

# God's role in the ethics of Kant and Dostoevsky

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**Abstract.** Despite their differences there is a deeper connection between Kant and Dostoevsky's thought on the relationship between belief in God and ethics. For Dostoevsky, belief in the existence of God plays an essential role with regard to the possibility and meaning of ethics. This role is expressed in the idea that we can find for example in *The Brothers Karamazov*, according to which if there were no God, everything would be allowed, i.e. there would not be any sense in moral interdiction. In Kantian moral theory, on the other hand, even though God is not a condition of possibility for ethics as such, as in Dostoevsky's case, it is still a subjective condition for the possibility of the realisation of ethics for finite human beings. Furthermore, I show that for both thinkers the importance of God for ethics does not exclude the importance of freedom. Thus, I argue that there is an implicit reflection on the importance of freedom for faith and therefore also for ethics in Dostoevsky's thought. In the "Legend of the Inquisitor" from *The Brothers Karamazov* Dostoevsky actually criticises dogmatic faith, incarnated in the figure of the Inquisitor. I will conclude from this that, according to Dostoevsky, faith needs a form of freedom.

**Keywords:** Kant, Dostoevsky, ethics, God, freedom, love, Other

## 1 Introduction

The aim of this paper is to show the deeper connection between Kant and Dostoevsky's thought on the relationship between belief in God and ethics. At first sight, their differences seem to be considerable. Dostoevsky is a profound religious writer, putting faith above reason; he goes so far as to affirm that "if someone proved to me that Christ is outside the truth and that in reality the truth were outside of Christ, then I should prefer to remain with Christ rather than with the truth" (Dostoevsky, 1928, p. 142). There is a form of anti-rationalism in Dostoevsky's thought, an anti-rationalism which can be explained by his view on religion or, in different terms, by his view on the relationship of human beings to God, i.e. something which has to be based on faith and not on reason in order to be authentic. Authentic faith cannot be proved or rationalised, i.e. understood and thought by means of concepts and ideas which ground logical truth.

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In Kant's case, God is presented – from his early critical works like the *Critique of Pure Reason* to his *Opus Postumum* – as a mere idea, i.e. as a subjective concept which originates in human reason. This concept, despite being subjective, is not arbitrary. It stems from the dialectical nature of human reason, as Kant shows in the first *Critique*. The fact that it is a mere idea means that it is not something which can be experienced, since for Kant there is no experience outside the field of sensibility; and the idea of God goes beyond this field.

In consequence, if Dostoevsky has an anti-rationalist attitude towards the question of God and its importance for human beings, Kant finds, on the contrary, the origin of the idea of God and its justification point in reason. Although Kant cannot be considered a rationalist since he denies the possibility of a theoretical knowledge of God, God is presented as a necessary idea of human reason in view of reason's unavoidable dialectics and, more importantly, due to the requirements of the moral law. Despite the differences between these two authors' conceptions of God, I argue that we can find a connection between them if we consider the link they make between God and ethics. First of all, for both of these thinkers, the idea of God is crucial for the realisation of ethics. Secondly, and this point seems perhaps less obvious, for both thinkers the idea of God bears an essential relationship to freedom. This second aspect leads me to inquire if both thinkers share the same interpretation of freedom.

In a first step I will deepen this first connecting point, i.e. the importance of God for ethics. In a second step I will deepen the other connecting point, the importance of freedom for the relationship between God and ethics.

