

Introduction

“Kantian Theodicy Reconsidered” To Lawrence Pasternack: In Memoriam

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I. The Background

This collection of essays has a long history and many parents. It was conceived by Lawrence Pasternack and Pablo Muchnik at the beginning of Covid (2020), when the question of theodicy was not of mere philosophical interest but had a deep existential bite. Subsequent events made the wound only deeper: serious medical problems in Pablo's family delayed the writing process, and Lawrence's untimely death in January 2024 left the collection adrift, virtually orphaned.

The project would have died off had not been for the infusion of life it received a few months prior to Lawrence's passing. Thanks to the generosity of Andrew Chignell, many of the authors in this collection had a chance to discuss their papers in the beautiful setting of Princeton University. Unbeknownst to himself, Andrew became a kind of godfather, bringing protection when the project needed it most. The spirited discussions during the meeting not only reminded us of how important it was to rescue Kant's 1791 essay, "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," from its neglect in the secondary literature, but also, after Lawrence's death, gave us a new reason to publish these papers. It became no longer a matter of closing unfinished business; publication became a way to mourn and celebrate Lawrence, to transform his loss into a tribute. At this point, Courtney Fugate stepped in as a co-editor, a surrogate father of sorts, for the project needed a final push to reach the broader public. We approached *Con-Textos Kantianos*, and the journal immediately decided to host our work, thus becoming the last in this long series of parents.

It does not escape us that there is a touch of paradox in this difficult and protracted story: a collection devoted to the question of theodicy had to endure a small ordeal of its own to see the light of day. Readers must now decide if clinging to its life was worth it.

II. A Persistent Scandal

The problem of evil, i.e., the seemingly irreconcilable conflict between the existence of a benevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent creator and the reality of gratuitous suffering, has long been termed the "scandal of philosophy." Since the dawn of the Enlightenment, this conflict has served as the ultimate testing ground for the claims of speculative reason. In the early eighteenth century, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz coined the term "theodicy" to describe the philosophical project of justifying God's ways to humanity, arguing famously that we live in the "best of all possible worlds." For Leibniz's contemporaries, however, the Lisbon earthquake of 1755 and the growing shadows of political despotism rendered this metaphysical optimism increasingly dubious. Voltaire captured the mood perfectly at the end of *Candide*, where he concluded that "we must cultivate our garden," thereby urging us to leave behind philosophical fantasies and create small pockets of beauty and goodness in our daily lives.

For Immanuel Kant, the year 1791 brought a definite closure to this whole tradition of philosophical defense of God's cause, putting an end to the infamous "scandal." In his seminal essay, *Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee* ("On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy," hereafter *MPT*), Kant argued that previous theodicies had failed, but not because of lack daring or ingenuity. His argument was far more scathing: *all* such projects, past and future alike, *must* fail—an ineluctable fate due to the inherent structure of human cognition. As Kant saw it, the "miscarriage" of theodicy was not a

contingent error of specific thinkers like Leibniz or Pope, but a necessary consequence of the limits of human reason. When reason ventures to step outside the bounds of experience to justify the divine will, Kant argued, it inevitably falls into “subreption,” confusing our subjective need to find meaning with objective knowledge of the world’s governance.

Despite its sweeping consequences and systematic importance in the development of Kant’s ethical thought, *MPT* has historically been relegated to the margins of the Kantian canon. Frequently treated as a minor piece, a mere steppingstone to *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793) or a fleeting response to the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), *Miscarriage* has rarely been the subject of sustained and thorough scrutiny.

The goal of these papers is to change that situation. By bringing together a distinguished group of scholars, this Special Issue seeks to demonstrate that *MPT* is a crucial linchpin that connects Kant’s epistemology with his deepest concerns regarding moral integrity, religious hope, and politics.

