

Freedom and  
Religion  
in Kant and  
His Immediate  
Successors

*The Vocation of Humankind,*  
1774–1800

George di Giovanni

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Freedom and Religion in Kant and His  
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*The Vocation of Humankind, 1774–1800*

The theologians of the late German Enlightenment saw in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* a new rational defense of their Christian faith. In fact, Kant's critical theory of meaning and moral law totally subverted the spirit of that faith.

This challenging new study examines the contribution made by the *Critique of Pure Reason* to this change of meaning. George di Giovanni stresses the revolutionary character of Kant's critical thought but also reveals how this thought was being held hostage to unwarranted metaphysical assumptions that caused much confusion and rendered the first Critique vulnerable to being reabsorbed into modes of thought typical of Enlightenment popular philosophy.

Among the striking features of this book are nuanced interpretations of Jacobi and Reinhold, a lucid exposition of Fichte's early thought, and a rare, detailed account of Enlightenment popular philosophy.

George di Giovanni is Professor of Philosophy at McGill University.



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*The Vocation of Humankind, 1774–1800*

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*for Sheila*



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## Preface

Many of my generation cut their Kantian teeth on Strawson's *The Bounds of Sense* (1966). Strawson's argument was that there is in Kant a powerful critical thesis about the conceptual a priori of experience combined, however, with what Strawson called a 'transcendental story' about an alleged unknown 'thing in itself', and about certain equally alleged a priori sensible intuitions of 'space' and 'time'. According to Strawson, this transcendental story detracts from the analytical force of the first thesis. One should abstract from it if one wishes to appreciate Kant's lasting philosophical contribution. The argument was well presented and convinced many. But then Henry Allison came along (1983). Strawson was no historian of philosophy. He treated Kant as a contemporary in the same spirit (so Jonathan Bennett said somewhere about his own practice) as any of us would read and criticize the work of the colleague down the hall. Allison had, however, historical as well as philosophical credentials, and he argued, referring to Strawson explicitly, that there is no such thing in Kant as a transcendental story. The mirage of such a story appears only if one understands psychologically distinctions that were intended by Kant rather as conceptual markers that delineate the limits of possible human knowledge without, however, restricting human identity to just these limits. Allison based his argument on a close reading of Kant's text, and he convinced many. In North America at least, his position has since become the presupposition of much of Kantian scholarship. One now speaks of Kant's 'modest proposal' (Ameriks, 2000) as denoting precisely the kind of self-limiting, but not necessarily humanly constricting, discipline for which, according to Allison, Kant provided the critical program.

For my part, I was impressed by both Strawson and Allison. The analytical side in me leaned toward Strawson; the historical, toward Allison. But then, my main interest lay in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Hegel's *Logic*. For a long while at least, I was able to indulge both sides. However, precisely as I searched the late German Enlightenment background of these works of Hegel, I had to recognize that, at least so far as Kant's contemporaries were concerned, there was indeed in Kant's critical system something like a transcendental story in Strawson's sense. It is the presence of this story that caused so much confusion in the reception of the system and precipitated what we now refer to as 'post-Kantian Idealism'. It would be presumptuous indeed to believe (without at least first carefully examining the facts) that Kant's contemporaries were all so obtuse as to be universally fooled by a mere mirage. Why would anyone want to claim, as Kant incontestably does, that we do not know the 'thing in itself' at all? To say that the claim is to be understood 'transcendentally' (or 'epistemically', as some might prefer), that is, that the denial of knowledge is only meant to provide a rational space for a moral conception of human nature, begs the question of why one would need the denial in order to allow for such a space. Might the need not depend on a faulty conception of the relation of moral to physical nature? This is what many of Kant's contemporaries thought. Kant spoke of the 'dissatisfaction of metaphysics' – a theme still being played upon today (Stroud, 2003). The metaphysics that Kant had in mind, however, was still that of the schools, and the dissatisfaction that he alleged was due to the impossibility of answering positively questions that metaphysics had been posing from time immemorial. But why would anyone still want to pose them, as Kant did? Critical idealism implied not just the scaling down of the claims of classical metaphysics – a new 'modesty' in things metaphysical, as it were – but its total revolution. It implied that the kind of knowledge its questions invited, but that Kant interdicted transcendentally, is not just impossible *for us* but impossible *per se* because they are directed at chimerical objects. Could it be that, inasmuch as Kant still experienced metaphysical dissatisfaction, it was because he was still serving the specific interests of the reason typical of the metaphysics he was undermining? To put it another way, could it be that, while recognizing the impossibility of being a 'dogmatic metaphysician', he still hankered to be one and would have been one if it were possible?

