

Kant's Moral Panentheism

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Abstract Although Kant is often interpreted as an Enlightenment Deist, Kant scholars are increasingly recognizing aspects of his philosophy that are more amenable to theism. If Kant regarded himself as a theist, what kind of theist was he? The theological approach that best fits Kant's model of God is panentheism, whereby God is viewed as a living being pervading the entire natural world, present 'in' every part of nature, yet going beyond the physical world. The purpose of Kant's restrictions on our knowledge of God is not to cast doubt on God's existence, but to preserve a mystery in God's reality so that God is always more than the world as we experience it. The same God who is theoretically unknowable is also an aspect of the moral substratum of the physical world. Kant's moral Trinity (God as righteous Lawgiver, benevolent Ruler, and just Judge) permeates everything, as the ultimate unifier of reason and nature. This Paper was delivered during the 2007 APA Pacific Mini-Conference on Models of God, together with papers published in *Philosophia* 35:3–4.

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What Kind of Being is Kant's God?

In the two and a quarter centuries since Immanuel Kant published his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), many scholars have treated the phrase 'Kantian theology' almost as an oxymoron. Those who have taken seriously the many claims Kant makes about God have not been able to agree on what *kind* of theology Kant defends. Many have viewed him as a deist,¹ even though Kant seems to regard

¹Perhaps the best known recent example of this position is Allen Wood's "Kant's Deism", in P.J. Rossi and M. Wreen (eds.) *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Re-considered* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), pp.1–21. For an argument against this way of reading Kant, see Christopher McCammon, "Overcoming Deism: Hope Incarnate in Kant's Rational Religion", in Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist (eds.), *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), pp.79–89.

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himself as a theist. For example, in defining a deist as one who “believes in a *God*” and a theist as one who believes “in a *living God*,” he appears to be identifying himself more with the latter than the former.²

If we take into account some of the theories Kant defends in his 1793 work, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*,³ we must admit that if Kant was a theist, he certainly did not wear this label in any traditional sense. For as is well known, Kant shied away from using the name of Jesus in his published writings; he rarely if ever joined organized religious services in his mature adult years (though commentators who discuss this point rarely acknowledge that Kant was raised as a traditional Pietist, that at university he majored in theology not philosophy, and that in his younger adult years he sometimes preached in a country church near Königsberg⁴); and he tends to reinterpret traditional religious doctrines by giving them highly refined, moral meanings. While readers of Kant’s *Religion* have traditionally taken him to be reducing religion to morality, as if religion itself could simply be replaced by morally good behavior, more recent interpreters have demonstrated that Kant’s strategy was not at all eliminative. That is, while he often did argue that the *meaning* of religious doctrines must be moral at their core, he never argued that human beings can succeed in being moral enough to do away with any need for religion (see note 3). Whether or not Kant thought of himself as a theist, the question remains: what theological label *best* describes his position?

Throughout most of the twentieth century, interpreters who granted that the principles of Critical philosophy do allow Kant to *have* a theology tended to regard Kant’s God as, above all, an abstract, *philosophical* God.⁵ While Kant undoubtedly *wrote* primarily for philosophers and therefore adopted the *language* of philosophy when discussing theological and religious issues, this does not mean the God in whom Kant believed and belief in whom his writings attempt to justify and encourage, was merely a ‘philosopher’s God.’ That the abstract nature of Kant’s argumentation has prompted

² See *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (Edinburgh: Macmillan, 1929), p.661; hereafter abbreviated *CPR*. All references cite the pagination of the second (‘B’) edition, as provided in the margins by both Kemp Smith and the editors of the Berlin Academy Edition. See note 12, below, for a brief discussion of this passage.

³ This is my preferred translation of the title of Kant’s *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*; hereafter abbreviated *Religion*. The use of “bounds” for *Grenzen* and “bare” for *blossen* can effectively counter the tendency to view Kant merely as an ethical reductionist. See Section 1 of my article, “Does Kant Reduce Religion to Morality?”, *Kant-Studien* 83:2 (1992), pp. 129–148, revised and reprinted as Chapter VI in *Kant’s Critical Religion: Volume Two of Kant’s System of Perspectives* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); hereafter abbreviated *KCR*.

⁴ These and other relevant facts about Kant’s personal faith can be gleaned from any good biography, including the excellent new effort by Manfred Kuehn, in his book, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For a critical assessment of his account of Kant’s life, with special emphasis on his rather skewed interpretation of Kant’s personal faith (or alleged lack thereof), see my review of Kuehn’s book, in *Metapsychology* 5, Issue 41 (October 2001); online version at: http://metapsychology.mentalhelp.net/poc/view_doc.php?type=de&id=722/.

