# Kant on Religious Moral Education

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## Abstract

While scholars are slowly coming to realize that Kant's moral philosophy
has a distinctive theory of moral education, the import of religion in such
education is generally neglected or even denied. This essay argues that
Kant's reflections on religion in parts II and III of *Religion within the
Boundaries of Mere Reason* interpret religion specifically as one aspect of
moral education, namely moral ascetics. After first clearly distinguishing
between a cognitive and a conative aspect of moral education, I show how
certain historical religious practices serve to provide the conative aspect of
moral education. Kant defines this aspect of moral education as practices
that render the human agent '*valiant* and *cheerful* in fulfilling his duties'
(*MS*, 6: 484). By this it is meant that certain practices can inspire moral
interests either by justifying rational hope in living up to a certain standard
of moral perfection (Christology) or by endeavouring to unite human
beings in a universal, invisible ethical community that inspires cooperation
rather than adversity (ecclesiology).

**Keywords:** education, religion, Christology, ecclesiology

The present essay illustrates and engages Immanuel Kant's views
regarding the moral-pedagogic relevance of certain religious practices.[1]
Despite the fact that he lectured on four separate occasions on pedagogy,
many readers would be rightly hesitant about ascribing positive views
regarding moral education to Kant in his moral philosophy. The two
traditional historical approaches to moral education appear, taken
separately, difficult to reconcile with Kant's system of moral motivation.
On the one hand, the inculcation of Aristotelian virtues aims at
cultivating an inner moral disposition through the outward repetition of
virtuous agency (habituation). This appears to be *prima facie* out of the
question since for Kant morality anchors onto an inner incentive that
cannot be determinedly taught or verified through external actions.

Furthermore, while Kant does suggest in the first *Critique* that there is an inferential relationship between empirical and noumenal character (B566–70/A538–42; cf. DiCenso 2012: 41), he does not allow for empirical agency – and so for repetition of such agency – to alter the noumenal character of the agent in question. On the other hand, Stoic moral education focuses on providing abstract knowledge of what exactly is entailed in moral agency. This appears also *prima facie* out of the question since Kant holds that the formal identity of the categorical imperative is a pure fact of reason that 'dwells in natural sound under-standing (*natürlichen gesunden Verstande*) and needs not so much to be taught as only to be clarified' (*GMS*, 4: 397). While Kant allows for the moral law to be clarified and vivified, he does not believe it to be necessary for the moral law to be taught.

For these reasons, Kant's moral system appears to be inhospitable to any purely cognitive (Stoic knowledge-based) or conative (Aristotelian will-based) theory of moral education. When considering the import of religion in the moral (re)constitution of the human agent in his writings on ethics, Kant's advice appears to be primarily cautionary by advising to keep religious and moral instruction far apart (e.g. *MS*, 6: 478–9).[2] Kant's moral theology is therefore traditionally read only as part of the architectonic operation of practical reason, rather than as an intrinsic aspect of his moral theory.[3] Similarly, his reflections on the possible moral merit of certain practices in historical religion in *Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason* are traditionally interpreted as being no more than potentially useful fictions.[4] Despite these initial interpretative and ideological hesitations, I will defend the claim that Kant has a complex and sound theory of moral education in which certain religious practices play a decisive role.

The majority of Kant's reflections in his *Lectures on Pedagogy* (as the most obvious location for a Kantian theory of moral education) are confined to what could best be called *Lebensweisheit*, namely prudential advice for the education of young human beings to render them internally (with regard to themselves) and externally (with regard to society) well-rounded and stable individuals. Kant's moral philosophy appears to lack a robust account of moral education, with the exception of a few isolated paragraphs on the moral upbringing of children. Nevertheless, Kant's moral philosophy could be greatly assisted by a chapter on moral pedagogy since, by locating the moral incentive wholly in an incentive to virtuous duty, Kantian morality runs the risk of seeming to be opposed to or at least unconcerned with the human agent's normal/natural modes of agency. Friedrich von Schiller objected early on, particularly in his

*Über Anmut und Würde* (1793) and *Über die ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen* (1795), that Kant's concept of freedom could do with an 'aesthetic dimension' – by which he means more concrete ground in human nature. The distance Kant projects in his works of the 1780s between the human agent's natural, aesthetic constitution and the demands of autonomy is indeed striking. In an early footnote in the *Religion*, Kant actually concedes Schiller's objection by including in virtue a graceful dimension of awe (*RGV*, 6: 23n.). This is an early sign of Kant's preoccupations in the *Religion*, namely to provide the necessary aesthetic dimensions of moral agency. My account of Kantian moral education will therefore not be primarily generated from the *Lectures*[5] or from the Doctrine of Method of the second *Critique*,[6] but from on the one hand the Doctrine of Method in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and, on the other hand, the second and third parts of the *Religion*. After first establishing Kant's general theory of moral education (section 1), I will turn to how Kant envisioned religion as playing a part in such education (section 2). This he did through envisioning the providing of moral examples (section 3) and the creating of a community that encourages cooperation rather than adversity (section 4).

## 1. Kant on Teaching Morality

How can one ever teach anyone to be free?[7] To charitably develop a sense of Kantian moral education, we must investigate his notion of pedagogy and attempt to reconcile it with his view of moral agency.[8] This can be done, first, by clearly separating a cognitive and a conative aspect of moral education, respectively called a 'moral catechism' and a 'moral ascetics' (or 'gymnastics'); then second, by showing how, through the interplay of both aspects, Kant generates a compelling theory of moral education.

