

Reason Reborn: Pietistic Motifs in Kant's Moral Philosophy

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The influence of Pietism on Kant's criticism, especially on his moral philosophy, is a question of lasting discomfort.¹ All authors, biographers and commentators alike, inevitably start by mentioning the Pietistic background of Kant's upbringing, stressing how deeply he was marked by his beloved mother Anna Regina, a devout Pietist.² Similarly, it is usually remarked that in the 1730s, at the time of Kant's childhood, Königsberg was a major stronghold of Pietism; that Franz Albert Schultz, the leading figure of Königsberg Pietism, was a regular guest in the Kant household, and personally intervened in support of his education; and lastly, that Kant attended the *Collegium Fridericianum*, an educational institution that followed the same principles as the *Franckesche Anstalten* in Halle where everything was organized under the

¹ This article relies on the material published in the paper "Moralnost ponovnega rojstva," *Stati inu obstati*, Nr. 26 (2017), pp. 243–69. Kant's works (Kant 1922—) are cited according to the *Akademie-Ausgabe* (AA), save for the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*KrV*) which is cited according to the pagination of the first (A) and second (B) editions. Unless indicated otherwise, the translations are taken from the *Cambridge Edition* of Kant's works.

² It was because of the example she set that Kant always felt a deep respect for the moral attitude of the Pietists. According to Rink, Kant commented: "One may say as many bad things about Pietism as one will. Enough already. The people who took it seriously were characterized by a certain kind of dignity. They possessed the highest qualities that a human being can possess. [...] In short, even a mere observer was bound to feel respect" (Rink 1805, pp. 13–14; my translation).

sign of Pietistic thought.³ In short: because in his youth Kant was virtually immersed in a Pietistic environment, it is generally acknowledged that Pietism was bound to leave deep traces in his way of thinking, in his philosophy in general, and in the field of morality in particular.

But once an attempt is made to specify this essentially tautological conclusion, divergences arise and calls for restraint are usually voiced. If Paulsen, the author of *Kant, Philosopher of Protestantism*, concluded that Kant's "morality is nothing but the translation of this Christianity," which he had grown familiar with as a child, "from the religious language to the language of reflection" (Paulsen 1902, p. 339), Kant's more recent biographer claims, on the contrary, that it is "absurd" to talk about any positive influence of Pietism in this regard:

If Pietism had any influence on Kant at all, then it was a negative one. It may have been precisely because he was acquainted with Pietism that he came to reject almost completely any role of feeling in morality. If anything, Kant's moral and religious views betray a definite anti-Pietistic bias. (Kuehn 2001, p. 54)⁴

Two recent monographs devoted to the problem of Pietistic influence on Kant, *Kant and Pietism* (Yamashita 2000) and *Freedom Reborn* (Szyrwińska 2017), fail to bring us any closer to a definitive conclusion. The question of Kant's reception of Pietism thus "continues to be regarded as open" (Szyrwińska 2017, p. 2).

³ For a more detailed presentation of Kant's college and his schooling, see Klemme 1994. The college motto read: *Pietas fundamentum omnium virtutum*.

⁴ This assessment, too, can be supported by Kant's own words, for instance by his judgment in *The Contest of Faculties* (AA 7, p. 57): "But it was not contempt for piety that made 'Pietist' a sect name (and a certain contempt is always connected with such a name); it was rather the Pietists' fantastic and—despite all their show of humility—proud claim to be marked out as supernaturally favored children of heaven, even though their conduct, as far as we can see, is not the least better in moral terms than that of the people they call children of the world."

There are several reasons that can help to explain this situation. First, Pietism was an extremely diverse movement that established a complex network of alliances and oppositions in the German space and beyond. Any general definition of it thus soon turns out to be misleading.⁵ It is probably appropriate to describe it as a repetition of Luther's gesture within the Protestant movement, when members of the reformed Church—disappointed with ossification and hypocrisy that had spread through the new institutions—emphasized the importance of personal experience, true belief, and active manifestation of faith in everyday life. However, since Pietism emerged as a countermovement that lacked a well-defined doctrinal core, depending on circumstances it was bound to produce different, even contrary manifestations.

Indeed, it suffices to compare the Halle and the Moravian varieties of Pietism—regardless of their geographical and historical proximity—to notice the immense discrepancies both in their basic attitudes, and in the organization of everyday life. Similarly, it is common to treat the Enlightenment and Pietism as contrary intellectual movements that usually took opposing views in philosophical disputes, in particular on the issue of free will that led to the notorious controversy between Wolff and Lange.⁶ Yet, in spite of that, Wolff's and Pietists' teachings also happened to coincide on numerous points. This conciliatory tendency was especially strong in Königsberg Pietism: both Franz Albert Schultz and Martin Knutzen, Kant's professor at the Albertina, strived to produce some kind of synthesis of the two schools of thought.⁷

⁵ For a brief presentation of the main traits and leading figures of Pietism, see Schmidt 1972; Beyreuther 1978; and Lindberg 2005.

⁶ For a closer examination of the controversy, see "Libertà e fatalismo. Sulla polemica tra Joachim Lange e Christian Wolff" (Bianco 1992, pp. 31–84). The controversy was famously put to rest by the King's decree ordering Wolff, under the threat of capital punishment, to leave Prussian territories within forty-eight hours.

⁷ Wolff allegedly said: "If there is anyone at all who did understand me, then it is *Schultz* in Königsberg" (Erdmann 1876, p. 26).

For this reason, it is once again very difficult to tell what exactly should be taken as a distinctive mark of Pietism, and to what extent the presence of certain claims betrays its specific influence.

Furthermore, we have to consider the fact that Kant's philosophy, too, was neither a homogenous nor a stable formation. Of course, Kant had to go a long and uneven way in order to finally formulate his critical position, and on this journey he was bound to defend many theses that, in retrospect, sound completely un-Kantian. What is more important, however, is that this process of constant transformation continued even after the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and indeed until Kant's death. For this reason, it is hardly possible to speak of a unified doctrine in Kant, not only with regards to the proper relationship between constitutive fields of critical philosophy, but also within each of the fields themselves.

