

Kant and Spalding on a “righteous man” Spinoza

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Abstract. One of the controversial issues of the philosophy of Kant is the question of the role of postulates of practical reason. Their introduction into the practical philosophy of Kant is often criticised since they are regarded as heteronomic elements, violating the autonomy of the will. In the first *Critique* the heteronomy of these foundations seems to appear more distinctly. By contrast, the third *Critique* is often regarded as the point where Kant's ethics finally reaches its maturity. Here Kant finally comes to a formulation of the superfluity of religion for morality. An important passage on which the apologists of such a view rely is the example of a “righteous man (Spinoza [...])” (*KU*, AA 05: 452) who reveres the moral law but rejects the existence of God. Quite often attention is paid only to the beginning of this fragment. But at the end Kant comes to the conclusion that, although morality as such does not need religion, morality inevitably leads to religion. This passage is also interesting for another reason. We see in it a direct parallel with a text of J.J. Spalding, who considers the same example of an atheist-minded person (Spinoza). And the conclusion is essentially identical to that of Kant. The moral law commands regardless of man's faith in God. Thus nothing prevents us from presenting a righteous atheist. But in practice this does not occur, since a truly righteous person, in accordance with his inner mood, freely and naturally comes to the idea of God.

Keywords: Kant, Spalding, moral, religion, God, atheist, Spinoza, autonomy, heteronomy

Introduction

The question of the relation between morality and religion in Kant's philosophy is one of the most intensively discussed problems. Argument over Kant's view has not subsided to this day. And today we can encounter different research positions, either denying that morality has any relation to religion in Kant's philosophy or, on the contrary, emphasising that religion is necessary to moral action. Both these extreme positions, as well as the spectrum of all possible intermediate points of view, find their confirmation in the works of Kant. Proponents of the first position often refer to a passage from the *Critique of Judgment* in which Kant writes that it is possible to imagine a righteous atheist (Spinoza) (*KU*, AA 05: 452). This passage, in their opinion (*cf.* Kühn, 2004, p. XXXIIIn42; Dörflinger, 2004, pp. 207-223),

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unambiguously resolves the issue of the relationship between morality and religion in such a way that morality does not need any religion and religion can be considered as something superfluous for the Kantian ethical system. But how legitimate is this interpretation? We will try to answer the question in this article.

Morality and religion in Kant

In order to answer this question in relation to Kantian philosophy, it will not be superfluous to turn to a wider range of his works. In so doing we will find, on the one hand, that Kant indeed repeatedly emphasises that morality as such does not need religion. The most famous formulation of this statement is found in the opening pages of Kant's later work *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (RGV, AA 06: 03; Kant, 1998, p. 33). On the other hand, however, a more detailed analysis reveals that it would be wrong to conclude from this that morality in Kant has nothing to do with religion at all and that religion is perceived by Kant as a kind of superfluous component. On the contrary, Kant emphasises that morality, although it does not need religion for itself, inevitably leads us to religion. This idea is clearly formulated by Kant in the same *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (RGV, AA 06: 06; Kant, 1998, p. 35). It can also be traced in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in the *Critique of Judgment* and in the *Metaphysics of Morals* – in other words, in all major works of Kant's critical period. It is, however, true that it occurs in different works with varying degrees of distinctness. In the following we will try to consider some aspects of Kant's argumentation, mainly in his *Critique of Judgment*.

We begin with the most famous passage which is often quoted in discussions of this kind, namely a passage from the *Critique of Judgment* on a "righteous man" Spinoza. These lines are often cited as confirmation of the position according to which morality in Kant is viewed as completely unrelated to religion and capable of existing in a completely independent way. Indeed, here we read the following: "Therefore, let us consider the case of a righteous man (Spinoza, for example) who actively reveres the moral law [but] who remains firmly persuaded that there is no God [...]" (KU, AA 05: 452; Kant, 1987, pp. 341-342). However, upon closer examination, it turns out that this so often cited example is actually not so unambiguous. The above quotation is just the beginning of a lengthy text fragment which ends with a rather unexpected and often overlooked statement (Sala, 1990, p. 443): "And so this well-meaning person would indeed have to give up as impossible the purpose that the moral laws obligated him to have before his eyes, and that in compliance with them he did have before his eyes. Alternatively, suppose that, regarding this purpose too, he wants to continue to adhere to the call of his inner moral vocation, and that he does not want his respect for the moral law, by which this law directly inspires him to obey it, to be weakened, as would result from the nullity of the one ideal final purpose that is adequate to this respect's high demand (such weakening of his respect would inevitably impair his moral attitude): In that case he must – from a practical point of view, i.e., so that he can at least form a concept of the possibility of [achieving] the final purpose that is morally prescribed to him – assume the existence of a *moral* author of the world, i.e., the existence of a God" (KU, AA 05: 452-453; Kant, 1987, p. 342).

