

FROM EPISTEMOLOGY TO ETHICS

Theoretical and Practical Reason in Kant and Douglass

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this essay is to provide a philosophical discussion of Frederick Douglass's thought in relation to Christianity. I expand upon the work of Bill E. Lawson and Frank M. Kirkland—who both argue that there are Kantian features present in Douglass as it relates to his conception of the individual—by arguing that there are similarities between Douglass and Kant not only concerning the relationship between morality and Christianity, but also concerning the nature of the soul. Specifically, I try to show that the moral weakness of slaveholding Christianity that Douglass attacked is found in the ecclesial formation of the slaveholding Christian church; it is a formation that begins with epistemology, but ignores ethics. I conclude, in part, that both Douglass and Kant reject a Cartesian psychological dualism in favor of a conception of the soul that is more attentive to one's moral development.

KEY WORDS: *Douglass, Kant, Cartesian, Christianity, morality, soul, epistemology, ethics, practical, metaphysical*

Christians have never put into practice the acts Jesus prescribed for them . . . *the Christian acts as all the world does* and possesses a Christianity of ceremonies and moods.

—Nietzsche (1968, 191)

But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves.

—James 1:22

1. Introduction

Christianity was important to Frederick Douglass. It was important to him because he saw that its precepts, when rightly conceived and practiced, had the potential for humanizing slaves. If it were true, as he argued in *The Claims of the Negro Ethnologically Considered*, that the Bible was correct in its proclamation that God “hath made of one blood

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all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth" (Acts 17:26) then black slaves and white slave owners are of a common origin, and the moral imperatives of the Bible could simultaneously condemn the slave owner and humanize the slave. For if the slave could be baptized as a Christian then the slave had a soul. If the slave had a soul, then the slave was a human being. If the slave was a human being, then it was morally wrong for one human being to "own" another as chattel. But not only would the thesis of monogenesis, if proven, be an equalizer by humanizing slaves; there would be other moral implications, such as a Christian demand for moral action to remedy the devastating effects of the injustice of "man stealing," to use Douglass's phrase. This action would be equivalent to "doing justly," "loving mercy," and "walking humbly" with God (Micah 6:8). Thus it was that Christianity could help abolish American chattel slavery and rectify its social, political, and economic wrongs. But only the right kind of Christianity could dismantle slavery. The slaveholding Christianity of America would not do. It was too committed to maintaining the status quo. It had to be undermined. To this end, Douglass exposed a moral weakness at the core of slaveholding Christianity: it was more concerned about the theoretical justifications for its beliefs than it was about the moral practice of its slave owning members. By exalting epistemology over ethics in this manner, slaveholding Christianity thrived. Douglass sought to reverse this paradigm by emphasizing that adherence to practical morality was more important than merely adopting the doctrinal beliefs of Christianity. In doing this, Douglass displays some remarkable affinities with Immanuel Kant. Expanding upon earlier discussions of the affinities, my goal is to provide a philosophical account that is attentive to Douglass's thoughts on Christianity.¹

The purpose of this essay is to develop a Kantian interpretation of Douglass's conception of subjectivity as it relates to the relationship between morality and Christianity in Douglass's thought. To do this, I will build upon Bill E. Lawson's and Frank M. Kirkland's work through showing Douglass's affinities with Kant's view of the relationship between morality and Christianity.² Kant's conception of the individual—what I will refer to here as "subjectivity"—is thoroughly concerned with Christianity and its relationship to moral action. Kant ultimately concludes

¹ Among the philosophical discussions of Douglass and Kant are Frank M. Kirkland's work on Douglass and his connection to Immanuel Kant's view of the Enlightenment (see Kirkland 1999), and Bill E. Lawson's work on Douglass and his connection to Kant's conception of the self (see Lawson 2009).

² I use the phrase "build upon" here because both Lawson and Kirkland have been instrumental in the development of Douglass scholarship as it relates to Kant. I discuss the some of the details of their work later in the essay.

that while morality may “ineluctably” lead to religion (Christianity), Christianity does not ineluctably lead to morality. On Kant’s account, then, morality has primacy over Christianity.

Douglass, like Kant, is concerned about Christianity and its relationship to morality, and, as I will argue below, reaches a similar conclusion to Kant: an autonomous, rational self, committed to the moral law must precede Christianity for that self to be moral. For Douglass and for Kant, simply claiming to be a Christian without any commitment to the moral law is a perversion of Christianity and is destructive of one’s humanity. Kant can thus be used in the service of Douglass to provide a more complete conception of Douglass’s view of the person. I will try to show how Douglass removes religion from the abstraction of the theoretical spheres of epistemology and metaphysics, and locates it in the realm of human subjectivity in the interest of ethics and moral action, and that, by doing so, Douglass makes a Kantian-styled shift from theoretical to practical reason. My approach in showing the connections between Douglass and Kant on the relationship between morality and Christianity is akin to Kirkland’s and Lawson’s: I am neither making the strong claim that Douglass was a Kantian, nor claiming that the two have no differences; indeed, they do (Kirkland 1999, 253–57; Lawson 2009, 124).

My claim is a more modest one: I want to defend the thesis that there are at least two Kantian features present in Douglass’s critical engagement with slaveholding Christianity as it relates to the relationship between morality and Christianity that help us better understand Douglass. First, when Douglass condemns slaveholding Christianity, he is condemning a community of persons that have formed a church without first becoming moral individuals. The slaveholding church begins with a Christian epistemology (a way of understanding its basic doctrinal beliefs), but never works its way to ethics. The end result of this commitment to epistemology over ethics is the slaveholding Christianity that Douglass condemns. Second, when Douglass rejects Reverend Morgan Godwin’s argument in favor of Negro baptism, he is rejecting an argument that is rooted in an overly theoretical Cartesian psychological realism that ignores moral and ethical concerns. Douglass’s criticism of Godwin’s argument on practical grounds is more consistent with Kant’s notion of the immortality of the soul than it is with Godwin’s Cartesian psychological realism. Since I consider my work an advance on Kirkland and Lawson, it is important to summarize their positions. After these summaries, I turn to the arguments in support of my claims and two possible objections to my interpretation of Douglass and Kant. Given Kant’s disturbing racist views, I thought it important to devote an entire section of the essay to a third objection prior to my conclusion.

