

Kant on Remorse, Suicide, and the Descent into Hell¹

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Abstract

Kant's conception of remorse has not received focused discussion in the literature. I argue that he thinks we ought to experience remorse for both retributivist and consequentialist reasons. This account casts helpful light on his ideas of *conversion* and the *descent into the hell of self-cognition*. But while he prescribes a heartbreakingly painful experience of remorse, he acknowledges that excess remorse can threaten rational agency through distraction and suicide, and this raises questions about whether actual human beings ought to cultivate their consciences in such a way as to experience remorse on his model.

I. Introduction

We can respond emotionally to the belief that we have acted immorally with a variety of painful feelings, some of which include disgust, embarrassment, shame, remorse, and guilt. Remorse differs from the feelings listed before remorse on the list just given, in that we can understand (even if we do not endorse) the earlier-listed feelings as responses to anything that can prompt mockery from others, even if it is clearly not a moral failing (for example, vomiting at the podium during a talk as a result of food poisoning). The difference between remorse and guilt is more complex—terminologically “guilt” is used both to refer to a painful moral feeling and also to a state of culpability which can be determined by a court, or God, or conscience,

¹ I reiterate some aspects of the interpretation I attribute to Kant here in another paper I have under review. There it is for the purpose of contrasting Kant's own account of remorse with an alternative account I argue is preferable and available in his texts. So the papers have quite different aims.

which we think ought to have a painful feeling as a feature, but has other features too (for example, courts can "find" people guilty even if they do not feel guilty). Here I will focus primarily upon remorse.

Kant comments on all the feelings in the list given above in various passages. Disgust [*Ekel*] can "make moral aversion sensible"² (MM 6:406), and some specific vices (such as

² Abbreviations and translations for Kant's texts are from the following books unless otherwise noted. "t" in passages from Kant indicates that I have altered the Cambridge translation to reflect my own translation. Pagination is by *Akademie* edition, which is included in texts cited, unless otherwise noted. "NA" at the end of entries in the following list in this note indicates texts not included in the *Akademie* edition; quotes from these are paginated according to the volume cited. Translations from German-language volumes in this list are my own. **A/B**: *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. **2C**: *Critique of Practical Reason*, in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, 137-271. Cambridge University Press, 1996. **AP**: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Robert B. Louden. In *Anthropology, History and Education*, ed. Günther Zöllner and Robert B. Louden, 231-429. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. **CA**: Collins notes from Kant's Anthropology lectures in *Lectures on Anthropology*, trans. Robert B. Clewis, Robert B. Louden, G. Felicitas Munzel, and Allen W. Wood. Ed. Allen W. Wood and Robert B. Louden, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012, 11-26. **CO**: *Immanuel Kant: Correspondence*, trans. and ed. Arnulf Zweig, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999. **CE**: Collins notes from Kant's Ethics lectures, in *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath, ed. Peter Heath and J.B. Schneewind, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997, 37-222. **CF**: *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor and Robert Anchor, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 237-327. **FA**: Notes from Kant's Anthropology lectures by Michael Friedländer, in *Lectures on Anthropology* (ibid.), 37-255. **G**: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy* (ibid.), 41-108. **HM**: Notes from Kant's Metaphysics lectures by J.G. Herder, in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften: Vorlesungen über Metaphysik und Rationaltheologie (Band 28, Erste Hälfte)*, ed. Gerhard Lehmann, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1968. **MA**: Notes from Kant's Anthropology lectures by Christian Coelestin Mrongovius, in *Lectures on Anthropology* (ibid.), 335-509. **MM**: *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy* (ibid.), 363-602. **MT**: *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*, trans. George di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology* (ibid.), 19-38. **RR**: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. George di Giovanni, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, (ibid.), 39-216. **RS**: Review of Schulz's *Attempt at an Introduction to a Doctrine of Morals for All Human Beings Regardless of Different Religions*, in *Practical Philosophy* (ibid.), 1-10. **S1**: Notes from Kant's Anthropology lectures likely from 1780-1 (date uncertain), in *Immanuel Kant's Menschenkunde oder philosophische Anthropologie*, ed. Fr. Ch. Starke, Leipzig: Die Expedition des europäischen Aufsehers, 1831^{NA}. **S2**: Notes from Kant's Anthropology lectures in the winter term of 1790-1791, in *Immanuel Kant's Anweisung zur*

lechery) typically prompt disgust (MA 25:1349), but disgust does not appear to play a significant role in Kant's account of self-reactive moral feeling.³ He emphasizes that there are things which prompt disgust in some people but joy in others (OB 2:207), such as strong smells (MA 25:1246) and French cuisine (MA 25:1402), with the implication that while these things seem disgusting to him, there need be no moral defect in those who feel otherwise. Kant thinks of embarrassment [*Verlegenheit*] as resulting from attention from others which prompts attention to oneself and leads to self-consciousness (AP 7:121, 132), and while this can happen when we act unethically, it can also reflect laudable motivations. He gives an example of embarrassment from being caught in a lie (FA 25:633), but also says that someone seriously [*ernstlich*] in love may be embarrassed in the presence of the beloved, while a deceiving seducer will not be embarrassed in the presence of his target.⁴ Shame [*Scham*] is perhaps more like a moral feeling than the previous ones, but while it can express injury to one's sense of moral dignity (2C 5:88), it can also express injury to one's sense of *honor* in a way that is not bound up with moral dignity but has merely to do with the opinions of others, whether they be right or wrong (OB 2:218).⁵ Kant notes that shame can be prompted by forgetfulness (MA 25:1241) and talking to oneself (RR 6:195n).

Kant's comments on remorse and guilt indicate that they are always bound up with the belief that one has acted immorally, but here analysis of his terminology is more complex. The German word Kant uses which translates as "guilt" is "*Schuld*", which can also mean debt or

Menschen - und Weltkenntniß. Nach dessen Vorlesungen im Winterhalbjahre von 1790/91, ed. Fr. Ch. Starke, Leipzig: Die Expedition des europäischen Aufsehers, 1831^{NA}. **VE**: Notes from Kant's Ethics lectures by Johann Friedrich Vigilantius in *Lectures on Ethics*, (ibid.), 249-452.