III. The Road to 1791

George Huxford opens this investigation by tracing the “pre-critical” roots of Kant’s mature theodicy. Contradicting the common assumption that the 1791 essay can be considered in isolation, Huxford substantiates the claim that Kant was grappling with the fundamentals of theodicy (the nature of God, the source of evil, and the role of free will) as early as the 1750s. By examining early works such as the *Universal Natural History* and Kant’s scientific reflections on the Lisbon earthquake, Huxford shows how Kant’s formative years were spent navigating the wreckage of Leibnizian optimism. This pre-history reveals that Kant’s position in 1791 was a hard-won victory: to clear the path for a truly moral faith, Kant had to dismantle the very metaphysical assumptions he once championed.

The theme of internal struggle is further developed by **Pablo Muchnik**, who reads *Miscarriage* as a kind of “philosophical autobiography” in which Kant attempts to come to terms with his recent intellectual past. Muchnik’s interpretation is provocative: he reads *MPT* as a tribunal in which Kant acts as both judge and defendant, since what is on trial in this essay is the lingering effects of Kant’s own rationalism. Muchnik argues that throughout the 1780s, i.e., for almost a decade after the publication of the first *Critique*, Kant continued to indulge in speculative claims about providence in his writings on history and in his lectures on religion. In his view, the 1791 text represents Kant’s belated attempt to discipline those views, which uncomfortably coexisted with his commitment to the principles of Transcendental Idealism. By recasting Job as the model of the “authentic” theodicist, Kant effectively judges his own prior rationalist self, curbing the temptation to provide theoretical justifications for God’s world-government and replacing them with a defense of moral integrity.

III. The Politics of Sincerity

In addition to Kant’s internal philosophical struggle, it is important to understand that the 1791 essay was not written in a historical vacuum. Kant’s defense of moral integrity, particularly his emphasis on “sincerity” (*Redlichkeit*) and its rejection of doctrinal hypocrisy, carried heavy political weight in the context of the repressive reign of Frederick William II and the censorship of J.C. Wöllner. Seen in this light, the “authentic theodicy” Kant favors represents as much a political act as an ethical/theological position.

Allen Wood situates *MPT* within this specific climate of political mendacity. Wood argues that Kant’s insistence on honesty in matters of faith was a direct response to a regime that used political power to force citizens to become “liars to themselves.” For Wood, the “miscarriage” of theodicy is not merely a failure of logic, but a failure of character—a refusal to acknowledge the limits of what we know. Drawing suggestive parallels to contemporary political conditions, Wood highlights how Kant’s critique of theodicy serves as a defense of the “sincerity of faith.” In an era where a government seeks to mandate religious belief to ensure social order, Kant’s essay asserts that the only “authentic” response to evil is one that refuses to use God as a rhetorical shield for intellectual and political dishonesty.

Complementing this historical analysis, **Susan Shell** explores the concept of “political theodicy.” She argues that *MPT* represents a dark assessment of the political circumstances of the early 1790s. For Shell, Kant’s focus on “formal conscientiousness,” i.e., the scrupulousness of not pretending to hold as true what one does not know, is much more than an epistemological virtue; it is, primarily, a *political* task. By transforming the “inner trial” of conscience into a public standard for enlightenment, Kant’s theodicy serves as an ironic “declaration of spiritual war against the public champions of the inner lie.” Shell’s interpretation links the failure of theodicy to the broader Kantian project of constructing a just political community that remains sustainable despite the “radical evil” inherent in human nature.

IV. Wisdom, Faith, and the Limits of Reason

At the heart of the 1791 essay lie a series of systematic distinctions that redefine the relationship between reason and faith. Of particular interest is the contrast Kant draws between “artistic” (technical) and “moral” wisdom. **John Hare** offers a detailed elucidation of these categories. He defends Kant’s “authentic theodicy” as a superior response to the problem of evil, precisely because it survives the “moral attack” that doctrinal theodicies cannot withstand. Hare shows how Kant manages to preserve the God-relation without falling into the “impoverishment” of mere speculative theorizing by grounding theodicy in the postulates of practical reason. He also offers a critical angle, questioning whether Kant’s narrow focus on morality might neglect other aspects of the human-divine relationship. Hare concludes that Kant’s authentic approach, i.e., finding God in the moral law rather than the mechanics of nature, remains the most resilient defense against despair.

