

KANT AND COLERIDGE ON THE ISSUE OF MORALITY

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Abstract

This paper seeks to contrast Kant's strong belief that morality is the ultimate aim of religion with Coleridge's statement in *Aids to Reflection* that morality is merely a step in the ascent towards a spiritual religion. The issues to be discussed are the relationships between emotion and grace on the one hand, and theism and Christology, on the other hand. While Kant believes the core of religion to be that of doing one's duty in *this* world (because fulfilling one's duty may be a sign of divine election), Coleridge understands Kant's rendering of morality as a reduction of religion to the mere role of moral religion. Coleridge also believes that morality is the body, while the soul of the Christian religion is faith in Christ.

Keywords: Coleridge, Kant, morality, grace, Christology.

Résumé

Ce document vise à contraster la forte conviction de Kant que la moralité est l'objectif ultime de la religion avec la déclaration de Coleridge dans « *Aids to Reflection* » où la moralité est seulement un pas dans l'ascension vers une religion spirituelle. Les questions à examiner sont : les relations entre l'émotion et la grâce, d'une part, et le théisme et christologie, d'autre part. Tandis que Kant croit que le cœur de la religion c'est de faire notre devoir dans *ce monde* (parce que si on a réussi faire notre devoir, il peut être interprété comme un signe d'élection divine), Coleridge entend l'interprétation de Kant sur la moralité comme une réduction de la religion au simple rôle de religion morale. Coleridge croit aussi que la moralité représente le corps, pendant que l'âme de la religion chrétienne est la fois en Christ.

Mots-clés: Coleridge, Kant, moralité, grâce, christologie.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to contrast Kant's strong belief that morality is the ultimate aim of religion with Coleridge's acknowledging in *Aids to Reflection* that morality is just a step in the ascent towards a spiritual religion. The issues to be discussed are the relationships between emotion and grace on the one

hand, and theism and Christology, on the other hand. Firstly, a short introduction to Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* should underline the philosopher's aim to equate religion with morality. To get his argument across, he tackles theological themes such as grace or the importance of prayer for practical reason. Kant believes the core of religion is doing one's duty in *this* world, because fulfilling one's duty properly may be a sign of divine election. In order to better understand Kant's simplification of religion to the role of moral religion, we must inquire into how the German philosopher approaches the traditional Christian concept of *grace*. The exposition of Kant's understanding of *morality* will be followed by a discussion of Coleridge's understanding of the term.

It is also worth underlining Coleridge's debt to Kant as far as his intellectual progress is concerned. In Chapter Nine of the *Biographia literaria*, Coleridge expresses his gratitude to Kant and sketches the latter's philosophy in a few dense sentences: "The writings of the illustrious sage of Koenigsberg, the founder of the Critical Philosophy, more than any other work, at once invigorated and disciplined my understanding [...] the clearness and evidence of the Critique of Pure Reason; and Critique of the Judgment; of the Metaphysical Elements of Natural Philosophy; and of his Religion within the bounds of Pure Reason, took possession of me as with a giant's hand. After fifteen years' familiarity with them, I still read these and all his other productions with undiminished delight and increasing admiration". (Coleridge, 1984: 153)

Apart from expressing his admiration for the German philosopher, Coleridge also attempts to summarize Kant's system of morality, underlining the role of the will and of the categorical imperative: "in his moral system he was permitted to assume a higher ground (the autonomy of the will) as a postulate deducible from the unconditional command, or (in the technical language of his school) the categorical imperative, of the conscience". (Coleridge, 1984: 154)

2. Articulations of Morality

2.1. The fall of grace and the rise of morality

Kant envisages a human subject who is fallen from grace not because of the import of an Augustinian anthropology (which sees Man as fallen from the Grace of God after the Fall from Paradise), but because the concept of grace is taken to be outside the scope of religion. Grace is at best an aid, but cannot be understood within the bounds of reason alone. Grace, along with Miracles and Mysteries are of secondary importance, which means they are "*parerga* to religion within the boundaries of pure reason; they do not belong within it yet border on it". (Kant, 1998: 72) Further on, Kant states that "reason does

not contest the possibility or actuality of the objects of these ideas; it just cannot incorporate them into its maxims of thought and action". (Kant, 1998: 72) Morality is of *this* world since the supernatural is an "inscrutable field". (Kant, 1998: 72) To conceive that such a thing as grace can be conceived, Reason appeals to a "*reflective* faith", but not to a "*dogmatic* faith". (Kant, 1998: 72) A dogmatic sort of faith pretending to be considered knowledge appears to Kant as flawed. His argument further turns to the issue of enthusiasm.

