Five Replies to Kant's Moral Despair Argument against Atheism

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Introduction

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant rejects the traditional metaphysical – i.e., the ontological, cosmological and physico-theological (or teleological) – proofs for God’s existence. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that our duties are not grounded in the divine will, but solely in the moral law (G 4:431). Otherwise, morality would be based on religion, which would amount to theological morality and heteronomy. Hence, faith in God seems to be no requisite for a virtuous life and atheism seems to be compatible with morality within Kant’s philosophy. Yet, in many of his other works, including the *Critique of Practical Reason*, *Critique of Judgment*, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and his different Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion, Kant argues that ‘morality leads inevitably to religion’ (CPrR 5:125; Rel 6:6) and insists that faith in God is necessary for the intelligibility of the possibility of the highest good, i.e. the harmonious and proportionate union of virtue and happiness, as the final end of the moral law. Hence, Kant defends moral theism understood as faith in God based on morality, viz. ‘a conviction of the existence of God on practical grounds’ (LPR/Volckmann 28:1151). Furthermore, Kant condemns atheism on moral grounds arguing that – by rejecting the idea of God as a sufficient cause of the highest good – it rules out additional religious incentives to morality (CPR A 812, B 841), leads to moral despair, weakens respect for the moral law, damages the moral disposition (CJ 5:540), causes social disorder (O 8:146) and robs fellow citizens of incentives to morality viewed as commanded and enforced by God (LE/Vigilantius 27:531). This paper explores (1) Kant’s moral criticism that atheism leads to moral despair by lacking the cognitively determinate and psychological reassuring view offered by rational faith for rendering the possibility of the highest good intelligible, and (2) five rational, non-theistic strategies that atheists could embrace for upholding the possibility of the highest good and resisting moral despair.

Kant’s moral despair argument against atheism

Kant’s practical arguments for rational faith in God (CPrR 5:110–14, 124–46) are directed to the possibility of the highest good. Kant’s argument starts from the unquestionable validity of the moral law as a fact of reason. This law commands categorically through reason. If the moral law commands us to pursue the highest good as the final end, we have to do so and the highest good has to be possible (CPrR 5:57). If this were not the case, we would not act rationally – for rational agency entails that if we intend an end by our agency, it should be possible to realize this end – and the moral law that commands us to seek this end would be invalid. However, given our finite (physical) capacities and the amoral nature of the world, which does not systematically connect virtue with proportionate happiness, it remains unclear how we are to establish the highest good. Yet, if there were an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent author of the world who is at the same time a holy, beneficent and just world ruler, i.e., God according to moral theism, such a being could supplement our limited endeavours and complete the realization of the highest good. Since theoretical reason cannot demonstrate the impossibility of God’s existence and rational faith in God does not conflict with theoretical reason, we are justified in assuming the existence of God (CPrR 5:135–43). Moreover, Kant argues that rational faith in God is the only cognitive pathway for understanding how the highest good is to be brought about. Hence, he concludes that we have to believe in God (CPrR 5:125–6, 142–6). Faith in God is thus grounded in the necessity of being
able to think the possibility of the highest good so that we can rationally execute the commands of the moral law.” Precisely for this reason, Kant argues that faith in God is morally necessary and that morality inevitably leads to religion (CPrR 5:125, Rel 6:6) in this sense that religion, while not being necessary for grounding the principles of morality, is necessary for rendering the completion of the final object of morality intelligible. Consequently, Kant contends that if one doubts the possibility of God’s existence, one has to give up the highest good, fall into despair and hold all moral laws for empty imagination.

Kant’s criticism that atheism leads to moral despair is most fiercely expressed in the Critique of Judgment, where Kant conceives of a righteous man who is convinced that there is no God and who ‘would merely unselfish establish the good’ (CJ 5:450). Yet, so Kant argues,

his effort is limited; and from nature he can, to be sure, expect some contingent assistance here and there, but never a lawlike agreement in accordance with constant rules [...] with the ends to act in behalf of which he feels himself bound and impelled. Deceit, violence, and envy will always surround him, even though he is himself honest, peaceable, and benevolent; and the righteous ones besides himself that he will still encounter will, in spite of all their worthiness to be happy, nevertheless be subject by nature, which pays no attention to that, to all the evils of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death, [...] and will always remain thus until one wide grave engulfs them all together (whether honest or dishonest, it makes no difference here) and flings them [...] back into the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter from which they were drawn. – The end, therefore, which this well-intentioned person had and should have had before his eyes in his conformity to the moral law, he would certainly have to give up as impossible; or, if he would remain attached to the appeal of his inner moral vocation and not weaken the respect, by which the moral law immediately influences him to obedience, by the nullity of the only idealistic final end that is adequate to its high demand [...], then he must assume the existence of a moral author of the world, i.e., of God, from a practical point of view, i.e., in order to form a concept of at least the possibility of the final end that is prescribed to him by morality. (CJ 5:452-3)\(^8\)

