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Kant's Religious Argument for the Existence of God – The Ultimate Dependence of Human Destiny on Divine Assistance

Stephen R. Palmquist

Abstract

After reviewing Kant's well-known criticisms of the traditional proofs of God's existence and his preferred moral argument, this paper presents a detailed analysis of a densely-packed theistic argument in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*. Humanity's ultimate moral destiny can be fulfilled only through organized religion, for only by participating in a *religious* community (or "church") can we overcome the evil in human nature. Yet we cannot conceive how such a community can even be *founded* without presupposing God's existence. Viewing God as the internal moral lawgiver, empowering a community of believers, is Kant's ultimate rationale for theistic belief.

I. The Practical Orientation of Kantian Theology

Kant is well known for attacking three traditional attempts to prove God's existence: the ontological, cosmological and physico-theological (or teleological) arguments. All such "theoretical" arguments inevitably fail, he claimed, because their aim (achieving certain knowledge of God's existence) transcends the capabilities of human reason. Viewed from the theoretical standpoint, God is not an object of possible human knowledge, but an idea that inevitably arises as a by-product of the totalizing tendencies of human reason. The very process

of obtaining empirical knowledge gives rise to the concept "God", and this enables us to think and reason about what God's nature must be *if* God exists; yet we have no "intuition" of God (neither through sensible input nor in any "pure" form), so we can have no reasonable hope of obtaining theoretical knowledge of God's existence.

All three traditional arguments, in Kant's estimation, aim to establish such theoretical certainty, so they are all bound to fail. Ontological arguments fail because we cannot reason from a pure concept ("God") to an *actual* object (*God*, as the goal of theoretical proof). Cosmological arguments fail because we cannot intuit the entire existing universe (the "world" God is supposed to have created) as an empirical object, so we do not know whether it must obey the same causal laws that individual objects *within* the empirically knowable universe must obey. And teleological arguments fail to establish *knowledge* (though they can inspire *belief*), because we cannot know whether the powerful intelligence that seems to have *shaped* the world for our benefit actually *created* it as well.¹

Ever since Mendelssohn portrayed Kant as an anti-metaphysical "all-destroyer" who was supposedly aiming to put an end to theology and religion, this reputation has been imputed to Kant by many commentators. In the mid-nineteenth century the influential German writer, Heinrich Heine, intensified this traditional reading by calling Kant the "arch-destroyer in the realm of thought" who put forward "destructive, world-annihilating thoughts".² He called Kant's first *Critique* "the sword that slew deism in Germany",³ depicting its criticism of the traditional theistic proofs as "one of the [book's] main points" – so important that we ought to "recognise everywhere visible in [the first *Critique*] his polemic against these proofs".⁴ The polemic's goal, Heine argues, was to demonstrate that "this ideal ... being, hitherto called God, is a mere fiction".⁵

Thanks to a growing number of voices opposing this traditionally negative reading of Kantian theology in recent years, it is slowly coming to be recognized as a gross perversion of

Kant's intentions. Many interpreters of Kant's theological and religious views now agree that Kant intended his criticism of the traditional theistic arguments not as an assault on the validity of theology or religion, but as a preparation for a more authentic way of rationally affirming God's existence.⁶ The traditional arguments, being theoretical, would not provide a suitable theological basis for religion, *even if they succeeded*.⁷ Aiming to achieve scientific-type *knowledge* of God's existence, rather than humble *belief*, their success would encourage human beings to believe we can *manipulate* God the way we manipulate objects in the natural world.

In place of the traditional theoretical arguments, Kant introduced an entirely new approach to arguing for God's existence that he believed would have a more healthy influence on the way people view God. His special "moral" argument carries a more qualified *practical* validity: Kant never assigns it the status of an absolute proof, as the theoretical arguments claim to achieve. Wood's explanation of the argument as constituting a "*reductio ad absurdum practicum*" (i.e., a proof that requires any atheistic moral person either to postulate God's existence as an explanation for why persevering in morally good conduct makes sense, or else to give up the claim that moral behavior is rational) is still one of the clearest and most persuasive accounts.⁸ Scholars have discussed the details of Kant's moral argument so thoroughly that the generally accepted position is now that, at least in this instance, Kant saw his philosophy as having generally affirmative theological implications – though the more skeptical interpreters think Kant's argument fails, rendering his affirmation misplaced.

While the importance of Kant's moral argument to his overall philosophical system is now widely recognized, many commentators remain unconvinced that he also intended to make specifically *religious* affirmations. Interpreters still tend to view Kant as having a highly abstract, excessively rational theology, with little or no relevance to the experience or belief affirmed by ordinary church-goers.⁹ The exceptions to this tendency are increasing as the affirmative

approach gains momentum, with more and more scholars willing to see Kant's philosophy, especially his later writings, as providing a stable foundation for a healthy and sustainable religious life.¹⁰ The reason Kant often appears to adopt a negative approach to religion, especially in *Religion*, is that most examples of religious belief and practice in his day (as perhaps also today) were a far cry from conforming to the ideal he believed reason presents of the authentic religious life. Nevertheless, even among scholars who explicitly adopt the affirmative approach to interpreting Kant's theology and religion, few have recognized that in Part Three of *Religion* Kant provides a new and strikingly different argument for God's existence.¹¹ Kant intends this argument, I shall claim, to provide a great deal more "comfort" than the moral argument on its own ever could.¹²

My strategy will be to present the context and text of Kant's "religious" argument (§II), then analyze its details (§III) and finally assess its validity and the applicability it may have to a community of religious believers (§IV). I shall argue that Kant employs this special argument to justify his explicit (but often neglected) claim that organized religion is *necessary* for the fulfillment of humanity's ultimate moral quest. Lest I (or Kant) be accused of arguing in a circle, I must add that the term "religious" here refers not to belief in God, but to *participation in a community* that has the (moral) character Kant refers to as "religious". (Kant's *individualist* version of this special argument will be discussed only briefly, in §IV.) If the argument's inferences are valid, it takes us significantly further in our philosophical quest for a justification of religious belief than does Kant's moral argument on its own, for its conclusion offers religious believers access to a *power* that would otherwise be either inaccessible (for atheistic or agnostic attempts to be moral) or ineffective (for religious approaches that recognize the source but misuse the power in question).

