

Introduction to
**GERMAN
PHILOSOPHY**

FROM KANT TO HABERMAS

Andrew Bowie

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polity.

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PREFACE

Einstein once said: 'Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.' He may not have been talking about explaining modern German philosophy, but the same principle probably applies. The present book offers an account of the German philosophy from Kant to the present which forms the often neglected background to much recent theoretical work in the humanities. My aim is to provide a comprehensible, but not reductive, outline of the major concerns of the German philosophical tradition for students and teachers in the humanities who need a text that can give them an initial orientation in this often rather formidable area. The book is also intended for those working in the tradition of Anglo-American 'analytical' philosophy who have realized that the rigid boundaries between their concerns and the concerns of the European tradition are breaking down in the light of the arguments of Donald Davidson, Nelson Goodman, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Wilfrid Sellars and others.¹

Any such enterprise poses considerable difficulties, not least because of the size of the area to be covered. The texts which form this tradition are often written in a manner which puts off the non-specialist reader, and the interpretation of the texts remains controversial. Nietzsche, to take an extreme example, is regarded by some, including in certain respects myself, as a dangerous Social Darwinist

with leanings towards the kind of ideas which later informed Nazi ideology, and by others, such as Jacques Derrida, as a valuable resource for feminist thinking. In relation to the first problem, I have generally tried to avoid extensive quotation, as this can lead to the need for lengthy commentary to explain the text in question. I have, though, on occasion dealt with a key passage of text in some detail. In relation to the second, I have tried to restrict my agenda to the kind of questions which interest people working in the humanities today, or which interest natural scientists who wish to reflect upon philosophical issues in their scientific practice. This approach has allowed me to avoid extensive engagement with the literature on the interpretative debates. Doubtless none of this will prevent the inevitable feeling for many readers that I am not doing justice to the complexity of the work of the thinkers in question. However, this feeling would be based on a misapprehension of what I am trying to achieve. The point of this book is to enable its readers to gain access to the primary texts which, when read without the help of such an introductory work, often seem wholly intractable. If I succeed in facilitating such access, any questionable judgements on my part can be corrected by a subsequent engagement with the primary texts.

The further methodological point here concerns the nature of the story I am telling. Some of the stories told in the Anglo-American philosophical tradition about the history of philosophy consist of the exposition of a series of philosophical arguments which replace each other as the preceding arguments are rendered invalid. Such an approach is valid for some purposes. However, it does little to show why philosophical positions become generally accepted in a wider community. The approach also fails to deal with the ways in which philosophical arguments are situated within historical and political debates that can affect their very nature, and, of course, vice versa. The simple fact is that philosophical arguments do not invariably determine the success of philosophical theories. It is not, however, that a plausible alternative general theory of what really does this is available. The success of theories in real contexts depends upon so many factors that it is only through particular research in an area that one can begin to arrive at more adequate judgements. My main concern is, then, with the role the major works of the German tradition play in philosophy and in theoretical approaches in the humanities today. A final point: the book is best read sequentially. This is because arguments and concepts explored in earlier chapters are often necessary to understand ideas that occur in later chapters. I have tried to give a basic explanation of unfamiliar philosophical concepts when they first occur (I have also appended a glossary). If the

¹ These thinkers share the conviction that we must give up the ideas that we can claim the world has an inherent 'ready-made' structure and that there is an infallible kind of access to that structure which provides reliable knowledge. Such ideas will become clearer to non-philosophical readers in the course of the book. See e.g. Davidson (1984), Goodman (1978), Putnam (1983), Rorty (1980), Sellars (1997).

reader does not understand a concept used in a later chapter, they should consult the index, where the explanatory reference will be highlighted, or the glossary. At the end of each chapter there is a commented list of selected further reading on the author or topic. The works listed (all in English) offer some possibilities for exploring both the work of the philosophers and the movements to which they belong. The books also offer bibliographical information on more specialized aspects of the philosophers concerned, and they may be relevant for more than one chapter. I have included some books also cited in the references, if they offer a useful broader picture.

The completion of this book was assisted by an award from the Research Leave scheme of the Arts and Humanities Research Board.

INTRODUCTION

Why is German philosophy so central to our philosophical and theoretical culture, and yet also a warning of what can happen when ideas and historical reality interact in the wrong ways? Answers to this question can play a significant role in the contemporary situation in the humanities, where theoretical reflection has never before been so widespread. The theoretical developments that go under the headings of 'literary theory' and 'continental' or 'European' philosophy have brought about a rethinking of conceptions of language, subjectivity, science and art in most humanities subjects. However, it is too rarely acknowledged to what extent nearly all the new directions in the humanities rely upon the tradition of German philosophy which begins with Immanuel Kant's work from the 1780s onwards, and continues through German Romanticism, German Idealism, historical materialism, phenomenology, hermeneutics and Critical Theory, to the present day.¹ Michel Foucault's reflections on the way power is inseparable from knowledge, for example, rely on ideas which go from Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas in the late nineteenth century back to the work in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century of Arthur Schopenhauer, F. W. J. Schelling, and J. G. Fichte, and even to the work in the earlier part of the eighteenth century of Gottfried Leibniz. There is these days also an almost universal adherence in all areas of 'theory', as well as in the Anglo-American tradition of ana-

¹ I will generally either explain in the text the initial occurrence of any technical name for a kind of philosophy or any technical term that is required for my argument or I will include an explanation in a note. Many of these terms are also included in the glossary. The content of the terms referred to here is not part of the main argument and will be explained later.

lytical philosophy, to some version of a 'linguistic turn'.² The linguistic turn shifts the focus of philosophy away from the workings of the mind towards the role of language, and it too can be traced to origins within the Kantian and post-Kantian German traditions.³ In some other areas of the humanities, like social theory, the influence of the German philosophical tradition is widely acknowledged. However, this still has not led to a broader philosophical examination of this tradition of the kind to be offered here.

