

### **The Role of Hope in Kantian Moral Conversion**

In the first two *Critiques*, Kant defines the basic properties of hope in relation to the religious postulates of God, freedom and immortality of the soul: hope replaces theoretical speculation as the proper posture of reason before these lofty concepts; hope has happiness as its primary object; happiness requires worthiness to be happy, so hope for happiness always follows virtue. Kant will offer other objects of hope beyond the religious postulates including moral progress, holiness and beatitude. When he introduces the notion of moral conversion in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, he seems to want to include it among the objects of hope as well, but the implication of his conversion doctrine—that we begin from a freely chosen state of moral corruption—conflicts with the requirement that virtue precede hope. We are then left with a dilemma explaining how and why we should have hope in either conversion or the ensuing moral progress which requires its attainment.

The initial goal of this essay is to demonstrate how Kant's concept of hope breaks down in its application to conversion, in particular, through Kant's introduction of the notion of radical evil in his *Religion* book. Faced with this failure to establish conversion as a valid object of hope, additional strategies for salvaging a role for hope in moral conversion will be explored including appeals to a divine grace and to the ethical community. Both approaches, however, will fall short of Kant's insistence that individual moral agency is prior to religion. Finally, we will propose that Kant's account of the inextinguishable moral law provides the most reasonable source of hope for conversion—even though Kant himself does not directly make this move.

Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* introduces a level of complexity to the discussion of hope and moral perfection that was missing in the first two *Critiques*. He traces virtue back to its starting point—a revolutionary break or conversion from a state which

Kant refers to as “radical evil.” Kant describes radical evil as “depravity,” “corruption” of “the human heart,” and the “propensity” of human beings to choose “maxims that subordinate the incentives of the moral law to others (not moral ones).” The choice of the evil maxim imbues and infects all action taken under its perverse guidance. Kant says, “[T]he mind’s attitude is thereby completely corrupted at its root” (*Religion* 6:30). While human beings are not naturally evil, our experience tells us that, “we may presuppose evil as subjectively necessary in every human being, even the best,” and so Kant concludes that while all evil originates in a free choice, we all have a “natural propensity to evil” (*Religion* 6:32).

With the notion of radical evil, the adoption of an overriding maxim that taints all action with its surrender of the will to inclination rather than duty, Kant establishes the state in which the relationship between happiness and virtue unfolds. Virtue is not merely the accomplishment or accumulation of good deeds. Human beings have given in to temptation. The will has been surrendered to the leadership of a distorted disposition. Virtuous behavior can only begin with a dramatic break, a conversion from radical evil to a new life. As Michel Despland explains: “[S]ince the core of evil lies in a disposition, what is required is rather a revolution in the disposition, a change of heart, or a kind of rebirth which takes place once and for all.”<sup>1</sup>

While the rule of the evil maxim is pervasive, the call to duty initiated by the moral law in our hearts is never extinguished. “And so for the human being, who despite a corrupted heart yet always possesses a good will, there still remains hope of a return to the good from which he has strayed” (*Religion* 6:44). The critical question is how can Kant refer to hope remaining after a human being has made the free decision to subvert the rule of the moral law to other incentives? If hope requires virtue (worthiness to be happy), how can a human being, whose every action is tainted and rendered suspect by the direction of an evil maxim, be considered in

any way virtuous and therefore hopeful? John E. Hare summarizes the issue in this way: “The problem...is to see how any people can choose for good, given the fact of innate (though imputable) depravity.”<sup>2</sup> Kant acknowledges this difficulty when he asks, “How is it 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” (Religion 6:44-45)?

The difficulty with conversion, conceived in this way, is that it cannot be an object of hope—at least according to the account of hope that Kant establishes in the first two *Critiques*. In the first *Critique*, Kant asserts that all hope is about happiness; hope has happiness as its object. Happiness must follow, not precede, virtue—worthiness to be happy. Hope for happiness, therefore, must follow, not precede, virtue. In the second *Critique*, he emphasizes moral perfection or holiness as the highest end of the moral law, and describes beatitude or perfect happiness, as the state that follows it. In the *Religion* book, Kant maintains the priority of virtue over happiness, and the goal of moral perfection along with perfect happiness, as the highest end of the moral law, but the sequence from conversion through moral progress to moral perfection and beatitude, begins with a state a vice not virtue. If hope cannot exist prior to virtue, there does not seem to be a way to reasonably hope for moral conversion.

