



Rose-Tinted Reality

IMMANUEL KANT (1)

If you are wearing rose-tinted spectacles they will colour every aspect of your visual experience. You may forget that you are wearing them, but they will still affect what you see. Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) believed that we are all walking around understanding the world through a filter like this. The filter is the human mind. It determines how we experience everything and imposes a certain shape on that experience. Everything we perceive takes place in time and space, and every change has a cause. But according to Kant, that is not because of the way reality ultimately is: it is a contribution of our minds. We don't have direct access to the way the world is. Nor can we ever take the glasses off and see things as they truly are. We're stuck with this filter and without it we would be completely unable to experience anything. All we can do is recognize that it is there and understand how it affects and colours what we experience.

Kant's own mind was very ordered and logical. So was his life. He never married and he imposed a strict pattern to each day. In order not to waste any time, he had his servant wake him at 5 a.m. He would then drink some tea, smoke a pipe, and begin work. He was extremely productive, writing numerous books and essays. Then he would lecture at the university. In the afternoon, he would go for a walk at 4.30 – exactly the same time each day – up and down his street precisely eight times. In fact people who lived in his home town of Königsberg (now Kaliningrad) used to set their watches by his walk.

Like most philosophers, he spent his time trying to understand our relation to reality. That, in essence, is what metaphysics is about, and Kant was one of the greatest metaphysicians to have lived. His particular interest was in the limits of thought, the limits of what we can know and understand. This was an obsession for him. In his most famous book *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), he explored these limits, pushing right to the boundaries of what makes sense. This book is far from an easy read: Kant himself described it as both dry and obscure – and he was right. Very few people would claim to understand it all, and much of the reasoning is complex and jargon-heavy. Reading it can feel like struggling through a dense thicket of words with little sense of where you are going, and few glimpses of daylight. But the core argument is clear enough.

What is reality like? Kant thought that we can't ever have a complete picture of the way things are. We'll never learn anything directly about what he calls the *noumenal* world, whatever it is that lies behind appearances. Although he sometimes uses the word 'noumenon' (singular) and sometimes 'noumena' (plural) he shouldn't have done (a point Hegel made too, see Chapter 22): we can't know whether reality is one thing or many. Strictly speaking, we can't know anything at all about

this noumenal world; at least we can't get information about it directly. We *can* know about the *phenomenal* world, though, the world around us, the world we experience through our senses. Look out of the window. What you can see is the phenomenal world – grass, cars, sky, buildings, or whatever. You can't see the noumenal world, only the phenomenal one, but the noumenal world is lurking behind all our experience. It is what exists at a deeper level.

Some aspects of what exists, then, will always be beyond our grasp. Yet we can, by rigorous thought, get a greater understanding than we could get from a purely scientific approach. The main question Kant set himself to answer in *The Critique of Pure Reason* was this: 'How is synthetic a priori knowledge possible?' That question probably doesn't make any sense to you. It will take a little explaining. But the main idea is not as difficult as it first seems. The first word to explain is 'synthetic'. In Kant's philosophical language 'synthetic' is the opposite of 'analytic'. 'Analytic' means true by definition. So, for example, 'all men are male' is true by definition. What this means is that you can know that this sentence is true without making any observations of actual men. You don't need to check that they are all male, as they wouldn't be men if they weren't male. No fieldwork is required to come to this conclusion: you could sit in an armchair and work it out. The word 'men' has the idea of male built into it. It's like the sentence 'All mammals suckle their young.' Again, you don't need to examine any mammals at all to know that they all suckle their young, as that is part of the definition of a mammal. If you found something that seemed to be a mammal, but which didn't suckle its young, you'd know that it couldn't be a mammal. Analytic statements are really just about definitions, so they don't give us any new knowledge. They spell out what we've assumed in the way we've defined a word.

Synthetic knowledge, in contrast, requires experience or observation and it gives us new information, something that isn't simply contained in the meaning of the words or symbols we use. We know, for example, that lemons taste bitter but only through having tasted them (or because someone else tells us about their experience of tasting lemons). It isn't true by definition that lemons taste bitter – that is something that is learnt through experience. Another synthetic statement would be 'All cats have tails.' This is something that you would need to investigate to find out whether or not it was true. You can't tell until you look and see. In fact some cats, Manx cats, don't have tails. And some cats have lost their tails, but are still cats. The question of whether all cats have tails is, then, a matter of fact about the world, not about the definition of 'cat'. It's very different from the statement 'All cats are mammals,' which is just a matter of definition and so is an analytic statement.

