1.

The Pre-Critical Period

1.1 FAMILY, SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY

Immanuel Kant was born on 22 April 1724 in the outskirts of Königsberg as the fourth of nine children of a simple harnessmaker. On the following day he was baptized under the name "Emanuel" ("God with us"). Like other scholars of the German Enlightenment, Kant stems from a modest, indeed poor background. His hometown is the flourishing capital of East Prussia with a harbor for international trade, in which particularly English merchants exchanged wine and spices from the colonies for Russian grain and livestock. The city, which lay on the northeastern border of the German-speaking world, is founded in the year of Kant's birth out of three cities (Altstadt, Löbenicht, Kneiphof) merged into one: Kant and Königsberg are equally old.

Archival data do not confirm Kant's opinion that his grandfather immigrated from Scotland (*Letters*, 744). His great-grandfather, Richard Kant, presumably still stems from the Courland (two daughters, however, were married to Scotsmen); the family of Kant's mother Anna Regina comes from Nurenberg and Tübingen.

Young Immanuel attends the Vorstädter Hospitalschule (1730–32) and from the age of eight on, the Friedrichskollegium (1732–40). Due to the poverty of his parents, Kant depends upon the support of friends, specifically Albert Schultz (1692–1763), principal of the school and a professor of theology. Schultz is an important student of the great philosopher of the German Enlightenment Christian Wolff and soon discovers Kant's talent.

The Friedrichs-Gymnasium, pejoratively called the "Pietists' Inn" by the local population, has a strict religious regimen. Religious instruction (learning the catechism) and church services make up a significant portion of the curriculum; Hebrew and Greek are taught with the aid of the Old and New Testaments; mathematics and natural sciences play a minor role. Only Latin, which attracts Kant's sustained interest, appears to have been taught well. In the fall of 1740 Kant graduates from the Friedrichs-Gymnasium as second in his class. In later years he still remembers its "enslavement of youth" with "fear and trembling."

Kant's family is likewise influenced by pietism, a movement in German Protestantism which arose in the seventeenth century and which wanted to renew a pious life-style and to reform the church accordingly. Despite his disapproval of pietistic cult forms, Kant always esteemed the basic pietistic stance, which recalls the imperturbable equanimity of the Stoic sage. Kant's mother, whom he admires during her lifetime for her common sense and her genuine godliness, dies in 1737 and is buried by the thirteen-year-old Kant on the evening before Christmas Eve.

After passing the entrance examination, Kant enrolls at sixteen years of age at the Albertina, the University of Königsberg. With the help of friends and with earnings from private lessons—according to his college friend Heilsberg also by winnings in billiards—he is able to study mathematics and natural sciences, theology, philosophy and classical Latin literature from 1740 to 1746. Martin Knutzen (1713–51), a professor of logic and metaphysics who—also a student of Wolff—might have become an important philosopher if not for his early death, gains particular influence. This diverse scholar draws Kant's attention to the natural sciences; after this time the physics of Isaac Newton (1643–1725) exemplifies for Kant strict scientific knowledge.

1.2 PRIVATE TUTOR, FIRST WRITINGS

After the death of his father (1746), Kant leaves the university and earns his living—as was usual for unmoneyed scholars—as a private tutor ("Master of the Household"), first for the preacher Andersch, then for the landowner Major von Hülsen (until about 1753), and finally for Count Keyserling. During this period Kant not only acquires social skills but also increases his philosophical and scientific knowledge. But with his first work *Thoughts on the True Estimation of Living*

Forces[3] (1746, published in 1749) Kant attempts too much. Calling upon "the freedom of human understanding" (I 8), he tries to resolve "one of the greatest schisms . . . among the geometers of Europe" (I 16) by means of a compromise. In the conflict on the calculation of force (F) from mass (m) and velocity (v)—this force is now known as kinetic energy—he supports the Leibnizians ($F = m \cdot v^2$) with regard to "living forces," that is, free movements, and Descartes and his followers ($F = m \cdot v$) with regard to "dead forces," that is, unfree movements. The correct solution ($F = \frac{1}{2} m \cdot v^2$), which d'Alembert had published in 1743, is ignored. The self-confidence of the twenty-two year-old young man is remarkable: "I have already marked the course that I want to hold. I will begin my journey, and nothing will keep me from continuing it" (I 10).

