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Kant and Grace

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Introduction

Immanuel Kant was not a theologian. He was a philosopher. To be sure, he was a philosopher who wrote on theological topics. Taken by itself, that fact should be no cause for alarm. Over the last two thousand years, there have been many writers who have written capably on both theology and philosophy; Augustine and Aquinas come to mind immediately, but there are certainly many others. The question is, of course, whether the author in question is able to give each discipline its proper place, or whether he allows the conclusions of his philosophy to swallow up the doctrines of theology so that his philosophy and a biblical theology contradict each other (or, presumably, succumb to fideism and suppress rationality so that matters of faith fly in the face of reason).

The topic of this paper is Immanuel Kant's view on the Christian doctrine of divine grace. Everything that he wrote concerning God's reaction to our actions was based on suppositions, and, insofar as he carried through on a doctrine of salvation at all, it was based on a concept of judgment and rewards, but leaves out the biblical teaching of God's grace, except in a highly contorted manner. To quote,

Moreover, even the hypothesis of a practical application of [the assistance of *works of grace*] is wholly self-contradictory. For the employment of this idea would presuppose a rule concerning the good which (for a particular end) we ourselves must *do* in order to accomplish something, whereas to await the work of grace means exactly the opposite, namely, that the good (the morally good) is not our deed at the deed of another being, and that we therefore can *achieve* it only by *doing nothing*, which contradicts itself. Hence we can admit a work of grace as something incomprehensible, but we cannot adopt it into our maxims either for theoretical or for practical use.²

That paragraph could conceivably be the end of this paper. For Kant, the concept of grace was self-contradictory and, thus, could not be accommodated to his system.

However, Kant did not stick to his convictions on this point. As we shall describe below, surprisingly Kant did wind up with a notion of "grace" in his theological explorations, though it bore little resemblance to what a Christian would consider to be grace. Thus, as

² Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt M. Hudson (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1960), pp. 48-49.

we look over the content of Kant's philosophy, on the one hand, he dismisses "grace" as self-contradictory, and yet he also accommodates a version (albeit a seriously mutilated one) of it. How can this be?

As I go along in this article, I would like first of all to provide some very general background to help us find a basis to answer the question of why Kant should have such a peculiar religious philosophy that includes a somewhat bizarre doctrine of grace, which, it turns out, was acceptable to no one, least of all himself. We must start by putting to the side some common general explanations that, at a minimum, do not shed direct light on Kant's work.

A. Potential Explanations for Kant's Error

1. Intrinsic Opposition Between Faith and Reason: Counter-example in St. Thomas Aquinas

First of all, the fact that Kant wrote as a philosopher, or even as an unregenerate human being, by itself does not imply that he had to be wrong on this, or any one specific issue. Consider the "theology" that he did produce. There is no question that his premises and the arguments in which he embodied them added up to a soteriology based on justice rather than grace. But, unless one were a psychologist who could infallibly predict the sequences of Kant's private thoughts, we could not really say why he employed those specific premises in these specific arguments.³ The only legitimate route open to us is that of following his thinking as recorded in his writings. And thus, we will have to go back eventually to the very starting point of Kant's philosophy. Still, let us clarify why the matter of Kant's stance as a non-Christian⁴ vis-à-vis Christian theology should even be an

³ It is easy here for the historian of philosophy to fall into the trap of invoking historical influences, and, thereby, commit a rather obvious form of the "genetic fallacy." For example, it is all too easy to state that it was Kant's formal education in deistic philosophy that led him to his views, particularly as a reaction against his early pietistic upbringing. However, this is an empty explanation because if Kant had gone in the opposite direction, one could just as easily say that he was influenced by his early Pietism and reacted against the deism of his day. The point is that Kant reasoned according to his own mind, which was clearly influenced, but not necessarily determined, by the intellectual world in which it grew to maturity.

⁴ I do not know to what extent it is necessary to underscore the point that by historical or biblical standards it would be absurd to consider Kant to have been a Christian in a meaningful way. I realize that in the mid-twentieth century there was [Footnote continued on next page ...]

issue. If Kant was a non-Christian philosopher who wrote on Christian theology, and his theology contained some serious flaws, isn't that what we should expect?

As unprofound as that sentence sounds, it may be helpful to pause for a moment and ask ourselves why that should be so. Is it inescapable that the reason of the philosopher must come to conclusions contrary to revealed truth? Are there two truths or two legitimate deductions, that of the philosopher and that of the theologian, on any given issue? St. Thomas Aquinas argued vehemently that there cannot be two inconsistent conclusions, one proposed by revelation and the other achieved by the proper use of reason, let alone two "truths." He stated,

Now, although the truth of the Christian faith which we have discussed surpasses the capacity of the reason, nevertheless the truths that the human reason is naturally endowed to know cannot be opposed to the truth of the Christian faith. For that with which the human reason is naturally endowed is clearly most true; so much so, that it is impossible for us to think of such truths as false.⁵

The reason why this should be so, argued Aquinas, is that there is only one world, the one created by God, only one revelation, the one given by God, and only one faculty of reason, the one instilled in us by God. The *Contra Gentiles* is a book of apologetics, based intentionally on rational arguments, but he makes the same point in the context of the *Summa Theologica*, which is devoted to the systematization and clarification of revelation.

