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# Reading Kant Ecumenically: Prolegomena to an Anthropology of Hope in the Aftermath of Modernity

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# Reading Kant Ecumenically: Prolegomena to an Anthropology of Hope in the Aftermath of Modernity

PHILIP J. ROSSI, S.J.

## I. SITUATING KANT

WHERE TO LOCATE KANT and his work on the theological "map" of modernity is a matter of long-standing contention among his readers and interpreters. While there has been a tradition of speaking of Kant as "the philosopher of Protestantism"<sup>1</sup> that goes back to the end of the 19th century, Kant's work has also been appropriated—not without controversy—in service of so-called "transcendental Thomism," which constituted one important stream of the neo-Thomism that set the prevailing style for Catholic philosophy and theology for at least a century. Throughout the same period, however, Kant was—and continues to be—also the object of fierce polemics, conducted from a variety of Christian theological perspectives that viewed him among the thinkers who planted the most important intellectual roots of the forms of late modern atheism.

I should add a cautionary note here: Christian theologians do not constitute a unique cadre of those who would locate Kant (or Kant's

1. E.g., Friedrich Paulsen, *Kant der Philosoph des Protestantismus* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1899); Julius Kaftan, *Kant, der Philosoph des Protestantismus* (Berlin: Reuther & Reichard, 1904).

heritage) as a key source for some important philosophical strategies of modern atheism, for the shaping of intellectual cultures of unbelief, or for the rise of a "secularity" that marginalizes or privatizes religious belief. For instance, philosophers, historians, and social scientists (among others) who subscribe to what Charles Taylor calls the "subtraction story" of the rise of modernity, in which scientific knowledge and technological control increasingly displace and replace religious faith and practice, would most likely consider Kant and Kant's heritage to have provided crucial intellectual impetus to such a secularizing trajectory.<sup>2</sup>

More recently, some Kant interpreters in the English-speaking world have endeavored to position Kant as at least a friendly ally to Christian theological perspectives that make robust affirmations of orthodox renderings of Trinitarian and Christological doctrines.<sup>3</sup> In addition, there have been recent efforts, particularly in Germany, to counter the long-standing animus with which Catholic philosophers and theologians had most often treated Kant in the hope of making his work a locus for constructive engagement with important elements of the Catholic intellectual tradition.<sup>4</sup>

These efforts—whether they seek to engage Kant's work as constructive resource for theological inquiry, or they find his work irremediably hostile to the central elements from which theological inquiry originates—must grapple with important historical and interpretive issues posed by his texts, as well as by the trajectories of both his personal and public life.

2. In Taylor's alternate account of secularity, put forth in extensive detail in *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2007), which is explicitly offered to counter such "subtraction stories," Kant's work and its reception also plays a major role, but that role is not simply a negative one that pushes religion and faith to the sidelines; it also reconfigures in a positive way what is at stake morally and anthropologically when humans take a stance of faith in the face of the transcendent.

3. E.g., Chris L. Firestone and Stephen R. Palmquist, eds., *Kant and the New Philosophy of Religion*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2006); Chris L. Firestone and Nathan Jacobs, *In Defense of Kant's Religion*, Indiana Series in the Philosophy of Religion (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2008).

4. E.g., Norbert Fischer, ed., *Kants Metaphysik und Religionsphilosophie*, Kant-Forschungen 15 (Hamburg: Meiner, 2004); Norbert Fischer, ed., *Kant und der Katholizismus: Stationen einer wechselhaften Geschichte*, Forschungen zur europäischen Geistesgeschichte 8 (Freiburg: Herder, 2005); Aloysius Winter, *Der andere Kant: Zur philosophischen Theologie Immanuel Kants*, Europaea memoria: Reihe I, Studien 11 (Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 2000). Other contemporary Catholic constructive engagement with Kant in Germany can be found in the works of Richard Shaeffler and Thomas Pröpper. For a proposal for a Catholic reading of Kant, see Philip J. Rossi, SJ, "Reading Kant from a Catholic Horizon: Ethics and the Anthropology of Grace," *Theological Studies* 71 (2010) 79–100.

