The Ethical Commonwealth:
Moral Progress and the Human Place
in the Cosmos

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Part 1. Kant’s “Cosmopolitan Perspective”:
A View from the Sideline of History?

Context: Critique as the Social Authority of Reason

My discussion of Kant’s cosmopolitanism in this essay is situated within a larger two-fold inquiry which I am making into the social dimensions of Kant’s project of Critique. The first element of that inquiry involves showing, on the basis of an examination of relevant Kantian texts, how “critique”—i.e., the inculcation of self-discipline upon the exercise of human reason—has a trajectory which is fundamentally moral and social. Within this part of my inquiry I elaborate a concept of “the social authority of reason”: by which I mean the

manner in which critique, as the self-discipline of reason, functions as a principled activity for ordering the dynamics of human social and civic interaction. The second element of my larger inquiry then seeks to bring the concept of the social authority of reason to bear upon a particularly neuralgic feature of life in our democratic polity during these waning years of the 20th century: the growing dominance of a culture of marketplace choice that does not require that we engage one another in sustained, reasoned argument about the terms of our living with each other, nor about the constitutive social ends that make us a polity, and even less about what ends our common humanity might make incumbent on us.

In the context of this larger project, I plan to argue that Kant's notion of a "cosmopolitan perspective" bears upon both elements. With respect to the first element, it is one of the concrete ways in which he articulates the social authority of reason for his own late 18th century context. A "cosmopolitan perspective" means taking the viewpoint of a "world-citizen" upon the historical and cultural dynamics of human social and political interaction as it moves on a trajectory aimed at the

2References to Kant's works throughout both parts of this study are given parenthetically in the text using the abbreviations below. References before the slash (/) give the pagination of the appropriate volume of GS, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, Ausgabe der Königlichen Preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin 1902-); the volume number is listed after each title. References after the slash are to the corresponding English translation used in my text. Citations from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* are to the pages of the 1st (A) and 2nd (B) editions.

destiny of the human race\(^3\); from this perspective one can then plausibly envision the nations of Europe at the end of the 18th century


\(^3\)Though Kant’s discussions of what is here termed a “cosmopolitan perspective” comprise a rather heterogeneous set of texts and touch on a variety of topics, a feature common to one important set of them is a referencing to an historical trajectory which has as its goal the attainment of human destiny: e. g., in IAG (1784), the “cosmopolitan state” is “the perfect civic union of the human species” which is “nature’s supreme objective” (28-29/38); the discussion of cosmopolitanism in KU (1790) occurs in B83, “On the Ultimate Purpose that Nature Has as a Teleological System”; similarly, the discussion in TP (1793) is embedded in a discussion in which Kant affirms the practical necessity of presuming the continuing moral progress of humanity. In AP (1798) the establishment of a cosmopolitan society is envisioned in terms of “a regulative principle, [directing us] to pursue this diligently as the destiny of the human race” (331/191). There are passages in which Kant does not explicitly associate what is cosmopolitan with an historical trajectory toward human destiny; these discussions, however, seem concerned only with that aspect of a cosmopolitan perspective that can be articulated as enforceable articles of international law: rights of hospitality and commerce (MdS, EF). It is important to note the stress which this description of a “cosmopolitan perspective” places upon referencing its understanding of the dynamics of human interaction to an historical trajectory ordered to the attainment of human destiny. In the absence of reference both to an historical trajectory and to a destiny of the human species at which this trajectory aims, Kant’s cosmopolitan perspective can be reduced to a notion of “world citizenship” vulnerable to the criticism of being a mere abstract universality.
moving toward a certain form of international order\textsuperscript{4} — an order so governed by reason that it will eventually provide the conditions of possibility for the establishment of a peaceful community among sovereign nations.\textsuperscript{5} With respect to the second element, a cosmopolitan perspective is a feature of Kant’s account which I think can provide some help in constructing an understanding of the social authority of reason appropriate to our own late 20th century circumstances: in our context, an authentically Kantian “cosmopolitan perspective” may offer a way to envision the concrete forms of mutual moral recognition (“social respect”) that enable members of a polity — and a world — that is pluralist, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic, to engage one another in sustained, reasoned argument about the terms of living with one other, including the constitutive social ends that make them a polity and a global human community.

**A Cosmopolitan Perspective as an Aspect of “Critique”**

In this essay, I plan to address only the first of these elements: The bearing which a “cosmopolitan perspective” has for elaborating an account of social authority of reason within the framework of Kant’s own project of critique. In particular, I am concerned to articulate and address one of the several problems which I see arising from Kant’s own efforts to articulate this cosmopolitan perspective precisely as an aspect of critique which is to have a concrete bearing upon the dynamics of the human social and political order. In general, these problems (not unlike others which emerge within Kant’s work) concern the relation which a particular outcome of the exercise of critique — in this case, adopting a “cosmopolitan perspective” — bears to the larger account which Kant gives of the theoretical and the practical uses of reason.

\textsuperscript{4} One question that Kant’s account does not clearly address is the extent to which taking the perspective of “world citizen” is a possibility open to those who are not members of “a learned public.”

