Königsberg Confidential

By Simon Blackburn

Kant: A Biography by Manfred Kuehn

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There is a scene in the film Superman III in which Lorelei Ambrosia, the blonde bombshell, is secretly reading the Critique of Pure Reason. "But how can he say that pure categories have no objective meaning in transcendental logic? What about synthetic unity?" she squeaks, before hurriedly hiding the book and picking up a trashy magazine as her gangster boss enters. The director's choice of book was perfect: no other single work could be so improbable, and so easily recognizable as such by the audience. You might just take Bertrand Russell on a beach holiday, as I once did; but Kant, never. (Incidentally, although she has not quite mastered the jargon, Lorelei's question is a good one.)

Kant is notorious not only for opacity and difficulty, but also for having lived about the most unpromising life imaginable for a biographer. He spent it entirely within a few miles of the desolate coastal town of Königsberg, or Kaliningrad, in northeast Prussia. He never travelled. In all his life he never saw a mountain and never heard a decent orchestra. He never married. Once he met a "beautiful and well brought up widow from somewhere else," but by the time he had calculated income and expenses, she had married someone else. Another girl, from Westphalia, also struck his fancy, but he was still thinking about making an offer when she crossed the border out of Prussia. Kant almost certainly never had any sexual relations, and one hopes for his own peace of mind that this was so, since he held that sex outside marriage dishonors human nature, and "exposes mankind to the danger of equality with the beasts."

Kant's life, like that of a monk, was regular to the point of caricature. The familiar story that the townspeople could set their clocks by the time at which he took his afternoon walk had at least some truth in it. The University of Königsberg was his monastery. There were no heroes: when, in 1794, he fell afoul of the theological censors appointed by the Rosicrucian bigot Frederick William II, he gave in and promised not to do it again. He lectured, wrote, declined, and died a safe university man.

Not only are the externals unpromising, but they seem perfectly to express the inner man. Kant was small, and self-controlled, and unhealthy. He was preoccupied with the state of his bowels, and he seems to have devoted a lot of quite public attention to what Hamann called his "evacuations a posteriori." He found it difficult to laugh. The Prussian virtues of discipline, efficiency, thrift, hard work, and obedience are all canonized in his life and in his writings. Surprisingly, it seems to have been not a Prussian but an Englishman, a man called Green, who led the young Kant into these rigorous pathways. It was Green, a merchant and a close friend, who impressed Kant with the virtues of living according to uncompromising rules or maxims, and before Kant it was Green by whose doings the townspeople set their clocks.

Yet in this exhaustive and fascinating biography, the distinguished German scholar Manfred Kuehn struggles to convince us that the bloodless, legalistic Kant is mainly a myth. For Kuehn, neither Kant nor his frontier town is half as bleak as the conventional picture has portrayed them. Königsberg, after all, was the first capital of Prussia, where Frederick the Great's grandfather had proclaimed himself king in 1701. (Prussia's third centenary is a matter of somewhat controversial celebration in Germany this year.) It was a proud cosmopolitan city in which Russian and English businessmen rubbed shoulders with Prussian academics and nobles.

Kuehn introduces us to a long list of more or less forgotten academics and divines, merchants and minor landowners, whose lives revolved around the university. In his account, Kant was in the thick of a rich social and intellectual life. Anthony Quinton once wrote that the trouble with Kant is that "he is a wild and intellectually irresponsible arguer. Any innate leaning that way must have been enhanced by the intellectual isolation of Königsberg, which preserved him from serious criticism." But Kuehn will have none of this, and the long list of Kant's academic wrinkles certainly rebuts the charge that he was insulated from serious criticism.

Not only was Königsberg a kind of Athens of the Baltic, but this Kant, too, is hardly the cold automaton of legend. In his youth he played billiards well enough to be something of a hustler; and when targets refused to play with him, he turned to cards as a supplementary source of income. With his increasing respectability these adventures had to cease, but Kant was not immune to temptation, even after he had adopted one of his own iron-clad rules or maxims of conduct. So, emulating Green, he gave himself the rule of just one pipe of tobacco a day, but friends noticed that as the years went by the pipe got bigger. He seems to have been an enthusiastic host and guest, seldom dining alone, prone to talk about gossip and politics rather than matters intellectual, and not at all averse to a moderate quantity of wine.

