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Critical Idealism and Religion

A virtue of Critical Idealism is that its starting point is the assertion of reason's limits. Karl Barth's assertion that Kant elevated human reason above God is absurd. On the contrary, both theoretical and practical reason *necessarily* presuppose God, and it is no accident that Kant referred to his work as philosophical theology.

Although reason is limited, religion is at the core of Critical Idealism not because of what we can't do, which would require divine assistance in order for us to overcome our limits. Rather, religion is at the core of Critical Idealism because of what we can do. In other words, religion is not an answer to a problem. Religion consists of the conditions that constitute the extraordinary capacities of humanity to *see things that are not there* in phenomena and to *initiate a sequence of events that nature could never accomplish on its own*. In short, our very ability to understand the world (our theoretical reason) as well as our very ability to be autonomous, creative beings *above*, yet never separate from, nature (our practical reason) depend upon the *givenness* of a universe and of capacities that are inscrutable to us, yet absolutely *necessary* for us to experience, act, and create as we do. Such faith with respect to our not-knowing (that is, with respect to the limits upon which we depend) is constitutive of the human condition, and it is a far more profound faith than any faith with claims to know beyond reason. Critical Idealism is anchored in non-epistemic, but not epistemic faith.

Faith and Theoretical Reason

The strategy of Critical Idealism is to start with phenomena. There is no experience or knowledge without a world of appearances. However, the task is not simply to draw conclusions about the truth or falsehood of those phenomena. We quickly learn that our senses trick us, that our dreams confront us with a clarity and distinctness as any waking state, and that we do not have access to the things themselves of phenomena, which could ground our knowledge of appearances. We experience effects not things themselves. Rather than the phenomena and the things themselves constituting the ground of our knowledge, the fact that we can experience phenomena in the first place means that we must *necessarily* possess certain conditions and capacities that make it possible to experience those phenomena. It is these conditions and capacities that ground our knowledge, not the phenomena.

Understanding, then, requires critical reflection that turns the spy glass of our concentration back toward the subject rather than merely focusing on the object(s) of experience. Any knowledge

that we can have of objects presupposes our subjective conditions and capacities, and it is the combination of subjective necessities and objective phenomena that makes any kind of *objective* knowledge possible.

Objective knowledge does not consist merely in our opening our eyes. It requires the presence and conscious awareness of subjective conditions and capacities *in addition to* perception. On occasion as with the case of the Copernican Revolution, objective knowledge even requires that we *deny our sense perception*. Nonetheless, it would never occur to us to deny our sense perception were we not, first, to have perception that forces us to critical reflection.

We have control over the degree of conscious clarity that we achieve with respect to the conditions and capacities that we must contribute to our understanding. We do not have control over the phenomena that demand our understanding. It is this issue of the *degree of conscious clarity* that drives the critique that constitutes *Critical* (!) Idealism. There is a dangerous circularity to our understanding. We can only understand what we understand. For this reason, Paul Ricoeur reminds us that texts read us as much, if not more, than we read texts. We are incapable of grasping that which is beyond our understanding so that we are constantly susceptible to dogmatism. This is why our understanding requires, no demands, the vigilance of critical reflection. Not only must we embrace a strategy of self-correction where the data challenge our hypotheses, but also we must constantly seek to uncover the subjective mechanisms that make it possible for us to formulate hypotheses and to draw conclusions about the structure and order that drives the data in the first place. No other species can come close to humanity when it comes to uncovering these subjective mechanisms. Without them, there would be no discernment of hypothetical necessities. It is humanity's advantage that it can consciously identify, and not merely instinctively employ, such subjective mechanisms.

Non-epistemic faith permeates this process. Otto Neurath of the Vienna Circle employed a famous metaphor of the task of knowledge consisting of the situation of our being in a boat on a vast ocean,¹ and we must constantly be re-constructing the boat. Yet, we can construct only because we are dependent upon an objective and subjective givenness that we can (and must) assume has an order that justifies the effort of construction. Yet this faith of theoretical reason is more complex than merely that we must assume the order that we might discover in phenomena.

Particularly when it comes to organic phenomena, Kant reminds us, we encounter structures and processes that are more than the mere sum of their parts. If we are going to understand such phenomena, we must assume (*add to the phenomena*) that there is a teleological structure that is governing the organic process. If we are to understand the liver fluke that requires two external hosts in order to complete its life-cycle, we must recognize that neither the liver fluke nor any of the hosts is consciously aware of the others involved in the cycle. Yet the system must function as a symbiotic whole for the liver fluke to survive. The observing researcher *must assume* that there is a system teleologically governing the life-cycle. To be sure, this assumption involves a kind of faith that can lead to speculations, which, in turn, can undermine the very project of theoretical reason.

¹ See Otto Neurath, *Foundations of the Social Sciences*: International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, 2/1 (1944): 47.

The seductiveness of the teleological is that one will leap to conclusions about the origin of the teleological order. Rather than be satisfied with acknowledging that the phenomena of nature as well as the conditions and capacities that we possess are a gift beyond our ability to explain (and justify use of the notion of “God” for labeling this mysterious origin), the requirement that we must invoke teleological systems in order to understand organic phenomena can encourage us to assume that this mysterious origin has conscious intentionality. Teleology invites anthropomorphic speculations about the author of such goal-oriented systems that are more than the sum of their parts.

Here is an example of where Critical Idealism’s faith insists upon caution. It is not that we can prove or disprove that there is an anthropomorphic, divine intentionality that governs such organic phenomena, but, if we were to acknowledge such an anthropomorphic intentionality, we would undermine our very theoretical reason. It would mean that there was an agency in the world “above” and not susceptible to the laws of nature because it would be able to introduce systems that the laws of nature could not produce on their own. As a consequence, we would be discouraged, rather than encouraged, from seeking out the possible physical and teleological order that governs the phenomena.