Despite his ambiguity about the role of hope in conversion, Kant assigns a clear role to hope in its relationship to the moral progress that occurs after conversion. He explains in detail how the will, which has been won over from its allegiance to a corrupt maxim, reasserts its loyalty to the moral law. The hopeful moral agent begins the life-long (and beyond) work of moral progress towards holiness. Conversion is the first step. Endless action in the service of the moral law must follow it:

If by a single and unalterable decision a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims by which he was an evil human being (and thereby puts on a ‘new man’), he is to this extent, by

principle and attitude of the mind, a subject receptive to the good; but he is a good human being only in incessant laboring and becoming i.e. he can hope—in view of the purity of principle which he has adopted, and in view of the stability of this principle—to find himself in the good (though narrow) path of constant progress from bad to better. (Religion 6:48)

If we can have no knowledge of our personal moral conversion, however, the role of hope in moral progress also seems dubious Kant insists that proof of an individual conversion is beyond the capacity of human reason: “Assurance of this cannot of course be attained by the human being naturally, neither via immediate consciousness nor via the evidence of the life he has hitherto led, for the depths of his own heart (the subjective first ground of his maxims) are to him inscrutable” The problem is that Kant wants to say that we can hope that we are making moral progress based upon the evidence of our improved moral behavior, but the possibility that there are ulterior motives behind our behavior leaves us without confidence that we have actually achieved conversion. The validity of our moral progress is therefore questionable. The good disposition may bring comfort and hope, but not certainty (Religion 6:76).

Kant has developed the concept of hope as the way for reason to pursue the objects of religion without certainty, but his account of radical evil and the manipulative and pervasive nature of the bad disposition, seems to leave reason short of hope and comfort. Without knowledge of moral conversion, all of our seeming improvements may amount to nothing. They may be merely good acts co-opted by some ulterior motive—the cleverly disguised machinations of an evil, still unconverted maxim. Kant tells us that “it is purely accidental” when the actions of an individual with an evil disposition “agree with the law,” and such a “human being, despite all his good actions, is nevertheless evil” (Religion 6:31).

How would we know that we are truly improving if that improvement is contingent upon a conversion of which we have no proof? How can we reasonably hope for moral progress if there is the potential that we are still in a state of vice? Leslie Mulholland describes the state of

an individual who lacks certainty of his or her conversion as follows: “[S]ince no one knows whether the good maxim has been chosen, each must act as if he or she has not yet become good.”<sup>3</sup> We must act as if we are on the way to conversion rather than in some stage beyond it. With our transformation of disposition unconfirmed, we are left to question our right to hope for moral progress. If happiness must follow worthiness to be happy, any hope for happiness that we feel might be nothing more than *wishing* for greater pleasure—the false hope of a soul still under the sway of a corrupt disposition. We may feel hope, but if we lack certainty about our conversion, and confidence of our virtuousness, such hopes may not be rational ones.

Kant’s discussion of the need for atonement for the sinful behavior, engaged in before conversion, accentuates the problems of including conversion among the objects of hope. Atonement is necessary because the free decision to surrender the will to the corrupt guidance of the evil maxim reduces all actions to violations of the moral law. The disposition of an individual subject to such a maxim yields an infinite amount of guilt. Conversion requires punishment and atonement for the life of sin led prior to conversion. Kant describes conversion as a revolution involving two selves: the old man, following the dictates of an evil maxim, and the new man who embraces the rule of the moral law. Atonement cannot take place before the conversion, because the soul is still in the grip of radical evil and would still be living a life of sin. The new man—who emerges from conversion pure and committed to the moral law—is certainly not deserving of punishment.

