

## Religious Faith, Teleological History, and the Concept of Agency

Comments on Onora O'Neill's Tanner Lectures:

"Kant on Reason, Morality, and Religion"

by Christine M. Korsgaard

It's an old story that if you focus on the fact of the causes behind you, the ones in the past, it can threaten your sense of your agency. To be an agent, for Kant, is to be a self-conscious causality: to think to yourself that you will bring about a certain end, and somehow, through that thought, to bring it about.<sup>1</sup> When you think of yourself as an agent, you think that your effects are your own, and had you not taken thought to realize them, they would not, other things being equal, have happened at all. So you are their cause, and these effects are yours, and the world is different, because you've made it so. There's a touch of the divine in being an agent, and as Aristotle says, we love the effects of our actions, as poets do their poems, and parents their children, because we see them as our handiwork, and we see ourselves realized and completed in them.<sup>2</sup>

But then we look back, over our shoulders so to speak, and there they are: the prior causes. It's true, you *did* say to yourself, that you would do this thing, and somehow that caused the thing to come to be. But your saying it to yourself in turn had a cause; some combination of the immediate stimulus of the decision, and of course of the causes of that stimulus, and of the forces at work in you - the forces we call your character - that determine how you respond to such a stimulus. And those forces in turn have *their* causes - your education, your training, your psychic formations - that eventually lead, taken backwards far enough, behind you and outside of you, into the past before you were born. And suddenly you do not seem to be *the* cause of this event, and it is in no special way *yours*, for in fact it was inevitable, and

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<sup>1</sup> See the Introduction to *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 211-214.

<sup>2</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* IX.7, 1168a1-10.

you, well, you are just one of the links - and there are millions of them - in a causal chain that has rolled inexorably along a preset path that can be traced back to the very beginning of time.

This is the problem of freedom and determinism, of the threat to our agency that arises from causes that lurk behind us, and as I have said, it is perfectly familiar. But it took the genius of Immanuel Kant to notice the threat to our agency that comes from the causes that loom up in front of us. And it is just as real a threat. For I say to myself that I will do this thing, but what happens next?<sup>3</sup> Does my body obey the command of my will, and if it does, is that my doing? Suppose that I am paralyzed or partially anesthetized or simply tied up or bound down? Then my willing the end has no tendency to bring about the end that I will. And if I do move, as I will to move, what then? Normally, I cannot bring about the effect that I intend directly, but rather move to set off some causal chain, which, if all goes well, will lead to the effect that I will.<sup>4</sup> But that “if all goes well” contains a world of assumptions about the causes that loom up in front of us.

As with the problem of freedom and determinism, the problem of the causes behind us, there are cases that make this parallel problem, the problem of the causes in front of us, seem especially vivid. Cases of rescue make good examples, for let's face it - the world you have saved for another is a very fine thing to see as your handiwork.<sup>5</sup> So you shoot off your gun to stop the attacker, only you mow down the escaping victim instead. Or you try to throw the victim the gun, and the attacker, hitherto unarmed, catches it and turns it on the victim. Or you open the window to let out the smoke, and a gust of wind

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<sup>3</sup> Early I said that your thinking you would bring about an end brings it about “somehow”; I am now unpacking the question that is wrapped in that somehow.

<sup>4</sup> Actually, it isn't clear what the “directly” in this sentence could possibly mean. That's the problem.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, “benefactors” are the agents Aristotle is most directly discussing in the passage cited earlier, although his point is general.

fans the flames yet higher. Or you open the window to let out the smoke, and the arsonist pitches a second grenade through the opening that now you have made for him.<sup>6</sup>

Now as in the case of freedom and determinism, the vivid examples really only serve to bring out a problem that is always there. In the vivid cases, you set out to do something, set off a causal chain that ought to bring about a certain end, but the forces of nature and the actions of others so to speak step in, divert the course of the chain, and make the result the opposite of what you intended. Your own incompetence, unexpected events, interfering agents, can all derail the train whose engine you have started, or worse: set it off on a course of destruction. But this only serves to bring out a standing fact, there in every case, which is that it is always true, in *every* case, that the effects of your actions depend not just on your will, but on the forces of nature, and the actions of other people. To act [ - that is, *if* such a thing is possible at all, *if* we can solve the problem of freedom - ] is to insert yourself into the causal network. But that inevitably means it is to become hostage to the causal network, to the forces of nature, and the actions of others.

