

Skeptical Theism, Soul Making, and Kant's Practical Response to the Problem of Evil¹

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ENG Abstract: This paper examines Kant's distinctive response to the Problem of Evil (PE) and situates it in relation to contemporary debates on Skeptical Theism. Standard approaches to PE assume two independent premises –the existence of God and the existence of evil– and then attempt reconciliation through doctrinal theodicies or epistemic humility. Kant, by contrast, reconfigures PE through his Moral Argument and “Authentic Theodicy,” grounding belief in God in the moral need to resist despair before suffering and injustice. This practical theodicy neither denies evil nor speculatively explains it, but frames faith as a necessary condition for sustaining moral resolve. In doing so, Kant avoids the Symmetry Objection often raised against Skeptical Theism and offers a response that is neither fideistic nor doctrinal but rooted in the demands of practical reason. The paper argues that this Kantian strategy provides a distinctive and underexplored framework for addressing PE within philosophy of religion.

Keywords: Problem of Evil, Skeptical Theism, theodicy, fideism, moral argument, Spinoza

Summary: I. The Problem of Evil; II. God and Evil in the Critique of Judgment; III. God and Evil in “On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy”; IV. Theodicy and the Highest Good; V. Skeptical Theism and Fideism; VI. Conclusion.

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The Problem of Evil (PE) is among the perennial issues in the philosophy of religion. Questions arising from suffering and injustice in a world that is supposed to be overseen by a benevolent deity or deities can be found in many ancient religious texts. It likewise has been a matter of debate throughout the history of philosophy. Further, it is one of the few philosophical issues that is also a matter of widespread concern among the world's laity.

Responses include: that the good of free will can only be sustained if God does not intervene; that evil exists as a trial through which we are to grow; that evil is inevitable given the nature of the created physical world; that evil supports the rejection of theism; that we are not so epistemically situated as to be able to responsibly assess whether or not apparent all-things-considered evils are actually all-things-considered evils; and, that even without an answer as to how to reconcile God and evil, one should have faith in God.

Yet, despite this variety of responses, the prevailing strategies used to address PE begin in the same way. First, two independent premises are posited, the first being God's existence and the second being the existence of evil in the world. Second, it is proposed that there is at least a *prima facie* conflict between these two premises. Then, third, a solution is proposed to address this conflict, either by granting that the *prima facie* conflict is genuine, and the first premise is denied, or by denying that the *prima facie* conflict is genuine through some mitigation of the second premise, or by arguing that we are not so epistemically situated as to be able to assess the second premise (and/or its relation to the first premise) so that the theist can just set aside PE.

The first of these solutions aligns with atheism, Manicheanism, and other alternatives to traditional theism. The second solution is exemplified by most of the familiar philosophical theodicies (Free Will Defense, Soul-Making Theodicies, etc.). The third is advanced under what has come to be known as Skeptical Theism.²

¹ Lawrence Pasternack was working on this paper before his death in January 2024. We present here the text with minimal editorial changes. The only significant addition editors made is the abstract, which Pasternack did not have a chance to finish.

² There are, of course, other strategies, including those that are less overtly philosophical, such as associating PE with the suffering of Jesus Christ, “Protest Theodicies,” that Theodicies are idolatrous in that they expect God's ways to be our ways, and Fideism.

It is the aim of this paper to introduce a new strategy for addressing PE, or perhaps more aptly, to bring it into conversation with the contemporary landscape. That strategy has its roots in Kant's Critical Period, most notably in the so-called "Example of the Righteous Atheist" (5:452-3) found in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), and a year later, in what Kant calls "Authentic Theodicy" in his essay "On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy" (1791).³ As we shall see, while Kant's strategy for addressing PE also has certain affinities with Soul-Making Theodicy, it is best understood as a fundamental reconstruction of PE, though one that has much in common with contemporary Skeptical Theism.

This paper will proceed as follows. First, we will discuss how PE is usually formulated and the best-known responses to it, focusing primarily on Skeptical Theism. Second, we will turn to Kant, looking at the key texts which serve as the basis for his 1790/1 response to PE. Third, we will briefly discuss the relationship between the Highest Good and Kant's 1791 Theodicy. Lastly, we will show how Kant's response to PE, though it has some kinship to Skeptical Theism, is able to avoid the principal objection raised against it.

I. The Problem of Evil

The Problem of Evil (PE) is usually understood in terms of an incompatibility between two claims:

- (P1) There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God (OG); and,
- (P2) some all-things-considered evil (ACE) exists.

