The Ethical Community and the Cultivation of Virtue in Kant's Rational Religion

Insisting on the radical autonomy of human agency, Kant is often understood as developing a form of morality intended to be universally applicable regardless of the prevailing *nomoi* of any given socio-political order. Since the ground of morality lies in every man's capacity for spontaneous self-determination, one ought always and everywhere to be able to determine one's will in accordance with the moral law. Such an image of human morality seems to insulate the individual from the influence—whether for good or ill—of his or her community, and since only intentions (not outcomes) determine the goodness of a moral choice, it seems to make morality an internal and private affair.

In *Religion Within the Bounds of Mere Reason*, however, Kant explores the importance of man's communal life, especially his religious practice, for the cultivation of moral individuals. Arguing that we are receptive to public representations of the good, the holy and the just, Kant concludes that we are duty bound to be concerned with the community's understanding of virtue and how it represents this understanding to itself. To this end, Kant explores the role of the church both as an empirical, historical reality and as a rational idea. By connecting the individual's pursuit of morality with that of his companions, the church—not simply as an aggregate of individuals but as a collective whole of some sort—constitutes a distinct domain of human activity. Understood in its rich complexity as the realm in which the ethical is made manifest in imaginative story, customary practices and aesthetic representations, the church is the medium in which an individual interacts in a distinctly moral way with his or her peers.

In particular, the church is the domain for the articulation and the realization of our shared moral ideals. Accordingly, it is communal not only insofar as it is the locus of our moral education in the present but also, and more importantly, in its being the vehicle of our future

aspirations. This two fold temporal orientation works in tandem with a twofold logical orientation: the church is the medium in which one relates, on the one hand, to one's concrete, particular peers in the performance of moral duties and obligations to those around us—what we might call moral neighborliness—and, on the other, to the species as a whole, through our hope for the realization of the highest good—or, what Kant calls "the wish of all well-disposed human beings, that the kingdom of God come, that his will be done on earth."[1]

In the following, I want to show how Kant's notion of an ideal church—what Kant calls the "ethical-community"—constitutes a response to these two dimensions of human concern. From the perspective of the developing individual, the church is the institution that most aids his moral maturation; because we are not simply rational automatons, its principal role is pedagogic, leading individuals from the inchoate and confused mess of conflicting moral beliefs and habits to our natural fulfillment as rational moral agents. From a more global perspective, the church is not only an organ of education—a mechanism for promoting the flourishing of discrete individuals—it is the collective and shared project to which we all ought to be directed and in which we find our deepest satisfaction. In short, it is the realm in which the *summum bonum* returns to Kant's socio-political thought.

The paper will have three sections. First, I will describe the peculiar anthropology Kant offers in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* specifically how the notion of "radical evil" and two related features of human practical reason substantially modify the standard or "textbook" picture of Kant's account of rational agency. Second, I will show why the ethico-religious sphere is necessarily distinct from the juridico-political, and as such constitutes a

[1] Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in *Religion and Rational Theology*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 6:101. Citations will refer to the standard Prussian Academy Edition of Kant's collected works by giving volume and page number, except for references to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which cite page numbers from the first (A) and second (B) editions.

response to this insight into the human condition. Third, I will treat Kant's account of how the full and complete realization of man's moral efforts would issue in a unique form of communion, "the ethical community." Finally, I will conclude with some suggestions as to why Kant thinks such a communal end is the culmination of our activity as autonomous individuals.

I. Kant's Religious Anthropology

Kant is often criticized for presenting a picture of human psychology that is either naïve or perverse and a moral philosophy that is either excessively rigorous or fantastically idealistic. Moreover, Kant's picture of an independent, autonomous agent engaged in self-legislation, continually observing the dictates of the universal moral law regardless of particular exigencies, appears to exemplify those trends in modern philosophy that depict man as an atomistic being endowed with a ratiocinative capacity but lacking any essential connection to those around him. In light of such an image of the human, one might wonder why religion is necessary. What role could a church play, if the human is a kind of self-sufficient, moral res *cogitans*?

However, in a few easily overlooked remarks in *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* Kant reminds his reader that the description of moral agency from the *a priori* perspective "needs anthropology for its *application* to human beings."[2] That is, since the structural principles of morality are derived "from the universal concept of a rational being as such," understanding what is distinctively human requires an anthropology to connect the pure principles of *a priori* moral reasoning, which "hold for every rational being," with the embodied, localized flesh-and-blood person.[3] Such an anthropology would account for the peculiarities of

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, in *Practical Philosophy*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Mary G. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 4:412.
[3] Ibid., 4:412.

the human condition, distinguishing man's rationality and will from their pure or angelic counterpart. In particular it would account for both man's fallibility and his perfectibility. In other words, as should become clear in the following, this anthropology would explain why the rational animal needs religious institutions.

