

Kant's Robust Theory of Grace

La teoría robusta kantiana de la gracia

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Abstract

In this paper I argue against two prevailing views of Kant's *Religion*. Against commentators such as Michalson and Quinn, who have argued that Kant's project in *Religion* is riddled with inconsistencies and circularities, I show that a proper understanding of Kant's views on grace reveals these do not exist. And contra commentators that attribute to Kant at best a minimalist conception of grace (e.g., Wood 1991 and Pasternack 2014), I show that Kant's view of it is remarkably robust. I argue that Kant works with three different conceptions of grace. These are: a) grace and the God within, b) grace and the transformation of the fundamental orientation, and c) grace that can be laid hold of; the first and the last play a significant role in his philosophy of religion.

Keywords

Kant, grace, revelation, divine aid, church, ethical community, Christ, *deus in nobis*, change of heart, propensity to evil.

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Commentators on Kant's *Religion* have charged that the work is a failed synthesis of Enlightenment rationality and Christianity, and that, moreover, his understanding of both human evil and the means to overcome it is riddled with inconsistencies.¹ In this paper I argue that his view of grace is remarkably robust,² and that these alleged inconsistencies disappear once it is recognized that Kant works with three understandings of grace. These are: a) grace and the God within, b) grace and the transformation of the fundamental orientation, and c) grace that can be laid hold of.³ While Kant is strongly critical of the

¹ For instance, in his book *Fallen Freedom*, Gordon Michalson comments that Kant “wobbles” between Enlightenment views and those of Christianity (Michalson 1990, p. 8); in his later work he emphasizes Kant’s “conception of autonomous rationality that undermines the integrity of theological statements” (1999, p. 20). Nicholas Wolterstorff finds that Kant’s attempt to make sense of grace from the standpoint of autonomy yields a series of “conundrums;” he reads Kant as a Pelagian who has little room for making sense of God’s forgiveness and grace (Wolterstorff 1991); Phil Quinn has also criticized Kant’s view of grace as impossibly circular (Quinn 1990); cf. (Hare 1996, pp. 62ff.). I have discussed some of these views, in particular the charge that Kant is Pelagian, in my article “Kant on Grace,” (Mariña 1997) and while my thinking on the matter remains largely the same, the enormous amount of literature that has since appeared on the topic has led me to further develop and qualify the arguments I made there. Firestone and Jacobs (2008) provide an excellent review of the secondary literature on the coherence of Kant’s views in their book *In Defense of Kant’s Religion*.

² The views put forward by commentators such as James DiCenso (2011) who argue that for Kant, God (and therefore whatever aid might come from such a Being) is a useful fiction is certainly mistaken. DiCenso too often glosses over Kant’s stress on the difference between the limits of theoretical reason in establishing the existence of the objects of metaphysics and theology, and the demands of practical reason. While theoretical reason cannot legitimately prove God’s existence, Kant nevertheless insists on the primacy of practical reason, and here, Kant maintains, the moral agent must hope and act as if God exists. It cannot be stressed enough that this hope is not directed to a mere imaginary object; one hopes that God really does exist. While one cannot know that God exists, moral commitments demand that we make a decision and act as if God exists. This is rational faith and the true meaning of moral hope. The practical need to postulate God’s existence concerns the moral hope that the Highest Good is genuinely possible, and the conditions that must be assumed for its possibility given both the limitations of our embodied finitude as well as the threat of radical evil. I discuss this in Mariña 2000; recently Lawrence Pasternack has done a marvelous job detailing just about all of the secondary literature on the Highest Good, arguing convincingly that Kant has no secular conception of it. He shows that right down to his latest writings Kant maintained a theological conception of the Highest Good in which the postulates of both God and the immortality of the soul are preserved (Pasternack 2017). On the question of hope see Chignell 2013 and Chignell 2014.

³ In his paper “Kant on Grace” (2014) Leslie Stevenson analyzes several different kinds of grace in the Christian tradition and relates these to Kant’s views. These are: cooperative grace, sanctifying grace, forensic grace, providential grace and electing grace. He discusses my paper on grace (Mariña 1997) and refers to what I call the grace that “can be laid hold” of as “providential grace. Insofar as cooperative and sanctifying grace have to do with the mysterious effect of God’s power on our soul helping us to transform the fundamental moral orientation, these two kinds of grace belong to b) above. It is of course also true that God’s power might both cooperate with us and sanctify us after the fundamental change in orientation, helping us to become completely good. However, insofar as this cooperation cannot be distinguished from natural effects we cannot lay hold of it, since we cannot identify it, and for this reason it may not be practically useful.

Interestingly enough, Stevenson notes that Kant also makes use of the idea of *forensic grace*, where a righteousness not one’s own is imputed to one. This was at the heart of Luther’s rift with Rome. It is certainly true that Kant believes that the individual that has already made the fundamental commitment to a moral orientation can rationally hope that the righteousness of the Christ within, to which she commits through the moral disposition, will be imputed to her. Nevertheless, Kant differs significantly from Luther, who claimed that it was faith in what God has done for us that *produces* the change of heart: gratitude for what God has done for us is the impetus for the change of heart. Stevenson, along with others, have wondered why in my earlier paper on grace (Mariña 1997) I claimed that Kant was closer to Rome than the Reformation. The reason for my claim had merely to do with the fact that for Kant justification is not

views of grace in the Lutheran pietism of his day, specifically in regard to grace and the transformation of the fundamental orientation, he has a remarkably positive understanding of grace with respect to a) grace and the god within and b) the grace that can be laid hold of, that is, grace and the real possibility of divine providential aid within the historical arena. Because certain kinds of divine aid can be understood as really possible in relation to the interests of practical reason, a rational believer may not only hope in them, she may, in fact make use of them in her struggle in virtue. Two things are particularly significant in this regard: first, the real possibility of a religion that is both natural and revealed, and second, the role of the ethical community founded by God. I first briefly lay out these three understandings of grace. My principal focus, however, is on Kant's exposition in *Religion* of the grace that can be laid hold of, which I develop in terms of Kant's discussion of the possibility of providential aid within the historical arena. The way these ideas are worked through in *Religion* is strongly tied to what I have previously identified as Kant's developmental view of the human being,⁴ advanced by him in both the *Lectures in the Philosophy of Religion* as well as in his *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*.

