

WHO IS HAUNTED BY THE SHADOW OF GOD? DIALECTICAL NOTES ON MICHAEL ROSEN'S NARRATIVE OF (FAILED) SECULARIZATION

ABSTRACT: *In The Shadow of God, Michael Rosen argues that modern moral philosophy in the tradition of German Idealism is profoundly shaped by religious views these thinkers could not overcome. However, a closer look at Rosen's critique of Kant's and Kantian conceptions of morality raises the possibility that Rosen's view may itself be haunted by the shadow of God. In particular, Rosen appears to believe that a moral imperative of respect for human dignity necessarily requires a religious-transcendent grounding, such that there is no purely moral answer to the question of why such respect is owed. In relegating morality to an impersonal realm that alienates us from our personal understandings of the good, Rosen fails to recognize not only that Kantian morality is meant to alienate us from certain ends (e.g., racist or sexist), but that it is also meant to overcome alienation. This is because Kantian morality is not so much impersonal, as it is interpersonal: it recognizes us as belonging to a community of free and equal persons, who are autonomous when we morally reflect on, or even reject, certain ends.*

Keywords: Kant; Michael Rosen; alienation; ethics; morality; secularization

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Michael Rosen's *The Shadow of God: Kant, Hegel, and the Passage from Heaven to History* (Harvard, 2022) is a major contribution to the complex landscape of narratives of secularization or, as he puts it in the subtitle, "the passage from heaven to history." Most importantly, his story does not easily fit into the standard categories of such narratives. To name just a few such narrative, they are:

Affirmative, praising the radical character of secularization and enlightenment as a story of progress (see, e.g., Blumenberg 1985; Pinker 2018; Buchanan 2020);

Negative, telling a story of loss and decline (e.g., Schmitt 1922 [2006]; Murdoch 1970; MacIntyre 1981), or (as a variant of the negative view) *genealogical*, presenting a story of increased domination (e.g., Nietzsche 1887 [2012]; Foucault 1975 [1977];

Critical, bemoaning impoverishment but not decline (e.g., Taylor 1989 and 2007); or

Dialectical, combining a story of progress with critique (e.g., Habermas 1984, 1987, and 2019; Forst 2013).

I would call Rosen's view *negative-dialectical*, in the tradition of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, because its main aim is to achieve historical-philosophical understanding in order to open up the space for radical critical reflection. Rosen emphasizes the distance separating us from the Idealists in order to uncover that we are on shaky ground once we can no longer share Idealist assumptions but still use their concepts and ideas. I consider this to be a variant of what Adorno (1973, 408) once called "solidarity with metaphysics in the moment of its fall." Throughout Rosen's brilliant analyses, he is trying to wake us up from a deep metaphysical slumber generated by

those very philosophers whose original aim was to awaken us from such slumbers: “This book is written from the premise that each of us must find our way to that set of *doxai* that we can inhabit with some comfort. Some will not withstand rational criticism and some—to me, at least, and, I hope to my readers—are morally repulsive, but there is no single right answer. That is one lesson I take from Adorno” (Rosen 2022, 307; see also 21). This might be a slightly more skeptical conclusion than would be drawn by Adorno (1973, 365), who held onto the “new categorical imperative” that Auschwitz shall never happen again; but I leave this aside here. Suffice it to say that the negative-dialectical doubts about an objective grounding of morality Rosen and Adorno share (to some extent) are motivated by fundamental moral concerns.

Rosen provides two perspectives to look at what Kant, Fichte, and Hegel, in particular, tried to achieve. But in my view, as the negative-dialectical story unfolds, one of these perspectives becomes increasingly dominant. The first perspective concerns the extent to which these thinkers were still indebted to and steeped in Christian theology; the second involves appreciating how great their efforts were to radically change and overcome that tradition. A dialectical reading would combine both of these perspectives, as both are true. But Rosen ends up focusing much more on the first perspective, and that is part of his own enterprise of enlightening the Enlightenment. As I will try to show in what follows, I fear that this leads to a serious problem in his account.

Reproducing the Shadow of God

Rosen is right that the shadow of God is long, indeed, longer than many of us may think. But here is my critical question: can a critical narrative like Rosen’s unwittingly become subject to a dialectical turn by *itself* being overshadowed by God? That is, might his narrative end up reproducing, in a negative way, the very assumption it seeks to overcome?

This would occur if the reading of thinkers such as the Idealists were to become one-sided and reified, for example, by overemphasizing and generalizing certain aspects of their work. It would thus end up with the thesis that *any* universalist form of morality that emphasizes human dignity could and can be thought of *only* in quasi-theological philosophical terms. This kind of thesis would have to conclude that moral universalism, once it is no longer buttressed by such theology, is a mere fantasy, a remnant of past times.¹ But that conclusion would be unwarranted, for it transforms a *hermeneutic* interpretation of the Idealists into a *general* position about morality. And that may be one step too far, overextending the shadow of God.