When it comes to Kant's moral philosophy, the situation is no different. It can be shown that at the time of publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in 1781, and even for some years after that, Kant defended a highly elaborate theory of morality that derived the existence of the unconditional obligation from the necessary conditions of unity of the subject of rational action, while placing the incentive of moral action in the pursuit of happiness as a supposedly necessary demand of any rational and finite being. The radical rupture which still remains largely unexplained, in particular because its basic tenet was rather anticritical, followed around 1784, when in addition to the notion of autonomy Kant introduced also the concept of pure will, and started to treat the moral subject as a pure rational being *separated* from anything belonging to sensibility.⁸ However, the process of transformation did not stop there. While in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) Kant basically

⁸ For a closer examination of Kant's moral theory in the period of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, including the assessment of possible reasons that brought about the rupture, see Kobe 2015.

tried to establish the possibility of a moral deed, in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1792) his exposition was focused around the problem of evil in a way that is strictly speaking unthinkable within the conceptual framework of his critical philosophy.⁹ Once again, this internal dynamism makes it hard to determine what exactly we are talking about when we speak of Kant's notion of morality. Relying on selective use of his statements, fairly diverse versions of his moral philosophy can be presented.

Finally, the question of the influence of Pietism on Kant faces a certain methodological difficulty, as it is far from clear in which area and in what way such influence should manifest itself. As long as Pietism is treated as a religious movement, the interaction seems to be categorically excluded. As a philosopher, Kant always insisted on autonomy of reason and denied that transcendence could play any founding role in matters of morality. But the influence of Pietism was not confined to the religious realm. It is well established, for instance, that by insisting on careful self-examination, and by actively inducing strong emotional states, Pietism made a lasting impact on the German vocabulary for expressing psychological phenomena. But above all, we must take into account the fact that in the Pietist environment a series of topics, and a number of habits of thought were formed that, embedded in everyday life, progressively lost their theological reference.¹⁰ This aspect is even more important in Kant's case, because, as I will claim, he displayed a similar modular style of thinking. In Kant, one can often observe how a certain complex of

⁹ A similar thesis defending a further development of Kant's moral philosophy *after* the *Groundwork* was recently proposed by Kervégan: "Everything happens so as if, from 1785 to 1793, the center of gravity of practical philosophy had *moved from the will* [volonté, i.e. Wille] *to the choice* [arbitre, i.e. Willkür]" (Kervégan 2015, p. 56).

¹⁰ This was stressed by Bianco in his path-breaking *Motivi pietistici nel pensiero dell'età di Goethe* (Bianco 1976). Part two, dedicated to Zinzendorf, regrettably was never published.

thoughts is not bound to its original content, but frees itself from its initial context and is then used and reused for other purposes. A suitable illustration is provided by paralogsms: Kant had already made use of the topic of an unavoidable error in reasoning that is discernable only from a very particular standpoint in his first published essay; in different stages of his intellectual development, he then exploited the topic for various other purposes, until finally managing to refute rational psychology by “discovering” that this was the error upon which the entire project of rational psychology had been built.

Our general thesis is that the influence of Pietism on Kant is to be traced at this modular level, and that in this respect Pietism indeed left marked traces in his moral philosophy. In order to show this, we will first indicate what, at least for our present purpose, constitutes the typical features of Pietist thought. Next, we will demonstrate the presence of Pietistic motifs both in Kant’s philosophy of religion and in his moral philosophy. Here, we won’t pretend to be drawing up an exhaustive list on the topic; however, we will try to protect ourselves against the objection of an arbitrary interpretation that takes every resemblance as sufficient proof of effective influence. Thus, we will limit ourselves only to those motifs that both display a strong resemblance to Pietism and clash with Kant’s general theory. Only after having determined that a certain complex of thoughts is somehow out of place in the Kantian system, while fitting neatly into the Pietist mental world, will I venture the assertion that it is in fact possible to speak of the influence of Pietism.

I

Pietism is a very diverse formation which is not easily reduced to a common denominator. Nevertheless, one can agree with Bruno Bianco, who (at least at the theological level) takes its “central motif” to be that of

“rebirth” (*Wiedergeburt*) of a man who, justified by faith, manifests in the fruits of his labors his participation in the divine life in accordance with the “justification” (*Rechtfertigung*). (Bianco 1976, p. 18)

The motif of rebirth, or new birth, has evolved as a radicalization of a Pauline topic that was already used by Luther in order to formulate his views on justification. With a generous degree of simplification, we can say that according to Catholic dogma man can be justified by his works. By accepting baptism, man is freed from the inherited burden of mortal sin, and can start afresh, meaning that salvation lies, at least in principle, in his hands. It turns out, of course, that the task is too demanding for this worldly creature to be able to perform it on his own. Consequently, help from above is required, especially in the form of the sacrament of forgiveness. Nevertheless, there is still some fundamental continuity between the two worlds: the greater the sum of good works over bad works, the greater the probability that the bliss of eternal life will be bestowed upon someone. As you lived in this world, one could say, so you shall live in the next.

For Luther, such a conception was unacceptable. In his view, sin is the ontological condition of man after the fall from God, so that forgiveness of sins is inevitably futile; it is as if trying to cure a person by simply erasing the visible marks of her illness. Salvation is therefore always undeserved. Indeed, the mere suggestion of bringing God's actions within the borders of our understanding is already a sign of disrespectful pretense. On the basis of such considerations, Luther restored the distinction between law and faith and, in the footsteps of Paul, affirmed that we can only be justified by faith: “For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom 3:28). Works in themselves are irrelevant; their true value within the economy of salvation is determined by and grounded in their relation to faith: if performed out of faith, works are considered good regardless of their consequences; conversely, if performed without faith,

they bring no merit as regards salvation, irrespective of their humanly perceived goodness. What counts, is *sola fides*. Faith is a gift of God, however, which it is impossible to deserve. It is a proof of His presence, indeed, a miracle that occurs in us without a sufficient reason—strictly speaking without any reason—as an irruption of an entirely other order. The only thing we can do is accept this unmerited gift and remain faithful to it.¹¹

Because sin stands for the ontological condition of man, the receiving of faith entails a complete reversal of man's inner economy. In describing this event, Paul already referred to the death of the old and the resurrection of the new man (see Rom 6:5). Drawing on this metaphor, a figure of rebirth took shape in Pietism, and Spener, the informal founder of the movement, made it the central motif of the new piety. In the sermon *On the Necessity of Rebirth* he says:

If a subject-matter inherent in our Christianity is needed, it is certainly the subject-matter of rebirth, in which conversion, justification, and the beginning of our salvation coincide, and which forms the foundation of all other salvation, or the fountain from which everything good that is and that happens to us in our entire life must spring. Therefore, anyone who understands it correctly, certainly understands correctly the whole of Christianity, too. (Quoted in Jannasch & Schmidt 1965, pp. 44–45)

In Spener, rebirth was understood as a real event, accompanied by all the signs of physical birth: it “comes from above,” man “does not do anything”; the event itself is violent and laborious; in it, “something comes into being that has not existed before”; and just as once we were the children of our parents, we have now

¹¹ The gift of faith bears a strong resemblance to the logic of an event and to subsequent subjectivization, as Badiou describes it. This is no coincidence. In this regard, a clear line can be established leading from Badiou back to Heidegger, and from Heidegger further back to Luther and Saint Paul.

“become children of God.” By being born again, we have thus not only become different, but rather another person, and even though a view from the outside perceives no manifest change, “the inside, the meaning, and the attitude have been entirely transformed.” Because there is no direct correlation between the inner attitude and the outside appearance, one would expect that the mere fact of rebirth does not affect the outer configuration of works. However, it seemed natural to Spener—as to Luther before him—that the inner attitude should in a certain way also find an outward expression. Hence the idea that those reborn will confirm the fact of their salvation by constantly increasing their perfection through good deeds, that is, by living in ever greater conformity with God’s law. The good works, once the active cause of salvation, thus turn into outer manifestations of it.

For Spener, it was the structure of rebirth that was important, whereas its inner dynamics were left very much open. His pupil August Hermann Francke, however, understood rebirth as a violent physical event that took place in a precisely determined space and time. Francke prescribed a standard choreography consisting of four steps, which he presumably derived from his personal experience, which always played a significant role in Pietism (see Bianco 1976, p. 21). First, a deep personal crisis occurs, leading the sinner, usually awakened by a verse from the Bible, to realize the depth of his corruption and to fall into despair. After the *struggle of contrition* (*Bußkampf*), which varies in duration, there follows a firm *decision* or *resolve* (*Entschluß*) to leave the old life of sin behind, and to devote oneself completely to God. Only after man does everything that is in his power, the repentant sinner is penetrated by the grace of God, bringing to him a peace of mind and the unshakable certainty of God’s presence. This *eruption* or *breakthrough of grace* (*Durchbruch der Gnade*) corresponds to the moment of rebirth. In the fourth and final step, a new life follows for the reborn. The renewed life, however, does not consist in peaceful enjoyment of the certainty of salvation,

but rather forms a path of constant *self-examination* (*Selbstprüfung*), with the person continually scrutinizing her thoughts and inclinations, confirming her certainty of being in God's favor by steadily growing in moral perfection.

The fact that Francke was an exceptionally successful pedagogue, who founded numerous educational institutions, helped greatly in spreading his model of rebirth across the Prussian territories. Among many to attend an institution organized in accordance with Francke's principles was Emanuel Kant. To be sure, Kant did not retain warm memories of *Collegium Fridericianum*. It is certain, however, that he grew well acquainted with the four-stroke sequence of Francke's model, which could be summed up as follows: Humiliation—Decision—Rebirth—Moral Growth. As we shall see, this model, combined with the opposition between the inner and the outer man, which is congruent enough with Kant's duality of the intelligible and the empirical, left clear traces in his philosophy.

II

In April 1792, Kant published the essay "On the Radical Evil in Human Nature" that later became part of in his *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In the essay, he developed his views on religion by drawing heavily upon moral considerations, so that it may well appear that, for him, religion was nothing but an extension of morality. But, as Bruch remarked, rather the opposite was the case: "it is on the basis of Christian concepts and schemes that Kant structured his fundamental moral concepts" (Bruch 1968, p. 80).

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant denied any constitutive role to the concept of good, instead preferring to build the realm of morality upon the existence of unconditional bindingness. The concept of good was declared in itself empty. In a

move that ran strictly parallel to the first Copernican Turn, Kant maintained that the good was first brought about and determined as a consequence of acting upon the moral law. Similarly, within the conceptual framework of the *Critique of Practical Reason* evil was just a failure to fulfill the requirements of reason—a failure that man as a finite rational being at any rate is unable to entirely avoid. In direct opposition to this model (but, for that matter, in accordance with the common Lutheran belief), in *Religion* Kant states that good and evil always presuppose a respective maxim that, in turn, has to be grounded in an act of freedom: “[F]reedom of the power of choice has the characteristic, entirely peculiar to it, that it cannot be determined to action through any incentive *except so far as the human being has incorporated it into his maxim*” (AA 6, pp. 23–24). In order to perform an evil deed, the human being must now, in a sense, first choose to be evil.¹²

How is such a choice possible? To answer this question, Kant first pointed out that, as a rational yet finite being, man is simultaneously subjected to two principles, namely to the principle of morality and to the principle of happiness (or of love and self-love), which inevitably raises the question of their respective hierarchy. But above all, Kant developed the concept of the primordial “intelligible deed” (AA 6, p. 31), defined as primordial in the sense of supposedly having taken place outside any temporal condition, before the beginning of time, when the subject had freely determined his intelligible character, giving priority to the one principle over the other. It would be only rational to expect that the subject preferred the principle of morality. However, because Kant thought evil was not only real but constituted the natural condition of man, he was bound to argue that in our

¹² See AA 6, p. 32: “In view of what has been said above, the statement, ‘The human being is *evil*, cannot mean anything else than that he is conscious of the moral law and yet has incorporated into his maxim the (occasional) deviation from it.” These two references were widely exploited by Allison who, on their basis, formulated the so-called “incorporation thesis”; see Allison 1996, p. 130.

transcendental past we had, inexplicably, given preference to the principle of happiness. Kant thus developed a highly paradoxical view that in that decisive moment of choice when we truly had all the freedom, because what was at stake was the original determination of our intelligible character as such, we, as it were, blew it; and that now that we possess a clear consciousness of the moral law, and thus should be capable of doing something, we are simply powerless, because from the moral point of view every action of ours is a mere consequence of that fundamental choice.