## **2 First connecting point between Kant and Dostoevsky: The importance of God for ethics**

While considering Kantian ethics, it is important to insist that the idea of God is not necessary for the *possibility* of ethics, but rather for the possibility of a finite human nature *realising* ethics. Indeed, we become immediately inwardly conscious of the moral law without the mediation of the idea of God. That is why none of the diverse formulations of the moral law that we find in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* – not the formulation which is based on the possibility of universalising the maxim of our actions, nor the one which is grounded on the idea that we have to treat humanity in our person as well as in other persons never as a mere means, but always also as an end, nor the one which is founded on the analogy between moral and natural law – contains or implies the idea of God.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the moral law, since it is a categorical imperative, requires that the will respect it for itself and not for other, hidden reasons, which are not enunciated in the moral law itself, e.g. the will of God. That is why Kant affirms that the moral law is founded on the autonomy of practical reason in the etymological sense of the term, i.e. in the sense that practical reason gives to itself its own moral laws, and does not obey an exterior principle of determination. In relation to our topic, this means that the moral law cannot be grounded on divine laws, regarding which practical reason has no necessary insight. The autonomy of practical reason does not mean that moral laws are arbitrary, in function of our arbitrary will. Such a will, on the contrary, would not have any laws, neither autonomous nor heteronomous. This autonomy means that our will is required to obey laws whose compelling necessity we can grasp or understand through our practical, i.e. moral reason. On these grounds, we see that the moral law not only does not imply the idea of God but, on the contrary, it seems to be incompatible with this idea. Therefore it is legitimate to ask in what sense God is important for Kantian ethics.

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<sup>1</sup> However, Robert Theis (2005, p. 11) argues that the diverse formulations of the categorical imperative are already moved by the idea of the highest good, which is the accomplishment of the Kantian ethical theory.

The importance of the idea of God is related to the characterisation of the concept of the highest good as determining object of our will.<sup>2</sup> The objects of practical pure reason are the good and evil. These objects are implied by the moral law, since it is good to respect the moral law for its own sake and bad not to respect this law, or to respect it for other reasons than its own sake, as for example out of personal interests. Why then is it necessary to talk about a highest good? Is the moral good not already absolute? The reason lies in the fact that human will can be determined by different principles which are not necessarily moral, but originate from our personal subjective interests, e.g. our striving for happiness. This is why, in order to acquire a morally pure will, we need to separate clearly those principles from the moral law and to subordinate all our maxims, which are moved by our self-love, to the moral law. It is precisely the difficulty of doing so that causes the radical evil of human nature, as Kant states in his work *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, and not because of the incapacity of human reason to know rightly what is a moral law. Thus, the concept of a highest good does not imply that all other motivational forces of our will such as happiness should be abandoned – this would be inhumane – but that they must be subordinated to the moral law.

However, this concept of the highest good (*das höchste Gut*) is, in Kant's formulation, ambiguous, since it can mean the supreme good (*das oberste Gut*) or the complete good (*das vollendete Gut*).<sup>3</sup> The supreme good expresses what we have just explained, i.e. the subordination of all our desires, including our happiness, to moral law. This sense of the highest good does not need the idea of God. However, the complete good takes into account the realisation of our happiness and not merely our worthiness of being happy, as is the case with the supreme good. It is called “complete” because it takes into account both principles of our will's determination, i.e. moral laws and happiness. In other words, it involves the complete nature of the human being, both phenomenal and noumenal. If having a phenomenal nature means having a finite nature, then we can say that the highest good, as a complete good, is the object of a finite will.

Kant conceives this highest good as being the philosophical equivalent of what is called, in a Christian context, the Kingdom of God. The idea of this Kingdom represents a world where happiness is given in accordance to a perfect pure moral will. The worthiness of being happy, grounded on a pure moral will, is realised in this Kingdom, In such a world happiness is distributed “in the most exact proportion of morality with the greatest degree of moral perfection (possible in creatures)” (*KpV*, AA 05: 129-130; Kant, 2015, p. 104). This happiness, which is proportional to morality, is not merely selfish happiness where the human being sets himself as the supreme end (*Zweck*) above moral ends, a type of happiness to which Kant gives the generic name *Glückseligkeit*.<sup>4</sup> This is why Kant reserves for this second type of happiness, happiness in perfect concordance with morality, another German term, *Seligkeit*, which is used in Christianity and can be translated into English as “beatitude” (*KpV*, AA 05: 129; Kant, 2015, p. 104). Thus, it is important to take into account the idea that this type of happiness is something analogous to the happiness that we can experience in our life,

<sup>2</sup> In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant explicitly defines the concept of God, or at least one possible concept of God, as the highest good, as it appears in this quotation: “But whence have we the concept of God as the highest good?” (*GMS*, AA 04: 408-409; Kant, 1997, p. 21).