⁵ For a recent example of this tendency by a seasoned philosopher who rejects more recent trends in Kant scholarship, insisting the strictures of the first *Critique* simply disallow any meaningful theological affirmations (especially those involving any personal God), see Keith E. Yandell, “Who Is the True Kant?”, *Philosophia Christi* 9.1 (2007), pp.81–97.

interpreters so often to regard him as either a deist or a closet atheist⁶ should not prevent us from taking seriously his own declared intentions: as we shall see in Section II, he *attacked* this philosophical God in the first *Critique* in order to make room for the God of genuine religious faith in his subsequent writings (see *CPR*, xxx–xxxi). For two centuries the bulk of interpreters mistakenly thought Kant was *slaying* God (see note 30, below) because the limits of knowledge he identifies in the first *Critique* do slay any conception of God based on the kind of pure, logical argumentation that philosophers often take as their primary task.

The central misconception has been that in slaying the God of the philosophers Kant was promoting an anti-religious secularism driven by the intellectual elite, when in fact he was awakening philosophers to a view of God as necessarily *available* to every human person – or at least, to every *rational* human person. The latter interpretation raises quite a new question. If Kant was not defending belief in a remote, deistic God, nor encouraging us to give up all religious belief in favor of an enlightened humanism, then what kind of God *did* Kant believe in? In my book, *KCR*, I attempt to synthesize the various options by portraying Kant as a “Critical mystic”⁷ – an option that has not received much serious attention up to now. In what follows I shall advance a position that is not so much an alternative to the others as an attempt to draw many loose strings together in one all-encompassing model of how Kant believed we should think of God.

Kant’s model of God was so new, so forward-looking, so deeply ingrained in his thinking about a wide range of other philosophical topics, that he never thought of giving it a distinctive name to set it apart from past approaches to theology. As such, we should not be surprised if someone writing in the period immediately following Kant and directly influenced by Critical philosophy were to have come up with a term that can be read back into Kant’s theology as a good ‘fit.’ My claim here is that Kant’s philosophy is best viewed as presenting a special, morally-focused version of what has come to be called ‘pantheism.’ This apparently outrageous suggestion becomes more plausible once we recall that the term ‘pantheism’ was first coined in 1828 by a post-Kantian German philosopher with a mystical bent, Karl Christian Friedrich Krause (1781–1832). Born in May of 1781, when Kant was busy delivering pages of the first *Critique* to the printer, Krause was a schoolboy when Kantian philosophy enjoyed its heyday in Germany. He then studied under Fichte and Hegel and later was one of Schopenhauer’s teachers.⁸ Like so many others

⁶ Kuehn’s biography (see note 4, above) treats Kant this way, as do a number of other Kantians who would rather read Kant as conforming to their own, anti-religious preferences. For a thoroughgoing refutation of this option, see John E. Hare, “Kant on the Rational Instability of Atheism”, in *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, *op cit.*, pp.62–78.

⁷ See Part Four of *KCR*. By “Critical mysticism” I do not mean that Kant explicitly accepted ‘mystical’ as a label for his own world view. Rather, I argue first that Kant’s own understanding of the word ‘mysticism’ was rather narrow (see notes 22, 31 and 33, below), and second, that a broader understanding of the word as it is used in the writings of mystics shows it to have many resonances with Kant’s own philosophical and theological disposition.

⁸ For a brief introduction, see Arnulf Zweig, “Krause, Karl Christian Friedrich”, Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 4 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), pp.363–365, and the *Encyclopedia of Britannica* article (accessed 6 September 2007) at <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9046217/Karl-Christian-Friedrich-Krause>. While he remained an obscure and largely neglected figure in Germany and throughout most of the world, Krause enjoyed a generation of popular (almost cult-like) influence in Spain. See Neil McInnes, “Spanish Philosophy”, Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, vol. 7 (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1967), p.514.

during this period of German history, Krause claimed his philosophical system represented “the true Kantian position.”⁹ Fortunately, we need not evaluate this rather questionable claim, nor even describe or assess how and to what extent Kant influenced Krause’s development, in order to explore the possibility that Kant’s theological position is best described as a form of panentheism. For in defending the latter claim, I am not assuming that Krause’s own, rather peculiar and highly obscure *version* of panentheism¹⁰ was a faithful development of Kant’s own thinking.