Dealing with these trajectories might well be called "the quest for the historical Kant," so it may be useful for me to make it clear at the outset that the kind of "mapping" which I am most interested in examining is not one that tries to discern in detail the "historical Kant's" personal religious commitment with respect to the ecclesial terrain of 18th-century Prussia. The most prudent response to the questions about this dimension of his views on Christian faith, practice, and theology may be to consider him as at least aspiring to exemplify the attitude of what he intriguingly calls, in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, a "catholic protestant," that is, a "human being whose frame of mind (though this is not that of their church) is given to self-expansion."<sup>5</sup> He seems to take such a person to exhibit crucial elements of the proper bearing that a critical use of reason would endorse with respect to the concrete forms that Christian belief and practice had so far historically developed. This outlook would most centrally include an acknowledgement that there is a (moral) universality proper to the fundamental religious claim that our reason places upon our finite humanity, but that this universality may not be identified *in toto* with the concrete historical form given to such a claim by the particular "ecclesial" faith to which one may, in fact, adhere.

Though Kant's view here is neither fully articulated, nor unproblematic, it does seem, first, to indicate a principle from which Christian ecumenical conversation—or even an interreligious conversation—might begin and, second, to be congruent in important ways with aspects of the "cosmopolitan perspective" so central to Kant's effort to articulate principles for a harmonious world order of peace among nations. Such congruence between Kant's outlook upon religion and his outlook upon international relations, moreover, should be unsurprising in view of the observation he makes in a footnote added to the second edition of *Religion*, that differences in language and differences in religion constitute the "two mightily effective causes" that stand athwart the efforts that are driven by the practical interest of reason to have us work for the establishment of a harmonious world order.<sup>6</sup>

5. *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 14; German text: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. 6 *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft, Die Metaphysik der Sitten*, Ausgabe der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: G. Reimer, 1914) 109.

6. *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, 153; German text: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, 6:123.

The main claim of this present essay, which will be put forth in sections II and III, is that Kant's work can function as a useful resource for articulating a theological anthropology of hope to help address some of the philosophical and theological questions about humanity and its meaning that seem most urgent for a culture in the aftermath of modernity. Before doing that, however, let me indicate why I have chosen not to focus on placing the "historical Kant" in direct conversation with these questions. A key reason for this choice is that Kant's work—and, perhaps even more significantly, the reception of Kant's work—has served to change in a significant way the context in which such questions need to be asked. We—at least those of us whose ambient intellectual culture has been that of late Western modernity—are all "post-Kantians." I use this term in the sense neither that we have simply left Kant behind such that his thought is now only a matter of "mere" historical interest, nor that we have realized that he is a carrier of an infectious conceptual syndrome for which we best seek a cure.<sup>7</sup> I call us "post-Kantians" in the sense that Kant's work has played a role in determining how we may construe the very meaning of what it is to be human in our relation to one another, to the cosmos, and to the transcendent Other that Christian discourse names "God." Kant's work and its reception has been, at least for those who have been carried about on the main intellectual currents of Western modernity, one of the forces that have set the trajectory of that current, even as it encounters the under-currents and counter-currents we have come to call "post-modernity" and, as these mingle, rush through seemingly uncharted rapids of global cultural, intellectual, and social change.

Within such a context, any efforts to find a starting point for ecumenical conversation in a reading of Kant—as a thinker of the past who is worth engaging as we grapple with the insistent theological issues of today and tomorrow—needs to be carried on at multiple levels. The most basic level is constituted by Kant's own complex philosophical discourse. At this level, it is hardly surprising that Kant's interpreters disagree over many matters, including some that are as basic as understanding the aim and the finality of his great project of critique. My dissertation director, Alexander von Schoenborn, first drew my attention to what I have come to call "the many faces of Kant." He knew that one large issue that led me to study philosophy was the seemingly unbridgeable chasm between the regnant Anglo-American "analytic" style of philosophy and the various styles of

7. See, for instance, Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Is It Possible and Desirable for Theologians to Recover from Kant?" *Modern Theology* 14 (1998) 1–18.



philosophy that, from the analytic perspective, were often casually lumped together as "continental." In his efforts to persuade me to focus my dissertation on Kant, one reason he offered—and the one I still recall most clearly—was that Kant is the last philosopher of historical importance that everyone, analytic or continental, reads. The inference from this (which he let me draw for myself) was that, if I hoped to help build even a small footbridge across that philosophical chasm, some of the more effective tools and useful materials for doing so might come from Kant. It has since become clear to me that a similar dynamic is also at work in Kant's relation to theology: dealing with Kant, even if only by way of rejection, has been an unavoidable point of reference for most Protestant and Catholic theologies for more than two centuries.