In the light of Germany's dominant role in nearly all spheres of modern culture, the lack of attention to the broader German tradition in recent theory is particularly surprising. The work of Kant, G. W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger in philosophy, and of Mozart, Beethoven, Wagner and Schoenberg in music is frequently regarded as addressing the concerns of the modern world in ways not equalled by other cultural traditions. It is, though, hard to ignore the sense that these exceptional German intellectual achievements are also connected to what has been wrong with Germany in the modern period. This is one of the reasons why the role of German philosophy in much contemporary theory has been underplayed.⁴ From the second half of the eighteenth century onwards the intensity both of philosophical activity and of musical creativity in Germany is linked to the failure of German society to transform itself politically, socially and economically in the way that countries elsewhere in Europe were doing. Historians often connect this initial failure to the disastrous way in which Germany then belatedly began to modernize during the second half of the nineteenth century. In this period traditional forms of feudal social and political organization were kept in existence along with new forms of production and exchange. The socio-political transformations required to make these forms part of German culture simply did not take place or took place too late for them to have a socially integrative and stabilizing effect. This disjunction is characteristic of modern Germany,

2 Suspicions that the linguistic turn may not resolve every question about meaning and the mind are, though, becoming common in both analytical and European philosophy.

3 The obvious example of theory where this is not immediately the case are feminist and gender theories, which can truly be said to have broken new ground. Even here, though, many of the conceptual resources now employed in such theories can be traced to Hegel, Nietzsche, Heidegger and others in the Romantic and post-Romantic traditions. There has been no lack of attention to specific thinkers in these traditions, like Nietzsche or Heidegger – on the contrary – but there has been a lack of attention to the broader picture and its implications.

4 A more contingent reason for this is the narrow agenda of much of German Studies in both the USA and Europe, an agenda which is now being broadened.

in which different aspects of society develop at sometimes very divergent rates. The writer Heinrich Heine, himself no uncritical admirer of German philosophy, already suggested in his *On the History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany* of 1834 that 'German philosophy is an important matter, which concerns the whole of humanity, and only the last grandchildren will be able to judge whether we should be blamed or praised for working out our philosophy before our revolution' (n.d. 615–16). It is clear that Europe would have benefited socially, politically and historically had the sequence been the other way round. However, this is not a reason to disregard what is offered by the German philosophical revolution for understanding our world.⁵ Why is it, then, that modern philosophy developed in the most revealing ways in Germany?

Karl Marx's remark in the Communist Manifesto of 1848 that in capitalism 'All that is solid melts into air' provides a clue here. What Marx meant was that the new market economy undermined the idea of a fixed order of the world which was given by tradition. It did so by subordinating the value of objects for their particular use to their money value. The market economy made it more the case than ever before that the value of things depends upon the contexts in which they are encountered, rather than upon something intrinsic to the things themselves or upon their traditional or theological value. This change is echoed in other aspects of modernity, and Germany often has great trouble adjusting to these changes. It was therefore more likely that Germany would also produce more elaborated theoretical responses to them. There are, broadly speaking, five main interrelated dimensions in which previously established orders tend to disintegrate in modernity.

- 1 The old social, political and economic *hierarchies* are replaced by new, shifting hierarchies, in which values are no longer directly derived from existing tradition or from theology.
- 2 The idea that people have a stable *identity* which is a result both of their ascribed place in society and of their inherent God-given nature gives way to two opposed new conceptions. In the first, one can autonomously *make* oneself what one is, rather than be told what one is by a higher authority. In the second, one is *made* into what one is by the new historically shifting social and economic

5 The contemporary development of the Islamic world in a world dominated by modern science and technology seems to me to have worrying parallels with the German development. In both cases what Ernst Bloch calls 'non-simultaneity', the coexistence of modern techniques with pre-modern beliefs, has often devastating effects.

pressures, by the language into which one is socialized, and by other factors, such as one's early upbringing, one's unconscious mind, or one's place in the class structure, all of which are ultimately beyond one's control.

- 3 *Knowledge* based on theology and established authority handed down the generations is replaced by knowledge that changes at ever more bewildering speeds via empirical research in both the natural sciences and the humanities.
- 4 *Art*, which had been seen mainly as either entertainment for those in power or as connected to religious observance, comes to be seen as 'autonomous', subject only to its own changing rules and to the freedom of the artist. At the same time, however, art itself also becomes a commodity which can be bought and sold like any other commodity.
- 5 *Language*, which was previously conceived of as originating in God, and thus as the symbolic medium in which a pre-existing order of things is reflected, comes to be seen as in some way 'constitutive' of what there is in the world. It brings things to light by giving them a name which makes them what they are. Greater importance is therefore attached to the languages of poetry and of music, and a new interest emerges in the way that the languages of differing peoples can offer new perspectives on the world.

These five dimensions will play a major role in the chapters to come.

The changes in question here all involve aspects of a vital tension, the manifestations of which are particularly characteristic of Germany's responses to the modern world. On the one hand, the disintegration of traditional orders liberates technological and creative potential, giving rise to new and previously inconceivable possibilities. On the other hand, the – albeit often repressive – stability provided by traditional orders is lost. People therefore often anxiously seek for new points of reference within which to locate themselves, or try to sustain the old order against the destructive forces of the new. This tension between the destruction of existing orders of things and the need to establish new orders is vital both to modern Germany's history and to its philosophy. How much of a role this tension plays even now in Germany can be illustrated by the following observations on the effects of the disintegration of the German Democratic Republic in 1989. In the GDR: 'People were not allowed to decide anything because there was nothing left to decide, because history had already decided everything "up there".' After the fall of the Wall, the other side of the tension comes to the fore: 'Now, in freedom, they may and must decide for themselves; all the

existing institutions have collapsed, all the old certainties are gone... The joy of freedom is at the same time a falling into a void. Now let everyone look after himself. What are the rules? Who's in charge?' (Friedrich Schorlemmer, cited in Elliott 1999: 156–7). The worst aspects of the GDR were a result of an attempt to find ways of controlling the freedom which is inseparable from modernity, and this has been a major issue throughout modern German philosophy.⁶

