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Reconsidering Virtue: Kant's Moral Religion

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It might surprise some people to learn that a considerable amount of Kant's moral thought is devoted to the concept of virtue. In stark contrast to the rigorist caricature that has emerged from selective readings of his *Groundwork*,[1] Kant's later writings on morality demonstrate a remarkable sensitivity to matters of virtue and the relevance of moral character for religion and reason. However, thanks to the prominence of this caricature, there exist today two widespread assumptions about Kant. The first holds that Kant is a philosophical rigorist whose legalistic ethical theory is obsessed with duty and principle, to the complete exclusion of emotion, virtue and character formation. The second holds that Kant's 1794 text, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*,[2] with its extensive treatment of character in relation to his notion of 'radical evil', rests uncomfortably within Kant's philosophical corpus, sitting at odds in particular with his writings in moral philosophy, which largely bracket the question of religion.

I want to challenge these assumptions by claiming that Kant's writings exhibit a deep understanding of moral motivation, character-formation, and virtue, which is of timely significance for contemporary debates in moral philosophy and philosophy of religion.[3] I will

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[1] Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Arnulf Zweig (Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002). Henceforth *G*.

[2] Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. Allen Wood & George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). Henceforth *R*.

[3] In part, the narrow focus of these assumptions can be attributed to an overreliance on the *Groundwork*, an incomplete and inconsistent work initially sketched by Kant, at the earliest stages of his exploration of ethics, as a textbook for a wide readership (on this front, judging by its initial sales, it was a catastrophic failure!). Indeed, read in light of later texts such as the *Religion* and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (the *Doctrine of Virtue*, in particular), the *Groundwork*, with its strict focus on human agency in relation to normative principles, appears precisely as its title suggests, a mere *groundwork*, a preliminary exploration of what was to become Kant's broader interest in a metaphysics of morals or, as I will argue, a moral religion. See Immanuel Kant, 'The Doctrine of Virtue' in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Henceforth *DV*.

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also argue that Kant's *Religion* does not sit at odds with his moral philosophy, but in fact marks the culmination of his moral philosophy generally, and his writing on virtue in particular. And I will claim that Kant's concerns in both moral philosophy and religion are ultimately inseparable, delineating a unique and significant *moral religion*, which is crucially distinct from both moral legalism and religious orthodoxy.

Before proceeding further, however, the term 'moral religion' demands further explanation. For it is presented here, in the broadest Enlightenment sense, as the rationally responsible attempt to recover a fundamental human goodness overshadowed by the corrupting influence of society. Deeply influenced by Rousseau, Kant's moral religion can be likened to a civic or common religion: a distinctly democratic, shared moral perspective which is social, universal, and bound up with autonomy and rationality. It therefore differs from what sociologists have called historical religions – which most people today usually associate with the notion of religion – which are inextricably bound up with a heteronomous allegiance to particular institutions[4] (although this is not to say that the two are necessarily mutually exclusive).[5] Kant's moral religion is thus a rational attempt to articulate and promote the dignity of each individual within a moral idiom of traditions and commitment to a common good (like Rousseau before him).[6] It is consequently of timely significance for both moral philosophy and philosophy of religion in a contemporary society increasingly shaped by clashes of identities often saturated with religious elements, and where the definition and role of religion in the public sphere are matters of continual contention.

In what follows, I begin with an outline of Kant's account of virtue and character formation. I argue that this often-overlooked aspect of Kant's philosophy serves to answer the charges of abstract formalism and rigorism often levelled by contemporary virtue ethicists, as captured in Richard Rorty's allegation that Kant aims to 'derive solutions to moral dilemmas from the analysis of moral concepts'.[7]

This reconsideration of Kantian virtue serves to ground my second claim: that Kant's understanding of moral evil is rooted not in

[4] This is of course the very thing Kant rallied so ardently against in his attack on 'counterfeit service' and 'priestcraft' in book 4 of the *Religion*.

[5] The distinction between civic and historical religion, and its relevance for conflicts between public and private life, and the role of religion in the public sphere, is delineated in Mark Cladis' 'Religion, Democracy, and Modernity: The Case for Progressive Spiritual Democracy', in his *Public Vision, Private Lives: Rousseau, Religion, and 21st-Century Democracy* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2nd edition 2007), pp. xxi–lvi.

[6] Cladis, 'Religion, Democracy, and Modernity', p. xxiii. Rousseau's influence on Kant will be discussed below.

[7] Richard Rorty, 'Justice as a Larger Loyalty' in P. Cheah & Bruce Robbins (eds.), *Cosmopolitics* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) p. 49.

