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From Revelation to Revolution: The Critique of Religion in Kant and Marx

1. On religion in Kant and Marx

Marx's best-known slogan concerning the role of religion in society is that it provides "the opium of the people" (Marx 1844: 72). For Kant, on the other hand, "morality leads necessarily to religion" (R, 6: 8).¹ In the first case, the route to authentic human emancipation seems to require the abolition of religion. In the second case, the very belief in human emancipation seems indissolubly tied to its endorsement. Kant seems to provide the most compelling justification of religion; Marx offers the most compelling rejection of it. The first seems to be a deist. The second is an atheist. What could their treatment of religion have in common?

There is plenty of textual evidence to suggest that reading Kant's and Marx's analysis of religion alongside each other is only useful to highlight the differences between the former's textbook idealism and the latter's textbook materialism. On the surface, Marx's critique of religion reads like a direct confutation of Kant's argument about the necessity of practical faith, a mockery of the comforting role that Kant seems to assign to it, within the limits of reason. It is therefore not surprising to see that, to the extent that scholarly literature has found it worthwhile to engage with a comparison between the two authors, the treatment of religion has often stood out as an example of

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1793] 1998) p.60, VI: 8, from now on abbreviated as R.

where reconciliation is beyond reach.² In this paper, I want to question that interpretation. I want to argue that Marx's attitude towards the role of practical faith is much more ambiguous than the dominant trend suggests. And I want to suggest that Kant's critique of religion in the very text that is supposed to justify its role, has much more radical implications than it is usually given credit for. While significant differences between the outlook of the two authors are obviously difficult to dismiss (and I will say more on that towards the end of the paper) my hope is that reading their analyses of religion alongside each other contributes to a more thorough appreciation of the political implications of Kant's thoughts on religion and their influence in the subsequent German idealist tradition. It is also important to critically interrogate and put pressure on those readings of Marx that have emphasised the weight of historical materialism at the expense of a more careful analysis of the moral assumptions that underpin his interest in human emancipation.³

The reception of Kant's and Marx's respective claims on religion by established authorities is a useful entry point to the intricacies of this debate. As is well-known, *Religion within the limits of reason alone* was judged by the Prussian censors a text that misused philosophy to "distort and disparage many of the cardinal and basic teachings of the Holy Scripture and of Christianity". Kant, whose reputation was by then well-established, was warned to expect "unpleasant measures" for his "continuing obstinacy".⁴ In the case of a very young Marx, there was more than a warning threat. The treatment of religion in his doctoral thesis, including the endorsement of Prometheus's proclamation "I detest all the gods" in its *Preface*, cost him the pursuit of an academic career (McLellan 1987: 9). Elsewhere I have discussed in greater detail the historical links between the writings of Marx and Kant, including the extent to which the thought of the former is influenced by the latter, both directly and in a shape mediated by Hegel's philosophy (Ypi 2-14). In this paper, I am interested in both what grounds and what follows from their critical engagement with traditional thinking about religion. My argument is that the critique of religion in both Kant and Marx is linked to an attempt to supersede dogmatic faith, and its reliance on revealed religion, in favour of a form of practical faith

² See, for example, Howard Williams's paper in this issue. But see also, for a contrasting interpretation, which highlights the affinities between the two authors and from which I have much learned Yovel (1980).

³ For more criticism of these readings see also Suzanne Love's paper in this issue.

⁴ See the text of the letter published in Immanuel Kant, "The Conflict of the Faculties," (hereafter CF) in *Religion and Rational Theology*, ed. Allen W. Wood and George Di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1798] 2001), p. 240, VII:7.

culminating in a revolution in (for Kant) moral and (for Marx) political attitudes. By active faith I mean a form of faith embedded in historical efforts to construct a universal ethical community as the condition of possibility for the achievement of full human emancipation and the realisation of the highest good in the world.⁵ By human emancipation I mean the historical, collective practice of progressively removing obstacles to the full realisation of humanity's moral potential. As we shall shortly see, the greatest difficulty with this enterprise concerns the nature of such obstacles. For both Kant and Marx, they are irreducible to the inimical intervention of particular inclinations or the hostility of nature, but due to human voluntary choices and the way they are entrenched in particular religious, social and political institutions. This is the challenge to which Kant's and Marx's analysis of religion is supposed to respond. The answer, for both, lies in a radical reshaping of the role of faith and its subordination to a thoroughly human emancipatory project. While Kant's theory remains aspirational and in some way reluctant to endorse the idea that such a project can ever be fully realised on earth, his account is an important point of departure to understand what is morally at stake in Marx's much more explicitly political stance.

2. The critique of religious authorities

Oddly enough, there is no better way to introduce the transition from revelation to revolution at the centre of my analysis of religion, than returning to Marx's (in)famous remarks on religion as the opium of the people. What seems at first like an unambiguous condemnation, turns out to be a more nuanced reflection on the role of religion in a world that has not yet achieved full human emancipation. Religion, Marx argues, is at the same time a reflection of that world, and a protest against it. Or to put it differently, religion is "the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet won through to himself or has already lost himself again" (Marx 1843: 72).

