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The Idea of Immortality as an Imaginative Projection of an Indefinite Moral Future

Stephen Palmquist

1 Immortality as a Metaphysical Illusion

In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant famously includes immortality as one of the three “ideas” that give rise to “unavoidable problems of reason” (KrV, B7)¹ and thereby constitute the basic subject-matter of metaphysics. Interpreters have paid a great deal of attention to the other two ideas, God and freedom; yet very few studies of Kantian immortality have ever been undertaken. This should come as no surprise, once we realize that Kant himself used the word “immortality” and its cognates only 40 times in all three of his great *Critiques*. (By comparison, forms of the words “God” and “free(dom)” appear 119 and 509 times, respectively, in the three *Critiques*.) Kant’s theory of immortality – if he can be said to have one – is therefore exceedingly difficult to understand. For example, he says at one point (KrV, B395n): “Metaphysics has only three ideas as the proper purpose of its investigation: *God, freedom, and immortality* – and in such a way that the second concept, when combined with the first, is to lead to the third as a necessary conclusion.” How are we to understand this claim? Does Kant really mean that combining the concept of freedom with the concept of God somehow gives rise to immortality as a necessary inference? In any case, why does Kant say so little about immortality, even though he portrays it as one of three ideas that constitute the “final aim” of all metaphysical speculation?² These and other puzzles

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- 1 Immanuel Kant: *Critique of Pure Reason*. Trans. Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis 1996; hereafter “KrV.” One of the few other recent studies is Douglas Burnham: “Immortality and Finitude: Kant’s Moral Argument Reconsidered”. In: *Death and Anti-Death*, Vol. 2, *Two Hundred Years after Kant, Fifty Years after Turing*. Ed. Charles Tandy. Palo Alto 2004.
 - 2 KrV, B 826. Elsewhere (A 384) Kant presents a more cautious account of the status of immortality: “There are still three dialectical questions that are based on this transcendental illusion of our psychological concepts – questions that

raised by Kant's occasional comments on immortality will be the focus of this paper.

Traditional metaphysics, Kant claims in the Introduction to the first *Critique*, seeks to establish synthetic *a priori* propositions that constitute necessary and universal truths concerning the three metaphysical ideas. From the outset (KrV, B XXX), Kant insists that these ideas can be justified only insofar as they can be shown to have some practical use – and by this he means, some necessary relation to our moral nature. When he eventually examines their legitimacy (in the Transcendental Dialectic), Kant ends up analyzing not God, freedom, and immortality but the soul, the world, and God. Immortality turns out to be but one of four “paralogisms,” or fallacious syllogisms, that metaphysicians have used in an effort to define the characteristics of the soul. Kant explains that these paralogisms arise because we mistakenly take our inner self-awareness, especially our use of the concept “I,” as a transcendental ground for inferring the existence of a substantial soul. The characteristics traditionally ascribed to the soul arise because of the human mind's natural tendency to explain this illusion in terms of the four main categories (KrV, B 403):

From these elements arise all concepts of pure psychology, merely by the assembly of these elements and without the least recognition of another principle. This substance, merely as object of inner sense, yields the concept of *immateriality*; as simple substance, that of *incorruptibility*. Its identity as intellectual substance yields *personality*; all three of these components together, *spirituality*. The relation of the substance to objects yields *commerce* with bodies; and hence as so related it presents thinking substance as the principle of life in matter, i. e., as soul (*anima*) and as the basis of *animality*; and animality as limited by spirituality presents *immortality*.

In this complex explanation of how we derive the concept of immortality, Kant appears to be saying that when physical bodies exhibit *life*, we tend to think of the latter as evidence that *another* substance (equal and opposite to the body) exists within it to make it alive. This *soul* is then thought not only to be a substance, but also to be immaterial, incorruptible, and

amount to the goal proper of rational psychology and cannot be decided otherwise than through the above inquiries: viz., the questions (1) about the possibility of the soul's communion with an organic body, i. e., about animality and the state of the soul in a human being's life; (2) about the beginning of this communion, that is, about the soul in and before a human being's birth; (3) about the end of this communion, i. e., about the soul in and after a human being's death (the question concerning immortality).”

personal (at least, in the case of us humans). Because our bodies are mortal, this soul that limits the body is naturally thought of as immortal.

