Kant’s Transcendental Religious Argument –
The Possibility of Religion

Dennis Schulting

I want to zoom in on the central transcendental aspect of Kant’s line of reasoning in his *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the book where he expounds his philosophy of religion. I believe that it offers a piece of transcendental philosophy par excellence. Against this backdrop, I hint at a way to read Kant’s account of religion as an explicit claim to the possibility of a “universal world religion,” specifically Christianity that has world religion as its end. This ties in with what I shall be claiming is the implicitly teleological nature of the transcendental approach to religion. In this context, I shall also very briefly say something about Kant on history, and more particularly historical faith. I should note that this essay is extremely exploratory, and perhaps a bit speculative, and does not do justice to the wealth of material contained in the Religion book.

The teleology might at first sight be seen to conflict with the putative transcendental nature of Kant’s argument. I argue that it need not be seen thus. The gist of my reading is that reason is an essential ingredient of religion, and that *a fortiori* reason is religion’s end or final cause; that, in other words, religion is geared to revealing reason as its essential nature. The transcendental argument is not in conflict with this, for it shows up reason as the implicitly necessary condition or ground of religion, which also in historical time will be shown to be religion’s ground, even if only ideally. Some tension nonetheless remains. I point this out towards the end.

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1 Transcendental Arguments

But before I proceed, I must expand a bit on what, for Kant, amounts to a transcendental argument. Kant himself never adopts this terminology. He does talk about transcendental proofs, but these are not quite what is standardly conceived as a transcendental argument. Despite some ambiguous connotations, I have retained the notion of transcendental argument in my title and throughout primarily since it is in common use among English-speaking Kantians. If we take Strawson’s reading of Kant as the paradigmatic case of a transcendental argument as commonly understood, then we may see it as having roughly the following general structure: If something A is the case, then something B must be the case; given that A, hence B. Put in more familiar terms, B is seen to be a necessary condition for A to be possible. B is the enabling ground of A.

This framework is, rightly or wrongly, imposed on Kant’s reasoning in the Deduction in the first Critique. The argument so conceived is supposed to have an anti-sceptical force and is supposed to provide a proof of the external world of ‘weighty’ objects, through which a subject of experience patterns a trajectory. There are all sorts of problems with an argument designed along these lines, philosophically and exegetically. For one thing, I believe that Kant’s argument in the Deduction is not based on anti-sceptical reasoning nor is it out to prove the existence of the external world. One major interpretive problem with arguments of this sort is that they proceed without showing the need to engage in what Kant understands by properly transcendental, viz., a priori, analysis (KrV, B 25). Famously, Strawson has not much concern for a priori analysis, at least not in the way Kant sees a priori as linked with necessity (KrV, B 4). Strawson has even less concern for what Kant deems quintessential for transcendental analysis, namely a priori synthesis.

I cannot go into vexing issues surrounding such a cumbersome notion as synthesis, and whether or not it is an indispensable part of Kant’s argument. I do want to retain one important element though of the Strawsonian reconstruction in order to highlight Kant’s transcendental way of reasoning: this concerns the dual element of possibility and self-consciousness, which are at the core of Strawson’s reading of what he understands as Kant’s analytical argument. This is linked with what Strawson calls self-reflexiveness. I think Strawson was onto something centrally involved in Kant’s theory of experience by construing the analytical argu-

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ment as showing up self-reflexiveness, whereby the possibility of self-consciousness is somehow seen to be dependent on objects in the world. Apart from the scepticism issue, the major difference between Kant and Strawson, I believe, lies in the direction of the argument. Whereas for Strawson the goal of the explanation is the possibility of self-consciousness, i.e., the subject of experience, for Kant the explicandum is rather the object of experience. For Kant, the constitutive role of the subject, self-consciousness, is integrated into the way the explication proceeds operatively. The possibility of self-consciousness is not a problem, but a fact that is in no need of further justification. The possibility of objects is what presents the problem to be explained.

