



Is there something of divinity regarding Kant's account of reason?

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Abstract

This article undertakes a crucial examination of Kant's depiction of the interconnectedness between human reason and the divine. The argument posits that Kant conceptualizes reason as inherently founded on a divine basis. The primary objective of this article is not to delve into whether Kant endorses or dismisses specific Christian doctrines, or if his portrayal of reason aligns with a particular strand of Christian thought. Instead, the aim is to chart an interpretive middle path – one that embraces the profound philosophical underpinnings embedded in Kant's rationalist legacy while recognizing the inherent limitations he imposes on human reason. The conclusion drawn is that Kant's account of reason tends towards the divine, though the precise nature of this interconnectedness remains shrouded in mystery.

Keywords Kant · Practical reason · Theoretical reason · God

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Introduction

Kant distinguishes between the theoretical reason and the practical reason, and by means of the latter, as with a magician's wand, he revivifies God, which theoretical reason had killed.¹

While Immanuel Kant's theological and religious commitments have become a focal point of contemporary research, an essential aspect of his philosophical project remains insufficiently addressed: the extent to which Kant's conception of reason exhibits a divine foundation.² The ongoing discourse concerning Kant's theological commitment has led to significant divisions among contemporary scholars.³ However, the relationship Kant presents between human reason and God has been rarely explored. This article seeks to address this gap by demonstrating that there is a substantial amount of textual evidence in Kant's work that emphasizes the divine nature of practical reason and human rationality in more general terms.

This article unfolds through three distinct phases. The first phase focuses on examining the diverse interpretations of Kant's theological and religious stance, shedding light on the current state of debate. The second phase adopts an analytical approach, introducing three guiding principles for interpreting Kant's treatment of reason. These principles—designated as the *Principle of Deficient Reason*, the *Principle of Rational Faith*, and the *Principle of Divine Reason*—provide a framework for examining the interconnectedness of reason and God in Kant's writing.

¹ Heinrich Heine, *Religion and Philosophy in Germany*, trans., John Snodgrass (Boston: Beacon, 1959), pp.119.

² Reference to Kant, apart from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, refer to the Akademie edition, *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1990-) Unless otherwise stated, translations are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1998-). Citations to the first *Critique* are to the A (first edition) and B (second edition). The following abbreviations are used: *CPrR*=*Critique of Practical Reason*, *OPA*=*The Only Possible Argument*, *GS*=*Gesammelte*, *LPR*=*Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, *OP*=*Opus Postumum*, *OIT*=*What does it mean to orientate One-self in Thinking*, *CJ*=*Critique of Judgement*, *NE*=*New Elucidations*, *OPR*=*On a recently prominent tone of Superiority in Philosophy*, *Pr*=*Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics that Will be Able to Come Forward in Science*, *Refl*=*Notes and Fragments*, *Rel*=*Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, *WRP*=*What Real Progress has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?*, *MPT*=*On the Miscarriage of all philosophical trials in Theodicy*, *CF*=*Conflict of the Faculties*, *JL*=*Jäsche Logik*; *EaT*=*The End of all Things*; *MM*=*The Metaphysics of Morals*; *Corr*=*Correspondence*; *Lec.E*=*Lectures on Ethics*.

³ The most extreme differences can be found in the works of: Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Is it Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant," *Modern Theology* 14, no.1 (1998), pp. 1-18); Gordon E. Michalson, *Kant and the Problem of God* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishes, 1999); Gordon E. Michalson, *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1990); Chris L. Firestone and Stephen Palmquist, *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006); Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press,2008); Chris L. Firestone, *Kant and the Question of Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Christopher Insole, *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), and Allen Wood, *Kant and Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

Finally, in the third phase, the conclusion is drawn that Kant's endorsement of an inherently divine aspect within practical reason is grounded in his belief in the existence of God as a postulate of pure practical reason.⁴ The idea of God lies wholly in reason⁵; and this message is repeated in various other places in the Critical corpus.⁶ This interpretation contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of Kant's philosophical landscape, one that extends beyond the realm of religious theology and further strengthens the ties between reason and divinity within his philosophy.

Kant and his commentators

In the realm of Kantian scholarship, three major interpretive camps have dominated discussions regarding the interpretation of Kant's philosophical theology. The first camp, often referred to as the traditional approach, finds its proponents in scholars such as John E. Hare,⁷ Philip L. Quinn,⁸ and Keith Ward.⁹ Although these commentators have engaged with various facets of Kant's philosophical ideas, their consensus largely centers on a fundamental notion: Kant posits that reason itself possesses divinity, implying that God is not an actual entity but rather a construct that arises from the necessities of reason. This doesn't equate to stating that reason itself is God in an anthropomorphic sense; instead, it signifies that reason is the aspect of human beings that distinguishes them from all other creatures and simultaneously relates them analogically to the creator. We are all rational beings like God (albeit creatures), and we are the sole rational beings among creatures. Traditional interpreters also argue that Kant completely reduces religion to nothing more than morality.¹⁰ The traditional position on Kant can be distilled into two primary perspectives. First, it asserts that our reason is coextensive with God's, perhaps akin to Aristotle's concept of *Nous*. Second, it maintains that God is not an actual entity but rather a construct that arises from the necessities of reason. In later sections of this article, it is demonstrated that Kant endorses the first thesis but rejects the second.

The second significant trend in recent years is the theological affirmative approach. This trend was fully codified in 2006 by Stephen Palmquist and Chris L. Firestone.¹¹ While this is a multifaceted trend with many interpreters deviating on

⁴ A572/B600-A590/B618.

⁵ *CF*, 7:58.

⁶ A327/B384, A567/B596, A621/B649; *Lec. E*, 27:723; *OIT*, 8:142–3; *Rel*, 6:174.

⁷ John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996).

⁸ Philip L. Quinn, "Christian Atonement and Kantian Justification," *Faith and Philosophy* 3, no.4 (1986), pp.440-462.

⁹ Keith Ward, *The Development of Kant's Views on Ethics* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1972).

¹⁰ Rem B. Edwards, *Reason and Religion* (Washington, D. C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1979), p. 46.

¹¹ See Palmquist and Firestone, *Kant's New Religion*, p.2–4. Also see, Stephen L. Palmquist, *A Comprehensive Commentary on Kant's Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (Malden, MA: Wiley Blackwell, 2016); "Immanuel Kant: A Christian Philosopher," *Faith and Philosophy* 29, no.3 (1989), pp.

key Kantian themes, they generally subscribe to the view that there exists explicit textual evidence within Kant's philosophical oeuvre that aligns with various doctrinal tenets of the Christian faith.¹²

The third interpretive trend, Kantian constructivism, has assumed a prominent role in philosophical discussions on moral obligations and, more broadly, the function and structure of practical reasoning over the past thirty years. The concept of Kantian constructivism was initially articulated by John Rawls in his Dewey Lectures on "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory"¹³ and further developed by his students, Christine Korsgaard and Onora O'Neill.¹⁴ While moral constructivists may differ on various meta-theoretical matters,¹⁵ they agree on a central idea: that 'moral values and moral norms are not discovered, or revealed to us as if by the gods, but rather constructed by human agents for a specific purpose'.¹⁶ Kantian constructivists maintain the perspective that Kant's work displays no textual commitment to God, asserting that God serves no purpose within Kant's practical or theoretical philosophy. It is important to note that constructivist interpreters of Kant represent a variation of the traditional interpreters, as they sideline Kant's theological and religious ideas, deeming them superfluous given Kant's alleged intention to reduce them to ethics.

The interpretation of Kant provided in this article differs from the perspectives outlined above in two ways. First, unlike theological affirmative readings, the focus of this article is not to suggest that Kant's account of reason is consistent with 'a' Christian tradition, or whether Kant accepts or rejects this or that Christian doctrine.¹⁷ That focus, as Allen Wood correctly notes, 'must always rest on some dogmatic assumption about what Christian doctrine is – that is, about how it should be interpreted; and it must dismiss all rational arguments as irrelevant to how Christian

Footnote 11 (continued)

65–75; "To Tell the Truth on Kant and Christianity: Will the Real Affirmative Interpreter Please Stand Up!," *Faith and Philosophy* 29, no.3(2012), pp.340–346.

¹² See, Firestone and Jacobs, *In Defence of Kant's Religion*; Chris L. Firestone, *Kant and Theology at the Boundaries of Reason* (London: Routledge, 2009).

¹³ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice, Revised Edition* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999a); "Kantian Constructivism in Moral Philosophy", in Samuel Freeman, ed., *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999b), pp. 303-359; "Themes in Kant's Moral Philosophy", in Samuel Freeman, ed., *Collected Papers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press), pp. 497-529; *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* ed., Barbara Herman (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press), 2000.

¹⁴ Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996a); "The Authority of Reflection", In Onora O'Neill, ed., *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 90-131. Also see, Onora O'Neill, *Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); *Acting on Principle: An Essay on Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); *Kant on Reason and Religion: The Tanner Lectures on Human Value* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).