The very nature of Kant's description of human beings' relation to the moral law, i.e. as a virtuous disposition, implies that moral agency needs to be edified:

> The very concept of virtue already implies that virtue must be taught (that it is not innate); one need not appeal to anthropological knowledge based on experience to see this. For a human being's moral capacity would not be virtue were it not produced by the *strength* of his resolution in conflict with powerful opposing inclinations. (*MS*, 6: 477)[9]

Virtuous agency, in other words, implies acting in non-innate, perhaps even anti-natural, ways and such agency is to be artificially acquired

through education that leads (*ducere*) away from (*ex*) normal ways of acting. In Kant's *Religion*, the point is made that such education becomes highly relevant given humanity's propensity to evil (see below). According to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, such education is an inter-connected twofold process, namely a moral catechism (*MS*, 6: 478–84) and an ethical gymnastics (*MS*, 6: 484–5). The former provides the pupil with the necessary moral concepts as derived from common under-standing; the latter provides the pupil with the proper disposition towards the moral law. Kant's own definition of this distinction is as follows:

> The first exercise consists in questioning the pupil about what he already knows of concepts of duty, and may be called the erotetic method … Catechizing, as exercise in theory, has *ascetics* for its practical counterpart. Ascetics is that part of the doctrine of method in which is taught not only the concept of virtue but also how to put into practice and cultivate the *capacity for* as well as the will to virtue. (*MS*, 6: 411–12)

Kant distinguishes two forms of the erotetic (i.e. interrogative) method of teaching: a 'catechism' that draws moral teaching from memory and a 'dialogue' that draws moral teaching from natural reason (*MS*, 6: 412, 478). Since Kant himself only develops a moral catechism and not a moral dialogue, it stands to reason that he is primarily interested in his pedagogy in instilling memory of the moral law, not so much in drawing moral knowledge from natural reason (although he does not exclude the latter as a possibility). In what follows we will see that, for Kant, a purely catechistic approach to moral education is insufficient since this lacks practices that would psychologically bend the will to duty. This latter function is fulfilled by moral ascetics.

Through teaching standardized answers to certain questions, the catechism awakens pupils cognitively to certain moral insights already ambiguously present in their own mind. Through continuous repetition of this practice, the student will become accustomed to the correct theoretical account of moral agency without having to go through the pains of deducing it (or reading the *Groundwork*, second *Critique* and *Metaphysics of Morals*). While this process is fairly similar to that of Luther's catechism, Kant reiterates that 'it is most important in this education not to present the moral catechism mixed with the religious one (to combine them into one) or, what is worse yet, to have it follow upon the religious catechism' (*MS*, 6: 484; cf. 6: 478). A moral catechism

should be taught independently of any specific confessional point of view. However, Kant does not exclude that this secular form of education can be reinforced by certain religious notions so as to provide the human agent with additional attunement to the moral law. These do not, however, belong to a moral catechism, but rather to moral ascetics.

The first aspect of Kantian moral education is a form of theoretical instruction; the second aspect habituates the student to this theoretical instruction through certain conative practices ('ascetics' or 'gymnastics'). Elsewhere, Kant describes these as practices that 'tear [the student] away from all sensible attachments so far as they want to rule over him and to find a rich compensation for the sacrifice he makes in the independence of his rational nature and the greatness of soul to which he sees that he is called' (*KPV*, 5: 152). Accordingly, Kantian moral education does not merely provide theoretical concepts (Stoicism) and neither does it generate virtues by way of mere habituation (Aristotle). By combining both aspects, Kant is able to create a unique theory of moral education that combines the best of Stoic and Aristotelian moral education. In a nutshell, moral education teaches something the student already somehow knows (*a priori*) and then introduces the necessary ethical gymnastics so that the student approaches virtue with 'a frame of mind that is both *valiant* and *cheerful* in fulfilling its duties' (*MS*, 6: 484).[10] Kant remains, however, frustratingly sketchy about the content and process of moral ascetics (in contrast with his lengthy exposition of moral catechism). This might be because 'pure' reason lacks the grasp of social practices needed to provide such moral ascetics and some measure of 'impurity' is required. Moral education more potently takes place in a historical framework where certain traditional practices are more able to be moulded to that end. Therefore, it is not mere happenstance that Kant turns to religion immediately after detailing what moral education involves (*MS*, 6: 486–8). In the remainder of this article, I will discuss two particular forms of moral gymnastics inspired by historical religion. These religious ideas do not provide knowledge of the moral law, but invigorate the feeling for moral duty so that naturally morally disinclined agents might acquire the disposition to conform their maxims to morality.

## 2. Religion and Moral Education

My primary reason for reading Kant's Christology and ecclesiology as a form of moral education is that Kant himself signals that it ought to be read in that way. After having established that human beings have universally acquired a propensity to evil (*Hang zum Böse*) that cannot

'be *extirpated* through human forces' (*RGV*, 6: 37), Kant initially seems rightly baffled by the very notion of human moral progress: 'How it is possible that a naturally evil human being should make himself into a good human being surpasses every concept of ours. For how can an evil tree bear good fruit?' (*RGV*, 6: 44–5). This propensity to evil is a universal characteristic of humanity that induces them, both individually and communally, to overturn the proper hierarchical order of maxims, or to make the 'incentives of self-love and their inclinations the condition of compliance with the moral law' (*RGV*, 6: 36). The propensity to evil proves to be a remarkable adversary since it corrupts the power of choice to its roots: '[It] corrupts the ground of all maxims' (*RGV*, 6: 37). This admission renders Kant's reference to the moral necessity of regeneration deeply baffling: how can a totally corrupt agent recover from evil? To enable moral regeneration, Kant argues that the corruption of the human agent is 'radical', but not 'original', so 'acquired'. What is 'acquired' does not necessarily belong to our *a priori* constitution – in Kant's words, a propensity is 'contingent to humanity' (*RGV*, 6: 29) – and our nature is originally predisposed to moral goodness, which allows for the rational hope for moral regeneration. Whether Kant ever granted this as an actual possibility is somewhat unclear: while human agents must have faith in the possibility of moral regeneration, they are never in a position to judge themselves as morally good. The predisposition (*Anlage*) to good leaves, nevertheless, a trace in the human agent that would become attuned to the good. The human agent must then '[recover] the *purity* of the law, as the supreme ground of all our maxims' (*RGV*, 6: 46). In other words, human agents must reform their modes of conduct in such a way that their maxims are appropriately ordered.

