Kant: A Very Short Introduction Study Guide

Kant: A Very Short Introduction by Roger Scruton

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Immanuel Kant was born in the Prussian city of Koenigsberg in 1724. Though of humble origins, through some luck and a long career of hard work in academia, Kant's "critical philosophy," which purported to solve all of the problems of metaphysics confronting philosophy, proved to be one of the most influential philosophies of the modern era.

Though Kant was interested in solving all of metaphysics' puzzle, his initial interest was in sorting out the controversy between the Rationalists and Empiricists. The controversy was centered on the question of knowledge: Could one have objective knowledge of the world? If so, how? According to the Rationalists, the most important representative of whom was Gottfried Leibniz, reason and reason alone was capable of providing an understanding the world as it is. The Empiricists, on the other hand, led by philosophers like David Hume, argued for the primacy of experience and more or less dismissed reason—at best, it could analyze what the senses had already provided. Kant found neither of these satisfying and therefore set out to create his own system. In his system, both reason and experience play an important role. He rejected the Rationalist doctrine that one could have perspective-less knowledge; one could not see, so to speak, through God's eyes. His conclusion is that all knowledge comes through the senses, but it must be interpreted by reason. Experience without reason was just meaningless, raw sensation.

While he did place a great emphasis on the role of experience, he avoided becoming an out-and-out Empiricist who simply had to wait and see what science produced before he believed anything. He thought that one could analyze experience itself; not this or that particular experience, but experience in general. In so doing, he deduced that were certain "categories" by which the world was always understood by a rational creature. The categories are the various modes of understanding the mind imposes upon the world to understand it; it is important to understand that the categories are explicitly not descriptive of the world as it really is. However, the categories of thought are universal, in the sense that they are capable of representing any object that can be experienced. A result of this theory of perception is a division between the world as it appears and the world as it really is. It is central to Kantian philosophy that the world as it really is completely unreachable for humanity, which is bound always to see the world through its perspective.

Kant was skeptical about the exact nature of the soul, but deduced a few of its faculties, like the faculty of understanding. Another such faculty is practical judgment, the faculty by which a person decides what to do. Practical judgment is the source of an ethical life However, if he is to build an ethical system, he must first establish that humans have free will. He was able to resolve this paradox, at least to his own satisfaction, by falling back on his distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal, the apparent and the real. In the phenomenal world, he argues, humans are like every other object, subject to the unbending laws of causation. However, in the noumenal realm, they are free to do as they please. Since humans are distinguished from the rest of existence by their freedom and since it is what makes an ethical life possible it becomes the foundation for

his ethical system. Ethical living is identical to living in accordance with pure practical reason, free from any selfish interests or desires which come not from reason but from the phenomenal world. The fundamental principle of his ethical theory is the categorical imperative which states that one must always act as if one were following some universal law. In other words, one may only do that which he would accept others doing; it is a philosophical reformulation of the Golden Rule.

Kant's metaphysics and ethics are by far the most well-known aspects of his works, but his writings on aesthetics and politics are very informative and relevant. Kant used his transcendental philosophy to understand the seemingly paradoxical nature of beauty. Beauty seems, at once, to be both objective and subjective. This, he explains, is because beauty is the result of a kind of imaginative free play: The understanding is presented with a perception that has no concepts and therefore is "free" to apply whatever concepts it pleases. The judgment makes on the basis of this interpretation are true and valid, but the judgment is subjective insofar as others might apply entirely different concepts to their own perceptions.

Politically, Kant was a classical liberal very much in tune with the spirit of the Enlightenment. Like many of his contemporaries, he opposed democracy—he did not have faith that the average person was capable of making informed decisions—but also distrusted monarchy. He was, instead, an advocate of an ill-defined republicanism. Though he gave no specifics on how his ideal government would function, he was explicit that it must operate as a kind of "virtual" democracy. The passage of a law would not require the explicit consent, or even the implicit consent, of every citizen, but it must be consistent with the principles of practical judgment, namely the categorical imperative.

Chapter 1: Life, Works, and Character

Chapter 1: Life, Works, and Character Summary and Analysis

Immanuel Kant was born in the Prussian city of Koenigsberg in 1724. He was the fourth of nine children of a poor family; his father was a harness maker. Even at a very young age, he impressed people with his intelligence. In fact, he was even allowed to attend a local school, a rare occurrence for a child in his economic class. He actually hated his time there, especially the strictness of the teachers, and was hesitant to speak about those years in his adult life. However, if he had not been given that improbable opportunity, it is quite likely that the world would never have benefited from his brilliant philosophical mind. After he finished school, he attended the University of Koenigsberg where he would eventually become a professor. His early academic career was quiet and eclectic. He taught and studied a variety of different disciplines, including history, geography, math, and, of course, philosophy. The latter is what eventually seized his fascination but his work shows clear traces of the breadth of his knowledge.

Aside from a few unremarkable short books, he published nothing until he was 1781 when he published "Critique of Pure Reason" at the age of 57. The book caused an enormous stir in European philosophical circles but it was (and remains) notoriously difficult to read and, as such, he released a supplemental work known as the "Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysic which shall lay Claim to being a Science" in 1783. After producing a second edition of the "Critique"—purportedly to make it more readable, though the fact that it failed to do so is probably more of an indication of the intrinsic difficulty of the ideals than any flaw in Kant's writing ability—Kant wrote two more "Critiques": "Critique of Practical Reason" (1788), which dealt with ethics, and "Critique of Judgment" (1790), which dealt with aesthetics. While Kant wrote much more, these, along with "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" (1785), comprise the most important of his works.

