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Kant and Existentialism: Inescapable Freedom and Self-Deception

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1 Human Subjectivity and Finitude

Although Kant's critical philosophy is often contrasted with existentialism, the present chapter argues that Kant anticipates nineteenth- and twentieth-century existentialism in several respects.[1] Instead of giving a full overview of Kant's philosophy, the present text gives a *selective* presentation of Kant as a forerunner of existentialism by emphasizing his account of freedom, self-deception, despair, anxiety, anthropology, religion, and theodicy.

In *The Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), Kant anticipates the emphasis on human finitude in existentialism by analyzing the limits of human reason. In the "Transcendental Analytic," Kant suggests that traditional metaphysics seeks a divine standpoint that allows knowledge of things in themselves (Neiman 1997, p. 38). Kant argues that such a divine standpoint is fundamentally inaccessible to us as finite beings since we can only know how things are given to us in experience. There is no *sub specie aeternitatis* view of the world accessible to us, as we only know the world from our human perspective (cf. Kant 2007, A276–277/B332–333).

Like the existentialists, Kant holds perspectivality in general, and the first-person person perspective in particular, to be crucial to both human

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J. Stewart (ed.), *The Palgrave Handbook of German Idealism and Existentialism*, Palgrave Handbooks in German Idealism, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-44571-3_3

experience and agency. Kant not only describes our world (or existence) from the inside, but he even anticipates the crucial idea that all human existence is defined by self-referentiality or mineness (*Jemeinigkeit*). More specifically, he argues that I must be able to recognize that all my representations are mine, since "the I think must be able to accompany all my representations" (Kant 2007, B131–132). All consciousness thus involves self-referentially, if only implicitly. Partially because of this, Kant contributes to making human subjectivity one of the main topics of existentialism and Continental philosophy. Like Sartre, he holds that we "cannot pass beyond human subjectivity" (something Sartre characterizes as "the deeper meaning of existentialism" (Sartre 1975, p. 350)).

The first *Critique* argues at length that we cannot have knowledge of God or the soul, as claimed by traditional metaphysics (particularly in the Rationalist tradition). Neither can we have knowledge of the supernatural and supersensual, including our own dispositions (*Gesinnungen*). Partially because of this, Kant argues that all theoretical proofs for the existence of God fail. His critique of the ontological proof for the existence of God is particularly important since it denies that existence is a predicate (Kant 2007, A592–602/B620–630). Whether or not something exists, is a contingent matter that cannot be known *a priori*. Necessity and essentiality, by contrast, can be known *a priori*. Kant here anticipates the crucial distinction between being and thought, actuality and possibility, existence and essence, the concrete and abstraction, developed by (the late) Schelling and Kierkegaard. The idea is that being, existence, and actuality are fundamentally contingent, whereas thought, essences, and possibilities are not (Pinkard 2010, pp. 320–329; cf. Stewart 2010, pp. 80–81, 93–94). Pure reason can know the latter but not the former, since the former involves historical contingencies and free agency that initiates new causal chains that cannot be known *a priori*.

2 Human Freedom and the Central Philosophical Issue

In the 1780s and 1790s, Kant develops a theory of freedom that is extraordinarily influential and controversial. Kant's account is highly modern, since it salvages freedom and responsibility from both scientific determinism and theological predestination (cf. Madore 2011, p. 20). He describes freedom not only as the highest principle, but also as the cornerstone of the system of reason (Kant 1900ff., vol. 5, pp. 3–4). By placing human freedom at the very

center of his philosophy, Kant anticipates not only German Idealism and Romanticism but also existentialism. However, as far as existentialism is concerned, the importance of Kant's account of freedom lies more in its general focus, and its emphases on autonomy, anxiety and *Willkür* (the power of choice), than in its details (e.g. intelligible and empirical character). It is not so much the content and rules of Kant's ethics that anticipates existentialism, as his view that freedom is inescapable.[2]

In 1781, Kant argues that human freedom is possible, given transcendental idealism. That is, human freedom is conceivable and compatible with causal determinism. However, Kant is hardly a compatibilist about freedom in any ordinary sense. Rather, he is an incompatibilist and libertarian about freedom, as most existentialists are. More specifically, Kant understands freedom as the ability to start a new causal chain (Kant 2007, A445/B473). This makes it necessary to distinguish between the causality of freedom and the causality of nature. The latter follows the causal laws of nature, whereas the former starts new causal chains that may (or may not) intervene successfully in nature.

One of the most debated aspects of Kant's theory is the dualism between freedom and nature developed in the first *Critique*. Kant describes nature in deterministic, Newtonian terms, whereas human freedom is interpreted in teleological terms. Human beings are then described as *either* natural beings determined by natural laws *or* as free moral beings. We can see ourselves *either* as unfree beings who are products of causal processes in nature *or* as free beings who initiate new causal chains. The former alternative is favored by a description of human beings from a third-person perspective, whereas the latter alternative is favored from a first-person perspective in which human agents must act and choose. We tend towards the former alternative when we are passive spectators who observe the world. We tend towards the latter when we are agents who participate and intervene in the world. Both of these perspectives are essential to us, but both Kant and existentialism give priority to the practical perspective (Burnham and Papandreopoulos 2011, Part 1E). They both suggest that our practical agency cannot be objectified or denied without self-estrangement and self-deception.

In *The Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), Kant goes beyond the first *Critique* by assuming the reality of moral freedom (*Wille*). More specifically, he argues that the moral demand presupposes the reality of human freedom, although the latter can only be shown through our awareness of the former. Freedom is the foundation for the existence of the categorical imperative, but the latter is only known from our experience of freedom (Kant 1900ff., vol. 5,

p. 4n). Based on a somewhat phenomenological analysis of moral consciousness, Kant then argues for the necessity of postulating moral freedom.[3]

In addition, he assumes that a free will and a moral will reciprocally imply each other. A free will and a moral will (following the categorical imperative) is the same thing, Kant argues in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and the second *Critique* (Kant 1900ff., vol. 4, p. 446; vol. 5, p. 29). The problem with this approach (i.e., the reciprocity thesis) is that, according to this view, it is far from clear how moral evil is either intelligible or imputable (Allison 1995, pp. 133–136; Kosch 2006, pp. 56–65). It seems that either agents act morally, or they are unfree. In order to escape this dilemma and to account for alternative possibilities, Kant introduces the notion of *Willkur* (the power of choice) and the incorporation thesis (in 1792–1797).

