

The Human Deficit according to Immanuel Kant:

The Gap between the Moral Law and Human Inability to Live by It

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Note from Sophie editor: This Month of Philosophy deals with the “human deficit” in relationship to the economic crisis. This deficit is a debt that cannot be satisfied, according to some writers. The idea of a human deficit can be perceived as a secularized idea of sin: The realization that humans are not perfect beings but are full of weaknesses. “Radical evil” naturally clings to humans, just as the Christian doctrine of sin has posited all along. We run across this concept even in the rational philosophy of no one less than Immanuel Kant. His interpretation, however, is not sufficiently radical. This essay makes clear that this deficit requires more than just morality to be rectified; It requires a transcendent perspective. That is precisely the point made by Soren Kierkegaard when he has an immanence ethic collide with a paradoxical faith.

While in the thought of the Greeks and in all sorts of religious creation myths a tragic conception of evil dominates, the Bible offers a perspective of evil as a human guilt or responsibility. Evil is not merely something external to the human will that strikes him as a tragic fate. The emphasis on guilt does not cancel the tragic aspect, but adds an essentially other dimension to evil, namely, the evil will. Understood in this way, the human deficit is not merely a general human condition, but it is radical in the sense that it has its seat in the root, the *radix*. Kant also speaks of “radical evil,” but the question is whether he goes deep enough.

The Human Deficit of Kant

In Kant’s ethics all emphasis is placed on the human capability to know the good and to do it. This capability is anchored in the good or unspoiled human will with which a human being can operate in conformity with laws that he himself

¹Original title, “*Het menselijk tekort volgens Immanuel Kant: De kloof tussen de morele wet en ons onvermogen ernaar te handelen.*” *Sophie*, February 2013, pp.23-25. Transl. Jan H. Boer.

can devise. The point of ethics is to determine those principles of action or maxims that can serve as objective moral law or categorical imperative that every rational creature can impose. Kant's ethics gives evidence of a strong faith in the rational capability of humans with which he determines what he ought to do.

This raises the question what this human deficit actually works. In contrast to his ethical works, in his book *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, Kant speaks radically about the radical evil in humans. On the one hand, according to Kant, evil is a free deed of choice, while on the other it is radical in nature: It is present in human nature from the time of birth. Kant cannot avoid acknowledging this fact, but he simultaneously does not want in any way to minimize the human capability to turn back to the good. The constant concern in his "rational religion" is the restoration of this good. The question now is how it is possible for Kant to simultaneously do justice to both the radical nature of the human deficit *and* to the ability to know and do the good.

The "Moral Gap" and God

In his study, *The Moral Gap*, John E. Hare points to a trinitarian structure in Kant's ethics. This consists of (1) the unconditional moral law; (2) our natural (dis)ability to respond to this law; (3) the source of this moral law. The natural human capability consists of the fact that we do strive for a life in conformity with the moral law, but that our success is frequently unsatisfactory. There is a "moral gap" between the unconditional demand of the moral law and the incapability of humans to live according to this law. If this gap is a definite fact, it becomes an acute problem for Kant. After all, in his thoughts "must" also implies being able, to "can." But if we are incapable, if we *cannot* live according to the moral law, are we still required to do so—*must* we do so regardless? In this context, the basis of his ethics would be unsettled or shaky.

At this point, Kant adduces the necessity of God's assistance. Note well: according to Kant, the crusher or destroyer of metaphysics, we cannot do without God in morality! The human inclination towards evil is so radical that it

cannot be overcome by humans themselves. In order to nevertheless persevere in the moral life we must have “moral faith,” according to Kant. Such a faith assumes trust in God’s work for us. Kant is here referring to a form of divine assistance. After all, God is the source of the moral demand. We need this source in order to bridge the gap between the unconditional moral law and our inability to live by this law.

