

Kant on the Epistemology of Indirect Mystical Experience

Ayon Maharaj¹

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Abstract While numerous commentators have discussed Kant's views on mysticism in general, very few of them have examined Kant's specific views on different types of mystical experience. I suggest that Kant's views on direct mystical experience (DME) differ substantially from his views on indirect mystical experience (IME). In this paper, I focus on Kant's complex views on IME in both his pre-critical and critical writings and lectures. In the first section, I examine Kant's early work, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766), where he defends the possibility that the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg's alleged visions of the spirit-world are veridical cases of IME. In the second section, I discuss Kant's views on IME during his critical period. I first argue that the epistemology of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) accommodates the possibility of IME. I then examine Kant's views on Swedenborgian visions in his lectures from the 1770s to the 1790s and argue that his critical views on Swedenborg are largely continuous with his pre-critical views in *Dreams*. Finally, I examine passages in Kant's late works, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (1793) and *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), where he discusses three non-Swedenborgian types of IME. In the final section, I explore briefly how Kant's views on IME relate to contemporary debates among analytic philosophers of religion regarding the nature and possibility of mystical experience.

Keywords Kant · Swedenborg · Mysticism · Mystical experience · Epistemology · Philosophy of religion

✉ Ayon Maharaj
ayon@alum.berkeley.edu

¹ Ramakrishna Mission Vivekananda University, P.O. Belur Math, Howrah Dist. 711202 West Bengal, India

Introduction

From Kant's own time up to the present, readers of Kant have debated whether Kant's philosophical views are compatible with mysticism. One of the first scholars to suggest an affinity between Kant's philosophy and mysticism was Kant's contemporary, C.A. Wilmans, whose Latin dissertation was entitled *On the Similarity between Pure Mysticism and the Kantian Religious Doctrine* (1797). Three years later, Kant's student Reinhold Bernhard Jachmann published a book-length response to Wilmans, in which he vigorously denied that there are any affinities between Kant's philosophy and mysticism. Kant clarified his position on this issue in his short preface to Jachmann's book, where he expressed his gratitude to Jachmann and contrasted his own critical philosophy with "mysticism," which he called a "counterfeit philosophy" (8:441).¹

However, despite Kant's efforts to deny any affinities between his philosophy and mysticism, numerous scholars have argued that Kant was more sympathetic—and perhaps even indebted—to mystical ideas and doctrines than he himself was willing to admit.² For instance, in 1889, Carl Du Prel argued that Kant held a "mystical worldview," partly on the basis of Kant's enduring fascination with the Swedish scientist-turned-mystic Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772), who claimed to have had numerous visions of the spirit-world.³ By contrast, Hans Vaihinger, while also acknowledging certain doctrinal affinities between Kant and Swedenborg, insisted that "it is entirely unjustified to want to label Kant a 'mystic' in the modern sense of the term" (Vaihinger 1892: 513 fn. 1).

More recent commentators have understood Kant's attitude toward mysticism in wildly different ways. The majority view—held by scholars such as Allan Wood, Ninian Smart, and Peter Baelz—is that Kant was outright hostile to all forms of mysticism.⁴ As Wood puts it, Kant "had no patience at all for the mystical or the miraculous" (Wood 1992: 414). In stark contrast, scholars such as Gregory Johnson and Stephen Palmquist argue that Kant had a more favorable attitude toward mysticism and even incorporated mystical elements into his own critical philosophy.⁵ Palmquist goes so far as to claim that Kant was a "closet mystic" (Palmquist 2000: 379) and that "mystical feeling lies at the very heart of the Critical philosophy" (Palmquist 2000: 299–300). Johnson, meanwhile, has argued that some of Kant's own mature philosophical doctrines—including the distinction between sensible and intelligible worlds, the ideality of space and time, and the "kingdom of ends"—were influenced by Swedenborg's mystical ideas (Johnson 2009).

Instead of taking sides in this debate, I want to nuance the discussion by distinguishing Kant's views on different types of mystical experience in both his pre-

¹ Quotations from Kant's work are from the Akademie Ausgabe, with the *Critique of Pure Reason* cited by the standard A/B edition pagination, and the other works by volume and page. Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Königlich-Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin [now de Gruyter], 1902–). English translations usually differ insubstantially from the translations in the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, general editors Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992–). English translations of German secondary sources are my own.

² See Sewall 1900: vii–xi, Du Prel 1889: xv–lxiv.

³ Du Prel 1889: xv–lxiv.

⁴ See, for instance, Smart 1969: 5.62, Baelz 1968: 41, and Ward 1972: 168. For other references, see Palmquist 2000: 300–301.

⁵ See, for instance, Palmquist (2000): 17–43 and 297–386, Johnson 2009, and Johnson 2006.

critical and critical writings and lectures.⁶ Admittedly, Kant’s own sweeping statements on “mysticism” in general might lead us to assume that he held only a single, monolithic view of mystical experience. In his critical period, Kant frequently characterizes “mystics” as those who claim to have direct experience of supersensible entities through a special faculty of non-sensible intuition, which he often calls “intellectual intuition” or “mystical understanding.”⁷ Let us call this type of mystical experience “DME_{ns}” (“ns” standing for “non-sensible”):

(DME_{ns}) The direct experience of a supersensible entity by means of non-sensible intuition

As we will see, however, Kant, in both his pre-critical and critical discussions of Swedenborg, considers another type of direct mystical experience, which I will call “DME_s” (“s” standing for “sensible”):

(DME_s) The direct sensible experience of a supersensible entity that has assumed a physical form

Apart from these two types of direct mystical experience, Kant also considers numerous types of *indirect* mystical experience (hereafter IME), which I define as follows:

(IME) The indirect experience of a supersensible entity through the perception of something sensible—such as an image or a feeling—that is caused by that supersensible entity

Scholars writing on Kant’s views on mysticism have tended to focus on his views on DME_{ns}.⁸ However, in order to gain a more accurate and comprehensive understanding of Kant’s views on mysticism, we have to consider his views not only on DME_{ns} but also on DME_s and IME. Since this is much too large a task for a single paper, I will restrict myself here to examining Kant’s views on IME, which have not yet received the sustained attention they deserve.

In the [first section](#), I examine Kant’s pre-critical views on Swedenborg’s alleged visions in his early book, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer* (1766), as well as in several letters written at about that time. In *Dreams*, instead of dismissing Swedenborg’s visions as mere hallucinations, Kant defends the possibility that Swedenborg’s visions are veridical cases of IME—an indirect awareness of a “genuine spiritual influx” by means of the perception of analogous sensory images that are caused by that spiritual influx (2:340). While the early Kant

⁶ An anonymous referee rightly pointed out to me that certain mainstream analytic philosophers on mysticism—including W.T. Stace and William Wainwright—would not consider the kinds of experiences Kant discusses to be cases of “mystical experience” proper, since they take mystical experience to involve a “union between subject and ‘object.’” I should clarify that whenever I refer to “mystical experience” in this essay, I do not mean to imply that the experience is unitive.

⁷ Some of Kant’s many references to non-sensible intuition in the context of mysticism include A854/B882, 28:207, 28:58, 29:759–762, 28/2.2:1325, 29:950–954, 28:1053, 7:57–58, 8:441.

⁸ See, for instance, Palmquist 2000: 299–300, Henrich 2003: 67–70, Vaihinger 1892: 513. Johnson, Wouter Hanegraaff, and C.D. Broad are the only scholars I am aware of who have discussed in detail Kant’s views on Swedenborgian IME. See Johnson 2001: 163–183, Hanegraaff 2008: 159, and Broad 1953.

defends the epistemic possibility of Swedenborgian IME, he nonetheless claims that belief in IME is both morally dangerous and philosophically untenable.

In the [second section](#), I discuss Kant's views on IME during his critical period. I argue that the epistemology of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787; hereafter CPR) rules out the possibility of DME_{ns}, which presupposes a non-sensible faculty of intuition that human beings do not possess. However, I suggest that Kant's critical epistemology does accommodate the possibility of IME, which only presupposes noumenal causality. I then examine Kant's views on Swedenborgian visions in his lectures from the 1770s to the 1790s. Finally, I discuss Kant's views on three non-Swedenborgian types of IME: namely, the experience of a feeling as the "effect" of God's grace; the experience of a feeling as a "divine influence," on the basis of which one interprets the Scripture; and the hearing of a voice as the voice of God. I argue that even in his critical period, Kant never rules out the possibility of IME. Nonetheless, Kant argues that belief in IME should be discouraged on both moral and philosophical grounds. Hence, I suggest that there is a basic continuity in Kant's views on IME in his pre-critical and critical periods.