Grace and the God within

In the *Conflict of Faculties* Kant identifies grace with the “incomprehensible moral disposition in us—that is, the principle of pure morality.” He notes that there are two ways of thinking of nature: if we take nature to refer to those drives connected with the inclinations clamoring for satisfaction and the desire for a merely sensuously conditioned happiness, then nature and grace can be represented as at war with one another. If, on the other hand, we understand by nature our “ability to achieve certain ends by our own powers in general, then grace is none other than the nature of the human being insofar as he is determined to actions by a principle which is intrinsic to his own being, but supersensible (the thought of his duty)” (7:43). Here we are speaking of a *graced* nature. Moreover, this feature of our nature cannot be lost; Kant notes that we are “never able to lose the incentive that consists in the respect for the moral law, and were we ever to lose it, we would also never be able to regain it.” Hence the restoration of the human being “is not therefore the acquisition of a *lost* incentive for the good” (6:46). Such an idea of a *graced* nature certainly conflicts with certain Reformation views, (e.g. those of Calvin and

forensic; the individual is justified before God through and in light of her moral commitment, which is the first crucial step in a complete transformation. When I spoke of Kant's “Augustinianism” it was only this narrow point that I had in mind: for both Augustine and the Catholic tradition in general moral transformation is a condition of justification. Given Stevenson's point that for Kant we may hope that the “perfected whole” of a moral life will be imputed to us by God, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that on this point Kant splits the difference between Luther and Rome.

⁴ See “What Perfection Demands: an Irenaean Account of Kant on Radical Evil” in *Kant and the Question of Theology*, edited by Chris Firestone, Nathan Jacobs, and James Joiner. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming.

Luther), which stressed that the fall was so severe that it had destroyed the very image of God in human nature.⁵

Kant finds the moral predisposition in us so remarkable that he notes that it “point[s] to a divine source that reason can never reach (in its theoretical search for causes), so that our possession of it is not meritorious, but rather the work of grace” (7:43). Two things are worthy of attention here. First is Kant’s claim that the moral predisposition points to a divine source (Cf. 6:50). If the moral law is to be worthy of producing respect in us and capable of calling us to the moral life over against a life of the sensuous inclinations, it must be represented as having its origin in Mind. This mind cannot be thought of as the result of blind causal processes, but instead must be thought of as the *ground of reason in us*, as well as the ground of nature. Only in representing the moral law as having a divine origin does the law gain the requisite metaphysical status over the inclinations. In the *Opus Postumum* Kant notes that “There must also, however, be—or at least be thought— a legislative force (*potestas legislativa*) which gives these laws emphasis (effect) although only in idea; and this is none other than that of the *highest* being, morally and physically superior to all and omnipotent, and his holy will—which justifies the statement: There is a God” (22:126). Furthermore, the individual committed to morality must certainly *hope* that an absolute and benevolent Mind (God) stands at the ground and origin not only of the moral law in us, but of all of nature as well: only in such a way can we hope that all that exists is ultimately directed to the ends of morality, even if in a way yet obscure and unknown to us. Second, that the creature has been ennobled through the predisposition to morality, that she has the capacity to hear the Call and is as such capable of entrance into the Kingdom of God, this is not the creature’s own work. Hence, the predisposition which we did not establish in ourselves must be represented “as a stimulus to good produced in us by God....and so as grace” (7:43).

Central to Kant’s understanding of grace in *Religion* is the “*deus in nobis*” (22:130), that is, the God in us. This is especially notable in Kant’s idea of the prototype. The predisposition to morality also produces the idea of a divine archetype in us. This is the idea of humanity “in its full moral perfection.” In the second book of *Religion* Kant provides us with a rational/moral interpretation of the prologue to the Gospel of John: “This human being, alone pleasing to God, ‘is in him from all eternity,’ the idea of him proceeds from God’s being; he is not, therefore, a created thing but God’s only begotten Son, ‘the Word’ (the *Fiat!*) through which all other things are, and without whom nothing that is made would exist” (6:60). Everything that is, is for the sake of this Son. This is the Christ in us, the “prototype” which we project onto the teacher of the Gospel, and which must be “sought in us as well.” Kant notes that its presence in the human soul is itself “incomprehensible enough” (6:63). We are not its authors; rather “the idea has rather established itself in the human being without our comprehending how human nature could have even been receptive of it;” hence “it is better to say that that *prototype* has *come down* to us from heaven, that it has taken up humanity....” (6:61). Kant uses the idea of the Son

⁵ It does not, however, conflict with a Catholic view of grace, which holds that grace is operative in nature, and that the image of God was not utterly defaced in the fall.

of God in us for numerous purposes: because it can be found in us, through it we can discern the true from the false in religious matters (6:169n); it is that through which we are enabled to make moral progress, that is, it is the Christ in us that guides us our endless progress, This prototype is the *human being in its full moral perfection*. We are not identical with it, and yet, in some important sense, we are. It is within us as a destiny that we have not yet achieved. Insofar as this destiny is *not yet*, it is distinct from us in our earthly iteration. Yet as *our* destiny it is already within the soul, and only its embrace confers upon us any genuine worth. Hence, the goal of the human being is to become what in some sense he or she already is, that is, to develop out of herself that which is in some sense already within. Moreover, because this archetype proceeds from God's very being and "is not, therefore, a created thing," we can infer that the individual is divinized to the degree to which she approximates it, and in such a way becomes God with God.