Kant’s moral despair argument against atheism argument can thus be summarized and reconstructed as follows. Its premises are: (P1) the amoral nature of the world, the failings and sufferings of the righteous and the futility of their moral endeavours offer no perspectives for establishing the highest good; (P2) moral theism offers the only concept, i.e., the existence of an omnipotent, intelligent and just moral world ruler, for rendering the possibility of the highest good intelligible; (P3) (dogmatic) atheism rejects the concept described in (P2). Its main conclusions are: (C1) an atheist has to abandon the highest good; and (C2) (dogmatic) atheism leads to moral despair. It is this argument that I challenge by proposing the following five replies.

**First reply: the appeal to a non-theistic, moral teleology**

Is Kant right in arguing that moral faith in (the idea of) God as a just world ruler provides the only concept for embracing the possibility of the highest good? If not, then we could only mention non-theistic, moral-teleological accounts that render the highest good intelligible, the atheist would not have to abandon the possibility of the highest good. While denying the existence of God, an atheist can still commit himself – because of the authority of the moral law directing an agent to pursue the highest good – to embrace some non-theistic, moral-teleological schema that suffices to be able to think the possibility of the highest good. An atheist can assume an intelligent, rational world order through which a moral teleology necessary for establishing the highest good can be presupposed. For example, Fichte holds that the morally well-disposed subject believes that the world in which he acts is in conformity with his moral actions without believing in (the idea of) a personal and transcendent God over and above this impersonal, rational and teleological world order. Theravada Buddhism embraces the concept of karma as a moral-teleological mechanism that is operative in nature and that lets us think a harmony of virtue and happiness but that does not appeal to a God. By analogy, an atheist may dismiss moral theism and yet ground the possibility of the highest good in some (unknown) moral-teleological mechanism in nature through which the natural and the moral world are brought into harmony and through which the highest good will be attained by virtue of moral agency. A drawback to such an account seems to be that it is less cognitively determinate and specific than Kant’s moral theism regarding the
precise mechanism of how the highest good is to be brought about. Yet, as Byrne (2007:93) notices, avoiding commitment to ‘metaphysical assumptions containing rich pictures of the possible mechanism behind moral teleology is more “Critical” than Kant’s own apparatus of postulates.’ Hence, an atheist embracing the possibility of a non-theistic conception of the realization of the highest good need not necessarily succumb into moral despair.

Second reply: the appeal to a non-theistic, natural teleology

In the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant himself considers the possibility of a non-theistic, natural-teleological conception of the realization of the highest good:

I said above that in accordance with a mere course of nature in the world happiness in exact conformity with moral worth is not to be expected and is to be held impossible, and that therefore the possibility of the highest good [...] can be granted only on the presupposition of a moral author in the world. [...] In fact, the impossibility referred to is merely subjective, that is, our reason finds it impossible for it to conceive, in the mere course of nature, a connection so exactly proportioned and thoroughly purposive between events occurring in the world in accordance with such different laws, although, as with everything else in nature that is purposive, it nevertheless cannot prove – that is, set forth sufficiently on objective grounds – the impossibility of it in accordance with universal laws of nature. (CPrR 5:145)

Kant thus argues that – objectively speaking – there are two equal possibilities for conceiving the highest good: moral theism and natural teleology. He concedes that objective grounds for the possibility that nature itself provides the unification of virtue and happiness in accordance with its own natural laws cannot be ruled out. However, so Kant argues, since human reason is not capable of fathoming in detail how the latter possibility has to be conceived, he concludes that there are compelling subjective grounds for human reason to dispense with this possibility and to prefer the theistic conception of how the highest good is to be brought about:

But as for the way we are to represent this possibility [of the highest good], whether in accordance with universal laws of nature without a wise author presiding over nature or only on the supposition of such an author, reason cannot decide this objectively. Now a subjective condition of reason enters into this, the only way in which it is theoretically possible for it to think the exact harmony of the realm of nature with the realm of morals as the condition of the possibility of the highest good, and at the same time the only way that is conducive to morality. (CPrR 5:145)

