

Kant at the Masked Ball

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1. Which of the Two Kants?

We should grapple with the fact that two opposing traditions of scholarship on Immanuel Kant's philosophy have come down to us. On the one side, Kant is presented as the pro-reason philosopher of the Enlightenment. Philosopher Yvonne Sherratt advocates this position, holding that Kant "became known historically as the greatest thinker of the Enlightenment."¹ Kant biographer Otfried Höffe also positions Kant as a paragon of the Enlightenment: "The philosophy of Immanuel Kant represents not only the intellectual climax but also the transformation of the European Enlightenment."² Kant scholar Paul Guyer agrees that "Immanuel Kant was the paradigmatic philosopher of the European Enlightenment," explaining that "Kant was the philosopher of human autonomy, the view that by the use of our own reason in its broadest sense human beings can discover and live up to the basic principles of knowledge and action without outside assistance, above all without divine support or intervention."³

That position has had heavyweight support historically, beginning with Georg W. F. Hegel's prediction, given Kant's dominance within a generation of his death in 1804: "From the Kantian

¹ Yvonne Sherratt, *Hitler's Philosophers* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), p. 40.

² Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant*, trans. Marshall Farrier (New York: State University of New York Press, 1994), p. 1.

³ Paul Guyer, "Kant, Immanuel (1724–1804)," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed online at: <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/biographical/kant-immanuel-1724-1804/v-1>.

system and its completion I expect a revolution in Germany.”⁴ Poets even chimed in, including Hegel’s former college roommate Johann Hölderlin, who rhapsodizes that “Kant is the Moses of our nation” leading them to the Promised Land.⁵

Yet on the other side, Kant is depicted as the saboteur of reason and launcher of the Counter-Enlightenment. Philosopher and theologian Moses Mendelssohn, Kant’s contemporary, identifies him as “the all-destroyer,” fearful that Kantian philosophy cuts off all access to true reality.⁶ In the next generation, University of Berlin philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer identifies Kant as “the most important phenomenon which has appeared in philosophy for two thousand years” and drew from his work as the grounding for his own irrationalist and nihilist views, citing the first part of Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* as decisive: “The Transcendental Aesthetic is a work of such merit that it alone would be sufficient to immortalize the name of Kant. Its proofs have such a complete power of conviction that I number its propositions among the incontestable truths.”⁷

Heinrich Heine, a younger contemporary of Schopenhauer’s, agrees with the destructiveness of Kantian ideas: “Our German philosophy is really but the dream of the French Revolution. . . . Kant is our Robespierre,” but then adds that he is even worse: “Immanuel Kant, the arch-destroyer in the realm of thought, far surpassed in terrorism Maximilian Robespierre.”⁸ A generation later, Friedrich

⁴ Georg W. F. Hegel, Letter to Friedrich Schelling, April 16, 1795, in *Hegel: The Letters*, trans. Clark Butler and Christiane Seiler (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 35.

⁵ Johann Hölderlin, ‘Kant ist der Moses unserer Nation’, Letter of January 1, 1799, to his brother, Friedrich Hölderlin, in *Sämtliche Werke und Briefe* (Leipzig: Insel, 1914), p. 381.

⁶ Moses Mendelssohn, quoted in Lewis White Beck “German Philosophy,” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 3 (New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. 337.

⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (New York: Dover, 1969 [1818]), pp. xv and 437.

⁸ Heinrich Heine, “Religion and Philosophy in Germany: A Fragment” (1834), accessed online at: https://archive.org/stream/religionandphilo011616mbp/religionandphilo011616mbp_djvu.txt.

Nietzsche also believes Kantian philosophy to be corrosive: “As soon as Kant would begin to exert a popular influence, we should find it reflected in the form of a gnawing and crumbling skepticism and relativism.”⁹

That assessment also held sway in the twentieth century, as philosopher Lewis White Beck, selected to write the entry on “German Philosophy” for *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, identifies the high stakes: “Immanuel Kant was to put almost every fundamental concept of the Enlightenment in jeopardy.”¹⁰ And novelist-philosopher Ayn Rand also agrees that Kant’s philosophy, more than any other, undercut the life-essential achievements of the Enlightenment, stating that “Kant is the most evil man in mankind’s history.”¹¹

We are confronted with big names and strong rhetoric on both sides of this debate. How should we proceed to break the interpretive impasse?

