

On the Need for Distinctive Christian Moral Psychologies

How Kant Can Figure into Christian Ethics Today

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ABSTRACT I show how those with Kantian habits of mind—those committed to maintaining certain kinds of universality in ethics—can still get involved in the project of securing the distinctiveness of Christian ethics by highlighting parts of his moral philosophy that are amenable to this project. I first describe the interaction among James Gustafson, Stanley Hauerwas, and Samuel Wells surrounding the issue of the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, to explain why Kant is generally understood as the opponent of this project in this discourse. Then I lay out his discussions of how his moral argument for postulating divine existence can have beneficial moral-psychological results, and of how we can find moral satisfaction, the sense of pleasure in our moral strivings, as two elements in his moral philosophy that can be turned into a distinctively Christian ethics with revisions that should be allowed within the broad confines of Kantian moral philosophy. I also point out that his own answer to the question of moral satisfaction is already distinctively Christian, in that it is inspired by the Christian tenets of the imputation of righteousness and the assurance of salvation.

KEYWORDS autonomy; Christian ethics; highest good; justification; Kant, Immanuel; moral psychology; universality

1. INTRODUCTION

In the “Christian Philosophy and Its Challenges” conference organized by the Institute of Philosophy of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow in 2022, the following question was suggested as one of the prompts worth considering in the call for papers: “What philosophy is needed in the twenty-first century and what distinguishes Christian philosophy?” This question of how we can distinguish the category of Christian philosophy from philosophy in general or other kinds of philosophy invites us to turn our gaze toward the discipline of Christian ethics, where it has received a lot of attention. Whether ethics can be Christian, and, if so, exactly how it comes to stand apart as a distinctive category, are popular questions in introductory texts on Christian ethics, and it is not difficult to encounter monographs, anthologies, and articles specifically devoted to them. The fact that these questions have been consistently raised already indicates that there is something puzzling or even suspicious about the business of Christian ethics that deserves our attention.

In this paper, I reflect on the source of this puzzlement, in order to explore whether a distinctive Christian ethics can be established in spite of it. My main approach to this task is to highlight parts of Kant’s moral philosophy that should be amenable to this project, which can be surprising to many Christian ethicists who see him as the main culprit behind suspicion of this project. I focus on his moral philosophy, as this approach shows that there is a way forward in this project without just brushing aside the concern expressed in the suspicion of its viability.

In Section 2, I present James Gustafson’s grappling with the question of how a distinctive Christian ethics is possible, and the critique of it by Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells, as this interaction brings to light the influence of Kant in this debate. In Sections 3–6, I lay out parts of his moral philosophy that tend to receive less attention in this debate. In Section 3, I highlight the moral-psychological component of his moral argument for postulating divine existence, and I also argue that, given the content of this argument, the term “autonomy” as he utilizes it cannot mean humans’ self-sufficiency in terms of achieving our final moral end. In Section 4, I explain the significance of what he calls moral satisfaction in his conception of our moral life, and I point out how we can appeal to its significance to justify adding distinctiveness to our ethics. In Section 5, I show that Kant’s account of how humans can enjoy moral satisfaction is actually distinctively Christian in that it is inspired by the Christian tenets of the imputation of righteousness and the assurance of salvation. I also make the case that Kantians can, in light of our need for moral satisfaction, deviate from Kant

himself by relying for this on faith in the historical person of Jesus, and still stay within the confines of his moral philosophy. In Section 6, I claim that, while the way of establishing the distinctive Christian ethics advanced in this paper falls short of fulfilling completely what Hauerwas, Wells, and Gustafson have in mind, it at least goes some way toward meeting their desiderata. So I argue that Kant's reflections on the moral-psychological benefit of the moral argument and his emphasis on moral satisfaction can be interpreted as putting forward a vision of a distinctive Christian ethics that should be attractive to those interested in this project though unwilling to completely do away with universality in ethics. In Section 7, I conclude by briefly noting why I think this vision of a distinctive Christian ethics is especially called for today.

2. HAUERWAS AND WELLS' CRITIQUE OF GUSTAFSON'S KANTIAN HABITS OF MIND

The puzzlement over the discipline of Christian ethics is aptly captured in the book by Gustafson (1975) entitled *Can Ethics be Christian?* Even though the viability of Christian ethics is affirmed here, there are moments when its distinctiveness seems to come into question. For instance, Gustafson concedes that ethics cannot be distinctively Christian "if certain restrictive concepts of 'ethics' are used"; the prominent example of such restrictive concepts would be a view that "a pattern of thought, in order to be ethics, must ... be *exclusively rational*," which would leave no room for an appeal to "particular religious warrants" (Gustafson 1975, 169). The condition of exclusive rationality seems to preclude any appeal to allegedly historical revelation as the source of insights relevant to our moral life not found in reason, so it categorically blocks a class of attempts to secure the distinctiveness of Christian ethics by relying on its unique elements, such as its scriptures, institutional systems, doctrines, practices, etc.

Now, Gustafson (1975, 170) contends that such a universalistic rational ethics can still deserve the label of "Christian" because, according to him, "it is in Christ that all things are created, and he is the Lord of all things." But, as he immediately acknowledges, this implies that "Christian ethics and universal human ethics are convertible terms," and, "[f]rom this point of view, in principle there is no distinctive Christian morality" (Gustafson 1975, 171). He goes so far as to note that "[t]he historical particularity of the source of the life of the church has no particular ethical significance, though its theological significance is tremendous" (Gustafson 1975, 171). His tendency to make a distinction between the ethical and the theological significance of particular elements of Christianity, undergirded by his

openness to universalistic rational ethics, is visible in his later writings as well. For instance, in the preface to Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture*, Gustafson (2001, xxvii) makes the following claim:

the ethics of Christianity are not unique in any way comparable to the uniqueness of the doctrine of the Trinity, Incarnation, Sacraments, and others. Ethics, both theoretical and practical, in the Christian tradition are much more like Jewish ethics and the ethics of classical Greek and Roman world than the theology of the Christian tradition is like Jewish theology or Greek metaphysics and religion.

This is why so much ink has been spilled on the question of whether a distinctively Christian ethics is viable, as those willing to accept this implication of championing a universalistic rational ethics and others who find this apparent loss of the distinctiveness of Christian ethics regrettable continue to square off.¹

In their history of the formation of the discipline of Christian ethics, Stanley Hauerwas and Samuel Wells make their opposition to this position of Gustafson clear.² This is in part because, in contrast to his openness to a universalistic rational ethics which “can be acknowledged by ‘anyone’” (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 30), they are suspicious of the project of finding such an ethics. They see this project as a modern innovation epitomized by Kant, which prompts them to characterize Gustafson's position as “shaped by Kantian habits of mind” (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 36). As the conflicts and wars in Europe around and after the time of the Reformation increasingly prompted people to seek “a morality that was not based on rival perceptions of revelation” (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 31), Kant's moral philosophy, with its view of moral duty as having the form of the categorical imperative which applies universally to all rational beings,³

1. Another indication of Gustafson's openness to universalistic rational ethics can be found in his work *Protestant and Roman Catholic Ethics*, where he writes approvingly of Karl Rahner's theological view that the created world governed by natural law is already graced (Gustafson 1978, 111–26). Gustafson (1978, 118) takes this view to imply that “to be Catholic or, more inclusively, to be Christian in the explicit sense, is not necessarily in order to live a life that is Christian in a moral sense.”

2. Hauerwas and Wells write in the following way regarding the passage by Gustafson: “We could not wish for a clearer contrast to the methodological presuppositions that have informed the essays in this book.” (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 36). The book here refers to the anthology they edited, which includes their history of Christian ethics as a chapter.

