Review of “The Idea of Humanity: Anthropology and Anthroponomy in Kant’s Ethics”

Anne Margaret Baxley
Virginia Tech

Kant’s account of “rational faith” is undoubtedly one of the more perplexing aspects of his practical philosophy. While Kant portrays the relation between morality and religious faith in different ways in each of the three Critiques, Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone, as well as several shorter essays from the critical period, he consistently claims that some form of religious commitment is justified, perhaps even demanded, by a morality grounded in pure practical reason. It is unclear, however, what role religious faith could play in an account of morality based on the autonomy of the will; indeed, one might assume that faith would be otiose on Kant’s view, once morality’s authority and motivational force are divorced from all religious ideas and objects. Since Kant’s account of religious faith does not sit easily with other central insights of his critical philosophy, historical and contemporary commentators have largely viewed Kant’s attempt to derive a rational faith as the product of personal attachment to the simple faith of his parents or, as Heine famously joked, an attempt to comfort his old servant Lampe.

David G. Sussman makes a convincing case that such a dismissive treatment toward Kant’s reflections on religious ideas has come at a cost, especially when we turn to Kant’s Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone (1793), where religious faith is “too deeply intertwined with Kant’s fundamental accounts of agency, morality, and human reason to be dismissed as a mere excrescence of sentimentality” (p. xiii). For those interested in Kant’s moral theory, Religion would appear to be a central text, for it contains some of Kant’s most sustained discussions of the basic structure of the human will and choice, the nature of moral evil and moral corruption, and the need for atonement and moral reconstruction. In Sussman’s analysis, the importance of Kant’s philosophy of religion to his moral philosophy has been ignored because of what Sussman (delightfully) identifies as “an anglophone tendency to see Kant as part of the history of modern liberalism, in a trajectory that begins with Locke and reaches its apex perhaps with Rawls” (p. xii). Although this familiar story holds some truth, it also misleads insofar as it encourages us to ignore certain features of Kant’s thought that are essential to his moral and political vision. The Idea of Humanity attempts to correct this standard picture by systematically investigating the place of Kant’s Religion in his practical philosophy as a whole. Whereas others have understood Kant’s interest in religious ideas as a vestige of his Protestant upbringing, Sussman (provocatively) portrays Kant’s philosophy of religion as both a natural development, and profound revision, of his fundamental conception of the human will and morality’s place in it. On the rich picture of Kant’s account of the ethical life Sussman sets out, Kant’s ethics still centers upon the notion of autonomy; however, autonomy is now represented as something that cannot be meaningfully understood apart from the particular
ways it is realized in distinctively human psyches and distinctively human communities.

The following summary of chapters indicates the wealth of riches *The Idea of Humanity* boasts. After a brief introductory chapter, Chapter Two examines Kant’s two main arguments for the unconditional authority of the moral law, contained in the final section of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785) and the Analytic of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1787). Sussman believes Kant ultimately recognized that the *Groundwork’s* attempt to vindicate the authority of the morality by appeal to a non-moral, conceptually prior sense of freedom was circular and, as a result, adopted a radically new strategy of defending the moral law in the second *Critique*, where he invokes the authority of the moral law itself as the basis of a deduction of human freedom. After criticizing some of the most prominent contemporary interpretations of Kant’s “Fact of Reason” doctrine (advanced by Henry Allison, Karl Ameriks, Lewis White Beck, and John Rawls) on the grounds that they fail both as an adequate interpretation of Kant’s text and as a defense of the authority of the moral law, Sussman sets out an alternative reconstruction of Kant’s argument for morality’s authority in meticulous detail in Chapter Three. On this novel reading, Kant’s account of the moral law’s status as a Fact of Reason represents a transcendental version of what Christine Korsgaard has called a “reflective endorsement” strategy of justification (Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*, 49-89). Kant’s argument, as Sussman sees it, aims to neutralize the motivations for skepticism (rather than directly proving the authority of the moral law) by showing that there is no coherent standpoint within the practical realm from which the authority of morality can be called into question, nor could any external standpoint be relevant to the question of morality’s authority – this authority is even a conceptual precondition of any coherent kind of self-love, such that challenges based in self-love ultimately undermine their own intelligibility. Sussman makes a persuasive case for the interesting claim that Kant’s Fact of Reason argument is circular, but not viciously so – even if the authority of the moral law cannot be reduced to or explained in terms that are conceptually prior or independent of it, this law has all the justification we should demand of it, once we realize precisely what sort of justification can be relevant to the question of its authority.

