

IMMANUEL KANT'S ATONEMENT "WITHIN THE BOUNDS OF BARE REASON" AND THE VIABILITY OF MORAL RECEPTIVITY AS A CONDITION OF GRACE

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Immanuel Kant attempted to articulate an account of religion that provides genuine hope through its rational certitude and universal applicability. Kant's analytical foray into the mysteries of the atonement was not a biblical or systematic theological project. Through the practical reason primordially present to humankind, he sought a "pure religion" where individual belief in personal salvation is warranted.¹ Whereas Kant is attempting to build a system acceptable within a purely rational worldview, and thereby uses philosophical presuppositions that disallow historical, religious propositions, he does not deny the possibility of what Christian tradition asserts was accomplished in first-century Palestine.²

Preliminarily, I intend to establish that a concatenation of Kant's epistemology, moral philosophy, and view of providence brings him to a subjective atonement. Then, I explore two foci that challenge the consistency of Kant's subjective account of atonement. The first problem embraces the removal of debt both before and after conversion. The second problem is that Kant's purely rational system is unable to adequately articulate the possibility and identity of grace in relation to the moral agent. Kant's attempt involves a remarkably innovative proposal of a dynamic interplay of God and humankind in justification, which could be meaningful within a covenantal framework for understanding salvation. However, the weakness of Kant's covenantal perspective results in a moral interpretation of the atonement that is contradictory, ambiguous, and paradoxical. For his purposes of providing warrant for a personal belief in salvation, Kant's unresolved problems with explaining atonement bring his interpreters back full circle through the use of "bare reason" to an inexorable distance between God and sinful humankind.

¹Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, "Conundrums in Kant's Rational Religion," in *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. Philip J. Rossi & Michael Wreen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991).

²Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. and trans. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 445–446 (*AA* 28:1120–1121). The following abbreviations are used hereafter in the footnotes of this article to refer to Kant's texts: "*AA*" refers to the Prussian Academy edition (Preussische Akademie-Ausgabe) of Kant's Works and this precedes the volume and page number(s). "A" and "B" refer to the first and second editions, respectively, of Kant's *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (Critique of Pure Reason) and are followed by the page number(s).

Epistemology as Precursor to View of Atonement

Kant's theory of knowledge begins with the premise that the human mind is innately structured to project reality. The laws of nature, incumbent on the "world" of *phenomena*, act by physical necessity, and causal relations can be known in time so that certain knowledge of nature is possible. The individual receives information through the senses, and their mind organizes the material data according to its a priori intuitions of time and space. Further a priori categories of the understanding rearrange the data into various modes of relationship. As long as a concept of the understanding is originally derived from sense experience, it is able to be held as scientific knowledge. That is, it may be accepted as objective knowledge, versus opinion or belief.³

But there is also an "intelligible world" that is not subject to the strictures of space and time and cannot be understood, scientifically speaking. Items in this transcendent realm are not accessible by reason's theoretical use. They have no referent in sensible experience, and thus, transcendental ideas such as God, the soul, and the workings of divine grace are unknowable by reason's theoretical use, even partially or analogically.⁴

Leaving the transcendent and returning to the historical/spatiotemporal, Kant allows that empirical facts may be gathered about historical events, but their essential identity remains elusive. This means that historical facts can provide no objective knowledge on which to ground religious belief.⁵ This is because the essence (*Ding an sich; noumenon*) of any historical thing (e.g., Jesus of Nazareth, the cross) is timeless. But the object as one can know it, the *phenomenon*, is temporal and subject to change. This gives it a lesser degree of reality, not absolute reality.⁶

Besides people and events, special revelation also occurs in history and is particularly found in nature. This means that it is not accessible to all but is subject to personal interpretation—for who can be assured that their interpretation is the correct one? Therefore, all human beings cannot be responsible or be required to find a rationally certain basis for hope from the content of special revelation. Furthermore, it provides no rational, scientific knowledge of metaphysical truths. If humankind can have no rational knowledge of ultimate reality, then it follows logically that the intelligible world (and an ultimate being) must not be able to present at least a partial picture of ultimate reality, say perhaps, with the assistance of grace, to all finite beings. There is, for Kant, a gulf between the knowledge of the transcendental and phenomenal "world" that cannot be bridged by theoretical reason's grasp of a special revelation. To recklessly attempt to do so is superstition.⁷

³Idem, *The Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 500 (A, 471; AA 3:327); idem, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 13–14 (AA 8:141).

⁴Idem, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 409 (B, 396; AA 3:261).

⁵Idem, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 142 (AA 6:109–110).

⁶Idem, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 181 (B, 52; AA 3:61).

⁷Idem, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 280–285 (AA 7:65).

Kant's treatment of providence parallels the existence of this gulf between *noumena* and the *phenomena* of history. Providence does not include, as Christian tradition has typically presented it, a divine being's personal interventions, or miraculous and particular acts of preservation in history. For Kant, the laws of nature were established by one act of God in eternity and work only according to their necessary functioning in time.⁸ It is actually they who are directly guiding the course of history and the destiny of the human species. Kant calls this predetermined providence "that great artist, nature."⁹

The notion of special revelation, in which God arbitrarily breaks through and enlightens some particular people or prophet, is unfathomable; the miraculous incarnation of an eternal being in time would also conflict with the laws of nature. Moreover, even if either of these happened, the group or individual would have no way of knowing for certain that it was God talking to them or walking among them.¹⁰

