

On Kant and the End of Theodicy

1. Prolegomena

With respect to the diverse orders of God, nature, and humanity, there is a puzzle at the heart of Kant's *Religion* and related works in his discussion of theodicy and the role of miracles. The puzzle is whether and how, in his discussion of *Vernunftglaube*,¹ Kant's commitment to a kind of pure moral interpretation of human progress, which may at first appear motivated largely by anti-supernatural Enlightenment ideas, can in the end be disentangled from an appeal to items that in a sense seem miraculous themselves.

Kant did not work out the complex theodical² aspect of his conception of *Vernunftglaube* all at once. Its basic idea goes back decades, and Kant's late works contain a series of final fine-tunings that especially deserve close analysis. In addition to his massive and unexpected book on *Religion* (1793) and several closely related essays 1780s essays on history,³ there are half a dozen very relevant late essays.⁴ Taken together, these works constitute a bold attempt on Kant's part to shore up the Western teleological tradition in a way that is, all at once, deeply religious, liberal, scientific, philosophically nuanced. Kant's attempt is also riddled with "conundrums,"⁵ and I will discuss what I take to be the main philosophical puzzle that arises from his treatment of the supernatural at the very end of Parts One and Two of the *Religion*.

2. The Puzzle

In a long second edition note added to the very end of the General Remark at the end of the first of the four Parts of the *Religion*, Kant makes explicit a theme common to each General Remark that concludes a Part of the book. Each General Remark considers what Kant calls one of the four kinds of "extravagant ideas" that are "*parerga*" to pure moral

¹ It is important to note the special Kantian meaning of this term and its components—*Vernunft*, *Glaube*, and the implication of a kind of *Glaube* re *Vernunft* itself above all. On the contrast between "the rational" and "reason," see e.g., 6: 26n.

² I had hoped to claim some originality in this paper with the introduction of this unforgettable term, but it has been used by Fenves and others. "Theodical" is also sometimes used, but it is the name of a town in southern India.

³ See my "Herder..."*

⁴ "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" (1791), "The End of all Things" (1794), "On a Recently Prominent Tone of Superiority in Philosophy" (1796), "Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy" (1796), and "The Conflict of the Faculties" (1798).

⁵ Here I will not be stressing the more specifically theological problems that arise especially in the context of Kant's notion of radical evil and grace. See KFA*, and Wolterstorff.*

religion but understandably occur to reason as it reflects on its limitations in fulfilling our moral needs (6: 52). These four kinds of ideas are neatly organized under the headings of “Effects of Grace, Miracles, Mysteries, and Means of Grace,” but the ideas are not all on the same level and determining exactly how they differ is no easy task.

For our purposes it will be enough to concentrate on an issue related to the contrast between ideas of the first two kinds. Even though Kant never explicitly denies the possibility of miracles—which he defines early on as items that, materially or formally, “interrupt the order of nature”⁶—he understandably seems increasingly interested in strongly discouraging appeal to them, especially—but not only—as “means of grace.” With respect to mere “effects of grace,” however, it turns out to be difficult to make sense of *Vernunftglaube*’s own central notion of hope without appealing to something at least very like a miracle. As this General Remark stresses, *Vernunftglaube* involves not only an initial moral effort on our part but also hope that then “what does not lie in [our] power will be made good by cooperation (*Mitwirkung*) from above” (6: 52).⁷ The mention of *Mitwirkung* “from above” implies reference to some kind of “effect of grace” through a special action upon us by a supernatural power. There are several theological conundrums here, but the first philosophical challenge here is to find a way in which Kant’s invocation of any non-naturally based effect can be understood to be sufficiently unlike the superstitious reference to miracles that he heavily criticizes in Part Two and other texts.⁸

One strategy for dispelling part—but only part—of the problem is to note that Kant distinguishes quite different ways of invoking ideas that go beyond ordinary nature, and he immediately adds explicit qualifications to his reference to help “from above.” In the body of his first General Remark Kant stresses that *Vernunftglaube*, even in its most developed form, cannot claim to amount to “conviction” (*Überzeugung*, 6: 51). And near the end of a long second edition note to this Remark Kant adds a stress on the point that, even with *Vernunftglaube*, we cannot “summon” any effects of grace by “incorporating” them into either a theoretical or practical “maxim of reason” (6: 53). The effects postulated with the conditions of rational hope do not allow us to say either, straightway,

⁶ *Beweisgrund*, 2: 116; cf. *Metaphysik* L1, 28: 216.

⁷ Cf. Kant’s critique of Herder for appealing to “. *”

⁸ See also Kant’s notes, e.g., R 5662, 5997.

how nature is to be characterized theoretically, nor, given Kant's doctrine of autonomy, can any appeal to them be put directly into a proper practical maxim.