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religious orthodoxy, but in the Enlightenment anthropology which he inherits – and develops – from Rousseau. This Enlightenment belief, in an originally innocent state of nature, masked but never completely destroyed by the corrupting influence of society, is particularly significant when it comes to interpreting the *Religion*, which emerges from this reading neither as a work in speculative theology nor as a crude dismissal of religion; but rather as a constructive proposal for a *moral religion*. This anthropological reading of moral evil has significant implications both for Kant's interpretation of the Christian doctrine of hereditary sin, and his conviction that moral evil can and ought to be overcome. Hence it is that while Kant presents the cultivation of virtue as an arduous struggle – against the pull of heteronomous inclinations corrupted by society – he refuses to deny the possibility of moral perfection, and the potential restoration of original innocence. For Kant's moral religion is grounded on a single, crucial, regulative belief: that human beings, despite their propensity to evil, are *fundamentally* 'innocent'; and that there always remains, untainted and uncorrupted, a core original 'predisposition to good', such that for each and every human being, no matter how deep the corruption, when it comes to morality, 'ought' *always* implies 'can'.[8]

Kantian Virtue

Virtue ethics is defined broadly as an agent-centred ethics, distinguished by the primacy given to the character of the agent: the sort of person she must be in order to do the right thing(s) in a given situation. Contemporary accounts take as their point of departure Aristotle's conception of virtue as a complex disposition that encompasses one's desires, emotions, perceptions, attitudes, interests, and expectations. In sum, one's virtues (and one's vices) are fundamentally a matter of who one is.[9] This focus on character grounds the chief objection levelled by virtue ethicists against Kant's moral

[8] I have bracketed the question of what role Kant's postulates of practical reason (God, freedom, and immortality) might play in the pursuit of moral perfection. This is not to deny that they might constitute significant sources of moral motivation. But the content of the postulates will of course differ considerably depending on the individual's particular context and (religious) tradition (the idea of what constitutes immortality, for example, will differ across communities, and will motivate to differing degrees accordingly). Moral religion, however, is not confined to any particular historical tradition. It concerns only an unwavering belief in original innocence, while bracketing the question of what heteronomous grounds we might also happen to have for adhering to that belief.

[9] For an extended discussion of this point, and a nuanced yet accessible assessment of virtue ethics generally, see Rosalind Hursthouse, 'Are Virtues the Proper Starting Point for Morality?', in James Dreier (ed.), *Contemporary Debates in Moral Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006). The foundational account is, of course, Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* (trans. Christopher Rowe [Oxford & New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002] henceforth *NE*).

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philosophy: that it is rigidly rule-governed, unable to give an adequate account of motivation and virtue.[10]

However, the charge seems peculiar when Kant's own understanding of virtue is considered. For while the virtue tradition has, at various junctures, drawn on several versions of a definitive list of 'the virtues' (like the four – or five – in Greek ethics, and the three – or seven – in Christian ethics), nothing comparable appears in Kant's writings. By contrast, Kant thinks the virtues by a person differ with their ends and plans of life, which vary too much from person to person to make any generalized list pertinent to all of us.[11] Particularity and character are thus on the same page. So contrary to the objection, Kantian virtue appears, in this instance, to be less rule-governed and less abstract than what has typically been found in the virtue tradition. The objection appears to be mistaken.

A full understanding of Kant's definition of virtue is inconceivable apart from his unique conception of human willing. As Kant presents it in the *Religion*, the human will includes *both* legislative reason (*Wille*) and the faculty of desire (*Willkür*). *Wille* is the purely rational structure which introduces the moral law into the expression of human willing. *Willkür*, on the other hand, is the power of choosing between alternatives; it is determined by an incentive only to the extent that the individual has incorporated that incentive into her maxim. Accordingly no impulse or desire can be a determining incentive for *Willkür* until *Willkür* chooses to make it so.[12] For unless this power to choose its determining incentives is attributed to *Willkür*, it cannot be both free and yet under the *influence* of desires and incentives. Sensible incentives are thus compatible with absolute freedom in *Willkür*,[13] a fact confirmed by the experience of obligation from which our awareness of *Willkür* arises. As Kant explains, the moral law 'makes us conscious of the independence of our power of choice from determination by all other incentives (of our freedom) and thereby also of the accountability of our actions.'[14]

[10] An accompanying charge is Kant's alleged inability to take account of differences between persons and cases. This is a point made especially forcefully by Bernard Williams. See 'Persons, character and morality' in his *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge & New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1981) pp. 1–19). For a Kantian response to Williams, see Barbara Herman, 'Integrity and Impartiality' in her *Practice of Moral Judgement* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1993), pp. 23–44.

[11] Allen Wood, *Kantian Ethics* (Cambridge & New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 144–5.

[12] This thus represents to a certain degree a solution to Kant's Third Antinomy of pure reason, namely, the compatibility of the noumenal order (of absolute freedom) and phenomenal order (of necessity) in human action.

[13] John R. Silber, 'The Ethical Significance of Kant's *Religion*' in Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene & Hoyt H. Hudson (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1960) p. xcv.

[14] *R* 6:26n.

