

## 50 GREATEST BOOKS

» THE CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON, BY IMMANUEL KANT  
 » SUSAN NEIMAN MAKES THE CASE

# Can and Kant

Kant was a terrible writer. He was honest enough to admit it, and gracious enough to publish his longing for the elegance and clarity of style with which two of his contemporaries – David Hume and Moses Mendelssohn – were born. Kant knew *The Critique of Pure Reason* was a problem, and his later attempts to revise or summarize it only made things worse. Still, the book is the single greatest work of modern philosophy, and has but one rival – Plato's *Republic* – in the history of thought. It's not only general readers who are put off by its clumsy, sluggish writing; most university courses spend so much time on the first half that they stop before reaching what Kant said was the point.

So I've taken a quote that many readers never get to, but it shows the *Critique* at its heart. The book seeks to determine what it means to be real. Unlike many contemporary philosophers, Kant wasn't interested in skeptical puzzles. For him, what is real and what is not was a matter of great moral and political import. The Enlightenment contested the reality of superstitions: Though witches were no longer burned in the 18th century, you could still be sent to jail for denying the reality of demons in free-thinking Holland. Other superstitions were less dramatic but more dangerous: As long as people believed that poverty and illness were God's punishment for one sin or another, they were unlikely to explore ways of eliminating them.

Conservative authorities, on the other hand, scornfully denied principles the Enlightenment held dear. Give up feudal tradition for abstract ideals of universal justice? All men created equal? Surely anyone with a bit of real-life experience could see that such a claim is not only not self-evident, it isn't even true.

Such examples show why it was important for the *Critique* to distinguish what is true from what ought to be true. Kant thought the gap between what reality is and what it should be will never disap-



ANTHONY JENKINS/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

pear. But while he's the only philosopher who insisted that reason and reality are utterly different, he's also the only one who gave both equal time. He thought this is what it means to be grown-up – a stance that is tense, sometimes tragic, and thoroughly modern. Much easier to believe whatever your government tells you, like young children believe their parents. Or – the postmodern solution – to conclude, like adolescents, that because some claims to moral and political authority turn out to be false or specious, they never have substance at all.

Maturity, for Kant, is not resignation, the stance usually intended when someone is told to be realistic. It isn't childish to work for a world in which ideals of perfect justice would be realized (though it would be childish to swallow the claim that we're already there). Nothing you do in your lifetime will take you all the way to the ideal; but if you confine your efforts to cynical headshaking, you will never get anywhere at all.

As long as your ideas of what is possible are limited by your ideas of what is actual, no other idea has a chance. We've all heard the claim that this or that reform would be very nice in theory, but the hard data on human nature show it won't work in practice. Kant found the claim stale in the 18th century, for he turned those empiricist claims upside down. Of course, ideas of reason conflict with the claims of experience. That's how ideas work. Ideals are not to be measured

by whether they conform to reality; reality is judged by whether it lives up to experience. If enough of us work to make it do so, it will.

It's not hard to recall how many bits of reality have changed in my lifetime. Forget about the Internet; I grew up in a world where black and white children couldn't swim in the same lakes, and girls planned to be secretaries or housewives. Even in the most hopeful moments of the 1960s, the idea that the world could be riveted on the current U.S. presidential election would have been dismissed as utterly utopian. Despite some ugly moments, what we're now watching is a triumph of idealism. It wasn't Barack Obama, but Immanuel Kant, who first insisted on the audacity of hope.

Will slogging your way through the *Critique* give you a foolproof way of deciding what's real? Kant doesn't give recipes; the principle of Enlightenment is to think for yourself. Work your way through this book (a good guide is helpful) and you'll be better equipped to do so, for you will have learned to hone and sharpen your own judgment. Judgment, says the *Critique*, is just what fools don't have, whether they are scholars or saddle-makers. But though anyone can fail to think for herself, anyone can learn it. There's no better place than Kant to begin.

» Susan Neiman is director of the Einstein Forum in Germany, and author of *Moral Clarity: A Guide for Grown-up Idealists*.  
**Next week: *Pride and Prejudice*.**

## Quotable

Nothing, indeed, can be more harmful or more unworthy of the philosopher, than the vulgar appeal to so-called experience. Such experience would never have existed at all, if at the proper time, those institutions had been established in accordance with ideas. ... This perfect state may never, indeed, come into being; nonetheless, this does not affect the rightfulness of the idea, which in order to bring the legal organization of humankind ever nearer to its greatest possible perfection advances this maximum as an archetype. For what the highest degree may be at which humankind may have come to a stand, and how great a gulf may still have to be left between the idea and its realization, are questions which no one can, or ought to, answer. For the issue depends on freedom, and it is in the power of freedom to pass beyond any and every limit.  
 » From *Critique of Pure Reason*

## E-VOX POPULI » OUR READERS WRITE

Kendall Defoe from Montreal writes: Has anyone given a thought to the dictionary? It may be one of those choices that is so obvious that it is overlooked, but it is hard to imagine the literature of the last 300 years without it. Writers need it; students need it; politicians and pundits who think they know better need it. And it is an interesting choice in that it is a book that was not written, it was compiled, first and famously by Samuel Johnson. Then there was the *Oxford English Dictionary*, taking more than a century to put together and relying on the input of scholars and at least one madman. Today, we all benefit from the labour and talent of endless minds engaged in creating the other Good Book. This deserves some space on your list and in the conversation.

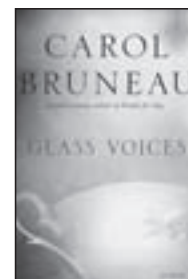
» Posted May 3, 2008, at 2:24 p.m. ET

## On the website

Readers can join the debate on the 50 Greatest Books at [www.globeandmail.com/arts](http://www.globeandmail.com/arts).

## CONGRATULATIONS TO Carol Bruneau GLASS VOICES

a finalist for the  
 Dartmouth Book Award



"This novel is so rich in detail and emotion that a first reading merely opens the reader to an appreciation of its gifts. Its density submerges the reader in a complete world of character, plot and setting ... *Glass Voices* illustrates the immense strength some people have to cope with tragedy — and that is truly inspiring."

— *The Globe and Mail*

FROM SCOTIABANK GILLER  
 PRIZE WINNER

## Elizabeth Hay THE ONLY SNOW IN HAVANA



"The writing is a constant joy, alive with simple images ... a clarity of expression that is like clean air ... The book floats in the mind after it is read ..."

— *Canadian Book Review Annual*

GREAT BOOKS FROM CORMORANT

