

## Introduction

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### I

Immanuel Kant was born on 22 April 1724 in Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) in East Prussia which, except for occasional journeys into the immediate vicinity, he hardly ever left during the whole of his long life of almost eighty years. Königsberg in the eighteenth century was a lively city which, owing to its flourishing trade, was by no means isolated from the world at large. Kant, who was anything but a recluse, enjoyed social life and intelligent conversation. He was friendly with many Königsberg merchants, among whom there were also Englishmen, two of whom, Green and Motherby, were particularly close friends. Although he was meticulous and regular in his habits, punctual to a fault, he was also a man of urbanity and wit.

Kant's parents were not rich. His father was a harness-maker who lived in Königsberg. His family was steeped in Pietism, the Protestant religious movement which stressed emotional religiosity and the development of the inner life. The pietistic atmosphere of his parents' household was a formative influence in his childhood, and he was particularly impressed by his mother's simple piety. After the early death of his parents (his mother died in 1738, his father in 1746), Kant's relations with his family were not very close.

Kant's outstanding intellectual gifts were recognised at school. It was made possible for him to enter the University of Königsberg, where he was a brilliant student. In 1755 he was granted the right to lecture as *Magister legens* or *Privatdozent*, i.e. as an unsalaried lecturer who depended on his lecture fees for his income. Since his lectures were popular and since he gave a large number of them—twenty a week at least—he was able to eke out a meagre living. He lectured on many subjects—logic, metaphysics, ethics, theory of law, geography, anthropology etc. He began to make his name as a scholar and scientist by his writings. In his *General History of Nature and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), he put forward a highly original account of the origin of the universe similar to the one later elaborated by the French scientist Laplace. It is now generally called

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the ‘Kant–Laplace’ theory. Kant thus started his academic career by discussing a scientific problem, i.e. he sought to vindicate Newtonian science philosophically—an attempt which later gave rise to his critical philosophy. But it was not until 1770 that he was appointed to the chair of logic and metaphysics and at last found economic security. When his fame spread, his stipend was considerably increased. He was Rector of the University on several occasions.

Kant was a stimulating and powerful lecturer. His students were struck by the originality and liveliness of his observations, which were seasoned with a dry ironic humour.

He was also a prolific writer. His really decisive breakthrough as a philosopher came only in 1781 when he published the *Critique of Pure Reason*. For him, this work initiated a revolution in thought realistically compared by himself to the Copernican revolution in astronomy. In fairly rapid succession, the other important works followed.

The publication of *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793, 2nd ed. 1794) offended the then King of Prussia, Frederick William II, who (contrary to Frederick the Great, his predecessor) did not practise tolerance in religious matters. Frederick William II ordered his obscurantist minister Wöllner to write to Kant to extract a promise that he would not write again on religion.<sup>1</sup> Kant reluctantly agreed with their request, which amounted to a Royal command, implicitly qualifying his promise by saying that he would not write again on religious matters as his Majesty’s Most Loyal Subject. After the King’s death, Kant considered himself to be absolved from this undertaking and explained that his pledge applied only to the life-time of Frederick William II, as this phrase ‘Your Majesty’s Most Loyal Subject’<sup>2</sup> indicated. He explained his attitude fully in the preface to his *Contest of Faculties*,<sup>3</sup> in which, by implication, he attacked Frederick William II who had died the year before.

Kant was obviously not easy in his mind about this decision. In an unpublished note, he explained his conduct: ‘Repudiation and denial of one’s inner conviction are evil, but silence in a case like the present one is the duty of a subject; and while all that one says must be true, this does not mean that it is one’s duty to speak out the whole truth in public.’<sup>4</sup>

Kant gradually retired from the university. His mind slowly declined,

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet order of Frederick William II, King of Prussia, of 1 October 1794; *AA* VII, 6; *AA* XI, 506 f.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to King Frederick William II, 12 October 1794; *AA* VII, 7–10, particularly p. 10; also *AA* XI, 508–11, particularly p. 511; cf. also *AA* XII, 406 f.

<sup>3</sup> *AA* VII, 7–10.

<sup>4</sup> *AA* XII, 406.

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his memory gave way, and he had to abandon lecturing. In 1800, his pupil Wasianski had to begin looking after him. Other pupils began to publish his lectures from notes which they had taken down. In 1803, he fell seriously ill for the first time. His mind became more and more clouded. He finally died on 12 February 1804, a few months before the end of his eightieth year.

