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Allen W. Wood, KANT AND RELIGION

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Kant and Religion, by Allen W. Wood. Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. xxii + 249. \$89.99 (hardcover); \$29.99 (paper).

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What is the relationship between Kant's commitment to Christianity and his philosophy, both transcendental and practical? In addition to treating a raft of new topics, Allen Wood's *Kant and Religion* revisits and, in some cases, revises the views familiar to the readers of *Kant's Moral Religion* (Cornell University Press, 1970). The present work carries forward Wood's high level of textual mastery, historical acumen, and philosophical rigor.

The expressed aim of the work is to "present critically but sympathetically" Kant's project in the 1793 *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (2). The subjects and the order of topics will not be surprising to anyone familiar with that book: we find chapters on "Religion and Reason," "Moral Faith in God," "The Radical Evil in Human Nature," "The Propensity to Evil," "The Change of Heart," "The Son of God," "Grace and Salvation," "The Ethical Community and the Church," and "Freedom of Conscience." A hallmark of Wood's long engagement with Kant's views on religion has been his insistence that these views must be set within the context of Kant's epistemology and his ethics. *Kant and Religion* is no exception. Thus, at various points in these chapters, Wood displays Kant's Christian commitments as constrained by the epistemic modesty that comes with our unavoidable conformity to the formal rules that make experience possible, as well as by the thought that it can never be legitimate to treat a person simply as an object of experience. Kant's epistemology and ethics serve as guard rails: whatever may be said on its behalf, a person's commitment to this or that religious belief or practice must not violate the terms of these a priori constraints. In a trivial sense, this basic architecture comes with the territory—the concept of boundary is, after all, built-in to the title of Kant's *Religion*. But what distinguishes Wood's treatment of the guard rails—that is, of Kant's transcendental idealism and his practical philosophy—is his appreciation of their continuing philosophical power and depth. One comes away with the idea that what one makes of Christianity should, in fact, be determined by the positions Kant has staked out in these areas—that Kant's outsized influence on the history of modern religious thought in the West is well-earned.

In the early chapters of *Kant and Religion*, Wood considers early versions of the argument from the Highest Good—the argument that would eventuate, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in the Practical Postulates



of God and a future life. Thus, in Chapter Two, Wood offers what is, to my knowledge, an original and important reading of the argument as it appears in a section of the 1781 edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* titled, "The Canon of Pure Reason." In those pages, Kant represents the Highest Good—a world in which happiness is dispensed in proportion to virtue—as inextricably bound up with practical reason. The connection is tight enough that, without it, Kant says we would be forced "to regard the moral laws as empty figments of the brain" (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge University Press, 1998, A 811/ B 839). Among others, Henry Allison has argued that Kant later rejects the portrayal in the Canon as eudemonistic and heteronomous and Wood engages in an extended rebuttal of Allison's view (40ff; for Allison, see *Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2011, 55-56). Wood points out that, in 1781, Kant has not yet articulated the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy. The charge of heteronomy is, then, he says, difficult to evaluate. The outstanding question is whether—granting that Kant has not yet explicitly deployed his central terms—we should, nevertheless, read Kant as, in the first edition of the *Critique*, already distinguishing between action undertaken for the sake of the moral law and other forms of action.

The central passage from the Canon reads as follows:

It is necessary that our entire course of life be subordinated to moral maxims . . . [But] without a God and a world that is now not visible to us but is to be hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approbation and admiration but not incentives for resolve and realization, because they would not fulfill the whole end that is natural for every rational being and determined a priori and necessarily through the very same pure reason." (A812-13 / B840-41)

Wood emphasizes the unifying moment in this passage—"the whole end"—and argues that Kant here has in view the satisfaction of both our moral and our psychological attitudes. His further, striking suggestion is that this formulation may be superior to his later, "more austere" view, namely, that moral incentives must alone support the moral life (43-44). Wood is right seeing Kant's unifying move in this passage as of signal importance. The question is, however, what is being unified. The quoted paragraph has in view not this or that action but "our entire course of life"; the invitation, then, may be to take "the whole end" as referring to the episodes of the moral life taken together. Heretofore, I have read Kant as pointing out that we cannot view each episode of moral striving in isolation, but rather that we must view them as a whole, as a unity. The form of cognition which requires taking a plurality as a unity is a supporting member in Kant's theoretical philosophy; it underlies the table of categories, makes possible the figurative synthesis of the imagination, and is conspicuous in his philosophy of mathematics—and it also recurs throughout the Critical philosophy of religion (see, for example, *Religion*

within the Boundaries of Mere Reason, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, 177).

Whatever the upshot of this interpretive question, Wood's tracing of the argument(s) from the Highest Good through the *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* (1783), *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1788), and into the *Religion*, will be required reading for anyone with a serious interest in Kant's philosophy of religion. Within the confines of a brief review, I cannot convey a sense of the range and subtlety of Wood's discussion of the texts, or of his engagement with such critics as, among many others, Beck, Michalson and Reath. Suffice to say the book will now take its place among the few secondary sources to which I will refer advanced undergraduates.

