

Kant's Career in German Idealism

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[To cite, see: Steve Naragon, "Kant's Career in German Idealism." In: *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism*, edited by Matthew C. Altman (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 15-33.]

Immanuel Kant helped launch "the next big thing" in German Idealism during the summer of 1791, two months after celebrating his sixty-seventh birthday. It had been ten years since the publication of his long-awaited *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the past decade had been filled with a remarkable output of writings developing Kant's "critical philosophy," including his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), as well as an important second edition of the first *Critique* (1787). Although the first *Critique* lacked sympathetic and competent early readers, support for his philosophical innovations widened steadily during the 1780s, and a growing stream of pilgrims began to make their way to Königsberg, a city of fifty thousand souls lying in the far northeastern corner of Europe.¹

Kant had been teaching at the university – called the *Academia Albertina*, after its founder – for thirty-six years, the last twenty-one as the Professor of Logic and Metaphysics, which was one of eight salaried professorships in the "Philosophy Faculty" (really a faculty of arts and letters), and during the summer of 1791 he was also serving as dean of that faculty. Kant was lecturing on logic every Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday (the main class days) from 7–8 in the morning, and on physical geography every Wednesday and Saturday from 8–10; earlier on Saturdays, from 7–8, he would meet with his logic students to test their understanding and answer their questions.

In Kant's day, professors lectured in their own lodgings or else they rented a room in someone else's home. Kant had rented rooms during his first three decades of teaching, but finally bought and moved into a home of his own just north of the Königsberg Castle in May 1784, after which he was able to hold all his lectures in a room on the first floor. On July 4, 1791, a Monday, the university was two months into the summer semester, and early that morning a twenty-nine-year-old Johann Gottlieb Fichte walked through Kant's front door and joined the other auditors to hear Kant lecture on logic. He had arrived in town the previous Friday specifically to meet the famous Professor Kant.

Fichte (1762–1814) would likely have stood out in the classroom, being a good decade older than most of the students. He had already completed his theology studies at Jena and had been working as a private tutor for the

¹ I have drawn primarily from the following early sources: Johann Christoph Mortzfeld, *Fragmente aus Kants Leben. Ein biographischer Versuch* (Königsberg: Hering und Haberland, 1802); Ludwig Ernst Borowski, *Darstellung des Lebens und Charakters Immanuel Kants, Von Kant selbst genau revidirt und berichtet* (Königsberg: Nicolovius, 1804); Reinhold Bernard Jachmann, *Immanuel Kant geschildert in Briefen an einen Freund* (Königsberg: Nicolovius, 1804); Ehregott Andreas Christoph Wasianski, *Immanuel Kant in seinen letzten Lebensjahren. Ein Beitrag zur Kenntnis seines Charakters und häuslichen Lebens aus dem täglichen Umgange mit ihm* (Königsberg: Nicolovius, 1804); Johann Gottfried Hasse, *Letzte Äusserungen Kants von einem seiner Tischgenossen* (Königsberg: Nicolovius, 1804); Friedrich Theodor Rink, *Ansichten aus Immanuel Kants Leben* (Königsberg: Goebbels und Unzer, 1805); and material gathered in 1804 for Samuel Gottlieb Wald's memorial address for Kant, but first published in Rudolf Reicke, *Kantiana. Beiträge zu Immanuel Kants Leben und Schriften* (Königsberg: Theile, 1860). Emil Arnoldt assessed the above and other material in his "Kants Jugend und die fünf ersten Jahre seiner Privatdocentur," *Altpreussische Monatsschrift*, 18 (1881): 606–86. Still definitive is Karl Vorländer, *Immanuel Kant, der Mann und das Werk*, 2 vols. (Leipzig: Meiner, 1924); and the more recent (and in English) Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), both of which I have made constant use. Finally, an excellent brief developmental summary of Kant's writings can be found in Paul Guyer, *Kant* (London: Routledge, 2006), ch. 1.

past eight years. Presumably he listened quietly to Kant's lecture and left,² and more than a month passed before the socially awkward Fichte managed to arrange a proper meeting with the great man. Fichte wrote in his diary: "For a long time I've wanted to pay Kant a serious visit, and found no means. Finally I began to work on a critique of all revelation, and to dedicate it to him" (GA II/2:415).

He finished this small book in about five weeks, sent it to Kant with an introductory letter, and finally paid him that visit on August 23, which went well, since Kant liked the book (although he had read only the first eight pages).³ Unfortunately, Fichte was running out of money and decided that he should return to Saxony to live with his parents, but lacked the money even for that. So in a heartfelt plea that would have moved anyone, but not Kant, Fichte asked to borrow the necessary funds (letter of September 2, 1791; Ak 11:278–82). Kant turned down his request, but offered what he perhaps thought was a better alternative: that Fichte sell his book to a local publisher. This Fichte did, and his *Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation* was published in 1792. Because it was published anonymously, and because the reading public had been expecting something from Kant on the topic of religion, many believed this book to be Kant's, including Gottlieb Hufeland, a Jena law professor and admirer of Kant's, who wrote a glowing review of the book. Kant finally clarified the matter of authorship in the same newspaper that published Hufeland's review,⁴ and the good name and career of Johann Gottlieb Fichte was established.

Kant's early education

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), arguably the most important Western philosopher since the Middle Ages, was born into a home of very modest means, at the far eastern end of the Baltic Sea, in the bustling port city of Königsberg (now the Russian city of Kaliningrad). He was the fourth child and first surviving son in his family, with one older and three younger sisters and a younger brother who survived into adulthood.⁵ He was born the same year as Königsberg itself, which had been formed from the three medieval towns of Kneiphof (a small island located where the New and Old Pregel rivers meet), Altstadt (to the north), and Löbenicht (to the east). The Kants lived in that part of Königsberg given over to members of the harness and saddle guilds, in the Vorderste Vorstadt, just south of the Kneiphof island. At the east end of this island sat the fourteenth-century red brick cathedral, or *Domkirche*, where Kant's parents had been married and where Kant and his siblings were later baptized. On the north side of this cathedral stood a few low buildings that made up the *Academia Albertina*, a Lutheran university founded in 1544 in the wake of the Protestant Reformation.

