



## **Kant: A Very Short Introduction**

*Roger Scruton*

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## **Kant: A Very Short Introduction** Roger Scruton

Immanuel Kant is arguably the most influential modern philosopher, but is also one of the most difficult. In this illuminating Very Short Introduction, Roger Scruton--a well-known and controversial philosopher in his own right--tackles his exceptionally complex subject with a strong hand, exploring the background to Kant's work and showing why *Critique of Pure Reason* has proved so enduring.

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## **Kant: A Very Short Introduction Details**

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Author : Roger Scruton

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## From Reader Review Kant: A Very Short Introduction for online ebook

### Szplug says

The four stars, in this particular instance, reflect less that fact that I *really liked it*—it made a pained pretzel out of what's left of my mind capable of absorbing this kind of High German discursive roundhouse kickery—than that Scruton did a commendably lucid and relatively succinct job herein of explaining Kant's formidably difficult thought.

I still don't *get* it, but I don't get it less than I did. I do have to state, however, that I am drawn, philosophically, to the manner in which Kant has tried to negotiate a workable (and impressively all-encompassing) system that answers—while denying—the extreme ends of Empiricism even while insisting upon a sensory world of phenomena as being the only theatre in which we can determine verities and achieve knowledge. It is a sticking point within me these days—from a germ that truly set itself within when I was reading *Metaphysical Horror*—to notice how this limiting state has shown itself across a spread of disciplines, even as its barriers seem to perpetually tempt mankind with the promise of their being overcome through feats of extraordinary will and intellectual striving. So Kant, while seemingly commiserative with this potent urge for the totality, and thus the beyond, set out to craft a complex and tiered manner of showing the attempt by Reason to think of the world's *unconditioned totality* as one both false and futile, an accomplishment that rings with a frequency attuned, to my own way of (limited) understanding, with those restraining or tamping or cautionary formulations and/or theories by the likes of Keynes, Gödel, Heisenberg, Kołakowski, Smolin, and a handful of others of whom, or of whose works, I have read about in the past year or so: that is, when they espied their own particular field making promises, or straining efforts, towards that utopia in which a unity, a perfection, a balance of suzerainty over the (formal) system itself would be achieved, and, at the very least, the doorway into the mysteries of the beyond brought within reach of our own mental set of keys, they endeavored mightily to lower our sight to what was actually achievable, within our reach, our possibilities—at least as presently constituted. Not refusing the particular merits or rewards of a careful exploration, a cautious probe towards what might be whole, or outside of the entirety, to come to terms with the *thing-in-itself*, find guideposts for innate longings that refused to be buried or silenced; but rather to set terms upon what we might be able to deem *true* about such potentially dangerous far-faring, and thus seek to enthrone under those weighty diadems of dogma and ideology, with all of the damage and stasis they can spread into a free-thinking populace.

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### Riku Sayuj says

#### A Tourist in Kant-Land

A quick and dirty overview of Kant, as it has to be in so short a space. But the book holds together well and actually manages to have a logical progression through Kant's ideas — largely thanks to Kant himself, for he systematically expanded his thought into new and related realms and a commentator/tour-guide only has to follow him in this path, looking back and explaining to the student/tourist what Kant is going on about.

Scruton does a really good job of laying out the bare bones of the critiques but limits himself to that. He avoids most of the controversy and the developments that arose from Kant's ideas. Barely a couple of paragraphs summarize Kant's continuing influence through later thinkers. That is one area where a bit more

meat would have been useful.

In any case, it was a good tour and even though Scruton takes us only through a few popular tourist spots, he leaves us with a sense of confidence that we may take the rest of the journey by ourselves... one day, with the requisite preparation. As always, when a VSI tour guide does that I rate them highly. (For a complete summation and a flash-tour, go to Ian's review.)

Buy the ticket, this guided tour is worth your money. You can always come back later without the guide.