At the same time, we should ask the value question about Kantian philosophy: Why does it matter what this now-long-dead philosopher said? The answer is that Kantian philosophy continues to flourish and is perhaps still the dominant philosophy of our era. Historian of philosophy John Passmore states it boldly: “The Kantian revival is so widespread as scarcely to lend itself to illustration.”¹² In his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer*, philosopher Christopher Janaway makes this striking claim: “One feature uniting many kinds of recent philosophy is an increasing recognition that we are working within the legacy of Kant.”¹³

⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Schopenhauer as Educator*, in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997 [1874]), sec. 3, p. 140.

¹⁰ Beck, “German Philosophy,” p. 300.

¹¹ Ayn Rand, “Brief Summary” (1971), in *The Objectivist* (Palo Alto, CA: Palo Alto Book Service, 1982), p. 1092.

¹² John Passmore, *Recent Philosophers* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1985), pp. 133–34 n. 20.

¹³ Christopher Janaway, “Introduction,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Schopenhauer* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 3.

If Passmore and Janaway are correct, then “We are all Kantians now” is no doubt too strong. Yet all of us, Kantian or not, still need to grapple with Immanuel Kant’s ideas. That philosophical self-understanding requires that we first ask: Which Kantian philosophy are we working within or against?

2. The Famous Second Preface

The first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* appeared in 1781. Yet what Kant meant, as the subsequent opposed scholarly assessments demonstrate, was hardly transparent. Schopenhauer puts the predicament amusingly, in assessing the value quest of Kantian philosophy: “I should liken Kant to a man at a ball, who all evening has been carrying on a love affair with a masked beauty in the vain hope of making a conquest, when at last she throws off her mask and reveals herself to be his wife.”¹⁴ Although it is difficult to imagine Immanuel Kant in pursuit of a love affair, Schopenhauer’s simile captures something important. Which version of Kant’s philosophy is wearing the mask and which is the reality? Once the mask is removed, do we find the hoped-for lovely woman or (apologies to all wives) something less appealing?

Six years after the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason* was published, Kant issued a second edition and took the opportunity, with the famous Second Preface, to present an overview of his argument, to emphasize its main points, identify his motivations for it, and signal its significance for the future of philosophy. His extra efforts at clarity in that Preface make sense. *Critique of Pure Reason* is his most important work, serving as the foundational book in his trilogy of critiques, followed by *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Critique of Judgment*. Furthermore, by the time of the second edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, he had enjoyed six years of additional reflection as well as feedback from colleagues. He took pains to modify unclear passages and to add explanatory ones, creating its final form. I thus want to focus on the Second Preface as our best method of unmasking the merely phenomenal “Kant” and getting to real Kantian philosophy in itself.

¹⁴ Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Basis of Morality*, trans. E. F. J. Payne (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1999 [1840]), accessed online at: <https://tinyurl.com/mrzxcvzy>.

3. The Plight of Metaphysics

When we do metaphysics, we are pursuing the truth about reality. We grapple with perennial questions such as: Is reality made up of matter or of abstract essences? Are there gods or a God out there? Do miracles and random events occur or does all of reality work strictly by cause and effect? Was the world created in time or is it eternal?

Kant begins his Second Preface by saying that philosophers have made zero progress in metaphysics:

Whether the treatment of such knowledge as lies within the province of reason does or does not follow the secure path of a science, is easily to be determined from the outcome. For if after elaborate preparations, frequently renewed, it is brought to a stop immediately it nears its goal; if often it is compelled to retrace its steps and strike into some new line of approach; or again, if the various participants are unable to agree in any common plan of procedure, then we may rest assured that it is very far from having entered upon the secure path of a science, and is indeed a merely random groping.¹⁵ (Bvii)

Yet, by contrast, Kant notes that other disciplines—such as logic, mathematics, and physics—have made strong progress. Logic, for example, “has already, from the earliest times, proceeded upon this sure path [as] evidenced by the fact that since Aristotle it has not required to retrace a single step” (Bviii).

