The genesis of Kant's theory of the primacy of the will

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THE GENESIS OF KANT'S THEORY OF THE PRIMACY OF THE WILL

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fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of
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by
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Prefatory Note

My main study has been based on Hartenstein's Immanuel Kant's Sämtliche Werke, Paulsen's Immanuel Kant, Watson's Selections from Kant, Wallace's Kant, Weber's History of Philosophy, and Rodger's History of Philosophy. I am especially indebted to my teacher, Professor E. D. Starbuck, who has guided this study and furnished many valuable suggestions.
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"The will is the causality of living beings in so far as they are rational. Freedom is that causality in so far as it can be regarded as efficient without being determined to activity by any cause other than itself."*

Herein is contained Kant's final doctrine of the will. He placed this more fundamental fact of consciousness (the will) behind the antinomies of pure reason, for he had demonstrated the inability of the latter to transcend experience. This real is within consciousness as its determining factor. From the standpoint of pure understanding it has noumenal reality. He says: "Now the conception of a being who has free will is that of a noumenal cause."** This cause is not a noumenon in the sense of being an absolute thing in itself, but has this quality only relative to pure reason. It lies behind the categories and gives them whatever validity they have. To quote again: "Moreover the objective reality of a pure conception of understanding in the sphere of the supersensible, when it has once been introduced, imparts objective validity

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*Watson, "Selections from Kant" p. 250.
**Watson, "Selections from Kant" p. 279.
to all the other categories, although only in so far as these stand in necessary connection with the moral law, through which the pure will is determined.*

This doctrine marks a new epoch in the philosophic thought and is wholly inconsistent with the Leibnitz-Wolffian rationalism of Kant's time. It is inconsistent with his own scholarly training. From his earliest childhood he was under the influence of Schultz, the pastor of his parents, who was a disciple of Wolff. The same is true of Knutzen, who was his instructor and close friend while he attended the University of Koenigsberg. Besides the personal contact of these strong characters, he became familiar with the rationalistic doctrines of Descartes, Spinoza, Leibnitz, and Wolff. Later he lectured on mathematics, physics, logic, and metaphysics, and continued to use text-books based on the rationalistic philosophy of Wolff. This naturally tended to reinforce his early training. Indeed his writings bear ample evidence, even to the last years of his life, that his terminology and methods of thought were entirely dominated by the technique of Aristotelian logic, so much used by the students of that

*Watson, "Selections from Kant" p. 280.
time and so consistent with the Leibnitzian-Wolffian views of the nature of consciousness and reality.

How shall we account for this anomaly, that a student of rationalistic doctrines, whose training and habits of thinking have been biased in that direction, turns away from these notions and builds up a theory of the primacy of the will?

In the first place it may be said that after Kant had written the first Critique, he realized the futility of pure reason to transcend experience and interpret reality. This left him without any fundamental principle of life, therefore he substituted the will as an interpretation of reality.

Another way of accounting for this seeming inconsistency, is to say that the real Kant is found in the Critique of Pure Reason, which was produced in the prime of his powers. The later writings, which set forth the will as a sure foundation for moral and religious life, simply represent the retraction of a man grown weak by age, who has become fearful of his own destructive criticism of eternal truths. The real tragedy, as Heine says, is the Critique of Pure Reason which witnesses the death of Jehovah, but as a solace
to his own soul and for all others, who, like his servant Lampe, cannot endure the tragedy, he introduces the after-play of the Critique of Practical Reason.

Still another explanation might be given, namely, that Kant turned to voluntarism and the establishment of faith, because of the recrudescence of an old religious bias, incurred through his early pietistic training. Paulsen* points to this explanation when he says that thousands of people have thanked him for helping them to see that one can be an honest thinker and still retain sincere faith in God.

While there may be a grain of truth in each of these explanations, they fail to recognize the main current of thought which runs through Kant's entire inner life, and also the outside forces which were determining its trend. Instead of presenting the whole situation, they give only part of the picture and thus give rise to the notion that the Critique of Pure Reason marks an independent stream of thought, whereas it is only a necessary part of the voluntaristic stream which has its beginning in Kant's own individuality.