Kant understands the continuous influence of the moral predisposition and the prototype, recognized in the "example of humanity pleasing to God in his son" as grace. This influence draws out the best in us, and in fact, if we do not oppose it, and allow it to work in us, this "grace can and should become more powerful than sin in us" (7:43). God is well pleased and well disposed to humanity in its full moral perfection and wills its happiness; punishment is merely the limitation of God's loving kindness when the individual has opposed grace. This idea can be found both in some of the *Lectures*⁶ and in *Religion*, where Kant notes that God's justice must be represented "only as restricting his generosity to the condition that human beings abide by the holy law" (6:141). Given that the moral law within us is itself the principal locus of grace, and that God is always well disposed to the Son of God in us, we must not understand grace merely in terms of divine aid in the face of the problem of radical evil. Rather, the problem of radical evil must itself be understood in terms of an outright refusal to allow the predisposition and archetype of the Son of God (the Christ within) to be effective in us.

Grace and the Transformation of the Fundamental Orientation

Besides Kant's fundamental understanding of a *graced* nature, a nature in which the moral predisposition is always operative even when it is resisted, Kant presents two other understandings of grace. The first, while theoretically possible, is just about practically useless, since it has to do with how God may affect the will itself such that its very desires and motives will become different. The second understanding has to do with the kind of divine aid that *must be laid hold of*. Recognizing the differences between these two understandings is key to a proper grasp of Kant's project in *Religion*. Commentators such

⁶ For example, in the *Danziger Rationaltheologie* Kant notes that "what good we receive from God is all unmerited grace.... Justice is the limitation of loving kindness.... Therefore justice does not reward, but alone punishes" (28: 1292-1294). For further discussion of this point see Mariña 1997, 382-385.

as Michalson and Phil Quinn conflate these two understandings of grace in Kant, and as a result have accused him of setting forth circular conditions for transformation leaving the fallen agent mired in evil, with no real possibilities for regeneration. Quinn notes that according to Kant “we can become morally better persons only if we receive divine assistance, and will receive divine assistance only if we make ourselves worthy of it” (Quinn 1990, 421). Michalson reads Kant as allowing that the problem of radical evil is so severe that only through grace can it be overcome, yet as affirming, in contradictory fashion, that the moral agent must nonetheless “will its way upwards again” (Michalson 1990, 102). Claiming Kant holds that only after the change of heart is the agent worthy of divine aid, Michalson quips that “the element of grace here is thus not only beside the point—it is, as it were, after the fact” (Michalson 1989, 269). These problems rightly disappear if we understand that besides understanding grace in terms of the god within, Kant also makes use of two other views of grace: a) grace as conditioning the possibility of the change in the fundamental orientation (the change of heart) and b) grace as divine aid that might be *laid hold* of by the individual who is committed to morality, but who is still weakened by results of the propensity to evil.

In the *Religion*, Kant offers us a definition of grace different from the one in *Conflict of the Faculties*. Whereas in *Conflict* Kant identifies grace with the moral predisposition, in part four of *Religion* Kant defines grace in terms of a “faculty available to [the individual] only through supernatural help;” this is contrasted with nature, defined in terms of what “the human being can do on his own,” (6:190). At the beginning of book one, Kant discusses the problem of the possibility of a radical change in the fundamental disposition: “But if a human being is corrupt in the very ground of his maxims, how can he possibly bring about this revolution by his own forces and become a good human being on his own?” (6:48). The question alludes to one posed by the Reformers, who stressed the complete depravity of the human being and the bondage of the will. They stressed that because nothing good can come from human beings, salvation is only possible through grace, that is, if God himself transforms the individual at his very root, killing the “old man” and bringing the new one to life. Now, were we to think of God’s action in this way, grace would be an alien force transforming the fundamental moral orientation itself. As such, it would completely bypass the agency of the agent, and therefore would be practically useless. Because this orientation—the supreme ground of maxims—is the root of all desires, its transformation through grace would amount to a complete change of the individual through a foreign source. As such, no prior act or desire of the agent would have occasioned the change of heart. This is particularly true of the *first moment* in the change of orientation. Call this the zero point of transformation, where the agent first turns away from evil and directs herself to the good. All subsequent genuine desires to become a better person must have their ground in this zero point of the change in orientation. This first change does not imply the person has been fully transformed; far from it. But it does mean she has begun the struggle in virtue, that she has begun to understand and value a different way of life, one in which she strives to treat others as ends in themselves. If this fundamental change originates from outside the agent, we have no way of understanding

the identity between the old self and the new, for there would be no lines of continuity between them. Instead of continuity, we would have complete rupture. And if the change of heart were something simply effected in the person from without, this would mean, further, that it would be hard to grasp how the change of heart was something really characteristic of *her*, or how it had to do with how she had interiorized certain values because *she* began now to see how they were worthwhile, when previously she did not understand them. This is a magical solution to the problem of human evil.

For these reasons, Kant insists that the idea of a supernatural assistance that completely bypasses the agency of the agent, while theoretically possible, is practically useless. This kind of grace cannot be incorporated into the maxims of reason:

For it is impossible to make these effects *theoretically* cognizable (that they are effects of grace and not of immanent nature), because our use of the concept of cause and effect cannot be extended beyond the objects of experience, and hence beyond nature; moreover, the presupposition of a *practical* employment of this idea is wholly self-contradictory. For the employment would presuppose a rule concerning what good we ourselves must *do* (with a particular aim [in mind]) in order to achieve something; to expect an effect of grace means, however, the very contrary, namely that the good (the morally good) is not of our doing, but that of another being - that we, therefore, can only *come by* it by *doing nothing*, and this contradicts itself. Hence we can admit an effect of grace as something incomprehensible, but cannot incorporate it into our maxims for either theoretical or practical use. 6:53

There are two fundamental issues here: first, there is no possible way for us to distinguish between the natural and the supernatural, between our own activity and that of God's, which would be necessary for us to cognize the effects of grace (Cf. 6:88). Second, and more importantly, since this grace is not our own work, it would be impossible for us to incorporate it into our maxims of action; the very idea that we should come by a moral good by doing nothing contradicts itself. Moreover, the idea can be a pernicious one, insofar as it might tempt persons to indolence, and to therefore not do what is in their power because they are expecting a work of grace.