⁵ Kant's doctrine of the highest good is, of course, controversial. I side with those authors who see the concept as related to a practical duty to promote the highest good in the world and who defend Kant's emphasis on a secular rather than theological analysis especially in his later writings. For an important analysis along those lines, see Reath (1988), and also Yovel (1980). For a recent critique that emphasises Kant's commitment to a more religious interpretation, see Pasternack (2017). For my own analysis of the concept see Ypi (2011).

Marx does not think of himself as having been the first to come up with this criticism of religion. He sees it as a legacy of the German philosophical tradition immediately preceding him, and he underscores the relevance of that philosophical tradition by remarking that the criticism of religion is the first step towards a more general critique of society, it is “the pre-requisite to all criticism” (ibid). According to this tradition, Marx reports, “man makes religion, religion does not make man” (ibid.). It is well-known that Marx’s remarks here are strongly influenced by those of Feuerbach, and that in mounting this critique of religion Feuerbach was merely offering what he thought was the most plausible interpretation of Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit in the process of articulating the transition of human self-consciousness through different historical stages. What is much less well-established is how both Feuerbach’s and Hegel’s advancements would have been impossible without the radical shift in perspective pioneered by Kant. Let me explain.

For Kant too, just like for Marx in the passage that I have cited, humans make religion, religion does not make humans. Religion thrives in the tension between the awareness of the human being as the sole source of moral worth and a realistic assessment of obstacles to their full moral emancipation. Both historical religious institutions (in Kant’s terms “religion of roagation” or “of mere cult”) and moral religion (“the religion of *good* life conduct”) have their roots in this tension (R: 6, 51). Yet the way they combine the elements of protest and resignation have very different manifestations. In the case of religions of cult, when faced with adversity, human beings turn to the projection of God and ask for his assistance (grace) through the work of his intermediaries. The human being imagines a world in which “everything is again made good through the intercession of someone else who is favoured in the highest degree” and “transfers his conception of the human being (his faults included) over to the Divinity” (R: 6, 200). Such projection to God of the answer to the weaknesses of human conduct constitutes, on the one hand, a reflection of the perceived powerlessness of humans in the process of realising their moral goals. The comfort provided by religion expresses, to put it in Marx’s famous words, “the sigh of the oppressed creature”, “the soul of soulless circumstances” (Marx 1844: 72).

Notwithstanding this diagnosis, the effect of historical religious institutions on the face of such declared impotence is one that paralyses action even further. The worry, for Kant, is that faith in external assistance of this kind cultivates a passive attitude, which

relies on institutional intermediaries and so-called representatives of God to compensate for human lack of initiative. This merely consolidates institutional practices of domination that promise human salvation while merely stifling the active search of the good, entrenching “the dominion that the clergy has usurped over minds by pretending to have exclusive dominion on the means of grace” (R, 6: 200). In light of this, Kant’s critique of the hypocritical and reactionary nature of the religions of mere cult is as relentless as that of Marx. No efforts at human emancipation can succeed for as long as human beings hold on to the illusion that a divine will can compensate for the weaknesses and corruption of which they suffer. Such an attitude can only cultivate passive submission to the constituted order, deference to authority and a hypocritical subservience that undermines rather than reinforcing the promotion of autonomous moral ends. “The faith of a religion of service”, Kant argues, is “a slavish and mercenary faith” whereby “actions are extracted only through fear or hope, the kind which also an evil human being can perform” (R, 6: .115). Such “lazy and timid cast of mind (in both morality and religion), which has not least trust in itself and waits for external help, unharnesses all the forces of a human being and renders him unworthy even of this help” (R, 6: 57).

Marx’s critique of the comforting nature of religion and its effects on practical action takes a similar form. His analysis of the projection of properties of human beings to God reveals the same tendency to try and identify a force able to compensate for the weaknesses and deficiencies that are all too human. For Marx, in the “mist enveloped regions of the religious world [...] the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life” (Marx 1867: 473). Yet both authors are sensitive to the context in which this illusion emerges, and to the fact that it is, in some way, a necessary one. When Kant criticises the claims of a historical faith which is attached to the purely practical needs of reason, he argues that a similar link is “in accordance with unavoidable limitations of human reason” (R, 6: 115). For Marx, the epistemic limitations that Kant highlights are ultimately dependent on social-structural ones – a point to which I shall return. Yet he also understands that “it is necessary to give religious forces a spiritual form by erecting them into an autonomous power” against the human being (Marx 1933: 548). And like Kant he shows appreciation for a form of belief that moves away from the reverence of authorities in the direction of practical faith.

One paradigmatic example of the overlap is their analysis of Protestantism. Marx praises Luther for having planted the seeds of the transition from a religion of cults to a religion of the heart. Luther, Marx argues, “removed the servitude of devotion by replacing it by the servitude of conviction” and “even though Protestantism was not the true solution, it formulated the problem rightly”. The real issue, Marx argues, “was now no longer the battle of the layman with the exterior priest, it was the battle with his own interior priest, his priestly nature” (Marx 1844: 77). For Marx, the greatest legacy of Luther and the Reformation was to begin a revolution in the mind, which liberated human beings from religious deference to external authorities. But Marx is also aware that while Luther “destroyed faith in authority”, he restored “the authority of faith”. As he puts it, Luther “turned priests into laymen by turning laymen into priests. He liberated man from exterior religiosity by making man’s inner conscience religious. He emancipated the body from chains by enchaining the heart” (ibid.).