Critical Idealism embraces a subtle but profound strategy: It rejects literal but embraces symbolic anthropomorphism.² Literal anthropomorphism would satisfy speculation but destroy our confidence in the physical and moral orders that are demanded by our faith in the conditions and capacities that make it possible to engage phenomena. In other words, phenomena teach us that there are subjective *necessities* that make possible our ability to encounter and make sense of those phenomena. When it comes to conditions that we can neither prove nor disprove, the default must be our understanding of the conditions and capacities that make it possible for us to experience and understand in the first place. This default position is not arguing for or against any particular knowledge content either physical or spiritual. It does insist upon defending general conditions and capacities without which we would not be able to experience or understand anything. In short, Critical Idealism’s symbolic anthropomorphism obviously rejects any literal claims about the origin of teleology in nature, but it does embrace the general notion of systems, which are more than the sum of their parts, as a strategy for understanding *physical* phenomena.

Even more destructively, literal anthropomorphic speculations would have a devastating effect on our practical reason. However, before turning to practical reason, we should examine the role of faith in aesthetic experience.

The Faith of Aesthetics

Humanity along with other conscious species lives on the basis of its judgments. Erroneous judgments can be deadly. Correct judgments do not always bring success, but they are necessary if we are to be successful.

What does it mean to formulate a judgment? It means encountering a set of phenomena (i.e., once again, appearances come first) and finding the appropriate concept to classify the

² See Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* AA IV: 350 f; especially, 355-358

phenomena. It is our general concepts that make it possible for us to process, remember, and act with respect to a set of particular phenomena. There are two kinds of judgments: determinative and reflective.³

A *determinative judgment* is one by which we already possess the appropriate concept and we simply apply it to the appearances. This is a keyboard, that is a computer screen, and on the desk is a coffee mug.

However, we also have experiences of phenomena for which we so not already possess the appropriate concept. As a woodworker's apprentice, we must first be able to distinguish among the various kinds of wood with respect to their properties and conduciveness to various artificial manipulation through woodworking. Without gaining sovereignty over the conceptual world of particular kinds of wood, we can't begin to be a master craftsman. The same goes for the process the apprentice must undergo in order to become skilled with the tools of the trade. It is patently absurd to assume that the apprentice already in advance possesses the concepts for the various kinds of wood, the tools, and the proper steps for the application of the tools to be a successful woodworker. The apprentice cannot make sovereign determinative judgments about the trade. S/he must first acquire sovereignty over the conceptual world of the trade, and that means to learn the appropriate concepts in order to classify the phenomena of woodworking. This activity is called *reflective judgment*.

Although we all know the frustrations of reflective judgment and are more than happy to just have our instructor "tell us what we need to know in order to get an 'A'" in this course, learning by determinative judgments is usually extremely boring. It is called memorization and regurgitation. In contrast, learning is usually most exciting and evocative of our fullest attention, when it is a creative process for the student. In other words, reflective judgment is far more interesting than determinative judgment. In fact, at some point all determinative judgments were originally reflective, and what we take to be "determined truths" at one point had to be acquired by some consciousness. At least one trick to successful learning, then, is for the student to develop strategies to make the process reflective. For example, that is why as a student we take notes, write up those notes after class, and contextualize the material of class lectures by reading the texts of the course. These are the activities that make the learning process reflective for the student whereas the professor is sharing by means of determinative judgments the product of her/his reflective process with the material. When the material becomes the student's own reflective project, there is no holding back because there is hardly, if anything, more enjoyable in life than what we experience when we engage our own personal creativity in the activity.

Critical Idealism views the process of reflective judgment to be precisely that sequence one must go through with respect to a set of phenomena in order to grasp it "objectively." In other words, the process of reflective judgment identifies the subjective conditions that make it possible for us to engage the invisible order (conceptual and explanatory) that governs the phenomena. Critical Idealism's reflective judgment is the activity of cultivating the *a priori* synthetic judgments that make it possible for us to "see things that aren't there" in the phenomena. When such an insight

³ See Kant, *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 179-188-

of reflective judgment occurs authentically for the student and is not merely a regurgitation of pre-chewed judgments, it is thrilling.

It is clear, then, that reflective judgment takes us beyond empirical phenomena. Once we are able to take the step into transcendental consciousness to grasp the supersensible order that is the necessary condition for us to make reflective and, eventually, determinative judgments with respect to physical phenomena, we enter a whole other dimension of the power of judgment. The non-epistemic faith that drives our encounter with phenomena is our confidence that there is an imperceptible order to those phenomena, and, if we make the serious reflective effort to discern the order that is not visible, we will gain a sovereignty of understanding and creativity over the phenomena that otherwise is impossible. The degree to which we as a species can acquire this sovereignty is what distinguishes us from all other species of which we are aware. It is clear that other species are able to make determinative judgments instinctively. Some species are able to make at least rudimentary reflective judgments. However, no species is able to make the extensive determinative judgments that we are capable of making through training, and no species is able to pursue reflective judgment with a singularity of focus and precision that we are able to do. This is not to argue for speciesism with all of its possible destructiveness, but it will be an important element for our acknowledging the extraordinary judgments that constitute practical reason, which we will discuss below.

However, when Critical Idealism steps over into the supersensible dimension of transcendental consciousness, it can illuminate another set of judgments that take us to a whole different set of capacities beyond merely understanding the phenomena of the physical world.

Among the new foci of capacities is our experience of beauty. Foremost, the experience of beauty in nature presents us with a remarkable state of affairs. Assuming that one's urban experience has not transformed one's experience of nature into something threatening, human beings are capable of experiencing staggering beauty in nature that extends, for example, from the detailed beautiful structures of flowers to waterfalls and to sunrises over mountain peaks and sunsets over expansive plains or oceans. We easily take such experiences for granted without noticing how unusual the capacity of judgment with respect to what beauty in nature actually is.