Let me expand on this. Whereas for Strawson the self-reflexiveness concerns the way that the possibility of self-consciousness is grounded upon concrete weighty objects that are being experienced, for Kant the self-reflexiveness concerns the way that the possibility of objects as such or objects in general can be fully explained by having recourse to an a priori analysis of self-consciousness. Weighty objects are then explainable as grounded upon such objects in general. Thus, if we look at answering the how-possible question, for Strawson the direction of argument employed in answering that question is from object to subject, whilst for Kant it is precisely the reverse: from subject to object. But does Strawson not also argue from self-consciousness to objectivity? If we look closer, then we must be mindful of the proper goal of a Strawsonian transcendental argument: it explains the possibility, or, the very concept of experience itself. The starting point is the question how experience is possible, and the goal is answering that question by virtue of a proof of the external world. So Strawson’s argument is not solely designed as providing anti-sceptical ammunition, but also as answering, at a stroke, the how-possible question. As said, however, for Strawson the how-possible question only concerns the subject of experience, not the object, even though the self-reflexive connexion connects the two reciprocal parts of the conceptual analysis.³ For Kant, it is precisely the how possible question regarding the object which is at issue, which can only be answered by explaining its rootedness in the subject. The way in which Kant proceeds to answer the rootedness is by virtue of pointing out the entwinement of self-consciousness and the way of explaining – this is what Kant calls transcendental reflection, which has the possibility of objects as its object of inquiry. One would

be forgiven for thinking all this a tad obscure. The important point for
now is the idea that for Kant a general way of explaining the possibility
of something, any object of knowledge, in the most general terms, is by
having recourse to an analysis of self-consciousness, more specifically, of
self-critical reason itself. To put the point in the metaphorical terms fa-
mously proposed by Kant in the B-preface of the first Critique: there
is only as much reason in an object as is put in it by us (cf. KrV, Bxviii).
It is in this sense that I’m interested in the question concerning religion as
an object of reason, indeed as the object of a transcendental religious ar-
gument.

2 The How-possible Question and Religion

How can religion be the object of philosophical explanation? Are philo-
sophical reason and religion or faith not radically opposed categories? If
we were to grant that faith is independent of reason and that the two are
hostile to each other, then it would be difficult to conceive of a way of
explaining religion philosophically and so it would not seem possible
to answer the how-possible question regarding religion by means of phil-
osophical analysis. But if we do engage philosophically with the topic of
religion, it is important to try and steer a middle course between, on the
one hand, too quickly reducing religion to philosophy and pursuing a
typically rationalistic approach and, on the other, adopt a strict dualism
in regard to how philosophy or reason and religion are related. So how
then to proceed? Let me first note two general things.

First, this question concerning the relation between faith and reason
is not just a sterile academic one. It is of topical interest against the back-
drop of renewed, often violent engagement with religion in today’s soci-
ety. However, although my central claim is in some ways linked to look-
ing for possible avenues for mitigating socially and culturally related
problems associated with religion, I want to abstract from such complex
matters here and focus on simpler issues of formality.

Secondly, religion is a serious matter for study, even though we phi-
losophers tend to be derogatory with respect to it. The cult of religion is
seen by many philosophers as a thing of the past, as backwards, indeed as
non- or irrational. It is easily pointed out that in contrast to the “symbolic
representation,” as Kant puts it,⁴ which epitomises religious language and

⁴ RGV, AA 06: 176.
expressions of faith, philosophical enquiry obeys a universal regulatory order that ostensibly avoids the ambiguity of particular symbols. The particularity of religion is seen as precisely opposite to this and should therefore be seen as per definitionem contrary to philosophical enquiry.

My position here is that we should not dismiss religion out of hand. But in order to be able to take religion seriously as object, and thus to explain its possibility, we need to adapt our philosophical approach without sacrificing the rationalism. We must steer a middle course between submitting to religious apologetics and simplistic atheist renunciation based on supposedly rational arguments. Kant’s transcendentalism offers the best way to finding such a middle course, which preserves the particularity of its explanandum and the universality of the explanans. In this way, the connection between religion and philosophy, or faith and reason, can be more favourably explicated.

To give an idea of how such an analysis might go, I want to look specifically at the fourth part of the Religion book, concerning “service and counterfeit service.” I will talk about two types of relation. The first relation is about the general way in which reason regards religion as its object, or to be more precise, how religion is the object of reason alone, as the title of the book already suggests. By this I take Kant to mean that we consider religion insofar as it can be the object of rational enquiry. To the extent that an a priori account can be given of religion, religion is the object of rational enquiry, of self-critical reason. Insofar as religion is the object of rational enquiry, religion qua its essence can be said to issue from reason itself. It has, as it were, arisen naturally out of it, which is not a claim to its historical de facto origination, but a claim regarding the justificatory sense in which reason must be seen as the ground of religion qua religion. It is in this way, as a transcendental argument of sorts, that the possibility, indeed the very concept, of religion can be explained.

