Postscript: the kingdom of truth and the civil kingdom

We began this book by contesting the view of early modern German intellectual history as a dialectical progression leading to Kant. We have since discovered that this historiography is anything but a mistake. It is, in fact, a central weapon in the ongoing intellectual civil war between civil and metaphysical philosophy.

This historiography first appeared in the dialectics through which Kant represents his own transcendence of the philosophies that preceded his. In using the figure of *homo duplex* to organise his intellectual antinomies, Kant was able to reduce the colliding cultural worlds seen at Halle to a series of neatly paired intellectual oppositions – between rationalism and voluntarism, idealism and empiricism – which could be resolved through the cultivation of a particular intellectual deportment. This method was then used by his early adherents – such as the theologian Carl Friedrich Stäudlin – to write Kant-centred histories of philosophy (Hochstrasser 2000, 206–12). Like Kant, Stäudlin was centrally preoccupied with reconciling moral philosophy and Christian theology; and he was among the first to use the metaphysical hermeneutics of Kant’s *Religion* to marginalise Pufendorf for ‘failing’ to achieve this goal (Stäudlin 1808). Never forgiven for its detranscendentalising of ethics and desacralising of politics, at the end of the eighteenth century civil philosophy was driven from Protestant arts faculties by Kant’s renewal of *Schulmetaphysik*, finding itself increasingly restricted to the teaching of law and politics. If, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, many historians still treat the civil philosophers as failing to reconcile rationalism and voluntarism in a morally grounded politics, this is surely testimony to the long hegemony of post-Kantian philosophical history, which is perhaps only now beginning to break down.

In making its own contribution to this disintegrative process, this book has offered a redescription of Kant’s practical philosophy, including its dialectics. Kant’s philosophy is best understood as a modification of a
longstanding metaphysical paideia, grounded in the pathos of homo duplex, and dedicated to the ethos of intellectual self-purification. By presenting human experience as governed by a realm of pure intelligences, while simultaneously insisting that this realm lies beyond human understanding, Kant’s metaphysical anthropology is the programme for a particular kind of intellectual grooming. This is one that requires its bearers to maintain faith in the metaphysical noumena, but only as regulative ‘ideas of reason’ or as ‘deontological’ moral laws. At the same time, those undergoing this formation must accept the independence of empirical experience, but only as the mode in which the noumena appear to a being with our ‘human’ kind of sensibility.

The grooming of this ‘critical’ intellectual deportment – surely a modern form of Hadot’s Platonic exercises in ‘mental concentration and renunciation of the sensible world’ – holds the key to understanding the cultural role and historical significance of Kant’s philosophy. In forming an intellectual estate capable of both entertaining the positive sciences (of law, politics, theology), while simultaneously treating them as manifestations of a recessive power of creative intellection, this philosophy was responsible for a momentous double transformation of intellectual culture: the simultaneous rationalisation of religion and sacralisation of reason. With this transformation, German university metaphysics was able to reassert its claim to moral oversight of civil ethics, law, and politics. These sciences would now all be subject to the imperious gaze of a personage who claimed privileged access to the pure laws from which they devolved on the basis of his own intellectual purity – the ‘critical’ intellectual.

It was this reincarnation of the metaphysical personage that recommended Kant’s philosophical theology to modernising theologians like Stäudlin. Not only did the critical deportment permit the reconciliation of moral philosophy and Christian theology – through the subordination of civil conduct to a quasi-divine intellectual self-governance – it also sealed the cultural settlement that Neology sought between metaphysical rationalism and theological voluntarism. It did so via the anthropology of self-legislating rational being; for this assimilated theological voluntarism while simultaneously transposing moral regeneration into the philosophical register, where it could be administered by metaphysicians. In this way, the ‘Kantian settlement’ allowed university metaphysics to re-attach itself to the cultural power of ecclesiastical Protestantism, by providing ‘rational’ explications of biblical doctrines for the religious intelligentsia. At the same time, it allowed Christian
metaphysics to penetrate civil ethics, law, and politics. Here metaphysics would appear in the form of the ‘critical’ recovery of the pure moral law, the pure principle of justice, and the ideal general will that would eventually lead to the ‘withering away of the state’.