All the same, Christian theology also uses human reasoning, not indeed to prove the faith, for that would take away from the merit of believing, but to make

a wave of undermining the very content of Christianity to the point where one supposedly could have a "secular" theology, the ultimate oxymoron to anyone but the "initiated." Suffice it to say that using the occasional theological buzzword does not make a conceptual scheme "Christian," and that any system of thought that denies the authority of the Bible, the true deity of Christ, his atonement and resurrection as historical events, his bodily return to earth in the future, and the need to receive his salvation by conscious faith in him, can only be a parody of Christianity. Such is certainly the case with Kant. See my more complete and somewhat informal discussion of the theologians of the 1960s and 1970s at http://win_corduan.tripod.com/theologians.html.

⁵ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, volume 1, chapter 7, paragraph 1. Hereafter *ScG*, 1,7, 1, etc.

manifest some implications of its message. Since grace does not scrap nature but brings us to perfection, so also natural reason should assist faith as the natural loving bent of the will ministers to charity.⁶

Thus, theology and philosophy can be partners, or, as the popular expression goes, philosophy can fulfill the vital role as the "handmaid to theology."⁷ Nevertheless, without question, there are times in our experience when the teachings of Scripture and the apparent conclusions of human reason seem to clash. In that case, the consequence should be clear, according to St. Thomas.

For whatsoever is encountered in the other sciences which is incompatible with its truths [i.e., the conclusions of the science of theology] should be completely condemned as false.⁸

Insofar as there should be any hypothetical opposition between reason and revelation, it would stem neither from an intrinsic flaw within reason, nor from any possibility that reason and revelation address different realities, but from the faulty use of reason by human beings. Reason, as created by God, is reliable, and there is only one reality to which both reason and reality have access, though clearly from different vantage points. There are some items of belief or knowledge that reason cannot deduce, such as the Trinity or the Incarnation, but that restriction only means that these areas are closed to the discovery of their truth by reason; it does not mean that they are irrational. In short, there is no *a priori* reason why a properly constructed human philosophy must end up with theological error.

Truth is whatever corresponds to reality; philosophy and theology both seek for truth. Reality was created by the same God who also created human beings with the faculty for rational thought. Consequently, philosophy and theology should arrive at the same truth, and there should be no good reason why an "overemphasis" on philosophy should distort the conclusions attained in theology. In fact, it is not at all clear what an "overemphasis on philosophy" could even be. Philosophy can go wrong in two ways, either by accepting a

⁶ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, volume 1, question 1, article 6. Hereafter: *ST*, 1, 1, 6, etc.

⁷ See my further discussion of this point in *Handmaid to Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009).

⁸ Aquinas, *ST*, 1, 1, 6.

falsehood as truth or by ignoring the facts that God has directly revealed, but in either case the fault does not lie with philosophy *per se*.

2. Noetic Effects of Sin: Counter-example in Two Eastern Religions that Have a Concept of Grace

Not everyone is as optimistic concerning the possibility of human reason arriving at some true natural theology within its marked-out confines. Some people consider the appearance of error in philosophy vis-à-vis theology inescapable. Here are some standard reasons:

Philosophy is based on human reason; human reason has been influenced by the fall; therefore, human reason is incapable of arriving at a true theology.

As appealing as this point maybe in general, it loses its force when it is explored more precisely in Scripture or, for that matter, applied to actual specific instances in the history of human thought. Theologians speak of the “noetic effects of sin,” by which they mean that our fallenness has skewed our capacity to reason in such a way that unregenerate human beings are incapable of grasping the true nature of God, the Creator and Sustainer of the universe, and of other spiritual truths. 1 Cor. 2:14 states:

But the natural man does not welcome what comes from God’s Spirit, because it is foolishness to him; he is not able to know it since it is evaluated spiritually.” (HCSB).

The apostle Paul sustains this thought in Romans 1:21b (HCSB) by declaring concerning unbelievers: “and their senseless minds were darkened.” However, we need to maintain this verse in its context. The darkening of minds referenced here occurred after the people had rejected the unmistakable content of general revelation.

What can be known about God is evident among them, because God has shown it to them. From the creation of the world His invisible attributes, that is, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what He has made. (Romans 1:19-20 HCSB)

Despite the clear facts that God had made available for people to know, they rejected the plain truths of this general revelation and substituted worship of the creature for worship of the Creator. They had the opportunity to recognize God from his creation, and they chose to deviate from what they could know and how they should have responded to that knowledge. Only then, subsequent to that

rejection, do we read that their minds were darkened. The noetic effects of sin do not rule out the capacity to know some things about God within the confines of general revelation.

Furthermore, even though the noetic effects of sin do keep an unregenerate person from truly understanding spiritual truth, they do not specify any one particular doctrine that a person may not realize. Since our fundamental concern in this article is how Immanuel Kant related to the concept of grace, it is important to know that it is also possible for unregenerate minds to arrive at a doctrine of grace within their self constructed schemes. This potential is demonstrated by two Eastern schools of thought:

a. The Tenkalai School of Hinduism

The Tenkalai school is one of the many schools of devotion to the god Vishnu in the form of the avatar Rama. *Pillai Lokacharya* (1264-1327), its founder, asserted that the only manner in which a soul can receive *moksha* (release, redemption) is by utterly trusting in the grace of Rama.⁹ Attempting to assist by producing works of devotion (*Bhakti*) will only interfere.

b. Jodo Shinshu, Popular Japanese School of Pure Land Buddhism

Similarly, *Shinran*, the founder of the Japanese school of *Jodo-shinshu* taught that the Buddha Amida freely grants access to the Paradise that he has created to anyone who is thankful to him for having done so and expresses his gratitude by saying the standard mantra associated with him, “*Namu Amida Butsu*” (“I worship the Buddha Amida,” often abbreviated as the *Nembutsu*). One recitation is sufficient. Saying the mantra should in no way be construed as a work intended to earn salvation, but merely as a sign of accepting what Amida has already done on behalf of a person, and being thankful for it. Shinran wrote,

