KANT

A REVOLUTION IN THINKING

MARCUS WILLASCHEK

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A foremost Kant expert takes us on a lively tour through the revolutionary ideas of the founder of modern philosophy.

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Preface

When I was sixteen years old, I didn't know the first thing about Immanuel Kant. Browsing an anthology of classical German essays, I hit upon the following lines: "Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred immaturity. Immaturity is the inability to make use of one's understanding without direction from another. This immaturity is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding, but in lack of resolve and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude*! Have courage to make use of your own understanding is thus the motto of enlightenment." Even though at sixteen, my own "immaturity" was not completely "self-incurred," Kant's lines resonated with me: What makes you a free and responsible human being is not your age, education, or social position, but the courage to think for yourself. I was so excited that I ran to my parents and triumphantly quoted Kant's words at them: I was not going to accept their authority blindly, but to make critical use of my own understanding!

Immanuel Kant, who lived in Königsberg (Prussia) from 1724 to 1804, is widely considered to be the most important philosopher of the modern period. His *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) is a milestone of intellectual history. No thinker since Plato and Aristotle has had more profound and innovative ideas on such a wide and varied range of topics as Kant. His contemporaries said of Kant that he had "crushed" traditional metaphysics, with its supposed proofs of God's existence and of the immortality of the soul. Kant showed that God and immortality were topics that lie beyond human knowledge—and

precisely for this reason they are apt objects of faith. Human knowledge, Kant argued, is limited to objects in space and time, since space and time are necessary frameworks for our minds to recognize anything as an object in the first place. But Kant's achievements go far beyond his contributions to metaphysics and epistemology. He correctly explained the origins of our planetary system and found a new, secular foundation for ethics in human autonomy. His "categorical imperative" requires us to respect the dignity of all human beings and to act only on rules that can hold for all of us. He was a champion of the Enlightenment and a pioneer of cosmopolitanism. Kant devised a subtle theory of beauty and explained how a global federation of states could guarantee "perpetual peace." His revolutionary thought left a lasting impression not only on philosophy and learning in general, but also on the German Constitution and the United Nations.

April 22, 2024, marks Kant's 300th birthday. In Germany, where Kant is something like the semiofficial philosopher of the modern democratic German state, both President Frank-Walter Steinmeier and Chancellor Olaf Scholz gave public speeches highlighting the importance of Kant's thoughts on enlightenment, peace, and democracy. And not only in Germany, but all around the world, philosophers celebrated the 300th birthday of Kant with innumerable talks, conferences and congresses, books and articles. Even philosophers in Ukraine, despite the Russian war against their country and despite the bombing of their cities, hosted a one-day online conference to celebrate Kant's birthday with participants from Ukraine and many other countries. The Ukrainians clearly felt that in their dire situation Kant had something important to say.

Indeed, as we will see in this book, there is much we still can learn from Kant today: In a "post-truth" environment where facts can seem to depend on people's points of view, Kant can explain to us how reality and truth are human constructs, but still objectively valid for all. In an ideologically divided society, we can learn from Kant to respect and integrate insights contained in seemingly incompatible views. In a world where liberal democracies have come under attack, Kant can remind us that only democracy and the rule of law can protect human freedom. In a time where many distrust science, Kant can explain both its value and its limits. And in a climate of ideological and emotionalized debates, Kant can teach us the value of critical thinking and rational argumentation.

This is why, even more than forty years after my first youthfully enthusiastic encounter with Kant's philosophy, his work still fascinates me more

than that of any other philosopher. After engaging with Kant's thinking more seriously as an undergraduate, and later writing my PhD dissertation on Kant's account of action and morality, over the years I repeatedly turned to other topics and traditions in philosophy, only to return to Kant again and again. And each time I returned to Kant's work with new questions, I found surprising and exciting answers. To my mind, there is no other philosopher in what is called "the Western tradition" who has more to teach us than Kant.