Beauty is not a property of the object but a "quality in it [the object] by means of which it [the object] corresponds with our way of receiving it."⁴ Unlike reflecting and determining judgments, here we have a judgment *without a concept*. Were there to be a concept, it *would be an essential predicate of the object*. Nonetheless, with a judgment of beauty *we make a universal claim*. "Anyone in her/his right mind must find this natural scenery (object) beautiful." The first characteristic of "free" beauty in nature,⁵ that is, that it is not a universal, essential concept, is

⁴ Kant, *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 282.

⁵ Kant distinguishes between "free" beauty (*freie Schöpnheit* [*pulchritude vaga*]) and "merely dependent" beauty (*anhängende Schönheit* [*pulchritude adhaerens*]). See §16 of *The Critique of Judgment* AA IV: 229 ff. "Free" beauty is our experience of beauty in nature whereas "dependent" beauty is "art", that is a product of autonomous freedom: "By right, only production through freedom, i.e., through a capacity for choice that grounds its actions in reason, should be called art." (*The Critique of Judgment* AA V: 303) Unmistakably, Kant privileges the experience of beauty in nature over "art": The "[...] preeminence of the beauty of nature over the beauty of art in alone awakening an immediate interest ["in the beauty of nature (not merely to have taste in order to judge it" AA V:

actually quite staggering: there is no concept (essential predicate) that unites flowers, waterfalls, sunrises, and sunsets as well as the host of other elements and scenes of nature that we find beautiful. The second element usually presupposes the first: how is it possible to make a universal judgment without a universal concept?

Of course, one can simply deny that we do and dismiss our experience of beauty in nature as romantic hogwash! However, our experience of the phenomena teaches us not only that we experience such things in nature but also that we do make such judgments. Our lives are dramatically impoverished were we to deny such experiences just as our experience of our capacity of creativity would be reduced to an illusion were we to deny our autonomous freedom “above” nature. It is precisely this connection between aesthetic judgment and practical reason that allows Critical Idealism to propose that *beauty in nature is a symbol of the moral*.⁶ In other words, as with the case of freedom and a moral judgment, our experience of beauty does not depend upon our first being able to prove that we can make a universal judgment without a concept.

Again, the mantra of Critical Idealism is appropriate: “We don’t act because we know; we know because we act!” Our experience of beauty (our actions) forces us to acknowledge that we obviously do make such judgments (our knowledge), and they are extraordinary judgments. As with our encounter with all the limits to reason that Critical Idealism identifies, our experience of aesthetic judgment involves a non-epistemic faith (a judgment without a concept, in fact) that is crucial to our experience and its denial would involve a dramatic impoverishment of experience and our appreciation of who we are and what are responsibilities are.

Aesthetic judgment is a remarkable capacity because it teaches us to value the creative *a priori* synthetic power of judgment that allows us to make universal judgments without a concept. Aesthetic judgment allows us to experience beauty in phenomena while instructing us about our supersensible capacities of judgment that require that we *add things to* (and even can add something that doesn’t exist) phenomena. Here in the neutrality of the experience of beauty in nature, we are instructed of our *a priori* synthetic power of judgment to *add things that are not there* in the phenomena in order to understand. Of course, then, everything hinges upon what it is that we in fact *add to* the phenomena, and that, again, is where the task of *Critical* (!) Idealism comes into play.

The Faith of the Sublime

If the non-epistemic faith of aesthetic judgment teaches us to appreciate our power of judgment to *add to* phenomena that focuses our attention on the *external* dimension of experience, there are other experiences of phenomena that push us even deeper into the supersensible dimension of human capacities to instruct us of the awesomeness of transcendental consciousness. Kant called these other experiences *the mathematical and the dynamical sublime*.

298), even if the former were to be surpassed by the latter in respect of form, is in agreement with the refined and well-founded thinking of all human beings who have cultivated their moral feeling.” (CUP trans.) (*The Critique of Judgment* AA V: 299)

⁶ See §§ 59-60 of the *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 351-356.

Critical Idealism stresses that a judgment of the sublime is *not* (!!) a judgment about the external phenomena that engender it.⁷ Rather, as we now have come to expect from Critical Idealism, the sublime is a statement about a capacity of transcendental consciousness in the midst of external phenomena. Here our aesthetic (perceptual) experience turns our attention from the beauty of the external world in understanding toward the sublime that enlarges humanity to appreciate the very power of reason above understanding.

Reason for Critical Idealism does not mean Lockean discursive thought based upon logic. Kant invokes the tradition as old as Plato that identifies reason as a capacity and activity above discursive thought. Plato in turn calls discursive thought understanding, not reason. For Plato reason is concerned with “theoria” (contemplation) and consists of a dialectic that commences with universals, which he calls in Book VI of the *Republic* “hypotheses” in acknowledgment of the aporetic nature of concepts (we must use them but can’t define them), to indirectly think about what he calls the “First Principle of the Whole” or the Good. The re-tooling of reason by discursive thought has suppressed this Platonic notion of reason above discursive thought although thinkers as diverse as Lévy-Bruhl with his “pre-logical thinking”⁸ and Rudolf Otto with his “non-rational” (but not irrational) dimension of *das Heilige* (the Holy)⁹ still are indebted to the Platonic notion of reason above discursive thought/understanding.

