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Kant the Buddhist: An Analysis of Kantian Ethics, Metaphysics, and Philosophy of Religion in
the Context of Christianity and Buddhism

Whitney Grimm

Philosophy Honors Thesis

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The majority of philosophers, even those considered to be among the greats, will never make it out of the arcane labyrinth of academia and into the discourse of the general population. Despite the prevalence of this philosophical fate, it is not the case for one eighteenth century German philosopher: you will find his influence in every Ethics 101 class, in a popular party game called “Trial by Trolley,” and even in the popular TV show “The Good Place.” I am, of course, talking about Immanuel Kant. The level of popularity that Kant has achieved among the general population is quite rare, only to be outdone in recognizability and influence by the likes of the great Greek philosophers, such as Aristotle. Additionally, the predominance of his influence is made even more astounding when one realizes that his work is much less accessible than that of his counterparts. Nevertheless, the influence of Kant—most notably in the fields of ethics and philosophy of religion—has persisted, and that influence is not without justification.

Immanuel Kant is arguably the most important philosopher of the modern era. There is certainly no question that he is one of the most influential philosophers, both of his time and throughout the history of philosophy, but Kant’s influence is as recognized among his critics as it is among his fans. Even Nietzsche cites Kant as one of the three philosophers who influenced him the most (albeit in opposition to Kant). In the introduction to his work *A Kant Dictionary*, Howard Caygill sums up Kant’s influence when he says:

The influence of Kant’s philosophy has been, and continues to be, so profound and so widespread as to have become imperceptible. Philosophical inquiry within both the ‘analytic’ and the ‘continental’ traditions is unthinkable without the lexical and conceptual resources bequeathed by Kant. Even outside philosophy, in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, Kantian concepts and structures of argument are ubiquitous. Anyone practicing literary or social *criticism* is contributing to the Kantian tradition; anyone reflecting on the epistemological implication of their work will find themselves doing it within the parameters established by Kant. Indeed, many contemporary debates, whether in aesthetics, literary or political theory, show a peculiar tendency to mutate into disputes in Kant exegesis. All in all, in the less than 200 years

since the death of its author, Kantian philosophy has established itself as an indispensable point of intellectual orientation. (Caygill 1995, 1)

The point that Caygill is trying to make here is that Kant's influence, while great in the field of philosophy, goes far beyond philosophy and into many other disciplines. One of the biggest influences that Kant has had outside of the field of philosophy is within religion. Michael Rohlf, writes in his entry for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy that Kant proved that "scientific knowledge, morality, and religious belief are mutually consistent and secure" through the arguments laid out in his ethical and religious theories (Rohlf 2020). Kant's importance to the field of religion as a form of critical academic discourse can not be overstated, yet the discussion of Kant's religious theory has really been restrained to discussing it either in the context of Christianity or secularism. There have been a few scholars who have explored Kant within the context of religion more broadly, but the scholarship is relatively limited in comparison to what is available in the "big two" camps with regard to Kant. It is within this context that I chose to write this thesis, which will explore Kant's ethical and religious theory through a different lens.

In this thesis, I will look at the relationship between Kant's ethical theory and his theory of religion. This thesis aims to explore two major issues: what metaphysical assumptions Kant's ethical theory commits him to, and what those commitments mean for a comparison between Kant's ideal religion and the forms of religion that exist in the world today. Specifically, I will focus on the metaphysical assumptions that underlie Kant's ethical theory and compare them with the metaphysical assumptions of two specific religions: Buddhism and Christianity. In order to do this, I will start with an exegesis of Kant's ethical theory, in which I will specifically explore the concepts of a good will, duty, and the categorical imperative. Kant's

ethical theory, often referred to as deontology, is the most well known area of his work among the general population. When Kant is being discussed in board games and TV shows, they are talking about his ethical theory. Although an understanding of the general principles of deontology is useful, understanding that deontology generally means “doing the right thing for the right reason” is not sufficient for the purposes of this thesis: the specifics of the good will, duty, and the categorical imperative are necessary in order to lay the groundwork for the analysis of Kant’s metaphysics and religious theory that will come next. In the third chapter, I will lay out the three metaphysical assumptions that Kant claims are necessary to his ethical theory (he calls these the necessary postulates of pure practical reason): freedom, immortality, and God. Additionally, in this chapter I will look at the relationship between Christianity and Kant’s theory as he discusses it in his work: this will include an analysis of the role of Jesus Christ according to Kant—as an ideal moral person. In the fourth and final chapter I will do two things. First, I will analyze how the concepts of freedom, immortality, and God, as laid out by Kant, compare to similar conceptions in Christianity and Buddhism. With Christianity, this will be rather straightforward, although I will argue that the Christian idea of heaven and hell is not compatible with Kant’s concepts of freedom and immortality. The comparison to Buddhism is a bit more complicated, but ultimately I will illustrate that karma can replace Kant’s conception of God, rebirth can replace immortality, and the conception of freedom is similar for both Kant and Buddhism. Second, I will explore how Kant, Christianity, and Buddhism understand the role of religion in cultivating ethical people. It is generally assumed, and indeed said by Kant himself, that Christianity is the closest existing religion to his theoretical ideal religion. While the metaphysical elements of both religions make a strong case in favor of Buddhism, the discussion of cultivating ethical people seals the deal. I will argue that Kant’s support for Christianity on

moral grounds is rooted in a misunderstanding of the relationship between justification and salvation. I will also argue that Buddhism shares a similar goal with Kant regarding the role of religion in cultivating moral persons, and that at the root of each is the idea of increasing individual autonomy. Ultimately, I will argue two things in the final chapter of this thesis: first, that Christianity is a poor fit for Kant's ideal religion, and second that Buddhism is the closest existing religion to Kant's ideal religion.

Chapter 2: An Exegesis of Kant's Ethical Theory

I. Introduction

Kant's ethical theory is based on a concept called pure practical reason. Kant does not consider moral philosophy to be an issue of pure reason itself, because he believes that it has an empirical part (Kant 1988, 10). In order for something to be considered pure, he argues, it must "deliver its doctrine from a priori principles alone" (Kant 1988, 10). In other words, in order for something to be pure it must be entirely separate from experience. However, pure practical reason deals with how humans can act morally, and morality cannot be separated from human experience. Morality is concerned with the "laws of the human will, so far as it is affected by nature" (Kant 1988, 10). Humans exist as beings that are affected by nature, so they cannot be separated from the empirical. The empirical, or experienced, world includes both what *is* and what *ought* to be, and moral philosophy is concerned with "laws according to which everything ought to happen" (Kant 1988, 10). In other words, pure practical reason is when reason is applied to what ought to happen in the world. Kant lays out the basis of his theory through an explanation of a few key concepts and their connection to one another. The three most fundamental of these concepts are a good will, duty, and the categorical imperative.

II. Good Will

The first concept that is important to understand in Kant's philosophy is what he calls a good will. The definition of a good will is quite self explanatory: a will that is good. More specifically, a good will is will that is aligned with the moral law. Many ethical theories focus on finding what is referred to as the supreme or highest good; in more common terms, the idea of a supreme good can be understood as the goal or purpose for which other ethical actions are done. Kant's ethical theory is rooted in the idea that the supreme good is a good will. Kant explains

that “nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a good will” (Kant 1988, 17). The point that he is making here is twofold. First, he is establishing the supremacy of a good will: nothing else is equivalent to (hence its title as the supreme good). Second, he is saying that the goodness of this good will does not come from some external factor or measurement of goodness. He further explains this idea when he says that a good will is good “not because of what it performs or effects” but because “it is good in itself” (Kant 1988, 18). At first, this seems like a difficult concept to grasp. In day to day life, it seems like one is often making decisions about how to act based on the good consequences that the actions will result in. However, Kant argues that this idea of a good will is actually intuitive. He says that a good will is “a will which deserves to be highly esteemed for itself, and is good without a view to anything further, a notion which exists already in the sound natural understanding, requiring rather to be cleared up than to be taught, and which in estimating the value of our actions always takes the first place, and constitutes the condition of all of the rest” (Kant 1988, 21). Here, Kant is trying to establish that people already have the idea of a good will and judge their actions based on this inner sense; in other words, people have an idea about what is right and wrong and that idea doesn’t always line up with consequences. During day to day events, one can hear people talk about what the right thing to do is, even when that right thing results in bad consequences. For example, someone might choose to tell the truth in a court case, even if it leads to them going to jail. Despite knowing what the right thing to do is, people may not always act based on their sense of what is right, but they still have a sense of what is right and they have to choose to act against it in order to do immoral things.

Although Kant posits that a good will does not need qualification, he does provide justification for how we can know that it is the supreme good. His argument is that if the ultimate

goal of human life were happiness, we would be governed by instinct rather than reason (Kant 1988, 19). He lays this argument out by establishing a few key points. First, he argues, “we assume it as a fundamental principle that no organ for any purpose will be found but what is also the fittest and best adapted for that purpose” (Kant 1988, 19). In other words, all natural things are designed so that they best achieve their purpose; a bird's wings are excellent at flying, a bat's eyes can see in the dark because they live in caves, etc. The next part of his argument claims that humans being governed by instinct would better guarantee happiness than being governed by reason (Kant 1988, 19). This idea is rather easy to grasp; people often muse about how much more blissful it would be to be an animal, constantly giving in to every instinctual desire. Yet, despite the supposed appeal of such a life, this is not how humans act. The reason for this is explained in Kant's next point, when he argues that humans are governed by reason above instinct (Kant 1988, 19). This simply means that humans choose reason over instinct when making decisions. So far, Kant has established that natural organisms are designed in order to best achieve their purpose, that instinct would better achieve happiness than reason, and that nonetheless humans are governed by reason. Thus, he concludes that the purpose, or ultimate goal, of human life is not happiness.

