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Response to Christopher Insole's *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020)

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journals.sagepub.com/home/sce**Nicholas Adams**

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Abstract

This is a response given at the book launch for Christopher Insole's *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), hosted jointly, in November 2020, by the Centre for Catholic Studies, Durham University, and the Australian Catholic University. The response considers the gap between the textual Kant (as set out by Insole), and the received Kant, and reflects on how theologians have been too quick either to condemn and dismiss (a poorly interpreted) Kant, or to rehabilitate Kant for theological projects, which Kant would have been opposed to, given his deepest philosophical commitments.

Keywords

Kant, divine, divinity, theology, reception, Christianity

We live in strange times. Now there are many candidates for such a pronouncement, admittedly. But I want to focus on the one that troubles me deeply.

First, I want to pay tribute to OUP, and to Tom Perridge as commissioning editor. It is really encouraging to see a door-stopper like this published. It is a great encouragement to all who value such textually detailed work. Thank you, Tom.

I have two comments—the first on texts and reception; the second on how theologians learn philosophy, and the difference that Chris Insole's new book makes.

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Texts and Reception

Ours is a time when the ‘received’ Kant conflicts with the ‘textual’ Kant. When theologians, in particular, use words like ‘Kantian’ or attribute views to ‘Kant’ these reflect what they were taught in lectures and what they have read in books written over the last 200 years. The Kant in these lectures and books is a heady mixture of Reinhold’s successful PR offensive, Kant’s successors protecting him against a ‘radical’ political reputation by confecting a ‘boring old Kant’ image (a lie, really), and generations of theologians offering assessments without reading terribly carefully, without the benefit of expert commentaries in many cases, and with anxieties about ‘liberal’ theology projected on to him. The ‘textual’ Kant is a relatively new phenomenon: we have critical editions, and many expert commentaries, and are in a position to assess pretty confidently what Kant did and did not say, and to grasp pretty confidently the reasonings that accompany his claims. These two Kants are not the same Kant.

Chris Insole’s *Kant and the Divine* is a decisive intervention for the textual Kant and against the received Kant. Every theologian should read it. The Kant who emerges is strange, unfamiliar, asking questions that theologians today might not even imagine asking. I will talk about a theme that theologians ask about a lot—the theme of autonomy—shortly.

The lack of fit between the received Kant and the textual Kant (these are the strange times I referred to above) is a serious problem. This is because of an obvious contradiction, or at least stress.

The received Kant—his influence, his stature—is what motivates and in some ways justifies our reading of the textual Kant. You can see where this is going, perhaps. If the textual Kant weakens the hold of the received Kant, as it perhaps should, then the ground—to use a nice German Idealist word—the ground of our interest in Kant is also weakened. And I can tell you from experience that theologians only have so much patience for the retort: that would be all very well, except that Kant does not quite say what you say he says. The resistance to this is not hard to explain, at least in part. If you remember with a grimace the effort you put in to understanding Kant many years ago, and you now discover that this effort has produced a chimera, a bogeyman, who disappears at the first sign of textual engagement—well, that is not the most encouraging news of the day.

Theologians and Philosophy

Theologians learn their Kant in different ways. At the start of the 1990s I was taught by Brian Hebblethwaite, in supervisions held in his rooms in Queen’s College, Cambridge. His quiet but smelly black cat listened in from a perch high above the ground.

We were reading part of the transcendental dialectic. I could not make head or tail of it. Or rather, I had difficulty relating Don Cupitt’s lectures (which were fun and easy to follow) to the complex prose in front of me. Brian made various expansive and dismissive gestures (he preferred to argue with Hume) and I was directed to the reading list. So off I went to the University library and somehow found myself working through C.D. Broad’s discussion of Kant’s analogies of experience. When I presented the fruits of this

to Brian Hebblethwaite it was greeted with further expansive and dismissive gestures: I had failed to grasp the simple truth that Kant was wrong, and that my troublesome case of textual interest would be cleared up by a dose of Richard Swinburne.

Barely three years later, as a graduate student trying to understand Hegel (Ben Quash and I used to meet weekly to read the *Phenomenology*, drinking mint tea and eating German cookies), I stumbled upon Henry Allison's *Kant's Transcendental Idealism* (via his first book, on Spinoza—I wanted to read more by him). I was furious. This textually attentive study had been published in 1983. Why was it not on the Cambridge bibliographies for Kant? Why had I been reading C.D. Broad? I learned the hard way that theologians often do not take the most textually attentive path. Some perch up high, like their cats, occasionally stretching, with their own agendas.

About a decade later, in Edinburgh, I was teaching a course on German Idealism—half Kant, half Fichte, Schelling, Hegel. The students were few, but appreciative. We read portions of text, accompanied by choice commentaries. Not only Allison, but also Ameriks, Guyer, Wood. It was a very male reading list, incidentally. It would look very different today. But while this was going on, I would have strange discussions with graduate students at the Society for the Study of Theology. I was a sociable fellow, and would strike up conversations with newcomers, asking about their work. They would ask about mine, and to their incredulity it would emerge that I read Kant, and took him seriously. On one memorable occasion, 'Oh I don't read Kant. I read John Milbank!' But mostly, some version of, 'But Kant is *wrong*!'