II. The Context and Primary Text of the Religious Argument

Kant sets the stage for his religious argument by establishing in Part One of *Religion* that humanity (i.e., every normal human person) by nature has a “good predisposition” that is infected at its root by an “evil propensity”.¹³ The latter perverts our moral decision-making process from the outset of our moral development.¹⁴ He goes on in Part Two to argue that a solution to this problem is possible only through a fundamental revolution in one’s character (a “change of heart”) that empowers a person to recover the proper way of making moral decisions – namely, to treat the moral law as one’s primary incentive for ethical choice, even when it conflicts with desires that arise out of our nature as phenomenal beings having specific mental and physical needs. Religion is possible, and inevitably arises in human societies, only because solving the problem of personal evil requires “divine assistance” (i.e., what theologians typically call “grace”) to succeed (see note 25, below). Kant thinks philosophy is incapable of identifying a particular historical vehicle as necessary to bring about this result, though philosophy can establish a *rational form* that can test the validity of any historical faith’s claim to have conveyed God’s grace to a given community. As an example of this philosophical procedure, Part One (especially Section IV [*Religion*, 39-44]) assesses the validity of the Christian doctrine of original sin: it is “inept” in its typical historical-genetic interpretation; but if understood as referring to the *rational* origin of all evil, it constitutes a suitable version of the practical (moral) problem that cries out for a religious solution (i.e., the problem of the evil propensity in human nature). Likewise, Part Two (especially Section One, subsection B [62-66]) assesses the Christian doctrine of grace through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus as morally harmful if presented in a way that removes the believer’s duty to effect his or her *own* self-improvement, but as “valid for us, as a precept to be followed” (64) if it is understood as depicting an internal rational model (the “prototype of perfect humanity”) that each person should strive to imitate.

At the outset of Part Three, just when the attentive, religiously-attuned reader may think the problem of the evil propensity (or original sin) has been solved by the availability of the prototype of perfection (or atoning grace), Kant argues that, *even if* a person experiences (or claims to have experienced) such divine assistance at an individual level, the battle is far from over. The individualistic solution of Part Two cannot permanently solve the problem of personal evil, because the most any given person can do is to engage in a *struggle* between the newly empowered good predisposition and the evil propensity. In the opening pages of Part Three Kant claims our tendency as human beings to act in self-centered ways *remains* a part of our nature, so even a “well-disposed” person, one who has experienced a conversion from evil-heartedness to good, will tend to be overcome by evil “as soon as he is among human beings”.¹⁵ He goes on to argue that the evil in human nature can be permanently overcome – i.e., a genuine *victory* of good over evil is possible – only when good-hearted individuals join together to participate in a *religious community* governed by rational (moral) principles.

Kant initially describes this community using a neutral, non-religious term, the “ethical community” (or ethical commonwealth) to indicate the *rational form* a religious community must take in order to fulfill its proper function. Unfortunately, many (if not most) commentators emphasize this *non-religious* term to such an extent that they mistakenly portray him as saying this community is not genuinely religious. As a result, Kant's theory of the ethical community is frequently discussed in the literature, while only rarely do we read about his theory of the *church*.¹⁶ Yet Kant explicitly argues in the first four subsections of Part Three's Division One that the ethical community must become a *religious* community (a “church”) in order to succeed.

That this point is so frequently ignored indicates a bias among Kant-scholars, many of whom would rather not think of their hero as supporting the church (an institution whose empirical manifestation is often unenlightened), and who therefore tend to skip lightly over these

subsections. Nevertheless, in these pages, Kant clearly does argue *from* the duty of an ethical community *to* the necessity of the church as a *religious* community. In order to preserve their preference for “ethical community” over “church” as a description of Kant’s argument in Part Three, commentators must neglect an argument presented in subsection II, where Kant first presents the ethical community as a unique duty of the human race to itself. What has been wholly ignored or (when acknowledged) downplayed is that Kant’s argument explicitly ties this duty to the *rational need* for “a higher moral being” (*Religion*, 98). Embarrassing though this fact may be for skeptical or non-religious Kant scholars, the remainder of *Religion* examines not the ethical community as such, but the ethical community *as religious* – i.e., the church. My focus here will not be on those later sections of the book, but on the transitional argument that appears in the very section where Kant first claims that joining the ethical community is a special human duty.

The term “ethical community” is not Kant’s *last* word on the subject of how human beings can secure a lasting victory over evil, but only a tentative *first word*. He makes this clear when, after comparing the “ethical state of nature” with the “juridical state of nature” in the first paragraph of subsection II (*Religion* 96-97), he argues in the second (and final) paragraph that the community’s purpose cannot be realized without weaving into it a belief in God as an internal moral lawgiver to all participants. After describing the ethical state of nature as one consisting “of inner immorality which the natural human being ought to endeavor to leave behind as soon as possible” (*Religion*, 97), Kant writes:

Now, here we have a duty *sui generis*, not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race toward itself. For every species of rational beings is objectively – in the idea of reason – destined to a common end, namely the promotion of the highest good as a good common to all. But, since this highest moral good will not be

brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole toward that very end, [i.e.] toward a system of well-disposed human beings in which, and through the unity of which alone, the highest moral good can come to pass, yet the idea of such a whole, as a universal republic based on the laws of virtue, differs entirely from all moral laws (which concern what we know to reside within our power), for it is the idea of working toward a whole of which we cannot know whether as a whole it is also in our power: so the duty in question differs from all others in kind and in principle. – We can already anticipate that this duty will need the presupposition of another idea, namely, of a higher moral being through whose universal organization the forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own, are united for a common effect....

Following a brief transitional sentence, the heading of subsection III then identifies this being as “God” by stating, as if to clarify the conclusion of the foregoing argument, that “the concept of an ethical community is the concept of a people of God under ethical laws” (98).

