The Primacy of the Practical (and Is Kant an early Encroacher?)
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0. Introduction

- The recent incursion of ethics into epistemology
    - **Strong pragmatism**: M. McCormick, S. Rinard: all reasons for belief are broadly practical
    - **Weak pragmatism**: P. Hieronymi, S. Leary: "wrong-kind" reasons can be normative for belief
        - Right-kind reasons: truth-conducive, evidence
        - Wrong-kind reasons: beneficial (pragmatically, morally)
    - L. Buchak: **faith** as a practically-motivated policy of suspending evidential inquiry
    - **Encroachment:** (M. McGrath/J. Fantl, S. Moss, R. Jorgensen, R. Basu, M. Schroeder): practical considerations can encroach on the epistemic: they can raise (and lower?) the bar regarding how much *epistemic* justification is required for knowledge.
        - Pragmatic: Asking a fellow passenger is normally sufficient for gaining knowledge of the next stop, but not if your career hangs on getting off at the right station.
        - Moral: Statistical information is normally sufficient for knowledge, but not when moral harm will come from accusing someone of a crime on the basis of, say, statistical demographic information.

- This is another instance of analytic philosophy swallowing its own tail, since the rejection of this sort of incursion of the ethical-ought into the theoretical-is was part of its founding narrative:

    - Russell in *Mysticism and Logic* (1919): "Driven from the particular sciences, the belief that the notions of good and evil must afford a key to the understanding of the world has sought a refuge in philosophy. But even from this last refuge, if philosophy is not to remain a set of pleasing dreams, this belief must be driven forth." (30-31)
        - Russell opposing the classical pragmatists here, but also neo-Kantians like (Frege's teacher) Rudolph Hermann Lotze: "The true beginning of metaphysics lies in ethics."

- Kant not the first to argue from "ought" to "is." Traditional divine command theory:

    1. I ought to follow the Moral Law
    2. The only (or best) account of the truth of (1) involves God's existence.
    3. So God (probably) exists.

- But Kant not a divine command theorist, and not interested in arguments that conclude with a <u>claim about what exists</u>. Kant's "primacy of the practical" concerns arguments with conclusions regarding what <u>I am permitted to be committed to regarding what exists</u>.
    - Pascal the *eminence grise* here, and hints of this sort of argument found in Kant's predecessors G.F. Meier and C.A. Crusius. But Kant the most prominent defender.

- **Plan of talk:** (i) look critically at some ways in which Kant thinks moral considerations justify existential commitments, (ii) evaluate their fit within his own theory of moral motivation and (iii) consider whether such argument-structures have any ongoing appeal. At the end return to the question of whether Kant is an early pragmatist or encroacher, and conclude with a contemporary secular application of one model of Kantian moral argument.

I. Kant's Moral Argument: Carrots and Sticks model (*Critique of Pure Reason* (1781))

- Kant's third question ("What may I hope?") unites the first two questions about knowledge and duty: it is "simultaneously practical and theoretical" – it "concerns happiness" and "finally comes down to the inference that something **is…because something ought to happen**" (A805-6/B833-4).
  - That's not quite right: the conclusion is that we can *justifiably commit* to the claim that something is because we *know* that something ought to happen.

- The unKantian Kant of 1781: "Everyone also regards the moral laws as **commands**, which, however, they could not be if they did not connect appropriate consequences with their rule *a priori*, and thus carry with them **promises and threats (*Verheissungen und Drohungen*)"** (A811/B839, Kant's bold).

  - From a lecture note: "We are obliged to be moral. Morality implies a natural promise: otherwise it could not impose any obligation upon us. We owe allegiance only to those who can protect us. Morality alone cannot protect us."

- So in the first *Critique* it looks like part of the *incentive* to be moral has to do with the hope for rewards and punishments. "Thus without a God and a world that is not now visible to us but is hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approval and admiration but not incentives for intending and realizing" (*Gegenstände des Beifalls und der Bewunderung,aber nicht Triebfedern des Vorsatzes und der Ausübung*)… (A812/B840).

