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Kantian Reason & Epistemic Humility

By Elias Seeman

There are few more prominent and influential figures in the history of philosophy than Immanuel Kant and his contributions to the fields of epistemology and ethics are particularly significant. However, Christian thinkers often—and for good reason—struggle with the implications of much of Kantian thought, leading to the view that Kant is “hostile to religion” and seeing “his Critical project as inimical to traditional Christianity.”¹

While I recognize the dangers of wholesale adoption of Kant’s thought, I want to be cautious not to throw out the baby with the proverbial bath water. In addition to the real problems, I have come to think that Kant offers real insights into the life of faith and the ontology of the world in his philosophy of knowledge and his philosophical theology. In this paper, I will present two possible and contrasting readings of Kant’s work on the capacity of reason to achieve knowledge of God. One reading shows Kant to be confident of reason’s ability to arrive at divine knowledge while the other is distinctly doubtful of that possibility. I will then outline what I think are the two most important insights for Christians from Kantian thought, followed by a section dedicated to where I believe Christians must depart from Kant’s system. Finally, I will introduce a third way of making sense of reason’s role in arriving at genuine knowledge of God that seeks to bring on board genuine Kantian insights while avoiding the potential crucial errors of his thought.

The position I see fulfilling these criteria is called epistemic humility. It seeks to maintain an appropriate level of confidence in the human capacity to know God through reason,

¹Lawrence Pasternack and Courtney Fugate, “Kant’s Philosophy of Religion,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/kant-religion/>.

understanding reason as a God-given gift. This confidence is balanced with a biblically-rooted understanding of the Fall and its far-reaching effects on every aspect of human existence.

Reason & Knowledge of God: A Dubious Reading

First, we must examine two possible interpretations of Immanuel Kant’s thought on the powers of reason as it relates to God and religion in general. I will begin by making the case that Kant is sometimes extremely doubtful about the capabilities of the rational capacities of human beings. To understand this point, one must have a clear understanding of Kant’s thought on knowledge. Knowledge, for Kant, comes through cognition which is “any conscious mental representation of an object.”² Both parts of this statement have important implications.

First is Kant’s understanding of the mind, which performs mental representation. In contrast to John Locke, Kant did not conceive of the mind as a “*tabula rasa*,” a blank slate on which experience writes. Instead, the mind has certain built-in structures of intuition through which it makes sense of reality. The two most important intuitive structures are time and space, but Kant eventually adds a third form—cause and effect—in response to David Hume’s work.³ In Kant’s thinking, the human mind cannot make sense of experience *except in and through* space, time, and cause and effect. It is out of these three that “metaphysics consists wholly and completely.”⁴

²Robert Hanna, “Kant’s Theory of Judgment,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/kant-judgment/>.

³Andrew Brook and Julian Wuerth, “Kant’s View of the Mind and Consciousness of Self,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2023), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2023/entries/kant-mind/>.

⁴Graciela De Pierris and Michael Friedman, “Kant and Hume on Causality,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/kant-hume-causality/>

This leads into Kant’s understanding of objects. For Kant, objects exist in two ways. The first sphere is that of “sensuous phenomena”⁵ which is the realm of all human experience. All that human beings can know belongs in the realm of phenomena, and “our cognition is unable to transcend the limits of possible experience.”⁶ Because the mind’s cognition comes through the structure of cause and effect, the phenomenal realm is that of “appearances and therefore of mechanistic causality.”⁷ The word “appearance” here is important. Kant said that for something properly to be called an appearance, it must correspond to something else outside of itself, “for appearance can be nothing for itself and outside of our kind of representation; the word ‘appearance’ must already indicate a relation to something.”⁸ Kant’s main point is that this first mode of an object’s existence is dependent on something else.

Kant terms that which an appearance corresponds to “noumena” or things in themselves. These noumena occupy their own sphere of reality and in this realm, they exist as they actually are in themselves, unconditioned and pure. These objects are supersensible, meaning they exist “beyond the range of our cognition,”⁹ and thus beyond the range of the human mind’s comprehension and access. Given that they reside outside of the mind, they are also not limited by space, time, and cause and effect.

Taken together, these strands comprise Kant’s understanding of the world. It is an understanding that has massive and destructive consequences for the knowledge of God. Especially damaging is Kant’s phenomena/noumena distinction. As Anthony Sciglitano notes,

⁵Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. J. M. D. Meiklejohn (Waiheke Island, NZ: The Floating Press, 2011), 51.