2. Kirkland on Douglass, Kant, and the Enlightenment

Frank M. Kirkland, in his essay, "Enslavement, Moral Suasion, and Struggles for Recognition: Frederick Douglass's Answer to the Question—What Is Enlightenment?" argues that Douglass's critical approach to the cultural and social life of nineteenth century America—a cultural and social life tainted by the scourge of chattel slavery—employs what he calls "a communicative practice of justification" (Kirkland 1999, 251). Kirkland points to the notion of moral suasion and argues that Douglass employed this notion in the public sphere, appealing to the rational, critical, and progressive sensibilities of the American public as an integral part of his abolitionist political agenda (Kirkland 1999, 252). Such usage of moral suasion presupposes that persons are rational, free-thinking beings who are capable of making moral judgments upon critical reflection, and who are capable of free associations with one another to act upon those judgments; and this is precisely the kind of public reason that Kant outlines in his essay, "What Is Enlightenment?" (Kirkland 1999, 252). According to Kirkland, Douglass essentially wants to subject the "peculiar" institution of American chattel slavery to the tribunal of reason. And, according to Kant, the age of the Enlightenment is "an age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit" (Kant, 1929, 9). Kant, in the preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, summarizes the age of the Enlightenment and notes that neither religion nor law—two subjects with which Douglass sustained an ongoing critical engagement—was exempt from rational scrutiny: "Religion through its sanctity, and law-giving through its majesty may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination" (Kant 1929, 9). Indeed, Kirkland correctly indicates that from the time of Douglass's first public speech, he employed his moral suasion in public forums to seek the demise of American chattel slavery, and it was this public use of reason that reflects a Kantian conception of the Enlightenment. Kirkland does not make the strong claim that Douglass has any direct knowledge of Kant's texts, or that Douglass has intentionally appropriated any of Kant's ideas. Instead, Kirkland is making the weaker claim that Douglass's social and political practices reflect the same critical attitude that Kant advocates in his essay, "What Is Enlightenment?" (Kirkland 1999, 251). On Kirkland's view, then, Douglass is subjecting American chattel slavery to the court of public opinion, presupposing that the public is composed of free-thinking, rational beings, who are not only capable of making moral judgments upon critical reflection, but who are also capable of acting on those judgments through association with like-minded persons to take political action. This is the Kantian view of enlightenment.

3. Lawson on Douglass and a Kantian Conception of the Self

Bill E. Lawson, in his recent essay, “Douglass among the Romantics,” argues that there is a philosophical connection between Douglass and the nineteenth-century transcendentalist movement. Lawson argues that Douglass ought to be counted among the transcendentalists, whose conception of human nature was a Kantian one, which invests human beings with a kind of rational dignity that is worthy of respect from other persons. The reason why human beings have such dignity is that, on Kant’s account, human beings, via the categories of pure reason, make a genuine cognitive contribution to experience (Lawson 2009, 124). By shaping and structuring the objects of experience, human beings take on a certain degree of importance; we are not mere passive recipients of sense perceptions, as Hume or Locke would have it, but our perceptions have a real cognitive value (Lawson 2009, 124–25). For this reason, Lawson claims that an empiricist conception of the self as it is represented in the works of John Locke would have been ineffective for the abolitionist agenda; for if one is, at birth, a *tabula rasa*, and is, as an adult, merely the sum total of their experiences, as Locke believed that one was, then the most that Douglass or any former slave could have been would be a slave; and thus could not have been a free, rational, human being capable of making moral judgments, and worthy of respect from others by virtue of one’s cognitive contribution to the acquisition of knowledge, as is the case with Kant (Lawson 2009, 127). Like Kirkland, Lawson does not make the strong claim that Douglass was a Kantian, but rather advances the weaker claim that a Kantian conception of the self is present in Douglass’s abolition agenda, and that such a conception of the self needed to be present in order for Douglass “to avoid the pitfalls of the empiricists” (Lawson, 2009, 126). To make his case, Lawson argues that the portrayal of Madison Washington, the protagonist in Douglass’s novella *The Heroic Slave*, exemplifies the characteristics of manhood that can affect “a change in attitude about slavery or about blacks that is not caused by a written or verbal interchange between two persons” (Lawson 2009, 122). By simply lamenting his condition as a slave in a soliloquy at the beginning of the story, Washington’s manly characteristics, intellect, and speech were sufficient to impress a white person that Washington was *a man*, and to channel all of his energies toward abolition (Lawson 2009, 122–23). So according to Lawson, it is this notion of manhood that is closely related to a Kantian conception of the self, and is thus not only an integral part of Douglass’s abolition agenda, but also is evidence of Douglass’s deep philosophical connection to the transcendentalists and the romantics, both of whom favored Kant’s transcendental idealism to Locke’s empiricism.

4. The Primacy of Morality: Douglass and Kant on Morality and Christianity

This section of the essay offers support for my claim that both Douglass and Kant hold that morality must precede Christianity if Christianity is to be morally acceptable. With respect to Douglass, my argument for this claim comes from Douglass's novella, *The Heroic Slave*, a segment of *My Bondage and My Freedom*, and several of his speeches and writings. As for Kant, my argument takes place in three phases. First, I briefly discuss Kant's account of moral agency with reference to the will, the moral law, and the inclinations. Second, I provide a discussion of Kant's moral psychology, "radical evil" and "ethical state of nature" from books one and three of *Religion Within The Boundaries of Mere Reason (Religion)*. Third, I explain Kant's account of ecclesial formation from *Religion* and some of his remarks on Scripture from the *Conflict of the Faculties*. Structuring my discussion of Kant in this manner is important because it is in the formation of the slaveholding church where one finds its most severe moral deficiency: the slaveholding Christian church begins with beliefs, not with individuals who recognize the need to be moral. It is this defect that results in the hypocrisy of slaveholding Christianity. By contrast, for Kant, Christian beliefs are the final step in a process that begins with a person's commitment to the moral law. I begin my argument with Douglass.

At the beginning of *The Heroic Slave*, Douglass deftly juxtaposes two worlds: the world of the slave and the world of the slaveholding Christians. The story opens in the "spring of 1835," on a Sunday morning, with the "solemn peals of the church bells" from a distant village audible in the background (Douglass 1999a, 221). Within earshot of the church bells, there stands the protagonist of the story, Madison Washington; a slave who is lamenting his condition while a white traveler's horse imbibes from a nearby brook. Of his condition, Washington notes that his life is "aimless and worthless, and worse than worthless" (Douglass 1999a, 221). Considering himself to be inferior even to the birds, he says that in contrast to the birds, who fly freely at night, and "retire in freedom at night," his condition is that of a slave; a slave by heredity, one who is worse off than a snake (Douglass 1999a, 221). Then, as though he is speaking to another person, he argues that, in comparison to the snake, he is a man: "But here am I, a man,—yes, a man!—with thoughts and wishes, with powers and faculties as far as angel's flight above that hated reptile,—yet he is my superior" (Douglass 1999a, 221). Washington's argument here is clear: (1) I (Madison Washington) have thoughts and feelings; and (2) morally speaking, having thoughts and feelings makes one superior to a reptile. The conclusion should be that Madison Washington is morally superior to a reptile. But slavery denies him this position of superiority and instead

assigns it to the snake that can freely slither away, whereas Washington cannot. The conclusion that Washington is inferior—which is the actual state of affairs—does not follow from the premises. Accordingly, Washington’s reality is utterly devoid of rationality—and he knows it. But at the very moment Washington is experiencing the perplexity of his predicament and arguing for its utter irrationality, slaveholding Christians are attending Sunday church services. For this reason, the setting of this opening scene is just as, if not more important than the soliloquy, for it sets the soliloquy against the backdrop of a world—a Christian world—where, on the customary day of worship during church services, people who profess Christianity can be inside of a church, while there is suffering outside of the church—suffering for which the church-going, slaveholding, Christians are morally responsible. It is the very setting of the story in the context of two worlds that gives Douglass’s critique of slaveholding Christianity its moral force: a world where slaves languish in their wretched condition within the sound of the church bell, and a world where slave owners worship their god not in “spirit and in truth” (John 4:23–24), but rather in flesh and falsehood. They worshipped their god in their flesh because their god was their own creation; a manifestation of their desire to know the deity only on their own terms. Thus was the god of slaveholding Christianity perfectly suitable to their corrupt social, political, and economic interests, which included holding slaves as chattel. They worshipped their god in falsehood because at the very foundation of the slave system is the false idea that black slaves were not human beings; yet another idea suitable to the corrupt ends of slave owners. Slaveholding Christians could thus participate in the slave trade and while doing so maintain an active “Christian” life. Douglass’s aim, then, at least in part, through the imagery and setting of *The Heroic Slave* was to expose the profound moral deficiency of slaveholding Christianity; to show that true Christians, if they were more concerned about morality than they were concerned about membership in a church, would not tolerate American chattel slavery.

