

Kant on God

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Chapter 1

God and Kant's Critical Project

The aim and the problem

The theme of this book – the status of claims about God in the Critical Philosophy – gains its importance from a number of facts. One is that the Critical Philosophy displays an obvious bi-valence or paradox in its use of the concept of God. On the one hand, God and related concepts are used, appealed to and depended upon by Kant in many key passages of thought and argument. On the other hand, the Critical Philosophy tells us that we can have no knowledge of the divine nature and existence. Early on in the first *Critique* (in the Preface to the second edition) we encounter the famous statement concerning the notions of God, freedom and immortality: ‘I therefore had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*’ (Bxxx). We will come across many such statements to this effect as we proceed. Further, readers of the first *Critique* will be familiar with other passages that entail that statements about a transcendent divine being are without sense. So Kant not only denies that we can have knowledge of God; he also *appears* to deny that there is any meaning to talk about God. This latter point is controversial. Many commentators on Kant’s philosophical theology ignore or deliberately discount Kant’s apparent commitment to the meaninglessness of claims about transcendent entities such as God. And one can see why they do. If the interpreter of Kant on God takes this commitment seriously, then the problem of making sense of Kant’s dependence upon, and positive use of, the concept of God becomes that much more difficult.

It is my contention that Kant’s Critical account of God cannot be properly interpreted unless Kant’s account of the meaning and reference of religious language is taken seriously. The effort must be made to disentangle the threads in it and present it as both coherent and intimately connected with other facets of the Critical Philosophy. I do not claim that I am the first on this particular scene – indeed what I have to say on this score is indebted to others (notably to Keith Ward – see Ward 1972:81ff.). But I will focus on this issue to a greater extent than is usual in English-speaking commentaries on Kant’s philosophy of religion.

I will contend that there is a real sense in which, for Kant, talk about God is meaningless – albeit he thinks we can give it a sense! There is in the Critical treatment of God a passage of thought of the following form: ‘try to construe talk about God in the “normal” way and its meaning evaporates in our hands; to restore that meaning re-interpret it in a radically new (and subjectivist) way’. This is to say that he is a radical revisionist in the philosophy of God: his own account of the limits of knowledge, thought and meaning block off traditional uses of the God-concept, so he must construct a new understanding of what it means to talk of God. The reconstruction Kant offers is undertaken in the spirit of trying to retain key features

and uses of the traditional concept of God, but there is radical change nonetheless. Thus my interpretation of Kant on God will yield the conclusion that he was not a theist or a Christian in anything like the standard ways those stances are understood. If we must use modern jargon, we can say he was a post-Christian and post-theistic thinker. Something like this verdict must be entered at the same time as we give due acknowledgement to the fact that the concept of God (and allied concepts such as immortality) played a key role in his Critical system. Here is the tensive, paradoxical character of his philosophy of religion again.

From the above it will be seen that this study will set itself in opposition to a certain trend in recent English-speaking philosophy of religion. This is a trend that turns to Kant and discounts the religious scepticism that I and others see in the Critical Philosophy. Kant is reclaimed for theistic and Christian philosophy. An article in a leading philosophy of religion journal proclaims in its title 'Immanuel Kant: a Christian Philosopher' (Palmquist 1989; see also Palmquist 2000). In a clutch of articles, John E. Hare contends that Kant had (contrary to virtually all standard interpretations of his moral philosophy) a divine command theory of ethics (Hare 2000a, 2000b, 2001). Here it is implied that Kant's ethics actually demands a personal deity who commands, rewards and punishes. Note what is at issue here between Hare and earlier interpreters of Kant with whom he is in dispute. There is an abundance of textual material in post-1780 Kantian texts that show Kant thinks we must use *the idea of God*, and which indicate that this idea includes in its content the notions of a holy lawgiver, a beneficent world-governor and a just judge of all human conduct (see, e.g., *Critique*₂ 5:131_n). The interpretative question concerns what Kant thinks the use of the idea amounts to. Is the use literal or metaphorical? Is it assertoric or does it merely have the force of an 'as-if' posit?

Palmquist and Hare on Kant on religion may be styled 'revisionists'. They are going against a consensus that has seen Kant as a powerful religious sceptic. The sceptical side to his Critical metaphysics and philosophy of religion serves as a standing challenge to the many philosophers who think that, now Positivism is dead, rationalist philosophical theology can be launched again. Some contemporary philosophers want to do 'old-style' philosophical theology. They also respect Kant. So they want to show that he is on their side. There is in addition a very powerful movement in contemporary English-speaking philosophy of religion that is Christian philosophy. Some Christian philosophers want to reclaim Kant. They want to show that Kant was much more religiously orthodox than older interpretations allowed.

Let us return to the topic of Kant as a religious sceptic. Interpretations of Kant on God that see him as an arch-sceptic are very old. Heinrich Heine's 1835 book *Zur Geschichte der Religion und Philosophie in Deutschland* signals a common view of Kant as the ultimate religious sceptic. Heine contrasts the quiet external life of the scholar Kant with his destructive, world-crushing ideas (Heine 1979:81). Kant is the great destroyer in the world of thought (82). In contrast to the destructive power of Robespierre, who merely killed a royal family, Kant produces the greater terrorism. Kant killed God (82). This act of assassination was completed in the *Critique of Pure Reason* through the means of confining human thought to that which may be encountered in experience. The Critical boundary on valid thought leaves us like the prisoners in Plato's myth of the cave. Plato's prisoners only know shadows and

images of the real things that make up reality outside the cave. Kant's prisoners can only know of things as they appear to, as they are reflected in, the human mind. Things in themselves, independent of us, are unknowable. God, as a putative thing in itself, thus becomes *nicht anders als eine Dichtung* ('nothing other than a work of fiction', 86). Thus Kant's message to humanity on the front of his great work should have echoed those of Dante: 'Abandon hope'. (Heine's suggestion is unwittingly ironic: it is one of the aims of the Critical Philosophy to assure its students that there is an answer to the deep human question 'What may I hope?') Kant, the Robespierre of thought, is, according to Heine, not content with his deicide. He cannot forget about his old servant Lampe and the ordinary good-hearted people he represents. Lampe stands before his master, tears in his eyes at the prospect that the consoling thoughts of traditional religion are delusions. Kant has pity on him. He says to himself: old Lampe must have his God and so I will give him his God back by letting practical reason vouch for God. Thus Kant, having killed God with theoretical reason, tries to enliven God's corpse through the magic wand of practical reason (89). This is Heine's reference to Kant's claim that, though God be unknowable (and perhaps unthinkable) through theoretical reason, practical reason needs to postulate God in order to meet our deep-seated ethical needs. This does not impress Heine. It reminds him of his Westphalian friend who destroys all the street lamps on the road and then, standing in the dark, waxes at length on the practical necessity of street lamps on a dark night. He has only destroyed them in order to show how necessary they are (90–91).