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## Roy Lotz says

When I first heard of the *Very Short Introduction* series, I thought “Oh, great: a series for people who want to learn *about* something, but who don’t want to *learn* it.” But this thought was motivated by blind arrogance. Now, having read quite a few books in the series, I am astounded by their quality. Peter Singer’s books on Hegel and Marx are excellent, as is Michael Inwood’s book on Heidegger; A.C. Grayling’s introduction to Wittgenstein was a bit dismissive, but nonetheless well-written and comprehensive. Roger Scruton’s introduction to Kant, however, may set a new standard.

The way I use these books is perhaps backwards: first I read the philosopher in question, then I check my reading against the *VSI*. This allows me to both experience the original with a minimum of preconceptions, and to make myself aware if I misread the text. Having read my fair share of Kant, I can confidently say that Scruton’s summary is excellent. With minimal jargon and penetrating arguments, Scruton takes the reader to the core issues, gives a brief survey of the answers put forward by Kant’s predecessors, and then shows how Kant resolved (or attempted to resolve) the issues.

Because I read Grayling’s introduction to Wittgenstein just a few weeks before this book, I can’t help but compare the two. Grayling’s *VSI* is skeptical; he puts forwards Wittgenstein’s arguments with an air of contempt, and can’t help but offer two counterarguments for every argument Wittgenstein makes. This is out of place in an introduction, in my opinion; but it is interesting reading nonetheless.

Scruton’s *VSI*, by contrast, is quite sympathetic to Kant. He does put forward counterarguments, but these often serve to reinforce or clarify Kant’s points. Scruton’s agreement with Kant is especially noticeable in the sections dealing with morality and justice. This is no doubt due to Scruton being a conservative, which makes Kant’s duty-centric theories appealing to him. Even though I often found myself disagreeing in these parts, I think introductions to philosophers should be generally sympathetic—if only for the purpose of inspiring students to go out and read the philosopher themselves.

In fact, I’d lately been getting into the habit of being dismissive of Kant’s ideas. This was partly due to my affection for Russell, who treats Kant as a philosophic bungler who couldn’t come to grips with Hume. Scruton’s explanations and evaluations of Kant were far more compelling and even-handed; and, not surprisingly, I found that many of the reasons I was dismissive of Kant were due to my misunderstanding him. This is certainly not to say that I am now in total agreement with the sage of Königsberg; but at least this time my disagreements might be real ones, and not due to my own ignorance.

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## Josh Bauder says

In this book Scruton explains the general contours of Kant's complex philosophy, framing it as a corrective to both the optimistic rationalism of Leibniz, who claimed that all of the universe was objectively knowable, and the empirical skepticism of Hume, who claimed that nothing was objectively knowable (not even the self!).

Kant believed that neither experience alone nor reason alone could lead to knowledge, as the first provides content without form and the second form without content. Only through their synthesis was knowledge possible. Once such a synthesis was achieved, however, the resulting knowledge is indeed objective, transcending, in Scruton's words, the point of view of the person possessing it, and making legitimate claims about an independent world. *Critique of Pure Reason*, one of the most important and difficult texts of modern philosophy, contains Kant's arguments against both Leibniz and Hume. Contra Hume, Kant maintained that genuinely objective synthetic knowledge was possible. Contra Leibniz, Kant claimed that reason alone provided not knowledge but illusion.

After two chapters in which I understood nothing, Scruton introduces Kant's categorical imperative, his insistence on duty as the cornerstone of ethics and virtue, his view of aesthetics, and his late-blooming political philosophy.

To quote a better-worded review than mine, on the same text:

The four stars, in this particular instance, reflect less the fact that *I really liked it*—it made a pained pretzel out of what's left of my mind capable of absorbing this kind of High German discursive roundhouse kickery—than that Scruton did a commendably lucid and relatively succinct job herein of explaining Kant's formidably difficult thought.

