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On Religion: Kant & Kierkegaard

Immanuel Kant was a German philosopher born on April 22, 1724, in Königsberg, Prussia, or modern-day Kaliningrad, Russia. In his work titled *Religion Within The Boundaries of Mere Reason* published in 1793, he attempts to analyze and understand religion through a lens that considers the innate human moral code. He believes that human ethics is universal and that understanding how to be an 'ethically good person' is a primal inclination. Adding to that, he believes that humans are prone to corruption, and described the struggle to consistently be a morally good person as a battle against evil. He states that if human beings were able to free themselves from the temptations of doing morally 'wrong' things, then they would have achieved the 'highest prize that [they] can win' (Kant 105). Ultimately and universally, Kant believes that religion is a product of this innate morality that all humans share. He argues that religion cannot precede morality, as the natural moral duty of human beings inclines them to create such a concept as religion. Thus, he believes it is not completely unreasonable for someone to create or manufacture a system that attempts to explain the ethical code within everyone. In contrast, another philosopher and theologian, Søren Kierkegaard took a different approach when viewing religion. In his work titled *Fear and Trembling* published in 1843 under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio, Kierkegaard states that in order to be a faithful and truly

religious person, one must renounce the ethical code and values that commonly dictate human civilization. Although notably, this suspension of the ethical is not indefinite. He believes that one must take an extraordinary leap of faith that allows oneself to fully believe, and later on trust the divine. According to Kierkegaard, this full trust could very well include following unreasonable requests from whatever divine voice that a religious person may experience. Rather than believing religion is a product of innate human moral code, he perceives religion to be more individualistic. An individual must embrace the absurdity in their religion in order to be a truly faithful person. Kierkegaard explains that there will always be a tension between acting upon one's faith versus one's ethical duty in the world. These two philosophers approach religion very differently, yet share some similar sentiments about a few things concerning faith. The aim of this paper is to highlight those shared sentiments while also attempting to answer the question: Is there anything within these arguments that is not universal, or not applicable to all of humanity? It has been a few centuries since these works were published, so one must question if it is still reasonable to apply the principles of both Kant and Kierkegaard in order to live a purposeful life.

To establish an associated connection between both texts, it is necessary to analyze how the two philosophers differ from each other. When looking at Kant's arguments, it is clear that he takes a logical, cause and effect, sort of approach in viewing religion. He first establishes that all humans possess an innate natural predisposition to do ethically good actions. Conversely, he recognizes that humans also have the natural tendency to become corruptible and lean into wickedness and immorality easily. Henceforth, Kant comes to the conclusion that it is not unreasonable for humans to try and rationalize these inner predispositions and create systems to both explain and sustain the morally good consciousness of their community. Therefore, Kant

believes that religion, as a whole within human history and consciousness, must chronologically come after innate human morality. An important part of this sequence—especially for a religious person—would be the role of an omnipotent watcher such as God. Kant believes that God fixes himself as both the moral lawgiver and judge of the world and that humans would consequently be inclined to uphold morality in the eyes of an omnipotent watcher in hopes of achieving a greater existence. This inclination would consequently lead to hope or belief in the idea of an award of greater existence or wisdom awaiting an utmost virtuous human. Humans would then want to please their God so that they achieve Heaven, Jannah, Nirvana, or another comparable higher plane of existence. Henceforth the concept of religious community is created; virtuous human beings would want to preserve universal morality while also creating a rallying point for other ethical persons. For instance, Kant writes, “In addition to prescribing laws to each individual human being, morally legislative reason also unfurls a banner of virtue as rallying point for all those who love the good, that they may congregate under it and thus at the very start gain the upper hand over evil and its untiring attacks” (Kant 106). Kant describes wickedness, evil, or in a Christian sense, sin, as something that is constantly barraging the human consciousness, tempting humans to stray from ethical goodness. This sentiment of humans needing to combat evil’s ‘untiring attacks’ can be often seen in Christian theology. Christianity, as well as various other religions, often personify evil as the ‘devil’, whose primary goal is to tempt humans into wrongdoings and morally unjust actions. With the workings and tamperings of the devil—or evil—a person’s disposition of ‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you’ quickly fades, and selfishness and hedonism become focal points. This is why Kant believes that the church is a valuable element in sustaining an ethical and virtuous character. He states,