*Paulsen, "Kant" p. 7.
The object of the discussion in the following pages is to show that the genesis of the theory of the primacy of the will must not be sought in the supposed waverings in Kant's philosophic thinking, but is found in his own temperament and the attitude he took toward life from his earliest youth.

We recognize the effect of outside influences and have already pointed out the scholastic-rationalistic strain which colors the main stream from the earliest time. We also recognize the strain of a simple faith in God, which is inculcated into his very being through the pietistic training of his parents and through the precepts of Schultz and Knutzen, who were ardent followers of Franke in Halle. This thorough training in a belief of a personal relationship between man and God and doing right for right sake, could never be eradicated from his character. He testifies himself that the moral and religious example of his parents was a continuous incentive to noble living. The discussions on morality, religion, and faith show the influence of these earlier teachings. It appears in the following: "I have, therefore, found it necessary to deny knowledge of God, freedom, and immortality, in
order to find a place for faith."* But we must remember that the pietistic influence plays only an incidental part in that it adds a certain strain to his philosophy, but does not constitute the main stream of his thought. The real Kant interprets consciousness in particular and reality in general in such a way that the will is the final reality and the things of faith necessary postulates. This interpretation is the fruitage of a long life of intense analytical and synthetical study of the great thought movements of the eighteenth century, and comes from a man who possessed a reserved, logical, persistent and vitalizing temperament, which made it possible for him to see reality in terms of the will.

Kant always believed what he said yet was cautious in giving expression to his ideas. He was not a bold leader in times of trouble but did possess great power of will to live up to principles of righteousness. Pietism and Rationalism which prevailed in Koenigsberg, stood for personal freedom and individuality and in this democratic atmosphere, Kant soon developed an intense conviction that the highest goal

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*Watson, "Selections from Kant" p. 6.
of man is political and moral freedom. Through his long life and especially in his later years, he manifested great sympathy for all who were oppressed. He sympathized very heartily with the American colonies in their struggle for independence and rejoiced in the victory of the French revolutionists.

This idea of moral justice and personal freedom began to germinate and flourish when he was still under the rigid but just and kindly training of his parents, who belonged to the tradesmen's class. They were poor but loved justice and honesty and lived up to their convictions. It was their absolute faith in a personal God and their belief in an inner, religious life, which enabled them to see that right was might. This very same idea of an inner life, which transcends the subtleties of reason, is the embodiment of Kant's own personal life, and finds definite expression in the idea of the autonomy of the will.

One would naturally expect that a man, who had the mental powers of a Kant, possessed a strong and robust physique, but we are told that he was of small stature and had a frail constitution, yet by persistent dieting and very regular habits he was able
to ward off serious disease and reach an old age. This grim determination, to preserve the highest efficiency possible under adverse circumstances, marks the man who was constantly saying in his heart; the only unlimited good thing is a good will.

The following quotation will give one a fair idea of the man. "I am inclined to believe", says the author of twenty-two, as he enters upon a field strewn with the bones of controversy, "that it is sometimes not without its uses for a man to place a certain reliance on his own powers. Such a confidence gives new life to all his efforts, and instills into them a certain stimulus which much conduces to the discovery of truth. When a man is in the way of believing that some dependence may be put on his own studies and that it is possible to catch even a Liebnitz in mistake, he will leave no stone unturned in order to corroborate his conjecture. Again and again he may go astray in his undertaking. Yet after all, the profit which this accrues to the service to truth is much more considerable than if he had always kept to the main road. It is on this consideration that I take my stand. I have already fixed upon the line which I am resolved to keep. I will
enter on my course, and nothing shall prevent me from pursuing it."*

The facts of this character sketch give us the right to assume that the tendency, to make the will primal, lay latent in Kant's own individuality and only needed an outside influence here and there to make it develop as time went on. We recognize the influx of three currents of thought which were especially vitalizing in their effect upon this innate tendency.

The first of these, which began to awaken in him the idea of a dynamical interpretation of the world, came from the study of the cosmological theories of Newton, Descartes, Leibnitz, and others. He became so thoroughly interested in this study that he undertook to state his own theory in "Thoughts upon the True Estimation of Living Forces", (1747), in which he discusses the controversy between the Leibnitzians and Cartesians, on dead and living forces. This early statement was slightly modified by the further study of Newton's physical laws and is in brief this: Matter pervades all space and has inherent in it a living

*Wallace, "Kant" p. 100.
energy. This energy manifests itself in an attractive force and an equal amount of repellant force. Whenever they do not balance, motion ensues until the equilibrium is restored.

