

*The Critical Faith: A Paper Concerning Kant's Belief in God*

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Immanuel Kant's views on God and religion as espoused throughout his career are a strong point of contention among scholars, particularly as it pertains to the Critical philosophy. Today, Kant's Practical defense found in the second *Critique* is often taken as a consolation to his "weeping' manservant Lampe,"<sup>1</sup> and not a serious or central philosophical stance, especially within the framework of the Critical philosophy as a whole. This academic myth that "Kant threw God out the front door"<sup>2</sup> in his first *Critique* persists.<sup>3</sup> In this framework, it appears that Kant only defended God for the emotional benefit of the uneducated, yet this sentiment is in stark contrast to the understanding of his colleagues and early successors. The purpose of this paper is to show that Kant's transition from metaphysics to Critical philosophy is marked not with disbelief in God, but rather with concern for the rational foundation of belief in general.

While Kant offered a body of work, though rather modest, throughout his career dealing with God, immortality, and the soul, much less attention is offered to the subject of his affiliation with or sympathy towards a religion. Kant's early allegiance was to the ideals of the Enlightenment (*Aufklärung*)<sup>4</sup>, which was more interested in rational demonstrations of the deist's God than an emotional connection to Him. Kant's early career was marked with ideas which challenged foundational beliefs. For example, Kant warned his readers that the argument put forth in the *Universal Natural History and Theory of Heavens* (1755), might appear offensive to the sensibilities of religion.<sup>5</sup> In the *Systematic Constitution of the Stars*, Kant rejects the possibility of miracles,<sup>6</sup> a doctrine almost universal in the religions of his day. It seems, then, that the pre-Critical Kant is at least as critical of religion as he in his mature philosophy.

The reason for this opposition becomes evident in light of Kant's alignment with the ideals of the *Aufklärung*. Prior to the first *Critique*, Kant might easily be considered a deist. In the sixth observation of Kant's young and ambitious work *The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1763), he argues for a teleology in nature which conforms to the criterion of necessity,<sup>7</sup> a classical deist argument which was praised by the prominent *Aufklärung* philosopher Moses Mendelssohn. However, even in this pre-Critical work, Kant shows dissatisfaction with the liberties that are sometimes taken with the concept of teleology by some deists. He argues that speculation of the purposiveness of nature can only be empirically driven, and that trying to discern an intention in natural phenomena leads to error.<sup>8</sup> Ultimately, however, this is only a critique of a sort of theistic influence on Deism, since it does not challenge the notion of a creator but only one which has discernable intentions that might imply a personal connection to Earth and its rational inhabitants. Despite this, what began as a progressive step away from tradition became a dramatic leap forward towards a new philosophical standard for a concept of God.

Kant's next major enduring project, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), marks a profound change in the direction of his interests. While the essay is a work of aesthetic philosophy, it marks a paradigm shift in Kant's thinking that would influence his view of God profoundly. Kant's earlier works have the same sorts of theoretical concerns as the *Aufklärung*, yet the same is not the case for *Observations*, Kant's first notable work of practical philosophy. Certainly by 1765, Kant openly believed that the philosopher's duty was to furnish practical philosophies which benefit society, rather than engage in theoretical speculations which cannot be tested

empirically,<sup>9</sup> distancing himself from the intellectual meritocracy of Enlightenment thinkers.<sup>10</sup> This dissatisfaction seems to be equally drawn out of Kant's reading of Rousseau and Hume during the interim between *The One Possible Basis* and *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). From his study of Rousseau, Kant develops a profound concern for the well-being of the average man and the community.<sup>11</sup> Hume wakes Kant from his "dogmatic slumber"<sup>12</sup> that kept him from seeing the flaws of speculative reason when it extends beyond the bounds of possible experience which Kant would overcome in the "Amphiboly of Concepts" in the first *Critique* (B345). The combination of these fundamental changes in Kant's views make the transition to the Critical philosophy seem as if it were inevitable, since Kant began to see a major deficit of these standards in his early works and in the philosophical positions of the *Aufklärung* in their concept of God. The Critical philosophy was Kant's formal and exhaustive challenge to these pretensions of knowledge about transcendent things.

