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Kant on Freewill, Grace and Forgiveness

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KANT ON FREEWILL, GRACE AND FORGIVENESS¹

– Leslie Stevenson –

Abstract. How do our secular reflections on freewill relate to the theological tradition of human freedom and divine grace? I will pursue this question with reference to Kant, who represents a half-way house between Christianity and the atheism of other Enlightenment thinkers. But are those the only two alternatives? I suggest that Kant’s wrestling with the notion of divine grace can draw us all towards recognition of the ultimate mystery of human motivation and behaviour, and our need for forgiveness and hope.

Keywords: Freewill, grace, forgiveness, faith, Bible, Kant, Augustine.

I

How do our secular reflections on freewill relate to the theological tradition of human freedom and divine grace? I will pursue this question with special reference to Kant’s thought on religion, which represents a half-way house between Christianity and the atheist stance of other Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, the French *philosophes*, and their nineteenth century German successors Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche. Gordon Michalson has argued that the logic of Kant’s argument takes him in the latter direction,² whereas John Hare says it points towards mainline Christianity.³ But are those the only two alternatives? I suggest that Kant’s wrestling with the notion of divine grace can draw us all, whether theists or not, towards recognition of the ultimate mystery of human motivation and behaviour, and our need for forgiveness and hope.

I will first offer a brief overview of human freewill and divine grace in the Judeo-Christian tradition, to compare and contrast with Kant’s treatment.⁴ Some references in the Hebrew Scriptures to divine grace or favour suggest that God recognized a particular virtue in Noah (*Genesis* 6:8) or Moses (*Exodus* 33:12–17), yet the call to Abraham is presented simply as God’s inscrutable choice (*Genesis*

¹ This is an adapted and abbreviated version of my paper *Kant on Grace* that is forthcoming in a Cambridge University Press collection *Kant on Religion*, edited by Gordon Michalson.

² Michalson [1990].

³ Hare [1996].

⁴ Quotations are from Suggs [1992].

12:1–4). At *Exodus* 33:19 God majestically asserts “I shall be gracious to whom I shall be gracious, and I shall have compassion on whom I shall have compassion”, and Paul refers back to that saying at *Romans* 9:14–18, though it hardly fits with the idea of God’s universal love. In the New Testament, no reason is offered for God’s choice of Mary to be the mother of Jesus (*Luke* 1:26–33) or of Paul to preach Christ to the Gentiles (*Galatians* 1:15–16). Such divine selection of an individual for a function can be labelled *electing* grace.

There are anticipations of God’s *sanctifying* grace, making someone a better person, in the verses: “I shall give them the wit to know me” (*Jeremiah* 24:7) and “I shall give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you” (*Ezekiel* 36:26). But on the other hand at *Deuteronomy* 29:4 Moses says to the Israelites: “To this day the Lord has *not* given you a mind to understand or eyes to see or ears to hear”, and at *Isaiah* 29:10 we read: “The Lord has poured on you a spirit of deep *stupor*”. There are also references to God working the opposite of grace (should we call it “*dis-grace?*”) in hardening Pharaoh’s heart (*Exodus* 4:21, 7:3, 9:12, 10:27), though elsewhere we are just told that his heart *became* hard (8:15, 9:34–5).

It is in the writings of Paul that we find the most developed account of the Christian conception of grace. This is not so much God’s election to a role, but rather the divine rescue plan for the human condition of sinfulness (*justificatory* grace), and for infusing holiness into individual believers (*sanctifying* grace):

Therefore, now that we have been justified through our faith, we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us access to that grace in which we now live. (*Romans* 5:1–2)

For it is by grace you are saved by faith; it is not your own doing. It is God’s gift, not a reward for work done. (*Ephesians* 2:8–9)

Yet along with all such emphasis on God’s initiative, the New Testament is full of injunctions to keep to the right path and avoid wrong choices, and the preaching of the apostles exhorted their hearers to repent (*Acts* 2:38). James alludes to “*dis-grace*” when he says: “the spirit which God has implanted in us is filled with envious longings” (*James* 4:5). Thus the Christian conception of grace has involved two elements that stand in uneasy tension, namely God’s action within us and our own responses and choices. The two can be found in a single sentence of Paul’s: “You must work out your own salvation in fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you” (*Philippians* 2:12–13).