Chapter Four investigates Kant’s various arguments for rational faith. In his struggles to articulate a philosophical conception of faith, Kant, according to Sussman, aims to express an important insight within the confines of a philosophical vocabulary that is simply inadequate to the task. Since Kant’s insight about faith is not primarily addressed to either theoretical or practical judgment, the language of such judgments distorts what Kant really intends by the concept of faith. Faith turns out to be not essentially a matter of the understanding or of the will, but instead a matter of the imagination. Such faith is best understood as fundamentally a matter of trust, an attitude that turns out to be quite different from either belief or intention, even if it bears resemblances to both. Sussman maintains that trust provides the best expression of Kant’s account of moral faith and allows us to see how such an account of faith is compatible with the central commitments of his practical philosophy.

Chapters Five and Six together turn to the issue of the limitations of human rationality and explore how Kant’s moral psychology adapts to accommodate these considerations, which are in part based in his views on empirical psychology, or anthropology. (Hence that term in the subtitle of *The Idea of Humanity*. Anthroponomy, by contrast, Kant understands as the autonomy that humanity as a whole possesses with respect to its individual members). In an excellent discussion of Kant’s
developing views on the possibility of weakness of will (one stage in which the bare propensity to evil is manifest), Sussman argues that, on the account of non-moral motivation Kant develops in *Religion*, passion, a form of inclination pretending to have the authority of reason, makes more radical kinds of weakness of will possible, because passion makes it possible for inclination (independent of duty) to appear as possessing the justificatory force of reason.

Chapter Seven considers the account of the nature of repentance and the appeal to God’s grace at the heart of Kant’s *Religion*. Sussman claims that grace is essentially the counterpart of Kant’s doctrine of radical evil. As creatures that must grow into our autonomy, we always begin from some condition in which our passions dominate choice, a condition that can only be deemed evil. From the perspective of ourselves considered as empirical agents, we never at any given point in time have a determinate will, but can only be a mass of conflicting passions. Insofar as we do attribute a will to ourselves, Sussman explains, we have to look beyond our present constitution, to a future development of ourselves both individually and as a species – this trust in the future trajectory of our own development and the development of humanity as a whole is a form of trust that Kant represents as a receptivity to grace. This final chapter concludes with a brief but suggestive discussion of the ways in which the account of human character Sussman finds in Kant’s philosophy of religion might inform the application of the Categorical Imperative to particular cases.

The *Idea of Humanity* is undeniably an impressive book. It demonstrates a remarkable command of both the Kant corpus and the secondary literature on Kant’s practical philosophy as well as an enviable knowledge of a broad range of important figures in the history of philosophy (Aristotle, Butler, Rousseau, Hegel, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, Wittgenstein) and the relevant contemporary debates in value theory. Sussman consistently gives us imaginative, constructive readings of Kant’s positions that are plausible and loyal to Kant’s words. He makes a strong case for the claims that Kant’s moral philosophy cannot be fully understood independently of his philosophy of religion and that, in that philosophy of religion, Kant is not merely rehabilitating paradoxical concepts of Christian theology that have no place in the critical philosophy, but rather expanding and revising his views on rational agency in light of the special limitations and complexities of human psychology he came to recognize. Those interested in Kant’s practical philosophy and the philosophy of religion will without question benefit from a careful reading of this important work in Kant scholarship.

Anne Margaret Baxley
Virginia Tech

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