

On Artistic and Moral Wisdom in the Theodicy

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ENG Abstract: This essay looks at a section of Kant's 'On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy', 8: 263-65, in which he makes two distinctions: first, that between artistic and moral wisdom, and second, that between doctrinal and authentic theodicy. The essay defends Kant's vindication of Providence from a practical point of view. Kant argues that all the philosophical attempts at theodicy fail, but we can continue to hold onto the faith that the world is wisely governed if we restrict ourselves to moral, as opposed to artistic, wisdom and to authentic, as opposed to doctrinal, theodicy. Kant's key move is negative, that the workings of the highest wisdom are beyond our experience and so beyond our insight; but where there is no theoretical veto, the practical interest prevails. The essay considers what this priority of the practical amounts to. Kant uses the geographical metaphor of 'domains' and argues that Reason, which has both theoretical and practical employments, has an interest in extending its territory, which requires theoretical reason to accept existence claims needed by practical reason even though these claims cannot be legitimated by theoretical reason from its own insight. The 'authentic' theodicy is God's declaration within the practical employment of reason that there is a wisdom behind the creation and maintenance of the universe even though it is inscrutable to us and hidden.

Keywords: Kant, Theodicy, Faith, Evil, Job, Providence, Freedom, Reason, Wisdom, God.

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In this paper I am going to look at a section of Kant's "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" (henceforth *Theodicy*) in which he makes two distinctions: first, that between artistic and moral wisdom, and second, that between doctrinal and authentic theodicy.¹ This section of Kant's text is obscure in several places, and my goal will be to elucidate it. But more than that, I think it gives us a *good* way to think about theodicy, and I will try to defend it. This defense will have to rely on premises from the rest of Kant's system because the text is embedded within those premises and no essay of the present length can sensibly aim at defending the whole system. But hopefully it will be useful to see in detail how Kant's views about the problem of evil come out of other parts of his philosophy.

The section of the text in question is *Theodicy* 8: 263-65. It comes just after the consideration and rejection of all nine of the attempts to produce a theodicy within the theoretical use of reason. And it comes just before the treatment of the story of Job. The section starts by a summary of the preceding material: Every previous theodicy has failed to accomplish the attempted vindication of the moral wisdom of the world-government against the doubts raised against it on the basis of human experience. This last phrase is important because it makes clear the nature of the doubts in question. They are doubts arising out of experience, namely the experience of sin, pain, and injustice. Kant goes on immediately to make the central point here. Although it is true that these doubts from experience cannot be overcome by these means, and we do not achieve the vindication of providence this way, it is also true that these doubts cannot show the opposite, namely that the moral wisdom of the world-government is *not* vindicated. It remains undecided whether more solid grounds of vindication will be found, and not merely *ab instantia*. This last Latin phrase is legal and means taking a verdict of acquittal (*absolutio*) from a single case and not from principle.² What I have called "the central point" here is a negative one. Finding limits to the theoretical use of reason has *both* the effect of delegitimizing certain traditional proofs or arguments that purport to take us from experience to positive

¹ I am grateful to Lawrence Pasternack and Andrew Chignell for organizing the conference at Princeton where this paper was first delivered.

² In 1662, Gregor von Santen accused Martinus Lelack of sexually abusing Gregor's wife when she was sick. The court did not believe Martinus's denial, even on oath, and Martinus then confessed to the adultery, but not to rape. He asked for mercy, and the court granted it "because there was no way of punishing such crimes," granting an *absolutio ab instantia*. See *Conquest and the Law in Swedish Livonia*, Heikki Pihlajamäki, Leiden: Brill, 2017, 34.

conclusions about the supersensible *and* the equal effect of delegitimizing disproofs or arguments that purport to take us from experience to negative conclusions about the supersensible.

This is the point of the following sentence of our text which is hard to read because of the triple negative embedded within it (“not succeed,” “incapable,” “dismissed.”) Kant says, “If we do not succeed in establishing with certainty that our reason is absolutely incapable of insight into *the relationship in which any world as we may ever become acquainted with through experience stands with respect to the highest wisdom*, then all further attempts by a putative human wisdom to gain insight into the ways of the divine wisdom are fully dismissed.”³ What he is saying here is that the hope for the vindication of providence is indeed at an end, unless we can show with certainty that the relationship of our experience to the highest wisdom is beyond our insight. In order to bring “this trial” (presumably all philosophical trials taken together) to an end *once and for all*, what we need to show is that there is within our reach a negative wisdom, a wisdom about the limitation of what we can prove and disprove about the supersensible. And he concludes that this negative wisdom is indeed within our reach.