3 Inescapable Freedom: The Incorporation Thesis

In the "incorporation thesis," Kant claims that

> [F]reedom of the power of choice [*Willkür*] has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive [*Triebfeder*] *except so far as the human being has incorporated* [aufgenommen hat] *it into his maxim* (has made it into a universal rule for himself, according to which he wills to conduct himself); only in this way can an incentive, whatever it may be, coexist with the absolute spontaneity of the power of choice (of freedom). (Kant 1900ff., vol. 6, pp. 23–24; 2001a, p. 73)

Even actions that are based on inclinations presuppose freedom, since I must prioritize inclinations above morality by freely incorporating inclinations into my maxim. Whether I act morally or not, I am always free and responsible for my actions. Indeed, we are not only responsible for our actions but also for our maxims and moral characters.[4] Even if I follow my desires, or give in to pressures, this still represents a free choice for which I am responsible. Kant therefore anticipates Sartre's view that I am responsible for my passions (Sartre 1975, p. 353). For Kant and Sartre, even self-deception and weakness of will involve a free choice (although the agent may not be aware of it).

Like the existentialists, Kant emphasizes the idea that we cannot choose not to be free; we can only choose how to make use of our freedom. Kant's incorporation thesis therefore anticipates the Sartrean dictum that we are condemned to be free. More specifically, it implies that we always stand at a

crossroads, at which the power of choice must choose between alternative possibilities. We can either prioritize morality over sensuousness or prioritize sensuousness over morality. However, the choice between these two alternatives is inescapable. Any attempt to avoid choosing will therefore involve a tendency towards self-deception and moral corruption that effectively prioritizes sensuousness over morality.

4 Autonomy and Meta-Ethics

In the history of ethics, Kant introduces the concept of moral autonomy (self-legislation) in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. This concept represents one of Kant's most influential ideas. Although post-Kantian interpretations of autonomy often differ from Kant's interpretation of autonomy, it still seems that the latter anticipates ideas of autonomy and authenticity in existentialism (Stewart 2010, pp. 168–197).

Kant's account of autonomy in *The Groundwork* and the Second *Critique* relies on the reciprocity thesis. An autonomous will is then identical to a free moral will (*Wille*) that follows its own practical reason and the categorical imperative. On this account, any failure to be moral implies heteronomy or unfreedom. Someone who fails to be moral is therefore ruled either by external forces or by his own inclinations and desires.

Still, even Kant allows for a form of non-moral autonomy, at least in the later writings from the 1790s (Allison 1995, pp. 95–96). More specifically, the incorporation thesis, and the doctrine of radical evil, implies that even evil agents freely prioritize sensuousness (or prudence) above morality. The power of choice (*Willkür*) is then free to choose between good *and* evil, morality *and* immorality. This involves a form of self-determination (autonomy) that goes beyond the moral autonomy of the reciprocity thesis. Although only a moral will follows its own reason consistently, it is still the case that an evil will is free to prioritize sensuousness above morality (or prudence above pure practical reason). The latter represents a free choice that may or may not involve reflection or deliberation. It does not represent our rationality and freedom as fully as moral action does, but it must still involve some freedom if immoral actions are to be intelligible and imputable.

However, there are different interpretations of Kantian autonomy. The most influential interpretation views Kant as a moral constructivist in meta-ethics. Moral constructivists typically see a moral norm as valid because it is arrived at through a valid procedure. That is, valid norms are created, constructed, or legislated by passing through a certain procedure. Particularly the

Formula of Universal Law and the Formula of the Kingdom of Ends seem to support this reading. Paul Formosa explains:

> [W]e can read Kant as saying that there is decision procedure for testing maxims from which, by running our proposed maxims through this procedure and testing them for universality, we can construe rational maxims. Alternatively…the stance of the members of an ideal kingdom of ends defines what is right. (Formosa 2013, pp. 174–175)

However, the moral realist objects to this by arguing that norms can only pass the procedure if norms are antecedently valid (Formosa 2013, p. 170; Stern 2012, chapters 1–3). The Formula of Humanity in particular seems to support a realist reading of Kantian autonomy. Here Kant appears to claim that

> in order for there to be a categorical imperative there must be "something the existence of which in itself has an absolute worth," and that something by elimination must be persons in virtue of their capacity for rational agency. The absolute worth of persons or rational agents comprises an independent order of value which precedes and grounds the moral law. (Formosa 2013, p. 174)

However, many readers of Kant have pointed to a *dilemma* inherent to Kantian autonomy.[5] The first horn of the dilemma takes the form of self-determination being based on practical reasons that are *antecedently* valid and therefore have normative authority prior to self-legislation. As a result, autonomy is constrained by standards that are not self-imposed, something that seems to involve not only moral realism (and rationalism and intellectualism about ethics) but also *heteronomy*.

The second horn of the dilemma, by contrast, only recognizes the authority of autonomy. It establishes normative principles that are themselves unprincipled. On this account, it is contingent decisions that create rules with normative content. There are no external constraints, or antecedent justificatory reasons, that limit decisions or hinder them from being valid. Any decision that is self-imposed by contingent *fiat* is authoritative, irrespective of normative content (at least if it follows a valid procedure). Still, the normative content can change at any time since it is always possible to change one's will. As a result, any normative content is only provisionally valid.