This transformation in our understanding of Kant’s practical philosophy lies at the centre of the essay that we now bring to a close. It was in order to effect this change that we sketched the history of metaphysics as an academic Lebensform (1.4), tracing its modifications through Leibniz (3.2) and Wolff to Kant, whose formal–transcendental ethics we described as an elaboration of the metaphysical paideia (6.3, 6.4). At the same time, through a parallel reconstruction – by treating its anthropology as an alternative irrefutable mode of spiritual grooming – we have been able to rescue civil philosophy from its present marginalisation in the history of moral philosophy (2.4, 4.2, 5.2). In stepping outside the engrossing but self-enclosed theatre of dialectical philosophical history, we have been able to encounter the ‘rival enlightenments’ of civil and metaphysical philosophy in their true unreconciled forms. Each, we have argued, may be regarded as an attempt to reconfigure the relations between religious and civil governance in the wake of their political–jurisprudential separation, but in divergent forms and in accordance with conflicting interests. Each executed this reconfiguration via a reshaping of the academic disciplines through which religious and civil intellectuals acquired their characteristic ethical deportments and intellectual expertise.

Herein lies the significance of their two fundamentally different attitudes to the relation between theology and ‘philosophy’. In continuing to hybridise the two fields – whether via Leibniz’s monadology, Wolff’s rational psychology and theology, or Kant’s metaphysical ethics and philosophical theology – early modern university metaphysics maintained its demand for the resacralisation of politics, in the form of a morally grounded state. It did so by treating the political community as the devolved ‘sensible’ form of the moral or spiritual community. As a result, in rationalist political metaphysics, political and legal rule appear as a debased mode of governance, required only until the moral community regains its capacity for reciprocal collective self-governance, which will appear in the form of the general will of a total or ‘unlimited society’. At this point the need for law and state will wither away, displaced by the moral sovereignty of the community of rational beings, who, in accordance with a revivified political ecclesiology, will form an ‘ethico-civil society’ or ‘kingdom of God on earth’.
Conversely, in partitioning theology and ‘philosophy’ – via their ‘spiritualist’ theology and statist natural law – Pufendorf and Thomasius were seeking to separate the pursuit of moral regeneration from the exercise of civil sovereignty. Their object was to reshape the academic intelligibility of civil authority, treating it in terms of the maintenance of social peace by a government exercising supreme power in a religiously or morally indifferent manner. In making this task central to his natural law, Pufendorf was giving philosophical expression to the desacralisation of politics that had been achieved by the political jurists seeking a way out of religious civil war. The civil philosophers were thus not attempting to institute a new integral moral–political governance of a total society – one based on a secular political philosophy – but to separate the maintenance of political order from the pursuit of moral regeneration. From now on these were to belong to different moral personae – the sovereign–subject and the teacher–auditor – inhabiting incommensurate moral worlds: the civil kingdom and the kingdom of truth. The latter would be unconditionally free unless it disturbed social peace; the former would be governed ‘absolutely’, on the condition that the sovereign power remained indifferent to all transcendent truths.

Given our fundamental concern to demonstrate the intellectual and institutional autonomy of civil and metaphysical philosophy, we shall not, of course, be closing this book by anticipating their future harmonisation. There is no shortage of such anticipations. Rather we shall conclude by reprising our prime object, to contribute to a chastened historical understanding of these cultures in their unreconciled state. We do so by sketching four themes for further research.