Inevitably, for someone of a dour Pietist background, all this rioting gave rise to some serious soul-searching. In the early Lectures on Ethics gluttony comes in for special criticism—bestial, again; and in the more humanistic late work The Metaphysics of Morals Kant still tells us that stuffing oneself with food incapacitates a person "for actions that would require him to use his powers with skill and determination." It is obvious that putting oneself in such a state violates one's duty to oneself. Fortunately all is not quite lost:

Although a banquet is a formal invitation to excess in both food and drink, there is still something in it that aims at a moral end, beyond mere physical well-being: it brings a number of people together for a long time to converse with one another. And yet the very number of guests (if, as Chesterfield says, it exceeds the number of the muses) allows for only a little conversation... and so the arrangement is at variance with that end, while the banquet remains a temptation to something immoral. . . . How far does one's moral authorization to accept these invitations to intemperance extend?

With such a question buzzing in his
mind, one would hardly expect Kant to have been the life of the party. Yet "jest, wit and caprice were in his command," raves (the verb is Kuehn's) the younger Johann Gottfried Herder, hastening to add, "but always at the right time, so that everyone laughed," slightly spoiling the effect. Kant apparently thought very highly of Fielding's rump Tom Jones. One cannot imagine that he thought as highly of Joseph Andrews, whose Parson Adams illustrates Fielding's unswerving devotion to simple good nature, contrasted with the cold qualities of rectitude and "abstract contemplation on the beauty of virtue."

Kant would have remained a fairly minor figure in the history of philosophy had it not been for one decade of thought and one decade of publication. In 1770, upon becoming professor of logic and metaphysics, he delivered his Inaugural Dissertation, On the Form and Principles of the Sensible World. Here, for the first time, some famous doctrines of the "critical philosophy" come into view. Kant insists on a number of sharp divisions. He separates concepts and intuitions, or intellect and sensation. He separates "things in themselves" from "things as they are for us," or, in other words, he distinguishes the noumenal from the phenomenal. He sees space and time as the forms of our sensibility, imposed on the noumenal world as a condition of our experience of it. But he also leaves room for a genuine "metaphysics," or science of the world as it is in itself, knowable through the pure principles of the understanding.

There was a fatal flaw lurking in all of this. The key to metaphysics would need to be causation: it is because the noumenal causes the world as we apprehend it that it is a possible object of knowledge. Thirty years previously, however, Hume had already blocked the road to any purely rational knowledge of what causes what. In Prussia, Hertz and Hamann soon brought Hume's criticism of speculative reasoning about causation to Kant's attention: it now seemed that causation itself had to be seen as the work of the mind, or as a form of sensibility. Kant was later to say that it was Hume who "first interrupted my dogmatic slumber." It took a decade for him to come to terms with the problem that Hume had left him.

The result was the eight hundred and fifty-six pages of the Critique of Pure Reason, published in 1781, when Kant was fifty-seven years old. The central doctrine of this extraordinary work is the interdependence of intellectual cognition and experience: "Thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." It takes both conceptual ability and its application in experience to generate intelligible thought. It follows that the pure metaphysics that Kant had previously imagined, his reasoning beyond the limits of experience, could have been nothing but an illusion.

To be sure, armchair or a priori reasoning is possible—but not about the world as it is in itself. Such reasoning concerns only the world as it appears to us. When we attempt to reason beyond this, wanting to know about the nature of the soul, or the world as a whole, or the existence of God, reason falls into contradiction, and its exercise is doomed to failure. As its name implies, the Critique of Pure Reason is fundamentally a skeptical work, and this is how it was seen by its contemporaries. Kant became famous as the Altessepsilon, or all-crushing skeptic and critic of rational theology and metaphysics. Indeed, contemporary opinion tended to assimilate Kant not only to Hume, but even to the notorious idealist Berkeley—a charge with some justice to it, but one that particularly outraged Kant himself.