On this latter account, autonomy collapses into a decisionism and voluntarism that is motiveless, arbitrary, and groundless. Normative content is created *ex nihilo* by a decisionistic bootstrapping operation that constitutes itself. However, this form of decisionism is closer to Sartre's notion of radical choice

than Kant's concept of autonomy (cf. Fremstedal 2014, chapter 10; Stern 2012, chapter 1). Still, this dilemma was identified in discussions of Kantian autonomy, and his view anticipates Sartre's "radical choice" and existential autonomy (cf. Pinkard 2010; Fremstedal 2020). More specifically, anti-realist and voluntarist readings of Kant's ethics radicalize Kantian autonomy and anticipate twentieth-century existentialism by separating *Willkür* (the power of choice) from *Wille* (practical reason) (cf. Sartre 1975; Burnham and Papandreopoulos 2011; Stewart 2010, p. 169).[6]

5 Freedom, Anxiety, Self-Deception and Moral Evil

In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), Kant anticipates the influential existential distinction between fear and anxiety. Kant claims that fear and anxiety are *qualitatively different*: "Fear concerning an object that threatens an undetermined ill [*Übel*] is *anxiety* [Bangigkeit]. Anxiety can fasten on to someone without his knowing a particular object for it: an uneasiness arising from merely subjective causes (from a diseased state)" (Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, p. 255; 2009, p. 357). Rather than saying that anxiety is a form of fear, Kant is saying at that it is a form of "aversion [*Abscheues*] to danger" that is undetermined (Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, p. 256; 2009, p. 358). Anxiety thus concerns undetermined danger or ill, whereas fear concerns determined danger or ill.

Elsewhere, Kant claims that the awareness of freedom leads to anxiety. In his discussion of the Fall of man into sin in "Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History," (1786) Kant writes:

> [Man] discovered in himself a faculty of choosing for himself a way of living and not being bound to a single one, as other animals are. Yet upon the momentary delight that this marked superiority might have awakened in him, anxiety and fright [*Angst und Bangigkeit*] must have followed right away, concerning how he, who did not know the hidden properties and remote effects of anything, should deal with this newly discovered faculty. He stood, as it were, on the brink of an abyss; for instead of the single objects of his desire to which instinct had up to now directed him, there opened up an infinity of them; and from this estate of freedom, once he had tasted it, it was nevertheless wholly impossible for him to turn back again to that of servitude (under the dominion of instincts). (Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, p. 112; 2009, p. 166)

Like Kierkegaard, Kant uses anxiety in order to shed light on how human volition can fall into evil.[7] More specifically, he argues that consciousness of freedom (*Willkür*) leads to anxiety (*Angst*), and that anxiety in turn precedes the fall into evil. Indeed, the passage above suggests that we are anxious about plunging into the abyss rather than accidentally falling into it. This idea clearly anticipates the interpretation of anxiety in Schelling's *Freiheitschrift*, Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*, Heidegger's *Being and Time*, and Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*.[8]

In order to explain the possibility and imputability of immoral action, Kant develops the controversial doctrine of radical evil (1792–1794). Although this doctrine is accused of reintroducing the Christian notion of original sin, it views the fall into evil not so much as an historical event that affects humanity in general, as a fall performed by each single individual. Kant's emphasis is therefore not on Adam's fall into evil, but on each individual's fall. This individualistic account of original sin anticipates Kierkegaard's interpretation of original sin in *The Concept of Anxiety* (Fremstedal 2014, chapter 2).

More importantly, Kant anticipates the existential notion of bad faith by taking moral evil to involve *self-deception* (and self-conceit). Kant argues that immoral actions involve self-deception that takes the form of an evaluative mistake (or illusion) that prefers heteronomy to autonomy, and sensuousness (prudence) to morality. This mistake involves practical irrationality that corrupts the characters of moral agents, leading the agents to have a propensity or tendency (*Hang*) towards evil that can never be eradicated completely. This is a propensity that is self-inflicted by each individual, Kant argues. As a result, each individual is prone to self-deception by valuing personal inclinations and sensuousness above morality and rationality. Hence, radical evil rejects rational, moral constrains on inclinations, sensuousness and prudence. It chooses to be ruled by contingent, arational inclinations instead of moral freedom (*Wille*), something that involves heteronomy and self-deception. This analysis anticipates the analysis of bad faith and self-deception in existentialism.[9] Both bad faith and radical evil involves a self-handicapping by which the agent deceives himself. Instead of facing up to the responsibility that comes with freedom, one tries to abdicate and to avoid free choice. To both Kant and Sartre, this self-deception does not represent an isolated incident but a general disposition (Kant 1900ff., vol. 6, pp. 20–25; Sartre 1998, p. 68; cf. Stewart 2010, p. 224).

Kant assumes that the propensity towards evil results from a free choice that corrupts the agent's entire moral character. He describes this choice of evil as a choice made beyond time. Henry Allison comments:

> Unlike ordinary, first-order maxims, however, the meta-maxim [character] or propensity cannot be thought as self-consciously adopted at a particular point in time. On the contrary, it is found already at work when moral deliberation begins and must be presupposed in order to conceive of the possibility of immoral actions in beings for whom the moral law provides an incentive. It is in this sense alone that it is to be viewed as timeless and intelligible. (Allison 2002, p. 341)

Formosa explains:

> Kant only claims that such a supreme choice must be "posited" and thus "represented" as being present at birth. It is not as if we adopt our supreme maxim [character] first, at birth say, and then reason downward. Rather the reverse is the case. We begin to use our freedom by adopting some lower-level and unimportant maxim….But *any* maxim already presupposes a complex hierarchy of maxims, in terms of which that maxim can be understood, which the agent may not, indeed is very likely not to be, explicitly aware of at the time. (Formosa 2007, p. 233)

Much like Allison, Formosa argues that it "must be possible in subsequent reflection to discover and articulate…the maxims on which one acts" (Formosa 2007, p. 233). Subsequent reflection typically discovers that one has *always already* deceived oneself, by prioritizing sensuousness without being fully aware of it at the time of choosing. We only become aware of this choice retrospectively (Muchnik 2009, p. 108). When we consciously start to exercise our moral freedom, we realize that we have already chosen an evil maxim (or character). We find ourselves in a situation and we cannot know how it originated, something that is reminiscent of Heideggerian phenomenology and hermeneutics.

