
PRAGMATIC ASPECTS OF KANTIAN THEISM

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Abstract

This paper proposes a re-evaluation of the theism vs. atheism controversy, and of the related meta-level dispute between evidentialism and fideism, from a Kantian transcendental perspective, connected with Jamesian pragmatism. If there is a morally vital human need to postulate the reality of God, and if this theistic postulation can be regarded as rational or legitimate from the perspective of “practical reason”, then metaphysical and ethical aspects of the theism issue turn out to be deeply entangled with each other. A Kantian-cum-pragmatist philosophy of religion will inevitably approach the question of God’s existence from a standpoint that thoroughly synthesizes ethics and metaphysics – just as Kant’s defense of theism as a postulate of practical reason did. A serious engagement with the theism vs. atheism issue thus requires a plurality of philosophical standpoints, including the Jamesian pragmatic one and the Kantian transcendental one, and cannot be reductively accounted for in terms of a single overarching framework.

1. Introduction

Does God exist? What do we, or what should we, mean by this question? How, if at all, might the question, given that its meaning(s) can be clarified, be settled or even rationally discussed? Is there any chance for a reasonable, scientifically-minded person to believe in the existence of God, or is atheism the only intellectually responsible option for us today? Is theism inevitably committed to the anti-scientific absurdities of creationism, the “intelligent design theory”, and other unfortunately increasingly influential fundamentalisms?

The purpose of this paper is not to solve these vast issues in the philosophy of religion. Nor will I engage in the science vs. religion controversy in any detail. I do, however, hope to illuminate the traditional issue of theism¹ from a specific philosophical perspective. The kind of questions listed above help to describe the problem framework we are entering, as well as the sidetracks to be avoided in serious philosophy of religion (e.g., the debate between creationism and Darwinism, which is hardly scientifically interesting).² Furthermore, my remarks will not be restricted to the opposition between *theism* and *atheism*³ as such. The meta-level contrast between *evidentialism* and *fideism* opens up another basic dispute in the modern debate over theism, perhaps even more important philosophically than the theism vs. atheism dispute itself, as it concerns the criteria in terms of which the latter dispute is to be adjudicated, and the kind of reasons that may be invoked to

¹ A terminological note is in order: I will not be concerned with polytheism, pantheism, panentheism, or other “non-standard” versions of religious belief in God(s), even though I recognize the need for philosophical discussion of such varieties of theism, given the interesting alternatives to traditional religious outlooks offered, say, by process theology and metaphysics. The kind of theism I am interested in here is of the traditional (Judaean-Christian-Islamic) monotheistic type. My discussion is, of course, philosophical in the sense of being independent of any particular religious or theological traditions (as well as the in itself ideological tradition of atheistic “free thinking”), though I do not claim to be independent of a religiously and theologically shaped background which makes only monotheistic faith a “live option” to most Western thinkers (to use an expression famously coined by William James, to whom we will have a chance to return below).

² I will not waste time for defending the view that creationism (like most other fundamentalist creeds) is pseudo-scientific; a more interesting point (not argued in this paper, either) is that it may be pseudo-religious, too.

³ The concept of atheism requires clarification as much as the concept of theism. Atheism should be distinguished from (mere) agnosticism, which is essentially a suspension of judgment concerning theism. While the theist believes that God exists, the atheist does not merely disbelieve this but believes that God does not exist, that is, that there is no God. Alternatively, we can distinguish between weak atheism (disbelief in the existence of God) and strong atheism (belief in the non-existence of God). For a useful treatment of atheism and its philosophical justification, see Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990); for more up-to-date essays on the topic, see Martin (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). For a controversial distinction between scientific and philosophical atheism, see Raimo Tuomela, *Science, Action and Reality* (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1985); here, scientific atheism is the view that science can, or perhaps will, demonstrate the non-existence of God, while philosophical atheism understands atheism as a (rational, justified) philosophical thesis never to be confirmed by science. Again, I will ignore this contrast in what follows, usually meaning “philosophical atheism” by the term “atheism”.

support (or attack) theism.⁴ It seems to me, for reasons that will properly emerge in due course, that there is a desperate need for a middle ground or synthesis between these two extremes in contemporary philosophy of religion, and the present paper will go some way toward providing such a synthesis by redescribing the problem of theism in Kantian (and to some extent pragmatist) terms. In short, evidentialism is, in most cases, inadequate as an interpretation of religious people's views on God, because religious faith needs no rational (religiously neutral) evidence, and can be neither defended nor criticized in terms of such "scientific" evidence. Religion, in short, is a human practice quite different from science, and though it may be related to science in various ways – that is, it is not completely "autonomous" and self-standing – it cannot be adequately evaluated by means of criteria internal to scientific practices. Fideism, in turn, is highly problematic, because it tends to lead to relativist and irrational views sharply distinguishing between faith and reason and by advancing the view that reason has no role at all to play in religious issues. Fideism, thus, sees science and religion as too autonomous from each other, while the evidentialist's error is the opposite one.⁵

