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Moral Purity and Moral Progress: The Tension between Assurance and Perfection in Kant and Wesley¹

Kevin Twain Lowery

Introduction

In Christian theology, the desire for assurance is somewhat at odds with the quest for moral perfection, for assurance is a state of security regarding one's salvation, and this can undermine the impulse to pursue perfection, which requires a certain dissatisfaction with one's present state. In this paper I will explore this point of tension in the thought of both Kant and Wesley, and I will endeavor to show that Wesley's broader definition of moral motivation allows him to resolve this tension in a manner that is inaccessible to Kant on his own terms.

Relating Wesley to Kant

At first glance, Wesley and Kant seem to be rather unlikely conversation partners. For one thing, there is no evidence that they were familiar with one another whatsoever. In fact, it appears that Kant was at best indirectly influenced by Locke, whom we know impacted Wesley's thought in particular ways.² In addition, Kant's view of religion is vastly different from that of Wesley. Kant claims that morality essentially has no need of

¹ This essay is adapted from several sections of my doctoral dissertation. As such, I am indebted to my director, Jean Porter, for her guidance throughout the project. I am also grateful for the helpful comments of Jennifer Herdt, Maura Ryan, and Jerry McKenny, all of whom served on my dissertation committee.

² Klaus P. Fischer, "John Locke in the German Enlightenment: An Interpretation," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 36 (1975): 446.

religion, but only requires pure practical reason.³ In fact, even the concept of God is a byproduct of morality.

Natural morality must be so constituted that it can be thought independently of any concept of God, and elicit our most zealous devotion solely on account of its own inner worth and excellence. But it serves to increase our devotion if after we have taken an interest in morals itself, to take interest also in the existence of God, a being who can reward our good conduct. And then we will obtain strong incentives which will determine us to the observance of moral laws. This is a highly necessary hypothesis.⁴

In other words, Kant claims that morality is independent of the concept of God, as well as many other religious concepts. As a result, religion is relegated to a position inferior to morality. Whereas morality is necessary in and of itself, religious concepts like the concept of God are construed as practically necessary moral concepts.⁵ Kant understands religion itself to be little more than recognizing all our duties as God's commands.⁶ Religion is not only dependent on morality, religion is essentially derived from it. For Kant, the foundation of religious faith should be morality itself, since "nothing firmer or more certain can be thought in any science than our obligation to moral actions."⁷

Wesley and Kant were both raised in pietistic homes, but they later separated themselves from pietism. In Wesley's case, he not only gradually distanced himself from Pietists like the Moravians, he aligned himself with the Anglican moderates on a number

³ Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1998), 33 [6:4]. Henceforth, references to Kant will include, whenever available, the volume and page number of the standard German (originally the Royal Prussian) Academy of Sciences *Kants gesammelte Schriften*. These references will be placed in square brackets [].

⁴ Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, trans. Allen W. Wood and Gertrude M. Clark (Ithica, NY: Cornell University, 1978), 31.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

⁶ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. H. Bernard (Amherest, NY: Prometheus, 2000), §91, p. 423.

⁷ Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, 40.

of issues.⁸ As far as Kant is concerned, although he was a rationalist, it can be argued that he never completely severed himself from his pietistic roots, intellectually speaking. He defines true piety as “moral conduct in accordance with the divine beneficent will.”⁹ In essence, Kant’s ties to pietism were loose at best, and he also separated himself from traditional orthodox Christianity in key ways, reflected most sharply in the ways that he sterilized many religious terms and themes. It should therefore be noted that when Kant uses language that is characteristic of Wesley’s thought, he is not indicating quite the same thing as Wesley. Then again, I believe that there is enough overlap in meaning such that Kant’s general concepts can be related to Wesley’s beliefs in specific ways, and this should become more evident as the comparison unfolds.

Kant on Perfection

Kant asserts that we have a duty to pursue our own perfection as moral agents in two respects. First, we must cultivate our faculties (i.e. natural predispositions), especially our understanding, since it is the highest faculty we possess. Second, we must cultivate the will for two reasons: a) so that we might raise ourselves from animality to humanity by setting ends for ourselves, diminishing our ignorance, and correcting our errors, and b) so that the moral law itself might become our incentive for conforming with duty.¹⁰ There is thus a distinction between quantitative and qualitative perfection, and both facets must be pursued.¹¹

⁸ John C. English, “John Wesley and the Anglican Moderates of the Seventeenth Century,” *Anglican Theological Review* 51 (1969): 205-16.

⁹ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1963), 42.

¹⁰ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 150-1, 154-5 [6:386-7, 391-3].

¹¹ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §15, p. 78.

Kant claims that the perfection of our faculties is necessary so that the dictates of the will can be made operative.¹² However, since morality excludes everything which does not contribute to the perfection of our inner moral worth, it cannot dictate the manner in which all our powers and capacities should be perfected, for that is a pragmatic affair. One thing is certain, our mental powers must be perfected most of all, because they have the greatest influence on our moral conduct.¹³ Moral perfection requires not only strength of will, but also proper judgment.¹⁴ More generally, the duty to develop one's natural perfection is derived from Kant's demand that we treat humanity as an end in itself. Again, this does not necessitate endorsing particular maxims of perfection, it only requires the acceptance of the goal of natural self-improvement.¹⁵

For Kant, perfection concerns the will itself and the motives which guide it, not merely the knowledge which informs it.¹⁶ Humanity is thus completed and perfected in the realization of "personality," i.e. a good will.¹⁷ As Phil Quinn explains, "complete moral perfection is constituted of both a morally good disposition to act purely on the incentives provided by the moral law and a morally good course of life full of deeds in harmony with that disposition."¹⁸ Kant does make a distinction between being holy, i.e. having a pure disposition to duty, and being perfect, i.e. "fulfilling all one's duties and ...

¹² Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 26.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 141-2.

¹⁴ Lara Denis, "Kant on the Perfection of Others," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 37 (1999): 23.

¹⁵ Lara Denis, *Moral Self-Regard: Duties to Oneself in Kant's Moral Theory* (New York: Garland, 2001), 113.

¹⁶ Viggo Rossvaer, *Kant's Moral Philosophy: An Interpretation of the Categorical Imperative* (Oslo: Universitetsforlag, 1979), 23.

¹⁷ Christine M. Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 123-4.

¹⁸ Philip L. Quinn, "Christian Atonement and Kantian Justification," *Faith and Philosophy* 3, no. 4 (1986): 447.

attaining completely one's moral end with regard to oneself."¹⁹ Moral perfection is thus subjective with respect to one's inner disposition to duty, but objective with respect to the fulfillment of duty and the achievement of one's own moral end.²⁰

Kant likewise makes a distinction between virtue and holiness: "Virtue implies ability and readiness to overcome our inclination to evil on moral principles ... Thus holy beings are not virtuous, for the reason that they have no evil inclinations to overcome; their will is of itself sufficient for compliance with the law."²¹ In this way, a holy will, i.e. one which is absolutely good, can only belong to God, since God is the only being that has no evil inclinations. Humans can only aspire to holiness by acting from duty in spite of subjective inclinations and desires.²² According to Kant, "The moral condition which [we] can always be in is virtue, i.e. moral disposition in conflict, and not holiness in the supposed possession of perfect purity of the dispositions of will."²³ In other words, given the fact that virtue involves overcoming evil inclinations while holiness is the absence of evil inclinations altogether, human beings can be virtuous, but not holy. On the other hand, God can be holy, but not virtuous.

