

**Kant's Prudential Theory of Religion:
The Necessity of Historical Faith for Moral Empowerment**

*La teoría prudencial de la religión en Kant:
La necesidad de la fe histórica para el empoderamiento moral*

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Abstract

Given his emphasis on deontological ethics, Kant is rarely regarded as a friend of prudence. For example, he is often interpreted as an opponent of so-called “historical faiths” (i.e., empirical religious traditions). What typically goes unnoticed is that in explaining the legitimate (indeed, indispensable) role of historical faiths in the moral development of the human race, Kant appeals explicitly to their prudential status. A careful examination of Kant’s main references to prudence demonstrates that the prudential status of historical faith is the key to understanding both its limitations (as merely the *vehicle* of true religion, not its essential core) and its real value (as a *necessary* means of moral empowerment). The wise person adopts some form of historical faith, because to abandon any and all prudential appeals to a faith-based vehicle for morality would render the goal of living a good life virtually impossible for embodied beings to achieve.

Keywords

Immanuel Kant; Historical Faith; Prudence; Moral Religion; *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*

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Resumen

Dado su énfasis en la ética deontológica, Kant es considerado raramente un amigo de la prudencia. Por ejemplo, con frecuencia es interpretado como opositor de la llamada “fe histórica” (por ejemplo, tradiciones religiosas empíricas). Lo que típicamente pasa inadvertido es que al explicar la función legítima (en realidad, indispensable) de la fe histórica en el desarrollo de la especie humana, Kant apela explícitamente a su estatus prudencial. Un examen cuidadoso de las principales referencias de Kant a la prudencia demuestra que el estatus prudencial de la fe histórica es la clave para comprender tanto sus limitaciones (como mero *vehículo* de la religión, no su núcleo esencial) como su valor real (como medio *necesario* del empoderamiento moral). La persona sabia adopta alguna forma de fe histórica, habida cuenta de que abandonar todo recurso prudencial a un vehículo para la moralidad basado en la fe volvería el objetivo de vivir una vida buena virtualmente imposible de alcanzar para seres encarnados.

Palabras clave

Immanuel Kant; fe histórica; prudencia; religión moral; *Religión dentro de los límites de la mera razón*

1. Was Kant Opposed To Prudential Reasoning?

Immanuel Kant’s moral philosophy is widely regarded as leaving little (if any) room for a legitimate influence on moral decision-making from any source other than what he calls the “moral law”. Because so much of his ethical writing focuses on constructing rational arguments that appeal to the pure form of this law (i.e., the “categorical imperative”) and encourages moral agents to disregard the consequences of their actions, few scholars would turn to Kant’s writings for insight into prudence. Indeed, portrayals of Kant’s moral theory (especially by those who seek to discredit it) sometimes go so far as to claim that Kant was positively opposed to prudential reasoning as such, leaving it no legitimate role. While he does refer on several occasions to the “rules of prudence”, such interpreters take this heading as little more than a negative place holder, indicating why the maxims that many people would regard as constituting wise ethical advice are actually of no use to moral and/or political reasoning.¹

¹For typical examples of such a caricature, see Beiner 1983, 63-71, and Davie 1973, 57. A more recent example is McGaughey 2013, who claims that Kant’s “methodological skepticism” (154) causes him to “reject” forms of prudential reasoning, such as a belief in “special acts of grace”, that aim to supplement bare moral reasoning. For brief responses to McGaughey’s misreading of Palmquist 2010 on this specific issue, see notes 7 and 10, below. Contrary to McGaughey’s caricature of my position, I do not equate Kantian religion with “*historical* religion based on particular revelation” (155); rather, as clarified in the present

A closer look at Kant's references to prudence (*Klugheit*) reveals that he actually assigns to it a very important role: one that at least complements, and possibly (in some pragmatic contexts) even supersedes, the role of pure moral deliberation. In what follows, I shall begin (in §2) by sketching the role Kant assigns to prudence in his three *Critiques*; I shall then argue (in §3) that his theory of "historical faith" (i.e., adherence to an empirical religious tradition), as defended in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, is one of the key contexts (and possibly the most important one) where reason *must* acknowledge its need for a prudential supplement, to shed light on the path to wisdom. I shall therefore conclude (in §4) that, although several recent studies of Kantian prudence have likewise sought to rehabilitate the notion as a powerful tool that complements Kant's ethical formalism, these studies have missed an essential feature of Kant's theory by focusing (almost without exception) on the role of prudence in *politics*.²

2. How To Avoid Milking a Ram: Prudence in Kant's Three *Critiques*

Kant's first use of "*Klugheit*" in his *Critique of Pure Reason* is rarely recognized as such by English readers, because translators have used words other than "prudence" in this context. In A58/B82 Kant opines that persons who know the proper question to ask in a given context possess "sagacity" (as Pluhar and Kemp Smith translate it or "cleverness" (according to the Cambridge Edition, while those who *lack* this skill put themselves into an

article, the form of necessity I claim Kant ascribes to the elements of Christian doctrines, or to those of any other historical faith for that matter, is entirely subjective and *prudential*.