This takes us to the first of the two distinctions mentioned in the first paragraph of this paper. There are two different ways, Kant says, that we might think of the arrangement of the world, under two different kinds of wisdom. There is what he calls “artistic wisdom,” which is available for inspection by reason in its speculative employment, and which gives us a contribution to “physico-theology,” though it is not sufficient for this.⁴ And there is what he calls “moral wisdom,” the idea of which resides in our own practical reason, but which could have been implanted in the world by a most perfect creator. I will discuss these two kinds of wisdom in the same order. The first takes us to the territory of the discussion of the physico-theological proof in the *First Critique*, which Kant there says is impossible.⁵ This, however, is only part of the story. For he *also* allows that we *can* get “as far as admiring the magnitude of the wisdom, power, etc. of the world’s author.”⁶ We do not get, to be sure, a proof of a creator who starts the world from nothing. But we do get an “author” or “architect,” by legitimate analogy with a human artist, and the mind of this architect is properly located as the source of the “purposiveness and well-adaptedness of so many natural arrangements.”⁷

Kant is here in continuity with the equally surprising permission that Hume gives us in the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.⁸ It is always difficult to know from the *Dialogues* where Hume’s own opinion lies. This is partly because of Hume’s pervasive irony, and partly because of the form of the work, which is the record of a conversation between three fictional characters. But Philo has a better claim than the other two, playing off one against the other.⁹ Philo, in his last speech (on a sheet added to the manuscript by Hume after the rest was complete) says that we should accept “that the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence.”¹⁰ But he adds that the “analogy can be carried no further than to the human intelligence; and cannot be transferred, with any appearance of probability, to other qualities of mind.” In particular, it cannot be “the source of any action or forbearance.” He says that the proper response to this limitation is to lament that philosophy cannot give us more than this, and then to seek the aid in revelation that goes beyond reason. This differentiates Philo from “the haughty dogmatist, [who is] persuaded that he can erect a complete system of theology by the mere help of philosophy.” Seeing this proper limit to reason is in fact, he says, a way to faith: “To be a philosophical sceptic is, in a man of letters, the first and most essential step towards being a sound, believing Christian.”¹¹ Perhaps Philo is being merely sarcastic here, but perhaps the situation is more complicated than this. In Kant, the point is made without irony that we have to “deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.”¹² Perhaps Hume is pointing to a similar possible intellectual structure that he is not endorsing but is also not merely mocking. In the same way Henry Sidgwick in *Methods of Ethics* later points to the possibility of reconciling enlightened self-interest with aiming at the maximum balance of happiness for all sentient beings, whatever the cost to oneself; the way to do this is to postulate the existence of a god who desires the greatest total good of all living thing and will reward and punish in accordance with this desire.¹³ Such a belief would, Sidgwick says, restore coherence to our moral beliefs, but he did not commit himself one way or the other as to whether this was sufficient reason to believe. In the same way R. M. Hare, my father, writes in *Moral Thinking*, that most Christians will think “that God has, and we have to a much more limited degree, the means (rational moral thinking) wherewith to resolve at the level of critical thinking conflicts which arise at the intuitive.”¹⁴ He does not mean here to commit himself to the truth of the Christian claim, but also he does not mean to deny it. It is characteristic of one strand of the

³ M 8: 263, emphasis original. I will return later to the difference between this dismissal within the theoretical use of reason and the later dismissal within the practical use.

⁴ Kant uses the term “speculative” for the use of theoretical cognition beyond experience, KrV A634–35=B 662–63, “Theoretical cognition is *speculative* if it concerns [such] an object, or such a concept of an object, as we cannot reach in any experience.”

⁵ KrV A620–30=B648–58, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

⁶ *Ibid.* A629=B657.

⁷ *Ibid.* A627=B655.

⁸ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Norman Kemp Smith, Indianapolis: The Library of Liberal Arts, 1947.

⁹ This is true even though Pamphilus, who records the dialogue, ends by saying, “I cannot but think, that PHILO’s principles are more probable than DEMA’s; but that those of CLEANTHES approach still nearer to the truth.”

¹⁰ *Ibid.* 227.

¹¹ *Ibid.* 228.

¹² KrV B xxx.

¹³ Henry Sidgwick, *The Method of Ethics*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989, 509.

¹⁴ R. M. Hare, *Moral Thinking*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981, 44.

British intellectual tradition to take this kind of distanced but non-adversarial posture towards the traditional Christian faith.

Kant, like Hume, wants to accept the basic analogy, and to deny any determination thereby of the character of the intelligent designer beyond its merely being intelligent. In particular, we cannot legitimately extend the analogy from artistic wisdom to moral wisdom. His view on this is worked out in most detail in the *Third Critique*. The key difference from Hume is that Kant *does* commit himself to the truth of the theological claims in question. He does not do so, like Philo, by seeking an aid in “revelation that goes beyond Reason.”¹⁵ Rather, he claims that reason itself, but in its practical employment rather than in its theoretical employment, takes us to legitimate belief. In the *Third Critique* Kant distinguishes between a physical teleology and a physical theology. The former takes us to an “artistic understanding to [provide] sporadic purposes” but not to a “wisdom to [provide] a final purpose.”¹⁶ Physical theology, if it is based merely on physical teleology, is a misunderstanding, because the physical teleology cannot get us to belief in a God who has moral wisdom. We only get there “if we supplement it by a further principle for its support.”¹⁷ This principle is given us by what Kant calls “ethico-theology.” It starts from the premise that we are under the moral law. This is not a premise that Kant here tries to justify; he takes it as already granted.¹⁸ In this premise we have a basis “for regarding the world as a whole that coheres in terms of purposes, and as a *system* of final causes. But above all, in referring natural purposes to an intelligent world cause, as the character of our reason forces us to do, we now have a *principle* that allows us to conceive of the nature and properties of this first cause, i.e., the supreme basis of the kingdom of purposes, and hence allows us to give determination to the concept of this cause. Physical teleology was unable to do this; all it could do was to give rise to concepts of this supreme basis that were indeterminate and on that very account were inadequate for both theoretical and practical use.”¹⁹