Now how does this threaten our sense of our agency? Put in general terms, we might say that the problem is that the relation between the content of our wills, and the effects of our willings, is completely contingent. To get a sense of the problem, imagine that the relation between the content of your speech, and its effects on the minds of your audience, becomes (as perhaps it is already) completely contingent, or worse. “Let me help you” you say, and the person you say it to backs off in terror, or cowers as if expecting a blow. “You’re wonderful” you say, and find you have given the gravest offense. “Kiss me” you say, and get punched in the stomach. Somehow your words are always taken up in some different sense than you meant them, do not relate you to others as you thought that they would, and things do not turn out, as you had set yourself to make them turn out, when you opened your mouth up to speak.

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<sup>6</sup> Or, to take Kant’s own example, you lie to the watchman at the front door to save your master from disturbance, and your master slips out the back way and commits a great crime - which will now be imputed to you by your own conscience, according to Kant. (MPV 431)

Could you still see yourself as a speaker? Of course, it does *not* always happen that way - and yet sometimes it does.<sup>7</sup> And acting, according to Kant, is like this, for the meanings of our actions are determined, not just by what *we* mean by them, but by the way the world takes them up.<sup>8</sup> And so our actions are like children in a different way, a more unsettling way, than the way that Aristotle had in mind, namely, that there seems to be no telling what might happen to them out there in the dangerous world, and so how they will turn out.

We cannot regard ourselves as agents, that is, as the causes of certain effects through our wills, if in fact our wills have no power at all to make our effects be the ones that we willed. And yet we must regard ourselves as agents, that being our situation, and not negotiable, for to be human is to have no choice but to choose. And so, just as she who must speak, must cross her fingers and hope, that her listener will take up her words in the sense in which she meant them, so we who must act, must cross our fingers and hope, that the world, starting with our own bodies, will take up our willings in the sense in which we mean them. And this means that just as the speaker is forced to take up an attitude of trust towards her hearer, so the agent is forced to take up an attitude of trust towards the world itself.

These thoughts are the starting point, more or less, for Kant's philosophy of religion.<sup>9</sup> And in saying this, I mean to be agreeing completely with Onora O'Neill's argument, in her first lecture, that the problem

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<sup>7</sup> As we all learn from unwitting violations of the standards of political correctness, or on trips to New York City.

<sup>8</sup> I am indebted to many useful conversations about these issues with Tamar Schapiro.

<sup>9</sup> In fact, I offer them as a possible but admittedly controversial reading of the following passage in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

But reason in its practical use is not a bit better off. As pure practical reason it likewise seeks the unconditioned for the practically conditioned (which rests on inclinations and natural need); and this unconditioned is not only sought as the determining ground of the will but, even when this is given (in the moral law), is also sought as the unconditioned totality of the object of the pure practical reason, under the name of the highest good. (C2 108)

Briefly: the problem of the unconditioned condition, or determining ground of the will, is the problem of freedom, of past or first causes, which is as Kant says here solved by the moral law; while the problem of unconditioned totality

that Kant thinks religion addresses is essentially the same as the problem of how “the great gulf” between his “two standpoints” is to be bridged. For the problem I’ve just described to you arises precisely from the way in which both standpoints are bound up in the conception of ourselves as agents. In taking up the practical standpoint we see ourselves as active beings, as the thinkers of our thoughts and the authors of our actions. But it is just as inevitable that we should view the world from the theoretical standpoint, as a causally ordered system of which we and our actions are a part. And this is not just because the world must be causally ordered in order to be accessible to the scientific understanding. It is also because the world must be causally ordered if we are to act in it. For to be an agent is to be a cause, and to have effects. So both standpoints are irreducibly linked to the very fact of agency. And yet they seem to be incompatible, for both the causes behind us and the causes in front of us challenge the thought that our effects are our own. And it is this that gives rise to the issue of how the free will manages, as Onora puts it, to insert itself into the world.