In the contemporary world, as Kuehn observes, Kant is more commonly seen as an opponent of skepticism, more interested in the scope of our knowledge than in its limits. Such are the revolutions of philosophical interpretation. This positive side is certainly there, but it is only part of the picture, since for Kant himself the point of the critical philosophy lay elsewhere entirely. It lay in its religious and moral implications. Throughout the 1780s, Kant wrote the works on moral and religious themes that stand alongside the Critique as his great legacy to philosophy. Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals appeared in 1784; and by 1790 there were two more critiques, as well as one book expounding his system in a more accessible form (Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics) and the strange Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science, which sought to place Newtonian physics on a pure, a priori footing.

Even if Kant's life was speckled with outbreaks of conviviality, it is difficult to say the same for his uncompromising, law-intoxicated moral philosophy. Kant's moral psychology is one in which duty is forever at war with blind and slavish inclination, which itself is always a species of self-love. Emotions and desires are the enemy. You score moral points only when duty wins over them, and just because it is duty. In most of Kant's moral writings, in fact, the less you care about other things and other people, the better.

Bliss, for Kant, is equated with complete independence from any inclinations or needs, including feelings of compassion and sympathy with others. But since as human beings we are unlucky enough not to have this freedom, we must be on the alert to slap our feelings down. We gain moral credit only when we do so. Hence Schiller's famous jibe: "I must try to hate my friends so that my doing them good, which now I gladly do, will acquire moral worth." Kant's ideal, more accurately, is that you should try to be apathetic about your friends, and about everything else. Only then does real freedom, or real "autonomy," hold sway. Kant would not have
been a happy reader of books extolling emotional intelligence.

Nor is a life of duty a bed of roses. As all students of philosophy learn, the duty of truthfulness extends for Kant to telling the mad axman where your children are sleeping (if he asks, that is, and makes you answer). There is no room to wriggle. You cannot argue that the axman has no right to the truth. That just means that you do him no injustice by lying. But you still inflict a wrong upon humanity, and violate a sacred command of reason. In Kant's account of morality, it is quite easy to wrong humanity. Not only the bestialities of gluttony and misdirected sex, but also more principled stands such as rebellion against a government, wrong humanity, no matter how unjust, arbitrary, usurping, or plain evil the government may be. It can be so grim doing your duty that we are forced to postulate a life after death where happiness and righteousness get back into alignment. The critical philosophy completely destroys any project of rational theology, but then our needs are supposed to step in and fill the gap. We may not be permitted to lie, but we are permitted the wishful thinking of eschatology.

In spite of such unpromising doctrines, Kant is undoubtedly the most influential moral and political philosopher of modern times. At present he probably has more, and more crusading, defenders among professional moral and political philosophers than ever before. He is a foil to "utilitarianism," which is equated in many minds with a fearsome social engineering that puts the individual firmly at the service of the collective. Better still, he directs attention away from any very demanding educational needs. According to the Greek tradition, virtue is respect, just like that. They do not have to any very demanding educational needs.

Kuehn shows in detail how these views developed. Just as with the critical philosophy, there was a revolution in Kant's thinking. As well as having a taste for Henry Fielding, Kant grew up accepting the ethical views of Frances Hutcheson, the great eighteenth-century Scottish moral philosopher. Hutcheson, who coined the phrase "the greatest happiness of the greatest number," founded morality on a "moral sense" or sentiment of impartial benevolence toward humanity. Kant was apparently disabused of this approach by reading Rousseau. He tells us about it:

I am an inquirer by inclination. I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge, the unrest which goes with the desire to progress in it, and satisfaction at every advance in it. There was a time when I believed this constituted the honor of humanity, and I despised the people, who know nothing. Rousseau set me right about this. This binding prejudice disappeared. I learned to honor humanity, and I would find myself more useful than the common laborer if I did not believe that this attitude of mine can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of humanity.

The trouble with benevolence, Kant came to feel, is that it appeals to our feelings. But Kant wants a moral order in which we do not just happen to concern ourselves for others. We are under a duty to each other: our equal dignity demands their respect, and "what properly belongs to me must not be accorded me as something I beg for." The problem with private benevolence, as with public charity, is that it treats its objects as pitiable, as beggars, and this is a way of refusing to recognize their rights. It conceals our own injustice. The beggar is to be submissive and grateful; the benefactor is to be gracious and generous. But a person with rights should not have to be either submissive or grateful; and the person who heaps those rights is doing no more than listen to a demand, and so listening is neither gracious nor generous. It is a matter of obligation.

