

## 1 Introduction: Politics, Religion, and the Scope of Kant's Critical Project

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) is generally placed among the most influential proponents of the European Enlightenment and its core values, such as human dignity, freedom of inquiry and expression, and individual moral autonomy. During most of the twentieth century, the prevailing interpretation of Kant's philosophy located the main line of inquiry in his enterprise for determining the scope and the limits of human reason – an enterprise he named a “critique” – principally within the field of academic philosophy known as epistemology. It was thus taken to be an effort to provide an account of how and what humans beings are capable of knowing truly and with certainty about the world and about themselves as participants in the world. This interpretation accordingly views the central outcome of Kant's inquiry, which he first sets forth in his monumental *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781; 2nd edition 1787), as a claim about the limits of human knowledge: genuine human knowledge is restricted to the field of objects that, inasmuch as they present themselves to our human senses under the conditions of space and time, can be represented by our cognitive capacities in accord with the necessarily connected conceptual patterns (“categories”) that our reason provides us. In less technical terms, this claim means our human cognitive capacities can yield genuine knowledge only for those objects and principles that are part of a world of “matter and motion,” i.e., the material world that is physically measurable in reference to space and time.

This claim about the limits of genuine human knowledge accordingly provides the basis upon which Kant then elaborates in subsequent writings a critical philosophy that radically undercuts the long-standing philosophical enterprise of “metaphysics.” That enterprise sought to articulate a comprehensive conceptual account of all that exists, including whatever may exist in ways that “transcend” the physical world and thus stand “outside” the limiting conditions of space and time. Such efforts at metaphysics, which are traceable as far back as Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient Greek philosophers, were represented in Kant's time in the rationalist systems elaborated by thinkers such as Gottfried Leibniz, Christian Wolff, and Alexander Baumgarten. These rationalist systems of metaphysics also were proposed as the basis upon which one could reason philosophically to (at least a limited) knowledge of realities that stand beyond the limiting conditions of space and time, such as God, the immortal human soul with a capacity for freedom, and the basic principles of morality, such as good and justice. These rationalist systems of metaphysics thus served as one of the chief targets against which Kant directed his construction of a “critical” account of human knowing. In many versions of this account, Kant's critical philosophy

heralded “the end of metaphysics,” an intellectual program espoused by various philosophers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and that continues in the twenty-first.<sup>1</sup>

The rendition of Kant’s philosophy I briefly elaborate here has been “standard” in the sense that it has frequently served as the narrative “backbone” of the account of Kant given in textbooks and lectures in university courses in “modern” philosophy, a period most often taken to comprise the span from René Descartes in the seventeenth century until Kant and (at least) some of his nineteenth-century successors.<sup>2</sup> A variety of elaborations and additions can be made to this basic narrative, many of which take account of the importance and influence of aspects of Kant’s philosophy other than epistemology, most notably his writings on morality and ethics. Yet even those accounts may tread lightly when it comes to presenting the systemic and conceptual connections among all the topics that were of concern to Kant in the course of his elaboration of the critical project during the 1780s and 1790s. A particularly challenging connection to articulate adequately is the relationship between, on one hand, the writings in which Kant’s account of the limits of human knowing are seen as undermining the claims of metaphysics and, on the other hand, the writings in which he articulates the moral demands that he takes reason to place in no uncertain way upon our human moral intention and agency. In the former, the concepts of human freedom, the soul, and God are treated, in view of the limits critical philosophy requires us to place on human knowledge, as extravagant illusions leading to seemingly insuperable contradictions (“antinomies”);<sup>3</sup> in the latter, Kant sees the unconditional demand of moral duty (the “categorical imperative”) that reason unmistakably places upon our conduct as providing a firm and indisputable basis upon which human reason may then confidently

<sup>1</sup> One good instance of what had become the interpretation representative of twentieth-century Kant scholarship, particularly in the Anglophone world, is W. H. Walsh’s entry “Kant” in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. P. Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing & The Free Press, 1967), vol. 3, pp. 305–324. Another is the two-chapter treatment of Kant in J. Collins, *A History of Modern European Philosophy* (Milwaukee, WI: Bruce Publishing, 1954).

