

Interpreting Kant's Theory of Divine Commands

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Kant rejected “theological morality”, insisting that no one, including God, can be the “author” of the moral law because the moral law is a categorically necessary, non-positive law.¹ Kant was also no religious enthusiast² and clearly intended to rule out certain kinds of dependence of ethics on theology. Such considerations make it tempting to suggest that Kant was fully committed to what has been called the “autonomy of ethics” from theology.³ Yet an observant reader of Kant’s corpus is constantly confronted with passages in which Kant discusses philosophical theology, connections between moral philosophy and theology, and even argues that we should “recognize all our duties as divine commands.”[KpV 5:129] Some have responded to these passages by suggesting that Kant’s conception of practical faith “is a boil, a tumor, a cancer within the critical philosophy, which is necessary to remove surgically,” in order to save what is valuable in Kant.⁴ Yet, Allen Wood and John Hare have each recently argued that such attempts to “secularize” Kant not only obscure our understanding of the history of philosophy, but may also blind us to ideas that are among Kant’s most important contributions to contemporary philosophical reflection.⁵ Wood emphasizes (against critics’ claims of individualism) both Kant’s deeply social conception of organized religion as model for genuine ethical community and its connection to the salutary social ideals of the Enlightenment; Hare emphasizes Kant’s avoidance of a false dichotomy (allegedly grounded in “the descriptive fallacy”) between substantive moral realism and creative anti-realism and a second false dichotomy (grounded in the presumed inadequacy of traditional theism) between a morality completely dependent upon God’s will and one completely independent of it.⁶ To some extent, one’s judgment of Kant’s greatest

contributions to contemporary discussions tends to be a function of one's own philosophical position, and here Kant's interpreters differ significantly. To a significant extent, however, the resolution of debates about the contemporary significance of Kant's theory must turn upon an adequate understanding of the theory itself. By focusing on many such details, Wood and Hare have made significant contributions to our understanding of it, yet at least three significant interpretive problems emerge from a comparison of their work.⁷ First, Wood and Hare disagree about the connection Kant intends to draw between moral theism and the authority of morality. Second, Wood and Hare disagree about what Kant thinks reason actually requires concerning belief in God's existence. And third, their discussions leave unresolved why Kant thinks our obligations should be regarded as divine *commands*. I will argue that further attention to the relevant Kantian texts reveals an immanent solution to each of these three interpretive issues, thereby providing us with a better historical and philosophical understanding of these features of Kant's theory of divine commands. I will argue, in short, that Kant's moral theism included the claim that practical reason, reflecting upon the absolute authority of the moral law, should lead finite rational beings like us to believe that there is an omnipotent, omniscient and holy being who commands our obedience to the moral law and proportions happiness to virtue.

1. Moral theism and the authority of the moral law

Kant repeatedly suggests (in his published works, notes, and lectures) that it is proper, even necessary to view our moral obligations as divine commands. As Kant wrote in the *Religion*, "an ethical community is conceivable only as a people under divine commands." [R 6:99] In fact in the second *Critique*, Kant defines religion itself as "the recognition of all duties as divine commands." [KpV 5:129] Both Wood and Hare assert that such claims are consistent with Kant's claims about moral autonomy, yet they disagree significantly about the

details of this relationship. Whereas Hare suggests that Kant considers the “authority” of moral obligations to depend, at least in part, upon their being divine prescriptions, Wood insists that the validity of our obligation to the moral law is independent of God’s existence and will.⁸

Part of the explanation for this disagreement is the presence of apparently contradictory textual evidence. On the one hand, Kant explicitly denies “that it is necessary to assume the existence of God *as a ground of all obligation in general* (for this rests, as has been sufficiently shown, solely on the autonomy of reason itself.)”[KpV 5:125-126] Moreover, he insists that

So far as morality is based on the conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws, it is in need neither of the idea of another being above him in order that he recognize his duty, nor, that he observe it, of an incentive other than the law itself.[R 6:3 (pref. to 1st ed.)]

Yet, it is hard to reconcile this claim, that the authority of the moral law is sufficiently grounded in our autonomy, with some of his claims elsewhere, that the existence of God is inseparably linked to the “binding” or “obligating force” of morality, its ability to “command” [KrV A634;811-815 / B661;839-843] or his suggestion that “we cannot very well make obligation (moral constraint) intuitive for ourselves without thereby thinking of *another’s* will, namely God’s...”[MdS 6:487] After filling in some background, I will sharpen the tension between these suggestions, preparing the way for a resolution.

It is helpful to approach Kant’s theory of divine commands in terms of his distinction between two different ways that religion and morality could be related. “Theological morality” [*theologische Moral*], which Kant rejected, “contains moral laws, which *presuppose* the existence of a supreme ruler of the world.”[KrV A632 / B661]⁹ In contrast,

“moral theology [*Moraltheologie*],” which Kant endorsed, “ascends to a supreme intelligence, as the principle ... of all moral order and perfection.” It is “a conviction of the existence of a supreme being- a conviction which bases itself on moral laws.”¹⁰ While both theological morality and moral theology posit a necessary connection between religion and morality, this connection plays a different role in the two theories. Whereas moral theology bases beliefs about the existence and nature of God on knowledge of the moral law, theological morality reverses this order and insists that beliefs about the moral law be based upon a prior knowledge of the existence and volitions of the divine being. Thus, Kant’s epistemological criticism of theological morality: since, as Kant insists, theoretical reason is unable to determine the nature or even the existence of God, theological morality lacks its starting point. Another difference between theological morality and moral theology is less apparent. Theological morality, as Kant conceives of it, does not merely suggest that theology should be *epistemically* prior to moral philosophy; it maintains that theology’s object is *conceptually* or *metaphysically* prior to moral philosophy’s: that theology must precede moral philosophy because the content of the moral law or our motive for obeying it depends upon God’s will.¹¹ Kant viewed this position to be both false and dangerous – an unsuitable foundation for our grasp of our duties (due to the epistemic limitations on our conception of God) and an encouragement to servility. He insisted, to the contrary, that moral philosophy must precede theology conceptually, motivationally and epistemically.