  - "God and the future life are two presuppositions that are not to be separated from the obligation that pure reason imposes on us in accordance with principles of that very same reason." (A811/B839)
  - There is debate about how to read this, but it's hard for me to see how this is not a heteronomous theory of moral motivation that the later Kant would eschew.

II. Kant's Moral Argument: Rational Coherence Model (*Critique of Practical Reason* (1788))

HG = Highest Good, GFL = God and the "Future Life"

1. I ought to will HG (i.e. a perfect correlation between virtue and happiness). [Premise]
2. So, I am permitted/obliged to take HG to be really possible [1, Ought-justifies-taking-really-possible]
3. The only (or best) account of real possibility of HG involves GFL's existence. [Premise]
4. So, I am permitted/obliged to take GFL to exist.

Problems:

- **Re (1):** Why ought I will HG, rather than just the me-being-virtuous part of HG?
  - Also, why ought I will *HG* (i.e. the whole shebang) instead of just to *promote* or *approximate* the HG the best I or we can?
- **Re (2):** Controversies about the use of ought-implies-really-can, and ought-justifies-taking-really-possible.
  - Why more than merely *logically* possible?
    - That would block the move to (3) and (4).

- **Re (3):** How to get this claim about an *actual* ground of the real possibility of the HG? It would seem that if you are committed to the real possibility of an outcome, then you are at most committed to the *real possibility* of its ground.

  - In the pre-critical period, Kant endorses a kind of <u>actualism</u> (based in a modal version of the Principle of Sufficient Reason) according to which all real possibilities are grounded in facts about what is actual.
    - **X is really possible** = actually existing substances and powers in the world can bring X about.

  - In the critical period, Kant is no longer committed to the PSR, so we need some other reason to think that, in the case of the Highest Good anyway, the ground of its real possibility must be *actual* rather than merely really possible. The fact that Kant occasionally *says* that a commitment to GFL's real possibility is the "minimum of theology" required of us by the moral argument muddies the waters here.

  - A. Wood and M. Willaschek (in different contexts) argue, persuasively I think, that the kind of possibility involved in moral arguments is "realizability" – or what Kant himself calls "**real *practical* possibility**." In other words, we have to regard the moral end that we set as at least in principle *realizable* by some set of agents and powers in the *actual* world (typically that set will include ourselves). We aim at "the highest good, which is possible through our collaboration" (8:279n).

- **Re (3):** Why the traditional omni-God?
  - Why not a benevolent **architect of nature**, one of Hume's "**mediocre deities**," a **karmic law**, or even **nature itself** playing a very long game (Fichte: a "living moral order")

- **Overall**: There is **no role for hope** in this form of the argument, which seems architectonically odd: this is supposed to be the answer to Kant's third question ("What may I hope?").

III. Kant's Moral Argument: Moral-Psychological Model (*Judgment* (1790), *Religion* (1793) "Theory and Practice" (1793))

Religion **(1793)** offers the following as the rational essence of the doctrine of providence:

> ***Providence:*** "Each must, on the contrary, so conduct himself as if everything depended on him. Only on this condition <u>may he hope</u> that a higher wisdom will provide the fulfillment of his well-intentioned effort." (6:101)

"Each must." For many of us, however, sustaining such activity requires the hope that justice will someday be done, and that our moral efforts will make some small contribution to it doing so. We have

> "a natural need (*natürlichen Bedürfnisse*), which if not met would be a hindrance to moral resolve [*Hinderniß der moralischen Entschließung*], to conceive some sort of final end of all our doings and non-doings taken as a whole, one that reason finds justifiable." (6:5)

Two kinds of de-moralization =
>   (1) a *general despair* in the face of the clear unlikelihood that full justice will arrive soon and that our individual efforts will make a difference in that regard.
>   (2) Partly as a result of this, a *psychological loss of resolve* to do what we continue to think we ought to do.

