

Immanuel

KANT

GREAT THINKERS

SHAO KAI TSENG

Foreword by William B. Edgar

“Immanuel Kant is unquestionably one of the most significant and influential figures in the history of philosophy. Summarizing and assessing his thought in a concise, accessible, and responsible fashion is no easy task, yet Alex Tseng has accomplished it. While offering his own distinctively Reformed critique of Kant’s philosophical system, Tseng exemplifies scholarly integrity by challenging and correcting what he takes to be some interpretive missteps by earlier Reformed writers. The result is a fresh and thought-provoking introduction to a titan of Western philosophy.”

—**James N. Anderson**, Carl W. McMurray Professor
of Theology and Philosophy, Reformed Theological
Seminary, Charlotte

“Immanuel Kant’s influence reaches far beyond that of nineteenth-century theologians, and contemporary scholars are still considering the ways in which religion and philosophy interact in his approach. In this excellent introduction to Kant’s work, Alex Tseng illuminates Kant’s ideas and contributions with pertinent and broad-ranging philosophical and religious background, particularly on how Kant influenced theology as science. Even readers familiar with Kant will benefit from this fine neo-Calvinist response to one of the greatest and most influential figures in Western philosophy.”

—**Annette G. Aubert**, Lecturer and Visiting Scholar of
Historical Theology and Church History, Westminster
Theological Seminary

“This short book packs a punch. In it, Tseng moves from historical exegesis to constructive theologizing, all the while in an accessible style, and with a clear commitment to his own branch of the Reformed tradition. For Reformed Christians looking both for a primer on Kant and for a guide to how their tradition

might equip them to interact with him, this book makes a very useful contribution.”

—**James Eglinton**, Meldrum Senior Lecturer in Reformed Theology, University of Edinburgh

“Kant’s complex and wide-ranging philosophy shaped virtually every aspect of the modern world, and our understanding of theology and religion is no exception. Frequently hailed as the inspiration for naturalistic materialism, humanistic determinism, and much of what most Christians find wrong with the modern world, Kant is often portrayed as an enemy of the faith.

“Alex Tseng, taking his cue from recent developments in Kant interpretation, courageously exposes numerous myths about Kant that have led Christian philosophers in general and Reformed theologians in particular to reject Kant prematurely. *Immanuel Kant* offers a comprehensive yet readily accessible summary and balanced assessment of the background, key features, and primary influences of Kant’s philosophy. Tseng exhibits such a refreshingly direct and straightforward style that, even if one occasionally disagrees with his conclusions, the reader is left in awe of the author’s erudite scholarship and fair-minded reasoning.

“If Kant fails to provide a philosophy that Christians can fully and confidently embrace, what is the precise nature of his failure? This book offers Christians a golden opportunity to reconsider this challenging question. Just twenty-five years ago, the appearance of such a book would have been unthinkable!”

—**Stephen R. Palmquist**, Professor, Department of Religion and Philosophy, Hong Kong Baptist University

“Everything from Shao Kai Tseng is worth reading. Treating Kant neither as Christianity’s bogeyman nor as its inevitable handmaiden, and in line with recent scholarship on Kant’s

transcendental idealism, Tseng offers a fruitful yet self-critical neo-Calvinistic engagement with the major features of Kant's philosophy. Unfailingly charitable and eminently readable."

—**Gray Sutanto**, Assistant Professor of Systematic
Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary,
Washington, DC

Immanuel
KANT

GREAT THINKERS

A Series

Series Editor

Nathan D. Shannon

AVAILABLE IN THE GREAT THINKERS SERIES

Thomas Aquinas, by K. Scott Oliphint

Francis Bacon, by David C. Innes

Richard Dawkins, by Ransom Poythress

Gilles Deleuze, by Christopher Watkin

Jacques Derrida, by Christopher Watkin

Michel Foucault, by Christopher Watkin

G. W. F. Hegel, by Shao Kai Tseng

David Hume, by James N. Anderson

Immanuel Kant, by Shao Kai Tseng

Karl Marx, by William D. Dennison

Karl Rahner, by Camden M. Bucey

FORTHCOMING

Karl Barth, by Shao Kai Tseng

Friedrich Nietzsche, by Carl R. Trueman

Alvin Plantinga, by Greg Welty

Plato, by David Talcott

Adam Smith, by Jan van Vliet

Immanuel
KANT

Shao Kai Tseng


P U B L I S H I N G
P.O. BOX 817 • PHILLIPSBURG • NEW JERSEY 08865-0817

© 2020 by Shao Kai Tseng

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or otherwise—except for brief quotations for the purpose of review or comment, without the prior permission of the publisher, P&R Publishing Company, P.O. Box 817, Phillipsburg, New Jersey 08865–0817.

Scripture quotations are from The ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-62995-701-2 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-702-9 (ePub)

ISBN: 978-1-62995-703-6 (Mobi)

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Tseng, Shao Kai, 1981- author.

Title: Immanuel Kant / Shao Kai Tseng.

