

Kant's Political Theodicy: "Sovereign Speech" and the Book of Job

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ENG Abstract: Scholarship on Kant's religious writings commonly diverges on two related issues: the theological weight and meaning of his endorsement of religious faith, and the apparent inconsistency between his earlier and later, seemingly less secular, treatments of the subject. The questions raised by these disputes are not only theoretical; for at stake is whether in Kant's considered view a just political community is ultimately sustainable without affirmative theological commitments of some kind. Kant's brief essay "On the Failure of All Philosophic Efforts at Theodicy" opens a promising window on such questions. It is thematically continuous with the *Critique of Judgment*, published one year earlier, that itself ends with an implicit proof of the impossibility of theodicy understood as a theoretical justification of God's moral wisdom based on what experience of the world teaches. [8:255] At the same time, Kant's essay also differs from the *Critique of Judgment* in a number of crucial ways that partly reflect Kant's darkening assessment of his political circumstances as ones requiring new means of public enlightenment on the crucial question of the true basis of religious faith, as reflected in subsequent religious writings beginning with *Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason*. One striking feature of that change is the replacement of sincerity, or honesty before the bar of conscience, with conscientiousness, or *striving* to be honest, as the highest goal of moral aspiration, and of indulgence of the inclinations through self-deception as the ultimate source of human evil. Another is conceptual room for something like grace in the religious sense.

Summary: a reading of Kant's *On the Failure of All Philosophic Attempts in Theodicy*, with a focus both on its political intentions, and on its role in bridging Kant's ethico-theology, as presented in the third Critique, and religion within the boundaries of bare reason as presented in his later writings.

Keywords: theodicy, sovereign speech, belief, conscientiousness, allegory, grace

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I. Introduction

Scholarship on Kant's religious writings commonly diverges on two related issues: the theological weight and meaning of his endorsement of religious faith,¹ and the apparent inconsistency between his earlier and later, seemingly less secular, treatments of the subject. The questions raised by these disputes are not only theoretical; for at stake is whether in Kant's considered view a just political community is ultimately sustainable without affirmative theological commitments of some kind.

Kant's brief essay "On the Failure of All Philosophic Efforts at Theodicy" opens a promising window on such questions. It is thematically continuous with the *Critique of Judgment*, published one year earlier, that itself ends with an implicit proof of the impossibility of theodicy understood as a theoretical justification of God's moral wisdom based on what experience of the world teaches. [8:255] At the same time, Kant's essay also differs from the *Critique of Judgment* in a number of crucial ways that partly reflect, as I will argue, Kant's changing political circumstances – circumstances that require new means of public enlightenment on

¹ For a helpful discussion, see (Pasternack 2014, pp.2-15); on the issue of Kant's secularism, see also (Wilford, 2014); and (Firestone, et. al. 2017)

the crucial question of the true basis of religious faith. These changes, as I will also argue, are accompanied by a darkening assessment on Kant's part of the political-theological conditions of civil and moral progress. One striking feature of that new assessment is the replacement of sincerity, or honesty before the bar of conscience, with conscientiousness, or *striving* to be honest, as the highest goal of moral aspiration, and of indulgence of the inclinations through self-deception as the ultimate source of human evil. The result, as we shall see, makes conceptual room for the first time for something like grace in the religious sense without necessarily requiring it, with telling implications for Kant's political theology and, arguably, ours as well.

On the Failure appeared in the *Berlinische Monatschrift*, in September 1791, or roughly mid-way between the publication of *Critique of Judgment*, in April 1790, and *Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason* [Part One], which was published in the same journal in February of 1792, under the title "Concerning the Radical Evil in Human Nature." These same months saw Kant under increasing public pressure in treating matters of religion. The Religious Edict of 1788, under the auspices of the recently installed King Frederick William II, required those serving as religious ministers (including all members of the theological faculty of the university) to adhere in *all* religious utterances, private as well as public, to the official tenets of the officially recognized church to which they belonged. The new edict took direct aim at the famous distinction that Kant had confidently advanced under the previous monarch, between the "private" statements of a state or church official, which the government could rightly regulate, and his public statements as a member of the larger reading community, where one might "argue as much as [one] like[d] about anything [one] like[d]" so long as one obeyed civil authority.[MpVT 8: 38] Increasingly stringent enforcement of the Edict, beginning in 1790 and continuing until the death of Frederick William II in 1796, effectively blocked Kant's earlier strategy of civic and moral enlightenment, which had depended mainly on the initial circulation of the critical philosophy among scholars, gradually spreading to the wider reading public and including critically enlightened religious ministers and other institutionally authorized officials.[MpVT 8:41]

That strategy –briefly sketched in *What is Enlightenment* (1784) and elaborated in subtler detail in the closing sections of the *Critique of Judgment*² -- relied on a dual movement from both the top down and the bottom up, culminating in a critically enlightened version of the "reciprocal communication" between the more and less refined that presaged the political achievements of ancient Greece and Rome. [KU 5:355] Wöllner's edicts threatened that attempt in at least two ways: first, by requiring all religious officials to profess, both in public and in private, the official tenets of an officially authorized sect; and second, by prohibiting any changes in those official tenets, thus foreclosing the gradual transformation in the direction of a pure moral religion that Kant seems to have anticipated at the time with some confidence, judging by his essay on "Enlightenment." Finding that path toward transforming "the people's way of feeling" effectively blocked, Kant sought, as I will argue, an alternative route of public engagement.³

My suggestion, then, is this: *On the Failure* is a revealingly transitional work both pedagogically and critically: *Pedagogically*, it reflects a widening of Kant's aim to include a more popular audience: hence his central use of Biblical allegory and other analogical and symbolic means of presenting rational ideas to those who may find critical "reflection" difficult [KU 5:478]. *Critically*, it for the first time characterizes "conscientiousness" before the bar of "conscience" (newly defined as necessarily unerring) as a necessary condition of genuine moral choice. All we are accountable for is striving our utmost to be honest with ourselves, so far as we are subjectively aware. Kant thereby opens up conceptual room for "grace" (along with other traditional Christian doctrines), without compromising his critical view as to the non-transferability of morally imputable liability and credit. In so doing, moreover, Kant finds new means to intervene politically in the transformation of passive "persuasion" into active "conviction": namely, by reinterpreting traditional Christian concepts with a view to radically transforming established Christian institutions from within.