Kant says that the first command of the duties we have to ourselves is to know ourselves not with respect to our natural perfection, but with respect to our moral perfection.²⁴ Even though we cannot be conscious of performing our duty from completely unselfish motives, it is still what morality requires of us.²⁵ It can thus be said

¹⁹ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 196 [6:446].

²⁰ Denis, *Moral Self-Regard*, 113.

²¹ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 244.

²² Terrence Charles Williams, *The Concept of the Categorical Imperative: A Study of the Place of the Categorical Imperative in Kant's Ethical Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1968), 2-3.

²³ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 88 [84].

²⁴ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 191 [6:441].

²⁵ Kant, "On the Proverb," in *Perpetual Peace*, 68 [8:284].

that Kant views moral motivation as opaque, since he thinks that we cannot be absolutely certain of the purity of our motives.²⁶

For Kant, perfection is motivated by a love and respect for virtue and for the moral law itself. Granted, it can be argued that the motivation behind Kantian perfection is ultimately grounded in respect for our own rational nature.²⁷ For instance, J. B. Schneewind indicates that “Rousseau convinced Kant that everyone must have the capacity to be a self-governing moral agent, and that it is this characteristic that gives each person a special kind of value or dignity.”²⁸ However, there is little evidence to suggest that the Kantian stress on treating people as ends in themselves is anything more than a respect for rationality itself, so it does not seem that this aspect of Kant’s thought can dismiss all charges of formalism.

Kant’s Concept of Moral Purity

A rather problematic part of Kant’s doctrine of perfection is his concept of moral purity, for it excludes motives that allow a more positive tension between perfection and assurance. Consequently, it would be helpful to elaborate on this concept before proceeding to Kant’s view of assurance.

One of Kant’s most famous tenets is that a good will is the only thing that is good without qualification (i.e. it is intrinsically good).²⁹ Since the possibility of morality rests upon the existence and exercise of human autonomy, one of morality’s chief aims is to

²⁶ Daniel Guevara, *Kant’s Theory of Moral Motivation* (Boulder, CO: Westview, 2000), 23.

²⁷ Denis, “Kant on the Perfection of Others,” 21.

²⁸ J. B. Schneewind, “Autonomy, Obligation, and Virtue: An Overview of Kant’s Moral Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Kant*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1992), 314.

²⁹ Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1981), 7 [4:393].

respect this autonomy. This is evident in all three formulations of the Categorical Imperative. Kant claims that a good will is not only the source of the individual's absolute moral worth, it is that which gives the world a final purpose.³⁰ Good willing is the foundation of virtue, which of course is the "ability and readiness to overcome our inclination to evil on moral principles." This is what leads him to equate strength of virtue with strength of character.³¹ The goodness of the will is essentially revealed in adversity. Consequently, Kant's ethics has often been characterized as an ethic of good willing, not of good intentions.³² In reality, Kant's ethics does not separate willing from the intentions. However, the emphasis is clearly on the exercise of the will. In other words, morality not only requires that our intentions be proper, they must also be sufficiently strong so as to result in an exercise of will.

William Hund indicates that for Kant "any object of the will, even the concept of perfection, would endanger the purity of the will if this object were to determine the will."³³ Viggo Rossvaer also realizes that the pure will for Kant is not empirically determined. "Reason's evaluation of our intentions recognizes the superiority of the pure, non-sensuous will over our sensuous incentives by giving it an absolute, maximum value. This maximum value in the pure, non-sensuously determined will is what is referred to when we speak of the good will."³⁴ As Lewis White Beck points out, Kant's concern is with the intentions, but the basis for morality is rationality itself, not the empirical nature of human beings.³⁵ In essence, Kant believes that moral motivation

³⁰ Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, §86, p. 371.

³¹ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 244-6.

³² W. G. Harbison, "The Good Will," *Kant Studien* 71 (1980): 53.

³³ William B. Hund, "Kant's Attitude toward Human Perfection as a Moral Determinant," in *Proceedings of the Third International Kant Congress*, ed. Lewis White Beck (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1972), 341.

³⁴ Rossvaer, 21.

³⁵ Lewis White Beck, *Studies in the Philosophy of Kant* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), 31-2.

cannot be external, since external motivation is heteronomous and not conducive to universal necessity. Consequently, moral motivation must be strictly internal.³⁶ For example, Kant asserts that deathbed repentance has no moral worth because it originates in impure motives. To be specific, the nearness of death itself provides an external incentive that makes motivation heteronomous.³⁷

Beck is absolutely correct when he claims that Kant's concept of moral purity denies the empirical nature of human beings, for even though our rationality gives us a certain degree of transcendence over our empirical selves, we cannot neatly segregate autonomous reason (i.e. "pure reason") from the empirical influences which shape us. Allen Wood concludes that the real problem for Kant is that he "confused the fact that inclinations are necessary for the existence of moral evil with the mistaken view that *in man* inclinations are the source of the threats to moral perfection."³⁸ Essentially, Kant only sees the negative potential in our empirical selves. He fails to recognize the fact that our inclinations can also lead to our own moral perfection.

The Tension between Assurance and Perfection

According to Kant, saving faith entails faith in the satisfaction of one's sins and faith that one can become well-pleasing to God.³⁹ It is Gordon Michalson's opinion that Kant's "belief in atonement really only amounts to a belief in our own rational capacity to become well-pleasing to God – a potential savior figure, in whom we would believe,

³⁶ Ibid., 221-4.

³⁷ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 130.

³⁸ Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 1970), 112.

³⁹ Kant, *Religion*, 123 [6:116].

merely embodies a moral capacity available to all.”⁴⁰ In light of Kant’s assertion that God regards our moral progress as a completed whole, it could be argued that Kant means more than this, that he at least understands satisfaction to involve an act of divine forgiveness. However, this would still fall far short of a traditional Christian view of atonement. Quinn surmises that Kant’s real objection is to the belief that human sinfulness is somehow transferred from generation to generation: “Any doctrine of vicarious atonement will be difficult, if not impossible, to square with a conviction that is central to the conceptual scheme of common sense morality,” namely, that “moral credits and debits are neither transferable nor transmissible.”⁴¹

A tension arises in this aspect of Kant’s thought, for he recognizes that the belief in justification by faith counters the belief that we shall be held responsible for the conduct of our lives. As such, justification by faith tends to undermine the incentive we have to progress morally. In other words, assurance gives us a certain satisfaction with our present state, and this counteracts our motivation to progress morally. Nevertheless, justification by faith is necessary for having a clear conscience (i.e. being able to regard oneself as pleasing to God).⁴² In fact, the need for a clear conscience is ongoing. In that regard, Kant asserts that our moral shortcomings do not need to torment us, because as long as we are progressing morally, God regards our infinite moral progress as a completed whole.⁴³ John Hare speculates that this assertion could be regarded as Kant’s

⁴⁰ Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 102.

⁴¹ Quinn, “Christian Atonement and Kantian Justification,” 458-9.

⁴² Kant, *Religion*, 86-7n [6:69-70n].

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 85 [6:67].

version of the doctrine of imputed righteousness. Like his insistence on faith in satisfaction, it is one of his attempts to preserve Reformation doctrines.⁴⁴

A similar tension can be observed in the thought of Wesley. Both Wesley and Kant consider moral progress to be an integral part of salvation, and this primarily involves the purification and the perfection of the will. Even though they hold different standards of moral purity, they both assert that the will must be properly motivated. For Kant, moral motivation comes from a respect for duty itself. For Wesley, it comes from love for God and for others. In both cases, pure motives cannot be self-centered. Consequently, it appears that moral purity can only be achieved if one's conscience is clear, and this is only possible if moral agents can believe that God has forgiven them of their sins. Otherwise, good works cannot be morally pure since they will largely be an attempt to earn justification. The attempt to earn justification could be rooted in a desire to be morally worthy, a desire to be free from guilt, or a desire to atone for one's own sins. In any case, these desires preclude moral purity both for Kant and for Wesley.