3. For instance, in *Groundwork*, Kant describes morality as producing “*commands (laws)*” with “an *unconditional* and objective and hence universally valid *necessity*” (G, 4:416). He

came to represent the culmination of this search for universality in ethics. Emmanuel Kantongole expresses how Kant is typically understood when he writes:

In the second *Critique*, Kant effectively denies the contingent factors of an individual's existence (inclinations, self-interest, prudential considerations) a place within the Moral Point of View. Any introduction of such considerations would, according to Kant, compromise the purity of reason and the autonomy of the will. (Kantongole 2000, 23)

Kantongole, in his defense of Hauerwas' critique of Kant, argues that such contingent factors of life cannot be left out of our moral life, so Kant's attempted flight from particularity is judged to be ill-fated.

It has to be admitted that, in Kant's universalistic scheme, these contingent factors, including particular religious sources of ethical insights to which individuals happen to have access, cannot serve as our primary moral authority, although it is certainly possible for these religious teachings to agree with what the pure practical use of reason dictates. So autonomy from the tyranny of religious institutions, as well as from the complete determination of our actions by inclinations, which Kant takes to render freedom and moral responsibility impossible, becomes a necessary condition for us to lead a truly moral life.⁴ He hoped that progress in terms of everyone's participation in this kind of autonomy would represent our advancement toward perpetual peace. But Hauerwas and Wells' (2011, 31) opposition to this hope is clear when they claim that "the Kantian revolution" led to "bigger wars" rather than eliminating them.

Hauerwas and Wells take this commitment to universality in Kant's moral philosophy to affect his Christology, as they paint him as a self-conscious Christian who tried to rescue Christianity as its traditional assumptions came to be threatened by Newtonian science and historical consciousness; Kant's solution is to find the alternative of arriving at this

also claims that "if duty is a concept that is to contain significance and real lawgiving for our actions it can be expressed only in categorical imperatives" (G, 4:425).

4. Hauerwas and Wells, focusing on the former sense of autonomy as a kind of independence from religious authority, describe the significance of this concept as utilized by Kant in the following way: "Both the individual and the ethics that established the moral dignity of the individual were assumed to be free of any historical or religious determination" (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 31). So it can be understood as involving freedom or independence from two kinds of influence—both the influence of religious authority and that of our inclinations as dictated by how the laws of nature dispense them to us.

religion through morality. So they suggest the following as what took place in Kant's alternative attempt, which focused on presenting Christian claims as "justified to the extent that they were consistent with the moral law" (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 32):

Accordingly, he argued that Christian belief could not depend on a historical figure like Jesus as an *authority to sustain the moral life*. It was not possible to depend on such a figure and yet sustain the autonomy necessary to be a moral agent. Having removed the historical Jesus as the fulcrum of Christian ethics, Kant nonetheless maintains his Christian identity by arguing that the "archetype" is already present in human reason, making it possible for the autonomous person to identify Christ as the embodiment of the moral law. (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 32; italics added)

Here Hauerwas and Wells are calling attention to the fact that, in Kant's hands, the moral significance of Jesus came to be concentrated on its function as the personified archetype of the moral ideal of complete conformity with the moral law. Kant's description of Jesus in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*⁵ (hereinafter *Religion*) as the "ideal of moral perfection" which "resides in our morally-legislative reason" certainly supports their reading (R, 6:61–62).⁶ And Hauerwas and Wells appeal to the status of autonomy, as an indispensable element of Kant's moral philosophy, to explain why he is bound to construe the significance of Jesus in this way.⁷

On the one hand, Kant's move in *Religion* is a way of prolonging the talk of Jesus as meaningful in our moral life, as referring to the ideal demanded

5. Hauerwas and Wells (2011, 32) call this text of Kant "the great book in Protestant moral theology" that has shaped the subsequent course of Protestant liberal theology.

6. The following abbreviations are used when citing the texts of Kant:

CJ: *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (the third *Critique*)

CPR: *Critique of Pure Reason* (the first *Critique*)

CPrR: *Critique of Practical Reason* (the second *Critique*)

EAT: "The End of All Things"

G: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Groundwork*)

MM: *The Metaphysics of Morals*

O: "What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?" (the "Orientation" essay)

R: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (*Religion*)

Citations from the *Critique of Pure Reason* refer to the standard A/B pagination. For other works of Kant, citations refer to the Akademie Edition volume and page. All English translations are from the series "The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant."

7. Hauerwas has advanced this historical account of Kant's influence in the discipline of Christian ethics and Protestant liberalism more generally in earlier texts (e.g. Hauerwas 1983, 10–12; 1997, 29–32).

by the moral law. On the other hand, this move appears to limit the potential impact on our moral life that Jesus as a historical person can have, as he ends up coming across as a moral example that is redundant in some sense.⁸ Because Kant thinks of the essence of Jesus as residing in our reason, the allegedly historical instantiation of this ideal, even if assumed to have taken place,⁹ is morally unnecessary. To be sure, awareness of this historical example can have the beneficial effect of making the ideal residing in reason more vividly present to us, who are sensibly affected in addition to being rational. In *Religion*, Kant clearly recognizes the legitimacy of particular historical faiths as part of our life as long as they support our fulfillment of universal moral duty (R, 6:102–68),¹⁰ and stories of this person can be understood as parts of such a historical faith. But Kant wants to steer all humans, including Christians, away from *necessarily depending* on this and other historical examples for the sake of moral conduct, because those who have no access to these stories still need to be held accountable for their moral failures.

Rejecting these Kantian habits of mind, Hauerwas and Wells strive to establish a closer link between Christian ethics and particular Christian elements such as its liturgical practices and idiosyncratic doctrines, including perhaps its most distinctive statements about Jesus that set it apart from other monotheistic traditions. Presumably, their approach would do a better job of explaining the distinctiveness of Christian ethics relative to other kinds which have no attachment to particular Christian elements. If so, this can incline us to regard Kant as a great nemesis of Christian ethics. However, according to Hauerwas and Wells, he is actually one of the most crucial figures for getting this discipline off the ground. This is because his philosophy of religion, particularly his Christology, in which Jesus's significance as the personified representation of the moral ideal came to stand apart from particular and historically conditioned elements of Christian theology, inspired Protestant liberals to attribute to Jesus "a peculiar moral significance" (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 32). A prominent example of such an attempt was to set up the contrast between Jesus' ethic of love and Jewish legalism, and it is in the context of such attempts to preserve the significance of Jesus by way of morality that "Christian ethics became

8. In *Religion*, Kant admits, "There is no need ... of any example from experience to make the idea of a human being morally pleasing to God a model to us" (R, 6:62).

9. Kant is careful not to rule out this possibility in *Religion* (R, 6:63–66).

10. When discussing Kant's treatment of historical faiths in *Religion*, Stephen Palmquist (2015) would go so far as to claim that Kant sees these faiths as indispensable for moral empowerment for humans given our embodied nature.

an identifiable discipline distinct from theology” (Hauerwas and Wells 2011, 32).

So, at the end of the day, Hauerwas and Wells’ story of the invention of Christian ethics is the story of its separation from theology, but this separation is what they find regrettable, in part because this implies that particular elements of Christian theology and liturgy cannot be utilized to ensure the distinctiveness of Christian ethics. Thus, I think it is fair to say that, in their attempt to bridge this gap between Christian ethics and theology, they think of Kant as the legacy that should be left behind.

Leaving Kant behind would certainly facilitate the project of securing the distinctiveness of Christian ethics. Fundamental to his methodology in moral philosophy is his emphasis on the primacy of reason as our guide to answering the question of “What should I do?” (CPR, A805/B833), which he identifies in the first *Critique* as one of the three questions encapsulating all interest of his reason.¹¹ The implication of this methodology is his opposition to relying on what can be termed moral sense or feeling as the way to cognize what the moral law demands. In all his major treatises on morality—*Groundwork*, the second *Critique*, and *The Metaphysics of Morals*—he makes it very clear that he is not fond of “the pretense of those who assume a certain moral sense which, instead of reason, determines the moral law” (CPrR, 5:38). This is because, as he explains in *Groundwork*, “feelings, which by nature differ infinitely from one another in degree, [cannot] furnish a uniform standard of good and evil, and one cannot judge validly for others by means of one’s feeling” (G, 4:442), but he clearly thinks that this problem would not arise if we let reason determine the moral law. So his opposition to the moral sense school again testifies to his commitment to universality in morality,¹² and it would be understandable to suspect that such a commitment leaves no room for a distinctive Christian ethics.

