

Belief, Sincerity, and Certainty in Kant's "Theodicy" Essay

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ENG Abstract: In this brief paper I offer an interpretation of what "sincerity" and "certainty" mean in the context of Kant's discussion of the story of Job in the "Theodicy" essay. I argue that, for Kant, the encounter with evil ideally leads various commitments to become reflective.

Keywords: Kant, evil, sincerity, theodicy, certainty, fallibilism

Summary: Introduction. 1. Unreflective and Reflective Rational Belief. 2. Fallibilistic Certainty. 3. Counterpurposiveness and Wavering but Certain Belief. 4. Conclusion

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Introduction¹

Kant's 1791 essay on "The Failure of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" deepens our understanding of his theory of rational Belief (*Vernunftglaube*)² and the way it can become self-conscious or reflective. Kant depicts Job's response to the "counterpurposiveness" in nature as a sincere and fitting response—in part because Job eschews the "doctrinal" efforts of most theologians (and Job's friends) to justify God's ways in the face of suffering and apparent injustice, in part because Job both acknowledges his doubts and maintains Belief throughout.

In this paper, I seek to expand on T. Scott Ferguson's suggestion (in his paper in this same volume) that the story of Job, in Kant's hands, becomes an allegory about Belief "becoming conscious of itself." Unreflective Belief is perfectly fine – and rational – for most of us most of the time. But when that very Belief heightens our awareness of evil or "counterpurposive" elements in nature and history, as Ferguson suggests it does, then for Kant the sincere response is to admit all doubts, even conceding that any resolution to them is "vexing" (MpVT AA 8:267), all the while (paradoxically) remaining certain in Belief.³ My claim here is that this process involves a transition from *unreflective rational Belief* to *reflective rational Belief*, and that it invokes an unusual and under-appreciated conception of *certainty* – one that Kant sometimes deploys in the epistemic context too.

1. Unreflective and Reflective Rational Belief

Kant concludes the first *Critique's* discussion of moral Belief (*Glaube*) in God and immortality by raising the following objection to his own account:

But is that all, one will say, that pure reason accomplishes in opening up prospects beyond the bounds of possible experience? Nothing more than two articles of Belief (*Glaube*)? This much the common understanding (*der gemeine Verstand*) could also have accomplished without taking advice from the philosophers! (KrV A830-831/B858-860)

Kant's response to the objection is first to concede its substance, while insisting that the "negative" benefits of his critique of metaphysics should be acknowledged. The critical philosophy defends commonsense

¹ I dedicate this essay to the memory of Lawrence Pasternack, one of the preeminent scholars of Kant's philosophy of religion over the past few decades. Lawrence was a co-editor of this collection of essays and he helped organize a workshop on these papers that we held at Princeton in December 2024. Just one month later, while working on the topic of evil, suffering, and the highest good, Lawrence passed away unexpectedly. His contributions remain, but he will be profoundly missed.

² I use "Belief" to translate Kant's term "*Glaube*": the latter's meaning, for Kant, is different in important ways from "belief," "faith," and "trust" in contemporary English and so the capital "B" is meant to highlight that it is a technical (German) concept. However, when I quote others I leave the translation as "faith."

³ Citations from Kant are to the Akademie Ausgabe by volume and page, except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where citations are to the standard A/B edition pagination. English quotations are, with occasional emendations of my own, taken from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (1992 -).

Belief in God and immortality by showing that knowledge of such august things isn't possible for us, and so no one should be disturbed by demands to make assent about them meet high epistemic standards. Ought implies can, after all.

Kant goes on to pepper the questioner: "But do you demand then that a cognition [i.e. Belief] that pertains to all human beings should surpass common sense and be revealed to you only by philosophers?" On the contrary, Kant says,

in what concerns all human beings without exception, nature is not to be blamed for any partiality in the distribution of its gifts, and in regard to the essential ends of human nature even the highest philosophy cannot advance further than the guidance that nature has also conferred on the most common sense. (KrV A831/B859)

Here we see the Rousseauian and Scottish Common Sense influence on Kant's mature thinking. With respect to these most important issues, nature has not left humanity in bondage to its philosophers. Rather, ordinary people are commonsensically inclined to firm assent regarding supersensible things, as the history of religion attests. What the philosopher *can* do is tidy up the concepts, and also explicitly show how this assent counts as rational Belief (*Vernunftglaube*) on the basis of "subjectively sufficient," non-epistemic considerations. These are the sorts of considerations that Kant adduces in his famous moral argument.