It comes as no surprise then, that Kant understood his *Critique of Pure Reason* to be a 'Copernican revolution' of the faculty of reason (Bxvi), superseding the order of objects with the order in our cognitive faculties. As a result of this, metaphysical speculation about nature through the principle of sufficient reason falls flat, since reason is a product of our minds and not an axiomatic or provable property of nature itself. However, Kant also concludes that Hume's skepticism is ultimately as untenable as dogmatism in the "History of Pure Reason" (A855/B883). In the "Doctrine of Method," Kant relates the concept of God to the ideal of the highest good, despite the constraints on speculative philosophy (A810/B843).

Maintaining the same interest in God that defined the start of his career before the so-called Copernican revolution, Critical Kant had identified that the foundation for philosophical support for God was weak and sought to replace it with one much stronger. This new foundation was the faculty of pure practical reason, the Critical basis for autonomy, morality, and a rational theology. Thus Kant made a clean break in the first *Critique* from his earlier argument in *The One Possible Basis*, which attempted to ascribe specific qualities to God (such as the claim that he is simple, unitary, or that he is a spirit)<sup>13</sup> through the use of theoretical reason.

This transition (from the stance of a reformationist Deism to a rational theism) began in the "Doctrine of Elements" of the first *Critique*. Rather than rejecting any possible rational foundation for God, Kant rejected the theoretical arguments for a creator which were the cornerstones of deistic philosophy. For Kant, these arguments "extend cognition beyond the field of possible experience" (A697/B725). Yet in the same passage, Kant also insists that God must be assumed, yet only as a regulative principle of the pure schema which can furnish no theoretical proof of itself (A179/B222). Essentially, where the deists' arguments failed, the theists' faith was justified, since Kant had "denied knowledge" from the former "in order to make room for faith" for the latter (Bxxx).

This concept of a regulative principle of pure reason offers a kind of latitude for faith in God which Kant's early scholarship denied. The faithful are free to pursue their faith for Critical Kant, so long as they do not attempt to furnish theoretical proofs for their beliefs: a much higher degree of freedom from the thinking in his *One Possible Basis*. How did this transition occur? The transcendental idea of freedom creates personal autonomy, which allows individuals to be the grounds of their own actions,

(a533/B562) and by extension form regulative judgements. This frees mankind to think about nature *as if* it had a creator in whatever moral way they wish, so long as they recognize that speculative reason cannot establish a proof for their beliefs (A688/B716, A697/B725). For Kant, God is noumenal, and therefore ineluctably unknowable: He cannot be considered as if He were known through the practice of theoretical reason (B310). However, the use of God as a regulative principle escapes this impasse. For the time, Kant's own use of God as a regulative principle remained unexplored, but this would not remain the case for long.

At the time of the first *Critique*, one of Kant's central concerns was with the dogma of religious authority. In the Newtonian spirit which is so evident throughout Kant's career, "The Architectonic of Reason" reveals that one of Kant's fundamental intentions in the first *Critique* was to liberate science from the reigns of dogma (A849/B877). The same passage also articulates that these oppressive forces are particularly concerning since they abuse both morality and religion itself. By 1781 Kant clearly saw a difference between the dogma of religious authority and the practice of religion for the individual, and that the latter does indeed gain his sympathy despite the former (Kant does explicitly affirm this view later in his 1793 work *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*.)<sup>14</sup>

While Kant was no longer in alignment with the *Aufklärung* view of metaphysics, he was still equally concerned with the negative impact of religious dogma on morality. Kant emphatically maintained that the traditional notion of religion as the foundation of morality was false.<sup>15</sup> In his *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), Kant lays the foundation for the self-determination of the will (autonomy) as the measure of moral worth.<sup>16</sup> Autonomy leads to a regulative ideal, that of a "kingdom of ends" where the system of autonomous beings make each other the ultimate goal or 'end' of their actions.<sup>17</sup> Yet in the end of the *Groundwork*, Kant suggests that these concepts require a *Critique* of practical reason, in order to understand their relationship to his concept of freedom, the notion that the soul is noumenal, and thus not constrained to the laws of nature. Thus it is freedom that allows for the possibility of rational autonomy,<sup>18</sup> but if our freedom is by definition noumenal, how do we think about it? This was the central question which the *Groundwork* left open for a *Critique* of practical reason.