6 Choosing Oneself: The Moral Conversion

As a response against self-deception, Kant calls for the necessity of choosing oneself. Allison writes:

> …Kant's conception of *Gesinnung*…reflects his partial agreement with a tradition in moral psychology that stretches at least back to Aristotle and that includes, in addition to Leibniz and Hume, contemporary thinkers who insist that moral responsibility be connected with the character of the agent. Where Kant breaks with this tradition…is with his insistence that, like the specific

> maxims adopted on the basis of it, an agent's *Gesinnung* is itself somehow chosen. In insisting on this point, Kant appears to go well beyond the widely shared intuition that, to some extent at least, we are responsible for our characters as well as for our deeds and to affirm a paradoxical…doctrine of a timeless act of self-constitution. (Allison 1995, p. 137)

The idea that the agent can choose his fundamental disposition (*Gesinnung*) involves an atemporal act of self-constitution that seems to break with traditional moral psychology. However, Kant's point is not that we create ourselves or that we cause our inclinations. Rather, we only choose or constitute ourselves insofar as we are moral beings who are good or evil. More specifically, we freely choose our moral characters and maxims (Allison 1995, pp. 140–142).

Kant describes the choice of *character* both as a gradual *reform* in time and as a sudden atemporal *revolution*, which concerns life as a whole. He thinks that a revolution is necessary since mere reform of behavior is compatible with radical evil (Allison 1995, p. 169). A reform that reduces evil is insufficient, as morality requires that we become new, reborn persons who avoid evil entirely. The latter requires a revolution that existentially transforms the agent by radically changing his principles, identity, and way of thinking (*Denkungsart*). It is this idea that breaks with traditional moral psychology (cf. Allison 1995, p. 137) and anticipates the idea of existential choice in existentialism (cf. Schulte 1991, pp. 119, 278–279; Fremstedal 2014, chapter 3; Madore 2011, p. 20).

In this context, Kant suggests that we can overcome self-deception by converting from evil to good (Kant 1900ff., vol. 6, pp. 50–51, 74, 117–120). This anticipates Sartre's idea that a "radical conversion" can overcome bad faith through "an ethics of deliverance and salvation" (Sartre 1998, p. 412n, cf. 627). For Sartre (1998, p. 70n), this conversion takes the form of a "self-recovery of being which was previously corrupted," something that amounts to authenticity. For Kant, the conversion represents a revolution in the way of thinking that has both *moral* and *religious* aspects. It is a moral conversion from evil to good, which establishes moral character, and a religious conversion, by which the agent may hope for divine assistance if and only if he does moral good with all his power (cf. Kant 1900ff., vol. 6, p. 109).

This conversion requires not only full moral commitment, but also a personal independence and maturity (*Mündigkeit*) that has the courage and resolve to think for itself by overcoming self-incurred minority (*Unmündigkeit*) (Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, p. 229). As such, it involves a non-conformism that courageously and resolutely uses its personal understanding without direction from another (Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, p. 35). Kant characterizes this as true

enlightenment, although it is reminiscent of existential authenticity.[10] Still, existentialism goes beyond this by developing richer notions of selfhood and practical identity than what can be found in Kant. More specifically, Kant is less concerned with the narrative and temporal form of practical identity than Kierkegaard and later existentialists are (cf. Rudd 2012; Davenport 2012).

7 Philosophical Anthropology as a New Discipline

In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant analyzes the establishment of moral character in anthropological terms. Character requires that, as a *free rational* being, the agent takes responsibility for himself as a *natural* or *sensuous* being. Kant describes the latter as the "physical character," which includes temperament (*Temperament*), the mode of sensing (*Sinnesart*), natural predisposition (*Naturanlage*) and natural aptitude (*Naturell*).[11] This physical character represents "what *nature* makes of man," something that is studied by "physiological anthropology" (Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, p. 119).

"Pragmatic anthropology," by contrast, concerns what the human being "as a free-acting being makes of himself, or [what he] can and should make of himself" (Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, p. 119; 2009, p. 231). This anticipates Heidegger's view that "Rather than being an object among others, *Dasein* is a "*relation* of being" [*Seinsverhältnis*…] …that obtains between what one is at any moment and what one can and will be" (Varga and Guignon 2017, Part 3.1). It also anticipates Sartre's (1975, p. 349) view that "[man] will be what he makes of himself" (although Kant and Sartre differ when it comes to formal and rational constraints on choosing oneself). Jon Stewart writes:

> Kant breaks with classical moral theory by largely rejecting the conception of a human being with a fixed essence which has a determinate content. To be sure, he conceives of humans as essentially rational, but he limits this conception to the rational will [*Wille*] that demands self-consistency. Kant thus prepares the ground for thinkers like Sartre who categorically deny any *a priori* human essence that could serve as the basis of a moral theory. (Stewart 2010, p. 169)

Kant agrees with existentialists who maintain that accounts of what it means to be human are necessarily largely formal and general (Crowell 2017). More specifically, accounts of human nature may indicate human possibilities and ideals (that overcome self-deception). As such, these accounts may help us to acquire self-knowledge (Neiman 1997, pp. 196–202). But how we actually

use our freedom is a contingent matter that we only have limited knowledge of, insofar as freedom shows itself in actions that are empirically accessible.

In his anthropological and historical writings, Kant assumes that human beings are characterized by "unsocial sociability," in which our social relations are fundamentally ambiguous and conflicted (Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, pp. 20–21). We cannot stand others, yet we cannot do without them either. The result is an antagonism between human beings that leads to social conflict and competition that propels historical development. At this point, Kant's analysis partially anticipates the existentialists' interpretation of the social dynamics of competition and comparison, although Kant did not analyze the dialectics of recognition like Fichte and Hegel did.

Kant's pragmatic anthropology studies what we make of ourselves by focusing on our way of thinking (*Denkungsart*), as represented by our moral characters (Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, pp. 119, 285, 292). We are not only objects shaped by nature (studied by physiological anthropology) but also free, rational beings that take over and reform our physical characters in light of our ideals. Kant's pragmatic anthropology concerns how we use (or should use) our freedom to (1) revolutionize our thinking by adopting moral character, (2) take over ourselves, and (3) attempt to reform ourselves in light of our ideals (Fremstedal 2014, chapter 3).