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## Ahmad Sharabiani says

Kant: A Very Short Introduction (Very Short Introductions #50), Roger Scruton

Immanuel Kant is arguably the most influential modern philosopher, but is also one of the most difficult. In this illuminating Very Short Introduction, Roger Scruton—a well-known and controversial philosopher in his own right—tackles his exceptionally complex subject with a strong hand, exploring the background to Kant's work and showing why *Critique of Pure Reason* has proved so enduring.

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## Steve says

My expectations of this book were never towards a light, easy read. The VSIs on Hume, Hobbes and Spinoza were all tough for the general reader, but, with perseverance, not insurmountable. This one, I'm afraid, defeated me. I forced myself through to the end, and what I understood, I enjoyed. Most interesting to me was Scruton's account of Kant's political vision and the introduction to Kant's metaphysics with relation to the rationalist/empiricist positions of Leibniz and Hume.

Beyond that, there were large chunks that, for me at least, made for tortuous reading - no doubt a reflection of my own intellectual limitations rather than any failing of the author, who, to be fair, pre-warns that a re-

read will be necessary. I realise that Kant's ideas are notoriously tough even without their own ambiguities and contradictions, but other readers have obviously got a lot out of this book, so I shall probably file this under 'to re-read'. In the meantime, take this rating as a first impression - possibly of use to other beginners, and hopefully to be revised at a later date.

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### Jakob says

Interesting biography but I can't really say I understood a lot of the philosophy parts. I just Kant get it hohoho :)

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### Jeff says

I fell in love with Kant. He's the first philosopher i've tried to learn about, but he just might be my man. As i gobbled up Scruton's synthesis of Kant's opus in chapters 6-8, i began to have an almost religious experience. I'd read only a tiny bit of Kant to this point, but it seemed holy writ for a hyper-rationalist society (or cult). Scruton's overview made me see that i've known Kant's best ideas since i was a kid; some that i hold sacred (as much as a diehard secularist can deem anything sacred) are directly Kant's. In fact, they ought to be some of the most important ideas for all of humanity.

So, Scruton's little intro was a good place for me to start. I think it'd also be good to read in parallel with Kant or other books about Kant. Scruton doesn't discuss "controversies. I don't know where to find that stuff.

Ah, but let's start at the beginning.

Imagine somebody speaking to you for almost 150 pages worth of words merely to introduce you to someone for the first time. That's what Scruton's little book does. He starts, sensibly enough, with factoids about Kant's life and times (ch 1) and his intellectual influences (ch 2). Then, without warning—other than ch 3's title, "The Transcendental Deduction"—he launches into Kant's "answer to the ultimate metaphysical question, 'How is synthetic *a priori* knowledge possible?'" And you just know it's gonna be hard to pay attention.

Chapters 3 through 5 contained many sentences that i had to reread 5 or more times; some paragraphs needed 10 rereadings. You might end up wondering the ultimate philosophical neophyte question, "Is any knowledge of Kant possible?" I, for one, hoped to get a sense of who this Kant fellow was and what he was trying to tell me.

Maybe i succeeded. Chapters 6 through 8 were much more manageable. The ultimate critical reader question could crop up: "Why couldn't the author make *everything* as digestible as this?" If Kant required a lifetime of tortuous cogitation to create multiple lengthy, densely packed volumes, then it is not fair to expect all of that to be reducible to "almost 150 pages worth of words."

I want to study Kant thoroughly, rather than my initial goal of reading just Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals, even though his oeuvre could require almost an entire year to barely get the gist of it. I have Scruton (and Kant; and Ferry) to thank/curse for that.

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## Ian "Marvin" Graye says

### In Training for the Twin Towers of Philosophy

This is step four in a personal project in which I had hoped to learn about Kant's philosophy, without necessarily reading the original works, at least to start with.

My original goal was to help understand the issues that the inverted, but towering, twins of Hegel and Marx confronted after Kant, to some extent, in response to him. Then I intended to move onto the Continental Philosophers.

