

# Kant

## *Sacrifice and the Transcendental Turn*

An analysis of the notion of sacrifice in Kant's philosophy has often been neglected in previous literature. Papers and books dealing with this subject matter are very few. Of course, this does not mean that there is a complete lack of interest. After all, Kant explicitly mentions sacrifice while addressing the schematism of analogy in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; therefore, works dealing with Kant's philosophy of religion or "philosophical theology" have sometimes addressed this notion.<sup>1</sup> More recently, Milbank<sup>2</sup> addressed Kant's notion of sacrifice as part of his critique of Kant's practical philosophy.

Furthermore, the issue of sacrifice has been raised in debates surrounding Kant's ethics, usually in relation to discussions of specific questions, such as constructivism,<sup>3</sup> consequentialism,<sup>4</sup> hedonism,<sup>5</sup> charity,<sup>6</sup> supererogation,<sup>7</sup> or security.<sup>8</sup> However, this literature tends to *employ* the notion of sacrifice, either by referring to Kant's use of the term, or by regarding "sacrifice" as the most adequate term to describe the process or dynamics under scrutiny, without wondering what sacrifice *means* for Kant and without raising the problem of its role in Kant's philosophy broadly conceived. Keenan has several references to Kant in his study on sacrifice<sup>9</sup>; but they are mostly connected to readings of Kant made by postmodern thinkers such as Derrida and Žižek, and Kant himself does not feature among the philosophers who are taken into specific consideration in his work.

A recent notable and welcome exception to this lack of specific attention is represented by Axinn's book *Sacrifice and Value*.<sup>10</sup> The main thesis of his book is that sacrifices "create values."<sup>11</sup> Axinn claims that Kant is not a "value realist," and thus reads Kant as an advocate for his central argument: "When what we do is to sacrifice, we create value for ourselves."<sup>12</sup> I find Axinn's view intriguing, and I will address some of his claims shortly.

However, the focus of this chapter is both more general and, at the same time, more specific. It is more general because I will discuss the role of sacrifice in Kant's philosophy in its entirety, including his epistemology and his account of religion. At the same time, it is more specific because I will distinguish between two different meanings of sacrifice, arguing that Kant employs them both, but with a certain degree of ambiguity. The first meaning is sacrifice as suppression, or destruction, of something for the sake of something else. The second meaning is sacrifice as kenosis, or withdrawal.

I will now briefly address Kant's epistemology, arguing that sacrifice as kenosis plays a hidden and yet important role in the development of Kant's transcendental philosophy. Then, I will focus on Kant's practical philosophy, arguing that the notion of sacrifice that is both implied and explicitly analyzed by Kant is mainly *suppressive* sacrifice, although Kant's account is fundamentally ambiguous and ends by being marked with some aporias. Finally, I will consider the role sacrifice plays in Kant's account of religion, showing that Kant's approach, with its achievements and problems, paves the way to various developments of the question of sacrifice in post-Kantian philosophy up to Nietzsche.

### Kant's Kenotic Turn in Epistemology

In the *Preface* to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (the so-called *B Preface*), Kant wrote:

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects; but all attempts to find out something about them a priori through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition [. . .].<sup>13</sup>

These lines are followed by the famous reference to Copernicus, which made generations of scholars talk about Kant's "Copernican turn" or even "Copernican revolution." And it was indeed a revolution: in fact, from the hypothesis that we should consider the objects of metaphysics as conforming to our knowledge, rather than vice versa—a revolutionary hypothesis in itself—stemmed the even more revolutionary claim that we know the objects not *in themselves*, but *as they are known* by the knowing subject. There is no

*absolute objectivity* for Kant, but only *universal subjectivity*, which is due to the fact that we all have the same a priori forms. Put into jeopardy here is the very notion of metaphysics as it was usually understood and practiced in modern philosophy, that is, as the alleged knowledge of the fundamental nature of the world *independent of the knower*. Where did this traditional idea of metaphysics come from?

In Western thought, the philosophical account of God has always been indicative of the knowledge aspired to in philosophy. The Aristotelian God, the immutable and fully actualized “unmoved mover” (“thought thinking itself”) was indicative of the goal of philosophy as a metaphysical immutable knowledge of an “ultimate” reality. The mainstream tradition in Medieval and early-modern philosophy did not substantially divert from that image of God, with the addition of the attribute of omniscience as a consequence of the introduction of a personalistic component (the Judeo-Christian omnipotent God). For instance, Thomas Aquinas, in his five statements about the divine qualities, defines God as simple, perfect (lacking nothing), infinite, immutable, and one, that is, without diversification within God’s self.<sup>14</sup> In modern philosophy, it is this image of God that has informed the idea of metaphysics, especially in the domain of epistemology, where this image was connected with a conception of metaphysics as expressed by the phrase “God’s-eye view.” Even for Leibniz, who introduced a perspectival account of knowledge (each monad is a peculiar “point of view” on the world), the main epistemic aspiration is to become God-minded. The distance between the knowledge attainable by the human agent and that attainable by God is represented by a difference in degree (being the “monad of monads,” God is able to grasp all the possible points of view on the world), but *not* in kind. Kant broke with this tradition: humans are finite and, as such, can only know phenomena, that is, things as they appear to us. Only God (should he exist) could be able to know things in themselves. In other words, as a consequence of thinking of ourselves as finite, Kant drew an absolute barrier—a difference not only *in degree*, but also *in kind*—between human and divine cognition.