\textsuperscript{5} EF contains the clearest appeal to rulers that the nation-states in Europe, at least, have reached a stage of historical development which makes the fostering of an international order conducive to peace both politically and economically plausible; see also TP, in which he takes note of—and argues against—those who would take the “cosmopolitan perspective,” as they took “the theory of an Abbe St. Pierre of a Rousseau” to be “ever so nice in theory...yet...of no practical use” (313/89).
Before identifying the specific problem which I propose to address here, it will be useful to note some of the features it shares with others which emerge in Kant’s work.

These problems, as I see them, arise at two levels. The first level is one in which I would locate the most fundamental issues involved in Kant’s account of the relation between and the unity of the theoretical and practical uses of reason. On this level, the notion of a cosmopolitan perspective exemplifies Kant’s controversial claim about the primacy of the practical interest of reason within the overarching unity of reason in its practical and theoretical uses. The cosmopolitan perspective seems to function here as a framework from which an answer — though admittedly not a full answer — can be made to the question which Kant identifies as “simultaneously practical and theoretical” (KRV A 805/B 833): “For what may I hope?” From a cosmopolitan perspective one may specifically hope for that which Kant proposes as a necessary intermediate stage for humanity’s reaching the moral destiny which is the object of a critically validated human hope: this intermediate stage is the establishment of a federation or league of nations which will provide the conditions for perpetual peace and thus for the eventual full attainment of human moral progress.6

At this level, the problems which arise with respect to the notion of a cosmopolitan perspective concern the complex relationship in which it stands to both uses of reason and to their overarching unity. The problems which arise at this level, however, are not peculiar to the notion of a cosmopolitan perspective, since similar ones arise for other notions in Kant’s account which play a key role in answering the question of hope, notions such as the “highest good” and the “ethical commonwealth.” For my purposes in this essay, the problems at this level will be articulated, not with a view to their resolution, but only to provide a context for framing a more specific problem which arises at a different level in Kant’s account, viz., the bearing which a cosmopolitan perspective has upon the concrete dynamics of civic life in the kind of republican polity he envisions as already emergent in an “age of enlightenment.”

6In connection with this, it is important to note that Kant takes the attainment of “perpetual peace” to be the highest political good (MdS 355/161), but it does not of itself constitute the full attainment of human destiny which he designates, without qualification, as “the highest good.”
This problem is the extent to which a cosmopolitan perspective, in addition to being an interpretive (and, to that extent, a theoretical) framework from which all members of a polity — rulers and citizens alike — can make moral sense of the course of political events, places on all of them a requirement for action as well. Put in terms of the image used in the title of this paper, the problem is whether Kant envisions this cosmopolitan perspective as providing merely a spectator’s view from the sideline of history — or as also providing a “game plan” which constitutes citizens of a republican polity as participants who can — and, indeed, must — affect the outcome of what happens on the playing field of history.

The Scope of the Practical Demand of a Cosmopolitan Perspective

In order to frame this question in a way that respects the place of the cosmopolitan perspective within Kant’s project of critique, however, we need to remain a bit longer at what I have referred to as the first level at which problems arise, viz., Kant’s account of the relation between and the unity of the theoretical and practical uses of reason. Within this context, a cosmopolitan perspective can be legitimately framed only from the vantage point of reason’s practical use: it functions to provide a form of comprehensive intelligibility to a matter — the trajectory of the whole course of human history — on which reason’s theoretical use entangles itself in dialectical conflict. The practical (i.e., moral) vantage point which a cosmopolitan perspective provides thus validates a conceptual framework which reason in its theoretical use has to recognize, in virtue of its critical self-discipline, as lying beyond the legitimate field of its exercise — yet as nonetheless “not impossible”; in particular, this vantage point is constituted in terms of a critically justified teleological framework from which the course of political events, the dynamics of commerce, the interplay of national rivalries and, most notably, armed conflict among nations can be connected and construed in moral terms.7 As a result, a cosmopolitan perspective, though its

7See Part III of TP (307-13/85-89); note especially p. 313/89: “For my own part, I place my trust in the theory about what the relations among men and nations ought to be that derives from the principle of right and that recommends to the earthly gods the maxim always so to proceed in their conflicts that such a universal cosmopolitan nation will thereby be introduced and thus to assume that it is possible (in praxi) and that it can exist.”
origin lies in a critically justified practical use of reason, also has a (limited) theoretical function for all members of a polity—rulers and citizens alike—which can be validated from the self-disciplined perspective of critique. It provides the basis on which nature (i.e., the proper object of critically validated theoretical inquiry) can be judged to be working to bring human beings “to the point of entering a cosmopolitan state, even against their wills” (TP 310/87).

The relation of the cosmopolitan perspective to the practical use of reason, however, consists in more than the critical validation which I have just described as operating on this first level. It also seems to have a more concrete practical function, viz., as that by which principles [maxims] for action may be morally assessed with respect to their impact upon the trajectory of events that lead to the attainment of humanity’s moral destiny. It is at this level of its practical function where the problem of the bearing of a cosmopolitan perspective on the concrete dynamics of the civic life in a polity arises. The initial form the problem takes at this level is that the practical function of the cosmopolitan perspective does not seem to bear upon all members of a polity in equal measure. The adoption of this perspective has the practical function of making rulers aware of the obligation they have to lead the nations they rule out of the international “state of nature” and thus provide the conditions which would make perpetual peace possible (TP 311-12/88-89). Yet adopting a cosmopolitan perspective does not seem to have a parallel practical function for citizens, i.e., it does not seem to bring them to awareness of any obligation incumbent on them to bring about an end to the international “state of nature” and thus to secure perpetual peace.