Kant was something of an eccentric. He was very reserved—though, he claimed, such reservation was necessary for his philosophical lifestyle—and surprisingly superstitious for a man whose life was dedicated to reason. He never married, though he did come close on two occasions. He respected the institution, but not with any kind of religious reverence; he thought it was little more than a contractual agreement to have sex. He retired from the University in 1796 when his mental faculties had begun to decay. He died peacefully in 1804.

Chapter 2: The Background of Kant's Thought

Chapter 2: The Background of Kant's Thought Summary and Analysis

When Kant started writing the "Critique of Pure Reason," his ambitions were high: He wrote that he believed his worked either answered every metaphysical question or at least provided the tools to do so. Despite this broad goal, Kant certainly was interested in some specific philosophical questions. Foremost among these was a question that had begun with Rene Descartes a century early: the problem of objective knowledge. Descartes famously argued that the first and most certain piece of knowledge one can have is that one is a thinking self: "I think, therefore I am." As later commentators point out, one could not even be certain of this much, for it assumed, without reason, the existence of a "self," a center of subjectivity.

The question remained, then, how one could have objective knowledge. As Kant entered the world of philosophy, opinions on this question were divided mainly among two great thinkers, Leibniz and Hume, who each represented completely opposite views. Leibniz argued that through reason alone could know almost everything about the world; indeed, in order to know anything, he argued, one must use reason, for it separates one from the biased perspective of humanity and shows the universe as God sees it. Hume, on the other hand, doubted reason could really do anything on its own; at best, it could say something about one's experience, though it could not draw any kind of universal conclusion from it. For Hume, something could be believed only if there was good, empirical evidence for it, and even then, there could not be the kind of infallible belief Leibniz aspired to.

Kant found neither of these answers satisfying. Rather, it might be said that he believed each was half right. The system he created had a role both for reason and experience, and only when the two were combined could there be true knowledge. The knowledge of the world, however, was never of the world as it is actually is. That world is totally inaccessible to humanity. One only knows what the world seems like to him, but the appearance does indeed reveal, by representation, the true nature of objects. He created two sets of distinctions to classify truths. First, there is the distinction between analytic truths and synthetic truths. An analytic truth is what one might call trivially true: "A square has four sides." The truth of the statement can be determined by "analyzing" the words involved. Synthetic truths, on the other hand, are more substantive, for they express something which could not be known by the words alone. An example might be "Everything has a cause" or "Fido has brown spots." He also distinguished between "a priori" truths and "a posteriori" truths. An a priori truth is one that is known before any experience; it is something reason is able to ascertain on its own. An a posteriori truth is the opposite, something which is known only as the result of some experience. While

these ideas were hardly new, Kant's system was revolutionary in asserting the existence of synthetic a priori truths. He believed that there were certain facts about the world that could be ascertained independent of one's experience; indeed, many such truths were necessary to understand experience at all, like the proposition that "All discoverable objects are in space and time."

Chapter 3: The Transcendental Deduction

Chapter 3: The Transcendental Deduction Summary and Analysis

Kant believed the fundamental question of metaphysics was how synthetic a priori knowledge is possible, if it is at all. Synthetic a priori knowledge, the reader will recall, is substantive knowledge (that is, something that is not true merely by definition) that can be attained without reference to experience. He approaches the question from two angles, the subjective and objective. The subjective argument is concerned with explaining the faculties of understanding themselves: what it means to hold a belief, the nature of perception, and so on. The objective argument, on the other hand, is concerned with the content of synthetic a priori knowledge.

The subjective argument begins at the most fundamental level: What are the prerequisites for experience? It should be noted that this question does not relate to the objects of perception, but of perception itself. This analysis is known as the transcendental deduction because it "transcends" any individual experience by addressing the nature of experience itself. Kant identified several "categories of thought." The categories of thought are modes of understanding where by the mind interprets and represents its perception. Among these categories are things like substance—something is a substance when its existence is not dependent upon anything else—and properties, something which exists dependently upon a substance. Thus, for example, Fido is a substance, but his brownness is a property. Fido could exist without his brownness—he could be white, for example—but the brownness could not exist without a substance; there is no such thing as brownness without a brown object. It is important to remember that the categories are not derived from experiencing the world; rather, they are meant to describe what experience, as such, must be like. Therefore, there it is possible to imagine a possible world which does not appear this way to the understand. This also means, however, that Kant has yet to prove anything about the world itself yet. He has simply shown that any world must appear; he has not shown that the appearance is in any way correlated with reality.

Kant's objective argument—the argument which purports to show that the appearances established in the subjective argument are actually meaningful and, in some sense, true—begins with what he calls the "transcendental unity of apperception." Apperception is a technical philosophical term borrowed from Leibniz which refers to any kind of perception that is inherently self-conscious; in other words, it is a kind self-reflection on one's own consciousness. Thus, to a certain extent, Kant begins his arguments like Descartes, by appealing to that most basic and indisputable fact of self-existence and self-consciousness. However, unlike Descartes, he is unwilling to draw the conclusion that he is a substance. He objects, methodologically, to the notion that one can observe

oneself as if one were simultaneously object and subject. Therefore, Kant's system does not rule out the possibility that consciousness is merely a property of some other substance (like the brain or human body).