For philosophers and theologians who use the term, *panentheism* typically refers to a synthesis between traditional theism and pantheism, whereby the whole world (and everything in it) is believed to be *in* God, though God transcends the boundaries of the natural world and is more than nature.¹¹ Krause’s special term, like the label “Critical mysticism,” was not available to Kant, so we will never find a text where Kant explicitly affirms or denies being a panentheist. However, this does not prevent us from recognizing a close fit between his ideas and this theological model, provided we know where to look and how to interpret his key terms.

My argument will proceed in three steps: two premises and a conclusion. In Section II I shall defend the premise that Kant’s God is (and must be) moral. In Section III I shall then demonstrate that Kant conceives of the whole physical world as existing within a larger, moral reality that permeates the physical world yet goes beyond it. Finally, Section IV will conclude that ‘panentheism’ describes this theological model in a way that explains why Kant has been viewed as an atheist, a deist, a theist and even a mystic.

Kant’s God is Moral

The theological implications of Kant’s philosophy have so often and so badly been misunderstood throughout nearly two centuries of interpretation mainly because the theology he presents in his most influential work, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), is essentially *negative*. After defining strict limits on what can properly be regarded as knowledge, Kant denies that theoretical (or logic-based) arguments can be used to prove God’s existence. He seems prepared to think of God as “living,” in the sense of being able to influence or relate in some manner to other rational (or

⁹ Zweig, *op cit.*, p.363.

¹⁰ As Zweig explains (*op cit.*, p.363), Krause developed a tortuously complex vocabulary with many compound German terms that were newly invented to serve Krause’s mystical purposes. The fact that ‘panentheism’ was simply one of Krause’s many neologisms may explain why the term was virtually ignored by English-speaking philosophers until it became popularized by Wolfhart Pannenberg and others in the last quarter of the twentieth century. That it was an almost unknown term before that point is evidenced by the fact that *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, published in 1967, has no entry for ‘panentheism’ and lists only three brief mentions in the Index, including just one in the article on Krause himself.

¹¹ A brief look of some of the more than 136,000 web sites listed on Google as relating to panentheism reveals the wide variety of ways this term is now used. Many apply it to theologians or writers much earlier than Kant, including in some cases the biblical writers themselves. The current essay, however, is in no sense a review of the history of panentheism. My concern is only with the much narrower question of whether or not this label can describe Kantian theology. At this point in my argument all I am claiming is that the person who *first* used this term was more deeply influenced by Kant than by any other single philosopher.

“intelligible”) beings.¹² Only near the end of the book, and without sufficient justification, do we read Kant’s unambiguous confession that he believes in God. He there attributes his belief to requirements that arise out of our *moral* nature – a topic he never thoroughly discusses in the first *Critique*. At just the point where many readers are wondering whether Kant’s God is any more than an idea generated by human reason, he explicitly confesses that he *must* believe in God and a future life in order to prevent himself from “becoming abhorrent in my own eyes.”¹³

In the second *Critique* (1788) Kant develops this claim in more detail, though only near the end of the book, where he explains why we should believe in God despite our inability to prove God’s existence theoretically: we must “postulate” the existence of a real God to satisfy the requirements of morality, as established by practical reason.¹⁴ Kant uses this moral postulate to argue that we must view God as an *actual* being, not merely an abstract idea of reason. Until the last few decades, many interpreters failed to realize how important Kant’s theory of the primacy of practical reason¹⁵ is to a proper understanding of Kantian theology. Even though the first *Critique* is far longer and apparently more important than the second *Critique*, the latter shows us, in Kant’s view, the true essence of what human reason actually is. Reason itself *is* the power of acting and choosing how to act; as such, it is part and parcel of what Kant calls the “noumenal realm.” That we humans have the ability to apply our reason to objects that present themselves to our sensations, thus producing scientific knowledge, is an *epiphenomenon* of reason’s core nature and purpose. Once we understand this, the claim that practical reason *requires* us to posit a real God, that the meaning of human life would disintegrate if we refuse to undertake such a step of faith, becomes far weightier. That God’s reality is confirmed only in the moral–practical realm, not in the scientific–theoretical realm, is a direct outcome of Kant’s view that phenomenal reality arises out of a narrower, restricted application of reason than the wider, noumenal reality – a distinction we shall examine in more detail in Section III.

