

Chapter Twelve

Rational Faith: God, Immortality, and Grace

**** This draft is prior to editing and does not reflect the final version of the chapter. For any citations, consult the published version in [*Immanuel Kant: Key Concepts*](#), ed. Will Dudley and Kristina Engelhardt, Acumen Press, 2011, pp. 200-215.****

In 1786, as Kant's philosophy became prominent in Germany, it remained marginal to the hottest philosophical issue of the day: the relationship between faith and reason. The preceding year had seen two posthumous biographies of Gotthold Lessing, the dominant intellectual presence in Germany for a generation. In one, F.H. Jacobi claimed that in Lessing's dying days, he confessed to being a "pantheist," which was essentially synonymous with atheism. In another, Moses Mendelssohn defended Lessing against such charges. The apparently biographical disagreement became a hotly contested philosophical dispute about the Enlightenment: Could one be an "enlightened," rational philosopher without giving up religion and morality? Into this debate came a series of "Letters on the Kantian Philosophy," by an early disciple of Kant's philosophy. Karl Reinhold argued that the apparently arcane and incomprehensible *Critique of Pure Reason* actually "secures . . . a better future for our descendents" by providing "universally satisfying" answers to "the most pressing philosophical needs of our time" (Reinhold 2006:16).

Today's philosophical scene is quite different. It is no longer assumed that atheism is immoral or dangerous. If anything, most professional philosophers hold the opposite view, that "God is not great" and religion is a dangerous "God delusion."¹ But we continue to deal with problems Reinhold hoped Kant solved forever. Despite atheism's popularity *among philosophers*, many people still find mere reason insufficient for making sense of human life. At the same time, the recent rise of religiously-motivated violence brings an increasingly acute awareness of the dangers of religion severed from rational moral ideals. If, as Reinhold suggests, Kant provides a path whereby "supernatural religion and natural religion dissolve into ethical religion," where "superstition and non-belief give [way] to rational faith" (Reinhold 2006:64), this path is still urgently needed today.

Kant's approach to religion involves three stages. First, the *Critique of Pure Reason* "denies *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*" (B xxx). Kant argues that questions about immortality or God's existence are unanswerable with the rational capacities used to understand the empirical world. This limitation of reason, however, is not a rejection of *belief* in God or immortality, but simply of *knowledge*. Second, the *Critique of Practical Reason* fills in this "faith" with *practical proofs* of immortality and God.² Finally, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* expands this faith with grace as a response to humans' "radical evil."

1. Kant vs. Theistic Proofs

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* "denies knowledge in order to make room for faith" (Bxxx). The refutation of religious knowledge occurs both at a general level and through specific arguments against classic theological arguments. At the general level, Kant's *Critique* is based on a "Copernican" turn whereby we have a priori knowledge of the world only by rejecting the assumption that "cognition must conform to objects" and

instead “assuming that objects must conform to our cognition” (B xvi). Kant’s general idea is that metaphysics, as an a priori science of objects, is possible only insofar as the structure of human cognition contributes to the make-up of the world. Since a non-spatial or non-temporal world could never be experienced by us, we can know – a priori – that the world must be spatial and temporal. This shift in perspective provides the basis for a positive a priori metaphysics of experience. But this shift also implies that metaphysics is *limited* to the world of possible human experience:

Our exposition establishes the . . . objective validity of space [and other a priori categories] in . . . whatever can be presented to us . . . , but also . . . the ideality of space [for] things . . . considered in themselves . . . , without regard to [our] constitution. (A28/B44)

Things *in the world* (of experience) must be spatial, but we can make no claims at all about things “in themselves” independent of our structures of cognition. Because classic metaphysical questions of freedom, God, and immortality go beyond possible human experience, Kant’s Copernican turn is “very disadvantageous to . . . metaphysics” and “sever[s] the very root of materialism, fatalism, atheism . . . and superstition” (Bxxxiv).