The Aristotelian-Thomistic account of God was clearly dominant in the Middle Ages, and it exerted a major influence on modern philosophy; but it was not, however, the only proposed account of God. Neoplatonic influences led to an alternative, more dynamic conception of God. One of the most notable figures in this tradition is Meister Eckhart. Eckhart’s triune God, far from being the simple and immutable divinity of the Thomistic tradition, reveals himself through a series of kenotic sacrifices: first the Father pours the totality of his divinity into the Son; and then the Son self-empties of his divinity in the incarnation for the sake of the world.<sup>15</sup>

As already mentioned in the Introduction, Eckhart's doctrines had a significant impact on Martin Luther and the Reformation, and his conception of kenosis eventually resurfaced in the thought of the German Christian mystic Jacob Böhme. Significantly, kenotic thinking was common in Pietism, and many of the "radical Pietists" were influenced by the writings of Böhme.<sup>16</sup> In turn, Pietist influences on Kant's thought are often acknowledged, although they are usually regarded as being limited to the impact of the Pietist ideal of ethical purity on the development of Kant's practical philosophy.<sup>17</sup> What if the general approach of kenotic thinking, exemplified in Böhme's thought, lies in the background of Kant's transcendental turn?

The main focus of Böhme's thought is the relationship between the unity of God and the multiplicity of "things" in the universe. A significant aspect of Böhme's theology is that God can have knowledge of himself only through his creation. Böhme writes: "In his depth, God himself does not know what he is."<sup>18</sup> Strictly speaking, God cannot "reveal" himself to anyone (including himself), unless there is someone or something to which the revelation can be made. In a Neoplatonic fashion, God creates the universe by giving "form" to it, thus establishing a subject/object distinction: an observing subject (God), and an object being observed (the created universe). Giving form to the world, God effectively knows it; and by knowing the world, he reveals himself to the world and, at the same time, he reaches knowledge of himself. The explicit kenotic aspect in Böhme's narrative resides in this: God needs to empty himself and to renounce his absoluteness to truly know himself and the universe.

Surely, anyone with a basic knowledge of Kant's philosophy will have grasped some striking analogies between Böhme's theology and the framework of Kant's epistemology. In distancing himself from the metaphysical tradition that had its cognitive ideal in the God of the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition (a detached account of an independent knowledge of an ultimate reality), Kant's epistemic view is developed in such a way that the "modest" God of the kenotic tradition might be considered its ideal—represented by a concrete and spatio-temporally determined knowledge of the world.

The Kantian "subject" is the human being, rather than God: but once the subject is changed, the similarities are impressive. Like Böhme's God, Kant's cognitive subject can know the external world only by contributing *forms* (the a priori intuitions of space and time, and the categories) to the process of knowledge. And like Böhme's God, Kant's cognitive agent knows his "self" only by knowing external objects: this is the ground of the necessary reflexivity of self-consciousness—that is, the Kantian idea that the capacity to identify external objects as distinct from oneself and the awareness of

oneself as a subject are indissolubly connected. However, the most notable analogy, I suggest, concerns precisely the kenotic aspect of Böhme's narrative. Even Kant's cognitive agent has to renounce his/her absoluteness: what has to be renounced is the idea that the world can be known from an alleged God's-eye point of view, free from the spatio-temporal and causal constraints usually limiting the knower in his cognition. Kant's cognitive humility is intrinsically kenotic: we come to accept that we can know the world merely as a set of phenomena (things as they appear to us), and *not* as it is "in itself." In other words, we can know the world only from our finite perspective.

This "modesty" in epistemic aspiration is undoubtedly one of the most characterizing features of Kant's philosophy. It is clearly due to the distance that Kant establishes between the unattainable God's-eye view, which was the goal of traditional metaphysics, and the cognition attainable by a human, finite agent, which is limited by spatio-temporal and causal constraints. Kant effectively moves away from the traditional ideal of the God's-eye view to propose a more modest cognitive ideal, that objectivity which is, after all, only universal subjectivity. This move mimics the process of withdrawal that is at the core of the kenotic thinking: God withdrawing from his absoluteness to make room for the universe; and Christ renouncing his peculiar divine attributes (such as omnipotence, omniscience, etc.) to accept a finite (and thus spatio-temporally determined) condition through the incarnation. However, the transfer of the kenotic dynamic from God to the human beings introduces a new problem, or paradox—one that was already implicit in Leibniz's thesis of the perspectivity of knowledge.<sup>19</sup> If our knowledge is inevitably perspectival (in the sense of spatio-temporally determined), how is it possible for us to become conscious of the perspectivity of knowledge, without *eo ipso* admitting the possibility of reaching a superior, aperspectival standpoint (the God's-eye view), whose possibility seemed to be negated in the definition of knowledge as inevitably perspectival? Clearly the problem does not present itself for God or Christ: for a divine entity, the withdrawal—and the consequent assumption of a perspectival standpoint—are always temporary. For Kant's agent, however, the perspectivity of knowledge is a constitutive condition. Should there be some further justification that the restriction of the God's-eye view is not itself been stated from a God's-eye view?