²See Nelson 2004, 305-8, for references to several critics of Kant's theory of prudence in the political realm who view it as inferior to "Aristotelian *phronesis*, Confucian propriety, or hermeneutic tact" (306); Nelson also cites several passages where Kant does seem to cast *political* prudence in a largely negative light. Whereas Nelson grants "that Kant mostly used *Klugheit* in the...sense" of "instrumental rationality", he argues that he also allows "an important role" for prudence in the sense of "context-sensitive judgment" (307). Properly understood, Kant's negative assessments of prudence relate only to those who "seek to *ground* morality in conditional reasoning" (308, emphasis added) rather than in the categorical imperative. Whereas Nelson focuses on Kant's *political* philosophy in his attempt to revive Kant's notion of prudence, I shall focus on the role of prudence in Kant's theory of *religion*. But in both cases, "prudence is...secondary to morality...yet *essential*", functioning as "a cultivated ability to participate with others in public life with a view towards the interests of others and the general welfare" (310). Whereas Nelson is mostly right to claim that Kant merely "hints" at this position (314)—indeed, "Kant did not articulate this ethics of prudence in his moral writings. He presupposed it"—we shall see that in *Religion* (which Nelson never cites) it comes to the fore. For a helpful analysis of the differences between Aristotelian "flourishing" and Kantian prudence, see Hill 1999, especially 166-74. And for references to several other recent scholars who share Nelson's focus on politics, see note 5, below.

embarrassing situation:³ they may mislead “the incautious listener” to attempt what will inevitably amount to “absurd answers”, thus causing both parties to appear equally foolish. He then compares such a situation (A58/B82-83 to “the ridiculous spectacle where (as the ancients said) one person milks the ram [*den Bock melkt*] while the other holds a sieve underneath.” One party in this comic scene foolishly fails to realize that “rams” (i.e., ill-formed questions) can give no “milk” (i.e., insightful answers), while the other naively awaits an answer while holding a receptacle (i.e., a mind that has not gone through the discipline of critique) that would not be able to hold the milk (i.e., appreciate the wisdom) even if it were somehow to be produced. Once we recognize that Kant poses this well-known, humorous metaphor in a context where he is admonishing us to be prudent, it takes the form of a riddle. Who *is* the foolish questioner that Kant portrays as using a “sieve” to collect the “milk” of insight from the animal of philosophy? And who is the foolish *answerer* that we are to think of as attempting to extract such insight-milk from a “ram” rather than from a ewe? Holding these questions in abeyance as we examine some of Kant’s other key references to prudence over the 12 years that followed, we shall return to this question at the close of this article.

The first explicit mention of “prudence” in (the English translations of) the first *Critique* comes in the first edition’s version of the chapter on Phenomena and Noumena, where Kant explains why the previous chapter has not included a thorough account of the schematized version of each of the twelve categories he had presented earlier. He claims to have employed

«a not unimportant rule of prudence: viz., not to venture immediately upon defining [a concept], and not to attempt or allege to attain completeness or precision in determining a concept, if one can make do with anyone or another of its characteristics» (A241).

In other words, prudence excuses us from exploring each and every potential application that some theory may have, if exploring a sampling of key applications suffices to justify the theory’s usefulness.

³ Unless otherwise noted (as here), all translations from the three *Critiques* and from Kant’s *Religion* are to Werner S. Pluhar’s translations, as follows: *Critique of Judgment* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987); *Critique of Pure Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1996); *Critique of Practical Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002); and *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009). References to Kant’s works will normally be included in the main text, citing the Berlin Academy Edition volume and page numbers, except in the case of *Critique of Pure Reason*, for which the standard A/B referencing system will be used to refer to the pagination of the original A and B editions, respectively. Quotations from *Religion* will be based on my revised translation, as found in Palmquist 2015.

Kant's next use of the term comes in the second part of the Transcendental Dialectic, where he considers how best to respond to the four Antinomies of Pure Reason that threaten to cast doubt on reason's reliability. Kant begins his overall solution to the Antinomies by observing (A485/B513) that "we act prudently if at the outset we leave aside the supposed bases for answering them, and consider first of all what we would gain if the answer fell to the one side, and what if it fell to the opposite side." That is, when pure reason offers us two plausible options, it is not only acceptable but *advisable* to make our selection based on which option produces the best results. However, in discussing how to respond to the limits placed by the *Critique* on our knowledge of the three metaphysical ideas of reason (i.e., God, freedom, and immortality), Kant warns his reader against the temptation to employ illusory methods in the service of the good; because so many well-meaning religious people employ arguments and justifications that entail dishonesty (A749-50/B777-8), we end up with the ironic result that "this cause [of upholding these rational ideas] has perhaps more upright and righteous opponents than defenders." So Kant allows us to use prudent tactics, as long as we do not compromise our moral integrity in the process. A *merely* prudential reason for belief risks dishonesty, so if someone is genuinely uncertain regarding God's existence, then Kant would rather have the person be an honest skeptic than a dishonest believer. As is well known, Kant thinks the proper way out of this impasse (given that theoretical reason necessarily fails in its attempt to demonstrate that God exists) is to ground our certainty in *moral* reason.

Kant's first technical *definition* of prudence comes in the "Canon" chapter of the first *Critique*'s Doctrine of Method (A800/B828):

«in the doctrine of prudence, the entire business of reason consists in taking all the purposes assigned to us by our inclinations and uniting them in the one purpose, *happiness*, and in harmonizing the means for attaining this happiness. Consequently, reason can here supply none but *pragmatic* laws of free conduct that is aimed at attaining the purposes commended to us by the senses, and hence can supply no laws that are pure, i.e., determined completely a priori».