What Onora actually says is that “it must be possible to insert the moral intention into the world.” And those of you who know the second *Critique* know that Kant sets his problem up there as a problem about moral agency, while I have set it up here as a problem about agency in general. Onora too, in some of her other formulations, shifts back and forth between describing the problem as one about moral agency and describing it as one about agency in general. Since some of you may be bothered by this discrepancy, I’d like to say a quick word about it.

There are two ways to explain why the discrepancy doesn’t matter, which in the end come to the same thing. The first is that it is possible to argue that on Kant’s view there is a sense in which only moral agency is full-fledged agency. To act, as opposed to just being caused, is to give yourself a law rather than merely to react in accordance with one. So the phrase “autonomous action” is redundant, or at least,

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is the problem of the whole network of causes discussed in the text. Both problems are sources of antinomy, since both spring directly from the conflict between the view of ourselves as agents, and the view of ourselves as causes that the view of ourselves as agents requires.

it doesn't so much name a species of action as a species of success, like the phrases "good cooking" or "intelligent thought"; heteronomous action is defective *qua* action.<sup>10</sup> This way of putting it gives rise to a number of difficulties about the nature and possibility of immoral actions, which aren't immediately germane to our topic, so I don't want to make too much of this point right now.<sup>11</sup>

The second way of putting the point starts from the observation that although we can indeed raise the problem about agency in general, it looks at first as if Kant's proposed solution, religious faith, pertains only to *moral* agency. We can see this by considering the structure of Kant's argument, as it appears in the second *Critique*. A commitment to morality, according to Kant, essentially involves a commitment to the realization of a certain end, the highest good, which he describes as the state of things in which human beings achieve virtue and happiness in proportion to their virtue. If this end is impossible to achieve, or there is nothing we can do to promote it, then we cannot intelligibly be committed to its realization; and if a commitment to morality involves a commitment to its realization, then we cannot intelligibly be committed to morality either. Yet because of the very factors we've just been discussing - the forces of nature, and the actions of others - it seems impossible to see how anything we can do can promote the highest good. But since we must be committed to morality - for that, of course, isn't optional - it follows that we must suppose that the highest good is possible, and that we can, through our moral efforts, contribute to its realization. And this rational necessity or non-optionality licenses us to have faith that the conditions under which the highest good would be possible are indeed realized, even though we cannot know for sure that they are. According to the argument of the second *Critique*, these conditions are that the soul is immortal, so that we may progress unendingly towards moral perfection or virtue; and that a God exists, that is, an Author of the laws of nature, who will so adjust those laws that our moral intentions will have, ultimately, the effect of promoting the highest good.

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<sup>10</sup> That is to say, not just defective with respect to a standard imposed on it from outside, but defective with respect to a standard that arises from the nature of agency itself (a teleological standard, if you will).

<sup>11</sup> I have dealt with these in "Morality as Freedom," Chapter 6 in Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

So what grounds religious faith or hope is not just the fact that it enables us to see ourselves as agents; it is also the fact that the ends we are trying to bring about through our agency are necessary ends, ones that we cannot rationally give up.<sup>12</sup>

But I'm inclined to think this is not so different from solving the problem of agency in general, since the essential point here is that the need for hope arises only if you think that it actually *matters* that you achieve the end you are trying to achieve. This, however, is built right into the structure of agency, since to act without thinking that it matters how your action turns out is just to flail, and to flail is not to act. And this is a fact Kant shows complete awareness of elsewhere, in his endorsement of the traditional doctrine that human beings, as rational beings, always act for the sake of what we take to be good (G 412; C2 59-60).<sup>13</sup> So it doesn't really matter whether we call it a problem about agency, or a problem about moral agency, since in the end it comes to the same thing.

So much for the problem; now I'd like to look a little more closely at the idea that religion provides a solution. As Onora points out, Kant, in various places, advances arguments for two rather different forms of faith, the religious faith that is the culmination of all three *Critiques*, and what I think of as a doctrine of political faith, advanced at the end of the *Metaphysical Principles of Justice* (MPJ 354-55) and in Kant's essays on history and moral progress.