Kant's solution to this paradox is simple and quite traditional: it is the understanding (conceptual thought) that frees the thinker from the effects of perspective.<sup>20</sup> *Sensory* intuition is always different because it necessarily depends on spatio-temporal location. However, the content of *thought* is

conceptual; and given that the pure a priori forms of the understanding (or categories) are the same for all humans, it follows that its conceptual products are also the same for all humans. The conceptual standpoint is not a God's-eye view; and yet it is aperspectival. However, another problem now arises: which status should be assigned to pure *objects of thought*? According to Kant's famous claim, "Thoughts without content are empty"<sup>21</sup>—the content being sensory intuition. This is why (traditional) metaphysics is, for Kant, "the science of illusion"—because it has the intention of providing knowledge about concepts (such as the soul, or God), of which no empirical (i.e., spatio-temporal) intuitions are possible. Considered from this angle, the *Critique of Pure Reason* has been often interpreted as representing a radical skepticism about metaphysics; and there is no doubt that most of the book pursues this path.

Sometimes, however, Kant seems to suggest that metaphysics is somehow *possible*—not the traditional (pre-Kantian) metaphysics that treated metaphysical objects as if they were natural objects, but a new kind of metaphysics, conceived as that discipline in which reason is concerned *with its own products*.<sup>22</sup> A meaningful example is represented by the ideas of the human soul and of God. Whereas pre-Kantian metaphysics dealt with the human soul and God as if they were natural objects, Kant approached them as products of reasons that hold a peculiar regulative status, that is, as regulative principles that "serve to lead the understanding by means of reason in regard to experience and to the use of its rules in the greatest perfection."<sup>23</sup> In other words, in light of Kant's "strong transcendental idealism," the existence of the objects of metaphysics is different from the existence of natural objects—metaphysical objects have an *ideal* rather than a "naturalistic" existence.

In line with this interpretation, one of the major achievements of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is that knowledge is not "the ultimate orientation to the world"; rather, in Redding's words, "there is a purely conceptual articulated stance not reducible to one of knowing" whose prototypical expression is human morality, which is regarded by Kant as proceeding "from pure conceptual considerations" and as not ultimately resting on knowledge. In short, "metaphysics is reconceived from within a practical point of view."<sup>24</sup>

To recap: apart from any indirect influence that traditional kenotic thinking might or might have not exerted on Kant, kenotic issues play an important role in the development of Kant's project, especially in relation to the central question of metaphysics. Thus, practical philosophy should be the appropriate place within Kant's work to encounter an explicit treatment of the topic of sacrifice. A hypothetical reader with no knowledge of

Kant's ethics, after reading the current section, would undertake the reading of next section with certain expectations about the role sacrifice might play in the practical realm. In such a case, however, he would be mostly (albeit not completely) disappointed.

### Kant's Practical Philosophy: "A Sacrifice Before the Moloch of Abstraction"?

In the practical realm, Kant rejects any heteronomous motive as the foundation of ethics. Moral law can only be grounded in the *form* of will. Kant does not assign a specific content to will and recommends that we choose potentially universalizable maxims as the basis of our morality. In other words, according to Kant's formal conception, humans should behave *as if* maxims were universally applicable.

Kant's modesty, which is a distinctive element of his epistemology, does *not* extend to his practical philosophy. As emphasized at the end of previous section, metaphysics can be reconceived from within a practical point of view because human morality is regarded by Kant as proceeding from *pure conceptual* considerations. The kenotic dynamic, identified in the previous section in relation to Kant's cognitive humility, is driven by the negation of the possibility to step out of spatio-temporality and causality. In the practical realm, the possibility to step-out of spatio-temporality and causality is reestablished; actually, this possibility represents the precondition of that freedom from natural necessity that Kant wants to reestablish in the practical, noumenal realm. Indeed, the moral law is given "as a fact of pure reason of which we are conscious a priori and which is apodeictically certain" (KpV, 47/66). Kant also argues that we have a duty to the moral law itself (on which our duties to others depend) prior to having duties to others.

An evidence of the *absolute* standpoint in the Kantian foundation of morality is his repeated insistence that duties "be regarded as commands of the supreme Being" (KpV, 5: 129/164). Kant invites the moral agent to listen to moral commands *as if* they were spoken by the voice of God. That is, the categorical imperative should be regarded as a duty toward God. Kant's insistence represents an attempt to solve the paradox that, according to Pinkard, is implied in the Kantian idea of self-legislation—the idea that one has to be bound by laws of which one is also the author.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, there is only *one* autonomous and objective moral law, which is absolute and must not be determined by spatio-temporal and causality issues. Because there is no necessary agreement between will and reason,



morality is a duty, and hence implies some violence against our sensible inclinations and desires. The first time the word “sacrifice” (*Aufopferung*) occurs in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is precisely in the context of affirming the necessity to negate desires that might lead the moral subject to deviate from the moral law; such a negation is, in Kant’s own words, a sacrifice:

For if a rational creature could ever get to the point of fulfilling all moral laws completely *gladly*, this would be tantamount to meaning that there would not be in him even the possibility of a desire stimulating him to deviate from them; for, overcoming such a desire always costs the subject [some] sacrifice [*Aufopferung*] and hence requires self-constraint, i.e., inner necessitation to what one does not do entirely gladly. (KpV, 84/108)<sup>26</sup>

The understanding of sacrifice that emerges from this passage—which is not limited to it, but rather informs the entire Kantian ethics—is very far from the kenotic dynamic that we have seen at work in the previous section. The notion employed is rather that of sacrifice as suppression of something (instincts, desires, inclinations) for the sake of something else (moral law).

