

# Kant and the prominent tone of superiority

## *Kant e o enaltecido tom de superioridade*

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**Abstract:** The paper discusses Kant's views on the alleged tone of superiority in philosophy, a topic which the philosopher directly addressed in the paper called *On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy*. It attempts to provide a somewhat systematic approach regarding this particular subject, while also connecting it to pivotal themes in Kant's philosophy, like philosophy as labor, enlightenment, knowledge (and wisdom) within the limits of theoretical reason and perpetual peace.

**Keywords:** Enlightenment; Kant; philosophical labor; knowledge; superiority; wisdom.

**Resumo:** Este artigo discute a percepção de Kant sobre o suposto tom de superioridade na filosofia, um tema que o filósofo abordou diretamente no artigo intitulado *Sobre um recentemente enaltecido tom de distinção na filosofia*. Pretende-se apresentar uma abordagem sistemática do tópico, conectando-o a temas centrais da filosofia kantiana, como filosofia como trabalho, esclarecimento, conhecimento (e sabedoria) nos limites da razão teórica e da paz perpétua.

**Palavras-chave:** Iluminismo; Kant; trabalho filosófico; conhecimento; superioridade; sabedoria.

### “Vornehm”

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm point out in their dictionary that the adjective “*vornehm*” was narrowed in their time to the meaning of an advantage through birth and rank (VORNEHM, 2025). We are also dealing with this narrowing of the meaning of “*vornehm*” in the texts of Kant, which I want to discuss. Young people today whose native language is German still understand this adjective in this meaning, but it is rarely actively used anymore. In the 1960s and 1970s, this word was still used more often in the sense of “*Vornehm-Tun*”, which means something like pretending to be superior or noble. Someone “*tut vornehm*” (acts noble) if this person at least temporarily displays the behavior of an upper social class (a more noble class), even though he or she does not belong to this class. The behavior of “*vornehm tun*” also includes the attitude of not wanting to do menial work or of thinking oneself superior to it. In this sense, there is something arrogant and presumptuous about “*vornehm tun*”.

In Kant’s time, when society was much more hierarchically structured than it is in Germany today, there was nothing offensive about saying that a person was “*vornehm*” (noble). She was then usually a noble or aristocratic person. In this respect, one can say of a person in Kant’s time that they were “*vornehm*” (noble or superior) without wanting to say anything negative about them. The use of the adjective “*vornehm*” becomes problematic in philosophy, which is about the giving and taking of reasons. The reasons are important and not the person who presents them: it is about reasons regardless of the person. A person’s status and rank are irrelevant, and their social class does not matter. That’s why you can’t be “*vornehm*” (noble or aristocratic) in philosophy. But you can pretend to be superior or noble (“*Vornehm tun*”) in philosophy, precisely when you believe that you can rise above the give and take of reasons because you believe you have privileged access to the truth. The “*vornehme Ton*” (tone of superiority) has no place in philosophy.

And this is precisely what Kant wants to demonstrate in his essay *On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy*. He argues not only against Schlosser, but against an entire group of philosophers who, while claiming to be enlightened, used their superior tone to absolve themselves of philosophical work and thus undermined the Enlightenment. Here, Kant’s line of thought will be traced, which is clearly directed against the refined tone in philosophy, because the latter believes it can dispense with elaborate argumentation in favor of intuitive insight.

### The addressees of Kant’s essays of 1796

In his essay *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie* (*On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy*)<sup>1</sup>, Kant does not specify who raised this tone of superiority. In his essay *Kants Kniefall vor der verschleierten Isis*, Norbert Klatt quotes a letter from Johann Georg Schlosser to Johann Georg Jacobi, in which Schlosser sees himself as the addressee of Kant’s essay from the *Berlinische Monatschrift* (May of 1796). Schlosser, who married Goethe’s sister Cornelia, was also in contact with Count Friedrich Leopold zu Stolberg. Johann Georg Jacobi, in turn, was the brother of the philosopher Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi. Princess Amalie von Gallitzin, in whose garden the Königsberg philosopher Johann Georg Hamann was buried, also belonged to this circle. She maintained contact with the Dutch philosopher Frans Hemsterhuis, who in turn plays an important role in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi’s book on Spinoza. This circle can

<sup>1</sup> I use the English translation of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, edited by Henry Allison and Peter Heath (2002).

be assigned to the literary movement of *Empfindsamkeit* (sentimentalism), in which an intimate relationship with God should be cultivated<sup>2</sup>.