This implies that moral agents are embodied individuals with certain personalities and temperaments. Kant's pragmatic anthropology here anticipates the central existentialist idea that each individual must take over himself consciously by choosing himself not only as a free being but also as a concrete, embodied being. More specifically, Kant suggests that individuals must take over not only their own physical character but also inherited features of society, partially by appropriating skills and knowledge acquired by earlier generations (cf. Kleingeld 1999, p. 66; Wood 2003, pp. 52–53). Kant suggests that we need to take over facticity since freedom is situated. However, this point is not systematically developed since Kant lacks a systematic analysis of facticity (as such), something that has the result that historicity and contingency tends to play a somewhat unclear and unsettled role in his account (Fremstedal 2014, chapter 3).

The discipline of philosophical anthropology represents another part of Kant's legacy that prepared the ground for existentialism. As an academic discipline, anthropology was introduced by Kant, Herder and Platner in the late eighteenth century (and later became institutionalized in the first half of the nineteenth and reestablished in the early twentieth). Whereas the physiological anthropology of Kant's contemporary Ernst Platner anticipates Biological and Physical Anthropology, Kant anticipates Existential and

Phenomenological Anthropology (Louden 2011, p. 67, p. 81). Kant's pragmatic anthropology particularly anticipates Max Scheler's anthropological view that the human being goes beyond animals by being "a 'spiritual' being" [*ein 'geistiges' Wesen*] that is "no longer tied to its drives and environments, but rather 'free from the environment' ['*umweltfrei*'] or …'open to the world' ['*weltoffen*']."[12]

8 Philosophy of Religion as a New Discipline

Another part of Kant's legacy is his influential and controversial philosophy of religion. Together with other German idealists, Kant established philosophy of religion as a new philosophical discipline that goes beyond traditional natural theology (Dorrien 2012; Collins 1967). This discipline prepares the ground for both secular and religious existentialism. On the one hand, Kant anticipates secular existentialism by criticizing both theodicies and traditional justifications of religious faith. Kant is here typically seen as someone who destroys natural theology by limiting knowledge in the first *Critique*.

On the other hand, Kant makes new room for religious faith by stressing the practical and moral functions of religion, something that anticipates religious existentialism. More specifically, Kant is clear that religion concerns practical, moral questions about how to live our lives rather than epistemic questions about what we can know. As a result, religion concerns faith, hope, and charity rather than mythology or cosmology. Religious texts should therefore be read morally and existentially as something that concerns how I should live my life instead of being read literally or in a historical-critical manner. Kant thereby anticipates the existential interpretation of scripture developed by Kierkegaard and Bultmann (cf. Bayer 2007, pp. 161–168).

However, both secular and religious readings of Kant tend to agree that our ideals differ clearly from reality. More specifically, human history does not represent the highest good, a moral world in which only the virtuous are happy. Even Kant's notion of historical progress (towards legality, morality and the highest good) is not based on a naïve enlightenment belief in progress as something inevitable. Instead, it is based a regulative (heuristic) notion of progress that is humanly necessary if we are to understand history as a system rather than a planless aggregate of action (Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, p. 29). Kant's point is not that the world contains progress or teleology. Rather, these are only regulative notions that are humanly necessary, even if the world itself is ruled by blind, amoral causal laws. Hence, Kant points to a fundamental

discrepancy between human reason and the world that anticipates Camus's notion of the absurd. Susan Neiman writes:

> Kant offered a metaphysics of permanent rupture. The gap between nature and freedom, *is* and *ought*, conditions all human existence….Integrity requires affirming the dissonance and conflict at the heart of experience. It means recognizing that we are never, metaphysically, at home in the world. This affirmation requires us to live with the mixture of longing and outrage few will want to bear. Kant never let us forget either the extent of our limits or the legitimacy of our wish to transcend them. (Neiman 2004, p. 80)

9 Overcoming Despair: Moral Faith and Hope

In the first *Critique*, Kant tries to reconcile religion and science by limiting knowledge in order to make room for faith (Dorrien 2012, chapters 1–2). However, knowledge (*Wissen*) and faith (*Glaube*, sometimes translated belief) are both technical notions, explained in "The Canon of Pure Reason" (Kant 2007, A822–829/B850–858). Knowledge requires sufficient evidence. Faith, by contrast, is not based on evidence since it concerns issues that we cannot have knowledge about (e.g., the existence of God and immortality). That is to say, we cannot have sufficient epistemic reasons either for or against faith (or belief), according to Kant. Still, there can be perfectly good reasons to have faith. Instead of being justified epistemically (as knowledge is), faith is justified by practical (and moral) reasons. Kant is therefore a pragmatist (non-evidentialist) about faith, although he is an evidentialist about knowledge (Chignell 2007). Faith only requires a subjective, practical justification, whereas knowledge requires an objective, theoretical justification. However, the theoretical content of faith does not provide any knowledge but only serves to guide action (Neiman 1997, p. 158).

In one variant of the moral argument for the existence of God and immortality, Kant argues that the alternative to religious faith and hope is demoralization that involves despair and a loss of moral resolve. This seems to be a point about the moral psychology of ordinary agents, who do not know if they are making a difference for the better by being moral. Without faith and hope, agents tend to become *demoralized* when their moral efforts do not seem to be making a difference.

More specifically, Kant argues that moral agents who face serious, inescapable injustice, in which virtue leads to unhappiness and vice to happiness, tends to be demoralized, in the sense that their moral motivation is weakened

or deteriorated (cf. Adams 1987, pp. 151–156). First, there is a tendency towards general moral *despair* in the face of such injustice.[13] Second (and partially because of this), demoralization involves a psychological loss of resolve to continue to be moral.[14] In the face of injustice and personal unhappiness, moral agents then tend to lose moral resolve. Kant (1900ff., vol. 28, pp. 1076, 1151) therefore concludes that, without faith in a God who makes possible a moral order (which provides justice), we are led to an unstable condition ("*schwankender Zustand*"), in which we continuously fall from hope into doubt, mistrust, and despair.