⁶Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 26.

⁷Anthony C. Sciglitano, “Prometheus and Kant: Neutralizing Theological Discourse And Doxology,” *Modern Theology* 23, no. 3 (2009): 398.

⁸Nicholas F. Stang, “Kant’s Transcendental Idealism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/kant-transcendental-idealism/>.

⁹ Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 27.

“Since time and space as the sensible forms of intuition alone make possible the reception of any and all sense data, and thereby knowledge of phenomena, these same forms of intuition limit knowledge to spatio-temporal phenomena.”¹⁰ In other words, Kant locates *all possible human knowledge* in the phenomenal realm. This is a crucial point, and it is a stark departure from the tradition of metaphysics and the discipline of theology—disciplines that often make use of knowledge that Kant believes reason cannot deliver.¹¹ For Kant, this calls into question reason’s capacity to know anything about God, immortality, and freedom.¹²

Why would Kant identify these three things as problems given a reason-only approach? The answer is because they all reside in the noumenal realm which lies beyond the scope of reason. Writing specifically on these subjects, Kant says that he “cannot even make the assumption... of God, freedom, and immortality, if I do not deprive speculative reason of its pretensions to transcendent insight.”¹³ This more dubious reading of Kant understands that God can never be an object of knowledge for human beings. Diogenes Allen is right in saying that Kant has placed a “metaphysical embargo on the knowledge of God.”¹⁴ The results of this are clear: “Kant has shut God up in his own noumenal kingdom, and we are now free to assume total authority in our phenomenal one.”¹⁵ By assuming total phenomenal authority, reason becomes “what Kant calls at one point, ‘the God within us.’”¹⁶ In effect, the phenomena/noumena distinction does away with the accessibility of God from a human perspective.

¹⁰Sciglitano, “Prometheus and Kant: Neutralizing Theological Discourse And Doxology,” 395.

¹¹Garrath Williams, “Kant’s Account of Reason”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2023/entries/kant-reason/>.

¹²Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 51.

¹³Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 33.

¹⁴Diogenes Allen and Eric O. Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), 190.

¹⁵Sciglitano, “Prometheus and Kant: Neutralizing Theological Discourse And Doxology,” 399.

¹⁶Sciglitano, “Prometheus and Kant: Neutralizing Theological Discourse And Doxology,” 397.

However, Kant is not content with limiting only human knowledge of God. He also does away with the ability of God to reveal Himself to His creatures, refusing the possibility of divine revelation breaking through into the phenomenal realm.¹⁷ Kant’s embargo goes both ways, applying both to human beings and to God and leaving religion devoid of all content and concepts. Kant, however, is hesitant to get rid of the possibility of religion. In hope of preserving it, he says the only possibility left open to religion is to exist “within the boundaries of unassisted natural reason, religion without the supernatural aid of miracles, signs or other divine revelations through mystical experience, ecclesiastical tradition, or holy scripture.”¹⁸

Such a religion is a direct result of Kant’s view of reason which is at the same time both completely confident about the capabilities of reason for life as it is lived and gives no credence to its abilities concerning the knowledge of God. Kant’s “god” is inaccessible and unknowable because of his “consistent and faithful application of a principle which sets aside the God of Revelation in favour of the supremacy of reason.”¹⁹ For Kant, all possible knowledge, in the strongest sense of the word, can be arrived at through reason. And the only possible subject of that reason is the realm of sensuous phenomena. Put simply, where reason cannot go, knowledge cannot be found. This is why Kant doubles down on the unknowability of God, immortality and freedom: They are beyond the scope of reason and so beyond the scope of genuine knowledge.

So far, we have explored a dubious reading of Kant, examining how his phenomena/noumena distinction shuts off the possibility of genuine knowledge of God arrived at

¹⁷Sciglitano, “Prometheus and Kant: Neutralizing Theological Discourse And Doxology,” 397.

¹⁸Philip J Rossi and Michael J Wreen, *Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991), 2.

¹⁹James K. A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology*, Cultural Liturgies, Vol. 3. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 143.

through reason alone. We will now move to another, more confident reading of Kant’s work on the same subject.