This densely-packed argument presents what I call a “religious argument” for God’s existence, where the term “religious” refers to a *community* grounded in mutual belief in a divine moral being. Like its famous counterpart, the moral argument in the second *Critique*, it should not be regarded as a theoretically valid *proof*. For as we saw in §I, Kant devotes considerable effort to demonstrating why all such proofs fail, and at no point does he backtrack on that position. But unlike the moral argument, where we find no more than an abstract “postulation” of God whose practical force rests in its ability to help us understand how moral conduct can be rational even though it does not always make us happy, this new argument carries with it an *empirical* (social) force that must, if successful, manifest itself in the unmistakably concrete

form of the *victory of good over evil* in a human community – a goal explicitly stated in the title of Part Three. Before we can assess the validity of this argument, we must scrutinize Kant's difficult language, carefully analyzing the argument's logical structure. In §III I shall therefore go back through the above-quoted paragraph, analyzing Kant's argument one step at a time in hopes of unpacking the logic of each premise, presenting each as itself the conclusion of a subordinate argument based on a distinct set of logical premises that Kant apparently expects the reader to recognize.

III. Analyzing the Argument's Four Steps

The above-quoted paragraph from *Religion 97* begins by introducing the concept of a new and unique kind of human duty, “not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race toward itself.” Kant presents this duty as the first premise of his argument by defending it in a single sentence: “For every species of rational beings is objectively – in the idea of reason – destined to a common end, namely the promotion of the highest good as a good common to all.” This first step can be understood as a mini-syllogism with one implied premise and one key term, “the highest good”, only minimally explained. Understanding why Kant says so little here about the meaning of this key term is crucial to appreciating the force of his argument.

That “highest good” is a technical term in Kant's moral philosophy might suggest he is here merely assuming its technical meaning, taking for granted that readers are familiar with his previous use of the concept. However, this would be a strange move, in light of his claim in the second edition Preface that the arguments in *Religion* require *no* familiarity with his Critical writings, but “[o]nly common morality”, whose “matter itself is contained, though in other words, in the most popular instruction for children or in sermons, and is easily understood.” If the logic of Kant's new argument is *based on* his technical concept of the highest good, then his

failure to defend or even specify its meaning at this point commits the potentially fatal error of grounding his argument's validity on an exceedingly problematic concept.¹⁷ Another possibility is that Kant does not describe or even *mention* his theory of the highest good here because this new argument does not depend on the details of that theory; rather, he uses the term in the quoted text as a general reference to *whatever* good one deems "common to all" members of the species. Kant himself obviously must think of this good as the situation where all people are rewarded with happiness in proportion to their virtue. But by calling it merely a "good common to all", he here neither denies nor affirms his own preferred (and rather complex) way of defining the concept; he thus protects the religious argument from being unnecessarily linked to the validity of his previously defended moral argument for God's existence – a dependence that would render his argument here so problematic (due to all the problems raised by critics of the moral argument¹⁸) that I could not hope to defend his position successfully in a single article.

Taking the text's non-committal reference to "highest good" at face value, we can express the underlying logic of this first step (using parentheses here, as throughout the arguments displayed in this section, to demarcate premises Kant does not state explicitly, but merely assumes) as follows:

1. Every species of rational beings is objectively destined to pursue a good common to all members of that species as its "highest good".
2. (Every species of rational beings has a unique, collective duty to pursue its objective destiny.)
3. The human race is a species of rational beings.
4. Therefore, the human species has a unique, collective duty to itself, to promote its highest good among all human beings.

Kant gives us no clue why he thinks the first premise is true. Apparently, he regards it as

analytic: the very conception of a species of *rational* beings is the concept of beings who promote as their collective (highest) good a good that is common to all. In other words, promoting an alleged “highest good” that is *not* common to all members of the species would be *irrational*. Presumably, Kant would defend the second (implied) premise in a similar way, inasmuch as “objective destiny” refers to an end one would be *foolish* to work against. Regardless of whether Kant would *require* us to interpret “highest good” here in his technical sense, we can see that the main point of this first step of Kant's argument is that the “duty” forming the basis of the overall argument is tied not to individuals, but to *humanity as a species*.

The next (third) sentence constitutes more than half of the quoted paragraph and advances two intertwined claims that are best examined separately, as distinct premises. The first is that this new duty requires “a union ... into a whole” of all persons who are “striving ... for [their] own moral perfection” as constituent parts of this big picture of human “destiny”. What Kant posits here is more than just a group of perfection-pursuing individuals, but individuals who together see their moral conduct as working toward “the highest moral good” of the species, in the form of “a system of well-disposed human beings ..., as a universal republic based on the laws of virtue”. Kant's actual argument is thread-bare at this point, merely previewing a claim he defends more fully in the next subsection. As we shall see at the end of §III, Kant's subsection III argues that the laws governing an ethical community must be *internally* legislated in order to retain their status as ethical. As a result, we cannot establish the ethical community through any political (i.e., humanly-contrived, *externally*-legislated) organization. It must be established in such a way that each member of the community generates the laws that govern the community *within* his or her own reason.

With the subsequent argument of subsection III in mind (summarized below in square brackets), we can reconstruct the logic of Kant's second step as follows:

1. In order for the “common good” affirmed by this new duty to be truly *common*, it must include *all* morally responsible members of the species.
2. (The human species consists of individual persons each of whom is morally/internally responsible for his/her own conduct.)
3. [In a political community the laws are externally legislated and coercive, so they cannot be “common to all”; there will inevitably be a “ruler” and a “ruled”.]
4. [In an ethical community the laws are internally legislated and non-coercive, so they can be “common to all”; no human individual can legislate the moral law on behalf of another human individual.]
5. Therefore, this new duty must establish a purely ethical community by systematically uniting the self-legislation of *each* person who pursues (however imperfectly) the ideal of his or her own moral perfection.

The first premise of this second subordinate argument merely explicates what Kant means by “common good”. The second premise, implied by the first, appears to be taken for granted as a basic tenet of any ethical system. It is analytic inasmuch as Kant would claim anyone who is *not* morally responsible should not be counted as a legitimate member of the community he is attempting to establish as necessary. As Kant discusses the rationale behind the third and fourth premises in subsection III, I shall examine them more fully at the close of §III. On the basis of these premises, the second major step in Kant's argument follows as a necessary inference: if a species includes multiple individuals, if these individuals become good only through internal self-legislation, and if political and ethical legislation are (respectively) external and internal, then the common good must be *internally* legislated to each, yet *applicable* to all.

