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Kantian Futurism

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ABSTRACT

The future of philosophy and the future of humankind-in-the-world are intimately related, not only (i) in the obvious sense that all philosophers are “human, all-too-human” animals—i.e., members of the biological species *Homo sapiens*, and also finite, fallible, and thoroughly normative imperfect in every other way too—hence the natural fate of all human animals is also the natural fate of all philosophers, but also (ii) in the more profound and subtle sense of what I’ll call *philosophical futurism*. Philosophical futurism is a critical, synoptic, and speculative reflection on the fate of humankind-in-the-world, with special attention paid not only to what humankind-in-the-world (including philosophy itself) will most likely be, if things continue to go along in more or less the same way as they have been and are now going, or could conceivably be, as in science fiction or other forms of imaginative projection, but also to what what humankind-in-the-world (including philosophy itself) *ought* to be, and therefore (assuming that “ought” entails “can”) *can* be, as the direct result of our individual and collective free agency, for the purpose of rationally guiding humankind in the near future. In this essay, I very briefly present, defend, and strongly recommend a version of philosophical futurism that I call *Kantian futurism*.

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The future of philosophy and the future of humankind-in-the-world are intimately related, not only (i) in the obvious sense that all philosophers are “human, all-too-human” animals—i.e., members of the biological species *Homo sapiens*, and also finite, fallible, and thoroughly normative imperfect in every other way too—hence the natural fate of all human animals is also the natural fate of all philosophers, but also (ii) in the more profound and subtle sense of what I’ll call *philosophical futurism*. Philosophical futurism is a critical, synoptic, and speculative reflection on the fate of humankind-in-the-world, with special attention paid not only to what humankind-in-the-world (including philosophy itself) *will most likely be*, if things continue to go along in more or less the same way as they have been and are now going, or *could conceivably be*, as in science fiction or other forms of imaginative projection, but also to what what humankind-in-the-world (including philosophy itself) *ought to be, and therefore* (assuming that “ought” entails “can”) *can be*, as the direct result of our individual and collective free agency, for the purpose of rationally guiding humankind in the near future. In what follows, I will very briefly present, defend, and strongly recommend a version of philosophical futurism that I call *Kantian futurism*.¹

Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, aka *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, aka “the first *Critique*,” and also “CPR” for short, is the single most brilliant, difficult, and important book in modern philosophy; although to be sure, the CPR has always provoked as much controversy, criticism, and disagreement as it has inspired agreement, application, and creative revision-&-updating. The CPR was first published in 1781 (the edition), followed six years later by a revised second edition (the B edition) in 1787. Whole libraries could be filled with the secondary literature—books and essays—published on the first *Critique*, since its explosive appearance on the philosophical scene in the twilight decades of the 18th century. Correspondingly, during those 240+ years, the impact of the CPR, via Kant’s comprehensive *Critical Philosophy*, has steadily deepened, increased, ramified, and widened, in three directions: **first**, as a positive source for foundational work in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, ethics, aesthetics and the philosophy of art, philosophical anthropology, the philosophy of religion and philosophical theology, political philosophy, the history and philosophy of the formal and natural sciences, and the philosophy of nature, **second**, as a negative foil for *all* alternative developments in those basic philosophical subjects, since *all* philosophers in the post-Kantian era, whether pro-Kant, anti-Kant, or officially Kant-neutral, must define themselves and their work in relation to Kant and the Critical Philosophy (Hanna, 2020), and **third**, as a broad, deep, and powerful sociopolitical force, under the much-controverted rubric of *enlightenment* (Hanna, 2016, 2017a, 2021a).

¹ This short essay has two different and longer versions: **first**, a same-named but much longer essay, “Kantian Futurism” (Hanna, 2023), in which I present, defend, and strongly recommend three futuristic Kantian ideas: (i) *moderately anthropic cosmology* aka *weak transcendental idealism* aka *top-down cosmology*, (ii) *cosmological and cognitive organicism*, and (iii) *the moral and sociopolitical primacy of human dignity*; and **second**, “Kant, Williamson, and The Future of Analytic Philosophy” (Hanna, 2024a), in which I explicitly relate Kantian futurism to classical and post-classical Analytic philosophy.

