

## From Postulates of Reason to Doctrines of the Faith: on doing theology after Kant

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This paper is meant to be a reflection on the possibility of doing theology with a general commitment to the strictures on human knowledge articulated in Kant's critical system. My reflections will be personal and provisional. They represent my own *personal* interest in doing theology with philosophical assumptions that are recognizably "Kantian", and they are motivated by certain challenges that I take Kant's philosophy to pose for doing theology. They are also *provisional* attempts to answer these challenges. This is not a finished work of scholarship about Kant and theology, but more an attempt to make explicit some of the problems that I have run into while doing theological work.

What I would like to talk about in Kant's work, and what I will refer to as a "Kantian" approach to theology, includes the following:

1. the limitation of human knowledge to the categories of human judgment: such categories require a conditionedness, or relativity, of any candidate object of knowledge. Quantity, quality, relation... such categories bring to understanding a world of objects in relation for Kant.
2. despite this limitation of objects of knowledge to the bounds of human understanding, Kant also turns to the question—which he takes to be a basic human drive—of offering reasons for these objects of knowledge in pursuit of an ultimate ground of all conditions. These are the ideas of pure reason.

These two primary assertions of the Kantian philosophy will be recognizable from the *Critique of Pure Reason*: the limitation of human knowledge to the concepts of judgment is the topic of the *Transcendental Analytic*, and the pursuit of ideas of pure reason (as well as the various pitfalls faced by

human reason along the way) are the topic of the *Transcendental Dialectic*. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* we find the ideas of God, world, and soul developed further as postulates of reason that are necessary for our conception of the moral law and the purposefulness of nature. Kant's critical system offers an explanation of the human grasp of purposefulness and meaningfulness in the world without granting to human knowledge that which goes beyond our sensible world: to claim to know the ultimate things upon which the coherence of our known and experienced reality is based would be to set these ultimate grounds within the *nexus effectivus* of the world. One is reminded of Barth's critique of theologies which make of God "a concrete thing—no doubt the highest—in the midst of other concrete things"<sup>1</sup>

There is an odd dichotomy that we experience in Kant as theologians: on the one hand his approach to ultimate realities continues very much in the tradition of pre-critical metaphysics, with the important exception that the desire of Reason to supply sufficient reasons and in this pursuit ultimately reach the unconditioned ground of things is never achievable. On the other hand, this Kantian limitation on human knowledge puts theology, as a human academic inquiry, into a methodological quandary. What now counts for theological knowledge? A Kantian can know the realm of appearances and, by way of regulative principles, come to rational beliefs about the soul or the moral law. But can we understand them? Or conceptualize them in a way that is contentful, the way that we can for phenomenal intuition?

Some of Kant's lack of appeal for theologians today, especially with regard to his ideas and postulates of reason, stem from the all-or-nothing sense one gets from his system of critical idealism. Human reason, in a rather unhistoricized fashion, is understood to universally come upon

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. E. Hoskyns (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968) p. 47. It is worth noting that in this passage Barth also criticizes the fact that "we make of the eternal and ultimate presupposition of the Creator a 'thing in itself[...]' This is clearly directed against Kant, but it is difficult for me to know what to make of it. How is God as "thing in itself" opposed to God as eternal creator? In any case, the present essay does not require a conception of the ideas of reason as noumena, so Barth's apparent critique of Kant here can be set aside.

ultimate grounds in its natural orientation toward sufficient reasons. I think, however, that we can reasonably set aside the *necessity* of pursuing a complete system along these lines; one could hold the position that while a collection of ideas like “God”, “world”, and “freedom” would be necessary for a complete account of the conditions of the objects of human knowledge or belief in the moral law, I see no reason to suppose that human reason universally seeks out such totality of conditions, or must do so for an adequate account of human knowledge in general or of proximate human ends. In a similar way philosophers have often not accepted the completeness of Kant’s table of the categories of judgment, but have still affirmed the basic relation of human judgment to experience. It does seem clear, though, that even if it is not necessary, much theological work does seek to achieve just such a completeness: to inquire into ultimate realities understood as conditions of the world of human knowledge, moral action, and purposefulness.

