

The Relationship between Morality and Religion in Kant's Philosophy

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Abstract

Kant delves into the relationship between morality and religion, particularly how traditional morality is integrated into practical reason and how the moral law is seen as a self-imposed rule of free practical reason. Kant distinguishes between two forms of religion: religion within the boundaries of pure reason and revealed religion. The former is based on the rational conception that the establishment of a supreme being ensures the supreme good; the latter emphasizes the independence and authority of reason in matters of faith. In his moral philosophy, both beliefs are crucial, not only in helping to sustain the moral life, but also in the way that both reason's conception of God and belief in revealed religion can positively affect the moral life.

Keywords

Kant, morality, religion, relationship.

1. Introduction

Kant does not propose a new morality in addition to the usual morality, but rather incorporates the usual knowledge of moral reason into the examination of practical reason, thus tracing the foundations of morality and viewing the moral law as a law that free practical reason makes for itself, i.e., self-discipline. Similarly, Kant does not propose a new divine law, but rather incorporates faith under the examination of reason in order for faith has subjectively adequate reason. The nature of divine laws is complex; on the one hand they are an integral part of everyday ethical life, and thus moral, and on the other hand divine laws are a coercive other law, and so are not the same thing as moral commands. For the finite rational being, he is inevitably confronted with a difficulty: how are the commands of the self-regulating moral law to be taken as the commands of the other-regulating God? Next, I will try to answer this question in terms of the relation between morality and the two religions mentioned by Kant, that is, the religion of the limits of pure reason and the religion of revelation.

2. Kant's Two Religions

Religion can be divided into two categories in the Kantian context: the religion within the limits of pure reason and the religion of revelation. The two bear different tasks in Kant's philosophy, and thus Kant's focus in the two discourses is also different. For the former, Kant's focus is on the need for reason to postulate a God as the supreme being in order to guarantee the supreme good, while for the latter, Kant's focus is on the need to make sure the independence of the philosophical disciplines, which take reason as their authority, by clarifying the boundaries of the disciplines. In the preface to the second edition of *Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that revelation can include the religion of pure reason, but that at least the historical part of revelation cannot be included in the religion of pure reason. John Hare argues that religion within the limits of pure reason and the religion of revelation are concentric circles, and that Kant's delimitation of the boundaries of religion of reason and religion of revelation can be understood in the same way that one understands Kant's ethics: namely, that The

religion of pure reason, because it is as universal as the principles of pure morality, must exclude all that pertains to the individual and to a particular time and place; revelation, on the one hand, is the divine revelation given to man through time- and space-limited vehicles such as the Bible, and this divine revelation excludes the divine revelation of reason. On the other hand, there is nothing in the idea of revelation that prevents God from revealing this purely rational religion to man. In the context of Kant, who emphasizes more on the boundaries between the two, the second aspect is what Kant emphasizes, i.e., that revealed religion cannot intervene in religion within the boundaries of pure reason, cannot deny the conclusions of religion within the boundaries of pure reason, and cannot deny the authority of reason in matters of faith.

In Kant's philosophy, religion within the boundaries of pure reason is a moral religion. Kant's discussion of "God" begins with the epistemological discussion of "God" as a supersensible thing by discursive reason in theoretical philosophy. But the idea of God cannot be the content of knowledge, nor can it be the object of knowledge. "The idea of God, as the idea of a 'most real being' (ens realissimum), is a 'transzendentes Ideal' (transzendentes Ideal). "The idea of God is a necessary requirement of reason, but the materialization and personification of the idea of God leads to a fiction" (KrV, A580/B608). The three kinds of arguments for God put forward by traditional Western theology, the existence argument, the cosmological argument, and the teleological argument, are all based on a transcendental illusion. By discursive reason alone, we can neither affirm nor deny the existence of God. At Kant, discursive reason cannot argue for the possibility of God's existence. From the teleological view, the idea of "God" can be retained as a "regulative principle" but not as a constitutive principle. At the same time, in the part of the "statute" in the "a transcendental methodology", Kant conceives of a "moral theology", i.e., "a belief in the existence of a supreme being, and that such a belief is a belief in the existence of a supreme being, and that such a belief is a belief in the existence of a supreme being. Kant conceives of a "moral theology", i.e. "a belief in the existence of a supreme being, which is founded on the moral law" (KrV, A632/B660). This belief comes from reason's understanding of the highest good: the highest good implies "the unity of virtue and happiness", i.e., the union of morality and happiness must presuppose a "primordial supreme good", i.e., God (KrV, A810/B838). Kant calls our belief in God and the afterlife "moral belief" (KrV, A828/B856). After clarifying the boundaries of belief, Kant shows how a universal moral law and its program are possible through the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, and in the dialectical section of the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant discusses practical reason's postulation of God and shows that the postulation is a requirement of the will based on a universal principle, not an arbitrary assumption or fiction.