If the hypothetical reader I mentioned at the end of the previous section was now disappointed, he would be in good philosophical company. Hegel, for instance, maintains that Kant’s conception of morality is formal and empty;<sup>27</sup> and the second chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is harshly critical of the “abstract negation” of desires, in which the desire is not overcome but only abstractly denied. From a different angle, and even more explicitly, Nietzsche thunders against the Kantian suppression of desires for the sake of the “impersonal” duty, something that he defines as “a sacrifice before the Moloch of abstraction.”<sup>28</sup> Additionally, Nietzsche saw in Kant’s practical philosophy a regression to the idea of “a real world” (the metaphysical idea of a world conceived as what is there independently of the knower), a move that Nietzsche stigmatized as the last consolation of metaphysics.<sup>29</sup>

As regards to recent scholarship, Milbank focused precisely on Kant’s use of the notion of sacrifice, which in his view drives the entire Kantian theory of ethics “into irresolvable aporias.”<sup>30</sup> In fact, sensory inclinations “must be sacrificed,” Milbank remarks, “even in the case where a sensory inclination happens to coincide with duty.” The point raised by Milbank is indeed an important one and deserves to be analyzed in detail.

When addressing sacrifice, Kant often considers it as a possible moral motive and usually in association with the topic of heroism. A first reference to sacrifice as a moral motive can be found in the *Groundwork*:



It is indeed sometimes the case that with the keenest self-examination we find nothing besides the moral ground of duty that could have been powerful enough to move us to this or that good action and to so great a sacrifice [*Aufopferung*]; but from this it cannot be inferred with certainty that no covert impulse of self-love, under the mere pretense of that idea, was not actually the real determining cause of the will; for we like to flatter ourselves by falsely attributing to ourselves a nobler motive, whereas in fact we can never, even by the most strenuous self-examination, get entirely behind our covert incentives.<sup>31</sup>

Even great sacrifices (including the sacrifice of one's life) are not necessarily moral for Kant, as they can involve pride alongside duty. This is clearly a serious concern for Kant because we find the same remark in two different places in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

Actions of others which have been done with great sacrifice [*Aufopferung*] and, moreover, solely on account of duty, may indeed be praised under the name of *noble* and *sublime* deeds, yet even this only insofar as there are indications suggesting that they were done entirely from respect for one's duty, not from bursts of emotions. (KpV, 85/110)

And again:

More decisive is the magnanimous sacrifice of one's life [*die großmütige Aufopferung seines Lebens*] for the preservation of one's country; and yet there remains some scruple as to whether it is indeed so perfectly a duty to dedicate oneself to this aim on one's own and without having been ordered to do so, and the action does not contain the full force of a model and impulse for imitation. (KpV, 158/198)

If one considers Kant's rejection of any heteronomous moral motive, which is the foundation of his ethics, these concerns are understandable. And yet, Milbank touches on an important point when he wonders: "How is one ever to know that sacrificial motives are pure?"<sup>32</sup> Clearly, one cannot; and yet, we cannot simply get rid of our attraction for sacrifice because sacrifice and heroism are *symbols* that grant us access to the otherwise inaccessible purity of duty. In Milbank's words:

How is one to discriminate within oneself, if only a feeling of love of self-sacrifice registers the law, and yet *even this feeling* contaminates the purity of duty and is only valid in so far as this feeling constantly negates itself, sacrificing even the love of sacrifice? If this sacrifice even of sacrifice is, still, nevertheless sacrifice, how to distinguish a diminution of love of sacrifice and denial of self, from a subtle increase of love of sacrifice and affirmation of self?<sup>33</sup>

Milbank's discussion of sacrifice is functional to his critique of Kant's account of radical evil as "an original possibility constitutive of freedom as such," something that makes of Kant's philosophy "only an alternative theology" (and not a good one, in Milbank's view). However, Milbank's opinion of Kant aside, his analysis has the merit of showing some aporias and problems embedded in Kant's discussion of sacrifice as a moral *symbol*. In fact, the need for symbols (including religious symbols) in Kant's conception of morality is connected to the issue of sacrifice, and I will devote the next section precisely to this topic. Before that, however, it is appropriate to consider another recent reading of Kant's notion of sacrifice, that proposed by Axinn.

Axinn offers a much more positive interpretation of Kant's use of sacrifice. The main thesis of his book is that "we don't find the values, and then sacrifice for them: our sacrifices produce them."<sup>34</sup> By arguing that Kant is not a value realist, he comes to the conclusion that, through the emphasis on suppression of the individual's personal desires, Kant has effectively clarified the process of formation of values. I do not dispute Axinn's claim about a general relationship between sacrifices and values (which is something that is beyond the scope of this chapter); what I wish to explore here are: (a) the implications of such a reading for Kant's philosophy, and (b) whether Kant can be legitimately regarded as supporting such a claim. In fact, these two aspects are related to each other. Let us assume that Kant is effectively not committed to value realism: this means that *we* create the values to which we are bound. This is the paradox identified by Pinkard,<sup>35</sup> to which Kant found no other solution than a repeated insistence that moral commands should be listened to as if they were spoken by the voice of God. The position that Axinn attributes to Kant—that values effectively depend on us, they are *made* by us<sup>36</sup>—might be attributed much fittingly to some post-Kantians—first of all, Hegel. It is Hegel who, through the notion of recognition, made values dependent on human activity (most notably, sacrifice);<sup>37</sup> and after him, the so-called left Hegelians considered the distribution of the activity of the constitution of norms over the species