Kant takes this kind of re-education to be radical in the further sense that such an operation cannot proceed by trying to train or mould the inclinations, but must generate a '*revolution* in the disposition of the human being' (*RGV*, 6: 47). While this revolution is 'all at once and completely' (*MS*, 6: 477), it will only become apparent to human agents, since they cannot scrutinize their own intentions (e.g. *MS*, 6: 447; *RGV*, 6: 51, 63), as an 'ever-continuing striving for the better' (*RGV*, 6: 48). Human agents are therefore in need of some kind of 'fuel' for their lifelong moral quest and must be well-educated to have the appropriate frame of mind for the task. As elaborated above, moral ascetics explicitly fulfils this function by providing practices that render human agents cheerful and valiant in doing their duty. At this turning point, Kant starts to seriously consider the possible benefits religions can have in providing such a moral ascetics and explicitly calls this 'moral education (*moralische Bildung*)'

(*RGV*, 6: 48). The word *Bildung* could be read as even referring to the third stage of education in the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, which is there usually translated as 'formation' or 'self-realization'. The final stage of *Bildung* is not the moralization of the world as such, but the preparation or prospect for this moralization. Moral education does not then render agents 'good', but puts them in the best position to freely choose the moral good. In the words of Robert Louden: 'Moral education and institutional reform can help to prepare the way for the radical transformation that Kant calls moralization by securing "the completion of empirical practical reason", but they alone cannot bring it about. Ultimately, moralization is a free choice on the part of each individual' (Louden 2011: 141).

Accordingly, it would not be a far stretch to read Kant's Christology and ecclesiology as attempts to be the relevant religious socio-cultural tools that pave the way for the moralization of humanity. This is what Kant in fact calls his first 'experiment' (*Versuch*) in the second preface, i.e. to 'abstract from all experience' and investigate 'from mere principles *a priori*' how morality rationally extends to religion for finite human agents (*RGV*, 6: 12). Religion serves then as a necessary assistant to the moral law so that it might accomplish its ends. After this first experiment, Kant will test whether some specific historical revelation might (or might not) lead back to the kind of rational religion towards which morality extends itself. Accordingly, one consistently finds that the penultimate section of each part of the *Religion* investigates how certain Christian concepts (original sin, Jesus Christ, the history of the church and the sacraments) might blend with rational religion.[11] If 'between reason and Scripture' there were 'not only compatibility but also unity' (*RGV*, 6: 13), then the Christian religion would be adequate to serve as a vehicle for the kind of moral ascetics developed above. Kant does emphasize that such unity is not fixed *ab initio* but is 'a task [for] the philosophical researcher of religion' (*RGV*, 6: 13): Christianity might need some reformation so as to become attuned to the proper structure of a rational religion. Something that cannot be developed here is that Kant similarly envisioned a proper state-structure for moral education to civic virtue: 'The good moral education (*Bildung*) is to be expected from a good state constitution' (*ZeF*, 8: 366).

## 3. The Moral Example of a Son of God

Already in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (*MS*, 6: 479–80) and the second *Critique* (*KPV*, 5: 155–60), Kant hints that moral examples can be

helpful for moral ascetics. This assertion seems, however, to conflict with his dismissal of examples in *Groundwork* II:

> One could give no worse advice to morality than by wanting to derive it from examples. For, every example of it presented to me must itself first be appraised in accordance with principles of morality, as to whether it is also worthy to serve as an original example, that is, as a model; it can by no means authoritatively provide the concept of morality. Even the Holy One of the Gospel must first be compared with our ideal of moral perfection before he is cognized as such. (*GMS*, 4: 408)

This conflict disappears, however, if the project of the *Groundwork* is taken into account together with the goal of moral ascetics.[12] The *Groundwork* focuses on setting a ground for morality which cannot be successfully pursued by use of empirical examples, but must be achieved '*a priori*' or 'purely'. Moral ascetics to the contrary follow upon a moral catechism that has clarified the necessary moral concepts and therefore uses examples, not so that one might 'know' the moral law, but so as to have a clear example that the moral disposition is possible. More generally, ethical gymnastics do not instruct the human agent as to which actions are worthwhile (for this they know already), but instil the discipline in the human agent to be well-disposed towards moral agency. Part II of Kant's *Religion* explicitly deals with such moral examples by way of seeking a rational ground for faith in the highest moral ideal, or the 'Son of God', as the most appropriate moral example. Through espousing something highly akin to a Christology, Kant is thus mainly interested in investigating to what extent an experiential example of a 'finite holy being' could assist in the cultivation of an interest in morality. He is therefore not primarily concerned with either interpreting the Bible or providing an apology for traditional Christology. Instead, he is fleshing out the way in which he can employ certain historical-religious practices for their potential moral benefit.

A moral example serves to increase the vivacity and cogency of our 'universal human duty to *elevate* ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection' (*RGV*, 6: 61). To put it in less Kantian language, an empirical example of moral perfection can augment the conviction that any human agent can reach such a state of perfection. The rational idea of human perfection houses in the human imagination as an 'archetype' (*Urbild*).[13] Such an 'archetype' can become incarnated as an actually

existing human being (*Vorbild*) which when presented to us can strengthen our resolve in the moral struggle. In Kant's terms, the example of the ideal enlivens

> practical faith in this Son of God (so far as he is represented as having taken up human nature), the human being can thus hope to become pleasing to God … [such a human being is enabled to] believe and self-assuredly trust that he … follow this [archetype's] example in loyal emulation. (*RGV*, 6: 62)

The primary function of the moral example is thus not to teach anyone how to act, but buoys faith that human agents can reach perfection: 'A good example (exemplary conduct) should not serve as a model but only as a proof that it is really possible to act in conformity with duty' (*MS*, 6: 480).