In the [final section](#), I gesture toward the contemporary relevance of Kant's views on IME by bringing them into dialogue with the views of recent philosophers of religion who distinguish direct from indirect mystical experience and debate whether mystical experience can ever be "self-authenticating." I discuss briefly some of the main arguments on both sides of this contemporary debate and suggest that Kant would side with those philosophers who reject the possibility of self-authenticating mystical experience.

Kant's Early Views on Swedenborgian Visions of the Spirit-World

In 1763, 3 years before the publication of *Dreams*, Kant wrote a long letter to Charlotte von Knobloch in which he expresses his enthusiasm for Swedenborg:

I doubt that anyone has ever perceived in me a trace of an inclination to believe in marvels or a weakness for giving in easily to credulity. So much is certain: that regardless of the many tales of apparitions [*Erscheinungen*] and actions in the realm of spirits that I have heard, I have always submitted these stories to the test of sound reason and have been inclined to regard such tales with skepticism. Not that I have gained insight into their impossibility (for how little do we know about the nature of such a spirit?) but, taken all in all, we simply do not find sufficient evidence to validate them....That was my position for a long time, until I became acquainted with the stories about Herr Swedenborg. (10:43–4)

Significantly, Kant points out here that even before he became aware of Swedenborg's paranormal feats, Kant did not take visions of spirits to be an "impossibility." However, after hearing of—and subsequently investigating—three "stories" concerning Swedenborg, Kant feels warranted in taking Swedenborg's alleged visions of the spirit-world to be not only possible but veridical. Kant then recounts three incidents in which

Swedenborg's paranormal experiences were publicly tested and found to be veridical by certain credible people. First, in 1761, a princess tested Swedenborg's supernatural abilities by asking him to communicate with a particular deceased spirit, and a few days later, Swedenborg successfully conveyed a private message from the deceased spirit to the princess, which absolutely convinced her of Swedenborg's mystical abilities. Kant adds that "[t]he credibility of such a report stunned me" (10:44).

Kant then narrates an incident in which Madame Marteville⁹ asked Swedenborg to obtain a very specific piece of information from her deceased husband regarding the location of some papers regarding a financial settlement. A few days later, Swedenborg claimed to have obtained the information from the spirit of her deceased husband and told her where to find the papers, and Madame Marteville found the papers in exactly the place where Swedenborg indicated. Kant finally mentions an incident that took place in 1756. Swedenborg, who was in Gothenburg on a certain evening, suddenly announced that there was a massive conflagration in Stockholm at that very moment. Swedenborg's account of the conflagration, in all its details, was later confirmed by a report delivered by a "royal courier" to the Governor of Gothenburg (10:47). Kant then adds: "What objections can one raise against the authenticity of such a story?" (10:47). He also remarks that this incident regarding the Stockholm fire "seems to me to have the greatest weight of any of these stories and really removes any conceivable doubt" (10:46). In this 1763 letter, Kant is so impressed with the credibility of these three incidents that he feels warranted in taking Swedenborg's visions to be veridical.

Shortly after writing this letter to Knobloch, Kant purchased and read Swedenborg's eight-volume *Arcana Coelestia*, which seems to have dampened somewhat his enthusiasm for Swedenborg, perhaps in part because it contains many lengthy descriptions of the spirit-world and symbolic interpretations of Biblical passages that seemed to Kant to be fanciful in the extreme.¹⁰ Nonetheless, Kant was still sufficiently interested in Swedenborg to write *Dreams*, a rather strange book on Swedenborg's alleged visions, which was published in 1766. In Book II, Chapter 1 of *Dreams*, Kant recounts the same three incidents concerning Swedenborg's alleged visions that he mentioned in his earlier letter to Knobloch. Strangely, however, while Kant found all three of the stories highly credible in his letter to Knobloch, he expresses a much more skeptical attitude toward them in II.1 of *Dreams*: while he finds the incident regarding the princess to be reasonably credible, he claims that the other two incidents are based on nothing but "common hearsay" (2:355). In stark contrast to the views expressed in his letter to Knobloch, Kant now feels that these incidents are not sufficiently credible to warrant belief in the veridicality of Swedenborg's visions.

On the other hand, Kant makes clear in Book I of *Dreams* that he does not go to the other extreme of ruling out Swedenborgian visions as impossible.¹¹ Indeed, one of the

⁹ In the letter, Kant misspells her name as "Harteville." He spells it correctly in *Dreams*.

¹⁰ An anonymous referee suggested to me perhaps an even more compelling reason for Kant's dampened enthusiasm for Swedenborg. Kant wrote a letter to Swedenborg to which Swedenborg never replied, and Swedenborg told the messenger of Kant's letter that he would reply to Kant's questions in his forthcoming book. As the referee plausibly suggests, Kant may have been quite disappointed to find that Swedenborg's expensive *Arcana* did not in fact address any of the philosophical concerns he raised in his letter to Swedenborg.

¹¹ Hence, I disagree with the various scholars who interpret *Dreams* as a straightforward "debunking" of Swedenborg's visions. Guyer, for instance, makes the sweeping assertion that in *Dreams*, "Kant had little trouble debunking Swedenborg" (Guyer 2006: 25). Johnson 2001: 297–99 provides a helpful bibliography of the work of scholars who accept the "received view" that Kant's *Dreams* is a debunking of Swedenborg.

main preoccupations of Book I is to determine whether—and, if so, how—Swedenborgian visions are possible. However, the complex antinomic structure of Book I makes it difficult to determine Kant’s answer to this question.¹² In I.2, entitled “A Fragment of Occult Philosophy, the Purpose of which is to Reveal Our Community with the Spirit-World,” Kant argues that Swedenborgian visions of the spirit-world are possible and outlines the epistemological structure of such visions. In I.3, entitled “Anti-Cabbala—A Fragment of Ordinary Philosophy, the Purpose of which is to Cancel Community with the Spirit-World,” Kant rejects the argument of I.2 and defends the materialist view that Swedenborgian visions are subjective hallucinations caused by derangement of the brain. In I.4, Kant speaks in his own voice and draws certain “theoretical conclusions” about the possibility of Swedenborgian visions on the basis of the antinomy presented in the previous two chapters. In light of the antinomic structure of Book I, we have to take into account all three chapters in order to arrive at an accurate understanding of Kant’s views on Swedenborgian visions.

In I.2, Kant presents rational arguments in favor of the view that there is a “spirit-world” and that each of us is “simultaneously a member of the visible and the invisible world” (2:337). He then goes on to point out that our modes of cognition in these two worlds are mutually exclusive, so “what I think as spirit is not remembered by me as human being,” and vice-versa (2:338). Accordingly, he draws the following conclusion:

Furthermore, no matter how clear and intuitive the representations of the spirit-world may be this would still not suffice to make me as a human being conscious [*bewußt*] of them; for in so far as even the representation of *myself* (that is to say, of the soul) as a spirit has been acquired by means of inferences, it is not in the case of any human being an intuitive empirical concept [*ein anschauender und Erfahrungsbegriff*]. (2:338)

Significantly, this sentence anticipates the critical epistemology he would later elaborate and attempt to justify in CPR.¹³ Kant claims here that spirits are not “intuitive empirical” concepts since they are not objects of sense-experience. Kant thereby implies that human beings can only cognize things that are given to them in sensible intuition; hence, human beings cannot cognize supersensible entities such as spirits. As he puts it, human beings can never be directly “conscious” of the “representations of the spirit-world.” Hence, Kant clearly rules out the possibility of DME_{ns}—the direct experience of supersensible entities such as God or spirits. In his later writings, beginning with the *Inaugural Dissertation* (1770), Kant argues that only a being equipped with “divine intuition” or “intellectual intuition” would be able to cognize supersensible realities.¹⁴ Although Kant does not use the term “intellectual intuition” anywhere in *Dreams*, he already strongly implies in *Dreams* that human cognition is based on sensible intuition. However, at several points in *Dreams*, Kant does leave open the possibility that in the

¹² See Johnson 2001 and Johnson 2008 for excellent discussions of the complex structure of *Dreams*.

¹³ Grier 2002: 14 makes a similar point.