Beyond this general philosophical approach, within which arguments about God and immortality are irresolvable, Kant also offers detailed arguments against traditional proofs for (or against) the existence of God or immortality, proofs highlighting the dangers of trying to extend knowledge beyond its proper limits. For example,³ Kant takes on three central arguments for God’s existence: the “ontological,” “cosmological,” and “physico-teleological” proofs. The ontological argument uses the definition of God as “that than which nothing greater can be conceived” or “the most perfect being” to prove that God, so defined, must exist.⁴ Since it is better to exist than not, and since God must be the best (by definition), God must exist. Kant’s key objection is that existence “is . . . not a real predicate, i.e. a concept of something that could add to the concept of a thing” (A598/B626):

A hundred actual dollars does not contain the least bit more than a hundred possible ones. For since the latter signifies the concept and the former its object, . . . [if] the former contained more than the latter, my concept would not express the entire object and would not be the suitable concept of it. (A 599/B627)

If an *actual* hundred dollars is an instantiation of the concept of “hundred dollars,” the content of the actual hundred dollars better match the concept exactly, nothing more or less. But this means that “existence” cannot be included *within* the concept, since in that case, no instantiation could ever match its concept. To exist is for one’s entire concept to be “posited” or “actualized.” “When I think a thing . . . , not the least bit gets added to the thing when I posit in addition that this thing is” (A600/B618). Since existence cannot be part of the definition of *any* concept, it cannot be part of the concept of God. If God actually exists, then God must have all of the properties of a most perfect being (omnipotence, etc.), but if one denies the existence of these properties, one must – and can without contradiction – also deny God’s existence.

The “cosmological” argument states, “If something exists, then an absolutely necessary being also has to exist. Now I myself, at least, exist; therefore, an absolutely necessary being exists” (A604/B633). The minor premise, which Kant describes as “I exist,” can be any empirical claim that *something* exists, whether oneself, the world, or any particular object. The main work of the proof is done in the major premise, and the

argument for this premise is typically set up in terms of a dilemma. Either the existing thing in the minor premise is self-caused, in which case it is already absolutely necessary, or it is caused by something else. In the latter case, either the cause is absolutely necessary, or it is in turn caused by something else. But since “it is not possible to go on to infinity,”⁵ one must eventually stop at a “first cause” that is absolutely necessary. This first cause is God.

Kant offers two main objections to this proof. First, to prove the existence of *God*, the proof must show that its “absolutely necessary being” is also that most perfect being that we call “God.” But “[i]f [this] proposition is correct . . . then it must be convertible” (A 608/B637), that is, if it is an a priori truth that “absolutely necessary being = most perfect being,” then it is also true that “most perfect being = absolutely necessary being.” But the latter claim is the essence of the ontological argument, so unless the ontological argument is valid, the cosmological argument fails to show that its “necessary being” is a “most perfect being.” Since the ontological argument is not valid, neither is the cosmological. Even if there is a necessary first cause, this being need not be God. Kant’s second objection involves claiming both that the conditions of possibility of experience *preclude* an absolutely necessary cause in the world of possible experience and that reason’s need to look for causes of contingent things does not actually require that there *be* a first cause. Kant argues that the cause of anything contingent must begin to act at some moment (otherwise its effects would be just as necessary as itself). But human beings cannot conceive of an uncaused beginning of action,⁶ so any cognizable cause must be caused and hence not absolutely necessary. Kant then scrutinizes the claim that “it is not possible to go on to infinity” and finds in this reason’s demand for an unconditioned, absolutely sufficient explanation of events in the world. If one considers this demand as a basis for proving claims about a world independent of human cognition, one must think of there actually *being* such a first cause. But once one sees that thinking of the first cause in this way contradicts the conditions of possibility of experience, one will recognize that reason’s demand for an unconditioned is a demand on human cognition not to be satisfied with partial explanations but to constantly seek out more and more complete ones.⁷ As a *task* for speculative inquiry, this demand provokes greater understanding of the world of experience, rather than assertions about things beyond possible experience.