Kant’s resolves the dilemma by positioning atonement “neither *before* nor *after* conversion,” but “in the situation of the conversion itself” (Religion 6:73). His solution is not as important to our discussion of hope as is the fact that Kant frames the issue within this bifurcation of the self into the old man and the new man. Here our breakdown of the assumption

that hope must follow virtue is most apparent. The old man is deemed incapable of atonement because he is a state of vice. Kant identifies the antipodes of vice and virtue in the old and new selves in his definition of conversion as “an exit from evil into and an entry into goodness” (Religion 6:74). The old man is in a state of evil; if hope depends upon virtue, there cannot be any rational hope for release from evil. How can practical reason assert any claim to hope for a conversion from the corrupt disposition of the old man? Virtue is required for hope, and virtue does not arrive until after the conversion has taken place. Hope is for the new man, not the old one.

Kant’s theory of radical evil seems to undercut the possibility of hope for an improved disposition. Kant clearly wants to preserve the autonomy and freedom of the individual human being. He does not want his account of conversion to deteriorate into a divine rescue plan in which human moral agency is bypassed or moral improvement is imposed upon us. He states that a human being “must be able to *hope* that, by the exertion of *his own* power, he will attain to the road that leads in that direction, as indicated to him by a fundamentally improved disposition” (Religion 6:50).

Kant does, however, recognize the severity of the situation which radical evil conveys, and the implausibility of a human being, trapped in such a state, being able to break free from it. Accordingly, he acknowledges that our hope for conversion may be one that requires the role of God’s grace to sustain it. He treads lightly, however, granting that while God might play some role in the conversion process, this cannot deter us from the conviction that we are responsible for transforming our own disposition: “It is not essential, and hence, not necessary, that every human being know what God does, or has done, for his salvation’; but it is essential to know *what a human being has to do himself* in order to become worthy of assistance” (Religion 6:52).

The possibility of God’s grace—as contingent upon worthiness to receive it—does not, however, resolve our dilemma in positing hope for conversion. Some state of virtue is implied as necessary to establish worthiness, and hope would again have to wait for this state to be achieved. Hope for God’s grace becomes rational when we are worthy of it—and so this divine assistance becomes an object of hope after, rather than prior to, conversion.

How then are we to establish conversion as an object of hope? Can practical reason regard the sequence from conversion through moral progress to holiness and beatitude as reasonable? The contention that conversion cannot be considered an object of hope rests on the claim that hope can only proceed from a state of virtue and that no such state of virtue exists prior to conversion. In an attempt to address this shortcoming, we will explore several scholarly attempts to rescue Kant’s conversion doctrine. Unfortunately, we will find that each of these claims either falls short of reasonably establishing conversion as an object of hope or requires a substantial reworking of Kant’s philosophy to make this assertion. Our proposal for a resolution of this dilemma will rest on locating the possibility of virtue in the moral law itself, and on the establishment of hope for conversion in the ever present call of the moral law. We will attempt to show that Kant leans in the direction of identifying the moral law as a source of hope, without exactly committing to this claim.

The first proposal we will look at is Jacqueline Mariña’s account of God’s continuously and universally extended grace. Her account of the continuous presence of God’s grace sounds very much like Kant’s description of the inextinguishable, ever-beckoning, call of the moral law. She equates the adoption of an evil maxim with a shutting out or denial of grace:

[T]he general notion of grace is *not simply* a response to the problem of radical evil. If it were merely this, the problem of evil would define the contours of that which is needed to solve it, namely grace.... [R]adical evil can be defined in terms of a decision not to be receptive to God’s grace.<sup>4</sup>

Here, again, she reminds us of Kant's description of radical evil as a rejection of the moral law, but not an eradication of it.

An account of grace available to us prior to conversion seems to be a potential source of hope for the sinner, but Mariña finds no discernible role for God's grace in conversion. The embracement of moral law through conversion entails a return to receptivity to God's grace, and the beginning of hope. In Mariña's view, hope is post-conversion. She states: "The ability to be receptive to grace already presupposes that it is valued, for only when it is valued will a person *want to lay hold of it*. Thus, from a practical point of view, Kant's insistence that a change in cast of mind must precede the hope of supernatural assistance makes sense."<sup>5</sup> Rather than providing hope for conversion, grace—as an-ever present invitation to return to the path toward moral perfection—Mariña only permits grace to become a source of hope after we acknowledge it. It is an aid to our moral progress, but we cannot make any use of it in terms of moral conversion. Here she agrees with Kant that conversion is a noumenal event and so we can know neither when nor how it happens, and like Kant, she leaves us wondering how conversion can be an object of hope.

