

# ETHICS, AESTHETICS AND RELIGION: KANT AT THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

IOANNIS SPILIOPOULOS

**Abstract.** This paper will examine particular notions and expressions from Kant's writings on ethics, aesthetics and religion from the perspective of early Wittgenstein's philosophy (as exemplified in his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and his *Lecture on Ethics*). Even from a charitable point of view, many of Kant's propositions regarding ethical and religious notions seem, at least prima facie, like language that verges on paradox: 1) The way Kant conceives of moral (free) action: Every free action (as an effect) is a phenomenon, i.e., part of the world of phenomena, whose cause is nevertheless not another phenomenon, but a noumenal free choice. In other words, every free action takes place at a given place and time but presupposes a timeless, i.e., outside the time series, free choice of a maxim as its cause. 2) Kant's famous "fact of reason", that signifies our unmediated consciousness of the moral law. It is conceived as a non-empirical fact that is not supported by any sensible intuition. In a sense, it is a fact that is also not a fact – in the proper sense of the term. 3) Kant's notion of the "moral feeling", the feeling of respect for the moral law. On the one hand the moral feeling is a feeling, i.e., something felt and for that reason part of the world of phenomena, and on the other it is not induced by the world of phenomena, but by pure reason working on our sensible nature. In short, it is a feeling that is also not a feeling, at least in the proper sense of the term. 4) The postulates of practical reason are conceived as theoretical propositions that are nevertheless not theoretically established. 5) In the field of aesthetics Kant famously describes the experience of the beautiful in terms of the apparently paradoxical idea of "purposiveness without a purpose". I propose to view all the above as examples of language that runs against its limits, in the manner that Wittgenstein articulated such a notion in his *Lecture on Ethics*: "My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language." In other words, I propose to examine Kant's pronouncements as examples of language that tries to go beyond the world and express (treat in a scientific manner, in the broad sense of the term) absolute and unconditional value. My aim in this paper is not to argue for or against Kant's views but only to point out the fact that their expression in language feels like we are at, what Wittgenstein calls, the limits of language. I make this comparison in good spirit since I take it for granted that the early Wittgenstein and Kant understand the ethical in the same pre-philosophical way (in an absolute and unconditional way) even if they

Ioannis Spiliopoulos ✉  
University of Athens

differ enormously in the way they treat it philosophically (Kant holds that the ethical is essentially rational in character while nothing analogous holds for the early Wittgenstein).

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## INTRODUCTION

My aim in this paper is to examine particular notions and expressions from Kant's writings on ethics, aesthetics and religion as examples of language that runs against its limits, in the manner in which Wittgenstein articulated such a notion in his early philosophy. I will begin with a brief primer on Wittgenstein's early philosophy -as formulated in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (*Tractatus*) and the *Lecture on Ethics* (*Lecture*) - and will then proceed to Kant.

### 1. THE *TRACTATUS*

In very broad terms the *Tractatus* can be described as dealing with the problem of the sense of the proposition or with the problem of the essence of language. The book is composed out of seven main propositions where the first five of them can be seen as the steps of a process that reaches its climax in proposition 6. Proposition 6 provides the essence of language through the notion of the general propositional form – the common form shared by every possible proposition. This notion also encapsulates Wittgenstein's proposed logical notation, i.e., a formal language that accurately portrays the logical structure of thought – in contrast to the deceptive forms of everyday language.<sup>1</sup>

Through the notion of the general propositional form Wittgenstein clearly circumscribes the concept "proposition": A proposition is anything that is contained in that form. The general propositional form is a variable expression that, from a given set of elementary propositions (the simplest propositions in the notation) and a logical operation (the Sheffer stroke), produces all possible propositions that can be constructed out of them (every possible truth-function of them). Hence, it is the rule for a formal process that contains within it all language. Without getting into details and interpretative intricacies, every proposition contained in the general propositional form is characterized by the following: it is a logical picture (simple or more complex) of a fact (simple or more complex) where the fact pictured is the sense of the proposition, and if the fact pictured happens to be the case, then the proposition is true, otherwise it is false. Simply put, every proposition contained in the general propositional form must be capable of both truth and falsehood and its truth or falsehood is a contingent matter to be determined by comparison with the

<sup>1</sup> Which are "deceptive" in that they clothe as it were the structure of that which is portrayed in them, thus making it imperceptible.

world of experience. In other words, there can be no necessary propositions, at least in the proper sense of the term “proposition” that the *Tractatus* clearly circumscribes.