However, I found that Kant too is intrinsically interesting. Besides, a cursory glance at the index of any modern philosophy book will reveal that Kant remains an influence on not just the subject matter, but the methodology.

My review of Stephan Körner's book on Kant, in which I tried to summarise my understanding of some of Kant's basic concepts, is here:

<http://www.goodreads.com/review/show/...>

This review is intended to be complementary to the earlier review.

The two together show the path of my development, so that if you're interested in a similar project, they might give you some comfort, if not guidance.

### Graye's Folly

While I'm accumulating some sort of understanding of Kant's basic concepts, the more secondary works I read, the more I'm convinced of the folly of my project.

You can only avoid the lure of the original for so long. Hopefully, what I have assembled is some sort of tool kit that will help me navigate the deep ocean waters that Kant himself tried to chart.

On the other hand, perhaps my project is like a philosophical flight simulation. If the truth be told, there is no purpose in it, unless you eventually get into the cockpit and endeavour to fly the spatio-temporal or even the astral plane.

Immanuel, I think I'm ready, but I'm still nervous. I haven't totally overcome my fear of flying yet.

### Intelligibility Without Censure

The problem with Kant in the original, apparently (see, I haven't even looked), is the complexity of his prose, whether in German or in English translation. While his lectures and conversation were entertaining, his writing varied in quality, and declined towards the end of his life.

However, the reality is that Kant was trying to express in concrete language concepts that are highly abstract and obscure. In order to do so, he created a new vocabulary, which makes comprehension even more difficult.

Many academics find confusion and inconsistency in Kant's works. Those who strive for clarity are accused of missing the nuances of Kant's thought. Many others find that "the only way to escape academic censure is to fall into the verbal mannerisms of the original."

Roger Scruton aims for intelligibility, while usually quoting Kant in his support. In contrast, Körner's book was much denser and relied more on Kant's own writing to establish his point.

I recommend that anyone who is prepared to read both books start with Scruton. He supplies an accessible overview that I found beneficial after reading shorter summaries by Bertrand Russell and Thelma Z. Lavine.

Körner presented Kant's thought fairly, but not uncritically. He usually concluded with a commentary on how Kant's successors had dealt with the essence of his Critiques.

Scruton is more prepared to paraphrase in pursuit of clarity, even if he risks censure. He is more accessible and populist in style, occasionally betraying a playful, if slightly egotistical, sense of humour. This is what he says of one attempt to explain an aspect of Kant's thought:

*"None of those thoughts is clearer in the original than in my brief resume."*

Then later:

*"Many scholars do not accept this interpretation; but it seems to me that, if we do not accept it, we attribute to Kant more inconsistency than his dexterity can sustain."*

Bust of Roger Scruton by the Scottish sculptor Alexander Stoddart, Sculptor in Ordinary to The Queen in Scotland

### **Interview:**

After finishing this book, I holed up in a hotel room with Roger Scruton and a modestly stocked minibar.

The purpose of this interview is to document some of the aspects of Scruton's explanation of Kant that I felt was most helpful or brought out nuances I hadn't appreciated in my other readings.

### **The Collaboration of Experience and Reason**

**Ian:**Roger, what's more important: experience or reason?

**Roger:**Neither experience nor reason alone is able to provide knowledge. Experience provides content without form, while reason provides form without content. Knowledge requires the synthesis of experience and reason.

**Ian:**If this knowledge depends on the individual's reason, can it be objective?

**Roger:**Such knowledge is both genuine and objective. It transcends the point of view of the subject and makes legitimate claims about the outside world.

**Ian:** You say "legitimate claims". Does our point of view limit what we can claim?

**Roger:** It is impossible to know the world "as it is in itself," independent and free of all perspective.

**Ian:** So how we think affects how we see the world?

**Roger:** Yes. The world is as we think it, and we think it as it is.

**Ian:** Is it our thought that determines the a priori nature of the world? Or is it the world that determines how we must think of it?