Even if Kant does not name a specific addressee in his essay on the “tone of superiority”, this circle and Schlosser in particular can be identified as the addressee. In his essay from December of 1796 (also published in the *Berlinische Monatschrift*), called *Verkündigung des nahen Abschlusses eines Tractats zum ewigen Frieden in der Philosophie* (*Proclamation of the imminent conclusion of a treaty of perpetual peace in philosophy*), Kant also explicitly refers to Schlosser (Kant AA 8:419). With this essay, Kant responded to Schlosser’s reply to his essay on the “tone of superiority”.

### Philosophy as labor

“Philosophy” as a title for an activity is also used “as a decorative title for the understanding possessed by uncommon thinkers” (Kant AA 8:389/CE 431). And recently thinkers have emerged who are described by Kant as “*philosophus per inspirationem*” (Kant AA 8:389/CE 431), who cannot communicate the wisdom or knowledge they have acquired. The theoretical use of reason is denied knowledge of the supersensible. Such insight would be based on either a discursive or intuitive mind/understanding. The intuitive mind/understanding, which would “grasp and present the object immediately, and all at once” (Kant AA 8:389/CE 431) by means of an intellectual intuition, is superior to the discursive mind, because the latter has to work through concepts to develop its knowledge little by little, for what purpose sensual perception must first provide him with material. According to Kant, it can be explained “by the naturally self-seeking tendency in man” (Kant AA 8:389/CE 431) that an inclination arises to attribute to oneself an intuitive understanding in order to look down contemptuously on those who only have a discursive one, which they can use to gain knowledge. Anyone who attributes to themselves an intuitive understanding with which they believe they can acquire knowledge of the supernatural is already adopting an attitude that can be described as “*vornehm*” (noble or superior). And since we know that we do not have such an intuitive understanding, such a person is one who “*vornehm tut*” (pretends to be superior).

Kant distinguishes those “who *have enough to live on*” (Kant AA 8:390/CE 431) from those who have to work. And those who don’t have to work think of themselves as “*Vornehme*” (nobles or superiors or aristocrats). Knowledge is something you have to work for, but the type of “philosopher of *intuition*” (Kant AA 8:390/CE 432) who think that they only have to listen to an “oracle within” (themselves) (Kant AA 8:390/CE 431) in order to participate in the whole knowledge that philosophers strive for.

things have lately gone so far that an alleged philosophy is openly proclaimed to the public, in which one does not have to work, but need only hearken and attend to the oracle within, in order to gain complete possession of all the wisdom to which philosophy aspires (Kant AA 8:390 / CE 431).

### The origins of the tone of superiority in the ancient philosophy of mathematics

In Kant’s interpretation of Plato’s philosophy, he asked himself how we can have a priori knowledge that goes beyond our *a priori* concepts? He saw that we have such knowledge in mathematics. After Kant, Plato already asked himself the question: “How are synthetic propositions possible

<sup>2</sup>I don’t want to provide a definition of the literary movement of *Empfindsamkeit*, but rather just say that this circle around the Princess von Gallitzin, the Count of Stolberg and the Jacobi brothers is just a branch of the German-speaking *Empfindsamkeit*.

a priori?” (Kant AA 8:391 Footnote/CE 433). Since Plato did not consider that there was such a thing as pure sensory intuition, he assumed that our mind would have intuitions (ideas), but in our life, when the soul is bound in a body, we can only access them via “an intuiting of copies (*ectypa*)” (Kant AA 8:391/CE 432). For Kant, freeing oneself from physical restrictions in order to grasp the archetypes (ideas) themselves is the beginning of the enthusiasm for which Plato “put the torch” (Kant AA 8:392/CE 432).

Aristotle receives a different assessment from Kant: “The philosophy of Aristotle, on the other hand, is work” (Kant AA 8:393/CE 434). Aristotle made the mistake of extending the application of his categories to the supersensible, but the crucial difference is that for him philosophy has not to fall into a tone of superiority, but was work. It does not rely on a special cognitive faculty that we do not have, but is limited to giving and taking reasons.

### **The tone of superiority in the modern philosophy**

Anyone who philosophizes – and this also applies to superior people – enters a field of “civil equality” (Kant AA 8:394/CE 415). Here Kant distinguishes “philosophizing and making philosophers” (Kant AA 8:394/CE 435): “The latter happens in the tone of superiority, if despotism over the reason of the people (and over one’s own reason), by fettering it to a blind belief, is given out as philosophy” (Kant AA 8:394 Footnote/CE 435). Kant sees the tone of superiority within philosophy as a danger for philosophy itself.