Kant received his first taste of student life at a German school in his neighborhood, where a single teacher gave instruction on reading, writing, arithmetic, and Christianity, but he would not have attended here for long, since at the age of eight he transferred to the *Collegium Fridericianum*, a Pietist Latin school. This was at the urging of Franz Albrecht Schultz (1692–1763), a forty-year-old Pietist theologian and pastor who had arrived in Königsberg just the year before, and who oversaw the German school that Kant had been attending. Local children hoping to enter the university, and too poor for a private tutor, needed to study at one of the three Latin city schools or else at the *Collegium Fridericianum*, which had beds for about 75 boarders, and which also accepted day-students, of which Kant was one. From Easter 1732 (having just turned eight), until Michaelmas 1740 (when he was sixteen), Kant walked across town each day to attend this school. Classes began every

² Fichte's account in his diary is brief: "I paid an early visit to Kant, who received me without any special show of interest. I stayed for his lecture. He seemed sleepy" (GA II/2:415).

³ As noted in Kant's letter to Borowski, dated September 16, 1791 (C 11:284).

⁴ Kant, "On the Author of the Essay, 'Toward a Critique of All Revelation'" (1792; Ak 12:359–60).

⁵ Vorländer, *Immanuel Kant*, 2:385. Relevant excerpts from the Kant family papers are printed in Arnoldt, "Kants Jugend," 608–9.

morning at 7 a.m. and ended at 4 p.m., with time set aside for play and for worship. He attended as a charity student, and without Schultz's intervention he likely would not have gone at all. Kant was grateful to Schultz for this, however much he came to dislike his years there – Kant's friend Hippel later wrote that “terror and fear would overcome him as soon as he thought back to the slavery of his youth”⁶ – and his extreme distaste for institutional religion likely began at this time, as well.

Kant's studies at the *Collegium* included Latin and theology for all seventeen of his semesters there, as well as Greek for at least ten semesters and Hebrew for eight, French for six, handwriting for eleven (at one point he fell back a level), singing for six, geography for at least four, history for three, antiquities for five, poetry for four, arithmetic for nine, mathematics for two, and philosophy beginning in his next to last year.⁷

The curriculum included nothing from the natural sciences, nor was there any study of modern literature. Instruction in Hebrew and Greek focused on Bible translation, with no classical Greek works. Of more relevance to Kant's later philosophical career was the study of Cicero in the context of the Latin class. Kant excelled in Latin, becoming a fine stylist, and “even as an old man recited the most beautiful passages of Latin poets, orators, and historians.”⁸ But in general, as Kant once mentioned to a former classmate, “any sparks in us for philosophy or math could not be blown into a flame by those men,” to which the classmate replied: “But they were good at blowing them out.”⁹

Pietism and rationalism in Königsberg

Kant came of age in the wake of two strong challenges to orthodox Lutheran theology: Pietism and rationalism. Pietism was a revivalist, anti-intellectual movement within the context of the German Lutheran church that was inspired by Philipp Jakob Spener (1635–1705) and his *Pia Desideria* (1675), and was similar to the Methodism that was sweeping England. In the words of Isaiah Berlin:

[Pietism] laid stress on the depth and sincerity of personal faith and direct union with God, achieved by scrupulous self-examination, passionate, intensely introspective religious feeling, and concentrated self-absorption and prayer, whereby the sinful, corrupt self was humbled and the soul left open to the blessing of divine, unmerited grace.¹⁰

Kant's family belonged to this Pietist movement, as did all of his instructors at school, so this religion deeply informed the first 16 years of Kant's life. The spiritual center for Pietism at the time was the university at Halle, the largest of the four Prussian universities (the others were Königsberg, Frankfurt/Oder, and Duisburg). August Hermann Francke (1663–1727) had studied under Spener at Dresden and then brought the movement to Halle, and he was instrumental in helping Friedrich Wilhelm I (who reigned from 1713 to 1740) install Pietists at the university in Königsberg.

Rationalism was championed by Christian Wolff (1679–1754), also at Halle, who developed a scholasticism consistent with the scientific advances of his day. He viewed the special revelation of scripture as consistent with, but separable from, the natural revelation of rational theology. Just a year before Kant was born, the Pietists had

⁶ Reported by Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel in his autobiography and reprinted in Friedrich Schlichtegroll, *Biographie des Königl. Preuß. Geheimenkriegsraths zu Königsberg, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel, zum Theil von ihm selbst verfaßt* (Gotha: Perthes, 1801), 78–79.

⁷ On Kant's experiences here, see Heiner F. Klemme, *Die Schule Immanuel Kants. Mit dem Text von Friedrich Schiffert über das Königsberger Collegium Fridericianum, 1741* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1994), esp. 32–60.

⁸ Wald, quoted in Reicke, *Kantiana*, 6.

⁹ Borowski, *Darstellung*, 161–62.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 258.

convinced the king to expel Wolff from Halle, having been particularly scandalized by the rectoral address Wolff gave on July 12, 1721 – “On the Moral Philosophy of the Chinese” – in which he argued that Chinese (i.e., Confucian) and Christian ethics were fundamentally the same, and thus that ethics as such was not in need of a special Christian revelation.¹¹

This struggle between the Pietists and the rationalists played itself out in Königsberg as well, but a peculiar blend of these two forces also emerged. Schultz had studied under both Francke and Wolff in Halle and managed to reconcile these seemingly antagonistic positions. He was sent to Königsberg precisely because of his Pietism, assumed the directorship of the *Collegium Fridericianum* shortly after arriving in town, and eventually helped oversee all of its churches and schools. Yet in his inaugural dissertation he argued that faith and reason can be harmonized, and that Wolff’s philosophy is acceptable and even useful for the faith.