Thus, we can conclude that, according to Kant, we can really imagine a righteous person who is convinced that there is no God. An example of such a person for Kant is the "atheist" Spinoza, a traditional point of view for that time. However, while imagining such a person we are according to Kant forced to admit that such a person cannot remain an atheist without substantial damage to his moral disposition, since by renouncing the goal that is prescribed by the moral law, a human being thereby refuses also his moral destiny and so cannot fulfil his moral duty entirely (Wagner, 1975, pp. 515-519; Schaeffler, 2005, p. 170). At the same time, we can be sure that this conclusion is not an error or some kind of oversight on the part

of Kant, caused by inaccurate wording, since in a slightly modified form we meet it also several pages below: “A dogmatic *unbelief* in a person is incompatible with his having a moral maxim prevail in his way of thinking (since reason cannot command us to pursue a purpose that we cognize as being nothing but a chimera)” (*KU*, AA 05: 472; Kant, 1987, p. 366). But in this case, it seems logical to pose the question how the introduction of faith in the existence of God as an element necessary for a genuine moral attitude can fail to violate the purity of self-determination of the will to act, i.e. autonomy.

Kant himself does not leave this question unanswered, proposing the following solution in the pages of the *Critique of Judgment*. Here Kant, in contrast to the second *Critique*, does not speak directly about the feeling of respect for the moral law, but submits for consideration a kind of “moral feeling”, arguing that in moments of moral disposition (this moral feeling) a human being feels the need to be grateful to someone for his existence and the beauty of the surrounding nature. It is just as natural for a human being in moments of moral disposition to perform duties that he can fulfil only through voluntary self-sacrifice by perceiving them as something commanded, as if he were obeying the supreme ruler. In the same case, if he does not fulfil his duty, strict self-accusations ring out in his soul, sounding like the voice of a stern judge demanding an account of what he has done. So Kant comes to the conclusion that a person needs a moral intelligence as the cause of his and the world’s existence, and the feelings discussed above – gratitude, obedience and humility – naturally lead us to this primary essence. On the other hand, they cannot be regarded as violating the purity of moral self-determination, since they lack any motive external to moral duty: “There would be no point in artful attempts to find incentives behind these feelings, for they are linked directly to the purest moral attitude” (*KU*, AA 05: 446; Kant, 1987, p. 335). A soul inclined to expand its moral predisposition voluntarily thinks for itself this object – the highest moral essence. And the key word here is precisely “voluntarily”, since it excludes any coercive influence from objects external to us. Thus, this idea of the supreme essence is a voluntary creation of our soul. Its foundation lies in the very moral disposition of a person, and the need to recognise the existence of the highest moral intelligence is “a pure moral need for the existence of a being under which our morality gains either in fortitude or (at least according to our presentation) in range” (*KU*, AA 05: 446; Kant, 1987, p. 335).

Summing up, we can conclude that morality for Kant is closely related to religion, understood as belief in God as the highest moral intelligence. At the same time, such a belief is regarded by Kant as an inevitable consequence of the individual’s truly moral attitude. Hereby, such a conviction of the existence of a higher essence is not perceived as something external in relation to the will of a person, since the will itself voluntarily comes to this expansion, and therefore there is no point in talking about its dependence on or subordination to something external, which would be an indication of heteronomy. Above, we examined how Kant argues for this position in his work, the *Critique of Judgment*, which is often cited in confirmation of a directly opposite position, according to which Kant allegedly insists on the complete independence of morality from religion and the redundancy of the latter. However, we also find it in other Kantian works, in particular in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (*MS TL*, AA 06: 439; Kant, 1991, p. 234) and in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (*RGV*, AA 06: 06; Kant, 1998, p. 35). But with regard to this assumption of Kant’s, it seems worthwhile to look not only at the general context of Kantian thought, but also at the broader context of the epoch in which he lived. This would allow us to appreciate this aspect of Kantian philosophy more reasonably, as well as expand our understanding of the philosophy of the German Enlightenment. And the most significant figure for us in this research is another thinker, at one time no less famous than Kant himself, J.J. Spalding.