Reason & Knowledge of God: A Confident Reading

Interestingly, however, though Kant is certainly dubious about the capacity of reason to access anything in the noumenal realm – including God, he wrote a book entitled *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. This is truly a fascinating choice of title, given the above exploration of Kant’s thought on knowledge, the division between phenomena and noumena, and the status afforded to knowledge of God. However, it is important to understand the goal of Kant’s project in this work. His goal is to show that “the nature and intrinsic limits of human thought and knowledge preclude any such demonstration [of God’s existence].”²⁰ This seems to fit with the above reading of Kant and seems to push Kant toward atheism. That, however, is not the case. Kant also “argued that any metaphysical demonstration of the *non*-existence of God is equally precluded by the limits of reason.”²¹

For Kant, the only way forward for religion is within the bounds of reason. Wayne P. Pomerleau points out that Kant’s understanding of religion is “crucial to his philosophical purposes” and that “we should take [what is found in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*] seriously as representative of his own rational theology.”²² This leaves us with an interesting question: how can Kant be said to have a rational *theology* if the meaningfulness and/or thinkability of everything supersensible—including God, the traditional subject of religious thought and belief—is inaccessible, locked away behind a noumenal wall? Kant’s

²⁰Robert Adams, introduction to Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, eds. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), vii.

²¹Adams, introduction to *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, vii

²²Wayne P. Pomerleau, “Immanuel Kant: Philosophy of Religion,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/kant-rel/#H6>.

solution is to propose “a novel philosophical theology that grounds religion on the ‘needs’ of practical reason.”²³ The aim of this sort of reason is absolute consistency which is shown particularly clearly in Kant’s moral philosophy. In fact, Kant thought it was “crucial for religion to be controlled by moral considerations.”²⁴

The central consideration of Kant’s moral system is called the categorical imperative. While there are four formulations of the categorical imperative, the first does the best job of illustrating this point: “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”²⁵ Here, two words are particularly important. The first is the word “only.” For Kant, this is how rational beings *ought* to act. Any action contrary to or even only incidentally aligned with this principle is morally wrong—or at least not morally perfect. The second is “universal.” This underscores reason’s drive for consistency. Practical reason—in the realm of morality—is concerned with ensuring everyone acts in accordance with the rational law, regardless of the influences of culture or desire.

The same need for consistency undergirds Kant’s philosophical theology because, just as in his moral philosophy, reason is the starting point for his theology. Kant makes this explicit in his essay “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking,” saying “The concept of God and even the conviction of his existence can be met with only in reason.”²⁶ It is important to understand the status Kant affords to this concept of God. Again, knowledge, for Kant, comes through cognition which is “any conscious mental representation of an object.”²⁷ God, however,

²³Pasternack and Fugate, “Kant’s Philosophy of Religion.”

²⁴Adams, introduction to *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, viii.

²⁵Craig A. Boyd and Don Thorsen, *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy: An Introduction to Issues and Approaches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2018), 108.

²⁶Immanuel Kant, “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking,” in *Kant’s Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 245.

²⁷Robert Hanna, “Kant’s Theory of Judgment,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/kant-judgment/>.

is *not* an object and thus cannot be the subject of cognition or knowledge. Rather, God is considered a hypothesis or a useful tool in the hands of reason.²⁸

Here, it is important to clarify Kant’s understanding of cognition. One of the most famous sayings in *The Critique of Pure Reason* is “thoughts without content are void, intuitions without conceptions, blind.”²⁹ Put differently in another essay, Kant asks “How would we procure sense and significance for our concepts if we did not underpin them with some intuition? (which ultimately must always be an example from some possible experience).”³⁰ Kant uses vivid imagery to depict what happens when reason seeks knowledge apart from intuition and sense experience.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant discusses the amazing capabilities reason must achieve certain knowledge, citing mathematics as the primary example.³¹ The experience of arriving at such certain knowledge, however, can lead reason down an unproductive path. Bolstered by discovery and assuming such certainty can be found in every avenue of exploration, reason can be tempted to move beyond the phenomenal realm and investigate the noumenal realm. Here Kant compares reason to a light dove “cleaving in free flight the thin air, whose resistance it feels, might imagine that her movements would be far more free and rapid in airless space.”³²

The point is that if reason is free from the constraints of the phenomenal realm, it will explore superfluous questions that cannot be investigated by sense experience and thus never rise to the level of cognition. Only when reason and experience—intuitions and concepts—are both

²⁸Pomerleau, “Immanuel Kant: Philosophy of Religion.”