Wolff himself had maintained that “if anyone has ever understood him, it is Schultz in Königsberg.”¹² Kant’s student and later close friend, T. G. von Hippel (1741–1796), studied theology under Schultz, and wrote that he “taught me theology from a different perspective, bringing in so much philosophy that one was led to believe that Christ and his Apostles had all studied in Halle under Wolff.”¹³

Martin Knutzen (1713–1751), under whom Kant would later study, had nearly completed his own studies when Schultz arrived in Königsberg, and under his influence soon developed much the same blend of rationalism and Pietism – what Erdmann described as a Pietist content of divine revelation trussed up in the Wolffian form of definitions, theorems, and lemmas.¹⁴ Both of these men were of considerable importance for Kant, shaping the intellectual backdrop of his early years as a student at the university.

Kant’s university studies

Kant’s transition into university life must have been exciting. Near the end of his last term at the *Collegium Fridericianum*, in the summer of 1740, the old king died and on July 20 his son arrived in town to be installed as the new king, Friedrich II (later dubbed “the Great”), beginning what was to become a forty-six year reign promoting Enlightenment ideals throughout the land, and particularly in the universities. Wolff was coaxed back to Halle from his chair in Marburg, and Pietists everywhere were put on notice. Two months after the coronation, Kant matriculated at the *Academia Albertina*. He was 16 years old, a standard age for such beginnings.

The little we know of his studies is that he attended lectures by C. F. Ammon (mathematics), J. G. Teske (experimental physics), Knutzen (mathematics, logic, metaphysics, and moral philosophy), and Schultz (theology).¹⁵ He may also have attended J. D. Kypke’s lectures on logic and metaphysics, since they were free. Rink reports that he took classes for “about three years.”¹⁶

Kant’s relationship with Knutzen is a puzzle. Kant’s early biographers describe a close mentoring relationship between Knutzen and Kant, and most accounts since have repeated and embellished this. According to Ludwig Ernst Borowski (1740–1831), one of Kant’s students and earliest biographers, Knutzen “was the teacher with whom Kant felt most connected. He attended all his courses on philosophy and mathematics without interruption.

¹¹ Lewis White Beck, *Early German Philosophy: Kant and His Predecessors* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 258–59.

¹² Wald, quoted in Reicke, *Kantiana*, 6; a nearly verbatim quote is given by Hippel in Schlichtegroll, *Hippel*, 160.

¹³ Quoted in Schlichtegroll, *Hippel*, 162.

¹⁴ Benno Erdmann, *Martin Knutzen und seine Zeit: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der Wolfischen Schule und insbesondere zur Entwicklungsgeschichte Kants* (Leipzig: Voss, 1876), 116.

¹⁵ Heilsberg, quoted in Reicke, *Kantiana*, 48, and Borowski, *Darstellung*, 28. See also Manfred Kuehn, “Kant’s Teachers in the Exact Sciences,” in *Kant and the Sciences*, ed. Eric Watkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 11–30.

¹⁶ Rink, *Ansichten*, 27.

. . . Knutzen . . . found in Kant splendid talents . . . eventually loaning him works by Newton.”¹⁷ Yet when Knutzen mentions his better students, he does not mention Kant; nor does Kant mention Knutzen.¹⁸ Kant’s first work (*Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces*, 1746–49; LF 1:3–181), which Borowski viewed as Knutzen-inspired, was dedicated not to Knutzen but to J. C. Bohl, a professor of medicine at the university. Insofar as Knutzen had a favorite student, it was Friedrich Johann Buck (1722–1786), the same Buck who in 1759 would be given the Professorship in Logic and Metaphysics, instead of Kant.¹⁹ So the relationship could not have been very close, although Kant did receive from Knutzen at least this much: an introduction to Wolffian metaphysics and Newtonian science.

Becoming Professor Kant

Kant was the first major modern philosopher to spend his life teaching at a university, and most of his immediate followers – certainly those whom we now identify as German Idealists – sought to make that their home as well. When Kant decided on this academic path is unclear, but it appears to have come rather late. Most students in the eighteenth century took classes for two to three years without seeking a degree; only those wishing to teach at the university needed one, either a doctorate to teach in theology, medicine, or law, or a master’s degree to teach in the philosophy faculty.

Kant stayed at the university, or at least with his friends in Königsberg, for eight years, until poverty forced him to leave in the summer or fall of 1748 to serve as a private tutor in the countryside.²⁰ He did this for about five years²¹ – three years in one home, and two in a second – working with young boys ranging in age from seven to fourteen. These tutoring positions were usually taken by young theology students waiting on their first church appointment, although this was not Kant’s situation, who listed himself as a “student of philosophy” (rather than as a “theology candidate”).

Of the eight years between entering the university and leaving Königsberg, no more than three years were spent attending lectures, so how did Kant spend those remaining five years? Had he been pursuing an academic career, he would have written a Latin dissertation to present to the philosophy faculty, as this was a prerequisite for graduation. Kant did not do this. Instead he wrote what he took to be an important book on a physics problem of his day, and he wrote it in German for publication outside the university. This first publication – written between 1744 and 1747 – was a 240-page work that attempted to reconcile the Cartesian and Leibnizian accounts of force (*Living Forces*, 1746–49; LF 1:3–181),²² and this was followed by a book nearly as long that offered a Newtonian account of the formation of the universe, also in German, and published in 1755 (*Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*; UNH 1:217–368). Kant clearly had been working on this second book during his five years in the countryside, if not earlier. Apart from that, he wrote a few shorter pieces for a local paper (in the summer of 1754, perhaps after his return to Königsberg) on the rotation and age of the earth.