The argument for political faith quite exactly maps the argument for religious faith. The argument for religious faith begins by setting forth the moral ideal of the highest good; the argument for political faith begins by identifying a specific idea, peace, as the "highest political good" - that's Kant's own phrase

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<sup>12</sup> Kant himself insists that if the end that you sought to bring about was not necessary, but just one that you wanted, no rational faith could be grounded in it (C2 120-21). But, as I am about to point out in the text, since Kant also thinks that we take it to be *good* that we should get what we want, at least so long as the pursuit of it is morally permissible, he does not think that we ordinarily do pursue things *just* because we want them.

<sup>13</sup> This of course amounts to the same thing as my first point, that heteronomous action is defective *qua* action.

(MPJ 355). Peace is the highest political good because according to Kant its realization would be coincident with a world in which every nation was a republic. Kant thinks if every nation were a republic, in which the decision whether to go to war was always made by the people and their representatives, war would come to an end, since it is only the rulers, not the people, who really want war (PP 351). In a world without war, civic freedoms are possible, and the money now spent on arms could be spent on culture and education (IUH 26, 28; CBHH 121). Education and free public discussion lead to enlightenment, the condition in which people think for themselves, and that in turn to morality, the condition in which people choose for themselves, that is, autonomously.<sup>14</sup> And when all act morally, the Kingdom of Ends on earth will be realized. The argument, as I said a moment ago, exactly maps the argument for religious faith. We cannot from where we now stand see how peace is possible through our efforts, just as we cannot from where we now stand see how the highest good is possible through our efforts. Yet, in both cases, Kant urges, theoretical reason has nothing to say against it - it cannot be decisively shown to be impossible. Given that we must will the highest good, we are entitled to have faith in the conditions under which it would be possible - God and Immortality. Given that we must will peace and the earthly kingdom of ends that it brings, we are entitled to have faith in the conditions under which that would be possible - conditions Kant vaguely specifies in terms of the cooperation of history, which are sketched in a teleological account of historical progress that foreshadows the ideas of Hegel and Marx.

As Onora points out, there is something of a puzzle about the co-presence of these two doctrines in Kant's writings, and he never helps us out by saying whether he thinks both are necessary, or we can choose between them, or he changed his mind, or what? He does, however, make some remarks that show that he thought about their differences. In the essay "Idea for a Universal History" Kant sets forward a teleological account of history, showing how natural forces, working quite independently of anyone's moral intentions, might lead the human species to the development of republican governments and peace. Kant suggests that such a conception of history, rather like an economic forecast, is designed

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<sup>14</sup> See "What is Enlightenment?"



to help bring about its own truth, for the thought that we can count on nature's cooperation will cheer us on to greater moral efforts (IUH 29; Reiss 51). And yet he also points out that it is "disconcerting" that on this view of history "the earlier generations seem to perform their laborious tasks only for the sake of the later ones" since only the later ones will get to live in the perfected world (IUH 20; Reiss 44). And elsewhere he says that to be cheered by such a conception:

... calls for unselfish goodwill on our part, since we shall have been long dead and buried  
when the fruits we helped to sow are harvested. (Theory and Practice; Reiss 53)

This stands in stark contrast to the account of religious faith, which allows each of us to hope not only for the achievement of the highest good, but also for our own personal participation in it.

Yet religious faith also has its drawbacks. In his uncanny essay, "The End of All Things," Kant presents us with a stark set of dilemmas. We must believe human life has some moral purpose which is actually meant to be achieved, for otherwise, Kant says:

"creation itself appears to be pointless... like a drama that is totally without issue and has  
no rational design." (END 330-31; Beck 73)

[Full of sound and fury, and signifying nothing.] But this moral purpose is achieved in the next life, not in this, and there are two ways we can conceive of that. The first is the way Kant himself invites us to think of it in the Second *Critique*, as an endless progress towards the achievement of perfect virtue, with happiness presumably increasing as virtue improves. Yet here, in an apparently self-critical moment, Kant observes that "an infinite progression towards the ultimate purpose" is still "an unending series of evils" (END 335; Beck 79). The difficulty is that an infinitely long life is *ipso facto* a life in time, and a life in time is a life under the conditions of causality, and causality, as we have seen, is the source of the problems we started with. Immortality, in short, is just more of the same. So Kant concludes that we can be satisfied "only by thinking that the ultimate purpose will sometime finally be reached" (END 335 Beck 79).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> There's a real puzzle here about how the idea of an immortal life is supposed to function, I think, one which presses not just on Kant's account but will have an analog in others. For on the one hand, the evils of this life may

