

# **Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion**

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# two

## Kant on the Rational Instability of Atheism

John E. Hare

### I

This essay has five sections. In the first I will talk about Kant's view of morally good people who are not theists. In the second I will discuss his moral criticisms of atheism. The third topic is some passages in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that have been taken to deny that the moral life requires believing that God exists. In the fourth section I will mention briefly some ways Kant thinks theism helps in the attempt to lead the moral life. Finally, in the fifth section I will make some even briefer remarks about the attempt to do Kantian ethics without theism.<sup>1</sup>

I am going to start by discussing Kant's view that one can be a good person without believing in the existence of God, and that even someone who denies the existence of God can lead a virtuous life. Kant's prime example is Spinoza, whom he takes to be a conspicuously good person but not to believe in God in the way Kant approves of. The exegesis of Spinoza is not my purpose here; perhaps Kant is being unfair to him. My point is just that Kant *does* believe it is possible to be a good person without believing in God. To be clear that those who do not believe in God can be good people is even more important now than it was for Kant, since there are now so many more such people.

## Kant on the Rational Instability of Atheism

Kant talks about Spinoza in the third *Critique* (CJ 452), but before discussing this passage it will be useful to mention Kant's remark, recorded in Collins's notes of Kant's lectures on ethics, about speculative atheists, who are dogmatic atheists in their theoretical beliefs, but are able to venerate God through their actions.<sup>2</sup> In this passage the central example is again Spinoza. Kant's view of him seems to be that his error extends to theology but not to religion. He "did what a man of religion should do. His heart was good, and could easily have been brought to rights; he merely had too much trust in speculative argument." By contrast, in a later passage in the same notes, Kant talks about a practical atheist

who lives in such a way that one would take him to maintain that there is no god. Those who live thus are called practical atheists, though that goes too far. The practical atheist is the godless man, for godlessness is a kind of shameless wickedness which bids defiance to the punishments that the idea of God inspires in us. (Collins, LMP 327)

The distinction seems to be between two kinds of atheism or two kinds of atheist (it doesn't matter which way we put it). One kind, like Spinoza, has his heart right. Even if, because of speculative mistakes or confusions, he ends up saying, "There is no God," this error can be remedied easily. He needs to be shown the limits of human understanding, and then the moral faith he already has in germ will be free to express itself in terms of belief in God. On the other hand is a person who says he believes in God, but does not have moral faith. Such a person is in effect an atheist, though Kant admits it is a stretch to use the term, and Kant does not hold out hope for him.

In the passage about Spinoza in the third *Critique*, Kant's point is that it is possible to be a good person and say, "There is no God," but there is something rationally unstable about such a state. Significantly, after describing the evils Spinoza and, indeed, any good person will recognize in the world, Kant says: "And so, this well-meaning person *would* indeed *have to* give up as impossible [*müsste er als unmöglich allerdings aufgeben*] the purpose that the moral laws obligated him to have before his eyes, and that in compliance with them he did have before his eyes" (emphasis added). Kant does not say Spinoza *did* this giving up, or that such a person *will* do it. I think his point is that reason will present a dilemma to such a person, and to resolve it requires giving up either the sense of the real possibility of the highest good or the refusal to believe in God. The passage from Collins's notes suggests that Kant thinks Spinoza, given the removal of his speculative confusions, actually would be likely to resolve the dilemma in the direction of theism.<sup>3</sup>

A nontheological analogy might be helpful here. Suppose you have two friends, James and Joanna, who are becoming increasingly fond of each other. At some point you realize that in their hearts they both have made a commitment to spending the rest of their lives together. But James has not yet admitted this to himself, or declared himself to Joanna. What is holding him back is a

certain exaggerated trust in his own rationality, preventing him from acknowledging the validity of any impulse in himself that he cannot completely understand. You are sure that once he comes to see how misplaced this trust is, he will realize that he has in fact been committed to a life with Joanna for some time and this commitment has been controlling the way he already lives his life and his decisions about how to spend his time and devote his energies. Now, does James *believe* he is going to get married to Joanna? You are not clear what to say. If you ask him to profess such a belief, he will probably say he does not know, one way or the other. But his life-choices indicate the condition of his heart, and in that sense he does already have the belief. Another thing you do not know is how things are actually going to turn out for James. It all depends on which of the two dispositions prevails, his love for Joanna or his pride in his intellect.

To go back to Spinoza, suppose the speculative confusions remain. If he comes to see the dilemma he is in, he still has three options. One is to reject the pursuit of the highest good, one is to reject his atheism, and the third is to stay in the dilemma, unable to be happy with either alternative that presents itself. In the third *Critique* passage Kant goes on to say that if someone like Spinoza responds to the dilemma by refusing to give up the real possibility of the highest good, then he *must* assume (*so muss er annehmen*) the existence of a God. The modality is significant. It is not that such a person will do this, but that he must. He must, that is to say, if he is to be rational. This is what I mean by saying atheism is, for Kant, *rationally* unstable.