It is not surprising then that in theological tradition there have been recurring controversies about the nature and limits of human freewill. Soon after his conversion Augustine wrote a philosophical dialogue⁵ in which he defended the freedom of our human wills within the divinely-created world. However in later work he qualified this by insisting that because we are corrupted by sin, our freewill is weakened and incapacitated, so that we cannot save ourselves, but stand in need of God's gracious salvation in Christ.⁶ If God's saving grace is not bestowed as a reward for any human merit, it seems to follow that it is given to those whom He elects for no reason that we can understand. Paul talked of God pre-ordaining some people, even before they were born, to be justified in Christ (*Romans* 8:29–30 and *Ephesians* 1:4–5.) Hence arose the doctrine that some are predestined from all eternity to be saved and others to be damned, which some theologians have felt obliged to maintain in order to respect the complete and utter sovereignty of God, but which most people have found repugnant to the concept of a just and loving God.⁷ Most Christian thinkers have admitted that our free responses have to play *some* role in the economy of salvation, but Augustine resolutely opposed Pelagius' assertion that we have a natural capacity to live up to God's requirements without any special infusion of grace. Pelagianism was condemned as heresy, yet almost all theologians have recognized that there is some important sense in which human beings retain responsibility for their choices and actions. The controversy has continued down the centuries, famously in the Reformation debate between Luther and Erasmus.⁸ In the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard expressed a very Augustinian view of the freedom yet helplessness of the unredeemed human will.⁹

The tension remains at the centre of Christian thought. Donald Baillie, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of St. Andrews in the mid-twentieth century, describes it as "the paradox of grace":

Its essence lies in the conviction which a Christian man possesses, that every good thing in him, every good thing he does, is somehow not wrought by himself but by God. This is a highly paradoxical conviction, for in ascribing all to God it does not abrogate human personality nor disclaim personal responsibility. ...

⁵ Augustine [1993].

⁶ See Stump [2001].

⁷ Including Kant at *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* 6:143 and in his *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* at 28:1116. (Kant [1996] pp. 168 and 442.)

⁸ Erasmus-Luther [1961].

⁹ See Jackson [1998].

We can never ponder enough upon the meaning of this paradoxical conviction which lies at the very heart of the Christian life and is the unique secret of the Christian character. It is this that makes so wide a gulf between the Christian way of life and any 'mere morality', so that in a sense Christianity transcends morality altogether and there is no such thing as a Christian ethic.¹⁰

That last sentence sounds dangerous in view of our sad knowledge of priests and pastors and cult leaders who have abused power, wealth or sexuality: surely nobody can safely be allowed to "transcend morality". Baillie's point was presumably that grace enables us not merely to live up to morality but to *surpass* ordinary conceptions of it. As Paul wrote:

By God's grace I am what I am, and his grace to me has not proved vain; in my labours I have outdone them all - not I, indeed, but the grace of God working with me. (1 *Corinthians* 15:10)

II

At the end of each of part of his remarkable late work *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant appended a "General remark". His titles for these passages, which he describes as not belonging within his rational conception of religion yet "bordering on it", are: 1) Of Effects of Grace; 2) Miracles; 3) Mysteries; and 4) Means of Grace. He explains how he conceives of their borderline status:

Reason, conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral needs, extends itself to extravagant ideas which might make up for this lack, though it is not suited to this enlarged domain. Reason does not contest the possibility or actuality of the objects of these ideas: it just cannot incorporate them into its maxims of thought and action. And if in the inscrutable field of the supernatural there is something more than it can bring to its understanding, which may however be necessary to make up for its moral impotence, reason even counts on this something being made available to its good will even if uncognized, with a faith which ... we might call *reflective*, since the *dogmatic* faith which announces itself to be a *knowledge* appears to reason dishonest or impudent ... (6:52)

This fits with the distinction between knowledge and faith that Kant elaborates on in his three *Critiques*. In his view, beliefs in God and immortality cannot be

¹⁰ Baillie [1956] p. 114-115.

proved or disproved whether by pure reason or scientific evidence, yet they are appropriate and morally necessary objects of faith (*Glaube*), with an epistemological status intermediate between knowledge (*Wissen*) and mere subjective opinion (*Meinen*).¹¹

In his first “General Remark” Kant distinguishes *religion of roration* (of mere cult) from *moral religion*, the religion of good *life-conduct* (6:51). About the former, he sarcastically describes devotees as expecting that God can make them eternally happy without any need on their part to become better people, or that He can make them better people without their doing anything more than wish for it. But if we do our best, Kant says we are entitled to *hope* for the grace of God:

... it is a fundamental principle that, to become a better human being, everyone must do as much as it is in his powers to do; and only then, if a human being has not buried his innate talent (*Luke 19:12-16*), if he has made use of the original predisposition to the good in order to become a better human being, can he hope that what does not lie in his power will be made good by cooperation from above. (6:52)

But it is not essential to *know* what God does for us. Alleged “effects of grace” in our own experience cannot be known, and any action-guiding employment of the idea of grace would be aiming at something we know to be beyond our power. Kant concludes Part One with the ringing statement that “we can admit an effect of grace as something incomprehensible”, but we cannot incorporate it into our theoretical or practical maxims (6:53). Earlier however he made more positive mention of divine grace as in some sense accessible to us:

Granted that some supernatural cooperation is also needed to his [the human being’s] becoming good or better, whether this cooperation only consists in the diminution of obstacles or be also a positive assistance, the human being must nonetheless make himself antecedently worthy of receiving it; and he must *accept* this help (which is no small matter), i.e. he must incorporate this positive increase of force into his maxim ... (6:44).

There is a contradiction between saying here that we should incorporate divine cooperation into our maxim, and at 6:52 that reason *cannot* incorporate such ideas into its maxims of thought and action. This is a foretaste of the antimony Kant tries to resolve in Part Three.

¹¹ I offered a *systematic analysis* of Kant’s epistemological vocabulary in Stevenson [2003] pp. 72-101. A revised version is included in Stevenson [2011].

In Part Two Kant invokes the concept of grace in a rather different way, in his analysis of the tension between our imperfect moral dispositions and our ideal of moral perfection. On the one hand there is the “radical evil” in human nature that he diagnoses at length in Part One, namely our innate tendency to prefer our own self-interest over the demands of morality. On the other hand we can set before ourselves an ideal of holiness, the idea of a person who measures completely up to such moral ideals and is “morally pleasing to God”. Kant subverts Christian orthodoxy by suggesting that we do not need a historical example of such perfection in Jesus, since “the idea is present as a model already in our reason” (6:62), though he concedes that real life exemplars may have practical usefulness. But with or without actual examples of perfection, our lives involve a “moral gap”: judged by the highest standard, we all fall short. There is an infinite distance between the holiness we aspire to, or ought to aspire to, and the imperfections which remain in us at every stage of our lives.