The account that follows, however, is far from being a hagiography; its aim, rather, is a critical appraisal of Kant's work, as is only fitting for this critical thinker. Many of his views now appear outdated, others even repulsive—his racist and anti-Semitic statements, his disparaging, judgmental attitude toward women, and his moralistic condemnation of homosexuality. Though such utterances must be interpreted in their historical context, they cannot be justified in any way. They fall well below the standard of Kant's characteristic insights. But neither should they blind us to Kant's great achievements or distract us from the deeply humane spirit that distinguishes most of his work.

Kant's current significance goes far beyond individual contributions to philosophical debates or political institutions. It arises from three key features of his thought, which we will encounter time and again in this book. Firstly, Kant often picks up opposing, seemingly irreconcilable positions and manages to highlight and merge what is correct in them. Secondly, Kant achieves this on the basis of a new understanding of our position as humans in the world, which he calls a "revolution in our way of thinking." This comprises a fascinating idea that we will soon explore in greater depth—namely, that our mind does not just mirror reality, but also structures it in fundamental ways. And thirdly, by placing theory in the service of practice, Kant breaks down the traditional antitheses of theory and practice and of thought and action. The human being as a free and active entity is at the center of his philosophy.

This book follows Kant's revolution in thought throughout his entire work in thirty self-contained chapters. It is organized not chronologically but thematically. The first chapters begin with politics and history, followed by moral philosophy, law, religion, nature, epistemology, and metaphysics. This structure makes for an easier entry into Kant's thinking, gradually introducing the reader to the more abstract realms of his philosophy. It also allows each chapter to be read quite independently from the others. All together, the

separate pieces afford the reader a comprehensive insight into Kant's way of thinking. Brief explanations of certain technical philosophical terms typically employed by Kant can be found in the glossary at the end of the book.

The separate chapters also facilitate access to Kant's philosophy by locating his philosophical ideas within their particular context and showing how they relate to Kant's life and the historical situation. In this way, biographical and historical vignettes also paint a picture of Immanuel Kant as a man of his age. Contrary to the manner in which he is often portrayed, Kant was a fascinating and often dazzling character: a social climber, the young Kant cut a dapper figure and was a popular socialite; while, in his old age, he stood at the center of a large circle of friends. Kant spent his entire life in his native city of Königsberg and its immediate environs, though he spoke with great (and sometimes unfounded) authority about the most far-flung parts of the world. He was an enthusiastic supporter of the French Revolution, while at the same time condemning of it as unlawful. For the most part, Kant appears to have observed the principle of the categorical imperative—though not unfailingly. The first chapter of this book provides a sketch of Kant's life and work, which is then fleshed out and highlighted in the chapters that follow. The appendix contains a timeline overview of Kant's life.

This book is meant to bring to life Kant's thought for any and all readers, who may have little or no preexisting knowledge of philosophy. As they proceed through this book, it invites them to think philosophically themselves—perfectly in accord with Kant's own dictum that one cannot teach or learn philosophy, only philosophizing.

CHAPTER 1

Kant's Three Revolutions

> The most important revolution within the human being is his emergence from his self-incurred immaturity.[1]

When we hear the word *revolution* nowadays, we generally think of an act of political insurrection. However, the term's first significant appearance in European intellectual history occurred in the field of astronomy. *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* (*On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres*) was the title of a book, itself revolutionary at the time of its publication in 1543, in which Nicolaus Copernicus set out his heliocentric system: the sun does not move around the Earth, as the evidence of the naked eye seemed to suggest and as the Bible maintained; rather the Earth and all the other planets revolve around the sun. Immanuel Kant, who himself wrote an important though long forgotten treatise on modern astronomy in 1755 (see chapter 19), latched on to Copernicus's use of the term "revolution" to signify "rotation" or "turnabout."[2]