¹⁵ For a detailed set of essays which discuss the various ways commentators interpret moral constructivism see, Carla Bagnoli, *Constructivism in Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.1.

¹⁷ Peter Byrne argues that Kant was not a Theist or a Christian in anything like the standard ways those stances are understood. See, Peter Byrne, *Kant on God* (London: Routledge, 2017), p.2.

doctrine ought to be interpreted'.¹⁸ Second, it is demonstrated that Kantian constructivists such as Korsgaard and O'Neill misrepresent Kant when they assert that God has no function or role within Kant's account of practical or theoretical reason. The aim is to account for the divine characteristics of Kant's understanding of reason and its connection to God.

Finally, there is one more meta-interpretive aspect that warrants attention – how interpreters construe Kant's account of Christianity and the Christian tradition in a monolithic manner. The theological tradition is inherently porous and multifaceted, making it challenging to speak of a singular Christian tradition in the modern world. Kant is explicit on this point; he specifically refers to the Lutheran-Pietist tradition, the tradition in which he received. In his own philosophy and his *Religionsschrift*, Kant offers insights into the dogmatic lectures at the Theological Faculty in Königsberg. Moreover, in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant proposes four principles of scriptural exegesis, illustrating his criticism of Lutheran theology. It is crucial to remember that Kant has a specific reference to a particular dogmatic tradition – Lutheran dogmatics. In this context, Christopher Insole correctly asserts that Kant 'explicitly moves away from any theological tradition of which he could have been a recipient, including these influenced by Luther, and by Leibniz'.¹⁹ However, it is not the focus of this article to determine whether Kant accepts or rejects core Lutheran doctrines. Engaging in such an endeavor would risk the article succumbing to its own criticism.

Despite Insole's astute observations, one of the limitations in the recent work *Kant and the Divine* (2020) is its tendency to overlook the diversity within the Christian theological tradition.²⁰ While this study is indebted to Insole's work and occasionally aligns and overlaps with ideas he presented, this article's primary value is its attempt to revise Insole's earlier stance on key features of Kant's theology. For instance, Insole is adamant that Kant 'is not' and 'cannot be a Christian',²¹ while the approach adopted in this article maintains a more neutral stance on that question. Moreover, Insole's book depicts Kant as viewing reason itself as divine,²² whereas the interpretation presented here takes a more cautious approach to Kant's position on this matter. Put simply, it refrains from imposing the label of a Christian

¹⁸ Allen Wood, *Kant and Religion*, p. 26.

¹⁹ Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p. 142; 278–9; and 307.

²⁰ In Insole's defense he does specify that when he talks of the tradition of Christian Theology, he is directly referring to the Pietist tradition Kant received from thinkers such as August Hermann Francke, Christian Thomasius, and later Martin Knutzen. However, it has been one point of criticism that his view on the theological tradition is slightly myopic. See, James DiCenso, "Critical Notice of Christopher J. Insole: *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law* (Review)," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, 92, no.3 (2022), pp. 183–192; Chris L. Firestone, "Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law (Review)," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 61, no.1 (2023), pp. 164–66. For Insole's position, see *Kant and the Divine*, p. 11.

²¹ Insole makes this point most explicit halfway through his book when he writes, 'Kant does not even manage the base-line Christianity requisites to qualify as a Christian heretic', p. 300.

²² Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p.2.

theologian or a secular philosopher on Kant. Instead, it reads Kant on his terms as *einen 'Philosophischen Religionsforscher'*.²³

Having detailed the major interpretive camps that engage with Kant's treatment of God, the following section will delve into a detailed analysis of the three principles used to assess the divine character of Kant's account of reason.

The three principles

The first principle, labelled the *Principle of Deficient Reason* (hereafter, *PDR*), is relatively uncontroversial. It addresses the epistemological and ontological status assigned by Kant to reason and its connection with God. (*PDR*) can be articulated as follows:

(*PDR*): Theoretical reason, as opposed to practical reason, exhibits deficiencies in comprehending the divine *in concreto* (a posteriori).

Since God is an 'idea of reason, not a possible object of empirical cognition, no sensory content is available from a theoretical standpoint'.²⁴ Kant ardently acknowledges the limitations of our theoretical knowledge concerning God's existence, favoring faith (*glauben*) over knowledge (*Wissen*). Kant, throughout his life consistently emphasizes the inherent limitations of human reasoning, recognizing that reason can err and, as a result, not all things can be demonstrably proven. However, it is crucial to understand that 'Kant is not opposed to the idea of rational, speculate assertoric assents regarding things-in-themselves; he is just claiming that they do not count as knowledge'.²⁵ As Rescher aptly notes, we can 'meaningfully assume or suppose (and indeed posit or postulate) such things' because we 'have a cognitive (or, at any rate, intellectual) route to things-in-themselves independent of our outright knowledge of them'.²⁶ Therefore, the route to meaningfully assuming or supposing God's existence can be supplied from a practical standpoint. Indeed, Kant says 'the idea of God and the conviction of his existence can be met only in reason',²⁷ for we can 'presuppose the existence of a highest being, but we cannot demonstrate it'.²⁸ That is, not in practical terms, but can yet have a cognition of God by analogy.²⁹

Kant's explicit articulation of this position can be found in the *Prolegomena*, where he asserts that 'the *ens realissimum*, is a being wholly unknowable to us regarding what it contains'.³⁰ Kant maintains that we cannot fully comprehend the

²³ *Rel*, 6:13.

²⁴ Wood, *Kant and Religion*, p. 5.

²⁵ Chignell, "Belief in Kant," p.345–50.

²⁶ Rescher, *Kant and the Reach of Reason*, p.9.

²⁷ *WRP*, 8:142.

²⁸ *WRP*, 8:121.

²⁹ *WRP*, 20:280.

³⁰ *Prol*, 4:358, 4:360.

nature of God. Divine attributes remain enigmatic X's that we represent through analogy.³¹ Despite the limitations of reasons cognitive ability to comprehend the idea of God, Kant claims that we can have 'real, positive cognition' of God, albeit cognition of a special kind, which he calls 'cognition by analogy' and elsewhere 'symbolic cognition.'³²

Kant assertions are most emphatic in the *Prolegomena*, but similar sentiments can be found in various other texts, including the *Critiques*.³³ Importantly, Kant contends that 'they (unknown X's) must not, for that reason be declared also to be impossible'.³⁴ While theoretical reasoning can demonstrate that these things are not impossible, it is practical reason that demands our belief.³⁵

The second principle, the *Principle of Rational Faith* (hereafter, *PRF*), is intended for readers who contend that Kant, as he matures, abandons his belief in God. Textual evidence demonstrates that Kant maintains his belief in God throughout his life, and crucially, his belief is rooted in practical reason or what Kant terms 'pure rational faith' (*Reiner rationaler Glaube*),³⁶ not revelation or 'ecclesiastical faith' (*Kirchenglaube*). *PRF* can be understood as follows:

(*PRF*): Both practical reason and revelation can engender robust belief in God, indicating the absence of any incompatibility between reason (*Vernunft*) and belief/faith (*Glaube*).³⁷

(*PRF*) demonstrates that Kant does not reject belief based upon revelation and scripture (if properly interpreted).³⁸ Instead, it is just that reason is sufficient (for all morally significant religious beliefs) and that revelation is to be interpreted through the needs of practical reason. Pure rational faith and revelation constitute two concentric circles, both having the ability to ground properly formed religious belief, however practical reason grounds it more effectively.

(*PRF*) does not intend to provide an exhaustive account of Kant's belief system, a topic that had garnered significant attention in recent time.³⁹ Instead, it seeks to

³¹ *Prol*, 4:358; *CJ*, 5:353.

³² I am indebted to Samantha Matherne for making this observation in Kant's writing. See, Samantha Matherne, "Cognition by Analogy and the Possibility of Metaphysics," in *Kant's Prolegomena: A Critical Guide*, eds Peter Thielke (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 215–234. For Kant, see, *Prol*, 4:358; *CJ*, 5:353.

³³ *Prol*, 4:361, 4:357, *CPrR*, 5:353.

³⁴ A290/B347; A291/B347.

³⁵ *CPrR* 5:119–121, 134–141.

³⁶ See, *WDO*, 8:142. Kant expresses this in the *Religion* as 'pure religious faith' and 'rational faith' (*Rel*, 6:103).

³⁷ Kant rejects Jacobi's attempt to separate faith from reason in *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* See, 8:143.

³⁸ *MM*, 6:488.

