

Why Is Kant Noncommittal About Grace?

¿Por qué es Kant evasivo con respecto a la gracia?

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Abstract

In *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Kant claims that we may need to invoke divine aid in order to explain how a person can change from evil to good. Kant's language is a bit curious; why does he not more clearly assert, either that we must posit divine grace, or that we may not? The explanation is this: if we affirm that God grants aid, then this could convince people to passively await it or to think, upon becoming good, that they are part of a special elect. On the other hand, if we affirm that God does not help, then some may despair of ever becoming good while those who successfully change could become arrogant. Thus, Kant is noncommittal about grace because it allows the morally timorous to have hope that they can change, and the morally successful to avoid hubris.

Keywords

Evil, Grace, Kant, Moral Revolution

In *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Kant writes the following:

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What the human being is or is to become in the moral sense, good or evil, into that he must turn or have turned *himself*. Either must be an effect of his free power of choice; for otherwise it could not be imputed to him, and consequently he could not *morally* be either good or evil. When it is said, He is created good, then this can mean nothing more than this: He is created for the *good*, and the original *predisposition* in the human being is good. The human being himself is not yet good on that account; rather, according as he does or does not admit into his maxim the incentives contained in that predisposition (this must be left entirely to his free selection), he brings it about that he becomes good or evil. Supposing that, for him to become good or better, a supranatural cooperation were also needed, whether this cooperation were to consist only in the diminution of obstacles or also in positive assistance, the human being must yet make himself worthy beforehand to receive it, and must (which is no trifling matter) *accept* this aid, i.e., admit this positive increase of power into his maxim; through this alone does it become possible to impute the good to him and to cognize him as a good human being. (*Rel*, 6:44)¹

This paragraph contains two important claims: first, people are responsible for their own overall moral goodness or evil. Second, it's possible that we need "supranatural cooperation" to become morally good.

At first glance, the two claims seem to be at odds: if it's true that you must have turned yourself into what you are to become in the moral sense, then how can it also be true that you might need God's help in becoming good?²

This worry is not particularly troubling. As Lawrence Pasternack has pointed out, there are cases in everyday life where we recognize both that people are responsible for what they become and that they need help.³ Take, for example, students and learning: there are some subjects that a student cannot learn without a teacher instructing her, but even if the student has an excellent teacher, she may need to work very hard and be properly responsive to the teacher's guidance. In such cases, the teacher may say "I can't *make* you learn – at best, I can only put you in the right position for *you* to take your education into your own hands. Whether you learn or not is up to you." Kant could say something similar about God's grace: even if God offers it, it's up to the individual to take it; if the individual *does* take it, though, then we can say that the individual made herself good.

¹ I use the following abbreviations to refer to Kant's works:

CF = "The Conflict of the Faculties", Mary Gregor and Robert Anchor's translation, in *Religion and Rational Theology*.

Collins = "Moral philosophy: Collins's lecture notes", Peter Heath's translation, in *Lectures on Ethics*

CPrR = *Critique of Practical Reason*, Mary Gregor's translation, in *Practical Philosophy*

EAT = "The End of All Things", Allen Woods's translation, in *Religion and Rational Theology*.

G = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann's translation

MM = *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Mary Gregor's translation, in *Practical Philosophy*

Rel = *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Werner Pluhar's translation

² I equate "supranatural cooperation" with divine aid or God's grace.

³ Pasternack, unpublished manuscript, pp. 21-22.

Given that the two claims are not at odds, I want to focus on the second claim, that we may need supernatural cooperation to become good. Kant writes, “*Supposing* that, for him to become good or better, a supernatural cooperation also be needed.”

What puzzling is that Kant does not *assert* that divine aid is needed for someone to become good; instead, he leaves it open: possibly, grace is needed for someone to become good, but possibly it’s not. Why does Kant leave this matter open? In other words, why is Kant noncommittal about grace?⁴

In this paper, I explain why. In brief, Kant’s position is this: theoretical reason cannot know whether God grants grace; that means that we should guide our thinking about grace by practical considerations. However, there can be negative moral consequences both for asserting that God does or that God doesn’t offer grace. Consequently, while we must admit that grace is possible, we should be noncommittal about whether God actually aids anyone.

Before discussing grace, though, one might wonder why Kant thinks that it might be needed at all. After all, there are, in theory, an infinite number of supersensible claims that reason cannot rule out that Kant nonetheless does not think it helpful to posit.