Description: Phillipsburg, New Jersey : P&R Publishing, 2020. | Series:

Great thinkers | Includes index. | Summary: “Writing firmly in the Reformed tradition, Professor Shao Kai Tseng presents a reinterpretation and critical appreciation of Kant-whose complex philosophy gave rise to the secularization of modern society”-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020011583 | ISBN 9781629957012 (paperback) | ISBN 9781629957029 (epub) | ISBN 9781629957036 (mobi)

Subjects: LCSH: Kant, Immanuel, 1724-1804.

Classification: LCC B2798 .T765 2020 | DDC 193--dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020011583>

To Joanny

In Loving Memory of Aubin

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|------|
| Series Introduction | ix |
| Foreword by William Edgar | xi |
| Acknowledgments | xvii |
| | |
| 1. Why Kant Matters Today | 1 |
| <i>What Has Zion to Do with Königsberg?</i> | |
| <i>Toward an Objective Criticism</i> | |
| <i>Kant's Continuing Significance</i> | |
| | |
| 2. A Summary of Kant's Thought | 17 |
| <i>Kant's Thought in Context</i> | |
| <i>The Bounds of Human Reason</i> | |
| <i>Faith and Hope: Kant on Morality and Religion</i> | |
| | |
| 3. A Reformed Assessment of Kant's Thought | 99 |
| <i>Theology as Science: Kant and Modern Christian Thought</i> | |
| <i>Kant on Divine Incomprehensibility and Revelation: A Reformed Assessment</i> | |
| <i>Faith Seeking Understanding: A Reformed-Anselmian Response to Kant</i> | |
| <i>God, History, and Science: A Neo-Calvinist Understanding</i> | |
| <i>Conclusion: Knowledge of God in Christ</i> | |
| | |
| Glossary | 153 |

Bibliography 189

Primary Sources by Immanuel Kant

Primary Sources by Confessional Reformed Theologians

Other Primary Sources

Secondary Literature

Recommended Reading 195

Reading Kant: A Strategy

Secondary Literature: Transcendental Idealism and Beyond

Secondary Literature: Kant, Theology, and Religion

Another Reformed Response to (Neo-)Kantian Philosophy

Index of Scripture 203

Index of Subjects and Names 205

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Amid the rise and fall of nations and civilizations, the influence of a few great minds has been profound. Some of these remain relatively obscure even as their thought shapes our world; others have become household names. As we engage our cultural and social contexts as ambassadors and witnesses for Christ, we must identify and test against the Word those thinkers who have so singularly formed the present age.

The Great Thinkers series is designed to meet the need for critically assessing the seminal thoughts of these thinkers. Great Thinkers hosts a colorful roster of authors analyzing primary source material against a background of historical contextual issues, and providing rich theological assessment and response from a Reformed perspective.

Each author was invited to meet a threefold goal, so that each Great Thinkers volume is, first, *academically informed*. The brevity of Great Thinkers volumes sets a premium on each author's command of the subject matter and on the secondary discussions that have shaped each thinker's influence. Our authors identify the most influential features of their thinkers'

work and address them with precision and insight. Second, the series maintains a high standard of *biblical and theological faithfulness*. Each volume stands on an epistemic commitment to “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27), and is thereby equipped for fruitful critical engagement. Finally, Great Thinkers texts are *accessible*, not burdened with jargon or unnecessarily difficult vocabulary. The goal is to inform and equip the reader as effectively as possible through clear writing, relevant analysis, and incisive, constructive critique. My hope is that this series will distinguish itself by striking with biblical faithfulness and the riches of the Reformed tradition at the central nerves of culture, cultural history, and intellectual heritage.

Bryce Craig, president of P&R Publishing, deserves hearty thanks for his initiative and encouragement in setting the series in motion and seeing it through. Many thanks as well to P&R’s director of academic development, John Hughes, who has assumed, with cool efficiency, nearly every role on the production side of each volume. The Rev. Mark Moser carried much of the burden in the initial design of the series, acquisitions, and editing of the first several volumes. And the expert participation of Amanda Martin, P&R’s editorial director, was essential at every turn. I have long admired P&R Publishing’s commitment, steadfast now for over eighty-five years, to publishing excellent books promoting biblical understanding and cultural awareness, especially in the area of Christian apologetics. Sincere thanks to P&R, to these fine brothers and sisters, and to several others not mentioned here for the opportunity to serve as editor of the Great Thinkers series.

Nathan D. Shannon
Seoul, Korea

FOREWORD

A handful of philosopher-theologians tower over the rest. In the ancient Asian world, it was Confucius and Laozi. In the West, we count figures such as Plato and Aristotle as foundational. Augustine, a hinge at the fall of the Roman Empire and the establishment of the Christian church, surely qualifies. Thomas Aquinas certainly qualifies. Perhaps John Calvin belongs in this company. But none in the last four hundred years matches Immanuel Kant's standing. This may seem strange, since he is very difficult to read and harder to understand. It has been said, perhaps unfairly, that to get access to most philosophers, it is best to read them in the original, whereas to fathom Kant his commentators are clearer than his own texts. Plato is a pleasure to read. Augustine may be understood by believers and unbelievers alike. Even Thomas Aquinas, whose scholastic method can be a roadblock for some, is clear, once you decipher his logic. But Kant is simply opaque.

