

‘As Kant has Shown . . .’

Analytic Theology and the Critical Philosophy

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The uniqueness of Kant’s position can already be seen in the fact that it is a solitary one. . . . He stands by himself . . . a stumbling-block and rock of offence in the new age, someone determinedly pursuing his own course, more feared than loved, a prophet whom almost everyone—even those who want to go forward with him—must first re-interpret before they can do anything.

(Karl Barth)

The goal of the present volume is to say something about what analytic theology might be, and about whether and why theologians and philosophers might want to engage in it. I can think of three general things that analytic theology might be, though I suspect that other contributors will have different ways of dividing up the territory. Analytic theology might be

(1) Good old-fashioned conceptual analysis (think: Moore, Ayer, Austin) applied to concepts of theological importance, especially the concept of God.

Few philosophers or theologians in the post-Quinean context are optimistic about the prospects of pure conceptual analysis all on its own, of course, and so analytic theology will need to go beyond (1) if it is to be more than a disappointing non-starter. Fortunately, there are at least two other candidates:

(2) The use of the characteristic tools of analytic philosophy¹ to generate arguments with theological content or import. These tools include: logical apparatuses of various sorts (deductive, probabilistic, epistemic, modal, etc.); abduction; rational intuition; thought-experiment;

¹ I do not mean to suggest that these tools are the sole possession of analytic philosophers of course. This is merely a sketch of some of the features that are responsible for the ‘family resemblances’ between works of ‘analytic philosophy’. Michael Rea offers a more detailed account of these family resemblances in his introduction to the present volume.

reflective equilibrium; appeal to substantive theory-building constraints such as simplicity, elegance, and explanatory depth; stylistic rigor, clarity, and understatement; and, of course, necessary-and-sufficient-conditions analysis of our concepts, refined by appeal to counterexamples.

The problem with (2) is that it is hard to distinguish from what currently falls under the rubric of ‘philosophy of religion’ in analytic circles. So while (2) might be consistent with analytic theology, or even a part of analytic theology, it can’t constitute the whole thing, for fear of losing our topic.

A third candidate is

(3) The use of *explicitly principled* appeals to special religious sources—namely, scriptural revelation, testimony from the religious community, ecclesiastical tradition, and individual or corporate religious experience—in order to

- (a) supply topics (e.g. Creation, Fall, Trinity, etc.) and direct inquiry;
- (b) supply prima facie justification for claims with theological content or import; and
- (c) supply defeaters for claims that are prima facie justified on other grounds.

Note, first, that according to (3) these ‘special religious sources’ can both supply justification and defeat it. By way of example: suppose that the claim that the universe is the result of creation rather than emanation or chance is one for which Jim has little or no justification before he recognizes that the creation doctrine is a part of the scriptural and communal tradition in which he is theologizing. Other things being equal, that recognition supplies the doctrine with some (further) justification for him. Conversely, Sue may start out having plenty of prima facie justification for the common-sense claim that each person is a unique being or substance. But this justification is (at least partially) defeated when she realizes that a central, settled doctrine of the ecclesiastical tradition in which she is working is that at least one being comprises three different persons.²

² Justification comes in degrees, and I don’t mean to take a position here regarding how much justification an appeal to such sources could supply or defeat. It’s also worth pointing out that I’m speaking of claims, doctrines, and principles here, rather than of beliefs. That’s because I do not want to presume that the propositions involved must be actual candidates for an analytic theologian’s belief in order for her effectively to work with them. We could say, of course, that special religious sources give the analytic theologian prima facie justification for the belief that *p* even though she herself doesn’t believe that *p*. But I think that this, too, is misleading, since it is natural to slip from talk of having justification for a belief that *p* to talk of having a justified belief that *p*. Analytic theologians can consider and weigh the justification a claim has within some broader system or set of assumptions, or within the context of some overarching narrative, or within a particular religious language-game, or etc., without being at all inclined to believe the claim themselves. Talking about having justification for claims, doctrines, and principles, rather than beliefs, helps keep all of this straight.

Second, note that (3) *does* clearly distinguish analytic theology from philosophy of religion, granting (as is customary) that the latter does not properly make justificatory appeals to any such special religious sources. Philosophy of religion involves arguments about religiously pertinent philosophical issues, of course, but these arguments are customarily constructed in such a way that, ideally, anyone will be able to feel their probative force on the basis of 'reason alone'. Analytic theology (3), by contrast, appeals to sources of topics and evidence that go well beyond our collective heritage as rational beings with the standard complement of cognitive faculties.

Third, note that (3) contains hints about how we might distinguish analytic theology from other species of revealed theology.³ One paradigmatically 'analytic' feature of (3) is that appeals to special religious sources are governed by principles that are formulated as *explicitly* as possible by the theologian: making these principles explicit will presumably require the use of some of the tools of analytic philosophy listed in (2).⁴ Another analytic feature of this practice is that the concepts involved in the claims that acquire or lose justification would have to be clarified, analyzed, and altered using some of the tools in (2). This means that (3) is not only compatible with, but also *entails* (2). And of course (2) entails (1), given that pure conceptual analysis (insofar as it is possible) is one of well-worn tools of analytic philosophy. The merging of our three candidates in this way is salutary, I think, since something in the neighborhood of the conjunction of (1)–(3) is what many (though perhaps not all) of the authors in this volume are likely to conceive as our collective topic.⁵

³ There are of course further distinctions to be made between different kinds of 'revealed theology': biblical, liberation, ecclesiastical, womanist, historical, systematic, etc. I will pass over these distinctions in silence here, except to note that I suspect that 'systematic theology' is the closest cousin to analytic theology, although they may still differ in some of the ways described in this paragraph.