³ See Clewis (2009: 114-16) for a discussion of disgust in the context of Kant's aesthetics.

⁴ See Cohen (2009: 44-5) for a discussion of how embarrassment thwarts anthropological observation.

⁵ See Sussman (2008) for a discussion of Kant's account of shame.

obligation, and he often uses it in the context of legal or divine judgment. Kant uses *Schuld* rarely in ways that indicate that he is thinking of feeling, but he does write of feeling guilty in at least one place (*schuldig zu fühlen*, RR 6:38). The English word “remorse” has a helpful simplicity in that it refers just to painful moral feeling, but matching it up to Kant’s German is complicated. Kant uses a number of terms which the Cambridge edition translates as “remorse”, including *Zerknirschung*, *Kummers*, *Verweis*, and *Reue*. All of these words can be translated in other ways. Kant uses *Zerknirschung* (also “contrition”) and *Kummers* (also “sorrow”) rarely. Kant uses “*Verweis*” in several places, but it is more literally “rebuke” or “reprimand”. Kant uses “*Reue*” at least 40 times, and the related verb “*bereuen*” at least 10, so this term plays a more significant role, but it has a meaning which is broader than “remorse”. Helpfully, Kant draws distinctions which mark out a kind of *Reue* which I take to be identical to remorse, which he calls “*moralische* [moral] *Reue*” (CE 27:353) and “*wahre* [true] *Reue*” (VE 27:464). “*Reue*” has “rue” as a close cognate in English, and both can mean painful regret for our past actions either because they were immoral, or because they were imprudent and brought negative consequences upon us, and only the former meaning matches “remorse”. Kant discusses this distinction in multiple places. In the Collins Ethics lecture notes, Kant identifies “*moralische Reue*” as *Reue* for behavior “in regard to morality “[*in Ansehung der Moralität*]” and distinguishes it from *Reue* because one has acted “imprudently [*unklug*]” (CE 27:353). Similarly, in his famous 1792 letter to Maria von Herbert (CO 11:333, discussed below), he distinguishes *Reue* over “imprudence [*Unklugheit*]” from *Reue* “grounded in a purely moral judgment [*auf bloßer sittlicher Beurtheilung ...Verhaltens gründet*]” about one’s behavior.

The Cambridge edition often translates “*Reue*” as “repentance”, which suggests a theological orientation, and this context is often part of Kant’s discussions, but I do not wish my

account here to be relevant only for this context. However, I take Kant's to hold that the emotional core of sincere repentance even in a theological context is remorse, and that this core can be isolated from the feelings specifically about God which are also involved in repentance, for example, fear of God's punishment. Kant distinguishes the "inner sorrow" of "*wahre* [true] *Reue*" (CE 27:464) from the sorrow of *Buße*, which the Cambridge edition also translates as "repentance", but can also be rendered as "penance". Kant remarks that "*Buße*" is "not a good not a good term; it derives from penances and chastisements [*Büßungen, Kasteyungen*]" which we inflict on ourselves when we recognize that we deserve punishment, in the hope that God will not punish us later (CE 27:464). At MM 6:485, Kant draws a parallel distinction between *moralische zu bereuen* and *büßen*:

monkish ascetics, which from superstitious fear or hypocritical loathing of oneself goes to work with self-torture (*Selbstpeinigung*) and mortification of the flesh, is not directed to virtue but rather to fantastically purging oneself of sin by imposing punishments (*Strafe*) on oneself. Instead of morally repenting [*moralisch zu bereuen*] sins (with a view to improving), it wants to do penance [*büßen*][.]

I think these distinctions allow us to equate remorse with Kant's *wahre, moralische Reue* (though I think the Cambridge translation is helpful in rendering the broader range of expressions noted above as remorse as well). Therefore, in the following I will typically replace appearances of "repentance" and its derivatives in the Cambridge translation with "remorse" or derivatives in cases where it seems clear that Kant is referring to *wahre, moralische Reue*.

In this paper I will address the following questions. What are the reasons Kant gives us for feeling remorse? How does Kant think we should cultivate the experience of remorse on the basis of those reasons? And last, but not least: is the experience of remorse Kant thinks we should cultivate an appropriate one to recommend for flawed agents like ourselves? I do not mean to suggest that we typically experience remorse as a result of explicit deliberation about

reasons for remorse. Kant holds that we have an “instinct” to judge our evil actions in a way that “conveys to us an inner pain” (CE 27:296-7), and this suggests the plausible view that the experience of remorse has an immediacy which makes it prior to such deliberation. On the other hand, remorse is prompted by conscience, and we have a duty to cultivate conscience (MM 6:401), and this duty entails an ability to rationally shape conscience. We must make judgments about which actions we cause ourselves inner pain over, to avoid a "micrological" conscience "burdened with many small scruples on matters of indifference", and a "morbid conscience", which "seeks to impute evil in [one's] actions, when there is really no ground for it" (CE 27:356). We must "sharpen" conscience if it is too dull (MM 6:401), but we must not make it *too* sharp. To brood over remorse [*über Reue zu brüten*] can "make one's whole life useless by continuous self-reproach [*Vorwürfe*]" (CO 11:333), and an "excess of remorse [*Kummers*] over ...transgressions of duty" can prompt suicide (VE 27:642). Shaping conscience in these ways requires judgments about *when* and *how* we should feel remorse, and such judgments must be grounded in reasons for remorse.

II. Kant's Account of Reasons for Remorse

There are at least three plausible ways of justifying the pain of remorse. One is retributive: we should have painful feelings in response to past wrongful actions because we *deserve* them, whether or not they lead to good consequences. Retributivist justifications are often called "backward-looking" because they refer only to past wrongs. *Pure* retributivism would be the view that *only* retributive considerations play a role in justifying remorse. A second is consequentialist: we should feel remorse because it motivates us to act more morally in the future. Consequentialist justifications are thus often called "forward-looking". *Pure*

consequentialism would be the view that *only* consequentialist considerations play a role in justifying remorse. Third, a *hybrid* justification of remorse includes multiple justifying reasons. I will argue that if we exercise interpretative care in assembling the sometimes-contradictory remarks in Kant's texts, we have a good case for attributing a hybrid justification to Kant, which has a retributive basis, but is consequentially constrained.