According to Kant, the “change of heart” that consists in reversing our usual subordination of morality to selfishness “must be possible, because it is a duty”. But how, he asks, “can this disposition count for the deed itself, when this deed is *every time* ... defective?” He suggests that “we can think of the infinite progression of the good toward conformity to the law as being judged by him who scrutinizes the heart ... to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed (the life conduct)” (6:66–67). Yet how can we be relieved of the guilt we have incurred for our past sins of omission and commission? Kant here offers a somewhat convoluted reinterpretation of the Christian doctrines of atonement, justification and salvation: after conversion there is (in a sense) a new person, who in Paul’s words “has discarded the old human nature and the conduct that goes with it, and has put on the new nature” (*Colossians* 3:9–10). As Kant puts it: “*Physically* ... he is still the same human being liable to punishments ... Yet, in his new disposition (as an intelligible being), in the sight of a divine judge for whom the disposition takes the place of the deed, he is *morally* another being” (6:74). And this involves divine grace:

Here, then, is that surplus over the merit from works for which we felt the need earlier, one which is imputed to us by *grace*. For what in our earthly life (and perhaps even in all future times and in all worlds) is always only in mere *becoming* (namely, our being a human being well-pleasing to God) is imputed to us as if we already possessed it here in full. And to this we indeed have no rightful claim (according to the empirical cognition we have of ourselves), so far as we know ourselves (estimate our disposition not directly but only according to our deeds), so that the accuser within us would still be more likely to deliver a verdict

of guilty. It is always therefore only a decree of grace when we are relieved of all responsibility for the sake of this good in which we believe ... (6:75–76).

God's grace performs a different function here from Part One. There "co-operation from above" was hoped for, though its operations cannot be discerned, to help make us better human beings, to bring about definite improvements in our moral characters. But now a God's-eye-point-of-view is invoked, firstly to judge all our efforts as inadequate however much progress we may make, yet secondly not to impose the blame or punishment that we strictly deserve but to treat us as already "well-pleasing to God" provided we make the requisite change of heart. The influence of Paul and Luther is obvious here in the notion that although we are all guilty when judged by the highest standards, God graciously "justifies" us in His sight, "counting the disposition for the deed" *as if* we already displayed good life-conduct in full, provided only that we place our faith in Christ. Kant's discussion replaces faith in the atoning work of Christ by a reversal of our priorities to put morality above self-love. But both the Kantian and the orthodox Christian are unable to explain why some people choose good, and some evil. In Part One sanctifying grace *makes* us better (even if still imperfect), but in Part Two *justifying grace imputes* to us a status that we do not possess.

In Part Three Kant presents what he calls "a remarkable antinomy of human reason with itself" (6:116). He says that "saving faith" contains two elements necessarily bound together, namely "faith in satisfaction (reparation for guilt, redemption, reconciliation with God)" together with "faith in the ability to become well-pleasing to God in a future conduct of life" (6:116), thus uniting the justificatory and sanctifying conceptions of divine. He then formulates his antinomy about saving faith:

1. It is totally inconceivable, however, how a rational human being who knows himself to deserve punishment could seriously believe that he has only to believe the news of a satisfaction having been rendered for him ... in order to regard his guilt as done away with ... No thoughtful person can bring himself to this faith ...
2. But if humankind is corrupt by nature, how can a human being believe that on his own, try hard as he will, he can make a "new man" of himself, well-pleasing to God, when conscious of the transgressions of which he has so far been guilty, he still stands in the power of the evil principle and finds no capacity in him sufficient to improve things in the future? ... Faith in a merit which is not his own, but through which he is reconciled with God, would therefore have to precede any striving for good works, and this contradicts the previous proposition. (6:116–117)

In line with his general epistemology Kant says we cannot resolve this problem at the theoretical level, for we can know nothing about the operation of divine satisfaction or atonement, or the influence of divine grace on our wills. But from the practical point of view the question is whether we have to start “from what God has done for our sake, or from what we ought to do in order to become worthy of it”, and Kant predictably comes firmly down on the side of the second (6:117–118). Later statements confirm his difference from Christian orthodoxy on this point:

... true religion is not to be placed in the knowledge or the profession of what God does or has done for our salvation, but in what we must do to become worthy of it ... (6:133)

Kant also remarks that according to the first side of the antinomy faith in “vicarious satisfaction” would be a duty, and faith in one’s own better behaviour would have to be given by grace, whereas on the second side good life conduct is our duty and “satisfaction from on high” is a matter of grace (6:118). He thinks that only the second is acceptable, but he tries to accommodate Christian piety by arguing that “living faith in the prototype of humanity well-pleasing to God (the Son of God) refers, *in itself*, to a moral idea of reason”, i.e. what is important in faith in Christ is not the historical details of his life and death, but the moral ideal that we derive from the stories about him (6:119).