3. Kant's Two Moral Beliefs

In Kant's system of moral philosophy, morality itself does not require God, but the requirements of the supreme good and the unanimity of virtue require practical reason to suspend God. As John Hare argues, Kant fails in arguing against the difficulties of moral theology. But this paper argues: more important than the argument is the Kantian context: the maintenance of the authority of reason over faith. In this context, the finite rational being has no reason to believe that God's commands will take a form other than the commands of the moral law, but finds himself justified in believing a moral belief. This is because a belief in God out of a belief in deontic consistency and thus a belief in God is a warranted belief. Just as the righteous Job believes in God's justice rather than taking Satan's torment of himself as God's guidance. Kant still refers to a moral belief when discussing faith.

Specifically, Kant recognizes that there are two corresponding moral beliefs by which we believe in these acts of God. The first moral belief is the belief that God will find a way to make

up for our shortcomings. This belief is necessary because although we have a seed of goodness in our hearts, this seed is not sufficient for us to live morally good lives because of our tendency to do evil. The second type of moral belief is the belief in the consistency of Devo: that is, a person believes that his future happiness does not require him to give up trying to live a morally good life. This belief leads the rational person to believe that he can combine an inner desire for his own happiness with a commitment to morality.

If a rational person has the second kind of moral belief, i.e., a belief in the consistency of *de fide*, does he still need the first kind? That is, a belief in special revelation or divine providence? For Kant, the answer is yes. For morality requires its followers not only to pursue duty and happiness, but also to prioritize duty over other commitments. The first moral belief leads him to believe that finite rational beings can give morality this priority when they are supported by God, and that God can ensure that finite rational beings can live morally good lives when they are not sufficiently well off on their own terms. According to Kant, the second kind of moral belief requires us to assume that God exists and that he assigns not only appropriate consequences for our good deeds, but also whatever rewards are sufficient to satisfy his goodness. The second moral belief is twofold: on the one hand, we believe that this Being has organized the world in such a way that we tend to be sufficiently successful in our attempts to do good to make it worthwhile for us to persevere in our attempts. On the other hand, we believe that the Supreme Being (God), also as the Highest Good, rewards us for our basic behavior.

It is worth noting that Kant does not discuss the absurdity of the unity of virtue and happiness, but rather the possibility of this unity. This is due to the fact that a finite rationalist cannot think that to deny the consistency is impossible. Instead, this belief can be secured through belief in the afterlife and God. Insofar as belief is what Kant calls subjectively well-founded to be true, the rationalist need only to postulate the existence of God to mean that the possibility of the two elements of the realization of the ultimate good, the "afterlife" and the "unanimity of the virtues," is guaranteed. This is what the finite rational being can grasp.

As for special revelation, Kant regards it as the "vehicle" of God's dealings with human beings. Reason, he argues, has the right to believe in a supernatural supplement that fills in the gaps of human justification, but the finite rational being does not need to specify what this supplement is as a form of knowledge because the finite rational being has no such transcendental knowledge. God Himself may tell the finite rational being, but it is inconceivable to the finite rational being. Thus, both "religion within the bounds of pure reason" and "revealed religion" are indispensable in Kant's account. Kant's account focuses on defending the authority of reason, but does not abandon the possibility of revealed religion.