Against this background, we can see Kant commit himself to at least the following two points. First, we need not (as in fact Kant thinks we could not and should not) identify our duties by inferring them from putative revelations of the divine will. Kant insists that the content of the moral law is determined by a purely rational first principle, not any specific divine volitions. God’s will does not determine the content of any of our duties.¹² One can infer the obligatoriness of an action from the nature of the action itself. Second, although,

early in his career, Kant had considered promises and threats of rewards and punishments to be morally significant motivating factors, in his mature position, Kant came to reject the idea that we need to consider our duties as divine commands in order to have a motive or incentive to perform them.¹³ The moral motive can be neither fear of punishment nor a desire for reward. Thus, as Kant put it,

Religion is the recognition of all duties as divine commands, not as sanctions, i.e., arbitrary and contingent ordinances of a foreign will, but as essential laws of any free will as such. [KpV 5:129]

Kant's moral theology maintains that moral duties are supposed to be recognized as not only absolutely necessary (the "essential laws of any free will as such,") but simultaneously as divine commands. Kant repeatedly argues that it is necessary to postulate the existence of a God who is "the holy legislator (and creator), the beneficent ruler (and sustainer), and the just judge." [KpV 5:131n.]

[All duties] must be regarded as commands of the Supreme Being because we can hope for the highest good (to strive for which is our duty under the moral law) only from a morally perfect (holy and beneficent) and omnipotent will; and therefore, we can hope to attain it only through harmony with this will." [KpV 5:129]

For present purposes, we can state the outlines of Kant's argument as follows. The highest good, the systematic union of virtue with happiness, is the necessary object of practical reason: the moral law demands that we make the highest good our end, that we intend happiness follow virtue.¹⁴ This leads to the postulation of God's existence, Kant argues, because only such a postulate (in conjunction with the postulate of immortality) can sustain the rational coherence of this obligatory intention.¹⁵ We are required to intend and

promote the highest good, but one can only rationally intend what one thinks possible. If we had empirical knowledge that the highest good was impossible, reason would have to “regard the moral law itself as a mere deception [*bloße Täuschung*].”(KU5:471n.)

If... the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic [*phantastisch*] and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore be in itself false [*an sich falsch*].[KpV5:114]¹⁶

The only way we can conceive of the highest good as possible, Kant argues, is through the assumption that there is an all-knowing, all-powerful, good and just being who intends to apportion happiness in proportion to the degree one is worthy of it.¹⁷ So our recognition of our obligation to promote the highest good leads us to conclude that there must be a moral being, God, who connects suitable consequences with the moral law via promises of rewards and threats of punishments.¹⁸ God’s intention to reward virtue with happiness is necessary for the coherence of practical reason.¹⁹ If there were no God, our moral “endeavors would be pointless and virtue an empty delusion [*ein leerer Wahn*];” moral worth would be “a glittering delusion [*eine glänzende Täuschung*][“Vigilantius” 27:483;549]; “the moral law... would have no worth or validity.”[“Collins” 27: 313]

While there are a number of questions to be raised about the validity and soundness of this “moral argument,” Kant clearly took it to establish that the “force”, “reality” or “bindingness” of the moral law, conjoined with other reasonable premises, entails God’s existence and benevolence. Thus, the existence of God is inseparably linked to the “binding” or “obligating force” of morality, its ability to “command.” [KrV A634,811-815 / B661,839-843] Yet, while this argument aims to establish that there is a necessary connection between God’s existence and the validity or bindingness of the moral law, Kant denies in principle that this *modus ponens* argument for God’s existence can be turned around into a successful

modus tollens argument for the denial of morality's authority. He insists that it is improper for someone who denies the existence of God to "judge himself released from the obligations the moral law imposes." Regardless of his unbelief or denial of the existence of God, "every rational being would still have to cognize himself as strictly bound by what morality prescribes, because the moral laws are formal and command unconditionally." [KU 5:451] Kant claims that the *modus tollens* argument would be illegitimate because moral obligation is "cognized *a priori* as absolutely necessary;" [KrV A634 / B661] morality is grounded in an "inner practical necessity" [KrV A819 / B847] which is supported by a "deduction" from transcendental freedom, or, as he later resolves, by a "fact of reason". [G 4:446ff.; KpV 5:31; KU 5:450;468]²⁰ Neither the "deduction" nor the analysis of the "fact of reason" make explicit reference to the existence of God, so reflective atheists should be able to recognize the authority of the moral law as well as anyone else. It is this analysis that grounds Kant's limited defense of the political toleration of speculative atheists and his acknowledgment of the moral virtue of Spinoza. ["Collins" 27:277,312; "Herder" 27: 11]²¹ It is the necessity of the moral law that leads Kant to describe the existence of God as a *postulate*, as opposed to a (mere) presupposition of morality: belief in God's existence is a rational consequence of something *necessary*, rather than of something contingent.²² Kant claims that atheists may be tolerable and even virtuous because it is not "*as necessary* to assume that God exists as it is to assume that the moral law is valid." [KU 5:450-451, emphasis added]²³ Even without God, the moral law could still be an object of "approbation and admiration." [KrV A813 / B841]. An agent could recognize that certain acts, such as deceitful promising, are prohibited by the moral law and could disapprove of and choose to refrain from them out of this recognition. Even if God did not exist, practical reason and the moral law would "still command; it would still be good to obey it." ["Collins" 27:313] Thus, an atheist who "regarded the laws of duty

as merely imaginary, invalid, nonobligatory, and decided to violate them boldly...” would and should still consider himself, upon reflection, “a worthless human being.”[KU 5:451]

Yet, it remains unclear how these Kantian claims can be reconciled with his claims about the necessary connection between morality and religion: the moral law commands us to further the highest good in the world, which we can only coherently and reflectively do if we postulate that there is a God. How could it be true that, if there were no God, that the moral law would “command,” yet lack “worth” and “validity?”[“Collins” 27:313]²⁴ Juxtaposing the textual evidence reveals an ongoing tension in Kant’s theory of divine commands, that a selective focus on certain passages overlooks. It simultaneously suggests an intriguing resolution to that tension.