The problem with such metaphysical claims, apparently grounded in logic, is that philosophers tend to believe they have established *knowledge* of the soul and its immortality, yet this requires us to step out beyond the limits of what human reason can possibly comprehend in its “theoretical” application (i. e., through logical argumentation). It transcends reason’s limits because the soul (and so also, its immortality) is not an object that can be presented to us in intuition (i. e., given to the senses); rather, ideas such as immortality and God (KrV, B 883) “lie entirely outside the bounds of possible experience.” Kant is careful to explain that this does not require us to give up *belief* in a soul; it only forces us to recognize that the kind of reasoning appropriate for gathering and assessing scientific knowledge is not appropriate for assessing the nature and functioning of this most elusive aspect of our nature.

Unfortunately, Kant’s account of immortality in the first *Critique*, unlike his discussions of the ideas of freedom and God, is very sketchy. He says almost nothing about what immortality actually means. What he does tell us is expressed in negative terms, rather than as a positive theory of what immortality might be. He says the most we can affirm regarding such an idea is that it points to “a noumenon in the *negative* meaning of the term” (KrV, B 307) – i. e., the idea that our physical bodies are *not all* that constitutes a human life. What the nature or characteristics of this “more” may be, Kant tells us nothing in the first *Critique* – aside from some hints in the course of commenting on other philosophers’ metaphysical claims.

Kant’s response to Moses Mendelssohn’s book, *Phaedo, or On the Immortality of the Soul, in Three Dialogues*,³ is particularly instructive. In the second edition of the Paralogisms Kant argues that *any* theoretical proof of the immortality of the soul must fail, for in one way or another the categories will inevitably be misused.⁴ Kant grants that Mendelssohn may be justified in arguing that if the soul is a simple substance then it could not possibly cease to exist (KrV, B 404), but this refers only to its *quantity* (or “extensive magnitude”); the same could not be true of its *quality* (or “intensive magnitude”). Even a soul that existed in the form of a simple substance could cease to exist, not by “division” of its

3 *Phaedon oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele, in drey Gesprächen*. Berlin/Stettin 1767.

4 KrV, B 413–418, including the footnote.

quantity, but “by the gradual abatement (*remissio*) of its powers (and hence, [...] by fading out).” Kant goes on to explain that the failure of all theoretical arguments for immortality is a two-edged sword: although the “bounds for speculative reason [...] keep us [...] from getting lost while roving about in spiritualism,” they also prevent us “from throwing ourselves into the lap of soulless materialism” (KrV, B 421); “this refusal of reason” serves “as a hint” encouraging us “to turn our self-cognition away from fruitless transcendent speculation and to fruitful practical use.”

The fact that the soul’s existence and characteristics (including immortality) cannot be proved by theoretical reason may sound like very bad news to anyone who believes in life after death. But Kant actually highlights the bright side. In § VIII of the Dialectic of the second *Critique* he says of the three ideas that, although “I cannot prove these by my speculative reason, [...] neither can I refute them.” What the first *Critique* establishes, therefore, is a purely negative conclusion: that human reason is not capable of knowing, with objective certainty, whether human beings have souls and, if so, whether they survive the death of the body. This negative conclusion has a positive corollary: we can be certain that physicalists cannot prove their metaphysical commitment to human soullessness any more than someone like the mystic, Emanuel Swedenborg, could prove his metaphysical commitment to a self-subsisting spiritual world inhabited by disembodied human souls.

In the remainder of this paper, I shall examine three exceptions Kant makes to what might otherwise appear to be a Wittgensteinian resolve to remain silent about that of which we cannot speak. First, although the limits of knowledge presented in the first *Critique* prevent us from affirming any theoretical truths about the soul, we shall see in § 2 that Kant does leave room for regarding the soul’s immortality as a “regulative idea” that guides our understanding of whether and how we might somehow survive our body’s death. Second, the principles of practical reason explored in the second *Critique* require us to “postulate” an actual future life of *some* type, despite our theoretical ignorance of its precise nature (see § 3). Finally, in § 4 the power of imagination will take center stage as we examine how Kant argues in the third *Critique* and in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* that we should *picture* an indefinite future life (or series of lives) – portrayed at one point as an ever-decreasing dependence on our physical nature – in order to inspire hope of reaching the goal of perfect moral goodness, or what Kant sometimes calls *holiness*.