<sup>2</sup> For an incisive criticism of readings of Kant that place epistemology and the overcoming of metaphysics at its interpretive center, see S. Neiman, “Meaning and Metaphysics,” in *Teaching New Histories of Philosophy*, ed. J. B. Schneewind (Princeton, NJ: University Center for Human Values, 2004), pp. 29–50.

<sup>3</sup> Kant presents a vivid image of the limitations of “understanding,” the term he uses to designate human cognitive capacities, at CPR A235-236/B294-295: “We have now not only traveled through the land of pure understanding, and carefully inspected each part of it, but we have also surveyed it, and determined the place for each thing in it. But this land is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end.”

affirm what he terms the “practical reality” of the “transcendental ideas” of human freedom, the soul, and God.<sup>4</sup> Kant’s account of morality and its implications thus seems to restore the very objects, i.e., human freedom, the soul, and God, that his critique of metaphysics had proposed were beyond the reach of our human knowing – a criticism Kant himself encountered during his lifetime.<sup>5</sup>

One particularly influential form of this “backbone” narrative has taken the lasting philosophical significance of Kant’s work to lie in the way in which his critical articulation of the limits of human knowing has become the wrecking ball that demolishes not just the rationalist metaphysics of his day but also the entire enterprise of Western speculative metaphysics. A number of problems occur with this version of the narrative, not the least of which is that Kant himself continues to use the term “metaphysics” to designate certain portions of his critical project. A notable instance is *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), among the last of the book-length works published during Kant’s lifetime as part of the critical project. Enough other evidence certainly exists for Kant’s continuing use of the term “metaphysics” to indicate that, whatever else the critical project had as its purpose, it was *not* to demolish metaphysics root and branch.<sup>6</sup> It was rather to reform metaphysics into an enterprise more modest in scale, a scale appropriate to one of the fundamental aims of Kant’s project: to give appropriate recognition to the limited, finite character of human reason and its use, particularly in view of a human tendency to overstep those finite limits.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The main textual locus for Kant’s presentation of the Antinomies of Reason is in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPR) A405/B432–A567/B595. A major statement of his argument for affirming the “practical reality” of human freedom, the immortality of the human soul, and God is found in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (CPrR), 5:113–158. C. J. Insole, *The Intolerable God: Kant’s Theological Journey* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2016) provides a provocative account of the underlying tensions between human freedom and God that are represented in both Kant’s articulation of the antinomies and his ongoing attempts to resolve this tension.

<sup>5</sup> On the ambiguities in Kant’s views and arguments O. O’Neil remarks, “Many of his readers have thought that he eventually endorses the substantial view of the self that he ostensibly repudiates, and that his ethical writings return to the transcendental theology and metaphysics that he so convincingly put into question in earlier works” (“Reason and Politics in the Kantian Enterprise,” in *Constructions of Reason* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989], p. 4).

<sup>6</sup> More than a decade before *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant published the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (G) and *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (MFNS) in 1784 and 1785, respectively; in the period between the publication of these three works, he began preparing a treatise for submission to an essay contest, announced in 1790, that was sponsored by the Royal Academy of Berlin on the question “What real progress has metaphysics made in Germany since the time of Wolff and Leibniz?” Kant’s treatise, which remained incomplete and was not submitted for the second and final announced deadline of June 1795, was published after Kant’s death in its fragmentary form by his friend Friedrich Theodor Rink in 1804 (AA 20:259–351).