As we have seen, Kant is clear that even a reflective atheist cannot rationally deny the authority of the moral law. Even when the apparent impossibility of the highest good leads him to deny its authority, he is committed to judging himself a scoundrel in the light of the law. Thus, there is *at best* one rational option for the reflective atheist: to accept what is entailed by the moral law.²⁵ But this does not entail that there *is* a rational option, that an atheist can rationally come to accept what is entailed by the authority of the moral law.²⁶ If it turned out (or appeared to turn out) that someone could not rationally believe that God exists, then there would be *no* fully rationally coherent position for such a person to adopt. Upon consistent reflection, Kant argued, an experienced, well-meaning person firmly convinced of atheism and unable to abandon it “would indeed have to give up as impossible the purpose that the moral laws obligated him to have before his eyes” and deny the reality of this obligation, even as he recognized its authority in his judgment that his failure to fulfill it makes him a scoundrel.[KU 5:452] He would be unable “to think consistently in morality.”[KU5:451n.] Now, since the authority of the moral law is supposed to be grounded in its *pure rationality*, if it turned out that, upon reflection, its practical demands required

unavoidable inconsistency or rational incoherence, this could not but compromise its normative force or “grip.” This dynamic allows us to understand why Kant thinks a steadfast yet reflective atheist’s respect for the moral law and its “high demand” must be weakened.[KU 5:452-453]²⁷ On Kant’s view, atheism and agnosticism present an obstacle to virtue. There is an inherent reflective instability in Spinoza’s atheistic virtue; it is an “unstable condition [*ein schwankender Zustand*] in which one continuously falls from hope into doubt and mistrust.”[“Volckmann” 28:1151]²⁸

Of course, Kant argues that belief in God, and thus belief in the possibility of the highest good, can be rational. This is the point of his attempts to establish that there can be no sound theoretical argument for the conclusion that God does not exist, and the point of his discussions of the moral argument itself. Yet, given an atheist’s or agnostic’s error about the existence of God, while he or she would have grounds for recognizing the fact of moral obligation (the same grounds everyone has), he or she would lack full warrant and conviction for that belief. This conflict within practical reason, I propose, explains part of what Kant meant by his repeated, apparently contradictory claims that the authority of the moral law is absolute, yet that that law would lack worth or validity (or even turn out to be false) if God did not exist. According to Kant, we are not *obligated by* the will of another. [“Collins” 27:262; “Vigilantius” 27:720] God’s will does not establish the content of our obligations; nor is revelation about the contents of his will necessary for us to know what our particular obligations are; nor does his will provide us with a necessary motive. Yet, the rationality of our acceptance of morality’s authority, at least with respect to our obligation to promote the highest good, requires a theological postulate. Here then is a sense in which Kant thinks that the authority of the moral law does depend upon God’s existence.

Interestingly, this implies that there is a certain incompleteness in both the “deduction” of the moral law in *Groundwork* III and the account of the “fact of reason”

presented in the Analytic section of the second *Critique*, since neither explicitly mention this postulate. This gap is not too worrisome, however. First, it is only a gap with respect to us and our obligation to promote the highest good; the general deduction or analysis provided in those passages may be adequate for other kinds of rational beings, as is fitting a general deduction.²⁹ Second, Kant himself offered a proposal to fill this specific gap: the moral argument and its theological postulate.³⁰

2. Reason and belief in the *existence* of God

To this point I have glossed over a second significant interpretive dispute about Kant's claim that we should recognize our duties *as* divine commands. Whereas Wood has argued that, for Kant, as far as religion is concerned "it is not even necessary to believe in God's existence:" belief in the *possibility* of God's existence is sufficient; Hare insists, in contrast, that, "we are required to believe that God exists."³¹ A close examination of Kant's claims in the relevant texts reveals a plausible resolution of this interpretive dispute.

Wood adduces significant textual evidence which confirms his emphasis upon Kant's conviction that belief in God's existence cannot be morally required, i.e., there cannot be a moral obligation to believe that God exists; (nor can belief in his existence be justly required by the state.) Kant held these convictions out of respect for freedom of conscience, a disdain for hypocrisy, and because it fit with his belief that the best "theoretical" evidence and arguments could only establish God's logical possibility, that the concept of God is not self-contradictory. As Wood correctly notes, Kant did suggest that the "minimum of theology" everyone can be expected to accept is the minimum compatible with this theoretical evidence, i.e., that "it is possible that there is a God," and sometimes claimed that "religion" does not necessarily involve "assertoric faith" in God, i.e., belief in the *existence* of God, as

opposed to his mere possibility. Thus, it is indeed possible for an agnostic (what Kant liked to call a “skeptical” as opposed to a “dogmatic” atheist) to be religious in Kant’s sense.³²

Yet, from the claim that *religion* may not necessarily involve assertoric faith in the existence of God, it does not follow that assertoric faith cannot be rationally required. In fact, Kant consistently asserted that it is.³³ In his lectures on religion in the 1780s, for example, Kant compared the epistemic status of the “firm conviction” in the postulate of God’s existence with that of mathematical axioms.[“Pölitz” 28:1012-1013,1083] Moreover, in both the second *Critique* and the *Critique of Judgment*, despite some differences, two features of Kant’s presentation of the moral argument are quite clear. First, in both places, the semantic content of the conclusion of Kant’s moral argument is: God exists, not simply that it is possible that God exists, and this conclusion is described as a legitimate extension of our thought into the noumenal world. Second, in both places, it is emphasized that this extension is, however, valid only “from a practical point of view.”[KpV 5:124f.; KU 5:447f.]³⁴ As Kant explains, the *point* of the practical postulates, including the postulate of God’s existence, is to sustain the requisite intention for the highest good,³⁵ not to allow us to further “extend” our theoretical knowledge to include determinate knowledge of the nature of things in themselves by combining the postulates with empirical observations or alleged “supersensible intuitions;” nor to facilitate the interpretation of specific events in the empirical world as “miracles;” nor to support claims, based upon putative divine revelation, about the existence of specific obligations. Kant clearly objects to such uses of the practical postulates.[KpV 5:134-5; KU 5:453f.] Nonetheless, Kant’s view is that rational reflection leads us to believe this cognitive existential claim and “act as if we know” it (even though we cannot *know* it in the technical sense), while simultaneously directing us not to employ it for further cognitive purposes.³⁶ Kant repeatedly suggests that such an assertoric faith is rationally superior to mere belief in God’s possibility. Thus, he suggests that religion without