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Unlike *Willkür*, however, *Wille* does not choose between alternatives. It is rather the source of an ever-present incentive in *Willkür* which imposes its own normative rational nature. And it is the presence of *Wille*, in relation to *Willkür*, which constitutes what Kant refers to as the predisposition of the will to '*personality*'. This predisposition is the 'susceptibility to respect for the moral law *as of itself a sufficient incentive to the power of choice*.' This is significant, for it entails a *capacity* to incorporate respect for the moral law into one's maxim – a capacity which indicates an original or fundamental goodness, or, in Kant's terms, 'original predisposition to good.' The mere possibility of respect as *the* moral feeling indicates that 'there must be present in our nature a predisposition onto which nothing evil can be grafted.'[15] This, as we shall discover, is the crucial presupposition on which Kant's moral religion is grounded.

However, despite this original predisposition to goodness, the 'propensity to evil' emerges as a fundamental aspect of lived experience. Yet Kant is adamant that this propensity cannot and must not reside in our sensible nature. As he sees it, *moral* evil can only arise in the *moral realm*, the realm of *free choice* – the human will. But sensible nature – itself bound up with causality – does not belong to the domain of free choice, or the moral realm. Our sensible inclinations, therefore, cannot be morally evil (or good, for that matter). They are ethically neutral. Rather, this propensity to evil is 'rooted in' and 'interwoven with' our 'subjective highest basis' of the adoption of 'all maxims' – our power of choice.[16] Evil is thus the wilful *subordination* of moral maxims to sensible maxims. It is an intentional adherence to one's desires *despite* one's moral feeling. It is thus 'radical' insofar as it radically disrupts the human being's original predisposition to goodness.

On the basis of this conception of human willing, encompassing the lived experience of radical evil, Kant defines virtue as a matter of *strength*. Strength is measured by its capacity to overcome resistance. A person is therefore more virtuous the greater the struggle of her will in resisting temptations to transgress duties. For Kant, moral strength is an 'aptitude' and a subjective perfection of the power of choice, or *Willkür*. So if virtue is a *habit*, as Aristotle claims,[17] then Kant will insist that it is a 'free habit', and not merely a 'uniformity in action that has become a *necessity* through frequent repetition'[18]. This marks a crucial point of convergence for Kant with Aristotle, since both are adamant that virtue is exhibited in actions that are desired and done for their own sake *on rational grounds*. Furthermore, Kant shares

[15] *R* 6:27, 6:26, 6:27–8.
[16] *R* 6:32.
[17] *NE* II.1–3.
[18] *DV* 6:407.

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Aristotle's belief that virtue is *acquired* through *practicing* virtuous action.[19] In light of this, the charge that Kant neglects the cultivation of virtuous character also seems misplaced. For Kant thinks virtue is a capacity that the moral agent is capable not only of cultivating, but also of perfecting – a point that will be of great significance to his moral religion.

A central component of Kant's *Doctrine of Virtue* is the distinction between *duties of right* and *duties of virtue*. The fundamental difference between these two sets of duties is that while a duty of right can be externally imposed (as the law of a state binds its citizens, say), a duty of virtue must be self-imposed or, in Kant's words, 'based only on free self-constraint.'[20] Of course, duties of right can also be self-imposed, that is, from the spirit of duty, rather than from fear of external sanction.[21] But duties of virtue cannot, conversely, be legally enforced. They are thus a matter of *character*.[22]

Kant's conception of virtue lays specific stress on the strength of the will in constraining itself, in obeying an internal sanction. But Kant also insists that virtue involves not only the capacity to resist one's inclinations when they are contrary to duty, but also the capacity to '*master* one's inclinations.'[23] In other words, it is a duty of virtue to *transform* our natural inclinations in ways that align with morality. The perfection of our humanity involves choice guided by reason's own principle (in other words, the Categorical Imperative). But perfection also involves working up our natural inclinations to support that principle. In Kant's own words:

> When it is said that it is in itself a duty for a human being to make his end the perfection belonging to a human being as such (properly speaking, to humanity), this perfection must be put in what can result from his *deeds*, not in mere *gifts* for which he must be indebted to

[19] *DV* 6:397.
[20] *DV* 6:393.
[21] *DV* 6:383.
[22] This is a crucial distinction to bear in mind when interpreting Kant. For the fact that the term 'duty' carries such negative connotations in our everyday usage surely goes some way to explaining why Kant's moral philosophy, with its emphatic use of the term, is initially greeted by many as less than appealing. In everyday usage, 'duty' is nearly always associated with some form of external pressure. This thought, especially when applied to the phrase 'acting from duty', makes 'duty' the very last word anyone would associate with autonomy or the free self-direction of one's life. As Allen Wood memorably puts it, '[i]f I say that I am visiting Aunt Maude in the Alzheimer's ward "solely from duty," that means I am doing it grudgingly, probably cowed into it by the thought of the dirty looks and nagging phone calls I will otherwise get from my overbearing parents and disapproving siblings' (Wood, *Kantian Ethics*, p. 159]. It is for this reason that Kant's classification of 'duties of virtue' as strictly self-imposed is so important. For 'duty' here simply refers to the act of *freely* making oneself desire something and do it because one appreciates the objective moral reasons there are for doing it. There are no external reasons for action, only moral reasons (as distinct from merely instrumental or prudential reasons).
[23] *DV* 6:380, 6:383 (emphasis added).

