

GOD AND THE ETHER IN KANT'S LATER PHILOSOPHY

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Kant always insisted that phenomena cannot be explained by the mere accumulation of sense impressions.¹ What we usually call experience is hardly that, but rather "the asymptotic approximation to the empirical completeness of perceptions."² It is a set of perceptions integrated by the mind into a unit.³ We must recognize in natural science that "experience cannot be given but must be constructed by the subject into a sensible representation. This construction follows a principle of empirical representations that makes a unity of a possible experience, whose form must be conceived a priori."⁴ As we will see, this principle applies in strict parallel to the concepts of God and religion. Kant gives various names to the concept that makes a unitary experience of the physical world possible: caloric, luminous matter, sensible space, etc. But the name best suited to it is ether. God and the ether – the culmination and basis of Kant's transcendental philosophy, but not its center.

Faithful to his dynamical and anti-atomistic views, Kant had supposed the existence of an elementary substance (*Grundstoff*) in his *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels* (1755). All bodies can be resolved into this fundamental space-filling stuff.⁵ But following the general development of modern physics from Descartes to Euler, Kant supposes that this stuff (which is closer to force or energy than to matter) is like any other material or body, except that being subtler it is more difficult to detect with instruments. He remained faithful to this classical idea in his first mention of it in his *Opus postumum* (text of 1796), with particular reference to Euler's *Lettres à une princesse d'Allemagne*. In his 18th letter, Euler opposed Newton's corpuscular ether and atomism in general, preferring Huygens' undulatory picture. At the end of the 19th letter, Euler expressed his conviction that, since space can be neither vacuous nor full of corpuscles, it must have as its basis a subtle medium, the ether, whose vibrations engender light waves. But the concept did not support a satisfactory physics.

Kant came to realize that the general problem of the ether arose from treating it as a sort of matter, however subtle it might be. Beginning in 1788/9, he introduced the audacious idea of dematerializing it, and converting it into a principle of the possibility of experience. This led to the principle of "transcendental material in general." If bodies arrange themselves

¹ KrV, A833/B861.

² O.p., xxi, 53.

³ KrV, A, 110.

⁴ O.p., xxii, 391.

⁵ *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte*, i, 263.

under motive forces (attraction, repulsion, etc.), the seat of these forces cannot be in the bodies themselves but in a *continuous* medium, which Kant provisionally called “caloric.”⁶ It was a *fluidum deferens* in the sense of Jean André Deluc, who held a position between Lavoisier’s chemistry and the phlogiston theory. Kant studied Deluc’s writings carefully.⁷ As a fundamental transcendental material, caloric is not a body, and does not change place or form.

[Two paragraphs relating Kant’s ideas to modern physics are omitted.]

In his *Metaphysische Anfangsgründe der Naturwissenschaft* (1786), Kant had given repulsion priority over attraction, since repulsion secures the existence of bodies while attraction serves to connect them. In his later work the difference is ontological. Repulsion is a manifestation of the basic transcendental material and pertains to the dynamical order (the seat of motive forces), while attraction corresponds to the mechanical order (it establishes relations between bodies).

Kant was very much interested in the step or transition from the metaphysical principles of natural science to physics made possible by the a priori existence of caloric, ether, or “sensitized space.” What was truly important for him, however, was that the replacement of a metaphysical God (introduced surreptitiously into cosmology) by a *transcendental Ether* enabled him to bring the entire system of critical philosophy into harmony. The connection between the epistemological order and physics was a necessary building site (not the foundation but the place and material) of the superior moral order with vistas of a new and difficult concept of religion and of the Idea of God.

To progress, Kant had to remove all divine traces from the world both in physics and in transcendental logic. The reason for this removal is the exaltation of human reason as the center and keystone of the entire system. Kant required that the world be resolved superficially into a gigantic mechanism and referred at its foundation to a dynamical connection that he explicitly called an “artificial” one. “Experience is not a natural aggregation of perceptions, but an artificial one. Experience is not *given* by sensation, but *made* to secure sensory knowledge.”⁸ Why must it be the perceiving subject, and not God or nature, that guarantees the unicity and collective totality of knowledge? The reason is that freedom in a metaphysical sense supposes an absolute *independence* from the things of the world, from their causes and order, independence in respect of *natural necessity*.

⁶ O.p., xxi, 215, 25.

⁷ Cf. O.p., 70, 85, 197, 299, 388, 501.

⁸ O.p., xxii, 498.