While the example is necessarily an actual corporeal being, the archetype is a practical, so *a priori*, idea that 'resides in our morally-legislative reason' (*RGV*, 6: 62). With this, Kant emphasizes that human beings do not require (religious) education so as to have a notion of moral perfection, but do require a historical religion to incarnate this archetype in an example. The example of moral perfection is then recognized as such because of its correspondence to the archetype. Whenever confronted with such an example, the human being is in awe of that specific person. This is so because despite the presence of an idea of perfection in human consciousness, that very idea appears alien and removed from that consciousness. The archetype is namely of a remarkably different mindset than finite human beings. There is, in other words, a (quasi-infinite) distance between human nature and moral perfection which makes the archetype of perfection look otherworldly: 'It is better to say that that [*archetype*] has *come down* to us from heaven' (*RGV*, 6: 61). Numerous recent commentators have on account of this statement hastened to take the archetype of perfection as therefore originating in God (or as a 'work of grace'): 'Kantian grace is first and foremost the willful descent of the [archetype] which restores to our species moral freedom and the possibility of genuine moral goodness' (Firestone and Jacobs 2008: 167); 'The archetype is an unmerited gift of grace that must be present in a human being before any conversion from evil to good can begin.' (Palmquist 2000: 289; cf. Mariña 1997). Such a point of view, in my opinion, disturbs the transcendental autonomy of practical reason since morality would essentially be made dependent on a gift of divine grace. Contrary to these authors, Kant's language is better interpreted as

metaphorical: because of the vast distance between the human agent and the archetype of perfection, the human agent can act as if (*instar*) the archetype is a divine gift (*MS*, 6: 487–8).The archetype is clothed in divine appeal so as to further cultivate its remarkable status. We are, however, not making any theoretical (or even practical) claim on the actual divine origin of the archetype.

Such a metaphorical interpretation is buoyed by Kant's later reflections, in the *Conflict of the Faculties*, on the subject of the interpretation of scripture (*SF*, 7: 36–48). Here Kant once again clarifies that any historical religion, e.g. Christianity, consists of two elements, namely 'the canon of religion and … its organon or vehicle' (*SF*, 7: 36) – the former is '*pure religious faith*' and the latter '*ecclesiastical faith*' (*SF*, 7: 37). Religious faith is essentially rational, namely as an extension of morality, and therefore particular historical beliefs are not 'an essential part of religious faith' (*SF*, 7: 37). Nevertheless, Kant immediately adds that historical faith and beliefs can be useful for the propagation of pure religious faith since these serve as its vehicle. Accordingly, Kant does not object to clothing rational religious notions in historical clothing insofar as these are interpreted philosophically, which means by using 'principles of interpretation [that are] philosophical' (*SF*, 7: 38). This implies that any and all statements or practices found in historical religion that contradict practical reason must, at times forcefully (cf. *RGV*, 6: 110), be interpreted so as to serve the interests of practical reason. (Any statements that merely transcend reason without contradicting it do not have to but may be interpreted in accordance with practical reason.) One application of this is Christology: insofar as, in Kant's view, a moral example must complement the agent's own agency in struggling for moral goodness, not suggest 'an external, higher cause by whose activity the human being is passively healed' (*SF*, 7: 43), a Christology does not relate primarily to a work of grace that would passively heal the agent. If there is a dimension of grace to such a Christology, it resides primarily in 'the hope that good will develop in us – a hope awakened by belief in our original moral predisposition to good and by the example of humanity as pleasing to God in his son' (*SF*, 7: 43).

Faith in the experiential example of the archetype of humanity is then rationally justified only if it is in line with practical reason, i.e. if it serves to provide hope that the good *Gesinnung* is a possibility for human beings. Such faith in the example of moral perfection is thus itself an exercise in moral gymnastics/ascetics since it arms the human agent in the effort to be morally righteous and walk the path of arduous morality despite occasional opposition. However, this pedagogic function of the

corporeal moral ideal could possibly be impeded by three difficulties. Although these problems are originally theological, Kant's use and solution of them are thoroughly philosophical. They roughly correspond to the theological problems of sanctification, eternal security and justification. The solution to all three has to do with God's justice and/or grace. Stephen Palmquist points out that what they all have in common is that they counter 'moral laziness'. Moral laziness could be reinforced, on the one hand, by too much dependence on God's grace since the human agent could attribute all relevant moral actions to God or, on the other hand, by overconfidence in human abilities since this could counteract the recognition of our demerits and the extent of our duties (Palmquist 2010: 530–53). More importantly, in my view, is how the resolution of these difficulties also counters 'moral despair': if human agents recognize their own (radical) depravity, then they might despair about the potential reach of their moral works. The moral example and a philosophy of grace counter these difficulties, thus functioning as part of a moral pedagogy that strengthens moral resolve.[14]

First, human agents could despair of making moral progress since even though they might have 'taken up the good *Gesinnung*', their deeds will remain defective inasmuch as the good *Gesinnung* does not render the human agent a holy being (*RGV*, 6: 67). With the good *Gesinnung*, the human agent has only adopted the aspiration towards moral purity, not purity itself. The recognition of this problem could impair the pedagogic function of the moral ideal since emulation of the ideal might appear futile. To counter this problem, Kant posits that the moral lawgiver who ultimately judges the human agent does so by '[scrutinizing] the heart' (*RGV*, 6: 67). This means that the *Gesinnung* stands in and assuages the defectiveness of any moral life.[15] So 'notwithstanding his permanent deficiency', the human agent can still hope to be '*generally* well-pleasing to God' because the '[*Gesinnung*] counts for the deed itself' (*RGV*, 6: 67). In a footnote to the second *Critique*, Kant had already put forth a similar view regarding moral progress:

> sanctification, i.e., this firm resolution and with it consciousness of steadfastness in moral progress (*im Fortschritte zum Bessern*). … [One may have] comforting hope, though not certitude, that even in an existence continuing beyond this life he will persevere in these [good] principles. (*KPV*, 5: 123n.)