These are the questions and the considerations that motivate the present study. However, except for the occasional passage in Chapter 1, I deliberately avoid engaging in polemical discussion with contemporary

interpreters of Kant. This does not mean that I do not have a philosophical agenda. On the contrary, in defense of Kant's idealism, I argue that its truly revolutionary implications were hidden to Kant himself and to most of his contemporaries, because, in expounding it, Kant was still being held hostage to the modes of thought of classical metaphysics. One must recognize, and effectively suspend, Kant's transcendental story in order to recognize in full the novelty that the *Critique of Reason* was bringing to the philosophical and cultural scene of the day. I have tried to make this point in the plain language that eighteenth-century 'popular philosophers' would have understood. It is with them, rather than with contemporary commentators, that I am most visibly engaged in discussion. I make the point, moreover, historically, concentrating on details that, in Anglophone philosophical literature at least, are normally adverted to only globally. It was my intention to offer a more nuanced reading of both Jacobi and Reinhold than is usually provided. If I have succeeded in this, I will have supplemented, and perhaps even corrected, whatever literature already exists on the subject. I have also harbored the ulterior motive of providing the basis for linking Hegel's *Phenomenology*, and his *Logic*, to the tradition of late Enlightenment philosophy, conceptually as well as historically. If this link were ever to be made, it would provide indeed a corrective to much traditional Hegel interpretation. In the present work, however, this last motive remains only adumbrated and the desired link only a wish.

Many are the intellectual debts that I owe. To acknowledge them all would require summing up a whole intellectual career. There are two recent books that I should, however, mention. Both came to my attention when the present study was already practically finished in script form, and I was therefore able to retrieve them for the most part only in the notes. Both nonetheless helped me in crucial ways. The first is Manfred Kuehn's Kant biography (2001). The book helped, of course, because of the vivid portrait of Kant, the real individual, that it conveys and the handy review of all his works that it makes available. For my purposes, however, it helped especially because it confirmed me in my long-standing belief that Kant, the real individual, not only claimed not to know anything about God, he also personally did not care to know anything about him. For all practical purposes, Kant was an agnostic. Religion and religious practices were for him just a matter of subjective need, and he apparently had no such personal need. In that case, however, the question becomes all the more pressing: why would he have expended so much energy, and taken so much care, in establishing in his system what he thought

to be a critical basis for both a moral faith and a morally motivated form of religion? Short of accepting Heinrich Heine's cynical view (as if Kant were just throwing a morsel of security to poor Lampe), there must have been serious systematic reasons motivating him. It is these reasons that I explore in the present study.

The other book is Ian Hunter's admirable *Rival Enlightenments* (2001). This study confirmed me in my long-standing belief that the critical Kant, far from reconciling conflicting tendencies of the *Aufklärung*, in fact brought new conflicts to it. Contrary to the author's opinion, I believe that these conflicts were creative. I also believe that the Critique of Reason was not necessarily bound by its conceptual commitments to a reactionary sociopolitical agenda. My estimate of the nature and the intellectual value of idealism is quite different. Yet it is true, as Hunter's study demonstrates at length, that the *Aufklärung* was made up of competing mental cultures, and that the one most responsible for the 'desacralizing' tendencies in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century German society had its origin in the thought and the political practices of the jurists. Personally, I am inclined to believe that Kant had ties with this jurist culture that Hunter ignores. The Critique of Reason even made a contribution to its later development (Negri, 1962). It is nonetheless true that Kant at least played into the hands of the 'resacralizing' agenda of the academics – though not necessarily for the reasons, or with the effects, that Hunter adduces. Whether one agrees or disagrees with its main thesis, *Rival Enlightenments* should be reading de rigueur for all Kantian scholars.

There are other debts, of a different nature, that I owe and that it is my pleasure now to acknowledge. The Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada greatly facilitated the research that went into this study with a three-year grant (No. 410-1998-0802). I had the opportunity to present the first outline of the study in a series of seminars at the Istituto italiano per gli studi filosofici di Napoli (October 1998), and I was given access to much needed but not readily available texts during a six-month tenure as *Stipendiat* at the *Herzog August Bibliothek zu Wolfenbüttel* (January to June 1999). I thank all three institutions for their financial support and the last two for their gracious hospitality as well. A special note of thanks goes to Dr. Jillian Bepler of the *Herzog August Bibliothek*.

I am also grateful to my doctoral student, Pierre Chételat, who edited the final version of my script and saw it through the publication stage. I consider myself fortunate to have had such a diligent and clear-headed collaborator.

I have presented some of the themes explored in this study in already published papers, but in considerably different forms and with different contexts in mind. I shall refer to these papers at the appropriate places.

Of a yet different nature is the debt that I owe to my wife, Sheila. I am grateful to her for her companionship in my many travels and her unfailing moral support. This book is dedicated to her.