Yet no one has influenced modern thought and theology more greatly than Kant. How can this be? It may be that philosophy as a discipline does not cause change. It can certainly

be influential, and at least until recently thoughts pondered at the great universities could trickle down to the level of the ordinary person. It may be, too, though, that Kant crystallized what was happening in European culture at the end of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth. We have become more aware of this reciprocal relationship through insights from the sociology of knowledge. As Peter Berger and others have reminded us, worldview formation is not just a one-way causal passage from ideas to social consequences. Kant thus, as the French put it, is *incontournable* (“essential” or “unavoidable”).

John Frame makes the point that the greatest philosophers are not the ones who are satisfied with a narrow range of insights, but the ones “who try to bring together ideas that initially seem irreconcilable.”¹ He cites Plato, who reconciled Parmenides with Heraclitus; Thomas Aquinas, who synthesized Plato, Aristotle, and Christian revelation; and, of course, Kant, who conjugated the world of the *noumenal* (*the Ding an sich*) with the world of the *phenomenal* (human experience). Frame calls this synthesis “highly creative.”²

In the pages that follow, Shao Kai Tseng masterfully, and also highly creatively, presents the thought of Immanuel Kant and makes it accessible to the reader. He shows us how Kant, no doubt the greatest mind of the German Enlightenment, not only “opened eyes long closed but also put new blinders on them.”³ As is well known (or at least assumed), Kant defined the categories by which we tend to think of religion and science. As a good dualist, he restricted knowledge by making it rigorously scientific (pure reason) while at the same time making a place for God and

1. John M. Frame, *A History of Western Philosophy and Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 253.

2. Frame, *History*, 253.

3. The felicitous assessment of Stephen Ozment, *A Mighty Fortress: A New History of the German People* (New York: Harper Collins, 2004), 180.

especially for morality (practical reason). Even today we tend to separate these spheres. It could be that we try to reconcile them, or even put religion to the test of science, but Kant believes that this is ultimately impossible, while yet arguing that it is better for both realms if we keep them somewhat separate.

This kind of dialectical thinking was well suited to a conservative Germany that was facing change and trying to cope with the French Revolution. But still today, many in the West agree. Or if we don't, we have perhaps become more humble, without challenging the overall scheme. Apologists who wished to verify the soul, human freedom, and even God objectively felt somehow edged out. Kant's limits were discouraging to many theologians. But not to all. Schleiermacher celebrated the emotional value of the Christian religion. And though scientists were free to pursue their work, they had to proceed without the pretension of coming of age by shaking off the church's emprise. Still, much great science was accomplished, at least some of which was made possible by protecting it from a misguided church. Succeeding philosophers would kick against these pricks, trying to consider these limits as being in need either of correction or of further development, but were never quite free of them.

For example, Johann Gottlieb Fichte claimed that he could reunify the field of vision by challenging the untouchability of Kant's *noumenal* and arguing that the human self was the ultimate reality. It wasn't going to work, since there was no real transcendence. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel believed that history was driven by the "absolute *Geist*" (Spirit). "The rational is the real and the real is the rational," Hegel claimed. But the logical conclusion of this view became a trajectory within which Nietzsche posited the *Übermensch*, which has been influential partly for good (now, we better understand the power dimension of knowledge) and partly for ill (the twentieth century witnessed the oppression of the "overman").

In their own ways, Fichte, Hegel, and many others wanted to make room for God. In the spirit of Romanticism, they sought a coexistence of humans, nature, God, and good and evil. It was not going to succeed. But it must be remembered that many in the early nineteenth century thought they were saving the Christian faith from skepticism. Most who are even slightly acquainted with Immanuel Kant recall his “Copernican revolution of thought.” When Kant read David Hume, the Scottish Enlightenment philosopher, it roused him from his “dogmatic slumbers.” Hume claimed to have deconstructed any rational grounds for certainty. Hume argued that there could be no verifiable assignment of causality, and thus no way to prove God as the ultimate cause. Cause is merely mental associations we make, sense impressions that cannot be measured empirically. Kant answered with his transcendental critique. If knowledge is not possible based on traditional rules of logic, are there any other principles on which it can be based? His answer was revolutionary: of course knowledge is possible, because we know! The principle is a synthetic *a priori* principle. The universe does not reveal itself to us, but we define the data received from the unknown. Almost a *what if?*

The story gets complicated, and Dr. Tseng explains it as well as anyone else. Even though you can’t “get there from here,” there must be a cause; otherwise, all is lost. And that cause looks very much like an absolute being who contains all perfections. One of the places that we are most likely to encounter this absolute is in ethics. But, following John Hare, Tseng says that his ethics is more *de facto* than *de jure*. Is this simply a leap of faith? At one level, it is. But the alternative, for Kant, is unthinkable. Here we are confronted with one of the great challenges of Kant studies.

Kant was brought up by a godly mother, and was strongly influenced by the pietistic pastor Albert Schultz. It would not have occurred to him that the Christian religion was not true.

He believed he was defending faith in Christ. Yet Kant's Christ is the moral ideal of humanity, not necessarily God's Son come to atone for us. Luc Ferry, the French popularizer of philosophy, says that Kant's outlook "could be described as a Christian heritage," but he adds that "that is a pure and simple secularization of certain Christian ideas."⁴ Tseng ends up endorsing the Van Tillian view of Kant, but does so with a serious appreciation of Kant's quasi-Christian roots.