Second, human agents might get overconfident about their abilities and believe themselves to have 'assurance of the reality and *constancy* of a

disposition that always advances in goodness' (*RGV*, 6: 67). Next to Kant's hesitations whether such assurance is possible (*MS*, 6: 447; *RGV*, 6: 51, 63), he fears that such confidence might work counterproductively: if one were at some point secured in one's *Gesinnung* then one could very well stop striving towards self-improvement, especially since one is 'never more easily deceived than in what promotes a good opinion of oneself' (*RGV*, 6: 68). But also, if the human agent would completely lack 'confidence in the disposition once acquired, perseverance would hardly be possible' (*RGV*, 6: 68). Therefore, Kant argues that the human being is in need of something between knowledge (certainty) and complete ignorance (uncertainty), namely rationally justified faith that does not allow for certainty, but can act as a reasonable opinion to hold (a similar view will hold with regard to the ethical community).

Finally, human agents could despair of their abilities to live up to the standards of the moral example because they '*nevertheless started from evil*' (*RGV*, 6: 72). There is, in other words, a moral debt that cannot be erased by adopting the good *Gesinnung*. The conversion to the good disposition and endless progress towards holiness cannot cancel out the evil that has been committed prior to conversion. To render 'satisfaction to Supreme Justice' (*RGV*, 6: 73), Kant emphasizes that even this evil must be atoned for. This is, in Kant's view, 'executed in the situation of conversion itself' (*RGV*, 6: 73). Taking up the *Gesinnung* is thus the atonement that is necessary for past evils. In Christian language, this would mean that taking up Jesus's sacrifice in one's heart justifies the agent, through his vicarious atonement, from original sin. Most commentators have been extremely hesitant about ascribing any positive views of vicarious atonement to Kant's philosophy of religion.[16] They rightly object that, on the one hand, religious justification upsets moral autonomy: 'The human being must make or have made *himself* into whatever he is or should become in a moral sense, good or evil. These two must be an effect of his free power of choice' (*RGV*, 6: 44). On the other hand, a moral debt is of such a personal nature that it cannot be settled by anyone else: 'This original debt … cannot be erased by somebody else' (*RGV*, 6: 72). Nevertheless, Kant admits that 'this very Son of God bears as a *vicarious substitute* the debt of sin for him' (*RGV*, 6: 74) and even calls this a 'surplus over the merit from works for which we felt the need earlier, one which is imputed to us by *grace*' (*RGV*, 6: 75). What must be borne in mind in consideration of this issue is that Kant is here not advocating that taking up the *Gesinnung* effectively justifies the human agent (as in traditional theology), but rather that holding this as a practical notion reinforces the moral resolve of the agent (a preparation

for moralization, not moralization itself). In other words, a historical religion's cultivation of this idea of vicarious atonement could have a morally beneficial effect, as long as the emphasis remains on moral works, not on mere faith.

The cultivation of moral interest through confrontation with a moral ideal can educate the human agent morally by providing a means to be valiant in the face of temptation. The cultivation of a Christology as moral soteriology can thus be a beneficial historical practice that takes place in a certain religion to morally strengthen the human agent.

## 4. Ethical Community

Kant also suggests a communitarian remedy to counter the possible interpersonal corrupting influence of human agents. Namely, he believes it to be beneficial for the individuals who have adopted the good *Gesinnung* to be united in an ethical community. His moral philosophy thus retains a sense of moral community, despite what some of the earlier, coarser stereotypes of it might suggest.[17] The communitarian dimension of Kant's moral philosophy is gradually receiving increased attention. The scholarship is, however, tempted to read Kant's communitarianism (especially in his works on the philosophy of history) as accomplishing a moralization of society. This reading misses the fact that, as I will argue, Kant's views with regard to the ethical community ought to be regarded in light of his pedagogical interests in erecting a virtuous community, rather than in its prospects for abolishing any and all temptation.

Kate Moran and Kristi Sweet have recently argued against the stereotype of Kant's moral philosophy as unwaveringly individualistic (Sweet 2013; Moran 2012).[18] While Moran builds her argument mostly against the backdrop of Kant's notion of the 'complete good' and the rational necessity of moral progress (Moran 2012: 98–167), Sweet more promisingly argues that Kant's moral teleology and moral anthropology already necessitate a sense of moral community. Sweet points out, namely, that 'the moral law demands not only that we act out of our own freedom consistently but also that we do so in an effort to bring about a certain kind of world; the moral law requires both that we act from duty and that we adopt certain ends' (Sweet 2013: 207).[19] This assumption is buoyed by Kant's moral anthropology as relating to the notion of moral duty: 'The demands of moral life are seen, then, to be remarkably steep. They are so steep, in fact, that Kant believes that they exceed what each of us can do on our own, and even insofar as we join with others in their pursuit, they require the long arc of history to achieve' (208).

While Sweet is especially sensitive at times to some of the pessimistic angles of Kant's moral anthropology, she expresses relative optimism with regard to the overcoming of the relevant sources of pessimism given the 'long arc of history'. According to the line of interpretation I am developing here, however, the religious moral community (i.e. church) serves not so much to accomplish this overcoming as rather to inspire cooperation through morally arming human beings with the appropriate social institutions to assist in their moral struggle (again, as preparing moralization rather than accomplishing it).

Those who have adopted the good *Gesinnung* are not thereby freed from their propensity to evil: '[There is] no greater advantage [from the battle with evil] than freedom from the *dominion* of evil … He still remains not any less exposed to the assaults (*Angriffen*) of the evil principle … He must henceforth remain forever armed for battle' (*RGV*, 6: 93). Kant clarifies accordingly that exposure to and emulation of the moral ideal does not set the human agent free from temptation to evil as such, and neither does it root out the propensity to evil. The title of part II of *Religion*, 'Concerning the battle of the good against the evil principle', eloquently captures the military heroism of the moral ideal fighting a never-ending war against the evil principle. The title of part III, 'The victory (*Sieg*) of the good principle over the evil principle, and the founding of a kingdom of God on earth', suggests, however, that the foundation of the Kingdom of God might achieve something that exposure to the moral example cannot. By founding the 'Kingdom of God', the human being would then not solely be educated morally, but empowered to weed out the propensity to evil and unite in a heavenly society.

