

Rejoinder to Lawrence Pasternack

 virtualcritique.wordpress.com/2015/07/19/rejoinder-to-lawrence-pasternack/

Critique

July 19, 2015

LAWRENCE PASTERNAK | Guidebook to Kant on *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* | Routledge 2014

By Allen Wood

On some points, Pasternack thinks I have misunderstood him. This may be true. I accept that on those points we agree. I have no interest in deciding whether it was his unclarity or my inept reading, or both, that was responsible for the misunderstandings.

There are too many matters of detail in Pasternack's reply for me to take up all of them. I choose those I regard as the most significant and easily addressed within a relatively short space. I therefore limit myself to four main topics.

1. Pasternack's frequent appeals to the authority of 'the literature'

I am disturbed by the frequency with which Pasternack refers to 'the literature' as an authority regarding the points where we disagree, especially where 'the literature' is critical of Kant or rejects the interpretations of Kant that I suggest in place of Pasternack's interpretations in cases where his interpretations seem to me to 'sell Kant short' or make him vulnerable to charges that he cannot accommodate Christian doctrines.

I took Pasternack's aim in the book to be defending Kant against a lot of 'the literature', and the main thrust of my comments is that I think he could have done a better job of this. My comments were aimed mainly at showing how he might have done so. Appeals to 'the literature' on points where I think we both want to reject what it says and defend Kant seem to me inconsistent with the basic aims of his book. In my comments I could not of course both discuss his book and all 'the literature' where I think a lot of it is wrong. I think I did indicate that I disagree with a lot of 'the literature'. I therefore do not find appeals to it persuasive as reasons for retracting my interpretations or defences of Kant.

This is especially true of the question of Kant's symbolic interpretation of vicarious atonement and what I put forward as the 'forgiveness interpretation' of Kant's resolution of the "third difficulty" (AA 6:71–8). Pasternack offers no defence of his own interpretation of Kant's response to the third difficulty and no

substantive criticism of mine. He appeals only to 'the literature', in which he says this interpretation is rejected. To me that argument from authority carries no weight at all. 'The literature' was what I thought Pasternack and I were opposing.

It may be that I partly misunderstood Pasternack's aims in his book. I took him to be defending Kant as far as he was able against criticisms in 'the literature'. My comments were intended to help along those aims. I think in my comments I was quite clear that I regard the misunderstandings of Kant on which the common criticisms are based as symptoms of a serious cultural deficiency, which makes us unable to understand enlightenment religion, as found not only in Kant, but also in such other great thinkers as Lessing, Mendelssohn and Fichte.

Perhaps Pasternack's attitudes here are not like mine, and more like those of the modern culture I am criticizing. I take his appeals to the authority of 'the literature' in his replies to my comments to be a sign that this may well be true. If so, then my disagreements with him go deeper than I realized. He is more like Hare, Michalson, Wolterstorff, and Insole than I thought he was. Too bad.

2. Does Kant "appraise" Christianity? Is his procedure inconsistent with his purely philosophical aims?

Pasternack agrees with Kant's critics, both the censors in his own day and modern Christian philosophers and theologians in our day, in answering the first question in the affirmative. He also answers the second in the affirmative. I think Pasternack, Wöllner, and Kant's Christian accusers today are all wrong in giving these answers.

Kant's aim is to see how far doctrines of Christianity can be reconciled with the religion of pure reason. This is a purely philosophical exercise. It is, in Pasternack's own words (also Kant's), an "experiment". Kant wants to see how far Christian doctrines can be reconciled with the religion of pure reason. The general result is that he concludes they can if they are interpreted in certain ways, but not if they are interpreted in others. That is how his programme works. It is a purely philosophical programme, not an appraisal of Christian doctrines themselves, and not even an appraisal of their ecclesiastical interpretation according to the standards of church authority. Kant does not tell theologians or clerics, or even ordinary believers, in their capacity as members of an ecclesiastical faith and subject to its authority, what they should believe or even how they should interpret their doctrines. Kant says only how those doctrines would have to be interpreted in order to reconcile them with pure reason. Kant does not see this as offering an appraisal of their doctrines, simply because the standard is philosophical, not theological; it uses pure reason, rather than agreement with putative revelation or ecclesiastical authority, as its standard.

Kant would think that he is offering an appraisal of Christian doctrine if he were to say that some doctrine is false or pernicious. But if he says that it is acceptable to the religion of pure reason if interpreted in way P but false or pernicious if interpreted in the way T, then he is not offering an appraisal of the doctrine itself, but at most of a certain interpretation of it, and that only from the standpoint of pure reason, not from the standpoint of church theology, authority or revelation.