Kant does not write in Latin, the international academic language, but rather—as Leibniz, Thomasius and Wolff have to some extent already done—in clear German. Although he produces no significant result, the constructively critical endeavor toward compromise which motivates Kant's transcendental critique of reason already comes to light here. Kant's interest in natural science, which will dominate his work for the next ten years, also becomes manifest. At the same time, Kant makes his appearance as a philosopher, since he places the controversy about the calculation of force in the context of a more far-reaching issue. Kant is disturbed by the experience that the most prominent scientists of the age can find no agreement on a well-defined problem. He sees the Enlightenment idea of a universal human reason thus called into question. Simultaneous doubt and faith in human reason will accompany Kant all the way to the elaboration of his critical transcendental philosophy.

After his return to Königsberg the philosopher becomes remarkably productive. In March of 1755 his *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*,[4] "treated according to Newtonian principles," appears anonymously. Kant here sketches a theory of the origin of the solar system and of the entire cosmos. He dispenses with theological considerations and rests his argumentation exclusively upon "natural causes." Important parts, in particular Kant's theory of the rings around Saturn and of nebula, are later confirmed by observations of the astronomer Herschel (1738–1822). Kant's purely mechanical explanation of the formation of the universe remains, however, practically unknown, and its significance for natural science is discovered only in

the mid-nineteenth century. With some modifications due to *Laplace*'s independent hypothesis on the origin of the universe (1796), the Kant-Laplace theory forms an important basis of astronomical discussion for quite some time.

In 1755 Kant completes his doctoral work in Königsberg with a dissertation about fire: *Meditationum quarundam de igne succincta delineatio*.[5] His public lecture on 12 June, "On Easier and on More Thorough Philosophical Speech," is attended by particularly many respected and scholarly men of the city. In the same year, he completes his "habilitation"[6] with the treatise *Principiorum primorum cognitionis metaphysicae nova dilucidatio*.[7] Kant becomes "magister legens," a private teacher with no university salary, who must earn his living from lecture attendance fees and private instruction.

In the *Nova dilucidatio* Kant criticizes Wolff's academic metaphysics, a systematic elaboration of Leibniz' philosophy. He discusses the relationship of Leibniz' "real principle" of sufficient reason to the logical principle of contradiction. Along with the philosopher Christian August Crusius (1715–75), a student of Leibniz and critic of Wolff, Kant considers the attempt to subordinate the real principle to the logical to have failed. He thus contests the basic assumption of Wolff's rationalism: that all principles of knowledge can ultimately be traced to a single common principle. Kant is, however, still far from his later assertion of the synthetic nature of any knowledge of reality.

Kant continues to study questions of natural science. A strict division between empirical and philosophical knowledge of nature does not exist during this period in any case. The philosopher writes about the "shakings of the earth perceived for some time," particularly about the earthquake which destroyed two-thirds of the city of Lisbon on 1 November 1755 and which led to a keen interest in the question of theodicy, the justification of God with regard to the suffering in the world, throughout Europe. The priority of practical over theoretical reason, of great importance later, comes into view here (I 460).

Kant's definition of the smallest particles as "spacefilling force" in his *Monadologia physica*[8] (1756) makes a quite modern impression. The public disputation of this third treatise after *De igne* and the *Nova dilucidatio* was required for a position as associate professor. Scientifically important is Kant's explanation of the cause of trade-winds and monsoons (*New Notes Explaining the Theory of Winds*,[9] 1756).

1.3 THE SUCCESSFUL TEACHER AND ELEGANT SCHOLAR

In the fall of 1755 Kant begins his activity as a lecturer, which demands on the average sixteen hours a week of hard work (cf. Letters, vol. XIII: 13). Short finances sometimes require him to lecture for twenty hours a week and more. Kant's first years as an academic teacher hence mark a period lacking in publications; no piece of importance appears in the years 1757–61.

In 1756 and again in 1758 the philosopher applies for an associate professorship in logic and metaphysics. The position, vacant during the five years since Knutzen's death, remains unoccupied due to the outbreak of the Seven Years' War. He also unsuccessfully applies for a full professorship in logic and metaphysics which falls to his older colleague F. J. Buck. In the summer of 1764 Kant turns down a professorship in literature which would have required him to write certain greeting messages to the king. In the year 1766 he finally receives his first remunerative post, the modestly paid position of assistant librarian in the palace library. Despite his great success in research and teaching, Kant must wait until 1770, that is, until the age of forty-six, to achieve the desired professorship in logic and metaphysics. However, in the autumn of the previous year, invoking his ties to Königsberg, his broad circle of friends and acquaintances as well as his poor health, he has rejected both an appointment at the University of Erlangen and overtures by the University of Jena.