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> nature; for otherwise it would not be a duty. This duty can therefore consist only in *cultivating* one's *faculties* (or natural predispositions), the highest of which is *understanding*, the faculty of concepts and so too of those concepts that have to do with duty. At the same time this duty includes the cultivation of one's *will* (moral cast of mind), so as to satisfy all the requirements of duty.[24]

However, this inclusion of natural inclinations (correctly cultivated) among the virtuous person's attributes is tempered when Kant claims, just a few lines later, that as a human being one has the duty of cultivating one's will 'up to the *purest* virtuous disposition, in which the *law* becomes also the incentive to his actions that conform with duty and he obeys the law from duty.'[25] Kant thus seems to be issuing two demands. On the one hand, we are to develop our talents and emotional capacities as part of virtue (and so to conceive of virtue along the Aristotelian model of character habituation). But on the other hand, we are nevertheless to develop a purer attitude of virtue, which is grounded in and responds to the rational nature of persons as end-in-themselves, and moral legislators. So it would appear that while we need to cultivate our natural inclinations to support our capacity to act from autonomous principles, the latter remain, in the 'purest' sense, the source of morality. But this then raises the question as to how genuine Kant's appeal to natural inclinations really is. Does Kant genuinely share with Aristotle and his successors the belief that properly cultivated emotions are indispensable to the good life? Or does his appeal to virtue, in the end, amount to little?

Not necessarily, for two significant reasons. To begin with, by arguing that the *ultimate* ground of morality must rest in the authority of reason, Kant is making a metaphysical – and, by extension, ontological – point. Reason is the transcendental source of moral deliberation. Morality is rooted in the rational *nature* of human beings: it is a fundamental capability that lies anterior to any corruption by external sources. This is important, not just for our understanding of Kantian virtue, but for our broader understanding of Kantian ethics. For when Kant appeals to the rational *nature* of human beings, he is appealing not to any particular faculties, nor even to bare reason itself, but rather to *fundamental (rational) humanity*. This means that each and every human being, regardless of their reasoning capacity, is *fundamentally* rational. Since rationality is a fundamental attribute of humanity, to be human is to be fundamentally rational, and thus worthy of respect, regardless of the shape of one's cognitive faculties.[26]

[24] *DV* 6:386–7.

[25] *DV* 6:387.

[26] This serves to dispel the well-known criticism that Kant's moral philosophy discriminates against the mentally disabled on the basis that their inability to reason properly deprives them of the grounds for respect and thus of human dignity.

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This is an aspect of Kant's thought that will proves deeply important for understanding the anthropology that underlines his moral religion, particularly his insistence that the human 'predisposition to good' always precedes the 'propensity to evil'.

Second, while Kant is arguing that the ultimate ground of a moral project must rest in the *authority* of reason, he is not denying that natural inclinations can be shaped by and respond to that authority. Rather he is claiming that this responsiveness to morality, as rooted in the rational nature of persons, flourishes best in someone who has properly cultivated their emotional capacities. There is a noticeable emphasis in the *Doctrine of Virtue* on *character*, on *who* will act in morally worthy ways from a pure attitude of virtue. And the thought is that the virtuous person is the one who cultivates emotions that do not battle with her duty, but positively promote it. Such emotions are not themselves expressive of the purest attitude of virtue, since they are not themselves the ultimate source of adequate reasons for doing what is required or determining what is morally permissible. However, they form a crucial dimension of character that, ultimately, best supports moral motivation.

Kant's claim is a persuasive one. Emotions, after all, have no normative content apart from the normative moral framework within which the emotional moral agent operates. As a result, they cannot be viewed as *sources* of morality, in and of themselves. A good example of this is compassion. For while compassion itself has a basic structure that enables me to attend to a vulnerable other in her time of need, it does not equip me, in and of itself, with the means of ensuring that my compassion is expressed in the right way, or even directed at the appropriate target. I might, for example, initially find myself drawn by feelings of compassion to the fellow human being who I see shackled in chains. I then learn, however, that this person is guilty of several cruel and callous acts of murder, and, reasoning that murder is wrong, and that he thus deserves to be punished, cease to feel compassion towards him (since a precondition for compassion is the thought that the object of compassion's suffering is undeserved). In other words, compassion itself is not a normative view. It is rather a *motivation* compatible with a wide range of ethical views (indeed, our standard experiences of compassion will usually incorporate the answers that our cultures give to them). Furthermore, the failure to hold fast to a robust commitment to each person's equality on the basis of dignity will leave us no way of saying when ethical relations are going bad. This is not to say that emotions cannot play a considerable role in the moral life, but that they must operate within some sort of normative framework which determines what that moral life is. It is within normative structures that compassion is made practical.

