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The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance. by John E. Hare

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*THE MORAL GAP: KANTIAN ETHICS, HUMAN LIMITS, AND GOD'S ASSISTANCE*. By JOHN E. HARE. Oxford: Oxford University Press, Clarendon Press, 1996. Pp. x, 292.

The title of Hare's book refers to the gap between the demand that morality places on us and our natural capacity to live by it. Such a gap is paradoxical if we accept the "ought implies 'can'" principle. The solution, Hare argues, is that the gap is filled by the Christian God. So we ought to be moral and can do so—with divine assistance. Hare's statement and defense of the existence of the gap combines a rigorously Kantian notion of the moral demand with a rigorously Calvinist notion of human depravity. As such, many readers will find the gap exaggerated, but most people will admit that there is *some* sort of gap here to be faced, and any gap at all is a problem.

As Hare sees it, the gap exists not only on the metaethical level, but on the level of practical reason. We have no reason to try to be moral, given our awareness of the gap, unless we also *believe* in extra-human assistance. In summarizing this aspect of the project in the last chapter, Hare says: "I have not given an argument . . . that living a morally good life requires belief in God, only that it requires belief in extra-human assistance. The Christian doctrines of atonement, justification, and sanctification provide a version of such assistance, and I have looked at a few rivals. I have also tried to counter some objections, that the doctrine is unintelligible or that belief in the doctrine is inconsistent with the nature of practical reason. To try to show that Christian doctrine is required would be far more ambitious" (270–71). But, of course, it is quite ambitious enough to argue that engagement in the moral life requires belief in extra-human assistance, since it is a fair guess that few people, even few Christians, are predisposed to accept such a view. As for the metaethical gap, Hare appeals to the full panoply of Christian doctrine to close it.

Hare rejects three strategies for filling the gap, as well as Kant's own strategy. The first two strategies are attempts to deny that the gap exists. One is the strategy of "puffing up the capacity," as Hare puts it. The chapter on this strategy is almost entirely devoted to a discussion of utilitarianism, which Hare sees as singularly optimistic about human moral capacity. I found this discussion curious, since I have never found utilitarians more optimistic in this respect than many Kantians, and certainly not more so than virtue theorists. What's more, if there ever was a theory that makes super-human moral demands on us, it is utilitarianism. So even if utilitarians have a more benign diagnosis of human moral ability than does Hare, I doubt that they are typically using it as a strategy to fill the gap.

So when Hare rightly argues that utilitarians do not solve the gap problem, the conclusion should be that they are not an example of the first strategy, not that the first strategy ought to be rejected.

The second strategy for closing the gap is to reduce the moral demand. Hare focuses on, as examples of this strategy, only some feminist views and recent objections to the impartiality of morality, but he ignores the historically most important version of this position—Aristotle's. In Aristotelian ethics there is no moral gap, partly because of Aristotle's optimistic view of human nature, but mostly because the moral demand in his eyes is simply not at the Kantian level. As Hare sees it, morality demands that we put duty before our own happiness, but not only would Aristotle never make such a claim, it has often been remarked that there is no notion of duty at all in Aristotle. But since Hare prefers the context of contemporary ethics, we need only look at Bernard Williams's well-known attack on the concept of moral obligation to see that the Kantian interpretation of the moral demand can be credibly rejected—and even rejected by Christians, as is illustrated by Charles Taylor's complimentary essay on Williams.<sup>1</sup>

The third strategy for closing the gap is not to deny that it exists, but to bridge it by naturalistic alternatives to divine assistance. In one of the most interesting chapters in the book, Hare looks at the ethical theories of Donald Campbell, David Gauthier, and Alan Gibbard, each of whom closes the gap by some machinery external to the agent's will that turns egoists into useful members of society. Unsurprisingly, he rejects these theories, arguing that even apart from particular objections, none of them has much explanatory power.

Hare argues that Kant's own attempt to fill the gap does not work either. Kant appeals to divine assistance, but because he translates Christian doctrine into the religion of pure reason, his strategy fails. Kant concedes a need for "cooperation from above," but denies a use for such thoughts in the maxims of practical or theoretical reason (67). Hare argues that this leaves Kant with an incoherence in his theory. He not only cannot explain *how* the gap is bridged; he cannot explain *that* the gap is bridged. So the moral life leaves us with a problem with which the religion of pure reason is not able to cope. But Kant's strategy was not bound to fail, Hare argues. There is a better translation of Christian doctrine within Kant's constraints that uses the resources of historical faith, including the doctrines of atonement, justification, and salvation.

This brings me to Hare's solution to the gap problem: divine assistance

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Taylor, "A Most Peculiar Institution," in *World, Mind, and Ethics: Essays on the Ethical Philosophy of Bernard Williams*, ed. J. E. J. Altham and Ross Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

with the full-blooded Christian doctrines mentioned above. But when he goes into the details of these doctrines, it is not clear to me that the gap God fills is the the right gap. Doctrines of justification, forgiveness, and salvation surely fill *some* gap, but do they fill the gap between the alleged moral demand to put duty before happiness and the alleged human inability to do so? That gap is not filled by the doctrines Hare discusses—that sins will be forgiven, that good will eventually triumph over evil, and that there is a heaven for the righteous. In fact, the evidence of moral failure even among believers is very strong, and Hare is aware of that. He says that one work of the Holy Spirit is to give us assurance that the revolution of the will has taken place (271). Is that assurance against the evidence? Faith is one thing; faith against the evidence is another. Of course, there *is* evidence that some people have the kind of will that closes the gap. But that evidence could be taken either as evidence that God helps those who seek help and some who do not, or as evidence of a lack of a gap in the first place.

This book is in the *Oxford Studies in Theological Ethics*. The general description of the series indicates that the books are for serious students and are not specialized monographs. That description does not fit *The Moral Gap*, which is quite clearly a scholarly book, of most interest to professional philosophers and graduate students in philosophy, particularly Christian philosophers partial to Kant and anyone interested in Kantian ethics. It is unlikely that any student who does not already have a good knowledge of modern philosophical ethics will understand it. Hence, although the book is not “specialized,” it is intended to advance scholarship in Kantian ethics and Christian ethics, and is a fine contribution to those areas. I would not recommend it for undergraduate courses or for academics outside philosophy.

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*RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE: THE PLACE OF RELIGIOUS CONVICTIONS IN POLITICAL DEBATE.* By ROBERT AUDI and NICHOLAS WOLTERSTORFF. Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997. Pp. x, 180.

These matched essays constitute an extremely valuable contribution on the place of religious ideas in our country’s political life. Robert Audi defends an “exclusivist” position: participants in political life fulfill the responsibilities of liberal citizenship best if they support only measures justified on secular grounds. Nicholas Wolterstorff argues for an “inclusivist” position: citizens and legislators are encouraged to rely on whatever sources, including religious ones, they find convincing.