**Morality and Fallen Man**

Since the Enlightenment of the 18th century, it has been routine for intellectuals to oppose the practice of positive religion to that of morality and, in various ways, to attempt to drive a wedge between these two things. So far as I am aware, we lack a good historical account of this process, so that the standard sort of account that we get from irreligious writers from Lord Shaftesbury to the New Atheists remains the only one in the field. According to this account, the overthrow of Aristotelianism and the feudal system led to scientific and technological progress, which in turn led to the increase in education and a sense of human empowerment. From this perspective, traditional religious belief (including historical Christianity) was exposed as the product of ignorance and superstition and persistence in its practice proof of either willful ignorance or deliberate self-deception.[[1]](#footnote-1) More than this, the evils done in the name of religion were given as proof that religion is a merely a human invention, one that can retain its hold over men only through the exercise of a combination of censorship and violence and which results in enthusiasm, unnatural fears, and persecution of those few noble souls who seek to think for themselves. Positive religion is condemned as bad for the individual, for society, and for civilization as a whole. As such, we should join Hume, Thomas Jefferson (and, for that matter, John Lennon) in looking toward the day in which religion in general and Christianity in particular will be something dismissed with ridicule as merely a bad memory of the way things used to be in the bad old days of ignorance and superstition.

From very early on, modern European intellectuals have tried to drive a wedge between positive religion and morality. Earliest of all were perhaps Grotius and Pufendorf, who argued that the principles of natural law could be known apart from revelation (i.e. apart from positive religion) and thus needed no religious foundation in order to ground the practice of morality.[[2]](#footnote-2) This quickly encouraged the notion of an autonomous reason capable in and of itself of providing a religiously neutral standard for the evaluation of all human practices and customs, including religious ones. Thus, reason in this sense was first turned against the aberrant practices of non-European cultures; however, it was not long before it was turned with equal vigor against traditional ethical ideas grounded in Judeo-Christian revelation. Whatever reason did not approve from its secularized moral point of view became questionable, then superfluous to living a morally good life, then ultimately contrary to living a good human life. In the post-Lockean intellectual milieu, in which discursive reason was regarded as the sole source of truth and knowledge, philosophers like Shaftesbury and Hume then turned reason’s sites on the metaphysical and historical claims of Christianity, taking for granted that whatever could not be justified by “neutral” (i.e. secularized) reason could not be credibly believed or sustained. Not surprisingly, they found that the claims of religion were wanting and condemned all believers as contemptible, cowardly, and wicked. They have been followed in this by their modern incarnation, the New Atheists, who (like Shaftesbury) claim that religion is contemptible and worthy only of ridicule.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Central to all these claims was the thesis that morality does not depend upon or require religion, and that it perfectly possible for us to live morally good lives without even a tincture of positive religion. Indeed, for the deists and many others, religion and living a moral life are one and the same thing. Indeed, rational morality becomes such an important thing that it becomes the common view that, if there is a God, He will care for nothing except morality, so that anyone who does right by his or her own lights, regardless of his religious beliefs or lack of them, will receive the reward of heaven if such a place exists. No need for positive religion, then, or its tedious and insulting observances and those who avail themselves of its uses and practices are simply wasting their time.

Not surprisingly, persons of this sort have little patience with the notion of original sin. For most Enlightenment philosophers, beginning at least as early as Francis Hutcheson, the doctrine of original sin, i.e. the notion that human beings are incapable of any good actions apart from the grace of God, is both false and insulting.[[4]](#footnote-4) The notion that human beings, apprised by the moral sense or intuitive reason of the content of the moral law are incapable of obeying that law through the exercise of their own free will in response to the promptings of reason or sentiment, is deemed empirically false. On this ground, no more is needed for the pursuit of morality than the willpower to overcome temptation and adhere to the promptings of one’s own heart and mind, which are fundamentally sound and will operate with perfect clarity once the blinkers of outmoded customs and religious belief have been removed from our eyes.