To be sure, such a conception is rather odd for Kant and, in my view, it is very difficult, strictly speaking impossible, to integrate it into his critical system. However, I will not tarry with the question of the true source of evil here. In the end, I can simply consider it a price that Kant had to pay in order to venture into the realm of religion in the first place. It is more interesting to note that this issue by no means exhausts all of the theoretical surprises. Kant allowed for “the possibility” of amending this self-inflicted propensity to evil in our nature, for if reason demands “that we *ought* to become better human beings,” i.e. that we ought to obey the moral law, “we must also be capable of it” (AA 6, p. 45). How? This

cannot be effected through gradual *reform*, but must rather be effected through a *revolution* in the disposition of the human being (a transition to the maxim of holiness of disposition). And so a “new man” can come about only through a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation (John, 3:5; compare with Genesis, 1:2) and a change of heart. (AA 6, p. 47)

Kant further notes:

If by single and unalterable decision [Entschließung] a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims by which he was an evil human being (and thereby puts on a “new man”), he is to this extent, by principle and attitude of mind, a subject receptive to the good; but he is a good human being only in incessant laboring and

becoming, i.e. he can hope—in view of the purity of the principle he has adopted as the supreme maxim of his power of choice, and in view of the stability of this principle—to find himself upon the good (though narrow) path of constant *progress* from bad to better. (AA 6, p. 48)

Here, no additional proof is needed to assert that the motif of unalterable decision followed by a gradual and steady moral growth is clearly rooted in the Pietistic model. The explicit reference to “rebirth” (*Wiedergeburt*) makes this obvious. It is significant, however, that this time the motif in question is in direct contradiction with Kant’s ontology as developed in the process of resolving the third antinomy in the first *Critique*. Because the intelligible character is by its very notion outside time, and remains the same through all of the alterations of empirical character (*KrV*, B 854/A 556), it is simply *contradictory* to claim that the intelligible character could be subject to change—just as it would be contradictory for a triangle to alter its essence and become a square. As with every thing noumenal, the intelligible character cannot but be what it is.

Be it as it may, we are bound to conclude that here Kant was obviously prepared to assume something that is not only inconsistent with his moral philosophy, but also openly contradicts his critical ontology, just so that he could include the motif of rebirth.¹³ It is hard to imagine a better confirmation of strong Pietistic influence on Kant’s thought.

The intrusion of the motif of rebirth in the *Religion* is not a fleeting occurrence. This is amply illustrated by Kant’s reasoning in *The Contest of Faculties*. Discussing the conflict between the

¹³ Bruch arrived at a similar conclusion: “The first question to raise is the possibility of conversion, a possibility that can be contested both from the moral (Does the fallen man have the power to stand up again?) and from the metaphysical point of view (Is the very structure of conversion not in contradiction with the principles of the Kantian system?)” (Bruch 1968, p. 84).

philosophical and theological faculties, Kant first asks the question, how could Christianity really become “present in the hearts of human beings” (AA 7, p. 54)? This then leads him to the question: “how is rebirth (resulting from a conversion by which one becomes an other, new man) possible” (AA 7, p. 54)? Considering the fact that people tend to conflate the “supersensible” and the “supernatural,” there are, according to Kant, but two possible solutions to the problem of “the valiant Spener”:

I maintain that [...] we can predict a priori that people [...] must inevitably divide into sects over this problem. Indeed, I maintain that this division is the only one that entitles us to speak of two different religious sects. (AA 7, p. 54)

According to one hypothesis, man is by nature corrupt and incapable of converting on his own. To this end, therefore, “a supernatural operation [...], a breaking and crushing of the heart in *repentance*, a grief [...] bordering on despair” is needed. Once the “breakthrough [*Durchbruch*]” has taken place, “the purer metal of the *reborn* gleams through the dross, which surrounds but does not contaminate it,” so that one can now conduct a life that is pleasing to God. Here, “the radical change [...] begins with a *miracle*” and ends with what would be considered natural and rational. Contrary to this, the other view maintains that the sinful man takes “the first step” towards his improvement “quite naturally, by his *reason*; for as reason holds before him, in the moral law, the mirror in which he sees his guilt, this leads him, using his moral disposition to the good, to decide [*Entschließung*] that from now on he will make the law his maxim.” If conversion is an act of reason itself, according to this hypothesis it is “the carrying out of this resolution” that constitutes “a *miracle*,” since a human being is “naturally incapable” of persevering in this resolution and to “advance constantly in goodness.” In order to achieve this, he needs “nothing less than the feeling of supernatural communion with a heavenly spirit and even continuous awareness of intercourse with it” (AA 7, p. 56).

In short, according to Kant there are only two possible trajectories of rebirth. The human being is either so utterly corrupt that she can only be born again upon the intervention of heavenly grace, although from then on she is capable of persisting in goodness on her own; or the human being can be reborn completely by herself, relying on her reason alone, but then she needs divine support in order to persevere on this path. If the first version begins with a miracle and continues as nature, the other is triggered as a natural event and ends in a miracle.

According to Kant, this difference in the conception of conversion can be derived completely “a priori,” without relying on historical considerations. Still, it may be of significance that this a priori distinction corresponds precisely to “the Spener-Francke and the Moravian-Zinzendorf difference of sects” (AA 7, p. 55), which at the time constituted the two most prominent varieties of the Pietist movement. Even if this lucky coincidence were not interpreted as evidence of Pietistic influence, it would still testify to Kant’s view of the intimate relation between the requirements of pure reason, on the one hand, and the empirical reality of Pietism, on the other. As we shall see, this intimacy extends beyond Kant’s philosophy of religion.

