



Point of View

Can Religion be the Basis for Dialogue at the Global Level?

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Abstract

As human beings do we at all have a common ground for dialogue and mutual understanding? Yes: what we as human beings have in common, is that we can use and understand arguments. In other words: that we are rational beings. 2. Is our capability for argumentation the only ground we have in common as the basis for dialogue and mutual understanding? There is no argumentation against argumentation. Argumentation can't be transcended. Thus argumentation, more precisely: the capability of argumentation – i.e. reason - is the only ground we have in common as human beings. 3. Does religion play a role in this respect? Isn't religion superfluous for a rational human being? No, not in the sense Kant has ascribed to it. To know about the boundaries of knowledge (of reason) and to humbly marvel about the miraculous existence of world, life and reason can rightly be seen as the form of religion - as the form of attitude towards the "beyond" - which is adequate (and unavoidable) for a rational being. Religion is the source of truth and ethics if it means: humble acknowledgment of the un-knowable and hence of the fact that in our search for orientation we are relegated to ourselves as fellow human beings, as brothers and sisters.

Keywords

religion, Kant, human reason, dialogue, boundaries of reason.

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As human beings do we at all have a common ground for dialogue and mutual understanding? If so, is there but one (single) such ground? Does religion play a role in this respect?

These are the three questions I will try to answer in the following. My main focus will be on the last question.

Obviously, the first question ("Do we as human beings at all have a common ground for dialogue and mutual understanding?") is a question of utmost importance.

It is hard to imagine how humanity could be able to solve its manifold conflicts in a peaceful way if it had no common ground, as frail as it may be, for dialogue and mutual understanding. If there was no such base, violence would be the only "solution". Violence between countries means war. Wars can begin as "conventional" wars or "asymmetric" wars, but there will be the risk, if worst comes to worst, that they will mutate into "all-out nuclear, chemical or biological warfare". That would be the possible end of mankind – or close to it.

Yet, humanity is not fatally doomed to experience such a destiny.

Humanity does have a common ground that allows for communication, discussion, argumentation, and mutual understanding!

Even the most radical skeptic will have to accept the simple, overwhelming proof for this, which consists, for example, in the mere existence of this Review which contains articles written by authors from various cultural backgrounds and is read by people equally from various cultural, biographic, linguistic, religious, atheist or agnostic backgrounds.

From whatever background we are – we all have understood that this is a Review, that certain questions are being asked in the articles and that answers are given. We, in principle can understand the arguments used, or at least try to understand them and ask for clarification if they are unclear, etc. This, our common endeavor, would be completely senseless if we were convinced that the answer to the first question ("if we have a common ground") is "No". Our simple participation in the activities of authors and/or readers shows that our answer to the question is "Yes"!

This is so to say the pragmatic side of the proof.

The underlying logical structure of this argument consists in the contradiction between the explicit verbal negation and the revocation of the negation by practical consent. This kind of contradiction usually is called "performative self-contradiction".

Even if I consider myself to be a member of a group or culture that has no common basis (for dialogue and understanding) with the others, in the end my answer can only be "Yes". For even if my answer were explicitly "No", I – unwillingly – would admit, by the act of my answering, that I have understood the question – or more precisely: the words it consists of and

their pragmatic function as a question. Yet, at the same time, this understanding is precisely what I explicitly reject. Giving an answer is only possible after having understood that there was a question.

I will stop here and reflect on what I did so far.

I have put forward an argument, defending a positive answer to the first question. I have tried to convince you (the reader) with arguments. By doing so I have considered you to be able to understand arguments, in other words: to be rational beings – whether you accept my *specific* arguments or not.

I think this actually is what we as human beings have in common: We can use and understand arguments. In this sense what we have in common is that we are rational beings.

This leads me to the second question: Is this common ground – i.e. our capability for argumentation –, the only ground we have in common as the basis for dialogue and mutual understanding?

Even if the answer to this question would be “No”, recourse to argumentation remains unavoidable.

Even a person who maintains that there is not only the capability for argumentation as the basis we have in common for dialogue and mutual understanding, but that there exists another basis for dialogue and understanding – whatever it might be –, even such person would have no other means to convince us but argumentation. He would have to *argue* to defend his position and to convince us. To put it in a more general way: There is no argumentation against argumentation. Argumentation can't be transcended. Argumentation, more precisely: the capability of argumentation – i.e. reason - is the only ground we have in common as human beings.

Now I turn to the third question: How far can religion play a role in our search for a common basis? Is religion not superfluous for a rational being?

