

Christopher J. Insole, *The Intolerable God: Kant's Theological Journey*  
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Christopher Insole's *The Intolerable God: Kant's Theological Journey* is based on his 2013 McDonald Lectures at the University of Oxford. Like his earlier *Kant and the Creation of Freedom* (2013), Insole develops a theologically 'affirmative' and 'metaphysically-friendly' picture of Kant. Hence, rather than focusing on the moral foundations for Kant's philosophical theology, Insole tends instead to see Kant's theism as an iteration of the 'Theological Rationalism' of his German forebears.

The first four chapters of *The Intolerable God* are devoted to the above thesis. More specifically, Insole contends that while Kant's critical turn led him to reject the traditional proofs for God's existence, he nonetheless continued to employ the conception of God promoted by German Rationalism. As explained in chapter 2, theological rationalism needs to be distinguished from the more empirically oriented natural theology of the period. For while both schools see the order of nature as due to God, where the latter, according to Insole, assigns to God an 'arbitrary will' that 'just lets things unfold' (p. 17), the former envisions a created order imbued with a system of essences and ends. Moreover, unlike the deist God whose role in creation extends no farther than the original establishment of a 'clockwork' universe, the theological rationalist affirms not only a providential plan, but regards nature's ongoing existence as dependent upon 'the plentitudinous action of divine self-outpouring' (p. 17). Nonetheless, theological rationalism does not, as Insole later discusses, bode well for human freedom. For if 'everything unfolds according to an essence sustained in, and activated by, the divine nature' (p. 18), then there is no possibility (either for us or God) to act otherwise.

This problem is the central concern of *Kant and the Creation of Freedom*, and is likewise 'the intolerable problem when thinking about freedom' (p. 132) that motivates its retelling in *The Intolerable God*. Yet where the early chapters of the former read, at least to me, like a dissertation trying to get into gear, Insole has found now a more apt way to introduce the problem, one not based upon a few accidents of recent secondary literature, but rather by way of the historical backdrop for Kant's 'intolerable problem'.

As such, I think there is in this text a marked improvement in format over its predecessor. Nonetheless, I have some reservations about its thesis. While Insole is most definitely correct that there is much to connect Kant's early theology with Wolff, Baumgarten and Knutzen, I believe that the conception

of God found in Kant's Critical period is deeply at odds with theological rationalism. In fact, as I will very briefly outline below, both in his lectures on Baumgarten's Natural Theology, as well as in the 'Critique of all Speculative Theology' found at the end of the first *Critique's* Dialectic, Kant advances a penetrating objection against the Wolffian conception of God, an objection that flows from his critique of their conception of reason. Before, however, I turn to this, let me discuss a parallel problem in Insole's own exposition, for it seems to me that his account of Kant's rejection of divine *concursum* in chapter 7 is at odds with the thesis guiding its first four chapters.

Consider how intimately tied together the doctrine of *concursum* is with theological rationalism. According to theological rationalism, God does not merely create the world and then abscond, but rather the created order continuously depends upon God. As Insole describes it, 'everything unfolds according to an essence sustained in, and activated by, the divine nature' (p. 18). This applies as well to the human will, and thus with *concursum* as Insole describes it: God acts 'immediately and directly in the action of the creature' (p. 167). Hence we find in Leibniz, Wolff, Baumgarten, Knutzen, all those figures from which the early Kant derived his theological rationalism, a comfortable acknowledgement of the doctrine of *concursum*.

Yet, it is Insole's contention that Kant rejects *concursum*. As Insole explains, it is a consequence of transcendental idealism that 'anything that is a product of our action, whether free or unfree, is not directly a product of divine creativity' (p. 126). Insole in fact cites an array of texts to make this point, a point that seems central to his tale of how Kant deals with the 'intolerable' conflict between the God of theological rationalism and the sort of freedom that is necessary for morality. So, while I do agree with Insole that Kant does reject (general) *concursum*,<sup>1</sup> what seems to have escaped notice in *The Intolerable God* is the implication of this rejection for the thesis which guides its first four chapters. Of course, one might try to gerrymander the boundaries here and work out some picture of how Kant can be both a theological rationalist and an opponent to divine *concursum*. But it strikes me that Kant has already (a) dismissed such manoeuvres in his 1791 Theodicy essay; and (b) developed a lengthy critique of theological rationalism in both his lectures on Baumgarten's natural theology and in the Transcendental Dialectic's 'Critique of all Speculative Theology'.

With regard to (a), it is irksome to me that Insole never considered Kant's 1791 Theodicy essay, neither in *The Intolerable God* nor in his previous *Kant and the Creation of Freedom*. For Kant wrote this essay specifically to address the 'intolerable' problem that is so central to Insole's scholarship. While I certainly lack here the space to discuss this essay at length, Kant there surveys the various attempts that have been made to explain how evil in its many forms (pain, moral evil, injustice) could be made compatible with the traditional

conception of God. Kant then concludes that there is no *theoretical* solution. What he proposes instead (albeit cryptically) is a solution that attends to the source of the problem, arguing that as the real source of the problem is practical (since both our judgements of value and the postulation of God have their roots in practical reason), the solution will likewise be found in practical reason. Unfortunately, that is all I can say here. Space limits.