III

The relation of Kant’s moral philosophy to Pietism is ambiguous. Judged on its principles alone, it would be difficult to find a system that is more clearly opposed to every religious, and thus also Pietistic, ethics than Kant’s morality of pure reason. Kant initially assumed nothing but the fact of reason, and on this ground alone, without any additional considerations that would refer to human nature or traditional notions about what is considered “good” and “proper,” he tried to establish the existence of unconditional obligations that bind any finite rational being as such. The decisive operation in his derivation of morality was performed by

the concept of autonomy of reason, i.e. the thesis that reason is, in its very essence, sovereign, and that it recognizes only the laws given to it by itself. In this manner, it became impossible to derive moral rules from the notion of a perfect being, and to treat them as God's laws, as was the case with the Pietist Crusius, for example.¹⁴ In order to establish morality, no God was needed. Moreover, as Kant explained in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the idea of God could even act as an obstacle to its realization. For if something that is morally commanded happens to be performed for the wrong reasons, for instance, out of fear of punishment in the afterlife, the deed automatically turns into a manifestation of heteronomy, and loses all its moral merit.¹⁵ In this respect, Kant's moral subject is rather opposed to positive religion.

But, on the other hand, when we look at the formal features of Kant's notion of morality, we can hardly avoid the impression of a strange affinity to Pietism. True, Kant builds the edifice of morality upon the law of universal and anonymous reason. This law, however, commands with such inflexible relentlessness that to a subject it must appear as an alien and oppressive agency. It is for this reason that Schiller blames Kant for the monastic disposition of morality repressing natural human inclinations and driving all the graces out (see Schiller 1902, p. 205). In other words, and this is interesting, Schiller addresses Kant's account with the very same reproach that Kant once addressed to Francke's Pietism.

The structural affinity does not stop there, however. According to Kant, the moral value of an action is not determined by its

¹⁴ See, for instance, Crusius 1744, p. 33 (§ 26): "*The morally good* is what is in accordance with God's moral purposes [...], that is, with his laws."

¹⁵ I have to admit that this is not the only possible reading of Kant's notion of morality. However, on several occasions Kant made definitive claims that for a deed to be considered moral implies that it must be performed exclusively on moral grounds; and in the period between the publication of *Groundwork* and approximately 1790, this position was closely related to the role of moral feeling. For a more detailed presentation of the argument, see Kobe 2008, pp. 99ff.

outer appearance, for instance by the effects brought about in the phenomenal world, but rather by the subject's intention,¹⁶ and in the final analysis by the question of what figured as the determining ground of the will. If an action was performed out of the respect for the moral law, if its incentive was moral feeling, then the action was morally good, whereas otherwise it would be at best morally neutral. This requirement considerably complicates the evaluation of the moral worth of an action. Because other subjects can only see the consequences, which are irrelevant in this respect, but cannot observe the maxim, they can never really know whether the action in question was morally good. Moreover, this knowledge also remains out of reach for the subject of action, for she can never positively ascertain that no pathological inclination played a causally determining role in it. Thus, Kant developed a system of morality in which the moral worth of an action is not susceptible to empirical verification, and in which even the moral subject has no insight into her own morality.

For a system based on reason, this is definitely strange. However, once respect is replaced with faith, and morality with justification, it becomes apparent that Kant's conception of true morality almost seamlessly coincides with the problem of justification by faith characteristic of Protestants in general and of Pietists in particular.¹⁷ Just as for Pietists works do not count unless

¹⁶ Paradigmatic formulations of this point can be found in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*: "A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes, [...] but only because of its volition, that is, it is good in itself [...]. Even if, by special disfavor of fortune or by the niggardly provision of a stepmotherly nature, this will should wholly lack the capacity to carry out its purpose [...], then, like a jewel, it would still shine by itself, as something that has its full worth in itself. Usefulness or fruitlessness can neither add anything to this worth nor take anything away from it" (AA 4, p. 394).

¹⁷ Kant had already drawn an analogous connection between morality and justification in his precritical lectures on moral philosophy: "But now ethics tells us to act from a good disposition. [...] God desires, not the action, but the heart. Heart is the principium of moral disposition" (AA 27, p. 274).

they are performed in faith, so for Kant the decisive question is that of the determining ground of action; and just as for Pietists the subject can never be entirely certain of her salvation, so for Kant it is not entirely clear that in the whole history of mankind a single morally good deed was ever performed.¹⁸ Anyone who claims to be morally good, or even to have performed a single good deed, claims something that cannot be known.¹⁹ In view of such considerations it is possible to understand the position of those commentators who see in Kant's morality at least a partial translation of Protestant religiousness into the language of reflection, whereby the place of God's law is occupied by an equally inflexible and impenetrable law of pure reason.

However, as we already noted, such an agreement is by itself not yet proof, but only warrants the conclusion that both Pietism and critical philosophy draw from the same source, and that they both stress the importance of the subjective moment. There are, I propose, two specific arguments, namely the genesis of moral feeling and the postulate of the immortality of the soul, that compel us to think that Kant actually borrowed some elements of his moral philosophy from Pietistic thought. Without this assumption, it is almost impossible to explain their presence in Kant's system.

Let us begin with moral feeling. The structural place of moral feeling in Kant's system was by no means stable. Under the influence of English theory of moral sense, Kant initially treated

¹⁸ "In fact, it is absolutely impossible by means of experience to make out with complete certainty a single case in which the maxim of an action otherwise in conformity with duty rested simply on moral grounds and on the representation of one's duty" (AA 4, p. 407). And similarly: "Perhaps no one has ever performed quite unselfishly (without admixture of other incentives) the duty he cognizes and also reveres; perhaps no one will ever succeed in doing so, however hard he tries" (AA 8, pp. 284–85).

¹⁹ "I readily grant that no one can become aware with certainty of *having performed his duty* quite unselfishly" (AA 8, p. 284).

it as a faculty for perceiving good and evil. In the 1770s, when unconditional bindingness had gained a definitive foundation in reason, moral feeling acted mainly as a kind of bridge between the intelligible and the sensible, that is, its function was to provide the principles of pure reason with the means of realizing themselves in the empirical world. It became the *principium executionis* of the moral deed. Kant was well aware of the paradoxical character of this intermediate entity, which had one foot in the noumenal and the other in the phenomenal world, and contented himself with the remark that this was as it was. In *Reflection* 6860, presumably written in the second half of the 1770s, he contends:

We cannot have any concept of how a mere form of actions could have the power of an incentive. Yet this must be if morality is to obtain, and experience confirms it. (AA 19, p. 183)

In the lectures from about the same period, he similarly described the problem of the genesis of moral feeling as the “philosophers’ stone,” that is to say, as an impossible task similar to that of turning lead into gold.²⁰ Kant held on to this view in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Even in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, after already abandoning the theory of morality as one’s worthiness to be happy, Kant still claimed that “it is quite impossible to see [...] how a mere thought which itself contains nothing sensible produces a feeling of pleasure or displeasure” (AA 4, p. 460), and that it “is quite beyond the capacity of any human reason to explain *how* pure reason [...] can be of itself practical,” that is, “how the mere *principle of the universal validity* [...] can of itself furnish an incentive” (AA 4, p. 461).