In the course of efforts to articulate an understanding of Kant that might have a philosophically or theologically "ecumenical" import, an important lesson I have learned from Kant's own work is that it is crucial to attend to the orientation with which one approaches any conceptual terrain, including Kant's own. Thus, in the case of the writings that explicitly constitute his project of critique, the scope, the trajectory, and the results of that enterprise take on a different configuration when approached from the works that constitute its end point than they do when approached from the works with which it was initiated.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, if we align the central trajectory of his critical project along epistemological coordinates, by seeing that project as providing a mediating track between empiricism and rationalism, our reading of the overall import of the project and of the role played by its various parts will come out differently than if we align—as some recent Kant interpreters have argued that it is appropriate to do—that central trajectory along moral and anthropological coordinates, by conceiving his critical project as a track mediating primarily between skepticism and dogmatism.

At least one crucial textual basis for orienting a reading of Kant's critical enterprise along moral and anthropological coordinates is the well-known passage from the first *Critique* in which he enumerates the three questions that articulate the defining "interests" of reason: "What can I know?" "What should I do?" and "What may I hope?"<sup>9</sup> That text does not directly include the fourth question which Kant, in at least two other texts,

8. In fact, I think a particularly useful touchstone for testing one's own point of orientation for reading Kant can be found in the questions "Did Kant *complete* his critical enterprise, and, if so, in which one of his writings did he do so?"

9. *Critique of Pure Reason* A804–5/B 832–33.

put forth as gathering together the other three: "What is humanity?"<sup>10</sup> I believe a strong case can be made—as is done in the work of Susan Neiman—that these passages indicate that what Kant understands as the fundamental dynamic of human reason, namely, a drive to render intelligible, to make sense of, what it is to be human, provides the fundamental thrust and trajectory to his critical project. Of course, simply making a plausible case for a basic anthropological thrust to Kant's critical project is hardly enough to render Kant philosophically, let alone theologically "ecumenical"; Kant's account of what it is to be human is by no means uncontroversial. But the way that Kant's work can be considered "ecumenical" is not that he provides an account of the human on which we can agree with little controversy. It is "ecumenical" in that it provides a focus that all of us can recognize as fundamental and unavoidable, a focus upon which we all need to articulate our understanding if we hope to engage one another in productive conversation about important philosophical and theological differences. Kant's work is "ecumenical" in that it requires us to hold one another's "feet to the (conceptual) fire" with respect to our understanding of the human, with respect to what we take to be the best philosophical and theological account we can give of our humanity, its hopes and its destiny, as we stand in relation to one another, to the world, and to the transcendent divine.

So, if it is correct to take the trajectory of Kant's work to be oriented by human *reason's* effort to render its very humanity intelligible, then the further suggestion I have made, namely, that it provides a locus for *theological* engagement requires both explication and justification. Those familiar with even the smallest part of the long-vexed controversies over faith and reason (or grace and nature or revelation and reason) will realize that the kind of juxtaposition I am proposing walks directly into deeply disputed territory. One may appropriately ask, how can an anthropology such as Kant's, in which all seems to be measured by the capacity of human reason, claim to offer itself as a resource for theology, which has its origin in the initiative of the Other that exceeds reason? This challenge is as old as Tertullian's question, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?"<sup>11</sup> In a range of current theological discussions, we can see this concern, for example, in the work of the proponents of various forms of "post-liberal theology" or "Radical Orthodoxy," or in the dynamics of

10. The fourth question is posed in the Lectures on Logic (Jaeske) and in a letter to Carl Friedrich Stäudlin, dated May 4, 1793.

