

Lessons from Kant: On Knowledge, Morality, and Beauty

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Abstract

Kant's work contains numerous inspiring ideas regarding knowledge, morality, and beauty, and I will attempt to present some of them in this short essay. Following are very brief summaries of the main lessons that I suggest to take home.

Knowledge is a synthesis of concepts and sensory data; it is never obtained by sheer accumulation of data (or facts); it is obtained by the organization of meaningful data, where the meaning is assigned by our prior conceptual frameworks. This implies that all that we learn and know is filtered by our conceptual frameworks and is never independent of them.

Morality is based on freedom, which combined with reason forbids treating humans as merely means to some other end. This is a categorical imperative.

Our experience of beauty refers to our own sensation and requires a free play of our imagination. It cannot be reduced to concepts nor can it be determined by interests or perceived purposes.

A personal preface: Almost three decades ago, in a reception of a conference, I expressed the desire to write a popular exposition of Kant's work. This was approximately five years after feeling fundamentally enlightened by reading some of it. In the last year, I have written a few texts that made explicit use of some of Kant's central ideas. This reminded me of my old wish, and the result (which only partially fulfills it) follows.

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Introduction

Although *Kant's Copernican revolution* has had a fundamental and lasting impact on modern thought, far beyond philosophy proper (where it is clearly dominant), it seems that many people are only aware of (some of) its derivatives. This is unfortunate, since the central elements of the original revolution are extremely enlightening.

Loosely speaking, Kant's Copernican revolution consists of *placing the human (or rational) subject at the center of the philosophical study of knowledge, morality, and beauty*. Although it is clear that our interest in knowledge, morality, and beauty arises from their relevance to our human life, previous philosophers have *placed the objects* of knowledge, morality, and beauty *in the center* of their study.

Placing the human (or rational being) in the center means that the study does not start from the objects and their nature, but rather from the subjects and their rationale thinking. In terms of knowledge this means that the question is not how do we get to know the "nature of things", but rather what are the preconditions of our knowledge acquisition mechanisms and what are the implications of these preconditions on what we get to know.

Likewise, in terms of morality this means that the question is not how do we recognize our (objective) duty, but rather what must rational being legislate as their duty. In terms of beauty this means that the question is not how do we recognize "beautiful objects", but rather what is implied by the notion of aesthetic judgment. That is, the moral legislator and the aesthetic judge are in the center, and the question is what do they legislate and judge if they are to act rationally (with respect to the notions of morality and beauty).

I believe that a discussion of these issues is of interest to any human being, and it is even more acute for a scientist. These claims can be manifested by translating the foregoing points from their original philosophical level to the concrete daily level. This translation is done next, where I only state the daily lesson (without its philosophical origin).

On knowledge. Knowledge is obtained by a synthesis of our existing conceptual frameworks and external data, which in turn is gathered under the directions of our concepts. That is, knowledge is never obtained by sheer accumulation of data (or facts); it is obtained by the organization of *meaningful data*, where the meaning is assigned by our prior conceptual frameworks. This implies that all that we learn and know is filtered by our conceptual frameworks and is never independent of them.

Let me stress again that "pure facts" (or "pure data") are useless (i.e., they cannot be used in a cognition process), even if they exist (which may be questionable too). The useful facts (or data) are those that are coupled with an interpretation (i.e., a meaning) that refers to a conceptual context. For example, any scientific experiment is coupled with conceptual theories regarding the basic setting in which the experiment takes place as well as theories regarding the apparatus used in the experiment. Consequently, the data obtained in such an experiment is never more sound than the theories that give it meaning (and, indeed, it is often less sound). In particular, the common flaws with various statistics refer exactly to the unsoundness of their interpretation. Indeed, I would suggest that any discussion of statistics starts with a critical review of the soundness of their interpretation.¹

¹My favorite example is the various publication statistics, which most people use without questioning their meaning. The common interpretation by which these statistics reflect academic excellence is totally unsound, unless one defines academic excellence as scoring high on these statistics. Unfortunately, the latter joke is becoming a reality, and I believe this is a consequence of a careless attitude towards the question of meaning.