¹⁷ Borowski, *Darstellung*, 28, 29, 163–64. See also Jachmann, *Immanuel Kant*, 10, and Kraus as quoted in Reicke, *Kantiana*, 7.

¹⁸ See Hans-Joachim Waschkies, *Physik und Physikotheologie des jungen Kant. Die Vorgeschichte seiner Allgemeinen Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels* (Amsterdam: Grüner, 1987), 20n4.

¹⁹ Both Erdmann (*Martin Knutzen*) and Waschkies (*Physik und Physikotheologie*) promote the view of a close relationship between Knutzen and Kant. A more skeptical position is found in Kuehn, *Kant*, 78–84, and Kuehn, “Kant’s Teachers,” 22–23.

²⁰ Waschkies, *Physik und Physikotheologie*, 25–27, offers the best evidence for this disputed date of Kant’s departure.

²¹ This early chronology is contested. For an account, see “The Hofmeister” at www.manchester.edu/kant/Students/studentHofmeister.htm.

²² This matter had already been resolved by Jean le Rond d’Alembert in 1743, although Kant had not heard the news, which presumably had not yet reached Königsberg.

This scholarly activity suggests that Kant was looking to create a name for himself outside of academia, a path certainly in keeping with the careers of many of the individuals with whose ideas he was engaged: Descartes, Newton, Leibniz, and many of their followers.²³ And yet Kant returned to Königsberg in the summer of 1754, perhaps by then with the intention of teaching. He submitted his master's thesis ("Succinct Exposition of Some Meditations on Fire"; MF 1:371–84) the following spring on April 17, 1755, sat for the oral exam on May 13, and received his degree on June 12. He was then required to submit a second Latin thesis for the privilege of teaching at the university. This was to be publicly defended, which he did – his *New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition* (NE 1:387–416) – on September 27. And thus did Kant's teaching career at the university begin. It lasted almost forty-one years.

Kant's lectures and his students

Kant's life was shaped by the rhythms of the academic year, which in Prussian universities was divided by Michaelmas (September 29) and Easter (fluctuating between March 22 and April 25), with a new semester beginning about two weeks after each of these dates: winter semester the second week of October, and summer semester sometime in April or May. Most classes – and all "public lecture" classes – met four times each week.

The philosophy faculty in eighteenth-century Königsberg included eight full professors, the occasional associate professor, and a fluctuating number of unsalaried lecturers (*Privatdozenten*) whose only remuneration came at the end of the semester, collected directly from the students, normally at the rate of four thaler per head.²⁴ The salaried professors were required to offer "public lectures" (normally one each semester) that students attended for free, but they also offered various "private lectures" alongside the *Privatdozenten*, and paid for by the students directly. Kant taught as a lecturer for 29 semesters (1755–1770) before finally receiving the professorship in mathematics, which he quickly exchanged for the professorship in logic and metaphysics,²⁵ teaching in that capacity for 53 semesters (1770–1796).²⁶

The records are incomplete, but Kant appears to have taught logic most often (56 times), followed by metaphysics (53) and physical geography (49). He taught these three courses nearly every semester until he became a full professor, after which he taught each of them once a year. His first course on anthropology was given in 1772–73, and every winter semester thereafter (for a total of 24 semesters). These four courses formed the core of his teaching as a full professor, with metaphysics and anthropology offered in the winter, and logic and physical geography in the summer. Kant also offered private lectures in mathematics nearly every semester at the beginning of his career, but abruptly stopped after 1763–64 (15 semesters total). Theoretical physics (21) and moral philosophy (28) were alternated during much of his career, along with natural law (12), which he first

²³ Kant was also studying the work of academics such as Wolff, who taught at Halle and Marburg, and Crusius, who taught at Leipzig. But Lambert and Maupertuis were outside the university, as was Euler (other than for a brief stint at St. Petersburg). Hume and Rousseau were non-academics, but Kant did not read them until later.

²⁴ Johann Friedrich Goldbeck, *Nachrichten von der Königlichen Universität zu Königsberg in Preußen, und den daselbst befindlichen Lehr- Schul- und Erziehungsanstalten* (Leipzig: Buchhandlung der Gelehrten, 1782), 102, estimates student living expenses (viz., room, board, and firewood) at 60 thaler per year, so these tuition fees for private lectures were not trivial.

²⁵ Kant petitioned to have his mathematics position switched with either F. J. Buck (professor of logic/metaphysics) or K. A. Christiani (professor of practical philosophy). The king chose the former course, but it appears from his letter that Kant was equally comfortable assuming either professorship.

²⁶ Most of the data regarding Kant's teaching comes from Emil Arnoldt, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 10 vols., ed. Otto Schöndörffer (Berlin: Cassirer, 1906–11), vols. 4–5.

taught in 1767, and philosophical Encyclopedia²⁷ (10), which he first taught in 1767–8. Occasional courses were given on natural theology (4) and pedagogy (4).

Kant and his early biographers claim that his classrooms were always well-attended, and the records tend to bear this out, but not always. Other well-regarded instructors were teaching the same courses as Kant – for instance, there might be four or five private courses on metaphysics, apart from the public course offered by the full professor – and yet there were fewer than 400 students enrolled at the university.²⁸ The competition for students must have been intense, especially among the unsalaried lecturers whose income was entirely tuition-based.