<sup>3</sup> This distinction appears clearly in this fragment from the beginning of the chapter “On the Dialectic of Pure Reason in Determining the Concept of the Highest Good” of the *Critique of Practical Reason*: “The Highest can mean either the supreme (*supremum*) or the complete (*consummatum*)” (*KpV*, AA 05: 110; Kant, 2015, p. 89).

<sup>4</sup> “*Happiness (Glückseligkeit)* is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence everything goes according to his wish and will, and rests, therefore, on the harmony of nature with his whole end (*zu seinem ganzen Zwecke*)” (*KpV*, AA 05: 124; Kant, 2015, p. 100). We see thus that this definition of happiness is generic since it does not imply in itself a moral context.

but at the same time is beyond our reach and, in a certain measure, our imagination. Indeed, it presupposes a perfect moral will, and thus that human being is not only virtuous but, as Kant states in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, that he is also in possession of a sacred moral sense. Kant here uses the word *Heiligkeit*, which is also a Christian concept (see *KpV*, AA 05: 128). The acquisition of such a perfect, sacred moral sense requires an infinite moral progress of the human being, because of the radicality of its evil. This beatitude could thus be achieved only in eternity.

This is the reason that this concept of the highest good remains ambiguous in Kant's thought. It is not clear if it is something that should be achieved in this empirical world, albeit in an infinite or indefinite time, or if it is something that should be achieved in the life beyond death in which Christians usually believe. On the one hand, this highest good can be achieved only in eternity and that is precisely why it presupposes the immortality of the soul. On the other hand, Kant states that it is our moral duty (*Pflicht*) to work for the realisation (*wirklichmachen*) of this highest good in the world (*KpV*, AA 05: 144). However, can it be a duty to realise this highest good in a spiritual world after our death that hardly has any meaning for us? Moreover, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* Kant clearly interprets this world of the highest good as the Christian idea of God's Kingdom realised on earth.

Also, it is not clear what the role is of other human beings considered as moral persons in the realisation of this highest good. In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant does not give any clarification on this point. However, in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* he seems to imply a necessary role of other persons in the realisation of this highest good. There Kant states that it is more difficult to exercise the moral will when others do not do so. In this case, the others' behaviour stimulates the germs of our evilness.

What is, however, the role of God in the idea of this highest good, understood as complete good? One main indication lies in the fact that there is absolutely no necessary connection between morality and its proportional happiness. Consequently, we need to postulate the existence of a being who is the ground of this connection, and who will thus guarantee the realisation of this happiness proportional to the purity of moral will (*KpV*, AA 05: 124). This being is precisely God. We see here that God is a necessary postulate in order to conceive the possibility of a realisation of an ethical world which takes into account the whole of human nature, i.e. not only its moral reason but also its striving for happiness. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, however, we see two further reasons for the importance of God for ethics. First, Kant speaks here from the perspective of the specific Christian conception of God. Kant states that Jesus as Son of God who was incarnated as a human being has the function of a concrete moral ideal for the human being, which he is called to follow (*RGV*, AA 06: 60-62). We see, however, that God still maintains a function, since human beings and finite beings realising ethics need, due to this finitude, an ideal to follow.

Secondly, God is conceived as the "supreme lawgiver of an ethical community, with respect to whom all *true duties*, hence also the ethical, must be represented as *at the same time* his commands" (*RGV*, AA 06: 99; Kant, 1998, p. 110). Indeed, an ethical community, which is the ideal of a human community, oriented only by moral laws, and which can realise itself only as a church (founded on a rational and not dogmatic faith) presupposes the necessity of a lawgiver and, at the same time, a supreme judge "in order to penetrate to the intimate parts of the dispositions of each and everyone and, as must be in every community, give to each according to the worth of his actions" (*RGV*, AA 06: 99; Kant, 1998, p. 110).