On morality. Skipping the way in which Kant reaches this conclusion, I find his (second) formulation of the categorical imperative striking. It reads: *Never treat humans as merely means to some other end.*

Note that this does not prohibits using people in various ways, but rather prohibits relating to them as pure functions or instruments that are deprived from their humanity. We should always respect their humanity, which is reflected in their principled freedom.² Let me stress that this does not refer to the way that we *appear to relate* to people in our daily interactions, but rather to the way we *actually relate to them in our own thinking*. And it also refers to the way we treat ourselves (i.e., as mere instruments to something or as our own ends).

On beauty. Skipping the way in which Kant reaches this conclusion, I share his conclusion that beauty has nothing to do with science. This is not said to diminish science, nor to diminish beauty; it is just that the two are unrelated because science is focused on concepts and predetermined purposes, whereas beauty is free of concepts and purposes. Let me stress that it is not that we cannot judge some scientific object (or some scientific inspired object) as beautiful, but when we do so we ignore its scientific contents. Let me also note that “beauty” is often used by scientists, when what they actually mean is “enlightening”; the reason for that confusion is a topic for a separate essay.³

More generally, a judgment of beauty cannot be reduced to concepts nor can it be determined by interests or perceived purposes. Our actual sensation and our free play of imagination are pivotal to our experience of beauty. The crucial role of our imagination in the experience of beauty is related to the common assertion that this experience requires an active participation of the subject. In contrast, passive enjoyment of sensations and pleasure that does not involve our imagination (our free play with the perceived sensation) do not amount to an experience of beauty.

On Kant’s method. Turning back to philosophy, let me note that in all three cases (which are treated in Kant’s corresponding three critiques),⁴ the starting point is the gap between the human subject and the objects of knowledge, morality, and beauty. This gap is not proved (or established), but is rather assumed by whoever asks about how it can be bridged.⁵ The fact that the question is asked is thus the first clue to its resolution, which is rooted in the rationality of the subject. This rationality implies limits on what can be known and how it can be known (e.g., only rational explanations can be known), and similarly dictates the form of the moral and aesthetic judgments.

In the rest of this essay, I will try to clarify the various points made above. Not being a professional philosopher, it is not my aim to provide a faithful overview of Kant’s work, but rather an account of my understanding of his work. In particular, I intend to stay away from his specific formulations and try to focus on few of the many fundamental conceptual issues. My presentation will be biased towards ideas that can be applied in our actual life and offer corresponding lessons.

²Indeed, most people are far from being free, but still we should respect their right to their freedom, of which they are deprived by society.

³Actually, this confusion is explained in the last couple of pages of Gian-Carlo Rota’s essay “The Phenomenology of Mathematical Beauty” [*Synthese*, 111, 171-182, 1997]. According to Rota, the word “enlightening” (or clarification) is avoided because referring to it may reveal that Mathematics is actually concerned with understanding (or enlightening) rather than with truth, which in turn is not admitted because “enlightening” sounds fuzzy and is quantitative (i.e., allows for degrees), whereas Mathematics wishes to appear as perfectly definite and absolute. Needless to say, the same explanation applies to all sciences.

⁴*Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and *Critique of Judgment* (1790).

⁵Indeed, this starting point frees us from establishing the duality of subject and object, which is very “fortunate” since we cannot establish this duality (according to Kant).

1 On Knowledge

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but ... let us once try whether we do not get further with the problem of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, ...

Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (2nd edition)

The first critique refers to our relation (as rational subjects) to the world (the world of phenomena). The issue at hand is the gap between our internal cognitional processes, which we (unlike others) directly experience as internal, and the external world, which we experience through our senses. The question at hand is how is this gap bridged and to what extent (i.e., “What can we know?”); furthermore, what guarantees the universal validity of our cognition (i.e., its relation to the world).⁶

Kant’s answer is that the question itself suggests that its solution must start in us (i.e., in our cognition). This means that the conditions of rational thinking (e.g., concepts of time, space, and causality) precondition all that we can know. That is, we (viewed as rational beings) can only understand things in terms of rationale explanations, but nothing guarantees that things do have a rational explanation. Thus, we understand the world in these terms (regardless of whether it is really like that), we cannot do better (as far as we are rational beings), but that’s fine (since our original question was about the guarantees provided within the limits of rational understanding).⁷

The foregoing answer can be applied at any level of discussion. It asserts that *our way of looking at things plays a central role in what we see; our conceptual frameworks play a central role in what we perceive*. What we perceive is never a pure impression of the world. Such “pure impressions” are meaningless and would have no utility in our cognition processes. Meaning is assigned by our existing conceptual frameworks; the perceived impressions themselves are already a synthesis of the external data and our cognition filters, and we farther synthesize these impressions with our existing concepts in order to fit them into our understanding of the world, which is thus extended.

As hinted above, at the highest philosophical level, the foregoing conceptual frameworks are merely the very basic a priori forms of time and space as well as a priori concepts of substance and causality. For example, we view the world as governed by causality relations, which we seek to learn. We are looking for casual relations and we interpret things in terms of casual relations, but nothing guarantees that the world itself is governed by casual relations. We can only understand what appears to be governed by casual relations, and so we discover specific casual relations that fit the appearance of the world. We cannot claim that this is the world itself; we can only claim that this is the way that the world appears to us (and any rationale being is bound to agree to that).

At a more daily level, the foregoing conceptual frameworks consists of our current concepts and theories regarding the world. In experimental settings, these theories include not only theoretical models that frame experiments but also our theories regarding the experiment itself (e.g., the

⁶The problem is evident in the phrasing that contrasts our internal cognition and things that are supposedly external to it. Indeed, denying this contrast eliminates the problem. Such a denial amounts to either denying the existence of anything external to us (cf. extreme *solipsism*) or denying any self-agency (or subjectivity) by claiming that our perceptions are direct (passive) reflections of the world (cf. *naive realism*).

⁷The question referred to the universal validity of the understanding we reach, and the answer is that this understanding (which is preconditioned by the principles of rationality) is guaranteed to be valid with respect to all rational beings. This does not say that the world is as we understand it to be, but rather that all rational being must share this understanding (provided that they were presented with the same information). (The latter condition is more problematic than it seems, but that’s a different story.)

operational theories regarding the apparatus in use etc.). In scholarly settings, which are actually far more dominant (since almost all that we know comes from texts not from raw data), the relevant theories include also “theories” regarding the trustworthiness of various sources. In both cases, we never perceive new data in isolation, we perceive it within a context (i.e., a conceptual framework), which determine its initial meaning. Indeed, it is crucial to bear in mind that things are always interpreted and given meaning; they do not appear in isolation from such meaning, which is always the result of some prior understanding.⁸

A common illustration of the foregoing idea refers to looking at the world through glasses (which is what we actually do, regardless of whether these glasses are real ones or just metaphorical ones (e.g., our own eyes)). What we see is the world as filtered through these glasses, not (i.e., never!) the world itself. Indeed, these glasses can “distort the view” and/or block certain parts of the view (e.g., colors). If we can only look at the world through these glasses, then the various filtering features of these glasses will be reflected in what we perceive (which is not reality but rather reality as filtered through these glasses; e.g., using dark glasses we shall perceive the world as dark).

A different illustration is suggested by the computational learning theoretic notion of *agnostic learning*:⁹ Our position in the world is akin to a learner that uses a particular hypothesis class, whereas the world itself is a concept that belongs to a possibly different (e.g., wider) class. Furthermore, unlike in the COLT setting, we are not free to move to using a different hypothesis class; we are stuck with the hypothesis class that we use, and we may just try to find the most fitting hypothesis to explain the world that we experience (i.e., the target concept).