Of course, Wesley does not recoil from the traditional doctrine of original sin as does Kant. Nonetheless, the basic elements of Wesley's account of assurance bear some resemblance to Kant's description. Frederick Dreyer asserts that that Wesley understands faith to be manifested through confidence in one's pardon (i.e. the witness of the Spirit) and in holy affections (i.e. the fruit of the Spirit).⁴⁵ This dual emphasis is indeed indicative of Wesley's struggle to find a mediating position between antinomianism and legalism. Without the doctrine of justification by faith, the result is works righteousness. However, emphasizing justification by faith can lead to trivializing the need for good

⁴⁴ John E. Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits, and God's Assistance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), 54-5.

⁴⁵ Frederick Dreyer, "Evangelical Thought: John Wesley and Jonathan Edwards," *Albion* 19 (1987): 183.

works. Consequently, part of Wesley's attempt to resolve this tension is his assertion that repentance must surpass mere sorrow for one's sins and include an entire change of heart and life.⁴⁶

Wesley subscribes to the traditional view that divine forgiveness is bestowed freely by the grace of God when one trusts in the merits of Christ's atonement. When believers truly believe that their sins have been forgiven, their guilt and shame are dispelled, and they are given a fresh start in life with a clear conscience. Of course, attaining a clear conscience regarding the harm we have caused others requires more than this, because we must also ask for their forgiveness and try to make restitution for our sins toward them. In regard to one's attitude toward God, although a convert's motives may be self-interested in seeking justification, the justified believer no longer needs to be concerned with meriting the favor of God, and good works can now be done through unselfish love. Agents are thus enabled to move beyond self-interest and progress toward moral purity.⁴⁷

I suggest that this particular point is one which Kant cannot ultimately make, since he refuses to embrace the notion of unmerited grace. Rather, he claims that we must make ourselves worthy of divine assistance, the respect of others, and happiness. Kant places such heavy emphasis on human responsibility that it becomes inappropriate to see salvation as a free gift from God. Granted, he would most likely argue that

⁴⁶ Randy L. Maddox, *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville: Kingswood, 1994), 162-3.

⁴⁷ Wesley, Sermon 12, "The Witness of Our Own Spirit," §§ 15-6, *WW*, ??? [J 5:140-1]. Hereafter, *WW* shall refer to *The Works of John Wesley*, begun as "The Oxford Edition of the Works of John Wesley" (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975-83) and continued as "The Bicentennial Edition of the Works of John Wesley" (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984-), 35 total vols. to be eventually printed. Likewise, *WWJ* shall refer to *The Works of John Wesley*, 14 vols., ed. Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872), reprinted often. In addition, all citations from the Bicentennial edition will also include the volume and page number from the Jackson edition in brackets, e.g. [J x:xxx].

salvation is free in the sense that God is not obligated to forgive us. However, he still suggests that we must strive to earn God's forgiveness. As a result, it does not appear that he can ever assert anything more than works righteousness, and this certainly falls short of his standard of moral purity, i.e. performing duty for its own sake, not for one's own sake. Moreover, it is unlikely that Kant would join Wesley in asserting that the incentive to progress morally should originate in gratitude to God.

Wesley carefully defines the limits of human moral responsibility, because he wants moral purity to be attainable. Specifically, he contends that believers are not condemned for: 1) past sins (since they have already been forgiven), 2) present sins (since believers do not commit them), 3) inward sinful inclinations, 4) impure (i.e. mixed) motives, 5) "sins of infirmity" (i.e. transgressions committed out of ignorance), and 6) that which is beyond our control.⁴⁸ However, Wesley is not attempting to reduce our moral responsibility, for he insists that we must strive for the highest attainments of holiness. In William Cannon's mind, Wesley's assertion "that man can be righteous and indeed must be righteous if he is to be Christian means that his final salvation includes moral attainment and personal purity as essential elements. Without inherent personal holiness, Wesley says, no man can see God."⁴⁹ Of course, Wesley believes that true morality is not found in keeping the letter of the law, but in keeping the spirit of the law. In this way, our righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees.⁵⁰

For Wesley, moral transformation should be judged by the results it produces. As Cannon points out, "And always in defending the validity of his preaching and the work

⁴⁸ Wesley, Sermon 8, "The First Fruits of the Spirit," §§2.1-13, *WW*, ??? [J 5:89-94].

⁴⁹ William Ragsdale Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley: With Special Reference to the Doctrine of Justification* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1946), 225.

⁵⁰ Charles N. Dillman, "Wesley's Approach to the Law in Discourse XXV on the Sermon on the Mount," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 12 (1977): 62.

of his movement, John Wesley pointed to the moral successes, to the fact that men's lives were changed and that they produced in deeds and character the fruit of their faith."⁵¹ A Wesleyan understanding of assurance must therefore include both the belief that one's sins have been forgiven as well as a firm conviction that one's life has been changed to the extent that significant moral progress is being made and will continue to be made.

Kantian Attempts to Resolve the Dilemma

The Need for a Moral Revolution

Kant's own attempt to resolve this dilemma is perhaps the least satisfying. To be specific, he claims that we need a moral revolution to attain a good will. Wood asserts that for Kant, the will always chooses according to rules; it never chooses only particular acts.⁵² Essentially, Kant believes that each of us acts according to subjective principles, which he calls maxims. He claims that human beings are not evil because of the acts they perform, but because their constitution allows the inference of evil maxims.

Consequently, the ground of evil is not in a determining power of inclination, but in the exercise of freedom in forming maxims.⁵³ In essence, good and evil are not found in the nature of things, but in the exercise of reason. The same principle holds true for actions as well, for the moral worth of duties performed does not come from the purposes they achieve, but from the maxims which determine them.⁵⁴ The mere conformity of an action

⁵¹ Cannon, *The Theology of John Wesley*, 25.

⁵² Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, 45.

⁵³ Kant, *Religion*, 46-7 [6:20-1].

⁵⁴ Kant, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, 12-3 [4:399].

with law is its legality, but the conformity of an action's motive with the incentive of duty is its morality.⁵⁵

In order to be morally pure, we must have a morally good supreme maxim, i.e. a maxim to be unconditionally committed to being moral. According to Kant, we are always influenced by both moral and sensuous motives.⁵⁶ Happiness is necessarily the desire of every rational being. Consequently, good and evil in the human will is not in the presence or absence of incentives, but in the subordination of one incentive to another.⁵⁷ Notwithstanding, humans cannot be part good and part evil, for each person has a single basic disposition to morality which either is or is not fully committed to being moral.⁵⁸ This basic disposition to morality is for all intents and purposes a "supreme maxim," which serves as the ground of all other maxims.⁵⁹ After all, our general attitude toward morality largely determines the particular morals we embrace and practice.

Kant espouses the view that human beings are naturally "radically evil." The radical evil of human nature cannot be extirpated by human forces, but it can be overcome.⁶⁰ Quinn thinks that this particular doctrine is a fairly good rationalization of the traditional doctrine of original sin.⁶¹ Kant regarded the fall symbolically as the triumph of self-love over duty within each individual.⁶² The radically evil disposition is

⁵⁵ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 20 [6:219].