2 Immortality as a Regulative Idea of Reason

The reason Kant has no theory of how immortality works is quite clear (KrV, B 826 f.): “even if one can have insight into the spiritual nature of the soul (and, with this nature, into the soul’s immortality), one still can count on this spiritual nature neither as a basis of explanation regarding the appearances of this life, nor as shedding light on the particular character of our future state.” This comment alludes to a bad experience in Kant’s own past that may explain his reluctance to say anything about how immortality might work. Fifteen years before writing the first *Critique*, Kant attempted to correspond with Swedenborg concerning the nature and meaning of Swedenborg’s mystical visions; but his attempts were met with cold silence. To cope with his frustration, Kant wrote *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766), wherein he claimed that such mystical visions are to the normal functioning of the human senses what metaphysical speculation is to the normal functioning of human thinking. However, this early book is not entirely skeptical, despite the reputation it has for being heavily influenced by Hume. For as he nears his conclusion Kant encourages us to “devote ourselves to what is useful,”⁵ claiming that the only way to solve *both* problems (i. e., how properly to view metaphysical speculation, and how to understand the nature and characteristics of mystical visions) is through a critique of the powers and limits of human reason.

In the Appendix to the Ideal of Pure Reason, Chapter 3 of the first *Critique’s* Transcendental Dialectic, Kant explains how the idea of God can be used as a regulative idea. He claims that, without presupposing the existence of a real God and without claiming any speculative knowledge thereof, the bare *idea* of God can be used to meet the demands of systematic unity that reason places on all scientific inquiry. Kant could have defended freedom as also having such a status; but as we shall see in the next section, he had a better way to defend freedom’s status as a valid idea despite our theoretical ignorance of its reality. Kant also could have portrayed immortality as a regulative idea, but here he merely remained silent.

An interesting exercise would be to attempt an argument whereby immortality functions as a regulative idea of reason in relation to our systematic knowledge. For example, whereas the “I” of apperception serves

5 Immanuel Kant: *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*. Trans. David Walford and Ralf Meerbote. Cambridge 1992; TG, AA 02: 368.

as a constitutive principle that enables us to unite the manifold nature of the empirical self into *one* being, taking immortality as a *regulative* principle might enable us to view science as not only true but ultimately meaningful. In a short paper such as this, I cannot attempt to unpack such an argument. Let it suffice for our present purposes to say that Kant's account of the soul in *Dreams*, as a useful idea for explaining the way perception functions in human experience, could serve as the basis for such a reconstruction.

3 Immortality as a Postulate of Practical Reason

In the second *Critique* Kant refines his initial account of the status of the metaphysical ideas of reason by portraying freedom as a practical "fact," with the other two ideas (God and immortality) arising out of this factual basis as necessary results of our moral nature. He claims in the Preface that the ideas of immortality and God "attach themselves to the concept of freedom and acquire, with it and through it, stability and objective reality"; in other words, "their *possibility* is *proved* by freedom's being actual, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law."⁶ Kant here introduces a new, hierarchical relationship between the ideas: from the practical standpoint, freedom is a condition of the moral law (for we cannot be moral if we are not free), while the moral law is a condition of God and immortality. That is, any knowledge we may have of these latter metaphysical ideas must be derived from our moral nature. Although this provides us with "a basis of assent" that is "merely *subjective* in comparison to speculative reason," it is "valid *objectively* for an equally pure but practical reason" (KpV, AA 05: 4); the practical principle of freedom thus provides "the ideas of God and immortality [...] with objective reality and with an authority [...] to assume them." Whereas reason's theoretical standpoint on its own is limited, always needing to be tied to empirical reality to retain its meaningfulness, the practical standpoint provides "a moral use of reason" (5) that gives us direct access to a real awareness of our immortality.

Having protected morality from being conditioned by the ideas of God and immortality, Kant develops his entire moral theory without any constitutive reference to them, but then returns to these ideas in

6 *Critique of Practical Reason*. Trans. Werner Pluhar. Indianapolis 2002; hereafter abbreviated KpV (AA 05: 04).

the Dialectic of the second *Critique*. He there refers to each of these two ideas as “a postulate of pure practical reason” (KpV, AA 05: 122,124). The term “postulate” here refers not (as in mathematics) to “the possibility of an action,” but to “the possibility of an object itself” (KpV, AA 05: 11n). As is well known, Kant has earlier argued that our moral nature provides us with the notion of a *summum bonum* or “highest good,” consisting of a situation wherein a person’s happiness is directly proportional to his or her virtue. Working toward the realization of this ideal, Kant argues, is the very meaning and purpose of human existence. The problem is that our earthly, *physical* existence does not appear to give us much hope of this ideal ever being realized in our actual experience. Therefore, practical reason justifies us in regarding any object as *possible* whose presupposition enables us to conceive of how this goal could be reached.