to be a better solution to the Kantian paradox. It might be objected that an understanding of values as objects having an *ideal* (and thus, human-dependent) rather than a *naturalistic* existence was already implied in a reading of Kant along the lines of “strong transcendental idealism” (according to Redding’s definition).<sup>38</sup> However, this objection on the one hand reminds us of a fundamental ambiguity in Kant, who constantly oscillated between weak transcendental idealism and strong transcendental idealism; and on the other, confirms my previous claim because it is precisely on the ‘strong transcendental idealism’ reading that post-Kantians have drawn to develop post-transcendental forms of idealism. Significantly, the Kantian passage that Axinn cites in support of his argument is from the *third* critique—the *Critique of Judgment*.<sup>39</sup> Once a certain tension running through the formulation of transcendental idealism (as articulated in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) has been acknowledged, it seems safe to say (with Redding) that the general trajectory of Kant’s journey “was towards conceptions that are [. . .] closer in spirit to the type of idealism developed by those coming after him, such as Fichte, Schelling and Hegel.”<sup>40</sup>

Finally, even assuming that Kant’s understanding of sacrifice is positive, as Axinn maintains and that Kant can be interpreted as establishing a strong relation between sacrifices and values (with sacrifices effectively *producing* values), what is the notion of sacrifice that emerges from this interpretation? It is the traditional meaning of sacrifice as suppression of something for the sake of something else. “Why would a rational person sacrifice in this sense, give away more than is expected to be returned?” Axinn asks, and continues: “My response: to gain nonmonetary value.” We are certainly very far from the conception of sacrifice as kenosis that is at work in the development of Kant’s perspectivism. Effectively, most of the references to sacrifice in Kant’s practical philosophy seem to be related with such an interpretation of sacrifice as the suppression of something to gain something else in exchange. This might even raise the doubt that perceiving the presence of a kenotic conception of sacrifice in the development of Kant’s perspectivism could be the result of an overinterpretation.

Sometimes, however, Kant shows an understanding of sacrifice that goes precisely in the *opposite* direction—that is, in the direction of a *kenotic* interpretation of sacrifice. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, in the context of the discussion of the relationship between freedom and the states, Kant writes:

One cannot say: the human being has sacrificed [*Aufgeopfert*] a *part* of his innate outer freedom for the sake of an end, but rather, he has relinquished [*Verlassen*] entirely his wild, lawless

freedom in order to find his freedom as such undiminished, in a dependence upon laws, that is, in a rightful condition, since this dependence arises from his own lawgiving will. (MS, 316/127)

Here we have precisely the opposition between sacrifice as *suppression*—the human being as *suppressing* a part of his freedom for the sake of the state—and sacrifice as *kenosis*—the human being as *relinquishing*<sup>41</sup> his freedom. The human being does not relinquish his freedom for the sake of something else, but to have his freedom reestablished in that dependence upon laws that sees the moral/political subject in a mutual and constant relationship with his/her fellow citizens.

A kenotic understanding of sacrifice is even more evident in another passage, which is worthwhile to quote in full:

[. . .] I ought to sacrifice [*Opfer machen*] a part of my welfare to others *without hope of return* [*ohne Hoffnung der Wiedervergeltung*] because this is a duty, and it is impossible to assign specific limits to the extent of this sacrifice. How far it should extend depends, in large part, on what each person's own happiness, one's true needs, would conflict with itself if it were made a universal law. Hence this duty is only a *wide* one; the duty has in it a latitude for doing more or less, and no specific limits can be assigned to what should be done. The law holds only for maxims, not for specific actions. (MS, 393/197; emphasis added)

The key point here is that the happiness of others is an end *that is also a duty*; however, it is first of all *an end in itself* (MS, 393/196–197), and it is for the sake of others' happiness that I am required to sacrifice a part of my welfare. The dynamic described here looks more like a withdrawing of my welfare to “make room for others,” rather than a *suppression* of my welfare. That the sacrifice at stake is different from the sacrifice mentioned above is evident from the concern suddenly expressed by Kant. Others' happiness is not primarily a duty, but it is a duty only insofar as it is an end in itself; which implies the problem of the extent to which sacrifices have to be performed to make other people happy. The law has, therefore, only a *regulative* value: it tells us that we must promote the ends of others, but does not provide any indication of *how much* we should sacrifice for the sake of others' happiness.<sup>42</sup>

In conclusion, it appears that there is a certain tension running through Kant's account of sacrifice. The general orientation of Kant's employment

of sacrifice in his practical philosophy seems consistent with the meaning of sacrifice as suppression of instincts and desires for the sake of the moral role. However, Kant's account of sacrifice in the context of his practical philosophy is not without a certain degree of ambiguity because sometimes the kenotic meaning of sacrifice seems to resurface, especially in connection with the central issue of the regulative nature of the moral law. At stake is the viability of Kant's *formal* conception of morality. The formality of the moral law is that which makes it universally applicable; and yet, it generates the need for some way of making moral concepts concretely applicable to the world. Religion and, to some extent, beauty serve this purpose. We should therefore analyze the role sacrifice plays in Kant's account of religion, with the goal of exploring if in that realm a solution to the fundamental ambiguity mentioned above can be found.