Some may think that it is necessary first to cleanse the heart from all defilement, and then to receive the inestimable gift. That is not so. The depraved heart (*mōshin*) of the sinner cannot cleanse itself by its own efforts. If it were possible for it to do so, there would be no room for the exercise of Mercy. It is a comforting fact that Saving Faith can be received by the sinner whilst yet in his

⁹ Sabapathy Kulandran, *Grace in Christianity and Hinduism* (Cambridge: Clark, 1964), p. 176.

sin. This fact throws the greatness of Amida's compassion into more striking prominence.¹⁰

So, here we have two false (i.e. non-Christian) religions, both of whom came up with a doctrine of grace, and—to the best of my analysis did so independently of direct outward influence. Still, even if they did have external influences in the direction of grace, that makes no difference for this thought-experiment since so did Kant. Needless to say, there are serious differences between grace as it functions in these religions and the New Testament framework for the concept of grace¹¹, and I am claiming nothing for them except creativity. Still, they do have precisely the doctrine that Kant does not have, namely that salvation is not based on purely judicial or meritorious grounds. I assume that Lokacharya and Shinran were suffering from the noetic effects of sin just as much as Kant was. My point is then that Kant's concept of salvation based on attaining an appropriate degree of goodness cannot simply be explained by the noetic effects of sin.

3. Impenetrability of Certain Areas to the Human Mind: Problem Is to Identify Those Areas Is Self-refuting

a. There Are Limits Beyond which No Human Mind Cannot Penetrate

This thesis could be an interesting and helpful explanation of the deficiencies in Kant's theology. Unfortunately, I can neither confirm nor deny it, because in order to do so I would have to be able to identify those areas and, in fact, in Bertrand Russell's sense of the word, provide a minimal "description" for them, but I cannot do that because my human mind cannot penetrate to those ineffable locations.

b. There Are Limits Beyond which the Unaided Mind Cannot Penetrate

The little word "unaided" makes all the difference here. There are, as we noted already, some truths that have been revealed to us, such as the Trinity and the Incarnation, and, were it not for divine

¹⁰ Shinran, *Shinshu Hyakuwa*, # 67, in Arthur Lloyd, *Shinran and His Work at Sacred Texts*. URL: <http://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/sahw/sahw15.htm>.

¹¹ See my article, "Words for Grace in Hinduism."

URL: <http://www.scribd.com/doc/47940311/Words-for-Grace-in-Hinduism-2>

special revelation, we could not know about them. It is fairly clear that Immanuel Kant suffered from revelation deprivation. His aim for religion was, of course, to keep it within the white lines that demarcate the boundaries of reason. Assuming that salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone is something that can only be known in that specificity on the basis of special revelation, then by recognizing that Kant excluded all revelation from his views of religion, it looks as though we could be on the verge of finding an explanation for his lack of a doctrine of divine grace.

However, we are not quite there yet. The problem with this explanation is that Kant did make use of instances based on revelation at certain points when it suited him. See, for example, his re-interpretation of the divine judgment.¹² Consequently, our question still needs to be more pointed. How is it that Kant would have dismissed this particular point of revelation, namely, the doctrine of God's grace, in a manner that appears to be final and permanent, and then allowed it to reappear in a wholly unrecognizable form?

B. Kant's Not-so Copernican Revolution

At the risk of invoking a truism, it all goes back to Kant's starting point. Kant left no doubt in the preface to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* of how delighted he was with his "Copernican Revolution." Still, one needs to ask two questions: "To what extent was it a revolution?" and "How 'Copernican' was it?"

In the eighteenth century, modern Western philosophy had entered a new phase that carried the prospect of great progress. After several centuries in which most of the advances in philosophy had occurred outside of the academy, philosophy had once again found a respected place within the universities. René Descartes (1596-1650), the indolent retired soldier, had rescued philosophy from the skepticism that was the legacy of the late middle ages and the early renaissance. Two well-known figures who carried forward his rationalist principles were Baruch Spinoza, the lens grinder, and Gottfried Leibniz, the diplomat. Cartesian rationalism was opposed on the British isles by John Hobbes, the private tutor, John Locke, the physician, George Berkeley, the bishop, and David Hume, the

¹² Kant, *Religion*, p. 133.

historian. However, despite the seeming disparity, other than Hobbes who was a contemporary of Descartes', the British empiricists mounted their opposition to the rationalists on the identical understanding of the nature of a substance as Descartes, namely as something that was separate (if it existed at all) from its properties. They differed only on the method of how we get to know the things constituted by such substances, even if they were empty collectors for bundles of sensory impressions. Descartes had set the agenda for modern philosophy, and—regardless of minimal differences—most philosophers followed his fundamental plan.

Now philosophy had reestablished itself as a discipline in the universities of Europe. Kant held a well-respected chair in Königsberg in East Prussia. Early on in his career—along with most German philosophers—he aligned himself with the rationalistic tradition, as it was now championed by Leibniz's disciple, Christian Wolff, who had taught at Halle and Marburg. The cream of philosophy had come back into the lecture halls and seminar rooms of the universities.

