

# ▼ Introduction

## ▼ Connection with Part One of Topic

- Last time, we looked at Nominalism and Luther's thought.
- We will continue this time by choosing another "moment" in the development of thought that leads to the current crisis.
- Immanuel Kant lived in the 18th century (1724-1804) and was raised in a pietist family (Pietism was a form of Lutheranism, itself a kind of "toned-down" version of Luther's thought).
- In university, he studied the empirical sciences, and most especially Newton's astronomy. This will influence his thinking to no little extent.

## ▼ The thought of Immanuel Kant is interesting to us for two reasons:

- First, because it represents a "systemization" of Luther's own ideas – where Luther merely concerned himself with religion, Kant is attempting to understand all of our knowing and acting.
- ▼ Second, because especially in the realm of ethics (which concerns itself with morally good and bad actions), Kant's thought underlies much of our modern thinking. If there is such a thing as a "Protestant Ethics," it is really "Kantian Ethics."
  - The modern world is crumbling, of course, but this still inhabits our thinking to no little extent.

## ▼ Context: Modern Philosophy and René Descartes

- Before we approach Kant, we have to set the stage somewhat by making a brief remark about one of Kant's predecessors, René Descartes (1596-1650).
- ▼ Descartes introduces into philosophy a "doubt" about our knowledge. To illustrate his thinking:
  - He sees that sometimes, as he says, his senses give him information which he knows is not true. To take an example, the straw in the glass of water – it seems, to our sight, that the straw is broken (because of the refraction of light), and yet we know well that the straw is still in one piece.
  - Descartes reasons that, if his senses can deceive him, he cannot wholly rely upon them as the foundation for certitude in his knowing.

- He then begins to ask himself: what is the foundation of our knowledge such that we can indeed have certainty? Phrased otherwise: how do I know that I am knowing things with certainty?
  - Descartes himself will propose a way out of this dilemma, but the important thing for our purposes is to see that, once this question takes hold, **we definitively cut ourselves off from what is *outside* us, and our knowing becomes primarily of what is *inside* us.**
- ▼ This brings us back to the idea which actually began with nominalism, viz. that I finally do not know the thing outside, but I only know my *impression* of that thing.
- The doubt which Descartes casts upon our *sensation* as a means for our knowledge is going to affect philosophical thought for centuries afterwards.
- ▼ The “Cartesian Doubt,” as it is called, is also going to broaden and ultimately lead to complete skepticism, viz. “How can I know that I know anything?” To illustrate this, we could use Descartes’ own question against the doubting itself: why should I not also doubt that I am really doubting?
- We’re oversimplifying things here, but, with hindsight, it is easier to see the dangers that arise from cutting our knowing off from the outside world.
- ▼ We can also see how much this idea of “doubting” is present in our own thinking. Take the example of popular movies and people’s reaction to them:
- The Matrix – based on the idea that we are living in a computer simulation. When people see this movie, they ask, “But what if we are in a computer simulation? How would we know that we aren’t?”
  - More recently, Inception – based on the idea of sharing dreams. Of course, your grip on what’s “real” is called into question if you spend most of your time in a dreamworld. For those who have seen the film, the last scene is a kind of “shout-out” to Cartesian Doubt: if the top keeps spinning, then what we were assuming to be “reality” throughout the film is maybe not reality at all!
- ▼ The reason I call this the “context” for Kant is because he takes the same starting point as Descartes viz. that what we know is our impressions of things outside:
- We do not first know what is outside of us and then reflect upon our own knowing.
  - We first know our knowing.

# ▼ Kant

## ▼ Introduction

▼ **Kant's philosophy is really too vast to attack in one discussion, let alone as a part of a bigger discussion, so we are going to focus in on two broad points only:**

- The first is how Kant deals with our knowing, and especially whether we can know what in some way transcends the material world.
- The second is Kant's understanding of morality, or "Kantian Ethics."

## ▼ First Point: Kant's understanding of our knowing

• **Kant was very impressed by the progress which empirical science was making in his own day.**

▼ **He therefore poses to himself a question: why is it that certain sciences – such as logic, mathematics, and empirical science – have seemingly made such easy strides forward, whereas philosophy, and especially higher philosophy – dealing with the immortality of the soul, human freedom, and the existence of God – seems to be plagued with difficulties and disagreements.**

- Note, in passing, that in some way he is echoing Descartes here, who saw the disagreement among philosophers as a real problem to calling philosophy a "science."
- Descartes concluded that he should "start over" and "find the real ground of certainty" for philosophy.