The third step in Kant's overall religious argument comes in the same long sentence as the previous step: the unique duty introduced here *cannot* be an individual duty, as all other

Kantian duties are, because no single person could fulfill it. The most significant difference between this duty and all ordinary (individual) human duties lies in its novel application of a key principle of (Kantian) ethics, that “ought implies can”. The underlying logic justifying this third premise goes like this:

1. For human beings, ordinary duties relate solely to what we know lies within our power to bring about (i.e., “ought implies can”).
2. We cannot know whether we have the power even to work *toward* creating the “whole” whose existence would fulfill this duty of the human species toward itself.
3. Therefore, this new duty is unique: we do not know how it would be possible for individual humans on their own to work toward fulfilling it, though we do know the species as a whole *ought* to (and therefore can) fulfill it.

The first premise restates a fundamental tenet of Kantian ethics, one he has already employed earlier in *Religion*.¹⁹ The rationale behind the second premise can be traced back to the limits of theoretical reason established in the first *Critique*, preventing us from knowing (as a theoretical fact) whether we human beings will ever be capable of bringing about, as an objectively real phenomenon, this practical idea of the whole species united under a common good. This has already been discussed earlier in *Religion* (e.g., 20), where Kant insisted human individuals cannot see into the dispositions (i.e., the internal moral motives) of other persons. Practical reason can give us certainty that this idea constitutes our “objective destiny” even though theoretical reason leaves us uncertain whether individuals can even *help* to bring it about. The conclusion reached here (serving as the third premise of Kant's overall argument) is that in this case, we can know what this duty requires (*for our species*), even though we do not know whether we can contribute anything (*as individuals*) to its fulfillment.

The last sentence of the passage quoted in §II conveys the argument's overall conclusion.

Given that a new duty has been introduced, that this duty requires individuals to be united in a “universal organization” under ethical laws, and that “the forces of single individuals” are “insufficient on their own” to be “united for a common effort”, Kant concludes that in order to preserve its own integrity, reason “will need the presupposition of another idea, namely of a higher moral being”, to complete the work we humans cannot reasonably hope to accomplish. The steps leading to this conclusion can be displayed merely by restating the conclusions of each subordinate argument analyzed above:

1. The human species has a unique, collective duty to itself, to promote its highest good among all human beings.
2. This new duty must establish a purely ethical community by systematically uniting the self-legislation of *each* person who pursues (however imperfectly) the ideal of his or her own moral perfection.
3. This new duty is unique: we do not know how it would be possible for individual humans on their own to work toward fulfilling it, though we do know the species as a whole *ought* to (and therefore can) fulfill it.
4. Therefore (in view of our ignorance), reason needs to presuppose the idea of a higher moral being who can complete the work human individuals cannot reasonably hope to accomplish on their own in fulfilling this unique duty of the human species to itself.

The foregoing analysis demonstrates that the purpose of Kant's argument in subsection II is to establish not that an ethical community is necessary, but that because its establishment is a necessary precondition for the fulfillment of human destiny, yet we cannot establish it on our own, we must view the community as *religious*.

An important point here – one Kant never tires of repeating – is that the necessary

presupposition of God's involvement in the fulfillment of human destiny does not (indeed *cannot* be used to) marginalize the importance of human effort toward self-improvement. Kant's argument requires us to believe in God in order to assist *the human community* to fulfill a collective duty, yet without taking away the equally important requirement each individual has to work diligently for moral self-improvement. The latter remains necessary because without it we would not even have the building-blocks to make the required "whole" possible. That is, God cannot *make* us conform our wills to the moral law; but *only* God can unite these building-blocks – the almost unimaginable diversity of human willing – into a consistent whole that we can picture as forming a coherent *community*.

This point becomes amply clear in the second paragraph of subsection IV (*Religion*, 100-101), where Kant reaffirms the conclusion of his religious argument, reminding us that the only ground for rational hope that "a moral people of God" can be established is to regard it as "a work whose execution ... [originates] from God himself." Yet we cannot merely sit back and do nothing, "entrust[ing] to a higher wisdom the whole concern of the human race (as regards its moral destiny)." Instead, each individual must act "as if everything depended on him." The reason Kant presents this as the "condition" that enables us to "hope that a higher wisdom will provide the fulfillment of this well-intentioned effort" is that his religious argument for God's existence, as he presents it in subsection II, requires *both* factors: if we individuals are not doing our best to improve our moral conduct, no amount of assistance from a higher being can bring about a "common good"; but if there is no God, then all our efforts are wasted.²⁰ Only "well-disposed human beings", therefore, are rationally justified in calling upon the conclusion of this religious argument, because only they have made the relevant "preparations" concerning what lies within their power to insure that this "whole" that is our common human destiny will "come to pass among them" (101).

This religious argument for God's existence is genuinely new and different from Kant's moral argument inasmuch as it encourages us to believe in God not for our *own* sake (i.e., to justify the rationality of our commitment to be moral), nor out of any sense of *individual* duty (i.e., any necessity practical reason may impose on each of us as a person); rather, Kant now urges us to believe in God *for the sake of our species*, because as rational beings we realize that the destiny of our species, insofar as we are to fulfill what is implied by our rational nature, *requires* something we must humbly acknowledge we are profoundly unable to accomplish on our own. We believe in God as the being through whom all the diverse duties we give ourselves as individuals (duties that, in light of each person's autonomy, seem bound to stand in conflict²¹) can be united in a single, self-consistent tapestry, called the common (or "highest") good.

This is the main point Kant seeks to establish in subsection III, by distinguishing between a political and an ethical community. The only way a person can imagine how one's individual duties can be consistent with the duties of others (especially *all* others!), Kant argues, is to regard all duties as emanating from a single, higher source. This source cannot be *political*, because then we would be dealing not with the free choice implied by the word "duties" (i.e., with ethics), but with the external constraint implied by the word "rights" (i.e., with politics).²² The problem, whose solution is Kant's religious argument, arises precisely because the nature of this proposed universal community must be *ethical*. As Kant frequently reminds us (e.g., *Religion*, 20), other people's dispositions, the motives underlying their choices, remain forever hidden from our view; we therefore cannot be sure whether what other persons regard as their duty is consistent with what we regard as our duty. As a result of our inevitable ignorance in the face of apparently conflicting duties, we cannot even be certain we are *capable* of bringing about the required unity of ethical purpose. The only solution is to introduce a moral being who *can* see into the depths of each person's

disposition and would therefore have the power to weave our different conceptions of duty into a consistent whole. Our need to understand how this is possible, Kant argues, rationally justifies us in believing that God exists. Because moral commands come to each of us *internally*, they are not coercive in the way political laws are, so we can rationally hope God is capable of fulfilling the unity of purpose that reason tells us constitutes our human destiny.

