

Editorial

MALONEWS—gnawing at the roots of academic psychology

**Kant's Abstammung: Schottland?**

“Immanuel Kant,” aka Emmanuel Cant, is widely regarded as the greatest of modern philosophers, though John Stuart Mill, A.J. Ayer, and Bertrand Russell dispute that opinion. And his is usually thought of as the essence of Germanic thinking; without him, who can imagine Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Lipps, Müller (Johannes, not Georg), Wundt, or Wertheimer? Yet we often run across references to his *Scottish* origins - Will Durant called him “the canny Scot from Königsburg” and others claim that *both* of his parents were Scots! Unglaublich? Um des Himmels willen? How might one get to the bottom of this issue?

After several sleepless nights, filled with Deutung-laden Träume, I decided to look thoroughly into the matter to determine the true and the ganz Wahrheit. Luckily, the University of Tennessee/Knoxville library possesses a collection of over fifty thousand volumes dealing with matters other than Appalachian history and the American Civil War, and this includes over 250 books on and by Kant (Hume is about equally represented). Poring through the dozens (or so it seemed) of biographies of Kant, the same themes reappeared again and again, though with slight variations. Had I the Vernunft to sort it all out, Ich wundere mich, as chaotic as it seemed?

As it turned out, extracting the essence through use of the categories that constitute the a priori structure of the human mind proved ganz leicht. It was a matter of sorting histories written by authors strongly influenced by self-interest, a bias the more easily indulged as the facts of Kant's lineage are so wenig. Bear in mind that Kant's folks were peasants indeed — his dad, John, and granddad, Dick, made leather straps used by saddlers, and records of the lives of such ordinary people are scanty. His mom, Anna, was a strapmaker's daughter from Nürnberg — German, but also undistinguished. Though details were lacking, most of the biographers agreed on the main features of the story, which runs as follows.

In 1797 Kant was told by “schwedischen Bischof Lindblom” that his grandfather Dick (Richard Cant) had served in the Swedish army. Kant replied that this was nicht Wahr and that Dick was actually “einer von den vielen gewesen sei, die am Ende des vorigen ... Jahrhunderts aus Schottland ... in großen Haufen emigrierten ... ein guter Teil sich unterwegs auch in Schweden, der Rest aber in Preußen ... und weiter, das derselbe in Tilsit gestorben sei.”

Now, one needs no knowledge of German to see that *Kant* believed his grandfather to have come

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Editor's note: MALONEWS, the acerbic musings of historiophile psychologist John Malone, has circulated in *samizdat* for several years. Now we are able to bring Malone's comments to a wider audience, in the form of an occasional column in *Behavioural Processes*.

from Scotland and that Dick died in Tilsit! The Kant quotations come from an “establishment” German biography by Karl Vorländer (1911/1974) that goes on lamely to suggest that Kant was mistaken and that perhaps “der Großvater in ganz jugendlichen Jahren mit seinem Vater aus Schottland eingewandert wäre...” und so weiter. He took a vacation to Scotland as a Jugend, as if that were normal vacation behavior for Prussians of the seventeenth Jahrhunderts? What Unsinn!

I translated the rest of Vorländer’s fanciful argument and it came out literal nonsense, notwithstanding my minor in German from SUNYA. There may be no truth to be gotten from German historians — a great pity, since they are deferred to by all others as the authorities. There is warrant for this — consider Diels and Zeller, the greatest authorities on ancient Greek philosophy — but it makes tracing Kant’s Stammbaum sehr schwer. German historians insist that Kant was German, dismissing his contrary protestations.

British biographers could possibly be more impartial, so I examined a standard source by an Oxford fellow and tutor, who in 1882 (Blackwood and Sons) traced Kant’s lineage, concluding that “A direct and detailed confirmation of the belief which the philosopher thus expressed in his seventy-third year cannot be given, but there can be no real doubts as to his Scotch origin.” This biographer noted that around 1700 Danzig, Poland (then Prussian) was swarming with Scots and that a suburb was even called Alt-Schottland. And there are Cants in Scotland, such as the Rev. Andrew Cant of Aberdeen, famed in the mid-17th century. So Kant’s story gains credibility, but the author of this biographical piece was William Wallace, perhaps Scottish himself (“Scots wha hae wi Wallace bled, Scots wham Bruce has aften led...”)? Can such a writer be trusted?

Perhaps a Russian biography would tell a different tale, I thought, since the Slavs had no dog in this fight, so I examined the first Russian biography of Kant that I chanced upon. According to Arsenij Gulyga (1987, trans. Marijan Despalatovic), “Kant claimed that he was of Scottish ancestry. As it turns out, the philosopher was wrong: his great-grandfather, Richard Kant, was of Baltic descent, born in Prökuls, in what is today Latvia.” As evidence, the reader is referred to the 1953 Jahrbuch der Albertus-Universität Königsberg! Sure, having just fallen off the beet truck, I’ll consult a journal from the period when Königsberg was Kaliningrad, part of the now-zerstreut USSR! Good story, Arsenji, I’m sure the bosses back in the Kremlin gave you a bonus for cooking up that story.

The most authoritative-seeming biography was published in 1882/1986 and authored by J.H.W. (John Henry Wilbrandt) Stuckenberg (1835–1903), born in Hanover, a Lutheran priest, moved to America and served as chaplain with the 145th Pennsylvania Volunteers, was a pastor in Berlin, member of the Berlin Philosophical Society, usw. There’s the scholar to dig out the truth! Stuckenberg examined the old Prussian newspapers and the April 23rd funeral address for Kant, as well as Kant’s records from Friedrich Wilhelm High.

At FWH Kant’s name was spelled five ways (Cant, Candt, Cante, Kant, Kandt) and, as several sources claim, Manny may have changed the spelling of the original “Cant,” since he was teased that it could be pronounced “Tsant.” His first name owed to the fact that 22 April in the old Eastern Prussian calendar was the day of St. Emanuel (spelled variously). John Henry, finally a professor of theology at Wittenberg College in Ohio, surveyed the evidence and concluded that “we have in Kant a union of the blood of the two nations which are most distinguished for their metaphysical speculations, namely the Scotch and the German.” I take that as the final word and, while many doubt that Kant was really Scottish, all agree that Manny Cant surely thought he was.

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