In our passage in *Theodicy*, Kant is careful not to overstate his conclusion. Even after we have linked artistic wisdom and moral wisdom in the way just described, we are still at a loss to understand *how* the divine purpose and our purposes work together. In *Perpetual Peace*, he gives us a *name* for this working together, but he does not make a claim for further understanding. He says, “The concept of a divine *concursum* is quite appropriate and even necessary.”²⁰ A *concursum*, literally “running together,” is a cooperation between two parties, and we should say that the divine purpose and our purposes are cooperating when we will and we do what the moral law requires. But nothing here helps us understand how we could be free in this cooperation and at the same time under the power of an omnipotent and omniscient being. In *Theodicy*, Kant puts the point this way: “For to be a creature and, as a natural being, merely the result of the will of the creator; yet to be capable of responsibility as a freely acting being (one which has a will independent of external influence and possibly opposed to the latter in a variety of ways); but again, to consider one’s own deed at the same time also as the effect of a higher being—this is a combination of concepts which we must indeed think together in the idea of a world and of a highest good, but which can be intuited only by one who penetrates to the cognition of the supersensible (intelligible) world and sees the manner in which this grounds the sensible world.”²¹ That kind of penetration and insight, he says, is one which no mortal can attain.

This is a disappointing admission, but one that is entirely reasonable given the gap between us and God that Kant is presupposing. He goes beyond merely abstaining from judgement, however; he grants that theoretical reason has a certain kind of veto. He says that if we could show in the theoretical employment of reason that this kind of *concursum* between God and us is impossible, then we should not believe it is actual. This is the importance of the negative wisdom described earlier. The limits that Kant has argued for on the theoretical employment of reason mean that we cannot show *concursum* is impossible; to claim to show this would be to claim just the sort of insight into the supersensible that he has ruled out. So, we deny knowledge in order to make room for faith.²² The role of philosophy is here defensive; it teaches us to doubt our doubts, the doubts that philosophy herself has given us through the hands of some of her less skillful practitioners.

The argument here is spelled out in more detail in the *Second Critique* in the section “On the Primacy of Pure Practical Reason in its Connection with Speculative Reason.”²³ When we are talking about primacy between two areas of thought, we mean that the interest of one is subordinate to the interest of the other. Every faculty of the mind has, Kant says, an interest in the sense that it has “a principle that contains the condition under which alone its exercise is promoted.”²⁴ The term “principle” here has a broad use, rather like Aristotle’s *arche*, or “starting point.” “Principles” here are not merely universal propositions, but for example the existence of God can be a principle in this sense. It is important that Kant talks here about a single reason with two uses, each of which has its own principles, and from now on I will spell the single faculty with a capital first letter. Sometimes he writes as though “practical reason” and “theoretical (or speculative) reason” were two different faculties, but this is merely for ease of diction (which I will sometimes follow) and his settled position

¹⁵ Strictly, for Kant, there is a *revelation* to reason in addition to biblical revelation, See *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6: 12.

¹⁶ KU 5: 441.

¹⁷ KU 5: 442.

¹⁸ In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* he does attempt such a justification in its third section, but he does not repeat this.

¹⁹ KU 5: 444.

²⁰ *Perpetual Peace*, 8: 362. Karl Ameriks, in ‘Kant and the End of Theodicy’, in *Kant’s Elliptical Path*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012, 275–76, discusses the senses in which Kant allows and does not allow *concursum*.

²¹ M 8: 263–64.

²² Again, KrV B xxx.

²³ KpV 5: 119–121.

²⁴ *Ibid* 5: 119.

is that there is one faculty of Reason with two employments. This position is crucial in the argument of the present section. But he supplements it here with a different metaphor, that of geographical domains, as though the single Reason had two different territories it controls. The interest of Reason in its speculative use, he says, “consists in the *cognition* of the object up to the highest *a priori* principles; that of its practical use consists in the determination of the *will* with respect to the final and complete end.” The principles in one use, or in one domain, must not contradict the principles in another; but this is a condition of having Reason at all, not an interest peculiar to any one domain. The interest of Reason itself is to extend its domain as a whole, however, not merely to attain consistency within itself.

Now we can imagine two different possible rank-orderings. In one of these, practical reason is allowed to accept only what theoretical or speculative reason gives to it from its insight. This immediately gives the priority to theoretical reason. But this seems wrong. Practical reason has its own *a priori* principles “with which certain theoretical positions are inseparably connected.” These positions are “withdrawn from any possible insight of speculative reason” even though they must not contradict it. Take the existence of God, for example. The claim that God exists should be, like all existence claims, a position within the territory of theoretical reason; it claims something about what is, and not about what we should do. Our being under the moral law is a principle of *practical* reason, though it is “inseparably connected” with the position that God exists. On the other hand, God’s existence is not something that is subject to the *insight* of theoretical reason, since it lies altogether beyond the domain of the sensible. But this takes us to the second possible rank-ordering, which reverses the priority. It rejects the view Kant attributes to the Epicureans, that we will accept only what sense experience validates and the *a priori* principles necessary for experience; it does not say that any suggested propositions beyond this are “nonsense” or “delusion” or “imagination.”²⁵ The second rank-ordering, giving priority to practical reason, says that speculative reason “must accept these propositions and, although they are transcendent for it, try to unite them, as a foreign possession handed over to it, with its own concepts.”²⁶ Here we have the metaphorical language of domains or territories. It is as though practical reason were handing over a new piece of land adjacent to but not already controlled by speculative reason.²⁷

