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IMMANUEL KANT

*Religion within the Boundaries of  
Mere Reason*

CAMBRIDGE TEXTS IN THE  
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IMMANUEL KANT

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*Religion within the  
Boundaries of Mere Reason*  
*And Other Writings*

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## Introduction

As the title, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, rightly suggests, Immanuel Kant's religious thought is strongly rationalistic. In this Kant belongs to an important current of eighteenth-century thought – but with a difference. Rationalistic religious thought of the period, in Germany as in Britain, typically proposed to base religious belief on metaphysical proofs of the existence of God. Kant himself propounded and defended such a demonstration of divine existence in *The Only Possible Ground of Proof for a Demonstration of God's Existence* (1763), a work of his earlier, “precritical” period. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), however, which inaugurated the “critical” period to which all the works collected in the present volume belong, Kant criticized traditional attempts at metaphysical demonstration of the existence of God, and argued that the nature and intrinsic limits of human thought and knowledge preclude any such demonstration. Such a critique might be expected to support atheism, but that was not Kant's intent. On the contrary, he argued that any metaphysical demonstration of the *non*-existence of God is equally precluded by the limits of reason. In a famous phrase, he declared that he “had to deny *knowledge*, in order to make room for *faith*” (B XXX).<sup>1</sup>

The faith Kant has in mind is a purely rational faith, but it is grounded in practical (action-guiding, moral) reason rather than in theoretical

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1998). This, Kant's “First critique,” is customarily cited by pages of the first (a) and second (b) German editions of 1781 and 1787; this pagination is normally given in the margins of translations, including that in the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, which I follow.

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reason. In Kant's view the inability of our theoretical faculties to prove the truth or falsity of religious claims leaves room for our practical reason to determine our religious stance. He welcomes this because he thinks it crucial for religion to be controlled by moral considerations.

Both in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and more fully in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant argues that the needs of morality demand and justify a sort of faith in the existence of God; he gives related arguments for believing in human immortality and affirming the freedom of the human will. We will touch on Kant's views on free will below; the arguments for belief in God and immortality both turn on claims that morality demands that we set ourselves certain ends, and that we therefore need, morally, to believe in the possible attainment of those ends. One such end is the perfection of our own virtue. Kant argues that we cannot reasonably hope to reach perfect virtue in any finite period of time, and that the only reasonable way in which we can seriously take perfect virtue as an end, as morality demands, is by believing in an immortality which makes possible an infinite approximation to perfect virtue. More comprehensively, Kant holds that morality demands that we take as an ultimate end the highest good that is possible in the world. The perfection of our own virtue is only a part of this highest good. Other parts, which according to Kant include the eventual happiness of moral agents in strict proportion to their virtue, are beyond our power to achieve, and also beyond anything we can reasonably expect from the ordinary course of nature. Therefore, Kant argues, we can reasonably believe the highest good possible, and seriously take it as our end, only if we believe there is a God who can and will supplement our contribution to the achievement of the highest good with whatever divine assistance may be required.

This is not the place for a thorough interpretive and critical examination of these arguments. They are developed primarily in Kant's three *Critiques*, and are largely presupposed in the writings collected in the present volume, though the latter do contain occasional passages that amplify the arguments.<sup>2</sup> What calls for more discussion here is the metaphysical framework established by the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which conditions everything said in Kant's critical writings on religion.

<sup>2</sup> Notably the long note (AK 6:6ff.) in the Preface to the first edition of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Kant's works, other than the *Critique of Pure Reason*, are cited here by volume and page of the German Academy edition, which are given in the margins of the Cambridge edition of Kant's works, and of the present collection.

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## Phenomena and Noumena

Kant's exclusion of theology from the realm of theoretical knowledge is an example of a larger program for establishing the boundaries of reason that lies at the heart of his "critical" philosophy. The *Critique of Pure Reason* claims to establish mathematics and physical science on a sure foundation, but only at the price of restricting their scope to mere appearances (phenomena). Things as they are (or may be) in themselves (noumena) are inaccessible to our theoretical knowledge. Kant's reasons for this limitation of theoretical reason spring from a central feature of his grounding of mathematics and physics. He argues that any experience that is possible for us must be structured by certain fundamental concepts such as those of substance and cause, and by space and time as "forms of intuition" within which objects of sensation can be represented. On this basis he argues, on the one hand, that we can know that any world that we can experience must necessarily conform to certain principles of mathematics and natural philosophy, connected with these forms and concepts; and on the other hand, that since our knowledge of the experienced world is so profoundly shaped by the needs of our cognitive faculties, we cannot reasonably take it as knowledge of things as they are in themselves, but only of things as they must and do appear to us.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, Kant argues, rightly or wrongly, that space and time definitely do not characterize things as they are in themselves. As we shall see, this conclusion generates both resources and problems for the argument of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*.

It had a major attraction for Kant in the solution it made possible to the problem of free will. One of the main principles about objects of experience that Kant claimed to prove in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that they are all subject to a complete causal determinism. At the same time he maintained that morality requires free will in such a way that its commands can be addressed only to wills whose choices are not causally determined. How then can the demands of empirical knowledge be reconciled with the demands of morality? Kant's answer, in a nutshell, is that both can be satisfied according to his philosophy; for though we are subject to causal determinism as phenomena (as we appear to ourselves and to each other), it does not follow that we are causally determined as noumena (as we are in ourselves).

<sup>3</sup> This is a gross oversimplification of a famously complex argument, but I think it will do for present purposes.



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Like our free will, God is conceived by Kant as a thing in itself (a noumenon). In a way this is religiously unsurprising; one might think that a God that is merely an appearance would be no God at all. More controversial religiously is a consequence that Kant draws from the noumenal status of the deity: that we cannot experience God at all – since all our experience is necessarily structured by the forms of space and time, and hence is only of appearances. This thesis is applied to the critique of types of religious piety in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Of course the controversial thesis will not follow if God can be, like human selves, a noumenon that is *also* experienced as a phenomenon.