Kant may have felt a need to add this point, and perhaps the note as a whole, precisely because otherwise it might well appear unclear whether, in regard to mere effects of grace, he has anything at least somewhat negative to say that would link up with the highly negative points about references to the supernatural that are stressed in the other Parts of the *Religion*. Nonetheless, essential to *Vernunftglaube* is hope, and essential to hope is still some kind of positive reference to some such effects. The effects must be thought of as more than simply not (as far as we know) impossible—for, obviously, such a weak thought could be had by all sorts of faithless persons. It is not necessary in this context to make much more precise the status of Kantian hope as a specific epistemic attitude.⁹ What matters here is simply that there must be some kind of affirmative thought, some “holding to be true” about some special effect of the relevant sort—even though, as Kant repeatedly insists, this thought can never be absolutely “certain” or come with any explanatory “insight” (*Einsicht*) (6: 50).

The main point I will be stressing is that the perplexities just noted in the status of *Vernunftglaube* are also relevant to Kant's general notion of our free agency, which is nothing less than the “keystone” concept of the Critical philosophy. In the *Religion*, a positive reference to an “effect of [our] free power of choice” (6: 44) is the very starting point of the first General Remark, and yet Kant repeatedly stresses that here too we can have no insight into how or any unqualified certainty about the that. All we can say is that the assertion effects of our absolute freedom supposedly follows from—and only from—acceptance of something provocatively described as a “fact of reason.”¹⁰ This is something taken to be, for each practical agent, an absolutely fundamental truth—and hence it is called a matter of “reason”—but it is a non-demonstrable truth—and hence it is called a kind of “fact”. This acceptance can also be described as the “deed” (*Tat*) of recognizing oneself as a moral being in a strict sense. It involves what Kant even calls a kind of “moral certainty” (B 857), but this is a form of certainty essentially qualified by

⁹ See Chignell, *

¹⁰ KpV *; cf. 6: 50n, and Moral Vigilantius (1793), 27: 506.

the fact that it requires a first person commitment to the non-natural demands of Kant's strict moral perspective.¹¹

Kant's endorsement of absolute freedom is, to be sure, not completely on a par with his endorsement of the hope of moral faith. His analysis of hope has built into it a presumption of the first endorsement, whereas the mere analysis of our endorsement of freedom does not by itself entail the requirement of hope and its implications. Nonetheless, in Kant's system the perplexing thought of our freedom still seems relevantly enough like the perplexing thought of effects of grace in so far as both thoughts essentially invoke a non-natural ground of empirical effects and do so in ways that are said to go beyond anything about which we can claim insight or unqualified certainty. Hence, even prior to Kant's carefully worded endorsement of the affirmation of the complex second-order effects of an external higher freedom acting upon us in grace in response to our devotional freedom, there is already the more general interpretive puzzle of explaining the deep asymmetry between, on the one hand, Kant's very critical attitude toward affirming any specific miracles and, on the other hand, his carefully worded but frequent affirmation of effects of our own everyday absolute freedom.

The issue of miracles dominates Kant's General Remark to the *Religion's* second Part, and its critical tone is set in its very first sentence, which proclaims that, after the enlightened spread of *Vernunftglaube*, "faith in miracles" "eventually" will be rendered "in general dispensable" (6: 84). This Remark still does not declare miracles non-existent, let alone impossible (6: 88n), but it can be read as philosophically allowing the notion of them merely as (for all we know) a bare logical possibility, one that has played an understandable, but temporary, role earlier in history simply because of lack of adequate education.

A distracting complication here is that, because of issues having to do with very sensitive church-state issues at the time, the text is especially concerned with arguing vigorously against the notion of making public commitment to miracles a test of faith and ministerial certification (6: 85n).¹² This focus on the political aspect of the issue should

¹¹ See my "...Dogmatic?"".

¹² Cf. *Miscarriage*, 8: 268n. Kant holds such tests to be not only not required by genuine morality or religion but to be directly contrary to both because of the ways in which the tests can pressure people into hypocrisy and an improper concern with effects rather than pure internal attitudes (6: 62f).

not distract one from noticing that Kant is also very opposed to the thought that faith requires any sort of private belief in miracles. Because the requirements of *Vernunftglaube* must be of a sort that are in principle open to being satisfied by all human beings, simply on the basis of their original full rational equipment, there is a kind of public condition—a condition on universal access—on what one can even properly believe or affirm privately. This condition is taken to rule out requiring, for genuine internal faith, any appeal to a special experience of the miraculous, that is, any strictly local and historical event. Because a miracle—whether “great” or “little,” past or present, rare or repeated—must be thought of as a particular event essentially inconsistent with the whole order of “worldly events” (6: 85fn.), it is therefore also something that cannot be fairly expected to be affirmed by persons as such wherever they are, and so for Kant belief in miracles cannot be required in any religion respecting the principle of rational autonomy.¹³ At the end, I will argue that this principle has serious consequences for Kant’s own position.

Kant’s language in the *Religion* cleverly dances around the issue of exactly how to talk about miracles without being either offensive or untrue to his own religious concerns and Critical perspective. This perspective cannot, of course, ever absolutely exclude non-natural sources for anything, and such sources are by no means a far-fetched option for Kant. He points out himself that even with respect to phenomena obeying natural laws, the Critical philosophy must “renounce cognition of that which brings about effects according to these laws, in itself” (6: 88). Given transcendental idealism, it follows that in principle we can have no insight into the things in themselves that ultimately do the genuine “bringing about” that goes beyond whatever we can know in terms of the relational principles governing spatiotemporal phenomena. Kant immediately adds that the same point applies in the context of our own self and its attempt at moral improvement, where we “have no understanding of how to distinguish with certainty [non-natural] influences from natural ones,” and so, for all we know, “heavenly influences” might “cooperate” here and be “necessary” in an ultimate—but to us inaccessible—explanatory way (6: 88).

