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Why the World Still Needs Immanuel Kant

Unlike in Europe, few in the United States will be celebrating the philosopher's 300th birthday. But Kant's writing shows that a free, just and moral life is possible — and that's relevant everywhere.

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By Susan Neiman

The philosopher Susan Neiman is the director of the Einstein Forum in Potsdam, Germany.

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When I arrived in Berlin in 1982, I was writing a dissertation on Kant's conception of reason. It was thrilling to learn that the apartment I'd sublet turned out to be located near Kantstrasse, though at the time I wondered in frustration: Why was there no James Street — Henry or William — in the Cambridge, Mass., I'd left behind; no streets honoring Emerson or Eliot? Were Americans as indifferent to culture as snooty Europeans supposed? It didn't take long before I, too, could walk down Kantstrasse and turn right on Leibniz without a thought.

It's harder to ignore the way Germany, like other European nations, sets aside entire years to honor its cultural heroes. This century has already seen an [Einstein Year](#), a [Beethoven Year](#), a [Luther Year](#) and a [Marx Year](#), each commemorating some round-numbered anniversary of the hero in question. Federal and local governments provide considerable sums for events that celebrate the thinkers in question and debate their contemporary relevance.

Years before Immanuel Kant's 300th birthday on April 22, 2024, the Academy of Science in Berlin, to which he once belonged, organized a conference to begin preparations for his tercentennial. A second conference published a report of the proceedings, but when I urged colleagues to use the occasion to create programs for a wider audience, I was met with puzzled silence. Reaching a wider audience is not a talent philosophy professors normally cultivate, but conversations with other cultural institutions showed this case to be especially thorny.

It wasn't just uneasiness about celebrating "another dead white man," as one museum director put it. The problems became deeper as the zeitgeist changed. "[Immanuel Kant: A European Thinker](#)" was a good title for that conference report in 2019, when Brexit seemed to threaten the ideal of European unification Germans

supported. Just a few years later, “European” has become a slur. At a time when the Enlightenment is regularly derided as a Eurocentric movement designed to support colonialism, who feels comfortable throwing a yearlong birthday party for its greatest thinker?

Nonetheless, this year’s ceremonies [will officially commence on April 22](#) with a speech by Chancellor Scholz and a memorial lunch that has taken place on the philosopher’s birthday every year since 1805. Two days earlier, President Frank-Walter Steinmeier of Germany will open an exhibit at the presidential palace devoted to Kant’s writing on peace.

The start of the year saw special Kant editions of four prominent German magazines. A [Kant movie made for television](#) premiered on March 1, and another is in production. Four exhibits on Kant and the Enlightenment will open in Bonn, Lüneburg, Potsdam and Berlin. The conferences will be numerous, including one organized by the Divan, Berlin’s house for Arab culture.

But why celebrate the Kant year at all?

The philosopher’s occasional autobiographical remarks provide a clue to the answer. As the son of a saddle maker, Kant would have led a workman’s life himself, had a pastor not suggested the bright lad deserved some higher education. He came to love his studies and to “despise the common people who knew nothing,” until “Rousseau set me right,” he wrote. Kant rejected his earlier elitism and declared his philosophy would restore the rights of humanity — otherwise they would be more useless than the work of a common laborer.

Chutzpah indeed. The claim becomes even more astonishing if you read a random page of his texts. How on earth, you may ask, are human rights connected with proving our need to think in categories like “cause” or “substance?” The question is seldom raised, and the autobiographical remarks usually ignored, for traditional readings of Kant focus on his epistemology, or theory of knowledge.

Before Kant, it’s said, philosophers were divided between Rationalists and Empiricists, who were concerned about the sources of knowledge. Does it come from our senses, or our reason? Can we ever know if anything is real? By showing that knowledge requires sensory experience as well as reason, we’re told, Kant refuted the skeptics’ worry that we never know if anything exists at all.

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All this is true, but it hardly explains why the poet Heinrich Heine found Kant more ruthlessly revolutionary than Robespierre. Nor does it explain why Kant himself said only pedants care about that kind of skepticism. Ordinary people do not fret over the reality of tables or chairs or billiard balls. They do, however, wonder if ideas like freedom and justice are merely fantasies. Kant's main goal was to show they are not.

The point is often missed, because Kant was as bad a writer as he was a great philosopher. By the time he finishes proving the existence of the objects of ordinary experience and is ready to show how they differ from ideas of reason, the semester is nearly over. Long-windedness is not, however, the only reason his work is often misinterpreted. Consider the effects of a bad review.

Had Kant died before his 57th birthday, he'd be remembered by a few scholars for some short, early texts. He withdrew from writing them in 1770 to conceive and compose his great "Critique of Pure Reason." After what scholars call his "silent decade," Kant pulled the text together in six months and finally published in 1781. For a year and a half, Kant waited for responses. When one finally appeared, it was a hatchet job accusing him of being a Berkeleyan solipsist: someone who denies the existence of ordinary objects.

Any author can imagine Kant's dismay, and most likely his rage. In haste to refute the distortion of his life's work, Kant wrote a second edition of the "Critique of Pure Reason," and more fatefully, the "Prolegomena." Since the latter is much shorter than the main book, it's read far more often, and this has skewed the interpretation of Kant's work as a whole. 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, the "Critique of Practical Reason." Kant asks us to imagine a man who says temptation overwhelms him whenever he passes "a certain house." (The 18th century was discrete.) 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 him 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. Contemporary dismissals of Enlightenment thinkers forget that those thinkers invented the concept of Eurocentrism, and urged their readers to consider the world from non-European perspectives. Montesquieu put his criticisms of French society in the mouths of fictitious Persians; Lahontan attacked European politics through dialogues with a Native American.

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?

In Germany, it's now common to hear that the Enlightenment was at very best ambivalent. While it may have been an age of reason, it was also an age of slavery and colonialism: This argument ignores the fact that, like progressive intellectuals everywhere, Enlightenment thinkers did not win all their battles. It also neglects the fact that they fought for them anyway, despite the risks of censorship, exile and even death.

Significantly, many contemporary intellectuals from formerly colonized countries reject those arguments. Thinkers like the Ghanaian Ato Sekyi-Otu, the Nigerian Olufemi Taiwo, the Chilean Carlos Peña, the Brazilian Francisco Bosco or the Indian Benjamin Zachariah are hardly inclined to renounce Enlightenment ideas as Eurocentric.

The problem with ideas like universal human rights is not that they come from Europe, but that they were not realized outside of it. Perhaps we should take a lesson from the Enlightenment and listen to non-Western standpoints?

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