¹⁴ See, for instance, §10 of Kant’s *Inaugural Dissertation* (2:396–397).

afterlife, we would be equipped with a faculty of non-sensible intuition that would allow us to cognize supersensible entities directly.¹⁵

Interestingly, in the very next paragraph of I.2, Kant argues for the epistemic possibility of Swedenborgian visions, conceived as IME rather than as DME:

The heterogeneity [*Ungleichartigkeit*] between spirit-representations and those which belong to the bodily life of man need not, however, be regarded as an impediment serious enough to prevent all possibility of our becoming conscious [*bewußt*], from time to time, even during this present life, of influxes [*Einflüsse*] from the spirit-world. For these influxes can enter the personal consciousness of man, not, it is true, directly [*zwar nicht unmittelbar*], but, nonetheless, in such a fashion that they, in accordance with the law of association of ideas, excite [*rege*] those images which are related to them, and awaken analogous representations of our senses [*analogische Vorstellungen unserer Sinne erwecken*]. They are not, it is true, the spirit-concept itself, but they are symbols of it. For after all, it is always exactly the same substance which belongs to and is a member of both this world and the other world. (2:338–9)

While Kant reiterates here that direct awareness of “spirit-representations” is impossible due to our epistemic limitations, he goes on to argue for the possibility of *indirect* awareness of spirits. Let us call this Swedenborgian form of IME “IME_s” (“s” standing for “spirits”):

(IME_s) The indirect awareness of spirits through the perception of analogous sensible images that are caused by those spirits

According to Kant, influxes from the spirit-world can cause “analogous” sensible images or representations to arise in the mind of certain imaginatively sensitive people. Such people, like Swedenborg, would be able to decipher these symbolic images and thereby become indirectly aware of the spiritual realities at their basis.

Kant goes on to point out, however, that Swedenborgian mystics themselves tend, mistakenly, to take their spiritual visions to be veridical cases of DME_s when, in fact, they are cases of IME_s (which may or may not be veridical):

Such unusual people would, at certain moments, be assailed by the appearance of certain objects as external to them, which they would take for the presence of spirit-natures presenting themselves to their corporeal senses, though the occurrence is in such a case only an illusion [*Blendwerk*] of the imagination, but of such a kind that the cause [*Ursache*] of the illusion is a genuine spirit-influx, which cannot be sensed immediately but can reveal itself to consciousness through images of the imagination which are akin to it, and which assume the appearance of sensations. (2:340)

¹⁵ Kant notes, for instance, that the “human soul” perceives other spirits in the spirit-world by means of an “immaterial intuition” (*immaterielles Anschauen*) (2:337).

From Kant's perspective, the Swedenborgian mystic labors under the delusion that he or she directly *perceives*, with the physical senses, supersensible spirits that have assumed physical spatio-temporal forms.¹⁶ In reality, the Swedenborgian mystic experiences *mental images* that might be caused by a "genuine spirit-influx." At best, then, the Swedenborgian mystic enjoys not DME_s but IME_s. Accordingly, in II.2 of *Dreams*, Kant claims that the "stories" Swedenborg tells about the spirit-world in *Arcana Coelestia* "seem, in truth, to have arisen from *fanatical intuition* [*fanatischem Anschauen*]" (2:360). Although Kant does not define "fanatical intuition," he implies that Swedenborg mistakenly takes the sensory images he experiences to be actual physically embodied spirits. Likewise, Kant claims that Swedenborg falls prey to the "systematic delusion of the senses" (2:360) and to "*illusory experiences*" (*Scheinerfahrungen*) (2:361).

In I.2, then, Kant defends the epistemic possibility of Swedenborgian visions by conceiving them as possibly veridical cases of IME_s. Indeed, at certain places in I.2, he seems to hazard the even stronger claim that IME_s is not only possible but probable. As he puts it, "It is thus not improbable [*nicht unwahrscheinlich*] that spirit-sensations may enter consciousness, if they arouse images in our imagination which are akin to them" (2:339).

However, Kant goes on to add in I.2 that *even if* the Swedenborgian mystic experiences a veridical case of IME_s, he or she could never be certain that the cause of the experience was a veridical spirit-influx:

But it will also be admitted that the capacity thus to develop the impressions of the spirit-world [*die Eindrücke der Geisterwelt*] so that they can be clearly intuited in this life can scarcely be of much use, for, in a case like this, the spirit-sensation is of necessity so intimately interwoven with the illusion of the imagination, that it cannot be possible to distinguish the element of truth in such an experience from the crude illusions which surround it. (2:340)

Kant sketches here a complex phenomenology of what a veridical case of IME_s would look like. From the standpoint of the experiencer of IME_s, the real "spirit-sensation" would be inextricably mixed up with various figments of the imagination which appear falsely as external objects. Hence, according to Kant, it "cannot be possible" to distinguish the veridical "spirit-sensation" from the sensible images surrounding it. The mystic perceives a chaotic jumble of equally vivid sensible images and is unable to determine which, if any, of these images has a veridical spirit-influx at its basis. The Swedenborgian mystic, in Kant's view, is a fallible hermeneutician faced with the task of accurately decoding the symbolic images he

¹⁶ As Grier 2002: 11 puts it, "it seems to me that most of Kant's derision is reserved for the suggestion that Swedenborg is having essentially sensible representations of immaterial beings." For a similar conclusion, see Laywine 1993: 8. Arguing against Laywine's reading, Johnson 1999 argues that Kant consistently claims that Swedenborg himself understood his visions as cases of IME_s rather than of DME_s: "Kant himself was well aware that Swedenborg did not think that spirits were visible to the eyes..." In my opinion, however, while some passages in *Dreams* might suggest that Swedenborg did not take his visions to be cases of DME_s—as in Kant's statement that the "presence of spirits affects only a person's inner sense" (2:362)—Kant much more frequently reproaches Swedenborg for believing that spirits are physically present to his senses.

or she perceives and thereby determining whether they were caused by actual spirit-influxes. Kant's point is that this hermeneutic procedure is inherently fraught with uncertainty, so even if the Swedenborgian mystic experiences a veridical case of IME_s, he or she would never be certain of its veridicality.

In I.3, the "Anti-Cabbala" chapter, Kant suddenly assumes the persona of a skeptical materialist who dismisses the "deep speculations of the previous chapter" as "wholly superfluous" (2:347). Kant now argues, in contrast to I.2, that the cause of Swedenborg's alleged visions of the spirit-world could simply be a derangement of the brain rather than a real "spiritual influx" (2:346–7). Notably, however, even in I.3, Kant does not entirely rule out the possibility of IME_s. Rather, he claims that a strictly materialist explanation of Swedenborgian visions is "more consonant with a rational mode of thought" and "can expect more general support" than an explanation based on the assumption of a real spiritual influx (2:347). In other words, I.3 presents an Occam's Razor-type argument for preferring a materialist explanation of Swedenborgian visions to a spiritualist one since the materialist explanation does not appeal to any supersensible entities such as spirits. Accordingly, Kant claims that "[o]rdinary ghost stories... strongly warrant the suspicion that they may well have arisen from a source such as I have described"—namely, brain derangement (2:347). In I.3, then, Kant defends a materialist explanation of Swedenborgian visions without ruling out altogether the epistemic possibility of IME_s, which he established in I.2.¹⁷

In I.4, Kant weighs the respective merits of the spiritualist and materialist explanations of Swedenborgian visions provided in I.2 and I.3, respectively. On the one hand, Kant refers disparagingly to his argument in I.2 as "my own pretentious theory of the community of spirits," which seems to "weigh no more than empty air" (2:350). On the other hand, he admits that stories about spirits and Swedenborgian spirit-visions do "have a significant weight when placed in the scale-pan of hope" (2:350). That is, Kant believes there are strong *practical* grounds for believing in an afterlife in which we will be rewarded or punished for our good and bad deeds in this life. He goes on to point out that the argument in I.2 is incomplete because it fails to address matters such as how a "human spirit...comes into the world" (2:350), and he confesses that "I am completely ignorant about all these matters" (2:351).

In the next crucial paragraph of I.4, Kant clarifies his considered view on Swedenborgian visions:

It is exactly the same ignorance [*Unwissenheit*] which prevents my venturing wholly to deny all truth to the many different ghost-stories which are recounted, albeit with a reservation which is at once commonplace but also strange: I am skeptical about each one of them individually, but I ascribe some credence to all of them taken together. The reader is free to judge for himself. But for my part, the arguments adduced in the second chapter are sufficiently powerful to make me serious and undecided

¹⁷ See Johnson 2008: 99 for an account of what he calls the "received view"—accepted by most scholars—that I.3 of *Dreams* represents Kant's own view. Following Johnson, I militate against this received view and argue that we have to consider *Dreams* as a whole in order to determine Kant's ultimate position.

[*unentschieden*] when I listen to the many strange tales of this type.
(2:351)

Kant makes clear here that we cannot rule out the epistemic possibility of IME_s . Indeed, Kant remarks that the “arguments adduced” in I.2 are “sufficiently powerful” to leave him “serious and undecided” regarding the veridicality of Swedenborgian “ghost-stories.” How are we to reconcile this more positive evaluation of the arguments of I.2 with his earlier disparaging characterization of I.2 as a “pretentious theory of the community of spirits”? I would suggest that what Kant finds “pretentious” in the argument of I.2 is its overly ambitious conclusion that it is “not improbable” (2:339) that real spirit-influxes are at work in alleged visions of the spirit-world. In I.4, Kant does not so much reject the arguments of I.2 as scale back what the arguments of I.2 establish: the “arguments” of I.2 are “sufficiently powerful” to establish only the *bare possibility* that Swedenborgian visions of the spirit-world are caused by genuine spirit-influxes. These arguments in I.2 leave him “serious and undecided” in that they convince him not to rule out the possibility that Swedenborgian visions are veridical cases of IME_s . Kant’s considered position in I.4, then, is that IME_s is epistemically possible but cannot be proved to be probable. This position is confirmed by Kant’s letter to Mendelssohn dated 8 April 1766, in which he sums up his argument in *Dreams* as follows: “I myself tried to defend them [Swedenborg’s visions] against someone who would deny their possibility [*ihre Möglichkeit angriffe*]...” (10:72).

