

THE SACRED MONSTER

I remember a conversation with a new acquaintance about how I had studied philosophy in college, and, as it turned out, she had also taken a few classes. When I asked her what she studied, she dodged the question for a while before finally saying, as if to close the matter, “Well, it’s not like I read Kant!”

Catherine Wilson has read Kant. Kant, who, as my conversation partner well knew, proved definitive for so much of subsequent philosophy, lived from 1724–1804, and spent his life in Königsberg, in northeastern Prussia. Although Kant wrote enough that his works should take up significant real estate on a modest bookshelf, he is best known for what are called his three Critiques, namely the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), and the *Critique of Judgment* (1790). Together, they have come to define the critical project, arguably circumscribed by Kant when he wrote, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that the interests of human reason are “What can I know?”, “What must I do?”, and “What may I hope?”

For Europeans, these three questions are wrapped up in the inheritance of Christianity and the possibility of supernatural intervention in human history, and Kant can be seen as having authored a way of thinking systematically about them in a way that allows for the persistence of many of the traditional answers, albeit via the medium of human reason rather than divine revelation.

In her recent book, *Kant and the Naturalistic Turn of 18th Century Philosophy*, Wilson emphasizes the role of doubt in necessitating this kind of borrowing and repackaging of Christianity in early modern times, and challenges the scholarly consensus that would see the critical project in any terms other than that of a salvage operation for morality.

Wilson’s overarching thesis is that Kant’s three *Critiques* are not to be read as a self-enclosed system that is all-encompassing and the work of an isolated genius, but rather are a self-conscious construction aimed at securing morality amidst a time of change and transition. In Kant’s time, Wilson writes, certainty in religious truths began to be undermined with the advance of the natural sciences, so that the

Kant and the Naturalistic Turn of 18th Century Philosophy
by Catherine Wilson (Oxford University Press, 2022)
reviewed by Brad Rappaport

substantiation of the difference between moral right and wrong, which had previously been grounded in Scripture, came to be a live philosophical problem.

Medieval philosophers had distinguished between faith and reason as two different sources of knowledge – one universally accessible and the other accessible by divine revelation alone. By reason they understood pagan thinking, namely that of the Greco-Roman world prior to the advent of Christianity, when it remained polytheistic. We all are capable of the kinds of thoughts that the pagans had simply by virtue of being human. But whereas pagan society had its own customs and mores that served as its distinct centripetal force, the idea that one should love one's neighbor as oneself or that one is commanded to attain a certain height of conduct according to the view that we are all created in the image of God is a heritage of the West from a different part of the world, namely ancient Israel. For Europe, this takes the form of Christianity, Hebraic monotheism as mediated by the figure of Jesus of Nazareth, taken by the Christians for the Messiah prophesied in Hebrew Scripture. But Scripture claims to be of a divinity, the God of Israel, foreign to the pagans.

Pagan philosophy posed a challenge to Christianity, while leaving its foundation intact. With its maturation into the natural sciences in the Renaissance, however, it came to pose a challenge to the very idea of revelation, and thereby to morality, thus necessitating a major revision of medieval assumptions.

Kant will attempt this major revision. One of his declared aims in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is to “make room for faith” by setting limits to what we can claim to know. This he accomplishes by suggesting that we cannot know how things really are in themselves, but rather that we can only know how they appear to us, given the condition under which they do so, which is, namely, how our minds are structured. Kant's way of thinking about the difference between faith and reason differs from that of the medievals in that it makes a hybrid of the two. Rather than presenting us with a source of knowledge of moral right and wrong alleged to be supernatural, he presents us with Scriptural injunctions – such as to love one's neighbor as oneself – that he alleges to be moral because they

appeal to our rational nature, which is what makes us distinctively human.

This hybrid nature of faith and reason in Kant's thinking is characteristic of the modern philosophical project in general. In his *Meditations*, Descartes tells a story about how he systematically doubts everything he can know through the senses, proceeding through a cascade of doubts until he comes up against the question of whether he can even know that he exists, whereupon he arrives at his celebrated formula that he knows that he exists because he is thinking. In Christian terms, this served to demonstrate, by secular means, the doctrine of the separateness of the individual soul from the body, because it is from certainty of his existence as a thinking thing that Descartes proceeds to reconstruct the certainty of the external world without, including his very own bodily existence. If he were to start from the external world without in equally secular fashion, he might find that he had no proof at all of the individual soul within, which is a version of the moral problem with which Kant finds himself confronted.