¹³ Cf. *Tone*, 8: 393f n.3, which totally rejects affirming testimony regarding supernatural beings or events, despite “the subjective impossibility of my [own] inability to explain” them.

In alluding here to something beyond both external and internal phenomena, Kant is, I presume, not making a hypothetical statement but is referring to a nonspatiotemporal “I know not what” that he is obliged to assert exists, at the same time that he has to say that we cannot determine specifically what it is, beyond the very general characterization of it as whatever ultimately allows for experience and the fulfillment of our moral agency. For this reason, in addition to directly criticizing the main advocate at the time of appeal to miracles, Johann Caspar Lavater (in a footnote, (6: 86n.), that crisply expresses lines of thought that Kant had already expressed very eloquently in a letter to him on April 28, 1775), Kant reiterates, in a second edition footnote (6: 88n.), the first Part’s key claim that no appeal to miracle is ever to be brought into our theoretical or practical maxims. Here Kant does mention something loosely called a “*theistic* miracle,” but this is “only a *general* concept” of a “creator and ruler of the world, according to the order of nature” (6: 86), and for Kant this is precisely not the common concept of a miracle as an event that is within the world but not fitting in the order of nature.¹⁴ With respect to God’s particular effects, beyond assuming that they would never violate theoretical or moral reason, Kant insists that our reason cannot even “ever hope to be instructed in the world” (6: 87).¹⁵

In a final footnote to this Remark Kant speaks of how events that strike us as highly unusual are only “so-called miracles of nature” (6: 88n). They should not be presumed to be “genuine miracles,” for this would only confuse and “deject” our reason, and we would then even have to worry that even all our supposedly moral thoughts are simply driven into us in some miraculous way. Unusual events normally are, and should be, taken to be occasions for “nourishing reason” and the theoretical “*hope* of discovering new laws of nature” (6: 88n). Kant dismisses worries that we have “no cognition of the *cause* of gravity,” for we do have “cognition of the laws of these forces” sufficient for “regressive employment... in the ordering of experiences under them” (6: 88n). In his final sentence to this footnote and Part Two as a whole, Kant responds directly to those who “pretend to *have insight*” (correcting CUP, “to understand”) into how the very

¹⁴ Cf. *Metaphysik Dohna* (!792-3), 28: 667.

¹⁵ The same point is found already in earlier lectures: “according to the nature of our reason we have to hold on to the universal and not try to determine how divine providence has proven itself effective in particular cases.” *Philosophical Religion* (1783-4), 28: 1114. Cf. *Moral Collins* (1774-7 [according to Stark/ Naragon, not 83-4, as cited by others], 27: 320, “Everything lies in universal providence and it is actually better in our discourse to abstain from trying to determine anything of God’s intentions.”

complex natural developments that come with every return of spring are a matter of the “immediate influence of the creator” (6: 89). Against this pretence, Kant dramatically proclaims: “But these are experiences (*Erfahrungen*); *for us*, therefore, they are nothing but effects of nature, and *ought* never to be judged otherwise,” and he closes by saying that to accept this much is the true “modesty” of reason, in contrast to the false humility of invoking miracles (6: 89). The appeal here to the notion of *Erfahrung* is, of course, not a matter of crude representationalist empiricism but a Kantian reminder of the commonsense *Faktum* underlying the entire Critical system,¹⁶ which is a structured and cognitive domain, and one that turns out to be law-governed in a very strict way without any reference to miraculous interventions.

The fact that Kant stresses the words “for us” and “ought” is also an implicit reminder of another aspect of what he means by reason’s modesty, namely, that he is speaking only about what our maxims should be for making determinate claims, and he does not go so far as to make any absolute denials beyond these maxims. All the same, I take his vivid language to be a clear indication that his real point is roughly, “of course it’s possible to try to introduce miracles in nature, but a rational person should not do so, given where we in fact stand, with our well-structured domain of *Erfahrung*.” That is, Kant’s tone indicates, albeit indirectly, that we can read as sarcasm his earlier sentences in the text proper, which allow that “it might well be” (*es mag also sein*) that Jesus’s “appearance on earth, as well as his translation from it, his eventful life and his passion, are all but miracles—indeed that the history that ought to testify to the account of these miracles is itself a miracle” (6: 85). The suggestion that, once one starts on this path, one might as well introduce second-order miracles surely implies that Kant has lost sympathy with affirming any particular miraculous works. But this again still leaves us with the critical question of whether one might not respond similarly to Kant’s own approach, and argue that as soon as one introduces any effects with non-natural sources, as he still does, then one might as well be more open to something like literally miraculous sources too.