The *mathematical sublime* consists of our experience of the immense immeasurability of the universe in which we as individuals and even as a species are dwarfed to the point of insignificance. We not only don’t show up in the historical account of the universe until the last mini-seconds of its time line, but, from the perspective of the universe, we simply don’t show up on the screen. Yet, in the very experience of the vastness of the universe on a clear night with the Milky Way and the expansiveness of innumerable galaxies, we must be astonished over our capacity to have a sense (even though we might lack the *a priori* synthetic capacity ourselves to do the calculations) of that vastness. Our minds are “able to take in” the vastness of the universe because we possess a supersensible dimension that is itself immeasurable: transcendental consciousness. Critical Idealism calls this capacity our awareness of the mathematical sublimity of consciousness.

As if such mathematical sublimity of the illimitable and immeasurable nature of consciousness were not astonishing enough, we can have a similar experience in the face of the enormous power of nature. Kant calls our ability to fathom the threatening power of nature the *dynamical sublime*. Here “dynamic” comes from the Greek δύναμις (“dunamis”), which means power! In the face of a tornado, an earthquake, a hurricane/typhoon, a tsunami, or the power of a thunderstorm, we are capable of processing the power even though we are insignificantly weak in the face of the power. Here, sublimity consists not in the power of nature but in the power of transcendental consciousness, a power that itself can transform nature. As with mathematical sublimity, our limits (here our weakness) are capable of experiencing limitlessness and power.

⁷ See the *Critique of Judgment* AA V:245-246,

⁸ See “Chapter II: The Law of Participation” in Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (New York: A.A. Knopf, 1925).

⁹ See Otto’s discussion of the rational and non-rational (not irrational!) in Chapter I “The Rational and the Non-Rational” of *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and Its Relation to the Rational* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

We may speak of faith with respect to sublimity because our experience of the mathematical and dynamical sublime turn our attention away from the external stimuli, which initiate our experience of sublimity, to view our insignificance and powerlessness as the very capacity to experience such significance and power in the universe and nature. The faith of sublimity is the capacity of such experiences to remind us of the capacity for measurement and power anchored in the immeasurable and creative power of transcendental consciousness, a set of capacities that we are obviously incapable of proving or disproving by means of our sense perception of the mathematically limitless, universal and dynamic force of nature; yet, our experience of the phenomena instructs us of the *necessity* of the sublime for, without these capacities, we could not experience the universe and nature as we do.

Religion and Practical Reason: On Good, good and evil

Our travels through theoretical reason, aesthetic judgment, and the sublime indicate a hierarchy of capacities to transcendental consciousness that take us far beyond the mere phenomena of sense experience. We have indicated the *necessity* of non-epistemic faith (what Kant calls *Fürwahrhalten*) (*Critique of Pure Reason* B 850-859) at every step of the way. However, we have barely reached the threshold of the significance of religion in human experience.

Humanity possesses an efficient causality that, like every form of efficient causality, is incapable of proof or disproof in sense phenomena. Our form of efficient causality makes it possible for us to initiate a series of events that nature could never accomplish on its own. This efficient causality is irreducible to the blind, mechanical efficient causality of physical events to which even our autonomous efficient causality, of course, must conform. Because we can neither prove nor disprove the “fact” of this efficient causality, it, like our experience of aesthetic judgment and the sublime, is something that we must *assume* as necessary for us to be able to experience phenomena as we do. This assumption involves the core moment of non-epistemic faith that is at the very core, and constitutes the ground of, practical reason.

However, Critical Idealism engages the religious nature of human experience in a far more radical sense than simply to identify that theoretical reason, aesthetic judgment, and practical reason all have non-epistemic faith at their core. The ultimate concern of practical reason is not merely to acknowledge our autonomous, creative freedom, it is also concerned with the autonomous “kingdom” of moral principles that are the *necessary* presupposition of the extraordinary efficient causality that is our creative freedom. We have the autonomy to self-legislate (αὐτόνομος means “to give oneself or live by one’s own law”) this system of principles – unlike our experience of the efficient causality of nature that is a heteronomous, blindly mechanical order of physical laws.

The very condition of our autonomy both with respect to creative freedom as well as with respect to our self-legislation of moral principles means that we have the capacity to self-legislate a good or an evil moral maxim to govern our actions. Critical Idealism identifies the complex structure associated with this capacity of self-legislation. It involves capacities (*Anlagen*) and inclinations (*Hänge*) (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* AA VI: 29ff).

We cannot not act! To be the species that we are, we must satisfy certain capacities (fulfill certain aspects of our nature that are not complete by birth): animality, humanity, and personality. To survive as an individual and a species, we must exercise our animality (i.e., our sensuous appetites). We are animals, and we cannot exist as human if we deny our animality. Of course, how we satisfy our animal appetites is a crucial moral question, but as a capacity, our animality demands that certain sensuous appetites must *necessarily* be satisfied: food, clothing, sexuality, etc.

Furthermore, we are a species that is profoundly social. We cannot escape (even in an anchoritic hermitage) the activity of seeking status and prestige *in the eyes of others*. This is clearly a capacity that we have to cultivate because there is no status or prestige by just showing up. We all tend to benefit from this capacity because, usually, seeking status and prestige in the eyes of others is a strategy to keep us in conformity with the rules of our community. However, Jürgen Habermas reminds us that communities can suffer from “systematic distortion”¹⁰ in which what are taken to be the moral principles of the community by which one establishes one’s status and prestige are barbaric and destructive not only of the environment but also of human dignity. We can use honor to dishonorable ends.

Hence, the significance of the third incomplete capacity of humanity: personality. Here we are concerned with our ability to do things that nature on its own cannot accomplish, which in turn is the necessary condition for us to be able act on and to hold ourselves accountable to a moral maxim merely and exclusively because it is right and not because it will serve our personal interest either of animal appetites or of honor. We possess this capacity only if we are autonomous and capable of creative freedom. In short, the higher we go on this list of capacities, the more that the higher ability can have a direct effect on the lower capacities. Nonetheless, exercising our animal appetites according to the capacity of personality as well as the pursuit of honor under the expectations of personality introduce the moral element at the core of humanity in a way that affirms the lower capacities, not denying them in the service of asceticism.