II. The Politics of the *Critique of Judgment*

In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant's proffered remedy for the ills of civilization had rested on a critique of the power of judgment [Urteilkraft] in its reflective rather than determinative use, i.e., where it is not under the command of the faculties of understanding and reason but instead "heautonomous." That reflective use took both aesthetic and teleological forms, the former concerned with states of subjective feeling, the latter concerned with objects (e.g., "natural products" like plants and animals) whose possibility we cannot explain, giving our cognitive limitations, without appealing to the idea of an intelligent artist.

II.A. Aesthetic judgment: reciprocal communication between the more and less refined

Kant's critique of aesthetic judgment (Part One of the Critique) had had as one of its aims the improvement of refined taste, especially a taste for fine art, that would resist the fusion [as in "zusammenschmelzen"] of our taste for beauty with the corrupting inclinations of vanity and mere social joy [KU 5: 298]. That project, in turn, had several parts: first an analysis of the beautiful and the sublime as such, with special attention to the character of natural beauty; and second, a treatment of fine art, together with the dialectic of taste to which cultivation of the arts, on Kant's account, inevitably gives rise.

Kant's critical settlement of that antinomy rested on an appeal to the "indeterminate concept of the supersensible substrate of humanity" (or of an underlying ground of unity between man's animal and rational natures) that made it possible to hope for eventual agreement on taste on a sound rational basis [KU 5:340].

² See especially [KU 5:461-63, 472-73, 477-78] and Shell (2022).

³ For the alternative, more standard account, see e.g. (Kuhn 2001, pp. 361-72)

Absent that critical intervention, on the other hand, the refinement of taste, accompanied by increasing popular susceptibility to rhetorical “persuasion” [KU 5: 327n.], would amount to no more than “glittering misery.” [JaG 8:26] As Kant makes clear in the final pages of Part One, by critically averting such an outcome he hoped to revive on an enlightened and more stable basis the “mutual communication between the more educated classes and the cruder” that had enabled the formation of the ancient republics of Greece and Rome. [KU 5: 355-56]⁴

II.B. Teleological judgment: persuasion vs. conviction

Part Two (The Critique of Teleological Judgment), for its part, had sought to justify the regulative use of teleological principles for purposes of theoretical inquiry into nature, thereby refuting the dogmatic claims, vis a vis the attribution of purposes in nature, of both “idealism” (be it the system of Epicurean chance or of Spinozistic fatalism), in which the purposes in question are merely in our mind, and “realism” (be it the hylozoism of Herder or “theism” proper) where purposes are held to be in nature itself. Kant’s alternative descriptions of these four dogmatic options: namely, as – respectively, “a *lifeless matter...*, a *lifeless God*, ...a *living matter...*[and] a *living God*” – gives conditional preference, however, to **theism**, or belief in an intelligent Maker. For unlike hylozism, which is self-contradictory on its face, theism at has the advantage, according to Kant, of affirming -- albeit on a dogmatic basis -- the legitimacy of a physico-teleology, or seeking for evidence of God’s moral purpose in nature, for reason in its theoretical use. Hence, theism need not be rejected (as with the other three options) but only critically transformed into a principle of judgment that is non-dogmatic, or “reflective” rather than “determinate.”

Part Two thus culminates in a non-dogmatic justification of physical teleology for reason in its *theoretical* use alone, posing the question of what *practical* use, if any, physical teleology might legitimately serve. That question is addressed in an extended “appendix” on “methodology” in which Kant specifically takes up the relation between physical teleology and rational theology proper, a subject that is especially pertinent, as I will argue, to an understanding of Kant’s treatment of the topic of theodicy a year later.

To briefly state the argument of that appendix: physical teleology in its theoretical use leads one to inquire as to the ultimate end or purpose of nature as a whole, the only satisfactory answer to which is human culture, understood both positively, as the capacity for making use of means in general, and negatively, as the discipline (via the fine arts and sciences) by which we wean ourselves from subservience to inclination that obstructs such use [KU 5:431-32]. Still judgment in its theoretical use can with equal reasonableness deem human existence a mere means to ends of other species (e.g., feeding the worms). Only *practical* reason makes available a final end of creation: namely, man’s full realization of his own moral vocation.

But this raises a further question: namely, that of the relation between physical teleology and the existence of a moral author of creation without whose assumption that realization would seem to be impossible. Hence moral interest itself, Kant claims, tends to lead to physico-theology, or to proof of the existence of a moral God based on evidence drawn from our experience of nature [KU 5:462].

Now such a physico-theology (or physical teleology misunderstood) has, to be sure, a wholesome use as *preparation* for the *true* proof of God’s existence, which can only be a moral one. The danger, as Kant saw it, is this; although physical teleology can add “rhetorical strength” to a “lively interest” in moral incentives, it also tends to give rise to “persuasion” [Überredung] as to the “objective sufficiency” of the physico-theological proof, not only “entirely superseding any examination of its logical acuity” but actively “abhor [ing] and resist [ing]” such examination as if it were based on an “outrageous [frevelhafter] doubt.” The result is a “fusion” [Zusammenschmelzung] of the physical and moral proofs that makes the “nerve” of the true proof “hard to recognize” [KU 5:462] leading to a morally dogmatic fear of “scandal” that ultimately gives rise to moral cynicism.

At the same time, a “doubting faith” [Zweifelglaube],” as distinguished from “dogmatic disbelief” -- is an “obstacle” that can be easily overcome, as Kant here asserts, through “critical insight,” opening the way to genuine “conviction,” i.e., belief in God’s moral wisdom that is based on moral need alone. [KU 5:472-73] It is therefore a “duty” for the philosopher (assuming that he “disregards the requirements of sincerity [Aufrichtigkeit]”):

to expose even such a wholesome illusion,...and distinguish what belongs to persuasion from what leads [führt] toward conviction (two determinations that differ not only in degree but kind), in order to be able to present with complete clarity the state of mind [Gemüthsfassung] in this [physico-theological] proof and subject it to the most stringent and frank [freimüthig] testing. [KU 5:462]⁵

The *Critique of Judgment* thus ends with the following summary remark: “in place of certain “unsuccessful attempts in philosophy [verfehlten Versuche in der Philosophie] in natural theology,” Kant aims to “introduce and make influential a different principle” [KU 5:473], namely ethico-theology, or theology that is grounded in moral need alone. And yet Kant is content (for now) to leave matters as “they usually stand” with the popular mind, in as much as a fuller exposure of those philosophic failures, however theoretically “satisfying,” [KU 5:462], would demand “reflection” of a sort that “the healthy human understanding usually finds difficult” [KU 5:478].