**Roger:** The answer, I believe, is "neither, and both."

**Ian:** I thought you might say that.

**Roger:** You have to go back to the two "L's": Leibniz and Locke. Kant pointed out that "Leibniz intellectualised appearances, just as Locke...sensualised the concepts of the understanding." In fact, however, there are two faculties here, irreducible the one to the other; they "can supply objectively valid judgements of things only in conjunction with each other."

**Ian:** So we sense an object and we think about it as well?

**Roger:** Almost, but not exactly like that. Objective knowledge has a double origin: sensibility and understanding. And, just as the first must "conform to" the second, so must the second "conform to" the first; otherwise the transcendental synthesis of the two would be impossible.

### **Transcendental as Anything**

**Ian:** What do you mean by "transcendental"?

**Roger:** Kant uses the term to describe the conditions of our experience of objects, the way we experience objects. Transcendental knowledge is occupied not so much with the objects themselves as with the mode of our knowledge of objects.

**Ian:** What's the difference between a real object and a transcendental object?

**Roger:** The notion of a transcendental object is misunderstood when considered as referring to a real thing.

**Ian:** So I stuffed up?

**Roger:** Yes. The idea is posited only as a "point of view", in order to make clear that "the principles of pure understanding can apply only to objects of the senses...never to things in general without regard to the mode in which we are to apprehend them."

**Ian:** What do you mean by an "object of the senses"?

**Roger:** It's what Kant calls a "phenomenon". An object of possible experience or an empirical object. Empirical objects are real, whereas transcendental objects are ideal. A transcendental object or a noumenon is not perceivable.

**Ian:** So, a noumenon doesn't belong to the physical world, the world of space, time and causality?

**Roger:** Yes. I was just about to say that. A noumenon is an object knowable to thought alone.

**Ian:** Are there really such objects?

**Roger:** The concept of a noumenon can be used only negatively, to designate the limit of our knowledge, and not positively, to designate things as they are in themselves...in which case, the "thing in itself" is not an entity, but a term standing proxy for the unrealizable ideal of perspectiveless knowledge.

**Ian:** Is a noumenon the concept of an object that's in our mind?

**Roger:** No, a noumenon is not the concept of an object, but a problem unavoidably bound up with the limitation of our sensibility.

**Ian:** So we can only "know" things within limits?

**Roger:** Yes. There is no description of the world that can free itself from the reference to experience. Although the world that we know is not our creation, nor merely a synopsis of our perspective, it cannot be known except from the point of view that is ours.

**Ian:** Is my experience at the heart of knowledge?

**Roger:** Our own perspective on the world is in some measure a constituent of our knowledge. Transcendental deduction establishes the objectivity of my world while assuming no more than my point of view on it. The essence of Kant's "transcendental" method lies in its egocentricity. All the questions that I can ask I must ask from the standpoint that is mine; therefore, they must bear the marks of my perspective of "possible experience".

**Ian:** Do you mind if I have a drink? This is making my brain hurt.

**Roger:** Sure, just help yourself to the minibar.

## Moral Law

**Ian:** This is all what Kant called "Pure Reason". What did he mean by "Practical Reason"?

**Roger:** Pure reason leaves, as it were, a 'vacant place' in its account of the world, where the moral agent should be.

**Ian:** What's a "moral agent"?

**Roger:** You or me. We're moral agents or free agents. Rational beings. Rational beings exist not only as self-conscious centres of knowledge, but also as agents.

**Ian:** Does reason affect the actions of rational beings?

**Roger:** Their reason is not detached from their agency, but forms a constitutive part of it; which is to say that, for a rational being, there is not only action, but also the question of action (the question "What shall I do?"), and this question demands a reasoned answer...This question asks, not for a cause or explanation, but for a

reason...Reasons are designed to justify action, and not primarily to explain it. They refer to the grounds of an action, the premises from which an agent may conclude what to do.

