Religious Morality or Moral Religion? Kantian and Pragmatist Reflections

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1 Introduction

While recent empirical findings strongly challenge the traditional conception of religion as a source or foundation of morality, it has been (largely non-empirically) argued by philosophers for a long time that basing morality on religion, or justifying ethical views theologically, leads to a severe misunderstanding of both morality and religion. Perhaps, then, religion should itself be based on morality (if it can be based on anything) instead of offering grounds or a basis for morality? Or perhaps the relation between morality and religion should be regarded as a matter of mutual holistic adjustment, with no one-way grounding either way?

In order to pursue these options, this paper will first examine the Kantian argument that grounding morality in religion yields a “heteronomous” and therefore misguided conception of morality, whose true core is human autonomy. Kant, however, famously suggested that religious ideas such as God's existence and the immortality of the soul can be defended as “postulates of practical reason” that need to be invoked in order for us to be able to make sense of the human moral pursuit, even though morality as such does not (and cannot, in order to remain autonomous) presuppose religion or theology. According to Kant, there can be no theological ethics or religious morality, but “moral theology” (which, for Kant, is the only legitimate form of rational theology) is nevertheless available to the critical thinker. Versions of this Kantian idea have also been further explored in different ways in philosophical traditions otherwise relatively far from Kantianism, including William James’ and John Dewey’s pragmatism. On the basis of Kantian and pragmatist arguments,

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1 See, e.g., Ilkka Pyysiäinen's contribution to this volume.
2 I must immediately add a qualification here: we will discuss below John Dewey's naturalized philosophy of religion, which is based on the rejection of any sharp dichotomy between empirical science and non-empirical philosophical inquiry.
3 In addition to Kantian and pragmatist perspectives, the Wittgensteinian tradition in moral philosophy and philosophy of religion is potentially an important source here but must unfortunately be set aside in this investigation. For a comprehensive discussion of the relation
it will be suggested in this essay that no serious moral or religious thought can ground morality in religion; on the contrary, religion itself requires continuous moral evaluation. This general position, illustrated with brief discussions of not only the classical pragmatists but also Richard Rorty's neopragmatism, will finally be further developed with special emphasis on “negative” moral concepts, such as evil, which are argued to be both morally and religiously profound and significant.

2 Kant’s Critique of Traditional Theology

Famously, Immanuel Kant rejected all traditional proofs of God's existence—the ontological argument, the cosmological argument, and the physico-theological (“design”) argument—that his rationalist predecessors such as René Descartes and Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (among many others) had employed in their attempts to demonstrate theism as a truth of reason. These traditional theistic proofs are examples of reason's natural tendency to seek the “unconditioned” beyond the series of “conditioned” entities and events we come up with in the empirical world. Insofar as we remain at the level of mere “ideas” (concepts), there is no problem, and our tendency to form the idea of the unconditioned—in its various forms—is humanly unavoidable. Problems arise when reason finds itself compelled to postulate the unconditioned object of such an idea. Such a move to a metaphysical unconditioned is, Kant tells us, simply beyond the capacities of human cognition. Human reason's habit of formulating ideas leading to “transcendental illusion” is natural and inevitable, but the theistic proofs are fallacies the critical thinker can and should avoid.4

The details of these issues need not concern us here. What we are concerned with is Kant's own moral argument for theism: God's existence and the immortality of the soul can, Kant suggests, be defended as postulates of practical reason. The moral law (categorical imperative) does not presuppose theism but it does urge us to pursue the “highest good” (*summum bonum*) in which duty and happiness are in harmony. In order to be fully committed to

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34 between ethics and religion from a pragmatist point of view taking into account both Kantian and Wittgensteinian dimensions of these issues, see Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Pluralism and the Problem of God* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013). (The present article partly summarizes the more detailed reflections available in my book.).