The historical event of atonement, the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth, is understood by humankind through such a historical revelation. Only a portion of humanity is exposed to this content, however. This is not sufficient for Kant's intentions of a pure religion, since that religion must be universally accessible to be valid. The historical, atoning death of Jesus has been received through "outer" revelation and does not provide certain, verifiable content for a pure religion constituted by reason. The essence (*noumenon*) of the historical crucifixion, its true meaning, is also completely unintelligible to theoretical reason. Furthermore, it is not accessible to all. Therefore, there must be another form of revelation, a greater "inner" revelation by way of reason, that can make the historical event (e.g., the cross) rationally useful. This would allow all of humankind to have genuine hope in salvation.¹¹

Where speculative reason fails for Kant, he retains entrance to the transcendental realm by proposing that the quest for justified belief is realized only by means of the use of practical reason. Each person has an a priori consciousness of the moral law. As a free moral agent, they are also aware of themselves as both an intelligible and phenomenal individual.¹² In the world

⁸Kant considers providence as the equivalent of the laws of nature, which God has already "wound" as a clock: "and for this reason nature, regarded as a necessitation by a cause the laws of whose operation are unknown to us, is called 'fate,' but if we consider its purposiveness in the course of the world as the profound wisdom of a higher cause directed to the objective final end of the human race and predetermining the course of the world, it is providence" (ibid., 331 [AA 8:360–362]); Kant writes also, "Providence is in God one single act" (ibid., 437 [AA 28:1110]).

⁹Idem, "Zum ewigen Frieden," Prussian Academy of Sciences, n.d., <https://korpora.zim.uni-duisburg-essen.de/Kant/aa08/360.html> (AA 8:360).

¹⁰Idem, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 444 (AA 28:1118).

¹¹Ibid., 443 (AA 28:1117). See also 140–152 (AA 6:108–120).

¹²Idem, *Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 98, 218 (AA 4:451; AA 5:97–98). In Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970), 6, Wood states this dichotomy by saying that for Kant "human nature is dialectical."

of appearances, they are subject to physical necessity and particular conditions, but in the intelligible world they are absolutely free and wholly responsible for their conduct. They are able to deduce a categorical imperative to obey the moral law and, from that, the transcendental ideas of God, immortality, and freedom; and with these, practical reason demands that the attainment of the highest good (*summum bonum*)—moral perfection and a proportional conferral of eternal happiness—must be possible.¹³

Atonement Apart from Revelation

Filtered through his epistemic limitations and emboldened by his robust moral philosophy (adumbrated above),¹⁴ Kant's version of religion is an account of the existential perspective of the moral agent as they endeavor to find certainty in the hope that they can attain eternal blessedness (*summum bonum*).¹⁵ Here we arrive at an analysis of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Bare Reason*, a remarkable attempt by the Enlightenment philosopher to establish epistemic justification for personal salvation.¹⁶

An initial problem that Kant's account of atonement faces is the question of the removal of debt before conversion.¹⁷ Since, according to the categorical imperative of moral duty, one "ought" to be holy according to the moral law, it follows that one "can." Kant expresses it in this way: "The human being must make or have made *himself* into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil. These two [characters] must be an effect of his free power of choice, for otherwise they could not be imputed to him, and consequently, he could be neither *morally* good nor evil."¹⁸

The "ought implies can" principle places the highest duty upon the individual and demands by itself that their achievement of the highest good occurs without external assistance. External propitiation for the debt caused by infinite, radical evil, the "most personal of all liabilities," is not only unethical, but it would destroy freedom, a founding element of the moral

¹³Kant, *Practical Philosophy*, 238–240, 246–247 (AA 5:122–124, 132).

¹⁴The interpretation of Kant's philosophy is obviously far from comprehensive, but this is a brief outline intended merely to show on what basis Kant must move to a subjective atonement.

¹⁵I do not intend here that Kant reduced religion as a whole to morality. He did not disregard ecclesiastical religion and faith entirely, as mentioned earlier, only that as part of his philosophical project, moral reason is the only means of gaining certifiable evidence to justify religious belief (see Wolterstorff, "Conundrums," 41).

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷I use the term "before conversion" for purposes of understanding Kant's thought in the context of soteriological discourse; as will be shown, the *noumenal* self, which must enact its conversion outside of time with absolute spontaneity, cannot technically be construed in terms of "before" and "after." Thus, throughout this paper, references to a before and after conversion are not used technically, although they are accurate from the perspective of Kant's *phenomenal* self.

¹⁸Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 89 (AA 6:44).

self.¹⁹ Obviously, this is problematic from the perspective of traditional Christian soteriology, especially if this is all Kant has to offer.²⁰ One would think that Kant is left with only the prospect of personal remission. But to the contrary, the individual is also equally incapable of paying their own debt.²¹

Further exacerbating the difficulty of debt is Kant's insistence on the absolute spontaneity of the human will in his concept of freedom.²² The spontaneous freedom of the will, grounded only in the law, is by definition autonomous; this distances the radically evil, supersensible self from any external assistance, since autonomy makes it impossible for any external entity to condition or determine volition, be it divine, human, sensible experience, or otherwise.²³

With the above factors in mind, Kant attempts to solve the problem of debt before conversion in a most creative way. He posits in the moral consciousness of the individual an archetype through which each may recognize, and acquire force to achieve, the ideal of moral perfection. One's duty is to adopt ("elevate themselves to") the disposition of this prototype into their own maxim so that they possess, as close as possible, the disposition of the prototype. At this time, satisfaction for sin is also made and conversion from the evil to the good disposition occurs, as Kant writes:

[T]he punishment must be thought of as executed in the situation of the conversion itself . . . conversion is an exit from evil and an entry into goodness, "a putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new." . . . The emergence from the corrupted disposition into the good is in itself already sacrifice and entrance into a long train of life's ills which the new human undertakes in the disposition of the Son of God."²⁴

This solution Kant presents of the "new man" suffering and satisfying the punishment (paying the debt) due the "old man" is not analytically

¹⁹Ibid., 113 (AA 6:72).