**Ian:** So the vacant place you were talking about...

**Roger:** This vacant place is filled by pure practical reason with a definite law of causality in an intelligible world. This new "law of causality" is called "transcendental freedom".

**Ian:** What sort of law is the law of causality?

**Roger:** It's a moral law. The laws are practical laws, concerning what to do. The free agent is bound by them in all his practical reasoning, since acceptance of them is a presupposition of the freedom without which practical reason is impossible.

**Ian:** What is freedom?

**Roger:** Freedom is the ability to be governed by reason. The imperatives of reason are "laws of freedom": principles whereby reason determines action. I am constrained by reason to view the world as a "field of action", and hence to postulate the freedom of my will.

**Ian:** Does freedom of your will mean you can do anything you desire?

**Roger:** No. An autonomous agent is able to overcome the promptings of all heteronomous counsels, such as those of self-interest and desire, should they be in conflict with reason...a "transcendental being"...defies the causality of nature and refers the grounds of his actions always to the "causality of freedom".

**Ian:** To reason?

**Roger:** Yes. Freedom means autonomy, and autonomy necessitates rational choice. Only an autonomous being has genuine ends of action (as opposed to mere objects of desire), and only such a being deserves our esteem, as the embodiment of rational choice.

**Ian:** So reason is respectable?

**Roger:** Yes. Autonomy is "the ground of the dignity of human nature and of every rational nature."

## **Aesthetic Judgement**

**Ian:** Does art have to follow the same rules of reason and morality?

**Roger:** Art is within the arena of the imagination. Kant thought that imagination could be "freed from" concepts (that is, from the rules of the understanding). It is this "free play" of the imagination that characterizes aesthetic judgement.

**Ian:** Do we still think about or judge a work of art that we like? Don't we just know what we like, without thinking about it? Just like I'm enjoying this gin and tonic?

**Roger:** The pure judgement of taste "combines delight or aversion immediately with the bare contemplation

of the object..." Aesthetic pleasure must therefore be distinguished from the purely sensuous pleasures of food and drink. It can be obtained only through those senses that also permit contemplation (which is to say, through sight and hearing).

**Ian:**If I like it, does it mean that it is good for me?

**Roger:**Aesthetic judgement abstracts from every "interest" of the observer, who does not regard the object as a means to his ends, but as an end in itself (although not a moral end). The observer's desires, aims, and ambitions are held in abeyance in the act of contemplation, and the object regarded "apart from any interest".

**Ian:**If it doesn't have to be good for me, why do I like it?

**Roger:**Let's use music as an example. When I hear the formal unity of music, the ground of my experience consists in a kind of compatibility between what I hear and the faculty of imagination through which it is organised. Although the unity has its origin in me, it is attributed to an independent object.

**Ian:**The music?

**Roger:**Yes. In experiencing the unity I also sense a harmony between my rational faculties and the object (the sounds) to which they are applied. This sense of harmony between myself and the world is both the origin of my pleasure and also the ground of its universality.

**Ian:**Do we have to consciously think about it in order to feel pleasure?

**Roger:**No. In aesthetic experience we view ourselves in relation to a supersensible (that is, transcendental) reality that lies beyond the reach of thought. We become aware of our own limitations, of the grandeur of the world, and of the inexpressible good order that permits us to know and act on it.

**Ian:**It sounds almost religious.

**Roger:**You're not the first person to say that...Kant's remarks reinforce the interpretation of his aesthetics as a kind of 'premonition' of theology. Aesthetic judgement directs us toward the apprehension of a transcendent world, which is indeed an intimation of God.

**Ian:**Perhaps God is at the very limit of our understanding?

**Roger:**God is at the limit of knowability.

**Ian:**Awesome!

**Roger:**God is like nature in this regard. A person who can feel neither the solemnity nor the awesomeness of nature lacks in our eyes the necessary sense of his own limitations. He has not taken that "transcendental" viewpoint on himself from which all true morality springs.