Kant has destroyed God, for Heine. The reintroduction of God through appeal to ethics does not really complete a resurrection of the corpse. It is merely a sop to those with the human weaknesses of his old servant.

We have got two tensions in front of us up to this point. There is the primary tension: on the one hand, we have bucketfuls of religious scepticism in the Critical Philosophy, and, on the other hand, we have a plethora of seemingly positive uses of the notion of God. There is the further tension among his interpreters: between those who accept the scepticism at face value, explaining away the positive uses of 'God', and those who accept the positive uses of 'God', while ignoring or mitigating the scepticism: Heine versus Hare. I will come down closer to Heine as this study proceeds, but with one major qualification. Any credible study of Kant on God must acknowledge and demonstrate that the positive uses of the notion of God post-1780 are grounded in concerns integral to the Critical Philosophy. They are certainly not there because Kant was worried by the tears of the lower classes, or even because he was anxious about the Prussian censor (though he was worried about him). This desideratum evidently increases the first tension.

Sources and strategies

Consider some strategies for dealing with the primary tension. One such is the invocation of inconsistency. Kant just is an inconsistent writer – some may contend. The negative and positive statements about God in the Critical Philosophy indicate a thinker who cannot make his mind up on the truth and coherence of theism. But

this clearly will not do. *Critique*, Bxxx has already been quoted: Kant places limits around what may be known and cognised in order to make room for faith. The Critical limits on cognition do rule out forms of dogmatic religious and metaphysical claims. Yet from the beginning those same limits are there to rule out dogmatic materialism, fatalism and atheism (*Critique*, Bxxxiv). This philosopher's aim was actually to set up a tensive account of God. The atheists and their allies are defeated not by proving religious dogmas, but by showing that no one has any right to dogmatic assertions, negative or positive, in this area. Religion is saved through a meta-scepticism that undercuts the religious sceptic's claims, while at the same time it deprives the believer of objective certainty that his or her beliefs are true (or even, perhaps, meaningful). It is intended to be a defence through a kind of undermining of all previous positions on the nature and reality of God.

Having made this point, it must be said that Kant tests the patience of any interpreter committed to a principle of hermeneutical charity. There are things in his philosophy of religion that reveal a mind unresolved or unable to enunciate a single perspective. My discussion of Kant on the so-called 'moral proof' in Chapters 5 and 6 will illustrate this point. On this topic he says things which are difficult to make consistent and in some places he does not seem to realise the plain entailments of what he has written elsewhere. While violations of interpretative charity must be kept to a minimum, for otherwise they undermine the very notion of a correct interpretation, we shall not be able to avoid some such violations in what follows.

The issue of the consistency of the post-1780 Kantian corpus on religion raises the important question of what counts as belonging to that corpus. The three great critiques obviously do: the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, second edition 1787), the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) and the *Critique of Judgement* (1790). The major and minor works from 1780 to 1800 whose production was actually overseen by Kant must also be included. There are legitimate debates, however, over the relevance of other sources. One such set of sources is the texts created by Kant's colleagues and students from his lectures. The Academy text of Kant's *Schriften* contains lectures on, amongst other topics, ethics, logic, metaphysics and rational theology. The notable lectures on ethics and metaphysics are compilations of notes taken by Kant's pupils at one or other of his annual lecture series on the relevant subject. Some of these pupils were very eminent thinkers in their own right (the *Lectures on Ethics* includes a set of notes by J. G. Herder). Most of them were not. It is obvious that we cannot rely on them 100 per cent for completeness and accuracy. The status of the notes on Kant's lectures on rational theology is relevant to interpreting Kant on God, particularly the *Philosophische Religionslehre nach Politz*. These lectures date from the early 1780s and were edited by Karl Heinrich Ludwig Pölitz and first published in 1817. They contain some affirmations that are more religiously conservative, less sceptical, than those found in the critiques. They are thus ammunition for those interpreters of Kant's philosophy of religion I have crudely called 'revisionists'. This portion of the lectures on rational theology show a Kant apparently more content with traditional, rationalist metaphysics about God than one would expect from the author of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. A. R. Wood accordingly uses these lectures to suggest that the Critical Philosophy is to a large extent compatible with traditional, rationalist philosophical theology (see

Wood 1978, especially 149). The problem we will find in Chapter 4 is that there is one place where the account of religious language in these lectures contradicts that contained in the three critiques, and in numerous other places in the Critical corpus. It seems evident to me that a broad interpretation of Kant on God must be established from the post-1780 writings that he saw to press, and within those particularly from the three critiques, and that this interpretation must take priority in any conflicts with such sources as the lectures on religion. There are comments on God as the legislator of the moral law in notes taken by C. C. Mongrovius of lectures on ethics from the session 1784–85 that provoke similar issues of consistency – this time in relation to Kant's rejection of theological morality. In the case of *Moral Mongrovius II*, ways can be found of harmonising Kant's reported comments with those on the same issues in the critiques.