²⁰John Silber, "The Ethical Significance of Kant's Religion," in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960), cxxxii. Silber is correct when he writes that Kant's view of freedom is logically incompatible with grace even though Kant insisted on the possibility of grace: "When Kant confronted the Antinomies, he presented thesis and antithesis and then offered a resolution. His absolute conception of freedom precludes the need for grace, since every guilty man freely wills to become guilty; the purity of the moral precludes grace; for grace violates the uncompromising nature of the law" (ibid.).

²¹Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 112 (AA 6:72).

²²Idem, *Practical Philosophy*, 94; idem, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 72–73 (AA 4:46; AA 6:23–24). Kant writes that "freedom of the power of choice has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive *except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim*. . . . [O]nly in this way can an incentive, whatever it may be, coexist with the absolute spontaneity of the power of choice (freedom)" (emphasis original).

²³Idem, *Practical Philosophy*, 166, 199, 89 (AA 5:33, 76; AA 4:40).

²⁴Idem, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 104, 113–114 (AA 6:61–62, 73–74).

reconcilable²⁵ with the deeper structure of Kant's autonomous and timeless self. That there can be a new self (who makes the decision for good) emerging from the old (who has made the decision for bad) is the question. Kant surmises that the old and new are morally different persons that represent a legitimate transformation of the human being.²⁶ This change logically brings the inevitability of antecedent conditions to the self-determining apparatus of the self that is, the free will. This means that contingent states and actions in time (e.g., knowledge of right and wrong, fear, pangs of guilt, conviction, repentance) may have no effect on the supersensible self, as this would destroy its spontaneity. Kant is conjecturing a qualitative change of the supersensible self, where some pillars of his moral system do now allow. The character of the individual "must be a result of the timelessness of the choice of the supreme maxim," but in the change from evil to good, the only other logical way of conceiving this event—apart from divine aid or events in time—is that the *noumenal* "old man" must be, in some way, a prior determinant of the creation of the new.²⁷

Kant's conversion account also contradicts the deep structure of his view of the transformation of the self in regards to the problem of radical evil. The radical evil that characterizes the moral disposition of the old self "corrupts the ground of all maxims" for action in time.²⁸ He claims that the human being brings about their good or evil disposition according to whether they absorb into their rule of conduct (maxim) the habitual desires of the original good predisposition that humanity was created with. But Kant does not explain how or why the evil self would make the movement for this change.²⁹ The evil self is irrevocably set in its moral direction and there is nothing good that can overpower and reverse this disposition so that it is capable of choosing the good. Furthermore, it cannot be determined by the good disposition which does not yet "exist." As Jacqueline Mariña observes, something mediate is missing that would allow an unadulterated (by evil), unconditioned choice to take place.³⁰ A third self, neither good nor evil, must be abstracted by Kant; yet this is also impossible because as Kant says the "disposition as regards the moral law is never indifferent."³¹ Radical evil has corrupted the ground of all maxims, and it is inconceivable that a morally neutral self, lurking about in

²⁵Kant must know that his explanation is insufficient when he says that the "reascend" from evil back to good is "no more comprehensible" than the fall from good to evil (ibid., 90 [AA 6:46]).

²⁶Ibid., 114 (AA 6:74); see also Leslie A. Mulholland, "Freedom and Providence in Kant's Account of Religion: The Problem of Expiation," in *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. Philip J. Rossi & Michael Wreen (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 87.

²⁷Ibid., 88.

²⁸Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 83 (AA 6:37).

²⁹Ibid., 89 (AA 6:44).

³⁰Jacqueline Mariña, "Kant on Grace: A Reply to His Critics," *RelS* 33.4 (1997): 87.

³¹Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 73 (AA 6:24).

human nature with no duty to the law and without being externally placed there, exists. The idea of a self *qua* self without the moral law is inconceivable for Kant—even the opposing selves, good and evil, that Kant imagines in *Religion* are only considered as such because of their moral status. These puzzles and contradictions, as abstruse as they may seem, are incredibly important for Kant's ability to explain the removal of debt, because it is in the conversion of the old to the new self where the suffering requisite for satisfaction takes place.³²

It is important to remember, at the risk of falling into indicting Kant with Pelagianism, that he admits the human inability to become good on their own, and he sees the logical contradiction of this and the freedom to do just the same without divine aid. This is, in Kant's view, an antinomy that is not reconcilable through theoretical reason's imagining external aid. Theoretical reason might posit a "divine merit not its own . . . preceding every good work,"³³ but human knowledge may not attain to knowledge of this to ground belief. Kant's bottom line is that practical reason can find no benefit for morality in allowing divine aid to be a factor in conversion.³⁴

What Kant removes (divine aid) from conversion, he allows into his discussion of the moral self who has chosen the good disposition. There is little doubt, in spite of his own vacillations, that Kant thought divine aid, practically considered, *was possible* for the converted earnestly pursuing the *summum bonum*:

[R]eason does not leave us altogether without comfort with respect to the lack of righteousness of our own (which is valid before God). Reason says that whoever does, in a disposition of true devotion to duty, as much lies within his power to satisfy his obligation (at least in a steady approximation toward complete conformity to the law), can legitimately hope that what lies outside his power will be supplemented by the supreme wisdom *in some way or other* (which can render permanent the disposition to this steady approximation).³⁵

³²Ibid., 113–114.

³³Ibid., 148 (*AA* 6:117–118).

³⁴For example, Kant writes in his general remark on grace in conversion that "Granted that supernatural cooperation is also needed to his becoming good or better, whether this cooperation only consist in the diminution of obstacles or be also a positive assistance, the human being must nonetheless make himself antecedently worthy of receiving it." Here Kant appears to allow grace into the event of conversion, but he qualifies this entire section by noting that what he has said is a "*parerga* to religion within the bounds of reason" that is to say, grace in conversion is not consistent with the use of practical reason (ibid., 89, 96 [*AA* 6:44, 52]).

