

Kant, Divinity, and Autonomy

Christopher J. Insole

University of Durham/Australian Catholic University

Department of Theology and Religion, Durham University, Abbey House, Palace Green, Durham. DH1 3RS

christopher.insole@durham.ac.uk

If 'public theology' involves, at least in one of its legitimate variants, some theological reflection on the values and aspirations of secular culture, then the concept of 'autonomy' must be apt for consideration. This is because 'autonomy' is all of the following: a central component of canonical texts going back into antiquity; widely discussed in cutting-edge academic journals; contested in the popular press; and discussed in legislatures around the world, when debating, for example life-and-death issues such as euthanasia. The meaning of autonomy is itself a 'real-world issue', given that large parts of the globe are governed according to traditions of political philosophy that prize this concept, and that the value of autonomy is part of the worldview of numerous individual citizens.

In theological circles, there is a familiar critique of the notion of the 'autonomous subject', who shares features with Milton's Lucifer, or Barth's 'absolute man': a figure deluded by visions of control and self-creation, in ways that are harmful, individually and collectively, with implications for ecology, international order, economics, and all aspects of human flourishing and identity. Without denying that such a conception does indeed do widespread cultural and political work, I want in this article to uncover a surprising theological shape to the concept of autonomy, through a distinctive reading of Immanuel Kant.

I recommend what Kant draws our attention to, not so much as something we ought to 'adopt' (which might be very difficult to do), but as something worthy of contemplation, because of some surprising strands of Enlightenment religious philosophy it could open up for us. My suggestion will be that in Kant's conception of autonomy, we have a faithful variant of a perennial philosophical conception of divinity, distinctively re-configured by Kant's own preoccupations and system, but still recognisably oriented around some philosophical conceptions of the divine, which have their origins in deep classical wells, with dreams and memories of thought-thinking-itself, joyously diffusing itself, generating plenitude and harmony, of which spatial and temporal lawfulness is a mere moving image. If this is correct, then we might find that the most interesting dialogue in the realm of 'public theology' is not necessarily between Christianity and secularism, but between Christianity and a latent pagan

religious philosophy (in the honourable sense in which Plotinus is a pagan), that draws upon a perennial strand of Platonism in Western Philosophy.

Recent waves in Kant scholarship have identified much more continuity between his earlier rationalist metaphysics (roughly speaking, all the stuff before 1770), and his mature ‘critical’ philosophy (roughly speaking, the more famous stuff published from 1770). I associate my own work with this trend. Along with others, I believe that the continuity of rationalist metaphysics is even compatible with Kant’s own claims to have achieved a new ‘epistemic discipline’ in his later thought, after 1770. To put it briskly, the headline claim is this: the *content* of much of what Kant believes in his early thought (God, divine creation, and non-spatial and non-temporal human souls) remains much the same in his later thought, but the *epistemic* status changes, from knowledge, to warranted and required (true) beliefs, arrived at on the basis of practical reason. Where Kant does make a significant shift, both away from his own early thought, and, as Kant himself accurately (in my view) puts it, away from all previous philosophy and theology, is in his account of the relationship between the highest good, and human freedom.

In order to get to our final destination, I need to do a little setting up. First of all, I sum up what I mean by saying that Kant is philosophically religious, but that he cannot easily be called a Christian, because of how he conceives of human freedom in relation to divine action. I then move on to draw out two features of Kant’s philosophical religiosity: first of all, the way in which a transcendent dimension underlies and sustains everything that appears, which dimension is a source of spiritual and moral challenge and consolation, especially in relation to the concept of autonomy. I will, throughout, be making controversial claims about Kant that I do not have the space to defend here. I need to move briskly, if we are to get ‘to the point’ about autonomy. But, at each stage, I do refer to other works of mine where a full defence can be found. In the second part of the article, I explore the way in which the ideal autonomous moral community itself has some divine properties. It is often said, amongst both secular and theological Kant scholars, that Kant’s conception of reason has ‘something divine’ about it. In this article I want to push a little beyond the level of vague gesture, simile, and metaphor (‘something divine about it’), to offer a more textually and conceptually grounded explanation of what might be meant here.

I Kant and Christianity

First of all, I claim, Kant really does, that is *really does*, believe in God. A generating source of much of the error in the reception of Kant, not least amongst theologians who repeatedly harp on the theme

of Kant disallowing ‘God talk’, is the failure to grasp the capacities and centrality, for Kant, of the category of the ‘practical reason’. The most important aspect of practical reason, for Kant, is moral practical reason, which is ordered to the question of what is to be done, in relation to the good. Practical reason, Kant is convinced, is able to deliver stable and substantial rational beliefs, that are wholly, and in principle, unavailable to theoretical reason. Practical reason can do this, because it is able to understand some of the relationships between our fundamental projects, and underlying commitments and concepts.

