

## Book reviews

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Gordon E. Michalson (ed.) *Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: A Critical Guide*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Pp. xiv+266. £60.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 1 107 01852 5.

Kant's *Religion* has attracted increased scholarly attention in recent years. It is recognized not only as a landmark in the philosophy of religion, and not merely as an important part of the Kantian corpus, but also as a work that addresses religion in relation to ethics, anthropology, history, hermeneutics, and politics. This new collection of original essays brings together a variety of scholars from both sides of the Atlantic, many of whom are leading figures in Kantian philosophy, and it makes a strong contribution to these evolving discussions. Michalson has planned a balanced volume that sheds light on Kant's *Religion* from several angles. His Introduction, in addition to summarizing and contextualizing each essay, outlines issues and controversies that have surrounded Kant's text since its publication in 1793. He rightly emphasizes moral theory and 'the central role of the ethical life' as the touchstone for Kant's interpretation of religion and scripture, and likewise he notes the continuity between *Religion* and Kant's major critical writings (2–3). In fact, if there is a theme that binds together the distinct essays comprising this volume, it concerns the contributions of *Religion* to core issues in Kant's philosophy. Earlier analyses that attempted to see *Religion* as somehow at odds with the critical philosophy have given way to more coherent inquiries into how it develops principal issues in Kant's work. To convey a sense of the whole, I will discuss a few central themes from each essay.

Ottfried Höffe directly addresses the continuity between *Religion* and Kant's mature work, focusing on the interpretation of scripture. He notes that an Enlightenment approach to philosophical theology emancipated 'from any authoritative holy scripture' plays a role in all three *Critiques* (10–11). The focus is on the rational concept of God as central to practical rather than speculative reason (13–14). Höffe sees *Religion* as continuous with this ethical approach to theology, but as adding a far more detailed analysis of Christianity as a historical religion (15). Central to this inquiry is a 'moral philosophical' interpretation that focuses on 'concepts that are indispensable for a universal religion of morality and

reason' (18–19). This critical analysis also clarifies the distinction between universal principles, as they are presented in historical faiths, and the doctrinal and institutional elements of tradition that are non-universalizable (21). Höffe augments his study with reference to Kant's companion piece, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, producing a close textual reading that explicates the interpretative framework established by practical reason.

Allen W. Wood provides another notable contribution, focusing on the theme of 'The evil in human nature'. Wood understands Kant's rational interpretation of 'original sin' as proposing the 'religion of reason . . . as a saving response to it' (32). Rather than seeing Kant's engagement with the problem of evil and with traditional Christian concepts as a lapse from an Enlightenment project, Wood elaborates the integral role of rationally engaging historical traditions. He offers a precise summary of key themes related to our capacity freely to choose or incorporate evil, augmenting *Religion* with relevant passages from the *Anthropology*, the *Metaphysics of Morals*, and the 'Idea for a universal history'. Building on a number of his prior writings, Wood stresses that 'the propensity to evil arises from our use of reason in a social context' and that 'self-regarding duties and vices' do not constitute an exception to the 'social origin of the human propensity to evil' (46–47). The crucial point is that Kant's focus on human rationality and free choice does not contradict his simultaneous emphasis on social and political factors. These complement one another, so that social and historical forces provide the 'context in which human freedom and reason have developed' (49). Kant does not isolate an inner moral transformation from the equally essential institutional factors shaping our priorities. Addressing radical evil through reason requires attention to both freely adopted maxims and the institutional environments informing them. At the same time, Kant's subtle analysis eschews simplistic causal explanations of human personality based on deterministic social influences. Hence *Religion* makes a vital contribution to our understanding of the interface between inner dispositions and external institutions.

Ingolf Dalferth explores 'radical evil and human freedom' in a more far-ranging manner, addressing fundamental Kantian themes of autonomy, freedom of choice (including our ability to choose evil), and the animality, humanity, and personality that form our nature. One of his most important points is that 'there is no possibility for human beings to live as morally neutral' (66). The human condition inevitably involves ethical choices, even when we evade decisions or do not expressly choose. Dalferth also engages the Kantian dilemma concerning how fallible human beings can correct their own propensity to evil (69ff.). Dalferth presents our inability to 'extirpate' radical evil in terms that lean towards a more traditional theological response, so that the postulate of God (as formulated in the second *Critique*) is required to resolve the dilemma (77). However, in *Religion* Kant also establishes a dynamic investigation that juxtaposes this inability

to eliminate radical evil with an equally clear ability to ‘overcome’ it through a freely chosen revolution in our moral maxims. In this way, Kant points us towards ethical vigilance guiding the ongoing approximation of a good will.

Alison Hills provides a more closely focused analysis of the key concept of *Gesinnung* or disposition; this appears in all three *Critiques* but is given far greater development in *Religion*. She highlights the role of the *Gesinnung* as an underlying maxim operative in terms of our moral responsibility, our reasons for action, and our character (82ff.). Her treatment helps clarify an important but elusive concept in Kant’s work, though one would have wished for further explication of its role in some of the key themes of the text, such as our tendency to be guided primarily by self-love as corrupting our supreme maxim, and the need for what Kant terms ‘a revolution in the disposition of a human being’.