That Kant’s God is and must be a *moral* being can be established without providing a complete explanation of all this claim means to Kant. Here, it will suffice to mention briefly a few key examples of how the primacy of practical reason

¹² In an oft-neglected passage of the first *Critique* Kant distinguishes between deists, who uphold an abstract, theoretical belief in “a *God*,” conceived as the “supreme cause” of the universe, and theists, who believe “in a *living God*,” conceived as a “supreme intelligence” (*CPR*, p.661). Whereas theism is the view that God exists and has an ongoing relationship with the world (i.e., God is “living”), deism is the view that God exists but remains separate from the world (i.e., God is “dead,” at least as far as the day-to-day lives of human beings are concerned).

¹³ *CPR*, p.856. The paragraph is worth quoting in full: “It is quite otherwise with *moral belief*. For here it is absolutely necessary that something must happen, namely, that I must in all points conform to the moral law. The end is here irrefragably established, and according to such insight as I can have, there is only one possible condition under which this end can connect with all other ends, and thereby have practical validity, namely, that there be a God and a future world. I also know with complete certainty that no one can be acquainted with any other conditions which lead to the same unity of ends under the moral law. Since, therefore, the moral precept is at the same time my maxim (reason prescribing that it should be so), I inevitably believe in the existence of God and in a future life, and I am certain that nothing can shake this belief, since my moral principles would thereby be themselves overthrown, and I cannot disclaim them without becoming abhorrent in my own eyes.”

¹⁴ *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., 1956), pp.122–132; hereafter abbreviated *CPrR*. All references cite the pagination in volume 4 of the Berlin Academy Edition.

¹⁵ *CPrR*, pp.119–121.

gives Kantian theology an exclusively moral focus. First, when Kant talks about God's *nature* he often expresses it in the form of a *moral Trinity*. Human beings are capable of experiencing God, according to Kant, primarily in three ways, all of them moral: as a righteous Lawgiver, benevolent Ruler, and just Judge.¹⁶ Even though theoretical reason leaves us wholly ignorant on the question of whether God exists as a 'part' of nature, practical reason assures us that the *nature* of the God we must postulate, and in whom we are naturally driven to believe, has these three characteristics. Conceived in this threefold manner, God becomes the guarantor of all the highest and most important concepts in Kant's moral philosophy: we are responsible to bring about the "kingdom of ends" through our commitment to follow the moral law, yet we can conceive of the possibility of success only by assuming a moral God permeates the whole human world.¹⁷ In order seriously to contemplate the possibility that the highest good, the pinnacle of Kant's entire moral system, might become *real* for us human beings, we must postulate the reality of this moral governor of the human world.

As we shall see in the next section, Kant consistently portrays morality as the key to the meaning of human life throughout the rest of his philosophical System. In the third *Critique* (1790) morality functions as the key to understanding our experiences of beauty, sublimity and the natural purposiveness exhibited by "organisms."¹⁸ Likewise, in *Religion* (1793) Kant argues that all doctrines and practices that are to retain meaning and power in the life of a religious person must be interpreted in terms of their moral core. This position has been discounted by many as an anti-religious reductionism, whereby Kant is taken to be arguing that only morality matters, that religion should be discarded as an irrelevant aberration (see note 3, above). But this is a far cry from the way Kant actually argues. His position, rather, is that the reality of "radical evil" in human life threatens to destroy the very fabric of meaning that practical reason offers to give us, so the task of religion is to rescue morality from the debilitating effects of evil through a redeeming belief in and an empowering experience of a real God who is intimately bound up with our practical reason.

The Phenomenal World Exists *in* the Noumenal World

Nobody seriously denies that Kant's God is moral; but the second premise of my argument, that the phenomenal world (i.e., the physical world of nature as we know it) exists *in* the noumenal world (i.e., the world of free rationality that makes us moral beings) constitutes a highly controversial claim. Kant's phenomenal–

¹⁶ For a lengthy discussion of Kant's views on the moral nature of God, including his explanation and defense of this moral Trinity, see Chapter V of *KCR*.

¹⁷ Near the beginning of Part Three of *Religion*, Kant develops a unique argument to the effect that the human race as a whole has a duty to bring about an ethical community, but that we cannot conceive of the possibility of such a community existing without assuming God works together with human beings to make it real. I have examined this much-neglected argument in "Kant's Religious Argument for the Existence of God", a paper presented as the keynote address for the symposium on "The Position of God in Kant's Moral System", held at UCE Birmingham on 14 June 2007 (published version forthcoming).