Morality and religion in Spalding

Johann Joachim Spalding was born in 1714 in Tribsees into the family of a pastor. He was educated at the University of Rostock, studying theology there from 1731 to 1733. Spalding himself later recalled that philosophy and theology at the University of Rostock at that time were deeply imbued with the scholastic tradition and only a few professors shared positions close to modern eclecticism (Spalding, 1804, p. 3). This led to his rejection of orthodoxy and conservatism, and it was during these very years that he learned to despise pietism (Spalding, 1804, p. 4). The situation at the university began to change only from 1733 on the appearance of new professors such as G.B. Bilfinger. But it was exactly at this time that Spalding had to leave Rostock. After graduating from university he could not find a permanent job for a long time. He had to work as a home-teacher and help his father in the church ministry. In 1734, Spalding moved to Greifswald. Here he developed an interest in Wolffian philosophy, which resulted in his return to Rostock and in 1736 the defence of his dissertation on the ontology of Wolff (Sgarbi, 2011). In the early 1740s, Spalding began to study English. Later he translated the works of such famous thinkers of the time as Shaftesbury, Foster, Gastrell, Butler and le Clerk. His translations won him scarcely less fame than his own philosophical and theological writings. Apart from that he managed to engage in a successful church career. As a result, his position in the church hierarchy gave additional weight and credibility to the opinions he expressed.¹

The rise of Spalding was largely associated with the personality of Emperor Frederick II, who was guided in his religious policy by certain trends of the Enlightenment. After his death Spalding's position changed for the worse. After Wöllner's edict of 9 July 1788 Spalding (1804, p. 114), fearing accusations of heresy, resigned from the post of superintendent and relinquished his pastoral duties. However, by this time he already enjoyed fame as one of the leading minds of the late Enlightenment in Germany. Contemporaries appreciated not only the depth of his philosophical thought, but also his personal qualities and the correspondence of his own life to the ideas he expressed in his writings (Beutel, 2001, p. XXIII; Aner, 1929, p. 81). Recently, more studies have been appearing on the work of Spalding which consider him not only as a forerunner of subsequent thinkers more renowned today, such as Mendelssohn, Kant, Goethe, Herder and, especially, Schleiermacher, but also as an independent philosopher and theologian. But we can still argue that this thinker is insufficiently researched and poorly understood, although he is most remarkable and undoubtedly deserves closer attention. In this article we will consider only one aspect of Spalding's philosophical views, namely, his views on the essence of morality and the question of its relationship with religion.

The main philosophical writing of Spalding is *The Destiny of Man*, first published in 1748, afterwards repeatedly reprinted and significantly expanded. This work is significant for the Age of the Late Enlightenment in Germany because it marked the beginning of one of the most discussed problems of that epoch, i.e. the destiny of man.² At the same time it expressed not only the main lines of Spalding's philosophical thought, but also the main features of neology, an influential philosophical and theological trend in the second half of the eighteenth century. Spalding was one of its most representative thinkers. The central subject of this work is clearly formulated at the beginning and runs as follows: "Why I am

¹ It should be noted here that for Spalding himself this state of affairs was rather unpleasant. He strove to ensure that the opinions expressed by him were accepted because of their fairness and validity, and not because of worship of authority and he directly named the fear that the public position he held would force the others to admit his rightness as one of the reasons for the anonymous publication of some of his works (Spalding, 2004, p. 204).

² According to Norbert Hinske (1990, pp. 434-435), the destiny of man is one of the basic ideas of the German Enlightenment.

there and what I should reasonably be” (Spalding, 1748, p. 3). The subsequent consideration of this issue is carried out in the form of a conversation of the author with himself, his attempt to find an answer in the depth of his own soul via introspection and interrogation. Here several different life-strategies are considered which are to seek in everything the person’s own benefits and pleasures; to help others, but purely for the sake of satisfying the person’s own vanity and pride etc. But all things of this sort can only lead to temporary happiness and cannot satisfy the soul in itself. The only thing which can give the soul entire satisfaction and bring it to eternal blessedness is morality itself. And in the following discussion what morality and true virtue are we find much similarity with the Kantian view.

The leading feature of morality for Spalding as well as for Kant is its pureness. When we act we should not expect reward or fear punishment. In other words, we should not have in mind the possible consequences of an act and should not strive for them, regardless of whether they are useful or harmful to us. We should act in this way and not otherwise simply because it is exactly the only proper way things should be done. And this very consciousness should be sufficient inner motivation for us in doing good. This holds true both for the earthly consequences of our actions and for possible divine rewards and punishments in the afterlife. This idea is already clearly expressed in *The Destiny of Man* and is developed in other writings of Spalding, especially in his late work *Religion, the Matter of Man* (1797). Here it is necessary to highlight a few more points. It was typical for Spalding as well as for other leading representatives of neology to consider virtue and morality in the context of the destiny of man as such. This question was closely connected with God’s will regarding the human being as His creature. The human being is called by God to a virtuous life and the development of his inner inclinations and disposition towards moral good. It is virtue and the capacity for moral behaviour that distinguishes humans from animals. And their development was thus a task of the highest priority for humans.