The autonomy that Kant offers in the *Groundwork* gives mankind a purely rational basis for morality. However, Kant still finds religion rooted in morality, as opposed to the inverse proposition of the status quo of traditional religious belief.<sup>19</sup> This inversion of the traditional understanding reflects the inversion of reason attempted in the 'Copernican revolution' in the first *Critique*. As theoretical reason is constrained, so is the institution which offers a moral code based on an appeal to transcendent authority.

Perhaps ironically, the idea of this inversion between morality and religion is intensely Lutheran and Pietist in character, at least in spirit, as it denies the authority of the church as an intermediate to moral righteousness.<sup>20</sup> By the eighteenth century, Pietism was much more interested in a "personal commitment" to God than to any sort of dogmatic claims of transcendent knowledge.<sup>21</sup> Thus for the Pietist, this denial is done in order to put that authority in God's hands. For Kant, the denial is done to place authority directly in the moral command which man imposes on himself out of respect for the moral law.<sup>22</sup> This very anti-dogmatic statement that Kant makes is thus itself

ironically a sort of spiritual successor to the doctrine of a religion, though it is grounded purely in practical reason in the way he expounds it. The role of Pietism in shaping Kant's anti-dogmatic views warrants further exploration beyond the scope of this paper, though in identifying this connection, a sense of Kant's sincere sympathy towards religion is potentially revealed. Certainly his views by 1787 were more in line with Pietist beliefs than they were with the *Aufklärung*. A year later, Kant would publish his second *Critique*, which would clarify his own stance on the question of man's ideal relationship with God in the affirmative.<sup>23</sup>

Herein lies a serious tension within Kant's Critical philosophy, and perhaps the greatest source of confusion. The *Critique of Pure Reason* constitutes a 700 page argument which systematically deconstructs every traditional apologetic and proof of God, and indeed the foundation for any other conceivable stance whatsoever through the use of theoretical reason. It seems unlikely that it was devised even in part to vindicate the existence of a God from either a deistic or theistic perspective. And yet, in the preface to the second edition, published a year before the second *Critique*, Kant insists that he "had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith (because) the dogmatism of metaphysics... is the true source of unbelief conflicting with morality..." (Bxxx). For Kant, the traditional foundations of religious defense (namely dogmatic metaphysics) are actually the strongest barrier reason must overcome in order to believe in God. Kant definitively establishes the intent of the Critical philosophy: a vindication and defense of such belief. Thus the source of any argument against Kant's faith is identified: the dialectical mindset simply struggles to understand how an apologetic argument must begin to make its case by first destroying the inadequate demonstrations offered hitherto. An invalid argument is invalid even if it arrives at the correct conclusion, and for Critical Kant, the invalid argument is the deist's. Once Kant had recognized that the criterion of necessity was a regulative judgement of belief rather than the constitutive judgement of God's existence, he was ready to reject his claim in his *One Possible Basis* entirely and move his future philosophical interests entirely towards practical philosophy. While Hume and Rousseau had changed Kant's interests in this way, if anything, Kant became more interested in mankind's relationship with God. Critical Kant asserted that man has a "right to assume... that God exists,"<sup>24</sup> but he no longer defended the impersonal god of the Enlightenment. Kant was going to start defending theology in the wake of his Critical philosophy.

On this note, it is important to distinguish Kant's notion of theology from its modern practices, as modern theological apologetics frequently attempt to employ the same theoretical arguments that the deists did in Kant's day. It is indisputable that Kant's critiques apply to the mainstream theoretical theology seen today. However, Kant specifically defends a 'moral theism' as being impervious to the theoretical faults of Deism.<sup>25</sup> Since human morality is a product of human autonomy, autonomy not only allows for one to believe in a personal God, but it also compels him to do so in light of the kingdom of ends.