After the exact delimitation of the concept “proposition” Wittgenstein proceeds to examine the status of different kinds of propositions, traditionally conceived as necessary, such as the propositions of mathematics, the propositions of logic, or the very general propositions of natural science. It is noteworthy that the last category of propositions that Wittgenstein examines are those of ethics. By ethical propositions Wittgenstein seems to understand everyday normative propositions (of the form “You ought to...”) as well as metaethical philosophical propositions that make use of ethical notions (such as “the ethical subject”, “the ethically good or bad exercise of the will”, “moral reward and punishment”, etc.).

The conclusion Wittgenstein reaches for all these different kinds of propositions, traditionally conceived as necessary, is the same: They are not genuine cases of propositions, they are not among the totality of propositions stipulated by the general propositional form. In his terminology, they are nonsense (either “unsinnig” or “sinnlos”). However, that which such propositions try to express is acknowledged by Wittgenstein as legitimate – since it is acknowledged as something that shows itself even if it cannot be said, i.e., described by a proposition. For example, the logical properties of the world that logical propositions seem to directly portray, are shown by the logical properties of all non-logical propositions expressed in an appropriate notation, or the (ethical) consequences of the (ethically) good or bad exercise of the will are shown by the difference between a metaphysically happy world and an unhappy one.

It is to be noted that in the relevant passages that treat of ethical propositions, the propositions that comment on proposition 6.4, Wittgenstein seems to take it for granted that ethics is to be understood in an absolutist way: the moral ought is presented as absolute in character, as commanding with unconditional necessity, and the good exercise of the will is that exercise of it which is good in an absolute way, good-in-itself in more traditional terms. Furthermore, Wittgenstein seems in these passages to correlate the ethical with the question as to the sense of the world, understood again in an absolute sense, as the ultimate purpose of the world’s existence: the question as to the sense of the world is said to dissolve (soften) or to acquire more force (harden) as a result of the ethical, of the good or bad exercise of the will.

To reiterate, in the relevant passages that treat of ethical propositions Wittgenstein proceeds as if the ethical is understood in an absolute way; his remarks presuppose that there is an ethical kind of value that is of an absolute and unconditional character; so he can then draw the conclusion that the ethical thus conceived cannot be described through language proper – as the concept of “language” is defined through the notion of general propositional form. Language proper can only describe/picture contingent and relative things as it were, things

that can also happen to not be the case. And value of the unconditional kind, if there were such a thing would have to correspond to a necessary fact/thing, to a super-fact as it were. In other words, Wittgenstein's thesis about the inexpressibility of the ethical<sup>2</sup> already presupposes in a certain sense that its existence and absolute character are taken for granted. Otherwise, the ethical would not even be inexpressible, but a plain nothing.

According to this perspective, when we try to describe that which is conceived as of absolute value (e.g., the good exercise of the will and its consequences), we cannot but fail to do so; since through a language that can express only contingent facts, we wish to express something that is already conceived as non-contingent. The *Tractatus* acknowledges the reality of the ethical sphere to be of a super-factual kind while at the same time it portrays language and thought as of an essentially factual kind.

So according to this point of view, the attempt to describe the ethically good and the notions related to it involves an illicit use of language that vainly tries to overcome its own limits. Wittgenstein expresses the same idea in a more pronounced way in his *Lecture on Ethics*, which I will now proceed to examine.