‘Knowledge’, that which can be known, is only one sub-category in the wider class of rational beliefs. That is, there is more to rational belief than knowledge. As Kant puts it in the opening of his first *Critique*, he ‘had to deny knowledge, in order to make room for belief (*Glaube*)’ (Bxxx). Kant does not only mean religious belief, but the whole panoply of rational beliefs that do not amount to knowledge, of which religious belief is one type. Kant is convinced that one of the entailments that practical reason reveals is that the completion of the moral law can only be achieved if ‘there be a God and a future world’. Indeed, Kant claims to ‘know with complete certainty’ that ‘no one else knows of any other conditions that can guarantee properly ordered happiness’ (A 828/B 856). ‘I will inexorably believe’, Kant writes, ‘in the existence of God and a future life, and I am sure that nothing can make these beliefs unstable’ (A 828/B 856; see also A742-744/B770-772; *CPrR*, 5: 4, 108-114, 121, 125, 134-135; *LPR*, 28: 1084; *CJ*, 5: 546). This state of ‘properly ordered happiness’, for which ‘God and a future world’ are required, is what Kant calls the ‘highest good’.

But at this point Kant’s explicit self-distancing from the tradition that he receives becomes clear. In the Christian conception, as received by Kant, God is always the central constituent element of the highest created good, as that which is enjoyed, known and loved in this state; in Kant’s schema, the highest good is a ‘world of intelligences’ acting in ‘accordance with universal and necessary moral laws’ (A815/B843). God is in this community, certainly, as a sovereign (*CPrR*, 5: 128-132) and a Holy Will (*GW*, 4: 414), but the movement and structure on this conception seems to be horizontal, between rational moral agents (of which God is an ideal instance), rather than vertical, between creatures and the creator. When all is said and done, the reason for this, in Kant’s thought, is always freedom. ‘Freedom cannot be divided’, Kant insists, such that ‘the human being is either entirely free or not free at all’ (*R* 4229; 17: 467). Freedom must be a ‘faculty of starting...events from itself, i.e., without the causality of the cause itself having to begin, and hence without need for any other ground to determine its beginning’ (*Pr*, 4: 344; see also A446/B474). This has the implication, for Kant, that if God, who Kant calls an ‘alien cause’ (*CPrR*, 5: 95; see also *CPrR*, 5: 100-101; *R* 4221, 4225, 4337, 5121), acts upon our will, our freedom is destroyed, where freedom, for Kant, is the ‘inner value of

the world' (*MoMr*, 27: 1482). Kant has a 'zero-sum' conception of the relationship between divine and human action: for the human to be free, God must withdraw.

Morality, for Kant, depends upon pure reason being 'in itself' practical, which means, providing for itself, and from itself, the unconditioned good that it seeks. Kant puts this by explaining that the will can have no 'external object', where by 'object' Kant means any dimension of reality, created or uncreated. For example, the 'essence of poetry' can be the object of our thought, without itself being an empirical, or quasi-empirical, 'object'. If the will can have no principle or reality that is *heteros*, or *ab alio*, from another, then, it follows, it must have a sheerly intrinsic object, or, in other words, it must make itself its own object. And this is precisely what Kant says. In one of the most electric and illuminating lines in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant writes that the will 'has as its object', 'itself as giving universal law' (*GW*, 4: 432).

In making this move, Kant departs from the central claim of the Christian tradition, which is that God, and not just the moral law which God necessarily commands, is the all-satiating end-point and final object of our loving and knowing, and where God is, in the technical terms employed here, an external object (and so not co-extensive with our own moral law-giving), who nonetheless, and uniquely, acts interiorly within creatures, in all they do, in a way that does not violate, but constitutes, their freedom. In relation to this claim, for the traditional theologian, Kant's God seems awkwardly on the outskirts of the ideal moral community, or to disappear entirely within it.

Now we are ready to make our move into Kant's philosophical religiosity, and to engage, on its own terms with what it might mean for God to 'disappear entirely within' the Kingdom of Ends. Here, I will suggest, we find Kant at his most religiously committed and exciting. When reason becomes identical with divinity, this impacts upon the concept of divinity, and, from the point of view of the Christian tradition, seems unduly to narrow the scope of the divine nature. But the identification of reason with divinity also transforms how we understand reason. And if, as Kant does, we also identify reason with proper selfhood, and with freedom and morality, the divinization, the *theiosis*, goes far and wide.

II Transcendence

In order to understand Kant's conception of autonomy properly, we need, first of all, to understand what it means for Kant to say that 'the moral will is its own object' (*MetMr*, 29: 610), in that it 'has as its object itself as giving universal law' (*GW*, 4: 432). We can understand what this activity

amounts to, by approaching it through a key distinction that runs through Kant's later moral philosophy. This is the distinction between *being determined by a cause*, and *choosing an end* in freedom. The critical Kant is emphatic that to be determined by a cause, even if the cause is God, is to enjoy 'nothing better than the freedom of a turnspit' (*CPrR*, 5: 97), which can never have moral value, where freedom to choose, and to choose for reasons, constitutes what Kant, as we have just seen, calls the 'inner value of the world' (*MoMr*, 27: 1482). To have a will, Kant explains, is to have 'the capacity to act *in accordance with the representation of laws*, that is, in accordance with principles' (*GW*, 4: 412)¹. 'Rational nature', Kant explains, is distinguished from the 'rest of nature' in that it 'sets itself an end' (*GW*, 4: 437), where the 'proper worth of an absolutely good will - a worth raised above all price - consists just in the principle of action being free from all influences of contingent grounds' (*GW*, 4: 426). So when Kant talks about the rational will having as its unconditioned good 'itself', what he means precisely is this: the unconditioned good for the rational will is the activity of acting according to ends.