The final proof for God’s existence is physico-teleological, which, like the cosmological, is based on empirical premises. Here, however, the premises refer not merely to existence but to the world’s “immeasurable . . . manifoldness, order, purposiveness, and beauty” (A622/B650). As William Paley famously put it,⁸ if one finds watch, one assumes that an intelligent designer built it; when one finds an even more complex network of causes and effects in the world, one should assume that an even more intelligent designer built it. Just as Kant objected to the cosmological argument by showing its dependence upon the ontological, here he reduces the physico-teleological argument to the cosmological. Based merely on the world one observes, the physico-teleological argument cannot establish any determinate concept of God, but only that the world’s cause is something like an intelligence and in some sense greater than ordinary human intelligence. We cannot know whether this “architect of the world” is a *single* architect, nor *how* powerful this architect is, nor how wise, etc (A627/B655):

After one has gotten as far as admiring the magnitude of the wisdom, power, etc. of the world's author and cannot get any farther, . . . one suddenly . . . goes back to the contingency . . . inferred right at the beginning . . . The physico-theological proof, stymied in its undertaking, suddenly jumps over to the cosmological proof . . . (A629/B657)

Since the cosmological in turn depends upon the ontological and the latter upon the erroneous attempt to use pure reason to go beyond the limits of possible experience, all three proofs ultimately fail to prove God's existence.

2. Kant's Moral Religion

Kant's philosophy of religion is not, however, entirely negative. His *Critique of Pure Reason* opposes not only dogmatism but also "skepticism," not only religious "fanaticism" but also "atheism" (Bxxxiv). And Kant insists that he denies *knowledge* of God (and immortality) only "*in order to make room for faith*" (B xxx). Moreover, Kant is no fideist recommending a "leap of faith" here. The "faith" that he has in mind is wholly grounded in reason, but in *practical* rather than theoretical reason. The positive part of Kant's philosophy of religion thus comes in his *Critique of Practical Reason*. Whereas the *Critique of Pure Reason* finds conditions of possibility of *experience* in a priori forms of intuition and categories of understanding,⁹ the *Critique of Practical Reason* looks for conditions of possibility of obligation. The consciousness that we are morally obligated is a "fact of reason" from which Kant deduces claims that outstrip theoretical knowledge, the most important of which is that we are transcendently free causes of our actions: one "judges . . . that he *can* do something because he is aware that he *ought* to do it" (5:30). Freedom is the first object of practical "faith," but the moral law provides rational grounds for two further "postulates of pure practical reason": immortality and God.

Neither immortality nor God's existence are conditions of the possibility of morality *per se*. Whereas unfree beings would not be bound by categorical imperatives (see 4:445ff., 5:28-9), free human beings are bound even if we are mortal and God does not exist: "on its own behalf, morality in no way needs religion" (6:3). But humans are not *merely* free morally-bound agents. We are also *finite* agents with a volitional structure whereby we act not only on principles but also for the sake of ends.¹⁰ Thus the moral law is not only a necessary principle; it also gives us necessary *ends*.¹¹ The "whole *object* of pure practical reason" (5:109) is the "highest good," which refers either to a "supreme good . . . not subordinate to any other" or the "complete good," that "whole which is not part of a still greater whole" (5:110). But making either highest good an object of will requires cognitive commitments to immortality and God, so by giving human beings certain objects of volition, the moral law makes the associated beliefs "morally necessary" (5:125).

Kant's key claim is that one can aim only for what one takes to be possible at least in part through one's effort. I cannot aim to win a race if my defeat is literally certain, nor to build a house out of materials that I know will not stand. I can, of course, run along a track or put nails in materials without the relevant beliefs, but I can't aim for goals that I take to be impossible or unrelated to my efforts. Kant's arguments for God and immortality proceed by clarifying the necessary objects of pure practical reason and arguing that pursuing those objects is unreasonable without the relevant beliefs.

The argument for God's existence begins with the central thesis of Kant's moral philosophy, that "virtue (as worthiness to be happy)" is the "supreme good."¹² Kant adds that for the "*complete* good, . . . *happiness* is also required" (5:110). To one familiar with Kant's moral theory, this claim might be surprising, since Kant repeatedly opposes duty and inclination and insists that "the direct opposite of the principle of morality is the principle of one's own happiness" (5:25). Still, Kant never claims that happiness is not good, and *Groundwork* even implies what Kant here confirms, that for one "worthy" of it, happiness is good (4:393, 396). To avoid confusion, however, Kant emphasizes that this complete good can never "be taken as [the] *determining ground*" of the good will (5:109); that is, we do not obey the moral law for the sake of attaining the complete good. Rather, we seek the complete good only because doing so is required in order to obey the moral law. Moreover, we do not include happiness in our conception of the complete good simply because we want happiness; it is required not "merely in the partial eyes of a person who makes himself an end" (5:110) but rather for specifically *moral* reasons:

For to need happiness [and] also be worthy of it and yet not to participate in it cannot be consistent with the perfect volition of a rational being that would at the same time have all power. (5:110)

In an unfortunate rhetorical blunder, Kant might seem here to assume the existence of God – a "perfect . . . rational being" with "all power" – in order to establish a premise he later uses to prove God's existence. But Kant is merely drawing attention to the morally-required content of the complete good by asking, not what we would *want* to have included in that goal, but what our "impartial reason" *demand*s. Given that humans are finite creatures with worldly needs, having virtuous people who are worthy to be happy yet nonetheless unhappy is a condition towards which a morally good agent cannot deliberately aim. We must, if we are really morally good, aim for a state wherein virtue is rewarded with happiness.

Once Kant argues that happiness proportionate to virtue is a morally necessary aim, he asks after the conditions of possibility of this aim. The complete good requires that virtue and happiness be "necessarily" combined such that one is to be happy *because* one is virtuous, but these elements can be combined "either as analytic (logical connection) or as synthetic (real connection)" (5:111). An "analytic" connection, advocated by "the ancient Greek schools," denies a real difference between virtue and happiness. For Stoics, "happiness" is nothing more than virtue itself, while for Epicureans, "virtue" is nothing more than the effective pursuit of happiness. Against both schools, Kant reminds us, on the basis not only of common sense but also of his argument earlier in the *Critique of Practical Reason*,¹³ that these concepts are in fact "extremely heterogenous" (5:111). "Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence everything goes according to his wish and will" (5:124), and however virtuous he may be, the Stoic sage being tortured on the rack is not "happy." And because virtue requires doing one's duty *for the sake of duty*, an Epicurean who acts virtuously for the sake of pleasure has no true virtue.

Having dismissed "analytic" connections between virtue and happiness, Kant offers an "antinomy of practical reason," considering a causal relationship between happiness and virtue such that either "happiness [is] the motive of maxims to virtue" or "virtue [is] the efficient cause of happiness" (5:113). The former is "*absolutely* impossible because . . . maxims that put the determining ground of the will in the desire

for happiness are not moral” (5:113). Even if acting in accordance with duty leads to happiness, doing duty *for the sake of* happiness undermines moral worth.¹⁴ But the latter idea – that virtue ends up causing happiness – is “*also impossible* because any practical connection of causes and effects in the world . . . does not depend upon the moral dispositions of the will but upon knowledge of the laws of nature and the physical ability to use them for one’s purposes” (5:113). While attempting to get virtue from seeking happiness is evil, hoping for happiness as a fringe benefit of virtue is stupid. The way to satisfy desires is through knowing how the world works and putting that knowledge to use. Cleverness and strength, not one’s moral disposition, effect changes in the world that bring happiness.

If his discussion of the highest good ended there, Kant would offer little more than despair. One ought to pursue the highest good and thus believe it possible, but no way of making sense of it seems consistent with one’s knowledge of the nature of duty and the way of the world. But Kant offers a “resolution of the antinomy” that shows how one *can* combine virtue and happiness in a necessary way by discarding an assumption underlying the previous analysis. For Kant, “antinomies” are apparently intractable conflicts of reason that are resolved “by showing that there is no true conflict if the . . . world . . . [is] regarded merely as” a world of experience rather than the world “in itself” (5:114). In particular, the claim that virtue can lead to happiness is false only *if* one’s moral disposition is taken as a “form of causality in the sensible world” (5:114). One need not, however, think of the moral disposition in this way. Instead, one can and should see oneself (with one’s moral disposition) as a “noumenon,” existing in an intelligible world that is the ground of but not reducible to the empirical world (5:115, cf. A546/B574f.). This perspective opens the possibility that one’s noumenal moral disposition can be a *nonempirical* cause with happiness as its (empirical) effect. And this opens room for claiming that virtue leads to happiness, albeit not on grounds of any empirically-observed correlation between the two.