³⁵Ibid., 191 (*AA* 6:171). In "The Conflict of the Faculties," Kant's notion of grace after conversion is even more robust in that it is thought practically beneficial: "faith in this supplement for . . . deficiency is sanctifying, for only by it can man cease to doubt that he can reach his final aim (to become pleasing to God) and so lay hold of the courage and firmness of attitude he needs to lead a life pleasing to God." (idem, "The Conflict of the Faculties," in *Religion and Rational Theology*, 268 [*AA* 7:44]).

From this passage, found not in a *parerga*³⁶ and clearly referring to the self subsequent to conversion, one can see the inklings of an interplay between human initiative and divine aid, and further, that the individual has epistemic justification (“legitimate hope”) for believing in this aid. Interestingly, when Kant says “our lack of righteousness,” he is implying that what the individual may legitimately hope for is an alien righteousness. The context of this passage is that Kant is concerned that the self, despite its choice of the highest maxim and the good disposition, must still fall short of the *summum bonum*. The *noumenal* self upon conversion is no longer, by virtue of its good disposition, considered evil,³⁷ but actions in time by the sensible self, which flow from the good disposition, are deficient. As Kant explains,

Even the purest moral disposition elicits in the human being, regarded as a worldly creature no more than the continuous becoming of a subject well pleasing to God in actions (such as can be met with in the world of senses). In quality (since it must be thought as supersensibly *grounded*) this disposition can indeed be, and ought to be, holy and conformable to the archetype’s disposition. In degree, however, (in terms of its manifestations in actions) it always remains deficient and infinitely removed from that of the archetype.³⁸

The deficiency, still evident in the sensible experience of the individual, will still disqualify the human being from the *summum bonum*, even though they have chosen the good disposition. By distinguishing between “quality,” a reference to the supersensible self’s good disposition, and “degree,” which is a term denoting movement of the sensible self in its ongoing quest for moral perfection, Kant means to emphasize that the latter is a continual work-in-progress, while the former is already “there.” The impediment to salvation for the human being still remains. The “infinite” deficiency must disqualify the human being from the *summum bonum*, even though they have chosen the good disposition, because the deeds do not always measure up to the disposition. Kant’s solution is to make the good disposition stand in the place of the deficiencies in God’s judgment. The good disposition is the supersensible ground of the actions in time, and God, who alone can apprehend the inscrutable *noumenal* self, sees the timeless unity of the individual’s endless moral progress and judges them, at whatever point in their life after choosing the good disposition, based solely on their disposition, not on their temporal and permanent deficiencies.³⁹

³⁶I mention this because, as Barth notes, some of the positive affirmations Kant makes about grace are found within his “General Remarks,” and these, he states, do not fit within the confines of moral reason (Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens [New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959], 187–188).

³⁷Kant states “Nor can a human being be morally good in some parts, and at the same time evil in others. For if he is good in one part, he has incorporated the moral law into his maxim” (*Religion and Rational Theology*, 73).

³⁸*Ibid.*, 115n (*AA* 6:74–75).

³⁹Kant writes, “How can this disposition count for the deed itself, when this deed is *every time* (not generally, but at each instant) defective? The solution rests on the

This discussion of supplemental (imputed) grace leads to a question, given that divine aid may be supposed to reside within the moral agent or external to it, about the nature and location of saving righteousness for Kant. He does, as mentioned earlier, seem to hold to the possibility of an alien righteousness. Karl Barth supports this point, explaining that, for Kant, "It is solely in the *idea*, known only to God, of the improved disposition, that justice can be done to eternal righteousness. It is this ideal righteousness, and not the righteousness of a disposition which we might find present within us! It will therefore always remain a righteousness which is not our own."⁴⁰

By "idea" Barth is referring to the prototype, or archetype, which in Book 2 of *Religion* Kant employs as the guiding moral principle and force for atonement and conversion. Throughout his religious writings, Kant tiptoes delicately around the divine identity of Christ (a mystery to reason) revealed in Scripture. Earlier we saw that in conversion the "new man" takes on the disposition of the archetype, the "Son of God," including his sufferings, and this archetype implanted into the primordial reason of humanity, when acted upon during conversion, serves to satisfy sins committed. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant identifies the prototype with grace. His definition of grace here in this work greatly blurs the distinction between the moral subject and divine presence/action. The issue then becomes whether, and if so, how the "idea" can be considered an external righteousness. Barth's assessment does lend credence to the interpretation that, for Kant, the idea, or prototype, which exists in primordial human reason is external to humankind, and in this sense, an external righteousness, but he does not venture to explain how.⁴¹

Stephen Palmquist's recent assessment of the possibility of external righteousness is less conservative than Barth's. In his 2016 commentary on *Religion*, Palmquist interprets Kant as admitting a morally justified belief in

following: According to our mode of estimation, [to us] who are unavoidably restricted to temporal conditions in our conceptions of the relationship of cause to effect, the deed, as a continuous advance *in infinitum* from a defective good to something better, always remains defective, so that we are bound to consider the good as it appears to us, i.e., according to the *deed*, as *at each instant* inadequate to a holy law. But because of the *disposition* from which it derives and which transcends the senses, we can think of the infinite progression of the good toward conformity to the law as being judged by him who scrutinizes the heart (through his pure intellectual intuition) to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed (the life conduct). And so notwithstanding his permanent deficiency, a human being can still expect to be *generally* well-pleasing to God, at whatever point in time his existence be cut short" (ibid., 109 [AA 6:68]).

⁴⁰Barth, *Protestant Thought*, 183.

