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General introduction: the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries

Nicholas Boyle

I

Between 1781, when Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared, and 1807, when Hegel published the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, an intellectual revolution took place in Germany as long-lasting and widespread in its effects as the contemporary political revolution in France. Unlike the French Revolution, however, the German revolution has been underestimated and the extent and degree of its influence inadequately recognised, even in Germany, where its role in the cultural history of the nation overshadows and distorts the appreciation of its international significance. Yet throughout the European and American worlds and, by extension, wherever Euro-American culture has left its mark, Kant's critique and reappraisal of the Enlightenment consensus, and the response to his challenge by the next generation of German thinkers, have profoundly affected theory and practice in most of the fields studied by the humanities and social sciences. Political thought was given a new direction by Kant and the post-Kantians through a new understanding of the State and of the foundations of law, and social and critical theory is largely a post-Kantian invention. In its transformation by Marx, Hegel's social thinking determined the political landscape of the twentieth century and still provides the ideology through which one fifth of the human race is at least nominally ruled. Kant, and Hegel's disagreement with Kant, gave later moral and religious thinking some of its canonical problems and most powerful concepts – autonomy, universalisability, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), and (world-)spirit, for example. Aesthetics, itself a disciplinary innovation of eighteenth-century German academic Enlightenment, was almost immediately refounded by Kant's followers and, together with their new and immensely persuasive concept of 'Art', has influenced the understanding, the institutionalisation,

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and thus the practice, of literature, music, the visual arts and architecture, down to the present day. Even in the biological sciences the monistic and evolutionary tendencies and morphological interests of the post-Kantians prepared the way for the now all-powerful Darwinian model, while their various pioneering formulations of the concept of the unconscious mind bore fruit in the later development of depth psychology. It goes without saying that across the world much of academic philosophy still devotes itself to what are essentially Kantian and post-Kantian questions, and even the philosophy practised in Anglo-American universities sometimes proves on close inspection to incorporate elements that derive from the same source. The pathways through which an initial complex of potent innovations, concentrated and localised in a specific social and geographical context, came to be a major determinant of Western thinking are still imperfectly understood. The phenomenon itself is only hazily discerned and is often ignored. Over the last five years more than forty scholars from Europe and North America have collaborated in the task of tracing the presence in the self-understanding of the modern world of Kant's 'Copernican' revolution and its consequences. Under the title *The Impact of Idealism* we now present our findings. Preliminary and partial though these may be, they amount together to a recovery of a significant but forgotten part of our shared intellectual inheritance.

Such a venture naturally raises acute problems of definition. One possible misunderstanding can be dealt with fairly easily. The term 'Idealism' in our title is shorthand for 'German Idealism', a reasonably familiar and established concept in the history of philosophy.[1] This project is not concerned with the historically unlocalised 'view that mind is the most basic reality and that the physical world exists only as an appearance to or expression of mind, or as somehow mental in its inner essence'.[2] Nor is it concerned, except for purposes of comparison and derivation, with philosophers earlier than the German Idealists – Plato or Berkeley, for example – who might for one reason or another be called 'idealists' too. 'German Idealism', however, is a term that raises its own problems. Are the figures conventionally grouped under this heading properly described as 'idealists' in the sense that they adopted some such philosophical position as that just cited? Even if they did not, or even if it is irrelevant whether they did or did not, did the doctrines which they actually held have enough in common for them legitimately to be treated as a group? Did their positions change so much in the course of their lifetimes that no single term could be appropriate to their different phases? These difficulties, real though they may be in contexts different from the present, can also be resolved fairly easily, as far as these essays are concerned, if it is accepted that

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the term 'German Idealism' is also historical shorthand. 'German Idealism' is short for the principal philosophers who were part of the remarkable cultural efflorescence in Germany at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, notably Kant and those who were in productive dialogue with Kant and with one another, and who all at some time and in some sense used the term 'idealism' to describe at least some part of what they believed and taught. German Idealism is what Goethe, himself a figure on its margins, in 1805 called 'that great philosophical movement, begun by Kant' which, he said, 'no scholar . . . has with impunity rejected, opposed, or scorned'.[a] The term 'German Idealism', in short, means, for present purposes, the philosophical work of Kant, Fichte, Schelling, Hegel and Schopenhauer, and – more controversially, perhaps – some components of the work of such major literary contemporaries of these as Goethe, Schiller, Hölderlin and Friedrich Schlegel. It does not affect the unity of the phenomenon we are studying that there are real and possibly serious differences in the meaning of the term 'idealism' when Kant uses it in conjunction with the words 'critical' or 'transcendental', when Fichte or Schelling oppose it to 'dogmatism' or 'criticism', or Schiller opposes it to 'realism', or when Schelling and Hegel use it in connection with their philosophy of identity. It is perfectly normal in the history of ideas, as of politics, to find that the flags or slogans for the sake of which battles are nominally fought mean different things to those whom they unite in a common cause.