Perhaps the epitome of this sort of view is to be met with in Kant’s moral philosophy, predicated on the notion that morality is utterly and completely *autonomous*. For Kant, morality is autonomous both in its fundamental principles and in its influence on the human will. In both cases, the human rationality is the source of this autonomy. Rational moral agents possess a power of pure practical reason that delivers the fundamental principles of morality to us by means of a direct, *a priori* intuition of the fundamental principle of the moral law, a form of knowledge that is beholden only to itself and cannot be corrected by any other kind or source of knowledge. Our knowledge of these principles is thus insulated from any possibility of review or critique either from religion or empirical science. More than this, Kant maintains that the will of a rational moral agent, insofar as it is itself autonomous and thus governed by rational principle rather than the promptings of self-love, will legislate that law as the law for every rational will, including its own. It further seems to be Kant’s view - though this is disputed - that this very act of legislation is the source the binding force of that law and that which makes it my duty as opposed merely to a substantive truth apprehended by pure practical reason.[[5]](#footnote-5)

In all of this, there is no need for God or religion. Indeed, Kant clearly thinks that morality is not only separate from religion but provides the standard by means of which religious beliefs and practices are to be judged. Nothing has value in this world or even outside of it, Kant tells us, except the good will. God, who has a holy will and can do nothing other than what morality requires, is unable to interact with us on any other terms. Thus religion, which both imposes external, non-moral obligations upon us as a condition for salvation and promises us extra-moral means of forgiveness for our sins, are contrary to morality and therefore pernicious. In this way, the autonomous moral agent is thereby able to discern that the uses of positive religion are impermissible to a rational being and beneath his dignity. Kant puts man in place of God through the faculty of pure practical reason in such a way that it seems that the will of a rational moral agent can even dictate to God that He may not forgive us our sins since to do so would undermine the authority of the moral law.

A view like this cannot countenance any notion of original sin. Indeed, Kant insists on the freedom of the will as a necessary condition for the possibility of moral responsibility, since ought implies can. If human beings are incapable of doing what morality requires as a consequences of an original sin in which they themselves did not participate, then they cannot be obligated to do so either. Therefore, it seems, if morality is to be possible at all it has to be the case that it lies within ourselves to conform our behavior to the moral law, so that something akin to Pelagianism must be true. Kant does not deny that we are also subject to non-rational motives that incline us to pursue self-love in preference to morality. Indeed, that there should be such motives is also a necessary condition for morality and for the same reason - ought implies can. I can only be prescriptively obligated to act as the moral law demands if it is possible for me to do otherwise. If I act autonomously, then I will act freely in accordance with the demands of reason and morality in circumstances in which I could have done otherwise. If I refuse to act autonomously then I will freely allow my action to be determined heteronomously by non-rational motives and impulses, abdicating my exalted status as a rational being, in circumstances in which it lay within my power to have done as morality requires. Which I do lies within my power and is ultimately up to me; for this reason and this reason only I can be held liable to praise and blame, punishment and reward for my actions.

For Kant, nothing counts except action in accordance with duty from the motive of duty for duty’s sake. Since those character traits traditionally known as virtues (prudence, temperance, courage, and so on) can be used for evil as well as for good, these traits as such have no particular moral quality, though we should cultivate them to the extent that they enable and reinforce our commitment to morality. For Kant, virtue has nothing to do with the virtues *per se*, i.e. the virtues understood as character traits. Instead, for Kant, virtue is simply a quality of the will understood as the ability to resist temptation and hew to one’s duty despite the blandishments of pleasure and self-love.[[6]](#footnote-6) Thus, virtue is essentially a matter of what was once known as “willpower,” by means of which we both resist strong temptation and overcome the assault of powerful spontaneous impulses to wrongdoing. Kant believes that it lies within our power to resist any and all temptations through the exercise of willpower and so must deny, of necessity, that we are unable to do what morality requires of us.

II

Contrary to the Enlightenment position is that of traditional Christianity, which denies that morality, in Kant’s sense, is even so much as possible for us. According to the much-maligned doctrine of original sin human beings, who once possessed the power of free will in its perfection so that doing the right and the good was simply a matter of following our natural bent, committed some transgression that permanently and irremediably undermined our ability to do as reason and morality require. The primary result of this original sin is a disordered motivational structure that strongly and routinely prefers the merely apparent to the actual good for us. This leads to a divergence between our postlapsarian natural bent, i.e. the things under the aegis of our disordered motivational structure that we spontaneously judge to be good for us and thus are naturally motivated to pursue as necessary to our happiness, and the demands of reason and morality grounded in the true and original nature from which we have become estranged. Fallen humanity can be motivated only by appetite, desire, and passion in accordance with the contingencies of pleasure and pain; in this there is no basis for genuine moral action in Kant’s sense.