How should Reason proceed here? Should it follow the Epicureans or allow the extension? Here what settles the question is the interest of Reason itself in extending its domain as a whole. This extension is subject to the veto previously mentioned. Reason in itself cannot allow internal contradictions of its principles, even if they belong to different domains. This is why it is crucial to the argument of the section that there is only one Reason. But as long as that veto does not apply, Reason has an interest in the widest extension it can find. What does the metaphor of extension mean here? We can think of Reason as asking continually “Why?”. It gets an answer in one place, but then it finds itself asking again about this answer, “Why?”, until it gets to the unconditioned. It is like Plato’s Reason seeking for an “unhypothetical starting-point,” or like an irrepressible five-year-old child who exhausts her parents by following up every answer with another question.²⁸ Reason should accept the extension, and deny the Epicurean position, because the extension allows it to go further in giving answers to its most fundamental questions and so to go further in achieving peace.

This extension would not be legitimate if practical reason were merely interested in finding means to happiness. This is the answer to a Freudian skepticism about wish-fulfillment.²⁹ The skeptic suggests that religious believers bring in God merely to give them solace in the presence of life’s harshness towards them; a “big daddy” could give them what their experience of the world seems to preclude, namely getting the satisfaction of their desires as a whole. Kant says that if this were all that practical reason were demanding, its demands on speculative reason would not be legitimate. But “if pure reason of itself can be and really is practical,” if what it aims at is not merely happiness but the highest good (happiness proportional to virtue), then the demand should be accepted. Kant does not here try to prove that we are under the moral law, but he appeals to this as what he calls earlier “a fact,” “which is not an empirical fact but the sole fact of pure reason which, by it, announces itself as originally lawgiving.”³⁰ Speculative reason in this situation needs to “accept these propositions as something offered to it from another source, which has not grown on its own land but yet is sufficiently authenticated,” and it needs to proceed to try to compare and connect this new gift with everything under its own control.³¹

²⁵ The first rank-ordering is like the position of the logical positivists who dominated what R. M. Hare called the “revolution” in philosophy that swept over analytic philosophy after the second world war: R. M. Hare, “A Philosophical Autobiography,” in *Utilitas* 14. 3, 2002, 284. The difference is that the logical positivists attached to meaningful assertability the criteria that Kant attached to knowledge.

²⁶ *KpV* 5: 120,

²⁷ It is interesting to compare this geographical metaphor to what Kant says about the “*parerga*” in the General Remark at the end of the First Part of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. These General Remarks concern “*parerga*” to religion within the boundaries of mere reason; they do not belong within it yet border on it. Reason, conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral needs, extends itself to ideas like “effects of grace”. Kant says we can make room for these (in German *einräumen*), even though they are outside the internal limits of our cognition and our action. Reason allows the possibility and actuality of the objects of these ideas. Karl Ameriks, in “Kant and the End of Theodicy,” *op. cit.*, 274, suggests that these effects of grace do not fall under Kant’s skepticism about miracle-claims, because we *do* know the laws (namely the moral laws) under which they fall. It is natural to ask, if these *parerga* do not belong within the maxims of Reason in either its theoretical or practical employment, where do they belong.

²⁸ Plato *Republic* 510b6.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*, W. W. Norton: New York, 2021. Kant’s actual target is Islam and Theosophy: “Mohammed’s paradise or the fusion with the Deity of the theosophists and mystics would obtrude their monstrosities on reason according to the taste of each, and one might as well have no reason at all as surrender it in such a way to all sorts of dreams.”

³⁰ *KpV* 5: 31-2.

³¹ *KpV* 5: 121.

What Kant gives us here is a *union* of the two employments of Reason, not merely a juxtaposition. If we had merely a juxtaposition, speculative reason would “close its boundaries strictly” and admit no new territory. But union gives us more than this. It gives us a principled subordination in which the two domains retain their distinctness, but the speculative is required to widen its boundaries. Could we get a union by proposing a principled subordination the other way round, with practical reason subordinating itself to speculative reason? Kant refuses this option on the grounds that “all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone.”³² This connects with the priority of what our text calls “wisdom”: “The proper concept of wisdom represents only a will’s property of being in agreement with the highest good as the *final* end of all things.”³³ In the *First Critique* Kant says that “philosophy in a genuine sense ... relates everything to wisdom.”³⁴ Or again, in *The End of All Things* he says, “Wisdom, that is practical reason using means commensurate to the final end of all things – the highest good – in full accord with the corresponding rules of measure, dwells in God alone; and the only thing which could perhaps be called human wisdom is active in a way which is not contrary to that idea of wisdom.”³⁵ One implication of this is that Reason in its practical employment gets further even with the questions that Reason in its speculative employment asks, and even though no answer can be given in speculative reason’s own terms.³⁶ I have mentioned the geographical metaphor of extension of territory here, but a different metaphor (not used by Kant) would be one of adoption. Reason in its theoretical employment is required to adopt a principle that is not (so to speak) from its own bloodline. The distinction between different origins within its new “family” needs, however, to be maintained in order to avoid what Kant calls “subreption” which is an illegitimate extension of theoretical reason’s objects. The adoption means that the academic disciplines which claim jurisdiction over the proper description of theoretical reason’s objects have to limit their claims to supervision of these new members of the “family”. But none of this means that Reason has to bar the door against adopting these new members. Kant says, in the Preface to the second edition of the *First Critique*, that after denying the metaphysical pretensions of speculative reason, “everything yet remains in the same advantageous state as it was before concerning the universal human concern and the utility that the world has so far drawn from the doctrines of pure reason, and the loss touches only the *monopoly of the schools* and in no way *the interest of human beings*.”³⁷