In 1785, Kant began to feel pressure from his peers to engage in the supposed "pantheism controversy" which sprang from an intense private quarrel between F.H. Jacobi and Moses Mendelssohn about Lessing's Spinozism, and the greater role of reason in thinking about God.<sup>26</sup> Kant's Critical philosophy was accused of being atheistic and detrimental to the cause of faith by Jacobi,<sup>27</sup> whose agenda was to show that all

reason leads to Spinozism and ultimately atheism. Jacobi charged Kant with inconsistency, saying that the second *Critique* fails to “stave off nihilism.”<sup>28</sup> For Jacobi, Kant’s relative judgement was insufficient to the demand of faith. Perhaps this is the case, yet Kant couldn’t have disagreed more strongly. For Kant, his *Critique of Practical Reason* demonstrates that it is “morally necessary to assume the existence of God”.<sup>29</sup> Kant is thus certain that the only rational course is belief in a creator, as opposed to a false belief of knowledge of a creator which the deist proposes.

The contents of *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), which so boldly show Kant’s belief in God can easily be read with skepticism. Indeed, Kant had only recently written *The Groundwork* three years earlier, a work which covered very similar ideas as the second *Critique* (autonomy and the moral law) but without its theistic implications. Did Kant feel pressured into writing something in affirmation of God’s existence? Surely an affirmation coerced is no affirmation whatsoever. Yet the content of the *Critique of Practical Reason* is, if anything, self-affirming and grounded in the core tenets of the Critical philosophy. It must be, for if the self is rational and noumenal then it is not determined by phenomenal law but by determination of the will, the leading argument in the second *Critique* which is a natural consequence of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (A801/B829). This was the argument which first established freedom in the Critical philosophy.

The second *Critique* sits well in the chronological progression of Kant’s thought. The work certainly addressed the dialogue of the pantheism controversy, but the evidence suggests that its argument for God was a genuine natural extension of reason once it has realized its freedom. Rather, it seems more likely that the second *Critique* was written at the very least to clarify the significance of *The Groundwork* in light of the controversy, and further, that Kant may have even had the intention to write the second *Critique* before the controversy began. After all, the last section of *The Groundwork* explicitly calls for a *Critique* of practical reason.<sup>30</sup> Kant re-established that pure practical reason demonstrates the freedom of the soul via its autonomy from empirical influence in the second *Critique*, but then suggested that this freedom leads to a moral faith through the rational implication of a ‘Kingdom of Ends’ which practical reason is drawn to because of the moral law.<sup>31</sup>

Further evidence that Kant’s transition towards theism was genuine comes from Kant’s lectures on philosophical theology in the years between *The Groundwork* and the second *Critique*. During this time, Kant claimed that a consequence of the Critical philosophy is a moral theology.<sup>32</sup> This is opposed to the concept of a moral Deism, which suggests that Kant finds his moral philosophy to be a foundation for belief in, and a relationship with, a personal god.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Kant goes on to assure the reader that his moral theology should not only convince its practitioners of the existence of God, but that it should also move them to religion.<sup>34</sup> Kant then finds any possible detractor of this belief by necessity an immoral scoundrel,<sup>35</sup> hearkening back to his challenge to unbelievers in the preface to the second edition of the first *Critique*. In these Critical lectures between Kant’s two most prominent works on morality, he explicitly states that the Critical philosophy “is as certain as a mathematical demonstration” without needing to appeal to knowledge about God specifically, and thus needs no proofs to defend it.<sup>36</sup> After establishing the practical necessity of human autonomy in *The Groundwork*, Kant immediately began lecturing that freedom brings an unshakable faith in the theist’s

God.

