

# Home of the Owl? Kantian Reflections on Philosophy at University

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**Abstract:** *The focus of this paper will be on Kant and on a text which has often been drawn upon when talking about the present situation of philosophy at university, namely his The Conflict of the Faculties of 1798. Kant's claims, though not applicable to the contemporary situation directly, can indeed be worked out in a way which can assign a distinct and clearly identifiable role for university-based philosophy. I need to emphasize, though, that I am not suggesting that this is the only way Kant's thoughts in this respect can be adapted to and utilized for such an account. Quite the contrary, Kant's text offers a manifold of highly important options here.*

*In my article I will seek to establish the following claims: a) Kant, in his later years, which therefore amounts to something like his "mature" position, subscribed to a conception of a public use of reason which mainly referred to the Faculties of Philosophy at universities. b) Kant's dismissal of philosophy according to the school conception of it must not be taken as a dismissal of academic philosophy altogether. Philosophy practiced at university by professionals is vital for Kant to build philosophy as a fully worked out discipline and to answer questions revolving around the issue of the compatibility of the theoretical standpoint and Kant's own moral theory. c) Neither a) nor b) can be immediately applied to the contemporary situation we find ourselves in. Combining elements of a) and b), however, a possible route for the actualization of Kant's ideas may open up. At least one of the functions for which university-based philosophy is uniquely qualified is the assessment of the implications of progress in the natural sciences for the conception of a moral standpoint in general, and as such for a core element of our self-understanding as rational beings.*

## 1. Introduction

The university is perhaps the greatest invention of the European Middle Ages, but nonetheless there is no semantic golden age to which we can turn in order to get help about how to organize it and what role the university – as a whole and in its parts – is supposed to play. This is particularly true with regard to the main question for us, namely the role and function of philosophy at university.

Stefan Collini (2012), one of the leading critics of the UK government university policy and in this respect perhaps the counterpart of Reinhard Brandt (2011) in Germany, has recently come up with an intriguing comparison. The concept of university, he says in an article in the *London Review of Books* (2016), is similar to how Alasdair Macintyre (and one could add, Elizabeth Anscombe before him) sees concepts of morality. According to Macintyre, these concepts are like splinters from a system no longer in place and therefore constantly contested and re-interpreted without any authoritative standard to turn to. We cannot simply say that a university should be like it was at a certain period of time, simply because this arrangement complied with the *original* conception of a university. These conceptions need to be argued for in their own right, although a certain amount of confidence and trust in received wisdom certainly would not do too much harm.

Strictly speaking, however, the questions we are facing are not conceptual questions, but substantial ones. Even in the Middle Ages, when the university was invented, the role of the philosophical faculty was fiercely contested and the subject of sometimes acrimonious debates. While some regarded the Faculty of Philosophy, or the Faculty of Arts as it was then usually called, as having a merely preparatory function and offering a basic training in methodological thinking, some members of those faculties went far further than this. In 13<sup>th</sup> century Paris, for example, as Alain de Libera (1996) has explained in great detail, an alternative, quasi secular, account of the good life was developed which challenged and was perceived as a challenge to the theological orthodoxy.<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that this was done by an engagement with canonical texts, in this case mainly texts by Aristotle, for example the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

In my paper I will also turn to a canonical text in order to find answers to our question. Of course, it is not because these are canonical texts that the answers are relevant, but – again – because the answers provided there are substantial. Moreover, I will try to keep questions of interpretation on the one hand, and relevance or actualization on the other hand, strictly apart. This, of course, does not diminish the

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps even the concept of the intellectual, familiar from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, was already formed then.

importance of correct interpretation, but actually enhances it. We need to know the original intention of a classical philosopher in order to find ways of applying his thoughts to contemporary problems. My main focus will be on Kant and on a text which has often been drawn upon when talking about the present situation of philosophy at university, namely his *The Conflict of the Faculties* of 1798. Kant's claims, though not applicable to the contemporary situation directly, can indeed be worked out in a way which can assign a distinct and clearly identifiable role for university-based philosophy. I need to emphasize, though, that I am not suggesting that this is the only way Kant's thoughts in this respect can be adapted to and utilized for such an account. Quite the contrary, Kant's text offers a manifold of highly important options here.<sup>2</sup>

