

LESSON 8

THE ENLIGHTENMENT: PART II

The German Aufklärung

The *Aufklärung* in Germany was a movement that included many brilliant minds. Moses Mendelssohn, who defended immortality, the separation of Church and State as well as the freedom of conscience, was one. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was another.

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781)

Gotthold Ephraim Lessing was best known as an art and literary critic; but his publishing of *Fragments* of H. S. Reimarus (1694-1768) launched what Albert Schweitzer called the nineteenth-century quest for the historical Jesus.¹ Reimarus' work was done, however, with the basic presupposition being "that the intervention of the supernatural is impossible in history."² Of course, this unstated presupposition is a direct rejection of the biblical revelation. Small wonder that the conservative French evangelicals would not allow Albert Schweitzer to preach.

Reimarus distorted the image of the biblical Jesus, representing Him as a "ranting enthusiast," and His disciples as a group of conspirators who perpetuated a grand fraud when they established the Christian religion. Lessing's axiom was that *accidental truths of history can never become the proof of necessary truths of reason*. This axiom was of small consequence since the Christian faith has proven trustworthy for the orientation of human life during nearly two thousand years of history.

Immanuel Kant (1724-1804)

The greatest mind of the German *Aufklärung* was Immanuel Kant. His thought represents the best of eighteenth-century rationalism and empiricism. In some ways his viewpoints square with current concepts of the strengths and weaknesses of reason.

Kant was born at Königsberg in East Prussia of Scottish and German ancestry. He was the son of a pietistic saddlemaker. He began his education and pursued it all the way through the University of Königsberg in his hometown. He later became a tutor and finally a professor of logic and metaphysics in the university. He never travelled very far and never married. "Kant dethroned the 'Goddess of Reason' even before the French revolutionaries erected altars to her" by the powerful arguments in his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Moses Mendelssohn called him "the smasher of everything."³ His influence on early

¹Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* (London: InterVarsity Press, 1973), p. 86.

²Ibid., p. 87.

³Carl J. Friedrich, *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York: The Modern Library, 1949), p. xi.

In Germany the Enlightenment was known as the _____.

(*Aufklärung*)

Reimarus distorted the image of the biblical _____. He considered Jesus' disciples to be _____.

(*Jesus, conspirators*)

This axiom was of small _____. The Christian Faith has proven _____ for nearly two _____ years.

(*Compare your answers with the text.*)

The greatest mind of the German Enlightenment was _____.

(*Immanuel Kant*)

Kant was called the _____ of _____.

(*smasher, everything*)

nineteenth-century thought was not as great as he would have liked. Transcendental Idealism paid him very little attention.⁴

Many writers today mistakenly credit Dietrich Bonhoeffer with the idea of the world's coming of age, but it was Kant who insisted that mankind is coming of age, kicking and screaming all the way. Man is still intellectually adolescent, but he is on his way to maturity.⁵

In a letter to a friend, Kant wrote that he believed that philosophy centred upon dealing with

What can I know? (metaphysics),
What should I do? (ethics),
What may I hope? (religion),
What is man? (anthropology).

Kant had already written his *Critique of Pure Reason*. This classic was written in response to a personal reaction to the writings of David Hume who wrote without seriously examining his presuppositions on which "experience" rests.⁶ With a pietistic background and a thorough training in the thought of Leibniz, he said that Hume's work woke him from his dogmatic slumber. He came to believe that Rationalists placed too much credence on human reason, and Hume gave too little confidence to the ability of man to reason. The former led to dogmatism and the latter to scepticism.

Rejecting both dogmatism and scepticism, Kant proposed a careful study of the *presuppositions*, *capacities* and the *limits* of human reason. This is what he called *criticism*.

What Can I Know?

Kant's view of knowledge was a mixture of rationalism and empiricism.⁷ In his *Critique of Pure Reason* he asks why logic, mathematics and natural science had reached so much generally accepted knowledge, and metaphysics "had never been able to reach agreement in its conclusions."⁸ The metaphysical subjects of God, freedom and immortality seemed to be some of the most important and universal of man's cherished beliefs. He, Kant, had found that there are *no* rational proofs for these beliefs. He wrote, "I have, therefore, . . . found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith."⁹

Kant made reference to what is called his "Copernican revolution." As Copernicus had assumed that the earth moves around the sun rather than the sun around the earth, Kant suggested the hypothesis that for objects to be known they must conform to the mind, not the mind to the objects. "Things cannot become objects of knowledge unless they

Kant insisted that mankind is coming of _____.