## II

Kant, at least in English speaking countries, is not generally considered to be a political philosopher of note. Indeed histories of political thought do not give him pride of place, but generally mention him only incidentally, if at all. Historians of political thought ignore him, however, at their peril. Only too frequently, he is merely seen as a forerunner of Hegel. The reasons for this neglect and misunderstanding are not hard to discover. Historians of philosophy, even Kant scholars, have neglected his political writings because the philosophy of his three critiques has absorbed attention almost entirely. And historians of political thought have paid little attention to him, because he did not write a masterpiece in that field. *The Metaphysical Elements of Right* has interested legal historians rather than historians of political theory. Furthermore, the very fact that Kant's great works of critical philosophy are so formidable makes his less exacting political writings appear very much less weighty. It also encourages the belief that they are not central to his thought. This assumption, however, is greatly mistaken. While it would be going too far to see in them the ultimate end of his thought, they are not an accidental by-product. Indeed, they grow organically out of his critical philosophy. In fact, Kant has rightly been called the philosopher of the French Revolution.<sup>1</sup> There is, indeed, an analogy between the spirit of Kant's philosophy and the ideas of the French and American revolutions: for Kant asserted the independence of the individual in face of authority, and the problem of human freedom was at the very core of his thought. Similarly, the revolutionaries of 1776 and 1789 believed that they were attempting to realise the rights of man. Besides, the events of the American and of the French Revolution greatly excited and preoccupied him and he sympathised with the aims of the revolutionaries. He did so although he was a man of conservative disposition who refused to countenance revolution in politics as a legitimate principle of action, and certainly did not

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Heine, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Ernst Elster, Leipzig and Vienna, n.d., iv, 245; also Karl Marx/Friedrich Engels, *Historisch-Kritische Gesamtausgabe* (Frankfurt/Main, 1927), I, 254.

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advocate revolution in his native country, Prussia. But his approach to politics was already shaped well before 1789, as his essays of 1784 reveal. It is possible that the French Revolution may have stimulated him to continue writing on the subject. But the example and influence of Rousseau must not be underrated. Rousseau had taught him to respect the common man;<sup>1</sup> he was for him the Newton of the moral realm.<sup>2</sup> Rousseau's portrait was the only adornment permitted in his house, and when reading *Émile* he even forgot to take his customary afternoon walk, allegedly the only deviation ever to occur from a daily custom followed with clock-like regularity. Kant's views are also, in many ways, close to the aspirations of the French revolutionaries, but in his demand for perpetual peace he goes further. Here he takes up ideas first put forward by Leibniz and the Abbé de St Pierre, but develops them in a novel, original and philosophically rigorous manner.

If it is correct to infer this link between Kant's philosophy and the ideas of the two major eighteenth-century revolutions, the significance of Kant's political thought becomes clear; for the American and French revolutions constituted an open break with the political past. An appeal was made to a secular natural order and to the political rights of individuals for the purpose of initiating large-scale political action. The revolutions, of course, arose from the political, social and economic situation in America and France, but the beliefs of the revolutionaries were not intended as a smoke-screen designed to mislead the public. They depended on a political philosophy in which a belief in the right of the individual would be guaranteed. This attitude was new. In earlier revolutions, even in the English civil war and in 1688, Christian theology had still played an important part in shaping revolutionary thinking in the West. The realities of a revolutionary situation are, of course, always complex. It usually presents a pattern of ideology and political practice which is difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle. Kant did not set out to provide a blueprint for revolutionaries or a theory of revolution. On the contrary, he wanted to arrive at philosophical principles on which a just and lasting internal order and world peace could be based. He wanted to provide a philosophical vindication of representative constitutional government, a vindication which would guarantee respect for the political rights of all individuals.

To understand his political thought, it is necessary to see it in the context of eighteenth-century thought, and against the background of his own general philosophy. The American and French revolutions had,

<sup>1</sup> *AA* xx, 44.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 58.