Whereas the *Heroic Slave* provides a literary critique of the church from the outside, Douglass’s 1841 speech, “The Church and Prejudice,” provides an empirical critique of the slaveholding Christian church from the inside. In this speech, Douglass is criticizing not only the hypocrisy of the slaveholding Christianity of the South, but also the racist attitudes of northern Christians. Douglass offers four examples; three of northern prejudice and one of southern prejudice. First, Douglass recounts the experience of attending a communion church service at a Methodist Church. The communion service is a religious event wherein the participants of the congregation are called to partake of bread and wine, which represent the belief in the broken body and shed blood of Jesus on the cross and its sufficiency to atone for one’s sin. By partaking in this ritual,

the members of the church are called to a common-ground with one another as they are reminded of their belief that Jesus sacrificed himself for all of them; they are thus called to unity; to “commune” with one another in a spirit of Christian brother and sisterhood. With this purpose of communion in mind, Douglass tries to show how immoral it is for the Christians in the church to behave as they do. On one occasion, the minister served all of the whites communion first, and then served all of the blacks, quoting the Bible passage that indicates that “God is no respecter of persons” (Douglass 1999b, 3). On another occasion at communion in New Bedford, a black church member, who, according to Douglass, “was baptized in the same water as the rest” was reluctantly handed the communion cup, drank from the cup, and then the white woman whom was to receive the cup after her “rose in disdain, and walked out of the church” (Douglass 1999b, 3). Also in New Bedford, he spoke of how a church member “fell into a trance,” and how “when she awoke, she declared that she had been to heaven. Her friends were all anxious to know what and whom she had seen there” (Douglass 1999b, 3). When someone asked her if she had seen any blacks in heaven, her response was: “*Oh! I didn’t go into the kitchen!*” (Douglass 1999b, 3). Douglass’s final example in this speech is best recounted in his own words:

I used to attend a Methodist church, in which my master was class-leader; he would talk most sanctimoniously about the dear Redeemer, who was sent “to preach deliverance to the captives, and set at liberty them that are bruised”—he could pray at morning, pray at noon, and pray at night; yet he could lash up my poor cousin by his two thumbs, and inflict stripes and blows upon his bare back, till the blood streamed to the ground! All the time quoting scripture, for his authority, and appealing to that passage of the Holy Bible which says, “He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!” Such was the mount of this good Methodist’s piety. (Douglass 1999b, 4)

All of these examples show the kind of Christianity that infuriated Douglass and made him call for a more authentic religious experience wherein the principal concern of religion is not about adherence to ceremonial practices, but rather is about adherence to moral and ethical ones. One can thus see a move in Douglass from epistemology to ethics. These examples, I argue, serve to show how a mere adherence to a creed or a set of objective beliefs that is not grounded in rational moral faith is problematic. Slaveholding Christianity, then, is entirely epistemological; it gives no thought for how one lives in relation to the beliefs that one holds, but rather is so concerned with adherence to objective practices like church attendance, public prayer, and a “knowledge” of the Scriptures, that there is no subjectivity of which to meaningfully speak; no concern about the authenticity of one’s life in relation to one’s beliefs, but rather only a concern about the beliefs themselves, and, more significantly, a

belief that one is a Christian merely because of adherence to a certain creed. Furthermore, the religious zeal in these examples is fueled by a theology that is infused with unjustified—and unjustifiable—metaphysical and epistemological claims that, as I will discuss below, have no concern for ethics, morality, or personal responsibility, all of which are questions of an ethical variety that concerned both Douglass and Kant.

Another example of Douglass's objection to Christianity without morality is his criticism of the program to give Bibles to slaves in his 1847 essay, *Bibles for the Slaves*. In this essay, Douglass is responding to an overwhelming show of nationwide support to give Bibles to the slaves. Of the nationwide support for this movement, Douglass refers to a "numerous class of persons, whose ostensible object seems to be to give Bibles to the American slaves" (Douglass 1999c, 86). Douglass writes that "So full of promise and popularity is this movement that many of the leaders in Church and State are pressing into it" (Douglass 1999c, 86). But Douglass is not persuaded by the current of public opinion. His criticism of Christianity ensues: "Churches, which have all along slumbered unmoved over the cruel wrongs and bitter woes of the Slave—which have been as deaf as Death to every appeal of the fettered bondman for liberty" are somehow now motivated enough to provide Bibles to the slaves" (Douglass 1999c, 86). Douglass then raises the question "of what value is the Bible to one who may not read its contents?" (Douglass 1999c, 86). Later in the essay, Douglass notes that "The Bible is only useful to those who can read and practice its contents. It was given to Freemen, and any attempt to give it to the Slave must result only in hollow mockery" (Douglass 1999c, 87). Notice what Douglass is doing here. He is emphasizing the need for subjective, ethical practice as opposed to mere adherence to objective belief. Proponents of the "Bibles for the Slaves" measure seem to be suggesting that the mere possession of the Bible will be of some moral and ethical benefit. Douglass, who clearly disagrees with such an approach, claims that giving a slave a Bible when he cannot read it is worse than the immorality of giving "a hungry man a stone," "a freezing man" some ice, and a "drowning man a dollar" (Douglass 1999c, 87). There is, then, for Douglass, a moral disconnect between the objectivity of religious belief and the subjectivity of its practice: the Bible is seen as a moral compass solely in its possession, without any regard for how one lives in relation to its contents, as those contents are stated in the Bible itself. Douglass thus argues that the objectivity of belief must be subordinated to the subjectivity of practice. Douglass is also showing us a second layer of epistemic difficulty for the slaves: the slaves neither know God in a primary sense as a spatiotemporal object because of their innate human limitations, nor can they know God in a secondary sense because of their illiteracy. But neither of these epistemic limitations matters, because