While human beings know of a tension between the good will and the inclination towards evil, God cannot will anything else than the good, for He is the good. There is only One who is good and that is God. With Kant this is not a pronouncement he accepts on basis of revelation so much as a conclusion he draws on basis of reason. After all, we regard God as a perfect being. Amongst other things, this means He act in conformity with a good will. That is, according to objective moral laws. Only in God do the knowledge of the good and the perfect coincide. Kant is neither an atheist nor a deist, but a rationalistic theist—faith is rational in nature.

God is the one who enables us to bridge the moral gap. He is the authority who provides mean to our lives by giving us the moral law and, subsequently, to provide us assistance. We find that this moral law, which is what the law of God is, as an archetype in our spirit. To put it better, the moral law is the law of God and we are also capable of devising it with our reason. God’s assistance to us consists of His teaching us how to live according to His will, i.e., the moral law. The faith in God’s omnipotence and goodness, whereby He as a righteous Judge applies His good laws, helps us to persevere morally and not to allow us to become discouraged when we fall short. The significance of Christ is that He dwells in us and makes us new persons by teaching us to die to our sins.

The Deficit of Kant’s Deficit

Kant’s argumentation is not without problems. Not only is God in Kant’s “rational faith” a rational construct, but also the scope of this construction is too restricted. God’s assistance in Christ is a mere idea, not an active power who really introduced something from the outside. In fact, it once again depends on the human herself who is once again assigned by the demand to live

according to the moral law. Christ is reduced to an *idea* of humanity in us. The moral deficit is overcome by a moral enlightenment that the human experiences as taught by Christ. In addition, the Biblical dialectic of the old and the new person is changed: The new person leaves the old behind him for good. The human status of sinner changes to that of the righteous one. How does that happen? By means of the fact that he now pays full attention to the moral law. The solution for the moral deficit is thus found by overcoming the deficit with the aid of something that was impossible, namely, to do the moral good. It appears on balance that herewith Kant has insufficiently honoured the radical nature of evil. That is the result of evil not affecting the *rational* nature of humans. The inclination to evil does not affect human reason. Furthermore, there is the question of the return to the good does justice to the guilt that has already been established. The do the good now does not overcome the guilt established before. The gap between the good will and the human deficit cannot just be bridged by equipping the good will with a more solid religious-ethical basis.

Ethics and Religion in Kierkegaard

The problem with Kant's construction is that God is reduced to an ethical concept, namely to a transcendent agent who provides meaning to moral behavior. After Kant, the need to postulate such transcendence any longer gradually fell away. Ultimately as modernity advanced, the moral no longer needed that sort of faith. However, the problem of the moral gap is not therewith overcome. Such a solution is not possible within an autonomous ethic, but only within a religious perspective that emphatically distinguishes itself from the ethical demand. After all, religion a la Kant can do nothing but to motivate to the ethical duty to live according to the moral law. The fact of the moral gap brings us instead to other religious concepts such as guilt, penance and forgiveness.

Soren Kierkegaard's book, *Fear and Trembling*, that appeared under the pseudonym of Johannes de Silentio, can be regarded as an attempt to distinguish the core of a religious perspective from an autonomous ethic. He

does this DOOR HET VERTREKKEN at the point where a religious command does not square with the universal moral law in the Kantian sense. The pre-eminent example is the Biblical story in which God orders Abraham to offer up his son Isaac (Genesis 22). From an ethical perspective this is the highest where a person wills and does the good. This is a case where Abraham must love his son as himself. From the religious perspective Abraham is expected to obey the divine command to offer up his son. From an ethical point of view, this is nothing less than an attempt at murder.² Can we actually regard Abraham as the exemplary model for which he is known?

There is an enormous tension between the moral responsibility of the father for his son and the divine order to offer up the son. According to the author of *Fear and Trembling*, this tension can only be endured in faith: the paradoxical faith of Abraham that, in spite of everything, he will in one way or another save Isaac. This faith goes beyond all the bounds of reason. Johannes de Silentio himself cannot comprehend it.