⁴ For a fuller discussion, see Shell (2022).

⁵ On “persuasion” and “conviction” see the discussion in (Pasternack 2014, pp. 27ff.); as Pasternack notes, the Cambridge University Press edition does not always translate these terms consistently.

In sum: in the *Critique of Judgement*, the task of addressing the question on which “everything depends [alles ankommt]” [KU 5:476; cf. Rel. 6:173] – namely, precise determination of the relation between physical teleology and ethical theology – is left mainly to scholars, especially the “philosopher” and his academically enlightened students. Tightened enforcement of the Religious Edict would force Kant to find another means of making “influential” the only principle on which, in his view, a civilly and morally constructive faith can be based [KU 5:473]

I. On the Failure [Misslingen] of all Philosophical Attempts at Philosophical Theodicy⁶

On the Failure represents a first installment in that new means of “convincing [Überzeugung]” or at least “leading toward conviction [auf dem Weg dahin geführt wird]” [KU 5:463] – i.e., one that is both legally permissible (given the new political strictures) and no longer limited primarily to scholars. At the same time, Kant’s essay also brings sincerity (a topic that the *Critique of Judgment* had specifically left aside) into new and enduring prominence, by making “conscientiousness” [Gewissenhaftigkeit] before the bar of “conscience” [Gewissen] a practical goal for all alike, including those who find theoretical reflection difficult.

The *Berlinische Monatschrift* was the public organ of the *Mittwochsgesellschaft* whose members included many major figures of the German Enlightenment; and while not exactly “popular,” it aimed to reach beyond its immediate philosophic membership to a wider educated readership. While nature’s counter-purposiveness had not gone unremarked in the *Critique of Judgment* [5:427; 5:452], Kant’s overall stress was on nature’s purposiveness – even, finally, with regard to human culture. [5:433] The mood in *On the Failure* has darkened, expanding upon the concerns that can persuade even, and perhaps especially, a righteous individual (like Spinoza) to affirm a dogmatic atheism out of his own despair [KU 5:451-52]. To be sure, external events may also have contributed to that darkening mood. Whereas Kant had earlier mentioned the Religious Edict only glancingly [KU 5:469n.], its political and moral repercussions are now a prominent, if not central, theme.⁷

A final preliminary note: Job was a popular figure among “enlightened” religious writers of the later 18th century, none more prominent than Herder, who had published influential translations of the Book of Job, along with several related works, including the *Spirit of Hebrew Poetry* (i.e., the Hebrew Bible).⁸ The story of Job thus presented Kant with an apt means to distinguish his own prosaic approach to Biblical allegory from both the poeticizing philosophy (as he saw it) of Herder from which he especially wished to distance himself, and the “philosophic poetry” of Haller which he would later cite approvingly though without himself emulating it.⁹

On the Failure proceeds as follows: **first**, nine accusations against God’s wisdom on the part of ordinary moral reason, followed by nine “philosophic attempts” at God’s defense, with accompanying refutations, without conclusive result; **second**, a contrasting “authentic” theodicy, allegorically expressed in the Book of Job, that can alone “end the trial once and for all”; and **finally**, a closing remark [Schlussanmerkung] that draws attention to the practical implications of such expression from the standpoint of civil and moral progress.

III.A. The trial

1. Kant presents nine accusations, corresponding to the three basic ways in which the world we know seems inconsistent with the wisdom of God as we must conceive of him morally: namely as holy (as lawgiver), benevolent (as executor) and just (as judge).
2. This is followed by nine defenses and their refutations, 11 ending “inconclusive[ly]:” For if, on one hand, “no previous theodicy delivered what it promised”: namely “justification of God’s moral wisdom on the

⁶ Kant’s title bears interesting comparison with a similar phrase that appears in his contemporary reply to Johan August Eberhard (*On a Discovery whereby Any New Critique of Pure Reason is to be Made Superfluous*) which appeared in the *Philosophisches Magazin* in the same month in which the *Critique of Judgment* appeared. Kant there writes “Success in the use of principles a priori lies in their constant confirmation in application to experience; for then one almost concedes to the dogmatist his demonstration a priori. But a failure [Misslingen] in their use, which gives rise to skepticism, occurs solely in cases where demonstrations a priori can alone be required, because experience can neither affirm nor deny anything regarding them.” Such skepticism, Kant goes on to say, consists in the fact that a priori demonstrations and counter-demonstrations of equal strength “are contained in common human reason” [UeE 8:226n.], a skepticism whose only remedy is “the doubt of deferment” pending the establishment of metaphysics on a new, critically enlightened basis. [UeE 8:226] Kant’s essay on theodicy will apply the lessons of that earlier piece to the arguments of Job and his accusers. Prior to his final vision, Job entertains a “doubting faith” that amounts, in effect, to a “doubt of deferment.” For a very early endorsement on Kant’s part of the “doubt of deferment,” see his remarks on Quintus Fabius “Cunctator” (The Procrastinator) [Rem 20:175]

⁷ Recent events in France, including the arrest and detention of Louis XVI, must surely also have dampened the political hopes that Kant had earlier expressed in speaking in a note to the *Critique of Judgment* of the “recent transformation of a great people.” [KU 5:375n.]

⁸ Lessing, too, had weighed in with his Job-like *Nathan the Wise*. (I am grateful to Hannes Kerber for drawing my attention to Lessing’s role in the 18th century Job debate.) Cf. especially Nathan’s “ich will! Willst du nur, dass ich will!” [4:7] and [MpVT 8:263-64]. Nathan’s exclamation speaks to the paradox that Kant here singles out as humanly inexplicable (and yet necessary to assume if one is to will the highest good): namely, how something can be both our own deed and the effect of a higher will. The negative wisdom into the limits of theoretical reason is now to be made available without the critical detour Kant had earlier represented as essential.