Leslie Mulholland agrees that Kant does not give us any reason to be hopeful prior to conversion, but he insists that Kant is mistaken in not providing a role for divine providence in the transformation of the will. He explains: "Something is required to move persons to a position where they recognize the need to make a new choice. Since there is nothing in the choice of the original maxim that can supply this, it must come from without..."<sup>6</sup> Mulholland finds that Kant is mistaken in equating divine aid, in the form of a liberating removal of obstacles, with the diminishment of human freedom. He asserts:

[C]ontrary to Kant, faith in some sort of external power able to release one from the original supreme maxim is essential for radical moral improvement. Also grace must precede the moral improvement, for this release from guilt only repositions the individual in the initial situation and enables the new choice....Through grace the bad person is at every moment able to choose the good.<sup>7</sup>

Mulholland extends Mariña's account of continuously offered grace so that it now includes hope for conversion. While Mulholland's approach does seem to provide a pre-conversion role for hope, it is, of his own admission, not Kant's view. Mulholland attempts to rescue Kant's account of rational religion from the inconsistencies of the conversion doctrine. Mulholland insists that "providence serves as a necessary condition for the change from a bad to good character,"<sup>8</sup> while Kant claims that, "to expect an effect of grace means, however, the very contrary, namely that the good (the morally good) is not of our doing, but that of another being..." (Religion 6:53).

Sharon Anderson-Gold interprets the *Religion* book as positioning the hope for moral conversion in humanity rather than in any individual human being. She claims that Kant is describing "moral revolution" and "the moral life" as "a social or collective undertaking."<sup>9</sup> She says "Kant maintains that our hope to effect a revolution 'within' rests upon the transformation of the social conditions of our existence."<sup>10</sup> Philip J. Rossi also finds a source for hope in the human community. He claims that "the exercise of freedom in human conduct makes us pose the question of hope in terms which can be satisfied only by the accomplishment of a shared and common human destiny."<sup>11</sup>

Communal or institutional revolution, however, still does not seem to provide the reasonable hope for conversion that we are looking for. Kant focuses on the ethical community in terms of its role in defending the moral law against our collective propensity for evil, rather than on its role in supporting or assisting individual conversions. He criticizes the human

community for its contribution to the frequent victories of the evil disposition. He would seem to be as concerned with sacrificing individual moral autonomy to a communally supported conversion, as he is with the loss of freedom implied by the type of divine rescue plan proposed by Mulholland.

Neither God's grace nor the human community seems to provide grounds for a rational hope for conversion, so we turn to the moral law itself to see if it could be the source of hope we are looking for. Kant refers to the moral law as a "holiness that lies in the idea of duty"—a source of "wonder" and "admiration" (Religion 6:49). He depicts the moral law as a source of strength to help us fight off our propensity to place our sensible inclinations above our moral obligations, but he also speaks of the role of the moral law in conversion. He states:

The very incomprehensibility of this predisposition, proclaiming as it does a divine origin, must have an effect on the mind, even to the point of exaltation, and must strengthen it for the sacrifices which respect for duty may impose upon it. Often to arouse this feeling of the sublimity of our moral vocation especially praiseworthy as a means of awakening moral dispositions, since it directly counters the innate propensity to pervert the incentives in the maxims of our power of choice. (Religion 6:50)

If the moral law does help to awaken lost, neglected, or subverted moral dispositions, then it would seem to be a source of hope for the individual who has succumbed to radical evil and fallen into the sway of a false, corrupting disposition. Kant asserts that the moral law works for "the restoration of the original ethical order among the incentives" and "for the restoration to its purity of the predisposition in the human heart to good" (Religion 6:50).