## 2. THE LECTURE

To begin with, I view the *Lecture* as being in agreement with the *Tractatus* in regard to the way it conceives 1) the expressive capabilities or essence of (descriptive) language and 2) the notion of value and the ethical.<sup>3</sup>

Wittgenstein distinguishes in the *Lecture* between relative and absolute uses of value terms (e.g. "good", "correct", "right", "important" etc.) a distinction reminiscent of the Kantian distinction between hypothetical (relative) and categorical (absolute) imperatives. An example of a relative judgement of value is "This is the right road to Bucharest". An example of an absolute judgement of value is "It is right to tell the truth." Wittgenstein claims that the relative use of value terms is not problematic since a relative judgement of value (a hypothetical imperative) can always be rephrased so as to lose all appearance of value.<sup>4</sup> To use the previous example, "This is the right road to Bucharest" could be rephrased as "This is the right road to Bucharest if you want to get there in the shortest time". Thus, propositions that express relative and conditional kind of value are essentially

<sup>2</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, edited by Charles K. Ogden, translated by Frank P. Ramsey, London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1922, 6.421.

<sup>3</sup> Most commentators treat the *Lecture* and the *Tractatus* as sharing the same conception of language and the ethical. Indicatively I mention Rush Rhees, "Some Developments in Wittgenstein's View of Ethics", in *The Philosophical Review*, 74 (1), 1965, p. 19 and Chon Tejedor, "The Earlier Wittgenstein on the Notion of Religious Attitude", in *Philosophy*, 88 (343), 2013, p. 67.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, "A Lecture on Ethics", in *The Philosophical Review*, 74 (1), 1965, pp. 5–6.

propositions that express facts. In our example, the fact that, this or that road is the shortest in length among the possible ones. In contrast, Wittgenstein claims that propositions that make an absolute use of value terms, if seen as descriptions of whatever kinds of facts, are inherently problematic, or “nonsense” in his terminology.

Wittgenstein’s point is that if the ethically good<sup>5</sup> were approached as if it were a describable state of affairs, it would be an impossibility, a chimera: On the one hand, as far as it possessed an absolute kind of value and significance (as far as it was an end in-itself) it would have to be like a super-state of affairs and on the other, as far as it were describable, it could possess no absolute value and significance, at most it could possess a significance of the a relative kind.

During the *Lecture* Wittgenstein mentions the experience of feeling guilt as an example of an experience that he, and those who share his ethical perspective, would be inclined to attribute an absolute kind of value to.<sup>6</sup> However, his point is that as far as such an experience is an experience, that is, an event that happens at a certain place and for a certain time, it cannot possess an absolute kind of value. Wittgenstein expresses this tension in the starkest way possible, i.e., in the form of a paradox: that an experience, a fact, should seem as if it possessed absolute value and significance, that it should seem as a super-experience, a super-fact, i.e., a chimera.<sup>7</sup> The paradox is the crux of Wittgenstein’s point: Experiences that we feel as immensely important, cannot, as experiences, possess any more importance than others, they cannot possess an absolute kind of importance.

Wittgenstein writes at the conclusion of the *Lecture*:

My whole tendency and I believe the tendency of all men who ever tried to write or talk Ethics or Religion was to run against the boundaries of language. This running against the walls of our cage is perfectly, absolutely hopeless. Ethics so far as it springs from the desire to say something about the ultimate meaning of life, the absolute good, the absolute valuable, can be no science. What it says does not add to our knowledge in any sense. But it is a document of a tendency in the human mind which I personally cannot help respecting deeply and I would not for my life ridicule it.<sup>8</sup>

The outcome of Wittgenstein’s analysis is that no scientific, in the broad sense of the term, description of the ethically good is possible. That judgements of absolute value cannot be assimilated to the scientific world picture that aims at objective descriptions of the world; and that every attempt to assimilate them is likened to the hopeless running against the boundaries of our language. Against this background, I wish to examine a selection of Kant’s pronouncements on ethics and religion as paradigmatic of this running against the walls of our cage.