Kant's account of reasons for remorse has not received focused discussion in the literature, but it has been discussed indirectly in relation to Kant's account of conscience, by way of a debate between Thomas Hill and Allen Wood about whether conscience *punishes*. A resolution of this debate cannot on its own answer the question about Kant's reasons for remorse, since Kant's reasons for punishment are themselves matters of controversy. However, a review of the debate will situate the present inquiry in the literature and provide helpful context.

On Thomas Hill's interpretation, a "bad conscience 'hurts', and...Kant treats this pain as analogous to the suffering imposed on lawbreakers by the system of criminal justice" (2002: 352). He points out that Kant sees conscience as an inner court in which we "think of ourselves as playing several roles: that of accuser, defender, and finally a judge", who

issues verdicts of acquittal or condemnation. Like a trial judge, who is not legislating or merely informing others about the law, conscience 'imputes', 'reproaches', and passes 'sentence'. If it judges us to be guilty, we are made to suffer, and at times the result can be torment. (2002: 301)

Hill reads Kant as holding that conscience "enforces the law, passes sentence", and "makes us suffer for our misdeeds" (2002: 353).

By contrast, Allen Wood holds that conscience does *not* punish (2008: 187). He claims that "Kant denies that it is even *possible* to punish oneself", citing MM 6:335, which is a discussion of social contract theory and the justification of external punishment according to principles of right. There Kant states that "it is impossible *to will* to be punished", but just as

clearly states that there is indeed a sense in which "I draw up a penal law against myself as a criminal": "pure reason in me (*homo noumenon*)...subjects me, as someone capable of crime and **so as another person** [my boldface]" to punishment (MM 6:335).

Kant also addresses concern about self-punishment at MM 6:485 (quoted above), where he faults "monkish ascetics" for aiming at penance (*büßen*) *rather than* the experience of remorse (*moralisch zu bereuen*), in part because it involves "punishment [*Strafe*] chosen and executed by oneself", while punishment "must always be imposed by another". But as Hill emphasizes in his remarks quoted just above, Kant holds that agents must take on multiple perspectives in the experience of conscience, just as we saw they must do in drawing up penal law against themselves.⁶ Kant discusses this in detail at MM 6:438:

conscience is peculiar in that, although its business is a business of a human being with himself, one constrained by his reason sees himself constrained to carry it on as at the bidding of another person...[T]o think of a human being who is *accused* by his conscience as *one and the same person* as the judge is an absurd way of representing a court, since then the prosecutor would always lose...[A] human being's conscience will, accordingly, have to think of *someone other* than himself ...as the judge of his actions...This other may be an actual person or a merely ideal person that reason creates for itself.

If punishment must be inflicted by another person, and conscience contains a judge who we must represent as a different person even though he is really an aspect of ourselves, then we represent the pain of conscience as punishment inflicted by another person even though it is inflicted by an aspect of ourselves. I think this is Kant's view. I think his criticism of monkish ascetics is not that it involves self-punishment *as such*, but rather that it involves self-punishment which is not mediated by the inner judge of conscience—that it is about doing penance by imposing unpleasant experiences "such as a fast" on oneself *instead of* experiencing *wahre*,

⁶ See Timmermann (2014) for a helpful discussion of the perspectival structure of Kant's ethics.

moralische Reue, and is thus a self-deluding substitute for the kind of self-punishment inflicted by one's inner judge.

Perhaps the most definitive passage supporting the view that conscience punishes is one that neither Hill nor Wood cite in their texts quoted here, at MT 8:260:

[T]he virtuous man lends to the depraved the characteristic of his own constitution, namely, a conscientiousness [*Gewissenhaftigkeit*] in all its severity which, the more virtuous a human being is, all the more harshly punishes [*bestraft*] him because of the slightest indiscretion frowned upon by the moral law in him.

It is reasonable to assume that the virtuous have consciences which function properly, so if their consciences punish, then it is the proper function of conscience to punish.

Wood acknowledges that on Kant's view, "conscience can 'judge us punishable'", but he claims that Kant thinks conscience does not inflict punishment upon us *itself*, and that "our happiness or misery is left for the ruler of the world to decide", citing MS 6:439n, 440, and 460 in support. But the purpose of Kant's discussion of God at MS 6:439n and 440 is to explain that we must think of the "internal judge" who "pronounces the sentence of happiness or misery" (MM 6:439n) *as God*, while emphasizing that this idea is given to us "*subjectively*, by practical reason" (MM 6:439) and is merely another perspective on "morally lawgiving reason...present in our inmost being" (MM 6:440). This makes it clear that anything we must think of *God as doing to us* in the context of conscience also must be understood as something *we do to ourselves*. MM 6:460-1 is a dramatic passage in which Kant talks about the limits of vengeance:

Every deed that violates a human being's right deserves [*verdient*] punishment, the function of which is to *avenge* [*geracht*] a crime on the one who committed it (not merely to make good the harm that was done). But punishment is not an act that the injured party can undertake on his private authority but rather an act of a court distinct from him, which gives effect to the law of a *supreme authority* over all those subject to it...no one is authorized to inflict punishment and to avenge ...except him who is also the supreme moral lawgiver; and he alone (namely

God) can say "Vengeance [*Rache*] is mine; I will repay." It is, therefore, a duty of virtue...to refrain from repaying another's enmity...out of mere revenge [.]

The kind of punishment at issue here is external punishment we inflict on bodily distinct others, which Kant says cannot be done out of vengeance, because only God can punish out of vengeance. Implicit but obviously present here is the assumption that we *must not think of ourselves as like God* when we punish others. If we follow Wood in applying this passage to conscience, it would seem to imply that, since we *must think of the inner judge as God*, and we *can* think of God as punishing out of vengeance, and this inner judge is an aspect of *ourselves*, we can think of ourselves as inflicting self-punishment out of vengeance. If we bracket the troubling concept of vengeance, then the conclusion this line of thought suggests is that we can think of the pain of remorse as *self-retribution*, since what is at issue is *deserved (verdient)* punishment.