There is something sublime here, and something that will appeal to anyone looking to legitimate a liberal order. The claim is that there is indeed such a thing as a rational way of living, and that there is a duty to respect it and to aim for it. This duty is not something that we create, or happen to find burdensome, like a chore imposed on us either by our own will or by that of someone else. It is, rather, rationally mandated; reason makes it compulsory. Its authority is visible to any rational agent. And, unlike our inclinations, it is categorical and inescapable. Maxims of behavior that appeal to our well-being ("honesty is the best policy") merely advise us, but the law of morality commands us.

Thus Kant promises to provide the template or the form for a universal, liberal, Enlightenment politics. If the system works, there are no problems of skepticism, nihilism, or relativism. If our principles measure up, we need not fear that our favorite view is arbitrary or parochial, or that we are imposing our opinions without rational warrant on others over whom we have power. No wonder, then, that moral and political philosophers want the system to work. In this construction of the place of philosophy in the human world, philosophers are not mere bourgeois, selfish, and timid creatures of a particular time and place, vainly hoping to impose their liberal standards on others unlike themselves. They are in the vanguard, articulating the demands that, because of the very structure of reason itself, must be heard by everyone.

It may be that Kant, because of his pietistic Protestant background, got those demands slightly wrong. But that leaves the hope of being able to soft-pedal some of his absolutism while retaining the essence of his approach. This involves crying up the passages in which Kant seems a little less severe than usual. It means a little bit of pick 'n mix, trying to tow Königsberg some way to Edinburgh, or to Athens. This is a major industry in philosophy departments from Cambridge to Los Angeles. There are Aristotelian Kant's, and Humean Kants, and even postwar Parisian existentialist Kants. One surprising feature of Kuehn's book in this context is that while Kant himself is painted as a bit of a lad, the late metaphysics of Morals, which is the main resource of humanizing movements, is put down as disappointing: "it reads just like the compilation of old lecture notes that it is."

Contemporary manifestations of Kantianism tend to work through ideas of what reasonable people could demand of each other, of "contractarian" and "procedural" approaches to the foundations of society and morality. The fountainhead, of course, was John Rawls's A Theory of Justice, and Rawl's Harvard has been the main powerhouse of the "back to Kant" movement in liberal political philosophy. But in truth there is a serious question about how far the Kantian trappings of Rawls's works, and those of his followers, are not necessary to the argument, and therefore dispensable.

A Theory of Justice cracks up a social and fiscal order somewhat resembling the social democracies of Western Europe, with their substantial freedoms and their substantial welfare floors. The book gives the impression that this is a Kantian exercise of pure practical reason, describing the necessary goal of rational politics. But over the years this appearance has eroded. Perhaps a nice liberal welfare state is no more (or less) than the kind of place in which some of us would choose to live. It appeals to us not because of our autonomy, or because of our especially clear gaze into the crystal ball of pure practical reason, but only because we are prudent, and mildly benevolent, and not obsessive.
about the powers of the state or the beauties of the market.

Even if we do not all want to go back to Kant, none of us can escape him. He invented the guiding metaphor of contemporary thought, of all thought since his time. This is his Copernican revolution: that the world as we know it is at least partly a creation of the conceptual and linguistic resources that we bring to it. He articulated the guiding principles of liberal political thought. He may never have seen a decent painting, but he wrote the most interesting work on aesthetics in Western philosophy after Aristotle. Russell thought that Leibniz was the greatest example of pure intellect that the world had ever known. Russell, who could write well, was naturally prejudiced against Kant, who could not write well; but surely Kant is the only other contender for the Western mind’s laurels.

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**Inauthentic Fabrics**

*By Ruth Franklin*

**The Biographer’s Tale**

by A.S. Byatt

(Alfred A. Knopf, 305 pp., $24)

**On Histories and Stories: Selected Essays**

by A.S. Byatt

(Harvard University Press, 196 pp., $22.95)

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**S**ome children dream of becoming astronomers when they grow up; others dream of becoming librarians. A.S. Byatt’s characters fall into the second category. Among them are: an impoverished, confused graduate student; a literary critic fiercely marking her intellectual territory; a reedy naturalist chasssing down rare insects in the Amazon; an intensely repressed governess who authors books about ant colonies on the side; a beautiful radiologist who regards a bowl of marbles as an intellectual puzzle. Reclusive and introspective, they devote their minds to arranging, to categorizing, to developing an organizing principle for the world: this is life as a card catalogue. As Byatt wrote about her first novel, *The Shadow of the Sun*, which was published in 1964, “I found myself writing into my text ‘taxonomies’—from one girl’s study of all young men in Cambridge to a forimicary and an essay in field grasses, from children’s pictures representing alphabets to a long discursus on child’s pre-speech.”

