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Pelagius and Kant as Moralists

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A difference of more than fourteen hundred years lies between Pelagius and Kant. Pelagius lived at the beginning of the fifth century, when the Roman Empire was tottering to its fall, but still existed, and only a hundred years after the Christians had ceased to be a persecuted sect. Kant lived well within the modern era. When he published his *Critique of Practical Reason*, the younger Pitt was Prime Minister of England; and before he died, the French Revolution had shaken Europe, and Napoleon Bonaparte was well advanced in his career of conquest.

Pelagius was a monk, living in the midst of monks, whose conduct was governed by rules regulating every detail of life and behaviour; but even their standards he found too lax for his tastes. And as a monk he accepted the authority of the Bible, of the Church and its tradition. Kant lived in the sophisticated University town of Koenigsberg and mingled not merely with its academic crowd, but with foreign merchants, sea-captains and travelling scholars. He was a philosopher, not under the same obligations of belief as the member of a religious order.

This difference of background, however, does not necessarily throw light on either the diversity or similarity of their experience or thought. The difference in time hardly bears on the subject, as it is possible to think alike across the gap of centuries (and think differently in the same period). The difference in callings, while sometimes enlightening, is at other times positively misleading. Kant, for instance, lived a life more rigorous than a monk is usually called upon to live, taking only one solid meal a day; and while the monk had travelled in three continents, the Professor of Philosophy had never travelled ten miles beyond where he lived. And considering Pelagius' constant prevarications before Synods, the devotion of the philosopher to his ideals seems to have been of a higher order than that of the monk. But the differences of calling and experience do not detract from the essential oneness of their moral passion or from the agreement of their fundamental outlook. Kant as a philosopher could, of course, take greater liberties, though he himself later came under the censorship of the Prussian authorities, while Pelagius was all the time hunted by Augustine with every means in his power; but both held to their convictions with a passionate sincerity; and the very prevarications of Pelagius were due to his determination to maintain his principles.

Neither disowned the Christian Faith or tradition. Pelagius could not, and would have recoiled in holy horror at the idea ; and Kant did not ; and made it quite clear in his *Philosophy of Religion* that 'of all the public religions that have ever existed' Christianity is the one religion for him. He believed that in his ethical works he was merely making a painstaking effort to lay bare the ideas that lay at the root of Western Christian Culture. The idea that in his earlier work, *The Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had thrown the Christian tradition overboard is due to the misunderstanding that that work could be judged by itself and not as part of a larger plan. The purpose of that book was deliberately negative, not because Kant's philosophy was negative, but because he wanted to clear the way for his positive philosophy. Considering the fact that he looked upon his mission as that of crushing Hume's devastating scepticism, it would have been strange if he himself had nothing positive to offer.

Though neither of the two can be accepted as spokesmen of the historic Church or of Biblical Christianity, there is no doubt that both firmly believed and earnestly tried to prove that what they were saying was just what Christianity and the Bible were saying ; and it must be also admitted that what they were saying is what has been actually believed by many who have called themselves and still call themselves Christian. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that neither of them may be allowed to speak for the Faith which the Church holds, without admitting that Christianity has no *raison d'être* for a distinctive existence.

There is ample material to enable us to judge, where within the area of their common interest and mission, either agrees or disagrees with the other. Pelagius seems to have written a number of books, but only two of them are known to us by name : *A Commentary on Paul's Epistles* and *A Defence of Free Will*. There are also various letters to friends and the proceedings of Synods and Councils, held to pronounce on his orthodoxy. None of these, however, is extant (outside perhaps the Vatican Library), and his views are known to us chiefly, as those of Celsus before him, through the criticisms and attacks of his adversary ; but there is no reason to think that Augustine in any way misrepresented him. And thirteen books of Augustine are simply a running commentary (adverse, of course) on the teachings of Pelagius. They contain numerous quotations ; and we are left in no doubt about the views of Pelagius. Kant wrote four ethical works : *The Metaphysics of Morals*, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, *The Metaphysical Elements of Ethics* and *The First Part of the Philosophical Theory of Religion*.

As between the two teachers there is no doubt that Kant's examination of questions is more systematic and painstaking and his views and insights profounder beyond comparison. On reading his ethical works, Jean Paul Richter was led to say that Kant was not so much a light as a solar system by himself. Kant, however, is a closed book to the man in the street, and though he was not merely examining things but preaching, his preaching was to

the learned. Pelagius was a preacher by profession, and preached to the ordinary men ; but he was not so much preaching to ordinary men, as voicing their views.

Pelagius denied that Sin was anything real or positive. To him it was not a substance, an existence or a body, but merely an act, the doing of a wrongful deed. When a wrongful deed had been done, it was over and done, it had no further effect. It did not weaken human nature. All that he would admit was a series of disconnected acts. If, however, Sin itself was not an existence, it must be the absence of an existence ; if there was not something which produced Sin, it was the failure of something that did it. That this conception is not scriptural is obvious ; nor is it difficult to discover from where it came. With Socrates, Sin was due to ignorance ; that is, the absence or failure of knowledge ; with Aristotle, vice was simply due to the failure of a possible virtue, through defect or excess. So with Pelagius, Sin was simply the failure to do right.