In what follows I will be trying to establish the following claims:

- a) Kant, in his later years, which therefore amounts to something like his "mature" position, subscribed to a conception of a public use of reason which mainly referred to the Faculties of Philosophy at universities.
- b) Kant's dismissal of philosophy according to the school conception of it must not be taken as a dismissal of academic philosophy altogether. Philosophy practiced at university by professionals is vital for Kant to build philosophy as a fully worked out discipline and to answer questions revolving around the issue of the compatibility of the theoretical standpoint and Kant's own moral theory.
- c) Neither a) nor b) can be directly applied to the contemporary situation we find ourselves in. Combining elements of a) and b), however, a possible route for the actualization of Kant's ideas may open up. At least one of the functions for which university-based philosophy is uniquely qualified is the assessment of the implications of progress in the natural sciences for the

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<sup>2</sup> To be sure, attempts at justification can easily fall into a trap. The point to stress is that obviously not everything which is important and valuable is so in an instrumental manner. There are things which are good in themselves and intrinsically good, for example when they are part and parcel of what it means to lead a proper human life. In this vein, it is crucial to see that philosophy, just like the arts, music and literature, is both valuable in itself and instrumentally valuable. Hence, my argument for an actualization of Kant's thoughts on the role of philosophy at university utilizes only one possible strategy for such a justification and, moreover, by no means exhausts what Kant has to say about this matter.

conception of a moral standpoint in general, and as such for a core element of our self-understanding as rational beings.

## 2. Kant on philosophy at university

The idea of public reason<sup>3</sup> plays a prominent role in a number of major contemporary moral and political theorists, such as Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, who – in this respect – both see themselves as indebted to Kant. While a comprehensive account of Kant’s theory of public reason, along with a comparison with these contemporary approaches, cannot be provided in what follows,<sup>4</sup> I shall try to focus on a relatively small, but central element of it, namely the contrast he draws between what he calls the public vs. private *use* of reason. As we shall see, these ideas ultimately lead to very strong claims about the institutional role philosophy is supposed to play at university in particular and society in general, claims which, however, seem to challenge attempts to render Kant’s thoughts applicable in today’s circumstances.

In a relatively early work (of the critical period, to be sure), namely in his essay, “An answer to the question: What is enlightenment” (AA VII, 35-42), Kant argues on the basis of King Frederick II of Prussia’s maxim: “*Argue* as much as you will and about whatever you will, *but obey!*”<sup>5</sup> This ‘maxim’ – in the non-technical sense of this term – of course raises serious questions about Kant’s political philosophy, in particular with regard to the problem of obedience to authority. I will say a little more on this later, but what is of primary concern for our purposes is Kant’s very peculiar distinction between the public and private *use* of reason. One could perhaps initially think that the private use of reason occurs in the safe space of privacy, for example in one’s home, perhaps in the company of one’s friends. Even the image of the philosopher donned in dressing gown and slippers might come to mind. Kant, however, is aiming at something completely different. Conversely, one

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<sup>3</sup> See Turner and Gaus (forthcoming) for an account of the main contemporary conceptions. Quong (2013) provides a very reliable overview of the main philosophical issues discussed in connection with public reason today.

<sup>4</sup> See Rauscher (2005) for a recent attempt in this direction.