3. Critique of Pure Wonder

This point is not a matter of casual interest for Kant, for he repeatedly stresses another way of speaking that plays off the language of miracles but gives it a Critical twist. The

¹⁶ See IKC*.

first General Remark links Kant's central notion of a "revolution in our way of thinking," as in the "new creation" of a person in *Vernunftglaube* (6: 47), with the attitude of what he calls proper "admiration (*Bewunderung*) for virtuous actions" (6: 48). In the German edition—but not in the Cambridge translation, which, by using the term "wonder," may obscure the sharpness of the contrast intended here—it is impossible to miss Kant's main point here. Kant's aim is to substitute for reference to *Wunder*, that is, literal miracles, a supposedly much more modest reference to *Bewunderung*, that is, a common deep sense of amazed admiration with regard to examples of radically giving one's life to morality. This key terminological point of the *Religion* is anticipated in Kant's slightly earlier *Theodicy* essay, which uses the term *Bewunderung* to describe the proper reaction to the story of Job.¹⁷ Kant takes this story to teach us to respect the primacy of pure morality and sincerity, as opposed to any pretence of being able to discern specific actions of God in the world as specially intended punishments. Although the essay is perhaps best known for its title reference to a "miscarriage" or "failure" of theodicies, Kant's basic point is rather that although one cannot expect speculative philosophy to show how the world actually does serve God's purposes, this is consistent with accepting what he calls "authentic theodicy," which takes proper service to God to rely simply on accepting the absolute primacy of the moral law. The "end," in the sense of the limitation or defeat of traditional theodicy, is thus for Kant only the beginning—and leads to the goal—of what he takes to be the genuinely theodical attitude.¹⁸

That this kind of discussion of miracles is very important for Kant is also clear from the fact that it is emphasized again in his very last essay, *The Conflict of the Faculties*. His discussion occurs in the first Part of the text, which is a section that was given an English translation only in 1979, and in a translation that again weakens the intended contrast by using the term "wonder" and noting the sharp distinction for Kant between mere *Bewunderung* and literal *Wunder*. The General Remark in this Part of the *Conflict* is devoted to the advocacy of our "moral metamorphosis" (7: 55) in a pure religious "revolution" (7: 59) that would take us beyond all sectarianism. Kant goes out

¹⁷ *Theodicy* (8: 270). This is a rare positive reference by Kant to the old Testament, and it does seem to have implications that complicate his account of moral history as having its crucial start only in the Gospels.

¹⁸ *Theodicy* (8: 264). Hence the title of my own essay. One could also argue that Kant's work concerns the "end of theodicy" in an additional historical sense, in that it may constitute (in a general way that includes the projects of German Idealism) the end (i.e. the final version), in mainline philosophies, of attempts to provide at least a close analog to traditional theodicies, and to make this a central aspect of one's system.

of his way here explicitly to reject the recourse to miracles (“before” or “after” our change of heart) by traditional Pietists and Moravians (7: 55f), and then he turns to immediately to the “something in us that we cannot cease to wonder at [admire, *bewundern*],” namely, the moral law that “lies objectively in the natural order of things as the object of pure reason” (7: 57). Kant speaks here of “*höchsten Bewunderung*,” with italics, and he repeatedly uses a verb form of the term (7: 58f). For significant reasons that will be discussed later, Kant here contrasts the appreciation of what he calls the “*supersensible*” practical law that is “in us,” that is, is contained in our nature as beings of reason, with the “greatly mistaken” move of those “who are led to consider it *supernatural*—that is, to regard it as the influence of another and higher spirit” (7: 59).¹⁹

The repeated use of the term “revolution” in the *Religion* is clearly meant to resonate at a number of internally teleological levels at once. In addition to the revolution discussed first simply in terms of each individual person’s conversion to pure morality, Kant claims that there is, secondly, a related general revolution within “the human race” (6: 63; cf. 6: 80, 6: 81n, 6: 84), one that was inaugurated, although not completed, by the Gospels. Kant goes so far as to say that the innovative moral attitude of the “teacher” of the Gospels fundamentally excels anything found in prior philosophy (6:80),²⁰ and that the revolutionary ideal that defines it and is exemplified in stories of the teacher’s life is the major force behind the ultimate direction of all subsequent history (“that quietly spread everywhere,” 6: 81n). This ideal introduces “a realm... in which nobody is therefore slave” (6: 82), for “by exemplifying that principle (in the moral ideal) that human being opened the doors of freedom to all” (6: 82).

The main theme of Part Two of the *Religion*, and especially of the subpart concerned with “the personified good” and the “objective reality” of the ideal present in the Gospels (of being morally “pleasing to God,” which alone can provide “an end to creation,” 6: 60), is that a relation back to this very ideal—as an ideal model rather than as an external miraculous fact—is what is crucial for each individual moral “*revolution*” (6: 47) in modern life. In addition, Kant links modern individual revolutions forward to the new ideal of an autonomous political realm, one whose success he anticipates because of the effects of a recent philosophical development. Kant understands this development

¹⁹ See *Tone*, 8: 396n, for a similar rejection of those who infer an external “supernatural influence.”

