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The tension between reason and faith: a reconstruction of Kant's interpretation of *Romans* 7:22–23 from the perspective of freedom

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Abstract. In the Christian tradition, there exists a profound tension between the goodness of God's law and the reality of human sinfulness. In his work "*Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*", Kant articulates an alternative, rationalist conception of moral religion: he internalizes God's law as the "original predisposition to good" and replaces the law of sin with the "natural propensity to evil". The former is a normative principle, while the latter is the actual consequence of free "arbitrium" (Willkür). The fundamental aim of Kant's moral philosophy is to exercise free will, conform to the moral law in order to overcome inclination, and thereby fully actualize the original predisposition to good. Kant's reinterpretation of *Romans* 7:22–23 in "*Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*" highlights his rationalist stance. Centered on the concept of freedom, he argues that the power to choose between good and evil resides in human rational freedom—a position that stands in sharp contrast to the Christian view, which regards evil as an innate yoke that transcends human freedom. Kant emphasizes human beings' subjective responsibility for their own moral condition, embodying his distinctive philosophical project of grounding religion in practical reason.

Keywords: Kant, *Romans*, principles of good and evil, freedom, philosophy of religion

1. Introduction

Romans 7:22–23 characterizes the relationship between God's law and the law of sin as follows: "For I delight in the law of God, in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members" [1]. In response to this passage, Kant elaborates in the second part of *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*—"The Struggle of the Good Principle with the Evil Principle for Dominion over Humanity"—reinterpreting *Romans* 7:22–23 from the standpoint of human reason. He transforms "God's law" into the "pure moral law" and reduces the "law of sin" to the "evil principle", internalizing the origins of both from external divine legislation or transcendent sin into the domains of human reason and freedom themselves. Kant's interpretation clearly demonstrates his rationalist commitments, and "freedom"—the cornerstone of his philosophy—occupies a central position in his philosophy of religion. Freedom is the key to understanding the relationship among the good principle, the evil principle, and human beings: the good principle is rooted in the human rational predisposition to good,

manifested as the autonomous adherence to the moral law; the evil principle, by contrast, stems from the deviation of human free arbitrium from moral incentives, rather than from coercion by external forces. This interpretation stands in sharp opposition to the Christian tradition, and particularly to Augustine's doctrine of original sin. Augustine regards sin as an innate yoke that transcends human freedom, originating in the fall of the first human beings, while Kant entrusts the power to choose between good and evil entirely to human rational freedom, thereby emphasizing human beings' subjective responsibility for their own moral condition.

Grounded in the concept of freedom and with primary reference to Augustine's views, this paper analyzes the similarities and differences between Kant's philosophy of religion and Christianity with respect to the relationships among good, evil, and human beings.

2. Conceptual reconstruction: law, principle, and reason

The concepts of "God's law", "the law of the mind", and "the law of sin" appear in *Romans*, while the corresponding concepts of "the good principle" and "the evil principle" are found in *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*. This section elaborates on the content of these concepts, establishes a correspondence between Paul's and Kant's expressions, and outlines their core meanings.

2.1. Law as a statutory rule, not a principle

In the New Testament context, God's law must be understood as referring to Jewish (Mosaic) law; without this identification, it would be impossible to infer "the body of death" (Rom. 7:24) [1] from the inability to obey God's law. In Kant's philosophy of religion, this law is referred to *as statutory law* [2], which is logically on a par with pure moral legislation [2]. Nevertheless, Kant draws a clear distinction between the two: statutory laws are established by an external legislator—God, in this case—and thus possess externality, whereas the pure moral law is internal, autonomously derived by human reason [2]. For the purposes of this paper, both are collectively referred to as *laws*, to be distinguished from *principles*.

The good principle, however, is not a concept at the same level as the aforementioned laws. The term *Princip* (principle) connotes a motivating ground or logical incentive; the good principle is the "subjective original ground for adopting good maxims", which in Kant's framework is specifically manifested as "the ground in accordance with which one acts by obeying the pure moral law and taking it as the sole incentive." [2] Transposed to the Christian context of *Romans* 7:22–23, therefore, the good principle constitutes the ultimate ground for the mind's obedience to God's law.