For Kant too, the shift from religion as subservience to external authorities to a form of practical faith that follows (rather than conditioning) human being’s duty to act in conformity with the moral law is an important step in the transition from institutionalised to moral religion. And while it is certainly possible to trace certain philosophical affinities between Kant’s religion of the heart and Luther’s (see Paulsen (1900) for an early classical discussion), Kant was just as cautious as Marx is in his overall assessment of Protestantism as an ecclesiastical faith and its contribution to this transition. The protestant church, for Kant, stood out as much as the catholic one for its “narrowness” of mind when it protested against the latter’s claims to “universally binding faith” while “it would often gladly exercise them itself, if it could” (R, 6: 109). As one scholar has recently put it, “Kant’s thought has little in common with the narrowly biblical religion of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli, and has even less in common with their Augustinianism and their deprecation of human reason”, his was more “the spirit of Erasmus and Nicholas of Cusa than that of Luther and Calvin” (Wood 1970: 1970).

It might be tempting to argue that Marx’s critique might apply just as much to the kind of moral faith that Kant carefully defends in his analysis of religion as it does to a protestant religion of conviction which ultimately enslaves the human being to itself. For Marx “religion is the illusionary sun which revolves around man, as long as he does not revolve around himself” (Marx 1844: 77). Obviously, Kant never went as far as the young Marx to articulate a demand for “the abolition of religion”, a call to “give up the illusions”

about the human condition as “a demand to give up a condition that requires illusion” (Marx 1844: 72). The period in which he wrote was very different from Marx’s and the orientation towards political action that pervades Marx’s writing is only there as a seed in Kant. The process Kant advocated was not one of radical abolition but a call for slowly abandoning a set of irrational beliefs for a more rational one (something to which the mature Marx would also return). But no one has done more than Kant to pioneer the Copernican outlook that animates Marx’s critique of religion, a critique which is in turn central to the study of the foundation of human action and its historical implications. Kant initiated the kind of philosophical revolution that, starting with a radical critique of institutionalised religion, culminates with the assertion that “for man the root is man himself” (Marx 1844: 77). He was the first German philosopher to insist that only a pure faith “based entirely on reason can be recognised as necessary” (R, 6: 115) and is able to contribute to the task of moral emancipation that practical philosophy has taken upon itself. He also explained that “on its own, morality in no way needs religion (whether objectively, as regards willing, or subjectively, as regards capability)” (R, 6: 4). And while Kant also recognises that historical religions contain a kernel of rational faith for contingent reasons, and “due to the unavoidable limitations of human reason”, he also alerts his readers to remain aware of their contingency. The appropriate attitude with regard to historical religions is therefore to interpret them as carrying “a principle for continually coming closer to pure religious faith until finally we can dispense of that vehicle” (R, 6: 4). Since revelation, Kant argues, can be interpreted to include “the pure religion of reason”, it is plausible to “start from some alleged revelation or other” and “to hold fragments of this revelation as a historical system, up to moral concepts, and see whether it does not lead back to the same pure *rational system* of religion” (R, 6: 4).

This defence of the claim that institutionalised religions appear to have a rational purpose when assessed from the standpoint of humanity’s own needs and demands, makes Kant the founding father of the German philosophical movement that Marx celebrates for articulating a “radical” (in the sense of grasping the roots of an issue) critique of religion which ends with the doctrine that “man is the highest being for man” (Marx 1844: 77). Likewise, Kant’s contextualisation of the point and purpose of religious authorities in light of the limitations of human reason, helps us come to grips with a theme of foremost importance for later German idealist thought: the supersession (or to

put it with Hegel, the *Aufhebung*) of religion in philosophy and the role of active virtue in promoting that transition. It is to this latter question, that I would now like to turn.

3. Evil, alienation and freedom

Kant's remarks on the role of historical religions in relation to the development of a pure faith of reason illuminates what is at stake in Marx's praise for the radical critique of religion developed by the more progressive strand of the German philosophical tradition immediately preceding him. The merit of Protestantism, as Marx saw it, had been the destruction of deference to institutionalised tradition in the direction of cultivating a religion of the heart, an internal faith in God with no need for external mediation. The merit of German philosophy was that of making this very idea of God a function of the needs and claims of humanity, its efforts to prioritise active virtue over the focus on heavenly grace. As Marx put it, while Protestantism turned all laymen into priests, the task of German philosophy was to "turn all priestly Germans into men", to "emancipate the people" (Marx 1844: 72). For him the radical critique of religion culminates in an emphasis on human freedom as reflected in the "categorical imperative to overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned, and despised" (Ibid.).