In any case, the main lesson to take is that our learning experiments always combine data from the world with our existing conceptual frameworks. The data itself appears to our cognition framed within some conceptual theories; that is, we never perceive a pure appearance, but rather perceive each appearance as a synthesis of some data and our way of perceiving it. When we integrate this data into our understanding, another synthesis takes place (i.e., of the current understanding and the new synthetic data), but here the role of our current conceptual framework is much more evident.

Even more abstractly, I suggest to take home the fundamental gap between reality and cognition, which are nevertheless related (since cognition is a form that attempts to capture reality). Reality, by itself, has no meaning and is actually inconceivable. Cognition, by itself, has no substance (i.e., is empty). Only the synthesis between them is something, which is called knowledge. This synthesis is an image (or perception) of reality subject to the (a priori) conditions (or possibilities) of rational cognition. I believe that this discussion is applicable not only at the highest level of philosophical discussions; it is also related to concrete controversies like those relating to the gap between theory and practice. A gap exists and should be acknowledged; furthermore, no attempt at rational cognition can overcome this gap.

Lastly, let me spell out both the negative and positive aspects of the above discussion. The

⁸Indeed, new data (which is always) coupled with meaning is incorporated into our understanding and extends it, provided that the new data can be integrated into the existing conceptual frameworks. Typically, when this is not possible, the new data is either invisible (i.e., we do not look for it and we may not be able to see it if it occurs) or is being ignored. The exceptional cases, which correspond to paradigm shifts (or scientific revolutions a la Kuhn [1962]), may cause a revision of our theories, but this happens when these things cannot be ignored and can be interpreted by lower level theories. Indeed, I suggest to view our knowledge as a hierarchy of theories, which are built one on top of another, providing increasingly more refined knowledge about more restricted (specific) portions of reality. New data gets to be interpreted by the highest level theory that seems relevant; if this interpretation is impossible and the data cannot be ignored, then the interpretation is made by a lower level theory and may result in modifying the higher level theory.

⁹See Michael Kearns, Robert Schapire, and Linda Sellie’s article “Toward Efficient Agnostic Learning” [*Machine Learning*, 17, 115-141, 1994].

negative aspect marks the basic principles that underly any rationale thinking as *limits on what we can hope to know* (e.g., famously, the (non)existence of God is beyond these limits). The same applies to our specific understanding of the world, which is always conditioned by our more principled ways of looking at it; that is, specific theories are generated under the filtered view provided by more general theories. The *positive aspect* asserts that knowledge that can be framed within these principles is achievable, at least in principle (e.g., questions that refers to the well-defined appearances of the world can be answered). Likewise, specific theories can be constructed to extend the understanding provided by more general theories (but the former are never independent of the latter).

2 On Morality

Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the more often and steadily [I] reflect upon them: the starry heavens above me and the moral law within me.

Conclusion of the *Critique of Practical Reason*

The second critique refers to our relation (as rational subjects) to people around us, and in particular to our duties towards people. Within this domain (of duty), we can discuss things that were undiscussable in the domain of knowledge; that is, things that we cannot know (per the first critique). Specifically, the notion of duty presumes freedom (i.e., the freedom to act in different ways, and the freedom to choose in which way to act). Indeed, again, the question (this time it is “what should we do?”) is the starting point of the solution (which is pivoted at the notion of freedom).¹⁰

Our sense of freedom, experienced in our exercising it (i.e., in making choices), is the basis of our sense of self. Indeed, freedom is the most fundamental idea regarding our sense of our own life. Freedom means being undetermined by external circumstances and being governed by reason alone.¹¹ In fact, the subject’s freedom (from external circumstances) was assumed in the discussion of knowledge (in Section 1), since the freedom of thoughts from external circumstances is the source of the gap between the subject’s cognition and the external objects.

Thus, the question of morality boils down to the question of what does rationality require (rather than explain). Such requirements are (called) categorical imperatives. Kant identifies a single categorical imperative, which in its first formulation calls for a radical abstraction of the reason underlying the chosen action, and requires that this abstract reason *can* form a *universal law* (free of self-contradictions).¹² But I wish to highlight the second formulation of this imperative, which requires *never treating a rational being as only means* to some other end.