There is, I believe, one temptingly easy way to resolve this problem: we could take it to be simply one more instance of the inchoative state of Kant’s account of citizenship in a republican polity, particularly as viewed from the vantage point of two centuries which have seen an ever-

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*There are some intriguing parallels which I think can be drawn between Kant’s discussion about the movement from out of the international state of nature which establishes the conditions for perpetual peace and his discussion about the movement from out of the ethical state of nature which establishes the “ethical commonwealth.” One of the most significant concerns the uncoerced character of the action which effects both movements. Compare Rel 95-96/87-88 with TP 311-12/88-89.
widening expansion of citizen enfranchisement. We could accordingly contextualize Kant’s account in terms of his own endorsement of monarchical rule (for which the Frederick the Great is prime exemplar) as fully consonant with republican principles — and of those republican principles as themselves fully consonant in turn with political enfranchisement only of the propertied. This is temptingly easy in that it suggests that Kant’s failure to extend the practical function of a cosmopolitan perspective to citizens is simply (or mainly) a matter of historical contingency: He would surely know better if he were making his proposals now and he would urge all citizens to make it their civic duty to press forward, by the appropriate political means at their disposal, the agenda of a cosmopolitan world order.

Kant, indeed, might very well do both of these in our late twentieth century context — but I don’t think that this would resolve the more fundamental problem which I see contained within his articulation of even the limited practical function which he attributes to a “cosmopolitan perspective.” This problem resides, as I hope my subsequent analysis will suggest, in the fact that Kant never fully articulates the manner in which human action formed in accord with the dictates of practical (moral) reason — be it that of individuals or of a collective body of persons, be it that of rulers or that of citizens — bears upon the trajectory and outcome of the course of human history precisely insofar as these constitute the moral destiny of the human race. Let me be quick to clarify that the issue here is not whether Kant thinks that there is such a bearing — for he clearly thinks both that there is such a bearing and that it is of extraordinary importance for us to acknowledge it; the issue, instead, is whether the account which Kant gives of the relationship between action properly formed by the exercise of practical reason and the attainment of human destiny constitutes an adequate framework for judging whether — and the extent to which — any course of human action affects the trajectory toward that destiny.

This is by no means a new issue for Kant’s account of how the attainment of human moral destiny arises from the concrete dynamics of history and politics. It is easy enough to find passages in Kant’s writings which indicate that the attainment of this destiny — including important stages on the way, such as perpetual peace — is just the outcome of causal processes by which nature (or, sometimes, providence) makes us do unwittingly and unwillingly what we willingly ought to
do — but in fact do not. According to these passages, nature seems not to wait on the acknowledgement by all human beings of a moral demand upon their actions in order to effect human destiny; it simply utilizes our “unsociable sociability” to spur us to the development of the culture and the civil order which will provide external conditions conducive to the eventual attainment of our human moral destiny (e. g., IAG 24-26/34-6, KUB 83, TP 310-13/87-89; AP 322-25/183-86; 328-31/188-91). On the basis of these passages, a cosmopolitan perspective would simply be a view — albeit the only critically sound view — of history from the sidelines.

It is just as easy, however, to find passages in which Kant is equally insistent that the attainment of human moral destiny is something which (practical) reason demands of us and that bringing it about—again, including important stages on the way, such as perpetual peace—finally rests upon what human beings concretely do (e. g., TP 312-13/89; EF 356/116, 368/125; MdS 354-55/160-61). These passages suggest that nature (or providence) can spur us unwittingly and unwillingly only so far along the path to our moral destiny: The moral demand which reason places on the formation of our action requires that we not take the attainment of the moral destiny of the human species as a foregone conclusion of the dynamics of history but rather as a task whose final shape and completion depend upon the properly ordered actions of human beings. As a result, the particular human social, cultural and political dynamics over which human beings can exercise control in accord with the demands of practical reason do have a decisive impact upon the trajectory along which humanity moves toward the attainment of its moral destiny. On the basis of these passages, a cosmopolitan perspective is a view to be taken by participants in the making of history: It provides a critically sound basis from which their participation can be taken to have a formative bearing on the determination of the final outcome of human history.

The tension between these two ways in which Kant construes the means of attaining human moral destiny is a general problem for his account of history. A path to its solution lies, I believe, taking each set of passages to represent opposite poles in an antinomy which can be resolved, in accord with Kant’s typical procedure, by properly assigning the origin of each pole to the theoretical and the practical uses of
reason respectively. My principal concern now, however, is not with the resolution of this general problem, but with examining the import of the particular way in which this tension arises within framework of Kant’s account of a cosmopolitan perspective. I shall thus argue, in the concluding section, that as this tension plays itself out in the notion of a cosmopolitan perspective, Kant’s account of history as trajectory toward the attainment of human moral destiny is indeed offered as a viewpoint for a participant, rather than just for a spectator.