Prudence cannot play any constitutive role in moral decision-making because, as Kant here reminds us, its laws are never pure and a priori, as genuine moral laws must be. Nevertheless, this passage clarifies that we are allowed to *consider* prudential reasons, especially when it comes to harmonizing our various efforts to reach the highest good

(which Kant views as the synthesis of virtue, or moral goodness, with happiness). Significantly, the Canon is entitled “On the Ultimate Purpose of the Pure Use of Our Reason” (A797/B825): even though prudence can play no direct role in the attainment of goodness as such (i.e., in *defining* virtue), it can and should play a role in attaining the *ultimate purpose* of being good, which is to harmonize goodness with happiness. A pragmatic maxim that helps us attain this ultimate purpose is called a “rule of prudence” (A806/B834; cf. *CPrR* 5:22-26); such a rule “advises [us] what we must do if we want to partake of happiness” and

«is based on empirical principles; for in no other way than by means of experience can I know either what inclinations there are that want to be satisfied, or what the natural causes are that can bring about the satisfaction of those inclinations».

Turning to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, we find that Kant is far more cautious about prudence in moral contexts. Following a rule of prudence is *reprehensible* if doing so causes a person to disobey the moral law (5:35): one’s duty must always take precedence over the desire for happiness. He thus reminds us (5:36): “The maxim of self-love (prudence) merely *counsels*; the law of morality *commands*.” But for this very reason, knowing how to be genuinely prudent is actually far more difficult than knowing how to be good: “the commonest and most unpracticed understanding” (5:36) instinctively knows how to be good in specific circumstances, even though such a person may have no “worldly prudence” when it comes to promoting the happiness required for the *highest* good in human society as a whole. To clarify his theory of prudence, Kant repeatedly compares it with the contrasting theories defended by two ancient Greek philosophical schools, the Epicureans and the Stoics (5:111; cf. 126-7): “To the former, *prudence* was tantamount to morality; to the latter, who selected a higher designation for virtue, *morality* alone was true wisdom.” For Kant, by contrast, true wisdom entails applying prudence as a *necessary supplement* to virtue, so that we can somehow attain both virtue and happiness simultaneously.

In the long (unpublished) Introduction to his *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant refines his previous position, clarifying that these pragmatic “rules of prudence” are a species of “*technical imperatives*” or “*imperatives of art*” (20:200n): they “command under the condition of an *actual* and even subjectively necessary purpose,...[namely] one’s own happiness”. In the shorter (published) Introduction (5:172) he adds that such rules

«must be included only in theoretical philosophy, as corollaries. For they concern nothing but the possibility of things according to concepts of nature; and this includes not only the means we find in nature for producing them, but even the will (as power of desire and hence as a natural power), as far as it can be determined, in conformity with the mentioned rules, by natural incentives».

Kant's crucial point here is easily missed: rules of prudence form a *bridge* between the theoretical and the practical, such a bridge being precisely the focus of the third *Critique* and (as I have argued elsewhere) of Kant's *Religion*.⁴ To be prudent is to consider how one's will (i.e., one's free volition) can be used to satisfy the natural *requirements* associated with one's embodiment (i.e., one's natural inclinations), yet without contravening the moral law. As such, prudence holds the status of being a "subjectively *necessary* purpose" (emphasis added).

Toward the end of the third *Critique* (in §91 of the methodological Appendix on moral teleology), Kant adds an important caveat that provides a natural segue to his subsequent discussion of prudence within religion (5:470):

«But assent in matters of faith is an assent from a pure practical point of view, i.e., it is a moral faith that proves nothing for theoretical pure rational cognition, but only for pure practical cognition that aims at [our] complying with [our] duties; it does not at all expand our speculation, nor our practical rules of prudence governed by the principle of self-love».

This is a crucial text, if we wish to understand the role of *historical* faith in Kant's explicitly religious writings, for in the foregoing passage Kant is referring only to the more limited phenomenon of "moral faith". Although he does not say so at this point, what we shall find as we now turn our attention to the role of prudence within religion, is that Kant uses the term "historical faith" to refer to a broad set of prudent means of putting moral faith into practice, and that a wise person *must* employ some such non-moral means in order to complement the purity of moral faith; for historical faith offers a form of theoretical cognition that, as Kant explicitly states in the passage quoted above, is inherently beyond the reach of pure moral faith.

3. Historical Faith as a Prudent Necessity in Kant's *Religion*

⁴ I first argued for this status in Palmquist 1986; revised and reprinted as Chapter III of Palmquist 1993. For my most detailed defense of this claim, see Palmquist 2015.

Among the several recent studies of Kantian prudence, I know of none that acknowledges how his theory reaches its highest expression in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793/1794);⁵ yet only in this work does he give full expression to his view that prudence is, in at least one sense, essential to the successful implementation of his ethical theory in the real world—i.e., to the project of bridging the theoretical and the practical standpoints. For in *Religion* Kant argues that our moral efforts inevitably fail on their own, due to the corrupting influence of what he calls “radical evil” on all human decision-making. Because we are all beset with the tendency (or “propensity”) to shape moral maxims in a way that gives priority to our self-interest, attending to the demands of the moral law only as (at best) a secondary consideration, we have the almost irresistible

⁵For example, Kain 2001 draws his interpretation primarily from Kant’s *Groundwork* and *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the former work, Kant provides helpful descriptions of prudence as “skill in the choice of means to one’s own greatest well-being” and “the sagacity to combine all [one’s] purposes for his own lasting advantage” (4:416). Most studies of Kantian prudence focus on its application to Kant’s *political* theory (see note 2). In the course of arguing that Kant’s theory of prudence provides a decisive response to critics of John Rawls’ (Kantian) political theory, Taylor (2005, 606) points out that an important “task of Kantian prudential reasoning is to unite or integrate the inclinations into a single scheme of happiness.” The process is “closer to gardening than to mechanics” (607). But Taylor, like Nelson before him (see note 2) and Flikschuh 2011 after him, focuses almost entirely on the *political* implications of Kantian prudence; though he does make a few passing references to *Religion*, he never cites the passages where Kant actually *mentions* prudence.