Now, this brings us up against an immediate difficulty. Where might we hope to find such free 'end-setting', in contrast to causal determinism? Kant is emphatic about where we cannot find it. We cannot find it, at all, in the realm of space and time. Space and time, for Kant, are entirely structured by Newtonian patterns of iron determinism. If space and time were 'everywhere', then there could be no freedom, and no inner value to the world. In the first *Critique*, Kant writes that, 'if appearances are things in themselves, then freedom cannot be saved', because in that case, 'nature' would be 'the completely determining cause, sufficient in itself, of every occurrence' (A 536/B 564).

'Appearances', in Kant's philosophical vocabulary, are always spatial and temporal. So what this claim means is that if reality were spatial and temporal all the way down (that is if 'appearances' were the 'things in themselves'), then there would be no dimension of reality wherein freedom could be found. The 'whole of creation', Kant writes in the third *Critique*, 'would be a mere desert, existing in vain and without a final end' (*CJ*, 5: 442), and the human being a mere 'link in nature' (*CJ*, 5: 443).

Now, as I have already said, Kant thinks he is able to discern patterns of conceptual entailment, even where theoretical knowledge is not possible. What we need, Kant thinks, in order for there to be 'inner value' to the world, is a realm where we are not determined by space and time, a realm outside of, and prior to, space and time, wherein there can be genuine freedom. Kant is convinced that he is entitled to appeal to just such a realm, the 'noumenal' realm, wherein we enjoy genuine freedom to

¹ Italics in the quotations represent Kant's original emphases, represented in the Akademie edition by bold gothic script.

set ends. Theoretical reason cannot deliver knowledge of such a realm, but it does assist practical reason in reaching out to it. This is because theoretical reason, Kant is convinced, for independent reasons to do with securing the foundations of geometry, mathematics and causation, does teach us that space and time are features of our reception of the world, *rather than being in the world itself*. If they were not, Kant argues, how else would we enjoy the knowledge that we do, of geometry, mathematics, and causation? Theoretical reason has its limits. It knows how things *appear* in space and time, but it does not know how things fundamentally are, prior to the way in which they appear to us. Into this space of unknowing, practical reason can, and must, confidently strike, delivering the rational belief that we are genuinely free, outside of the strictures of space and time.

So, whatever we think of it, and even though some Kant commentators seem to wish that Kant did not do so, Kant chooses to talk, a lot, continuously through the 1780s and 90s, about our fundamental non-spatiality and non-temporality, especially in relation to freedom and morality. This notion of timeless noumenal freedom arises out of Kant's formidably named doctrine of 'transcendental idealism': the claim that all we can ever experience is the world as it is received through our spatial and temporal forms of intuition. Moral freedom, if it exists, and we must presuppose that it does, Kant thinks, must exist in the world prior to, and independently of, this spatio-and temporal reception. All that we can ever experience is 'that which appears', or the 'phenomenon' (literally 'that which appears'), and the whole history of observable human actions 'resides alone in phenomena, and not the moral cause' (*CF*, 7: 91).

Because the notion of a timeless noumenal freedom can seem so scandalous to our 'modern sensibilities', an attractive option is to construe transcendental idealism in less troublesome ways. The most popular alternative construal is that offered by Henry Allison². Speaking briskly, it goes like this: transcendental idealism simply encourages us to attach an appropriate epistemic humility to all our knowledge claims, as we reflect on the in-principle impossibility of ever stepping outside of our epistemic skins and adopting a God's eye-view point. When Kant talks about 'things in themselves', this concept is intended merely as an heuristic category, a 'shading' concept of the world as it is independently of our access to it, about which we cannot know or speculate. Why can we not know or meaningfully speculate about it? Well, because the instant we begin to speak about this world, we bring it within the pale of our conceptual schemas and categories, such that it is in principle no longer the world independent of our access to it. Our inability to know or speak of the 'noumenal

² Henry Allison, *Kant's Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983).

realm' or things-in-themselves arises from its function in our thought as a constantly disappearing horizon, that which is always on the other side of our conceptual vista, rather than from any robust ontological theory of things in themselves underlying or being behind appearances.

It is easy to see why this interpretation of Kant finds favour: it is breezily urbane and naturalistic, helpfully undergirding projects which attempt, for example, to generate a robust conception of normativity and value without metaphysically embarrassing commitments. Kant is, indeed, a vital resource for the whole philosophical industry of trying to get, in the area of moral or political normativity, 'something for nothing': the good, we might say, without the true. Nonetheless, I am convinced, and I am not alone, that such approaches to Kant's transcendental idealism are, exegetically speaking, way off the mark. The account I associate myself with, and have defended in previous publications, alongside commentators such as Karl Ameriks and Desmond Hogan³, is known as the 'noumenal affection' interpretation of Kant. According to this interpretation, the 'noumenal realm' is the ground of the world of appearances, whereby 'noumenal objects' affect us (hence 'noumenal *affection*'). When they 'appear to us', we call these appearances 'phenomena', or 'that which appears'. These noumenal objects bring about our experience, which experience is always mediated through our forms of intuition, space and time. Although we understand that all our experience is always on this side of this mediation, coming downstream of how we receive the world, we also understand that it is dependent upon the world as it is in itself, even though we cannot know anything substantial about this world, except that it does indeed ground our experience. So, as well as giving us 'noumenal affection', we also understand that we have a principled ignorance about noumenal reality, at least from the perspective of knowledge.