Christianity is, for Douglass—and I will argue for Kant as well—fundamentally practical and subjective, not theoretical and objective, as Douglass tries to show in his account of “Uncle Lawson” in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom* in the chapter entitled “Religious Nature Awakened,” Douglass writes of a man whom he affectionately calls “Uncle Lawson.” This is a rather compelling example of the importance of morality and its relationship to Christianity in Douglass’s work because it shows the way in which Douglass demands that Christianity be grounded in a moral life. Douglass speaks of how his religious nature was awakened upon *hearing a sermon* from a minister named Hanson, but then actually *seeing the religious message lived* in the life of Uncle Lawson. Of this experience, Douglass writes that “My religious nature was awakened by the preaching of a white Methodist minister, named Hanson. He thought that all men, great and small, bond and free, were sinners in the sight of God, and that they were, by nature, rebels against His government” (Douglass 1996a, 231). Douglass was thoroughly impressed by the theological notion that all human beings must “be reconciled to God, through Christ” (Douglass 1996a, 231). Douglass then speaks of how, with the utmost religious zeal, he sought “to have the world converted,” and how he wanted a thorough knowledge of the Bible (Douglass 1996a, 231–32). It thus appears that the objectivity of a sermon was an initial motivating force for Douglass’s religious awakening, and that objectivity was important for Douglass. But the importance of subjectivity is recognized when Douglass writes “While thus religiously seeking knowledge, I became acquainted with a good old colored man, named Lawson. A more devout man than he, I never saw” (Douglass 1996a, 233). In the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*, recounting this same experience, Douglass writes of Lawson that “This man not only prayed three times a day, but he prayed as he walked through the streets, at his work, on his dray—everywhere. His *life was a life* of prayer, and his words when he spoke to any one, were about a better world” (Douglass 1996b, 538). Lawson, who could not read very well, needed Douglass’s help to learn “the letter,” but Lawson, through the way that he lived his life, would teach Douglass “the spirit” of Christianity (Douglass 1996b, 539). Indeed, Uncle Lawson suffers from the dual epistemological impediment that befell many slaves: not only did the limitations of his human finitude render him incapable of acquiring objective knowledge in matters of religion—an epistemological deficit applicable to all human beings—but he had the added difficulty of illiteracy. Yet notwithstanding Uncle Lawson’s compromised objective epistemological position, his practical subjective moral practice is rather vibrant. Uncle Lawson certainly considers what he knows about his religion to be important; this is why Douglass helps him with the “letter” of Christianity. But more important for Lawson—and for Douglass—is

that Lawson lives according to what he does know of his religion, however much his illiteracy impedes his acquisition of objective knowledge. One can thus understand how Douglass makes a shift from epistemology to ethics in his account of Uncle Lawson: Douglass portrays a church of rites and ceremonies without genuine morality. I now turn to Kant's discussion of morality and Christianity, and relate it to Douglass.

The Kantian treatment of Christianity does not take place until after his account of morality is thoroughly developed. The *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* (*Groundwork*) was published in 1785, the *Critique of Practical Reason* in 1788, and it was not until 1793 that Kant turned to a philosophical treatment of Christianity in *Religion*. And when he did turn to Christianity, he did so in a way that attempted to make Christianity compatible with his moral philosophy.

The opening passage of the *Groundwork* emphasizes the importance of a good will (Kant 1999a, 49). A good will is important for Kant because an individual whose will wants to do what is good is better than an individual that may have certain virtues such as courage, or calmness of disposition. On Kant's view, the latter virtues may be corrupted if one has a bad will. But if one has a good will, then the virtues will be put to good and not to corrupt uses. Kant goes on to argue that the will is situated between two kinds of laws: the laws of nature that are governed by cause and effect, and the moral law which the moral agent gives to herself. Kant's moral agent is free to choose whether her will is determined by either the inclinations or the moral law. For an action to be moral, the determining ground of the will must be the moral law. Any action in which the will is determined by the inclinations (happiness, etc.) is immoral. A virtuous person, for Kant, is one who chooses to allow the will to be determined by the moral law. On Kant's view as he presents it in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, an individual does not possess virtue (as on Aristotle's view, for example), but rather virtue possesses the individual (Kant 1999b, 534). The key moment in Kant's account of moral agency is the freedom of the will to choose between the inclinations and the moral law. For it is from a position of freedom that the will is either determined by the inclinations or the moral law. The picture, then, of Kant's account of moral agency is this: an individual is situated between the laws of nature (the inclinations, governed by cause and effect), and the self-legislated moral law of reason. And it is the agent's free choice to have the determining ground of the will be either of these two options. Furthermore, one is only as moral as one's last moral action. Every moral decision is presented to the agent anew (Kant 1999b, 537). This deeply existential moment of complete moral freedom is where Kant's moral agent finds herself.

In *Religion*, Kant subordinates Christianity to morality, and argues that there is a radical evil in human nature, which is a tendency to make

choices contrary to the demands of the moral law (Kant 1996a, 69–97). This tendency is not a pre-ordained curse on human beings like the Christian story of the fall; for if it was a pre-ordained curse on human beings, one could argue that the propensity to do evil deeds comes from compulsion and not a free-will. But Kant rejects this notion. For Kant, every human being freely chooses whether to compromise the demands of the moral law by incorporating a type of immoral disposition into his maxims of action, and acting either out of instinct (the predisposition to animality), or out of a desire to please others (the predisposition to humanity), instead of acting out of a duty to the moral law, without regard for the consequences of the action (Kant 1996a, 70–76). Kant thus reinterprets the biblical notion of the fall and “original sin” symbolically as the permanent possibility for every human being to, at any time, freely choose to incorporate a corrupt predisposition into her maxim of action. Moral responsibility is thus ensured for human beings on a rational, practical basis instead of an epistemological one: I am perpetually in a state of moral freedom, and each time I perform an immoral action (what the Christian might call “sin”), it is as if I have fallen out of paradise for the first time. This leads to what Kant calls the “ethical state of nature” (Kant 1996a, 130). In the ethical state of nature, a moral agent who is trying to adhere to the moral law is ever faced with the conflict between her inclinations and her duty (Kant 1996a, 132). This conflict is so intense that Kant likens it to the politically oriented, Hobbesian state of nature; a state of “war” (Kant 1996a, 132). So difficult is this ethical state of nature for a person standing alone, that Kant urges the moral agent, who is already postulating the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient God as a matter of practical reason (Kant 1999c, 239–46), to associate with other persons in the form of a church (Kant 1996a, 135). According to Kant, the ecclesial formation is beneficial because the association will help those who are already attempting to be moral remain that way. Kant sees great value in baptism, church attendance, public prayer, etc. (Kant 1996a, 210–14). But Kant is clear: none of these activities can make one a moral person (Kant 1996a, 210–14). One thus does not become moral by attending church, but rather *one attends church because one is moral*. Now, if we recall Douglass’s juxtaposition of the two worlds in *The Heroic Slave*, we can better note the Kantian themes: in the opening, the slaveholding Christians place more value in religion than they do morality. They have no regard for the moral law. If they did, then they would not give in to their inclinations and purport to “own” other persons as chattel, or attend church and participate in the rites and ceremonies such as communion while treating others like means to an end and not as ends in themselves. Without beginning from a foundation of morality, their individual Christianity—and their collective assembly as a church—is thoroughly corrupted.

In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Uncle Lawson's sincerity in spite of his illiteracy illustrates another Kantian point, which is that objective knowledge is, subjectively speaking, inconsequential when it comes to Christianity. For even if Uncle Lawson could understand the Bible, according to Kant: "No historical account can verify the divine origin of such a writing. The proof can be derived only from its tested power to establish religion in the human heart and, by its very simplicity, to reestablish it in its purity should it be corrupted by various (ancient or modern) dogmas" (Kant 1996b, 284). Indeed, by this standard, it appears that Uncle Lawson indeed was able to "establish religion in the human heart," because Uncle Lawson actually *lived* his Christianity with a certain passion for doing what is right because it was the right thing to do. This passion for right conduct for its own sake is quite Kantian.