<sup>7</sup> O’Neill, in the four essays that constitute Part I of *Constructions of Reason*, offers a number of astute observations on the role that the recognition of the finitude of reason plays in shaping Kant’s critical project. She offers the image of “the cottage of Immanuel Kant” (“Reason and Politics in the Kantian Enterprise,” p. 11) to portray the self-disciplined scope of Kant’s project in

Accounts of Kant's enterprise that take the cognitive delegitimation of metaphysics to be its most significant result (and perhaps even its intended outcome), however, provide little positive scope for then connecting this reading of its main trajectory with the larger constructive and systemic expectations that Kant articulates for his enterprise within its very advocacy of a more "modest" metaphysics. Kant sees the critically disciplined use of reason – one that recognizes both the importance and the limitations of the deeply embedded human "disposition" to metaphysics – as continuing to have a fundamental and necessary bearing upon the full range of human inquiry and activity.<sup>8</sup> These include, but are not limited to, ethics, history, religion, politics, anthropology, aesthetics, education, and culture, all of which Kant indicates have integral connections with the project of constructing a critical philosophy. A number of places in Kant's critical writings indicate that, in addition to the fundamental importance that the enterprise of critique has for reason's governance of human moral activity and ethical inquiry, two other fields of human activity for which a critique of reason is of crucial significance for reason to exercise proper governance are religion and politics.<sup>9</sup> This suggests that an account of the overall trajectory of Kant's project of critique needs both to identify the place that these forms of human activity and inquiry have within the larger critical enterprise, and to characterize how their specific functions within that enterprise bear upon one another.

It is thus within the context of rendering the scope of Kant's critical enterprise as having a horizon more encompassing than that provided by the task of overcoming, by dint of epistemic rigor, the rationalist school metaphysics of his age, that this Element articulates an account of the role that his philosophy of religion and his political philosophy play within that enterprise. It does so by identifying the basis from which the fundamental trajectory of the critical project – i.e., its central focus on the anthropological questions of what it is and what it means to be human – squarely places both forms of inquiry, and the human activities from which they arise, within the ambit of that project; this anthropological focus, moreover, also locates them in a way that shows the integral link they have to one another as elements of Kant's critical enterprise.

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striking contrast to the raising of grandiose conceptual "towers" characteristic of rationalist system building.

<sup>8</sup> Kant discusses metaphysics as "disposition" in the concluding sections of the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (P 4:250–272).

<sup>9</sup> Kant's 1784 essay "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim" (IUH) can be considered a programmatic statement of the task that humanity as a species is called upon to undertake with respect to the end that "nature" bestows on it, as human reason becomes critically self-disciplined in the course of history in the development of human society.

*The Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*

5

In the background of this question about the connections linking these two particular elements within Kant's critical project is a larger one that has long vexed scholars and students of Kant's work: to what extent does Kant succeed in articulating and justifying his oft-made claim – and his even more frequently operative presupposition – that it is one and the same finite reason that humanity employs both for understanding the natural workings of the world (“theory”) and for living morally in that world (“practice”)?<sup>10</sup> One telling sign that Kant was not all that successful in making a convincing case for the unity of reason among those who have placed themselves among his philosophical followers is that there seems to be little expectation in the philosophical community that being a “Kantian” moral philosopher then commits one also to being “Kantian” in, for instance, one's epistemology, philosophical anthropology, metaphysics, or philosophy of religion – or vice versa. Given that the jury is still out – and is likely to remain out for a long time – on the question of the adequacy of Kant's treatment of the unity of reason, this Element does not attempt to resolve this larger question as it sets forth an account of the more specific relationship between Kant's philosophy of religion and his political philosophy. Note, however, that its treatment of this specific relationship works from an interpretive presupposition that seeks to respect Kant's operative commitment to the unity of reason and to identify the elements in his treatment of religion and of politics from a critical standpoint on which such unity has a bearing.