The previous argument has established that happiness is not the ultimate goal of human life, but Kant has still not yet proven that a good will is the ultimate goal of human life. Thus, he must continue on with his justification. Reason is often contra happiness, so the only way to justify the predominance of reason is to posit that humans have a different teleology. Kant explains that the use of reason, “especially in the case of those who are most experienced in the use of it,” often makes people “find that they have, in fact, only brought more trouble on their shoulders” and “they end by envying, rather than despising, the more common stamp of men

who keep closer to the guidance of mere instinct” (Kant 1988, 20). Kant’s point here is rather simple and intuitive; in everyday terms, this is referred to as the dilemma between being a happy fool or a troubled genius. Another common phrase is: ignorance is bliss. Ignoring reason and indulging in instinctual desires when making decisions seems to consistently result in more happiness for the person making those decisions. Kant does not deny this—in fact, it was the point of his previous argument. However, despite all of this, some people still think that reason is good. Kant describes this feeling that reason is good despite its inconveniences when he says “there lies at the root of these judgements the idea that our existence has a different and far nobler end, for which, and not for happiness, reason is properly intended, and which must, therefore, be regarded as the supreme condition to which the private ends of man must, for the most part, be postponed” (Kant 1988, 20). The point he is making here is that our sense that we should prefer reason despite its problems does not exist for no reason. We prefer reason because some part of us knows that the purpose of human life is not mere happiness; it is something more than that, it is a good will. Kant goes on to make the point that reason is a good way to achieve a good will; if reason is the means, then a good will must be the ends. Kant explains this when he says that:

As reason is not competent to guide the will with certainty in regard to its objects and the satisfaction of all our wants (which to some extent it even multiplies), this being an end to which an implanted instinct would have led with much greater certainty; and since, nevertheless, reason is imparted to us as a practical faculty, i.e. as one which is to have greater influence on the will, therefore admitting that nature generally in the distribution of her capacities has adapted the means to the end, its true destination must be to produce a will, not merely good as a means to something else, but good in itself, for which reason was absolutely necessary. (Kant 1988, 20-21)

In more simple language: natural organisms are designed in such a way that their preferences align with their purpose, humans prefer reason over instinct, but reason is not a good way to achieve happiness, reason is a good way to achieve a good will, therefore, the purpose of human

existence is to achieve a good will. This is a teleological explanation of the human capacity for reason. Kant says that humans have reason so that they can eventually align themselves with a good will. This explanation, with reason as the means and a good will as the ends, raises the question of how we can know that a good will isn't just an intermediary means to achieving some other end. Kant explains that the potential other positive end "could have been also brought about by other causes, so that there would have been no need of the will of a rational being... it is in this alone that the supreme and unconditional good can be found" (Kant 1988, 26). The point here is that other things, besides reason, could achieve any other potential ends, so that can't be the purpose of reason. Reason is the only way to achieve a good will. Other ends can be achieved through other means that are more effective than reason at achieving those ends. For example, Kant's previous argument shows that instinct is the best way to achieve happiness. Reason is most effective at achieving good will. If a good will were only an intermediary end, then humans would show a preference for whatever would help them achieve the final end. The human preference for reason and reason's particular effectiveness at achieving a good will makes it clear that a good will is the final end.

III. Duty

Up until this point, this chapter has discussed Kant's conception of what he calls the supreme good, or a good will. Kant says that a good will, "though not indeed the sole and complete good, must be the supreme good and the condition of every other, even of the desire of happiness" (Kant 1988, 21). The fact that a good will is the supreme good has already been established, but Kant introduces a new concept here, which is what he calls the complete good. A good will is not the complete good. The complete good is what Kant refers to as duty. Duty includes a good will, but it is more than that. This is why duty is called the complete good. Kant

says that in order to understand the complete good “we will take the notion of duty, which includes that of a good will, although implying subjective restrictions and hindrances” (Kant 1988, 21). In other words, the term duty refers to the incentive to act in accordance with a good will. Specifically, it is the feeling of inclination to act in accordance with a good will out of a sense of commitment to or respect for the moral law, rather than as a result of some other type of inclination. An action that is done in accordance with and from duty is considered a moral action. Kant explains that an action is not moral if it is done “as duty requires...but not because duty requires” (Kant 1988, 22). If someone performs an action “not from inclination or fear, but from duty—then his maxim has moral worth” (Kant 1988, 22). In other words, a moral action cannot just conform with duty but be done from some inclination. A moral action is an action that is taken because it is the right thing to do. It is not an action that is taken because it will have good consequences that just happens to be the right thing to do. Kant gives an example of this in the case of a merchant. The merchant has honest business practices. These honest business practices benefit the salesperson because they make people want to shop with this salesperson. These honest business practices also align with the moral law. The difference lies in why the salesperson has these honest business practices. If they have honest practices because it is the right thing to do, then having them is a morally good action. If they have honest business practices because they are beneficial to their business then the action is not morally wrong, it is just morally neutral with beneficial consequences—it is not a moral action so it does not have moral worth (Kant 1988, 22). A key point here is that Kant’s theory does not mean that all actions that are taken for reasons other than following the moral law are *bad*. Those actions just do not have any moral worth. In simple terms, people do not get moral points for performing an action that just happens to be in accordance with the moral law when the moral law is not the

reason that they take that action. Additionally, not all actions and choices are moral in nature. People will have inclinations, and it is preferable that those inclinations are beneficial in a practical way. For example, it is preferable that a person have an inclination to eat salad rather than candy. Other actions (such as eating) are not bad, they just have no moral worth. They can even be good in the everyday use of the word, meaning that they are beneficial, and not good in the moral sense, but they are morally neutral (Kant 1988, 23). Kant explains that it is a positive thing for people to have inclinations to do these beneficial actions, and that they “deserve praise and encouragement, but not esteem” because esteem should be reserved for actions that are good in the moral sense (Kant 1988, 23). According to Kant, the issue of doing things for reasons that aren’t related to the moral law, like positive consequences, is simply a discussion that ought to exist outside the bounds of ethics. Of course, it is bad to do things that contradict the moral law, but actions that are aligned with the moral law and are done for other reasons are just not issues of ethical concern. Kant’s ethical theory is focused much more on the *why* of moral actions than the *what*. Kant views this as a good thing, since a moral theory focused on the moral law is much more consistent than one that is based on something as inconsistent as consequences. Nonetheless, his focus on the why of moral actions does cause some dilemmas for Kant.

IV. Grounding for the Moral Law

Kant establishes that a good will is the supreme good and that duty is the complete good. This creates a problem for Kant because it is basically impossible to find an example of an action done purely out of duty. Even if such an action did exist, it would be impossible for anyone else to know that action was done purely out of duty (Kant 1988, 33-34). So there is no empirical evidence upon which to ground Kant’s ethical theory. One can not see people acting on the basis of duty. At this point, it seems like there are some major problems with Kant’s ethical theory. He

himself argues that there are few or no examples of actions done purely out of duty, which makes it seem like his ethical theory is impossible to follow. Additionally, he also points out that it is seemingly impossible to prove his theory through empirical experience because, even on the off chance that it actually happened, it would be impossible to know if an action was done purely out of duty. Kant, however, does not view these things as problems for his theory. He argues that it is not possible to derive moral laws from experience. Here, it is important to have a basic understanding of what Kant means by the concept of a moral law. Laws are rules for action that are universal, they apply to all rational beings (Kant 2002, 29). A moral law is a rule about morality that is universal, it applies to all rational beings. This universalizability is what causes the issue with concluding moral laws from experience. Empirical experiences exist within a specific set of individual circumstances and it is highly unlikely that anyone else will experience those exact same circumstances. And it is definitely the case that those specific circumstances will not apply to everyone, so they cannot be the basis on which moral laws that are supposed to apply to everyone can be formulated (Kant 1988, 34). Kant further justifies his argument for why moral laws cannot be based on experience in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (hereafter abbreviated CPR). In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant introduces a concept that he refers to as pure reason.