In order to understand how the main elements of the modern German philosophical tradition came about, it is useful to consider a manifestation of the essential tension between the destruction and creation of order that is a frequent point of reference for the German thinkers we shall be examining. In two of the founding texts of the modern world, the *Discourse on Method* of 1638, and the *Meditations on First Philosophy* of 1641, René Descartes bids farewell to the medieval world-picture. He does so by deciding to doubt the veracity, both of all scientific truths derived from tradition – his and others' scientific researches suggest they often cannot be verified – and of all perceptual experiences – because he can never be completely certain that he is not dreaming or hallucinating. He is left with the sole certainty of his own existence as a thinking being, which he cannot doubt without removing the very possibility of doubting itself. There can be no doubt without something existing that can doubt. Every other aspect of experience is, he argues, potentially deceptive. Descartes aims to construct a new world-picture which will provide truths based on rigorous method, rather than on received wisdom, by beginning from whatever he thinks he can establish as indubitable.⁷ Subsequent history would appear to confirm the positive aim of this enterprise. The natural sciences have provided more and more theories which enable us really to control the natural world for our purposes, rather than rely on mythical explanations. At the same time, however, the history of philosophy since Descartes has been a history of the failure to explain *why* it is that the sciences are so successful in providing reliable predictions. The sciences provide new conceptions, in the work of Newton, Darwin, Einstein and others, which enable more and more control of nature and of ourselves, based on predictive laws. What *explains* the predictive and explanatory success

6 Many of those ways were simply adopted from the authoritarian past: anyone who knew the GDR would always remark upon how 'Prussian' it was.

7 What Descartes wished to achieve is much more complex than this, and he actually relies on a further theological argument. What matters here is that he has been understood predominantly in relation to what he makes of 'I think, I am'.

of those conceptions remains elusive. Philosophy does not, as some hoped, become the 'science of science'. Even more importantly, the growth in the ability to explain and predict is not accompanied by a similar growth in the ability to make rational decisions about what should be done with the results of this ability.

Reflections on these issues have consequences both for modern societies and for philosophy's relationship to the sciences and the rest of human culture. Science may, for example, be nothing more than the human activity of predicting the course of events in nature and thus controlling nature, rather than being a true picture of the world 'as it really is'. This view of science as pragmatic control is often associated with Descartes's claim that there is a firm foundation for science in our thinking, which will enable us to become 'lord and master of nature'. When seen in the context of the sometimes catastrophic effects of the application of modern science serious questions therefore emerge as to what science actually is. These questions affect how the image of the world presented in the sciences relates to the everyday world we inhabit, in which most of us rarely think in terms of the scientific explanation of what is happening. Responses to these questions have often gone in two opposed directions.

- 1 If science is indeed merely our way of controlling nature, it can become the object of a wider investigation of what it is about human beings in the modern world that can make their activity, from the atom bomb to the growing ecological devastation of large parts of the globe, so destructive of nature. Why does the human mind, which itself depends on natural biological processes, lead to acts which are so damaging to nature?
- 2 Giving up the idea that science truly represents what there is, and thus relativizing science's privileged position in relation to the rest of human culture, can offer an opportunity to make better decisions about what human beings want to do with themselves and their world. Such decisions are not dependent on invoking scientific criteria that are necessarily inadequate to the complexity of our needs, desires and ethical impulses.

The view expressed in (1) is often espoused by German thinkers who are involved in the catastrophic history of Germany in the first half of the twentieth century, although the beginnings of what led to this view emerge, as we shall see, in the work of Schelling in the 1790s. The view expressed in (2) is often that of contemporary American pragmatists who live in a country which has not seen the kind of devastation that has occurred in Germany and elsewhere in Europe.

These divergent responses to the understanding of science already suggest the way in which this issue impinges on how modernity is conceived. Is the main characteristic of modernity the disintegration of the new Enlightenment hopes for a better and more humane form of existence that develop out of the decline of feudal authoritarianism? Or does modernity still offer the potential for an opening up of major new possibilities for humankind in ways which are not necessarily destructive?

German philosophers react in a variety of ways to the centrality of the natural sciences in the modern world. These range from the attempt to make philosophy itself into a kind of science which would require the same degree of rigorous proof as well-confirmed scientific theories, to the claim that there may be, as Ludwig Wittgenstein says in the 1930s, 'nothing good or desirable about scientific knowledge' and that, if this is the case, 'humankind which strives after it is running into a trap' (1980: 56).⁸ The divergence of these conceptions indicates how problematic this area can be. How, then, do such conflicting conceptions emerge from the same cultural milieu? It would be foolish to offer any kind of definitive answer to such a question. However, the tension we have observed, between the need to come to terms with new orders of things and the feeling that this can entail the destruction of indispensable cultural resources, clearly has to do with the coexistence of such opposed views.

The opposition just described has sometimes been characterized in terms of an opposition between 'Romanticism' and 'Positivism'. This opposition can establish a framework that the coming chapters will employ to clarify some complex issues. The opposition is often understood as between conceptions which concentrate on the subjective and expressive dimensions of human experience and conceptions which concentrate on the objective ways in which we can find out about the world and ourselves. In its most well-known guise in the English-speaking world the opposition was seen by C. P. Snow in the 1950s as involving 'two cultures', the artistic and the scientific. The resulting debate affected major aspects of British culture, and continues to do so. If the issue seems too abstract, think of arguments over the fact that the arts make more money for the British economy than the car industry, or look at the relative spending in university departments on the arts and the sciences. Another way of looking at this issue is to contrast the description of a human being by an evolutionary biologist, who sees us in terms of how we are determined

8 As we shall see in chapter 8, the earlier Wittgenstein has a view of philosophy less suspicious of the sciences.

by genes and by the need to adapt to an environment, and a novelist, who might see us in terms of our ability to be both self-determining and yet also prone to give way to baser determining impulses. How can one exist under both kinds of description at the same time? The very dissonance generated by the attempt to think of oneself both as a piece of causally determined nature like any other, and as someone who can care about others and the world, can suggest the kind of problem produced by the division between a 'Positivist' and a 'Romantic' conception of philosophy.