Now for (b). This one gets a bit complicated. In both his lectures on Baumgarten's natural theology as well as in the appendix to the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant advances a criticism of rationalist theology, arguing that it yields no more than a 'silhouette' (28: 452, 605) of theology, a 'useless' (28: 596) or 'unusable' (28: 453) God, 'quite superfluous to us' (28: 1020). Kant's reasoning here is quite involved, but let me try to explain it concisely: (i) according to the Wolffian rationalist, metaphysics requires that we remove from our concepts all that is bound to experience; (ii) for Kant, however, once we strip away from our concepts all that is bound to experience, they are left thoroughly impoverished, so much so that we no longer have the conceptual resources to think of God as will or intellect, cause or substance, etc.; (iii) accordingly, Kant claims that the conception of God available to the (thoroughgoing) theological rationalist is 'not worth much more than atheism' (28: 597, A644/B661).

This criticism is, moreover, quite wily on Kant's part, for he uses it to turn the tables on the rationalist's own critique of deism. As Insole notes, theological rationalism reads empirical natural theology as having a deficient conception of God. In fact, deism is regularly criticized by Wolffians, attacked on various grounds, but all to the effect that it leaves God as nothing but an unknown non-natural cause of nature. Baumgarten for example writes: 'DEISM is the doctrine maintaining that almost nothing is conceivable about God, except perhaps his existence' (Baumgarten 2013: §862).

Moreover, where Allen Wood quite famously asserts that Kant's account of deism is disconnected from the 'common seventeenth- and eighteenth-century usage' and thus is 'idiosyncratic' (Wood 1991: 1), what Wood did not recognize is that Kant's picture of deism echoes how it was cast by Wolff and his followers. They dismissed it for its ultimately hollow picture of God, and Kant followed in kind. Accordingly, Kant's depiction of deism is not a departure from the 'common seventeenth- and eighteenth-century usage'. It certainly diverges from the 'Dryden Deism' that Wood proposes. But Kant's use of 'deism', though befuddling to modern readers, would have been recognized by – and perhaps even raised a smirk on the faces of – his contemporaries.

Where Kant does go off on his own, where he makes his important philosophical move, is in how he uses against the Wolffians their own critique of deism. Kant's Copernican revolution stages something of a *reductio* for the Wolffian, for if our concepts are to be made fit for metaphysics by removing all their empirical elements, what must now be removed is not just the

contingencies of sensibility, but the *a priori* structure of experience as well. Accordingly, the thoroughgoing rationalist theologian ends up with a mere ‘silhouette’ of theology, leaving us with no content, not even a *monotheism*. For since ‘how-many-times’ depends upon ‘time and the synthesis (of the homogeneous) in it’ (A242/B300), once purified of all that is bound to experience, even the concept of magnitude collapses. This, Kant claims, is where theological rationalism ends up.

Moving on to the conclusion of *The Intolerable God*: I fear that Insole has not shown much care in his use of the *Opus Postumum* (OP). First, its fascicles (i.e. bundles of disjointed notes) were not, as Insole describes them, Kant’s ‘last writings’ (p. 130). Rather, they are dated to 1796–1801, and thus concurrent with the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), the final version of the *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), and an array of shorter pieces and lecture notes prepared (some with Kant’s aid) for publication. Second, while we may surmise from various correspondences that Kant intended to use the OP notes to address a ‘gap’ (Kant to Garve, 21 September 1798: 12: 257; to Kiesewetter, 19 October 1798: 12: 258) between transcendental philosophy and natural science, their fragmentary and disordered character has made them into a ‘philosophical Rorschach test ... easy for commentators to see what they want to see [in them]’ (Hall 2015: 8).

Hence, rather than attend to the dozens of comments in the OP where God is described as the creator or architect of the natural order (21: 34), as a discreet person who has ‘rightful power over all rational [beings]’ (21: 35), and a ‘being of the greatest perfection, a being who knows everything, and is capable of everything’ (21: 50), Insole chose instead to take from it what he was looking for: a final solution to the ‘intolerable problem’. However, as I have argued in this review, Insole has missed two important moments in Kant’s theological journey.

First, with the inception of his Critical philosophy, Kant *rejects* theological rationalism. We find his arguments against it in the ‘Critique of all Speculative Theology’ found at the end of the first *Critique*’s Dialectic. They also are integrated into his lectures on Baumgarten’s natural theology.

Second, Kant does not replace theological rationalism with yet another religious metaphysic, nor does the ‘intolerable problem’ ultimately lead him, as Insole claims, to atheism. Rather, Kant’s (woefully neglected) 1791 theodicy essay takes up this ‘problem’, and by way of its distinction between ‘doctrinal’ and ‘authentic’ theologies, directs us back to the source of the ‘problem’: reason itself. For it is there where we shall find the ‘authentic’, critical, and thus properly *Kantian* solution.

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### Notes

- 1 Unfortunately, because of space, I have to oversimplify here. Kant actually affirms particular forms of *concursum* in a discussion of providence in *Perpetual Peace* (8: 362) and seems open to the possibility in the *Religion*, on the grounds that the operations of freedom are incomprehensible (6: 191). Hence, Kant leaves room for at least ‘special *concursum*’ (i.e. divine aid in our moral efforts). However, the *Religion* presents various restrictions to what sort of aid is compatible with moral religion versus what ends up leading to a ‘religion of roagation’. I discuss this issue in Pasternack (2018).

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