

The Role of Religion in Kant's Early Ethics Lectures

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1. Kant and Herder

Konigsberg in the early 1760's brought together, at formative moments in their careers, two figures who would go on to be among the most important philosophers of the late 18th and early 19th centuries: Johann Gottfried von Herder and Immanuel Kant. At this time, Kant was a "Magister" in his late 30's, in the midst of figuring out what kind of an intellectual he wanted to be. As a Magister, Kant could teach courses at the University of Konigsberg but had to advertise his courses at his expense and received no salary from the University. His income was based on his classes' popularity as he charged students fees. While he sought a Professorship to provide a fixed salary and time for his philosophical work, Kant worked on developing his own philosophical stance and teaching interesting classes well.

Enter Herder, a seventeen-year-old, shy, rural student with amazing philosophical acumen and the style and diligence to excel.¹ From a poor family, Herder was discovered by a Russian army doctor who helped him get to Konigsberg, where he received a small stipend teaching at Kant's former primary school while attending the University (first for medicine, later for philosophy). Kant took interest in Herder from the start, and Herder attended every course that Kant offered during the years he was at Konigsberg. Kant allowed him to attend his courses for free (no small consideration for either of them) and came to identify Herder as his star pupil. Among the fruits of Herder's attendance in those lectures is a set of lecture notes in ethics, metaphysics, logic, and even physics and mathematics.²

All accounts of Kant as a lecturer during these years are glowing. Herder himself gives some of the best descriptions of what attracted himself, and countless other students, to Kant's classrooms:

From his eloquent mouth flowed pleasant speech, rich in thought. A joke, a witty remark, humor, he used them always to good effect and at the right moment, remaining serious amid the general hilarity ... His lectures were fascinating discourses, he would speak of an author and one could see his mind at work, probing further and further, and yet, in the three years I attended his lectures daily I never noticed in him the smallest sign of arrogance ... I heard his evaluations of Leibniz, Newton, Wolff, Crusius, Baumgarten, Helvétius, Hume, Rousseau, some of them then very new names; it is remarkable that when he dealt with them

¹ This account of Herder draws from Zammito 2002: 138ff.

² These lectures notes are often incomplete. For portions of them, see 27:3-89 (ethics); 28:5-166, 843-941 (metaphysics); 24:3-6, 1099-1102 (logic); and 29:49-71 (math and physics).

his sole aim was a noble search for truth, a beautiful enthusiasm for everything that was best in man, a ceaseless, dispassionate desire to imitate what was best and greatest.³

At the same time, Kant's writings covered an exceptionally wide variety of topics and genres, from a satire on metaphysics to an elegant and popular essay on the feelings of the beautiful and sublime to a detailed "proof of the existence of God" to complex works in logic and natural sciences.

Strikingly, the end of Herder's time at the University of Königsberg coincided with the first offer of a Professorship to Kant. But this was not the professorship in logic and metaphysics Kant would accept six years later, but a professorship in rhetoric and poetry that he turned down. That Kant was offered such a professorship shows a significant part of why Herder was attracted to him. That Kant turned it down signaled the direction his philosophical development would progress, a development from more popularly-oriented, observational, informal philosophizing rich in feeling to the rigorous, systematic, rational philosophy for which he became famous, a development that would take him further and further from his former student.

Elsewhere, I have discussed more general issues with Kant's moral philosophy during this period,⁴ and others have discussed the evolving relationship between Kant and Herder.⁵ In the rest of this chapter, I focus on one particular topic: the roles of religion in Kant's early ethics, particularly as that ethics is reflected in the lectures Herder transcribed,⁶ and particularly with respect to the problems of moral *motivation* with which Kant was particularly engaged.

2. The Problem of Motivation in Kant's Early Ethics

During the 1760's, two of Kant's central concerns were ethics and the philosophy of religion. He lectured on ethics throughout this period, wrote on ethics in both a "Prize Essay" entitled *An Inquiry into the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morality* and his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, and voraciously read whatever he could of the ethical writings of Wolff, Baumgarten, Hutcheson, Shaftesbury, Rousseau, and others. During the same period, Kant published his *Only Possible Argument for the Existence of God* (1762), *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics* (a parody of rationalist metaphysics by means of comparing it to Swedenborg's spiritism, published in 1766), and an "Essay on the Maladies of the Head" (1764) that was, at least in part, a response to the increasingly popularity of a Polish religious fanatic who had recently appeared outside of Königsberg. Both aspects of the philosophy of this early Kant reflected, as Herder put it, a "mind at work, probing further and further," rather than the (relatively) settled views of the Kant who would become famous for his "Critical" philosophy.