⁹ [RGV 6:65n.]; cf. Kant’s reference in the *Critique of Judgment* to “the speaker without art but full expression” at [KU 5:328n.] and Refl [15:435, #990 {1785-1789}]

basis of what experience of the world teaches” [MpVT 8:263; cf. KU 5:541]; the contrary, on the other hand, also can’t be proven.¹⁰

3. More is therefore needed to put a stop to reason’s wavering between dogmatic faith and skeptical doubt: namely, as Kant here claims, the destruction of all *hope* of ever arriving at a “concept of the *unity in the agreement* in the sensible world of God’s artistic and his moral wisdom.” [MpVT 8:263] Only a divine “sovereign speech” [Machtspruch] that was also “the pronouncement [Ausspruch] of our own might-exercising reason [machthabende Vernunft] could end that hope forever.”¹¹ Much hinges, then, upon this curious term, which attributes to speech itself a might [Macht] that Kant elsewhere defines as “a capacity [Vermögen] that is superior to great obstacles” [KU 5:260, 262].¹²

a) “Sovereign speech” in Kant’s other writings

Kant uses “Machtspruch” in two other published works: the “A” Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* [A xi–xii], and Part One of the *Metaphysics of Morals* [MS 6:334]. In the former case, the context is theoretical and negative: reason renouncing the use, in establishing its rights, of “sovereign speeches” rather than appealing to its “own eternal laws [A xi–xii]. In the latter case, the context is practical and positive, and concerns a ruler’s use of “sovereign speech” to pardon criminals where punishment in accordance with regular legal process would destroy the state itself. Kant’s usage thus straddles the line between perfect justice, in accordance with the laws of reason, albeit understood only analogically, and political necessity, which acknowledges the concessions necessary if rights are to be actualized within the world we know empirically. Kant’s three-fold usage of the term in *On the Failure* – i.e., negative, positive, and ambiguous – involves, as we shall see, a similar range: namely from negative (i.e., mere persuasion [Überredung]) to positive (i.e., true conviction [Überzeugung; Überführung]) by way of something in between, (i.e., “doubting faith,” or a “moral faith” that remains “satisfied”).

Machtspruch” had become a political and legal term of some importance in 18th century Prussia, featuring, for example, in juridical discussions at the time of Prussia’s ascension to the status of a kingdom.¹³ According to these contemporary jurists, the sovereign might override normal judicial processes when they threatened to yield results contrary to justice understood as equity (in the traditional Aristotelean sense). By the middle of the century, the tide had turned, partly under the influence of Montesquieu. In the words of one influential writer, in a pamphlet entitled “Philosophical and Historical Reflections of a Jurisconsultant...on the order of procedure and arbitrary and immediate decisions of the sovereign,” the sovereign should unconditionally restrain himself from interfering with “every performance of the official judge,” i.e., from issuing “Machtsprüche” or other such pronouncements.¹⁴ Carl Gottlieb Svarez, co-author of the *Allgemeines Landrecht* of 1794, was insistent on replacing the *Machtsprüche* that had flourished both as a legal term and (to some extent) in practice under Frederick I, with strict adherence to the *Rechtsprüche* of official judges. To be sure, the issue remained controversial. Though Frederick the Great claimed in 1780 to “abhor sovereign speeches,” he himself made infamous use of that prerogative in the well-known case of the millers Arnold, in which he intervened on behalf of plaintiffs who found themselves without formal legal recourse against the traditional privileges of their aristocratic neighbors.¹⁵ Whatever the merits of Frederick’s decision from the perspective of “equity,” Kant would later insist on the latter’s unenforceability against the letter of the law [MS 6:234–35], and himself refers disparagingly in a late note to Frederick’s action in the Arnold case [Ref. 19:607].¹⁶

Jurisprudence was not the only use of the term “Machtspruch” with which Kant might have expected his audience to be familiar. An influential early German work on rhetoric had used it to refer to speech that is not

¹⁰ The various arguments are considered in detail elsewhere in this volume. On links between these defenses and arguments presented in Kant’s own early works, see (van der Lugt 2021, 284–33). Scholars go astray, however, in conflating the theodicy present in Kant’s pre-critical works, such as the unpublished essay on Optimism, with his later critical period, at least beginning with his introduction of the principle of moral autonomy in 1785. For more on this subject, see Shell, forthcoming; cf., e.g., (Duncan 2012), 973–91.

¹¹ Cf. CrV A/738=B766ff. (“The discipline of pure reason with regard to its polemical use”) where pure reason is itself on trial ends in a proper “verdict” [Sentenz]. [KrV A/752=B/780] rather than (as here) a dismissal of the court of philosophy as incompetent to judge; but cf. Ref. [18:617, #6314 {1790–91}].

¹² “Gewalt,” on the other hand, is there defined as a capacity that is “superior to that which has might.” [KU 5:260]. Kant tends to use might [Macht] when speaking of the power of nature, God, and the state, and tends to use power [Gewalt] when speaking of an oppositional power (as in having “control” [MS 6:252]). Our capacity, as exhibited in the dynamic sublime, to disregard the might of nature in favor of our highest principles exemplifies might of a higher order. [KU 5:262]. “Macht” is especially associated in Kant’s writings with “sovereignty,” both human and divine, whose relation to legal authority is not oppositional but, as it were, grounding (there can be no authorities [Gewalten] in a juridical or legal sense without the existence of an effectual sovereign). Thus the state has “Macht” [RGV 6:102, UdG 8:299], while its authorities exercise “control,” as do those who engage in rebellion [Gegengewalt] against the state [UGTP 8:299–300]. On “Macht” and “Gewalt” see also (Wuerth 2021, p. 344).

¹³ For an informative discussion of evolving juridical treatments of the term “Machtspruch” over the course of the 18th century, see (Fenves 2003, pp. 33–35).

¹⁴ See p. 155–6; also cited in Peter Fenves, p. 35. The author of the contemporary pamphlet was Philipp Joseph von Jariges, Frederick the Great’s High Chancellor, who published it anonymously in 1766, ending it with a ringing denunciation of the use of “Machtsprüche.” For additional juridical uses, see *Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften Wörterbuch*, <https://drw.hadw-bw.de/drw/cgi/zeige?index=lemmata&term=machtspruch>. accessed 3/22/26.

¹⁵ On the specific legal principles at issue, see (Lueke 1999, pp. 379–408).

¹⁶ Ref. PR [19:607, #8077 {1795–97}]. Kant there deems Frederick’s widely criticized action preferable at least in its effect to the legally more correct practice of the British, whose “political machine” goes unnoticed.

merely “sweet” but “meaningful, incisive” and “emphatic.”¹⁷ And Johann Georg Sulzer, in his widely known *Allgemeine Theorie der Schönen Künste* had used the term in discussing rhetorical exclamations that express truths particularly emphatically and effectively. Statements of this kind, he says, have “a penetrating force supporting *Machtsprüche* against which no one dares to rebel.”