The first and foremost requirement is that we must be able to imagine human (mortal) life as we know it being extended beyond our physical death into a potentially endless future. The reason this imagined future must be *endless* – or, as Kant puts it in § V of the second *Critique’s* Dialectic, the reason it must be projected into “eternity” (KpV, AA 05: 124) – is that the progress we can detect in our earthly existence does not even come close to achieving the ultimate goal of holiness (i. e., perfect virtue). Just as he earlier compared his practical postulates to mathematical postulates, Kant seems here to have in mind something like the way an infinite parabolic curve in mathematics can be said to “reach” its limit at infinity, even though it has not quite reached that limit if we measure it at any specific point along its projected path.

The postulate of immortality, as Kant summarizes in § VI (KpV, AA 05: 132), “flows from the practically necessary condition of adequacy of [one’s] duration to the complete fulfillment of the moral law.” Thus, the heart of his argument in § IV goes as follows (KpV, AA 05: 122):

This endless progression ... is possible only on the presupposition of an *existence* and personality – of the same rational being – continuing *ad infinitum* (which is called the immortality of the soul). Therefore the highest good is practically possible only on the presupposition of the immortality of the soul, and hence this immortality, as linked inseparably with the moral law, is a *postulate* of pure practical reason (by which I mean a *theoretical* proposition, though one not provable as such, insofar as it attaches inseparably to a *practical* law that holds a priori [and] unconditionally.

In other words, even though the theoretical *Critique* attacked the legitimacy of *any* proof that a human soul even exists, much less that we can know it to be immortal, the practical *Critique* affirms that this

self-same theoretical claim is a necessary *outcome* of our moral nature. This does not mean we can now claim scientific knowledge of our immortality, but only that we have a powerful practical justification for *believing* it is true. Such practical cognition provides us with a strong rationale for belief, but not theoretical insight into how immortality actually works. This, as we shall see in § 4, makes Kant's theory of immortality flexible enough to serve as a philosophical grounding for a wide variety of religious beliefs.

The reason this same result was not possible in the first *Critique*, as Kant explains in § VI, is that in order for speculative reason to establish the validity of the idea of immortality, it would need to have "the characteristic of permanence by which to supplement the psychological concept of an ultimate subject – a concept that is necessarily ascribed to the soul in self-consciousness – to [yield] a real presentation of a substance" (KpV, AA 05: 133); practical reason, by contrast, need only establish the possibility "of [the] duration required for adequacy to the moral law" (*ibid.*). We are capable of imagining an endless duration of our life, but we are not capable of imagining a permanent substance that somehow manages to avoid being physical. So, the rationale for any belief in immortality must be practical.

4 Immortality as an Imaginative Projection

The third *Critique* (1790) includes 13 references to "immortality," connecting it to a new use of "imagination" as the faculty of the mind that unites the theoretical and practical standpoints. In an attempt to bridge the great divide between nature and freedom that was mirrored by the first two *Critiques*, Kant argues that the human imagination is a power distinct from both human intuition (or sensibility) and human conception (or thought). The imagination has the ability to produce objects merely by thinking them, in a manner not entirely unlike the "intellectual intuition" Kant ascribes to God.⁷ In short, whenever we judge an object to be beautiful, this judgment transforms the perceived

7 KrV, B 72. Kant associates the power of intellectual intuition with positive knowledge of a noumenon (B 308). Because we humans do not have access to intellectual intuition, we can establish our own existence only in relation to a permanence that is outside of ourselves (B XLII).

object into a *symbol* that paradoxically participates in both the physical world and the moral world.

Rather than examining the details of Kant's portrayal of immortality in the third *Critique*, I shall focus here on the book Kant wrote immediately after writing the latter, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793); here Kant develops his previous theory of immortality along similar lines to the imaginative projection described in the third *Critique*. Whereas the first two *Critiques* provided definitive answers to the questions *What can I know?* and *What ought I to do?*, the third *Critique* did not present a clearly definitive answer to Kant's third question, *What may I hope?* We should therefore not be surprised that Kant turned directly to religion in order to fulfill the task of answering the latter question more fully. Kant originally wrote *Religion* as a set of four journal articles, so he called its major divisions "Pieces" [*Stücke*] rather than "Chapters" [*Hauptstück*].⁸ He begins by arguing in the First Piece that human nature is essentially good but that the presence of evil in human experience requires us to assume that a "propensity to evil" has infected our nature at its root.