Key distinction here between *incentive* and *resolve*. Compare **fragility**: the "first degree" of the propensity to evil in *Religion*:

>   "First: the **fragility** (*fragilitas*) of human nature is expressed even in the complaint of an Apostle, "What I would, that I do not!" In other words, I adopt the good (the law) into the maxim of my will, but this good, which objectively, in its ideal conception (*in thesi*), is an irresistible incentive, is subjectively (*in hypothesi*), when the maxim is to be followed, the weaker (in comparison with inclination)." (6:29)

Kant **not a traditional divine command theorist or a consequentialist** (of the Epicurean, utilitarian, or eudaimonist sort).   "Morality… needs neither the idea of another being above him in order to recognize his duty nor as an incentive anything other than the law itself in order to observe it.…" (6:3)

But **also not a Stoic** – virtue is not its own reward; Kant is clearly focused on the rationality of our hope for appropriate **happiness**, **justice**, or "**fulfillment** of our well-intentioned effort." And in this third version of the proof he explicitly characterizes that hope as stabilizing our "*moralische Entschliessung*." This is not consequentialism, then, but rather *consequence-dependent moral psychology*.

>   A righteous man (like Spinoza) who takes himself to be firmly persuaded that there is no God and… also no future life…does not demand any advantage for himself from his conformity to the moral law, whether in this world or another; rather, he would simply and unselfishly bring about the good to which that holy law directs all his powers. But his strivings (*Bestreben*) have limits…. Deceit, violence, and envy always surround him, even though he is himself honest, peaceable, and benevolent. The other righteous people that he encounters at times will, in spite of all their worthiness to be happy, nevertheless be subject by nature, which pays no respect to that, to all the evils (*Übeln*) of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death, just like all the other animals on earth. It will always remain so until one wide grave engulfs them all together (whether honest or dishonest, here it makes no difference) and hurls them, the very ones who were capable of believing that they were the final purpose (*Endzweck*) of all creation, back into the abyss of purposeless material chaos (*Schlund des zwecklosen Chaos der Materie*) from which they all were drawn. (*Judgment* (1790), 5:452)

When faced with the abyss, the righteous Spinoza has two options: either he will "certainly have to give up his end [i.e. of being righteous] as impossible (*müßte er allerdings als unmöglich aufgeben*)
or "**he will have to accept (*annehmen*) [take on faith], from a practical point of view… the existence of a moral author of the world (*Welturheber*), i.e. of God, from a practical point of view** (*in praktischer Absicht… das Dasein eines moralischen Welturhebers, d.i. Gottes, annehmen*). (5:452)"

So even the righteous Spinoza cannot maintain his resolve without taking on faith something that grounds the hope that, ultimately, justice will prevail.   How much less, then, can the rest of us?

"Theory and Practice" (1793) connects substantial hope to a commitment to real, practical possibility:

"It does not matter how many doubts from history may be raised against my <u>hopes</u>, which, if these doubts were <u>proved</u>, could move me to desist from <u>a task so apparently futile</u>; <u>as long as these doubts cannot be made quite certain</u> I cannot exchange the duty (…) for the rule of prudence (…) not to attempt the undoable." (8: 309)

Laborious step-wise reconstruction:

(1) I ought to do what is morally right. [Premise from independent argument]

(2) For me, it would be *demoralizing* in the first sense (i.e. it would lead to despair and dejection) not to be able to have substantial hope that there is a moral order by which the HG will come about, for that would amount to regarding it as <u>certain</u> that the ultimate history of the world will not be just, no matter what I do. [Empirical premise, conditions on hope]

(3) Such demoralization has an enervating effect on my resolve, and is thus *de-moralizing* in the second sense: it threatens my resolve to perform actions that I take to be morally required. [Empirical premise]

(4) Demoralization or "fragility" of this sort is seriously morally undesirable. [1,2,3]

(5) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage for me in being able to have substantial hope that there is a moral world order that will bring about the HG. [2,3,4]

(6) Substantial hope that *p* requires <u>belief or at least faith</u> that *p* is really, practically possible – i.e., that there are agents or powers in the actual world that can bring it about. (Concepts of "substantial hope" and "real, practical possibility")