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At the same time, it is equally clear that the moral life cannot be determined by the idea of duty alone. Emotions equip us with remarkable modes of attention that help us track what is morally salient as morally salient in our circumstances. Compassion, again, is a good example of this; for it is an emotion that draws the moral agent to occasions of distress or need which a bare adherence to the idea of duty – detached from the modes of attention with which our emotions endow us – might miss. In short, duty alone is insufficient to provide information about which objects and circumstances require our moral attention. It is for this reason that Kant stresses the 'indirect duty' bearing upon us 'to cultivate the compassionate natural (aesthetic) feelings in us, and to make use of them as so many means to sympathy based on moral principles and the feeling appropriate to them.' For as he rightly observes, 'this is still one of the impulses that nature has implanted in us to do what the representation of duty alone might not accomplish.'[27]

Be this as it may, we are still left with an uneasy tension between the call to cultivate emotions, and their apparent subordination in favour of the '*purest*' attitude of virtue, one motivated entirely by duty (the ideal towards which Kant seems to believe the virtuous person should aspire in cultivating her emotions). However, understanding the source of this tension clarifies matters. Kant's entire moral philosophy orients, of course, around the purity of the good will, and thus the purity of the moral agent's motive in acting morally. Simply put, Kant thinks emotions have a role to play in the moral life, but only insofar as they enhance, and do not diminish, morality. As Nancy Sherman explains: 'Kant wants to repudiate sentimentalism, not sentiment. At bottom, his worry seems the reasonable one, that indulging sentiment can sometimes be more a matter of self-absorption than altruistic engagement in the social world. The problem is that Kant is not always effective in making this point.'[28]

So the proper cultivation of the emotions is central to Kant's conception of both virtuous character and duty. Moral agency, for Kant, is about doing one's duty for the right reason, but also, ideally, with the right attitude. This is best exemplified in Kant's theory of ethical duties. This is a teleological theory, based not on the inherent 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of actions, but on which actions promote certain obligatory *ends*. Kant argues that we as human beings have two such ends: *our own perfection* (met by the 'duty to ourselves'), and *the happiness of others* (met by the 'duty to others').[29] It is the latter end, the happiness of others, that is of interest here. For the

[27] *DV* 6:457.

[28] Nancy Sherman, *Making a Necessity of Virtue: Aristotle and Kant on Virtue* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 153.

[29] *DV* 6:392–3.

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'duty to others', which meets this end, itself consists of two independent sets of duties: duties of love, and duties of respect. Duties of respect are narrow or strict duties not to behave in certain ways toward others, while duties of love are wide or meritorious duties, allowing for latitude regarding how, how much, and toward whom, we act benevolently. Kant, in turn, isolates three specific duties of love: the duties of beneficence, gratitude, and sympathetic participation.

Now, it is the duty of sympathetic participation that is of particular interest here. For it dispels finally any remaining (false) assumptions that Kant is indifferent – or even opposed – to emotions in favour of some rigid formalism. Sympathetic participation includes the duty to cultivate the feeling of sympathy in order to strengthen our sensitivity to the needs of others and to strengthen our capacity to perform duties of beneficence. Kant emphasises that there is no duty just to *feel* sympathy for the joys and sorrows of others, at least if that feeling is ineffectual. 'Participation' is rather the active sharing in the situation of others, and seeing things from their point of view. For it is this active involvement that will usually give rise to both feelings of compassion and beneficent actions that are both informed by the active sharing in the others' situation and taken from a standpoint aligned to theirs, so that it is emphatically not a standpoint of cool detachment or condescending superiority.[30]

By emphasising the duty of sympathetic participation, then, Kant is as far as one can imagine from the mistaken caricature against whom objections were raised at the outset. By stressing the *active involvement* needed in attending to others, Kant presents us with a rich account of moral agency, the end result of which constitutes a significant cognitive *and* emotional achievement on the part of the moral agent. In pressing for an account of moral character that seeks to situate the appropriately cultivated emotions within a framework that holds fast to the moral agent's responsibility to respect both herself and others in their fundamental (rational) humanity, Kant lays a foundation that will prove crucial for the development of his moral religion, to which I now turn.

Kant's Moral Religion

In the *Religion,* Kant offers an account of human nature as hierarchically structured by distinguishing three predispositions which characterise human nature: the predisposition to *animality* as a mere living being; the predisposition to *humanity* as a living and rational being; and the predisposition to *personality* as a living, rational and responsible being. The predisposition to animality concerns self-love

[30] Wood, *Kantian Ethics*, p. 177.