One is here reminded of Kant’s one reference, in the *Critique of Judgment*, to a kind of “artless” speech characterized by both “clarity of insight” and “full expression,” and that thereby avoids the twin pitfalls of both artfully deceptive rhetoric and a poetry that expands the mind beyond the bounds of conceptual clarity:

I must admit [gestehen] that a beautiful poem has always given me a pure enjoyment; whereas reading the best speech [Rede] of a Roman popular speaker or a contemporary speaker in parliament or the pulpit has always been mixed with the disagreeable feeling of disapproval of a deceitful art, which understands how to move people, like machines, to a judgment in important things that must lose all weight for them in quiet reflection [Nachdenken]. Eloquence [Beredtheit] and well-spokenness (together, rhetoric) belong to beautiful art; but the art of the orator [Rednerkunst] (ars oratoria), as the art of using the weakness of human beings for one’s own aims (as well intentioned or even effectually good as one may like) is not worthy of any respect. Further, both in Athens and in Rome it was raised to its highest level only at a time when the state was hastening toward its ruin and a true patriotic way was extinguished. He who has in his control [in seiner Gewalt] through clear insight into things speech in its richness and purity, along with a fruitful imagination capable of presenting his ideas, along with clear insight into the facts, language in all its richness and purity, and who, along with a fruitful imagination capable of presenting his ideas, takes lively heartfelt share [Herzensantheil] in the true good, is the *vir bonus dicendi peritus*, the speaker without art but full expression [Nachdruck], as Cicero would have him, without himself always remain true to this ideal. [KU 5:327-28n.]

Such artless yet effective speech, I hazard, would be the *Machtspruch* of a practical reason against which speculative reason would no longer dare to raise unfounded claims – with or without theoretical insight into the limits of theoretical reason. What is needed, in other words, is a kind of speech that is neither rhetorical nor poetic nor strictly philosophic and that yet has the “might” to put an end once and for all to reason’s wavering between dogmatic hope and skeptical despair. And Kant will indeed claim in *On the Failure* to “find” just such a sovereign speech “allegorically expressed” [8:264].

b) Sovereign speech in *On the Failure*

Kant deploys the term “sovereign speech” ([*Machtspruch*]) on four occasions in the course of his essay: first, and negatively, in characterizing premature dismissal of the charges by God’s self-declared advocates and without reason’s own assent [MpVT 8:255]; and second, and ambiguously, in characterizing the pronouncement of a “morally believing [moralisch-gläubigen] reason” that “directs the doubting to have patience [Geduld] without satisfying them” [MpVT 8:262].¹⁸ Kant’s later discussions of a “morally believing” reason in *Religion* suggests what is here still lacking. [see RG 6:143, 182] Both treatments concern doctrines that fall outside of pure moral religion proper but that the “morally believing” may accept to the extent that such doctrines are subjectively efficacious in dealing with the theoretical perplexities by which one’s faith might otherwise be weakened. By leaving a morally believing reason “dissatisfied,” as *On the Failure* puts it, the traditional (Christian) counsel of patience fails that test. For reason has no other theoretical principles by which it can assess the justice of a future world other than the laws that govern this one. In short, the counsel of patience does not give the sovereign speech of a morally believing reason the “might” to overcome “once and for all” the “opposing influence of reason in its theoretical use.”¹⁹

Kant’s third and fourth uses of *Machtspruch* are wholly positive, the third referring to a dismissal that is adequate to the moral interest of a law-giving reason [MpVT 8:262] and the fourth [8:264] and last to one that “leads [the mind] over” [überführen] or “convinces” [überzeugen] it conclusively. Such a sovereign speech could be called theodicy of an “authentic” sort, as Kant here puts it, since in such a case reason’s pronouncement would be nothing other than “the mediated ...voice of God through which he gives meaning to the letter of his creation.” [MvPT 8:264]

III.C. “Authentic” theodicy and the “conviction” of Job

Kant does not offer that authentic theodicy in his own name qua philosophic critic (for any such “philosophic attempt” would fail), but instead “finds” it “allegorically” expressed in an “ancient holy book” whose poetic

¹⁷ In his *Teutsche Rhetorica*, Johann Matthäus Meyfart defines rhetoric as follows: ein Kunst von einem vorgesetzten Ding zierlich zureden / vnd künstlich zuverreden. Es heisset aber zierlich reden / nicht mit lustigem Gethön die Ohren füllen / sondern mit weisen / scharffen vnd druchdringenden Machtsprüchen: auch mit außerlesenen / zu der Sachdienlichen vnd heilsamen Worten reden. (59-60) [an art of speaking gracefully on a given topic and persuading artfully. To speak gracefully does not mean to fill the ears with sweet-sounding expressions, however, but rather with meaningful, incisive, emphatic formulations: with well-chosen words as well, which are useful and salutary to the topic.] Meyfart, *Teutsche Rhetorica*, (1634), (pp. 59-60), cited in (Knappe 2007, p. 263).

¹⁸ For further evidence of Kant’s negative view of “patience,” see *Anthropology* [7:257], where it is explicitly contrasted with “courage”: “patience is a feminine virtue; for it does not muster the force of resistance, but hopes to make suffering (enduring) imperceptible through habit.” [7:257] On the high regard for patience among certain orthodox writers of the Reformation (who especially associate it with Job), and, in a revised sense, Leibniz, see (Sheehan 2007, pp. 211-32). Strikingly, the term “patience” appears in neither *Religion within the Boundaries* nor the theologically relevant sections of the *Conflict of the Faculties*.

¹⁹ On Kant’s understanding of “belief” or “faith” see (Chignall 2007, pp. 323-60).

author is unknown. Kant speaks neither as a prophet nor a poet, then, but as a philosophic interpreter of the work of others who presumably bear legal and moral responsibility for its content. In sum, and in accordance with his definition of allegory elsewhere: Kant's reading of the Book of Job, stands to in relation to the letter of the text as authentic theodicy stands in relation to the letter of creation –a creation that, alas, remains a “closed book” to all who do not read it in the register of a “commanding” practical reason.²⁰

1. Symbol and allegory

Allegory, according to the *Critique of Judgment*, is a means by which even ugly objects can be beautifully presented, albeit through a “judgment of reason” rather than of taste alone. [KU 5: 312] The *Anthropology* further clarifies how such rationally informed aesthetic presentation differs from the offerings of poets and enthusiasts (like Herder?) “who can *always only* express [themselves] symbolically” [Anth 7: 191; emphasis added]:

To maintain...that the actual appearances of the world laying before the senses are merely a *symbol* of an intelligible world...is *enthusiasm* [Schwärmerei]. But in exhibiting concepts of pure reason (called ideas) that belong to morality, and that constitutes the essence of all religion, it is *enlightenment* to distinguish the symbolic from the intellectual (divine service from religion), as an at times useful and necessary husk....Because otherwise the final end is missed. [Anth 7: 192]