One may object to my analysis here and argue that I am conflating a pathos based ethics with Kant's more "apathetic" morality. But this criticism fails because the distinction between a "pathos-based ethics" and Kant's so called "apathetic" morality is not as clear cut as this criticism makes it out to be. For the term "apathy," as Kant points out in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, has "fallen into disrepute" (Kant 1999b, 536). In using this term, Kant does not mean that there is no feeling at all involved in moral action. Rather, Kant claims that to be "apathetic" is to disregard one's inclinations in moral decision making. This kind of apathy, for Kant, leads one to a moral strength of character and sense of virtue (Kant 1999b, 536–37). But one must distinguish carefully between the "feeling" of the inclinations, which Kant associates with the phenomenal realm of mechanistic causality, and what Kant calls "moral feeling," which is the term that Kant uses to describe one's regard for the moral law (Kant 1999b, 528–29). Simply because "moral feeling" does not belong to the phenomenal realm of the inclinations, it is not any less of a "feeling" in the broad sense of that term. It makes moral feeling a different kind of feeling, indeed. But it is a feeling nonetheless; one that requires a pathos and a passion for the moral law. Moral feeling in this sense is closely connected to Kant's notion of the dynamically sublime from the *Critique of Judgment*, where he argues that a rational being, sensing that she is overwhelmed by nature, recalls her rationality and is reminded that she is capable of overcoming nature because of her rationality (Kant 1987, 120). Generally speaking, the sublime for Kant is a "feeling," an "emotion," and a "negative pleasure" (Kant 1987, 98). Kant divides the sublime into the mathematical and the dynamical (Kant 1987, 101). Unlike the mathematical sublime, which is concerned with size or magnitude, the dynamically sublime is concerned with "nature as a might." That is, something in nature is dynamically sublime when "we consider nature as a might that has no dominance over us" (Kant 1987, 119). Kant connects the sublime to his moral philosophy by pointing out that, like the categorical

imperative, the experience of the sublime may be “required and demanded” of everyone, much like “the predisposition to the feeling for (practical) ideas, i.e., to moral feeling” (Kant 1987, 125). The might and power of nature seems utterly overwhelming to us, and it seems as though we can be easily obliterated by nature. But this kind of feeling is quickly overcome when we remember our moral vocation as human beings. Kant writes, “though the irresistibility of nature’s might makes us, considered as natural beings, recognize our physical impotence, it reveals in us at the same time an ability to judge ourselves independent of nature” (Kant 1987, 120–21). The feeling of the dynamically sublime reveals our moral superiority over nature after a momentary sense of our physical impotence. Judging from Kant’s descriptions in these texts, this kind of morality is hardly “apathetic” in the sense in which an objector would use that term to describe Kant’s moral philosophy. Moreover, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant discusses the moral agent’s state of affairs as one involving a serious moral struggle. Kant points out that humans have a “moral vocation” that entails epistemic uncertainty and repetition (Kant 1999c, 258; 1999b, 537). For Kant, this is what makes for the “life” of a moral individual. This kind of life—a life of moral struggle between the inferior “feeling” of the inclinations and the superior “moral feeling” toward the moral law—can hardly be described as “apathetic” in the sense in which an objector might use that term to distinguish Kant’s ethics from an ethics that is rooted in pathos. Uncle Lawson can thus be said to have lived passionately and ethically in a Kantian sense: in a world which gave him every reason to give in to the inclinations and perhaps resort to the abandonment of his morality; a world where he was tempted by oppression and evil to respond in kind as if oppression and evil could only be the mechanistic efficient cause of more oppression and evil, he remained faithful not merely to the letter of the law but also to the spirit of the law. Uncle Lawson is thus not only a good Christian, but a good Kantian as well. This interpretation leaves me vulnerable to another criticism that I shall now address.

One may argue that the analogy between Christian morality and Kantian morality is untenable. I disagree. There are no less than four similarities between Kantian morality and Christian morality that make Uncle Lawson’s morality both Christian and Kantian. In the interest of brevity, I only discuss two here.³ I do not advance the strong claim that

³ The other two affinities between Kant’s moral philosophy and Christian morality are: (1) Kant and Kierkegaard; and (2) Kant and C. S. Lewis. With respect to Kierkegaard, Kant’s moral psychology from Book I of *Religion* has much in common with Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Vigilius Haufniensis, who distinguishes between “psychology” and “dogmatics” in *The Concept of Anxiety*. Although Kierkegaard is arguably using his pseudonym to “indirectly” communicate the practical complexities of moral deliberation to a deluded Christendom, the Kantian insights are present nonetheless (Green 1985, 63–87).

Kant's ethics is, in all respects, identical to an orthodox Christian ethics. My claim is much a much more modest one: as it relates to one living a Christian life, the kind of life that Douglass so admired in Uncle Lawson is a moral life that can be broadly interpreted as both Christian and Kantian. Moreover, I readily acknowledge the differences between Kant's rejection of certain Christian beliefs as historical events and Christianity's embrace of these beliefs as historical events. But this distinction takes place at a theoretical/epistemic level, not at a practical/ethical level, which is the principal concern of this essay. Now as it relates to the notion of a struggle between one's inclinations and the moral law, Kant's ethics resonates strongly with the ethics of the Christian tradition in the following two ways. First, the battle of Kant's moral subject between the influence of the inclinations and the moral law sounds much like Saint Paul's account of moral struggle in chapter seven of his letter to the Romans. Indeed, Kant, in *Religion*, defines the propensity to evil and then tries to show that it is divided into three degrees. For Kant, the propensity to evil consists in "the subjective ground of the possibility of the deviation of the maxims from the moral law" (Kant 1996a, 77). Kant is referring here to the freedom of each individual to derive maxims of action from a source other than the moral law. Insofar as one is free, there is a "possibility" that one will derive one's maxims from the inclinations; for example, one is free to adopt a maxim rooted in prudential considerations like self-preservation. This possibility marks one's propensity for evil. Kant then explains the propensity to evil in terms of "three different grades:" (1) the frailty of human nature; (2) the impurity of the human heart; and (3) the depravity of the human heart (Kant 1996a, 77). Only (1) concerns us here. Kant defines the "frailty of human nature" in Pauline terms, quoting Romans 7:15. Kant writes that "the frailty of human nature is expressed even in the complaint of an Apostle: 'What I would, that I do not!'" (Kant 1996a, 77). Kant's appeal to Paul is intended to convey the relative weakness of a desire to obey the moral law after incorporating it into one's maxim as compared with the power of the inclinations (Kant 1996a, 77). Kant's moral agent wants to do what is right for the sake of the moral law alone, but this desire is overwhelmed by the power of the inclinations. Paul is saying that he wants to do what is right, but cannot; and Kant is trying to provide a similar description of moral deliberation. In Romans 7, Paul also makes a distinction between "the mind" and "the flesh" (Romans 7:25). This distinction, I would argue,

As for C. S. Lewis, in the opening chapter of *Mere Christianity*, he presents an account of what he calls "the law of human nature" that sounds much like Kant's account of the moral law; especially when Lewis contrasts the laws of gravity, which one cannot choose to disobey, with "the law which is peculiar to his human nature" (Lewis 2001, 19). Lewis's account of "the law of human nature" thus seems to resonate strongly with Kant's account of the sensible and intelligible self from the *Groundwork* and the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

is akin to Kant's distinction between the rationality of the moral law and its connection to freedom on one hand and the pure feeling of the inclinations and their connection to causality on the other. For even as Kant argues that one must struggle between choosing the moral law as the determining ground of the will over the inclinations, Paul writes that the "law" of his "mind" is at war with the "law of sin" present in his "members" (Romans 7:23). As it relates to the mind, Paul indicates that it is with his "mind" that he serves "the law of God," and with his "flesh" that he serves the "law of sin" (Romans 7:25). Moreover, Paul writes "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Romans 7:22). Now, since Kant would have Christians interpret their duties as divine commands, on one hand, our rational obligation to the moral law can be represented by the "law of God after the inward man" and may correspond to Kant's notion of "the moral law within" which is at war with the inclinations. And on the other hand, the inclinations may be interpreted to represent the "law of sin" and may correspond to the "starry heavens above" that represent the phenomenal world of mechanistic causality. It is in the Pauline battle between the "law of God after the inward man" and the "law of sin" that one recognizes a Kantian battle that the moral agent fights between making the moral law the determining ground of the will as opposed to the inclinations. A Kantian ethics can thus be a Christian ethics in this sense.