To conclude this point, I interpret Kant as saying that to be a good person and disbelieve in God is not impossible, but presents a dilemma. Which way out of the dilemma a person takes will depend, first, on whether he has got rid of his speculative errors, and second, on whether he is in fact committed to the moral law and the pursuit of the highest good. If he has and he is, then the atheism is easily corrected.

## II

The second part of this essay is about Kant's moral criticisms of atheism. I will mention four of these criticisms: that it makes the moral life harder because it removes the ground for belief in the real possibility of being good,<sup>4</sup> that it rids atheists of incentives to morality, that it leads them to moral despair about the possibility of the highest good, and that it corrupts their moral character both individually and socially.

(a) The most helpful text in connection with the first of these criticisms is *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. This is because if we are considering Kant's views on the moral dangers of atheism, we need to look at the relation between ethics and religion from the point of view of someone who (unlike Kant himself) is proposing to leave historical religion behind in the entry into ethics.<sup>5</sup> In the Preface to the second edition of *Religion*, Kant

suggests we think of revelation as two concentric circles, with revelation to reason on the inside and historical revelation on the outside; then he proposes the experiment of seeing how much of historical revelation he can translate into the terms of the inner circle. This experiment could result in various forms of atheism. We could find out that the translation fails, and then reject the outer circle. Or we could find that the outer circle was completely redundant after the translation, though still consistent with the inner circle. But Kant does not take either of these positions, and we can learn what he thinks is wrong with atheism by examining why he rejects them. The second *Critique* has a different direction; it starts from the fact of reason and moves outward to the various postulations that are required. The moral argument given in the second *Critique* plays a comparatively small role in *Religion*, for example, in the Preface to the first edition. The relation of *Religion* here to the second *Critique* is like the relation of the *Metaphysics of Morals* to the *Groundwork*. The *Groundwork* gives the form of the moral law, and the *Metaphysics of Morals* gives the matter or content. It tells us what we do *in* our role as members of the kingdom of ends, namely, work for our own perfection and the happiness of others (MM 398). In the same way the second *Critique* gives the form of the postulate, and *Religion* gives us the matter or content. It tells us what God does *in* the role as king of the kingdom of ends.<sup>6</sup> We will see Kant's argument for the rational instability of atheism more clearly if we focus on the question of what our moral lives would be like if we did not believe in the existence of such a king.

The focus of Kant's attention in *Religion* is the good and evil in the human heart, and this gives content to the moral postulation of God as the enabler of virtue. Translating the doctrines of creation and fall, Kant talks of a predisposition to good and a propensity to evil. Because we are born under the evil maxim, we have the propensity to prefer our happiness to duty. We cannot reverse this ranking, because our fundamental maxim is already corrupt. So we have to believe in divine assistance to accomplish what Kant calls "the revolution of the will." The moral agent cannot inspect this revolution, but she has to believe it has taken place. So here is the danger from atheism: it might leave us without this kind of moral faith, "that God will have the means to remedy this imperfection" (Collins, LMP 317). As in the point I made in §I, so here Kant has to be interpreted as presenting a rational dilemma, not making a prediction. Which way the atheist will *in fact* resolve the dilemma depends on whether the atheist is in fact committed to the moral law. But it is going to be hard for an atheist to sustain belief in the real possibility of being good, given that we are social beings and given the social aspect of evil.<sup>7</sup> In *Religion*, Kant says the propensity to evil is activated by how we are toward each other (R 94):

Envy, the lust for power, greed, and the malignant inclinations bound up with these, besiege his nature, contented within itself [*an sich genügsame*], as soon as he is among men. And it is not even necessary to assume that these

are men sunk in evil and examples to lead him astray; it suffices that they are at hand, that they surround him, and that they are men, for them mutually to corrupt each other's predispositions and make one another evil. (R 94)

Kant's view is that we have a natural propensity to evil, activated in the social relations we cannot dispense with. Kant also thinks divine assistance is the only way to suppose this propensity can be overcome. An atheist who accepts Kant's views about the propensity but wants to lead a morally good life must therefore find some substitute for divine assistance. The final section of this essay contains some brief remarks about the prospects for this.

(b) The second moral criticism of atheism is that it deprives us of certain incentives for the moral life. In the first *Critique*, Kant puts this in a way that is not completely consistent with his mature ethical writing.<sup>8</sup> He says: "Without a God and a world that is not now visible to us but is hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approbation and admiration but not incentives for resolve and realization."<sup>9</sup> This suggests that we can only be motivated to *live* morally, as opposed to merely *admiring* the moral life, if the hope of heaven or the fear of hell is added to respect for the moral law. This is not Kant's mature view. In his lectures on the philosophical doctrine of religion, Kant puts the point more carefully:

Natural morality must be so constituted that it can be thought independently of any concept of God, and obtain zealous reverence from us solely on account of its own inner dignity and excellence. But further it serves for this if, after we have taken an interest in morals itself (we) take an interest also in the existence of God, a being who can reward our good conduct; and then we obtain strong incentives which determine us to observe moral laws. (LPR 1003)

Here Kant's point is that heaven gives us an *additional* incentive to that given by the moral law itself.