Kant argues that the existence of a moral law is based on an assumption of the existence of pure reason, or reason separate from empirical experiences, because if people are being motivated by empirical experiences they are actually acting based on maxims rather than laws (Kant 2002, 29). Kant further explains the distinction between laws and maxims by saying that laws cannot be based on desiring some thing, while maxims can be based on desire (Kant 2002, 32). The reason for this is that desiring a thing is based on an empirical experience of that thing

and whether it causes pleasure, pain, etc. Empirical experiences are unique to each person, so desire for some thing can't be universal. This idea that empirical experiences are unique to each person can seem a little off-putting at first. On a basic level, it seems like fire would always cause pain and chocolate cake would always cause pleasure. However, human psychology and physiology is more complicated than that. Even if being burned by fire usually causes pain, some masochists might enjoy it, and even among average people the experience of the level of pain would be different. All humans experience things slightly differently because of their uniqueness, so they will not desire or avoid the same things or to the same degree. The implication of all of this is that laws, needing to be universally applicable, cannot be based on anything empirical. Kant goes on to contrast the concept of laws with the concept of material practical principles, or maxims. He says that all maxims are based on self love (Kant 2002, 34). In other words, people want things because they want happiness, and the desire for happiness is rooted in self love. It is important to understand here that Kant is not just referring to desire in the sense that it is usually associated with (food, sex, etc.), he also means more sophisticated types of desire. He explains that there is not a difference between lower pleasures that are rooted in senses and higher pleasures which are rooted in understanding, they are still all based on sensibility because they are based on experiencing pleasure (Kant 2002, 34-35). Sensibility here just means that they exist within the realm of empirical experience. In other words, according to Kant, pleasure from doing drugs or from doing math are still fundamentally the same, because they are pleasures that are derived from empirical experience. Pleasure can only be experienced by sensibilities and it is based on being a living being existing in the realm of sensibility. This connection between experience and pleasure is important for understanding why empirical experience cannot tell us anything significant about the moral law. Every rational and finite

being necessarily desires happiness. Kant explains that because humans are finite we have needs that we have to satisfy and we are always striving to fulfill our needs; ultimately, happiness is simply having our needs satisfied, and therefore experiencing pleasure and not pain (Kant 2002, 38). Another way to understand this is that as biological organisms we have a basic drive to satisfy our needs in order to survive. Thus, the basic drive of any organism is getting things that are pleasurable and get rid of things that are unpleasurable. Pleasurable things, like food or sex, lead to survival, while painful things, like hunger and injury, lead to death. Kant makes a point here to clarify that this motivation for happiness does not constitute a law in his sense of the word. It is not a law because what causes happiness in each person varies from person to person. He explains that “a law that is subjectively necessary (as a law of nature) is objectively a very contingent practical principle that can and must be very different in different subjects” (Kant 2002, 38). While everyone desires happiness, the method of achieving this varies from person to person. Thus, Kant draws a distinction between laws of nature and laws of pure practical reason (moral laws). Laws of nature are in the realm of sense, and their reliance on experience makes this subjective. Laws of pure practical reason, or moral laws, must be universalizable, so they cannot be based on experience

Kant has thus argued that moral laws that apply to everyone cannot be based on empirical experiences, so he must provide an alternative basis for them. Kant argues that morality should be based on a priori moral concepts (Kant 1988, 35). A priori concepts are those things which can be understood through reason alone, without the need for experience. This is where the concept of pure reason that he talks about in CPR comes in, he says in CPR that “pure reason is practical by itself alone and gives (to human beings) a universal law, which we call the moral law” (Kant 2002, 46). In other words, the moral law comes from pure reason alone and does not

need help from anything else, such as empirical experience. Kant is arguing here that moral truths can be discovered through the use of reason and logic, rather than through seeing moral actions play out in the world. One example of this that Kant gives is the idea of God. Humanity's idea of God is based on an a priori conception of moral perfection, not on experience (Kant 1988, 36). The point that Kant is making about morality is that humans are able to figure out what is right and wrong simply through the use of reason. This is what he meant when he said that morality requires "rather to be cleared up than to be taught" (Kant 1988, 21). Humans already have an innate ability to know right from wrong, the point of philosophy is simply to make that clearer. One way to help make the moral law clearer is to provide a simple concept that people can reference in order to make sure that their actions align with the moral law. Kant calls this concept the categorical imperative.

V. Categorical Imperative

Kant argues that people can choose to align their will with reason, or with their instincts and desire. Each of these things influences different practical principles that people use to make decisions. Practical principles are basically sets of principles that people hold that serve as the basis for how they handle and reason through specific situations. Kant says that there are two types of practical principles, which have been discussed in a different context previously. These are maxims and laws. Maxims are subjective, they are based on desire and are only valid for the will of the individual who holds them. This is because of Kant's point about how people experience things differently and different things bring them happiness, so they have different desires and therefore different maxims. Laws are universal, they are valid for the will of all rational beings. In other words, maxims and laws differ with regard to the justification for why someone is performing that action. Maxims are specific to individuals, they are about what that

specific person wants. For example, a person would state a maxim using the format: “I am doing q because...” Laws are universal statements about why people should take a certain action. A format for a law might be: “Everyone should do t because...” Maxims and laws are about why people should perform certain actions. Kant also has a concept called imperatives, which are about what actions people should take. Specifically, Kant says that imperatives are the actions that one should take in alignment with reason (Kant 1988, 40). Imperatives are rules of action. There are two types of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical (Kant 1988, 41). Hypothetical imperatives are about what a person needs to do in order to achieve some desired end other than morality. Categorical imperatives have to do with moral actions, they are about what one must do in order to align their actions with the moral law. Hypothetical imperatives can be formatted like this: “If a person wants x (where x is some desired end besides morality), that person should do y .” Categorical imperatives always apply to everyone, they can be formatted: “Everyone must always do z .” Needless to say, hypothetical imperatives are not particularly relevant to ethics. It is categorical imperatives that the field of ethics is concerned with. Categorical imperatives provide the clarification of the moral law which Kant claims is what philosophy ought to concern itself with. There are three formulations of the categorical imperative. The first formulation is the idea that one ought to only perform an action which they would wish to be willed into a universal law (Kant 1988, 49). One way that Kant phrases this is “act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle of a universal legislation” (Kant 2002, 45). The action needs to be universalizable. In other words, a person needs to think about whether they would want everyone to always take the action that they are about to take. If they would not want that, then the action isn’t moral. It is easy to determine if a maxim is universalizable using common understanding (Kant 2002, 40-41). Apply that maxim to the case in which one would

like to use it and then see if that action would be universalizable. For example, it could not be a universal maxim that one should lie. If that rule were universalized (if everyone always lied all of the time) it would make it impossible to have any type of functioning society or human interaction. The second formulation of the categorical imperative is that rational beings are an end in themselves and should never be treated merely as a means (Kant 1988, 58). This basically means that it is not morally acceptable to just use people to achieve something. Sometimes people are used to achieving something, but morality requires that their dignity and rationality is also respected. An example to clarify the difference is that it would not be okay to order a group of slaves to go into battle in order to win some war. They do not have a choice in the matter and therefore their rationality is not being respected, they are just being used as cannon fodder. However, it would be okay to send a group of soldiers into battle who had willingly signed up and understood and accepted the risk. They are still being used to win the war, so they are being used as means, but they are not being used *merely* as a means; their dignity and rationality have been respected because they are making a free choice. This formulation makes it clear that respect for the dignity of all human beings is a requirement of morality. The final formulation of the categorical imperative is what Kant refers to as the “kingdom of ends” (Kant 1988, 62). The basic idea here is that people should act in such a way that if their actions were to be ruled into universal laws in some theoretical utopian society, that society would be one that treated people as ends in themselves. The key difference between the second formulation of the categorical imperative and the third is that the second is about how to treat individuals, while the third is about what type of society it would be ideal to live in. The kingdom of ends is not the way the world actually works, but in theory, if everyone acted perfectly in accordance with the moral law then it would be how the world looked. The use of the terminology “kingdom of ends” here is

interesting because it sounds very similar to the term “kingdom of God.” This is a small hint of the connection between morality and religion that is key to Kant’s ethical theory. This connection will be the subject of the rest of this thesis.

VI. Conclusion

Kant’s ethical theory focuses on three major concepts. These concepts are a good will, duty, and the categorical imperative. The justification for these three concepts is rooted in the idea that people are rational beings. The idea that people are rational beings, while seemingly intuitive, should not be taken for granted. This seemingly fundamental concept of rationality is actually based on something even more fundamental: the idea of freedom. Freedom is one of the key assumptions that underlies Kant’s ethical theory, however it is not the only assumption. Kant’s ethical theory is based upon many assumptions that are necessary in order for it to be consistent. These assumptions have to do with the metaphysical, so they indicate the overlap between Kant’s ethical theory and his theory of religion. The next chapter of this thesis will deal with Kant’s theory of religion, so it will discuss these assumptions. Additionally, it will discuss other aspects of Kant’s theory of religion that are foundational to his theory of ethics.

Chapter 3: An Exegesis of Kant's Theory of Religion

I. Introduction

As the previous section of this thesis discussed, Kant argues for a concept called pure practical reason as the basis of his ethical theory. The implications of this pure practical reason are laid out in his ethical theory. Kant argues that this concept of pure practical reason requires three necessary assumptions about freedom, immortality, and God. These assumptions will be the subject of the first half of this section. The second half of this section will deal with Kant's thesis on the purposes of religion. Specifically, it will address Kant's claim that the value of religion lies solely in its function to make people more ethical. Kant's discussion of religion in this context also includes an evaluation of the role of Jesus as a religious figure and the value of Christianity specifically as it relates to achieving the highest good. In summary, the first part of this section will deal with the metaphysical claims that Kant makes in order for his theory of ethics to be consistent—these claims deal with concepts that are usually considered religious in nature—and the second part of the section will deal with the practical aspects of Kant's theory of religion—what an ideal religion would look like—and apply this criterion to the case study of Christianity and its key figure, Jesus.