Further - and this is the problem I want to consider today- Theologians take their inquiry to be determined by objects of knowledge. Insofar as a theologian 1) seeks to preserve Kantian strictures on knowledge and Kantian identification of ultimate realities as grounds of the conditions of objects of human knowledge, but also 2) understands theological ideas like “God” as themselves objects of theological knowledge, we have a real problem from Kant: what sort of objects of knowledge would these be? Or how can we even call it knowledge and at the same time call ourselves Kantian?

No shortage of possible answers to this conundrum exists, and the way one answers it will depend very much on the way that one does theology. Doctrines of the faith could be, as in Schleiermacher, a reflection upon the doctrines of the faith community.<sup>2</sup> I would go so far as to

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<sup>2</sup> Schleiermacher, *Der christliche Glaube*, §19. It is worth noting that in this section Schleiermacher expresses misgivings concerning theologians who “are in complete agreement with the definition of dogmatic theology which we have here established, but assign this actual Dogmatic to a pretty low level, as being only concerned with the presentation of ecclesiastical opinions, and assert that there must stand above it another and higher theology which even with disregard of these ecclesiastical opinions, would bring out and make evident the

argue that this is what theology is *usually* doing. Such an inquiry can operate under a sort of methodological agnosticism in which the truth of these particular doctrines of the faith are not so much what is being considered (except insofar as such truth might be acquired through theoretical coherence). Here theoretical talk of God, the soul, human freedom, etc. is permitted because these things are theorized as objects of faith; In becoming objects of theological knowledge they are not considered as something verifiable, falsifiable, or experienceable in themselves, but only in their relation to the community of faith. Their objectivity for theology, that is, is mediated by their objectivity for the ordinary believer; they exist as social or literary facts, upon which the theologian reflects as a critic within various standards of judgment.

This approach to theology, which might be called the *Glaubenslehre* approach, is perhaps the most widespread post-Kantian option for theology that seeks to be attentive to the Kantian limits on human reason. In its favor, theology as *Glaubenslehre* remains firmly anchored to the doctrinal traditions of the churches as they are passed on through theological, liturgical, and other media. While it defers on any direct inquiry into God as an object of thought, it does so because of a commitment to the centrality of the religious consciousness, which is the site of the human encounter with God.

Other candidate explanations for metaphysical concepts like “God” focus on Kant’s distancing of objects of faith from objects of knowledge by granting them a “regulative” rather than a “constitutive” status. That is, they order or regulate the rational unity of our experience of the world of objects, rather than constituting objects themselves (A670-1/B698-9). A fictionalist account of objects of theological inquiry might follow the Neo-Kantian Hans Vaihinger in focusing

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essential truths of religion.” (92). Insofar as this describes what I am seeking to do (although I am not entirely sure that it does), Schleiermacher would be unsympathetic to this project.

on Kant's language of "as if," which in the *Transcendental Dialectic* seems to argue that theological concepts are useful fictional constructs through which we understand the world:<sup>3</sup>

"we have to consider everything that might ever belong to the context of possible experience **as if** this experience constituted an absolute unity, [...] **as if** the sum total of all appearances (the world of sense itself) had a single supreme and all-sufficient ground outside its range [...] **as if** the objects themselves had arisen from that original image of all reason. That means: it is not from a simple thinking substance that we derive the inner appearances of our soul, but from one another in accordance with the idea of a simple being; it is not from a highest intelligence that we derive the order of the world and its systematic unity, but rather it is from the idea of a most wise cause that we take the rule that reason is best off using for its own satisfaction when it connects up causes and effects in the world." (A672-3/B700-1)

Alternatively, various understandings of theology as practical knowledge also present objects of theological inquiry as regulative in nature.