I was young and foolish. And cruel. I developed a little game to play with theologians at conferences who experimented with their own expansive and dismissive gestures. If someone told me Kant was wrong, I would ask them if that included the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Of course it did, and I would normally be treated to a garbled set of views about noumena and phenomena. 'How interesting!' I would say. 'What role do you see the schematism playing in the first critique?' This would provoke awkward silence. You can bullshit your way through noumena and phenomena. But the schematism is quite another matter. I would smile, sweetly, and say that I'd be willing to listen to critiques of Kant that can answer this question. But let us honestly face the truth: I did not change anyone's mind. Perhaps I persuaded some graduate students that there were more rewarding theologians to complain about Kant to.

Chris Insole's book changes the game entirely. A new generation of graduate students has an opportunity to confront the hasty dismissals of the past. It is possible to place Kant in his time and place, and to grasp not just what he says but what he was trying to do. Every claim is tested against texts, and decades of misreadings by theologians are made casually irrelevant. With luck, the new generation of philosophical-theological bibliographies are busy repairing the past's errors of omission—this book will help.

Insole achieves this without cruelty. There are no humiliations. He does not go full Allen Wood on his opponents. He reads the texts. Lots of 'em. He confronts uncertainties, ambiguities. And most of all he helps the reader see that late 1700s Prussia is another world, captivated by its own fragile intellectual journeys in which the old ways of thinking were not shipwrecked on the rocks of reason (as in the foolish tale told by romantics), but showed themselves vigorously adaptable. Insole did this before, in *Kant and the*

Creation of Freedom,¹ in relation to grace and human freedom. That is discussed here, too. But now the reader can see these shifts across a range of topics—and in Kant’s work we see the long tradition sharing space with newer ideas that do not simply displace the old. They live alongside them, and indeed interfere with them.

As an example of reading the texts, I want to share Chris Insole’s reading of *The Groundwork*.

This is a significant moment in the book—when the focus is God and the Good—and it marks an important moment in Kant’s writing, where there is a break with the long tradition that Kant received.

It is impossible to think of anything at all in the world, or indeed even beyond it, that could be considered good without limitation (*ohne Einschränkung für gut könnte gehalten werden*), except a good will (*ein Guter Wille*).²

That is Kant’s claim. Chris notes that few theologians could affirm this. And one can see why. Surely God is good without limitation, and is ‘beyond the world’.

Perhaps. But what if Kant, with the long tradition, does not think God is an ‘anything’? Not so fast. Insole heads that off at the pass: Kant really means any reality whatsoever, including God.³ The aim in this section of the book is to find out not only what Kant claims, and what it means, but also: why Kant says it. What question is being answered here?

The answer, to abbreviate drastically, is that a good will is autonomous. There is nothing wrong with God, of course, but contemplating God is to contemplate what is heteronomous—with the danger that if God is acting on us, then however you put it (in Kant’s view) something external is acting on us. And the freedom of our action is compromised. One can and should argue with this. But Insole refuses to allow one to argue that Kant does not believe it. To quote Insole:

[T]he theological tradition declares that we are indeed made whole by another, from *heteros*, and that heteronomy therefore is our created, given, and blessed state, in the recognition of which we can hope to find our true freedom. Theology says ‘yes’ to heteronomy, when, and only when, the ‘other’ is God; the *Groundwork* says ‘no’, even (although not especially) in the case of God. A Christian theological reading of the *Groundwork* will need to make this the centre piece of its engagement with Kant.⁴

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1. Christopher Insole, *Kant and the Creation of Freedom: A Theological Problem* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
 2. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 4: 393. References to Kant refer to the Akademie edition, *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften* edited by the Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences (Berlin: Georg Reimer, later Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1900–). These references are cited by volume: page number, which can be found in all standard editions and translations of the texts. This passage is quoted in Christopher Insole, *Kant and the Divine: From Contemplation to the Moral Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), p. 124.
 3. Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p. 129.
 4. Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p. 129.

Why does this matter? In part because there is a little industry of theologians whose purpose is to rehabilitate Kant in theology, against the ‘received’ rejection of him. Chris Insole says, in effect, you can try: but if you don’t engage with the centrality of autonomy and heteronomy in Kant, you aren’t rehabilitating Kant—only a wishful image that you’ve made up. It’s strong stuff.

This is reinforced in several later sections, none more emphatically, however, than in the wonderfully titled section: ‘Kant does not need grace, but is not a Pelagian’.⁵ The gist of that discussion is: Kant is not a Pelagian. It’s much worse than that!

If you want the *ipsissima verba insolis*, then I am happy to oblige:

Kant does not even manage the base-line Christianity requisite to qualify as a Christian heretic.⁶

That has to be a candidate for the best line in the book.

This has deeper implications for those who offer theological critiques of Kant. It might be more fruitful to view him as a partner in inter-religious dialogue, representing a different religion, rather than a wayward Christian brother. I find this a deeply attractive idea. It sounds crazy at first. But further reflection gives it gradually increasing force, at least for me.

I still meet students who tell me Kant is wrong. But I am older and wiser now. And if not wiser, at least less cruel.

‘How interesting!’ I say. ‘Have you read Chris Insole?’

5. Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, pp. 299–300.

6. Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, p. 300.