No one should expect indulgence from those who raise a tone of superiority within philosophy, because in philosophy there is “freedom and equality in matters of mere reason” (Kant AA 8:394/CE 435). The person who refers to his feelings – or even “higher feelings” (CE 435) – In his philosophical argument also uses a tone of superiority, “for who will dispute my feelings with me” (Kant AA 8:395/CE 435). By invoking a feeling that is only accessible privately, one evades the public exchange of reasons and claims privileged access to particular reasons. Kant rejects a form of argument that claims to grasp an object through a feeling and pretends to be above communicating it through concepts. Taking up the legal diction of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant says that the legality of the title of possession that one has acquired through feeling must first be proven. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, no ability that we humans have that could prove the legitimacy of such knowledge could be identified.

However, the note in the next page (Kant AA 8:395/CE 436) makes it clear that in rejecting the appeal to feelings, Kant is concerned not only with the theoretical but also with the practical use of reason. Here it is important for him to distinguish between a pathological and a moral feeling as the determining factor of the will. The moral feeling does not precede the moral law, but follows from it, while the pathological feeling as the determining factor of the will can never be moral. We are then dealing with a material determining ground of the will and from this - Kant emphasizes this again clearly - only maxims of happiness can follow. In practical philosophy, appealing to a feeling does not, in principle, lead to a practical law.

### **The hunch/intuition (*Ahnung*)**

Kant had already written in the note in Kant AA 8:394/CE 435 that the tone of superiority in philosophy will annihilate it through “by obscurating” (Kant AA 8:394/CE 435). Kant takes up this idea of the end or death of philosophy through the tone of superiority again when he talks

about the division of what is believed to be true into knowledge, belief and opinion, because his opponents of the tone of superiority want to expand this division to include the “*intuition* of the super-sensible” (Kant AA 8:397/CE438). In relying on such an *intuition* or hunch there is “an overleap (*salto mortale*) from concepts to the unthinkable” (Kant AA 8:398/438). The call to perform a *salto mortale* in philosophy goes back to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, who called for such a *salto mortale* from pure, rational, argumentative philosophy to faith in opposition to Spinoza in a conversation with Lessing.

Whether Kant was alluding directly to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi or merely using the same term *salto mortale* cannot be said with absolute certainty, but the *intuition* or hunch as the basis for knowledge is in poor condition.

For intuition is obscure expectation, and contains the hope of a solution, though in matters of reason this is possible only through concepts; if these are transcendent, therefore, and can lead to no true knowledge of the object, they must necessarily promise a surrogate thereof, supernatural information (mystical illumination): which is then the death of all philosophy. (Kant AA 8:398/CE 438).

### The neoplatonism of Schlosser

Plato, as the author of the dialogues, is described by Kant as “Plato the academic” (Kant AA 8:398/CE 438) and although he was “the father of all enthusiasm *by the way of philosophy*” (Kant AA 8:398/CE 438), he is nevertheless acquitted of guilt. He distinguishes this academic Plato from the Plato who wrote the letters. Johann Georg Schlosser translated these letters from Greek into German. Kant cites quotations from the book with the new translation of the letters and comments on them:

Who can fail to see here the mystagogue, who not only raves on his own behalf, but is simultaneously the founder of a club, and in speaking to his adepts, rather than to the people (meaning all the uninitiated), plays the *superior* with his alleged philosophy! (Kant AA 8:399/CE 439)

In the theoretical use of reason, this leads to a theophany, which leads to idolatry. Worship of God becomes superstition. In practical use, feelings are foisted on reason which can only paralyze practical reason.

But the philosophers of feeling believe that the philosophy of feeling would make us better. Now, according to Kant, one can see that an action was good, but how much of this action can really be attributed to a moral attitude cannot be said on an empirical basis. We can only say whether an action was morally good if we know from which maxim it was carried out and whether this maxim can be generalized. Kant speaks here about the possibility of universalizability because this requirement cannot be met by feeling as a basis for practical rules. The philosopher of feeling wants to derive a practical principle from feeling and see reason used to support this feeling. In doing so, he overturns the relationship between feeling and reason on its head. His daring attempt at a *salto mortale* failed. With emphatic words, Kant reminds us that we can hear the inner voice of reason and follow it, even if all our inclinations and considerations of advantage speak against it.