The answer is that Kant thinks we’re obligated to change from evil to good: “the command that we *ought* to become better human beings [...] resounds undiminished in our soul; consequently we must also be capable of this” (*Rel*, 6:45), but he also seems to think that, *prima facie*, it’s beyond our capabilities: “how it is possible for a human being who is evil by nature to turn himself into a good human being, this surpasses all our concepts; for how can an evil tree bear good fruit?” (*Rel*, 6:44-45) Thus, we need to allow for the possibility of grace because it may be the only way to explain how evil people can discharge their obligation to become good.

The structure of this paper is as follows: first, I sketch Kant’s understanding of morally evil and morally good people; second, I explain why Kant thinks that going from good to evil is so difficult that it leads one to conclude that we must allow for grace; third, I articulate Kant’s reasons for being noncommittal about grace.

Evil and Good People

Kant thinks that, fundamentally, what makes someone good or evil is her *Gesinnung* or, as it has been translated, her “disposition”,⁵ “attitude”,⁶ or “conviction”⁷ (I follow Pasternack’s decision to leave “*Gesinnung*” untranslated).⁸ Just how Kant understands the *Gesinnung* is a matter of controversy; as I read him, an agent’s *Gesinnung*

⁴ Kant talks about different kinds of grace throughout his corpus. The kind of grace I discuss in this paper is aid God grants people in their efforts to go from morally evil to morally good.

⁵ This is George DiGiovanni’s translation (Kant, 1996, p. 65).

⁶ This is Werner Pluhar’s translation (Kant, 2009, pp. 13-14).

⁷ This is Stephen Palmquist’s translation (Palmquist, 2015).

⁸ Pasternack, 2014, p. 125.

is the noumenal ground of her phenomenal character.⁹ Moreover, Kant often equates a person's *Gesinnung* to her "supreme maxim" (see e.g., *Rel*, 6:31-32, 36, 39, 47). This suggests that, ultimately, the reason why people have the maxims and (at least some of) the reactive attitudes they have is that they have a *Gesinnung* of a particular sort. And Kant thinks that *Gesinnungen* are of only two sorts: good and evil. If an agent has a good *Gesinnung*, then she subordinates the "law of self-love" to the moral law, but if she has an evil *Gesinnung*, then she "makes the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law" (*Rel*, 6:36).

Now, one way to understand the relationship between an agent's *Gesinnung* and the rest of her maxims is as follows: if you have an evil *Gesinnung*, then this means that you *always* subordinate morality to self-love when the two conflict, and if you have a good *Gesinnung*, then you always subordinate self-love to morality when the two conflict. This would mean (1) an evil person would be capable of acting from duty only if doing so didn't conflict with self-love;¹⁰ and (2) a good person would be capable of acting from self-love only if doing so didn't conflict with duty. (1) would entail the impossibility of an evil person doing something she thought would hinder her self-love, and (2) would entail the impossibility of a good person's acting immorally. I call this interpretation the "logical interpretation", for it understands the *Gesinnung* as a ground that entails each action an agent takes.¹¹

In the present context, the logical interpretation has an advantage and a disadvantage. Its advantage is that it makes sense of why Kant thought that the transformation of an evil person into a good person was incomprehensible. After all, if it's completely impossible for an evil person to act from duty when it conflicts with self-love, then an evil person could become good only if she thought doing so were in her self-interest. But if that's why she tried to become good, then she wouldn't have become good after all, because someone who made morality paramount only because she thought doing so advanced her self-interest would not in fact have made morality paramount. All she would have accomplished is convincing herself that acting morally is the best means of advancing her self-interest. She would always act consistently with duty, but never from duty, so she could not count as a good person.

But this brings us to the disadvantage: the logical interpretation makes the transformation from evil to good incomprehensible because it makes it out-and-out *impossible*. Not only would the evil person not have the moral psychological resources to

⁹ Just how Kant understands noumena, phenomena, and their relationship is enormously complicated, and beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁰ Arguably, on this interpretation a person with an evil *Gesinnung* could never even act from duty, because when he does his duty and thinks that he's doing something because it's right, he's really doing it because it's right *and because it doesn't set back his self-interest*. If that's the proper description of the evil person's moral psychology, then at best he can only act impurely: "the *impurity* of the human heart consists in this: that although in terms of its object (the intended compliance with the law) the maxim is indeed good, and perhaps even powerful enough for performance, it is not purely moral, i.e., it has not, as should be the case, admitted the law *alone* into itself as *sufficient* incentive" (*Rel*, 6:30).