This division is obviously not just an abstract philosophical matter, because decisions about what is done in society depend upon which assumptions one adopts in this respect. Criminals are, for example, regarded very differently, depending on whether one thinks they are subject to their genes or are able to choose what they do.⁹ One of the reasons why the German tradition is so important is that it offers extreme examples, both at the level of theory and at the level of real historical events, of the consequences of these issues. The contrast of the Enlightenment idea of human self-determination with the Nazi idea of a self predetermined primarily by its race evidently does not just come down to a disagreement about which theory is correct. Both Enlightenment thinkers and Nazis, however, tend to invoke science as a way of legitimating what they *do* with such descriptions.

The decisive point here lies in the way in which the scope of science is conceived. Until the nineteenth century what we term natural science was included under the wider umbrella of philosophy. Science up to and beyond Isaac Newton was termed 'natural philosophy'. Since the second half of the nineteenth century, however, philosophy has ceased to be the all-encompassing discipline which, along with theology, it was throughout the Middle Ages and the early modern period. We have now reached a point where many of those engaged in philosophy spend time pondering whether philosophy may not be at an end, because so many of the tasks previously allotted to it have been taken over by the natural sciences. This situation might seem only likely to worry professional philosophers, as their chances of getting a job diminish along with the scope of the profession itself. Indeed, this is what has already happened in professional philosophy, particularly during the second half of the twentieth century. As the sciences became more and more industrialized and became an ever greater source of wealth-creation, philosophy departments shrank in the face of the increased resources being pumped into the sciences.

⁹ Interestingly, this rarely seems to mean that those who think predominantly in terms of genetics are more forgiving of the failings of criminals; if anything, it is the other way round.

However, this 'Positivist' development also made possible a new explicit role for philosophy. This role is based on its link to 'Romantic' concerns about what science may obscure, that is therefore only accessible in other ways, such as through works of art. The very success of science, then, changes the perceived role of philosophy, either in the direction of its abolition in the name of science, or in the direction of a potentially critical role in relation to the sciences.

In the Anglo-American world the former view became more and more dominant until quite recently. The present renewed interest in the German tradition evident among the best contemporary American philosophers is not least a result of a reaction against 'scientism', 'the doctrine that natural science is privileged over other areas of culture, that something about natural science puts it in closer – or at least in more reliable – touch with reality than any other human activity' (Rorty 1998: 294). This academic change in the focus of major philosophers is not necessarily just a result of the fact that many of the arguments claiming to be able to get rid of philosophical problems by finding scientific solutions have been shown to be seriously flawed.

One aspect of German philosophy which has proved to be particularly durable is its concern to see things 'holistically'. Holism is the idea that no particular phenomenon can be properly understood in isolation, and therefore must be seen in terms of its contexts. The contemporary questioning of scientism within philosophy evidently relates to the wider *cultural* suspicion of the assumption that all human problems are best approached solely by using the methods and assumptions of the natural sciences. At its worst this suspicion can, though, lead in irrational directions. It sometimes results in an indefensible refusal to accept that in their own domain the natural sciences are capable of a precision and reliability absent in other areas of human life. However, it is precisely the fact that the sciences have their effects in social and cultural contexts that are themselves *not* susceptible to the same kind of analysis as the objects of science which is at the root of the demand for better philosophical responses to the ways science affects the modern world. Even today, philosophy oriented principally towards scientific methods dominates much of the academic world. The reappraisal of the more critical responses to natural science in the German tradition now taking place in Anglo-American philosophy is therefore an indication of a broader concern about the direction of the modern world. The problem in this respect is, of course, the Janus-faced nature of German philosophy, which, on the one hand, seems to offer critical resources lacking in some of Anglo-American philosophy, and, on the other, is associated with a

very disturbing history indeed. The fact that two of the thinkers in Germany in the twentieth century who developed serious ecological ways of thinking, Heidegger and Ludwig Klages, were, respectively, a member of the Nazi party and a reactionary anti-Semite, makes clear how difficult this area can be.

No assessment of this tradition is going to overcome all the methodological difficulties involved in finding a focus which both does justice to the arguments of the thinkers and takes proper account of the historical developments within which their arguments emerged. Modern philosophy is divided between (1) assessing arguments from the history of philosophy as part of the discipline of philosophical argumentation in the present, and (2) seeing philosophical arguments as part of a wider historical field of research. In the former, Kant becomes, for example, the source of key ideas in the theory of knowledge which still affect debates over the nature of scientific knowledge today. In the latter, Kant's theory of knowledge is part of a broader historical shift away from established authority in the direction of a new autonomy for human thinking which relates to the French Revolution, Beethoven's music and a host of new phenomena in modernity. There is no necessary reason why these approaches need be incompatible. The right historical interpretation of Kant might turn out to be the truth about why scientific knowledge is valid, and be independent of the fact that Kant arrived at his views in specific historical and intellectual circumstances which influenced how he thought. However, the fact that this possibility seems implausible indicates something important about the nature of philosophical interpretation. A historical interpretation of Kant has no need to come to an end, because the relevant contexts and the information discovered by new research continue to grow, and what counts as valid evidence changes as our conceptions both of philosophy and of history change. How much of these contexts and information is significant for contemporary philosophical debate will alter, depending upon the focus of that debate, a focus which continually shifts in nearly all areas of philosophy.

Despite this obvious fact, manifestations of this tension between the approaches are widespread in contemporary philosophy. Some philosophers in the Anglo-American analytical tradition talk, for example, of the 'philosopher they will call Kant', knowing that they are simply employing certain very limited interpretations of Kant's arguments for contemporary purposes. These philosophers will tend to refer to what those involved in a historical approach are doing as merely the 'history of ideas'. Others in the 'European' tradition are horrified that such thinkers often have only read one or two books

by Kant and that they therefore have no ambition to understand the complexity of Kant's wider project, preferring instead to reduce his thought to being another means of combating what they think is wrong with 'empiricism'.¹⁰ Neither of these approaches is satisfactory, and yet both are an ineliminable part of contemporary philosophy. I shall not attempt to resolve this tension here, because it is part of the story this book is concerned to tell. Philosophers must surely think that their own theory, because it seems to them to deal more effectively with the crucial problems, is a better account of the truth than competing theories. This leads them in the direction of a justified concern with the cogency and rigour of philosophical arguments. On the other hand, the history of philosophy shows that even the most widely held theories are eventually invalidated, albeit only to re-emerge in some new guise at a later date. They often do this because it comes to be thought that they have been inadequately interpreted. Philosophers working within a historical framework therefore have to focus as much upon why the theories were 'held as true', as upon whether they are true or not – although philosophers of this kind can tend to ignore the question of whether the theories are worth examining in such detail. German philosophy offers many examples of responses to this tension which are both historically and philosophically illuminating, and which therefore enable one to explore the tension between the 'argument-based' and the 'historical' approaches in a more reflective manner.