(7) The *actual* existence of GFL is part of the only adequate ground of the real practical possibility of the moral world order that will bring about the HG. [Premise]

(8) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage, for me at least, in being able to <u>have belief or at least faith </u>that GFL exists. [5, 6, 7]

(9) Justified belief requires sufficient epistemic reasons. [Kant's evidentialism]

(10) We can have no sufficient epistemic reasons either for or against the existence of GFL. [argument of the Transcendental Dialectic in the first *Critique*]

(11) So, belief in GFL's existence is not justified. [9,10]

(12) Justified *faith* (*Vernunftglaube*) does not require sufficient epistemic reasons; it can instead be based on sufficient pragmatic or moral reasons. [Kant's conception of faith]

(13) Therefore, faith (though not belief) that GFL exists is *prima facie* morally (though not epistemically) justified, for me at least. [8,11,12]

- Advantages:
    - Has an essential role for hope to play.
    - First premise is attractively weaker than that of the second argument. Doesn't say I ought to will the Highest Good but rather just my own virtue.
    - The model is attractively empirical: it starts with the <u>psychological</u> conditions on my hope and my resolve to underwrite the claim that it's rational for me to hope for HG.

- (7) is the lynchpin. Even if we can get to the need for an *actual* ground, why must it be the full-blown omni-omni-omni God?

  - Some people may not need it – they may be able to soldier on even in the face of an amoral universe, perhaps appreciating what Russell called the "tragic beauty of morality."

  - Others may take solace and inspiration from karmic theory or Fichte's "moral order of nature."

  - But some people may need more, even, than the assurance that justice will be done. In order to stabilize resolve, they may need the connection between virtue and happiness to be intended and superintended by something personal, something that cares, something that intervenes in history occasionally to provide guidance and encouragement.
      - They might even <u>need</u> it to be an omni-God, so that the connection is entirely stable.
      - The history of religion suggests that a *lot* of people need something like this.

- This is an intriguing moral-psychological kind of justification for a conclusion regarding what *I* may justifiably take to exist. Kant hints at the "for me, at least" component already in first *Critique*:

  No, the conviction is not logical certainty, and, since it depends on subjective grounds (of moral disposition) I must not even say "It is morally certain that there is a God" etc., but rather "I am morally certain" etc. (A829/B857)

- But isn't this <u>a kind of self-deception or a pernicious form of Feuerbachian wish-fulfillment</u>?

  - No: even for those for whom GFL is morally crucial, Kant is *not* recommending a "wax nose" approach where we can just twist the world to look whatever way we prefer. Remember,

    1. the (moral) justification is **defeasible**
        *the result must be philosophically coherent and also not lead to other moral risks or harms
    2. the result is merely **faith, not belief or knowledge**
    3. the goal is not to feel better but to **receive *essential* moral sustenance**
    4. the issue must be **epistemically ambiguous** (in this case theoretically undecidable)

        - Sidgwick was attracted to Kant's moral argument, but felt some discomfort with respect to this last point when applied to the "future life" of the soul:
            - "Some fifteen years ago, when I was writing my book in Ethics, I was inclined to hold with Kant that we must postulate the existence of the soul in order to effect that harmony of Duty with Happiness which seemed to me indispensable to rational moral life. <u>At any rate, I thought I might provisionally postulate it, while setting out on the serious search for empirical evidence.</u> If I decide that

this search is a failure, shall I finally and decisively make this postulate? Can I consistently with my whole view of truth and method of its attainment? And if I answer 'no' to each of these questions, have I any ethical system at all?"

IV. Upshots and Extensions

- The moral argument is a key place where we see Kant's doctrine of the primacy of the practical at work. "I had to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith" (*Critique,* Bxxx). We have "denied" (i.e. ruled out) knowledge of GFL, but moral-psychological considerations regarding hope and resolve still ground a kind of faith about them.