Why have those three disciplines been so successful while metaphysics has been a failure? Kant’s answer is that the geniuses who started them along their sure paths effected revolutions that involved a common maneuver:

- The revolutionary logician performed an act of abstracting “from all objects of knowledge and their differences, leaving the understanding nothing to deal with save itself and its form” (Bix).
- The revolutionary mathematician was able “to bring out what was necessarily implied in the concepts that he had himself formed a priori” (Bxii).

¹⁵ All in-text citations are to page numbers in the Akademie edition, and all quotations are from Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (London: MacMillan & Co., 1963 [1787]).

- The revolutionary physicist realized that “reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own” (Bxiii).

Notice that Kant’s analysis of each revolution focuses only on the subject, not the object: “the concepts that he had himself formed,” the understanding has “nothing to deal with save itself and its form,” and has insight into what it made “after a plan of its own.”

It further follows that if reason has insight only into that which it produces after its own plan, then we need to know what reason’s prior plan is. What does the subject put into the constrained result that it presents to itself? As philosophers, our critical project is thus to isolate the aspects of the process by which reason determines its object completely and purely *a priori*.

A closely related point is about how Kant says we should understand the subject. Rather than as a being passively impressed upon by objective reality and then inspecting the result *a posteriori*, the subject should be seen as active and constructing *a priori*. Reason “must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature’s leading strings, but must itself show the way with principles of judgment based upon fixed laws, constraining nature to give answer to questions of reason’s own determining” (Bxiii). It is not that the subject’s reason simply follows along with nature or that some external objective reality guides us to where it wants us to go. Rather, we subjects provide the plan, we interrogate nature, and we get answers from nature that we extract according to our prior plan. If we can learn from what led to revolutions in mathematics, logic, and physics, then we can return to metaphysics and grasp why it has not achieved its revolution—and thus position ourselves intellectually for Kant’s own philosophical revolution.

4. Kant’s “Copernican” Turn

Metaphysics has failed and must have failed, Kant argues, because of a faulty premise. What has been the assumption of philosophy since its beginnings? “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects” (Bxvi). That is to say, the assumption of philosophy prior to Kant has been that objectivity—or small-‘o’ objectivism—has been the goal. The objectivist idea is that the subject’s knowledge, that is, what is going on inside our own minds, must conform to something outside of itself, namely, to objects. The assumption has been that objective reality sets the terms and that the subject—if the subject is to have knowledge—must conform to the object.

However, Kant carries on, “all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them *a priori*, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure” (Bxvi). That is, we have been doing philosophy for millennia, and assuming objectivity as philosophers’ guiding principle has ended only in failures. It is thus time for a sober reassessment. We can keep trying and continue our objectivity-hopeful random groping—or we can make the bold move of accepting that objectivity is and must be a failure. If we can allow ourselves to accept the latter possibility, then we open ourselves to a new approach: “We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects must conform to our knowledge” (Bxvi).

That is a huge reversal. What if, daringly, we reverse the order and say that the subject sets the terms? This is Kant’s revolutionary language. First and foremost, the suggestion is that the subject’s knowledge sets the terms and objects must conform to our knowledge. That is to say, what we call the “object” conforms to the subject. In other words, Kant is either proposing a rejection of objectivism in the direction of a kind of subjectivism or he is rejecting objectivity in the traditional sense for a new kind of subjectivity. Hence, what is sometimes called the “Copernican revolution in philosophy,” as inaugurated by Kant and using language he endorses, “We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus’ primary hypothesis” (Bxvi).¹⁶

Kant is suggesting a “Copernican” revolution in philosophy on the same order of magnitude. We should reject the assumption of objectivity. That is, we should stop thinking that our knowledge and truth must conform to independent objects and, instead, embrace the view that the object of knowledge must conform to conditions set by the knowing subject. Kant proceeds to give a number of formulations of this revolution in terms of various aspects of knowledge, including intuitions, concepts, and principles.

¹⁶ As a reminder, Nicolaus Copernicus’s 1543 hypothesis was that astronomers had proceeded on the assumption that the Earth is at the center of the system and that the planets, stars, moon, and Sun rotate around it. However, astronomers had for millennia tried and failed to make such models of the heavens work. If we effect a reversal and place the Sun at the center and make our Earth a satellite, then we get closer to the truth.