The cultivation of the moral capacity of personality illuminates that the conditions of our moral effort are constitutive of our being although they are not reducible to nature. The capacity of personality presupposes that we are autonomous, creative creatures in possession of an efficient causality “above” but never separate from nature. The only order of laws compatible with such an efficient causality is an order that *the individual must necessarily legislate for her-/himself*. Here we have a tripartite structure that is crucial to our moral lives. We cannot be human without the capacity of personality, which means we cannot be human without the capacity of autonomous, creative freedom. Because this capacity is what makes us quintessentially what we are, in and of itself it is Good (an *amoral* Good in the sense that without it we could not exist, not that we always do the morally right thing), and as long as we are alive it is inalienable no matter what evil we might do because we must possess this creative capacity as the most fundamental condition of our existence – even to do evil. However, for us to exercise this capacity in fact, we must *always and necessarily* possess the option of acting on a good or an evil maxim. If our creative efficient causality is a primordial Goodness, then its ability to be exercised with respect to a good or an evil maxim must be a constitutive but not a determinative

¹⁰ See Jürgen Habermas, “On Systematically Distorted Communication” in *Inquiry* 13 (1970): 205-18.

aspect of our being.¹¹ Were we only to be able to do good, we would not be creatively free; if we were only able to do evil, we would not be creatively free.

Hence, this structure of capacities and the inclination toward good or evil maxims allows Critical Idealism to stress that our capacity for evil is neither the consequence of mere sensuousness nor a consequence of an evil reason (original sin).¹² If sensuousness alone made us evil, then it would be a denial of autonomous freedom (our highest *amoral* Good) which allows us to choose between good or evil maxims. If reason is by nature evil, then it would mean that it would always act contrary to any good and in consort with an evil maxim, which would make reason *too strong* in that it would be incapable of acting freely by self-legislating either a good or an evil maxim.

In short, Critical Idealism allows us to establish that humanity is in fact Good to the extent that the foundation of its capacities is autonomous freedom. Furthermore though, evil must be a constitutive, not a mere accidental, option for the exercising of our capacity of personality. As an option, not a determining inclination, humanity is *always capable of a moral transformation*.¹³ Even an individual who has consistently cultivated an evil inclination, *must necessarily* possess the higher capacity of creative freedom that makes it possible, even if improbable, for the individual to transform her/his ways. This means that evil and good maxims presuppose the Good because neither can be exercised without autonomous, creative freedom.

Although this discussion of capacities and inclinations allows us to grasp that we are “evil by nature” in a particular sense because we must always have the option of choosing to act on an evil maxim, it also allows us to talk about the ineradicable capacity for us to mend our ways. It is such a transformation that takes practical reason beyond non-epistemic faith to religion.

Religion is concerned with the ineradicable conditions and moral transformation of the individual in a community that encourages one another to do one’s “duty” (i.e., to act on the basis of a moral principle merely because it is right and not (!) because it fulfills some interest either for ourselves, God, or the state). As such, it is the answer to Kant’s third question: “What can I hope for?”¹⁴ Furthermore, this community encourages the individual to exercise her/his capacity of the self-legislation of moral principles in light of humanity’s categorical nature independent of the hypothetical necessities imposed by society. The key to exercising our categorical nature is the three modes of the Categorical Imperative¹⁵ that provide us with criteria

¹¹ In other words, Kant rejects the notion of an inherited “original sin.” See Kant, *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* AA VIII: 123 where he explicitly says that one cannot inherit an inclination (*Hang*). See as well, *Religion* AA VI: 21-22, 35, 39-44. Kant points out that the notion of “original sin” is an example of subreption, that is, the turning of a predicate into a substance. See *Metaphysik Mrongovius* (XXIX): 771. Kant defined subreption already in 1770 in the *Inaugural Dissertation* AA II: 412-414, but it is also found in the *Critique of Pure Reason* A 389; A 402; B 53, 537, B 647.

¹² See *Religion* AA VI: 35.

¹³ See *Religion* AA VI: 45-46.

¹⁴ Kant poses three questions in the *Critique of Pure Reason* B 832-833 but adds a fourth question in the *Logic* AA IX: 25.

¹⁵ Act on the basis of a principle that you would want to be universal, like a law of nature; only allow oneself to be and treat the other only as an ends and never as a mere means; and acknowledge all others to be autonomous

for the selection of the maxims on which we are going to act [see the post “What is Categorical about the Categorical!” at <https://criticalidealism.org>]). Finally, this community encourages the individual to apply the three maxims of the understanding in this moral process.¹⁶ All of these elements confirm that, for us to exercise our highest creative capacity (and it is this creative capacity that in its degree sets us apart as a species), we must *necessarily* assume that there is a kingdom of moral principles that structure the pursuit of moral ends in which individuals are treated as themselves ends (possessing dignity) and not mere means for the ends of others.

Critical Idealism, then, speaks of an invisible Kingdom of Ends¹⁷ that governs the exercising of our highest capacity, Personality, in which all individuals are treated with dignity (and not mere worth, which is a concept of exchange for something else) and in which all in the community encourage one another to exercise her/his highest capacities in the recognition that each individual must self-legislate moral principles and no one else can ever know whether or which moral principle the individual legislated for the governance of her/his action. This invisible Kingdom is appropriately be called the Commonwealth of God.

Two crucial elements remain with respect to religion and practical reason: 1) what role do “historical” or institutional religions play in the religion of practical reason and 2) what role do examples of moral rectitude play in the religion of practical reason?