With respect to ethics, the view of the early Kant were preliminary in several respects. First, the Kant of the 1760's had not yet figured out the proper source for moral laws. As he puts it in his Prize Essay, "The ultimate fundamental concepts of obligation need to be determined more reliably" (2:300). In seeking to determine the concepts of obligation, Kant was influenced

³ See Zammito 2002:142-143.

⁴ Frierson 2012.

⁵ Zammito 2002.

⁶ For Herder's reliability as transcriber of Kant, see Zammito 2002:148-9.

by both rationalist-perfectionist moral theories (including Baumgarten's) that find moral content in rational principles, particularly the requirement to promote perfection (in oneself or others or both), and moral sentimentalists such as Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, who focus on moral feeling as the source of moral norms (2:300). But religion – and in particular God's commands – might seem to provide another possible route to moral justification and content. Kant discusses this possibility during the 1760's as a philosopher still searching for a source of morality, rather than – as later – one who has settled on such a source.

Along with this concern about the nature and justification of moral laws, Kant is deeply concerned with the problem of moral *motivation*. Kant has not yet settled on what an appropriate and sufficient motivation for moral actions would be. He is drawn towards “moral feeling” as both a determinant of content and a moral motive, but he struggles with how to articulate the nature of this feeling. For instance, while he considers the possibility that natural benevolence or complaisance might be “raised to its proper universality” (2:216) and in that sense provide some motive, he is skeptical about the force of any such universalized sentiments, pointing out that such properly universal feelings are “colder” (2:216): “He who loves the Tartar, loves not his neighbor” (27:67). Alternatively, Kant considers the importance of sympathy (see especially 27:3) and even a repulsion from the “immediate ugliness” of vice (2: 300, see too 20:24, 85, 93) as possible ways of making sense of the moral motive. Nonetheless, Kant is not wholly satisfied, and he continues to seek a proper formulation of how we can be morally motivated. In the absence of a well-worked-out account of “respect for the moral law” as the sole properly moral motive (e.g., 4:400-402, 5:71ff.), Kant is open – at least in principle – to the possibility of religious motives for moral actions.

In addition to these general problems of moral justification and motivation, Kant is occupied in the 1760's with developing a properly *human* ethical theory, one that teaches “how properly to fulfill one's station in creation, and to rightly understand what one must be in order to be a human being” (*Remarks*, 20:41). In contrast to his insistence in the *Groundwork* that “a law, if it is to hold morally ... must ... not hold only for human beings” (4:389), Kant emphasizes in the Herder lectures,

the *highest morality* is not on a par with the *moral level* of man ... [W]e should investigate the degree of morality that is suited to human beings ... An ethic for the human being, *determined* in his nature, by his knowledge, powers and capacities, has yet to be written. For by reason we can also discern rational perfections that are suitable, indeed, for a higher being, but not for him. (27:61-2)

This problem is relevant to both moral content and moral motivation. With respect to the latter, for example, the problem with universalizing benevolence is not a problem *in principle*, but rather for beings *like us*. Thus Kant aims for a *realistic* account of moral motivation, which leads to a concern with humans' moral imperfections, particularly that we are assailed by temptations to which we frequently succumb. Kant seeks an account of the moral motivation that can strengthen us against those temptations.

Moreover, with respect to motivational issues, Kant further narrows his interest by focusing not only human nature in pristine purity but on human beings *in society*. In this respect, Kant is heavily influenced by Rousseau, even while explicitly contrasting his approach with Rousseau's: “*Rousseau* ... starts from the natural human being, I ... start from the civilized one“

(20:14). And this starting point leads to even more pressing problems with moral motivation, since the temptations for the civilized human are, as Kant emphasizes throughout the Herder lectures, more pressing than for the natural human: “In the savage state, instincts are enough ... In civil society, where the needy have multiplied, ... feeling is much weakened ... [and t]he civilized man is much constrained by self-serving artificial desires” (27:58).⁷ One result of the focus on the civil condition is an increased role for religion. For Kant, religion is not necessary for morality: “the Hottentots ... possess moral feeling” (27:11) and “in the state of nature there is less occasion for religion ... [In] the first state of things ... [people] are ... morally good without God” (27:76). Kant condemns the moralist who “presupposes comforts, honour, etc., though that is unnatural [and] extends duties contrary to nature” (27:63). Such people “fabricate false virtues,” since “those that are *appropriate* to the *natural* man are too *elevated* and hyperbolic for the *artificial* one” (27:64). In some cases, the motivational problems of the civil condition can arise *from* religion, as when one “derives marriage not from the sexual impulse but from the command of God” (27:63-4). But Kant sees importance for religion in the context of the civil condition’s increased moral temptations:

when many of his comforts turn into necessities, [the human being’s] impulses gain the upper hand, so that morality becomes too weak, and the religion of nature does not suffice. For this, more understanding and philosophical reflection are required, than can be expected of the whole human race. So it has to be complemented by a revelation. (27:74-5)

Religion, even in the form of special revelation, is needed to counteract the morally weakening effects of the civil condition.