IV. Concluding Implications regarding the Power of Belief

In presenting his religious argument, Kant portrays divine assistance as the only way to satisfy reason's special need to fulfill humanity's destiny. He claims "this duty will *need* the presupposition of ... a higher moral being" to be fulfilled.²³ Is this claim justified? Kant thinks it is, because the only other option would be to suppose an ethical community could fulfill the destiny of the species even if it were based entirely on human organization. Yet if people merely *select* a set of rules to govern the community of all well-disposed individuals, even if the explicit purpose of these rules is to encourage the members to act together for the common good, the status of such an organization would be essentially political, not ethical. Other people are, after all, external to us. Although each individual might legislate the moral law internally, the whole community could only *guarantee* its unity by imposing these laws as an external (i.e., *political*) code. Thus, if we are left on our own, without being empowered by divine assistance, the founding of an *ethical* community seems extremely unlikely, if not practically impossible.

If we accept Kant's claim that God alone can guarantee an ethical community will be established, we might still ask what his argument aims to prove about our *belief* in God. Does it merely prove we must presuppose the *idea* of God, or does it set out to prove the more robust conclusion that an *actual* God must really exist? This is a thorny issue with an extensive literature, so here I can only outline an answer. As stated in §I, the first *Critique* established that

the *idea* of God arises inevitably in the mind of any human knower who obtains empirical knowledge, and that belief in God is rationally *possible* (i.e., cannot be proved to be illegitimate), though not theoretically necessary. The second *Critique* then establishes that this same idea must be subjectively posited as *actual* in order for us human beings, as individuals, to make sense out of our inner conviction that behaving morally is at least part of living a meaningful life. Kant's new argument in the *Religion* passage analyzed above (in §III) can be described in two quite distinct ways. First, we can view it as claiming belief in the idea of God is now *necessary*, if we are to pursue the whole range of our duties as human beings (including the special, collective duty of our species). But what does "necessity" *mean* in this context? This is best answered by giving a second description that amounts to the same claim: our belief must be in an *actual* God (not merely in a convenient idea) in order for its purpose to be fulfilled. For Kant's religious argument implies that, if the modality of God's reality turns out to be merely *possible* (if all our God-postulation is merely wishful thinking), our ability to fulfill the destiny of our species is doomed to fail. We are therefore presented with a choice: either this God we believe in is *actual*, thus making both our belief and our moral life rational (for we can then reasonably hope its ultimate collective goal will be fulfilled), or this God we believe in is a mere *idea*, thus rendering our belief ineffectual and irrational (for the idea on its own could not have the *power* to fulfill the immense task Kant's argument requires of God).

That Kant requires an actual God in *Religion* becomes clearer in the opening paragraph of Part Four, where he summarizes the essential message of Part Three by restating his religious argument. He now portrays it in terms that explicitly emphasize God's role in establishing and giving a religious character to the ethical community (*Religion*, 151-152):

We have seen that to unite in an ethical community is a duty of a special kind (*officium sui generis*), and that, though we each obey our private duty, we might

indeed thereby derive an *accidental agreement* of all in a common good, without any special organization being necessary for it, yet that such a universal agreement is not to be hoped for, unless a special business is made of resisting the attacks of the evil principle ... by the union of all with one another for one and the same end, and the establishment of one community under moral laws, as a federated and therefore stronger force. – We have also seen that such a community, **as a Kingdom of God**, can be undertaken by human beings only through *religion*, and finally, that in order for religion to be public (a requisite for a community), this *Kingdom* is represented in the visible form of a *church*, the founding of which therefore devolves on human beings as a work which is entrusted to them and can be required of them.

In this restatement Kant follows the same basic steps as the argument analyzed in §III, so I shall not scrutinize this passage in such detail. The important point is that, having completed the arguments of Part Three, Kant now settles on a specific position regarding who is responsible for creating the ethical community. Kant here distinguishes two standpoints: establishing the community in its ultimate or ideal form, as “a Kingdom of God” (or “invisible church”, as he calls it in Part Three, Division One, subsection IV), can only be God’s responsibility. This cannot be a human duty, because we are powerless to bring it about. What *is* our duty, as Kant so clearly states in the above overview, is founding a *visible* church that approximates the invisible ideal. Without mentioning the potentially problematic concept of the “highest good”, referring instead only to the less technical notion of “a common good”, he argues that a merely *private* religion (as portrayed in Part Two) will not suffice, as it will not have the power to overcome the social influence of evil. We are therefore faced, once again, with an ultimate choice: either we believe in an actual God who can and will establish this religious community (this “*corpus mysticum*”,²⁴) or we give up our rational hope that our imperfect efforts to approximate that goal

can ever effectively promote the destiny of our species.

This argument for God's existence, grounded on reason's need for *public* religion, is not the only argument Kant presents in *Religion* that could be described as a "religious argument for the existence of God". For example, in the General Remark to Part One (*Religion*, 45), he employs a similar form of reasoning, but applies it to our need for private religious belief:

For, in spite of that fall, the command that we *ought* to become better human beings still resounds unabated in our souls; consequently, we must also be capable of it, even if what we can do is of itself insufficient and, by virtue of it, we only make ourselves receptive to a higher assistance inscrutable to us.