Indeed, in this very year, 2024, the 300th anniversary of Kant's birth, it's self-evident that the impact of the CPR, via the larger Critical Philosophy and post-Kantian enlightenment thinking, is now truly *cosmopolitan*, hence worldwide, and also by no means restricted to what Arthur Schopenhauer in the mid-19th century so sarcastically and presciently called "university philosophy" (Schopenhauer, 2014), i.e., *professional academic philosophy*, nowadays known simply as "professional philosophy." This is an oxymoron if ever there was one, since that is precisely how Plato defined *sophistry*, as philosophy for pay and inherently controlled by conventional social and political norms. By 2024, Kant's philosophical thinking and writing are fully and globally *in the real world*, and thereby woven as efficaciously and tightly into the warp and woof of modern life as *real philosophy* can ever be. By "real philosophy", I mean *authentic, serious* philosophy, namely, philosophy done wholeheartedly for its own sake and focused on fundamental issues and problems flowing from the rational human condition in a nonideal natural and social world. That's as opposed to *inauthentic, superficial* philosophy, namely, philosophy done halfheartedly and essentially for the sake of one's career, and basically focused on scholastic, trivial issues—for example, contemporary professional academic philosophy (Hanna, 2022; see also Haack, 2021).

In that connection, it is ironic that Kant was the first truly great real philosopher who was *also* a professional academic philosopher, an irony presciently noted by Schopenhauer too. In his 1798 essay, "The Conflict of the Faculties," Kant rightly asserted the rational autonomy of the faculty of philosophy, not only from all the other faculties of the university, especially including the faculty of theology, but also from the government (*CF* 7: 27). But at the same time, Kant failed to anticipate the future heteronomy and subordination of mainstream 20th and 21st century philosophy *to the formal and natural sciences* and above all *to its own academicization and professionalization* (Hanna, 2022).

In any case, given the conception of real philosophy, I spelled out two paragraphs above, my metaphilosophical view about the CPR in particular and the Critical Philosophy in general is this:

Like all philosophers Kant sometimes errs, or anyhow nods. However, we respect him most by critically noting and then setting aside his slips, and by promoting his deepest and most powerful doctrines.... Kant's Critical Philosophy is fully worth studying, critically analyzing, charitably explicating, defending, and then independently developing in a contemporary context. This is because, in my opinion, more than any other single-authored body of work in modern philosophy the Critical Philosophy most doggedly pursues and most profoundly captures some non-trivial fragment of the honest-to-goodness truth about about rational human animals and the larger natural world that surrounds them (Hanna, 2006a, 7).

Lying behind and scaffolding those claims, my take on the relationship between contemporary philosophy and the history of philosophy is based on what I call *The No-Deep-Difference Thesis*:

There is no fundamental difference in philosophical content between the history of philosophy and contemporary philosophy (Hanna, 2017b: section 3).

In other words, in doing contemporary philosophy one is thereby directly engaging with the history of philosophy, and in doing the history of philosophy one is thereby directly engaging with contemporary philosophy. There is no fundamental difference in philosophical content between philosophy that was thought, spoken, written, or published 2000 or 200 or 20 years ago, or 20 months ago, and philosophy that was thought, spoken, written, or published 20 weeks or 20 days or 20 minutes or 20 seconds ago.

Relatedly, it's a truth *not* generally acknowledged, that *all* Anglo-American-&-European philosophy since Kant—i.e., since the end of the 18th century—is *post-Kantian*. This is of course trivially true, in that all Anglo-American-&-European philosophy since the end of the 18th century literally temporally succeeds the publication and dissemination of Kant's philosophical writings. But it's also profoundly true, in that all Anglo-American-&-European philosophy since the end of the 18th century falls within a single comprehensive *Ur*-framework, according to which Kant's philosophy is either (1) wholly accepted without revision-or-updating (*ortho-Kantianism*), (2) at least partially accepted but also significantly revised-&-updated (*quasi-Kantianism*, *crypto-Kantianism*, and classical 19th and early 20th century *neo-Kantianism*, whose original rallying cry was: *back to Kant!*), or (3) outright rejected (*anti-Kantianism*) (Hanna, 2008, 2020).