Enthusiasm was a religious issue that manifested itself after the Protestant Reformation. Max Weber noticed that the most important result of Protestant asceticism was a rational, ordered systematization of moral life as a whole. (cf. Weber, 2003: 105) Calvinism developed a bent towards asceticism, while Lutheranism developed a religious practice favorable to emotion. Out of Lutheranism sprang Pietism, a religious movement that flourished in Germany under charismatic figures such as Nicolaus Zinzendorf. The charismatic count believed that one should embrace an infantilism of religious sentiment, believed to be a sign of the authenticity of religious experience. (cf. Weber, 2003: 113) This sort of emotional religion entered into an alliance with the ascetic ethics that Puritanism had impregnated with rationality. While Calvinism held that whatever was emotional was illusory, Pietists believed that the only sure grounds of *certitudo salutis* consisted in a pure feeling of absolute certainty concerning forgiveness, derived from the testimony of the Holy Spirit. (cf. Weber, 2003: 116)

Unlike in *Aids to Reflection*, Kant's *Religion* does not mention religious groups. A possible reason for this would be Kant's desire to discourage such religious practices. A form of hypocrisy can however be sensed concerning the role Kant assigns to aids such as prayer or church-going. Although these are outside what religion should consist of, namely morality, they are still of value as long as they are solely *aids*. Prayer is placed under the label of "delusory faith" (Kant, 1998: 185), being only of use as a way of maintaining a righteous conduct, but not because it is a duty. Interestingly, Kant mentions another good feature concerning prayer: the most important thing about prayer is not the words themselves, but the *disposition*. A right disposition on the part of the subject is a moral disposition – to pursue all our actions "as though they occurred in the presence of God". (Kant, 1998: 186) But we should only expect an answer from God as a consequence of our moral actions, not out of our prayers.

Overall speaking, however, Kant is an adversary of prayer simply because it is outside man's power to influence God's wisdom: "a human being cannot determine how divine wisdom judges in these matters and hence cannot, by means of the wish that he nurtures in and by himself, make use of

the divine power for his purposes”. (Kant, 1998: 187) Concerning churchgoing, he assigns it the role of edification, a moral role or a “moral solemnity” and not “a means of grace”. (Kant, 1998: 187) Furthermore, public prayer is a form of “moral exaltation”. (Kant, 1998: 187)

To return to the previous discussion regarding the role of emotion in religious experience, Kant mentions a positive role for emotion which he dubs “*a service of the heart*”. (Kant, 1998: 184) A worthy service of the heart consists in “the disposition of obedience to all true duties as divine commands, not in actions determined exclusively for God”. (Kant, 1998: 184) Further on, Kant blames anthropomorphism as idolatry, “easily taken for the *service of God* itself”. (Kant, 1998: 184) The critique of anthropomorphism in early modernity goes back to Michel de Montaigne, who revived Pyrrhonism, a branch of Ancient skepticism. He also drew attention to Lucretius’ poem *De rerum naturae*, where anthropomorphism receives a heavy blow. In *The Apology to Raymond Sebond*, Montaigne portrays Man as lonely and stripped of the gift of grace. (cf. Montaigne, 2002: 330)

The Kantian philosophic picture which sees Man as suspicious to the works of grace is contradicted by Saint Paul’s outlook on grace in the *Epistle to the Romans*. For Saint Paul, the human subject voluntarily accepts to enter a state of grace: “we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God”. (Romans 5:2) One can sense a strand of Stoicism in Kant’s thought, where self-discipline, especially a discipline of the mind was emphasized, while the emotions were marginalized. Mind, the purely rational mind, is at the core of Kant’s philosophical inquiries. St. Paul also speaks of the danger of rationalizing and its inability to fight the sin of the flesh: “So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin” (Romans 7:25). In chapter eight of the *Epistle to the Romans*, St. Paul considers that once Man is freed from the law of sin, he voluntarily submits to the Law of God. An ontological shift occurs at the moment St. Paul proclaims the following: “But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his”. (Romans 8:9)