⁵⁶ Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., "Moral Regeneration and Divine Aid in Kant," *Religious Studies* 25, no. 3 (1989): 261.

⁵⁷ Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, 42.

⁵⁸ Kant, *Religion*, 49-50 [6:24-5].

⁵⁹ Michalson, *Fallen Freedom*, 54.

⁶⁰ Kant, *Religion*, 59 [6:37].

⁶¹ Philip L. Quinn, "Original Sin, Radical Evil and Moral Identity," *Faith and Philosophy* 1, no. 2 (1984): 197.

⁶² Bernard M. G. Reardon, "Kant as Theologian," *Downside Review* 93 (1975): 254.

personally adopted through a free, non-temporal choice.⁶³ Denis Savage interprets this point as meaning that the disposition to evil is chosen after the disposition to morality is developed. However, since the human tendency to hedonism precedes reason, it has the upper hand and ultimately wins out.⁶⁴ According to Richard Dean, choosing to act immorally entails the choice to abandon the unconditional commitment to morality. The result is that the good will is ultimately relinquished.”⁶⁵

The only way that one can be freed from radical evil and adopt a morally good supreme maxim is through a moral revolution. Kant contends that we can become legally good through a change in mores, but becoming morally good requires a revolution (i.e. a rebirth) in the disposition through a “single and unalterable decision.” The revolution occurs in the mode of thought, but gradual reformation takes place in the mode of sense.⁶⁶ Of course, divine assistance is needed for the moral revolution, but we must be worthy of receiving it.⁶⁷ Kant contends that we have the right to hope “that our weakness and infirmity will be supplemented by the help of God if we but do the utmost that the consciousness of our capacity tells us we are able to do.”⁶⁸

Michalson feels that Kant’s comments on divine aid or grace are his attempt to counterbalance the motivational problems encountered by a lack of assurance of moral regeneration.⁶⁹ His insistence that we merit God’s grace is also a safeguard against

⁶³ Kant, *Religion*, 62 [6:40].

⁶⁴ Denis D. Savage, “Kant’s Rejection of Divine Revelation and His Theory of Radical Evil,” in *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered*, ed. Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wreen (Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana, 1991), 68-73.

⁶⁵ Richard Dean, “What Should We Treat as an End in Itself?” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (1996): 276.

⁶⁶ Kant, *Religion*, 67-8 [6:47-8].

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 65 [6:44].

⁶⁸ Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, 128.

⁶⁹ Michalson, *Fallen Freedom*, 95-6.

irresponsibility.⁷⁰ In a more basic sense, Kant finds it necessary to appeal to divine aid in order to preserve both radical evil and human autonomy.⁷¹ Michalson believes that in the end, what Kant espouses is a type of human-divine synergism.⁷²

Although this analysis is a good characterization of the general change from an evil disposition to a good one, it is somewhat misleading with respect to the moral revolution itself, for it seems that this event is more monergistic than synergistic. On Kant's own terms, a decision is not moral if it is not ultimately rooted in respect for the moral law, and this respect cannot be empirically determined. Since Kant assumes that we are "radically evil," it is unclear where this moral motive arises, even in the moral revolution itself. Kant would somehow have to argue that the decision to be a moral could be empirically determined, and yet there is no reason to believe that this is possible in his general schema. Indeed, this appears to be the very reason that he appeals to divine assistance.

In another sense, Kant's portrayal of the moral revolution as "a single and unalterable decision" which reverses the "radical evil" in human nature could be interpreted as a rationalistic version of the Reformed doctrine of irresistible grace, which is certainly monergistic. The problem is not with the doctrine itself, but in the fact that such a view of human will is inconsistent with the moral autonomy that Kant elsewhere claims that we have. I believe that there are two possibilities for explaining these inconsistencies: 1) Kant is firmly committed to maintaining key Reformation doctrines, even when they contradict his own theories, and/or 2) in places where Kant's own

⁷⁰ Michalson, "Moral Regeneration and Divine Aid in Kant," 265.

⁷¹ Michalson, *Fallen Freedom*, 126.

⁷² Gordon E. Michalson, Jr., "The Problem of Salvation in Kant's *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (1997): 323.

theories fall into contradictions, he is forced to appeal to divine grace. In the final analysis, since Kant views human nature as “radically evil,” and since he espouses such a narrow view of moral purity, he is forced to conclude that a morally pure disposition cannot be attained without supernatural transformation. On a religious level, this has a certain allure, but it is not characteristic of Kant’s thought in general, for it compromises Kantian moral autonomy.

Aiming for the Highest Good

Another possibility for resolving the dilemma is Kant’s contention that we should aim for the highest good. Perhaps this can motivate the pursuit of perfection while in a state of assurance. Kant asserts that the best possible world is one where moral and physical perfection are combined.⁷³ The highest good is thus the unity of virtue and happiness. However, neither is the cause of the other, so achieving one does not guarantee the realization of the other.⁷⁴ The finite rational will thus finds its hopes in the attainment of these two ends. Since virtue is an end in itself, it is the superior end, and happiness must consequently be subjugated to it.⁷⁵

Kant contends that the concept of duty requires us to strive with all our powers toward the highest good, which he describes as “the purest morality throughout the world combined with such universal happiness as accords with it.” We can aim at both moral purity and happiness at once, but they generally are not achieved in proper proportion. Consequently, we must strive for morality and have faith that virtue will ultimately be

⁷³ Kant *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, 140-1.

⁷⁴ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (New York: Macmillan, 1993), 120 [113].

⁷⁵ Gene Fendt, *For What May I Hope? Thinking with Kant and Kierkegaard* (New York: Lang, 1990), 76.

rewarded, and this presupposes the existence of God as well as the afterlife.⁷⁶ The concept of the highest good requires us to posit the existence of God as the rewarder of virtue and as the being in whom happiness and holiness are united.⁷⁷ The afterlife is where they who have made themselves worthy of happiness will actually participate in it.⁷⁸

Jacqueline Mariña feels that Kant's stress on the purity of the will does not disqualify the highest good from motivating the will altogether, for it would seem that the pure will could be motivated by the highest good to the extent that its concept contains the moral law.⁷⁹ Andrews Reath concludes that the difficulty with Kant's concept of the highest good is not that it includes happiness, for Kant never claimed that happiness has no involvement in moral conduct. Rather, it is difficult to conceive a proportionality of virtue and happiness, expressed in a system of incentives, which does not inevitably lead to heteronomous moral motivation.⁸⁰

In reality, Kant recognizes only one moral incentive – the respect for duty itself. He does believe that virtue deserves to be rewarded with happiness, but the prospect of happiness cannot be a moral motive. Moreover, he does not feel that virtue is rewarded sufficiently in the present life.⁸¹ This ultimate rewarding will be implemented by God in the afterlife. The highest good must be the object of the pure will, but that is all that it can be. Even the highest good cannot motivate the pure will, for the sole motivation of

⁷⁶ Kant, "On the Proverb: That May Be True in Theory, But Is of No Practical Use," in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, trans. Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1983), 64 [8:279].

⁷⁷ Kant, *Religion*, 34 [6:5].

⁷⁸ Kant *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, 110.

⁷⁹ Jacqueline Mariña, "Making Sense of Kant's Highest Good," *Kant Studien* 91 (2000): 345.

⁸⁰ Andrews Reath, "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 610-1.