assertoric faith is a reflectively “unstable condition [*ein schwankender Zustand*] in which one continuously falls from hope into doubt and mistrust.”[“Volckmann” 28:1151] As if sufficiency could be a matter of degree, he suggested, “The mere possibility of God’s existence is already sufficient for moral religion; yet not as much as faith.”[Refl. 6226-18:515] While agnosticism about God’s existence may be minimally compatible with morality, it still presents an obstacle.[KU 5:472] Faith, which is more than “the minimum,” is what is appropriate to the best will.[Refl. 6244 (18:523)]

Thus, although the textual evidence confirms Wood’s claim that, for Kant, belief in God’s existence may not be a necessary component of “religion,” it also supports Hare’s stronger contention that belief in “God’s existence is not... for Kant, ‘as if’;” Kant does not deny “that we should believe in the actual existence of such divine commands or their legislator.”³⁷ Kant held that rational reflection upon the authority of the moral law leads finite rational agents to postulate and believe in God’s existence; at least he held this position prior to his retirement in 1796.

There is significant evidence that Kant’s views on this point changed significantly, if not radically, after his retirement.³⁸ In the drafts of the fragmentary and uncompleted work that has become known as Kant’s *Opus postumum*, it is explicitly suggested that, in line with the more thoroughgoing idealism Kant was trying to develop, God must be *merely* an idea and *not* a substance existing outside of human thought. “The *existence* of [God] is not postulated in this formula, which would be self-contradictory [if it did]...” What we are left with is “the formula of the knowledge of all human duties as (virtual [*tamquam*]) divine commands...”[Op 22:116-117]³⁹ At this point in his thought, what had been “the modal ‘as’ becomes for him an ‘as if’, an *instar* or *tamquam*...”⁴⁰ This change both confirms and qualifies the proposed interpretation of Kant’s position prior to his retirement: that reason leads us to believe in God’s actual existence.

3. Regarding our obligations as divine *commands*

In addition to questions about the authority of morality and the place of assertoric belief, there is a third significant issue about Kant's theory of divine commands left open by recent work. Wood has argued that Kant's moral argument may manage to show that "we must believe... that the performance of our duties is in *harmony* with the divine will. But this does not show that we must recognize our duties as *commanded* by God."⁴¹ This raises an important question about the connection between the divine will and the highest good: why is it important to consider our moral obligations as divine *commands* as opposed to divine "suggestions" or "wishes"? If all the moral argument establishes is that "the performance of our duties is in *harmony* with the divine will," then Wood has a point: the fact that one person's behavior is in accord with another's intentions is not sufficient to establish that the former person is subject to the latter's *command* or "legislation." On its own, the representation of the divine will as the "ideal of all moral perfection" or the "archetype" of a perfect will⁴² does not entail that we should view morality as a set of divine *commands*. Commands must involve something more.

Wood suggests that Kant's justification for the recognition of moral duties as divine *commands* must presuppose the idea of the highest good as a *social* good.⁴³ Wood emphasizes Kant's anthropological claim in the *Religion* that individual humans are weak and subject to the influence of (and corruption by) others, which would imply that the attainment of virtue and the highest good by an individual must be accompanied by its attainment by her society, that is, the establishment of a moral community. But, the argument continues, a moral community must be based upon a common set of public laws, the commands of a common lawgiver. Since the laws of a moral community must be moral, not

simply juridical laws, the people, a collection of humans, cannot be the lawgiver. A non-human lawgiver is needed. Thus Wood concludes,

in my pursuit of the highest good as a social good, I must recognize the moral law not only as pertaining to me as a rational being, but also as a law binding morally on all rational beings, a law which obliges me to see myself as part of a moral unity with such persons, a *member* of a Kingdom of Ends, under a divine *head*.⁴⁴

It is no doubt correct to emphasize, as both Wood and Hare do, the social significance of Kantian religion and morality, in particular, the way the idea of divine commands is an integral part of Kant's conception of the "Kingdom of Ends" and of human history.⁴⁵ But, it is not clear that that the converse is true, i.e., that the basic recognition of duties as divine commands depends upon such claims about society. At the core of the moral argument is the claim that God not only intends that we fulfill our duties, but that, as author of nature and supreme judge, God also connects the performance of our duties with ethical rewards and punishments (which should, however, not themselves be our motive) by proportioning virtue and happiness. Why think that a divine intention to judge and reward or punish the behavior of *everyone* in a community would constitute a command, while a divine intention to judge and reward or punish the behavior of a solitary individual would fail to constitute a command (as Wood seems to imply)?⁴⁶ In both the former and latter cases a will promulgates a rule as suitable for judicial and executive determinations of punishment or reward. If this is what a command amounts to, this is already a sufficient basis for Kant's claim that we should regard our duties as divine *commands*.⁴⁷ In principle at least, these conditions could obtain in a kingdom that happened to contain only one finite member.⁴⁸ Thus, Kant's conception of the social role of divine commands within a well-populated "kingdom," while important, is built upon his prior, pre-social (though not necessarily individualistic) understanding of the place

of divine commands.⁴⁹ This distinction is worth noting since there may be legitimate questions about Kant's particular claims about the extent of human weakness and/or his argument from those claims to a requirement for the establishment of a moral community. What is essential to the notion of command on Kant's account is that a will promulgates a rule with an eye toward judicial and executive determinations of reward and punishment, whether for one or many. Of course, once in place, it offered fertile grounds for connections with Kant's cultural, anthropological, and historical theories.