II. Freedom

When Kant discusses the concept of freedom he does not necessarily mean it in the colloquial sense of the word. Oftentimes, freedom is conceived of as a lack of any constraints and therefore being able to do whatever one pleases. Kant, however, explains that freedom is when the will is not constrained by natural laws (Kant 2002, 42). People are only able to be fully free when they are making choices using their rationality, and thus in accordance with the highest good, rather than being constrained by acting based on their desires and instincts. Kant explains

this distinction as *autonomy* versus *heteronomy*: autonomy is the concept of being self governing, and in Kant's case this means that one is acting based on their reason; conversely, heteronomy is the concept of being restrained by some external force, and in Kant's case he is referring to desire and instinct (Kant 1988, 62). This is an important distinction to understand because the colloquial use of freedom often means the opposite: the common sense conception of freedom is that freedom means being free of an external constraint (such as a government) so that one can give in to their own instincts and desires. Kant argues that freedom is what causes a rational being to act (Kant 1988, 10). According to Kant, a rational being engages in action as a result of the will; Kant defines the will as "a kind of causality belonging to living beings insofar as they are rational" (Kant 1988, 77). In other words, the will is what causes the rational individual to engage in the practical part of pure practical reason: the action. Freedom is a property of the will. An irrational actor has no will, because Kant's definition of the will assumes rationality. This concept can tie back to the animals versus humans example used earlier; an animal is capable of taking actions in order to fulfill certain desires or impulses, but this is not what Kant means by the concept of a will. When he uses the term will he means the part of a person's consciousness that is making choices based on rationality. Rationality requires that someone is making decisions in accordance with reason, rather than acting based on the constraints of their desires or interests (Kant 1988, 62). Freedom is the lack of these external constraints. Thus, freedom is a necessary component of rationality and therefore a necessary property of the will. Pure practical reason is carried out through the use of the will, thus freedom is a necessary postulate of it because without freedom there could be no will.

Ultimately, the concept of freedom relates to Kant's ethical theory because in order to engage in action that has moral weight one has to be responsible for the choices that they are

making. If a being does not have the capacity to reason, if they do not have the potential choice to follow the moral law, then they cannot be held culpable for not following it. The clearest example of this is the concept of the murder. No one calls it murder when an animal kills another animal, it is not considered a bad moral choice on the part of the animal, they are simply following their instincts. However, we do use the idea of murder in reference to humans; this is because humans have the ability to use reason to choose to follow the moral law. Humans are free, so they are morally culpable for their actions. Kant argues that freedom and the moral law are the same thing; this is because acting from anything other than reason restricts one's freedom (Kant 2002, 43). He goes on to posit that recognizing the moral law is what makes someone realize that they are free, not the other way around. In other words, a person will not recognize their own autonomy and then realize that they need to follow the moral law. A person will come to understand the moral law through the use of reason, and that recognition will lead them to understand that they are free. The basic argument that Kant is making here is that reason makes people think about what they *ought* to do. When we use reason, we think about how we would feel if other people did the action we are thinking about to us or what would happen if everyone took this action. This is what Kant means when he talks about an organic recognition of the categorical imperative. It is important to understand that Kant does not think of his theory as something that people have to read in order to understand, he believes he is just explaining something that naturally happens. Once we think about how our actions will affect other people and the world, we try to justify them; we try to find a reason why it would be okay for anyone else to take these actions: in doing this, we appeal to universal principles. This process is how Kant gets from reason to the moral law. The next step is to get to freedom. The conception of freedom that Kant establishes is negative—it is the lack of being constrained by one's sensual

impulses—naturally, this means that recognition and adherence to the moral law moves one closer to freedom by providing an alternative to giving in to sensual impulses—thus, Kant has now gone from reason all the way to freedom. And when one comes to the recognition that they are free, they realize that they have dignity. The term dignity here can be understood in the context of one of the formulations of the categorical imperative mentioned earlier in chapter two—to treat human beings as an end in themselves and never merely as a means—and basically means that human life is inherently valuable in a way that objects are not. This conception of dignity must be rooted in reason because reason is what distinguishes humans from other types of life. The point that he is making when he posits freedom as a necessary component of pure practical reason is that part of what gives people dignity is their ability to make choices outside the limits of the material world, independent of causality.¹ Kant takes this concept of independence from causality even further when he discusses the concepts of an immaterial and immortal consciousness; these topics will be the subject of the next section.

III. Immortality

The previous section discussed the fact that freedom means that the will is not constrained by natural laws; this raises the question of how the will is not constrained by natural laws when the body *is* constrained by natural laws. The moral law demands that in order to be entirely moral one must completely align their own will with the moral law (Kant 2002, 155). In other words, perfect alignment with the moral law demands that one no longer be subject to the constraints of their desire and instinct; desire and instinct no longer have an influence on the will. In order for this conception of the moral law to be worth consideration it has to be possible for

¹ Under this conception of reason, reason is not just another mechanical process. In modern terminology, reason cannot just be a result of chemical processes happening in the brain and neurons firing. If that were the case, reason would be a physical process and would thus be constrained by the limits of the physical world. This concept will be addressed further in the next section.

people to adhere to it (Kant 2002, 155). The basic concept that he is promoting here is that culpability requires possibility; if it is not possible for someone to achieve something, then they cannot be held accountable for not achieving it. People cannot be held morally responsible for not adhering to a moral law that is impossible for them to achieve and a moral theory that is unachievable does not have any practical ethical value. However, no human is going to be able to achieve a perfect alignment of their will with the moral law during their lifetime, because they exist as beings in a sensible world and that puts some constraints on them that makes complete alignment with the moral law practically impossible (Kant 2002, 155). Although humans have the capacity for reason that other beings do not, we still have many of the biological requirements of any living beings: these requirements include things like a sex drive and a need for food in order to survive. Nonetheless, despite these biological impediments, complete alignment of the will with the moral law is still the eventual requirement of morality. Thus, one must consider how this complete alignment could be possible. Kant posits that because the ultimate object of the will is alignment with the moral law, humans are always making progress towards it, so given enough time the will will eventually become aligned with the moral law (Kant 2002, 155). Human lives are finite and relatively short, so the solution for giving people enough time to become aligned with the moral law is immortality. This conception of continuous progress towards alignment with the moral law can only happen if it is assumed that what continues after death is the “existence and personality of the same rational being” (Kant 2002, 155). In other words, Kant’s conception of immortality requires a unified and immaterial conception of the self. This requirement of Kant is often described as a soul, but it is important to note that what he means is not necessarily the conception of a soul that practitioners of a religion such as Christianity believe in; his conception of a soul is best conceived of as an immaterial

consciousness. The key point here is that Kant argues that complete alignment with the moral law can eventually be achieved, despite the material restrictions of the sensible world, because the body and the will are separate and an immaterial consciousness is responsible for the will. In this sense, the will is not restricted by natural laws because it is not tied to the sense of material causality in the world. Kant must posit a consciousness that exists outside of material causality because it makes his theory possible: it allows for the possibility of perfect morality that is not impeded by the restriction that are placed on beings that exist in the material world by virtue of their material existence, such as the desire for food or sex. However, the constraints of the material world are not the only barriers that Kant has to overcome in order for perfect morality under his theory to be possible; he also has to provide a theory that allows for the necessary amount of time that it takes for the human will to make the journey towards moral perfection given the finite nature of human lives. The combination of the concepts of an immaterial consciousness and immortality solve these issues. Thus, Kant posits immortality as one of the postulates of pure practical reason in order to make moral perfection a theoretically attainable possibility.

When Kant postulates freedom and immortality as necessarily postulates of pure practical reason he is specifically resolving gaps in his moral theory that must be accounted for. Freedom is not a necessary postulate under a materialist conception of human consciousness that defines it only as chemical reactions and neural stimulations, and immortality is not a necessary postulate of human existences without the requirement of aligning one's will with the highest good. His final postulate of pure practical reason is a bit different; it does address issues in his theory, but he also argues that it is necessary in order for the existence of the world, regardless of one's

ethical theory, to make sense. In this sense, his final postulate comes the closest to the traditional idea of religion. This final postulate is God.

IV. God

God is a necessary postulate of pure practical reason because both nature and the highest good must have a cause; of course, Kant is making the assumption with this claim that anything that exists must have a cause. He doesn't justify this assumption, rather it is simply presumed as a natural conclusion of reason that causation exists. However, reason does not instantly get to the conclusion that the cause of nature and the highest good is God, more justification is required for that claim. Kant proves earlier in his work that the highest good does in fact actually exist in the world. This concept was discussed extensively in chapter two. The only possible way that the highest good can exist is if the cause of the world, or nature, "has a causality conforming to the moral attitude" (Kant 2002, 159). Because Kant has previously proven that the highest good does in fact exist, then his second statement that the causality of nature conforms to the moral attitude must also be true. In other words, whatever caused the world must recognize the moral law and have a will that is aligned with it. In order for the cause of nature to recognize the moral law it must be rational and in order for it to have a will that is aligned with the moral law it must have a will. Thus, more simply, Kant's conception of the cause of nature requires that it is both rational and has a will. This is a very important point because it means that Kant's theory of the cause of the world must be an anthropomorphized conception of God. God must have a consciousness that operates in some ways similar to that of humans in that God is a rational being and rationality is the distinguishing characteristic of humanity. Additionally, because the will of God is aligned with the highest good, God is also all good. This characteristic of God aligns with the conception of God as omnibenevolent in Judeo-Christian literature. Here, God differs from

humanity in that God is not constrained by instincts or desires in the same way that humans are. This connects to the next characteristic of God: Kant argues that because God is the cause of the world, God must exist outside of the natural world and is therefore free of its constraints (Kant 2002 158). In summary, Kant's conception of God is fundamentally a morally good and rational being that exists outside of the natural world.