²⁹Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 116.

³⁰Kant, “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking,” 237.

³¹Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 51.

³²Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 53.

present, can knowledge be had. Kant is clear, “understanding cannot intuit, and the sensuous faculty cannot think”³³ and “in no other way than the united operation of both, can knowledge arise.”³⁴ This is what scholars have termed “the togetherness principle” because it makes explicit the intrinsic connection between intuitions and concepts.³⁵

Kant, however, distinguishes between knowledge and ideas. For Kant, ideas are the basic building blocks of metaphysics.³⁶ “They are concepts of reason, and they do not correspond to possible objects of experience.”³⁷ This is how Kant thinks of God. Since the idea of God resides in the noumenal realm, He cannot be a knowable object by either the senses or reason and thus falls afoul of the togetherness principle. God, then, for Kant, could be considered an ‘empty concept’. At this point, we must remember that “‘empty concept’ for Kant does not mean either ‘bogus concept’ or ‘wholly meaningless concept’: rather it means ‘concept that is not objectively valid’” and cannot legislate behavior.³⁸ This maps on to the distinction Kant makes in *The Critique of Pure Reason* between “constitutive function” and “regulative function.” An idea is constitutive if it “can be used to constitute knowledge”³⁹ and regulative if it cannot constitute knowledge, but nonetheless can “serve the heuristic purpose of regulating our thought and action.”⁴⁰ God, for Kant, is a regulative idea “which is serviceable to the experiential use of our reason”⁴¹, especially in the moral realm.

³³Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 117.

³⁴Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 117.

³⁵Robert Hanna, “The Togetherness Principle, Kant’s Conceptualism, and Kant’s Non-Conceptualism,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Palo Alto, CA: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2022/entries/kant-judgment/>.

³⁶Tim Jankowiak, “Immanuel Kant,” *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 15, 2024, <https://iep.utm.edu/kantview/>.

³⁷Jankowiak, “Immanuel Kant.”

³⁸Hanna, “The Togetherness Principle, Kant’s Conceptualism, and Kant’s Non-Conceptualism.”

³⁹Pomerleau, “Immanuel Kant: Philosophy of Religion.”

⁴⁰Pomerleau, “Immanuel Kant: Philosophy of Religion.”

⁴¹Kant, “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking,” 240.

It is this experiential use of reason in Kant’s moral system that leads to the idea of God. Why? “Because reason’s job is to unify cognitions into a systematic whole, and it finds that it needs these ideas of the soul, the world, and God, in order to complete this systematic unification.”⁴² Again, it is only because “reason, conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral needs, extends itself to extravagant ideas which might make up for this lack”⁴³ of explanatory reasons in the moral realm. This may seem to fit better with a reading of Kant that is doubtful about the knowability of God through rational means, but it is crucial to understand that it is reason that even introduces the idea of God as a possibility. Kant goes so far as to say that “Without assuming an intelligent author we cannot give any intelligible ground of [the order of the world] without falling into plain absurdities.”⁴⁴ This again emphasizes that God is a useful concept that is only introduced because nothing else fulfills the explanatory demands of reason. In a very real sense, God is only introduced because reason demands it. It is reason that opens the possibility of God.

This gets fleshed out in the moral realm. Rather than seeking happiness as the highest good, moral agents should seek to be the kind of people who are worthy of happiness.⁴⁵ Thus, the highest good possible for human beings is rooted in the kind of beings humans are. This, however, is a dependent highest good and like most philosophers before him, Kant is wary of an infinite regress of dependency. This is something reason will not allow. Thus, there needs to be an independent highest good on which all other goods depend.⁴⁶ This is why “reason needs to

⁴²Jankowiak, “Immanuel Kant.”

⁴³Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*, 72.

⁴⁴Kant, “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking,” 241-242.

⁴⁵Boyd and Thorsen, *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy: An Introduction to Issues and Approaches*, 108.