Through a serious of complicated arguments, which Scruton admits are generally not considered to be philosophically sound, Kant attempts to use the unity of apperception to prove several important facts about the world. First, he argues that, since experience itself cannot be an object, knowing one's experience must really mean knowing the objects of one's experience. Since one can only have knowledge of something which exists continuously, it follows that the objects of experience must be continuous and, since continuity is independent of observation, they must persist throughout time independent of the observer. Further, identity implies causality; a causal chain links together an object through successive moments in time. Otherwise, the object would really just be a series of "momentary" and unrelated objects arbitrarily strung together. Finally, since the present has a privileged place in perception—one knows what is happening now more immediately then what happened earlier—it follows that objects are ordered in time.

Having thus established that perception is actually related to the world, Kant then returns to the category to deduce certain facts about the world. As the reader will recall, the categories are the different modes by which reason interprets experience. From each of these categories one can deduce a certain, related principle. One such principle, derived from the notion of substance, states that the notion of change implies the unchanged existence of some medium. If a tomato changes from green to red it is logically necessary that there is a tomato from beginning to end. Such a principle, since it is derived from the categories themselves, applies of necessity to every possible object of experience and, therefore, also to the actual objects of experience.

Chapter 4: The Logic of Illusion

Chapter 4: The Logic of Illusion Summary and Analysis

While Kant obviously believed in the possibility of legitimate and substantive a prior knowledge, he was also aware that the faculty of reason was frequently perverted to arrive at conclusions for which it had no warrant. He considers the misuses of reasons in each of the categories he divides metaphysics into: rational psychology, the study of the soul; cosmology, the study of the universe; and theology, the study of God. Generally speaking, every mistake shares the same fundamental error: attempting to go beyond the boundaries of experience and get perspective and "unconditioned" knowledge. For Kant, all experience was necessarily conditioned, or interpreted, by the categories of thought and other mental structures. Since all knowledge is through experience—whether through experiencing particular objects or considering possible objects of experience—this tactic is methodologically flawed.

Kant's philosophy distinguishes between so-called "phenomena" and "noumena." Phenomena are the objects which appear the understanding through experience; they are the appearances of objects. Noumena, on the other hand, are the objects in themselves. Noumena serve a purely negative role in Kant's philosophy because it is logically impossible to know what a thing is in itself according to his system. They mark out, so to speak, the limits of possible human inquiry, which is legitimately restrained only to phenomena. There is some ambiguity in Kant's writings as to the exact relationship between phenomena and noumena. It would seem that if he wants to have any possibility of objective knowledge, the phenomena must be causally related to the noumena; they may, for example, be representations of the object. However, as this would seem to imply one could have knowledge of the noumena—which is impossible—he often seems to think that there is no relationship between them. Taken to the extreme, however, this gives license to all forms of subjectivity, for then appearances are nothing more then creations of one's imagination. Since Kant explicitly expressed such a view—often called "idealism"—it is probably best to believe that the phenomena do, indeed, represent real objects in the world. From this picture of the world and humanity's relationship to it, it should be clear why Kant was such a determined opponent of Rationalism. For, Rationalists, through the use only of "pure reason" attempted to demonstrate certain facts not about the world as it seems, but the world as it actually is. In other words, they attempted to penetrate, illegitimately, into the world of the noumena.

Mistakes of these kinds can be found all in three of the branches of metaphysics and those related to psychology are discussed in a later chapter. The logical fallacies or "illusions" of cosmology are called "antinomies." An antinomy is a strange logical entity, for it is something which implies two contradictory statements which are both false. This seems to defy traditional logic, which states that if two statements contradict one

another they must be false. For example the statement "Fido is on the couch" must be true if the statement "Fido is not on the couch" is false, and vice versa. Kant gives a lengthy argument attempting to logically grand antinomies, the outcome of which is that both propositions can be false because they both betray a common, false assumption. As it turns out, the common assumption is that it is possible to know the world beyond the world of appearances.

To apply this notion to a specific cosmological argument, consider the perennial metaphysical question of the origins of the universe. If one assumes that one can consider the universe in its totality, one can conclude both that the universe had a beginning in time and that it did not. To prove the first argument, Kant claims that it is impossible for that to be an actually infinite number of things—similar ideas are held by other philosophers, like Aristotle. However, the opposite conclusion also follows, because to suppose that the universe had a beginning in time is to imply the absurd notion that a moment in time somehow has the ability to the rest of the universe to come into existence from nothing. Therefore, both of these arguments are false even though they are logically contradictory to one another. This is possible because both are founded on the false assumption that one can consider the universe outside of the bounds of one's perspective.