⁸¹ Kant, *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*, 111.

the pure will is duty for its own sake.⁸² In this respect, the pursuit of the highest good itself is only of moral worth when it is of duty.⁸³

It is obvious that Kant did not see the concept of the highest good as an incentive to progress morally. Rather, the concept serves to remind us that we should pursue morality for its own sake, even in the absence of other incentives, because justice demands that morality will be rewarded with happiness in the afterlife. However, we will only be morally worthy of this reward if the reward itself is not an incentive for us. In essence, although the highest good is certainly an object of the good will, only the moral law is an incentive for it, so it does not appear that this concept will resolve the dilemma either.

Pro-Duty Inclinations

There are a number of Kantian scholars, however, that interpret Kant more favorably on his view of moral purity, and this might provide a viable resolution of the dilemma. Daniel Guevara states that there is an alternative reading of Kant apart from the traditional interpretation, a reading which is based on the consideration of counterfactuals. It says that moral motivation and worth are not spoiled in the presence of pro-duty inclinations if these inclinations are dispensable and hence redundant.⁸⁴ In this line of interpretation, moral action is always overdetermined in Kant's schema, for moral law and other natural factors all contribute to moral motivation.⁸⁵ Barbara Herman concludes that for Kant, "An action has moral worth if it is required by duty and has as its

⁸² Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 115 [109].

⁸³ Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Happiness and Human Flourishing in Kant's Ethics," *Social Philosophy and Policy* 16 (1999): 159.

⁸⁴ Guevara, 13.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

primary motive the motive of duty.”⁸⁶ Wood concurs, arguing that duty must simply be the sufficient motive of action. Perfect virtue does not preclude the presence of cooperating inclinations.⁸⁷ The pure will is the will that acts from duty whether its non-moral incentives support duty or oppose it.⁸⁸

In effect, these Kantians believe that the pure will for Kant is not necessarily devoid of non-moral incentives, but it must abstract itself from them. This is why Dean believes that although a good will is often displayed in actions of moral worth, it still remains hidden when it chooses permissible ends.⁸⁹ Robert Johnson suggests that even virtuous actions for Kant are not emotionally sterile, because virtue contains the reward of “moral pleasure,” which surpasses mere contentment with oneself.⁹⁰ The assertion which Kant himself makes is that motives are not virtuous if they accidentally produce dutiful action. Johnson feels that this criterion will be met so long as: 1) virtuous motives consistently produce dutiful action regardless of the circumstances, and 2) dutiful actions are always an expression of an underlying virtuous motive.⁹¹

This alternative reading of Kant does offer a more acceptable account of moral purity, but I do not believe that it directly addresses the tension between assurance and perfection, because Kant himself indicates otherwise. In this alternative reading of Kant, having a clear conscience (i.e. believing that one is pleasing to God) would not be a prerequisite to moral purity, because the latter can be attained with heteronomous motives so long as respect for the moral law remains the primary incentive. As a result,

⁸⁶ Barbara Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1993), 16.

⁸⁷ Allen W. Wood, “The Emptiness of the Moral Will,” *Monist* 72 (1989): 456.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 469.

⁸⁹ Dean, 270.

⁹⁰ Robert N. Johnson, “Kant’s Conception of Merit,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 77 (1996): 329.

⁹¹ Robert N. Johnson, “Expressing a Good Will: Kant on the Motive of Duty,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 34 (1996): 160-2.

this would eliminate the need for assurance altogether, and this is clearly contrary to what Kant himself argues.

Offering a More Robust Account

Although Wesley's thought exhibits a similar tension between assurance and perfection, I believe that his emphasis on love as the chief moral motive proves to be a more promising option for resolving the dilemma encountered by Kant.

Wesley's Doctrines of Assurance and Perfection

Regarding his understanding of assurance, the defining moment for Wesley was his well-known experience at Aldersgate.

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate-Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation: And an assurance was given me, that he had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.⁹²

This event would later become the cornerstone of Wesley's doctrine of assurance. At first, he did not interpret this experience as the witness of the Spirit, but as his true conversion. Five days later, he related this experience to a group of people gathered at the Hutton home, alleging that he had lacked real faith before that time.⁹³ However, within a year of his Aldersgate experience, Wesley was already expressing serious doubts concerning his status as a child of God. Apparently, the doctrine of assurance was

⁹² Wesley journal, 24 May 1738, §14, *WW*, 18:249-50 [J 1:103].

⁹³ Mrs. E. Hutton to Samuel Wesley, 5 June 1738, *WW*, 18:252 n. 90.

Wesley's way of overcoming his own self-doubt and fear, and he practically admits as much, since he claims that the direct witness of the Spirit brings peace to those who are otherwise plagued with doubts.⁹⁴ The direct witness also gives assurance to those who strive to be pleasing to God, but have "no consciousness that they are forgiven."⁹⁵ Once again, it seems that Wesley has himself in mind.

Wesley also acknowledges the necessity of the "indirect witness," which is essentially the witness of conscience.⁹⁶ The content of this judgment is primarily the observance of the fruit of the Spirit in one's own life. Nevertheless, Wesley asserts that there is a direct witness of the Spirit beyond one's self-evaluation, and he believes that this assertion is validated both by the "plain natural meaning" of Scripture and by the experience of many.⁹⁷ Even if he does not assume that other people share in his doubts and fears, he certainly supposes that all Christians experience trials and temptations, at least from time to time. When faith is tested in this way, only the direct witness can grant assurance.⁹⁸ Wesley is indeed aware of the possibility (perhaps probability) that his insistence on the direct witness of the Spirit might lead to exaggerations and aberrations. "If we deny it, there is a danger lest our religion degenerate into mere formality ... If we allow it, but do not understand what we allow, we are liable to run into all the wildness of enthusiasm."⁹⁹ However, he is willing to run this risk, because he regards this as preferable to the omission of the doctrine altogether.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁴ Wesley, Sermon 11, "The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse II," §3.7, *WW*, 1:291 [J 5:128].

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, §3.9, *WW*, 1:292 [J 5:129].

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, §2.6, *WW*, 1:287-8 [J 5:125].

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, §5.1, *WW*, 1:296-7 [J 5:132].

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, §5.2, *WW*, 1:297 [J 5:133].

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, §1.2, *WW*, 1:285 [J 5:123].

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, §1.4, *WW*, 1:285-6 [J 5:124].

The other major focus of Wesley's ethics is his doctrine of Christian perfection, which he regards as "the grand depositum which God had lodged with the people called Methodists, and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up."¹⁰¹ Basically, Wesley defines Christian perfection as deliverance from all sin.

In conformity, therefore, both to the doctrine of St. John, and the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion: a Christian is so far perfect, as not to commit sin. This is the glorious privilege of every Christian, yea, though he be but a babe in Christ. But it is only of grown Christians it can be affirmed, they are in such a sense perfect, as, Secondly, to be free from evil or sinful thoughts.¹⁰²

In effect, at conversion believers experience: 1) justification, i.e. they are pardoned of their sins and declared righteous on the merits of Christ's atonement, 2) regeneration, i.e. they are "born again" and made alive unto God, and 3) adoption, i.e. they become God's sons and daughters and joint heirs with Christ. At this point, sanctification (i.e. the process of perfection) is begun. All Christians, even "newborn babes in Christ," are expected to not commit sin, for such is a part of repentance. However, perfection involves the process of cleansing one's thoughts, dispositions, and attitudes. Consequently, Wesley is only willing to affirm the attainment of perfection in mature believers, since he evidently does not believe that God typically makes this transformation in us in a short period of time, let alone in an instant.