But philosophy was stuck. Both rationalism and empiricism had gone as far as they could, and skepticism was looming on the horizon once again. David Hume appeared to have taken the simplistic empiricism of John Locke to its logical conclusion, and, as he himself relates, that conclusion was an unviable skepticism¹³. To anticipate Kant's comment: "Content without concepts are blind." Thus, David Hume awoke Kant from his dogmatic slumber.¹⁴

On the side of rationalism, Leibniz's goal of attaining a state of affairs in which every belief could be checked for truth by rational calculation¹⁵ was far from becoming reality. He had hoped to create an entire philosophical system on the basis of two principles: the principle of identity (which implied contradiction and excluded middle) and the principle of sufficient reason. However, these

¹³ David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, vol. 1 (New York: Dutton & Co., 1939, orig. 1817), pp. 253-55.

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1950), p. 80.

¹⁵ Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz, "On the Universal Science: Characteristic" in *Monadology and Other Philosophical Essays*. Trans. By Paul & Ann Martin Shreck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 13 – 14.

principles, which might be considered to be indispensable to organize the content of our knowledge, could not supply the content. Consequently, reason could just as easily prove one side of an issue (e.g., the world had a beginning in time) as the other (e.g. the world is eternal), thereby creating the antinomies of reason. As Kant would state, “Concepts without content are empty.” Thereby, and this is a fact frequently ignored, the antinomies of reason also woke Kant from his dogmatic slumber.¹⁶

The problem for both orientations lay directly in Descartes’ “plan,” which, to put it drastically, consisted of digging oneself into a subjective hole as deeply as possible and then seeking to emerge triumphantly with indisputable conclusions. Both the rationalists and the empiricists copied Descartes’ starting point, beginning with an isolated human mind, at least heuristically disconnected from both God and other minds, and then trying to find a method by which they could acquire knowledge, evaluate its truth claims, and win back the world they had forsaken methodologically. Even though this method has been particularly associated in explicit fashion with Descartes, it constituted precisely the approach used by all modern philosophy: Start with a minimum and seek to arrive at a maximum. It didn’t work.

In light of their disappointing lack of success, Kant proposed that we need to begin with the fact that we do, in fact, know certain things and then delineate the conditions that make knowledge possible and certain. This approach is his transcendental method; it was his rudder to steer clear of the Scylla and Charybdis posed by empiricism and rationalism. by In contrast to the previous philosophers of either stripe, for whom the mind was essentially a passive receptor of preformed knowledge once it had escaped from its self imposed prison, Kant held that the mind itself contributes to the formation of what it then recognizes as knowledge.

So, along came Kant with his “Copernican revolution” of philosophy. His idea was that both rationalists and empiricists were unsuccessful in their conclusions, because they were wrong in their starting points. It’s not difficult to disagree with that point. But look where he was taking philosophy!

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects. But all attempts to extend our knowledge of objects by establishing something in regard to them a priori, by means of concepts, have, on this assumption, ended in failure. We must therefore make trial whether we may not have more success in the tasks of metaphysics, if we suppose that objects conform to our knowledge.¹⁷

He was moving even further inward! There was nothing “Copernican” about Kant’s so-called Copernican revolution. An important corollary of what Copernicus discovered, and what apparently annoyed many people, was that he declared that the universe does not revolve around us human beings. Neither the earth, nor human beings, let alone you or I, are at the center of the universe. The earth is but one of several planets revolving around the sun, and, as we discovered later, the sun is but one of many stars composing one of many galaxies.

But Kant took us even deeper into of our own selves. In fact, he located the basic categories by which we know the world inside of ourselves.

- Time is constituted by our minds. Did someone first blow the whistle, and then the train started? If that’s the sequence in which you experience the event, that’s because your mind ordered it in that way. We have no access to time sequences apart from how our minds have assembled them for us.
- Space is constituted by our minds. If this room looks pretty neat and orderly to you, it’s because your mind has imposed that arrangement on it. We have no blue print of how objects are arranged in space other than the one that our mind has drawn up for us.
- Does the occurrence of one event cause the occurrence of another one? David Hume, the British empiricist, made this question famous, or should I say, notorious. He said that we cannot have actual knowledge of causation because, even though we may see one event that is regularly followed by another event, we don’t see any empirical object called a “cause.” Kant said that that’s okay; we don’t need to see “causes” in the world outside, because concepts such as causality are not out there; they are in our minds, and our minds impose them on our perception of the world.

In short, Kant went even further than the previous modern philosophers in viewing the mind as autonomous; it not only was the starting point from which to try to reach the world, but it actually was

¹⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1929), p. 19.

the instrument that made the world coherent and knowable. So, was this a revolution? And, specifically was it a *Copernican* revolution?

It certainly was a revolution insofar as Kant insisted that the objects of perception conform to our minds rather than that our minds conform to the objects of perception. However, in significant aspects, this was not a revolution at all; it was an intensification of the subjectivism on which Descartes and his followers in modern philosophy built their subsequent systems. Descartes held the assumption that, even though we can start methodologically without an external world, we can dig ourselves out from behind our self-erected barriers and find our way back to that external world with greater certainty. Kant, all protests notwithstanding, diminished this hope significantly. Sure, Kant always conceded that there was an external being, an object of perception, the "thing-in-itself," though by Kant's construal we can never have direct access to it. Without going further into the details of Kant's epistemology here, the point I want to emphasize is simply that the revolution, whose flames Kant ignited, was not so much a turnabout as a logical progression towards a new and deeper level of subjectivism.