Three very different revolutions characterized the life and work of Immanuel Kant—a personal, a philosophical, and a political one. The first of these, an inward volte-face on Kant's part, took place in the mid-1760s around his fortieth birthday. It had a profound influence on his philosophy, transforming the scientist and metaphysician Kant into an ethical and political thinker. The second revolution occurred in the 1770s and found its expression in Kant's principal work, the *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781. Its particular "revolution in thinking" resided in its inversion of the generally

assumed relationship between the perceiving subject and the perceived object, an approach which placed the human subject at the center of the world. The third revolution began on July 14, 1789, with the storming of the Bastille in Paris, and culminated in the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the founding of the French Republic. The French Revolution radicalized Kant's political thought and left its mark on his late works of the 1790s.[3]

These three revolutionary upheavals took place in a life that was outwardly characterized by utter regularity and constancy. Immanuel Kant—a small and graceful man with bright blue eyes, always elegantly dressed and with an affable social manner—pursued a quiet and undramatic existence in the East Prussian city of Königsberg (present-day Kaliningrad), the region's long-established royal and commercial capital. He was born there on April 22, 1724, taught there for over forty years at the venerable Albertus University, and died there on February 12, 1804, as the most renowned and important thinker of his age. He remained a bachelor throughout his life, never traveled, and declined all invitations and appeals to go and teach elsewhere, devoting himself entirely to his writing instead. And yet correspondence, visitors, newspapers, and books ensured that he was always extremely well informed about current events in the rest of the world. For instance, his student Johann Kiesewetter, who became the Prussian crown prince's private tutor in Berlin, furnished him not only with a regular supply of small white turnips, which Kant had a great fondness for, but also with court gossip and snippets of news from the Prussian political scene. Kant's network of correspondents and other sources of information also extended to a number of other German states, and even as far afield as England, France, and Russia.[4]

Kant was by no means predestined from earliest childhood to one day become an eminent thinker with a wide circle of international connections. He was born into a reputable family of skilled artisans, which nevertheless became increasingly impoverished as he was growing up. Scholarships and the support of an uncle enabled him to attend a prestigious grammar school, the Collegium Fridericianum, and subsequently, from 1740 on, the university in Königsberg, commonly known for short as the "Albertina." Kant primarily attended lectures on philosophy there, but also sat in on ones on mathematics, physics, theology, and poetry. His beloved mother died in 1737, followed in 1746 by his father, who had had a stroke two years earlier, so that Kant had to interrupt his university studies at the age of twenty in order to

Drawing of the young Kant by Caroline von Keyserlingk, ca. 1755. akg-images.

provide for his four siblings. Like many of his fellow students, Kant followed his studies with stints as a domestic tutor to a succession of wealthy families in rural East Prussia. He only returned to the university in Königsberg in 1755, after which he proceeded to teach continuously for a total of eighty-two semesters. To begin with, Kant held lectures on logic, metaphysics, mathematics, and physics, and later supplemented these subjects with several others: physical geography, mineralogy, mechanics, general philosophy, practical philosophy, ethics, anthropology, natural law, natural theology, and pedagogy. His students used to joke that Kant could single-handedly give lectures for the whole of the philosophy faculty—at that time, this included all subjects on the curriculum except law, medicine, and theology. In his role as *Magister*, a non-stipendiary lecturer in modern terminology, Kant's initial

source of income came from lecture attendance fees; his great success as a lecturer meant that that income provided him with ample funds. In his lectures, his (exclusively male) students hung on his every word as he described foreign lands and customs, discussed metaphysical questions, or criticized religious and social prejudices. Before long, Kant was able to afford a suite of two rooms and a servant.[5]