We can now return to our passage in *Theodicy* and to the second distinction introduced there. The first distinction was between the two kinds of wisdom, artistic and moral, and we have been exploring Kant’s doctrine that lies behind this distinction. The second distinction is that between “doctrinal” and “authentic” theodicy. The distinction is first introduced as one between two ways to give an “interpretation” of nature (in German, *auslegung*, or “exegesis”). This is a metaphor that Kant takes from the tradition, that nature is a book, one of God’s two books for our reading: Scripture and nature. On this picture these two books are two ways that God reveals to us God’s will. But the book of nature like the book of Scripture has to be given an exegesis, and there are again two ways to do this. The first (“doctrinal exegesis”) is “a rational *inference* of that will from the utterances of which the law-giver has made use” (emphasis added). The second (“authentic exegesis”) is “made by the law-giver himself.” Since Kant’s view is that all theodicy is an exegesis of nature, the distinction between the two kinds of exegesis becomes a distinction between two types of theodicy. Why would Kant think that all theodicy is exegesis? This follows from his definition of “theodicy” in the first sentence of the work: “By ‘theodicy’ we understand the defense of the highest wisdom of the creator against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is counterpurposive in the world.”³⁸ If we take the world as a book, then defending the creator’s wisdom against charges of counterpurposiveness in the world will require exegesis of this book.

The difficulty of exegesis, however, is that the book is often “closed.” This is always so, Kant says, when we are trying to read God’s *final aim* from our experience of the world. This final aim is always moral, Kant thinks, but it is opaque to us “even though [the world] is an object of experience.”³⁹ Here, I think we can properly object to Kant’s single-minded emphasis on morality as the location of our relation to God, and we will return to this in the final section of this paper. Kant thinks of God as most importantly the commander of our duties; he thinks of our moral goodness as the purpose of the whole creation; and he thinks of the next life as a gradual but never finished approximation to moral holiness. All of this is too procrustean as an account of our God-relation. But the monochrome moralism is not necessary for his argument here. All he needs is that we should suppose God’s purpose to be moral if we are trying to give a *theodicy*.

A doctrinal theodicy, then, is one that performs an *inference* from our experience of the world to a defense of God’s wisdom against charges of counterpurposiveness experienced in the world. Kant’s view is that all

³² KpV 5: 121.

³³ M 8: 256.

³⁴ KrV A850=B878.

³⁵ *End of All Things*, 8: 336.

³⁶ See KrV A vii.

³⁷ KrV B xxxii. Lewis White Beck, in *A Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, 250, suggests that “the Ideas needed by speculative reason for its own purposes are the same as those needed by pure practical reason, and theoretical reason can present them only as problematic concepts.”

³⁸ M 8: 255.

³⁹ Kant says, “even though it is an object of experience,” and the immediate antecedent of “it” looks at first sight as if it is “God’s final aim.” But this cannot be Kant’s meaning, because God’s final aim is precisely *not*, in Kant’s doctrine, an object of experience, and this is because God’s final aim is moral. The reference has to be back to “every time we look at it to extract from it God’s final aim,” where the “it” refers to the world.

nine versions of such a theodicy that he has looked at fail. And this means the failure of “theodicy proper” (in German, *eigentlich*), the failure of all “philosophical trials in this kind of interpretation” which are all “doctrinal.” This does *not* mean, however, that we have to stop doing theodicy. We can give the name “theodicy” also to “the mere dismissal of all objections against divine wisdom, if this dismissal is a *divine decree*.” This would be the “authentic exegesis” which is “made by the law-giver himself.” Our familiar use of “authentic” is misleading here. The word originally comes from the Greek “*authentēs*,” which itself comes from “*autos*” and “*hentes*,” or “self-doer.” The authentic exegesis in this sense is an exegesis that the author of the text makes himself. Here, Kant tells us that this authentic exegesis is a dismissal. But here we need to make a distinction.⁴⁰ Kant talks in two different ways about dismissal, using two different German words on two successive pages. There is, first, the dismissing (*abgewiesen*) of human attempts to gain insight into the divine wisdom (8: 263), as quoted earlier. Then there is the dismissal (*Abfertigung*) of objections against the divine wisdom (8: 264). The first dismissal is within the theoretical use of Reason, recognizing its own limits. But the second is generated by the practical use. The relation between these two dismissals is that the first is a precondition for our acceptance of the second because there must be no veto of the kind discussed earlier. Unlike the merely negative wisdom we get from the first dismissal, however, we get from the second dismissal an authentic exegesis which is something positive. We learn that this dismissal is “a pronouncement of the same reason through which we form our concept of God.” Kant says here that this exegesis is from the author of the text himself and thus authentic.