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to some extent, been prepared for by the ideas of the Enlightenment, the intellectual movement which dominated so much of eighteenth-century thought.<sup>1</sup> Incontestably, the revolutionaries largely used the vocabulary of the Enlightenment, which had created a climate of opinion in many ways favourable to revolutionary action. In Kant, many of the intellectual strands of the Enlightenment converge. He presents a culmination of this intellectual movement, but he is also one of its most thoroughgoing critics. Kant himself characterised the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) as a dynamic process. It was not a static condition, but a continuous process leading to further self-emancipation. The age was not yet enlightened, but still in the process of becoming so. *Aufklärung* meant liberation from prejudice and superstition. It also meant the growing ability to think for oneself. This observation echoes Lessing's famous dictum that what mattered most was not to possess the truth, but to pursue it.<sup>2</sup> In Kant's view, man was to become his own master. In his special function as officer, clergyman, civil-servant etc., he should not reason, but obey the powers that be, but as a man, citizen and scholar, he should have 'the courage to use his own intelligence'.<sup>3</sup> This is the translation which Kant gives to the watchword of the *Aufklärung*, *Sapere Aude*, expanding its meaning for his own purpose. Indeed, this Horatian tag was so popular that it had been inscribed as a motto on a coin struck in 1736 for the society of Alethophiles, or Lovers of Truth, a group of men dedicated to the cause of Enlightenment.<sup>4</sup>

Kant, in his essay *What is Enlightenment? (Was ist Aufklärung?)*, outlines his view of the major tendencies of his age. The Enlightenment has frequently been called the Age of Reason. One of its most striking characteristics is, indeed, the exaltation of reason, but the term 'Enlightenment' (or *Aufklärung* or *les Lumières*) covers a number of ideas and intellectual tendencies which cannot be adequately summarised. A brief characterisation of this movement, as of any other, must needs remain incomplete. For this movement, like all intellectual movements, is made

<sup>1</sup> For thorough general discussions of the Enlightenment cf. *inter alia* Ernst Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung* (Tübingen, 1932) (*The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, trs. Fritz A. Koelln and James Pettegrove, Princeton, N.J., 1951); Paul Hazard, *La pensée européenne au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. De Montesquieu à Lessing*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1946) (*European Thought in the Eighteenth Century*, trs. J. Lewis May, London, 1953); Jack F. Lively (ed.), *The Enlightenment* (London, 1966); Fritz Valjavec, *Geschichte der abendländischen Aufklärung* (Vienna, 1961).

<sup>2</sup> Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Werke* (ed. Julius Petersen and Waldemar von Olshausen), Berlin, Leipzig, Vienna, Stuttgart, n.d. xxiii, 58 f.

<sup>3</sup> *AA* viii, 35.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (ed. and trs.), Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters* (Oxford, 1967), LXXIV ff.

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up of a number of various, and often conflicting, strains of thought. What binds the thinkers of the Enlightenment together, however, is an attitude of mind, a mood rather than a common body of ideas. A growth of self-consciousness, an increasing awareness of the power of man's mind to subject himself and the world to rational analysis, is perhaps the dominant feature. Reliance on the use of reason was, of course, nothing new, but faith in the power of reason to investigate successfully not only nature, but also man and society, distinguishes the Enlightenment from the period which immediately precedes it. For there is a distinct optimistic streak in the thought of the Enlightenment. It springs from, and promotes, the belief that there is such a thing as intellectual progress. It is also revealed in the increasing and systematic application of scientific method to all areas of life. But there was by no means agreement on what scientific method was. Newton's impressive scientific achievement dominated eighteenth-century thinking on science. One school of thought interpreted his work as a great attempt, in the wake of Descartes, to systematise scientific knowledge, whereas another school was struck rather by his emphasis on observation and experiment.

Voltaire, in his *Lettres Philosophiques* or *Lettres sur les Anglais* (1734) (English translation *Letters concerning the English* 1733), popularised Newton and English science in general. He also praised English political life, not only English constitutional arrangements, but also political theory as represented by Locke. Locke's ideas of government by consent and the toleration of different religious and political views appeared to Voltaire in particular and to the thinkers of the Enlightenment in general as exemplary.

These ideas sounded revolutionary in the atmosphere of French politics. Here Church and State resisted change. On the other hand, they persecuted or suppressed heterodox political and religious thought only intermittently. Many thinkers of the Enlightenment believed not only that politics could be subjected to rational scrutiny, but also that political arrangements and institutions could be reconstructed along rational lines. The sceptical refusal to accept traditional political authority is consonant with scepticism towards authority in general. This critical attitude towards authority led to an incessant questioning of all accepted values, particularly those of religion. Revealed religion was scrutinised; in fact, it was put on trial.

The secularisation of accepted beliefs and doctrines is an important process in the development of the Enlightenment, whether it be in the field of religion, science, morals, politics, history or art. Contrary to

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medieval custom, the individual spheres of human experience were isolated from religion. The basic intellectual position, then, was anthropocentric. And for the purpose of our enquiry into Kant's politics, it is particularly important to note that the realms of morality and law, politics and history were seen in a secular context. Although these spheres were separated from religion, the view prevailed in the Enlightenment that, for each of them, universal laws could be established.