For the early Kant, then, moral motivation is a serious problem. Most fundamentally, Kant is trying to figure out the nature of moral motivation in general. Having not yet isolated “respect for the moral law” as the sole moral incentive (see 4:400), Kant needs an account of what moral motivation *in general* is like. But Kant is also occupied during this period with thinking through a properly *human* ethics. And, under the influence of Rousseau, he is particularly concerned with motivational problems arising from the luxury, excess, and moral corruption of “civilization.” For all of these motivational issues, Kant turns to a variety of different possible incentives to moral action, including certain feelings such as sympathy or complaisance, an innate aversion to moral ugliness, and – of central concern in this paper – to various forms of religious motivation.

In the next two sections, I focus on several positive roles for religion. First, while religion will not be *the* moral motive, it can provide a “new motivating ground ... derived from God’s *arbitrium*” (27:11), which can *directly* cooperate with more purely moral motives. Second, religious motivation can be a “preparatory” motive conducive to ethics (27:14), particularly in the context of the motivational problems caused by the moral limits and failings of civilized human beings. This preparatory function provides the framework for understanding two indirect roles of religion in moral motivation. Religion helps cultivate the resignation required to dampen the corrupting influence of luxury on desire, and if considered properly, it

⁷ In this context, Kant suggests the need for rational bases of morals: “pity is here replaced by the concept of what is *right* . . . ; here virtue becomes calm and rational, and no longer remains a mere animal instinct” (27:58). But the same problems in the civil condition that lead Kant to shift from pity to reason also lead him to an increased role for religion in moral motivation.

prevents moral despair without fostering lazy self-confidence. In the next section, I take up the direct role of religion in moral motivation. In section 4, I discuss the two indirect ways it prepares for morals. And in my conclusion, I briefly discuss some of the ways that religion goes wrong.

3. Religion and Moral Motivation 1: Direct Religious Motivation

As we have seen, Kant in the 1760s has not yet settled on a definitive account of moral motivation, so there is at least some room for considering religion as *the* moral motive. However, even before he has settled on “respect,” Kant makes clear that religion cannot provide the legitimate *primary* motive for fulfilling moral obligations: “the ethical motivating grounds should always be moral ... [and] must be drawn solely from noble, virtuous and free choice” (27:14). Thus religion has nothing to offer in terms of satisfying Kant’s desire for a clear explanation of the nature of moral feeling. In this sense (and, as we’ll see, in another as well), religion is strikingly similar to two “sort[s] of kindly feeling which [are] to be sure beautiful and lovable but still not the foundation of a genuine virtue” (2:216). As discussed in his *Observations* (published at the same time he was giving the Herder lectures), these feelings – sympathy and complaisance in particular – can be “weak” and “blind” and, when present as one’s primary motives, “only contingently agree with” virtue (2:215). Thus while beautiful, neither sympathy nor complaisance – nor, it turns out, religion – can solve Kant’s problem of discerning the primary moral motive.

To get clearer on why religion cannot function as the primary moral motive, it is necessary to get a sense for Kant’s attitudes during this period towards the relationship between moral obligations and divine commands. Importantly, at this stage, Kant could in principle be open to a divine command theory of moral duties. In these lectures, Kant asks explicitly, “Can we, even without presupposing God’s existence and His *arbitrium*, derive all obligations from within?” (27:9) and “Should Christian ethics precede the philosophical or vice versa” (27:15). But the Kant of the Herder lectures – like the Kant of the *Groundwork* – already answers the former question “in the affirmative” (27:9), saying that “the *natural* must justly precede” (27:15). Kant’s justification for the priority of non-religious grounds for obligations hinges on his distinction between what is good “in a physical sense” and what is genuinely morally good. Physical goods are conducive to our physical well-being, but not in themselves morally good. Given this distinction, Kant explains several related but distinct reasons that the content of our obligations must be derived “from within”⁸ rather than from God’s choice. All reasons depend on the fact that “From the *arbitrium divinum* I cannot myself obtain the relevant concepts of the good, unless the concept of the morally good be assumed beforehand” (27:9). Thus even “the judgment as to the perfection of God’s *arbitrium* presupposes the investigation of moral perfection. Otherwise, the sheer *arbitrium* of God is good merely in a physical sense” (27:9). That is, without a prior standard of goodness, God has only the “good” of a strong ruler or a Creator, neither of which is intrinsically moral.