Against the background of a long-standing interpretive preoccupation with the cognitive strictures that Kant's critique places upon metaphysical inquiry, it is hardly surprising that his writings on religion and politics have often been treated in relative independence from claims that bear upon the unity of critical reason. One consequence of this has been that the main interpretive issues that arise in reading these texts on religion and politics are often not framed from a perspective attending to what their roles might be within his larger critical enterprise. Instead, the interpretive focus turns to issues that, as important as they may be in their own right, are not always pertinent to what, as I argue, Kant sees as the overriding concern that gives shape to his critical writings and to the bearing that concern has upon his claims about the unity of human finite reason. This concern is not, as the standard interpretation often has it, to limit – if not to eliminate – human claims to possess metaphysical knowledge. It is, instead, a

<sup>10</sup> See S. Neiman, *The Unity of Reason: Re-reading Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) for a particularly insightful account of what is philosophically at stake in Kant's commitment to the unity of reason as a fundamental orientation for his critical enterprise. She offers a less technical account of that commitment in *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), where she argues that for Kant, “ethics and metaphysics are not accidentally connected” (p. 327).

far more encompassing concern for understanding our humanity and its relation to the world in which we dwell and act. This concern, with roots stretching back to the earliest origins of Western philosophy, makes Kant's critical project one that is at root anthropological: it seeks to enable us to articulate, first of all, a sound understanding (which is also constitutively a *self*-understanding) of what makes "us" – embodied, finite knowers and agents who are integrally part of a material world that works in accord with laws of natural necessity – distinctively "human." The articulation of such a sound self-understanding of our humanity, moreover, is not simply a *descriptive* ("theoretical") achievement telling us what "kind" of being we are in relation to other "kinds" in the world. Such a critical self-understanding of our humanity also provides a frame of reference from which we can then articulate the *normative* ("practical") points of reference that our humanity enjoins upon us for directing our ways of living in this world with one another in a human community.

One shorthand way to characterize this central concern informing Kant's critical enterprise is that it aims to make us self-aware of "the human place in the cosmos" as the locus from which reason enjoins upon us to live out a distinctively human "moral vocation": this vocation is to make "the highest good in the world" possible through the exercise of our human reason. When viewed from this anthropological framework, which bids humanity to participate in the achievement of the highest good in the world, Kant's writings on religion and on politics can be seen as both integrally a part of the critical project and closely connected to each another. Their connection with one another has its basis in how they each serve as mutually supportive elements of the social and historical dimensions of the critical project: they have complementary roles for what Kant sees as the social and historical unfolding and accomplishment of humanity's moral vocation in the world through the exercise of reason. Both their connection with one another and their role in the critical project are specified by their serving as interrelated but distinguishable elements for the social and historical enactment of what Kant envisions as a cosmopolitan human community.

On Kant's account, the historical instantiation of such a community provides the locus for humanity to work together to provide the moral and political conditions for making "the highest good in the world" concretely possible. Chief among these conditions is the construction of a cosmopolitan world political order for establishing an enduring peace among nations; in the historical construction of that order, moreover, politics and religion have complementary roles in setting the social conditions that will make enduring peace possible. In consequence, the larger anthropological trajectory of the critical project, which aims toward articulating the distinctive place of humanity in the

cosmos, may be said to have as one of its important outcomes the articulation and the legitimation of human efforts to enact peace-making on a global scale. Such efforts constitute a concrete marker for what Kant's critical philosophy assigns as the moral vocation of humanity in history and in these efforts, religion and politics each play an important role in the formation of the social dynamics constitutive of enduring peace.<sup>11</sup>

My argument proceeds in three stages. The first stage, "Kant's Critique as Anthropology: The Duality of Human Reason in the World," proposes some of the key considerations that indicate that there are good reasons, based on Kant's texts, for enlarging the fundamental scope of the critical project beyond the epistemological and metaphysical concerns that have often preoccupied Kant's interpreters. This expanded scope is an anthropological one; it arises from Kant's efforts to articulate and resolve what he takes to be a fundamental duality at the core of our humanity. At one level, this duality is experiential: we are aware of being inextricably part of a cosmos governed in accord with universal physical laws of its material nature and, at the same time, also inextricably participants in a world of human interaction whose social and historical trajectory requires governance by human agents through the mutual exercise of their moral freedom. At another level, the duality is one that we can articulate reflectively in terms of the conceptual contrast between the necessary operations of "nature" and the autonomy of (human) "freedom." The locus of that tension – both experiential and reflective – lies within humanity itself, and Kant's critical project sees this polarity as arguably irresolvable, that is, as long as human reason does not subject itself to the self-limiting discipline he terms "critique." The urgency in resolving this duality provides the critical project with its core intellectual and moral energy: Kant takes this polarity between nature and freedom, as humanity both experiences it and reflexively engages it in the exercise of reason, to constitute the historical and social locus in which humanity is called upon to enact its moral vocation to serve as the very juncture that *enacts nature and freedom into unity*. The unity of reason thus is not a predetermined given; it is, instead, a project for human enactment, a project that extends throughout the course of human history.