The Cosmopolitan Perspective and Sustaining Hope

To elucidate the claim that Kant offers the cosmopolitan perspective as a viewpoint for the participant rather than just for the spectator, I propose to place the problem of the practical function of the cosmopolitan perspective in relation to the discussion of an ethical commonwealth found in Book Three of Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone. I make this proposal in part because Kant wrote Religion and some of the key essays articulating a cosmopolitan perspective — the ones on theory and practice, perpetual peace, and human moral progress — within the same four year time-frame (1792-95). More important, however, is the fact that the discussion of the establishment of an “ethical commonwealth” elaborates an account of the requirements of “moral citizenship” [my phrase, not Kant’s] which, in my judgment, provides a way to understand the practical [moral] import of a cosmopolitan perspective, i.e., as a critically validated framework from which one may take human action — including one’s own — to have effective bearing upon the outcome of human history.

Book Three of Religion begins with what may very well be Kant’s most eloquent account of the “unsocial sociability” under which humanity must work out its moral destiny; Division One then elaborates the role of the church as an “ethical commonwealth” in the attainment of that moral destiny. For my purposes it is of no little significance that the discussion of an ethical commonwealth in Division One concludes with two explicit references to concerns which inform Kant’s account

of a cosmopolitan perspective: First, in the long footnote to the next to
last paragraph, Kant explicitly compares the problem facing the achieve-
ment of "the unity of the pure religion of reason" to the problem fac-
ing the achievement of a [single] cosmopolitan state (Rel 123/113-14); and second, in the final paragraph, Kant affirms the establishment of
an ethical commonwealth as that which brings with it an assurance of
"perpetual peace" to the world (124/114).

These passages suggest a number of lines of connection which can
be drawn through (at least this part of) Religion and the essays of the
1790s and 1780s in which Kant tries to articulate a cosmopolitan per-
spective; the lines of connection most pertinent to my claim that a "cos-
mopolitan perspective" provides a participant's, rather than just a
spectator's, viewpoint cluster around the functions which Kant assigns
both to it and to the ethical commonwealth in sustaining human moral
effort precisely with respect to the social character of our human moral
destiny. I think this point can be put in (fairly) simple terms by refer-
ence to the three famous Kantian questions (KRV A 805/B 833):

The ethical commonwealth and a cosmopolitan viewpoint each pro-
vide elements of a framework which enables moral agents to take their
individual answers to the second question:

What ought I do? to have an effective bearing on the outcome of
the history which will provide a common and collective human answer
to the third question:

For what may we hope? Both these answers can be properly framed,
however, only within the context of a critically validated answer to the
first question:

What can I know? All three answers together, moreover, constitute
a prelude to a fourth, anthropological question:

What is humanity? This final question, there is good reason to be-
lieve, is the controlling question of Kant's entire philosophical career.10

As with many other key features of his critical project, the notion
of a cosmopolitan perspective is yet another [partial] articulation of

10See Kant's letter to C. F. Stäudlin of May, 4, 1793 in Kant: Philosophical Corres-
pondence 1979-1799, translated and edited by Arnulf Zweig, University of Chicago
what Kant sees as the appropriate human response to the status of our species as the unique conjuncture of nature and freedom. On the one hand, “nature,” which has already thrust upon us the necessity of leaving “the juridical state of nature” to become citizens of a particular state now also thrusts upon us — by virtue of the circumstances of our human existence as finite, needy beings on a planet of finite resources — the necessity of taking the perspective of “world citizen.” Since nature gives us no choice but to live as social beings, not only within the confines of a single nation, but also as members of an assemblage of nations sharing one planet, we must learn to take a perspective that looks out from and upon the whole human world. Viewed in terms of the exigencies of nature, our human destiny — if there be a common one — can only be along whatever path nature carries us. So long as we view ourselves as — and only as — a part of nature, a cosmopolitan perspective will be that of the spectator.

Viewed simply as a spectator’s outlook on history a cosmopolitan perspective may then seem principally to provide a way to frame a (partial) answer to the question — What can I know? — with respect to the workings of nature upon the outcome of human history. Yet the critically validated answer to this theoretical question which we can frame from a cosmopolitan perspective is quite restricted in its scope: we will indeed be carried wherever nature goes, whether we will to go there or not. This spectator’s outlook cannot provide us, however, with (theoretical) knowledge of the end point to which the workings of nature are carrying us, let alone whether that end point comports well (or at all) with the unique character of our human status as the juncture of nature and freedom.

Although this answer which a cosmopolitan perspective provides to the theoretical question about the outcome of human history is quite restricted, this is not, from Kant’s perspective, merely a negative result. It is, rather, a particular instance in which Kant has “found it necessary to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (B xxx). Awareness of limits of the theoretical knowledge which a cosmopolitan perspective provides on the outcome of history clears the way for placing that outcome within the purview of the practical use of reason. In this way, the outcome of history becomes a matter on which the exercise of human freedom has a bearing.
It is thus only when it is operative with respect to the workings of our freedom that a cosmopolitan perspective can provide us with a critically validated response to the question about the outcome of human history. Such a critically validated response is one which poses this question in terms of its moral intelligibility: What must we do so that our being carried in history wherever nature takes us comports properly with the unique character of our human status as the juncture of nature and freedom? Posed this way, the question becomes one of the mutual moral responsibility which human beings can and ought to take for the outcome of history: We can effectively act as “world citizens” only on the basis of an uncoered mutual recognition of one another as agents of human destiny for one another. A cosmopolitan perspective places our mutual moral recognition of one another and the action that is to follow from it in the framework of a shared hope with respect to the outcome of what all of us do. This, then, is how a “cosmopolitan perspective” constitutes the viewpoint to be taken by a participant in history: It is the critically validated social framework from which one may take human action (including one’s own) to have effective bearing upon the outcome of human history. This suggests that it is only to the extent that we place our action in the framework of a shared hope for a human destiny which we work out in mutual recognition of one another’s freedom that we will be justified in taking our human destiny to move along a trajectory which we impart to it.