Since all peoples, Kant there continues, may have begun with this transposition [Vertauschung] of “ideal” and “idol,” one must read what their “teachers themselves” have maintained in their “holy” writings “literally” [buchstäblich] rather than “symbolically,” because to twist [verdrehen] their own words it would be dishonest [unredlich]. Still:

When it is not merely a matter of the *truthfulness* [Wahrhaftigkeit] of the teacher but of the truth [Wahrheit] of the teaching, one can and should interpret this as a merely symbolic manner of representation, in which introduced forms and usages accompany those practical ideas, lest the intellectual meaning, which constitutes the final end, be lost. [Anth 7: 192]

In this remarkable passage Kant justifies a kind of honest subterfuge: namely transposition of a symbolic interpretation for the literal meaning as originally intended. What distinguishes such an exchange from perversion [Verdrehung] of the original author's words and hence outright dishonesty, is the author's lack of clear insight as to the final end that alone makes his language morally intelligible and hence intellectually legible. Such teachers, in the manner of poetic geniuses generally, literally knew not whereof they spoke.²¹

Kant, speaks, then, as one who interprets the Bible with a clarity of rational insight that its original author(s) may have lacked. Job, on that interpretation, is an upright man who cleaves to his integrity despite suffering a “harsh fate” that he deems undeserved. His friends, on the basis of their own “system of divine justice,” assert that he must have committed some offense for which God is punishing him. Job replies that there is nothing (other than human weakness) for which his conscience can reproach him, and declares instead for an opposing philosophic theodicy, namely the “*system of unconditional divine decision*.”²²

God favors Job's candor: Job speaks “as he thinks” and as one who has nothing to fear before the bar of conscience, whereas his friends, who know of nothing of which they can honestly accuse Job, speak as if they wished to bribe God with their flattery and thereby betray their own inner corruption. [MpVT 8:265] In sum: *both* Job and his companions err theoretically in grounding their theology in physical teleology, whether positive (in the case of the companions) or negative (in the case of Job himself). Only Job, however, refuses to “remove [his] integrity” even in the face of the “strongest doubts” -- doubts exacerbated by worldly suffering to whose unmerited character his own conscience testifies. The failure of his friends, by way of contrast, arises through a lack of “conscientiousness” [Gewissmässigkeit] (before the bar of conscience), a conscientiousness that is always in one's power, as Kant here asserts, and for whose absence they are indeed morally culpable.

2. Job's “conviction” and their two meanings

The education of Job, however, is not yet over.²³ Job is subsequently favored with a presentation that results in his “conviction [Ueberführung] of/for his ignorance”²⁴ [MpVT 8:267]:

²⁰ For a classic statement of the theological position on which Kant is here drawing for his own purposes, see Calvin, *Institutio* I,7,4 (CR 30, S. 59). See also (Kerber, unpublished). On the traditional legal meaning of “authentic interpretation” as reliance on the stated intention of the original lawgiver, see (Endicott 2020, pp. 6–23).

²¹ 1 Timothy 1: 7. Kant here specifically mentions Homer, Ossian, Orpheus, and the prophets. [Anth 7: 191] Cf. Kant's distinction in the *Critique of Judgment* between the poet and the rhetor who, like the ratiocinating defender of God's cause in MpVT [8:263], fails to deliver what he promises and thereby “deceives the people.” [5: 327] See also the late anthropological reflection [RefI 15:435, #991(1796–98)], which contrasts persuasion among the people with what leads toward conviction or convinces: “when eloquence in a people mounts high it is in decline, because it is smitten by illusion [Blendwerk]. The mere word persuasion [Bereden] already expresses fraud, not leading toward conviction or convincing [überführen oder überzeugen].”

²² He is unchanging; he does as he will” (Job 23:13) The “system of absolute divine decision” was especially associated with Calvin. As presented here, the conflicting positions of Job and his friends call the mind the respective positions of Crusius and Wolff that a younger Kant had sought to reconcile in such works as the *New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysics* (1756). Job's initial position as presented here differs crucially, however, from the fideism of Crusius, in placing morality before faith. Cf. (van der Lugt, 2021, p. 317).

²³ Cf. Luca Fonnesu, according to whom Job remains a thoroughgoing voluntarist throughout. (Fonnesu 2022, pp. 369–84).

²⁴ Sheehan, who ignores Job's subsequent advance in wisdom, also misses this crucial point.

God honored²⁵ Job by laying before his eyes the wisdom of his creation, especially its inscrutability. He allowed him glimpses into the beautiful side of creation, where ends comprehensible to the human being place the wisdom and benevolent providence of the author of the world in an unambiguous light; and also, by contrast, the terrible side, by calling out to him products of God's might [Macht] and hence harmful, fearsome things, that indeed appear purposively arranged for themselves and their species and yet with respect to other things and to human beings themselves, as destructive, counter-purposive, and incompatible with a universal plan arranged with wisdom and goodness. [MpVT 8:266]

And yet this cycle of destruction and creation also demonstrates thereby a unity and order that "announces" a wise author whose "ways must remain hidden" [MpVT 8:266], destroying all hope, as promised, of ever representing **conceptually** the *unity in the agreement* in the sensible world of God's *artistic* wisdom as the creator of nature his *moral* wisdom as creator of a kingdom of ends." [MpVT 8:263; bold emphasis added] In short: Job is honored with the effectual equivalent of critical insight as earlier described.

Job's newfound conviction as to theoretical reason's impotence calls to mind Kant's discussion in the *Critique of Judgment* of the human being of "doubting faith" who can be brought round by "critical insight" and thereby "deprive [speculative reason] of influence on [his] conduct" and "replace it with a practical holding to be true that outweighs it":

To be incredulous is to doubt testimonies [Zeugnissen] in general; but to be *unbelieving* [Ungläubig] is to be one who [of this sort] who denies all reality to any rational idea whose reality lacks *theoretical* grounding. Such a one thus judges dogmatically. But a dogmatic unbelief cannot coexist with a moral maxim dominating one's way of thinking ... whereas a *doubting belief* certainly can, for the absence of conviction based on grounds of speculative reason is only an impediment [Hindernis] that critical insight into the limitations of speculative reason can deprive of influence on conduct and replace it with a practical holding to be true that outweighs it. [KU 5:472-73]