Scott Ferguson takes this line of inquiry into the realm of “negative wisdom.” He reads *MPT* as a challenge to Kant’s views in the third *Critique*, arguing that the essay represents a “retreat” from the loftier ambitions of the Kantian system, specifically the unification of reason through teleology. Ferguson identifies an “apophatic” mode of wisdom in the text, where doubts are not “answered” by better arguments but are instead contextualized within a life of moral conduct. This “negative wisdom” shifts the focus from the teleological order of nature to the internal self-cognition of the moral agent. In this reading, the failure of speculative theodicy is the beginning of a more profound, practical self-knowledge that recognizes the “counter-purposive” in experience as a spur for moral resolve.

Drawing on Ferguson’s analysis, **Andrew Chignell** interprets the story of Job as an allegory for Belief (*Glaube*) becoming “reflective” or self-conscious. He defines “reflective Belief” as an assent grounded in sufficient non-epistemic considerations that the subject can consciously cite upon reflection. This view rests on a fallibilistic conception of certainty, interpreted as the subjective “inalterability” of an assertion rather than a truth-guaranteeing connection. Job’s encounter with counter-purposiveness in nature prompts a sincere admission of ignorance and doubt. Paradoxically, this reckoning validates Job’s Belief by rooting it in inalterable moral dispositions rather than speculative insights. Contrasting Job’s “weak,” yet nonetheless certain, Belief with his friends’ insincerity or “persuaded Belief,” Chignell concludes that authentic theodicy transforms unreflective commonsense into a self-conscious state of moral certainty.

Job is also a key figure in **Shterna Friedman’s** paper. Sharing a similar intuition with Chignell regarding the need to distinguish between different modes of faith (*Glaube*), Friedman argues that Kant uses the Biblical story to dramatize a “dialectic of suffering.” In her reading, Job represents the “untutored,” but morally faithful reason that undergoes a critique *through* the experience of suffering. This experience leads the believer to discover the limits of theoretical reason and the power of practical reason to “envision the whole of nature as moral,” even when empirical experience suggests the opposite. Friedman’s analysis highlights how the experience of suffering, rather than being an obstacle to faith, becomes the very ground upon which a critical, authentic faith is built. Job’s “authentic theodicy” consists in his refusal to accept the “false” explanations of his comforters—explanations that Kant equates with the doctrinal theodicies of the philosophers.

V. Kant in Contemporary Dialogue

This Special Issue closes with a piece by **Lawrence Pasternack**—the last paper he wrote. Pasternack situates Kant’s response to the problem of evil in relation to contemporary debates. While current skeptical theists (such as William Alston or Michael Bergmann) argue that we simply lack the cognitive access to judge God’s reasons, Pasternack demonstrates that Kant’s approach is fundamentally different. By grounding faith in the moral need to “resist despair,” Kant’s authentic theodicy avoids the “Symmetry Objection” that plagues contemporary debates, namely, the idea that if we are skeptical about God’s reasons for evil, we must also be skeptical about God’s reasons for good. Pasternack’s analysis positions Kant as offering a distinctive framework: faith is not a guess about God’s hidden motives, but a necessary condition for sustaining moral resolve in the face of suffering and injustice. This “practical” response ensures that the moral agent continues to act even when the world remains inscrutable.

We dedicate these papers to Lawrence Pasternack (1967–2024). Lawrence was a brilliant scholar, a generous mentor, a dear friend, and a primary architect of this project. This collection stands as a testament to his passion for authentic thought and his enduring legacy in the field of Kantian studies. As editors, we are honored to present his final words on a subject that he navigated with both intellectual rigor, elegance, and deep personal integrity.