Wesley is not speaking of flawless perfection, but of a relative state of moral perfection. Nevertheless, this type of perfection exceeds mere sincerity, since those who would be perfect must be "cleansed from pride, anger, lust, and self-will."¹⁰³ In order for

¹⁰¹ Wesley to Robert Carr Brackenbury, 15 September 1790, *WWJ*, 13:9.

¹⁰² Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," §12, *WWJ*, 11:376-7.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, §25.Q12, *WWJ*, 11:418.

this to take place, the Holy Spirit must reveal to believers the depths of their own depravity. One by one, carnal dispositions are renounced and essentially reversed, and this frees the soul to love God and others unconditionally and unreservedly. “Yea, we do believe that [God] will in this world so ‘cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit, that we shall perfectly love him, and worthily magnify his holy name.’”¹⁰⁴

Wesley contends that the moment in which perfection is attained “is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.”¹⁰⁵ Inward sanctification thus begins within the believer at the moment of justification, and “yet sin remains in him, yea, the seed of all sin, till he is sanctified throughout. From that time a believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace.”¹⁰⁶ Death to sin is typically a gradual process. Nevertheless, there must still be a terminus, a point at which the process is culminated.¹⁰⁷ For Wesley, the process of crucifying sinful desires is rarely, if ever, accomplished in a short amount of time. In fact, he clearly maintains that in referring to those who have attained perfection, “we are not now speaking of babes in Christ, but adult Christians.”¹⁰⁸ They can likewise be regarded as those who are “grown up into perfect men.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, “perfect” Christians are neither those who indefinitely progress but never attain, nor are they immature believers.

Wesley’s desire for assurance is not nearly as strong in Christian perfection as it is in justification. He acknowledges that a certain degree of uncertainty is inherent in

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., §28, *WWJ*, 11:445-6.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., §26, *WWJ*, 11:442.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., §17, *WWJ*, 11:387.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., §19, *WWJ*, 11:402.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., §12, *WWJ*, 11:374.

¹⁰⁹ Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” §15.(2), *WWJ*, 11:383.

perfection, most likely since it is more a process (which culminates at a particular point in time) than it is an event. Even the precise moment when the process is complete can be difficult to perceive.¹¹⁰ This is much different from the assurance received subsequent to justification (i.e. the witness of the Spirit) which is an instantaneous event.

Wesley's doctrines of assurance and Christian perfection are related in that they are both driven by Wesley's desire to be holy before God. Nevertheless, the two doctrines are formed in different ways. On the one hand, Wesley's doctrine of assurance was essentially an interpretation of his Aldersgate experience. In other words, Wesley theorized about what he had definitely experienced. On the other hand, Wesley never clearly testified to having attained Christian perfection, so this doctrine remained more theoretical and less focused on experience. It is true that Wesley was willing to allow the experiences and claims of others to influence his views on perfection, but this can largely be attributed to Scripture's silence concerning whether sanctification should be regarded as a process or as an event.¹¹¹

Wesley does not believe that attaining Christian perfection in this life is ultimately necessary for salvation. Rather, he avers that many Christians will not attain it until death or a little before.¹¹² In the same way, the witness of the Spirit is not necessary for salvation, yet it does testify to the reality of justification, which is what ultimately determines one's eternal destiny. However, the key difference between the two doctrines

¹¹⁰ Ibid., §26, *WWJ*, 11:442.

¹¹¹ Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 46.

¹¹² Wesley, "A Plain Account of Christian Perfection," §25.Q25, *WWJ*, 11:423. Charles Wesley held an even stronger position. He objected to John's insistence that Christian perfection can be attained in this life, and he became increasingly convinced that it is not attainable until death. See Maddox, *Responsible Grace*, 186.

is that striving for perfection is portrayed as a duty while the witness of the Spirit is seen as a privilege.

Love as the Chief Moral Motive

Wesley believes that love for God is the primary affection in morality, an affection for which Kant has little, if any, use at all. Kant does speak of the duty of gratitude,¹¹³ and it could be argued that this implies the necessity of having gratitude toward God. However, given his definition of moral purity, as well as the hypothetical nature of his concept of God, it is difficult to conceive how love for God can be personal for him as it is for Wesley. I am inclined to agree with George Croft Cell when he alleges that although Kant provides a plausible account of moral transformation, he completely neglects what Wesley considered to be the core of religion, namely, “the continual sense of total dependence on God.”¹¹⁴ A Wesleyan commitment to duty is ultimately a commitment to God and to others. It is not impersonal as it is in Kantianism.

Commenting on I Corinthians 13, Wesley asserts that even the most noble acts are done in vain if they are not motivated by love.¹¹⁵ He thus believes that morality originates with love itself. Indeed, love is what motivates us to obey the moral law, but this is not the mere respect for duty that Kant advocates. Rather, Wesley affirms the scriptural maxim that if we love God, we will keep his commandments. “Love rejoices to obey; to do, in every point, whatever is acceptable to the beloved. A true love of God

¹¹³ Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 203-4 [6:454-6].

¹¹⁴ George Croft Cell, *The Rediscovery of John Wesley* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1935), 203.

¹¹⁵ Wesley, Sermon 149, “On Love,” §1, WW, 4:382 [J, 7:494-5].

hastens to do his will on earth as it is done in heaven.”¹¹⁶ In this way, obedience to God is not burdensome, because it is motivated by personal love. In general, Wesley feels that giving and receiving love is a necessary part of living the good life, because it is necessary if one is to have “a steady, lasting satisfaction.”¹¹⁷

Wesley insists that true religion must include both love for God and love for others. He believes that too many Christian thinkers emphasize one to the neglect of the other. For example, whereas he criticizes Hutcheson for ignoring love for God, he disparages Wollaston for overlooking the importance of love for others.¹¹⁸ Darlene Fozard Weaver suggests that the same type of imbalance still exists in Christianity. “The relative silence in contemporary Christian ethics about love for God yields an anemic theological anthropology. Too often, the person’s self-transcendence is truncated and the religious dimension of human life is neglected.”¹¹⁹

What is needed is a thorough integration of spirituality and ethics. For Wesley, this integration is rooted in the connection between faith and love. He does not regard faith as an end in itself, but as the means to the end of love. “Let this love be attained, by whatever means, and I am content; I desire no more. All is well if we love the Lord our God with all our heart and our neighbors as ourselves.”¹²⁰ Wesley feels that we often try to compensate for the lack of love in our hearts. However, “nothing is higher than this, but Christian love, the love of our neighbor flowing from the love of God.”¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Wesley, Sermon 10, “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse I,” §2.7, *WW*, 1:280 [*J*, 5:120].

¹¹⁷ Wesley, Sermon 149, “On Love,” §3.4, *WW*, 4:386 [*J*, 7:497-8].

¹¹⁸ Wesley, Sermon 90, “An Israelite Indeed,” §§1-4, *WW*, 3:279-81 [*J* 7:37-9].

¹¹⁹ Darlene Fozard Weaver, *Self Love and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2002), 45.

¹²⁰ Wesley to John Smith, 25 June 1746, §9, *WW*, 26:203 [*J* 12:78-9].

¹²¹ Wesley, Sermon 91, “On Charity,” §2.6, *WW*, 3:300 [*J* 7:51].

