

# Kant's philosophy as the development of the intentions of enlightenment

Leonard A. Kalinnikov<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, 14 Aleksandra Nevskogo st., Kaliningrad, 236041, Russian Federation

**Abstract.** Ernst Cassirer in his *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* writes of Kant's overcoming of the Enlightenment yet giving its deepest justification. This justification came in the form of epistemology which transformed the modern worldview, handing its form and content over to science. The medieval theistic worldview had to be cleansed from miracles and mysticism and give way to a scientific worldview. However, the Enlighteners, though initiating this movement, could not follow it through and failed to break the ties to theology. This was true in psychology, epistemology, philosophy of history and religion, law and the state. Kant's role was to complete this task. His philosophy is built upon the principle of the material unity of the world. This required the creation of transcendental anthropology which resolved the problem of the human being and the natural foundations of reason – the problem that had puzzled the most prominent thinkers of the Enlightenment. The principle of the material unity of the world is consistently maintained from the first *Critique* to the *Opus Postumum*, making Kant's system monistic. In order to maintain this unity, Kant had to subordinate formal logic to transcendental logic which made extensive use of the antinomial dialectic, the principle of the relativity of rational thinking, including the relativity of such ideas of reason as object and subject. Kant's effort resulted in human nature's being presented as part of the whole of nature, and so the limit of Enlightenment thinking was overcome.

**Keywords:** Kant, Enlightenment, science, scientific validity of philosophy, scientific worldview, Ernst Cassirer

“Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority”  
(*WA*, AA 08: 35; Kant, 1996, p. 17).

If we proceed from the jocular statement that everything has already been written before us, I would like to lean on Ernst Cassirer's excellent book, *The Philosophy of Enlightenment*, written in the late 1920s. Cassirer set himself the task of expressing the spirit of the age of Enlightenment, which can no longer expire and is called upon to impregnate eternally the

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\* Corresponding author: [LKalinnikov@kantiana.ru](mailto:LKalinnikov@kantiana.ru)

humanity enlightened by it. Kant, as the heir to this spirit, helped him to bring out its defining traits. I have the further task of showing that, in inheriting the maxims of the Enlightenment, Kant severed the Enlightenment spirit's entanglements and opened up new horizons for it.<sup>1</sup>

Concluding Chapter VI "Law, State, and Society", Cassirer (2009, p. 274) wrote: "Rousseau [...] prepared the way for Kant as did no other thinker of the eighteenth century. Kant could find support in Rousseau when he came to build up his own systematic edifice, that edifice which overshadows the Enlightenment even while it represents its final glorification." Where does this "final glorification" lie? But more importantly: What does Cassirer see as the "overshadowing of the Enlightenment"?

The main merit of the Enlightenment, according to Cassirer, is the formation of one of the most important functions of human consciousness – the cognitive function. It is expressed in the formation of science, in the desire to make the entire worldview of humanity scientific. All types and forms of consciousness that constitute it must be examined and understood with the help of science. The medieval religious-theological picture of the world, shaken by the Renaissance but still surviving, must be completely purified of the wonders of mysticism.<sup>2</sup>

However, the Enlightenment did not fully fulfil this historical mission. Scientific reason, as it was understood by the Enlighteners, invariably failed them.<sup>3</sup>

The *first scientific method* of thinking, *the mechanistic method*, was developed through the efforts of thinkers of two centuries, the seventeenth and eighteenth. With its help many mysteries of nature were explained. In the minds of scientists of the Enlightenment it gradually became a dogma, the only possible way of cognition. And the complete powerlessness of this method in trying to understand the phenomena of life and intelligence led to the belief that life in general and human intelligence are completely inaccessible to science, that they have a supernatural character. As a result, the reason of the Enlighteners, it seemed, inevitably led to the consequence that it is not of this world, that the world is divided into two, the natural world and the world of the divine transcendence. Thus, in the Enlightenment worldview, religion continued to feel like a queen, it "ruled the ball", despite all attempts to limit its influence. There was no way to avoid it (*cf.* Sorkin, 2008).

Cassirer shows in his book that, having taken decisive steps towards a scientific cognition of the world, the representatives of the Enlightenment failed to follow this path to the end. As one of the last Neo-Kantians, Cassirer records this in each of the chapters of his book, whether it is a question of psychology, theory of cognition, philosophy of history, understanding of the nature of law and the state, morality or art. Only Kant succeeded in doing this. His idea of the *transcendental method* enabled science to take decisive steps in clarifying the natural essence of all these areas of human culture. Kant brought philosophy to new horizons, preserving the very essence of Enlightenment ideological intentions – the tendency towards *scientism* in worldviews. He enlightened and justified this tendency as one of the decisive means of the historical progress of human culture, opening to it unlimited prospects (*cf.* Friedman, 2013; Watkins, 2001).