Since Pelagius did not believe in the positive reality of Sin or evil, he did not have to account for its origin. He not merely refused to accept that the human race was affected by the Sin of Adam, but refused to accept any theory or doctrine of Original Sin. He asserted that we come into the world without any entailment. 'Just as we are procreated without virtue, so without vice.' He, however, had to account for the universality of Sin ; and this he did by attributing it to the bad example of Adam and the force of habit. 'Nothing', he said, 'makes well-doing so hard as the long custom of sins, begun from childhood which gradually brings us more and more under its power till it comes to have the force of nature.'

Kant takes a more realistic view of Sin ; in fact, the subtitle of his *Philosophical Theory of Religion* is 'Of the Bad Principle in Human Nature'. He says, 'In the face of the multitude of crying examples which experience sets before one's eyes' the fact does not need any proof ; and dismisses those philosophers who talk about the goodness of human nature in the state of nature, by pointing them to many instances of unprovoked cruelty and vice among savage tribes ; and caustically adds that judging from the 'long melancholy litany of complaints', civilized people do not show themselves much better. While declaring the origin of evil to be inscrutable, he says that Scripture is perfectly right in the position that it was with the human race from the beginning. He considers that the story of Adam is allegorical but insists that there was a Fall ; so that there is a radical perversion in our will.

Both are passionate believers in the Freedom of the Will. Pelagius says there are three faculties in us : capacity, volition and action. The last two are ours ; the first is God's. If we do not have the ability to do good, how can we be worthy of blame, when we do anything wrong ? Free Will was with us from the beginning and remains with us always. For this reason he believes it is possible to live sinlessly. In reply to the question whether any

one has lived sinlessly so far, Pelagius replies, 'Our contention is about what is possible and not possible; not about what is; and what is not'; but he cites a number of people, beginning from Abel and Enoch in the Old Testament and coming down to Joseph and Mary in the New, whom he holds have indeed lived sinlessly.

As with Pelagius, Freedom is a presupposition of morality for Kant. It is, he says, impossible either for philosophers or common reason to argue away freedom. Nevertheless, man has a natural propensity to badness; his elective will prefers bad maxims to good ones and refuses to make the moral law supreme; so that his freedom is a freedom vitiated by this propensity. That he should come to make the moral law supreme requires not gradual reform but a revolution of the mind. He quotes the words of Our Lord to Nicodemus as being perfectly right. Man to be good requires a new birth; he must be a new creation. The moral culture of man must begin not with improvement in morals but a transformation of the mind. If it be asked how such a transformation is possible when man is radically perverse, he says that, in spite of the Fall, 'a germ of good has remained (in man) in its complete purity, which could not be destroyed or corrupted'. It may be seen, therefore, whose side he would have taken in the controversy of thirty years ago between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. Kant, however, does not explain how, because of this 'germ', there could be a spontaneous reformation, if man's elective will is radically perverse.

Pelagius believes that a sinless life can be lived without divine help. He does not believe that we should pray, 'Lead us not into temptation', as that would mean that God has left us without power of our own to lead a sinless life. He believes, prayer is necessary not for what is in our power but for what is not, as for instance against accident, robbery and misfortune. In fact the quarrel between him and Augustine is not about the possibility of a sinless life. In Augustine's eyes, though the possibility of a sinless life is unscriptural, to hold it is not a fatal heresy. What provokes Augustine's bitter wrath is that Pelagius should say that such a life is possible without God's help. We, therefore, need not wonder that Archbishop William Temple was led to call Pelagianism the most damnable of all heresies. It would, of course, have been ridiculous for Pelagius to maintain that the help of God would make no difference. So he said, 'With the sail more easily; with the oar with more difficulty; nevertheless we can go. On a beast more easily; on foot with more difficulty; nevertheless progress can be made on foot.'

As against Pelagius, Kant does not believe that a sinless life can be attained in this life. There can only be progress; but that progress is *ad infinitum*, which for that very reason justifies man's hoping for an endless duration of his existence. As for this life, man should try his best and then only ask God's help; it is, however, not necessary for him to know in what the co-operation of God consists.

It may, therefore, be seen that with both the emphasis is almost entirely on man's effort. With Pelagius God's help in moral life is unnecessary; but if given can, of course, be of some use. With Kant, as we have seen, human effort is always supplemented by divine help and therefore need not concern us. With neither does it seem very important. Pelagius holds that is not needed; Kant thinks it can be taken for granted; and therefore need not be taken into account. Both use the phrase 'God crowns our merit'; but with Pelagius it seems to mean merely reward; with Kant both help and reward.

In view of the general attitude of both, it is natural that to them the work of Christ towards human salvation does not enter the picture at all. To Pelagius the value of Christ consists in His example and His teaching. He does not admit that Christ 'accomplished' anything on the Cross; and would by no means have accepted St. Paul's identification of the Christian message with the 'Word of the Cross'. Kant on his part says, 'It is not essential and therefore not necessary for everyone to know what God has done for his salvation, but it is essential to know what he himself has to do in order to be worthy of his assistance.' But it is just to proclaim what God has done for us that Christianity came into the world. 'Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel', the disciples were told; and not 'Go ye into the world and engage in moral exhortation'. We see, therefore, that in the case of both, 'the gospel' drops out.