<sup>5</sup> AA VIII, 37; CE, trans. Gregor, 18. With the exception of the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (KrV) Kant’s works are quoted according to the pagination of the so-called “Akademie-Ausgabe”(AA), with the Roman number indicating the volume and the Arabic number the page(s). English translations for AA texts are provided on the basis of the corresponding volumes of “The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant” (CE).

could think that the public use of reason must amount to what we now call “freedom of expression”, nowadays regarded as one of the fundamental human rights. He says, however:

“I reply: the *public* use of one’s reason must always be free, and it alone can bring about enlightenment among human beings; the *private use* of one’s reason may, however, often be very narrowly restricted without this particularly hindering the progress of enlightenment. But by the public use of one’s own reason I understand that use which someone makes of it *as a scholar* before the entire public of the *world of readers*. What I call the private use of reason is that which one may make of it in a certain *civil* post or office with which he is entrusted.” (AA VIII, 37, trans. Gregor, CE, 18)

Clearly, the picture is rather like this. The private use of reason is the use the holder of a public office may be making in carrying out this public office, judging for example whether the duties or obligations which come along with this office are just, and making his or her opinion known to those affected by his actions as an official. Paradoxically perhaps, this private use is thus connected to something public in the contemporary sense of the term. An example of a private use of reason which is illegitimate for Kant would be a judge who in court openly voices criticism of the law he is to apply, or who even refrains from applying the pertinent law because she takes it to be problematic.

For Kant, the public use of reason by the very same official, by contrast, would consist in giving his assessment of, for example, his duties as an official, or of the quality of the law in our example, *as an author addressing readers*, or more precisely educated readers, specifically: the educated public. In short, what Kant has in mind is a rather restricted realm or a societal “safe haven” of free speech, as we may call it. In line with this idea, the extension of potential ‘public users’ of reason is rather large. Basically, any active citizen (although the percentage of the overall population counting as active citizens is relatively small in Kant’s political theory) can count as somebody entitled to the public use of reason, as long as he (in Kant’s account this does not hold for women) enters this safe haven of free speech.

Kant’s mature (or at any rate, late) position on this matter, i.e. in his work *The Conflict of the Faculties*, is quite different. Strikingly, Kant now focuses on a

much smaller group of those entitled to a public use of reason.<sup>6</sup> Again, perhaps a representative passage will be helpful. In order to assess this passage properly, however, we first need to take a brief look at the political context of this work: The political situation in Prussia had changed dramatically after the deaths of two monarchs. Frederick William II had succeeded Frederick II to the throne in 1786, and it was under Frederick William II's reign that Kant ran into trouble with regard to his book *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* in 1793. *The Conflict of the Faculties* was published in 1798, one year after Frederick William III was crowned in 1797. As we shall see, the standard picture of this situation, in particular the problems Kant faced with regard to the book on religion, need to be considered rather cautiously, and this in turn is immediately relevant for our main question.

The passage reads as follows:

“So the philosophy faculty, because it must answer for the truth of the teachings it is to adopt or even allow, must be conceived as free and subject only to laws given by reason, not by the government. But a department of this kind, too, must be established at a university; in other words, a university must have a faculty of philosophy. Its function in relation to the three higher faculties is to control them and, in this way, be useful to them, since *truth* (the essential and first condition of learning in general) is the main thing ... Only the business people of the higher faculties (clergymen, legal officials, and doctors) can be prevented from contradicting in public the teachings that the government has entrusted to them to expound in fulfilling their respective offices, and from venturing to play the philosopher's role; for the faculties alone, not the officials appointed by the government, can be allowed to do this, since these officials get their cognition from the faculties ... But the result of this freedom, which the philosophy faculty must enjoy unimpaired, is that the higher faculties (themselves better instructed) will lead these officials more and more onto the way of truth.” (AA VII, 27-29, trans. Gregor/Anchor, CE, 255-256)

In *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant tries to clarify the task of the university and of its constituting faculties. In this book, moreover, Kant returns to engaging with religious topics and discusses the relationship between the Christian religion and his

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<sup>6</sup> It has to be said, though, that he does not explicitly rule out participation in the public use of reason by non-members of the philosophical faculty *tout court*.

