HEINRICH HEINE

On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany and Other Writings

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Book Two

In the previous book, we discussed the great religious revolution in Germany represented by Martin Luther. Now, we turn to the philosophical revolution which emerged from the religious one, and which, indeed, is nothing other than the logical conclusion of Protestantism.

Before we describe how this revolution began with Immanuel Kant, though, we must talk about its philosophical predecessors outside of Germany, the importance of Spinoza, the vicissitudes of Leibniz's philosophy, the interrelationships of this philosophy with religion, and their points of friction and dispute, etc.[61] .

[...]

Lessing died in Braunschweig in the year 1781, misunderstood, hated, and in ill repute. In the same year, The Critique of Pure Reason by Immanuel Kant appeared, in K¨onigsberg. With this book, which, curiously, was not generally known until the end of the eighties, a spiritual revolution begins in Germany which has the oddest analogies with the material revolution in France, and to which the serious thinker must assign equal importance. It went through the same phases, and there is the most remarkable par-allelism between the two. On both sides of the Rhine, we see the same break with the past; all reverence for tradition is annulled.

[...]

[61] Heine discusses Spinoza and Leibniz below, in Book Two. He discusses Kant in Book Three.

Book Three

[...]

For I now speak of a man whose very name carries with it a power of exorcism; I speak of Immanuel Kant.[141]

It is said that night spirits become alarmed at the sight of an executioner's sword. – How terrified they must have been when Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* was put in front of them. This book is the sword with which deism was executed in Germany.

To be perfectly honest, you French are tame and moderate in comparison with us Germans. The most you did was to behead a king, but this king had already lost his head before you cut it off. And at the same time you felt it necessary to bang your drum, shout, and stamp your feet so that the whole world shook. It is really far too great an honor for Maximilian Robespierre to be compared to Immanuel Kant. Maximilian Robespierre, that grand *petit-bourgeois* from Rue Saint-Honoré, indeed had his fits of destruction against the monarchy, and trembled terribly enough in regi-cidal epilepsy; but as soon as the idea of the Highest Being came up, he wiped the foam from his mouth and the blood from his hands and put on

his Sunday best with the bright buttons, and even stuck some flowers in his vest.[142]

Immanuel Kant's life story is difficult to describe, because he had neither a life nor a story. He lived a mechanically ordered, almost abstract bachelor existence in a quiet isolated lane in Königsberg, an old city on the north-eastern border of Germany. In my opinion, not even the great cathedral clock there went about its daily labor with less passion and more regularity than its compatriot Immanuel Kant. Getting up, drinking coffee, writing, giving lectures, eating, walking: everything had its set time, and the neighbors knew that it was exactly half past three when Immanuel Kant, in his grey frock-coat, rattan cane in hand, emerged from his front door and strolled in the direction of small Lindenallee, which is still called "Philosopher's Way" on his account. He walked there eight times back and forth in every season, and when the weather was dismal or grey clouds indicated rain, one would see his servant, old Lampe, walking with anxious concern behind him, a long umbrella under his arm, like an image of Providence.

What a remarkable contrast between the external life of this man and his destructive, world-crushing thought! Indeed, had the citizens of Königsberg sensed the true meaning of this thought, they would have been in much greater dread of him than of the executioner – the executioner, namely, who only kills people. But the good citizens saw in him only a professor of philosophy, and when he walked by at the proper time, they gave him friendly greetings, and set their watches.

If, however, Immanuel Kant, the great destroyer in the realm of thought, far surpassed Maximilian Robespierre in terrorism, the two, on the other hand, had certain similarities, which invite us to compare them. First, we find in both the same unrelenting, cutting, unpoetic, and sober honesty. Next, we find in both the same aptitude for distrust, only that the first exercises it upon thought and calls it criticism, whereas the second uses it against people and calls it republican virtue. Yet, both demonstrate to the highest degree the type of the *petit-bourgeois* – nature had meant for them to measure out coffee and sugar, but fate forced them to weigh other things, and put a God and a King, respectively, on their scales . . .

[142] Robespierre, born poor, lived in the Rue Saint-Honoré. In May 1794, he reversed the revolutionary persecution of religion with a new cult of the Supreme Being.

And they found their true weight!