But this seems to require that we conceive of the next life in the other possible way - as one in which we leave the temporal condition behind altogether and embark upon a true atemporal eternity. And about this Kant says:

But that at some time a moment will make its appearance when all change - and with it time itself - will cease is a notion that revolts our imagination. ... For a creature which can be conscious of its existence ... in time only, such a life, if, indeed, it may be called life, must seem equivalent to annihilation... (END 334, Beck 78)

and faced with these two unsatisfactory options, Kant rather helplessly concludes that:

... reason does not understand itself and what it wants. (END 335, Beck 79)

I'll come back to this problem, but first I want to look at a more obvious problem, a problem about the way the religious postulates are supposed to *solve* the problem of agency. Near the end of her first lecture, Onora notices that the very specific postulates which constitute Kant's religious solution arise from the demand that "the moral and natural orders ... be *fully* coordinated in an optimal way." But precisely because of this, the religious solution, on reflection, seems much too strong.

For consider what it actually implies. The problem, Kant says in the second *Critique* is that:

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seem to be wholly unnecessary, in which case we do not know why God has permitted them; or, on the other hand, we may try to justify the evils of this life by asserting that these evils are the inevitable product of certain conditions of this life - say, for instance, of the fact that we live under conditions of space and time, and therefore of causality. But then we are faced with a dilemma: either these conditions will be essential to anything we can recognize as life at all, and therefore will also characterize the next life, which will have exactly the same evils and just be more of the same; or they will not be essential to anything we can recognize as life, in which case the next life may indeed be free of them, but for that very reason we will wonder why it was necessary for us to live for a time under these conditions.

the acting rational being in the world is not at the same time the cause of the world and of nature itself.... Not being nature's cause, his will cannot by its own strength bring nature ... into complete harmony with his practical principles. (C2 124-25)<sup>16</sup>

The trouble is that we are not the cause of nature. So the solution is that:

... the existence is postulated of a cause of the whole of nature, itself distinct from nature, which contains the ground of the exact coincidence of happiness with morality. (C2 125)

This postulated cause of nature must have the traditional attributes of God, Kant says, because:

This being must be omniscient, in order to be able to know my conduct even to the most intimate parts of my intention... In order to allot fitting consequences to it, He must be omnipotent, and similarly omnipresent, eternal, etc. ...<sup>17</sup>

This suggests that what God is going to do is look into our hearts, know our moral state, and so arrange the laws of nature that each of us is made happy in proportion to the goodness of her moral state.

But if this is supposed to be a solution to the problem of agency, then it seems as if something has gone terribly wrong. For if this is the world I live in, how is it that my effects are ever really mine? Think back to the examples I mentioned earlier, of cases of rescue, and rescue gone awry. Can I ever rescue you, or fail to? God has designed the laws of nature so that your fate will be determined by your moral character. If you are good, I cannot - in the long run, of course, and with many qualifications - harm you. And if I help you, I am only the instrument of God, doing something that would have been done another way if I had not taken thought to do it. Where then is my dream of agency, of effects that are my own,

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<sup>16</sup> Kant actually says, filling in the ellipses, "bring nature, as it touches on his own happiness, into complete harmony with his practical principles." In his earlier treatments of practical religious faith, Kant tended to emphasize, although he never exclusively focused on, the agent's thoughts about his own happiness. I think Kant came to see that this was misleading, for in later treatments he tends to emphasize that this is not the primary worry - the primary worry is about the possibility of achieving some good through your actions. In the *Critique of Judgment* version of the argument, Kant says that the "righteous man" "desires no advantage to himself from following [the moral law], either in this or another world; he wishes, rather, disinterestedly to establish the good to which that holy law directs all his powers." (C3 452)

<sup>17</sup> Yes, apparently that bored-sounding "etc." really is Kant's own.

and that would not have taken place at all, had I not taken thought to produce them? How can I make this all too perfect world a better place?