own moral theory. As indicated already, and as is well known, Kant had to face substantial difficulties after publishing *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* in 1793, when the pertinent censorship agency managed to obtain a Royal rescript against him. Kant then promised<sup>7</sup> to refrain from writing on religious matters. This incident has been discussed a great deal in Kant scholarship and among the wider public. Usually, it is seen as a typical instance of reactionary forces blocking the progress of enlightened thinking, very much along the same lines as Wolff's dismissal from Halle earlier (i.e. in 1723) and Fichte's demotion in Jena later (i.e. in 1799). Of course, to a large extent this is true, but the complete story behind these incidents is much more complex, as Bettina Stangneth (2003) has shown in her fascinating introduction to her Meiner edition of the *Religion*.<sup>8</sup> This story includes the familiar mixture of personal and institutional rivalries, and therefore is an important context for what Kant is maintaining in *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

Kant's 'tactics' in his quarrel with censorship are important in their own right. According to Stangneth (2003, XXXVII), it is plausible that Kant may have intentionally provoked something like a showdown with the censorship authorities. The case she makes, at any rate, is quite convincing: He chose to publish the *Religion* in parts and hence as (lengthy) articles in journals, and this made their publication even more difficult. In fact, he must have been surprised that the first one was actually approved. The second part got rejected, as expected, after which Kant changed his plans and turned the papers into a monograph, which required approval only by the university faculty in whose domain the topic fell. Kant approached the theological faculty in Königsberg (i.e. the faculty of his home university) to confirm that it was not a work of theology but of philosophy, and then received the *imprimatur* or permission of publication from the Philosophical Faculty of the University of Jena. After the publication of the book, the said rescript came and, in the wake of it, Kant's promise to refrain from publishing about religion. From today's point of view, it may look as though Kant was much too conciliatory in this respect. In this vein, one could think that he should never have made such a promise. After the death of the monarch Frederick William II, however, Kant at any rate considered himself no longer bound by this promise, as he made clear in the very preface to the *Conflict* (AA VII, 10 fn). If Kant's caving in to the authorities may look like an undue compromise, Kant's claim that he only made his promise to

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<sup>7</sup> See Kant's own account of this matter in AA VII, 5-11.

<sup>8</sup> See in particular Stangneth (2003, IX- LIX).

the former king as an individual person at least at first sight looks ethically dubious as well.

For Stangneth (2003, LIII-LIX), by contrast, Kant tried on the one hand to stick to and respect the existing legal framework and at the same time expose its deficits, which were largely due to the strong element of arbitrariness on the part of the individual monarch in enlightened absolutism. Simply put, the quirks of a monarch's mood swings, however preposterous, often amounted to law. In all this, he wanted to provide an example to the ethical community and expose the weaknesses of the existing legal order without dismissing it in its entirety. He did, after all, formally comply with it. Understanding the promise as having been made to the individual monarch in this sense amounted to taking the reality of absolutism seriously, which – as pointed out – licensed arbitrariness of the individual monarch. Moreover, obeying the order to refrain from publishing about religion in the first place must at least be taken as being in line with Kant's often misunderstood principle that the political authorities must be obeyed. However, this principle, rightly understood, does not require us to bow to the will of totalitarian or authoritarian regimes. Rather, Kant sets the bar as to what can legitimately be called "political authority" very high: political authorities need to be obeyed as long as the given political system meets the criterion of being an overall just political system, and a concrete order does not command one to do something intrinsically immoral.

In sum, a proper assessment of Kant's actions can be made as follows: a) They can't be interpreted as a general appeal to freedom of expression; rather he tried to secure what he saw as an essential role for himself as a philosopher holding a public office at a university. b) His actions do not amount to undue submissiveness (although this might still seem debatable), nor to undue sophistry. As we shall see, moreover, c) he is not arguing against a conception of university which focuses on its usefulness to the state. We should not overly idealize his ideal of a university or the university in the idea as a whole. From the perspective of such an idealization, Kant's apparent preparedness to make considerable concessions in the *Conflict*, with regard to the prerogatives of government authorities, may look rather surprising. But it is quite understandable in light of his account of the structure of the university and the function of the faculties (AA VII, 18-36). For Kant, a university essentially consists of four faculties, following the standard developed in the middle ages: the Faculty of Theology, the Faculty of Law, the Faculty of Medicine and the Faculty of Philosophy. In order to understand Kant's point, we need to make an important distinction with regard to the state (in the political sense of this term) in which the

university is situated. There is on the one hand the state as it is, the actually existing state, as it were, and there is the ideal state. Now, the first three faculties, the commonly (but for Kant, according to AA VII, 20, in the end presumably not properly) so-called “higher faculties”, not only perform an important function in and for the running of the state as it is, because they supply graduates who can fill the vital functions of such a state, but also with regard to the running of the ideal state. This usefulness is never put into question by Kant, let alone dismissed.