The Paulian voluntary participation to grace seems suspicious to Kant should we refer to an excerpt from the final part of Section IV of *Religion*, concerning the nature of grace. It is in this passage that Kant argues that man usually poses as a *favourite*, but more rarely as a good *servant*: “It is arduous to be a good servant (here one always hears only talk of duties); hence the human being would rather be a favorite, for much is then forgiven him, or, where duty has been too grossly defended against, everything is again made good through the intercession of someone else who is favored in the highest

degree, while he still remains the undisciplined servant he always was". (Kant, 1998: 190)

The subject-as-favorite heavily relies on God's mercy and on the "someone else who is favored in the highest degree" – that would be the priest. This is for Kant yet another delusion of religion, a superstition engrained in the minds of believers by priestcraft "the dominion which the clergy has usurped over minds by pretending to have exclusive possession of the means of grace". (Kant, 1998: 190) If there is such a thing as saintly life, it consists merely in the subject's respect for the moral law: "the highest goal of the moral perfection of finite creatures, never completely attainable by human beings, is, however, the love of the Law". (Kant, 1998: 146)

One can however find an instance of the possibility of unveiling a flicker of grace: "It is presumptuous to require that more be made manifest to us, and if this were to happen, we must not regard it as a universal human need" (Kant, 1998: 145). As for Coleridge, the 'ban' on anything that might suggest enthusiasm or mysticism is pregnant. However, both authors, and especially Coleridge find it difficult to reconcile the private, individual religious experience with the universal principles of Reason. Both philosophers seem 'stuck' between acknowledging the authenticity of religious expression and its place within the boundaries of Reason.

2.2. Theism versus Christology

Kant envisages a moral republic (or an ethical community) that pays no lip service to God, but lives by the moral law alone. The only God suitable for such a republic is a monotheistic God, keeper of the human race, reigning over people with benevolence and keeping watch as a father would. God also presides over his saintly laws, because He is also a just Judge. (cf. Kant, 1998: 114) What makes Kant a theist is also his belief in the existence of an evil principle in the world. The overall consensus is that Christian theists agree on the omnipotence, wisdom and mercifulness of God and that He acts upon Creation. Also, a principle of evil is thought to exist, although the Fall hypothesis is not recognized. Kant's rational theism seems to rest on the assumption that God is the highest moral principle. A moral religion is thus foregrounded, an insufficient proof of belief for a believer of Coleridge's sort, in favour of a spiritualized theism.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, one cannot align Kant with the supporters of an Augustinian anthropology of the Fall of Man, as he is still aware of the Medieval 'degrees of sin' doctrine: fragility (*fragilitas*), impurity (*impuritas*), corruption (*corruptio*). (cf. Kant 53-54)

Concerning the doctrine of Original Sin, Kant believes it to be the most inappropriate representation of the origin of flaws in human nature: "Whatever the nature, however, of the origin of moral evil in the human

being, of all the ways of representing its spread and propagation through the members of our species and in all generations, the most inappropriate is surely to imagine it as having come to us by way of inheritance from our first parents". (Kant, 1998: 62)

Alasdair Macintyre considers that Kant thought the original sin thesis to be erroneous because "at any point in human history it is already present" and that "its rational origin must remain inscrutable". (Macintyre, 2006: 26) However, Kant uses the word "innocence" to convey a "fall" in our moral principles. Action consists in a free exercise, not subjected to causes intrinsic or extrinsic to Man: "Every evil action must be considered, whenever we seek its rational origin, as if the human being had fallen into it directly from the state of innocence. For whatever his previous behaviour may have been, whatever the natural causes influencing him, whether they are inside or outside them, his action is yet free and not determined through any of these causes; hence the action must always be judged as an *original* exercise of his power of choice". (Kant, 1998: 62-63)