¹¹ I am not sure that anyone has ever endorsed the logical interpretation as a reading of Kant, but some of what Daniel O'Connor (O'Connor, 1985, p. 293) and John Silber (Silber, 1960, cxvi) write comes close.

become good, he wouldn't even have the resources to make himself "worthy beforehand to receive" God's grace.

Fortunately, the logical interpretation is probably wrong, for three reasons.

First, there is strong textual reason to think that a good person can act against duty out of self-love. For instance, Kant writes that a good person can sometimes act against her adopted moral maxims: "the human being who admits this purity into his maxim, although not yet himself holy on that account (for *between the maxim and the deed there is still a large gap*), is yet on the way of approaching holiness in infinite progress" (*Rel*, 6:46-47, emphasis mine). The reason a good person can do this is that, even if she has a good disposition, she still has a propensity to evil,¹² which makes her frail, i.e., someone who "admit[s] the good (the law) into the maxim of my power of choice" but for whom "this good, which objectively, in the idea [...] is an insurmountable incentive, is subjectively [...] the weaker (by comparison with inclination) when the maxim ought to be complied with" (*Rel*, 6:29). Thus, contrary to what the logical interpretation implies, a good person is capable of acting from self-love even if it conflicts with duty.

If a good person can act immorally, then, by parity of reasoning, perhaps an evil person could act from duty, even when doing so competed against his self-interest. After all, recall how Kant defines a good person: a good person is someone who makes "the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law"; this suggests that a good person's supreme maxim is: "whenever duty and self-love conflict, do your duty." And yet, despite the fact that this is her supreme maxim, she is capable of following self-love. Thus, even if the proper formulation of the evil supreme maxim were, "*whenever* duty and self-love conflict, pursue self-love", it might still be possible for an evil person to forgo self-love and act from duty.¹³

But, and this is the second reason to think that evil people can sometimes act from duty, it's likely that the proper formulation of the evil supreme maxim is not so all-or-nothing, for elsewhere in the *Religion* Kant defines an evil human being as someone who is "conscious of the moral law and yet has admitted the (*occasional*) deviation from it into his maxim" (*Rel*, 6:32, emphasis mine). This indicates that the evil person's supreme maxim is not "*whenever* duty and self-love conflict, pursue self-love", but rather, "*sometimes*, when duty and self-love conflict, pursue self-love." But if that's the evil person's supreme maxim, then presumably it would also allow for sometimes following duty when duty and self-love conflict.¹⁴

¹² Kant writes that the propensity to evil "cannot be *extirpated* through human powers" (*Rel*, 6:37).

¹³ This must mean that, whatever a supreme maxim is, you can have it without it literally entailing certain kinds of actions. Because of this, I understand a supreme maxim to be something that expresses itself phenomenally through your reactive attitudes, deliberative processes, and judgments without it literally causing particular maxim-adoptions or actions. Another way of putting it is: each agent has an outlook on or orientation to morality; she either thinks she should always abide by the real moral law, or she doesn't. If she doesn't, then she has an evil *Gesinnung*; if she does, then she has a good *Gesinnung*. Going into greater detail would take one beyond the scope of this paper.

¹⁴ If I am right that a person's *Gesinnung* manifests itself in an outlook that only *influences* the maxims she adopts and actions she undertakes, then, even if the evil *Gesinnung* did say to always subordinate morality to

A third reason for thinking that an evil person can act morally is that each of us has a predisposition to personality that is “the subjective basis” for our ability to “admit this respect into our maxims” (*Rel*, 6:28). Kant is clear that this predisposition cannot be exterminated (*Rel*, 6:28) or corrupted (*Rel*, 6:35). Moreover, Kant writes that, in regards to any immoral action, that a person “should have refrained from the action, whatever the circumstances of time and the connections in which he may have been; for through no cause in the world can he cease to be a freely acting being” (*Rel*, 6:41). In other words, no matter how evil you are, you are still capable of acting out of respect for the moral law.

I conclude that an evil person can act from duty. Given that, couldn't an evil person turn into a good person out of respect for the moral law? If so, why does Kant think the transformation from evil to good surpasses all our concepts to the point that we might need to invoke God's grace to explain it?