Kant's intensive teaching schedule did not prevent him from making a name for himself from the early 1760s onward as an original and prolific author in the German-speaking world. Moreover, the topics he treated in his writings were as broadly varied as the subjects of his lectures. While most of his initial publications related to themes in "natural philosophy"—many of which we would now categorize as physics, astronomy, or geology—from the 1760s on, Kant began to address predominantly metaphysical, epistemological, and ethical questions. By this stage, he was exchanging ideas with many of the leading thinkers of the time. Meanwhile, at home in Königsberg, he was a well-respected lecturer with a large circle of friends and acquaintances. During this period he was, as his then student Johann Gottfried Herder wrote, "the most urbane fellow in the world" (*der galanteste Mann von der Welt*). Always fashionably dressed, Kant was full of joie de vivre and enjoyed going out and gambling, often winning at billiards or cards. Above all, though, Kant was a dazzling socialite who entranced those he conversed with and who could hold a large audience spellbound with his repartee. He moved in the most refined social circles in Königsberg and allegedly entertained the idea of marrying at this time.[6]

Yet, on turning forty in 1764, Kant's lifestyle underwent a change. He went out less and imposed strict rules on his way of life. Accordingly, he rose every morning at five o'clock and got down to work immediately. The catalyst for this change is said to have been the death of his friend Johann Daniel Funk. The influence of a new friend, the English merchant Joseph Green, who had taken up residence in Königsberg, may also have played a part (chapter 18). This is all pure supposition, however. Contemporary accounts of Kant's life from this time are scarce. All we do know for sure is that Kant retrospectively came to accord a special importance to everyone's fortieth birthday, including his own. Thus, in retrospect, when Kant was seventy-four, he wrote, "The human being who is conscious of having character in his way of thinking does not have it by nature; he must have *acquired* it." And for this to happen, he claimed, some "kind of rebirth," indeed something as drastic as an "explosion"

or "revolution" was necessary: "Perhaps there are only a few people who have attempted this revolution before the age of thirty, and fewer still who have firmly established it before they are forty."[7] According to Kant, a person aged twenty is nothing more than the product of their education and environment, while at thirty he or she is still reliant upon the judgment of others. Only at forty is one mature enough "to acquire a character"—that is, to decide for oneself how to live one's life. Kant himself also seems to have completed just such a "revolution" at the age of forty—in other words, in middle age. This involved him quite consciously living his life henceforth according to rigid principles, or "maxims."[8]

In his work *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* of 1793, Kant justifies the necessity of such a revolution, explaining that we all tend to excuse ourselves on wholly inadmissible grounds; a lie used to our own advantage and to the detriment of others is morally wrong—but if it is too embarrassing for us to tell the truth, we still wriggle out of a situation by telling an expedient lie. To give a topical example, traveling by airplane is bad for the environment and should be avoided whenever possible—but the lure of a holiday makes us turn a blind eye, albeit perhaps with a bad conscience. In Kant's view, decisions such as this are prime examples of our fundamental propensity to prioritize our own happiness over what is morally right and good. In this sense, we are all born egotists.

But if we still want to become morally good individuals—and according to Kant, we really should aspire to be so—then we must shift the balance between self-interest and morality by undertaking a "revolution [. . .] in the mode of thought."[9] Of course, it is perfectly legitimate and indeed necessary for us to cater to our own interests—but only on condition that the means by which we choose to do so are also morally admissible. The yardstick for what is morally admissible is Kant's famous "categorical imperative," which in its simplest formulation runs as follows: "Act upon a maxim that can also hold as a universal law."[10] Only by performing this inner revolution, says Kant, will we meet the expectations that we, as rational beings, must have for ourselves.

Kant's inward revolution of 1764 went hand in hand with a fundamental change of direction in his philosophy. From Rousseau, whose works he was especially heavily influenced by during this period, Kant took the idea that people's worth does not depend on their social standing or on their talents and intellect, but solely on the moral quality of their desires and actions

(chapter 9). Kant also applies this notion to himself and his own philosophical work, whose value he now sees as no longer residing exclusively in unearthing scientific or metaphysical truths, but also in the contribution it makes to improving people's quality of life. Here we come across a characteristic of Kant's work that we will encounter time and again in this book: namely, the *primacy of practice over theory*. Kant himself later spoke of the "primacy of pure practical reason."[11] By "theory" here he means not only especially abstract and speculative forms of reflection but also philosophical or scientific cognition in general, which does not intervene as such in the world but rather describes and explains it. By contrast, "practice" signifies the entire realm of human action and, above all, morality.

