

'GOD' WITHOUT GOD: KANT'S POSTULATE

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Resumo. O postulado prático da existência de Deus é problemático por várias razões: primeiro, Kant nega que ele proporciona qualquer cognição da natureza ou existência de Deus como um ser em si; segundo, ele salienta a natureza prática do postulado contribuindo para o desempenho de nossos deveres; e, terceiro, Kant parece mesmo algumas vezes indicar que nosso postulado de Deus não corresponde a nenhuma realidade, mas é um mero pensamento. No meu trabalho, eu sustento o argumento que o postulado de Kant de Deus pode ser melhor entendido como um conceito sem extensão que serve para unificar vários outros conceitos e obrigações morais mas que ele próprio não tem referência. Eu sustento esse argumento apontando para a relação do postulado para o propósito da filosofia prática, em oposição à teórica e pelo exame da função regulativa da razão em geral e invocando a teologia construtivista contemporânea.

A fim de mostrar este ponto eu primeiro analiso a natureza de um postulado comparando postulados a hipóteses transcendentais (A772 / B800) e crenças (A827 / B855) da *Crítica da Razão Pura*. Em segundo lugar, eu examino o uso que Kant faz do postulado da existência de Deus como sendo “imane... para propósitos práticos” e “somente em referência à lei moral e em função dela” (5:133) na *Crítica da Razão Prática*. Terceiro, eu procuro pela função que o postulado de Deus desempenha no *Opus Postumum* e em outros textos de 1790 para mostrar que Kant chegou mais e mais a argumentar pelo papel funcional ao invés do referencial desse postulado. Ao longo do trabalho, eu discuto a natureza da filosofia prática – direcionada ao uso livre das nossas vontades – como sendo distinta da filosofia teórica – dirigida ao conhecimento dos objetos. Eu mostro como essa solução pode fazer Kant um naturalista metafísico. Eu também entro em questões contemporâneas da teologia relacionadas com o papel humano na construção de sistemas conceituais para ajudá-los a fazer sentido ao mundo que eles experienciam no contexto de um mistério maior que desafia a conceitualização.

Palavras-chave: Kant. Deus.

Abstract: Kant's practical postulate for the existence of God is puzzling for several reasons: first, he denies that it provides any cognition of the existence or nature of God as a being in itself, second, Kant stresses the practical nature of the postulate as contributing to performance of our duties, and third, Kant even seems on occasion to indicate that our postulate of God does not correspond to any reality but is a merely a thought. In my paper I advance the argument that Kant's postulate of God is best understood as an extensionless concept that serves to unify various other moral concepts and moral obligations but that has no referent itself. I make this argument by noting the relation of the postulate to the purpose of practical, as opposed to theoretical, philosophy, and by examination of the regulative role of reason in general, and by invoking contemporary constructivist theology.

In order to show this point I first examine the nature of a postulate by comparing postulates to transcendental hypotheses (A772 / B800) and to beliefs (A827 / B855) from the *Critique of Pure Reason*. I second examine the use to which Kant puts the postulate of the existence of God as “immanent . . . for practical purposes” and “only in reference to the moral law and for the sake of it” (5:133) in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Third, I look at the role that the postulate of God plays in Kant's *Opus Postumum* and other texts from the 1790s to show that Kant came more and more to argue that the postulates have this functional rather than referential role. Throughout the paper I discuss the nature of practical philosophy – directed toward the free use of our wills – as distinguished from theoretical philosophy – directed toward knowledge of objects. I note how this solution could make Kant a metaphysical naturalist. I also touch on contemporary issues in theology related to the role of human construction of systems of concepts to help them make sense of the world they experience in the context of a greater mystery that defies conceptualization.

Key-words: Kant. God.

KANTS POSTULATE OF GOD AS A USEFUL EXTENSIONLESS CONCEPT

In my work I have argued that several crucial elements of Kant's metaethics can be understood within a metaphysically naturalistic framework, i.e. one that does not require any noumenal things in themselves to exist prior to or independent of nature in space and time. I canvassed reasons Kant gives for holding that specific elements of the ontology of his moral theory must be understood as independent of nature in space and time. I argued that these reasons fail to require that the corresponding ontology be non-natural, either because a naturalist solution satisfies all the criteria better than a non-natural solution, or when the criteria seem unsatisfied, the non-natural solution is no improvement over a naturalist solution. For example, the nature of reason as a faculty producing the a priori valid moral law has been shown to be comprehensible as a necessary cognitive structure for all reflective rational beings, although one discovered through a transcendental method rather than empirical scientific inquiry.¹

Kant's metaethics contains other important metaphysical claims. The status of the highest good, for example, is ambiguous between an earthly and a heavenly fulfilment. That is a matter for another time. But along with the highest good and as a precondition of its realization, Kant offers the postulates of immortality of the soul and the existence of God. Kant's arguments have often been rejected by commentators, mainly on the basis that the kind of rational hope for happiness Kant stresses is not really required for moral obligation, thus undermining the practical nature of these postulates; although recently more positive attention has been paid to them and to Kant's philosophy of religion in general.² I will not assess the validity of those arguments; rather, for purposes of argument I will assume that something in Kant's moral theory does require the postulate of God. Instead this chapter will assess the metaphysical status of the postulate of the existence of God relative to see just how it is compatible with a naturalistic metaphysics. I will argue that the postulate of the existence of God is best understood as the claim that rational beings must hold in their minds some particular concept or other which functions as a bridge to satisfy the systematic demands of practical reason, yet which does not, and is not intended to, refer to any existing object.

¹ "Pure Practical Reason as a Natural Faculty", published in Portuguese translation in *Ethic@* 5, Dez 2006.

² For an example of traditional criticism, see Lewis White Beck *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, (Chicago, 1960), 274f. A defense of Kant's argument can be found in Allen Wood *Kant's Moral Religion*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970) 129f. A very recent collection of essays giving a more positive role for religion in Kant is Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist, eds., *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006).

In some ways my argument is similar to the famous “as-if” interpretation of Kant offered by Hans Vaihinger a century ago. Based on ideas he developed around 1875, Vaihinger’s *Die Philosophie des Als-Ob* (the philosophy of as-if) was very influential; it went through at least six editions in the dozen years following its publication in 1911, including an abridged “Volksausgabe” (people’s edition) in 1923.³ In brief, Vaihinger offered a philosophical system in which human life is structured by a set of assumptions and ideas which are themselves “fictions” but which help human beings to survive and thrive. He held that many mathematical concepts such as the point and line, physical concepts such as the atom, juridical concepts such as rights, moral concepts such as freedom of the will, and of course the practical concept of God are all fictions. Vaihinger discusses fictions as resulting from the teleological and organic structure of thought (the Psyche) in a world which is itself mechanical not teleologically organized. The Psyche finds it very useful to employ certain concepts which help it to fulfil the purpose of navigating the organism through its life; these concepts are *useful functions* (zweckmässige Funktionen).⁴ These concepts do not themselves correspond to actual objects in nature (or outside nature for that matter) but as part of the system of thought they function to guide the organism successfully. Vaihinger describes this relationship as follows:

Objective events and being may be what they will, nonetheless it must be stressed that they do not consist of logical functions [. . .]
Their purposiveness [i.e. usefulness] manifests itself precisely in this: the logical functions, though they operate according to their own laws, still always manage to coincide with being.⁵

One might summarize this reference relation as follows: individual fictitious concepts do not correspond with reality, the functional system which they help to constitute does. This functional system would consist of non-fictitious concepts glued together, as it were, by the fictitious concepts.

Vaihinger’s theory is not presented as a straightforward interpretation of Kant. He presents the philosophy of “as if” as his own, inspired by Kant (and others). Vaihinger does, however, present what he calls “historical confirmations” that focus mainly on Kant but also include Nietzsche and some minor figures. His discussion of Kant does not claim to be an objective analysis of Kant’s actual philosophical statements, proving that Kant really always held

³ Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, First Edition (Berlin: Verlag von Reuther & Reichard, 1911). And Hans Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als Ob*, Volksausgabe (Leipzig: Verlag von Felix Meiner, 1923).

⁴ Vaihinger 1911, p. 2.

⁵ Vaihinger 1911, p. 10, 12.

the theory of “as if”. Rather, Vaihinger admits that he selectively chose passages from Kant which reveal this tendency in Kant and excluded passages which contradict this interpretation.⁶ His point is that, as a philosopher, Kant was presenting the kernel of the “as if” theory without himself fully developing it, indeed even without realizing the full potential of this theory.

One must keep this in mind when considering objections to Vaihinger’s theory, and correspondingly to the interpretation I present below. For this reason one ought to reject the charges against Vaihinger raised by Erich Adickes in his book-length attack on Vaihinger’s Kant interpretation, *Kant und die Als-Ob-Philosophie*⁷. For all its academic rigor and thorough review of Kant’s writings, published and unpublished, Adickes’s argument boils down to the claim that Vaihinger’s Kant is not the historical Kant.⁸ If the standards for assessing Vaihinger’s view of Kant are strict historical accuracy, then Vaihinger himself would admit that his theory is inadequate because it does not capture Kant’s complete historical view. Vaihinger does, however, note that some of Kant’s arguments point toward a theory of fictions even if Kant himself did not fully develop it. Vaihinger is, as it were, looking at the Kant that might have been had the historical Kant followed a path that he saw, and even mapped, but did not fully traverse.

My interpretation bears some resemblances to Vaihinger’s; the differences will become apparent as my argument proceeds. I would like to mention a few key differences here. First, unlike Vaihinger, I stress that this theory of fictional concepts is for Kant mostly practical; I think that Kant’s theoretical philosophy of nature uses fictions only in the regulative use of reason, but not in physics or mathematics themselves. Second, while Vaihinger resolutely denies that there can be any noumena, I am at least allowing that Kant can retain the view of noumena as limit view which allows that there can be some general unknown which we constructively fill in, but which will not match our concept. Third, I try to be clearer about the possible referential relations between fictitious concepts and objects.

My interpretation is also, in some ways, is related to the semantic analysis of Kant given by Zeljko Loparic⁹. Like Vaihinger, Loparic sees Kant’s ideas of reason as heuristic devices. Loparic applies this interpretation to Kant’s theoretical philosophy, using the ideas of reason as heuristic devices to aid in scientific research regarding how concepts refer to objects in nature (in appearances). Ideas of reason function mainly for Loparic in the systematization of concepts in the natural sciences, for example, the idea of the soul is used in empirical psychology (Loparic

⁶ Vaihinger 1911, p. 639, for example.