Merely admitting the possibility that one’s moral disposition *could* somehow provide a noumenal ground for happiness is insufficient. Happiness “rests . . . on the harmony of nature with [one’s] whole end” (5:124). But “the acting rational being in the world is . . . not also the cause of the world . . . itself” (5:124), so human beings lack the capacity to ensure that good moral dispositions will noumenally ground happiness.

Nevertheless, in the . . . necessary pursuit of the highest good, such a connection [between virtue and happiness] is postulated as necessary . . . Accordingly, the existence of a cause of all nature, distinct from nature, which contains the ground of this connection, namely of the exact correspondence of happiness with morality, is *postulated*. (5:125)

To pursue a morally required end (the complete good), human beings must assume that their pursuit of virtue brings about a world in which happiness is proportionate to virtue. For that world to come about, something must ground necessary connections between virtue and happiness. Since this something cannot be human beings (we are not powerful enough) nor nature itself (as merely empirical, it makes no reference to noumenal dispositions), we must assume a separate noumenal ground that Kant calls “God.” “It is morally necessary to assume the existence of God” (5:125).

Like traditional rational theologians, Kant moves from a proof that God exists to a discussion of the nature of God. Unlike proofs Kant rejected earlier, the moral proof

establishes “an author of the world possessed of the highest perfection . . . [,] *omniscient* in order to cognize my conduct even to my inmost disposition . . . , *omnipotent* in order to bestow results appropriate to it, and so too *omnipresent*, *eternal*, and so forth” (5:140). Moreover, because God secures the morally required highest good, God must be omnibenevolent, justice, etc. And because in God belief follows *from* dutiful effort to attain the highest good, it is not a basis *for* that effort. If speculative theology proved the existence of a just and all-powerful God, “transgression of . . . law would . . . be avoided . . . but because . . . the spur to activity . . . would be external . . . most actions conforming to law would be done from fear, only a few from hope, and none at all from duty” (5:147). *Knowledge* of a just God undermines true virtue, while morally-motivated *faith* in such a God completes the virtuous disposition with a basis for moral hope.

By connecting virtue and happiness, God provides *part* of what makes the highest good possible, but the difficulty attaining the highest good is not limited to connecting happiness and virtue. Virtue itself seems out of reach, at least without *immortality*.

1. Virtue requires “*complete conformity* of dispositions with the moral law” (5:122).
2. “This conformity must therefore be . . . possible” (given that we are obliged to pursue it).
3. But this conformity is not possible in any finite period of time.
4. Thus we must have literally “*endless progress* toward that complete conformity” (5:122).
5. Thus we must “presuppos[e] . . . the *existence* . . . of the same rational being continuing *endlessly* ([i.e.,] immortality of the soul)” (5:122).

Kant’s explanation of the third and key step in this proof is sparse: “Complete conformity of the will with the moral law is . . . *holiness*, a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of its existence” (5:122). Kant says nothing more (here) about *why* complete conformity of will is impossible for temporally-limited, sensible, rational beings. And there are at least three ways of reading Kant’s argument, none of which precisely fits Kant’s claims.

First, one might examine other passages in which Kant discusses “holiness.” There “holiness” distinguishes God’s will from the human wills. A “*holy will*” is one that “by its subjective constitution, . . . can be determined *only* through the representation of the good” (4:414, cf. 5:82-3). Such a will necessarily follows the moral law, so this law is not an “imperative” for it. If Kant means this by “holiness” in the proof above, humans are clearly incapable of it. As sensible beings, we are beholden to an interest in happiness that, even if wholly subordinated to the moral law, nonetheless provides an alternative possible motivation for the will. But this version of the argument makes it unclear why Kant would think that human beings, even *with* endless time, would be able to attain holiness. Kant denies that “we could *ever* bring it about that . . . we . . . , like the Deity raised beyond all dependence, could come into possession of holiness of will” (5:82-3, emphasis added). Moreover, why should human virtue *require* holiness of will? Kant emphasizes that the moral law does not “*strike down*” but “*merely infringes upon* self-love, inasmuch as it only restricts it, as natural and active in us even prior to the moral law, to the condition of agreement with this law” (5:73). For virtuous agents, the moral law *trumps* other motivating grounds, but need not eliminate them altogether.