²⁰ “*”; cf. *Moral Collins*, 27: 301: “*.”

to have been generated by the explicit appeal to the idea of autonomy (i.e., freedom in human action that is rationally lawful) emphasized in the “genius” of Rousseau’s work—work that can itself be called a third kind of Critical revolution. This work literally turned around the direction of Kant’s own thought in the 1760s,²¹ and so it is no accident that the very beginning of the *Religion* (6: 19f, cf. 6: 38, 6: 45, 6: 54, 6: 66) links the theme of our reborn social optimism to Rousseau’s awareness of the “seed (*Keim*) of goodness” in humanity as such. According to the Collins lectures, Kant held that, “many have maintained that in man there are no seeds of good, only of evil, and Rousseau alone preaches the opposite.”²² Rousseau’s revolutionary philosophical achievement is to begin to turn cultivated modern humanity away, at a level that is itself reflective and literary, from the special problem of its absolutization of the life of luxury and scientific preoccupations,²³ just as the Gospels began to turn naïve ancient humanity away, at a level that is itself religious and exemplary, from the obsession with mere priestly trappings and superstition that Kant takes to define the pre-Christian world.

The last two Parts of the *Religion*, along with other late essays related to it, fill out Kant’s revolutionary narrative by taking the “enthusiastic” affirmative response of common people throughout Europe, in their unselfish “sympathy” toward the basic anti-elitist ideal of the French Revolution, to be an “irreversible” sign of humanity’s entrance into the political antechamber of history’s final era²⁴—and thus to constitute a Critical revolution in yet a fourth and most concrete sense. This “sign” bolsters Kant’s own hope that individual moral revolutions will be combined more and more with republican and peaceful political reformation, and that an enlightened “invisible church” will move humanity as a species asymptotically toward an earthly realization of the theodicy of *Vernunftglaube*.²⁵ Within this last phase, works such as Kant’s own Enlightenment essay, as well as similar works by allies such as Reinhold, can be understood, as intended to be part of, yet a fifth and final Critical revolution, a late modern “Copernican” turn

²¹ See my Rousseau*

²² Moral Collins 27: 317; cf. Moral Mrongrovius (1784-5), 29: 603.

²³ Kant calls such times a “most dangerous for morality” (*The End*, 8: 332).

²⁴ *Conflict*, 7: 85. Kant sees a somewhat similar sign, at the individual level, when one can detect some apparent past progress in one’s commitment to moral principles, “if he has perceived the efficacy of these principles in what he does” (6: 68).

²⁵ Or else—if, as is also possible, freedom is misused and Christianity, as a cultural institution, “ceases to be worthy of love,” then, as Kant provocatively says, “it will appear that “the Antichrist” reigns—perhaps at first in the form of Frederick William II (*The End*, 8: 339).

that aims at perpetually securing, at a metalevel, the insights of Christianity's and Rousseau's moral visions, as well as those of common humanity and the fans of the French Revolution, by saving them, hopefully, from all future contamination by dogmatic or naïve misunderstandings.

Kant's use of the term *Bewunderung* is therefore hardly casual. It is clearly positioned in a place that is central to his cleverly designed theodical account of how a pure moral religion is supposed to move, through various interlocking revolutions, from a prior miracle-oriented era to one that comes at least close to replacing miracle religions of all types, including any that would insist on saying that a supernatural being is literally part of human history.²⁶ The puzzle remains, however, that at the same time that Kant works out a progressive Enlightenment view of society and history, he continues to make what now must seem to be extraordinarily immodest non-natural remarks of his own about how all human beings can work freely toward the highest good. Kant stresses right from the start that each step in this complex multistage epic of freedom²⁷ rests on non-sensible factors that are entirely within us but whose operation is "absolutely inexplicable" (*schlechterdings unerklärlich*) to us (6: 59n). In the hopeful attitude of *Vernunftglaube* a Kantian must affirm that existence on the whole is a teleological unified complex of, first, a natural sphere that is fully law-governed although not itself moral or with any miraculous interventions, and, second, a moral sphere that is law-governed but not itself either sensible or literally miraculous, and yet is such that, third, all the non-natural features just reviewed fit together, so that the laws of morality also turn out to govern the general shape of the laws of the natural world and world history.

4. Hermeneutical Hypothesis

Kant's theodicy thus implies not only a very strict conception of each of the cosmological and moral orders by themselves but also a very strong commitment to their tight linkage. It is precisely these two orders that are referenced in the most famous of Kant's phrases, the second Critique's comment about our "ever increasing" *Bewunderung* and *Ehrfurcht* with regard to the "starry heavens above" and the "moral law within" (5: 161). What this

²⁶ Kant goes so far as to make the heterodox argument that Jesus's moral effectiveness rests on his not being thought of as literally divine, for only then is he a model that human beings can understandably attempt to imitate (6: 64).

²⁷ Kant therefore is especially fond of Milton's epic work. See Buddick*.

comment should remind us of now is not merely the individual features of these two contrasting sources of our amazed admiration and awe, but also the fact that this text connects them in one grand statement, a statement that can be taken as another indication that, from the very start in Kant's mind, these orders are much more closely related than contemporary readers tend to assume.