Kant's view is thus that there is no requirement that we be able to *identify* the sufficient non-epistemic grounds of our Belief in order for it to count as rational. Rather, the Belief simply has to *have* those grounds – in this case the merit of shoring up our moral-psychological resolve (on my preferred reading) or of making our moral commitments practically coherent.⁴ In short, unreflective Belief can be perfectly rational.

It's important to clarify, however, that Kant does *not* think that common sense is inerrant. On the contrary, he often charges it with a variety of philosophical misdemeanors, including that of "taking as known (*bekannt*) what has [merely] become familiar to it through repeated usage," and "imagining itself to have insight and knowledge into whatever its apprehensions or hopes impel it to accept or Believe" (*er bildet sich ein, das einzusehen und zu wissen, was anzunehmen, oder zu glauben, ihn seine Besorgnisse oder Hoffnungen antreiben*) (KrV A473-4/B501-2; compare AA 4:258 where Kant explicitly sanctions various figures in the Scottish Common Sense movement).

So although the critical philosophy *serves* common sense insofar as it fends off the dogmatic unbeliever who claims to know that its deepest-seated assents are false, critique also *chastens* common sense around the edges, especially when the latter is "impelled" by fears or hopes. This suggests that Kant would allow, despite his Rousseauian inclinations, that there is a higher *reflective* state that a subject can achieve with respect to *Vernunftglaube*. Such a state, which Kant doesn't name but which I'll call "reflective rational Belief," is more demanding than the unreflective rational Belief of common sense insofar as it includes the ability to identify the (practical, non-epistemic) grounds on which the Belief is based.⁵ Here is an analysis, where *p* is some proposition about which the subject does not have sufficient epistemic grounds one way or the other:

Reflective Rational Belief: S's assent that *p* counts as reflective rational Belief iff ($\exists g$) such that

- (i) *g* is a sufficient non-epistemic ground for *p*,
- (ii) S's assent is based on *g*, and
- (iii) on reflection, S would cite *g* as the sufficient non-epistemic ground of his assent.

Unreflective rational Belief satisfies (i) and (ii). The commonsense subject's commitment to morality is in place (let's suppose), and this in some inchoate way leads him to Belief that *p*. But the reflective Believer is also able to cite that commitment as the grounds of her Belief. Philosophy, in turn, makes the connection between the commitment and the Belief maximally explicit, and also tightens up all the concepts involved.

Note that there is no truth condition in the analysis. In the "Theodicy" essay's discussion of proclamations of Belief, Kant acknowledges that they can turn out to be false:

One cannot always stand by the *truth* of what one says to oneself, or to another (for one can be mistaken); however, one can and must stand by the *truthfulness* of one's declaration or confession, because one has immediate consciousness of this. (MpVT AA 8:267)

It's possible for even the most sincerely-held, reflective assent to turn out false, but no one should make false or careless *reports* about what he holds to be true. Thus Kant's main target in the Concluding Remark of "Theodicy" is someone who doesn't get clear about *whether* he actually Believes what he asserts about God. This is insincerity, and a violation of the principle of "formal conscientiousness":

someone says to himself (or – what is one and the same in religious professions – before God) that *he Believes*, without perhaps casting even a single glimpse into himself – whether he is in fact conscious of thus holding a truth or at least of holding it to some degree – then such a person lies. (MpVT AA 8:269)

That lie, Kant says, is the "most sinful thing," and he goes on to throw shade (and "contempt") on people like Job's friends who claim falsely to Believe. So the demand for *formal conscientiousness* – that one report and

⁴ For a comparison of these readings, see Chignell 2023.

⁵ By "reflective" here I mean something like "accompanied by awareness of its grounds." This is unrelated to the power of "reflecting judgment" (*reflektierende Urteilskraft*) that Kant describes in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Thanks to an anonymous referee for prompting this clarification.

live by what one actually holds to be true – is a requirement on everyone. But, again, reflective rational Belief goes further: there the subject also has the ability to cite the *grounds* for what she Believes. Such a reflective ability is not a requirement on everyone.