⁴¹Kant says that "grace is none other than the nature of the human being insofar as he is determined to actions by a principle which is intrinsic to his own being, but supersensible. . . . Since we want to explain this principle, although we know no further ground for it, we represent it as a stimulus to good produced in us by God, the predisposition to which we did not establish in ourselves, and so, as grace . . . grace, is the hope that good will develop in us—a hope awakened by belief in our original moral predisposition to good and by the example of humanity as pleasing to God in his son" (*Religion and Rational Theology*, 268 [AA 7:43]).

a God/man, an interpretation which quells any misgivings as to an external righteousness. In a careful analysis of book 2, Section 1/B (*AA* 6:66), Palmquist explains the following:

The archetype is an *idea*, not an “ideal” (i.e., a transcendental object) so the “ideal of humanity” must refer neither to the archetype nor the historical Jesus, considered merely as a man, but to the God-man (i.e., in Christian tradition, *to the Christ*), considered as a transcendent object of faith. Therefore Kant’s claim is that the *conviction* of a human being whose vicarious suffering was grounded in a total reliance on the archetype would be—Kant actually dares to say “is!”—“completely valid,” not just for everyone on earth but for *all possible* human beings; this makes such a person the *prototype* (i.e., the first model) for imperfect human beings to emulate. Kant’s (crucial) qualification is that such a belief in an ideal God-man as the representative of all humanity before God’s “supreme righteousness” . . . retains its validity only “if” one who interprets Jesus’ sufferings (for example) as an expression of the Christ is able to adopt a conviction similar to Jesus’ (archetypal) conviction. In other words, those who aspire to be Christian must, through a commitment of practical faith, conform their own conviction to the archetype that is embedded within this ideal, thereby affirming the dominion of the good through a “righteousness that is not ours.”⁴²

Palmquist’s reading of this passage is innovative and, if true, a windfall for Kant scholars advocating a positive, Protestant-oriented interpretation of Kant’s concept of grace. An inductive study of both this passage and the larger section surrounding it (*AA* 6:60–66) reveals that Palmquist may be incorrect in identifying the “God-man” with the “ideal.” Evidence that challenges Palmquist’s interpretation is the initial paragraph where Kant describes him as the model of humanity, “the Word,” and his origins as the “idea of him proceed[ing] from God” (*AA* 6:60). In the second paragraph, Kant calls the same the “ideal of moral perfection” and the “prototype.” (*AA* 6:61) It appears that Kant might be referring to the same concept/entity in different ways in respect to its role or function in moral religion. Nevertheless, his reckoning of the “human model” with the “idea,” ideal of humanity, and the prototype/archetype appears to discredit Palmquist’s argument that the “ideal” is other than the “idea.”⁴³

Another key to interpreting this passage is where (just prior to the passage in question) Kant introduces the hypothetical nature (“Now if a human being

⁴²Stephen Palmquist, *Comprehensive Commentary on Kant’s Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 2016), 176–177. Cf. 176 (*AA* 6:60), “Now, such a conviction with all the sufferings taken upon oneself for the sake of the world’s greatest good—as thought in the ideal of humanity—is completely valid, for all human beings, and at all times and in all worlds, before the supreme righteousness, if the human being makes, as he ought to do, his conviction (*die seinige*) similar to it. It will of course always remain a righteousness that is not ours insofar as this righteousness of ours would have to consist in a lifestyle completely and unflinchingly in accordance with that conviction” (ibid., 176 [*AA* 6:66]).

⁴³Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 103 (*AA* 6:60).

of such a truly divine disposition had descended . . . from heaven to earth at a specific time . . .") of his discussion.⁴⁴ This fully-human teacher, because of his impeccable teaching and conduct and not because of any divine credentials, could rightly speak of himself as if the "ideal of goodness . . . [was] displayed incarnate in him." The disposition, "the purest one", or righteousness, of this human—not only his teachings and conduct, but also the sufferings undertaken for the good of the world—Kant claims could rightly be associated with each moral self who adopts this disposition and strives to emulate it in their own disposition. Yet, in spite of its adoption, it "will ever remain a righteousness which is not our own."⁴⁵ Is Kant bringing back the content of the Christian atonement of tradition, as Palmquist seems to say, even the doctrine of the imputation of divine righteousness made possible by the union of human and divine? It is doubtful that Palmquist's strict identification of the ideal as a God-man can be true because of the merely hypothetical nature of what Kant can assert under the parameters of his epistemology as well as the problem of terminology already mentioned. One thing that can be certain is Kant's agnostic bent toward much that is supernatural and revealed,⁴⁶ which, in this case, means theoretical knowledge of divinity in the ideal human is impossible. The divinity of Christ is also problematic for moral reasons. A model who is divine, and not merely human, is exceedingly harmful to the self's moral striving.⁴⁷

A better interpretation of Kant's intent in this passage would be that, despite no way of knowing, speculatively or morally, if the ideal is also divine, such an ideal human, whose disposition reflects in the purest form the moral law, (as a divine being would) and who suffers for the highest good of the world, would consist of a righteousness that is "perfectly valid" for anyone who emulates this disposition. What remains unsaid in this interpretation is how one who is merely human, but has a divine disposition, can provide a "perfectly valid" source of righteousness for the world, and admittedly, this problem points back in favor of Palmquist's interpretation. Nevertheless, I agree with Barth's assertion that Kant intends that this righteousness is an external righteousness whose source is not the moral subject's own inasmuch as an idea residing in humankind's rational faculty from the beginning can be considered an external righteousness.⁴⁸ Kant presumably believes he has provided epistemic justification for external righteousness when he says

⁴⁴Ibid., 106 (AA 6:63).

⁴⁵Ibid., 108 (AA 6:66).