⁴⁶Boyd and Thorsen, *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy: An Introduction to Issues and Approaches*, 241.

assume, for the sake of such a dependent highest good, a supreme intelligence as the highest independent good.”⁴⁷

This is another possible reading of Kant’s thought on the relationship between God and reason as found in *The Critique of Pure Reason*, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, and “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking.” At the most basic level, if this reading is plausible, the *idea* of God only ever enters the picture as a delivery of reason and in service of morality. It is moral concerns of practical reason that introduces the possibility of God’s *hypothetical* existence.

Insights from Kantian Thought

To this point, we have explored two possible and distinctly different readings of Kant’s understanding of how God and reason relate. However, while both have merit, I believe they are ultimately inadequate. Before exploring their inadequacies, I now want to examine two real insights from Kant’s work on reason that inform my argument for epistemic humility. One comes from Kant’s more negative view of reason and one from his more positive understanding.

I begin with the negative. I think Kant is right that there is a division between phenomena and noumena—things as we experience them and things as they really are. I also agree that reason is completely incapable of breaking through the barrier on its own and accessing the noumenal realm. There do indeed seem to be some real limits on the powers of reason, though it is incredibly capable. I also think Kant is right that these limitations have significant implications for the capacity of human beings to know God on their own. In fact, I think that without Divine aid – which Kant does not make space for—humanity is left with a “metaphysical embargo on the knowledge of God”⁴⁸ under which we cannot experience God at all.

⁴⁷Boyd and Thorsen, *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy: An Introduction to Issues and Approaches*, 241.

⁴⁸Allen and Springsted, *Philosophy for Understanding Theology*, 190.

On the positive side, I think Kant has something importantly right about the nature of human reason. While reason on its own cannot access the noumenal, it does seem naturally aimed at transcendence—at some understanding of something higher and greater than itself. Kant is right that reason cannot help but assume the idea of God to make sense of the order of the world and the existence of morality. There is something about the status of human beings as rational, moral agents that makes it such that “Without assuming an intelligent author we cannot give any intelligible ground of [the moral fabric and order of the world] without falling into plain absurdities.”⁴⁹ To me, this does seem to be a demand of reason.

Crucial Departures from Kantian Thought

As stated above, I believe Kant has genuine insights into the functioning of human beings and the world that Christians would do well to take seriously. However, there are legitimate reasons for concern. His thought, taken without any modification, has disastrous implications for Christianity that—if adopted—would do away with the gospel entirely. This, and two other departures are worth considering and each will be drawn out in conversation with the epistemically humble method of reasoning presented in the final section.

The first problem is the status of the gospel in Kantian thought. At the very foundation of the Christian faith is the belief that the eternal God became flesh and made His dwelling among us.⁵⁰ When Christ ascended, He went a step further, saying that it was good for Him to go back to heaven because He would send a helper, advocate, and comforter—the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Trinity—literally to live inside believers.⁵¹ Do not miss this: an action of this kind *cannot* happen in a Kantian world. God—who resides in the noumenal realm—cannot break

⁴⁹ Kant, “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking,” 241-242.

⁵⁰ John 1:14.

⁵¹ John 14:15-17.

through to interact with humans—who can only reside in the phenomenal realm—much less have genuine relationship with them. The incarnation and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit break the Kantian paradigm. Kant is right, in part, that it is inconceivable for God, something in the noumenal realm, to break through to the phenomena. But he is mistaken to say that it is impossible. Where Kant sees impossibility, we find God’s grace, and “we must meet God where he has promised to descend to us, meeting us in grace.”⁵² This divine movement toward sinful, fallen humanity is the crux of the gospel and our only hope for salvation and it is precisely this sort of occurrence that is impossible given Kant’s division between phenomena and noumena.

Second, the insufficiency of thinking of God as a regulative idea. As stated above, a constitutive idea is one that “can be used to constitute knowledge.”⁵³ Contrastingly, a regulative cannot constitute knowledge, but nonetheless can “serve the heuristic purpose of regulating our thought and action.”⁵⁴ God, for Kant, is only ever a regulative idea. This is why he famously wrote “I must, therefore, abolish knowledge, to make room for belief.”⁵⁵ In other translations, the word belief is translated as “faith.” This makes Kant’s point even more explicit. Because God cannot be the subject of knowledge, Kant found it necessary to restrict reason to open the possibility of faith. This has interesting implications. Faith is, for Kant, at best does not result in knowledge and, at worst, is opposed to knowledge. This, again, is a claim Christians cannot accept. Christianity hinges on the assurance that the relational knowledge resulting from faith is constitutive, not merely regulative. If this were not so, Paul is right to say that we are to be pitied more than all people.⁵⁶ It is crucial that we understand we are dependent on God for knowledge

⁵²Michael Horton, *The Christian Faith: A Systematic Theology for Pilgrims on the Way* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 49.