Three passages seriously mitigate this suggestion of a victory over evil. In them, in a nutshell, Kant holds that the ethical community – which is for human beings already 'impossible' – is not the Kingdom of God. While it is intuitively possible that in the Kingdom of God the propensity to evil is overcome, the ethical community does no such thing and remains a 'virtuous' rather than a 'holy' community. First, Kant claims that the ethical community is a 'never fully attainable' ideal because a 'whole of this kind is greatly restricted under the conditions of sensuous human nature' (*RGV*, 6: 100). Accordingly, the ethical community remains an ideal of reason and never an empirical reality for human agents (presumably because of their embodiment and/or propensity to evil). One could object that such ready admittance that the ethical community is 'never fully attainable' counteracts the practical faith that Kant has established with regard to the *Gesinnung* in part II of *Religion*. As with regard to the

difficulties surrounding the moral ideal, human agents must somehow have faith that their flawed attempts will be graced by a 'mighty moral lawgiver'. Members of such an ethical community are then rationally justified in believing that, as long as they exhaust their own means, the flaws of this ethical community can be assuaged by a gracious God.

Second, this ethical community is said not to be itself the 'Kingdom of God … but what preparations must [be made] in order [to bring this about]' (*RGV*, 6: 101). While it would stand to reason that in the 'Kingdom of God' the propensity to evil is rooted out, the ethical community is a 'preparation' for this and therefore necessarily incomplete. And finally, Kant concludes his account of the ethical community with the statement that the labour of the good principle is to continuously advance in

> erecting a power and a kingdom for itself within the human race, in the form of a community according to the laws of virtue that proclaims victory over evil and, under its dominion, assures the world of an eternal peace. (*RGV*, 6: 124)

While this could at first glance be read as implying a final victory ('eternal peace') over the evil principle, Kant's words need to be weighed against what he had previously said. A 'community according to the laws of virtue' is not freed from temptation by evil, since virtue requires an adversary. A final victory over the evil principle would establish a 'holy community'. Moreover, the word dominion (*Herrschaft*) refers back to the initial paragraph of part III, where Kant univocally states that someone who is 'free from the dominion of evil' is still open to attacks from the evil principle. Accordingly, the victory over evil might be represented as an ideal of reason (*focus imaginarius*), but in itself the ethical community does not amount to any ultimate victory over evil. Therefore, the establishment of an 'ethical community' prepares a victory over the evil principle only fully realized in the Kingdom of God and, therefore, its practices are virtually identical to the moral ideal of the Son of God, namely they are a means to enliven and cultivate moral interest. Moral religion, however, does not, as the moral ideal does, aim at the particular human agent, but rather at the human race in its entirety.

After having established that the moral community fulfils a similar pedagogic function as the moral example (i.e. to inspire moral interest, not to overcome evil), we can now investigate how this is accomplished. According to Kant, even well-disposed human agents are prone to corrupt one another whenever they experience each other's

presence: 'It suffices that they are there, 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' (*RGV*, 6: 94). The problem Kant is dealing with at this point is that human beings, even those with the best of intentions, are prone to seduce or even corrupt other human beings and make the struggle for morality more difficult, rather than to facilitate the moral quest germane to humanity. Allen Wood has reduced the propensity to evil to this aspect of societal corruption, or 'unsociable sociability', where evil derives from the corrupting influence of other people who induce us to attach excessive value to our own happiness and self-love (Wood 1999: 283–91). Jeanine Grenberg ably shows, however, how such societal corruption is only one, rather egregious, form of a propensity that does not require society to enliven it, but is already at work in the particular individual (Grenberg 2005: 36–42). Societal corruption is then to be seen as one of the effects of the propensity to evil that a properly circumspect moral religion must combat. Accordingly, Kant believes it to be necessary to erect a 'society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue' (*RGV*, 6: 94).

What kind of a society would this be and how would it educate morally? The society we are looking for is not political for three important reasons. First, a political community has a public legislation that establishes certain material laws to regulate conduct. The laws of morality, however, are self-legislated internal laws of autonomy pursued out of respect for the moral law, not external coercion. Second, the highest authority of a political community can only judge external deeds, not the internal disposition of the human agent. Accordingly, such an authority is unfit to determine whether a human agent is (or is not) moral. Third, a political community can potentially inspire respect for the law ('civic virtue'), but never for the moral law ('moral virtue'). However, Kant's hesitations with regard to the potential pedagogic function of a political community do not commit him to a return to a more natural community (Rousseau), as he suggests that the human race is morally no better off in its primitive than in its cultured form (*RGV*, 6: 32–4). Accordingly, he requires a kind of society with a public legislation which has an authority that is able, on the one hand, to judge the inner intentions of people and, on the other hand, to legislate moral laws.