This is a part of Kant’s doctrine that has sometimes given offense to what I will call “evangelical critics.”⁴¹ Sometimes he expresses the point in language that sounds idolatrous. He says, for example, in the *Second Critique*, “I will that there be a God.”⁴² This sounds at first hearing as though Kant is saying that we *create* God. There is, indeed, a whole “decline of the West” narrative which reads Kant this way, as taking God off the throne and putting ourselves there in God’s place, creating a god out of our own image. And it is true that there were contemporaries of Kant who did just this. Thus, Novalis has a reading of the famous inscription on the temple of Isis: “I am all that is and that was and that ever shall be, and all that is, and no mortal hath raised the veil from my face.”⁴³ Kant comments about this inscription: “Perhaps there has never been a more sublime utterance, or a thought more sublimely expressed.”⁴⁴ But Novalis interprets the inscription this way: “To one it was granted: he raised the veil of the goddess of Sais. And what did he see? He saw—wonder of wonders—himself.”⁴⁵ This decline-of-the-West narrative interprets the whole movement of German Idealism *including Kant* as substituting self for God or making God in the self’s image: “For the age of Goethe, Kant, and Hegel was a watershed in the history of humanism. Man once again became the measure of things... a perspective decidedly *sub specie humanitatis*.”⁴⁶

This is not Kant’s conception, and it is indeed a travesty of his view. If the self were God, then God would not be able to play the role that Kant thinks is central to the moral life. “Morality inevitably leads to religion,” he says, and this is precisely because humans *cannot* secure the real possibility of the highest good; this requires that the world be under the control of the supersensible author of nature.⁴⁷ So what does Kant mean by saying, “I will that there be a God”? He means, as he says five pages earlier, that because “reality is given to the concept of the object of a morally determined will (that of the highest good),” reality is also given “to the conditions of its possibility, the ideas of God, freedom, and immortality, but always only with reference to the practice of the moral law (not for any speculative purpose).”⁴⁸ God is a postulate of practical reason, and within this use of Reason God is a constitutive and not merely a regulative principle. That is to say, we are entitled to make an existence claim, and not merely to speak as *if* these postulated entities existed. The movement of thought is from the good will to God as a postulate of practical reason, and that is why Kant says that he wills that there be a God, in a sentence that is easily misunderstood.

Is this movement of thought idolatrous? The first thing to say is that the God who is postulated, the king of the kingdom of ends, is postulated as a being outside the self and outside all human beings. As argued in the previous paragraph, the postulate requires this externality in order for God to do God’s work. For example, because of radical evil we cannot accomplish our own revolution of the will: “This [innate] evil is *radical*, since it corrupts the ground of all maxims; as natural propensity, it is also not to be *extirpated* through human forces, for this could only happen through good maxims—something that cannot take place if the subjective supreme ground of all maxims is presupposed to be corrupted.”⁴⁹ Similarly, Kant believes that the human *race* is improving morally, though not in a linear fashion, but “supreme wisdom is required for the complete fulfil-

⁴⁰ I owe this point to Shterna Friedman.

⁴¹ There is an irony here. The American evangelicals (such as Carl Henry and Cornelius Van Til) who reacted strongly against Karl Barth’s theological position attacked him as being too close to Kant. But Barth himself, though a good reader of Kant in many ways, does not see that Kant makes God a *constitutive* principle within the practical use of reason. This is a mistake about Kant that these evangelicals themselves made. The irony is that if the evangelicals and Barth had known Kant better, they would have seen that they were both closer to Kant than they thought, and closer to each other. See John E. Hare, “Karl Barth, American Evangelicals, and Kant,” in *Karl Barth and American Evangelicalism*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack and Clifford B. Anderson, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011, 73–90.

⁴² *KpV* 5: 143.

⁴³ See Robert L. Jacobs, “Beethoven and Kant,” *Music and Letters*, 42/3 (1961), 249.

⁴⁴ *KU* 5: 316

⁴⁵ See Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995, 112.

⁴⁶ Burnham, *op. cit.*, 113. See John E. Hare, *Unity and the Holy Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023, chapter 2.

⁴⁷ *Rel* 6: 6.

⁴⁸ *KpV* 5: 138.