On our experience of intuitions, he says, “A similar experiment [that is to say, the Copernican experiment] can be tried in metaphysics, as regards the *intuition* of objects” (Bxvii). The word ‘intuition’ has varied meanings over the course of the history of philosophy, but we can take it here neutrally as becoming aware of things as they appear to us. The traditional problem, then, is: “If intuition must conform to the constitution of the objects, I do not see how we could know anything of the latter *a priori*” (Bxvii). That is to say, if intuition is analyzed by the standard of objectivity, then intuitive knowledge is impossible.

However, if we change our assumption, as Kant suggests, “if the object (as object of the senses) must conform to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, I have no difficulty in conceiving such a possibility” (Bxvii). That is, taking all of the things our senses seem to be experiencing as objects of intuition—if we say that what they are is dependent upon our faculties, our subjective faculties of intuition—then we have the possibility of constructing some sort of knowledge system that makes sense.

When considering where our concepts come from, Kant presents his “Copernican” hypothesis by means of a dilemma:

[E]ither I must assume that the *concepts*, by means of which I obtained this determination, conform to the object[s], or else I assume that the objects, or what is the same thing, that the *experience* in which alone, as given objects, they can be known, conform to the concepts. (Bxvii)

The latter option is Kant’s choice. First come the concepts in the knowing subject and objects conform to the subject because the objectivity option is impossible: “In the former case, I am again in the same perplexity as to how I can know anything *a priori* in regard to the objects” (Bxvii). If we say that concepts are based on objects and objectivity is a requirement, then we are lost, but “in the latter case the outlook is more hopeful” (Bxvii). The subject’s concepts come first and objects conform to them.

As knowing subjects, we put certain things into objects. We constitute them, construct them, make them—and that is how we can know them: “we can know *a priori* of things only what we ourselves put into them” (Bxviii). Again, Kant holds: “we suppose that our representation of things, as they are given to us, do not conform to these things as they are in themselves, but these objects, as appearances, conform to our mode of representation” (Bxx).

The revolution comes at a cost, though, and this is the first big principle that Kant draws from his Copernican move: “For we are brought to the conclusion that we can never transcend the limits of possible experience, though that is precisely what this science [of metaphysics] is concerned, above all else, to achieve” (Bxix). A foundational limit is thus established. We can know experiential objects, but we cannot know anything beyond those experiential objects. As we are now operating on the assumption that those experiential objects are constituted by and conform to the faculty of the knowing subject, it follows that what we experience does not have in any sense a constitution that is objective or independent of the knowing subject.

Reason’s knowledge, then, is severely constrained: “such knowledge has to do only with appearances, and must leave the thing in itself, as indeed real *per se*, but as not known by us” (Bxx). The way things really are—whatever is out there in reality in itself—is not and cannot be known to us. All that we can know are our subject-constituted appearances. Kant’s Copernican revolution is a rejection of the assumption of objectivity in the direction of saying that the knowing subject constitutes its world of experiential appearances and that this subjective reality is all that can be known.

5. But Not Solipsism

Kant immediately rejects solipsism, the thesis that only the world of subjective experiences exists, “otherwise we should be landed in the absurd conclusion that there can be appearance without anything that appears” (Bxxvi). There must be some sort of independent reality out there providing some sort of raw material for the appearances. However, it is filtered, structured, and/or constituted by subjective forms of intuition and conception, yielding an apparent object.

There must be something(s) behind the appearance(s), but while we cannot say what that is, we subjects can imagine them or perhaps conceptualize formulations about them in some way. Kant maintains: “But our further contention must also be duly borne in mind, namely, that though we cannot *know* these objects as things in themselves, we must yet be in position at least to *think* them as things in themselves” (Bxxvi). While that is a legitimate option for Kantian reason to pursue, we must never make the claim that we *know* objective reality, only *that* it is.

6. Space and Time? Cause and Effect?

Kant next turns to several specific traditional issues in metaphysics. What about space and time, for example? Are they infinite or finite? Are they absolute or relative? Are space and time real or merely subjective creations? Kant applies his philosophical revolution here and argues that they are not objective: “space and time are only forms of sensible intuition, and so only conditions of the existence of things as appearances” (Bxxv).