(age)

The *Critique of Pure Reason* was Kant's response to the thought of _____.

(David Hume)

Kant's view of knowledge was a mixture of _____ and _____.

(rationalism, empiricism)

Kant stated that for objects to be known they must _____ to the _____.

(conform, mind)

⁴Ibid.

⁵So insinuated in his *What is Enlightenment?*

⁶Albert E. Avey, *Handbook in the History of Philosophy*, 2nd. ed. (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1961), p. 165.

⁷Colin Brown, p. 93.

⁸George Thomas, *Religious Philosophies of the West* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), p. 230.

⁹Ibid.

conform to certain conditions imposed by the cognitive faculties of the mind . . . the mind is active rather than passive in the process of knowing and that it adds something of its own."¹⁰

The *content* of knowledge is perceived by sense experience; the *form* of knowledge is imposed by reason (*a priori*). Knowledge is, therefore, (a) sensibility, and (b) understanding.

The central question of the *Critique of Pure Reason* was "How are *a priori* synthetic judgements possible?"¹¹

His understanding of *a priori* and *a posteriori* was that *a priori* knowledge is that which is absolutely independent of all experience; and *a posteriori* knowledge is empirical knowledge which is possible only through experience.¹²

An *analytic* statement is necessarily true. To deny it would require a contradiction in terms. Sentences like "a rainy day is a wet day" is an *analytic* sentence because the idea of a "wet day" is already understood by the term "a rainy day."

A *synthetic* statement would be like "Tuesday was a wet day." Tuesday could have been a dry day, so the truth of the statement must be tested to be sure of it.¹³ Analytic knowledge is *a priori*, and synthetic knowledge is *a posteriori*.¹⁴

Kant writes: "We need only to say that there are two stems of human knowledge, namely, the *senses* and the *intellect*, which perhaps spring from a common, but to us unknown, root. Through the former, objects are given to us; through the latter, they are thought. Now insofar as sensibility may be found to contain *a priori* images constituting the conditions under which objects are given to us, it will belong to transcendental philosophy."¹⁵

In effect, Kant is saying that the mind does not literally perceive things as they are in themselves, because in the synthetic sense things perceived are inevitably processed by the human mind in categories of the several forms of intuition, time, space, quantity and quality. "The mind conditions everything that it encounters."¹⁶ "What Kant has achieved is in fact a more sophisticated form of the representative theory of knowledge."¹⁷

Human intuition for Kant must be held valid only for objects of possible experience. Otherwise it drives into the realm of *Autonomics* or irreconcilable self-contradictions. Therefore "mind cannot attain to rational knowledge of anything beyond its immediate experience of the world."¹⁸

Kant rejected the *ontological* proof of the existence of God, the *cosmological* proof, as well as the *teleological* proof. He pointed out that the proof only works if we assume that such a being exists in the first place. His most

According to Kant the *content* of knowledge is perceived by _____ experience. The *form* of knowledge is imposed by _____.
(sense, reason)

MATCH the following:

a priori	empirical knowledge
a posteriori	knowledge independent of all experience

(Compare your answers with the text.)

MATCH the following:

analytic	a posteriori
synthetic	a priori

(Compare your answers with the text.)

Kant felt that the mind _____ everything it _____.

(conditions, encounters)

Is the following statement true or false?

According to Kant, mind cannot attain to rational knowledge of anything beyond its immediate experience. _____

(true)

¹⁰Ibid., p. 231.

¹¹Colin Brown, p. 94.

¹²Ibid., p. 95.

¹³Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 95.

¹⁵Carl J. Friedrich, pp. 38, 39.

¹⁶Colin Brown, p. 96.

¹⁷Ibid. (cf. Berkeley and Locke).