The answers to these two questions are: yes, an evil person can turn into a good person out of respect for the moral law; what it takes is fortuity—she needs to find herself in the right kind of situation. That said, though we know that certain kinds of events allow us to do things that seem beyond our powers, we cannot understand how those events pull it off. That's the sense in which transformation surpasses our concepts. However, the invocation of God's grace is one model that allows us to make sense of these fortuitous situations.

In the next section, I explore these answers in greater detail.

The Moral Revolution

To understand why fortuity is needed for moral revolution, it helps to know more about evil people. If you are evil, then this means that there is at least some set of non-moral concerns that you think override moral ones, all things considered. Call these concerns “core projects.” When it comes to core projects, not only do you pursue them when they conflict with your duty, but you also think you have more reason, *ultima facie*, to follow them than you do your duty.

If this is how you think, then it is very difficult to figure out how you could ever decide that you should prioritize morality over core projects, for not only does it advance your interests or flatter your self-conception to pursue core projects, but it also seems to you like the right thing to do, all things considered.

If you're like this, then when it comes to a conflict between tending to your core projects and doing your duty, you will not only *want* to pursue your core projects, you will think you *should*. You may recognize that it is immoral to do so, but think that practical reasons based in your core projects override or outweigh moral ones;¹⁵ or you may think

self-love, it would still allow her to act from duty; it's just that such dutiful actions would always feel imprudent, illicit, or somehow not on the up-and-up. Given that one's *Gesinnung* only says to subordinate morality to self-love on some occasions, though, then it's possible for even an evil person to wholeheartedly act from duty.

¹⁵ Bernard Williams thought that Gauguin should have abandoned his family to paint native Tahitians, even though doing so was immoral (Williams, 1981, p. 23). I don't think that Williams would have described the

that pursuing your core projects is immoral but, given the kind of person you are, you can't help but to do the immoral thing;¹⁶ or you may think, on some level, that pursuing your core projects is itself the moral thing to do.¹⁷ In each case, it seems psychologically impossible for you to subordinate your core projects to morality.

However, having a predisposition to personality means that you can grasp what morality requires of you, see that it dictates outweigh non-moral ones, and realize that you can carry them out. But to achieve such illumination, you need to be in the right situation; more precisely, you either must find yourself in a situation stark enough to cause you to question your fundamental priorities, or you must observe an inspiring example of moral worth.

Call the first kind of situation a revelatory situation. In a revelatory situation, commitment to your central projects requires a deep breach of morality. This is revelatory because before this situation, you didn't realize that your central projects could be so misaligned with morality. Once you see that they are, though, your predisposition to personality forces you to reconsider whether you really want to pursue your central projects at such a high moral price,¹⁸ and at this point, you can decide to slough them off and commit yourself to the moral law in a revolutionary act.

Call the second kind of situation an inspiring situation. In an inspiring situation, you observe someone doing her duty at great personal cost. When you see that, you not only get a good sense of what morality demands, but you also realize both that people can do what it demands, and that what it asks of us overrides non-moral reasons.¹⁹

In the foregoing situations, being in the right place at the right time allows even an evil person to appreciate what he is supposed to do, and motivate him to do it. So a question naturally presents itself: why think that moral revolution surpasses our concepts?

Gauguin case as one where the action was right but immoral; rather, he would have seen it as a case where a non-moral concern overrode a moral one. For Kant, though, thinking in Williams's way is one kind of way of being evil.

¹⁶ See *Collins*, 27:350. Admittedly, Collins compiled his notes on Kant's lectures on ethics between 1774 and 1777, so it's possible that Kant came to reject the possibility of moral despair. However, there is no reason to think he did.

¹⁷ In *The Metaphysics of Morals* Kant writes, "I can indeed be mistaken at times in my objective judgment as to whether something is a duty or not" (*MM*, 6:401).

¹⁸ In the Collins lecture notes Kant allegedly says, "[n]o man will readily be wicked on his own, and more than he will gladly do a duty on his own; he always appeals to others" (*Collins*, 27:334). He later writes that "[c]onscience [...] has a driving force, to summon us against our will before the judgment-seat, in regard to the lawfulness of our actions" (*Collins*, 27:351). I take these two passages together to suggest the possibility that if an evildoer becomes aware that his action is unusual in its immorality, this realization will summon his conscience up to judge him.