In II.3 of *Dreams*, Kant adds that even if we grant that Swedenborgian visions are possible, it is neither useful nor necessary for us to believe in them or experience them ourselves, for two main reasons. First, Swedenborgian visions are not intersubjectively verifiable since they “cannot be brought under any law of sensation, which is unanimously accepted by the majority of people” (2:372). Second, Kant claims that Swedenborgian visions, even if they are genuine, are morally “superfluous” (2:372). He considers the possibility that the “genuineness” of Swedenborgian visions can “furnish a proof” of the afterlife and hence provide a “motive for leading a virtuous life” (2:372). However, he rejects this line of reasoning by arguing that knowledge of an afterlife might even be injurious to moral action, since one might, in that case, act virtuously not for the sake of being moral but for the sake of avoiding punishment and reaping heavenly rewards (2:372).

The early Kant’s views on Swedenborgian visions, then, are complex. In the 1763 letter to Knobloch, Kant finds the three incidents involving Swedenborg’s paranormal feats so credible that he feels warranted in taking Swedenborg’s visions of the spirit-world to be not merely possible but robustly veridical. In *Dreams*, by contrast, Kant claims that “stories” such as those concerning Swedenborg’s alleged visions are not sufficiently credible to warrant belief in their veridicality. Nonetheless, he insists that such “ghost-stories” cannot be ruled out as impossible and he even defends the epistemic possibility of Swedenborgian visions in I.2 and I.4. Kant’s considered view in *Dreams* is that while Swedenborgian visions cannot be veridical cases of DME_{ns} or DME_s , they can be veridical cases of IME_s .¹⁸ Nonetheless, he also maintains in I.2 that

¹⁸ According to Henrich 2003: 67–9, the early Kant “defended the view that space and time, as well as moral sense, depend on intellectual intuition” in his work, “Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in Space” (1768), but then rejected this appeal to DME_{ns} shortly thereafter.

the phenomenology of IME_s forecloses the possibility of first-person epistemic certainty: the Swedenborgian mystic could never be certain which sensible images he or she is perceiving are actually caused by genuine “spirit-influxes.” Moreover, while Kant insists that Swedenborgian visions are possible, he warns that belief in such visions is both philosophically unjustifiable and morally unnecessary—and potentially even morally dangerous.

Kant’s Views on IME in the Critical Period

In CPR, Kant claims that human cognition is restricted to what we can know through sensible intuition and, hence, we can only cognize appearances (phenomena) and not things in themselves (noumena).¹⁹ However, at various points in CPR, Kant asserts that a hypothetical being endowed with “intellectual intuition,” rather than sensible intuition, would be able to cognize things in themselves (A249). Unfortunately, human beings do not possess the faculty of intellectual intuition: “sensible intuition...is the only one possible *for us*” (A252). Interestingly, Kant repeatedly characterizes Plato’s philosophy as “mystical” precisely because Kant thinks it presupposes a non-sensible intuition of things in themselves, “an *intuition* through pure understanding not accompanied by any senses” (A854/B882).²⁰

Indeed, in works and lectures subsequent to CPR, Kant frequently characterizes “mysticism” in general as belief in DME_{ns}, the direct experience of noumenal entities through a special faculty of non-sensible intuition, which he calls variously “intellectual intuition” (28:207), “intuitive understanding” (5:406), “supersensible intuition” (29:950–951), “mystical intuition” (28/2.2:1325), “mystical intellect” (29:761), and “mystical understanding” (28:241). For instance, in *Lectures on Metaphysics Vigilantius* (1794–95), Kant defines “*mysticism*” as “the presupposition of an intuitive intellect...or intellectual intuition, i.e. the possibility that purely intellectual a priori concepts...rest on immediate intuition of the understanding” (29:953). Crucially, in Kant’s critical period, Kant sees mysticism as the diametrical opposite of his own critical philosophy, which humbly restricts human knowledge to the deliverances of sensible intuition. Accordingly, in the *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (1783), he notes that “our *Critique [of Pure Reason]*...contains the proper antidote” to Berkeley’s “mystical and enthusiastic idealism...along with other similar fantasies” (4:293). Since Kant clearly takes his critical epistemology to rule out the possibility of intellectual intuition for human beings, he believes his critical epistemology *ipso facto* rules out the possibility of mysticism, which presupposes non-sensible intuition. For instance, in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), Kant asserts, “A direct revelation from God embodied in the comforting statement ‘Your sins are forgiven you’ would be a supersensible experience, and this is impossible” (7:47).

However, Kant’s own sweeping dismissal of “mysticism” is misleading, since he tends to define mysticism narrowly as belief in DME_{ns}. Indeed, throughout his philosophical career—beginning, as we have already seen, with *Dreams*—Kant considers two other types of mystical experience that are not based on a non-sensible

¹⁹ See, for instance, A42/B59–60 and A249–253.

²⁰ See also Kant’s footnote at A314/B371 where he refers to Plato’s “mystical deduction” of Ideas.

faculty of intuition: namely, DME_s and IME. In *Dreams*, Kant explicitly defends the possibility of IME_s. In his critical period, while Kant clearly rules out the possibility of DME_{ns},²¹ it is not at all obvious whether his critical epistemology also rules out the possibility of DME_s and IME.

For reasons of space, I will focus on Kant's views on IME in his critical period. I will make the case that even in his critical period, Kant never rules out the epistemic possibility of IME. First, I will argue that the epistemology of CPR, at least according to one plausible interpretation, accommodates the possibility of IME. I will then examine Kant's remarks on Swedenborg in his critical period, which also strongly suggest that he continues to admit the possibility of IME_s. Finally, I will consider places in Kant's work from the 1790s where he discusses two non-Swedenborgian types of IME, neither of which he rules out as impossible.

Does Kant's Critical Epistemology Accommodate the Possibility of IME?

In general, all types of IME presuppose (1) that a supersensible entity such as God or a spirit exists and (2) that this supersensible entity can affect our mind in certain ways. Hence, if we can determine whether the epistemology of CPR admits the possibility of (1) and (2), then we can conclude that it *ipso facto* accommodates the possibility of IME. Regarding the first presupposition of IME, Kant maintains that we have no theoretical knowledge of supersensible entities, so we can never rule out the possibility that God or spirits exist (A753/B781). In fact, Kant announces in the second preface to CPR that one of his main intentions is to “deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*”—specifically, faith in “God, freedom and immortality” (Bxxix-xxx). Moreover, although Kant never explicitly mentions Swedenborg in CPR, he seems to have Swedenborg in mind when he suggests the “transcendental hypothesis” that “if we could intuit the things and ourselves *as they are* we should see ourselves in a world of spiritual natures...” (A780/B808). Kant explicitly indicates that transcendental hypotheses—such as the Swedenborgian hypothesis he himself advances—“at least cannot be refuted, though of course they cannot be proved by anything...” (A781/B809). Hence, Kant's CPR epistemology clearly accommodates the possibility that noumenal entities such as God or spirits exist.

It is considerably more difficult to determine Kant's stance toward the second presupposition of IME. Does Kant's critical epistemology accommodate the possibility of noumenal causation of the kind involved in IME? On the face of it, the answer might seem to be in the negative. In his pre-critical *Dreams*, it might be argued, Kant was able to talk of spirit-influxes as the “cause” (2:340) of sensible images because he had not yet arrived at the mature epistemology of CPR. In CPR, however, Kant argues that causality is an a priori principle of the understanding and hence cannot be applied to things in themselves.²² If the epistemology of CPR rules out the possibility of noumenal causality, it would, *ipso facto*, rule out the possibility of IME, which entails that supersensible entities can affect our mind in certain ways.

²¹ I think Palmquist 2000: 299 is not justified in claiming that Kant admitted the possibility of a “direct form of communication or communion with a personal God.”

²² See, for instance, A180-81/B223-24.

However, such a verdict would be too hasty. In fact, as numerous scholars have noted, there are many places in CPR where Kant himself seems to claim that noumenal entities *can* and *do* causally affect the mind.²³ For instance, at A494/B522, Kant refers to a “non-sensible cause” of spatiotemporal “representations.”²⁴ And at A538/B566, he asserts that “nothing hinders us from ascribing” to the transcendental object “another *causality* that is not appearance”—namely, what he calls “intelligible” causality or “causality through freedom.”