This leads either to the view that given P2, P1 must be false, or that given P1, P2 must be false. By "all-things-considered evil," I mean some act or state of affairs that is not only evil when considered in isolation (ECI), but that no mitigating factor (MF) is sufficient, such that in light of MF, it is morally preferable to have a world where ECI obtains as opposed to a world where neither MF nor ECI obtain.⁴

For example, proponents of the Free Will Defense appeal to the value of our efficacious free will as an MF to justify God not stopping immoral deeds, including such outright horrors as the Holocaust. However terrible the Holocaust was, what would be worse from this position is to have a world where we are incapable of willing immoral deeds or where God prevents us from following through with what we have willed. As such, this MF maintains that the Holocaust, though an ECI, is not an ACE.

Similarly, proponents of Soul-Making Theodicy claim that there is value in how we confront and overcome evil, thus using the value of our moral improvement to justify God not stopping evil. Illness, natural disasters, injustice and so forth are therein understood as permitted if not necessary vehicles for our moral improvement. As such, the strategy is to show that the value of moral improvement functions as an MF through which an ECI is not an ACE.

By contrast, many find the arguments used to defend P1 against P2 unpersuasive, thus holding that there are no MFs capable of showing that no ECIs are also ACEs. They in turn will either choose atheism or some alternate theism, such as Manicheanism.⁵

A third school of thought, beyond those that appeal to some MF in order to defend P1 against P2, and beyond those that conclude that there is no MF sufficient to defend P1 against P2, is that PE should not affect our credence for theism. A lay fideist, for example, might contend that they trust in God, meaning that their belief in P1 commits them to the denial of P2 even without the adoption of any explanatory MF. Likewise, Skeptical Theism maintains that we are not so epistemically situated as to be able to assess the truth of P2—holding that even if there are some ECIs for which there does not seem to be any adequate MF, we are not so epistemically situated as to be able to conclude that there is nevertheless not some MF of which we are just not aware.⁶ Their typical reasoning for this is that the divine nature and plans for creation are so beyond our ken that it is not reasonable for us to think that we have cognitive access to all the potential MFs with which an OG might engage.⁷

Arguably, lay fideism resists philosophical critique insofar as it might just reject the demands of philosophy (or reason more broadly) altogether, claiming that faith entitles the believer to hold not only unprovable, but even demonstrably false or self-contradictory claims.⁸ A person of faith, for example, might grant that some part of their catechism is self-contradictory and have no way to reconcile that contradiction, but still maintain that they are nevertheless entitled to take it as true. The doctrine of Hypostatic Union (that Jesus was both *fully* human and *fully* divine) might be such an instance.⁹

³ Citations to Kant will be to the Akademie Ausgabe by volume and page, except for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where citations will use the standard A/B edition pagination. Unless otherwise noted, English quotations will be from the Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant, general editors Paul Guyer and Allen Wood.

⁴ "All Things Considered Evil" may also be understood in accordance with what Rowe (1979) calls "pointless" evil and later literature refers to as "gratuitous" evil (e.g. Hasker 1992).

⁵ Although we may think of Manicheanism and similar dualisms as having only historical relevance, there is some recent literature offered in their defense. See for example Kronen and Messen 2010. Further examples of non-standard theisms include David (2008) and Murphy (2017).

⁶ Perhaps the clearest succinct account of what Skeptical Theism holds is as follows: "[according to] the skeptical theist, we should not grant that our inability to think of a good reason for doing or allowing something is indicative of whether or not God might have a good reason for doing or allowing something." <https://iep.utm.edu/skept-th/>

⁷ Proponents include Alston (1991), Wykstra (1996), and Howard-Snyder (2009).

⁸ Piper (2008, 143-4) argues that Skeptical Theism cannot effectively prevent its skepticism with regards to P2 from carrying-over to P1 and that their attempts to save P1 implicitly or explicitly tend to fall back into fideism.

⁹ We may think of Kierkegaard's faith "by virtue of the absurd" as such an example—including Abraham's faith that God both commands Isaac's death and that Isaac will not be killed to fulfill God's command. Kierkegaard also refers to the doctrine of Hypostatic Union as the "absolute paradox" that would nevertheless be affirmed as an item of faith for the authentic Christian. By contrast,

Conversely, proponents of Skeptical Theism generally maintain that their position is philosophically defensible, and there is a sizable body of literature where its proponents defend it against criticisms. The most significant of these criticisms is what we may refer to as the Symmetry Objection, namely, that the Skeptical Theist cannot consistently use epistemic skepticism to sideline P2 without impacting P1 as well. Hence, if we are not so epistemically situated as to be able to judge whether or not there is some ECI that is also an ACE, why should we take ourselves to be so epistemically situated as to be warranted in the belief that P1 is true.