Let us bracket for a moment the analysis of the specific form that this critique of domination takes in the writings of Marx to focus on some parallels with Kant's account of freedom. Notice how for Kant too, the problem of religion arises in the context of an analysis of human freedom, when a moral human being starts to reflect on the question of "what sort of world he would *create*, were this in his power, under the guidance of pure practical reason (R, 6: 5). This idea that "every human being ought to make the highest possible *good* in the world his own *final end*" is, Kant argues, an "objective-practical proposition given through pure reason" (Ibid.). But the duty to realise the highest possible good in the world has to come to grips with human being's anthropological propensity to perform actions that are "so constituted that they allow the interference of evil maxims" (R, 6: 20). This propensity to evil and to undermining the realisation of moral dispositions is the main obstacle to humanity's moral emancipation.

It is important to notice that the root of what Kant calls evil has emphatically nothing to do with *nature* understood as something external to human beings but rather

with their own power of choice. As Kant puts it, “the ground of evil cannot lie in any object *determining* the power of choice through inclination, not in any natural impulses, but only in a rule that the power of choice itself produces for the exercise of its freedom” (Ibid.). Indeed, Kant insists, it would be futile to enquire further if anything other than human being’s own capacity to adopt particular maxims is at the basis of this choice since “if this ground were ultimately no longer itself a maxim, but merely a natural impulse, the entire exercise of freedom could be traced back to a determination through natural causes – and this would contradict freedom” (Ibid.). Therefore, the main obstacle to human emancipation and the realisation of the highest good in the world, the propensity to evil “can only attach to the moral faculty of choice” (R, 6: 31). Inclinations might only make more “difficult the *execution* of good maxims opposing them” but “genuine evil consists in our *will* not to resist the inclinations when they invite transgression, and this disposition is the really true enemy” (R, 6: 58).

Acts of free will rather than natural inclinations are therefore the prime stumbling block to human emancipation and to human beings’ realisation of the highest good in the world. In principle, the human species is capable to set and pursue moral ends that earn its members the title of “titular lord of nature” and put them at the centre of a teleological system whereby the ends of nature are subordinated to their moral purposes (CJ, 5: 431).⁶ But in practice, and all too often, the decisions humans make are contrary to their moral vocation. Evidence of such a corrupt propensity to evil is provided by the multitude of examples “that the experience of human deeds parades before us”, both in so-called civilised societies and outside them. Unprovoked cruelty, falsity, hypocrisy, hostility towards each other all suggest, for Kant, that “we shall have enough of the vices of culture and civilization (the most offensive of all) to make us rather turn our eyes away from the doings of human beings” (R, 6: 33). Kant’s list of the evils of civilisation overlaps with that of Marx, as does his denunciation of the “splendid misery” and “inequality among people” , and his critique of commercial societies whereby “the majority provides the necessities of life [...] for the comfort and ease of others [...] and are maintained by the latter in a state of oppression, bitter work and little enjoyment” (CJ, 5: 432, for more discussion on this point see also Ypi 2014). He further argues that “ambition, love of power, and greed, especially on the part of those who are in power” render war, as a condition directly

⁶ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, [1793] 2000) 298., 5: 431, hereafter CJ.

antithetic to human emancipation “almost inevitable” (CJ, 5: 432). They seem to condemn to the status of “mere phantasy” both the “philosophical chiasm, which hopes for a state of perpetual peace” as much as “theological chiasm, which awaits for the completed moral improvement of the human race” (R, 6: 34).

For Kant, the kind of the will that needs to be actively fought on the way to realising human emancipation is human made. It results from the propensity to evil that vitiates humans’ power of choice and is evident in the institutions and practices that shape human lives and which also require radical reshaping. We saw that for Marx, taking up the categorical imperative implicit in the German philosophical critique of religion demanded of human beings that they “overthrow all circumstances in which man is humiliated, enslaved, abandoned, and despised” (Marx 1844: 77). The difference between good and evil does not lie in the difference between the incentives that human beings incorporate in their maxims but in how they are subordinated to each other, or to put it with Kant in which of the two the human being “makes the condition of the other” (R, 6: 36). But if domination is reflected in the adoption of a maxim contrary to moral purposes, it is also clear that domination does not annihilate the power of the moral law. Indeed, even the worst human being, Kant argues, “does not repudiate the moral law in rebellious attitude to it” (R, 6: 35). This is also why fighting evil is a historical duty of the human species. Since evil is found in human beings as acting freely, Kant argues, it must equally be possible for them to outweigh it through our actions (*muß es zu überwiegen möglich sein*) (R, 6: 37).