If this is correct, it still leaves unresolved the questions of the bearing which a cosmopolitan perspective — construed now as the perspective of a participant in the mutual making of our human destiny — has on the concrete dynamics of the civic life in a polity — first, Kant’s and, second, our own. I shall only attempt here a brief answer to the first, since answering the second is a major — but not yet reached — goal of my larger project. The civic dynamic upon which Kant envisions a cosmopolitan perspective having its impact is what he terms “freedom to reason publicly on all matters” or “the public use of reason” (BF 36-38/5-7; cf. TP 304/82-83; SF 19-20/27-29). Kant uses these terms to refer to a central condition for the exercise of the non-coercive social authority of reason: it is the engagement of citizens in self-disciplined inquiry and argument as the procedure for reaching reasoned and reasonable settlement of matters of policy and action. While it is true that, within his own context, Kant did not envision all members of a polity engag-
ing in the exercise of the "public use of reason," it is also true that he did not take this activity to be in any way the prerogative of the ruler or even of the legislator; quite the opposite, in fact, since it is precisely the public use of reason which rulers and legislators must hear and heed lest ignorance, error, or the corrupting influence of power lead to policies that "wrong the commonwealth" (TP 304/82-83; see BF, 41-42/45-46; EF 368-69/125-26).

When read through the filter of the two centuries which separate us from Kant, his account of the dynamics of the public use of reason in his own time can be seen as shot through with irony, both unintentional and intentional. The clearest — and most instructive — instance of the latter is the "Secret Article" for perpetual peace, which consists of the single proposition that "The maxims of philosophers concerning the conditions under which public peace is possible shall be consulted by nations armed for war" (EF 368). The intended irony seems at least double: not only was the proposition unlikely to get a hearing in the corridors of power in the Berlin of 1795, but also the very dynamic which Kant envisions as the "public" use of reason is made the subject of a "secret" article. Yet the irony is also instructive in that, even with its biting edge, it reaffirms Kant’s fundamental confidence that the outcome of human destiny, for weal or woe, lies along a trajectory imparted by the exercise of human freedom.

Part 2: The Ethical Commonwealth: Moral Progress and the Human Place in the Cosmos

In Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone Kant uses the notion of the "ethical commonwealth" to indicate that human destiny—and the process by which humankind attains it—are both fundamentally social (R 97-98/89). This notion thus makes fully explicit the intrinsically social character of Kant’s account of moral life.11 It remains true, as Kant

had argued in his earlier writings, that human beings, as *individuals*, must make themselves worthy of a destiny that consists of a proper *individual* apportionment of happiness to virtue (KRV A 809-10/B 837-839; KprV 130/136; KU 450/339); the human *species*, however, attains its moral destiny in the social project of working toward the establishment of such an “ethical commonwealth.” Kant points out, moreover, that the establishment of an ethical commonwealth involves human beings in a *unique* task: it is a duty “not of men toward men but of the human race toward itself” (R 97/89). As Kant explicates this duty in *Religion* (principally in Books Three and Four), its uniqueness seems to consist in the intention to social and moral unity which it enjoins as an overarching focus for [the whole range of] our human activity (R 97-98/88): Human beings must *work together* to establish those social conditions which enable each and every (potential) member of the “ethical commonwealth” to develop and sustain the “inner,” moral disposition to work for the destiny of the human species. This essay thus will examine the extent to which Kant succeeds in adequately specifying this unique moral task. I shall argue that, even though he may very well be correct in holding that human destiny and the process of its attainment are fundamentally social, he is only partially successful in delimiting the concrete social conditions which definitively establish “an ethical commonwealth.” He is successful to the extent that he establishes that such conditions require a public, non-coercive framework of social practice; he designates this framework “the church” (R 101/92) He is not successful, however, to the extent that fails to provide a clear and full account of the concrete practices which such a framework should establish and foster.

The earlier Kantian image of “the kingdom of ends” made the point that freedom, understood as the self-legislative power of reason, requires that we think of ourselves, not as isolated individuals, but as members of an intelligible “world” of equal, self-legislative agents (G 433-34/51-52). This image thus clearly places Kant’s account of moral life within a social context. Even so, the “destiny” which, under this image, appropriately crowns human moral existence is simply the integrity of an

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12 Kant’s definition of this “kingdom” (Reich) is “die systematische Verbindung verschiedener vernünftiger Wesen durch gemeinschaftliche Gezetze,” which Beck translates as “the systematic union of different rational beings through common laws.”
individual life lived in accord with a good conscience. The “inner” conformity of individuals as moral agents to their membership in a “kingdom of ends” (or an “intelligible world” of freedom) serves as both a necessary and a sufficient condition for the attainment of human destiny, but this destiny is understood as bearing singly on individuals, in the apportionment of happiness to individual moral agents in proper accord with the moral quality of the life each one has led (KprV 129-132/136-138).