⁸ The “within” that these obligations are derived from is not yet pure practical reason. In these early lectures, Kant discusses knowledge of obligations coming from “the nature of things” (27:7, 8), “moral feeling” (e.g. 27:4-6, 10, cf. 2:300), and a direct awareness of moral perfection (27:13). For further discussion, see Shell and Velkley 2012.

Kant goes further, however, highlighting the moral impotence of purely religious motives:

Supposing the *arbitrium* of God to be known to me, where is the necessity that I should do it, if I have not already derived the obligation from the nature of the case? God wills it - why should I? He will punish me; in that case it is injurious, but not in itself wicked; that is how we obey a despot; in that case the act is no sin, in the strict sense, but politically imprudent ... Without the prior assumption of obligation, punishments come to nothing; what God displays is merely ill-will (27:9-10)

Even if we knew that God's will was morally perfect, we would need some concept of obligation that tells us to obey morally perfect wills, lest our obedience, even to a morally perfect God, be merely obedience as to a despot, obedience out of physical but not moral grounds. Moreover, even the notion of "obligation" itself depends upon human beings having a volitional structure susceptible to intrinsically normative necessitation. As Kant explains,

The revealed ethic, if it is to be practical, must ground itself upon the motives of the *natural* ethic. Like any revelation, it presupposes natural powers, e.g. capacities of the soul that are fit for the purpose. Otherwise, it would be at most a miraculously transforming book; but in fact it is a book that *lays obligations* upon us, and presupposes instruments and receptivity in the face of revealed religion. (27:16)

Here Kant is considering a divine influence on behavior that need not be mediated by pursuits of physical goods but might even be the result of "divine inspiration and influence" (27:10) such as through a holy book. But in whatever way God were to influence a person, unless such an influence proceeded by means of *natural powers* conducive to a sense of obligation, it would not *obligate* but only control. For Kant, then, obedience to God can be morally good only when it is *secondary* to a more fundamental "deriv[ation] of all obligations from within" (27:9).

Nonetheless, despite all his arguments that internal grounds of obligation precede divine commands, Kant argues that religion in general and a sense of divine commands in particular are morally important: "from [our concept of obligation] we come to God's power of choice" (27:9). While we must formulate a concept of obligation based on internal grounds alone, we can and should go on to see our obligations as originating from God's will. This conception of moral laws as also arising from divine commands is consistent with Kant's claims in his *Critiques* (see A819/B847, 5:129, 5:481) and with his claim in *Religion* that while "morality in no way needs religion," still "morality leads inevitably to religion" (6:3, 6). In the Herder lectures, however, this emphasis on "natural religion" is more pronounced, and Kant details why the "application of the divine arbitrium ... as a ground" of moral obligations constitutes "a part, but not the basic principle, of morality" (27:9).⁹

One possible argument for extending natural morals into natural religion is based on God's omnipotence as Creator: "since God ... is the ground of all things, this is also the case here" (27:9). Just as God creates the physical world, God is the source of moral obligations. But Kant limits the importance of the argument from omnipotence by siding with those who see God's *nature* rather than God's power of choice as the ground of morals: God "is indeed the ground of it, but not *per arbitrium*" (27:9). Rather, "since He is the ground of possibility, He is

⁹ In these lectures, Kant even entertains the idea that religion might give rise to duties (such as a strict prohibition on suicide) derived from "a **special** divine will" (27:30, see too 27:84).

also the material ground (since in Him all things are given) of geometrical truths and morality. In Him there is already morality, therefore, and so His choice is not the ground” (27:10, cf. 2:100f.). Thus the argument from God’s creative omnipotence is *not* Kant’s primary argument for recognizing the importance of divine *law*.

Consistent with his later rejection of rational-theological proofs of God in favor of morally-practical proofs,¹⁰ Kant replaces what is a primarily metaphysical-theological basis for grounding ethics in divine commands, with a moral-practical one:

morality is incomplete, if all grounds of obligation are not included, ... [s]o the *arbitrium divinum* should never be left out ... [since then] our moral perfection becomes incomplete, if it arises solely from inner morality, and is considered without reference to God's *arbitrium*. In the absence of the latter, my action is already still moral, indeed, but not so completely good, morally, as when it conforms to all grounds. Those who attend solely to the *arbitrium Dei* are considering merely their liability to the *jus naturae divinum*; but we should attend also to the inner morality, and consider obligation as well. *Ethica rationalis*: the one without the other is not universal morality, and indeed far less than this; we are virtuous already from the nature of the case, pious only in having regard to the *arbitrium divinum*. (27:10)