Unlike Nelson or Taylor (whose work she does not cite), Flikschuh clearly recognizes that the role of religion in Kant’s system of practical faith is crucial; yet she, too, makes no explicit references to prudence in *Religion* itself and focuses instead on its political implications, suggesting (109) we should “understand the role of prudence in Kant’s political morality as a form of transcendently oriented practical faith.” As we shall see, this suggestion becomes all the more plausible when we see how prudence functions in Kant’s theory of religion. For, after making a helpful distinction (111) between “mundane prudence” (“a practical response to insufficient factual information”) and “existential prudence” (a practical response “to theoretical unknowability in the metaphysical sense”), Flikschuh opines that “Kant nowhere explicitly discusses the requirements of existential prudence” (114). Yet those requirements, as we shall see, are to be found in *Religion*, precisely because (as Flikschuh rightly acknowledges) Kantian “practical faith” absolutely requires “faith in God, due to “our own inscrutability: ... we cannot know ourselves” (73). Flikschuh closes her essay by raising the tantalizing prospect, “whether, in the absence of [“Reinhold’s and Fichte’s important interventions” in the history of Kant interpretation]..., a less radically humanistic Kantianism might have survived” (74). An affirmative reply is suggested by the evidence amassed in Palmquist 2015, that the single major influence on Kant’s decision to write a second edition of *Religion* (the only book other than the first *Critique* that Kant published in a significantly revised edition) was his desire to respond to the feedback to the first edition that had been offered by the influential German theologian, G.C. Storr.

That the once common caricature of Kant the prude (i.e., the *enemy* of prudence) is quickly fading among Kantian ethical theorists is evidenced by the fact that Taylor quotes passages from Paul Guyer, Henry Allison, and Allen Wood that show their respective (and quite accurate) understandings of prudence as a much-needed (happiness-producing) *balance* to the formalism of the moral law (Taylor 2005, 608-9). Of these three influential Kant-scholars, the one whose work offers the most thorough account of Kantian prudence is Wood 1999; see especially pp.65-70. As Wood emphasizes (352n): “The essence of prudential reason [as opposed to instrumental reason] is that happiness has a rational claim on us distinct from and superior to that of any arbitrarily chosen end.” Wood offers a lengthy discussion of the ethical status of historical faith in Kant; however, he never mentions Kant’s explicit application of prudence to historical faith in *Religion*.

temptation to deceive ourselves regarding the status of our own moral character (see e.g., 6:20). The proper task of religion is to empower us to overcome this universal propensity to evil by *influencing how we motivate ourselves to act*. Without recounting all the details of Kant's argument here, let it suffice merely to note that the key for Kant is for us to call upon an archetypal idea of moral perfection that resides within each human person, then to band together with other, similarly good-hearted people to form a community whose purpose is to encourage each other to aim at the highest possible moral goal, *holiness*. Although we will inevitably fail to achieve the community's transcendent goal of holiness, aiming at this essentially religious ideal is the best (if not the only) way that an individual human being can become *virtuous*.⁶

While empowering human beings to be virtuous is the proper moral goal of all true religion, Kant repeatedly argues that this is not the sum-total of what makes religion actually work;⁷ rather, the *means* for achieving religion's moral goal are bound to be non-moral, historically-conditioned features that arise out of our embodied nature. Kant explicitly rejects the view that our bodies are to be blamed for radical evil; in *Religion* he clearly and repeatedly insists that evil is a defect of the *will*. Thus there is no contradiction for Kant to argue that the proper solution to "this weakness of ours" (6:43; see also 6:29, 59n, 103, 169, 191) is to take refuge in some historical (embodied) religious tradition. With this in mind, he distinguishes between what is essentially religious (and therefore universally true, by virtue of its grounding in moral reason) and the complement of some historical religious tradition that must inevitably accompany it (though the latter by its very nature is contingent and ever-changing). Interpreters of *Religion* have typically assumed

⁶ For a more detailed summary of Kant's argument in *Religion*, see Palmquist 2009. And for an interpretation and defense of those details, see Part Three of Palmquist 2000.

⁷ See Palmquist 1992, revised and reprinted as Chapter VI of Palmquist 2000. That article/chapter concludes by demonstrating that Kant's goal in *Religion* is actually to *raise* morality to the level of religion, not vice versa. The nuanced, essentially perspectival character of my position on Kantian religion is ignored by McGaughey 2013, who constructs a straw man by imputing an absurd set of interpretive positions to me in support of his allegation that I have misrepresented Kant. He claims, for example, that I interpret "Kantian religion" to be entirely *empirical*, whereas he claims Kantian religion is entirely *pure*; this, together with the ten other diametrical oppositions, most of them equally facile, that McGaughey displays in tabular form to enhance the impression of an alleged dichotomy, portrays the options for Kant-interpreters as a specter that is no less ridiculous than that of holding a sieve while milking a ram! Fortunately, the straw man that McGaughey sets up bears virtually no resemblance to the interpretation of Kantian religion that I actually defend in Palmquist 2010 or anywhere else. Not surprisingly, McGaughey's one-sided polemic contains very few quotations from Palmquist 2010 or from any of my other previous publications, and the quotes that do appear are all taken out of context.