Indeed, in Kant, reason cannot deny the possibility of revealed religion. However, this is not the point of Kant's account, which focuses on the need for reason to establish God's law by itself, rather than to be completely passive in accepting an entirely other-worldly command. As Allen Wood (1991) puts it, the so-called "pure reason" of "religion within the bounds of pure reason" seems questionable, since it apparently takes the position that God has supernaturally given man certain commands while denying that he is morally to carry out these commands. But this is certainly not a position that Kant intends to accept. Kant's only purpose in holding to the position of "pure reason" in religion may have been to disguise his apparent rejection of pure supernaturalism. It is also worth noting that Kant does not hold any nihilistic or atheistic position. Religion within the boundaries of pure reason does not deny special revelation, but it is not accepted in the sense of moral and purely rational religion. That is to say the rational agent obeys the command in special revelation. It believes it is God's command because reason itself realizes its own limitations and it has no possibility to deny God and his commands. But reason does not regard this obedience to special revelation as moral, and therefore does not obey the commands in special revelation as obligatory, because they do not come from the

moral law that practical reason enacts for itself. It does not find a ground for special revelation in the realm of practice; it is simply that reason cannot discharge the possibility of special revelation.

On the other hand, because reason is capable of realizing its own limitations, the rational person takes a cautious view of the commands of revealed religion. Kant argues that the rational person can determine only the moral beliefs within the limits of pure reason, but cannot deny the parts it cannot determine, and thus historical beliefs remain necessary for the finite rational being. Braithwaite (1964) and R.M. Hare (1973) argue that Kant, who came from a Pietist family, was able to fully comprehend the role of the stories of the traditions in religious beliefs that help the person who has been raised in the tradition to live a moral life. It is, after all, only a portion of the entire faith tradition that is capable of having reason as its ground. If what the divine law reveals is the full content of obligations, then religious tradition stories may still be necessary for people to maintain a moral life. In the unlikely event that human reason is unable to determine a moral ground, people at least move toward moral belief through historical revelation. In *The End of All Things*, Kant argues that human nature is imperfect because the dictates of reason are insufficient for moral action (8:338). Therefore, Kant sees "love" as the subjective maxim of freely incorporating the will of others into one's own actions, and as "the indispensable complement to the imperfection of human nature" (8:339).

Philip Quinn has argued that since Kant claims that all normal human beings are rational agents, as John Hare (1996) quoted from Quinn, Kant would not think that accepting revelation is necessary for anyone. Different from Quinn, John Hare holds, "For Kant, no human being is a purely rational subject, and so the subjective possibility of receiving revelation is necessary". It is the test of knowability, not assertability, that the story of the traditions of religious life fails at Kant. John Hare argues that those who conclude that Kant is agnostic about supernatural revelation are misleading. In the context of Kant's text, God belongs to the supersensible. He is therefore outside the scope of the discussion of "knowledge". If God does speak to man, he can never know that it is God who speaks to him. John Hare distinguishes between "knowing" in Kant's epistemological sense and "understanding" in the general sense, i.e., in Kant's narrower sense of "knowing" and "understanding" in the general sense. That is, in the narrower Kantian sense of "knowing," rational beings cannot know that the claim to receive supernatural revelation is true, and it is absolutely impossible for human beings to grasp the infinite through their senses. At the same time there is a good moral justification for belief in natural theism, although this "good moral justification" is far from adequate for the moral judgment of rational beings. But can moral grounds give special or historical insights, John Hare argues? For Kant, a person who has understood the requirements of duty will find Christian doctrines worth loving, even if they are not objectively necessary. People's minds abide by Christian doctrines because their understanding or what Kant calls knowing has been illuminated by the concept of the law of duty. Thus Kant's approach to special revelation is that insofar as the statutes in the Bible are consistent with practical reason, then, if some rational person is one who has been "strengthened" by the stories of the Bible, he ought to take these statutes as commands from God. In this way, he would treat himself, rather than all rational persons, as bound by these statutes. Religion, after all, is only a purely moral order in form; but as to the substantial aspect of religion, i.e., the sum total of obligations to God or service to God, this may consist in particular obligations as commands of God. These obligations do not derive merely from universal laws given by reason, and therefore we can only know them by experience and not a priori. We should be grateful to God that it is He who has formulated the various statutes and stories that serve as the vehicle for a complete and purest religious moral doctrine, and therefore for an unfinished Enlightenment.