A second affinity between Kant's ethics and Christian ethics is the similarity between Kant's moral psychology from Book I of *Religion* and Augustine's account of the will from *The City of God*. Both Kant and Augustine are dealing with certain Manichean difficulties in their respective accounts of moral action. In his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, John Rawls points out that Kant's moral psychology from Book I of *Religion* is "Augustinian" in nature (Rawls 2000, 291). Rawls then argues that there are certain "Manichean" features to Kant's moral philosophy from the *Groundwork* and *Critique of Practical Reason* that Kant eliminates in *Religion*. Specifically, Rawls points to Kant's distinction between the sensible and intelligible selves as Kant develops it in the *Groundwork* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (Rawls 2000, 303–5). According to Kant, there are two selves, a self of the intelligible world (good), and a self of the sensible world (bad). The good self, when seen from the practical standpoint, has no choice but to obey the moral law, or, to put it in Kant's terms, "The moral ought" becomes a "necessary will" from the practical standpoint of the intelligible world (Kant 1999a, 101). And the same is true of the bad self. The bad self of the sensible world is inclined to happiness as the determining ground of the will, and thus lacks "moral feeling" or respect for the moral law (Rawls 2000, 304). Instead of respect for the moral law, the natural self of the sensible world views the moral law as an impediment to the satisfaction of desire.

According to Rawls, then, Kant's moral philosophy as developed in the *Groundwork* and *Critique of Practical Reason* "presents grave difficulties for Kant's moral doctrine" (Rawls 2000, 304). Rawls argues that in *Religion*, Kant attempts to overcome these difficulties "by attributing to the self a free power of choice and enough complexity for a satisfactory account of responsibility" (Rawls 2000, 305). Similarly, Augustine, in *City of God* XIV:3, argues against the Manichean notion that the flesh is inherently evil, and concludes that "it was not the corruptible flesh that made the soul sinful, but the sinful soul that made the flesh corruptible" (Augustine 1993, 444). The problem with the Manichean view for Augustine and Kant is that it posits the existence of evil as an unavoidable reality of the flesh. But on this view, there can be no genuine moral responsibility.

Although I believe that a loose comparison between Kantian morality and Christian morality can be sustained, another reply to the objection that they are too dissimilar to justify comparison could be that the analogy is not an analogy between Christian morality and Kantian morality at all, but rather is a looser comparison between a certain kind of Christian morality in Kant and a certain kind of Christian morality in Douglass that Douglass uses to undermine the morality of slaveholding Christianity that he finds so offensive. My argument is thus an argument in favor of a normative distinction between authentic and inauthentic Christianity. I simply cast that distinction in terms of the similarities between Kant and Douglass. That is the point of the essay: to try to show that the slaveholding Christianity is, because of its moral failure, an "inauthentic Christianity," and that the Kantian features of Douglass's brand of Christian morality are "authentic." Moreover, although it may be true as a historical matter that the hypocrisy of slaveholding Christianity is part and parcel of Christian identity—at least in the United States—this is not crucial to my philosophical claim that the brand of Christianity endorsed by both Kant and Douglass—one that subordinates belief to practice—is the better view than the morality of slaveholding Christianity.

These objections aside, on Kant's account, just as on Douglass's, slaveholding Christianity misses the mark. Its members sink into hypocrisy, because there is no morality that precedes their Christian beliefs. Kant's insights on church attendance from *Religion* are important here because he indicates that while church attendance is good for "edification," there can be no moral improvement "unless the human being systematically sets to work, lays firm principles deep in his heart in accordance with well-understood concepts, erects thereupon dispositions appropriate to the relative importance of the duties connected with these principles." The individual then "strengthens" these principles and "secures them against the attack of the inclinations and, as it were, builds up a new man as a *temple of God*" (Kant 1996a, 213n). Otherwise, "human beings believe

themselves to be duly edified (through listening or reading or singing) while absolutely nothing has been built, indeed, when hand has yet to be put to the work" (Kant 1996a, 213n). Under these conditions, Kant writes that such church-goers "hope that that moral edifice will rise up of itself, like the walls of Thebes, to the music of sighs and of ardent wishes" (Kant 1996a, 213n). It seems that, for Douglass, slaveholding Christian church members had such grandiose hopes.

5. Douglass and Kant on the Soul

Perhaps Christians felt so comfortable sitting in church while owning slaves because of philosophically and theologically sophisticated justifications for slavery. Douglass consistently critiqued the numerous theoretical abstractions that justified slavery and by doing so demonstrated their profound moral shortcomings. For example, in his essay, "Why is the Negro Lynched?" Douglass chronicles the history of "the Negro" as a "religious problem." The problem in the late eighteenth century was, in Douglass's own words: "in respect of what relation a Negro sustains to the Christian Church, whether he was in fact a fit subject for baptism" (Douglass 1999d, 774). According to Douglass, there was much at stake in this controversy; for if the Negro could be baptized, then he would be a member of the Church of Christ, and "in fact, to make him an heir of Jesus Christ" (Douglass 1999d, 774). The Negro's baptism would "take him out of the category of heathenism and make it inconsistent to hold him a slave, for the Bible made only the heathen a proper subject for slavery" (Douglass 1999d, 774). Such results were, according to Douglass, "more terrible and more dangerous than the Civil Rights Bill and the Fourteenth Amendments to our Constitution" (Douglass 1999d, 774). Douglass then recounts the elaborate argument of Dr. Godwin, a theologian, who in the late eighteenth century was addressing this problem. Douglass is somewhat equivocal in his assessment of Dr. Godwin. On one hand, he credits him with advancing "the cause of righteousness" insofar as the argument acknowledges that the Negro at least has the right to baptism (Douglass 1999d, 774). In this regard, elsewhere in his corpus, Douglass indicates that Dr. Godwin's argument in favor of Negro baptism was "the starting point, the foundation of all the grand concessions made to the claims, the character, the manhood and the dignity of the Negro" (Douglass 1999e, 663). But on the other hand, he believes that the argument falls short as a practical matter. Douglass notes that Dr. Godwin was "a skilled dialectician" who "could not only divide the word with skill, but he could divide the Negro into two parts" (Douglass 1999d, 774). Douglass then summarizes Godwin's argument. Dr. Godwin "argued that the Negro has a soul as well as a body, and insisted that while his body rightfully belonged to his master on earth, his soul belonged to his Master in heaven" (Douglass