that Kant, as a child of the Enlightenment, *must* be disparaging the various historical religious traditions that he mentions throughout the book (see e.g., note 7), just as it is easy to read Kant's ethical writings as if he is disparaging prudence in general. However, if we take Kant at his word, this was not his intention.⁸ What I shall demonstrate in the remainder of this article, by focusing on the passages in *Religion* that explicitly mention prudence, is that Kant's distinction between pure (moral) religion and impure (historical) faith is a two-edged sword: it not only seeks to protect religious believers from the delusion of assuming that they can please God without becoming good; it also conveys wise counsel to all who recognize the need to be good; for we can hardly expect to succeed in actually *becoming* good without engaging in certain non-moral activities that are properly called "prudent".

Kant uses forms of the root word, "*Klug*", a total of 12 times in *Religion*, twice in each of the first three Pieces and six times in the Fourth Piece. He also *alludes* to the notion on numerous other occasions by employing a variety of metaphors that vividly portray the relationship between the moral core of religion and its prudent means of application. In the second Preface, for example, he explains that the two "*Versuch(en)*" ("experiment(s)") that he conducts throughout the book relate to each other as "concentric" spheres "of faith" (6:12): identifying the inner sphere with moral faith and the outer sphere with historical faith entails that the latter serves a prudential role in relation to the former. The same holds true for Kant's frequent references to the inner "seed" or "kernel" of religion in its relation to the outer "husk" or "shell": the latter perform a necessary function, even though they are of only secondary (i.e., prudential) importance to the former. A growing ear of corn *needs* the husk in order to mature into an edible vegetable, even though we typically throw away the husk as if it were useless, once the kernels are

⁸ For example, in the Preface to his 1797 book, *Conflict of the Faculties*, p.8 (German pagination), Kant writes: "Since...I make no *appraisal* of Christianity, I cannot be guilty of *disparaging* it. In fact, it is only natural religion that I appraise." Many readers of Kant's *Religion* question the accuracy of this claim. However, if we keep in mind that by "Christianity", he is referring to the historical religious tradition that goes by this name, then what he means is that his focus in *Religion* was on insisting that, in order to maximize its prudential purpose, the doctrines of faith must serve as morally empowering aids to the religion of bare reason. Kant clearly does point out many examples of how Christian doctrines, symbols, and rituals may be interpreted as non-moral, and hence as lacking in prudence; his claim in this *Conflict* passage is that he did not thereby intend to be assessing their historical truth, as legitimate features of the tradition (for appraising *that* is the job of the biblical theologian, not of the philosopher). Rather, he was merely assessing their *prudential value*, as vehicles for moral faith. McGaughey 2013 completely ignores this crucial nuance in my reading of Kant, assuming that I take Kant to be referring always and only to historical religion *per se*, rather than to historical faith as *empowered* by moral religion (see notes 1, 7, and 10).

ripe enough to eat.⁹ Elsewhere Kant uses metaphors such as “vehicle” (“*Vehikel*” [6:106]) and “channel” (“*Leitmittel*” [6:115]) to describe the necessary function that the historical elements of a religious tradition fulfill in *conveying* to us the content of moral faith. And, of course, the clothing metaphor that pervades the entire book, starting with the title, also stresses the distinction between the “bare” (“*blossen*”) body of moral religion and the various types of historical faith that “cloak” (e.g., 6:83) it in ways that can be either wise or foolhardy. However, for the remainder of this article, my focus will be limited to Kant’s explicit uses of the term “prudence”.

Although Kant’s two references to prudence in the First Piece of *Religion* are both closely connected to his theory of radical evil, they are not as negative as might at first appear. The first occurs as a side-comment in a footnote added in the second edition: “the self-torment of a repentant sinner [...] is very ambiguous and is usually only an inward reproach for having violated the rule of prudence” (6:23n). Here prudence is presented ambivalently, as a good tool that is easily used in the service of evil: all too often a religious person experiences great psychological pain during repentance, not out of a sincere conviction that a change of lifestyle is required, but only as a show, prompted by a secret disappointment at having been foolish enough to have been caught in the act of some wrongdoing. This illustrates a general theme that runs throughout the First Piece, even though Kant never uses the word “prudence” when discussing it: we often try to keep our actions consistent with the demands of the moral law, not out of respect for the moral law, but for prudential reasons; in such cases, Kant says (6:37), “the empirical character is good, but the intelligible character is still as evil as ever.” This is the essence of what Kant calls “the *disingenuousness* [...] of the human heart” (6:29) and is one of the three sources of the “*innate* guilt” (6:38) that he claims every human being has. But such disingenuousness (and the accompanying guilt) is not *caused* by our need to be prudent; rather, prudence arises as a *response* to the threefold evil (frailty, disingenuousness, and perversity) that is presented to us by the human situation.

⁹For further discussion of the concentric circles metaphor, see Palmquist 2015, §0.4. Without portraying it as Kant’s position on the matter, Green 1988 (127) aptly expresses the difference between Kant’s special type of pragmatic necessity and the stricter, moral type of necessity: “prudence is prior to morality in the order of learning. If we were not already, as a part of our first nature, prudential creatures [cf. Kantian “animality”], we could not later, as a part of our second nature [cf. Kantian “personality”], become moral creatures.” After setting out an economic model for a theory of prudence, Green offers a conclusion that accords well with Kant’s prudential theory of religion (141): prudence is “the non moral seed...which, when planted in brutish soil, enables a moral education to take root and without which it may not. But prudence...is not a brutish capacity. It is rather a central part of any education that aims at moral maturity.”