⁷ Erich Adickes, *Kant und die Als-Ob-Philosophie* (Stuttgart, Fr. Frommanns Verlag, 1927).

⁸ Adickes 1927, p. 291

⁹ Zeljko Loparic *A Semântica Transcendental de Kant* (UNICAMP, Campinas, 2000).

pp. 292-296, citing Kant A672 / B700¹⁰). This exact analysis cannot be applied directly to the practical problems that Kant is attempting to solve with his doctrine of the postulates of practical reason, because practical reason does not aim at cognition of nature (as theoretical reason does) but at providing rules for free behavior. My paper suggests that there is an analogous use of practical ideas of reason not with reference to the natural sciences but with reference to human practical beliefs about morality. I am sure that others I am unaware of have worked in this area.

I would like to start by layout out the possible metaphysical statuses of any kind of postulate. Metaphysically, it must be noted that the postulates are generally understood to refer to “noumena” as opposed to “phenomena.” Phenomena are understood as the world of appearances, that is, nature in space and time. I have defined metaphysical naturalism as a view that holds that the only things that exist are entities required by the proper causal laws of natural science to explain observations and properties of those entities which arise from their structure. I showed in my third chapter that Kant himself is actually committed to a robust ontology of nature, including not only physical objects but also biological properties, properties required for social sciences like history, and empirical psychology. All these disciplines are capable of operating purely within a naturalistic metaphysics. None of them require non-natural objects, i.e. those not in nature in space and time, and so none of them postulate any “noumenal” entities considered as non-natural things in themselves. For Kant, then, a metaphysical naturalism is one that requires only the world of nature in space and time. It coincides with appearances in transcendental idealism under an ontological interpretation. A clear division of the metaphysical possibilities of the postulates, then, is between metaphysical naturalism and metaphysical anti-naturalism, i.e. one in which the postulates may be understood merely in terms of nature in space and time, and one in which the postulates must be understood in terms of non-natural things in themselves.

To interpret the postulate of the existence of God merely in terms of nature in space and time is to interpret it as not requiring attribution of the actual existence of God. Rather, the concept “God” is held in the mind of a moral agent without affirming the existence of any independent being matching that concept. Instead, the moral agent uses the concept of God, qua concept in relation to other concepts, for the practical purpose of furthering morality. Certainly

¹⁰ References to Kant's works will be to their volume and page number from *Kants gesammelte Schriften*, 29 Vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter [and predecessors], 1900-) except references to *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* taken from the edition edited by Jens Timmermann (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1998) and identified by page numbers for the first and/or second editions, cited as 'A' and 'B'. These page numbers are given in the margins of the English translations. I use the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant for English translations when available. Other translations are my own.

by the end of his career as evidenced by the *Opus Postumum* Kant had clearly come to such a position. For example, he writes in one of his last jottings:

The idea of that which human reason itself makes for the universe is the active representation of God. Not as a particular (personality) **substance** outside me but a thought **in me**. (21:154)

Human beings are said here to create the concept of God, and we comprehend this concept only as a thought in us, not as a separate substance outside us. My paper will show that this conception of the postulate of God is implicit in Kant's earlier discussions of the postulates of practical reason. I argue that it is the position Kant was working toward throughout his philosophical development, and that it best serves the purpose of the postulate.

To reach this result I will trace Kant's conception of a postulate in three main stages: prior to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and after the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

I: BEFORE THE *CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON*

This first section will show that prior to his direct work on the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant had not firmly conceived of practical postulates as distinct from theoretical ideas and hypotheses. It will also show that Kant had a tendency to treat postulates as well as ideas and hypotheses as abstracting from ontological claims in favor of their use for some particular purposes.

Kant's use of the term "postulate" first comes in his early metaphysical works where it applies to theoretical claims.¹¹ Kant was certainly exposed to the term from its use in Meier's Logic textbook, where §315 says:

Unproven judgments are either judgments after due consideration (*Erwägungsurtheile*) or judgments made in the moment (*Übungsurtheile*). The former are axioms (*Grundurtheile*, latin *axioma*) but the latter are postulates (*Heisheurtheile*, latin *postulatum*). (Meier's Logic, printed in KS 16:668)

The precise German term "*Heisheurtheile*" means "a judgment on demand", which relates the term to the latin *postulatum*, which means a demand or request. Thus the meaning of the term "postulate" that Kant employs is that of an unproven claim required by a particular context. This

¹¹ For example, See the *Inaugural Dissertation*, 2:402, for the postulate of pure time, and 2:418, for the postulate that "nothing material at all comes into being or passes away"

is confirmed in Kant's own notes to his copy of the Meier textbook, where he comments on this very section:

A postulate is actually a practical immediately [*crossed out*: necessary] certain proposition. But one can also have theoretical postulates for the sake of practical reason, namely, a theoretical hypothesis that is necessary from the point of view of practical reason, such as that of the existence of God, of freedom, and of another world. Practical propositions are objectively certain; subjectively, they can only become practical insofar as that hypothesis serves as their ground. (R 3133, 1775-79, 16:673)

At this time, Kant had not yet distinguished practical postulates as such from other kinds of postulates. He uses the terms "postulate" and "hypothesis" interchangeably, showing that he had not finalized any special or distinct role for what will become the postulates of practical reason. For example, in R4113, written sometime from about 1765-1775, Kant notes that the idea of God is a "necessary logical ideal", the "necessary hypothesis of the natural order" and the "necessary hypothesis of the moral order" (17:421). "Hypotheses" are seen as serving for both theoretical and practical purposes (see also R4582, 17:601; and R4928, 18:30).

The postulate is also construed as a concept that must be held by the mind in order to play some sort of functional role while the existence of any object corresponding to that concept is not claimed. However, this suggestion is made not with regard to a practical but with regard to a theoretical proof of God; theoretically only a concept of God is attainable, practically proof of the object of that concept is also attainable. In a Reflection from the early 1770s Kant distinguishes between the need for a concept and the need for its proof; however the proof in question is a moral proof necessitated by the experience of moral order rather than any purely a priori reflection in pure reason as part of an explanation of the theoretical "pure concept of possibility":

The transcendental concept is necessary, not the transcendental proof; in that one sees that one cannot make heterodox claims without any ground. The necessity of the divine being as a necessary hypothesis either of pure concepts of possibility or of experience in this world, and the latter as hypothesis of morality. Absolute necessity cannot be proved.

The proof of the existence of good is not apodictic but hypothetical under logical and practical hypothesis [*sub hypothesis logica und practica*].

A hypothesis that is necessary in relation to the laws of pure reason is original [*originaria*], a hypothesis that is necessary in relation to experience is conditional or relative [*conditionalis sive relativa*]. The first is necessary, the second necessitated; the former original [*originaria*], the latter subsidiary [*subsidiaria*], e.g. a supplement [*suppletoria*] for explanation of order in the world. (R4580, 1772-75, 17:600)

This moral proof is one that is said to be necessitated rather than necessary, that is, required for some particular empirical circumstances rather than purely a priori. The moral order in the world must be explained using a transcendental hypothesis, yet that hypothesis remains conditional

upon or relative to the alleged moral order in the world. For theoretical purposes only a transcendental concept of God is allowed, but no proof. When a proof is available, then, it is only contingent upon a certain empirical fact.

Even in the *Critique of Pure Reason* itself, the term “postulate” is used theoretically, occurring most often in the name of the three modal principles of the understanding, the “postulates of empirical thought”.¹² He also calls reason’s search for the unconditioned in the Dialectic a “postulate of pure reason” (A498 / B526). There is no hint of Kant’s later special status of practical postulate (although there is a relation to the nature of “belief” in the Canon of Pure Reason, which will be discussed below)

The term “hypothesis,” however, is restricted to theoretical claims. The section “The Discipline of Pure Reason with Regard to Hypotheses” is worth a detailed look. Hypotheses, as Kant defines them, are not merely any kind of groundless assertion. Hypotheses “must be connected as a ground of explanation with that which is actually given and consequently certain” (A770 / B798). That which is actually given in experience must always conform to the conditions of possible experience, our reason cannot conceive of the possibility of things in any other way. Hypotheses must be connected to experience; in this way they are like the “hypotheses” and “postulates” Kant noted in R3133 that cannot simply be free-floating assertions but must arise in particular situations to resolve particular problems. Still, transcendental hypotheses, like ideas of reason, do not themselves represent objects of cognition. Here is how Kant describes the ideas of reason before contrasting them with transcendental hypotheses:

The concepts of reason are, as we have said, mere ideas, and of course have no object in any sort of experience, but also do not on that account designate objects that are invented and at the same time thereby assumed to be possible. They are merely thought problematically, in order to ground regulative principles of the systematic use of the understanding in the field of experience in relation to them (as heuristic fictions). If one departs from this, they are mere thought-entities, the possibility of which is not demonstrable, and which thus cannot be used to ground the explanation of actual appearances through an hypothesis. (A771 / B799)

Ideas of reason merely ground the regulative principles of reason as heuristic devices. Yet Kant also hints that they are more than “mere thought entities”, implying that there must be some sense in which the idea is taken to correspond to some independent object. Kant provides the example of the idea of reason of the soul, into which one cannot have any insight *in concreto*, yet

¹² Paul Guyer has argued that this use of the same term “postulate” here and in the second *Critique* is not accidental, and that the practical postulates Kant gives in the second *Critique* must be understood in terms of the postulates of empirical thought, in particular that in practical postulates, the concepts must be understood as possessing real possibility, not merely logical possibility Paul Guyer “From a Practical Point of View: Kant’s Conception of a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason” in Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness* (Cambridge 2000) , 333-371.

which allows one to think the unity of powers of the mind (A771-72 / B779-800, compare A672/B700f). It must at least be possible for there to be a unity of the powers of the mind. The ideas of reason thus have a positive use. Transcendental hypotheses, however, do not even rise to this level of positive use: they cannot provide any ground of explanation of appearances. A transcendental hypothesis is one in which "a mere idea of reason would be used [directly] for the explanation of things in nature" as opposed to the regulative use of the idea of reason, in which the idea is used only to guide inquiry in nature and thus indirectly relate to things in nature.