Both moral theism and natural teleology are thus two objectively equal ways to represent the possibility of the highest good. The difference between these two options is that the latter is cognitively less determinate and specific: it falls beyond the scope of our reason to conceive how natural teleological laws may establish an exact proportion of happiness and virtue, whereas faith in God as moral world ruler does seem to provide us with a more vivid and concrete account of the possibility of such a harmony. Kant thus concludes that human beings will prefer moral theism for conceiving the possibility of the highest good because the postulate of God is subjectively more comprehensible to our human cognitive faculties than a view according to which the highest good would be in conformity with mere laws of nature.9 Yet, it is important to keep in mind that Kant himself concedes the validity of appealing to a natural teleological world order as an objective alternative for considering the possibility of the highest good without appealing to a supersensible entity. As such, Kant implicitly provides the atheist with a non-theistic account for affirming the possibility of the highest good. And although Kant thinks that moral theism is subjectively more attractive or persuasive for human reason by offering a more specific and determinate account of how the highest good may be brought about, he has no conclusive objective arguments for tipping the balance in favour of moral theism.

Third reply: the appeal to an alternative, ‘negative’ rationality claim
However, appealing to some non-theistic, metaphysical schemes such as a teleological world order for guaranteeing the possibility of the highest good may be a leap to far for some radical atheists as it still relies on some kind of metaphysical faith. Moreover, an atheist may also advocate a Darwinian view on nature and reject the existence of a teleological world order. Yet, even such atheists could still uphold the possibility of the highest good by adopting the moderate epistemic stance that – in spite of what Kant thinks – the impossibility of the highest good is not sufficiently or objectively proven and hence recognize – because of their commitment to the moral law – that the highest good is something valuable to be pursued. As long as there is no sufficient, objective proof for the impossibility of the highest good, there is no reason to regard our moral efforts for realising it as irrational, especially if it is our well-considered free and rational choice to put great value on this moral ideal. This negative rationality claim yields a stance that is genuinely ‘critical’ and that is more consistent with present-day scientific insights and growing secular pluralism in ethics.

The idea that it is not irrational to pursue the highest good as long as its impossibility is not proven does not contradict Kant’s philosophy itself. Both in On the Common Saying and the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant contends that in the case of an end set as a duty it suffices that its possibility is not demonstrably impossible in order to render its pursuit rational. In On the Common Saying, he argues that the thought that a moral end has not yet been realized and for this reason will probably be never realized does not in itself justify to abandon this end ‘as long as its achievement is not demonstrably impossible’ (TP 8:309–10). Kant thus argues that if an end is morally valuable, the absence of proof of the impossibility of it suffices to render our efforts in its behalf rational. In the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant argues that our duty consists in acting in accordance with the idea of a moral end ‘even if there is not the least theoretical probability that it can be achieved, as long as its impossibility cannot be demonstrated either’ (MM 6:354). Once more, Kant contends that if it is a duty to achieve an end, all that is needed to make the pursuit of that end rational is not a guarantee that it can be achieved, but rather the absence of a demonstration that it cannot be achieved. The idea that rational agency directed to pursuing an end set as a duty only requires that the impossibility of the end is not proven – rather than that its possibility has to be proven by postulating God, provides the atheist with a rationally stable alternative to moral theism in order not the abandon the highest good.

This approach also resists Hare’s claim that the atheist has only three options: (1) abandoning his pursuit of the highest good, (2) abandoning his atheism, and (3) staying caught in the dilemma between (1) and (2) (Hare 2006:64). Consequently, Hare argues that if the atheist replies to the dilemma by refusing to abandon his pursuit of the highest good, he has to assume the existence of God: ‘It is not that a person will do this, but that he must. He must, that is to say, if he is to be rational. This is what I mean by saying atheism is, for Kant, rationally unstable’ (Ibid.). Yet, by showing that the atheist need not abandon the pursuit of the highest good by adopting the epistemological stance that this pursuit is not irrational as long as the impossibility of the highest good is not sufficiently proven, not even in the case of a lack of faith in God, which will be argued in the following reply, it can be concluded that Hare’s dilemma fails and that the atheist must not assume God’s existence in order to be able to act rationally.