⁴⁹ *Rel* 6: 37.

ment of this end.”⁵⁰ But still, the evangelical critic might say, the *conception* of God here is one that comes from our own moral lives; even if God is postulated as a separate being from us, have we not constructed this god in our own image? But here Kant can reply by returning to the distinction between Reason in its practical and theoretical employments. God’s wisdom is not exactly like our wisdom, but the practical use of reason requires this wisdom to be *enough* like ours to ground the hope in the real possibility of the highest good. In a long footnote in *Religion* on the need to use analogy in order to think of the supersensible, Kant insists that the use of such analogy is consistent with avoiding anthropomorphism as long as we do not assume that we are thereby getting an “object-determination (as means for expanding our cognition),” which would have to be under the constraints proper to reason in its theoretical employment.⁵¹ In the *Third Critique*, he puts the point this way, talking about God’s understanding: “But I am in no way entitled to flatter myself that I [can] attribute [an] understanding to this being and *cognize* this being through it as through a property... And thus it is with all the categories; they cannot have any significance whatever for cognition from a theoretical point of view if they are not applied to objects of a possible experience. But from a certain different point of view, I certainly can, indeed must, use the analogy with an understanding to think even a supersensible being, yet without trying to cognize it through this theoretically.”⁵² Kant is committed to avoiding anthropomorphism. But this does not mean that he has to avoid analogy; it means that he has to restrict its usage to what practical reason requires.⁵³

We can now go to the key premise in our passage that takes us to an authentic theodicy. Kant says that we cannot refuse the name “theodicy” to the mere dismissal of all objections against divine wisdom “if this dismissal is a *divine decree*, or (for in this case it amounts to the same thing) if it is a pronouncement of the same reason through which we form our concept of God—necessarily and prior to all experience—as a moral and wise being.”⁵⁴ As described earlier, the movement of thought is from the good will to God as a postulate of practical reason. As Kant is going on to say in the next section of our text about Job, “he did not found his morality on faith, but his faith on morality.”⁵⁵ Or, as he says at the very end of *Religion*, “which proves that the right way to advance is not from grace to virtue but rather from virtue to grace.”⁵⁶

There is one way to take this point that makes theodicy too easy. We might think that if God is conceived as a moral being, this already means that the conception of the divine will must be prior to all experience because the will is free, and therefore beyond all sense impression. The same is true even of the freedom of lesser moral beings such as us. And this independence of experience necessarily follows from what it is to be a moral being on Kant’s account. But if you can dismiss objections to divine wisdom by saying simply that we cannot have experience of the will of a moral being, then no evidential problem of evil can get started at all. Kant is not, however, denying here that there is much in our experience that is, in his term, “counterpurposive,” and that it counts against divine wisdom within the theoretical or philosophical use of Reason. He has already conceded in the first part of the work that the world is full of evil, and that all the usual theodicies fail.

There is a purple passage in the *Third Critique* in which Kant discusses the position of a man like Spinoza. This is a man of conspicuous virtue who, partly because of his experience of evil, becomes persuaded that there is no God.⁵⁷ (I am not here passing judgement on whether Kant’s view of Spinoza is fair to Spinoza.) “Deceit, violence, and envy will always be rife around him, even though he himself is honest, peaceable, and benevolent. Moreover, as concerns the other righteous people he meets: no matter how worthy of happiness they may be, nature, which pays no attention to that, will still subject them to all the evils of deprivation, disease, and untimely death, just like all the other animals on the earth. And they will stay subjected to these evils always, until one vast tomb engulfs them one and all (honest or not, that makes no difference here) and hurls them, who managed to believe they were the final purpose of creation, back into the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter from which they were taken.”⁵⁸ In the next section of *Theodicy*, which discusses the story of Job, Kant stresses that when God speaks to Job from the whirlwind, he lays before him the wisdom of his creation, but also its inscrutability. God shows Job the beautiful things (like the horse, though Kant does not actually give these examples) but also the horrible things (like Behemoth), “harmful and fearsome things, each of which appears indeed to be purposively arranged for its own sake and that of its 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.” In *Religion*, Kant says he does not need a formal proof of our propensity to evil “in view of the multitude of woeful examples that the experience of human *deeds* parades before us.”⁵⁹ He cannot be arguing in our text that we are unable to pass judgement on the evil we experience because evil involves the will, and the will is inaccessible to sensory inspection. To the contrary, he thinks that both moral and physical evil are open to our inspection and our repugnance.

This is not, however, the end of the story of God’s dealing with Job. Even though God speaks to him out of the whirlwind about both beautiful things like the horse and horrible things like Behemoth, God also

⁵⁰ *On the Common Saying*, 8: 310.

⁵¹ *Rel* 6: 65.

⁵² *KU* 5: 484.

⁵³ Peter Byrne in *Kant on God*, London: Routledge, 2007, gets this wrong. He does not acknowledge this restriction of Kant’s worries about anthropomorphism.

⁵⁴ *M* 8: 264.

⁵⁵ *M* 8: 267.

⁵⁶ *Rel* 6: 202.

⁵⁷ *KU* 5: 451-53.

⁵⁸ *M* 8: 266.

⁵⁹ *Rel* 6: 33.

“demonstrates an order and a maintenance of the whole which proclaim a wise creator, even though his ways, inscrutable to us, must at the same time remain hidden—indeed already in the physical order of things, and how much more in the connection of the latter with the moral order (which is all the more impenetrable to our reason).”⁶⁰ So Kant’s claim is that in the practical use of Reason God declares an authentic theodicy, that there is a wisdom behind the creation and maintenance of the universe even though it is inscrutable to us and hidden. This is the interpretation or exegesis of nature made by Reason, but not “a *ratiocinating* (speculative) reason, but an *efficacious* practical reason.”⁶¹ This practical reason can be considered “as the unmediated definition and voice of God through which he gives meaning to the letter of his creation.”