My interpretation will emphasise the subjectivist strands in Kant's treatment of religion, even while it acknowledges contrary tendencies toward objectivism. These are strands that make the truth and meaning of religious affirmations relative to human needs. In the jargon of contemporary philosophy of religion, there is a strongly anti-realist thrust in Kant on God. That anti-realist thrust is strikingly supported by the *Opus Postumum*. This is a set of loose, unbound, remarks written by Kant largely between 1796 and 1803 which were to be the basis for a statement of his final metaphysics. He did not complete the remarks or bring them to an accomplished order. They abound with 'subjectivist' comments on God, comments that identify God with the moral law and deny that he is a reality independent of the human mind. To interpreters of Kant who wish to see him as within mainstream theism, the *Opus Postumum* must be dealt with. It can be seen as embodying a radical change in Kant's view of God (as did the first editor of the notes, Erich Adickes – see Ward 1972:160). Or it can be dismissed as the unfinished rambblings of a man who was clearly very weak in mind and body in his last years. A contrary tale will be told by those who want to interpret Kant's account of God in the completed Critical works as being radically subjectivist. Thus Paul Guyer claims that the *Opus Postumum* makes explicit what is implicit in Kant's prior writings and that it is wrong to suppose that he would undertake a radical break from earlier views in the last years of his life (Guyer 2000:405). My use of the *Opus Postumum* will in general terms follow Guyer's lead.

Does Kant's life settle the interpretative questions?

If there is some tension within and controversy over Kant's religious views, may one sort matters out by reference to his life? Do biographical materials enable a clarifying light to be shone on his philosophy of religion? The answer to these questions is: there is some light to be shed from study of Kant's life, but it is not as decisive as we might hope for.

We must first acknowledge the usefulness of the extensive private correspondence of Kant's that has been preserved. One thing that the correspondence does for us is show that this man set great store by sincerity in speech. In a letter to Moses Mendelssohn of 6 April 1766, Kant stated that the greatest evil that could befall

him was losing the self-respect that comes from a sense of honesty. He would never become a person who indulged in fraud. He distinguished between, on the one hand, lacking the courage to affirm in public all the things he was completely convinced of and, on the other, making statements in which he did not believe (*Correspondence* 10:69). Kant must therefore be read as capable of holding things back in his writings on religion, but we should be wary of accusing him of deliberately saying what he did not believe.

Does a study of his further correspondence tell us what he believed in matters of faith? Kant's *Correspondence* is remarkable for the lack of letters in which he writes directly about his religious faith. There is, however, a notable exception in the case of a letter to J. C. Lavater of 28 April 1775 (10:175–9). In response to Lavater's request for Kant to comment on his (Lavater's) account of faith and prayer, Kant distinguishes between the teachings of Christ and the report that we have of them. To see these teachings properly we must separate out the moral instruction of the New Testament from its dogmas: 'These teachings are certainly the fundamental doctrines of the Gospels, what remains can only serve as auxiliary teachings to them' (10:176). Thus Kant seems to commit himself to a fundamentally deistic view of Christ: he was but a moral teacher. The similarity is strengthened by Kant's equation of the non-fundamental doctrines with those that we could only know through knowing a historical revelation (10:177–8). Thus: the essential truths of Christianity are its moral teachings and no reliance on historical revelation is necessary to know these. The unspoken but obvious implication is that these moral doctrines are truths of reason, and as such accessible to anyone, anywhere and any time. The letter then adds the thought that we will be conscious of the gap between our evil doings and the holiness of the law and must rely upon some inscrutable means or other by which God will justify us in despite of that evil. In a follow-up letter to Lavater, Kant summarises the essence of his account of true faith as: 'the sum of all religion consists in righteousness and that we ought to seek it with all our power in the faith i.e. unconditional trust that God will then supply the good that is not in our power [to bring about]' (10:180). In both letters Kant says we need not strive to know any more about how God might supplement our efforts. We should equally not venerate the teacher of this simple message (Jesus) rather than the message itself or think that anything other than moral conduct will do in orienting ourselves toward God. We should not think that religious ceremonies or confessions of faith are any help in this task.

In these letters Kant seems to lay his own religious commitments clear: faith in a God (the precise kind of God is left undefined); commitment to a moral law; faith that there is some divine mechanism for overcoming the gap between our moral obligations and our evil ways; and an assertion of the irrelevance of dogma, revelation in history and ceremonies to true faith. At first glance, this comes close to the standard package of eighteenth-century deism. On the surface, it seems to scotch the notion that Kant was a Christian in any substantive sense of 'Christian', since it marks the rejection (as necessary to salvation) of belief in the *religion about Jesus* which the Christian church has constructed and which it has claimed to anchor in the New Testament. It is notable that the text of these two letters to Lavater does not assert that humanity needs a Redeemer. The question of how exactly to place Kant

in relation to Christianity and deism will be taken up more thoroughly in the last chapter of this study.

Moving from Kant's correspondence to biographical sources, we find that these contain some striking facts. One is that Kant was believed by many of his close acquaintances to be some kind of unbeliever (see Kuehn 2001:120). This reputation was based on Kant's behaviour. For most of his adult life he seems to have played no part in organised religion, keeping well clear of the Lutheran churches and practices of his native Königsberg. Many biographical accounts have the following famous story: Kant was to be seen in his academic finery processing across the university square toward Königsberg Cathedral to inaugurate a new Rector only to walk past the building at the last moment while others went in (Kuehn 2001:318; Kant would enter only when it was his turn to be the Rector). Contemporaries who published accounts of his private conversations and table-talk record that Kant had no time for prayer or for hymns, and, more importantly, that he expressed his unbelief. Kuehn records that one such companion, J. G. Sheffner, often heard Kant 'scoff' at prayer and other religious practices. Kuehn's verdict is that 'It was clear to anyone who knew Kant personally that he had no faith in a personal God. Having postulated God and immortality, he himself did not believe in either' (2001:3). Kant's long-time acquaintance K. L. Pörscke recorded that Kant had often assured him that, though Kant had not doubted any of the dogmas of Christianity even after being a *Magister* for a long time, 'by and by one element after another fell away' (*nach und nach sei ein Stück ums andere abgefallen*, Vörländer 1977:155).