¹⁸ Kant defines an organism (or "organized being") as a "product of nature ... in which everything is a purpose [or end] and reciprocally also a means" (Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, tr. Werner S. Pluhar [Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987], p.376 [German pagination]; hereafter *CJ*),

noumenal distinction has been the source of great misunderstanding and has given rise to innumerable premature rejections of Kant's system. Clearly understanding Kant's intention in making this distinction is perhaps the single most important requirement for understanding the key features of his whole philosophy, including its underlying theological model. Many readers treat it as a simple dualism, not unlike Descartes' distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, or as a double aspect theory along the lines of Spinoza's pantheistic identification of the world and God.¹⁹ Kant's view, by contrast, was that (contra Descartes) these are two *perspectives* (two ways a rational being can view the world) rather than two self-subsisting substances, and that (contra Spinoza) one perspective (the noumenal) has *primacy* over the other (the phenomenal).²⁰ This primacy is rooted for Kant in his claim that from the standpoint of practical reason, freedom "is now confirmed by fact":²¹ namely, that the noumenal is where we meet, in our own *first hand experience*, the reality of human freedom and the whole package of moral obligation that follows from it. That we are also phenomenal beings is a very important fact about our nature, but as already pointed out in the previous section, it is always and only of secondary relevance to Kant.

The roots of this distinction in Kant's thinking go back at least as far as his early interest in the spiritual writings of the Swedish mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, whose influence on Kant any informed interpretation must take into account.²² For our purposes the most

¹⁹ Probably the best example of a Kant scholar of this sort is Henry Allison, who has also published extensively on Spinoza. In *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An interpretation and defense* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), Allison treats this and several other key distinctions (especially the empirical-transcendental distinction) as depicting two sides of the same coin, or two perspectives on one and the same reality. While I agree with Allison's approach as far as it goes, it errs to the extent that it fails to recognize a clear hierarchy or order of priority in Kant's mind between the different perspectives. Kant's claim that these two senses of reality arise as a result of rational beings adopting two different perspectives does *not* imply (or at least, need not imply) that the two realities have an identical ontological status. See René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, and Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*.

²⁰ Kant's mature distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal realms has probably been responsible for more misunderstandings of his philosophical system than any other single theory he put forward. Anyone who takes these as referring to two separate worlds is likely to view Kant in much the way that Kant viewed Swedenborg (see below in the main text and Chapter II of *KCR*). But in *Kant's System of Perspectives: An architectonic interpretation of the Critical philosophy* (Lanham: University of America Press, 1993), especially Chapters IV and VI, I have shown that Kant intended these terms (like many of the subordinate distinctions that depend upon them) to be regarded not as names for two ontologically separate realities, but as alternate *perspectives* on one and the same human reality. Even the infamous 'thing in itself' makes sense when we view Kant's System in this perspectival manner, for it then refers to nothing more than the world we live in, viewed as it is apart from any and all of the perspectives we adopt in coming to experience, understand and interpret it.

²¹ *CPrR*, p.6.

²² Kant was a late bloomer. He wrote the entirety of his great Critical philosophy and supporting writings during a 20-year period starting at age 56. His last book before writing the first *Critique* was published 15 years earlier: *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766) was a poorly received and frequently misunderstood assessment of Emanuel Swedenborg's mystical writings. What escapes the attention of many commentators on that book is that, beneath the shroud of ridicule he uses to cloak his concluding remarks (for example, comparing Swedenborg's ideas to passing gas and saying he belonged in a mental hospital), Kant seriously examines the close correspondence between Swedenborg's account of a "spiritual world" that is right here among us all the time, if we only have eyes to see, and his own belief in what he would eventually come to call the "noumenal" world in its relationship to the phenomenal world of science and everyday empirical knowledge. As I have argued in detail in Chapter II of *KCR*, many of the key themes and theories of Kant's mature Critical philosophy are present in this early work.

important of these influences is evident in Kant's claim, near the end of his early book, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer, Illustrated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766), that our moral action rather than a literal physical 'seeing' must be regarded as the true *mode* of interaction between the two 'realms' of human experience that Swedenborg describes. In other words, in that early work, Kant never denies the reality of a spiritual world, of which the world of our ordinary experience is a mere appearance; rather, he explicitly affirms it but argues that it must be reinterpreted in *moral* terms.

Kant refines this early position by defending in the first *Critique* a set of transcendental conditions that we (i.e., freely choosing, noumenal beings) impose onto the phenomenal world, conditions that constitute a 'theoretical standpoint' that guarantees science will 'see' only empirical realities that appear in spatio-temporal guise. Those who only read the first *Critique* usually fail to appreciate that Kant never says or even means to imply that the empirical objects of science are the only realities that exist. They are the only realities that exist *for* our theoretical knowledge – this is why the only positive role for the idea of God in science is regulative²³ – but the theoretical standpoint is not the only one we use to interpret our experience.