Kant argues for the same methodology of relying on mere reason in philosophy of religion. In his essay “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?,” he writes approvingly of Moses Mendelssohn’s strategy of following what he calls “*common sense* or *healthy reason*” or “*plain understanding*” (O, 8:133). So in Kant’s defense of Mendelssohn in the pantheism controversy, Kant claims that “it was in fact *only* reason—not any alleged sense of truth, not any transcendent intuition under the name of

11. The other two questions Kant mentions are “What can I know?” and “What may I hope?” (CPR, A805/B833).

12. In the second *Critique*, Kant names Francis Hutcheson as the figure representing the moral sense school (CPrR, 5:40).

faith, on which tradition and revelation can be grafted without reason's consent—which Mendelssohn affirmed" (O, 8:134). And Kant contends that the same approach should be maintained even when we are wading in the "immeasurable space of the supersensible" (O, 8:137). Here, he presents his well-known moral argument as representing this approach. Based on his view that "precepts of moral laws" are directed to both morality and happiness "insofar as it is apportioned according to" morality, he calls the harmonious unity of these two ends of morality "a *dependent* highest good," and the concept of this unconditioned totality of ends leads to that of "a supreme intelligence as the highest *independent* good" (O, 8:139), a being with traditional attributes of divine perfection capable of fully instantiating this state of affairs. According to Kant, it is "*the right of reason's need*" to assume the existence of such a being (O, 8:137), so there is no need to appeal to anything else to produce this concept of God as the foundation of theology. Here, as in his moral philosophy that showcases the universally applicable categorical imperative as the fulcrum of morality, mere reason seems to come out as sufficient, as the ultimate goal he sees in religion is for us to eventually reach "the universal religion of reason" (R, 6:122), even if we depend on historical faiths as "its vehicle" (R, 6:115).

If this is Kant's mindset in moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, perhaps we can even have the impression that leaving Kant behind would not only facilitate the project of establishing a distinctive Christian ethics, but also be required for this project—that a distinctive Christian ethics is not possible if we do not leave him behind. And if we escape the clutches of Kant's towering influence in ethics, this project will no longer be much of a challenge. As a case illustrating this point, let us suppose that one of the most pressing moral tasks identified by the practical use of reason today is to limit the destructive impact of climate change. But if an appeal to some transcendent intuition is allowed, it leaves the door open for a move like the following: "while common sense reason directs us to focus on the ongoing climate change, what Christians are called to do is to radically relativize our concern with all that is going on in the material world." This simple contrast between Kant's mindset and the alternative he rejects indicates why those who are invested in securing a distinctive Christian ethics may be tempted to opt for the latter.

Thus, for those who are inclined to go against Kant at this point, securing the distinctiveness of Christian ethics should not be much of a challenge. A more interesting question would be to ask whether a distinctive Christian ethics can be built on the Kantian foundation. And I think this is a question worth asking, because not everyone feels comfortable leaving Kant behind

completely. Even if we acknowledge that we often face quandaries with no easy answers as we deal with the question of “What should I do” in our moral life, it is difficult to shake the impression that, when considering a duty that seems evident, this duty should apply to all mature humans. Unless we want to do away with the notion of duty or obligation completely, I suspect that many would be inclined to hold as universally valid a duty to refrain from infringing on what is commonly considered today the most basic human rights, for instance.¹³ So, in the rest of this paper, I focus on examining whether it is possible or even desirable to hold onto a distinctive Christian ethics for those who have not completely divested themselves of these Kantian habits of mind.¹⁴

I would guess that what I have written so far about Kant’s treatments of morality and religion points to an answer in the negative. But, in the next three sections, I suggest that other, lesser-known parts of his philosophy can actually be more accommodating to the project of a distinctive Christian ethics.

3. THE MORAL-PSYCHOLOGICAL USEFULNESS OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

Kant’s moral argument, which I summarized in Section 2, serves as the foundation of his constructive theology. In addition to its presence in the “Orientation” essay, it is laid out in all three *Critiques* as well as in *Religion*, although its importance arguably fades away toward the end of his career.¹⁵ All these different iterations make it difficult to nail down a definitive summary, but the later versions are similar in that they are based on the following understanding of morality. For an action to have true moral worth, what is required first and foremost is that it is determined by the right kind of maxim—namely, the kind that can be willed as a universal law without contradiction—rather than that it is directed toward a certain end. And these maxims of the right kind, if they are not to take hold of us because of their reference to ends, must be adopted merely out of our respect for the moral law; without the inner determination of the will by this respect, an action can have conformity with duty in terms of outward appearance and effect, but it cannot be said to be “done *from duty*” (G, 4:397). In Section 2,

13. Tore Lindholm (2002) makes a case for treating humans as sharing a universal goal based on considerations of human rights.

14. Jan Narveson (1985) offers a thorough survey of how, exactly, “universality” has been construed, and a defense of the significance of certain kinds of universality in moral philosophy.

15. Samuel Kahn (2018) goes so far as to claim that *Opus postumum*, Kant’s collection of notes published posthumously, displays his disavowal of the moral argument. I discuss possible reasons for this trend in Woo (2023).

I stressed that autonomy in Kant's sense must involve independence from complete determination of our actions by inclinations which direct us to the ends we crave. This autonomy is absolutely crucial for him, because it preserves the room for determination of the will by the moral law, made effective for us as sensibly affected beings because of the feeling of respect it inspires.

Nevertheless, all this focus on the maxim rather than the end of an action as the true locus of moral worth does not change the fact that every action still has to be directed toward an end or an object. In our moral life, Kant lists two appropriate kinds of ends to which our actions can be directed: on the one hand, happiness, and, on the other hand, morality in the sense of respect for the moral law just explained above. If so, we can also think of all these ends taken together, "the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the *highest good*" (CPrR, 5:108); this is what he calls "a dependent highest good" in the "Orientation" essay as seen in Section 2. When we reflect on this totality of all ends, the question of how they can be harmoniously integrated into one concept arises, and Kant's answer is that morality must serve as the condition or the ground of happiness. What underlies this answer is his views that "[t]wo determinations *necessarily* combined in one concept must be connected as ground and consequent" (CPrR, 5:111), and moral virtue "as worthiness to be happy ... is the *supreme condition* of whatever can even seem to us desirable and ... is therefore the *supreme good*" (CPrR, 5:110). In the second *Critique*, he also calls "a will whose maxim always conforms with" the moral law "*good absolutely*," while an action in pursuit of happiness is not to be considered "good absolutely but only with reference to our sensibility" (CPrR, 5:62). This is why, in many descriptions of the highest good, he insists on the proportionality between everyone's moral virtue and happiness.

So this concept of the highest good represents the final end to which all our moral strivings need to be directed in Kant's moral philosophy, and it becomes our duty to promote and produce this end through our exercise of freedom. But he is quick to point out that realizing this state of affairs lies beyond human capacity, as we cannot scrutinize our hearts to ascertain what the underlying maxims of observable actions are, which is required to apportion the precisely right amount of happiness to every individual. However, it does not make sense for us to will a state of affairs we know to be impossible, so, to preserve the status of the highest good as the final end of a morally determined will, its possibility must be maintained somehow. This is when God comes into the picture, as realizing the highest good is

possible only with the involvement of a being with the requisite powers to ensure the perfect proportionality between moral virtue and happiness. So our moral life finds its fulfillment only with our cooperation with God, who shares the same end with us and has the capacity to open up its possibility.¹⁶ One implication of this view of our moral life is that Kant cannot have thought that necessary involvement of the divine in our moral project amounts to nullifying our autonomy; if he had regarded divine involvement and human autonomy as incompatible, he would not have made reliance on God a part of our moral life, given his fundamental commitment to upholding autonomy. Thus, whatever else autonomy may involve, it cannot mean complete self-sufficiency in terms of fulfilling our moral aim.