The tension just described is, of course, another version of the tension between 'Positivist' and 'Romantic' conceptions, which this time also maps onto the now more and more widely discussed division between 'analytical', and 'continental' or 'European' philosophy. Until recently this division was seen by many philosophers as almost unbridgeable, the one tradition being supposedly concerned to pursue argument with the utmost logical rigour by isolating problems and working on them in detail, the other concerned to explore the textuality and history of philosophy as much as the validity of the arguments in the texts studied. These approaches are, however, becoming much harder to separate, as it becomes apparent that the borders of each approach are not hard and fast. The style of argument among some 'continental' philosophers may differ from some of their analytical counterparts, but anyone now interested in Hegel would, for example, be ill-advised to concentrate solely on works on Hegel from one side of the notional divide. The very challenge such radically divergent approaches pose to contemporary thought seems

10 The reasons for this will be examined in chapter 1.

to me inevitable in the present situation. In what follows I aim to offer a way into what is at issue that might contribute to establishing a more creative future dialogue between the traditions.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- Bubner, R. (1981) *Modern German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). *Good, if demanding, general account of the area.*
- Habermas, J. (1987) *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity). *Classic overview of modern philosophy by German's leading contemporary philosopher and social theorist.*
- O'Hear, A. (ed.) (1999) *German Philosophy After Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). *A useful collection of essays on individual philosophers and on central themes in German philosophy.*
- Roberts, J. (1988) *German Philosophy* (Cambridge: Polity). *Quirky, but readable, account of some key thinkers.*
- Schnädelbach, H. (1984) *Philosophy in Germany 1831–1933* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press). *Scholarly and philosophically acute account, which includes much important material on lesser-known academic philosophers.*

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THE KANTIAN REVOLUTION

Accounts of the history of modern German philosophy generally begin with Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). However, exclusive attention to Kant's role can distort what was significant about German philosophy in the modern period. Concentrating on Kant produces a picture of the early development of modern philosophy in which the dominant factor is the analysis of the structures of the mind as the new post-theological basis of knowledge and ethics. This picture leads to the claim that the decisive contribution of the twentieth century to philosophy is the 'linguistic turn' – the turn towards the primacy of questions of language before questions of the mind – which some philosophers regard as invalidating much of what was attempted by Kant. An account of this kind fails, though, to show that a version of the linguistic turn is itself part of German philosophy in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. In the work on language of J. G. Herder and J. G. Hamann from the 1760s onwards, which is taken up by the Romantics at the end of the century and developed by the linguist, Wilhelm von Humboldt, and the philosopher and theologian, F. D. E. Schleiermacher, the role of language in thought is regarded as essential. Many of the assumptions of the 'linguistic turn' are, therefore, already present much earlier than is usually thought. Modern German philosophy has always been concerned both with the mind and with language. However, even though Herder had already published his *Essay on the Origin of Language* in 1772, nine years before Kant's most influential work, it is still best to begin with Kant. We will look at Kant in more detail than many of the other philosophers because his innovations affect all his successors.

Making Kant Accessible

Many approaches in contemporary theory in the humanities involve questions about the nature of the self which demonstrably derive from Kant. Kant is, however, not easy to understand. Much of the notorious difficulty of Kant's thought is a result of the language he employs. His vocabulary often derives from philosophical texts of his era which are now neither easily accessible nor widely read. He is, moreover, writing at a time when there is no real precedent for writing philosophy in German: most philosophical texts until his time were written in Latin. Despite these obstacles, things are not as hard as they are sometimes made out to be. To take one example: the fact that Kant refers to what he is writing as 'transcendental philosophy' is enough to make many people think that he is concerned with something incomprehensible beyond the everyday world. However, what he means by 'transcendental' has nothing to do with anything other-worldly. Something is transcendental if it is, in Kant's phrase, the 'condition of possibility' of something. Thus it might be said that sex, at least until the advent of in-vitro fertilization, was transcendental in relation to pregnancy. Another example: the first part of Kant's first major work, the *Critique of Pure Reason* (the 'first Critique') of 1781, is called the 'Transcendental Aesthetic'. *Aisthesis* in Greek means perception by the senses, and this section of the work is simply concerned with the conditions under which perception takes place. Perception must be of something in a spatial location at a specific time. Kant's claim is that the conditions of perception are functions of the mind. Space and time are the prior framework – what he terms the 'forms of intuition' – within which we perceive objects, so they are not attributes of the objects themselves. Why is this so important?

The idea that space and time are functions of the mind remains one of Kant's most controversial doctrines. However, the idea is part of a series of contentions about the nature of knowledge which revolutionized modern philosophy. In order to understand a revolution one has to understand what preceded it that meant there had to be a radical change, rather than a gradual one. The thinking which Kant put in question can be summed up in a phrase used by the contemporary American philosopher, Hilary Putnam. Putnam refers to the rejection of the idea of a 'ready-made world'. This idea can be construed in a theological sense, so that Kant is understood as undermining the idea that God made the world. The real point of the idea, though, is that in a 'ready-made' world there is no doubt that the truth about what is the case is already 'out there' as part of the world itself.

Knowledge therefore entails establishing something which is the way it is completely independently of anything we do. Kant's contention is that we can no longer justifiably claim to be able to attain such a point of view, because what we know is known under certain unavoidable conditions. It is *not* that Kant is denying the validity of well-confirmed scientific theories, or that what we justifiably know *might* indeed be true of a 'ready-made' world; he is just asking what it is that makes theories reliable once previous assumptions about this reliability have been shown to be impossible to sustain.

