

# Why The World Needs A Creatively Revised-&-Updated Kant

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(Immanuel Kant, 1724-1804)



(Quintessential Mind, 2024)

22 April 2024 is the 300<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Immanuel Kant's birth. In "Why The World Still Needs Immanuel Kant," Susan Neiman makes a strong case for the contemporary and foreseeably future relevance, and indeed urgent importance, of Kant's 18<sup>th</sup> century Critical Philosophy. Here is the essence or gravamen of her argument:

If the major problem of philosophy were proving the world's existence, then Kant surely solved it. (Richard Rorty argued that he did, and that philosophy has little more to offer.)

In fact Kant was driven by a question that still plagues us: Are ideas like freedom and justice utopian daydreams, or are they more substantial? Their reality can't be proven like that of material objects, for those ideas make entirely different claims on us—and some people are completely impervious to their claims. Could philosophy show that acting morally, if not particularly common, is at least possible?

A stunning thought experiment answers that question in his next book [after the *Critique of Pure Reason* (Kant, 1781/1787/1997)], the "Critique of Practical Reason" [Kant, 1788/1996], Kant asks us to imagine a man who says temptation overwhelms him whenever he passes "a certain house." (The 18<sup>th</sup> century was discreet.) But if a gallows were constructed to insure the fellow would be hanged upon exiting the brothel, he'd discover he can resist temptation very well. All mortal temptations fade in the face of threats to life itself.

Yet the same man would hesitate if asked to condemn an innocent man to death, even if a tyrant threatened to execute him instead. Kant always emphasized the limits of our

knowledge, and none of us know if we would crumble when faced with death or torture. Most of us probably would. But all of us know what we *should* do in such a case, and we know that we *could*.

This experiment shows we are radically free. Not pleasure but justice can move human beings to deeds that overcome the deepest of animal desires, the love of life. We want to determine the world, not only to be determined by it. We are born and we die as part of nature, but we feel most alive when we go beyond it: To be human is to refuse to accept the world we are given.

At the heart of Kant's metaphysics stands the difference between the way the world is and the way the world ought to be. His thought experiment is an answer to those who argue that we are helpless in the face of pleasure and can be satisfied with bread and circuses — or artisanal chocolate and the latest iPhone. If that were true, benevolent despotism would be the best form of government.

But if we long, in our best moments, for the dignity of freedom and justice, Kant's example has political consequences. It's no surprise he thought the French Revolution confirmed our hopes for moral progress — unlike the followers of his predecessor David Hume, who thought it was dangerous to stray from tradition and habit.

This provides an answer to contemporary critics whose reading of Kant's work focuses on the ways in which it violates our understanding of racism and sexism. Some of his remarks are undeniably offensive to 21st-century ears. But it's fatal to forget that his work gave us the tools to fight racism and sexism, by providing the metaphysical basis of every claim to human rights.

Kant argued that each human being must be treated as an end and not as a means — which is why he called colonialism “evil” and congratulated the Chinese and Japanese for denying entry to European invaders....

At a time when the advice to “be realistic” is best translated as the advice to decrease your expectations, Kant's work asks deep questions about what reality is. He insisted that when we think morally, we should abstract from the cultural differences that divide us and recognize the potential human dignity in every human being. This requires the use of our reason. Contrary to trendy views that see reason as an instrument of domination, Kant saw reason's potential as a tool for liberation.

He also argued that political and social relations must aim toward justice rather than power, however often those may be confused in practice. We've come to better understand how racism and sexism can preclude genuine universalism. Should we discard Kant's commitment to universalism because he did not fully realize it himself—

or rather celebrate the fact that we can make moral progress, an idea which Kant would wholeheartedly applaud? (Neiman, 2024)

I completely agree with Neiman's argument and her conclusions. Nevertheless, sadly, the majority of contemporary professional academic philosophers and philosophically-minded people are *anti-Kantians*, a negativist tradition that goes as far back as the first appearance of Kant's breakthrough masterpiece *Critique of Pure Reason* in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century and has had important resurgences after World War I, World War II, and in the first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Hanna, 2020). Therefore, I also think that Neiman's account should be supplemented with more details about precisely *how* we should charitably interpret, and then creatively revise-&-update, Kant's Critical philosophy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world and beyond. For in knowing precisely *how* we should creatively revise-&-update Kant for the 21<sup>st</sup> century world and beyond, then we'll also know precisely *why* we should do this. In other words, what we need is a cogent and sufficient rationale not for going *back to Kant*, but instead for going *forward to Kant*.

In 2006, I wrote this:

Like all philosophers Kant sometimes errs, or anyhow nods. But we respect him most by critically noting and then setting aside his slips, and by promoting his deepest and most powerful doctrines.... Kant's Critical Philosophy is fully worth studying, critically analyzing, charitably explicating, defending, and then independently developing in a contemporary context. This is because, in my opinion, more than any other single-authored body of work in modern philosophy the Critical Philosophy most doggedly pursues and most profoundly captures some non-trivial fragment of the honest-to-goodness truth about about rational human animals and the larger natural [and social] world that surrounds them. (Hanna, 2006: p. 7, square-bracketed material added)

What are the creatively revised-&-updated Kantian ideas that the world needs? I think that there are at least seven of them.