Of course, Kant also emphasises that in addition to being *imputable*, evil is *radical*, and in that sense perhaps one cannot hope to fully extirpate it (R, 6: 37). His stance here is different from that of Marx, and his conception of the human will in its relation to external circumstances more pessimistic. Marx is not interested in the metaphysics of evil and its relation to free will but in the critique of modern commercial societies and of the corruption, selfishness and cruelty associated with the inequalities they generate. Yet, domination in his case too is human made and constitutes a main hindrance to freedom. As in the case of Kant, hindrances to freedom become transparent through the analysis of the social institutions and practices that shape human co-existence and constitute a main source of political upheaval and social conflict. Interesting to emphasise here is the relation between that diagnosis and the role of human freedom in Marx’s analysis of the development of the human species. Central to that account is a certain interpretation of

the tension between the moral potential of the human species and the historical obstacles preventing the realisation of that potential. We saw that for Kant the human being is entitled to be considered an ultimate end of nature on condition that it has “the understanding and the will to give to nature and to himself a relation to an end that can be sufficient for itself independently of nature” (CJ, 5: 431). What hinders that potential is the way in which human beings end up choosing selfish or corrupt maxims over moral ones in virtue of self-love, or as a result of practices and habits that encourage envy, corruption, inequality and thirst for power.

For Marx too, the freedom of the human species consists in the ability of human beings to subordinate nature and to set ends for themselves. As he puts it, contrasting animals and human beings “the animal is immediately one with its vital activity. It is not distinct from it”. But the human being, on the other hand, “makes his vital activity itself into an object of his will and consciousness.” This is exactly what singles him out as “a species-being”, not merely the ability to use means for ends in general but especially the relation to “himself as to the present, living species”, the relation to itself as “a universal and therefore free being” (Marx 1844/1932: 89). An animal, Marx argues, “produces only under the pressure of immediate physical need, whereas man produces freely from physical need and only truly produces when he is thus free” (Marx 1844/1932: 90). This changes the perception of oneself and of other members of the human species, human’s self-conscious perception of themselves. What singles out the human species is its ability to relate to ends in general in a way that is not determined by natural constraints. It is through this relation that the unique freedom of human beings in choosing ends independently from nature is manifested. To put it with Marx, “man makes his vital activity itself into an object of his will and consciousness” (Marx 1844/1933: 89). This ability to make one’s own life the object of one’s own will and knowledge is what singles out a species being from merely animal activity. It is “the only reason for his activity being free activity” (Marx 1844/1933: 89).

Central to Marx’s analysis is here the gap between the potential recognition of the species being in human activity and the historical distortion of this potential as a result of particular social practices and human decisions. Marx’s critique of commercial societies in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* is intended to illustrate precisely how the freedom of human beings as species beings is perverted in the way in which labour relations under capitalist conditions of production corrupt human beings’ relation

to ends in general and to each other as ends in themselves. Marx's category of alienated labour picks up on the gap between human potential and human reality when it comes to the background constraints informing the selection of ends in general (or, to put it with Kant, the adoption of maxims for action) and to the recognition of these ends as a result of free choice. Alienated labour appears when the worker relates to the *product of his labour* as to an *alien* object. Alienated labour is the kind of labour that creates a world that the worker does not recognise as one of his own making.⁷ The more, Marx says, "the worker exerts himself in his work, the more powerful the alien, objective world becomes which he brings into being over against himself, the poorer he and his inner world become, and the less they belong to him" (Marx 1844/1932: 89). Alienated labour is labour directed to the mere satisfaction of one's needs which thereby degrades "man's own free activity to a means" and turns "the species-life of man into a means for his physical existence" (Marx 1844/1932: 91). While the free activity of a species being consists in the subjection of the external world to human beings' will and consciousness, alienated labour "reverses the relationship so that, just because he is a conscious being, man makes his vital activity and essence a mere means to his existence" (Marx 1844/1932: 90).

Therefore, for both Kant and Marx, the prime obstacle to human emancipation consists in hindrances to the free development of the human beings, understood as the ability to set and pursue ends independently of nature and in conformity with their own intelligence and good will. This obstacle is human made, it is *emphatically* not due to the effects of natural inclinations. Propensity to evil, Kant emphasises, "can only attach to the moral faculty of choice" (R, 6: 31). To understand the way, it hinders free human agency, we need to analyse the relation of human will to the external world, and the background conditions under which certain decisions are taken. For Kant, the analysis of such background conditions takes the form of an exploration of humans' "propensity for evil" where "propensity" indicates "the subjective ground of the possibility of an inclination (habitual desire, *concupiscentia*) in so far as this predisposition is contingent for humanity in general" (R, 6: 29). Such propensity comes in degrees, it can be explained as frailty of human will, impurity in the pursuit of moral goals, or depravity in the active perversion of their course (R, 6: 29). And yet, all of this, Kant insists, afflicts human beings

⁷ For further discussion of this point and some important parallels with Kant's theory see also Rainer Forst's discussion of alienation in this issue.

to the extent that they live in association with each other: “they do not come his way from his own raw nature, so far as he exists in isolation”, but rather from the comparison with other human beings “to whom he stands in relations of association” (R, 6: 93). The human being is poor, Kant argues, in Rouseauian fashion, “only to the extent that other human beings will consider him poor and will despise him for it” (Ibid.). Civil society is the social condition in which “envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, *as soon as he is with other human beings*” (Ibid.).⁸