⁵³Pomerleau, “Immanuel Kant: Philosophy of Religion.”

⁵⁴Pomerleau, “Immanuel Kant: Philosophy of Religion.”

⁵⁵Kant, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, 34.

⁵⁶1 Corinthians 15:19.

of God. But it is equally important to understand that the knowledge resulting from God’s self-revelation in the Word, the person of Jesus Christ, and the illumination of the Holy Spirit is genuine, substantive knowledge, not something of lesser significance.

Third and finally, Christians cannot agree that God is beholden to human reason. As explained earlier, reason is what demands the existence of the idea of God in Kantian thought. God is at *our* mercy, and He is our object. Michael Horton gives what I think is a strong analogy for the difference between Kantian and Christian thought when he discusses the differences between seeing and hearing. Kant’s understanding can be compared to seeing. In sight, the seer beholds the subject. For Kant, this is how reason and God relate. God only enters in as an idea because reason demands it. This is contrasted with hearing. In hearing, there is a posture of receptivity—a main component of epistemic humility. When hearing, the hearer is summoned and claimed. They are beholden to something or *someone* else. This *must be* the way Christians understand reason’s relationship to God. Reason is beholden to and informed by God, not the other way around.

Epistemic Humility

Given the problems identified with a Kantian relationship between reason and knowledge of God, the goal of epistemic humility is to accurately understand reason’s role in Christian philosophy and theology without being overly confident or doubtful about its capabilities. It is what Kevin Vanhoozer would call a “well-versed moderate realism”⁵⁷ because it maintains that human beings can have *true but not exhaustive* knowledge of God. Two key understandings allow an epistemically humble method to hold a middle ground between the two possible and differing readings of Kant outlined above regarding the capability of reason to genuinely arrive

⁵⁷Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *The Drama of Doctrine: A Canonical-Linguistic Approach to Christian Theology*, 1st ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 289.

at knowledge of God. The first is that epistemic humility acknowledges the limits of human reason because “reason—like every other human faculty—has been corrupted by the fall.”⁵⁸ The second is that since reason has been so corrupted, it *must be* illuminated by and made receptive to God through the Holy Spirit. Then and only then, is human reason able to have some knowledge of God. Each of these tenets requires exploration.

Reason & the Fall

When God created the world, He created it *ex nihilo*, meaning out of nothing. This means that God’s creatures—including human beings—are not of the same stuff *ontologically* as God is. So, while there are similarities, there are also crucial differences that must be accounted for if we are to avoid relating God and humanity too closely. God is unlike humans in that He is eternal and perfect in knowledge, power, and love. Human beings are not. They are created. This is called the Creator-creature distinction. However, unlike every other creature, the Bible says that human beings were created in God’s image.⁵⁹ This affords human beings a special sort of dignity and means that human beings have certain relevant similarities to God. One similarity that Kant and Christians both rightly identify is the human capacity for reason. Our reason is indeed derived from God and “only because God gives us life and truth are we capable of existing and knowing.... True human knowledge does not stand in contradiction to divine knowledge but depends on it.”⁶⁰

While this is clearly true in the current fallen state of the world, it would remain true in a perfect world where Adam and Eve never sinned because even there the Creator-creature distinction would hold true. With or without sin, human beings are always completely dependent

⁵⁸Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 101.

⁵⁹Genesis 1:27.

⁶⁰Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 54.

on God for everything—including our ability to reason. But there was a fall, there is sin, and everything has been damaged by it. The upshot is that “there was not any part of humanity left unsullied by the fall.”⁶¹ This includes the ability human beings have to reason. When Adam and Eve sinned, they were banished from the Garden of Eden. Before the fall, God and humanity enjoyed rich communion, unaffected by sin. Now, only “God himself is high and lofty and inhabits eternity,” a “realm to which no man can penetrate.”⁶²

John Calvin is certainly dubious about man’s ability to know God through unaided reason, saying that in matters pertaining to God, “men are blinder than moles”⁶³ and “intoxicated with a false opinion of our own perspicacity.”⁶⁴ Analyzing Calvin’s work, Horton says that “although unbelieving reason is still able to attain remarkable knowledge of ‘things below,’ it must be liberated from its hostility to God before it can rightly know ‘heavenly things.’”⁶⁵ It is precisely this hostility that was introduced as a consequence of the fall.