For Kant, he does not deny the morality of the usual moral philosophical knowledge, but rather argues that the roots of morality cannot come through the usual morality. The best example of

this is Kant's distinction between “out of the moral law” and “in accordance with the moral law”. While it is undoubtedly “morally right” to be a “child”, it is not necessarily “morally right”, but may well be motivated by commercial interests. Similarly, compliance with a special revelation order is only a formality, and may be compelled by submission to force, rather than heartfelt obedience. Thus, as far as the rationalist is concerned, it needs to find out what a religion is that is within the bounds of pure reason, to bring the content of faith under rational scrutiny, and as far as religious belief itself is concerned, it needs religion within the bounds of pure reason, in order for the rationalist's faith to be a sincere conviction.

Thus, Kant insists that we should not think that a sinful man can be saved merely by seeking supernatural help, but that he “should postpone deciding on a good way of life until he has first freed himself from those debts” (6:105). That is, God's grace is not a cheap grace, and one cannot merely believe in Christ as Savior without believing in Christ as Lord. One cannot merely enjoy God's grace without being a moral person. In the Kantian philosophical system, on the one hand, reason needs to find in itself a sufficient ground for faith, to establish the authority of reason in matters of faith and to avoid falling into fanaticism in faith, and so it needs to establish a religion within the limits of pure reason; on the other hand, it needs to reveal religion as a vehicle to make up for the inadequacy of reason in matters of faith. The mystical part of religion, i.e., the mystery, is an object of reason which can be fully recognized from within for practical use, but not for theoretical use. Theoretical reason is limited by the requirement that the use of causal categories must be confined to the experience of the rational person, whereas faith in God is outside the realm of experience and thus does not qualify for the use of causal categories. Practical reason, on the other hand, is limited in that it must provide a subjective maxim for moral action. Since the moral law is self-regulating, the rational person cannot use an otherworldly divine law as a moral code. However, the rational person may have to believe that a supernatural help exists. But this supernatural help is not a mystery in the Kantian sense; rather, based on the limitations of reason with respect to supersensible things, reason may allow or even require this belief in supernatural help. The rational person can admit (einräumen) that the work of grace is incomprehensible because God's help or cooperation is necessary, but neither in theory nor in practice can this belief in supernatural help serve as a subjective maxim for action. According to Kant's theory, the rationalist has neither certain knowledge nor can he offer any valid opinion about historical beliefs and revelation, and reason lacks a subjective and objective basis for judgment in regard to historical beliefs and revelation. Thus a pure rationalist can believe that Christ's death and resurrection are necessary, but the historical belief that God acted in all these ways is not itself necessary for salvation. Consequently, in turning Christian doctrine over to scrutiny within the bounds of pure reason, Kant systematically excludes any help from outside the human race, and instead attempts to construct a religion within the bounds of pure reason. At the same time, Kant did not exclude the possibility of historical faith and revealed religion. So the quandary at the beginning of this paper is still retained: namely, how are the commands of the moral law or the moral obligations of rational beings as divine commands?

4. The Indispensability of Religion for Morality

In Kant's philosophical system on the one hand, practical reason is itself free and not dependent on any empirical factors; on the other hand, reason has realized its own limitations. For supersensible things such as God, reason's power of proof is limited. Reason has no other way of proving the existence of God than by moral proof. Moreover, reason itself cannot guarantee the *de fide* consistency it needs. Individuals may not be able to overcome the tendency to do evil without some kind of help. But if God is benevolent, one can at least hope that one can overcome one's own extreme evil.