Apart from the controversial issue of divine revelation, there is a suggestion here for an interpretation of grace that relates to other things Kant has to say, and might even be attractive independently of theism (see section IV). If we agree that a wise friend or therapist or pastor or the example of Jesus or Muhammad or the Buddha can sometimes help a person to change for the better, we also have to agree that the person must “accept” or “lay hold” of this help - they need to be *open* to insights and suggestions and be prepared to let them affect their approach to life. Believers will want to say that this is divine grace operating *through* particular people or traditions, and not unknowably, though the means of its operation may remain mysterious. This can be called *providential* grace.

In Part Four Kant touches on grace once again:

The persuasion that we can distinguish the effects of grace from those of nature (virtue), or even to produce these effects in us, is *enthusiasm*; for nowhere in experience can we recognize a supersensible object, even less exert influence to bring it down to us, though there do occur from time to time movements that

work towards morality but which we cannot explain, and about which we are forced to admit our ignorance.

And he quotes *John* 3:8 as supporting his case: “The wind blows where it wills, you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone who is born from the Spirit.” Kant says that although the concept of grace or “supernatural intervention” is a transcendent concept which cannot be instantiated in our experience, its impossibility cannot be proved either, since freedom itself remains just as incomprehensible to us (6:191). And he robustly insists that the idea of a *means of grace*, of performing some specifically religious action such as prayer or ritual to in order to bring about divine assistance, is a self-deception and delusion (6:192–202).

III

What then is the relation between Kant’s treatment of grace and the Christian tradition with which he wrestles with such a striking combination of sympathy and scepticism? There is an obvious difference when he seems to align himself with Pelagianism: “There is absolutely no salvation for human beings except in the innermost adoption of genuine moral principles in their disposition” (6:83). But unlike most other Enlightenment thinkers Kant has a strong sense of human sinfulness, for Book One of the *Religion* offers an elaborate analysis of what he calls the “radical evil” in human nature. At one point he declares that the evil in us “has its source in a free power of choice, and hence is imputable”, yet in the next sentence he says it is “not be to be extirpated though human forces” (6:37), which suggests the need for divine salvation. For Kant, what makes a human being evil or good is the relation between the incentives of self-love and those of morality, and he argues (to my mind, not very plausibly) that this comes down to a single fundamental choice whether to give priority to self-love or the moral law (6:20–25, 36). I therefore suggest that *both* Kant and Christianity are subject to tensions about the extent of our freedom. Kant puts more emphasis on human freewill than much of the Christian tradition (especially in its Protestant form), but both acknowledge an ultimate mystery in the explanation of human behaviour.

Another difference is that whereas the Biblical writings make very confident assertions about the influence of divine grace (or “dis-grace”) on certain individuals, Kant resolutely maintains that we can know absolutely nothing of its operation. He allows that we can meaningfully speculate about it, and we may *hope* that God’s grace will supplement our own efforts to do better, but we can never *know* that it has actually operated in any particular case. In contrast, the

Hebrew Scriptures are full of stories about the grace of God operating in the patriarchs and the prophets, and the New Testament is brimming over with proclamations of the grace of God given through Christ. Yet if we ask that awkward and unbiblical question “How did they know, in any particular case?” confidence may wobble.