The discussion of the use of transcendental hypotheses offers two important further points. First, Kant claims that the genuine use of transcendental hypotheses is merely negative, as a defense against unwarranted attacks on particular philosophical positions. And second, transcendental hypotheses are themselves never fully endorsed but only offered defensively in particular contexts, for particular purposes, and for a particular length of time.

Suppose, first, that you find yourself discussing the nature of the soul and find yourself faced with someone who claims that experience in nature offers strong indication that our mental life is all physically based. In this context, Kant says, you may offer the following transcendental hypothesis in defense:

That all life is really only intelligible, not subject to temporal alterations at all, and has neither begun at birth nor will be ended through death, that this life is nothing but a mere appearance, i.e. a sensible representation of the purely spiritual life, and the entire world of the senses is a mere image, which hovers before our present kind of cognition and, like a dream, has no objective reality in itself; that if we could intuit the things and ourselves as they are we would see ourselves in a world of spiritual natures with which our only true community had not begun with birth nor would not cease with bodily death (as mere appearances), etc. (A779-80/B807-08)

This transcendental hypothesis is certainly an extreme form of defense against a materialist theory of mind. Note that it has no direct explanatory power for anything empirical: that is, empirical experience in nature is left phenomenally the same. The transcendental hypothesis makes no claim to cognize any particular part of nature. This hypothesis is merely negative, serving as a defense against an unjustified claim to knowledge.

The second and most important part of this passage is yet to come. Kant continues immediately by noting that the person who makes this claim does so without actually believing the hypothesis himself.

we do not know or seriously assert the least thing about all of this where we have here pleaded against the attack, and it is all not even an idea of reason but merely a concept thought up for self-defense . . . he who turns such hypothetical countermeasures against the pretensions of his rashly negative opponent must not be considered to hold them as his own genuine opinions. He abandons them as soon as he is finished off the dogmatic self-conceit of his opponent. (A780-81 / B808-09)

The hypothesis, then, is not asserted as true. It is not part of the world-view of the person who makes this claim. It is asserted as not-impossible. The person makes this claim only for a particular purpose without actually asserting the truth of the claim. The particular purpose is the main point for the claim. As Kant sums it up, “Thus one sees that in the speculative use of reason hypotheses have no validity as opinions in themselves, but only relative to opposed transcendent pretensions” (A781 / B809).

These two differences between ideas of reason and transcendental hypotheses should not obscure the similarities. An important similarity to keep in mind is that both concern concepts which we “cannot have insight into *in concreto*” (A771 / B799). Kant notes this with regard to the example he gives of a transcendental hypothesis. He says strongly “We do not know or seriously assert the least thing about all of this”. He also notes that it remains wrong to extend the principles of possible experience to the possibility of things in general; that is, it remains wrong to apply the categories and principles of the understanding beyond the boundaries of possible experience in nature (A781 / B809). Hence transcendental hypotheses cannot be affirmed in any detail.

A transcendental hypotheses, then, is not a reference to an object at all. If anything, it is a placeholder, that is, it serves to highlight a *lack* of concrete theoretical knowledge of objects in nature. This is to say, the transcendental hypothesis has the function of pointing out to an opponent a lack of complete support for the opponent’s claims. That is how the transcendental hypothesis is able to be used as a defense. Since the hypothesis is never affirmed as such, and in fact cannot ever *be* affirmed because not known *in concreto*, its meaning is equivalent to its function. Its work is merely negative, to remind the dogmatic opponent that he is making a claim that transgresses over the boundaries of experience and thus over the boundaries of knowledge. No one’s ontology is extended by this claim. The claim is not intended to have any ontological significance. It is meant to remind the other of the limits of ontology.

I think this is the best way to understand transcendental hypotheses in Kant. I also think that this is how Kant ought to have, and eventually does, understand the practical correlate of transcendental hypotheses, namely the postulates of practical reason. But Kant does not reach this sort of conclusion right away. Rather he explains practical ideas in a way that makes them stronger than theoretical ideas. Within the discussion of transcendental hypotheses Kant says that “in regard to its practical use reason still has the right to assume something which it would in no way be warranted in presupposing in the field of mere speculation without sufficient grounds of proof” (A776 / B 804). Thus, the negative element of transcendental hypotheses is not at issue

for practical hypotheses. There will be further, positive reasons to affirm something about the practical hypotheses. The positive reasons, of course, will turn out to be related to the need for the realization of the highest good

The first Critique, never uses the term “postulate” to describe a moral claim and seems to restrict the term “hypothesis” to theoretical claims. Still, what will later be called the postulates are not ignored. Moral claims that will later be called postulates are raised in the “Canon of Pure Reason” chapter. The Canon is a rich resource for assessing the state of Kant’s concerns in both ethics and systematic issues; its importance comes in part from the fact that when Kant wrote the Critique of Pure Reason, he planned no further critical works before turning to his “metaphysics of morals”. Thus the Canon contains what Kant considered before 1785 as the important critical discussion of ethics in its broader relation to epistemology, metaphysics, and system of transcendental idealism.

The focus for our present topic is rather limited: the status of the concept of God as a belief rather than a hypothesis. To what extent does Kant claim that belief in God is a claim that the concept “God” refers to an actual, although noumenal, object? And to what extent does Kant provide good reasons for claiming any difference between the practical and the speculative use of concept “God”.

The second question shall be treated first. Only reason in its practical use, Kant claims, can have a canon, or “the sum total of the a priori principles of [its] correct use” (A796-7 / B824-5). The whole of the Critique up to this point, Kant claims, shows that speculative reason has no correct use and thus cannot have a canon. (This claim goes too far, even if one accepts that the negative use of transcendent concepts just described does not count as a correct use; for the ideas of reason do have a correct and positive *regulative* use.) The only legitimate use of reason then must be practical. Kant defines the practical use of reason as “everything that is possible through freedom” (A800 / B828). This has to count as one of his least informative definitions. Elsewhere we have seen that the practical is defined as the rules for free action and free behavior, and as determining what ought to occur as opposed to what is in existence. The practical, then, concerns moral laws, “and thus these alone belong to the practical use of reason and permit a canon”.

The concept of God, then, is permitted because of its relationship to the moral law. Presumably this means the following: IF there is a moral law stemming from reason, then some other concepts or ideas of reason are so tied to it that they must be affirmed. That is, I would have reason to use the concept “God” if reason already provides moral laws which somehow

demand that the concept “God” be invoked. But Kant initially does not present the problem this way, but reverses their relationship:

These [three problems of freedom, God, and immortality], however, have in turn their more remote aim, namely, **what is to be done** if the will is free, if there is a God, and if there is a future world. (A 800 / B828)

Setting this up as a conditional, roughly “If God, then moral duty”, we can see that it is entirely possible for the antecedent to be false and the consequent true; that is, there could be no God and yet I could still be subject to moral obligation. In fact, Kant makes nearly the same claim a few pages later when he notes that the question “what should I do?”

is merely practical. As such, to be sure, it can belong to pure reason, but in that case it is not transcendental, but moral, and thus it cannot be in itself a subject for our critique. (A805 / B833)

Hence, Kant is admitting here that the strict delineation of our duties is not the basis for invoking the concept “God”.

Rather, the basis of the practical use of the concept “God” is in a different question, “what may I hope”. Kant puts the conditional this way: “If I do what I should, what then may I hope”. Roughly speaking, this reverses the previous conditional and results in “If moral duty, then God”. Here is the proper formulation Kant seeks, for only on this basis can we start with the moral law and proceed to God. Note, however, that the matter is slightly different – instead of asking what I ought to do, that is, *determining* my duties, it asks what will happen if I do my duty, that is, my *performance* of my duty is central, not the delineation of the duty itself. Perhaps this is why Kant offers as his definition of the practical the vague “whatever is possible through freedom” rather than the more precise formulation he usually uses regarding the rules for free actions¹³.

Given this focus on performance, one might complain that the canon for practical reason is misplaced, since it is now a canon that mixes together some elements from the practical (namely, determination of our duties) with some elements of the theoretical (determining causal relations and effects, in this case happiness). Kant admits that the question he focusses on, “what may I hope”, is “simultaneously practical and theoretical, so that the practical leads like a clue to a reply to the theoretical question and, in its highest form, the speculative question” (A805 / B833).

¹³ The importance of this is clearer in my paper from the X Congresso Kant in Sao Paulo, “Why Kant’s Ethics is A Priori – and Why It Matters”, forthcoming in the Proceedings volume from that Congress.

The speculative question, of course, is whether God exists. What is the status of the concept "God"? What is it that Kant argues for? Even here in the Canon there are indications that Kant does not require there to be an independent being "God" as substance. It must first be clarified that neither the moral law, nor particular duties themselves as possible actions under the moral law, are transcendent. Kant affirms that, as actions we could perform, these "**could** be encountered in the **history** of humankind". That is, these actions could occur in nature. Yet it is nature considered as conforming to moral laws, and thus applies to nature rather than to anything transcendent:

Thus far it is therefore a mere, yet practical, idea, which really can and should have its influence on the sensible world, in order to make it agree as far as possible with this idea. The idea of a moral world thus has objective reality, not as if it pertained to an object of an intelligible intuition (for we cannot even think of such a thing) but as pertaining to the sensible world, although as an object of pure reason in its practical use. (A 808 / B836)

We humans conceive of nature as the arena for the performance of our duties. We have before our minds the idea of human beings all being able to follow the moral law, and the idea of the sensible world as it would be under that empirically possible yet empirically unlikely condition. This idea of the moral world does not yet involve any transcendent concept such as God. Thus, under the conception of the practical limited to determination of the rules for free behaviour, this idea of reason applied to the sensible world is all that practical reason needs. Kant himself notes this when he concludes that this was the reply to the question "what should I do", with the answer being, "do that through which you will become worthy of happiness" (A808 / B836))

Kant's next move in the argument is to ask how this determination of our duty is related to our expectations for happiness. Here he again notes that this question mixes practical and theoretical concerns:

I say, accordingly, that just as the moral principles are necessary in accordance with reason in its practical use, it is equally necessary to assume in accordance with reason in its theoretical use that everyone has cause to hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his conduct, and that the system of morality is therefore inseparably combined with the system of happiness, though only in the idea of pure reason. (A809 / B837)

The theoretical use of reason at issue here is applied to the question of linking moral behavior to expectations of happiness, in contrast to the practical use of reason which is to determine the moral law itself. Since theoretical reason is at work, it seems as if Kant ought to invoke some of the same concerns that arose in the discussion of transcendental hypotheses, in particular, the

way that the concept or idea of reason would not itself be affirmed but only entertained for the function of making some other claim, or defeating a claim made by another.