²⁰ “The moral feeling is a capacity for being affected by a moral judgment. When I judge by understanding that the action is morally good, I am still very far from doing this action of which I have so judged. But if this judgement moves me to do the action, that is the moral feeling” (AA 27, p. 1428).

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, this restriction suddenly falls. What used to be inconceivable turned out to be conceivable after all, for now Kant attempts not only to “show” that “pure reason of itself alone suffices to determine the will” (AA 5, p. 15), but also “to determine carefully in what way the moral law becomes the incentive” (AA 5, p. 72). The genesis of moral feeling should, Kant now claims, follow a two stage scheme, which can be described a priori. First, the moral law confronts the subject with an unconditional demand that shows no regard whatsoever for his inclinations, and thus “*infringes upon* [his] self-love” (AA 5, p. 73). In the first step, the moral law unavoidably humiliates the subject, affects his self-conceit in which he takes himself to be the center of his world: it inflicts “pain” on him. In the second step, however, this negative feeling automatically turns into a positive one, into the feeling of respect, and as such it can now serve as the incentive for performing a moral deed in the phenomenal world.

How does this conversion take place? In order to explain it, Kant resorts to an old argument that boils down to saying that, in the final analysis, it makes no difference if we raise the strength of the positive incentive for the moral action or remove the hindrances that act against it: “For, whatever diminishes the hindrances to an activity is a furthering of this activity itself” (AA 5, p. 79). Since humiliation reduces the strength of preexisting sensible inclinations, which the moral feeling must overcome in order to produce the appropriate action, it can also be taken as a strengthening of the moral feeling. To this extent, the pain of humiliation is itself equivalent to a positive feeling.

Thus far Kant. It is not difficult to see, however, that this essentially hydraulic argument is bound to fail, for it is not qualitative but *quantitative in structure*. It explains how a degree of something that already exists can rise, but it cannot explain how something not yet existing could begin existing in the first place.

In other words, if we assumed that human beings are naturally endowed with a certain inclination towards good, then we could successfully use the above mechanism to increase the strength of this already existing incentive, perhaps even up to a level where it would overcome all pathological inclinations. Yet in no way would this explain how a human being who, according to the assumption, does not yet have, and cannot have, a natural inclination towards good originally obtains something like moral feeling. However, the aim of Kant's reasoning was to demonstrate precisely that. The argument is therefore blatantly invalid.²¹

Why Kant nonetheless used the argument remains a mystery. It should be noted, however, that the entire derivation of moral feeling in its two steps displays an unusually close affinity to the Pietistic conception of rebirth, which is, as we have seen, also characterized by a sequence of initial distress, despair about oneself, which then turns into its opposite. Let us once again take a look at Kant's description of the origin of moral feeling:

Hence the moral law unavoidably humiliates every human being when he compares with it the sensible propensity of his nature. If something represented *as a determining ground of our will* humiliates us in our self-consciousness, it awakens *respect* for itself insofar as it is positive and a determining ground. Therefore the moral law is even subjectively a ground of respect. (AA 5, p. 74)

Humiliation is induced by the comparison between the sublimity of the moral law and the "sensual propensity of human nature," that is, it is induced in a situation that corresponds

²¹ It may be added that Kant must have been aware of this. For in an early attempt to introduce the concept of negative magnitudes into philosophy he listed very precise conditions of the validity of his argument; and in the case in question, these conditions were not met: "A real repugnancy only occurs where there are two things, as *positive grounds*, and where one of them cancels the consequence of the other" (AA 2, p. 175).

remarkably to the condition of a Pietist addressed by God.²² To describe this condition, Kant uses the word *Demütigung*, which is usually translated as humiliation, but which literally means “waning of courage,” “loss of self-confidence,” and thus indicates the very state of despair that characterizes the Pietist prior to being reborn. Indeed, the entire scene, both in terms of content and vocabulary, gives the impression of being taken out of some Pietistic manual. Kant notes, for instance, that practical reason “strikes down self-conceit altogether” (AA 5, p. 73), just as with regards to Pietists he speaks of “a breaking und crushing of the heart” (AA 7, p. 55). He also comments that “all claims to esteem for oneself that precede accord with the moral law are null and quite unwarranted” (AA 5, p. 73), which again is almost indistinguishable from the desolate condition of a repenting Pietist who is desperately aware of his or her powerlessness and worthlessness.²³

In Pietism, this condition of utter desolation is typically followed by a radical conversion: the despair turns into a firm

²² The analogy did not go unnoticed; see, for instance: “The Law, just like the word of God, is violent. If I may shift the focus of Kant’s imagery while still retaining its biblical color, it is as if the Law preempted a space otherwise occupied by nature alone” (di Giovanni 2005, p. 170).