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expressed in our impulses for self-preservation, propogation of the species, and community with other human beings. The predisposition to humanity concerns self-love expressed in our cultural strivings and social dependence upon and rivalry with others. Finally, the predisposition to personality is the capacity to hold ourselves morally accountable by justifying our actions in terms of autonomously generated moral principles. All of these predispositions are 'original' parts of human nature which, when properly transformed and ordered, form a more inclusive, composite conception of good moral character. As Kant explains:

> . . . these predispositions in the human being are not only (negatively) *good* (they do not resist the moral law) but they are also predispositions *to the good* (they demand compliance with it).[31]

For Kant, then, a well-regulated character is not simply a matter of the absence of counter-incentives. The goal is rather to *transform* our self-love so that it promotes and advances compliance with the moral law. Moreover, Kant's language suggests that cultivated natural and social powers are not simply necessary conditions of moral agency, but necessary, hierarchically structured *parts* of the overall character of the original predisposition of a human being to achieve the moral good.

Kant thus shares with Aristotle the idea that virtue can only be achieved as the result of habituation. Indeed, his hierarchically structured account of moral character echoes the ancient project of ordering the parts of the human 'soul' and rendering them harmonious. But he departs from Aristotle in stressing the 'incessant labouring and becoming' involved in this process. Whereas Aristotle's account of virtuous action involves the non-rational part of the soul 'listening to' the rational part, Kant's account of practical reason simply involves the will, which itself directly produces desires, both good and bad, depending on its predisposition to good or propensity to evil. Accordingly, and to a far greater extent than Aristotle, Kant never loses sight of the 'invisible enemy' which always threatens to corrupt us, no matter how nobly we strive to adopt the proper maxim.[32] Consequently, Kant understands the pursuit of virtue as a *constant struggle* to ensure that we continue to adopt the moral law as our maxim. Because we are finite and flawed beings whose conformity to reason must take the form of self-constraint, virtue is constantly required if we are to follow rational principles, which may command

[31] *R* 6:28.

[32] For the choice of a maxim is not one isolated decision, but one that must be constantly renewed (hence the virtue of the moral agent who has the strength of character to continually renew this decision). In Kant's own words, it is 'an ever-continuing striving for the better . . . a *gradual* reformation of the propensity to evil' grafted onto us by society (*R* 6:48. Emphasis added).

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unconditionally, but become subjectively 'irresistible' only through virtue.[33] Kant's moral psychology is undoubtedly sceptical. But he arguably provides us with a more graphic – and fitting – account of the extent of the struggle involved in the cultivation of moral character than what we find in Aristotle and his successors in the virtue tradition.

At the same time, however, Kant's scepticism here risks masking a more fundamental belief that lies at the heart of the *Religion*. This is his conviction that, despite our 'propensity to evil', there is an 'original predisposition to good' that remains forever uncorrupted. Understood in light of his discussion of the cultivation of moral character, we can understand this fundamental belief of Kant's as a regulative ideal. The perfection of one's virtue is the ideal toward which the human being should always strive, because, as *originally* good or innocent, she is always *fundamentally* capable of attaining this perfection, no matter how tainted she may be by the corruption of moral evil.

Significantly, the idea of an 'original predisposition to good' runs directly counter to the Christian doctrine of original or hereditary sin. Human beings, on Kant's reading, are not born into evil. Instead, the root of moral evil lies strictly within the bounds of human volition. As each human being is born originally innocent, so she is entirely culpable for the subversion of the moral law to her heteronomous inclinations. As Kant explains, moral evil must 'always be a deed of freedom', for otherwise 'the use or abuse of the human being's power of choice with respect to the moral law could not be imputed to him, nor could the good or evil in him be called "moral".'[34]

It is for this reason that Kant configures the biblical narrative of the Fall in Genesis 3 as a story about a universal aspect of lived (human) experience, rather than a single, unique event at the beginning of (human) history. Adam, on this reading, should be understood as the universal representative of every human being, since 'it is clear . . . that this [acting freely, but always with our propensity to evil] is what we do daily, and that hence [in *non-historical*, narrative terms] in Adam we have all sinned.' Of course, this brings us no closer to an intelligible explanation concerning the origin of evil. Yet the image we gain from the text is still significant. For, as Kant notes, it portrays 'evil at the beginning of the world, not, however, within the human being, but in a *spirit* of an originally more sublime destiny.' This non-specific 'beginning' thus portrays evil coming from *outside* the human as 'originally' created. The human being's original predisposition should therefore be seen as a predisposition to *good*. The narrative of the Fall depicts Adam

[33] *DV* 6:405.
[34] *R* 6:21.