Our analysis of *Reflective Rational Belief* also opens up logical space for another kind of mistake, one that is different from insincerity. It may be that someone genuinely holds a Belief on the basis of some grounds, and can even cite those grounds, but in fact those grounds are insufficient to support the Belief. In other words, a Belief could satisfy (iii) and (ii) but not (i). This state is an analogue of “*persuasion*” (*Überredung*) – the term Kant gives to unfounded claims to knowledge (KrV A820/B848). As long as the subject is sincere in what she reports, however, such *persuaded Belief* is presumably less a case of sin than of negligence (though it may be culpably negligent at times). In section 3 I will suggest that some of Job’s friends may be manifesting persuaded Belief, rather than rank insincerity. Before turning to that, however, it is worth getting clear about the sense in which Belief is “certain.”

2. Fallibilistic Certainty

2.a) Infallibilism: Certainty as the Possession of Truth-guaranteeing Grounds

In the epistemic context, Kant holds that a subject can have “sufficient objective grounds” for assent that *p* which are such that, *if p were true*, they would allow the assent to count as knowledge; and yet *p* is false. Or at least that is what I have argued elsewhere.⁶ Put more simply:

SOG-Fallibilism: *Possibly, S has sufficient objective grounds (SOG) for assent that p, and p is false.*

The opposite of SOG-Fallibilism is

SOG-Infallibilism: *Necessarily, if S has sufficient objective grounds (SOG) for assent that p, then p is true.*

SOG-infallibilism is out of favor among contemporary epistemologists, but it is the near-consensus reading of Kant in the commentary literature. Thus Watkins and Willaschek say that that, for Kant,

a reason is *objectively* sufficient if it brings about certainty, i.e. ‘consciousness of necessity,’ whereas a reason is objectively insufficient if it involves the consciousness of “the possibility of the contrary” (9:66). In other words, an objectively sufficient ground guarantees the truth of the judgment for which it is a ground... (2020, 3207, my underline).

On this reading, my reason or ground doesn’t count as objectively sufficient *unless* it guarantees the truth of the assent *and* brings about “consciousness” in me of the fact that it affords that guarantee. That’s a very high bar.

Lawrence Pasternack likewise endorses infallibilism, but suggests that the bar is fairly easy to clear: “Kant seems less cynical than we are today and, perhaps because of that, he thought that both knowledge *and* certainty can be won fairly easily” (2014b, 56). Elsewhere he concedes somewhat: “Nonetheless, I admit that Kant might have been a bit naïve concerning empirical knowledge” (2014a, 64n). Leslie Stevenson is a bit coy: “for *Wissen* Kant requires certainty,” though Stevenson intriguingly adds that “it remains to be discussed what such certainty amounts to” (2003, 100).

Finally, Christopher Benzenberg (ms) argues that Kant must have been an SOG-infallibilist because (i) Kant seems to say in places that the *insufficient* grounds of opinion can gain a probability arbitrarily close to 1 and (ii) the sufficient objective grounds of knowledge must be stronger than those of opinion. Since uncertain assent can be arbitrarily probable, certain assent must be maximally probable.⁷

There are texts that speak in favor of SOG-Infallibilism. For instance, in the “Canon of Pure Reason” chapter of the first *Critique* Kant says that knowledge involves “objective sufficiency, **certainty** (for everyone)” (KrV A822/B850, original bold). This seems like an objective, world-directed notion of certainty (*Gewissheit*) based in the fact that the grounds of the assent establish a secure connection to what makes it true. In other words, “certainty” here refers not to a maximal degree of *subjective, psychological confidence* (although that may also be present) but rather to the *truth-conducive* connection between the subject’s grounds and the assent, where the strongest version of this connection would just be entailment. It is, in effect, very close to what Descartes calls “metaphysical certainty.” That is presumably why it is “for everyone”: any rational subject who has those grounds will also be certain in that way.