When recounting examples of the “long melancholy litany of charges against humanity” that easily come to mind when we examine the empirical character of human beings in their social interactions, Kant’s first example cites the “secret falsity even in the most intimate friendship” that leads us to include “moderation of trust in reciprocal openness by even the best friends” as part of “the universal maxim of prudence” (6:33). A quick reading of this second reference to prudence might give the impression that Kant is depicting prudence as *contributing* to radical evil. But on closer inspection, this is not what he says. Rather, his argument assumes that radical evil makes us untrustworthy in our interpersonal relationships; an implied premise is that if we were perfectly good (i.e., holy, as opposed to being creatures of virtue), then we could tell our friends all of our deepest, darkest secrets and not worry about having our trust abused; but because we are not holy, and must struggle merely to be virtuous, *prudence is necessary*—even to the point of being a “*universal maxim*”. Indeed, Kant elsewhere defends this maxim in detail, warning friends not to share personal details about themselves that could be used against them, should the friendship someday cease (Kant 1979, 200-209).

Kant begins the Second Piece with some reflections on where the ancient Greek Stoics went wrong, and his next reference to prudence appears in this context (6:58):

«Natural inclinations, *considered in themselves*, are *good*, i.e., irreprehensible; and not only is it futile, but it would also be harmful and censurable, to want to eradicate them. Rather, one must only tame them, so that they do not themselves wear one another out but instead can be brought to consonance in a whole called happiness. The reason...that accomplishes this is called *prudence*. Only the moral-unlawful is in itself evil, absolutely reprehensible, and must be eradicated; but the reason that teaches this...alone deserves the name of *wisdom*...».

Far from disparaging the body, Kant shows himself here to be deeply aware of the significance of human embodiment. Although our inclinations contribute to the process whereby the will is led to give priority to the principle of self-love over the demands of the moral law (this being Kant’s definition of radical evil), the proper solution is to eradicate not the inclinations, but the foolish will that refuses to tame them. Clearly, Kant is here implying that the Epicurean is no better off than the Stoic: the former lets the inclinations run wild; the latter tries to eradicate them. The wise person (i.e., the person who combines genuine virtue with prudence), by contrast, recognizes that both solutions suffer from a weakness of will whose only effective solution is to find prudential ways of allowing our

inclinations to exist in consonance with each other and with the moral law.

A passage reminiscent of Kant's first use of "*Klugheit*" in the first *Critique*, some 12 years earlier, appears in a footnote added to his discussion of the "second difficulty" that arises out of any attempt to believe that evil can be overcome by divine grace.¹⁰ In discussing certain "children's questions" Kant observes that, even if clear answers could be given, "the questioner would still not understand how to make them prudent [*Kluges*]" (6:69n). Among such theological questions, he says, is "whether the punishments of hell will be finite or eternal punishments." Our interest here is not with the question as such, but with Kant's emphasis on how to make the question prudent. Kant's point is that asking and/or attempting to answer such speculative questions, like trying to collect a ram's milk with a sieve, leaves us unable to *do* anything with any attempt at an answer, even if we could determine what the supposedly "correct" answer should be. Here again, therefore, Kant is not downplaying the role of prudential considerations in religion, as traditional interpreters such as McGaughey assume, but is raising it to the level of a factor that determines whether or not a given question is even worth asking.

Kant's first reference to prudence in the Third Piece (6:121) comes in a paraphrased quote from 1 Corinthians 13:11, where Kant uses "*Klug*" to stand in place of three Greek verbs used in that verse:

«As long as he (the human genus) "was a child, he was prudent"¹¹ as a child" and knew how to associate with ordinances—which had been imposed on him without his collaboration—presumably scholarship as well, and indeed even a philosophy subservient to the church: "But now that he becomes a man, he puts away what is childish».

The original biblical passage points out that nobody blames a young child (*νηπιος*) for speaking (*ελαλουν*), thinking (*εφρονουν*), or reasoning (*ελογιζομην*) in child-like ways, but admonishes readers to beware not to import child-like principles into their adult situation.

¹⁰ The second difficulty is the theological problem often known as "eternal security": can a person be assured that he or she really is *called by God*? And if called, is such a state guaranteed to be permanent? For a discussion of this and the other two difficulties, see Palmquist 2010. In his misconstrual of my interpretation of Kantian religion (see notes 1 and 7, above), McGaughey 2010 portrays the argument of Palmquist 2010 as if I read *Religion* as a defense of Christianity *as such*, and as promoting a form of the doctrine of divine grace that is exclusively and necessarily Christian. What I actually read Kant as arguing, by contrast, is that pure moral religion *leaves a space* for divine grace, telling us nothing about *whether or not* such grace actually occurs, but requiring any historical faith that affirms a doctrine of grace (whether it be Christian or otherwise) to *interpret* it in a particular way (i.e., as not contradicting moral religion, and preferably as *empowering* the believer to be more fully moral).

¹¹ Pluhar uses "astute" for "*Klug*" here, and for "*kluge*" at 6:188n, where Kant expresses reservations about using the phrase "freedom of thought", even though "prudent men" sometimes use it.