At this stage in his reflections on moral philosophy, Kant still allows that moral perfection can have multiple, irreducible elements. For better understanding how this notion of “all grounds of obligation” works in the context of religion, one key difference between Kant’s early ethics and his later is particularly salient. While Kant’s moral philosophy from the *Groundwork* on emphasized the importance of *purity* in moral motivation, no such emphasis was present in his early ethics. Thus the possibility of co-operating moral motivating grounds was discussed throughout these early works. In the *Observations*, for example, even while rejecting sympathy and complaisance as *the* moral motive, Kant goes on to insist that these feelings are genuinely “moral [*moralischen*] qualities” (2:215) that have a “kinship” with virtue (2:217). Moreover, “to the extent that they harmonize with virtue, [they] may also be regarded as noble” (2:215) and when they are properly proportioned, they even “bring about the noble attitude that is the beauty of virtue,” warranting for themselves the title “adopted virtues” (2:217). In sharp contrast with the emphasis in the *Groundwork* on displaying duty in all its purity, Kant is interested throughout his early ethics in showing how virtue as a whole, while it requires a purely moral motivating ground, is enriched by quasi-moral qualities that are part of completed human virtue.

In the Herder lectures, this importance of combining the pure moral motive (whatever that will turn out to be) with other motivating grounds is particularly important with respect to religious motivations. Just as one who is virtuous but also sympathetic has a beautiful virtue, in the religious case, Kant allows that while someone who does their duty for its own sake is “already still moral,” someone who *also* does it because God commands it is better, and better in way that can be called “moral.” Both rational and theological ethics are incomplete when isolated:

To disregard the one [the inner grounds of obligation] is wicked; to disregard the other [divine commands], godless; the former are moral errors, the latter, sins; the former concern

¹⁰ But cf. his *Only Possible Demonstration of the Existence of God*, published in 1762-3 (2:63-163).

the moral teacher, the latter, the preacher; the one wishes to have people morally good, the other wants their moral goodness to be complete. (27:10)

Just as sympathy and complaisance make virtue kindly, beautiful, and lovable, attention to moral laws as divine commands makes virtue pious and reverential: “Thus in their highest stages, all morally good actions are religious acts” (27:17).

The only indication in this particular part of the lectures as to how, precisely, recognizing moral obligations as divine commands “completes” ethics is a repeated emphasis on the divine will as an *external* ground of duty: “the *arbitrium divinum* is a ground of external obligation for our morality, so the *arbitrium divinum* should never be left out, as an external obligating ground” (27:10). But given his prior argument against obeying God merely for “physical” reasons, it is not clear why this external ground should be necessary or even helpful for completing one’s moral perfection. Kant even warns that “He who has a notion of the external obligation, without the inner, sees the motivating grounds as tasks, which do not make him moral at all, but merely politically crafty” (27:10).

One explanation for the importance of adding religion to morals that is more consistent with Kant’s overall account derives from the importance of morality as the proper means of relating to an all-good God and more generally towards harmony with morality in the world as a whole. Kant explains,

this new and higher morality ... contains a relationship [*Verhältnis*] to the greatest supreme rule, which is the ground of everything, and thus constitutes the greatest harmony ... I must first abstract my actions from the divine will, in order even to recognize the goodness of that will. But once I have perceived it with sufficient abundance, exactitude and vividness, it becomes the supreme basis, (1) because the knowledge is then noble, and (2) because it provides the highest degree of vividness ... When a man then rises to the highest level, that shows him as God's supreme instrument. (27:17-18)

Kant is thoroughly suspicious of grounding moral obligation on divine commands in a way that would make obedience to such commands a matter of fear of punishment. Hence even this passage is *primarily* focused on arguing that “this new and higher morality is only brought in afterwards” and thus that “our author's [Baumgarten’s] method is incorrect, since it begins from religion, whereas it ought to have started from a morality, which would then be increasingly purified” (27:17-18). But Kant also suggests a different sort of obedience to the divine will, one aiming for a harmonious cooperation with God. One first recognizes what is morally good, then turns to a recognition of those obligations as flowing from the good will of a wholly good God. And then one obeys that God not out of fear of physical punishment but out of awe and love towards a supreme goodness whereby one comes to see oneself as an instrument of that supreme goodness.