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falling from innocence (through an act of free will), 'not as corrupted *fundamentally*.'[35]

Accordingly, when Kant insists that the cultivation of virtue in pursuit of moral character is a strenuous matter, this should not be taken as an ontological claim about a fundamentally corrupt human nature. Instead, Kant's argument should be interpreted *anthropologically*. For Kant's seeming mistrust of our natural inclinations (mistaken by many as the byproduct of either a legalistic, philosophical rigorism, or a reactionary religious orthodoxy) can in fact be attributed to a mistrust of *all* human behaviour – to the extent that it has been shaped *by society*. And it is here that Rousseau's influence upon Kant is most apparent. For, like Rousseau, Kant holds that our inclinations, considered in themselves, as expressions of our bodily or animal nature, are ethically neutral, and are only corrupted by 'an invisible enemy, one who hides behind reason and is hence all the more dangerous.' This enemy, however, is not original sin, but rather the 'vices of culture': the competitiveness, social inequality, 'the unjust desire to gain over others', the 'radical propensity to evil' which develops along with our reason (as Rousseau also thought), and hence *only* in society.[36] In Kant's own words:

> It is not the instigation of nature that arouses what should properly be called the *passions*, which wreak such great devastation in his originally good disposition . . . Envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, *as soon as he is among human beings*. Nor is it necessary to assume that these are sunk into evil and are examples that lead him astray: it suffices that they are, that they surround him, and that they are human beings, and they will mutually corrupt each other's moral disposition and make one another evil.[37]

It might be objected that this emphasis on the influence of Rousseau fails to appreciate sufficiently the background for Rousseau's own belief in the corrupting influence of society. Specifically, one might object that it fails to recognise that Rousseau identifies the social condition which yields the emergence of moral evil as the byproduct of a departure from a garden paradise which sustains its own state of innocence (not unlike Eden).[38] But this objection fails to recognise that, for Rousseau, this garden represents a state of innocence only insofar as it is entirely *amoral*. For while Rousseau believes that the social condition is accompanied by the possibility for evil, it is equally accompanied by the possibility for good that

[35] *R* 6:42, 6:43–44, 6:44.
[36] *R* 6:57; cf. 6:27, 6:30.
[37] *R* 6:93–4.
[38] See Rousseau's *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* (trans. Donald Cress [Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1992]).

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would not itself arise in the garden. It is only in *society* that human beings come to be their own work, because it is only with others that people perfect themselves and devise their own modes of life.[39] So to be moral, argues Rousseau, we need to leave the garden, and its accompanying state of amoral innocence. But this departure from the garden comes at a price. For as your capacity to do good increases, your capacity to do evil increases in equal measure.[40]

So Kant, following Rousseau, is sceptical about the possibility of cultivating a virtuous moral character. But he will never dismiss it as an impossibility. For his unwavering belief in original innocence grounds the conviction that moral perfection is something that will always remain within the limits of human capability (and, for that reason alone, it ought to be pursued).[41]

Understood thus, Kant's moral religion emerges as a significant contribution to both moral philosophy and philosophy of religion on the basis of two remarkable claims. First, the 'original predisposition to good' means that human beings are fundamentally capable of moral perfection, *despite* the reality of moral evil. Second, as fundamentally capable, or originally 'good', human beings are *not* fundamentally fallen or originally sinful. The propensity to evil simply masks – but does not erase – the original predisposition to good. Kant thus shifts the focus of religion away from notions of fallenness and sin, towards the potential restoration of innocence that lies fully within the realm of human capability. The focus of religion becomes, in this instance, unmistakably moral.

Another substantial aspect of Kant's moral religion is his treatment of respect. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in a section entitled 'Of the Motives of Pure Practical Reason',[42] Kant presents respect (for the moral law) as itself a distinctive moral emotion. The explicit focus of the passage centres on the effects of practical reason – that is, the source of the moral law – on our phenomenal nature. Kant's claim is that practical reason motivates us directly, but also that as affective creatures, we experience that determination *affectively*, as respect. Kant thus presents respect not as a separate sort

[39] Allen Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge & New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 292.

[40] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile*, or On Education, trans. B. Foxley (New York, NY: Dutton), pp. 172–176.

[41] Consequently, it would be a mistake to dismiss Kant's ideal of moral perfection as overly optimistic, for he is more than aware of the obstacles we will encounter as we seek to cultivate virtue. Indeed, one might even speculate that the restoration of original innocence is such a strenuous task, that the individual simply cannot hope to achieve it alone. As a social problem (originating in the corrupting influence of society), it may require a social solution. The social functions of a moral religion, however, lie beyond the confines of this paper.

[42] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. T.K. Abbott (Minneola, NY: Dover Publications, 1954), pp. 196–218. Henceforth *C2*.

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of moral motivation, but rather as the *effect* of moral motivation *on feeling*.