### Original Sin and the Good Will

The grounds of religious belief are not the main subject of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (hereafter, *Religion*). It is principally concerned, more concretely, with the sort of religion that morality does and does not commend. The thematic question of religious belief, Kant once suggested, is “What may I hope?” (A 805 = B 833). As this suggests, Kant espouses a religion of aspiration, of deeply moral aspiration, and to that extent a religion of salvation. In this Kant’s rational religion has obvious points of contact with Christianity; and his *Religion* is a product of intense engagement with the Protestant Christianity in which he was raised, and which was the established religion of the Prussian state of which he was a subject. The book is in part an investigation into whether there is a form of Christianity that can at the same time be a form of the rational religion demanded by morality; this is particularly explicit in *Religion* AK 6:157–67. Kant is sharply critical of traditional theology and church practice on a number of points, but he is also quite sympathetic with some of the Christian views in which he is most interested.<sup>4</sup> On some points indeed he shows a depth of engagement with theological tradition that is quite uncommon in modern philosophical writing.<sup>5</sup>

This is particularly true of his treatment of the issues of sin and salvation from sin that are a central concern of his *Religion* book. His

<sup>4</sup> As the reader will see, the same cannot be said for Kant’s attitude toward other historic religions (especially Judaism), which may well be found offensively dismissive. In this way Kant is less suited than other German thinkers such as Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) and Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81) to serve as a model for the use of religious rationalism to promote interreligious harmony.

<sup>5</sup> He grapples much more seriously with Luther’s central theological concerns than Leibniz, for example, despite the latter’s vast theological erudition and ostensibly more orthodox Lutheranism.

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concerns and views on these issues may seem surprising to some students of Kantian ethics. I will argue, however, that they are motivated (and in part, perhaps, frustrated) by a main starting point of his moral philosophy, the doctrine of the good will.

Nothing in the *Religion* is likelier to surprise than Kant's endorsement of a form of the doctrine of original sin. What could be more out of tune with Kant's emphasis on individual moral responsibility and its implication of free will? And what is there in his Enlightenment rationalism that could ground such a gloomy view of the human moral condition? Yet Kant's conception of original sin or, as he calls it, "the radical evil in human nature" is in fact well connected with his moral theory.

In traditional forms of the doctrine of original sin, human beings are said to have inherited two moral liabilities from their first ancestors, Adam and Eve. One is guilt: we are said to share in the guilt of the first sin that our ancestors committed. The other is corruption, a perversion of motivation that is itself evil and makes people likelier to do wrong deeds. Kant agrees that both moral corruption and guilt for it are innate in us – already present in us when we were born (*Religion* AK 6:21, 38, 43). But he denies that they were inherited from our ancestors, in the sense of having been caused by their sin. Nothing is to be charged against us as sin, in Kant's view, unless it is the product of our own free will (*Religion* AK 6:40–41). It follows that the biblical story of Adam and Eve cannot explain our corrupt condition; its value for Kant was merely illustrative, providing a model for understanding our own sin (*Religion* AK 6:41–43).<sup>6</sup> For this reason it is appropriate that in stating his own position Kant does not use the usual German term for original sin, *Erbsünde*, which means literally "hereditary sin," though he does use the Latin *peccatum originarium* (*Religion* AK 6:31), which does not imply heredity.

How then can moral evil be innate in us? The only sense in which good or evil can be innate in us, Kant says, is "that it is posited as the ground antecedent to every use of freedom given in experience (from the earliest youth as far back as birth) and is thus represented as present in the human being at the moment of birth – not that birth itself is its cause" (*Religion* AK 6:22). Evil deeds as experienced in time proceed from immoral or amoral dispositions – from a propensity to evil, as Kant calls

<sup>6</sup> Much of subsequent Protestant theology has followed Kant's example on this point. The biblical Fall narrative is allowed only illustrative or symbolic value, for example in the twentieth century's most noted defense of the doctrine of original sin, Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* (New York: Scribners, 1949), vol. 1, p. 269.

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it. One's propensity to evil cannot have originated in any evil deed one performed in time, for all such deeds presuppose the propensity to evil.

"This propensity [to evil] must itself be considered morally evil" (*Religion* AK 6:32). But how can it be morally evil, since it did not originate in any free act in time? Kant's answer is that it originated in a free and voluntary act that was not in time. Appealing to the timeless character that he ascribes to moral freedom as a noumenon, he distinguishes two senses of the word "deed" [*Tat*]: an empirical sense in which it applies to acts in time, and a noumenal sense in which it applies to acts of a free will that transcends time. Our most fundamental ethical dispositions originate in the second sort of deed, according to Kant. Indeed "the propensity to evil is a deed in the [noumenal] meaning" (*Religion* AK 6:31).

Suppose this appeal to the difference between phenomena and noumena is successful in preserving the consistency of Kant's conception of original sin with the rest of his system. What leads him to believe that we actually have this propensity to evil, and that it is universal among human beings? *Experience* establishes this conclusion, Kant says (*Religion* AK 6:32–35). Some may find this claim of empirical grounding plausible enough without further argument, but its appeal may be also strengthened if it is viewed in relation to Kant's standard of moral goodness.

Moral aspiration is central to Kant's religion, as was noted above; it is also central to his ethics. His *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* begins with a thesis, not about the criterion of right action, but about the proper object of aspiration for a rational agent: "It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation except a *good will*" (AK 4:393).<sup>7</sup> It may be thought odd that an argument so resolutely anticonsequentialist in its aims and conclusions should begin with a thesis about the good rather than the right; but so it does begin. Kant's ethics is anticonsequentialist, not because there is no object of aspiration at its heart, but because its object of aspiration is not one that Kant thinks can be pursued as a goal by extrinsic means.

Kant's aspiration for the good will is in important ways religious, an aspiration for something transcendent. He is looking for something that would be good without limitation, something unqualifiedly good. Will we find empirically, in ourselves or in our neighbors, any will that is good

<sup>7</sup> I quote from the translation of the *Groundwork* in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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without limitation? Kant (plausibly enough) thinks not.<sup>8</sup> The good will is therefore for Kant a *transcendent* object of aspiration, in the sense that it transcends any empirically available realization of it, though he does *not* think of it as transcending the human as such.