The paradigmatic example of ortho-Kantianism is mainstream late 18th, 19th, 20th, and 21st century Kant-scholarship, allowing of course for many and various domestic or in-house scholarly disagreements about how best or correctly to interpret Kant's writings. Paradigmatic examples of quasi-Kantian philosophy include: classical German idealism (Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, etc.); British neo-Hegelianism (Bradley, McTaggart, etc.); realistic phenomenology, transcendental phenomenology, and existential phenomenology (Brentano, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, etc.); other varieties of post-phenomenological "Continental" philosophy (existentialism, hermeneutics, post-structuralism, deconstructionism, postmodernism, etc.); New England transcendentalism (especially Emerson); classical American pragmatism (especially Peirce); process philosophy (especially Bergson and Whitehead); and Pittsburgh neo-Hegelianism (especially Sellars, McDowell, and Brandom). The paradigmatic example of crypto-Kantianism is Wittgenstein's philosophy, both early and late (Hanna, 2017c). In addition, obviously, classical 19th and early 20th century German and French neo-Kantianism are paradigmatic examples of neo-Kantianism. As to anti-Kantian philosophy, paradigmatic examples are classical Analytic philosophy and post-classical Analytic philosophy (Hanna, 2001, 2006a, 2021b).

Nevertheless, whether Kant's philosophy is wholly accepted, partially accepted, or outright rejected, *it is inescapable*. This is simply because Kant's philosophy determines the total logical

space of relevant philosophical options for all post-Kantian Anglo-American-&-European philosophy. In this sense, all post-Kantian Anglo-American-&-European philosophy, including of course all contemporary philosophy up to 6am this morning, *has come out from under Kant's wig*, whether positively (pro-) or negatively (anti-).

Now, it must be admitted that it is at least possible that some old or new *non-Anglo-American-&-European* philosophical framework will unexpectedly stride into the center of the global intellectual and sociocultural scene like an all-conquering Colossus, and henceforth dominate philosophy worldwide. Let us call this *the extra-Kantian-philosophy possibility*. But the extra-Kantian-philosophy possibility seems to me *extremely unlikely*, in view of the bumpy (to put it very mildly) yet relentless *Americanization* of world culture, driven by the USA's militaristic adventures and misadventures, music, movies, television, and digital technology, and the correspondingly equally bumpy yet equally relentless *neoliberalization* of world politics, driven by technocratic capitalism, whether corporate capitalism or State-capitalism, and whether democratic or not-so-democratic, since the end of World War II.

Therefore, leaving aside the extra-Kantian-philosophy possibility, then all foreseeably future philosophy worldwide *will be a series of positive or negative footnotes to Kant*. Moreover, as regards negative footnotes, the 140-year-long anti-Kantian tradition of Analytic philosophy is in fact now coming to an end, as post-classical Analytic philosophy crashes, burns, and goes down forever into the ash-heap of history. In addition, as regards positive footnotes, obviously ortho-Kantianism is historically and philosophically backward looking, not forward-looking. Therefore, (i) the times they are a-changing, and (ii) the near-future emergence of some or another creatively revised-&-updated version of Kant's philosophy, as the central and dominant world philosophy, is historically inevitable. For all these reasons, *forward to Kant!* Must be humankind's philosophical futurist rallying cry.

Now, briefly, what does Kant's Critical Philosophy say? Focusing for the purposes of this short essay on Kant's *theoretical* philosophy, especially including logic, metaphysics, the theory of cognition, and epistemology (see, e.g., Hanna, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e, 2021f, 2021g, 2021h)—as opposed to his practical philosophy, including his moral theory, his political theory, and his theory of enlightenment—what I call Kant's *real metaphysics* (Hanna, 2017d), aka his “transcendental idealism,” is an a priori conceptual science describing the essential nature of the manifestly real world, insofar as that world necessarily conforms to the a priori formal constraints and normative structures of our two basic innately-specified cognitive faculties or powers: (1) “sensibility” (*Sinnlichkeit*), the capacity for pure or empirical sensory intuition (*Anschauung*), sense-perception, and imagination, and (2) “understanding” (*Verstand*), the capacity for conceptualizing and logical thinking (*CPR* A713/B741, A723/751, A841-842/B869-870).