The best account of the role in the moral life of God's rewards and punishments is given us, again, in *Religion*. As Kant sees it in *Religion*, God's role in sustaining the moral life is not confined to the rewarding of our individual attempts at virtue with eternal happiness. God has legislative, executive, and judicial functions within the kingdom of ends, of which God is the king and we are merely members. Actually, this theme can be traced throughout Kant's corpus, but I will not try to do that here. There is a problem about coordinating the ends of the members of the kingdom of ends. The agent has to believe not merely that *she* can be happy and virtuous, but that all the members of the kingdom can be. She has to assume that the world is not the kind of place where she can be happy only if other people are not, or where some of the people she tries to help can be happy only if other people she tries to help are not. This is one central reason why we have to recognize our duties, Kant says, as God's commands. It is the higher moral being who is the head of the kingdom "through whose universal organization the forces of single indi-



viduals, insufficient on their own, are united for a common effect” (R 98). This is an important place where God’s sanctions come in. The ground of our own obedience to the moral law is not to be hope of reward or fear of punishment (though this may give us additional incentive). But we do have to be able to believe that those who are not motivated by reverence for the law can be motivated by the sanctions to at least external obedience. The role of the sanctions here is the same as it is for an earthly kingdom, where too the ground of obedience is not supposed to be hope or fear but moral respect for internal freedom, and so also for the external freedom that is its external expression and that the sanctions make possible. The sanctions are, in Kant’s phrase, “a hindrance to the hindrances to freedom.”<sup>10</sup> As he sees it, to believe that one can act morally and that one’s actions make a difference in the world is not enough. If we were all virtuous, and we could believe we were, perhaps what Kant calls in the first *Critique* “self-rewarding morality” (CPR A809/B837) would be enough. But as things are, we have to believe in the real possibility of the highest good *whether most other people are virtuous or not*.

(c) I will deal with the third and fourth of Kant’s moral objections to atheism more briefly, because they are already implicit in what I have said so far. The third objection is that atheism makes it harder to believe in the possibility of the highest good, and so tends toward a kind of despair. The passage from Volkmann’s notes (see note 1 here) says that religion without assertoric faith is an unstable condition “in which one continuously falls from hope into doubt and mistrust.” In the passage about Spinoza in the third *Critique*, also referred to previously, Kant says:

Moreover, as concerns the other righteous people he meets: no matter how worthy of happiness they may be, nature, which pays no attention to that, will still subject them to all the evils of deprivation, disease, and untimely death, just like all the other animals on the earth. And they will stay subjected to these evils always, until one vast tomb engulfs them one and all (honest or not, that makes no difference here) and hurls them, who managed to believe they were the final purpose of creation, back into the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter from which they were taken. (CJ 452)

The despair here is about whether the universe makes moral sense. As I said earlier in connection with this passage, Kant is optimistic about how Spinoza would in fact resolve the difficulty presented by his atheism, once the speculative errors of his philosophy were exposed. Nonetheless, an objection to atheism is that it puts good people in this kind of difficulty. Kant’s view is that the moral agent is rationally required to aim at the highest good, and if his atheism rules out the only way our reason finds this thinkable, the morally good atheist is likely to find full reflective endorsement of his moral commitment unavailable. As I said in §I, however, this does not mean he will not in fact persevere in the moral life. Kant’s point is not meant as a prediction but as a rational prescription of belief.

(d) The fourth objection, that atheism has a tendency to corrupt moral character, can be found in the same passage. Kant says the final purpose of our compliance with the moral law is the highest good, namely, “a happiness of rational beings that harmoniously accompanies their compliance with moral laws.” But, he goes on to say, the “nullity” of that one ideal final purpose would “weaken his respect for the moral law,” and “such weakening of his respect would inevitably impair his moral attitude” (CJ 453). This language sounds more like the kind of prediction I have been saying Kant does not intend. But Kant does not say Spinoza *will* reach this “nullity” (despair about the possibility of the highest good)—only that if he *did* reach it, it would impair his moral attitude. If we think about atheism as a social phenomenon, however, something more like a prediction is available. Kant thinks Christianity has been the “vehicle” his contemporaries in Europe have employed to reach their appreciation of the moral law, and he thinks Christianity is destined to play this role for the whole world (R 157–158). Atheism in its dogmatic form, if it became pervasive and destroyed this vehicle, would therefore be dangerous not just for the individual, and not just for the State, but for the whole human race.