If 'Idealism' is a term in need of explication, 'impact' is no less so. The task we have set ourselves is not just a matter of reception history, nor of the influence of one individual figure on another. It also involves recognising how questions given their canonical modern form in the German Idealist period – for example about knowledge, self-consciousness, freedom, society, history, God – have been renegotiated in different times and contexts, and how the original questions and answers have often survived that renegotiation. But further still, and most challengingly, perhaps, it involves recognising those areas where German Idealism has not been received, but should have been: the areas where the work of these great thinkers can still act as a creative stimulus and produce new thoughts for a new age. The full and proper title for such a project would presumably therefore be something like: 'The reception, influence, and continuing relevance of those younger German philosophical contemporaries of Kant who saw their work as in productive

a. 'Daß kein Gelehrter ungestraft jene große philosophische Bewegung, die durch Kant begonnen, von sich abgewiesen, sich ihr widersetzt, sie verachtet habe.' *Goethes Werke*. Hamburger Ausgabe in 14 Bänden, ed. E. Trunz (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1988), xii, 120.

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dialogue with his, and of Kant's work in so far as they received it in that sense.' 'The Impact of Idealism' may be less accurate a title, but it can hardly be denied that it is shorter.

From its inception the project has faced the intractable problem of reconciling breadth and depth. In many areas – social theory, the philosophy of mind, post-structuralism, aesthetics, for example – the contribution of the German Idealists has obviously been so extensive and pervasive that whole monographs could not do it justice. W. J. Mander's recent monumental study of British Idealism[3] also demonstrates how richly a neglected and seemingly limited field can reward the investigator. Since it was our principal motive to draw attention to a feature of the cultural landscape so big that few even noticed it, we early decided that we had to aim to be 'comprehensive rather than exhaustive'. We believe, that is, that we have, more or less, mapped out the terrain, identified many of its major features, and at least touched on most of the issues that need further discussion. We have combined general surveys with selected studies of detail that are intended to be exemplary. But we cannot possibly claim to have dealt with everything this topic might include, not even within the four volumes generously allotted to us by our publishers. Volume I has to discuss not only the academic study of philosophy in several different countries, but also developments in the theory and practice of natural science. Volume II embraces social, political and moral philosophy, and gender studies. Volume III deals with literature, literary theory and aesthetics, Volume IV with Biblical, systematic and moral theology. The bibliographies appended to each of these volumes will, we hope, be a guide to future study of the Idealist legacy in all these fields. But they are also a warning of how much has had to be left out.

There are, finally, some more specific definitional problems that have had to be settled – how satisfactorily, the reader must judge. First, there is the question of Schopenhauer. It could be urged against including Schopenhauer in a study of German Idealism that he vehemently scorned the work of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, and that his doctrine of 'the Ideas' was wholly distinct from theirs, and indeed from Kant's, and had a different origin. That, however, would be to give insufficient weight to the historical connection. Schopenhauer may or may not have been a philosophical idealist but, historically speaking, he was certainly a post-Kantian. He explicitly states that he regards his theory of knowledge as a continuation and correction of Kant's.[4] Indeed, his entire system is structured around Kant's distinction between 'appearances' – for Schopenhauer, 'representation' – and 'things as they are in themselves' – for Schopenhauer the one thing-in-itself, the will.