<sup>5</sup> Assuming that there is such a thing.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p.10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p.10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p.12.

### 3. KANT

Before proceeding I want to mention that I find a certain kinship between Kant's and early Wittgenstein's conception of the ethical. Even if my focus is on ethics and the practical, there is a longstanding tradition of interpreting the *Tractatus* along the lines of Kant's theoretical philosophy, either as providing Kantian-transcendental kind of arguments that aim to account for the possibility of language or as espousing a form of transcendental idealism.<sup>9</sup> As suggestive of this kinship between Kant's and early Wittgenstein's conception of the ethical I present the following list of general common themes:

- Both philosophers assume the same absolutist conception of the moral ought.<sup>10</sup> In other words, both can be seen as holding an analogous pre-philosophical ethical perspective on things – in contrast to philosophers who e.g., view the ethical in a utilitarian or constructivist way.

- Both philosophers recognize the notion of the Good will, the will that is unconditionally good or good in-itself, as the most valuable thing in the world as it were, as the only thing possessing unconditional kind of value. Moreover, they both relate the question as to the Sense of the world (understood in an unconditional sense), the purpose of the world's existence as it were, to the exercise/realization of such a will.

- In very broad terms the central gesture of the Kantian critical philosophy is the same gesture that Wittgenstein's early philosophy makes: the explicit delimitation of the sphere of knowledge/thought proper and the acknowledgement that what is of absolute value, is not to be found within that sphere, thus making apparent the higher and supernatural character of value and morality.

Notwithstanding these very general common themes there is an enormous difference in their philosophical treatment of the ethical. Kant conceives of the ethical dimension as essentially rational in character (the "moral ought" is pure practical *reason*) while nothing analogous holds for the early Wittgenstein who seems to clearly separate between the theoretical and practical dimensions of the human being. I will now proceed to examine a selection of Kant's pronouncements on ethical and religious notions from the perspective of early Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.

<sup>9</sup> See for example G.E.M. Anscombe, *An Introduction to Wittgenstein's Tractatus*, London, Hutchinson University Library, 1959, pp. 93–95 and Hao Tang, "Transcendental Idealism in Wittgenstein's Tractatus", in *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 61 (244), 2011, p. 606.

<sup>10</sup> That the early Wittgenstein had, a Kantian-like, absolutist conception of the ethical is expressed in the secondary literature by Genia Schönbaumsfeld, *A Confusion of the Spheres: Kierkegaard and Wittgenstein on Philosophy and Religion*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 147.

#### 4. KANT'S ETHICAL AND RELIGIOUS "NONSENSE"

A number of Kant's assertions from the corpus of his practical philosophy can be seen as examples of, what Wittgenstein calls, "nonsensical" language that seems to run against its boundaries.

I make this comparison in good spirit since I take it for granted that Wittgenstein accepts in broad terms the absolutist conception of the ethical implicit in Kant's assertions, even if the two philosophers differ enormously in the way they treat it philosophically (as I remarked Kant holds that the ethical is rational through and through while nothing analogous holds for the early Wittgenstein). What is thus deemed as "nonsense" is not the ethical (and the religious) *per se*, but only the language used in the attempt to provide a theoretical account of it. Even from a charitable point of view, Kant's language when discussing ethics and religion appears like language that verges on paradox:

1) As a first example of such language I wish to briefly examine the general framework of Kant's proposed account of free action, as he presents it in different places of his practical writings. Succinctly put, every performed free action is a phenomenon, i.e., part of the world of phenomena, whose cause is nevertheless not another phenomenon, but a noumenal free choice. Every free action is the effect of a free noumenal choice of a (good or bad) maxim. We made that choice and so we are morally responsible for the action. But such a free choice was not something that happened in time. If it were, it would not be free and our product, but it would be naturally coerced. Thus, every performed action that happens at a given place and time is the effect of a timeless, i.e., outside the time series, free choice of a maxim. More starkly, we have an effect (the performed action) in time whose cause was not in time, or, we have an effect whose cause was not the effect of another cause – at least in the proper sense of the term "cause".