It follows that God's law is not identical to the good principle, but can contain it: the content of God's law includes the demand to obey God's law (a point particularly evident during the era in which law held sway), and this demand constitutes the ground for human beings' obedience to it. Unlike in Kant's framework, however, the good principle in this Christian context originates from an external divine legislator rather than from human internal reason.

By the same token, from the parallelism between God's law and the law of sin in *Romans*, it can be inferred that the law of sin also belongs to the category of laws rather than principles. The law of sin is not, in itself, the evil principle; rather, the evil principle is the ground that impels human beings to submit to the law of sin.

2.2. The greek context of "the mind" and Kant's pure reason

The term "the mind" in *Romans* bears a strong imprint of Greek philosophy, referring specifically to human understanding and moral judgment. Kant's concept of pure reason, by contrast, denotes the capacity for logical inference that operates wholly independently of experience. In this sense, "the mind" in *Romans* can be

regarded as a component of human pure reason, and the law of the mind is therefore the law that human beings choose to obey through the exercise of pure reason.

3. The foundation of "delighting in the law of god in one's inmost self": the good principle and human freedom

Romans 7:22 affirms that human beings are willing to obey God's law—that is, they possess the will to abide by it. In Kant's framework, God's law is replaced by the pure moral law, to which Kant assigns far greater importance than to statutory law. Consequently, "delighting in the law of God in one's inmost self" becomes equivalent to "human beings possessing the will to obey the pure moral law". As established above, the pure moral law is a law, not a principle; the good principle, therefore, should be understood as the ground for this will to obey the moral law. This analysis gives rise to two core questions: Why do human beings will to obey the pure moral law? And is this will a product of human free arbitrium (*Willkür*)? The second question leads directly to an inquiry into the relationship between human beings and the good principle.

3.1. The origin of the will: the objective reality of the good principle

As the ground for obeying the pure moral law, the good principle is what effectively moves human beings to form the will to abide by the law. The first question thus reduces to a proof of the objective reality of the good principle, for which Kant's framework offers two distinct paths.

3.1.1. The predisposition to good as the ground of the good principle

In the first part of *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Kant classifies the original predisposition to good into three types, of which the third—the predisposition to personality—disposes human beings to respect the moral law and to take it as a sufficient incentive of the will in itself [2]. By virtue of the moral feeling arising from this predisposition, human beings ought to possess the will to obey the pure moral law. On this account, however, the objective reality of the good principle does not appear to stem from the freedom of human beings as agents, but from a predisposition that is not itself a product of free arbitrium.

This does not mean, however, that the good principle is wholly unrelated to human freedom. In discussing the predisposition to personality, Kant emphasizes that this predisposition requires human beings to exist as rational beings. Accordingly, the possession of the good principle cannot be reduced to a purely natural, mechanically conditioned response of "predisposition to good → moral feeling", but must presuppose the participation of reason. The objective reality of the good principle necessarily requires human beings' cognition of the pure moral law, which in turn inevitably depends upon human free reason.

3.1.2. The anthropomorphized idea of the good principle as objectively real

The second path indirectly establishes the objective reality of the good principle through its anthropomorphized idea, since the objective reality of this idea is a sufficient condition for the objective reality of the good principle itself. In the second part of *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, Kant demonstrates this reality at two levels. The anthropomorphized idea of the good principle is "human nature in a state of complete moral perfection"—the "archetype of humanity with a moral disposition of unalloyed purity" [2]. To possess this idea means that human beings strive to approximate this archetype in their moral conduct. Regarding its objective reality: first, this idea is cognized by pure reason and is consistent with the pure moral law constructed through pure reason, and thus possesses reality in itself. A deeper question, however, concerns how such an idea can be received by human beings and become a motivating ground derived from free arbitrium that is more compelling than any other. Without this, one cannot affirm the

existence of a pure moral law that requires itself to be taken as the supreme and sole incentive—and, by extension, the existence of a good principle, which takes such a pure moral law as its necessary condition [2].