Coming back to our original question, why, then, is Kant so influential? Many reasons. His thought appeared to be an airtight refutation of skepticism. It seemed a great defense of science (Kant was deeply influenced by Newton). It defended traditional (*deontological*) morality. And not least, it gave us expressions such as *the sublime* to describe beautiful artwork. We can benefit from Kant's remarkable insights while eschewing the humanistic system that they ultimately espouse.

William Edgar
Professor of Apologetics
Westminster Theological Seminary
Philadelphia

4. Luc Ferry, *Kant: Une lecture des trois "Critiques"* (Paris: Grasset, 2006), 91.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book is dedicated to my friend Joanny and her late husband, Aubin. I first made an effort to wrap my mind around Kant's first *Critique* when I was an undergraduate student. I managed to understand the meaning of the term *synthetic a priori judgments* and the importance of this notion, but beyond that, I could hardly make sense of Kant's text. Then I met Joanny and Aubin. They were kind, patient, and passionate in helping me with Kant—as well as Van Til and Dooyeweerd. I stayed at their home in Glenside, Philadelphia, many times, and have always enjoyed their hospitality and friendship. Many times I prayed with them in tears and laughed with them over great food and drinks. Every conversation I had with them has turned out to be inspiring in a unique way.

Before I could finish this book, Aubin went to be with the Lord. In memory of our beloved brother, I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge our dear friends with whom we used to enjoy fellowship together, especially Stephen and Catherine, Peter and Esther, Lyna, Pei and Steven, Easter, Gang and Grace, Henry and Li, David and Aliece, Neal, Maranatha, Ike, Tsun-En

and Grace, Virginia, Mingzhi and Cindy, Dixin, and Timothy. With this group of friends, I have personally witnessed the authentic love with which Professor Edgar, Mrs. Edgar, Professor Poythress, and Mrs. Poythress of Westminster Theological Seminary have cared for Joanny and Aubin. I would also like to acknowledge all the mutual friends I have with Joanny and Aubin around the world, including the editor of this series, Nate. When Nate and I finally met in person in November 2019 at a conference in San Diego, we “clicked” right away. I am also thankful for the new friendship with Professor Stephen Palmquist that this book has occasioned. Receiving me as a brother in Christ, he went out of his way to read the manuscript with great care, and engaged with my text with detailed and often lengthy comments. I wish I had sent him my manuscript at an earlier stage, so as to have allowed for the more extensive revisions that I wish I could have made in light of his comments.

Each time I remember these names in my prayers, I feel unworthy of their friendship. Each of them has been a blessing to me and to many. I pray that I will be the same to them and to others.

1

WHY KANT MATTERS TODAY

What Has Zion to Do with Königsberg?

This is a book on the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). Its preliminary goal is to present an introduction to his thought on the basis of an academically up-to-date interpretation. This is to set the stage for an assessment of Kant's philosophy and his role in the history of thought from a confessionally Reformed perspective.

I freely admit that I hold to a neo-Calvinist position on matters of theology, philosophy, and ethics. As a historian of modern Christian thought, I find the dogmatics and ethics of Herman Bavinck (1854–1921) to be the most convincing articulation of confessional Reformed orthodoxy in modern times. I take the presuppositionalism of Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) to be a coherent expression of the dogmatic system of neo-Calvinism in the area of epistemology.

Yet I also admit that I find traditional neo-Calvinist readings of Kant flawed. The interpretations found in the writings of Bavinck and Van Til, as well as Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920) and Herman Dooyeweerd (1894–1977), were shaped and

informed by paradigms of philosophical studies that dominated their respective generations and geographical areas. Bavinck's misclassification of Kant as a theological agnostic, for instance, reflects the mainstream scholarly opinion of his time. Despite this shortcoming, Bavinck's assessment of Kant's philosophy is, overall, fair and insightful.

Van Til's reading of Kant, however, pertains to the dominant American paradigm of his day, and contemporary scholars generally deem it to be explicitly contradictory to what we know about Kant's texts and context. To Van Til's credit, his misinterpretation of Kant resonated with some of the most authoritative Anglophone scholars of his generation (e.g., P. F. Strawson). He should be commended for having followed the pioneers of Kant studies to the frontiers. He did not simply submit to the authority of his predecessors, such as Bavinck. Bavinck (correctly) observed that Reformed theology and Kant are in agreement on the empirical limits of human knowledge (see chapter 3), but Van Til updated himself with contemporary literature and claimed (wrongly) that Kant was an empirical skeptic (see chapter 2). Even though Van Til misinterpreted Kant, his willingness to keep his academic knowledge updated and to disagree with the masters of his own tradition exemplifies the true spirit of Reformed scholarship.

I am afraid, however, that many Reformed believers today, unlike our predecessors, simply inherit outdated misinterpretations without going back to the sources and consulting recent academic literature. I personally know a number of Van Tillians who trust Van Til's criticisms of Kant and others (most notably Karl Barth) so blindly that they do not see any need to engage with primary and secondary sources. It appears to me that this often reflects inconsistent applications or even violations of some basic principles of Reformed theology.