Regarding theology, Kant, a religious man himself, was interested in the arguments often given for God's existence. He divided the arguments into three categories: arguments from design (so-called "physico-theological" arguments), cosmological arguments, and ontological arguments. He found arguments from design the most attractive of the three, for identified something in man, or at least in himself, which was drawn to the idea that the apparent order in nature suggests that there is an orderer, namely God, who is responsible for it. However, the argument, he believes, really has little weight and winds up collapsing into the second type, the cosmological argument. According to this argument, God must exist in order to explain some contingent feature of the universe—he is the "prime mover" that explains all other motion; he is the "first cause" which created all other things; and so on. This argument, however, itself ultimately collapses into the ontological argument. The ontological argument attempts to prove the existence of God from his concept. It is often formulated in the following terms: God is the most perfect being. To be perfect means to lack no perfection. Existence is a perfection. Therefore, God exists. In other words, the ontological argument relies on believing in the possibility of a necessary being—a being which has existence as one of its fundamental properties. It is obvious that the cosmological argument must share this assumption because God as posited as the one being which needs no further explanation or cause. Kant's objection to the ontological then, if successful, is sufficient to refute all three of these arguments. The essence of his reply is that existence is not a "predicate." A predicate is a description or property of the concept of an object. One might say, for example, that apples are red and, in that case, redness is predicated of apples. However, to say that apple exists says nothing about apples themselves, but merely states that there is such a thing. Therefore, insofar as perfections all must be predicates, it follows that existence cannot be a perfection. The ontological argument, therefore, fails.

On the topic of the soul, Kant seemed torn with the question of whether knowledge of the soul amounted to knowledge of a noumena, a possibility much more plausible on account of the intimate knowledge one naturally has of one's own consciousness. While not necessarily consistent with his principles—for he believed that the idea that one could view one's own soul as an object was impossible—he was tempted to believe it because he thought it was essential to the development of an ethical theory.

Chapter 5: The Categorical Imperative

Chapter 5: The Categorical Imperative Summary and Analysis

Before Kant can ground an ethical theory, he must first resolve what is commonly called the paradox freedom. The paradox highlights the apparent contradiction between one's sense of freedom—a person thinks that he is the cause of his own actions—and the seemingly universal law of causality that permeates with nature. A rock has no choice about falling off a cliff; whether it does or does not is determined by complex but determinate physical laws. Insofar as humans are part of the same physical universal, there seems no good reason to exclude them from the same necessity. Kant solves this problem by referring, once again, to his transcendental philosophy. He says that, considered empirically, humans are indeed part of the natural world and therefore not free. Considered transcendentally, however, that is, considered as objects in themselves, outside of the world of appearances, they are free. It might be justifiably asked how this does not contradict Kant's own principles, according to which such noumenal knowledge, knowledge of things as they are, is impossible. Kant has no answer to this objection, but without human freedom, his ethical system, or any ethical system, is impossible.

Assuming that this last, dubious step is valid, Kant goes on to determine the content of the moral law. For Kant, the moral law is based on the idea autonomy. What distinguishes persons from the rest of existence is the will and, more specifically, the rational will; for Kant, to be free is nothing more or less than to be able to obey one's reason. Rocks, plants, and even animals all obey natural laws of causation, even if they are unimaginably complex laws. Humans, however, are free from this necessity, and this freedom or autonomy is what gives them their inherent dignity and moral worth. The particular kind of reason which is relevant to the moral life is what is called practical reason. Practical reasoning, Kant argues, is just as inherent to human nature as the unity of apperception; not only do humans experience, they also see the world as a "field of action." Practical reason is what directs humans as to what they ought to do. Now, the ethical law, Kant believes, should flow firmly from practical reason; if it is adulterated with individual desires and circumstances, one is no longer autonomous. One must be committed to reason alone.

Kant distinguishes two different kinds of imperative or "should" statements. There are hypothetical imperatives which place some condition or qualification on their imperative. For example, one might say "If you want to make a lot of money, you should go to college." This statement may or may not be true, but it certainly does not apply to a person who is not interested in making a lot of money. A categorical imperative, on the other hand, is completely unqualified; it is a "should" statement which applies equally to every possible actor: "You should not steal." Kant believed that at the root of all morality, there was a single categorical imperative, though he provided several formulations for it.

The first formulation is that one ought to act in a way that is always consistent with a universal law. In other words, one should not act in such a way that he would not want others acting. The second formulation of the categorical imperative, purported to be derived from the first, is that one must treat people always as ends and never as means. That is, one cannot just use other people to fulfill their own goals, with no respect for the fact that they have goals of their own, too. The third formulation, similar to the first, states that one should always act as if his actions were legislating some law that the rest of humanity had to obey.

From this basis, Kant is able to derive a moral law that is more or less consonant with common sense. It prohibits such anti-social behaviors as murder, theft, and rape because such things are not consists with a universal law and view other people as means and not ends. Kant's ethical system, however, does defy common sense in some points. In particular, he has a curious way of approaching the question of emotions. Kant believed that an action is good only if it is contrary to one's inclinations; to merely act in accordance with one's desires is a surrender of sovereignty and, therefore, not a free act. It is not bad, but merely neutral. The only morally valuable actions are those which are done in accordance with duty contrary to one's inclination. Thus, an action is only good insofar as it is difficult.