It is true, of course, that after his early 1760s turn to Rousseau and his dramatic realization that the distinctive fulfillment of the human species concerns our practical rather than exclusively theoretical capacities, Kant frequently contrasts the determined theoretical order of nature with the pure practical order of absolute freedom. Nonetheless, after this turn Kant also insists that reason is unified and theoretical philosophy must find a way—namely, transcendental idealism—to allow metaphysical room for our practical claim to be an absolute free source of effects, despite all that his system entails about nature as a determined spatiotemporal order. The key move here in his practical philosophy is Kant's Rousseauian abandonment of the notion that freedom must come with lawlessness (cf. KrV *) and his development of a conception of what he calls our "nature" as free beings, a nature that, like all natures, is governed by a law, in this case the moral law. As has been noted above, this is an order that Kant sometimes prefers to call supersensible (*übersinnlich*) rather than supernatural (*übernatürlich*), despite its definitely nonempirical character. This is because there is a sense in which the term "nature" is very appropriate here, even if it is not meant in a physical sense, because for Kant the term "nature," in its most general sense, signifies the law-governed structure of a concrete item of whatever kind—in contrast to "essence," which is a term that applies to abstract structures as such.²⁸

In this broad sense, for Kant "nature" is not entirely opposed to grace, for there is a moral nature that defines the distinct system of prescriptive laws governing concrete rational beings in general, and that is formally similar to the descriptive law-governed structure of physical beings, even though this moral nature, and it alone, at its deepest level, is immediately determined by essentially teleological rather than mechanical principles. Kant's notion of our lawful moral nature underlies his cosmopolitan "Idea" of the special practical telos of the human species. According to this Idea of reason, which is closely connected to the metaphysical Ideas of Kant's postulates of pure practical

²⁸ In general, Kant holds, "every nature has laws." *Metaphysik L1* (1770s), 28: 216.

reason, we are to believe that there is an underlying theodical pattern within human history, such that legal and political developments will eventually lead to conditions that make possible the fulfillment of our sublime moral vocation.²⁹ This pattern of human history proceeds at first through a kind of cunning of reason that does not at first require any moral intentions on our part, let alone any miraculous interventions from above, and is entirely consistent with all the laws governing the physically natural, and even psychologically egoistic, developments of human history

Scholars such as Paul Guyer and Eric Watkins have begun to trace the complexities of Kant's account of how his overarching Critical conception of purposive moral order coheres with his full theoretical account of nature and his entire system of philosophy.³⁰ Work like this helps us to see that there is an underlying unity to Kant's third Critique, and to appreciate that its interconnected account of aesthetics and physical nature is meant to be completed by, and not merely juxtaposed with, references to a "supersensible," that is, moral, ground for all existence that alone gives human life a genuinely meaningful purpose. What I would add to such account is simply some more evidence that Kant's unified view of freedom and nature, and of the human and the divine order, is not a late addition to his thought.

The unity behind Kant's vision (and this is my major "hermeneutical *Leitfaden*") may well go back even to his earliest philosophical experiences when, according to Jachmann's account of Kant's "frequent" recollections in later life, his pietist mother took her young children out to the edge of town at night, so that they could see all the more clearly, from a point not very far from Copernicus's home, the "power, wisdom and goodness" of "the creator of all things" in the stars of the northern European sky.³¹ Jachmann's account seems genuine and especially relevant since it links a reference to the mother's awakening of an appreciation of the "impressions of nature" with a mention of the "seed [*Keim*] of goodness," a phrase that plays a key role throughout Kant's work on religion and our moral nature. A somewhat similar linking of the natural and the moral orders can be found in the cosmology section of the 1782-3 *Metaphysics* Mrongovius (29: 869):

²⁹ This essay is Kant's answer to the question that dominated so much discussion in the mid-18th century after Spalding's work, namely, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. See my *, and Brandt,*.

³⁰ PG, *; EW*.

³¹ Jachmann, 162f.

The order in nature excites wonder and respect [NB] in us at all times. But whence does it come? From the fact that without nature [as ordered by law] we would not have any objects of the understanding... We would then have either useless understanding, or none at all. Thus, since this nobility of soul which raises us to humanity, the worth of our understanding, rests on nature, we thus regard this natural order as if it were something holy...

It was only when Kant was almost forty years old, and after many years of studying the “impressions of nature” in a scientific way, that he came back, through the close study of Rousseau’s moral writings in 1763-4, to begin to concentrate on the “seed” and destiny of our nature in a primarily moral sense, with a specific law of its own. Even before that time, however, in the first two decades of Kant’s career, it is significant that he regularly added remarks about design, development, and divinity in his natural philosophy. His early essays on metaphysics and the “natural history” of the universe are composed on the presumption that there is an evident overarching teleological unity to the universe, one that redounds all the more appropriately to the creator’s wisdom and goodness because it does not appeal, as Newtonianism or occasionalism might, to repeated miracle-like interventions or acts of support by the deity.³²