Now it is important to keep in mind that Kant does not deny the *possibility* of God's cooperation with our will, both throughout the change of heart itself and through the struggle in virtue (cf. 6:191).⁷ And he allows that as long as we do all that is in our power,

⁷ On this point I am in disagreement with Lawrence Pasternack, who claims "Kant opposes the view that we need Divine aid in order to undergo a change of heart" (Pasternack 2014, p.146). Even if "ought implies can", this tells us nothing about how we must obey the command; we would still be obeying it were we to make use of auxiliary means in doing so. This is especially so since there is no contradiction in the idea of a command and the need for help in fulfilling it. To affirm that we are responsible for our moral condition does not exclude the possibility that we may need aid in order to become good; it only means that we must do all that is in our power to achieve it, and make use of whatever aid is provided. For example, if I tell a child "you ought to learn your lessons," this does not preclude that the lessons need to be taught in an orderly and comprehensible manner if the child is to be able to succeed, or even that a tutor might have to be hired for extra help. It does mean, however, that whoever issues the command must make auxiliary means available if those are required in order for the person commanded to fulfill the request.

we may “legitimately hope that what lies outside [our] power will be supplemented by the supreme wisdom *in some way or another*” (6:171). However, since we have no way of separating out natural from supernatural effects, we have no way of understanding how this supplement might work.⁸ And insofar this supplement has to do with the awaiting of an action that is not one’s own, there is simply nothing that can really be *done* with it. Nevertheless, Kant admits that the idea of grace can strengthen one’s resolve to do everything in one’s power (6:174).⁹ As such, the idea of God’s cooperation with the freedom of the *Willkür* may have some use. For instance, a good person may be acutely aware of her limits, for instance, of her possible cowardice in the face of a moral demand that might require her sacrifice of life itself, or of the possible depths of her own self-deception that even she cannot fully fathom. Were one to believe that try as one might, the obstacles may just be too great, and failure is inevitable, one might just collapse in despair and give up the fight, for the ultimate goal would seem impossible. Here the hope for divine aid—even when in principle how it works cannot be understood—has a positive function.¹⁰ For this hope can actually strengthen resolve and even prevent the collapse of all moral action: one is rationally entitled to believe that despite one’s initial weaknesses and incapacities, so long as one engages *all* one’s strength in the moral struggle, success will eventually be assured. In *Conflict* Kant notes that “faith in this supplement for his deficiency is sanctifying, for only by it can man cease to doubt that he can reach his final aim (to become pleasing to God) and so lay hold of the courage and firmness of attitude he needs to lead a life pleasing to God....” (7:44). It is important to note, however, that this kind of moral hope for God’s grace has legitimacy only for the individual that *already* has a fundamentally good disposition, one who is already *oriented* in the proper moral direction and has a good sense for what she is aiming at. For the individual who willingly

⁸ The question of the possible ways in which God might cooperate with the will in both its reorientation and continued progress in the good has recently been the topic of a good bit discussion, for instance, Hogan (forthcoming) and Insole 2013. Insole is particularly interested in the orthodox doctrine of concurrentism, which holds that God is both the creator and preserver of substances *and* their effects, without, however, vitiating the causality of the created substance itself. For the concurrentist, everything in nature, including all effects and actions of creatures, “directly and constantly depend upon divine action” (198). The position was taken to be an alternative to occasionalism, which held that substances do not interact because they have no genuine power of their own; they only seem to interact. It is God who acts in them, God who “is the sole cause of all the effects in nature, with created natural substances making no causal contribution” (195). The third alternative is mere conservation; here God both creates and preserves substances, but substances, once given their *esse* by God, can themselves be considered the origin of their effects. Given the no splitting requirement of the orthodox doctrine of *concursum*, Insole argues that Kant must be a mere conservationist; he later notes that Kant grants the possibility of *concursum* even in its orthodox form, although we have no insight into how such *concursum* is possible. While this debate may be of theoretical interest, what is most significant is Kant’s position that for practical purposes the doctrine of *concursum* is useless. For what can the practical upshot of such metaphysically abstruse doctrines be? What practical use can we make of the idea that God is acting in us, even when, for instance, our hearts are hardened, like that of Pharaoh?

⁹ “To believe that grace may have its effects, and that perhaps there must be such effects to supplement the imperfection of our striving for virtue, is all that we can say on the subject; for the rest, we are not capable of determining anything concerning their distinguishing marks and even less of doing something toward their production” (6:174).

¹⁰ As Chignell notes, all that is required for rational hope is that “for all she is certain of, the state of affairs is not really impossible” (Chignell 2013; cf. Chignell 2016).

remains mired in evil will not *want* to become a better person, and hence, the notion of a divine supplementation to the maximal exercise of a moral power would, for such a one, simply be irrelevant.