²³ But perhaps there is no need to go back to Pietism, and a simple comparison with Luther will do. In his famous sermon *On the Freedom of a Christian*, Luther describes a similar situation, which is even more telling since, here, the *humiliation* is brought about by the *law* itself—the law of God, to be sure, but a law nonetheless: “Although the commandments teach things that are good, the things taught are not done as soon as they are taught, for the commandments show us what we ought to do but do not give us the power to do it. They are intended to teach man to know himself, that through them he may recognize his inability to do good and may despair of his ability. [...] Now when a man has learned through the commandments to recognize his helplessness and is distressed about how he might satisfy the law [...] then [he is] truly humbled [*gedemütigt*] and reduced to nothing in his own eyes” (Luther 1989, p. 600). It should be noted that it is often very difficult to determine the exact source of a certain motif, whether it comes from the general Lutheran tradition or specifically from the Pietistic world.

decision that hereafter one will follow the path of God. As we have seen, it was with regard to the exact course of this reversal that Kant a priori derived a distinction between the two sects, a posteriori called “Spener-Francke” and “Moravian” Pietism. In the first, the decision can only be taken through the intervention of God’s grace, while in the second, the natural power of reason should suffice:

For as reason holds before him, in the moral law, the mirror in which he sees his guilt, it leads him, using his moral disposition to the good, to decide that from now on he will make the law his maxim. (AA 7, p. 56)

What Francke attributed to the effect of God’s address to the sinner, prompting him to see all the depth of his depravity, this should be, according to Zinzendorf, produced already by the prescription of the moral law alone, which makes the subject aware of his inadequacy.²⁴ By now, it probably goes without saying that the humiliation that Kant speaks of while considering the genesis of the moral feeling refers to a situation of a virtually identical structure. The choreographies of both cases overlap to such a degree that it is difficult to tell whether the above description refers to the process whereby the necessary conditions to perform a moral action are established, or to the moment of

²⁴ Kant’s portrayal of Zinzendorf’s conception seems a bit forced, though. Zinzendorf indeed opposed Francke’s emphasis on the struggle of repentance, noting that while a child’s teething might well be plagued by pain, it would be absurd to inflict pain in order to make teeth grow: “Therefore, I consider all birth-laboring that the souls are induced to not only unnecessary to the spiritual rebirth, but also harmful” (Zinzendorf 1747, p. 68). It is also true that, according to Zinzendorf, the spiritual rebirth could have taken place already in the mother’s womb, so that in one’s physical life no additional intervention is needed. This does not mean, however, that a man could be reborn out of himself, as Kant seems to imply. For a closer assessment of Zinzendorf’s notoriously vexed theological conceptions, see Beyreuther 2000, in particular pp. 248ff.

rebirth. Therefore, it can be safely affirmed that Kant's account of the genesis of moral feeling effectively draws on the Pietistic motif of rebirth, especially since Kant's immanent derivation of the moral feeling was shown to be inconclusive.²⁵

Let us now turn to the postulate of the immortality of the soul. Kant introduces it in the dialectics of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, together with the postulates of freedom and God's existence, as an attempt to solve the antinomy arising from the fact that we are unconditionally bound to realize the highest good in the world, which however consists of two independent elements: morality and happiness. On the basis of the same idea of the highest good, we are allegedly further obliged to manifest "the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law" which would correspond to the "holiness" of the will (AA 5, p. 122). Since for a finite rational being such holiness is not possible, while also being unconditionally commanded, Kant now argues that there can only be "an *endless progress* toward that complete conformity." And further, since this endless or infinite progress is "possible only on the presupposition of the *existence* and personality of the same rational being continuing *endlessly*," it is necessary to assume as the condition of possibility of the highest good in the world and thereby as the postulate of practical reason that the soul is immortal.

However, Kant does not seem to care all that much for immortality. It is probably more important to him that the whole

²⁵ When examining Pietism, Kant was perfectly aware of the fact that without God's intervention the conversion was possible only under the assumption that, in spite of radical evil, there still remains in us an original propensity for good: "Surely, we must presuppose in all this that there is still a germ of goodness left in us in its entire purity, a germ that cannot be extirpated or corrupted" (AA 6, p. 45). In short, speaking of certain Pietistic sects, Kant knew very well that the calling of the moral law "simply makes room" for a conversion to good, for this spirit "is already present in us by our moral predisposition" (AA 7, p. 79). This circumstance provides an additional confirmation of our reading that Kant's argument is unable to justify an original coming into existence of moral feeling.

case implies moral perfectionism, that is, the claim that for a finite rational being morality is not some state to be reached at the end of the road but consists in the practice of self-overcoming and constant improvement in goodness:

For a rational but finite being only endless progress from lower to higher stages of moral perfection is possible. (AA 5, p. 123)

Here, it is of course not difficult to notice a close structural affinity with the Pietistic motif of a gradual moral improvement which serves as an outward sign of rebirth. In the sermon *On Christian Perfection*, Francke already commented in a similar vein that no matter how far a man has come in this growth “he is never completely perfect but he can grow and increase in good works as long as he lives” (Erb 1983, p. 115). Once more, this affinity cannot prove a direct influence. It is quite possible that the problem of thinking revolution and reformation together, or the problem of how something infinite could express itself in the medium of the finite, would in any case lead to the idea of endless approaching.

What is more significant is that within the framework of transcendental idealism Kant's argument does not allow us to conclude from this that the soul is immortal, but rather leads us to affirm the *immortality of the body!* As we have seen, the conclusion of immortality is predicated upon the demand for a continuous improving, i.e., *changing* in the direction of the good. Change is only possible *in time*. In the system of transcendental idealism, however, time is itself nothing but a form of sensibility, more precisely, the form of the inner sense. It is true that Kant was rather elusive on the exact relation between the outer and the inner sense, especially as regards the question of what happens after death with the so-called separation of the soul from the body. But at least in his lectures on metaphysics, delivered only few years prior to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure*

Reason, Kant presented a sufficiently detailed theory according to which sensibility, and thereby the temporality of the inner sense, is a result of the presence of the outer sense, which in turn is a consequence of the soul being attached to the body:

But when the soul separates itself from the body, then it will not have the same sensible intuition of this world; it will not intuit the world as it appears, but rather as it is. Accordingly the separation of the soul from the body consists in the *alteration of sensible intuition into spiritual intuition; and that is the other world*. The other world is accordingly not another location, but rather only another intuition. (AA 28, pp. 297–98)

Such a conception has some interesting consequences. It implies, for instance, that the virtuous person does not go to heaven only after her death, but already *is* in heaven; she just cannot *know* it yet: “Since I still have sensible intuition in this world, *I cannot at the same time have a spiritual intuition*” (AA 28, p. 300). Be it as it may, for our present purpose it is important that according to this account of bodily death—and to our knowledge, this is the only account of it that Kant explicitly presented against the background of his transcendental idealism²⁶—at the moment of death sensible intuition of oneself turns into spiritual intuition such that in it there remains nothing phenomenal or temporal anymore. The separation of the soul from the body brings about the end of time.