A more complete philosophical assessment of Kant's theory of divine commands and its contemporary significance requires additional reflection on the arguments that were and could be offered for and against it. Yet, the foregoing consideration of three interpretive challenges has yielded a clearer historical and philosophical understanding of this theory. Kant's moral theism included (at least until 1797) the claim that practical reason, reflecting upon the absolute authority of the moral law, should lead finite rational beings like us to believe that, whether we be one or many, there exists an omnipotent, omniscient and holy being who commands our obedience to the moral law and proportions happiness to virtue.⁵⁰

NOTES

Apart from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, all references to Kant are to the volume and page number of the “*Akademie-Ausgabe*.” [*Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin (formerly the Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), 29 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902-)] References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the standard A and B pagination of the first and second editions. Specific published works are cited by means of the abbreviations listed below.

KrV *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* [Critique of Pure Reason]. 1st ed. [A], 1781; 2nd ed. [B], 1787.

G *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* [Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals]. 1st ed., 1785; 2nd ed., 1786.

KpV *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [Critique of Practical Reason]. 1788.

KU *Kritik der Urteilskraft* [Critique of Judgment]. 1st ed., 1790; 2nd ed., 1793; 3rd ed., 1799.

R *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* [Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone] 1st ed., 1793; 2nd ed., 1794.

MdS *Die Metaphysik der Sitten* [The Metaphysics of Morals]. 1st ed., 1797; 2nd ed. 1798.

Op *Opus postumum* [Opus postumum].

Citations to Kant’s *Reflexionen* are made by reference to the reflection number (Refl.), followed by the volume and page number from the *Akademie-Ausgabe*. Notes from Kant’s lectures are cited by means of the following abbreviations, followed by the volume and page number from the *Akademie-Ausgabe*.

“Herder” *Praktische Philosophie Herder* (from 1762-1764)

“Collins” *Moralphilosophie Collins* (from between 1774 and 1777)

“Mrongovius II” *Moral Mrongovius II* (from 1784-1785)

“Vigilantius” *Metaphysik der Sitten Vigilantius* (1793-1794)

“Pölitz” *Religionslehre nach Pölitz* (1817, from the mid-1780s)

“Volckmann” *Natürliche Theologie Volckmann* (1783?)

Translations from G, KpV, MdS are based upon the translations of Mary Gregor in *Practical Philosophy* (1996); from R and “Pölitz” on the translations by George di Giovanni and Allen Wood in *Religion and Rational Theology* (1996); from “Collins” and “Vigilantius” on the translations by Peter Heath in *Lectures on*

Ethics (1997); from KrV on the translation by Paul Guyer and Allen Wood in *Critique of Practical Reason* (1997), from KU on the translation by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2000), from Op on the translation by Eckart Förster and Michael Rosen in *Opus postumum* (1993), all part of *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

¹ See my “Self-legislation in Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” forthcoming in *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*.

² For a sampling of Kant’s attitudes about religious enthusiasm and religious observances, see *Religion* 6:172-175, 194-202; and a few of Kant’s letters 10:175-180; 191-194. See also Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³ Charles Larmore, “Objectively Good,” review of *The Invention of Autonomy*, by J.B. Schneewind. *The New Republic* 219, September 28, 1998 (1998): 42-45. R. M. Hare, “The Simple Believer” in *Essays on Religion and Education*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), pp. 30; and *Sorting Out Ethics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 27.

⁴ Frederick C. Beiser, unpublished commentary on Lara Denis’s “Kant’s Criticism of Atheism.” APA Pacific Division Meetings, March 30, 2001. Beiser claims that Kant advocated, for political reasons, a moral religion which he considered to be inconsistent with core principles of the critical philosophy articulated in the first *Critique*. See also *Enlightenment, Revolution, and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1992), ch. 2. On similar grounds, Yovel has concluded that, according to Kant, “the postulate of the existence of God tells us nothing of God, only of man and the world, and the Kantian theory of the Deity remains strictly humanistic,” political, and historical. Yirmiahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), esp. pp. 118-121; 275-277. [See also **n. 15 below**]

⁵ Allen Wood, “Religion, Ethical Community and the Struggle Against Evil” *Faith and Philosophy* 17(2000):498-511 [Hereafter “REC”]; and John E. Hare, “Kant on Recognizing our Duties as Divine Commands.” *Faith and Philosophy* 17(2000):459-478 [Hereafter “KRD”]. See also Wood’s *Kant’s Ethical*

Thought (Cambridge University Press, 1999) [Hereafter *KET*] and “Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 394-416. [Hereafter “RTM”]; John E. Hare, *God’s Call: Moral Realism, God’s Commands & Human Autonomy* (Eerdmans, 2001) [Hereafter *GC*] and *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God’s Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). [Hereafter *MG*].

⁶ Despite some significant difference in their perspectives, Hare does seem sympathetic to some of Wood’s social emphases (see **n.45** below) and appreciation for aspects of the Enlightenment and Wood seems sympathetic to Hare’s rejections of constructivist ethical anti-realism. *KET* pp. 157, 374-375 n4-5.

⁷ There is also a substantial disagreement between Wood and Hare about the role of revelation in Kant’s religion and moral theism which I do not take up here. See Wood, “Kant’s Deism” *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, edited by P. J. Rossi and M. Wreen. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. pp. 1-21; Hare, *MG* pp. 38-53; cf. Philip L. Quinn “Kantian Philosophical Ecclesiology,” *Faith and Philosophy* 17:512-534; and Kelli S. O’Brien “Kant and Swinburne on Revelation,” *Faith and Philosophy* 17:535-557.

⁸ see Hare, *GC*, 89, 94, 96, 102; 105; cf. “KRD”, pp. 465-466; Wood *KET*, pp. 410n42, “REC”, 500, and *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Cornell University Press, 1970) [Hereafter *KMR*], pp. 26-27; 188. In a footnote to *KMR* p. 188, Wood cites many passages, the least ambiguous of which is from the *Religion*. [R 6:3] Wood says “it is not God’s will, but only our own, which is conceived as the *author* of the moral law (the one whose will makes obedience to it obligatory.)” *KET*, 410. I have argued elsewhere that Kant insists that there is no author of the moral law in the strict sense, it has only legislators and/or “authors of obligation in accordance with” it. See **n.1** above.