Grace that can be laid hold of

Even after the individual has turned away from evil, her beginning in evil is a kind of self-wounding with significant consequences for both her imaginative and emotional life; the damaged propensity remains even after the individual has changed over from evil to good, and as such the person is at a significant disadvantage in her struggle to become fully good.¹¹ Hence, *contra* Michalson, given the vestiges of evil darkening the propensity, there is a kind of divine aid that is most certainly *not* after the fact, and that can provide significant help to the moral progress of those committed to morality. Towards the beginning of his general remark in book one of *Religion*, after he has affirmed that the human being must *bring it about* that she become good or evil (depending on which incentive she chooses to drive her fundamental orientation), Kant notes:

Granted that some supernatural cooperation is also needed to his becoming good or better, whether this cooperation only consist in the diminution of obstacles or be also a positive assistance, the human being must nonetheless make himself antecedently worthy of receiving it; and he must *accept* this help (which is no small matter), i.e., he must incorporate this positive increase of force into his maxim: in this way alone is it possible that the good be imputed to him, and that he be acknowledged a good human being. (R 6:44)

What kind of divine aid can be *accepted* such that a *positive increase of force* is incorporated into a maxim? Above, we had seen Kant object that with respect to the kind of grace involving God's concurring with our free actions, we cannot distinguish between natural and supernatural effects, that is, we cannot distinguish between what is our own doing, and what amounts to God's cooperation in the strengthening of the *Willkür* in its moral striving. This is certainly part of the reason that practically, nothing can be done with this kind of understanding of grace, except perhaps as a hopeful afterthought staving off despair in the face of the enormity of the moral task. If we cannot even identify this kind of divine aid, how can we even accept it, or incorporate it as positive increase of force? But the kind of divine aid that must be *laid hold of* must be of a different kind. It must be something *to* which we can react so as to lay hold of it, and in order for this to happen it must be identifiable as something that is distinct from one's own action. And if it is to be considered as grace or divine aid, it must also be distinguished from mere natural effects in the natural world. We have then several important criteria for this kind of grace: a) it must be distinguishable from our own action, and b) we must be able to at least *take it*

¹¹ Kant's development of this idea dovetails with the Christian notion of concupiscence, and he is very much aware of this.

as the providential work of the moral author of the world. It must furthermore c) be something that is capable of deepening and broadening our understanding of ourselves, of others, and of what the moral law requires of us. It must strengthen the moral incentive itself by making its ultimate value and its demands upon us more salient.

In the fourth book of *Religion* Kant echoes Lessing¹²: religion can be both *natural* and *revealed* if a person could and ought to have arrived at it through the use of reason, even though “they *would* not have come to it as early or as extensively as is required” so that a revelation of it would be “advantageous” to the human race” (6:155-6). He further notes that the rationalist will never “contest either the intrinsic possibility of revelation in general or the necessity of a revelation as divine means for the introduction of religion” (6:155).¹³ That as an *a priori* fact of reason the moral law is in some sense innate does not

¹² In his *Education of the Human Race*, Lessing notes that “Education gives man nothing which he could not also get from himself; it gives him that which he could get from within himself, only quicker and more easily. In the same way too, revelation gives nothing to the human race which human reason could not arrive at its own; only it has given, and still gives to it, the most important of these things sooner” (Lessing 1957).

¹³ Kant’s position on reason and revelation can be found in part four of *Religion*. There he outlines several positions that can be taken regarding the relation of the true, universal religion to revelation: rationalist, naturalist, pure rationalist, and supernaturalist. What Kant means by these terms, how they are related to one another, and Kant’s own position have been a matter of controversy. Wood, for instance, argues that Kant is a deist, for whom religion based on natural reason is sufficient. Kant certainly affirms that “natural religion is alone morally necessary (6:154).” But this still leaves several questions open. Wood claims that Kant is not a pure rationalist, because he (Wood) understands pure rationalism as taking “the position that God has given us certain commands supernaturally while denying that we are morally bound to carry them out (Wood 1991, p. 11; cf. Wood 2002, p. 98). If this is what Kant had in mind by “pure rationalism” then Wood would have a point. However, a closer look at the text reveals that Wood’s reading of what Kant means by pure rationalism is incorrect. Firestone and Jacobs have an alternative reading that makes more sense of the text: what Kant is arguing is that there are three kinds of positions a rationalist can take regarding revelation: the naturalist, the pure rationalist, and the supernaturalist (Firestone and Jacobs 2008, pp. 211-220). The naturalist denies the reality of any supernatural divine revelation. Kant argues naturalism can be ruled out, since it makes a dogmatic claim that we are not in a position to ascertain regarding the *impossibility* of revelation. The true rationalist must “hold himself within the limits of human insight” (6:155). Since naturalism is a claim that *does not* remain within the limits of what we can know, what is left is the choice between pure rationalism and supernaturalism. Both positions allow for the possibility of revelation. What is at stake in the debate between the pure rationalist and the supernaturalist is the question of whether revelation a) merely gives us the pure moral faith faster and in more detail than we would otherwise have had it, or b) is actually *necessary* for the human race to acquire true religion. And on the question of whether we should be pure rationalists or supernaturalists, Kant is agnostic. It may very well be the case that human beings, left on their own, would never have arrived at a pure rational faith, the seed of morality laying dormant without an external revelation to quicken it. Or it may be that we would eventually have hit upon the pure moral faith, but revelation got us to it faster. But the question as to which position, pure rationalism or supernaturalism, (or neither), is the correct one, is also one that we are in no position to know. Since it is possible that there is revelation, naturalism is out, but the other two options remain real possibilities, and we have no way of knowing which is correct. Kant notes that the rationalist will never “contest either intrinsic possibility of revelation in general or the *necessity of a revelation* as divine means for the introduction of true religion; for no human being can determine anything through reason regarding these matters” [italics mine] (6:155). Hence it is clear that the choice between pure rationalism and supernaturalism must remain an open question. Kant however, stresses that what is important is not the *origins* of a religion, but how it can be communicated. Once the content of rational religion is known, it no longer requires the husk of the revealed religion for it to be grasped or communicated to others, although it may well be the case that without the initial vehicle of an historical event, the true religion would remain in obscurity. There is no question here of an additional revealed command, as suggested by Wood, but rather, the question concerns what it takes for the germ of morality to become explicit.