This is how the concept of the highest good, as the final end necessarily imposed on us by the moral law, leads to the argument about God; and, as we saw in Section 2, he would go so far as to claim that it shows reason's need to assume divine existence in the "Orientation" essay. Similarly, in the second *Critique*, he characterizes this assumption about God "as something without which that cannot happen which one *ought* to set unflinchingly as the aim of one's conducts," because it is "a *need having the force of law*" (CPrR, 5:5). But this argument has invited several questions from those not entirely convinced by the moves Kant tries to execute here. I think the following two especially lead us to question his argument. First, even if we go along with his view that the proportionality between moral virtue and happiness is part of the final end of our moral life, it is unclear why we have to presuppose perfect realization of this ideal in the future; instead, can we not think of ourselves as promoting this ideal to the best of our ability? And if this is sufficient, is there a need to bring God into the picture? Second, even if we grant Kant that it is reason's need to maintain perfect actualization of the highest good as a possibility for us, this need seems to be fulfilled as long as we remain open to the possibility of divine existence. But this assent to the possibility of a God who would help us achieve this goal falls short of assuming actual divine existence, which is what he tries to derive in the moral argument.

These and other questions have troubled many readers of Kant, and the controversy surrounding his moral argument preoccupies much of

16. In the second *Critique*, he describes the highest good as "the end of creation" in the following passage: "Those who put the end of creation in the glory of God ... perhaps hit upon the best expression. For, nothing glorifies God more than what is most estimable in the world, respect for his command, observance of the holy duty that his law lays upon us, when there is added to this his magnificent plan of crowning such a beautiful order with corresponding happiness" (CPrR, 5:131).

the scholarship on Kant's philosophy of religion. But less attention has been paid to the fact that, in the third *Critique*, he appears willing to tone down the strength of assent to divine existence afforded by this argument, perhaps with these questions in mind. His earlier tendency is to emphasize the necessity of the postulate of divine existence by pointing out that it is based on the concept of the highest good, which is supposed to be necessarily laid down as our final end by the moral law. In contrast, just after laying out the moral argument in the third *Critique*, he immediately clarifies that "[t]his proof ... is not meant to say that it is just as necessary to assume the existence of God as it is to acknowledge the validity of the moral law" (CJ, 5:450), which is a striking admission considering his earlier tendency. Similarly, he would go on to state that, as a result of the moral argument, "[t]he reality of a highest morally legislative author is thus *adequately established* merely for the practical use of our reason" (CJ, 5:456; italics added). Such talk of adequate establishment seems to be a far cry from that of a need having the force of law in the second *Critique*.

Perhaps not unrelated to this shift is the introduction of moral-psychological considerations in support of the moral argument in the third *Critique*, as the following representative passage shows:

... there is the fact that we feel ourselves forced by the moral law to strive for a universal highest end, but at the same time feel ourselves and all of nature to be incapable of attaining it; there is the fact that it is only insofar as we strive for this that we can judge ourselves to be in accord with the final end of an intelligent world-cause (if there is one); and there is thus a pure moral ground of practical reason for assuming this cause ... *even if* for nothing more than avoiding the danger of seeing that effort as entirely futile in its effects and thereby flagging in it. (CJ, 5:446; italics added)

In addition to reiterating a number of steps in the moral argument, this passage shows that Kant is willing to defend this argument in part by appealing to its expected effect on an agent in terms of moral motivation. Along the same lines, he points out that the assumption of "the existence of a moral author of the world" is related to making the agent "remain attached to the appeal of his moral inner vocation and not weaken the respect" (CJ, 5:452–53).

Such overt appeals to moral-psychological considerations in favor of the postulate of divine existence are a surprising addition because it seems difficult to regard them as *universally required* for all finite rational beings, even though Kant generally presents the moral argument as enjoying this

kind of validity. So this new element introduced in the third *Critique* seems to be offered by him as a helpful but inessential supplement to the existing moral argument.¹⁷ However, for those who are not convinced by the core argument due to the questions mentioned above, this new element can play a more decisive role.¹⁸ To illustrate this point, let us suppose that there is a person with Kantian habits of mind, who goes so far as to think that everyone is morally obligated to set the highest good as one's end. But she can depart from Kant at this point by granting that we can in theory promote a greater approximation of the world toward this ideal without presupposing its full actualization in the future, so she would not be all that surprised by non-theists who can devote themselves to this cause. Nevertheless, she can still find the hope for full actualization, combined with faith in a divine being who shares this end with us, to be morally invigorating *for her*, as the present state of affairs, which she judges to be so far off from this ideal, tempts her to see her meager attempt at its improvement to be not worthwhile, so to speak. If such a case is possible, then Kant's moral argument can be preserved as a way to justify the religious hope she may entertain, based on the ground of its salutary moral-psychological effects on her, even if it is no longer regarded as rationally required.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that this is what Kant would readily admit; even in the third *Critique*, his position is rather that we "must assume the existence of a moral author of the world" to remain attached to the moral project of promoting the highest good (CJ, 5:453). But what I claim is that the above revision can readily be considered by Kantians who are more willing than Kant himself to admit that any given thought can have different moral-psychological effects on different individuals. And if this

17. Andrew Chignell (2022, 61) proposes a distinction between "two varieties of moral arguments in Kant," what Chignell calls "*moral-coherence* arguments and *moral-psychological* arguments." The moral-coherence variety refers to the version found in the second *Critique* and the "Orientation" essay. The moral-psychological variety is what the passages in the third *Critique* I pointed out give rise to; in this variety, the need to presuppose the full actualization of the highest good in the future is not about avoiding the incoherence of willing an impossible end; rather, it "appeals to morally important but contingent psychological needs" to justify our hope for the full actualization of the highest good (Chignell 2022, 66). Chignell (2022, 66) champions the moral-psychological argument as "the superior variety of Kantian moral argument," but he has to admit that not everyone will experience the moral-psychological needs that call for such hope; to "moral saints who can sustain their resolve even in the face of what Kant calls the 'abyss of purposeless material chaos' ... Kant's argument has nothing important to offer" (Chignell 2022, 69).

18. It is noteworthy that even Allen Wood (2020, 55), well-known as a defender of Kant's moral argument in its core form, cannot help but admit that it "cannot deliver the comforting confidence of unquestioned certainty."

possibility is admitted, greater openness to a variety of distinctive world-views follows even if they share the same feature of being geared toward supporting our pursuit of the highest good; this variety would be called for by the variegatedness of our receptivity to different moral-psychological attempts to sustain us in our moral strivings. So it is not that difficult to imagine a Kantian framework that would accommodate contingent factors pertaining to an individual's existence.

4. KANT'S EMPHASIS ON MORAL SATISFACTION

Another largely ignored part of Kant's moral philosophy that has unmistakable moral-psychological relevance is his discussion of what he calls moral satisfaction, happiness, or pleasure; the German term *Zufriedenheit*, usually translated into English as "contentment" or "satisfaction" is often used to refer to this concept. In *Groundwork*, Kant claims that, when reason attains its purpose of "the establishment of a good will," it is capable "of its own kind of satisfaction, namely from fulfilling an end which in turn only reason determines" (G, 4:396). Toward the end of this text, he claims that this moral sense of satisfaction is crucial in our moral life for the following reason: "In order for a sensibly affected rational being to will that for which reason alone prescribes the 'ought,' it is admittedly required that his reason have the capacity to *induce a feeling of pleasure* or of delight in the fulfillment of duty" (G, 4:460). This emphasis on moral pleasure as a required part of our moral life is maintained through Kant's later work *The Metaphysics of Morals*, where he describes "moral feeling," which every human possesses according to him, as "the susceptibility to feel pleasure or displeasure merely from being aware that our actions are consistent with or contrary to the law of duty"; here he claims that "any consciousness of obligation depends upon the moral feeling to make us aware of the constraint present in the thought of duty" (MM, 6:399).

