Was Immanuel Kant a Humanist?

This article continues FI's ongoing series on the precursors of modern-day humanism.

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German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) is generally regarded to be one of the greatest philosophers of the Western world. His reputation is based mainly on his contributions to the theory of knowledge and to moral philosophy, although he also has contributed to other parts of philosophy, including the philosophy of religion. Kant was a very original philosopher, and his historical importance is beyond any doubt. And although some contemporary humanists do not share the general admiration for Kant, he to some extent, remains important for modern humanism.

Kant is sometimes regarded to be the philosopher of the Protestants, just as Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) is considered to be the philosopher of the Catholics. One might think a philosopher who is important to Protestantism is an unlikely candidate for a similar position among secular humanists. But for various reasons that is not so.

First, secular humanists share some ideals with the best of Christianity. It is mainly in the justification of such ideals that secular humanists part company with Christians, although there are also some values that are more common among Christians than among secular humanists, and the other way around. Second, and much more important, Kant in no way is an official philosopher of the Protestants, many of whom ignore philosophy and turn their backs on the classical philosophers. In practice, many Protestants have some scraps of philosophical beliefs which are taken from various sources, but they are not integrated into a unified system. A similar situation prevails among secular humanists, many of whom do not even know that they are humanists.

Even Protestants with a philosophical education do not always look to Kant for a philosophical justification of their faith. Some rely on the religious existentialists for support, whereas others go back to some medieval philosophers, including a major source of them all: Augustine (354-430). But it is characteristic for many thinking Christians that they look to philosophers to support their faith: The Bible is simply not enough.

Kant, like secular humanists, rejected the Bible as a reliable source of truth. He did not do this in any straightforward way, but it is implied in much of what he wrote. In his celebrated Critique of Pure Reason (1781), he rejected the traditional "proofs" of the existence of God. Although elements can be found in antiquity, the proofs were mainly developed in the Middle Ages. And during this time Thomas Aquinas was their major advocate and systematizer.

Kant undertook a new classification of the proofs, or arguments, as we shall call them. He distinguished between ontological, cosmological, and physico-theological arguments, and rejected them. He believed that there were no other arguments of importance. Thus, for Kant, it was impossible to prove the existence of God.

God's position was not improved in Kant's next important publication, Foundation of the Metaphysics of Morals (1785). In this rather slim (about seventy pages) publication, Kant gave an analysis of the foundation of ethics. What is remarkable from a humanistic point of view is that God is ignored. The term God occurs only in some unimportant passages, and it is abundantly clear that ethics finds its basis in man and not in God, and this is common to Kant and secular humanism.

On the whole, this view continues in his next important publication, The Critique of Practical Reason (1788), which follows the main lines of the Metaphysics of Morals, although it is less concise. But God makes an unexpected reappearance in Book Two, Chapter Two of The Critique of Practical Reason, and this passage has endeared Kant to many religious believers. Having rejected that the existence of God can be established within the framework of theoretical reason, Kant in 1788 argued that the reality of God was a postulate of practical or moral reason.

The background of this new way of thinking was the following. According to Kant in 1788, the highest good, which is the aim of the moral will and includes both virtue and
happiness, often cannot be reached on earth. As moral behavior would then be meaningless, we have to postulate a life after this one. In this way, Kant postulates both impartiality and God. God, who had been thrown out of front door in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, reintroduced through the back door.

It remains quite enigmatic what Kant means when he states that God is a postulate of practical reason. He continues to adhere to his earlier position that the existence of God cannot be proved. But he, in 1788, clearly states that it is “morally necessary to assume the existence of God.” Kant has been widely interpreted as introducing a new argument, the so-called moral argument for the existence of God. But, at the same time, he writes as if he has no new argument to offer after having demolished the former arguments for the existence of God. In any case, it is important to note that his new line of arguing in no way makes God the basis of ethics. It is rather that ethics is the basis of God.

The secular humanist cannot, of course, agree that ethical behavior provides any basis for postulating the existence of God, or an afterlife. Ethical behavior is largely identical with customs and habits, which are inculcated in children from a very tender age and which adults accept without reflection and justify by referring to the importance of ethical behavior if families and societies are to remain going concerns. (Ethical behavior is justified by referring to something greater than the individual, which is the family or the society.)