In the second *Critique*, as we saw in the previous section, Kant argues that the human mind is capable of interpreting the world from a wholly different, 'practical standpoint.' When we choose to impose onto our experience not the transcendental conditions of space, time and the twelve categories, but freedom and the categories of good and evil implied by the moral law, it is as if a whole new world opens up to us: the noumenal realm of moral action. But where *is* this noumenal 'world?' Like Swedenborg's spiritual world, it is *right here* among us. From the examples he gives and his concrete manner of treating real moral actions *in* our world of human experience, Kant makes amply clear (for those who have ears to hear!) that the phenomenal just *is* the noumenal, viewed from a different standpoint. That is, when we make moral choices and engage in moral actions, we do not somehow transport ourselves out of our bodies to a different place, beyond space and time. Rather, we exercise a basic capacity of human reason to *interpret* our spatio-temporal experience in a non-spatio-temporal way. We see ourselves as autonomous *initiators* of causes in nature, rather than as heteronomous *receptors* of natural causes. Yet when we view our physical bodies from the theoretical standpoint as we perform those very same moral actions, we find ourselves subject to the physical causation that applies to all objects in the phenomenal world.

Perhaps the best support for the second premise of my argument (i.e., the claim that Kant saw the phenomenal as existing *in* the noumenal and the latter as permeating every aspect of the former) comes from Kant's third *Critique*. Without going into great detail, we may observe that the theories Kant defends in his third *Critique* make little sense apart from the assumption that my second premise is an

²³ In *CPR's* Transcendental Dialectic, Kant does argue that the ideas of reason (God, freedom and immortality) can have a positive use in science, but only when employed in a "regulative" (not a "constitutive") manner. He presents this argument in an Appendix, so he obviously did not regard it as a crucial part of his system of theoretical knowledge.

accurate description of Kant's intentions. How could our experience of beauty in natural objects be a "symbol of the morally good"²⁴ if the noumenal did not transcend the phenomenal yet permeate every aspect of it? The same holds for Kant's claims about our experiences of the sublime as evidence of playful interaction between intellect and sensibility. In short, every major theory Kant defends in the third *Critique* illustrates this basic principle. That Kant had its theological implications clearly in mind is also evident from the fact that the third *Critique's* lengthy Appendix explores how a moral theology arises out of the theories developed in that book. The overall purpose of the third *Critique* was to bridge the apparent gap between the phenomenal and the noumenal by showing how they are intimately intertwined in every aspect of human experience.²⁵

We can observe a similar tendency in Kant's *Religion*: he presents many examples of religious beliefs and practices that illustrate how the phenomenal and noumenal realms are thoroughly interwoven in the day-to-day experience of living human beings. Perhaps the most significant of these is Kant's discussion of the need for a *change of heart* – an *experience* of empowerment from God to become good-hearted where before our ability to follow the moral law was debilitated by the corrupting influence of radical evil. Kant's insistence on good conduct as the hallmark of a true believer guards against the temptation, especially among those who lack assurance that the required change of heart has actually taken place, to let superstitious rituals and fanatical experiences replace practical belief and moral action.²⁶ Thus, for example, he says:

Finally, lest perchance for want of this assurance we compensate *superstitiously*, through expiations which presuppose no change of heart [*Sinnesänderung*], or *fanatically*, through pretended (and merely passive) inner illumination, and so forever be kept distant from the good that is grounded in activity of the self, we should acknowledge as a mark of the presence of goodness in us naught but a well-ordered conduct of life.²⁷

²⁴ *CJ*, 353. The passage is worth quoting at length, given its emphasis on the interpenetration of the phenomenal and the noumenal: "Now I maintain that the beautiful is the symbol of the morally good ... The morally good is the *intelligible* that taste has in view ... And because the subject has this possibility within him, while outside [him] there is also the possibility that nature will harmonize with it, judgment finds itself referred to something that is both in the subject himself and outside him, something that is neither nature nor freedom and yet is linked with the basis of freedom, the supersensible, in which the theoretical and the practical power are in an unknown manner combined and joined into a unity."

²⁵ See, e.g., *CJ*, 176–179, where Kant describes the third *Critique* as "mediating" between the standpoints of the first two *Critiques*. See also Kant's *System of Perspectives*, Chapter IX, for a thoroughgoing examination of this aspect of the third *Critique*.