Kant thus rejects two traditional objectivist positions that take space and time to be real phenomena. One position argues that space and time are absolute, fundamental features of the universe and that objects and events occur within a kind of space-time container that is fundamental to the universe. The other objectivist position on space-time argues that the order goes the other way. Objects and what objects are doing are more fundamental, and so space and time are ways of relating objects to each other; that is, objects are more basic, and so space and time are functions of whatever it is that objects are doing.

Kant rejects both of those positions, arguing that in no way are space and time out there in reality independent of us. They are only forms of sensible intuition, conditions that we impose on whatever is coming in through our faculties. We add space and time rather than discover space and time out there in reality.

The same holds for causality on Kant’s view. Cause and effect exist as features of objects of experience because we have put causality into the world of appearance. As for things in themselves, such realities are not governed by the subjective cause-and-effect principle, so we subjects cannot say whether things have causal features out there in reality independent of us. Kant holds that “the principle of causality therefore applies only to things taken in the former sense, namely, insofar as they are objects of experience—these same objects, taken in the other sense, not being subject to the principle” (Bxxvii).

Thus, both space and time and cause and effect are features of our apparent world, and they are such features because we subjects have constituted our apparent world that way. Precisely because of our subjective constituting, we are precluded from knowing the way the objective world is itself. Kant concludes: “Thus it does indeed follow that all possible speculative knowledge of reason is limited to mere objects of experience,” and “that we can therefore have no knowledge of any object as a thing in itself” (Bxxvi).

7. The Subjective Turn's Positive Value: God, Freedom, and Immortality?

The subjective turn, ruthlessly applied, strikes a cruel blow to aspirations to knowledge of objective reality. As Kant acknowledges, it “has the appearance of being highly prejudicial to the whole purpose of metaphysics” (Bxix). Yet Kant also holds out a simultaneous positive value from the ruthlessness.

Metaphysics based on objectivist assumptions has been corrosive to three traditional metaphysical aspirations: discovering the existence of God, validating the reality of free will, and confirming the existence of an immortal soul. Millennia of rational argumentation have not been able to prove God's existence, belief in the reality of cause and effect seems to have invalidated free will, and the ambitions of scientific-materialist physicalism have left no room for souls. Especially by Kant's generation, many have abandoned God, freedom, and immortality as either disproven or to be discarded as incompatible with modern natural philosophy and science.

Yet, Kant argues, his “Copernican turn” can salvage the possibility of belief in all three traditional pillars of religious belief. He asks, “What is the value of the metaphysics that is alleged to be thus purified by criticism and established once for all?” (Bxxiv). We want to believe that we are free agents, and thus worthy of moral responsibility. However, objectivists have insisted upon strict cause and effect, but if we presume strict causality, that seems to lead to determinism. If we subjects are entirely determined, then we do not have freedom and, hence, we do not have moral responsibility. Causality seems to destroy morality.

Yet if causality is only a subjectively imposed principle, then that “resulting limitation” opens up a possibility, for it allows us to say, “though I cannot *know*, I can yet *think* freedom” (Bxxviii). While we can say that causality is not *known* to be true of the objective world of things in themselves, that leaves open the possibility of *assuming* freedom out there in the objective world, even if it does not seem to exist in the subjective world.

What of God? It seems that in the world of appearances, there is no room for a godlike being. However, if our knowledge is only of an apparent world, then—since we do not know what is really out there in reality in itself—we cannot eliminate the possibility that there is a God out there. We thus can think of the possibility of God.