In this book, then, my aim is not only to offer a reinterpretation

of Kant that, to the best of my ability, endeavors to allow his texts to speak for themselves from his context, while taking seriously ongoing debates in the secondary literature. I will also seek to honor some basic neo-Calvinist principles in both my interpretational methods and attitude.

Specifically, I have in mind the principles of the *antithesis* and *common grace*. The former dictates that there is no neutrality between regenerate and unregenerate reason. The two will always hold to different sets of basic presuppositions and interpret the same facts, data, and information within fundamentally diverging worldview systems. Lest this be misconstrued as a post-truth approach to public discourse, the principle of common grace serves to remind us that regenerate and unregenerate minds are creatures of God alike, and that no creature can escape God's self-revelation given in and through creation and providence. Because God's revelation is perspicuous—everywhere perspicuous—the Christian must be reminded time and again that we should never give up striving for objectivity in the process of truth-seeking in all spheres of human existence. So what are some implications of these principles for the attitudes and methods with which we might reinterpret Kant?

For readers unfamiliar with the philosopher, it may be helpful to answer this question by starting with a brief introduction to the man and his life. Kant was born in the Prussian city of Königsberg (literally “King’s Mount”), present-day Kaliningrad, Russia. Historically, this small city had been a prominent university town that hosted the likes of E. T. A. Hoffmann (1776–1822) and Hannah Arendt (1906–75). Kant is known, among other anecdotal facts, for having never left his hometown during his lifetime.

In the pantheon of human wisdom, Kant is in a league where only the few brightest luminaries shine. The philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1861–1947) once commented that “the safest

general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”¹ This rhetorical overstatement might be even less of an exaggeration if we substitute “modern philosophy” and “Kant” for “the European philosophical tradition” and “Plato,” respectively. Roger Scruton, in his classic introductory volume, comments that Kant’s “*Critique of Pure Reason* is the most important work of philosophy to have been written in modern times; it is also one of the most difficult.”² There is little dispute that as far as influence is concerned, the stature of Kant in the history of Western philosophy is commensurate to that of Plato and Aristotle, paralleled in modern times by almost none, with perhaps very few exceptions such as G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). These philosophers represent the summit of worldly wisdom.

The ancient question of the Latin church father Tertullian (ca. 155–ca. 240), then, arises for the Christian reader: “What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the Church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic . . . ?”³ Or, in the case of Kant: what has Zion, mount of the King of kings, to do with Königsberg? For Tertullian, this rather cavalier question can be raised only rhetorically, for “after Jesus we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research.”⁴ My hope, however, is that the reader will begin the journey of this book by considering this question in a serious manner. The way that we answer this question will determine the *attitude* that we adopt.

It should be self-evident to the reader that Tertullian’s Jerusalem-Athens dualism is fundamentally incompatible with any worldview that may properly be called Reformed. Yet it has

1. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: Free Press, 1979), 39.

2. Roger Scruton, *Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 11.

3. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, vol. 3 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 249.

4. Tertullian, *Prescription against Heretics*, 249.

often been the case that conservative Reformed believers—some of them renowned scholars—would fall into the temptation of treating non-Christian philosophies with simplistic friend-or-foe mindsets. Kant, Hegel, and Schleiermacher have often been feared and hated in conservative Reformed circles as the modern archenemies of Christianity; believers have often been cautioned against any positive appreciation of their philosophies, however critical such appreciations may be. Such antagonism, I am afraid, is dogmatically contradictory to the Reformed faith, and is not an attitude that the finest Reformed minds in history—Witsius, Edwards, Hodge, Kuyper, Bavinck, to name but a few—have adopted.

In my interpretation and appraisal of Kant's thought, I will adopt a neo-Calvinist philosophy of revelation, with Bavinck as my chief guide.⁵ This carries at least three implications. First, I will endeavor to imitate the kind of Reformed charity and "eclecticism" that Bavinck (as well as Kuyper and Hodge, among others) exemplifies.⁶ Second, both the appreciative and critical aspects of my assessments will be regulated by my commitment

5. See Herman Bavinck, *Philosophy of Revelation*, ed. Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2019).

6. The term *eclecticism* has been recently highlighted by Cory Brock and Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, "Herman Bavinck's Reformed Eclecticism: On Catholicity, Consciousness, and Theological Epistemology," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 70, 3 (2017): 310–32. It is a term that emerges in the writings of the neo-Calvinist masters. My reading of Bavinck is in line with what has recently come to be called the *Edinburgh school*. The interpretational trajectory was initiated by James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012). It has been further developed by Dr. Eglinton's former and current doctoral students, including Brock and Sutanto. This interpretation is set against an older paradigm known as the *two Bavincks hypothesis*, which posits fundamental contradictions in the writings of Bavinck between his confessional orthodoxy and his occasionally positive uses of German idealism. Underlying this hypothesis is a kind of spiritual separatism akin to that of Tertullian, which dominated the theological seminary in Kampen, where Bavinck once taught. It must be clarified, however, that Professor Jan Veenhof, the leading figure of this interpretational paradigm, stands firmly against the nature-grace dualism of which Tertullian is representative. See Jan Veenhof, *Revelatie en Inspiratie* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 1968).

to Reformed orthodoxy, delimited by the historic confessional standards, which I, following Bavinck, take to be the basic framework of a consistently Christian worldview. Third, I will interact with and learn from secular academia, not as an outsider, but as a member of the academic community, which I understand to be a social sphere instituted by God's common-grace design.