With regard to the material taught in these faculties the state, according to Kant, is entitled to give directives (e.g. AA VII, 19), so that these functions can be performed properly. Of course, Kant is not endorsing unconstrained and arbitrary interference of the government into university teaching, rather this interference itself is regulated by norms of reason which are meant to rule out arbitrariness. Since even an imperfect state is still a state for Kant (although he raises the bar very high for even being an imperfect state), certain interferences may need to be accepted which do not meet the standards of how it should be in the ideal state. To be sure, however, this only refers to the so-called “higher faculties”.

The task, or at any rate one of the tasks of the philosophical faculty, is now to scrutinize and test doctrines taught in the higher faculties and sanctioned by the government against the standards of reason and hence also against the standards of what ideally a state should sanction as doctrines for these faculties (AA VII, 27-29). Strikingly, this is true both for the university in an actually existing, imperfect state, and in a perfect state, but mainly in an imperfect state.

This function is to be carried out primarily by means of debates in the realm of scholarly publications of faculty members of the Faculty of Philosophy on the one hand, and members of the other faculties on the other. Moreover, Kant appears to think that the positive effects philosophy can have in improving the doctrines taught at these faculties also – in a mediated manner – reach the graduates of those faculties holding key offices in the state, who in turn and in various ways disseminate the pertinent doctrines to the wider public, thus making a real difference in the world.

As far as the Faculty of Philosophy and Faculty of Law are concerned, Kant’s aim is to have philosophers assess positive laws against normative legal and thus ultimately moral theory, and this is to be accomplished also by addressing state officials directly. With regard to the Faculty of Philosophy and the Faculty of Medicine, Kant’s points are not immediately obvious. This is perhaps the most idiosyncratic part of the text in which Kant is not shying away from giving a concrete account of the dangers for one’s own well-being of engaging in thinking at

the wrong time in one's daily routine (AA VII, 109). At any rate, he establishes an important connection between moral health on the one hand and mental as well as physical health on the other, with moral health being regarded as the condition of true physical and mental well-being. Moreover, he seems to suggest that health is not something to be put into the exclusive charge of the medical profession.

When it comes to the relationship between the Faculty of Theology and the Faculty of Philosophy, his idea is that the clergy are the vehicle for disseminating philosophical moral insights or philosophically purified religious doctrines pertaining to morality to a wider public.

Although, as we have seen, Kant's manoeuvres must be regarded and judged with great care and clearly are less disappointingly submissive than often assumed, Kant's claims quite obviously are not apt for a simple application to our contemporary situation. Even if we limit our attention to his account of the conflict of the philosophical and theological faculties, Kant's ideas of promoting progress within society as a whole may look more paternalistic than one would perhaps expect. The idea behind all this is clearly detectable, though. Kant aims at reform from above by reaching and addressing the pertinent people, those who play an important role in the machinery of the state. Of course, to assess this matter properly would require a full account of his doctrines about the role of philosophy in other areas of human development and character formation, but unfortunately this cannot be accomplished here. Still, the model of the dissemination of moral progress through educational multipliers is worth considering for a contemporary actualization, as are Kant's theses about the role philosophical insights can play in changing conceptions of well-being when addressed to members of the medical faculties and the effect this can have on health professionals in general.