We thus have some limited autobiographical and biographical data that tell us that the man Immanuel Kant had lost faith in the Christianity of his youth some time after becoming a *Magister* (Kant became a full professor in 1770, at the age of 56). However, for all his scepticism about revealed and organised religion, he avowed belief in God in private correspondence. We have a hint that he was a deist (yet we shall see below that he repeatedly denies being a deist – another conundrum).

The *Weltanschauung*

Kant's writing career stretched from 1749 to the early 1800s. Lewis White Beck claims that, through the many changes in his detailed philosophical positions, Kant remained committed to a general *Weltanschauung* that can be summarised in 11 theses (Beck 1969:427–9):

1. Philosophy/metaphysics can be scientific.
2. Philosophy/metaphysics is not merely a technical subject but is important for humanity.
3. The interests of humanity are identified in the ideals of the Enlightenment and centre on freedom of the individual under strong government.
4. The progress of the human race is not measured by the amount of happiness it enjoys but by the development of moral character and freedom on the part

of human beings.

5. There is a God and an immortal soul.
6. Moral duties are not founded upon or derived from belief in God. Though morality supports religion, religion is a problematic support for morality.
7. Historical revelation may instruct people morally, but moral truths do not depend on historical revelation.
8. Human beings have free will.
9. The Newtonian, mechanistic view of nature is correct.
10. The physical world, by virtue of being a machine, is not the product of chance but is a teleological whole.
11. From (6) and (10): the science of nature, as well as morality, leads to a theistic metaphysics, in which the doctrine of humanity remains all-important.

Beck seems to me to have got it about right. We will see as we proceed that there are problems about, qualifications in, the belief in God and immortality in (6). We will find that the assertion of the theistic-teleological world-view in (10) and (11) is also subject to some qualification in Kant's mature writings. Despite this, the above list points to an enduring world-view in Kant's thought. What his philosophical progress amounts to is a journey through different ways of defending and articulating that world-view.

The elements of the world-view show that Kant was keen to defend and reconcile what appear to be conflicting demands of the Enlightenment: commitment to human progress and commitment to the completion of the scientific project. The first commitment shows in a belief in the perfectibility of the human race. Kant sees that perfectibility in moral terms. We have a duty to become morally perfect. The goal of the individual is the cultivation of the worthiness to be happy conjoined with happiness itself. The second commitment is based on the assumption that Nature is in harmony with the human intellect. Human reason seeks as an end the thoroughgoing explanation of all natural facts through subsumption of facts under laws and the unification of those laws in theoretical systems. These two commitments are made by one and the same human reason, which in Kant's special sense (when not identified with our cognitive powers in general) is the faculty of ends and principles. Reason sets the human being its key goals and provides it with overarching principles of thought and action. Reason appears to be in conflict with itself because its first goal, human-perfection-through-morality, seems to demand that human beings stand in some significant sense outside the world of natural causes. If they are wholly part of it, then they have no free will and their perfection and happiness is entirely at the mercy of blind, natural causes. On the other hand, if they do stand outside the world of natural causes, then the project of science cannot be completed, for scientific explanations could not then extend to human nature and human actions.

One of the chief aims of the Critical Philosophy is to resolve this tension. The idea of God, in the traditional lineaments provided by Western philosophical theology, is central to the resolution and thus central to the Critical Philosophy. The notion of God is necessary to sustain the belief in the completion of science, since we cannot (affirms Kant) support the notion that the world is intelligible, and thus open to human understanding and reason, save through the thought that it is the work

of a designing intelligence. The idea of God is necessary to sustain belief in human perfectibility, since through the idea of God we maintain the thought that something other than blind natural causality controls the world and thus our destiny. Rather, the world can be thought of as a teleological whole – a whole working toward an end in which the human good will be realised – and as controlled by an agency that is morally aware. What the Critical Philosophy does is both enable this dual use of ‘God’ (to refer to a world designer and to a providential planner of history) and resolve the tension between the commitments behind the dual use. It does these two things by relativising and restricting the scope of the commitments reason makes in both the realms of theory and practice.

Heine must be wrong: the concept of God is not an afterthought designed to comfort the vulgar. This point about the centrality of God to Kant’s entire project tells in favour of seeing Kant on God as within mainstream Christianity and philosophical theism. It will have to be balanced by stress on the radical character of the relativising and restriction of the import of the concept of God arising out of Kant’s account of the boundaries of reason.

The context of religious philosophy

In his biography of Kant, Manfred Kuehn states that there were two main influences on German philosophy at the time Kant was developing his ideas: Wolffianism and British philosophy (2001:183–4). In philosophical theology the importance of Wolffianism was in its promotion of a God whose existence could be proved by pure reason alone. Appeal to the mere idea of a God as an all-perfect being, or to the principle of sufficient reason, was enough to prove the existence of a being in which essence entailed existence. The religiously conservative character of the German Enlightenment showed in the fact that such religious rationalism was not perceived as a threat to Christianity’s status as a true but revealed religion. The influence of the British tradition was present through knowledge of Locke, Hume and Hutcheson (among others). In general philosophy, the impact of British thought was shown in the concern of Kant and his contemporaries to give due weight to the claims of sensation, feeling and perception alongside the claims of reason. The task set by the British thinkers for German philosophers was to balance the role of pure intellect in knowledge and morality alongside against the importance of sensation and feeling in those areas.

In the person of Hume and the English deists, Kant would also have encountered striking forms of religious scepticism. Hume’s *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (published posthumously in 1779) were read by Kant in translation in time to be mentioned in the text (dating from 1782 or later) of his lectures on rational theology. (10:1063). The *Dialogues* contain sceptical reflections on the cosmological and design arguments. In the closing paragraph of the third dialogue and the opening paragraph of the fourth, they present the charge that the traditional concept of God in philosophical theology is an incoherent mixture of anthropomorphism and mystery. The anthropomorphism stems from the desire to present God as a person with a mind and will. The mystery stems from the desire to present God as an absolutely

necessary, simple and timeless first cause (see Hume 1976:179–81). The thought behind Hume's charge was not lost on Kant, as we shall see later. There are, in addition, strong resemblances between Hume's strictures on the bad effects of popular religion (Hume 1976:251ff.) and Kant's attacks on the corruptions of 'statutory faith' that abound throughout his writings. The thought that religion as an institutionalised system is riddled with superstition and false ways of serving the perfect being are the stock-in-trade of Enlightenment reflections on religion and Kant signed up to them wholeheartedly. We have seen that in his personal life he had a marked aversion to organised religion and public religious devotions.