³⁹ For readers interested in this specific questions, see Wood, *Kant and Religion*; Christopher Insole, "Free Belief: The Medieval Heritage in Kant's Moral Faith,"; Chignell, "Belief in Kant"; Leslie Stevenson, "Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge," *Kantian Review* 7 (2003):72–101; Lawrence Pasternack, "Kant on Knowledge, Opinion, and the Threshold of Assent," in *Rethinking Kant Volume*, ed. Oliver Thorndike (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2014), 55–74.

clarify that Kant's belief in God is substantiated through the means of practical reason⁴⁰ not through scripture or revealed theology.⁴¹ Furthermore, (*PRF*) enables us to attain a sufficiently clear understanding of God's nature within the constraints of our finite human perspective.

The third principle, the *Principle of Divine Reason* (hereafter, *PDiR*), exclusively addresses the nature of reason and the extent to which Kant presents reason as an extension of God's divine capabilities. This principle can be expressed as follows:

(*PDiR*): Reason has its epistemological inception in God.

The assertion that reason 'begins with God' implies that, as Kant conceives God, as the *ens realissimum* and the 'complexus aggregatum of all realities.'⁴² In the *Metaphysics of Moral* and the last *Critique* Kant outlines an ethico-teleology,⁴³ proposing that the world was created by God to provide a moral path for human advancement. However, belief, like all other aspects of Kant's religious views, is anchored in our practical interests. There is no ambiguity in this regard. Either there exists a practical need or there does not. If such a need exists, there is a moral basis for assent. For Kant, the practical interest holds greater weight because it is rooted in morality. While theoretical reason can merely demonstrate that these things are not impossible, it is our practical interest and moral obligation that necessitate belief in them. Kant asserts that 'all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone'.⁴⁴

Having provided the foundational aspects of the three principles the inquiry now turns to an examination of the first principle (*PDR*). The following section demonstrates the intricate relationship Kant posits between reason and the divine, offering an account of the deficiencies inherent in human reason as expressed by Kant.

The principle of deficient reason (*PDR*)

Kant's philosophical engagement with the idea of God (*Die Idee Gottes*) belongs in the context of his critical attempt to determine the limits of reason. Kant is not concerned with a theory of knowledge but rather with a philosophical determination of the boundaries between reason or non-reason. In his critical philosophy, Kant seeks to understand the conditions of possibility, the right, and the limits of our knowing, acting, and hoping. Crucially, Kant aims to identify where we transgress our limits when we want to know, do, or hope something that we cannot know, cannot

⁴⁰ Kant typically contrasts 'persuasion' (*Überredungen*) with 'conviction' (*Überzeugung*): 'If it is valid for everyone merely as long as he has reason, then its ground is objectively sufficient, and in that case taking something to be true is called a conviction. If it has its ground only in the particular constitution of the subject, then it's called persuasion' (A820-21/B848-49). Conviction for Kant is than intrinsically bound up with belief, not persuasion.

⁴¹ Although Kant writes that, 'there is a God- is a theoretical proposition', it is a theoretical proposition only by virtue 'of practical reason' (*WRP*, 20:298).

⁴² *RPT*, 8:400.

⁴³ See, *MM*, 8:362; *CJ*, 5:478 and *CJ*, 5:442-3.

⁴⁴ *CPiR*, 5:121.

do, cannot hope. It is essential to note that the topic of God is situated within this context.⁴⁵

In the first *Critique*, Kant unequivocally acknowledges the challenges faced when attempting to extend our theoretical reasoning beyond the bounds of experience to reach metaphysical conclusions. Kant candidly admits to the perpetual need for retracing our steps, as reason often veers away from our intended path. Kant eloquently characterizes reason as a ‘battlefield’ where discord and disagreement among its adherents prevail.

How little causes have we to place trust in our reason if in one of the most important parts of our desire for knowledge, it does not merely forsake us but even entices us with delusions and in the end betrays us!⁴⁶

In this passage, Kant squarely confronts the cognitive limitation of speculative reason, emphasizing the inadequacy of theoretical reason in providing a path to knowledge extending beyond possible empirical experiences, such as knowledge of God. Kant asserts that practical reason possesses the potential to be pure and a priori, operating independently of our inclinations. In contrast, theoretical reason falters when it endeavors to attain knowledge in isolation. Furthermore, Kant highlights that theoretical reasoning can only acquire knowledge through the faculties of sensibility and understanding, while practical reason displays a unique independence unattainable by theoretical reason.

This perspective, well-established among Kant scholars, underscores the inherent limitations of human understanding. From a theoretical standpoint, even the most rigorous exercises of reason fail to bring us any closer to a concrete conviction of God’s existence. This deficiency arises because we possess no ‘insight whatsoever into the nature of super-sensible objects’,⁴⁷ with God being the chief among them. It is from this standpoint that Kant’s need for a principle like (*PDR*) becomes evident. Theoretical knowledge of God remains incomplete, as the profound mystery of God’s nature transcends the horizon of human comprehension. Kant posits that theoretical reason alone cannot furnish knowledge of God *in concreto*; for that, we rely on pure rational faith and practical reason, a concept that aligns with (*PRF*).

Kant not only characterizes our understanding of God as ‘short-sighted’ but also emphasizes our tendency to defend God’s cause⁴⁸ through ‘presumptuous reason’, which ‘fails to recognize its limitations’.⁴⁹ However, despite the deficiencies of theoretical reason, it retains a cognitive and regulative role that holds significance within Kant’s philosophical system, particularly concerning belief in God. Kant maintains that the absence of empirical evidence sufficient to establish the factual knowledge of God’s existence or non-existence should not be viewed as a cognitive deficit.

⁴⁵ In the *Prolegomena*, Kant uses the metaphor of a boundary in order to fix the limits of reason. See, *Prol*, 4:350.

⁴⁶ Bxv; see also Aviii/Bxiv.

⁴⁷ *WRP*, 20:300.

⁴⁸ *LPR*, 28:1088.

⁴⁹ *MPT*, 8:255.

Instead, Kant views it as ‘providential’ that God withheld such knowledge. Kant goes as far to suggest that we should ‘thank heaven’ that ‘our belief (*Glaube*) is not knowledge (*Wissen*): for divine wisdom is apparent in the very fact that we do not know but rather ought to believe that a God exists’.⁵⁰ In Kant’s view, this deficiency of reason should not be viewed as a flaw in human nature but rather as a manifestation of our inherent cognitive limitations, paving the way for belief.

Building upon this notion, Kant sets the boundaries for reason, acknowledging its limits as the ‘*alleszermalmende*,’⁵¹ yet he refrains from relegating reason to the metaphysical abyss of cognition. Kant asserts that ‘knowledge is not the only or even the primary end of reason: in its practical use, reason addresses our role within the world,’⁵² which includes considering God’s function and role as the *ens realissimum*. In the first *Critique* Kant goes as far to suggest that the idea of God is connected specifically to a system of nature, of everything in the world: ‘the idea of that being [God], means nothing more than that reason bids us consider every connection in the world according to principles of a systematic union’.⁵³ Here, we do not need knowledge of the idea of God in a *constitutive* sense (as God is not an empirical object this is impossible), however, knowledge does not need to be the primary function of the idea of God, rather reason serves a *regulative* function for human beings to better understand the physical world. Kant is quite clear on this point, the *regulative* function of the idea of God does not provide knowledge about the existence of the nature of its objects.

Furthermore, (*PDR*) leads us to Kant’s account of understanding God in analogical terms. Kant’s usage signifies a nuanced understanding of how human reason (practical, theoretical, and judgmental) grapples with the idea of God, encapsulating the inherent limitations of human cognition and language when attempting to comprehend the divine. Kant contends that the concepts inherent to human understanding, forged through sensory experience in the empirical realm (*constitutive*), are fundamentally inadequate to capture the full scope and nature of God. Given the transcendent and infinite attributes ascribed to God, Kant asserts that conventional human concepts and predicates fall short in capturing the essence of the divine. Consequently, the representation of God becomes analogical in nature – a semblance that bears some resemblance to empirical concepts but remains distinct and transcendent.⁵⁴ As Samantha Matherne correctly observes, ‘when we symbolically think of God as the rational cause of the rational form of the sensible world, this fills out our consciousness of God as something that stands over and against us’.⁵⁵

The analogical representation of God, according to Kant, assumes a dual function in human cognition. First, it highlights the inadequacy of human concept and

⁵⁰ *LPR*, 28:1084.

⁵¹ Moses Mendelsohn, *Gesammelte Schriften Jubiläumsausgabe*, eds., Alexander Altmann et al. (Akademie-Verlag: Berlin, 1990), p.3.2:3.

⁵² A383/B866, A805/B833.

⁵³ A686/B714.

⁵⁴ *Prol*, 4:361, *CPrR*, 5:57, A631/B659.

