

Topics: **BOOK REVIEW**Category: **HUMANITIES / INTERDISCIPLINARY**

**Der Weltbürger aus Königsberg:
Immanuel Kant heute. Person und Werk**
Otfried Höffe
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One of the West's greatest thinkers was born 300 years ago on 22 April 1724: Immanuel Kant. This circumstance is reason enough to consider what this philosopher – a high point and turning point of the European Enlightenment and one of the most important intellectual personalities of mankind – has to say to us today. There is no doubt that Kant made an outstanding contribution to the intellectual history of the human species, *i.e.*, to the global history of ideas. But this also applies to Thales, Pythagoras and Archimedes, to Hippocrates and Galen, to Galileo, Copernicus, Kepler and Newton as well as many other mathematicians, naturalists, engineers and physicians. While the ideas of the latter group were overtaken by subsequent researchers after some time, this is not the case with Kant. This book argues that Kant's philosophy was certainly of revolutionary significance for his time; however, it cannot be considered obsolete now. Kant's impact today goes well beyond having intellectual-historical value.

In the twentieth century, philosophers have provided a substantial contribution to the reflection on science and innovation. A climax was the *année Descartes 1937*, a year-long celebration of the tercentenary of the publication of René Descartes's *Discours sur la méthode*. In 1937, the 9th WCP took place in Paris at the Sorbonne and was named *Congrès Descartes*, during which scholars considered issues such as causality, determinism, and the unity of science just a few years before World War II. In preparation for Kant's tercentenary jubilee and on time for the 25th World Congress of Philosophy in Rome, the first volume of the new edition of Kant's writings has appeared with De Gruyter, edited by the BBAW (Kant 2023). The biggest challenges of the twentieth-first century – think of *globalization*, *climate change*, *biodiversity collapse*, and *disaster risk reduction* – ask for a philosophical narrative, and what Kant has written on reflection and inclusion is the key to shaping the effort. In other words, it is conceivable that Kant's work will be the key to enable the paradigmatic shift philosophy might take to support sustainability in a globalized world.

For some philosophers, the *curriculum vitae* forms an essential part of their work; for others, it is the work itself that counts. Kant eludes this alternative. Although his writings are by far the most important part of his thinking, the philosopher's social background also plays a role in his work. Anyone who takes a closer look at his personality will discover the opposite of what many expect. It is a malicious legend that Kant lived in a provincial town, led a monotonous existence there and was a pedantic misanthrope in character (p. 19). With more than 50,000 inhabitants, Königsberg was about a third of the size of Berlin, internationally connected thanks to its contacts with the Baltic states and Russia, and as a port and trading city of similar importance to Hamburg; it also had a distinctly international flair, especially thanks to merchants from Poland and Lithuania, Denmark, Great Britain, Sweden and Russia. On his way to school, Kant, who had been highly inquisitive since his

childhood and youth, was no stranger to the various activities of his hometown or its economic and intellectual openness (p. 21). Although the philosopher had to cope with a heavy teaching load, one might think that due to the lack of a family of his own, non-academic events and experiences played a lesser role compared to today. Kant's horizon of experience far exceeded that of many university teachers. It is a horizon that begins outside the educated middle class, in artisan circles, and expands through what is probably the only greed that is not a vice: an irrepressible curiosity and thirst for knowledge. This manifests itself in Kant's interest in conversations with foreign merchants. Added to this is his extensive reading of travelogues. In the draft of a *Collegii der physischen Geographie* he declares that he has read nothing less than “the most thorough descriptions of particular countries by skilled travelers, the general history of all travels, the *Göttingische Sammlung neuer Reisen*, the *Hamburgisches Magazin* and the *Leipziger Magazin*, the writings of the Academy of Sciences in Paris and Stockholm, and much more” (KGS II 4). However, the lecture only deals with a very small part of Kant's research interests, which are characterized by an extraordinarily broad scientific and philosophical horizon (p. 24). In any case, only those who are able and willing to cross political, ethnic, linguistic and cultural borders are cosmopolitans in a more sophisticated sense. Obviously, you do not necessarily have to cross the borders of your home country for this task. More important are basic attitudes such as curiosity about others and other things, combined with a willingness to broaden one's own horizons, to explore the value of other things and, where appropriate, to acknowledge them. Those who are generally willing to take an interest in their fellow human beings cultivate cosmopolitanism in the sense of a cosmopolitan attitude. According to these criteria, those who remain in their own cultural and linguistic area are not already cosmopolitans, even if this – like French in the past, Latin before that and English today and soon Chinese – extends to larger parts of the world (p. 48).

As his legacy and testament show, Kant cultivated another bourgeois virtue, namely thriftiness, to which he added generosity and prudence (for more information on Kant's estate, see Ostertun 2022). Unmarried and childless himself, Kant leaves behind a debt-free house, estimated to be worth 5,000 guilders, and securities worth five times that amount. Most of the inheritance goes to Kant's siblings or their children, probably eight nephews and nieces in total, who, according to other calculations, inherit 21,352 thalers, which corresponds to more than 25 annual salaries of a professorship at the time (p. 29).