Of course, by this definition Kant's philosophy is itself theory and not practice. But for him, correct action takes precedence over purely theoretical knowledge. Science and philosophy are not ends in themselves but should actively contribute to improving people's lives—in material terms, but above all in a moral and political respect. For Kant this also means that, in the event of a conflict between theoretical knowledge and moral objectives, the latter will always prevail (provided this does not directly contradict the current state of knowledge).

Kant famously argues that there are insufficient theoretical grounds or proofs for the assumption that God exists. From a purely theoretical perspective it would therefore be irrational to believe in God. Yet it is Kant's view that a belief in God is nonetheless morally necessary, since we can only attain our ultimate moral goals (the "highest good"; see chapter 10) with divine assistance. Here, then, theoretical understanding and moral purpose are at variance with one another. In the case of conflicts such as this, other Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume insist on the primacy of theory, maintaining that one ought not to believe in anything for which there is no proof or sound empirical grounds. Kant disputes that: if it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God (to "postulate" it, in his words), then this position is also rationally justified even without any scientific proof, just as long as such an assumption is not expressly refuted by what we know. Morally correct action has priority over the demands of theory.

Whether Kant's argument for postulating the existence of God still holds water from a modern perspective is open to question (chapter 10). By contrast, the general idea of practice taking precedence is not only revolutionary but also more relevant than ever before. It is revolutionary because it

stands the traditional relationship between theory and practice, in the words of Marx, "on its head." And it is relevant because Kant's primacy of practice might embolden us, in light of the many political threats currently facing us, to strive after certain political objectives even when from a purely theoretical angle their prospects of being realized are less than encouraging. So, according to Kant, it is necessary and reasonable to work actively to bring about justice and peace in the world regardless of how unlikely it is that we will succeed in achieving this in the foreseeable future (chapters 2, 3, and 10).

Even after his inward revolution at the age of forty, Kant remained a very sociable person, spending most of the time he was not working in conversation with his many friends and acquaintances. Nor did this change when, in 1770, he was finally appointed to the professorship for logic and metaphysics at the University of Königsberg, a post he had unsuccessfully applied for as early as 1756. As was customary at the time, the appointment to this chair was for life. Had it been a tenure-track post, as is often the case with first appointments nowadays, Kant would have had cause for concern about his position, since he appears to have completely stopped producing scholarly works on gaining his appointment. Although he continued to teach on a regular basis and with great success, apart from an occasional minor paper, not a single work by him appeared over the following decade. During this period of silence, Kant was working intensively on the book that would usher in a new era in the history of philosophy: the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which finally saw the light of day in 1781.

In this work, Kant accomplishes what he himself terms a "revolution in the way of thinking."[12] After the internal revolution in his attitude, this was the second great revolution in the life and work of Immanuel Kant. It is also sometimes called Kant's "Copernican Revolution," a term which he himself, however, does not use, though he does compare his approach to the "first thoughts of Copernicus."[13] Copernicus explained the complicated movements of the planets across the night sky by taking into account the perspective of the observer on Earth. Since the Earth rotates around the sun, while at the same time turning on its own axis, our perspective on the other planets in our solar system is constantly changing, meaning that their trajectories are not solely determined by the motions of the planets themselves but also by that of the Earth. Copernicus thus explained the perceived motion of celestial bodies by pointing out how they must appear to an observer on Earth.

Kant transfers this idea to human cognition as a whole: our view of the world results not only from the inherent characteristics of the things we perceive, but also from the way in which these things must appear to human spectators when filtered through the cognitive tools at their disposal. According to Kant, these include, for example, space and time, which are not qualities of the "thing in itself" but rather forms of human cognition. Kant, therefore, maintains that we can only speak of space and time "from the standpoint of a human being."[14] But because these forms are the same for all people, and are what make everyone's perception of the world possible in the first place, Kant states that they are objective determinants of human reality.