### Symbolic and Regulative Value of Sacrifice

The role of religious notions and narratives in Kant's moral theory is often underestimated. Standard accounts tend to regard religious representations as mere metaphors or, at best, as useful symbols that serve to illustrate some moral content. From Kant's perspective, it is suggested, religious representations have more or less the function of pictures in old novels: they embellish the pages, but ultimately it would not make any difference if they were omitted from the text. If one considers them in the light of the Kantian need for some way of making moral ideas applicable to the world, however, a very different picture emerges.

First, Kant's discounting of any religious *foundation* from either the theoretical or the practical realm does not mean that he dismisses the content of revealed religion as irrelevant in general, or that he discounts the idea of God in particular.<sup>43</sup>

Regarding the latter, it has already been recalled that Kant invites the moral agent to listen to moral commands *as if* they were spoken by the voice of God. In other words, moral duties should be regarded as *theonomous* duties—that is, duties toward God: “Since all religion consists in this, that in all our duties we look upon God as the lawgiver to be honored universally” (RGV, 6:104/137). And a few pages later, Kant reinforces the claim: “Religion is (subjectively considered) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands” (RGV, 6:154/177).

Regarding the former, Kant considers religious claims and notions as symbolic *presentations* or exhibitions (*Darstellungen*) of the moral law. They

are not mere “metaphors”: the need for such *presentations* is, conversely, deeply rooted into the need for a way of making moral concepts concretely applicable to the world. In fact, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant notes “special difficulties” in dealing with the application of the moral law—difficulties that do not present themselves in the realm of theoretical reason. As pointed out by Redding,<sup>44</sup> the problem of applying categories (pure concepts) to the contents of intuition was solved by Kant through the introduction of “schemata” (rules that connect pure concepts with sensible data). In the realm of practical reason, however, we deal with “the morally good,” and “the morally good as an object,” that is—in Kant’s own words—something supersensible

so that nothing corresponding to it can be found in any sensible intuition; hence the power of judgment under laws of pure practical reason seems to be subject to special difficulties which are due to [the fact] that a law of freedom is to be applied to actions as events that occur in the world of sense and thus, to this extent, belong to nature. (KpV, 68/90)

The problem for Kant is to find something equivalent to schemata for practical reason, that is, transitional forms to be used to apply the pure principles of practical reason to experience. These forms are identified by Kant in symbolic presentations or exhibitions (*Darstellungen*). In fact, whereas a pure concept can be *schematized*, moral ideas can only be *symbolized*.<sup>45</sup> Religious notions and narratives are an essential component of a set of symbolic notions that, for Kant, is necessary to make moral ideas applicable to the world.<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, for Kant, religious symbols (both notions and narratives) are transitional forms, or analogical *presentations* (*Darstellungen*), that must be used to apply the pure principles of practical reason to experience, insofar as they can serve as models for our behavior; in other words, they play a *regulative* role in the application of moral ideas to the world. It follows that religious notions and narratives, far from being mere metaphors or symbols *in a weak sense*, are rather an *essential* component of Kant’s practical philosophy.

However, not *all* religious notions or narratives can be accepted as moral symbols and can thus serve as models. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant distinguishes between “the natural religion,” whose main characteristic is that “every human being can be convinced [of its truth] through his reason,” and “a learned religion,” whose main characteristic is that “one can convince others only by means of erudition” (RGV, 6:155/178). In natural religion, theology conforms to morality, whereas in learned or

revealed religion, morality conforms to theology. The relationship between natural religion and revealed religion is visible in the image of the concentric circles included in the Preface to the 1794 edition: revealed religion, represented by the wider circle, includes natural religion (“the pure religion of reason”), which is in turn represented by the narrower circle. What is implied in this image is that the criteria according to which it is decided that some claim is acceptable within the sphere of natural religion are set by the philosopher (“as purely a teacher of reason”), who is guided by the consistency of the a priori principles of practical reason.<sup>47</sup> It follows that only those religious contents that are compatible with potentially universalizable moral maxims can be regarded as having symbolic and regulative status.<sup>48</sup>

As in the realm of practical philosophy, even in the realm of religion (understandably, as in Kant’s view these two realms are strictly related to each other), Kant’s standpoint is grounded by a restated possibility to step out of the constraints represented by spatio-temporality and causality (similar to what happens in his practical philosophy): if the philosopher is correctly guided by the consistency of the a priori principles of practical reason, he will be able to decide which religious claims are acceptable within the sphere of natural religion, and which are not. If they are not acceptable, they have to be rejected.