### III

This section addresses whether Kant thinks moral religion and moral life in general require believing that God exists. On the one hand, the answer seems to be “yes.” After all, “religion” is defined in terms of recognizing one’s duties as God’s commands (R 154). How can a person who does not believe in God recognize her duties as God’s commands? On the other hand, we have texts like the one about Spinozism from Collins’s lecture notes: “Atheism can reside in mere speculation, while in practice such a person can be a theist or venerator of God, whose error extends to theology, but not to religion.”<sup>11</sup> We need to separate here the question about whether Kant uses the *term* “religion” in such a way as to allow that skeptical atheists can be religious, and the more important question whether he thinks *the moral life* rationally requires belief in the existence of God. On the first question, Kant is saying in this text and elsewhere that a kind of atheism is consistent with venerating God, or with religion, namely, the kind that “resides in mere speculation.” One example of such a person would be someone who thought she had to say “there is no God” if she did not have a theoretically compelling proof of God’s existence. She might refuse to say she believed something when she did not understand it, and she might think she was obeying the demand of reason in this refusal.<sup>12</sup> I think we should allow that Kant uses the term “religion” to include someone who refuses to assent to the statement “God exists,” even though Kant thinks a belief that God exists is rationally presupposed by one’s commitment to the moral life.<sup>13</sup> My analogy of James and Joanna was designed to illustrate a parallel case of a person who has a practical faith that is consistent with the

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refusal to assent theoretically or make public profession. Kant's answer to the second question is that moral earnestness (or moral religiousness) rationally presupposes belief that God exists. Kant's reply to the person I have just been describing is that she needs to see the limits of the human understanding. Kant agrees there is no compelling theistic proof within the theoretical use of reason, but thinks we are nonetheless rationally required to believe that God exists.

An important passage appears at the beginning of Part Four of *Religion*, where Kant connects religion and assertoric faith in the existence of the highest good. The passage is obscure and comes in a footnote to Kant's statement "*Religion is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands.*" The footnote begins as follows:

With this definition some erroneous interpretations of the concept of a religion in general is [*sic*] obviated. First, so far as theoretical cognition and profession of faith are concerned, no assertoric knowledge is required in religion (even of the existence of God), since with our lack of insight into supersensible objects any such profession can well be hypocritically feigned; speculatively, what is required is rather only a *problematic* assumption (hypothesis) concerning the supreme cause of things, whereas with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work, what is presupposed is an *assertoric* faith, practical and hence free, that promises a result for the final aim of religion; and this faith needs only *the idea of God* which must occur to every morally earnest (and therefore religious) pursuit of the good, without pretending to be able to secure objective reality for it through theoretical cognition. Subjectively, the *minimum* of cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must alone suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being. (R 154)

This passage has been interpreted to say that Kant's position is that neither religion nor the moral life requires that we believe in the existence of God. Allen Wood says, about our moral agency:

Kant does not even think that we have to believe that there really is a God who wills that we perform our duties. Even a religious person, who regards her duties as divine commands, need not be certain that her duties are in fact commanded by God. For religion, Kant says, "no assertoric knowledge (even of God's existence) is required, (but) only a problematic assumption (hypothesis) as regards speculation about the supreme cause of things"; the "faith" that is strictly indispensable to religion "needs merely the *idea of God* . . . only the minimum cognition [*sic*] (it is possible that there is a God) has to be objectively sufficient." To be religious, then, "I do not even have to believe in the existence of God."<sup>14</sup>

Kant's footnote is obscure, but I think Wood has misread it. The passage does not settle whether Kant thinks the moral agent has to believe in the existence of God or not. I will divide my comments into three parts.

(a) Wood omits Kant's restriction of his initial point (note, "so far as") to

*theoretical* cognition and the *profession* of faith and does not give the appropriate stress to Kant's term "knowledge" (as distinguished from faith).<sup>15</sup> I take it that Kant is making two linked contrasts here. The first is between theoretical cognition (where only a "*problematic* assumption," a hypothesis, about God's possibility is required, and not knowledge of God's existence) and our morally legislative reason, where, Kant explicitly says, "what is presupposed is an *assertoric* faith" (namely, faith in the existence of the highest good). The second is between a person's public profession and inner moral life. The former cannot be held accountable to any physical sensation of God since God is not that kind of object, whereas the latter does presuppose assertoric faith in order that the person can believe in a result for her ultimate purpose, namely, the achievement of the highest good. Kant is here separating off two erroneous interpretations of the concept of a religion, namely, the theoretical assertion and the public profession that God exists. Neither of these two is what he is interested in here.

(b) Kant goes on to say this assertoric faith needs "only the *idea of God* which must occur to every morally earnest (and therefore religious) pursuit of the good, without pretending to be able to secure objective reality for it through theoretical cognition." Here again, the contrast is between theoretical cognition and practice. Assertoric faith (in the existence of the highest good) has to make do with an *idea* and cannot secure the kind of object-status for God that theoretical cognition can establish for what we can sense and so put under concepts. Kant is insistent that we should not pretend to be able to secure this kind of status for our picture of God. He leaves open the question whether this assertoric faith nonetheless requires belief in the existence of *God* in addition to the existence of the highest good.