Kant must also have been aware of English deism and its critique of revealed religion. One of Kant's most important teachers when he went up to the University of Königsberg was Martin Knutzen. Knutzen published a defence of Christianity against the attacks of the deists in the year Kant went up to the *Albertina*. It beggars belief to suppose that Kant was not fully aware of the main outlines of the critique of Christianity contained in the writings of the likes of Tindal and Toland (see Kuehn 2001:80). He was certainly aware of German proponents of deism. There are six references in his works to the writings of Herman Samuel Reimarus, author of the posthumously published *Apology for the Rational Worshippers of God* (see, for example, *Religion* 6:81_n). The positive and critical views of Reimarus are very similar to those of the English deists. Such thinkers undertook a root-and-branch critique of the truth and authority of the Christian scriptures and the doctrinal system of Christianity. Anything in these that went beyond the preaching of a plain, natural religion was false, corrupting, religiously unnecessary and lacking in any authority over the rational mind whatsoever. A natural religion – consisting in a belief in a perfect being, providence in this life and the next and the accessibility and bindingness of the moral law – is the universal, timeless essence of true religion.

Our discussion of Kant on revelation in Chapter 8 will show striking parallels between Kant's thought and the deistic critique of Christianity (likewise between Kantian and deistic accounts of true religion). Deism was part of the common currency of German thought of the latter half of the eighteenth century, as is shown, for example, in the writings of the likes of Reimarus. If Kant was influenced by English deism, as I assert must have been the case, he certainly hides his tracks. The only explicit reference to an English deist in his writings that I have been able to come across is a brief mention of Toland in a list of sceptics (*Reflexionen* 16:450). He uses the word *deismus* in a number of places, but his definition of deism (belief in a non-personal, lifeless God akin to blind fate; see, for example, *Lectures Religion* 28:1047) is not close to deism as it is set out by English deists.

Kant deals with this diverse legacy in religious thought in the manner in which he deals with the whole of the history of philosophy. He seeks to hold together its incompatible elements. There are parts of his philosophy of religion that parallel Hume (his critique of the arguments of natural theology). There are parts that use the rationalist inheritance (his articulation of God as the original being, the sum of all reality). There are parts that cohere nicely with deism (his critique of historical revelation and defence of a pure, rational faith). And there are parts which speak highly of Christ and which use Christian symbolism. Once again, Kant's thought is tensive.

The Critical project in outline

Both of the conflicting commitments in the Enlightenment *Weltanschauung* that Kant takes over are, in his view, metaphysical. These commitments cannot be proved on the basis of experience. The belief about human perfectibility through morality relies on further beliefs about free will and about the co-operating influence of a deity that go beyond anything that can be vouched for in experience. Experience cannot assure us that the universe is such as to allow human beings to be free and to achieve the highest good. The belief that all things in nature are scientifically explicable through a unified system of theories goes beyond the mere empirical fact that, so far as we have discovered, most events appear to be connected with other events through laws. Kant accordingly took as one of his major preoccupations the settling of the due limits and scope of metaphysical knowledge. In outline, he sets about the reconciliation of the items in his Enlightenment world-view by limiting the pretensions of its competing scientific and religious metaphysics and thereby producing an outcome in which their conflicting commitments can be jointly maintained. This central preoccupation with metaphysics allows Kant to pursue another task of reconciliation, a reconciliation between the views of those, such as Wolff, who thought substantive a priori knowledge of the world was possible and those, such as Hume who denied it. This Kant styled the problem of how synthetic a priori knowledge was possible, if at all.

Descartes had set a standard for certainty in knowledge according to which true knowledge was demonstrable from intuitively known starting points. Thinkers in opposing camps, such as Leibniz and Hume, agreed that such knowledge was not available from the world as known through our senses. This fact could then be taken in one of two ways. Some took it as showing that the true object of knowledge was an intelligible, rational world behind the world revealed by the senses. Others, such as Hume, denied that pure reason alone could yield knowledge of matters of fact. They thereby confined our knowledge to the observable world but lowered its certainty and reliability in the light of the Cartesian ideal.

Kant's solution to the dilemmas outlined is found in the first *Critique*. It depends on the point that there have to be elements of universality and necessity in the guiding principles of human enquiry, or as he puts it: there have to be a priori contributions to our knowledge of reality. But he makes these a priori principles not descriptions of an intelligible, rational realm beyond the senses, but statements of the *form* to which the matter of our experience of the ordinary world has to conform. General metaphysics contains principles describing the fundamental nature of what exists. Its propositions now become statements a priori of the form any intelligible experience of the world has to take. Because we can be assured a priori that, for example, any experience we can make sense of must be of a world in which all events are causally interconnectable, so it is that our knowledge of the world of experience can be guaranteed to have the certainty that comes from its obeying rational principles of order.

The general metaphysical principles of reality turn out to be true when relativised into statements about the form and structure of empirical knowledge. This structure is dictated by two sources of empirical knowledge: sensibility and understanding.

Knowledge is of empirical things, their properties, relations, actions, etc. It requires that something be given to sensibility and that the experience so occasioned be ordered through concepts provided by the understanding. Sensibility has an a priori structure – the mode in which things are given to human beings is as objects in space and time. Something similar is true of understanding, which turns out to have just twelve ‘categories’ (or higher-order concepts/forms of judgement) under which all concepts applicable to experience can be subsumed.

More convincing than Kant’s list of categories is his argument, sustained through the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, that any conceivable form of human experience must be such as to allow concepts of an objective world to apply to it (in particular concepts within such categories as cause and substance). The argument turns around the necessity of experience having the richness capable of giving rise to self-consciousness. This richness involves experience having a rule-governed structure. Such a structure allows the subject to take its experience to be of a causally and temporally ordered world – in other words: to be of an objective world of enduring, interconnected things.