⁵⁵ Matherne, “Cognition by Analogy and the Possibility of Metaphysics,” p.231.

language to fully articulate the divine, emphasizing the epistemic gap between finite human understanding and the infinite nature of God (*PDR*). Second, it serves as a *regulative* principle, guiding moral and metaphysical reasoning within the confines of human reason. While the analogical representation may draw upon familiar concepts from human experience, it does so imperfectly and with the recognition on inherent limitations. The analogical representation of God, characterized by its imperfect resemblance to empirical concepts underscores the inherent limitations of human cognition. Simultaneously, it plays a pivotal role in guiding moral and metaphysical reasoning, emphasizing the practical and moral significance of the idea of God within the discernible boundaries of human understanding. Thus, ‘the symbolic cognition of God aids us in our rational efforts to understand the sensible world in maximally unified ways.’⁵⁶

Although Kant demarcates the bounds of reason and its inability to lead us to concrete knowledge of God, he does not diminish the ‘special features’ (*Besondere Merkmale*) of reason,⁵⁷ nor does he undermine the intrinsic connection reason shares with God. This connection, often referred to by Kant as *Stimmhaftigkeit*, denotes the agreement or concordance (*Stimmigkeit* or *Übereinstimmung*) between God and reason— a harmony between the voice of God and the voice of reason in conscience.⁵⁸ Although unaided human reason cannot ascertain final answers because the ‘*ens realissimum*, is a being wholly unknowable to us in regards to what it contains’,⁵⁹ Kant’s ultimate aim is to preserve both the integrity of reason and the distinctiveness of faith.

The principle of rational faith (*PRF*)

Kant firmly asserts his belief in the existence of God and a future life, stating, ‘I will inexorably believe’. Notably, he remains unwavering in his conviction, declaring that ‘nothing can make these beliefs unstable’.⁶⁰ Adding depth to this perspective, Kant suggest that ‘our reason compels us to look on the world as if it were the work of a supreme understanding and will’.⁶¹ Moreover, Kant maintains these core beliefs throughout his lifetime, continually emphasizing that we have the ‘free choice’ to believe in God and ‘we must assume the existence of God’.⁶² Kant’s commitment to these beliefs extends to both theoretical and practical realms. In the second part of the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic, Kant argues that ‘we must presuppose

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.233.

⁵⁷ *WRP*, 20:294.

⁵⁸ See, *CPJ*, 5:127.

⁵⁹ *WRP*, 20:330.

⁶⁰ A828/B856. It is important to note here, that Kant draws a distinction between claiming that ‘it is morally certain there is a God’, and ‘I am morally certain there is a God’ (A829/B857). The first statement is a *meinem* (opinion), whereas the second is a *Glauben* (belief).

⁶¹ *Prol*, 4:357.

⁶² See A742-744/B770-773; *CPrR*, 5:4, 108-114, 121, 125, 134-135, 145; *LPR*, 28:1084; *WDO*, 8:139; *CJ*,5:546; *JL*, 9:70.

this idea [God] in relation to the systematic and purposive order of the worlds structure.’⁶³ Lorenzo Spagnesi aptly identifies that the deduction ‘provides a template for understanding the fundamental characterization of the idea of God as the *ens realissimum*.’⁶⁴ It is essential to highlight Kant’s distinction between the concept of God (*Der Begriff Gottes*) and the Idea of God (*Die Idee Gottes*). Although this differentiation is not always linguistically consistent, it is central to his Critical philosophy. Kant’s philosophical theology centers on the idea of God, not about God and not about a concept of God. For Kant, the *ens realissimum* ‘is the philosophical basis of the idea of God and the concept underlying the traditional arguments for God’s existence.’⁶⁵

Kant posits that ideas in human thinking have two potential functions: they are either *constitutive* (empirical), forming knowledge, or *regulative*,⁶⁶ serving the heuristic purpose of guiding thoughts and actions without constituting knowledge. Three such *regulative* ideas are Kant’s postulates of practical reason: God, freedom, and immortality. While none of them refers to an object in empirical knowledge (*constitutive*), Kant contends that it is rational to postulate them as matters of faith. Therefore, for Kant, the idea of God is not a concept corresponding to an object of experience or empirical reality. Instead, it functions as a *regulative* principle— a product of reason guiding and organizing our thoughts. It aims not to represent an actual object but serves as a necessary postulate of practical reason, contributing to the coherence and purposiveness of our thoughts about the world. As Michelle Grier correctly notes, Kant ‘wants to demonstrate the rational necessity of the idea of the *ens realissimum*’.⁶⁷

In contrast, the concept of God would denote a definite and determinate representation that could be part of empirical knowledge. It would serve a *constitutive* function, contributing to our understanding of the world by representing an object within the realm of possible experience. However, Kant argues that that we cannot have a determinate concept of God through empirical means; the concept of God, as an empirical concept, is elusive and not attainable through experience. This is essentially what leads Kant to denounce the proofs for God’s existence.⁶⁸ On this matter,

⁶³ I am indebted to Lorenzo Spagnesi’s article, “The Idea of God and the Empirical Investigation of Nature in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*,” *Kantian Review* 27, no.2 (2022), pp.280. Spagnesi suggests that the Transcendental Dialectic is supposed to explain how the idea of reason, including the idea of God, can obtain objective validity and become critically legitimate with respect to the systemization of empirical cognition. For Kant’s reference, see A698/B762.

⁶⁴ Spagnesi, “The Idea of God,” p.280.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.297.

⁶⁶ A180/B220.

⁶⁷ Michelle Grier, “The Ideal of Reason,” *The Cambridge Companion to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, ed., Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 266. For Kant, see, A572/B600-A590/B618.

⁶⁸ This is a hotly contested area of Kant scholarship. Some commentators suggest that Kant reconfigures proofs for the existence of God to suit his philosophical framework. See, Michael Oberst, “The Possibility Proof is not what Remains from Kant’s *Beweisgrund*,” *Kantian Review* 25, no.2 (2020), pp.219–242; Morgan Jackson, “Something than which nothing greater can be thought and Kant’s *ens realissimum*,” *New Blackfriars* 103 (2022), pp.77–96; and Ina Goy et al., *Kant on Proofs for the Existence of God* (Walter De Gruyter: Berlin, forthcoming).

Grier accurately observes that ‘while the ideas of the supremely real being and the necessary being are necessary and unavoidable, the proofs for the existence of such beings matching those ideas are bound to fail.’⁶⁹ Despite this Kantian position, the idea of a highest intelligence or wise Author of the world continues to serve a legitimate function in guiding empirical inquiry into objects that can be given in experience. Kant’s emphasis on the idea of God as a *regulative* principle aligns with his broader epistemological concerns. The idea of God— a product of reason, assists in giving unity and purpose to our thinking, particularly in the moral and metaphysical domains, even though it does not correspond to a determinate object within empirical experience.

This distinction forms part of Kant’s broader project to reconcile the limits of human cognition with the aspirations of metaphysical theology. As mentioned in section (*PDR*), Kant attempts to determine the limits of reason, seeking to identify instances where we transgress our cognitive boundaries in the pursuit of knowledge when we want to know, do, or hope something that we cannot know, cannot do, cannot hope. Although a thorough analysis of the *constitutive* and *regulative* distinction lies beyond the scope of this article, Spagnesi stresses the importance of *regulative* reasoning, asserting that it ‘occupies a fully legitimate place in cognition and plays an important role in the investigation nature,’⁷⁰ a perspective Kant himself deems ‘indispensably necessary.’⁷¹

Kant’s articulation of belief in the *ens realissimum* reflects a strand of theism grounded in practical reason rather than relying solely on doctrine revealed through scripture. Kant, in *Conflict of the Faculties*, describes this as ‘faith which our reason can develop out of itself’.⁷² Some five years before the publication of the *Religion* (1792) in an essay entitled *What does it mean to orientate oneself in thinking* (1786), written in response to the pantheism controversy in Germany at the time, Kant terms this theism ‘Pure rational faith’ (*Reiner rationaler Glaube*).⁷³ Kant elaborates on this concept, explaining that: ‘a pure rational faith is the sign post or compass by means of which the speculative thinker orientates himself in his rational excursions into the field of supersensible objects.’⁷⁴ This passage reveals two critical Kantian notions regarding practical reason and its relationship with God. First, it emphasizes that it is not practical reason itself but moral needs arising from practical reason that guide human beings in their speculative thinking. These moral needs involve fulfilling what morality requires given our limited nature. Kant’s point here is that merely saying ‘reason’ would be overly general; the focus is on the necessity to overcome the hinderance of happiness for the sake of morality, constructing a world view that

⁶⁹ Grier, “The Idea of Pure Reason”, p. 275.

⁷⁰ Lorenzo Spagnesi, “A rule-based account of the regulative use of reason in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 31, no.3 (2023), p. 673.

⁷¹ A644/B672.

⁷² *CF*, 7:58–9.

⁷³ *WDO*, 8:142.

⁷⁴ *WDO*, 8:142. Also, in the *Religion*, Kant claims that ‘pure religion of reason’ relies upon the ‘supersensible, but not the supernatural.’ (*Rel*, 6:12).

serves this purpose while also having a moral foundation. It would be distorting to say ‘reason’ without these details included.