⁴ I am not suggesting that non-analytic theologians do *not* make principled appeals to special religious sources, or that they make *unprincipled* appeals to such sources. The point is rather one of emphasis: my sense is that in analytic theology (3), a very high premium would be placed on making it explicit precisely how the deliverances of 'special religious sources' can e.g. justify a claim, and on carefully examining and explicating the claims that are so justified. It seems likely to turn out that the difference between analytic theology and other forms of revealed theology (and especially 'systematic theology') is a difference in emphasis or degree, rather than a difference in kind.

⁵ I frankly have some trouble seeing a significant difference between analytic theology and what has recently been called 'philosophical theology' in the analytic tradition. As far as I can tell, the latter can and often does involve (1)–(3) above. Oliver Crisp suggests in correspondence that analytic theology uses the same *methods* as philosophical theology in the analytic tradition, but to somewhat different *ends*. He develops this idea in his contribution to the present volume, and so I will simply refer the reader to that chapter and set the question aside.

Immanuel Kant would not have been opposed to analytic theology conceived as (1) or (2)—he did a lot of it himself, as we will see. Nor would he have railed against the idea that (1) and (2) produce genuine a priori knowledge. He *would* have opposed the thought that (2) produces a priori knowledge of *synthetic* claims (i.e. claims that assert more than that some predicate is contained in some concept⁶). But it's not obvious that aspiring analytic theologians need to claim anything as strong as that. Instead, I will suggest, they might do better to follow Kant in holding that (1) produces analytic knowledge, and that (2) produces at most what Kant calls rational 'Belief' (*Glaube*) or 'Acceptance' (*Annehmung*)—i.e. a positive sort of propositional attitude which, even if it is justified and true, doesn't count as knowledge (*Wissen*). I'll say more about this suggestion, and about the Kantian notion of 'Belief/Acceptance', below.⁷

As for (3) and its various species, Kant himself recommends (3*a*) to readers of his works on religion, but he explicitly repudiates (3*b*) and (3*c*). For him, appeals to sacred texts, communal and ecclesiastical traditions, and individual religious experiences are acceptable only as signposts directing our inquiry to claims that are defensible from within the bounds of mere reason.⁸ There are no principles, however explicit, which legitimize their use as sources of justification or defeat. So if a brand of analytic theology involves (3*b*) and (3*c*), it will find no friend in Kant.

Accordingly, in what follows, I'll try to lay out Kant's attitude towards analytic theology conceived as the conjunction of (1), (2), and (3*a*), and in particular his reasons for thinking that the results of such a practice will have the status of Belief. My goal here is not merely to provide a specific sort of analytic theology with the imprimatur of an eminent historical philosopher. Analytic theology (on this characterization or another) could certainly soldier on without the support of the Sage of Königsberg. My motive for focusing on Kant stems rather from the fact that his influence among people working in theology and religious studies is by all accounts *immense*, and that while many embrace that influence, others—especially those inclined towards analytic theology—find that influence deeply regrettable.

⁶ I'm ignoring difficult questions regarding Kant's various notions of analyticity (and syntheticity) here. A rough intuitive grasp of the 'containment' notion of analyticity which he provides in the introduction to the first *Critique* will suffice for present purposes.

⁷ For more on this, see my 'Belief in Kant', *Philosophical Review*, 116/3 (July 2007), 323–60. In general, I'll capitalize 'Belief' below when referring to Kant's notion of *Glaube*. There is unfortunately no good English translation of the German term: sometimes it means something like our words 'belief' or 'opinion', and sometimes it means something more like our words 'faith' or 'acceptance'.

⁸ Kant writes in the *Religion* that 'any attempt like the present one to find a meaning in Scriptures that is in harmony with the *most holy* teachings of reason must be viewed not only as permissible but as a duty' (6: 83–4).

Let me explain this motive in somewhat more detail. Kant's influence is *embraced* by the many theologians, scholars, and religious thinkers who maintain that he taught something crucial about the limits of our cognitive, conceptual, and therefore epistemic access to supersensible objects ('things-in-themselves') and, by way of Hegel, about the cultural and historical sources of our conceptual schemes. As a result, one often encounters statements in theological circles that begin with the phrase 'as Kant has shown' and end with a claim about the inability of our concepts to apply to reality-in-itself in general—and to God in particular—and thus the impotence of all attempts at substantive theology in a traditional 'realist' mode. These statements are then used to motivate the shift to an anti-realist mode, or an allegorical mode, or an apophatic mode, or at the very least a practical mode in which doctrinal wrangling takes a back seat to concerns about liberation and social justice.

Kant's influence is typically *regretted* by would-be analytic theologians precisely because of this near-consensus picture and the philosophical and sociological obstacles it presents to those who wish to reflect in a traditional realist mode about substantive theological topics. As a result of 'what Kant has shown', questions regarding how we can even *begin* to engage in God-thought and God-talk dominate a great deal of theological discussion—questions which are often categorized, fittingly enough from a Kantian point of view, under the rubric of 'prolegomena'.⁹ Those who regret Kant's influence regard this ongoing questioning as a kind of hand-wringing 'agony' or theoretical compulsion from which we should seek to 'recover'.¹⁰ This does not mean that such people are not *also* interested in allegory, apophatic discourse, liberation, and social justice.¹¹ In many cases the contrary is true. Still, these thinkers wish that it were not true that Kant, for theologians, always plays the role of 'a stumbling-block and rock of offense... a prophet whom almost everyone, even among those who wanted to go forward with him, had first to re-interpret before they could do anything with him'.¹²

⁹ Kant's own textbook summary of his theoretical philosophy, of course, was called *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*. Citations from Kant's works are by 'volume: page' to the Akademie edn. of Kant's works (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1900–), except for citations from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which will be by 'A-edition/B-edition'. I have consulted and typically followed the translations in the Cambridge edition of Kant's works, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992–).

¹⁰ Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Is it Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?', *Modern Theology*, 14/1 (Jan. 1998), 1–18.