11. *De praescriptione haereticorum*, chapter 7.

controversy among Catholic theologians who would pit von Balthasar against Rahner or *ressourcement* over against *aggiornamento*. There are many dimensions of these controversies, but the one most germane for my purposes concerns the role of the "anthropological" with respect to the "theological": to what extent is it (theologically) proper and legitimate to claim that what we come to understand about our humanity provides us with a place from within which we may encounter and articulate truth about the divine Other, who is (definitively) revealed in Jesus the Christ? As an initial step in approaching this question and in rendering an answer that constructively engages Kant's thought, it may be useful to reconsider the standard epistemic reading of his critical project, in which the "limits of reason" become the wedge for dislodging "faith" and to propose, in its stead, a reading in which recognition of the moral finitude of our human condition in our practical, that is, moral, use of reason provides the place from which we are empowered to act in hope.

## II. BEYOND "THE EPISTEMIC KANT"

Once upon a time we thought we knew the story of modern philosophy and how that philosophy played its role in shaping the culture of the West. It all started with Descartes, and it all had to do with epistemology; the key questions were about the possibility, the legitimation, and the scope of human knowledge. It was a story shaped by the interplay between empiricists and rationalists, between whom Kant tried to shape a middle path. But it is also a story which subsequent *philosophical* controversy has not yet brought to conclusion; we have yet to come to a point in the story in which we might be able to say, "They lived happily ever after." Yet there is a certain way in which this story *has* ended, even though no one seems to have told the philosophers. The story has ended through the emergence of a secular, technological culture, which has opted for the empirical, the testable, the marketable, and what works, as the measures of what we know and what is true. In the face of such apparent cultural hegemony, the philosophical telling of the story seems to have been rendered not so much untrue, but irrelevant.

Philosophy itself had a role in making this story irrelevant, but that ironic complicity is not the main point of calling to mind how culture "on the ground" may have rendered moot the long history of philosophical battles over epistemology. Even as academic philosophy (especially in the English speaking world) continued to wrestle with the heritage of



Descartes' rooting of knowing in the indubitable certainty and clarity of what presents itself to reflective consciousness, there were voices within the philosophical world that were offering alternative accounts of the career of modern philosophy (and, implicitly, about the career of modern culture). Some of those voices proposed a return to the skepticism that brought about Descartes' efforts to secure certainty in knowing—and in that they resonate with the voice of David Hume, who is the precursor of a very important form of the postmodern. Others sought to circumvent the impasse by turning attention away from thought and consciousness to language as it is embedded in human activity and practice. Yet many of these voices did not fundamentally challenge the story that "it all began with Descartes." There were exceptions: Nietzsche is surely one of them, to the extent that he took the story to be not about knowledge, but about power. In doing so he provides one of the markers along the way in which an important contemporary interpreter of Kant, Susan Neiman, has recounted the story of modern philosophy and Kant's role in it.<sup>12</sup>

On Neiman's reading, the story of modern philosophy has not primarily been about what can we know and how can we know it; it has been about the problem of evil. It has been about philosophy's efforts to render intelligible the difference between the world as it is, where things go terribly wrong, and the world as it ought to be, where things go as they should. This is the fundamental "fracture" that we encounter in the world, a fracture to which she sees Kant so attentive that she speaks of it as his "metaphysic of permanent rupture."<sup>13</sup> Neiman's rereading of Kant has a variety of sources, for example, her keen awareness of the manner in which philosophy and culture interact. But a particularly important source of her reinterpretation of Kant she shares with a number of other Kant scholars who have also been "rereading Kant" (the subtitle of her first book, *The Unity of Reason*). They are looking at this project from two opposite directions, not just from the perspective of its extensive initial articulation in the 1st Critique (which is the way it is looked at in the standard story), but also from the perspective provided by the 2nd and 3rd Critiques, as well as by many of the writings Kant produced in the 1790s in which he continued to struggle to bring his critical project to its completion. Looking at Kant's critical project from the former perspective makes plausible "the epistemic Kant" of the standard story, a Kant who is primarily interested

12. *The Unity of Reason: Rereading Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

13. *Evil in Modern Thought*, 80.

in dealing with the aftermath of Descartes' rooting of knowledge in self-consciousness. Looking at Kant's project from the latter perspective—one that takes into account writings such as *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, *Perpetual Peace*, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, and *The Strife of the Faculties*—we see him grappling with an issue in which the epistemic is just a part. This issue concerns the human place in the cosmos; it focuses upon trying to render intelligible our human status as the unique juncture of freedom and nature.