The same reasoning applies to the possibility of an immortal soul. In the world of appearances, it seems like our bodies and our

minds are subject to cruel space-and-time limitations and to devastating causal processes: we become corrupted and die. There is no room in the world of appearances for a being that transcends all such limitations. Yet, if space, time, and causality are merely subjectively imposed conditions, then we do not know of the soul-in-itself outside of the range of those conditions. We can, accordingly, make imaginative room for thinking of the soul as immortal. Hence, the negative critique of reason yields benefit:

This discussion as to the positive advantage of critical principles of pure reason can be similarly developed in regard to the concept of *God*, and of the *simple nature* of our *soul*. . . . [E]ven the *assumption*—as made on behalf of the necessary practical employment of my reason—of *God*, *freedom*, and *immortality*, is not permissible unless at the same time speculative reason be deprived of its pretensions to transcendent insight. (Bxxx)

We face a harsh either-or: Either reason does have such insight or we can assume religion—but not both. If we continue to believe that reason can do objective metaphysics, that is, that it can figure out what really is out there, then that is a threat to religion and morality. Objective metaphysics eliminates God, freedom, and the immortal soul as possibilities by subjecting everything to principles of reasoning based on the logic of cause and effect and space-time limitations. If we are to preserve any sort of belief in God and, along with it, beliefs in an immortal soul and moral responsibility—that is to say, if we are going to salvage something of traditional religious belief—then we have to adopt Kant’s critical philosophy. Hence his key, oft-cited line: “I have therefore found it necessary to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*” (Bxxx).

The belief that reason can know reality as it really is can now be seen not merely as a failed theory, but as a dogmatism and a warlike threat to goodness. Kant’s language then becomes stronger: “The dogmatism of metaphysics, that is, the preconception that it is possible to make headway in metaphysics without a previous criticism of pure reason, is the source of all that unbelief, always very dogmatic, which wars against morality” (Bxxx).

It is belief in the power of objective reason that leads to atheism, materialism, determinism, and the nihilistic undermining of ethics. Those metaphysicians who think that they can prove

materialism and universal cause and effect—and who apply reason and logic to all of reality—are the ones who dismiss God, immortality, and moral freedom. It is precisely their aspirations that must be dismissed as destructive pretensions: “It is therefore the first and most important task of philosophy to deprive metaphysics, once and for all, of its injurious influence, by attacking its errors at their very source” (Bxxxix). By putting severe limits on what reason can do through arguing that reality in itself is off-limits to reason, we leave open the door for a faithful adoption of a religious outlook—that is, a God-oriented outlook, an immortal-soul-oriented outlook, and a moral outlook. That, Kant says, is the chief value of his *Critique of Pure Reason*: “But, above all, there is the inestimable benefit, that all objections to morality and religion will be for ever silenced, and this in Socratic fashion, namely, by the clearest proof of the ignorance of the objectors” (Bxxxix).

Nobody knows reality—and nobody can know reality—as a matter of principle. That philosophical conclusion, Kant believes, is the best defense for “the hope of a *future life*,” “the consciousness of *freedom*,” and “the belief in a wise and great *Author of the world*” (Bxxxix–xl). We can preserve them only by attacking “the arrogant pretensions” of objectivist metaphysical philosophers and, by means of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, “sever the root of *materialism, fatalism, atheism, free-thinking, fanaticism, and superstition*, which can be injurious universally; as well as of *idealism and scepticism*” (Bxl–xli). All schools of metaphysics based on rational attempts will thereby be destroyed. Room is thus created for faith via severely limiting reason to the subject-constituted world of appearances.

8. Kant and Our Contemporary Philosophy

The historical Kant has been enormously influential upon the trajectory of philosophy in the centuries since his death. That is a truism. Yet when contemporary historians of philosophy such as Passmore and Janaway say that in our time the Kantian “revival is so widespread” and that collectively we are “working within the legacy of Kant,” that much stronger pair of claims makes imperative not only reading Kant carefully in his own words, but also mapping Kantian terminology onto our own, contemporary terminology.

The following list of five key propositions extracted from this reading of the Second Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason* adds to each a contemporary label for a philosophical position:

- The assumption of objectivity has been and must be a failure: anti-objectivism.
- The world we are aware of is formed by our subjective constitution: subjectivism.
- The world as it actually is, is unknowable to us: skepticism.
- We cannot know whether reality is material or ideal, causal or random, includes a god or is empty of gods, and so on: anti-realism.
- Absent knowledge, we can believe in the possibility of God, free will, and immortality, if we choose: fideism.

This reading leads to the conclusion that Kant's fundamental philosophy is anti-objectivist, subjectivist, skeptical, anti-realist, and fideist.