In the Jäsche logic lectures published in 1802, Kant is likewise reported as saying:

What I *know*, finally, I hold to be *apodictically certain*, i.e. to be universally and objectively necessary (holding for all), even granted that the object to which this certain assent relates should be a merely empirical truth. (AA 9:66)

“Necessary” here presumably refers to the normative connection between the grounds and the assent. Kant goes on in the AA 9:66 passage to speak of our “consciousness of the necessity” of the assent (Willaschek and Watkins explicitly draw on this passage). So *if* a subject has grounds that are sufficient for knowledge that

⁶ See Chignell 2021, from which some of the work in this section is adopted with revisions.

⁷ Benzenberg (ms) acknowledges, however, that “Kant allows for fallible certainty” of various sorts. He insists only that such species of certainty “do not characterize knowledge.”

p , then from a rational point of view it is *necessary* that she assent to p . Moreover, she is aware of that fact: there is no room for rational doubt. And this is not just something about her: it “holds for all” rational subjects who have that ground. Most strikingly of all, it somehow goes for “merely empirical” judgments as well. In the *Dohna-Wundlacken* lectures (1790’s), Kant is likewise reported as saying: “The propositions assented to (*die Sätze des Fürwahrhaltens*) can be empirical and the assent apodictic” (AA 24:733). (These comments about empirical certainty are what lead Pasternack to concede that Kant “may have been a bit naïve.”)

All of this sounds very *demanding*. Even the great certainty-mongers of the past (Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, Locke) would not have gone this far – i.e. they would not have held that many of our *empirical* assents can count as apodictically certain. But the demandingness here is driven by the *SOG-Infallibilism*: knowledge must be certain and “certainty” (for the infallibilist) requires a *maximal* degree of worldly connection – i.e. something like *entailment* between the grounds and truth. Moreover, if I have such grounds then I will be “conscious” that I do.

I think that “certainty” needn’t be conceived along such implausibly demanding lines, and that Kant has other conceptions of certainty that are compatible with SOG-fallibilism. We will see in section 3 that one of these fallibilist conceptions is of use in practical contexts, such as the “Theodicy” essay, when we are talking about “morally certain” Belief.

2.b) Fallibilism: Certainty as Conviction of Inalterability

Explicit textual support for the alternative conception of certainty that I want to focus on here is found mainly in lectures. But there are enough of these passages to suggest that Kant took the idea seriously. The Jäsche lectures report Kant saying that “[w]ith knowledge one still listens to opposed grounds” (AA 9:72). But if we are “conscious of the necessity” of our assent, given our grounds, why would we still “listen to opposing grounds?”⁸ There is a similar passage in the Pölitz lectures (from the early 1780’s), one which contrasts knowledge with Belief:

with respect to the latter [knowledge], one still listens to opposing grounds, but not with respect to practical Belief” (*Bei letzterm [Wissen] hört man noch nach Gegengründen aber beym praktischen Glauben nicht*). (AA 24:543)

Finally, in the early Blomberg lectures (1770s) Kant reportedly said that

if the degree of truth is greater than the degree of the grounds of the opposite, then the cognition is probable. Here, then, there does not exist in the slightest any settled truth. With probability (*Wahrscheinlichkeit*), there really is sufficient ground, and this ground of truth is greater than the grounds of the opposite; it outweighs them. (AA 24:143, underline added)

So here we have a “sufficient ground” (a SOG) that renders the relevant assent more probable than not – it is “sufficient” for knowledge if true, but it does not require apodictic certainty because the truth is not entirely “settled.”

Conversely, Kant says that grounds that *fail* to make the assent at least 50% probable are “insufficient”:

if there is a lesser degree of truth on the side of the insufficient ground than there is on the side of its opposite, then the cognition is not only uncertain, not probable, either, but even improbable. (AA 24:144, underline added; see also Blomberg AA 24:194 and Dohna-Wundlacken AA 24:742ff)

Here the claim is that an “insufficient ground” always makes the assent “improbable.” This will be hard for an infallibilist to explain, since he holds that some insufficient grounds make the assent probable – they just don’t *guarantee* its truth.

Clearly if we follow Kant’s usual practice and take “sufficient” (*zureichend*) in these epistemic contexts to mean sufficient *for knowledge*, then these passages favor SOG-Fallibilism. But how then, on this model, can we make sense of the claim that knowledge is *certain*?