▼ **Kant tries to answer this question by first examining the empirical sciences.**

- Note that in this examination, he begins from the same starting point as Descartes, viz. we do not really know what is *outside* of us; we know only our impressions of what is outside.
- For Kant, this starting point takes on a particular "flavor," viz. our mind works in such a way that it imposes very definite ideas on the experiences which it has, i.e. on what comes in from outside.
- **These Kant calls the "categories"** – it is as if our mind is a machine which, receiving some kind of input, inevitably manipulates the input and then knows only the result of that manipulation. So, whenever we know, we know only the

combination of the experience from outside and whatever our mind imprints upon that experience.

- ▼ **After his examination of empirical science, Kant then turns to higher philosophy:**
  - Now this higher philosophy pretends to deal with what entirely surpasses our immediate experience – we cannot experience the immortality of the soul or the existence of God. And even our own free will is seemingly unknowable because we cannot know whether we are just being manipulated all the time.
  - Therefore, Kant says, if higher philosophy is to be scientific at all, then we must be able to found it upon something that has certainty without consulting our experiences. In other words, we have to find within our mind itself the truth of these matters.
  - Kant “tries out” these various positions by making an argument for and against each of them (e.g. for and against the existence of a higher being, God). In a slightly different form, these are usually called the Kantian “antinomies of pure reason.”
  - What he finds is that he has no way of determining which side of the antinomy is the true argument – each side is equally convincing.
- ▼ **Kant therefore concludes that “pure reason” (reason by itself) can decide neither for nor against the real human freedom, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God.**
  - He sees this as an “emptying out” of reason, “to make room for faith.”
  - If, Kant says, we have some kind of “faith” then the way is open to believe in these things – but then you are in a region which pure reason cannot touch.
- ▼ **Note immediately that this conforms very well with Luther’s own thought!**
  - Luther said that faith was *not something of reason*. Faith is rather a kind of blind act of confidence.
  - Kant opens the way to reconcile this idea while not doing away with reason altogether.
- ▼ **We therefore have a real dualism in man:**
  - The realm of reason, which concerns things of our daily experience – this is properly called “science.”
  - The realm of faith, which is beyond reason and cannot be approached by reason – this is “religion” and it cannot be called “scientific.”

- ▼ As a final point here, if we fast-forward for a moment to the 20th century and St. Pius X's encyclical against modernism, we see that he identifies the foundation of modernism as being "agnosticism."
  - Quotation: "According to this teaching human reason is confined entirely within the field of phenomena, that is to say, to things that are perceptible to the senses, and in the manner in which they are perceptible; it has no right and no power to transgress these limits. Hence it is incapable of lifting itself up to God, and of recognising His existence, even by means of visible things. From this it is inferred that God can never be the direct object of science." (Pascendi)

## ▼ Second Point: Kant's morality

- ▼ Once we cut ourselves off from knowing anything definitive about human freedom, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God, an ethical problem immediately arises:
  - What is the foundation for morally good or morally evil actions?
  - Or is morality merely a conventional thing?
  - Or does morality simply not exist?
- ▼ This problem did not escape Kant.
  - We should note that he himself – from his Pietist upbringing – was what we would call a "moral man." His private life was not at all wanton. To illustrate this: [story of the walk at 5 o'clock every day]
  - In part, Kant saw the problem the more clearly because he knew the position of David Hume on morality. Hume said, "Morals excite passions, and produce or prevent actions. Reason itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason."
  - Kant did not want this to be the "fate" of morality, and so he sought to establish morality on the basis of reason.
- ▼ So Kant is kind of "stuck" on account of these two issues:

- On the one hand, it seems he cannot establish morality on a basis which would be true for all men, because he himself has claimed that reason can have nothing to say about freedom and God.
- On the other hand, he does not want to fall into the conclusion of Hume, which is that morality is merely sentiment – this would mean that laws and rules have nothing to do with reason at all.

▼ **How does he escape?**

- Kant will have recourse to reason again, but – just as we saw with the matter of knowing – he chooses to found morality on “pure reason,” i.e. on conclusions which reason itself can see simply by examining itself.
- **This foundation of morality Kant calls the “categorical imperative.”**

▼ **To explain the Categorical Imperative:**

▼ Kant formulates this principle of morality as follows: **“Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”**

- “Maxim” here means a rule or principle.
- So the idea is: your action will be morally good if it follows a rule that you can reasonably apply to all men, all the time.

▼ **To take an example:**

- Suppose I am faced with the possibility of lying to obtain some advantage.
- If I choose to lie, then I would in effect be saying: “People can lie whenever they need an advantage.” Kant says that I would have to see this as being acceptable as a universal law for all men, all the time.
- But, Kant points out, if that were a universal law, then even lying would bring no advantage, since we would all just assume someone could be lying and distrust them anyway. And so there is a contradiction there, hence lying is morally evil since it contradicts “pure reason.”
- The correct maxim would therefore be, “Never lie.” This can become a universal law without contradiction, and therefore refusing to lie is morally good.