But consequently, the immortality of the soul turns out to be irrelevant for the problem of infinite moral progress. Once separated from the body, the soul simply has no more room for improvement. Like all things intelligible, the soul too then simply

²⁶ There is one other occasion, in *The End of All Things* from 1794, where Kant seems to explicitly deny the idea of duration or alternation after death (see AA 8, p. 327). There is no place for moral improvement in eternity, then. Compare also Menegoni 2005, pp. 87ff.

is what it is and is where it happens to be—if it is good, it is in heaven, that is, in the spiritual community of the virtuous, and if it is evil, it is in hell. Conversely, if we were to allow for the idea of endless progress, then under given ontological assumptions, the inseparability of the soul from the body would be required for this purpose. By the force of its very structure, Kant's argument in effect leads to the immortality of the body!

And this is no coincidence, as a brief comparison with Francke serves to demonstrate. In Francke the fact of rebirth was similarly associated with endlessly approaching moral perfection. But, we may ask, if now one has become a completely other, new man, why is one not immediately good in one's deeds as well? In *On Christian Perfection* Francke comments:

If a person is justified he can be completely certain of his blessedness. Nevertheless he immediately discovers the weakness of the flesh and inherited sinful behavior. He desires in the depth of his heart nothing other than God and eternal life and he looks upon everything which is in the world as the lust of the eye, the lust of the flesh and the pride of life as dirt and harm. Nevertheless, he discovers that original sin stirs in his flesh and causes in him all kinds of doubts and evil thoughts, at times evil inclinations of the will. Likewise he discovers that because of the great and long habit of sinning he often hastens into this or that external activity with words or deeds. (Erb 1983, p. 115)

The problem is, of course, that while the soul is reborn, *the body remains unchanged*; and because it has long been leading a sinful life, sin has become its habit. The body has thus become the seat of an independent, habitual, almost mechanical sinfulness that is now in a sense detached from the spirit. As a consequence, against his or her will, so to speak, and out of mere habit, even the justified still commit evil deeds. Such transgressions “however, are not reckoned to the justified man,” provided of course that rebirth really happened and is not just a fabrication of his self-

conceit. This is attested by his life in which he, aided by Jesus Christ, “strives with all earnestness against the evil which arises in his flesh” und thus forever improves in goodness.

In introducing the postulate of the immortality of the soul, Kant relied on an argument that corresponds to the Pietistic motif of endless moral improvement. In doing so, however, he happened to overlook the fact that, according to his own ontology, as well as in line with the Pietistic conception, this argument effectively validates the persistence of the body.

IV

The massive presence of the Pietistic motif of rebirth in Kant’s philosophy of religion, and above all the markedly Pietistic manner in which Kant explained the genesis of the moral feeling and the postulate of the immortality of the soul, undoubtedly establish the influence of Pietism on his moral philosophy. True, this influence appears at first as a kind of external disturbance, working against the inner consistency of Kant’s morality. But we have to consider the fact that this is a simple consequence of our own methodological decision not to satisfy ourselves with structural resemblances, but instead search for places where Kant is inconsistent according to his own criteria, and where consequently an external cause is needed to explain the apparent deviation.

Now that we have established the presence of Pietistic influences according to these stronger requirements, we are justified to seriously entertain the possibility of Pietistic influence in some other cases where its actuality is not so obvious. On the one hand, we are referring to the motifs of the sublimity of duty, the inflexibility of the moral law, which displays a sovereign indifference to subject’s inclinations while demanding unconditional subjection; and on the other, to the fact that the true moral value of an action depends on the intention that, as it were, remains a puzzle even

to the very subject who performs it. In both cases we witness a translation of the Pietistic and broader Protestant conception of justification by faith into the field of moral agency.²⁷

If this is correct, a distinctive Pietistic influence could perhaps paradoxically be situated historically in the period that coincides with the formation of a specific Kantian morality of pure reason. We have already noted that prior to the *Groundwork* Kant defended the system of morality as worthiness to be happy. Such a conception of morality has naturally led him to moral theology, that is, to the assumption of God's existence, for, as Kant maintained (see *KrV*, B 841/A 813), without such support morality would produce no effect. Yet in spite of this theological flair, the general structure of this moral theory was very much "worldly," even common: the acting subject was virtually immersed in the empirical world, in her moral actions she relied on the necessary pursuit of happiness, and even the value of her actions was independent of a particular pure feeling. All this changes abruptly, as Kant introduces the concept of autonomy, and then the concept of pure will. As if the emphasis on the pure subject, and the subsequent deepening of the split between the intelligible and the empirical, offered a favorable ground for the use of Pietistic models of thought. In any case, Kant now drew a sharp dividing line between the inner and the outer, to the effect that, for instance, moral evaluation of an action became an entirely inner category, independent of the consequences it produced in the world.

This is how the moral theory as we know it from the *Critique of Practical Reason* emerged. But as we already noted, the development did not end there. In the later writings, and by minimizing the formal character of morality, Kant ascribed an ever greater significance to the original decision between good and evil—a decision that was difficult to think within his previous critical framework,

²⁷ It has to be added that opacity of the moral motivation is a theme that had already been broadly discussed in the English philosophy of moral sense.

but which for that reason fit neatly in the moral theory of Pietism. On this basis it seems safe to assume that after its initial intrusion the influence of Pietism on Kant's moral theory actually grew stronger.

But let us return to our basic question. As long as we search for eventual influences of Pietism and, broadly speaking, Protestantism at the level of content, for instance at the level of the role attributed to God or religion within a certain philosophical system, we are bound to conclude that, at least from the *Groundwork* on, there is virtually no such influence to be found in Kant. Even in the late *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, where such material coincidence would arguably be the most probable, Kant openly declared:

So far as morality is based on the conception of the human being as one who is free but who also, just because of that, binds himself through his reason to unconditional laws, it is in need neither of the idea of another being above him in order that he recognize his duty, nor, that he observe it, of an incentive other than the law itself. (AA 6, p. 3)

However, as our study has hopefully shown, under this general atheistic orientation there often lay buried models of thought originating in religious discourse. Furthermore, everything suggests that it was precisely the introduction of autonomy and the pure subject that made Kant more receptive to Pietistic and Protestant mental schemes.

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