Kant's perception of evil is rooted in the absolute, unqualified character of the goodness he requires of a good will. This unqualified goodness is demanded of our moral disposition [*Gesinnung*] and not just of observable behavior. For Kant as for Luther a disposition incorporating and ordering ends in a morally deficient way is already sin. That is why the "propensity [to evil] must itself be considered morally evil" (*Religion* AK 6:32). Like the propensity to evil, the good will must be a noumenal deed in order to be imputed to us. It is not an empirical deed but something deeper that orients a whole life and grounds empirical deeds.

This motivational orientation is characterized by Kant in terms of the adoption of maxims, or principles of action. The human being in whom radical evil dwells is one who "has incorporated into his maxim the (occasional) deviation from" the moral law (*Religion* AK 6:32). When we think of someone as a good person, we normally make light of occasional deviations; but then we are not talking about absolute, unqualified goodness. The religious character of Kant's aspiration is revealed at this point. It is one of the points at which his thought about good and evil in human nature is deeply attuned to the dynamics of the Lutheran piety in which he was reared. That was a piety in which the absolute perfection of the divine ideal brings into strong relief, by contrast, the universality, subtlety, and depth of evil in human motivation, which in turn gives rise to a powerful need for salvation.

### The Justification of the Sinner

Kant proposes what he calls a "deduction of the idea of a *justification* of a human being who is indeed guilty but has passed into a disposition well-pleasing to God" (*Religion* AK 6:76). Philosophers are familiar with the ideas of a justification of a belief and a justification of an action, but the reference here to "a justification of a human being" is of a sort that is familiar only in theology. What is meant here is *not* a person's being

<sup>8</sup> I take here (as suggested, in my opinion, by the argument of the *Religion*) a more rigorous view of the requirements of a Kantian good will than some interpreters would accept. For canvassing and discussion of some of the views in this area, see Karl Ameriks, "Kant on the Good Will," in Otfried Höffe, ed., *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten: Ein kooperativer Kommentar* (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1989), pp. 45–65, especially pp. 56–59.

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justified in believing or doing something in particular. That would be merely another way of speaking of justification of a belief or an action. In this context the question of justification is the question, how a human being can be acceptable in the eyes of a holy judge. And the question is about something like forgiveness because it is asked about a person “who is indeed guilty.”

One of the most interesting things about Kant’s treatment of the subject is that he sees a problem here at all. In most purely philosophical moral systems ideas of the removal of moral guilt have little or no role to play. A theologian who believes that God is committed to punishing sin faces the question, how the sinner can escape such punishment, or how, if the punishment cannot be escaped, the sinner can nonetheless attain salvation. But how does this problem arise if one does not believe on independent grounds that God is committed to punish sin?

Kant does think of God as committed to punish sin. But that is not the ground for his belief that there is a problem here. Kant’s central religious problem is not, “How I can escape divine punishment and be happy?”, but (as he regularly puts it) “How can I be *worthy* of happiness?” And when he asks, as he does, “How can I be well-pleasing to God?” the question is explicitly one that does not lose its interest for Kant if God is not there to do anything about it. Kant is prepared to rephrase it as the question, how he can be a person that would be well-pleasing in the sight of his own pure practical reason if he knew his own heart as God knows it. He talks about the verdict of “the judge within” oneself, about which he thinks one may well be anxious (*Religion* AK 6:77).

Kant’s regarding guilt as a problem in and of itself can be seen as an aspect of his self-conscious rejection of the classical, hedonistic utilitarianism (German as well as British) of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Kant’s fundamental principle that nothing can be called good without qualification except a good will is an anti-utilitarian principle. For it implies that morality is not merely an instrumental good but an intrinsic good. This makes a difference to the significance of guilt. If happiness is the sole intrinsic good, the fact of guilt can hardly have intrinsic moral importance. For the hedonistic utilitarian, happiness is the intrinsic good, and morality is only an instrumental good. But Kant, who holds that the one thing unqualifiedly good is a good will, cannot say that it

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does not matter intrinsically whether one's will is or has been good. On the contrary, that must be what matters most of all about one's life. In fact, however, according to Kant's account of radical evil, our wills have not been, and are not, as good as they ought to be; we are guilty.

In theory, at least, one alternative at this point would be simply to pass a harsh judgment on ourselves and go on to some more attractive subject. This approach is not acceptable to Kant, however. It is an article of faith for him that moral worthiness is possible for us; and he believes that in order to make steady progress in goodness, it is necessary to have a certain favorable and hopeful (though not overconfident) attitude toward oneself as a moral being (*Religion* AK 6:68).

How can such a self-affirmation be justified? Given my guilt and given the dependence of moral worth on the goodness of one's will, how can I both be serious about morality and have the affirmative attitude toward myself and my life that is necessary, as Kant agrees, for moral health? Here, without any essential reference to punishment, is a problem of guilt that seems to flow very naturally out of Kant's conception of morality and his conception of the good. Some such problem of guilt should in general be expected to arise for non-utilitarian ethical systems that ascribe a non-instrumental value to morality. Not only is the problem not accidental in Kant; it is one of the expressions of his depth as a moralist that he does see a difficulty here.

How is the problem to be solved? Kant's fullest attempt at a solution involves the idea of punishment. He speaks of a "debt" that we have because of our past evil (*Religion* AK 6:72), and that must be discharged through punishment. There is much that is interesting in the solution that Kant tries to develop on this basis, but it is not clear that it has much relevance to the problem that most concerns Kant here, which is "How can I be well-pleasing in the eyes of the moral judge?" or as I put it, "How can I, as a morally serious person, affirm my own life?" In relation to this question it is not clear why the occurrence of punishment in my life should serve to remove the blot on my pleasingness that is constituted by the evil in me. If a more satisfactory solution to the problem is to be found in Kant's *Religion* book, perhaps it will be in his beliefs about conversion, about which he says,

that a human being should become ... *morally* good (pleasing to God) ... – that, so long as the foundation of the maxims of the

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human being remains impure, cannot be effected through gradual *reform* but must rather be effected through a *revolution* in the disposition of the human being. (*Religion* AK 6:47)