It is clear when looking at Kant's postulates of pure practical reason that he is concerned with the topic of religion in a much different way than a theologian or a scholar of religion would be. His engagement with the topic of religion is necessary because it ties back to his ethical theory. Kant's discussion of the necessary postulates of pure practical reason are religious in that they are metaphysical in nature and deal with concepts—such as a “soul” and God—that are usually considered to fall under the umbrella of religion. His discussion of pure practical reason does not deal with the topic of religion in practice. However, Kant does view the topic of religion more broadly as important to understand ethics; he just does not view the two topics as one and the same. The next section of this chapter is going to address what Kant sees as the intersection between religion and ethics in a practical sense.

V. The Relationship between Religion and Ethics

Kant proposes a nuanced conception of the relationship between religion and ethics. He does not claim that morality is derived from religion or from God. The previous section discusses that God is necessary to his ethical theory, but he claims that God is a being whose will is aligned with the moral law, not that the moral law is whatever God's will is. This distinction is important to understand because it clarifies the direction of causality in the relationship between ethics and religion that underlies his theory on the subject; religion can be ethical, but that happens if and only if it is aligned with the moral law. Religion gets its ethical justification from moral

philosophy, not the other way around. The supremacy of ethics over religion is the first key point in Kant's theory of religion. The other major point that this section of the chapter will explore is that there are some aspects of religion that do align themselves with ethics, and in this way religion can be a useful tool in cultivating morality. However, no established religion aligns itself perfectly with the moral law. Christianity will be used as an example of both the possible positive aspects of religion with respect to ethics, as well as its limitations.

The first step in understanding where Kant believes that religion and ethics *do* overlap is to understand the areas where he thinks they *do not* overlap; particularly in two specific areas. Kant argues that acting based on the will of God is not reasonable (Kant 1988, 69). This is confusing at first because the will of God is aligned with the highest good; however, there are two nuances that clear up this confusion. Acting based on the will of God, if one is talking about Kant's conception of God, is not reasonable because a person is doing it because it is the will of God rather than out of recognition of the moral law. Also, the majority of religious people do not have a conception of God that aligns with Kant's, so when they talk about acting based on the will of God they usually mean that they are acting based on what their religious text says the will of God is. This conception of God's will in these religious texts does not necessarily line up with the highest good. The second major point that Kant makes about where ethics and religion do not overlap is that duties to God are not a part of ethics (Kant 1996b, 229). It is important to remember here a point that was made earlier: not all actions are moral actions. This does not mean that they are *immoral*, but rather that they are *amoral*. They do not have moral weight one way or the other. This is where Kant puts actions—such as following a religious law regarding when to plant seeds—that are considered duties to God by certain religions. For example, it is not wrong to pray five times a day, eat symbolic wine and crackers, or abstain from eating pork,

but those activities are not ethical either. The ritualistic aspects of religion belong in a category separate from ethics as long as they do not violate the moral law. For example, a religious ritual that required human sacrifice would be immoral. In addition to clarifying where religion and ethics are not applicable to each other, Kant also has a theory about where they overlap, specifically with regard to Christianity.

VI. Christianity

Kant discusses what he calls impure religious ideals, by which he means religious ideals that bring people farther away from alignment with the moral rather than closer to it. He divides religion into two categories “religion of roagation” and “moral religion” (Kant 1996a, 95). Religion of roagation belongs to the category of impure religious ideals; it promises either that God will make the practitioner happy without that person having to become a better person, or that God will make the practitioner a better person without the need of any effort on their part (Kant 1996a, 95). Conversely, moral religion requires that “to become a better human being, everyone must do as much as it is in his powers to do; and only then... can he hope that what does not lie in his power will be made good by cooperation from above” (Kant 1996a, 95). Kant also argues that, of the mainstream religions, Christianity is the only moral religion under this definition. It is important to clarify here that Kant is not saying that Christianity is perfectly aligned with the moral law in the way that it is currently being practiced, or that it is a perfect religion. Rather, he is saying that it is the closest existing major religion to being a moral religion because it contains an element of obligation on the part of the believers to be an active participant in moral development. However, Kant does not believe that people need religion to be moral. He does not think that people need the cooperation from above that Christianity provides; it is simply a preferable model of religion to one in which the believer has no part in

their own moral development. The point that Kant is making here is that the redeeming quality of Christianity is that it requires a person to take at least some responsibility for their own moral development. However, the doctrine of salvation through Jesus Christ interferes with this positive quality of Christianity: which is why Kant proposes that people need to reevaluate the role of Jesus as a religious figure.

VII. *Jesus*

According to Kant, Jesus's contribution to the world is not as humanity's savior, but rather as the archetype of perfect human morality. Kant says regarding Jesus:

That which alone can make a world the object of divine decree and the end of creation is *Humanity* (rational being in general as pertaining to the world) *in its full moral perfection*, from which happiness follows in the will of the Highest Being directly as from its supreme condition. - This human being, alone pleasing to God, "is in him from all eternity"; the idea of him proceeds from God's being; he is not, therefore, a created thing but God's only begotten Son, "the *Word*" (the *Fiat!*) through which all other things are, and without whom nothing that is made would exist (since for him, that is, for a rational being in the world, as can be thought according to its moral determination, everything was made.) - "He is the reflection of his glory." - "In him God loved the world," and only in him and through the adoption of his dispositions can we hope "to become children of God"; etc. (Kant 1996a, 103-4)

The main point that Kant is making with this effusive description of Jesus is that Jesus is the personified idea of moral perfection. Kant goes on to explain that "it is our universal human duty to *elevate* ourselves to this ideal of moral perfection" (Kant 1996a, 104). Kant's position on Jesus is essentially that Jesus is our example of moral perfection and that people have a moral obligation to strive towards this idea of moral perfection. This idea exists in Christianity, and it is embodied in the call for believers to make themselves more "Christ-like." However, traditional Christianity requires more than just a belief in Jesus as an example of moral perfection; it requires faith in Jesus as a savior. It is this second conception of Jesus that Kant adamantly objects to. Kant advocates for a "practical faith in this Son of God" (Kant 1996a, 104). This

practical faith is not faith in the salvific powers of Jesus Christ as the redeemer of humanity, rather, it is faith that Jesus could achieve moral perfection, even given the limitations of human nature, demonstrating that moral perfection is possible for the rest of humanity as well; moral perfection is possible for one's self. This practical faith is not really faith in Jesus as a deity, it is a faith in humanity's capacity for goodness: Jesus is simply the exemplar of it.

Kant's conception of the purpose of Jesus serves as a reflection of theory on the purpose of religion more generally. Jesus does not function, according to Kant, to provide salvation for humans from their moral failing—an escape from moral culpability. In the same way, he posits that religion should not be used to provide people an escape from moral culpability by promising them happiness or moral growth without effort on their part. However, Kant does believe that Jesus serves a purpose by demonstrating what moral perfection would look like and how it can be achieved. Parallely, religion can serve as a guide for directing people to engage in their own moral development. Jesus is not necessary to Kant's theory of religion, and religion (in the traditional sense of the word) is not necessary to his theory of ethics; however, both serve as a tool in humanity's pursuit of moral perfection.

VIII. Conclusion

The most significant contributions of Kant's theory of religion can be broken down into two categories. First, there are the necessary postulates of pure practical reason. In order for Kant's ethical theory to be sound, he must posit three things: people are free; they have an immaterial consciousness that exists after their physical body has perished; and there is a God that is good, rational, and exists outside of the material world. The second major contribution of Kant's religious theory is the idea that the only thing that matters in religion, at least with regard to morality, is ethics. He uses Christianity and Jesus as examples. He argues that Christianity is a

useful religion in that it puts some of the burden of moral development on the believer. Jesus should be valued as a religious figure because he is an example of a morally perfect human being: one who was able to consistently resist instincts and desire in favor of aligning his will with the moral law. Ultimately, while Kant must postulate some of the general ideals of religion (such as an immaterial consciousness and God), religion in the sense of the common usage of the term (holy books, religious rituals, etc) is not necessary to his theory of ethics.

Chapter 4: Ideal Religion vs. Religion in Reality

I. Introduction

In this chapter I will analyze Kant's religious and ethical philosophy in comparison to two major religions that may be seen as particularly relevant to his theory: Christianity and Buddhism. Specifically, this analysis will be looking at two aspects of Kant's theories in comparison to the theologies of these religions. First, I will consider the alignment of the metaphysics of these religions with the necessary postulates of pure practical reason laid out in Kant's theory: freedom, immortality, and God. Second, I will look at the purpose of each religion and the relationship of that religion with individual moral development. In doing this, I will compare these religions to Kant's conception of an ideal religion, which serves to cultivate personal moral development and bring individual's wills closer to alignment with the moral law. The first religion that I will analyze in this chapter is Christianity. Christianity is the religion that Kant discusses extensively in his work and it provides context for how Kant saw his religious theory in relation to existing dominant religion in his cultural milieu. Additionally, Kant argues in his works that Christianity is the closest of the major world religions to the ideal religion that he posits in his philosophy. The analysis of Christianity in this chapter will discuss Kant's argument for the superiority of Christianity in comparison to other religions in cultivating moral virtue, as well as propose reasons why a more nuanced understanding of the conception of Christianity laid out by Kant in comparison to actual Christian theology makes it clear that Christianity, as it is generally practiced, does not come close to Kant's ideal religion.