(c) Finally, Kant says, "subjectively, the *minimum* of cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must alone suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being." This is a point Kant makes elsewhere about what kind of *duty* we have in our beliefs about God. In the Vigilantius notes on Kant's *Lectures on the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant makes a distinction between the dogmatic atheist and the skeptical atheist.<sup>16</sup> The skeptical atheist cannot persuade himself of theism, or the reality of God, though he also cannot demonstrate that God is impossible. "It is therefore incumbent on him," says Kant, "merely to assume the possibility of a God." The dogmatic atheist, on the other hand, does not accept even the possibility. But then Kant goes on to say that whereas the dogmatic atheist is making a "wrong and even dangerous contention," the skeptical atheist is not punishable, for his doubts are guiltless. Kant's position, in other words, is that human beings have a *duty* to say not that God exists, but only that God's existence is possible. There can be no duty to assume the existence of anything, he says in the second *Critique*, since this concerns only the theoretical use of reason (CPrR 125).

In this footnote in *Religion*, therefore, Kant has separated off some kinds of religion he is not talking about, and he goes on to separate off another,

namely, a religion of particular duties revealed not to reason but to the visible church. In the part of the footnote I quoted, Kant is separating off the interpretation of religion as a theoretical belief, and as a public profession, and he is denying that we have a duty of assertoric belief. But even though we do not have a duty to believe in the existence of God, Kant leaves open the possibility that such a belief is presupposed and therefore rationally required for the moral agent. If other passages lead us to believe that Kant thinks moral agency does require belief in the existence of God, nothing in this footnote is inconsistent with such a view. And there are other such passages. For example, in the second *Critique*, he says our reason finds the possibility of the highest good thinkable

only on the presupposition of a supreme intelligence; to assume the existence of this supreme intelligence is thus connected with the consciousness of our duty, although this assumption itself belongs to theoretical reason; with respect to theoretical reason alone, as a ground of explanation, it can be called a *hypothesis*; but in relation to the intelligibility of an object given us by the moral law (the highest good), and consequently if a need for practical purposes, it can be called *belief*. (CPrR 126)

Another passage in *Religion* has been interpreted as denying that moral agency requires belief in the existence of God, and I want to comment on this briefly. It comes from the beginning of the Preface to the first edition:

So far as morality is based on the conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws, it is in need neither of the idea of another being above him in order that he recognize his duty, nor, (in order) that he observe it, of an incentive other than the law itself. (R 3)

The key to understanding this passage (as also the previous passage) is to stress the three words “so far as.” We human beings are, for Kant, free beings who bind ourselves through our reason to unconditional law. In a word, we are autonomous. But we are not *only* such beings. We are also creatures of need. If we were purely rational, we would not need the idea of another being over us to help us do our duty. But also true of us, as Kant puts it in the second theorem of the second *Critique*, is that “all material practical principles as such are, without exception, of one and the same kind and come under the general principle of self-love or one’s own happiness” (CPrR 22). This is what generates the moral argument for the postulate of God’s existence. We have to be able to believe that we do not have to do what is morally wrong in order to be happy. This postulate is not necessary, Kant says in the second *Critique*, “as a ground of all obligation in general (for this rests, as has been sufficiently shown, solely on the autonomy of reason itself)” (CPrR 126). It is only necessary because we humans have to be able to strive to produce and promote “the highest good in the world” (the union of happiness and virtue), and so we have to believe in the possibility of its attainment. In the passage quoted at the end

of the previous paragraph, Kant says “our reason finds this thinkable only on the presupposition of a supreme intelligence,” and goes on to say that the assumption of the existence of such a being is a *hypothesis* for our theoretical reason, but for our practical reason it can be called *belief*.

So we have here two components, and the proper order of them is crucial. There is the belief in a supreme intelligence governing the world, and there is the commitment to obey the moral law for its own sake. Kant is insistent that the commitment to obey the moral law for its own sake has to come first. What he calls “moral theology” gets this order right.<sup>17</sup> He thinks that putting the two components the other way round, deriving one’s obligation from one’s belief in God, corrupts both the morality and the religion. There is much to be said about Kant’s view here, but for the purposes of this essay what needs to be distinguished are the different ways the atheist can and cannot recognize the proper authority of the moral law. I think Kant would say that *so far as* he is rational and autonomous, he can; but, like Spinoza, because of that very same rationality he will find obstacles to the full rational endorsement of his commitment to morality.

#### IV

In this section I am going to list some ways Kant thinks theism helps in the attempt to lead the moral life. This will be the reverse side of Kant’s criticisms of atheism as discussed in §II. I will list eight ways theism helps the moral life. I am not trying to list them in order of importance, or to claim the list is exhaustive, and each item on the list is described in the briefest summary.

(a) Belief in God’s existence helps the moral agent believe it is possible for her to be good. She has to overcome the problem that she is born under what Kant calls “the evil maxim” that subordinates her duty to her happiness. Since this is her original fundamental maxim, she does not occupy a position whereby she can reverse the order of incentives and accomplish what Kant calls “the revolution of the will.” If she can believe God exists, she can believe God has given her “a divine supplement” whereby a revolution in her will can take place (CF 44 and R 37, 45).

(b) Belief in God’s existence helps her see how the highest good is realizable. The highest good (in one version, the exact proportioning of virtue and happiness) is required, Kant thinks, as the final object of the moral agent’s pursuit. But all we humans can do is try to be virtuous (given the assistance described above). We cannot produce the proportioning of this virtue to happiness. If we are to believe the highest good possible, we have to believe in the agency of some being beyond us in power and goodness (CPrR 124ff. and R 5).