The *Critique of Pure Reason* is Kant's main work, and it will be our main focus. No other writing of Kant has greater importance. As I have already mentioned, this book appeared in 1781 but did not become well known until 1789. In the beginning, it was completely overlooked, and only two unimportant reviews of it appeared. Only later did articles by Schütz, Schultz, and Reinhold bring the attention of the public to this great book.[143] The cause of its delayed recognition is probably its unusual form and poor style. As for the latter, Kant merits greater censure than any other philosopher, all the more so if we consider the better style of his earlier works. His first essays appear in the recently published collection of his small writings, and we are amazed at the good, sometimes very witty style. Kant worked out his great work in his head first, but these short essays he hummed aloud to himself. He smiles in them like a soldier calmly arming himself for a battle in which he is certain of victory. Particularly notable among these small writings are the following: *General Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (written 1755), *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (written ten years later), as well as the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*,[144] full of good cheer in the style of French *essais*. Kantian wit, as expressed in these writings, is most unique. It climbs like ivy around his thought, and despite its weakness, attains a healthy height. Without such support, even the richest wit cannot flourish. Like a grapevine without a stake, it creeps miserably along the ground and goes to rot along with its most precious fruits.

Why, though, did Kant write his *Critique of Pure Reason* in the grey, dry style of a paper bag? Since he rejected the mathematical form of the Descartes-Leibniz-Wolffians, I think he was afraid that philosophical science would forfeit some of its dignity if it expressed itself in an easy, accessibly bright tone. He thus gave it a rigid, abstract form which coldly rejected all familiarity with the lower spiritual classes. He wanted, in aristocratic fashion, to separate himself from the contemporary "popular philosophers" who strove for the most bourgeois clarity, and he clothed

[143] Christian Gottfried Schütz (1747–1832), co-founder of the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (*Universal Book Review Newspaper*) in Jena; Johann Schulz (1739–1805), mathematician and colleague of Kant in Königsberg; Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1758–1823), professor of philosophy in Jena, and author of the *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* (1790/1792).

[144] Published in 1766.

his thoughts in courtly and chilled officialese.[145] Here, the philistine shows himself in full. But perhaps Kant needed an even more carefully deliberate language for his carefully deliberate mode of thought, and he was incapable of creating a better one. Only genius finds a new word for the new thought. But Immanuel Kant was no genius. Feeling this deficiency, just like the good Maximilian, Kant was even more distrustful of genius, and in his *Critique of Judgment*, he even claims that genius has nothing to do with science, its contributions belonging solely to the realm of art.

Kant did much harm with the starchy and ponderous style of his major work. His soul-less imitators mimicked him in this regard, and this led to the superstition among us that good writing was incompatible with being a philosopher. But at least the mathematical form of philosophy could no longer be used after Kant, who mercilessly criticized it in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. He said that mathematical form in philosophy creates nothing but card houses, just as philosophical form in mathematics is mere chatter. For in philosophy there can be no definitions like those in mathematics, where definitions are not discursive, but intuitive, that is, can be demonstrated in intuition; what are called definitions in philosophy can only be produced experimentally, hypothetically; really true definitions appear only at the end, as results.[146]

How is it that philosophers demonstrate so much fondness for mathematical form? This fondness began as far back as Pythagoras, who designated the principles of things by numbers.[147] This was a thought of genius. In a number, everything sensuous and finite is stripped away, and yet it designates something definite and this definite thing's relationship to something else definite, which, when also expressed by a number, has the same characteristics of non-sensuousness and non-finiteness. In all of this, numbers are like ideas, which have the same characteristics and the same relationship to each other. Ideas, as they appear in our minds and in nature, can very well be designated by numbers; but the number remains always the mere sign of the idea, not the idea itself. The master is always aware of this difference; the pupil however forgets it and transmits

[145] The "popular philosophers" were members of the German Enlightenment who attempted to spread their beliefs to the reading public by writing in a non-technical manner.

[146] Kant makes these distinctions in the section of the *Critique of Pure Reason* entitled "The Discipline of Pure Reason in its Dogmatic Use," beginning at A712/B740.

[147] Pythagoras, ancient Greek philosopher (*c.* 580–*c.* 500 BC).

to his students only a hieroglyphics of numbers, mere numerals, whose living meaning is no longer known and which are parroted with a sort of school pride. The same is true of the other elements of mathematical form. The spiritual in its eternal movement cannot be fixed; just as little by line, triangle, square, and circle as by number. Thought can be neither counted nor measured.

Since my main goal is to make the study of German philosophy easier in France, I will concentrate on those external features which can easily scare off the foreigner who is not yet familiar with them. I would like especially to point out to *littérateurs* who wish to revise Kant for a French audience that they can omit that part of Kant's philosophy which aims at combating the absurdities of Wolffian philosophy. This polemic, which is visible everywhere, can produce only confusion among the French, certainly nothing useful.