Wood has chosen not to treat the *Opus Postumum*, and, in view of a spate of recent, sophisticated work on that text, that is regrettable. He cites his verdict from *Kant's Moral Religion*, that "there is no conclusive evidence that Kant repudiated" his earlier arguments (*Kant's Moral Religion*, 12), commenting only that, "after fifty years, I have nothing to add" (34). But, in view of work from, to take just two examples, Eckart Förster (*Kant's Final Synthesis*, Harvard University Press, 2000), Samuel Kahn ("Kant's post-1800 Disavowal of the Highest Good Argument for the Existence of God," *Kant Yearbook* 10/1 2018, 63-83—the latter cited by Wood), the pressing question is not one of repudiation. Rather, it is whether or to what extent Kant increasingly came to assimilate the concept of God to the concept of a conscience informed by the categorical imperative.

Stepping away from issues of textual interpretation, perhaps the most urgent question the book raises is not about God, but about religion. In the Preface, Wood comments that "the cultural and political influence of a corrupt version of Christianity in my time and nation could not avoid having a powerful emotional impact on me" (xix). Close behind the notion of a "corrupt" Christianity lies Kant's distinction between rational and historical religion. Looking, say, at the rise of fundamentalist movements around the world should serve "as a sad reminder that Kant's hopes for enlightened religion and human progress have been disappointed. That failure belongs not to Kant but to modernity and to institutional religious faith (specifically, to Christianity)" (20). But a good case can be made that the fault lies elsewhere.

To put the emphasis more nearly where it belongs, let us ask: Was Kant ever talking about religion as we find it on earth? Wood, citing Kant in a sympathetic spirit, notes, "to think authentically about religion requires that we consider claims about God *symbolically*" (8). I would say the notion of "authentic" thinking merits some scrutiny. Let us note the contrast, over this point, between Kant's thinking about religion and about epistemology and ethics. In the epistemological realm, we are talking about rules, conformity to which makes experience possible. Here there is no question of thinking authentically about them. And so

for the categorical imperative: it is inescapable for the reflective agent, a fact of reason. But, as concerns religion, Wood notes that Kant's "single basic background assumption" is "that both rational and revealed religion have it as their fundamental aim to make better human beings of us" (12). At least from the vantage point of the early twenty-first century, I think the failure Wood has in view goes not to modernity or to institutionalized Christianity, but rather to the baselessness of Kant's basic background assumption.

Consider, for example, ritual. As Wood notes, Kant held the view that certain forms of Christian ritual—e.g., church going, prayer, baptism, the eucharist—could further the practitioner's moral perfection. Thinking along with Kant, Wood remarks that, "these same practices can, through self-deception, become nothing but superstitious rituals through which we reinforce pious hypocrisy, subjecting ourselves to irrational group-think that perpetuates traditional errors and evils. The difference depends on whether they undergo the reforms for which Kant is hoping" (189). But to focus on self-deception makes for, at best, a superficial diagnosis. Today we recognize that repetition, in ritual contexts, enhances belief and creates the feeling of truth (Lisa K. Fazio, Nadia M. Brashier, B. Keith Payne, Elizabeth J. Marsh, "Knowledge Does Not Protect Against Illusory Truth," *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 2015, 144/5, 993–1002). Not truth, but the feeling of truth. Again, it appears that ritual practices tend to create stable sets of interlocking beliefs (Joseph Henrich, "The evolution of costly displays, cooperation and religion: credibility enhancing displays and their implications for cultural evolution," *Evolution and Human Behavior* 30 (2009) 244–260). Stability even in the face of countervailing evidence. And, far from expanding the sphere of the human community, ritual performances tend to breed tolerance mainly toward those who perform similar acts (Harvey Whitehouse, "Ritual, Cohesion, Hostility," in (eds.) Steve Clarke, Russell Powell, and Julian Savulescu, *Religion, Intolerance, and Conflict: A Scientific and Conceptual Investigation* (Oxford University Press, 2013). What should the author of the formula of humanity say about an institution whose very existence tends to enforce a distinction between in and out-groups?

We might be tempted to respond by saying that contemporary social science really hasn't changed the terms of the discussion—that, just as in Kant's day, these results apply to "institutionalized" religion or to a "corrupt" form of Christianity. I am more inclined to say that we have learned to be suspicious of any such distinction; that, at a minimum, what Wood calls Kant's basic background assumption—again, "that both rational and revealed religion have it as their fundamental aim to make better human beings of us"—has been turned on its head. Such a verdict has no tendency to diminish the importance of Kant's project in the *Religion*. On the contrary, the project of erecting and defending epistemic and moral guardrails has only taken on an added urgency.