Chapter 6: Beauty and Design

Chapter 6: Beauty and Design Summary and Analysis

The topic of the third "Critique", the "Critique of Judgment," is considered with providing a transcendental groundwork for aesthetics. Though the work is disorganized and unclear and the arguments are generally weak, the conclusions Kant drew have had an enormous influence on the study of aesthetics ever since. The notion of beauty represents a difficulty for Kant, for he wants to classify it along with the judgments of understanding and practical reason. However, it would seem that beauty differs from these faculties in the fact that it is subjective. It should be noted, though, that this subjectivity is not total. People tend to think of their aesthetic judgments as at least somewhat objective, and for that reason they look for a way to justify them to others. Kant explained this seeming paradox away by analyzing the way in which aesthetic objects are perceived. As was explained earlier, normal perception is always overlaid with concepts. One does not just see the colors of a person, one sees a person; the concept of humanity is, so to speak, superimposed upon one's perceptions. However, in the ideal aesthetic case, this process does not occur and one is, instead, simply moved by the raw sensory experience. The judgment of beauty is an "immediate" judgment, one which requires no intermediate concepts or deliberation. What occurs when one beholds an aesthetic object is what Kant calls "free play." Since there are no concepts inherent in the object, the mind is free to apply its own. Therefore, what each individual perceives is, in a certain sense, his own; no two people perceive the same aesthetic object. However, the judgments are still, in a certain sense, objective, insofar as the judgments are correct appraisal of the individual's particular, unique interpretation of the art. In this way, Kant is able to preserve both the subjectivity and objectivity that seems to be essential to aesthetic judgment.

As had been mentioned previously, Kant was partial to, if not persuaded by, the argument for God's existence which appealed to the apparent design in the world. He could not take it as a solid philosophical demonstration, but he did believe that there was some intuition or feeling in it that corresponded to something felt generally by mankind. In the third "Critique," Kant fleshes this feeling out a bit more. He says that when one contemplates natural objects, one gets a fleeting and transitory sense of the transcendent. It is on the basis of these feelings that Kant founded his belief in God, a fact which has annoyed many of his readers and commentators.

Chapter 7: Enlightenment and Law

Chapter 7: Enlightenment and Law Summary and Analysis

Politics was one of the last topics Kant addressed before his death at the beginning of the 19th century. He was one of the most well-known and influential proponents of the so-called European Enlightenment and many political theorists even up to the modern day have seized upon his ideas. Kant's political works are far removed from the almost obsessive systematic leanings of his earlier works. Indeed, he hardly makes any attempt to ground his political beliefs in his transcendental philosophy at all. However, reading the works in the context of Kant's philosophy and life, one can perhaps retrospectively construct a transcendental politics.

Kant believed the fundamental political right is freedom. How this flows from his philosophy is rather obvious, as he explicitly argued in the "Critique of Practical Judgment" that rational autonomy was the basis for moral dignity. The consequences of this belief are almost textbook classical liberalism. Kant believed, basically, that one was free to do whatever one likes so long as it does not interfere with the freedom of another individual to do the same. The government was permitted to engage in coercion, but only if the purpose was to maintain or increase the amount of freedom in society. His liberal political beliefs naturally inclined him to distrust monarchy and favor republicanism. It is important to realize that he, like many of his contemporaries, was not an advocate of democracy. He did not think many—most—people were qualified to vote, including all women. He never hashed out exactly how his ideal republic would function, but consent of the people was key to his understanding of the law. He did not require that literally every person approve of the law, but only that every person "could" approve of it. This strange statement probably means that a law is only just if a rational personal would consent to it, taking into account the unfortunate reality that most people are not rational.

Chapter 8: Transcendental Philosophy

Chapter 8: Transcendental Philosophy Summary and Analysis

Kant's philosophy has had an undeniable impact on all philosophy that has come after it. The most famous philosophers who followed in his theoretical footsteps were Fichte, Schopenhauer, and Hegel. Fichte took the distinction between phenomena and noumena to justify a radical subjective idealism that Kant was an explicit opponent of. Schopenhauer, too, interpreted Kant as an idealist and his philosophy, which presaged existentialism in many ways, took for granted the unreality of perception. Hegel took what one might consider the most extravagant interpretation of Kant. He read the "Critique of Pure Reason" not as an attempt to dethrone naked logic, but rather to show how reason builds through a perpetual process of self-destruction. Each attempt to reach the world as it is ultimately fails, but in each failure there is another step towards the truth. This attitude is what Kant correctly identified as the insatiable goal of almost all philosophers: to know what is unknowable.

Characters

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher who lived from 1724 to 1804. He was born into a poor family, but through good fortune was able to receive education in his childhood that enabled him to go onto university. His early academic career was quiet and varied. He studied and taught many subjects—math, geography, physics, and several more—before finally deciding that his true passion was with philosophy. Nonetheless, his peripheral academic studies certainly informed his later philosophy, especially his interest in Newtonian physics. Aside from a few relatively unimportant works, Kant did not publish anything until the "Critique of Pure Reason" in 1781 at the age of 57. Over the next two decades, however, he was extremely productive and was able to create an exceptionally large impact on philosophy despite the relatively short length of his writing career.

Kant's philosophy is, like any philosophy, a reaction to its times. Since Rene Descartes' "Meditations," Western philosophy had been obsessed (and, surely, rather troubled) by the question of objective knowledge: Could it be attained? If so, how? Many philosophers had provided their own answers to these questions, but Kant found none of them satisfying. Gottfried Leibniz, who belonged to a philosophical school known today as the Rationalists, believed that the world could only be known through the exercise of reason. David Hume, on the other hand, took the opposite extreme: The only possible way to know anything is through the senses. Kant's system might be viewed as a synthesis of these two views. He believed that knowledge comes through both the senses and reason. Experience by itself is formless and unintelligible; the understanding must apply concepts to it to make it comprehensible. One result of this conception is a division of the world into the world as it appears through concepts and the world as it really is, the world that lurks behind those concepts. These he called the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, respectively, and believed that any knowledge of the noumenal world was absolutely impossible.