Kant, like other men whom he had studied, as for example, Lucretius, Newton, Descartes, Leibnitz, and Wolff, believed in a mechanical interpretation of the cosmos.

In his "General Natural History and Theory of the Heavens" (1755) and in "Only Possible Proof of the Existence of God" (1763), he maintains the thesis that the conditions of his dynamical theory, including the principle of life, have their being in the will of God, and that "nature cannot act otherwise than in an orderly way, even in a state of chaos."* With these requisites given, the evolution and maintenance of the physical universe, including living things, can be accounted for through mechanical activity, which manifests itself in the contingent relations of nature. Set off against this world of contingent relations (the world of phenomena) is the world of morality (freedom, will) which seems to imply noumenal reality. The dynamical interpretation

of this world is elaborated in the three Critiques and the Metaphysic of Morality, but as it runs parallel with the interpretation of the phenomenal world, it is necessary to state it here, in order to keep the relationship between the two worlds before consciousness. *

In the Critique of Pure Reason, Kant states the dynamical interpretation of the "I think" (moral being) thus: "If sensibility is the receptivity of the mind in the actual apprehension of some impression, understanding is the spontaneity of knowledge, or the faculty that of itself produces ideas."** His further thought is, that these ideas result from the combinations of the impressions or perceptions received through sensibility, by the spontaneous self-activity of consciousness; or pure, original apperception; the "I think". The theory of the will and freedom, discussed in the Metaphysic of Morality and the two last Critiques, naturally grows out of the "I think", which applies only to rational beings. In taking up the will he says: "Will is the causality of living beings in as far as

**Watson, "Selections from Kant" pp. 40-41.
they are rational. Freedom is that causality in so far as it can be regarded as efficient without being determined to activity by any cause other than the self.*

These two parallel dynamical interpretations, that of the phenomenal world as set off from the moral world, gave rise to the dualistic strain which runs through Kant's entire philosophy. In his Critique of Pure reason he is constantly dealing with the world of sense and the world of understanding; the empirical self and the transcendental self; phenomenon and noumenon. He retains these divisions in the treatises on morality and aesthethics, which gives rise to his idea of the categorical imperative as set off against freedom; happiness against virtue; the mechanical as against the teleological interpretation, etc. But this dualistic strain does not interfere with the development of his voluntaristic theory, when we remember that his world of sense is mere phenomenon and that its laws are not self-existent but only the creation of the spontaneous self-activity of the "I think", which alone involves freedom.

*Watson, "Selections from Kant" p. 250.
To continue our discussion, we go back to the period (1762 to about 1769) which Paulsen terms "the skeptical-empirical period of Kant's thinking."* Herder was one of his students at this time (1762 to 1764) and gives us the following description: "His open thoughtful brow was the seat of unfailing cheerfulness and joy; the profoundest language fell from his lips; jest, wit, humor stood at his command; and his instructive address was like a most interesting conversation. With the same originality he tested Leibnitz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Crusius, Hume, and traced the natural laws of Newton, Kepler, and the physicists, he made allusion to the books which appeared - the "Emile" and the "Heloise," - as well as every new discovery in physics of which he became aware, estimating their value, and always coming back to the disinterested study of nature, and the moral dignity of man. The history of man, of nations, of nature, physical science, mathematics, and experience, were sources which gave life and interest to his lectures and conversation. No knowledge was indifferent to him; no cabal, no sect, no advantage, no ambition, had ever

*Paulsen, "Kant" p. 75.
the least attraction for him against the extension and elucidation of truth. By his encouragement and a compulsion welcome to his hearers, he taught them to think for themselves."

It was this open-mindedness toward all truth, which Herder portrays so well, that enabled Kant to appreciate the scientific and empirical spirit which came to him from the study of Newton and Locke. These studies, in connection with Voltaire's skepticism, caused him to distrust the sufficiency of reason.