Second, Kant argues that individuals must actively participate in the rational exploration of super sensible objects, including God, if they wish to express belief in this idea of God as the *ens realissimum*. In fact, according to Kant.

rational faith must come first, and then certain appearances or disclosures could at most provide the occasion for investigating whether we are warranted in taking what speaks or presents itself to us to be a Deity, and thus serve to confirm that faith according to these findings.⁷⁵

What Kant is saying here, is that we are reasonable to presuppose our belief in God through rational faith and our practical reasoning, but we are unable to demonstrate the existence of God through constitutive reasoning. At best, we could investigate whether we are rational or justified in believing that this idea is, in fact, God. Consequently, practical reason plays a paramount role in orientating one’s thoughts toward God and contemplating God’s existence. As Kant suggests, the conviction of his [God’s] existence can be met only in reason.⁷⁶ Kant’s position, as outlined in this essay, aligns with his earlier assertion in the first *Critique* and later reaffirmed in the *Opus Postumum*: only through active participation and exercising this self-reflexive process can one inexorably arrive at ‘the concept of a single, most perfect, and rational primordial being.’⁷⁷ As Peter Byrne correctly notes, ‘the result is a faith that there is a God that is motivated by reason in its end-seeking guise’.⁷⁸ For Kant, faith in God is the result of an exercise in orientation in thinking.

Kant’s endorsement of a divine-human collaboration, while somewhat ambiguous in terms of how this collaboration occurs, aligns with his own conception of *concursum*.⁷⁹ As Christopher Insole argues, Kant’s texts provide some evidence that supports a position that ‘allows genuine divine and human action to run together, directly, and fully, in single action.’⁸⁰ In Kant’s *Lectures on Religion*, it is stated that ‘a *concursum morale* of God’s free cooperation in the free actions of human beings cannot be regarded as impossible’.⁸¹ Kant informs us that this is because ‘*concursum divinum* can be affirmed of free [human] Actions’ and because ‘our reason cannot deny the possibility of this *concursum*’.⁸² Much like our rational belief in God, which must be freely affirmed, the possibility of *concursum* can take place for Kant, only as a free affirmation from the individual.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant maintains a similar stance affirming that ‘the concept of a divine *concursum* is quite appropriate and even necessary’.⁸³ This

⁷⁵ WDO, 8:142–3.

⁷⁶ WDO, 8:142.

⁷⁷ A814/B842; *OP*, 22:115.

⁷⁸ Byrne, *Kant on God*, p. 89.

⁷⁹ *DR*, 28:1309.

⁸⁰ Insole, “Free Belief,” p. 505.

⁸¹ *LPR*, 28:1110.

⁸² *LPR*, 28:1106; see also *Rel*, 644, 52,142–3.

⁸³ *MM*, 6:491.

is because ‘God, by means incomprehensible to us, will make up for the lack of our own righteousness if only our disposition is genuine, so that we should never slacken in our striving toward the good’.⁸⁴ Kant’s view point here is that if an individual disposition is genuine (we can take this as meaning that they do not violate the categorical imperative), a divine-human collaboration becomes entirely acceptable and necessary. It is crucial to emphasize that the agent must actively and freely affirm their striving; God assists only when the agent demonstrates active and uncoerced participation. The most important notion for Kant is that we can in no way be passive or impacted upon, in any way, by something else. To be active, as Insole puts it ‘we are no way passive, and when we initiate an action or project, or set an end, entirely out of ourselves, from our own freedom’.⁸⁵ Only under these conditions can a divine human collaboration take place.

Insole’s interpretation highlights that for Kant, *concursum* cannot be imposed upon the agent, as it would represent a form of heteronomy, violating the fundamental principle of human freedom. While Insole’s evidence is compelling, Kant’s epistemological position remains unchanged. We cannot *know*, either practically or theoretically, how divine cooperation occurs. Kant explicitly addresses this in the *Religion*, stating that we ‘can admit an effect of Grace as something incomprehensible but cannot incorporate it into our maxims for either theoretical or practical use’.⁸⁶ A similar idea is expressed in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant affirms that ‘what sort of moral relationship holds between God and human being goes completely beyond the bounds of ethics and is altogether incomprehensible for us’.⁸⁷ This is not a difficult position to understand, the difficulty is our own ideological motivated refusal to take him at his word.

Notwithstanding Kant’s epistemological uncertainty about the nature of human-divine cooperation, he is explicit in asserting that the concept of God is entirely determined by pure practical reason. Kant elaborates on this in the *Second Critique*, noting that:

When I now try to bring this concept [of the *supreme being*] into relation with the object of practical reason, I find that the moral principle admits it as possible only on the presupposition of an author of the world possessed of the *highest perfection*. He must be *omniscient* in order to cognize my conduct even to my inmost disposition in all possible cases and throughout the future, *omnipotent*, *eternal*, and so forth. Thus, the moral law, by means of the concept of the highest good as the object of a pure practical reason, determines the concept of the original being as the *supreme being*.⁸⁸

The crucial point to glean from the passage is Kant affirms that it is practical reason that ultimately determines the concept of God. Simultaneously, Kant maintains

⁸⁴ *MM*, 6:491.

⁸⁵ Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p.1.

⁸⁶ *Rel*, 6:53.

⁸⁷ *MM*, 6:491.

⁸⁸ *CPrR*, 5:140.

that the concept of the Supreme Being is intrinsically linked to moral belief, not merely the rational belief that has been presented thus far. It is essential to understand that moral belief, or the moral proof for God's existence, is 'inseparable from the complete practical use of reason'.⁸⁹ Therefore, practical reason remains the objective foundation on which moral belief thrives.

Additionally, in Kant's *Lectures on Religion*, he explicitly references his 1763 speculative proof of the *ens realissimum*, claiming its irrefutability on the grounds of reason. In these Lectures, it's recorded that Kant claimed:

But this proof can in no way be refuted because it has its ground in the nature of human reason. For my reason makes it absolutely necessary for me to accept (*annehmen*) a being which is the ground of everything possible, because otherwise I would be unable to cognize (*erkennen*) what in general the possibility of something consists in.⁹⁰

This excerpt reinforces that, for Kant, the right to assume the existence of God is grounded in human reason and nothing else. Theoretical reason can show that the idea of God is possible (i.e., not self-contradictory); and practical reason gives us very good reason to affirm the existence of God, even if we have no theoretical proof of God's existence. One cannot say: I know that God exists, but at best: 'I will that there be a God, that my existence in this world be also an existence in a pure world of the understanding outside the system of natural connections, and finally that my duration be endless. I stand by this and will not give up this belief'.⁹¹ Despite Kant's affirmation, it is important to approach the comments in the Lectures with caution, as they contradict Kant's rejection of 'collective unity' or the *ens realissimum* in the first *Critique*. Nonetheless, these passages seem to concern a theoretical condition for thinking rather than a point emerging from practical reason.

In the first *Critique*, Kant establishes his commitment to the intrinsic relationship between the *ens realissimum* and practical reason. Kant argues that reason 'looks around for a concept that squares with so supreme a mode of existence as that of the unconditioned necessity' and finds that 'the *ens realissimum* to be the best fit for it'.⁹² Kant makes it clear that that our practical reason allows us to contemplate God and God's existence. While this is not a controversial claim what truly matters for Kant is the necessity for individuals to actively engage their practical reason to ascend to knowledge of the supreme nature. This account takes us back to the earlier point regarding *concursum*, in that the individual must be actively exercising their practical reason freely, and at no time can they submit to heteronomy (notice the active/passive distinction).

While Kant is famously known for denying the possibility of any knowledge of God's existence or non-existence (epistemic claim, not an ontological claim) in the

⁸⁹ *CPrR*, 5:144.

⁹⁰ *LPR*, 28:1034.

⁹¹ *CPrR*, 5:143. I thank anonymous reviewer for bringing this passage to my attention.

⁹² A586/B614. Kant makes this point earlier in *OPA*, 2:85. Such evidence suggest a greater level of consistency in Kant's understanding of God.

first *Critique*,⁹³ he takes seriously the maxim that we ought to believe in God and assume the existence of God. Kant asserts that ‘divine wisdom is apparent in the very fact that we do not know but rather ought to believe in God’.⁹⁴ This represents a fundamental aspect of Kant’s philosophy where belief in God becomes a ‘necessary’ element for our practical reason. According to Kant, the ‘highest good’ is possible ‘only under the condition of the existence of God’,⁹⁵ referred to as the *Summum bonum*. Again, what we see here across Kant’s writing is his critique of practical reasoning opening the possibility that there may be something beyond the physical realm, which our faculty of reason, to an extent, can guide us to comprehend.