The objectivity of human cognition and a reality shared by all are not therefore based solely on qualities of perceived objects, but first and foremost on the cognitive structures of the perceiving subjects. How far is Königsberg from Berlin and how long does it take to get there by coach (chapter 13)? In Kant's view, the fact that this question has an objective answer is because all people see the world in the same "forms of intuition"—namely, the parameters of space and time. Our cognition, in Kant's famous formulation, must not only "conform to the objects," but the objects must also conform "to our cognition," otherwise they would not be recognizable to us as objects. Kant's "revolution in thinking" in the *Critique of Pure Reason* resides in this inversion of the relationship between the subject and the object, the perceiving mind and the perceived thing.[15]

We will examine these challenging ideas of Kant in greater detail later (chapter 25). At this point, our main concern is to familiarize readers with one of Kant's fundamental ideas—that of the *objectivity of the human perspective*. We will encounter this repeatedly in the chapters that follow. "Objectivity" here means that the correct judgments of different people necessarily concur. A person who judges objectively ignores his or her personal interests and preferences; for this reason all those who act in such a way also ultimately arrive at the same conclusion. Kant's revolutionary idea is that, although objectivity disregards *some* subjective factors like personal interests and preferences, it does not discount *all* subjective factors. Indeed, according to Kant, there are some aspects of our worldview that do not derive from qualities of the world itself and are consequently *subjective*, yet which nonetheless have *objective* validity because they make possible an objective picture of reality in the first place and hence are equally valid for everyone. For

instance, space and time are, according to Kant, merely human forms of organizing sense data, not independent features of the world. But they are necessary for us to experience an objective reality at all, and hence part of any objective worldview available to human beings. Thus, for Kant, objectivity is based on inter-subjectivity: in other words, objectivity arises from the necessary concurrence among different human subjects.

This idea is quite literally "revolutionary" since as it entails "overturning" the traditional relationship between thought and reality. Our thinking does not only depend on reality, but reality also depends upon our thinking and our human perspective. We will observe later that the idea of an "objectivity of the human perspective" lies at the very root not only of Kant's epistemology but of his ethics and aesthetics too (chapters 9 and 18).

From a sovereign philosophical-historical point of view, Kant, in adopting this stance, positions himself between two opposing basic trends in Western philosophy. On one side stand Plato, Aristotle, and the Christian philosophers of the Middle Ages. They hold that the objects of scientific knowledge, of aesthetic experience, and of ethical action—that is, what is "true, beautiful, and good"—exist wholly independently of humans and their thinking. For them, there is a fixed reality that we have the capacity to recognize in our true judgments and whose ethical and aesthetic values we must only discover and acknowledge. On the other side are the Sophists of ancient Greece, along with thinkers of the modern period, like David Hume. For them, beauty, goodness, and (with some qualifications) truth are human constructs. In simple terms: truth is what we take to be true, beauty is anything that pleases us, and whatever we value is good. Yet because different people regard different things as true, beautiful, or good, we are in danger here of losing sight of reality entirely. According to this viewpoint, as Nietzsche later pointed out, there is no such thing as an objective reality, merely a multiplicity of subjective perspectives.[16] Religious fundamentalists are a contemporary, atrophied iteration of the first, "objectivist" position, while superficial cultural relativism ("anything goes") is a modern echo of the second, "subjectivist" viewpoint.

Kant's grand project thus consists of mediating between these two extremes, by retaining the correct elements of each and combining them. To be sure, truth, beauty, and goodness are subjective concepts, creations of the human intellect. Yet these creations are in no way arbitrary or accidental, but obey rules that are the same for everyone. Objectivity, which most

philosophers sought to explain by claiming that our thinking must "conform" to objects, is not jettisoned by Kant. But his interpretation of it is that objects must conform to the necessary structures of our thinking in order to become objects *for us*. The result is an understanding of the concepts of "truth, beauty, and goodness" that ties them firmly to a human perspective, but which precisely in so doing explains how our judgments can hold good for everyone.

