

1. Intro: Three Kinds of “Moral” argument

1781, First Critique: Morality is “admirable” but offers no incentive of its own. Divinely-secured happiness in the afterlife is part of my motivation for being moral and “therefore the system of morality is inseparably combined with the system of happiness.” (A809-12/B837-41)

1788, Second Critique: I ought to will the highest good -- the state in which virtue (mine and others’) is precisely apportioned to happiness. Not a perfect society but a perfectly just society. If I am rational, I am also thereby committed to the existence of God and an afterlife as conditions of the real possibility of the highest good.

1790’s, Third Critique, Theory and Practice, Religion: I ought to will my own virtue, and the moral law is the only source of motivation. But I am then morally justified in adopting various pro-attitudes towards God and the afterlife as a way of sustaining resolve and avoiding despair.

Big picture questions: Suppose we have *prima facie* moral justification for adopting strategies that help us avoid despair. But can those strategies also reasonably involve believing certain things? Forming Belief (Glaube) in certain things? And can the objects of such hope, belief, or Belief be measurable aspects of the empirical world, or must they be supersensible items whose truth is undecidable? Finally, does it matter if these things are true, or is all the value here in holding-for-true (*Fürwahrhalten*)? If the latter, then how does this avoid becoming an exercise in mere wish-fulfillment and self-deception?

2. What may I hope?

This is Kant’s third key question in philosophy: it “concerns happiness” – indeed, “all hoping is for happiness” (A805-6/B833-4). But from a rational point of view the hope for happiness must also conform to the requirements of morality and justice:

Summum Bonum: [E]veryone has grounds to hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his acts... (*Pure* A809/B837)

Efficacy: “Each must, on the contrary, so conduct himself as if everything depended on him. Only on this condition may he hope that a higher wisdom will provide the fulfillment of his well-intentioned effort.” (*Religion* 6:101)

“Each must.” Still, Kant recognizes that sustaining such activity often requires the hope that our moral efforts will make some small contribution to bringing about the highest good.

We have a “natural need (*natürlichen Bedürfnisse*), which if not met would be a hindrance to moral resolve [*Hinderniß der moralischen EntschlieÙung*], to conceive some sort of final end of all our doings and non-doings taken as a whole, one that reason finds justifiable.” (*Religion* 6:5).

The “first degree” of the propensity to evil in *Religion* I:

First: the frailty (*fragilitas*) of human nature is expressed even in the complaint of an Apostle, “What I would, that I do not!” In other words, I adopt the good (the law) into the maxim of my will, but this good, which objectively, in its ideal conception (*in thesi*), is an irresistible incentive, is subjectively (*in hypothesis*), when the maxim is to be followed, the weaker (in comparison with inclination).

De-moralization =

(1) a general despair in the face of the clear unlikelihood that full justice will arrive soon and that our individual efforts will make a difference in that regard.

(2) Partly as a result of this, a psychological de-moralization: a loss of resolve to do what we continue to think we morally ought to do.

Kant was **not a traditional divine command theorist or a consequentialist** (of the Epicurean, utilitarian, or eudaimonist sort) in ethics. “Morality... needs neither the idea of another being above him in order to recognize his duty nor as an incentive anything other than the law itself in order to observe it....” (*Rel.* 6:3). But **also not a Stoic** – in the moral proof he is clearly focused on the rationality of our hope for appropriate **happiness**. And in this third version of the proof he explicitly characterizes that hope as stabilizing our “*moralischen EntschlieÙung*.” This is not consequentialism, but it is a consequence-dependent moral psychology.

“A righteous man (like Spinoza) who takes himself to be firmly persuaded that there is no God and... also no future life...does not demand any advantage for himself from his conformity to the moral law, whether in this world or another; rather, he would simply and unselfishly bring about the good to which that holy law directs all his powers. But his strivings (*Bestreben*) have limits.... Deceit, violence, and envy always surround him, even though he is himself honest, peaceable, and benevolent. The other righteous people that he encounters at times will, in spite of all their worthiness to be happy, nevertheless be subject by nature, which pays no respect to that, to all the evils (*Übeln*) of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death, just like all the other animals on earth. It will always remain so until one wide grave engulfs them all together (whether honest or dishonest, here it makes no difference) and hurls them, the very ones who were capable of believing that they were the final purpose (*Endzweck*) of all creation, back into the abyss of purposeless material chaos (*Schlund des zwecklosen Chaos der Materie*) from which they all were drawn.” (*Judgment* 5:452)

Righteous Spinoza’s Dilemma: either he will “certainly have to give up his end [of being righteous] as impossible” or “he will have to accept (*annehmen*) the existence of a moral author of the world (*Welturheber*), i.e. of God, from a practical point of view” (ibid).

“It does not matter how many doubts may be raised against my hopes by citing history -- doubts which, if they were proved, could move me to desist from a task so apparently futile; as long as these doubts cannot be made quite certain I cannot exchange the duty for the rule of prudence not to attempt the impracticable” (“Theory and Practice” 8: 309)

3. A moral argument from the threat of despair

(1) I ought to do what is morally right. [Independent argument]

(2) For me, it would be *demoralizing* in the first sense (i.e. it would lead to despair) not to be able to hope that there is a moral order by which a just arrangement (i.e. a “moral world”) will come about, for then we would have to regard it as certain that the entire history of the world will not be good on the whole, no matter what we do. [Empirical premise]

(3) Such demoralization has an enervating effect on my resolve, and is thus *de-moralizing* in the second sense: I will no longer perform actions that I take to be morally good or required. [Empirical premise]

(4) Double demoralization of this sort is seriously morally undesirable. [1, Conceptual truth]