Nevertheless, through the presence of conscience (the voice of God in every human breast) each human being becomes aware of a moral law that exists independently of his or her will through the feelings of guilt and self-reproach that faculty produces when we apprehend our dereliction. Having received this clue from the prompting of conscience, human reason is able to theoretically articulate the content of this law as the natural moral law, which finds its ontological ground/foundation in the divine nature/intellect.[[7]](#footnote-7) However, reason has no power of itself to move the will to the performance of this law; neither can the finite human will legislate this law for itself in such a way as to make it truly obligatory for us for it lacks both the power and the authority to do so. For fallen humanity, the only available incentives to act in accordance with the moral law are fear of punishment and hope of reward, which are not properly moral incentives, at least from the Kantian point of view. For this reason, then, fallen humanity has no ability to do any morally good action, being incapable of loving God for His own sake and all other things as God would have us do, and do so for our own sakes rather than merely His own self-aggrandizement, of which being God He has no need.

Morality is contrary to the natural bent of fallen human nature as expressed in the human motivational structure; because of this, morality can only be present to us as something external to us, apprehensible only as an external law imposed upon us and directing us to an ideal that transcends our ability to attain through our own efforts. Despite the fact that our own reason testifies to the existence of this law and even exacts it due in the form of feelings of awe and respect arising from its contemplation, this provides insufficient motivation to make it possible for us to the right thing for the right reason. On the supposition that human beings are fallen, this is exactly what we would expect to be the case. Since self-love only occasionally coincides with what reason demands, and on Kant’s view to that extent represents a possible threat to the moral worth of our actions on those occasions, morality must generally been seen as something contrary to our happiness, and thus as something onerous - as duty in the colloquial sense in which it means something that I have to do whether I want to or not and which will typically be opposed to what I would much rather do. Since happiness, as Kant himself avers, is grounded in self-love, morality not only potentially conflicts with happiness, but is quite likely to do so on a regular basis, and indeed, routinely more often than not. To the extent that Kant regards happiness to be nothing more than desire-satisfaction, this means that morality and happiness must inevitably be opposed to one another.

Thus, the very structure of Kantian morality shows that we are alienated from our true nature as rational beings. In a fully rational being, there would be no conflict between what reason demands and what we most desire, want, and seek to obtain. Nor would we desire anything beyond the limits established by reason. Morality, conceived of as a system of “autonomous” rules external to us that must be responded to in awe and respect and submitted to - even if this means self-imposition by one’s own will - can never really be the expression of our nature as rational beings, or rather can be so only so long as we are fundamentally irrational beings. If, like Kant, we suppose that the perspective of rational autonomy is expressive of our true nature, yet opposed to our natural bent, we can only conclude that we are to that extent *alienated* from our true nature. Viewed in this way, the Kantian perspective, which rejects our fallenness and teaches that morality is the highest shows us to be sub-optimally related to morality and content (if the only alternative is to submit to God and the guidance of His Church) to remain in a state of alienation, inner conflict, an incomplete rationality.

Indeed, a symptom of this is to be found in a curious feature of Kant’s ethics. Kant tells us in the very opening sentence of the *Groundwork* that nothing in the world or even out of it possesses intrinsic worth except the Good Will, which he identifies with the attitude of duty for duty’s sake which must accompany every act in order for it to possess moral worth and the agent who performs it worthiness to be happy. At the same time, Kant denies that God possesses good will. Instead, says Kant, since God does not have free will (since God cannot but do what morality requires), God possesses a Holy Will rather than a good one. If we takes Kant’s claims literally here, then since God’s Holy Will is such by nature and is incapable of virtue since never subject to the possibility of dereliction, neither God nor His will can possess intrinsic value. More than this, to the extent that it is due to our moral agency that we possess intrinsic value, dignity, and exist as ends-in-ourselves to whom equal respect and concern are due and in which our natural rights are grounded, God must be seen as lacking all of these things as well. This curious consequence, which as we shall see below does not correspond to Kant’s considered views in this area, would make human moral agents more valuable than and thus superior to God! Such is yet another symptom of the wrongheadedness of placing morality ahead of and as normative for, religious belief and practice.