<sup>1</sup> Robert Wokler (2012, p. 234), one of the leading English-speaking scholars of the Enlightenment, points to the lack of attention paid to this work of Cassirer's and emphasises its importance: "If only such praise from the Enlightenment Project's fiercest postmodern critic [Foucault] had genuinely echoed the esteem in which Cassirer's work was held by scholars of the eighteenth century, the history of Enlightenment studies over the past forty years would, I believe, have taken a very different course."

<sup>2</sup> This estimation has been confirmed in the contemporary literature on the Enlightenment and on the place of Kant's thought in it (Ahnert, *et al.*, 2017; Beiser, 2002; Bronner, 2004; Klemme, 2000; 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Attempts to understand and settle the world have been met with upheavals (*cf.* Kolakowski, 1997; Kosellek, 1988; Taylor, 1991). In his later philosophy, Cassirer addresses the political implications of the Enlightenment (*cf.* Aramayo, 2019) and, indirectly, the socio-political issues relevant at that time (*cf.* Renz, 2019).

Cassirer did not analyse the role of Kant in more detail, thus making his book, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, one of the best on the subject. Had Cassirer, as a neo-Kantian, delved deeper into an examination of Kant's true views, he would have distinguished in some respects the superiority of the Enlighteners, especially the German ones, over Kant. The transcendental system of philosophy, in his view, could only be *transcendental idealism* as the most consistent of all possible idealisms, and Kant was not an idealist. Because of the disagreement with Kant the philosophical views of Cassirer remained in the sphere of absolute rationalism, because transcendental idealism proclaims the world as absolute logical subject, which is at the same time object for itself, and the whole being of such a subject is limited by endless reflection concerning itself. This means that, unlike Kant, he did not manage to free himself from the fetters that restrained the Enlightenment and prevented him from deploying his aspirations completely. And this, of course, does not apply only to Cassirer, but to the whole of transcendental idealism as one of the defining currents of contemporary philosophy. Kant already in his lifetime managed to express his attitude to such philosophising in "Against Fichte" (*Br*, AA 12: 370-371), but especially thoroughly in *Opus Postumumum*.

Cassirer would have liked to see Kant as a transcendental idealist, as the Königsberg scholar is presented in his book *Kant's Life and Thought*, written a decade and a half earlier than *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. However, in fact the philosophical positions of Kant and Cassirer are diametrically opposed: The transcendental anthropological criticism of Kant is built on the principle of *the material unity of the world*, according to which rational humanity is the natural consequence of objectively existing nature, whereas the transcendental idealism of Cassirer proceeds from *the ideal-logical unity of the world*, according to which nature is the manifestation of the transcendental subject.

Therefore Cassirer is right when he concludes that the idealistically interpreted transcendental method enlightens and justifies the spiritual intentions of the Enlightenment by revealing its particular errors and contradictions. However, he is wrong when he thinks that the method thus interpreted is capable of overcoming the deep essence of the Enlightenment worldview represented by its outstanding thinkers. Thus, the idea of the subject-object identity, which remains incompletely destroyed, and which the Enlightenment strove to destroy, cannot be overcome with the idea of an absolute subject-object identity. This identity can only be strengthened by such means. Cassirer succeeded in enlightening and justifying the spirit of the Enlightenment with the help of Kant, but going beyond it remained in the book an unsupported declaration. I intend to contribute to this part of Cassirer's proclaimed but unfulfilled task as much as I can.

As the spirit of Enlightenment, Kant in his student work, *Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living Forces* (1749), proceeds from the principle of the unity of philosophy and science, i.e. philosophy should not only be based on science, it itself should be scientific, to pave new ways for science. The principle of the material unity of the world, which matured in the mind of Kant in his years of teaching, found manifestation already in the *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), in which the last stronghold of theology – deism in the form of Newtonian deism – was debunked. By contrast, this work is traditionally thought to demonstrate the deistic convictions of the pre-critical Kant (Wood, 1991). However, if one closely follows Kant's ironic thought from a *sapienti sat* attitude, it becomes clear that one of the philosophical purposes of this outstanding work is the total destruction of deism, that already in it the philosopher proceeds from the idea from which his transcendental criticism grew. Nature, Kant argues here, perfects and destroys itself, is in itself capable of producing both the most perfect phenomena and the greatest chaos and cataclysms, both the high ideas and virtues of rational beings and their low vices. Here the author courageously offers "protection for the atheist" (*NTH*, AA 01: 221; Kant, 2012, p. 194).