This earlier account, however, does not provide a full answer to the question central to Religion — “What is to result from this right conduct of ours?” (R 5/4) — where Kant now conceives of human moral destiny in the more explicitly social terms delimited by the image of an “ethical commonwealth.” Under this image, an individual’s “inner” conformity to membership in this realm remains a necessary condition for the attainment of human destiny, but it can no longer serve as a sufficient one, at least for the destiny of the human species. This is so because Kant presents the “ethical commonwealth” as functioning within a context — i.e., human society, culture, and history — which requires some specification of the “outer” effects in the “sensible” world which such “inner” conformity must bring forth (R 115/106). Human society, culture, and history require this specification inasmuch as they hold a unique place within the “sensible” order of nature: their workings can make manifest, in the development of human social institutions and moral practices, certain “outer” effects, which issue from, and are indicative of, human agents’ “inner” conformity to their membership of the realm of freedom (AP 327-30/188-90).

The image of the ethical commonwealth needs to be seen, therefore, in the context of a wider Kantian view which serves to mark out society and culture as this unique place. Fundamental to this view is the “vocation” which the critical project sees as properly incumbent upon humanity as the sole species known to be possessed of finite reason: to serve as the unifying point of juncture between the fully determined causal workings of “nature” and the self-governed spontaneity of “freedom” (KRV A 815-819/B 843-847; KprV 146-148/153-155; 161-62/169; KU 403-04/286-87). Kant clearly articulates the general outline of this vocation at least as early as the Critique of Pure Reason; yet the identification of the concrete locus in which human beings can and must effect the juncture between the two “realms” (or “orders”) of nature and
of freedom only emerges slowly, and with some struggle, in the course of the development of the critical project. As Kant continues to probe the issues of the uses and the limits of human finite reason, the possibility begins to emerge more clearly that the exercise of this specific human "vocation" takes place most properly in the workings of human society, culture, and history. Ironically, Kant's "occasional" writings on history, politics, and culture articulate this possibility with more force and clarity than do the writings which are more formally part of the critical project (e. g. BF 40-41/8-9; IAG 20-23/15-17; 27-28/22-23; EF 365-67/11-13; MMG 114-15/58-59; see, however, KU 8 83:430-34/317-19). Religion — which, it is of interest to note, shares characteristics both with the occasional writings and with the Critiques — marks an important development in Kant's specification of this possibility: here Kant presents our fulfillment of this vocation as taking place through the establishment and development of a social institution — "the church" — which serves to establish and foster those moral practices which are to bring about the attainment of the ethical commonwealth.

Kant's discussions of these possibilities in both kinds of his writing can be understood as a set of claims which specify how society and culture are themselves implicated in both "orders" of nature and freedom. They are so implicated because they stand as both the material for, and the outcome of, human efforts to live in accord with that "vocation" by efforts (even unwitting ones) to effect a juncture of both orders. These claims are fourfold. On the one hand, society and culture are implicated in the order of nature inasmuch as

1. human beings, as embodied organisms, are part and product of the order of nature (IAG 19-20/13-14); and

2. the natural world provides material necessary for shaping society and culture into concrete practices and institutions (IAG 22-23/16-17).

On the other hand, they are also implicated in the working of freedom inasmuch as

1. the concrete practices and institutions of society and culture can also be shaped in accord with the motives and intentions we have as moral agents (TP 308-12/76-80); and

2. these practices and institutions provide the specific conditions under which human agents shape their motives and exercise their intentions (R 95-96/87-88; EF 365-67/11-13).
This brief essay cannot provide an extensive examination of the various texts in which these claims take shape nor full discussion of the range of important issues which arise from these claims. There is one issue, however, to which we must attend, since it points to a crucial tension in Kant's account — a tension which, in my view, Kant does not successfully resolve. As I shall indicate below, his inability to resolve this tension makes it difficult, if not impossible, for him to provide anything more than a general, quite abstract, and not fully satisfactory specification of the concrete social conditions which would definitively establish "an ethical commonwealth." The tension arises because the "outer" effects which the "ethical commonwealth" requires its members to bring about in the "sensible" world of human society and culture stand in a problematic relation to agents' "inner" conformity to their status as members of a world of freedom. This tension arises out of certain distinctions which are basic to Kant's critical enterprise. He seems to have erected, with his distinction between "noumenon" and "phenomenon," a firm barrier between the "inner" (intelligible) order in which the maxims for moral action are formed and the "outer" (sensible) order in which the activities and practices of society and culture run their course. The barrier is such that primary test of moral adequacy of the former is not their "outer" results, nor does close inspection of the latter, however well they apparently conform to justice as the external norm for action, provide a reliable index of the "inner," moral purity of the maxim by which they were determined. As a result, there is no guarantee that any particular agent's (or set of agents') "inner" conformity to their status as members of an "intelligible" kingdom of ends will bring about in the "outer," "sensible" world of society and culture those effects which serve most effectively the attainment of the moral destiny of the human species (KRV A 809-10/B 837-38; R 139/130)

Yet, in the context of the ethical commonwealth, the delimitation of such "effects" is important because, on Kant's account, there is no guarantee that the workings of nature — including, of course, those elements of our human make-up which, as "sensible" are part of