KANT'S WAY OF THINKING ABOUT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FAITH AND REASON DIFFERS FROM THAT OF THE MEDIEVALS IN THAT IT MAKES A HYBRID OF THE TWO

David Hume took Cartesian doubt in a different direction. He denied that causal relations inhere in the nature of things, arguing instead that we conjoin cause and effect as a result of our experience of their correlation, with no objective ground with reference to which to substantiate their necessity. Kant's response to this was to migrate the necessity of causal relations from the objective natural world to the subjective human one. The necessity that Hume claims is indemonstrable and concluded only from observation, Kant concedes is indemonstrable, but then turns Hume's argument on its head by claiming that necessity is in fact woven into our perception of the world for reasons having to

do with ourselves. The necessity of causal relations is preserved by relocating its site. Thus, while the critical project sets limits to what we can claim to know, it also secures certainty in a manner that observation of the natural world alone never could. What Wilson wants to argue is that, in just the same way that observation of the natural world cannot demonstrate the truth of causal relations, neither can it demonstrate the truth of morality, so that it, too, can be substantiated only with reference to conditions that lie within.

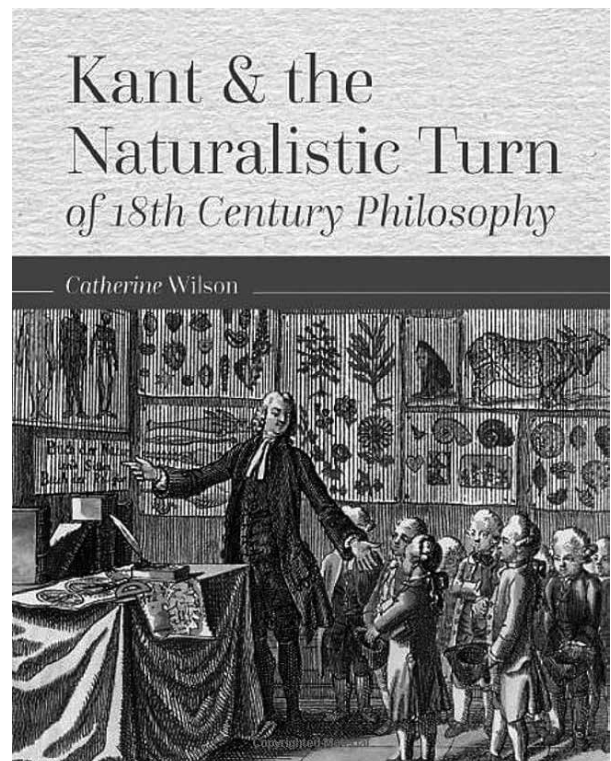
Kant's inventive defence of morality against the natural sciences, Wilson claims, is of a piece with the intellectual atmosphere of his day. She aims to situate Kant's thinking amidst that of his contemporaries, in order that he should not be thrown into relief against them as canonical, but rather be received as belonging to a past in which everyone was wrestling with the same question, as Jacob with the angel. Epicureanism was the vogue, she tells us, injected into the times by the Renaissance resurfacing of the ancient Roman Lucretius' *On the Nature of Things*. Lucretius defended the ancient Greek Epicurus' theoretical physics of atomism, which holds the world to have been generated by chance, and so challenges the Christian doctrine of Creation.

Epicurus definitively opposed the life of libertinage that bears his name, but an important aspect of his thinking is that we have nothing to fear from the gods, which puts him at odds with the dictum of Proverbs that the beginning of wisdom is fear of the Lord. One will be punished for disobedience of divine command, on this latter view, even if, as moderns, we rationalize the divine away by circumscribing this punishment to that of pangs of conscience. And while it is true that Epicurus concludes that a life of continence is best, promoting thereby the social order and stability that allows us to withdraw from contention and seek inner peace, the libertinage deduced from his writings by such modern figures as Julien Offray de La Mettrie, whom Wilson identifies as an antagonist of Kant, entails the offsetting of conscience to one side as a useless inheritance that inhibits our pursuit of pleasure.