Commentators have typically adopted one of three basic strategies for interpreting such statements in CPR. Philosophers ranging from Kant’s contemporaries, F.H. Jacobi and G.E. Schulze, to P.F. Strawson have argued that such passages from CPR do indicate Kant’s acceptance of noumenal causation, which commits Kant to a flagrant self-contradiction, since his own epistemic strictures forbid the transphenomenal application of the category of causality.²⁵ By contrast, numerous recent commentators—including Nicholas Rescher, Kent Baldner, and Henry Allison—have defended various deflationary interpretations of the problematic passages in CPR, which do not commit Kant to noumenal causation.²⁶ Meanwhile, commentators such as Kenneth Westphal and Claude Piché have argued that Kant does accept noumenal causation and that noumenal causation—when properly understood—is perfectly compatible with Kant’s epistemology.²⁷

Westphal’s interpretation of Kant’s views on noumenal causality seems to me to be the most convincing one available, though I am in no position here to defend his interpretation in any detail. From Westphal’s perspective, we can take Kant’s statements about noumenal causation at face value without committing him to a self-contradiction. According to Westphal, Kant accepts that “pure concepts have a logical significance independent of their schematization” (Westphal 1997: 221). Hence, Westphal argues that it is perfectly coherent for Kant to speak of things in themselves causally stimulating our sensibility, once we recognize that Kant, in those passages, is invoking the unschematized category of causality for the purposes of transcendental reflection (Westphal 1997: 223).

Moreover, Westphal convincingly demonstrates that Kant’s epistemology, practical philosophy, and philosophical theology all presuppose noumenal causation in the robust sense. In numerous passages in CPR, Kant clearly indicates that noumenal causation plays a key role in his account of sensible intuition. For instance, at A359, Kant states that an unknown noumenal “Something...affects our sense so that it receives the representations of space, matter, shape, etc.” As Westphal points out, Kant’s account of noumenal freedom, which lies at the basis of his practical philosophy, also presupposes robust noumenal causation: “freedom,” according to Kant, is “the unconditioned causality of the cause in appearance” (A419/B447).²⁸ Moreover, an entire section of Kant’s *Lectures on the Doctrine of Religion* (1783–84) is devoted to “God’s causality” with respect to the world, as the world’s creator, author, and ruler (28:1091–1117).²⁹

²³ Allison 2004: 460 lists the following places in CPR where Kant refers to “affection by things in themselves”: A44/B1, B72, A190/B235, A358, A380, A393, A494/B522, A288/B344, A613-14/B641-42. Westphal 1997: 415 also mentions A359, A419/B447, and A538-39/B566-67.

²⁴ Also see A288/B344 on the “transcendental object.”

²⁵ See, for instance, Jacobi 1787: 336, Schulze 1792: 199, Vaihinger 1892: 53, and Strawson 1966: 249–56.

²⁶ See, for instance, Rescher 2000; Baldner 1988; Allison 2004: 50–73, Hall 2010; Visintainer 1996.

²⁷ See Westphal 1997 and Piché 2004. For a different approach to the problem of noumenal affection, see Adickes 1924: 14–19.

²⁸ Westphal 1997: 214. Similarly, at A538/B566, Kant refers to the “intelligible cause” of our actions in the phenomenal world.

²⁹ See Westphal 2007: 241.

In light of Kant's apparent acceptance of noumenal causation in these cases, I think it is likely that he would also admit the possibility of the kind of noumenal causation involved in IME. In the "Paralogisms of Pure Reason," Kant argues that it is impossible to prove that "the unknown object of our sensibility could not be the cause of representations in us...because no one can decide about an unknown object what it can or cannot do" (A392). I believe this remark gives us an important clue to Kant's views on noumenal causation in general: since we cannot know anything about things in themselves, we can never rule out the possibility that a thing in itself is the "cause of representations in us." Accordingly, I think it is reasonable to infer that Kant's epistemology would also accommodate the possibility of IME, which presupposes that a supersensible entity causes certain sensible representations to arise in our minds.

Moreover, I will argue that Kant's views on various types of IME—as expressed in writings and lectures from his critical period—lend further support to my suggestion that Kant's epistemology accommodates the possibility of IME. As we will see, Kant never rules out the epistemic possibility of any of the types of IME he considers, although he does question their usefulness.

Kant's Post-*Dreams* Views on Swedenborgian Visions of Spirits

Although Kant rarely refers to Swedenborg in the published works of his critical period, he does refer to Swedenborg in the rational psychology unit of many of his lecture courses on metaphysics delivered from the mid-1770s to the mid-1790s.³⁰ In these lectures, Kant vacillates in his understanding of the epistemology of Swedenborg's alleged visions. In *Dreams*, as we have seen, Kant frequently accuses Swedenborg of mistakenly taking his visions to be cases of DME_s, but he also defends the possibility that Swedenborg's visions are veridical cases of IME_s. In his later metaphysics lectures, Kant continues to prefer to conceive Swedenborg's visions as IME_s, but he also sometimes seems to conceive them as DME_s and even DME_{ns}.

In two sets of student lecture notes, *Metaphysik Volckmann* (1784–85) and *Metaphysik L2* (1790–91), Kant carefully distinguishes DME_s from IME_s and claims that Swedenborg takes his visions to be cases of IME_s. Moreover, in both sets of lectures, Kant claims that it is impossible to rule out the possibility of either DME_s or IME_s. Since the relevant passage from *Metaphysik L2* is the more detailed of the two, I quote it below:

On the possibility of community with departed souls....The possibility of community with the souls of the dead is twofold, namely (1) the soul takes on a body, or it has one already; this can be a possibility. (2) Through its presence, a spirit brings forth in us thoughts and presentations of things, in the same way as when we intuit actual things. Schwedenburg [*sic*] also had this last view. To refute the possibility of spirit-apparitions would be a vain effort. Possible things, of which we can have no experience whatsoever, we cannot judge except other than with the principle of contradiction. All spirit-apparitions are of the kind that we can

³⁰ Johnson 1996 and 1997 provide a thorough discussion of Kant's references to Swedenborg in the *Lectures on Metaphysics*.

neither set up experiments nor precisely observe and inspect them, and it thus allows reason no further employment here at all. (28:593–94)³¹

The two possibilities of community with departed souls Kant considers here correspond to DME_s and IME_s, respectively. According to the first possibility, the mystic would perceive a spirit in the form of a physical body.³² Moreover, Kant explicitly admits that “this can be a possibility.” According to the second possibility, which Kant attributes to Swedenborg, the mystic would perceive sensible “thoughts and presentations of things” that are *caused* by a spirit. This description corresponds exactly to Kant’s account of IME_s in I.2 of *Dreams*. Moreover, just as the Kant of *Dreams* argued for the epistemic possibility of IME_s, the mature Kant, over two decades later, continues to insist that attempting to refute the possibility of “spirit-appearitions”—whether IME_s or DME_s—would be a “vain effort.” While Kant admits the epistemic possibility of both DME_s and IME_s, he nonetheless denies their usefulness on the grounds that they are not intersubjectively verifiable. Moreover, Kant’s explicit admission of the possibility that “a spirit brings forth in us thoughts and presentations of things” provides further evidence that the epistemology of CPR does not rule out the possibility of noumenal causation.

By contrast, in *Metaphysik L1* (mid-1770s), Kant attributes to Swedenborg the view that his visions are cases of DME_s rather than of IME_s. Kant claims that Swedenborg claimed to have a “spiritual intuition” (*geistige Anschauung*) that allowed him to intuit spirits while still in this physical world (28:300). Kant frames the entire discussion by posing the following question: “Whether the soul, which is already spiritual in the other world, can be seen and can appear in the visible world through visible effects [*sichtbare Wirkungen*]?” (28:300). Although Kant is not entirely clear here (or perhaps the student notes are not entirely clear or accurate), Kant does seem to indicate that the “spiritual intuition” involved here is not a direct supersensible intuition of spirits (DME_{ns}) but an intuition of spirits through their “visible effects”—that is, through their effects in the sensible world (DME_s). Kant’s views on whether such spiritual intuition is possible are somewhat confusing. He begins by asserting that it is “*not possible*” but, shortly thereafter, admits that the epistemic possibility of DME_s cannot be ruled out: “But granted it were possible that the soul can appear in this world, or that such spiritual intuition were already possible here—because we cannot, however, prove the impossibility of it—then here the principle of sound reason must be contraposed. This principle of sound reason is just this: *not to accept but to dismiss all such experiences and manifestations, that, if I were to accept them, would make the use of my reason impossible....*” (28:300). Kant’s overall view in *Metaphysik L1* seems to be that while DME_s cannot be ruled out as impossible, we should nonetheless dismiss alleged cases of DME_s because they are not intersubjectively verifiable and hence hinder the employment of reason.