David Hume

David Hume was a Scottish philosopher whose philosophical career ended just about the time that Kant's began: He died in 1776, five years before Kant rose to prominence with the publication of the first "Critique." David Hume belonged to a school of philosophy known retrospectively as Empiricism. According to Empiricists, all knowledge is through the senses. If one cannot verify a statement with solid, perceptible evidence, there is no justification for believing. Empiricism, then, is the opposite of and a direct reaction against Rationalism, the philosophical school which thought the world could be understand through pure reason alone. Hume took his Empiricism to such extremes that he eventually even denied the existence of the self; self-consciousness, he believed, is

too subjective to ground such a belief and, as there is no other evidence, the notion of a self must be rejected along with every other fantasy.

Though Kant disagreed with the essence of Hume's philosophy, his debt to him is obvious. In fact, Kant was sometimes called—perhaps with some scorn—"the Prussian Hume." While Kant certainly disagrees both with Rationalism and Empiricism, it is probably fair to say that he is more of a Rationalist than an Empiricist. He believed that Rationalism was flawed top to bottom and much of his philosophical work was involved in debunking their various proofs. Kant certainly thought more of reason than Hume, but for both experience is necessary for any true knowledge. The area in which they probably disagree the most is ethics. According to many interpreters,Hume was an ethical skeptic. Kant could not be more different; duty is one of the central themes of his philosophies and, indeed, the categorical imperative has perhaps had more lasting impact on subsequent philosophy than anything else.

Frederick the Great

Frederick the Great was King of Prussia when Kant was a child and young adult. He was a stable supporter of the arts and sciences.

Rene Descartes

Rene Descartes was a French philosopher in the 17th century. His "Meditations," which attempted to provide a basic foundation for all knowledge, was a major influence on Kant.

Gottfried Leibniz

Gottfried Leibniz was a 17th and 18th century philosopher whose works represent a Rationalist philosophy. Kant was influenced by his work, but, it seems, mainly by his disagreements with it.

Isaac Newton

Isaac Newton was an English physicist. His theories greatly influenced Kant's metaphysical system.

Charles de Secondat, baron de Montesquieu

Montesquieu was a French political theorist. Perhaps his most important contribution was the theory of separation of powers, an idea which Kant explicitly advocated in his political writings.

Aristotle

Aristotle was an ancient Greek philosopher. Kant revived some of his ideas—like the distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge—in his philosophical work.

Plato

Plato was an ancient Greek philosopher. Scruton writes that Kant was the first philosopher since Plato to place a significant emphasis on aesthetics.

G.W. Hegel

G.W. Hegel was a German philosopher who was inspired by Kant's ideas. According to his interpretation, Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" was not a refutation of the use of pure reason as such, but only a depiction of how the process of dialectic gradually reaches the truth through a series of failures.

Objects/Places

Koenigsberg

Koenigsberg is Kant's birthplace.

University of Koenigsberg

Kant taught at the University of Koenigsberg for his entire academic career.

Rationalism

Rationalism is the philosophical school which believes the world can be known through the exercise of reason alone.

Empiricism

Empiricism is the philosophical school which denies that reason is capable of knowing the world. Rather, knowledge comes through the senses only.

Phenomena

Phenomena are the objects of experience. Their relationship to the real objects in the world is unclear, though it would seem that Kant believed they were at least representative.

Noumena

Noumena are objects in themselves. According to Kant's philosophy, it is impossible to know anything about them.

Categorical Imperative

The categorical imperative is the basis for Kantian ethics. It states that one must always act in a way that is compatible with some universal law. In other words, one must always act in a way that one would accept others acting.

Free Play

Free play is the process by which the understanding contemplates an aesthetic object. The object is perceived without any concepts and, therefore, the understanding freely imposes its own concepts upon it.

The Enlightenment

The Enlightenment was a political and philosophical movement in the 18th century. It emphasized the importance of individual liberty and freedom of thought. Kant is often seen as one of the most important figures of the movement.

Republicanism

Kant believed that the ideal form of government was a republic.

Themes

The Illusions of Logic

Kant's philosophy is in many ways a reaction against the Rationalist philosophical systems of thinkers like Gottfried Leibniz. According to the Rationalism, one can know achieve objective knowledge of the world only through reason. Sensation is flawed and bound to an individual's perspective, but, they argue, one can see the world like God does through the use of pure logic. Kant believed that experience was crucial to any knowledge. He strongly disagreed with the notion that one could ever achieve an entirely perspective-less notion.

Much of Kant's writing deals with refuting specific Rationalist arguments. In particular, he was interested in disproving the traditional arguments for God's existence, though he himself did believe in God. He divided the arguments into three categories: arguments from design, cosmological arguments, and ontological arguments. Arguments from design attempted to prove God exists by pointing to the "obvious" signs of design in nature which, they thought, indicated the existence of a designer. Cosmological arguments started with some contingent fact, like the existence of motion, in order to deduce that it must have its cause in some necessary being, like God. Both of these arguments, he claims, wind up collapsing into the third type, the ontological argument. According to this argument, God exists by definition: God is the most perfect being, which means that he has every possible perfection. Existence is a perfection and, therefore, God must exist. Kant debunks this argument and thus, he claims, all of the arguments, by pointing out that existence is not a predicate. A predicate is something which adds something to a concept. Greenness, for example, is a predicate of grass. It means that whenever there is grass, it is green. However, existence cannot be a predicate because it does not add anything to a concept; it is meaningless to say that when something exists, it exists. If existence is not a predicate, it cannot be a perfection, and therefore the argument fails.

