

The Moral of the Story in Kant's Philosophy of Religion

Jacob Farris

Pennsylvania State University

Critics from Hegel to MacIntyre have argued that Kant's moral philosophy is too formal. Because he abstracts from the desired ends of actions and the social and historical context of agents, they contend that it cannot provide concrete guidance for the moral life. But in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant demonstrates that he is more sensitive to these features of the human condition than such critics acknowledge. In this text, he approaches the question whether faith and reason can be reconciled by means of another question: Can our rationality and sensibility be reconciled? Building on arguments by O'Neill (1996), I argue that Kant's approach to this question gives due importance to our hope for happiness and our belonging to historical traditions for he recognizes that his moral principles must be reconciled with them in order for our moral agency to flourish. While morality depends on the maxims of actions alone, we will be better people if we hope for the existence of a God who will reward good people with happiness after death. In this way, our condition as beings who both desire happiness and respect morality gives rise to religious hope. But only hope for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul follows directly from it. Kant argues that religious traditions whose doctrines and customs are based on historical revelations instead of moral reason are divisive and irrational if taken literally. But despite that, he makes constructive use of their scriptures for they can satisfy our need for concrete moral models and exemplars. They have an important place in our moral education but they should be interpreted as symbolic allegories of moral truths, not as historical facts. I conclude by questioning how successful this attempt is; in particular, whether the role that he gives to religious scriptures in our moral education is justifiable in our secular age.

In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that the supreme principle of ethics is to "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant, trans. 2018, 37). In other words, we must be able to will without contradiction that every rational agent act on the policy that we are acting on, or else we are granting ourselves an arbitrary and unfair exception. Hegel famously criticized Kant for failing to make the transition from "a merely moral point of view" limited to respect for duty in the abstract to "the concept of ethics" (Hegel, trans. 1991, §135). Because it excludes important elements of concrete ethical life such as our pursuit of goals and our participation in social institutions, Kant's moral philosophy is but "an empty formalism" (§135). This criticism has since been often repeated by critics of Kantian ethics such as the contemporary Aristotelian ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre. MacIntyre similarly argues that Kant's account of moral duty suffers from a "logical emptiness" because it considers duty in abstraction from "the wants and needs of men in particular social circumstances" (MacIntyre, 1998, 127). Wellmon describes the interpretation behind these criticisms of Kant as follows (Wellmon, 2009, 557):

With its focus on establishing the rational grounds of moral life and the logical form of moral

judgments, Kant's ethics is either uncontaminated by sensible desires or bereft of feeling ... Kant's notion of freedom, or so it is implied, is synonymous with an individual autonomy that would transcend nature and subordinate the body to reason ... inclinations and affections, it would seem, are simply tethers that bind reason to a burdensome body.

While Wellmon responds to this view by considering "Kant's repeated claims that reason has needs, desires, and even feelings" (558), I will instead respond to it by considering Kant's project in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. This text clearly shows his awareness of the excessive formality of his moral philosophy and his sensitivity to our embodiment and historicity. For he defends his notion of a religion within reason precisely on account of its ability to reconcile his ethics of abstract universal principles with the concrete particularities that are inextricably part of human life.

Kant begins *Religion within the Boundaries of Reason* by explaining the foundation of his ethics. He argues that our duties are grounded on "the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws" (Kant, trans. 2019, 33). The freedom at issue here is autonomy, our ability to determine ourselves on the basis of principles that we reflectively endorse. While we are surely affected to some extent by our physical environment, psychological constitution, and social and historical context, we are also capable of conducting ourselves on the basis of *reasons* for thinking and acting. This makes us conscious of unconditional moral laws because we find that there are some maxims or policies that contradict what it means to act on principle. In *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant gives the memorable example of a man who is about to make a false promise that he will return borrowed money in order to escape from financial distress. If he has "conscience enough" to reflect on whether it is "contrary to duty" to do so, he will realize that his maxim "could never be valid as a universal law of nature and still agree with itself, but rather it would necessarily contradict itself" (Kant, trans. 2018, 39). This is because

The universality of a law that everyone who believes himself to be in distress could promise whatever occurred to him with the intention of not keeping it would make impossible the promise and the end one might have in making it, since no one would believe that anything has been promised him, but rather would laugh about every such utterance as vain pretense.