Besides the autonomous self, Kant acknowledges that the only lawgiver than can potentially legislate the laws of morality is a divine agent. In a way, the pedagogic necessity of establishing an ethical community in fact leads Kant to postulate the existence of God much as the rational

necessity of a consummation of virtue and happiness did so in the second *Critique* (*KPV*, 5: 113–32). From this perspective, then, Stephen Palmquist makes a good point in saying that ethical-communal living implies a divine legislator in Kant's practical philosophy and that this would commit Kant to espousing a religious argument for the existence of God (Palmquist 2009: 3–22). However, the necessity of a divine lawgiver that scans the *Gesinnung* of the human being, and 'the concept of God as a moral ruler of the world' (*RGV*, 6: 99), arise only with respect to the pedagogic function of an ethical community. As established above, the function of an ethical community is to encourage a sense of cooperation rather than adversity in the face of theological schisms and exclusionism. By providing such an ethical community with the notion of a moral lawgiver, human agents can be trained so as to be more valiant in the execution of their moral duties and to include all others in their community. In a way, the ethical community thus reinforces the default definition of Kant's perspective on religion, namely as the 'recognition of all duties as divine commands' (*KPV*, 5: 129; cf. *RGV*, 6: 153). In other words, human agents are practically encouraged to perceive their moral duties not only as rational duties of morality, but also as if (*instar*) they were divine commands. Important to note is that such a point of view neither entails that there is any duty specifically to God (*erga*) nor that moral duties actually derive from God (*MS*, 6: 487).

The ethical community is thus a second form of moral ascetics that now aims at the counteraction of societal corruption by universally enlisting human agents in an invisible community overseen by a divine lawgiver. Specifically, this is done by the cultivation of the notion that humanity is a universal community under the same legislator. Accordingly, one would no longer be able to refer to any partisan religion or theology to justify the ill-treatment of someone who might be outside of that community. By uniting agents in such a society, Kant attempts to strengthen their moral resolve, not by freeing them from temptation, but by hardening them in the face of temptation. Accordingly, the ethical community fulfils a purpose highly similar to that of the moral example, namely to inspire moral heroism in the face of temptation. By this, Kant does not argue that a religious community, nor the Christian church in particular, is the sole tool for societal progress. But he does argue that the Christian church can be reformed so as to be able to provide this moral pedagogy.

## 5. Conclusion

Kant's account of moral pedagogy is complex in its attempt to combine both cognitive and conative elements. However, by confining the

cognitive elements to a moral catechism, he creates the necessary space for certain conative practices to assist the cultivation of this theoretical instruction. In a way, the conative elements seem even to outweigh the cognitive elements. For Kant consistently accepts that all human agents will arrive at the same moral duties insofar as their reasoning is pure. To nevertheless submit to these insights is a wholly different matter since pure insight alone seems too weak to guide the power of choice; human agents require a 'moral feeling' for guidance (*KPV*, 5: 75). This interest in morality must be diligently cultivated through a moral education that provides the necessary pedagogical notions to bolster moral resolve. Matters are also exacerbated by the fact, as Kant readily grants, that there is a '*natural dialectic*, that is, a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and, where possible to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations' (*GMS*, 4: 405). In the *Religion*, this ill-disposition towards the moral law is further refined and conceptualized as the *Hang zum Böse*, i.e. a positive tendency to overturn the hierarchy between sensuous inclinations and the moral law. So once again, to make the human agent better equipped to combat that evil propensity, a form of moral *Bildung* (education, formation, self-cultivation) is highly beneficial. In the *Religion,* Kant explicitly singles out two tools stemming from historical religion and employs them in such a way that they can accomplish this task. A Christology can provide a moral example that cultivates the hope that moral duty (to be 'pleasing to God') is a possibility for human agents. And an ecclesiology can provide the tools to unite human beings in a society under a moral lawgiver that encourages cooperation among its members as united in a similar quest.

## Notes

1  With the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, cited with the standard A/B pagination from Kant 1998, Kant's works are cited with the volume and page number from the Akademie Ausgabe, using the following abbreviations: *GMS = Grundlegung der Metaphysik der Sitten* (in Kant 1996); *KPV = Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (in Kant 1996); *MS = Metaphysik der Sitten* (in Kant 1996); *ZeF = Zum Ewigen Frieden* (in Kant 1996); *RGV = Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der Blossen Vernunft* (trans. G. di Giovanni in Kant 2001); *SF = Streit der Fakultäten* (trans. M. J. Gregor and R. Anchor in Kant 2001); *Päd = Vorlesungen uber Pädagogik* (trans. R. Louden in Kant 2011).

2  Paul Moreau, for instance, argues that for Kant religion has little input into moral education. In his view, religion is best purified of anything in opposition to morality so that it does not impede moral progress in history. He does briefly consider religious hope as playing a pedagogic function, but remains largely agnostic about how this would work (Moreau 1988: 81–114). G. Felicitas Munzel adds to this that Kant's specifically envisioned Critical philosophy is to come (as a kind of education) to the aid of historical

religion and morality by opposing certain corrupting schools of thought (Munzel 2012: 280). I will specifically show how religions have, for Kant, a pedagogic function in enlivening practical faith in one's leading of a morally good life.

3  For instance, Lewis White Beck holds that Kant's postulation of the existence of God is 'important [only] for the architectonic purpose of reason in uniting under one idea the two legislations [i.e. pure and practical] of reason' (Beck 1960: 275). Allen Wood similarly calls Kant's moral theology a *reductio ad absurdum practicum*, which means that to deny the existence of God and an immortal soul would put the moral agent into a morally objectionable position (Wood 1970: 26). For a more charitable reading of Kant's postulation: Vanden Auweele 2013.

4  For this: Michalson 1999; Byrne 2007; Bruch 1968; DiCenso 2012. I use the word 'traditionally' because a counter-movement has gained in popularity over the last few years. Among these: Palmquist 2000, 2015; Firestone and Jacobs 2008; Firestone and Palmquist 2006. These authors read Kant's reflections on religion as more than mere extensions of his ethics, and even as congenial to traditional Christianity. For my assessment of this: Vanden Auweele 2014.