Likewise, it is impossible for human beings to overcome the social corruption that fosters the tendency to evil. Kant even goes so far as to say that “even if everyone has good intentions, the lack of principles that unite them means that human beings deviate from the common goal of goodness, as if they were instruments of each other's evil” (6:97). The corrosive effects of society are powerful and self-reinforcing, and “the problem of the moral education of our people remains unsolved” (6:327), at least at the human level. At the level of providence, we can look to God's merciful intervention not only for individual transformation, but also for the providential establishment of a moral community: thus, “the establishment of God's moral people (i.e., a world-wide ethical community) is an endeavor that cannot be pinned on human beings but only on God” (6:100).

But because God is transcendent, divine mercy is not a substitute for human moral responsibility. “Man cannot therefore be idle in his endeavors, at the mercy of Providence On the contrary, every man must do so as if everything depended on him” (6:100-1). Providence and divine mercy are the antidote to moral despair, the guarantee that “higher wisdom will bring about the fulfillment of one's well-intentioned efforts” (6:101). Even with the cooperation of providence and divine mercy, one can expect nothing more than an “endless advance of the human will in the direction of full conformity to the moral law” (5:122), an “assault on the principle of evil . . . battle” (6:93), a constant “struggle” (6:78) between man's efforts toward good and man's inclination toward evil.

So, on the one hand, Kant insists that ethical cosmopolitanism does not depend on divine revelation, nor on any revealed religion. On the other hand, Kant's account of divine mercy suggests that divine mercy must be an essential component of any ethical community. Without divine mercy, one would obviously have to sacrifice the hope of moral progress, the strictness of the moral law, and would treat the fundamental evils of man as if they were normal to man. Giving up the former would render ethical cosmopolitanism hopeless and lead to moral despair. Giving up the second would cultivate a moral laxity, an inability to believe in true virtue and an ethical world community, and an inability to confront our own fundamental evils.

And excluding religion from morality may give rise to ethical self-deception. Without certain religious beliefs, it is doubtful that one can really be sincerely committed to the promotion of virtue, that is, whether these beliefs should be part of the program of an ethical community that seeks to promote virtue. As Patrick Frierson(2007) argues, “Without a belief in God's benevolence, promoting ethical cosmopolitanism or even one's own virtues is not only irrational, but psychologically difficult, if not impossible.” By further analogy with the assumption of practical rationality, we can understand the psychological characterization that Kant is concerned with here. In the Critique of Judgment, Kant revisits these axioms, but in a more psychological way. He discusses “a righteous man, like Spinoza, who thinks himself convinced that there is no God” (5:452), and he asks what kind of life such a person would lead. Kant explains that this righteous man would pursue the moral law from pure motives, but “his efforts would be limited” because, as far as he knows, nature does not cooperate with him. Kant says that there are two possible outcomes to this. One is that such a Spinoza will eventually abandon his purpose of moral justice, however well-intentioned he may be. The only way to avoid this effect is to “assume the existence of a moral master of the world, namely, God” (5:452-3). The point Kant makes here is psychological. Theoretically, one can be morally good without believing in God, but Kant argues that atheism weakens respect for morality and undermines moral tendencies. Part of the reason why one should believe in God is that such beliefs help develop one's moral sentiments, whereas not believing in God weakens one's commitment to morality.

5. Conclusion

Without belief in God's mercy, it is impossible to reconcile the absolute demands of the moral law with the fact of one's own extreme wickedness with one's continued commitment to the moral law. Theoretically, a finite rational being could be in a position to believe that he or she could not fully fulfill the requirements of the moral law and yet persist in adhering to it over time. Psychologically speaking, however, without belief in God's mercy, humans can fall into moral despair or hypocritical self-satisfaction. One can either lower the requirements of the moral law lest one make moral promises but fail to do them as a result. People can also believe that their sins are so bad that by nature they can only be villains. All of these results ignore the fact that people should live moral lives, and therefore ignore the contingent dimension of being human, and are therefore a form of ethical self-deception. So, in addition to being morally sincere in order to ensure moral consistency and to avoid moral self-deception, answering the question of what a human being is, faith is equally essential to morality.

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