The *Critique of Pure Reason*, as I have said, is Kant's main work, and his other writings can be seen as more or less dispensable or, at the most, as commentaries. The social importance of this main work will become apparent in the following.

Philosophers before Kant have thought, it is true, about the origin of our knowledge and, as we have already shown, they have gone down two different paths according to whether they accepted ideas *a priori* or ideas *a posteriori*. However, there has been less thought about our faculty of knowledge itself, about its extent, or about its boundaries. This now became Kant's task: he subjected our faculty of knowledge to an unsparing investigation; he sounded all of the depths of this faculty and established all of its boundaries. Indeed, he found that we can know nothing at all about a great number of things which we earlier thought to know most intimately. That was quite irksome. But it was undeniably useful to know which things there were about which we could know nothing. It is just as helpful to us to be warned away from useless paths as to be shown the right one. Kant proved to us that we know nothing of things as they are in and for themselves, rather we know of them only to the extent that they are reflected in our mind. Thus, we are just like the prisoners spoken of so gloomily in the seventh book of Plato's *Republic*:[148] these unfortunates, bound by the throat and legs so that they cannot turn their heads, sit in a prison open above, and from above they get some light.

[148] The famous myth of the cave, found at the beginning of the seventh book of the *Republic*.

This light, however, comes from a fire burning above and behind them, and, in addition, separated from them by a small wall. People carrying all sorts of statues and images of wood and stone walk along this wall, speaking with one another. The poor prisoners can see nothing of these people, who are not as tall as the wall. They see only the shadows of the statues the people are carrying, which stick out above the wall, and these shadows move back and forth on the wall which faces them. They take these shadows to be real things and, deceived by the echo of their prison, think that it is the shadows which converse with one another.

Philosophy, before the appearance of Kant, had run around sniffing at things, collecting and classifying features of them. With Kant, this ended, and he led research back into the human mind and investigated what was revealed there. Thus, he compared his philosophy, not unjustly, to the method of Copernicus.[149] Earlier, when the world was assumed to stand still, and the sun was assumed to revolve around it, astronomical measurements were not especially consistent. Copernicus let the sun stand still and the earth orbit it; and, look, now everything worked out splendidly. Earlier, reason, like the sun, orbited the world of appearances and sought to illuminate it; Kant, however, let reason, the sun, stand still, and he let the world of appearances orbit around it and become illuminated whenever it entered into the realm of this sun.

From these few words indicating Kant's task, everyone will see that I consider the most important part of his book, and the center of his philosophy, to be the part where he treats so-called phenomena and noumena.[150] Kant, namely, distinguishes between the appearances of things and things in themselves. Since we can only know something about things insofar as they reveal themselves to us through appearance, and since, therefore, things do not show themselves to us as they are in and for themselves, so Kant labeled the things, inasmuch as they appear, phenomena, and the things in and for themselves, noumena. We can only know something about things as phenomena; we can know nothing of them as noumena. The latter are only problematic; we cannot say "they exist," nor "they do not exist." Indeed, the word noumenon is contrasted to the word phenomenon only in order to be able to speak of things inasmuch as they are

[149] In the Preface to the second edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*.

[150] In the section entitled: "On the Grounds for the Division of All Objects into Phenomena and Noumena," beginning at A235/B294.

knowable to us, without our judgment touching on things which are not knowable.

Thus, Kant, unlike some teachers who will remain nameless here, did not divide things into phenomena and noumena, into things which exist for us and things which do not exist for us. This would be a philosophical Irish bull.[151] He only wanted to give us a *Grenzbegriff*.[152]

God is, for Kant, a noumenon. According to his argumentation, the transcendental ideal being which we have, up to now, called God is nothing but a fiction. It arose through a natural illusion. Indeed, Kant shows that we can know nothing of that noumenon, God, and that even any future proof of his existence is impossible. We must write Dante's words: "Abandon all hope!" above this section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

I think many would like to see me relieved of the task of explicating this section, which treats of "the Grounds of Proof Used by Speculative Reason to Derive the Existence of a Highest Being,"[153] in a way comprehensible to the general reader. Although the actual refutation of these grounds of proof does not take up much space and only emerges in the second half of the book, it is aimed at with the greatest intent from the very beginning, and it is among the book's central conclusions. The "Critique of all Speculative Theology"[154] is attached to it, and all of the other cloud castles of the deists are destroyed. I must add that Kant, in attacking the three main types of argument for God's existence, namely the ontological, the cosmological, and the physico-theological, in my opinion destroys the latter two, but not the first. I do not know if the above expressions are known here, and I thus will provide the passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason* where Kant formulates these distinctions:

> Only three types of proof of God's existence by means of speculative reason are possible. All of the routes which one might take towards this goal begin either with determinate experience and the particular make-up of our sensory world known through it, rising from it according to the laws of causality up to the highest cause outside of the world; or they are based only on indeterminate experience, that

[151] I.e., a contradiction in terms.