Calvin was deeply influenced by Augustine who believed that pride was the root of all sin.⁶⁶ I believe he would see pride at the root of Kant’s confidence in the power of reason as well. For Augustine, pride *is* idolatry. It is putting the self in the place of God. Horton’s words warning about the bent of such thinking toward idolatry and pride, I believe, can apply to Kant as well: “Following the light of nature—‘abstract speculative thinking’—does not lead to God but idols.”⁶⁷ It is precisely this pride, this “strain toward transcendence,”⁶⁸ that epistemic humility

⁶¹Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 142.

⁶²Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 116.

⁶³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1970), 291.

⁶⁴Calvin, *Institutes*, 292.

⁶⁵Horton, *Christian Faith*, 101.

⁶⁶Augustine, *The City of God: An Abridged Version from the Translation by Gerald G. Walsh [and Others] with a Condensation of the Original Foreword by Etienne Gilson. Edited, with an Introduction*, trans. Gerald G Walsh (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Image Books, 1958), 251.

⁶⁷Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 147.

⁶⁸Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 78.

seeks to avoid, instead keeping in mind that humans are still creatures and that they, “no less than other creatures, never know reality,” *or God*, “as a pure object.”⁶⁹ Because human beings are creatures and because of the fall, we cannot have access to God *as He is* through unaided reason.

Receptivity

Much of Christian theology would seem to agree with and celebrate Kant’s confidence in the ability of reason to serve as a guide in moral and even religious life. However, I believe there are things about God and the gospel that reason cannot know on its own and that must be revealed to human beings by God. Reason cannot ever on its own arrive at a right understanding of the incarnation, the atonement, the resurrection, or the new creation.⁷⁰ These are decidedly outside its scope. That is why Emil Brunner says the true God and the true gospel “can only be known by His coming down to us, in the revelation of Christ which is disclosed by faith.”⁷¹ Brunner is right to use the word “disclosed” here. Disclosure entails the giving of something, and Christians must maintain that what is given in faith is not *just* the illumination of our rational capacities, but special, additional, and genuine knowledge that reason alone could never produce.

This is something Kant cannot understand because nothing can break through the phenomena/noumena barrier. Reason cannot fully ascend and noumena must always be interpreted by the mind. Kant could not be clearer: “The concept of God and even the conviction of his existence can be met with only in reason, and it cannot first come to us either through inspiration or through tidings communicated to us, however great the authority behind them.”⁷²

⁶⁹Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 78.

⁷⁰Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 147.

⁷¹Emil Brunner, *Revelation and Reason: The Christian Doctrine of Faith and Knowledge*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1946), 318-319.

⁷²Kant, “What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking,” 245.

Nothing from the noumenal, no matter how powerful, can ever step into the phenomenal. That is why Kantian thought, if taken on wholesale, is incompatible with a robust understanding of divine revelation and even more so with the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

Epistemic humility avoids this by seeking rightly to understand reason's limitations resulting from both creatureliness and the fall and remaining fundamentally receptive to God. Receptivity is characterized by being claimed, summoned, and commissioned, rather than aiming to seize, grasp, and master.⁷³ Returning to an earlier, and helpful, distinction Horton makes between seeing and hearing, the difference between seeing and hearing is a difference in posture. When seeing, one expresses *their* grasp on reality. Hearing, on the other hand, is necessarily receptive. Hearing requires a posture of "putting oneself at the disposal of the speaker rather than of putting an object at the disposal of the examining subject."⁷⁴ This imagery further emphasizes that divine revelation results in genuine, special knowledge, not just the illumination of reason.

Receptive reason must receive something, and God has been offering Himself to His creation since the beginning of time. When human beings were brought into the world, they were always already at the disposal of a speaker. They came into an established reality as addressed beings, rather than being free to create reality themselves. It was a world already full of "being" that humans were brought into. Crucially, however, that being is not locked away behind a phenomena/noumena divide. That being is Triune, intensely personal, and seeking a relationship with His creatures. God has condescended to meet human beings where they are, rather than demanding the impossible ascent of reason.

