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MORAL CONSCIOUSNESS AS THE “VOICE OF CONSCIENCE” IN I. KANT’S RELIGIOUS PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: The notion of “conscience” is one of the most ancient components of the axiological sphere, the central factor of a person’s moral consciousness. The phenomenon is closely linked with the features of the ontological status of man in the world. The authors present the concept of conscience in the philosophical and religious tradition and examine the key ideas of Immanuel Kant’s religious philosophy in connection with moral consciousness as the “voice of conscience”. The idea of heterodoxy and contradiction between Immanuel Kant’s religious philosophy and Christian religious and philosophical tradition is substantiated.

Keywords: conscience, practical mind, perfect good, perfect virtue, moral law.

Introduction

The more complex the individual’s psyche, the more diverse the individual’s relationship with the environment, the higher the level of moral consciousness and the more developed the feelings of moral obligation, self-control, and assessment of their actions. One can assume that conscience is the ideal to which a person gravitates whenever making a choice. In a certain sense, all the spiritual and moral challenges of human existence as a whole begin with the fact that the development of culture presents a person with a choice, the semantic foundations of which are laid in the Universum of spirituality. Fulfilling the freedom of choice, each person chooses a life path as well as a system of value orientations (Cessario, 2009).

Conscience as a personal trait and spiritual value is the most frequently used in communica-

tion between people and in assessing their relationships. This indicates that conscience is the essential central feature of a person, an indicator of their versatile maturity (Croitoru & Munteanu, 2014). Nevertheless, it is believed that the category of conscience, unfortunately, remains conceptually vague and interpreted in different ways, which directly affects its personality transformative efficiency.

In case of doubts about the morality of the person’s behaviour or deviation from the norms of morality, a person turns, first of all, to their inner voice, conscience, and intensely reflects. As a result, a whole chain of mental phenomena is realized: awareness and experience of sin, suffering, and possible catharsis, the formation of a drive towards moral improvement (Granovskaya, 2004).

The problem of understanding the relationship between morality, conscience, and religion

is relevant, given the trends characteristic of societies with European culture, as well as Russian society. On the one hand, over the past several centuries, there has been a process of secularization, and the number of people without a clear religious identity, oriented toward secular goods and values, is growing. On the other hand, many people lose their value and life-purpose orientations, which creates serious social and psychological problems. Numerous vices of modern society are often united by a single concept of lack of spirituality, and in search of “remedies”, one turns, first of all, to religion. However, this is not a return to religiousness in the traditional (ecclesiastical) sense: more often, people look for ways to achieve inner spiritual harmony and harmony with the world around them in various religious and spiritual traditions without dogmatic acceptance of a religious doctrine. In this case, an unorthodox understanding of the religious-spiritual heritage that philosophy offers can be very helpful.

At the same time, some aspects of the classical philosophical heritage, which concerns the moral and value content of religious ideas, remain insufficiently studied and expounded in philosophical literature. This applies, in particular, to Kant’s religious philosophy and its connection with practical philosophy.

The purpose of the study is to expound on Immanuel Kant’s main ideas on religious philosophy in its connection with moral consciousness as the “voice of conscience”.

Theoretical Framework Conscience in Philosophic and Religious Tradition

Conscience, as the voice of God in man (God’s “You” in man in V. Frankl’s logotherapy (2000)), separates a moral act from a sinful one; it is a regulatory mechanism of morality, which is, according to Hegel (2019), “the process of internal identification of good and evil” (p. 187). The reward of conscience is a comfortable, contented, and calm state of mind, the so-called easy conscience (for a religious person, “living according to conscience” is living according to God’s commandments), and the torment of conscience is the punishment, which can be very cruel in its intensity, intolerable suffering.

That is, for a believer, “living according to

conscience” is living according to the commandments of God, in harmony with oneself and others, and an orientation towards charity in all one’s actions and thoughts. The pangs of conscience, according to E. I. Arinin, are the psychological core of repentance and redemption, which should lead the subject to tenderness, enlightenment, love, and benevolence (Arinin & Nefedova, 2005). Sincere repentance, a great inner desire for atonement for one’s sins, possible catharsis, and, as a result, clearing one’s conscience makes a person kinder, happier, and more harmonious.