From the a priori forms of intuition and the a priori categories of the understanding, Kant is able to demonstrate a range of necessary truths about reality that can serve as the basis of a scientific metaphysics (see item (i) in the *Weltanschauung*). But the cost of establishing these truths of metaphysics is a certain relativising of their validity. The demonstration, for example, that every event in the world must have some cause or other depends on the condition that the world is an object of possible experience: any world about which we can make empirical judgements must be causally ordered. On this ground, the principles of general metaphysics cannot be applied to items beyond human experience. Concerning aspects of reality that lie beyond all possible experience we can know nothing, either a priori or a posteriori. Kant’s thought here involves three things: the ‘Copernican revolution in philosophy’, the distinction between appearances and things in themselves and the idea of a boundary to thought and sense.

Prior to Copernicus, astronomers took the apparent daily motions of the stars and planets to be real. After Copernicus, they realised that these motions were nothing but the motions of the Earth projected onto heavenly bodies. Prior to the Critical Philosophy, metaphysicians took it that they had to discover the objective, necessary features of an independent reality revealed in the first principles of thought. After the Critical Philosophy, we realise that such features are nothing other than the a priori necessities of human cognition that we falsely assume to be reading off an intelligible reality. Contrary to Hume, we can anticipate reality a priori and thus be assured of the grounds of empirical knowledge. But we can only anticipate it if it conforms to the a priori forms of sensibility and a priori categories of the understanding lodged in the knowing subject. In the *Prolegomena* of 1783 Kant links the question ‘How is metaphysics possible?’ to the question ‘How are synthetic a priori judgements possible?’ (see 4:255–6) Synthetic a priori judgements would testify to the ‘real’ use of human reason. They would be judgements that contained substantive knowledge about things, about reality, while being necessarily true and knowable in advance of experience. Yet how can a reality which is fully independent of the subject be

knowable a priori by that subject? The only way such judgements are possible is if reality has to conform to the conditions laid down by the subject.

Out of the Copernican revolution in philosophy come two key ideas in Kant's thought: the distinction between appearances and things in themselves and the idea of a boundary to human thought. The ideas are interrelated. The boundary to thought comes with the line that divides things in themselves from appearances. We have cognition of reality only insofar as it appears to us. Cognition does not extend to things in themselves.

There is a great deal that can be said about the thing in itself/appearance distinction. Kant's language in expressing it allows the distinction to be interpreted in two ways. On a substantive, dualistic reading of it, there are two classes of object. We can have knowledge of objects in the class 'appearances' because these objects are in some measure or in some way part constituted by our cognitive activities. We cannot have knowledge of objects in the class 'things in themselves', not least because human knowledge depends on the a priori forms of intuition – space and time – and objects in the second class are non-spatio-temporal. Such a substantive reading of the distinction is plain contrary to the 'official' places in the first *Critique* where it is introduced. In such places the distinction is an adverbial one: objects as appearances are objects considered as knowable by a sensible intuition such as ours. Objects as things in themselves are those objects considered as knowable without reliance on a sensible intuition such as ours (see *Critique*, A249). A letter to Garve of 1783 reinforces the adverbial view. It tells us that there are two ways in which objects can be taken: as appearances and as things in themselves (10:342). Kant links the appearance/thing in itself distinction to that between phenomena and noumena. In the second edition of the first *Critique* the distinction is initially introduced as a negative one, and as such it corresponds to that the appearance/thing in itself distinction, but the notion of a noumenon is made richer via a positive use of it:

If under 'noumenon' we understand a thing *insofar as it is not an object of our sensible intuition*, because we abstract from our mode of intuition of it, then it is a noumenon in the *negative* sense. But if we understand by the term *an object of a non-sensible intuition*, then we assume a special mode of intuition, namely the intellectual, which, however, is not ours, and of which we cannot even grasp the possibility, and this would be a noumenon in a *positive* sense. (B307)

The things we know are known via the forms of a sensible intuition like ours: one that has to be affected by objects given to our senses. They can thus only be known insofar as they are phenomena. If we abstract from that way of knowing about objects, we cannot of course know anything about them, for that way of knowing is *our* way of knowing. It is not just a human way of knowing but characteristic of any finite, embodied creature's way of knowing. The act of abstraction may nonetheless be important because it reminds us that our modes of knowledge are limiting as well as enabling. This will allow room for the thought that things, reality, might have all manner of aspects which we, constituted as we are, could never be aware of. That thought is vital for the boundary drawing the Critical Philosophy wishes to undertake. We cannot make the world of phenomena co-terminus with all that there is. The positive sense of noumenon extends this thought to the conception of a knower with

a ‘non-sensible intuition’. Such a knower would know things without first intuiting them via receptive sense organs. This intuition would be creative. Things would be known and exist as objects of knowledge just in being thought of. This intuition would not be bound by space and time. It would not be bound by the categories, where they are thought of as general forms of judgement we use in ordering sensory input (see A256/B312). God’s intuition would be creative in this fashion.

The concept of a noumenon is a boundary concept. It is there to curb the pretensions of sensibility (A255/B311). With this boundary concept Kant can cement the relativising moves he makes as part of his attempt to ground metaphysics as a science. The substantive claims of general metaphysics (such as those contained in the principle that everything that happens has a sufficient cause) become true a priori but only true of things *qua* appearances, *qua* phenomena. The boundary stops the principle ‘Every happening in the world of sense must have a sufficient cause’ being generalised to cover everything. We can at least postulate, or think of, realities that could lie beyond the boundary and we cannot apply the synthetic a priori truths of general metaphysics to those. These synthetic a priori truths are necessary conditions of the possibility of natural science’s success in describing the world, but the boundary stops natural science being taken to be the complete description of all possible reality. This relativising of the claims of general metaphysics allows the claims of special metaphysics concerning the existence of God, the freedom of the human will (and thus the veridicality of the experience of being under moral obligation) and the immortality of the human soul to be thinkable, albeit not provable. Knowledge for beings with an intuition like ours is confined to appearances/phenomena. The problem with old-style special metaphysics is precisely that it has sought knowledge, and a priori knowledge to boot, of the things which, if real, would be beyond appearance. It is essential therefore for Kant’s project that he expose the proofs of old-style special metaphysics as irredeemably flawed. We simply cannot have knowledge of objects that cannot be given in a possible experience. With the appropriate minor premise, it follows that we cannot have knowledge that there is a God, that we have free will, that there is an eternal life. Thus there arises the part of the first *Critique* which so struck Heine: the Dialectic wherein all the false metaphysical proofs of these Ideas of Pure Reason are exposed as resting on illusion.