This view of the nature of morality caused Spalding to insist on the exceptional benefits of religion and its necessity for individuals and for the whole society. In this connection Spalding underlines the following points. Religion leads us to faith in God, the Creator of all that exists, who created also the human being in his own image and likeness, which means, in particular, that God instils in humans a striving for growth in virtue as a likeness of the holiness of God. But this also means that the human being as such is called upon to embody in his life this plan of God the Creator with regard to himself, since being a creation, the human is completely and entirely dependent on his creator. The human being is forced to fulfill the will of God, since this is his direct responsibility in relation to his creator. But at the same time, God created the human being in such a way that it is natural for him to behave in this way because of the natural inclinations laid in him by God. These inclinations are striving for virtue on the one hand and for happiness on the other. Here these two aspects are considered as closely and inevitably related to each other since happiness for the human being is possible only as a consequence of true virtue (Spalding, 1797, p. 300). And here we find another similarity with Kant’s philosophy, since we are faced with a similar paradox. On the one hand, truly virtuous behaviour must inevitably lead to happiness as its consequence. On the other hand, a person cannot be truly virtuous if he behaves in an outwardly appropriate manner merely in order to achieve happiness. Thus, the more a person strives for happiness, the less likely it becomes for him to achieve it.

Religion in this case turns out to be useful and even necessary, since it gives a person the idea of God and the relationship in which a person should stand with Him. It is religion that gives a person the opportunity to understand the will of God, without which its correct execution would be impossible. This leads to the fact that a person is enabled to become a human being (Spalding, 1797, pp. 272, 268), his internal moral motivation is strengthened and he himself gains hope for happiness, if not in earthly life, then after death.

For this reason, the importance of religion is, according to Spalding, difficult to overestimate. As a result, he comes to the assertion that an atheist cannot be truly moral. However, it should be noted that the foundation of this statement is not the certainty that morality would be impossible without religion. Otherwise, Spalding would reduce the essence of morality to religion, which would lead him to deny the possibility of the existence of non-theological virtue and, as a result, the possibility of the existence of virtuous gentiles. This was the case according to pietists and orthodox Lutherans. But in Spalding's view, on the contrary, the essence of religious teaching is reduced to morality. In this case, we can no longer directly conclude about the impossibility of virtue for gentiles and even atheists. Spalding's conclusion here is extremely close to Kant's. This similarity can be found both in the very essence of the question and answer and in the manner they are expressed. Both Spalding and Kant state that theoretically we can assume the existence of virtuous atheists. However, in practice this does not occur, since a truly righteous person naturally and voluntarily comes to the idea of God as a wise and good creator and ruler of all things. A person who insists on the non-obligated character of religion for virtue, is either himself deceived about the level of his morality or even wishes harm to others, deliberately leading them into a dangerous delusion (Spalding, 1797, pp. 297-298; 1784, pp. 63-64). It is noteworthy that for Spalding, as well as for Kant, none other than Spinoza is an example of such a righteous atheist (Spalding, 1784, pp. 57-59).

Conclusion

Summing up, it should be said that Kant is often perceived today as a pioneer in his formulation of the autonomy of the will as a necessary condition for morality. However, upon closer examination, it turns out that he did not stand out so clearly against the background of the general intellectual movement of the time as is commonly believed. This perception of Kant's exclusivity is often associated with the fact that we put into the Kantian autonomy of will the meaning that we would like it to have today but which Kant himself did not intend. The point is that today we tend to perceive religion as something external to the inner world of the individual, as something limiting it. Because of this any mention of religion is associated with a lack of independence of the will of a person, which in Kant's terms could be named heteronomy. For Kant himself, however, things were somewhat different. Religion was not considered by him as something limiting human freedom and therefore violating the purity of morality. On the contrary, Kant regarded belief in God as a logical and inevitable consequence of the individual's true moral disposition. Therefore, Kant assumed the possibility of the existence of the pious atheist Spinoza in theory, but denied the possibility of such an existence in practice, i.e. in our real world. However, this approach can no longer be considered purely as an invention of Kant's, since we find a similar attitude towards the relationship between morality and religion in other thinkers of that time, particularly in Spalding. This leads us to the conclusion that Kant's philosophy in this respect should not be considered separately as something isolated, but it is more justifiable to consider it in the context of the entire age of German Enlightenment. This approach will not only allow us to understand Kant better, but also expand our understanding of this epoch.

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