However, I shall try to explore a different route on which Kant's thoughts may be adapted to address a still pressing issue, and at the same time to assign an important function for university-based philosophy. I would like to do this by focusing on what might look like a rather out-dated element in Kant's doctrines, namely his notion of scholarly debate as a vehicle of societal progress. Moreover, I shall have to do this with the hugely different structure of contemporary universities in mind, compared with their 18<sup>th</sup> century counterparts. While in Kant's time natural sciences, along with historical subjects, were still part of the philosophical faculty – a point addressed by Kant himself in VII, 28 – the natural sciences have since emancipated themselves and turned into faculties in their own right. Hence, my attempt concerns a conflict which would have been an internal conflict in the

Faculty of Philosophy in Kant's time. With this qualification, we can retain his idea of professional philosophy having a unique function when seeing this function in something other than the way Kant himself officially did in the *Conflict*. Indeed, there is some ground for this in Kant's thought itself. This ground, however, cannot be taken up without modification and qualification either. But let us see first what this ground is.

### 3. Kant and the school conception of philosophy

In what is known as the “transcendental doctrine of method” of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in particular in the so-called “architectonic of pure reason”, Kant talks about philosophy and the way it is properly done. To this end, he contrasts what he calls the “school conception” and the “world conception” of philosophy.<sup>9</sup> What is the difference? Kant says:

“Thus far, however, the concept of philosophy is only a *school concept*, viz., the concept of a system of cognition that is being sought only as science, and that has as its purpose nothing more than the systematic unity of this knowledge and hence the logical perfection of cognition. But there is also a *world concept* (*conceptus cosmicus*) on which this name has always been based, primarily when the concept was, as it were, personified and conceived as an archetype in the ideal of the *philosopher*. From this point of view, philosophy is the science of the reference of all cognition to the essential purposes of human reason (*teleologica rationis humanae*), and the philosopher is not an artist of reason but the legislator of human reason. In such a meaning of the term it would be quite vainglorious to call oneself a philosopher and to claim that one has come to equal the archetype, which lies only in the idea.” (KrV A 838sq./B 866sq., trans. Pluhar, 760).

What is striking here is that within the school conception of philosophy, “science” seems to be taken in the sense of a body of propositions or a system, while “science” with regard to the world concept is presumably something which nowadays is sometimes called an epistemic virtue, corresponding to *epistêmê* in the

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<sup>9</sup> Important parallel passages can be found, for example, in the (textually slightly problematic) Jäsche Logic (AA IX, 24-27) and the Vienna Logic (AA XXIV, 799-801).

Aristotelian sense. In short, it is a personal quality of the philosopher, in turn taken as an ideal. Such a person has “science” in the sense of a capacity to refer all cognition to the essential purposes of human reason.

The idea seems to be this: there is a variety of essential ends of reason, one of which is the highest end, as Kant calls it later in the text (KrV A840/ B868). The highest end for Kant clearly must involve full moralization of all rational agents, but it is not entirely clear whether Kant identifies the highest end with the so-called (derivative) highest good here, i.e. happiness in proportion to a moral disposition. Kant is not very explicit either here about other essential ends. Plausibly, though, these ends include versatility in acquiring or having knowledge in the sciences as well as in the theoretical disciplines of philosophy, such as metaphysics. Clearly, the philosopher according to the world conception of philosophy, must be able to draw the right consequences, or at least assess properly the implications of insights gained, for example, in the sciences and in theoretical philosophy, for the highest end.

Moreover, while a school philosopher lacks a key quality, Kant suggests that the world philosopher has the skills a school philosopher has, namely his versatility, which turns him into an artist of reason and which enables him to work philosophy into a fully-fledged system. The world philosopher uses the very versatility, which turns the school philosopher into an artist of reason, to properly assess insights from the sciences and theoretical philosophy for the ultimate end of reason. Hence, Kant’s point cannot be a dismissal of school philosophy in the sense of academic philosophy altogether,<sup>10</sup> but only a dismissal of a certain form of academic philosophy, namely that which merely aims at artistry in reason and does not heed the ultimately moral vocation of man based on the autonomy of practical reason. Here Kant is definitely not advocating a French or British model of enlightenment philosophy to replace the German model.<sup>11</sup> As is well known, Enlightenment