More specifically, in the course of Rosen's critique I see a certain danger of losing the Kantian distinction between *transcendental philosophy* (a philosophy that examines the conditions of possible experience and knowledge) and a *philosophy of transcendence* (a philosophy that aims to demonstrate the presence and nature of objects beyond our experience, such as a just God). To loosen the distinction between these two types of philosophy is to make Kant appear as something like a Protestant Platonist, a firm believer in a just God ruling by eternal commands. This is, I fear, the picture of Kant depicted in *The Shadow of God*. This is not to deny that Rosen's view of Kant is plausible in very important respects, such as his insistence on the metaphysical character of Kant's ethics (Rosen 2022, ch. 5). But I think that his interpretation is too extreme and one-sided when it comes to understanding the nature of that character of Kant's thought. In Rosen's view, a Kantian morality of autonomous action requires "the observer who *really* matters for Kant—who is, of course, as this book is arguing, God" (Rosen 2022, 84).

The reason for this reading, as I indicated, is that Rosen *himself* seems to be standing in the shadow of God: He appears to think that if one invests such (so to speak) supernatural normative powers into that capacity called practical reason or into the idea of morality, such investment must be of a religious nature (see also the critical analysis of the term "dignity" in

Rosen 2012). And that is where I disagree. In my view, the (unfinished) Kantian enterprise is to establish a morality of equal respect as an *autonomous* imperative of practical reason without any requirement of religious faith or quasi-theological argument; and if you doubt whether this is possible at all, you should ask yourself why you think that any source of moral validity, apart from a religious one, is merely historical and contingent—a commitment we can, to repeat Rosen (2022, 307), “inhabit with some degree of comfort”? In other words, if you think that apart from such comfort, there is no moral truth accessible to the rational faculties of finite humans, because that view would *necessarily* imply a belief in a just God, my question is: Who exactly stands in the shadow of God? You or me?

Is Autonomy Alienating?

Let me highlight these concerns by focusing, by way of example, on Rosen’s fascinating discussion in Chapter 7 of autonomy and alienation.²

Rosen starts from an important dilemma, and (although he thinks otherwise) I agree with that diagnosis to some extent. The “alienation dilemma” arises when you regard, as Kant does, being guided by heteronomous motives as alienating, since it is not your autonomous self that determines your actions. As Rosen (2022, 194) aptly puts it, in such cases we experience the “alienation of arbitrariness.” We overcome that form of alienation by following the categorical imperative. But then another form of alienation might arise, which Rosen (*ibid.*) calls the “alienation of impersonality.” Simply put, this is the distance established between one’s autonomous self that is guided by rational motives according to the moral law and the heteronomous inclinations, desires and personal projects which, as Rosen rightly says, also define who one is, and to no small extent. The dilemma between the alienation of arbitrariness and impersonality does not arise in every case. For example, if our

personal projects of attaining the good (*Glückseligkeit*) does not conflict with moral norms, you are unlikely to feel alienated from them from the perspective of morality.

To be sure, Kant (1785, 4:457) did indeed think that morality overcomes (what I call) “noumenal alienation” by expressing our “proper self” (*eigentliches Selbst*) in autonomous action. In my interpretation, Kant’s view of the relationship between autonomy and non-alienation—i.e., the view that we are not alienated from our true selves when we are most autonomous—is especially important if we consider the possibility of (a) first-order alienation between persons who do not regard each other as moral equals, and (b) second-order alienation from ourselves when we do not consider ourselves as autonomous moral authorities equal to others. That “noumenal” (non-empirical and moral) status of being such an equal authority, even though empirically it is all too often denied, Kant regards as “inalienable.” The term for that normative status is “dignity.”

The alienation dilemma arises most forcefully when morality is in conflict with a person’s strong desires and motives. Consider the case of a patriarch, a racist, and/or a religious fanatic. Morality requires them to resist and overcome such inclinations and positions. That can indeed be alienating, since such persons are required to abandon a lot of convictions and beliefs they grew up with and which are of importance to who they are. To use a less drastic example, take a person whose identity is fixated on doing everything for their family, relegating general morality to second place. In that case, moral demands alienate them from what is truly important to them, from what, in a Harry Frankfurt-style way, they “wholeheartedly” affirm.

We might even go so far as to say that the very *point* of morality is to create that alienating experience in order to induce a reasoned difference between, on the one hand, our personal motives, interests, and values and, on the other hand, the requirements of a universal morality: that we do what is justifiable to all without special (unjustified) consideration for some, including ourselves.