▼ **Consequence of the Categorical Imperative:**

- In this understanding of morality, the morally good action is a question primarily of a duty to be done. Why?

- ▼ Because the Categorical Imperative demands that we be able to see the morality of an action from “pure reason,” with no reference to the goal or consequences of our actions.
  - It is no longer valid, for Kant, to say something like: “If you don’t want to displease God, then don’t lie.” Or, “If you want to be happy, then don’t lie.”
  - These kinds of statements are not based on pure reason, but are based on a hypothetical. We look to the consequences or the goal of the action instead of looking to pure reason irrespective of anything else.
  - To found morality on a hypothetical would be to destroy morality because we cannot really know what is outside of us.
  
- ▼ If this is the case, then the highest morality is to follow your duty – to follow the “law” of pure reason.
  - This means that “virtue” is a question of duty and duty alone.
  - Kant would go so far as to say the following, which should be shocking to us: “To set before children as a pattern actions that are called noble, magnanimous, with a view to captivating them by infusing an enthusiasm for such actions, is to defeat our end. It is nothing but moral fanaticism and exaggerated self-conceit that is infused into the mind by exhortation to actions as noble, sublime, and magnanimous, by which men are led into delusion that it is not duty, that is, respect for the law, that constitutes the determining principle of their actions...”
  
- ▼ Now, by way of contrast, consider the position which Aristotle took on moral action:
  - For Aristotle, the virtuous man is the one who does morally good actions because they lead to happiness, which he sees is what his very nature tends towards.
  - Moreover, the virtuous man distinguishes himself from the man who is merely following his duty because he finds morally good actions to be pleasant – he delights in them, and they also bring him joy.
  - For Kant, however, this would be a corruption of morality. The highest morality for Kant would be following your duty, irrespective of whether it

was pleasant or not. And, in fact, the less pleasant it is, the better, because then you are truly acting on “pure reason” alone.

- The highest thing you can do is your duty, even and especially if you don't want to do it.
- ▼ The ultimate consequence of all this is **complete moralism**:
  - Morality is no longer founded upon a truth that I can know and that exists outside of myself.
  - Actions are no longer good because they conform to an objective truth – rather, actions are good because they follow the law, and the law has no reason for being outside of itself.
  - Law and law alone make goodness and truth. You don't ask why you follow the law, you just follow it.
- ▼ As crazy as all of this may sound, if we examine the conception of morality upon which our world is largely based, we find that it is Kantian to the core (ultimately, Protestant – but Kant systematized it). And not just the world, but our conception of religion as well.
- ▼ First example – prohibition, and in general a kind of “Puritan” attitude.
  - Drinking alcohol is pleasant.
  - But we cannot act morally for the sake of pleasure.
  - Therefore drinking alcohol is inherently suspect – if you do it, you are somehow acting against your duty.
  - Contrast: the Catholic drinks alcohol because it tastes good, and he worships God while doing so because God created alcohol. He drinks moderately because he knows that drunkenness will deprive him of his true happiness.
- ▼ Second example – “sinfully delicious”
  - Any advantage which accrues to me from my action makes it morally suspect. I have to act only because the law is the law.
  - Therefore, what is pleasant and makes me feel happy is immediately suspect, and the chocolate bar tastes so good that it must be “sinful.”
- ▼ Man cannot live this way, and so we have a real duality:

- “Having fun” or doing pleasant things (such as eating good food) is in one sense disconnected from moral action – once you do your duty, then you can go “have fun,” but you cannot “have fun” by doing your duty.
  - We get the phenomenon of “Sunday religion” – on Sunday, you do your duty and go to church, but the rest of the week, you “have fun” and that is somehow untouched by your religion.
  - You have your life as a “believer” and your “real life.”
- ▼ Third example – difficulty is the principle of merit
- Our Lady cleans the house in Nazareth and that is a more meritorious action than a martyr dying for Christ.
  - Why?
  - The source of merit is charity, not difficulty.
  - But, for our Kantian minds, duty and difficulty primarily make for merit...

## ▼ Conclusion

- ▼ Kant “systematized” the religion which Luther proposed:
  - It is internally consistent, but disconnected from common sense.
  - It introduces a real duality in man – it “fragments” him.
  - We are therefore not surprised to see, again in *Pascendi*, that the modernists make distinctions, as if man plays different roles: “man as believer” is not the same as “man as historian” or “man as scientist.”
- Kant’s ideas (and, in general, those of modern philosophy) underpin our world in large part, and play a direct role in the current crisis.