For Kant, moreover, rendering intelligible our human status of being this unique junction of nature and freedom is not merely a matter of theoretical concern; it is a matter of urgent practical interest, for on it he sees hanging the possibilities that human beings have for taking responsibility for participating in the shaping of their own destiny as a species. It should be emphasized, moreover, that Kant does not think that our destiny is totally in our hands. As Neiman strikingly puts it, "[o]f the many distinctions Kant took wisdom and sanity to depend on drawing, none was deeper than the difference between God and the rest of us. Kant reminds us as often as possible of all that God can do and all we cannot. Nobody in the history of philosophy was more aware of the number of ways we can forget it."<sup>14</sup> Kant is neither Nietzschean nor Promethian, but he does affirm that for our destiny to be truly ours *as human* we must have a genuine hand in its making, even if it also depends at least as fundamentally upon the workings of what he variously calls "nature" or "providence."

At the heart of Kant's account, on Neiman's reading of it, is what she calls "dissonance and conflict at the heart of experience"<sup>15</sup> that renders problematic human reason's effort to resolve it. The world "as it is" presents itself to the theoretical use of reason as the "appearance" of a nature that, in its causal dynamism, works at best indifferently to the ends and purposes that the practical use of reason proposes as befitting the dignity of our finite human freedom. Neiman notes, "It would be easy to acknowledge that not controlling the natural world is part of being human, were it not for the fact that *things go wrong*. The thought that the rift between freedom and nature is neither error nor punishment, but the fault line along which the universe is structured can be a source of perfect terror."<sup>16</sup>

So as mightily as Kant labors in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, as well as in his occasional essays on history, politics and culture,

14. Ibid., 75.

15. Ibid., 80.

16. Ibid., 80–81.

to legitimate the application of categories of purpose to the workings of nature, that legitimation is not put forth as the basis for a claim about how the world "is." Whatever purposes, if any, the world of nature may have "as it is" "in-itself" remain opaque in principle to the theoretical use of finite human reason. Even more important for Kant is the fact that whatever *moral* purposes we may think are necessary for our making sense of the world are not features of the world but rather a demand that our reason *brings to* the world. Bringing to the world "as it is" the demand of practical reason to fashion the world "as it ought to be" is central to what Kant affirms as the primacy of the practical use of reason. The exercise of our finite reason brings those purposes to the world not in the mode of theoretical knowledge but in the mode of a practical, enacted hope that, by heeding the dictate of practical reason to do as we ought, we make it possible for the world to have, in a least some small measure, a moral order of which it would otherwise seem devoid.

Kant used a various pairs of coordinate terms to characterize this basic duality of our human experience, the two basic ways in which we engage the world. The distinctions between such paired terms, perhaps most famously and problematically that between "phenomenon" and "noumenon," have vexed generations of sympathetic and hostile commentators alike. It has rarely been the case, however, that the question of radical evil that Kant articulates in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* has been pressed into service as a key interpretive guide to the contours of the fissure that he sees running through our human engagement with the world. That discussion of the moral structure of evil seems to offer little promise for interpretive purchase upon distinctions fundamental to the critical project so long as Kant's affirmation of a duality of nature and freedom is understood—as it has often been—as a response to epistemic and metaphysical issues that are taken to stand in isolation from moral and anthropological ones. In consequence, his explicit engagement of the question of human evil in the later phases of the critical enterprise, as well as the maturation of his thought about the "highest good" as the social object of the practical use of reason, has often been considered marginal to the main conceptual and argumentative strands of his monumental endeavor to delimit the scope of human reason's engagement with the cosmos of which it is a part, in which it functions, and beyond which it drives itself to aspire. Similarly, as long as the vantage point from which Kant's writings are read remains epistemic, his various accounts of the "highest good" can also be seen as mere appendages to his efforts to vindicate the

theoretical use of reason. Once the focus shifts, however, to the vindication of reason's practical (moral) use, which Kant called, in the Preface to *Critique of Practical Reason*, "the keystone"<sup>17</sup> of the critical enterprise, the role of "the highest good" becomes far more important, inasmuch as it is the object of the practical use of reason, which has primacy both individually and socially.