Working from the presupposition that such an anthropological turn provides a sound interpretive background for Kant's critical enterprise, the second stage, "Critique and Cosmopolitanism: The Anthropological Shaping of Religion and Politics," considers key elements in, respectively, Kant's philosophy of religion

<sup>11</sup> See A. W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), chapter 9, "The Historical Vocation of Humanity," pp. 283–320, for an account of Kant's larger perspective on the circumstances that call upon humanity to consider its moral responsibility to be one that pertains to it as a species.



and his political philosophy. These elements have often been controverted, but, as I argue, when these controversies are reexamined with an eye toward the larger anthropological trajectory of the critical project, they provide pointers toward the complementary roles that critically shaped politics and religion have in that project: they function as central historical and social modalities through which humanity enacts its moral vocation.

In the case of religion, I situate Kant's account along an anthropological trajectory that, even as it still attends to epistemic issues arising from specifically Christian doctrines, focuses on a dimension of religion that is more fundamental for its role in the critical enterprise than is doctrinal exactness. This dimension consists in the role that religion, in the modality of "hope," plays in humanity's moral vocation, as the juncture of nature and freedom, to enact "the highest good in the world" as "the ultimate end" of human reason.<sup>12</sup> Kant takes "hope" as marking the function of religion as it is construed "within the boundaries of mere reason": hope enables humanity to envision the concrete contours of "the moral world" that is to be enacted in history in virtue of the unitary workings of critically disciplined human reason. Hope functions by envisioning "the world as it would be if it were in conformity with all moral laws" (CPR A808/B836) in the context of the distinctive social and historical conditions that are a central part of humanity's unique status as an embodied and finite rational species. Hope enables the envisioning of such a world in the form of an "ethical commonwealth" that enacts the social dynamics of a thoroughgoing mutual respect of one another's freedom.<sup>13</sup>

It is of crucial importance for understanding Kant's articulation of hope to recognize that, from the earliest stages of the critical project, he takes the ambit of the hope that reason critically enables us to hold to be one that is a thoroughly social one: hope bears upon our humanity not simply individually – as would be the case if its only focus were on the happiness proper just to my individual virtue – but also in and through our relationality to one another in a moral community constituted in the recognition and the exercise of our mutual freedom.<sup>14</sup> The social images he uses consistently throughout the critical project ("kingdom of grace," "kingdom of ends") offer one striking marker of

<sup>12</sup> "The Canon of Pure Reason," First Section and Second Section (CPR A797/B825–A819/847) provides an initial textual locus for Kant's account of the "end" of human reason. See F. C. Beiser, "Moral Faith and the Highest Good," in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. P. Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 588–629, for the bearing of the highest good upon the end of human reason.

<sup>13</sup> See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Part III (Rel. 6:93–147) for Kant's exposition of the "ethical commonwealth."

<sup>14</sup> See P. J. Rossi, SJ, *The Social Authority of Reason: Kant's Critique, Radical Evil and the Destiny of Humankind* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005) for an account of the social character of hope and its role in Kant's critical project.



*The Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*

9

this. The image that he uses in *Religion*, the “ethical commonwealth,” is of particular significance since it serves as an apt bridge for linking what Kant recognizes as the distinctively moral, political, and religious “inflections” of human community in service of concrete human efforts to participate in the enactment of the highest good.