Pelagius starts with God. It is He who sets the commands. He quotes the words of Deuteronomy: 'Life and death He hath set before thee; and good and evil—choose thou life that thou mayest live.' Pelagius, therefore, arrives at the Moral Law. Kant as a philosopher does not start with God; to him that is the business of 'theologia revelata'. He starts with the Moral Law; but since the faithful observance of the Law, ought to be, but is not in this world rewarded with happiness, there should be a God, who in the end brings this to pass. He points that where the Greek Schools—and to him there are only two, the Stoics and the Epicureans—failed was that they tried to solve ethical problems without reference to God. The Stoics finding that virtue was not accompanied by happiness thought there was no connexion between the two, while the Epicureans believing that there should be a connexion, made happiness 'the end' of morality. Both had tried to solve the question without reference to the Deity. In other words, Kant may be said to have arrived at God; and he has no hesitation in insisting that the Law from which he had started is God's Law. Here both he and Pelagius agree.

But on this common basis both differ as to why we should obey the Law. To Pelagius this would have been a straight matter; the commandments must be obeyed because they are God's. To Kant, on the other hand, to obey the Law because it is God's is to introduce the principle of heteronomy into the sphere of morality. The will must elect to do a thing solely and simply because it is right, and for no other reason; it is only then will the

will be autonomous. Heteronomy means that the law comes from outside ; therefore the purpose in carrying it out implies an ulterior motive. And of all heteronomous principles the one to which he objects most is the theological principle. In the first place, he says, we can deduce Divine Perfection only from our own conceptions. This would be arguing in a circle. In the second place, we shall have to obey the Law from considerations of divine might and vengeance. 'Any system of morals, erected on this foundation', he says, 'would be directly opposed to morality.' It is only when the Law is obeyed because it is the Law, that we are in perfect accord with the will of the author of the Law.

However, both the monk and the philosopher, whether they start from God or arrive at Him, remove the problem of morality away from God. It is considered independently. Having created man and having given the Moral Law, God is looked upon as leaving man to his fate. 'Before man are good and evil, and life and death, poverty and honour.' Man may choose ; the Deity does not seem concerned. It is not that God is ignored, but His intervention and His importance in the world are reduced to a minimum. Both Pelagius and Kant are in the world of Deism.

If a person is a Deist he may not be a Theist, but he cannot be a Pantheist. Pelagius must only too well have been aware of the philosophy of Neo-Platonism ; but the nature of his mission made it unnecessary for him to take notice of it in his teaching and controversies. Kant notices a school that holds similar views ; and that notice while it is curt is sufficiently final. He would have nothing to do with 'Spinozism', which says that human beings are attributes of the Supreme Being and that their actions are His actions in time and space. He calls the whole idea absurd. His general attitude made it necessary to maintain a clear distinction between God and man.

It has been said that the Christian religion contains both an 'Indicative' and an 'Imperative'. We have found the 'Indicative' missing from both Pelagius and Kant. What about the Imperative ? Kant lifts the Imperative to an exalted and absolute level and calls it 'The Categorical Imperative' ; but the Categorical Imperative is a rational Imperative. And an imperative separated from God has ceased to be the divine Imperative. It is not the Sovereign God who says, 'Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth', who is speaking through such an Imperative.

And an attempt to isolate the Imperative from the Indicative ignores the dependence of the former or the latter. God is not like the law-giver of Sparta who laid down his laws and then left the country for good. He is a God engaged in an unceasing struggle to save the stiff-necked and rebellious race He has created. His actions on man's behalf constitutes the chief ground of His appeal for man's obedience. In the New Testament the demand for repentance and conversion follows the recitation of what God has done in Christ. To isolate the Imperative from the Indicative is to cut the ground from under the former.

Pelagius and Kant were two earnest men who were genuinely attempting to make men live by the highest moral standards. One was clever and the other profound ; but they were two human beings attempting to solve the deepest problems of life in terms of human categories of thought. One was striving to show that the attainment of perfection was possible ; and the other was asking men to follow the Categorical Imperative to the bitter end. ' Be good, sweet maid, let who will be clever ', said the Poet ; and that is just what both were trying to say. Kant himself refers to moralists from Seneca to Rousseau ; there have been many since ; and that is exactly what they have all said. They have nothing to say on the agonizing problem of Sin and Salvation. That problem arises only before God. They give earnest advice to the man who is not willing to listen to their advice and keep the commandments ; but they having nothing to say to the man who has kept all the commandments and yet cries out in distress, ' What shall I do to be saved ? '

The moral command has ultimate meaning and authority, only because it is God's command ; and such a commandment, therefore, may not be taken away from Him, generalized and reduced to a formula, whether in the interests of attaining perfection or of universalizing maxims, without in the last analysis making void its worth. The discussion of morality apart from God is a feeble intellectual game.