The language in *The Metaphysics of Morals* here can create the impression that Kant is suddenly endorsing our reliance on moral sense or feeling, even though I showed in Section 2 that Kant has been opposed to this view. But he quickly squashes this impression when he makes a distinction between the moral feeling just defined above and "a moral *sense*" understood as referring to "a theoretical capacity for perception directed toward an object" (MM, 6:400), which he clearly rejects. This is a change in semantics compared to *Groundwork*, where this distinction between moral feeling and moral sense is not made explicit, but no change in substantial content seems to take place, as he makes it clear that "moral feeling ... is something merely subjective, which yields no cognition" (MM, 6:400). Kant would insist that the

practical use of reason is sufficient for this cognition, although, as I noted in Section 2, it does not rule out the potential use of representational aids to facilitate this reason-based cognition, such as the story of the historical person of Jesus. If the moral feeling is not about producing the requisite cognition of the moral law, it can be understood as the medium through which reason-based cognition can be made effective for us, whom Kant repeatedly describes as sensibly affected as well as rational. And because, according to him, every human is endowed with this moral feeling, “when a thoughtful human being has overcome incentives to vice and is aware of having done his often bitter duty, he finds himself in a state that could well be called happiness, a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward” (MM, 6:377). Moreover, Kant suggests that our capacity to feel moral satisfaction is *required* for us to remain interested in and conscious of morality, as he explicitly connects the question of how the fulfillment of duty can induce sensibly felt moral satisfaction with the question of “how and why the *universality of a maxim as law* and hence morality interests us” (G, 4:460).

However, if the moral feeling lays the basis for moral satisfaction, it also inevitably opens up the possibility of *moral discontent* when we fail to overcome incentives to vice. And the claims Kant makes in the *Groundwork* and *The Metaphysics of Morals* lead us to suspect that a serious amount of moral discontent can threaten to stop us from willing what the moral law commands. For instance, let us suppose that there is a human who just repeatedly fails to attain any degree of moral virtue even though he is somehow cognizant of the moral law, so that trying to will to meet its demand only multiplies the moral failures and the moral discontent they breed. I think the question Kant effectively raises is whether such a person, as a sensibly affected being, can sustain interest in this project of morality, and it is because he is worried that such a person would not be able to do so that he emphasizes moral satisfaction as a crucial part of our moral life.¹⁹ But even if we assume that humans are capable of at least some degree of moral virtue, moral discontent still remains a threat to our interest in morality, and those interested in persevering in this project have an incentive to look for a successful way of dealing with it.

19. This is seen in the following claim of Kant in the second *Critique*: “if the truthfulness of all [allegedly morally good] examples were disputed and the purity of all human virtue denied, human virtue might in the end be held a mere phantom, and so all striving toward it would be deprecated as vain affection and delusive self-conceit” (CPrR, 5:154).

Nevertheless, in addition to moral vice, there is another source that disrupts our enjoyment of moral satisfaction. This is the fact already pointed out in Section 3 that, according to Kant, we cannot be completely sure which maxim is operative for any given action. So even when we take ourselves to have performed some bitter duty, there is always a chance that it indicates conformity with duty only in terms of outward appearance, as we cannot completely rule out the possibility that this action was in fact determined by self-love. So, technically, we cannot be aware to the point of certainty whether we have followed the moral law in terms of securing the right kind of maxims as well as in terms of promoting the right kind of ends. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant consciously associates the term “virtue” with the latter rather than the former, as he writes that “[t]hose duties that have to do not so much with a certain end ... as merely with *what is formal* in the moral determination of the will (e.g., that an action in conformity with duty must also be done *from duty*) are not duties of virtue” (MM, 6:383). So we can be aware of moral virtue in this sense, but the question of whether we fulfilled the duties of virtue merely out of respect for the moral law can never be answered in the affirmative with complete certainty. And yet this formal duty of having the moral determination of the will “holds for all actions” (MM, 6:383), so this uncertainty about the state of our maxims always follows us around.

While Kant does not address this uncertainty as the source of disruption of moral satisfaction in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, this issue is brought up in his earlier discussion of this topic in *Religion*. That discussion is preceded by his account of radical evil, his adaptation of the Augustinian reading of the biblical story of the fall. Kant stipulates that every human is endowed with the disposition—the fundamental maxim that governs adoption of all the other maxims—that either prioritizes respect for the moral law over self-love or reverses this proper order by treating self-love as the fundamental condition of our fulfillment of duty.²⁰ In the latter case, we would perform the duties of virtue only if, deep down, they are not in conflict with our self-interest, so what fundamentally determines our will turns out not to be the feeling of respect for the moral law. Based on this concept of the disposition, Kant then advances a hugely controversial thesis that every human starts out with the wrong disposition that prioritizes self-love—what he calls the propensity to evil. So the propensity to evil can be said to reside

20. According to Kant, “[t]he disposition, i.e. the first subjective ground of the adoption of the maxims, can only be a single one, and it applies to the entire use of freedom universally” (R, 6:25).

in human nature, even though he describes it as resulting from a deed imputable to an individual.²¹ If this is the predicament of every human,²² in order to become capable of completely moral determination of the will, everyone must go through “a *revolution* in the disposition” which upends the problematic ranking of having self-love as the fundamental condition (R, 6:47). At this point, Kant shows openness to the possibility that “some supernatural cooperation” may be needed for this (R, 6:44), although he does not unabashedly embrace it. I think this move again confirms the claim I made in Section 3, that he does not see autonomy as self-sufficiency in terms of meeting the moral demand.

So, according to Kant, a revolution in the disposition must be possible for us; otherwise, having moral determination of the will cannot be maintained as our duty given his ought-implies-can principle, but he clearly wants to avoid this result. However, even if we grant him that such a revolution is possible, based on our observation of our appearances of moral conduct, it does not seem to involve our sudden transformation into morally perfect beings. But, while doing justice to this impression, Kant still wants to hold onto the possibility of revolution in the disposition, so he offers the following explanation of how the two can be reconciled:

The only way to reconcile this is by saying that a revolution is necessary in the mode of thought but a gradual reformation in the mode of sense ... If by a single and unalterable decision a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims ... he is to this extent, by principle and attitude of mind, a subject receptive to the good; but he is a good human being only in incessant laboring and becoming ... For him who penetrates to the intelligible ground of the heart ... this is the same as actually being a good human being (pleasing to him); and to this extent the change can be considered a revolution. (R, 6:47–48)

Here Kant reiterates the view expressed in the second *Critique* that “[t]he *eternal being*, to whom the temporal condition is nothing, sees in what is

21. Kant strongly insists on this as a way to maintain our responsibility for moral failures, which I mentioned in Section 2 as an important commitment in his moral philosophy. So the disposition “must be adopted through the free power of choice, for otherwise it could not be imputed” (R, 6:25).

22. The mainstream interpretation is to see Kant’s position that every human starts with the propensity of evil as his adaptation of the Augustinian story of the fall. Lawrence Pasternack (2020, 106–10) offers a dissenting opinion, pointing out the points of dissimilarity between Kant’s account of radical evil and the traditional Augustinian doctrine.

to us an endless series the whole of conformity with the moral law” (CPrR, 5:123). Later in *Religion*, he again brings up this view as an answer to the question of “[h]ow ... [the good] disposition [can] count for the deed itself, when this deed is *every time* ... defective”; he claims that the divine judge would find “the infinite progression of the good toward conformity to the law ... to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed (the life conduct)” (R, 6:67).