Here—following the primacy of practice over theory and the objectivity of the human perspective—we encounter a third defining characteristic of Kant's thought. Time and again, Kant manages to merge apparently irreconcilable statements, hypotheses, and theories and to overcome superficial differences and imbalances and, in so doing, arrive at an understanding that does justice to the particular subject in question in all its complexity. The combining of objectivist and subjectivist views is just one of several instances of the mediating nature of Kantian thought, which is geared toward resolving apparent contradictions. In later chapters we will see further examples of this, such as the proposition that freedom and determinism are not mutually exclusive (chapter 27). Kant describes the whole history of philosophy as a constant oscillation between extreme positions (for instance, between dogmatism and skepticism, or rationalism and empiricism), between which his own philosophy plays a mediating role, ultimately leading philosophy onto the "secure path of a science."[17]

By the time the *Critique of Pure Reason* was published, Kant, aged fifty-six, was already an elderly man by the standards of the period, and yet the bulk of his groundbreaking contributions to philosophy still lay ahead of him. Initially it took several years for Kant's revolutionary book to gain the recognition it deserved. It was misunderstood or simply ignored. However, Kant did not let himself become disheartened, and in the years following his decade of silence brought out one major work after another: 1785 saw the publication of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in which Kant first articulated the categorical imperative. A comprehensive substantiation of his moral theory followed in 1788, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, while in 1790 came the third and last of his three "Critiques," the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In addition to these he also produced a series of influential articles like the renowned "Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?" (1784).

This dazzling array of groundbreaking publications was only possible because Kant had, from as early as the 1770s on, alongside his ongoing

work on the *Critique of Pure Reason*, done a great deal of preparatory thinking about a number of hypotheses and ideas in his lectures. He was now able to draw upon this intellectual reserve. And it was not just in a philosophical sense that Kant appears to have done some good housekeeping, because by 1785 he had saved enough money to buy his own house. He delivered his lectures there and hosted guests for lunch on a daily basis (chapters 8 and 27). From 1786 onward, the *Letters on Kantian Philosophy* produced by his early acolyte Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1757–1823) spread Kant's fame beyond the academic world. He now became the most talked-about philosopher in Germany, whose works sold in increasingly large numbers.

In the 1790s, before his physical and mental powers began to wane, Kant's final major works on religion, law, and politics appeared, including the treatise *On Perpetual Peace* of 1795 and *The Metaphysics of Morals* of 1797. Even when writing the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant saw himself as an intellectual pioneer of social change. But the French Revolution of 1789 was what first radicalized Kant's political thinking. It was only then that he began to champion the ideas of the sovereignty of the people, freedom and equality before the law, and to openly criticize aristocratic privilege, religious paternalism, and colonialism (chapters 11–13).

No other political event made as deep an impression on Kant, or preoccupied him as greatly, as the French Revolution, and to such a degree that it became almost his sole topic of conversation—astonishing for a man who had hitherto always been adept at making small talk when in company. Yet his attitude toward this epoch-making event was ambivalent. On the one hand, a political revolution violates the rule of law and is therefore to be deplored. In Kant's view, purely on logical grounds no right to resistance can possibly exist, since this would be tantamount to legally sanctioning lawbreaking, a contradiction in terms. Political progress, which Kant was firmly convinced was necessary, must therefore come about through gradual reform rather than violent revolution. On the other hand, precisely the overthrow of the despotic and exploitative ancien régime was proof positive for Kant that political progress was possible to an extent previously thought unimaginable. A more just world suddenly seemed achievable, and for this reason Kant was openly sympathetic to the revolutionary forces. Kant repeatedly wrestled with the tension between these two positions: a legal and a political-cum-historical standpoint (chapter 11).