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Dissatisfaction with Kant's treatment of that distinction was a common factor in the philosophical beginnings of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel, and figured prominently in the critique of Kant by Schopenhauer's teacher, G. E. Schulze ('Aenesidemus') (1761–1833).[5] In so far as he set out to redo Kant's work and to reinterpret his terminology – 'understanding', 'reason', 'freedom', even 'ideas' – Schopenhauer clearly shared an ambition with his older contemporaries, even if he accused them of 'charlatanism' and 'windbaggery'.[b] To exclude him from our discussion would be to overlook an important route by which, through Wagner and Nietzsche, Thomas Mann and Samuel Beckett (and indeed Ludwig Wittgenstein), the themes of German Idealism entered the high culture of the twentieth century.

A second, rather different problem, is posed by Kant himself. A full survey of Kant's influence on modern thought would have a narrower and deeper focus than the present project, but would also run to many more volumes.[6] The contributors to *The Impact of Idealism* accepted – on the whole – that it made sense to maintain the historical perspective and to treat Kant as the first and most influential figure in a school, rather than to attempt to assess him in independence of the powerful thinkers through whom his work was first refracted. Kant, in other words, is here treated as one of the post-Kantians, or as the originator of questions with which his immediate philosophical successors were concerned, rather than as one of the isolated and supra-historical giants of Western philosophy (which of course he also is).

If, however, a historical perspective is to be adopted, the question might be raised whether German Idealism has been distinguished clearly enough from Romanticism – whether, therefore, the limits of the present investigation are either too broad or too narrow. To that a simple answer might be that not until there is a generally accepted definition of Romanticism can it be distinguished clearly from anything. A genuine problem arises only with the group centred on Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenberg, 1772–1801) and Friedrich Schlegel (1772–1829) known as 'Jena Romanticism'. That problem can be eliminated if the view is accepted that this group, which undoubtedly showed some philosophical originality, would be better termed 'the literary school of German Idealism', and after the dispersal of the school in 1803, there were no further serious philosophical contributions from an unarguably 'Romantic' quarter. Seen in the international context these distinctions anyway dwindle into insignificance. In a European perspective,

b. 'Windbeutelei und Scharlatanerei.' SpSW i, xx.

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Goethe, Schiller and Hölderlin are pre-eminent representatives of Romanticism, however they may be classified in Germany. For the purposes of this investigation they may equally naturally qualify as German Idealists: Goethe as a self-confessed eccentric Kantian (but perhaps the truest Kantian of them all);[7] Schiller as a highly influential reinterpreter of Kant's aesthetics; Hölderlin as not only the supreme philosophical poet of the movement – as Aquinas was to Dante, so Fichte was to Hölderlin – but also the *éminence grise* who pointed the young Hegel towards his true vocation. In terms of social and cultural history, German Idealism was the philosophical core of a movement of which the more literary outliers in Germany are given the name of 'Romanticism' (and, for good measure, of 'Classicism', but that is another matter). That movement was an outburst of intellectual activity extraordinarily concentrated in time and space, and of extraordinary internal coherence and connectedness, to which the distinction between literature and philosophy was of little relevance. If we are seeking a cause for this intellectual explosion that a social historian can understand, then we can probably say that it lay in a religious crisis experienced within a particularly restrictive social structure. We may well see in the extension of this crisis to less restrictive societies a reason for the impact of Idealism in contexts and countries very different from those in which it originated.

II

Germany from Anglophilia to the first Critique

The beginnings of German Idealism, in the sense in which the term is used here, lie in the decade of virtual silence, from 1770 to 1781, during which Kant, woken from his dogmatic slumbers by Hume, but at first publishing almost nothing, meditated and drafted the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason*. It was not mere chance that these ten years coincided with the period known in literary history as Storm and Stress (*Sturm und Drang*). The 1770s were a time of cultural crisis in Germany; out of the crisis emerged the distinctive form both of modern German literature and of modern German philosophy; and the crisis itself was the consequence and manifestation of a distinctively German social and political problematic.

Germany – if we mean by that the area of the Second Reich in 1914 – was in the eighteenth century something of a sleeping giant.[8] Its population of around 20 million was over twice that of England and Wales, but the economy was overwhelmingly agricultural: the largest towns – Vienna, Berlin,

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Hamburg – had fewer than 200,000 inhabitants at a time when London had over a million. After the Thirty Years War (1618–1648) economic leadership and political control had passed from the bourgeoisie, from the craftsmen and bankers, into the hands of local, absolute rulers. In England and France there was a significant property-owning middle class, a bourgeoisie in the full sense of the word, amounting to perhaps 25 per cent of the population.[9] In Germany the equivalent class was proportionally much smaller and could engage in political or economic activity of only local importance. But in the middle third of the eighteenth century a wind of change began to blow. After the Seven Years War (1757–1763) and the victory of the allied Protestant powers, Prussia and Great Britain, over Catholic France and Austria, the literary and intellectual culture of the English-speaking middle classes, which industrially and commercially were going from strength to strength, enjoyed ever greater prestige and influence in Germany, and threatened to displace the court-focused culture of France, dominant in the German princely states since 1648.