Due to space constraints, I am going to skip over a more thorough treatment of the debate over the Symmetry Objection. I want only just note that while I am sympathetic with the general approach of Skeptical Theism, I also think that it is vulnerable to this objection. My proposal is thus that what the Skeptical Theist is after, i.e., that one can sustain theism without having to give a positive theodicy, can be accomplished in a different sort of way. That is, one can still hold to Skeptical Theism's core thesis regarding our capacity to assess P2, but also can (a) ground our belief in P1 in such a way that the Symmetry Objection cannot apply; and (b) even more fundamentally, reframe PE's logical structure. As I will now try to demonstrate, both (a) and (b) can be found in Kant's writings circa 1790/1, especially in the ethicology of the *Critique of Judgment* and through what he calls "Authentic Theodicy" in his essay, "On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy." We will now discuss each text in turn.

II. God and Evil in the *Critique of Judgment*

In a passage of the *Critique of Judgment* which we may refer to as the "Example of the Righteous Atheist," Kant, as was common at the time, paints Spinoza as an atheist who, despite being committed to morality, may find himself limited in his moral efforts. The world, as Kant there portrays, is full of "[d]eceit, violence, and envy" (5:452), and no matter how much one tries to do the right thing, the order of nature will inevitably be filled with "all the evils of poverty, illness and untimely death" (5:452).

That, at least, is what the world looks like for the atheist; and as a result, no matter how "well-intentioned" (5:452) the atheist is, they will inevitably be dragged down by despair, feeling that their best efforts come to naught, swamped by "the purposeless chaos of matter" (5:452) where irrespective of how honest or dishonest one is, irrespective of how virtuous or corrupt, in the end, "one wide grave engulfs [us] all" (5:452). This is a psychological thesis held by Kant, namely, that human beings will (or at least seriously risk) fall(ing) into moral despair if they see the world in this way.¹⁰

Kant then argues that in order for one to "remain attached to the appeal of his moral inner vocation ... he must assume the existence of a moral author of the world, i.e., a God" (5:452-3). Hence, as with his earlier formulations of the Moral Argument, we see here an *absurdum practicum*, where the "upright man" can and should make a "voluntary determination" to believe in God and the afterlife so that his moral efforts do not seem futile.¹¹

This is, shall we say, a *practical* theodicy, one that reconciles God and evil not by way of a theoretical explanation as to how *prima facie* all-things-considered evils are not, in fact, all-things-considered evils (i.e., not by the introduction of some MF such that some ECIs are not ACEs), but rather by way of the practical need for theism, a need triggered by how evil challenges our moral resolve. But it also does something of great significance to how PE is formulated, as the logical structure of its premises is fundamentally different from what has dominated both the historical and the contemporary debate. Consider, again, the standard formulation of PE, in particular how it starts by setting out two logically independent premises:

- (P1) There exists an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God (OG); and,
- (P2) some all-things-considered evil (ACE) exists.

As discussed earlier, standard responses to PE then either (a) reject the first premise (the Atheist/Manichean response), (b) reject the second premise by appeal to some mitigating factor (the Free Will Defense, Soul-Making Theodicies, and other strategies that introduce some MF such that apparent ACEs are really just ECIs), or (c) dismiss the salience of the second premise on the grounds that we are not so epistemically situated as to be able to determine whether or not any ECIs are ACEs.

But what is not considered, or at least not usually brought into PE, is how P1 is grounded. Since PE is traditionally treated as a problem *for the theist*, the first premise tends to just be granted. The grounds for P1 are not made part of PE itself, except perhaps in some responses to the Symmetry Objection to Skeptical Theism.¹²

from the Council of Chalcedon to many Mediaeval scholastics, theologians sought interpretations of the doctrine to avoid contradiction.

¹⁰ This is a point likewise echoed two years later in the Preface to the 1793 edition of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, where Kant presents our concern for the "whither" (6:4) of our moral efforts, the "result of this right conduct of ours" (6:5) as a "natural need" (6:5), which if unaddressed serves as a "hindrance to moral resolve" (6:5). Note that I have the parenthetical (at least) because, in my view, the psychological manifestation of this "natural need" has a deeper root in the nature of what it is to be a finite agent.

¹¹ A question may be raised as to whether or not Kant is a doxastic voluntarist in light of this and related comments about religious assent. Since Kant morally rebukes those who refuse to make this "voluntary determination," there must be a choice here that is within our power. However, it does not follow that we have direct and full control over what we do and do not hold as true. That power may be limited to only certain special cases (such as the one here) and might also be indirect: we can't simply will to believe, but we can will to ignore or not think deeply about an argument that, were we to consider it carefully, would bring us to assent.

