

Chris L. Firestone, *Kant and Theology at the Boundaries of Reason*, Ashgate, 2009, 194pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-6130-6.

In this useful study Chris Firestone accomplishes two major tasks. First, building on work in his recent book *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, (co-authored with Nathan Jacobs), he argues that an adequate grasp of the whole of Kant's work decisively demonstrates that Kant was not hostile to religion, and that there are, in fact, fertile grounds for theology in the foundational ideas of the Kantian corpus. It is only when one restricts oneself to a one-sided reading of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, wherein Kant is read as imposing quasi-empiricist strictures on meaningful utterances—Strawson's principle of significance immediately comes to mind—that Kant can be read as hostile to religion and theology. If, on the other hand, the whole of Kant's work is approached earnestly and without prejudice, it becomes clear that both the theologian and philosopher of religion can pass "through" Kant, not only without injury to the theological enterprise, but to the contrary, so much the better for it. A genuine grappling with Kant's epistemology, ethics, aesthetics, and religion lays open the structure of human understanding and reason, and in this way prepares the theologian to come to grips with the possibility of human understanding of the divine. Firestone notes that the book is intended for those "interested in understanding the grounds for Christian theology in Kant's philosophy and estimating their promise for theology today" (11). Second, Firestone provides a useful catalogue of recent work on Kant's philosophy of religion. Firestone discusses three different strategies of exegesis in unfolding Kant's approach to religion, and then pairs each exegetical strategy with developments within theology.

Before discussing these three exegetical strategies and their corresponding theological models, Firestone argues that an adequate understanding of Kant must take into account an extremely important distinction operative in Kant's philosophy, that between *knowledge* and *cognition*. Knowledge (*Wissen*) is akin to empirical cognition: here empirical intuitions are synthesized through concepts, and concepts without corresponding intuitions are empty. On the other hand, Firestone wants to emphasize the role of pure cognition (*Erkennen*) in Kant's philosophy. The ability to *cognize* an idea is the capacity to have a fitting representation of that to which it refers, and in order to cognize no corresponding intuition is necessary. Firestone tells us that "pure cognition (or 'the cognition of reason') involves the basic capacity of reason to get something in mind and the way these ideas arise in and are utilized by reason" (38). Ideas of reason function to *unify* all our thoughts; in support of this, Firestone cites Kant's first *Critique*, "Under the government of reason our cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody but must constitute a system, in which alone they can support and advance its essential ends. I understand by a system, however, the unity of the manifold of cognitions" (A832/B860). As such ideas of reason need not, (and indeed cannot) have corresponding intuitions to be meaningful. Ideas are conceived along rationalist lines (50); it is these ideas, the contours and functions of which are developed by Kant in the first *Critique*, whose objective validity and reality are posited in rational faith. As such, Strawson's principle of significance requiring reference to empirical intuitions cannot play a role here. Ideas acquire significance in a very different way, that is, through their function of unifying and providing a coherent interpretation to the totality of human experience. It is these ideas, cognized but not known, which are at stake in rational faith. In particular, Firestone identifies the idea of the *ens realissimum* as the "point of departure for Kant's cognitive and

systematic development of the grounds for religion and theology in the practical philosophy and beyond” (51).

The question then arises, in just what way do we gain access to these ideas? The unity of reason demands that they be posited, but as mere ideas only. From a theoretical standpoint, the ideas of God and the soul remain merely problematic. Their existence can neither be proved nor disproved. The question for rational faith then becomes if and how they obtain objective reality. To this end, Firestone identifies three different interpretive strategies as to how the ideas function in Kant’s philosophy of religion, and three theological models influenced by such strategies.

The first strategy takes rational faith to be based on both the primacy of practical reason and its needs. While theoretical reason must remain agnostic as to the objective reality of God, freedom, and immortality, practical reason finds it necessary to posit their reality as a condition of morality and the highest good. Theological principles, too, are rationally justified insofar as they play a role as necessary conditions of the possibility of achieving the highest good. Firestone takes the Kant exegesis of Allen Wood and Ronald Green as representative of this strategy. He then offers an analysis of John Hick’s work as an example of a theology built on a version of the moral interpretation of Kant’s philosophy.

The second major interpretive strategy analyzed by Firestone takes Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* as key to the unification of nature and freedom in Kant’s philosophy; the work of Adina Davidovich is explored as an example. For Davidovich Kantian grounds for theology are not exclusively tied to the moral sphere, but include also aesthetic feelings and teleological concepts suggesting that the world is not mere blind mechanism, but is also the realm of human history, moral purposes and moral development. For Davidovich, the idea of God is a projection of our conscience. As such she espouses a theological constructivism “based on the collective understanding of aesthetic feelings united with teleological concepts”. In this theological constructivism, theology is the result of contemplation, “an imaginary middle ground between theory and practice, it is an “ultimate reference point for reason that is indifferent to the existence of its object” (91). Firestone pairs the theology of Gordon Kaufman with this strategy.

Lastly, Firestone provides a synopsis of Stephen Palmquist’s understanding of Kant, in particular his exegesis of the *Opus Postumum*. Here transcendental grounds for theology are found in what Palmquist dubs Kant’s “critical mysticism,” a reading of Kant having its basis in the symbols of the moral law within and the starry heavens above. Firestone reads Palmquist as providing an analysis of Kant’s ontological grounds for theology, although he concedes that the textual evidence for this reading of Kant is thin. Nevertheless he finds Palmquist’s interpretation suggestive, pairing the theology of Rudolph Otto and Paul Tillich with this approach. The end of the book contains two appendices, containing translations of two pieces by Paul Tillich on Rudolph Otto.

Through this catalogue of contemporary Kant exegesis and corresponding theological models, Firestone provides a useful delineation of some of the possible grounds for transcendental theology in Kant. The discussion early on in the book regarding the distinction between cognition and knowledge is, to my mind, correct, and an important step to understanding Kant’s philosophy of religion. The set up of the three models provides an effective working schema for understanding how it is that theology might go through Kant. However, much more needs to be done. The book too often remains focused on summarizing Kant’s interpreters, and does not do enough to grapple

with the primary texts themselves. One of the most suggestive parts of the book is the author's discussion of Otto and Tillich, but more could be done in order to demonstrate the ways in which their work was in fact rooted in Kant. Missing, too, is a discussion of the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, who was greatly influenced by Kant's philosophy and in turn influenced both Otto and Tillich. Notwithstanding these criticisms, the book will be extremely valuable to anyone interested in how to do theology while passing "through" Kant, and is certainly an important first step in an attempt to understand the transcendental grounds for theology in Kant.

Jacqueline Mariña
Purdue University