As interested as Byatt is in compartmentalization in all its forms, she is equally obsessed with recovering and uncovering the past, recent and not so recent. *Possession*, as is well known, depicts the literary sleuthing of two young scholars who are forced to reconsider the Victorian poets they study after finding a trove of their love letters. Byatt’s other novels—they include *The Virgin in the Garden*, *Still Life*, and *Babel Tower*, the first three of a planned tetralogy, as well as *The Game*—are all set in the twentieth century, but they incorporate allusions to everything from Elizabethan drama to Arthurian romance. And in the linked novellas “Morpho Eugenia” and “The Conjugal Angel” (which appeared together as *Angels and Insects*) she returned to the Victorians, meditating on concepts such as the conflict of Darwinism and theology, and Swedenborg’s views on love after death.

Byatt’s dual obsessions come to a head in both of her new books. The plot of *The Biographer’s Tale* revolves around a graduate student who sets out to write a biography of a biographer, a double immersion in history and literary analysis. And of the seven essays in *On Histories and Stories*, Byatt devotes four to the investigation of various aspects of historical fiction, including her own methods of writing. The ideas explored here are ones that Byatt has already examined at great length, and this may account for the staleness of both books. Or perhaps it is that Byatt’s techniques—the inclusion of fictitious “original texts” in the narrative, the lengthy digressions on some topic or another—no longer feel as fresh as they did ten years ago. Whatever the reason, both books are disappointments.

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**THE BIOGRAPHER’S TALE** begins with an epiphany. Phineas Nanson, a doctoral student in English literature, is sitting in a seminar discussing Lacan’s theory of *morcelement* when he decides, seemingly apropos of nothing, that he cannot go on. He has had it with the world of academia, with seminars on “not-too-long texts written by women,” with the professor himself, who “read his Foucault and his Lacan in translation, like his Heraclitus and his Empedocles.” And he has had it with the redundancies and the superficialities of contemporary critical theory: “We found the same eclefs and crevices, transgressions and disintegrations, lures and decepions beneath, no matter what surface we were scrying.” Though neither as acid nor as funny as the satire in *Possession*, Byatt’s depiction of life in the postmodern academy still wickedly hits the mark. At one point Phineas comments, “I had avoided the trap of talking about ‘reality’ and ‘unreal-ity’ for I knew very well that postmodern literary theory could be described as a reality. People lived in it.”

What Phineas wants is “a life full of things… Full of facts.” A kindly professor of Anglo-Saxon—quite the other end of the spectrum from postmodern theory—to whom Phineas proudly declares his change of heart directs the young scholar to what he calls “the greatest work of scholarship in my time”: a three-volume biography of Sir Elmer Bole, a fictitious Victorian seemingly modeled, at least in part, on Richard Burton, the swashbuckling explorer and orientalist. Phineas confesses that he has always thought biography a “bastard form.” But he is surprised to find that he becomes absorbed in the biography, which describes in impossible detail Bole’s adventures as a writer, diplomat, naturalist, traveler, and scholar of everything from British military hygiene to pornographic Roman jars.

As Phineas reads and re-reads the volumes, his interest in Bole slowly metamorphoses into an interest in Bole’s biographer, Scholes Destry-Scholes. For he knows even more about even more varieties of arcana than even Bole himself (though perhaps not more than Byatt): “the morphology of Mediterranean solitary bees, the recurring motifs of Turkish fairy tales, the deficiencies of the supply-lines of the British army.” Phineas becomes fascinated by Destry-Scholes’s construction of the biography, “his resourceful marshalling and arranging of facts.” And he determines, inevitably, that he will write a biography of the biographer: “Only a biography seemed an appropriate form for the great biographer.”

Phineas throws himself into the project with gusto, writing to Destry-Scholes’s