¹¹ Wolterstorff, for instance, has written on every one of these topics, most recently producing an enormous book on justice considered from both philosophical and theological perspectives. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

¹² Karl Barth, *Die protestantische Theologie im 19. Jahrhundert: Ihre Vorgeschichte und ihre Geschichte*, 3rd edn. (Zurich: Evangelischer Verlag, 1946). Partially translated as *Protestant Thought from Rousseau to Ritschl*, tr. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1969). This quotation is from p. 150. Gordon Michalson references this passage and also provides a more

I am not a professional theologian, and so I feel awkward doing what I just did—namely, discussing what members of another discipline do and don't do. My grounds are hardly scientific: they consist of personal observation, scattered reading and journal perusal, testimony from friends in the business, past participation in a weekly theology colloquium at a prominent Divinity School and, more recently, regular attendance at American Academy of Religion meetings. Even though these grounds are woefully unscientific, I propose for present purposes to take it as uncontroversial that modern theology has been immensely influenced by what 'Kant has shown', and that Kantian questions about the conditions of the possibility of speculative discourse have led to the ongoing prominence of 'agonizing' prolegomenal discussions.

I feel even more awkward saying anything about what people in another field *should* do and *shouldn't* do. So I won't do that at all. Rather, my goal in this chapter is to offer a few interpretive suggestions regarding Kant's own approach that might allow would-be analytic theologians to see him as an ally or even a forebear, rather than as a block over which to stumble or a disease from which to recover. In other words, I want to suggest that Kant doesn't really hold what 'Kant has shown'; in fact, he himself writes analytic theology *of a certain sort*, and he often goes beyond prolegomena with alacrity. The qualification 'of a certain sort' is crucial because, again, Kant is careful to note that the synthetic results of reflection about things-in-themselves can only be held as 'Belief' (*Glaube*) or 'Acceptance' (*Annehmung*), rather than what he calls knowledge (*Wissen*) or even what we *today* would call 'belief'. Belief is precisely the type of attitude for the sake of which Kant had to 'cancel' or 'set aside' (*aufheben*) knowledge, in the famous phrase from the preface to the first *Critique*.¹³ And though Belief is *often* and most famously grounded in *practical* considerations (the 'moral proofs' for which Kant is well-known, for instance), Kant's under-noticed but official view is that *theoretical* considerations can sometimes justify Belief as well. My ultimate irenic suggestion here, then, is that if analytic theologians are willing to follow Kant in putting aside knowledge in order to aim at something like Belief, then they may not need to recover from him at all.¹⁴

elaborate description of the ways in which Kant has influenced modern theology in *Kant and the Problem of God* (Malden, Mass.: Basil Blackwell, 1999), ch. 1.

¹³ 'Ich musste also das Wissen aufheben, um zum Glauben Platz zu bekommen' ('I thus had to put aside knowledge in order for there to be space for Belief' (Bxxx).

¹⁴ It is worth emphasizing that it is also not part of my aim to endorse analytic theology here. My goal is rather to show that those who want to engage in analytic theology (at least construed as the conjunction of (1)–(3a) above) needn't regret Kant's influence in theological circles, though they might well regret the influence of 'what Kant has shown'.

ANALYTIC THEOLOGY AS CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

One of the first things one learns in an undergraduate survey on Kant is that he distinguishes, throughout his career, between analytic judgments that merely draw out what is already 'contained' in a concept, and synthetic judgments that 'amplify' or 'add something new to' the concept. Analytic judgments are always a priori for Kant: his usual example is 'All bodies are extended.' Such 'judgments do not really teach us anything more about the object than what the concept that we have of it already contains in itself, since they do not expand cognition beyond the concept of the subject, but only elucidate this concept' (A736/B764).

Kant is *modestly* worried about analyticity insofar as he thinks that knowingly generating *full* analyses or 'definitions' of the contents of our (non-mathematical) concepts is extremely difficult. We might think, while we're doing armchair conceptual analysis, that we've drawn out all the predicates of the concept of 'body' and laid them before us, when in fact there are some predicates concealed in the corners of the concept which our analysis hasn't yet brought to light. This should lead us to a kind of skepticism about full definition: 'the exhaustiveness of the analysis of my concept is always doubtful, and by many appropriate examples can only be made *probably* but never *apodictically* certain' (A728/B756).

Despite these modest worries, Kant never countenances the *radical* worries about analyticity that came to prominence 150 years later. It's true, of course, that we acquire most of the content of our concepts through empirical experience and testimony ('no concepts can arise analytically as far as content is concerned': A77/B103). But Kant assumes that once we possess a concept, we can normally keep our analyses of it from involving any *justificatory* appeals to experience. So his pessimism about full definition is tempered by optimism about our armchair sense of *when* we're doing conceptual analysis and when we're not. He never seriously worries that the synthetic judgments that we take to be 'adding something' to a concept might in fact be non-obvious, complex analytic truths, or vice versa.

Such modest optimism allows Kant to view conceptual analysis as a central component of intellectual life: 'a great part, perhaps the greatest part, of the business of our reason consists in analyses of the concepts that we already have of objects' (A5/B9). Such business allows us to achieve that 'distinctness of concepts which is requisite for a secure and extended synthesis as a really new acquisition' (A10/B14); moreover, these analyses themselves 'yield real a priori knowledge, which makes secure and useful progress' (A6/B10). This is

as true in theology as elsewhere: analyses of our concepts of supersensibles (God, the soul, freedom, the afterlife, and so forth) are fully capable of giving us a priori knowledge. Again, however, the result is merely analytic knowledge of the contents of our concepts, and not synthetic knowledge that amplifies those concepts or, in particular, implies that something actually corresponds to them.