Even in Kant's own time it was customary to regard the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the French Revolution as parallel historical events. The German poet and writer Heinrich Heine picked up on an already well-established theme when he wrote the following in 1833 about the *Critique of Pure Reason*: "This book . . . marks the beginning of an intellectual revolution in Germany, which exhibits some remarkable parallels with the material revolution in France."[18] Since then, the failure of revolution to gain successful traction in Germany (at least until 1989) was repeatedly attributed to the fact that Germans were revolutionary only in theory and never in practice. Yet, as we have already seen, reducing Kant's philosophy to the purely theoretical is to do it an injustice. For, fully in the spirit of the primacy of practice over theory, Kant sees the aim of his philosophy as contributing to the social advancement of humankind—albeit preferably without political revolution.

PART I

Politics and History

Within the Boundaries

of Mere Reason

CHAPTER 2

The Highest Political Good: "Perpetual" Peace

> When . . . the consent of the citizens of a state is required in order to decide whether there shall be war or not, nothing is more natural than that they will be very hesitant to begin such a bad game, since they would have to decide to take upon themselves all the hardships of war.[1]

In 1795, at a time of profound political upheaval, the whole world was waiting for Germany's most famous philosopher to finally produce a book on politics and law. By then, six years had passed since the start of the French Revolution. In April of that year, after several years of war, Prussia concluded the Peace of Basel with France, which had declared itself a republic in 1792. Immanuel Kant had already aired his views on political issues in a number of essays but was yet to write a more comprehensive work offering a coherent account of the fundamental tenets of his political philosophy. Part of the reason for this was no doubt the censorship with which Kant had to contend since the passing of the Prussian Censorship Edict of 1788 (see chapter 14). But now, in the summer of 1795, Kant could remain silent no longer. He was seventy-one—a man of advanced years, whom correspondents had long been in the habit of addressing as a "venerable sage"—when he published his most important work on political philosophy: *Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Sketch by Immanuel Kant*.[2]

We do not know what external circumstances prompted Kant to make peace the central theme of his first book on political philosophy in 1795. Perhaps the Peace of Basel was the catalyst. Whatever the case in this matter, it was perfectly logical for Kant to expound his political philosophy in a treatise on war and peace, for as he wrote two years later, "perpetual peace [is] the highest political good."[3] Indeed, for Kant peace was not only the most important aim of politics but also a key objective of his own philosophy.

And yet Kant was no pacifist. For while it is true that he regarded war as "the greatest evil that can befall the human race," he was also able to see some remarkably positive aspects to it. Thus, he claimed that wars were instrumental in humankind developing its full potential, since they involved rearmament, which in turn brought technological and administrative progress.[4] And from an aesthetic point of view, war even had "something sublime about it."[5] Kant also recognized that wars could be just—in the absence of any overarching world order guaranteeing peace—namely as a response to an "act of aggression" or a "threat" on the part of another state.[6] And, finally, war is, according to Kant, a means to its own resolution, inasmuch as the evils of war ultimately lead nations to seek a lasting peace.

Unlike Goethe, who three years earlier, in 1792, accompanied German troops on their campaign against Revolutionary France as a kind of "embedded journalist," Kant never experienced the horrors of the battlefield firsthand. Yet he would surely have been all too familiar with the impact of war on a civilian population. Families lost fathers and sons, others returned injured or disabled from the front, the general populace was squeezed by war levies and food shortages, and the public finances lay in tatters. Kant's longtime servant Martin Lampe was a former soldier and would have recounted his experiences to his employer. During the Seven Years' War Königsberg was occupied by Russian troops for five years (from 1758 to 1763). Kant came to an arrangement with the occupying powers and during this period is said to have tutored German-speaking officers who were serving with the Russian forces.[7]

But if war had both negative and positive sides for Kant, why then was "perpetual peace" the highest political good? Here we encounter a central theme of Kant's moral philosophy: war is the greatest scourge of humankind not on account of the suffering that it causes, but because and insofar as it is an *injustice*.[8] This injustice resides in the fact that human rights cannot be

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