(c) Additional incentives are provided by the belief that God will reward virtue. These are not (unlike the highest good) required for the moral agent, but they are a help. For example, the belief that we will eventually be part of a

community of virtuous people (“the society of all the good”) helps sustain us through the difficulties of living in a world where virtuous people suffer and vicious people are rewarded.<sup>18</sup>

(d) Belief in God’s existence helps the moral agent by giving her what Kant calls a “vehicle” for the moral law to be revealed to her. Kant thinks this is especially true of Christianity, a tradition he thinks is destined to be the world religion because of the “vehicle” it provides in the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, “the holy one of the gospel.” If we were purely rational beings, we would not have need of such a vehicle; but because we are not, we do need it.<sup>19</sup>

(e) In giving us this special revelation (and also the revelation to reason), God is acting, so to speak, as legislator in the role of king of the kingdom of ends. The believer in God has also the advantage of belief in God’s acting as executive and judge in this kingdom. God’s assigning and carrying out rewards and penalties provides “a hindrance to the hindrances to freedom.” Some people may be moved to compliance with the moral law only by these rewards and punishments and, if they were not constrained in this way, would provide a hindrance to those who are trying to live morally (MM 231, 396, and R 161).

(f) There is a coordination problem even between people who are trying to lead a morally good life. The moral agent has to believe she does not have to do what is wrong in order to be happy. This is covered under (b). But she also has to believe it is not the case that she can be happy only if other people are not. Belief in God’s executive power in the kingdom allows her to believe that “through (God’s) dispensation the forces of separate individuals, insufficient in themselves, are united for a common end” (AP 333 and R 98).

(g) The moral agent can also believe, if she believes God exists, that God will bring about progress in history, so the kingdom will prevail in the end. We might call this “moral hope” as opposed to the “moral faith” operative in (a)–(c). The kingdom is represented in Christianity not merely as getting closer but as actually arriving. Kant believed in moral progress in history and thought his own age was seeing a decisive step in this progress. Moral hope is available, however, for moral agents who do not believe in historical progress, but believe that because God’s kingdom will prevail in the end, they will be vindicated (CF 93 and R 134).

(h) Finally, the moral agent who believes in God’s existence has a way to tie her moral life together with her worldview in general. Morality is, for Kant, just the practical exercise of pure reason. He does not think of different faculties of reason in us, theoretical and practical, but of a unified reason. Only in practical life is this reason required to postulate the existence of God; but in theoretical life in general and in science in particular, it uses the idea of God regulatively in order to make sense of the totality of experience. The belief in God’s existence, presupposed in the moral life, thus gives a unified sense to a person’s life as a whole (CPrR 139 and CJ 473ff.).

## V

Is there some nontheist substitute that might do the work in ethical theory that Kant proposes for theism? We might try escaping from Kant's position about the rational instability of atheism by distinguishing between an "ideal conception" and a "historical conception" of the highest good, where the historical conception *does not depend on divine agency*.<sup>20</sup> We might try to locate the historical conception in Kant's historical and political essays, occasionally in *Religion* and in the third *Critique*, and more securely in the *Opus Postumum*. We would have here a Kantian reply to the Kantian critique of atheism. The historical conception is just that of a happiness of rational beings, produced historically by human effort, that harmoniously accompanies their compliance with moral laws. This is a self-rewarding morality, because no agency other than the human is presupposed; humans make themselves happy by progressively becoming more virtuous as history proceeds.

The first point I want to make is that this is not Kant's conception.<sup>21</sup> He does indeed believe in moral progress. But throughout his work he thinks of this progress as dependent upon divine assistance. I know that some interpreters think Kant is not being sincere in these passages, that he is putting in God in order to avoid problems with the censor or the pietists he grew up with. But I don't think we should use this kind of interpretation unless we have to, and in the case of these texts it is better to suppose Kant is saying what he means. I will start again with *Religion*. I have already quoted one example of the sort of passage I have in mind. Kant does indeed say we can hope for a "system of well-disposed men, in which and through whose unity alone the highest moral good can come to pass" (R 98). But then he goes on to say that since we do not know whether such a whole lies in our power or not, we need to presuppose another idea, namely, that of a higher moral being "through whose universal organization the forces of separate individuals, insufficient in themselves, are united for a common effect." And then he says that in the ethical commonwealth (as opposed to a merely political one) all true duties must be represented as *at the same time* the commands of the highest lawgiver, who must also be "one who knows the heart." "To found a moral people of God is therefore a task whose consummation can be looked for not from men but only from God Himself" (R 100).<sup>22</sup>

The historical and political treatises are more equivocal, because they have a different agenda, but they are still best read as consistent with *Religion* in this respect. I will take just one example. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant frames his discussion by distinguishing between contexts (like *Perpetual Peace* itself) where we are concerned purely with theory and contexts where we are concerned with religion. In the former contexts we have to observe the constraint that we can talk only about nature, and not about providence, because we have to stay within the limits of possible sense experience. If we talked about provi-



dence in *these* contexts, we would be like Icarus flying on his manmade wings too close to the sun, producing in the end only his own destruction. Then at the end, Kant returns to providence and says that politics, though the discussion has been confined to nature, can still be believed consistent with ethics. For we cannot, without straying beyond the limits of human reason, attribute to the supreme power whose nature is beyond our understanding the restriction of our moral powers, so that we never can or will be in a better condition (PP 380). The whole discussion of nature in this work has to be understood as framed within the familiar Kantian ethical and religious framework, not as suggesting a replacement for it.

