

Robert Johnson

Moral Ideal

1. *Meaning and location in Kant's works*

The concept of the moral ideal is primarily deployed in *Religion within the limits of reason alone*, although such an ideal plays a role in all of Kant's major ethical works. The moral ideal is a schematized ideal of reason, in which a real human being such as Jesus is an analog of the abstract idea of perfection.

Wichtige Stellen: 4:408, 5:83, 5:129, 6:64-5n, 6:383

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2. *Related keywords in Kant's work*

Perfection, imperfection

3. *Philosophical function in Kant's philosophy*

Kant held that we are obligated to pursue moral perfection. But what is it we are pursuing? It is, Kant argued, an ideal of a person who is morally perfect in every way. However, due to the limitations of human reason, conceiving of perfect moral worth requires analogizing it with the actions of an actual human being. We need, that is, to emulate, not an abstract ideal of perfection, but a real human being. Any moral ideal, though it is an ideal of reason, thus requires a "schematism of analogy" in order to make it comprehensible to us. g. 6:64-5n For Kant, that schematized moral ideal was the Christian figure of Jesus. Jesus represents a prototype of a pure moral disposition, one willing not only to perform all of his duties for duty's sake alone, but to undergo the greatest temptations and sufferings, even including death, to do so. 6:61 We are to elevate ourselves to his level, even though it is not possible to conceive how, given our natures, we could do so. The ideal comes, not from any example

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from experience: even the best people are flawed. Rather, it is already contained in reason, and the only faith that has moral worth is faith in the practical validity of this ideal. 6:63

Morality requires that we emulate the ideal of moral perfection, or at least constantly approximate it. 5:83, 6:409, 446 However, the distance between ourselves and it is infinite, and however much progress toward it we could make toward emulating it we cannot do so for the simple reason that we began in imperfection. 6:66 Kant believes that it is nevertheless reasonable to suppose that we can emulate the moral ideal if we underwent a conversion that leaves us different enough from our old, imperfect selves, as to count as new persons entirely. 6:73

However, we must not elevate the ideal that Jesus represents above every frailty of human nature; that would prevent his being an ideal for our emulation. 6:64 If any actual human being had been born with an innate pure disposition that made moral transgressions impossible, then obviously he too would be able to resist the greatest of temptations. The issue is how someone *not* born with a pure disposition could attain it. Whatever ideal we are required to strive for, it amounts to an ideal for *human beings*. "Human morality in its highest stage can still be nothing more than virtue, even if it be entirely pure...commonly personified poetically by the *sage*". 6:383 The moral ideal is the *autocracy* rather than *autonomy* of reason, full possession of the capacity to master wayward inclinations, not holiness.

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4. *Secondary literature.*

1. Baron, Marcia. "Moral Paragons and the Metaphysics of Morals." in *A Companion to Kant*. Bird, Graham (ed), Malden MA : Blackwell Publishing, 2006. 335-349