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IMMANUEL KANT
Is God with Us or Beyond us?

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Synopsis

Immanuel Kant was a philosopher who critiqued the traditional view of epistemology (the study of knowledge) and sought a compromise between rationalism and empiricism. Rather than primarily or exclusively relying on human reason or experience to arrive at truth, Kant instead sought a philosophical synthesis of these approaches. In so doing, Kant’s philosophy resulted in skepticism such that what we can actually know about God is severely limited, if not entirely crippled. Kant jettisoned traditional theistic proofs for God as utilized by natural theology, but sought to ground ethics, in part, in his concepts of categorical imperatives or universal maxims to guide morality, rather than rooting ethics in God’s love and revealed truths.

Writing of the incarnation of Christ, the Gospel of Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel’—which means, ‘God with us’” (Matt. 1:23 NIV). Although philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) bore the name meaning “God with us,” his ideas resulted in skepticism that places God beyond us.

But who was Kant? What was the historical context in philosophy that moved him to form and develop his ideas? How do we respond to Kant’s philosophy? How are his ideas relevant to contemporary Christian apologetics?

Before addressing such questions, it will be beneficial to cover briefly two points. First, we need to address why we should study philosophy at all, particularly the variety that tends to harm rather than help Christianity. Second, we must become familiar with the basic vocabulary and concepts of philosophy.
Space does not allow for a thorough defense of the value of studying philosophy, so only brief points are made here. The objection is sometimes raised that the Bible prohibits the study of philosophy on the basis of passages such as Colossians 2:8: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Note that the caution offered concerns the need to be discerning combined with a warning against “hollow and deceptive philosophy.”

Being discerning of philosophy requires some level of familiarity and understanding of it. Moreover, not all philosophy is “bad.” As C. S. Lewis succinctly put it, “Good philosophy must exist, if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered.” Learning to interact with, and respond intelligently to, philosophical ideas is part of the Christian calling to love God with all of our minds and to defend the faith (see Matt. 22:37 and 1 Pet. 3:15).

Philosophy is the “love of wisdom.” Wisdom includes the ability to make correct judgments based on a proper understanding of reality. Any thoughtful study of philosophy requires familiarity with the basic terms of the discipline. Three questions summarize main areas of philosophical study: (1) What is ultimate reality? (2) How do we know? and (3) How should this knowledge of ultimate reality guide our conduct?

The first covers metaphysics, sometimes called ontology, which attempts to go beyond the physical realm to understand and answer questions such as, “Does God exist?” If so, what kind of God?

The second question covers epistemology, or questions regarding knowledge. Epistemology asks questions such as, “How is truth justified? What is knowledge? How do we know anything?”

The third question relates to ethics, the branch of philosophy concerned with right and wrong (what ought or what ought not to be done) and, consequently, how one should or should not live. As we shall see, Kant’s major contributions to philosophy are in the areas of epistemology and ethics, but they also touch on metaphysics.

**KANT, RATIONALISM, AND EMPIRICISM**

Influential philosophical ideas rarely if ever simply fall out of the heavens and into history. They are, rather, the result of the philosophical milieu of the time. For Kant, this included tension between two significant philosophical systems and how they relate to knowledge: rationalism and empiricism.
As its name suggests, rationalism focuses on reason as the primary or, in extreme forms, the only means of arriving at truth. Historically, key rationalists include Rene Descartes, Baruch Spinoza, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, and Christian Wolff. It may be said, then, that rationalism is an a priori philosophical approach, meaning that a philosophical proposition is said to be determinable prior to sensory investigation or experience.

Empiricism, on the other hand, as a philosophical approach to knowledge, is a posteriori, viewing sensory experience as paramount in determining truth. Historically, key empiricists include Francis Bacon, John Locke, and David Hume.

One of the key philosophical goals Kant wanted to accomplish was to synthesize rationalism and empiricism intelligently in order to arrive at a better system of epistemology. In short, Kant wanted to arrive at “a Copernican revolution of the theory of knowledge.”