While he was in this skeptical state of mind, the second great influx of new thought came into his life from the reading of Rousseau, and occasioned in him a definite voluntaristic attitude toward the moral relations of humanity. He began to see the importance of the individuality of man and his personal freedom.

It is said, "when Rousseau's 'Emile' appeared in 1762, Kant was so entranced by his perusal of the work, that he, for that day out of thousands, omitted his usual afternoon walk in order to read it to the end."** This is what he says himself: "I am inclined to be an

*Wallace, "Kant" p. 27.
**Wallace, "Kant" p. 28.
investigator. I have a passion for knowledge and an impatient desire to make greater advancements in it. There was a time when I believed that it alone could bring honor to mankind, and I detested the rabble which knows nothing. Rousseau has brought me to my senses. This illusory preference has disappeared, and I have learned to honor mankind. I would consider myself more unworthy than a common laborer, if I did not believe that this tenet (moral responsibility to man) was able to give value to all others and to establish the rights of man."

It has already been pointed out that the political and social atmosphere of Koehigsberg was democratic and that the parents of Kant belonged to the humbler class. This naturally had its effect on his character. He always remained a friend of the common people, for, even after he was a professor in the University and moved in the best society, he was constantly associating with all classes of people, from the common business man and mechanic, to the sailors on the wharf and the soldiers in the fortress. Besides

this, he was a great reader and became thoroughly acquainted with the habits and customs of many people. He also became interested in the philosophy of history, for Rousseau had taught him that man is more valuable than his theories, and that moral worth is more to be desired than great knowledge. But he did not follow Rousseau as closely in his discussions on this subject, as he did Hobbes, for he held with the latter, that man in his natural state is selfish. This selfishness marks his individuality, and is a necessary requisite in helping him to overcome the antagonistic desires of the sensuous world, and aids him to rise to a higher plane of culture. Humanity has worked itself out of a state of barbarity in its struggle for existence, but as Rousseau says: "We may civilized, but far from being moralized."* Much remains to be done before we have reached that stage of culture of which the human race is capable. Many times the individual suffers for the race. This is especially true in case of war. It is possible that war has been one of the factors to lift humanity to a higher plane, but it is to be hoped that

the time is not far off when factions will disappear and a world-peace be established. Real culture, which is the ultimate purpose of nature, can only be attained, when the moral law regins in the hearts of men, and true enlightenment can only come with freedom. This discussion anticipated the idea of the Good Will, and gives us an insight into Kant's own mind with reference to the social question of mankind.

In the article, "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime"* (1764), Kant makes constant allusions to the relation between the good and the beautiful, which become practically synonymous with him. They are not dependent upon reason for their explanation but rest upon the feelings. This explanation is very similar to the "aesthetic sense"** idea of Shaftesbury. Out of this conception grew the "Highest Good" idea of the Critique of Practical Reason.

In another article, entitled "An Investigation Concerning the Clearness of the Principle of Natural Theology and Morality"*** (1764), he points out that

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people are beginning to realize that truth is perceived but the good is felt. This feeling of the good (in other words, the sense of necessary obligation toward duty) cannot be explained by epistemology, but it still remains a necessary postulate. This necessary postulate accords very well with the innate "moral sense"* idea of Hutcheson, to whom he refers in this discussion. It is, moreover, simply the Categorical Imperative of the Metaphysic of Morality in disguise. The whole tenor of this article anticipates the logical relation between the Critique of Pure Reason and the later Critiques including the Metaphysic of Morality, in that it points out the limitation of knowledge and the necessity and universality of morality.