In *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant goes some way to offering such an anthropology, describing three distinct but interconnected elements of the human constitution that characterize our exercise of practical reason: (1) radical evil, (2) the need to posit ends, (3) receptivity to conditions.

Kant argues that since all action is preceded by a determination of the will in accordance with a maxim, any evil deed is the result of the willfull subordination of the claims of duty to the claims of "self-love." Consequently, "it must be possible to infer *a priori* from a number of consciously evil actions, . . . an underlying evil maxim, and from this, the presence in the subject of a common ground . . . of all particular morally evil maxims."[4] In the very essence "of a human being," therefore, there must lie a propensity to evil.[5] That is, the source of evil cannot be man's sensual nature or his natural desire for happiness, there must be something in his will that actively subordinates the dictates of the moral to such heteronomous ends. Thus, "the ground of evil cannot lie in any object *determining* the power of choice through inclination, not in any natural impulses, but only in a rule that the power of choice itself produces for the exercise of its freedom."[6] Thus the ground of evil lies in man's capacity to give himself rules, in his very capacity for autonomous action.[7] The will, therefore, is the locus for a war between two

[4] Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:20.
[5] Ibid., 6:21.
[6] Ibid., 6:21.
[7] It is not mere sensual receptivity or the promptings of natural instinct that interfere with the adoption of genuine moral principles. There must be, in addition, some active resistance on our part to the adoption of moral maxims. "Genuine evil consists in our *will* not to resist the inclinations when they invite transgression" (Ibid., 6:58). Since, the universal command of the moral law is always present to us, we must be actively turning away from it in all evil

countervailing propensities. The individual is "by nature" both good and evil because "he holds within himself a first ground" for the adoption of good (lawful) or evil (unlawful) maxims, and "he holds this ground *qua* human."[8]

The realization or actualization of this propensity for evil depends on what Kant identifies as one of "the inescapable limitations of human beings and of their practical faculty of reason" namely that we are unable to determine our will independent of a specified end or goal.[9] Kant states that, unlike angels, "in the absence of all reference to an end no determination of the will can take place in human beings at all, since no such determination can occur without an effect, and its representation."[10] For human beings self-determination is teleological. Our awareness of the moral law may provide a "*how,"* but without a "whither" or wherefore we cannot act.[11] In "every action," man seeks "something in it that might serve [him] as an end," which, though it comes "last in practice," is "first in representation and intention."[12] For the human, pure lawfulness—being motivated solely by the form of law is an ideal; man necessarily asks himself: "*What is then the result of this right conduct of ours?"*[13]

But to have some motive force in the determination of our will, such ideas must be given representational form, requiring "morally oriented reason [to] call (through the imagination) sensibility into play," thereby connecting man to locally available sensible material.[14] This need for representation is also described by Kant as an inexorable limitation of human reason, which demands "for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that the *senses can*

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deeds. Thus while man may have immediate access to something unconditioned in his awareness of the moral law, he is nevertheless beset by a propensity toward evil, a perversion in the very capacity for self-determination that is the ground of mankind's freedom, moral action and dignity.

[8] Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:21.
[9] Ibid., 6:7.
[10] Ibid., 6:4.
[11] Ibid., 6:4.
[12] Ibid., 6:7.
[13] Ibid., 6:5.
[14] Ibid., 6:23n.

hold on to."[15] This need for a representation of an end to precede all our actions means that we are receptive to the political, cultural and social circumstances within which we exercise our freedom. Such receptivity makes political life possible, but it also means, whether for good or ill, that we in fact exercise our freedom in response to the community's representation of moral ideas such as the holy, the just and the good and metaphysical ideas of God, freedom and immortality. The domain in which such ideas shape our lives as moral beings is properly understood as the ethico-religious sphere, which is the moral (as opposed to the legal) aspect of our public, communal lives.

II. Politics versus Religion

Kant introduces the need for an ethico-religious sphere distinct from the political through an account of how the three foregoing attributes of human practical reason are affected by our social life. Appropriating Rousseau's account of the baleful affects of *amour-propre*, Kant argues that our social life is the source of many of our moral shortcomings, provoking "envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these."[16] Social life promotes such corruption because it spurs the deleterious dimension of what Kant calls our "predisposition to Humanity". This "inclination *to gain worth in the opinion of others"* makes us responsive to social opprobrium or approbation and so susceptible to moral education, but it also can easily lead to the desire "to acquire superiority for oneself over others," thus inclining us to value ourselves comparatively or relatively rather than in relation to a rational universal standard.[17]

[15] Ibid., 6:109. Cf. Ibid., 6:65n; 6:80.
[16] Ibid., 6:93.
[17] Ibid., 6:27.