If there was an overall theme to Kant’s lectures, it was this: “I do not intend to teach philosophy, but rather how to philosophize.”²⁹ Kant repeated this sentiment throughout his teaching career. He sought to help his students master an activity, rather than a set of dogmas – how to think, rather than what to believe. Kant “compelled his hearers to think for themselves,” according to J. G. Herder, who studied with Kant in the early 1760s. Even during his first semesters as an instructor, Kant would “always remind us that he would not teach philosophy, but rather how to philosophize, etc. . . . To think for oneself. . . .”³⁰

Near the end of Kant’s career (April 1795), we hear that his “presentation is entirely in the tone of ordinary speech and . . . not very beautiful . . . yet everything that his delivery lacks in form is richly replaced by the excellence of the content.”³¹ And at the beginning of his career (1763–64), we hear:

How interesting Kant was in his lectures. He would enter the room in a sort of enthusiasm, saying: we left off here or there. He had memorized the main ideas so deeply and vividly that the entire hour was lived in these alone; often he took little notice of the textbook over which he was lecturing.³²

Kant would bring with him his copy of the required textbook used for the class³³ and sometimes notes on loose sheets of paper. His textbooks were interleaved with blank pages so that there was ample room for his own notes, and over the years these pages were entirely filled, yet he rarely read from these notes or the textbook, but instead would engage the author in a conversation, using the text as an organizing principle and as a springboard for his own ideas.

Kant often chose a student from the audience to look in the eye while lecturing, using this as a gauge of how well he was being understood. He must have found many of those eyes discouraging. Borowski studied with him during his earliest years and noted that “a lively attentiveness was always required. Without this his lectures couldn’t be understood, and one would get lost.”³⁴ Kant was generally hard to understand – in content, and

²⁷ This was an introductory course that surveyed the philosophical disciplines (logic, metaphysics, practical philosophy) and their history.

²⁸ Franz Eulenburg, *Die Frequenz der deutschen Universitäten von ihrer Gründung bis zur Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1904), 296.

²⁹ From a recently discovered reflection of Kant’s, reproduced in Steve Naragon and Werner Stark, “Ein Geschenk für Rose Burger,” *Kant-Studien*, 104, 1 (2013): 5. See also Jachmann, *Immanuel Kant*, 28–9; Kant’s “Announcement of the Program of his Lectures for the Winter Semester 1765–1766” (1765; Ak 2:307); and the Dohna logic lectures of 1792 (Ak 24:698).

³⁰ Borowski, *Darstellung*, 84, 188. The same sentiment is found in Kant’s essay “An Answer to the Question: ‘What Is Enlightenment?’” (1784; WE 8:35), and at the end of his “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?” (1786; OT 8:146).

³¹ From a letter written by an Austrian nobleman, W. J. G. von Purgstall (1773–1812), and quoted in Karl Hugelmann, “Ein Brief über Kant,” *Altpreussische Monatsschrift*, 16 (1879): 608–9.

³² C. F. Jensch, as quoted in Johann Friedrich Abegg, *Reisetagebuch von 1798* (Frankfurt: Insel, 1976), 251.

³³ By government decree, professors had to use an approved textbook in each of their courses.

³⁴ Borowski, *Darstellung*, 85, 185–86.

sometimes in delivery – and students were advised to take his easier classes first (physical geography, anthropology, moral philosophy) or else begin with an easier professor.³⁵

Kant's interests and where they led

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them: *the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me*. (CPrR 5:161)

Kant's philosophical project, broadly understood, was to reconcile the physical and moral worlds – the world of Newtonian mechanics with the world of persons – and doing this required some hard and innovative work in metaphysics. The lines quoted above, and found on a plaque once adorning Kant's tomb in Königsberg, come from the end of his *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788). The passage continues:

I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence. (CPrR 5:161–62)

These two worlds were basic facts for Kant and were captured by the names of Newton and Rousseau. Kant encountered Newton while still a teenager in Knutzen's lecture hall; he read Rousseau 20 years later in the early 1760s, and this second encounter was just as transformative as the first. Rousseau was for Kant a second Newton, as suggested in a remark written into his copy of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764):

Newton saw for the first time order and regularity combined with great simplicity, where before him was found disorder and barely paired multiplicity; and since then comets run in geometrical courses. Rousseau discovered for the first time, beneath the multiplicity of forms human beings have adopted, their deeply buried nature and the hidden law by the observation of which providence is justified. . . . After Newton and Rousseau, God is justified . . . (OBS_n 9 [Ak 20:58–59])

Another remark suggests how Rousseau transformed Kant's moral landscape:

I feel a complete thirst for knowledge and an eager unrest to go further. . . . There was a time when I believed that this alone could constitute the honor of mankind, and I had contempt for the rabble who know nothing. *Rousseau* brought me around. This blinding superiority disappeared, I learned to honor human beings . . . (OBS_n 7 [Ak 20:43–44])

Unfortunately, these two worlds – Newton's physical world of material bodies understood with and governed by causal laws, and Rousseau's moral world in which each human, as a free and rational being, is of inestimable worth living in a community of equals – are not easily held together. For how is freedom possible in Newton's universe? And without freedom, what becomes of the moral universe? If every event in the physical universe is the direct result of one or more previous events, then every event happens necessarily and human freedom is an illusion. The laws of nature appeared to leave no room for the concerns of morality and the freedom it assumes.³⁶

³⁵ Wald, quoted in Reicke, *Kantiana*, 18. Hippel, who matriculated at the university in 1756, wrote that he took the less challenging courses from Buck before attending Kant's lectures (*Hippels sämtliche Werke*, vol. 12: *Hippels Leben*, ed. Gottlieb Hippel [Berlin: Reimer, 1835], 91). Kant was aware of these difficulties and encouraged students to attend K. L. Pörschke's lectures first in preparation (Jachmann, *Immanuel Kant*, 30).