Kant himself engaged in analytic theology of something like type (1) throughout his career, often lecturing on theological topics and occasionally publishing in the field (at least when he wasn't barred from doing so by J. C. Wöllner, the Minister of Religion under Friedrich Wilhelm II, or the notorious ecclesiastical authority T. C. E. Woltersdorf, who in 1791 explicitly forbade Kant to write any further on religion¹⁵). This practice is by no means inconsistent with his objections to synthetic knowledge-claims in speculative metaphysics because, again, it merely involves type (1) analysis of what is contained in our theological concepts. With respect to the analysis of the concept of God, Kant follows his rationalist predecessors in taking a broadly Anselmian approach. He assumes that 'God' is the name we use for the most perfect or 'most real being' (*ens realissimum*), and then seeks to draw out and make explicit the predicates contained in our concept of such a being. These include the traditional 'omni-' predicates, as well as various other morally and ontologically superlative determinations. In his lectures on religion, Kant describes this method of 'natural' theologizing as a two-stage process: first, we remove all 'negativity' and 'lack' from our concepts of real predicates so as to focus only on the relevant 'reality' in them; second, we maximize that reality in order to arrive at a concept of a being with all and only the best or 'most real' predicates.¹⁶ Thus, for example, the concept of *volitional power* as we acquire it introspectively is first *purified* by removing everything that makes reference to finite structures and agency, and then *maximized* in order to arrive at the predicate of *omnipotence*.

Kant is fundamentally opposed to one component of the Anselmian model, however: he doesn't think that we can squeeze *existence*-claims out of our concept of God. His career-long opposition to the a priori proof which he

¹⁵ For discussion of this controversy, see Kant's correspondence at 11: 264 ff.

¹⁶ Kant follows the scholastic/rationalist tradition in calling this method the *via eminentiae* (the way of eminence). Again, the method involves clarifying our concepts of the good-making predicates of finite beings, extrapolating to their most real or eminent versions (*all-powerful, all-knowing, infinitely extended, etc.*), and then ascribing the largest compossible set of the latter to God. See *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, 28: 999. Descartes famously opposes the *via eminentiae* in the Third Meditation and the Second Replies to Mersenne.

himself christened ‘ontological’ is based in his broader views in philosophical logic and often encapsulated in the dictum that ‘Existence is not a real predicate.’ The ontological proof says that there is an entity whose non-existence would produce a *logical* contradiction among its own predicates—namely, the entity which, by way of being maximally great, must by necessity possess the great-making predicate of existence. Kant repudiates this whole conception by arguing that a non-existence claim can never of itself generate a contradiction, because to say that a thing does or does not exist is not to predicate something further of *it*, but rather to say something about its concept—namely, that the concept does or does not have an instance (2: 73–4; A592–3/B620–1). So although we can and do *use* ‘exists’ casually as a predicate in natural language, it is not a *real* predicate of any object (relational predicates between concepts and their instances, then, are not ‘real’ predicates on Kant’s view¹⁷). The attempt to smuggle it into the concept of a thing as just another predicate among many others, and then use armchair analysis to pull the actual thing out of a conceptual hat, is at best ‘a mere novelty of scholastic wit’, says Kant, and at worst ‘nothing but a miserable tautology’ (A597/B625; A603/B631).

This opposition to analytic existence-claims leads Kant to advocate what I will below describe as ‘synthetic theology’ (which despite its name is also a mode of analytic theology in the sense of (1)–(3a) above). But first let me note that what I have said so far is opposed by interpreters who insist that something about Kant’s broader theoretical picture, and in particular his theory of object-reference, implies that we can’t meaningfully think or talk about supersensible things-in-themselves at all. For ease of reference, I will call such commentators *Hardliners*.

Hardliners emphasize passages in which Kant says that in the absence of an appropriate connection to intuitional input from the senses, our concepts will remain ‘empty’ and such that we are not even able to judge whether it is *really possible* for them to have an instance. Consider, by way of example, the following passages:

For every concept there is requisite, first, the logical form of a concept (of thinking) in general, and then, second, the possibility of giving it an object to which it is to be

¹⁷ We might well wonder why Kant surely doesn’t want to say that relational predicates are never ‘real’ predicates. It is more plausible to suggest that relations between concrete particulars and abstract objects are not real predicates. Thus, many contemporary philosophers think that predicates such as *being such that* $2 + 2 = 4$ is a predicate that can be applied to everything in every possible world, but that it doesn’t express or pick out a real property. Kant’s arguments, however, often make it sound as though his problem is not with relations to abstracta in general, but rather with the relation of instantiation in particular. Why that relation in particular is not ‘real’ is a puzzling feature of his account.

related. Without this latter it has no sense (*Sinn*), and is completely empty of content (*völlig leer an Inhalt*). (A239/B298)

If a cognition is to have objective reality, i.e., to be related to an object, and is to have significance and sense (*Bedeutung und Sinn*) in that object, the object must be able to be given in some way. Without that the concepts are empty and through them one has... merely played with representations... To give an object... is nothing other than to relate its representation to experience (whether this be actual or still possible). (A156/B195)¹⁸

Remarks such as these about the connection between 'giving an object' in experience, on the one hand, and conceptual *Sinn*, *Inhalt*, and *Bedeutung*, on the other, are taken by Hardliners to indicate that Kant holds (in a proto-verificationist fashion) that our concepts of supersensibilia are literally *Sinnlos*—senseless. Thus, an assertion that contains such a concept is, from a cognitive point of view, no more meaningful than a line from 'Jabberwocky': it may appear to be grammatically sound, but it ends up signifying nothing. Applying these principles to God-talk in particular, a prominent German Hardliner concludes that Kant's 'most radical claim in connection with natural theology is not that the existence of God cannot be proved theoretically but that theoretical reason cannot even legitimately *ask* whether or not God exists'.¹⁹

Unless one is aiming to write nonsense poetry, it is a monumental waste of time to string together long complicated sentences that fail to express coherent propositions. It seems downright absurd to publish those strings of sentences in journals and books, and to go to conferences and utter them before other people. Thus when it comes to our natural propensity to conjure ideas of the supersensible, Hardliners like Höffe tend to emphasize passages in which Kant enjoins us to take up our *Critiques* and resist. If we do manage to resist, Kant promises (in the vivid language of self-mortification) that we 'can be spared many difficult and nevertheless fruitless efforts, since [we] would not be attributing to reason anything which obviously exceeds its capacity, but would rather be subjecting reason, which does not gladly suffer constraint in the paroxysms of its lust for speculative expansion, to the discipline of abstinence' (A786/B814). This passage comes from the second half of the *Critique* which, for Hardliners, is basically an extended meditation on the various ways in which reason seduces us into the dark realm of things-in-themselves, and a therapeutic attempt to convince us that these illicit

¹⁸ See also A146/B185; A485–8/B513–15; A493/B521.