Wesley also allows a legitimate place for self-love in his concept of perfection. Nevertheless, he recognizes the need to limit self-love and place it in proper perspective, for he believes that arrogance is pervasive and morally destructive. As a matter of fact, he condemned both the skeptics and the enthusiasts for their pride.¹²² However, rather than view self-love as something that should be eliminated, Wesley believes that love for God and love for others is ultimately what prevents “pride, vanity, and self-will” from tainting our words and actions.¹²³ True moral motivation includes humility, and the primary way humility is displayed is through obedience and submission to God.

Weaver agrees that love for God should serve as a norm for self-love, ruling out works righteousness as well as a quietism that reduces love to a faith which presupposes that God’s grace essentially nullifies human freedom and responsibility.¹²⁴ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop likewise argues that both self-interest and other-interest are “absolutely essential to mental health.” Self-love is only sinful when it crowds out “other selves.”¹²⁵ Albert Outler concurs, asserting that both self-loathing and narcissism should be avoided, since they corrupt the relationships that we have with others.¹²⁶

Love as the Motivational Link Between Assurance and Perfection

It was Wesley’s experience of assurance that led him to believe that we can only properly love God if we have a personal conviction that our sins are forgiven.¹²⁷ At

¹²² Wallace G. Gray, “The Place of Reason in the Theology of John Wesley” (Ph.D. dissertation; Vanderbilt University, 1953), 216.

¹²³ Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” §51, WW, 11:64 [J 8:20].

¹²⁴ Weaver, 136.

¹²⁵ Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972), 203.

¹²⁶ Albert C. Outler, *Theology in the Wesleyan Spirit* (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), 83.

¹²⁷ Wesley, “An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion,” §61, WW, 11:70 [J 8:24].

justification we thus feel the love of God shed abroad in our hearts.¹²⁸ Essentially, “we cannot love God till we know he loves us.”¹²⁹ In fact, when we receive assurance that God has forgiven us, we experience not only love, but also peace and joy.¹³⁰ It is not surprising that Wesley should assert this, since he believes that consciousness of our inward dispositions is part of the indirect witness of conscience. It is a part of discerning our own sincerity.¹³¹

Wesley claims that new believers are consequently delivered from the guilt of sin, but not from its power.¹³² Yes, believers are clearly aware that they are acceptable to God, yet they “continually feel an heart bent to backsliding, a natural tendency to evil, a proneness to depart from God and cleave to the things of earth.”¹³³ Moreover, although believers know that they have been pardoned, they still realize that they deserve punishment.¹³⁴ All of this serves to motivate the believer to pursue perfection. In other words, we are grateful to God for pardoning us of our sins, especially since we realize that we do not deserve forgiveness. We are also aware that our love for God is lacking in fundamental ways. As a result, we are motivated to increase our love for God and seek to love him with our whole hearts. This is why Wesley says that Christian perfection is comprised in the word “love.”¹³⁵

To love God is thus “to delight in him, to rejoice in his will, to desire continually to please him, to seek and find our happiness in him, and to thirst night and day for a fuller enjoyment of him.” In effect, as Christians “we are called to love God with all our

¹²⁸ Wesley, Sermon 43, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” §1.4, *WW*, 2:158 [*J*, 6:45].

¹²⁹ Wesley, Sermon 11, “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse II,” §3.5, *WW*, 1:290 [*J*, 5:127].

¹³⁰ Wesley, Sermon 45, “The New Birth,” §2.4, *WW*, 2:193 [*J*, 6:70].

¹³¹ Wesley, Sermon 11, “The Witness of the Spirit, Discourse II,” §3.2, *WW*, 1:289 [*J*, 5:126].

¹³² Wesley, Sermon 13, “On Sin in Believers,” §4.4, *WW*, 1:328 [*J*, 5:152].

¹³³ *Ibid.*, §3.7, *WW*, 1:323 [*J*, 5:148].

¹³⁴ Wesley, Sermon 14, “The Repentance of Believers,” §1.16, *WW*, 1:344-5 [*J*, 5:163].

¹³⁵ Wesley, Sermon 76, “On Perfection,” §1.4, *WW*, 3:74 [*J*, 6:413].

heart.” However, this does not preclude loving others sincerely.¹³⁶ Our love for God actually bolsters the love that we have for others and for the moral law. In this way, the Love Commandments are not only tied to each other, they are indeed the foundation of the law and the prophets.

The Need for Pure Motives

Wesley sees the person as a psychosomatic unity. He thus does not bifurcate the material and the spiritual elements of our existence as the idealists and the materialists do.¹³⁷ He also does not bifurcate the rational and the empirical as is the tendency of Kant and other rationalists. Rather, Wesley understands moral purity to involve the proper ordering and regulation of our affections, and this is not easily accomplished. It is this emphasis which leads Isabel Rivers to regard Wesley’s concept of perfection as “more demanding and ambitious” than the concept of benevolence proposed by Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, or Hume.¹³⁸ As Ray Dunning suggests, if Wesleyan perfection is to entail a change of character, then it must include the transformation of dispositions, perceptions, and intentions.¹³⁹

There is no doubt that the Wesleyan emphasis on moral purity is personal. As Wynkoop states, “It has always been the most profound conviction of Wesleyanism that the Bible speaks to the moral relationships of men and not about sub-rational, non-

¹³⁶ Wesley, Sermon 149, “On Love,” §§2.2-3, *WW*, 4:383 [*J*, 7:495].

¹³⁷ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley's Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998), 156.

¹³⁸ Isabel Rivers, *Reason, Grace, and Sentiment*, vol. 1, *Whichcote to Wesley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1991), 234.

¹³⁹ H. Ray Dunning, “Christian Perfection: Toward a New Paradigm,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 33, no. 1 (1998): 159.

personal areas of the self.”¹⁴⁰ For Wesley, the power of sin is expelled by the power of affection, specifically, love for God and for others.¹⁴¹ This can be seen in the way that Wesley describes the perfect person:

This man can now testify to all mankind, “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, yet not I, but Christ liveth in me.” He is holy, as God who called him is holy, both in life and in all manner of conversation. He loveth the Lord his God with all his heart, and serveth Him with all his strength. He loveth his neighbor (every man) as himself ... And whatsoever he doeth, either in word or deed, he doeth it all in the name, in the love and power, of the Lord Jesus. In a word, he doeth the will of God on earth as it is done in heaven.¹⁴²

Notwithstanding Wesley’s account of love, Kant’s analysis cannot be ignored completely. He is correct to point out the subjective nature of personal love. If love becomes too personal, then it becomes too subjective and often leads to self-deception about one’s motives. For this reason, personal commitment must be judged objectively. Lara Denis believes that even though the assistance of other people may not be necessary in the pursuit of our own perfection, they can still contribute to it in key ways.¹⁴³ I suggest that one of the most beneficial ways others can contribute to our moral progress is by providing us with a third person perspective so that we might be judged as objectively as possible. To be sure, Wesley recognizes the dangers of self-deception and narrowness of perspective. As such, he consistently stresses the need for Christians to be accountable to one another.

In contrast, Kant espouses a more rationalistic view of love that is indeed objective, but he takes matters too far and ends up with an impersonal, abstract love. For

¹⁴⁰ Wynkoop, 167.

¹⁴¹ E. W. H. Vick, “John Wesley’s Teaching Concerning Perfection,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 4 (1966): 207-8, n. 16.

¹⁴² Wesley, preface to “A Collection of Hymns and Sacred Poems” (1745), §§5-6, *WWJ*, 14:329-30.

¹⁴³ Lara Denis, “Kant on the Perfection of Others,” 35.