Andrew Chignell explores Kant’s concept of rational hope, distinguished from both knowledge and rational belief, as perhaps ‘the central topic of the philosophy of religion’ (100n.). He addresses hope in relation to miracles, effects of grace, and ‘the construction of a truly ethical society’ (100). Only the last of these has a clear textually supported warrant in *Religion* (indeed, miracles and effects of grace come in for sustained critique from an ethical as well as an epistemological angle). However, Chignell’s exercise remains useful in exploring the different modalities of hope. For example, the concept of hope is explicated through a discussion of different forms of possibility – empirical, logical, and ‘real’ or metaphysical possibility (105). The last of these best fits Kant’s approach, as it focuses on our belief that a connection between, e.g., virtue and happiness ‘is *really possible*’ (106). This real possibility is particularly relevant to the third object of hope, the ethical community, wherein practical grounds provide us with ‘rational hope for a this-worldly but still inconceivable goal’ (116). Hence a focus on hope is a key element in Kant’s negotiation of the tension between approximating the ideal of the highest good and our inability to realize this fully in the phenomenal world.

Leslie Stevenson discusses the familiar topic of Kant on grace, offering a balanced treatment that assesses Kant’s thinking in relation to traditional concepts such as sanctifying, justifying, and electing grace. However, like many commentators he is not always sufficiently clear about the epistemic status of Kant’s inquiry, sometimes placing Kant’s critical analysis of a historically transmitted religious concept on the same level as scriptural and theological discussions making direct claims about the workings of grace (126ff.). This lack of clarity can lead to false dilemmas, such as the alleged tension between Augustinian and Pelagian elements discerned in Kant’s thought (132). However, Kant’s focus is not on the nature of divine assistance *per se*, which is outside human knowledge, but rather on ‘*what a human being has to do himself* [or herself] in order to become worthy of this assistance’ (6:52). Still, this is a thoughtful discussion, which also highlights Kant’s critical sensibilities and his unremitting focus on human freedom – which is

itself, as Stevenson stresses, something of a mystery that eludes ‘complete scientific explanation’ (136).

Karl Ameriks’s discussion of the theme of miracles clarifies several fundamental issues. Ameriks deftly establishes the critical and Enlightenment framework for Kant’s reflections, while noting that the concepts of rational faith and human perfectibility as ‘theodical’ borrow ‘from non-natural Christian ideas’ (137). Nevertheless, Kant ‘is increasingly interested in strongly discouraging appeal’ to miracles and means of grace, and he emphasizes that rational faith ‘cannot claim to amount to “conviction”’. In this vein, Ameriks stresses Kant’s insistence on ‘our absolute free agency, which is nothing less than the keystone concept of the Critical philosophy’ (138–139). These and other related points show us that Kant does not embrace literal theological or supernatural claims, and that his unremitting focus is on human autonomy as the basis for ethical advancement. Yet, Ameriks rightly emphasizes that this is not the familiar naturalistic or reductive path of many modern thinkers, in that religious ideas are assessed through ‘the non-natural demands of Kant’s strict moral perspective’ (140). In other words, the universal moral law, and the human autonomy required to actualize it, are irreducible to mechanistic explanatory models. Rational moral principles provide the criteria for the critique of traditional speculative theodicies, and likewise for the formulation of an ‘authentic theodicy’ based on ‘the absolute primacy of pure morality’ (144). If this eschews a supernatural understanding of religious concepts, it does not hesitate to embrace a supersensible realm of moral freedom by which ‘we are able to work absolutely freely toward the highest good’ (147).

Manfred Kuehn discusses ‘Kant’s Jesus’, explicating Kant’s portrayal of ‘the personified idea of the good’ in relation to the theological movement of the Neologists. On the surface, there is some resemblance to Kant’s approach to religion here, in so far as the Neologists attempted to replace historical particulars ‘with purely rational content instead’ (157). Kuehn gives us an informative overview of two representatives of this movement: Reimarus, who tends toward deism and a naturalistic account of theology, and Semler, who while historically informed retains a role for suprarational revelation. On the one hand, Kuehn tries to locate Kant’s religion as ‘a middle way between these two positions’ (168). On the other hand, he also recognizes that Kant’s focus on religion as a ‘call to live a good life through the moral law’ is different from each, and ultimately (if unsurprisingly) ‘very Kantian’ (170). The exercise is valuable in showing Kant’s differences from even rationally oriented theologians, in so far as for Kant belief in Jesus ultimately means ‘that we should try to live in accordance with the genuine moral principles he revealed’ (173).