Consequently, the things of the world have to be progressively knowable as phenomena; knowable in the sense that the mechanical order to which these phenomena are subject will obey the Principles deduced in the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (1781), that is, axioms of intuition, anticipations of perceptions, analogies of experience, and postulates of empirical thought. The internal, dynamical connection of this order is guaranteed by the motive forces and by the transcendental basic material as set forth in the *Transition from the metaphysical principles of science to physics*.

The human being, as a determinate existence in time, is subject also to the “law of the natural necessity of all events in its existence and also in its actions; this amounts [apparently] to abandoning it to blind chance...and yet freedom must be attributed to this being as a thing in itself.”⁹ We cannot avoid this singular conjunction of freedom and necessity in the same subject, which makes a man the only thing-in-itself that that we can know apart from the infinite spatial-temporal frame. We know why. It is man, or the idea of man, human reason, that engenders time, which makes possible the apprehension of empirical intuitions; and time is engendered as this particular man experiences feeling or affect in his internal order. Kant concocted these complicated doctrines so that freedom “would necessarily be conceived as independent of everything empirical and of nature in general...without a priori freedom, no moral law is possible nor any law-like imputation.”¹⁰

[a paragraph omitted here]

In his *Critique of practical reason* (1788), Kant defined the existence of God as a postulate of the practical reason (in significant parallel to the later postulate of the ether in proto-physics). This lays the foundation of the Supreme Being as *object* of the pure reason (not as the basis of determination of actions, a thing that only the moral law can be). The doctrine reads: God, supposed to be at the same time Creator of Nature and Supreme Moral Judge, is the guarantor of a satisfactory response to the question, “What is allowed to me? What can I legitimately expect?” Kant argues that although “virtue is the highest condition that appears desirable to us...the highest good..., still it is not the complete and finished good as object of the faculty of desire of finite rational beings. For it to be so, happiness also is required.”¹¹ Virtue is the supreme good because the highest, but it still would not be the *bonum consumatum*, a finished perfection.

⁹ KpV, v, 97.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ KpV, v, 110.

The entry of happiness into the moral realm raised problems already in the *Critique of practical reason*. Kant had defined happiness as the “continual consciousness a rational being has of the pleasure of life, while the principle that makes of happiness the supreme foundation of the determination of the will is “the principle of love itself.”¹² Of course, the *natural* yearning for happiness must be distinguished from the principle of egoism, a *radical evil* entirely opposed to the highest good, which is virtue that derives happiness from its exercise. This derivation is hard to reconcile with Kantian rigor. Besides the metaphysical difficulty of deriving a *material* and empirical principle, with all the marks of an egoistical calculation,¹³ there is also a *moral* and *existential* problem.

If it is certain that happiness consists in pleasure (if possible, uninterrupted) in this empirical life, we cannot expect such a pleasure to follow from the fulfillment of an imperative -- for this fulfillment consists, in so far as it is an exercise in freedom, precisely in its absolute independence of life and its pleasure. Kant qualifies as *moral* the hyperstoical decision of a worthy man, unjustly disgraced, not to take his own life, not because he loves living, “but because he makes something completely different from life, in comparison with which, and in opposition to it, life, with all its *pleasure*, has not the least value. He lives only because he ought, not because life brings him the slightest pleasure.” And Kant adds, forcefully: “That is the nature of the driver of pure practical reason.”¹⁴

At the end of his life Kant said that he did not fear death and that only one thing could make him do so: “if a bad demon whispered to me, ‘you have disgraced yourself before men.’”¹⁵ This refined love for mankind could be understood as a sign of true happiness, but that is rather too material a definition. There are two more adequate construals of uninterrupted pleasure in Kant's posthumous writings. The first refers to a “principle of benevolence” subjected to the law of “duty.”¹⁶ The principle: “to favor the happiness of others (the duty of love), which limits egoism.”¹⁷ The second construal is more interesting: on the one hand, it restricts happiness to one's virtuous acts. Nature can do nothing to diminish this pure *reflexive* sentiment (the famous *respect for the moral law* would be a feeling of pleasure). On the other hand, it confirms the subjugation of the natural to the moral order. “The principle of the unity of freedom under law forms an *analogy* with what we call nature, and it is also an internal source of happiness that nature cannot give us, and of which we

¹² KpV, v, 22.

¹³ Kpv, v, 25.

¹⁴ KpV, v, 88.

¹⁵ E.A.C. Wasianski, *Immanuel Kant* (Halle, 1902), 235.

¹⁶ *Metaphysik der Sitten*, vi, 401.