The second formulation is derived from the first by observing that (1) treating a rational being as mere means to some other goal is disrespectful of that being’s freedom, whereas (2) disrespect of

¹⁰That is, our freedom is not established as a fact, but rather revealed by the question that clearly presumes it.

¹¹Note that acting according to our rationality (i.e., our existence as rational beings) does not contradict our freedom but rather manifest it: Freedom is the freedom from external circumstances, not “freedom” from our understanding of our duties.

¹²In contrast to the classic dictum “Never do to others what you do not want to be done to you” (cf. *The Book of Tobit*, 4 (16)), the categorical imperative (in its first formulation) refers to a logical contradiction rather than to personal desires. A famous example refers to lying in order to gain advantage, and infers that if this was made a universal law then no advantage could be gained by “lying” (since statements would loss any claim to truth), reaching a contradiction.

the freedom of a rational being contradicts any hypothetical universal law (since, as argued above, freedom is the basis of all morality). Both formulations can be used to reaffirm various moral intuitions (e.g., equality, respect of others, the binding force of morality (which may be ignored but not denied)). The point here is that these moral intuitions (and morality in general) are placed on the sound ground of the ideas of freedom and rationality, rather than on the authority of some supreme being (e.g., God).

Indeed, this theory of morality views individuals as free, reason-governed, and autonomous. Such individuals discover the moral laws in themselves, by following the guidance of a morally legislative reason. This theory of morality opposes attempts to derive morals based on the idea of a supreme being, arguing that such attempts are unsound and bound to lead to violations of the most basic principles (i.e., the categorical imperatives).

This seems to be a good place to comment on the distinction between pure and practical reason. Pure reason refers to our understanding (or knowledge), whereas the practical reason refers to our ends (or purposes). Knowledge determines the means for a given end, but it does not and can not determine the end. Determining the ends and purposes is the domain of practical reason. While it seems that treating the ends and the means covers all that we care about, this is not the case: We also care of things that are unrelated to both knowledge and purpose – one such thing is beauty.

3 On Beauty



Detail of the cover of C.H. Wenzel's book *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics*.

The third critique refers to our relation (as rational subjects) to whatever is not covered by the first two critiques. One notable uncovered thing is beauty, and again the starting point is our experience and contemplation of beauty (i.e., aesthetic judgment). Specifically, the question at hand is how can we bridge the gap between our subjective experience of sensory data and the notion of judgment (which claims universal validity).

Again, the pivot is the subject's perception of beauty, and not the "beautiful object"; that is, rather than asking what properties make objects beautiful, we should ask what is involved in asserting (or judging) that an object is beautiful.

The claim of universal validity that comes along an aesthetic judgment requires that this judgment is not conditioned by our interest in the object and that it is not related to any definite

purpose that the object may serve. That is, an aesthetic judgment must be independent of our interest in the object and our understanding of its purpose. Furthermore, such a judgment is related to a free play of our imagination with our sensation of the object; that is, we should sense the object (rather than know it) and our imagination should be engaged in our reflection of this sensation. The latter requirement implies that our sensation of the object should allow for such an engagement, which is argued to imply that the object should *appear to us as if it has some purpose that we do not know*.¹³

My take from the foregoing is that (1) whatever can be attributed to understanding (or knowledge) should (at least typically) not be called beauty; (2) likewise, whatever can be attributed either to our individual interests or to perceived purposes should (at least typically) not be called beauty; and (3) both our actual sensation and our free play of imagination are pivotal in our experience of beauty.