imply that we come into the world with a complete understanding of either its entailments or demands. Nor do we arrive with a perfected capacity for moral judgment. In regard to the *a priori* in general, Kant never affirmed that experience was not necessary for cognition to be *activated*: in the first *Critique* he concedes that “all our cognition commences with experience,” although he stresses this does not imply it arises from experience (B1). If we think of the moral law and its entailments analogously to the synthetic *a priori* of mathematics or geometry, we can see that the first workings through of a geometrical proof or of a mathematical theorem are not something obvious. In fact, the first time through both coming to see and demonstrating these truths can be arduous and ultimately consuming of all one’s energies. Something analogous may very well be true of the moral law and its entailments, as well as of the capacity for moral judgment. In the *Lectures*, for example, Kant speaks of the “*first development of our reason toward the good*” (28:1078), and in *Conjectural Beginnings* Kant mentions “the harder problem of how culture must proceed in order to properly develop the predisposition of humanity as a moral species to their vocation” (8:116). In both cases Kant speaks of the *development* of moral reason, and in the latter in particular he recognizes that moral reason is developed in social contexts. While the seed of the moral law is innate in our reason, it requires experience for us to understand not only its implications, but also for us to work it through and understand how it must be applied in particular cases. The very nature of the moral law, having to do with our relations with others in the context of the give and take of social expectations, can only be implemented in community, at the very least because it concerns how we are to relate to others. Moreover, that the race is infected with radical evil is yet another factor obscuring our moral understanding and impeding the process of correct moral judgment.

Kant’s affirmation that a moral religion can be both *natural* and *revealed* is of great significance on this score, for it shows that even though the moral law is an *a priori* fact of reason, this does not mean that we immediately fully understand it or its demands—we see rather, “as in a glass, darkly,” and it takes a great deal of commitment, and many trials and tribulations,¹⁴ to grasp its concrete requirements more clearly. Its proper understanding and implementation may involve a difficult process of false starts and mistaken assumptions regarding what is really right, even for those whose fundamental moral *orientation* is a good one. The fact that the moral law is contained as a seed within our reason, and that, indeed, the good principle is *implicitly* within us, may indicate that eventually we should be able to make its demands *explicit*.¹⁵ This however, may take a

¹⁴ In the *Lectures* Kant notes that the beginning of human cultivation brings with it “false steps and foolishness” (28:1077).

¹⁵ Although if my discussion of what supernaturalism amounts to is correct, it may be possible that even if the good principle is implicitly within us, it may take a certain kind of experience for us to become explicitly aware of it. Given that human beings are inherently social, it could be, for example, that in order for us to recognize the *deus in nobis* and absolute worth of the moral archetype within us, this worth must be recognized in us by a more morally advanced being. The process through which we are thus recognized is something that must *happen*; hence the awakening of the race to pure morality may indeed require a

great deal of time, and so a *revelation* making explicit that which is already within us would save us from the great deal of suffering resulting from our moral false starts. The idea of a revelation that is both natural and revealed fits well with Kant's *developmental* understanding of the progress of the human race.

Throughout *Religion*, Kant highlights the importance of how the life of Christ may function as a revelation. While Christ simply manifests the good principle present from the very beginning of the human race (6:82), this does not vitiate the moral impact the story of Christ's suffering and death may have on the moral development of the human race. Because Christ resisted all the temptations of the this world, everything "that could make his earthly life agreeable" was taken from him, and his steadfastness in the good "also provoked against him every persecution by which evil human beings could embitter him," resulting in "the most ignominious death" (6:81). Christ's life therefore serves as an example of an individual who upholds the purity of the moral law: because he gives *up his very life*, and therefore all earthly desires, in order to uphold what is right and good (and this was clarified through his teaching as well), he serves as an example of an individual who acts on the purity of the moral incentive. Hence "by exemplifying this principle (in the moral idea) that human being opened the doors to freedom to all who, like him, choose to die to everything that holds them fettered to earthly life to the detriment of morality; and among these he gathers unto himself 'a people for his possession, zealous of good works,' under his dominion, while he abandons to their fate all those who prefer moral servitude" (6:82). Kant's strong affirmation that Christ "opened the portals of freedom to all," demonstrates the effect that historical occurrences can have in quickening the moral development of the race. Simply because Christ is a mere *example* of the moral archetype already present within all of us does not vitiate the impact that such an instance can have in deepening our understanding and strengthening our will. It makes explicit what the purity of the moral law really requires, and demonstrates what the moral call concretely means in action: hearkening to the law, even when requiring the ultimate sacrifice, is really possible. Furthermore, such a life demonstrates what it *concretely* means to genuinely love the neighbor in the context of actual human relations, exemplifying the difference between genuine care for the other and the ritual commitments that are mere affirmations of those already in power. It may be objected that all of this must be quite obvious, but in reality the pull of our social group and its expectations may clash in fundamental ways with moral demands, and even when the fundamental moral orientation is a good one, our natural desire to fit in may very well obfuscate our capacity to clearly and fully understand moral requirements and their implications. Only in seeing its actual working through in the messy medium of history can the human being really understand what the seed of goodness within her calls her to do. Moreover, this messy medium too often demands "physical sufferings, sacrifices, and mortifications of self-love" for those committed to the moral law (6:83), and these consequences of moral commitment may not be clear without a moral exemplar.

revelatory *event* or *kairos* functioning as a Call, for only through it is the essential character of humanity revealed.