The tone of the Enlightenment in Germany was somewhat different from that prevailing in Britain and France. On the whole, considerably less emphasis was laid on empiricism than in Britain. The German thinkers were more erudite, but also more abstract and professorial than their English and French counterparts; and they were frequently more heavy-handed. The absence of a metropolitan culture militated against certainty of style, while the parochial politics of the many petty principalities and comparatively small free Imperial cities were not conducive to the rise of lively political discussion. Unlike Britain, Germany offered virtually no opportunities for the intellectuals to take part in politics. Frederick the Great was, of course, an intellectual, but an absolute monarch anyhow presents a special case.

It is characteristic of this political stagnation that the political event which most affected eighteenth-century Germany took place in France: the French Revolution aroused German political thought from its somnolence.<sup>1</sup> Nonetheless, modern political thought in Germany virtually began with the impact of 1789. Many thinkers, in Germany as elsewhere, welcomed the revolution at first and believed it to be the dawn of a new age. But disillusion began to set in with the outbreak of the Terror. The revolution in practice spread only to those territories occupied by the French revolutionary armies. Revolutionary sentiment in Germany was a tender plant capable of blossoming forth only under the stimulus of force.

Kant and Goethe, the two leading German minds of the age, assessed the political situation correctly. Both recognised that while in France the revolution had answered a great political need, the political situation in Germany was not at all ripe for revolutionary activity. In Germany as in England and France, the rise of the bourgeoisie was noticeable, but the German bourgeoisie had not become emancipated from the dominance of the princes and the aristocracy. It did not possess the self-confidence

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Jacques Droz, *L'Allemagne et la Révolution Française* (Paris, 1949), pp. 154-71; G. P. Gooch, *Germany and the French Revolution* (London, 1920), pp. 160-82; Karl Vorländer, 'Kants Stellung zur französischen Revolution', *Philosophische Abhandlungen Hermann Cohen gewidmet* (Berlin, 1912); for a full discussion of Kant's attitude to the French Revolution.

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of its French and English counterparts. Germany was a much poorer country than either Britain or France, and a rising self-confident class which is prevented from giving free expression to its political ambitions is much more likely to take revolutionary action than a weak and unsure one. There was little scope for political freedom in Germany. Even in the Prussia of Frederick the Great, freedom of speech, according to Lessing, meant only the ability freely to criticise religion, but not the government.<sup>1</sup> In addition, the small size of most German principalities permitted a much closer supervision of the subjects by rulers than in larger countries. The growth of bureaucratic control also impeded economic development and was another operative factor in sapping the self-confidence of the German bourgeoisie.

Given these political, social and economic conditions, it is not surprising that the Enlightenment in Germany was different from other Western countries. German philosophy, unlike British philosophy for instance, continued in many ways to resist the impact of empirical aspects of science. Rationalism dominated the outlook of German and French universities, but the style of German philosophical writing was, on the whole, much less urbane than that of its French counterpart.

In setting Kant against this background, it must not be forgotten that the Enlightenment was only one body of thought in the eighteenth century, even if it was the dominant one. There were other strands. Criticism of the Enlightenment arose not merely in its decline, but accompanied its rise and predominance. In Germany, and not only in Germany, the eighteenth century saw the spread of scientific ideas through the thinkers of the Enlightenment, but it was also characterised by a religious way of life centred on the emotions and inward experience. In Germany, Pietism stressed the cultivation of the inner life and fostered an emotional approach to religion. (It was not without its counterparts elsewhere—e.g. Methodism and Quietism.) Kant's fervent conviction of man's inward sense of morality may well have been rooted in that particular soil. Furthermore, persistent criticism of the Enlightenment came not only from the orthodoxy of established religion and from privileged or traditional political interests, but also, as the century progressed, from various new irrationalists. It came from those who preferred intuition to reason, the perception of genius to common sense, and spontaneity to calculated reflection. They tended to base their understanding on the individual instance and example rather than on the universal rule, and even on poetry rather than on science. Their attitude to science was, at

<sup>1</sup> Letter from Lessing to Friedrich Nicolai, 25 August 1769.



