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Interview with Michal Segal for Dehak Magazine

1. My first question about your philosophy concerns the methodology or the operation itself. Although I have no doubt you love Kant, but the truth you love even more, I am curious regarding your MO (MODUS OPERANDI) or the maxim you follow when dealing with such a brilliant and even formidable philosopher as Kant – will your point of departure usually be the assumption that he is basically and essentially right, and the strategy will then be to find out how to explain and justify that assumption (after all, you succeed – and brilliantly so, if I may add – in finding in Kant's morality even the grounds for treating animals "morally")? Or is it a rather different way of operating altogether?

REPLY TO 1: This is a pretty good description of my method of dealing not only with Kant, but also with Aristotle, and in a certain way with the great philosophers of the past in general. In the conclusion of the fourth lecture of *The Sources of Normativity* (sections 4.5.1-4.5.5), I go through all the different schools of thought that I have been discussing—and mostly criticizing—and show that there is a sense in which each of them is right. I feel that I have achieved an understanding of a philosophical view only when I can see how it looked true to its author, even if I disagree with it in the end. If it seems unintelligible to me, or as if it were based on a simple error, I assume I have failed to put myself where that philosopher was standing, so to speak, when the world looked that way to him or to her. That does not mean I agree with everything, of course, but I do think you can often find a place from which seemingly clashing views turn out to be compatible after all. But of course that does not mean that I do not think some of these philosophers are more insightful than others. Aristotle and Kant held themselves to the standard of achieving a systematic understanding that brings their answers to questions in ethics, politics, metaphysics, and the philosophy of mind or soul to bear on each other, and in this way achieved the deepest insights about many things. But sometimes I find even Aristotle or Kant to have overlooked something important, or to have gone wrong in other ways. It is

also important, perhaps especially with Kant, to keep in mind that what a philosopher says follows from his or her system is not necessarily what actually does follow from that system—what Kant says about animals is a case in point. By the way, why have you put scare quotes around “morally”?

2. The prologue of your book *The Sources of Normativity* presents "a very concise history of western metaphysics", which describes the revolution that has taken place "during the transition from the ancient to the modern world", a revolution in which "the world has been turned inside out" in that for us, not like for Plato and Aristotle, "the world is no longer first and foremost form. It is *matter*", so that "the real is no longer the good". You posit Kant as the one "who completed the revolution, when he said that reason – which is form – isn't in the world, but is something that we impose upon it". I understand this prologue as an explanation as for how and why the realm of morality or ethics became the realm of normativity. And an important part of your philosophy is to show how and why the fact that morality is a matter of normativity does not at all entail the conclusion that it is less strict, not objective, or better, it doesn't relativize morality.

You distinguish between the Formula of Universal Law in the formal sense (which you call the Categorical Imperative), the FUL as a principle (which you call the Moral Law), and the Formula of Humanity (which specify what the principle universalizes over: human beings as ends in themselves). The argument that shows that we have to see our human identity as a normative form of practical identity is your answer to the question of relativism, and by the same token, you believe that the Formula of Humanity is the best formula to work with in dealing with concrete moral problems.

REPLY to the first part of 2: Before we go on, I would like to clarify what I take you to have said here, to make sure that I and other readers understand it. You say that my prologue is an explanation of how the realm of morality became the realm of normativity. If you mean that it is an explanation of how morality became a matter of obligation and law (as suggested by the etymology of “norm-ativity”), that is right. But these days in philosophy people use the word “normativity” less strictly, sometimes to refer to the realm of value in general, or to whatever is “reason-giving,” and they might take conclusions about what is virtuous to be “reason-giving.” If we think of normativity that way, the contrast is not between a world devoid of normativity and a world with normativity imposed on it, but rather between a world that has normativity built into it, and one that has normativity imposed on it. Someone who understands “normativity” in that way might fail to see what you have in mind here, that you are associating “normativity” specifically with “law” or “imposition.”