⁹ See also “Pölitiz” 28:1002; 1141; 1241.

¹⁰ On certain “verificationist” readings of Kant’s theories of meaning and empirical knowledge, Kant’s talk of “God’s existence” [*die Existenz* or *das Dasein Gottes*] may seem illegitimate or without meaning. An adequate treatment of this important issue is beyond the scope of the present paper. For present purposes, I simply note that I am following Kant’s widespread usage throughout the critical period, and that this provides some reason to believe that an accommodation with his intended theories of meaning and cognition may be found. For further discussion, see Manfred Kuehn, “Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of God’s Existence as a

Postulate of Pure Practical Reason,” *Kant Studien* 76 (1985):152-169 and Robert M. Adams, “Things in Themselves,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997):801-825. In section 2, we will consider a separate argument, offered by Wood, against the claim that God’s *existence* is postulated.

¹¹ Kant does not always clearly distinguish between these various kinds of priority. Especially in connection with the epistemic and ontological priority claims, this is attributable to the fact that he is concerned with a *systematic* account of knowledge. Of course, we could distinguish the different sorts of priority claim and identify several other possible positions on the relationship between theology and moral philosophy including positions that deny that either is prior in one respect or the other.

¹² On Kant’s theory, God’s existence does not give rise to any particular duties (cf. the theory of Christian Wolff.) Kant argues that we have no duties *to* God, and that our only ethical duty with *regard* to God (to view our duties as God’s commands) is a duty of a human to himself. cf. R 6:155n.; MdS 6:486ff. We should view our duties as divine commands (which seems to presuppose God’s existence) but this is supposed to be a rational commitment not a moral duty.

¹³ This is the second point made in the passage from the *Religion*’s preface quoted above. It is perhaps not until the second *Critique* (1788) that Kant clearly endorses the claim that the moral law itself provides a sufficient, and the only morally worthy, motive (respect). In the “Praktische Philosophie Herder” lecture notes from the early 1760s, Kant indicates that theology is needed to supply a special motive, critical for morality, a view that seems to be preserved even in the “Moral Mrongovius II” lecture notes, contemporaneous with the publication of the *Groundwork*.

¹⁴ Part of Kant’s basis for this assumption rests upon the fact that we are finite rational beings who have needs. An extensive analysis of Kant’s moral argument can be found in Wood, *KMR*. See also Hare, *MG* ch. 3. pp. 69-96.

¹⁵ Kant’s “moral argument” occurs in a number of different variations in the corpus, sometimes a matter of separate, but compatible versions, other times changing in response to criticisms or in light of various other developments in his thought (e.g., with respect to the nature of moral motivation). Yet, as Guyer has recently argued, the basic structure of the argument remains quite consistent. Paul E. Guyer, “From a Practical

Point of View,” [Hereafter “FPP”] in *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). pp. 333-371; at 337, 355.

Many commentators have distinguished between a “worldly,” e.g., social and immanent conception of the highest good and a “religious,” e.g., transcendent and individual conception. One may be tempted to think that these two conceptions of the highest good are mutually exclusive and that the worldly conception came to supercede the religious conception in Kant’s thought, perhaps in the third *Critique*. But the evidence suggests that both aspects of the highest good can be found in Kant’s thought from the 1760s well into the 1790s and that Kant thought the worldly conception includes and comprehends the religious conception, rather than superceding or rejecting it. See, e.g., Yovel, pp. 32, 72, 81-2, 110; Richard Velkley, *Freedom and the End of Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), esp. p. 153; and Thomas Pogge, “Kant on Ends and the Meaning of Life,” in Reath, Herman, and Korsgaard, eds. *Reclaiming the History of Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). [The *Opus postumum* is a different matter, which I briefly discuss at the end of section 2.] For a defense of the claim that both are integral and complementary aspects of Kant’s mature theory, see Jacqueline Mariña, “Making Sense of the Highest Good,” *Kant-Studien* 91(2000):329-335.

¹⁶ In *KMR*, Wood argues that the moral argument leads to or reveals “an unwelcome conclusion about the person himself as a moral agent,” that the agent is logically committed to abandoning the pursuit of the highest good and thus to becoming a scoundrel. This is what he calls the “absurdum practicum” argument. Wood also seems to hold that these considerations are not best taken to lead to a “theoretical error” or “any inconsistency in judgments.” If these considerations did lead to an inconsistency in judgments, Wood argues, then the argument of the Analytic of the second *Critique* that the moral law is valid must be “incomplete,” which would be inconsistent with Kant’s apparent claims to the contrary. *KMR*, p. 25-30. I believe Kant thought both conclusions followed from these considerations and that the “practical absurdity” itself typically emerges from or is associated with a conflict of judgments. As for the alleged “incompleteness” of the argument of the Analytic, see n. 29, below.

¹⁷ Wood, *KMR*, pp. 132-133. God’s existence seems to be a “physical or metaphysical condition... of the possibility of the highest good.”[KpV5:143] Our inability to rationally endorse another condition, may itself be due to limitations of our finite nature.[KpV5:145] Of course, Kant recognizes that if one mistakenly believes that virtue is its own reward, he need not presuppose the existence of God in order to intend or promote the

highest good. [Refl. 6287 (18:557)] But since Kant thinks that such a belief is untenable, he does not consider this to be a rational way out. Why does Kant think the *possibility* of the highest good requires the *actual* existence (as opposed to the mere possibility) of God? As Guyer has helpfully explained, the answer lies in Kant's conception of real, as opposed to merely logical, possibility. "FPP" pp. 345-350. As Hare emphasizes, the possibility of a "kingdom of ends" makes more specific demands upon the executive and judicial functions that God must discharge, **see n. 45 below**.