As we noted above, *Exodus* sometimes talks of God hardening Pharaoh’s heart, but at other times of his heart merely becoming hard. It is tempting to take these as mere stylistic variants expressing the same state of affairs, namely that the ancient writers had no explanation of why Pharaoh refused to accede to Moses’ demands. How, after all, could it ever be *shown* that it was *God* who changed Pharaoh’s mind, rather than he himself changing his mind, or that his disposition was affected by other influences? Even if a voice from the heavens had publicly spoken to Pharaoh in resonant Egyptian tones, commanding him to let the Israelites go, he would presumably have retained enough freewill to disbelieve or disobey any such putative divine command. If we think of God influencing Pharaoh in secret ways that were not publicly observable, we are back to the question of how we could ever distinguish between that and the case of Pharaoh making up his own mind.

A similar question can be asked about how we could ever know anything of the operations of positive grace (whether justifying or sanctifying). At Pentecost the Holy Spirit is said to have descended on the apostles in the form of flame or fire, making them speak in strange tongues (*Acts* 2:1-4), and the risen Christ is said to have made a belated appearance to Paul (*Acts* 9:3-6). But whether or not we take those ancient reports as historically true, the problem with any *contemporary* alleged public signs of grace such as speaking in unintelligible “tongues” or snake-handling is that such stuff need not be connected with any transformation of mind and heart for the better. Such behavioural manifestations are surely neither necessary nor sufficient for an attribution of divine grace.

Of course, we may notice some moral improvement in others, and perhaps even in ourselves - though that had better be qualified with a great deal of caution and modesty, as Kant says at 6:67-71. Paul was confident that divine grace was present in the early Christian communities (e.g. *1 Corinthians* 1:4), and he attributed people’s different gifts to God’s grace (*Romans* 12:6). In *Galatians* Ch.5 we find a detailed list of the kinds of character and behaviour described as the “harvest” or “fruits” of the Spirit, whose operations can presumably be identified with sanctifying grace. It may be too “behaviourist” to concentrate on outward actions, crucial though they are, in light of the emphasis in the gospels and epistles on the *spirit* in which things are done. We can agree that it is not enough that the

required actions are undertaken if they are done grudgingly, with gritted teeth (perhaps with attention on the end of the shift, e.g. in the care of the sick or elderly); what is needed is that things are done graciously, and ideally with loving care. Kant himself said it is preferable to do our duties *cheerfully*, indeed “*gracefully*”: see the carefully-nuanced footnote at *Religion* 6:23n, where he insists (in response to Schiller’s famous criticism) that gracefulness is not *synonymous* with doing one’s duty, but he agrees that it should *accompany* it.¹²

Gracious and loving behaviour may be a necessary condition for attributing divine grace, but is it sufficient? What of the declared atheist or devotee of a non-theist religion who exhibits as much graciousness and love of neighbour as some Christians: is the grace of God (or Christ) manifest in the former, despite their lack of Christian belief? In the face of such questions, it seems wise for the Christian (or Jew or Muslim) to admit, with Kant, that we cannot know with any certainty about the operation of divine grace in individuals. To be sure, there are believers who manifest an admirable way of life with warmth and generosity of spirit, and it is natural to attribute this to their religious belief and practice and to the grace of God operating through them. But we may find similarly admirable individuals with a different religious faith or none, and conversely, not all religious believers conspicuously manifest the virtues; and even with the believers we cannot *prove* that what we admire in them is produced by the influence of God, rather than by a combination of their innate disposition, the culture in which they have been brought up, and their own choices. Kant sums up the situation in a footnote comment on *Exodus* 33:19:

No human being can say with certainty why this human being becomes good, that one evil (both comparatively), for we often seem to find the predisposition that makes for the distinction already at birth, and even contingencies of life over which nobody has any control are at times the decisive factor; and just as little can we say what will become of either. (6:122n)

IV

Why should we feel any need to invoke the controversial concept of divine grace at all, if only in the minimal Kantian way as something unknowable that we may hope for, but can never experience for sure? Let us consider a humanist ethic that agrees with Kant in thinking that there are objectively valid moral duties, some of them negative: “Do not kill”, “Do not steal”, and some positive: “Honour