To counteract the morally adverse effects of social life requires comprehensive reform, which is to be achieved through the formation of "a union which has for its end the prevention of evil and the promotion of the good in the human being – an enduring and ever expanding society, solely designed for the preservation of morality by counteracting evil with united forces."[18] Kant describes such an "association … under the laws of virtue" as "ruled" by the idea of promoting the good principle.[19] In being commonly directed toward this end, the association attains unity—the idea functioning as a principle of wholeness. In this regard, Kant's description of the ethical community recalls the classical political thesis that a polity attains unity by having a common object of interest.[20] Yet, and this is the decisive difference, this *ethico–civil* society is entirely distinct from the *juridico–civil* society.[21] So even though such an association may emerge in a particular juridico–civil society and any given individual may belong to both societies, it has "a special unifying principle of its own (virtue) and hence a form and constitution essentially distinct from those of the other."[22]

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[18] Ibid., 6:94.
[19] Ibid., 6:94.
[20] Cf. Augustine's exemplary formulation of this principle: "Suppose that we were to define what it means to be a people (*populus*) not in the usual way, but in a different fashion – such as the following: a people is a multitudinous assemblage of rational beings united by concord regarding loved things held in common. Then, if we wished to discern the character of any given people, we would have to investigate what it loves. And no matter what an entity loves, if it is a multitudinous assemblage not of cattle but of rational creatures and if these are united by concord regarding loved things held in common, then it is not absurd to call it a people; and, surely, it is a better or worse people as it is united in loving things that are better or worse. By this definition, the Roman people is a people, and its estate (*res*) is without doubt a commonwealth (*res publica*). What this people loved in earlier times and what it loved in the ages that followed the practices by which it passed into bloody sedition and then into social and civil wars, tearing apart and destroying that concord which is in a certain manner the health and welfare (*salus*) of a people – to this history bears witness. . . . And what I have said concerning this peaceful and concerning its Commonwealth, this also I should be understood to have said and thought concerning the Athenians, the rest of the Greeks, . . . and the other nations as well" (Qtd. in Paul Rahe, *Republics Ancient and Modern*). Exploring the possibility that Kant is giving a secularized version of Augustine's account of two political communities would be an especially fruitful avenue for illustrating: (1) although Kant's juridico-political thought is, unlike the Ancients, negatively determined in the tradition of Hobbes, the ethical community is determined by its *telos,* which (2) seems to indicate the persistence of a quasi-theological aim in the communal project of the ethical community that is, perhaps, also motivated by a similar erotic longing.
[21] Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:94.
[22] Ibid., 6:95.

Thus, although there is "a certain analogy between the two, when considered in general as two communities," they must be understood as pertaining to different realms and achieving their ends through different means. Three differences, in particular, are especially important: (1) Even though both associations pertain to social relations, the ethico-civil community is concerned with the formation of an internal disposition rather than the regulation of externally directed actions. (2) Whereas a *juridico-civil* or political *state* is defined by the use of coercion to enforce *public laws*, "an *ethico-civil* state is one in which individuals are united under laws without being coerced, i.e. under *laws of virtue* alone."[23] For Kant, one cannot coerce virtue or force people to be free. (3) Whereas political communities are always particular, parochial groupings of individuals, "the concept of an ethical community always refers to the ideal of a totality of human beings."[24]

Nevertheless, there remains an important analogy between the two that helps to bring into focus Kant's understanding of the role of an ethical-community in the formation of autonomous individuals. Just as a form of civil society is the political response to the juridical state of nature or the lawless war of all against all, so too is the ethical community intended as a response to what Kant calls an "ethical state of nature," which like the juridical state of nature is one of unremitting conflict, "in which the good principle, which resides in each human being, is incessantly attacked by the evil which is found in him and in every other as well."[25] This is due not only to the moral disposition of individuals but above all to the chaos of conflicting opinions about virtue. That is, human beings "mutually corrupt one another's moral predisposition and, even with the good will of each individual, because of the lack of a principle which unites them, they deviate through their dissensions from the common goal of goodness, as though they were