In other words, he will realize that he would be acting on a maxim that he cannot even conceive to be the maxim of all rational beings. If everyone acted on this maxim, then the trust that makes the social institution of promises possible, and which all false promises are parasitic on, would collapse. Moreover, he would be using other rational beings in a way that they could not in principle consent to. This means that he could not possibly be acting on principle if he made this false promise, but would instead be granting himself an unfair and arbitrary exception. In this way, Kant argues that we can discover unconditional moral duties simply by reflecting on our freedom to act on principle.

Two important consequences for morality follow from this. First of all, as the above example shows, our moral duties can conflict with our "needs and inclinations, whose satisfaction [is summarized] under the name of 'happiness'" (Kant, trans. 2018, 20). No matter how unhappy the man will become if he does not make that false promise, Kant argues that it is nonetheless his duty not to. The moral law that we

discover through rational reflection on our autonomy “commands its precepts unremittingly, without promising anything to inclinations, thus snubbing and disrespecting, as it were, those impetuous claims” (Kant 20). Ethics, therefore, is not fundamentally about the pursuit of personal happiness; on the contrary, that pursuit is the source of our temptation to disregard or distort morality. For it gives rise to a “propensity” in all of us “to ratiocinate against those strict laws of duty and to bring into doubt their validity ... to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations” (Kant 21). Secondly, since we can derive morality from human autonomy alone, a moral agent “is in need neither of the idea of another being above him in order to recognize his duty, nor ... of an incentive other than the law itself. At least it is the human being’s own fault if such a need is found in him” (Kant, trans. 2019, 33). This means that morality is independent of God’s commands and must be followed for its own sake without the incentives of our love and fear of God. In short, morality is secular. The view that the moral law must be based on divine authority in order to be objectively binding and subjectively compelling comes, at best, from a misunderstanding of morality. At worst, it comes from our own moral weakness. Therefore, “Morality in no way needs religion ... but is rather self-sufficient by virtue of pure practical reason” (33).

We have seen how the first consequence, that morality is unrelated to our desires and needs, has led some to argue that Kant’s moral philosophy is an empty formalism that abstracts too much from the concrete embodied life of agents. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant shows that he is quite aware that this is an important problem he must resolve. His solution to it also responds to an important question that the second consequence raises: since the content of morality is secular, what kind of relationship (if any) can religion still have with morality? Kant’s answer to this question begins with the acknowledgement that, while the moral rightness and wrongness of an action depends on its maxim and not on its end or goal, each of our actions always has both a maxim and a goal. Morality instructs us “as to *how* to operate but not as to the *whither*” (Kant, trans. 2019, 34), but each action always has both a *how* and a *whither*. Because of this, Kant argues that “An end proceeds from morality just the same; for it cannot possibly be a matter of indifference to reason how to answer the question, *What is then the result of this right conduct of ours?*” (34). For the fact that our actions always have an end in view makes it impossible to act in the world without some kind of hopeful commitment. As the ethicist and Kant scholar Onora O’Neill explains, “We must be committed to *some* view of the future if we are committed to action of any sort ... We see this clearly when we remember what it would be to think that there is no possible future: *complete* despair overwhelms all commitment and stifles action” (O’Neill, 1996, 283). If it makes sense to us to act at all, then that “[reveals] at least a minimal commitment to, a minimal hope for, some future in which some action may take place and may have some results” (284).

The end that Kant argues we should all hope for is the unification of “the formal condition of all such ends as we ought to have (duty) with everything which is conditional upon ends we have and which conforms to duty (happiness proportioned to its observance)” (Kant, trans. 2019, 34), that is, a world in which good people are happy. We cannot be indifferent to this because we are both rational beings who act

on principle and sensible beings who are affected by sensations and desires. We live in two worlds, one of necessary and universal principles and another of contingent and particular facts. We know by nature that we have duties that we must follow no matter what, but we also desire by nature to be happy, or at least for good people to be happy. In order for our lives as beings with both a rational and sensible nature to make sense to us, we must at least hope that following our duty to act on principle will also have good consequences for us. If we cannot hope for this, then our resolve to act morally will falter, since we will always care about our happiness too. In this way, the hope for a world in which good people are happy proceeds from morality because that view of the future makes us better people.

But this world gives no assurances that good people will be happy. Experience shows that bad people die happy and good people die unhappy all of the time. Kant argues that for this hope for the future to make any sense to us, “We must assume a higher, moral, most holy, and omnipotent being who alone can unite the two elements of the good” (Kant, trans. 2018, 34); that is, we must have faith in a God who will reward moral virtue with happiness. For we must hope that, despite appearances to the contrary, the world is not a blind causal mechanism with no moral purpose, but a world that is purposefully organized towards moral ends. And this implies the existence of an agent who is acting intentionally to govern the world so that happiness will be proportioned to moral virtue. To do so, this agent must be a being who is supremely knowledgeable, good, and powerful; that is, he must be God. In this way, “morality inevitably leads to religion” (35) since only religious hope can resolve the conflict between our respect for moral duty and our desire for sensible happiness. Morality and religion do belong together, after all – only, it is religion that derives from morality and not morality that derives from religion.