³⁶ Ten years earlier, Kant considered a similar challenge – this time from the side of Wolffian rationalism. In *A New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition* (1755; NE 1:387–416), Kant addressed this conflict between rationalism and human freedom, but at the time sided with Wolff over Crusius's "liberty of indifference" (NE 1:398–405). Kant eventually abandoned the rationalist account of freedom – calling it the "freedom of the turnspit" in his *Critique of Practical Reason* (CPrR 5:217–18).

That was one puzzle confronting Kant. A second puzzle arrived at about the same time in the form of David Hume, who famously argued that physical causation is nothing more than a subjective sense of connection between two events based on regularities encountered in the past, and that there is no objectively necessary connection between these events, which are themselves entirely “loose and separate.”³⁷ Kant viewed this as a serious problem for the natural sciences, as these are meant to be systems of objective and necessary causal laws. But if Hume is correct, such laws are merely contingent empirical generalizations.

Kant’s intellectual life has traditionally been understood as falling into two periods – the pre-critical and the critical – with the publication of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) marking the divide. These two puzzles fell on the pre-critical side, and their solution marked the divide. The metaphysical doctrine providing the solution, and which defined his new “critical philosophy,” was what Kant called transcendental idealism, which holds that knowledge is possible only when the mind partly constitutes the thing being known.

Kant arrived at transcendental idealism by asking a deceptively simple question: “How is experience of an objective, public world possible?” He concluded that this requires the mind to structure the experienced world: first, by the sensibility passively receiving and shaping (as spatiotemporal) an unknowable given, and second, by the understanding actively structuring this spatiotemporal array into the world of physical objects. The mind is no longer a passive recipient of sensations, but instead actively structures those sensations into an objective world, and each mind does this, and does this in the same way, resulting in a public, shared world.

Transcendental idealism redraws the boundary between the knowing subject and the known object and, like any boundary, it has two sides, one humbling and one affirming. The humbling side limits our knowledge claims to the world of appearances (the phenomenal world), denying that we are capable of speculative insight into reality, thus humbling traditional metaphysics into silence. The affirming side reminds us that this phenomenal world that we *can* know just is, after all, the spatiotemporal world of material objects in which we live and play and pursue science. What is more, transcendental idealism shows us that at least some propositions about this world are *a priori* knowable, namely, the formal part contributed by the knowing self. We cannot have *a priori* knowledge of any *particular* causal laws, but we *can* know *a priori* that such laws exist to be discovered empirically. Thus Kant’s two puzzles are solved, for although the phenomenal world is entirely law-governed by causal relations, it is at least possible that there exists a noumenal (real) self that is free and thus that morality is possible.

In planning out his new system, Kant had imagined writing a methodological propaedeutic (which turned into the *Critique of Pure Reason*) followed by a metaphysics of nature and a metaphysics of morality.³⁸ The former appeared in 1786 as the *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (MFS 4:467–565), while the latter did not appear until 1797 as the two-part *Metaphysics of Morals* (MM 6:205–355, 373–493): the *Doctrine of Right* (concerning the nature of law and the state) and the *Doctrine of Virtue* (concerning the system of moral duties that bind individuals). Kant’s best known and most closely studied work on moral philosophy was also the first that he published: the relatively short *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785; G 4:387–463), in which he introduced the concept of the categorical imperative and made autonomy a central feature of how we understand morality.

³⁷ David Hume, *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* [later editions: *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*] (London: Millar, 1748), sect. 7 (“Of the Idea of Necessary Connection”), pt. 2. Kant first raised this worry about causal connection in his essay *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy* (1763; ANM 2:167–204): “I fully understand how a consequence is posited by a ground in accordance with the rule of identity: analysis of the concepts shows that the consequence is contained in the ground. . . . But what I would dearly like to have distinctly explained to me, however, is how one thing issues from another thing, though not by means of the law of identity” (ANM 2:202).

³⁸ An early version of this plan can be found in Kant’s letter to J. H. Lambert (December 31, 1765) (C 10:56).

Responses to the “Critique”

Kant’s critical philosophy did not enjoy a promising start.³⁹ The *Critique of Pure Reason* is a hard read today and it was perhaps just as hard for those living in Kant’s day and speaking his language. Some of the brightest minds, such as Moses Mendelssohn and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, complained in all sincerity that they could not make sense of it.

This poor reception helped motivate Kant to write a summary introduction, the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783; Pro 4:255–383), which was further shaped by an early anonymous review written by the popular philosopher Christian Garve (and heavily edited by J. G. H. Feder), which viewed the *Critique* as belonging to the tradition of Humean skepticism and Berkeleyan idealism.⁴⁰ While Kant had only respectful words for Hume’s work, he wished to sharply distinguish his own brand of idealism from what he called the “dogmatic idealism” of George Berkeley, and several additions in the 1787 second edition of the *Critique*, such as the “Refutation of Idealism,” were responding to the Garve/Feder review.

Not until K. L. Reinhold’s *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy* (1786–87)⁴¹ did the *Critique* begin to receive its proper audience, and camps soon formed of Kantians and anti-Kantians. C. G. Schütz and Gottlieb Hufeland’s *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (1785–1804), a daily newspaper from Jena featuring book reviews, provided an early sympathetic forum for the new Kantian philosophy, while the Wolffian J. E. Eberhard published the *Philosophisches Magazin* (1788–92) featuring articles critical of Kant, and in which Eberhard himself argued that Kant’s “new” philosophy was, at best, a rehashing of Leibniz and Wolff.⁴² Kant spent the 1780s and 1790s filling out his critical philosophy and responding to critics, for which he often enlisted the aid of colleagues. Of these, most notable was Johann Schultz (1739–1805), a mathematics professor at Königsberg, whose review of Kant’s 1770 *Dissertation* was found by Kant to be so insightful that he later asked for Schultz’s help in promoting the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In 1797 Kant publicly declared Schultz to be his most reliable expositor.⁴³ Not even Schultz was a blind follower, however, and problems he raised in 1785 with what is commonly viewed as a key section of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely, the Transcendental Deduction, nearly led to a falling out with Kant, but also encouraged him to heavily revise that section for the second edition that appeared in 1787.⁴⁴

³⁹ Apart from Kuehn’s biography, see also his “Kant’s Critical Philosophy and Its Reception — the First Five Years (1781–1786),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 630–63; Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Fate of Autonomy: Problems in the Appropriation of the Critical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Brigitte Sassen, *Kant’s Early Critics: The Empiricist Critique of the Theoretical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁴⁰ Published in the January 19, 1782 issue of the *Göttingen Gelehrten Anzeigen*.