Like his Lutheran forebears, however, Kant does not interpret such a conversion as implying a time after which a person lives completely free from sin; for he believes that our action is defective, morally, at each instant of time (*Religion* AK 6:67). Kant actually extends this moral imperfection, as Christian tradition generally would not, to every instant of an endless life after death (a point that is important in his argument for immortality). He speaks of “the deficiency which is in principle inseparable from the existence of a temporal being, [namely] never to able to become quite fully what he has in mind” (*Religion* AK 6:67*n*), and offers an argument, which may or may not convince, for the everlastingness of moral imperfection:

The distance between the goodness which we ought to effect in ourselves and the evil from which we start is ... infinite, and, so far as the deed is concerned – i.e. the conformity of the conduct of one’s life to the holiness of the law – it is not attainable in any time. (*Religion* AK 6:66)

As he thus rejects any sinless period of time for us, Kant can maintain that holiness is possible for us only by accepting something like Luther’s doctrine that the regenerate person is *simul justus et peccator* (at the same time righteous and a sinner).

If we are, nevertheless, to be holy in such a way as to be “well-pleasing to God,” Kant suggests, this holiness must be found in a “disposition” [*Gesinnung*] which “proceeds from a holy principle adopted by the human being in his supreme maxim” by a “change of heart” [*Sinnesänderung*] (*Religion* AK 6:66). But this seems only to underline the difficulty: “How can this disposition count for the deed itself, when this deed is *every time* (not generally,<sup>9</sup> but at each instant) defective?” (*Religion* AK 6:67). Kant’s solution seems modeled on the classic Protestant idea of the justification of the sinner by *imputed righteousness*. In the view of the Reformers, faith is imputed to the believer as righteousness. That is, God graciously counts faith as righteousness. In Kant’s view a disposition is *counted for*

<sup>9</sup> *Überhaupt*. There is no perfect translation of this word in this context, nor is it unambiguous in the German. The solution toward which Kant is working involves ascribing holiness to the moral progress of the regenerate person considered as a whole, though not at any point in time.



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the deed; or, more comprehensively, an endless progress toward true goodness is counted as achieved goodness.

[B]ecause of the *disposition* from which it derives and which transcends the senses, we can think of the infinite progression of the good toward conformity to the law as being judged by him who scrutinizes the heart (through his pure intellectual intuition) to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed (the life conduct). And so notwithstanding his permanent deficiency, a human being can still expect to be *generally* [*überhaupt*] well-pleasing to God, at whatever point in time his existence be cut short. (*Religion* AK 6:67)

What is the “perfected whole” that God is supposed to see in an “infinite progression ... toward conformity to the law”? On the most natural reading (and I believe the correct one), it is the whole endless progression which God’s timeless intuition correctly perceives as having, throughout an endless future, a forever improving trajectory, with no long-term backsliding. It would be a mistake to prefer an alternative reading on which the “perfected whole” is a noumenal whole – the perfected virtue of the justified person’s self as it is, timelessly, in itself. On that reading, although the appearance (in time) of our moral life is never completely holy, the (timeless) reality of our moral life is completely holy. But does Kant mean to solve the problem of justification by denying the reality of sin and classifying it as merely an appearance?

Certainly not. If our progress, in time, towards holiness has a timeless noumenal ground in a good disposition, our morally wrong acts in time, according to Kant, have equally their timeless noumenal ground in the adoption of an evil maxim. Both of these timeless facts are facts about our moral selfhood, and we are equally responsible for both of them. It is not, therefore, Kant’s view that the noumenal reality of our lives, unlike its appearance in time, may turn out to be morally spotless. Whatever it is, it is not sinlessness, but something more dynamic that incorporates a tension between good and evil.

And the temporal expression of that timeless reality is progress. “Progress” signifies a dynamism that incorporates the imperfection from which one starts as well as the goal toward which one progresses. Kant describes it in the vocabulary of conflict, in terms of “a good disposition which has the upper hand over the evil principle formerly dominant in” the person (*Religion* AK 6:73), and even brings about a “revolution” in the person’s character (*Religion* AK 6:47). These images of revolution and



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conflict are, of course, no less temporal than the idea of progress. How then are they to be related to the timeless free action which Kant regards as the ground of our moral accountability?

The closest Kant comes to explaining that may be in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where he says that

A rational being can now rightly say of every unlawful action he performed that he could have omitted it even though as appearance it is sufficiently determined in the past and, so far, is inevitably necessary; for this action, with all the past which determines it, belongs to a single phenomenon of his character, which he gives to himself and in accordance with which he imputes to himself, as a cause independent of all sensibility, the causality of those appearances.<sup>10</sup>

Here it is the character, not the phenomenon (as the grammatical gender of the German words makes clear), that the rational being is said to give to himself; and the whole history of that being's actions in time constitutes a single phenomenon *of* that character. If that history in time is one in which a morally good principle can be seen to win out more and more over a previously dominant evil, that is a dramatization or enactment in time, so to speak, of the character that the agent, as it is in itself, has adopted, and possesses, in a timeless act. Even if your wrong action was importantly influenced by other people in accordance with the empirical laws of the phenomenal world, as Kant allows commonly happens (*Religion* AK 6:93–98), he can hold that you still bear full moral responsibility for it. For in Kant's view that action, in its context of social influences, is an expression of the character that your real noumenal self timelessly chose to act out in the drama of human history in time, and as such inherits the moral gravity of the timeless free action that it expresses.<sup>11</sup>

A character that is acted out, and thus expressed, in such a history must presumably be quite complex. Kant cannot consistently ascribe a temporal structure to that complexity; but he implies that the moral significance of the timeless character (and presumably of its complexity) is correlated with certain aspects of the temporal structure of the phenomenal history that expresses it. In particular, a phenomenal history in which the empirically knowable actions and motives of the rational agent

<sup>10</sup> *Critique of Practical Reason* AK 5:105ff. I use the translation of this work in Immanuel Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> One place to look for a philosophical precedent for such a view is the myth of Er at the very end of Plato's *Republic*.