Kant gives the passage a moral interpretation by applying the same distinction to the whole human race: he compares the child's admirably prudent character to the tendency among underdeveloped (i.e., pre-Enlightenment) human cultures to focus their religious understandings on "ordinances", "scholarship", and "a philosophy subservient to the church." Kant is comparing the religion of bare reason to the biblical author's adult human being, who always seeks to speak, think, and reason in a spirit of love, rather than merely following rules blindly. Note, however, that he is also implicitly assuming that childlike faith has a *proper role to play* in the historical development of the human race, just as it does for human individuals. Here we see, in the form of a simple, biblically-inspired metaphor, Kant's theory of historical faith in a nutshell: its prudential value is to serve as a good and useful channel for the transmission of goodness to the human race for as long as we find ourselves unable to follow the dictates of bare reason merely for their own sake.¹²

A few pages later (6:126), referring to the Ten Commandments, Kant points out that in the Jewish tradition,

«both reward and punishment were intended to affect even the progeny, which had taken no practical part in those deeds or misdeeds, which in a political structure can indeed be a prudential means [*Klugheitsmittel*] for providing oneself with compliance, but in an ethical one would be contrary to all equity».

Even though prudence has no proper place in ethical decision-making as such, "prudential means"—such as the belief that one's children may suffer as a result of one's wrongdoings—can serve a legitimate role in motivating good behavior. Believing that God will punish "the children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation" (Ex. 20:5; Deut. 5:9) will not make a person more virtuous; but it may well persuade a person to act in a manner that is at least legally correct (i.e., in compliance with the Ten Commandments, in this case). Kant assigns the same function to *all* the myths, rituals, and symbols that arise within historical religious traditions.

In the first of the four main references to prudence in the Fourth Piece (toward the

¹² Once we recognize that the "weakness" Kant mentions at various points in *Religion* (see references cited above) refers to our embodiment as human beings, it seems plausible to assume that Kant's position is that we will probably *never* come to the stage of human history when the need for the prudent vehicle of historical religious traditions totally ceases. Kant explicitly calls attention to this nuance of his theory in a footnote added in the second edition to a first edition footnote. Having pointed out that all historical faith must be treated as if it *can cease*, he adds (6:135n): "Not that it will cease (for it may perhaps always be useful and needed as a vehicle), but that it can cease; whereby is only meant the inward firmness of the pure moral faith."

end of Part One, Section One)¹³, Kant considers the likely inferences drawn by a rationally-minded person who is ruled “by self-interest—by the god of this world” (6:161); once such a person considers the possibility of a future life, he or she might easily come to the realization that kindness is actually preferable to mean actions that are technically justified. The person who acts with calculated kindness

«proceeds indeed, as regards the incentive of such beneficent actions, more *prudently* than *morally*, yet nonetheless in accordance with the moral law, at least according to its letter, and he may hope that this too may not remain unrequited to him».

Jesus, by contrast, portrayed genuinely godly behavior (i.e., holiness) as not being motivated by any desire for reward (6:162). Prudence, therefore, is not a *bad* thing, for it can lead a perverse person to do things that are at least legally good; its shortcoming is simply that it is not the *best* option, for it allows our motives to remain impure if treated as an end in itself (as Kant thought Judaism does).

A few pages later, in a section entitled “The Christian Religion as a Scholarly Religion”, Kant observes that “the first proliferators of Christ’s teaching” proceeded “prudently” by adopting a procedure that would “procure for it access among their people”: they taught “that every Christian must be a Jew whose Messiah has come” (6:165-6). Kant refers to this teaching as “faith”, clearly taking it as a typical example of what he often calls “historical faith”; in calling the procedure *prudent*, he is not implying that it is mistaken, but only that it must not be “taken to be a component of the religion itself, holding for all times and peoples”. In other words, the teachings and practices of particular historical religious traditions may be not only acceptable, but wise, provided their adherents do not claim too much for them. Kant thus goes on to exemplify how such a religious teaching might be interpreted in a way that transforms the prudence of rationally-grounded historical faith into the foolishness of an irrational demand for *knowledge*: the claim that Jesus’ teaching requires a person to become Jewish “does not well cohere with “the fact that Jesus also taught that a person “is actually not bound to any law of Judaism

¹³ One of the other two references in the Fourth Piece has already been mentioned (see note 11). The other one (in Part Two, §4, on “Conscience”) warns against *false* prudence (6:189): Kant points out “the utmost danger and unsafety with the supposed prudential means, to circumvent in a crafty way the detrimental consequences that might arise for me from not confessing and, by siding with both parties, to ruin one’s standing with both.” The warning here is against the danger of trying to “play it safe” by affirming a confession of faith even when one has serious doubts as to whether it is legitimate. As such, even here Kant is not discrediting genuine prudence; rather, he is implicitly affirming its value, if understood with proper (i.e., *moral*) limitations.

(as statutory)” (6:166);for according to the former claim, a believer “nevertheless would have to accept faithfully the entire Holy Book of this people as a revelation that is divine, given to all human beings.”