The God postulated by practical reason is a moral being, and that puts surprisingly tough constraints on what we can conceive the divine plan to be. This point is important because one might think that Kant’s theodicy leaves God’s purposes completely open-ended. One of the typical worries about a “sceptical theism” is that it leaves us open to moral scepticism as well.⁶² I am not going to try to enter this dispute except to say that for Kant the moral law is in God’s mind as well as the human moral agent’s mind. It is not present in the divine mind as *constraint*, unlike its role in our minds, but it is still present. But this means that God, like the human moral agent, will not use another rational being as a mere means but will always share ends as far as possible, which is to say as far as the moral law itself allows.⁶³ There are large difficulties here. Consider the passage in *John* 9: 1-12 where Jesus heals a man born blind, and the disciples ask “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?” Jesus says neither, but “so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” Presumably the divine work that is revealed is the healing. But does this imply that God is using the blind man’s suffering merely as a means to divine self-revelation, thus violating the moral law? There are ways to get round this apparent incongruity. Perhaps God’s work here is not merely the physical healing, but, as the story goes on to suggest, salvation, and perhaps the man’s physical suffering is “taken up” into his glorification.⁶⁴ But the point is that Kant’s insistence that the divine moral being has in mind the moral law just as we do puts constraints on what kind of theodicy we can give.

This point can be expanded into a larger one, a critique of Kant’s position that threatens to undo his whole strategy. The critique was signaled earlier in this paper, that Kant has made morality too large a part of our relation to God. Even if we agree with Kant that God is the commander of our duties, it does not follow that God regulates God’s own actions towards us by all the same precepts. There is a difference, to put this in the language of John Duns Scotus, between what God wills for us *simpliciter* and what God wills for our willing.⁶⁵ The second is within the constraints of what is fitting for the kind of willing that humans can do (though Scotus does not think that the second table of the law can be *deduced* from our nature). There are many places where Kant’s monochrome picture of our God-relation distorts his account. Here is one. He thinks that the legitimacy of the judgement of taste, that something is beautiful, derives from beauty being a symbol of *morality*.⁶⁶ His view is that the beautiful object exhibits a fittingness to our faculties which is a foretaste of the union of our happiness and our duty, which is our highest good. But there is an ancient tradition within Christianity which is better than this. In Bonaventure, for example, and before him in many of the Greek fathers, we can find the view that our next life does not consist (as it does on Kant’s view) centrally in the gradual approximation of our will to moral holiness; rather, we will experience the presence of God there through the spiritual senses, a transformed sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell.⁶⁷ Our experience of beauty in this life is then a foretaste of this later union, not just of the progress of the moral will. Kant is overly suspicious of religious experience even in this life, and he is no doubt responding to excesses he observed in his pietist upbringing.⁶⁸ The critique, then, is that conceiving God as interested primarily or predominantly in our moral progress is an impoverishment of our God-relation.

By way of conclusion, however, we can venture a reply on Kant’s behalf. He could say: “Even if I were to accept (which I do not) that morality is only a subsidiary part of our relation to God, that would not affect the validity of the kind of theodicy I have given. Theodicy is, after all, a defense against a *moral* attack. As long as it is conceded that God does care about moral holiness, even if that is not God’s primary concern, my authentic theodicy survives. Our morality, which we should recognize as commanded by God, requires us to postulate the existence of a God who can bring about the union of our happiness and our duty. And this postulate is legitimately prior to any experience we can have of evil in the world.” It is no doubt foolhardy to put words

⁶⁰ *M* 8: 266.

⁶¹ *M* 8: 264.

⁶² See Anne Jeffrey, *God and Morality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. See also M. C. Rea, ‘Skeptical Theism and the “Too-Much Scepticism” objection’, in J. R. McBray and D. Howard-Snyder (eds.) *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013, 482-506.

⁶³ This is the statement of the formula of humanity in *Gl* 4: 430 and *MdS* 6: 450, “The duty of love for one’s neighbor can, accordingly, also be expressed as the duty to make others’ ends my own (provided only that these are not immoral.)”

⁶⁴ See Marilyn Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999.

⁶⁵ John Duns Scotus, *Ordinatio* 1, dist. 48.

⁶⁶ *KU* 5: 351-54. See John E. Hare, *Unity and the Holy Spirit*, *op. cit.*, chapter two for a fuller account of this argument.

⁶⁷ Bonaventure, *Soliloquies* 4: 20, *Opera Omnia*, VIII, 63A, Quaracchi: *Ad Claras Aquas*, 1882-1901, quoted in Fr. John Saward, “The Fresh flowers Again: St. Bonaventure and the Aesthetics of the Resurrection,” *The Downside Review*, 110 (1992) 1f. See also Bonaventure, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke*, trans. Robert J. Karris (St. Bonaventure, NY: Franciscan Institute Publications, 110 (1992), volume VII, 233.

⁶⁸ *Rel* 6: 201, “If the delusion of this supposed favorite of heaven reaches heights of enthusiasm, to the point of imagining that he feels the special effects of faith within him (or even has the impertinence of trusting in a supposed hidden familiarity with God), virtue finally becomes loathsome to him and an object of contempt.”

into Kant's mouth. But this kind of response seems to me successful and better than any of the nine theodicies he has previously rejected.

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