In the "Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason," from the second *Critique*, Kant analyzes the conflict between morality and happiness. Instead of merely invoking empirical evidence that indicates injustice, Kant sketches a transcendental argument in which morality must differ from our prudential striving for happiness (Kant 1900ff., vol. 5, pp. 146–147).[15] Jens Timmermann explains:

> [If we] cannot experience any tension between prudence and the demands of morality [we] cannot be moved by, or take a pure interest in, the moral law as such….We need the "subjective antagonism"…of moral law and inclination for the law to affect our subjectivity. When we perceive that selfishness and moral judgement conflict, we realize for the first time that we are *not* enthralled by inclination, and that there is something within us that is active and radically free. This inspires respect, which in turn enables us to act independently of self-regarding considerations. (Timmermann 2013, pp. 674–675)

We cannot chose morality only for its own sake, unless it deviates from prudence. Morality would serve self-interest if it coincided perfectly with prudence.

Still, Kant argues that we should promote the highest good, a moral world in which only the virtuous are happy (Kant 1900ff., vol. 5, pp. 113–119, 126–133; vol. 6, pp. 97–124). We have moral reasons to minimize injustice since injustice tends to produce demoralization and despair. However, this means morality is committed to an end, the highest good, the realization of which lies beyond human powers. More specifically, divine assistance is needed for morality to cause happiness *and* for uniting the forces of separate individuals so that they participate in the ethical commonwealth (Kant 1900ff., vol. 6, p. 139).

Kant concludes that faith in God and immortality is morally necessary and not some arbitrary assumption we could do without (1900ff., vol. 5, pp. 132, 142–146; vol. 8, pp. 137–139). He justifies religious faith on the grounds

that it resolves the antinomy of practical reason. This antinomy represents a form of moral despair, in which the highest good appears both necessary and impossible simultaneously (Fremstedal 2014, chapter 6). Kant resolves the antinomy by arguing that the impossibility of the highest good is only apparent if God and immortality exist.

In his reply to critics, Kant concedes that he postulates the existence of God and immortality based on a human need. However, he denies that this involves wishful thinking since the postulate is based on a *need of reason* rather than inclinations (Kant 1900ff., vol. 5, pp. 143–144). Despite lack of evidence, reason must make a judgement based on practical reason in order to orient itself (Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, p. 137). Kant concludes that "I *will* that there be a God…this is the only case in which my interest, because I *may* not give up anything of it, unavoidably determines my judgment" (Kant 1900ff., vol. 5, p. 143; 1999, p. 255). The proof for the existence of God lies "merely in the moral need" (Kant 1900ff., vol. 27, p. 718; 2001b, p. 441). Dieter Henrich comments:

> To believe that the world order does not allow moral life would be to precipitate absolute despair. For that reason I *do not* believe it. Even if I think that I believe it, I am wrong. I do not believe that this is the case, no matter what I say. To read Kant this way is to encounter a sort of existential philosophy: there are well-founded beliefs that precede and survive all arguments. (Henrich 2008, p. 102)

The existential philosophy Henrich sketches here comes close, not only to religious existentialism, but also to fideism and pragmatism about religious faith. However, Kant insists that belief, faith, and hope can be justified by practical reason, although they go beyond evidence. Instead of being a fideist or irrationalist, Kant sketches a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that reduces the alternatives to religious faith and hope to despair and demoralization, something that clearly anticipates Kierkegaard (Fremstedal 2014, chapter 6). Kant also anticipates Kierkegaard by stressing the personal nature of faith:

> I see myself necessitated through my end, in accordance with the laws of freedom, to accept as possible a highest good in the world, but I cannot necessitate anyone else through grounds (the belief is free)….[O]n account of its merely subjective grounds, believing yields no conviction that can be communicated and that commands universal agreement, like the conviction that comes from knowledge. (Kant 1900ff., vol. 9, pp. 69–70; 2004, pp. 573–574)

Faith cannot be commanded, since it is only authentic if each individual freely accepts it personally (Kant 1900ff., vol. 5, p. 144). Kant does not deny that faith should be universal but he insists that every individual must reach faith on his own by realizing that he must believe in order to avoid despair and demoralization.

In this context, Kant warns not only against demoralization but also against passivity and undecidedness:

> [N]o more miserable condition for man can be thought…than the condition that leaves us undecided [*unentschloßen*]…particularly…when it affects our interests. Everything that holds us up and makes us inactive, leaves us in a certain kind of inaction, is quite opposed to the essential determinations of the soul. (Kant 1900ff., vol. 24, p. 203; 2004, p. 160)

Kant then uses Socrates as an example, "Even in the context of utter uncertainty in speculation there can be complete decisiveness in action. Socrates was uncertain [about immortality], but he acted as if he were certain" (Kant 1900ff., vol. 24, p. 433; Zammito 2002, p. 277). This interpretation of Socrates clearly anticipates Kierkegaard's interpretation of him in the *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (Stewart 2015, p. 154). It suggests that Socrates stakes his life on his faith, although the faith is based on practical reasons instead of evidence. To Socrates, philosophy is then not so much a theoretical doctrine as a way of life based on moral faith. To Kant (and Kierkegaard), Socrates is a proto-existential philosopher who unifies thought and life to the extent that he risks his life for his faith.

Kant distinguishes between two types of philosophy, one of which is proto-existential. Philosophy according to the *Schulbegriff* represents theoretical philosophy that is scholastic, whereas philosophy according to the *Weltbegriff* represents practical philosophy that is cosmopolitan (Kant 2007, A838/B866). The former represents theoretical knowledge of the world that belongs to a spectator. The latter, by contrast, represents practical philosophy that participates actively in the world based on practical reasons that go beyond possible knowledge. This is philosophy as a way of life, which Kant favors.