Kant's real metaphysics of transcendental idealism is also a *cognitive semantics*, that is, a general theory of rational human representational content (*C* 10: 129-130; see also Hanna, 2001,

2006a). According to Kant, a representational content is *richly* meaningful, *empirically* meaningful, or “objectively valid,” if and only if it is either directly grounded on human sensible intuition or is an a priori necessary condition of a representational content that is directly grounded on human sensible intuition, hence *indirectly* grounded on human sensible intuition (*CPR* A38-40/B55-57, A239-240/B298-299). A judgment or proposition can have a truth-value, and be true or false, according to Kant, if and only if all of its representational components are objectively valid (*CPR* A58/B83). If any representational component of a judgment or proposition is *not* objectively valid, *not* empirically meaningful, or “empty” (*leer*), then the whole judgment or proposition is *not* objectively valid, not richly or empirically meaningful, and empty—“thoughts without content are empty” (*CPR* A 51/B 75)—and it has no truth-value, hence it is neither true nor false. By sharp contrast, if a judgment or proposition *is* objectively valid, hence richly or empirically meaningful, and thereby has a truth-value, then (i) it is synthetic if and only if (ia) its denial is logically and conceptually consistent and (ib) its meaning and truth are grounded on either pure or empirical human sensible intuition (*CPR* B73, A721/B749, *C* 11: 38, *OD* 8, 245), and (ii) it is analytic if and only if (iia) its denial entails either a formal logical contradiction, a formal contradiction in “intension” or *Inhalt*, or a mutual exclusion of “comprehension” or *Umfang* (*CPR* A150-153/B189-19, *Prol* 4, 267), (iib) it is necessarily true and a priori (*CPR* B4, A6/B10), and (iic) its meaning and necessary truth are grounded on essential connections between objectively valid, richly or empirically meaningful concepts. In other words, by means of his theoretical philosophy, Kant worked out a richly detailed, robust, and (I strongly believe) defensible theory of the analytic-synthetic distinction and philosophical analysis (Hanna, 2001, 2006a: chs. 5-7, 2015: chs. 4-8; see also Lewin, 2023a, 2023b).

That all being so, then self-evidently, this question must also be asked:

Precisely *how* should we creatively revise-&-update Kant’s 18th century philosophy for the purposes of bringing about the Kantian philosophy of the near future?

Humankind’s existential predicament—including its epistemic, metaphysical, logical, mathematical, natural-scientific, moral, sociopolitical, and religious or spiritual modes—in this nonideal natural and social world is what I call *the rational human condition*. Correspondingly, I call the general philosophical theory of the rational human condition *rational anthropology*. Since 2001, for better or worse, I have been developing, presenting, and defending a version of rational anthropology as the comprehensive Kantian philosophy of the near future (Hanna, 2015, 2018a, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, and 2024b). Therefore, if I am right, then humankind’s philosophical futurist rallying cry—the rallying cry of Kantian futurism—must also be *forward to rational anthropology!*

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For convenience, I cite Kant's works infratextually in parentheses. The citations include both an abbreviation of the English title and the corresponding volume and page numbers in the standard "Akademie" edition of Kant's works: *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Königlich Preussischen (now Deutschen) Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: G. Reimer [now Walter De Gruyter], 1902). For references to the first Critique, I follow the common practice of giving page numbers from the A (1781) and B (1787) German editions only. Because the Akademie (AK) edition contains only the B edition of the first Critique, I have also consulted the following German composite edition: *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, ed. W. Weischedel, Immanuel Kant Werkausgabe III (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968). Here's a list of the relevant abbreviations and English translations of the works I've cited in this essay, together with the year of each work's first publication in German, its Ak volume number, and (if relevant) its Ak page-range:

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