For Marx, the analysis goes much further and takes the form of an exploration of the more specific social conditions under which these dispositions thrive. Competition for resources, the desire for profit, the accumulation of power, the analysis of the drive to realise certain human inclinations are all the evils associated to the triumph of civil society in modern social conditions and pervert the moral purpose of human beings as species being. As Marx puts it, the “sum of productive forces, capital funds, and social forms of intercourse, which every individual and generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as ‘substance’ and ‘essence of man’, and what they have deified and attacked” (Marx 1844/1932: 189). As we can see, the discussion of the relation between morality and society is here rather different, for Kant the issue is one of the will’s radical “propensity to evil”, while Marx focuses on alienation as a condition of modernity. Yet, in both cases the analysis also reveals how the free pursuit of moral ends is hindered by immoral human choices and ways of organising human relations which actively obstruct or pervert their course. And yet, because the obstacle to human emancipation is in both Kant and Marx dependent on human agency, the kind of hindrance to freedom that both emphasise is in principle possible to tame (in the case of Kant) and overcome (in the case of Marx). And in both cases, the way to achieve these emancipatory goals is through active struggle and the creation of an ethical community, cosmopolitan in scope, anchored in political change (if not entirely reducible to it) and understood as a collective historical enterprise through which human attitudes and dispositions are revolutionised. The next section explains how.

⁸ For more discussion of these points, see also Wood 1998 and Ypi 2010.

4. "The Kingdom of God is come into us"

The previous sections emphasised how Kant and Marx both reject institutionalised religion in the name of a radical understanding of the human species as essentially free and in control of its fate, without a need for external masters to determine its course of action. They both however also insist that human beings are equally prone to applying their capacity for choice to the pursuit of immoral ends, thus perverting the development of free agency and obstructing the full development of the species-being (or, for Kant, the realisation of the highest good in the world). Therefore, for both the main challenge of human emancipation is to narrow the gap between what human beings are under particular social circumstances and what they ought to be. But how can those who are prone to this perversion also be in charge of remedying it? If human beings are alienated, how can they overcome alienation? As Kant famously put it, "how can an evil tree bear good fruit"? (R, 6: 45).

For Kant, the answer lies in the fact that since the human being is in the current condition through his own fault, "he is *bound* at least to apply as much force as he can muster in order to extricate himself from it" (R, 6: 93). But since the obstacle becomes particularly intractable when human beings find themselves living in association with others, the solution will also have to be a collective one, or else the human species will constantly be in danger of a relapse. As Kant puts it, to exit a condition in which the evil maxim prevails over the good one, a collective effort is required, one that leads to the establishment of "a union which has for its end the prevention of this evil" and which forms "an enduring and ever-expanding society, solely designed for the preservation of morality by counteracting evil with moral forces" (ibid.).

For Marx, the emphasis on the power of critique, the theoretical insistence on the capacity of humans, in principle, to break free from their condition of dependence is, also not enough: "The weapon of criticism cannot, of course, supplant the criticism of weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force". But interestingly, Marx also insists that theory too "as soon as it seizes the masses" will "become material force" (Marx 1844: 77). There are important affinities here with Kant's analysis of virtue which has an active component, a component that contains the ground for struggling against evil and that requires the concerted efforts of all human beings to rally under the banner of virtue "so that they may congregate under it and thus at the very start gain the upper

hand over evil and its untiring attacks” (R, 6: 94). As Kant puts it, “to become a morally good human being is not enough to simply let the germ of the good which lies in our species develop unhindered; there is in us an active and opposing cause of evil which is also to be combatted” (R, 6: 57).⁹

For Kant, the kind of community responsible for promoting a collective struggle against domination by the evil principle is “an ethical community”, and in so far as the principles to which it asks human beings to subscribe are public and take the form of “laws of virtue” it can be called “an ethical state”. An ethical state has important analogies with a political state. Firstly, just like the political state, it is grounded on the necessity to overcome the (ethical) state of nature, a condition under which “each individual prescribes the law to himself, and there is no external law to which he, along with the others acknowledges himself to be subject” (R, 6: 95). Secondly, just as with the political state, the necessity of an ethical state is triggered by the recognition of the perceived insufficiency of individual efforts alone in their struggle against domination, and the need for coordination and continuity to collectively support such efforts. Thirdly, just as in the case of the political state of nature, it is a duty of human beings to abandon that condition and join a juridical community, in the case of the ethical community it is a duty to become member of a community that enacts laws of virtue.¹⁰

But there are also important differences. The first concerns the justification of coercion. While a political community uses coercion to ensure compliance, it would contradict ethical ends to compel citizens to join an ethical community, “since the latter entails freedom from coercion in its very concept” (R, 6: 95). Secondly, while a political community requires a sovereign legislator (*Gesetzgeber*) whose executive power reflects the supreme legislative authority of the people united in a political commonwealth, an ethical community relies on the idea of “someone other than the people” i.e. on the idea of God as the “supreme lawgiver of an ethical community” (*oberster Gesetzgeber eines ethischen gemeinen Wesens*) or “moral ruler of the world” (*moralischen Weltherrscher*) (R, 6: 99). Thirdly, there is a difference in scope. A political community is always a partial society with a particular location and circumscribed jurisdiction. On the other hand, since

⁹ Note the translation mistake (or typo) in the Cambridge edition where ‘the germ of the good’ (*Keim des Gutes*) is rendered as “the germ of god” (R, 6: 57).