¹² Such as through questioning our epistemic situation with respect to ECIs vs ACEs, the skepticism raised regarding P2 blows back against P1, i.e., the Skeptical Theist has to find a way to show that our epistemic situation with respect to these two premises is

By contrast, in what I think is among the most important, if not *the* most important aspect of Kant's treatment of PE, is that he inserts the question of how P1 is to be grounded right into PE; and he does so in a way that the two premises need not be understood as logically independent of one another. For the Moral Argument, especially in its 1790 formulation, takes P2 as part of the ground for our adoption of P1. That is, rather than imagining PE as a problem that the theist comes to recognize once they are affected by the many evils of the world, Kant reverses the subjective order of P1 and P2, with the agent turning to God as a response to evil. As a result, the logical relationship between P1 and P2 is also changed. Instead of being independent of one another, Kant's 1790 formulation of the Moral Argument takes our confrontation with the many evils of the world as what draws us to theism. As such, the compatibility between God and evil is, shall we say, already built into theism, for it is our confrontation with evil (and how that evil impacts our moral motivation) that directs us to believe in God.¹³ Evil, in short, far from standing as a threat to theism, becomes instead what drives it.¹⁴

III. God and Evil in “On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy”

Despite the implications of the argument outlined in the preceding section, Kant does not explicitly present it as a theodicy in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. But just one year later, in MPT, he does.

The overall structure of this generally neglected essay may be framed as having three main stages. In the first, Kant surveys what he regards as the standard theodicies found in the philosophical tradition. In the second, he distinguishes between these standard “doctrinal” theodicies and what he calls “authentic theodicy,” a theodicy that, as we shall see, leverages his Moral Argument. Then, in the third stage, the “Concluding Remark,” Kant emphasizes the practical nature of Authentic Theodicy, highlighting the moral importance of doxical sincerity.

The terminological distinction between “doctrinal” and “authentic” theodicy has its origins in Gottfried Achenwall's *Jus Naturale* (1763), the textbook Kant used when teaching natural law, as well as his notes on this text. Therein, a distinction is given between a lawmaker providing an interpretation of his own law versus a third party interpreting that law, say a lawyer or court. Because the former is an interpretation given by the author himself, the intent of the law is known and thus the interpretation is named “authentic.” By contrast, a third party does not have access to the author's intent and instead uses one or another principle of interpretation. Such interpretation is thus “doctrinal,” in the sense that it flows from some doctrine of interpretation (27:1384).¹⁵

Because theoretical reason for Kant has no insight into things in themselves, theodicies given by this faculty are removed from insight into the true intent of the legislator (God). Practical Reason, however, makes possible an Authentic Theodicy since it has such insight due to it being “the same reason through which we form our concept of God ... as a moral and wise being” (8:264). In fact, it is the same faculty that is both responsible for our judgements about whether something is evil and responsible for the “concept of the divine being that we now hold to be correct” (A818/B846). Hence, if practical reason finds there to be evil in the world, but at the same time also holds that there exists a “moral and wise” divinity, not only can it be claimed that there cannot be any contradiction here since reason cannot come into contradiction with itself (6:224). It can also be claimed, as discussed in the preceding section, that one version of the Moral Argument, and thus one need of practical reason, is indeed to posit a “moral and wise” divinity so as to bolster our commitment to morality in the face of evil. There is thus, even without any particular theoretical accounting of how ECIs are mitigated by God, a formal requirement that they must be so mitigated. Otherwise, reason (a) would in fact come into conflict with itself; and, further (b), the Moral Argument could not be used as it was in the Third *Critique* to provide a response to “all the evils of poverty, illness and untimely death.” (5:452).

Kant emphasizes, however, that where doctrinal theodicies are products of a “*ratiocinating* (speculative) reason” authentic theodicy reflects “an *efficacious* practical reason” (8:264). What this means is that because the practical need for theism would be undermined should it still leave open despair over the evils of the world, this need calls as well for the “mere dismissal of all objections against divine wisdom” (8:264), even without any ratiocination as to the specifics of how God and evil are found to be compatible. It is, rather, the same practical need that drives the belief in God which also demands their compatibility. And thus, as discussed in the preceding section, insofar as the Moral Argument has P2 grounding P1, such a relationship between premises is not only for the purpose of reconciling the two claims, but, upon that purpose, the content of P1 (i.e. the concept of God as “moral and wise”) is both formed and affirmed.

different enough to counter the Symmetry Objection. One example of a Skeptical Theist providing an argument for P1, though as a response to the Symmetry Objection, is Poston (2014) discussed above.

