

Book Review

***Immanuel Kant*, Lucien
Goldmann. 2011. New York:
Verso (240 pages).**

Ask any philosopher who Immanuel Kant is, and they will say that he is one of the most important figures in philosophy. There will be no dispute and no argument; a rare thing in such a discipline. However, if you press them to elaborate, you will realise that the answers vary to the point where you would think there is more than one Immanuel Kant in philosophy. I can assure you that there is only one famous Immanuel Kant but he is large and he contains a multitude. He has accomplished so many things that it would be a herculean task to explain all of them. To pick only a handful would be like saying that Aristotle is a great philosopher because of his work on friendship. The situation is even more complicated when many philosophers take certain aspects of Kant's philosophy to be their own starting point, goal or methodology. Interpreting Kant is essentially interpreting a philosophy Bible. Some would go so far as to say that the whole of twentieth-century philosophy is a war between philosophers to be Kant's rightful heir (Cutrofello pp. 1-2).

Lucien Goldmann's *Immanuel Kant* is one of the many attempts to claim the Kantian throne. It is no an ordinary attempt though. Contrary to its plain English name, this book is one of the most special treatments on Kant that I have ever read. Its German name, *Mensch, Gemeinschaft und Welt in der Philosophie Immanuel Kants* (*Man,*

Community and World in Immanuel Kant's Philosophy) captures its theme perfectly since this is a book on Kant by a Marxist philosopher.

True to its German name this book studies Kant through his main project – the inquiry into the nature of man. Goldmann does this by introducing readers to Kant's world where Kant is a tragic figure who tries to reach the so-called totality, an impossible dream which a human being must dream. On the surface, one may take this to be the case of the noumenal world but Goldmann argues that Kant had to face this impossibility not only as a man who was finite but also as a Prussian who had to live in a limited society. He argues for this position by appealing to the state of philosophy in Kant's Prussia where the intellectual (i.e. Kant) had no hope of convincing the public of their philosophical project but an intellectual who, by definition, must try to the best of their ability to do so.

This is where Goldmann's Marxism comes into play. He argues that Kantian philosophy cannot transcend this problem because it only recognise the emptiness of individualism but cannot come up with a Marxist solution. In other words, Kant's realm of ends is merely a prototype for Communism.

I must salute Goldmann for his insights into Kantian tragedy and at the same time question some of his readings. I shall begin with the salutation. Goldmann brilliantly quote Kant's famous statement: act as if the maxim of your action were to become through your will a universal law

of nature. Goldmann observes that the goal of this statement, a universal law of nature, is sublime. The means, willpower, is admirable. The reality, however, is tragic. We can only act *as if* it is the case. Humans must try to cross the abyss from our meaningful goal to the realized one but we will never be successful. To the best of my knowledge, Goldmann is the first to have observed this tragedy in Kantian philosophy.

More insightful readings can be found in this book. For instance, Goldmann asks why Kant insists that ethics must apply to any rational being when Kant believes that man knows the world aesthetically (through perception rather than logic.) According to Goldmann, aesthetic ethics fails because it does not force us to see things from a universal perspective. Reason alone can make us see the contradiction in the belief that moral law should be necessary and universal, yet there should be an exception when it suits us.

Nevertheless, I cannot let this brilliant scholarship distract me from the obvious flaws in this book. The most obvious is his comparison between German and French philosophy. Goldmann states that “All the great German philosophical systems start out from the problem of morals, from the ‘practical’, a problem virtually unknown to French philosophers before Bergson” (p. 41). A student of philosophy will be puzzled by this statement. Surely, Goldmann must include Leibniz as a great German philosopher but Leibniz is not known for his interest in ethics. It is questionable that such a generalization can

apply to many other great German philosopher such as Wolff, Mendelsohn, Hamann etc. It is even more questionable when we come to realize that Rousseau, a great influence on Kant, is a French moral philosopher. Furthermore, Voltaire himself was a major figure in Prussia before Kant. These obvious counter examples should, without irony, make us question the generalisations in this book.

Another major flaw is Goldmann’s insistence on using a Marxist reading. I have nothing against trying a method but Goldmann should realise that some of his reading is obviously problematic. Goldmann claims that the noumenal world is a bourgeois concept. He argues that this particular mode of production and economy leads us to believe that reality is different from perception. This is possible but the ancient upper-class such as Plato and Buddha had already proposed that reality is different from perception long before the rise of bourgeois.

Should we read this book then? This a fruitful and unique *tour de force* from a Marxist scholar on Kant. In spite of its flaws, it is a categorical imperative that we do so.

References

- Cutrofello, Andrew. 2005. *Continental Philosophy: A Contemporary Introduction*. Routledge.
- Goldmann, Lucien. 2011. *Immanuel Kant*. London and New York: Verso.

Reviewed by
Teerabhat Ruensiri
Lecturer
Department of History, Philosophy and
Literature
Thammasat University
Bangkok, Thailand