Wilson juxtaposes two quotes in the epigraph to her work, one from La Mettrie and one from Kant, each one

claiming, in the spirit of the age, that Enlightenment calls for us to throw off the chains of prejudice and take responsibility for our own lives, independent of the weight of the past. Wilson's point is that, from the same starting place, the two go off in very different directions – La Mettrie in dispensing with, and Kant with conserving, morality. Wilson suggests that, in their divergence and their different readings of the tea leaves of the day, Kant and La Mettrie can be read not as original, but as symptomatic. Perhaps their difference is merely one of taste.

Kant could not settle for grounding morality on taste any more than he could settle for grounding the necessity of causal relations on empirical observation alone, as Hume had done. Wilson writes that for Kant, systematicity was "the goal quite peculiar to reason," so that it is not enough that one should have the philosophic circumspection of a Spinoza, who placed himself at a remove from faith while living irreproachably; rather, one needed proofs and guarantees of morality.



If contemporary science was, in the ancient Greek sense, the discovery of the structure of reality, of what really is the case (ontology), and morality impossible to prove by demonstration, then Kant sought to turn this formulation around, notes Wilson, in a brilliant synopsis of his project. “In effect,” she writes, “Kant tried to meet the challenge of the view that natural science was ontologically grounded and morality a projective fiction by asserting the projective nature of natural science while hardening the ontology of moral right and wrong, guilt and responsibility.” The migration of causal relations inwards to the human subject, who thus reads the world in its terms, as he must, without these relations necessarily inhering in things as they really are, is an example of the assertion of the projective nature of natural science.

As for establishing moral right and wrong as obtaining in the structure of reality, this Kant does with a sleight-of-hand that is a version of tasteful preference, albeit executed on different, rational terrain. Wilson introduces, as crucial, what Kant calls “reason’s practical interest,” by which he means our need to think in terms of moral truths. It is these that license us to aspire to the improvement of our own character or the state of the world, goals without which, by comparison, we would be impoverished. Given the choice between a paganism devoid of such aspiration, and a divinely inspired Christianity, we must decisively opt for the latter.

The main objection to Wilson’s argument must be to the thesis itself, that the set of three *Critiques* is a willful construction of the author tailored to the particular problem of how morality is to be legitimated. Surely a work develops naturally, of its own accord, out of a diversity of interests that take shape in the mind. Kant himself warns us that the work of art should not “stink of glue,” which puts one in mind of the Frankenstein monster, stitched together from mismatched parts and brought horribly to life. Wilson even refers to Kant as a “sacred monster” by way of reckoning with his authority. But the Frankenstein monster is intelligent; its mind is no composite, any more than the unity of form that defines *Frankenstein*. There is an ineliminable element of the natural in the genesis of a work, as of a child, and the language of construction and composition does not touch this. The Frankenstein monster is a fiction.

The real dirt on *Kant and the Naturalistic Turn*, as Wilson confides to us in the introduction, is that, as an undergraduate, none of her professors were able to explain to her why the man should be as revered as he is. Wilson argues, against the various rationales that they offered, that Kant never avows that his purpose is to reconcile rationalism and empiricism, or to provide grounds for Newtonian science, or to firmly establish what scepticism questions, or to conduct a scientific investigation into human epistemology. However, in reply it might be said that Kant neither avows that his goal is to secure a foundation for morality amidst the tumult raised by the doubt of his age. Wilson is keen to rest her case that he does on a few select passages from the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

If Wilson writes as a corrective to a mainstream scholarship that threatens to divorce Kant from his context, then her own approach threatens to highlight this context at the expense of his genius. Loath though Wilson is to use the word, if we widen the historical lens, it cannot escape our vision that Kant himself is the inspiration for so much of the philosophical legacy of the succeeding years. Given, though, that Kant’s star is fixed for the ages, there is no danger in provisionally suspending our outsized regard for him in order to usher in new ideas about the best way in which to understand him.

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