'Transcendental idealism', on the noumenal affection and ignorance interpretation, has three dimensions. First of all, it sets the limits to knowledge. Secondly, within those limits, knowledge is made secure. Thirdly, it opens up possibilities for thinking beyond those limits, once it is understood that what is within the limits need not apply to that which goes beyond the limits. That is to say, transcendental idealism retains epistemic humility about what we can know (Allison is correct up to a point), whilst opening up the possibility that the way things are is fundamentally different from the

³ See my *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: a Theological Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013). See also Karl Ameriks, *Kant's Theory of Mind: An Analysis of the Paralogisms of Pure Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), and Desmond Hogan, 'Noumenal Affection', *Philosophical Review*, 118/4 (2009), 501-32.

way things appear to be. Things appear to be determined, but this is just an appearance. We can believe in freedom without epistemic irresponsibility.

Once we are properly equipped with an accurate interpretation of transcendental idealism and noumenal freedom, we are ready to understand the type of transcendence that is really at work in Kant's philosophical religiosity⁴. The history of human actions, as with everything that appears, is the appearance of that which is fundamentally non-spatial and non-temporal, where there is no sense in which we move towards or further away from the noumenal dimension wherein morality resides. Everything that appears, all phenomena, are equidistant, equally disclosing and veiling of ultimate reality. As Kant puts it, 'actions here in the world are mere *Schemata* of the intelligible [actions]', where 'these appearances', the actions, are interconnected in accordance with empirical laws', as a '*phenomenon* (of the character)', where one 'imputes' a moral status 'to oneself', insofar 'as one cognizes one's own character only from the *phaenomenis*' (*R* 5612; see also A540/B568; A551/B579). The category of morality cannot even be used (or not straightforwardly) to describe how we appear, individually, collectively, or historically, but regards the 'human being' 'considered as noumenon' (*CJ*, 5: 435; see also A445-451/B 473-479; A531-557/B 559-B586; *E*, 8: 334; *Pr*, 4: 343-4; *CPrR*, 5: 95-102; *R*, 4225, 5611, 5612; *MetM*, 6: 280n). For this reason, Kant emphasizes the invisibility of moral action, stating, for example in the *Groundwork*, that 'it is absolutely impossible by means of experience to make out with complete certainty'

a single case in which the maxim of an action otherwise in conformity with duty rested simply on moral grounds and on the representation of one's duty. (*GW*, 4: 406; see also *GW*, 4: 407-410 and 4: 418; *MetM* 6: 447).

We need all of this in place fully to understand Kant's conception of autonomy. Autonomy never appears, for Kant, in space and time. Autonomy is only possible if there is a realm of noumenal freedom, where rational will is able to will itself, in its activity of end-setting. The 'self' who might be able to do this is not the empirical self of observation, or even of introspection, but what Kant calls the 'proper self', the self as a thing-in-itself, who, for Kant, is the self conceived of outside of space and time, in its noumenal transcendental freedom. Kant uses a range of synonyms to evoke this notion of the free, proper self, including the term the 'intelligible self', who lives in the 'intelligible world'.

⁴ For a fuller account of this, see my *Kant and the Divine: from Contemplation to the Moral Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), ch. 6, and 'Kant on Christianity, Religion, and Politics: Three Hopes, Three Limits', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 29.1 (2016), pp. 14-33.

Our empirical biographies are, like moving images of eternity, the mere appearance of our proper selves. ‘As a human being’, Kant writes, a person is ‘only the appearance of himself’ (GW, 4: 457-8), but ‘he is his proper self’ as

intelligence and in the laws of effects and actions in accordance with principles of an intelligible world, of which he knows nothing more than that in it reason alone, and indeed pure reason independent of sensibility, gives the law. (GW, 4: 457-8)

Whilst every rational individual participates in this ‘proper self-hood’, constituted by reason, in another sense, the proper self is not an ‘individual’, in the sense of being this or that empirical character. The ‘proper self’ does not even pick out something as distinctive as humanity, as Kant insists that ‘a law, if it is to hold morally’ cannot ‘hold only for human beings, as if other rational beings did not have to heed it’, as ‘the ground of obligation here must not be sought in the nature of the human being or in the circumstances of the world in which he is placed, but a priori simply in concepts of pure reason’ (GW, 4: 389). As Karl Ameriks explains it, the ‘self’ who authors the moral law is not a ‘particular individual’ but ‘the faculty of reason in general in contrast to *other faculties* (which cannot ground strict principles)’⁵. It is this faculty of reason that human beings participate in, by virtue of their noumenal freedom. To be autonomous is to participate in a non-egoistical, individuality-transcending act of reason.