Indeed, Kant hints at this status, although he does not clearly state it. This comes in the following section of the Canon, “On having an opinion, knowing, and believing”. For the most part this section presents belief in God as belief that there is an object matching the concept “God.” While denying that human beings have any knowledge that there is a God, Kant argues that human beings inescapably believe that there is a God. He contrasts knowing as taking something to be true on the grounds of both objective and subjective sufficiency on the one hand, with believing something to be true on the grounds of subjective sufficiency but objective insufficiency on the other hand. Belief in God, then, appears to be a “taking to be true” that there is a being God matching the concept “God”.

But a closer look reveals some concerns on Kant’s part to weaken this interpretation. To see this it will help to focus on the definition of “conviction” as subjective sufficiency, which leads to the issue the nature of the practical relation that lies at the basis of belief.

Kant explains subjective sufficiency as “conviction”, and defines “conviction” this way: “If it is valid for everyone merely as long as he has reason, then its ground is objectively sufficient” (A820 / B848) and contrasts this with “persuasion” which is not based on reason but on “the particular constitution of the subject”. Insofar as a human being’s reason is the basis of the “taking to be true”, then, the human being believes something on a subjectively sufficient basis. But it does not have objective sufficiency, for then it would be knowledge. Kant defines “objective sufficiency” as “certainty (for everyone)” as opposed to “conviction (for myself)” (A822 / B850). Why would conviction, based on reason shared by everyone rather than the “particular constitution of the subject”, not be a taking to be true “for everyone” but only “for myself”? The only way that validity can be universal among humans as rational beings yet subjectively sufficient only for oneself is if the proposition in question arises from something universally shared yet private. Reason as a faculty is, we assume, universally shared among human beings – but it cannot be their mere *possession* of reason as a cognitive faculty that is private, for our understanding is another cognitive faculty that is private in this same sense, yet Kant does not thereby claim that the cognitions of the understanding are merely subjectively sufficient. There must be some private relation between the individual and his reason, a relation that cannot be shared with others although it can be assumed to be experienced by others, that lies at the basis of this subjective sufficiency.

Indeed, that is exactly what Kant intends. He argues that the “practical relation” is the only possible basis of belief, as opposed to knowledge or opinion (A823 / B851). This “practical relation” is an “aim” for some end. The only end that grounds belief in God, of course, is a moral end, which Kant defines as “that I fulfil the moral law in all points”, which, in combination with “all ends together” in a consistent system, requires that there be a God (A828 / B856). I will leave aside the problem here that Kant again assumes that obligation to follow the moral law implies that one really will follow the moral law and thus requires the conditions for completion. Instead I will point out that Kant is tying belief in God to the relation a person has to obligation. He denies that this belief in God can be justified to anyone objectively, instead placing its basis firmly in an individual’s perspective:

Of course, no one will be able to boast that he **knows** that there is a God and a future life; for if he knows that, then he is precisely the man I have long sought. All knowing (if it concerns an object of reason alone) can be communicated, and I would therefore also be able to hope to have my knowledge extended to such a wonderful degree by his instruction. No, the conviction is not **logical** but **moral** certainty, and, since it depends on subjective grounds (of moral disposition) I must not even say “**it is** morally certain that there is a God,” etc., but rather “**I am** morally certain” etc. That is, the belief in a God and another world is so interwoven with my moral disposition that I am in as little danger of ever surrendering the former as I am worried that the latter can ever be torn away from me. (A828-29 / B856-57)

My moral disposition, that is the relation between my will (or choice) and the moral law originating in my own reason, is the sole basis of belief in God. As such, this relation is individual, depending as it does on each individual’s own choices. Kant notes in the following paragraph that an individual who was indifferent to morality, that is, whose will did not take up a relation of obligation to follow the law of reason, would not have this conviction, and for such an individual the existence of God would be a merely speculative rather than a practical question.

Kant’s minimization of belief is perhaps clearest in his claim that the *effect* the concept of God would have on a person’s moral disposition is what constitutes the belief. He claims that a belief has even less substance than a transcendental hypothesis. If I took my belief to be a hypothesis, Kant says,

I would thereby make myself liable for more of a concept of the constitution of a world-cause and of another world than I can really boast of; for of that which I even only assume as a hypothesis I must know at least enough of its properties so that I need invent not its concept but only its existence. The word “belief,” however, *concerns only the direction that an idea gives me and the subjective influence on the advancement of my actions of reason that holds me fast to it*, even though I am not in a position to give an account of it from a speculative point of view. (A827 / B855, emphasis mine)

Here Kant claims that a transcendental hypothesis will take a previously given concept and “invent” (*erdichten*, i.e. think up or make claim to) only its existence. With a belief I am not in

possession of the appropriate concept to any degree of distinction, let alone am I in a position to claim that an object exists matching that concept. Instead, the belief is a functional relation between the idea (or concept) and the advancement of my actions. The belief has the following peculiar relation between idea and, as it were, its referent: the idea refers not to an object but to somehow to the individual's moral disposition. The belief functions to strengthen the moral disposition.

Now I may be reading too much into Kant's few words here. But that Kant offers these limitations on belief at least suggests that it is not appropriate to interpret his conception of belief, the equivalent of a postulate in the first Critique, as a straightforward assumption on the practical side of what could not be proved on the theoretical side. The nature of belief is rather something different than simple assertion that an object exists to correspond to a concept.

We see that there are two noteworthy elements to Kant's theory of the practical postulate of God in the period before and in the Critique of Pure Reason. First, Kant at least sometimes assumed that theoretical and practical hypotheses were essentially alike. He thought that both of them operated along similar lines, falling short of proof but instead satisfying reason by the introduction of concepts. Second, Kant, perhaps simultaneously, argued that the practical offered a different, or stronger, kind of hypothesis which he will later call a postulate. When he developed this difference in the first Critique in the Canon as a theory of belief, he hinted that beliefs were not directed toward objects but toward the subject holding the belief. These elements, when put together, indicate that Kant had a way to develop his theory of postulates as a functional concepts that do not refer to objects but that nonetheless play a necessary role in our practical lives. He still insisted, however, that the postulates did more than just that, as we will see in the next section.

II: IN THE CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON

The doctrine of the postulates of pure practical reason is explained in its fullest in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.¹⁴ There are two contradictory tendencies as Kant further develops his conception of the postulates. First, there is a tendency to claim that practical reason does in fact affirm exactly the same propositions that remain unproved by theoretical reason, in

¹⁴ I skip over some Reflections from the period between the first and second *Critiques*. In R6099 Kant says that a postulate is more than a hypothesis, and that this is because morality is more than just pragmatic. R6109 and R6111 both stress that God is postulate not mere hypothesis, and that this is due to the inescapable moral interest rather than just the contingent pragmatic interest. These can be taken to mean that postulates are like hypotheses, except that instead of merely offering them temporarily for defense they are held in the mind as a kind of constant support for morality. See also R6283.

particular, there is a stress on the existence of God as something practical reason not only may assume for its own ends but also as something it can force theoretical reason to accept. Second, in the other direction, there is a tendency to stress the interest of practical reason and the function of the postulates for moral purposes along with a minimization of their cognitive content.

It is first useful to note that Kant himself was worried that readers would misunderstand the status of the postulates. He notes in the "Preface" to the *Critique of Practical Reason* that this second *Critique* does have the problem the first *Critique* had in introducing new and strange terminology. The second *Critique* will even "approach popularity" in its topics and thus ought to be relatively well understood. However, Kant added a footnote to this paragraph to try to deal with what he obviously thought might be new terminology that would be misunderstood regardless. Here is what he says there about the term "postulate":

But the expression, 'a postulate of pure practical reason,' could most of all occasion misinterpretation if confused with the meaning that postulates of pure mathematics have, which bring with them apodictic certainty. The latter, however, postulate the possibility of an action, the object of which has been previously theoretically cognized a priori with complete certitude as possible. but the former postulate the possibility of an object itself (God and the immortality of the soul) from apodictic practical laws, and therefore only on behalf of a practical reason, so that this certainty of the postulated possibility is not at all theoretical, hence also not apodictic, i.e., it is not a necessity cognized with respect to the object but is, instead, an assumption necessary with respect to the subject's observation of its objective but practical laws, hence merely a necessary hypothesis. I could find no better expression for this subjective but nevertheless unconditional rational necessity. (5:11)

Kant's attempt to clear things up, as is often the case, only makes them more obscure. The postulates are said not to postulate an object itself but to postulate "the possibility of an object". Yet possibility of objects is a theoretical matter, not a practical determination. Further, Kant holds that the postulate is "a necessary hypothesis", thereby using a term, "hypothesis," that as we have seen he had specifically contrasted with moral belief in the first *Critique* (A827 / B855), although one that he had also used to refer to both theoretical and moral claims about God in his Reflections. Kant also tries in this passage to explain the nature of the necessity involved as not a necessity with respect to the object but a necessity with respect to the subject, in fact with "the subject's observation of its objective but practical laws", which he calls a "subjective rational necessity." Kant's attempt to clear up what he must have thought was a confusing explanation of the postulates does not itself shed much light on them.