However, since Kant does not refer to conscience at MM 6:460, more direct evidence that conscience is retributive would be helpful. Kant offers more direct evidence in his discussion of the negative duty to promote others' "*moral well-being*":

[T]he *pain* one feels from the pangs of conscience [*Gewissensbissen*] has a moral source...To see to it that another does not deservedly [*verdienterweise*] suffer this inner reproach [*innere Vorwurf*] is not *my* duty but *his affair*; but it is my duty to refrain from doing anything that, considering the nature of a human being, could tempt him. to do something for which his conscience could afterwards torture^t [*peinigen*] him [.] (MM 6:394)

This remark seems to imply quite straightforwardly that to experience pain from the pangs of conscience—to suffer remorse—is to *deservedly suffer* inner reproach.

However, Kant also many remarks implying that consequentialist (forward-looking) considerations play a role in justifying remorse. In the "monkish ascetics" passage discussed earlier, he states that *moralische zu bereuen* requires a "view to improving" (MM 6:485). In the

Religion he criticizes "remorseful self-inflicted torments [*reuige Selbstpeinigungen*] that do not...originate in any genuine disposition toward improvement" (RR 6:77). In the Anthropology he warns against regarding our "record of guilt as...simply wiped out (through remorse^t [*Reue*]), so that [we are] spared the effort toward improvement" (AP 7:236).

In fact, in some passages, Kant suggests such a complete reliance on consequentialist considerations in justifying remorse that he seems to advocate a *pure* consequentialism, such that the *only* reason to feel remorse is because of its consequences. In the Mrongovius Anthropology lecture notes (1784-5), Kant criticizes "idle desires" connected with the "wish that something would not have happened which, however, now is impossible" as a "distraction" which is "senseless and harmful". He gives "remorse [*Reue*]" as an example of such desires, and says that it "is good **merely insofar** as it impels us to cancel the consequences thereof and to act better in the sequel" (MA 25:1335, my boldface). His point seems to be that when we feel remorse, we should try to eliminate painful thoughts connected with the wish that we had not acted badly and focus on acting better. But retributive (backward-looking) justifications of remorse would seem to be intrinsically bound up with the thought that past bad actions ought not to have happened, and so the MA 25:1335 remarks suggest that there is no role for retributivism here. The Starke 2 Anthropology lecture notes (1790-1791) express what I take to be a similar thought: "fruitless remorse [*Reue*] is useless, because it attacks our powers too much"(S2 34). Perhaps the strongest suggestion of a pure consequentialism about remorse comes in a pair of passages in the Starke 1 (also known as "Menschenkunde") Anthropology lecture notes (likely 1780-1):

Remorse [*Reue*] for crimes committed, as soon as it is not connected with the endeavor to make amends for the crime, is an empty delusion; for with it no other man is served that one plagues oneself with a torment, so one must also make an effort to help others again. (S1 93)

Remorse [*Reue*] alone, as such, has no value, except insofar as it is the motive force of improvement. Remorse is serious [*ernstlich*] when it passes over as quickly as possible to good deeds. He who believes that remorse has a value in itself is very much mistaken. (S1 269)

If remorse is a *delusion* with *no value in itself* independent of the motivation to produce the good consequences of motivating us to improve or make amends, then retributivism plays no role in justifying remorse. If we attribute this view to Kant, then we have a clear conflict with the view suggested at MM 6:394 and 6:460 (quoted above).

There are, however, remarks in which Kant indicates that there are multiple reasons for remorse, and this would imply a hybrid theory. In Kant's critique of Johann Schulz's moral theory, Kant attributes a number of theses to Schulz with the clear implication that Kant does not accept them. One of these theses is that "Remorse [*Reue*] is merely a misunderstood representation of how one could *act better in the future*, and in fact nature has no other purpose in it than the end of improvement" (RS 8:110). If Kant rejects this, he thinks that remorse has *another purpose distinct* from improvement, and it is reasonable to assume that this is retribution, in light of the foregoing. Support for this view is also offered by Herder's Metaphysics notes, which attribute to Kant the statement that "[i]f remorse [*Reue*] about the past prevents all attention to the future, it is absurd" (HM 28:90). This suggests that it is appropriate for remorse to be both forward-looking but also backward-looking to some degree. A final and I think definitive text supporting a hybrid justification appears in the Collins Ethics lecture notes. There Kant writes that preachers attending the dying "must...see to it, that people do indeed feel remorse¹ for [*bereuen*] the transgression of self-regarding duties, since these can no longer be remedied, but that if they have wronged another, they genuinely try to make amends" (CE 27:354). Kant here gives us a case where he thinks the imminence of death means that there is a

forward-looking way to respond to some but not all of one's past bad actions. He states clearly that we should feel remorse for the actions to which we *cannot* respond in a forward-looking way, and based on MM 6:394 and 6:460 it is fair to assume that we should feel such remorse because we deserve it. His point about the actions to which we can respond in a forward-looking way seems to be that we should feel remorse about them but apply it to the production of good consequences.

Though there are tensions among the passages we have considered, I think together they give us sufficient evidence to attribute the following view to Kant. We must retributively inflict remorse on ourselves for past wrongs. But this self-retribution is consequentially constrained in two ways. First, remorse should improve our behavior: it should lead us to act better in general (which we have seen at RR 6:77, MM 6:485, RS 8:110, and S1 93 and 269), and it should prompt us to make amends to the particular people we have wronged (which we have seen at CE 27:354, and S1 93). Second, remorse must be moderated insofar as moderation is required to avoid damage to our rational agency. We saw this near the outset in Kant's warnings against brooding over remorse in a way that makes our lives "useless" (CO 11:333), and against being driven to suicide by excess remorse (VE 27:642), and more recently in his admonitions against remorse's "distraction" (MA 25:1335) and "attacks [on] our powers" (S2 34).

This gives us an outline of Kant's view of remorse, but it leaves some important questions unanswered. How much remorse does Kant think we should feel, and for how long? And does he have an account of how we channel it into self-improvement? Kant engages these questions most directly in his discussions of the "descent into the hell of self-cognition", which has connections with his concept of conversion.