Kant’s discussion of moral satisfaction in *Religion* immediately follows this answer. Here he describes moral satisfaction as “the assurance of the reality and *constancy* of a disposition that always advances in goodness” (R, 6:67), which is understandable given what precedes this description. And, at this point, he cannot help but reckon with his view that we cannot inspect our and others’ dispositions in the way God can, because this fact obviously puts into question how we can have this assurance related to our dispositions. But, as in the other works, he tries to show that we can enjoy moral satisfaction in this life, because “without *any* confidence in the disposition once acquired, perseverance in it would hardly be possible” (R, 6:68). So he is strongly incentivized to explain how this confidence or assurance is possible for us, and the following constitutes his answer:

We can ... find this confidence ... by comparing our life conduct so far pursued with the resolution we once embraced. For [take] a human being who, from the time of his adoption of the principles of the good ... has perceived the efficacy of these principles on what he does, i.e. on the conduct of his life as it steadily improves, and from that has cause to infer, but only by way of conjecture, a fundamental improvement in his disposition: [he] can yet also reasonably hope that in this life he will no longer forsake his present course ... since his advances ... will always increase his *strength* for future ones. (R, 6:68)

This passage clearly shows how Kant’s account of moral satisfaction in *Religion* depends on its account of radical evil, with its story of a fundamental disposition that manifests itself in observable conduct.

Kant’s account of the revolution in the disposition and moral satisfaction based on our observation of the effects of this revolution promises to deal with threats from both kinds of moral discontent, in light of defective deeds, and our inability to scrutinize our hearts. Even though our life can still be filled with morally defective deeds even after the revolution in the disposition, if divine judgment is focused on the underlying disposition,

so that a life of a good disposition is assessed to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed, moral discontent from defective deeds is at least mitigated, if not completely dispatched. With respect to our inability to inspect our maxims, Kant is suggesting that the threat to moral satisfaction from this source can be overcome by observation of our moral conduct in the long run, comparing various stages to detect the general pattern of advancement toward goodness.

However, it seems easy to question whether Kant successfully deals with the threats to moral satisfaction from these two sources. His moves in *Religion* naturally give rise to the question of how divine judgment can see a perfected whole in a life containing many defective deeds, given his stated position that God's purpose in creation is "*Humanity ... in its full moral perfection, from which happiness follows*" (R, 6:60). So he claims that this human being in full moral perfection is "alone pleasing to God" (R, 6:60), but then he turns around to state that "a human being can still expect to be *generally* well-pleasing to God," "notwithstanding his permanent deficiency" that our morally defective deeds attest to (R, 6:67), based on his appeal to the distinction between our temporal standpoint in time and God's atemporal one. All the same, if God's focus in creation is humanity in its full moral perfection, does it make sense for God to brush off our permanent deficiency like this? In consequence, many readers of Kant have found it difficult to accept his answer here.²³

Regarding the uncertainty of our maxims and the moral discontent it breeds, it seems unclear at best whether our *conjecture* of the good disposition, which Kant admits is all we can muster, is sufficient for the *assurance* he is looking for. What if we are worried that our conjecture of the good disposition in us is a result of our self-flattery rather than completely impartial observation, which anyway might be out of our reach? What if we encounter a case of someone whom we deemed to be acting on the resolution to advance in goodness, who relapses into evil late in his life? After all, in the later section of *Religion*, he claims that "however much the individual human being might do to escape from the dominion of this evil, he would still be held in incessant danger of relapsing into it" (R, 6:94). But if this possibility of relapse is to be taken seriously, how much confidence can we gain from our observation of the apparent signs of advance in goodness up to this point in time?

23. For instance, Andrew Chignell (2014, 110) remarks that Kant's explanation here "ascribes to God an odd sort of overestimation or self-deception."

This may be part of the reason why, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant takes a different approach in his answer to the question of how we can find moral satisfaction in our life, focusing on our moments of moral virtue because virtue is its own reward.²⁴ Perhaps this approach has the advantage of offering a more plausible explanation of how moral satisfaction can be part of our life because it is not as ambitious; identifying moments of virtue, at least in the sense of promoting the final end, seems more practicable than trying to figure out the state of our maxims, including the fundamental disposition.²⁵ But given its limited ambition, the question remains of how to deal with impressions of moral imperfection and worries about the underlying dispositions we cannot scrutinize. And this is where the room for distinctiveness is opened up. There can be Kantians who, on the one hand, go along with Kant in thinking that humans are all endowed with the moral feeling, so that we feel moral satisfaction when fulfilling the moral law, both in terms of acting from duty and promoting our final end. They can also agree with him that moral satisfaction is a required or at least highly desirable ingredient for sustaining our commitment to the project of morality. But they can *diverge* when it comes to the strategies they adopt to deal with moral discontent—which, for morally imperfect humans, comes as an ineliminable accompaniment to the moral feeling. My claim is that this divergence does not threaten Kant’s basic commitment to universality in moral philosophy, provided that it stems from people’s discrete strategies that are nevertheless geared toward the same goal of persevering in the shared project of promoting the highest good.

5. MORAL SATISFACTION AND *SIMUL IUSTUS ET PECCATOR*

In the preface to the second edition of *Religion*, Kant introduces this work as an experiment involving two concentric circles: the inner one of “the pure *religion of reason*” and the outer one of historical revelation, which, for him, signifies the Christian scripture interpreted in a certain way. More specifically, the experiment is “to hold fragments of [the outer circle], as

24. Kant’s essay “The End of All Things,” which was published between *Religion* and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, also seems to indicate discomfort with his earlier answers to the question of how humans can obtain moral satisfaction—to which he was only led given his conception of our moral life as the endless pursuit of moral perfection (EAT, 8:334–36).

25. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, unlike in his previous works, Kant does not stress the highest good as the required concept of the unconditioned totality of all proper ends in our moral life. Rather, his approach is to focus on discrete ends that are also duties, which can be classified into the two classes of “*one’s own perfection and the happiness of others*” (MM, 6:385). I take this to be one indication that Kant may have moved in the direction of de-emphasizing the moral argument in his later works, which I briefly mentioned in Section 3.

a *historical system*, up to moral concepts, and see whether it does not lead back to the same pure *rational system* of religion” (R, 6:12). If we have this description of *Religion* in mind, it should be clear that the fragments of historical revelation Kant is holding up when discussing the two sources of moral discontent—moments of moral failure in terms of deed and our inability to ascertain our maxims—are the doctrines of the imputation of righteousness and the assurance of salvation, respectively. The fact that this discussion takes place in the Christology section of *Religion*, and the fact that, after this discussion, he makes it explicit that it is part of the “deduction of the idea of a *justification* of a human being” (R, 6:76), both support this interpretation.²⁶ If so, we should be able to see that Kant’s division between the human temporal standpoint and the divine atemporal one is his adaptation of the traditional Christian tenet that those who have faith in Jesus are *simul iustus et peccator*. While these humans are still sinful in that they fail to fulfill the moral law perfectly, they stand justified before the divine judge because the allegedly perfect righteousness of Jesus has been imputed to them through faith. Thus, in some way, Kant’s strategy of dealing with the two sources of moral discontent is already *distinctively Christian*.

However, while Kant’s strategy is *distinctively Christian*, it is a radical departure from a traditional Christian story, because the former does not rely on the historical person of Jesus for this. Instead, the good disposition post-revolution takes the place of this person as what is supposed to generate perfect righteousness, but this is precisely why Kant’s account is puzzling, as our disposition, by his definition, does not attain the level that can be described as perfection. To explain the compatibility of the good disposition and occasional misdeeds, he resorts to the talk of “the *strength* of the disposition” (R, 6:71), which implies that a disposition can be good but still not strong enough to resist some overwhelming temptations supplied by inclinations to act contrary to duty. But then our disposition will

26. Just before this discussion, Kant reflects on the possibility that Jesus as “a divinely disposed teacher, though in fact totally human” possesses a perfect disposition (R, 6:65). And the ensuing passage makes it clear that Kant has the Christian doctrine of the imputation of righteousness in mind: “Now ... such a disposition ... is perfectly valid for all human beings, at all times, and in all worlds ... whenever a human being makes his own like unto it, as he ought. To be sure, it will ever remain a righteousness which is not our own, inasmuch as ours would have to come into existence in a life conduct completely and unfailingly in accord with that disposition. Yet an appropriation of it for the sake of our own must be possible, provided that ours is associated with the disposition of the prototype, even though rendering this appropriation comprehensible to us is still fraught with great difficulties” (R, 6:65). Kant’s appeal to the distinction between God’s atemporal and humans’ temporal perspectives is his attempt to make sense of this appropriation.

never attain the maximal strength of the disposition demanded by the moral law if “it is our universal human duty to *elevate* ourselves to [the] ideal of moral perfection” (R, 6:61).