The next paragraph concludes Section Two (and Part One) of the Fourth Piece by distinguishing between “the first founders of [Christian] *congregations*” and “the founders of the *church*” (6:167): the former, quite legitimately, “found it necessary to entangle with [Jesus’ message] the history of Judaism, which was a prudent action in view of their situation at that time—though perhaps only for that situation”; the latter, by contrast, mistakenly “took up these episodic means of recommendation among the essential articles of faith and augmented them...with interpretations that held inherent legal power from councils or were authenticated through scholarship.” Such a dependence on historical facts that are subject to change, and therefore not universally communicable, “cannot be avoided as long as we seek religion not within us but outside us.” Kant’s point here is twofold. First, bare reason provides us with an ideal picture of what being religious entails, and of why people should take advantage of this inward source of moral empowerment. Second, because we are embodied, historical beings, we inevitably end up appealing to symbols, beliefs, and/or rituals that have only a prudential value. We *need* such non-ultimate, subjective aids, as noted above, because of our “weakness” as embodied beings; prudence becomes wisdom, however, only if we recognize that all such prudential means are just that: non-ultimate aids to empower us to do what, in an ideal world, we would do out of a pure sense of moral motivation.

The final reference to prudence in *Religion* comes in Part Two of the Fourth Piece, §3 (entitled “On Priestery as a Governance in the Pseudoservice of the Good Principle”),in a lengthy paragraph that is worth quoting in full (6:182):

«It is, therefore, not only to act prudently to start from this [rational] faith and to let the historical faith that harmonizes therewith follow it, but it is also one’s duty to make [the former] the supreme condition under which alone we can hope to come to partake of whatever wholeness a historical faith might promise us; namely we can hope this in such a manner that we can or may let the historical faith count as universally binding only according to the interpretation given to it by the pure religious faith (because this faith contains universally valid doctrine), whereas the moral-faithful person is yet also open to the historical faith insofar as he finds it conducive to the animation of his pure religious conviction [*Gesinnung*]. In this way alone does this historical faith have a pure moral worth...».

Here Kant confirms his position on both prudence in general and historical religion in particular (as an example of prudence): we can and even should make good use of *some such* non-essential means, provided we remember that they *are means* to a higher end.

Kant's theory of the prudential value of historical religion has important implications for the issue of religious pluralism in this age of globalization: it requires us to recognize that, given the multiplicity of religious traditions, each carries an equal *potential* (at least in principle, though not necessarily in practice) to serve as a prudent means of empowering people to be good. What is abundantly clear in the above passage is that, if any aspect of a person's historical faith should *cease* to be "conducive to the animation of his pure religious conviction", as Kant puts it in the previously-quoted passage, then we are justified in laying it aside as a tradition that is now empty, inasmuch as it no longer carries with it "a pure moral worth". Looking around the world at the abundance of choices we have for possible religious and/or pseudo-religious beliefs and practices, we as citizens of the twenty-first century should acknowledge Kant's position to be perhaps even more relevant to us today than it was to the people of eighteenth-century Europe.

4. Concluding Reflections on the Role of Prudence in Kant's System

Having now explored Kant's view of the role of prudence in religion, let us return to the riddle Kant presented in his very first use of *Klugheit* in the first *Critique*. Although Kant may not have intended such an application, the metaphorical scenario of one person milking a male animal while a co-worker holds a sieve underneath can aptly elucidate the defects he saw in both sides of the ancient debate between the Stoics and Epicureans over the question: "What is the highest good?" The Epicurean is the presumptuous questioner who, like the imprudent man who holds a sieve under an animal that he takes to be female, fails to realize that, *even if the animal being milked were female* (i.e., even if a life of pleasure-seeking could be called "good"), his container (i.e., his inward conviction) could not hold the desired product (because it lacks genuine virtue). For the Epicurean foolishly believes that happiness *is* the highest good; should other people (such as the person milking the animal overhead) actually offer the desired product, the milk of genuine, morally-grounded contentment would flow straight through the Epicurean's un-virtuous sieve, for the Epicurean has no legitimate means of *preserving* (i.e., no *worthiness to*

receive) the deep satisfaction that Epicureans believe will come from fulfilling one's inclinations. Likewise, the Stoic is the trusting but duped answerer, who fails to realize that the "ram" of pure, unaided virtue *cannot produce* the "milk" of happiness, and whose moral theory therefore provides no container (i.e., no adequate conception of the highest good) to catch the milk, even if the ram could produce it. In other words, both of these classical positions lack prudence, but in different ways.

The all-too-common way of viewing Kant's moral theory, as a deontological rejection of any general doctrine of prudence (as if we could be good without the specific supplements provided by an appeal to *some* historical faith), so that his philosophy of religion relies instead on nothing but the postulates of practical reason (i.e., God and immortality, as defended in the second *Critique*), tends to make Kant look like the gullible dairy worker who faithfully sits on his stool holding a large and well-constructed bucket, hoping that *God on High* will pour milk down from heaven! It is no wonder that so few readers have been persuaded by Kant's philosophy of religion, when it is interpreted in this traditional way, whereby religion has to be reduced to a formalistic moral theory in order to be meaningful. In stark contrast to that black-and-white reading of Kant (see notes 7 and 10), our foregoing examination of Kant's theory of the prudential role of historical faith in transmitting moral religion to human communities demonstrates that, unlike the foolish approaches of the Stoics and Epicureans (or, we might add, of the deontologists and constructivists among Kant-interpreters), genuine Kantian wisdom welcomes the person who aims to be *virtuous* (i.e., the one who is willing to live the kind of good life that *would* serve as a suitable container) to walk the nuanced path of *prudence* (i.e., to find the genuine doe of a worthy historical faith that supplements pure rational religion in a way that produces *justified* happiness). Because our attempts to be good are all bound to be imperfect as a result of radical evil, Kant wisely argues in *Religion* that the prudent person should "milk" a "doe" that belongs to a reliable "dairy": that is, we are most likely to succeed (in seeking the highest good) when we associate ourselves with amorally-grounded historical faith.

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