By contrast, the Christian scheme of salvation proposes that the true expression of our nature consists not in the attitude of Kantian morality, but instead in the regeneration of that nature through grace, which cancels the effects of original sin and transforms us by degrees into beings for whom the “demands” of morality become the expression of the true and genuine self, and no longer need to be “imposed” or viewed as “duties” or “obligations.” The Christian view on this point is that the person who has been saved by God’s grace and transformed by it wants to do what morality “demands,” not because morality demands it, but because to act morally is the expression of one’s own true self and what one most *wants* to do. Such a person acts rationally because he or she *is* rational and to act in this way is easy, natural, and pleasant. Such a person possesses Plato’s well-ordered soul and acts as that well-ordered soul spontaneously prompts him or her to do without having to resist temptation or overcome his or her “lower impulses” because the grace of God has taken care of that already. That this process takes time and requires effort and struggle is a testimony, not to Divine lack of concern or power, but to the depth of ingression of sinfulness, and the sinful habits and attitudes it encourages and fosters, into our very being. Our souls are terminally ill with sin and only a miracle, accompanied by a long period of rehabilitative therapy, can save us.

From this perspective, the point of view that valorizes autonomous morality and attempts to set it up as the sole or final arbiter of the validity of positive religious belief and practice completely misunderstands the proper relation between religion and morality. It is our focus on morality as independent of religion, as *autonomous*, that keeps us in a state of alienation from our rational nature and thus divided against ourselves. It buys our freedom, dignity, and underived worth as moral agents at the cost of keeping us in thrall to our sinfulness. Even more oddly than this, it evinces an attitude that identifies the very possibility of morality with something guaranteed to keep morality at arm’s length and which ensures that we can never achieve the end of morality, which even Kant admits is *holiness* and identifies with the acquired inability to do wrong. Christianity, by contrast, treats Kantian morality (considered apart from religion) as a truncated or emasculated holiness that fails to embrace its own end or epitome as anything except a kind of regulative ideal, the realization of which would mean its own demise and which it thus resolves to deny is possible. More than this, its vaunted autonomy really reveals its lack of grounding in anything substantive, a defect that cannot be repaired by an appeal to a supposed faculty of pure practical reason.

The Kantian conception of morality, then, condemns us to a permanently divided self for whom holiness and self-integration are impossible to achieve *in principle*. It is no surprise, then, that the demands of morality strike fallen human nature as both irksome and unpleasant - an imposition in the further sense of being a difficult burden both to carry and discharge. Further, since morality finds no resonance in our fallen motivational structure, we cannot love either our duty or its products. At most, we can take a certain sort of pride in our doing our duty as such, a pride that in many cases becomes the foundation for a priggish character in those who account themselves morally good, one that judges itself superior to others, takes itself as the proper standard to which all should conform, and is singularly lacking in sympathy for those who fall short of its own attainments. This seems morally criticizable even if these such people are quite correct in all of their judgments with regard to themselves and others, as they generally are.

What such people evidently lack is *love*, which is both the foundation and motive of morality and of which moral action is the natural and spontaneous expression. On the surface, Kant denies that love can be the foundation for morality, because love is a feeling and feeling cannot be commanded. Thus, the Savior’s command to love another fails, if we interpret it as the command to have a certain sentimental feeling toward others, because this cannot be commanded *willy-nilly*. It can only be made sense of if we suppose that Jesus was talking about “non-pathological love,” which Kant identifies with his own attitude of duty for duty’s sake. However, Kant is wrong on both counts. The Savior *can* command us to love God and to love our neighbor for His sake as one made in God’s image and likeness because through his atoning death Christ has acquired the means that make such love possible for us, which means he is prepared to freely give us if only we will accept that gift and not resist its influence.[[8]](#footnote-8) In this way, by degrees our heart of stone will be replaced with a heart of flesh. Similarly, while Kant is correct in supposing that Christ was talking about “non-pathological love” he is wrong in supposing that such love is reducible to acting from duty alone. For the agent animated by Christian love, morality is not a matter of duty *at all*, but instead the expression of one’s true nature, a nature liberated by the saving power of the grace of Christ to live in accordance with reason and truth as God intended us to do.