Here, I suggest, Kant exhibits a philosophical religiosity, which invokes a transcendent dimension underlying and sustaining everything that appears, which dimension is a source of spiritual and moral challenge and consolation. The notion of ‘transcendence’ derives etymologically from the Latin term *transcendere*, ‘to go beyond’. The concept of transcendence need not enter our thought as an absolute presence, possession, and foundation, but can act subversively upon all our thinking, by marking a space that ‘goes beyond’ our knowledge, experience and competence. Kant has, I submit, a robust conception of the transcendent, that which always and everywhere ‘goes beyond’, provided by his transcendental idealism.

We note, then, that the possibility of autonomy is *itself* the great philosophical-religious hope of Kant’s whole system⁶. Only if there is a dimension of reality beyond mechanism, is end-setting, and

⁵ Karl Ameriks, ‘Vindicating Autonomy: Kant, Satre, and O’Neill’, in *Kant and Moral Autonomy*, ed. by Oliver Sensen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 53-70, p. 69.

⁶ For the full defence and exposition of this claim, see my *Kant and the Divine*, chs. 11-13.

so autonomy possible. The alternative is a universe without end-setting, and without freedom, which Kant tells us repeatedly, would be a sort of ‘desert’ with no ‘inner value’. Notice then, the way in which believing in the possibility of autonomy already, and in itself, leans into what we might call religious hope: the hope that things are not as they seem, and that there is a dimension to reality which is saturated with reason, wherein which we find our ‘proper selves’. Once this is understood, we get a better perspective on Kant’s so-called ‘moral argument’ for the existence of God, the claim that belief in God is required to sustain the possibility of happiness in proportion to virtue. This argument is typically, and unhappily, presented as a sort of gratuitous ‘add-on’ to an ethical system which is supposed to have no need for hope, divine sanction, or favour. But I would suggest the picture is more this: the most significant move into something like hope, for Kant, is to believe in freedom at all; once this move is made, we are already in a transcendent space of reasons, and not so very far away from the possibility of God, or, at least, the possibility of engaging in a God-like activity of harmonious end-setting. Human freedom is, of course, no more than an imperfect echo of perfect divine freedom. Human beings can choose to do other than the good. But when, and insofar as, human beings choose morality in freedom, they engage in a God-like activity. It is to the divine nature of such harmonious end-setting that I now turn, where we explore the divine-features of the harmony and plenitude that characterise Kant’s ‘Kingdom of Ends’⁷.

III Harmony, plenitude, glory

It is the activity of rational end-setting, that has value, and not any particular end. This nuance can be hard to grasp. A failure to get the nuance correct leads, in turn, to overly traditional or overly constructivist readings of Kant’s autonomy. Overly traditional, if we make the move from the claim that it is our nature to be purposeful, which Kant affirms, to the different claim that there is a purpose, or a finite set of purposes, which constitutes our nature. This view Kant rejects, as it would present an external ‘object’ of ‘human perfection’ prior to the act of freedom itself. But, at the same time, and contrary to constructivist readings of Kant, such as we find in Christine Korsgaard, we do not ourselves confer value upon our end-setting. How would this work? How could we confer value upon

⁷ For a full defence and exposition of the position set out in the following section, see my *Kant and the Divine*, chs. 17-18. See also my *The Intolerable God: Kant’s Theological Journey* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), ch. 8.

conferring value?⁸ Rather, it is our end-setting which has value (whatever we think of it), as an expression of Kant's commitment to freedom being the 'inner value of the world'.

The project of end-setting is valuable, not because I, or we, think it is, or project this value upon it. Rather it is valuable because it arises from the essential nature of reason as such, and where the essential activity of our 'proper self' is constituted by reason as such, and so, also, by freedom, because both freedom and reason involve acting according to ends set, rather than being determined by prior causes⁹.

When Kant valorises end-setting as such, as an expression of the inner-value of the world that is freedom, this does not mean that we can, individually, set whatever ends we choose. What is valuable, we have seen, is what I have called the 'project of end-setting' as such. The 'proper self' who attaches itself to this project, will seek always and everywhere to maximise this project of end-setting, attempting to facilitate the greatest amount of harmonious and compossible end-setting amongst a rational community of end-setters. That which a noumenal being cannot rationally do is this: intend to violate the project of end-setting as such. This project is valuable, not because it is my project, but because it expresses the essential nature of reason as such, and the essence of every noumenal being is to be constituted by reason. So, the rational noumenal self will value the project and activity of end-setting as such. The rational noumenal self will seek to realize those ends, their own and the ends of others, that are compatible with all rational noumenal selves realizing their ends. Some ends are incompatible with ourselves setting further ends, and other end-setters also having ends, and these in a proper sense 'violate' our nature, and 'contradict' reason. We do wrong, then, when we deny the ability of ourselves, or of others, to set their own ends, and when we fail to realize ends that are compatible with the ability of others to do the same.

The effect of all this ('the project of end-setting as such', and so on) can, in my experience be rather dizzyingly abstract and vertiginous. Perhaps an example will help. Imagine that a group of us decide to go on a day-trip together. We hire a coach, which has exactly as many seats as persons. As long as each person occupies one seat, and one seat alone, we have a nice example of a harmonious plenitude of end-setting. We all have the end of sitting on the bus, and all these ends can be harmoniously

⁸ See Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 128. For this criticism of Korsgaard, and in what follows, I am indebted to Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 92.