⁴⁶Ibid. Kant's agnosticism is observable more than once in the section. Notice the following example: "[H]ad he brought about, through all this, an incalculably great moral good in the world, through all this: even then we would have no cause to assume in him anything else except a naturally begotten human being. . . . Not that we would thereby absolutely deny that he might indeed also be a supernaturally begotten human being" (ibid., 106 [AA 6:63]).

⁴⁷Ibid., 264–265 (AA 7:39).

⁴⁸Barth, *Protestant Thought*, 183.

it “must be possible” to appropriate this righteousness, but this is only the case; and this is a consistent qualifier of Kant’s, if one makes the movement to associate their own disposition with that of the prototype (i.e., makes themselves receptive to grace).⁴⁹

Soteriological Innovation—Receptivity to Grace

The tenet that one must make themselves “receptive” to God’s grace through free decision is troublesome for some, especially of the Protestant persuasion, who ascribe to a *sola fide* and/or forensic justification formula.⁵⁰ It is true that Kant’s religion does not allow for grace before conversion (i.e., prevenient grace), since this would violate the free moral status of the self. But, after conversion, Kant allows for grace, in whatever inchoate form, as a necessity for reaching the *summum bonum*.⁵¹

Laying aside the obvious weakness in his theology of the omission of prevenient and cooperating grace,⁵² Kant’s teaching of the need to make oneself “receptive”⁵³ to grace does not prove as disgusting to Protestant Christian sensibilities as some might imagine. In fact, Kant is making a very logical point within his own system—one that, if viewed within a covenantal framework for justification, helps to explain the identity of justification as both an initial event and a dynamic process, what might be termed, “dynamic justification.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 108 (AA 6:66).

⁵⁰Alister McGrath recognizes that the Protestant Reformers created a disjunction between justification and regeneration, and it is precisely this disjunction that would make Protestants suspicious of Kant’s notion of moral receptivity. See Alister McGrath, *A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 217.

⁵¹Wood argues to this end, using Kant’s own *reduction ad absurdum practicum* argument that grace is a postulate of practical reason. Essentially, if one denies God, then one denies they can conceive the possibility of moral perfection; then they have denied the unconditioned component of the *summum bonum*; if one denies they can conceive the *summum bonum*, then they commit themselves to not obeying the moral law. This is practically absurd, and so Allen argues that grace is a necessary postulate (*Kant’s Moral Religion*, 248).

⁵²Kant does not seem to have any room for the illuminative and empowering work of the Holy Spirit in his moral system, which is consistent with his epistemology. He does not deem the Spirit as a person relevant to moral religion but as a manifestation of the teaching and conduct of Christ, which for moral reason is “contained” in the prototype (AA 7:59; AA 6:69). See also Mariña, “Kant on Grace,” 385, 387.

⁵³Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 115 (AA 6:75). Kant’s definition of grace includes the notion of moral receptivity. He writes that “receptivity is all that we, on our part, can attribute to ourselves, whereas a superior’s decision to grant a good for which the subordinate has no more than (moral receptivity) is called *grace*.”

⁵⁴On the concept of dynamic justification, see, for example the undated journal article by Robert Brinsmead, “The Dynamic, Ongoing Nature of Justification by Faith,” *Present Truth* 18 (n.d.): 20, 22, <http://presenttruthmag.com/archive/>

Kant is motivated in his insistence on moral "receptivity" by two things. First, he is concerned that a belief in grace is morally harmful to human beings. It promotes a dangerous confidence in the moral subject due to a supposed, but unknown, foreign power. This may lead the moral self into an inertial state of thinking where it expects from above "what we ought to be seeking within us."⁵⁵ A second reason for the necessity for "receptivity" comes from Kant's respect for the transcendence and sovereignty of God as it is expressed in the concept of immutability and atemporality. God's actions are conceived in eternity, and thus, since God cannot be said to respond (without using an anthropomorphism), his actions in time are unilateral. Kant also holds that grace is not particular in aim, but universal.⁵⁶ Grace then is comparable to an eternally derived "shower" which God "pours out" in time on humanity, but which is not received without the moral volition of the creature. In his *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Kant explains the following:

[I]t is anthropomorphic to represent God as able to be gracious after he was previously wrathful. For this would posit an alteration in God. But God is and remains always the same, equally gracious and equally just. *It depends only on us whether we will become objects of his grace or of his punitive justice* [emphasis supplied]. The alteration, therefore, goes on *within us*; it is the relation in which we stand to God which is altered whenever we improve ourselves.⁵⁷

It is clear from the above passage that Nicholas Wolterstorff's charge that Kant's "receptivity" doctrine renders God as "required to forgive" is false.⁵⁸ What Kant is actually saying by "receptivity" is that human beings must place themselves under the "stream" of the eternally generated "shower" of God's grace, and the only means by which they may do this is by choosing the good moral disposition and living by their self-chosen good maxims. As Mariña explains, "it is not our adoption of a good disposition that is the condition of God's [gracious] action upon us . . . but that rather, our adoption of such a disposition is the condition of *our ability to be receptive of and recognize God's grace*, which is ever present."⁵⁹ This argument may be qualified somewhat by Kant's statement in *Religion* that seems to describe a sequential interplay

PTM%2018%20Radical%20Nature%20of%20JBF.pdf, where he approvingly interprets Luther that justification by faith is a "dynamic, ongoing action in the divine-human relationship. . . . Justification is not static, it is dynamic and ongoing. As we *constantly* believe, God *constantly* justifies" (emphasis original).

⁵⁵Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 109, 207 (AA 6:68, 191–192).

⁵⁶Mulholland, "Freedom and Providence," 80–81.

⁵⁷Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*. 379–380 (AA 28:1039).