¹³ I think it may be debated whether or not the compatibility between evil and God under Kant's moral religion is to be understood as a compatibility between ACEs and God, or a denial of ACEs so that God is compatible with evil (as just ECIs). Perhaps one could model this either way. However, I have opted for the latter. This is because I take the logic of PE to be that P1 and P2 are incompatible and so standard solutions would opt to make them compatible by the introduction of an MF (or skeptical theism's view), and so I am locating Kant's solution in this context. P2 threatens our moral resolve, which in turn directs us to accept P1 so that we can then deny P2, even though we do not have a positive conception of how through God MFs diminish ACEs to ECIs. I suppose one could alternately render Kant's solution to be that OG and ACEs are compatible, even though we have no positive account of how. I don't think this alternative would alter the general practical position I am here advancing, though I can see the alternative meriting further examination.

¹⁴ One might even propose that the more evil one is aware of the greater the need for theism. This may be seen as intimated in the Concluding Remark of MPT, which will be discussed below.

¹⁵ Kant also uses the same terminological distinction elsewhere, such as when discussing how one interprets the Bible (6:114, 7:66) as well as scientific vs. metaphysical interpretations of nature (22:172-4).

Nevertheless, to theoretical reason, and to philosophers so guided, this will likely be unsatisfying. For how can we accept *that* evil and God are compatible without knowing *how*? But this is par for the course for Kant. It is part of his analysis of theoretical reason that it will always seek out the “unconditioned condition,” i.e., seek out a complete explanation despite our epistemic limits. Hence, like the overreach explored in the *Critique of Pure Reason*’s Transcendental Dialectic, or perhaps even more aptly, like the overreach Kant is concerned with in what he calls the Parerga attached to each part of *Religion*, “Reason, conscious of its impotence to satisfy its moral needs, extends itself to extravagant ideas which might make up for this lack, though it is not suited to this enlarged domain” (6:52).¹⁶

Moral Religion, by contrast, is always going to be more reticent than what speculative reason demands. Hence, while on practical grounds we can affirm *that* God and evil are reconciled, or *that* we can become “well pleasing to God,” it can do this without having to also tell us *how*. This is not only because of our epistemic limits, but because the goal here is not understanding but motivation. While there may be times where we would not be morally motivated without having some cognitive purchase on the matter at issue, it is quite fair to say that speculation can often be of little motivational support. One might think, *perhaps* the free will defense is adequate, or *perhaps* a soul-making theodicy is more salutary. But if we see PE, as did Kant in the Example of the Righteous Atheist, as devastating to our moral motivation, the *maybes* of speculation do little good.

This is why Kant devotes the lengthy Concluding Remark of MPT to the issue of sincerity. Although some interpreters have chosen to read this section as the true purpose of MPT, turning MPT into just a vehicle for a political attack on the confessional requirements imposed by Frederick William II,¹⁷ that is at best just a consequence of the main point, which is to contrast the “subtle reasoning” of doctrinal solutions to PE as opposed to the practical character of Authentic Theodicy.

For, this theodicy of “an *efficacious* practical reason” (8:264) would not succeed if the agent were less sincere in his beliefs, if he were to merely hold that there is a God as an “as if” hypothesis, a dalliance of the philosophical mind, a pretend game isolated to one’s pedagogy or academic publications. The point of his theodicy is rather far more visceral: life loses its meaning, our commitment to morality is ruptured, despair overtakes us in the face of all the “[d]eceit, violence, and envy” among human beings, all the “evils of poverty, illness, and untimely death” wrought by nature, and the “purposeless chaos of matter” whereby, in the end, “one wide grave engulfs [us] all” (5:452). Sincerity here matters because, without it, theism really will not do the practical work it is supposed to—offering the hope and comfort we need to avoid despair.¹⁸

IV. Theodicy and the Highest Good

We find discussions of the Highest Good in each of the *Critiques*, in the *Religion*, and in many essays of the 1780s and 1790s. I have argued elsewhere that Kant never deviates from a “theological” and “post-mortem” conception of the doctrine (Pasternack 2017, 2023), which is uniformly treated as the “distribution of happiness in exact proportion to morality” (5:110). Kant also continues to represent this distribution as brought about by God and being post-mortem. In two quick passages from the 1790s which reinforce this, Kant describes the afterlife as the “state in which man’s weal or woe is to be allotted to him in proportion to his moral worth” (8:418) and the domain for the “consequences which are commensurate to the moral behavior of such beings” (20:295).

Accordingly, this life is presented as the domain whereby we strive to become worthy of happiness, facing various challenges and working towards a disposition through which we prioritize morality over self-interest. Hence, under this reading of the Highest Good, one would think that Kant holds a soul-making theodicy, justifying the evils of this life as needed for us to morally advance.