10 Anti-Theodicy and the Hiddenness of God

An integral part of Kant's critical philosophy is his influential critique of theodicies. A theodicy is an attempt to excuse (or justify) God for allowing suffering and evil in the world. Kant says that theodicies defend God for allowing

either (1) moral evil, (2) natural evil (suffering, pain, sickness) or (3) the relation (proportion) between moral and natural evil in the world (cf. Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, pp. 255–257). Sami Pihlström and Sari Kivistö comment:

> …Kant's rejection of theodicies is a crucial part of his critical philosophy: on the one hand, insofar as theodicies aim at theoretical (metaphysical, speculative, transcendent) knowledge about God, they are…impossible and *must* fail, given the limitations of human reason; on the other hand, it is precisely by limiting the sphere of knowledge that Kant, famously, makes room for faith. (Pihlström and Kivistö 2016, p. 30)

In "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" (1791) and *Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason* (1793/1794), Kant maintains that evil is widespread and that it cannot be eliminated, justified or explained theoretically. Rather, evil represents a practical, existential problem that we must cope with as agents (Pihlström and Kivistö 2016, p. 48).

In the critical philosophy, Kant uses reason to determine, and acknowledge, the limits of reason. He rejects theoretical efforts to defend God in light of moral and natural evil in the world, because we cannot know God's relation to good and evil by inferences from the physical world. Kant argues that human rationality is so limited that we neither have reasons to defend nor accuse God. Rather, we have reasons to avoid defending or accusing God (Welz 2008, pp. 14–17, 83–87, 176–178; Neiman 2004, pp. 18–36, 61–111).

In "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," Kant sketches a powerful critique of theodicies more generally. In the first part of the text, Kant claims that (doctrinal or rationalizing) theodicies must fail since they overstep the limits of human reason (Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, pp. 255–264). Kant's reasons for holding this view seem to be the following.

First, theodicies make unwarranted assumptions about God since we cannot have theoretical knowledge of God or view the world from His point of view, given the limits of human reason (as argued in the *Critique of Pure Reason*). God must be hidden to us, since there cannot be any possible experience of God's existence or *a priori* knowledge of him. Even if God revealed himself, we would only experience a finite being, not an infinite being or anything perfect. Kant writes:

> [I]f God should really speak to a human being, the latter could still never *know* that it was God speaking. It is quite impossible for a human being to apprehend the infinite by his senses, distinguish it from sensible beings, and *be acquainted with* it as such. (Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, p. 63; 2001a, p. 283)

Kant concludes that a direct revelation of God would be a supersensible experience, which is impossible (Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, p. 47, cf. p. 58).

Second, we cannot have exhaustive knowledge of the relation between moral and natural evil, or vice and unhappiness. There are both theoretical and practical reasons why this is so. We lack knowledge of this relation, and even if possible, such knowledge would result in demoralization (Kant 1900ff., vol. 5, pp. 146–147). More specifically, we cannot choose morality only for its own sake, unless morality deviates from prudence—something that would be prevented by a divine judge who always rewards virtue. Standing before such a judge would prevent moral purity because morality would then serve prudence. It is therefore not only morally preferable but also necessary that God is hidden because we can only act morally in an imperfect world, in which morality and prudence diverge (Timmermann 2013; Fremstedal 2014, chapter 4).

Third, moral evil is extremely common, although it is inscrutable and mysterious, since it results from the contingent use of the power of choice that cannot be explained causally or be made intelligible in a theodicy (cf. Kant 1900ff., vol. 6, p. 21). It can be neither eliminated, nor justified nor predicted.

Finally, natural evil belongs to the realm of nature, not the realm of freedom. It therefore results from natural causes, rather than moral reasons or theological concerns. It cannot be justified morally since it results from blind natural processes that are amoral.

The second part of "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" sets aside the traditional, theoretical approach to theodicy and focuses on the Book of Job instead (Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, pp. 264–271). This second part presents the Book of Job as an allegory of theodicy and virtue that focuses on ethical questions rather than theoretical questions. Kant contrasts Job's frankness and sincerity with the hypocrisy and malice of his friends. Job's honesty and integrity is contrasted with the flattery and vices of his friends. The friends assume that Job must have sinned since God would not allow him to suffer unless he were guilty. Put differently, the friends present a theodicy that actually increases the suffering of Job by putting forward false allegations against him (Pihlström and Kivistö 2016, p. 39). In Kant's text, Job's friends are associated with philosophical theodicies, whereas Job is associated with Kant's critique of theodicies. Kant suggests that theodicies not only overstep our cognitive limits but also that they involve insincerity when they try to excuse and justify evil.

Kant contrasts ordinary, doctrinal theodicies with his own "authentic theodicy," which represents a "matter of faith" (Kant 1900ff., vol. 8, pp. 264, 267; 2001a, pp. 31, 34). As we have seen, Kant rejects theodicies that claim to be

based on sufficient evidence. But he is not opposed to a theodicy that is based on religious faith and hope that goes beyond theoretical evidence, by relying on decisive moral reasons. Still, Kant's authentic theodicy is so limited that it may be viewed as an *anti-theodicy* that does not try to justify or excuse God for allowing evil or suffering. Rather, it sees evil and suffering as a practical, moral and existential problem that we must face as agents rather than something that we can explain theoretically (Pihlström and Kivistö 2016, p. 48). Moral evil is something we must fight, whereas natural evil should be relieved (where possible) and endured (where necessary).

Kant's critique of doctrinal theodicies, and his anti-theodicy, anticipates existentialism more than his authentic theodicy. But even the latter involves a pragmatism about religious faith and hope that anticipates religious existentialism. Kant's view is neither that we should despair nor accept the world as it is. Rather, we should hope for progress that overcomes alienation and reconciles us with the world in its potentiality for good, without succumbing to evil. Instead of assuming that we are progressing towards our ideals, Kant holds that such progress is possible and that we should try to the uttermost of our ability to make progress, even if we can never reach our ideals completely (cf. Beiser 2006, pp. 602–604; Caswell 2006, pp. 185–190, 204; Fremstedal 2014, chapters 4–6). However, this indicates that human existence involves infinite striving towards regulative ideas that are transcendent since they exceed the bounds of all experience (cf. Kant 2007, A327/B384). By developing the regulative use of ideas, Kant may therefore be said to anticipate an existential subject that endlessly strives towards rest or completion, without ever reaching it completely (cf. Verstrynge 2004).