¹² See also Kant [1996b] pp. 206–208 (*Critique of Practical Reason* 5:82–84) and p. 568ff. (*The Metaphysics of Morals* 6:448ff).

your parents”, “Look after your children” (why was the latter not included in the Ten Commandments, one wonders?). For practical ethics it can be left as an open question whether these are self-standing or derivable from some more abstract Kantian principle about universalizability or treating people as ends, interesting as that question may be theoretically. And on the face of it, there is no need to accept Kant’s thesis that human beings cannot be partly good and partly evil (6:24–25), which seems to fly in the face of experience, for we hear of concentration camp guards being loving fathers and of zealous campaigners for good causes neglecting their own children. Perhaps most of us most of the time can avoid outward transgression of the negative rules of law and common morality, but we find it more difficult to live up to the positive duties, which are so general and vague, and even infinitely demanding: there will always be some indeterminacy in just *how much* one ought to do for one’s parents or one’s children, for the forgetful old lady next door, or for the starving babies in Africa. We may also have trouble balancing *conflicting* duties to parents, children, spouses, colleagues and friends without ignoring or hurting some of the people involved, or losing one’s own cool. In face of the ordinary pressures and temptations of life we all need to learn how to deal with our own resentments, anger, fear, envy, pride, sloth, lust and greed.

“Living up to the demands of morality” can thus be interpreted in a less demanding way, in terms of not infringing the rights of others and fulfilling the most obvious kinds of family and workplace duty. But all that, necessary as it is, does not tell us what we are living *for* (apart from reproducing ourselves). There is a more demanding level of thought about how we ought to live (which may deserve the label ‘ethics’ rather than ‘morality’) that sets before us *ideals*, for example of good parenthood, self-control, compassion, and generosity to the disadvantaged. It is fair to say that none of us manages to live up to these standards of perfection, with the possible exception of some saintly figures of history (though one may wonder if even they had imperfections that were expunged from the record). Jesus’ teaching as reported in the gospels clearly raises the bar to the second level, telling his legalistic Jewish interlocutors that it was not enough to fulfil the letter of the ancient commandments. So does Kant’s ethics, taken in the round, for he includes “imperfect duties” in the *Groundwork*, and in the *Metaphysics of Morals* he sets out as the two fundamental ideals or ends of human life the perfection of one’s own capacities (including the virtues) and the happiness of others. In the *Religion* he says there is always an infinite distance between our actual lives and such ideals (6:72).

We do not need to be card-carrying Kantians or devotees of any particular religion to accept this two-level picture of morality. Moral “respectability” at the first level is humanly achievable (though far too many people fail that test), but we can recognize that much more is ideally demanded of us. It is tempting to plead our incapacity to measure up to that second level, and thus (on the principle that “ought implies can”) to try to argue away any obligation to do better than the human average. But there is ample opportunity for self-serving self-deception here, for how can we be so certain about what we can or cannot rise to? As Kant repeatedly says, we do not know our own hearts, so we do not know what we may find ourselves able to do in hypothetical circumstances, or indeed what changes of “heart” or disposition we may undergo, or bring about in ourselves. And we do not know other people any better.

To be sure, there is all manner of evidence about physiological, psychological and sociological factors that *influence* human behaviour and character, which it would be stupid to ignore. But to say that the combination of such factors *predetermines* what a conscious individual will feel and say and do in every particular situation is a claim that will always go beyond the evidence, for it involves an impossible ideal of a complete and precise knowledge of a state-description of all the relevant facts in the world, plus a complete set of all the universal laws that apply. That may be a regulative ideal that guides the progress of physical science, but it will surely never be fulfilled.¹³ For all practical purposes, we cannot predict what we will feel or say or do in every future situation, neither about ourselves nor others. As Kant said towards the end of the *Religion*:

... freedom itself, though not containing anything supernatural in its concept, remains just as incomprehensible to us according to its possibility as the supernatural [something] we might want to assume as surrogate for the independent yet deficient determination of freedom. (6:191)

The unknowable exercises of freewill thus seem to take the place of the unknowable operations of the supernatural in Kant’s system.