However, if this view fairly represents Kant on the Highest Good, then it would seem that both before and after MPT he made use of a doctrinal theodicy, one that seems quite close to both the doctrinal theodicies he enumerates as IIc and IIc.

In the case of the former, we are told that the purpose of this life and its suffering is to give us the opportunity to become worthy of a “future happiness,” a “hoped-for superabundant blessedness” (8:260). Kant’s response here is somewhat cryptic: “in this way one can indeed cut the knot loose through an appeal to the highest wisdom which will it, but one cannot untie the knot, which is what theodicy claims to do” (8:260). We

¹⁶ One such example of this dialectic is that while based upon the logic of *ought implies can*, Kant holds that it must be possible for us to overcome the moral hindrances he associates with Original Sin and become “well pleasing to God,” even if we may need divine aid to assist us in our efforts, reason oversteps in its attempts to gain purchase on the “Means of Grace,” resulting in the many “extravagant ideas” of soteriology. All that we can hold, Kant maintains, is that given *ought implies can*, we must be able to become “well pleasing to God,” not even knowing whether or not it is something we can accomplish on our own or whether some supplementary “cooperation from above” (6:52) is also needed. Yet, speculative reason, unsatisfied by this, will naturally advance doctrines as to whether or not we, in fact, are so capable through our capacities alone, or if not, what precisely God does to aid us and what precisely we must do in relation to that putative aid.

¹⁷ This view has been advanced by Loades (1985, 42) and Shell (2011, 31). From correspondence, this is also a view held by Wood.

¹⁸ The practical impact of PE is not just a minor upset in the course of one’s life, but the damage done to our moral vocation, if not our sense of life as meaningful altogether. And so what is needed as a response is what Kierkegaard calls “the passion of faith.” This is, here where Kant most decisively anticipates Kierkegaard, in articulating the dialectic between “infinite resignation” and the “absolute relationship to the absolute.” For the answer to the former can only be had through the latter, and the willing of the latter is because of the former. The certainty here is not because of the epistemic merits of a demonstration of theoretical reason. It is rather a “voluntary determination” made by the will as the only authentic way out of meaninglessness. For more discussion of how Kant anticipates Kierkegaard, see Fremstedal (2014) and Green (cite).

may take this to mean: we may grant this view as a solution in general terms, but it does not tell us anything about the rules for worthiness, why God chose this, or the nature of the “future happiness.”

In the case of the latter, God ultimately will judge us, and reward or punish us accordingly in a “future world” (8:262). But Kant rejects this theodicy because, so long as it is constructed by theoretical reason, it would have to be construed in terms of the laws of nature, and thus we can’t think of the “future world” as having a morally-guided system which distributes happiness in proportion to moral worth, but rather the “agreement of human fate with a divine justice ... is just as little to be expected there as here” (8:262).

The essential critique of Ilc is that theoretical reason is unable to build the picture of the post-mortem world in which there would be justice. But I think the more interesting theodicy is that of Ilc, for it seems to parallel the theological conception of the Highest Good: in this life we struggle morally, and in the next life those who are worthy will find happiness. Hence, the Righteous Atheist sees “all the evils of poverty, illness and untimely death” (5:452) and succumbs to despair because they lack a belief in God and the immortality of the soul (5:452).¹⁹ So, the message seems to be: in order to sustain yourself morally, you need to accept these postulates, which in effect seems to mean, you can be OK with the evils of this world because there is still a larger moral order of things, filled in through a future life which reconciles morality and happiness.

So, if this is a fair portrayal of the example of the Righteous Atheist, and likewise of the Moral Argument tied to Kant’s doctrine of the Highest Good, is there a difference between them and Ilc? Does Kant’s rejection of Ilc imply a rejection of the Highest Good? And if so, why does he in the *Religion* and in various essays of the 1790s continue to appeal to that doctrine, including its post-mortem account of reward and punishment? Note, further, that we do *not* find Job referencing the Highest Good.²⁰ He does not say, “all this suffering I’ve gone through is fine, for there will be a greater happiness yet to come.” He does not say, “this was just a trial, one that is needed, in order to realize the worthiness that will then be allotted happiness in a future life.” Rather, he writes “He has decided” and “He does as he wills” (8:265).²¹