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start worse and get steadily better expresses a decisively better timeless character than would be expressed by a personal historical trajectory in which moral advance is regularly followed by moral decline.

Neither this, nor anything else that Kant says, is likely to answer all our questions about timeless noumenal free acts and the sorts of character they must have in themselves according to his theory. It seems likely that Kant knew that and was not bothered by it, because what he really cared about regarding those noumenal free acts and their characters was simply that they exist, unconditioned by any causal determination, and thus provide our empirically knowable actions and characters in time with a moral significance and value that he believes they could not otherwise have. Similarly in his theoretical philosophy Kant (as I read him) supposes that our timeless noumenal selves are the ultimate subjects of our consciousness, thought, and experience – but not that we know anything about how that works outside of time. Everything else that he speaks of as mattering in our lives goes on in time. We do mathematics and science in time, and Kant does not hold out to us the prospect of somehow escaping from the cognitive limitations he sees as imposed by our having space and time as “forms of outer and inner sense.” Likewise the maxims that we must choose in order to obey the moral law as he understands it are to govern actions in time. And both parts of the highest good that he says morality directs us to take as our ultimate end are to be realized in time, and thus in the empirical, phenomenal world. That is obviously true of the never-ending improvement in virtue which is to be made possible by immortality; and we are given no reason to suppose that the eventual proportionment of happiness to virtue will take place outside of time.

Here it appears that the metaphysical ascent from the phenomenal to the noumenal, from the temporal to the timeless, while it may be required by Kant’s system, and does help him in dealing, for example, with original sin, is not the crucial move in his solution of the problem of justification. Both moral evil and moral good are present at both the phenomenal and the noumenal level. At both levels the question arises, how Kant can escape the conclusion that the evil spoils the good. And at either level it seems that he can do this only by setting a sufficiently high value on something that is more dynamic and dialectical than having a will that is simply good. What moral acceptability will require, at either level, is rather a will in which good prevails over evil. What does the main work in his solution is not the contrast between phenomenal and noumenal

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or temporal and timeless, but a shift of focus from a pure and possibly unconflicted moral goodness that would be manifested in particular acts, to a moral victory that appears in time as progress.

In this shift of focus Kant has departed significantly from his insistence on a good will as the criterion of moral worth, in a way that may be difficult to reconcile with the rest of his ethics. The moral imperative, as Kant understands it, does not demand that we live each day a little better than we lived before; it demands categorically that we embrace morally correct principles and act always in accordance with them. Such a view suggests that if we are to make progress, it could not be by making progress our aim. It could only be by striving with all our might to *be* morally perfect. So if progress is the most we can ever attain, won't the progress involve a frame of mind that must judge itself a failure? Won't that reinstate the problem of justification? Nor can this disappointment in oneself be easily avoided by thinking of the underlying reality of the progress as a timeless whole. For the timeless whole, as we have seen, must include an analogue and ground of the evil that is involved in the temporal progress.

## Grace

The tension at this point between Kant's doctrine of the good will and his solution of the problem of justification is marked by an introduction of the concept of *grace*. Kant has an uneasy relation to this central concept of Christian theology. He fears the concept of grace for the potential he sees in it for a corrupt relaxation of the stern demands of morality (cf. *Religion* AK 6:51–52); but he thinks that moral faith may have to acknowledge a need for certain types of grace.

There is no place in the Kantian scheme of things for *prevenient grace* – that is, for divine assistance that precedes our first turning toward the good and indeed causes, or contributes causally to, that turning, without our previously having done anything to deserve it. Kant's rejection of prevenient grace is quite explicit; he says:

Granted that some supernatural cooperation is also needed to his becoming good or better, whether this cooperation only consist in the diminution of obstacles or be also a positive assistance, the human being must nonetheless make himself antecedently worthy of receiving it. (*Religion* AK 6:44)

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As indicated in the statement just quoted, however, Kant is open to the possibility of what Protestant theology has called *sanctifying grace*, the grace that provides divine assistance to the regenerate in becoming actually holy. This, as Kant is prepared, hypothetically at least, to embrace it, is grace that will help the good principle in us to vanquish the evil principle if we have really done all that we can to accomplish that goal. He holds that we cannot know that we cannot do absolutely all that is required, but he suspects that we cannot. What we need, morally, to believe, according to Kant, is that if we do all that we can do, then God is there and will supply whatever else is needed, which would be sanctifying grace.<sup>12</sup>

The very idea of the divine assistance involved in sanctifying grace is problematic for Kant, however, because of his insistence that anything by virtue of which our lives are to have moral worth must be the work of our own freedom. As he puts it,

The concept of a supernatural intervention into our moral though deficient faculty, and even into our not totally purified or at least weak disposition, to satisfy our duty in full ... is very risky and hard to reconcile with reason; for what is to be accredited to us as morally good conduct must take place not through foreign influence but only through the use of our own powers. (*Religion* AK 6:191)

The solution that Kant goes on to offer to this problem may disappoint those who seek deep understanding:

Yet its impossibility (that the two may not occur side by side) cannot be proven either, since freedom itself, though not containing anything supernatural in its concept, remains just as incomprehensible to us according to its possibility as the supernatural [something] we might want to assume as surrogate for the independent yet deficient determination of freedom. (*Religion* AK 6:191)

In other words, we do not know how anything works at the noumenal level; therefore we cannot say that both of these things cannot happen together.

This solution seems consistent at the metaphysical level, for at that level Kant professes not to understand much about the constitution

<sup>12</sup> Parts of this view, in less developed form, are found in Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, ed. Peter Heath and J. B. Schneewind, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge University Press, 1997), AK 27:317.

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of freedom. At the level of ethical analysis, however, we may wonder whether the individualism of Kant's conception of the good will and its moral worth is significantly compromised by permitting us to share with God the productive responsibility for what is accredited to us as morally good – though of course Kant does insist that we must have done all we can by our own power if we are to receive such grace.