⁴¹ Reinhold published his letters in installments in C. M. Wieland’s *Teutsche Merkur* (August 1786 to October 1787), and Kant publicly thanked Reinhold in his “On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy” (1788; Telp 8:160, 184).

⁴² Kant replied to Eberhard with his “On a Discovery whereby Any New Critique of Pure Reason Is to Be Made Superfluous by an Older One” (1790; NCR 8:187–251), and also enlisted his colleague Johann Schultz to critically review Eberhard’s magazine.

⁴³ Kant, “Against Schlettwein” (1797; Ak 12:367–68). See Johann Schultz, *Erläuterungen über des Herrn Professor Kant Critik der reinen Vernunft* (Königsberg: Döngel, 1784), and his *Prüfung der Kantischen Critik der reinen Vernunft*, 2 vols. (Königsberg: Hartung, 1789).

⁴⁴ Schultz’s criticisms are found in his anonymous review of J. A. H. Ulrich, *Institutiones logicae et metaphysicae scholae suae scripsit* (Jena: Cröker, 1785), in *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (December 13, 1785), 247–49, translated into English in Sassen, *Kant’s Early Critics*, 210–14. See also Kant’s *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786; MFS 4:467–565), where he publicly answers Schultz, in part by demoting the Transcendental Deduction’s role (MFS 4:474–76).

Completing the system: Kant's third "Critique"

The *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790; CJ 5:165–486) was Kant's most influential work for the generation of philosophers that followed, bringing to center stage the concepts of purpose and systematicity, and marking the emergence of aesthetics as a serious philosophical discipline. Kant himself gave the book a preeminence in his system, writing in the preface that "with this I bring my entire critical enterprise to an end" (CJ 5:170).

When Kant was writing the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), he did not have in mind to write any more critiques: one was to be quite enough. But while working up a second edition of this *Critique* (published in 1787), the material that he was developing on practical reason (primarily his defense of God, freedom of the will, and the immortality of the soul as "postulates of practical reason") expanded to the point that an entirely separate treatment was in order,⁴⁵ which he then published as the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788; CPrR 5:1–164).

The origins of the third *Critique* are less straightforward, with the idea to write it falling hard on the heels of working out the second. A letter to C. G. Schütz in June 1787 (C 10:490) indicated his intentions, and six months later we find him writing in a letter to Reinhold (December 28 and 31, 1787):

I am now at work on the critique of taste, and I have discovered a new sort of a priori principles. . . . For there are three faculties of the mind: the faculty of cognition, the faculty of feeling pleasure and displeasure, and the faculty of desire. . . . This systematicity put me on the path to recognizing the three parts of philosophy . . . : theoretical philosophy, teleology, and practical philosophy . . . (C 10:514–15)

Teleological explanation, where one understands nature as a system of purposes rather than a large clockwork following Newtonian laws, was now to be properly addressed by Kant.

The structure of the third *Critique* strikes the casual reader as simply odd, for Kant appears to have published two books under a single cover: the first concerns aesthetics (the nature of the beautiful and the sublime, of genius, and of the moral dimensions of aesthetic judgment), while the second concerns primarily biology (the use of purpose or final causation in our explanation of living organisms, as well as the purpose of nature as a whole). What unites these two halves is the concept of purposiveness guiding judgment, whether that judgment is aesthetic or teleological. With aesthetic judgments, beautiful works of art or natural objects fill us with a disinterested pleasure suggesting a harmonious fit between the mind and the object contemplated; with teleological judgments of nature, organisms appear purposive in their growth and development.

Kant intended with this third *Critique* to complete his critical project by bridging the "incalculable gulf fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, as the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, as the supersensible" (CJ 5:175–76). He hoped to demonstrate the possibility of these two realms forming a coherent whole, and so to bring within a single focus the starry heavens above (the domain of nature as legislated *a priori* by the understanding) and the moral law within (the domain of freedom as legislated *a priori* by reason). Unifying theoretical and practical philosophy under a single principle or system was a preoccupation passed on to those following Kant.

Kant and religion

Prussia's first patron of the Enlightenment, Friedrich the Great, died on August 17, 1786, and was succeeded by his religiously conservative nephew, Friedrich Wilhelm II. Kant's long-time admirer and ally at the Berlin court, K. A. von Zedlitz, was eventually replaced as Minister of Education and Religious Affairs by J. C. Wöllner – the man whom Friedrich the Great described as "a deceitful and intriguing parson" – and after just one week in office, on July 9, 1788, Wöllner issued a religious edict aimed at suppressing the display of Enlightenment beliefs among teachers and clerics, followed in December by a censorship edict to exert more control over religious publications.

⁴⁵ A note in the November 21, 1786 issue of the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* claims that the new edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* would also include a "Critique of Pure Practical Reason" (Ak 3:556).