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<sup>10</sup> In this vein, the positive connotations in passages touching upon the importance of professional, specialist philosophy deserve to be appreciated more properly. Of course, it is perfectly possible for Kant to find these standards outside academia, but certainly not usual. Conversely, university-based philosophy can, of course, fail to meet professional standards, be these the standards of Kant’s critical philosophy or not. These positive connotations, at any rate, are particularly obvious in passages where he dismisses popular philosophy and in which he seems to entrust the critical part of philosophy to specialists. This is particularly clear in the case of practical philosophy (e.g. AA IV, 409-410, AA VI, 206), but is also prevalent in his account as to how philosophy, in particular metaphysics, is to be worked out into a fully-fledged system and how conflicts within philosophy are to be treated.

<sup>11</sup> As Schneiders (2004, 89sq.) succinctly put it, the German Enlightenment philosophers were by and large pious civil servants.

philosophy in Britain and France was largely sustained by philosophers outside of the university – the gentlemen philosophers and *les philosophes* respectively. Kant rather dismisses academic philosophy according to the school conception of it. True, most probably he also demands that a greater degree of what we could call the existential urgency of critique be displayed by the faculty members. Moreover, he is aiming at effects in the ‘real world’ as far as the moral vocation of man is concerned, at making a difference in politics and the ethical community.

For Kant, there are philosophical insights particularly pertinent to and useful for this ultimate end of complete moralization, so as not to undermine it. These insights concern the proper assessment of the overall standing of human beings in relation to a world describable by the natural sciences. For Kant, it is essential that the success of natural sciences – for which he thought he had himself given a philosophical account, mainly in the transcendental aesthetic and the transcendental analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason* – does not undercut the legitimacy of the assumption of our freedom nor the assumption of the existence of God and immortal rational souls. The latter two articles of rational faith for him are indispensable for developing a morally good character, while the compatibility of human freedom with a theoretical standpoint is indispensable for Kant’s autonomy-based morality to hold.

Hence, the professional thinkers who have been through the acid test of critique are needed not just to properly turn philosophy, in particular metaphysics, into a system: these professional thinkers are in charge of actually fending off those who try to draw the – from Kant’s perspective – wrong conclusion about the explicability of what goes on in space and time by means of science. As Kant sees it, attempts at, for example, inferring ontological naturalism from methodological naturalism (see KrV A 776sq./B 804sq.) ignore the very lessons of transcendental idealism, according to which things in space and time are appearances grounded in things in themselves. Thus, appearances in space and time, with regard to which science is so successful, are not the only type of possible objects for Kant.

#### **4. Kant and university-based philosophy today**

It is precisely at this point that I should like to come back to the question of how Kant’s thought about the public use of reason in and through university philosophy can be actualized now. Of course, even the most committed Kantian has to admit

that things in philosophy have not turned out as Kant hoped they would. Instead of Kant's critical philosophy providing the framework within which the disputes in philosophy could be settled, critical philosophy itself became the topic of disputes, such as in German Idealism, in which Kant was criticized for an essentially dualist approach to the world, as the very distinction of things in themselves and appearances suggests.

And this is precisely where we can get a foot in the door. Three points seem to be particularly relevant in this respect:

1) Rather than taking it for granted that the task of philosophy is to work out the system of philosophy as an organic whole within which the fundamental concepts have been established, we must recognize that it is still a matter of debate what the fundamentals are in the first place. Maybe, even the idea that philosophy is something like a system (which was perhaps a matter of widespread consensus in certain quarters in Kant's time) is now itself contested. In the light of, for example, Wittgensteinian thoughts, some will surely argue that philosophical issues need to be addressed locally, one at a time.

2) We probably cannot agree with Kant regarding the special class of objects which are allegedly the real focus of our theoretical interest in metaphysics. For all the recent resurgence of philosophical theology and the continued interest in the philosophy of mind, God and rational souls (as separate substances) are perhaps not at the top of the agenda of contemporary philosophical research. If nowadays the focus is at all on non-physical objects, then it is perhaps rather on abstract objects, such as properties or numbers. About these abstract objects Kant says surprisingly little, although abstract objects in general raise a substantial challenge for ontological naturalism.