In this context of obedience to God as a moral motive, Kant works out, in some detail, different sorts of “fear of God,” explaining that one can (and should) “be moved by a morally perfect sublimity” while pointing out that this “reverence ... can actually suppress love” in some contexts. Some have a “*fearfulness towards God [Furcht vor Gott]*” that is “*servile*” and “recoils from actions because of punishment” (27:32-33). This servile fear “diminishes love; for as soon as we see somebody against us, a degree of love is eliminated; who loves anyone, insofar as he

punishes us?” But one can, instead of this fearfulness, have a proper “*fear of God* [*Furcht Gottes*] (i.e. awe) ... that can coexist with love, ... [and] is thus an *awe coupled with love*.” In that context, “We guard against God’s displeasure because of His beautiful and sublime qualities; but not, to that extent, from fear; it is ourselves we are in fear of, for we would ... be hateful in our own eyes” (27:31-32). One who properly understands the goodness of God seeks to avoid actions that displease God, not from fear of possible punishment by God, but out of that awe mixed with love that would find it hateful to displease God. The result is a will that does what is good *because* it is good but *also* because it is the good decree of a good God with whom my will is in “harmony.” Insofar as we raise moral feeling through religion, we not only reach “the highest degree of such sensation” of God, but we also attain “the whole *summa* of morality” (27:19).¹¹

Raising morals to the level of religion, then, adds piety to morality, putting one who acts out of moral motives as well as obedience to divine commands into harmony with supreme goodness and a right relationship of awe and love for God. While one could, in principle, act merely from inner grounds of moral motivation without any regard for God’s will, such actions would be “godless” or “sins” and thus one’s moral goodness would be incomplete (27:10). Incorporating religion into one’s motives recognizes moral laws as not *merely* natural laws but also positive laws of a supreme lawgiver. Kant exhorts, “Try especially to always couple the idea of God with your morality; first with your *natural* moral feeling, so that your immediate liking for the good becomes, in the light of God, religion. Try also to make the idea of God *dominant* in the *depths* of the soul” (27:23).

4. Religion and Moral Motivation 2: *Indirect Religious Motivation*

The last section emphasized the direct quasi-moral importance of being motivated by religious considerations, but for Kant, religious motives are particularly relevant given human moral limitations,¹² which lead Kant to several indirect ways religion functions to combat these imperfections. In discussing “external” motives, Kant explains that while “ethical motivating grounds should always be moral and not merely practical as physical means,” nonetheless these merely “subjectively motivating grounds” can “become *mediately* motivating grounds ... [and] are very good, and often *preparatory to ethics*” (27:14, second emphasis added). Again, the case with religion in the Herder lectures parallels Kant’s earlier discussion of sympathy and complaisance in his *Observations*, where he noted,

¹¹ In line with his emphasis on moral feeling during this period, Kant even argues that moral feeling – which he identifies with “conscience” – is all that is left of what was once “the immediately clear sensation of the divine presence,” a sensation that was “not symbolic, but intuitive; not from inference but from sensation.” As he explains,

With us, perhaps, the broadest and vaguest concept thereof still resides, even now, in conscience. If we directly improve our moral feeling, we approach the divine presence in sensation; so maybe such people again develop the image [of God], although their spiritual utterances sound fanatical; and religion elevates us to the highest degree of such sensation ... This is true morality; a part of it already precedes all religion, but a part is greatly enhanced by religion. (27:19)

¹² See e.g. 27:9: “*For one who has not wholly fulfilled his obligation*, morality is incomplete, if all grounds of obligation are not included” (emphasis added).

In recognition of the weakness of human nature and the little power that the universal moral feeling exercises over most hearts, providence has placed such helpful drives in us as supplements for virtue, which move some to beautiful actions even without principles while at the same time being able to give others, who are ruled by these principles, a greater impetus and a stronger impulse thereto. (2:217)

In the Herder lectures, Kant even more clearly connects the need for preparatory motives with human imperfection:

Everyone, to be sure, has need, in part, of *sensitive jucunda* [sensitively pleasing], and in part of *sensitive molesta* [sensitively displeasing], even for *moral* actions. For our moral feelings are so buried away under the sensuous, and the sensory motivating grounds thus make it easier for the soul subsequently to make its decisions on principle. By those principles which outweigh the sensory motives, we are brought nearer, as it were, to the domain of morality. This extends, not merely to the teaching of ethics, but also to education and religion (27:14-15)

Like Kant's much later discussion of respect for the moral law (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*), moral motivation involves a suppression of sensory motives for the sake of morally good action. But whereas the respect of the *Critique of Practical Reason* partly *consists in* the humbling of sensory motives, in these earlier lectures, this suppression is *preparatory* to moral motivation and can be the result of other sensory motivating grounds. Thus Kant considers various motives, including religious ones, as not-strictly-moral means by which one outweighs sensuous motives in order to give properly moral motives greater influence. In addition to functioning as a direct motive to morally good actions, then, religion can serve as an indirect preparation for morality that "makes it easier" for properly moral motivations to function. While Kant discusses several indirect roles for religion, this section focuses on two of the most important: the cultivation of resignation and the alleviation of moral despair.