¹⁷ O.p., xxii, 128.

ourselves are the authors....The unity of the intelligible world according to practical principles is like the unity of the sensible world under physical laws.”¹⁸

If happiness consists of doing good to others and submitting to the principle of “duty” without the intervention of nature, it is obvious that the doctrine of the Supreme Being makes no sense. There is nothing in nature that can make us truly happy and so it makes no sense to postulate “the existence of a cause of all nature distinct from nature, which cause brings about the exact coordination between happiness and morality.”¹⁹ In the huge *opus posthumum*, there are only two brief mentions of the Supreme Being. The first identifies the “ultimate end” with the “Supreme Being.”²⁰ In a strictly parallel passage, Kant says that *philosophy*, in its literal sense, has an unconditional value since it is the doctrine of the “ultimate end” of human reason. Reason’s imperatives have an absolute value in themselves because they are fixed directly on an end. The doctrine of happiness cannot claim anything more in this respect, since it takes means for ends.²¹ Hence God is liberated from the job of serving as the bond between two distinct parts of man: the part that is fixed in nature and the part that subjects itself to morality. The second mention of the Supreme Being in the *opus posthumum* has to do with the three maxims or rules of nature: “Supreme nature, Supreme freedom, Supreme good (beatitude, happiness).”²² Under the first concept of “good” we are to understand strict mechanical necessity, with no place for chance.

If the function of God as guarantor of the Supreme Good has no sense, what is His role in this austere philosophy of morality? Should we conclude that Kant had become an atheist just before he died? That would be as unreasonable as denying the existence of the ether because it is not directly detectable by measuring apparatus or human senses. Kant dedicated the second half of the *Opus posthumum* to the consideration of the Idea of God from every possible viewpoint, just as he had treated the ether or caloric in the first half. God and the ether are *the* themes of this work. We know that these ideas are linked. One corresponds to *exteriorization*, on the part of the subject, of the form of perception called “space.” That gives rise systematically to objects that affect external sense with a view to their scientific arrangement and their subsequent manipulation for technological, pragmatic, and ethical-practical purposes. In contrast, the Idea of God is a product of *Interiorization*, in the soul of the subject, of the practical reason and its supreme expression. This is the categorical imperative seen from reverse, not as an obligation imposed by a subject on itself,

¹⁸ *Refl.*, 7260; *G.S.*, xix, 296f.

¹⁹ *KpV*, v, 125.

²⁰ *O.p.*, xxi, 149.

²¹ *O.p.*, xxii, 370.

²² *O.p.*, xxi, 23.

but as a command dictated from its deepest depths, so that respect for this Being is enough for moral action, without expecting rewards or punishments from it.”²³

Paradoxically, it was the high respect in which Kant held the Idea of God that prompted him to free this suppositious but excellent Being from every sort of service function. As *ens necessarium*, God would have to be the Creator of the World for it and us to exist. As *ens realissimum*, He would have to be the universal logic of all the ways by which men communicate and speak truth. As *demiurgus* and Architect, he would have had to bind his Intelligence to his Will to enable us to live in a beautiful, purpose-oriented world. In sum, God would be “God” in order that men would be truly men. Accordingly, the traditional teachings about God conceal a shameful anthropocentrism.²⁴ It is not God that has to be put in the service of man, but nature dominated by science and technology and law – this last in the sense of *Deus in nobis* revealed in our deepest selves.

The philosophy of religion must be subordinated to a *metaphysics of morals*, which, without abandoning the transcendental level of justification, must proceed from the top down. For Kant, just as it would be impossible to raise the structure of natural science from below, on the basis of untrustworthy perceptions, it would be foolish or ingenuous to expect any improvement in the morals of men that arise so to say *inductively*, from below, in the manner of an assumed natural goodness in the sense of Rousseau.²⁵ And it would be much more dangerous to take a suppositious *experience* of the supernatural or the divine for support for beliefs and behavior. Kant calls a “crazy delusion” the belief in the “phenomenon of such a Being [God] or even simply [belief] from the mere desire of such a thing; that would be to accept ideas as if they were perceptions.”²⁶ Then if the jump from the *aggregation* of perceptions to the *system* of natural science always depends on some given that is and always will be unknowable since imprescindable for the beginning of knowledge, it would be blasphemy to ask to make a fact from a pure rational principle, a fact being an *object* of experience.

The later Kant is clear about the value and function of religion. Subjectively, he affirms that the need to inculcate morality in people implies education, a state, and religion. But religion is nothing more than civilizing by doctrine.²⁷ Again he proceeds from the top down. The question of turning people into civilized beings is a secondary matter, since it depends on their suitability for a true *civitas* whose foundation must be the supreme principle

²³ [see original text]

²⁴ [see original text]

²⁵ [see original text]

²⁶ O.p., xxi, 21.