(5) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage for me in being able to hope that there is a moral world order. [2, 3, 4]

(6) A deep and life-structuring hope that *p* requires firm positive assent that *p* is really practically possible. [Independent argument]

(7) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage for me in having firm positive assent that a moral world order is really practically possible. [5, 6]

(8) If a being or state of affairs is really practically possible, then there must *be* something in the actual world that can account for that fact. [Conceptual truth]

(9) The actual existence of God provides the only adequate account of the real practical possibility of a moral world order. [Theoretical premise]

(10) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage for me in being able to have firm positive assent that God exists. [7, 9]

(11) There are no good epistemic reasons either for or against the existence of God. [Transc Dialectic]

(12) Rational belief requires good epistemic reasons. [Kant’s evidentialism]

(13) Therefore, belief in God’s existence is irrational. [11, 12]

(14) Rational Belief (*Vernunftglaube*) does not require good epistemic reasons; it can instead be based on good moral or pragmatic reasons. [Conceptual truth]

(15) *Überzeugung* and *Glaube* are the two kinds of firm positive assent. [Conceptual truth]

(16) Therefore, other things being equal, Belief (though not belief) that God exists is morally (though not epistemically) justified for me. [10, 13, 14, 15]

The result is not ordinary belief (*Überzeugung*) or even opinion (*Meinung*) but rather mere *hope* for a moral world order sustained by Belief (*Glaube*) in the existence of the only being who can and would bring it about.

But isn't this still a kind of self-deception or a pernicious form of Feuerbachian wish-fulfillment?

Maybe, but here are some reasons to resist this conclusion:

- a. It's not required: there might be moral saints who don't need such hope or Belief.
- b. Even with respect to those for whom Belief in a supreme superintendent is morally crucial, Kant is *not* recommending self-deception. For:
 - (i) the issue is essentially epistemically ambiguous and undecidable: there is (can be?) no persuasive evidence for or against the existence of such a being;
 - (ii) the Belief the argument underwrites is *morally* (not epistemically) justified;
 - (iii) this moral justification is defeasible. If we find out later that there are moral disadvantages to this sort of Belief – that adopting it either constitutes or leads to the violation of some other duty, or fails to sustain the resolve that it promised – then it must be given up. Finally,
 - (iv) the goal is not merely to feel better or satisfy our wishes but to receive *essential* sustenance in the moral life.

4. A moral argument for difference-making?

(1*) I ought to abstain from purchasing the products of a morally objectionable part of _____ (industrial food system, sweatshop labor system, etc.). [Independent argument or intuition]

(2*) Despair would result from not being able to at least hope that my abstinence will make a significant positive difference with respect to _____ (the plight of animals, workers, the environment, the global poor, etc.) [Empirical premise]

(3*) Such despair is seriously morally undesirable. [Conceptual truth]

(4*) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage in being able to hope that my abstinence will make a significant positive difference with respect to _____. [from (1*)-(3*)]

(5*) Therefore, other things equal, hope that my abstinence will make a significant positive difference with respect to _____ is morally justified. [from (4*)]

(6*) A deep and life-structuring hope that *p* requires firm positive assent that *p* is really practically possible. [Independent argument]

(7*) Therefore, other things equal, belief or Belief that it's really practically possible that my abstinence will make a significant positive difference is morally justified. [from (5*)-(6*)]

##(8*) The existence of God, karma, etc. provides the only adequate account of the real practical possibility that my abstinence will make a significant positive difference. [Theoretical premise]

(8**) The existence of God, karma, etc. provides an adequate account of the real practical possibility that my abstinence will make a significant positive difference. [Theoretical premise]

5. Other morally justified options for sustaining resolve

a. Supersensible mechanisms

- Classical Providence, Kantian providence, other variations (e.g. karma).
- But: substantive commitments to supersensible mechanisms
- And: tendency towards quietism (cf. Franz Rozenzweig, Mark Driscoll (qtd in Mehta 2013)).

b. Hope for “Pivotality” (Norcross 2004, Almeida & Bernstein 2000)

- It is physically possible that you are on the threshold and make the difference.
- But it seems incredibly hard to hope for this, rather than to despair
- Moreover, hoping for a very improbable may be practically irrational by making us ignore important alternatives, and epistemically irrational insofar as we overestimate chances.

c. Symbolic value, Integrity (Hill 1979, Appiah 1986, Adams 2002)

- “Stand with the good,” avoid “moral taint.”
- Grace Boey: “I just felt *sad* every time I looked down at my plate...where I used to see a pork chop I now see a tail-less, crusty-eyed, psychotic sow. And it’s important to me that I keep this aversion going: I have no wish to remain in a system I don’t believe in, even if [my withdrawal] should make no utilitarian impact” (2016, 27).
- Not very consequentialist-friendly, somewhat mysterious axiology

d. Activist, collective, political action

- No guarantee against despair, but may sustain hope due to higher chance of difference-making.
- Taken alone, this is compatible with “opportunism” whereby I work with the group on activities that seem most effective, but then purchase whatever I want in private in the knowledge that it almost certainly doesn’t make a difference (see Almeida/Bernstein 2000, Chignell 2016)
- Kant is focused on the individual as a contributing cause through her “cooperation” (*Mitwirkung*) with God/nature/others. (But does this part follow from the moral argument?)

Concluding remark: The need to sustain resolve and avoid despair in the face of perceived inefficacy provides *prima facie moral* justification for taking one or more of these approaches (or perhaps others), but not for taking any one in particular. In each case there are propositions (about the actuality or possibility of various things) that the subject has to hold-for-true. But all the value here seems to be in the holding-for-true, and not in the truth itself.