From this point of view, love is no mere sentimental feeling of affection or attachment to others, whether we think in terms of exclusive relationships with others or of abstractions such as mankind or the human race. This is the way that the Greek notion of *agape* is sometimes portrayed: as a kind of selfless, universal affection for everyone. Love of the sort I am speaking of here is not a *sentiment* at all and to suppose otherwise is mere puerility. In another context, what many people suppose love to be is an emotion that is typically expressive of need, is focused on the self and its wants, accompanied by exaggerated expectations both of the beloved and of the life structured around that love. This sort of needy love is rooted in intense but rootless feeling, sure to quickly pass away and almost always doomed to bitter disappointment. Neither is the love I am speaking of here constituted by a kind of indulgent liking that looks past the beloved’s faults and identifies itself with acceptance, understanding, support, and acts only to enable the beloved to attain his or her own ends without regard to what those ends are. Again, this sort of love is usually rooted in one’s own neediness and animated by fear of loss of the beloved, which is ultimately a loss to one’s own self upon which this sort of love is ultimately focused.

The Greeks come closest to the proper Christian notion of love in their notion of *philia*, usually translated as friendship, insofar as *philia* seeks the good of the beloved for his or her own sake rather than one’s own and is thus prepared to sacrifice one’s own substantive good in order to secure the good for others, or the other. Such love is neither sentimental nor indulgent and is perfectly consistent with severity in one’s treatment in relation to the beloved so long as this has the moral improvement, in accordance with the true nature of the beloved, as its object. Socrates, as depicted by Plato, seems to have this notion in mind when he declares that a true friend will see to it that those he loves are punished for their malefactions, and begs his friends to see to it that, after his death, that they should see to it that his sons are punished if they are ever unjust, because punishment is the medicine for the soul made sick by the practice of injustice.[[9]](#footnote-9)

A better definition of “non-pathological” love is given Jonathan Edwards: true or genuine love is *benevolence toward being*. Love is not a feeling, however refined or elevating. After all, God is love but God, being a bodiless being, cannot have feelings of any kind. Instead, love is the disposition to seek the good of the other for the other’s own sake, a disposition that need not be accompanied by any particular feeling. This love, however, is neither undiscriminating nor is it focused merely on producing the “happiness” of the beloved conceived of as getting whatever it is that one wants. Rather, a rational being loves in accordance with the objective value of the beloved object, and thus loves God above all things, one’s neighbor as oneself, and oneself in preference to merely material things. A rational being also values him or herself precisely as rational, and thus as made in the image and likeness of God in a unique way that endows him or her with intrinsic (though not underived) value sufficient to constitute him or her as ends-in-themselves and natural rights-bearers. This is a privilege not shared by non-human animals, who possess value but not intrinsic value and whose interests, therefore, are not commensurate to those of human beings and do not ground claims to rights against humans on their own account. More than this, as Socrates and Plato also realized, genuine love for others, especially those over whom we have primary responsibilities of care, does not always mean supporting their pursuit of what they want or enabling them to live as they choose. In particular, it does not involve shielding them from the consequences of their actions or the punishments due to them as a result of their derelictions. In many cases, love must be severe and risk even the loss of the beloved in order to promote the genuine good for him or her when this is contrary to his or her own fondest wishes and desires. The loving thing is not always what makes someone happy by his or her own lights and may even involve imposing burdens and losses on them in order to promote their genuine good. Moreover, this may happen, and does happen more often than not, in circumstances in which there is no certainty that this will be the result, since ultimately it depends on what those enduring these losses choose to do and become. Even so, we can do no more than this, and ought to do no less, even if the self-destructive tendencies of some persons, despite our best efforts, prove impervious to any suasion.[[10]](#footnote-10)