Our first theme is that of the statist or authoritarian character of early modern liberalism. We have touched on this theme several times and, of course, the notion of an authoritarian liberalism is familiar to readers of Carl Schmitt (Cristi 1998). Pierre Manent and Blandine Kriegel have also illuminated our understanding of this issue (Kriegel 1995; Manent 1994). Despite this, to the extent that it remains committed to a politics founded in rational moral self-governance, much modern moral and political philosophy remains uncomprehending of the statist character of early modern liberalism. As we have seen, however, Pufendorf and Thomasius did not derive the founding liberal rights – to security of the person and freedom of religion – from the moral capacities of rational individuals or moral communities. Rather they grounded them in the state’s capacity to pacify such communities, by withdrawing civil power from the moral domain and concentrating it solely in the maintenance
of external order (4.5, 5.6). Conversely, early modern doctrines of popular sovereignty were typically not liberal, as we saw in the case of Althusius (1.5). In grounding the exercise of civil sovereignty in a communal moral will – a will that could only be formed through the available religious pedagogies – these theories were incapable of making the separation between moral and political governance on which the first liberal rights depended. Under these circumstances, in which the legitimacy of civil power is held to depend on the general will of a self-perfecting moral community, it is always possible to envisage such power being exercised to ensure the existence of this will.

After the Kantian cultural settlement, the statist character of early modern liberalism vanished from sight in post-Kantian arts and theology faculties. At this point, the central reality of historical liberalism – that personal security and religious toleration depended on the pacification of fratricidal moral communities by a desacralised state – passed into the metaphysical looking-glass. On the other side of this inverting mirror – held up to society by the new alliance of rationalist philosophy and enlightened theology – security and toleration appeared as rights against the state, achieved by self-governing moral communities. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, the state’s liberal withdrawal from the moral domain would thus be subject to a profound and systematic misunderstanding. It would appear in post-Kantian histories of liberalism not as the means by which the state achieved the religious neutrality required to govern confessionally divided moral communities – not, that is, as the exclusion of the church from the exercise of civil power – but as an expression of the moral community’s transcendent resistance to the state.

In considering Jacobi’s wide-eyed claim that it was the ‘ceaseless striving of reason’, not law and state, that put an end to the wars of religion – and in recalling his Kantian relegation of all ‘externally imposed laws’ in favour of those self-imposed by free rational beings – we obtained a snapshot of the self-deluding history that ‘critical’ intellectuals would entertain in the wake of Kant’s inversion of the dependency of freedom on security (Jacobi 1782, 203–7). For it was not philosophical reason that put an end to religious civil war but, in fact, law and politics, and the forms of reason peculiar to them. Specifically, as Heckel has argued, it was positive Staatsrecht that permitted the formation of a ‘non-confessional or supra-confessional order of coexistence between the two great confessional blocks’ (Heckel 1984, 50). This was achieved, ironically enough, by treating law as externally imposed for the sake of peace,
hence as neutral with regard to inner moral truth. Only inside this politically imposed jurisprudential order of coexistence would the first liberal rights appear.

Our second theme – that of the historical independence and persistence of civil philosophy – is one to whose exploration we have contributed in this book. We have done so by arguing that there was no dialectical supersession of metaphysical rationalism and civil voluntarism – Leibniz and Pufendorf, Wolff and Thomasius – except in the minds of Kantian philosophers and historians. They of course undertake the dialectical exercises precisely in order to achieve this supersession ‘in thought’. The fact that Pufendorfian–Thomasian natural law and political jurisprudence survived its recurrent metaphysical critiques – continuing to form jurists and politici for the Brandenburg-Prussian state throughout the eighteenth century – is a longstanding theme of historical research (Rüping 1968; Rüping 1979; Wiebking 1973). We have also taken note of Stephen Lestition’s more recent exploration of a similar theme, in his timely account of the continuing role of civil philosophy in the formation of a ‘juristic civic consciousness’ in the law faculty of Kant’s own university during the mid-eighteenth century (Lestition 1989). To the extent that we have contributed to this theme, it is by clarifying the radical autonomy of civil philosophy – as an instituted intellectual paideia – from all projects for its philosophical (metaphysical) ‘critique’. Grounded in its own ‘Epicurean’ anthropology, and self-consciously opposed to the ‘Platonic’ recovery of transcendental grounds for knowledge and morality – a recovery which it regarded as the dangerous illusion of a rival intellectualist anthropology – Pufendorfian and Thomasian civil philosophy was immune to all attempts to reveal its transcendental grounds.