There remains what Protestant theology has called *justifying grace*, the grace of God that consists in God's justifying the sinner; and it is Kant's cautious embrace of justifying grace that marks the tension I mentioned in his thought about justification. On the Protestant Reformers' view, God accounts us as righteous when, strictly speaking, in our own minds and deeds, we are not yet righteous; and this justifying grace consists in God's imputing to us the righteousness of Christ. A version of this is a part of Kant's theory, though of course not in the same form in which it is found in Luther or Calvin. Kant speaks of "a righteousness which is not our own," being that of an "ideal of humankind" which we know by reason, whether or not it was manifested historically in Jesus of Nazareth, and of "an appropriation of [that ideal righteousness] for the sake of our own"; but he acknowledges that "rendering this appropriation comprehensible to us is still fraught with great difficulties" (*Religion* AK 6:66). Kant holds that the basis in ourselves for the righteousness that God imputes to us in accepting us as persons well-pleasing in God's sight is, so far as we can see, insufficient for the righteousness that is imputed to us. In his explanation of justifying grace, however, the righteousness that is imputed to us is that toward which *we ourselves* are *progressing*, rather than another person's fully achieved righteousness as in the doctrine of the Reformers. Kant says,

Here, then, is that surplus over the merit from good works for which we felt the need earlier, one which is imputed to us *by grace*. For what in our earthly life (and perhaps even in all future times and in all worlds) is always only in mere *becoming* (namely, our being a human being well-pleasing to God) is imputed to us as if we already possessed it here in full. And to this we indeed have no rightful claim [*Rechtsanspruch*]. (*Religion* AK 6:75)

Having said that we have no claim of right to the imputation of the needed surplus of righteousness, Kant immediately adds a qualification: we do not have such a rightful claim "according to the empirical cognition we have of ourselves." And when he goes on to say that "it is always ... only a decree

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of grace,” he adds that nevertheless it is “fully in accord with eternal justice (because based on a satisfaction that for us consists only in the idea of an improved disposition of which, however, God alone has cognition)” (*Religion* AK 6:75–76). The suggestion at least is there that it is only from the empirical, time-bound point of view that this appears as grace – that from the timeless point of view, God is only doing the right thing, only doing what we deserve, in counting moral progress as perfected holiness.

But counting moral progress as equivalent to perfect moral goodness is not obviously consistent with Kant’s conception of the absolute demands of morality, and neither does the ascent to the timeless point of view provide any clear escape from the difficulty. Kant’s fundamental concern is not what God will say about our moral worth, but whether our wills really are good. Why then should a clear-sighted Kantian care whether anybody at all *counts* a perpetual moral progress *as if* it were perfected holiness? Why should that be any moral consolation at all? What’s the point of imputed righteousness for a Kantian?

For Luther the point of imputed righteousness is that it is part of a certain kind of relationship with Christ, a relationship that is for him the goal of spiritual aspiration.<sup>13</sup> It is a goal in which perfected holiness is found only in the divine party to the relationship, though the justified sinner cannot enter into the relationship without striving to approximate that holiness. To the extent that unqualified value is seen in such a relationship, rather than in an internal or monadic property of the self, it may indeed make sense to seek a solution to the problem of the justification of a sinner in religious conceptions of atonement. What I do not see is how such solutions can make sense on Kant’s more individualistic placement of unqualified value only in a good will, understood as an internal or monadic property of the self. It may be that the Kantian doctrine of the good will allows no really adequate solution of the problem of justification to which it gives rise. Kant himself acknowledges that the solution remains, in a sense, a mystery to him (*Religion* AK 6:143).

### This-worldly and Other-worldly Hopes

An important current in recent Kantian thought rightly stresses the importance that this-worldly hopes, particularly political hopes, had for

<sup>13</sup> Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in *Martin Luther: A Selection from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Anchor, 1961), pp. 60ff.

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Kant. There is no doubt that Kant's thought offers compelling grounds to maintain, as long as we can, a hopeful attitude toward empirical goals that we morally ought to try to achieve. It is also clear, however, that Kant includes other-worldly hopes in his religious faith, particularly in his postulate of immortality. I think it can be shown that a strictly this-worldly horizon of hope is not adequate from the point of view of Kant's aspiration for a good will.

The most obvious problem with hopes strictly bound to the empirical order is that they are too easily undermined or even refuted. Hope in the moral progress of human society looks a lot less plausible to many people now than it did to Kant, partly because civilization, in the last hundred years, has provided little assurance against the most horrible immorality, and partly because growing ecological and cross-cultural awareness has left us less confident that what seems to be progress really is. In any event it is depressingly easy to conceive of scenarios that would lead from our present situation to circumstances in which the empirical world would definitely not offer a hopeful future for finite rational agents. And many individual human agents will find themselves eventually in situations in which it would be absurd to suppose that anything *they* can do has any likelihood of producing much good in the empirical order. Thus can hope be snuffed out if it is strictly limited to the empirical world.

Surely, you may object, our actual empirical situation is not that desperate, even if truly desperate situations are possible. True, we may hope, for most of *us* most of the time, but that will not satisfy Kant, who insists that moral faith must be as unshakable as the firmest knowledge. Moral hope must be unconditional, not dependent on fortune or empirical evidence. This is part of the point of Kant's strategy of "deny[ing] *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*" (B xxx). It is a main point of his Transcendental Dialectic to establish that theoretical reason is no more able to disprove than to prove the religious doctrines required by practical reason (A 640f./B 668f.).

Kant's reason for insisting that moral faith be unshakable is clear (A 828f./B 856f). He held that our commitment to living a moral life must be unshakable. So if moral faith, or hope, is a necessity for living a moral life, as he claims, our need for moral faith or hope is absolute and unconditional. It cannot be limited to hopes that are liable to empirical refutation.

A committed this-worlder and naturalist who has followed the argument to this point may be moved to ask whether the possible failure of all this-worldly hopes does not show that Kant should have said (as he

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didn't) that we must be able to live without hope. I will press the objection in what seems to me its strongest form. According to Kant's doctrine of the good will, as I have emphasized, a good will has supreme intrinsic value, and not merely instrumental value. Mustn't moral action therefore retain its most important point and motive, as something worth doing for its own sake, even if it holds no hope at all of producing good results?