“The battle that every morally well-disposed human being must withstand in this life under the leadership of the good principle, against the attacks of the evil principle, can procure him, however hard he tries, no greater advantage than freedom from the dominion of evil. That he be free, that he ‘relinquish the bondage under the law of sins, to live for righteousness,’ this is the highest prize that he can win” (Kant 105). In order to maintain moral good, an individual should surround themselves with a community with like-minded ethical people. Within a religious community, moral laws and values are able to be distributed and communicated. Despite this, Kant recognizes that many churches and churchgoers are not true to his definition of a virtuous religious person. He believes that a large part of ecclesiastical faith contains many unnecessary appendages, such as doctrines, rituals, practices, and dogma. In Wayne P. Pomerleau’s article on Kant’s writings, he states, “Whereas statutory religion focuses on obedient external behavior, true religion concerns internal commitment (or good will). Mere worship is a worthless substitute for good choices and virtuous conduct. [In his third book] Kant makes a particularly provocative claim, that, ultimately, there is only “one (true) religion,” the religion of morality, while there can be various historical “faiths” promoting it” (Pomerleau). In this passage, Pomerleau highlights Kant’s idea of one true religion. Controversially, Kant believes that morality is the essence of all religions, thus every single religion must always come back to the innate human predisposition for ethical good. Kant states that if something were to be against or not aligned with innate morals, then it would consequently not be of pure religion. For example, he writes, “If something is represented as commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one (e.g. if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally

innocent)” (Kant 100). When taking into account the story of Abraham in the bible, one can realize that Kant would not be particularly fond of the message or meaning behind it. According to Genesis 22, Abraham is commanded by God to journey to Mount Moriah and sacrifice his beloved son Isaac. After traveling for three days, Abraham reaches the top, where he prepares both his knife and Isaac to be killed. As he raises his knife to kill his innocent son, an angel reveals to him that he won’t have to kill his son after all, and shows him a ram to sacrifice instead. If an individual were to follow Kant’s religious philosophies, they would read this story and believe it to be absurd and absolutely blasphemous. Primarily, Kant believes that humans are incapable of determining whether or not divine interventions or religious encounters are requests conjured by their God. Therefore, a Kantian Abraham would have questioned this encounter and would have been hesitant to follow the orders requested of him. More importantly, innate morality generally suggests that killing your son for no apparent reason would be completely wrong and immoral. As stated previously, an immoral act cannot be justified through religious means, as religious acts must be derived from universal ethical law. It is unequivocally contradictory according to Kant’s writings. On the other hand, there are the writings of Søren Kierkegaard.

In his work titled *Fear and Trembling*, Søren Kierkegaard argues that true religion must begin with an individual’s teleological suspension of the ethical. An important element to note is his illuminations regarding the ‘double-movement’ in human beings. He states that there must always be a tension between a human’s path towards the divine and their earthly duties. He believes that being a purely religious person starts with a leap of faith; this leap includes servitude to the infinite (the other side of the dialectical tension). Kierkegaard recognizes that it