But we can and we need to postulate the freedom of the will, the existence of God and some kind of eternal life for human beings. The needs that make us go beyond the boundary set by appearances/phenomena are not trivial or optional. They are the needs of human reason as such. The faith that the first *Critique* speaks of as transcending knowledge (Bxxx) is a not a passional affair. It is rather pure, rational faith (see *Critique*, 5:126). This is not reason directed toward the extension of our knowledge, but rather toward the founding of beliefs or working assumptions (there are ambiguities in Kant’s thought on this which will be discussed in later chapters) necessary for steady pursuit of the goals in elements (3) and (4) of the *Weltanschauung*.

It is important to note that Kant distinguishes between *limits* (*Shranken*) and *boundaries* (*Grenzen*) in human thought and enquiry. Kant draws the distinction thus in the *Prolegomena*: ‘Boundaries (in extended things) always presuppose a space, that is found outside a certain definite place and that encloses it; limits require

nothing like that, but are mere negations indicating a quantity insofar as it lacks absolute completeness' (4:352). In mathematics and natural science we recognise limits. We know that our enquiries in such disciplines are limited in their scope. At any one time insight is finite in extent, but we could always take those enquiries further and discover more and more facts in mathematics and natural science. Says Kant: 'the enlargement of insight in mathematics ... goes to infinity; similarly there is no end to the discovery of new natural properties, new forces and laws' (4:352). Metaphysics, by contrast, leads us to boundaries. Notions such as God, freedom and immortality ('the transcendental ideas') show us those boundaries (4:353). We cannot coherently imagine our insight into these objects of thought expanding into infinity. These notions reveal boundaries because they are the alleged answers to important questions that human reason cannot give up. Yet at the same time, reason cannot answer these questions by providing us with *knowledge* of God, freedom and immortality. This because it is reliant, for knowledge, on the concepts and laws of the understanding, and they are only adequate for gaining empirical knowledge of things within the sensible world (4:353). Reason hits a boundary, realises that knowledge of appearance cannot answer the questions posed by special metaphysics, but is forced to postulate concerning what lies in the territory beyond the boundary. The boundary marks the edge of what can be cognised (4:357); beyond the boundary lies what can merely be thought, albeit on the basis of analogies drawn upon our knowledge of what lies inside the boundary. In this fashion metaphysical thought is bounded by the distinction between appearances and things in themselves.

Coda on transcendental idealism

In expounding the key themes in the Critical Philosophy we have hit upon the fact that Kant's system embodies the point of view he styles 'transcendental idealism'. He distinguishes this form of idealism from the 'empirical idealism' he finds in George Berkeley. That latter form states that those things we thought of as existing and enduring in space and time are nothing other than collections of perceptions in our minds. There are numerous passages in the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* that are suggestive of a Berkeley-type view, passages such as 'appearances are not things in themselves, but rather the mere play of our representations' (A102). In the second edition he added a brief 'Refutation of Idealism' (B274–9) to rebut Berkeleyan views and to indicate that they formed no part of his *Critique*.

Transcendental idealism just is the claim that the objects of empirical knowledge are appearances rather than things in themselves. Considered from the standpoint of transcendental reflection these objects are appearances not things in themselves. Transcendental reflection takes in those facts that are necessary conditions for creatures like us (with sensible intuitions, etc.) to have self-conscious experience of a world that contains objects of ordered knowledge. To say, in the light of transcendental reflection, that we can only have knowledge of objects as they appear to us is, in one way, to utter a miserable tautology: we can only know objects in the manner in which creatures like us can know them. But the tautology is not so miserable given that transcendental reflection exposes the specific conditions under which creatures

like us can know them. These are the conditions set by space and time as forms of intuition and by the categories as the fundamental ways of ordering the input received by a spatio-temporally conditioned, sensible intuition. Delineation of the conditions set by sensibility and understanding in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* and *Analytic* of the first *Critique* throws up the peculiar limitations of a way of knowing about objects based on sensible intuition and a discursive understanding. It thus gives some substance to the thought that we know objects only as our cognitive constitution allows us to know them.

Transcendental idealism concludes that we do not know things as they are in themselves. Once more, that looks like a miserable tautology, telling us merely that we can't know things if they are not accessible to the ways we have of knowing things. But the statement reminds us of the peculiar conditions under which we know things and thus allows us room to speculate about those aspects of reality that our limitations might leave forever unknowable to creatures like us.

We are reading transcendental idealism adverbially – along with an adverbial reading of the appearance/thing in itself distinction. A non-adverbial reading would have Kant telling us that the objects of our knowledge, being mere appearances, are constructed by us (using the forms of intuition and the categories) in response to the causal input of a class of non-temporal, non-spatial objects styled 'things in themselves'. The non-adverbial reading has allowed generations of Kant's critics to throw knock-down objections at the *Critical Philosophy*. How can things in themselves causally interact with a sensible intuition when causality, to the extent that we understand it, is a relation between things and events in time? The self that has empirical knowledge is also an appearance (see, for example, B158) and thus the causal transaction would have to be between the self as it is in itself and things as they are in themselves. This, apart from piling mystery upon mystery, raises further problems: how could, for example, the distinction between things and persons be made in a realm of things in themselves? The possession of reason, memory, consciousness, and the like is an empirical fact about selves. Selves could not be distinguished from non-selves in the realm beyond appearances by reference to these factors.

