

# A Lonely Man in a Distant Backwater



## Katarzyna Kasia

Department of Culture Theory, Faculty of Management of Visual Culture,  
Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw

**Katarzyna Kasia, PhD**  
is a philosopher, a graduate of the Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology, University of Warsaw, a recipient of grants from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Kościuszko Foundation, and a visiting scholar at Princeton University. A lecturer at the Department of Culture Theory, Faculty of Management of Visual Culture, Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. A regular contributor to the weekly *Kultura Liberalna* and a frequent political commentator in the Polish media.  
katarzyna.kasia@asp.waw.pl

The “greatest revolution in the history of philosophy was carried out by a lonely man living off in a distant backwater” – this is what the great Polish philosopher Władysław Tatarkiewicz wrote about Immanuel Kant in the second volume of his *Historia filozofii* [History of Philosophy]. It would be hard to find a pithier assertion – one containing not only a concise biographical synopsis and a brief overview of the geopolitics of the late eighteenth century, but also an extremely potent philosophical diagnosis that situates its author in a very specific place in Europe’s heritage of thought.

Let us start by considering the revolution itself, which Kant himself very modestly called “Copernican.” What did the thinker from Königsberg come up with that forever redefined how we perceive and describe our relationship with the world? Was it truly

a breakthrough on par with the paradigm-shifting heliocentric model put forward by Nicolaus Copernicus? What was it that made Kant’s proposals so original and groundbreaking?

Before Kant, the theory of knowledge had been characterized by a division into what relates to the subject vs. what relates to the object. The job of epistemology, then, was to determine what roles should be ascribed to these factors in the cognitive process. In the most general terms, it was assumed that the active element was either the subject, which acquires knowledge, or the object, which presents itself to the subject in a way that depends on a variety of factors. The division between the active and the passive could vary. Regardless of the model, however, there was always an assumption of binarity, of a fundamental difference between the subject of cognition



**Jacek Łyżba,**  
*Landscape with a Bonfire,*  
a work exhibited in Galeria Art.  
galeriaart.pl

GALERIAART.PL/PL

and its object. That difference appeared to be an inviolable dogma.

It would likely have remained so if a copy of David Hume's *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* had not somehow found its way to Königsberg, a distant backwater in Prussia. Although the author had intended for it to play a seminal role, Hume's book was not resonating much in the philosophical world of the time. It could even be said that its appearance had escaped almost everyone's attention – until, that is, a horse-drawn mail carriage brought it to Königsberg, where it ended up in the hands of a *Privatdozent* who worked at the university there. Kant read Hume's book in one sitting, experiencing what he later called his awakening from a dogmatic slumber. What did the alarm bell sound like?

In a nutshell, Hume argued in his book that the perceived connection between cause and effect does not actually exist. It is a human invention: one of the possible ways of structuring the world that is nonetheless not itself actually present in that world, at least not in the form in which we seem to notice it everywhere. Its existence turns out to be impossible to prove through inductive or deductive reasoning. But does this mean that we should live out our lives as if the Sun were not to rise tomorrow? Of course not, Hume argues, but we have to accept that probability is enough for us to get by on, that 100% certainty is a pipe dream both in daily life and in science.

Delighted and moved by the book, Kant concluded that Hume's discovery made it impossible to continue to treat epistemology in the same old way, using the existing dogmatic categories. The Copernican Revolution that Kant effected, the turning-point that marked the start of the whole of critical philosophy, was the realization that the object and the subject condition each other in the process of cognition. Neither element is passive, the two inform one other, and the answers the world gives us depend on the questions we ask. The human mind has certain properties and cognitive capacities, so it cannot study the world in respects that go beyond these properties and capacities. Consequently, we realize that – just as with cause and effect – we tend to observe such mechanisms or regularities in the world as we want to see, rather than those that are actually present in it. According to Kant, this results from the very structure of our cognition, which we can analyze in action through a kind of scrutiny that he calls transcendental. This revolution would become the foundation on which Kant would build the impressive edifice of critical philosophy, resting upon the triple pillars of pure reason, practical reason, and esthetic judgment.

This awakening and the subsequent description of “the study of two sources of human knowledge,” which not only equated the importance of empirical and intellectual cognition, but also introduced the



GALERIAART.PL/PL

concept of the mutual exercise of cognitive powers – would indeed become the greatest philosophical breakthrough, one that would render it impossible to go back to the belief that we can discover things as they really are. In each case, our mind is already pre-conditioned by a need to scrutinize things, by a goal. In each case, it is also inscribed into a network of a priori forms of sensibility, or into space and time, very aptly described by another great Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski as glasses which we are born wearing and which we cannot take off. This is why we only have access to phenomena, whereas things themselves remain inaccessible – not because they are situated in some superhuman dimension, but because the nature of the human mind is such that humans are unable to perceive anything without placing it into space and time.

Kant's awakening from his dogmatic slumber would mark the beginning of gigantic philosophical effort on his part, but it would nevertheless not alter the regular routine of his lonely life. The inhabitants of Königsberg would continue to set their watches by the rhythm of his daily walks, and meals would continue to arrive on his table very promptly. He would never commit himself to a relationship with anyone, nor abandon his provincial university. He would be equally punctual in arriving at parties hosted by local notables, regaling guests with tales of distant travels and exotic adventures he had never actually experienced.

We could, of course, wonder whether this profound revolution could have been attained in any other way. Without Kant's iron discipline, would it have been possible to achieve it so fully, to describe it on paper? Whenever I recall the quote from Tatarkiewicz, I feel in my heart a gentle sting of yearning for peace and quiet, for a life that could be devoted entirely to thinking. ■

**Krzysztof Pająk,**  
*DNA codes Red,*  
 a work exhibited  
 in Galeria Art.  
[galeriaart.pl](http://galeriaart.pl)