¹⁰ Obviously my interpretation here emphasizes the secular nature of ethical community within Kant’s *Religion*. While that interpretation is contested (see Palmquist 2009 and Pasternack 2017 for critiques), I am not alone in holding it. For secular reconstructions to which I am sympathetic, see (Reath 1988: 606-7 and Wood 2000).

“the duties of virtue concern the entire human race, the concept of an ethical community always refers to the idea of a totality of human beings, and in this it distinguishes itself from a political community” (Ibid.). This implies that any particular multitude of human beings united to promote an ethical community cannot yet be called an ethical community. It is rather only “a particular society that strives after the consensus of all human beings (and, indeed of all finite rational beings) in order to establish an absolute ethical whole of which each partial society is only a representation or schema” (R, 6: 96).¹¹ A complete ethical community is therefore an ideal of reason, an ideal for the realisation of which it is a duty to work and which falls on the entire human species collectively and cumulatively.

The analysis of the parallels between political and ethical community shows that for Kant political emancipation is a first step towards moral human emancipation, it does not exhaust it. This points to an interesting relation between juridical and ethical community and to a distinctive analysis of the role of external coercion in bringing about complete human emancipation. Juridical and ethical emancipation do not oppose each other, rather the first is a precondition for the latter. As Kant puts it, without the foundation of a political community, an ethical community “could never be brought into existence by human beings” (R, 6: 94). But it is important to notice that while a political community supports the creation of an ethical community, it can never fully realise it. The realisation of an ethical community requires a fundamental transformation in human dispositions, a transformation that never be brought about merely through state coercion. A “new man”, Kant argues with a reference to *Genesis*, can “come about only through a kind of rebirth” and “a change of heart” (R, 6: 47). This requires a process of “moral education” which can only be consolidated by following the lead given by examples of good moral behaviour and by enabling virtue to become a habit “so that duty merely for itself beings to acquire in the apprentices heart a noticeable importance” (R, 6: 48). And even with all this, freedom is never fully asserted, it remains “constantly under attack” by the evil principle and the human being must remain “forever armed for battle” (R, 6: 93).

There are some interesting affinities between Kant’s and Marx’s views on the relation between political emancipation and human (moral) emancipation. For Marx too,

¹¹ On the relation between schema and ideal of reason, see Ypi (manuscript under contract).

freedom from domination cannot be achieved *only* through political means, however indispensable the latter may be. While reforming the state is necessary to initiate the process of human emancipation, the kind of revolution in disposition required to complete that process and realise a society in which “the free development of each is a condition of the free development of all” is one that no coercive institution could accomplish. As Marx puts it, “political emancipation is not the completed and consistent form of human emancipation” (Marx 1843: 51). Indeed, Marx argues, “the limitations of political emancipation are immediately evident in the fact that a state can liberate itself from a limitation without man himself being truly free of it” (Ibid.). This is because, Marx argues, “when man liberates himself politically, he liberates himself by means of a detour, through the medium of something else, however necessary that medium may be”.¹² Thus, just as for Kant political emancipation and human emancipation are not reducible to each other, for Marx too political emancipation is only a step in the direction of human emancipation. “Political emancipation”, Marx argues, “is of course a great progress. Although it is not the final form of human emancipation in general, it is nevertheless the final form of human emancipation inside the present world order” (Ibid.).

In talking about the kind of change required to control the human propensity to evil, Kant explains why political reform is necessary but insufficient to complete the process of human emancipation by referring to the importance of a change in human attitudes which no political revolution could deliver. As he puts it “that a human being should become not merely legally good but morally good ... cannot be effected through gradual *reform* but must be effected through a *revolution* in the disposition of the human being” (R, 6: 47). Marx cites Rousseau in arguing for how political emancipation is insufficient to achieve a similar revolution: “He who dares to undertake the making of a people’s institutions ought to feel himself capable, so to speak, of changing human nature, of transforming each individual [...] of altering man’s constitution for the purpose of strengthening it” (Marx 1843: 64). This in turn requires “to take away from man his own resources and give him instead new ones, alien to him” and “in the course of this process the individual human being becomes a species being, he recognises his own forces as social forces and organizes them” (Ibid.). Only when this has been achieved, Marx emphasises, will human emancipation be completed.

¹² Ibid.

For Kant, once this process begins to take hold, it becomes plausible to say that “the Kingdom of God is come into us” even if it means that only the principle of gradual transition to “a divine ethical state on earth” has put its roots “universally and *somewhere* also in public”. For this beginning also contains “the basis for a continual approximation to the ultimate perfection” (R, 6: 122). The *somewhere* (*irgendwo*) mentioned by Kant here is of course a specific place on earth, and the not-so-veiled reference to revolutionary France and the role it played in rendering the enlightened European public aware of the active struggle against domination, confirms Kant’s subsequent remarks on the increasing obsolescence of ecclesiastical faith and religious institutions to sustain the pure religion of reason.¹³ For Kant, “in the end religion will be freed of all empirical grounds of determination, of all statutes that rest on history and unite human beings provisionally for the promotion of the good” (R: 6, 122). Here, “at last the pure faith of religion will rule over all so that “God may be all in all” through a gradual transition from “ecclesiastical faith to the universal religion of reason” (Ibid.).