True virtue is possible only through the free gift of divine grace to which the will of fallen man freely submits by omitting resistance to its operation in our souls. Through sanctification, this grace recreates our motivational structure in accordance with reason and thus makes possible genuine moral action done from selfless love of God. It also provides us with the wisdom that consists in our ability to apprehend things from God’s point of view rather than the standard human one informed and largely constituted by our sinful natural bent. and thus to judge what is truly good for us as opposed to what simply seems to be so. Further, it does this in circumstances in which we are genuinely free to do as reason prompts, not through our own innate ability but through the power of Christ’s Spirit living in us. In this way by our non-resistant cooperation with that grace, we are by degrees transformed into what God intended us to be all along: His adoptive sons and daughters for whom eternal life with God is a desirable and appropriate condign reward after the travails of this life are past.

From the Christian point of view, then, genuine morality is not possible apart from positive religious belief and practice. Morality is not autonomous but instead derives both its origin and its *raison d’etre* from the will of God in relation to the end for which God has promulgated and published that law through the promptings of conscience, special revelation, and reason enlightened by the perspective of faith. More than this, it is precisely through the uses of religion - prayer, worship, the sacraments, sacramentals, devotions, scripture study, and so on - that God has willed to endow us with the grace that transforms us and has as its fruit a Godly life of heroic virtue of the sort that crowns the lives of the great saints and martyrs. Morality is not something separate from this life, but instead merely one manifestation of it, one which in the last analysis is far from being even the most important. Morality is not that from which we begin and thereby get to God; to the contrary, a life of moral rectitude is the product, and the last product, of the religious life for those who avail themselves of God’s gracious gift of grace. Those who identify human perfection with the sort of moral rectitude we can attempt to acquire on our own efforts in the context of our fallenness will fall far short of this, ultimately despair of it and, being content thereafter to simply embrace our fallenness as the true expression of what it is to be human, to either reduce the content of morality to a bare minimum or simply reject it altogether as the invention of those who despise freedom and human happiness. For those imbued with the fallen point of view, happiness is simply identical with getting whatever one happens to want or desire, regardless of what it is and liberty simply the non-interference of others in the pursuit of those wants and desires. This is simply the natural, logical consequence of the secular understanding of what freedom and happiness are and can be, and anyone who opposes it merely attempting to force us to live according to their own arbitrary standards for human life and conduct. This prevalence of this attitude is increasingly evident, I think, in our time.[[11]](#footnote-11)

The two views I have just sketched could not be more sharply opposed, yet Kant would be far from comfortable with the latter view. Kant wants to insist that autonomy is not merely the capacity for arbitrary self-disposition and license, but instead the capacity for choice in accordance with the dictates of reason, which far from enhancing the scope of our liberty ideally reduces and contracts it to a single choice, one that the rationally autonomously will can legislate not simply for itself but for every rational will with full authority and consequent obligatory force. Ideally, the holy will *normatively considered* has no open alternatives at all - there is only one act in each situation of choice by means of which we can express our rational nature as moral agents. All other choices are heteronomous and irrational, an abdication of reason that allows our behavior to be causally determined by non-rational motives and impulses, and which thus fails to be properly human at all. Once again, we seem to find a strong internal tension between the basic dynamic of the Enlightenment, which is at its core a rejection of morality in favor of autonomy as the right to do as one pleases without interference from others, with the claims of morality, even as the expression of pure practical reason. Thus, while Kant’s theory receives great interest and high praise from the moderns for separating morality from religion and grounding it in reason, Kant’s own account of our duties is rejected as rigoristic, puritanical, and unrealistic given our human nature - which, once again, is the fallen nature that has been embraced as the true human essence and which makes any but the lightest moral requirements beyond the limits of what we reasonably demand of ourselves and thus expect from others. There can, I think, be no better evidence for the thesis that, apart from religion, there can be no morality worth calling by that name.