Thus, as we already stated above, Kant's self-description of his contribution as "Copernican" is diametrically opposed to the facts. Philosophically speaking, even though Copernicus himself undoubtedly did not have such a philosophical intent, the common corollary became that, by saying that the earth was not actually located at the center of the solar system, let alone the universe, Copernicus was also making us realize that we human beings were no longer at the center of the universe. I believe the description above has shown decisively that in that sense Kant's philosophy was anything but Copernican because he put the human being, the knower, at the very center of "everything." I am using the word "everything," as broad as it is, advisedly, because ultimately for Kant the distinction between epistemology and ontology was blurred, which led it to become fused in the German Idealists.

C. Religion and Ethics

1. The Categorical Imperative

For most people, religion and ethics are intertwined, but it is not unfair to say that in Kant's total philosophy, religion existed only to

make ethics coherent. Few people entertain a genuine divorce between religion and ethics, but for most people ethics flows from religion. For Kant, religion served as an unavoidable complication to ethics. Let us pursue the development of his thought on this matter, leading us eventually back to his protean view of grace.

There are two basic facts that make up Kant's ethics: freedom and the moral law. Of these two items, a moral law would not be possible apart from freedom. Eventually the two facts lead us to two further indispensable postulates: the *summum bonum* (the "highest good") and the existence of God.

As is well known, Kant expressed the content of the moral law frequently in terms of fulfilling a duty. Furthermore, he went so far as to make the fulfillment of a duty the only acceptable motivation for the action to count as morally significant. If a person should do something for reasons other than to live up to the obligation to fulfill a duty—e.g., to pursue greater happiness or to comply with an instinct—the act would not be moral. It would not necessarily be immoral, but it would be outside of the rubric of morality altogether, just as an indicative descriptive proposition would be. Thus, in a moral situation, the subject has to have the freedom to choose consciously to fulfill a duty or not to. But here is where matters start to get tricky. If he chooses not to fulfill a duty, but gives in to a desire or an instinct, how free was he actually? Did he really choose or just slide along with his hormones or impulses?

So, if a person follows an instinct, such as to protect his children, his actions are not morally praiseworthy, because, again, he never invoked his freedom to choose. Thus, a truly altruistic person, someone who by nature will always do the right thing, it is not a truly moral person because he cannot help himself but do good. There must be freedom to choose, and there must be a choice, and the freedom to choose must play a role in the choice in order to make it a genuine moral choice.

Kant's moral imperative is well known: "Always choose in such a way that you can will your maxim to be universal law." It represents a deontological approach to ethics insofar as there is a right choice in compliance with duty and there is a wrong choice that goes counter to duty. Thus our ability to will the maxim to be universal law does not have anything to do with the factual consequences of one's choice, a

matter on which there frequently is confusion. Take the example commonly used, "One can will the lie, but one cannot will lying to become a universal practice." Now, this is what Kant is not saying: "In a world in which lying is universal law, no one could trust anyone else. It would be impossible to communicate with each other, commerce would be impossible, and ultimately everyone would hate each other, not to mention further consequences along this line that would make life insufferable." As true as these things may be, they are consequentialist in nature, and would fit better with John Stuart Mills' Utilitarianism than with Kant's deontology. What Kant is saying is that:

It is impossible, that is to say, a logical contradiction, to will the lie because in doing so one would make lying a universal practice. So, if I say, 'I will lying to be universal law,' I must be lying when I make that statement. And thus the statement 'I will lying to be universal law' would be in a league with 'this sentence is false.'¹⁸

The categorical imperative gains its force from the fact that its denial involves self-contradiction. The fact that certain prohibitions, such as the one against lying, have also been a part of what is alleged to be a part of Christian revelation, is of no genuine consequence for Kant.

2. Allowing for Actions to be Considered Evil

However, Kant was keenly aware of the fact that fulfillment of duty for duty's sake alone, was not necessarily a sufficient incentive for human beings to be moral. This observation was particularly true because, after all, the appropriate duty might go counter to our instincts, our prudential reason, and our interest in happiness. It's all very well to insist that we must act in compliance with justice. That obligation is a lot easier to "sell" if justice is just. There seems to be little point in making ourselves miserable by acting according to duty if, in the long run, there is no benefit in doing so except to maintain consistency with a philosophical scheme. Now, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant had attempted to demolish the traditional proofs for the existence of God and, in fact, consigned most talk about God to the realm of the noumenal, which is not accessible to our minds.

¹⁸ This is not a quotation. I have merely offset this paragraph in order to emphasize its importance.

However, in the second critique, the *Critique of Practical Reason*,¹⁹ Kant found himself in need of a God to make ethics work. There must be a way in which harmony is created between the harsh demands of duty and the temporary forfeiture of happiness. There must be a "*summum bonum*" so as to allocate rewards those who have consistently lived by the categorical imperative of moral duty. Kant postulated an afterlife in which this "highest good" could be attained. It would not necessarily be a place of unbounded joy and pleasure, but it would be the opportunity to continue one's moral development as a human being. Now, such an afterlife, geared to the attainment of the "highest good," demands a God, and thus, Kant postulated also— for the sake of making the argument work—the existence of God . So, an ethics based on nothing but human reason and freedom cannot help but accommodate certain quasi-theological concepts, though only to the extent that their hypothetical reality is necessary to enhance the viability of freedom and morality. Of grace, we can see, there is neither need nor interest.