For Christians who conceptualize the historical person of Jesus as divine and sinless, appropriating his perfect righteousness would enable them to bypass this problem faced by Kant. While he does not rule out the possibility of such a person having “descended, as it were, from heaven to Earth at a specific time,” he claims that “from a practical point of view any such presupposition is of no benefit to us” (R, 6:63). The following is his explanation: “the elevation of such a Holy One above every frailty of human nature would rather, from all that we can see, stand in the way of the practical adoption of the idea of such a being for our imitation” (R, 6:64). Thus, even though he does not reject high Christology as a theoretical possibility, he is still worried that, in such a scheme, “the divine human being could no longer be held forth to the natural human being as *example*” (R, 6:64). Thus, he favors low Christology in order to preserve this historical person “as proof that so pure and exalted a moral goodness can be practiced and attained *by us*” (R, 6:64). And this low Christology of Kant is one reason why he cannot stick with a traditional interpretation of *simul iustus et peccator*, but instead has to offer his own idiosyncratic rendition, which I argued is not a success.

Even so, Kantians who agree with much of his moral philosophy can still disagree with his low Christology by focusing on his claim that sensibly affected beings like us are actually not capable of reaching the perfect level of moral perfection at any point in time; after all, this is precisely why Kant conceptualizes our moral life as endless progress toward this ideal in the second *Critique* and *Religion*, as I pointed out in Section 4.²⁷ Given this assumption of Kant’s own, holding up Jesus, understood as an exceptional human being with actual moral perfection, as an example to be emulated turns out to be a false hope; based on this example, we can receive the impression that we may in time reach this level, when this is actually impossible for us. Thus, Kantians can argue in favor of a version of high Christology as a way of guarding against this misleading impression, holding that this would in fact provide a healthier framework of *imitatio Christi* than what he actually presents.

My contention here is that even though Kant’s actual view of the historical person of Jesus should be understood as a version of low Christology, this is not an integral part of his moral philosophy, and it is in fact possible

27. In the second *Critique*, this is the basis for Kant’s argument for the postulate of the immortality of the soul (CPrR, 5:122–24).

to advance a different Christology based on grounds he explicitly affirms. And if we combine this alternative high Christology with his moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, we can and should ask whether the moral discontents he is worried about can be dispatched by appealing to a more traditional interpretation of *simul iustus et peccator* that relies on the historical person of Jesus. Of course, if Hauerwas and Wells are correct in thinking that autonomy in the sense intended by Kant is not compatible with reliance on such a historical figure, an attempt at such a combination would be ill-fated. But, as I argued in Sections 3–4, autonomy should not be treated as requiring moral self-sufficiency, so there should be room for admitting our reliance on Jesus as part of our moral life as long as we can show it to be morally salutary.

As I pointed out in Section 2, according to Hauerwas and Wells (2011, 32), Kant “argued that Christian belief could not depend on a historical figure like Jesus as an authority to sustain the moral life,” which is what they demand as part of a distinctive Christian ethics. But I claim that it is possible for Kantians to understand Jesus in a way that makes him crucially relevant for sustaining our moral life by connecting his existence with the issue of moral discontent. Simply put, in some sense, Kantians can deliver what Hauerwas and Wells demand.

At this point, it should be admitted that Kant’s preference for low Christology is not the only factor that prevents him from just resorting to a traditional Christian affirmation of *simul iustus et peccator* based on our appropriation of Jesus’ perfect righteousness. Kant is probably also worried about making sense of how someone else’s righteousness can be imputed to us when we are being examined by the divine judge, and I see this, rather than his low Christology, as the more formidable challenge when it comes to integrating a traditional Christian story of *simul iustus et peccator* with his moral philosophy. But this is not a challenge just for Kantians, as making sense of imputation of an alien righteousness does not come easy. Thus, within Christianity, there are different attempts to parse out this Christian belief that humans can somehow stand righteous before God, and many of them may turn out to be the kinds that Kant cannot accept. All I want to claim is that if there is a successful attempt to explain how the person of Jesus helps us stand justified before God without appealing to some transcendental intuition explained in Section 2, Kantians can choose to utilize this explanation to deal with the threat of moral discontent.²⁸

28. For those interested in making sense of the Christian notion of justification but suspicious of an account that appeals to an imputation of alien righteousness, I think the natural

The fact that many different attempts to make sense of *simul iustus et peccator* are present within Christianity already indicates that there must be more than one explanation of how humans are to deal with moral discontent available to Christians. And, of course, not everyone who confesses to being a Christian needs to affirm *simul iustus et peccator* as part of their faith. Thus, while I would like to present this Christian tradition as a superb illustration of how a distinctively Christian element can be utilized as a crucial part of one's moral life,²⁹ I certainly do not want to present it as *the* Christian solution to the issue of moral discontent; hence the plural form of "Distinctive Christian Moral Psychologies" in the title of this paper.

6. KANT'S MORAL PSYCHOLOGY SPILLING OVER INTO ETHICS

Because of the elements of his moral philosophy covered in Sections 3–5, I claim that Kant can figure into a Christian ethics that seeks to maintain some degree of distinctiveness today. Even if we go along with him in understanding the moral law as making a categorical demand on all rational beings to promote the highest good merely from duty, individuals can diverge with respect to whether hope for full attainment of this end in the future, grounded in their faith in God, makes a positive moral-psychological impact. Also, individuals can choose different strategies for dealing with the moral discontent stemming from both failures to meet the moral demand and moments of uncertainty, and this adds still more room for distinctiveness, even if we take ourselves to be beholden to the same moral law. What makes room for this distinctiveness is the distinction effectively being introduced by Kant between his ethics in the narrow sense of spelling out our values and obligations, and his moral psychology. Although he does not explicitly acknowledge that his moral-psychological proposals have limited applicability, this is what Kantians can choose to accept while retaining his basic commitment to universality in ethics. Once they bite this bullet,

place to look is the Christian tradition of seeing the faithful as incorporated into the body of Christ. Kathryn Tanner (2010, 86) exemplifies this approach when she writes: "What justification refers to in us is the fact of our unity with [Christ], our incorporation within his own life, which brings about our being born again to a new identity in him. Nothing about us, in and of ourselves, therefore has to change in order for us to be justified; it is the fact of our attachment to Christ ... that accounts for God's declaring us just." I propose a different way of making sense of *simul iustus et peccator*, based on what I call "moral kenosis," in Woo (2023).

29. It is no accident that Anselm Min (2017, 579) claims that "the doctrine of justification by faith alone has a special significance and urgency for our time," in part because it serves as a critique of "the anthropocentric bravado as well as its concomitant theoretical and practical nihilism."

they can freely incorporate historically inherited elements of Christianity, which are not deemed to be available to everyone, to construct their own moral-psychological proposals, because they do not harbor the ambition of universal applicability. And the conceptual distinction between ethics in the narrow sense and moral psychology prevents such efforts from jeopardizing universality in the former.

In fact, this is similar to how many Christian ethicists, especially those drawn to the natural law tradition, have made sense of the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, according to Hauerwas (1983). So I am not suggesting this as a novel way of securing the distinctiveness of Christian ethics.³⁰ What I am pointing out is that this approach is viable in a framework of ethics that can credibly be called Kantian because Kant is clearly sensitive to the issue of how it is moral-psychologically viable for humans to remain interested in morality. My sense is that his focus on this issue is not well-known because of the impression that he understands morality as the domain of reason, which is not entirely incorrect; for him, morality is the vocation to which we are called because we are rational. But it has to be stressed that he conceptualizes humans as simultaneously sensibly affected and rational, so it is crucial for him to maintain morality as the business that can be practiced by such beings. So, even for him, the practice of morality is *not exclusively rational*, even though it is about meeting the demand that applies to us because of our rationality.