⁹ For a full account of this, see my *Kant and the Divine*, chs. 6-10.

willed, as long as nobody takes more than one seat. Although it would be a peculiar way of describing a coach-trip, we could say that we are a harmonious community of autonomous end-setters, willing that which can be universalised harmoniously. Perhaps now, though, I decide that I would like to have two seats. One for me, and one for my ego, or my bag. Now the project of universal and harmonious end-setting has been violated, in that I have violated the ability of others to set and realise the end of sitting down on the coach.

Reason, the activity of end-setting, is valuable in itself. This intrinsic value is contagious to any being who engages in the activity of end-setting: if the activity of end-setting is intrinsically valuable, the source of end-setting, the end-setter, or, as we would more usually say, the ‘person’, has value in themselves. Hence, a celebrated feature of Kant’s moral philosophy, that every ‘rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion’ (*GW*, 4: 428). Kant calls the moral community where noumenal selves value the project and activity of end-setting, aptly enough, the ‘Kingdom of Ends’. He writes that ‘in this way a world of rational beings (intelligible world) as a kingdom of ends is possible, through the giving of their own laws by all persons as members’ (*GW*, 4: 438).

The case that I want to make is this: that the Kingdom of Ends, for Kant, is a state of plenitude and harmony, and that this imitates and replicates a defining characteristic of the being of God, as Kant understands it¹⁰. I will make the case in three brisk stages: first of all, I will set out the way in which the rationalist conception of God is marked by harmony and plenitude. Secondly, I explore the way in which the Kingdom of Ends maps onto this. Thirdly, I look at how Kant reconfigures a traditional conception of *contemplating* the harmony and plenitude of God, whereby, instead, we *enact* the harmony and plenitude ourselves, through our reciprocal *willing*.

First of all: I consider God in relation to the concepts of plenitude and harmony. It belongs to the nature of God, in the rationalist tradition that Kant receives from Leibniz and Baumgarten, that God expresses in God-self all compossible actualities in a systematic harmony. In 1763 Kant describes the conception of God as that of a ‘Being’ who ‘contains within it the grounds not only of reality but also of all possibility’ (*OPA*, 2: 152-53). In the being of God is found the maximal set of compossible realities, as ‘in God everything is reality’ (*Opt*, 2: 34). The ‘possibilities of things themselves’ are uncreated aspects of the divine understanding. In God, Kant finds, ‘everything’ must ‘harmonise in the highest possible degree’, such that the divine will must have the ‘highest desire’ for the ‘greatest

¹⁰ For a full account of this, see my *Kant and the Divine*, chs. 17-18.

consequences' that flow from the 'essence of things'. As Kant puts it, 'the possibilities of things themselves, which are given through the divine nature, harmonise with his great desire', and so 'goodness and perfection' themselves 'consist in this harmony' (*OPA*, 2: 91).

This conception of God Kant carries in a more-or-less pristine form into his critical work. In the first *Critique* Kant describes the concept of God as the *ens realissimum*, a most real being possessing all perfections and attributes. God is the 'All of reality (*omnitudo realitatis*)', which 'contains as it were the entire storehouse of material from which all possible predicates of things can be taken' (A 575/B603 - A 576/B 604). Everything created can be characterised as a limited echo of this 'All of reality', where some possibilities are made actual, but not others:

All true negations are then nothing but **limits**, which they could not be called unless they were grounded in the unlimited (the All). (A 575/B 603 - A 576/B 604)

Each of God's ends is a realisation of an aspect of the divine being, and the harmonious realisation of all of God's ends constitutes God's own happiness, God's 'well-pleaseness with himself which causes him to make these possibilities actual' (*LPR*, 28: 1061). God necessarily, albeit as an expression of perfect freedom, wills to bring about the maximum possible degree of created reality and perfection. This arises as an expression of God's own nature as the 'all of reality'. God's creation of the world, is an expression and emanation of the very being of God, which is, in part, constituted by, the fullest possible plenitude of all compossible realities:

The chief rule of the perfection of the world is that it be in the highest degree complete, that everything exist which is possible, and that nothing which is at all capable of existence be lacking either in the chain of beings or in the multiplicity of the changes they undergo. (*R* 3703)

We could say that, for Kant, God's act of creation is the realization of all real possibilities that are compatible with each other. And, it is here that the relationship to the Kingdom of Ends becomes clear. The very heart of autonomy is: the rational willing of all harmonious and compossible ends. Kant identifies this clearly when he writes, in the *Groundwork*, that God, and God alone, has a volition that 'is of itself necessarily in accord with the law' (*GW*, 4: 414), such that God's 'maxims necessarily harmonize with the laws of autonomy' (*GW*, 4: 439). The state of an autonomous community is a condition of harmony and plenitude. In this, the community itself resembles the divine nature: in both, there is the full and plenitudinous expression of all compossible ends.