Höffe provides the reader with a thorough account of Kant's thought, following the famous four questions laid out in the introduction to the *Logik: Ein Handbuch zu Vorlesungen*, edited in 1800 by his disciple Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche (KGS IX 4). *What can I know?* (theoretical philosophy, p. 55); *What must I do?* (moral philosophy and philosophy of law, p. 143); *What may I hope?* (history, supreme good, religion, p. 251); *What is the human being?* (anthropology, p. 299); whereby Höffe adds a fifth question *How to achieve goals?* (biology, aesthetics, p. 349). All chapters are highly recommendable for clear, rigorous, and insightful. A real present Höffe makes to his readers is the graph representing the partition of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, which is reproduced below (p. 76-77) (Figure 1).

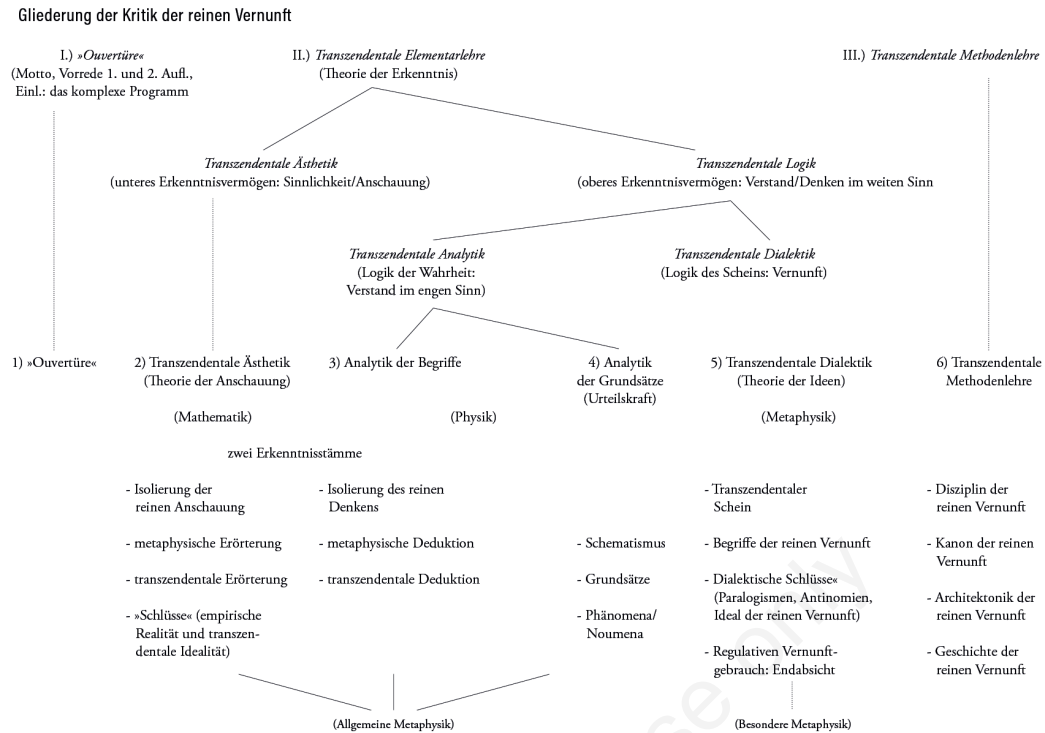


Figure 1.

As regards biology, however, especially as regards his stance on purposefulness (teleology, *Zweckmässigkeit*), Kant impacts the twenty-first century according to one research pattern, that of biophysics and biochemistry, living beings, organisms, are viewed as physical and chemical systems whose mechanism, supported by systems theory and cybernetic thinking, are examined in a similar way to the mechanism of machines. As Michael Tomasello (2019) has shown, molecular biology, which focuses primarily on the genetic code and its modifiability, views living beings as natural entities which, unlike sub-organic beings, can synthesize the corresponding nucleic acids and proteins themselves. However, Kant impacts on another research pattern, which is concerned with the dependence of organisms on their environment and the repercussions on them (p. 364).

In conclusion, Höffe's essay argues that our cosmopolitan citizen from Königsberg has dealt with so many topics of lasting significance today that it hardly makes sense to take stock of them. Höffe discourages all attempts to single out some of the questions, concepts, arguments, and answer patterns due to their outstanding importance or topicality. This is because, at best, one would be taking over the topics that are currently being discussed more, instead of countering their possible narrowness or bias. For instance, one ought to consider Kant's political philosophy as a whole and should not sidestep Kant's ethnocentric-racist statements about the Indians, the Chinese, and the Blacks. Because of Kant's controversial stand on race, it is up to debate whether Kant might be the best model to discuss globalization and cultural diversity. Many other models are worth discussing. Assuming the community insists on referring to Kant, Kant's view on race should be addressed, not ignored. It is therefore advisable to exercise a modest restraint that merely repeats the concluding insight of Höffe's book: one

can never have enough of a study of Kant. Höffe invites the reader to make Friedrich Hölderlin's advice her/his own: "Kant musst Du studieren, und wenn Du nicht mehr Geld hättest, um eine Lampe und Öl zu kaufen, und nicht mehr Zeit als von Mitternacht bis zum Hahnenschrei" (p. 384).

Riccardo Pozzo

*Department of Literary, Philosophical and Art History Studies,
 Tor Vergata University of Rome, Italy*

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