This is poignantly evident in the account of Job who demands God answer His questions. In response, God mediates His presence through a storm and speaks to Job. This shows two

⁷³Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 116.

⁷⁴Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 95.

important aspects that are central to an epistemically humble methodology. First, human beings are not capable of knowing and apprehending God as He is. His presence must always be mediated to us. “We know God in his activity toward us, not as he is in himself”⁷⁵ truly is the conclusion of Job and many other Biblical accounts. Think of Moses and seeing God’s back, Elijah and the still small voice, and the Israelites trembling before Mount Sinai.⁷⁶ Calvin rightly notes that God must interact with humans through discourse that is “accommodated to our capacity so that we may understand it.”⁷⁷

Second, epistemic humility recognizes that human beings are always dependent on God’s self-revelation. Job could do nothing to find God on his own. He was utterly dependent on God to reveal Himself. Horton says it well: “Human beings do not discover God; God reveals Himself.”⁷⁸ This is, again, because of the Creator-creature distinction. God transcends His creation and so must condescend to His creatures if those creatures are to know Him. This transcendence is precisely what renders “the unaided search for the Lord fruitless, and...makes the self-disclosure of God necessary.”⁷⁹ But at the same time, epistemic humility recognizes that God has given His creatures a role to play. They are to ask, seek, and knock and reach out to God, expecting to find Him. Epistemic humility does not give human beings an excuse to be passive and intellectually lazy.

This is something Kant gets wrong because he cannot imagine a completely transcendent God who would desire to be known by His creatures so much so that He reveals Himself to them. Since reason is the ultimate authority, there is no room for a beholdenness to something

⁷⁵Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 52.

⁷⁶ Exodus 33; 1 Kings 19; Exodus 20.

⁷⁷Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.17.13.

⁷⁸Horton, *The Christian Faith*, 16.

⁷⁹James G. S. Thomson, *The Old Testament View of Revelation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 11.

higher. However, when considered from an epistemically humble position, the conclusion is different: *since* human beings are created in God’s image and *since* God has chosen to reveal Himself through the written and incarnate Word, the creation, and His indwelling Spirit, humans have an actual ability to know God.

Kevin Vanhoozer gives an insightful description of the postmodern stance toward the other that I believe maps on exactly to how Kant conceives of God and the noumena more broadly: Kant views everything in the noumenal realm—including God—as “so different from anything our categories can name, so resistant to categorizations, as to be unable to say anything positive about it.”⁸⁰ This can and does result in a God that is remarkably easy for Kant—and those who fully adopt his understanding of reason and the world—to ignore. Since we cannot know God, we need not try. Vanhoozer, however, goes one step further and identifies this mindset with the sin of sloth, saying intellectual laziness is the “besetting temptation of the postmodern condition”⁸¹ which leads straight to an unknowable, ignorable God.

Adopting an epistemically humble posture, however, paints a much more hopeful picture. While God remains wholly other and unimaginably holy, He has chosen to become meaningfully and personally accessible. Theologians and everyday seekers are not left to bridge the gap between their rational capacities and knowing God. The good news—and the very heart of epistemic humility—is that God has chosen to bridge that gap Himself.

Conclusion

Immanuel Kant is rightly considered one of the most brilliant philosophers ever to live. He provides real insights into the order and structure of the world and the powers of human

⁸⁰Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Theology and the condition of postmodernity: a report of knowledge (of God),” in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodern Theology*, Cambridge Companions to Religion, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 24.

⁸¹Vanhoozer, “Theology and the condition of postmodernity,” 23.

reason as a guide in moral life. His groundbreaking distinction between phenomena and noumena and emphasis on the power and certainty of the deliveries of rational thinking has shaped much of subsequent thought. While Christian thinkers can and should take seriously the insights Kant offers into the order of the world and the nature of reason, they must avoid falling, as Kant does, into a theology that renders the gospel powerless, misunderstands God's nature and fails to take seriously His transcendence. These are real dangers and limitations that Christian thinkers should not take on board. There is, however, a different, more humble way of thinking about the capabilities of human reason that makes the most of the insights of Kantian thought without compromising a robust, distinctly Biblical understanding of God and His relationship to His creation. This view charts a positive path forward, striving to place God and the gospel at their rightful place in the center of our rational endeavors.