### III. TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL GRAMMAR OF GRACE AND HOPE

I hope that the discussion so far has provided some coordinates for understanding the way Kant sees our human condition in terms of a "metaphysic of permanent rupture." Let me now briefly sketch how, in response to these fractured human circumstances, Kant also provides the basis for constructing what may be termed "a grammar of hope" or an "anthropology of hope," in connection with what we are called upon to do with and for each other in the face of a fragmentation that presents itself to us in a variety of modes. This proposal is one that deliberately crosses back and forth between philosophical and theological modes of discourse and in which a key point of juncture is signaled by the space it then provides for using a grammar of "grace."

This proposal focuses on possibilities for engaging what I term Kant's "anthropological grammar of hope" so as to articulate that hope as a discourse of "grace." In particular, I propose that Kant's understanding of hope, which arises from his account of the fragility of our human freedom, offers a basis for an anthropology that renders us receptive to welcoming that which comes in and through the fractured dynamics of our human circumstances as an invitation to encounter the work of "grace."<sup>18</sup> Kant situates our human freedom in the contingency of the cosmos; his account manifests a deep sense that the common fragility of our finite human freedom stands inextricably coordinate to the dignity that we must recognize in one another's humanity in the moral community he terms the "ethical commonwealth." A relationality that is deeply embedded in

17. *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 139; German text: *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:3-4.

18. For a more extensive discussion, see Philip J. Rossi, "Finite Freedom, Fractured and Fragile: Kant's Anthropology as Resource for a Postmodern Theology of Grace," in *Philosophie et théologie: Festschrift Emilio Brito, SJ*, ed. Éric Gaziaux (Leuven: Peeters, 2007) 47-60.



our common human fragility is thus a key element for constructing an anthropology that inscribes human freedom in the embodied conditions of spatio-temporal finitude. Insofar as we each stand alone, our finitude provides thin and tenuous protection to our core dignity of spirit; under these conditions, our human power for bringing about good, rooted in the fragmentary, fragile exercise of a finite practical reason, stands on a slender and precarious footing. Human fragility stands in need of what it cannot provide of itself; yet, if it is to act responsibly, it must move forward in the hope that what is needed to overcome fracture will be offered. In this respect, both "hope" and "grace" may be construed as openness to the empowering presence of otherness.

One of the ways in which Kant suggests such an anticipatory movement in the direction of awaiting grace is, I would argue, is the mutuality and social character of his characterization of autonomy. This, of course, should be surprising—even outrageous—to those schooled in understanding Kantian autonomy as a lonely and noble moral individual heroism. I would argue, however, that a more accurate reading of autonomy in Kant is one in which awareness of the reciprocal connection of freely offered respect within which one stands to all other human agents—in Kant's terms, awareness of one's membership in a "kingdom of ends"—brings with it a deep sense of the fragility of our finite human freedom, a fragility that goes along with the dignity that we accord to one another through our mutual respect. This fragility of human freedom is inscribed in the embodied conditions of our spatio-temporal finitude. Insofar as we each stand alone, our finitude provides thin and tenuous protection to our core dignity of spirit. The human power for bringing about good thoroughly pertains to, and is rooted in, the fragmentary, fragile exercise of a finite practical reason. The ultimate bulwark for our finitude is not so much the solitary resoluteness that Iris Murdoch once so eloquently described in her depiction of Kantian autonomy<sup>19</sup> as it is the mutual recognition and respect we accord each other for the fragile and vulnerable freedom we each embody. Kant's recognition of the inestimable dignity of the power of human freedom to effect good is equally a recognition that such power resides in agents who are themselves profoundly fragile, who exercise that power in a correspondingly fragile way, yet who are capable of empowering each other's freedom in mutual respect for one another's

19. "Kant's [autonomous] man had already received a glorious incarnation nearly a century earlier in the work of Milton: His proper name is Lucifer." *The Sovereignty of Good*, Studies in Ethics and the Philosophy of Religion (1970; repr., New York: Schocken, 1971) 80.



fragility. As embodied, moreover, our freedom is rendered fragile not simply by the inconstancy of intention that Kant marks out as the "inversion of our maxims," nor only by the inattention and distraction with which we thoughtlessly descend into evil's banality. Our embodied freedom is also made fragile by a vulnerability of both body and spirit to violence and violation.