In other words: (1) each moral agent has a duty to become a better person, changing his or her evil heart to a good heart; (2) no person can make such a change through his or her own power alone, due to the limitations of the human condition; (3) each moral agent must be able to make such a change, or it could not be a duty; therefore (4) a higher power must exist, to assist individuals in making the change from evil to good. Likewise, a few pages later (in the paragraph spanning *Religion*, 47-48), Kant argues that "duty commands" us to bring about "a revolution" in our disposition in order to overcome radical evil; yet because we have no idea how this could come about by our own efforts, we must do whatever *is* in our power to ensure our conduct is consistent with our being on "the good (though narrow) path of constant *progress* from bad to better" and believe there is a God "to whom this endless progress is a unity"; we then have rational grounds to believe our "change can be considered a revolution."²⁵

Kant's religious argument has two prongs. On one hand, it tells us that the atheist and agnostic must rest all hope for realizing the destiny of the human species solely on the abstract idea of an ethical community, while nevertheless admitting their utter powerlessness even to work toward achieving that goal. How could we even *begin* to legislate genuinely ethical laws to

each other, given that we have no access to each other's dispositions? The only option for the atheist and agnostic, it seems, is to give up any hope of achieving the goal Kant regards as the destiny of our species.²⁶ On the other hand, seen in the context of his whole Critical philosophy, Kant's argument guards against a false way of believing in God, regarded as an object of *theoretical* cognition (i.e., knowledge), and prepares the way for a more humble acceptance of God on the basis of *practical* cognition (i.e., faith). For when a "religious" movement develops along the former (false) lines, it invariably degenerates into an aggregate of self-deceptive individuals who cannot hope to form a genuinely universal community, inasmuch as the very people who claim to be acting on God's behalf (through manipulative claims to "know God's will") end up thwarting the moral ends of humanity – and presumably also the ends of the God whose will they claim to know. This false approach, discussed in detail in Part Four of *Religion*, is what Kant was trying to guard against by developing in Part Three a religious argument that *belief* in the existence of a moral God is a necessary requirement for rational hope in the fulfillment of human destiny.²⁷

We can now see that one of the chief objections to Kant's moral argument for God's existence, when expressed as a postulate of practical reason, is overcome by Kant's religious argument. What Lilla says about the "cold" comfort to be gained from Kant's practical postulates may be true for the arguments in the second *Critique*; but Kant's argument in *Religion* goes well beyond the postulates.²⁸ If we interpret the religious argument the way I am suggesting Kant intended it, religious belief ends up providing us with the very power so many commentators have found missing in Kant's ethical system. As Lilla argues (410): "Man is religious because he is genuinely needy, to the very core of his being ... *Homo religiosus* is *homo cogitans* in action." Thus, the one factor that Lilla admits requires us to take Kant's theology seriously is its psychological insight (421): "What makes religion possible, in Kant's view, is that reason has

needs.” Lilla hints at Kant’s religious argument when he admits (425) that for Kant the ethical community “is at most a ‘people of God’ living under ethical laws within an organized church.” However, Lilla immediately qualifies this with the (unexplained) claim that for Kant this assumption was a mere “fiction”. What needs to be specified when a term like this is employed this way is that it has a special, technical meaning for Kant: it refers to a concept that has no empirical grounding in theoretical cognition, yet may nevertheless have a legitimate *regulative* role to play within the overall system of theoretical knowledge and may even have a *constitutive* role in practical cognition. As such, saying the invisible church is a “fiction” does not mean we can simply dismiss it, any more than we can dismiss ideas such as immortality or “the world” (i.e., the universe as a whole), simply because Kant calls them fictions, as far as scientific knowledge is concerned. Indeed, the religious community could hardly be more real, more powerful, than it is in *Religion*. Whereas Lilla may be seeing Kant’s project in an overly negative way when he says Kant “robbed Christianity of the doctrinal crutches on which it had lazily leaned” (432), he nevertheless rightly acknowledges that “his moral theology demonstrated ... that religion was a permanent human need and that Christianity, properly reformed, was the religion most suited to man’s moral improvement.”

Our analysis of Kant’s religious argument for God’s existence has enabled us to counter the claim often leveled against Kantian theology, that it leaves us wholly without assistance from God. As Lilla (420) again puts it: “The autonomous man who finds himself free from these superstitious dogmas [i.e., sin and grace] also finds he must now bear alone all the burdens God once helped him carry.... Now that man has reached the age of majority he must justify himself.” Such stark moral fatalism, however, is not the position Kant leaves us in. As this is not the place for a detailed assessment of his doctrines of sin and grace, we can merely note in passing that a proper understanding of his religious argument reveals a Kant who sees the relationship between

God and human beings as one of *partnership*,²⁹ not the absolute estrangement Lilla imagines. Thus, viewing human destiny from the divine/noumenal standpoint enables us to affirm the opposite of Lilla's position: as Kant sees our moral fate, we know of no conceivable way of overcoming the power of radical evil aside from divine assistance, we know of nothing we can do to justify ourselves apart from having practical faith in the prototype that has "come down" to dwell in human hearts, and – as Kant's religious argument demonstrates – we know of no way to "work toward" fulfilling our human destiny without assuming that God shapes our diverse moral self-understandings into a "People of God", an "invisible *church*".

Kant's vision of the moral community *as religious* ends up looking more like a communitarian moral theory than we normally think of Kant as defending. As Jennifer Moore points out, however, it is different from the communitarian vision (cf. note 17, above) in at least one key respect (68): "Community must flow from moral laws; moral laws cannot arise out of community." What she neglects to mention is that because we human beings are all subject to an evil propensity and are unable to see into other people's moral motivations, we cannot fulfill the duty of our species, to form, on the sole basis of the moral law within us, a harmonious whole that unites the multitude of different human wills that stand in potential opposition to each other. Kant does not think we have good reason to hope an ethical community (i.e., the *ultimate* community constituting the destiny of our species) will somehow come into being outside of religion. What Moore says about Kantian ethics may be true, that "to act autonomously is in a fundamental sense to act *in common* with others."³⁰ But as his religious argument for the existence of God demonstrates, Kant offers hope that our human efforts may help realize such autonomy-in-common only for those who are empowered by the belief that human destiny ultimately rests in God's hands.³¹

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Notes

1. Kant advances these arguments in *Critique of Pure Reason* (hereafter *CPR*), Transcendental Dialectic, Chapter III; page references cite the B edition. For a detailed explanation of what Kant's theoretical arguments entail and why their failure does not rule out theistic belief, see Palmquist (2000), Chapter IV and Appendix IV.