Contrary to appearances, the problem here is not merely that God is doing the work which my moral aspirations made me want to do myself. The problem, rather, is that complete control over nature undermines the concept of agency just as surely as does the idea that we have no control over nature, no way to insert our moral intentions into it. To see this consider the plight of God. God has complete control over nature - not just a mastery of its laws, but the creation of those laws, the power to make it so by the thought of His mind. Can God act?

It has famously been suggested that God cannot gamble, since God always knows how things will turn out. But this is just one example of a broader difficulty. For neither can God be a carpenter, if the wood shapes itself into objects at the bare command of His thought; nor a tap dancer, without any resistance from gravity; nor a philosopher, since everything is already clear to Him; nor a mountain climber, if there's no distinction between His going to the top of the mountain, and the top of the mountain coming to Him. In short, the problem is that agency - *at least as far as we can see* - needs finitude, needs friction, needs something to work against; for when thought and action are one, as they are for God, then there seems to be no action at all.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> cf. Bernard Williams:

It does not follow from all this that we want our choices to be as little limited as possible, by anything or anyone. We do not want our freedom to be limitless. It may seem to follow, but to accept it would be to leave out another vital condition of rational agency. Some things, clearly, are accessible to an agent at a given time and others are not. Moreover, what is accessible, and how easily, depends on features both inside and outside the agent. He chooses, makes up plans, and so on, in a world that has a certain practicable shape, in terms of where he is, what he is, and what he may become. The agent not only knows this is so (that is to say, he is sane), but he also knows, on reflection, that it is necessary if he is indeed going to be a rational agent. Moreover, he cannot coherently think that in an ideal world he would not need to be a rational agent. The fact that there are restrictions on what he can do is what requires him to be a rational agent, and it also makes it

This problem is the exact opposite of the problem with which I began, and, like that one, it has a parallel in the more traditional worries surrounding the idea of freedom. The arguments about freedom, about the causes behind you, seem to suggest that you cannot be free unless you can create your own character *ex nihilo*. Yet it is traditionally objected that neither can you be free if you *can* create your own character *ex nihilo*, for *ex nihilo* there is no “you” to create your character. The same dilemma arises here: that it seems as if we cannot be agents if the relation between the content of our wills and the results of our actions is completely contingent - but neither can we be agents if the relation between the content of our wills and the results of our actions is absolutely necessary.

So Kant’s religious solution seems far too strong. But if political faith escapes the problem I have been discussing, it is only by offering a solution that is somewhat more vague than the religious solution. Certainly, *knowledge* of an *inevitable* march of history towards the good would be just as freezing to moral aspiration as the knowledge that God is already taking care of it.<sup>19</sup> If we knew for sure that we lived in a world in which the good was always already arranged, regardless of how it was done, we could not see ourselves as its agents at all.

How can we move away from this predicament? The first step is to remind ourselves that what Kant offers us in both his religious and political visions is an object of faith, not of knowledge; and with it hope, not guarantee. Hope, as Kant urges, does not paralyze action the way that certainty does. And indeed the importance of hope emerges here. For to take the force of this point you must stop thinking of

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possible for him to be one; more than that, it is also the condition of his being some particular person, of living *a* life at all. We may think sometimes that we are dismally constrained to be rational agents, and that in a happier world it would not be necessary. But that is a fantasy (indeed it is *the* fantasy).

*Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 57.

<sup>19</sup> This is just an extension of a point Kant himself makes, and which Onora mentions, namely that if we knew for sure that there was a God who would reward us for our good conduct we would not be able to act morally.

hope as a cheap substitute for knowledge, and see that it is, all the way down, the right attitude for an agent to take towards the causes that loom up in front of her.

And yet given the problems which, as we have seen, infect both the religious and political solutions, it still may look as if, to paraphrase a remark I quoted earlier, reason does not understand itself and what it hopes for.

One might conclude from this that the notion of agency is after all hopeless: we cannot make sense of it, because we cannot conceive of a world, or of a relation in which we might stand to the world, that would make it possible. But I don't think that would be the right conclusion to draw. I think the right conclusion to draw is that Onora O'Neill is right about Kant, and Kant is right about agency. As Onora puts it:

All that Kant argues is that we must postulate, assume, hope for the possibility that our moral intentions are not futile: we must hope for the possibility of inserting the moral intention into the world. This bare structure of hope -- the canon of hope -- can be expressed in a range of vocabularies [which] will be accessible to different people....