The anthropology that I am suggesting can be drawn from Kant's account of finite freedom is thus one in which moral agency is exercised from a locus of human vulnerability and human solidarity that takes full account of the social and relational dynamisms that are central to Kant's understanding of finite human reason.<sup>20</sup> This fact has important anthropological implications. Once we take full account of those social and relational dynamisms, Kantian autonomy can be understood to have its most significant exercise in the context of a clear recognition of the fragility and vulnerability that form the matrix in which human finite reason finds that it must function. The mutual recognition of human vulnerability thus constitutes a central locus for the dynamisms of hope and of grace.

I believe a case can be made that coordinate to this social anthropology of finite reason is a grammar of moral hope that provides the structure for a syntax of moral recognition, a syntax that places constraint upon both explicit and implicit claims of self-preference, which constitutes the core of what Kant means by "radical evil." Such syntax can be found in the "universal law" formulation of the categorical imperative, which places a veto on the self-preferential obduracy of individual moral agents.<sup>21</sup> It is also operative in the discourse of mutual respect appropriate to membership and shared responsibility in what Kant terms "a kingdom of ends." In this context, a syntax of moral recognition functions to clear a social space within which agents address not only questions of individual human interaction but also those dealing with the social governance of human life.<sup>22</sup> On Kant's account, a grammar of hope functions to break the grip of

20. For an extensive discussion, see Philip J. Rossi, SJ, *The Social Authority of Reason: Kant's Critique, Radical Evil, and the Destiny of Humankind*, SUNY Series in Philosophy (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005).

21. Placing this formulation in the context of the self-preferential obduracy of radical evil suggests that its focus is more on the veto it imposes on self-preference and self-exemption as stratagems that issue from "the dear self" than on a formal claim of "universalizability" that generations of Kant's critics have castigated as a moral version of "one size fits all."

22. John Rawls' device in *A Theory of Justice* of "the original position" in which (ideal) agents deliberate about the terms of their social governance captures an important dimension of the social space that is a function of a syntax of mutual recognition.

self-preferential obduracy with respect both to the moral life of individual agents and to the structure and dynamics by which human agents mutually govern their social, political, and cultural interaction.

As a result, within the larger social framework that human autonomy provides, *the fragility of human freedom stands coordinate to its dignity*. As we each stand alone, our embodied state provides thin and tenuous protection to our core dignity of spirit. As I have mentioned already, the ultimate bulwark of that dignity is the mutual recognition and respect we accord each other for the fragile and vulnerable freedom we each embody. I noted above that Kant's recognition of the inestimable dignity of the power of human freedom to effect good is equally a recognition that such power resides in agents who are themselves profoundly fragile, who exercise that power in a correspondingly fragile way, yet who are capable of empowering each other's freedom in mutual respect for one another's fragility. In Kant's account, moreover, the finitude of the human freedom that is exercised in the community of mutual respect that he calls "the ethical commonwealth" has moral intelligibility in virtue of its standing in relation to a divine transcendence that affirms human moral responsibility in the shaping of history.<sup>23</sup>

In providing the moral space for human finite agency to have a genuinely constitutive role—though not the sole one—in shaping the trajectory and outcome of human destiny, divine transcendence thus opens a locus for the work of grace. In this case, grace functions in the moral space of mutual respect for freedom. A divine respect for human freedom holds humanity morally accountable, and a human respect for divine freedom acknowledges that human finitude cannot comprehend the mode of that divine freedom's enactment, save in terms of its steadfast respect for the exercise of human freedom, a respect to which I think it would be apt to apply Charles Taylor's characterization of a principle at the heart of the transformative activity of God: "God's steadfast resolve not to abandon humanity in its worst distress."<sup>24</sup>

23. See Philip J. Rossi, "Faith, Autonomy, and the Limits of Agency in a Secular Age," in *At the Limits of the Secular: Catholic Reflections on Faith and Public Life*, ed. William Barbieri (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

24. *A Secular Age*, 654.