

Teesdale U3A – Philosophy Group – Meeting February 2021 – A Report

Our February zoom meeting was centred around a presentation by Clare and James on Immanuel Kant, 1724 – 1804, who was an odd character, but very influential in the world of philosophy.

Kant lived in Europe during the times of the American Revolution and the French Revolution. His pietist religious upbringing was tempered by a university education in maths and physics, where his exceptional intelligence led him to search the world for truths, and in particular to ask the question “What is knowledge?”

He is credited with bringing together two previously opposing schools of thought about how we came to acquire knowledge. The empiricists thought everything came from actual sensory experience, while the rationalists thought that everything came from mental reasoning. Kant was able to conclude that both versions were not, as previously thought, diametrically opposed.

Leaving university financially embarrassed on the death of his father, he embarked on a period of private tutoring until, aged 31, he was finally able to graduate and become a university lecturer. By age 46 he was a professor of logic and metaphysics, an area that even Wallace finds challenging, and where the rest of us just mutter the words and move on!

Aged 57 he published one of his greatest works “A critique of Pure Reason” and seven years later he followed that with “A critique of Practical Reason”, and later embellished these with works on Metaphysics, on Morals, and on Judgement.

Kant adopted the method of deep study of other philosophical works, the conclusions of which he challenged. He is said to “have awakened from his philosophical slumbers” by using the newly developed “scientific method” to set out to prove or defeat previously accepted philosophical dogma.

Kant, a deep thinking physicist, and a polymath, found it scandalous that no-one had yet produced an argument **proving** that there actually **is** a world out there, not just in the imagination. This led to him examining “knowledge” and “reason” in depth, and resulted in theories about types of knowledge, and whether they were acquired by experience or by thought. His conclusions have often been challenged since, but his contribution to the debate remains

immense in the field of Epistemology, which is the theory of **all** knowledge with regards methods and validity. This he classified as Pure Reason.

Later Kant went on to look at how knowledge was to be best applied to practical issues such as Morals, and this topic, which he called “Practical Reason”, we hope to explore in our March meeting. Anyone interested should contact our convenor Ruth Sansom for details.

JJD 21.03.09