The second relation is the relation between historical or revealed, or also ecclesiastical faith, on the one hand, and pure rational faith on the other. The distinction here parallels Kant’s other distinction between positive and natural religion. In Kant’s view, historical faith gradually gives way to pure rational faith, which is pure religion or religion properly speaking. This type of relatedness between historical faith and rational faith is more controversial. It concerns a relation of cause and end. Kant speaks of a “continuous approximation of pure rational faith.”

5 RGV, AA 06: 153 (Trans. mine).
rational faith. Historical faith has rational faith as its end, or to put it more generally, the telos or end of religion is reason.\(^6\)

The last relation is less odd than might appear at first sight. A certain teleology arising from the transcendental stance is at issue here, namely a causality which lies at the root of our object of enquiry and has as its objective the unveiling, revelation I’m inclined to say, of the essence of the object. There is a certain end which is the object of a concept (‘religion’) insofar as this concept must be seen as the ground or cause of the possibility of that object, whereby the thought or conceived object is not just a concept or thought but the real effect of the cause of its concept.\(^7\) This concept concerns reason, which not only has religion as its object of enquiry, but also makes it into its object. Reason is the causa finalis of religion, to the extent that religion proper, religion qua religion, is considered. Reason produces, as it were, or ‘enables’ religion qua religion in the same way that the unity of consciousness in the first Critique Deduction produces or ‘enables’ the object in general, qua its objectivity. The concept of religion, its rational idea so to speak, is that which enables religion. It is important to see that this ‘enabling’ element only concerns a specific necessary condition, which is not a sufficient condition for religion as a manifest form, in the same way that, in the theoretical philosophy, the unity of consciousness is not a sufficient condition for an object of our empirical senses to be actually existent. The necessary condition here concerns the most elemental, conceptual feature of religion, that which makes religion religion. It does not concern the historical existence or actuality of any particular religion. The teleology here, viz., that reason has religion as its object and that religion is revealed to have reason as its final cause, is analytically implied in the very concept ‘religion’. Any particular historical faith or religion has a pure side to it just because it is an instantiation of the concept ‘religion’.

The basic unargued premise of Kant’s argument concerning religion is that religion essentially concerns our morality in a way that does not conflict with the sole groundedness of morality in strict obedience to the moral law. The teleology of religion that is implied in this argument concerns in particular a moral teleological order which we must associate with the highest good. It concerns that order in which exists an objective

\(^6\) Kant speaks of natural religion’s “ultimate end” at RGV, AA 06: 157, and of rational faith, in terms of “public religious faith,” as the “final end” at RGV, AA 06: 152–153.

\(^7\) Cf. KU §10, AA 05: 219–220.
unity between, on the one hand, our moral duty and our worthiness to happiness and, on the other, nature as that in which our moral acts are effectuated and contribute to the highest possible degree of happiness. I shall not go into this moral aspect of the teleological order of religion, but want only to stress the gist of Kant’s form of thought regarding religion’s groundedness in reason, viz., that reason is its final cause. At any rate, the fact that this objective unity is not achievable in our finite human lives already indicates how to read the final causality inherent to the way Kant sees the relation between religion and reason. Religion, then, has a noumenal side, which implies that this objective unity will (most probably) never be accomplished in the sensible world, not even beyond the finitude of our personal lives. Even though it lies at the root of religion, the objective unity that is the product of reason will not be revealed as to its noumenal nature. Consequently, the approximation of pure religion as end, of which I will tell more in a bit, is asymptotic. It can only be understood transcendently. In reality, it can only be ‘hoped’ for. The question then is how real this approximation effectively is. Let me first expand on the distinction between historical faith and pure rational faith in order to get a grip on this.