Kant’s exploration of practical reason and its ability to provide belief in the ‘objective reality of God’⁹⁶ extends into his Post-Critical writings, particularly in his essay *What real progress has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the time of Leibniz and Wolff* (1793/1804). In this essay, Kant reinforces his earlier position that practical reason can lead to belief in God, but it cannot lead to knowledge of God.⁹⁷ Kant expresses this by introducing the ‘Credo in the three articles of confession of pure practical reason’. ‘Kant writes:

I believe in one God, as the original source of all good in the world, that being its final end. I believe in the possibility of confirming to this final end, to the highest good in the world, so far as it is in man’s power. I believe in a future eternal life, as the condition for an everlasting approximation of the world to the highest good possible therein.⁹⁸

Kant emphasizes that this Credo serves as ‘an injunction, subjectively and indeed practically valid and in this respect sufficient, so to act, as though we knew that these objects were real’.⁹⁹ Of particular significance is the first-person language employed by Kant in this passage. What Kant articulates are not truths that can be demonstrated from the perspective of the third person. Instead, they are truths that can and must be affirmed from the first-person perspective, especially if I am to live as a truly human person capable of morality and with a justified hope in the possibility of the Good. For Kant, this Credo plays a positive *regulative* role in guiding our actions in the hope that there is an afterlife, expressed by Kant as a ‘future eternal life’. Furthermore, Kant’s account is consistent with his earlier position in the first *Critique* where he asserts that ‘the super-sensible above us (God) yields a rational belief rather than knowledge of the three Antinomies’.¹⁰⁰

⁹³ A590/B618-A742-44; A742-44-B770-72.

⁹⁴ *LPR*, 28:1084.

⁹⁵ *CPrR*, 5:125; see also A829/ B857; *CJ*, 444, 469.

⁹⁶ *CPrR*, 5:134.

⁹⁷ Caution should be exercised when analyzing this essay. It has been well-documented that that editorial skills and procedures of Friedrich Theodore Rinks have been severely criticized by commentators due to the imperfect state of the text, leading to numerous interpretive difficulties. See, *WRP*, Editors Notes, p. 340.

⁹⁸ *WRP*, 20:298.

⁹⁹ *WRP*, 20:298.

¹⁰⁰ *WRP*, 20:294.

While Kant's account of practical reason leads to belief in God, it is essential to acknowledge that this belief is distinct from theoretical knowledge. For Kant remains adamant that:

The most strenuous efforts of reason [theoretical] do not bring us nearer in the least to conviction of the existence of God, the existence of the highest good, or the prospect of a future life, since we have no insight whatever into the nature of supersensible objects.¹⁰¹

In other words, Kant asserts that belief in God is a product of practical reason, guided by moral principles, rather than theoretical inquiry.

Additionally, in Kant's essay *Theodicy*, he identifies the importance of subjecting faith and the existence of God to the 'tribunal of reason' (*Tribunal der Vernunft*). Kant suggests that individuals, particularly those in positions of religious authority who profess faith and the existence of God on the grounds of historical sources 'must be submitted to a trial of truthfulness by fire,' especially if 'they set down rules to others'.¹⁰² Kant maintains that it is through practical reason that we form our idea of God, 'necessarily and prior to all experience, as a moral and wise being'.¹⁰³ It is through practical reason 'and the voice of God' that leads us to believe in a moral creator of the world.¹⁰⁴

Kant's commitment to the intertwining of practical reason and belief in God is evident in his later works the *Metaphysics of Morals* and *The End of all Things*. In *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant reiterates that 'the idea of God is not given to us objectively, by theoretical reason, but only subjectively, by practical reason'.¹⁰⁵ And, in *The End of all Things*, Kant affirms that 'practical reason is absolutely necessary for a religion'.¹⁰⁶ While there is a certain controversy over how much interpretive weight to place on the *Opus Postumum*, it is nonetheless still important to provide some cursory commentary on the text. The evidence, albeit fragmented and contentious shows Kant's textual commitment to his belief in God and the bilateral relationship between reason and God.¹⁰⁷ Even though in this text Kant rhetorically asks, 'What is God?' and 'is there a God?',¹⁰⁸ there are still hues of Kant's pre-Critical and Critical thought on practical reason and its relationship with God within these texts. While the *Opus Postumum* may not represent Kant's definitive views circa 1800, they should not be dismissed by Kantian commentators.

In sum, this exploration reveals that, contrary to Kantian constructivists, God is a significant feature in Kant's philosophy, deeply intertwined with the concept of practical reason. This section has argued along similar lines as Insole, who states that

¹⁰¹ *WRP*, 20:294.

¹⁰² *MPT*, 8:255.

¹⁰³ *MPT*, 8:255.

¹⁰⁴ *MPT*, 8:624.

¹⁰⁵ *MM*, 6:439.

¹⁰⁶ *EaT*, 8:366.

¹⁰⁷ *OP*, 22:121, 122.

¹⁰⁸ *OP*, 21:9,13, 17,23. In this text, Kant expresses that the question of God's existence is a problem that remains unresolved.

‘practical reason leads us to a robust belief in God’.¹⁰⁹ Although commentators have correctly pointed out that Kant does concede that he had to ‘deny knowledge (*Wissen*) to make room for faith (*Glauben*)’,¹¹⁰ what they have failed to observe, is that Kant does not claim that he had to deny ‘reason’ (*Vernunft*) to make room for faith; this is both epistemologically and semantically different. Andrew Chignell comes close to substantiating this distinction when he correctly points out that commentators ‘typically focus on the denial of knowledge, and when they do talk about belief for which that denial makes room for, they assume that Kant is talking about moral faith’.¹¹¹ On this point, Leslie Stevenson also says something similar in that Kant maintains that we can only have a practical kind of faith.¹¹²

While Chignell and Stevenson both make compelling and accurate observations regarding Kant’s account of faith and reason, the aim here has been to develop this line of inquiry even further. Faith for Kant is not only ‘pragmatic, theoretical, doctrinal, and moral’ as Chignell correctly identifies,¹¹³ but it is also profoundly rational. Faith for Kant does have supremacy over knowledge; this is not controversial. A more nuanced question is, does faith have supremacy over reason?¹¹⁴ In this section, it has been suggested that faith and reason for Kant, are on equal footing. Therefore, it is helpful to understand the relationship between faith and reason as horizontal, rather than vertical for Kant.

Furthermore, contrary to much of the literature that tends to favor a secular reading of Kant’s concept of reason, it has been shown that there is a substantial amount of textual support which demonstrates Kant arguing that our faculty of practical reason shares an intrinsic relationship with our belief in God. Kant makes this point clear in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic where he demonstrates the rational necessity of the idea of the *ens realissimum*.¹¹⁵ To that end, what constructivist commentators have failed to identify, or rather chosen to omit, is that practical reason leads us to this belief in God. (*PRF*), for Kant, is not theoretical but practical. We represent God as we do because it is in our moral interest to picture God as, say, rewarding morality versus rewarding pious observance. More importantly, constructivist readings of Kant have failed to acknowledge that although Kant is explicit that the proofs of the existence of God (God a concept) cannot establish the objective existence of God, it is still ‘subjectively necessary to assume it as the only complete explanation of how the possibility of things could be ground’.¹¹⁶ Consequently, the

¹⁰⁹ Insole, *The Intolerable God*, p.51. A.W. Moore also makes a similar claim, writing that ‘belief in God is grounded upon the need of practical reason’, which is slightly more aligned with the position argued in this paper. See, A.W. Moore, *Noble in Reason, Infinite in Faculty: Themes and Variations in Kant’s Moral and Religious Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2003), p.32.

¹¹⁰ Bxxx.

¹¹¹ Chignell, “Belief in Kant”, p. 323.

¹¹² Stevenson, “Opinion, Belief, or Faith, and Knowledge,” pp.72–101.

¹¹³ Chignell, “Belief in Kant” pp.323–60.

¹¹⁴ This is a question Frederick C. Beiser leaves unanswered in his chapter entitled “Moral Faith and the Highest Good in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed., Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 610.

¹¹⁵ A572/B600-A590/B618.

¹¹⁶ Hoffer, “Kant’s Regulative Metaphysics of God,” 236.

main take away from this section is that (*PRF*) explicitly demonstrates for Kant, that reason and faith embrace and enfold each other.

The principle of divine reason (*PDiR*)

The connotations associated with the concept of reason within the Christian tradition have yielded a wide array of perspectives. From early Christian theologians like Tertullian to contemporary theologians like Sarah Coakley, the role of human reason has been a topic of multifaceted discussion. Christian's view on reason can be broadly categorized into two contrasting perspectives. On one hand, certain Christian writers suggest that human reason often misleads and distracts believers from genuine faith. According to this view, Christians should be careful not to be deceived by their reason and at all costs should turn away from knowledge.¹¹⁷ In contrast, many Christian figures throughout history have emphasized the crucial role of reason and rationality in gaining knowledge of God and nurturing belief.¹¹⁸

Kant's stance on this question is explicit. Practical reason, for Kant, serves as the cognitive instrument necessary for developing pure rational faith. As previously discussed, Kant is adamant that one must actively engage their practical reason, rather than passively rely on it, to orientate themselves towards contemplating God if they are to attain knowledge of the divine. Importantly, Kant acknowledges the potential for a divine cooperation (*concursum*) but interprets this as a horizontal interaction between God and humans, in contrast to a vertical one.