This does not mean that the alienation dilemma cannot be deep. I agree with Rosen that we should not only call the moral identity of persons their essential identity, as Christine Korsgaard's (2009) work suggests. I think that in addition to a *moral* identity there is also an *ethical* identity (connected to personal ideas of the good), and the two can come into conflict. As I described it elsewhere, from the moral perspective, the heteronomy of empirical happiness "leads to alienation; from the perspective of the good and happy life, morality can be alienating. Moral autonomy is different from ethical authenticity or happiness, and the two notions of non-alienation they refer to are also conceptually different" (Forst 2017, 534ff.).³

However, dramatic as such conflicts may become, Rosen (following Murdoch) dramatizes the situation too much. He thinks that moral reflection dooms us to "existential loneliness" (Rosen 2022, 194). But why should that be the case? Not only can personal (ethical) projects that are compatible with morality co-exist with moral autonomy, but, more important, moral reflection makes us part of a comprehensive *community* of equals in the (imagined) "realm of ends" (as Rosen often affirms himself, such as with respect to Kant's notion of an "invisible church"). That is an important aspect of noumenal non-alienation.

Hence, I worry that *The Shadow of God* is in danger of repeating too many of the prejudices against Kantian morality that Schiller, Hegel, Schopenhauer, and many others up to Bernard Williams have held. They all make an appearance in chapter 7 (on the alienation dilemma), and Rosen (2022, 207), given his (quasi-Platonic) emphasis on "impersonal" rather than "interpersonal" morality, accordingly speaks about a "kind of escape from the empirical self" into a "pure and impersonal higher realm." But what is actually meant according to Kantian morality is the critical reflection on whether our motives are morally justifiable toward others as equals. Your empirical self is still you, otherwise reflecting upon it would be morally meaningless. The point of moral reflection on one's empirical self is not to deny that it is an aspect of oneself, but to ask whether there is something worth changing about it. Remember the case of the fanatic or the racist or the patriarch—here alienation is urgently

required! If we reinterpret Kant's metaphysics of "two worlds" in a postmetaphysical way (see, e.g., Forst 2012, part 1; and Forthcoming), we can see that his idea of morality aims at a critical view of ourselves, whereby we must ask whether what we want to do is truly justifiable in an interpersonal-impartial (but not "impersonal") way. There is no flight from the self involved here, just a thorough examination of our motives and values.

In this vein, I do not see why, as Rosen (2022, 211) says with Schopenhauer, the moral law embodies "an authority which is alien to the self." Morality simply expresses *my* authority reflecting on the general justifiability of *my* aims, as someone *responsible* to others, accepting that this responsibility is *mine*. Why is that an alien authority and not my own? I suspect that the Platonic-Christian interpretation of the nature of moral commands has gotten the upper hand in Rosen's view, as suggested by phrases like "to meet the demands of morality is to be connected thereby to a transcendent realm" (ibid., 213).

True, following morality comes at a "very high price indeed" for those who would rather defy it (ibid., 214); some motives can indeed not be reconciled in a justifiable way. But the force of morality that Rosen calls "alien," allegedly condemning one to "loneliness" (ibid., 216), really is the force of respecting others as equals (and as having equal dignity). It is not obvious why that should be incompatible with community—or with love, for that matter (but that is a longer story).

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In the end, the reason I think that Rosen's own view is itself haunted by the shadow of God is, as I indicated, that he seems to believe that there is no plausible, categorical, non-religious moral answer to the question he poses (2022, 217) with Williams: "Even if morality is fully rational, objective and transcendent, why should we submit to it?" For Kantians, however, this question seeks for one reason too many if it searches for a non-moral reason to be moral.

There is no such reason, since only moral reasons lead to a non-alienated, autonomous standpoint of morality. Religious or quasi-religious reasons, in a Kantian view, especially count among those that are insufficient to ground morality, because they offer completely *heteronomous* motives such as the love of God—and not the respect for other persons as normative authorities equal to oneself. Convention and “comfort” fare similarly badly. If we truly want to step out of God’s shadow, Rosen’s alternative between religious reasons for morality and conventionalist or subjective, non-moral reasons of preference is too narrow. We need to identify truly moral reasons apart from such an alternative—reasons that take others, “non-identical” (as Adorno would put it) with me as they are, as a sufficient reason for respecting them as equals. The passage from heaven to history and morality is still unfinished, but a dialectical reading of Michael Rosen’s book may help us along the way.

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NOTES

¹ As, for example, Elisabeth Anscombe (1958) and (to some extent) Bernard Williams (1985) thought.

² This is to continue our long-running debate that began after a talk I gave at Harvard University based on Forst 2017.

³ That is why Rosen (2022, 360n25) is mistaken when he writes that I do not “consider the troubling possibility that the Kantian drive to replace heteronomy with rational justification might bring alienation of a different kind.”