Given this tension, let me propose the following. We can differentiate between a doctrinal “solution” ala Ilc, whose distinctive feature is presenting worldly evils as trials for soul-making and its consequent reward (i.e., using these as MFs so that worldly evils are not ACEs), versus a commitment to the Highest Good flowing out of our need to ensure that our encounters with evil do not do “damage to the moral disposition” (5:452). The difference here is certainly a subtle one, as there now seems to be both a properly moral versus a doctrinal way to make use of the Highest Good. But what does seem to be suggested in this, given that Job does not refer to the Highest Good, is that Authentic Theodicy reflects the particular moment: I find that the evils of the world can do damage to my moral disposition, but in response, I am taking on a commitment to preserve my moral striving. The positive conceptualization in the form of the Highest Good thus is not where PE is resolve for Kant, but it is in an antecedent moment: a choice, or as put in the second *Critique*, a “voluntary determination” (5:146) that it is not all a “purposeless chaos of matter” (5:452). It is thus that choice, as a response to our moral needs, rather than a conceptual scheme, an MF which tells us *how* it is not, which drives Kant’s Authentic Theodicy.

V. Skeptical Theism and Fideism

Before concluding, let us return to the relationship between Authentic Theodicy, Fideism and Skeptical Theism, and see more fully how the Kantian solution to PE navigates through these positions.

First, I take the philosophical concern about Fideism to be principally that it grants legitimacy to beliefs without regard to epistemic norms. At its worst, Fideism might be seen as permitting the pronouncement of any claim as not only true, but immune from criticism. In a world where mendacity has become acceptable in so many quarters of society, where public policy, especially in the United States, is shaped by religious dogmas, and where critical thinking is mocked as leftist indoctrination, it is fair to see Fideism as a clear and present danger to not only civilized society, but the continuity of life on Earth. Yet, more moderate forms of Fideism exist, including those that would limit it to only the supersensible, i.e., to claims outside the scope of empirical and rational argumentation.

Transcendental Idealism reflects this distinction, as its “room for faith” is made by setting out a limit to knowledge, distinguishing between that which falls within empirical and rational argumentation, and a domain sequestered from the epistemic norms proper that apply only to the field of possible experience. But this “room,” for Kant, does not give allowance to whatever someone might want to assert regarding things in themselves. As seen in the Transcendental Dialectic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant rejects all theoretical speculation about the supersensible nature of the self, the cosmos, and even God. He also rejects the legitimacy of beliefs that have mere “private validity,” i.e., beliefs based upon wishful thinking or other private

¹⁹ It is often overlooked, but it should be noted that Kant presents the Righteous Atheist as having denied *both* God and immortality.

²⁰ I believe the last reference to the Highest Good in MPT is at 8:264, where Kant proposes that we must “think together” two concepts in it, but we don’t have a way to positively conceptualize it. Those two concepts are there characterized in terms of what is “our own deed” and what is “at the same time also ... the effect of a higher being” (8:264). This, on the one hand, echoes theodicy Ilc, but more broadly, how becoming worthy of happiness is “our own deed” yet remaining still is the question of divine *concursum*.

²¹ Let me add that I think it would be an error to propose that Job’s faith is not perfected until after the visions given to him by God. That claim strikes me as very unKantian! Job is presented as an exemplar of moral faith, and thus to propose that something of faith is acquired through revelation goes against his account of the relationship between reason and revelation in the *Religion* (6:103, 6:155). While Kant leaves open the space for revelation, it can never be a need. That is, the proper “*pure religious faith*” should flow from one’s moral understanding. Revelation (or alleged revelation) can contain the same content (and could even come before one gets to that understanding), but there can be no content from revelation that is necessary for what he calls “genuine” moral religion (see 6:12).

interests of particular agents. And further, the primary aim of Kant's *Religion* is to determine which core Christian doctrines merit belief in virtue of how they benefit our moral interests, versus those that are to be rejected as injurious to these interests. Accordingly, he explains in the preface to its second edition, that through each section of the text, he will hold up various "fragments" of the Christian faith to "moral concepts" in order to determine their "unity" or "compatibility" with pure rational religion (6:12-13). Kant thus is not a Fideist: he does not sanction an open-ended "will to believe" or the adoption of beliefs by giving custom or tradition authority.

In fact, just before the publication of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he was criticized for what seemed to some to be a bald Fideism where his religious claims had nothing but the "merely subjective ground of the wish" (5:143n). To this objection, Kant responds that he is arguing instead from "a need of reason arising from an objective determining ground of the will" (5:143n). We thus see in the *Religion* arguments for religious institutions (6:94-102), arguments against Vicarious Atonement (6:72), arguments for Original Sin (6:19-44), and arguments against the Passive Reception of Grace (6:51-2). Thus, while Kant does share with the Fideist that there is room for legitimate belief absent epistemic warrant, he also holds that such legitimacy is not open-ended but gains its justification from our moral needs. The proper function of religion for Kant is in its relevance to our moral lives: what does and does not merit belief must be based upon that interest.