However, as John M. Silber has clarified²⁰, there is a serious problem with Kant's account of ethics (and thereby of religion) as it has been developed to this point. Let us say that, contrary to all of my instincts and oblivious to my happiness or well-being, I enter a burning building in order to rescue a child purely on the basis of my duty as I have chosen to perform it, utilizing my personal freedom. This action, I'm fairly sure, would be considered by Kant to be not only morally significant, but also praiseworthy. If the child in the house had been my son, on the other hand, as praiseworthy as the action might have looked to an outsider who had not yet read Kant, it would not be morally significant since, presumably, I would have acted entirely out of my paternal instinct; viz. I would not have taken recourse to my freedom to choose. As we said above, the freedom to choose is an integral aspect to make any action morally significant whether wrong or right. However, it is here that we hit a snag.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), pp. 126-36. Also, see Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), pp. 81-82.

²⁰ John M. Silber, "Introduction" in Kant, *Religion*, p. lxxxii.

Since going into the building and rescuing the child was the right thing to do in conformity with duty, it appears that turning my back on the burning building and walking away from it would not be the correct action. One is likely to judge that it was wrong, not in compliance with duty, certainly not praiseworthy, and possibly downright contemptible. But all of those descriptions presuppose that I still acted on the basis of my freedom in response to the categorical imperative. If so, I would have needed to have acted on the basis of some strange considerations. I would have to have been aware of my freedom to act, recognized the fact that I should always act in such a way that my choice could become a universal law, and then have freely and rationally chosen it to be universal law that people should allow children to perish in burning houses. If I had not gone through that thought pattern, my action would not have been morally wrong because it would not even have been morally significant. More likely, I would have acted in the way that I did because it was in line with my selfish nature, or I was afraid of fire, or perhaps because I was blind and unaware of the situation. In any case, moral significance would go out of the window because the recognition of the categorical imperative and the freedom to choose did not play a role. Thus, we must draw the conclusion that, under Kant's principles, it is not only unlikely but virtually impossible, for people ever to perform a morally wrong action. Kant himself was aware of this problem, and in *Religion Within the Bounds of Reason* he attempted to rectify it.

Kant's self-confessed mistake²¹ was based on the assumption of two options available to a person in a moral situation: 1) to choose to act in compliance with duty and 2) to let oneself get carried along by the powers of instinct, nature, desire for happiness, etc., none of which involve a conscious free choice with regard to duty. The second option is the default one, which we would most likely follow apart from conscious effort. Also, on the basis of Kant's presupposition that actions derived from internal drives or impulses are not in the territory of genuine moral decision-making, it keeps them outside of the boundaries of morally significant actions. Thus we can be good, but we can never be bad. Put arithmetically, as Kant himself did, we could say that the choice was between +1 and 0.

²¹ This discussion is based on Kant, *Religion*, pp. 18-19.

Based on that construal, we are all extremely lucky people. We can accumulate merit, but not demerit since the latter carries a value of zero. There would be no person, even if he only chose to act according to duty once in his life, for whom his good actions did not outweigh his bad ones, and we would all be on our way to heaven. There cannot be a truly evil act, let alone an evil person. Thus, Kant's exhortation for us to follow the categorical imperative would have become thoroughly trivialized.

Kant addressed this unintended problem by insisting that the second option, as described above, did not actually exist. There are no morally neutral actions. When a person faces a moral dilemma, the decision goes beyond making a conscious and free choice to follow one's duty or to slide along the path of non-moral inclinations. There are still only two options, but at the moment of choice, the person being truly free, cannot simply escape into neutrality. In a moment of spontaneity, he must face up to either conforming to his duty or to defying it. In short, the choice is, once again following Kant's mathematical analysis, between +1 and -1. There are no choices of 0 value. Every choice either adds or subtracts from the sum total.

So, Kant's theology was simple. If your good works, viz. those that comply with duty, sufficiently outnumber the bad ones, you have a chance at the afterlife. In general, we can assume that, even though there is no quantitative scale available to us, if we demonstrate a good disposition as discerned by a majority of good choices, the *summum bonum* is available to us. Kant attempted rather unconvincingly to adapt his thought to Christianity, so that, for example, Christ became the supreme example of the person who by his own free will consistently chose the path of duty. Similarly, whatever the biblical content may be, Kant attempted to turn it all into this conflict between good actions versus bad actions. The purpose of the biblical description, in his mind, was merely to give philosophically untutored people the opportunity to learn the same lesson more graphically.

D. Grace: Necessary but Unwanted

But Kant's new "arithmetical" approach carried a new problem with it. Let us say that there is a person in whose life there has been an overwhelming amount of bad moral choices, but at some time he reforms. Is it possible for him to undergo a moral transformation and

become a good person, even though his tally of actions over his entire lifetime would not allow it? Christian theology has traditionally answered this question by referring to the doctrine of grace. Now, there are two ways in which we can understand the word "grace" in this connection, though both present Kant with the same problem. We can talk about "grace" as the general term expressing God's relationship to us in giving us salvation despite our obvious unworthiness to receive it. We can also use the word more specifically, where it is often referred to as "graces" or the "means of grace," such as baptism and communion. Kant does not seem to be clear on which of the two he had in mind; perhaps he deliberately interchanged them. In any event, the bottom line is the same: God provides the sinner with "benefits" that he has not earned.