[152] German: limit-concept. A *Grenzbegriff* is a placemarker which represents negatively the limits of our knowledge.

[153] Begins at A583/B611.

[154] The section is entitled in full "The Critique of all Theology Based Upon Speculative Principles of Reason," and begins at A631/B659.

> is, of some existence or other; or, finally, they abstract from all experience and conclude entirely *a priori* from mere concepts the existence of a highest cause. The first proof is the physico-teleological, the second, the cosmological, and the third is the ontological. There are no more of them, and there also cannot be any more.[155]

After studying Kant's main work many times, I came to believe that the polemic against those existing proofs of God's existence is present everywhere, and I would discuss it in more detail if my religious feeling did not restrain me. As soon as I see someone discussing the existence of God, the same singular anxiety arises in me, the same uncanny sense of oppression which I once felt visiting New Bedlam in London, when, surrounded entirely by the insane, I lost sight of my guide.[156] "God is all that is"; doubt about him is doubt about life itself, it is death.

If, however, discussion about the existence of God is deplorable, all the more praiseworthy is contemplation of the nature of God. Such contemplation is true worship of God. By means of it, our soul is taken away from the finite and the transitory and arrives at a consciousness of original goodness and eternal harmony. This consciousness stirs the man of feeling in prayer or in meditation on ritual symbols. The thinker attains this holy mood in the exercise of that sublime power of thought which we call reason and which has as its highest task the investigation of the nature of God. Those who are especially religious have been occupied with this task from childhood on; they are secretly tormented by it at the first stirrings of reason. The author of these pages is himself most joyfully aware of such early, original religiosity, and it has never left him. God was always the beginning and end of all my thoughts.[157] When I now ask: What is God? What is his nature?, so as a child I asked: What is God like? How does he look? And at the time, I could spend entire days gazing into the heavens, growing morose when evening came because I never saw the most holy countenance of God, but always only grey, stupid faces in the clouds. I was utterly confused by astronomical information, which, in that era of Enlightenment, even the smallest children were not spared, and I never ceased to be amazed that all these billions of stars were globes just as large and beautiful as our own, and that above this luminous

[155] This quotation, which contains slight modifications by Heine, can be found at A590/B618.
[156] New Bedlam was an asylum for the insane outside of London.
[157] Compare also Heine's later proclamation of his "return to God," discussed below in the "Afterword" to *Romanzero* and the *Confessions*.

throng of worlds a single God ruled. I recall that once in a dream I saw God on high in the greatest distance. He looked down, pleased, through a small window in the sky, a pious old face with a small Jew's beard, and he scattered a bunch of seeds which, as they fell from heaven, opened up, as it were, in infinite space, expanding immensely until they were beaming, blooming, populated worlds, each as large as our own globe. I have never been able to forget this vision. Often in dreams I would see the happy old man sowing his world seeds out of the small window in the heavens; once I even saw him clicking his tongue just like our maid, when she threw the chickens their barley. I could see only how each of the falling seeds grew into a large luminous globe; but the huge chickens which may have been lurking somewhere with open beaks, waiting to be fed with the scattered globes, those I could not see.

You smile, dear reader, about these huge chickens. However, this childish idea is not so different from the view of the most mature deists. The Occident and the Orient have exhausted themselves in childish hyperboles, attempting to conceptualize their unworldly God. The imagination of the deists has also struggled in vain with the infinity of space and time. Here, their powerlessness is entirely on display, the weakness of their worldview, of their idea of the nature of God. For this reason, it does not disturb us very much when this idea is destroyed. But Kant wounded them deeply when he destroyed their proofs of the existence of God.