Toward an Objective Criticism

The third point above raises a question relating to the *method* of interpretation. Because this book seeks to offer a criticism of Kant's thought, our assessment has to be based on an objective interpretation. Precisely because we need to strive for objectivity, we cannot remain neutral in our presentation of Kant's philosophy. The problem is that interpretation of even the most fundamental doctrine in Kant's philosophy (called *transcendental idealism*) remains controversial today. How can I claim to be objective in my reading if there is no neutrality among even the most authoritative Kant scholars of our day?

This question arises only if one confuses *objectivity* with *neutrality*, which are obviously different concepts. In a court of law, for example, there is no neutrality between defense and prosecution, but this does not alleviate the need for the judge and jury to strive for objectivity in the verdict. Yet the difficulty remains: when even the best interpreters in the field have not been able to reach a final consensus, how can we determine which side of the debate is most objective?

The good news is that we are not required to play the presumptuous role of judge or jury in this case. Leading scholars in the field today generally make easily recognizable in their writings the various assumptions to which they hold, as well as the various interpretational emphases that they place on text, context, and contemporary reader responses. This means that

the task of recognizing an interpretational model that is most objective will not be hopelessly subjective: we will choose a model that consciously seeks to honor the text and the context as comprehensively as possible. This method of interpretation, as far as I can see, is the only approach that accords with biblical ethics, if we take seriously our Lord's command not to judge.⁷

Next, we need to consider how to deal with inconsistencies in Kant's thought. No serious interpreter, however charitable, will deny that there are inconsistencies in Kant's arguments, some of which can be quite radical. We must nonetheless acknowledge the fact that when he came to be aware of his own inconsistencies, he was, more often than not, quite ready to modify his own position, sometimes in ad hoc manners, but sometimes in more fundamental ways. Thus, we must not be too harsh when we spot an argument or premise that is inconsistent with his express intentionality or his most fundamental set of assumptions.

As critical readers, we are, of course, warranted and required to "read between the lines"—to look for hidden assumptions. But whenever Kant makes his assumptions explicit, we should exercise restraint in attributing to him contradictory assumptions that he rejects, unless we have firm evidence that he is contradicting himself. When a text can entail different assumptions that he does not spell out, we should not read into the text any assumption that is inconsistent with his fundamental presuppositions, with the context, and with his overall philosophical framework.

We should, in principle, avoid any friend-or-foe mindset before allowing Kant's texts to speak for themselves from his

7. I will be forthright in identifying the basic approach presented by Karl Ameriks as the one that I adopt. I do not claim that his model is necessarily or entirely correct. I take issue especially with how he habitually uses the word *faith* as something mysterious and nonrational. Yet we can at least acknowledge that he consciously strives for objectivity by honoring both text and context in the most comprehensive way. I have also been significantly influenced by Henry Allison's model, though I think some of his views are reconcilable to those of his opponents.

context. The doctrine of total depravity does not warrant anyone to be above the law and disregard the presumption of innocence—be it in a court of law, in everyday encounters, or in the critical appraisal of a philosopher’s thought.

Finally, if we follow our neo-Calvinist masters in believing that ultimate consistency cannot be attained in unbiblical systems of thought, then we are forbidden to think that any unbiblical philosophy can consistently oppose God’s truth in all its assertions. Kant was in fact so deeply informed by his religious upbringing that many aspects of his philosophy can be aligned with Christian doctrine in formal ways.⁸

I will take my cue from Professor John Hare and interpret Kant’s project as an attempt to translate traditional Christian doctrine into a philosophy and religion of pure reason. Partly relying on Professor Hare, I will argue that this project fails at two pivotal points, the first methodological and the second substantive. These are (1) Kant’s severance of faith from knowledge, and (2) his attempt to answer the question of hope by tackling the problem of the atonement. Although I see these as two planks on which the whole edifice of Kantian philosophy stands or falls (here I am more critical of Kant than Professor Hare), I will suggest that the building blocks of Kant’s thought can prove invaluable to our reflections on God and his ways, if we are able to eclectically incorporate them into our own system.

Kant’s Continuing Significance

Kant’s works are notoriously difficult. He invented some peculiar terms, and many of them do not carry unified definitions throughout his writings. His three famous *Critiques*, often

8. In this respect, I have been inspired for the most part by the writings of Professor John Hare and Professor Stephen Palmquist.

referred to as his *Critical works*, are among the most frequently mentioned philosophical opuses of all time. These are the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781 and 1787), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). Notwithstanding their preeminence, they are in fact seldom read in entirety, even within the field of academic philosophy. In the parts of the world where I have studied and taught—North America, the UK, Taiwan, and mainland China—the majority of undergraduate students in philosophy encounter Kant’s thought only through textbooks and lectures.

One reason why Kant’s famous works are read by only a small minority even in academic philosophy has to do with their difficulty. Unlike nineteenth-century philosophers such as Hegel, Schleiermacher, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and others who wrote in more historical-narrative, didactic, literary, or even poetic styles, Kant’s works were uncompromisingly scholastic. The problem is that the complexity and sophistication of his scholastic writings were elevated to a level hitherto unseen in the history of philosophy.