¹⁹ Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant* (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1992). English translation by Marshall Farrier (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1994), 123.

inclinations of reason itself must be, to the best of our abilities, identified, ‘disciplined’, or extirpated.²⁰

A closer reading of Kant’s texts, however, suggests that the Hardline view is difficult to defend qua interpretation. For, first, there are countless passages in which Kant claims that human reason *is* able to think up (*denken*) concepts of the supersensible that are logically coherent and that *do* have some intelligible structure and content (Bxxx n.). Such ideas may indeed be *leer an Inhalt* and *ohne Sinn und Bedeutung*, but that does not mean for Kant what it does for Frege and the verificationists, or what it does for contemporary Germanophones. On the contrary, Kant uses *Sinn* and *Inhalt* as technical terms: they explicitly refer to the content that a concept gets *by way of relation to intuitional experience*. If a concept has *Sinn* or *Inhalt*, then its ‘object must be able to be given in some way’—i.e. it must be possible for intuitions (pure or empirical) to be brought under it which would allow us to cognize an instance of it (A156/B195). ‘Empty’ is also a technical term in this context: being empty is the hallmark of the so-called ‘problematic’ concepts which may very well have a determinate, intelligible, and logically coherent structure, but which do not have a possible *sensory* content or *empirical* referent (A338–9/B396–7).²¹ Similarly, an idea that lacks a *Bedeutung* in the technical sense is one that lacks a possible *empirical* referent (B149).²² But clearly this does not entail that it does not or cannot have *any* referent whatsoever—it’s quite possible that empty ideas, lacking a *Bedeutung*, still have non-empirical referents.²³ In effect, then, to say that a concept of the supersensible is ‘empty’ or ‘without sense and reference’ is very close to uttering a tautology (miserable or otherwise)—it’s just to say that it’s a concept of the supersensible. Hardliners go far beyond

²⁰ Some prominent Anglophone Hardliners are Norman Kemp Smith, Jonathan Bennett, and P. F. Strawson. See Kemp Smith, *Commentary to Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason* (Atlantic Highland, NJ: Humanities Press, 1992; 1st edn. 1918), 398; Bennett, *Kant’s Dialectic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 52–3; and Strawson, *Bounds of Sense* (London: Methuen, 1966), 11–12.

²¹ ‘To represent a pure concept of the understanding as thinkable in an object of possible experience is to confer objective reality upon it, and in general to present it. Where we are unable to achieve this, the concept is empty, i.e., it suffices for no cognition’ (20: 279).

²² Cf. A240/B300 where Kant explicitly equates a concept’s *Bedeutung* with the empirical object (*Objekt*) that serves as its referent.

²³ Kant himself *sometimes* uses a broader sense of *Bedeutung* which refers to the sort of logical significance that an idea of an uncognizable supersensible can enjoy. ‘In fact, even after abstraction from all sensible condition, significance (*Bedeutung*), but only a logical significance of the mere unity of representations, is left to the pure concepts of the understanding, but no object (*Gegenstand*) and thus no significance is given to them *that could yield a cognition of the object (Objekt)*’ (A147/B186). The word ‘cognition’ at the end of this passage was printed as ‘concept’ in the A-edn. *KrV*, but it is noteworthy that Kant himself changed it to ‘cognition’ in his copy of that edn. (Cf. Benno Erdmann’s *Nachträge* transcriptions of the handwritten notes that Kant made in his own copy of the A-edn. of the *Critique* (23: 46).)

what the texts licence when they claim that, for Kant, a well-formed sentence in speculative metaphysics is no better than Jabberwockyan gibberish.

These points can help us make sense of the fact that in the *Critique* and the writings on religion, Kant develops a sophisticated theory of religious language according to which we *can* legitimately ascribe various predicates—predicates such as *having a will* or *being omniscient*—to the most real being after employing the *via eminentiae* in the manner discussed above. It is difficult to see why Kant would go to all of this trouble if he thinks that the resulting idea is without *any* possible referent whatsoever, or that the statements he entertains are complete nonsense which fail to express a coherent proposition. Clearly it is more charitable to see him as holding that, although we cannot *know* that the concept of a most real being has an actual or really possible referent (since we can't connect such a being via empirical laws to an object of possible experience), we also cannot *know* that it doesn't (A742/B770). In his lectures and writings on religion, he calls this position the 'minimum of theology'—the minimum commitment required in order rationally to practice theology. It is that God's existence is both logically possible (i.e. the concept of God is logically coherent), and epistemically possible (i.e. really possible as far as we know) (28: 1026; 6: 154 n.). And Kant himself, I have argued so far, is clearly committed to both of these claims.

ANALYTIC THEOLOGY AND MORAL BELIEF

Vestiges of Hardlinism can still be found in some interpretive circles, but most commentators nowadays reject it and claim that Kant thinks we *are* able, through speculative-theoretical reasoning, to develop logically coherent ideas of supersensible entities such as God, the world-whole, the free will, the future life, etc. and that we are able, further, to be aware that these ideas adequately reflect our best speculative conclusions about the issues in question. Let's call such commentators *Moderates*.