Saving the ontological proof would not be particularly useful for deism, since this proof can also be used for pantheism. To make myself more understandable, let me remark that the ontological proof is the one produced by Descartes, and which was expressed a long time ago in the Middle Ages by Anselm of Canterbury in the form of a prayer. Indeed, one can also say that St. Augustine had already produced the ontological proof in the second book of *De Libero Arbitrio*.[158]

As earlier stated, I will refrain from any popularization of the Kantian polemic against those proofs. I will merely assert that, since then, deism has faded in the realm of speculative reason. It will perhaps require a few centuries for this distressing death announcement to be heard

[158] The ontological argument, which claims that the idea of God implies God's existence, can be found in the fifth of Descartes *Meditations*, in the *Proslogion* of the scholastic theologian and philosopher St. Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109), and in rudimentary form, in the above-mentioned passage in Augustine.

everywhere – but we have been wearing our mourning clothes for a long time already. *De profundis!* [159]

You think we are ready to go home now? By no means! There is still one play left. After the tragedy comes the farce. Up to now, Immanuel Kant has, as relentless philosopher, played the tragic hero: he has stormed heaven, he has disposed of the whole crew, the ruler of the world swims, unprovable, in his own blood, there is now no more mercy, no fatherly benevolence, no reward in the hereafter for abstinence now, the immortality of the soul lies in its final agonies – moans and death rattles –; and old Lampe stands there with his umbrella under his arm, watching in dismay, his face dripping with anxious sweat and tears. Seeing this, Immanuel Kant takes pity and shows that he is not merely a great philosopher but also a good person. He thinks, and half with goodwill and half with irony, he speaks: "Old Lampe has to have a God, otherwise the poor man cannot be happy – people, however, should be happy in this world – that is what practical reason says – well, what do I know? – maybe we can let practical reason vouch for the existence of God." As a result of this argument, Kant distinguishes between theoretical and practical reason and with the latter, as with a magic wand, he again animates the corpse of deism which had been killed by theoretical reason.[160]

Did Kant stage this resurrection not just for old Lampe but also for the police? Or did he really act out of conviction? Was his true intent in destroying all proofs of God's existence just to show us the difficulty of not being able to know anything about the existence of God? Here, he was almost as wise as my Westphalian friend, who, first, destroyed all of the lanterns on Grohnderstraße in Göttingen, and then delivered a long speech to us in the darkness about the practical necessity of lanterns – which he claimed to have thus destroyed for theoretical reasons, just to show us that without them we could not see.

I have already mentioned that the *Critique of Pure Reason* did not make the least sensation when it appeared. Only several years later when a few astute philosophers wrote commentaries about it did it awaken the attention of the public, and in 1789 nothing was more talked about in Germany than Kant's philosophy. It already had a profusion of commentaries,

[159] Latin: from the depths, the beginning of a prayer for the dead. Nietzsche also speaks in many places (for example, again section 125 of *The Gay Science*) about the centuries of delay for the impact of events in the world of thought.

[160] This passage refers to the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).

anthologies, explanations, reviews, apologies, etc. You need only glance at the first good philosophical catalogue you find, and the enormous number of works which appeared at the time about Kant gives ample testimony of the spiritual movement which started with this one man. In one, you see bubbling enthusiasm, in the other a bitter annoyance, and in many a wide-eyed curiosity about the end results of this spiritual revolution. We have uprisings in the world of ideas just as you do in the material world, and tearing down the old dogmatism makes us as hot as storming the Bastille makes you. To be sure, here too there were just a few old invalids who defended dogmatism, that is, Wolffian philosophy. It was a revolution and it did not lack in atrocities. Among the faction of the past, it was the truly good Christians who were the least indignant about these atrocities. Indeed, they wanted even more terrible atrocities in order to exhaust all patience, and thus to spark the counterrevolution, as necessary reaction, all the more quickly. There were philosophical pessimists here just as you had political pessimists. Some of our pessimists deceived themselves so far as to think that Kant had a secret agreement with them, and that he had only destroyed all previous proofs of God's existence so that the world would see that one can never reach knowledge of God through reason, and that one would therefore be forced to adhere to revealed religion.

Kant did not produce this great intellectual movement by means of the content of his writings, but rather through the critical spirit which reigned in them, and which now penetrated into all of the sciences. Every discipline was seized by it. Even poetry was not spared its influence. Schiller, for example, was a powerful Kantian and his views of art are heavy with the spirit of Kantian philosophy.[161] This Kantian philosophy, with its abstract dryness, was quite damaging to literature and the fine arts. Fortunately, it did not influence the culinary arts.

The Germans are not easily moved, but once they are brought onto some course or other they will follow it with dogged persistence until the very end, as was demonstrated earlier in regard to religious issues. And now we have demonstrated it in regard to philosophy. Will we be equally consistent in our political progress? Germany was placed upon a philosophical course by Kant, and philosophy became a matter of national importance.

[161] Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805), second literary giant (following his friend, Goethe) of the Classical Age of German literature, studied Kant's philosophy intensively.