In his studies, the philosopher B. Spinoza (2007), using logical scientific structures, proves that the phenomenon of morality and conscience can be explained only by raising it above the earthly to the transcendent, to God, whom the philosopher considered a universal being. One guided by morality and conscience asserts the harmony of this universal being and oneself in it and therefore becomes like God. One acts following inner necessity and does only what gives one the experience of the perfection of life. This is the most reliable way for a person to self-preservation, although it is permeated with the spirit of “reasonable egoism”.

Martin Luther argued that conscience was the “religious foundation of man” and “the bearer of man’s relationship with God,” which significantly influenced the mind. If the conscience is in a state of sin, then the mind will be “darkened, perverted and defective” (Luther, 1994, p. 82).

F. M. Dostoevsky (1881) saw the path to the true meaning of life (“conscience without God is horror, it can wander to the most immoral” (p. 56)) in the active involvement of a person with high religious-spiritual and moral values as a source of invigorating energy, inspiration, tranquillity and harmony (Proskuriakov & Lalan, 2020).

I. Ilin (1993) wrote that “conscience characterizes the ability of a person to exercise moral self-control, independently formulate moral obligations for themselves and demand themselves to fulfil them, make a self-assessment of the actions committed” (p. 179).

Therefore, according to the philosophical and religious tradition, conscience is the message that our inner voice gives us that concerns the issues of good and evil, duty, and responsibility. Conscience acts as a mediator between man and

God. “Contact with God through ‘conscience’ is the innermost calling of the human spirit. Conscience becomes more active and promotes development when conscience appears in the role of a partner when it turns into a place of dialogue between God and man. Through it, a person ‘hears’ the call of God and, at the same time, responds to this call negatively or positively. The call is always an invitation to complete communion with God, and it is a meeting with the Creator who loves and calls for love in action” (Milts, 1990, p. 38).

I. Kant also believed that religion and faith in God are closely related to morality and conscience. Nevertheless, in Kant’s philosophical doctrine, this connection had specific features.

The Connection Between Religious Faith and Moral Consciousness as “The Voice of Conscience” in I. Kant’s Religious Philosophy

In the historical and philosophical literature, it is often mentioned that Kant considered his important achievement that his philosophy defined the boundaries for the mind and reserved a place for faith. However, Kant’s understanding of the essence of religious faith is very specific; it is radically different from the orthodox understanding that is followed by the Church and which is held by the majority of believers. From an orthodox point of view, religious faith is a special kind of knowledge, higher than secular knowledge, since this knowledge is given to people by God himself through Revelation. Hence dogmatism is an attempt to get rid of doubt, religious intolerance, and fanaticism (Kotovchikhina et al., 2022). Instead, Kant denied the possibility of religious knowledge and, in fact, identified faith with hope (which is naturally connected with doubt).

Kant disputed the opinion that religion is necessary for morality in the sense that without religion, there would be no morality and that religion is the source of morality (Bishop Alexander (Mileant), 2004). Objecting to these postulates, Kant introduced the distinction between moral and legal behaviour. Moral behaviour is behaviour that not only corresponds to moral norms but is also guided by moral motivation (respect for the moral law that is in a person’s heart) (To-

gaibayeva, Ramazanova, Kartbayeva, & Yergazina, 2020). On the other hand, behaviour that corresponds to moral norms but is guided by a non-moral motivation (fear of punishment or hope for reward) is legal rather than moral.

According to Kant, morality is primary and self-sufficient (autonomous). Moral requirements cannot be derived either from God’s orders, human inclinations, social requirements, or considerations of utility and satisfaction. A person learns about what is good and what is bad, what their moral duty is, thanks to a special ability that Kant called practical reason, and we can call it a more familiar word – conscience.

Nevertheless, Kant believed that there was an essential connection between morality (conscientiousness) and religion. In the philosopher’s opinion, the main religious ideas – faith in God and eternal life – express the hope that is necessarily generated by practical reason, moral conscientiousness, and human conscience. Morality does not stem from religion but, on the contrary: the main ideas of religion come from morality and conscience (Zhanabayev, Kolganatova, Su-leimenova, & Garifolla, 2020).