To take a closely related issue, Kant can also be seen as standing right at the limits of language when he tries to show how natural causality can coexist with freedom, where "freedom" is negatively defined as independence from natural causality. I am referring to the solution Kant provides to the Third Antinomy of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Freedom is there presented (A538-541/B566-569) as a higher, non-natural type of causality that can coexist, at least as a theoretical possibility, with natural necessity. The apparent contradiction between the notions of natural necessity and freedom is there dissolved through the introduction of the equally mysterious, from a theoretical point of view, distinction of the human being as a noumenon that is free and as a phenomenon that is subject to natural necessity. In this way Kant establishes that freedom, i.e., independence from natural necessity, is, at least, a non-contradictory idea. Kant writes in the Third Part of his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* while discussing the phenomena/noumena distinction: "For that a thing in the appearance is subject to certain laws

from which just the same as a thing or a being in itself is independent, contains not the least contradiction.”<sup>11</sup>

One justifiably asks, how can it be the same thing (the same being) since it is so enormously different, since the one aspect of it is in time and the other outside time? Or how can these two totally unlike things reside in the same thing? Nonetheless, we can understand what Kant is trying to express: loosely speaking, that a “part” of us is free, i.e., not naturally coerced, and morally responsible. At the same time, its expression in philosophical language seems, at least from a strict theoretical point of view, inherently problematic, as Kant himself openly admits at places of his works.<sup>12</sup> It is noteworthy that in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant explicitly acknowledges the difficulty of being able to solve the problem of freedom only through the introduction of a still greater problem, the phenomena/noumena distinction: “It will be said that the solution to the difficulty given here involves even greater difficulty and is hardly susceptible of a lucid presentation. But is any other solution that has been attempted, or that may be attempted, easier and more apprehensible?”<sup>13</sup>

I think it could be said that from Wittgenstein’s perspective, the impossibility of providing an intellectually perspicuous solution to such a problem is taken to be an essential characteristic of it and not just a matter of philosophical skill. For all that, Wittgenstein makes an almost identical distinction in the *Tractatus* between the empirical subject (that is part of the world) and the metaphysical subject (that stands outside the world as its outer limit) that is ethically responsible for the good or bad exercise of the will.<sup>14</sup> However, Wittgenstein’s assertions about the matter are not presented in a philosophically systematic way. His language is that of similes and metaphors and not proper, descriptive, analytical language (e.g., the ethical subject is likened to the “width-less limit” of the world, moral reward and punishment to the “waxing” or “waning” of that limit, etc.). Other than that, Wittgenstein just stresses the impossibility of a more exact and theoretically adequate description of the matter: “Of the will as the subject of the ethical we cannot speak.”<sup>15</sup>

2) As a second example of Kant “running against the boundaries of language” I wish to examine his notion of the “fact of reason”<sup>16</sup>. It is commonly accepted in the secondary literature that by this expression Kant means our direct and unmediated awareness of the moral law.<sup>17</sup> Even if Kant calls it a “fact” so as to

<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, translated and edited by Mary Gregor and Jens Timmermann, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2011, p. 143.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*, pp. 147, 151, 153 and Immanuel, Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, translated and edited by Mary Gregor, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, 5:133.

<sup>13</sup> Imm. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:103.

<sup>14</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.423 and 6.43.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibidem*, 6.423.

<sup>16</sup> Imm. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:31.