⁵⁸Wolterstorff, "Conundrums," 44–45. Kant wrote in response to Wolterstorff, "For what in our earthly life (and perhaps even in all future times and in all worlds) is always only in mere *becoming* . . . is imputed to us as if we already possessed it here in full. And to this we indeed have no rightful claim (according to the empirical cognition we have of ourselves), so far as we know ourselves" (*Religion and Rational Theology*, 115–116 [AA 6:75–76]).

⁵⁹Mariña, "Kant on Grace," 381.

of human and divine where God “first sees their moral constitution . . . and only then makes up for their incapacity to satisfy this requirement on their own.” However, this latter passage should be understood as descriptive next to the larger metaphysical context of Kant’s doctrine of God, where God is the unilateral cause of a universal grace.⁶⁰

Wolterstorff’s other criticism is that Kant destroys divine freedom in requiring forgiveness. If Kant is right that God is not free, that would extirpate grace as unmerited favor (a gift). Wolterstorff thinks that God’s actions in this case would be stemming from his justice, not from grace. Kant cannot hold, he asserts, that God’s divine aid is both a duty and a freely given gift.⁶¹ Kant’s method, as Wolterstorff sees it, consists of “probing the implications of our human rights and obligations” and holding God to the same human world of moral obligations.⁶² But in his rejoinder, Wolterstorff also draws on the empirical evidence of human relationships, arguing that “if we have a moral claim on someone’s doing something, then for that person to do that is not for the person to act graciously, but for the person to grant what is due us.”⁶³

Wolterstorff is correct that divine forgiveness is motivated by divine love, but in the divine act of mercy he claims that divine mercy transcends divine justice in the act of forgiveness. This is counterintuitive to both classical theological and biblical concepts: of God as containing the fullness of all perfections and incapable of change, and of God as a merciful judge who is also just in His justification of sinners through the satisfaction made by the Son.⁶⁴

Kant, for his part, adheres to the classical understanding of divine perfections and maintains that God is “always the same, equally gracious and equally just.”⁶⁵ Compared with Wolterstorff, for Kant, divine justice does not trump benevolence. In his *Lectures*, he writes that God’s justice is a perfection “that limits God’s benevolence,” not in God’s nature, but “only in the measure we have not made ourselves worthy of it.” With this dialectical tension of the perfections of divine grace and justice, Kant is able to speak of divine justice in terms of a “combination of benevolence with holiness.” Thus, Wolterstorff’s charge that Kant “requires God to forgive” because he shortchanges divine grace in favor of justice is suspect.⁶⁶

⁶⁰Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 115 (AA 6:75).

⁶¹Wolterstorff, “Conundrums,” 44–45. In comparison, Kant expressly states that God’s gifts do not flow from his justice, “for if they came to us from justice, then there would be no *praemia gratuita* [gifts of grace], but rather we would have to possess some right to demand them, and God would have to be bound to give them to us” (*Religion and Rational Theology*, 417 [AA 28:1085]).

⁶²Wolterstorff, “Conundrums,” 44, 47.

⁶³Ibid., 44.

⁶⁴Ibid., 46.

⁶⁵Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 379–380 (AA 28:1039).

⁶⁶Ibid., 410 (AA 28:1076).

As to Wolterstorff's assertion that for God's grace to actually be grace it must be free,⁶⁷ this seems self-evident enough under the normal conditions of human relationships—assuming divine relationships are analogous to these. But his claim that Kant diminishes divine freedom belies a simplistic view of divine freedom on his own part, at least when divine freedom is considered in relation to a covenantal framework for the understanding of justification.⁶⁸

In a covenantal framework for justification, God calls the sinner from where they are to a new life, but with specific stipulations that must be subsequently observed (cf. Abraham). When the sinner embarks on this new life, a new relationship with God, the perpetuation of their relationship with God is both founded in grace and necessarily contingent on their moral growth as it expresses their trust in God. Supposing the new creature commits a sin, or, supposing that the good works the new creature performed with good conscience are still deficient to meet the demands of the law, the question at issue is whether God is legally required (as Wolterstorff charges Kant with holding) to forgive/impute righteousness. The very nature of the covenant, in that it is founded on promise, indicates that by virtue of God's holy nature (commensurate with the law) and His inability to lie, God will forgive. In this covenant framework, it does indeed appear that God is morally bound, albeit by His own free choice, and perhaps paradoxically, because of the eternal claims of the law which are commensurate with his character, to forgive.⁶⁹

All of this is, of course, contingent on the sinners' decision to make themselves "receptive" to God's grace through repentance and confession; or, in the case of an individual whose has performed good but deficient works, have done their best to fulfill God's law. In this covenantal scenario, divine freedom is still intact, but through the divine act of initiating a covenant and entering the relationship, God has freely chosen to limit Himself to some obligations. It is fascinating that Kant seems aware, to some degree, of this covenantal framework. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant articulates an objection to his grounding belief in divine supplementation on moral reason instead of a revealed, covenantal framework.

To believe that God, by an act of kindness, will in some unknown way fill what is lacking to our justification is to assume gratuitously a cause that will satisfy the need we feel . . . for when we expect something by grace of

⁶⁷Ibid., 379 (AA 28:1039).

⁶⁸Rhys Bezzant recognizes how a covenant (in this case Edwards's) impacts discourse on divine and human responsibility in justification: "The language of covenant serves to create a framework connecting holy demands with justified status, just as it gives objective ballast to the experience of faith and grace: it situates the experience of salvation within a biblical and historical framework" ("The Gospel of Justification and Edwards Social Vision," in *Jonathan Edwards and Justification*, ed. Josh Moody [Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012], 79).