For Marx, the universal religion of reason that Kant emphasises in these passages is embodied in the utopia of communism, an ideal society that is thoroughly inclusive, universal in scope, and that no longer needs coercion to realise human emancipation. Communism represents an ideal of mutual cooperation that transcends the need for juridical enforcement by the state and that progressively promotes the transition to what Kant calls a divine ethical state on earth. As Marx puts it, “once the essential reality of man in nature, man as the existence of nature for man, and nature for man as the existence of man, has become evident [...] then the question of an alien being, of a being above nature and man—a question that implies an admission of the unreality of nature and man—has become impossible in practice” (Marx 1844: 104). Religion is as such not actively abolished, it progressively becomes irrelevant. With it the active opposition to religion in the form of atheism progressively loses its meaning. Atheism, Marx argues, “is a denial of God and tries to assert through this negation the existence of man; but socialism as such no longer needs this mediation [...] it is the positive self-consciousness of man no longer mediated through the negation of religion” (Marx 1844: 104).

Kant clearly does not go as far as Marx in emphasising the complete supersession of the need for religious faith and with it of an invisible church reinforcing ethical

¹³ For a discussion of the relation between Kant’s account of the French revolution and the development of moral dispositions, see Ypi 2014.

community. Yet he also insists that once the principle of transition to the universal religion of reason has planted its seeds, external religious authorities no longer support but hinder its development. “The leading-string of holy tradition, with its appendages, its statutes and observances, which in its time did good service, become bit by bit dispensable, yea, finally, when a human being enters upon his adolescence, turn into a fetter” (R, 6: 122). Equality, Kant argues, “springs from true freedom, yet without anarchy, for each indeed obeys the law (not the statutory one) which has prescribed for himself”. Such is the result not of an external revolution, but of the workings of “the principle of the pure religion of reason” as embedded in their ethical community, which contains the seed that “will one day enlighten the world and rule over it” (Ibid.).¹⁴ Marx radicalises this position in light of the change in the political conditions of Germany as well as his own distinctive critique of European commercial societies and more specific emphasis on capitalist social relations. Once the political revolution is completed, the ensuing revolution in ethical attitudes entails that a progressive community no longer needs religion to achieve human emancipation. It also does not actively seek to abolish it, rather it can afford to abstract from it “because it realises the human foundations of religion in a secular manner” (1844: 104).

Conclusion

Kant’s and Marx’s treatments of religion are of course very different: in relation to their historical context, in style, content, purpose and argumentation. The reading I have offered is clearly very selective, no doubt countless passages can be found to support an interpretation very different from my own. Kant’s audience was primarily academic and the style intentionally dry and abstract, perhaps, given the difficulties with Prussian censors, even more so in his writings on religion than elsewhere. Marx’s audience was not academic at all, his reflections on religion are much more scattered and unsystematic, and often appear in the context of criticism of his interlocutors or attacks to his political adversaries rather than in an attempt to offer sustained philosophical argument. Yet, as I tried to suggest in this paper, some common themes animate the reflection of each. Both

¹⁴ For the importance of the critique of religious authority at this point, see also Wood (1999: 318).

start with the fact of freedom as distinguishing human beings from all other species, both are concerned with the gap between the potential and the reality of human emancipation, both reflect on the social nature of obstacles to humanity's improvement. And when it comes to the answers offered, there are also some important affinities. For both Kant and Marx the duty to achieve human emancipation is a collective historical one. For both, such a duty relies on political emancipation but is not reducible to it. And in both cases, the necessity of ethical community has to do with the need to transform, indeed, revolutionise humans' attitude and mode of thinking so as to no longer need external authorities but only the purity of one's intentions to achieve moral progress. Marx radicalises Kant's message: the latter's analysis of the innate human beings' propensity to evil is an instance of alienation under particular social and political conditions. Yet in both cases what matters from a moral point of view is the perversion of the vocation of the human species due to the selfish and corrupt nature of particular social relations (the unsocial sociability on which commercial societies thrive). The answer for Kant is the foundation of an ethical community through an invisible church that aspires to sustain the fight against the propensity to evil even if one is never guaranteed to overcome it. For Marx, it is a much directly political solution, the overthrow of capitalist political relations and the progressive withering away of the state paving the way to the utopia of a communist society. Kant would have puzzled over Marx's optimism at this point, and most certainly he would have also disliked Marx's scepticism towards the state and the related preference for forms of radical direct democracy at the expense of representation. When it comes to their respective understandings of politics, there are of course innumerable other important differences of content, and it is impossible to offer a detailed analysis of such differences without engaging with Marx's critique of capitalism and how it complements Kant's more abstract and inevitably one-sided analysis of the unsociable-sociability of commercial societies. But all that is a story for another time.

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