In "Dreams of a Spiritualist explained by the Dreams of Metaphysics"** (1766), Kant gives expression to an idea which anticipates Schopenhauer's "The World as Will and Idea." He says in part: "We often have a feeling that we are directed, in our dealings with other things and other persons, by an outside Will, which causes us to act in conformity with morality,

much against our own will. This feeling is so prevalent in the world of rational beings, that one is inclined to believe in moral unity which has its source in a Universal Will. Newton saw that all bodies tend to attract each other and inferred from this that the Law of Gravitation applies to all matter. It is just as reasonable to infer that the Law of Morality applies, with equal universality and necessity, in the world of rational beings. With this condition given, the interaction of individual wills is simply the manifestation of the Universal Will. This accounts for the unity of the moral sense and argues for the continuance of these individual wills in the world to come, where they will be perfectly free because they are not hampered by the world of sense."* The world of sense, although purely subjective, involves the individual will in its contingent relations, such as desires, passions, etc., but it does not imply determinism. Kant emphatically denies the determinism of Schulz, and sarcastically remarks: "The practical conception of freedom has nothing to do with the speculative conception which belongs only to meta-

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physics! It is immaterial to ask where the condition came from, under which I have to act now. The question I have to raise is, what ought I to do? This question implies freedom, which is a practical presupposition and an idea which alone can give value to the dictates of reason. The most stubborn skeptic throws sophistry to the winds when he has to act. The fatalist acts as if he were free when duty calls him."

From these side lights on Kant's attitude toward morality, we can infer that it is only natural that he should eventually produce the theory of the will. In a letter written to Lambert, as early as 1770,** he mentions the fact that he is preparing the metaphysic of morality which he bases on his new theory of metaphysics. This gives us a clue to the correct relation between the Critique of Pure Reason and the later works on morality, for in the same letter he says that he has definitely settled his position on metaphysics. This position is stated in his dissertation of 1770, to which we shall refer later.

Side by side with Kant's interest in humanity and moral freedom, grew up a deep conviction that the rationalistic interpretation of truth and reality was not the correct one. His original mind could not consent to Wolff's dicta: "Where there is no reason, there is nothing by which we can understand why a thing is, and it must therefore arise out of nothing...... But since it is impossible that anything can come out of nothing, everything that is must have its sufficient reason why it is."

In the "Attempt to Introduce the Notion of Negative Quantity into Philosophy" (1763), he tries to state his own problem of causality: "Under the law of identity a cause logically has its effect, but how am I to know that if something is something else will be; or if something is, something else will not be. The will of God is something, the existing world, which has its being in Him, is something else."** He does not attempt to answer these questions here, but leaves them till he comes to the exposition of the last two

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antinomies in the transcendental dialectic.

The scientific studies of Newton and the sarcastic skepticism of Voltaire, convinced him that the world could not be explained through reason and that he must establish another theory of truth. In the meanwhile he was also testing the theories of Locke, Berkley, Spinoza, Descartes, Leibnitz, and others.

But it was the third great outside influx in Kant's philosophical development, the skepticism of Hume with regard to causal relations, which awoke him out of his "dogmatic slumbers" and induced him to write the Critique of Pure Reason.

There is little doubt that he was familiar with Hume's theory of causality as early as 1769, for its influence seems to be manifest in "De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma ac principiis"* (1770) to which we referred before.

This dissertation closely resembles the later Critique of Pure Reason. It contains one general presupposition, i.e. the ideality of space and time; and the two deductions; first, the possibility of a priori knowledge of the phenomenal world through the mathematical

*Paulsen, "Kant" p. 98.
sciences; secondly, the possibility of a priori knowledge of the pure intelligible world by means of the transcendental conceptions of reason, i.e. metaphysics. The Critique of Pure Reason differs on one important point; it does not believe that speculative knowledge of the intelligible world is possible and substitutes in its place "phenomenological" ontology and the faith of practical reason.* This new attitude of the Critique of Pure Reason is of very great importance, as it really dethrones pure reason in Kant's philosophy and enthrones the theory of the primacy of the Rational Good Will. The Critique of Pure Reason was necessary to clarify Kant's own mind with reference to his theory of the will and to clear the minds of others from dogmatism in epistemological problems. Kant makes this confession: "It was necessary to show that our knowledge never transcends experience but this was just the thing which the old metaphysicians implied and thereby established an impassible gulf between the mechanical and the moral world. In showing that the things known are not things in themselves, the difficulty between the mechanical

*Paulsen, "Kant" pp. 91-92.
interpretation and moral freedom is removed. But as soon as one draws transcendental things (things in themselves) into the realm of knowledge, they are no more unconditioned and we have crass determinism. It was necessary to annul dogmatic knowledge in order to make room for faith, for dogmatic metaphysics, which does not submit to criticism of pure reason, is the real source of all faithlessness in morality, and is above all things dogmatic."