In response, Kant argues that this cannot be demonstrated from either a purely rational or an empirical standpoint, and ultimately completes the argument with the assertion: "This idea, as such a model, is already contained in our pure reason" [2]. This demonstration does not derive the objective reality of the idea analytically, but through a kind of rational experience—the fact that one has cognized such a model in pure reason. A genuine difficulty remains: if this idea is not something that human beings can construct through pure reason, how can they be certain that they have cognized one and the same complete idea? This paper attempts to supplement Kant's argument as follows: since whatever the pure moral law demands of human beings must be within their capacity, it follows, from the standpoint of pure reason, that human beings can apprehend the pure moral law and can therefore cognize in pure reason what human nature in a state of complete moral perfection consists in—that is, the anthropomorphized idea of the good principle. This argument establishes the objective reality of that idea and, thereby, the objective reality of the good principle itself. This path requires the participation of human freedom: the anthropomorphized idea of the good principle presupposes pure reason, which in turn presupposes freedom. The objective reality of the good principle is therefore grounded in human freedom.

3.2. Freedom as the core: the autonomy of the good principle

The phrase "delighting in the law of God in one's inmost self" in *Romans* should not be understood as signifying that human beings naturally and spontaneously delight in God's law in their original state. Rather, it should be read as expressing that human beings form the will to obey God's law out of the desire for a blessed life and the longing for salvation at the final judgment. The reason is that the context of *Romans* 7:22–23 emphasizes the conflict between human beings' subjective will to obey God's law and the objective obstacle posed by the law of sin; the act of "delighting in the law of God in one's inmost self" therefore possesses the character of free will. Augustine's discussion of the intimate connection between will and the happy life in "On Free Choice of the Will" [3] also supports this interpretation, indicating that delighting in God's law is a purposive, free act of human beings motivated by their pre-existing Christian formation.

In Kant's framework, human beings' possession of the good principle likewise originates in their freedom. Kant holds that if rational beings relied solely on the moral feeling arising from the original predisposition to good, they would be reduced to a merely mechanical conditioned response. On the contrary, the good principle is grounded in human reason and is therefore derived from human free arbitrium.

It can thus be seen that Kant and Christianity share a common position on the relationship between human beings and the good principle: both take human freedom as the essential foundation, insisting that the good principle presupposes human beings as free rational agents, rather than arising entirely from a natural original predisposition.

4. The predicament of "another law in one's members": the origin of evil and the limits of freedom

Both *Romans* and *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* present two opposing laws or principles: in Romans, the correspondence between God's law and the law of sin; in Kant, the correspondence between the good principle and the evil principle. Section II established that both "delighting in the law of God in one's inmost self" and "possessing the good principle" are rooted in human freedom. In this section, however, a profound disparity emerges between the corresponding pair: "being captive to the law of sin" and "possessing

the evil principle". The former transcends the limits of human freedom; the latter remains within the domain of human freedom.

4.1. The origin and locus of evil: bodily bondage versus free arbitrium

As depicted in Romans, the law of sin is a force that compels human beings to sin against their will, corresponding to the Augustinian concept of original sin. In Augustine's framework, original sin denotes the corruption of human nature,* rendering human beings incapable of obeying God's law; it is, moreover, inherent to human existence as such. In Kantian terms, this can be understood as an original evil predisposition inscribed in human beings.

Regarding the origin of original sin, the Bible provides only a historical narrative—the account of Adam eating the forbidden fruit in Genesis [4], through which sin entered the world and subjected all his descendants to its dominion. Augustine offers a rational interpretation of this narrative, arguing that original sin originates in the abuse of free will [5]. This does not mean, however, that Augustine grants human beings the ability autonomously to determine whether they bear original sin; such a view would contradict the notion of sin dwelling "in one's members". Although original sin in Augustine's framework originates in Adam's abuse of free will, it has, since Adam, become an essential constituent of human existence, lodged in the human body and incapable of being eradicated.

Kant, by contrast, approaches the evil principle from the opposite direction. He holds that the evil principle originates in the human propensity to evil (*Hang zum Bösen*), which falls within the domain of free arbitrium. To this end, Kant distinguishes between innate nature (*angeborne Natur*) and original predisposition (*ursprüngliche Anlage*): although the propensity to evil is innate, it is not an original predisposition. That is, the propensity to evil is not acquired through temporal experience and accompanies human beings from birth, yet it is incurred by free arbitrium. Kant thus rejects the Christian view that original sin abides in the flesh, for in his framework the flesh denotes original predispositions or natural inclinations—features of human existence that are independent of free arbitrium [2].