There are also convergences between Kant's theism and more orthodox Christian views on morality. As far as Macintyre is concerned, "human beings, whose original predisposition is to good, are always apt to corrupt that predisposition in multifarious and unpredictable ways and must be held accountable for so doing". (Macintyre, 2006: 26)

At this point, it is worth drawing a comparison between Kant's strict brand of theism and Coleridge's opinion that Christology plays an important part in spiritual religion. Coleridge's creed is exposed in Aphorism VII, in the third part of *Aids to Reflection*, the one dedicated to 'Aphorisms on Spiritual Religion'. Coleridge emphasizes that "a Means of Salvation has been effected and provided for the human race in the person of Jesus Christ". (Coleridge, 2005: 130) Secondly, by Repentance and Faith we can be worthy of the benefit of being saved. Thirdly, our atonement can only be provided by our communion with the Holy Spirit, who is a "living and spiritual principle, a seed of life capable of surviving this natural life, and of existing in a divine and immortal state". (Coleridge, 2005: 130)

The last of the seven articles of Coleridge's creed has to do with an indirect denial of the Calvinistic predestination thesis: God "will finally judge us with a merciful consideration of our infirmities" coupled with "a gracious acceptance of our sincere though imperfect strivings, a forgiveness of our defects by the perfect righteousness, of the Man Christ Jesus". (Coleridge, 2005: 131) Furthermore, one of Coleridge's most frequent analogies between Jesus and the symbols used to portray Him in the New Testament, the philosopher uses the Bread of Life symbol, present in the Book of John. The implication is, for Coleridge, Christ is symbolically present within the community that commemorates Him. Kant's account of God as the father of

an ethical commonwealth is similar to that offered by the Old Testament. Without a stress on *grace* however, the relationship between Man on the one hand, and Jesus and the Holy Spirit on the other hand is, unfortunately, lost.

2.3. Morality and spiritual religion

In a passage from one of his letters from 1817, Coleridge portrays Kant as a Stoic as far as his system of ethics is concerned: “I reject Kant's stoic principle, as false, unnatural, and even immoral, wherein his Critik der Practischen Vernun[f]t he treats the affections as indifferent ... in ethics, and would persuade us that a man disliking, and without any feeling of Love for, Virtue yet acted virtuously, because and only because it was his Duty, is more worthy of our esteem, than the man whose affections were aidant to, and congruous with, his Conscience”. (Coleridge, 1971: 791-92)

Christianity, Coleridge states, moralizes the affections, (cf. Coleridge, 2005: 96) whereas Kant acknowledges the role of the affections in morality only to the extent to which they are an aid to shaping moral maxims. Morality itself is however a domain to which Coleridge assigns an intermediary place between prudence and spiritual religion. The main role of prudence is to prohibit actions: “Thou shalt not is the characteristic formula”. (Coleridge, 2005: 12) As for morality, it represents “the service and ceremonial (cultus exterior) of the Christian religion”. (Coleridge, 2005: 13) Another comparison Coleridge makes use of in order to stress the extrinsic, thus inferior role of morality compared to spirituality, is the following: “Morality is the body, of which the faith in Christ is the soul”. (Coleridge, 2005: 14)

Morality is also representable in Time and Space, whereas the Spiritual originates its actions in itself. (cf. Coleridge, 2005: 44) Through his implicit reading of Kant, Coleridge identifies what could be dubbed the key ‘weakness’ in the Kantian system of morality – namely its anchoring in the *hic et nunc*, whereas the Spiritual occupies an empty intellectual realm that is not preoccupied with the data of the senses. Rudolf Otto’s category of *the Numinous* is for Coleridge *the Spiritual*, an arena for the potential manifestation of Revelation: “Where the evidence of the senses fails us, and beyond the precincts of sensible experience, there is no reality attributable to any notion, but what is given to it by Revelation, or the Law of Conscience, or the necessary interests of Morality”. (Coleridge, 2005: 109)

Yet another argument for Spiritual religion as opposed to a simply moral allegiance to religion is rendered in the following excerpt: “It is comparatively easy to persuade men of the necessity of an amendment of conduct; it is more difficult to make them see the necessity of Repentance in the Gospel sense, the necessity of a change in the principle of action”. (Coleridge, 2005: 106)