For ease of reference, (*PDiR*) will be restated and then the nuanced ways Kant approaches it will be examined:

(*PDiR*): Reason, epistemologically and ontologically, begins with God.

This principle can be interpreted in two distinct ways:

- 1) reason itself is God (Insole's position).
- 2) human reason is a gift from God (affirmative interpretation).

It will be demonstrated that Kant rejects the former (1) and remains epistemologically agnostic concerning the latter (2). However, Kant concedes that (2) always remains a possibility.

¹¹⁷ The most cited are (Col 2:8; 1 Tim 6:29; Ecc 3:22). This theological thinking is first set out by the Early Church Fathers, Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Epiphanius of Salamis, and later developed during the Reformation by Luther, Calvin, and Zwingli.

¹¹⁸ In antiquity we only need to look at the writing of Clement of Alexandria, Origen, and Augustine to see that reason and rationality are important human faculties when it comes to attaining knowledge of God. This theological tradition is continued in the medieval period by figures such as Peter Lombard, Duns Scotus, and later Auxerre, Bonaventure, and Aquinas.

PDiR 1: reason itself is god

Kant defines practical reason as ‘the origin of certain concepts and principles’¹¹⁹ that are independent of those originating in sensibility and understanding (a priori). Kant often refers to these as ‘transcendental ideas’ or ‘ideas of [pure] reason.’¹²⁰ He characterizes reason as a ‘faculty of principles’ or the capacity to unify the rules governing principles. According to Kant, reason is an inherent facet of the human mind and an essential element of our nature as rational beings. In the first *Critique*, Kant claims that reason does not derive from experience (a posteriori) but is a priori, signifying its presence in the human mind prior to worldly experience. As Kant sees it, God and belief in God hold a place and function within such a system. Nonetheless, Kant is certain that human rationality should not be conflated with God being synonymous with reason.

Reason, in Kant’s philosophy, stands as a distinctive human capability residing within a broader spectrum of Kantian categories, such as quantity, quality, relation, and modality.¹²¹ Therefore, suggesting that reason ‘itself is God’ is misleading. In Kant’s view, God and reason are separate concepts, albeit intrinsically interconnected. To express this distinction in Kantian terms, consider the following table:

Categories	Sub-category	Object/Concept
Modality	existence/Necessity	God
Quality	Limitation/Reality	Reason

As we can see above, the concept of God (opposed to the idea of God) and reason are two distinctly different categories. This is a crucial point that has broader implications for how we understand the relationship between God and human reason in Kant’s writing.

The only textual evidence demonstrating Kant endorsement of the view that God and reason are unilateral can be found in the *Opus Postumum*. Insole, without caution, takes textual support from the *Opus Postumum* to claim that the critical Kant endorses the view that human reason is God. Kant writes, ‘There is a God, namely, in human, moral-practical reason...we are originally a divine race with regard to our vocation and its disposition’.¹²² Further, Kant details that God is not, ‘a *substance* outside myself, whose existence I postulate as a hypothetical being’.¹²³ Rather, ‘I, man, am this being myself – it is not some substance outside me’.¹²⁴ Insole has been criticized for his use of the *Opus Postumum* by Lawrence Pasternack¹²⁵; however,

¹¹⁹ A299/B355.

¹²⁰ A311/B368. Also see A609/B697; A229/B356; and A3030/B358.

¹²¹ For the complete list of categories see, A70/B95-A93/B108 and A80/B106.

¹²² *OP*, 21:30.

¹²³ *OP*, 22:123.

¹²⁴ *OP*, 21:25.

¹²⁵ Lawrence Pasternack “Christopher Insole, The Intolerable God: Kant’s Theological Journey (Review),” *Kantian Review* 20, no,1 (2017), p. 521.

this ‘taking to task,’ as Insole writes, has not deterred him from engaging with the *Opus Postumum* in his most recent work, *Kant and the Divine*. In Insole’s defense, this time around, he does observe that the route Kant takes in the *Opus Postumum* ‘is a more anthropocentric path: divinity as a way of talking about (enhanced) human activity and reason.’¹²⁶ However, Insole still seems to be taking the views expressed by Kant in these facsimiles as Kant’s genuine views circa 1800, which is contentious.

In the first *Critique*, Kant articulates that it is undeniable that ‘pure reason is practical of itself alone and gives (to the human being) a universal law, which is the *moral law*.’¹²⁷ Pure practical reason is regarded as ‘a faculty determining the will’¹²⁸ and announces itself ‘as original law giver’ (*sie volo, sic jubeo*).¹²⁹ Pure practical reason, in these terms, acts independently of God and is understood as something uniquely human, grounded in human nature. This position seemingly contradicts (*PDiR1*) and (*PDiR2*). In these terms, God plays no active role in the formation of human rationality, or rather, God does not imbue rationality into human beings, granting them the ability to understand God. This position, set out above, is commonly adopted by both traditionalist and constructivist interpreters. However, it is a position with which Kant would not agree. Kant’s reasoning is that practical reason is the epistemic starting point for our understanding of the super-sensible world and the world directly projected to us, which we perceive as reality.

PDiR 2: human reason is a gift from god

Within Kants philosophy, the terms *Urbild* (archetype) and *Vorbild* (prototype/model) have given rise to confusion among English-speaking scholars.¹³⁰ This section aims to disentangle the meanings of these terms, delineate Kants varying usage, and emphasize their relevance to the broader discussion of reason and divinity within Kant’s oeuvre. Additionally, Kant’s use of these terms has generated controversy because they encompass a wide range of representational ideas and are used interchangeably in various context.¹³¹ This area, although understudied, holds relevance to the question whether Kant views reason as divine or as a gift from God to humans with a divine aspect.

¹²⁶ Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p.380.

¹²⁷ *CPrR*, 5:31; *ORP*, 8:402.

¹²⁸ *CPrR*, 5:42.

¹²⁹ *CPrR*, 5:31.

¹³⁰ The Cambridge Editions of Kant’s work translate *Urbild* as “prototype”, whereas, I have translated *Urbild* as “archetype” and *Vorbild* as “prototype”. Kant uses both terms, each having distinct philosophical implications for their interpretation. For example, in the *Religion*, Kant uses the term *Urbild* in relation to the historical figure of Jesus Christ, but when referring to God, he uses the term *Vorbild*. Some scholars, such as Stephen Palmquist, have treated *Urbild* as a mere synonym of *Vorbild*. See, Palmquist *A Comprehensive Commentary on Kant’s Religion*, p.163.

¹³¹ *Urbild* in general, see A317-181/B374; A569/B597; A570/B598 and at A578/B606; *GW*, 4:408; *CPrR* 5:32- 83; 5:43; 5:129; *CJ*, 5:232–322; *LL*, 9:92. For a detailed account of the word *Urbild* in Kant’s writing, see DiCenso, “The Concept of the Urbild in Kant’s Philosophy of Religion,” pp.100–132.

Kant's concept of *Urbild* encompasses an ideal mental construct serving as the ultimate standard against which actual objects or experiences are measured. He primarily employs this term in the spheres of aesthetics and religion, where it signifies the loftiest conceivable ideal of beauty or moral perfection. According to Kant, *Urbild* is not a predefined image or concept; rather, it is a product of human imagination. It represents a standard derived from the human capacity to envision the highest moral or aesthetic excellence. Kant makes this apparent when he writes that the 'archetype is a discursive image dependent on understanding (*intellectus ectypus*)'¹³² and is 'an object of intuition insofar as it is the ground of imitation'.¹³³ Diego Bubbio makes this Kantian position clear when he states that 'the archetype (*Urbild*) is the original notion that makes something what it is, whereas the prototype is the first model that is adopted from that notion'.¹³⁴

In the *Religion*, Kant explores the archetype of moral perfection and its association with the figure of Jesus Christ. For Kant *Urbild* is a rational foundation for moral and religious belief, grounded in the utmost moral ideal. Kant's use of the term *Urbild* in this context reflects his examination of the relationship between reason, imagination, and moral and religious belief. By invoking the archetype of moral perfection in the form of Jesus Christ, Kant aims to establish a rational foundation for moral and religious belief rooted in the highest moral ideal. Notably Kant does not assert that Jesus is the *Urbild in concreto* in the *Religion* but is instead 'progressing with his experiment to see the extent to which it correlates with the principles of pure rational faith'.¹³⁵ Although in the *Religion*, Kant does draw a direct connection between Jesus and the term *Urbild*, he also uses this phrase to refer to a multitude of ideas. In the first *Critique*, Kant describes the *Urbild* as 'ideal reason' and in the second *Critique*, Kant discusses the *Urbild* of the 'holy will'.¹³⁶ Therefore, given the opacity and proliferation of translations regarding Kant's use of the term *Urbild*, it would be misleading to claim that for Kant, *Urbild* exclusively refers to Jesus.