III. The Descent into the Hell of Self-Cognition

Kant says he borrows the phrase *Höllenfahrt des Selbsterkenntnisses* from his acquaintance Johann Hamann (CF 7:55).⁷ A version of this phrase appears in the Collins Anthropology notes (dated to 1772-3), where Kant says that one of the reasons the science of anthropology is neglected, despite being very interesting, is that “one conjectures he would not find much to rejoice at if he were to undertake the difficult descent into Hell toward the knowledge of himself [*die schwierige Höllenfahrt zur Erkenntniß seiner selbst*] (CA 25:7). Kant uses it again in a famous passage in the Doctrine of Virtue:

For...a human being, the ultimate wisdom, which consists in the harmony of a being's will with its final end, requires him first to remove the obstacle within (an evil will actually present in him) and then to develop the original predisposition to a good will within him, which can never be lost. (Only the descent into the hell of self-cognition [*Höllenfahrt des Selbsterkenntnisses*] can pave the way to godliness.) (MM 6:441)

Following a number of commentators⁸, I think Kant's reference to *removing an evil will, and developing the predisposition to good* means that we should link this passage to the *conversion* in the *Religion* (RR 6:73), which Kant also calls a “justification [*Rechtfertigung*] of a human being who is indeed guilty but has passed into a disposition wellpleasing to God” (MM 6:76). Kant does not explicitly discuss remorse in the interpretatively challenging discussion of the conversion in the *Religion*, but I will argue we can connect that discussion to a crucial discussion of the *Höllenfahrt* in *Conflict of the Faculties* (CF 7:10, 7:54-9) in a way that sheds light on both these texts and on Kant's theory of remorse.

In Kant's view, we all begin our lives as *radically evil*, which means that we are willing to comply with the moral law only insofar as we are also able to satisfy the incentives of self

⁷ See Kuehn (2001: 118-135) for an account of their relationship.

⁸ E.g. Muchnik (2014: 240), Sweet (2013: 99), Ware (2009: 684-90).

love (RR 6:36). This is a way of incorporating evil into our maxims. Kant claims that since this evil is in our “maxims in general (in the manner of *universal principles* as contrasted with individual transgressions)”, it entails “an *infinity* of violations of the law” and thus an “*infinity* of guilt [*Schuld*]” for which we must expect “*infinite* punishment [*Strafe*] and exclusion from the Kingdom of God.” (RR 6:72).⁹ He holds that elimination of radical evil requires us to undergo a conversion in which we transform our disposition so that we choose to satisfy self-love only on the condition that we do our duty. But he thinks that mere fact of becoming a better person through conversion does not negate our desert of punishment (RR 6:72). Instead, he thinks conversion introduces a puzzle about *when* we can appropriately be punished. He thinks that it should not be thought of as “fully exacted before” the conversion (RR 6:73). On the other hand, “*after his conversion...the punishment cannot be considered appropriate to his new quality (of thus being a human being well-pleasing to God)*” (RR 6:73). Kant’s proposed solution is as follows:

[S]ince neither before nor after conversion is the punishment in accordance with divine wisdom but is nevertheless necessary, the punishment must be thought as adequately executed in the situation of conversion itself...Now conversion is an exit from evil and an entry into goodness, “the putting off of the old man and the putting on of the new”, since the subject dies unto sin (and thereby also the subject of all inclinations that lead to sin) in order to live unto justice. As an intellectual determination, however, this conversion is not two moral acts separated by a temporal interval but is rather a single act, since the abandonment of evil is possible only through the good disposition that effects the entrance into goodness, and vice-versa. The good principle is present, therefore, just as much in the abandonment of the evil as in the adoption of the good disposition, and the pain that by rights accompanies the first derives entirely from the second. The emergence from the corrupted disposition into the good is in itself already sacrifice (as “the death of the old man,” “the crucifying of the flesh”) and entrance into a long train of life’s ills which the new human being undertakes in the disposition of the Son of God[.] (RR 6:73-4)

⁹ Kant’s view that everyone deserves infinite punishment may imply the view that people who commit horrible crimes deserve no more punishment than people who do not, and this on its own could be seen as a fatal flaw in his retributivism. But I lack space to consider this problem here.

While it is important to emphasize that Kant maintains a significant skepticism about using the historical story of Christ as an epistemological foundation in theology throughout his corpus, and seems to rely on it only as metaphor, it is clear that Kant is telling us that the conversion involves a pain that is appropriately understood as understood as *excruciating*, though it is unclear whether Kant intends it to be understood as *infinite in degree* in any sense (or whether Kant's account of the intensive magnitude of sensation would permit a sensation infinite in degree).¹⁰

This passage is not clear about how *long* the pain Kant prescribes should endure, but Kant goes on to describe the “the suffering which the new human being must endure while dying to the *old* human being” as occurring “throughout his life” (RR 6:74), and this makes it clear that at least some aspect of the pain of the conversion is experienced as long as we live. Further, given that Kant appeals to the claim that we can only make “endless progress” toward complete conformity with the moral law in his argument for immortality as a postulate of pure practical reason (2C 5:122), we might suppose that some aspect of this suffering must occur forever, even beyond earthly life, and must thus be infinite in duration.

However, I think it is important to attend to the distinction Kant draws toward the end of the passage above between the sacrifice “already involved in the emergence from the corrupt disposition” and the “long train of life's ills” to which this “emergence” is an “entrance”. I think this implies that Kant is prescribing some kind of initial painful experience of finite duration followed by a second stage that involves “life's ills”, which in connection with the remark about suffering throughout life (RR 6:74, cited above) can be understood to continue at least as long as

¹⁰ At A176/B217, Kant says that the intensive magnitude of a sensation “can be raised from 0 up to any greater degree”, but this presumably does not entail that we can arrive at an infinite degree.

one's earthly life continues.¹¹ To defend the claim that there is such a distinction, it would be helpful to have a clearer account of what kinds of pain are at issue.

In light of the discussions earlier in this paper, it seems natural to think that remorse for our past evils would fit somewhere into the pain of conversion, but as noted earlier, Kant does not explicitly address the pain of remorse in this discussion of the conversion. Instead, his focus is on pain that results from resistance to the inclinations which “lead to sin”, a resistance which we must demand of ourselves in a new way after the conversion. That is, while our inclinations persist after the conversion, we have rejected the evil maxim of conditioning compliance with law on satisfaction of our inclinations, and have adopted a new maxim of conditioning satisfaction of inclinations on compliance with law, and resisting inclinations can be painful. Since having inclinations which do not necessarily conform to law is simply part of *what it is* to be a sensibly conditioned rational agent, we must assume that our inclinations will persist as long as we are such agents, and so it makes sense to think that the pain deriving from their resistance would continue as long as we continue as such agents. This kind of pain is thus a good candidate for what I claim is a *second* stage of conversion pain.