Alternatively, Kant might be making a general point about how to express complete conformity with morality in a temporally extended series. For God, who does not have a temporal existence, conformity with the moral law might be a single eternal act. But for a rational, *sensible* being, the only expression of a will in *complete* conformity with the moral law might be a will that conforms to that law over endless duration. At the “end” of our immortal lives, we will have brought about an accord with morality can “never be disturbed” (see 5:83), not because all possibility of temptation has vanished, but because we have withstood every temptation.

Finally, Kant’s claims here might anticipate his later argument in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that human beings “started from evil” (6:72) not merely in the sense that we have inclinations that *can* conflict with the moral law but that we “corrupt . . . the subjective supreme ground of all [our] maxims” (6:37). In this case, the best we can do is to make “progress . . . from the worse to the morally better” (5:123, cf. 5:127-8n) by gradually strengthening respect for the moral law and increasingly subordinating self-love to that law. This reading has the advantage of drawing on Kant’s extensive discussion of evil and moral progress in *Religion*, but does not fit well with the specific argument in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. It does not explain the *Critique*’s emphasis on *holiness*, nor why “no rational being of the sensible world” is capable of perfect virtue. Kant’s argument for radical evil in *Religion* is specifically about *human beings* and while Kant admits the possibility of other finite, rational agents in the universe, he nowhere claims such agents *in general* are evil.¹⁵ Any radical-evil based is inadequate to show why immortality is necessary for all “rational but finite being[s]” (5:123). In the end, however, even if the *Critique of Practical Reason* does not make clear why sensible rational beings are incapable of complete conformity with the moral law, one can remedy this gap in Kant’s proof by taking *Religion* as the requisite supplement to the *Critique*, or by appealing to the complete good and arguing for immortality as necessary to provide apportioning happiness to virtue.

Kant’s proofs for immortality and God have not escaped criticism. Some criticisms focus on the arguments’ details, while others attack the Kant’s overall proof-structure. Discussing even a substantial fraction of these criticisms is impossible in this short chapter, one objection is worth noting. Bertrand Russell and others have argued that Kant’s argument represents the worst sort of irrational justification of wishful thinking. After summarizing Kant’s moral arguments for God and immortality, Russell objects:

That is a very curious argument. If you looked at the matter from a scientific point of view, you would say, “After all, I only know this world. I do not know about the rest of the universe, but so far as one can argue at all on probabilities one would say that probably this world is a fair sample, and if there is injustice here the odds are that there is injustice elsewhere also.” Supposing you got a crate of oranges that you opened, and you found all the top layer . . . bad, you would not argue, “The underneath ones must be good, so as to redress the balance.” You would say, “Probably the whole lot is a bad consignment”; and that is . . . what a scientific person would argue about the universe. He would say, “Here we find in this world a great deal of injustice, and . . . that is a reason for supposing that justice does not rule in the world; and therefore . . . it affords a moral argument against deity and not in favor of one.”¹⁶

While Kant's response to such objections ultimately involves virtually the entirety of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, its basic structure can be summarized easily. Kant entirely agrees that if you look scientifically, you have no reason to think injustice will be remedied, since one sees injustice prevailing here and now. But this "scientific" perspective is only half of a practical antinomy that *seems* to make moral hope irrational. Russell's objection, like the antinomy itself, assumes that science is the only legitimate point of view on questions about reality. Once Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* limits science to claims about appearances, he *can* postulate God's existence. And once the *Critique of Practical Reason* shows that it is morally necessary, this postulate becomes *necessary*.

Postulates' status as postulates of *practical reason* is extremely important here. While these postulates' *content* is theoretical (there is a God; humans are immortal), their *epistemic grounds* are moral. Precisely how to interpret their practical status is an issue of contention among Kant scholars, with some claiming that one must merely "act as if" the postulates are true and others insisting that one must actually believe *that* they are true but without claiming scientific or metaphysical warrant for this belief. On either interpretation, however, claims about God and immortality are defended and applied solely in terms of their practical import, without the traditional rational-metaphysical theorizing of the tradition against which Kant argues in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

3. Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason

Kant's most comprehensive religious work – *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* – was an attempt to reinterpret and defend traditional Christian doctrines such as sin, grace, atonement, and the kingdom of God. The attempt successfully got Kant in enough trouble with Prussian censors for "misus[ing his] philosophy to distort and disparage . . . basic teachings of . . . Christianity" (7:6) that that he had to promise, "as Your Majesty's most loyal subject, [to] refrain altogether from discoursing publicly . . . on religion" (7:10).¹⁷ Among the wide range of theological issues Kant's *Religion* enters into, the most important are his philosophical defenses of *radical evil* and God's *grace*, and the related development of his argument for immortality.