²⁷ *Reflexion*, 1460 (1783-84); *G.S.*, xv/2, 641.

of ethics. In a word: *Moral vor der Religion*, "morality before religion."²⁸ Religion would thus be something *historical* (which is how Kant thought of state religion with its mix of doctrine, revelation, and coercion).²⁹ This does not mean that some enlightened day religion will disappear (that would be to claim that physics would disappear once a metaphysics of nature is constructed). First of all, religion has to be purged of all its historical and ideological baggage, and, secondly, the resulting rational religion has to be subjected, as far as its formal intelligibility is concerned, to the *metaphysics of morals*, just as physics is to the corresponding metaphysics.

From the objective side, in other words, from the effect of the moral law on the subject, this religion, which Kant sketched in broad strokes, is nothing but the "quality of acting according to conscience." Or, as Kant puts it, *Gewissenhaftigkeit*, "scrupulosity," the "sanctity of vows and truthfulness in what we must acknowledge within ourselves. Know yourself. Holding to this does not require the concept of God, much less the postulate, 'there is a God.'"³⁰

Kant's later philosophy took a radical course: religion ends by being something similar to the phenomenon or appearance of the moral law in each individual conscience: the *voice* that exhorts this conscience to act in conformation to law *as if* this voice expressed the commands of a Supreme Being. In a practical way it is the guarantor of a moral act, personified in God; it does not express anything but the reflection of the moral law in me (not by me, nor by my efforts alone, nor by my free will). "Reason by itself makes God."³¹ Or better: reason makes the *concept* of God in order to *acknowledge* itself. *But reason is not man*. Higher than reason is freedom, and this is an anthropogenic *fact*, a transformer that converts an astute rational animal into a moral being capable of raising itself above the strict limits of its physical existence.

It is not proper, according to Kant, to ask ourselves about the essence or existence of God. These questions lead to the mistake of reifying this Idea with the presumption of putting it at the service of man. Kant is clear: "I declare that the question, 'is there a God,' has a ready answer, given a desire for self-deception. For if there is a God, I have found him already; and if there is none, I neither win nor lose, except in my conscience, for I must admit something about which I know nothing as if I had knowledge of it."³² This fundamental correction of Pascal's bet dissipates all doubts about the function of the Idea-God. To claim

²⁸ Ibid., 1426; *G.S.*, xv/2, 622.

²⁹ O.p., xxi, 52.

³⁰ O.p., xxi, 81.

³¹ O.p., xxi, 13.

³² O.p., xxii, 64.

that a transcendental being dwells within us, either directly as the "Voice of conscience" or indirectly as the acceptance of a "revelation" would amount to renouncing entirely *cognitio ex principiis* for a "notice" received empirically or by indoctrination. In either case, this faith would be based on a *conceptus fanaticus*. "The concept is crazy when something that is inside of us is presented as something outside, and an act of one's own thinking is taken as a thing in itself."³³

It is difficult to live and work in conformity with Kant's paradoxical doctrine, according to which respect for the Idea and function of God makes us reject as fanatical every effort to penetrate into its essence or inquire into its existence. Certainly the Idea can be an *autonomous production of pure practical reason* by reflection on itself and can imprint a *feeling of obedience* on the human heart – but obedience to the law, not to an *ens summum*. And yet, if we are not allowed to affirm its existence, we would have to uphold, according to Kant, its sovereign *effectiveness*. The effectiveness of a reflection of human reason on every human being? Kant admits, on the one hand, that "there is a being in me distinct from me, which is in a causal relationship of effectiveness over me." He says, on the other hand, "I, a man, am this same being: thus God is nothing like a substance outside of me." Is this not an obvious contradiction?

Of course it is, and Kant recognizes it in a way no less obvious, but not without referring it to a final, mysterious *factum* on which the entire critical doctrine depends: God is the hypostasis, admitted *as if*, of the Idea of the categorical imperative in its character of an unconditional obligation. "This inexplicable internal constitution manifests itself through a *factum*: the categorical imperative of the absolute ought, the *nexus finalis*, God."³⁴ It is not possible to go beyond this *factum* in Kant's later works.

It would be unworthy of men, it would be something literally *contra naturam* not to attempt to fulfill the dictates of reason. Because of the supreme position religious faith occupies in moral reason, and of the assured fundamental character of a science rooted in theoretical reason, *science and religion are united in pursuit of an unattainable goal*. The quest is based on and driven on by philosophy, that is, by the activity of free men.

³³ O.p., xxi, 26.

³⁴ O.p., xxi, 25.