Now, when Hauerwas makes the above observation of a widespread tendency in Christian ethics, his intent is to criticize it as an insufficient measure of establishing the distinctiveness of Christian ethics; on top of it, Christians should look to the historical person of Jesus as their main source of determining how to live. Hauerwas (1983, 23) thinks that, within the moral-psychological approach of establishing the distinctiveness of Christian ethics, “positive theological convictions” still remain “ethically secondary,” failing to effect any change in our answers to Kant’s second question of “What should I do”; this is an indication that this approach is not adequate. According to him, it ends up putting forward “a moral psychology which artificially severs agents and their actions,” as “what we ‘ought to do’ is abstracted from the question of who we are” (Hauerwas 1983, 23). He is consistent in criticizing this severance, as he brings it up

30. Emmanuel Kantongole (2000, 26–29) also points out that there have been a number of similar attempts by philosophers influenced by Kant. A representative example comes from Stephen Toulmin (1950, 219), who claims that “[e]thics provides the *reasons* for choosing the ‘right’ course; religion helps us to put our *hearts* into it.”

again in his critique of Gustafson discussed in Section 2; as Hauerwas and Wells (2011, 36) see it, “Gustafson’s assumption that ethics can be isolated as a subject from Christian convictions about the Trinity, incarnation, and sacraments ... implies a moral psychology that separates an agent from an agent’s action.”

On the one hand, Kantians who follow Kant’s methodology outlined in Section 2—relying on mere reason as our primary practical guide—cannot go all the way in agreeing with Hauerwas and Wells. However, I would still like to claim that complete separation between an agent and an agent’s actions is not an inevitable result of this methodology, despite my suggestion of the conceptual distinction between ethics in the narrow sense and moral psychology operative in Kant. Even if we think of all humans as having a categorical duty to remain committed to the project of promoting the highest good, this duty leads to a different set of duties if discrete moral-psychological strategies prove optimal for individuals. So the variety in moral psychology cannot help but spill over to ethics in the narrow sense eventually, as this influence gets to have some say in which practices we ought to adopt in order to best maintain our moral commitment.

In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, I take Kant to leave room for this kind of variety even in ethics in the narrow sense, in the following passage: “if the law can prescribe only the maxim of actions, not actions themselves, this is a sign that it leaves a playroom (*latitude*) for free choice in following (complying with) the law, that is, that the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action for an end that is also a duty” (MM, 6:390). So even if all humans ought to prioritize the maxim of willing the highest good wholeheartedly over self-love, there is room for individual discrepancy, both in terms specifically of the way in which one contributes to the promotion of the highest good and in terms of which moral-psychological practices are most effective for helping one stick with this maxim. This would imply that even though reason remains the primary guide in answering “What should I do?,” it has to take into account empirical observation of our sensible nature to devise the optimal strategy for accomplishing reason’s own answer to this question.³¹

In their worry about the separation between an agent and an agent’s action, Hauerwas and Wells (2011, 37) continue to insist that “what people

31. If so, I think Kant fails to highlight adequately the indispensability of empirical observation of ourselves when he advances his methodology of relying on mere reason in moral philosophy and philosophy of religion, explained in Section 2, and this is why mere reason alone seems to come out as sufficient.

do is indistinguishable from how they do it.” My response has been to maintain this distinction at the level of conceptual analysis, but recognize that an answer to the question “How?” will inevitably exert its influence on the question of what one ought to do. Hauerwas and Wells (2011, 37) go on to claim that “[i]f ethics names the process through which people acquire habits and the virtues that habits make possible, ... then the ‘ethics of Christianity’ cannot help but be different from the ethics of Plato and Aristotle.” Here even Hauerwas and Wells concede that, rather than our direct answers to the question of “What should I do,” the broader process of facilitating our engagement with this question is where the distinctiveness of Christian ethics most clearly comes to light. So the case for the distinctiveness of Christian ethics becomes more convincing when the term “ethics” is understood in a broad sense that includes moral psychology and education, and Kant’s discussions of moral psychology explained in Sections 3–5, especially his adaptation of a Christian tenet of *simul iustus et peccator*, would certainly lead to a distinctive Christian ethics in this sense.

At this point, I must revisit my treatment of Gustafson’s classic in Section 2, where I just focused on his restricted use of the term “ethics,” because it has to be acknowledged that he is open to using this term in a broader sense as well. Earlier, I noted that he treats universalistic rational ethics as interchangeable with Christian ethics in the context of confessing Christ as the being in whom all things are created, but this is not the only way he makes sense of the expression “Christian ethics.” Another way he points out is to focus on how “religion *qualifies* morality,” and this includes providing “the reasons for being moral” (Gustafson 1975, 173). He goes so far as to suggest that Christians are the ones who derive their reasons for being moral from the prior “experience of the reality of God” (Gustafson 1975, 174).

On the one hand, this is not the place Kant would go. According to Gustafson (1975, 173), “One is not a religious person in order to have reasons of mind and heart to be moral,” but this is precisely what Kant seems to recommend in his moral argument, where, as was explained in Section 3, the moral demand of setting the highest good as our end leads to the postulate of divine existence. For him, the main reason for being moral solely has to lie in our respect for the moral law, and moving away from its primacy would call into question the autonomy of the will. On the other hand, even he can appreciate the value of establishing the harmonious relation of morality with religion or, more generally, all the other aspects of our life. Paradoxically, the best case in point would again be his moral argument, which boils down to his affirmation of the ultimate harmony

between morality and prudence, our pursuit of happiness.³² Thus, while he does not conceptualize morality as dependent on reasons from religious or prudential considerations, he does not need to block these considerations from supplying additional reasons to remain committed to morality; it is in this spirit that, in *Religion*, he claims that lacking the concept of the highest good as our final end “would ... be a hindrance to moral resolve” (R, 6:5). Given what I laid out in Sections 3–5, Kantians can even admit that complete disregard of these reasons would call into question whether many of us can plausibly expect ourselves to sustain our supreme moral commitment through to the end. To this extent, they can value the reasons to be moral supplied by religion stressed by Gustafson, and these reasons stemming from different religious contexts can add to the distinctiveness of religious ethics of one sort or another, because ethics in the broad sense can involve our duty to be attentive to these reasons.

7. CONCLUSION

I finish this paper by returning to the question with which I opened: “What philosophy is needed in the twenty-first century, and what distinguishes Christian philosophy?” I have concentrated here on the latter part of this question, but I now want to point out that my answer to the latter serves as a compelling answer to the former part. My claim is that individualized Christian moral psychologies are especially needed in the twenty-first century, as I think the motivation to stay engaged in the project of morality is jeopardized when facing global-scale crises. If, as I suggested in Section 2, one of the most pressing moral tasks today is to limit the destructive impact of climate change, there is a great chance that we will be stricken with a dramatic case of moral failure or at least adversity in the near future. If we confront the laying waste caused by climate change, for which we mostly have ourselves to blame, how can we stay committed to the project of promoting the highest good in light of this spectacular setback? How are we to deal with the ensuing moral discontent when we honestly reckon with it without blaming it all on others? In this predicament, for both Christians and non-Christians with Kantian habits of mind, a moral psychology which will sustain us in terms of upholding the priority of the moral law over self-love would be of utmost importance. So the task of poring over various elements in one’s own worldview that can be incorporated into

32. Thus, in the second *Critique*, Kant claims that successful determination of the concept of the highest good leads to “the most beneficial result” of resolving “the self-contradictions of pure practical reason” (CPrR, 5:109).

one's own optimal moral psychology is pressing; perhaps this task is one of the more important answers to the question of "What should I do?" today.

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