(Lecture II, §6)

The correct conclusion, I think, is that the concept of an agent *just is* the concept of a being who occupies the two standpoints, and so sees herself as a member at once of the kingdom of free agents and the order of causes. The concept of agency *requires* the eternal tension between the two standpoints, and any vision of the world that aspires to eliminate either standpoint, *or the tension between them*, threatens to eliminate the possibility of agency.<sup>20</sup> This is why the various attempts to imagine the solution in too much detail,

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<sup>20</sup> The fact that we all see ourselves as agents shows that Kant was right when he claimed in *Groundwork III* that even people of "the commonest understanding" see themselves as members at once of the two worlds (G 450-52).

the visions of eternity, immortality, or teleological inevitability, which eliminate that tension altogether, are doomed to undercut themselves.<sup>21</sup>

So the question whether there is some way to bridge the great gulf between the two worlds may be analyzed in terms of two further, and in a way, simpler, questions: the question whether creatures such as we conceive ourselves to be are possible, and the correlative question whether the world is such that creatures such as we conceive ourselves to be could live in it. To which the astonishing answer that Kant proposes is: that we must hope so.

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#### *Appendix: Scriptural Interpretation*

Despite the prominent place given to the religious solution in the three *Critiques*, I find it hard not to suspect that Kant himself preferred the political solution. But why then does Kant pay so much attention to religion? Onora has suggested some reasons in her second lecture; I'd like to add one more, and with it, one very small point of disagreement. When you think, as Kant and Kantians do, that certain things are grounded in human reason, you expect to find those things represented in the actual traditions and institutions of human societies. The point is a simple one, and can be clarified by an analogy. Philosophers who work out the basic principles of logic do not think they are introducing new principles, or teaching people how to reason, as if it were a hitherto unknown skill. Instead, they think that they are articulating and clarifying the principles that are implicit in the reasoning that human beings already do. Kant famously took this attitude about his moral principle, for when he was criticized by one Gottlob

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<sup>21</sup> More specifically (i) the vision of another life as eternity eliminates the tension by eliminating causality altogether, and therefore fails to be a vision of any sort of life; (ii) the vision of another life as immortality retains the tension completely and so fails to solve the problem, making life as Kant says a drama without issue; and (iii) the vision of inevitable historical progress eliminates the tension by reducing our lives to the acting out of a drama written in advance, and not by us, which robs us of our agency in a different way.

August Tittel for introducing not a new principle of morality but only a new formula, Kant scoffingly replied: “Who would want to introduce a new principle of morality and, as it were, be its inventor, as if the world had hitherto been ignorant of what duty is or had been thoroughly wrong about it?” (C2 8). The categorical imperative, Kant insists, is implicit in the ways ordinary people already reason about morality (G 403-404; C2 69-70).

The idea is perhaps an obvious one when applied to the basic principles of theoretical and practical reasoning, but Kant carries this way of looking at things into some unexpected areas. For instance, Kant thinks that law (in the ordinary sense now, civil and criminal, public, positive law) has a certain natural rational structure. When he lays out this structure, in the *Metaphysical Principles of Justice*, he at the same time undertakes to show how it is represented in the concepts and principles of an actual legal system, the venerable system of Roman Law. In fact, he even allows Roman Law to some extent to guide him, as if he takes it to be a methodological principle that where some concept or principle is central to a widely accepted legal system, it must have some rational basis, and the philosopher should seek that out. This method has obvious dangers, for one can end up seeking - and worse, finding - rational foundations for historical accidents, and for arrant nonsense; and one may as a result be pressed into the defense of overly conservative views. But Kant does not pursue the strategy slavishly - he accepts some parts of Roman Law, and rejects or revises others, and, that said, the strategy does, in light of his views about human reason, make a certain sense.<sup>22</sup>

Kant’s strategy in dealing with religion seems parallel to this. Something answering to the description of religion is found in nearly every human culture (or so we are told), so to the Kantian mind it is natural to