Nicholas Tampio addresses ‘Pluralism in the ethical community’. He argues that Kant’s ‘doctrine of right was part of an architectonic system that also included the philosophy of religion’, again emphasizing *Religion’s* contribution to practical

philosophy (175). Tampio brings Kant's model into dialogue with the work of John Rawls on religious pluralism. However, another accomplishment of this essay is to locate Kant's philosophy of religion in relation to the historical antecedents of Spinoza and Leibniz (176ff.). Tampio shows that *Religion* 'incorporates elements of both Spinoza's and Leibniz' responses to the theological-political problem', with Kant's approach to scriptural interpretation indebted to Spinoza and his rational appropriation of Christian ethics bearing resemblance to that of Leibniz (181). This in itself would be a worthy project, but it is only the first part of the discussion. Tampio's is also the only essay in the collection to address seriously the elements of religious pluralism in Kant's work (since in principle 'moral religion' is a rational ideal for assessing and transforming all historical traditions). This is accomplished through an illuminating discussion of Islamic thought (188–192). My only reservation is in the way Rawls's notion of 'overlapping consensus' is used here (186–188); the emphasis on making ideas 'speak to a wider spectrum of citizens' by not disrupting existing religious views dilutes the universal ethical focus of Kant's work.

Pablo Muchnik's essay on 'Kant's religious constructivism' explicates the rational project subtending Kant's discussions of God and religion. Muchnik shows that this is neither the 'private' religion endorsed by Richard Rorty, nor the theological programme of more traditional thinkers who diminish the status of rational ethics. The governing question concerns 'what kind of religion could support, and even advance, the emancipatory goals of the Enlightenment?' (199). The key is the capacity of religious ideas to give public expression to shared universal ends, and to do so in a way that does not violate human autonomy. As Muchnik summarizes: 'God's legislative function . . . gives public sanction, valid for all agents, to the same ethical commands each individual can find in her own reason' (210). This is another valuable contribution to explicating how inquiries into inner autonomy and public institutions intersect in *Religion*.

G. Felicitas Munzel further engages the contribution of *Religion* to Kant's conception of practical reason. She is interested in the mediation of the rational moral law with human anthropology (broadly understood by Kant as involving the psychological and cultural factors characterizing actual persons). As she stresses, 'the pivotal issue is whether and how the human rational subject can deliver on what is expected, on the "ought"' (223). As with her earlier work, Munzel makes a significant contribution in elucidating how Kant formulates a rational conception of morality that also addresses the qualities of empirical human beings. These can both facilitate and impede our realization of morality in the phenomenal world as the rational ideal of the highest good. To this end, she cites Kant as follows: 'the actions which are devoted to realizing the highest good, do belong to this world' (225). Likewise, she illustrates how *Religion* addresses such issues as the formation of 'an inner trust relationship between objective and subjective practical reason' (229), conscience, and 'reflective judgment' (232).

Richard Velkley's piece on 'Culture and the limits of practical reason' pursues the role of religion 'in the critical enterprise' (233). He explores how the 'primacy of practical reason' leads to positive claims concerning God, freedom, and immortality (234), and how practical reason is 'world transformative' (236). In pursuing these essential themes, Velkley is virtually alone in this collection in stressing the role in *Religion* of 'poetic figures coming to the assistance of philosophic reason' (238). This in itself casts considerable light on Kant's enterprise, because it is a sub-theme within the larger, crucial issue of Kant's ethical employment of symbolic and allegorical resources drawn from religious history.

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Jennifer R. Rapp *Ordinary Oblivion and the Self Unmoored: Reading Plato's Phaedrus and Writing the Soul*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014). Pp. xi + 205. £ 36.00 (Hbk). ISBN 978 0 8232 5743 0.

*Ordinary Oblivion and the Self Unmoored* is an exquisitely crafted example of that genre of writing, influenced by deconstruction and phenomenology, which has been gaining ascendancy steadily since the 1960s: the speculative 'close textual analysis' (6), in this case composed under the positive influence of the 'religious turn' in recent continental thought. As such, the volume is accompanied by a number of tacit, but crucial, caveats. First, though it attends to Plato's *Phaedrus* very closely, *Ordinary Oblivion* – like Jacques Derrida's 1968 essay 'La pharmacie de Platon' – is not a general introduction to the dialogue, or to Platonic thought. The author presupposes a familiarity with both Plato and his critics, most of the latter being mentioned only in passing references. Second, this book does not offer a sustained engagement with contemporary philosophers from the same field, for the simple reason that it pioneers a new reading (a phenomenon not untypical of the genre). It does not study the Greek concept of forgetting and *anamnēsis* ('recollection'), nor of that 'oblivion' which issues from the trauma of history (as in Paul Ricoeur's 2003 book *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*), but the oblivion which belongs to the everyday modality of the soul (x). This last concept introduces the third, and most significant, caveat, which is that *Ordinary Oblivion* accepts a certain theological inflection of its premise – specifically, of the 'soul' – in order to construct an alternative to secular and post-secular accounts of selfhood, yet does not argue positively for a recognizably