KANT’S LIFE AND WORK

Are Kant’s ideas the result of his personality and personal life? They may or may not be to a certain degree. We should not, however, seek to understand Kant’s philosophical ideas primarily on the basis of personal aspects of his life. C. S. Lewis referred to this sort of emphasis in approach to understanding poetry by understanding the personal life of a poet as “the personal heresy,” because of potential pitfalls. Applying a similar concern to Kantian studies, Winfried Corduan writes, “Perhaps too much has been made out of the fact that Kant spent his entire life in Königsberg, East Prussia [Germany], leading a regular and disciplined life.” Corduan goes on to write, “[Kant] was far from insular in his thinking.”

Kant’s family background was Lutheran, of a particularly pietistic variety. He began his studies at the University of Königsberg at the age of sixteen, where he studied the rationalism of Leibniz and Wolff. His studies of empiricist thinker David Hume would later spur Kant’s thinking in reference to synthesizing rationalism and empiricism.

In 1755, Kant accepted a lectureship with his former university, but the position was unsalaried (Kant’s students paid him directly). His fifteen years of service in this capacity resulted in the university appointing Kant, in 1770, to a position in logic and metaphysics. Kant’s inaugural address made note of his desire to reconcile rationalism and empiricism, something he worked on for many years until the
publication of *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Other key works include *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), *Foundation for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793).

Kant never married or traveled far, but his ideas influenced the history of philosophy, traveling the world and spreading what Kant believed was his Copernican revolution in epistemology.

**KANT’S KEY IDEAS**

A thorough presentation and critique of Kant’s philosophy is beyond the scope of this article. Much time, for instance, would have to be spent just on explaining Kant’s unique definitions of terms such as *synthetic, phenomenal, noumenal, transcendental deduction, ampliative, antinomies*, and more. Fortunately, the fundamental concepts of Kant’s philosophy and their particular relevance to the Christian worldview and apologetics can be presented in a straightforward manner.

Rather than delve deeply into Kant’s metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, we will concentrate first on presenting a basic outline of Kant’s epistemology, offer an apologetic example of Kant’s ethics, and briefly note the importance and interconnectedness of Kant’s ideas in relation to metaphysics.

Studying with rationalists such as Wolff resulted in Kant’s initial rationalism, but his encounter with Hume’s empiricism, in Kant’s words, “first interrupted my dogmatic slumber, and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy quite a new direction.” Ultimately, Kant argued that the beginning of knowledge is experiential, but not exclusively so. Rationalism, too, has something to offer and the mind can help us know.

Kant’s “Copernican Revolution” in epistemology is “that the mind is so structured and empowered that it imposes interpretive categories on our experience, so that we do not simply experience the world, as the empiricists alleged, but interpret it through the constitutive mechanisms of the mind.”

Knowledge, then, “is not the mind’s passive reception of orderly truth from outside itself, but the active work of the mind in formulating the very truths it is assimilating.” In short, Kant believed in the reality of knowledge, but wanted to know how we know.

Unfortunately, Kant’s epistemology for all practical purposes resulted in skepticism, effectively cutting off any valuable access to metaphysics and, hence, God. As such, in Kant’s philosophy, God is not with
us, but beyond us. As Colin Brown writes, “In effect, Kant is saying, ‘Hands off metaphysics!’ For metaphysics are completely beyond the grasp of the human mind.”\textsuperscript{10}

Ultimately, Kant’s philosophy also resulted in his rejection of natural theology and traditional “proofs” for the existence of God because Kant’s epistemology does not allow for apprehension of viable knowledge in the realm of metaphysics.\textsuperscript{11} Despite Kant’s rejection of traditional classical arguments for God such as cosmological,\textsuperscript{12} teleological,\textsuperscript{13} and ontological\textsuperscript{14} forms, it’s interesting to note Kant’s seeming recognition of at least the emotional impact such arguments may have: “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within” (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{15}

As we shall see next, Kant’s ethics offer some value for the Christian apologist.