Unlike Hardliners, Moderates can make sense of how Kant's discussions of religious concepts and language fit into the critical project. Moderates join with Hardliners, however, in holding that any theoretical claims that affirm (or repudiate) the existence of these transcendent entities are out of line. In order legitimately to make claims with existential import about particular things-in-themselves, we have to turn to specifically *moral* considerations, i.e. to Kant's 'proofs' that underwrite moral Belief (*Glaube*) in God, freedom, and the immortality of the soul.

There are plenty of passages in the critical works in which Kant seems to advocate something like Moderation:

Even though reason in its merely speculative use is far from adequate for such a great aim as this—namely, attaining to the existence of a supreme being—it still has in them a very great utility, that of *correcting* the cognition of this being by making it agree with itself...and by purifying it of everything that might be incompatible with the concept of an original being, and of all admixture of empirical limitations. (A639–40/B667–8)

This passage says that speculative/theoretical considerations lead us to generate the idea of God, and that the methods of analytic theology (1) and (2) above allows us to clean up the idea and make its contours more precise. But as far as theoretical reason is concerned, that sort of strictly analytical reflection can go no further. As a result,

the highest being remains for the merely speculative use of reason a mere but nevertheless *faultless ideal*, a concept which concludes and crowns the whole of human cognition, whose objective reality cannot of course be proved on this path, but also cannot be refuted; and if there should be a moral theology that can make good this lack, then transcendental theology, up to now only problematic, will prove to be indispensable through determining its concept and by ceaselessly censoring a reason that is deceived often enough by sensibility and does not always agree with its own ideas. (A641/B669)

On the Moderate interpretation of passages like this, Kant is saying that speculative reason strives to reach out beyond the sensible with guidance not from experience but from rational principles of a sort.²⁴ But for complicated reasons based in Kant’s criticism of rationalist metaphysics (the details of which I’ll have to set aside here), these principles are not such as to underwrite *synthetic* knowledge-claims in a theoretical context; we can only accept synthetic claims about the existence of things-in-themselves or their other non-essential attributes when we have a sufficient *moral* basis for doing so. Moderates sum up their vision as follows:

As far as theoretical/speculative reason is concerned, ideas are no more than thinkable possibilities beyond the reach of realizable knowledge. But practical reason shows that with such thinkable things ‘the category as a mere form of thought is here not empty but obtains significance through an object which practical reason unquestionably provides through the conception of the good.’ Practical reason can go where theoretical reason cannot tread.²⁵

²⁴ Here I am thinking of the unschematized category of cause-effect (or, perhaps better, ground-consequence), for instance, as well as maxims of reason such as Ockham’s razor.

²⁵ Nicholas Rescher, *Kant and the Reach of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 62–3. We don’t need to reify different kinds or faculties of ‘reason’ in order to agree with

It should be clear that Moderates are effectively ascribing to Kant a practically oriented brand of analytic theology (2). Not only can we generate, analyze, and clarify concepts in accordance with (1), we can also form synthetic ‘assents’ or ‘holdings-for-true’ (*Fürwahrhalten*),²⁶ about the existence of various supersensibles on the basis of the intuitions, inferences to best explanation, demonstrative arguments, and so forth that are operative in the famous ‘moral proofs.’²⁷ The result is moral Belief (*Glaube*) and not knowledge (*Wissen*), of course, but it is a substantive result all the same and one which should be of more than passing interest to theology.

ANALYTIC AND SYNTHETIC THEOLOGY

Those who take the approach that I propose to call *Liberalism* go one step further than Moderates in interpreting Kant’s views about what we can think, say, believe, and know regarding things-in-themselves. It’s true, Liberals will admit, that the operations of theoretical reason in its speculative capacity do not provide a demonstration of the existence of God, freedom, and the immortal soul: that’s what Kant’s criticism of the rationalists was supposed to show. And it’s true that we can’t have cognition of these things either, since we can’t experience them or connect them to our experience in any of the appropriate ways: that’s what Kant’s criticism of the Swedenborgians and other enthusiasts was supposed to show. So Liberals are by no means full-blown *Libertines* about these matters—they don’t think that we can have synthetic theological knowledge of either a demonstrative or an experiential sort. Still, theoretical inquiry *is* able in some contexts to identify grounds that underwrite rational synthetic assents involving these concepts. More

Kant’s general point here. ‘Practical reasoning’ is just reasoning that appeals in some integral way to considerations regarding what we should do as practical agents, or to considerations regarding the necessary conditions of doing what we should do. Pure ‘theoretical’ reasoning, especially in the speculative metaphysical mode, doesn’t make such appeals.

²⁶ For Kant, ‘assent’ or ‘holding-for-true’ is the general genus of positive attitudes that we take towards propositions. Its species include attitudes as weak as assuming for the sake of argument, and attitudes as strong as apodictic knowledge. ‘Belief’ or ‘Acceptance’ is a species of assent that is somewhere in between these two. For further discussion of this topic, as well as the various ways in which assents can be justified, see my ‘Kant’s Concepts of Justification’, *Nous*, 41/1 (Mar. 2007), 33–63.

²⁷ For lengthy discussions of the moral proofs, see Allen Wood’s now-classic treatment in *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970) as well as John Hare, *The Moral Gap* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), Gordon Michalson, *Kant and the Problem of God* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers 1999), and Peter Byrne, *Kant on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate Press, 2007).

precisely, Liberals claim that for Kant some of our theoretical practices *require* as a hypothetically necessary condition of their rational performance the acceptance (*Annehmung, Annahme*) of the existence of various supersensibilia. Thus the realm of particular, concrete things about which we can form rational synthetic assents on *theoretical* grounds is wider than the realm of things about which we can have knowledge.²⁸

I cannot develop this Liberal reading of Kant at any length here, but let me provide a sketch of how it would go with respect to one well-known theistic proof. The classical cosmological argument starts with a premise about some finite object or state in nature: the item in question could be as minimal as a state of self perceived in inner sense. From this premise—'something exists'—the argument employs what Kant calls the 'natural law of causality' to arrive at the 'unconditioned necessity of some being or other'—i.e. a First Cause. That is the 'first stage' of the cosmological argument: from experience of a conditioned, through the 'regress of causes', to a conclusion about an unconditioned (and thus necessary) First Cause (A584/B612).