In summary, the core divergence between the two positions lies here: *Romans* clearly indicates that the law of sin dwells in the flesh rather than in free arbitrium, whereas Kant argues that the evil principle resides in free arbitrium. On one point, however, they concur: both maintain that the ultimate origin of the law of sin or the evil principle is incomprehensible. Genesis and "On Free Choice of the Will" refrain from explaining why Adam's free will led him to eat the forbidden fruit; Kant likewise points out that the origin of the propensity to evil can be neither traced nor accounted for, whether temporally or rationally.

4.2. The root of the conceptual divergence: freedom and moral responsibility

The divergence between Kant and Christianity in their accounts of original sin and the evil principle reflects a deeper conceptual difference. An examination of the concept of original sin reveals a view entirely at odds with Kant's: although original sin is not incurred by one's own free arbitrium, human beings are nonetheless held responsible for it and must make themselves pleasing to God in order to be justified. Kant's careful distinction between "innate nature" and "predisposition" in his treatment of the propensity to evil is precisely an attempt to avoid this view: by attributing the propensity to evil—and thus the evil principle—to free arbitrium, he concludes that human beings are responsible for their evil principle and must strive to transform themselves into morally good beings.

This divergence also illuminates the differing status of the concept of freedom in Christianity and Kant's philosophy of religion. Throughout the development of Christian thought, the significance of human freedom has not been consistently affirmed. Early Christianity displayed a strongly supernaturalist and mystical tone

that tended to obscure the function of human reason and freedom; after Augustine, his determinist doctrine of original sin became normative, while Pelagius's account of free will fell into disfavor. Divine predestination was understood to operate wholly apart from human will, and Christianity thereby moved toward a discourse of determinism and fatalism [6]. For Kant, by contrast, freedom is the cornerstone of his entire philosophical system: the intimate connection between human free arbitrium and moral good and evil constitutes the theoretical foundation of his moral philosophy, a position that stands in stark contrast to the Christian tradition.

5. The eternal struggle: the conflict between the two laws and human subjectivity

Despite the conceptual differences between God's law and the good principle, and between the law of sin and the evil principle, the struggle between the good and evil principles described in *Romans* 7:22–23 and in the second part of *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* are analogous, and human beings face a comparable predicament in the conflict between the two laws. In Kant's framework, however, this struggle assumes a richer philosophical significance.

5.1. Similarities and differences in the struggle between the two laws: from mind–body dualism to the conflict of incentives

In Romans, human beings subjectively desire to obey God's law, yet are objectively unable to do so; instead, they are "made captive to the law of sin that dwells in [their] members". The struggle between the two laws in Romans is thus a vivid portrayal of original sin—though human beings desire not to sin, they lack the capacity to refrain from doing so. This view inherits from Plato's "Timaeus" the picture of a struggle between reason and necessity, presenting a classic picture of mind–body dualism [7].

In Kant's philosophy of religion, by contrast, the struggle between the two laws is the struggle between the good and evil principles, which do not embody a mind–body dichotomy but occupy an equal logical status as competing incentives. The struggle in Romans can be reduced to the first type of propensity to evil in Kant's taxonomy: the frailty of human nature (*Gebrechlichkeit*). Kant's account goes further, additionally identifying two other forms of propensity to evil: the impurity of the human heart (*Unlauterkeit*) and the depravity of the human heart (*Bösartigkeit*) [2]. This supplementation opens a new dimension of analysis beyond external actions—namely, the domain of motivating grounds or incentives.

The similarity in human beings' predicament lies in the fact that the struggle in both accounts is essentially a conflict between good and evil. In the Christian context, this opposition and struggle can be understood as that between life and death, and more broadly, as that between the earthly city and the City of God, concretely embodied in the opposition between Jesus Christ and the devil. Correspondingly, in Kant's philosophy of religion, it is manifested as the opposition between the predisposition to good and the propensity to evil, extended to the opposition between the kingdom of God and the earthly kingdom. Human beings are perpetually caught in this predicament: in their natural, unredeemed state they are evil, and they must exert constant effort and endure suffering in order to progress toward goodness [2].