Accordingly, I claim that what is called beauty in science (or mathematics) is typically not beauty at all. When we enjoy understanding something better, a cognitional enjoyment is present but this has nothing to do with beauty (and the correct account is that we are pleased by reaching a better understanding). On other occasions we have clear interests and/or purposes, which may not be clearly determined but suffice to violate any claim of disinterestedness or lack of purpose (e.g., a potential use in future research suffices here). Sometimes, we enjoy the beauty of a scientific object (or an object that was created based on scientific inspiration), but in these cases we do not perceive the object as scientific.¹⁴

4 On Politics (a parenthetical section)

Kant's writing on politics suggest the possibility of a fourth, non-existing (i.e., unwritten), critique; one of legitimacy and rights. Its structure would have been similar to the critique of practical reason, applying similar principles at the level of the society and the state. As part of Enlightenment, it would have been marked by skepticism towards authority and a strong belief in progress.

Specifically, such a theory would be based on reason, applied universally, and view Rousseau's notion of "social contract" as a logical test of legitimacy (rather than as an actual construct). The question would be whether the suggested political arrangements could have been agreed upon as universal ones.¹⁵ Also, the freedom of individuals must be respected as a first principle. In general, the political cannot contradict the moral, which is primal.

According to Kant, all human rights are derived from respect of freedom, and I wish to highlight the fact that the reference is to humans (and not to citizens). The republic itself is an ideal, but it need not be materialized (and actually it cannot be materialized). Kant pays little attention to the "rule of majority", and I dare say that this is not merely an artifact of his historical circumstances but is rather a consequence of his entire philosophical system. One may say that human rights are the end, and the rule of majority is merely means to it.

The relations among nations should follow the same schema; that is, the relevant notions of freedom will play a primal role. Hence, perpetual peace is an imperative of reason (since violence is immoral, not merely a violation of the interests of people).

¹³Kant talks here of a "purposeless purpose" (sic).

¹⁴For example, if we enjoy a figure that describes some scientific phenomenon regardless of its conceptual contents, then we happen to enjoy this figure as an artifact (and not as a scientific object).

¹⁵Indeed, this formulation heralds Rawls' *theory of justice* (1971), which refers to the distribution of resources (rather than to political arrangements).

Summary

Turning back to the three “official” critiques, I note that the positive (or constructive) dimension of Kant’s work is considered even more important than its negative (or critical) dimension. In the first critique, the critical dimension determines the boundaries of sound use of pure reason and thus of knowledge, but leaves open the possibility of filling up the area within these boundaries. Similarly, the critical dimension of the second and third critiques determines conditions for objective moral and universal claims of aesthetic judgment, respectively.

The positive dimension of Kant’s work on pure reason starts by reducing the possibility of acquiring any objective knowledge to the possibility of a priori concepts, and derives the latter from the very structure of pure reason (or rationality). Regarding morals, after reducing the possibility of objective moral to freedom, the categorical imperative is derived from reason, and is thus an objectively binding moral law.

All critiques are pivoted at the subject (or rather the idea of a subject), and ask about the possibility of objective judgments of knowledge, duty, or aesthetics, respectively. That is, rather than starting with an objective (existential, moral, or aesthetic) reality and asking how it can be known by rational subjects, the argument starts with the (corresponding faculties of the) subject and/or with the notion of knowledge (resp., will and pleasure), and asks what objective realities can be known (resp., regulated as duty or perceived as beautiful) and under what conditions.

In all cases the question (or skepticism) is used as a tool. (Indeed, any search of knowledge (or philosophy) starts from a common understanding of some vulgar notions.) The question doubts the objectivity (or universality) of the subject’s thoughts, and so it presupposes a subject as well as objectivity (or universality), which is reality, moral, and beauty in the three corresponding critiques. The corresponding questions are (1) how do we obtain objective knowledge of the world (reality), (2) how do we derive objective moral (or absolute imperatives), and (3) how can we place claims to universal aesthetic judgments.

Concluding comments

Knowledge is a synthesis of concepts and sensory data; concepts without data are empty, whereas data without concepts is meaningless. Although we cannot obtain knowledge other than by such a synthesis, we are tempted to do so and speculate on things that we cannot possibly experience (i.e., in principle). Kant calls such speculations (pure) *ideas*, and one may claim that many things that he says are such ideas.