5  There are three reasons for not taking one's cues from Kant's *Lectures on Pedagogy* for a theory of moral education. First, any of Kant's lectures are in themselves suspect since he generally did not lecture on his Critical philosophy, but used state-ordained textbooks. Moreover, these materials usually consist of Kant's own notes and the notes of his students. Relying on them therefore requires a somewhat unjustified amount of confidence that both Kant's students and the editor properly understood Kant's meaning. With regard to the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, one is faced with the additional difficulty that Kant did not publish these himself, but left this in the hands of Friedrich Theodor Rink (cf. Weisskopf 1970). Second, the *Lectures on Pedagogy* were delivered four times, i.e. the winter semester of 1776–7, the summer semester of 1780, the winter semester of 1783–4 and the winter semester of 1786–7. His account of education would accordingly not have the maturity of the 1790s. Third, Kant's focus in the *Lectures* is only on the moral education of children. In this article, I will explicitly point out how moral education is a lifelong, continuous process rather than limited to early stages of a person's life. For these reasons, the *Lectures* only serve to augment a point of view already clearly espoused by Kant in his other writings, and do not themselves provide original insight. For similar hesitations: Moreau 1988: 48–9; Louden 2011: 137.

6  The primary reason for not going into the second *Critique* is brevity (*KPV*, 5: 151–61), but also the consideration that Kant only, on the one hand, comprehensively formulated his views of moral pedagogy in the *Metaphysics of Morals* and, on the other hand, reflected on the significance of religious practices for moral pedagogy in the *Religion*.

7  R. S. Peters formulates this paradox independently from any comprehensive moral system (1981: 45–60). For a full discussion of the paradox of moral education and its resolution in Kant's moral philosophy, see: Moran 2009: 471–84; Surprenant 2010: 165–74; Giesinger 2012: 775–86.

8  I cannot elaborately detail Kant's theory of moral agency in this article. For a very good account of this: McCarty 2009.

9  In the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, this is called the need for a human being to 'develop his predisposition towards the good' since 'Providence has not placed them already finished in him; they are mere predispositions' (*Päd*, 9: 446). So while human nature is logically well disposed to moral goodness (since the moral law rationally attracts), this predisposition is easily overpowered by counter-moral inclinations. The bulk of the final chapter of the *Lectures* ('Of Practical Education') is then dedicated to a code of practice that accustoms children early on to a moral life. Kant is particularly attentive to

the interplay between religion and morality here (*Päd*, 9: 493–9). He believes that children should be taught 'religious concepts at an early age' in order to avoid the settling of 'perverted concepts' in the child's fantasy (*Päd*, 9: 493). Religion should always be linked to morality: '[Religion] is morals applied to knowledge of God' (*Päd*, 9: 494).

10  Robert Louden captures this twofold purpose of moral education as follows: 'Kantian moral education of course aims to teach children "the duties that they have to fulfill", but, more important, it also strives to foster a number of interconnected attitudes and dispositions that are preliminary to but essential for morality as Kant understands it' (Louden 2011: 148).

11  Commentators have traditionally thought that the first experiment (i.e. the pure religion of reason) is to be found in the practical works of the 1780s, namely the *Groundwork* and the second *Critique*, while the *Religion* would house the second experiment (Reardon 1988; Hare 1996). Gordon Michalson, Stephen Palmquist and Lawrence Pasternack locate the two experiments as taking place throughout *Religion* (Palmquist 2000: 128–35; Michalson 1979: 56–67; Pasternack 2014: 6–9). Chris Firestone and Nathan Jacobs identify the second experiment with the fourth part of the *Religion* (Firestone and Jacobs 2008: 114–19).

12  For an overview of the problem and a full account of Kant's resolution: Guyer 2012: 124–38.

13  The Cambridge Edition translates Kant's *Urbild* as 'prototype'. I prefer 'archetype', while 'prototype' or 'example' would probably better translate *Vorbild*. This has philosophical implications. While a prototype would have to be an actual empirically given example to be imitated, an archetype, in itself, does not suggest any empirical givenness. The archetype (much as Kant's 'Son of God') is a pure idea of reason, not an example that we have found in everyday life. The *Vorbild* is, however, an actual empirical manifestation of the archetype of perfection. For a discussion of Kant's usage of *Urbild*: DiCenso 2013: 100–32.

14  For an account of Kant's philosophy of grace and its relationship to Christianity: Vanden Auweele 2014.

15  Nicholas Wolterstorff and Philip Quinn have noted that something goes awry in these difficulties in general. If Kant's morality entails that human agents must autonomously bear their own responsibility, such a saving grace that expunges or forgives past sins is inappropriate (Wolterstorff 2010: 56–68; Quinn 1986). What Wolterstorff and Quinn fail to note is that moral evil or moral defectiveness are never efficiently expunged, although accepting such grace as a practical-regulative ideal can augment moral resolve without leading to moral complacency.

16  Lawrence Pasternack argues that Kant's Christology significantly deviates from the Anselmian Christological tradition because Christ merely sets an example to emulate and does not actively participate (vicariously or otherwise) in this atonement (Pasternack 2012: 30–52). Peter Byrne concludes similarly: 'All-in-all, it does not appear as if Kant can allow any substantive truth to the claim that "Jesus saves". Hence, his system is antithetic to Christianity' (Byrne 2007: 158). More recently, Jeffrey Privette, Nathan Jacobs and Stephen Palmquist have made some progress in showing how Kant's account of Christology could be made to fit Christianity (Privette 1999: 166–83; Jacobs 2006: 124–40; Palmquist 2012).

17  Historically, Hegel has been at the vanguard of this charge in his *Philosophy of Right*: 'However essential it is to give prominence to the pure unconditioned self-determination of the will as the root of duty, and to the way in which knowledge of the will, thanks to Kant's philosophy, has won its firm foundation and starting point for the first time owing to the thought of its infinite autonomy, still to adhere to the exclusively moral

position, without making the transition to the conception of ethics, is to reduce this gain to an empty formalism, and the science of morals to the preaching of duty for duty's sake. From this point of view, no immanent doctrine of duties is possible' (Hegel 1952: 89–90). For more contemporary forms of this argument: Sandel 1984: 81–96; McIntyre 1984: 125–48.

18 See also Payne and Thorpe 2011; Moore 1992: 51–71.

19 Sweet 2013: 207.

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