

REMARKS ON THE OCCASION OF KANT'S 300<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY  
TO THE NORTH CAROLINA ZEITGEIST FOUNDATION

April 21<sup>st</sup>, 2024 – Tyke Nunez

I've been asked to say a few words about why, 300 years after his birth, Kant is still relevant to the world today. I'll come at the topic through saying a little bit about Kant's achievement itself and that will require me to say a bit about the history of philosophy.

Socrates, as the well-known lore goes, was the first to go under the title 'philo-sopher' or 'lover of wisdom.' If you know anything about Socrates it is likely that he was put to death by his fellow citizens of Athens. In his own defense at his trial, he tells a story, where his friend has asked the Oracle at Delphi who the wisest person is, and the Oracle answers that it is Socrates. At first Socrates is confused by this. This is because he knows that he does not have knowledge of any of the important things in human life. He thinks, I can't be the wisest person because there are all of these generals and kings and other virtuous people who surely have knowledge of these things. Then Socrates goes out and he starts talking to people. A lot of these people claim to know what virtue is, what the good for human beings is, or what the well-structured state looks like, but when Socrates starts questioning their definitions of these things, one after another, they all end up contradicting themselves. So after a while, Socrates thinks he begins to understand the oracle. This is because while he doesn't think he knows anything, he at least is not deluded as to whether he has knowledge. After all, if you falsely think you know something, then you first have to unlearn what you falsely believe, before you can actually learn what is right. Thus, because he at least doesn't need to unlearn his false beliefs, he is farther along on the path of wisdom than all of those people who think they have wisdom but don't.

In this story we also see that Socrates has a method for acquiring wisdom—his questioning. With this, we get a picture of what it takes to have knowledge on a given topic: you have to be able to put forward a definition of the thing in question—of virtue or of the good, say—and then you have to be able to answer truthfully whatever questions are put to that definition, while not landing in contradiction. With mathematics, this kind of thing is relatively easy, and that's why mathematics is often taken to be the paradigm of knowledge. On ethical, political, metaphysical, or theological topics, however, it is incredibly hard to put forward definitions that will stand up to the test. Socrates famously didn't think he could do it. Still, he thought that these were the questions that we should be asking. With this, philosophy was born.

At the core of Kant's thought, he thinks he has discovered a kind of strategy, a method, for finding answers to these philosophical questions that will both yield knowledge and tell us where such knowledge is impossible and why. Then, in domain after domain—in metaphysics, morality, politics, aesthetics—he puts forward accounts of what, say, a substance is, or what a cause is, or what morality is, or what beauty is, and the accounts that he puts forward are pretty good. When you start asking questions of them, they don't just fall to pieces. Arguably, no one else before Kant had done this, at least so successfully, and in many respects no one else has been able to do it as successfully since either. Thus, one way to summarize why Kant is so important in the history of humanity, is that he got farther than anyone else in the project that Socrates and Plato set into motion.

Of course, a lot has happened in the 220 years since Kant's death. In all sorts of ways humanity has moved on from the system of knowledge that Kant put forward. For example, we no longer accept the Newtonian paradigm in physics. Still, just how we should not think of Einsteinian general relativity as *refuting* Newtonian physics but as a *refinement* of it, I think it will likely turn out that the right way to view the genuine developments in the various branches of human knowledge that Kant addressed is as refinements of the Kantian system. Of course, these refinements might be quite revolutionary, much as Einstein's own revolution in physics was. Nonetheless, I think that once these genuine developments are properly understood, they will look like refinements of Kant's view, rather than completely new beginnings. For this reason, I think that in thinking seriously about many of the different topics that he took up, Kant's position remains worth careful attention.

Now, what exactly was the method that Kant had found to make progress on Socrates' questions? What were Kant's views that were so exceptional?

Well, as to the method, Kant thought that in every branch of human enquiry there is some topic, some object of study. For example, in physics we study physical things; in biology, organisms; in morality, the good; in aesthetics, beauty; etc. The traditional way to study a given topic is to look to the object of investigation and see how things stand with it. This works okay in certain domains, like in certain crafts—like cooking or parts of physics, say—but Kant's thought was that there are other, more fundamental branches of human knowledge where simply looking to the object of investigation has proven to be unworkable. These were the kinds of areas of knowledge that Socrates was interested in. Kant thought that in these domains by just examining the objects—say, the nature of substance, the good, or the beautiful—we haven't been able to get much farther than did Plato, Aristotle, and the schools of thought that emerged shortly after them.