**First**, *weak transcendental idealism*, the anti-skeptical epistemological and metaphysical idea that the manifestly real world we correctly and directly perceive through our senses necessarily conforms to the innately specified structure of our cognitive faculties (see, e.g., Hanna, 2001, 2006, 2015a, 2017a). It's crucial to note that although this doctrine postulates a necessary connection between manifestly real nature and minds like ours, it *isn't* a version of *strong* transcendental idealism and therefore *doesn't* either assert the existence of things-in-themselves or noumena, on the one hand, or reduce nature to a set of mere phenomenal appearances, whether individually generated (subjective idealism) or collectively generated (communitarian idealism), on the other.

**Second**, *strong non-conceptualism*, the non-intellectualist epistemological idea that all meaningful cognition and knowledge begins in non-conceptual sensible cognition which puts us in correct, direct contact with the manifestly real world, in a way that's neither necessarily nor sufficiently determined by concepts and theories, and that also provides a ground not only for all conceptualization and theorizing, but also for a fully intelligible and defensible analytic-synthetic distinction (see, e.g., Hanna, 2005, 2008, 2015a, 2017b, 2021).

**Third**, *organicism*, the anti-mechanistic metaphysical idea that the manifestly real natural world that includes non-human and human minds is not determined by deterministic or indeterministic natural laws and computable algorithms, and that the mechanical systems are derivative from fundamentally organic systems by systematic abstraction (see, e.g., Hanna and Maiese, 2009; Hanna and Paans, 2020; Torday, Miller Jr, and Hanna, 2020; Hanna, 2024).

**Fourth**, *mind-life continuity*, the anti-materialist or anti-physicalist metaphysical idea that essentially embodied conscious, self-conscious, rational mind are nothing more and nothing less than non-reducible activating forms of organismic life (see, e.g., Hanna and Maiese, 2009; Hanna, 2011, 2024)

**Fifth**, *natural libertarianism*, the anti-deterministic, anti-indeterministic, organicist metaphysical idea that real and not merely psychological free will really and truly exists by virtue of our natural innate ability to choose and act in an essentially non-determined, non-indeterministic, and more generally non-mechanical and organic way (see, e.g., Hanna, 2018a, 2016a).

**Sixth**, *moral dignitarianism*, the anti-egoistic, anti-utilitarian, and anti-relativistic universalist ethical idea that every rational human animal possesses *dignity*, i.e., an absolute, non-denumerably infinite, intrinsic, objective value or worth, beyond every merely hedonistic, self-interested, instrumental, economic, or utilitarian value, which entails that we always and everywhere ought to treat everyone as *persons* and never as mere means or mere things, and therefore always and everywhere with sufficient respect for their dignity, no matter what merely prudential reasons there are to do otherwise (see, e.g., Hanna, 2018b, 2023a, 2023b).

And **seventh**, *political dignitarianism*, the anti-despotic, anti-totalitarian, and anti-Hobbesian-liberal yet also liberationist, radically enlightened idea that all social institutions based on coercion and authoritarianism, whether democratic or not-so-democratic, are rationally unjustified and immoral, and that in resisting, devolving, and/or transforming all such social institutions, we ought to create and sustain a

worldwide or cosmopolitan ethical community beyond all borders and nation-States, consisting of people who who think, care, and act for themselves and also mutually sufficiently respect the dignity of others and themselves, no matter what their race, sex, ethnicity, language, age, economic status, or abilities (see, e.g., Hanna, 2015c, 2016b, 2017c, 2018c, 2023c).

These seven ideas might surprise you by their importance, originality, and substance. And it might also surprise you that these seven important, original, and substantive ideas are actually Kant's or at least broadly Kantian, since it's a standard strategy of the contemporary "anti-Kanti" majority to convince you that Kant was a skeptical Berkeleyan idealist, racist, sexist, colonialist, ableist, white, male, celibate, Eurocentric, xenophobic, philosophical bogeyman who wore a funny-looking wig, and that not only all of Kant's ideas, but also all things Kantian, are obviously bad and false, or at the very best, empty. And to be sure, it will be very difficult or even impossible to change the minds of diehard anti-Kantians. But with the publication of excellent, heartening, revisionist articles like Neiman's in mainstream venues like *The New York Times*, I think it's also just possible that the times (and indeed the *Times*), they are a-changing, that anti-Kantianism is heading down into the ash-heap of history, that the rest of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a Kantian renaissance, and that humankind will experience genuine philosophical, moral, and sociopolitical progress as a direct consequence of it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> I'm grateful to the organizers of the online conference, "Kant's Philosophy and the Challenges of Our Time" (Ukraine Kant Society et al., 2024), for inviting me to talk about and re-think issues on and around the main topics of this essay. My short conference presentation, "Kantian Futurism" (Hanna, 2024b), was based on two longer essays, (Hanna, 2023d, 2024c). I'm also grateful to Martha Hanna and Scott Heftler for drawing my attention to (Neiman, 2024).

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