Kant, everything revolves around the respect for duty, so we respect others to the extent that they respect duty. He is right when he claims that we naturally respect the goodness of the will in people who love us, but this cannot be attributed entirely to an admiration of their moral character. Rather, we also appreciate sincere love because it indicates that others value us. This is why we can find it flattering to be loved even by those whose moral character is not admirable. It is true that personal love can be selfish, but in its highest form personal love demands that we value people for their own sake, that they be treated as ends and not merely as means to other ends. However, personal love values others for many reasons besides their respect for duty or their status as rational beings.

Wesley provides a rather extensive description of universal love, which integrates many of these points.

Above all, remembering that God is love, [the perfect Christian] is conformed to the same likeness. He is full of love to his neighbor, of universal love ... Neither does he love those only that love him, or that are endeared to him by intimacy of acquaintance ... For he loves every soul that God has made, every child of man, of whatever place or nation. And yet this universal benevolence does in nowise interfere with a peculiar regard for his relations, friends, and benefactors, a fervent love for his country, and the most endeared affection to all men of integrity, of clear and generous virtue.

His love, as to these, so to all mankind, is in itself generous and disinterested, springing from no view of advantage to himself, from no regard to profit or praise, no, nor even the pleasure of loving. This is the daughter, not the parent, of his affection. By experience he knows that social love, if it mean the love of our neighbor, is absolutely different from self-love, even of the most allowable kind, just as different as the objects at which they point. And yet it is sure, that, if they are under due regulations, each will give additional force to the other, till they mix together never to be divided.

And this universal, disinterested love is productive of all right affections ... It makes a Christian rejoice in the virtues of all and bear a part in their happiness at the same time that he sympathizes with their pains and compassionates their infirmities ...

The same love is productive of all right actions ... It guides him into a uniform practice of justice and mercy, equally extensive with the

principle whence it flows. It constrains him to do all possible good, of every possible kind, to all men, and makes him invariably resolved, in every circumstance of life, to do that, and that only, to others, which, supposing he were himself in the same situation, he would desire they should do to him.

And as he is easy to others, so he is easy in himself. He is free from the painful swellings of pride, from the flames of anger, from the impetuous gusts of irregular self-will. He is no longer tortured with envy or malice, or with unreasonable and hurtful desire. He is no more enslaved to the pleasures of sense, but has the full power both over his mind and body, in a continued cheerful course of sobriety, of temperance and chastity ...

And he who seeks no praise, cannot fear dispraise. Censure gives him no uneasiness, being conscious to himself that he would not willingly offend, and that he has the approbation of the Lord of all ... So that, in honor or shame, in abundance or want, in ease or pain, in life or in death, always, and in all things, he has learned to be content, to be easy, thankful, happy.¹⁴⁴

Notice that when Wesley speaks of “disinterested love,” he is not indicating the absence of self-love altogether. What he asserts is that genuine love for others is not ultimately motivated by self-love. Rather, people are loved for their own sakes. In fact, Wesley claims that self-love and universal love, when properly regulated, can actually strengthen one another. As such, Wesley emphasizes universality in love without sacrificing personal love or self-love in the process. Moreover, love is not confined to personal affection, but encompasses a respect for morality and duty. This is certainly a more robust account of love than Kant offers, and it consequently proves itself to be more fruitful.

¹⁴⁴ Wesley to the Rev. Dr. Conyers Middleton, 4 January 1749, §§6.1.5-11, *WWJ*, 10:68-70.

Conclusion

For Kant, even dutiful actions performed from feelings of love or sympathy do not have moral worth.¹⁴⁵ By excluding beneficent emotions as proper moral motives, Kant effectively discriminates against those who are naturally disposed to act from altruistic emotions more so than from duty alone.¹⁴⁶ According to Tom Sorell, Kant's ethics should either prescind from this type of circumstantial or constitutional luck, or not be equally binding on everyone.¹⁴⁷ However, Kant was aware of this dilemma as it appears in moral education. Moral incentives cannot determine the will, else freedom will be destroyed. On the other hand, mere inducements are generally insufficient for proper moral motivation. Kant concluded that a sense of duty should be developed before moral feeling can be properly realized.¹⁴⁸ In Wesleyan ethics, this emphasis is reflected in understanding love as the motivation for fulfilling the law.

Wesley does not regard love as a hindrance to keeping one's duty. Rather, love is the specific motivation for keeping the law.¹⁴⁹ In Wesley's mind, God's will cannot be separated from God's nature.¹⁵⁰ Consequently, love for God naturally includes a love for God's will, i.e. the moral law. Nevertheless, love is not limited to the mere performance of duty, because love seeks to act in ways beyond that which is demanded by duty alone.¹⁵¹ Even Kantians like Onora O'Neill realize that although such acts of supererogation are not addressed in many ethical systems, especially Kant's, they are still

¹⁴⁵ Wood, "The Emptiness of the Moral Will," 456.

¹⁴⁶ Walter E. Schaller, "Should Kantians Care about Moral Worth?" *Dialogue* 32 (1993): 32-3.

¹⁴⁷ Tom Sorell, "Kant's Good Will and Our Good Nature: Second Thoughts about Henson and Hermann," *Kant Studien* 78 (1987): 97.

¹⁴⁸ John R. Silber, "Kant and the Mythic Roots of Morality," *Dialectica* 35 (1981): 184-5.

¹⁴⁹ Dillman, 64.

¹⁵⁰ Wesley, Sermon 34, "The Origin, Nature, Properties, and Use of the Law," §3.7, WW, ??? [J 5:441].

¹⁵¹ William Edwin Sangster, *The Path to Perfection: An Examination and Restatement of John Wesley's Doctrine of Christian Perfection* (1943; reprint, London: Epworth Press, 1984), 155.

ethically admirable.¹⁵² As Donald Walhout points out, it is more practical to endorse acts of supererogation, so long as they do not conflict with morality, because they help to prevent pharisaic concern for others, i.e. being ultimately motivated by one's own virtue and perfection.¹⁵³

All love is not equally moral, since love can become narrow and self-centered in varying degrees. Kant avoided this motivational problem by precluding love from his definition of moral purity. He thought that if we could be driven solely by the respect for morality itself, only then we could be certain that our motives are pure. Unfortunately, this opens up other kinds of problems, as we have seen.

Wesley's emphasis on love as the chief moral motive solves the problems created by Kant's narrow definition of moral purity. However, it becomes the task at hand to evaluate the morality of love, if it is indeed to be the main factor in moral motivation. Love must be carefully scrutinized so as to determine the morality of motives in a given situation. Additionally, there will be a need to strive for the perfection of actions as well. As John Cobb indicates, the presence of love does not guarantee knowledge or understanding. Granted, a certain knowledge of the beloved is requisite to love. However, people who love God and others may not understand the benefit or harm of their actions, nor may they always agree as to "what actions properly express love."¹⁵⁴ In the end, a robust account of morality should begin with love as the chief moral motive, then it must focus on the morality of actions. In terms of our own morality, if careful

¹⁵² Onora O'Neill, *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructive Account of Practical Reasoning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1996), 206.

¹⁵³ Donald Walhout, "Kant's Conception of Nonmoral Good," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 3 (1972): 18-9.

¹⁵⁴ John B. Cobb, *Grace and Responsibility: A Wesleyan Theology for Today* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), 114.

scrutiny deems our motives and our actions to be moral, then perhaps we can have some assurance that we are making progress in the pursuit of perfection.