Kant thought that we did, however, have examples of sciences—specifically mathematics and logic—where humanity had gotten farther. He thought a careful examination of these disciplines showed that in each case they did not look out to the world, but looked inward at our own capacity for thinking and knowing. By examining, say, our own capacity for thinking, Kant thought we could establish necessary laws that should always govern thinking and that this was in fact what logic had done since the time of Aristotle. Following this example, his fundamental thought was that if we want to make progress in understanding the laws of morality or the most fundamental basic laws of nature, we should begin not by investigating the objects first but by looking to our capacity or faculty for knowing those objects.

If that was Kant's basic methodological move, and this move allowed him to make progress in formulating laws of morality or metaphysics that could stand up to the kind of questioning that Socrates engaged in, then what was the content of this philosophy? One thing that Kant set out to show was that the fundamental concepts of nature, like substance or cause, are legitimate. A powerful challenge to the legitimacy of these concepts had been raised by the English philosopher John Locke and the Scottish philosopher David Hume. This was a challenge to prior philosophers from the continent, like French philosopher Rene Descartes or German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who took the legitimacy of concepts like substance and cause for granted. One thing that Kant did was answer this challenge from across the Channel and show that these concepts have a place in the system of the basic laws of nature.

Nonetheless, it was morality that was at the core of Kant's philosophy. He thought that the main payoff for his magnum opus in the theoretical philosophy of nature, the *Critique of Pure Reason*, was that it dispelled false pretenses that got in the way of the knowledge of morality. Here I have in mind fallacious proofs of the immortality of the soul or God's existence. Thus, like with substance and cause, he was ultimately concerned with showing that concepts like freedom and justice were not mere fantasies, and this was the project of his major work in practical philosophy, the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Finally, In the third of his three *Critiques*, the *Critique of Judgment*, his project splits into two parts. In the first part he gives a theory of beauty and the sublime. In the second he gives a theory of organisms and life, and our concepts of them.

One way in which these contributions remain relevant is that in many of these domains Kant's position is still a serious contender in the contemporary philosophical discussions. For example, the most important formulation of modern liberalism was given by John Rawls, in his *A Theory of Justice*,

and he counted himself a Kantian. Or in ethics, contemporary deontologists and constitutivists usually trace the roots of their views back to Kant.

Beyond such doctrinal influences, Kant remains a model for how to practice philosophy. He was an earnest, serious, devoted seeker of wisdom. He was never content with an easy initial answer to his questions. He also exhibited a keen sense of the history of their answers. He always looked for what was true in these answers and how that truth might be preserved, while accommodating insights that might initially appear opposed to them. In this sense he was a model of non-partisanship who strove to weed out his own prejudices and attain a clearer view of the matter, whatever his topic.

To my mind, however, part of what makes Kant's contributions to human knowledge so exceptional is not just their content, depth, and staying power, but their breadth, systematicity, and comprehensiveness. In Kant, I think we find the last place in history where one person had mastery over almost all of the branches of human knowledge, where this mastery included making fundamental contributions in many of these domains, and where those contributions all fit together under one idea, in one system. This made Kant the consummate Enlightenment thinker. It wouldn't be too much of an exaggeration to say that in virtually every domain that he worked in, for at least the next one hundred and fifty years, it was his view that set the agenda.

A teacher of mine was fond of referring to Kant as the great grey mother of us all. He meant all of us philosophers. Kant, however, is not just the great grey mother of the philosophers. Mathematicians, physicists, biologists, poets, and painters, insofar as they asked the philosophical questions that undergirded their practices in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century had to grapple with Kant's position. It is these questions that the actual practice of these disciplines were working out the answers to, concretely, as they developed across this period. So even if these practitioners were not directly engaging with Kant's work, they were working in traditions profoundly shaped by it.

In this respect Kant is a bit like Einstein or Newton were to the prior paradigms in physics, but instead of working merely within physics, he worked on everything, and transformed everything. In this sense, we would not live in the world that we now live in if it weren't for Kant. This is not merely because he invented a gadget, like, say, the steam engine or the Iphone, that transformed the material conditions of life. Rather, it is because his thought transformed all of human culture, radically and fundamentally. It is in this sense that Kant remains relevant to anyone who wants to understand how we became who we are, or who is looking for answers to Socrates' questions.