However, Kant's focus on the pain of resisting inclination creates an interpretative conundrum. Kant thinks that to understand the infinite punishment we must receive for past evils as “adequately executed in the situation of conversion itself” (RR 6:73, quoted above), we must see “all the sufferings and ills of life in general” as punishment for our past evils. But the pain of resisting inclinations is a puzzling thing to regard as punishment for past evils, for three

¹¹ While practical reason requires us to see the phenomenology of conversion as the manifestation of noumenally timeless action, transcendental idealism implies that this need not be in tension with the claim that the phenomenology of conversion is a process with a determinate temporal structure. (See Loncar (2013: 360) for an argument which disputes the notion that conversion has “empirical manifestations” with a real temporal ‘before and after’.)

reasons. First, since having inclinations which do not necessarily conform to law is simply part of being a sensibly conditioned rational agent, dealing with the pain of resisting inclination is presumably part of the daily affairs of such agents. How can an ordinary kind of unpleasantness required to maintain rational agency be regarded as punishment? Second, it is pain we must grapple with in order to do the right thing *in the present*, so it seems to lack the backward-looking reference which seems essential to regarding pain as justified based on past evils. The third reason takes longer to explain but is the most important. Consider some features of Kant's view of the ontological and moral status of inclinations. The "natural inclinations do not have us for their author"—they are "conatural to us" and we "cannot presume ourselves responsible for them" (RR 6:35). They themselves are "innocent" and bear "no direct relation to evil" (RR 6:35). They only lead to sin if we adopt a fundamental maxim of conditioning our compliance with law on satisfaction of our inclinations, and that fundamental maxim does not have a "ground...in the natural inclinations" (RR 6:34). The "inclinations only make more difficult the *execution* of the good maxims opposing them" (RR 6:57n). Now suppose that sensibly conditioned rational agent 1 begins life in the *right* way, by prioritizing *duty over inclination*, and thus does *not* deserve to suffer, while sensibly conditioned agent 2 begins life in the *wrong* way, by inverting that priority, and thus *does* deserve to suffer. Kant's view of the ontological and moral status of inclinations would seem to imply that both 1 and 2 would have to contend with the pain of resisting inclinations. If God or Reason say that it is *just* for 2 to have this pain *because of his past evils*, then 1 can quite reasonably object that it is *unjust* for him to *have this pain too*. We might suppose that there is an implicit background metaphysics which respects the deserts of 1-type agents by ensuring that they are never incarnated as sensibly conditioned

agents, but that would seem to imply that we *are* in some sense responsible for being assailed by inclinations, and (as noted) Kant appears to reject this.

Kant's idea that the pain of conversion is justified by our past evils would thus make more sense if he had a more plausible locus of punitive pain. I think what I claimed above to be the *first* stage of conversion pain can provide such a locus if the pain in that stage is remorse. I think that strong evidence to support this idea appears in *Conflict of the Faculties*, where Kant explicitly discusses the concepts of conversion, the *Höllenfahrt*, and remorse. Care is required to put this discussion forward as evidence about Kant's own view, because he offers it in the context of a critique of the Pietist conception of conversion. In the Preface to this work, he says that Pietists hold that forgiveness requires "an overwhelming remorse [*Zerknirschung*]", which he also calls "a deep remorseful sorrow^t [*ein tiefer reuiger Gram*]" (CF 7:10). But he faults their view *not* because of the deep remorse it prescribes, but because they hold that the "human being" cannot "attain this by himself", and so "the remorseful^t (*reuvolle*) sinner must especially beg this remorse (*Reue*) from heaven" (ibid.). He goes on to argue that it is "obvious that anyone who still has to beg for this remorse^t (*Reue*) (for his transgressions) does not really *feel remorse for*^t (*wirklich nicht reuet*) his deeds" (ibid.). So he is not denying the claim that we ought to feel deep remorseful sorrow—he is rather asserting (*contra* Pietism) that we can attain it on our own. Later, in the "General Remark: On Religious Sects" (CF 7:48-61), he explicitly states that this remorse is part of conversion. At 7:54, he asks "how is rebirth (resulting from a conversion by which one becomes an other, new man) possible[?]", and writes that

According to the Pietist hypothesis, the operation that separates good from evil (of which human nature is compounded) is a supernatural one – a feeling of remorse^t [*Zerknirschung*] and crushing [*Zermalmung*] of the heart in *repentance* (*Buße*), a sorrow...bordering on despair which can, however, reach the necessary intensity only by the influence of a heavenly spirit. The human being must himself beg for this grief, while grieving over the fact that his sorrow is not great

enough (to drive the pain [*Leidsein*] completely from his heart). Now as the late Hamann says: “This descent into the hell of self-knowledge [*Höllenfahrt des Selbsterkenntnisses*] paves the way to deification.” In other words, when the fire of repentance [*Buße*] has reached its height, the amalgam of good and evil *breaks up* and the purer metal of the *reborn* gleams through the dross, which surrounds but does not contaminate it, ready for service pleasing to God in good conduct...But even in the highest flight of a mystically inclined imagination, one cannot exempt man from doing anything himself, without making him a mere machine[.] (CF 7:55-6)

This passage adds important detail in four ways. First, it appears to have the same basic structure as the critique of Pietism in the preface: it is obviously critical, but the target of criticism is not the view that we ought to experience such profound remorse, but is instead the view that we cannot attain it on our own. Second, it provides support for the view that Kant himself endorses the view that we ought to experience such remorse, because he clearly indicates that such remorse is (or is part of) the *Höllenfahrt des Selbsterkenntnisses*, which is established as an element of Kant’s own moral psychology by the way he refers to it at MM 6:441 (cited above). Third, I think that Kant’s reference to the kind of remorse which Pietists might acquire by begging God for it as *Buße* rather than *Reue* is in line with the distinction we observed earlier, such that *Buße* is not *wahre, moralische Reue*. Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, if we suppose that Kant’s own view is that we should experience remorse like this under our own power (presumably through the faculty of conscience), then we get a detailed phenomenological picture of how remorse is channeled into improvement: stripped of the metallurgical analogy, the idea is that we must force the pain of remorse to rise to a great intensity, which leads to a kind of heartbreak, and with it, a conversion, at which point the remorse abates and is driven “completely from [one’s] heart” (CF 7:55, cited above). If we take remorse to be the first stage of the pain of conversion, then this account of how remorse should cease would explain why Kant would think of it as finite in duration. And if remorse is self-retribution inflicted by a part

of ourselves which we must also represent as God, then it is comprehensible to regard it as punishment that we deserve for our past evils, which I argued above is not the case with respect to the pain of resisting inclinations.