The power of what preceded Kant's new claims lay in the idea that the world was held together on the basis of a pre-existing divine foundation which could not be shaken. There was a way the world really is because it was *made* that way. René Descartes (1596–1650) had already begun to shake the faith in this basis when he pointed out both how unreliable the senses could be and how much of the science of the ancients turned out to be mistaken. Along with his argument about the certainty of his existence as thinking being, Descartes did, however, also rely on the claim that he could prove God existed.

Kant not only shows in the first Critique that Descartes's proof of God's existence is invalid, but he also accepts aspects of an even more emphatic attack on the notion of a reality with an inbuilt rational structure, that of the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, David Hume (1711–76). Hume's arguments threaten any claim to the effect that the universe is, so to speak, held together by theological glue. This glue is supposed to be apparent in the laws of nature, which reveal a regularity and necessity which we cannot escape or ignore. Hume's argument is simple. He asks how we in fact arrive at the knowledge of the laws that govern the functioning of nature, and insists that we require observation of phenomena for this. The phenomena come to us through our senses, and we can only know something if it is associated with other phenomena that have also come to us through our senses. If we think something is caused by something else, we therefore do so because we *habitually* see a conjunction of events of the same kind. However, the vital fact about what comes to us through the senses is that it is contingent. We never absolutely know what we will perceive next, and even when we think we are certain that we do know, we can be mistaken. Everything we know therefore has contingency built into it, because it is reliant on what we happen to have perceived in the past, rather than on anything 'out there' which is already ordered independently of ourselves. This 'empiricist' view made the world feel a very unstable place indeed.

What, though, of the fact that there did seem to be a kind of knowledge which was not subject to contingency, namely the a priori truths

of mathematics, which could not be changed by experience? The 'rationalist' philosophers of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, like Baruch Spinoza and Gottfried Leibniz, had invoked these truths as a proof that there must be a pre-existing structure of things. In the light of the success of Newton's new laws of physics, the mathematically based view seemed highly plausible, but it was always confronted in actual scientific investigation with the empiricist reliance upon contingent observation. What was therefore required was a way to combine the empiricist and the rationalist positions, and this was what Kant tried to establish.

Kant refers to what he is initiating as a 'Copernican turn'. During the first half of the sixteenth century Copernicus had been the first modern thinker to oppose the view that the earth was the centre of the universe with mathematically based arguments. In the wake of Copernicus, at almost exactly the same time as Descartes was beginning to change the medieval world-view in the 1630s, Galileo gave more decisive evidence for what Copernicus had suggested, and was threatened by the Catholic Church with being burned at the stake for doing so. Here it becomes rather easy to see what might have been 'at stake' in challenging medieval religious authority: others had already been burned to death for doing so.¹ The odd thing about Kant's turn is that it can be seen as involving the *opposite* of Copernicus's turn, though it is just as revolutionary. Copernicus began to take us *away* from the centre of the universe, and thereby helped set in motion the development of the scientific image of the universe we now inhabit, in which the place of humankind is pretty insignificant. Kant, on the other hand, makes our thinking the very principle of the universe's intelligibility, thus putting the human mind at the centre of everything.

It should now be clear that something spectacular is afoot in what Kant proposes. The big question is how he is to be interpreted. On the one hand, he can be understood as demonstrating that reliable knowledge depends upon our ability to employ certain prior mental rules which cannot be derived from looking at the world. On the other hand, he also seems to be suggesting that nothing could be intelligible at all without the activity of thought, which becomes the 'light' that illuminates an otherwise dark universe. It is vital to

1 There is a kind of rationale for some of the opposition to such challenges, which is well illustrated in Bertolt Brecht's play about Galileo. In it the little monk suggests that what Galileo proposes is likely to render his peasant parents deeply unhappy because it threatens the stable world-picture that made sense of the harshness of their lives. This kind of ambivalence about science is crucial to modern German philosophy.

remember that, even though he has generally been read in the English-speaking world as a theorist of knowledge and of ethics, what Kant is ultimately trying to achieve is a map of our location in the world once we can no longer assume a theological basis for what we know and do.

Kant himself says that he is drawing the limits of knowledge to make space for religious faith, but it is now pretty clear that the modern world has been unable to fill that space. In the philosophy of J. G. Fichte, F. W. J. Schelling and G. W. F. Hegel, known as 'German Idealism', which begins in the 1790s, the space is often filled with aspects of what Kant proposes which are given a more emphatic status than Kant himself thinks possible. Fichte, for example, will make the activity of the I the source of the world's intelligibility in a way that Kant rejects.² Development of some of these thinkers' ideas will be germane to Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx, and Nietzsche, who, though, reject many of the central philosophical contentions of German Idealism. However, the structures which inform much of what these thinkers say still depend upon what might initially appear to be rather specialized aspects of Kant's philosophy. In the following I will primarily consider elements of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the *Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785)³ and the *Critique of Judgement* (1790), with the emphasis mainly on the first Critique.

The First Critique

The *Critique of Pure Reason* seeks to come to terms with the fact that modern science has begun to progress so rapidly, both because of the new importance of empirical observation and because of its reliance upon the certainties of mathematics. The problem is that the first of these two sources of knowledge is changing and contingent, whereas the second is supposed to be unchanging and necessary. This problem has been around in Western philosophy at least since Plato, so the impact of Kant cannot just be explained in terms of his contributions to dealing with this perennial dilemma. Let us, then, look at how Kant tries to reconcile the apparently incompatible dimensions of observed empirical data and a priori knowledge. In previous

2 He does, though, seem to come close to Fichte in his final work, the unfinished *Opus Posthumum*.

3 I choose this in preference to the second Critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*, because it is more accessible and its influence has probably been greater.