The Second Piece then responds to this problem by examining how religion – and here he is thinking especially of Christianity – offers us hope that the meaningfulness of our nature can be restored through assistance from divine grace. This is basically the same problem that gave rise to the antinomy of practical reason in the second *Critique*: that is, the twin facts that we feel a deep inner calling to be perfect and yet we inevitably fail in our attempts to realize this goal of our nature. In the Second Piece Kant develops a complex theory of divine grace that centers on an imaginative projection of a future life, after the death of our earthly body, wherein we continue on the path of moral development (either toward the goal of perfection or in the opposite direction). Because God has the power of intellectual intuition, Kant argues, God can view this entire path of our development (including the future projection) *as a completed whole*. Interestingly, Kant's claim seems to be that, in order for God to be able to view our future development as a whole, we need not actually *experience* that development in a real future life (though we might do so – Kant leaves this as an open question). God just *knows* whether we are on

8 Werner Pluhar adopts this usage in his recent translation of the book as *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Indianapolis 2009; hereafter referred to as *Religion*.

the good and narrow path that leads to perfection or on the evil and wide path that leads to eternal destruction.

Ronald Green's claim about Kant's notion of grace in *Religion* is only partly correct: "This stress on grace as a means to the perfection of virtue in the *Religion* replaces the emphasis on immortality in the second *Critical*. This reflects Kant's deepened awareness of the problem of sin."⁹ However, in *Religion* Kant not only continues to use the *term* immortality (9 times), but leans heavily upon the *concept* as the symbolic, imaginative key to explicating a rational theory of divine grace. Toward the end of the Third Piece, Kant confirms that this imaginative vision can be extended to a future ideal world that includes heaven and hell. He regards heaven as a state of imagined

victory over all external enemies, who are likewise regarded as [dwelling] in one state (the state of hell); and thus all life on earth comes to an end: "the last enemy (of good human beings), death, is abolished," and with both parties immortality begins, to the salvation of the one, and the perdition of the other; the form itself of a church is dissolved; the vicar on earth enters into one class with the human beings elevated to him as citizens of heaven, and thus God is all in all.¹⁰

In an earlier footnote (RGV, AA 06: 60), Kant had explained that the ideas of heaven and hell, while not to be taken too literally, are effective symbols to represent the fact that human moral character is always *either* good *or* evil, never a mixture of the two and never neither.¹¹

In the Fourth Piece (RGV, AA 06: 157), Kant neatly combines all three metaphysical ideas in a single sentence, showing how each serves a unique role in making "natural religion" an inevitable part of human societies.

Natural religion, as morality (in reference to the freedom of the subject), combined with the concept of that which can provide its ultimate purpose with a result (the concept of *God* as moral originator of the world), and referred to a duration of the human being that is commensurate with this entire purpose (to immortality), is a pure practical concept of reason that ... presupposes only so little theoretical power of reason that one can sufficiently convince every human being of it ...

9 Ronald M. Green: *Religious Reason: The Rational and Moral Basis of Religious Belief*. New York 1978, 270. Cf. Allen W. Wood: *Kant's Moral Religion*. Ithaca 1970, 182, 231.

10 RGV, AA 06: 135.

11 In the First Piece (*Religion* 22), Kant calls this the "rigorist" position, as opposed to the "syncretists," who view moral actions as partly good and partly evil.

That is, immortality as a “bare” idea of reason is merely the concept of a human life that lasts long enough to enable the purposes of human life to be attained.

Because Kant’s theory of immortality is so bare – i. e., so focused on the rational justification for such a belief, without any attempt to say how it might happen – it can be clothed by a wide variety of different religious explanations. I have already mentioned Kant’s own view that belief in heaven and hell can serve as appropriate moral symbols of the reality of human life as practical reason enables us to know it. Theories such as karma, reincarnation, and bodily resurrection¹² could also be presented in such a way as to “fit” Kant’s theory. One belief that cannot be made to fit, however, is the belief that our physical existence is all there is to human life. While Kant admits that this is theoretically possible, it is morally and practically abhorrent, for it renders the whole of human life meaningless.

12 It is worth noting that for Kant the idea of the immortality of the soul cannot be identified with the Christian idea of the resurrection of the body. Thus he notes with interest that the religious teacher, Priestly, rejects immortality because of his distrust of speculative reason, and because “the hope for a future life is for him only the expectation of a miracle of resurrection” (KrV, B 773).