I argue that Kant has captured something hugely important with this notion. For he puts forward a conception of morality that allows for a feeling or affectation which is responsive to persons simply as persons; as ends-in-themselves, independent of any contingent circumstances or other external factors. This can be contrasted with feelings cited as morally 'fine' within standard accounts of virtue, which are always context-specific. The feeling of sympathy, for example, always responds to particular situations of need, just as pity always responds to undeserving tragedy or misfortune. Respect, however, is different, for the focus is never local or context-specific. So by including respect at the heart of his presentation of moral character, Kant offers an account of the virtuous moral agent who will not be bound by circumstance or context, but will be driven by an unerring respect for *all* persons, in their fundamental humanity, as ends-in-themselves.

Moreover, in doing so, Kant offers a means of universalizing a tendency, inherent within a range of ethical models (including virtue-oriented accounts of Christian ethics), towards localism or shared context. This can be illustrated by considering the distinction, initially drawn by Bernard Williams, between 'thick' and 'thin' ethical concepts.[43] Roughly, 'thick' ethical concepts are local or world-guided concepts that guide one's actions, while 'thin' concepts are not world-guided, and not necessarily action guiding. A thin concept will not tell you how to act, a thick concept will. Accordingly, we can say that, in contrast to the emphasis on particular narratives inhabited by particular ethical communities (as prevalent in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, for example, or Stanley Hauerwas[44]), and the accompanying thick ethical concepts inextricable from the particular ethical communities with which they are associated, the Kantian notion of respect is a thinner ethical concept, applicable to a wide range of narratives, that can be shared across a range of ethical communities. While respect may not guide specific actions (which will continue to be informed by the thick concepts associated with one's particular ethical narrative), it may still be embodied in the intentions of a range of ethical agents across different communities, and thus be shared by these different agents and their respective communities. So while particular ethical communities may fail to reach an agreement over, say, the appropriate practices associated with welcoming

[43] Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 140–151.

[44] Hauerwas' attack on the rights-based tradition of cosmopolitanism in his 2008 Oxford Amnesty Lecture, 'Pentecost: Learning the Languages of Peace' is a recent example of this.

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guests, they might at least agree that the underlying intention of the welcome could well be the same across a range of communities (i.e. respecting the guest may be embodied in the intention which underlies the welcoming act).

Insofar as an ethics of virtue is driven by ideals, those ideals will tend to be interpreted in a form relative to the context in which they are received (as Hauerwas argues). Consequently, the very 'virtues' which contribute to a good character will vary considerably depending on the context. Of course, this is not to say that the 'ideal' of what constitutes a 'good life' should be universally shared across contexts, communities and cultures. Human life owes its rich texture to the diversity of practices, institutions, and interpretations of what constitutes a meaningful existence. To undermine that would be unthinkable. What Kant's moral religion provides, I suggest, is a robust apparatus with which to regulate the pursuit of the 'good life', regardless of what one's culture or context deems that to be. It ensures that the moral agent is guided, first and foremost, by the *respect* that her reason dictates she owes both to herself and to others on the basis of their fundamental (rational) humanity. Returning us to the definition of 'moral religion' established at the outset, we can characterise Kant's moral religion as a thin concept, governing the rational pursuit of moral perfection, that cuts across particular traditions and communities. It should therefore not be seen as undermining any beliefs associated with particular traditions or communities, but rather as establishing a means by which members of those traditions and communities can cultivate virtue (in the Kantian sense) while still being guided by their specific beliefs, ideals and thick concepts. Moral religion, we might say, is a regulative ideal which aims to ensure respect for *all* others in their fundamental humanity, while striving toward the restoration of original innocence which human beings remain forever capable of attaining.

As this paper has aimed to demonstrate, Kant has a great deal in common with the virtue tradition, not least in his understanding of character-formation and 'sympathetic participation.' What he offers, though, is a means of reconsidering virtue, in a manner that extends far beyond the propensity to localism that has long been a hallmark of the virtue tradition, and its interpretation and manifestation in particular models of religious ethics. By rooting the moral law in the fundamental *universal* capacity of human reason – which we all share – Kant provides a framework for virtue, based on *respect* for all persons, regardless of context, on the basis of their fundamental (rational) humanity, and their fundamental *capability* or 'predisposition to the good'. Kant's *Religion* is a crucial text in this regard, articulating a sophisticated account of his moral philosophy while at the same time offering a robust defence of his own unique philosophy of religion. Why, then, I ask in conclusion, has this remarkable

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text spawned a legacy of such divergent interpretations? My own belief is that these interpretations have failed to recognise that the text represents the culmination of *both* Kant's moral *and* religious philosophies which are, ultimately, inseparable. Kant's account of the cultivation of moral character, and of the pursuit of virtue, is inconceivable apart from his own faith in the fundamental goodness or original innocence of human nature. Only by understanding Kant's moral philosophy as inherently religious, and his religious philosophy as inherently moral, can we fully appreciate his unerring conviction – articulated in the *Religion* – that the human being, 'despite a corrupted heart . . . always possesses a good will, [and] there still remains hope of a return to the good from which he has strayed'[45]. This is the essence of Kant's moral religion.

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[45] *R* 6:44.

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