philosophy the realm of a priori knowledge, the realm of 'pure reason', had been the location of debates about the nature of God and being, which did not rely on empirical evidence. The title *Critique of Pure Reason* indicates Kant's desire to question the basis of such debates. The vital element in the first Critique is the establishing of a series of necessary – a priori – rules of thought for the classification of phenomena, together with the idea that these rules are based on the 'spontaneous' nature of the mind. For Kant something is spontaneous when it takes place 'of its own accord', rather than being caused by something else. It might seem odd that in cognition *spontaneity* functions in terms of necessary rules, but this is the crux of what Kant proposes. The idea is that the knowledge of natural necessity is only possible on the basis of something which is itself not necessitated. The borderline between deterministic nature, and human spontaneity, is the location of the most fundamental disputes in modernity about how human beings are to describe themselves. Kant's three 'Critiques' can be seen as concerning themselves with: in the first, how we arrive at natural laws and what that means for our descriptions of our place in the universe; in the second, how we understand human freedom; and, in the third, how we might connect the realms of natural necessity and freedom via the fact that we can also apprehend nature as beautiful and create beauty ourselves in art.⁴ This threefold division has, in turn, led to the view that Kant maps out the ways in which modernity separates the spheres of natural science, law and morality and artistic expression, which had not been separated in pre-modern cultures (see the Conclusion).

Kant claims that knowledge must have two sources: 'intuition', what is 'given to us' in specific perceptual experience of the world, and 'categories' and 'concepts', the mental rules according to which we link intuitions together into judgements. The first source involves 'receptivity': it depends upon how the world impinges on us. The second source is spontaneous: it involves the activity of the mind. The way to understand what is persuasive about this is to ponder how we apprehend objects in the world. We have no choice but to do this all the time, although we can be mistaken about what we apprehend. In one respect the impact of the world upon us is just causal: physiological reactions in the brain and the rest of the organism take place when we perceive things. This does not explain, though, how an object which we may assume is the same object can be apprehended in very different ways. At this level it seems clear that there must be an active

4 All three Critiques discuss the relationship between freedom and necessity, but their primary focus is what is suggested here.

element of judgement in play. The very possibility of re-describing something cannot just be the result of how it impacts upon our organism, because we can so easily misjudge. This might be because the object has been located in the wrong context, as when a vegetable is classified as a fruit. It can also be because what were thought to be the boundaries of an object turn out not to be. This kind of confusion is apparent in the history of the chemical elements, in which things that are now seen as different were seen as the same, and vice versa. Immediate perception, then, is not the same as judgement: the former is passive and can take place with only a minimal active contribution by the mind, the latter entails the activity of the mind. The source of Kant's ideas here is Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 'Profession of Faith of a Savoyard Curate' from *Émile*. What Kant means is underlined by his claim that the 'senses do not judge', so they cannot be mistaken: mistakes occur when we judge what the senses provide us with in terms of concepts.

The use of concepts to describe perceivable objects inherently involves the possibility of re-describing what is perceived. However, in the first Critique, Kant is initially most concerned about how scientific laws can be invariably valid, despite Hume's sceptical objections. His contention is that there must be necessary kinds of judgement. These involve what he terms 'categories', or 'pure concepts of the understanding', by which he means forms of thought which cannot be derived from looking at the world. The difference between empirical and pure judgements is vital to his conception. If I assert that there is one red billiard ball on a table, my understanding of its being red comes from having learned to use the concept 'red' by seeing red things that have the same or similar attributes as what I now see. We learn concepts by repeatedly seeing things as related to each other. How, though, do we learn about 'oneness', which is a notion universally applicable to any single entity and is required for mathematical thinking, or how do we learn about 'sameness'? We cannot learn the notion of oneness from seeing lots of single things, because that *presupposes* the notion we are trying to learn. The categories of oneness and manyness are the basis of what Kant terms 'synthetic judgements a priori'. The judgement $2 + 2 = 4$, which is usually taken to be both a priori (not derived from experience) and 'analytic', in the manner of the analytic judgement 'all bachelors are unmarried men', is, he claims, really 'synthetic' (i.e. it adds to our knowledge).⁵ This is because 4 can also be $3 + 1$, $4 + 0$ and an infinity of other combinations, such as 3.3333 recurring + .7777 recurring. There can

5 We shall come back to this – questionable – distinction in chapter 8.

therefore be pure knowledge that can be increased without input from the senses, so this knowledge is also 'synthetic'.

A further pure concept is the notion of cause. If I see the billiard ball move because it is hit by another billiard ball, the movement is caused by the moving ball. What I see, though, are two balls moving in certain ways. I cannot *see* that one causes the other to move. In order to do this I must *already* possess the notion that if one thing *necessarily* follows from the other in time it is caused by it. Hume's alternative is that *any* event which is followed by another event would have to be seen as possibly caused by the preceding event, even though the events might be completely unrelated apart from the fact that I see one follow the other. To say something really *is* causal, then, means adding an element of necessity *in thought*. This necessity cannot be said to pertain in the world, because all our information from the world is subject to the contingency Hume highlighted.

Another element of Kant's thought can suggest why his argument should be taken seriously. For Kant, the essential factor in knowledge is the ability to say something is the same as something else. The problem here is that, as Leibniz had demonstrated by his principle of the 'Identity of Indiscernibles', it may be that no thing really is the same as anything else. Any two objects may appear to be identical in all respects, but they will always differ in some respect, even if it is only at the microscopic or even smaller levels (although there are now arguments that in the quantum domain this may not apply). A strict application of Leibniz's idea would mean that the only real form of identity is that of something with itself. As a result, all true statements would have to be tautologies, because they would simply explicate a particular thing's already existing intrinsic properties. Each thing would just be what it is, and would never be identical with anything else. For Leibniz this leads to the notion of a divine insight into the ultimate true nature of things, all of which are inherently particular.

Leibniz's conception of identity would, though, render all scientific knowledge based on observation liable to the sceptical objection that, because things are never really the same, one could not assert that they obey laws. This is precisely what Kant wishes to avoid. We therefore need a way of dealing with the fact that things may never *be* exactly the same. They may, of course, also *appear* to be completely different, even though they are the same with regard to the laws which govern them. Yet more problematic is the fact that subjective *experiences* are both contingent and also never identical, because we never receive precisely the same patterns through our senses at any two moments in our lives. Kant consequently argues that the identity

required for informative knowledge must be a built-in function of our thought. In order for our thinking to function in this manner, there must, though, be a way of coming to terms with the fact that the sources of knowledge are of a different order from each other. One source receives endless particularity, the other actively subsumes this particularity into forms of identity. The vital factor here will be the identity across time of the subject that apprehends in terms of these forms, without which experience would merely disintegrate into random particularity.