What about sacrifice as a religious symbol? With reason as a guide, the philosopher should conclude—as Kant does—that sacrifice is an *improper* symbol. Firstly, *self-sacrifice* is an improper symbol because, as we have already seen, it is not necessarily moral inasmuch as it can involve pride alongside duty. Secondly, Kant has serious concerns about the way *sacrifice* is addressed in the Bible—most notably, God’s request to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (the “binding” of Isaac, or *Akedah*). Kant thinks of morality as *prior* to the content of any religion; as already stressed, only religious content that is compatible with potentially universalizable moral maxims can be regarded as having symbolic and regulative status. This is clearly not the case with the *Akedah*. Kant writes:

Even though something is represented as commanded by God, through a direct manifestation of Him, yet, if it flatly contradicts morality, it cannot, despite all appearances, be of God (if something is represented as commanded by God in a direct manifestation of him yet is directly in conflict with morality, it cannot be a divine miracle despite every appearance of being one (e.g., *if a father were ordered to kill his son who, so far as he knows, is totally innocent*). (RGV, 6:87/124; emphasis added)



The claim that the whole of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* “was designed to denounce Abraham and banish such acts of reason-blind faith from the sphere of religion”<sup>49</sup> is exaggerated. However, there is no doubt that Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his own son due to a direct command from God represented a serious concern for Kant. This is further evinced in a passage from *The Conflict of the Faculties*, in which Kant condemns Abraham without appeal:

Abraham should have replied to this supposedly divine voice: “That I ought not to kill my good son is quite certain. But that you, this apparition, are God—of that I am not certain, and never can be, not even if this voice rings down to me from (visible) heaven.”<sup>50</sup>

The sacrifice that Abraham is willing to perform definitely falls outside the realm of religious symbols that Kant considers acceptable. After all, the relationship between moral duties and the idea of God is grounded for Kant on the priority of morality over religion: what Kant suggests is to listen to moral commands as if they were spoken by the voice of God, and *not* to listen to an alleged voice of God as if it were legitimate in itself (which is what is apparently happening in the *Akedab*<sup>51</sup>).

As in the practical realm, in the religious sphere Kant seems to conceive sacrifice in its suppressive meaning, and in general terms he does not seem to think that sacrifice might play a *positive* role. Once again, however, Kant’s account of sacrifice in the context of his approach to religion is not without a certain degree of ambiguity because the kenotic meaning of sacrifice resurfaces (almost inevitably, one might add) when Kant comes to examine the symbolic and regulative value of the figure of Jesus Christ.

The figure of Christ is regarded by Kant as the religious symbol *par excellence*. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant refers to Christ as the “prototype [*Urbild*] of moral disposition in its entire purity,” maintaining that that prototype “has *come down* [*herabgekommen*] to us from heaven” and has taken up humanity “by *descending* [*herablass*] to it,” and concluding that “this union with us may therefore be regarded as a state of *abasement* [*Erniedrigung*] of the Son of God” (RGV, 6:61/80). In this paragraph, Kant employs the classic kenotic vocabulary, and the second half is almost a direct quote from Philippians 2:8 which, as we know, is the first text where the term *kenosis* is used in connection with a sacrificial dynamic.

Later on in the text, Kant refers to the “schematism of analogy” involved in the representation of Christ and comments,

It is plainly a limitation of human reason, one which is ever inseparable from it, that we cannot think of any significant moral worth in the actions of a person without at the same time portraying this person or his expression in human guise, even though we do not thereby mean to say that this is how things are in themselves for we always need a certain analogy with natural being to make supersensible characteristics comprehensible to us. (RGV, 6:65/107)

We must, Kant claims, have exemplars on which we can model our behavior. Thus, the claim that “Jesus is the son of God” can be interpreted as a symbolic way of expressing the ethically exemplary nature of Jesus. The fact that Jesus’s behavior can be considered exemplary means that it serves as a model for our own behavior; the scriptural representation of Christ is peculiarly *regulative*. Christ represents the prototype of a pure moral disposition, one willing to undergo the greatest sacrifice (sacrifice until death) to be morally perfect. Thus the Scriptures, Kant writes, attribute to God,

the highest sacrifice [*Aufopferung*] a living being can ever perform in order to make even the unworthy happy (“Therefore hath God loved the world, etc.”), although through reason we cannot form any concept of how a self-sufficient being could sacrifice something that belongs to his blessedness, thus robbing himself of a perfection. We have here (as means of elucidation [*Erläuterung*]) a *schematism of analogy*, with which we cannot dispense. (RGV, 6:65/107)

In this passage, all Kant’s ambiguity about the role of sacrifice as symbol is concentrated. Christ is recognized as the prototype of pure moral disposition, and his willingness to self-sacrifice is acknowledged as an essential component of his perfection. The concerns raised in the context of the discussion of the *Akedah* are obviously absent here; similarly absent is any skeptical consideration about the possible involvement of pride alongside duty in Christ’s moral motive. To some extent, Kant’s positive consideration of Christ’s sacrifice might be culturally contextualized within the Lutheran tradition, where *kenosis* was often linked to the dreadful and paradoxical abasement of the most high. However, this cultural contextualization alone could not explain the philosophical relevance that Christ’s sacrifice assumes in Kant’s philosophy. Christ’s willingness to sacrifice himself “in order to make even the unworthy happy” appears to be a regulative symbol [*Darstellung*],

or schema, for that willingness to sacrifice part of one's welfare to others "without hope of return" that Kant introduced in the *Metaphysics of Moral* (MS, 393/197), which I discussed in the previous section. The example of Christ seems to suggest that we not consider the duties to others as dependent on the moral law itself (as in the standard account of Kant's practical philosophy), but the happiness of others (including the happiness of the unworthy ones) as *an end in itself*. In short, Christ, as an exemplar, seems to invite us to sacrifice ourselves, to withdraw our welfare and to (so to say) "make room for others" for the sake of their happiness.