Kant says that there is a 'second stage' to the cosmological argument—one which implicitly relies on a version of the ontological argument, and transforms the being that is delivered by it from a mere First Cause to the 'most real being' of classical theology. I'm going to set that portion of the argument aside here,²⁹ and note merely that Kant himself seems to think both that the first stage of the argument is an abject failure as a *demonstration* or ground of any sort of *knowledge* (*Wissen*) of the First Cause's existence (A606/B634), and yet that it is entirely natural and rational for us to have what he calls 'doctrinal' or 'theoretical' Belief (*Glaube*) in a First Cause on the basis of these considerations. But how is this supposed to work?

Note, first, that speculative inquiry not only *can* lead us to 'transcendental ideas' of supersensibles, but that it is somehow *natural* for it to do so. Here is a passage that is typical of many in the latter half of the *Critique*:

Reason is driven by a propensity of its nature (*einen Hang ihrer Natur getrieben*) to go beyond its use in experience, to venture to the outermost bounds of all cognition by means of mere ideas in a pure use, and to find peace only in the completion of its circle in a self-subsisting systematic whole. (A797/B825)

²⁸ Note that existence claims are synthetic because they say something about the *concept* of a thing—i.e. that it has an actual instance—which cannot be acquired through analysis of the concept of that concept. This way of putting the point avoids the charge that we're treating existence as a 'proper' or 'real' predicate.

²⁹ For discussion, see Bennett, *Kant's Dialectic*, 243–55; Wood, *Kant's Rational Theology* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1980), 123–30; William Vallicella, 'Does the Cosmological Argument Depend on the Ontological?', *Faith and Philosophy*, 17/4 (Oct. 2000); and Lawrence Pasternack, 'The *ens realissimum* and Necessary Being in *The Critique of Pure Reason*', *Religious Studies*, 37 (Dec. 2001), 467–74.

A 'systematic whole' (*systematische Ganze*) is, roughly, a fully explained and articulate account of a given subject matter, organized in accordance with explanatory principles like the causal rule that all states/events/objects have grounds/causes (cf. A616/B644). A metaphysical account, according to Kant, is complete and fully systematic only if every 'conditioned' entity within the universe of discourse is ultimately explained by something that is unconditioned (A832–3/B860–1; cf. 5: 110). A conditioned entity is just an entity that has a 'condition'—i.e. that cries out for an explanation, for a cause, for a subject of inherence, for a whole of which it is a part. An 'unconditioned' entity, on the other hand, is somehow self-grounding and self-explaining: it provides 'a therefore to every wherefore' (*zu allem Warum das Darum*) (A585/B613), and is as such a thing-in-itself.³⁰

The application to cosmology is obvious: a 'complete' and 'systematic' metaphysical picture, organized according to the (unschematized) Causal Principle, will have every item in it either grounded by some other item or self-grounding. If the series of conditioned entities is finite, then there must be an unconditioned, self-grounding First Cause of at least the first item in the series. If the series of conditioned entities is infinite, then the series as a whole must have a self-grounding Cause. Kant's contention, then, is that it is our natural inclination as inquiring beings to look for complete explanations (in order for reason to 'find rest'), and that it is this inclination or 'need' which leads us to generate ideas of unconditioned, supersensible things (A339/B397). As we have seen, he often employs this sort of erotic apostrophe to characterize the mental operations in question: reason is charged with having 'interests', 'needs', 'goals', 'concerns', 'ends', 'lust for expansion', 'drives', 'inclinations', and 'propensities'. By attributing these interests and needs to *reason* itself—our highest faculty—Kant makes it clear that the 'ideas' are not generated in a whimsical way by our passions, or in a mechanical way by our animal nature. On the contrary, reason 'has given birth to these ideas from its own womb alone, and is therefore liable to give account of either their validity or their dialectical illusion' (A763/B791).

So it is natural and perhaps even inevitable that many rational inquirers thinking about cosmological issues will both generate the idea of and also accept the existence of a First Cause (or, better, an Ultimate Ground) in order to satisfy the need that reason has to find a sufficient ground for everything. The resulting attitude would have the merit of responding to that need, but it

³⁰ I do not of course mean to suggest the converse—i.e. that all the things-in-themselves are self-grounders. Our minds have a noumenal component or correlate, but they are not presumably self-grounding. I won't try to say anything here about what a self-grounder is (or whether this is even a coherent notion).

would lack objective grounds (either experiential or inferential) that could allow it to count as knowledge.³¹ Here is a lyrical passage in which Kant sums up his position:

Everywhere we see a chain of effects and causes, of ends and means, regularity in coming to be and perishing, and because nothing has entered by itself into the state in which it finds itself, this state always refers further to another things as its cause, which makes necessary just the same further inquiry, so that in such a way the entire whole would have to sink into the abyss of nothingness (*Abgrunde des Nichts*) if one did not accept something (*nähme man nicht etwas an*) subsisting for itself originally and independently outside this infinite contingency, which supports it and at the same time, as the cause of its existence, secures its continuation. (A622/B650; cf. A677/B705)

But again, this Acceptance or Belief contains an empty concept: it is not based in cognition, and thus does not count as Knowledge. Speaking to metaphysicians and theologians who would like to employ, for instance, the Causal Principle to generate speculative knowledge of supersensibilia, Kant says *not* that they should give up their efforts but rather that they must redescribe the status of their conclusions: 'For enough remains left to you to speak the language, justified by the sharpest reason, of a firm Belief, even though you must surrender that of Knowledge' (A744–5/B772–3).