And there, of course, Kant's problem immediately jumps out at us. The only way in which he could think of God as providing us with benefits was as a reward, never as a present. After all, in his theological universe an unearned reward was just plain unfair. Why should the person who did not comply with his rational duties receive something that another person has earned through hard work and self deprivation? In addition to this obvious moral repugnance, there is the basic objective--mathematical, if you will--problem of how a moral debt (that is to say a case where the moral demerits exceed the moral merits) can simply be erased. To quote Kant's own handy summary,

Man *himself* must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become. Either condition must be an effect of his free choice; for otherwise he could not be held responsible for it and could therefore be *morally* neither good nor evil. When it is said, Man is created good, this can mean nothing more than: He is created for good and the original predisposition in man is good; not that, thereby he is already actually good but rather that he brings about that he becomes good or evil, according to whether he adopts or does not adopt into his maxim the incentives which this predisposition carries with it, which must be left wholly to his own free choice.²²

Nothing could be clearer—at least given Kant's overqualified language—than this statement: Your moral destiny is entirely in your own hands.

²² Kant, *Religion*, p. 40. Emphasis his.

Needless to say, such a conception has no room whatsoever for any such thing as “original sin” or whatever label we wish to give the doctrine that a human being is born in a state depraved from God or filled with innate evil. Kant declared,

However the origin of moral evil in man is constituted, surely of all the explanations of the spread and propagation of this evil through all members and generations of our race, the most inept is that which describes it as descending to us as an *inheritance* from our first parents; for one can say of moral evil precisely what the poet said of good: "Race and ancestors, and those things which we ourselves have not made, I scarcely account our own."²³

Thus, the only perspective from which religion can be approached rationally is from freedom and morality. Kant showed downright disdain of any other starting point:

Every initiatory step in the realm of religion, which we do not take in a purely moral manner but rather have recourse to as *in itself* a means of making us well-pleasing to God and thus, through Him, of satisfying our wishes, is a *fetish-faith*.²⁴

What applies to salvation as a whole, also applies to the particular means of grace. Take communion, for example. Under Kant’s critique,

. . . to assert that God has attached special favors to the celebration of this solemnity, and to incorporate among the articles of faith the proposition that this ceremony, which is after all but a churchly act, is, in addition, *a means of grace* — this is a religious illusion which can do naught but work counter to the spirit of religion.²⁵

Lest we draw an incorrect conclusion, for Kant’s own personal faith, this rejection did not just imply a reinterpretation of communion to suit his presuppositions. According to the introduction by Greene, as an adult Kant even took deliberate steps to avoid entering a church buildings.²⁶

Kant closed out his book with the observation:

²³ Ibid., p. 35. Emphasis his. The quotation comes from Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 12:140-41. *Genus et proavos, et quae non fecimus ipsi, vix ea nostra puto.*

²⁴ Ibid., p. 181. Emphasis his.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 188. Emphasis his.

²⁶ Greene, “Introduction,” p. xxix, note 1.

All such artificial self deceptions in religious matters have a common basis. Among the three divine moral attributes, holiness, mercy, and justice, man habitually turns directly to the second in order thus to avoid the forbidding condition of conforming to the requirements of the first. It is tedious to be a good *servant* (here one is forever hearing only about one's duties); man would therefore rather be a *favorite*, where much is overlooked or else, when duty has been too grossly violated everything is atoned for through the agency of some one or other favorite in the highest degree — man, meanwhile remaining the servile knave he ever was.²⁷

Thus, the human person loves grace because it underwrites his need for security driven by indolence. It is a doctrine for the lazy among us.

So, then, what consolation can one give to a person on his death bed? One can come up with the various illusory ideas that keep professional clerics in business, but—in truth—nothing can take the place of a person's self-evaluation on the basis of his deeds. Why should we give words of consolation to a person who does not deserve any? An overtly evil person cannot be helped magically out of the position he has earned. The person facing death must be aware of his character and his disposition. He realizes that: "Here he will not be able to let a previously recognized disposition take the place of action; on the contrary, it is from the action before him that he must infer his disposition."²⁸ He can ask himself whether his present disposition would be amenable to becoming improved given further opportunities in a further life. Without the empty words of common religion, he would have a pretty good idea of what was in store for him, and neither hope nor consolation could be guaranteed. "A man cannot bribe his own reason."²⁹

And yet . . .

The above quotation which began with "Man *himself* must make or have made himself into whatever, in a moral sense, whether good or evil, he is or is to become," takes a sudden surprising turn right after the cited passage.

Granted that some supernatural cooperation may be necessary to his becoming good, or to his becoming better, yet, whether this cooperation consists merely in

²⁷ Kant, *Religion*, p. 188.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

the abatement of hindrances or indeed in positive assistance, man must first make himself worthy to receive it, and may lay hold of this aid (which is not small matter)—that is, he must adopt this positive increase of power into his maxim, for only thus can good be imputed to him and he be known as a good man.³⁰

Thus, what we see here, not as an afterthought but right alongside the dismissal of grace and supernatural aid, is an allowance for grace and supernatural aid. Kant simply could not write a book intended to reinvent Christian theology without at least tipping his hat to Christian theology and its teaching concerning divine mercy and grace. Let us agree that his doing so is plainly inconsistent with all of his other statements, but let us also not dwell on this fact for the moment. Instead, let us examine the incoherence within his description. Supernatural aid may be available for the person of insufficient personal power to achieve the necessary level of goodness. However, there is a hitch: he must qualify for it. This is a difficult idea with which to come to terms. How can the person who needs grace the most, viz. the person entrapped in evil, possibly achieve the level to receive grace?

Unfortunately, although Kant makes this unanalyzed concession, we should not expect him to do any more than to acknowledge that there may be such a thing as grace. Other references to the hypothetical reality of grace are equally as wrapped in obscurity as the one above. Kant rules out that grace could be based on a vicarious atonement.