3 Ecclesiastical Faith vs. Pure Rational Faith

Religion is necessarily introduced in a historical form: this means that it has a necessary de facto beginning in time and that it starts out as a particular religious cult. In genealogical terms, the concrete historical form of a religion precedes its philosophical grasp or concept. Such a starting point may well be accompanied by a spectacle of miracles or by revelation, say. But a de facto historical genealogy does not amount to a de jure justification of religion, that is, an explanation of its very idea or concept. This can only be done by means of a transcendental analysis that considers religion qua its essence and examines historical religion’s natural tendency towards continuously approaching or revealing this essence. The historicity of religion, its positivity, with all its practices, rites, observances and statutory forms, is a necessary empirical condition, an enabling condition of sorts of religion, but it is not a sufficient condition. The how-possible question regarding religion is not answered by giving a descriptive account of its historical origin and nature. Its sufficient condition lies in reason alone, which has religion as its object.
Does this mean that religion has been reduced to reason, to philosophy? Are not precisely those aspects which Kant considers arbitrary and contingent elements of religion (its positive, historical aspects) the very essential characteristics of religion? However, the objection implied in this question in fact begs Kant’s transcendental question, for it assumes at the outset an unfounded belief that religion is quintessentially non-rational, merely particular, contingent and merely historical. There is no philosophically sound reason why we should presume the irrationality or extra-rationality of religion and its mere historicality. The concept ‘religion’ alone warrants asking after those aspects universally shared by all types of religion, which invites an enquiry into religion’s inherent rationality.

Furthermore, Kant’s transcendental distinctions are less absolute than might appear. The historical aspect of religion is still a necessary condition. Kant talks about historical aspects of faith in terms of means which promote pure rational faith and thus are “fortuitous means of advocacy [episodische Anpreisungsmit tel].” Kant is rather interested in a prioritisation of what is contingent and historically arbitrary in manifest religion and what is essential in it. This is not to be dismissive of religion’s historical aspect. Nor is this a case of disavowing of someone’s preference for a certain ecclesiastical service or statutory faith, “of which there can be different and equally good forms.” However, in the manner in which one chooses and practices one’s religion there is no essential difference, which would make the one religion more eminent or advantageous than any other. Kant says: “[T]here certainly is a tremendous distance in the style of faith, but not in the principle.” What is at issue in the transcendental analysis of religion is determining this general principle, shared by all forms of faith.

Let me dwell a little on the distinction between revealed or statutory faith (positive religion) and natural religion. For Kant, revealed religion is that religion whereby I regard my moral duty as a divine command. Natural religion asserts, in addition, that the fact that I consider my moral duty as a divine command can only be secondary to my consciousness of duty, which alone is universally valid. This consciousness of duty is

8 RGV, AA 06: 167.
9 RGV, AA 06: 168.
10 Cf. RGV, AA 06: 172.
11 RGV, AA 06: 176.
12 Cf. RGV, AA 06: 157.
connected with the inner light of natural reason, to which every person, religious or not, can appeal and has access.\footnote{Cf. RGV, AA 06: 167.} Kant differentiates further between rationalists and pure rationalists, between naturalists and super-naturalists. What is important in this context is that, contrary to the naturalist, the rationalist does not deny the metaphysical, real possibility of a revelation, for he, as a Kantian, is conscious of the bounds of knowledge. Nor does he deny the possibility that a revelation might lie at the root of religion, that it might have been an ‘enabler’ of religion, as it were.

However, Kant is most interested in religion’s universal communicability. This qualitative aspect is two-pronged: (1) as natural religion, which can convince anyone on the grounds of one’s use of reason and (2) as learned religion, which stems from revealed religion or statutory faith and is sedimented in a religion’s sacred writings and interpretive tradition (cf. religions of the book). Both these aspects make it possible for religion to be accessible to all and acquire continuity over time. Notice again that revelation need not be excluded from natural religion. A revealed faith, once there, can be regarded as natural religion. Primarily important here is that “every religion in part at least, even a revealed religion, must also contain certain principles of natural religion.”\footnote{RGV, AA 06: 156.} Also a revealed religion must exhibit objective elements and structures that equally characterise other types of religion, if only because of the temporal, historical aspect, namely in order to guarantee its continued existence. There must be a visible church or organised cult, for otherwise the revelation would have to take place anew over and over again. It could also be argued, more speculatively, that revelation is in fact, over time, the revealing of reason as the ground of religion, fully in line with the transcendental argument’s thrust. Seen in the Kantian light, revelation is then on a par with conceptual analysis.