In this exposition Kant implies the very same idea which was expressed before, namely, that the Critique of Pure Reason is merely a method to make possible his theory of the rational good-will, which had begun to formulate long before he began his critical investigations of the theory of knowledge. But while the theory of the will was formulating, he began to realize that it was impossible to develop it under rationalistic metaphysics, because the latter insisted upon the knowledge of a noumenal world. In order to show that the Good Will was the only unlimited thing, it was necessary

to point out the ideality of space and time and also the subjectivity of the noumenal world. In making both the phenomenal and noumenal world subjective things, the difficulty of the antinomies of the Critique of Pure Reason and also the antinomy of the Critique of Practical Reason disappears. The subjectivity of the noumenal world does not exclude the possibility of its existence, but as our experience can never extend beyond the phenomenal world, the existence of the noumenal world is always problematical. But subjective knowledge implies a knower and he is found in the pure original apperception, the "I think". Although this "I think" does not know itself as a thing in itself, it differs from the phenomenal world in that it is spontaneous in its activity, yet rational in its nature. The "I think" naturally implies a free will, because of its spontaneous activity. The free will implies freedom from law, except in as far as it creates its own laws, which result from a sense of duty. This sense of duty, or the categorical imperative, arises because of the conflicting desires of the phenomenal world, which we are not yet able to transcend. But as rational beings,
we are able to will the good in spite of desires, and are thus enables to establish a universal maxim. This maxim implies a good will, the only unlimited good thing.

Pure reason as well as practical reason recognizes the limits of human knowledge, but practical reason, with the sanction of pure reason, assumes the right to postulate an unlimited rational good-will toward which it reacts as if it had noumenal reality.

CONCLUSION

We found a pietistic and a scholastic-rationalistic strain in Kant's thought life, but they do not constitute the main current which culminates in the theory of the primacy of the will. The genesis of this current of thought (the real Kant) is found in his own individuality and is not due to any waverings in his later philosophic thinking or the recrudescence of an early religious bias. This voluntaristic tendency, which lay hidden in his tempermental make-up, was brought to light, vitalized, and moulded by three distinct influxes of thought. We refer the reader to the graphic representation of the development of Kant's thought life.

The first of these came from the scientific studies of Newton, Descartes, Leibnitz, and others.
They had to do with dynamical theories of the physical universe, and were instrumental in helping Kant to see the world in terms of will. This scientific attitude was strengthened by the empiricism of Locke, in that it loosened the grasp of dogmatic rationalism. The influence of Voltaire was also helpful, because it prepared him for the second great inflow of thought, which came through the humanism of Rousseau. At this stage of his development, Kant began to see clearly; on the one hand the inadequacy of rationalistic metaphysics to explain reality, and on the other hand the universality and reality of the moral will. While he was trying to reconcile the rationalists' idea of a noumenon behind all things, and the empiricists' idea, which interprets everything in terms of consciousness, he came under the influence of Hume; the third great determining factor in his development. He agreed with Hume that all reality was in terms of consciousness and that experience was necessary to make knowledge possible. But he did not agree with the latter's idea that all causal relations were simply successions of perceptions. He maintained that knowledge was impossible without the a priori background which
rests in the "I think". The Critique of Pure Reason thus becomes the mediator between extreme rationalism and extreme empiricism, and paves the way for a scientific treatment of the theory of the will. It was never intended to be a system of philosophy complete in itself, but as the author says, it was necessary to point out the limits of pure reason, in order to make way for faith. This is accomplished by demolishing the knowable noumenon of rationalism, and positing in its place an apperceptive unity, the "I think", which, because of its spontaneous activity, is the only thing to which we may possibly attribute noumenal reality. This spontaneous activity, the "I think" of the Critique of Pure Reason is nothing else than the autonomous will, (final reality) of the Metaphysic of Morality and the later Critiques. Thus the critique of Pure Reason is simply a dredging process, which removes the rubbish of many theories from the main channel in order to let pass unhampered the strong clear current of the doctrine of the primacy of the will - the real Kant.
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A GRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF KANT'S THOUGHT LIFE.