One answer we should expect Kant to give to this objection would appeal to the place of ends in his theory of action. That line of argument would be difficult, however, and there is a Kantian alternative more closely connected with his *Religion* book's themes of sin and salvation. Kant simply did not believe that our wills as we know them empirically are good enough, or that the virtues that are empirically possible for any of us are sufficiently inspiring, to bear the weight that is placed on them in the heroic alternative proposed by the objector.

For that reason, and contrary to the objector's assumption, Kant's moral hope is not merely outward looking. It is not designed for moral saints, secure in their own righteousness, who must rely on hope only in trusting that their actions will not be fruitless in external consequences. Rather it is designed for repentant sinners, engaged in a struggle for moral regeneration for which the empirical order promises no really adequate consummation. It is therefore not just a hope for external results, but also, and no less important, for a perfection of the agent's own inner moral life. It is, in short, a form of the aspiration for a good will. The conviction that morality demands this latter, internal hope, and that it would be unreasonable to look to the empirical order for its fulfilment, is the very heart of Kant's argument for the postulation of immortality in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. More generally, it is a powerful reason for Kant to resist a thoroughgoing restriction of moral hope to an empirical or this-worldly horizon.

There are two different ways in which Kant's aspiration for an unqualifiedly good will may be seen as transcending the empirical horizon. The more clearly indicated in his works is the way of immortality, the way of a moral progress that is infinite or endless in the sense that it continues after death throughout an infinite time. Kant repeatedly maintains that moral hope requires this, and it is such an endless progress toward holiness that he typically proposes as *counting*, in God's sight, as perfected holiness. His thought suggests an alternative, however. I have quoted a text in which he says that a person's progress toward holiness can be counted as "a perfected whole ... at whatever point in time his existence



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be cut short” (*Religion* AK 6:67). In this phrasing Kant seems to envisage an existence, and hence a moral progress, that comes to an end in time but still is counted, in God’s sight, as perfected holiness.<sup>14</sup>

This alternative hope for the perfection of a good will surely does not remain within the empirical horizon, however. It is only because it is grounded in a disposition “which transcends the senses” that the moral progress, in the text I just quoted, can be counted as “a perfected whole” (*Religion* AK 6:67). Kant is not interested in merely finding a way in which he can think of his life as if it were a morally perfected whole. Rather he is postulating the real possibility of an ultimately real ground for his life’s really having the value of such a whole. He does not expect to find any such ground within the empirical horizon. If he sought it only in a timeless noumenal realm, he would be following the path of an alternative tradition of religious thought on this subject, which conceives of eternal life in terms of timelessness, rather than an endless life, in time, after death; but that would still be a hope that transcends the empirical horizon, a broadly religious hope, rooted in Kant’s aspiration for an unqualifiedly good will.

### Philosophical Ecclesiology

Kant is sharply, in places even bitterly, critical of much organized religion, but he is not opposed to organized religion as such. On the contrary, he holds that a church, as an ethical community, is required for flourishing moral life, and for “the victory of the good principle in the foundation of a Kingdom of God on earth” (*Religion* AK 6:93–102).

The ethical purpose of a church, for Kant, is to provide a social structure in which people instruct, encourage, and support each other in virtue, instead of providing each other with temptations to vice. Church and state are parallel but distinct institutions, equally rooted in practical principles. The state rightly *enforces* laws of *justice* or right [*Recht*], whereas the church is to inculcate *voluntary* compliance with laws of *virtue*, which cannot properly be enforced by any human institution because they extend to motivation and govern the inner life. A good will must effectually embrace the laws of virtue as well as those of justice.

Providing a social environment that seriously and persistently focuses attention on moral aspiration is certainly one of the functions that have

<sup>14</sup> The conception of the end or goal of moral and religious aspiration as timeless is also discussed by Kant in *The End of All Things* (AK 8:327–28 and 333–36).

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often been assigned to religious institutions. And it is plausible to claim that it is important for moral life to have an institution that does this. What may be less obvious is what place this institutional role can have in the Kantian scheme of things. Kant is a fervent believer in the value and importance of moral education.<sup>15</sup> Yet one may wonder how Kant can believe even in the possibility of moral education, given his moral individualism and his views about free will. Unless it is purely self-education, moral education involves one person taking another person's moral perfection (or progress toward perfection) as an end; and it is hard to see how that sort of project can fail to be involved in Kant's conception of a church. Yet Kant himself, in his *Metaphysics of Morals*, declares that

it is a contradiction for me to make another person's *perfection* my end and consider myself under obligation to promote this. For the *perfection* of another human being, as a person, consists just in this: that he *himself* is able to set his end in accordance with his own concepts of duty; and it is self-contradictory to require that I do (make it my duty to do) something that only the other himself can do. (AK 6:386)<sup>16</sup>

Various interpretations may be proposed to rescue Kant at this point. Can the distinction between phenomenal and noumenal do it? It is not clear that Kant should have any objection to one person taking the empirical manifestations of virtue in another person as an end. All empirical manifestations, as phenomena, are part of a single deterministic causal nexus, according to Kant. My own physical actions, which are objects of my moral choice, are also phenomena, and as such part of this same causal nexus. Why then should they not have a causal influence, at the phenomenal level, on the phenomenal manifestations of virtue and vice in other people? And if they do or can have such an influence, will it not be morally incumbent on me to try to make it a good influence? This is not to say that one should take it as an end to promote another person's virtue at the *noumenal* level, nor that one has any way to influence another person's noumenal free will. But if this is Kant's view, it is misleading, at best, for him to say as flatly as he does that one is not obligated to take another person's perfection as an end of one's own.

<sup>15</sup> See, e.g., his *Lectures on Ethics* (AK 27:471), and the "ethical doctrine of method from the doctrine of virtue" in his *Metaphysics of Morals* (AK 6:477–85).

<sup>16</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, with an introduction by Roger J. Sullivan (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

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Kant's ideal church would limit itself strictly to its ethical function. Much of his reasoning on this point, in the fourth Part of his *Religion*, is concerned with the conception of religion as *service to God*. This conception has deep roots in the discourse of Christianity, particularly in language about *worship*. Christians routinely speak of a (public) "service" of worship, where what was originally meant was certainly that the worship is a service to God.