There are a number of accounts of “certainty” that could help us here. The one I want to focus on takes a state to be “certain” insofar as we are somehow sure that any “opposing grounds” will never rise to a *destabilizing* level. Consider this passage from a lecture on metaphysics:

In every science, if we abstract from the amount of knowledge [*Kenntnissen*], the essential aim is that it be distinguished from mere opinion, thus [the essential aim is] certainty. The method that one uses in the sciences is merely the means to reach this end. Certainty is the inalterability of an assent [Vorwahrhaltens]. An assent is inalterable either objectively, if we know that no more weighty ground for its opposite is possible in itself, or subjectively, if we are convinced that neither we ourselves nor any other person will ever be in possession of greater grounds for the opposite. (*Metaphysics L2*, AA 18:288, underline added).

⁸ Pasternack suggests that it is because even something that is certain can become more “distinct” and “complete” (2014a, 65n). But the passage he cites says that we don’t achieve certainty until *after* the opposing grounds have been considered: “...no one can be certain of a thing unless opposing grounds have been stirred up” (AA 9:83). On an infallibilist reading, then, we are left in the awkward position of saying that, for Kant, we gain apodictically certain knowledge *after* the opposing grounds have been stirred up and presumably dealt with, and yet we still listen to opposing grounds.

Here Kant reportedly said that the aim of science is to generate secure, inalterable bodies of knowledge, and that this involves keeping mere opinions and low-grade hypotheses distinct from them. He glosses this “essential aim” as the aim for certainty, but then *immediately characterizes it as a matter of probability*: we are certain if we “know that no more weighty ground for its opposite is possible in itself.” In other words, our grounds don’t need to *guarantee* the truth of the proposition; rather, they just need to make it such that there’s no foreseeable way that the evidence for *not-p* could come to outweigh it. And this is compatible, of course, with *p*’s being possibly false.

Note that Kant also references a *subjective* kind of inalterability in this passage, one that obtains when we are convinced that no one “will ever be in possession of greater grounds for the opposite.” This kind of certainty is explicitly subjective, and so could presumably apply to Belief. Sure enough, Kant goes on directly to say that

[t]he inalterable assent (with consciousness) is knowledge, the subjectively inalterable assent is Belief. The assent with consciousness of its alterability is opinion. (*Das (mit Bewusstseyn) unveränderliche Vorwarhalten ist Wissen, das subjectiv unveränderliche Vorwarhalten Glauben. Das Vorwarhalten mit dem Bewusstseyn seiner Veränderlichkeit ist Meynen*). (*ibid.*, underline added)

This notion of “subjective inalterability” will become important in section 3.

For now, compare Crusius’s *Metaphysics*:

We cognize something as certain when we have insight into stable grounds such that we will have no further cause to fear that our thoughts, which we take from the thing, deceive, whether the thing itself be necessary or contingent (1745, section 17, underline added).

For Crusius, whose work was a deep influence on Kant, there is the certainty of demonstration, but then there is the “certainty of an unending collection of probabilities (*Gewissheit einer unendlichen Menge von Wahrscheinlichkeiten*)” which is “**equal** to that of a geometrical demonstration (*denen geometrischen Demonstrationen gleich*)” (1747, section 357). This can’t be equal to a demonstration in terms of the amount of evidential support, so Crusius too must be invoking a conception of *certainty as inalterability*. With sufficient probabilistic grounds, even about contingent matters, it somehow becomes clear that we will never have good reason to give our assent up.

In the Prize essay of 1764 Kant says that “the grounds for supposing that one could not have erred in a philosophical cognition which is certain can never be as strong as those which present themselves in mathematics” (AA 2:292, underline added). This suggests that in the mid-1760’s, Kant had already adopted the Crusian Leipzig-Schule’s position that some kinds of “certainty” are consistent with the possibility of error – an altogether SOG-fallibilist conception.⁹

We also find fallibilism in a key Reflection dated to summer 1785. Kant says there that much of *history* is scientific – a “*wahre Wissenschaft*” – and that historical testimony can justify an “objectively immutable” assent. But this is because “it is impossible to admit sufficient grounds for the opposite [proposition]” (AA 18: 288.33–289.01). So the idea seems to be that there *may* well be grounds that support the opposite (e.g. testimonial sources that speak for *not-p*), and that we do listen to them in some sense. But we are also somehow sure that they won’t be “sufficient” to force a revision to our assent.