Turning now to Skeptical Theism, its distinguishing claim is that we are not so epistemically situated as to be able to determine whether or not all ECIs are ACEs, and because of that, we can sustain our theism despite PE. With respect to our epistemic situation, Kant would concur that at least theoretical reason is not equipped to assess the question at issue. Theoretical reason cannot tell us if some putative MF is a genuine MF, nor tell us whether some ECI escapes all MFs. Transcendental Idealism and Skeptical Theism thus share at least this perspective in common.

Furthermore, one of the aims of this paper is to show that the intent behind Skeptical Theism can likewise be met by way of Kant's Authentic Theodicy. When the Skeptical Theist argues that we are not so epistemically situated as to be able to assess whether or not all ECIs are ACEs, the skepticism so used has implications for theism itself. For if I am going to claim that I am not so epistemically situated as to be able to assess whether or not the evils of the world are part of the divine plan, why should I regard myself as so epistemically situated as to be able to assess whether or not the goods of the world are part of the divine plan? For all I know, God would have some reason beyond my ken as to why the universe should not have order, or why free moral agents should not exist, or why there should be no motion in the universe, or why there should be anything in existence beyond God's own self.

I have referred to this rebuttal as the Symmetry Objection and hopefully I have indicated how Kant's Authentic Theodicy can avoid it. It does so by way of the distinction between theoretical and practical reason, and the epistemic strictures that are made specific to the former but not the latter in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and subsequent texts. In fact, from the preface to its 1787 edition, Kant makes it a point to explain that the epistemic strictures applied to the former are motivated, in part, so that practical reason can provide the ground for religious assent. In other words, Kant does not merely separate the skepticism directed towards theoretical/speculative theodicy strategies from the practical, but he uses the skepticism in the case of the former for the purposes of making "room" for the latter.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, Authentic Theodicy recasts how PE is formulated, replacing the standard, independent relationship between its two main premises with a formulation that makes one of the premises logically dependent upon the other. As such, instead of the theist finding themselves in the difficult situation of trying to reconcile P1 and P2, Kant has advanced a practical argument for P1 grounded upon P2. For, unlike a faith based upon theoretical reason (or just cultural convention), Moral Faith finds its ground in our moral needs, each of which reflect different ways in which evil (be it our innate propensity to it or its manifestations in the world around us) impacts our moral resolve and must be addressed for the sake of protecting that resolve.

VI. Conclusion

The principal aim of this paper has been to bring Kant into dialogue with contemporary scholarship on PE, indicating that he offers a very distinctive response to PE, which can be seen if one takes a step back from its standard formulation, and considers both the logical relationship between its two main premises as well as what grounds are used in support of theism. Note, however, that what this paper has *not* done is advance a robust reconstruction or defense of the underlying Kantian commitments behind his Authentic Theodicy. These would include, for example, a Kantian account of how we are committed to morality, the nature of Kantian morality, and why theism in particular, for Kant, is the needed recourse in the face of despair before the evils of the world.²² Views on such matters are, of course, to be found broadly within the Kantian literature, and are considered more fully in some of the other chapters of this collection.

Moreover, it has to be understood that the above commitments are not going to be shared by many contemporary philosophers of religion, and thus it could be that while this paper provides the Kantian with a tool

²² It may for example be argued that hope for a better future brought about through improved social institutions or technological advances could likewise be taken as a response to evil. Perhaps the appeal of this alternative underlies as well the divide between the "this-worldly" versus "theological" conception of the Highest Good. I hope to have a monograph on the Highest Good which advocates for its theological conception and how, as well, Kant sees theism as needed as a response to evil. For the time being, one can consider the textual case for the theological conception in Pasternack 2017. See also Fugate 2016: 315-19 for some discussion of why theism is needed as a response to evil.

to connect to contemporary scholarship, non-Kantians would need much more than what has been provided here to be persuaded. Consider thusly, this paper, as expressed in the Introduction, is intended to provide a template or framework through which contemporary philosophers of religion can consider how Kant's practical response to PE may relate to the current philosophical landscape. In one key respect, Kant's Authentic Theodicy parallels the position of Skeptical Theism: although both advocate for a sort of "negative wisdom" (8:263), if the argument of the preceding section is tenable, in Kant's case the Symmetry Objection does not apply.

For Kant, the function of faith is to offset moral hindrances so that we can sustain our efforts amidst all the evils that challenge us, both the "radical evil" within, and the suffering and injustices which surround us all. Kant thus turns PE and theodicy, as he does with religion in general, into practical rather than theoretical problems; and from this vantage, I have argued that a fundamentally different, unique strategy is thereby offered, a strategy that provides a substantial new way of thinking about this perennial problem.²³

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