III

Kant, as I have said, would no doubt have resisted the Enlightenment’s deflationary approach to morality, one which promotes a morality compatible with thoroughgoing profligacy and libertinism. Indeed, there are in his later ethical writings, better acquainted with the historical and anthropological facts about human behavior, indications that Kant’s *animus* toward religion, and even in an oblique way the Christian religion, softens as his moral thinking matures. One can find indications of this, especially in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, despite the fact that he continues to toe the Enlightenment line regarding to the uses and practices of institutional Christian religion, condemning this as superstition, enthusiasm, and deleterious both to the individual and society.

In the libertine wing of the Enlightenment represented by Shaftesbury, Hume, and the French *philosophes* like Rousseau and Voltaire, human beings are intrinsically good, and to the extent that they are bad are so solely due to lack of education and outmoded social conditions. Once freed from the chains of religion and the feudal class structure, human nature will be eminently perfectible and will rapidly attain the flourishing to which our nature directs us. Kant, however, rejects this impious optimism and resolutely affirms the radical evil present in every human being, which he regard as intrinsic to human beings and, lacking the Christian hope of divine help available to through the practice of positive religion, sees as permanent and irremediable.[[12]](#footnote-12) Although we can make moral progress as individuals through freely acting as duty requires us, this evil propensity is never fully overcome or the need to strive against it eliminated. Secular “Holiness” remains a kind of ideal that, while approachable, can never be attained. Indeed, one reason for affirming an afterlife, says Kant, is in order that the pursuit of moral perfection may continue into the indefinite future - not even in “heaven,” it seems, do we achieve holiness. It remains an unknowable ideal to be asymptotically approached in an infinite future life.

Part of our radical evil, says Kant, is our “unsociable sociability.” On the one hand, it is a necessary condition for the possibility of morality that we not be self-sufficient, since without vulnerability there would be no significant moral obligations to ourselves or others. We need other persons and thus are forced into social relations of dependency, mutual reciprocity, and cooperative endeavor. At the same time, our radical evil makes us resent our lack of self-sufficiency and the consequent necessity of depending on others and of having to help them in turn insofar as they depend on us as a condition for their continued good offices on our behalf. Due to this, our social relations with one another are always going to involve tension, friction, and a struggle for power and dominance in every form of human activity and relationship. We all agree that peace is better than war, cooperation better than competition, harmony better than conflict, and love better than hate. However, we are prepared to seek these positive things only on terms favorable to ourselves and are quick to suspect that others are trying to rig things for their advantage, which puts us on guard against being too trusting of others and wary of them just in the same way they are (unreasonably, of course) wary of us. On these terms, human cooperation is barely possible at all and rarely if ever even approaches the fullness of what it can produce and accomplish.. For the most part, all such combinations result in winners and losers, hurt feelings, charges of exploitation, unfair dealings, and in many cases these resentments are well-grounded. In any event, we are far from anything like a Kingdom of Ends.

In his ethical writings, Kant proposes that we have good reasons for positing the existence of God and immortality as postulates of pure practical reason. Although morality is an end-in-itself, it nevertheless has an end in a different and further sense, an ideal the realization of which would be the epitome, ideal, and completion of the moral project. Kant calls this ideal the *summum bonum*; it consists in a fully realized kingdom of ends composed of all and only rational beings, each of which is rationally autonomous and thus both worthy to be happy and enjoys happiness commensurate to his or her worthiness to be happy. Unless there is a morally good God and an afterlife, we have no prospect of ever even approximating that ideal, and thus have no incentive to strive for it. Even though this in no way lessens our obligation to do as morality requires of us, it makes the moral project both futile and absurd when viewed in relation to its end because it is pointless to make this a project for ourselves. It would be silly for me to make it my end to train for the feat of jumping over the Space Needle, since it is physically impossible for me to do this. Nor is there any consolation to be derived from the admonition that I do my best, since train and prepare as I like, my best will never be even remotely close to the achievement of that goal or the completion of that task. The same is true of morality, conceived of in relation to its ideal, the summum bonum. If morality is not to be pointless in this way, there needs to some realistic prospect for the realization of that ideal or at least of its continual, asymptotic approach. That can be case, according to Kant, only if there is a God and an afterlife. In his *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, Kant shows how such a conception of God justifies all of the traditional claims about God made by Scholastic theologians and thus justifies belief in the God of natural theology without the need for natural theology itself.[[13]](#footnote-13) In the *First Critique*, Kant claims that he has had to clip the wings of reason in order to provide room for faith. In so doing, it appears that he undermined any reasonable grounds for faith, so that faith cannot be anything but a groundless leap of faith. However, in that work and in his moral writings, Kant attempts to find a genuine rational basis for religious belief, albeit one grounded in the demands of practical rather than theoretical reason.