This turn, however, despite later interpretations of it as an embryonic nationalism, had much less to do with ethnicity and patriotism than with class and politics. To reject French models in favour of English models, or models found in an Anglophone world, was to reject an absolutist state structure, centred on courts and sustained by a rigid hierarchy, in favour of a bourgeois class that was or desired to be culturally autonomous, and by implication it aspired to political autonomy as well.

Unfortunately, the desire was not commensurate with the realities. The point of decision, the point at which dreams had to dissolve and Germany had to decide to find its own way forward, was the crisis we now call Storm and Stress. Storm and Stress was the moment when Germany made its most strenuous attempt to have a bourgeois culture according to the English pattern and discovered that it could not. From roughly 1765 to roughly 1785 Germany saw an attempt to establish an at least partly commercial national theatre in Hamburg, free of the princely patronage that theatres elsewhere all required; it saw attempts to write plays that had some of the characteristics of Shakespeare, and some of the characteristics of the eighteenth-century English novel; it saw the growth and exaggeration of a cult of sentimental relationships based at least partly and consciously on models provided by Richardson and later Laurence Sterne; it saw in philosophy an engagement with the more materialist and sceptical elements in the thought of Locke and Hume, and the translation and discussion of the moral and economic philosophy of such figures of the Scottish Enlightenment as Hutcheson,

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Ferguson and Adam Smith. It even saw the writing of the one realistic novel of contemporary German life which completely corresponded to the English formula, for it was both a runaway publishing success and the vehicle of some of the deepest thinking of the time – Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. But *Werther* stands alone, and not even Goethe could write another novel like it, because *Werther* is the novel of the *failure* of the Storm and Stress. It catches the moment when the German Protestant intelligentsia were forced to recognise that their material circumstances did not permit the simple transplantation on to German soil of the western European Enlightenment, and especially of its English version. *Werther* is a parable of the fate of the German middle class in the watershed decade of the 1770s, and it was hugely popular because in it the German middle class recognised itself. But it took Goethe ten years, during which, like Kant, he published next to nothing, to recover from the crisis it represented and to define for himself a new path. By the late 1780s, the mid-century period of Anglophilia was over and the German literary and philosophical renaissance was well under way.

For Kant too the 1770s were a period in which he struggled to accommodate to native German circumstances a powerful, even threatening, impulse from the Anglophone world. Because he was seeking, or at any rate achieved, an accommodation, his struggle, unlike Werther's, did not end in disaster and, like Goethe, he survived to see others travel the path he had defined, though to a destination that was not his own. This cannot be the place to attempt to survey the critical philosophy as a whole. It is, however, important to recognise both how personal and how typical was the challenge to Kant represented by his encounter with Hume. In 1770 Kant was finally appointed to the one post he aspired to, the professorship of logic and metaphysics at Königsberg. He had over twenty years of exertion, waiting and self-denial behind him, and he expected to continue teaching the foundations of the (gently updated) rationalist philosophy of Leibniz and Wolff as he had done hitherto. No sooner had he reached this goal, however, than a sudden recognition of the full force of Hume's scepticism put in question both the validity of what he had done in the past and the integrity of any attempt to carry it on into the future. Nor was the confrontation simply intellectual and personal: it was a confrontation of social and political cultures. If Leibnizian rationalism was, as Voltaire devastatingly presented it in *Candide*, a demonstration of a divinely sanctioned order in things, exemplified, *inter alia*, in the monarchical order of the German states, Humean empiricism spoke alluringly of an ungrounded, perhaps adventitious, order constructed out of the habits, passions and judgements of human beings subject to no authority but

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themselves – the free men, as it were, of the Anglo-Scottish bourgeoisie. The fight for supremacy in Kant's system between sensibility and understanding, and, in moral matters, between understanding and reason, was also a fight between English and German models of (social) order, for a generation and a class that saw in England a hope for emancipation in Germany.