The Irreducibility of Religion

In *Fear and Trembling*, this incomprehensible faith is distinguished from diverse characteristics of the contemporary rational ethic. This ethic is general or universal and especially immanent. This means among other things that the divine cannot really be distinguished from the moral. That is indeed what we saw above in Kant. The ethical itself is the absolute and there is no separate duty with respect to God. In contrast, Johannes de Silentio posits that Abraham shows there is an absolute duty with respect to God that does not jibe with a moral duty. Abraham's faith means that the individual transcends the general ethical laws and stands in an "absolute relationship to the Absolute³." Abraham acts as an individual and on basis of his relationship to God. In contrast, Kant condemns Abraham's intention to offer up his son from a general ethical perspective and adds that a god who demands such an offer can never be the true God, for God is good and the good is determined by the standards of

²Translator: In the cultural context of that time, I doubt it should be so seen. It was a common Pagan practice that represented common values.

³Translator: The capitalization of "Absolute" is mine and is due to interpretation.

reason. Thus, Kant does not accept the notion of an absolute duty towards God that is contrary to the rational morality. What Johannes de Silentio already feared, with Kant—and also with Hegel—God becomes a disappearing point, a powerless idea that derives its power merely from the ethical, but is in itself redundant. The purpose of religious experiences then serve especially to motivate people for the moral good. Kierkegaard intensifies Abraham's extreme situation in order to highlight the irreducibility of religious faith. Faith cannot be reduced to a form of ethics.

That is all good and well, but do we now not have a reversal that sacrifices the ethical in favour of an irrational faith? In *Fear and Trembling* a dangerous perspective seems to emerge that, for some, calls up the association of religious fundamentalism and extremism. Johannes is very conscious of possible excesses. He cautions emphatically that we must not follow Abraham in his readiness to offer, but in his faith. Even more important than that: the ethical as such does not come up for discussion. Criticized is not the ethical responsibility, but, rather, its universal and absolute claim. The moral responsibility—in the case of Abraham, that of his as father for his son—is held on to till the end. It is this responsibility that makes faith so paradoxical. It is only in this light that the discussion about the ethical can be fully comprehended.

Guilt and Penance

How then does *Fear and Trembling* offer an alternative for the bridging of the moral gap? The relationship to the transcendent God determines for us the limits of a self-sufficient, immanent ethic and makes us aware of our limitless responsibility and thereby of our human deficit. That is the first point: The human deficit is fully honoured. This becomes clear only at the end of the book and then with the help of the religious concept of sin: the moral law does not lead to a soluble guilt. At the end, an immanent-ethical perspective, such as Kant's, is at a loss with respect to this guilt and the fear that results from it. With Kant, God's nearness is nothing but a reaffirmation of the human ability to do the good.

It is the religious aspect that offers a solution, which is the second point: the penance or the remorse that is not enclosed in itself but makes an appeal to someone on the other side of the ethical, namely, God who forgives sin out of grace. The concepts of sin and forgiveness are hardly mentioned, since they are Christian categories that play no role in Genesis 22. In Kierkegaard's work as a whole they do play an important role. Johannes does suggest that from this religious perspective a new ethics emerges in which the human deficit as sin is acknowledged. Such an ethic, a "second ethic," is also mentioned in Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Anxiety*: This ethic does not ignore sin. Its ideal is not a demand for ideal standards so much as a penetrating consciousness of the reality of sin. It is easy to see that the ethic we are now discussing is at home in another order. The first ethic stranded on the sinfulness of the individual without having an explanation for it.⁴

The "first ethic" looks very much like the immanence ethic of Kant that strands on (the reality of—transl.) sin. Genuine acknowledgement of the human deficit requires a religious perspective in which that deficit is acknowledged, leads to remorse and also finds forgiveness. From this emerges a new ethic, but then something has changed at the very root or radix.

⁴Translator: The last five lines are the translation of a quotation from the Dutch-language version of the Danish book. That Dutch quotation itself is a summary of the original. For this reason, I do not treat my translation as an actual quotation: It would likely be too far removed from the original to qualify as such.