is inevitable that a person will eventually encounter situations or choices that are ethically and practically absurd, but reasonable in the eyes of faith and God. It is the individual's responsibility to transcend the universally known ethical way of life and embrace the 'absurdity' of faith to realize justice or validity in one's actions—actions such as murdering one's son for no particular worldly reason. Kierkegaard reinforces this idea when he writes, "The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he was willing to murder Isaac. The religious expression is that he was willing to sacrifice Isaac. But it is precisely in this contradiction that the anxiety is situated, the anxiety that indeed can make a person sleepless, and yet, without this anxiety, Abraham is not who he is. Or perhaps Abraham simply did not do what is related about him" (Kierkegaard 36). According to Kierkegaard, an element of religion that is paramount would be unconditional devotion and complete faith in the voice of God. In his article about the matter, William McDonald writes, "But such obedience raises difficult epistemological questions – how do we distinguish the voice of God from, say, a delusional hallucination? The answer, which induces fear and trembling, is that we can only do so by faith" (McDonald). Religious faith is thus exactly this, a leap of faith, complete obedience to the infinite, the divine, the unexplainable. Is it perhaps absurd? In a practical, logical sense, perhaps, but that is precisely the reason that faith is a paradox, it is a completely individualistic experience that is unexplainable from one human to the next. In his study, Daniel Nica writes, "Moral values and norms are the creation of mankind, and they generally apply to all persons. Nevertheless, the true believer must always be ready to welcome God and obey his demands, even when those are in a visible contradiction to human morality" (Nica). A truly religious person must engulf themselves with the absurdity of faith, otherwise, is it truly faith?

After analyzing these two separate, but often interlinked perspectives on religion, one must question the validity or universalism within each argument. For instance, it is easy to say, “How could the most merciful God of the universe ask Abraham to do such a heinous act?” A Kantian would simply say, yes, the most reasonable thing to do would be to reject this voice, because a human being unequivocally cannot distinguish between the voice of God and the thoughts conjured from delusion. Furthermore, something cannot be both immoral and of religious devotion. Kant’s one true religion is based on the innate ethical law of humanity. There is a sort of triple protection for Kant’s argument against the story of Abraham. Firstly, it is simply impossible to believe a religious experience to be of God. Secondly, an act of worship is a mere appendage of religion, unless it were to be a moral one. Lastly, an act of religion cannot be an act of religion if it is an immoral act, considering that religion cannot precede innate ethical law. A Kierkegaardian stance would simply say, no, true religion is incommunicable and unexplainable, a purely religious experience is individualistic, and it is not within the bounds of normal morality. Are there any fallacies within this argument? Considering the teleological suspension of the ethical, Kierkegaard states that religious experiences and commands have priority over morality. He states, “Faith, indeed, is this paradox: that the single individual is higher than the universal, though, note well, in such a way that the movement repeats itself, so that therefore, after having been in the universal, then, as the single individual, he isolates himself as higher than the universal. If this is not faith, then Abraham is lost, then faith has never existed in the world simply because it has always existed” (Kierkegaard 67). Within this argument, it is perhaps certain that there are no fallacies, considering the all-encompassing nature of the teleological suspension of the ethical

In conclusion, it can be said that both Immanuel Kant and Søren Kierkegaard have valid reasons behind their theological perspectives. It is reasonable to believe in each of their versions of 'religion'. Furthermore, both perspectives are true to religion, meaning that they do not minimize the role of God for a religious person. While Kierkegaard might believe that the commandments of God can transcend morality, Kant believes that God would not prescribe a human to do such a heinous act. Each perspective can be utilized in the modern world and can apply to all persons. It is ultimately up to the individual to choose the ethical, practical, Kantian path, or the more devout, Kierkegaardian, knight-of-faith path. It is for that reason, humans have continued to struggle to grapple with the idea of religion. Since humans do not have absolute truthful knowledge of another existence beyond the physical, these tensions and conflicts with religion will be a constant battlefield in the minds of all. It is then fully responsible for the individual if they want to commence their leap of faith to be closer to what they perceive as infinite or divine. Conversely, they could also follow a path of virtue, one that perceives ethics as the absolute core of religion. A core that cannot be separated or disconnected in any sense. Henceforth, they would choose to live their life in a virtuous manner, even if they perceive the voice of God. It is ultimately a question of belief, but also action. Everyone possesses the ability to act, thus, it is up to the individual to believe in their conversations with the divine and act upon those illuminations.

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