

Review of Christopher J. Insole, *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: A Theological Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

How can human beings act freely, if divine creation determines their nature? This ground-breaking book provides incontrovertible textual evidence that Immanuel Kant was pre-occupied with this traditional theological problem throughout his career. The book's ten chapters offer a thoroughgoing overview of Kant's entire *corpus*, covering the whole range of his published and unpublished works. After a general introduction outlining the book's uniqueness—namely, its sustained focus on how Kant resolved the apparent incompatibility between divine action and human freedom—Chapters 2-4 set out various aspects of the pre-Critical background of the problem, Chapters 5-7 focus on the solution offered by the mature Kant through his discovery of transcendental idealism, and Chapters 8-10 clarify and draw various theological inferences from Kant's position. The concluding pages (pp.229-244) set the whole study in the context of the recent "'affirmative' trend" in interpreting Kant's philosophy of religion: while overwhelmingly substantiating the tendency of recent interpreters to see Kant as a serious contributor to Christian theology, the book poses a problem to any Kantian who wishes to maintain an orthodox position on divine-human interaction.

The "theological problem" that Christopher Insole highlights throughout this book is that Christian orthodoxy adopts a "concurrence" account of the compatibility of divine action and human freedom, while Kant's Critical philosophy appears to defend the "mere conservationist" account (p.10 and Chapters 9-10). The latter, sometimes associated with deism (pp.63, 202), portrays divine action as consisting in creating noumenal substances (e.g., human beings) and "conserving" their existence, but without intervening in day-to-day interactions between created beings. Traditional theists prefer a more robust understanding, whereby divine action "concurrs" with causal chains that human beings initiate, the two functioning as partners in a single cause. Kant's commitment to the conservationist position, Insole argues, explains why he thinks "it would be a contradiction to say that God is the creator of appearances" (*CPrR* 5:102)—a passage quoted repeatedly throughout the book. Kant the conservationist believes that making human beings the sole creator of appearances (as required by transcendental idealism) is the only way to preserve human freedom while at the same time affirming that human beings (as noumenal selves) were created by God. But Insole worries that most Christian theologians, being concurrentists, will regard this solution as worse than the problem it attempts to solve.

While Kant's mature, Critical phase introduced a marked change in his view of

human agency and freedom, his position on the nature of divine freedom remained constant throughout his career (p.13): unlike human beings, God is *not* free to do otherwise; rather, because “Kant does not think that the divine nature is external to the divine will” (p.28), divine freedom *requires* God to create a world that corresponds to the highest moral good. This is simply what it means to be a *holy* being. Because God’s nature (or “God’s understanding”, as Kant and Insole sometimes put it) is the ground of all possibility, according to Kant, the implementation of God’s holy will in creating a world is necessarily limited to options that will result in the created world being good. What changes with the discovery of transcendental idealism is that in Kant’s pre-Critical writings God can freely choose how substances interact, whereas transcendental idealism seems to make us the sole cause of phenomenal interactions.

Insole’s discussion of Kant’s view of divine freedom (Chapter 3) has an interesting outcome: “our ‘ability’ to do otherwise” turns out to be “not so much a capacity, as a failing” (p.57). Apparently, Kant’s view of human goodness as being necessarily limited to *virtue* pertains only because (or insofar as) human freedom fails to imitate God’s self-determination by the moral law—though Insole only hints at how the holiness-virtue distinction relates to all of this. The core *problem* that Kant faces (and that his solution presents to the theological tradition) is that, unlike God, we can be influenced by “alien causes”. Insole portrays Kant as moving from the pre-Critical (traditional theological) view that God is within us and that we, like God, can act freely without being able to choose otherwise, to the Critical (theologically problematic) view “that God is an alien cause” and that we *must* be able to choose otherwise in order to act freely (p.60). While the scanty evidence Insole provides does not convince me that Kant *ever* regarded God as an alien cause, he clearly did regard *human claims* about God’s will as examples of heteronomous motivating factors. With this minor modification, Insole’s insight is profound: Kant insists that God is not the creator of appearances because appearances are the source of the heteronomous causes that limit human volition to a quest for virtue, preventing us from participating in divine holiness.