In contrast to *Urbild*, *Vorbild* (prototype or model) pertains to tangible individuals or things that function as exemplars or models for others to emulate. It finds frequent application in ethical and moral contexts, referring to individuals who embody virtuous qualities and offer tangible models for emulation. While both terms imply a standard or model, the crucial distinction is that *Urbild* is an ideal or mental construct while *Vorbild* refers to a concrete individual or thing. In the *Religion*, Kant refers to the visible church as the *Vorbild* and a religious community as a regulatory role model of exemplary people (*vorbildlichen*).

Kant states that this archetype 'resides only in reason' and 'is nowhere to be sought except in our reason'.¹³⁷ Kant further states that 'this prototype has come

¹³² *CJ*, 5:408.

¹³³ *Lec.M.*, 28: 577.

¹³⁴ Bubbio, *God and the Self in Hegel*, p.18.

¹³⁵ Pasternack, "The 'Two Experiments' of Kant's Religion," p. 135.

¹³⁶ *CPrR*, 5:32; 5:38.

¹³⁷ *Rel*, 6:63.

down to us from heaven'¹³⁸ and has 'established itself in the human being without our comprehending how.'¹³⁹ Palmquist follows Kant's line of thought, suggesting that the archetype is always already present in a human being, although its presence cannot be rationally explained, describing it as 'a God-shaped hole in the heart of human reason.'¹⁴⁰ Kant acknowledges that we cannot determine whether the archetype in us has divine origins, but he does assert that 'we are not the ideas originators'. Therefore, Kant's position is that our faculty of reason, embodied in the archetype, is a divine gift expressed through God, whom Kant characterizes as the ideal *Urbilde*.¹⁴¹ While there is some controversy over interpreting Kant's use of the term *Urbild* due to the various contexts in which it is employed, it is more accurate to present Kant's view as follows: For Kant, the agent's reason holds both epistemological and ontological significance concerning God, preventing a complete endorsement of (*PDiR2*). This implies that if the agent affirms belief in God through their rationality, God has not imposed his divine will on the human capacity to arrive at this conclusion, preserving human agency and practical reason, thus endorsing (*PRF*) in the process. Pure rational reason does not deny the possibility that human reason could be a divine gift bestowed upon human beings, even if it does deny that we can never know for certain that some alleged gifting is genuine. By allowing for the possibility of a divine gift, pure rational reason departs from the strict naturalist position. In a passing line from the *Metaphysics of Moral*, Kant implies that such a harmonious relationship exists between human and God on the grounds that 'God has created rational beings from the need, as it were, to have something outside himself which he could love or by which he could also be loved'.¹⁴²

The voice of god and practical reason

In an often-overlooked passage from *On a recently Prominent tone of superiority in philosophy*, published fifteen years after the first *Critique*, Kant continues to explore the epistemic status of human reason:

The veiled Goddess (reason) before whom we both bow the knee, is the moral law within us, in its inviolable majesty. We hearken to hear her voice, indeed, and also understand her command well enough; but on listening are in doubt whether it comes from man himself, out of absolute authority of his own reason, or whether it proceeds from another being, whose nature is unknown to him, and which speaks to man through his own reason.¹⁴³

Embedded in this passage is a number of claims regarding Kant's thoughts concerning the interplay of reason, the moral law, and God. First, in the post-Critical

¹³⁸ *Rel*, 6:63.

¹³⁹ *Rel*, 6:61.

¹⁴⁰ Palmquist, *A Comprehensive Commentary on Kant's Religion*, p.168.

¹⁴¹ A568/B595.

¹⁴² *MM*, 65:488.

¹⁴³ *ORP*, 8:405.

period (1790), Kant continued to question the limits of our epistemic comprehension of reason and the moral law. Second, this passage demonstrates Kant's ongoing contemplation of pure practical reason as a human faculty and its interconnectedness with God and the moral laws. Third, and most importantly, Kant himself is open to considering the possibility that reason, or more precisely, our reason, comes to us as voice through God's *own* reason and that is how we come to the moral law.

It is important to note Kant's agnosticism regarding the epistemic status of the 'voice of reason'. Kant is more uncertain about the origins of this 'voice' than suggested by some scholars. For example, Palmquist assert that the 'voice' is the literal voice of God¹⁴⁴ and that 'God's voice comes to us immediately through practical reason.'¹⁴⁵ Although Kant occasionally associates consciousness with God,¹⁴⁶ the textual evidence provided by Palmquist is limited and it would be misleading to suggest this on the basis of the above passage. Kant, in the *Conflict of the Faculties* also reminds us of the inherent dangers of considering the voice of God, writing that 'if God should really speak to a human being, the latter could still never know that it was God speaking'.¹⁴⁷

Furthermore, in *Opus Postumum*, Kant articulates an understanding of God as 'a Being, which has unrestricted power over nature and freedom under laws of reason.' Kant contends that 'God is not merely a natural being but also a moral and rational being'.¹⁴⁸ Strikingly, Kant claims that 'there is a God', namely in 'human, moral-practical reason,' emphasizing a reconfigured version of (*PDiR1*) on an anthropomorphic basis, suggesting that practical reason *is* God. Some scholars such as Insole, Nathan Jacobs, and Chris Firestone have made some insightful observation, proposing that it may be more appropriate to interpret this understanding of reason in the context of the Platonic tradition rather than the Christian tradition.¹⁴⁹ Insole clarifies that the Platonic exhortation is always to 'become God through self-transcending pure reason; rather than by waiting upon a gracious God who condescends saves, and transforms.'¹⁵⁰ Here, Insole, Jacobs, and Firestone's observations appear valid, as Kant's understanding of reason in the post-Critical period aligns more with a Platonic framework, resembling (*PDiR 1*). Despite the *Opus Postumum* heavily scrutinized textual integrity, it still provides textual evidence leading to the conclusion that Kant, in his final days, is not fully able to endorse (*PDiR2*).

¹⁴⁴ Stephen Palmquist, *Kant and Mysticism: Critique as the Experience of Baring all in Reason's Light* (New York: Lexington Books, 2019), p. 65.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

¹⁴⁶ *MM*, 6:439.

¹⁴⁷ *CF*, 763.

¹⁴⁸ *OP*, 22:116.

¹⁴⁹ Jacobs and Firestone, *In Defence of Kant's Religion*, pp.152–172.

¹⁵⁰ Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p. 228.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be apparent to the reader that Kant's conceptualization of reason possesses a quality that can be aptly characterized as divine. From all directions of human reason, (cognitive, moral, judgmentally, evaluative), Kant constantly leads us back to the interconnectedness between human reason and the divine. While the alignment of this 'divinity' with traditional Christian beliefs remains an ambiguous issue, it was not the primary goal of this article to establish such alignment. Instead, the objective has been to shed light on an aspect of Kantian studies that has received limited critical attention and to elucidate the intricate relationship between reason and divinity in Kant's philosophical framework.

To substantiate the thesis presented in this article, three core principles have been used to evaluate the divine nature of Kant's conception of reason. Through this analysis, it has been demonstrated that Kant fully endorses (*PRF*) and (*PDR*). However, concerning (*PDiR*), it becomes apparent that Kant unequivocally rejects (*PDiR1*) and remains more agnostic regarding (*PDiR2*). Kant's cautious stance regarding (*PDiR2*) does not imply outright rejection; rather, it implies the acknowledgement that, at best, (*PDiR2*) remains wholly incomprehensible in theoretical terms, but remains a practical possibility. This is mainly because for Kant, practical reason is the realm of faith, whereas theoretical reason is the realm of knowledge. Furthermore, it has been illustrated that Kant expresses a sympathetic leaning toward the idea that it may not be impossible that human rationality is a gift bestowed upon us by God, as evidenced by the concept of the *Urbild*. Nevertheless, Kant consistently emphasizes that the process by which this occurs remains a profound mystery.

The overarching aim of this article has been to fill a lacuna that currently exists within Kant studies. Kant's engagement with theological discourse remains an important and fertile area of research and many Kant scholars still disagree on core Kantian themes and concepts after some 50 years of Kant scholarship. A prime example is the simultaneous publication of Allen Wood's *Kant and Religion* and Insole's *Kant and the Divine* in 2020, which grants insight into just how much remains unsettled. This article has offered a middle path between Wood and Insole, one that is indeed open to the rich philosophical recourse implicated in Kant's rationalist heritage but also acknowledges the undeniable limits that Kant places on human reason.

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