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13A reading of this basic Kantian distinction which is particularly helpful because it avoids such a rigid "two world" construal is found in Onora O'Neill, Constructions of Reason: Explorations of Kant's Practical Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), particularly the discussion in Chapter 3, pp. 59-64.
nature — will or even can, of themselves, sustain us in the inner disposition necessary to our “vocation” as the juncture of nature and freedom, let alone bring about the attainment of the moral destiny to which that vocation is ordered. We do have legitimate reason to hope that nature will, at the least, not be intractable in the face of our efforts to live in accord with our unique human status. Yet even if nature fully cooperates with these efforts, it is, first and foremost, the responsibility of our human agency, as the locus of freedom, to give shape to elements of nature — again, including those elements of nature in ourselves — in order to provide proper conditions for our living in accord with our human vocation (AP 327-30/188-190). These conditions are to be found principally in the forms, practices, and institutions of human society and culture: shaped from elements of nature by human agency, these stand as particular instantiations of the unique human place in the cosmos as the juncture of nature and freedom and thus make it possible for each and all to acknowledge and to live in accord with their status as members of the “intelligible” order of freedom:

As far as we can see, therefore, the sovereignty of the good principle is attainable, so far as men can work toward it, only through the establishment and spread of a society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue, a society whose task and duty it is rationally to impress those laws in all their scope upon the entire human race. (R 94/86)

So, despite the firmness of the barrier that Kant apparently erects between the “intelligible” and the “sensible” orders of our human existence, this distinction is not meant to affirm that these “orders” simply run their course independently of each other nor that they concur just in terms of mechanistic necessity, or of pre-established harmony, or of arbitrary divine decree. Within the context of Kant’s overall concern in the critical project to mark out the proper place and limits of our human existence, this distinction serves, finally, to make a rather different set of points about what can be affirmed, in accord with the principles of “critique,” about these “orders” and the consequences they have for our human activity. First, human beings, as the only (known) participants in both orders, must acknowledge that, as finite rational beings, they are unable to discover (or construct) a theoretically sound, adequate and comprehensive principle which governs these two orders
and accounts for their relationship (KprV 132-36/143-48; KU 403-4/286-87). Second, despite this limitation, human beings can nonetheless affirm, on critically valid practical grounds, the priority of the “intelligible” order as the proper source of the principle for determining the moral ordering of their own action: they must dispose themselves to act (freely) in conformity with the governing norm of the “intelligible” order (KU § 88:453-58/343-58). This norm is, in Kant’s terminology, “autonomy” — the self-governance of reason. Moreover, even though human beings may recognize and acknowledge conduct in the “sensible” order which exhibits autonomy as its governing principle — such recognition still cannot serve as a basis on which to build a (theoretical) account of the relationship between these two “orders.” Third — and most important point for our purposes — human beings may legitimately hope that, in sustaining the disposition to act autonomously, the conduct consequent upon that disposition has power to give to the “sensible” order a shape that more adequately expresses and represents the governing norm of the “intelligible” order (R 121-24/112-14).

Over against this hope, however, stands “radical evil,” in virtue of which human conduct binds itself to the “sensible” order in ways that serve to constrict the acknowledgment and the operation of autonomy as its own governing principle. Kant’s discussions in Books Three and Four of Religion make it clear, moreover, that his analysis of evil and of its overcoming of does not function only on the level of the individual moral agency. The presence of evil is not simply a consequence of the exercise of our human freedom, it is a consequence of the exercise of that freedom precisely in the context of our (necessary) human participation in society (R 93-94/87-88; cf. IAG 20-22/15-16). As a result, the overcoming of evil must also come about in and through the social context to which such participation necessarily binds us.

For Kant, then, the problem of evil — both its origin and its overcoming — is thus one in which individual and social processes are inextricably linked. They are linked in such a way, moreover, that even if individuals could successfully extirpate the evil by which they have disordered (and continue to disorder) their wills, this does not guarantee the extirpation of evil from the social dynamics of human life: the moral “salvation” of individual human beings does not, by itself, ensure the moral destiny of the human species, let alone constitute that destiny.
The character of radical evil is such that even the ordering of the social dynamics of human life to accord with justice, the norm which by which practical reason properly regulates external conduct, cannot secure its extirpation. In other words, even though progress toward the moral destiny of the human species might be signaled by the establishment of a just (or even a more just) political order, such external order in society does not by itself provide a guarantee that the ethical commonwealth has been, or will be, secured. The establishment of an external order of justice stands as a necessary element of the social dynamics that lead to an “ethical commonwealth,” but, by itself, it is not and cannot be sufficient to bring it about definitively.

This is so because the power and authority which the order of justice exercises over human conduct is coercive — a form of power and authority which properly limits the external exercise of freedom, but which finally stands impotent in the face of radical evil. The exercise of coercive power cannot provide the most fundamental condition for the establishment of an “ethical commonwealth” — the extirpation the evil which is radical because it issues from the uncoerced depths of human freedom. Kant thus suggests that there is another important social locus in which the exercise of autonomy, as a principle of rational self-governance, must be brought to bear upon the social and cultural dynamics of human existence. This is the “church,” which he describes as a “voluntary, universal and enduring union of minds and hearts” (R 102/93). His account of “the church” seeks to provide a necessary supplement to his accounts, in other parts of his critical and occasional writings, of the dynamics of human political and social order and their bearing upon the attainment of human destiny.