¹⁹ In the *Groundwork* Kant asserts, "[t]here is no one, not even the most hardened scoundrel, if only he is otherwise in the habit of using reason, who – when one presents him with examples of probity of purpose, of steadfastness in following good maxims, of compassion and of general benevolence (involving in addition great sacrifices of advantages and comfort) – does not wish that he too might be so disposed." (*G*, 4:454). Similarly, in the second *Critique* he writes that "before a humble common man in whom I perceive uprightness of character in a higher degree than I am aware of in myself *my spirit bows*, whether I want it or whether I do not" (*CPrR*, 5:76-77).

After all, in both the revelatory and inspiring situations, it seems clear enough how you can undertake a revolution: you see what you are supposed to do, and so you do it.

The problem with that answer, though, is that if you have an evil supreme maxim that says that your central projects override moral concerns, then why would either a revelatory or inspiring situation make you question this? Along similar lines: if you're committed to the moral law, then why should having to make a great personal sacrifice or seeing others having to make great personal sacrifices move you to question *that*? In other words: if someone really does think that her central projects override the moral law, then nothing that happens should move her to question this; similarly, if someone really does think that the moral law overrides all non-moral concerns, then nothing that happens should provoke her into questioning this belief either.

But of course, great personal sacrifice *does* make people question the moral law; indeed, as I noted before, good people can act akratically, or even fall back into evil.²⁰ Similarly, revelatory and inspirational situations *do* make people question their central projects; by parity of reasoning, evil people can act enkratically. Just how this is possible is unclear. It is in this sense that the fall from light into darkness and the ascent from darkness to light surpass all our concepts: given how we conceive good and evil people, they should never waver; and yet experience suggests they can.²¹

Why Kant Is Noncommittal about Grace

Here grace could play a role. Kant writes that divine aid, should it happen, would consist “in the diminution of obstacles or also in positive assistance.” In a revelatory situation, the strength of the reasons your central projects give you could weaken, thereby allowing you to see your moral reasons as being stronger, which in turn could allow you to incite a moral revolution; or, in an inspirational situation, the reasons given to you by moral considerations could strengthen, thereby allowing you to overcome your evil supreme maxim in a moral revolution. If God helped us in this way, then going from evil

²⁰ Kant mentions moral recidivism at *Rel*, 6:77 and 6:94.

²¹ One might simply wonder, why does Kant not revise his concept of good and evil people to accommodate the explicability of the fact that they can change? The reason Kant does not do this has to do with his commitments about morality: morality is overriding; we know what morality asks of us; we are morally responsible for our wrongdoing; and we have a character of some sort that persists through and helps to explain our actions. If you know what morality asks of you, and you also know that you are supposed to do what it asks, how can we explain why you choose to disobey it? Moreover, how can we explain how you choose to disobey it *over time*? The best way, Kant thinks, is to posit a commitment to a principle of self-love that you *can* know is wrong, but that you also *do* think is right. But this is just Kant's view, and forces him to take the position he takes.

A parallel in contemporary philosophy is in the work of Peter van Inwagen. Van Inwagen thinks that the arguments for the incompatibility of determinism and free will and for the incompatibility of indeterminism and free will are both compelling, but he is even more confident that we have moral responsibility, and that moral responsibility entails free will. So he concludes that he have free will, but also claims that it is mysterious how we can have it (van Inwagen, 2000, pp. 1-2).

Kant himself takes a similar position with regard to self-deceit in *The Metaphysics of Morals*: “It is easy to show that the human being is actually guilty of many *inner* lies, but it seems more difficult to explain how they are possible; for a lie requires a second person whom one intends to deceive, whereas to deceive oneself on purpose seems to contain a contradiction” (*MM*, 6:430).

to good would no longer surpass our concepts – we would be able to make definite sense of it. Without God, we could say only, “sometimes people just find themselves able to change, despite our not knowing how this is possible”, while with God we could say, “people can find themselves able to change because God allows them to appreciate what they already, on some level, accept.”

This possibility raises a new question: even if it is true that invoking divine aid allows us to make sense of the change from evil to good, why invoke it at all? In other words, why do we need any explanation of how people can change – why not instead say, “people should make themselves good, therefore they can?”