What is it in me which brings it about that I can sacrifice the innermost allurements of my instincts, and all wishes that proceed from my nature, to a law which promises me no compensating advantage, and threatens no loss on its violation; a law, indeed, which I respect the more intimately, the more strictly it ordains, and the less it offers for doing so? (Kant AA 8:402/CE 442)

It is this question that, according to Kant, shows us “the magnitude and sublimity of the inward disposition in mankind” (Kant AA 8:402/CE 442) and creates in us a feeling that can make us morally better. It is a feeling that is not the foundation of reason, but is based on reason.

## Philosophy as work/labor and the defense of the Enlightenment

Here, Kant claims, Archimedes found his point “on which reason can apply its lever” (Kant AA 8:403/CE 442). This Archimedean point is found through philosophical work. To do this, it must be examined what the concepts of the understanding are and how far they extend. And to do this, the faculty of reason must be examined, including its possible theoretical and practical uses.

Kant suspects that the use of the tone of superiority represents a general attack on the Enlightenment. And this is the reason why he raises his voice against the tone of superiority.

To ensure such a claim did not strike me as superfluous at the present time, when adornment with the title of philosophy has become a matter of fashion, and the philosopher of vision (if we allow such a person) might – seeing how easy it is, by an audacious stroke, to attain without trouble to the summit of insight – be able unawares (since audacity is catching) to assemble a large following about him: [...]” (Kant AA 8:403/CE 443).

The bold visionary and his followers look down with disdain on the school-like form of academic philosophical work that clings so closely to the formal. The accusation against them is that they are a “pattern-factory” (*Formgebungsmanufactur*) (Kant AA 8:404/CE 443) and that they are completely replacing them.

Kant reminds us that the concentration on form, in theoretical philosophy as the study of the forms of intuitions and forms of thought, was the first to explain how synthetic judgments are possible *a priori*. Reason leads us into the supersensible and can only ensure the practical reality of the objects of the supersensible through its practical use. But this insight is also based on practical laws that only consider the generalizable form of the maxims.

Kant once again emphasizes that there is something livelier in this formal observation than there is in the bold, visionary observation of the superior (*Vornehmen*).

In both fields (theoretical and practical) it is not an arbitrary form-giving undertaken by design, or even machine-made (on behalf of the state), but above all a piece of handwork, dealing with the given object, and indeed with no thought of taking up and evaluating the preceding industrious and careful work of the subject, his own faculty (of reason); by contrast, the gentleman who opens up an oracle for the vision of the super-sensible will be unable to deny having contrived it by a mechanical manipulation of men’s brain, and attached the name of philosophy to it for honorific purposes alone (Kant AA 8:404/CE 444).

## Perpetual Peace in Philosophy

But Kant also offers a conciliatory tone in his essay *On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy*, since both parties only want to make people righteous. The veiled goddess Isis, who is worshiped by the successors of the letter writer Plato, can be seen as the moral law within us and then Kant would also bow the knee to her. For didactic reasons, however, Kant prefers to explain the moral law “by logical instruction” (Kant AA 8:405/CE 444) and only then to personify it in order to give the moral law “an *aesthetic* way of presenting” (Kant AA 8:405/CE 444). However, he does not fail to point out the danger of an enthusiasm triggered by this.

In his essay *Proclamation of the imminent conclusion of a treaty of perpetual peace in philosophy* published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in December of 1796, Kant once again shows the reasons why he considers such a peace in philosophy to be possible. In the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, published in 1781, Kant wrote: “The battlefield of these endless controversies is called metaphysics” (Kant KrV A viii/Kant AA 4:7/CE 99). But the *Critique of Pure Reason* has also laid the foundations for peace to come where previously endless controversies caused turmoil. But the fact that such a philosophical dispute has its positive sides is illustrated

by Kant's tendency "to squabble on behalf of one's philosophy" (Kant AA 8:414/CE 453). As he says "[...] this itch, I say, or rather *drive*, will have to be viewed as one of the beneficent and wise arrangements of Nature, whereby she seeks to protect man from the great misfortune of decaying in the living flesh" (Kant AA 8:414/CE 453).

At first glance this may sound ironic, but it is actually meant seriously. At the beginning of the essay, Kant had said, quoting Chrysippus: "Nature has given the pig a *soul*, instead of *salt*" (Kant AA 8:413/CE 453). This soul, later called life force, prevents the pig from rotting or decaying in the living flesh. In contrast to animals, we have gained self-consciousness and so – "in virtue of which" (Kant AA 8:414/CE 453) – have become an animal that has reason. However, through the power of reason we get into what Kant calls "trifling (*Vernünfteln*)" (Kant AA 8:414). We get into "trifling" because of the structure of reason, because it compels us to ask questions that we cannot answer theoretically. The preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* begins with exactly this:

Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason (Kant KrV A vii/ Kant 4:7/CE 99).