On many points, such as vicarious atonement, he offers an interpretation of the doctrine according to which it can be reconciled with pure reason. Pasternack claims, contrary to this, that Kant simply rejected the doctrine of vicarious atonement. This is a point in dispute between us. I maintain that Kant accepts the doctrine as consistent with rational religion if it is given the interpretation he offers in response to his “third difficulty”. Kant’s interpretation of the doctrine is a symbolic interpretation, and it rejects the idea that sin could be a transmissible liability. It is understandable that those Lutherans who not only accept the doctrine of vicarious atonement but interpret it as involving a transmissible liability and holding that the death of Jesus Christ on the cross paid a debt owed by human sinners should see it as a negative appraisal of their beliefs when Kant tells them this interpretation of the doctrine of vicarious atonement cannot be reconciled with reason. But I hope it is also understandable why Kant did not think he was offering any negative appraisal of the doctrine of vicarious atonement. The Lutheran authorities are not philosophers but theologians and ecclesiastics. They recognize revelation and its authoritative ecclesiastical interpretation as the proper standards for their doctrines. Kant offers no criticism of their beliefs based on those standards.

Pasternack proclaims as one of his theses that “the *Religion* was not just an academic study but a manifesto for religious reform”. But I do not see why an academic study could not also have the effect of promoting religious reform among those whose minds it might open to such reform. Kant does not write as a churchman or for churchmen. He writes simply as a free human being or scholar (*Gelehrter*) for other scholars, some of whom may also happen to be churchmen, but the open forum of philosophy, which recognizes only reason as its standard, does not address them as churchmen but only as human beings and scholars.

Pasternack seems to think that there is something inconsistent in Kant’s procedure when he takes the Bible, and how it is to be interpreted, as a topic of discussion in the *Religion*. But this is not inconsistent; on the contrary, it is a necessary exercise for Kant’s purely philosophical project in the *Religion* to ask how the Bible must be interpreted if ecclesiastical faiths resting on it are to be reconciled with the pure religion of reason. So there is no inconsistency; just the reverse.

Pasternack writes, as if it supported his charge of inconsistency against Kant, that

the Bible's value, like other vehicles of historical faith, is in its capacity to help further humanity's moral development—and thus “[o]nly a moral interpretation [...] is really an **authentic** one” (AA 7:48). Its authority is “drawn from the pure spring of universal rational religion dwelling in every ordinary human being” (AA 7:63).

This is simply a consistent pursuit of Kant's aim. Pure reason, offering only a moral interpretation, is offering the only authentic one from the standpoint of pure reason; it is drawn not from the standards of ecclesiastical authority or church theology, but from the “pure spring of universal rational religion dwelling in every ordinary human being”. That is just what Kant proposes and is not inconsistent with it. When in *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant asserts that “when conflict arises, about the sense of a scriptural text, philosophy [...] claims the prerogative of deciding its meaning” (AA 7:38), he means that philosophy claims this prerogative when its aim is to determine what meaning can reconcile scriptural religion with the religion of pure reason. If ecclesiastical authorities use a different standard from philosophy, such as tradition or church theology, Kant makes no attempt to second-guess the interpretations they offer based on that other standard.

Kant's critique of fetishism, priestcraft and the counterfeit service of God in ecclesiastical religion does disparage some religious beliefs and practices, but again only from the standpoint of reason, showing that these ways of interpreting Christianity make it irreconcilable with the religion of reason. They do not show, or even attempt to show, that these beliefs and practices violate the internal theological standards of the Christian faith as an ecclesiastical faith governed by its own internal authorities, based on church and revelation. As long as Christians remain within their own murky, stuffy unenlightened cloister of faith, Kant does not trespass into it or disparage what they do according to their own self-imposed standards and authorities. But once they come out of that dark place and into the world of enlightened reason, they necessarily expose themselves to its universal human standards. That's their doing, not Kant's, even if he welcomes it.

No doubt traditional Christians, once they do step into the fresh air and the light, will not like it if Kant tells them their interpretation of the doctrine of atonement, or other doctrines drawn from Scripture, cannot be reconciled with reason. They may take him to be disparaging what they believe and do, but he does so only from the standpoint of philosophy and reason, not from the standpoint of

revelation and authority, which is the standard they as Christians profess to recognize. It is inevitable that if they want to dispute with him about matters of reason and philosophy, they need to leave the dimly lit enclosure of ecclesiastical religion and revealed theology and come out into the light, using the standards of philosophy and not relying on the unenlightened authority of Christian orthodoxy. That is their choice, not Kant's, even if he is glad when they make it.

I do not think Kant is the least bit inconsistent in the way he pursues his programme. I think Pasternack is confused about what his program is.

3. *Unvertilgbar*: *inextirpable* or *inextricable*?

Pasternack writes: "Wood makes a baffling comment—criticizing me for 'mistranslat[ing] *unvertilgbar* as "inextricable". What makes this so baffling is that the above is not even my translation. It is, rather, from Di Giovanni's translation of the *Religion*, a translation edited and endorsed by Wood, in his series for Cambridge."

There is only one occurrence of the word '*unvertilgbar*' in the *Religion*, found at AA 6:51. DiGiovanni translates it, at the bottom of p. 94 of my copy of *Religion and Rational Theology*, as 'inextirpable', not 'inextricable'. I cannot say how Pasternack's copy reads, but I ask him to look again. I doubt that different copies of this text read differently. I suspect Pasternack misread his copy, and continues to do so up to this minute.