⁶⁹Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 231 (AA 8:339). In "The End of All Things" Kant also recognizes the claims of the law on God, stating that "the law, as an unchanging order lying in the nature of things, is not to be left up to even the creator's arbitrary will, to decide its consequences thus or otherwise" (ibid.).

a superior, we cannot assume that we must get it as a matter of course; we can expect it only if it was actually promised to us, as in a formal contract. So it seems that we can hope for that supplement and assume that we shall get it only insofar as it has been actually pledged through divine *revelation*.⁷⁰

Kant's embedded objector claims that a legitimate hope in justifying grace may be gained from the promises of God made in the form of a contract. Though Kant himself would not accept revealed knowledge as grounds for belief in divine aid, he understands on some level how grace in a covenant framework might work. What he does not realize, as far as we find here, is that the notion of the moral agent's "receptivity" as a condition of grace (imputed righteousness) after conversion is a necessary cog in the covenantal framework of the interplay of God and the human agent in justification.⁷¹

Summary and Remarks

Kant's subjective atonement fails in explaining expiation in at least three ways. He fails to explain how debt may be removed by one phase of the moral self-rendering satisfaction for another. His failure in this aspect comes about because of a contradiction in the structure of the *noumenal* self as absolutely free and spontaneous and in his insistence that the *noumenal* self actuate its own transformation. Finally, he does not adequately explain how the permanence of the evil disposition, which has chosen its maxims, can change these without some condition that is able to overcome the disposition to evil and to choose the good.

In terms of the possibility and identity of grace, Kant cannot allow grace into the conversion event. The overriding reason for this is that it would violate the autonomous freedom of moral agents, who must choose for themselves good or evil to be moral agents. For the same reason, cooperative grace, during or after conversion, is not beneficial to moral progress. These points must be qualified by the fact that Kant would also say that grace in these forms cannot be denied—they are simply not objects of knowledge.

⁷⁰Ibid., 271 (AA 7:47).

⁷¹The notion of Kantian "receptivity" along with some of the same terminology (i.e., "disposition," "deficiency"), can be found in a covenantal context in the devotional writings of nineteenth/early twentieth century author, Ellen White, who wrote, "Those who with sincere will, with contrite heart, are putting forth humble efforts to live up to the requirements of God are looked upon by the Father with pitying tender love; He regards such as obedient children, and the righteousness of Christ is imputed unto them" (Ellen G. White to Elders M. and H. Miller, 23 July 1889, (Letter 4, 1889), Ellen G. White Estate, Silver Springs, MD, in idem, *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, 4 vols. [Washington, DC: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987], 1:402); "When it is in the heart to obey God, when efforts are put forth to this end, Jesus accepts this disposition and effort as man's best service, and He makes up for the deficiency with His own divine merit. But He will not accept those who claim to have faith in Him, and yet are disloyal to His Father's commandment" (idem, *Selected Messages*, 3 vols. [Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1958], 1:382).

The transformation to the good disposition allows for a legitimate hope in divine aid to make up for inevitable deficiency. But this is only on the condition that the moral agents make themselves "receptive" to grace. On this point, Kant is "most original"⁷² as a corrective to forensic notions of justification following the Protestant reformation and in pointing to a dynamic view of justification. The identity of this supplement is an idea of righteousness located in the original, created predisposition of humanity by God, and thus, technically external.

Kant famously said in his first critique that his efforts to limit knowledge were intended to "make room for faith."⁷³ Recognizing the limits of one's knowledge is an invaluable skill in any field of knowledge, but in theology it is paramount because the subject of study is chiefly a transcendent God. Kant's approach to religion, then, is not wholly without merit, for it restrains speculation that can be harmful to individual and corporate faith.

Kant's pursuit to justify belief in personal salvation ineluctably places him face-to-face with the mystery of atonement, and his caution serves him well in grappling with this mystery if we take into consideration his view of knowledge as scientific certainty. However, without revealed content, Kant struggles decidedly to make sense of rudimentary principles of Christian faith that have shaped the faith of believers across ages. He wrestles with profound questions on atonement that, in summary, leave him with a "remarkable antinomy" of faith in satisfaction and faith in the ability to become well-pleasing to God.⁷⁴ He attempts to solve this by considering what is most beneficial to morality and by studiously avoiding, for the sake of intellectual honesty, what cannot be known by speculative reasoning. Some scholars argue that he fails to resolve it.⁷⁵

From the perspective of revealed faith, Kant's religious project may indeed provide some justification for belief, say, for instance, in the argument for God's existence, freedom, and a life of holiness and future happiness all inextricably linked to the duty to obey the law (cf. Rom 1:20). However, Kant's insistence on autonomy severs the self from its maker, and his imperative of divine grace is, in many instances, an obscure wish at best. Rather than securing infallible grounds for belief, this evaluation of Kant's encounter with the mystery of atonement finds him returning his interpreter back again to the gulf between God and sinful humankind.

His failure need not be taken completely as such, however. Instead, it may also be seen as an affirmation of the paradoxical nature of the atonement—both to the theoretical and the practical uses of reason. The paradoxical character of the atonement, it may be argued, is one of the greatest arguments for its truth and is evidence to support belief. For, if one may legitimately hope that divine aid is available to bridge the gulf between

⁷²Mariña, "Kant on Grace," 400.

⁷³Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 117 (B, xxx).

⁷⁴Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, 147 (AA 6:116).

⁷⁵Silber, "Kant's Religion," cxxxii. See also Wolterstorff, "Conundrums," 48–52.

them and God, it is reasonable to conclude that, as grace is the action of one whose being, knowledge, and power exceeds cognition, such aid should be ultimately beyond human comprehension.⁷⁶

⁷⁶See C. Stephen Evans, *Why Christian Faith Still Makes Sense: A Response to Contemporary Challenges* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 104–113. Evans makes a similar argument about paradox as an apologetic tool in regards to revelation and the incarnation.