Kant’s discussion of the afterlife in his 1794 essay, “The End of All Things” helps. There, he tries to determine whether we should believe that everyone after death enjoys endless paradise (he calls believers in this view “unitists” (*EAT*, 8:328)) or whether instead we should think that some people enjoy paradise, but the rest suffer eternal damnation (he calls adherents of this view “dualists” (*EAT*, 8:329)). He thinks that we cannot decide the matter using theoretical cognition, so he concludes that we must settle it on the basis of practical considerations.²² And practical considerations show the salvific dualist’s system to be superior to the salvific unitist’s, for the assumption that everyone will enjoy paradise “appears to lull us too much into an indifferent sense of security” (*EAT*, 8:330).

Though Kant sides with the salvific dualist over the salvific unitist, a footnote in the *Religion* complicates his position.

When discussing people who have led bad lives, are on their deathbeds, and now wonder whether they have any chance of avoiding eternal perdition, Kant writes that there are difficulties with any answer a confessor gives. If you tell them that damnation lasts only a finite time, “then one must worry that many people [...] would say, ‘Then I hope I will be able to endure it’” (*Rel*, 6:69n). But if you tell them that hell is eternal, then you will create a situation in which confessors will feel pressed to tell their subjects that they can transform through the use of “repentant confessions, formulas of faith, and perhaps also vows to lead a new life” (*Rel*, 6:69n). Kant concludes that both results are bad, and this dilemma is “the unavoidable consequence if the *eternity* of the future destiny conforming to the way of life one has led here is set forth as *dogma*, and the human being is not rather instructed to frame a concept of his future moral state from his moral state as it has been hitherto and to infer this future state *himself* as the naturally foreseeable consequences thereof” (*Rel*, 6:69n).²³

This makes Kant’s view of the afterlife nuanced: on the one hand, he says that practical considerations favor believing salvific dualism over salvific unitism. On the other

²² “Hence the unitist’s system, as much as the dualist’s, considered as dogma, seems to transcend completely the speculative faculty of human reason; and everything brings us back to limiting those ideas of reason absolutely to the conditions of their practical use only.” (*EAT*, 8:330)

²³ In “The Conflict of the Faculties”, Kant defines dogmas as follows: “Dogma is not what we ought to believe (for faith admits of no imperative), but what we find it possible and useful to admit for practical (moral) purposes, although we cannot demonstrate it and so can only believe it” (*CF*, 7:42). (Note that the Cambridge translation of *Conflict* contains a misprint; instead of writing “Dogma is *not* what we ought to believe”, Gregor and Anchor have Kant writing that “Dogma is *now* what we ought to believe”.)

hand, he clearly thinks we shouldn't respond to evil people who are about to die with an answer to their questions about what will become of them. Instead, we should tell them only to look into their own hearts and answer the questions themselves. So, even though practical reason *favors* one view of the matter, we shouldn't tell people that it *commits* us to a particular view, but should instead tell them to figure out what they believe themselves.

Kant's thinking on the afterlife provides an example where Kant thinks both that practical considerations should settle a religious question about which theoretical reason must be agnostic, and that we should not communicate what practical reason says, even though it has a position. If we apply Kant's views on the afterlife to his views on grace, we can make sense of why he is noncommittal about grace. First, theoretical reason cannot tell us whether grace is real, but practical reason may have a need for it, so practical reason should address the issue. Second, even if it is true that practical considerations favor the view that God grants us divine aid, we should not assert that practical reason forces our hand, one way or the other.

That said, Kant comes to his somewhat noncommittal view about the afterlife on the grounds that taking a more dogmatic stand has negative consequences. So what negative consequences might there be to taking a strong stand on grace?

To see this, let's look at what negative consequences there might be to propounding as dogma the idea that we achieve our moral revolutions completely on our own. There are (at least) two.

First, if you have tried and failed many times to become good, you might conclude, despite what practical reason tells you, that you are not up to the task. Kant suggests this possibility in "The Conflict of the Faculties." There, he mentions that practical reason commands you to become perfectly good, but you might think that, so long as you are still blameworthy for your past life of evil deeds, you cannot become perfectly morally good. And if you think you cannot become perfectly morally good, then you might not even try to incite a moral revolution at all; why bother revolting if you won't succeed in your aims? Thus Kant writes that the hope that God will justify you is itself "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" (CF, 7:44). In other words, the belief that God can help you become perfect may itself be needed in order for you to try to become good in the first place. While that is not direct evidence for the claim that you need to believe God helps you undergo a moral revolution, it supports the idea that moral timorousness is real possibility, so it is indirect evidence for the view that if grace were ruled out, then some might stop trying to be good, out of moral timorousness.