- Is Kant a <u>pragmatist</u>?

    o No: Knowledge and faith involve different kinds of attitudes. Wrong-kind reasons are not normative for belief but for faith.

    o Complication: But Kant does say in places that "conviction" (*Überzeugung*) is the attitude that plays a role both in epistemic and practical contexts. One is "logical conviction," and this is what we call "belief" and can figure into knowledge (*Wissen*). The other is "practical conviction" – another term for "faith" (*Glaube*).

    o Okay, then maybe Yes: maybe at bottom it is just one kind of attitude, based on different kinds of reasons, in which case Kant is a pragmatist after all.

        ▪ There would be questions here about how the same kind of attitude can be an involuntary response to evidence in epistemic contexts (as Kant says), and a voluntary and subject-relative response to practical considerations in another. Are we really talking about the same psychological kind?

- Is Kant an <u>encroacher</u>?

    o No: again, I think these are different kinds of attitude. Compare: belief vs. faith/acceptance distinction in contemporary phil mind.
    o But even if the same kind of attitude ("conviction") is involved, there is still no encroachment. The epistemic domain has to "make room for faith" by way of being *placed within critical limits*, not by being encroached upon.
    o Practical stakes don't make it harder (or easier) to have knowledge; rather, they can justify faith in contexts where justified belief or knowledge is not in the offing.
    o Given that faith can motivate assertion, it's not the case that knowledge or belief are the norms of assertion. Proper assertion doesn't need to "pass through the doxastic states of the asserter" (Lackey 2007). But it's also not governed by the norm that you only assert what you have reason to believe.

- A **secular application of the moral-psychological argument** that I've been toying with (first sketch in Allais/Callanan volume *Kant on Animals,* Oxford 2020)

- Suppose it's morally crucial for a newly-minted ethical vegan, Vera, to avoid demoralization by sustaining substantial hope that her abstention from Animal-products will make a significant difference to the lives of the animals involved, and/or to the environment.

- What is the best account of the real, practical possibility of Vera making a significant difference in a context where what she buys and orders is extremely unlikely to do so?
    - Keep in mind here the empirical facts that some 80 billion land animals and up to 120 billion sea creatures are harvested each year for our consumption. So that's circa 200 billion animals slaughtered per year, globally.
    - Moreover the North American Meat Institute cites recent CNN and USDA survey data showing that of the approximately 6 percent of North Americans who claim to be vegans or vegetarians, around 66 percent will confess to "having eaten meat *in the past 24 hours*." The Meat Institute's conclusion? 'Bottom line: meat is amazing – and irresistible'.
      (https://www.meatinstitute.org/index.php?ht=d/sp/i/101931/pid/101931)

- In light of these sobering empirical facts, can Vera justifiably have faith that…

    - *Interpersonal Causal Connection:* If I choose to abstain from A-products, my action will **cause** a significant number of other people to abstain, and if I choose to purchase A-products, my action will **cause** a significant number of other people to purchase.
        - No: unless Vera is unwittingly a very serious "influencer," this fails the "evidentially ambiguous" test

- Okay but can Vera justifiably have faith that…

    - *Interpersonal Evidential Connection*: If I choose to abstain from A-products, that is strong **evidence that** a significant number of other people are likely to abstain from A-products, and if I choose to purchase A-products, that is strong **evidence that** a significant number of other people are likely to purchase A-products.
        - Yes, perhaps: if we take "other people" to be distributed very widely over space and time. It's not looking good now, but it might in 100 years.
        - This is a very Kantian thought: good moral reasons are universalizable, i.e. can be recognized as good by all rational agents in relevantly similar situations. And the "cunning of reason" ultimately leads to progress.

- So this would be a moral-psychological argument to prefer an evidential rather than a causal principle in decision theory.
    - Again, the result is *defeasible* moral faith about an *epistemically ambiguous* and perhaps *theoretically undecidable* principle that grounds a *morally essential* kind of hope, for Vera at least.

- There are difficult questions here about whether it is okay to take on faith a principle regarding what counts as epistemic evidence for what. Can we really take on *faith* various epistemic or decision-theoretic principles? I think the example suffices to show, however, that the moral-psychological version of Kant's argument has legs that allow it to run in lots of interesting directions, both metaphysical and otherwise.