**KANT, CHRIST, AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE**

Despite the resultant skepticism of Kant’s epistemology, his ethics offer an intriguing potential for an argument in favor of Christian ethics. This argument, presented here in brief, is particularly relevant in light of contemporary atheistic challenges to Christianity that claim, among other things, that Christianity is morally harmful.

Christianity, for instance, is often accused of contributing to strife, violence, and suffering in the world. While it is true that some Christians in some instances in history and the present are responsible for such behavior, it is far from true of all Christians. This argument will utilize one form of what is known as Kant’s categorical imperative and apply it to some key ethical principles of Christ and Christianity.

As Kant explained, “I ought never to act except in such a way that I can also will that my maxim should become a universal law” (emphasis in original).\textsuperscript{16} Kant is stating in this succinct presentation of one form of the categorical imperative that our moral behavior based on a specific maxim or maxims should be tested against its results if it were to become universal. In other words, what if everyone behaved this way? Would this result in a positive situation or a negative one? Christ said we are to love God, love neighbor (Matt. 22:37–38), and, in this context of love, to do to others what you would have them do to you (Matt. 7:12; Luke 6:31).

Let us apply these Christian concepts universally.

What if everyone loved God, loved their neighbor, and would “do to others what you would have them do to you”?
Would this result in a positive or negative situation in the world? Would it contribute to strife, violence, and suffering in the world, or would it alleviate it? Granted, not every Christian in every instance of behavior achieves or expresses the ideal maxims of Christ. Indeed, Christianity grants that we often fail. But the underlying moral principles of Christ and Christianity offer benefits to society, not detriments.

Are there similar universal maxims of atheism that would contribute as positively as those of Christianity? Atheism posits a godless universe that is the result of chance and time. Moreover, there are no transcendent and authoritative moral standards in atheism. Instead, the end result of atheism is logically that of despair in a meaningless universe, secular humanism notwithstanding. In short, atheism can offer no categorical imperative that would justify superiority to the moral maxims of Christianity. In fact, a case can be made that atheism does not on the whole contribute positively to the world.

**KANT’S LEGACY, OUR OPPORTUNITY?**

Despite disagreements with aspects of Kant’s epistemology, metaphysics, and ethics, his efforts highlight the importance of using our minds in order to better understand reality. Far from being detached and irrelevant, Kant’s philosophy continues to influence the world of ideas, with some thinkers crediting him with the rise of subjectivism and “the subsequent arrival of phenomenology, existentialism and postmodern relativistic philosophies.” In addition, incorporating or adapting philosophical concepts such as one form of Kant’s categorical imperative, aids in improving our apologetic efforts.

Far from being a lofty, enigmatic, or impractical pursuit, philosophy plays a key role not only in our everyday lives in areas such as ethical decision-making, but also a practical and relevant role when it comes to evaluating and understanding worldviews. In reality, as we pursue such endeavors, God is not beyond us, but is indeed with us.

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**notes**

2 Louis P. Pojman, *Classics of Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 819. Kant’s own suggestion that he desired to bring about a Copernican revolution in epistemology is found in his preface to the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787).


5 Ibid.


7 Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, in Pojman, 824.

8 Pojman, 821. See the second edition preface to *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787).

9 Campbell-Jack, s.v., “Kant, Immanuel” (entry by Winfried Corduan).

10 Brown, 95.


12 Cosmological arguments claim God is the explanation of a causal universe (i.e., a universe that could not have caused itself).

13 Teleological arguments point to evidence of design in the universe as indicators of God’s existence.
14 Ontological arguments claim the very concept of God supports the necessity of His existence.


16 Kant, *Foundation for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), in Pojman, 880.

17 Campbell-Jack, s.v., “Kant, Immanuel.”