2. Heine 1859, 109.

3. Heine 1859, 107.

4. Heine 1859, 115-116.

5. Heine 1859, 115.

6. In addition to the various articles that culminated in *Kant's Critical Religion*, see the collection of essays in Firestone and Palmquist (2006), where 14 scholars share a common standpoint the editors of the latter volume call the "affirmative" approach to interpreting Kant. The Editors' Introduction provides a thorough-going sketch of the history of the traditionally negative approach, followed by an exhaustive overview of the books in English focusing on Kant's philosophy of religion since Wood (1970) and Despland (1972) first turned the tide toward the affirmative. Although in most cases they did not explicitly align themselves with the early manifesto proposed in Palmquist (1989), interpreters since the early 1990s have been adopting a more and more affirmative approach to Kantian theology and philosophy of religion.

7. In *CPR*, xxx, Kant explicitly states the goal of his Critical philosophy is to *protect* religion and morality from the negative effects sophisticated and skeptical philosophers can have on them.

Similarly, in his *Lectures on Ethics*, he says: "In religion the knowledge of God is properly based on faith alone.... [So] it is not necessary for this belief [in God] to be susceptible of logical proof.... [For] sophistication is the error of refusing to accept any religion not based on a theology which can be apprehended by our reason.... Sophistication in religious matters is a

dangerous thing; our reasoning powers are limited and reason can err and we cannot prove everything. A speculative basis is a very weak foundation for religion" (86-7).

8. See Wood (1970), 25-34. The vast subsequent literature on this argument need not be reviewed here. For an overview of the first twenty years of literature discussing Wood's interpretation of the moral theory in Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason*, see Palmquist (1993), §VIII.3.B. For a recent account of the alleged weaknesses of the argument from a more skeptically-minded interpreter, see Byrne (2007), chapters 5 and 6.

9. For example, Lilla (412) says: "It is ... hard to imagine anyone taking genuine comfort from immortality or God as Kant conceives them." He later (421) adds: "The postulates of immortality and God are the most Kant can offer to meet this threat [of self-contempt]. They are, to say the least, ghostly humanistic substitutes for the real thing. In fact, there is no resurrection from the dead or God to whom we can turn." While this may be plausible as a depiction of the Kantian theology we find in the three *Critiques*, I argue here (and elsewhere) that it is far from true of the position Kant advances in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (hereafter *Religion*). As we shall see in §IV, Lilla acknowledges a role for religion in Kant's moral system, though he does not think it offers any more "comfort" than the postulates.

10. In addition to the works already mentioned, the books by Fendt (1990), Davidovich (1993), Lowe (1993), Peters (1993), Axinn (1994), Dell'Oro (1994), Galbraith (1996), Hare (1996), Kielkopf (1997), and Moore (2003) are noteworthy, though not all of these authors go as far as they could in affirming the specifically *religious* significance of Kant's philosophy.

11. The argument appears in *Religion* 97-99 (Part Three, Division One, §II). Wood (1992) acknowledges that Kant's arguments in support of "faith in a divine grace" (403) can be regarded as supplementing his moral argument, but does not call attention to this passage. Lenk identifies a "sociomorphic" argument for God in the passage (103), but leaves it undeveloped. Peters offers

a formalized version of the argument (101-102), but without acknowledging the way it lends support for belief in God (see note 20, below). And Hare (2000), 470, mentions the argument in passing, but says nothing about its distinct form or purpose in comparison to the moral argument, interpreting it instead as if it were based on Kant's technical concept of the highest good, just as the moral argument is.

12. See Palmquist (2000), where the summary of the argument's structure is sketchy and slightly inconsistent with the more detailed account provided below.

13. In Palmquist (2008), I argue that Kant uses a "quasi-transcendental" argument to defend both claims. In a nutshell, his argument (like that for space, time and causality in *CPR*) is that anyone who grants that we experience some degree of moral failing *must* accept the *universal* application of these two human attributes.

14. Palmquist (2008), especially §4 demonstrates that Kant repeatedly portrays the moral depravity he attributes to human nature as having *been there from the start*, even though in some (admittedly mysterious) sense, each of us *chooses* to make it our own.

15. *Religion*, 94. Wood (2000), 504-505, interprets this passage as Kant's *conclusion* that "[t]he source of evil ... is *social*." As I demonstrate in Palmquist (2008), this ignores Kant's own arguments in Part One of *Religion*, that evil originates *in reason* and therefore must have a transcendental origin in any philosophical analysis. Human society is responsible not for evil's *origin*, but for its *enduring presence*. The point of Part Three's Introduction is that people who have experienced a change of heart, who may therefore be regarded as "well-disposed" persons, are nevertheless still susceptible to the influence of evil. Ironically, Wood himself points out (505) that if evil has a social origin, "then the most natural inference from this might be that the struggle against it should take the form of self-isolation (the solution of the hermit)." Yet as Wood observes (without explaining how this can be), Kant firmly rejects the hermit's solution!

He rejects it because hermits tend to attribute to society something *grounded* in individuals as members of the human species; society merely *manifests* evil in its most obvious forms. Having shown in Part Two how religion must attack the *rational origin* of evil in the individual, Kant now turns in Part Three to show how religion must attack its manifestation in society. If Wood were right, if Kant thought evil *originated* in society, the individual could not be blamed for making evil choices – an outcome Kant repeatedly warns against throughout *Religion*.

16. Examples of this biased emphasis abound. Rossi's recent book (2005) is a good illustration, especially because the author cannot be accused of being anti-religious himself; yet his index entry for "church" (192) says only "see ethical commonwealth", and among the numerous subentries under the latter, "as church" cites only eight relevant pages (193). Likewise, Wood (2000) exclaims (509): "it is virtually impossible to overestimate the importance of organized religion in Kant's scheme of things." Yet Wood explicitly uses Kant's preferred term, "church" (508), only once. For two exceptions to this trend, see Quinn, who tackles the issue of "Kantian ecclesiology" head on, but neglects the crucial argument we shall be examining here, and Palmquist (2006), where I take seriously the potential for Kantians to take up public positions (e.g., as church leaders).