In short, the SOG-fallibilist says that “with knowledge one still listens to opposed grounds” (AA 9:72) but has no real fear that they will make one’s assent unstable. And this counts as a kind of certainty.

3. Counterpurposiveness and Wavering but Certain Belief

I now want to suggest that in the “Failure” essay we encounter an analogue of this conception of certainty-as-inalterability regarding Belief. Kant is clear in the first *Critique* that Belief enjoys “not logical but moral certainty”: he says that what the Believer asserts is that “**I am** morally certain that there is a God” (A829/B857, Kant’s emphasis). This is different from saying that “**it is** morally certain that there is God,” but only because the Belief is based on essentially “subjective grounds of moral disposition” rather than a secure epistemic connection to the fact of the matter (*ibid.*).¹⁰ Kant goes on to say that “nothing can make these Beliefs unstable” as long as the moral basis for them is in place, and depicts Belief as the almost inevitable result of the decisive voluntary choice to prioritize morality over self-love:

Belief in a God and another world is so interwoven with my moral disposition that I am in as little danger of ever surrendering the former as I am worried that the latter can ever be torn away from me. (A829/B857, compare *Critique of Practical Reason* AA 5:142ff)

There is some controversy in the literature regarding whether Belief is really supposed by Kant to be certain, but in light of these passages (and the one from AA 18:288 quoted earlier) I agree with commentators like Luca Fonnesu (2011) and Lawrence Pasternack (ms) that it is. Pasternack argues at length on textual grounds against people who think that Kantian Belief is a mere regulative or “as-if” commitment, and also argues that

⁹ That said, it’s possible that the “grounds” in mathematics are supposed to be “stronger” in a way that does not relate to the probability of the conclusion. Kant suggests in places that the fact that mathematics is based in pure intuition gives it a kind of “evidentness” (*Augenscheinlichkeit*) that philosophical conclusions lack, but it’s not clear that this increases the probability of the results. On the other hand, it would be odd to say that the evidentness of a mathematical conclusion is a function of it having stronger grounds. And yet in this passage Kant seems to be saying that mathematical cognitions have stronger grounds.

¹⁰ Compare a lecture note: “Belief is a private assent, sufficiently certain only for me” (*Dohna-Wundlacken*, AA 24:732).

this would make Belief into a kind of unstable “pretend-game,” concluding that “there is something askew about a philosophical endorsement of such a life” (17). Moral certainty, for Kant, involves a straightforward commitment to the truth of the proposition involved.

However, when a person who has moral Belief in God is confronted with evils and injustice in the world – or experiences them himself, as in the case of Job – their Belief is inevitably challenged. In the “Theodicy” essay, Kant says that the “doctrinal theodicy” of the philosophers is a “presumptuous” and sometimes “detestable” failure or miscarriage (*Misslingen*) of reason in response to this challenge (8:255, 258). An “authentic theodicy,” by contrast, involves adopting the “interpretation of nature” that is “made by the law-giver himself” (MpVT AA 8:264). For Job, this involves literally being shown by God “the beautiful side of creation, where ends comprehensible to the human being bring the wisdom and benevolent providence of the author of the world unambiguously to light” (MpVT 8:266). But then also “the horrible side”: God “called out” to Job

the products of his might, among which also harmful and fearsome things, each of which appears to be purposively arranged for its own sake and that of the species, yet, with respect to other things and to human beings themselves, as destructive, counterpurposive, and incompatible with a universal plan established with goodness and wisdom. (MpVT AA 8:266)

Job is humbled in the face of this exhibition of the two sides of creation, and acknowledges counterpurposiveness as a challenge to Belief instead of blithely dismissing it with a doctrinal theodicy. Paradoxically, his acute awareness of counterpurposiveness of what he sees on the horrible side is itself a *function* of his Belief. As T. Scott Ferguson puts it:

Moral faith [i.e. Belief] and the phenomenological visibility of the counterpurposive have a direct relationship: the more an agent wills a better world, and the more they hold to their faith, the more evident and egregious the evils of the present one will become. That suggests, first, that sincerely expressed doubts and complaints represent not a rejection of moral faith but if anything a confirmation of it, as those who are the most morally faithful should be the most aggrieved by the evils of the created world. It also suggests that the project of doctrinal theodicy, insofar as it seeks to resolve or remove such doubts, not only lacks the means to “defend God’s cause” but may actually *harm* that cause in some cases. (2026, n.p.)¹¹

Job’s “sincerity of heart” in the face of challenges to his Belief in the moral order and purposiveness of nature and history, and his “honesty in openly admitting doubts,” ultimately win Kant’s praise.

This phenomenology of Job’s confrontation with counterpurposiveness looks like an implicit rejection of the claim in Pöltz cited above: “with respect to the latter [knowledge], one still listens to opposing grounds, but not with respect to practical Belief” (AA 24:543).¹² Rather, in both cases we do “listen” to the opposition – we hear out the case put by the plaintiff – but still retain a kind of certainty, construed in this case as consciousness of the inalterability of our assent. Indeed, Kant suggests in this passage that Job’s honest profession of ignorance and lack of insight somehow leads to the “springing” of Belief within him:

The Belief, however, which sprang in him for such a vexing resolution of his doubts – namely merely from being convicted of ignorance – could only arise in the soul of a man who, in the midst of his strongest doubts, could yet say (*Job* 27:5-6): ‘Till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me.’ (MpVT AA 8:267)

In the figure of Job, then, we encounter “doubts” whose only resolution may simply involve a “vexing” appeal to ignorance. But at the same time, the revelation of counterpurposiveness, together with the admission of ignorance, makes room for Belief to “spring” in him anew. Kant seems to regard this as a reflective process: Job’s experience deepens his awareness that his Belief is ultimately based on his deepest moral commitment, rather than on physical evidence of benevolent design:

For with this disposition he proved that he did not base his morality on Belief, but his Belief on morality: in such a case, however weak this Belief might be, yet it alone is of a pure and true kind, i.e. the kind of Belief that founds not a religion of supplication but a religion of good life conduct. (MpVT AA 8:267, my underline)

Job does not lose his “pure and true” Belief in a “wise creator” in the face of evil. But the confrontation with counterpurposiveness leads him to reflect on the grounds for his Belief. His Belief may be shaken or “weak” while he undergoes this process, but there is no genuine threat: he knows his commitment to morality is inalterable, and so his Belief in what is required to sustain moral resolve (i.e. a world order curated by a wise and benevolent God) inevitably “springs” in him anew.¹³

Kant anticipated this point in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* published a year before the “Theodicy” essay. There Kant condemns atheistic “dogmatic unBelief” (*Unglaube*) as epistemically overweening and incompatible with moral commitment, but says that “doubting Belief” (*Zweifelglaube*) is the mark of an honest person. Doubting Belief is the sort of state

¹¹ Compare Pasternack: “Kant would have us think through the Problem of Evil as a challenge to faith but then come out on the other side not just with that faith sustained, but strengthened” (ms, 19).

¹² See also *Blomberg*: “in the case of Belief, I am in no way inclined to listen my opponent’s grounds” (AA 24:148).

¹³ Karin Nisenbaum suggests, in conversation, that Job’s conception of the Highest Good may also be transformed through the encounter with evil. He never gives up the Belief that God exists and may apportion happiness to virtue, but he acquires a new and more sophisticated (or even tragic) conception of what that happiness consists in.

for which the lack of conviction on the basis of grounds of speculative reason is only an obstacle... because a crucial insight into the limits of speculative reason can deprive this obstacle of influence on conduct and substitute for it a practical affirmation that outweighs it. (KU AA 5:472-3)

Likewise in the second *Critique*:

Thus [we find] repeatedly even in well-meaning people that this Belief can sometimes fall into wavering (*Schwanken*), but never into lack of Belief (KpV AA 5:146).