²⁶ For an extended discussion of this point, see my article, "The Ethics of Grace: Kant's Perspectival Solution to the Moral Problems with Divine Assistance", a paper presented at the *Societas Ethica* conference on the topic 'Philosophical Approaches to Ethics—Methods and Foundations', held in Leysin, Switzerland, in August 2007 (published version forthcoming).

²⁷ *Religion*, p.83.

Throughout his writings, as here, Kant tends to associate mysticism with superstitious beliefs and fanatical practices, rejecting the latter because they inevitably block us from attaining “the good that is grounded in activity of the self.” In lifting this veil, the ‘face’ of true religion that he exposes is not stripped of all religious experience. Rather, as I have argued in Part Four of *KCR*, Kant prepares us for a *genuine* or “Critical” mysticism, whereby “the presence of goodness in us” is evidenced by “a well-ordered conduct of life.”

The good life-conduct that forms the core of Kant’s concern in *Religion* takes place in the phenomenal world, for otherwise we could not observe it and know it exists. Yet we can assess it *as good* only because every moral act of every rational being also exists *in* the noumenal world, the intelligible realm where a “supreme intelligence” (a living God)²⁸ must exist as the threefold sovereign described in the previous section. Still further evidence could be cited from Kant’s unfinished *Opus Postumum*, where he presents the concept “man” as uniting in one transcendental idea the equal and opposite ideas of “one world” and “one God,” with the former characterized by the all-pervasive reality of *heat* and the latter by the all-pervasive reality of *obligation*. But at this point, to attempt a thoroughgoing interpretation of the unorganized notes that constitute that work would be to stray too far from the central point of this essay: demonstrating that Kant’s theology can best be regarded as a form of pantheism.

Pantheism as the Key to Kantian Theology

If I have accurately portrayed Kant’s phenomenal–noumenal distinction as involving a hierarchy of perspectives, whereby the phenomenal exists in and is thoroughly permeated by the noumenal, then the undisputed fact that Kant regarded the noumenal as the source and grounding of our *moral* nature implies that Kant constructed a *moral pantheism*. Like Enlightenment deism, such a model views God not so much in terms of any given religious tradition but as a being who transcends the entire physical universe.²⁹ Yet like traditional theism, such a God is also “living” in the sense of being bound up with the way human beings behave.

²⁸ See note 12, above. If choosing between theism and deism, most Kant-scholars would now regard Kant as a theist. See for example Fendt’s *What May I Hope?*, Hare’s *The Moral Gap*, my *KCR*, and a variety of other recent books and articles. For a synopsis of these and other relevant writings, see the second section of the Editors’ Introduction to *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, *op cit.*, pp.15–30; it provides an historical sketch demonstrating that in the past 30 years books that include lengthy interpretations of Kant’s philosophy of religion have almost exclusively adopted what the editors call the “affirmative” approach to interpreting Kant.

²⁹ Almost gone are the days when Kant can be viewed even as a conventional deist: while admittedly a few older scholars (see note 1, above) still present him in this way, the vast majority of younger Kant-scholars now view Kant as a theist of *some* sort – though exactly what *sort* has proved to be incredibly difficult to pin down. The aforementioned Editors’ Introduction to *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (see note 28, above) concludes by pointing out four specific issues on which the recent affirmative interpreters of Kant continue to disagree.

Unlike both of these traditions, but more along the lines of atheism,³⁰ a moral pantheism acknowledges the lack of evidence we have in the phenomenal world, *regarded as such*, that any real God exists. Yet as in pantheism,³¹ that same physical world is regarded as an existential carrier of a mysterious divine presence mediated through a wide variety of ordinary human experiences.

Kant's emphasis on morality as the sole criterion for genuine religion will leave many traditionally religious people (many theists) feeling uneasy. Determining whether this reflects negatively on Kant or on the uneasy adherents of traditional religion is beyond the scope of this essay. For my purpose here has not been to persuade anyone to *believe in* Kant's moral pantheism, but only to believe *that* this is an accurate description, perhaps the *most* accurate description yet offered, for what by all accounts was a wholly new way of portraying the relationship between God, the world and mankind. A closer look at relevant texts from *Opus Postumum* would reveal that Kant was there attempting to flesh out the view he only hinted at near the end of the second *Critique*, in the famous passage where he speaks metaphorically of the hand and voice of God as manifested in the starry heavens above and the moral law within.³² At numerous points in the first and seventh fascicles, Kant refers to this very triad as the key to understanding the most significant aspect of Critical philosophy: "God, the world, and man in the world."³³ Here at the close of his life Kant appears to have been groping towards a final, all-encompassing expression of his lifelong commitment to moral pantheism. Pantheism only sees God and the world as two sides of one coin. But *pantheism* requires a mediating agent, and this