So where does that leave synthetic a priori knowledge? A priori knowledge, as we have seen, is knowledge that is independent of experience. We know it *prior* to experience, that is, *before* we've had experience of it. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was a debate about whether or not we know anything at all a priori. Roughly speaking, empiricists (such as Locke) thought we didn't; rationalists (such as Descartes) thought we did. When Locke declared that there were no innate ideas and that a child's mind was a blank slate, he was claiming that there was no a priori knowledge. This makes it sound as if 'a priori' just means the same as 'analytic' (and for some philosophers the terms are interchangeable). But for Kant it doesn't. He thought that knowledge that reveals truth about the world, yet is arrived at independently of experience, is possible. That's why he introduced the special category of synthetic a priori knowledge to describe this. An example of

synthetic a priori knowledge, one that Kant himself used, was the mathematical equation $7 + 5 = 12$. Although many philosophers have thought that such truths are analytic, a matter of the definition of mathematical symbols, Kant believed that we are able to know a priori that $7 + 5$ is equal to 12 (we don't need to check this against objects or observations in the world). Yet at the same time this gives us new knowledge: it is a synthetic statement.

If Kant is right, this is a breakthrough. Before him philosophers investigating the nature of reality treated it simply as something beyond us that causes our experience. Then the difficulty was how we could ever get access to that reality to say anything meaningful about it that was more than just guesswork. His great insight was that we could, by the power of reason, discover features of our own minds that tint all our experience. Sitting in an armchair thinking hard, we could make discoveries about reality that had to be true, yet weren't just true by definition: they could be informative. He believed that by logical argument he had done the equivalent of proving that the world must necessarily appear pink to us. He'd not only proved that we are wearing rose-tinted spectacles, but had also made new discoveries about the various shades of pink that these glasses contribute to all experience.

Having answered to his satisfaction the fundamental issues about our relation to reality, Kant turned his attention to moral philosophy.



The Owl of Minerva

GEORG W.F. HEGEL

‘The owl of Minerva flies only at dusk.’ This was the view of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). But what does it mean? Actually, that question ‘What does it mean?’ is one that readers of Hegel’s works ask themselves a lot. His writing is fiendishly difficult, partly because, like Kant’s, it is mostly expressed in very abstract language and often uses terms that he has himself invented. No one, perhaps not even Hegel, has understood all of it. The statement about the owl is one of the easier parts to decipher. This is his way of telling us that wisdom and understanding in the course of human history will only come fully at a late stage, when we’re looking back on what has already happened, like someone looking back on the events of a day as night falls.

Minerva was the Roman goddess of wisdom, and she was usually associated with the wise owl. Whether Hegel was wise or foolish is much debated, but he was certainly influential. His

view that history would unfold in a particular way inspired Karl Marx (see Chapter 27) and so certainly changed what happened, since Marx's ideas stirred revolutions in Europe in the early twentieth century. But Hegel also irritated many philosophers. Some philosophers even treated his work as an example of the risk of using terms imprecisely. Bertrand Russell (see Chapter 31) came to despise it, and A.J. Ayer (see Chapter 32) declared that most of Hegel's sentences expressed nothing at all. For Ayer, Hegel's writing was no more informative than nonsense verse and considerably less appealing. Others, including Peter Singer (see Chapter 40), have found great depth in his thought, and argue that his writing is difficult because the ideas he is struggling with are so original and hard to grasp.

Hegel was born in Stuttgart, in what is now Germany, in 1770 and grew up in the era of the French Revolution when the monarchy there was overthrown and a new republic established. He called it 'a glorious dawn' and with his fellow students planted a tree to commemorate the events. This time of political instability and radical transformation influenced him for the rest of his life. There was a real sense that fundamental assumptions could be overturned, that what seemed to be fixed for all time needn't be. One insight this led to was the way in which the ideas that we have are directly related to the time we live in and can't be fully understood outside their historical context. Hegel believed that in his own lifetime a crucial stage in history had been reached. On a personal level he progressed from obscurity to fame. He began his working life as a private tutor to a wealthy family before moving on to be a headmaster of a school. Eventually he was made a professor at the university in Berlin. Some of his books were originally lecture notes written up to help his students understand his philosophy. By the time of his death he was the best-known and most admired

philosopher of his time. This is quite amazing, given how difficult his writing can be. But a group of enthusiastic students dedicated themselves to understanding and discussing what he taught and bringing out both the political and metaphysical implications.

Heavily influenced by Immanuel Kant's metaphysics (see Chapter 19), Hegel came to reject Kant's view that noumenal reality lies beyond the phenomenal world. Rather than accepting that *noumena* lie beyond perception causing our experience, he concluded that the mind shaping reality just *is* reality. There is nothing beyond it. But this did not mean that reality remained in a fixed state. For Hegel, everything is in a process of change, and that change takes the form of a gradual increase in self-awareness, our state of self-awareness being fixed by the period in which we live.