At the same time, after claiming that we must represent God's love toward the world in terms of self-sacrifice and that Christ, who is the concrete personification of this love, must serve as an exemplar for our moral behavior, Kant suddenly stresses that to suppose that an omnipotent being could sacrifice his absoluteness and divinity ("robbing himself of a perfection") is absurd, even nonsensical.<sup>52</sup> Additionally, it is not clear if Christ's willingness to sacrifice himself for the happiness of everyone else should be considered as having a strong regulative value (thus concretely guiding our moral behavior), or merely as an unachievable ideal of perfection. Clearly, behind this issue lies the question whether or not Kant is a theological realist (meaning by theological realism the idea that there is a transcendent divine reality). Kantian scholars are greatly divided on this issue.<sup>53</sup> According to some, Kantian religion is substantially the result of Kant's attempt to graft Lutheran Pietism into his rationalism.<sup>54</sup> Others consider Kant a theological realist who advances a rationalistic faith that has nothing to do with the "mystic" idea of a kenotic God that was an important motor in the development of German idealism.<sup>55</sup> In addition, there are several other more moderate positions that lie between these two extremes. While an in-depth analysis of this issue is beyond the scope of this chapter, it is worth pointing out that, in light of Kant's strong transcendental idealism, his claims about religion in general, and God in particular, should not be interpreted in terms of pre-Kantian metaphysical realism or unrealism.<sup>56</sup>

Let us recap. It is possible to argue that there is a kenotic dynamic embedded in Kant's epistemology and that kenotic issues play an important role in the development of Kant's metaphysical project. Metaphysics is reconceived by Kant from within a practical point of view; and in the practical realm, a substantial tension runs through Kant's account of sacrifice. While the entire Kantian ethics seems to be dominated by a suppressive sacrificial conception (suppression of instincts, desires, and inclinations for the sake of the moral law), sometimes the kenotic meaning of sacrifice seems to resurface, especially in the context of Kant's reflections on the happiness of

others as an end in itself, for the sake of which the moral agent is required to sacrifice his or her welfare. However, a moral ideal simply holds a *regulative* status. The need for some way of making moral ideals applicable to the world, which is a concern running through the entirety of Kant's philosophy is particularly evident here, as it seems difficult to provide any indication of how much we should sacrifice for the sake of others' happiness—it does not express the extent to which the kenotic process must be carried on. Religious notions and narratives are supposed to serve as transitional forms (symbols, or *Darstellungen*) to be used to make moral ideals applicable to the world. However, sacrifice is regarded by Kant as an improper symbol—both the unacceptable scriptural sacrifice of the *Akedah*, and self-sacrifice, which can always involve pride alongside duty. And yet, Kant recognizes in Christ the prototype of pure moral disposition, identifying in his willingness to self-sacrifice and to give up some of his divine perfections the highest symbol of morality. Although the idea of a God “robbing himself of a perfection” sounds like an absurdity to Kant, the figure of Christ, in his essential kenotic attitude, is clearly indicated as an exemplar for our moral behavior. Nevertheless, these reflections seem to remain partially undeveloped.

It might be argued that Kant grasped the importance of including a kenotic dynamic in practical philosophy, but he was somehow unable or unwilling to integrate it into the formal grounding of his ethics. Clearly, the rigid structure of his ethics, at the core of which lies the primacy of duty to the moral law itself (with respect to which our duties to others are merely secondary), made it very difficult for him to emphasize the kenotic aspect of interpersonal relationships, and thus that aspect remained confined in the context of his reflections on the happiness of others as an end in itself. This tension, however, effectively provides an entry point for features that can be found in the post-Kantians.

First, Kant's perspectivism is a legacy that can be traced through the post-Kantians, obviously finding different ways of expression in various thinkers—the German Idealists, most importantly Hegel, but also Kierkegaard and, obviously, Nietzsche.

Second, the hiatus between Christ as a moral *Darstellung*, and the lack of explicit attention to the kenotic dynamic, is a symptom of a problem that is pressing for post-Kantians: maintaining the regulativity of religious notions (including sacrifice), while going beyond Kant's formal grounding (with the problems it entails). At a more general level, this hiatus is also the symptom of the “Kantian paradox” diagnosed by Pinkard, which in the context of religious symbols presents itself in an even more acute form (the “Kantian religious paradox” that I referred to in the Introduction).

Third, the difficulties experienced by Kant in integrating the kenotic dynamics into the formal grounding of his thought are dealt with, from different angles, by several post-Kantians. Significantly, the “nonsense” of a God “robbing himself of a perfection,” and giving up his own divinity to become human was precisely the direction pursued by the German Idealist Solger, who built his entire philosophy around the idea of a God sacrificing himself first in the creation, and then in the incarnation (more on this in the next chapter). Hegel too, in his philosophy of religion, elaborated on this idea, considering Christianity “the highest form of religion” largely because of its central image of God becoming man, thus renouncing his divinity and absoluteness. Furthermore, the kenotic dynamic also plays a role in Hegel’s critique of Kant’s formal conception of morality. As argued by Pippin,<sup>57</sup> Hegel strongly relies on the idea that establishing moral and ethical relations with others does not involve a suppressive sacrifice, or abstraction from our particular ends, but rather their rational “realization.” This realization happens through a recognitive process of the other person, which presupposes a kenotic withdrawal. Therefore, the next two chapters will be devoted to Solger (Chapter 2) and Hegel (Chapter 3), respectively.