In his ethical theory Kant emphasized good will, the only good that is without qualification and that is manifested in acting for the sake of duty. And duty means acting out of reverence for the moral law which is prescribed by reason. Kant’s emphasis on reason makes him a son of the Age of Enlightenment, to which many humanists hark back. But secular humanists are not wont to stress duty to the same extent as Kant. In fact, secular humanists tend to play it down. It is fully possible to be a secular humanist and emphasize duty to the same extent as Kant, but it is not convincing to base duty on pure reason. It is doubtful whether anything like pure reason exists, and we cannot base our duties on something of doubtful existence. Our sense of duty must be based on our relations to other human beings.

One of the two or three main versions of Kant’s celebrated categorical imperative makes a reference to human beings: Kant postulates that man, and in fact any rational being, is an end in itself. We should always treat any other person “as an end, and never merely as a means” as part of this version of the categorical imperative is formulated. This imperative refers to rational beings only and does not have any element of compassion. It is not the first time in the history of Western ethical philosophy that our relation to fellow-beings is stressed. The Golden Rule, which states that we should treat other persons as we would like to be treated ourselves, makes its appearance already in Plato. And for Aristotle friendship was an important value. But as a whole, the ethical philosophers did not stress relations to other persons. It is only with Kant and the utilitarians that this becomes a major theme in ethical philosophy.

Another subject that is relevant in this comparison of Kant and secular humanism is metaphysics. For many secular humanists metaphysics has been a bad word, standing for something with which a decent humanist should have nothing to do. In the 1920s and 1930s logical positivists sharply attacked metaphysics, which was denounced as meaningless. The logical positivists can be regarded as being close to or the same as secular humanists, although the term secular humanist was not in current use at that time.

Still, there are also secular humanists who look less negatively at metaphysics; some even defend it in some form. And there is no doubt that materialism, which often is dismissed as metaphysics, always has had its adherents in freethought circles. Sometimes materialism has been defended under the name of naturalism, which has been called a “polite” form of materialism. Also physicalism, which has been defended by several first-class philosophers in this century, is close to materialism.

Kant’s attitude toward metaphysics was similar to modern humanism’s ambivalence. He dissociated himself from “dogmatic” metaphysics. In particular, he had the philosophies of his German predecessors, Leibniz (1646–1716) and Christian von Wolff (1679–1754), in mind. Whereas Wolff had been eclectic in his approach to philosophical problems, Leibniz had developed a quixotic metaphysics in which spiritual atoms, called “monads,” played an important role.

Such kinds of metaphysics were foreign to Kant’s way of thinking. He also had a negative view of materialism, although in his younger years he admired Newtonian science. In his mature philosophy Kant distinguished between phenomena, things that are known but stamped by our minds, and noumena, which are things beyond the scope of our knowledge. He did not mind calling his own philosophy “metaphysics”; in fact, it was the only kind of metaphysics that he recognized. Kant himself believed that his own philosophy was a pure science of reason, but even philosophers who have been close to Kant have dissociated themselves from much in his philosophy.

There are similarities but also differences between Kant’s philosophy and secular humanism. Kant’s criticism of the arguments for the existence of God and his attempt to find the basis of ethics in man, and not in God, remain viable elements of his philosophy. Secular humanists will, of course, dissociate themselves from Kant’s attempts to reintroduce God and immortality in his later philosophy. In my opinion, secular humanists might learn from Kant by emphasizing duty more than is now commonly done, although we should not glorify it as he does.

Secular humanists also agree with Kant’s statement that we always should treat our fellow beings as ends, not only as means. This is an ideal that is dear to many humanists. Kant’s attitude to metaphysics too, is of interest to secular humanists. We should dissociate ourselves from a one-sided, negative view of metaphysics, and should rather try to develop and defend some kind of materialism as part of our views.

So Kant, in spite of many doubtful features in his philosophy, with respect to other and important features, remains a predecessor of secular humanism. He is one of our many roots.