[23] Ibid., 6:95.
[24] Ibid., 6:96.
[25] Ibid., 6:96-7.

instruments of evil, and expose one another to the danger of falling once again under [evil's] dominion."[26]

The "ethical state of nature" does not consist in brutish violence like that of the lawless political state of nature, where man reacts to natural impulses—especially, the desire for self-preservation—but in a distinctly human form of discord, namely, "a *public* feuding between the principles of virtue and the state of inner immorality which the natural human being ought to endeavor to leave behind as soon as possible."[27] Our natural ethical state is not one of mere lawlessness, but rather one of *disagreement* about what should govern our conduct, about what laws ought to be followed, about the precise content of ethical ideas.[28] This external contention is then mirrored in our internal disposition; we reflect the confusion of conflicting moral ideals. Disagreement over ethical ideas leads to a kind of disorder in the soul that impedes our moral efforts. Just as, in the *Preface* to the first *Critique*, Kant warned of the deleterious and ultimately nihilistic effects of theoretical disagreement about metaphysics, Kant here emphasizes the effects of contentions debate over first principles on our ethico-religious lives.[29]

III. Ethical Community as Highest Good

The ethical-community is, therefore, an ideal of concord or agreement about the essential principles of morality. Of course, mere concord or agreement is insufficient to correct the insidious effects of amour-propre that characterize our sociality. To rectify the problems inherent in our nature as gregarious animals—namely our tendency to judge our worth through

[26] Ibid., 6:97.
[27] Ibid., 6:97.
[28] And, in so far as it is public, it requires man to have already left the juridical state of nature; there must be a public sphere within which an individual can disagree with his or her peers.
[29] See especially Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason,* Avii-Axii, Bxxxiv-xxxv. Cf. discussion of the need to discipline reason in Ibid., A751-52/B779-780.

comparison with others—requires the elevation of "true virtue" or autonomy. Only such a universally applicable principle of morality, which is concerned with the internal disposition of each individual's will rather than external outcomes, can address our innate desire for distinction, i.e., to be recognized as superior. In this regard the principle of autonomy is strikingly in accord with aspects of Christian morality insofar as there is one standard common to all regardless of natural differences, particular circumstances or historical accidents; it is universal and concerned with intentions rather than outcomes, with purity of heart rather than excellence of judgment.

Yet, as we are necessarily teleological beings, the bare principle of autonomy in the abstract is insufficient to determine our will. The content of the ethical teaching requires the specification of projects. Accordingly the ethical-community is principally concerned with the representation of two convergent ideals. On the individual, internal level, the ultimate end of individual moral striving is a pure or holy will, i.e., a will determined solely by the dictates of the moral law. On the corporate level, the formation of a perfectly just community, wherein merit receives its due reward, i.e., where virtue and happiness are correlative. One of the great achievements of Christianity, in Kant's mind, is the representation of these two moral ideals in the biblical presentation of Jesus as a moral exemplar and the idea of the kingdom of God as a perfectly righteous community enjoying God's beatitude.

Thus, the formation of the ethical community would not only serve to bring order to the conflicting variety of moral opinions and resolve the tension between different moral frameworks, reconstituting the moral landscape within which individuals reach maturity, it also provides them two specific tasks: the perfection of the will and the perfection of the community. These two projects seem oppositely directed—one inward, the other outward—and yet the two projects converge, for the success of each is dependent on the other. True holiness is impossible

outside the truly moral world and the truly moral world requires all rational agents to be holy. One is therefore not only concerned with one's own purity, one's own moral rectitude but that of one's neighbors as well. In the idea of the ethical community, interiority and intersubjectivity are linked through the positive moral obligation to bring "the kingdom of ends" into being.[30]

Kant stresses that this obligation is a unique duty "of the human race toward itself."[31] Though unlike all other duties, this most comprehensive and global of moral injunctions is an indispensible part of what Kant calls, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* "the true vocation of reason," namely to produce "a will that is good, not *as a means* to other purposes, but *good in itself*."[32]

> For every species of rational beings is objectively - in the idea of reason - destined to a common end, namely the promotion of the highest good as a good common to all. But, since this highest moral good will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole toward that very end, [i.e.] toward a system of well-disposed human beings in which, and through the unity of which alone, the highest moral good can come to pass.[33]

To grasp the full import of Kant's claim it's helpful to step back and recall the precise meaning of the highest good. The idea of the highest good plays an essential role in Kant's critical philosophy. In the "Canon of Pure Reason" in *Critique of Pure Reason,* the highest good is defined as the comprehensive convergence for all rational beings of the "worthiness to be happy" and happiness.[34] Here, the significance of the highest good for Kant's attempt to elaborate a *systematic* philosophy is made clear; for it is only through the idea of the highest good that we