I suppose that you think that making morality a realm of law *imposed on reality* rather than a standard of excellence *inherent in reality* brings on a threat of relativism, because if morality is law imposed on the world, then the world does not determine which standard, which law, we apply to it. So what does, and might it be different for different people? I am inclined to say my answer to the threat of relativism is that both the Formulas of Universal Law and of Humanity give us at least some definite conclusions, so to that extent the threat of relativism is met by reason itself. The role of the claim that human identity is a normative form of practical identity is to give us the ground for identifying with the standards of reason, and taking them to be our own.

a. I hope I am following your arguments successfully, and even believe I understand them. Nevertheless, I am not sure I understand how acting on reasons that can be shared with all rational beings *who live together in a cooperative community* is not at

least somewhat relativistic due to the specification of a certain and particular cooperative community. Would you please give an example of the praxis of dealing with concrete moral problems, or elaborate in details how can different communities, religions, nations, might meet the qualification and demand for universality? Are the moral relationships limited to the members of the same community, or are they possible also among different communities, and if so – how, given we don't share the same norms as to how one should treat her fellow human being?

REPLY: Kant used the phrase “the Kingdom of Ends,” his name for the moral community, to refer to a community consisting of all rational beings who regard themselves and others as ends-in-themselves and treat all rational beings as such. (And, of course, all rational beings who are exercising reason *correctly* do that.) Like the phrase “The Kingdom of God,” “the Kingdom of Ends” refers to a spiritual or notional community of which you are a member simply by virtue of inhering to its standards and ideals. So the different practices of actual communities do not come into the question of how we ought to treat each other. If a particular community does not treat all of its members as ends in themselves, or only treats those who share a certain faith or ethnicity or history as members of their community, then they have just got it wrong: there is little room for relativism here. Kant’s theory tells us how we should treat our fellow human beings; communities that do not treat them that way are just wrong.

I just said that there is “little” room for relativism rather than “no” room for relativism, because one sort of relativism is inescapable. Kant’s philosophy clearly mandates that we should not use force, coercion, or deception to get others to serve our own ends, but there is a cultural element to the determination of which actions involve coercion or deception. A principle against deception is not a principle in favor of maximal exposure. Whether you are deceiving someone simply by failing to volunteer a piece of information may depend on what the expectations of your culture are about what sorts of things are to be revealed. Similarly,

whether an action counts as coercive depends on the particular power structures that exist in your community. For example, in a community where women have traditionally been educationally and economically disadvantaged, many women are single mothers who receive no economic help raising their children, and employers can fire employees at will, a male employer asking a woman employee for a date can easily be coercive. He is not accountable to anyone if he fires her, she knows this, and she has children to feed. Will she be putting them at risk if she says no? But in another (presumably future) society where women are not under these disadvantages, and employers are answerable to someone when they decide to let an employee go, an employer asking a woman employee for a date might not count as coercive: after all, all she has to do is say “no” if she does not want to go. There can even be cases where it is fundamentally unclear whether an action is deceptive or coercive or not. So different things may turn out to be wrong in different cultures, or at different historical moments. But this kind of relativism is not really moral relativism, because what is wrong with a deceptive action or a coercive action is always the same, that it is a case in which an agent attempts to manipulate the choice of another for his or her own ends.

Another important point to remember when we are thinking about whether the existence of separate communities gives rise to relativism concerns Kant’s view of the relationship of politics, morality and—a little surprisingly—geography. In Kant’s teleological theory of history, moral community follows upon, rather than proceeding, political community. In the *Metaphysical Principles of Right*, we learn that people must come together into political communities because those who live in geographic proximity must share a system of rights, to determine what belongs to whom. From there, the story goes roughly like this: Once the political community is formed, it evolves (unfortunately very slowly) in the direction of a democratic republic. Once there are democratic republics, people stop wasting all their money on war, use it instead on education, and as a result learn to think for themselves and become autonomous, which leads to morality. (Most of that is in the *Metaphysical Principles of Right*,