According to Kant, the practical (moral) necessity of the immortality of the human soul and the existence of God follows from the idea of the moral purpose of human nature. The necessary final goal of the will, which is guided by the moral law (“the requirements of conscience”), is to realize the *summum bonum* (Lat.) – the highest, complete, absolute, perfect good, which is the fullness of virtue and happiness. This realization is possible only if the human soul is immortal and God exists.

The main component of perfect good (*summum bonum*) is perfect virtue. The second component is happiness, or rather, the correspondence between happiness and virtue. In the idea of the highest, perfect good (*summum bonum*) as the necessary goal of the will, which is guided by the moral law (conscience), virtue and happiness are combined in such a way that the decisive role belongs to virtue: virtue is the supreme good, and happiness appears as its necessary, from the perspective of practical (moral) reason, a complement to the perfect, complete, highest good: “After all, to need happiness and be worthy of it, but nevertheless not to be involved in it – this cannot in any way be compatible with the perfect expression of the will of a rational being...”

(Kant, 2019, pp. 123-124).

The relationship between the perfect good, virtue and happiness can be expressed as the following system of equations:

1. perfect good = perfect virtue + correspondence between happiness and virtue;
2. perfect virtue = supreme good;
3. happiness corresponding to perfect virtue = perfect happiness.

Since the realization of the perfect good is a necessary goal of the will, which is guided by the moral law (“the requirements of conscience”), the perfect good must be feasible. Belief in such feasibility is a practical (moral) necessity. Since the main defining component of perfect good is perfect virtue, that is, complete, perfect agreement (correspondence, harmony) with the moral law (“the requirement of conscience”), the goal of achieving such a perfect agreement must also be feasible. Nevertheless, this goal is not feasible “at any moment”: “the complete conformity of the will to the moral law is holiness - perfection, which is not possible for any rational creature of the sensible world at any time of its existence” (Kant, 2019, p. 136).

Thus, we have the “antinomy of practical reason” – the contradiction between the requirement of practical reason (moral consciousness, conscience) and the capabilities of man as a being belonging to the sensible world. This antinomy can be solved only if one assumes the human soul is immortal: if this is the case, the implementation of the specified requirement of practical reason (conscience), although impossible at one time moment of human existence, is possible in eternity as an endless process of approaching moral perfection (Kant, 2019).

Therefore, the immortality of the soul, according to Kant (2019), is a necessary postulate of pure practical reason (conscience) – “a theoretical, but as such, unprovable provision, since it is inherent in a practical law, unconditionally operating a priori” (p. 136).

Similarly, Kant shows the practical necessity of (belief/hope in) the existence of God. The idea of God, according to Kant, is the idea of the Supreme Being, who is the guarantor of realization, ultimately, in eternity (but not in time - not in any specific, definite period, such as the time of a person’s earthly life), the second component of perfect good which is the correspondence between happiness and virtue. The existence of such

a Supreme Being (God) is the guarantee that a person will receive as much happiness as he deserves. In other words, God is the guarantor of justice.

The implementation of such justice is necessarily assumed by practical reason (conscience) in the idea of perfect good. However, theoretically, it is not necessary; moreover, it is not confirmed by the experience of man as a being belonging to the sensible world. In one’s experience, which is always limited to a certain time frame, the idea of the existence of an exact correspondence between happiness and virtue is not supported. Rather, it seems that this idea is disproved by experience as there are many examples of virtuous people who were not happy and dishonest people who were not unhappy.

To eliminate this apparent discrepancy, practical reason “postulates the existence of a cause of the whole nature, different from it, containing the basis of this connection, namely, the exact correspondence of happiness with morality ... the highest good in the world is possible only because the most important reason of nature is recognized, which has a causality consistent with a moral disposition” (Kant, 2019, p. 139).

The idea of such a reason is the idea of God, and causality consistent with the moral attitude (with the moral law, “the requirements of conscience”) is the will of God.

Therefore, the need to believe in God as the Supreme Being who is the reason for the world is the need (from a moral point of view) to believe (hope) that, despite the appearance of the opposite, the reality is arranged according to moral requirements – in such a way that all injustices (inconsistencies between happiness and virtue) which can be observed at any limited time interval are temporary and will be eliminated in the eternity of the existence of the human soul; that virtue, in the end, will receive its due reward (in this or another life), and the crime will be punished to the fullest extent required by justice.