Therefore, so far as reason can see, no one can, by virtue of the superabundance of his own conduct and through his own merits, take another's place; or, if such vicarious atonement is accepted, we would have to assume it only from the moral point of view, since for a ratiocination it is an unfathomable mystery.³¹

Thus, all we can do is to maintain a notion of grace “at a respectful distance.”³² The alternative would be to “render ourselves unfit for all use of reason or allow ourselves to fall into the indolence of waiting from above, in passive leisure, what we should seek within.”³³

³⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

³¹ Ibid., p. 134.

³² Ibid., p. 179.

³³ Ibid.

And so, Kant toys with a notion of grace, but keeps it at arm's length because there is no way in which it really fits into his system of morality and religion.

To believe that there may be works of grace and that perhaps these may even be necessary to supplement the incompleteness of a struggle toward virtue — that is all we can say on the subject; beyond this we are incapable of determining anything concerning their distinctive marks and still less are we able to do anything to produce them.³⁴

So, what do all of these assertions amount to? On the surface, they do not say much. For one thing, as we just saw, Kant himself neither would nor could explain himself any further. Furthermore, inconsistent statements cannot jointly be true, but any proposition follows from them logically, so any commentary based directly on these quotations as true would be highly suspect. Consequently, if we intend to glean anything from this mountain of information we need to go back to his starting point once more.

Kant's so-called Copernican revolution (or better: subjectivist intensification) placed the human knower at the center of his universe. Not content with this position in the present, Kant also made him the autonomous director of his destiny. His system of morality and freedom were given; he brought in God and the afterlife only to patch up some weak spots in his ethics, which was for all practical purposes synonymous with his religion. Kant recognized that in his earlier formulations, a person could accrue merit by performing moral actions according to one's duty, but that any actions not in conformity with duty were not immoral. Instead, they fell outside of the area of morally significant actions altogether. Thus, there could be no evil actions, a deficiency in any moral system that seeks to take itself seriously.

In response to his own flaw, in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Reason*, Kant asserted that there were no neutral outcomes in a moral decision. Given the spontaneity of a moral situation, one either made the right choice (+1) or the wrong one (-1).

But thereby Kant created a new problem, namely how to deal with the situation of a person who is living with a deficit of moral points, so to speak, possibly without the opportunity to perform a

³⁴ Ibid., p. 162.

sufficient number of good actions to overcome the lack. And, even though in theory one could say that such a person does not deserve a better outcome, in reality people have turned over new leaves, started to live better lives, resolved to become increasingly moral in their actions and abided by such resolutions, and so forth. Can we simply ignore such cases as insignificant since only the moral tote board is relevant?

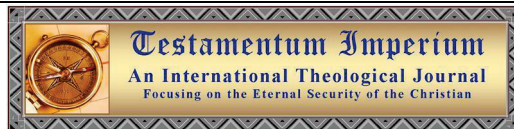
Even Kant could not bring himself to ignore the effects of what we might want to call the “conversion” of a person. But how could he accommodate such an event to his system? He could not, or—if we want to be wantonly generous with him—he could do so only at the cost of **accepting something at the same time as rejecting it**. We might not be privy to a direct empirical experience of God’s grace working in us (here Kant has tied himself thoroughly to Hume), but we certainly have seen people turn their lives from evil to good, and who have explained this phenomenon on the basis of supernatural aid, or grace. But acknowledging the reality is not the same thing as including it in your philosophy.

Grace has no chair on which to sit in Kant’s religion. The best he can do, so to speak, is to move a few chairs sufficiently apart so that grace can find enough room to sit on the floor—unwanted and out of place, but needed as a token presence. One can argue that Kant’s moral system is on the whole coherent and consistent, and that his concession to grace is an unfortunate inconsistency that mars his moral philosophy.

However, I think that it is also sound to say that Kant’s “approach-avoidance” method of dealing with grace demonstrates the intrinsic incoherence of his moral philosophy. Beginning with himself, the human subject, possessor of reason and freedom, as well as the autonomous discoverer of his own duty, Kant found himself beset by a number of problems. First, his analysis led to the peculiar notion that there could be no evil actions. Second, in the attempt to fix that problem, Kant created a new one: the grim idea that evil could not be eradicated. Third, then, Kant, all the while protesting, could not help but allow that there might be such a thing as divine grace, but that we don’t understand it and that it does not contribute to our moral development. But this is no longer religion with the limits of reason. Kant may call the recourse to divine moral aid irrational, but what

could be more irrational than to invoke a concept and make use of it while simultaneously declaring that it is contradictory and unintelligible?

Let us not forget, however, that this murky thinking began with Kant's aggravation of Descartes' subjectivism. If we begin with an autonomous human being, should we be surprised that our philosophy has left us no plausible room for a meaningful doctrine of God? Of course not. However, if we recognize that our ratiocinations have led us to an incomprehensible muddle, it is high time to reconsider the starting point. We realize that we cannot maintain our starting point without taking recourse to God, although that fact flies right in the face of our initial premise and renders us illogical. There is an easy way out: Make God the starting point and observe how beautifully an acceptable picture of the human being as responsible moral agent emerges. Furthermore, in that case there is then also non-contradictory room for a doctrine of grace, which is indispensable whenever the issue in question is the fulfillment by human beings of their moral duties. Kant has given us a good picture of the consequences of starting with the wrong presuppositions. The necessary response is not to patch up Kant's philosophy so as to make its defects less visible, but to start with different presuppositions altogether.



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