The second half of this chapter will analyze the relationship between Kant's ethical theory and Buddhism. The first part of the section on Buddhism will deal with the way that the Buddhist conceptions of freedom, rebirth, and karma map onto the Kantian conceptions of

freedom, immortality, and karma. Buddhism has some significant overlap with Kant metaphysically, and that overlap will be explored in this chapter, but it is particularly relevant to a discussion of Kant's religious theory because the Buddhist conception of the purpose of religion with regard to personal moral development aligns better with Kant's conception of the subject Judeo-Christian religion does. The purpose of this section will be to demonstrate that although Buddhism is not a perfect replacement for Kant's ideal religion, it maps onto it quite nicely.

Ultimately, this chapter will argue that Kant's distortion of Christianity in order to make it align with his theory is so far from traditional Christianity that it cannot be reasonably conceived of as the same religion. While at first glance Judeo-Christian religion may have the upper hand on Asian religions with regard to alignment with Kant's metaphysics, a deeper look at Kant's necessary principles of pure practical reason will illustrate why this is not the case. Furthermore, the conception of religion as a tool for individual moral development is much more aligned with Asian religious practices—specifically Buddhism.

II. Christianity

Kant posits that the closest existing religion to his ideal religion is Christianity. Throughout his work on the subject of religion, he argues that Jesus is an example of a perfectly moral person. Although Kant claims that Christianity is the closest existing religion to his ideal religion, he poses some major changes to the religion in order to make it fit within his ethical theory. Most notably, Kant argues that in order for Christianity to be a good fit for his ideal religion it needs to remove the idea of Jesus as savior and rather view Jesus simply as an example of an ideal moral person. My argument in this chapter will discuss two significant concepts within Kant's philosophy: the necessary postulates of pure practical reason and

religion's role in cultivating an individual's moral virtue. First, I will argue that, while on the surface it may seem like Christianity fulfills Kant's necessary postulates of pure practical reason, it actually falls short with regard to the concepts of freedom and immortality. Additionally, I will argue that when Kant attempts to separate the cultivation of moral virtue from the issue of salvation he is fundamentally misunderstanding the relationship between justification and sanctification in Christian theology.

A. Necessary Postulates of Pure Practical Reason

In *The Critique of Practical Reason* Kant posits that there are three assumptions that one must make in order for metaphysics to be consistent with his ethical theory. He calls these assumptions the necessarily postulates of pure practical reason and they are: freedom, immortality, and God. Generally, the scholarly consensus has been that Christian theology fulfills these three requirements through its conception of free will, an eternal soul, and an anthropomorphized God. The issue of God is quite straightforward, so I will pass over it quickly here; Christian theology lines up quite well with Kant regarding God—both postulate a God that is omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent. For my purposes, there is no need to further analyze these descriptions of God since they function to achieve the same thing, so I will concede that Christianity and the other Abrahamic religions are the most spot on with regard to Kant's conception of God. It is the two other necessary postulates of pure practical reason that I will take issue with in this chapter. My argument will focus on the conception of heaven and hell in Christian theology.² First, I will argue that the conception of heaven and hell may allow for the conception of free will that is proliferated in Christian theology, however, it does not allow for

² It is worth noting that there is a developing strand of modern liberal Christian theology that rejects the doctrine of heaven and hell. However, that strand is far from being dominant today and certainly would have had little to no influence in Kant's time. Given that this is not a thesis on Christian theology, I will limit my arguments to discussions of mainstream or traditional Christian doctrine.

the conception of autonomy that Kant puts forth in his philosophy. Second, I will argue that a conception of the afterlife in which one is doomed to heaven or hell based on the actions that they committed during their life runs completely contrary to the purpose for which Kant posits a theory of immortality. The point of all of this will be to demonstrate that while it may be easy to assume that Christianity lines up with Kant based on the prominent issue of God, ultimately a more nuanced understanding of both Kant and Christian theology shows that this is not the case.

Kant argues that freedom is central to his religious and ethical theory because in order to hold someone accountable, either positively or negatively, for their ethical choices they must make these choices without being constrained by any external forces. It is only when they are able to make decisions on the basis of their reason, rather than external constraints, that they are truly free and able to truly act morally by aligning their own will with the moral law. This conception of freedom is called autonomy. At first, it may seem like the Christian conception of free will is the same thing; however, that is actually not the case. Free will allows for actors to make use of their reason to make semi-rational choices, but those choices are still constrained by the circumstances in which they find themselves. Kant must admit that people are constrained by their circumstances (this issue will be addressed more thoroughly in the section on immortality) but he grants people a modified level of culpability as a result of this impairment. Christianity does not do this, it judges people worthy of heaven or hell based on the assumption of full moral culpability in a form of existence that severely limits their potential for true autonomy. This is only the first issue. The second issue is that the doctrine of heaven and hell in Christianity *creates* an additional form of external constraint that prevents people from being able to act morally. Remember, according to Kant, one must do the right thing for the right reason. When people act morally within Christianity in order to be rewarded by heaven or to avoid being

punished in hell, they are not acting morally out of a sense of duty to uphold what is right, they are acting morally on the basis of some external constraint. One might respond to my argument by saying that God knows why people are acting morally, because He is omniscient, so no one will be able to get away with acting morally simply based on the motivation of heaven or hell. I have two responses to this. First, Christian doctrine does not specify that one cannot be motivated to profess faith on the basis of heaven or hell. Arguably, this is an evangelizing technique that is often utilized by the church in order to grow its numbers. Second, it is impossible for a being to not be motivated or influenced by the fate of their eternal soul. If one believes the doctrine to be true, it is human nature that it would be an issue of the utmost importance. The intentions or moral fortitude of the individual person are irrelevant, the nature of the structure of a religion that has a conception of heaven and hell inherently limits people's autonomy. James Haring, a scholar who specializes in both Christian theology and Immanuel Kant, argues a similar point when he says:

... religious law seems to appeal for justification to the inclinations or happiness of agents by means of rewards and punishments. This means that religious law motivates not by reason alone, but by the potential effects of obedience to it... religious law is not always universal. Much of what one finds in Jewish and Christian religious law, for example, appears to be contingent. It depends on specific historical circumstances, cultural traditions, theological presuppositions, divine revelation, or some combination of these; it is not accessible to all persons. Much religious law is therefore "heteronomous" in that (1) its authority comes from threats of punishment or promises of reward and (2) it is issued by a lawgiver whose commandments are not coextensive with the a priori and universal moral law. For Kant, conversely, the moral law must be "autonomous," that is, it must be self-legislated by the practical reason of an agent (her *Wille*) to that agent's capacity for arbitrary choice (her *Willkür*). That autonomous self-legislation involves giving the principles that guide one's actions (what Kant calls "maxims") the form of universal law (much as the a priori categories of the understanding grant intelligible form to sensory intuitions in Kant's epistemology). When religious law is not autonomous in Kant's sense and yet claims that obedience to it is commanded by and satisfying to some deity, it possesses an especially insidious form of heteronomy. (Haring 2020, 74-75)

Haring actually makes two important points here. The first is that, in both Christianity and Judaism, external constraints are intentionally and explicitly used in order to motivate people to act morally. This is the exact opposite of the way Kant argues an ideal religion should motivate moral behavior on the part of behaviors. Rather than cultivate autonomy and moral decision making capabilities it squashes people's own moral capacities by making them secondary to the more immediate promise of reward or threat of punishment. The second point that Haring makes is that in both Christianity and Judaism the supposed moral law is not universal or reasonable: reasonable here meaning that it can be figured out through the use of reason alone. The moral law is specific to certain groups, places, times, etc. and many of the laws are practical (in a utilitarian way) at best and downright arbitrary at worst. A religion with a conception of eternal pleasure or eternal torment as reward or punishment for ethical behavior cannot possibly even allow for autonomy, much less cultivate it. Thus, Christianity is an abysmal ethical failure with regard to the Kantian conception of freedom. The concepts of heaven and hell continue to create problems for the relationship between Kant and Christianity when evaluating his conception of immortality.

Kant argues that one of the necessary postulates of pure practical reason is immortality. The reasons for this are essentially twofold: immortality allows for people to act completely autonomously without the restrictions of the material world and immortality gives people the time that they need in order to make the necessary moral development toward aligning their own will with the moral law. Kant emphasizes the value of immortality by pointing out that the human lifespan is finite (limited time) and that existence in the material world puts a large number of external constraints on people (limited autonomy). The Christian conception of immortality poses the existence of an immortal consciousness, or soul, that is judged at the end

of one's life based on their morality during their worldly existence and then sentenced to heaven or hell for all eternity. Outside of the existence of an immortal consciousness, these two conceptions of immortality are nothing alike; the Christian conception of immortality does not resolve any of the problems that Kant aims to use immortality to solve. In fact, it makes the problems of limited time to become morally good and limited autonomy even worse by judging people for all eternity despite those constraints. Kant needs immortality in order to allow people time to align their will with the moral law, because the human lifespan is so short. If people are sentenced to heaven or hell as soon as they die, they are never given the opportunity to develop their morality further. Neither eternal paradise nor eternal torment are environments conducive to moral development. Additionally, Kant posits that people need immortality in order to become moral because they cannot become fully moral during their worldly existence because of the autonomy-limiting restrictions of a biological existence. The Christian conception of heaven and hell, even if it was based on morality and not people's acceptance of Jesus, would doom them all to hell. The Christian conception of immortality, because it is based on the idea of heaven and hell, fails to serve any of the functions for which Kant posits immortality, so it is not a sufficient parallel.