[30] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* 4:433-437. Note Kant's remark that "*Teleology* considers nature as a kingdom of ends, *morals* considers a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature. In the former the kingdom of ends is a theoretical idea for explaining what exists. In the latter, it is a practical idea for the sake of bringing about, in conformity with this very idea, that which does not exist but which can become real by means of our conduct" (4:437n.). Cf. Ibid., 4:462.
[31] Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:97.
[32] Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* 4:396.
[33] Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:97-8.
[34] Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A813/B841; A804/B832-A805/B833.

can conceive of the convergence of the natural, phenomenal world, governed by strict apodictic laws, and the noumenal realm of freedom, governed by the moral law, and thereby conceive of the unity of reason's activity. For this reason, Kant calls the ideal of the highest good "a determining ground of the ultimate end of pure reason." The very systematicity and coherence of Kant's philosophy, thus, depends on the teleology of the highest good.[35]

For Kant, the highest good is both an ethical-religious principle and a metaphysical-philosophical principle; it orients our ethical and religious lives by providing a principle of unity that reconciles the doubleness that characterizes our situation as rational but finite beings. The project of realizing the highest good, whose religious form would be the establishment of an ethical-community, is therefore not an ancillary, contingent addendum but an integral part of Kant's systematic philosophy. In other words, for Kant, to be rational requires striving for the realization of the ethical community, for the perfectly rational and moral church.

However this effort to bring a moral whole or a fully rational world into being differs from other moral injunctions, which—in accordance with the Kantian adage that ought implies can—"concern what we know to reside within our power."[36] Working toward the ethical-community is "the idea of working toward a whole of which we cannot know whether as a whole it is also in our power: so the duty in question differs from all others in kind and in principle."[37] Such a duty, therefore, generates a "moral need" for another rational idea, "namely that of a higher moral being through whose universal organization of forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own, are united for a common effect."[38] It is in a sense a moment of

[35] N.B. Kant's description of philosophy in the 'archetectonic of pure reason' as "the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*). Ibid., A832/B860-A851/B879; A839/B867. Cf. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:108-113.
[36] Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* 6:98.
[37] Ibid., 6:98.
[38] Ibid., 6:98.

humility, of man's awareness of his own insufficiency for fulfilling his highest purpose that is the basis of his relation to the divine. Just as it is our epistemological limitations in the speculative domain that "make room for faith," it is the recognition of our limitations in the moral realm that lies at the font of man's religious convictions.[39]

Moreover, the ethical-community requires belief in God or a moral lawgiver since all its laws "are exclusively designed to promote the *morality* of actions (which is something *internal*, and hence cannot be subject to public human laws)."[40] The interiority of the ethical requires a transcendental lawgiver—someone, "with respect to whom all true duties, hence also the ethical, must be represented as at the same time his commands; consequently, he must also be one who knows the heart, in order to penetrate to the most intimate parts of the disposition of each and every one," and therefore be able to give "to each according to the worth of his actions."[41] Such a legislator is, of course, nothing other than "the concept of God as a moral ruler of the world."[42]

Conclusion:

To reiterate, there is a "moral need" for this higher moral being, for only such a being can secure the end to which the ethical community is directed and can guarantee the ultimate convergence of freedom and nature, morality and happiness. Only such a being can fully satisfy the demands of morality and therewith reason's need for coherence and systematicity. Hence, this unique duty of the human species to itself, which is the religious manifestation of the idea of the highest good, is coherent only if the species conceives of itself "as a people under divine

[39] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 1998), Bxxx.
[40] Kant, *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason,* 6:99.
[41] Ibid., 6:99.
[42] Ibid., 6:99.

commands, i.e., *as a people of God.*"[43] Man becomes himself and fulfills his highest purpose only through understanding himself in relation to something above and beyond himself.

The individual's pursuit of virtue entails the postulation of moral ends, these ends form a unity only in a species wide teleological project, and the project can only be reasonably pursued, if we believe in a divine authority. The individual's pursuit of his own autonomy, the perfection of himself as a self-legislating being, or what we might think of as his pursuit of wholeness requires promoting the wholeness of the entire species.

The individual's good is intimately linked with the good of the species and the good of the species cannot be thought or pursued without belief in the benevolence of a divine providence that will ultimately reconcile the rift between freedom and nature at the heart of the cosmos.

[43] Ibid., 6:99.