Perpetual Peace, and “What is Enlightenment”.) Eventually the different nations themselves come into geographical proximity, and then, again, have to have a way to settle questions of right that arise between them. Eventually all the world becomes part of this community, because, as Kant happily reminds us, the world is round, which ultimately brings every nation into proximity with every other (*The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:311; 6:262). When there is no established and authoritative procedure for settling questions of right, there is a sense in which people are not in what Kant calls a rightful condition with respect to each other, even if they are in fact at peace. So the only community in which relations of right and morality are actually completely realized is the community of all rational beings on earth. (There is disagreement about why exactly Kant did not conclude that a rightful condition cannot be fully achieved without a world government, but he did not.) In the meantime, actual communities are necessarily partial and therefore there is a way in which they necessarily flawed.

b. Might it happen, for example, that one of those communities – say, Christianity – will pass the test better, so it will prove to be universal, rational and moral, while in the case of the other the test will prove it not to be so? Put differently, can those tests help us to grade different communities by determining which community is less or more moral?

REPLY to 2b: We can certainly tell whether some political communities are better respecters of rights, since that is an outward matter. Kant thought that we cannot tell—even an agent himself cannot tell—whether his motives are genuinely moral. He might seem to be doing something for purely moral motives, but actually be doing it for some self-interested reason. Or, perhaps even more commonly, it may be the case that although the agent does not do the good action for any self-interested reason, still, it is true of him he would not have done it if some particular consideration of self-interest or some other limiting consideration were in

place. Suppose, for instance, someone saves a complete stranger from drowning, with no hope of reward or admiration, and it looks like a purely moral action; but, nevertheless, it is true of him that he would not have saved the stranger had the stranger been of a different race, ethnicity, or faith. Determining whether a faith-based community is genuinely moral gives rise to the same issue: they might appear to respond to one another's humanity and to treat one another as ends-in-themselves, but perhaps it is not really humanity, but someone's being "one of us" that moves them. In that case, their relations are not really moral at all. But Kant thinks the judgment that this is so is beyond the reach of empirical knowledge, so it does not actually enable us to "grade" communities. But why would we want to do that in any case?

c. Assuming (but alas, no assumption is needed here) that there isn't a perpetual peace, and wars still exist and are a reality, what would you say about them? – is war always immoral, since I cannot and even better not treat my enemies as ends in themselves, or rather can one formulate a universal law according to which 'when at war, one is obliged to her country/people/community to the extent that she is allowed to kill the ones who threatened it?

REPLY to 2c: In the *Metaphysics of Morals* and *Perpetual Peace*, Kant gives us a set of "laws of war" that are formulated on roughly this basis: we may defend ourselves in war, but we must not use any tricks or devices that would make it impossible for us to return to morally good relations, to treating one another as ends, when the war is over. What Kant thought followed from this is pretty strict, so strict that it would make almost anything we would recognize as war, or even as normal peacetime international relations, impossible. For instance, Kant thought it followed that a nation must not use its own citizens as spies in a war, since (he thought) trust could never be restored.

But without accepting the details of Kant's account, we can see his point. I must first point out that your statement "war is immoral" is a little odd, because it is primarily actions that are moral or immoral, and war is not exactly a cooperative activity that two states are engaging in together. (I suppose one could think of it that way—like fighting a duel—but as a characterization of actual wars, or at least modern ones, that seems misleading to me.) What individual states do is attack and defend. So one might respond, speaking very roughly: attacking is immoral, but defending yourself need not be, if you think you have done nothing wrong to bring the attack on. Of course nations are going to disagree about who was really the attacker and who was the defender, so it is not clear how much practical guidance is provided by this thought. But there has to be some limits on what you may do to defend yourself, and some principle behind those limits. The idea that we should not act in a way that makes it impossible to return to morally good relations seems at least like a promising starting place. Another of Kant's conditions, which in a way directly addresses the problem of disagreement about who was the attacker, is that war should never be punitive. Kant believed that we may fight wars only because there is no effective, authoritative judge to decide the case between two nations. And since no one with authority has decided who is right and who is wrong, neither nation may proceed as if it were in the right and therefore is in a position to legitimately punish the other.