Of course, this process through which a historical occurrence clarifies the meaning of genuine obedience to morality can only occur because the seed of goodness is already present within us. Hence Kant notes that

It is in no way reprehensible to say that every human being makes a God for himself, indeed, he must make one according to moral concepts (attended by the infinitely great properties that belong to the faculty of exhibiting an object in the world commensurate to these concepts) in order to honor in him *the one who made him*. For in whatever manner a being has been made known to him by somebody else, and described as God, indeed, even if such a being might appear to him in person (if this is possible), a human being must yet confront this representation with his ideal first, in order to judge whether he is authorized to hold and revere this being as Divinity. Hence, on the basis of revelation alone, without that concept being *previously* laid down in its purity at its foundation as touchstone, there can be no religion, and all reverence for God would be *idolatry*. (6:169n).

While a revelation may function to clarify and help one to grasp what the purity of the moral law demands concretely, any historical event or narrative part of a revealed religion must be first compared to the moral ideal and interpreted in its light. How then might the content of a revealed religion quicken the moral development of the race? Before a historical event or revelation awakens moral consciousness, it may have remained to a degree implicit and latent, perhaps as a vague call of conscience, one of which persons had only the dimmest awareness. Yet once awoken by the revelation of a moral exemplar, the workings of the pure moral consciousness and the moral imagination might be set into swing in such a way that they themselves become the means through which this revelation is understood and interpreted. This awakening of the moral imagination would not only serve to interpret and understand the life of the moral exemplar. Through the very act of understanding the call as embodied by, for instance, the teacher of the gospel, persons would also come to a better understanding of what is morally salient in human existence, what it is that has ultimate worth and what has less, and what it might mean, in a concrete human life, to chose the better over the worse, in particular when the others among whom one may live are hostile to such values.

Such a historical revelation is an instance of the kind of divine aid that *must be laid hold of*. It is laid hold of when such a revelation sparks the moral imagination, sharpens what morality demands, and is as such taken as a point of focus for moral reflection and engagement. It thereby spurs the individual in her working through what it means to be worthy of her divine inheritance. This is, however, not the only function of the kind of divine aid found in *Religion* that is both natural and revealed. God's establishment of an ethical community in the midst of human social unsociability through an exemplar such as Christ is clearly just as important, and perhaps even necessary, for the possibility of human ethical development.

Allen Wood has rightly pointed to the importance of Kant's understanding of unsocial sociability and its role in Kant's development of the idea of radical evil.¹⁶ He emphasizes that for Kant "*the human propensity to evil arises in the social condition, and develops along with the process of cultivation and civilization that belongs to it*" (Wood 2010, 159).¹⁷ Human beings are *social* beings; this sociality is a key feature of the second of the three human predispositions discussed by Kant in part I of *Religion*, what he there calls the predisposition to humanity. And while all three predispositions are original predispositions *to the good* and "demand compliance" with the moral law (6:28), both the predisposition to animality and the predisposition to humanity can be perverted or used "inappropriately." Insofar as rationality is the highest function essential to the human being, it makes sense to locate the most important possibilities for human perversion at that level. And while it is true that both the predisposition to personality and the predisposition to humanity involve the capacity to reason, the former cannot be perverted, as it is the susceptibility to simple respect for the moral law (6:27). The latter, however, "is rooted in a reason which is indeed practical, but only as subservient to other incentives" (6:28). In other words, the predisposition to humanity involves the use of reason in the service of goals that may or may not themselves have been determined through reason. It can be perverted. As Kant notes earlier, the most significant passion related to this predisposition has to do with our desire for recognition from the other:

The predisposition to humanity can be brought under the general title of a self-love that is physical and yet involves comparison (for which reason is required); that is, only in comparison with others does one judge oneself happy or unhappy. Out of this self-love originates the inclination to *gain worth in the opinion of others*, originally, of course, merely *equal worth*: not allowing anyone superiority over oneself, bound up with the constant anxiety that others might be striving for ascendancy; but from this arises gradually an unjust desire to acquire superiority for oneself over others. – Upon this, namely, *jealousy* and *rivalry*, can be grafted the greatest vices of secret or open hostility to all whom we consider alien to us. These vices, however, do not really issue from nature as their root but are rather inclinations, in the face of the anxious endeavor of others to attain a hateful superiority over us, to procure it for ourselves over them for the sake of security, as preventive measure; for nature itself wanted to use the idea of such a competitiveness (which in itself does not exclude reciprocal love) as only an incentive to culture. (R 6: 27)

Because we naturally desire to gain worth in the opinion of others, and this desire for recognition is, in fact, a central feature of what it means to be human, we are always *already* disposed to value what we think others value, for only in being *that*, or in possessing the things we think they want, do we think that we will find favor in their eyes. Because we are oriented to craving recognition from the other, our *default* values are

¹⁷ The insight was first put forward by Anderson Gold in her essay "God and Community" (Gold 1991). Allen Wood has adopted and developed it in several of his writings such as Wood 1999, Wood 2010 and Wood 2014.

socially constructed; they are values in the public eye, so to speak. Following Kant's lead on this, Heidegger would comment, famously, that we are always *already with the others*, that we stand in subjection to the others, and that our being has been taken away by them (Heidegger 1962, 164). Kant continues this theme of the corrupting influence of the others in book three:

If he searches for the causes and the circumstances that draw him into this danger and keep him there, he can easily convince himself that they do not come his way from his own raw nature, so far as he exists in isolation, but rather from the human beings to whom he stands in relation or association. It is not the instigation of nature that arouses what should properly be called the *passions*, which wreak such great devastation in his originally good predisposition. His needs are but limited, and his state of mind in providing for them moderate and tranquil. He is poor (or considers himself so) only to the extent that he is anxious that other human beings will consider him poor and will despise him for it. Envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, *as soon as he is among human beings*. Nor is it necessary to assume that these are sunk into evil and are examples that lead him astray: it suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they are human beings, and they will mutually corrupt each other's moral disposition and make one another evil. (6:94)

Our need for recognition, our default understanding of ourselves only in relation to, and in comparison with the others, imprisons us. For here, too often, what is of worth has already been determined beforehand, in the public eye, and often in the most superficial of ways. We seek to acquire what "they" want so that they should not consider us poor and despise us. We desire the kind of knowledge and stuff that can be traded in the clamor for status. The competition with others for public acclaim only makes matters worse. We seek, at all costs, to avoid the "hateful superiority" of the others over us, and in order to do so, we are all too happy to play the game of one up in becoming and having the things we think that "others" value. In this way the self is lost.