Kant's argument that human beings are evil depends on both "anthropological research" (6:25) and an "a priori" inference. From "the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human deeds parades before us" (6:32-33), one infers evil maxims by assuming that human agents are free. Given the specific nature of the moral law (requiring universal and thus unwavering adherence), one can infer from a single evil deed the presence of a fundamental ("radical") willingness to subordinate moral incentives to non-moral ones if the "price" is right (6:39). Given human freedom and the rigor of the moral law, the implication of universal human misdeeds is that "what the Apostle says . . . hold[s] true of human beings universally, 'There is no distinction here, they are all under sin – there is none righteous . . . , no, not one'" (6:39).

For Kant, the fact that humans are radically evil generates a problem akin to those that motivated the *Critique of Practical Reason*'s postulates:

[Human] evil is radical, since it corrupts the grounds of all maxims; . . . it is also not to be extirpated through human forces, for this could happen only through good maxims – something that cannot take place if the subjective supreme ground of all maxims is presupposed to be corrupted. (6:37, cf. 6:45)

The willingness to make an exception to the moral law when the price is right shows that evil lies at the root of human choice, which implies that one cannot extirpate it through that same (evil) power of choice. The problem is even worse because, for Kant, human evil involves tendency to cultivate a *propensity* to further evil. And even if one somehow reformed oneself overcame self-wrought evil propensities, one can never be someone who always chooses in accordance with the moral law since one has chosen wickedly in the past: “however steadfastly a human being may have persevered in such a [good] disposition in a life conduct conformable to it, he nevertheless started from evil, and this is a debt which is impossible for him to wipe out” (6:72).

Despite these challenges to virtue, “the command that we ought to become better human beings still resounds unabated in our souls” (6:45). Consistent with the key move in his arguments for the postulates, Kant argues that “consequently, we must . . . be capable of it” (6:45). As with the postulates, whatever must be believed to rationally make moral reform an object of will can and should become an article of rational faith. Because evil cannot be extirpated “through human forces” alone (6:37) and thus “some supernatural cooperation is also needed to [a person] becoming good or better” (R 6:44, cf. 7:43-4, 328), belief in divine assistance, or “grace,” is needed. For us to pursue virtue as an attainable end of our endeavors, we “can admit an effect of grace” (6:53) and “must accept this help” (6:44). As with the postulates, this belief is justified only in order to rationally pursue virtue as an attainable end, so one must see grace as something one “makes oneself antecedently worthy of receiving” (6:44) and never make use of grace to promote moral complacency (6:53).

The rest *Religion* gives further detail as to how grace functions in humans’ moral lives, included a long discussion of how his conception of grace relates to the tradition Christian doctrine of substitutionary atonement (see especially 6:66-78). For this essay, grace’s most important implication is its supplement to Kant’s earlier arguments for God and immortality. Kant’s argument for grace to solve the problem of human evil implies the existence of a God that at least arguably needs to have the traditional properties Kant ascribes to God (omniscience, omnipotence, etc.), but *Religion* adds an emphasis on the need for a God of grace and mercy as well as justice and goodness. With respect to immortality, because “the distance between the goodness which we ought to effect in ourselves and the evil from which we start is . . . infinite” (6:66), humans reach goodness only through “infinite progression” of a life that “steadily improves” (6:67-8). This provides either a further argument for immortality or a better explanation of second *Critique*’s argument.