¹⁸ Kant's mature position is that these rewards are not a necessary motive or incentive for morality and that a good will's dutiful actions are not *motivated* by the happiness she hopes for, though this happiness is necessarily part of her end. (Of course an impure will might be motivated by these rewards, not realizing that God rewards moral worth, not mere legality.) Even before Kant articulates respect for the moral law as the incentive of pure practical reason, i.e., when he still sees religion as a moral motive, he denies that rewards are the basis of this religious motive. On the motive/end distinction see Wood *KMR*, pp. 51ff;167; Hare, *MG*, p. 75ff.

¹⁹ I think there are two interrelated, yet distinguishable claims here: first, our acceptance of the moral law as a divine command is necessary to guarantee the internal coherence of our moral maxims; second, without the existence of this God (or a functional equivalent), practical reason's apparent demands would in fact be illusory and/or incoherent.

²⁰ On the developmental relation between the Groundwork's "deduction" and the "fact of reason," in the second *Critique*, see Karl Ameriks, *Kant's Theory of Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982/2000), chapter 6; and "Pure Reason of Itself Alone Suffices to Determine the Will" in Otfried Höffe, ed., *Immanuel Kant: Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* [Klassiker Auslegen, vol. 26] (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2002), pp. 99-114.

²¹ But cf. "Pölitz" 28:1010.

²² See KrV, A633/B661. KpV 5:122, 124-126, 132. "Pölitz" 28:1083.

²³ For a gloss on the meaning of "not as necessary," see the end of this section and **n.29 below**.

²⁴ Moreover, how could it still command ["Collins" 27:313] if it would lack the ability to command [KrV A811 / B839]? Kant's terminology on this point is neither uniform nor transparent, but if his position is

not incoherent, he must be employing different senses of “command,” “validity,” and “worth.” What is needed, and offered in what follows, is an explanation for and interpretation of Kant’s repeated assertion of such apparently contradictory claims, often in the same text. The persistence of this conflict seems to preclude a simple developmental explanation of it.

²⁵ That is, to believe in the existence (or possibility) of God (or to deny one of the premises of the argument other than those concerning the authority of the moral law and its demand that one promote the highest good.)

²⁶ Just as one cannot know in advance that there is a “way out” of the antinomies of theoretical reason. KrV A421 / B449. Skepticism is avoidable only if there is a rational way out. A507 / B535.

²⁷ In this case, why the conflicting claims about it “commanding” yet lacking authority and why the claims that respect for it is weakened, not obliterated? Because Kant thinks that we still could not reflectively avoid judging ourselves in the light of the law and admiring actions (esp. the possible actions of beings who can act rationally in response to it) done out of rational respect for it.

²⁸ Even if the atheist’s denial of (or agnosticism about) God’s existence is not itself completely rational, it may constitute a defeater for his belief in the reality of moral obligation. For the claim that an irrational belief can constitute a defeater, see Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. pp. 364-366; and “Naturalism Defeated,” unpublished manuscript 1994; cf. William P. Alston, “Plantinga, Naturalism, and Defeat” and Alvin Plantinga, “Reply to Beilby’s Cohorts,” in *Naturalism Defeated? Essays on Plantinga’s Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism*, edited by J. Beilby. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. pp. 176-203; 204-275.

²⁹ This is one way in which the postulate of transcendental freedom and the postulate of God’s existence differ. Freedom is supposed to be a necessary condition for the applicability of the moral law to *any* being. It is the *ratio essendi* of moral obligation in general.[KpV5:4n; 125-126] But the postulate of God’s existence is only “the condition... of the mere practical use of our pure reason.”[KpV5:4] The argument for the postulate of God’s existence (i) involves the more specific demand that we promote the highest good (which depends upon the assumption that we are [or, at least, that there are] finite beings with needs) and (ii) that we do not live in (indeed, cannot really conceive of) a world where the natural law could guarantee the proportionality

of virtue and happiness. Finite rational beings in such a possible world could coherently intend the highest good (as required), regardless of whether or not there was (or could be) a God. Thus, while the moral law directly entails the first postulate, the second postulate can only be derived in conjunction with these additional claims about *us* and our world. This is at least part of what Kant has in mind when he claims that the postulate of God's existence is not "as necessary" to assume as the moral law (and transcendental freedom) are.[KU5:450-451;cf. KpV5:143n.] It need not be the case that *every* rational agent to whom the moral law applies has a rational need for the postulate of God's existence like we do. This is part of the point of the "so far" qualifications at R6:3 and KpV5:143.

³⁰ This also seems to imply that, if there really were no God (regardless of our beliefs), the putative authority of the moral law for us (and its command that we promote the highest good) would be an illusion, a position supported at KpV5:114 and KU5:471n., and in the passages cited after **n.19** in the main text.

³¹ *KET* p. 410n.41. cf. Wood, "REC", p. 501. See also, **n.33**, below. Hare, "KRD", pp. 466; 475 n. 31. cf. *GC*, p. 104. In his publications, Hare has stopped short of *explicitly* insisting that, for Kant, belief in God's existence is required for *religion*. But neither does he deny this claim, which is easily inferred from his discussion. In correspondence, Hare has suggested that, for Kant, assertoric faith is not a necessary condition of having religion, but that religion rationally commits one to such a belief.

³² For Wood's evidence, see *KET* pp. 317, 410n41; "RTM" pp. 403-406. Among the evidence supporting these claims: R 6:153n.ff; "Pölitz" 28:998;1010; "Volckmann" 28:1137-1138; 1151; "Vigilantius" 27:531; Refl. 6213, 6226, 6227, 6236, 6244 [18:497-520.] Sometimes when Kant says this theoretical understanding is sufficient for religion, he also means to imply that it is a sufficient theoretical pre-requisite leading to moral *theism*, which itself does involve (assertoric) faith. see "Pölitz" 28:998;1011. There is also Kant's somewhat puzzling remark that "The mere possibility of God's existence is already sufficient for moral religion; yet not as much as faith." [Refl. 6226 (18:515)] It is unclear how "sufficiency" can come in degrees; but such a comment does reflect a certain fluidity in Kant's usage of the term "religion."