To the extent, then, that statist natural law and positive political jurisprudence did undergo philosophical critique and transformation, this was not the outcome of any weakness in its intellectual foundations. Rather, it resulted from the erosion of the institutional boundary between political jurisprudence and ‘critical’ philosophy, brought about by the spread of Kantianism as an academic enclave-culture. This is the lesson to be learned from accounts of the manner in which a group of Kantian legal philosophers – Hufeland, Feuerbach, Thibaut – dominated the Jena law faculty during the 1790s (Lingelbach 1995). For in their core doctrines – their insistence on the centrality of the moral law to jurisprudence, their refusal to derive justice from existing law, their insistence on the sanctity of the person as an end in itself, their relegation of
political–legal utility in favour of Kantian moral autonomy – we identify not the philosophical critique of positive jurisprudence, but something quite different: the institutional subordination of jurisprudence to the prestigious culture of Kantian philosophical critique. This subordination, we recall, is precisely what Kant’s *Rechtslehre* is designed to inflict, reserving insight into the pure ‘principle of justice’ for intellectuals prepared to purify themselves of all positive jurisprudence. The Kantian critique of positive jurisprudence thus represents the anti-juridical revenge of a metaphysics dedicated to reversing the law’s desacralisation of civil governance. Moreover this is how several anti-Kantian ‘popular philosophers’ saw the matter, as is clear in Friedrich Nicolai’s attack on the *Rechtslehre* for substituting moral philosophy for jurisprudence (Nicolai 1798).

The continuing importance of Pufendorfian natural law and positive *Staatsrecht* in other environs – ‘devoted not to the university but to government’ – indicates their grounding in an autonomous institutional–intellectual culture. In the early 1790s, at the very moment when the Jena Kantians were insisting that the state conform itself to the inner moral autonomy of its citizens – and when Kant himself was publishing his account of a future ethical state bearing the form of the ‘true visible church’ – the privy councillor Carl Gottlieb Svarez was instructing the Prussian crown princes in a very different conception of the state’s relation to the religious and moral cultures of its citizens: ‘Insofar as we regard the Regent simply as the head [*Oberhaupt*] of civil society, all his rights over religious associations flow solely from the rights of general supervision, through which he must ensure that no associations are tolerated in the state that are contrary to the ends of the state and endanger public peace and security.’ On this basis, Svarez builds the state’s rights of religious supervision: the right of the state to examine religious systems with a view to determining their impact on public tranquillity and security; to ensure that religious teachers are also well disposed to the state; to ensure that religious associations attempt to exercise no corporate rights apart from those enunciated by state law; and to prevent the controversies of opposed religious parties from breaking out into disturbances of civil order. If Svarez’s construction of the state’s supervisory right is thus immediately reminiscent of Thomasius’ defence of the religious rights of Protestant princes, then so too is the manner in which the statesman limits this right: ‘The state can never and under no circumstances be justified in prescribing what a religious association should teach or how it should order its form of worship.’ Further, ‘The
state can never prohibit the practice of a religion merely on the grounds of its dogmatic principles . . . Purely dogmatic concepts and opinions of God and divine things, of the relation of man to the Godhead, of his condition after death, no matter how false and incorrect, can never have a harmful influence on civil life and the duties that a man owes to his neighbour or the state’ (Svarez 1960, 504–6). In other words, a century after Pufendorf’s death, and regardless of its metaphysical critique, civil philosophy continued its task of forming the deportment of those charged with governing the desacralised state.

The third theme we have identified as worthy of further exploration is that of the quasi-religious character of enlightenment rationalism. We have seen that German civil and metaphysical philosophy were both deeply rooted in Protestant religious culture, which each nonetheless sought to reconfigure for its own ends. In referring to the quasi-religious character of early modern rationalism, we are thus indicating the reconfiguration characteristic of rationalist metaphysics. This reconfiguration imbues ‘rational’ metaphysics with a religious function by treating reason as that part of human being linking it to its divine intellectual archetype; for, in doing so, it deploys philosophy as an exercise in self-purifying, self-transcending moral regeneration.