Yet it is clear that very few of the central doctrines of actual historical religious traditions can be directly derived from morality in this way. It seems that only a very minimal faith in God and a morally deserved afterlife follows from such considerations. Indeed, Kant contrasts the hopes that emerge directly from morality, which he calls *pure religious faith*, with *ecclesiastical faith*, the belief in the doctrines and customs of a particular religious tradition that purportedly derive from historical revelations. Here again, the opposition between what is based on universal moral reason and what is based on our empirical particularities reemerges. Kant argues that “the only faith that can found a universal church is a *pure religious faith*, for it is a plain rational faith which can be convincingly communicated to everyone” (Kant, trans. 2019, 112). Since pure religious faith is derived from the moral law alone, which can be understood by all of us simply through rational reflection on our condition as agents who are both affected by our sensibility and capable of acting on principle, everyone could, at least in principle, recognize its validity. But each ecclesiastical faith, by contrast, “has only particular validity, namely for those in contact with the history on which the faith rests” (122). The credibility of historical revelations cannot be convincingly demonstrated to everyone through historical evidence and rational proof, so while we may find ourselves believing in one ecclesiastical faith over another, this cannot be the result of rational reflection, but must be attributed to the effect of our particular social and historical circumstances. Kant explains that “like all

cognition based on experience,” faith in a historical religion “carries at the same time the consciousness of its contingency” (122). Even a faithful adherent of an ecclesiastical faith has to recognize that the historical religion they find the most compelling depends on the accident of where and when they were born. In this way, ecclesiastical faiths’ claim to universality is undermined by their historical contingency and particularity, and religion within reason must leave them behind. Only pure religious faith can unite humanity into a single ethical community, and ecclesiastical faiths can at best serve as starting points and vehicles for the transition to a faith that is not based on historical revelations but on “a revelation ... permanently taking place within all human beings” (128).

But despite his thoroughgoing criticism of ecclesiastical faiths, Kant finds a way to make constructive use of their scriptures for pure religion. For the reason that we are so drawn to ecclesiastical faiths, despite our recognition that they are relative to the cultural milieu of their adherents, is that there is a “natural need of all human beings to demand for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that *the senses can hold on to*” (Kant, trans. 2019, 118). The particular, contingent, and temporal elements of ecclesiastical faiths resonate with us so much because we are not only rational beings but also sensible and historical beings. We are capable of grasping moral concepts in the abstract but also need historically mediated stories, images, and other concrete sensible representations to give us tangible and compelling moral models and exemplars. Since pure moral reason by itself lacks such models, Kant argues that “Some historical ecclesiastical faith or other, usually already at hand, must be used” (118). In the same article in which she defends Kant’s views about moral hope, O’Neill also argues that the universality of religion within reason depends on finding some way to integrate the images and stories of popular religions, for “it must start on familiar ground and show how the familiar sayings of Scripture can be interpreted without appeal to groundless authorities: otherwise it will be accessible only to a few philosophical theologians” (O’Neill, 1996, 300). This is of the utmost importance for a religion within reason, because of Kant’s criterion that what is rational be universal or law-like. O’Neill explains that for Kant, “ways of organizing thought and action” cannot be rational if they are “unfollowable by at least some others” who would otherwise “view them as arbitrary or incomprehensible” (276). In order to be rational, “reasoned religion must be lawlike” and “not just in the sense that it can be followed by any rational being, but also in taking account of the fact that rational beings, as things are, are adherents of particular religious traditions” (300). For this reason, religion within reason must make use of the available scriptures of ecclesiastical faiths in order to fulfill the demand that we organize our thought and action on the basis of what is universally communicable and comprehensible. Otherwise, it will be unable to reach the majority of human beings who are adherents of popular religions.