Philosophers of Kant’s own day quickly recognized the significance of his Critical philosophy upon the publication of the first edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (“first *Critique*”), but the majority of them found the work unapproachable without the aid of a popular interpreter such as Karl Leonhard Reinhold (1757–1825). As Karl Ameriks puts it, “the first edition of the *Critique* in 1781 was the major intellectual event of its day, but it completely perplexed even its best-prepared readers—until the appearance in 1786–87 of Reinhold’s *Letters on the Kantian Philosophy*.”⁹

Another reason why Kant has been ignored by so many

9. Karl Ameriks, *Kant and the Historical Turn: Philosophy as Critical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7.

academic philosophers today has to do with the ways in which they understand the task of philosophy. Interestingly, this is a case in which a philosopher seems to have dug his own grave. Philosophy after Kant underwent convoluted developments down to our own day, but the overall trend has been that philosophers increasingly understood their task to be *interpretive*, rather than *speculative*. Philosophers of our day generally prefer to focus on tangible phenomena, rather than to speculate about the big ideas with which Kant himself was concerned—God, freedom, immortality, the world, the soul, morality, religion, and so on.

Paradoxically, this very reason for which philosophers moved away from Kant has also drawn them back to Kant in recent decades. Recent philosophy seeks to focus on interpreting how people concretely live, think, speak, and write within specific cultural-historical contexts. By doing so, philosophers have discovered that these interpretive tasks are impossible if we fail to appreciate Kant's influence. Hardly any sphere of modern reality is not overshadowed—sometimes even indoctrinated—by Kant.

It may serve well to demonstrate this point by beginning with an anecdote of my own. In my volume on Hegel in the present series, I talked about how Kant (and Hegel) introduced me to Calvin, as it were. But Kant was also a key figure at another important juncture in my life. That was when I first met my wife, Jasmine.

I offered a course on systematic theology for lay church leaders in Asia, and Jasmine attended. I demonstrated a specific point with the paintings of Rembrandt, and she approached me after class to discuss matters of theology and the arts. I learned that she was a fashion designer with solid background in the fine arts and art history, both European and Chinese. We became so impassioned in these conversations that they were eventually carried over to email and social media after I returned to the UK for doctoral studies.

A decisive breakthrough in our relationship came at a point when Kant was mentioned in our discussions. She asked me how the influence of Christianity has made European art different from Oriental art. In response, I brought up Kant's notion of *the sublime*.

"But Kant's notion of the sublime is fundamentally different from any truly Christian understanding of God's glory or transcendence," Jasmine replied.

Then I fell in love with her. To be more precise, I began to allow myself to "follow my heart," as it were—but that is not the point here. As we continued our conversation, I became curious about her grasp of the Kantian notion of the sublime.

"I read it in an art history textbook. It's something that all students of art history must know," she told me.

This is an instance of the extent of Kant's influence. No modern theory of art can escape discussions of the beautiful and the sublime. Kant was, of course, not the first philosopher to employ these terms: his early, pre-Critical work on this subject simply addressed a topic of ongoing scholarly debates.¹⁰ But the way in which he delimits these notions in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* has set a standard for subsequent theories of art.

Some have concurred with Kant that art can convey only the beautiful, but not the sublime. The immediately ensuing generation, however, tended to see Kant's delimitations of the beautiful and the sublime as an impasse to be overcome. The way in which Friedrich Schiller (1759–1805) wrestled with Kant, for instance, became a source of inspiration for nineteenth-century romanticism, which reacted against Kant by attempting to show that the artist can indeed creatively represent not only the beautiful but also the sublime in tangible ways. Depictions of the natural

10. Immanuel Kant, *Bemerkungen in den Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*, ed. Marie Rischmüller (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1991).

sublime in the paintings of the German artist Caspar David Friedrich (1774–1840) and the sublimity of human nature in dramatic tragedy expressed by the unique tonality of the operatic compositions of Richard Wagner (1813–83) are well-known examples. The Anglophone reader might be more familiar with literary imaginations of the sublime in the poetry of William Wordsworth (1770–1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834). The trend in twentieth- and twenty-first-century art and art theory has been, by and large, to treat the beautiful and the sublime as entirely subjective feelings in the observer that have nothing to do with the object being observed. C. S. Lewis famously defended the objectivity of the sublime in his 1934 *Abolition of Man* against this trend by discussing “the well-known story of Coleridge at the waterfall.”¹¹

Whatever position one takes in the debates on the beautiful and the sublime, Kant is usually understood as one who set the rules of the game, as it were. Even if he is not always mentioned or engaged with directly, no aesthetic theory after him has been able to completely bypass him. Art and music as we know them today would have indeed been very different without the influence of Kant.