The more detailed argument about the postulates comes in the "Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason", beginning with his introduction of the term in a discussion of the immortality of the soul (5:122) and continuing through the end of the Dialectic (5:148). I noted above that

there are two tendencies in this discussion. The first is the tendency, easily recognized, to describe the postulates as claiming on behalf of practical reason the existence of objects that theoretical reason itself could neither prove nor disprove. Kant's definition of "postulate" shows that the theoretical concepts appear to be at issue: a postulate is "a *theoretical* proposition, though one not demonstrable as such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditionally valid *practical* law" (5:122). The bulk of section VI, "On the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason in General" is devoted to showing how the postulates of immortality, freedom, and the existence of God give "objective reality" to the related or identical concepts from the Dialectic of the first *Critique* (5:132-133). This tendency is also certainly quite strong in section III "Primacy of Pure Practical Reason" where Kant claims that the primacy of practical reason entails that it can insist that speculative reason "must accept these propositions and, although they are transcendent for it, try to unite them, as a foreign possession handed over to it, with its own concepts", implying that speculative reason must accept the postulates as being of like kind with theoretical concepts (5:120). And of course there is the abundant use of the term "exists", both in reference to the immortal soul and God (see, for example, 5:122 and 5:124). In fact, on face value, it appears that this tendency to treat the postulates as the practical replacement for an existence claim regarding transcendent entities is central to Kant's intentions.¹⁵

Yet Kant has another, opposite tendency in his description and analysis of the postulates, one that limits or negates these existence claims and instead presents the postulates as a merely subjective cast of mind which functions for moral purposes. I want to begin my discussion of this other tendency with a revealing passage that is often overlooked¹⁶, yet which is of the highest importance in understand the nature of the postulates. In the penultimate section of the Dialectic in the second *Critique*, "On Assent from a Need of Pure Reason", Kant tries to respond to the concern that some might have that the postulate is a command to believe something, which he says is an absurdity (5:144). In order to show that in fact the postulate is not commanded but merely assented to, he makes a startling concession:

¹⁵ Another way to minimize the import of these existential claims besides the manner in which I pursue the issue is to focus on the role that belief or faith (*Glaube*) plays in these claims. Not cognition of God's existence but only belief in God's existence is required for practical purposes. Adina Davidovich makes this claim in *Religion as a Province of Meaning: The Kantian Foundations of Modern Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993). "[E]ven if God does not actually exist, and we only believe in the existence of God, the practical consequences for obedience to the moral law are the same. Therefore, a postulate of Practical Reason does not have to be known to be true, and probably does not even have to be true, in order to serve its practical purpose." (pp. 20-21)

¹⁶ Guyer is one who notes the importance of this claim (Guyer, 2000).

I said above that in accordance with a mere course of nature in the world happiness in exact conformity with moral worth is not to be expected and is to be held impossible, and that therefore the possibility of the highest good on this side can be granted only on the presupposition of a moral author of the world. I deliberately postponed the restricting of this judgment to the subjective conditions of our reason so as not to make use of it until the manner of its assent had been determined more closely. In fact, the impossibility referred to is *merely subjective*, that is, our reason finds it *impossible for it* to conceive, in the mere course of nature, a connection so exactly proportioned and so thoroughly purposive between events occurring in the world in accordance with such different laws, although, as with everything else in nature that is purposive, it nevertheless cannot prove – that is, set forth sufficiently on objective grounds – the impossibility of it in accordance with universal laws of nature. (5:145)

Kant himself here weakens a crucial step in his argument for the postulate of God. The existence of God had been postulated in order to serve as the ground of the correspondence of happiness and virtue precisely as the means to ensure that this correspondence is possible (5:124-25). Kant now concedes that it *is possible that nature itself* in accordance merely with its own natural laws would provide the correspondence (recall that these natural laws will include laws regarding human behavior). “Objective grounds” for this possibility cannot be ruled out, although human beings’ reason cannot fathom how this possibility might be conceived in any detail, hence, Kant claims, there are “subjective grounds” for human reason to reject the possibility.

Still, the possibility is a live option objectively. Kant calls the existence of two possible objective explanations of the possibility of correspondence between virtue with happiness “this irresolution of speculative reason”. Both options are genuine. Both allow for the possibility of the highest good. Notice how Kant describes these two options as equal before he invokes a deciding factor in tipping the balance toward the side of God rather than nature:

The command to promote the highest good is based objectively (in practical reason); its possibility in general is likewise objectively based (in theoretical reason, which has nothing against it). But as for the way we are to represent this possibility, whether in accordance with universal laws of nature without a wise author presiding over nature or only on the supposition of such an author, reason cannot decide this objectively. Now a *subjective* condition of reason enters into this, the only way in which it is theoretically possible for it to think the exact harmony of the realm of nature with the realm of morals as the condition of the possibility of the highest good, and at the same time the only way that is conducive to morality (which is subject to an *objective* law of reason). (5:145)

Both options are “way[s] we are to represent this possibility” which pass the test of theoretical reason. Thus there are two ways that human beings can represent the single possibility of the highest good: one purely in accordance with natural laws (although without the details which are apparently beyond our reason) and one invoking God. Either of these two possibilities will fulfill the *function* of explaining the possibility of the highest good. Kant claims that human beings will choose to represent this function by using the postulate of God because this postulate is the only

one of the two conducive to morality. Although he does not spell this reason out, presumably Kant means to invoke something about the way that the concept of God is *subjectively* comprehensible to reason in a way that the highest good in accordance with mere laws of nature is not; the concept of God would thus be more “conducive” to morality by being more amenable to human cognitive faculties – a subjective consideration -- not by being more likely by any objective standards¹⁷.

This concession by Kant near the end of his discussion of the posulates helps to illuminate, I think, the arguments earlier in his discussion, and shows a tendency to minimize the theoretical, existential claims that appear in the postulates in favor of a functional, purely practical relation. I will look at this with regard to two aspects: first, the source of the concept of God as constructed by practical reason, and second the discussion of reference to the subject rather than the object.

First, there is Kant’s denial of theoretical and synthetic knowledge of the concept, and the corresponding insistence that the concept is entirely created by practical reason. Kant denies that we have any theoretical knowledge of the concept and denies that we have any synthetic knowledge of the object at all, except to grant that the concept somehow does correspond to some object. In this complicated passage, Kant takes great pains to argue that nothing about the object of the postulate is known or even claimed for theoretical purposes besides the mere existence of something that somehow corresponds to the concept – and Kant seems reluctant to allow even this concession:

Since nothing further is accomplished in this by practical reason than that those concepts are real and really have their (possible) objects, but nothing is thereby given us by way of intuition of them (which can also not be demanded), no synthetic proposition is possible by this reality granted them Now they receive objective reality through an apodictic practical law, as necessary conditions of the possibility of what it commands us *to make an object*, that is, we are instructed by it *that they have objects*, although we are not able to show how their concept refers to an object, and this is not yet cognition *of these objects*; for one cannot thereby judge synthetically about them at all or determine their application theoretically There was therefore no extension of the cognition *of given supersensible objects*, but there was nevertheless an extension of theoretical reason and of its cognition with respect to the supersensible in general, inasmuch as theoretical reason was forced to grant *that there are such objects*, though it cannot determine them more closely and so cannot itself extend this cognition of the objects. (5:134-35)

¹⁷ For a discussion and detailed rejection of the arguments Kant gives that an atheist would have insurmountable difficulty with moral incentives related to the highest good, see Lara Denis, “Kant’s Criticisms of Atheism”, *Kantstudien* 94 (2003) 198-219. She suggests at one point that an atheist might in fact be able to picture a non-theistic manner for the supreme virtue to correspond to happiness, although she does not invoke Kant’s distinction between subjective and objective comprehensions of possibility that Kant mentions at 5:145 (Denis, p. 210-11).

Kant appears in this passage to be denying that any theoretical cognition of an object is possible, that is, that beyond a claim that some object exists that bears some reference relation to the concept, nothing can be known about the object. Kant claims even more than this, perhaps without recognizing the import of his claim, when he asserts that “no synthetic proposition is possible”, for the existence claim itself would be a synthetic proposition. If indeed no synthetic proposition is possible, then even the existence of an object cannot be asserted of that concept. I think it is possible that Kant intends to allow only some existence claim regarding “the supersensible in general” rather than regarding any specific supersensible object directly corresponding to the concept.¹⁸ To put this more clearly: Kant might mean that theoretical reason must concede only that there is some supersensible object that can fulfill the function assigned to the practical concept, without conceding that the supersensible object must be precisely that captured in the practical concept.

There is another side to this coin: not only is it true that theoretical reason cannot have any synthetic cognition about an object corresponding to the concept in the postulate, it is also true that the concept itself stems from practical rather than theoretical reason. This point is, like many dealt with here, unclear in Kant. We have seen how he has claimed that the postulates are theoretical propositions, and how they correspond to the theoretical ideas from the *Dialectic* of the first *Critique*. These considerations point toward the claim that practical reason borrows the concepts for the postulates from theoretical reason. The concepts, then, in all their detail, would be those constructed by theoretical reason for theoretical purposes. Practical reason would only have to locate those concepts in order to postulate the reality of objects matching them. But this understanding is misleading. Kant argues that practical reason itself not only asserts the existence of God, but also constructs the concept of God used in the postulates.

There remains for reason only one single procedure by which to arrive at this cognition [of God], namely, as pure reason to start from the supreme principle of its pure practical use (inasmuch as this is always directed simply to the *existence* of something as a result of reason). And then, in its unavoidable problem, namely that of the necessary direction of the will to the highest good, there is shown not only the necessity of assuming such an original being in relation to the possibility of this good in the world but – what is most remarkable – something that was quite lacking in the progress of reason on the path of nature, *a precisely determined concept of this original being*. (5:139)

¹⁸ Allen Wood argues that Kant cannot possibly mean to deny the synthetic claim of existence (Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970, pp. 148f). But Wood's insistence is based on an assumption that Kant must understand the postulates to be asserting the existence of a transcendent substance. I am arguing that this assumption is unwarranted.

He explains that theoretical reason, by using a posteriori teleological reasoning about God as cause of nature, can infer a concept only of an imperfect God, powerful but not omnipotent, wise but not omniscient, etc. Practical concerns, in contrast, require a concept of God with the highest perfections; omniscience, for example, is required in order for God to know all possible conduct and even all possible inner dispositions of moral agents (5:140). Practical reason itself constructs the concept of God, and only after constructing it does it find a similar concept at work in theoretical reason, and so makes it appropriate. Kant concludes that “the concept of God, then, is one belonging originally not to physics, that is, to speculative reason, but to morals” (5:140).

It is important that the concept of God (as well as the other postulates) is constructed by practical reason. Practical reason constructs the concept of God for its own purposes. The concept is constructed in order to fulfill a certain function, namely to provide in some detail an explanation of the possibility of the highest good. We have already seen that Kant admits that, objectively, it is possible that nature itself, without recourse to anything supersensible, could be the ground of the possibility of the highest good. Subjectively, however, reason creates the concept of God in order to satisfy itself that the highest good is possible. The constructed concept is not borrowed from theoretical reason. Not only the function of the concept is practical, the very concept itself is practical. Theoretical reason plays virtually no part in the generation of the postulates.