11 Conclusion

As one of the most important modern philosophers, Kant anticipated existentialism in several respects, although he did not develop a systematic existential philosophy. It seems clear, at least in retrospect, that Kant's critical philosophy represents a proto-existentialism in the following respects: He emphasizes human finitude, limits our knowledge, and argues that human consciousness is characterized by mineness. He introduces the influential concept of autonomy, something that led to controversies about constructivism and anti-realism in meta-ethics and anticipates problems concerning voluntarism and decisionism in existentialism. Kant makes human freedom *the* central philosophical issue, arguing that freedom is inescapable for human agents. He even holds that the awareness of freedom leads to anxiety (as opposed to fear), and

that anxiety in turn precedes the fall into evil. In the doctrine of radical evil, he argues that human agents are always already suffering from self-deception because of this fall. In order to overcome self-deception and moral evil, Kant prescribes a radical self-choice in which the agent takes over himself and society by thinking independently and consistently. However, this is not only a moral issue for Kant but also something that concerns religious faith and hope since Kant argues that we need religion to overcome not only moral evil but also despair. Although he criticizes traditional natural theology, Kant develops an existential interpretation of religion and an influential critique of philosophical theodicies, in which God is necessarily hidden. By doing this, and by introducing philosophy of religion and philosophical anthropology as new disciplines, Kant prepares the ground for existentialism.

However, Kant does not distinguish between authenticity and inauthenticity as twentieth-century existentialists do. Still, he anticipates several aspects of these two categories. Kant's analyses of anxiety, despair, self-deception, minority (*Unmündigkeit*), and moral evil anticipate inauthenticity. Authenticity, by contrast, is anticipated by the maturity that dares to think for itself and the fundamental self-choice that takes responsibility for itself as an embodied individual. For both Kant and the existentialists, this existential choice requires that one be true to oneself for its own sake. Particularly voluntarist and anti-realist readings of Kant anticipate existentialism since these interpretations radicalize Kantian autonomy by separating the power of choice from pure practical reason. Still, Kant would not accept forms of authenticity that go "beyond autonomy by holding that an individual's feelings and deepest desires can outweigh…the outcome of rational deliberation in making decisions" (Varga and Guignon 2017, Part 2).

Notes

1. The present text draws partially on Fremstedal 2014 (a book that deals with Kierkegaard's relation to Kant). References to *Critique of Pure Reason* use the pagination in the A and B editions (e.g., Kant 2007, A445/B473). All other references to Kant use the volume and pagination in the German Academy edition of Kant's works (e.g., Kant 1900ff., vol. 6, p. 24).
2. Yet Kant's ethics anticipates Sartre's idea of man as a "legislator deciding for the whole of mankind" as well as his view that "the act of lying implies the universal value which it denies" (1975, p. 351). Sartre (1975, p. 366) explicitly agrees to Kant's view that "freedom is a will both to itself and to the freedom of others." For Kant's importance for Kierkegaard's ethics, see Fremstedal (2014).

3. Although Kant did not develop a phenomenology, he is still one of the forerunners of twentieth-century phenomenology (cf. Engelland 2010).
4. Moreover, Kant argues that "Another can indeed *coerce* me to do something that is not my end (but only a means to another's end) but not to *make this my end;* and yet I can have no end without making it an end for myself" (Kant 1900ff., vol. 6, p. 381).
5. My interpretation here is based on Fremstedal (2020), except that that the present text does not focus on Kierkegaard.
6. Kierkegaard represents an exception here since he tends towards moral realism (Fremstedal 2014, chapter 10).
7. To describe the fall into evil, some Kant scholars rely on the Kierkegaardian notion of a leap of volition developed in *The Concept of Anxiety* (Muchnik 2009, pp. 93–94; Morgan 2005, p. 77; Fremstedal 2014, p. 250n123).
8. See the chapters on Schelling, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre in the present anthology.
9. Kant is concerned with self-deception that tries to ignore the demands of moral freedom. He is hardly concerned with forms of self-deception that exaggerate freedom and understate facticity. Nor does he give a taxonomy of self-deception, as Kierkegaard does (Fremstedal 2014, chapter 3).
10. Like many existentialists, Kant was also highly concerned with freedom of speech, although he struggled with censorship and religious orthodoxy (cf. Kuehn 2001).
11. Kant 1900ff., vol. 7, p. 285; vol. 25, pp. 1367–1368. *Sinnesart* or "empirical character" belongs to the phenomenal realm and is the sensual sign (*sinnliche Zeichen*) of man's "intelligible character," his noumenal *Denkungsart* (Wimmer 1990, pp. 101, 130, 151–152, 188).
12. Scheler (1928, p. 51); translated in Louden (2011, p. 67).
13. Both Kant and his commentators seem to describe the antinomy of practical reason in terms of (moral) despair (Kant 1900ff., vol. 28, p. 1076; Marina 2000, p. 354; Kuehn 2001, p. 313; Henrich 2008, p. 102; Wood 1970, p. 160; Wimmer 1990, pp. 68, 156–159, 206).
14. I am indebted to Andrew Chignell and Darrel Moellendorf here.
15. Transcendental arguments represent one of Kant's most discussed contributions to philosophy. Pereboom (2009) explains, "In Kant's conception, an argument of this kind begins with an uncontroversial premise about our thought, experience, or knowledge, and then reasons to a substantive and unobvious necessary condition of this premise. Typically, this reasoning from uncontroversial premise to substantive conclusion is intended to be *a priori* in some sense." Transcendental arguments can be found in both Kierkegaard and twentieth-century existentialism. Some accounts even identify transcendental and phenomenological methodology (see Engelland 2010, Part III). For Kierkegaard, see Fremstedal (2014, pp. 229–230).

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