Kant himself was reprimanded on October 1, 1794, for his publication the previous year of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793; Rel 6:1–202), and perhaps also for his more recent essay “The End of All Things” (1794; EAT 8:327–39) that satirized the government censors. Kant was forbidden to teach or write on matters of religion because he had, in the words of the cabinet order, misused his philosophy “to distort and disparage many of the cardinal and foundational teachings of the Holy Scriptures and of Christianity” (Ak 11:525).

Kant’s early life had been deeply informed by religion, and he remained steadily engaged with religious questions until the very end. In his publications, beginning with his *New Elucidation* (1755) and *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763), he criticized the ontological proofs found in Descartes and Wolff, but then developed a proof based on the necessary conditions for the possibility of existence in general. By the time of his critical writings, however, Kant was quite certain that all such proofs for God’s existence fail and that the scope of natural theology was rather narrow. In general, religious doctrine is beyond the domain of human knowledge, incapable of either proof or disproof, but since certain supersensible ideas – including God, the afterlife, and freedom of the will – have important practical implications for us, Kant found it important “to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (CPR Bxxx).

In sum, the purpose of religion is to bolster our moral lives in community by helping to make actual the moral kingdom of ends (see, for instance, Rel 6:97–99). At the same time, any religion demanding assent to a creed is an affront to our humanity and a breeding ground for hypocrites. As for special revelation, Kant rejected from the very start any use of it to explain physical phenomena, and eventually morality as well. His *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755) offered an account of the universe’s design based strictly on Newtonian mechanics. In addition, three essays of 1756 sought to dissuade his readers from viewing the Lisbon earthquake, and earthquakes in general, as anything more than physical events. According to Kant, they are neither punishments meted out by an angry god, nor do they offer any clues about God’s nature or existence. Kant had little patience for claims of special revelation, which he found deeply problematic – for by what criterion could we ever be certain that some event had a divine origin, much less what it might mean?⁴⁶

Personally, Kant appears to have had little use for organized religion, and perhaps just as little for a personal god. As an adult he rarely passed through a church door.⁴⁷ When a friend asked Kant near the end of his life what he thought about the afterlife, Kant replied, “Nothing certain.”⁴⁸ And Johann Brahl, a frequent dinner guest and long-time editor of the *Hartung* newspaper, noted in 1798 that, “while Kant postulates God, he does not himself believe in it,” nor does he fear death.⁴⁹

Kant is dead; long live Kant!

Two stories have come down to us of how Kant might have died, but did not; and in both cases someone had thought to murder him during one of his regular afternoon walks. The first involved a deranged butcher, whom Kant skillfully talked down. The second involved an escaped prisoner who resolved to shoot dead the first person he met, which turned out to be Kant on his walk, but the sight of the elderly professor so moved the convict that

⁴⁶ One instance of special revelation considered central to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – namely, God’s command that Abraham sacrifice his son Isaac – was singled out for special scorn in Kant’s *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798; CF 7:63).

⁴⁷ Christian Friedrich Reusch, *Kant und seine Tischgenossen*. Aus dem Nachlaß des jüngsten derselben, des Geh. Ob.-Reg.-Rats Dr. Chr. F. Reusch (Königsberg: Tag & Koch, 1848), 5.

⁴⁸ Hasse, *Letzte Äusserungen*, 28–29.

⁴⁹ Abegg, *Reisetagebuch*, 147. Konrad Ludwig Pörschke (1752–1812), a former student and then colleague of Kant’s, told Abegg that Kant had assured him that “he had been teaching for a long time without ever doubting any of the Christian dogma, [but] gradually one piece after another fell away” (Abegg, *Reisetagebuch*, 184).

he instead shot a young boy who happened by.⁵⁰ As it turns out, Kant died peacefully in his own bed, just a month shy of his 80th birthday, on February 12, 1804 – although for all practical purposes he had disappeared sometime the previous year. In both body and mind, by the end Kant was an entirely wasted man.

A number of publications appeared under Kant's name during his last years. The occasional pieces were no more than a few paragraphs in length: a short preface to R. B. Jachmann's book on religion (1800; Ak 8:441), an afterword for a German-Lithuanian dictionary (1800; Ak 8:445), a public notice denouncing Gottfried Vollmer's unauthorized publication of Kant's physical geography lectures (1801; Ak 12:372). Younger colleagues edited three volumes from manuscripts – G. B. Jäsche's *Logic* (1800; Ak 9:1–150), and F. T. Rink's *Physical Geography* (1802; Ak 9:151–436) and *Pedagogy* (1803; Ak 9:439–99) – but Kant had no hand in any of these.

Among these last publications was a two-page public notice denouncing Fichte in the *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung* (August 28, 1799), written just seven years after the notice in that same newspaper in which Kant clarified the authorship of Fichte's first book. Fichte was now seen by many as Kant's proper interpreter and successor, and Kant had observed just the year before that Fichte was annoyed at him for not supporting him more publicly.⁵¹ But far from wishing to support Fichte, Kant was now quite ready to wash his hands of him and his “totally indefensible system,” insisting that the critical philosophy, as set forth in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “rests on a fully secured foundation, established forever” (C 12:370–71).⁵²

Kant was buried on February 28, 1804, just north of the church where he had been baptized 80 years earlier. This was in an arcade given over for the remains of professors, and Kant was interred at the far eastern end. Kant the man is dead, but his philosophy has lived on quite vigorously, kept alive either for its own sake or for the sake of where it led to next.

⁵⁰ August Hagen, “Kantiana,” *Neue Preußische Provinzial-Blätter* 6 (1848): 16.

⁵¹ Abegg, *Reisetagebuch*, 144. Abegg quotes Kant's comments about Fichte: that he has not read “all” of his writings, but that a recent book review assured Kant that he had nothing to gain from them.

⁵² See also Wald, quoted in Reicke, *Kantiana*, 23.