In accordance with the customs of the time, Kant does not teach his own philosophy. Not only during his pre-Critical period does he give lectures on the basis of manuals (*compendia*)— logic according to the *Science of Reason*[10] by G. F. Meier (1718–77), Wolff's successor in Halle; ethics and metaphysics usually according to *A. G. Baumgarten* (1714–62), a student of Wolff and an important philosopher in his own right; natural law according to the *Jus naturale* of Achenwall, a law professor in Göttingen, and so on. But his lecture does not pedantically paraphrase prefabricated ideas; it is a "free discourse, spiced with wit and emotion. Often quotes and references to works which he had just read, occasionally anecdotes, which were nonetheless always pertinent."[11] Kant understands better than any of his colleagues how to teach not philosophy but philosophizing: unbiased critical thought. Kant has a vivid and at the same time very accurate imagination; he once surprised an Englishman with a precise description of Westmin-

ster Bridge. The philosopher has a highly inquiring mind and thus feels at home in remarkably many areas of study; he is not only an exact analytic thinker but also likes to study the "book of the world."

The lectures, which demand from the students independent thought, attract lively interest right from the start. The audience, a mixture of Prussians and foreigners, mainly Baltics, Russians and Poles, "virtually deified" Kant for decades.[12] In personal contact the young teacher exhibits a warmth and cordiality which we would not expect of Kant. We find among his students the poet and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), to whom Kant immediately devotes attention. (In his *Treatise on the Origin of Language*,[13] 1772, Herder anticipates important results of modern science and philosophy: the adaptability and the organic and instinctual weaknesses of man, the dependence of man's linguistic capability on his frailty, and the connection between language and thought. But he also lays the cornerstone for his subsequent critique of Kant (cf. below, sect. 13.1.)

In his classes, Kant demonstrates the unusual breadth of his horizon. He teaches not only logic and metaphysics but also mathematical physics and physical geography (an academic discipline which he proudly introduces for the first time), anthropology (as of the winter semester of 1772–73) and education (as of the winter semester of 1776–77), philosophy of religion (natural theology), moral philosophy, natural law (as of the winter semester 1776–77) and philosophical encyclopedia (as of 1767–68), even fortress-building and fireworks. Frequently, Kant is dean of his department and in the summer terms of 1786 and 1788, president[14] of the university.

As much as Kant devotes himself to teaching and research, this activity fills only the first half of his day. The other half belongs to social life. Within his circle of friends and acquaintances Kant spends his time with a long noon dinner, with billiards and cards, in the theater and in the most respected salons of the city. As a witty conversationalist, Kant becomes a coveted guest. Maria Charlotta Jakobi, the wife of a banker and Privy Counselor for Commerce with whom Kant is on friendly terms, makes a sword-belt for the "great philosopher" and sends him "a kiss, in favorable regard."[15] In the salon of the Countess von Keyserling, a place of honor is always available for Kant. The philosopher Johann Georg Hamann (1730–88), also living in Königsberg, even fears that Kant will be torn from his scholarly plans by a whirlwind of social diversions. "Really, Herr Magister Kant was then

the most genteel man of the world, wore bordered clothes, a postillon d'amour and visited all coteries."[16]

The first Russian occupation of Königsberg in 1758–1762 was presumably partially responsible for Kant's-cheerful attitude. The liberal occupation of the city brought "the entire breadth and open-mindedness of the eastern life-style into the old, musty city."[17] The class hierarchy loosens up; pietistic seriousness gives way to a freer attitude, and Prussian austerity to an almost luxurious life-style. Kant, too, participates "in the gay bustle of the officers in private homes and officers' casinos."[18]

The style of the publications with which Kant first gains fame in Germany as a writer corresponds to the cosmopolitan's social adeptness. To the same extent to which Heine[19] mocks the "dry, grey packing-paper style" of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, with which Kant wants to "distinguish himself politely from the popular philosophers of the time, who strive for the most bourgeois clarity," he praises the elegant style of the early publications: "full of good humor in the manner of French essays."