This way in which practical reason is autonomous with regard to the postulates leads to the second aspect of the functional nature of the postulates, namely, Kant’s claims about the “immanent” or “practical” reality for the postulates, where he even claims that “reference” is not to any object but to the subject. He claims that the postulates of God and immortality are “immanent” rather than transcendent in two places in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:¹⁹

But is our cognition really extended in this way by pure practical reason, and is what was transcendent for speculative reason immanent in practical reason? Certainly, but only for practical purposes. For we thereby cognize neither the nature of our souls, nor the intelligible world, nor the supreme being as to what they are in themselves, but have merely unified the concepts of them in the practical concept of the highest good as the object of our will, and have done so altogether a priori through pure reason but only by means of the moral law, and, moreover, only in reference to it, with respect to the object it commands. But how freedom is even possible and how this kind of causality has to be represented theoretically and positively is not thereby seen; that there is such a causality is only postulated by the moral law and for the sake of it. (5:133)

Theoretical reason was forced to grant *that there are such objects*, though it cannot determine them more closely and so cannot itself extend this cognition of the objects (which have now been given to it on practical grounds and, moreover, only for practical use); for this increment, then,

¹⁹ Earlier in the second *Critique* he held that freedom is “immanent” practically although “transcendent” theoretically (5:105)

pure theoretical reason, for which all those ideas are transcendent and without objects, has to thank its practical capacity only. In this they become *immanent* and *constitutive* inasmuch as they are grounds of the possibility of *making real the necessary object* of pure practical reason (the highest good), whereas apart from this they are *transcendent* and merely *regulative* principles of speculative reason, which do not require it to assume a new object beyond experience but only to bring its use in experience nearer to completeness. (5:135)

In these two passages, Kant contrasts “immanent” with “transcendent”. Further, in the first passage, Kant also holds that the postulate is “only in reference to the moral law”.

Kant’s use of the term “immanent” here can be explained in part by reference to some of the Reflections from earlier periods. In several Reflections from the 1770s and into the mid 1780s, Kant uses the term “immanent” to refer to nature in space and time and thus to what can be known, and “transcendent” to refer to what goes beyond it and thus to what cannot be known (R5639, 18:276, 1778-1788; R6154, 18:470, 1783-84). At one point in a draft of the Antinomy of Pure Reason he contrasts “immanent” principles, which restrict themselves to appearances, to “transcendent” principles which stem from “the spontaneity of pure reason” to give a unity beyond appearances (R4757, 17:703-04, 1775-77). The First *Critique* also fits this use of “immanent” when, in the Dialectic, Kant says “We will call the principles whose application stays wholly and completely within the limits of possible experience ‘immanent’” (A295-96 / B352). The meaning of “immanent” that can be drawn from these Reflections and applied to the second *Critique* is roughly as follows: something immanent is something that refers to appearances, i.e. to nature.

Given this meaning of “immanent”, Kant’s use of the term to describe the postulate seems puzzling. How could the concept of God ever be something that refers to appearances? In both of the passages Kant notes that the immanence attributed to the postulate “God” is in its relation to highest good as the object of practical reason that duty commands us to try to create. Our moral duties, of course, apply to human beings as living in nature in space and time, that is, in appearance. The postulate of God is immanent, then, in its relation to the actions of human beings in nature as they strive to create the highest good, keeping in mind that the possibility of this highest good is for them – subjectively – represented by the concept “God” created specifically for this purpose by practical reason itself. I think this is what Kant means by this key sentence from one of the passages above: “For we thereby cognize neither the nature of our souls, nor the intelligible world, nor the supreme being as to what they are in themselves, but have merely *unified the concepts of them in the practical concept of the highest good* as the object of our will, and have done so altogether a priori through pure reason *but only by means of the moral law*, and, moreover, *only in reference to it*, with respect to the object it commands

(5:133, my emphasis). We “unify” the concepts of God and of the other postulates together with the concept of the highest good in order to complete in our minds a picture of the possibility of the latter. But this is done not by claiming that the concept of God corresponds directly to any object, but rather that the concept is merely functioning to sustain our hopes in the highest good as a result of our action in accordance with the moral law, or as Kant says “in reference to” the moral law. The concept of God merely functions as a support for the moral law, and thus in reference to it, and to the immanent moral life human beings live in nature, rather than to any object that might be God as a transcendent being.²⁰

III: AFTER THE *CRITIQUE OF PRACTICAL REASON*

The period after the *Critique of Practical Reason* reveals that of these two tendencies in Kant’s thought about the postulates, he finally clarifies his preference for the functionalist, non-ontological interpretation. Nearly all commentators²¹ are in agreement that in the *Opus Postumum* Kant affirms that the concept “God” used for practical purposes does not refer to an independent being God. This is his final position, one that I have tried to show is implicit in his prior work²². But the journey from the *Critique of Practical Reason* to the *Opus Postumum* is also marked by some of Kant’s most direct discussions of religion, in particular the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, where Kant advocates religious belief and practice to a degree that quite clearly appears to require a commitment to the existence of God. (There is also an important discussion in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* regarding the relation between teleological views of nature and the role of God that must be treated in a separate chapter). I will

²⁰ Here I will note that there is yet another strain to Kant’s discussion in the second *Critique* about God. He says at one point that the postulate is not a theoretical cognition of the existence of God but a personal desire that there be a God (5:143) This strain is discussed in detail in Drew Pierce “Kant e a Justificação das Crenças Morais” (*Impulso* Piracicaba, 15, 2004, 35-46), which argues that the postulate of God should be interpreted as a claim that we “ought to believe” in God.

²¹ Here the most famous exception is Erich Adickes, who in his book against Vaihinger declares that Kant was always a theist and that the apparent denials of the existence of God as a postulate in the *Opus Postumum* concern not the existence of God but are discussions only of the origin of the human idea of God. (Adickes, pp. 273 ff)

²² Patrick Kain, while admitting that in the *Opus Postumum* Kant takes the position that God as postulate is merely an idea and not an independent substance, claims in contrast to my position that this view “both confirms and qualifies” Kain’s interpretation of Kant’s postulate prior to that time in which “reason leads us to believe in God’s actual existence” (Kain “Interpreting Kant’s Theory of Divine Commands” (*Kantian Review* 9 (2005) 128-149), p. 137). Kain interprets Kant as insisting on the existence of God, and discounts the elements I have highlighted. In contrast I emphasize the philosophical importance of these elements and read Kant’s position in the *Opus Postumum* as fundamentally consistent with his earlier position, in that I take Kant to have finally resolved the tension in his original position in favor of the postulates as not involving existence claims.

show that even in the *Religion* the tendency toward making the postulates practical functions rather than theoretical existence claims is evident.

The *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* at the very least contains evidence that Kant recognizes that the concept of God is constructed by practical reason and ought to be understood to have practical but not theoretical significance.

So far as theoretical cognition and profession of faith are concerned, no assertoric knowledge is required in religion (even of the existence of God), since with our lack of insight into supersensible objects any such profession can well be hypocritically feigned; speculatively, what is required is rather only a *problematic* assumption (hypothesis) concerning the supreme cause of things, whereas with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work, what is presupposed is an *assertoric* faith, practical and hence free, that promises a result for the final aim of religion; and this faith needs only *the idea of God* which must occur to every morally earnest (and therefore religious) pursuit of the good, without pretending to be able to secure objective reality for it through theoretical cognition. Subjectively, the *minimum* of cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must alone suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being. (6:153-54)

In this passage Kant invokes the contrast between the mere idea of God and the existence of God corresponding to that idea. He holds that only the idea is required for moral purposes, with one small addition, namely that the “minimum of cognition” that it is possible for God to exist is required. Kant is still holding on to the claim that the idea must at least possibly correspond to reality, although he does not require the idea to be thought actually to correspond to reality.

Even given this minimal theoretical aspect, in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* the practical import of the concept of God, as well as other related religious concepts and doctrines, is stressed over any theoretical implications. In fact Kant even argues that the practical effect of some doctrines requires that their theoretical details be ignored. For example, in a long footnote regarding theoretical consideration of an afterlife, Kant comes very close to mocking the idea of hell as punishment (6:69-71). He argues that on the one hand eternal punishment in hell would seem by many to be too harsh a punishment for a finite amount of evil, so evil doers might expect easy escape through last-minute conversion and divine mercy. But on the other hand a finite duration of punishment in hell would seem to some as survivable and tolerable as a tradeoff for a certain amount of pleasure obtained by evil means in this life. After discussing this and related matters for two pages, Kant concludes that it is better to simply ignore these issues: “if, instead of [extending it to] the *constitutive* principles of the cognition of supersensible objects, into which we cannot in fact have any insight, we restricted our judgment to the *regulative* principles, which content themselves with only their practical use, human wisdom would be better off in a great many respects, and there would be no breeding of would-be

knowledge of something of which we fundamentally know nothing” (6:71). The point Kant is making is that the detailed tenets of religion might not survive theoretical scrutiny, and that if their moral effect depends upon their theoretical truth, then morality will be harmed. Instead, Kant holds, we should use religious tenets as, in essence, regulative principles for our moral duties, principles we hold in our minds only to the extent necessary for them to aid our moral duties.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant notes that any duties we might think we have toward God are really duties to ourselves:

This idea [of God] proceeds entirely from our own reason and we ourselves make it, whether for the theoretical purpose of explaining to ourselves the purposiveness in the universe as a whole or also for the purpose of serving as the incentive in our conduct. Hence we do not have before us, in this idea, a given being to whom we would be under obligation; for in that case its reality would first have to be shown (disclosed) through experience. Rather, it is a duty of the human being to himself to apply this idea, which presents itself unavoidably to reason, to the moral law in him, where it is of the greatest moral fruitfulness. In this (**practical**) sense it can therefore be said that to have religion is a duty of the human being to himself. (6:443-4)

The *idea* of God, rather than “a given being” here is said to be of importance, and only because the idea can be applied to the moral law. Later in the book Kant stresses that we “abstract” from the existence of God when utilizing the idea of God in philosophical morals: “The formal aspect of all religion, if religion is defined as the ‘sum of all duties as divine commands’ belongs to philosophic morals, since this definition expresses only the relation of reason to the idea of God which reason makes for itself; and this does not yet make a duty of religion into a duty to God, as a being existing outside our idea, since we still abstract from his existence” (6:487). In morality, we abstract from the existence of God while nonetheless utilizing the idea of God. I think this kind of relationship can be understood only as a functional relationship in which the concept of God is, qua concept, playing a role in the human.