17. Largely because Kant mentions the highest good here as part of his argument that the ultimate victory over evil must be social, some commentators have argued that Kant meant the concept to be a socially-oriented one all along. Jennifer Moore, for example, claims that *throughout* Kant's ethical writings "the highest good is always a *social* good" (55). By contrast, Rossi (2005), 7, thinks the social orientation of the highest good was not emphasized in Kant's primary Critical writings, where he defined that technical term as "the proper apportionment of happiness to accord with each *individual's* moral virtue."

18. Peter Byrne (1998), 70-93, has argued, for example, that the moral argument in the second *Critique* fails precisely because the components of the highest good cannot withstand a rigorous philosophical analysis. For his most recent account of the argument's failure, see Byrne (2006), chapters 5 and 6.

19. Kant refers only indirectly to this argument in the quoted passage. However, he repeats the "ought implies can" principle over and over again in the second *Critique*, in *Religion*, and elsewhere. In *Religion* 41, for instance, he says that in every moral act it "must be within his [a moral agent's] power" "to better himself."

20. As observed in note 11, Peters is one of the few interpreters to recognize the presence of a special new argument in the second paragraph of subsection II. However, he interprets the passage as an attempt to encourage hope in the possibility of an ethical commonwealth becoming real and regards the introduction of the idea of God as dispensable (106,157-61). Yet this totally ignores the argument's progression *from the assumption* that building an ethical community is a human duty *to the need* for belief in God in order to fulfill this duty. Without religious belief, the argument would be powerless to convince anyone of the reality of anything!

21. The argument analyzed here provides a new way of tackling the problem of how to harmonize conflicting duties within a Kantian framework: even though we cannot always understand how conflicting duties can coexist in a self-consistent moral system, we must believe that from God's perspective the whole picture does make sense. Of course, some ethicists are bound to reject the proposed solution, for it requires ethics to present itself in religious clothing. Hare (2000), 470, refers to this as the "coordination problem", correctly noting that in Part Three of *Religion* Kant argues that we must ultimately believe in God in order to solve it.

22. As Lilla (425) explains, "even if the public peace is maintained through the law, the moral state of man will decline as social interaction transforms good inclinations into wicked ones."

Thus, a political community cannot be the vehicle for bringing about the existence of an ethical community. Both Anderson-Gold and Rossi neglect this important point, portraying political reform as a step toward religious/moral reform. By contrast, I argue in Palmquist (1994) that, according to Kant's understanding of human destiny, the influence of *both* political and traditional religious systems must subside as the authentically religious (and thus, moral) community gradually arises. On the paradoxical notion of a community governed by laws with no external form, see Palmquist (2000), note VII.36.

23. *Religion*, 98, emphasis added. Rossi (1989) comes close to recognizing the distinctiveness of this religious argument for God's existence when he says Kant's claim that the "complete attainment" of goodness "lies beyond human capacities" (371) "helps open up a 'logical space' for an affirmation of God on the basis of 'moral faith'." However, he provides no detailed account of the argument Kant actually constructs in order to open up that "space".

24. In defending the thoroughly social nature of the highest good (see note 17, above), Jennifer Moore quotes from *CPR* 836, where Kant calls the highest good a "*corpus mysticism* of rational beings." Kant's uncharacteristic use of mystical terminology suggests he is thinking here of what he calls the "invisible church" in Part Three of *Religion*. This early hint does not detract from the primarily individualistic orientation of the highest good in the second *Critique*; rather, it confirms that for Kant the ultimate social goal of the highest good cannot be realized by ethics alone, but comes to fruition only in religion. Moore (60) herself relates this *CPR* reference to the *Religion* passage I analyzed in §III, but states only that the passage shows that this mystical community "does not arise automatically from interaction among its members, but must be established or constituted – in this case, by moral ... law." Yet this is not Kant's point! His point is that we must *appeal to God* in order to conceive of how the "mystical body" of all well-disposed persons can be established. Thus, while Moore rightly says that "Kant argues in

Religion that members must cooperate with each other to establish and maintain an ethical community” and that “our deepest and ultimate identity lies in our membership in a moral social order” (62), she never even hints that in Part Three Kant makes these claims as part of his religious argument for God's existence.

25. Limitations of space prevent us from examining here the logical steps in this individualistic version of Kant's religious argument for God's existence. In a nutshell, Kant's point is that without being supported by belief in an actual God, human duty would reach an impasse, rendering human life meaningless, for the meaning of our lives is grounded in our moral nature.

26. Fenves appears to adopt this approach in response to his efforts to take seriously the effects of radical evil (91): “All talk of an ‘invisible church’ may then become something of a joke, since it has the potential to raise a tense expectation that suddenly turns into nothing.” What Fenves ignores is that the hopelessness inherent in the human situation, considered in a non-theistic way, is the very basis for Kant's religious argument for God's existence.

27. Lilla (426) expresses this insight by pointing out that Kant's ethical (read *religious*) community is “transconfessional and therefore can be seen as a threat to both [visible, ecclesiastical] church and state.” On the close parallel between Kant's ethical and political theories, see Palmquist (1994).

28. *Religion*, 412, 421; see §I and note 9, above. Ignoring the distinctiveness of Kant's religious argument, Lilla (421) claims: “The postulates of immortality and God are the most Kant can offer to meet this threat” – the threat of “self-contempt” robbing a moral person “of the confidence we need to keep improving ourselves.”

29. Hare (1996) similarly portrays Kant as defending the need for “our membership with God in the kingdom of ends” (467) as *partners* in building an ethical community (468): “we share our final end with God, in the sense that both we and God aim at our own perfection.” In a footnote

he adds (477): “what Kant wants in our autonomous submission is both our will and God’s together, neither of them being sufficient without the other.”

30. J. Moore, 69. We can affirm what Moore (66) says of the “ethical community”, though only as applied to the *religious* community, conceived as an ethical community created and sustained by God’s guiding hand: “We can reject the possibility of a universal ethical community [*as religious*] – but only at the price of rejecting Kant’s entire ethical vision.” That is, to reject Kant’s emphasis on the church is to doom his moral philosophy to inevitable failure.

31. An earlier version of this paper was presented as the keynote address at a symposium on “The Position of God in Kant’s Moral System”, held at UCE Birmingham in June of 2007. I would like to thank all who attended that symposium, as well as two anonymous *Faith and Philosophy* referees, for their helpful feedback.