If we compare now this conception of the relationship between God and ethics with that of Dostoevsky, we see a similar point. For Dostoevsky, God plays an essential role for the possibility and meaning of ethics. This role is expressed, for example, in *The Brothers Karamazov* where Dostoevsky asks through the figure of Dmitry Karamazov how a human being is "going to be virtuous without God?" (Dostoevsky, 1992, p. 502) and "if everything

is permitted, in that case?" (*ibid.*, p. 503). We find this idea also in *Crime and Punishment* in the figure of Raskolnikov, who wants to prove to himself that he is able to transgress moral laws, more precisely, one of the most important moral laws, the prohibition of killing. This leads Raskolnikov, as we know, to commit a moral crime by killing an old lady, a crime which, however, he cannot absorb, showing by this that he cannot transgress his own moral consciousness.<sup>5</sup> It seems, however, that for Dostoevsky God is not simply necessary for the realisation of ethics by the human being as a finite being, but for the possibility of moral consciousness as such. This represents, at first sight, a strong contrast with Kant's own stance on the matter. Indeed, without God everything is permitted, in the sense that we cannot make any distinction anymore between what is morally good and what is morally evil.

At the same time, Dostoevsky strives in his novels to show that human beings cannot escape this moral consciousness. Humans cannot escape their relationship to God, even if they try to do so by committing a crime like Raskolnikov or, like Ivan Karamazov, by having the mere idea of it. Ivan becomes crazy because he feels guilt about giving the idea of killing his father to somebody else, Smerdiakov. He thus feels guilt for the evil intention which he has had, perhaps, for a simple instant. This transgression against one's own moral consciousness leads to the disintegration of the person, through madness as in the case of Ivan, or suicide as in the case of Smerdiakov. The only solution is to restore one's moral integrity by a long and difficult journey, symbolised in Dostoevsky's novels by forced exile. What is the reason, however, for the essential relation between God and moral consciousness in Dostoevsky?

### **3 Second connecting point between Kant and Dostoevsky: The importance of freedom of the human being for the relationship between God and ethics**

We could be tempted to explain this point from a dogmatic religious perspective. From this perspective, human beings need to believe in God as a being who judges them for their crimes and can reward and punish them according to their moral merits. Such an explanation, however, presents two weak points. First of all, it is not radical enough, since it does not explain the reason why faith in God is essential for moral consciousness in itself and not just for the sake of obedience to this consciousness. Indeed, as Kant already shows, particularly in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, those are two essentially distinct things. One can have a moral consciousness and know that one commits moral evil acts and still go against it because one is moved by other principles than moral laws.<sup>6</sup> This is a consequence of the radical (but not absolute!) evil which characterises human nature. However, Dostoevsky asks himself if without God anything would be morally allowed and not just unpunished. If we consider, for example, the figure of Raskolnikov we can say that he does not commit a crime because he knows that he will not be punished and because he is moved by his desire to steal from the old lady. This desire is a secondary motivation for his action.

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<sup>5</sup> After killing the lady, Raskolnikov says to himself: "I didn't kill a human being, but a principle! I killed the principle, but I didn't overstep (*perestupil*), I stopped on this side" (Dostoevsky, 1994, p. 557). The Russian verb "*perestupil*" has the same etymology as the word "*prestuplenie*" which means "crime".

<sup>6</sup> According to Evgenia Cherkasova (2004), *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* displays a different conception of freedom than the earlier works of Kant on ethics such as the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, displaying the freedom of human beings in their choosing evil or good; Dostoevsky studies deeply this form of freedom, especially in his *Notes from Underground*.

His main mobile is to prove to himself that he does not obey any moral law, that the concept of a moral law in itself does not have any sense for him.