3. In Hegel's philosophy, the two figures that loom most are Aristotle and Kant. Time and again when he is discussing an issue, Hegel notes that the best we have on the subject is what Aristotle said about it, and he often even notes that our task in many places is really just to rephrase Aristotle in modern terms. In another place, Hegel says that the most profound insight in Kant's first Critique is that the unity of what Hegel calls "the concept" – the principles holding his system together – is that of self-consciousness. In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel says that everything hangs on

comprehending that the true is just as much “subject” as “substance” – in other words, just as much Kant as Aristotle (or Spinoza). And so, when the two-in-one of self-consciousness – which is the real pulse of Hegel’s dialectic – is squared with an overall Aristotelianism, we get that “substance/subject,” or “Aristotle/Kant” synthesis that forms the “modern terms” of which Hegel speaks. And of course the “Aristotle/Kant” synthesis is aimed to mediate not only the substance and the subject, but also nature and freedom, or contemplation and morality (i.e., Kant’s first and second Critiques).

Your philosophy also presents a synthesis between Aristotle and Kant, yet it goes in a very different direction.

Was there a moment in your philosophical life in which you read Hegel and decided against him and in favor of Kant? And if so, is the reason you prefer Kant's philosophy over Hegel's (or, as I would like to put it, the reason for seeing Hegel's extra mile as a step backwards) is first and foremost epistemological or moral? Or, in other words, would you say you choose dualism over monism or a philosophy of limits over a philosophy of no limits, first and foremost due to your obligation to the truth or rather to the just/good/moral?

REPLY to 3: Hegel is one member of the philosophical pantheon with whom I am afraid I cannot make much headway; to put it in terms of my answer to the first question, I cannot get to a place where I can see why he saw the world the way he did. On the basis of what little I understand, it does seem to me that he wants to retreat from some of Kant's greatest insights, back to a place where for some reason we are allowed to suppose that the mind and the world are made for each other, and also to reject Kant's thesis of the primacy of the practical. This would be undoing what I, like many others, see as one of Kant's main achievements: to do philosophy in light of an acceptance of our true position in the world (more about this in my

answer to question 4). But I could be wrong about that, or there could be better reason for it than I am able to see. I will admit that my efforts to understand Hegel are partly frustrated by a sense that he makes himself unnecessarily difficult to understand. So, no, there was not exactly a moment in my philosophical life in which I decided against him and favor of Kant. I wish I could say something so respectable about myself! Instead there have been several moments in my philosophical life in which I tried to read Hegel, gave up and decided to let someone else untangle this philosopher's ideas if they can.

4. On the one hand, we have reasons to believe Kant sees religion as an exemplar of the positive (and therefore negative) law, which mature and enlightened humanity must overcome; whereas on the other hand, we have reasons to believe Kant's understanding may and should be compatible with, and even justify, religion and religious practices (as you say, "teleological thinking is not knowledge, and such grounding as it has lies in practical religious faith and so in ethics"; or again: "The doctrine of practical religious faith is motivated by the fact that the virtuous person needs to believe that the ends that morality sets before her may be achieved through her efforts. The moral law makes the highest good our end and is threatened if the highest good is impossible to attain"). How do you understand Kant's attitude toward religion?

REPLY: As you say, Kant's attitude towards religion is complicated. The ideas of God, Freedom, and Immortality play two roles in his thought. They are the metaphysical ideas of the ground of all possibility, a first cause, and a timeless, noumenal existence—things whose reality cannot be objects of knowledge for us, but which we need to believe in in order to avoid antinomy, and construct a picture of the world that makes it intelligible according to our own human rational standards. Kant thinks that our rational faith in them is grounded in morality—in order to believe that we can achieve the highest good (a condition in which everyone is good, and happy

in proportion), we need to believe that we are free; we need to believe in a personal God who arranges the laws of nature so that the good will be proportionately happy; and we need to believe we will have an “eternal” existence in which to evolve towards the perfection of will that morality demands of us. There is something beautiful about this conception of where religious ideas come from, and it brings a completeness to the Kantian system. By completeness, I mean that in this picture, the highest aspirations of theoretical and practical reason come together, when we realize that the only completely intelligible world would also be the morally best one.