In particular, a very appealing idea (i.e., an a priori concept that cannot be fit with experience) is the idea of the actual *world of things-for-themselves*, which is independent of our experiences. In other words, the idea is that there exists an objective explanation of everything, an explanation that is both rational (i.e., understandable) and perfectly fits the world (i.e., provides a full and exhaustive description of it). Indeed, typically we refer to this idea, and Kant also refers to it, although he stresses that we cannot really know it. (We only know the world of phenomena, which is effected by the world of things-for-themselves via our ways of experiencing and understanding things. The difference is not a matter of semantics; it highlights the active role of our conceptual frameworks and warns of their significant filtering effect of these frameworks.)

Our only “experience” of the things-for-themselves is our experience of ourselves. This experience is the basis of morality and our views of purpose, but this experience and our views of purpose are inside us – not in the external world.

With respect to knowledge, morality, and experience of beauty, the *a priori schemes of reason*

do not determine the contents, they only determine the way in which the contents evolves as a synthesis of our rationality and our experiences of the world. The schemes themselves are empty, but they are necessary as ways of organizing experiences (i.e., ways of viewing). The claim of universality refers to the principled form, not to its actual contents.

Kant seems to suggest that all rational beings must reach the same knowledge, morality, and judgment of beauty. But this may be the case only if they have equal mental faculties and more importantly if they are subjected to the same circumstances. It seems that Kant underestimated how severe the latter condition is and how drastically it is violated in the real world. Let me stress that here I refer mainly to the similar circumstances assumption; that is, the assumption that different humans are subjected to similar circumstances. This concern applies both with respect to their opportunities of acquiring knowledge and with respect to moral and aesthetic ideas that influence them (i.e., values and norms).¹⁶ But, indeed, one may expect to find greater agreement (regarding knowledge, morality and judgment of beauty) among people that were subjected to the same social circumstances.

Indeed, rationality in the deep sense plays a key role in Kant's ideas. Rationality is not merely an instrument, but it is rather the most basic principle of knowledge, morality, and the judgment of beauty. It seems appropriate to conclude with Kant's succinct formulation of the nature of Enlightenment as *having the courage to use one's own reason, without the guidance of others*.¹⁷

Suggested reading

Not being a professional philosopher, I cannot provide authoritative recommendations regarding the best way to study Kant's work. I can only rely on my personal experience with some of his original texts (mostly in 1977), and with a couple of texts I read recently.

I do not recommend trying to read any of the original critiques, certainly not the third one. They are extremely imposing and do not provide a clear distinction between high-level issues and low-level details. In contrast, in my opinion, a very good overview of Kant's ideas can be obtained from Roger Scruton's short text *Kant: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford, Very Short Introductions, Vol. 50, 2001]. I found this (130 half-pages) text extremely useful toward refreshing my own memory, and I believe it may be equally good as a starting point. It is well-written and clear, but too terse at some crucial points (which is understandable given the tight page limits of volumes in this nice series). Indeed, the fact that my criticism regarding terseness is relatively mild speaks in this book's favor.

Not being able to cope with the third critique in the later 1970s, I found Christian Helmut Wenzel's (150 page) book *An Introduction to Kant's Aesthetics: Core Concepts and Problems* [Blackwell Publishers, 2005] extremely useful. It is well-written, extremely clear, and a real pleasure to read. In addition, it has a very good glossary. I strongly recommend this book, although I disagree with the author's opinion regarding beauty in Mathematics (presented in Section 7).

¹⁶Indeed, even assuming the universality of the basic principles of moral and aesthetic judgment, the actual contents of these judgments will be affected by the social values and norms.

¹⁷This formulation is taken from Kant's essay "What is Enlightenment?" (1784), where he views Enlightenment as a departure from immaturity, which is marked by refraining from using one's own reason and turning to the guidance of others. Kant traces this immaturity to laziness and cowardice (or lack of determination).