It should be stressed once again: in Kant’s philosophy, faith is not knowledge; it is identified with hope. One can hope for the immortality of the soul and just world order (personified by God). This hope corresponds to and sustains moral consciousness. However, it is unknown whether the soul is immortal and whether God exists. It is this ignorance that makes human

freedom and moral motivation possible. If we knew about the existence of God, then moral motivation (“the voice of conscience”) would be suppressed by legal motivation (fear of punishment and the desire to receive a reward) (Kant, 2019, pp. 162-163).

Contradiction Between I. Kant’s Ideas of Religious Philosophy and the Christian Religious and Philosophical Tradition

It should be noted that even if one adheres to all of Kant’s essential grounds and methods of argumentation, some of the conclusions that the philosopher draws do not stem from the Christian religious-philosophical tradition. This relates to the personalistic idea of God (the idea of God as a person) and the conclusion that Christianity is the most complete, adequate expression of the requirements of practical reason (conscience).

Moreover, one should note that Kant, in his philosophy, does not make a qualitative, fundamental distinction between a person’s earthly life and life after death (as Abrahamic religions do). Both are thought of in the same way – as a process in which a person as a morally imperfect being can and should endlessly approach moral perfection. While eternal life after death is thought of as the goal of earthly life and as the achievement of perfect good, staying in the perfect good (and not the process of approaching it) in the Abrahamic religions (in particular, in Christianity), then in the perspective of Kant’s philosophy, the meaning and nature of the afterlife are essentially the same as the meaning and nature of earthly life – differences can be only in degree (degree of approaching the perfect good).

An equally important difference between Kant’s philosophy and the Christian doctrine can be discovered if we try to carefully examine the question: what is God in the perspective of this philosophy? The role of God, from the point of view of Kant’s philosophy, is completely reduced to causality, which corresponds to the moral law and is a necessary condition for the realization of justice (correspondence between happiness and virtue) in eternity.

However, if this is so, then God is deprived of the main personalistic attribute – freedom of will and action, the ability to make decisions and act

in one way or another. God, as a being whose will-causality fully corresponds to the moral law and the goal of perfect good, in principle, cannot desire and act otherwise than in a way that better corresponds to the goal of realizing this good. If God could wish and act differently, this would mean that His will-causality does not fully correspond to the moral law and its ultimate goal (the realization of the perfect good). However, Kant’s philosophy completely excludes such a possibility because there the idea of God follows from the ideas of the moral law and the perfect good and is completely subordinated to these ideas. Therefore, Kant’s God is completely devoid of choice. This God cannot, of His own free will, punish and pardon sinners, endow or not endow them with grace, cannot be guided by feeling (even love) – all His expressions of will and actions must certainly correspond exclusively to the moral law and the only goal for which we assumed the existence of God, - the goals of ensuring justice, rewarding virtue (a way of life that is guided by moral law) and punishing crime.

Thus, we believe that the Kantian idea of God is very far from the Christian personalistic concept (God as a person endowed with will). Rather, this idea corresponds to one of the main concepts of the Eastern religious tradition – the concept of karma, which is seen (like God for Kant) not as a person or a living being but as causality, which corresponds to the moral law.

Conclusion

In Kant’s philosophy, morality is viewed as primary and fundamental, and religion as secondary, a derivative of moral consciousness (conscience).

An important feature of Kant’s religious philosophy is the identification of faith with hope and not with the highest knowledge that God gave to people through Revelation. It is unknown if God, freedom, and immortality of the soul exist, but one can hope for their existence – and such a hope meets the needs of moral consciousness (conscience).

The idea of the immortal soul appears in Kant’s philosophy as a condition for the possibility of man’s infinite approach to moral perfection and the idea of God as a condition for cor-

respondence between virtue and happiness in eternity. Together the ideas form the condition for the feasibility of the goal of practical reason – the perfect good, which is the unity of perfect virtue and happiness.

In general, Kant’s understanding of the main religious ideas was very unorthodox and, in many ways, contradicted the teachings of the Christian Church.

Kant’s views on the essence of religious consciousness and religion and morality of neo-Kantian philosophers of the 19th and 20th centuries require more detailed research.

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