3) Contrary to Kant's own claims and much to the chagrin of Kantians and most Kant scholars alike, many philosophers remain unconvinced that we have found the correct doctrine of morality already. As the lively debate within the field of moral theory shows, it is – for many – still an open question whether a basically Kantian account of morality is correct, or, for example, a consequentialist, virtue-ethical, natural law, or perhaps even particularist one. The more prominent suggestions of recent years, such as Derek Parfit (2011) and Ronald Dworkin (2011) draw on a combination of Kantianism and consequentialism on the one hand and – although this is contentious – some form of actualization of a basically natural law account on the other. Moreover, these accounts, convincingly, provide a package of moral theory and meta-ethical theories indispensable for an account of the 'place' of

morality in a world of science. In this way, they can count as examples of what I have in mind, although I am of course not only thinking of meta-ethics.

Clearly, even if we cannot agree on which moral theory is correct, the problem of the compatibility of moral theory (whatever the correct one may be) with a scientific picture of the world remains a pressing issue in need of clarification.

We thus reach one way of adapting Kant's account to the contemporary situation which honours the essentially different structure of universities today, characterised by the emancipation of the natural sciences. This situation would – were we to venture into putting it forward – make the claim of truth being the prerogative of philosophy look somewhat presumptuous. Even though the natural sciences now have a strong foothold outside the university, and even though considerations of short term utility are on the rise in the sciences both inside and outside university, there is no denying that finding out the truth about the world is at least to a large extent the domain of these sciences. What remains a genuine philosophical task and, incidentally, belongs to the domain of truth widely conceived is the proper assessment of the scientific grasp of the world for our self-understanding as human and rational beings, for whom the moral standpoint is inescapable, perhaps even an inescapable predicament. A brief example may help clarify what I have in mind. The spectacular progress in neuroscience may tempt some to conclude that the uncovering of the intricate causal mechanism involved in human agency in and by itself amounts to a refutation of the thesis that human beings are free, which – as we have seen – despite it being not provable for Kant, plays such an important role in his approach to morality. Such a conclusion, however, would be premature, since it requires the truth of at least two further, exceedingly contentious premises. Even if we conceded the highly problematic inference from the discovery of a causal mechanism to the establishment of the thesis that this mechanism hints at an overall determinism in the neuronal realm, the conclusion presupposes that freedom and determinism are incompatible. This incompatibility claim, plainly, is not a scientific but a philosophical one, and it is nothing but astonishing that it is often taken for granted.

We can thus try to come to an overall conclusion. What can be retained from the Kantian approach is the necessity of assessing the challenge and the implications of the success of the sciences for our self-consciousness as rational beings more concretely. Academic philosophy is uniquely qualified to do this, as an institution

entering into a scholarly dialogue with academic or non-academic representatives of the sciences. To repeat, Kant's philosophy of transcendental idealism and his moral theory are not generally taken to be correct today. But the point I am trying to make does not presuppose the truth of transcendental idealism or Kant's moral philosophy at all. There is no general consensus as to the fundamental philosophical position one needs to take. Openness as to these positions themselves is rather an important aspect of a healthy and fruitful discussion.<sup>12</sup>

To be sure, what I call the "self-consciousness of rational beings" does not only include questions of morality and questions as to whether and how morality and its possible presuppositions fit in the world as accounted for by the natural sciences, most notably perhaps with regard to neuroscience and evolutionary theory. The "standing" of politics, economics, art and literature, for example, needs to be included here too, of course.

In all this, the most promising approach to addressing these questions is to leave it to the creativity and ingenuity of the thinkers of the profession, both with regard to methodology in philosophy and the relationship of philosophy to its past.

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<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Thomas Nagel's controversial book (2012) and the rather surprising reaction it caused, and also T.M. Scanlon's account of reasons (2014) as key examples for nurturing the discussion of these key questions.

## Home of the Owl?

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