Kant repeatedly draws attention to the harmony and plenitude that constitutes the Kingdom of Ends. It is a state where ‘all sorts of possible ends’ (*MetM*, 6: 392) are pursued, which is to say, all compossible and harmonious ends. In the second *Critique*, Kant calls the ‘concept of perfection in the *practical* sense’ the ‘fitness or adequacy of a thing for all sorts of ends’ (*CPrR*, 5: 41). It is for this reason that Kant calls on us to pursue both our own perfection, including out ‘*talent*’ and our ‘*skill*’ (*CPrR*, 5: 41), and the happiness of others, by furthering ‘the ends of others’ (*GW*, 4: 430). Significantly, Kant characterizes the ‘supreme perfection’ that is ‘God’ in terms of an ‘adequacy of this being to all ends in general’ (*CPrR*, 5: 41).

As we have seen, it belongs to our natures to be purposive as such, where a failure to be purposive, and to support the universal project of purposiveness, is a contradiction of our nature and our essence. In this state, each rational being ‘necessarily wills that all the capacities in him be developed’, as these capacities are ‘given to him for all sorts of possible purposes’ (*GW*, 4: 423). Far from being a rather static and buttoned-up state, of implausibly finding happiness through the habitual oppression of desires, or as Bertrand Russell put it, being obliged to be nice to people we cannot stand, the Kingdom of Ends is as Kant puts it, a ‘systematic union’ (*GW*, 4: 333), which is a state teeming with desire, if we understand that this must be the ‘free desire’ that Kant talks about in the third *Critique*: ‘the freedom of his faculty of desire’, constituted by that ‘good will’, which ‘alone’ gives our ‘existence’ an ‘absolute value’, in contrast to an inclination or an impulse, brought about from elsewhere, which would belong to us only insofar as we are mere ‘link[s] in nature’ (*CJ*, 4: 443).

The product of such harmonious ‘free desire’ is, Kant tells us, ‘*happiness*’, where ‘*everything goes according to the wish and will*’ of every ‘rational being in the [moral] world’ (*CPrR*, 5: 124). Our non-egotistical participation in ‘the nature that is in us to be purposive’ is our membership in the Kingdom of Ends, which is the ‘whole of all ends in systematic connection’ (*GW*, II, 4: 433). Insofar as we participate in this structure of reason as such, end-setting as such, we participate in something that shares the harmony and plenitude of the divine, which in itself and by itself brings blessedness, or happiness.

In setting out this notion of the Kingdom of Ends, Kant is offering his distinctive take on a well-established Platonic paradigm, which Kant certainly knew about from Leibniz, which stretches back into figures such as Philo and Plotinus. Precisely in the context of describing the Kingdom of Ends, Kant himself acknowledges his debt to Leibniz’s conception of the ‘realm of grace’. As it is found in Leibniz, this is the notion of a ‘glorious community’ of reciprocal and harmonious rational minds,

contemplating one another. In Leibniz, and also in Kant's early work¹¹, before he feels the need to embrace his 'all-or-nothing' conception of transcendental freedom, the paradigm and vehicle of the interaction is conceived of as *contemplation*, rather than *willing*. In his *Elements of Natural Law*, Leibniz explains how the goodness of the world is, as Christia Mercer shows, 'increased through the existence of perceiving and reflecting minds'¹². As Leibniz expresses it:

If God did not have rational Creatures in the world, he would have the same harmony, but devoid of Echo, the same beauty, but devoid of reflection and refraction or multiplication. On this account, the wisdom of God required rational Creatures, in which things might multiply themselves. In this way one mind might be a kind of world in a mirror... or some kind of point collecting visual rays.¹³

In a remarkable passage, as Mercer puts it, Leibniz skillfully blends 'modern scientific images' of 'lenses' and 'magnification', with 'ancient' notions of 'shadows and light'¹⁴, in order to explain the emergence of 'glory' in a reflective community:

But as a double reflection can occur in vision, once in the lens of the eye and once in the lens of a tube, the latter magnifying the former, so there is a double reflection in thinking: for since every mind is like a mirror, there will be one mirror in our mind, another in other minds. Thus, if there are many mirrors, that is, many minds recognizing our goods, there will be a greater light, the mirrors blending the light not only in the [individual] eye but also among each other. The gathered splendor produces glory.¹⁵

Now, Kant also talks about 'glory' in the context of a community of rational created agents, where the state of the '*highest good*' is described, by Kant, as 'the glory of God' (*CPrR*, 5: 131). Tracking

¹¹ For an account of Kant's early work in this connection, see my *Kant and the Divine*, chs. 1-3.

¹² Christia Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics: Its Origins and Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 217-220. For this discussion of Platonism in Leibniz, I am indebted to Mercer's book, especially chs. 5-6.

¹³ Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, ed. Akademie der Wissenschaft, Berlin Verlag, 1923, VI i 438, translated in *G.W. Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, ed. Leroy E. Loemker, 2nd ed., (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1969), p. 137. For this quote, I am indebted to Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics*, p. 218.

¹⁴ Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics*, p. 220.