In the second preface to *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason Alone*, Kant suggests that there is a point where institutional (historical) religion and *pure religion* intersect, and that point is over the issue of the capacities for and the moral improvement of humanity. However, by definition most of historical religion is heteronomous in that it constitutes a hierarchical system that imposes its doctrinal system on its followers. It is not simply, though, that historical religion is heteronomous and seeks to legislate the moral maxims for the individual that distinguishes historical from pure religion. To the extent that an historical religion claims to speak for God (i.e., claims to know the will of God), it has egregiously violated the limits to human reason to assume an omnipotent perspective,¹⁸ and it turns religion into an exercise of self-interest. The goal of religion turns into cultivating strategies to placate, please, and manipulate to one’s own ends this divine agent who has absolute power over one’s life. Kant refers to such religious endeavors as *Gunstbewerbung* (an exercise in currying divine favor).¹⁹ This is an exercise

self-legislators of the moral principles to govern the exercising of their autonomous freedom. See *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* AA IV: 421, 429, and 434.

¹⁶ Think for oneself, think from the perspective of the other, and be consistent with one’s highest capacity, autonomous freedom. See the *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 294. On consistency with our highest capacity of autonomous freedom, see Kant’s *Vorlesung zur Moralphilosophie* (1774/1775). Edited by Werner Stark and Manfred Kühn. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004: 180.

¹⁷ See *Groundwork* AA IV: 433 and *Vorlesungen über die philosophische Religionslehre* (Leipzig: Bei Carl Friedrich Frans, 1817): 172-174, 199.

¹⁸ On the dangerous assumption of omniscience in the teleological argument for design in nature, see *Critique of Judgment* AA V: 441.

¹⁹ See *Religion* AA VI: 51: „All religions [...] can be divided into *religion of roagation* [currying of favor] (of mere cult) and *moral religion*, i.e., the religion of *good life-conduct*.” (CUP trans.) Kant claims that the “Founder of Christianity” “[...] rebuffs the crafty hope of those who, through invocation and praise of the supreme lawgiver in the person of his envoy, would make up for their lack of deeds and ingratiate themselves into his favor ([Matthew 7.21].)” (CUP trans.) AA VI: 160.

entirely understandable for the capacity that Kant calls *humanity* because it is the capacity seeking to establish status and honor in the eyes of another. In the case of historical religion, though, one is seeking status and honor in the eyes of God, not of another human being, so that everything one does is calculated with respect to its effect on God's opinion of one (i.e., religion becomes an issue of self-interest).

Clearly, such a religious project couldn't be more dramatically different from the pure religion of practical reason. It seeks to do what is right merely because it is right and not as a consequence of a calculation of its enhancing one's interest in any fashion – including one's status in the eyes of God.

Kant proposes that the appropriate relationship between historical and pure religion is with respect to the spectrum of concerns that historical faith shares with pure religion. He maintains that at the core of all religions is the *one, pure religion* of morality anchored in the capacity of creative freedom.²⁰ To be sure, this does not mean that there is a single, heteronomous moral system to be imposed on all nor does it mean that one historical faith is the true faith that may be imposed upon others.

Although one might be tempted to invoke the notion of "Ten Commandments" in Exodus 20 as an absolute, divine moral law, one does so by overlooking the second set of "Ten Commandments" in Exodus 32. What these two sets of "Ten Commandments" have in common is not the same set of (moral) laws for one set applies to a nomadic and the other to an agrarian community. Rather, what they have in common is that they are a set of "external," civic laws that in turn are themselves subject to a "higher" moral law. Rather than invoking a single, heteronomous moral system to be imposed on all, Critical Idealism proposes that the "one" religion of humanity is that religion grounded in our highest capacity of autonomous, creative freedom with its self-legislation (but not creation) of moral principles to govern one's actions. As we have stressed before, though, this autonomous, creative freedom is not the rugged individualism of liberty that rejects culture and tradition.

Finally, what role might an exemplar of moral rectitude play for pure religion? Do we need an objective instantiation of moral perfection in order for us to have faith in our moral transformation? Critical Idealism answers with an unequivocal, "No!" No objective model can provide a substitute for what we already know as a consequence of our moral capacity of practical reason. In fact, moral exemplars can be dulling of our own moral efforts because they may lead to our own discouragement in comparison to our objective models. Because any "practical example" of morality is in fact an image of reason itself and because one's own circumstance is unique, imitation of objective models is impossible not out of imperfection but by the conditions and capacities of morality itself.²¹ Nonetheless, unless the individual is in a

²⁰ See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* AA VI: 3*, 101, 104, 107-108, 115; *Toward Perpetual Peace* AA VIII: 367*; *Conflict of the Faculties* AA VII: 36; 48, and *On Pedagogy* AA IX: 496.

²¹ Kant writes in *Groundwork*: "Imitation has no place at all in matters of morality, and examples serve only for encouragement...but they can never justify setting aside their true original, which lies in reason." (Kant, *Groundwork*, AA IV: 408-409) Later he writes, as well: "Even in religion..., each must derive the rule of his conduct from himself, because he also remains responsible for it himself and cannot shift the guilt for his transgressions onto others.... Even an example of virtue does not make the autonomy of virtue out of one's own original idea of

desperate situation or has had it consciously trained out of her/him, s/he already knows s/he possesses a moral capacity even as s/he fails to cultivate and apply it. Rather than objective examples, the individual is best served by an environment that encourages her/him to exercise the capacity that s/he has.

At the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (B 832-833), Kant proposes that reason's interest is governed by the following three questions: 1) what can I know?; 2) what should I do?; and what am I able to hope for? In the *Logic* (AA IX: 24-5), Kant proposes that the highest concern of philosophy is an understanding of the relationship of all knowledge and reason to the final end of human reason under which all other ends are subordinated and by which all ends are united. This concern results in the division of philosophy's work according to four questions: 1) "what can I know?" (Metaphysics); 2) "what should I do?" (Practical Philosophy); 3) what can I hope? (Religion); and 4) what is a human being? (Anthropology).