One of the main problems with the civil condition is the proliferation of "self-serving artificial desires" (27:58) where "comforts turn into necessities" (27:74), so one of the most important roles of religion within Kant's early ethics is the cultivation of a resignation to God's providential care that loosens attachments to objects of particular desires by shifting focus towards the good of the whole. Kant explains, in detail, how the civil condition erodes morally proper love for fellow human beings through the generation of "fanciful desires": "the more there is of excess [*üppigkeit*], the less there is of practical human love. For by excess we multiply in fancy our own needs, and thus make practical love *difficult*" (27:64). In response, Kant comments that "a person does not actively *love* another *until he is himself in a state of well-being*; since he is the *principium* of the other's good, let him first better himself" (27:64). Following the guidance of Rousseau (and earlier Epicureans), Kant rejects the model of "bettering himself" that would multiply *resources*. The attempt to put oneself in the condition to satisfy one's luxurious desires is ultimately self-defeating. Instead, "To make itself practical, [one should] puts oneself *at ease* with oneself, *making do with little*; and from this comes practical love ... hence in a condition of simplicity there will be much practical love, and in a state of luxury, little" (27:65). To prepare the way for genuinely moral motivation, one of the most essential steps for civilized human beings is to clear away the false sensuous incentives arising from fanciful excess.

For shifting attention away from fanciful desires and providing the “ease” needed to make love practical, religion can provide invaluable assistance. Kant claims that “resignation to the divine will is necessary” and really constitutes the proper form of “love of God” (27:26). In expanding upon the nature of this resignation, he explains,

Insofar as we regard all acts of God as the best means, to the best end, of happiness, we may be completely at ease. The great mutability of things, and the storms of my passions, can best be comforted by the thought that I am placed in the world, and placed there by supreme goodness, not for my own benefit; and however uncertain the order of nature may be, it is nevertheless under the supreme being; and in this way, then, *religion* alone may be completely reassuring. For even a naturally good and moral man must always tremble before *blind fate*. (27:25-6)

The importance of proper religion for resignation and calming the passions leads Kant to emphasize the nature of proper trust in God (27:28-9). We are to trust in God’s goodness for “the whole” rather than call on God to provide particular objects of present desire:

True trust is thus always connected to self-denial, as I am always convinced [that] I could not determine the measure of his goodness in an individual case, and the **greatest trust** is even connected with the **greatest resignation** because I still always trust God for the greatest goodness in the whole, although I don’t venture to specify this goodness in a particular case. (27:28)

For human beings naturally tempted to subordinate moral laws to sensuous temptations, and particularly by those in the civil condition with exaggerated and unnatural desires and a diffuse and weakened moral feeling, the shift of attention involved in genuine religion provides a healthy preparation for morality. Through genuine trust in God, one learns that the satisfaction of particular desires is not the highest good – “eternity serves ... to diminish the ills of this world” (27:44) – and one can thus allow oneself to be motivated by moral feeling.

A second important motivational problem, one present in morally imperfect human beings in general but particularly exacerbated by a civil condition that weakens moral resolve while heightening moral demands, is the problem of moral despair. Kant puts this point particularly clearly in the context of an argument for why the natural ethic must precede the Christian. There he explains,

the natural ethic shows us many obligations which are impossible *secundum quid*, and thus leads to the Christian ethic; the former creates the contradiction in man, that he *imputes* to himself something which he cannot omit; it creates the collision between impotence and the moral ordinance, which the Christian ethic reconciles. (27:15-16)

Kant’s immediate point, in context, is that we cannot make sense of why the elements of the Christian ethic (presumably various means of grace) are necessary without antecedently understanding humans’ incapacity to fulfill the obligations of the natural ethic.¹³ The corollary to this claim about the logical priority of natural ethics, however, is a point about the necessity of Christian ethics to “reconcile” the “collision” between our capacity and morality’s demands.

¹³ In this sense, he appeals back to the traditional theological argument-structure of Paul’s Letter to the Romans, where Paul uses the fact that the Gentiles have “the law written in their hearts” to justify the claim that “all have sinned” and must be “justified ... by Christ” (Romans 2:15, 3:23-24).