Phenomena and Noumena

Kant attempted to solve the problem of objective knowledge by synthesizing the approaches rationalism and empiricism. He believed that all knowledge of the world came through the senses but that the sense data had to be interpreted by the understanding which applied various concepts and categories to it. Experience, then, was not direct, but rather a representation created by the mind. This results into a distinction between the world as it appears—the phenomenal world—and the world as it really is—the noumenal world. One of the central principles of Kant's transcendental philosophy is that all knowledge is of the phenomenal world; knowledge of the noumenal world is philosophically impossible.

The inaccessibility of the noumenal world becomes a difficulty for Kant when he begins to derive his ethical theory. One of the principles that governs the phenomenal world is that everything obeys the laws of causation. A consequence of this, it seems, is that humans have no free will and their actions are as causally necessary as a rock rolling down a hill. Kant gets out of this problem by saying that humans are not free considered phenomenally, but that they are free in themselves—that is, from a noumenal perspective. Aside from the difficulty of humans being free and not free from different perspectives, Kant seems to be violating his own conclusion that the noumenal world is inaccessible. The only possible way to resolve the apparent contradiction is to suppose that the intimate access one has to one's own soul allows an exceptional amount of access to it.

Duty as the Foundation of Ethics

Kant's ethical system is founded upon his transcendental philosophy. He believes that rational creatures are unique in the universe because of the fact that they are not subject to the same laws of necessity that governs all other things. This freedom or autonomy becomes the basis for his moral system; a person has moral value as a result of their autonomy. Therefore, the essence of the moral law derives from the assumption that to be ethical means to be autonomous. Since desires and personal circumstances belong to the phenomenal world, which is not free, to be ethical means to be entirely rational and with no consideration for one's personal circumstances. Therefore, one must always act in such a way consistent with some universal law. In other words, one must always act in such a way that would be acceptable for others to act. This is called the categorical imperative and it is the foundation for Kant's ethical system.

Now, one might ask why he should act morally. Other philosophers have appealed to self-interest, Divine command, or happiness, but Kant's answer is simple: duty. One must obey the moral law simply because to do otherwise is inconsistent with one's rational, autonomous nature. To act according to one's desires and inclinations is to deny that nature and subordinate oneself to the phenomenal world. Kant goes further than this, actually. He says an action has moral value only insofar as it is contrary to one's inclination. Therefore, a person might have what is called a "holy will" and always desire what to do is right, but, paradoxically, such a person's act would not be morally good, but morally neutral. Kant's ethical system, in other words, values actions only insofar as they are difficult.

Style

Perspective

Roger Scruton is a professor of aesthetics but possesses a general knowledge of philosophy. As such, he is able to do an adequate job of making Kant as presentable as possible. As he himself points out, however, this is no small task, as Kant's ideas are themselves so complex that they defy any attempt of presenting them in simple terms. Scruton's philosophical expertise also enables him to place Kant in his proper historical and philosophical context. If one were to read Kant directly, one might miss the historical significance, for example, of Kant's attempt to synthesize the role of reason and experience in epistemology.

Scruton's interest in aesthetics is obvious in Chapter 6, which is dedicated to the same subject. As aesthetics is often passed over by many modern students, Scruton is probably trying to highlight its importance to readers who have perhaps too quickly dismissed it. He is obviously interested in showing the relationship between aesthetics and other branches of philosophy. It is not fluff, irrelevant to the "big" parts of philosophy like metaphysics and epistemology, but rather right there at the center of the important philosophical debates.

Scruton generally presents Kant in a disinterested way, but his occasional analysis of Kant's arguments do provide some of his own opinions, or at least the consensus opinion of Kant scholars. It is, of course, impossible to give an uncontroversial interpretation of a philosopher like Kant, since every bit of his writing has been contested at some point. Therefore, Scruton attempts to minimize the controversy by sticking to a more or less mainstream reading of his works and pointing out specific points that are especially contested.

Tone

Scruton's tone throughout the book is serious and academic, but as the book is meant to be a casual introduction for a reader who may not be fully initiated into philosophical discussion, it is also somewhat conversation and informal. Scruton, for example, does not worry about sticking strictly to the third-person perspective and often engages the reader directly with second-person pronouns.

Despite Scruton's efforts to make Kant accessible, the layperson will likely have difficulty understanding everything in the book. Scruton writes that Kant's "Critique of Pure Reason" is difficult to read, not because of the way it is written, but because of the concepts contained therein. The same could be truthfully said of this book. Kant's metaphysical system is highly technical and systematic. Each part depends on other parts. If one does not understand, say, the distinction between phenomena and

noumena one will also probably not understand his ethical system, which is largely grounded upon that distinction.

Scruton attempts to be objective in his presentation of the book, but does occasionally allow himself to passingly agree or disagree with some specific point in Kantian philosophy. This is probably the most pronounced in the seventh chapter, which deals with Kant's political theories. Scruton seems to be particularly enthusiastic about Kant's classically liberal political beliefs and he assumes, perhaps, that his audience will largely share his enthusiasm.