George di Giovanni  
McGill University, Montréal  
The Feast of the Epiphany, 2004



## Abbreviations

AK = *Immanuel Kant. Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Royal Prussian Academy of the Sciences: Academy Edition (Berlin: Reimer, 1902 –).

ALZ = *Allgemeine Literatur-Zeitung*.

*Between Kant and Hegel = Between Kant and Hegel, Texts in the Development of Post-Kantian Idealism*, translated with introductory studies, G. di Giovanni and H.S. Harris; revised edition, G. di Giovanni (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 2000). Original pagination is indicated in the translated texts.

GA = *J.G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, eds. R. Lauth and H. Gliwitzky (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1962–2005, projected), cited with series number in Roman numerals, volume number, pagination, and, when appropriate, line number.

GW = *Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Rheinisch-Westphalischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968–), cited with volume number, pagination, and, when appropriate, line number.

Jacobi = *Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel "Allwill,"* tr. and ed. G. di Giovanni (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's Press, 1994), 683 pp.; includes, G. di Giovanni, *The Unfinished Philosophy of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi*, pp.1–167. The translated texts include original pagination.

KrV = *Critique of Pure Reason*, followed by the pagination of the first edition (A) and the second (B).

KprV = *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Religion = Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.

Spinoza letters = *Über die lehre des Spinoza an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Löwe, 1785).

Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. Whenever a single reference is cited continuously, the page, paragraph, or column number is included in parentheses within the text.

An English translation of the German titles is included in the Bibliography.

## Introduction

### *The Vocation of Humankind, 1774*

Everything in nature persuades me that righteousness and happiness belong together, and that they also always come together if external circumstances do not disrupt this otherwise so essential a bond. Such a pervasive tendency for order must, however, be fulfilled; and only its realization would remove the confusion and contradiction that would otherwise obtain.

Spalding

#### 1.1 THE THEME

Kant is the most important figure in this book, as one would expect in a work that deals with late-eighteenth-century German philosophy. He is not, however, the only or even its main object of interest. As a matter of fact, Fichte will end up occupying just as much space as Kant. The main object of interest lies, however, in neither of these two philosophers but at the intersection of two themes too broad to consider on their own. One has to do with the reception of Kant between the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781 and Fichte's publication of *The Vocation of Humankind* in 1800 – in the period, that is, when transcendental idealism was being transformed either into what eventually came to be known as 'post-Kantian idealism' or into that kind of typically German form of scientific as well as religious positivism that took hold of the German philosophy faculties in the nineteenth century. The philosophy of Jakob Friedrich Fries can be cited as a splendid example of this kind of positivism.<sup>1</sup> The other theme has to do with the revolution in the traditional conception of 'humanity' that had been underway throughout

Europe long before the publication of Kant's Critique. Such a revolution was radical in nature and inevitably posed some formidable challenges to the still deeply religious culture of the late German Enlightenment. The object of this book is to show, on the one hand, how Kant's Critique of Reason<sup>2</sup> was itself part of this revolution, and, on the other hand, how older modes of thought interfered with a proper understanding of its conceptual as well as cultural implications. The fact that Kant himself was not completely clear about such implications, but remained in many respects still hostage to the philosophical language of the older tradition, made things all the worse.

The nature of this revolution in the concept of humanity can be summed up in a simple statement. It consisted in the recognition that it is a mistake for the human being to look for meaning in the world, since his primary mission there is precisely to create this meaning.<sup>3</sup> Of course, nobody could have been expected at the time to formulate as radical a shift in perspectives as this recognition entailed with the same clarity as is possible for us in retrospect. Goethe had, however, come as close to it as anyone could in his famous poem *Prometheus*, the one that was to cause much scandal for Jacobi.<sup>4</sup> And Kant himself was soon to provide the formula for the shift that we still accept today as normative. On the whole, however, the change found expression indirectly in a variety of ways, most obviously in the general tendency to consider human beings precisely as *individuals*. In reaction against what it considered the empty speculations of past metaphysics, the Enlightenment sought to portray humanity mainly in the practical sphere, according to the psychological makeup of individuals, their personal interests and social relations.<sup>5</sup> The late Enlightenment movement of 'popular philosophy' (*Popularphilosophie*) was a widespread and self-conscious expression of precisely this tendency. At the same time, the Enlightenment also endorsed a view of physical nature that in fact negated the most individuating factor of any human being – namely, his capacity to determine his existence independently of physical compulsion. This was a view consistent with the old scholastic metaphysics, for which the possibility of human freedom vis-à-vis God had always been a source of difficulties, but one that now found revamped justification in the new physics that the Enlightenment also accepted enthusiastically. The problem was that, on the view of humans as individuals, the human being emerges as the responsible master of his own destiny; on the deterministic view, as a piece of the greater organization of matter<sup>6</sup> by which he is determined from beginning to end. Or again,