Finally, with regard to both the issues of freedom and immortality, the Christian conception of heaven and hell is not actually based on whether or not someone is moral, it is based on whether or not they profess faith in the salvific power of Jesus Christ. Kant attempts to resolve this rather daunting issue by arguing that we ought to separate the part of Christianity that talks about Jesus as savior from the part of Christianity that talks about Jesus as a moral person. In other words, Kant wants to eliminate the salvation part of Christianity and keep the ethics part. The problem with this, as I will argue in the next section, is that because the role of

Jesus as savior is foundational to the Christian faith, there is no way to achieve the ethical benefits of Christianity without the salvation part. This is not to say that it is impossible according to Christianity to act ethically without being saved (a non-believer can still refrain from killing, give to the poor, etc.), but rather that Christianity only has some type of special influence on the desire and motivation of a person to be ethical as a result of the process of salvation; if that is eliminated, then the role of Christianity in contributing to the development of an ethical person is defunct. Christianity only promotes moral development at a level that is higher than other religions or higher than the general population because of the transformational powers of salvation. You cannot eliminate salvation from Christianity and maintain the “fruits of the spirit” that come from salvation.

B. Cultivating Ethical People

Kant’s position that Christianity is the closest existing religion to his ideal religion is grounded on a conception of Christianity that he puts forward in which Jesus is viewed as an example of a perfectly moral person rather than as the savior. This conception of Christianity creates a number of problems. Most obviously, a religion in which Jesus Christ is not positioned in the role of savior cannot really be called Christianity in the traditional sense. The role of Jesus as savior is the cornerstone of the Christian religion. Although the point certainly needs to be made, a criticism of Kant’s theory merely on that point would be rather asinine, as it is obvious to anyone with even a basic knowledge of Christian theology. The more nuanced point that I will be making in this section is that even if removing Jesus as savior was not an issue simply as a theological point, it would still render Kant’s attempt at co-opting the rest of the religion ineffective. Kant believes that Christianity without the salvation aspect is the closest religion to his ideal religion because it requires that believers go through a process of making themselves

better people. In traditional Christian doctrine, this process is referred to as sanctification. The problem with Kant's conception of Christianity is that he views sanctification as something that can be separated from salvation; the process of salvation is referred to in Christian doctrine as justification. In this section I will argue that sanctification can only be achieved in Christianity as a result of justification, and thus the supposed ethical value of sanctification in Christianity becomes irrelevant when Kant proposes a version of Christianity that eliminates the doctrine of salvation.

In order to understand the relationship between justification and sanctification in Christianity it is first important to understand what each of these terms mean. Theologian Andrew Snider explains that "justification is a legal term that is used in the NT to describe how a sinner is made acceptable to God. In salvation, God declares a sinner to be righteous—a consideration that begins in his own character and is accomplished by his own action" (Snider 2010, 2). In the previous quotation the word "his" refers to God and not to the sinner. In simple terms, justification can be understood as the process of someone being made holy through salvation. Of course, this conception is based on the idea of Jesus dying on the cross being the means of salvation. Alternatively, there is the concept of sanctification. When explaining sanctification Snider states that "although God's people have been marked out by him to be separate from the rest of the world, and even though this is an objective reality, God's people are commanded to live accordingly: 'You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine' (Lev 20:26; cf. 19:2; 1 Pet 1:15-16)" (Snider 2010, 18). Sanctification is the process of people acting more ethically in order to become holier. At first glance, it seems obvious why Kant would think the process of sanctification is similar to his idea of how an ideal religion would work. People have to put in

work in order to become more holy, i.e. align themselves with God's will, which—since Kant's conception of God is a being whose will is completely aligned with the moral law—is the moral law. However, what Kant's understanding of the topic is missing is the relationship between sanctification and justification. This relationship is key to the Christian conception of ethics, and thus is important to any philosophical account that values sanctification as a means of qualifying Christianity's ethical value. Snider explains the relationship between justification and sanctification when he says:

God, who is righteous in himself and is the normative standard of righteousness, lovingly provides his Son as a substitute for unrighteous sinners so that they can be made acceptable to him. This substitute lives a sinless life in obedience to the Father, qualifying himself to be the perfect sacrifice and high priest on behalf of sinners. Offering himself as the spotless Lamb of God, he is put forward by the Father as the propitiating sacrifice which is made available to sinners who may appropriate this sacrifice for themselves in faith. Upon exercise of this faith, they are united to the Son by the Father so completely that he considers the Son's efficacious death to be that of those who actually deserved it. The result is that the Father, the God who is righteous, sees those sinners as having his own righteousness, because he sees them in his divine Son. The sinner is justified. Now, because he is at peace with God, because he is accepted by God, because the penalty of sin has been paid and the power of sin has been broken, the justified sinner is expected to live as a growing testimony to the reality of God's righteous, redemptive love and presence in the world. This process is called sanctification. (Snider 2010, 14-15)

The point that Snider is making here is two-fold. First, it is true that the process of sanctification requires conscious work on the part of the believer. In this sense, the doctrine of sanctification does not commit what Kant calls religion's biggest error: saying that God will make someone ethical without any work on the part of that person. However, Snider also clearly explains that the process of sanctification can only happen as the result of changes that happen in the person because of salvation. The person may have to put in work to become once they are saved, but according to Christianity the only way for them to become motivated to put in that work is through salvation. The role of Jesus as savior is at the very core of the Christian faith, and the cultivation of moral virtue that comes post-salvation is a secondary issue in the religion. A

necessary assumption of Christianity is that people are not able to become good on their own, they are inherently sinful and they need salvation to ever move past that sinfulness. In Kantian terms, without salvation people will always be slaves to their instincts. It is only through salvation that people become free enough to even have the choice to use their moral reasoning. They do have to make that choice, it is not made for them, but the choice is not available without salvation. In Christianity, morality is impossible without salvation. In this way, at least with regard to the ethical value of Christianity, Kant very well might have been better off leaving the role of Jesus as savior in the religion. That would create other problems, as both Kant and the previous section of this chapter discusses, but Kant's solution of eliminating the salvific role of Jesus leaves Christianity ethically castrated.

Christianity, at least as it is traditionally practiced, has very little alignment with Kant's theory of an ideal religion outside of the fact that it happened to be the dominant religion in Germany at the time in which Kant was writing his philosophy. The Christian conception of God lines up with the Kantian conception of God quite well; however, this is where the important metaphysical similarities end. The Christian doctrine of heaven and hell makes the religion unsuitable to fulfill two of Kant's necessary postulates of pure practical reason: freedom and immortality. Kant's conception of freedom is arguably one of the most important assumptions of his ethical theory, so this incompatibility poses a major issue. Additionally, Jesus serves as an example of an ideal person in both Christianity and Kant's ethical theory; however, even the role of Jesus varies dramatically between the two. In Christianity, Jesus's primary function is as the savior of humanity. In Kant's ideal religion, Jesus does not perform any salvific function, but is rather an example of the kind of moral behavior that one should aspire to. Kant's conception of Christianity in which the salvific function of Jesus is separated from the moral betterment of

believers fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between justification and sanctification in Christianity. In conclusion, Christianity misses the mark with regard to being Kant's ideal religion both metaphysically and ethically. The next section of this chapter will discuss Buddhism which, while not able to perfectly match on to Kant's theory of ideal religion, is a much better match than Christianity.

III. Buddhism

Immanuel Kant, being a German living in the eighteenth century, would have had little to no knowledge of the religion of Buddhism. Nonetheless, Buddhism actually aligns quite well with Kant's conception of an ideal religion; particularly with regard to the central aim of religion being to cultivate moral virtue. The primary focus on Buddhism is achieving enlightenment, so the other aspects of the religions are all focused toward helping an individual to achieve this internal self-betterment. Buddhism does not have rituals or practices that are done arbitrarily or for the purpose of worshiping some deity. This section of this chapter will explore how Buddhism aligns with Kant both metaphysically and ethically. At first, it is difficult to conceive of how an Asian religion that is operating from a very different starting point could align with the metaphysics of a philosopher whose theory is rooted in Judeo-Christian conceptions of metaphysics. However, when looking at the function of Kant's necessary postulates of pure practical reason—rather than the specific terminology that he would have been predisposed to use given the time and place in which he was writing—it is clear that concepts in Buddhism can mostly fill the requirements of those postulates from a functional perspective. Ethically, Buddhism and Kant's theory of religion share a fundamental focus on personal moral development.

The most fundamental teaching of Buddhism is the four noble truths: all conditioned phenomena are suffering, all suffering arises as a result of craving, to end suffering one must end craving, and the path to ending suffering is to the eightfold path. Due to the idea that all conditioned phenomena are suffering, the ultimate goal of Buddhism is to escape the cycle of birth and rebirth by achieving nirvana. However, this only happens through enlightenment. A lesser aim in Buddhism is to have a positive rebirth.