We try to answer these irrefutable questions about the immortality of the soul, about the freedom and the existence of God, which arise from the nature of reason, within theoretical philosophy and thus entangle ourselves in contradictions so that metaphysics becomes that battleground, which Kant now thinks he can pacify.

Only through the practical use of reason can ideas acquire a moral and practical reality. To do this, however, it had to be shown beforehand that the theoretical use of reason could not give these ideas objective reality. It could only be shown in theoretical use that the ideas of freedom, immortality and God are conceivable without contradiction. The starting point for the moral and practical reality of these ideas is the idea of freedom in connection with the categorical imperative. Kant outlines this line of thought from the *Critique of Practical Reason* again in his essay from 1796:

But now there actually is something in human reason, which can be known to us by no experience, and yet proves its reality and truth in effects that are presentable in experience, and thus can also (by an a priori principle, indeed) be absolutely commanded. This is the concept of freedom, and of the law that derives from this, of the categorical, i.e., absolutely commanding, imperative. Through this we acquire Ideas, that would be utterly empty for merely speculative reason, though the latter inevitably point us towards them as cognitive grounds of our ultimate purpose – and admittedly only moral and practical reality; namely, so to conduct ourselves as if we were given the objects of these Ideas (God and immortality), which may therefore be postulated in this (practical) respect (Kant AA 8:416/CE 455).

Through the systematic insight into the limits of theoretical knowledge, the practical use of reason opens up the basis for the assumption that we are free beings and, as a result, we can postulate the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. For Kant, the "impotence, on the one hand, of *theoretical proof*" (Kant AA 8:416/CE 455) and the "strength of the practical grounds" (Kant AA 8:416/CE 455) gives rise to the prospect of peace, which, however, does not let us rot because our psychological forces will be kept active through repeated attacks, which arise from the fact that the theoretical illusion that arises from the nature of our reason will remain in place.

### **Philosophy as a doctrine of knowledge and as wisdom**

Kant does not want to accuse Schlosser of any bad intentions, as he believes that Schlosser also advocates "a mind attuned to promotion of the good" (Kant AA 8:419/CE 458). However,

Schlosser believes that he can get rid of philosophy as a doctrine of knowledge or skip it in order to move straight on to philosophy as a doctrine of wisdom. This also shows his superior way of thinking, from which the tone of superiority probably comes from. It was too much trouble and too much work for him to study critical philosophy, so “he has only looked at the final results proceeding from it” (Kant AA 8:419/CE 458). And Schlosser didn’t like these results: “and so, without having first gone to school himself, he forthwith became the teacher of ‘a young man who (he says) wanted to study the critical philosophy,’ in order to advise him against doing so” (Kant AA 8:419/CE 458). This young man, if he follows his teacher and does not submit to the effort and work of school, is then easily a victim of “the art of persuasion, on subjective grounds of approval” (Kant AA 8:420/CE 458), instead of making judgments based on objective grounds. Anyone who follows the art of persuasion is satisfied with the “*semblance of truth*” (Kant AA 8:420/CE 458) and passes it off for “probability” (Kant AA 8:420/CE 458). But in the field of a priori knowledge there can be no probability at all.

As far as the scope of knowledge in the theoretical area is concerned, philosophy as a theory of knowledge only has a “limiting pretensions” (Kant AA 8:420/CE 458). Philosophy as a teaching of wisdom must always keep these limitations of knowledge in mind.

Anyone who imposes subjective reasons on the semblance of truth where objective reasons striving for truth can be had is violating what Kant calls the “duty of truthfulness” (Kant AA 8:421/CE 459). One can make mistakes if one wants to fulfill this duty. But anyone who is wrong is not therefore untruthful. Anyone who is guilty of dereliction of duty to truthfulness is a liar. For Kant, lying is the original sin, as he makes clear again at the end of his essay:

The *lie* (“from the father of lies, whence all evil in the world hath come”) is the truly vile spot in human nature, [...] The commandment: *Thou shalt not lie* (were it even with the most pious intentions), if most sincerely adopted into philosophy, as a doctrine of wisdom, would alone be able, not only to procure eternal peace therein, but also assure it for all time to come. (Kant AA 8:422 / CE 459).

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