1999d, 774). By adopting a Cartesian metaphysical dualism, Godwin subtly provided, in one fell swoop, justification for slavery and justification for baptizing the Negro. Douglass notes that this argument was “somewhat metaphysical, to be sure” (Douglass 1999d, 774). Indeed, for Douglass, it seems that this argument was entirely too metaphysical. For it was “not entirely satisfactory” (Douglass 1999d, 775). According to Douglass, this argument “was much like that by which the white man got the turkey and the Indian got the crow. When the Negro looked for his body, that belonged to his earthly master; when he looks around for his soul that had been appropriated by his heavenly Master” (Douglass 1999d, 775). As a practical matter, when the Negro “looked around for something that really belonged to himself, he found nothing but his shadow, and that vanished into the air, when he might most want it” (Douglass 1999d, 775). It thus appears that Douglass, upon considering the merits of this metaphysical justification for Negro baptism, attempts to show that such beliefs are repugnant to a certain kind of practical reason; that moral and ethical notions of fairness matter more than metaphysical justifications of religious creed and dogma. I thus take Douglass’s account of Dr. Godwin’s argument in favor of baptizing slaves to be an example of Douglass’s shift from epistemology to ethics, or to put it in more Kantian terms, a shift from theoretical reason to practical reason. The problem with Dr. Godwin’s Cartesian justification for slavery and for baptizing blacks into Christianity is that an ontological realism is presupposed to the detriment of practical and moral concerns. In Kantian terms, theoretical reason has assumed the ability to know the immortality of the soul as a thing-in-itself. A Kantian approach will reject this kind of theorizing in favor of one more attentive to subjective practical life. An analysis of Kant’s account of transcendental psychology will be useful here to show Kant’s emphasis on practical reason, as contrasted with the Cartesian account of the soul and its emphasis on theoretical objective knowledge.

Kant presupposes the self for the purposes of empirical cognition with the transcendental unity of apperception, thus mediating between Cartesian psychological realism and Hume’s psychological skepticism. Unlike Descartes, who takes the soul to be an actual object having an immortal existence apart from the body, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant presupposes a self for the sake of empirical cognition; a presupposition that Hume refused to make, and that for Kant, makes empirical cognition possible. Also in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant maintains that the immortality of the soul is presupposed because the development of a holy will—a will in perfect conformity with the moral law—cannot occur in a finite period of time. For Kant, this notion of the immortality of the soul is connected to the idea of man having a “moral vocation,” as well as with Christianity. He writes: “The proposition about the moral vocation of our nature, that only in an endless progress can we attain complete

conformity with the moral law, is of the greatest usefulness, not merely in regard to the present supplement to the incapacity of speculative reason but also with respect to religion” (Kant 1999c, 238). Kant connects the following triad of concepts: (1) the moral vocation of human nature; (2) an endless progress to conform to the moral law; and (3) religion (Christianity). Our moral vocation at (1) mandates “the production of the highest good in the world” (Kant 1999c, 238). The highest good—the perfect proportion of happiness for one’s virtue—cannot be produced in the world unless the will is in “complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law.” Therefore one must presuppose “an endless progress toward” “complete conformity” at (2). This results in the belief that the highest good is possible only on the presupposition of an immortal soul, which is important for Christianity at (3). On the Cartesian account of the soul, the emphasis is on theoretical and objective knowledge as opposed to practical and subjective action, as in the Kantian account. On the Cartesian view, there is arguably no sense of moral vocation, development, or progress. But there is a moral teleology at work in Kant’s account of the immortality of the soul that demands the development of the self in conformity with the moral law. So when Godwin aligns himself with Cartesian dualism, he is aligning himself with a theoretical construct that is unlikely to produce morally acceptable results because of its preoccupation with theoretical concerns to the exclusion of the teleological development of the soul consistent with its moral vocation.

With this in mind, Godwin’s argument, as Douglass indicates, is practically deficient as for him it was like the arrangement where “the white man got the turkey, and the Indian got the crow” (Douglass 1999d, 775). Thus it is that theoretical reason has encroached upon practical reason in Dr. Godwin’s argument for baptizing blacks. The bounds (*Schranken*) of reason, which for Kant, presuppose the legitimate employment of religious notions in the practical sphere of human subjectivity, have been transgressed by theoretical reason, which has failed to operate within the limits (*Grenzen*) of its finitude. Thus it is that Douglass, like Kant, condemns the encroachments of theoretical reason in the practical sphere.

Kant and Douglass thus ought to be interpreted as being interested in preserving traditional Christian theological claims; but on a rational, moral basis; not on an epistemological one, as Kant’s predecessors, Leibniz, Wolff, and the Scholastics attempted to do. Kant emphasizes the positive impact of his critical doctrine, comparing his limitations on theoretical reason to the function of the police: “To deny that the service which the Critique [of Pure Reason] renders is positive in character, would thus be like saying that the police are of no positive benefit, inasmuch as their main business is merely to prevent the violence of which citizens stand in mutual fear, in order that each may pursue his vocation in peace and security” (Kant 1929, 27). Again, Kant seems to be saying here that

his criticism of traditional religious beliefs about God, free will, and the immortality of the soul are actually done *in the service of those beliefs*. For if theoretical reason is allowed primacy, then, according to Kant, “Mohammed’s paradise or the fusion with the Deity of the theosophists and mystics would obtrude their monstrosities on reason according to the taste of each, and one might as well have no reason at all as surrender it in such a way to all sorts of dreams” (Kant 1999c, 237). One may add Godwin’s argument in favor of baptizing blacks to the list of other failed attempts at epistemic certainty in religious matters such as “Mohammed’s paradise” and the “theosophists” and the “mystics.” By contrast, if the epistemological limitations of theoretical reason are clearly defined, then perhaps one can find a home for the traditional religious beliefs that do not amount to “knowledge” in the strict, scientific sense. And this is precisely what Kant attempts to do in his moral philosophy in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and his philosophical theology in *Religion*.

6. Objection and Replies

One may question the theoretical feasibility of aligning Douglass, a nineteenth-century African-American escaped slave and abolitionist, with Kant, an Enlightenment philosopher whose moral anthropology and racist views articulate an essence of humanity from which Douglass and all other American slaves would be excluded. The objection would be this: Kant argues that the essence of being human is the capacity for self-improvement, and non-Europeans lack this capacity. For Kant, then, non-Europeans are non-human. Kant’s critical philosophy and its resulting moral and religious principles may help Europeans improve non-Europeans, since non-Europeans cannot do this on their own. Kant’s moral and religious principles thus seem suitable for little more than colonial and paternalistic aims. But these aims are fundamentally inconsistent with those of Douglass, whose philosophical and religious insights emanate from an emancipatory impulse and are thus geared toward liberation. These basic differences preclude any meaningful theoretical association between the two. After a brief discussion of the basis for this objection, I make two replies to it.