In the *Fragment einer späteren Rationaltheologie nach Baumbach* (probably 1789–90 or 1790–91), Kant claims, rather surprisingly, that Swedenborg falsely believed his visions were cases of DME_{ns}:

³¹ For a similar passage from *Metaphysik Volckmann*, see 28:447–48.

³² Kant makes this clear in *Metaphysik Volckmann*, where he explains the first possibility as follows: “either the soul takes on a body, and then souls would come before us as corporeally appearing beings” (28:447).

Mystical intuition [*mystische Anschauung*] is the faculty to see things which are not objects of experience; e.g., the notion of spirits that are in community with us. Not one example is recorded, neither from here nor elsewhere. It is remarkable that the mystic only knows something already known through experience. Thus Swedenborg wrote of all planets and their inhabitants, but only those then known by astronomers. Of Uranus he knew nothing. He appears, therefore, to have been a deliberate fraud [*ein vorsätzlicher Betrüger*]. The mystic thinks that a higher reason should make the use of empirical reason superfluous. (28/2.2:1325)

This is the only passage in Kant's entire corpus (including *Dreams*) where Kant conceives Swedenborg's visions as DME_{ns}. According to Kant, Swedenborg claimed (falsely) to have had a faculty of "mystical intuition" by means of which he was able to experience directly supersensible realities such as spirits. Since Kant consistently rules out the epistemic possibility of DME_{ns}, it is not surprising that he scathingly dismisses Swedenborg here as a "deliberate fraud." What is mysterious is why Kant would conceive Swedenborg's visions as DME_{ns} in the first place, since he almost invariably conceives Swedenborg's visions either as IME_s or as DME_s. It is possible that Kant thought that Swedenborg himself claimed to have enjoyed numerous types of mystical experiences, including IME_s, DME_s, and DME_{ns}.³³ It is also possible that the lecture notes from which this passage is drawn were inaccurately transcribed.³⁴ In either case, what is important to recognize for the purposes of this paper is that whenever Kant takes Swedenborg's visions to be cases of IME_s or DME_s, he is much less dismissive of Swedenborg and is also at pains to *defend* the epistemic possibility of Swedenborg's visions.³⁵ Kant's views on Swedenborg in his critical period, then, are, in many respects, continuous with his pre-critical views on Swedenborg in *Dreams*.

Kant's Views on Non-Swedenborgian Types of IME in the 1790s

In his late works, *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone* (1793) and *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), Kant discusses three types of IME that are different from IME_s.

³³ There is some scholarly controversy regarding Swedenborg's own views on the nature of his mystical experiences. Alison Laywine, for instance, claims that Swedenborg conceives his own mystical experiences as cases of DME_s: Swedenborg, she claims, treats "immaterial things as though they could be objects of human sensibility" (Laywine 1993: 8). Johnson 1999 rejects Laywine's interpretation of Swedenborg, arguing instead that Swedenborg understood his own mystical experiences as cases of IME_s: "Swedenborg himself did not think that souls can be the objects of sensuous intuition.... Rather, spirits make themselves visible by directly stimulating the mind, causing it to experience the spirit as if it were an object of the external senses." For the purposes of this paper, I prefer not to take a stand on the difficult question of whether Swedenborg himself understood his own mystical experiences as IME_s, DME_s, or DME_{ns} (or as all three). What is relevant here is that Kant himself attributed all three types of mystical experience to Swedenborg at various points in his work. It would require another paper in its own right to assess the accuracy of Kant's interpretation of Swedenborg.

³⁴ Johnson 1997 makes this suggestion.

³⁵ Hence, I disagree with Vaihinger 1892: 513, who argues that by 1770, "a serious consideration of Swedenborgian fantasies was... completely ruled out" for Kant. I have argued, in contrast to Vaihinger, that even in his critical period, Kant continues to admit the possibility of Swedenborgian IME.

As we will see, Kant admits the epistemic possibility of all three types of IME, but he questions their usefulness on other grounds.

Kant's Views on IME_{eg}

In the “General Remark” to Book I of *Religion*, Kant discusses the belief in “effects of grace” (*Gnadenwirkungen*)—the view that through “inner experience,” one can determine that one’s moral conversion or change of heart was brought about by God’s grace (6:52–3). For Kant, this indirect experience of God’s grace through its effects has the structure of IME, since it is the experience of something sensible as an effect of something supersensible. Let us call this “IME_{eg}” (“eg” standing for “effects of grace”):

(IME_{eg}) The experience of one’s own moral state as an effect of God’s grace

Kant articulates his stance toward various supernatural phenomena such as effects of grace, miracles, and mysteries as follows: “Reason does not contest the possibility or actuality of the objects of these ideas; it just cannot incorporate them into its maxims of thought and action” (6:52). Significantly, Kant explicitly admits the “possibility or actuality” of IME_{eg}, but he claims that IME_{eg}—even if it is veridical—is both theoretically and morally useless since “all use of reason ceases precisely with it” (6:53).³⁶ He elaborates his position in this important passage:

For it is impossible to make these effects *theoretically* cognizable (that they are effects of grace and not of immanent nature), because our use of the concept of cause and effect cannot be extended beyond the objects of experience, and hence beyond nature; moreover, the presupposition of a *practical* employment of this idea is wholly self-contradictory. For the employment would presuppose a rule concerning what good we ourselves must *do* (with a particular aim [in mind]) in order to achieve something; to expect an effect of grace means, however, the very contrary, namely that the good (the morally good) is not of our doing, but that of another being - that we, therefore, can only *come by* it by *doing nothing*, and this contradicts itself. Hence we can admit an effect of grace as something incomprehensible but cannot incorporate it into our maxims for either theoretical or practical use. (6:53)

Only theoretical cognition of the alleged effects of God’s grace would allow us to determine with certainty that the cause of our moral state was in fact God’s grace and not “immanent nature.” According to Kant, however, such theoretical cognition of the effects of grace is “impossible.” Notably, Kant does not rule out the possibility of noumenal causation, since he explicitly admits the possibility that God’s grace can bring about a moral state in us. Indeed, by referring to “*our use* of the concept of cause and effect” (my italics), Kant strongly implies that there is a noumenal application of the concept of causation that is possible but not comprehensible to us.

What Kant denies is our ability to know or detect *when* such a case of noumenal causality has taken place. Since “our use of the concept of cause and effect” is limited

³⁶ Kant makes a similar remark in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (7:58–59).

to objects of sense-experience, we cannot possibly know whether the true cause of our moral state is “immanent nature” or God’s grace. For Kant, experiential conviction that one’s moral state is an effect of God’s grace never amounts to theoretical certainty, since we might have such a feeling of conviction even if the true cause of our moral state was the moral law within us rather than God’s grace. Hence, even if I experience a veridical case of IME_{eg} , I could never be certain of its veridicality.

Kant adds that IME_{eg} is also morally useless since it presupposes that the “morally good” is “not of our doing.” The conviction that moral goodness is an effect of God’s grace is “the very contrary” of the use of practical reason, which presupposes our own ability to do good. Hence, for Kant, an effect of God’s grace, while certainly *possible*, must nevertheless remain “incomprehensible” to us, since human cognition is limited to sense-experience.

Later in *Religion*, Kant calls belief in the effects of grace “enthusiasm” (“*Schwärmerei*”)³⁷:

The persuasion that we can distinguish the effects of grace from those of nature (virtue), or even to produce these effects in us, is *enthusiasm* [*Schwärmerei*]; for nowhere in experience can we recognize a supersensible object, even less exert influence upon it to bring it down to us, though there do occur from time to time in the mind movements that work toward morality but which we cannot explain, and about which are forced to admit our ignorance.... (6:174)

On the one hand, Kant admits that there are sometimes “movements” in the mind that “work toward morality” that *might* have been brought about by God’s grace. On the other hand, we could never *know* whether a particular moral state in us is the effect of God’s grace rather than our own “virtue.” Kant’s position on IME_{eg} in *Religion*, then, is consistent with his much earlier position on IME_s in *Dreams*. As Kant argued in *Dreams*, even if the Swedenborgian mystic experienced sensible images that were caused by “genuine spirit-influxes,” the mystic would not be able to distinguish these veridical spirit-influences from the non-veridical sensory images accompanying them.