Far from constituting the public "scandal" (from which Kant had earlier shied) Job's honest airing of his doubts proved to be the first step toward establishing a purely moral faith, based on the insight by which God honored his sincerity. Here at last is the conclusive *Machtspruch* of all accusations against God, spoken not by God's would be spokesmen (as in use number one) nor by a morally believing reason that remains theoretically dissatisfied (as in use number two) but through a practical reason with the "might" to overcome once and for all "the influence of reason in its speculative use." To be sure that conviction, according to the allegory as here interpreted, could only be effected in this manner in a person of blameless integrity; the faith that sprung in Job:

through a so strange/foreign [befremdliche] resolution of his doubts, namely merely the conviction [Überführung] of his ignorance [Unwissenheit], could only come from the soul of a man who could say despite his liveliest doubts ... "Until mine end, I will not put my integrity aside...etc." For with this disposition [Gesinnung] he proved that he grounded his faith upon morality and not his morality upon faith, in which case however weak it might be is alone of that purer and truer kind that grounds a religion not of supplication but of good life conduct. [MpVT 8: 267]

Kant use of "Überführung" (literally, "a leading over," which the Cambridge edition here renders as "conviction") here is worth noting. "Überführung" in Kant's usage usually has a softer or more nuanced meaning than "Überzeugung," his preferred term in describing a "holding to be true" on grounds known to be objectively or subjectively sufficient. Kant, for example, employs "Überführung," when characterizing the aesthetic or "felt" dimension of conviction,²⁶ or, alternatively, a subjective state of mind "leading toward" conviction,²⁷ i.e. a condition differing from conviction [Überzeugung] in degree but not in kind,²⁸ whereas persuasion [Überredung] differs from the latter in kind and not merely in degree [KU 5:462].

Like the Latin *convincere*, both "Überführung" and "Überzeugung" also carry the secondary sense of conviction for a crime, with the latter sense applying more strongly the case of *Überführung*. Job's "Überführung" is thus especially apt in capturing the "strange" or "foreign" way [MpVT 8:267] in which the ignorance of which he is here convicted or convinced both is and isn't deserving of reproof: the former insofar as his former

²⁵ To be "honored" [würdigt], according to Grimm and Grimm (v. 30, 2005), is to be favored in a way that is not necessarily unmerited, and differs decisively in this respect from Christian grace as commonly understood.

²⁶ Cf. RGV [6:113]. The distinctive meaning that Kant attaches to "überführen" (as distinguished from "überzeugen") has not, so far as I am aware, been previously noted.

²⁷ See for example [KrV A589/B617]; [KrV A785/B/813]; [CF 7:57].

²⁸ See especially [KU 5:461]: "The first thing that is required of any proof, whether...it proceeds by the direct empirical presentation of that which is to be proved or is carried out by reason a priori from principles, is that it not *persuade* [überreden] but *convince* [überzeugen], or at least "work toward conviction [auf Überzeugung wirke]"; that is what is required is that the ground of proof, or conclusion, not be a merely subjective (aesthetic) ground of assent (mere semblance) but be objectively valid and a logical ground of cognition; for otherwise understanding is deranged but not lead over [überführt]. The latter sort of "semblance-proof" is that to which natural theology leads, perhaps with good intention but also "with deliberate concealment of its weakness." Religion within the boundaries of bare reason, as distinguished from pure moral religion proper, merely "leads toward" conviction, I would suggest, resting, as it does, on grounds of assent that are subjective and aesthetic though not also communicable, as with judgments of taste proper. Pure moral religion, by way of contrast, *is* communicable, because it is capable of convincing everyone. [Rel 6:161-62]. Kant does not rule out, however, the possibility that religion within the boundaries might also play universally communicable aesthetic role in advancing human culture. Cf. (Trullinger 2013, 369-403). Trullinger, in my view, misses the mark by overly stressing reflection #2489 (1776-1783?) at the expense of Kant's later public treatment of moral faith in *Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason*.

declaration for the system of divine decision could not be rationally justified, and the latter insofar as the fault was both unintentional and accompanied by unswerving honesty. At the same time, that conviction is less a matter of rational proof (in which case one might expect Kant to have used “Überzeugung”) than of **feeling** prompted by a divine revelation whose effect is both analogous and superior to that of beauty and sublimity judged aesthetically. For whereas such aesthetic judgments are accompanied by an awareness of the respective limitations of imagination and understanding, God leads Job toward an awareness of the necessary limitations of human reason proper [MPVT 8:266], i.e., to a state in which his moral faith at last finds satisfaction.²⁹

Can anything short of divine aid give practical reason the might to overcome the influence of speculative doubt – other, perhaps, than the critical insight Kant had called on in the *Critique of Judgment*? Can the failure of all philosophical theodicies – even that earlier offered by Job – be shown, short of the critical education that many find difficult, owing either to external circumstance or to their own intellectual limitations? Kant here suggests that the answer may be yes, at least for one who “does not pretend [heucheln] to a conviction [Überzeugung] [as to his own integrity] he does not have indeed.” [MpVT 8:265] Job’s conviction [Überführung] of/for his ignorance [MpVT 8:267] resembles, in this respect, the uses to which Kant will soon put “religion within the boundaries of bare reason,” namely to lead “the people” (i.e., all with who have a heightened demand for something that the senses can hold onto) “toward conviction” by way of a striving to be conscientious before the bar of conscience, despite (and because) Wöllner’s Edict tempts one to do otherwise.³⁰

In sum: Job as here presented allegorically as honored with the “negative wisdom” ordinarily achieved through critical insight – an insight that most human beings “find difficult.” To be sure, this is not grace in the traditional sense of unmerited forgiveness, but instead a “sensibly holdable” [Sinnlich-haltbares] means (short of philosophic insight proper) by which moral faith can overcome the morally disabling doubts to which nature’s seeming counter-purposiveness otherwise gives rise. [8:255]³¹ Kant’s interpretation of the Book of Job thereby anticipates the alternative, more accessible path “leading toward conviction” that will be trod in the religious writings that follow.³²

III.C. Kant’s “concluding remarks”: Job as “prototype”

Job’s unwavering integrity in the face of a harsh fate foreshadows the role that the figure of Jesus will play in *Religion within the Boundaries*: namely, as a “schematism of analogy” [RGV 6:65n.] and “prototype” who makes holiness palpable by taking upon itself the greatest suffering; for “we cannot [otherwise] think the ideal of a humanity well pleasing to God (hence of such moral perfection as is possible to a being pertaining to this world and dependent on needs and inclinations).” [RGV 6:61] For like the purity of Jesus, the sincerity that Job makes manifest is one that we can only strive to emulate.