My second point is that this nontheist historical conception is not merely not Kant's view; it is not a plausible view on its own merits. Here I will be very brief, since the topic requires a book of its own.<sup>23</sup> A conspicuous exponent of the historical conception is John Dewey, one of the original signatories of the 1933 humanist manifesto that stated: "Man is at last becoming aware that he alone is responsible for the realization of the world of his dreams, that he has within himself the power for its achievement." That the statement was written in 1933 is significant. We need to ask the question whether the statement is true, and whether it is supported by our experience of the world run by the people who believed it. The historical conception is one of moral progress by human efforts alone. The "progress" part of this is common to Kant and Dewey. The "human effort alone" part has been more or less unique in human history to the last century and a half. This has been at once the most educated and the most brutal period of human history. I am arguing not for the causal claim that atheism produces brutality, but for a Kantian modesty about what humans, given the propensity for evil, can accomplish on their own. Has Marxism or laissez-faire capitalism or any other human system produced the world of our dreams? If we lose the Kantian kind of modesty, we have shown that we open ourselves to horrendous evil.

The key question about atheism, as Kant saw, is whether a person is already committed to the moral law and has reverence for it. I claimed at the end of §II that his view about the connection between morality and religion gives us a kind of prediction about the consequences for society of the widespread rejection of theism. Nietzsche suggested a similar prediction, that the death of God would bring the death of guilt along with it.<sup>24</sup> There have indeed been various attempts in recent ethical theory to reduce the moral demand. Certain sentiment-based theorists, certain kinds of care-theorists, certain kinds of communitarians, and certain kinds of evolutionary ethicists have all denied that we have the duty of impartial benevolence, to treat every human as one and none as more than one.<sup>25</sup> I think Kant would call them all "practical atheists," whether they say they believe in God or not. But if a person does have reverence for the law, then without God she is in what I call "the moral gap." I cannot argue this here. But my view is that if she cannot produce a working alternative to theism in bridging this gap, her position will be unstable in just

the way Kant said Spinoza's position was. She will not be able to make consistent her beliefs about what she can do and what she should do.

## NOTES

1. This essay was originally written in reply to a paper by Lara Denis, presented at the Pacific Division of the American Philosophical Association in 2001. I learned much from her paper, and some of the description of Kant's moral criticisms of atheism in the second section of my essay are drawn from her. Fred Beiser was the other commentator. Although he concedes that Kant's conception of practical faith is essentially theistic, Beiser's view was that it "is a boil, a tumor, a cancer within the critical philosophy, which is necessary to remove surgically." I have learned a great deal from Patrick Kain's unpublished paper "Interpreting Kant's Theory of Divine Commands: Three Proposals," and in particular he pointed me to the reference in N. T. Volkman's lecture notes to the "unstable condition" (*ein schwankender Zustand*) of religion without assertoric faith, whereby one continuously falls from hope into doubt and mistrust (LPR 1151). I have alluded to this phrase in the title of this essay. Finally, I have profited from Kelli S. O'Brien's paper "Kant and Swinburne on Revelation," *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2000): 535–557; she undertakes to adjudicate between my views and Allen Wood's on Kant's understanding of the place of revelation.

2. Collins, LMP 312. For more on the notion of "dogmatic" atheism, see §IIIc here. Although the Collins notes are early, the doctrine is repeated in later work.

3. Similarly, Kant attributes a kind of implicit religious faith (here in immortality) to Jews in general (R 126): "It can also hardly be doubted that the Jews subsequently produced, each for himself, some sort of religious faith." However, Kant thinks this was not part of statutory Judaism.

4. See Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 272: "To be really possible is to be (a) logically possible and (b) related necessarily to some other fact (viz., the moral) whose reality is given."

5. I have defended the claim that this is not Kant's view, in *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), esp. chap. 2.

6. I put it this way in order to connect the point with the distinction in the *Groundwork* (GMM 433–434) between mere members of the kingdom of ends and the king of this kingdom who is "a completely independent being, without needs and with unlimited resources adequate to his will."

7. Allen Wood emphasizes this point in his article "Religion, Ethical Community and the Struggle against Evil," in *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2000): 498–511.

8. For a good discussion of the relation of *Religion* to Kant's development of his views about this, see Sharon Anderson-Gold, "God and Community: An Inquiry into the Religious Implications of the Highest Good," in *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. Philip J. Rossi and Michael J. Wreen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 113–131.