¹⁸Ibid., p. 97.

valuable contribution to this problem of the proofs is as follows:

*if the objective reality of God cannot be proved, it also cannot be disproved by merely speculative reason.*¹⁹

"Enlightenment is man's leaving his self-caused immaturity. Immaturity is the incapacity to use one's intelligence without the guidance of another."²⁰ By this he seems to mean what he wrote in the opening words of his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*. Man must do what he reasonably believes to be right. "He has no need of God in the capacity of either a heavenly adviser or provider of incentives."²¹ But man's sense of duty which is universal plus other ethical necessities seem to point toward God, according to Kant.

In his inevitable sense of duty man is urged by *imperatives* which Kant divides into two classes: (a) *hypothetical* and (b) *categorical*. The *hypothetical imperative* is something that must be done in order to reach a certain goal and is not an imperative for every person. The *categorical imperative* applies to everyone, and has with Kant the same status that the clear and distinct ideas have for Descartes. "Kant accepts it as self-evidently true."²² The *categorical imperative* implies an authority which is transcendent—beyond human reach and common knowledge.

In his evaluation of Christianity, Kant replaces revelation and personal experience with God by reason. He wants man to save himself. For him Jesus is the abstraction "of the good principle."²³ Kant seems deliberately to ignore Christian experience with God and the historical testimony of the Bible.²⁴

Conclusion

The Enlightenment may have revealed certain scientific progress and released man for political freedom from royal tradition and political colonialism, but it covered man's hope for arriving beyond the limits of animal mortality with a black and sinister shadow. It shaped the thought of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth. But, in reality, its challenge to man to soar to new heights of freedom made him all the more earthbound.

Faith was sacrificed to "reason" based on false presuppositions—doomed to fail at the advent of the latest scientific discovery. When an Einstein appears, a Newton must go. A Quantum Mechanics opens up a whole new world of thought in the mind of the earth-bound philosopher. Unfortunately "hope" and "purpose" are still far beyond his reach, and he loses his soul in a swirling world of scientific wonder.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 99.

²⁰Carl J. Friedrich, p. 132.

²¹Colin Brown, p. 100.

²²Ibid., p. 101.

²³Ibid., p. 104.

²⁴Ibid.

State in your own words Kant's idea on the proof of the existence of God.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Something that is not an imperative for everyone Kant names the _____ imperative.

The categorical imperative applies to _____.

(hypothetical, everyone)

In Kant's evaluation of Christianity, reason replaces _____ and personal experience with _____.

(revelation, God)

Faith was sacrificed to _____.

(reason)

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (*Levels 1, 2, and 3*). Read the study guide and answer the following questions:

1. What was the Enlightenment called in Germany?

2. What was H. S. Reimarus' opinion of Jesus and the Christian religion?

3. How does the author of the text answer Lessing's axiom?

4. Who was the greatest mind of the German Enlightenment?

5. Why was Kant called "the smasher of everything"?

6. Why did Kant write his *Critique of Pure Reason*?

7. How did Kant define *a priori* and *a posteriori* knowledge?

8. What was Kant's contribution to proofs for the existence of God?

9. Define Kant's *hypothetical imperative* and his *categorical imperative*.

10. What was Kant's evaluation of Christianity?

11. What is the author's assessment of the Enlightenment?

Supplementary activity (*Levels 2 and 3*). Read pages 86-106 of Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith* and answer the following:

1. How did Lessing set off the nineteenth-century "quest for the historical Jesus"? Explain.
2. How did Lessing's scepticism differ from French scepticism? What was Lessing's axiom?
3. Give a summary of Kant's biographical facts.
4. If Kant proved that there is no acceptable proof for the existence of God, what else did he prove about God?

Advanced activity (*Level 3*).

1. What is Kant's view of what one can know? Explain.
2. Explain Kant's view of ethics and anthropology. Explain the *categorical* imperative.
3. What is Kant's understanding of the nature of Jesus? (See Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, page 104.)
4. Why did Kant try to secularize the Christian faith?

Seminar Discussion

1. What is the real theme of a *Critique of Pure Reason*?
2. Why did Kant write a *Critique of Practical Reason*?
3. Explain: "Religion is too strong for preconceived philosophies." (See Colin Brown, *Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, page 106.)