In politics, Kant’s proposal for the establishment of an international order to bring about a state of enduring peace – which is arguably the element of his political philosophy that has shown remarkable staying power as a point of reference for efforts to establish transnational rules and structures to curb armed conflict – is similarly repositioned along an anthropological trajectory. This trajectory is similarly indexed to the enactment of the highest good in the world as “the ultimate end” of human reason in a thoroughly social form. Two elements in Kant’s proposal are of particular importance for this anthropological repositioning. One is that Kant’s identification of the establishment of such an international order for enduring peace as “the highest political good” brings the project of perpetual peace into his wider articulation of the ends of reason and the central place these ends hold in the moral vocation of humanity. The second is that this project is itself part of Kant’s larger envisioning of a cosmopolitan world order as a fundamental social mode for the instantiation of the highest good in the world. From the anthropological trajectory of the critical project Kant’s cosmopolitanism can be understood as an overarching articulation of the distinctive social and historical vocation that is fitting to humanity’s unique status as an embodied and finite rational species. In virtue of this status, humanity lives out its vocation as a species within the concrete historical workings of society and culture; it does so by exercising its moral freedom to bring about the individual and social conditions that conjointly make historical progress toward attaining “the highest good” possible. Chief among the social conditions for historical progress toward such good is one that emerges from the dynamics of human political activity and whose establishment concretely takes a political form: the constructing of a cosmopolitan world political order for establishing an enduring peace among nations.

The argument that this second stage makes on behalf of the bearing both religion and politics have upon the human enactment of the ultimate end of reason thus also indicates their role in Kant’s discussions of the overarching aim of the critical enterprise. These discussions do not just point to the large anthropological question – What is humanity? – at the heart of the critical enterprise. They also frame that question in terms that locate its religious dimension and its political dimension in reference to the task of enacting the highest good in the world. A cosmopolitan world order for enduring peace and the ethical commonwealth thus provide, respectively, the political and the

religious “inflections” in which human reason articulates the social shape of the highest good in the world as the human enactment of the ultimate end of its finite reason.<sup>15</sup>

The third and final stage, “The Ethical Commonwealth: Social Imperative for Cosmopolitan Peace-Making,” of this Element’s argument for the integral connection that Kant makes between religion and politics focuses on the role that “hope,” a key element in his account of religion, plays in that connection. Hope provides a horizon from which to extend Kant’s account of the establishment of an international cosmopolitan order for enduring peace beyond the ambit of the political, the field for external and enforceable regulation of the conduct of nations. I argue that this extension can be made in terms of his account of the dynamics of the ethical commonwealth, the central social element of his account of critically disciplined religion. These dynamics serve as the locus within which “the true Church,” as “the moral people of God,” can play a role in the historical establishment of peace among the peoples of the world (Rel. 6:98–102, 115–124).

The extension I am proposing here thus arises on the basis of construing the (political) enactment of a cosmopolitan order of lasting peace as enabled through the exercise of human freedom that has been socially empowered for peace-making. Social empowerment arises from the hope for effective human participation in the enactment of the highest good in the world, the hope that is the focus of the (religious) dynamism of the mutuality of freedom constitutive of the ethical commonwealth. This social empowerment for peace-making thus serves as the locus within which religion and politics play complementary roles in the concrete historical attainment of the cosmopolitan end of human reason that is envisioned in the critical project: a social empowerment for peace-making arises from the perspective of the hope that is the *religious* inflection of the *moral* dynamism of the ethical commonwealth.

Relative to the overall anthropological trajectory of the critical project, a complementary religious rendering can be appropriately given to the establishment of a cosmopolitan world order for peace that Kant envisions in political terms in “Perpetual Peace” (1795). The attainment of this highest political good for humanity can be rendered religiously as the social and historical instantiation of empowerment of the moral freedom made possible by the mutual respect constitutive of the social dynamics of the ethical

<sup>15</sup> See Wood, *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, pp. 193–207, for a brief account of the development of Kant’s own understanding of anthropology and its role in his critical project. For more extensive treatments, see H. L. Wilson, *Kant’s Pragmatic Anthropology: Its Origin, Meaning, and Critical Significance* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) and J. H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).