Kant's profound attention toward the religious and spiritual fulfillment of the individual is marked by the overarching character of his later works, those composed after the first *Critique*. The history of Kant's scholarship is in many ways the transition from cosmological contemplation to an intense concern for humanity and the well-being of the individual and the community from Kant's reading of Rousseau. But is this change one of intention or of method? Certainly, a strong case can be made for either assertion.

Despite the transition to theism, the evolution of Kant's thinking must be seen as one of methodology before it is seen as a change in view. In the first four words of the title of Kant's early work *The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, Kant's uneasiness with the metaphysical approach towards the Deity is already apparent, as he had already excluded every other method ever taken with such an approach. With the weighty effects of his discovery announced and demonstrated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant is forced to abandon the project of proving God's existence through theoretical reason all together. But, taken in the context of his entire work, the first *Critique* is also extremely liberating for Kant. By eradicating the so-called rational foundation for the impersonal god of the *Aufklärung* and the Enlightenment deists abroad, Kant is then freed to establish a very influential argument in defense of a theistic approach to God, one which was an immediate consequence of his moral philosophy.

If Kant were in the self-described 'dogmatic slumber' before his revolution, having been persuaded by the arguments of the *Aufklärung*, there had previously been no room for a theistic argument within the bounds of reason. As far as what can be established by the evidence here offered, Kant's whole career as it pertains to God was highlighted by the most rigorous defenses of faith in the Deity that he believed reason could allow at the time, and the body of work to that effect was by no means insubstantial. The whole of his Critical philosophical writings on God culminated in an assertion of certainty, a fact that challenges any supposition of Kant's possible agnosticism. One need only read Kant's works on God to their fullest in the context of his moral philosophy to be assured against any notion of Kant's agnosticism, as Kant would consider such a disingenuous claim to be a fundamental violation of his own self worth. Truly, even if Kant did so, the only concept of Kant which is consistent with the evidence available to us is as such, and any further conjecture would constitute a failure to constrain the use of one's speculative reason to the bounds of possible experience.

## End Notes

1. Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy from Kant to Fichte*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 5.
2. Stephen Palmquist. "Kant's "Appropriation" of Lampe's God." *The Harvard Theological Review* 85, no. 1 (1992), 86.
3. Ibid., 104.
4. Ibid., 18.
5. Susan Meld Shell, *The Embodiment of Reason: Kant on Spirit, Generation, and Community*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 46.
6. Ibid., 55.
7. Immanuel Kant and Gordon Treash, *The One Possible Basis for a Demonstration of the Existence of God*. (New York: Abaris Books, 1979), 163.
8. Ibid., 165-167.
9. John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 179-180.
10. Shell. *Kant and the Limits of Autonomy*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 47.
11. Shell. *The Embodiment of Reason*. 75, 132.
12. Immanuel Kant and Lewis Beck, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company Inc., 1950), 8.
13. Kant. *The One Possible Basis*. 81, 87.
14. Immanuel Kant, and Theodore Meyer Greene, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*. (Lawrence: Digireads.com, 2011), 62-76.
15. Allen Wood. "Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion". *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*. Paul Guyer. (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), 403.
16. Immanuel Kant, and James W. Ellington, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*. (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub. Co., 1981), 41.
17. Ibid., 41.
18. Ibid., 49.
19. Wood. "Rational Theology". 403.
20. D.M. MacKinnon. "Kant's Philosophy of Religion." *Philosophy* 50, no. 192 (1975): 131-144. 139.
21. Douglas H. Shantz. *An Introduction to German Pietism: Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 277.
22. *The Grounding*. 13.
23. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2004), 142.
24. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*. 121.
25. Palmquist. "Kant's "Appropriation" of Lampe's God". 97.
26. Bieser, *The Fate of Reason*. 45.
27. Ibid., 123.
28. Ibid., 125.
29. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. 134.

30. Kant, *The Grounding*. 49.
31. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*. 153.
32. Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*. Allen Wood, and Gertrude M. Clark. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978), 40.
33. Wood, "Rational Theology". 398.
34. Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*. 122.
35. *Ibid.*, 123.
36. *Ibid.*, 40.