9. CPR A813/B841. In the rest of the passage the highest good as a whole is clearly supposed to be the incentive, not merely the heavenly reward.

10. MM 396; see also 231. I discuss this topic in "Kant on Recognizing Our Duties as God's Commands," *Faith and Philosophy* 17, no. 4 (2000): 459–478, esp. 468–471.

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11. Collins, LMP 312. There is a similar passage at *Vigilantius*, LMM 531.

12. Moral philosophers in the twentieth century who were strongly influenced by logical positivists like Carnap sometimes fell into this category. For example, R. M. Hare said the Apostles' Creed every Sunday in church. But his philosophical position was that we could not make meaningful assertions about the existence of God, and that faith in God was properly construed as what he called a "blik" (roughly, an attitude toward living in the world) rather than as making an assertion. See R. M. Hare, *Essays on Religion and Education* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 37–39:

It seems, indeed, to be impossible even to formulate as an assertion the normal *blik* about the world which makes me put my confidence in the future reliability of steel joints, in the continued ability of the road to support my car, and not gape beneath it revealing nothing below; in the general nonhomicidal tendencies of dons; in my own continued well-being (in some sense of that word that I may not now fully understand) if I continue to do what is right according to my lights; in the general likelihood of people like Hitler coming to a bad end. But perhaps a formulation less inadequate than most is to be found in Psalm 75: "The earth is weak and all the inhabitants thereof: I bear up the pillars of it." (38)

13. I am indebted to Patrick Kain for some additional references here: "The mere possibility of such a being is sufficient to produce religion in the human being" (Pölitz, LPR 998; see also 1010); "The mere possibility of God's existence is already sufficient for moral religion; yet not as much as faith" (Rf 6226 [18:515]; I take it that the latter clause means assertoric faith is better at producing and sustaining religion, even though it is not strictly necessary); and "It is possible that a God exists, is sufficient for religion, but not for *cultus*" (Rf 6244 [18:523]).

14. Wood, "Religion, Ethical Community and the Struggle against Evil," 501.

15. See LPR 1084: "Hence our faith is not knowledge, and thank heaven it is not! For divine wisdom is apparent in the very fact that *we do not know but rather ought to believe that a God exists.*"

16. *Vigilantius*, LMM 531. The distinction is also found in LPR 1010 and 1026. In the former passage Kant says, "Hence a skeptic can still have religion" and goes on to say that the belief in a merely possible God as ruler of the world is the minimum of theology.

17. LPR 999. See CPR A632/B661. The very last sentence of *Religion* ends (R 202) "which proves that the right way to advance is not from grace to virtue but rather from virtue to grace." This is not a chronological claim, and Kant is not denying the doctrine of prevenient grace. But he is talking about naturally honest human beings who "carry their religion without fuss" and put to shame in the way they live their lives those Christians who make a great to-do about their privileged status as elect.

18. *Vigilantius*, LMM 530 and R 129. See also the references in §IIb here.

19. *The End of All Things*, Ak 8:339 (there is no word in the German corresponding to the Cambridge translation "though *supposedly* destined to be the world religion"), and R 107, 112, 157–158.

20. This was the proposal of Lara Denis in the original paper that prompted the present essay as a response. She referred to a discussion by Andrews Reath, "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (1988): 593–619; Stephen Engstrom, "The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 4 (1992): 747–780;

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and Thomas Pogge, “Kant on Ends and the Meaning of Life,” in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays for John Rawls* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). I would add Fred Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992), e.g., 31: “The human will creates moral value.”

21. I am uncertain about the *Opus Postumum*. See Eckart Förster, *Kant’s Final Synthesis: An Essay on the Opus Postumum* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2000).

22. Wood stresses this point in the article already cited: “Kant believes that (owing to a certain weakness of human nature) it is impossible for people directly to form a pure ethical community” (508). See also CF 82.

23. I have given somewhat longer treatment to the topic in *The Moral Gap*, esp. chaps. 4–7, and in *Why Bother Being Good?* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002), esp. chap. 2.

24. *On the Genealogy of Morals and Ecce Homo*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), 90–91: “The advent of the Christian God, as the maximum god attained so far, was therefore accompanied by the maximum feeling of guilty indebtedness on earth. Presuming we have gradually entered upon the *reverse* course, there is no small probability that with the irresistible decline of faith in the Christian God there is now also a considerable decline in mankind’s feeling of guilt.”

25. I am thinking, for example, of Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984): “I am not obliged to care for starving children in Africa, because there is no way for this caring to be completed in the other unless I abandon the caring to which I am obligated” (86). She also says that the ethic of caring “will not embody a set of universalizable moral judgments” (28). Another example is Larry Arnhart, *Darwinian Natural Right* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998): “When individuals or groups compete with one another we must either find some common ground of shared interests, or we must allow for an appeal to force or fraud to settle the dispute. The only alternative, which I do not regard as a realistic alternative, is to invoke some transcendental norm of impartial justice (such as Christian charity) that is beyond the order of nature” (146).