In *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), Kant considers a particular form of IME_{eg} accepted by the Pietist sect founded by Philipp Spener and August Hermann Francke. According to Kant’s account of the Pietist view, a “heavenly spirit” brings about certain heightened moral feelings—“a breaking and crushing of the heart in *repentance*, a grief... bordering on despair”—that result in a radical “moral metamorphosis” (7:55). Kant’s stance toward this Pietist view is identical to his earlier stance toward IME_{eg} in *Religion*:

The most that could be granted is that the human being has experienced a change in himself (new and better volitions, for example) which he does not know how to explain except by a miracle and so by something supernatural. But an experience which he cannot even convince himself is actually an experience, since (as supernatural) it cannot be traced back to any rule in the nature of our understanding and established by it, is an interpretation of

³⁷ The German word “*Schwärmerei*” is difficult to translate, and I have opted to translate it as “enthusiasm” in accordance with many Kant scholars. However, the reader should bear in mind that *Schwärmerei* does not mean enthusiasm in the usual English sense of the term.

certain sensations that one does not know what to make of, not knowing whether they are elements in cognition and so have real objects or whether they are mere fancies. To claim that *we feel* as such the immediate influence of God is self-contradictory, because the idea of God lies only in reason. (7:57–58)

While Kant admits the possibility of a “supernatural” cause of “new and better volitions” in us, he argues that our experiential conviction of their supernatural cause is inherently fallible, since we cannot directly feel the “immediate influence of God.” The Pietist mystic *interprets* his or her moral feelings as the effects of heavenly spirits or God’s grace, but the mystic can never be certain that these feelings are in fact caused by something supernatural rather than something natural—such as his or her own virtuous disposition. In other words, the “sensations” involved in any alleged case of IME_{eg} are phenomenologically opaque, since they do not reveal or manifest their causal source, be it supernatural or natural.

Later in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant shows some degree of sympathy for those who believe that the “moral predisposition in us” is caused by “another and higher spirit”:

Since the *supersensible* in us is inconceivable and yet practical, we can well excuse those who are led to consider it *supernatural*—that is, to regard it as the influence of another and higher spirit, something not within our power and not belonging to us as our own. Yet they are greatly mistaken in this, since on their view the effect of this power [*Vermögen*] would not be our deed and could not be imputed to us, and so the power [*Vermögen*] to produce it would not be our own.—Now the real solution to the problem (of the new man) consists in putting to use the idea of this power [*Vermögen*], which dwells in us in a way we cannot understand, and impressing it on human beings, beginning in their earliest youth and continuing on by public instruction. (7:59)

Kant admits here that the moral law—what he calls the “*supersensible* in us”—is such a wondrous and sublime phenomenon that “we can well excuse” those who take the moral law to be an effect of God’s grace. As in the passage from *Religion* discussed above, Kant believes these mystics are “mistaken” not because IME_{eg} is impossible but because their expectation that they can identify the effects of God’s grace is morally dangerous. Moreover, just as he claimed in *Religion* that belief in IME_{eg} presupposes that the “morally good” is “not of our doing” (6:53), Kant claims here that the mystics’ belief in IME_{eg} entails the morally dangerous assumption that the “power to produce” our moral state “would not be our own.”

Somewhat surprisingly, Kant adds a long Appendix to *The Conflict of the Faculties* entitled “On a pure mysticism in religion,” in which he reproduces a long letter which Wilmans wrote to Kant. In this letter, Wilmans mentions a group of mystics who call themselves “separatists,” who “consider the inner [moral] law...an inward revelation and so regard God as definitely its author” (7:74). In other words, these separatist mystics claim to enjoy IME_{eg}. Wilmans adds that

these separatists exhibit “exemplary conduct” (7:75). Indeed, Kant may very well have had in mind these separatist mystics when he remarked earlier in *The Conflict of the Faculties* that “we can well excuse” those who take the moral law to be an effect of God’s grace (7:59). The very fact that Kant took the trouble to append Wilmans’ letter to his own essay suggests that he may have been at least somewhat sympathetic to the views held by these separatist mystics. In a footnote to the Appendix, Kant remarks: “I do not mean to guarantee that my views coincide entirely with his [Wilmans’]” (7:70). While Kant no doubt believes that Wilmans goes too far in reading mysticism into his moral philosophy, Kant nonetheless seems impressed by this group of mystics who are inspired to act morally on the basis of their belief in the moral law as an “inward revelation” of God.³⁸ However, the Appendix has to be read in the context of Kant’s other discussions of IME_{eg} in both *The Conflict of the Faculties* and *Religion*. From Kant’s perspective, while some people—such as this small group of separatists—might feel inspired to act morally on the basis of their belief in IME_{eg}, the conduct of these separatists can hardly be generalized. Indeed, Kant’s main worry is that people who believe in IME_{eg} might even engage in *immoral* actions by disavowing responsibility for their own conduct. Accordingly, in Part Four of *Religion*, Kant repeatedly warns against the danger of “pseudoservice” (*Afterdienst*), “a pretension of honoring God through which we act directly contrary to the true service required by him” (6:168). While Kant nowhere suggests that the separatists themselves were engaged in pseudoservice, he claims that the belief in the moral law as a revelation of God—held by the separatists—is dangerous precisely because it opens the floodgates to such pseudoservice.

Kant’s Views on IME_{is}

In his discussion of various methods for interpreting the Bible in *Religion*, Kant considers the claim of a mystic “who needs neither reason nor learning to recognize both the true meaning of Scripture and its divine origin, but only an inner *feeling*” (6:113). One of the mystics Kant seems to have in mind here is Swedenborg, whose *Arcana Coelestia*—which Kant read—provides a detailed symbolic interpretation of the Books of Genesis and Exodus on the basis of his own mystical experiences.³⁹ Such mystics, according to Kant, would interpret the Scripture on the basis of a feeling that they take to be caused by a supersensible entity such as God or a spirit. His discussion of this mystical mode of interpreting the Scripture suggests that he takes this appeal to inner feeling to be a form of IME:

But just as we cannot derive or convey the recognition of laws, and that they are moral, on the basis of any sort of feeling, equally so and even less can we derive or convey on the basis of a feeling sure evidence of a direct divine influence: for the same effect can have more than one cause, whereas in this case the morality alone of the law (and of the doctrine), recognized through reason, is the cause of

³⁸ According to Palmquist 200: 306, Kant’s inclusion of Wilmans’ letter suggests that Kant was “not entirely antipathetic towards mysticism.”

³⁹ See also Kant’s explicit reference to Swedenborg’s “mystical” interpretation of the Bible in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (7:46).

the effect. And even on the assumption that this origin is merely a possibility, our duty is yet to construe it in this sense, if we do not wish to open wide the gates to every kind of enthusiasm [*Schwärmerei*], and even cause the unequivocally moral feeling to lose dignity through association with all sorts of other fanciful ones. - Feeling is private to each individual and cannot be expected of others. . . ; thus we cannot extol it as a touchstone for the genuineness of a revelation, since it teaches absolutely nothing but only contains the manner in which a subject is affected as regards his pleasure or displeasure, and no cognition whatever can be based on this. (6:114)

Kant's account of the mystic's "inner feeling" suggests that it has the epistemic structure of IME. Let us call this type of IME "IME_{is}" ("is" standing for "interpretation of Scripture"):

(IME_{is}) The experience of a feeling that one takes to be caused by God or a spirit, on the basis of which one interprets the Scripture

Kant's main objection to the mystic's appeal to IME_{is} is that the "same effect can have more than one cause." That is, the cause of the feeling enjoyed by the mystic could be a supersensible entity such as God but it could also be the moral law. As in his discussions of IME_{cg} and IME_s, Kant maintains here that the mystic's feeling itself does not indicate or reveal its causal source. The mystic can never be certain that his or her feeling is based on a "direct divine influence" since feeling does not yield "cognition" of any sort. Kant clearly does not rule out the possibility that the feeling in question is caused by something supersensible but he insists that it is our "duty" to accept a natural, rather than a supernatural, cause for our feeling. Kant makes this claim in the service of his broader argument that a moral interpretation of Scripture is always to be preferred to feeling-based interpretations of whatever kind, both because feelings are "private to each individual" and because one can never be certain of the source of these feelings.