However, in defence of Kant, it might be argued that the atheist’s approach leaves it unclear how the systematicity and proportionality of virtue and happiness as core feature of the highest good can be guaranteed. Although it suffices to be convinced that the attainment of the highest good is not per se impossible in order to be able to rationally pursue it, one might question whether such an approach suffices for conceiving a systematic and necessary harmony – instead of a merely contingent aggregate – of virtue and happiness in the highest good. It is precisely this feature of systematicity that Kant thinks a righteous atheist like Spinoza lacks in conceptualising the possibility of the highest good. Yet, as we shall see, there are also strands in Kant’s philosophy that do not primarily emphasise this systematic and proportionate union of virtue and happiness, but rather advocate an account of the highest good as a moral world of virtue and happiness conditioned by morality. Furthermore, we can stick to the argument that as long as there is no sufficient proof for the impossibility per se of some harmonious system of virtue and happiness,
there is no reason to conclude that we act irrationally in striving for such a system. With respect to the question of how such a system might be conceived and thought, it seems that Kant’s ethic- theology provides us with a cognitively determinate and – perhaps above all – a psychologically reassuring, hence subjectively more attractive view on the realisability of the highest good: ‘in order to provide my heart with conviction, weight and emphasis, I have need of a God who will make me participate in happiness in accordance with these eternal and unchangeable laws, if I am worthy of it’ (LPR/Pölitz 28:1116–7).

Fourth reply: no sufficient proof for the impossibility of and hope for the highest good in case of a lack of faith

If Kant were really to succeed in arguing that moral theism offers the only pathway for guaranteeing the possibility of the highest good, he would also have to prove its impossibility in case of a lack of faith. But Kant has no real sufficient, objective arguments for this. This is where Kant’s first premise comes in. In fact, Kant relies mainly on empirical and subjective evidence according to which the world’s amoral nature and the failures and sufferings of the righteous rule out the success of man’s moral actions, display their futility and prove the (empirical) impossibility of the highest good. Yet Kant’s evidence here is rooted in a pessimistic anthropological worldview, which is at odds with his optimistic beliefs about the final destiny of mankind in his Lectures on Ethics and On the Common Saying, where he argues that many proofs show that in the course of history the human race has made a substantial progress toward self-perfection (LE/Collins 27:470–1; TP 8:310). Surely, the world taken as a realm of nature is completely amoral and we cannot deny that we are faced with sufferings and failures even of the most virtuous and righteous people. But, contra Kant, I contend that there are enough reasons to be more optimistic in this regard. Despite all its cruelties, mankind’s history has also abundantly shown its moral successes, such as the abolition of slavery, the spreading of democratic regimes, the promotion of equality between men and women, the institution of international human rights organizations, the right to free public opinion and speech, and so on. As Denis (2003:212) rightly notes: ‘despite Kant’s observations about the amoral nature of the world […], our day to day lives give us ample reason to see the world as amenable to our efforts’.

Viewed as such, Kant’s first premise seems to be first and foremost rooted in a particular and pessimistic anthropological stance and hence can neither appeal to universality, nor to objectivity. Moreover, in On the Common Saying, Kant himself recognizes that ‘empirical evidence against the success of […] resolves undertaken on hope does not count for anything’ (TP 8:309). Hence, an atheist who recognizes that the impossibility of the highest good is not objectively proven and who is confident in the future does not have to abandon the highest good and needs not succumb into moral despair. Furthermore, as Wood (1970:160) points out, Kant’s view that amorality of the world and the suffering of the righteous yield moral despair is only provisional and hence limited:

Such a despair must always be premature, in the sense that it is always beyond the power of a finite being to know absolutely that the world is destitute of moral goodness, that it provides no ground for the realization of his final end. His despair is always therefore a presumptuous judgment about the world. […] The uncertainty of the world and the finitude of his knowledge rather leave man suspended between hope and despair.

Although man’s natural condition seems to exhaust hope, as Kant holds, it does not refute it altogether and there are ample counterexamples furnishing evidence that confidence in a morally better future is not unwarranted.