I agree with O’Neill that reaching non-specialists is important, but I think that an even stronger case can be made on Kant’s terms for the conclusion that the universality of pure religious faith requires that the scriptures of ecclesiastical faiths be somehow incorporated into it. Recall that Kant claims there is a “natural *need of all* human beings” (Kant, trans. 2019, 118; my emphasis) for abstract moral concepts to

be concretized by more tangible representations. All of us – whether or not we are specialists in philosophical theology – need the elements of ecclesiastical faiths that resonate with our sensibility and historicity to be integrated into pure religious faith in order to wholeheartedly live out the latter. Otherwise, we will be internally divided between our recognition of the rationality of pure religious faith and our inclination as sensible and historical beings towards ecclesiastical faiths, just as we need to find a way to resolve the conflict between our respect for morality and our desire for happiness. We saw earlier that the rational superiority of pure religious faith over ecclesiastical faiths consists in its unique potential to unite all of humanity into one ethical community. But we can now substantially complicate this point by adding that it can only achieve this if it integrates the contingent, particular, and temporal elements of ecclesiastical faiths with concrete models and exemplars of abstract moral truths. But given that these are “empirical faith[s] which, to all appearances, chance has dealt us” (118), how can pure religious faith integrate their scriptures without losing its very purity – its rigorous exclusion of accidental historical elements that are ultimately unrelated to universal moral truths?

In order to integrate historically particular scriptures into religion within reason, Kant argues that we need “a thoroughgoing understanding of [them] in a sense that harmonizes with the universal practical rules of a pure religion of reason” (Kant, trans. 2019, 118). That is, we need an *allegorical moral interpretation* of them. For instance, the story of Abraham’s enduring faith in God’s covenant, even as many years went by and he and Sarah grew old without having a child, could be interpreted not as a historical fact that occurred thousands of years ago but instead as an allegory for maintaining hope in God’s providence and the moral purposiveness of the world despite appearances to the contrary. In this way, the myths of ecclesiastical scriptures can be rehabilitated by pure religious faith as symbols for moral truths that give us concrete models for encountering and coping with the trials of living a moral life. Although “this [kind of] interpretation may appear to us as forced” in comparison to literal readings of ecclesiastical scriptures, as long as it is *possible* to read the text in this way, Kant argues, then “it must be preferred to a literal interpretation that either contains absolutely nothing for morality, or even works counter to its incentives” (118). The suspicion that moral interpretations of scripture are forced may have some merit but those interpretations cannot be charged with being inauthentically religious because “the final purpose of even the reading of these holy books, or the investigation of their content, is to make better human beings” (119). It is the moral of a story that matters in religion, and if a moral interpretation cannot be given to a sacred text, then its study does not belong in religion at all.

Using morality as the interpretive principle for scriptural exegesis elevates sacred texts with a contingent historical origin to bearers of a universal meaning, as universal, necessary and eternal moral truths that resonate with our sensibility and can be recognized by all rational beings. In this way sacred texts lose the irrational relativity of literal belief while remaining sensible representations that can communicate pure religious faith to non-specialists. In this way, Kant shows how a religion within the boundaries of reason can reconcile our sensibility with our rationality.

Pure religious faith originally emerged from the opposition between our rational respect for moral duty and our sensible desire for happiness as the hope for a world to come in which these concerns will be reconciled by God. But resolving this opposition immediately posited a *new* opposition: between rational faith in a universal pure religion, which is well-grounded but too abstract, and sensible faith in a particular ecclesiastical religion, which is concrete but groundless. Through a defense of the primacy of allegorical moral interpretation of sacred texts, Kant overcame this opposition with an account of religion within reason that integrates scriptural stories as symbols for morality, and which is therefore both well-grounded and concrete.

But how successful is this solution? One of Kant's claims that likely strikes us as highly implausible is that we *all* require ecclesiastical scriptures to be incorporated into our moral education for our moral agency to flourish. Surely we can learn much about the concrete particularities of ethical life from stories of moral models and exemplars, but why must these be drawn from ecclesiastical scriptures specifically? Kant's justification for this view is that communities find local ecclesiastical scriptures whose history they participate in the most psychologically compelling, thus those stories would be the most illustrative and inspiring moral allegories for them. This may have been contingently true during the time that he was writing, but in our secular age where the public influence of ecclesiastical religion has diminished and many people have no religious affiliation, it cannot be assumed that the most compelling narratives for all of us will be specifically religious ones. O'Neill's argument that the allegorical interpretation of ecclesiastical faiths is rationally justifiable and needed for the universal communication of pure religious faith still holds true. However the stronger claim that we *all* require moral models and exemplars that are drawn from ecclesiastical scriptures is no longer true for us today. While I have argued against critics such as Hegel and MacIntyre that Kant does, to some extent, recognize the importance of the concrete particularities of our lives as moral agents, his solution to the opposition between our rationality and sensibility also demonstrates his insensitivity to historical contingency that they both discern in many of his universal claims.

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