Kant's Views on IME_{vg}

In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant considers a type of mystical experience that involves hearing what seems to be the voice of God:

For if God should really speak to a human being, the latter could still never *know* that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for a human being to apprehend the infinite by his senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and *be acquainted with* it as such.—But in some cases the human being can be sure that the voice he hears is *not* God's; for if the voice commands him to do something contrary to the moral law, then no matter how majestic the apparition may be, and no matter how it may seem to surpass the whole of nature, he must consider it an illusion. (7:63)

The voice the mystic hears—whether it is a physical voice or a voice in the mystic's mind—is a sensible voice that the mystic takes to be the voice of God. Since this type of mystical experience involves hearing a sensible voice, it cannot be either DME_{ns}, which involves non-sensible intuition, or DME_s, which involves the direct sensible

intuition of a supersensible entity that has assumed a physical form. Hence, Kant almost certainly conceives this type of mystical experience as IME, which involves taking something sensible (in this case, a voice) to be caused by a supersensible entity (in this case, God). Let us call this “IME_{vg}” (“vg” standing for “voice of God”):

(IME_{vg}) The experience of a voice—whether physical or mental—as the voice of God

In the first sentence of this passage, Kant admits the possibility of a veridical case of IME_{vg} (“For if God should really speak to a human being”), but he then immediately adds that the mystic could never be certain that the experience was in fact veridical: the mystic “could still never *know* that it was God speaking.” Notice that Kant’s explanation of the inherent epistemic uncertainty involved in IME_{vg} is structurally identical to his much earlier explanation in *Dreams* of the epistemic uncertainty involved in IME_s. Just as the Kant of *Dreams* claims that the Swedenborgian mystic would not be able to distinguish a veridical spirit-influence from non-veridical sensible images, Kant here claims that the mystic would not be able to “distinguish” God’s voice from the voice of “sensible beings.” Hence, Kant’s position on IME_{vg} is consistent not only with his pre-critical position on IME_s but also with his later views on IME_{eg} and IME_{is}: even if I have a veridical IME, I could never be certain of its veridicality.

In the remainder of the passage, Kant makes the intriguing suggestion that the mystic can judge that “the voice he hears is *not* God’s” if the voice commands him to do “something contrary to the moral law.” According to Kant’s reasoning, God would never command us to do anything immoral, so if a voice we hear commands us to do something immoral, we can be sure—albeit on moral rather than on theoretical grounds—that the voice is not God’s.⁴⁰ To illustrate this principle, Kant provides a striking footnote in which he argues that the Abraham of the Bible, in attempting to sacrifice his innocent son Isaac, failed to follow this principle and thereby committed an egregiously immoral act:

We can use, as an example, the myth of the sacrifice that Abraham was going to make by butchering and burning his only son at God’s command (the poor child, without knowing it, even brought the wood for the fire). Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: “That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.” (7:63)

According to Kant, Abraham’s certainty of the moral law—which dictated that he ought not to kill his son—should have led him to deny the veridicality of his IME_{vg}.⁴¹ Kant’s reasoning here is based on his view that the very epistemic structure of IME in general precludes the possibility that one could ever be certain that a particular case of IME was in fact veridical. Hence, Kant insists that our certainty of the moral law within us always trumps the authority of any mystical experience we might have.⁴²

⁴⁰ For a helpful discussion of Kant’s “principle of the primacy of practical (moral) reasoning over any theoretical interpretation of objective experiences,” see Palmquist and Rudisill (2009).

⁴¹ Kant makes a similar point in *Religion* at 6:87 and 6:186–7.

⁴² Palmquist and Rudisill (2009) make an interesting case that Kant’s charge of immoral conduct against Abraham is, in fact, invalid according to Kant’s own principles.

Since Abraham could not have been certain that the voice he heard was God's but he *was* certain that the voice was commanding him to do something immoral, he should have judged his experience of IME_{vg} to be non-veridical. From Kant's perspective, then, Abraham made a grave mistake in taking his IME_{vg} to be veridical, on the basis of which he was about to kill his own son.

It is worth noting a structural similarity between Kant's views on mystical feeling and his views on aesthetic feeling in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790). In the third *Critique*, Kant argues that one can never be certain that one correctly judges an object to be beautiful since one cannot be certain that the feeling of pleasure on the basis of which one makes this judgment was caused by a harmony of the cognitive faculties of the imagination and the understanding rather than by one's own private inclinations.⁴³ Similarly, when one claims to enjoy an indirect mystical experience—whether IME_s, IME_{cg}, IME_{is}, or IME_{vg}—one can never be certain that one's feeling was actually caused by a supersensible entity rather than by something much more mundane. Kant's views on both aesthetic feeling and mystical feeling seem to be based on the general assumption that feeling of any sort—aesthetic, mystical, or otherwise—never infallibly indicates its causal source.

The Contemporary Relevance of Kant's Views on IME

Numerous contemporary philosophers of religion have followed Kant in distinguishing DME from IME, though usually without acknowledging Kant as a predecessor.⁴⁴ William Alston defends the possibility of both direct and indirect perceptions of God, and gives several examples of indirect perceptions of God, including “experiencing God in the beauties of nature” and “hearing God's voice in the Bible or in sermons or in the dictates of conscience...” (Alston 1991: 25). According to Alston, many philosophers have focused their attention on “indirect perception of God” perhaps because “there is something suspicious or worse—incoherent or impossible—in the notion of a direct awareness of God” (Alston 1991: 26).

John Hick argues that while we are not capable of direct awareness of God, we *can* experience God indirectly: “God has to be the hidden God, veiling himself by creating us at an epistemic distance in order that he may then progressively reveal himself to us in limited ways...” (Hick 1980: 431). Tellingly, Hick draws explicitly on a “broadly Kantian epistemology” in order to conceive “religious experience” as “experience of the Transcendent, not however as divine noumenon but as divine phenomenon” (Hick 1980: 428–29). Moreover, Hick grounds his theory of indirect religious experience on noumenal causation, which he takes to be central to Kant's epistemology: “All that we know about the noumenal world is that it is the unknown reality whose impact upon us produces the phenomenal world of conscious experience” (Hick 1980: 428).

However, Hick arrives at a decidedly *un*-Kantian conclusion from these broadly Kantian premises. While Kant explicitly refrains from ascribing cognitive significance

⁴³ See especially §8, §9, and §22 of the third *Critique*.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, Alston 1991: 25–28, Hick 1980, Hocking 1912: 230–31, Baillie 1962: 88–89.

to mystical experience, Hick argues that mystical experience is a form of “cognition” since it “exhibits a common structure, which it shares with all our other cognitive experience”: namely, “experiencing situations as having this or that character” (Hick 1980: 427). Accordingly, Hick argues that the mystic who enjoys such indirect religious experience is “rationally entitled to believe what he experiences to be the case,” even if some allegedly mystical experiences may be “illusions” or “delusions” (Hick 1980: 434–35).

Pushing Hick’s line of argument even further, Robert Oakes has defended the possibility of “‘self-authenticating’ religious experience,” which he defines as “veridical experience of God which is sufficient to guarantee that the person having that veridical experience could never (in principle) have any justification for questioning its veridicality” (Oakes 1976: 314). According to Oakes, it is possible that the experiential conviction involved in a veridical mystical experience can be so overwhelming that the very fact of having that experience is sufficient to “guarantee” its veridicality. Similarly, George Mavrodes argues that we cannot rule out the possibility of a mystical experience the “veridicality” of which is “plain and open upon the face of that experience itself” (Mavrodes 1978: 256).

By contrast, C.B. Martin rejects the possibility of self-authenticating mystical experiences of God. As Martin puts it, “whether the experiences are or are not of God is not to be decided by describing or having those experiences. For whether anything or nothing is apprehended by experiences is not to be read off from the experiences themselves” (Martin 1959: 303). According to Martin, in order for me to be justified in claiming that my alleged mystical experience is veridical, the experience must be subject to “checking procedures” by others, who can confirm the veridicality of the experience by empirical means. However, Martin argues that while there *are* “tests” or “checking procedures” for sense-experience, there are no such “tests agreed upon to establish genuine experience of God” (Martin 1959: 290). Hence, Martin sums up his position as follows:

I have not denied that the religious mystic may have experiences that others do not. Neither have I denied that there might be some external agency responsible for these experiences. What I have denied is that the mystic’s possession of these experiences is in itself a way of knowing the existence or nature of such an agency. (Martin 1959: 302).

Kant would clearly side with Martin against Oakes and Mavrodes on the question of whether mystical experience can ever be self-authenticating. Like Martin, Kant does not rule out the epistemic possibility of at least certain types of mystical experience. As we have seen, while Kant does rule out the possibility of DME_{ns} , he *defends* the possibility of various types of IME. However, Kant insists that no case of IME can ever be self-authenticating, even if a mystic such as Swedenborg has an overwhelming conviction of the veridicality of his or her experience. For Kant, the very indirectness of IME entails epistemic uncertainty, since the allegedly supersensible cause of the mystical experience is not part of the experience itself. The sensible images or feelings experienced in a case of IME do not themselves guarantee that their causal source is supersensible, since the very same images or feelings could equally well have been caused by something more mundane, such as the mystic’s own overly active imagination.

By the same logic, though, DME_{ns} *could* perhaps be self-authenticating, since the allegedly supersensible entity would be felt directly in the experience itself. For Kant,

however, while DME_{ns} might be self-authenticating, DME_{ns} is impossible for human beings; on the other hand, while IME is possible, it can never be self-authenticating. Hence, we can conclude from Kant's views on DME_{ns} and IME that he would likely reject the possibility of self-authenticating mystical experience.

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