I want to be cautious about suggesting that Kant thinks there is a *causal* process here, such that *remorse causes the conversion*, since it is clear that Kant thinks of this phenomenology as the manifestation of noumenal freedom. However, given that we have an empirical character which *is* governed by causal laws, along with our noumenal character which is *not* governed by causal laws (see e.g. A539/B567), we can entertain the possibility that there are empirical-psychological laws according to which the phenomenal experience of remorse can cause our phenomenal experience of conversion without suggesting that the remorse and the conversion are not manifestations of noumenal freedom. We must, however, assume that there is enough diversity in such laws, or the antecedent conditions determining their instantiation, to accommodate experiences of remorse which do not conform to the ideal Kant seems to prescribe here. Such non-ideal experiences of remorse would appear to be common, and the next section discusses some of them.

IV. The Hazard of Suicide

The last question I wish to consider is whether Kant has an account of how we moderate remorse so that it does not prompt damage to our rational agency such as distraction and suicide. As far as I can discover, apart from the general idea that we can avoid affect through rational regulation of our feelings (e.g. MM 407-9), he does not. This is not to suggest that this general idea is not significant. It may be all Kant really needs to say for it to be true that he offers an account of how we can moderate remorse. But if he thinks that we ought to punish ourselves

with remorse until we crush our hearts, then it is reasonable for us to want a better account of moderation before we decide to cultivate our consciences in such a way as to strive for this experience, because of the way profound sorrow commonly prompts distraction and sometimes suicide. Even if it is reasonable to suppose that there are experiences of remorse fitting what seems to be Kant's ideal, where intense remorse leads to a conversion, which in turn leads to a cessation of remorse, it is clear that not all remorse fits this model. By Kant's own admission, people do not always tidily resolve their remorse in this way, and this is by no means always because they continue to act wrongly. Kant acknowledges this in his recognition of the problem of excess remorse, and more generally the problems of "micrological" and "morbid" conscience mentioned earlier (CE 27:356). Certainly we can say that agents afflicted by these problems fail to regulate affect, but given how common such failure is, I do not think this is enough to say to defend the view that we ought to cultivate remorse on this model.

Further, if one "connects the transgression or violation of his conscience with the idea of losing his entire moral worth" (VE 27:575), as Kant claims, there is arguably a kind of tragic *rationality* in thinking that blotting oneself out through suicide is appropriate self-retribution, even though this permanently forecloses the possibility of improvement. It is presumably because of this tragic rationality that Kant makes the distressing comment that suicide from excess remorse is not a "crude" kind of suicide "which should be an object of general hatred", but is rather a suicide which "could betray a worth of the soul", like suicide for "the conservation of [one's] honour" (VE 27:642), despite the fact that he sees suicide as a grave violation of duty.

We may even have an example of suicide motivated by excess remorse in Kant's own correspondent Maria von Herbert. In a 1791 letter to Kant, she writes that a man she loved had fallen out of love with her when she revealed a protracted but harmless lie, which was apparently

connected with the fact that she had had a previously relationship. She asks Kant for "solace, or for counsel to prepare [her] for death", proceeding to make it clear that she meant she was contemplating suicide (CO 11:273-4). Kant writes in 1792 back encouraging her not to kill herself, counseling "composure", and remarking that "life, insofar as it is cherished for the good that we can do, deserves the highest respect and the greatest solicitude in preserving it and cheerfully using it for good ends" (CO 11:334). But he refuses to provide a "moral sedative": he tells her that even a harmless lie is "a serious violation of duty to oneself and one for which there can be no remission", and lectures her about some of the details of his theory of remorse discussed above, sternly advising that her "bitter self-reproach" for the lie should not be *Reue* over "imprudence [*Unklugheit*]" but *Reue* "grounded in a purely moral judgment [*auf bloßer sittlicher Beurtheilung ...Verhaltens gründet*]" of her behavior (CO 11:331-3). He goes on to attempt to temper his admonition with a remark part of which we have already considered:

But to brood over one's remorse [*über...Reue zu brüten*] and then, when one has already caught on to a different set of attitudes, to make one's whole life useless by continuous self-reproach [*Vorwürfe*] on account of something that happened once upon a time and cannot be anymore - that would be a fantastic notion of deserved self-torture [*verdienstlicher Selbstpeinigung*] (assuming that one is sure of having reformed). (CO 11:333-4)

This remark obviously leaves open the possibility that we have a reason to think continued self-torture is deserved if we are *not* sure of having reformed, or, in the terms used earlier, if we are not sure our *conversion is complete*. Von Herbert appears to have been quite familiar with Kant's work, and thus may well have been familiar with his skepticism about ever really being certain of our underlying motives:

[A] human being cannot see into the depths of his own heart so as to be quite certain, in even a *single* action, of the purity of his moral intention and the sincerity of his disposition, even when he has no doubt about the legality of the action...[H]ow many people who have lived long and guiltless lives may not be merely *fortunate* in having escaped so many temptations? In the case of any deed

it remains hidden from the agent himself how much pure moral content there has been in his disposition. (MM 6:392-3, also see G 4:407)

This would seem to imply that we *cannot* be sure our conversion is complete, and in conjunction with the passage from Kant's letter cited above, that we would never be justified in ceasing to torture ourselves.¹² It would not be surprising for such an idea to prompt excess remorse. Von Herbert wrote to Kant again in 1793, expressing a "sense of constantly reproaching [*vorwerfen*] herself" (CO 11:401), and a continued desire to "shorten [her] so useless life" (CO 11:402), and once again in 1794, stating that while she still wished to die, she felt that "if people take morality and friends into account [they can] with the greatest desire to die still wish for life and try to preserve it no matter what" (CO 11:486). Kant did not reply to either of these letters, and von Herbert committed suicide in 1803.