My answer is: No, it is not superfluous. Not in a certain sense; not in the sense, I think, Kant has ascribed to it.

In the following, I will give my interpretation of Kant's philosophy. Both might be wrong, Kant's philosophy and, more likely so, my interpretation.

In my eyes, one of the important results of Kant's thinking is the insight that human knowledge, human reason has boundaries. “Religion within the boundaries of reason alone” is the title of one of his writings.

Human reason is not able to find out “the essence of things”, “das Ding an sich”, as he called it. It is beyond the boundaries of human reason to know anything about the beginning of the material world, of the *inanimate nature*; human reason can't answer the question: why does the world exist, how did it come into existence? Human reason can't answer the question: why does *life* exist, how did life (plants, animals, the human being) originate in the otherwise inanimate nature?

And human reason can't answer the question, how human *reason* itself,

i.e. how the *freedom* of thinking and acting, came into existence in the human body which is at the same time a piece of law-regulated nature.

Because these questions lie beyond the boundaries of human reason, it does not make sense to strive for answers. That would possibly lead us - in Kant's words - to "false hopes".

As the ancient Chinese thinker, Xunzi said: "...An intelligent human being should not think about heaven... We can't see anything at work. We can only see the results... We can call that 'miraculous'; it is also called heaven. ... A wise man does not feel a need to know about heaven." (Quotation from Hubert Schleichert/Heiner Roetz: *Klassische Chinesische Philosophie*, Klostermann Verlag, Januar 2009, page 271)

What remains is to marvel, to marvel about the "miraculous".

The marveled question is the beginning of philosophy and religion. We can't know anything about the "miraculous". All the more humbly - i.e. acknowledging our boundaries - we are restricted to marvel - to marvel about the existence of world, life, and reason.

This attitude of humble acknowledgment of the boundaries of reason can at the same time be seen as a religious attitude. The Latin word "religio" means connection, connection with the beyond. Seen this way, our relationship with the beyond, our re-ligio, consists in the humble acknowledgment of our limits as human beings. It consists in our common marvel and joy about the mere existence of world, life, and reason.

Some mystical texts in the history of religious thinking describe this existential religious attitude of humble, silent marveling very well.

Dionysos Areopagites (ca. 500, Christian era) writes to his disciple Timotheus: "... our truth lies beyond words and thoughts in a Union which transcends all reason and cannot be described by human language..."

Meister Eckhart (1260 -1328, Christian era) writes in his text "Blessed are the poor in spirit": "...the human being has to be free of knowledge, of insight, of discerning... God is above all discernation..." And in our times the mystical thinker Heidegger did not consider discerning words and reason as essential for attaining wisdom; for him, words are just "formal indications" (formale Anzeigen), which do not really lead to wisdom, i.e. to the union of the individual with the "Sein" (being).

So, in the end, what remains is: to know about the boundaries of knowledge and to humbly marvel about the miraculous existence of world, life, and reason. This is the *conditio vitae* of the human species.

Thus, the knowledge of the not-knowledgeable can be seen as the form of religion - as the form of connection with the beyond - which is possible for a rational being, i.e. possible within the boundaries of reason.

In a non-religious view, the human species is relegated to itself. We human

beings are unguided and unsheltered; we have to help ourselves, using our common reason. In this sense we are all equal, are brothers and sisters.

The source of truth and ethics is not “religion” in the sense of “knowing about the beyond”. The source of truth and ethics is “religion” in the sense of “knowing about the un-knowable” and thus about being relegated to ourselves as fellow human beings.

“Religion” in this sense does not mean connection to the beyond, but connection to others, to our fellow human beings, to our brothers and sisters.

According to this viewpoint, what unites us in this religious sense is the shared insight into the boundaries of reason and the insight in the senselessness of attempts to overcome them, and as a consequence of this the insight that we, as members of the human species, are dependent on each other, need each other. We are reduced to and depend on our ability for unguided self-orientation.

As the French say: “Il faut faire avec ce qu’on a!” – “One has to do with what one has!” We have no other option; we have no other means than to use our common reason.

For a theist, religion means: connection to God in the other world, and by that: secure orientation and consolation in our world.

To me, the wish to have this religious kind of security or guarantee is humanly understandable. Yet we should not allow ourselves to be misled, in Kant’s words, by “false hopes”. We should humbly use the only instrument we have and respect it – as frail and weak as it might be.

The discussions in this Review are a very good opportunity to do so!

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* The French phrase "Il faut faire..." is not taken from a text; it is just a common saying in France.

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