Allen Wood has famously interpreted Kant's moral argument for the existence of God as a *reductio ad absurdum practicum*, that is, Kant argued that to deny the existence of God or the immortality of the soul would put one in the position of asserting, not a logical, but a *practical* absurdity. Wood describes the argument of the *Critique of Practical Reason* as follows: "Now if I deny either of these [God or immortality], then I cannot conceive the highest good to be possible of attainment. If I deny that I can conceive the highest good to be possible of attainment, then I presuppose or imply that I will not pursue the highest good, or commit myself not to pursue it. But if I do not pursue the highest good, then I cannot act in obedience to the moral law."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The classic expression of fictionalism is Hans Vaihinger, *The Philosophy of "As If"*, trans. C.K. Ogden (1924). While fictionalism is not a very widespread theological approach today, it warrants mention because of its conscious intention of doing justice to the thought of Kant on the ideas of reason.

<sup>4</sup> Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), p. 29.

Édouard Le Roy, a modernist Catholic philosopher who did most of his work in the philosophy of science during the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, presents a further conception of the knowledge of theological objects as practical in describing doctrine as a “formula of a rule of practical conduct,” where theological assertions express standards of human relation to God rather than theoretical truth about God in Godself. For Le Roy: “‘God is a person’ means, ‘Conduct yourself in your relations to God as in your relations with a human person.’ Likewise ‘Jesus has risen’ means, ‘Be in relation to him as you would have been before his death, as you are with a contemporary.’”<sup>5</sup>

These all seem to me to be possible options for Kantian theology insofar as they are attentive to the validity of postulating theological ideas without also treating these ideas like any other object of sense experience. What is not an option is theology as a theoretical inquiry into objects like God, understood as ordered by human schema of understanding which work within a religious experience and through human judgment to produce “religious knowledge”. Why not? Because human categories of understanding require, most basically, modes of judgment such as Kant’s relation, quality, quantity, etc., which require a level of conditionedness of the objects of knowledge that simply does not apply to God, or freedom, the highest good, or the world-whole as a creation.

Insofar as theology considers these objects—not as mediated by the faith of the church but as objects in themselves—it risks entering into what Kant calls “mysticism” and is in real danger of the possibility of “fanaticism/enthusiasm” (both of which may be harmless for the believer but problematic for the theologian, and even for the believer who is not a theologian but engages in reflection on the faith to the point of making public claims on the basis of personal mystical experience).

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<sup>5</sup> Édouard Le Roy, *What is a Dogma?* trans. L.G. Robinson (Chicago: Open Court, 1918), p. 68, 70.

Theology, on these understandings, bears a rather complex relationship with its objects of inquiry. We do not simply inquire into the nature of God or the soul, but rather engage in second-order reflection upon God or the soul as objects of faith, religious consciousness, communal practices, or moral reasoning. As I have said above, I do not deny that theology is very often engaging in this sort of inquiry, but the fact remains that it also often purports to be making theoretical claims about God or the soul as objects of theological knowledge. Can it do so on Kant's terms?

Andrew Chignell has recently attempted to describe Kantian belief in a way that is more amenable to theology of this sort. Against what he calls the "Moderate" interpretation of belief in Kant (which would encompass all of the Kantian options listed above) as well as the "Hardliner" interpretation (which takes Kantian things-in-themselves as entirely uncognizable), Chignell defends "Liberalism":<sup>6</sup> belief or assent that is formed on the basis of theoretical considerations yet cannot be considered "knowledge" in the full sense because it is only subjectively, yet not objectively sufficiently grounded (where "to have an objective ground for an assent to a proposition  $p$  is simply to have experiences and/or assents that render  $p$  objectively probable to some degree or other."<sup>7</sup>) The primary example of a theoretical basis for assent to belief in theological objects is belief in an ultimate ground or a most real being on the basis of Kant's process, laid out in the *Transcendental Dialectic*, of a following up of the chain of reasons to the unconditioned ground of the whole (A322-3/B379-80). This belief is not based upon the necessity of assent to the existence of God for forming a coherent account of the moral law, rather it is based upon what Kant takes to be a basic human drive for sufficient reason in its understanding of the world.