None of that is to deny that, in some respects, Kant is an advocate of reason, objectivity, and knowledge. However, this is to assert that those respects pertain to secondary, tertiary, or otherwise derivative philosophical matters and that those advocacies must be understood as nested within and governed by a deeper and primary set of anti-theses.¹⁷

This reading of Kant also has implications for breaking the impasse between the interpretive tradition that places Kant in the pantheon of Enlightenment figures and those who see him as the philosophical pivot upon which the Counter-Enlightenment turns.¹⁸ If we judge a philosopher by his or her fundamental claims, and especially by his or her most distinctive philosophical claims, then this reading of Kant's most important book highlights his self-labeled "Copernican revolution" in philosophy as most fundamental and most distinctive. While the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment were united in

¹⁷ On several of those important but secondary matters, see Stephen R. C. Hicks, "Does Kant Have a Place in Classical Liberalism?" *Cato Unbound* (2016), accessed online at: <https://www.cato-unbound.org/2016/10/17/stephen-r-c-hicks/does-kant-have-place-classical-liberalism>. See also the colloquium contributions there by Mark White, Roderick Long, and Gregory Salmieri.

¹⁸ On the Counter-Enlightenment consequences of post-Kantian philosophy, see Stephen R. C. Hicks, *Explaining Postmodernism: Skepticism and Socialism from Rousseau to Foucault* (Tempe, AZ: Scholarly Publishing, 2004).

the progressive power of human reason to know *all* of reality—from ordinary everyday experience to the furthest reaches of the developing sciences—Kant’s signal response is: “No, it cannot.”

9. Postscript on the George Walsh and Fred Miller Exchange

Now I turn to my interpretation of two interpreters’ interpretations of Rand’s interpretation of Kant. The complexity is daunting not only because it requires keeping track of an original text nested within three stages of interpretation, but also because each of the interpretations requires judgments about:

1. *Translating* across terminological domains (e.g., “faculties of intuition” and “synthetic judgments” // “sense-perception” and “concept-formation”).
2. Allowance for *rhetorical* flourishes (e.g., Rand’s “delusions” and analogies to dying astronauts).
3. Sorting which statements are *explicit* and which are *implicit* in Kant’s text.
4. *Close* implications of Kant’s philosophy (e.g., whether it undercuts the Enlightenment era’s confidence in reason).
5. *Extended* implications of Kant’s philosophy (e.g., whether it opened the door to irrationalist art culture of the 1900s).

Professor George Walsh¹⁹ agrees that there are substantial differences between Kant and Rand on the fundamentals of metaphysics and epistemology, and that those differences underlay their other substantial differences. He does not, however, believe that Rand has consistently characterized those differences correctly, holding that she partially misinterprets Kant:

1. In asserting that Kant’s motive was to *deny* rather than *salvage* reason (p. 17).
2. In taking “Human consciousness has identity” as a *premise* rather than as a *conclusion* (p. 18).

¹⁹ George V. Walsh, “Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,” *Objectivity* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2001), pp. 1–27. All references to Walsh’s claims are in-text parenthetical citations.

3. In describing the collective universal as a “delusion” (p. 20).
4. By using the astronaut analogy to explicate Kant’s position applied to action (pp. 20–21).

Professor Fred Miller²⁰ responds that Rand’s brilliance is not as an academic doing scholarly exegesis, but as a public intellectual isolating Kant’s most important theses and drawing out their implications. Miller also holds that in her brief foray she nonetheless accurately captures the fundamentals and essentials of Kant’s metaphysics and epistemology.

In light of my above summary and interpretation of Kant’s “Second Preface” to *Critique of Pure Reason*, I judge that Miller is more correct than Walsh is. Drawing on a forest-and-trees metaphor, I think that Rand correctly identifies the Kantian forest and its place in the philosophy ecosystem, as Miller argues, even though she may have mislabeled some of the individual trees and their relative positions within that forest, as Walsh argues. Even that latter judgment is subject to ongoing debate, though, as professional scholars of Kant—I include Walsh and Miller among the ablest—continue to argue the fine details.

²⁰ Fred D. Miller, Jr., “Comments on George Walsh, ‘Ayn Rand and the Metaphysics of Kant,’” *Objectivity* 3, no. 1 (Fall 2001), pp. 28–37.