**Ian:**So God and nature put us in our rightful place?

**Roger:**Yes. Practical reason and aesthetic experience humble us. They remind us that the world in its totality, conceived from no finite perspective, is not ours to know. This humility of reason is also the true object of esteem. Only this is to be revered in the rational being, that he feels and acts as a member of a transcendental realm, while recognizing that he can know only the world of nature. Aesthetic experience and practical reason are two aspects of the moral: and it is through morality that we sense both the transcendence

and the immanence of God.

**Ian:** Does all moral law derive from God?

**Roger:** "The ideal of a supreme being is nothing but a regulative principle of reason, which directs us to look upon all connection in the world as if it originated from an all-sufficient and necessary cause."

**Ian:** Um, I'm not sure I understood that. Is it still OK to worship God?

**Roger:** The worship due to God becomes reverence and devotion for the moral law... The object of esteem is not the Supreme Being, but the supreme attribute of rationality.

### **Sexuality, Desire and Wedded Bliss**

**Ian:** Is it true that Kant never got married? What did he think about sex?

**Roger:** That's right. Kant described the married state as an agreement between two people for the "reciprocal use of each other's sexual organs".

**Ian:** Did he think that was a good thing or a bad thing?

**Roger:** Kant didn't think there was anything wrong with sex per se. Though he did think there are sexual acts in which the other is treated not as a person but as a thing, in which the subject is, so to speak, eclipsed by the object. This is a perversion, and it violates a fundamental duty to the other and to oneself. Kant thought we could be jeopardized by another's desire. In these cases, our personality is at risk in our sexual encounters.

**Ian:** So, in summing up...

**Roger:** Kant's philosophy describes the limits of knowledge, including objects-in-themselves about which we can know nothing. He recognised that we're nevertheless tempted to transcend these limitations. His advice was like that of Wittgenstein: "That whereof we cannot speak, we must consign to silence."

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### **Clif says**

Philosophers are known to be difficult to read and Kant meets that description. While scholars may take on the task, for those of us with too little time, having someone familiar with the material write an explanation in plain English is invaluable. I can't praise Roger Scruton too highly for this little book.

Immanuel Kant died at the age of 80 just after the turn of the 19th century in the same city in which he had been born. His life of thinking and teaching dealt with defending reason against attack at a time when most of what science has proven for us was unknown.

Philosophers had long pondered the world that we see before us. Can we trust our senses to tell us the truth? Of what can we be certain? Are there undeniable foundations for our thinking? These questions fall under metaphysics, which tries to answer the deepest questions we have about our relation to the world.

Scruton tells us how Kant sought to reconcile the thoughts of two giants of philosophy who had preceded him - David Hume, who defended empiricism, and Gottfried Leibniz, who defended rationalism.

Empiricism says that we are driven by our emotions. Our reason comes after, only serving to allow us to figure out a means to reach the end of our desire. We fool ourselves when we believe we are rational beings. All we really do is rationalize, creating reasons as justifications quite apart from the real motivation, of which we may well be unaware. We can have no ideas ahead of our experience of the world. Concepts are built from experience, not out of thought by itself.

Rationalism says there are ideas that exist before experience, that are innate with us. The only truth we can discover comes from the construction and employment of concepts that stand above our sensual impressions, impressions that cannot be trusted and easily lead us astray.

This little book traces the thinking Kant did to reconcile empiricism and rationalism to establish a foundation for pure reason (what is true), practical reason (what should I do?) the appreciation of beauty (aesthetics) and even politics. Kant sought a grand unified theory that would explain how intelligence in itself (not necessarily human) would perceive the world. His method was abstraction; moving from the specific to the general until a statement could be made that would include all instances under a limited number of maxims (rules).