The quotes from Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection* are meant to demonstrate that morality is not the proper ground of revealed religion. Unlike spiritual religion, morality can be appropriated by Deist as the Earl of Shaftesbury had done. In his approach, morality was Pagan, lacking any anchoring in the grace of God. (cf. Coleridge, 2005: 128)

3. Conclusion

But should moral religion and spiritual religion be conceived as mutually exclusive terms? If that should be the case, we might find Coleridge's account of enthusiasm an unfair one. However, spiritual religion is not mysticism or fanaticism. Referring to the lives of the fathers of the English Protestant Reformation such as Cranmer or the Cambridge Platonist Thomas More, Coleridge observes that their lives are not miraculous, but spiritual. What is not merely natural and yet not assumed to be miraculous must be termed spiritual. (cf. Coleridge, 2005: 64)

Tim Milnes is one critic who tries to meet Coleridge on Kantian grounds. In his book *Knowledge and Indifference in English Romantic Prose*, Tim Milnes maintains that English Romanticism "develops an alternating pattern of engagement with, and abstention from philosophical argument". (Milnes, 2003: 3) For instance, Coleridge is an example of this tendency in foundational texts to use terms such as first principles, grounds and ends. One of Coleridge's incentives to push the limits of Reason further than Kant had allowed them to centers on his belief that Kant meant more than he let us believe when referring to his noumenon. (cf. Milnes, 2003: 151) Transcendental idealism refers to Kant's thesis according to which one only has knowledge of 'phenomena', or reality-as-appearance. The object as it is in itself, the 'noumenon', is inaccessible to us precisely because what is 'given' to the senses as the raw material of sensation cannot become experience without the mediation of the *a priori* forms of intuition and concepts of understanding. (Milnes, 2003: 150)

Another appealing comparative study on Kant and Coleridge's religious views is Elinor Shaffer's article entitled "Metaphysics of Culture: Kant's and Coleridge's *Aids to Reflection*". While both philosophers want to ground Christianity in a rational sphere, (cf. Shaffer, 1970: 217) they attempt to explain the role of spiritual, non-rational exercises of faith, the so-called aids to reflection. The difficulty however lies in explaining manifestations of belief such as prayer, baptism or church-going undogmatically. The other option is the *reflective* approach to these "supernatural aids". (Shaffer, 1970: 211) Consequently, the question Coleridge and Kant want to provide an answer for is: "How may the reason make use of supernatural aids which are admittedly necessary to morality, yet may be held only reflectively and never dogmatically?". (Shaffer, 1970: 211) Of the two philosophers, Coleridge is

bent on believing in supernatural aids, while Kant could be better classified as a Deist, believing in the Reason-based existence of God.

As stated before, morality has its own, unique role to play in the construction of the Christian subject. By following the analogy suggested earlier in this subchapter, morality is the body, while the spiritual is the soul. Although the two terms may not be mutually exclusive, that does not mean that the two terms are not in a state of tension. Coleridge envisages the threefold ascent from prudence to morality and from morality to spiritual religion. In the “Moral and Religious Aphorisms” section of *Aids to Reflection*, Coleridge discusses the transition from morality to spirituality. The vocabulary used by Coleridge privileges those terms from the category of ‘emotion’ marginalized by Kant: “stirrings of the heart”, “inward state”, “blank misgivings”: (Coleridge, 2005: 64) “these very convictions [that there is more to religion than morality], when accompanied by correspondent dispositions and stirrings of the heart, are among the marks and indications of such a state?”. (Coleridge, 2005: 64)

The transition from morality to spiritual religion is focused on the experience of the unwilling skeptics, who, irrespective of their doubts concerning religion “may, nevertheless, betoken the commencement of a Transition from a not irreligious Morality to a Spiritual Religion”. (Coleridge, 2005: 64) Furthermore, in order to be godly, one has to transcend morality. How this can actually be achieved, Coleridge does not tell the readers. He only offers some aids, implying that a perfected self belongs outside the sphere of the purely moral, pagan morality.

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