Insole admits to reading Kant’s texts selectively, searching only for passages that discuss Kant’s stance on this particular theological problem. Thus, after noting that Kant’s mature theory of “practical freedom” may be “metaphysically less ambitious” than his theory of “transcendental freedom” (pp.73-74), he sidesteps the former, without acknowledging that for Kant the practical always has primacy over the theoretical. Surely Kant’s doctrine of the primacy of practical reason merits further attention; indeed, less theologically-inclined readers might object that it renders superfluous the whole speculative issue that is the focus of this book. In general,

however, this book's weaknesses are minor: occasional typos include an accidental omission of most of one sentence (p.24); the style is sometimes frustratingly repetitive; and key points in the argument rely on unpublished essays even though published works on the relevant topics were available. Insole sometimes uses key terms in unKantian ways, as when he calls "things in themselves" and "noumenal substance" a "category" (pp.99,116-120). Perhaps most significantly, his valiant attempts to align Kant's multifarious claims with predetermined labeling schemes (see e.g., pp.16-18,50-51,81-84,220-223) lack appreciation for the inherently perspectival character of Kant's thought.

These weaknesses are far outweighed by the considerable strengths of the book's core chapters: Chapter 5 establishes the central importance Kant gave to the much-maligned doctrine of "noumenal affection"; Chapter 6 demonstrates how the incoherence that plagues Kant's claim is unavoidable in significant ways; and Chapter 7 defends the seriousness and coherence of Kant's claim to believe in a *real* God. Through the compilation of insurmountable textual evidence, Insole portrays Kant as a firm believer in noumenal causality, who never regarded it as conflicting with the Critical limitation of the principle of causality to the phenomenal world; rather, "noumenal first causation" is the elegant solution that transcendental idealism provides to the problem of preserving human freedom while affirming divine creation. The degree of incoherence that plagues interpreters of Kant's theory should be welcomed as an attractive application of Kant's "apophaticism" (pp.134,237). If so, doesn't the fact that this solution bars God from direct involvement in creating appearances seem like a relatively small sacrifice?

Insole thinks not. Making a big deal out of this sacrifice, Chapter 8 "drills down" so deeply into the basis for Kant's claim (pp.9,172) that the significance of the whole study risks slipping through the cracks. Chapter 9 (especially p.215) argues that, although Kant nominally defends a kind of divine concurrence, he allows it *only* for the noumenal realm, not for the phenomenal (including moral actions that occur in time)—and this is insufficient for traditional Christian theology. However, as I read the relevant passages, Kant never positively *denies* natural concurrence; his arguments are consistently perspectival. When we interpret the world (and ourselves) from the theoretical standpoint, viewing God as the creator of appearances would constitute what Ryle called a *category mistake*. Insole is right that "Kant insists that we should regard ourselves as created only with respect to our noumenal existence, but *as appearances* we should not regard ourselves as created" (p.173); while Kantian concurrence allows God to *complete* an action that a human being initiates, the human aspect of the action "must be untouched by divine action, if the human act is to have moral worth" (p.217). This troubles Insole only because he does not

acknowledge the perspectival nature of Kant's vision: from the theoretical standpoint we also should not regard ourselves (or appearances) as *not* divine creations; our theoretical ignorance of the transcendent prevents us from dogmatically asserting either position. That divine creation plays no constitutive role in our empirical knowledge *or* in our practical reasoning does not prevent it from playing a *regulative* role—a possibility Insole does not adequately explore.

This book's greatest shortcoming stems directly from its greatest strength: due to the tremendous breadth of his coverage of Kant's *corpus*, Insole pays relatively little attention to the theological positions adopted in (or implied by) Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*. As a result, he overlooks or downplays strands of Kant's thought that can be read as being far more sympathetic to a robust theory of divine-human agency than his portrayal of Kant suggests. Even in his concluding attempt to "offer a possible reconstruction" of Kant's position (p.233), Insole finds Kant lacking; but a closer look at *Religion* would reveal more in-depth discussions of doctrines such as divine grace and the Trinity than Insole acknowledges (pp.232-240). Two of the various theories meriting further discussion are Kant's doctrine of the "true church" (whereby God timelessly founds the "invisible church", while human beings construct specific "visible churches" that exemplify its predetermined formal structure) and his theory of *conscience* (whereby God's noumenal judgment of human beings works *through* the phenomenal agency of humanity's inward moral compass). A perspectively-nuanced affirmative interpretation views grace not merely as "a supplementary action" (p.238) in the phenomenal world, but also (from the noumenal standpoint) as the divine gift of humanity's overall moral predetermination (*Bestimmung*). Viewed as such, divine-human concurrence constitutes a *partnership* that could not be more robust.

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