³⁰ Also almost gone are the days when Kant can be portrayed credibly as a qualified atheist, for in place of the lop-sided emphasis once given to his first *Critique*, scholarly attention to *all* his writings has revealed him to be a man of deep religious faith. Not so long ago respectable teachers, well-informed of the latest trends in scholarship, could portray Kant as the "God-slayer," the all-destroyer of metaphysics, who may have given lip service to "moral belief" in a divine being but who never regarded belief in a *real* God as a viable option. Such claims were first made by Heinrich Heine in *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland*², 1852(1834), tr. J. Snodgrass as *Religion and Philosophy in Germany* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959[1882]), p.119. I respond directly to Heine's claims in Section IV.1 of *KCR*. The first person ever to teach me Kant presented him in just this traditional way. For an account of my response, see my article, "Immanuel Kant: A Christian Philosopher?," *Faith and Philosophy*, 6:1 (January 1989), p. 66. Although Kant-scholars over the past 30 years have tended to reject that once common view (cf. note 28, above), some scholars do continue to defend it. See, for example, George di Giovanni, *Freedom and Religion in Kant and His Immediate Successors: The Vocation of Humankind, 1774–1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), who not only affirms Mendelssohn's portrayal of Kant as the "all-destroyer," but even regards Kant as essentially an atheist (p. 203 and *passim*); for a reply to his approach, see my forthcoming book review in *Kant-Studien*.

³¹ Whereas atheism is the belief that God does not exist (i.e., *nothing* is God), pantheism is the belief that God exists but only in the sense that God is identical with the physical world and/or everything in it (i.e., *everything* is God). Those familiar with my book, *KCR*, might guess I would label Kant as a pantheist, for I there depict Kant as a (somewhat reluctant) "Critical mystic." I hope the present essay demonstrates that the latter term is more justifiable than it seems at first to be, given Kant's frequently negative portrayals of mysticism (for examples, see *KCR*, pp. 393–395). Although mystics have often aligned with Kant (*KCR*, pp. 300–307), the term 'pantheism' might be even more suitable as a description of Kant's new approach to theology.

³² See CPrR, p.161.

³³ See *KCR*, Section XII.1, for citations to numerous texts in *Opus Postumum* that employ this or a similar phrase.

agent, according to Kantian philosophy, is the human being as moral interpreter of the world.

No attempt to recast the whole history of Kant-interpretation could succeed in a single essay. This sketch of an argument would have to be supported by a laborious, exacting analysis of each of the texts mentioned (and numerous others) before a really persuasive conclusion could be reached. The breadth of this sketch was necessitated by the initial skepticism most theologians and philosophers of religion express at the mere conjunction of the words ‘Kant’ and ‘panentheism’ (or any other affirmative theological term). What we have seen is that Kant’s corpus presents us with no shortage of passages containing statements that could hardly be taken at face value if Kant were anything *but* a panentheist. We can therefore appropriately close this initial defense of this position by quoting but a single example of the many passages wherein Kant describes God using language we now recognize as panentheistic. In his early (1763) book, *The Only Possible Argument for the Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Kant writes:

The sum of all these contemplations leads us to a conception of the Supreme Being which, when men made of dust venture to look beyond the curtain that conceals from created eyes the mysteries of the Inscrutable, *comprehends in itself every thing possible to be thought*. God is all-sufficient. What exists, whether it be possible or actual, is but something, so far as it is given by Him. A human language may let the Infinite speak to himself thus, *I am from eternity to eternity, besides me there is nothing, something is but so far as it is through me*. This thought, the most sublime of any is yet much neglected...³⁴

Also neglected, I suggest, has been the possibility that Kant’s philosophical system presents us with a thoroughgoing, moral panentheism.

³⁴ Immanuel Kant, *The Only Possible Argument for the Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763), tr. John Richardson in *Essays and Treatises on Moral, Political, Religious and Various Philosophical Subjects*, vol.2 (London: William Richardson, 1799), p.151, first italics added; pagination refers to Volume 2 of the Berlin Academy Edition. For quotations from many more passages in Kant’s writings that depict a similar theological orientation, see Part Four of *KCR*.