Just what can humanity hope for? Certainly, crucial to this question is the recognition of what is unrealistic hope. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (AA VI: 82-83), Kant states clearly that the goal of religion is not the conquering of the evil principle but the breaking of its power. In other words, the infantile fantasy of a state of moral perfection is clearly rejected. Earlier in the same text (AA VI: 65) Kant approvingly quotes a second time (first in *The Metaphysics of Morals* [AA VI: 397]) the poem "On the Origin of Evil" from Albrecht Haller that "The world with its defects/is better than a realm of will-less angels." Even where Kant appears to question the possibility of a moral revolution of the heart by asking "... how could one expect to construct something completely straight from such crooked wood?" (*Religion* AA VI: 100), he answers in the expected manner of Critical Idealism: we should not fold our hands and wait for God (i.e., to wait for external assistance), but we should proceed *as if* everything depended upon us (*Religion* AA VI: 101).²²

The Commonweal of God is an imperceptible "church" (Kant calls it a culture "promoting the will" in contrast to a culture "of skills" in *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge: 299) driven by the invisible and internal, self-legislation of moral principles by the individual and *not*

morality *a priori* dispensable or transform this into a mechanism of imitation." (*Critique of Judgment*, AA V: 283). See as well, *Religion* AA VI: 65 and 65*.

²² in his *Anthropologie* (Kant's *Reflections on Anthropology*) (Bruno Erdmann ed. [1882], # 674), a supplement to his writings on themes concerned with life wisdom. Here in answer to the issue of the crooked wood of humanity, he applies an analogy to the forest. The way one gets crooked wood to grow straight is for it to be part of a forest that encourages all trees to grow toward the light. In other words, the individual needs the encouragement of the social order in order to exercise her/his autonomous, creative freedom properly. Once more, in the *Lectures on Pedagogy* (9:448): "... a tree which stands in the middle of the forest grows straight towards the sun and air above it, because the trees next to it offer opposition."

Without a supporting culture that encourages the individual to do what is right merely because it is right and not because it satisfies personal interest, it is extremely difficult, if not nearly impossible, for the individual to even strive for the realization of her/his creative, moral potential. In such an invisible Commonweal only the individual knows whether or not s/he has acted on the basis of a moral principle. Moral culture is not the product of attempting to legislate morality through the civic law. The community can legislate all that it wants, but the individual must self-legislate the principle to govern her/his actions. Nonetheless, it helps greatly if the individual knows that s/he is acting with the moral support of a community committed to moral means and ends.

by an evaluation of moral success in terms of visible consequences. Kant's project in Section I of the *Groundwork* is to apply the strategy of Critical Idealism to morality: the spy glass shifts from external consequences over which we have no control to the internal/invisible self-legislation of moral principles over which we have control. Our hope is not in achieving perfection but in turning the spy glass back toward our capacities to question what internally hinders the revolution of the heart.

For what, then, can we hope, if not for moral perfection? Among a long list of "mysteries,"²³ which are capable of being thought but incapable of communication/explanation, is the mystery how our creative freedom (in itself *not a mystery* because it is conceivable and communicable) can be combined with a moral goal in practical reason (*Religion* AA VI: 137-139). This is the central mystery at the heart of the relationship between our Good capacity of creative freedom and the self-legislation of a good or evil maxim to govern the application of our freedom. This central mystery is the ultimate ground for hope!²⁴

It is one thing to describe the capacities (*Anlagen*) and inclinations (*Hänge*) in order to make comprehensible that our autonomous, creative freedom is inherently Good and ineradicable whereas the process of the selection of the good or evil maxims is one of self-legislation and susceptible to habit. Given that Critical Idealism is a *rigorist moral system* that holds that moral principles are absolute because they rein over the internal ethical orientation of the subject not the external consequences, the need for hope is because we come to the engagement of our need for moral improvement as a consequence of having already applied the conditions for practical reason (morality). We come to the investigation of these necessary conditions mid-stream having perhaps lived with a notion of right and wrong but in an environment that gives us every excuse in the book not to take such notions seriously. As a consequence, we have cultivated profound habits of acting exclusively on the basis of self-interest to the extent allowable under the civic law.

Assuming, then, that in this context the individual has had the opportunity to contemplate carefully the conditions of possibility that shape her/his moral capacity, how is it possible for a radical revolution of the heart to occur because our experience is that the Good of our creative freedom has been so compromised by the inclinations of exclusively self-interested evil maxims? What could possibly convince me that a conceptual scheme is in fact existentially possible? This is no trivial question because it takes us to the core of our very ability to recover

²³ Among such mysteries are how is it that there is a moral good and evil, how can good be the source of evil, and why are some transformed and others not? They must remain a mystery because no revelation with respect to them is possible which we would be capable of understanding. See *Religion* (AA VI: 143-144). As Kant claims in the *Prolegomena* (AA III: 318), we are incapable of providing answers to questions beyond our capacities because those capacities are what would be necessary to answer such questions.

²⁴ On „hope“, see *Religion* AA VI: 48, 51, and 144. Kant refers to a hope in the afterlife at AA VI: 67-9, not as reward or punishment but as the possibility of boundless improvement given that perfection itself is unattainable. Hence, the afterlife presents an alternative between happiness and misery, again, not with respect to a hope of reward or fear of punishment but with respect to the hope of being able to exercise one's moral capacity for oneself. Such hope is sufficient "[...] for rousing conscience to judgment, to make yet a break with evil so far as it is possible." (AA VI: 69)

our Goodness for the project of the good ever in light of the necessary presence of evil. Given the inscrutable mystery of the connection between Good and these ethical inclinations, the individual can only hope that it is possible. Because what it means to become human is what is at stake, this is a hope of the most profound (hence, religious) kind.