³³ See also Kant's claim that "with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work, what is presupposed [by the concept of religion] is an *assertoric* faith, practical and hence free, that promises a result for the final aim of religion." [R 6:153-4n.] In "RTM" esp. pp. 404-405, Wood suggested

that while “maybe” Kant thinks that something less than assertoric belief is required by his argument, “Kant thinks... something stronger than [hopeful agnosticism about God’s existence] would be preferable” or “harmonizes better” with morality. Although such qualifications are not articulated in Wood’s more recent discussions (*KET* and “REC”), he has assured me in correspondence that he agrees that Kant asserts that there is a positive “harmony” between assertoric faith and a moral disposition (or the coherent reflection upon such a disposition) and that such a harmony does not exist between mere religion and such a disposition (or reflection upon it.) Wood also thinks, however, that in spite of Kant’s claims to the contrary, the premises of the moral argument at best justify belief in God’s possibility, not his existence. I do not adjudicate this issue here.

³⁴ Guyer “FPP” pp. 337, 355; and “The Unity of Nature and Freedom: Kant’s Conception of the System of Philosophy,” In *The Reception of Kant’s Critical Philosophy: Fichte, Schelling and Hegel*, edited by S. Sedgwick. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) pp. 19-53; [Hereafter “UNF”] pp. 31, 41. This is not to deny that the third *Critique* marks a significant development in Kant’s thought, as its theory of reflective judgment and of teleology attests. But I see no radical shift in the third *Critique* on the points at issue here, or, as I suggested in **n. 15, above**, on the conception of the highest good.

³⁵ Guyer, “FPP”, pp. 364-365.

³⁶ Cf. the 1793 draft of the “Real Progress of Metaphysics.” [20:298] The passage suggests we act as if we know it, thus supposing we can’t know it, but does not say “act as if it were true,” supposing it isn’t true.

³⁷ Hare “KRD” pp. 465-466;475n.31.

³⁸ Guyer claims that the change on this point is “striking but not radical” given what has come before, more a “change in emphasis than in doctrine,” esp. in light of continuities in his overall conception of the “systematic unity of nature and freedom.” “UNF” pp. 47, 20. In the present context, it is sufficient that these statements represent a genuine change on the point at issue.

³⁹ Fascicle VII, Sheet X, page 1; Förster/Rosen translation, pp. 200-201. This and related subjects are explored extensively in the seventh and first fascicles (composed between 1800 and mid-1802), Förster/Rosen trans., pp. 200ff., See Förster’s “Introduction,” pp. xxvii-xxviii. The earliest evidence I have found of Kant using the phrase “(virtual) divine commands” [(*tamquam*) or (*instar*) *göttliche Gebote*] is in Refl. 8104, (19:646,

which Erich Adickes dated as after 1796.) The phrase is also found in the 1797 *Metaphysics of Morals* (MdS 6:443,487), and Refl. 8110, (19:650, from 1800.) See also Refl. 6360, (18:690, from 1797.) For discussion of *Opus postumum*, see Eckart Förster, *Kant's Final Synthesis: An essay on the Opus postumum*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000). [Hereafter *KFS*] esp. ch. 5; and Guyer, "UNF", pp. 43ff.

⁴⁰ Förster, *KFS*, p. 143.

⁴¹ Wood, *KMR*, p. 188. Second emphasis added. cf. "REC", pp. 500-502;507. "RTM" p. 407. Most recently *KET* pp. 317-320; 410, n. 42.

⁴² R. 7092, (19:247). See also KrV A632/B660.

⁴³ "In order to understand the function and justification of 'religion' in human life, we must turn to Kant's argument in the first part of Book III of the *Religion*." Wood, *KMR*, p. 188. cf. "REC" pp. 502, 507. In *KET*, Wood draws significant attention to connections between Kant's ethical and religious thought, on the one hand, and his social, historical, and anthropological thought, on the other. One excellent way to follow the developments in Kant's conception of society and history is in the recently published notes from his lectures on Anthropology. For discussion, see Brian Jacobs and Patrick Kain, eds., *Essays on Kant's Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.)

⁴⁴ Wood, *KMR*, p. 191.

⁴⁵ Hare emphasizes the multiple, interconnected roles that God plays in making this "kingdom of ends" possible by coordinating, maintaining and judging members of it. "KRD", pp. 468-471.

⁴⁶ Rousseau had claimed that "the object of laws is always general," but even this is a claim about laws, not about commands, per se. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social; Ou, Principes Du Droit Politique* II.vi. (Amsterdam: Marc Michel Rey, 1762.)

⁴⁷ It is important to note again that, on Kant's mature account, anticipation of these rewards (or the proportionality of virtue and happiness) cannot be the agent's *motive* for complying with the commands. Genuinely ethical rewards presuppose a morally worthy motive. Ethical rewards and punishments may appear in the agent's end, but not the agent's motive. Likewise, the point of divine commands is not to induce agents

to comply with the moral law. The point of divine commands is to promote the highest good (and enable us to promote it.) Nonetheless, the promise of ethical rewards is part of what constitutes them as divine *commands*.

⁴⁸ But perhaps one could respond as follows: “in the case of a solitary individual, God may be needed as judge and executor, but not necessarily as legislator-- why can't I be the legislator for myself?-- while in the social case, a common legislator is needed, and only God can be that.” In reply, I would ask why a common legislator is needed in the social case. A common law may be a necessary part of a moral community, but if that law is necessary, why is a common legislator also needed? Also note that Kant's own claims about the incapacity of humans to serve as the legislature for a moral community actually hang on our inability to be judges or executors because of our limited knowledge and power. The operative assumption is that it is unhelpful in this context to separate the legislative, executive and judicial powers or functions.

⁴⁹ Of course, if Kant's moral argument for the existence of God fails and the “social” argument Wood lays out can be salvaged from it, then the justification for the claims that we should regard our duties as divine commands would be that social argument. Along similar lines, see my comments on Andrews Reath's “Legislating for a Realm of Ends: The Social Dimension of Autonomy,” in my review essay of [Reclaiming the History of Ethics](#), ed. Reath, Herman, and Korsgaard. *Kantian Review* 3(1999):114-122.

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