<sup>17</sup> See for example John Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, edited by Barbara Herman, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2000, p. 260.



signify its immediate and non-deducible character, it is nevertheless a sui generis “fact” unlike any other. In Kantian terms, it is a non-empirical fact that is not supported by any sensible intuition. Thus, it is qualitatively different from all other facts. In a sense, it is a fact that is also not a “fact” -at least in the proper sense of the term. The “fact of reason” is an almost divine kind of fact in the Kantian system since it is essentially the “fact” of the reality of our noumenal self. The immediate awareness of the moral ought discloses at the same time our higher self that is free from the world of phenomena and the natural causality characterizing it. In other words, the “fact of reason” stands above all other facts as the only fact that is of an absolute and unconditional importance, as the “fact” that reveals our self as it is in-itself as it were. Kant acknowledges its special, and one-of-a-kind, status in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: “However, in order to avoid misinterpretation [...] it must be noted carefully that [the fact of reason] is not an empirical fact but the sole fact of pure reason which, by it, announces itself as originally lawgiving.”<sup>18</sup>

I do not wish to criticize the content of what Kant is saying but only to point out the fact that its expression feels like we are at, what Wittgenstein calls, the limits of language. The “fact of reason” is essentially a fact that is not a fact; it is like a super-fact that carries with it absolute value and significance. It is also to be noted that the “fact of reason” is the ground on which the most important ideas of theoretical reason (God, freedom and immortality) acquire reality, a reality that, from a practical perspective is justified and secured, while from a theoretical perspective, is inexplicable and no further determinable. In a certain sense this “fact” makes possible the breaking of the restrictions that the *Critique of Pure Reason* imposed on knowledge, or, it enables the unlocking of the doors of the noumenal realm as it were. The key for unlocking these doors is the notion of the “pure/good will”, a notion that Kant takes as being implicit in the “fact of reason”.<sup>19</sup>

3) As a third example of Kant running “against the boundaries of language” I wish to discuss the notion of the “moral feeling”, the feeling of respect for the moral law. Again, Kant conceives the moral feeling as sui generis “feeling” since it is the only non-empirically induced feeling and the only feeling that is cognized a priori. The moral feeling is presented as the outcome of the way our noumenal, higher self, our purely active self that is the source of the moral ought, interacts with our sensible, phenomenal self, our self that is pathologically affected. As in the previous example there was a higher kind of use of the term “fact”, so here there is a higher kind of use of the term “feeling”. On the one hand the moral feeling is a feeling, i.e., something felt and for that reason part of the world of phenomena, and on the other it is not induced by the world of phenomena, but by pure reason working on our sensible nature. In short, the moral feeling is a feeling

<sup>18</sup> Imm. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:31.

<sup>19</sup> The fact of reason is the fact of the unmediated consciousness of the moral ought. And the moral ought is conceived by Kant as the synthesis of: 1) the notion of a pure will, i.e., a will solely determined by pure reason, and 2) the notion of a will sensibly conditioned.

that is also not a “feeling”, at least in the proper sense of the term. It is noteworthy that Kant explicitly acknowledges such a “feeling” as singular and impenetrable from a strict theoretical point of view. He writes in the *Critique of Practical Reason*:

There is something so singular in the boundless esteem for the pure moral law stripped of all advantage [...] that one cannot wonder at finding this influence of a mere intellectual idea on feeling quite impenetrable for speculative reason and at having to be satisfied that one can yet see a priori this much: that such a feeling is inseparably connected with the representation of the moral law in every finite rational being.<sup>20</sup>

In this context I would like to mention a criticism, along the previous lines, of Kant’s notion of the “moral feeling” by one of his contemporaries. In an otherwise laudatory book review of the *Critique of Practical Reason* by August Wilhelm Rehberg, the latter writes in regard to Kant’s notion:

‘But is this respect no sensation [Empfindung]? [...] Kant twists and turns [...] in manifold ways in order to prove that it is not a sensible feeling [sinnliches Gefühl]. But here he is quite unsatisfactory’. Indeed, Rehberg continues, ‘if respect for the law is to be a feeling and yet not a sensible sensation [sinnliche Empfindung], what else is this but fanaticism [Schwannerey]?’<sup>21</sup>

