

Immanuel Kant

Immanuel Kant: Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime and Other Writings.

Ed. and trans. by Patrick Frierson and Paul Guyer.

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This is a collection of Kant's works from the 1760s. While most of the translations it includes are already available in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation* ('Cambridge Edition', 1993-), the thematic organization of that larger edition separates works that Kant composed during the same period. By contrast, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime and Other Writings* brings them together again in an edition that is more accessible and more affordable, while maintaining the rigorous translations and editorial standards of the Cambridge Edition.

A new collection of Kant's writings from the 1760s is particularly welcome now, as this period has received a great deal of scholarly attention in recent years. John Zammito has argued that we see an 'altogether different' Kant during this period than the philosopher we are familiar with from the three critiques. During the 1760s, Zammito claims, Kant was the 'gallant *Magister*', a popular lecturer who enjoyed socializing, dressed elegantly, and wrote in a lively and engaging style. According to Zammito, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) is the work that best represents this 'altogether different' Kant. A decidedly lighthearted work, *Observations* is filled with witty observations on the manners, mores, and sentiments of the age. It also contains chapters on the differences between the sexes, between nationalities, and between races. These observations are sure to offend modern sensibilities, and they might leave the reader with the impression that the book is nothing more a catalog of eighteenth century prejudices. Yet it must be remembered that *Observations* was Kant's most popular work, going through eight printings during his lifetime. It reveals the degree to which Kant and his contemporaries were interested in what different people did, said, thought, and felt. For that reason, it can be seen—and, indeed, this is how *Observations* has been read by Zammito, Robert Loudon, and others—as a kind of proto-anthropology, prefiguring the pragmatic point of view that Kant began to develop in his lectures on anthropology in 1772.

The remarks that Kant wrote in his copy of *Observations* have assumed a currency in contemporary Kant scholarship that probably surpasses the work itself. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime and Other Writings* contains the first complete translation of Kant's *Remarks* supplementing the selections included in the Cambridge Edition of Kant's *Notes and Fragments* (2005). It also improves on the translation in the Cambridge Edition by including deleted text, to indicate where Kant struck through his own remarks. Some of these remarks are of considerable importance. Frederick Beiser has even claimed, in a survey of Kant's

intellectual development between 1746 and 1781, that they contain evidence of a ‘complete revolution’ in Kant’s thought. ‘If we closely examine these remarks’, Beiser suggests, ‘we find that Kant had come to a decidedly negative view about not only the possibility but even the desirability of metaphysics.’ As evidence for this claim, Beiser cites a remark Kant wrote on the inside of the back cover of his copy of *Observations*, where he calls metaphysics ‘a science of the limits of human reason’ (192).

Calling metaphysics ‘a science of the limits of human reason’ could be taken to mean that metaphysics is neither possible nor desirable, but, in context, Kant’s remark does not seem to imply anything of the sort. After saying that ‘metaphysics is a science of the limits of human reason’, Kant writes that ‘the doubts of the same do not remove useful certainly, but useless certainty...metaphysics is useful in that it removes the appearances that can be harmful...In metaphysics, it is partiality not to also think from the opposite side, and it (is) also a lie not to say it; in actions it is different...One falls in love with illusion, but one loves truth. If one should reveal the illusion of most human beings, they would seem like that bride of whom one says that (when) she had taken off her beautiful silken eyebrows, a pair of ivory teeth, excellent ringlets, and a few handkerchiefs that had supported her bosom, and had wiped off her make-up her astonished lover ... Illusion demands refinement and art, truth demands simplicity and peace. According to Swift, everything in the world is clothes’ (192). Far from denying the possibility or desirability of metaphysics, it seems, Kant is claiming that metaphysics is a science of the limits of human reason because it exposes the lie of the world, the appearances that cover over reality. Metaphysics shows us where we are mistaken when appearances lead human reason into error and delusion.

