

**Reason, Freedom,
and the Continuing Revolution
of Kantian Thought**

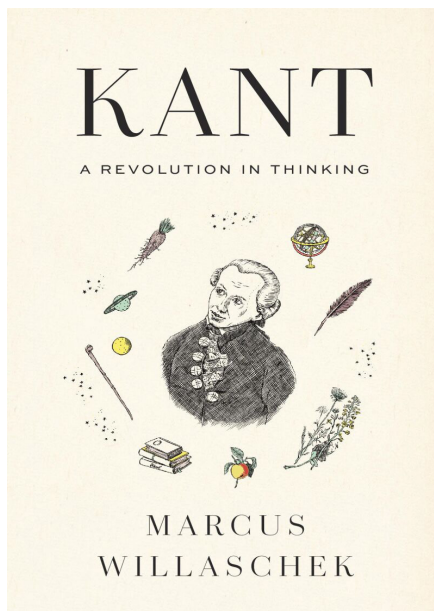
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Willaschek, Marcus: *Kant: A Revolution in Thinking*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2025. 368 pp. Translated by Peter Lewis. ISBN 9780674296107.

Marcus Willaschek's *Kant: A Revolution in Thinking* is an unusually successful book. It manages to do something many introductions promise and few achieve: it presents Kant in his full systematic range without reducing him either to a museum monument or to a specialist's puzzle. The volume, first appeared in German in 2023 as *Kant: Die Revolution des Denkens*, Verlag C. H. Beck oHG, München, reaches the Anglophone world in Peter Lewis's lucid translation. The result deserves a wide readership, not only among students encountering Kant for the first time, but also among scholars interested in how Kant can be reintroduced to the public without distortion.

The organizing idea is stated from the outset: Kant's philosophy is revolutionary in at least three senses. There is, first, the personal revolution in Kant's own moral self-understanding; second, the famous revolution in metaphysics and epistemology associated with the *Critique of Pure Reason*.



son; and third, the political revolution represented by the French Revolution and its impact on Kant's later thought. Willaschek uses this triadic frame to connect biography, doctrine, and historical context in a way that feels organic rather than schematic. It allows him to portray Kant neither as a detached professor nor as a merely textual philosopher, but as a thinker responding to crises of religion, politics, science, and moral life.

The book is divided into thirty relatively short thematic chapters, arranged not chronologically but by domains: politics and history, morality, law and society, human nature, metaphysics, and legacy. This decision is wise. Readers are introduced first to Kant's practical philosophy before being led into the more forbidding terrain of transcendental idealism and the antinomies. Anyone who has taught Kant knows how often beginners are repelled by premature immersion in the Transcendental Deduction. Willaschek instead starts from questions that remain recognizably ours: peace, coercion, dignity, religion, property, cosmopolitanism, education. Only later does he turn to space, objectivity, things in themselves, and freedom.

This practical orientation is not merely pedagogical. It reflects Willaschek's substantive interpretation of Kant. He emphasizes what he calls the primacy of practice: Kant's conviction that reason is not exhausted by theoretical cognition but is essentially oriented toward action. That thesis gives coherence to the whole presentation. Thus *Perpetual Peace* is treated not as an occasional pamphlet but as integral to Kant's system; the doctrine of dignity is connected to autonomy rather than sentiment; religion is read through moral reason rather than ecclesiastical dogma. Even readers who disagree with aspects of this emphasis will recognize that it captures something central in Kant's self-understanding.

One of the book's strongest achievements is its treatment of Kant's political philosophy. The chapter on perpetual peace is especially fine. Willaschek avoids the two standard caricatures: Kant as naïve pacifist and Kant as cold legal formalist. He shows instead a thinker deeply aware of conflict, ambition, and the fragility of institutions, yet unwilling to surrender the regulative ideal of a lawful international order. In our own moment, when cosmopolitan hopes are widely dismissed as sentimental residues of the 1990s, this reconstruction has genuine force. Willaschek's Kant is realistic without cynicism.

The chapters on morality are similarly accomplished. The categorical imperative is explained with admirable economy and without the usual textbook stiffness. Willaschek rightly insists that Kantian morality is not

a machine for deriving answers but a discipline of reflective self-legislation. He is also attentive to the social dimensions of respect, obligation, and reciprocal recognition. Particularly effective is the chapter linking Rousseau to Kant's mature conception of dignity. Here Willaschek reminds us that autonomy in Kant is not aristocratic self-sufficiency but the equal worth of persons irrespective of rank, talent, or fortune.

Where the book is especially refreshing is in its willingness to discuss Kant's defects without making them the interpretive center. Willaschek explicitly addresses Kant's racist remarks, anti-Jewish prejudices, and demeaning judgments about women and homosexuality, stating plainly that these views are indefensible and fall beneath the level of Kant's best insights. Yet he resists the now familiar ritual in which every historical thinker is measured chiefly by present moral failure. This balance is intellectually mature. It neither excuses nor sensationalizes.

On the theoretical side, the exposition of transcendental idealism is clear and responsible. Willaschek avoids both metaphysical melodrama and deflationary trivialization. He presents Kant's central claim as the objectivity of the human standpoint: experience is structured by forms and concepts that are not copied from things but supplied by the conditions of cognition. That formulation is apt, though some specialists may wish for a sharper distinction between epistemic conditions and ontological commitments. Likewise, readers hoping for sustained engagement with current analytic debates on idealism, affection, or nonconceptual content will not find it here. But that is not the book's aim. It is synthetic rather than interventionist.

There are, inevitably, limits to a project of this breadth. The chapter format sometimes produces brisk transitions where deeper argumentative reconstruction would have been welcome. Specialists may also feel that figures central to Kant's reception—Fichte, Hegel, neo-Kantianism, Rawls, Habermas—receive less sustained treatment than they merit. At moments Willaschek's admiration for Kant leads him to understate unresolved tensions, especially between universalism and anthropology, legality and politics, or moral rigorism and empirical psychology. Yet these are criticisms of omission rather than distortion.

A word should be said about style. The prose is lively, urbane, and free of needless jargon. Anecdotes about Königsberg society, Mendelssohn, the French Revolution, or Kant's domestic routines are used not as ornament but as interpretive openings. Lewis's translation reads naturally and preserves cadence without pedantry. The English edition should therefore

travel far beyond German-speaking Kant scholarship.

What, finally, is the significance of this book? It lies in recovering Kant as a philosopher of modern freedom whose questions remain unfinished. How can reason be authoritative without dogmatism? How can law secure liberty rather than suppress it? How can moral equality survive social hierarchy? How can peace become more than an interval between wars? How can objectivity be humanly conditioned without collapsing into relativism? Willaschek shows that Kant still matters because these questions still matter.

This is not a technical monograph that alters the state of a specialized debate. It is something rarer: a large-scale interpretive introduction written by a first-rate scholar at the height of his powers. It will bring new readers to Kant and give experienced readers occasion to revisit familiar texts under a unifying perspective. In an age of shrinking attention and expanding noise, that is no small achievement.

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