This basis for this objection is found, in part, in the work of Emmanuel Eze. Eze argues that Kant “transcendentally grounded” a notion of race (Eze 1997). By “transcendentally grounded,” Eze means that for Kant, “human nature” “constitutes the unchanging patterns of specie-classes so that racial differences and racial classifications are based a priori on the reason of the natural scientist” (Eze 1997, 122). Contrary to Buffon, who held that racial characteristics were merely accidents of environmental conditions like climate or physical geography, Kant held such characteristics to be necessary and universal, like the categories of pure reason (Eze

1997, 120). Eze argues that Kant's racist statements from the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (*Observations*) are Kant's attempt to "transcendentally ground" the notion of race in a way that Buffon did not. Eze writes that in *Observations*, "Kant shows the theoretic transcendental philosophical position at work when he attempts to work out and establish how a particular (moral) feeling relates to humans generally, and how it differs between men and women, and among different races" (Eze 1997, 120). Eze also relies on Kant's handwritten notes from his anthropology lectures to try to show that Kant provides "the psychological-moral account for the differences on the basis of a presumed rational ability or inability to 'elevate' (or educate) oneself into humanity from . . . the rather humble 'gift' of 'mother nature'" (Eze 1997, 116). Eze also refers to Kant's biographer, Ernst Cassirer, for the proposition that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* was part of Kant's attempt to provide "logical grounding for natural and racial classification" (Eze 1997, 120).

I have two replies to this objection. The first is loosely based on an evaluative framework suggested in the article "Kant and Race," by Thomas E. Hill, Jr. and Bernard Boxill. In this article, Hill and Boxill defend Kant's moral philosophy against Eze's charge that Kant's critical philosophy—his moral philosophy included—is fundamentally racist. They point out that Kant's moral philosophy can only be considered racist *if Kant derived his racist ideas from the principles of his moral philosophy themselves, and not from misinformation* (Hill and Boxill 2001, 452). If the principles did not generate the racist ideas, then one cannot condemn the principles of Kant's moral philosophy any more than one can condemn scientific principles that are misapplied in a racist manner. Viewing Eze's assessment of Kant against this standard, Eze's claim fails for the following four reasons. First, Eze's reliance on Kant's *Observations* is misplaced. This work was a pre-critical work published in 1764. Kant's critical period, where he makes the transcendental turn, does not begin until 1781, with the publication of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Eze's discussion of the *Observations* suggests that Kant's metaphysical and epistemological insights from the *Critique of Pure Reason* can be somehow related back to the pre-critical period (Eze 1997, 120). But Eze provides no argument for how this can be done. Since Kant's racist ideas preceded his critical work, they cannot have "transcendental grounding" in the way that Kant uses the term "transcendental" throughout the critical philosophy. Second, Eze takes many of Kant's racist statements from his handwritten lecture notes on anthropology. Although Eze correctly points out that Kant taught anthropology for forty years, from 1756 to 1796, there is no way to tell how much his lecture notes coincide with his critical philosophy. And although Kant edited and published *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* in 1797, which

also contains racist ideas, Eze acknowledges that much of the material in this volume pre-dates the critical period (Eze 1997, 104). Third, Eze appeals to the *Critique of Judgment* for the proposition that it provides a transcendental grounding for Kant's notion of race (Eze 1997, 120–22), but this assertion is unsupported by any argument. A fourth reason why Kant's racist conclusion that non-Europeans (Africans or African-Americans like Douglass) are non-humans is not derived from either his moral or religious principles found in his critical work is that this false conclusion is derived from a wealth of misinformation that served as the principal source for Kant's lectures on anthropology. As Eze himself recognizes, these sources were generally not reliable (Eze 1997, 127–29). Kant simply drew his conclusions about the supposed sub-human qualities of non-Europeans from faulty sources. Moreover, if, as Eze points out, Kant holds that one must have "struggled to develop one's character, or one's humanity, as universal" in order to exhibit the capacity for self-improvement (Eze 1997, 120–21), then Douglass fits that description perfectly. Douglass's entire life was a moral struggle. Furthermore, Kant had no experience with people beyond his home town of Königsberg, East Prussia other than the travelers from whom he gleaned much of his misinformation and racist views that formed the basis for his lectures on anthropology. None of his racist views were based on scientifically reliable data. This brings me to my next reply to this objection.

My second response to this objection is that the principles of Kant's critical philosophy, especially the metaphysics and epistemology which inform his moral philosophy and his philosophical theology could not possibly be the source of racist conclusions that are drawn based on misinformation beyond the bounds of spatiotemporal experience. To the contrary, these principles would preclude Kant from ever having such racist views. Recall that for Kant, empirical cognition takes place within a spatiotemporal framework that is presupposed as a condition for the possibility of experience. Without space and time, there can be no empirical cognition, and thus there can be no synthetic a priori statements and no knowledge. And the same is true of the categories. Without the notions of cause and effect, our experience would be a Humean bundle of perceptions, lacking a guarantee of necessity and universality necessary for scientific progress. Furthermore, our spatiotemporal framework and categorical structure of experience would be empty without the sensory manifold, and the sensory manifold would be chaotic without the a priori character of space and time and the categories of pure reason. Both concepts and intuitions are necessary for there to be knowledge. Thus we have Kant's famous dictum, "concepts without intuitions are empty, and intuitions without concepts are blind" (Kant, 1929, 93). With this in mind, Kant's racist ideas are essentially lacking in any sound empirical data, and as such they are ideas without intuitions; they are empty. Kant may

have attempted a post-hoc grounding of his racist ideas in the critical philosophy, but this attempt was clearly invalid insofar as Kant could make no synthetic a priori statements about race because his experiences of race were merely second-hand; they were not direct, empirical observations or observations of others based on legitimate scientific data. Thus it seems that not only do the basic principles of Kant's moral philosophy not give rise to racist ideas, but Kant's principles would seem to prevent him from holding such ideas in the first place. The principles of Kant's metaphysics and epistemology, which carry over into his moral philosophy and philosophical theology—and are the basis for my alignment of Kant with Douglass—are thus not the source of Kant's racist ideas and are not tainted with racism. For these reasons, I think it appropriate to align Douglass with Kant notwithstanding Kant's racist views.

7. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to show some affinities between Kant and Douglass on their views of the relationship between Christianity and morality, and also between their views on the nature of the soul. I first attempted to show that, throughout Douglass's critique of slaveholding Christianity, he adheres to the view that one's Christianity must be grounded in a rational morality. I then turned to Kant's moral philosophy, which, in his words, "ineluctably" leads to Christianity in the form of a church. This showed not only the affinities with Douglass, but also that Christianity, when not grounded in morality, has a serious foundational defect. I then turned to Kant's and Douglass's concern for the soul's moral progress. Since both Kant and Douglass share this concern, a stifling Cartesian psychological dualism is shunned in favor of a moral teleology where one's soul makes perpetual moral progress; a far cry from the soul's moral downfall to the distorted, stultifying ethics of slaveholding Christianity, which posits an ontological soul without any real moral concern.⁴

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 1996a "My Bondage and My Freedom." See Gates 1996, 103–52.

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- 1996b “Life and Times of Frederick Douglass.” *See* Gates 1996, 453–1045.
- 1999a “The Heroic Slave.” *See* Foner 1999, 219–47.
- 1999b “The Church and Prejudice.” *See* Foner 1999, 3–4.
- 1999c “Bibles for the Slaves.” *See* Foner 1999, 86–7.
- 1999d “Why is the Negro Lynched?” *See* Foner 1999, 750–56.
- 1999e “The United States Cannot Remain Half Slave and Half Free.” *See* Foner 1999, 656–69.
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