The first Critique is divided up into three main sections. The first is the 'Transcendental Aesthetic', the theory of space and time as the 'forms of intuition'. The second is the 'Transcendental Logic', the account of the necessary forms of thought. The third is the 'Transcendental Dialectic', the account of what occurs if concepts that are only supposed to apply to the world of experience are applied to what is beyond the limitations inherent in experience. These limitations are: (1) that experience has to take place in a specific time and place, (2) that experience requires certain a priori notions to be intelligible at all. In this latter part of the Critique Kant is referring to what one does if, for example, one moves from using the notion of causality to explain a specific regular occurrence in nature based on empirical evidence, to asserting that the whole of nature is causally determined. The latter judgement would require infinite confirmation, because the evidence for it is only ever supplied when the law for a phenomenon is arrived at by experiment and observation. At the same time, without the *assumption* that all of the natural world functions deterministically, we would be faced with scepticism, because the particular part of nature under examination might in fact be an exception to the iron law of causality. Kant's attempt to deal with this situation has far-reaching consequences for his successors. The first Critique moves, then, from an account of the necessary framework of thinking, to considerations of what happens to the traditional questions of metaphysics, concerning God, the world, and freedom, in the light of the restrictions imposed by this framework.

The Transcendental Subject

The decisive aspect of the first two parts of the first Critique, which influenced much subsequent philosophy, is the role given to the subject, in the light of the 'Copernican turn'. The first aspect of the subject, which is dealt with in the Transcendental Aesthetic, is the fact that it can only perceive objects within a framework. The account of

the 'forms of intuition', space and time, is part of Kant's demonstration that our knowledge requires step-by-step elaboration, because we are never able to grasp an object as a whole all at once. The ability to know the whole of something at once would only be possible for God, who actually brings the object into existence. Once it is acknowledged that space and time should be thought of as belonging to how we must perceive things, rather than to the things themselves, we can achieve certainty within the limits set by how objects can appear to us. We cannot know how objects are independently of the form in which we must perceive them. Knowledge of 'things in themselves' is therefore impossible.

The Transcendental Logic is Kant's account of what he calls the 'understanding', our capacity for law-bound knowledge. If it is the case that experience has an irreducibly contingent element, there must be an element in knowledge which overcomes contingency. Experience takes place in time, and judgements of experience require the linking of contingently occurring events as *necessarily* related. Perceptions *must* be different from one another (otherwise they would merge into one inarticulable whole), and they are not actively produced by the knowing subject, because the subject receives them in 'intuition'. What links them together must, then, itself be something that remains the same. Cognition depends upon memory, and memory depends upon a subject which itself remains identical between different experiences and which can *apprehend* the experiences as the same. Furthermore, the subject must also be able to apprehend the moments of remembered perception as belonging to *it*. The moments must have a 'mineness' which means they can be reidentified as part of my experience as a whole.

This essential requirement Kant terms the 'synthetic unity of apperception'. 'Apperception' is Leibniz's term for the 'reflective' awareness *that* one is perceiving something in the world. I think about my partner, and then 'apperceptively' think about the way in which I think about my partner. This kind of self-consciousness is essential to being able, for example, to ponder whether one may have misjudged something. Kant's extension of the use of the term beyond 'empirical apperception', which occurs when I reflect on my awareness at a particular moment, to the 'synthetic unity of apperception', is vital for his whole account of epistemology. Consider the 'synthetic unity of apperception' as follows. If I am to remember later in the day something I saw this morning, a whole series of perceptions, experiences and thoughts will have intervened between now and this morning. Most of these experiences will not have occurred to me in an 'apperceptive' manner: I will just have had them without reflect-

ing on their relationship to my consciousness. How, then, is it that I can connect to moments of awareness in the past as being part of my experience at all, unless there is a connecting unity of myself which makes this possible? I am not conscious of this unity in my general experience, because empirical apperception only occurs when I reflect on my perceiving, and this may be a rare occurrence. The unity does, however, seem to have to exist if I am to make sense of experience at all, especially 'experience' in Kant's strong sense of perceptions correctly judged according to rules. As Kant puts it, 'an "*I think*" must *be able* to accompany all my representations' (1968a: B 132).⁶ Furthermore, if scientific laws are to be possible, the 'I think' which accompanies my experience must also be able to make necessary links between moments of experience. These moments are not subject to my will, even though the linking itself must take place via my 'spontaneity' in judgement.

The kinds of linkage which are a priori rules for organizing experience are termed the 'categories', or 'pure forms of understanding'. Kant lists twelve of these, under four headings: *Quantity*, *Quality*, *Relation*, *Modality*. These forms divide up how things exist in terms of ways of thinking which cannot be derived from observing the world. The forms have been argued about ever since, and we do not need to get embroiled in the detail of these arguments. Two points should, though, be noted. An important issue for subsequent philosophy is how these forms of thought relate to natural languages: do they remain the same even in languages which do not possess the same distinctions as Kant is making? The other point concerns how these distinctions came to emerge at all in human thinking. Kant does not concern himself with the genesis of the categories in the first Critique, but a significant part of German Idealism, and the work of Heidegger and others, will be concerned with the genesis of forms of thinking.

The next stage of the Critique, the 'Transcendental Deduction of the Categories', is about justifying the use of these a priori forms of thought in relation to objects encountered in the world. 'Deduction' is used in an old German legal sense, where it means 'legitimation'. This part of the Critique will give rise to some of the major questions in German Idealist and Romantic philosophy. We have already encountered the main argument in explaining the 'synthetic unity of apperception'. Kant insists that this unity is the 'highest point, to

6 The page references to Kant are, as is now standard, to the A and B versions of the Academy edition which are generally given in all editions of Kant. The A version is the original 1781 version, the B version is the extended version of 1787.