We are thus prepared for the down-beat and sardonic tone of Part Three (Kant’s “concluding remark”) in anticipation of a promised work to follow (on “radical evil”). Authentic theodicy “depends less on subtle reasoning” than on “sincerity in taking notice” of reason’s impotence. [MpVT 8:267] The issue of sincerity – deliberately omitted in Kant’s earlier exoneration of the popular mind – is more critical in leading to conviction, as it now seems, than logical acuity in distinguishing the respective principles of physical and moral theology [cf. KU 5:462]; accordingly, sincerity now assumes a prominence it will retain throughout Kant’s later writings. Although “one cannot always stand by the *truth* of what one says” (for one may indeed be mistaken) “one can and must stand by the “truthfulness of one’s declaration or confession,” for one has “immediate consciousness of this.” For in the former case we compare “what we say” with a logical judgment of the understanding; while in the latter we compare it with “the subject before conscience.” [MpVT 8:267]

IV. Conclusion

Job is an allegorical prototype – a moral paragon or ideal goal the human being can only strive to approximate. “Immediate consciousness” is not the same as self-transparency. The inwardly divided human subject (at once the defendant and the judge) remains prone, on the former side, to “falsehood and impurity.” “Conscientiousness” – or *striving* to be sincere -- before the bar of conscience becomes the effectual aim of human moral self-perfection – a role it will retain throughout the 1790’s, and is given special prominence in the late *Metaphysics of Morals*. “Conscience,” on the other hand -- formerly identified with a moral judgement that can be *wrong* -- now becomes the witness, in itself *unerring*,³³ to professions of sincerity that may

²⁹ Job’s revelation, which confronts him with the “might” of God himself, differs in this respect from the dynamic sublime, which allows one to aesthetically transcend the “might” of nature. [cf. KU:260-61].

³⁰ See [RGV 6:109]: “Even though [such historical doctrines are] incapable of a universally convincing communication, yet owing to the natural need of all human beings to demand for even the highest concepts and grounds of reason something that is *sensibly holdable* [Sinnlich=haltbares], one must use some experiential confirmation (which one who intends to *introduce* a faith universally must really [wirklich] have regard), one or another historical ecclesiastical faith, which one commonly already finds on hand [vor sich findet].” Kant here describes precisely the procedure he earlier employed in “finding” allegorically expressed in an “ancient holy book” an interpretation of creation by a practical reason, that “just as in legislating it commands absolutely, without further grounds, can be seen as the unmediated declaration and voice of God.” [MpVT 8:264]

³¹ Huxford is therefore wrong to claim that Kant’s “authentic theodicy” fails to meet the terms of his own definition of theodicy. Kant need not prove theoretically that God is just (nor could he, given his own critical strictures), but only that reason’s accusations against God’s justice can be dismissed “once and for all” on rationally practical grounds, provided that one is morally sincere. Cf. (Huxford 2022).

³² See in this regard Kant’s treatment of grace in the General Remark to Part One of *Religion* [RGV 6:52-53].

³³ For a detailed treatment of the change in Kant’s depiction of conscience, see (Knappik et. al. 2019, pp. 92-134).

themselves be false.³⁴ Though conscience cannot err, consciousness itself, even when it is not mediated by objective judgments that can be wrong, bears unreliable witness to one's inner truthfulness. For "the human being knows how to falsify its declarations" even before "one's own conscience." [MpVT 8:270] Thus although it is the least that can be expected of a good character, sincerity also seems to be the property "farthest removed from human nature," at least judging by the admiration that it arouses in us. [MpVT 8:270]

Like his earlier portrait of the "naïf" whose confusion stirs the observer to rueful recognition of his own lost innocence [KU 5:333; cf. MpVT 8:269], Kant's new account of conscience is partly meant to quicken our defenses against inner wiles reinforced by compulsory measures like the current Edict. Deferring to an indefinite future purification of the way of thinking of the "commonwealth itself," now infected with a certain "falseness," Kant can only urge unrelenting personal resistance to all such public invitations to insincerity. [MpVT 8:269].

As to that public way of thinking: nothing more can be civilly demanded of one who testifies before a judge than to declare, by oath, that *if* there is a God who judges him the speaker is willing to answer to him for the truthfulness of his external declaration. Indeed, to require more might frighten [as in *aufschrecken*] one as to the danger of professing more than one can maintain with certainty. Conviction on the basis of a morally grounded, yet always free, "assumption," on the other hand, is "commendable above all things," as alone making possible on a newly sound basis the union "into one system" the highest principles of practical reason "with those of the theoretical cognition of nature." [MpVT 8:269n.]

We thus return by way of a startled conscience to the negative wisdom which section one had ended – a wisdom that Kant had previously reserved to a narrower and more learned critical audience. At the same time the remark ends on an unexpected note of inquisitorial zeal that opens a divide between the many and the few whom many passively allow to vouch for them. Precisely owing to the importance of that wisdom:

professions of faith whose source is historical must be submitted all the more to this trial of truthfulness by fire if they are set down as prescripts for others; for here the impurity and simulated conviction is propagated among the many,... the guilt [falling] on the one who as it were vouches for [verbürgt] the consciences of others (for human beings are gladly passive with their consciences). [MpVT 8:269n.]

Kant thereby announces the program of his forthcoming writings on religion, which will indeed hold the doctrines of historical faith to the trial by fire of "formal conscientiousness" in laying down precepts for others.

Such conscientiousness, which consists in "scrupulousness in becoming conscious of one's faith (or lack thereof) and not pretending to hold for true what we do not" [MPVT 8:268], is thus itself a political task, unlimited both in its duration and in its scope. An inner trial by fire is here projected outward over time and human history, in anticipation of the course that *Religion within the Boundaries of Bare Reason* will subsequently follow.³⁵ If this reading is correct, Kant's late writings on religion represent not so much a break with what precedes them as the resumption of a deferred project of transforming the public "way of thinking" under political conditions that preclude his earlier reliance on the "public use of reason" alone. *On the failure* is at once an invitation, under the auspices of the "sovereign speech" of reason, to moral self-examination, and an ironic declaration of spiritual war against the public champions of the inner lie wherever they are found.

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³⁴ On Kant's late account of conscience, see also (Ware 2009, pp. 561-91).

³⁵ For uses of conviction (Überführung) with specific reference to popular resistance to despotic persuasion, see VT [8:398]; VAZef [23:159]; and Refl [15:435][1796-98].

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