In the Preface to the first edition of *Religion*, Kant formulates the same hope in a slightly different, and potentially misleading, fashion. Because we are always concerned that our internal moral efforts will in fact bring about good consequences but we are not ourselves in control over those consequences, Kant proposes that we must hope that “the highest good in the world, for whose possibility we must assume a higher, moral, most holy, and omnipotent being who alone can unite the two elements of this good,” (AA VI: 5) will unite the ends of duty with that which is conditional (i.e., consequences). This seems to suggest that religious hope is concerned with *consequences* and not with *conditions and capacities*. However, Kant quickly adds: “What is most important here [...] is that this idea rises out of morality²⁵ and is not its foundation; that it is an end which to make one’s own already presupposes ethical principles.” (AA VI: 5) (emphasis added) How may we view this hope that our internal moral efforts will somehow be united with proper consequences with the hope that our revolution of the heart will be complete and sustaining of our moral efforts?

The determination of the will for a particular purpose requires that we identify ends. The highest that humanity can achieve is the determination of its will in light of laws (either physical laws in theoretical or moral laws in practical reason). Critical Idealism insists that the determination of the will in light of laws is sufficient for right conduct and that “[...] the law that contains the formal condition of the use of freedom in general suffices to it.” (AA VI: 4-5) Returning to a determination of the will in light of self-legislated moral laws is the moral revolution that accomplishes the retrieval of the Good Will (creative freedom, not the mere liberty of choice) for the purpose of the autonomous (not heteronomous) good moral maxims. This revolution is the concern of religion’s hope because it is inscrutable even if ineradicable. That Kant acknowledges that we, nonetheless, are concerned with consequences and that we hope that those consequences will affirm the goodness of our moral self-legislation constitutes no substitution of a consequentialist ethic for his deontological ethic. Rather, it is acknowledging what Critical Idealism incessantly calls us to recognize: our limits. The question what such hopes beyond our limits might contribute to our religious (i.e., moral) lives must wait for a later posting.

Religion and Morality

Whenever (and it is too often) someone derisively says that “Kant reduces religion down to mere morality,” we can say that it is a red flag that s/he does not understand the Critical Turn [see the post “What is Critical Idealism?” at <https://criticalidealism.org>], the role of *necessary* assumptions (non-epistemic faith) in theoretical and practical reason, and the significance of *mystery* or the inscrutable (*das Unerforschliche*) in the Kantian project. One must clearly

²⁵ It arises out of morality because it occurs to us only after we have clarified the conditions and capacities that make us moral beings and only after our internal moral efforts to properly exercise those conditions and capacities

respond that such a dismissal is the triumph of what Kant calls *opinion* over *belief*, and it is (almost) always the consequence of one's dogmatic insistence that religion *must involve certain elements* (e.g., creation, fall, grace, and salvation) or else it cannot be called religion. Those necessary elements are, from the perspective of Critical Idealism, obviously heteronomous, and they serve to undermine the very conditions and capacities that make us religious beings.

The attempt here to formulate the relationship between Critical Idealism and religion seeks to demonstrate not only the pervasiveness of non-epistemic faith in Deontology (a label that, as far as I know, Kant never used) but also the recognition of our dependence upon the givenness of the conditions and capacities that make it possible for us to become human beings as well as our dependence upon a hope that the moral revolution of the heart is possible. To be sure, this is not an irrational hope, but it is by no means certain in light of our moral habits. In any event, it is a hope that empowers our moral efforts to "do our best," not (!) "to be perfect" because perfection is unattainable. (AA VI: 68) We don't have to know in advance that we have turned the moral corner with a revolution of the heart before we self-legislate good maxims. The very fact that we cannot not act, that we must exercise our creative freedom, empowers us to seek to act in light of our highest potential: our ability to grasp physical and moral laws. We learn what those are only by acting, not through heteronomous, metaphysical principles or historically revealed heteronomous lists of moral principles. We can only become human by acting *in faith*.

One Reason and One Religion

A theme that sounds extraordinarily politically incorrect in Kant's work is his suggestion that there is "only one reason" and only "one religion." However, his claim, as we should now suspect, is not (!) that the particular content of reason and the particular content of a historical religion is the same for everyone in all times and in all places. Rather, he is talking about capacities and actions. What is significant for Critical Idealism is not so much what Kant says with respect to *particular* religions but what he says with respect to that with which Critical Idealism is fundamentally concerned: the identification of universal conditions and capacities that make humanity the "end of creation" as morally responsible, creative agents in the world.

The *capacity* of reason (theoretical, aesthetic, practical, and pure reason) is universal. All persons if to varying degree possess the capacities of *a priori* synthetic judgment, the judgment of beauty and of the sublime, as well as possessing creative freedom and the ability to self-legislate moral maxims, and, finally, to make the reflective judgments of pure reason. The particular contents, of course, cannot and will not be universally the same.

Critical Idealism makes the same claim with respect to religion. It is not that all religions are alike in institutional structure, doctrine, and ritual. However, at the core of all faiths is *pure* religion, the religion of morality anchored in universal capacities that acknowledges its dependence on the givenness of the world, creative freedom, and the open-ended exercising of that freedom on the basis of the self-legislation of moral principles. We see in the discussion of history, the Bible/scriptures, and social justice, that these universal capacities are what allow Critical Idealism to speak of hope not only for the moral improvement of the individual but,

more significantly, of the entire species.²⁶ It is on the basis of this hope that Kant can even invoke the notion of “prophecy” in the *Conflict of the Faculties* (AA VII: 79ff).

²⁶ See Kant’s *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* AA VIII: 17-31. 1784.

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