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its very best, ambivalent. One of the ironies of history is that Königsberg harboured at the same time the most potent champion of the Enlightenment, albeit a most critical one, and its most original opponent, viz. Johann Georg Hamann. The seminal critic of the Enlightenment, Johann Gottfried Herder, the mentor of the German literary school of the *Sturm und Drang* (Storm and Stress), also spent some time in Königsberg and became a friend of Hamann and a pupil of Kant. Hamann and Herder criticised the claim of the Enlightenment to discover universally valid principles and to see history and society in terms of uniform regularity. For them, the individual instance was more revealing and could not readily be subsumed under general laws. In a particularly incisive and outspoken review of Herder's main work, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (*Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*) (1785), Kant took issue with Herder.<sup>1</sup> He apparently sensed that here was not only the decisive issue that separated his approach to knowledge from Herder's, but that it was also the watershed between those who wish to understand the world principally in terms of science and logic and those who do not. Consequently, he mercilessly exposed the logical flaws in Herder's argument. Herder, in turn, reacted with unforgiving bitterness.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, there can be no bridge between Kant's method and an approach to knowledge primarily based on intuitions of poetic truth and emphasis on the individual example.<sup>3</sup>

In the sphere of political thought, the differences between Britain and France on the one hand, and Germany on the other, were as marked as they were in any other area of life. There was no single dominating school of political thinking in Germany prior to Kant. There were many people who wrote about politics, and some of their writings were distinguished. The school of Natural Law forms one strand, the cameralists another. In addition, there were a number of publicists, such as Schlözer and the two Mosers, father and son. The most important, perhaps, and certainly the best known political thinkers, were Leibniz and Frederick the Great. Political theory was not central to the activity of either: general philosophy absorbed Leibniz's interests, and government, war and the administration

<sup>1</sup> AA VIII, 43–66, *Rezensionen von J. G. Herders Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, first published in *Allgemeine Literaturzeitung*, IV, No. 271 (Jena, 1785).

<sup>2</sup> *Metakritik zur Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1799) (Johann Gottfried Herder, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. B. Suphan, Berlin, 1877–1913, XXI).

<sup>3</sup> For a general account cf. Alexander Gillies, *Herder* (Oxford, 1944); cf. also H. B. Nisbet, *Herder and the Philosophy and History of Science* (Modern Humanities Research Association Dissertation Series, 3, Cambridge, 1970) for a thorough account of Herder's approach to science.

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of his country the Prussian king's. The thinkers of the school of Natural Law,<sup>1</sup> indeed, propounded political theories of great importance, and even laid the foundation for revolution, but their style of thinking was not itself revolutionary. Nor was it specifically German. It continued, modified, and even changed a great tradition. The modern representatives of that school—men like Althusius, Grotius and Pufendorf—had continued to uphold an immutable standard of law which was to determine the positive laws enacted by the state and to regulate the conduct of its citizens, but they had liberated the philosophical study of law and politics from its dependence on theology. Its German practitioners dominated the faculties of law in German universities and German jurisprudence in general. Their works were, like many of the philosophical writings of the *Aufklärung*, abstract and dry. It was the accepted doctrine; it is therefore not surprising that Wolff, the leading philosopher of the *Aufklärung*, wrote a treatise on this subject. Not even Leibniz or Frederick the Great brought about a revolution in political thinking in Germany. It needed perhaps both the events of the French Revolution and the radical reorientation of thought promoted by Kant's philosophy to set in train a new mode of political thinking.

Kant assimilated or criticised the political ideas of many great thinkers, such as Machiavelli, the theorists of the school of Natural Law, Hobbes, Locke, Hume and Rousseau. Of these, only Hobbes was singled out for attack (in *Theory and Practice*), a fact which calls perhaps for comment. The political theories of the two philosophers, of course, differed greatly. Kant rejected Hobbes' authoritarian view of sovereignty, his rationalism, his attempt to apply the methods of geometry to human and social affairs and his explanation of society based on a psychological assumption, that of the fear of sudden death. Yet the basic political problem is the same for both: to turn a state of war into a state of order and peace. Law is a command and has necessarily to be enforced. Sovereignty is indivisible; the individual's status as an independent rational being can be safeguarded only in a civil state. Finally, despite all radical differences in method and conclusions, both thinkers are exemplary in their attempt to develop a rigorous, consistent and coherent argument based on an appeal to reason, unhampered by tradition or any other form of tutelage. In contrast to Hobbes, Kant is indebted to the school of Natural Law and believes in an immutable standard of right. He was, however, much more radical than

<sup>1</sup> See A. P. D'Entrèves, *Natural Law* (London and New York, 1951); cf. also Otto von Guericke, *Natural Law and The Theory of Society* (ed. and trs. Ernest Barker), 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1934).