But in spite of my admiration for these ideas, in my view the whole thing does not work. These arguments are all based on the idea that the moral law requires us to achieve the highest good. Or it might be better to say that the moral law requires us to believe we are promoting the highest good, and Kant thinks we cannot believe we are promoting something unless we can see some way in which it could be achieved. Kant thinks that therefore we must conceive the highest good to be possible through our efforts, and therefore we have a practical reason, a moral reason to believe in the conditions under which that would be possible. (The idea of believing something for a moral reason gives Kant a conception of “faith” that makes it an epistemic condition quite different from knowledge, so these arguments are nothing like the traditional proofs of the existence of God.) But these arguments do not work because they are still inconsistent with something that is deeply secular about Kant’s philosophy, about which I will say more below. Just as theoretical reason cannot tell us that we are living in the best of all possible worlds, practical reason does not tell us we must make the world perfect. It only tells us to do the best that we can, and if we cannot make the world perfectly good, we just have to be adults, and live with it. (See section 12.1 of *Fellow Creatures* for more about this.)

5. Somewhat on the same topic: would you say Kant is a Christian thinker? – By that I don’t mean to imply he was in fact a theologian and not a strict philosopher, yet I also don’t mean to imply the simple fact that he was a Christian.

I have in mind the arguments of Paul against Judaism and in favor of Christianity. One of them, for example, is this: Judaism is a legalistic religion, which follows a law that doesn't come from within but from a lawgiver "outside" me who dictates the law, and therefore Judaism is neither mature nor spiritual religion; maturity only comes with Christianity, with the internalization of the law, with the understanding that only a law which comes from within can make me a free moral agent rather than a slave or a child.

In a deep sense, then, we may think of Kant as a late link of a (Christian) chain that calls for internalization of the law, an internalization which should be understood as a result of maturity and autonomy. Of course, on the other hand, it may also be fascinating to point out the similarities between Kant and the Jewish thought, for example, the accusations made against Kant that are echoing the accusation made against Judaism: too legalistic, too formal a law, too much emphasize on the practical, too deep an abyss between the theoretical and the practical, too strict is the limit drawn for the theoretical as not being able to know the absolute (and indeed, there are no proofs for the existence of God throughout the Jewish tradition of thought) etc. So, in addition to the above question of the first sentence, would you mind sharing your thoughts about those (or other) similarities between Kant's philosophy and Christianity /Judaism?

REPLY to 5: As I indicated in my last reply, I think Kant is a deeply secular thinker. Although Kant would reject this description himself, I think his philosophy invites us to be adults who can face our situation with respect to the world, rather than dreaming that we are the secret favorites of some creator, who is, among other things, heedless of the fate of his other creatures. (See my paper "Just Like All the Other Animals of The Earth," (*Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, Volume 36, No. 3, 2008 for more on Kant's regrettable attitudes towards this question). That situation is this:

We find ourselves within the world, with a power of reason that generates its own standards. These standards tell us what it would be for the world to be theoretically intelligible and practically good, but we have only limited ways of knowing to what extent the world is actually intelligible or to what extent it can be made good. We cannot assume that the world is designed by a creator in such a way that we can necessarily grasp what it is in itself or can expect that our moral efforts will necessarily promote the good.

I do not know enough about Christianity and Judaism to answer the question which of them is “more Kantian,” but I do not think I would be tempted to answer it even if I did. There is another aspect of Kant’s attitude towards religion, and I might say of his faith in humanity, that I have not discussed yet. I think that Kant believed something like this: if a large number of people share some system of beliefs, we must be able to find the roots of that system in reason, even if the rational ideas expressed in that system are distorted or mythologized in certain ways. Kant therefore believed that religious ideas must have a rational basis, and he thought of his system of practical faith as explaining what that basis is. He devotes a lot of space in the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason* and in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* to showing how the ideas of practical faith are the true rational core of the ideas of Christianity. In the Dialectic of *Critique of Practical Reason*, he makes similar suggestions about the development of religion among the ancient Greeks. If morality and religion as Kant understands them are indeed the natural output of human reason, we should expect to find traces of them in the ideas of any widely held faith, or at least any widely held faith that emphasizes morality. So it would hardly be surprising to find reflections of Kantian ideas in both Christianity and Judaism. But if being close to Kant is a virtue in a system of beliefs, why try to determine which system of beliefs has this virtue to a greater extent? Why not just believe in Kantianism itself?