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<sup>22</sup> Kant does not say this is what he is doing - he just does it. An interesting example of his willingness to depart from the structure of Roman Law is his “discovery” that the two categories of rights - in *rem* and in *personam* - were not exhaustive, and that a category of rights in *rem* over persons - was also needed. I owe the observation to John Ladd; see the Translator’s Introduction to the Library of Liberal Arts edition (*The Metaphysical Elements of Justice*, 1965), p. xxiv.



suppose, at least as a methodological hypothesis, that religion has some rational basis.<sup>23</sup> And the claim that religious faith bridges the gap between the two standpoints, and so resolves the problem of agency, must have seemed to Kant to provide the needed rational basis.<sup>24</sup>

That Kant has, independently of solving the problem of agency, a deep interest in finding an explanation for religion is clear in many places. In the second *Critique*, Kant makes a great deal of the fact that his moral argument for faith in God does something which no theoretical argument purporting to give us *knowledge* of God has ever managed to do, namely, it explains why God must be conceived as a perfect Person. Consider the familiar “proofs” which Kant refutes in the first *Critique*. The ontological and cosmological arguments, even if they worked, would give us no reason to conceive God as a Person; and while the argument from design would, according to Kant, give us reason to conceive God as a Person, if only it worked, it could give us no reason to conceive God as a *perfect* Person.<sup>25</sup> The moral argument,

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<sup>23</sup> And if, as Kant’s arguments suggest, it is the same rational basis as the basis for progressivist teleological conceptions of history, yet it must be said that religion is older and more common than progressivist teleological conceptions of history - although not, perhaps, of teleological conceptions of history in general, which after all form part of many religious views.

<sup>24</sup> And a very crude popular version of part of the thought behind Kant’s account of faith - namely, that there must be a God and another life, so that justice might ultimately be done - has been with us for a while. Nor was Kant the first to suggest that religion is based on morality, rather than the reverse - a version of the idea is found, for instance, in the work of Samuel Clarke. (See the selections in D. D. Raphael, *The British Moralists 1650-1800* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1991), Volume I, pp. 215-16.

<sup>25</sup> In his handling of the argument from design, Kant is of course responding to Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*. Hume argued that the argument from design proved neither that God - or the cause of the world - is intelligent (a person) nor, if God is intelligent, that He is perfect. Kant doesn’t think that the argument from design *proves* anything, but he does think, contrary to Hume, that design favors the hypothesis of an intelligent designer. But he agrees with Hume that the evidence of design doesn’t suggest a *perfect* designer (C1 A626/B654 - A627/B655). But the moral argument suggests, in effect, that we must hope the world is perfectly designed, and so Kant thinks that the moral argument effectively rehabilitates the argument from design, not as an argument which gives us knowledge of God, but still as an hypothesis that can guide scientific thought as well as undergird moral intention (C2 139-40). He even claims that historically, the very idea of natural religion did not appear among the Greeks until after their moral ideas were sufficiently advanced to give rise to this idea (C2 140-41).

however, does suggest God must be conceived as an omniscient, omnipotent, morally motivated author of the world, so only the moral argument explains where we got these ideas about God.

Now all of this makes it very tempting to see Kant's efforts, in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, to find rational bases or analogs for specific Christian doctrines, as analogous to his efforts to find the rational bases for the specific concepts and principles of Roman Law. For this reason, I disagree with Onora's suggestion that Kant thinks "there is no reason to suppose that ... contingent cultural documents and traditions are morally admirable or even sound" and that what Kant is proposing is in effect that moral ideas be *read into* religion. Onora quotes some remarks of Kant's own in support of this attribution, in which he seems to advocate the outright *forcing* of a moral interpretation on a scriptural text if that is the only way to make it serve moral purposes. But a few lines after these remarks he also says:

That this can be done without ever and again offending greatly against the literal meaning of the popular faith is due to the fact that, earlier by far than this faith, the predisposition to the moral religion lay hidden in human reason; and though its first rude manifestations took the form merely of practices of divine worship, ... yet these manifestations have infused even into the myths, though unintentionally, something from the nature of their supersensible origin. (R 102)

I take Kant to be saying here that actual religions really are expressions of moral faith, even if their contingent cultural documents and traditions are at a number of corrupted removes from that origin in human reason. So it isn't surprising if the doctrines of moral faith may be discovered hidden within them.