If you think this sounds like a reconciliation of materialism and idealism, you aren't wrong. What perplexes us as intelligent beings is our consciousness of self, the "me" that seems to float above and apart from the material world around us, independent and controlling, existing in freedom, independent of any cause, a first cause for all our decisions. It is the "soul" some believe is immortal, the unique identity of each individual. Kant was out to make a case for this view, though not for any particular religious ideology. His only faith was in reason.

Most of his work can be interpreted unambiguously with careful study and the whole largely stands supported by the parts. Some parts are still debated and some have been elusive to interpreters, but the overall effort is widely admired and credited with great influence on modern thinking. The patient reader will admire the quality and quantity of work that Kant did, the work of a great mind.

However, the entire construction collapses if one key point falls - the idea of free will.

If the "me" in each of us is a product of physical processes, what I would call "brain state", then "I" am not something apart from the material world, a soul in charge of what I do. Instead, "I" am an illusion and all of my behavior is caused by electro-chemical processes ahead of my consciousness; ahead of my awareness of making decisions. "I" am an effect, not a cause. Logically this makes sense and supporting scientific evidence keeps coming out. Daniel Dennett, of whom I am a great fan, calls us "meat robots" and presents very convincing evidence for his views backing them up with a profound thought experiment on how evolution brought our consciousness about in his marvelous book, "Darwin's Dangerous Idea".

This, of course, is a downer for anyone who likes to think of things spiritual, of eternal life, of mystical dimensions and so forth, in other words the way that almost everyone thought before science spoiled the party. Kant, only 220 years ago, was still holding the fort for a self existing in freedom, driving personal behavior. But if one claims the self exists apart from the material world, then physical experiments on the brain should have no impact on it, yet such experiments do have a profound impact on the conscious self and in detail. The conclusion is that "I" am part of my body and my behavior comes from that body, not what I feel is "me".

For this reason, I think that Kant's work will at some point be relegated to the history of philosophy, an undeniable masterpiece of thought from a time in which not enough was known to test/contradict it. Roger Scruton's book is a great way to explore it

## C. says

I found this book unbearably dull — and this is coming from someone whose idea of fun includes reading the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself. Scruton's writing is unnecessarily complicated, although any sober editor could have made it much clearer. (The same could indeed be said of any of Kant's books, but this is supposed to be a 20th century introductory text). I am thoroughly confused by the high reviews other people have given him; it must be said that I did read this in translation, but the translator couldn't possibly have made something this bad out of a masterpiece. I would advise you to skip this book entirely. If you just want to know who Kant was and what he was up to, read one or more SEP articles; if you want a more direct introduction to his philosophy, read his Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics and his Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals. If you're going to study him, dive straight into the texts and serious commentaries (of which I highly recommend Sebastian Gardner's Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Kant and The Critique of Pure Reason and Henry Allison's Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense). Scruton, it seems to me, will only confuse you and leave you with a limping understanding of this monumental philosophical system.

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## Ahmad Sharabiani says

Kant (Past Masters), Roger Scruton

Kant: A Very Short Introduction, Roger Scruton

Kant is arguably the most influential modern philosopher, but also one of the most difficult. In this short introduction Roger Scruton tackles Kant's exceptionally complex subject with a strong hand, exploring the background to his work.

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## Patrick Neylan says

This is a very simple guide to Immanuel Kant's philosophy, which is too complicated to read in the original, full translation.

Kant's supreme argument vindicating human rationality is presented in a brief summary, using language that is relatively easy to understand even if you don't have a degree in philosophy. Morality, humanity and civilised behaviour are shown to have rational bases, without the need for religion.

That doesn't mean you have to abandon religion, of course, if that's what does it for you (Kant himself wasn't an atheist), but rational, self-interested actions are shown to lead to something other than unprincipled, dog-eat-dog behaviour, which itself is shown to be irrational.

With this book, you will be able to bandy Kant's Categorical Imperative round the pub after a few pints, without sounding like a pretentious tool. That won't stop you being a pretentious tool if you are one already, of course, but you won't be able to blame Kant for that.

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