The end of the eighteenth century witnessed a crystallization of the Enlightenment in Germany and France, an attempt to organize and formalize it in systematic treatises rather than in satirical dialogues and tales. The Enlightenment, it was felt, was an ongoing process of indefinite perfectibility and would be made more rational by the nature of reason itself.¹

Kant, like most graduates of secondary schools in the eighteenth century, had a good classical education. But he keenly disliked the school’s church services, despite his Pietist background. In 1740, he entered the University of Königsberg, where he stayed on as a professor for the rest of his life. He taught as many as eight subjects, ranging from logic to math to geography, and eventually received the chair in philosophy in 1770.²

Intellectual life in German universities was much more active than in France. None of the leading French philosophes of the Enlightenment held a university position; indeed, most lacked a university education. The French Enlightenment grew outside the universities, often in protest against their sclerosis, particularly that of the scholastic philosophy and theology departments. But things were different in Germany. Virtually all philosophical endeavors were carried out in the leading institutions of higher learning. There, too, remnants of medieval scholasticism were evident in the dominant philosophies of Gottfried Leibniz (1646–1716) and Christian von Wolff (1659–1754), who held sway before Kant.³

Kant never wanted to leave Königsberg, despite an attractive offer from the University of Halle in 1778 that would have made him a neighbor of Goethe and Schiller. But Kant had a world, even a universe, within him, which he had to explain. Moving would distract him from his grand...
enterprise: “All change frightens me . . . I must obey this instinct of my nature if I am to spin out to greater length the thin and delicate thread of life which the Fates have spun for me.” For a critic of reason, the truth was to be found by turning within, not by seeking experience without.

The Critique of Pure Reason appeared in 1781. The title reveals it as an Enlightenment work, because epistemology, or the knowledge of how we know what we know, had become the Enlightenment’s principal branch of philosophy since the great Descartes had wondered what, if anything, he knew. Descartes had reestablished Continental philosophy with the cogito of self-consciousness. Locke, on the other hand, argued that most of our ideas came from sensation—that is, from the external world rather than from the mind alone. The Enlightenment, then, inherited two epistemological traditions: the idealist and the empiricist.

In 1783, Kant wrote in his Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics (that is, any tenable metaphysics), “My remembering David Hume was the very thing which many years ago first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a quite new direction.” Why David Hume (1711–1776)? A decade older than Kant, Hume was an empiricist in the Lockean tradition, but far surpassed Locke in his skepticism. For Hume, cause and effect were inferences from experience. But just because experience teaches cause and effect, he continued, we cannot infer that such things exist outside experience. We do not, for example, know whether the world has a cause—a “first cause” in, say, the Aristotelian or Thomistic sense. Since natural laws are invariable, miracles, which interrupt them, are impossible. But one can object that natural laws cannot always be invariable, because “all time” or “always” surpasses experience! Sense knowledge or experience is not absolute, but only probable. Knowledge of the beyond is a matter of faith. Fideism was frequent in Protestantism, but in Hume it may not have been sincere. Hume’s Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion (1779) pretty much demolish the comfortable Enlightenment deism based on the common experience of all religions (existence of God, immortality of the soul, and rewards and punishments after death). But they posit the components of Kant’s “antinomies,” or contradictions of pure reason, examined below. Hume could have been a fideist as he claimed, but today most see him as an atheist, or “the complete modern pagan.”

If the attraction of empiricism was that it rescued man from nonage, from immaturity, it also left humanity with little beyond experience. German philosophers were not interested in surrendering such an important part of reality without a struggle.