Contrary to Beiser, I find no hostility to metaphysics in Kant’s *Remarks*. If there is a ‘complete revolution’ in Kant’s thought during the 1760s, however, it is perhaps to be found in the influence of Rousseau. Instead of leading him to discount the possibility or desirability of metaphysics, Kant says that Rousseau taught him to honor human beings (96). Because of Rousseau, Kant says, he feels that he would be ‘far less useful than the common laborer’ if he did not believe that the attempt to honor human beings ‘could impart a value to all others, in order to establish the rights of humanity’. These comments are to be found in Kant’s *Remarks*, along with numerous other reflections on the best ways to honor human beings. Kant does not seem to have shared Rousseau’s naturalism, and he found Rousseau’s views on education artificial and impractical; but he was impressed by the ways in which Rousseau brought freedom, virtue, and reason together. In the same remark in which he describes how Rousseau set him right, Kant notes, ‘It is very ridiculous to say that you shall love other people. One rather must say that you have good reason to love your neighbor. This even holds true for your enemy’ (96). This is, I think, a good summary of what Kant took from Rousseau. Yet it also serves as an important contrast to the emphasis on sentiment in *Observations*, where Kant said that ‘the noble attitude that is the beauty of virtue’ could only be brought about by subordinating ‘one’s own particular inclination’ to a larger feeling for ‘the beauty and the dignity of human nature’ (24). Shortly after publishing *Observations*—the *Remarks* were composed in 1764-1765—it seems Kant had already begun to realize that feelings and inclinations, however enlarged, could not provide sufficient grounds for morality. Only

reason can explain why it is morally obligatory to love one's neighbors and enemies, though, as Kant notes in his *Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* (1764), feeling might still contribute to our experience of the good (246).

Kant's *Inquiry* provides further evidence that he did not regard metaphysics as impossible or undesirable during the 1760s. A work hastily composed for the Prussian Royal Academy's prize-essay contest in 1763, the *Inquiry* was, Kant admitted, wanting in 'what concerns the care, precision, and elegance of execution' (248; II: 301). Yet it came extremely close to winning and the Academy said the work merited the highest praise. As such, it was published by the Academy, along with Mendelssohn's prize-winning essay, in 1764. Reading the text, we see that Kant is concerned to establish the proper method of metaphysics by distinguishing the method appropriate to philosophy from the method employed in mathematics (222-43). Unlike mathematics, Kant thinks metaphysics is a thoroughly analytic science that resolves what is given into 'indemonstrable propositions' that serve as the 'primary data' and 'stuff' from which definitions can be drawn (242-43). Only definitions that are the products of thorough and complete analysis could, Kant maintained, provide a suitable foundation for demonstrations.

In order to understand the significance of Kant's account of the 'proper method' of metaphysics, it is helpful to compare Kant's *Inquiry* to the works of those critics who charged that Wolff and his followers began their demonstrations with arbitrary definitions and proved only what they presupposed. The critics of the Wolffians claimed this was a result of the mathematical method the Wolffians employed. Kant agreed that metaphysics could not begin with arbitrary definitions, but only with 'real' definitions, drawn from thoroughgoing analysis. However, unlike other critics of the mathematical method, and like Mendelssohn, Kant maintained that metaphysical demonstrations could produce absolute certainty when they began with real definitions and proceeded according to the 'proper method'. Kant's correspondence with Johann Heinrich Lambert from the years following the publication of the *Inquiry* shows that Kant intended to develop this idea further, even claiming that his reflections on the 'proper method' of metaphysics constitute 'the culmination of my whole project'. It could be argued that these reflections eventually led to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), which Kant also describes as a 'treatise on method'.

Unfortunately, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime and Other Writings* does not contain any selections from Kant's correspondence, though some of his letters could be said to provide a clearer picture of Kant's project during the 1760s than any other source. Nor does this edition contain Kant's strangest and, perhaps, most interesting work from the 1760s, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Elucidated by the Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766), a work Kant wrote shortly after the *Inquiry* while simultaneously describing plans for a more systematic work on the proper method of metaphysics in his correspondence with Lambert. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime and Other Writings* does, however, reproduce Kant's 'Thoughts on the Occasion of Mr. Johann Friedrich von Funk's Untimely Death' (1760), his 'Essay on the Maladies of the Head' (1764), as well as Kant's announcement of the Program of his Lectures for

the Winter Semester 1765-1766 (1765), Herder's notes from Kant's *Lectures on Ethics* (1762-1764), and a selection of other notes and fragments from the 1760s, all of which are interesting and valuable contributions to Kant scholarship in the English language.

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