The functional role of the postulate of God and the consequent limitation of this postulate to the concept qua concept, is also evident in some of the unpublished notes and drafts Kant wrote in the 1790s prior to the *Opus Postumum*. There is a reintroduction of the idea of “as if”. This reflection from his notes on Logic can be taken as paradigmatic of this line of thought:

One cannot obtain or prove objective reality for any theoretical **idea** except that of freedom alone, and only because it is the condition of the moral law whose reality is an axiom. The reality of the idea of God can be proved only through this and thus only with a practical purpose, i.e. act as if there is a God, thus it can be proved **for** this purpose. (R2842, 1790-1804? (1776-78?); 16:541)²³

²³ The Reflection is repeated in the published book of Kant’s Logic, edited by Jäsche.

The dating of this Reflection itself shows that Kant could have held these views as early as 1776 (as was shown in my earlier section). Certainly in the 1790s Kant has established to his own satisfaction that the idea of God is valid only for the practical purpose of defending the possibility of the highest good, and here he expresses this position with the hypothetical “act as if there is a God”, not the assertoric “act because there is a God”.²⁴

This position accords with the position Kant laid out in his unpublished draft essay “What real progress has metaphysics made in Germany since the time of Leibniz and Wolff?”, written sometime during 1793-1795 but not published until after his death. He claims there that the moral arguments for God, immortality, and freedom are not proof of their truth, nor of any “objective teaching as to the reality of their objects, for in regard to the super-sensible this is impossible; instead, it is merely an injunction, subjectively and indeed practically valid, and in this respect sufficient, so to act as though we knew that these objects were real” (20:298). Regarding whether this also involves existence claims, Kant is less clear. He adds to the “as if” discussion a claim that we “voluntarily grant them objective reality”, but only a few paragraphs later claims that they have “reality in a subjective context” but are not “knowledge of the existence of the object corresponding to this form.” (20:299-300). Even more confusing is Kant’s claim that the practical proof is “thus really not a proof of God’s existence absolutely (*simpliciter*) but only in a certain respect (*secundum quid*), namely in relation to the final end which the moral man has and should have, and thus with reference merely to the rationality of assuming such a being; whereby man is then enabled to accord influence upon his decisions to an idea which he frames for himself, on moral principles, exactly as if he had drawn this idea from a given object” (20:305). A proof “in relation to” something, “only in a certain respect” but not “absolutely” does not sound like a proof of anything but only a subjective expression or need, and Kant’s gloss on this claim that we take the idea of God that we have framed for ourselves and allow that idea to influence our behavior. The idea that human beings construct the concept of God in practical reason is further discussed in the “Progress” essay. Kant notes that sometimes “we forget that these Ideas have been arbitrarily framed by ourselves, and are not derived from the objects” (20:300).

²⁴ There is a similar comment, “Practical idea as regulative principle, to act as if there were a God and another world”, in a review of the whole critical philosophy Kant wrote in November or December 1797 (R6358, 18:683), although later in that same Reflection Kant seems to indicate that God is to be understood in terms of a metaphysics of the supersensible (18:685).

This review of Kant's writings in the 1790s shows that well before the *Opus Postumum* Kant was making claims that were major elements of the view that we have only an idea of God and do not also affirm a being God. Let us now briefly assess his final position in the *Opus Postumum*.

Virtually all of the passages cited from the *Opus Postumum* in this regard are from the years 1800 and after, appearing in what is known as the first Konvolut (reprinted in *Kants gesammelte Schriften* 21: 3-158). They are among the very last thoughts Kant set down in writing. The position that Kant works out in these writings is a complex review of the nature of his transcendental philosophy. In part he seems to be simply toying with some of the ideas that Fichte and Schelling had published; but in part he appears to be genuinely attempting to restate the transcendental idealism he had earlier worked out as a unified system of ideas. I will not attempt to do anything more here than focus on a few aspects of the concept of God that appear in this last stage of Kant's thought. I will show that the position I have claimed is implicit in Kant's earlier philosophy is stated clearly in the *Opus Postumum*. Three aspects are treated: first, the nature of the concept of God as a mere idea without any claim to correspondence to a substance; second, the practical rather than theoretical use of this concept; and third the construction of the concept by reason.

Kant frequently in these notes identifies God with an idea or concept. In fact in one note Kant first wrote "God is a personal being" then inserted the phrase "the concept of" to get "God is *the concept of* a personal being" (my emphasis on Kants insertion) and then further adds "Whether such a being exists is not asked in transcendental philosophy" (21:45).

We have already seen above that Kant treats the concept of God as itself a useful concept without an object. As he states this position clearly in the *Opus Postumum* he adds two new elements. First, he claims that all of transcendental philosophy is merely a set of ideas without existential import:

Transcendental philosophy is the system of ideas in an absolute whole (21:80) [. . .]
System of pure philosophy. First part – Transcendental philosophy. what we make as objects for ourselves. Second part – what nature makes as objects for us. (21:118)

All ideas of reason are treated the way that I have interpreted the postulate of God. This ought not be surprising, given the earlier discussion of theoretical hypotheses as well as the regulative use of the ideas of reason. The idea "God" is but one idea that reason has created to use merely as idea without any assertion about God's existence.

A second new element is the identification of this idea of God with pure practical reason itself. Here Kant is thinking about the concept of God as lawgiver. He equates God not as a substance but as “the highest moral principle in me . . . God is moral/practical reason legislating for itself” (21:144-5). By equating God with the self-legislation of reason, Kant clearly abandons any conception of God as substance and instead identifies God with the functioning of pure practical reason. Such a conception conforms to the earlier claims that only the idea of God is necessary, and that it functions within practical reason as a confirmation of the possibility of the highest good. To say that God is “pure practical reason itself” in its moving forces is to admit that the *idea* of God is all that is needed, and all that is meant, when postulating God.

The second aspect I want to show in the *Opus Postumum* is the moral or practical nature of the idea of God. Obviously the identification of God with pure practical reason’s self-legislation is strong evidence in this direction. But Kant also stresses the moral function of the idea God:

Difference between unconditioned and conditioned duty of practical reason. The former has God as originator – God is thus not a substance to be found outside me but merely a moral relationship in me. (21:149).

In these notes Kant discusses God in terms of the motivating force of the categorical imperative. We human beings create the concept of God in order to provide ourselves with a concrete idea of the power and authority that we accord to the moral law.

This reason for postulating God is different from the reasons that Kant gave in the arguments in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. God in the second *Critique* is needed to serve as representation for the possibility of the highest good. Here in the *Opus Postumum* (as in some of Kant’s other writings and his course lectures), God is seen as the legislator posited as commanding us to obey the moral law. There is one passage in this series that does discuss the highest good:

That philosophy (doctrine of wisdom) is called “worldly wisdom” in German is relevant, for wisdom, the science of wisdom, aims at the final end (the highest good). – Now this wisdom, in the strict sense, can only be attributed to God, and such a being must be given at the same time all power; for without this the final end (the highest good) would be an idea without reality; so the proposition: **there is a God is an existential proposition.** (21:149)

I admit that this passage is evidence against my interpretation, in that Kant claims that there is existential claim regarding God related to the highest good. I don’t think that this passage alone overturns my claim, since it is also at odds with virtually every other passage regarding the

concept of God as a mere idea in the *Opus Postumum* and it can be minimized like similar claims in the second *Critique*.²⁵

The third aspect that I wanted to show in the *Opus Postumum* is the way that Kant discusses the concept of God as a construction of reason. This is perhaps the most important aspect for understanding the real intent of Kant's doctrine of the postulates. For here Kant not only shows that the postulate of God is a concept without reference to an object, he not only shows that this concept functions for human beings for moral purposes, but he shows that it is essential to the core of Kant's ethics, the autonomy of reason, that the concept of God is one constructed by reason for its own purposes. Here is one of Kant's clearest statements of this claim:

Transcendental philosophy is the consciousness of the capacity of being the originator of the system of one's ideas, in theoretical as well as in practical respect. [to the right of this sentence:] **Ideas** are not mere concepts but laws of thought which the subject prescribes to itself. **Autonomy**. (21:93)

Reason prescribes certain laws of thought to itself. These laws are the ideas of reason. Kant quite clearly here identifies ideas of reason not with concepts purporting to refer to objects but instead with laws that prescribe how reason must think. Reason governs itself. The autonomy of reason in legislating laws for itself is central to Kant's conception of morality (see *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* 4:440f). Here in the *Opus Postumum* we see that this autonomy is understood to extend to every aspect of the moral, including the ideas that reason requires to support morality, namely, the postulates. The idea of God is given by reason to itself for its own purposes. These moral purposes are intrinsic to reason, and thus the ideas reason creates are not arbitrary but necessary. Kant stresses this point in a passage that comments on a definition of God:

The concept (thought) of such a being is not an ideal (fictive) but a necessary [one] emerging from reason in the highest standpoint of transcendental philosophy. It is not a fiction (arbitrarily constructed concept, *conceptus factitius*) but one necessarily given by reason (*datus*).

²⁵ Eckart Förster argues that Kant's focus on God not as a being but a concept is made possible by an important change in Kant's conception of the highest good. In the *Opus Postumum* Kant views the highest good not as an objective relation among the totality of beings in the world but a subjective state of a particular being. The highest good no longer is a result to be achieved beyond human efforts, so no independent God as substance is required. I think Förster is reading too much into Kant's lack of discussion of the highest good. But note that he also does not think that the passage I quoted is problematic for the general claim that Kant does not treat the concept of God as involving any existential claims. See Förster, *Kant's Final Synthesis* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 117-147, esp 144-145.

There is a God. – For there is a categorical imperative of duty before which every knee shall bend in heaven as on earth etc. and whose name is holy, without the assumption of a substance being permitted which would represent this being for the senses. (21:64)

Reason creates the concept of God as a necessary correlate to its practical functions. Reason does not choose to create this concept any more than it chooses to legislate the categorical imperative. The nature of the transcendental philosophy is that reason has its own framework that guides human beings in their lives without directly providing human beings with knowledge about reality.

Among Kant's last written words, then, we find the culmination of his doctrine of the postulates of pure practical reason in a system of transcendental philosophy. God is not seen as a substance; rather, God is an idea created by reason for moral purposes. While nearly every Kant scholar admits that Kant presents such a view in the *Opus Postumum*, they usually see this as a change from Kant's earlier doctrine of the postulates. I have argued that instead of being a change in Kant's position, it is the realization of tendencies that were already included in Kant's earliest discussion of a postulate. He always considered some concepts or ideas to be held only for particular purposes, and used for those purposes without affirmation of any existence claims regarding them. Certainly in the presentation of his moral doctrine regarding the postulates, Kant appears to make existence claims. But at the same time he insists on the immanent, practical use of the concept of God qua concept.