At the heart of the religious function of metaphysical rationalism lies the metaphysical anthropology of *homo duplex* – the figuration of man as a pure intelligence temporarily embodied in a sensible being. This anthropology is responsible for the inward intellectualist character of the whole line of metaphysical philosophies, from Leibniz through Wolff to Kant and beyond. In requiring its initiates to view themselves as ‘sensibly affected rational beings’, the anthropology induces the pathos of metaphysical longing, driving them to renounce their civil surroundings and begin the endless task of intellectual self-purification. Yet this quasi-religious function of metaphysics is simultaneously the source of its rational ‘scientific’ claims; for it is through self-purifying abstraction that certain individuals gain access to the pure a priori concepts of which empirical things are the supposed manifestation. Both functions of metaphysical rationalism – the religious and the scientific – are captured in Leibniz’s conception of transcendent concepts as ‘perfections’ whose knowledge perfects the beholder. This is a knowledge promising access to the divine intellection of the pure concepts – of things, of morality, of justice, of regeneration – prior to their impure embodiment in the empirical prudential world (PW, 84; Gr, 11, 580–1). This privileged participation in a quasi-divine pure thinking holds the key to the moral and
epistemological authority of the metaphysician, which is in turn the source of this personage’s claims to exert influence in a variety of intellectual and social domains, including those of law, politics, and religion.

Modern Kantians generally argue that Kant achieved the rational emancipation of philosophy by effecting the final transition from a quasi-religious metaphysics to a fully formal transcendental philosophy. In the case of Kant’s moral philosophy, this transition is supposed to entail the relegation of all substantive metaphysical anthropology and cosmology in favour of a formal concept of morality derivable from ordinary consciousness. Nonetheless, in our reconstruction of Kant’s *Groundwork* (6.4), we have shown that the process of deriving the formal concept from ‘ordinary consciousness’ is itself a spiritual exercise, one deeply informed by the self-formative use of the anthropology of ‘sensibly affected rational being’ and the cosmology of the spiritual community. Even at its most formal – indeed, especially here – Kant’s practical philosophy retains its metaphysical anthropology and quasi-religious ethos. For it is through their self-formative use of this anthropology – through their renunciation of prudential ethics and purgation of all sensible inclinations and ends – that Kantian philosophers presume to accede to a universally binding (‘holy’) rational moral law; presume, that is, self-transcending access to a universe of rational beings whose *communio* is the moral law. Moreover, through this turning inwards – away from externally imposed civil duties and towards an absolute inner ‘humanity’ bearing all the features of the metaphysical God – Kantian ethical rationalism inherits the religious purism of its neoscholastic and Leibnizian predecessors. The faint chill of zealotry thus surrounds Kant’s treatment of suicide as sensible man’s sacrilegious assault on his own ‘humanity’, which ‘is conceived as an intelligible substance . . . as a subject that is destined to give moral laws to man, and to determine him: as occupant of the body, to whose jurisdiction the control of all man’s powers is subordinated’ (xxvii.627; *LE*, 369).

Rather than accepting the modern account of Kant’s supposed formalisation of a quasi-religious metaphysics, we should in fact begin to look for the quasi-religious aspects of modern Kantian formalism. Were we to consider John Rawls’s theory of justice in this light, for example, then we might well adopt a different view of the supposedly formal character of his central methodological strategies – in particular the ‘veil of ignorance’ required to enter the so-called ‘original position’ needed for the choice of principles of justice (Rawls 1972, 136–42). In requiring the philosopher to abstract from all forms of knowledge relevant to extant
civil ends and personally interested desires – in stipulating the philosopher’s ignorance of his or her social position, natural abilities, moral beliefs, historical and cultural location – might not the veil of ignorance simulate Kant’s spiritual exercise in self-purification and ascent to the spiritual community? After all, what is a community of mutually disinterested beings – beings whose rational calculations of interest come to form a reciprocating totality through abstraction from their personal and social ‘embodiment’ – if not a simulacrum of Kant’s community of intellectual beings? In other words, to the degree that knowledge of Rawls’s pure principles of justice requires the intellectual purification of those charged with knowing them, we have prima facie reasons for investigating whether modern Kantian formalism might not conceal the same quasi-religious metaphysics as its prototype. Further, might not the intellectual and moral prestige of the modern formal philosopher owe something to the religious deportment of the metaphysical personage? For how else does this philosopher accede to formal principles of justice except via the cultivation of a self-purifying transcendence of all instrumental social ends and positive laws? These at least are questions for further research.