4 The Continuous Approximation of Pure Rational Faith

This leads us to Kant’s notion of an approximation of pure rational faith. Kant writes that “every church erected on statutory laws can be the true church only to the extent that it contains within itself a principle of constantly coming closer to the pure faith of religion (which, when it is prac-
tical [wenn er praktisch ist], is what truly constitutes religion in every faith) and of eventually being able to dispense with ecclesiastical faith (in its historical aspect).”$^{15}$ He calls this principle the “maxim of continuous approximation [Maxime der continuirlichen Annäherung].”$^{16}$ Kant argues that ecclesiastical faith should, paradoxically, in its very service be directed towards the final end of being dispensed with. He connects this goal with achieving a “public religious faith.”$^{17}$ By contrast, the religious person who repudiates this maxim and remains consigned to the historical and statutory part of ecclesiastical faith, because he believes it is that part which is solely soul-saving, or puts revealed religion above natural religion, is guilty of spurious worship or counterfeit service, that is, he adheres to false religion.$^{18}$

What is important here is the ranking order between what is essential to faith or religion and what is a mere facilitating means, albeit an important one (“bloßes aber höchst schätzbares Mittel”$^{19}$). The means of the symbolic representation of a faith serves to diffuse or communicate and give continuity to religion$^{20}$ and must not be seen as the true end of religion, and so is not truly religion. The genuine goal or purpose of religion is the good life-conduct, that is, purely acting from duty, having a pure moral disposition, the principle of which everyone can have an insight into merely by the light of reason. Those who strive for this goal, which consists in eventually achieving the highest good, if only ideally, are servants in the church “as an ethical community [ein ethisches gemeines Wesen].”$^{21}$ To esteem the particular form of one’s religious cult higher than the primary goal of religion would imply a reversal of means and ends. Such a reversal, Kant asserts, would mean “the moral death of reason.”$^{22}$

It is difficult to ascertain what Kant effectively means by an ethical community and how this could come about. He does not mean something that merely exists in the minds of those who are its participants. It has to have some concrete instantiation, but it is not simply a church community nor will it be something like a universal rotary club, say.

$^{15}$ RGV, AA 06: 153; translation amended and emphasis added.
$^{16}$ RGV, AA 06: 153; translation amended.
$^{17}$ RGV, AA 06: 153.
$^{18}$ RGV, AA 06: 153. Cf. RGV, AA 06: 165.
$^{19}$ RGV, AA 06: 165.
$^{20}$ Cf. RGV, AA 06: 165.
$^{21}$ RGV, AA 06: 94.
$^{22}$ RGV, AA 06: 175.
Could he mean by an ethical community something that is on a par with a “civil commonwealth [bürgerliches gemeines Wesen],” of which he relates in Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte, where it is argued that a condition for such a commonwealth is set up, partly “internally” through a “civil constitution [bürgerliche Verfassung],” and partly “[externally] through a common agreement and legislation [durch eine gemeinschaftliche Verabredung und Gesetzgebung äußerlich ein Zustand errichtet] […]”? What would furthermore be the relation between an ethical community and a civil constitution, which is the arrangement for a “commonwealth,” a “civil society”? What thus could be the concrete external arrangement for an ethical community?

To return to the distinction between historical and pure faith, the Christian or any religious doctrine is based not merely on concepts or principles of reason. The service of a church, dedicated to a particular faith, is therefore two-fold. On the one hand there is the outward service which is in accord with historical faith, on the other hand the inward service that corresponds to moral rational faith. Neither service can effectively function as a standalone service. This holds for the Christian faith especially: it is both a religious rational faith and a learned, historical religion, which has its own particular statutory forms. Both are indispensable aspects of one and the same religion. In order to have a church at all the fact of its de facto foundation and institutionalisation must be assumed, to which a certain authority must also be granted. A church as “universal union” cannot exist solely by virtue of a consentient rational faith, in and as natural religion. In other words, there is no living, manifest religion at all which does not have a historical form which changes over time. Religion, in short, is not an empty concept, but a living concrete communal form.