IV: CONCLUDING REMARK

At the beginning of this paper I noted that my purpose is to show that Kant's ethics is compatible with a metaphysical naturalism. By "metaphysical naturalism" I mean the view that nature in space and time, as studied and revealed by the natural and social sciences, provides our ontology. Philosophy can use a different methodology than the sciences, but it remains within their ontology. In this paper I have shown that Kant had a naturalistic metaphysics available to him for his doctrine of the postulates of pure practical reason, which on the face of them appear to demand a non-natural metaphysics. This is just one part of my overall project of showing that Kant's ethics can be interpreted naturalistically. If, however, God can be brought down to earth in this way, then surely human beings can too.

POSTSCRIPT ON CONTEMPORARY CONSTRUCTIVIST THEOLOGY

Some might object to the characterization of Kant's postulates given above on the grounds that it would seem hypocritical, counterproductive, or even pernicious to deny that the specific concept of God used in practical reason corresponds to any real object, either in its details or in general. Belief in God, these objecters might say, means belief *in God* as a distinct object, not in any sense only to the *content* of the concept of God or to its *function* in a larger structure of thought. In this postscript I will discuss the contemporary theology of the American Gordon Kaufman, who offers what I understand to be a modern version of the view I attribute to Kant. Kaufman, as I understand him and his place in modern theology, is one of several "non-realists" in theology. I am not a theologian, but I hope that this postscript shows that the view I am attributing to Kant is not only accurate as an interpretation of Kant but viable as a philosophical theology in its own right.

The central core of Kaufman's theology is that human beings are required to construct their own images or symbols which serve for them as answers to the ultimate mysteries of existence.²⁶ By the ultimate "mystery" of existence Kaufman has in mind something very similar to Kant's conception of the noumena as a negative concept that serves to highlight the limits of our knowledge rather than to provide any access to anything beyond our experience. Mystery is the "bafflement of mind" we face when we have reached something we cannot grasp or comprehend, something "beyond what our minds can handle" (Kaufman 1993, p. 60). The existence of the universe and life itself, any possible objective meaning that human life might have, all are mysterious because all transcend our cognitive abilities. Yet these mysterious matters include issues that matter deeply to human beings, mainly the meaning of life and the nature of an authentic life (Kaufman 1993, p. 6). In order to have a meaningful or authentic life, humans want some answer to these question, yet since they are ultimately mysterious, no particular answer to them is certain. In light of this situation, or "In Face of Mystery" as his book it titled, human beings construct images and symbols because "we are not able simply to live with a blank, empty Void" (Kaufman 1993, p. 29).

Every religious belief and all theology is a product of this kind of construction. Kaufman uses the term, or as Kaufman puts it, symbol "God" because of his Christian perspective, but he allows other religious constructions the same status as constructions that try to serve as answers to the same mystery (Kaufman 1993, p. 28). While allowing for this universalistic perspective,

²⁶ The texts to which I refer are Gordon Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery: A Constructive Theology* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1993) and Gordon Kaufman, *God the Problem* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1972).

he also holds that the symbol "God" serves uniquely (at least in the Western tradition) as the most powerful symbol upon which to orient human life (Kaufman 1993, p. 5). Hence Kaufman appropriates the symbol "God" as the symbol that takes center stage in his own theological construction. This symbol is not inflexible for Kaufman. His theological project is to reconstruct the symbol "God" so that it will serve as a plausible and appropriate symbol for the modern world. As a *basis* for this construction, he argues that the symbol "God" will have to perform the function of "focus[ing] human devotion and service on that which would bring about human fulfillment (salvation)" (Kaufman 1993, p. 307). The construction of the content of the symbol "God" proceeds by an analysis of the functions that this symbol has performed in the past and an assessment of the ways that various candidate conceptions might best bring human beings fulfillment and meaning in their lives in a way plausible today. As Kaufman constructs it, what the symbol "God" stands for is not a being distinct from the universe but instead is the process of creativity active within the universe. I will not delve into the details of this definition of God. What is important for our purposes is that this symbol "God" is constructed by Kaufman in order to function in a way to allow for human fulfillment, and that this symbol is supposed to somehow relate to the ultimate mystery of the universe.

The relation between the symbol God and the mystery itself is important for the comparison between Kaufman and Kant. Construction in theology must retain awareness of itself as construction in the face of the intrinsic unknowability of the mystery. Kaufman argues that to "acknowledge God as indeed *God*" we must recognize "the ultimacy of the mystery ascribed to God" by keeping in mind that our constructions are just that – constructions – and that the ultimate reality to which they might refer (if it can be given the positive name "reality" rather than simply the more negative "mystery") are unknown and unknowable. Here is one way that Kaufman attempts to explain the reference relations in more detail:

With the image/concept of God, we humans attempt to symbolize that which grounds our humanity, that which makes possible our very existence even while driving us, or drawing us, beyond what we now are. On the one hand, thus, the word "God" stands for something objectively there, a reality over against us that exists whether we are aware of it or not: we did not make ourselves; we were created by cosmic evolutionary and historical processes on which we depend absolutely for our being. On the other hand, however, the word "God" functions as a symbol within our minds, in our self-consciousness as beings who are not entirely made from without but who significantly contribute to our own creation, shaping and forming ourselves in accordance with images and symbols to which we are devoted. (Kaufman 1993, p 320).

In this passage, Kaufman sets up a dichotomy between God as reality and "God" as symbol. But there is an ambiguity in this phrasing: is God as reality is that which exists as God independently

of human construction of the symbol? Or is God as reality that which is claimed to exist *by* our symbol and *as* we symbolize God? I think that Kaufman actually means the latter in this passage, because any content of the symbol is a product of construction and the genuine referent can be only the “mystery”, which is itself only a negative concept. He notes that we must allow that whatever reality God has is independent of whatever we may think or say about God, that God’s “concrete actuality” is “quite apart from our symbolizations” (Kaufman 1993, p. 353). This reference is independent of our symbol and beyond any specificity we can supply, we are “not to regard this reality as a straightforward exemplification or instantiation of the content or imagery of the metaphor”, that is, of our symbol, but instead we must admit that what our symbols “refer to remains in many respects mystery” (Kaufman 1993, p. 331).

In an earlier essay, Kaufman is even clearer that we cannot expect that the content of the concept of God that we have constructed will match whatever reality it purports to refer to, and further that this lack of correspondence is irrelevant for the practical concerns that drive theological construction:

It may well be right to act in accordance with the conception of God and what that implies about our world and ourselves even though we are unclear whether or in what respects that notion is true. If the idea of God helps to sustain our action and ourselves as agents, helps to further humanize and develop man, enhancing his moral sensitivity and stiffening his will to live responsibly, then it is right to allow that belief to shape one’s policies of action. That is, it is right to act in accordance with that belief, to believe in God (in a practical sense) (Kaufman 1972, pp. 108-09).

To this passage Kaufman adds a footnote that invokes none other than Kant. Kaufman cites Kant’s position that the practical significance of the concept of God does not mean that the concept must be taken as true theoretically.

Kaufman appears to have the following relation in mind. About the genuine mystery of existence we can know nothing specific; we have no knowledge of any particular being or reality which solves the mystery. Yet the very mysteriousness of the universe and of life allows and requires human beings to construct symbols that purport to solve the mystery. Human beings thus construct religious symbols such as God for the practical purposes of giving meaning and coherence to their lives. These symbols are given content through this process of construction. We then apply the symbol in our lives in such a way that we take it to refer to something real matching the details of our constructed concept. This reference is, however, false in the sense that we know that nothing we can ever construct is adequate to the genuine mystery of the universe. In one sense, then, our symbol “God” is understood to have a full reference matching

its content, but upon our theological reflection we recognize that this is only a projection upon the universe as we, in light of its mystery, choose to view it. So we recognize that this reference, to speak loosely, turns back to us and to our practical concerns. In another sense, the symbol "God" has a reference, but only a bare pointing to the mysteriousness of existence; because the reality it purports to represent is in fact merely the negative mystery of existence, not anything positive that can serve as a referent. The real referent of the symbol "God" is not an object but only the lack of knowledge of certain matters that become labeled "mystery".

Kaufman's theology illuminates in a contemporary manner how I think Kant's practical postulate of God is best understood. For Kant, we can understand the postulate of God as a construction, performed by practical reason itself for practical purposes, that performs a function useful to giving coherence to human life; for Kant this function is the moral function of representing the possibility of the highest good, for Kaufman it is a practical function of providing meaning to human life. In Kant the conception of noumena as a limit to our knowledge, and limit to our possible references, plays the role that "mystery" does for Kaufman. Because our knowledge extends only to phenomena, but that knowledge is fated to remain forever incomplete because of human cognitive limitations, human beings are permitted to construct concepts that appear to transcend the limits of phenomena yet which ultimately reflect and refer to only the human practical needs themselves.

For both Kant and Kaufman, the concept of God is constructed in order to perform a certain function for human beings that is necessary because of human cognitive limitations. Human beings cannot know the mysterious meaning of life itself or have insight into the actual manner in which the highest good is possible. Yet for practical purposes humans need to believe that there is some meaning to life or some final justice in the moral order. Humans thus construct their practical concept of God to perform this practical function. The content of that concept is, however, understood to be a practical construction that does not have theoretical implications. We recognize, at least when reflecting theoretically upon our practices, that this concept is merely a placeholder. In other words, we believe that there is *some way or other* in which our practical quandries are resolved and we are constrained to picture this belief in terms of the concept of God, although we recognize that this concept is constructed by us only in order to serve as the manner that we picture to ourselves that there is an answer to our quandries. We must theoretically hold in mind both its origin as constructed and its inadequacies in capturing what it ultimately unknowable or mysterious to us.

I end with the following passage, related to the doctrine of the Trinity:

But, if this very faith (in a divine Trinity) were to be regarded not just as the representation of a practical idea, but as a faith that ought to represent what God is in himself, it would be a mystery surpassing all human concepts, hence unsuited to a revelation humanly comprehensible, and could only be declared in this respect as mystery. Faith in it as an extension of theoretical cognition of the divine nature would only be the profession of a creed of ecclesiastical faith totally unintelligible to human beings.

Although this passage sounds as if it were written by Kaufman, it comes from Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (6:142).

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