Maturing and gaining more and more grounded argumentation, the principle of the material unity of the world becomes in the mature philosopher the third analogy of experience from the “Analytic of Principles” in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. The fundamental painful points of the Enlightenment, as well as of all the phases of philosophy that preceded it, found in this work a complete cure, just as the experienced physician Kant found for them some therapeutic and some surgical treatment.

The principle of the material unity of the world was the defining idea of Kant’s last and very important work, *Transition from the Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science to Physics* (*OP*, AA 22: 559, 566, 583, *passim*), which he worked on from 1796 to 1803, essentially until the end of his life. By Kant’s intention it was to represent the doctrinal part of his system, i.e. the philosophical-theoretical picture of the world, appearing as a result of his philosophical-methodological theory of “all the faculties of the mind” (*KU*, AA 05: 198; Kant, 2000, p. 83), elaborated in the three *Critiques*. The doctrine was to demonstrate the conditions of material unity of the inanimate, living and mental bodies of nature, which, as already stated, was absolutely excluded by the mechanistic methodology of the Enlightenment. This unity of the world rests, according to his hypothesis, on a “hyperphysical” (*OP*, AA 21: 405) state of matter, possessing the properties of a fundamental physical field (the philosopher was close, but never formulated this concept), capable of ensuring the functioning of any material bodies with their entire set of properties. This matter (caloric or ether – Kant never chose a name for it) is weightless, not held back by anything, all-penetrating, itself eternally oscillating, vibrating, superliquid... These its qualities should now, if we consider all the variety of available facts about the properties of large and small bodies of nature, be postulated, but the list of them is open, since the process of scientific cognition is infinite (*cf.* Kalinnikov, 2021). The striving to find a material explanation of human activity and reason in the works of the 1760s leads Kant to the idea of the social nature of human activity, which is based on moral relations. These ideas served as a starting point for the teleological method of thinking which was used in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and took its fully developed form in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. In the latter work, Kant introduced mechanism as a special case of teleology, using the principle of correspondence for the first time in world philosophy (Angeloni, 2017). He did not give this principle its name, but gave it life and on its basis solved the problem of the unity of the world, which had remained beyond the Enlightenment’s comprehension.

I conclude that this circle of ideas appears in Kant’s field of thought during his work on his first master’s thesis *Meditationum quarundam de igne succincta delineatio* (1755) (*Di*, AA 01: 369-384; *cf.* Lugovoy, 2019).

In fact, it was for the justification of the natural essence of human beings, the basis of which he finds in morality, that the whole system of critical transcendental anthropology was constructed. Kant’s logic looks paradoxical: The basis for explaining the *existence of the world* is the fact of the existence of human beings and their morality, and not that the existence of moral human beings is explained by the properties of being itself or, even more so, by the properties of Divine Being. Having assimilated this idea of Kant, Karl Marx (1973, p. 105) did not accidentally express the thesis that “*human anatomy* contains a *key* to the *anatomy* of the *ape*”. The teleological method finds its application here as in the significant dialectical idea of *method reversal*.

Kant develops a very important idea that the properties possessed by morality and people’s moral relations are not at all exclusive to the world as a natural whole. For example, the properties of the laws of morality are completely identical with the properties of the laws of gravity. Both moral and gravitational relations are subject to the same property: The whole of a system (moral or gravitational) relates to any of its elements or subset of elements, just as any elements (or their subsets) relate to each other. Such a property of relations is now

called “fractal”. Kant noticed this property, apparently here first as well, but it did not come to the formation of the concept, to its term. Such a stage in the existence of a concept can be called a “periphrastic” stage, since the concept exists without a signifier in the form of its description, indicating the similarity of very different entities.

A direct consequence of the division of the world into the natural world and the transcendental world of reason was the contradiction between sensiblistic empiricism and intelligent rationalism that characterised Enlightenment epistemology. Kant, as is well known, found a way out of this contradiction with his idea of unity of empiricism and rationalism under the condition of priority of the theoretical level of cognition over the empirical level, higher cognitive abilities, i.e. reason and intellect, over lower abilities, i.e. in the end over sensibility. Because of the special role of morality in human nature, this idea was brought by the philosopher to the position of the primacy of practical reason over theoretical reason. Incidentally, the very assertion that there were three “faculties of the soul as a whole”, rather than one cognitive faculty of consciousness, as it was considered by the Enlightenment, gave Kant’s system a great advantage over the Enlightenment philosophy, which epistemologised human consciousness. From Kant’s perspective, the value-oriented and normative-practical functions play an even greater role in human activity than cognition.