Structure

The book is divided into eight chapters. Each chapter is, in turn, divided into a number of subsections which effectively separate the chapter into the appropriate subsections. The book is divided according to specific subjects but Scruton also attempts to follow a roughly chronological order, too. This effort is facilitated by Kant's own rather discrete progression from one topic to the next.

The first chapter introduces Kant from a biographical perspective. It gives some basic information about the kind of life he had growing up, his intellectual development, and an overview of his professional career until his death. The second chapter situates Kant inside of philosophical history. The fact that he is largely replying to the epistemological and metaphysical writings of David Hume and Gottfried Leibniz is crucial to understand the rest of his work. The third chapter treats of the main substance of Kant's theory, the transcendental deduction. This argument is meant to prove the possibility of objective knowledge without dismissing either experience or reason. The fourth chapter summarizes Kant's objections to Rationalism, including his refutation of the various arguments for God's existence. The fifth chapter introduces Kant's ethical system which is based upon the categorical imperative. The sixth chapter discusses Kant's aesthetic beliefs, an area of his philosophy which Scruton notes has been particularly influential. The seventh chapter discusses what is perhaps the most neglected area of Kant's thought, his political beliefs. Scruton notes that Kant's own writings on these subjects are disorganized and, thus, the chapter represents a kind of retroactive reconstruction of his beliefs. The eighth chapter is a brief summary of Kant's philosophical legacy.

Quotes

"The greatest modern philosophy was moved by nothing more than by duty. His life, in consequence, was unremarkable. For Kant, the virtuous man is so much the master of his passions as scarcely to be prompted by them, and so far indifferent to power and reputation as to regard their significance as nothing beside that of duty itself." (1)

"His attitude to marriage was curious disenchanted, and, although he defended the institution in 'The Metaphysics of Morals', he also described the married state as an agreement between two people for the 'reciprocal use of each other's sexual organs.'" (11)

"The first problem posed by the interpretation of the "Critique of Pure Reason" is this: what are the questions that it hopes to answer? Kant wrote, in the preface to the first edition: 'In this enquiry I have made completeness my aim, and I venture to assert that there is not a single metaphysical problem which has not been solved, or for the solution of which the key at least has not been supplied.'" (17)

"Neither experience nor reason is alone able to provide knowledge. The first provides content without form, the second form without content. Only in their synthesis is knowledge possible; hence there is no knowledge that does not bear the marks of reason and of experience together. Such knowledge is, however, genuine and objective." (27)

"An argument is transcendental if it 'transcends' the limits of empirical enquiry, so as to establish the a priori conditions of experience." (33)

"It is fair to say that the transcendental deduction has never been considered to provide a satisfactory argument. In all its versions it involves a transition from the unity of consciousness to the identity of the subject through time. Hume pointed out that the slide from unity to identity is involved in all our claims to objective knowledge; he also thought that it could never be justified. Kant did not find the terms with which to answer Hume." (46)

"The illusions of cosmology are called 'antinomies'. An 'antinomy' is the peculiar fallacy which enables us to derive both a proposition and its negation from the same premiss. According to Kant, antinomies are not genuine contradictions, since both of the propositions that constitute them are false, being based on a false assumption." (62)

"To say that an 'x' exists is to add nothing to its concept: it is to say that the concept has an instance. Indeed, there is already a fallacy (Kant even says a contradiction) involved in introducing existence into the concept of a thing. For it then becomes empty to assert that the thing exists." (68)

"Because autonomy is manifest only in the obedience to reason, and because reason must guide action always through imperatives, autonomy is described as 'that property

of the will whereby it is a law for itself.' It is also 'the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature.'" (81)

"Disinterested contemplation is a recognition that the object matters—matters so much that our interests have no bearing on our judgment. If you find this thought both strange and persuasive, then you will also recognize the genius of Kant, in make it the central premiss of his aesthetics." (104)

"Our sentiments of the sublime and of the beautiful combine to present an inescapable picture of nature as created. In beauty we discover the purposiveness of nature; in the sublime we have intimations of its transcendent origins. In neither case can we translate our sentiments into a reasoned argument: all we know is that we know nothing of the transcendental. But that is not all we feel. The argument from design is not a theoretical proof, but a moral intimation, made vivid to use by our sentiments towards nature, and realized in our rational acts." (110)

"But Kant's final advice to it [philosophy] is that given in the last sentence of Wittgenstein's 'Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus': That whereof we cannot speak, we must consign to silence." (132)

Topics for Discussion

Kant's system is intended to be a synthesis of Rationalism and Empiricism. Does he seem to favor one system over the other?

Explain the difference between categories of thought and forms of thought.

Kant claims that the cosmological and physico-theological arguments both, ultimately, collapse into the ontological argument? Is this correct?

Scruton points out the apparent contradiction involved in Kant's ethical system. Kant is philosophically committed to the idea that there can be no knowledge of the noumenal world but makes an exception for the soul. How does Kant justify this exception? Is it legitimate?

Explain how Kant derives the categorical imperative from the autonomous nature of the will.

Explain the concept of "free play." Does it successfully resolve the problem of beauty?

Kant's belief in God is based on feelings inspired by observing nature. Is this legitimate? Explain.