The adverbial and modest reading of transcendental idealism might suggest that Kant has in mind a 'filter' view as opposed to a 'creation' view of the knower-known relation. On the filter view, the subjective turn in epistemology and metaphysics at the heart of the Copernican revolution in philosophy serves to bring home the fact that human cognition limits those aspects of reality that we can be aware of. Our modes of sensible intuition are spatio-temporal. Thus the only aspects of reality we can be aware of will be spatio-temporal. The realisation of this limitation allows us to think that there may be aspects of reality of a non-spatio-temporal kind. This in turn allows us to suppose, though not to know, that human beings have a contra-causal freedom, something that they could not have if they were wholly spatio-temporal. In this manner, the picture of an epistemological subject with a sensible intuition and a discursive understanding kills off dogmatism. The fact (according to Kant it is a fact – see below) that human beings have no proof from experience that there is a God does not entail that there is no God. It remains thinkable that such a being exists in the realms of reality that our cognitive filtering apparatus will not let us reach. The

filter view preserves one of Kant's essential thoughts: the world disclosed in ordinary experience is empirically real but transcendently ideal. That is to say, reflecting on the a priori necessary conditions of experience (that is, transcendently), we see that our knowledge of this world is conditioned by our cognitive apparatus and thus contains a vital contribution from that apparatus. It is in that sense, but only in that sense, ideal or mind-dependent. It is like the sense in which the fisherman's net makes a contribution to the catch in the boat. The net does not create the fish, but it does mean that only a fish of a certain size will be caught.

The two-worlds reading of transcendental idealism makes the human subject the constructor of what it knows. The immediate objects of cognition are 'in the mind' in something like the fashion objects of perception are in the mind for Berkeley. A realm of things external to human cognition provides some causal (albeit it is an incomprehensible kind of causality) input to this process, but the specific character of the phenomenal objects thus created is down to our constitution. We have to accept this last claim, since the dualist reading of things in themselves excludes the thought that things in themselves could have the properties empirical objects have.

We have seen that the dualist reading of transcendental idealism encounters great difficulties, both intra- and extra-textual (see Allison 1983 for a full case against it). Does that mean that we must suppose that Kant views the finite knower's intuition and understanding as mere cognitive filters? Alas not. There are numerous passages in the *Transcendental Aesthetic* that state that the spatio-temporal properties of the world only reside in it *qua* appearance, not as it in itself. Just one example will illustrate the point. At A37–8/B53–4 Kant writes of time:

Time is certainly something real, namely the real form of inner intuition. It therefore has subjective reality in respect to inner experience, i.e. I really have the representation of time and of my determinations in it. It is therefore real, not as object, but as a mode of representing myself as an object. If, however, I could intuit myself, or another being could intuit me, without this condition of sensibility, then these very determinations, which we now represent to ourselves as changes, would yield us a cognition, in which the representation of time and therefore of change as well would in no way occur. Its empirical reality therefore remains as a condition of all our experiences. It is merely that absolute reality cannot be granted it, according to the above. It is nothing except the form of our inner intuition. If one takes away the special condition of our sensibility from it, then the concept of time also vanishes, *and it does not attach to the objects themselves*, but merely to the subject, which intuits them. (my emphasis)

This is manifestly not the filtration view and the essential idea in this passage is repeated elsewhere in the *Critique of Pure Reason* – as at B148, where we are told, that beyond the boundaries set by the senses, space and time 'do not represent anything at all and outside of them have no reality'.

The core of the filtration view is simple. A given object can be viewed in more than one way. Viewed in a certain way, say by creatures with a certain cognitive constitution, only some of its properties are manifest. Viewed in another way other properties are discernible. But the one object has both sets of properties. However, Kant seems to set his mind against these plain consequences of the filtration model of the subject's contribution to knowledge. Kant's view is precisely *not* that objects

have one set of properties considered *qua* appearances alongside, conjoined with, another set considered from another point of view. Rather: the properties they have *qua* appearances they *only* have *qua* appearances. (For further support of this reading see Allison 1996:12ff.) The thing in itself and the thing *qua* appearance may be the one thing considered in two ways, but the properties it has as an appearance it does not have as it is in itself.

The above problem more properly concerns a study of Kant's epistemology and metaphysics, but it does throw up an issue that pertains to Kant's concept of freedom, which conception is of importance for this study. Granted Kant has an adverbial conception of the appearance versus thing in itself distinction, and yet rejects the filtration model, he has a problem about identity. How can the one thing serve both as appearance and thing in itself? How can the one thing be a particular human being and also a thing in itself? In viewing it in the latter light, we will have to deprive it of its spatio-temporal properties since they only exist when it is viewed as appearance. But a human agent's very identity is given by him or her being born at a particular time and place, of certain parents, and as having certain memories and psychological traits. Kant wants to say of the given human being that s/he is part of a causal nexus considered as appearance, but has freedom of the will of a radical, contra-causal kind when considered as thing in itself or as member of an intelligible realm. He must therefore make an identity claim that his rejection of the filtration model makes very hard to comprehend. And if he were to accept the filtration model the reconciliation of universal determinism in the realm of appearances with free will in the intelligible realm would appear not to work. For the filtration model licenses us to give the thing in itself the properties of the thing *qua* appearance; these properties are merely a selection of the full set of properties it has. But then the human being as it is in itself would be determined by spatio-temporal causes and there would be no freedom in reality.

What we have learnt from this coda is that the modest, adverbial construction of transcendental idealism looks tempting. It enables us to see how Kant's Critical Philosophy allows him to place limits around certain kinds of dogmatism. It will, as noted, stop certain kinds of proofs of God's non-existence in their tracks. However, the adverbial reading requires an identity claim to be registered for it to be fully comprehensible. That claim is most easily made on a filtration model, but the filtration model hardly does justice to the full range of Kant's assertions about the subjective character of space and time. Here then is a conundrum in the interpretation of the fundamental thrust of the Critical Philosophy that we will just have to set aside. (Allison 1983, 1990 and 1996 open the door to the debates this conundrum has raised.)