Samsara is the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. In Buddhism, a being has either a good rebirth or a bad rebirth based on their karma in their past life. In Buddhism, karma is the idea that “beings are reborn according to the nature and quality of their actions” (Harvey 2000, 14-15). Karma is viewed as “a natural law inherent in the nature of things, like a law of physics” (Harvey 2000, 16). Good actions result in a good rebirth and bad actions result in a bad rebirth. The idea of karma in Buddhism is distinct from the idea of karma in some other religions because the focus is on how ethical actions affect one’s karma, rather than how ritualistic actions affect one's karma. Additionally, the Buddhist idea of karma emphasizes the idea that the motives for actions, not just the actions themselves, are important.

One final concept in Buddhism that is particularly relevant when comparing it to Kant’s ethical theory is the idea of the impermanent self. Buddhism views sentient beings (including humans) as interrelated processes of momentary events, i.e., a set of changing causally interconnected mental and physical processes, wherein the constantly changing mental stream is the primary connecting thread between rebirths (Harvey 2000, 33). So Buddhism's key idea regarding the self is the conception of "no-self" or "absence of self"--that there is no permanent, unchanging self or soul as the essence of a sentient being. One way to think of this is as a stream of consciousness that is continually changing as it goes through different experiences. This

concept has important ethical ramifications in Buddhism because it rejects the idea that any being is too evil to ever be changed or become moral (Harvey 2000, 34). This conception of the self in Buddhism stands in stark contrast to the more traditional conception of the self as a unified and unchanging consciousness. A common term for this latter conception of the self is the soul.

A. Necessary Postulates of Pure Practical Reason

The idea of freedom is where Buddhism and Kant's ethical theory overlap the most. In Kant's ethical theory freedom is a necessary property of the will. The conception of freedom that Kant defines here is a negative one, freedom is the lack of being constrained by one's desires. Kant's conception of desire is very similar to the Buddhist conception of craving. Both of these concepts refer to the idea that there is something besides the rules of ethics that often controls people's behavior. Additionally, both Kant and Buddhism advocate that part of achieving morality is being able to eliminate these external desires or cravings. Buddhism has the idea that suffering is caused by craving and that in order to escape suffering one needs to eliminate craving. This is fundamentally also a conception of freedom defined in the negative, as the lack of being controlled by desire, although in the case of Buddhism it is called enlightenment.

The Kantian and Buddhist conceptions of immortality are similar in that they both hold the idea that people can become moral if they are given enough time. Kant has a conception of a unified soul that says that people are always making progress toward aligning their will with the moral law. And Buddhism says that because people are always changing, no one should be completely written off as immoral, they are always capable of positive change (Harvey 2000, 34). Additionally, Buddhism argues that every being is capable of eventually achieving enlightenment. Thus, both Buddhism and Kant have a conception of immortality that helps

people make progress toward moral perfection. Notably, immortality in both serves the purpose of allowing people to make moral progress that they were not able to make within their finite moral life. Additionally, the Buddhist conception of the self encourages people to detach from the limits of their current worldly body by realizing that it is not ultimately significant, which serves the purpose of granting people autonomy from external constraints in a way similar to Kant's conception of immortality freeing one's consciousness from the limitation of their worldly bodies. One notable difference between Buddhism and Kant is that Kant's conception of immortality is based on the idea of one continuous self. Although this may seem like a problem, it is really not key to the function of immortality as a necessary postulate of pure practical reason. Rather, it is simply a result of the fact that the only conception of an immortal self that Kant would have been exposed to would have been a soul, he would not have known about a conception of immortality in the sense of continuity of a changing mental stream. Buddhism does not have a conception of the self, it has a conception that is more akin to a continuous stream of consciousness. However, this ever changing stream of consciousness serves the functions of immortality by giving people time to morally develop and by detaching them from the constraints of the material world. In fact, the Buddhist conception of the self allows for much more change and autonomy than the traditional idea of the soul does.

At first, it may seem impossible to reconcile Kant's conception of God with Buddhism. In Buddhism, the overarching force in the universe is karma, and karma is a law of nature, not an anthropomorphized deity. However, it is important to understand that Kant's ethical theory is not really committed to his idea of God. Kant postulates God because he needs something omniscient to be able to tell if people are acting morally for the right reason. Karma can account for this because the laws of karma take into account intention. Karma is a superior necessary

postulate of pure practical reason because it solves Kant's need for God. The rest of the characteristics of God that Kant proposes are those things that would have to be true about God *if* there is a God. However, if he is able to solve his accountability problem without having to postulate God then the rest of those characteristics are not necessary.

Despite the initial surface level differences between Buddhist ethics and Kant's ethical theory, Buddhism and Kant's ideal religion ultimately aim for the same goal, in the same way, with similar (although notably not identical) metaphysical assumptions. Kant's ethical theory and Buddhism have a very similar conception of freedom, and this is really key to their similarity. Both systems conceive of freedom as autonomy, or lack of external constraints. The goal of both is to be able to act completely free of these external constraints, and this is achieved through continuous self cultivation in the pursuit of freedom. The specific practices of this self cultivation might look different—e.g., Kant probably had little conception of the idea of meditation—but the goal is the same. Additionally, the concept of rebirth in Buddhism can be substituted quite nicely for Kant's conception of immortality. Finally, although it is not as perfect of a match as the Abrahamic God, the Buddhist conception of karma can fulfill the basic function that Kant's God does. Buddhism does not perfectly align with Kant's ideal religion with regard to metaphysics; however, its differences are not as significant as one might think. Specifically, Buddhism lines up very well with Kant's most fundamental postulate of freedom. This, coupled with the Buddhist conception of individual moral development discussed in the next section, illustrates that Buddhism is a much better candidate for Kant's ideal religion than Christianity.

B. Cultivating Ethical People

The comparison of Kant's ideal religion to Buddhism with regard to the issue of cultivating morality is not complicated. Kant argues that the focus of religion ought to be helping people align their wills with the moral law. Religion ought to help people do this because that is the point of human existence. Buddhism is a religion that is focused on helping people achieve enlightenment. Notably, alignment of one's will with the moral law and enlightenment are not the exact same thing on the surface. However, the focus of both concepts is fundamentally the same. Alignment of one's will with the moral law both consist of and are the result of complete freedom from instinctual desire. One is only able to align their will with the moral law once they are no longer willing lesser things. Similarly, enlightenment both consist of and is the result of complete freedom from craving. The summum bonum of both Kant's ideal religion and Buddhism, although phrased and conceived of quite differently, boils down to simply freedom. Furthermore, the path to achieving the summum bonum in both is by consciously putting in effort to make oneself more free in pursuit of that final goal. Buddhism may use methods such as meditation that Kant would not have been very aware of, but such methods are not in conflict with his theory. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both Kant and Buddhism posit that what the final goal is, the path to achieving it, and the moral rules to follow along the way are innate and accessible to people. In other words, people can figure out Buddhism or Kant's ethical theory just by thinking about what the right thing is. Neither religion requires holy texts, priests, or elaborate rituals in order to follow it. This is not the case with other religions such as Judaism or Christianity. For example, people do not have an innate sense that eating pork, wearing mixed linens, or not going to Mass on Sunday is wrong. However, people do have an innate sense that murder is wrong. Buddhism and Kant's ideal religion are most alike in their lack of

“religiousness.” The core point of Kant’s theory of religion is that you do not really need to have religion, in the traditional sense of the word, in order to be ethical; but if you are going to have a religion it ought to be one that helps you be more ethical, not one that focuses on deity worship or abstract rituals. Christianity may result in being ethical as a secondary effect of the religion, but in Buddhism being ethical is the only way to practice the religion. That does not mean that Buddhists never act immorally, it simply means that there are no other obligations in Buddhism that come before being ethical. One does not need to “believe in the Buddha” in order to achieve enlightenment in Buddhism. Although Kant may not have known about Buddhism, Buddhism is the closest that any mainstream religion has come to Kant’s ideal religion. In fact, the lack of shared exposure between the two proves both Kant’s and Buddhism’s point, the path to freedom is accessible to all if one simply puts in the effort to think about it.

IV. Conclusion

Kant argues that Christianity is the closest existing religion to his ideal religion. This section has illustrated that his claim is mistaken both because Christianity does not align well with his ideal religion and because Buddhism would be a much more suitable alternative. The first section of this chapter argued that Christianity does not align with Kant’s ideal religion both metaphysically and ethically. While the conception of God is similar in Christianity and Kant’s ideal religion, the conception of heaven and hell outlined in Christian doctrine does not align well with Kant’s postulates of freedom and immortality. Ethically, Kant posits a revised conception of Christianity in order to make it better align with his ideal religion, but his conception fundamentally misunderstands the relationship between justification and sanctification in Christianity. The second section of this chapter posited that Buddhism would be a better religion to compare to Kant’s ideal religion. The Buddhist conception of karma can

loosely take the place of the Kantian idea of God, rebirth can take the place of immortality, and—most importantly—Buddhism has a very similar conception of freedom to that which Kant postulates. Additionally, both Kant’s and Buddhism’s theories of ethics are rooted in cultivating moral betterment through conscious efforts to make oneself more free. The dominant religion of Kant’s time and place was Christianity, and he would have had little to no access to Buddhism; however, the limitations of the historical circumstances of Kant need not be imposed on those who critically study his ethical and religious theories today. Perhaps, if Kant would have lived in a time where he was both exposed to Buddhism and would not have feared retribution for blasphemy, he would have viewed Buddhism as the closest the world has gotten to realizing his ideal religion.

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