4) As a fourth example of Kant running “against the boundaries of language” I would like to examine Kant’s postulates of practical reason that are the subject matter of Kantian (pure rational) faith. The postulates are the three presuppositions that make the realization of the *summum bonum*, the object necessarily pursued by a morally determined will, possible. Those presuppositions concern the existence of freedom, the immortality of the soul and the existence of God. Kant treats the postulates as theoretical propositions, though not demonstratable as such, insofar as they are inseparably attached to an a priori unconditionally valid practical law, i.e., the moral ought. Kant conceives the postulates as theoretical propositions that are nevertheless not assented to on proper theoretical grounds. In such a way the *Critique of Practical Reason*, through the notion of pure rational faith/belief in the postulates, provides reality to the transcendent ideas (freedom, immortality and God) of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but as it were, less reality than the one the *Critique of Pure Reason* would provide if it could cognize the objects of those ideas in a proper theoretical way. Only if human beings possessed a faculty of

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*, 5:80.

<sup>21</sup> Cited in Werner S. Pluhar footnote in Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, translated by W.S. Pluhar, Indianapolis, Indiana, Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 2009, pp. 187–188.

intellectual intuition (i.e., if humans were not sensibly conditioned beings) could they have a proper cognition of these “objects”. The root of the difficulty of clearly expressing the epistemic status of the postulates seems to be that on the one hand something is gained (the practical reality of those theoretical ideas) and on the other what is gained is not what would have been gained if the same reality were established in a theoretical way, that is, what is gained is not a theoretical cognition proper of those objects, but a kind of quasi-cognition, i.e., a practical cognition of them.<sup>22</sup>

Again, Kant seems to be right at the limits of language: the postulates are theoretical propositions on the one hand that are not theoretically established on the other. Schopenhauer’s following remark on Kant’s notion of a “practical postulate”, expresses in a direct way their peculiar status. The idea of a theoretical proposition that has practical, and not theoretical, validity is presented by him as a contradiction in terms: “For a theoretical dogma which has only practical validity, is very like the wooden guns we allow our children to handle without fear of danger: properly speaking, it belongs to the same category as: ‘Wash my skin, but without wetting it.’”<sup>23</sup>

I take the endless interpretative controversies in the secondary literature about the epistemic status of the postulates as also the fact that this part of Kant’s moral philosophy (that is the transition from morality to religion) is generally considered to be of an inferior philosophical quality, as indirect validations of Schopenhauer’s remark. However, from Wittgenstein’s perspective the religious notions, referred to in the postulates, are not criticized *per se*, are not to be totally discarded. What is criticized is only the attempt to justify and account for these notions in a philosophically adequate way as if they were amenable to a theoretical handling and analysis.

5) As a last example of Kant “running against the boundaries of language” i will just mention the seemingly paradoxical idea of “purposiveness without a purpose/end” [Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck] that Kant uses in his description of the experience of that which is beautiful in-itself in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> However, Kant presents this kind of quasi-cognition (practical cognition) of the objects of the postulates, not as a deficiency, but as something positive in the overall scheme of Reason (5:147 of the *Critique of Practical Reason*). If we could have proper theoretical cognition of those ideas then the true moral disposition, i.e., the free and uncoerced choice of morality, would be destroyed.

<sup>23</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *On the Principle of Sufficient Reason*, translated by Karl Hillebrand, New York, Prometheus books, 2006, p. 142.

<sup>24</sup> Imm. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, edited by Paul Guyer, translated by Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2001, 5:220.

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## 5. CONCLUSION

Kant's ethical philosophy, as also the transition from ethics to religion, is filled with such examples of language that seems to run against its boundaries. The texts contain a number of apparent contradictions and sublimated uses of terms that can be seen as examples of, what Wittgenstein calls, the hopeless attempt to treat in a theoretically adequate manner, in the broad sense of the term, that which is already conceived as standing above the domain of theoretical description/knowledge proper. My aim in this paper was not to argue for or against Kant's views but only to point out the fact that their expression in language feels like we are at its limits. And Wittgenstein's early philosophy seems to suggest that the paradoxical appearance of such language is not just an appearance but an essential characteristic of it.