Another Kantian notion globally influential today, closely related to those of the beautiful and the sublime, is that of human dignity. As Christopher McCrudden, world-renowned expert on human-rights law, Fellow of the British Academy no less, puts it, “The concept of human dignity has probably never been so omnipresent in everyday speech, or so deeply embedded in political and legal discourse.”¹²

Again, just as Kant did not create the notions of the beautiful

11. C. S. Lewis, *The Abolition of Man* (New York: HarperCollins, 1974), 1–5.

12. Christopher McCrudden, “In Pursuit of Human Dignity: An Introduction to Current Debates,” in *Understanding Human Dignity*, ed. Christopher McCrudden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

and the sublime *ex nihilo*, he was not the first person to use the term *dignity* with definitions familiar to us in sociopolitical discourses today. Professor Michael Rosen neatly summarizes the contemporary definition of the term as “an ‘inner, transcendental kernel’—something intangible that all human beings carry inalienably inside them that underlies the moral claims that they have just by being human.”¹³ Kant is usually credited with having solidified this basic definition of *dignity*. It is true, as a recent volume on the history of dignity has shown, that Kant did not “construct his argument for dignity out of whole cloth,” and that there were “earlier innovators of the modern concept.”¹⁴ Yet even though “Kant’s fame in this matter” may not be “fully deserved . . . , there is something revolutionary in Kant’s thought . . . in the way Kant justifies the requirement to respect all others.”¹⁵

As a final example of Kant’s continuing relevance in contemporary society, let us consider our conception of science in the modern world. In English, *science* often refers specifically to the natural sciences. Its Latin origin, *scientia*, from *scire* (“to know”), however, refers to systems of demonstrable knowledge. The German word for *science* is *Wissenschaft*, formed by *wissen* (“to know”) and the suffix *-schaft* (etymologically related and close in meaning to the English suffix *-ship*). Any academic discipline with a well-defined set of methods to demonstrate what it claims to know about its object of inquiry is properly called a *science*.

Kant lived in a time when the radical developments of how Europeans conceptualized their knowledge of the world were

13. Michael Rosen, *Dignity: Its History and Meaning* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), 9.

14. Remy Debes, “Introduction,” in *Dignity: A History*, ed. Remy Debes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 3–4.

15. Oliver Sensen, “Dignity: Kant’s Revolutionary Conception,” in *Dignity: A History*, 238 (*italics original*).

often likened to a revolution (though the term *scientific revolution* was not coined until the twentieth century). The overwhelming success of Newtonian physics led many of Kant's contemporaries to consider Isaac Newton's publication of the *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica* in 1687 as the inauguration of the final phase of the revolution of human knowledge. Kant himself saw Newtonian physics as a paradigmatic example of *Wissenschaft*. His task as a philosopher was to reconceptualize what we call *science*, that is, what we claim to *know* by means of conceptual theorization and empirical observation.

We will reserve the details of Kant's theses and arguments for the next chapter. Suffice it now to say that in Kant's system, our knowledge is drastically limited to the domain of nature, which is immanent to our cognitive faculties. While Kant's intention was to preserve morality and religion in the wake of the scientific revolution, the net result of his Critical philosophy has been an increasingly naturalistic view of science that denies the scientific status of traditional theology.

It is important to make distinctions when we apply such labels as *naturalism* and *idealism* to Kant. He is not a naturalist or even a deist with regard to revelation, but his view of science is certainly naturalistic. This has to do with the way in which he is an empirical realist and transcendental idealist in the theoretical use of reason, and a transcendental realist in the practical use of reason (see chapter 2).

Kant's limitation of knowledge to the realm of the natural has had a significant bearing on various views of science in recent history down to our own day. Even a philosopher as averse to the Kantian system as Bertrand Russell, for instance, would retain the view that definite knowledge pertains to science, which inquires only into tangible things. Russell rebelled against the Kantian system by rejecting what he (mis)understood to be Kantian idealism, but that was only to carry through with the

naturalistic impulse of Kant's view of science. A famous quote from Russell's celebrated *History of Western Philosophy* reflects a widely accepted view of science and "definite knowledge" in the modern era that is in many ways derived from Kant:

Philosophy, as I shall understand the word, is something intermediate between theology and science. Like theology, it consists of speculations on matters as to which definite knowledge has, so far, been unascertainable; but like science, it appeals to human reason rather than to authority, whether that of tradition or that of revelation. All *definite* knowledge—so I should contend—belongs to science; all *dogma* as to what surpasses definite knowledge belongs to theology. But between theology and science there is a No Man's Land, exposed to attack from both sides; this No Man's Land is philosophy.¹⁶

Kant's dominance in modern views of science has given rise to one of the deepest questions driving the developments of modern theology: how can theology be a science? In one sense, the whole of modern Protestant (and, to a lesser but also significant extent, Catholic) theology—orthodox or not—stands under the shadow of Kant. This is certainly an important reason why Christian readers should give Kant a read.

In the third chapter of this book, we will offer an overview of Kant's influence on modern theology. We will then rely on historic Reformed theology and neo-Calvinism to construe a Christian understanding of science and knowledge. I do not intend to offer a theory strictly associated with any Reformed thinker. My hope is to be as catholic as I can within the bounds of confessional Reformed theology, so as to offer the average

16. Bertrand Russell, *History of Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2004), xiii (italics added).

Reformed reader a basic worldview with which to hold on to the faith as a “firm and certain knowledge” (Calvin) in an age in which academic learning at all levels, despite increasing cultural superstitions in broader society, is still dominated by naturalistic paradigms.