Finally, our last theme draws attention to what might be called the neo-confessional character of rationalist political metaphysics. By ‘neo-confessional’ we mean the preparedness to declare metaphysical philosophy necessary for living a good life and, sometimes, the willingness to make assent to this philosophy compulsory, as the condition of forming a good society. The neo-confessional character of early modern political metaphysics is grounded in its intellectualist ethics. In modelling ethical conduct in terms of the self-legislating self-governance of an intellectual being – rather than, for example, in terms of the capacity to restrain external behaviour in accordance with public decorum or positive law – there is a tendency to treat the doctrine held to be responsible for intellectual self-governance as necessary for the good life. For as long as the metaphysics of morals is understood as a formal theorisation of a moral law in principle available to the ‘ordinary consciousness’, then the problem of a metaphysical confessionalism remains invisible. As soon, however, as we uncover the self-formative role of the metaphysical paideia – the moment we see that metaphysics programmes the exercises in abstraction and self-purification required to deport oneself as a self-governing intelligence – then its neo-confessional character becomes starkly apparent. For, if it is only intellectually self-governed conduct that is going to count as moral – and if metaphysics contains the doctrine and
discipline required to become a self-governing intellectual being – then metaphysics itself must be necessary for living a good life. It is only a short step from here to making metaphysical ethics compulsory and to declaring other forms of ethics not just erroneous but morally corrupting, hence deserving of prohibition or even of punishment.

We first encountered this chain of consequences in Leibniz’s remarks on the issue of whether heresy is a crime (3.5.3), written, it will be recalled, as a criticism of Thomasius’ negative answer to this question. The twin grounds of Thomasius’ answer – his voluntarist denial that ideas can affect the will, and his statist insistence that only external civil actions be punishable – encapsulate the religious and political disposition of civil philosophy. Conversely, it is Leibniz’s rationalist insistence that the goodness of the will is determined by the purity of the mind’s ideas – his fundamental teaching that humans are perfected through contemplation of the intellectual perfections – that leads him to regard heresy as culpable and punishable. For, in establishing a continuity between intellectual purity and civil conduct – without which, says Leibniz, we would be forced to the absurd Pufendorfian conclusion that good acts may come from bad dispositions – the way is open to exercise civil force to achieve the required intellectual purity. In Wolff’s discussion of the relation between the sage and the prince, we encountered an even more pronounced tendency to give civil force to metaphysical doctrine. Wolff treats metaphysics as both the key to knowledge of the true end of the state – the perfection of man’s intellectual nature – and as the means of acquiring the pure disinterested disposition required to direct government to this end. In other words he collapses the distinction between the sage and the prince – metaphysics and politics – and, on the basis of the continuum between the pursuit of moral perfection and the exercise of civil power, envisages his own natural theology forming the basis of a state religion (Link 1984, 116).

As we have seen (6.4.2), Kant also regards metaphysics as necessary for leading the good life, treating prudential–empirical ethics not just as erroneous but as morally corrupting, and metaphysics as both true and morally purifying: ‘We know well that without possessing such a metaphysics it is . . . impossible . . . to ground morals on their genuine principles and thereby to create pure moral dispositions, grafting them onto human souls [Gemüthern] for the highest good of the world’ (iv.411–12; PP, 65–6). Like its Leibnizian and Wolffian precursors, Kantian metaphysics may thus also be regarded as neo-confessional. Despite his attempt to open a gap between ethical cultivation and juridical coercion,
in treating the latter as a devolved version of the former Kant leaves the way open for juridical laws to be ‘elevated and absorbed’ into moral ones. Once this pathway has been opened, then it is possible to envisage a state governed by ethical laws.