4. The Change of Heart: is it datable?

Pasternack writes:

I do tend to see the Change of Heart as dateable (i.e., there is a 'before the change' and an 'after the change' in an individual's life). I make this claim for both textual and philosophical reasons. Textually, consider AA 6:47–8, where Kant contrasts the "revolution" of a "single and unalterable decision" versus a "gradual reformation". Consider as well the footnote at AA 6:75n., where Kant discusses how the New Man seeks to "test and exercise his disposition for the good". There are many more such discussions of a before-and-after regarding the Change of Heart—so while one may not know the date of this change, nor even know if such a change has taken place, Kant does present it as an abrupt transition in time from one moral state to another.

'Datable' in one sense means simply involving some relation between before and after, and any change involves a before and after and is datable in that sense. But in a narrower and more proper sense 'datable' means 'able to be dated to a

particular time'. I think Kant regards the Change of Heart as datable only in the first, looser sense: it involves a change, an alteration between distinct and opposed principles, and a before and after. But it is not necessarily datable in the second, more proper sense, which is the sense I think Pasternack thinks is required to capture Kant's meaning. Pasternack now seems to think that it may not be datable in the sense that we can identify the precise time it occurs, but he still thinks there must be a precise time at which the Change of Heart takes place. He thinks that if Joe undergoes the Change of Heart, neither you or I or Joe would know when it occurred—that, for instance, it occurred precisely at midnight on the first day of the new millennium, as December 31, 2000 turned into January 1, 2001—but presumably God would know it, and there would have to be a fact of the matter about precisely when it happened.

If Pasternack does think this is Kant's doctrine, then he is clearly mistaken. But Kant's repeated references to gradual improvement in conduct as the only confirmation of the Change of Heart seem to me to imply that he is not interested in datability in the more proper sense. The "single unalterable decision" refers to a distinction between two opposed principles, maxims or dispositions, not necessarily between two adjacent time slices. Kant repeatedly indicates that the only manifestation that matters is a gradual improvement in conduct: "the good (though narrow) path of constant *progress* from bad to better" (AA 6:45) or a "continuous advance *in infinitum* from a defective good to something better, [though] always defective" (AA 6:67, cf. 6:68–9). I take these claims to entail that there need not be (though of course I suppose there could be) a definite, datable moment at which the change of principles takes place. The important thing is that the change should be manifest in gradual moral progress.

Pasternack's mistake may be natural because Kant does deny that the Change of Heart can be effected "through gradual reform, but requires a *revolution* in the disposition" (AA 6:47). I may have been partly responsible myself for our misunderstanding over this, since I used the words "gradual reform" in describing Kant's doctrine of constant moral progress. This might have led Pasternack to think I was attributing to Kant agreement with a proposition he explicitly rejects. So let me try to be clearer. When Kant rejects "gradual reform", I think he means that the Change of Heart cannot consist in adopting one totally depraved principle today, a slightly less corrupt principle tomorrow, a merely thoroughly bad principle the next day, and so on, or committing ten malicious acts today, only nine tomorrow, eight the following day, etc., where each day the agent gets a little less bad, but always acts on a bad principle, displaying the radical propensity to evil and not fundamentally combatting it. The Change of Heart, however, must somehow involve the adoption of good principles, directly opposed to the radical propensity to evil. The question is: How does this show itself in the conduct of the

person? Kant thinks we never reach perfection in our conduct, but our conduct can and should exhibit good principles, not merely bad principles that are less bad than they used to be. This is what Kant's rigorism requires. It does not require, however, that the Change of Heart must occur through a single sudden event (e.g., a vision on the road to Damascus). Whether it has occurred depends on the constant moral progress of our conduct and not on our emotions experienced on a certain day and at a certain time.



© Allen W. Wood, 2015.

Allen Wood is Ruth Norman Halls Professor of Philosophy at Indiana University, Bloomington, US. Among numerous articles and book contributions, he has published the following monographs: Kant's Moral Religion (Cornell UP 1970, reissued 2009), Kant's Rational Theology (Cornell UP 1978, reissued 2009), Karl Marx (Routledge 1981, 2nd expanded ed. 2004), Hegel's Ethical Thought (Cambridge UP 1990), Kant's Ethical Thought (Cambridge UP 1999), Unsettling Obligations (CSLI Publ. 2002), Kant (Wiley-Blackwell 2005) and Kantian Ethics (Cambridge UP 2008). His latest book is The Free Development of Each: Studies on Freedom, Right and Ethics in Classical German Philosophy (Oxford UP, 2014). He is also, alongside Paul Guyer, general editor of The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, and has translated several of Kant's works as well as Fichte's Attempt at a Critique of All Revelation. He currently works on a book on Fichte's Ethical Thought. His Kant's Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals: A Commentary (co-authored with Dieter Schönecker), originally published in German, has recently been published with Harvard UP.

Website