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<sup>6</sup> See Andrew Chignell, "Belief in Kant" *Philosophical Review* 116.3 (2007), pp. 323-60 ; "As Kant has Shown..." Analytic Theology and the Critical Philosophy" in *Analytic Theology: New Essays in the Philosophy of Theology*, ed. O. Crisp and M. Rea (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 117-35.

<sup>7</sup> Chignell, "Belief in Kant", 327.

This moves us much closer to my own present goals of considering the objects of theological inquiry as objects... if not of “knowledge” in the fullest sense, at least as objects of some sort of theoretical assent that is distinct from the “faith” of ordinary believers. It still seems unclear to me what “theology” would entail here, though. Is it simply a more rigorous version of the faith of ordinary believers? Or a less epistemologically over-stated version of pre-critical metaphysics? Both of these conceptions of theology seem inadequate (to me, at least... but this may be a point for discussion).

One option that may be worth exploring is approaching the objectivity of theology through the concept of divine causality. The term should be familiar from Schleiermacher, and indeed I would venture to suggest that *The Christian Faith* can be read profitably through a largely Kantian interpretation of the relationship between God and world.

In Kant, divine causality surfaces explicitly in the moral proof for God as the author of a purposeful creation in the Third Critique, and this regulative conception of God fits well with some of the practical conceptions of theological knowledge of God that were presented above. We have already encountered the idea of an ultimate ground postulated by theoretical reason in the *ideas* of the *Transcendental Dialectic*, but these ideas are, again, merely regulative and do not reach objectivity. Let us consider, then, God in terms of causality as it is discussed in the *Transcendental Analytic*, as a problem inherited from Hume for human understanding of the sensible world. Here, causality is, like God or the thing-in-itself, not a phenomenon given in experience to the understanding. Nor, however, can human understanding do without it if it is to preserve a unified perception of reality. Kant takes this necessity of a rule of causality and uses it as the basis of an argument against causality as merely human custom, a process of induction whereby we conclude from the sun having risen every previous day this week that it will rise tomorrow by some tentatively asserted rule of succession. For Kant, this “would merely be empirical, and the rule which it supplies, that everything



which happens has a cause, would be as contingent as the experience upon which it is based.” In contrast,

“We can extract clear concepts of [causality, as well as space and time] from experience, only because we have put them into experience, and because experience is thus itself brought about only by their means. Certainly, the logical clearness of this representation of a rule determining the series of events is possible only after we have employed it in experience. Nevertheless, recognition of the rule, as a condition of the synthetic unity of appearances in time, has been the ground of experience itself, and has therefore preceded it *a priori*.”

(A196/B241)

Here we have an argument for the objectivity of causality insofar as, while it is subjectively given in experience (causes are not just out there to be perceived by us), it is also a condition of the possibility of experience itself. This seems to grant it something like universality or even communicability, such that its subjective ground in human judgment is accompanied by a certain objectivity: it is not merely a subjective rule used to make sense of our experiences after the fact, as if our experiences could so much as be given to us without it. It is a necessary condition for the objectivity of our experience.

There is a significant difference, though, between God as that from which the world’s conditionedness (or, in a more Schleiermacherian sense, “dependence”) is derived, and causality as the condition of an alteration over time of an object in experience. The former, which Kant calls a *ground*, is a condition for the possibility of something, while the latter, which Kant calls a *cause* proper, is a condition of actuality.<sup>8</sup> Grounds include the ideas of reason, but also the principle of causality insofar as it is a rule that is necessary for experience of objects in general. Kantian things-in-themselves can also be considered grounds in this sense insofar as “*knowledge* of objects would not

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<sup>8</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on Metaphysics*, trans. K. Ameriks and S. Naragon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 334-5.

be knowledge *of objects* if the ‘objects’ at issue did not have an ontological foothold outside the knowledge situation.”<sup>9</sup>