In Kant’s account of this ‘ethical state’ or ‘kingdom of God on earth’ – whose blueprint is sketched in the *Religion*, the essays on world peace and cosmopolitan citizenship, and the *Conflict of the Faculties* – we see the full and final neo-confessional character of his metaphysics. For, unlike Pufendorf and Thomasius, who treat all moral societies or churches as voluntary associations permanently encased in a morally indifferent political state, Kant envisages the emergence of an ‘ethico-civil society’ that is co-extensive with the political state and destined eventually to displace it from within. There must be, Kant argues, a publicly proclaimed religious doctrine in order to form individuals into an ethico-civil society, even if such a public historical doctrine threatens to straitjacket the inner freedom of the moral law and corrupt the purity of ‘rational faith’. In fact, it is in overcoming this threat – via the progressive hermeneutic revelation of the rational faith contained in historical religion – that Kant’s metaphysics inherits its full confessional role, constituting itself as the rational theology of a ‘true visible church’ or emergent ethical state.

Kant’s political metaphysics thus resiles from the ideological neutrality of the desacralised state not by directly giving this state moral ends, but by envisaging its progressive withering in favour of the moral state hidden within, giving rise to ‘a union of human beings merely under the laws of virtue . . . an ethical commonwealth [*gemein Wesen*]’ (*vi*.94; *RRT*, 130). In proposing a state run on laws of virtue Kant is of course adopting a position antithetical to Pufendorf’s fundamental separation of the kingdom of truth and the civil kingdom, which entails that: ‘there need not be established a particular state in order to propagate and preserve truth, no more than it is necessary to set up a separate commonwealth where philosophy and the other sciences are to be taught’ (*DHR*, 35). For Pufendorf and Thomasius there can be no ethical state, because the condition of bringing tranquillity to religiously divided communities was the radical moral indifference of the state and the equally radical privatisation of religion. Hence, despite his insistence that the members of the ethical state are united by non-coercive moral laws, Kant’s political metaphysics compromises both the religious neutrality of the state and the political neutralisation of religion.

It is here that the neo-confessional character of Kantian metaphysics is most fully evident and its difference from civil philosophy most fully
apparent. This difference – approaching incommensurateness – is given symptomatic expression in the different uses that the two cultures make of the distinction between private and public. For Pufendorf and Thomasius it is religion and morality that define the private domain, their inward and unenforceable character defining the kingdom of truth inhabited by the teacher and auditor; just as use of coercion to preserve social peace defines the civil kingdom inhabited by sovereign and subject – there being no interstitial world or persona. In Kant’s *Conflict of the Faculties*, however, it is the individual’s official duties that define the private domain, while the public domain is constituted by scholars in free intellectual exchange. Moreover, it is envisaged that one day the free exchange of ideas will itself make the official exercise of power redundant, as the persona of the scholar displaces that of sovereign and subject.

This inversion of the usual conception of private and public has understandably struck many commentators as anomalous. It makes perfect sense, however, as soon as the community of scholars or republic of letters is seen as an avatar of Kant’s spiritual community and as an analogue of his ethical state. Under these circumstances, the official use of reason, for the purposes of church and state, indeed appears limited and restricted – ‘private’ in comparison with the spontaneous and transparent ‘public’ communications of the community of pure intelligences. It is, therefore, in envisaging the moral renovation of political governance through the figure of the rational community – the figure known today as ‘rational communication in the public sphere’ – that Kantian metaphysics assumes its full neo-confessional form. For here, an anti-political enclave politics, grounded in the metaphysics of rational community, envisages its own expansion into the ‘true visible church’.

In this setting, under such intense pressure to make the state ethical and accountable, the hard-won separation of the pursuit of moral regeneration and the exercise of civil authority threatens to collapse, at least ‘in thought’. Here too the gap between civil and metaphysical cultures is at its widest. For, while the former treats this separation as the condition of governing a liberal society, the latter regards it as something to be overcome, in order to facilitate the self-governance and self-perfection of a democratic moral community. At this boundary, where, from one side, the division of the kingdom of truth and the civil kingdom appears as the fundamental condition of a pluralistic liberal society and, from the other, as the unleashing of an instrumental repressive state, the rival intellectual cultures remain as far apart as they did in the eighteenth century.