I shall thus bring this discussion to a close by briefly indicating why this account is only partially successful in delimiting the concrete social conditions which would help in the definitive establishment of the “ethical commonwealth.” I shall do so by first identifying two elements of Kant’s account of “the church” which “succeed” and then sketching the reasons why this success is only partial. Their success lies in the fact that these two elements — the non-coercive character of the power and authority proper to “the church” and the public character of its moral role and responsibility — help to delimit a framework for shaping practices and institutions of society and culture so that they may effectively serve the unique human status as the juncture of freedom and nature.
This success is partial, however, because even within this framework, Kant does not (and, perhaps, cannot) provide a clear and full account of the concrete practices which such a framework should establish and foster. He cannot do so, I believe, because he does not provide a fully coherent account of the relationship of these two elements; he is blocked from doing so, I believe, by the fact that he does not have a fully developed account of human social dynamics that would provide conceptual "space" for delimiting the concrete public form of institutions and social practices that can be shaped by the operation of non-coercive power.

The first element to note in Kant's account of "the church" is its power: the power which Kant considers proper to the authority of the church ought to be non-coercive in its character. This non-coercive power distinguishes the church's moral role in human culture and society from those played by other institutions, most notably those of politics and the state. As Kant conceives of the church, it is an institution—perhaps the only institution—whose authority rests solely upon the power which is proper to reason, viz., the non-coercive power to convince (R 98-100/90-91). Thus one central element of the framework which would make the "ethical commonwealth" possible is its provision of a set of ordered social relationships and practices based on a non-coercive authoritative principle. Although Kant is very clear about what the ordered social relationships and practices based on such a principle would not be like ("it has nothing resembling a political constitution" R 102/93), he is less definite about what they would and should be like. His account resorts to an image of a household or family (Hausgenossenschaft, Familie) conceived according to an ideal principle of entirely voluntary association. How this principle functions to shape concrete forms of social practice and organization that would make possible the ethical commonwealth, however, is far from clear. Kant's formal treatments of familial and household relationships (MdS 277-84/96-101; AP 303-11/166-73) seem, moreover, to be of little help on this point. They certainly acknowledge that the voluntary character of the marriage contract forms the basis of familial and household relationships; yet their subsequent discussions of the internal dynamics of the relationships consequent upon that voluntary contract focus upon considerations of possession, right, and power.
The second element to note in Kant's account of "the church" is the *public* character of the role and responsibility which Kant assigns to both the "visible church" and the "church invisible" in the establishment of an "ethical commonwealth" (R 101/92; 105-6/96-97; 122-23/113). The public character of the "visible church" seems relatively unproblematic: it is a partial and imperfect "sensible" instantiation of the "intelligible" ideal of a voluntary, universal, and enduring union of hearts. It is more difficult, however, to specify how the "invisible church" is — or even can — be "public" in a way that would adequately distinguish its proper role from that of the "visible church." Part of the difficulty lies, once again, in the firm barrier that Kant has apparently set between the "intelligible" and the "sensible" orders of human existence. Yet this is not the only source of difficulty. There is an incompleteness to Kant's notion of what is "public" that prevents him from concretely specifying — even for the "church" — the forms of social practice and organization that can function "in public" to help establish the ethical commonwealth.

Kant correlates his notion of what is "public" to his understanding of the role of reason in human activity: the forms of human activity in which reason functions with full freedom constitute that which is "public." In terms of this correlation, it is relatively easy for Kant to demarcate the arena of scientific inquiry into the causal workings of nature as the "public" (or the "public space") constituted by reason's theoretical use; it is not as easy, however, for him to demarcate fully the "public" which is constituted by reason's practical use. Justice, the norm which by which practical reason properly regulates external conduct, allows us to demarcate at least part of what is "public" for this use of reason; yet it demarcates only that part of the "public" in which the power of coercion may legitimately be employed, by the political institutions of the state, to secure external conformity to this fundamental norm of reason. In this context, Kant's notion of the "church" then represents an effort to demarcate another part of the "public" constituted by the practical use of reason, one in which the non-coercive power of reason — i.e., its power to persuade — functions with full freedom to secure from each of us the inner acknowledgment of our human status.

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and vocation. The problem with Kant's effort here, however, is that it provides only a negative line of demarcation, drawn in contrast to the clearly marked sector of what is "public" where coercive power may legitimately be employed secure justice. Beyond this characterization through contrast, however, it is not clear what positively constitutes the "public" in which the "church" functions. Thus, to the extent Kant leaves unspecified the nature of the "public" in which the church — or any other institution or social practice shaped by the non-coercive power of reason — functions, he also leaves unspecified the concrete forms such institutions and social practices may take.

Despite Kant's lack of clarity on this point, I do think that there are resources within his account from which to provide a more complete and positive demarcation of the "public" in which the non-coercive power of reason functions with full freedom. This would then provide conceptual "space" for us to envision, in concrete form, institutions and social practices so shaped by the non-coercive power of reason that they effectively help us secure the "ethical commonwealth." Locating and utilizing those resources, however, is a task for another essay.