This way of talking about worship sets up Kant's critique of it. He interprets service to God as an attempt to please God. What pleases God? Kant is surely not alone in thinking that supposing that public praise of God is of itself pleasing to God comes far too close to conceiving of God on the unflattering model of human vanity. On a suitably exalted conception of God, Kant thinks, nothing but a morally good will is by itself pleasing to God, as nothing else is unqualifiedly good (*Religion* AK 6:170). "There are no particular duties toward God in a universal religion," in Kant's austere conception of it; "for God cannot receive anything from us; we cannot act on him or for him" (*Religion* AK 6:154n). The point of a pure Kantian religion and its worship will not be to seek relationship with God for its own sake, but to inculcate and exercise moral virtue.

A less restrictive view than Kant's of the proper function of worship might be based on other conceptions besides that of service. Much religious worship may be based, not just on the question, "How can we serve or please God?" but more broadly on the question, "How can we relate ourselves most fully to the divine goodness, and to God as the source of our own being?" Praise of the divine goodness, grounded in teaching and meditation about it, may be seen, in its own right, as an important way of relating positively to the divine goodness, and thus as a supplement to moral endeavor, though certainly not an acceptable substitute for it.

Such a view of the purpose and value of worship implies that morally good life-conduct, to the extent that it is possible for us, is not enough to relate us as fully as possible to the divine goodness, perhaps because the divine goodness infinitely outstrips any value that our wills could achieve in time or eternity. Kant would disagree. In his view nothing can be better than a good will (unless it would be a good will suitably rewarded). God's will is purer and better than our wills are when viewed from any vantage point in time, but in Kant's opinion it

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is not of greater worth than the moral perfection to which humans are called to aspire.<sup>17</sup>

### Reason and Revelation

Kantian religion is to be grounded in reason – not, to be sure, in theoretical reason, but in practical reason, as explained above. Kant allows revelation a role – but a carefully circumscribed role – in religious life. “Revelation” signifies for Kant empirical, historical sources of religious belief and practice. The essential religious doctrines that constitute for him “pure religious faith” do not depend on experience or history, but have their source a priori in pure practical reason. Kant does not think, however, that these essential rational doctrines sufficiently determine the form of a church or ethical community, which he believes “needs . . . some ecclesiastical form that depends on experiential conditions and is intrinsically contingent and manifold, hence cannot be recognized as duty” on a priori grounds alone (*Religion* AK 6:105). Among these empirical conditions will typically be religious leadership that possesses authority that “presupposes a [historical] fact and not just a concept of pure reason” (*Religion* AK 6:158). Faith that is grounded in empirical, historical conditions and shapes a church Kant calls “ecclesiastical faith.”

We can discern in Kant’s *Religion* at least three conditions that a church must satisfy if it is to be a “true” church. (1) Its doctrines and practices must not contradict the principles of rational morality; it must be in that sense “within the boundaries of mere reason.” (2) It must assign the pure religious faith of reason *priority* over its own historically conditioned doctrines and practices, regarding the latter merely as a means or vehicle to the fostering and social embodiment of the former (*Religion* AK 6:178–82). (3) A “true” church must enshrine “a principle for continually coming closer to pure religious faith until finally we can dispense” with historical faith as a vehicle for religion (*Religion* AK 6:115). Whether Kant believes that an ethical community that would dispense with all commitment to historically conditioned doctrines and practices is a real historical possibility, or whether he regards it rather as an ideal to be

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Allen Wood, “Self-love, self-benevolence, and self-conceit,” in S. Engstrom and J. Whiting, eds., *Aristotle, Kant, and the Stoics: Rethinking Happiness and Duty* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 141–61, especially pp. 148–49.

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approximated in an indefinitely continued progress of religious life, is a question of interpretation that may be left here to the reader.

The relation of religion to history has been one of the dominant themes of nineteenth- and twentieth-century religious thought, and Kant has certainly not been the last to associate the concept of revelation with the historical element in religion. Such major religious thinkers as Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) and Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55) have claimed to find a more important and fundamental role for this historical element than Kant grants it. Their claims depend in general on assigning to religion a significance in human life that is wider, or at least other, than the strictly moral value that Kant's exclusive exaltation of the morally good will allows him to assign to it.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Much of the information given below, in the Chronology and in the Note on the Texts, is drawn from the general and specific introductions in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, edited and translated by Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge University Press, 1996), to which the reader is referred for much fuller discussion of these matters. I am indebted to Allen W. Wood and to participants in my Fall 2014 seminar on Kant's philosophy of religion at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, for helpful comments on previous versions of this introduction, and to Karl Ameriks for wise and generous assistance in all aspects of the preparation of this edition. Kelly Sorensen, as my research assistant at Yale, aided greatly in checking the proofs and preparing the index of the present volume for its first edition.

## Chronology

- 1724 Immanuel Kant born in Königsberg in East Prussia
- 1740 Kant enters the University of Königsberg
- 1755 Kant becomes *Privatdozent* in the University of Königsberg
- 1763 *Kant publishes The Only Possible Ground of Proof for a Demonstration of God's Existence*
- 1770 Kant becomes Professor of Logic and Metaphysics in the University of Königsberg
- 1781 Kant publishes the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*
- 1781 Death of Gotthold Ephraim Lessing
- 1783 Kant publishes *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*
- 1783 F. H. Jacobi begins a correspondence with Moses Mendelssohn, claiming that Lessing had accepted the pantheism of Spinoza
- 1785 Kant publishes *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*
- 1785 Jacobi publishes *On the Doctrine of Spinoza in Letters to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn*, favoring an antirationalist fideism in religion; Mendelssohn publishes *Morning Hours*, defending a rationalist theism
- 1786 Mendelssohn publishes *To Lessing's Friends*, attacking Jacobi's account of Lessing's views; Jacobi responds with *Against Mendelssohn's Imputations in his Writing to Lessing's Friends*; death of Mendelssohn in January. Death of Frederick the Great, and accession of Frederick William II as King of Prussia. In October Kant publishes "What does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, responding to Jacobi and Lessing with a defense of his own religious rationalism