In the *Beweisgrund* of 1763 Kant still makes a twofold theoretical teleological claim that (1) “different natural effects are, in respect of their beauty and usefulness, to be subsumed under the essential order of nature, and by that means, as subsumed under God,” and (2) “many arrangements... will be subsumed under an order of nature which is contingent in character and the product of artifice, and in virtue of that subsumption they will also be subsumed under God” (2: 207-8). In his Critical work Kant gives up taking this teleological claim to be a demonstrable theoretical proposition, and he provides a new moral ground for it, but it is striking that even in this earlier phase he is concerned, above all, with conceiving a tight overarching order—of God, humanity, and nature all at once—with no need for interruption anywhere by miraculous events. Although at this point Kant still speaks of a system that can do without “the assistance of frequent miracles” (2: 109), what is most significant here is that he dares to go far as explicitly to challenge Newton, who had proposed that a “miraculous intervention” was needed to prevent the universe falling back into a “state of complete stagnation” (2: 110n). It is

³² See UNH* motto to Pope/Milton; plus JBS>

typical of Kant's firm theodical attitude that he argues here that, whatever our local problems, we can use our cosmological imagination to postulate that the universe can still have "great fruitfulness elsewhere."³³ In this way we can still maintain a fully teleological and yet seamlessly natural conception of the mundane sphere, as a whole governed in a non-interventionist manner by an all-encompassing moral design (2: 100n).

This section of the *Beweisgrund* also bears a close relation to Kant's 1784 "Idea for Universal History." Both discussions focus on the seeming indeterminacy that arises from actions that "issue from freedom... and harbour within themselves a possibility of deviating" from what is the good (2: 110), and both discussions call attention to the statistical laws that apply even to human actions that appear significantly free, such as marriage choices (2: 111; cf. 8: 17). In the *Beweisgrund*, to be sure, Kant still speaks sometimes without direct reservations about "immediate divine intervention" and "revelation" at "specific times and among specific nations" (2: 111). It is very significant therefore that, in his otherwise parallel discussions in the 1780s and after, Kant does not speak in this way, and he instead stresses that endorsing "rare" miracles is just as questionable as referring to "frequent" ones. But although this is an important change in explicit language, it can also be taken as a natural development of strands already in Kant's thought in the 1760s, for even the *Beweisgrund* ends its discussion by saying "I should find it amazing if anything occurred or could occur in the course of nature... in need of a miracle to improve it. And were such an event to occur [it]... would be utterly incomprehensible to us" (2: 112). In addition, Kant already uses roughly the same example here as in the dramatic culmination of his discussion at the end of the second Part of the *Religion*, namely, the amazing regenerative fruitfulness of plants and animals, to argue against the other scientific leader of the age, Buffon, that there is no need to refer to "immediate divine action," for "one must concede to the things of nature a possibility, greater than that which is commonly conceded, of producing their effects in accordance with universal laws" (2: 115).

Given this attitude, it is not surprising, that even prior to the Critical turn as such, Kant's 1770 *Dissertation* ends with a section that proposes, as a first "rule of judging,"

³³ Although this is a pre-Critical text, it is not to be dismissed in this context, for in the *Moral Vigilantius* of 1793 there is a rare explicit reference to it, endorsing its "belief in a deity which our practical reason must endorse" (27: 718). Cf. *Progress* (1793), 20: 307: "to assume therein, as object-in-itself, a morally teleological connection, such that by an

that “all things in the universe take place in accordance with the order of nature,” and hence “comparative miracles, such as the influence of spirits, are carefully excluded from the explanation of phenomena” (2: 418). In his metaphysics lectures, Kant explains that a “comparative miracle” would be an event that seems “supernatural in relation to our reason” but can still occur “according to certain laws unknown to us,”³⁴ and so to speak of “miracles” in this extended sense is still not to concede that there are miracles “strictly speaking.” But the most revealing point that Kant makes here is when he adds that a miracle is “not something of which we do not cognize the cause, but rather that of which we do not cognize the laws. Thus magnetic power is no miracle, for we cognize its law (but not the cause).”³⁵ I take this to be an extremely significant qualification, because it suggests that the distinction between law and (ultimate) cause may be the main reason that Kant believed he could regard our own absolute freedom, and even all its theodical involvement with the moral assistance of God and nature, as not miraculous, for even if we cannot literally know the ultimate causes at work here either, we still do grasp the law of their operation, which in this case is moral, and so in that sense we are not going beyond nature in its most fundamental meaning, which is simply to be lawful.

There is a second point that is crucial here. Kant conceives of our free action as not only lawful but also internally governed in a number of important but distinct senses. In so far as our action is normatively guided by the moral law, and insofar, as has already been noted, Kant regards this law as internal to the structure of practical reason itself, there is a sense in which a moral agent is following something “within” its own self, that is, not its merely individual and psychological self but rather its general nature as a being of practical reason. The “internality” condition is significant here because it implies for Kant that ultimately our action is normatively not to be thought of as guided by an external, that is, heteronomous ad hoc force—such as either mere feelings, or physical or historical forces, or even God thought as arbitrarily “interrupting” us by using miraculous power. Secondly, in a metaphysical causal sense, it is also true that, in so far as we take ourselves to be an ultimate subject (as Kant, against Spinoza, always thinks we do and

ordering of nature beyond his comprehension, it tends to the final purpose, as supersensible goal of his practical reason, namely, the highest good.”

³⁴ Dohna, 28: 667; cf. Mrongovius, 29: 874, and Metaphysik L1 28: 219.