5.2. Human beings' role in the struggle: from passive sufferers to free moral agents

A significant difference remains, however, between the struggle between the two laws in *Romans* and Kant's conception, and the root of this difference lies once again in the divergent status of human freedom. According to Romans 7:22–23, the human figure depicted is passive and unfree. Phrases such as "I see in my members another law" and "make me captive" clearly indicate human beings' role: they are at once sufferers and

onlookers. Although both laws inhere in the human person (God's law belongs to the mind, and the law of sin dwells in the members), they struggle independently, tearing at human beings as passive sufferers who are distinct from both laws. Human beings do not control this struggle. This is consistent with Augustine's account of original sin and grace: human beings cannot do good through reason and law alone, but only through divine grace.

In Kant's framework, by contrast, the status of human beings is significantly elevated [8]. He argues that the struggle between the good and evil principles is, in fact, a human-centered conflict that takes place within human free arbitrium. From a rational standpoint, the good or evil principle of human beings—as the ground for adopting good or evil maxims—is accessible to human beings through reason, and consequently the opposition and struggle between them is likewise subject-centered. Kant offers a rationalist interpretation of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ as symbols of this struggle, arguing that they illustrate that "there is no salvation except through the sincere acceptance of the true fundamental moral law into one's disposition" [9]. He further analyzes that the dominion of the evil principle persists even after the crucifixion; the crucifixion breaks the power of the evil principle, but does not signify the victory of the good principle.

This account might give rise to a misunderstanding: it might appear that human beings can simply remain citizens of the earthly kingdom, pursuing secular happiness as their sole end and evading the struggle by fully capitulating to the evil principle. This reading is mistaken, however. The good principle, rooted in the original predisposition to good, is ineradicable in human beings—the moral feeling arising from the predisposition to personality is an inseparable part of human nature, and human beings therefore cannot fully comply with the evil principle [10]. In other words, even if human beings wish to obey the evil principle entirely, they cannot do so on account of the predisposition to good.

5.3. The eternal tension: the predicament of freedom and the possibility of moral progress

Thus, on the one hand, human beings are willing to obey the good principle yet cannot rid themselves of the evil principle; on the other hand, even if human beings were willing to obey the evil principle entirely, they cannot ignore the good principle. Regarding the former, in the second part of *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* [2], Kant makes three key points:

(1) Human beings begin from evil, and the distance between their actual condition and the good is infinite, thus requiring unceasing effort to attain goodness;

(2) Human beings cannot empirically verify when they have become good, but can only infer their moral progress;

(3) Human moral actions committed in the state of evil require atonement, and the process of turning from evil to good demands a kind of surplus moral compensation.

At the same time, by virtue of the predisposition to good and the principle derived from free arbitrium that the demands of the moral law do not exceed human capacity, human beings possess the genuine possibility of attaining goodness [11]. They must therefore engage in continual practice and self-transformation, making unremitting effort to become morally better. Hence, even when willing to obey the good principle, they can never wholly free themselves from the evil principle [2]. Regarding the latter: as noted above, the predisposition to good is an essential, ineradicable component of human nature, and thus even when inclined to obey the evil principle, human beings remain enmeshed in the struggle between the two laws.

6. Conclusion

From a consistently rationalist standpoint, Kant reinterprets *Romans* 7:22–23 with human freedom as the cornerstone, advancing the concepts of the "good principle", the "evil principle", and the "struggle between the two laws". He maintains that morality is grounded in human free arbitrium, and that both human goodness and human evil are therefore products of free arbitrium; human beings do not require the mediation of an external God in order to achieve moral transformation. On the contrary, human beings can derive the moral law through reason and possess, by virtue of their free arbitrium, the capacity to effect moral transformation from within—though this transformation takes the form of an infinite revolution of moral disposition, implying that a state of complete moral purity cannot be fully realized in actual life [12]. Kant's concept of freedom endows human beings with genuine moral agency; his reconstruction of *Romans* 7:22–23 fundamentally negates the reduction of human beings to passive recipients of divine grace who surrender their right to rational judgment. It affirms instead that human beings ought to exercise their rational autonomy and assume their central role in moral practice.

Note

The term "nature" here does not refer to Natur in Kant's sense, but to that which inheres in human existence independently of free arbitrium, equivalent to Kant's concept of predisposition (Anlage).

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