Second, if you try to become good and succeed, and you think that your success was due wholly to your own efforts, then you may become conceited about yourself or judgmental of those who fail. Doing that, though, may cause (or perhaps just constitute) your becoming evil. This might seem strange: if you truly are morally good, then how could you entertain either of those attitudes? Remember, though: Kant is clear both that the

good person can be frail, and that she can revert to evil (see *Rel*, 6:77 and 93). Thus, to forestall moral recidivism, we should not claim that God definitely does not help us to become good.

To sum up: we should not claim that grace does not happen, because such an assertion will rob the morally weak of hope, and will convince the morally strong that they are stronger than they in fact are. As Kant puts it in the Collins Lecture Notes, “[o]n the one hand a man must not despair, but believe he has the strength to follow the moral law, even if he fails to comply with it. On the other, however, he can fall into self-conceit, and build far too much on his own powers” (*Collins*, 27:350).²⁴

Are there any downsides to propounding as dogma that God helps us become good? Again, there seem to be two.

First, if you are convinced that God dispenses divine aid, then this could diminish the effort you put forth in trying to be good. You might not try as hard as you could if you think that God will carry you over the finish line.

Second, thinking that God dispenses divine aid may lead you into thinking that God plays favorites. If you are certain that God has helped you become good, you might conclude that you are one of God’s chosen, which could lead to moral superciliousness.

Kant enunciates the negative consequences of positively asserting grace near the end of *Religion*:

This idea [i.e., divine aid] is entirely extravagant, and keeping at a reverential distance from it as something sacred is moreover salutary for us, lest, under the delusion of performing miracles ourselves or perceiving miracles within us, we render ourselves unfit for any use of reason, or allow ourselves to be enticed to the inertia of awaiting from above, in a passive idleness, what we should seek within ourselves. (*Rel*, 6:191)²⁵

²⁴ It is worth noting that the sentence immediately following reads, “Yet this self-conceit can be averted through the purity of the law; for if the law is presented in its full purity, nobody will be such a fool as to think he can fulfill it quite purely by his own efforts” (*Collins*, 27:350). This suggests that someone who accurately grasps the demands the moral law will think that he needs divine grace, and so it suggests that, at least in the 1770s, Kant thought that practical reason spoke in favor of grace.

²⁵ Kant’s claim that we who believe we have received divine grace will suffer “the delusion of performing miracles ourselves or perceiving miracles within us”, and “render ourselves unfit for any use of reason”, deserves some explanation; why think such people are especially likely to render themselves unfit for any use of reason? I imagine Kant probably reasons as follows: if you think that God does not offer divine grace, this is likely because you are a philosophical theist, or a deist, or a religious skeptic. Each of these types is unlikely to believe of herself that she has knowledge of the supersensible realm (although atheists claim to know more than they can know, they usually don’t claim to have mystical insights). The person who claims to know that God does grant divine aid but who thinks that he can’t receive it is also unlikely to claim to have mystical insights – not because he denies God’s existence, but rather because he believes that God has no interest in him. It is only the person who thinks that God grants divine aid and thinks that God has granted it to him in particular who is likely to think he has special insight into God’s actions – after all, God has chosen him, so there must be something special about him.

There are moral downsides to committing yourself to either position about the role of divine aid in moral conversion. This is why Kant takes the position he does: it may be that we are capable of becoming good by our own unaided efforts, but it may be that we are capable of becoming good only by grace. Reason has no theoretical grounds to assert either position, and it has practical grounds to keep both positions open. Consequently, we should be noncommittal about grace.

Conclusion

Kant's position allows us to avert the negative consequences of taking a stand on how conversion works. If someone despairs of becoming good on the grounds that God will not help him and it is too difficult for him to do it on his own, you must point out to him that he knows no such thing, and that if it really is too difficult for him to become good on his own, then God *will* help him. Similarly, if someone assumes that God will help her, and so doesn't try as hard as she can, you should tell her she does not know that God will help her, so she must try harder.

On the other side, if someone seems to have become good but starts showing self-conceit or judgmental attitudes about those who have failed to become good, you must point out that for all he knows, he did not become good on his own, and that God helped him cross the divide. Similarly, if someone is good and thinks himself a member of the religious elect, you should respond that he does not in fact know that God helped him at all. Perhaps the effort was all his own.

This, then, is why Kant is noncommittal about grace: it is the way to prevent damaging attitudes from taking hold, and so the way to enable moral conversion to occur and hold fast.

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