We have spoken of the negative valuation cast on all human behavior by the evil maxim, so how then can the moral law be said to be available to the sinner? Kant's answer is as follows: "The human being (even the worst) does not repudiate the moral law, whatever his maxims, in rebellious attitude (by revoking obedience to it). The law rather imposes itself on him irresistibly, because of his moral disposition..." (Religion 6:35). Human choice, for good or ill, cannot

eradicate or extinguish the moral law; it continues to impact the fallen individual, even in the midst of his attempts to reject it; it calls to him, invites him, entices him to reaffirm the priority of his moral duty. As Allen Wood explains: “[T]he fact remains that man, as we know him, does possess a predisposition to the good in the form of an *awareness* of the moral law through reason. He knows that he *ought* to become good.”<sup>12</sup>

Does this hopeful presence of the moral law, as a reminder and an obligation to return to the good that we are capable of, satisfy the criteria for reasonable hope which Kant has established in the first two *Critiques*? If hope requires the presence of virtue, can we equate the call of the moral law to a return to virtue with virtue itself? Kant indicates that the presence of the moral law is more than a summons to return to the moral life. He tells us that, “However evil a human being has been right up to the moment of an impending free action (evil even habitually, as second nature), his duty to better himself was not in the past: it is his duty now...” (Religion 6:41). If this duty is present, felt, and real—a challenge to the deepest state of evil into which we may have fallen—is it not a source of hope?

Kant insists that the moral law dictates that “we *ought* to be better human beings,” and so, “we must be capable of being better human beings (6:50). This implies that conversion must be possible—and a valid, reasonable object of our hope. Kant’s focus is to preserve the autonomy of the moral agent and to maintain that, just as the human being fell freely into sin, the same human being is capable of freely choosing to reaffirm the moral law. His determination to establish happiness as something *earned* tends to push hope to the moral progress that begins after conversion, but this move may not be necessary.

Our contention is that there is a nascent hope grounded in the reality of the moral law, so that reason can postulate that even a fallen individual can always turn his life around by

acknowledging the superiority of the good disposition. Curtis Peters says that, “Kant rejected complete pessimism regarding human nature. He affirmed that humanity also has ‘*eine ursprüngliche Anlage zum Guten*’—an original predisposition toward goodness. Nature has equipped every individual with life, reason, and accountability respectively.”<sup>13</sup> This potential for a return to virtue presents the precondition for potential hope. A human being who has chosen the evil disposition may have no hope from the purview of that disposition, but he always has the hope of abandoning this disposition for the moral law. In this sense, reason can affirm that there is hope for conversion.

Kant seems to want include conversion among the objects of hope, but his doctrine of radical evil, and its positioning of human beings in a self-elected state of corruption, violates the requirement, established in the first two *Critiques*, that virtue—worthiness to be happy—must precede hope for happiness. Attempts to generate hope by promoting a more prominent role in conversion for either divine grace or the human community seem to run afoul of Kant’s desire to establish individual moral duty prior to, though necessarily leading to, religion. While Kant himself does not acknowledge it, the moral law, and its ever-present, inextinguishable call, appears to be the one source that can render conversion a valid hope for the sinner, even if the call is barely discernible and the hope is only potential. This hope arises from our basic duty to live a moral life, and it linked to our highest end, perfect happiness in proportion to perfect virtue.

Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Michel Despland, Kant on History and Religion (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973), 190.

<sup>2</sup> John E. Hare, The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 64.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie A. Mulholland, "Freedom and Providence in Kant's Account of Religion: The Problem of Expiation," in Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered, eds. Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wren (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), 85.

<sup>4</sup> Jacqueline Mariña, "Kant on Grace: A Reply to his Critics," Religious Studies 33 (December 1997), 385.

<sup>5</sup> Mariña, 389.

<sup>6</sup> Mulholland 98.

<sup>7</sup> Mulholland 99.

<sup>8</sup> Mulholland 101.

<sup>9</sup> Sharon Anderson-Gold, "God and Community," in Kant's Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered, eds. Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wren (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1991), 123.

<sup>10</sup> Anderson-Gold 125.

<sup>11</sup> Philip J. Rossi, "Moral Autonomy, Divine Transcendence, and Human Destiny: Kant's Doctrine of Hope as a Philosophical Foundation for Christian Ethics," Thomist; A Speculative Quarterly Review 46:3 (July 1982), 450.

<sup>12</sup> Allen W. Wood, Kant's Moral Religion (London: Cornell University Press, 1970), 246.

<sup>13</sup> Curtis H. Peters, Kant's Philosophy of Hope (New York: Peter Lang: 1993), 83.

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