Nevertheless, Kant does suggest that this historical aspect of religion, or historical faith, is provisional in the development of religion towards pure rational faith. The historical aspect does not after all appear as necessary as was first suggested. An important reason for this is that each statutory faith or historical faith is “restricted to one people and cannot contain the universal world religion.” World religion, however, is the goal of pure rational faith, which being the “one and true religion” contains

23 IaG, AA 08: 25.
24 IaG, AA 08: 22.
26 RGV, AA 06: 168; my emphasis.
“nothing but laws, i. e., practical principles of whose unconditional necessity we can become conscious and which we therefore recognize as revealed through pure reason (not empirically).”

This shows the exoteric nature of natural religion, which is accessible to all. The veritable goal of any religion, despite being rooted in statutory observances and practices, is to shed itself of its culturally and historically conditioned outer shell and to steadily approximate a “complete conformity [vollständige Angemessenheit]” to the law, i. e., the moral law.

The historical aspect of religion is indeed a necessary facilitating condition of religion, but eventually it is only a function of a higher purposiveness, i. e., the complete correspondence with the intellectural principle underlying the moral law, through which achieving the highest good can idealiter be accomplished in accordance with the good principle. However, as I said before, given that Kant believes that this complete correspondence can only be approximated and can at any rate not be achieved during anyone’s finite life (“the complete development of its appearance in the world of the senses is postponed to an unseen distance”), history can also not be put to an end.

In both asserting the necessity of the historical-positive aspect of religion, if only as facilitating condition, and a purification towards a pure rational faith, there appears to be a tension here. This tension is heightened if we recall that in the analysis of the relation between reason and religion Kant proposes a teleologically constructed framework for determining religion, viz., determining it as an object of reason, which thus first constitutes religion. That is to say, it seems that from this teleological construction, the analysis was always already aimed at seeing religion as essentially purified from its historical aspects. From the start, the historical aspect appeared difficult to reconcile with the rational a priori approach. Kant’s arguments, then, concerning the necessity of historical facilitating conditions might appear gratuitous. On the other hand, if we interpret history along the lines of Kant’s conception of history in his Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte by means of the idea of history serving as “a guiding thread for exhibiting an otherwise planless aggregate of human actions, at least in the large, as a system,” as an immanent, almost dialectical development towards a civil community and state constitution.

27 RGV, AA 06: 167, 168.
28 RGV, AA 06: 171.
29 RGV, AA 06: 151.
30 IaG, AA 08: 29.
in accordance with “nature’s aim [Naturabsicht],”\textsuperscript{31} “[o]nly the approximation to [the] idea [of which] is laid upon us by nature,”\textsuperscript{32} then we might better understand his reasoning that ecclesiastical or historical faith itself gradually must give way to pure rational faith, which is in fact, as with history in general, its hidden natural predisposition.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In conclusion, I want to briefly bring to mind again the relation in general between religion and reason or philosophy. This relation is in a way asymmetrical, for religion must be considered in the terms of reason, more in particular, from the perspective of how, in our moral conduct, we as servants in an ethical community strive to achieve the highest good. It is in this way only that religion, as morality, can be a proper object of reason. Religion, as institutionalised religious service, provides the facilitating elements to achieve this goal by organising, in some manifest form, a visible church on earth that is the practically real manifestation of God’s kingdom. Kant does not deny the contingent, historically and culturally conditioned aspects of religion. However, religion according to Kant must be world religion, religion in a cosmopolitan sense, amenable to being adopted by people of all stripes by means of the natural light of reason. Kant takes Christianity as an example, for from its inception it already started out not as “statutory, but as a moral religion,” and thus it already “treads in the closest proximity to reason.”\textsuperscript{33} By contrast, Judaism is said to be typically based primarily on statutes and rites. However, Christianity is only an exemplification of rational faith as world religion, which has continued on the path of approximating pure rational faith and completing the conformity to the moral law. Historically, it has apparently made the most progress, but this does not prevent other religions from adopting this same maxim of approximating pure rational faith, as long as the moral law is considered the solely sanctifying principle. In this way, every religion can be a rational faith, and hence, as Kant states, “[...] by nature available to all human reason and is therefore to be met with in the religion of most civilized peoples.”\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{31} \textsuperscript{31} IaG, AA 08: 27.
\textsuperscript{32} IaG, AA 08: 23.
\textsuperscript{33} RGV, AA 06: 167.
\textsuperscript{34} RGV, AA 06: 140.