What sort of objectivity can we ascribe to the objects of theological inquiry, then? Here I will follow Manfred Kuehn in a similar argument that he makes for understanding the practical postulate of God’s existence in the Second Critique as a “deduction”:

In the transcendental deduction of the first *Critique* Kant differentiates between particular objects and an ‘object in general,’ and he claims that we can know the former only because we can think the latter. We produce, as it were, the particular objects according to the ‘pattern’ of the object in general. However, we do not produce it in so far as its *existence* is concerned, but only in so far as its form is concerned. The existence or ‘givenness’ of the particular object depends upon intuition. Now, with regard to ‘God’ we clearly cannot have any intuition [...] but we can (and indeed must) think God as an ‘object in general.’ The necessity of making certain postulations as acts amounts to the necessity of thinking what is postulated as an object.<sup>10</sup>

Kuehn goes on to point out that Kant even asserts that “insofar as the categories are to be applied to these ideas [of reason, e.g., God] it is not possible to give them any object in intuition; but *that an object really exists*, so that a category as a mere form of thought is here not empty but has significance, is sufficiently assured them by an object that practical reason presents beyond doubt in the concept of the highest good, namely the *reality of the concepts* that are required for the possibility of the highest good. (AA 5:136)

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<sup>9</sup> Nicholas Rescher, “Noumenal Causality” in *Kant and the Reach of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 21-35, 29.

<sup>10</sup> Manfred Kuehn, “Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of God’s Existence as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason” *Kant-Studien* 76.2 (1985), pp. 152-69, 165.

In this paper I have attempted to lay an initial foundation for the idea that objects of theological inquiry can be understood as having some measure of objectivity while still retaining a Kantian understanding of the restriction of knowledge to the categories of human judgment. Theological ideas like “God” are not merely subjective practical postulates necessary for shoring up the coherence of the idea of a moral law—their objectivity in general, while never an object of theoretical knowledge, can be affirmed as surely as we affirm the objectivity of any human experience. To put it another way: while we can never know God theologically the way that we might know a table empirically, we can know God in an analogous way as we can know the cause of a table’s construction. Even more fitting: we can know God theologically to the same extent that we can objectively know causality in any experience of a particular object (like a table) in temporal succession.

As I have already mentioned, these are preliminary musings for ongoing problems that I consider as I do theology, and many of the questions or concerns that define these problems for me have been left somewhat implicit. It should be clear that while I readily admit the Kantian idea that human knowledge cannot encompass an idea like “God”, I am also uncomfortable with conceiving of God, insofar as God is an object of theological and philosophical inquiry, as an object of faith—even rational or moral faith. What concerns me here is the possibility of theology or philosophy simply becoming a more reflective posture of one’s faith in God, even a more rigorous version of the faith that ordinary believers have. Under such an understanding theologians would risk becoming a special class of saints or priests, through whom proper faith is mediated to the community. One safeguard against such a possibility is to clarify the objectivity of God in the assent of the theologian as distinct from that which in the faith of the believer is the ground of salvation.

A number of further questions linger for me in all of this, and I will end by mentioning one of them, which has to do with my heavy reliance on some of Kant’s more constructively

metaphysical moves. I tried above to couch Kant's pursuit of ultimate grounds in a very nonchalant way: we can bracket the idea that a complete system of reason is necessary and simply argue that, if one were so inclined to pursue the chain of reasons back to an ultimate ground, one would find that the ideas of reason are in fact necessary conditions for the possibility of human experience of the world. But I wonder: if we are not so sanguine as Kant concerning the universality of the human will to truth or the unquenchable desire of Reason for sufficient reasons, does this make a difference for theology? Can theology survive in the same way if ultimate realities are optional objects of interested inquiry? Or will a satisfaction with penultimate ends and more proximate reasons turn the task of theology (at least as I have identified it here, as an inquiry into God, the soul, the world-whole, etc., insofar as they can be thought objectively) into a mere curiosity for people who ask an unseemly amount of questions?