¹⁵ Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, VI i 464, translated in *G.W. Leibniz: Philosophical Papers and Letters*, 444. Quoted in Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics*, p. 219.

the similarities and differences between Leibniz and Kant here illuminates some of Kant's distinctive commitments. The language of glorification, in the scholastic tradition, referred to the enjoyment of God's own self-communication: to enjoy God's own self-communication is to glorify God. We find Leibniz's use of the term mapping onto this comfortably. The 'gathered splendor' that 'produces glory', arises from contemplating the many created goods, which are emanations of God's own self-communication of God's own goodness. Leibniz writes that:

Thus God alone is the primary unity, or the original simple substance, of which all created or derivative monads are products. They are generated by the continual flashes of divinity, so to speak, which pour out from moment to moment, and they are bounded by the receptivity of the created thing, to which limitation is essential.¹⁶

The 'contemplation of the universal Harmony of things', Leibniz explains, is even equivalent to the 'beatific vision or the intuition of God, face to face', as 'GOD or the Mind of the Universe is nothing other than the harmony of things, or the principle of beauty in them'¹⁷.

We can see here how Kant re-deploys and reconfigures this traditional language of glory. Kant sings the same song, but has changed the dominant key. He does not construe the glorious community through the categories of contemplation, and understanding. These, for Kant, would involve freedom-destroying receptivity. The key category, because of the centrality of freedom, becomes that of willing. The community that is the Kingdom of Ends approaches 'glorification' not by contemplation of God, nor of God through creation, but through autonomy, as, Kant writes, 'nothing glorifies God more than what is most estimable in the world':

respect for his command, observance of the holy duty that his law lays upon us, when there is added to this his magnificent plan of crowning such a beautiful order with corresponding happiness. (*CPrR*, 5: 131)

Kant grafts aspects of the divine nature, traditionally conceived, onto the moral community itself, of which our proper selves are members. In a sense, for Kant, 'glory' even remains the participation in God's own self-communication, where the key shift is where the heart of divinity is to be found. The heart of divinity, that which is good without limit, is the setting of harmonious and universalisable

¹⁶ Leibniz, *Monadology*, §47.

¹⁷ Leibniz, *Sämtliche Schriften und Briefe*, VI i 499, quoted by Mercer, *Leibniz's Metaphysics*, p. 213.

ends, autonomously willing the moral law. When we participate in such willing, we do, indeed, participate in a sort of self-communication of divinity: divinity is, here, what divinity does, and divinity wills its own rational willing. Hence, our participation in such willing approaches, Kant correctly identifies, ‘glorification’. We become our proper selves, insofar as we participate in the non-egotistical structure of reason, and so, insofar as we become divine.

In regarding Kant’s glorious community, we have a window upon an alternative Enlightenment, neither Christian, nor secular, but evocative of perennial occidental longings, for transcendence, divinity, and happiness-without-end. Behind Kant’s concept of autonomy, there are dreams of participation in, and enactment of, the divine. Divinity, in the Platonic strand that Kant works in, brings its own free constraints: those of harmony, universality, and plenitude, without which the divine lacks its divinity. One question that public theology might bring to the surface is this: do we find lurking behind some contemporary dreams of secular autonomy elements of a darker and less constrained divinity, at work without these constraints? So, the theologian will be particularly concerned to detect ‘small gods’ lurking in apparently ‘secular’ world-views: where salvific aspirations are attached to an idea of the nation, freedom, the ‘people’, science, or a great leader. If there is no God, there ought indeed to be, therefore, no god and no gods.

Abbreviations

References to Kant, with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, refer to the *Akademie* edition, *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer, later Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1900-). These references are cited by volume: page number, and are prefaced by an abbreviation of the title of the work, as set out below. Citations to the first *Critique* are to the first (‘A’) or second (‘B’) edition.

CJ *Kritik der Urtheilskraft* (1790). *Immanuel Kant. Critique of the Power of Judgement*, ed. by Paul Guyer, trans. by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: 167-484.

CPrR *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788). *Critique of Practical Reason in Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), trans. and ed. by Mary J. Gregor, 5: 3-309.

E Kant’s notes on his copy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, given in Benno Erdmann, *Nachträge zu Kants Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Kiel: Lipsius & Tischer, 1881).

GW *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (1786). *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals in Practical Philosophy*, 4: 385-463.

LPR *Philosophische Religionslehre nach Pölitz* (1783-84). *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion in Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. by

Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 28: 993-1126.

MetM Die Metaphysik der Sitten. The Metaphysics of Morals (1797) in Practical Philosophy, 6: 203-493.

MetMr Metaphysik Mrongovius (1782-1783), Lectures on Metaphysics, 29: 747-940.

MoMr Moral Mrongovius (1782-1783), 27: 1395-1581.

OPA Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes (1763). The Only Possible Argument in support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God, in *Immanuel Kant: Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, trans. and ed. by David Walford and Ralf Meerbote, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2: 63-163.

Opt Versuch einiger Betrachtungen über den Optimismus (1759). An attempt at some reflections on optimism, in *Immanuel Kant: Theoretical Philosophy, 1755-1770*, trans. and ed. by David Walford and Ralf Meerbote, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 2: 63-163.

R Reflexionen (1753-1804). Reflections, in *Notes and Fragments*, ed. by Paul Guyer, trans. by Curtis Bowman, Paul Guyer, Frederick Rauscher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17: 229-19: 654.