Kant's claim that the malignant inclinations assail us as soon as we are "among human beings" occurs right before his discussion of the ethical community, namely the church. This is important, since it underscores the facts a) that sociality is an essential component of human nature, b) that our *default* way of being with one another is one in which we mutually corrupt each other, and c) that a new community must be established to upend this default. Kant remarks that the others with whom we are in community do not have to be evil: "it suffices that they are there," and we will "mutually corrupt" one another. Why this is the case is left unclear; presumably it would have something to do with the propensity to evil which has corrupted every aspect of the human being. At its core this propensity to evil has to do with the desire for an unconstrained freedom, one wherein the other is not recognized as an equal that rightfully makes demands and sets limits on the self. The temptation is, in fact, to make of the other a tool for the self's aggrandizement of itself: the other is used *only* for the self's recognition of itself. And because all are engaged in precisely this project, these rules of engagement are toxic to

morality. But these, precisely, are the *default* rules of engagement we are born into. In fact, since the individual always develops in such a social context, and her possibilities for moral understanding and moral judgment are always constrained by it, the universality of radical evil is all but assured. Kant notes that radical infects the *race*. It does so precisely because the consciousness of the human being is never developed in isolation, but only in terms of the possibilities that are afforded to him or her by the others and the society in which he or she finds herself. It is for these reasons that Kant emphasizes the need for the establishment of an ethical community. This community must be one in which the rules of engagement are completely different than those of fallen sociality, a community which sets up new possibilities for moral self-expression. Kant notes the dilemma, however: if we already begin in the condition of radical evil, with all the fallen socialization attendant upon it, how can such a community be established? He asks, “how could one expect to construct something completely straight from such crooked wood?” Kant concludes: “to found a moral people of God is therefore a work whose execution cannot be hoped for from human beings but only from God himself” (6:100). The fact that such a community must have a divine origin does not excuse anyone from doing everything in his or her power to establish and participate in such a community. But it does mean that absent divine providence in helping to overturn the old ways of relating to each other and the establishment of the ethical community, the prospects for such a community look bleak. Kant notes that on the condition that each one acts “as if everything depended on him,” the person may “hope that a higher wisdom will provide the fulfillment of his well-intentioned effort” (6:101). Interestingly, in the part four, Kant ties the founding of the ethical community to the historical Jesus. There he claims “. . . one will not fail to recognize the person who can be revered. . . as the founder of the first true church. For accreditation of his teachings as of divine mission, we shall adduce some of his teachings. . .” He then goes on to list several passages from the gospel of Matthew. He further notes that we cannot “deny to him the authority due to one who called human beings to union in his church” (6:159). The founding of the ethical community has its basis in the wisdom and actions of an historical individual who is able to disclose true rational religion and to call all persons to a loving union in this community.

Kant’s penetrating analysis of both the propensity to evil and the social condition that perpetuates it, as well as his description of the general characteristics of the ethical community, may provide some insight into the ways in which divine providence might function. He describes the constitution of the ethical community in the following way:

It could best of all be likened to the constitution of a household (a family) under a common though invisible moral father, whose holy son, who knows the father’s will and yet stands in blood relation with all the members of the family, takes his father’s place by making the other members better acquainted with his will; these therefore honor the father in him and thus enter into a free universal and enduring union of hearts. (6:102)

The church is founded by an individual in his or her capacity as a pure representative of the moral prototype, the son of God. This archetype is, of course, present in each and every one of us, although perhaps only latently or implicitly. The goal of the ethical community is to bring this highest part of the self forward, to nurture it, and to bring it to expression. An individual who is greatly advanced and developed, such as Christ, or the Buddha, could found such a community, establishing a new way of being in the world, one in which persons relate to one another as children of God, rather than as competitors who are always trying to demonstrate that they are “better” and worth more than others. Such an ethical community would be founded on the principle that all persons are Sons and Daughters of God; the Christ or divine archetype resides in each and every one. Insofar as persons are susceptible to the moral call, they are offspring of divinity. And on the basis this call they can, indeed, recognize each other as children of the most high. This mutual recognition is freely given and is the basis of a “free universal and enduring union of hearts,” a union possible through the divine archetype present in every being.

The presence of such a community furthers the moral development of the race, and entrance into it greatly strengthens an individual’s capacity to persevere in his or her struggle in virtue. First, such a community provides a space in which persons can practice recognizing one another as sons and daughters of God instead of possible competitors. When a *visible* church accords as much as possible with the true ideal of the church invisible, members can freely speak with one another to sharpen their moral judgment and further their understanding of what it is that amounts to a really good life. Second, they can join together in good works, and hearten one another in their daily struggle. Third, they can encourage one another in “the assurance of things hoped for,” that is, in the objects of moral hope, especially given that the world too often does not reward moral choices. The work of the visible church is very much a process, one that makes possible the moral development of its members.

Kant does not have a merely negative view of grace. He understands the moral law as having a divine origin, and human nature as graced because of it. Admittedly he is very skeptical of the kind of grace that is itself to effect transformation of the fundamental orientation; for various reasons this kind of grace cannot be incorporated into our maxims. However, Kant also has more positive expositions of grace, and *Religion* contains significant resources for understanding how the kind of divine aid that “must be laid hold of” might function in the struggle for moral development.

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