Fifth reply: appeal to Kant’s alternative, ‘secular’ and ‘historical-immanent’ highest good
Finally, dogmatic atheists may also bypass Kant’s conception of the highest good as happiness proportionate to virtue and restrict themselves to Kant’s conception of the highest good as the creation of a moral world of virtue and happiness conditioned by morality, the possibility of which depends on human – but not divine – agency. The former account is ‘ideal-transcendent’ because it refers to the unconditioned final end of pure practical reason as a mere object of thought, and because the intelligibility of its realization depends on assuming the existence of a moral world ruler and the immortality of the soul. Hence, it is also a ‘theistic’ account of the highest good. The latter account is ‘historical-immanent’ because it refers to social end to be pursued collectively by the human race in this world over the course of history. Hence, it is also a ‘non-theistic’ account of the highest good. While Kant’s ‘ideal-transcendent’ account as happiness in perfect proportion to virtue is predominant in his philosophy, some passages suggest the alternative ‘secular’, ‘historical-immanent’ account of the highest good. In this context, Kant approaches the highest good as ‘a system of well-disposed human beings’ (Rel 6:97–98), ‘the existence of rational beings subject to moral laws’ (CJ 5:444, 450), ‘a final end’ determined by the moral law, viz. ‘the highest good in the world possible through freedom’ (CJ 5:450), ‘the highest physical good that is possible in the world and which can be promoted, as far as it is up to us, as a final end, [i.e.] happiness – under the objective condition of the concordance of humans with the law of morality’ (CJ 5:450), ‘a final end assigned by pure reason and comprehending the whole of all ends under one principle (a world as the highest good and possible through our cooperation)’ (TP 8:280, fn), and ‘the inner worth of the world’, namely ‘freedom according to a power of choice that is not necessitated to act’ (LE/Collins 27:344). This account of the highest good does not so much stress the systematic proportionality between happiness and virtue, but rather happiness in conformity to or conditioned by moral agency and virtue: it acknowledges the importance and necessity of happiness but makes its value dependent upon the morality of the maxims on which it is pursued. Hence, the realization of the ‘historical-immanent’ highest good does not depend on the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, and offers a more fruitful account that is suitable to serve as the end of our autonomous moral conduct and that lies entirely within the scope of our human agency. Adopting this ‘historical-immanent’ account of the highest good provides even the most rabid atheist with a legitimate alternative to moral theism for affirming the possibility of the highest good and hence for resisting moral despair.

Conclusions

In spite of his rejection of the traditional metaphysical proofs of God’s existence, Kant defends moral theism, i.e. a subjective, rational conviction in the existence of God as a moral world ruler on behalf of the intelligibility of the highest good as the final end of the moral law. In the third Critique, Kant argues that atheism leads to moral despair by rejecting moral theism as the sole cognitively determinate and psychologically reassuring view for rendering the highest good intelligible. Yet an atheist could invoke different strategies for refuting Kant’s argument: (1) adopting some non-theistic, moral-teleological world conception through which the highest good can be conceived, (2) adopting a natural teleology through which nature itself is conceived as the ground for the highest good, (3) adopting the epistemological stance that striving for the highest good is not irrational as long as its impossibility is not sufficiently demonstrated, (4) showing that Kant has not sufficiently proven the impossibility of the highest good in case of a lack of faith in God, and (5) appealing to an alternative, secular and historical-immanent account of the highest good as the creation of a moral world of virtue and happiness conditioned by morality.

References

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For a careful analysis of Kant’s appreciation and refutation of these proofs, see Wood (1978:95–146).

With the exception of Kant’s *Lectures on Ethics Brauer* and *Lectures on Ethics Kaehler*, in which case I refer to Menzer (1924) and Kant (2004) respectively, all references to Kant’s works are to Kant (1900ff.). Volume numbers are followed by page numbers. Used abbreviations: CPR: *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787), CPrR: *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788); CJ: *Critique of Judgment* (1790); G: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785); LE/Brauer: *Lectures on Ethics Brauer* (1782); LE/Collins: *Lectures on Ethics Collins* (1784–5); LE/Herder: *Lectures on Ethics Herder* (1764–5); LE/Kaehler: *Lectures on Ethics Kaehler* (1774–1777); LE/Mrongovius I: *Lectures on Ethics Mrongovius I* (1782); LE/Mron II: *Lectures on Ethics Mrongovius II* (1784–5); LE/Powalski: *Lectures on Ethics Powalski* (1782); LE/Vigilantius: *Lectures on Ethics Vigilantius* (1793–4); LM/Dohna: *Lectures on Metaphysics Dohna-Wundlacken* (1792–3); LM/K2: *Lectures on Metaphysics K2* (1790–1); LPR/Pölitz: *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion Pölitz* (1783–4); LPR/Baumbach: *Lectures on Rational Theology Baumbach* (1784); LPR/Volckmann: *Lectures on Natural Theology Volckmann* (1783–4); MM: *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797); O: *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* (1786); OP: *Opus Postumum*; R: *Reflexionen*; Rel: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793); TP: *On the Common Saying: That May Be Right in Theory, but Is of No Use in Practice* (1793). Unless mentioned otherwise, English translations are taken from Kant (1992ff.).


For a meticulous reconstruction and analysis of Kant’s practical arguments for faith in God, see Wood (1970).

See also Denis (2003:201).

For a defence of Kant’s argument, see Mariña (2000).

See also Rauscher (2007:46).

Cf. LPR/Volckmann 28:1221.


See also Denis (2003: 212).