Paradoxically, then, even momentarily “weak,” “doubting,” or “wavering” Belief can still count as certain in the fallibilist sense described in section 2. The virtuous person’s Belief inevitably wavers in the face of counterpurposiveness, but in the end she reflects and refocuses on her moral grounds, in effect saying with Luther *Here I stand; I cannot not do (and thus will not Believe) otherwise*.

This too looks like a change in view, on Kant’s part, from the first *Critique* where he says that unlike theoretical or “doctrinal” Belief, moral Belief does *not* waver because it is firmly based on moral grounds (A827-8/B855-6). In the second and third *Critiques* and the “Theodicy” essay, he comes to recognize that even moral Belief can waver and be weak, though in a soul with “integrity” it ultimately survives as a more reflective state.

The phenomenology here is analogous to that of the “dynamically sublime in nature” which Kant depicted the previous year in the third *Critique*. In that context, an experience causes us to focus on the terrifying “irresistibility of the power” of nature and on our “physical powerlessness” in the face of it. There is a moment of mesmerized recoil, but that ultimately recedes as we refocus on “our own capacity for judging ourselves as independent of [nature] and on our superiority over nature ... whereby the humanity in our person remains undemeaned” (AA 5:261-2). What happens to Job in “Theodicy” is effectively a sublime experience, curated by God himself, of some of the most awesome and terrifying parts of nature.¹⁴ After the theophany, Job returns to himself and his moral principles as the basis for inalterable even if not unwavering Belief.

If this is right, then one of the lessons of the “Theodicy” essay is that a sincere reckoning with counterpurposiveness can transform commonsense moral Belief into something genuinely reflective. It’s true that nature has not left humanity dependent on philosophy for its Belief in God and immortality. But when our experience, or the “authentic... interpretation of nature,” starkly reveals various counterpurposive features, the virtuous person is effectively forced to reflect on the moral, non-epistemic grounds for her ongoing Belief in a wise and benevolent creator. In the process, unreflective rational Belief becomes reflective, and its certainty (i.e. inalterability) becomes self-conscious.

4. Conclusion

Kant is focused, in the Concluding Remark, on condemning insincere people who assert things without examining whether they really hold the propositions in question. He accuses Job’s friends accordingly:

Job speaks as he thinks, and with the courage with which he, as well as every human being in his position, can well afford; his friends, on the contrary, speak as if they were being secretly listened to by the mighty one, over whose cause they are passing judgment, and as if gaining his favor through their judgment were closer to their heart than the truth. Their malice in pretending to assert things into which they yet must admit they have no insight, and in simulating a conviction which they in fact do not have, contrasts with Job’s frankness... (MpVT AA 8:265-6, underline added)

Kant reads the friends as “pretenders” who “simulate conviction” in an effort to curry favor with God. But we can imagine a reading of the Job story on which at least some of his friends are not insincere but rather just mistaken regarding the grounds of their assent. Perhaps they ground Belief on the wrong kinds of considerations. Perhaps they even make claims to know. Either way, they are suffering from “persuasion” rather than insincerity. If the persuasion is a result of an overweening refusal to “admit they have no insight,” then it is culpable. But it might just be a sincere mistake – the sort of mistake that even conscientious theologians make all the time, given the ineffability of their topic.¹⁵

Kant is friendly to unreflective rational Belief – the sort that common sense has – and thinks that the critical philosophy can help shore it up by making explicit moral arguments on its behalf. He is also, of course, a friend of shored-up reflective Belief, whether it comes from doing philosophy or from deep individual reflection in the face of counterpurposiveness. What he condemns is the profession of something that one doesn’t actually Believe, especially in an effort to win favor with God or men (MpVT AA 8:265-6). Such insincere profession of Belief is sin, and persuaded Belief is a mistake – one that may be culpable or non-culpable. But weak and wavering Belief in the face of evil is neither of these: it is a sincere response in the mode of authentic theodicy and, weakness and wavering notwithstanding, it is compatible with moral certainty.¹⁶

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¹⁴ For critical discussion of the idea that experience of evil can be regarded as sublime, see Chignell 2019.

¹⁵ Perhaps it will not, then, strictly be persuasion for Kant, since “[p]ersuasion is always blameworthy” (AA 24:218).

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