4. Conclusion

Kant’s arguments for God, immortality, and grace remain forces to be reckoned with. This chapter laid out only the beginnings of debates about the legitimacy of Kant’s theological arguments. Some continue to defend traditional theistic proofs against Kant’s objections and others attack Kant’s own arguments for God, immortality, and grace. More important than these particular arguments, however, Kant’s philosophy of religion reflects an important philosophical *approach* to religion. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is an important step towards freeing religion from domination by scientific and metaphysical arguments. Kant provides both detailed arguments and a general strategy for showing why neither science nor metaphysics in any traditional sense is capable of

grappling with religion. Moreover, Kant helpfully points out that even if science and metaphysics provide no reason for believing in God, there are aspects of life that are at least as important as science and metaphysics, aspects that may require beliefs that go beyond what science can prove. Kant provides a way of making non-scientific arguments that are rigorous and rational without being *metaphysical*, and even if his arguments have problems in details, the strategy of developing such arguments continues to be worth pursuing.

Kant's focus on religion's practical importance is also important today. Absent convincing scientific evidence for it, many today see no point in religion. But Kant shows how religious beliefs can be rationally and psychologically necessary to ward off either moral lenience or moral despair. In his *Critique of Practical Reason*, religious beliefs are a way of maintaining moral demands in the face of a human life that seems too limited and a world that seems unjust. In *Religion*, religious beliefs prevent moral despair in the face of a rigorous moral law and the recognition of one's own corrupt tendencies. Human finitude and moral imperfection continue to tempt us either to soften the demands of morality or to give up hope of meeting them. Kant shows that this apparent choice is illusory, that religion provides a way to combine rational moral hope with an uncompromised conception of virtue. But Kant also models how faith could solve other apparently intractable dilemmas within practical reason. By recasting dilemmas as "antinomies," Kantian philosophies of religion can highlight the extent to which conflicts between strict duty and corporate welfare, or between duty and authenticity, or between fairness and moral progress, can be alleviated by faith.

And religion's practical import implies not only (nor even primarily) that those who are non-religious should become more religious. When many continue to use religion to defend immoral violations of rights, Kant's moral arguments justify religion *within moral limits*. If one believes in God and immortality *for moral reasons*, then one should *not* hold beliefs that require or even allow moral violations or compromise. Without theoretical grounds for religion, the *only* basis for believing religious claims is that such belief is required to adhere to moral demands, so religious belief can never require *transgressing* these demands. Kant's lesson to those who want to be morally good is that they should be open to religious faith, his lesson to those who want to be religious is that they can – and must – restrain that faith within limits, not only of reason, but of respect for the dignity of all human beings. Today, both lessons remain worth heeding.

¹ See Hitchens xxx and Dawkins xxx.

² Kant's argument here is not the so-called "Moral Argument," that God has to exist in order to legislate moral laws. For Kant, one legislates moral laws to oneself, and so would have moral obligations whether God exists or not. But because of the sorts of beings that we are – imperfect and needy of happiness – we must believe in God and personal immortality in order to make sense of our morally-required pursuit of the "highest good."

³ For the purpose of this chapter, I pass over Kant's discussion of human immortality in his "Paralogisms of Pure Reason." See Ameriks 2000 and Wood 2009.

⁴ See Anselm, *Proslogion*, Chapter 2, and Descartes's *Meditations*.

⁵ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* Question 2, Article 3.

⁶ See A188-211/B232-256 and the discussion of these passages in this book, chapter xxx, pp. xxx-xxx.

⁷ See A508/B536ff. and Grier 2000.

⁸ See William Paley, *Natural theology: or, Evidences of the existence and attributes of the Deity*, Chapter One. See too David Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion*.

⁹ See chapter xxx in this volume.

¹⁰ See 4:427, 5:109, 6:211

¹¹ See 5:109, 6:4-5

¹² See 4:393 and chapter xxx (pp. xxx—xxx) in this volume.

¹³ See 5:21ff. and chapter xxx in this volume (pp. xxx-xxx).

¹⁴ See chapter xxx.

¹⁵ For a detailed defense of this reading, see Wood 2009.

¹⁶ Bertrand Russell, “Why I am not a Christian.” For a strikingly similar criticism phrased in much different terms, see G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 622ff.

¹⁷ Kant emphasizes the phrase “as Your Majesty’s most loyal subject” when, after the King’s death, he publishes his *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), his final published work on religion.