Having presented this brief on behalf of the Liberal interpretation, I should emphasize that Kant's concept of 'assent' is much broader than our contemporary concept of 'belief'. It is quite possible for a subject to form the assent that *p* in Kant's sense even if she doesn't believe that *p* in the contemporary sense. This is also true regarding the species of assent that Kant calls Belief or Acceptance: it seems quite possible for us to have the Belief that *p* without believing that *p* in the contemporary sense. In other words, the grounds the subject has for *p* might allow her rationally to act as if *p* is true, to assert that *p*, to appeal to *p* as a premise in an argument or a policy in deliberation—and together that will be sufficient for Kantian Belief. But just as with acceptances of firm hypotheses in natural science, all of this could be the case even though the subject doesn't really *believe* that *p*.

For this reason, I don't think we can regard what I've been calling Kant's 'synthetic theology' here as aiming at belief in the existence of supersensible, metaphysical entities. The arguments aim at something more like what some contemporary philosophers have called, in a witting or unwitting echo of Kant, 'acceptance' or 'holding-as-true'.³² This sort of attitude is typically

³¹ Again, for more of this story, see my 'Kant's Concepts of Justification'.

³² L. Jonathan Cohen, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Edna Ullman-Margalit and Avishai Margalit, 'Holding True and Holding-as-True', *Synthese*, 92/2 (Aug. 1992), 167–87. Michael Bratman, 'Practical Reasoning and Acceptance in a Context', *Mind*, 101/401 (1992), 1–16.

construed as voluntary, as lacking the characteristic phenomenology of occurrent belief—the ‘feeling that the proposition is true’—and as being properly based on considerations—practical and theoretical—that go beyond our epistemic evidence. But it can still motivate our assertions, deliberations, inferences, and actions. The fact that Kantian Belief isn’t even belief (in the ordinary sense) is another reason why contemporary epistemologists won’t be inclined to regard it as a candidate for knowledge, even if it turns out to be true.

I want to suggest, finally, that analytic theologians who are looking for a compromise with those who embrace Kant’s legacy might do well to characterize the goal of their practice as Kantian Belief rather than ordinary belief or knowledge. Kant’s own vehement opposition to any justificatory appeals to special religious sources (i.e. analytic theology (3*b*) and (3*c*)), can safely be ignored in this context, because it is not that aspect of Kant, I am suggesting, that is the main stumbling block for analytic theology. Many contemporary theologians seem perfectly happy with principled appeals to special religious sources as providing a kind of justification and defeat, at least from within a tradition, and so making such appeals is unlikely to raise eyebrows or lead to invocations of what ‘Kant has shown’. Rather, it is the practice of appealing to special religious sources to provide some of our subject matter (3*a*) and *then* using the characteristic tools of analytic philosophy (2) to refer to and make arguments about supersensible entities (God in particular) in a non-‘agonized’ way that leads to eyebrow-raised references to ‘what Kant has shown’. But as we have seen above, Kant himself is not opposed to thinking that the results of such practice can be justified, even on *theoretical* grounds, so long as we are clear that the status of these results is Belief or Acceptance rather than belief or knowledge. I see no reason why analytic theologians could not accept this restriction, and then go on to engage in substantive speculation in a realist mode, free of all fear that lurking somewhere in the pages of the Kantian corpus is a devastating critique of their fundamental aspirations.³³ I further suspect that if analytic theologians were clear about the fact that their aim is mere Belief rather than belief or knowledge, other theorists in theological and religious circles would be less inclined to invoke what ‘Kant has shown’—or any other such prolegomenal worries—against them.

³³ Indeed, I am skeptical that we have anything like belief (rather than Belief) regarding most of the metaphysical doctrines that we passionately assert and defend, though I can’t provide my reasons for thinking that here. I also do not see that knowledge or belief (as opposed to Belief) is required or even clearly desirable from the point of view of *confessional* theology, or from a religious point of view generally.

CONCLUSION

Kant's writing is often obscure, and his legacy is hotly contested; indeed, the difficulty involved in grasping what he meant provides much of the fuel for the industry of Kant studies. The critique of speculative metaphysics is no different in this regard: what follows the phrase 'as Kant has shown' can range all the way from Hardlinism to Libertinism and almost any of the positions in between. I have noted that theologians and religious thinkers *tend* to take Kant to have shown something closer to the Hardline end of the spectrum, and thus that Kant has become a 'stumbling block' and a source of 'agony', especially for those who would go beyond prolegomenal reflection to substantive analytic theologizing.

Nothing in this chapter implies that what 'Kant has shown' is false or unimportant, or that our concepts do in fact apply to supersensibles, or that the methods of analytic theology (on some characterization thereof) are in fact a good guide to truth. My aims here were more modest: I hope to have raised doubts about whether the 'Kant' who has shown what 'Kant has shown' is really the historical Kant, and to make some suggestions about how the historical Kant's views (on my reading of them, anyway) might be appropriated in a different manner by those engaged in theological and religious reflection. In effect, then, this is an irenic suggestion: the proposal is that we *can* engage in substantive analytic theology, even by Kantian lights, as long as we are careful to deny the status of belief and knowledge to our results, and agree that Belief is enough. The suggestion is irenic because it is designed to appeal both to those who embrace what 'Kant has shown', and to those inclined to regret it.³⁴

³⁴ Thanks to Oliver Crisp and Michael Rea for helpful discussion of this chapter, and to Dean Zimmerman, Daniel Garber, Kevin Hector, and Stephen Bush for a conversation that suggested the title. My debt to Nicholas Wolterstorff and Allen Wood for countless conversations is pervasive.