Kant's 'Copernican Revolution' – his decision to explain the regularities in our experience by the necessary ways in which we think rather than by the necessary ways in which things behave – was widely understood at the time (and subsequently) as an assertion of the absolute right to self-determination of the individual 'subject' (whatever that might be), possibly even in a political sense. If anything, it was the opposite. By showing how the rationalist, Leibniz—Wolffian order of things was not a feature of the external world, but was internal to us, Kant might appear simply to have made every man his own monarch: in fact, though, he had also shown that the monarchs' realm was *only* internal. Everyman might count himself a king of infinite space, but he was bounded in a nutshell. Kant's truly subversive step, in the German context, was to require that to count as knowledge thoughts must have a content locatable in space and time. That was his – very extensive – concession to Hume, and to English empiricism generally, and an empowerment, not of an infinite and internal subject, but of *l'homme moyen sensuel* finding a way through the external world. If he then further required that sensibility should submit itself to being ordered by a rationalist system, so that coherent individual experience should become possible, that was an accommodation to established authority which internalised an existing power structure rather than offered emancipation from it. However, through being internalised, the monarchical authority did indeed become subject to the free decision of the ethical agent to recognise it, and in that sense the common contemporary interpretation of Kantianism as a philosophy of self-determination was correct after all. It was wrong, though, – and for this the systematisation of Kantian critique by K. L. Reinhold (1757–1823) was as responsible as Fichte's ethically based polemic in favour of a philosophy of the ego – in two important respects. First, it reduced the epistemological caveats with which Kant surrounded his doctrine of freedom to the simple opposition of 'appearances' and 'things-in-themselves'.[c] And, second, it overlooked that Kant postponed the full realisation in space and time of a self-determined rational human order – a 'Kingdom of God'[d] – to an indefinite future that

c. 'Erscheinungen, Dinge an sich selbst.' e.g. *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B592, A564.
d. 'Reich Gottes.' e.g. *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A232 (KW VII, 260).

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could be approached only asymptotically. Like other Ideas he postulated, the perfect harmony of freedom and nature could have only regulative, not constitutive status: it was a goal to strive for, not a goal it was realistic to expect to attain. When Kantianism became German public property in the 1790s, it was not appreciated that its originator had learned the lessons of the 1770s. A realistic Idealist, such as Kant, could strive for the liberation of the German middle class, but, unlike his Storm and Stress contemporaries, did not expect to attain it in his own lifetime.

The extraordinarily subtle equilibrium that Kant established between the conflicting powers he identified in the mind enabled him, after the crisis of the 1770s, to maintain in his public life a position as the loyal, republican, subverter of an authoritarian, monarchical, regime. That position was perfectly attuned to the particular circumstances in which Kant found himself: not Hume's circumstances as a man (eventually) of private means who never held an academic post, but the distinctive circumstances of the German middle class and, within that class, of the publicly active intelligentsia. In two significant respects Kant was unlike Hume, but like other intellectuals among his fellow-countrymen: he was a state employee, and he was a university professor. Enlightenment Germany might be lacking in rentiers, or industrial or commercial capitalists, but, thanks to its multiplicity of sovereign princes, it had in abundance a class of state-salaried officials. Germany's officials – and there were tens of thousands of them – were close to political power, and were often its executive arm,[10] but could not exercise it in their own right. What distinguished them as a class was not their material but their intellectual capital – their university education. Germany had around forty universities at a time when England had two, but these were not founded or maintained out of a disinterested love of learning. They were founded to educate civil servants, and functioned as 'channels for social advancement into the ranks of the clergy and the bureaucracy'.[11] Consequently, the classes which became the vehicle of the second German renaissance were not a commercial or industrial bourgeoisie, but the cultural triangle of forces composed of the Protestant clergy, the professors and the secular administrators, united by their economic dependence on the state they served and by the university education that has led historians to give them the name *die Gebildeten*.[12] However, although Kant's achievement of an equilibrium between Hume and Leibniz made sense of his personal position as a loyal yet critical state official, his example was not one that could be followed by many from the generation that came to maturity after 1770. To understand how it came about that, after a first wave of enthusiasm, not

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