Raised on Leibniz-Wolf philosophy, Kant could not consider either English or French empiricism as the methodology of science for the reason that it makes it utterly impossible to cognise the laws of nature. Scientific knowledge, however, is first and foremost the knowledge of necessary and generally binding laws; only these give us the opportunity, using them, to transform nature to meet the highest needs. At the same time Kant realised very early, in fact while still in his student years, the logical vulnerability of traditional rationalism due to the inconsistency of the universal notions on which it is based and from which it is derived. These are concepts such as the totality of all things in general, the concept of God and divine attributes, and the like. Because of their contradictory nature there is no correspondence to them in the real world and cannot be; they are empty: there is the conceptual form, but there is no content. The idea of compulsory correspondence of human thought and reality became one of the principles of his philosophical views, and it was necessary to decide how the cognition of the supersensible content of the world is possible until that historical moment when it would be possible to interact with it with the help of the senses as well. This is Kant’s famous question: How is synthetic knowledge possible *a priori*?

It was the answer to this question that left the Enlightenment and all its epistemology far behind. The intellectual potentialities of the Enlightenment were never realised because of its inconsistency. The conservative position of “Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar’s, and unto God the things that are God’s” (Matthew 22:21) held them back. The philosophers of the Enlightenment, despite all their aspirations, could not free themselves from the tenets of the irrationalism of religion, neither in understanding the phenomena of the human spirit nor in understanding the nature of human beings and human society. The Enlightenment failed to give rational meaning to nature, morality, law, the state and politics, history and art.

The traditional Neo-Kantian attitude to Kant fails Cassirer, and he himself is inconsistent in the logic of his book. This inconsistency is most apparent, and quite naturally, in Cassirer’s assessment of the Enlightenment’s attitude to religion. Cassirer approves of it and believes that the Enlightenment owes its intellectual success to it. Kant seemed to anticipate this position of transcendental idealism when he wrote in *Opus postumum* that, in fact, transcendental idealism is identical with objective idealism. Absolute idealism is one and the same in all its forms. Cassirer wrote: “All apparent opposition to religion which we meet in this age should not blind us to the fact that all intellectual problems are fused with religious problems, and that the former find their constant and deepest inspiration in the latter.” And

explaining why this is so from his point of view, he writes: “The strongest intellectual forces of the Enlightenment do not lie in its rejection of belief but rather in the new form of faith which it proclaims, and in the new form of religion which it embodies (Cassirer, 2009, pp. 135-136). This *new form of faith* is quite consistent with the idea of natural religion, the very notion of which conceals an oxymoron.

The extent to which Cassirer neglects or does not want to see Kant’s move beyond the Enlightenment to new horizons of intellectual culture is best expressed in Cassirer’s assessment of the philosophy of Enlightenment history. It is here that the new ideal of belief is most fully manifested. Cassirer shows that Reason in its true nature (and it is Divine nature) received through the efforts of Lessing, Montesquieu, Vico and Herder a historical dimension, a direction of movement toward the Ideal. Ultimately, it is the action of Divine Providence that ensures the perfection of social morals and aesthetic feelings, which are all the more fulfilled by the good, the more reason overcomes human unreason. Yet this historical progress has never brought history, as the Enlightenment sees it, out of the confines of Sacred History. Clearly it was not Cassirer’s task to show the role of Kant in breaking the conservative fetters that bound the Enlightenment spirit; just how clearly is shown in an evident exaggeration of the importance of Herder and his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man*, in which, as one can easily see, the new form of religion is well mixed-up in its oldest form. Cassirer does not even mention Kant’s acutely polemical review of this work of Herder as well as other aspects of this polemic. Herder develops in this fundamental work the idea that the peoples of past historical epochs, with all their national peculiarities, are trial versions of history, carried out by Providence on its way to an ideal acceptable to Providence, and this movement itself is not without the guiding aid of the Divine *Elohim*. In the earlier stages of history, in *the natural history of the world*, Providence had to work tirelessly, but when natural history is replaced by *human history*, i.e. “completed in the last and noblest work of the *elohim*” (Herder, 1803, p. 500), they shift most of the labour to humanity itself, leaving for themselves, apparently, only control over the degree of rationality of action.

Cassirer’s pathos is clearly misplaced when he ends chapter five of “The Conquest of the Historical World” with these words: “The conquest of the Enlightenment by Herder is therefore a genuine self-conquest. It is one of those defeats which really denote a victory, and Herder’s achievement is in fact one of the greatest intellectual triumphs of the philosophy of the Enlightenment” (Cassirer, 2009, p. 233).

*Self-overcoming* was beyond the power of the Enlightenment. The little professor from Königsberg was able to do this for all the geniuses of the Enlightenment. Endless horizons and paths opened up for the defining Enlightenment intention – to build the world on the principles of human reason – to move toward the Kingdom of Ends. The true spirit of the Enlightenment, bequeathed to us by Kant, – to use *one’s own and only one’s own* mind, to watch closely for its *purity* and consistency, – remains the Great Reference Point for the ages.

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