In his *Religion*, Kant further explores the relation between morality and religion.[[14]](#footnote-14) In this work, he proposes that the pursuit of the moral ideal and its realization in the form of the Kingdom of Ends cannot be a solitary affair but requires a community with an institutional structure, one that he conceives of as a religious community and even calls a church. Pursuit of the moral ideal, then, requires something like positive religion, albeit one that is wholly at the service of the moral ideal and devoid of most of trappings of traditional religion: dogmas, creeds, scriptures, ceremonies, and specifically religious practices or customs. At the same time, Kant even finds a place for something like divine grace in the pursuit of the summum bonum. Kant is well aware that we are far from transparent to ourselves, and thus incapable of knowing ourselves sufficiently to accurately judge either our motives or the degree to which radical evil distorts our thoughts and judgments about what our duty is, how to do it, and which elements of our character to cultivate and which to discourage. In such case, we can only do the best we can, and trust to God for the internal help necessary to make up the difference between what we can do on our own and what needs to be done to bring this project to its fruition. Kant conceives of this as something that God, as a Holy Will, will undertake to do automatically and, one supposes, more or less silently, without the need for the cooperation or acknowledgement of the human will. Still, it does represent one way in which Kant is willing to countenance the presence and operation of supernatural influence in the pursuit of the *summum bonum* and so another reason to postulate a certain sort of God as the ultimate guarantor of the moral project.

IV

Kant’s God is still a long way from the God worshipped by Christians and his conception of religion still yet farther from the positive religion practiced by Christians. At the same time, it is much closer to that God and that religion than Kant (or at any rate, a good many of his expositors) have wanted it to be, with many readers surprised at the extent to which Kant continues to see positive value in religion, if only as an ancillary to morality. What prevents Kant from recognizing the need to go all the way and affirm the full-blown Christianity? Undoubtedly, it is his commitment to the central tenet of Enlightenment religion - the denial of original sin and the consequent need for salvation. Despite his realism about human nature and reservations about the perfectibility of man (though he was cautiously optimistic about the long-term influence of the French Revolution for human improvement)[[15]](#footnote-15) Kant continued to embrace a belief in Pelagian free will and the conviction that we can actually achieve rational autonomy if we only try hard enough. If Christianity is true, this is a benighted conviction adherence to which retards, rather than advances, the moral progress of the human race. Only when we recognize and admit our sinfulness and inability to save ourselves will we be humble enough to be open to God’s offer of salvation. At that point, we will no longer say, as Kant does, that “kneeling down or groveling on the ground, even to express your reverence for heavenly things, is contrary to human dignity.”[[16]](#footnote-16) Instead, we will bend the knee is both gratitude and expectation to the God who alone can succour us and our reason will approve this as the only means by which we can attain the end that reason can conceive of but cannot secure for us through its own efforts. Only then will human dignity become more than a mere philosophical abstraction and something that actual human beings manifest in their lives and personalities, precisely because of and through the practice of positive religion. In those days, even grave philosophers will unashamedly shout “Hosanna in the highest!” and the Kingdom of Ends will be merely a vanished standpoint, wholly taken up, transformed, and superseded by God’s Holy Kingdom, the Kingdom that never ends.

1. Hume [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As I have argued elsewhere. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the same way, God’s command that we adhere to the moral law even to the extent that we should be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect despite our inability to do so given our fallenness does not violate the “ought implies can” principle, precisely because the atoning death of Christ makes possible the means by which we can meet these demands through cooperation with the grace of Christ. Of course, if we refuse to do this, we will be left in our inability and sinfulness, but in that case our inability will not excuse us from culpability for the evil acts that we have done and a just God will not remit the appropriate punishment. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. This holds especially in the case of God - see Paul Moser, *The Severity of God*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2012. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Brad Pitt quote. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)