Think of the whole of history as a long bit of paper folded up on itself. We can't really understand what is there until it has all been unfolded. Nor can we know what is written on the very last bit of paper until it is opened out. There is an underlying structure to the way it unfolds. For Hegel, reality is constantly moving towards its goal of understanding itself. History isn't in any sense random. It's going somewhere. When we look back over it we will see that it had to unfold like this. This is a strange idea when you first hear it. I suspect most people reading this won't share Hegel's view. History for most of us is closer to how Henry Ford described it: 'just one damned thing after another'. It is a series of things that happen without any overall plan. We can study history and discover the probable causes of events and predict something of what might happen in the future. But that doesn't mean it has an inevitable pattern in the way Hegel thought it did. It doesn't mean it's going somewhere. And it certainly doesn't mean it is gradually becoming aware of itself.

Hegel's study of history wasn't a separate activity from his philosophy, it was part of it: the main part of it. History and philosophy were entwined for him. And everything was driving towards something better. This wasn't an original idea. Religions usually explain history as leading to some end point, such as Christ's Second Coming. Hegel was a Christian, but his account was far from orthodox. For him, the final result wasn't the Second Coming. For Hegel, history has an end target, one that no one had really appreciated before. It's the gradual and inevitable coming to self-awareness of Spirit through the march of reason.

But what is Spirit? And what does it mean for it to become self-aware? The word for Spirit in German is *Geist*. Scholars disagree about its precise meaning; some prefer to translate it as 'Mind'. Hegel seems to mean by it something like the single mind of all humanity. Hegel was an idealist – he thought that this Spirit or Mind was fundamental and finds its expression in the physical world (in contrast, materialists believe that physical matter is basic). Hegel retold the history of the world in terms of gradual increases in individual freedom. We are moving from individual freedom, via freedom for some people but not others, towards a world in which everyone is free in a political state that allows them to contribute to that society.

One way he thought that we make progress in thought is by a clash between an idea and its opposite. Hegel believed that we can move closer to truth by following his dialectical method. First someone puts forward an idea – a thesis. This is then met with its contradiction, a view that challenges the first idea – its antithesis. From this clash of two positions, a more complex third position emerges, which takes account of both – a synthesis of the two. And then, more often than not, this starts the process again. The new synthesis becomes a thesis, and an

antithesis is put against it. All this keeps going until full self-understanding by Spirit occurs.

The main thrust of history turns out to be Spirit understanding its own freedom. Hegel traced this progress from those who lived under tyrannical rulers in Ancient China and India, who did not know that they were free, through to his own time. For these 'Orientals', only the supremely powerful ruler experienced freedom. In Hegel's view, the ordinary people had no awareness at all of freedom. The Ancient Persians were little more sophisticated in their appreciation of freedom. They were defeated by the Greeks, and this brought progress. The Greeks and later the Romans were more aware of freedom than those who went before them. Yet they still kept slaves. This showed that they didn't fully appreciate that humanity as a whole should be free, not just the wealthy or the powerful. In a famous passage in his book *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), he discussed the struggle between a master and a slave. The master wants to be recognized as a self-conscious individual and needs the slave in order to achieve this: but without acknowledging that the slave merits recognition too. This unequal relationship leads to a struggle, with one dying. But this is self-defeating. Eventually master and slave come to recognize their need for each other, and the need to respect each other's freedom.

But, Hegel claimed, it was only with Christianity, which triggered an awareness of spiritual value, that genuine freedom became possible. In his own time history realized its goal. Spirit became aware of its own freedom and society was as a result ordered by principles of reason. This was very important to him: true freedom only arose from a properly organized society. What worries many readers of Hegel is that in the sort of ideal society imagined by Hegel those who don't fit in with the powerful organizers' view of society will, in the name of freedom, be forced

to accept this 'rational' way of living. They will, in Rousseau's paradoxical phrase, be 'forced to be free' (see Chapter 18).

The end result of all history turned out to be Hegel himself coming to an awareness of the structure of reality. He seemed to think he had achieved that in the final pages of one of his books. That was the point at which Spirit first understood itself. Like Plato (see Chapter 1), then, Hegel gave a special position to philosophers. Plato, you'll remember, believed that philosopher-kings should rule his ideal republic. Hegel, in contrast, thought philosophers could achieve a particular kind of self-understanding that was also an understanding of reality and of all history, another way of enacting the words engraved at the Temple of Apollo in Delphi: 'Know Thyself'. It is philosophers, he believed, who come to realize the ultimate unfolding pattern of human events. They appreciate the way that the dialectic has produced a gradual awakening. Suddenly everything becomes clear to them and the point of the whole of human history becomes obvious. Spirit enters a new phase of self-understanding. That's the theory anyway.

Hegel had many admirers, but Arthur Schopenhauer was not one of them. He thought Hegel wasn't really a philosopher at all because he lacked seriousness and honesty in the way he approached the subject. As far as Schopenhauer was concerned, Hegel's philosophy was nonsense. Hegel, for his part, described Schopenhauer as 'loathsome and ignorant'.