Owen Ware argues that in the *Religion and Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant struggles against his skepticism about knowing our underlying motivations which I mentioned above in connection with Kant's letter to Maria von Herbert. Ware thinks that while Kant holds that we lack *knowledge* that our conversion is complete, Kant arrives at "subjectively sufficient grounds" for the belief that our conversion is complete, grounds which yield what Kant calls 'conviction'" (Ware 2009: 694, citing A822/B580). Ware argues that a key threat to knowledge of our underlying motivations is that when we evaluate ourselves, we are always inclined to see ourselves as better than we really are, or as Kant puts it in the *Groundwork* passage cited above, that we like to "flatter ourselves by falsely attributing to ourselves a nobler motive" (G 4:407). Ware argues that Kant circumvents this problem in his account of conscience by appointing God as an authoritative and distinct person within us: representing the verdict of conscience as handed

¹² This would in turn imply that there is in fact no justification for what I called the first stage of conversion pain, the punitive pain stage, to be finite in duration.

down by God provides the verdict with an authority that self-evaluation lacks. Ware thinks this implies that if we are diligent about submitting not only our particular actions but also our maxims for the scrutiny of conscience, and conscience does not hand down a verdict of “guilty”, we can have conviction that our conversion is complete. I think this is a plausible and interesting account of some of Kant’s aims in his theory of conscience. But as discussed earlier (and as Ware acknowledges), we must acknowledge that what we represent as God in conscience is also an aspect of ourselves which we ourselves *set up* as authoritative, however rationally rarefied it may be. As Kant puts it, “[a]lthough it certainly sounds questionable, it is in no way reprehensible to say that every human being *makes a God* for himself” (RR 6:169n). Would it be so unreasonable for someone uncertain about the completion of his conversion to worry that he might have unwittingly incorporated a bit of self-flattery into his God, and that the verdict of his conscience therefore lacked authority, so that even if it did not demand continued self-retribution, he might deserve it anyway? This kind of objection might be seen as asking more of Kant’s ethics than it can reasonably provide, were it not for the serious damage to rational agency that threatens us if the authority of conscience is unstable in rational reflection. It seems to me that it is unstable, and that its authority depends as much on a kind of faith as it does on reason, a faith which is least likely to be found in the people who need it most. I lack space to argue for this claim in detail, but I think that we may find an example of such a person in Maria’s brother, Baron Franz Paul von Herbert.

The historical evidence that Franz Paul had expertise in Kant’s philosophy is as strong as it is with respect to Maria. The von Herbert family were lead paint manufacturers in Klagenfurt, and Franz Paul left the family business to study Kant’s philosophy in Jena and Weimar, making the acquaintance of a number of Kantian philosophers including Karl Leonard Reinhold.

According to Wilhelm Baum, Reinhold and Herbert had many conversations, and Reinhold wrote in a letter that Herbert was his “house and table companion” for four weeks (Baum 1996: 489). Upon Franz Paul’s return to Klagenfurt, he established a discussion circle to debate Kant’s philosophy, despite strong local political opposition (Langton 1992: 481, Baum 1996: 499-504). Franz Paul committed suicide in 1811, after leaving this gnomic but sadly evocative passage in his will in 1810:

[M]y children, may you take the truth deeply into your hearts that an upright way of life is impossible without the faith in the divine judge announced by the conscience, without this faith the consequent man owes himself [*bleibt sich...schuldig*] for the last answer to the last question. (Baum: 1996, 513)

This passage is of course too oblique and brief to count as a critique of Kant’s idea of conscience, but it seems fair to say that it manifests concern about the reflective instability of that idea. It would probably be unfair to suggest that Kant’s own philosophy played a role in the death of either of the von Herbert siblings. People commit suicide for a variety of reasons, and the von Herberts’ consciences were not the only painful things in their lives. Maria had lost her love, and Franz Paul’s activities were the subject not only of political opposition but also active police scrutiny (Baum 1996: 499-504). Further, for all we know, the von Herberts may have had a genetic predisposition to major depressive disorder, and may have suffered from chronic lead exposure, which is also positively correlated with major depression. But it does seem reasonable to think that we have textual evidence that anxieties about conscience and excess remorse *may* have played a role in both their deaths, and that neither found anything in Kant’s philosophy to keep them alive. It is probably unreasonable to hope that any philosophy can prevent suicide. But it does not seem unreasonable to expect a philosopher who advocates heart-crushing remorse, while acknowledging that it can prompt suicide, to offer an account of how to moderate remorse.

Conclusion

The overall conclusion I draw is that while Kant has a detailed and interesting account of remorse which is compelling in some respects, he does not offer enough detail about how we can prevent remorse from damaging our rational agency for us to be confident that we ought to cultivate conscience in such a way as to conform to his model of remorse. As far as my argument here is concerned, it may nonetheless be the case that Kant is *right* about how we should experience remorse, and that it therefore falls to Kantian ethicists to explain how we can experience such remorse without damage to rational agency. But another sensible option for Kantian ethicists is to seek alternative models of remorse which can be developed within Kantian ethics, in a way that is revisionist but nonetheless grounded in important features of Kant's philosophy. One such alternative model can be grounded in the duty of sympathy (e.g. MM 6:456-8). The duty of sympathy gives us a reason to be pained by the pain we cause people we have wronged, and I think this is a reason to be pained by our wrongs which cannot be reduced to a consequentialist reason. Thus a Kantian sympathy-based model is, like Kant's own model, not purely consequentialist. I think the duty of sympathy derives from the duty to take others' ends as one's own (G 4:430; MM 6:388, 450), and that it therefore has a ground in Kant's moral system which is at least as fundamental as the ground of retributivism. But an argument for this alternative model must be deferred for another occasion.

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