³⁵ Dohna, 28: 688.

should³⁶), then each of our actions has an internal “efficient” source, but now in the very different sense of resting precisely in our concrete individuality as such. Here too this source, even if it not omnipotent, is to be thought of as independent in its original direction of any external, that is, metaphysical ad hoc force—such as either mere feelings, or physical or historical forces, or even God thought of as arbitrarily “interrupting” us by using miraculous power.

Our most detailed indication of Kant’s view on God’s metaphysical relation to us comes from some not clearly trustworthy notes to lectures on philosophical theology, apparently from the 1780s.³⁷ These notes discuss problems in conceiving either a “natural concursus” of God with the world in general, or a “moral concursus” with us as free agents. With respect to the world, Kant takes each substance to rest entirely on God for its existence, so in that respect God is sufficient, and there is no need for the thought of a concursus (28: 1005f). With respect to the states of the substance, however, Kant indicates that the previous natural state is sufficient for the effect, and so here too, although for an opposite reason, there is no need for the thought of a concursus (28: 1106, 1109). Similarly, with respect to our freedom, Kant notes that our absolutely free choice is sufficient in its own realm, so here again it would seem no literal concursus is to be introduced (28: 1106, 1109). It is noted that we cannot rule out that in some “not in the least conceivable way,” God might concur with us here (28: 1106), but the notes, like the *Religion*, also indicate that such special causings could be multiplied arbitrarily, endlessly, and absurdly, and this would lead to the conclusion “what imperfection in [such] a world, totally irreconcilable with a wise author!” (28: 1110). I take this to mean that, hypothetically, we might speak of a “miracle of the moral world, just as”—the notes go on to say—“God’s acts of cooperation with occurrences in the sensible world are [that is, are hypothetically to be called] God’s miracles in the physical world” (28: 1106f). Rhetorically, all this seems to imply that actually we should not go so far as to affirm that such oddities are really possible. This is not to deny that we can also say that, with respect to the complex achievement of the highest good, there is still a sense (28: 1110) in which Kant can think of ourselves and God in a kind of concursus, because this highest

³⁶ See my Spin*

³⁷ I say not clearly trustworthy because these notes very oddly ascribe to the Critical Kant what appears to still be an a priori argument for our substantiality (*), as well as a kind of theoretical argument for this being the best possible

good is precisely a joint arrangement, requiring free agents fitting properly together with an amenable environment, independent of them, and hence whatever is ultimately responsible for that environment must also play a role in making the end possible.

In sum, Kant can, after all, conceive his extremely elaborate theodical teleology as not literally miracle involving because, insofar as it is defined by the thought of beings—human, subhuman, and superhuman—that are always ultimately acting in a way that fits together with a fully purposeful set of internally determined laws, there is no assertion of special acts or exceptions imposed on the order of nature in the broadest sense, that is, including our nature, God’s nature, and the nature of the physical and moral world on the whole.

5. Concluding Critical Caveat

There remains at least one problem here, one that may be severe even from a kind of internal Kantian perspective. The problem is that the main reason that Kant prefers *Vernunftglaube* to the traditional religion of miracles is that he takes *Vernunftglaube* alone to appeal to considerations that can be expected to be agreed to by the “even the most limited human being,” “even children” (6: 48). Any religion relying on miracles supposedly fails this test because the experience of a miracle directly, or the authentication of one through historical and esoteric means, must rely on local and contingent circumstances that cannot be presumed to be in the reach of all rational agents as such.

The difficulty, however, is that Kant himself appears to presume circumstances that, on reflection, we may also understandably come to regard as in a sense local, contingent, and esoteric. In particular, we may ask how it is that so many common people and philosophers—before, during, and after Hume’s time—have appeared to live a life of “healthy and sound understanding” without seeing any need to assert, or any claim to understand, the absolute notions of freedom and morality that Kant relies on. From a non-question-begging and general commonsense standpoint, the Kantian specific appeal to absolutely free and pure causings can appear to be ultimately just about as ad hoc and contingent as the appeal to literal miracles that disturbs Kant. Just as Kant holds that it would be unfair religiously to condemn people who understandably think that they

world (*). In such cases perhaps the notetaker was mixing arguments in Kant’s own position with arguments that he

have no access to miracles, a non-Kantian—but one who is sympathetic to one of Kant’s own basic principles—can say that it would be morally unfair to condemn people who understandably think that they have no access to the demanding prerequisites of *Vernunftglaube*.

This is not to say that *Vernunftglaube* is wrong, but it is to suggest that perhaps Kant had some good reason for maintaining a relation with his odd acquaintance Hamann. For there seem to be at least three options here: the Humean “no miracles along with no *Vernunftglaube*” stance, the Kantian “no literal miracles and yet the quasi-miracles of *Vernunftglaube*” stance, and then the other unmixed extreme, the Hamannian option³⁸. This proto-Kierkegaardian option says, if we are not going to settle with anything like Humean naturalism, and we are going to bother with taking the Gospels very seriously, why not be just as open to the basic miracle claims of that tradition as to the supposedly—but also not clearly universally perceivable—quasi-miracles of *Vernunftglaube*?

was merely reporting.

³⁸ In his last writing, *Conflict* (7:55), Kant cites Hamann and connects him with miracles.