The second weak point of this interpretation is that it presents the relationship of the human being to God as a servile one, a relationship in which the human being obeys the laws of another higher being out of pure fear, and not because he sees through his own reason the necessity of these laws. This goes against the autonomy of moral reason on which Kant insists, as we have seen, and for this reason, it would go against this inner freedom, which is essential in order to understand the possibility of a moral will. Indeed, a moral will is a will that has the power to determine itself by obeying laws which moral reason gives to itself and does not derive from a superior being. The fact that we call moral laws “divine” laws shows only, according to Kant, our unconditional respect for these laws. Thus we do not obey moral law, in a truly ethical attitude, because God obliges us to do so, but because we see the necessity of this law through our own reason. This obedience is the act and possibility of a free being, and perhaps this is precisely what Raskolnikov does not understand. Raskolnikov’s rebellion proceeds as if the moral laws are arbitrary rules that we can transgress.

Surprisingly enough, there is an implicit reflection on freedom in Dostoevsky’s thought, which appears at its clearest in the “Legend of the Grand Inquisitor” in *The Brothers Karamazov*. In this legend, Jesus appears to a Spanish inquisitor of the 16th century who kills heretics in the name of what would be a true faith in God. The inquisitor tells Jesus, who remains silent, that he overestimates the human being who prefers to be ruled by an authoritarian and dogmatic spiritual power, which gives him a form of inner security, than to follow freely his path. He thus tells Jesus: “You desired the free love of man, that he should follow you freely, seduced and captivated by you. Instead of the firm ancient law, man had henceforth to decide for himself, with a free heart, what is good and what is evil, having only your image before him” (Dostoevsky, 1992, p. 216). The silent response of Jesus is the only adequate response according to Dostoevsky, because Jesus does not constrain us to follow him, i.e. to convert all our principles of life into ethical principles, but waits that we choose this in a free manner.

Among the numerous interpretations of this legend, we can suggest as one possibility the idea of an implicit critique of dogmatic faith, which Dostoevsky accomplishes by showing the essential role of freedom for the relationship of the human being to God.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the idea that without God anything is allowed, does not justify a dogmatic faith but, on the contrary, presupposes that the human being has to choose God in a free way, and that it is this free choice that makes our moral consciousness possible. Here we find a second similarity in Kant and Dostoevsky on the question of the relationship between God and ethics, i.e. the crucial importance of freedom.

In conclusion, we can ask ourselves what it means for Dostoevsky to choose God freely. Again, he does not give a clear, explicit answer but we can attempt an interpretation from the content of his novels. What makes us decide freely for God is the love of other persons towards us. That is why in Dostoevsky’s novels it is always love that allows his figures to restore or, at least, to hope to restore their moral integrity (Raskolnikov is loved by Sonia, who follows him into exile). Thus, this free choice for God can be conceived, according to Dostoevsky, as a call that we feel through the love of others. This is not in its most eminent sense a passionate love, but a form of love which is able to see the germs of our morally good will inside ourselves.<sup>8</sup> It is thus the Other who unveils to myself my morally good will and

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<sup>7</sup> Paul Evdokimov (2014, p. 110) even states that, according to Dostoevsky, “only in God freedom possesses an absolute character”.

<sup>8</sup> In that sense we can construe the relationship of the human being to God as part of a “deontology of heart”, which cannot be identified with the “rational deontology” which characterises Kantian ethics (cf. Cherkasova, 2009, pp. 7-29).

from a Levinasian perspective we could say that, according to Dostoevsky, I see God through the face of the Other. It is this face which, through his love to me, unveils my morality. It shows us the importance of the other person for the possibility of ethics in the thought of Dostoevsky and opens finally the question of the role of this Other in the ethics of Kant.

## 4 Conclusion

We have seen through this study that there are two connecting points between Kant and Dostoevsky: (1) for these thinkers the idea of God bears an important connection to ethics; (2) these thinkers conceive human freedom as grounding this connection, since neither of them conceives God as a moral legislator, demanding heteronomous obedience. We have seen, however, that there are two important differences: (1) if for Dostoevsky faith in God plays an important role for the moral consciousness, for Kant God plays a key role in the possibility of realising a pure moral will for us finite beings; (2) if for Dostoevsky the Other, and more particularly the love of the Other plays an important role in the free election of the belief in God, the role of the Other is less obvious in Kantian ethics.

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