If the ethical ideals of universal love and compassion capture our imagination, so that we feel an obligation at least to *try* to live up to them in character and in action, then obviously we will *hope* that we can make progress in the right direction; but we never know for certain that we will. So what difference remains between this hope that the morally serious humanist can entertain, and Kant’s hope for divine grace (of the sanctifying kind), of which we

¹³ See the last essay in Stevenson [2011].

can know nothing at all? Is it merely putting a different label on the same situation? Does Kant's talk of grace amount no more than a pious phrase, as in the saying "There but for the grace of God go I" – which in most mouths means only: "It is so far as I know, a matter of sheer luck that I am not in the same situation" – or the talk of "acts of God" in old-fashioned insurance policies – which presumably meant events beyond all human foresight or control?

It may seem difficult to make any humanist sense of the notion of justifying grace that Kant takes so seriously – but I am going to try. As usually explained, justifying grace presupposes belief in God, for it offers to explain how we can be justified *in the sight of God* despite our sinfulness, whereas the result of sanctifying grace can be expressed just as making us into better people. However, Kant's appeal to the God's-eye-point-of-view might be interpreted as a conceptual device for invoking an ideal standard of ethical judgment to which we may try to approximate but can never completely live up to (he talks of "the accuser within us" and our stern judgment upon ourselves at 6:77). So perhaps the "moral gap" to which justifying grace is offered as an answer might be reformulated in secular terms: given our painful awareness of ourselves and each other as imperfect beings (however much progress we make), how can we live with ourselves and each other? We may be handicapped by feelings of guilt, not necessarily in a neurotic way worthy of psycho-analysis, but just because we have a realistic appreciation of the gap that always remains between the ideals we recognise and our actual attitudes and actions. So we need for *forgiveness*. It is difficult to forgive ourselves without the mediation of another person and without being self-indulgent, and it is difficult to forgive others when real hurt has been done. We may, if we are fortunate, benefit from the attentions of a wise counsellor or therapist, a confessor, spiritual director or guru, to help us live better both for ourselves and for those we relate to. Such a figure may explore with us what we feel remorseful about in ourselves, and what we feel resentful about in others, and may be able to help free us from guilt and anger or at least reduce them to manageable proportions. But there is no guarantee of success, for human actions and reactions are inherently unpredictable, as we have repeatedly noted.

In the gospel of *Luke* (19:1-10) there is a story of the sudden turnaround of a life. Zacchaeus was a tax-collector who had become rich at the expense of others, and like today's bankers he was generally reviled for it, but having heard about Jesus, he was curious to see the famous preacher and healer for himself. When Jesus noticed Zacchaeus peering from a tree, he straightaway invited himself to stay at his house, with the reported result that Zacchaeus decided to give half his possessions to charity and to repay anyone he had defrauded four times over.

Here there was a minimal movement on the part of the sinner (if only of idle curiosity), a surprising offer of loving companionship from a person of charisma, the acceptance of that offer, and a dramatic change in attitude to life. Radical conversions sometimes happen (as Sartre allowed), but there is no guaranteed response to offers of compassion and love; human actions and reactions remain inherently unpredictable, as we have repeatedly noted.

My conclusion is that all three of the positions reviewed here – the thoughtful non-dogmatic Christian, the ethically sensitive humanist who recognizes the reality of good and evil in human nature, with Kant perhaps unstably poised somewhere in between – have to acknowledge an element of ultimate mystery in explaining and dealing with human behaviour and character. Our freedom and the manifold complexity of our minds and the influences upon us mean that complete scientific explanation of human behaviour will always elude us. But we need to face up to that mystery with forgiveness and hope.

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