Kant does not lay out in detail how the Christian ethic solves this problem, but a later comment provides some clue: “a deficiency of confidence that God will improve our morality can make us [either] despairing or way too reliant on our own powers without dragging God into it” (27:29). Arguably, what Christianity¹⁴ can contribute to alleviating moral despair is the clear sense that God can and will improve our morality. This suggestion is confirmed by Kant’s later claim about the proper focus of appeals for divine aid:

The highest degree of connection with God as a means is when we utilize the divine will as a means to the betterment of our own morality. Julie says, for example: Our good actions are noticed by witnesses: - she uses God's will to better her morality; but to use it merely as a means to happiness is ignoble, and no religion. (27:18)

Just as in the case of providence and resignation, so here the role of religion is to provide aids to morally good actions. Julie¹⁵ does not, importantly, see God as a rewarder of happiness. Rather, she sees God as an aid to her own moral development, whether as an ever-present witness or, as Kant suggests later, as one who can “increase our moral perfection,” albeit not without our own effort (27:29). This awareness that God is present with assistance towards moral perfection can protect weak human beings from both arrogant complacency that ignores our own moral shortcomings and the despair that simply accepts them.

5. Conclusion: Moral dangers of religion

The Kant that shows up in the Herder lectures is deeply concerned with questions about religion and about moral motivation, and these come together into a theory of moral motivation that accords religious motives at least three important roles. Religion functions as a direct moral motive, one that must be combined with a purely moral internal motivating ground but that, when so combined, helps to complete morality by adding a further good motive, one that makes actions both good *and pious*. And religion functions indirectly as a preparation for pure moral motivation, both by cultivating resignation and by alleviating moral despair. Both of these indirect roles are particularly important for human beings corrupted by the luxury of the civil condition.

For Kant, of course, religion is not without its dangers, and much of Kant’s religious thought in the 1760’s is focused on moral dangers arising from bad forms of religion. Kant points out, for instance, how Julie’s noble supplication for divine assistance can become a “lazy trust” that “trusts God, so far as to despise external means” (27:29) and thus undermines rather than cultivating moral virtue. Unlike the admirable pleading of Julie for God to cooperate with her own efforts towards moral perfection, lazy trust expects God to take care of everyone for me, and in just the ways I want and expect (see too 27:30). Likewise “the *moralist* or *cleric*” can exacerbate rather than alleviate the problems of the civil condition when they “presuppose comforts, honour, etc., though that is unnatural” or “extend duties contrary to nature, e.g. by

¹⁴ To what extent this would apply to other religious systems is difficult to discern in the Herder lectures. Kant often emphasizes tolerance and religious pluralism but also seems to see some advantages of Christianity in particular.

¹⁵ See Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Julie, or the New Heloise*, published in 1761 and widely read (including by Kant).

deriving marriage, not from the sexual impulse, but from the command of God” (27:63-4). Here religion actually cooperates with the civil condition in both extending the range of our luxurious desires and in placing moral demands that are unnecessarily difficult to fulfill. And much of Kant’s discussion of the value of religious resignation focuses on exposing the dangers of “uses of religion not just for the chief end of religion [virtue] but also for a minor subordinate end” such as the satisfaction of particular desires (27:35).

Beyond these particular issues, the Herder lectures show significant preoccupation with four main ways in which religious thinking was going astray in his time. All of these reflect failures to recognize the proper role of religion as supplement to virtue, but in very different ways. Two – religious fanaticism/enthusiasm (e.g. 27: 21-24, 40) and religious intolerance (e.g. 27:73-78) – reflect a failure to sufficiently attend to natural morals as the primary basis of obligation, *replacing* morality with God rather than *supplementing* it with true religion. A third – empty theological speculation (27:19-20, 22) – focuses on theoretical claims about God without seeing the primarily *practical* import of religion. And a last – atheism – can reflect mere thoughtlessness about God, an excessive speculation, or a “moral ground” which is “very dangerous to society” (27:11, see too 27:37-38, 80). All of these issues are discussed with care in these lectures, and it is during this period that Kant begins – in the *Remarks* – to develop a notion of metaphysics as “a science of the limits of human reason” that “do[es] not remove useful certainty, but useless certainty” and “removes the appearance that can be harmful” (20:181). This general usefulness of metaphysics eventually comes to the fore with respect to the very religious threats Kant worries about in his early work. As he puts it in the *Critique of Pure Reason* over 15 years later, “Through criticism alone can we sever the very root of **materialism, fatalism, atheism**, of freethinking **unbelief**, of **enthusiasm** and **superstition**, and finally also of **idealism** and **skepticism**, which are more dangerous to the schools and can hardly be transmitted to the public” (Bxxxiv).