The proposal I will explore and (with some reservations) defend in the following inquiry is a reconceptualization of the theism vs. atheism and evidentialism vs. fideism issues in an explicitly *ethical* manner – though obviously only some selected perspectives on such an enormous task can be taken up in a single paper. Indeed, both evidentialism and fideism, arguably, turn out to be insufficiently ethical responses to the problem of theism vs. atheism. The traditional alternatives themselves – that is, theism and atheism, when characterized as opposed metaphysical standpoints regarding the question of God's existence – suffer from the same insufficiency. Philosophical debates over these matters have unfortunately often ignored the ethical, hence pragmatic, aspects of the problem of God's existence; or, more precisely, philosophers of religion have traditionally been interested only in the ethical implications theism (or atheism) might have, instead of considering whether theism (or atheism) might itself be grounded in ethical premises, or whether such

⁴ On the debate between evidentialists and fideists, see several essays in useful recent anthologies, such as Eleonore Stump and Michael J. Murray (eds.), *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* (Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999), and Brian Davies (ed.), *Philosophy of Religion: A Guide and Anthology* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000). For a helpful overview of this issue and of major methodological controversies in twentieth century analytic philosophy of religion, see Timo Koistinen, *Philosophy of Religion or Religious Philosophy? A Critical Study of Contemporary Anglo-American Approaches* (Helsinki: Luther-Agricola Society, 2000).

⁵ Very little in this paper depends on to whom views such as evidentialism and fideism can, or should, be attributed. Let me just note that a thinker such as Richard Swinburne is a paradigmatic example of evidentialism (see, e.g., his *The Existence of God*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), while "Wittgensteinian" philosophers of religion such as D.Z. Phillips have usually, though somewhat inaccurately, been regarded as representatives of fideism (see, e.g., Phillips, *Belief, Change and Forms of Life*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1986). The expression, "Wittgensteinian fideism", was (as far as I know) introduced by the strong atheist critic of religion, Kai Nielsen, as a pejorative term; yet, Wittgensteinians such as Phillips are not completely innocent to this (mis)characterization of their way of thinking about God and religion.

metaphysical issues might in the end be inevitably entangled with ethical ones. It is to these ethical issues at the heart of the theism debate that I suggest we should turn our attention. This suggestion, as we will see, amounts to a Kantian – and pragmatist – rearticulation of what the question is ultimately about. However, while Immanuel Kant’s doctrine of the “postulates of practical reason” and William James’s pragmatist defense of the legitimacy of religious faith will function as my starting points, this essay is not an historical study of either Kant’s or James’s philosophy of religion. Rather, I will use these two classics as sources of inspiring perspectives on the complexities of the theism issue. My purpose is not to get either Kant or James (or any of their interpreters) right but to say something right, or at least something worthy of further consideration, about the systematic problem of theism (and atheism) with the help of these important thinkers.

In particular, I will use Kantian and Jamesian insights in order to argue that the theism issue is not exhausted by the narrowly intellectual (evidentialist) considerations one might advance in favour of either theism or atheism. Accordingly, theism should not be reduced to the mere metaphysical theory that God exists. This is because we need the resources of what Kant called “practical reason” – the kind of reason that James, the pragmatist, saw as (in a certain sense) pervading human reason-use more generally – in order to arrive at any humanly acceptable solution to this problem. It is, in short, not only philosophically narrow-sighted but downright *unethical* to leave the ethical aspect out of such a major metaphysical problem as the one of (a)theism. Theism *might*, I will be suggesting, be rationally acceptable in terms of practical reason, or more generally from the standpoint of the vital human needs and interests embedded in our practices of life, and this *is* a kind of rational justification; nevertheless, it is very different from the kind of justification standardly aimed at in the evidentialist discourse on theism and atheism. Moreover, justification in terms of practical reason – fully taking into account the pragmatic aspects of the theism issue – might be the *only* rational justification available for the religious believer. From a Kantian and Jamesian point of view, the religious believer’s faith in God need not be made scientifically acceptable, or warranted in terms of religiously neutral criteria of reason (that is, either empirically verifiable or epistemically justified in a broader sense), because it is ultimately not a matter of science or reason (at least not primarily); the important thing is to make it *ethically acceptable* in the face of evil and suffering that we, believers and unbelievers, experience in the world we live in.

This paper, by itself, will not defend either theism or atheism – nor will it defend either evidentialism or fideism. Rather, I will examine some central conceptual background assumptions a proper scrutiny of which I find necessary for any philosophically adequate account of the complex situation we face when considering the problem of God’s existence – and the problem of what a proper human response to such a question ought to be. The major suggestion for revision regarding

the assumptions we habitually make here amounts to a rethinking, or ethical reorientation, of this problem framework. Far from dispensing with the metaphysical status of the theism vs. atheism dispute, however, I see the proposed rethinking of the ethical (pragmatic) aspects of theism as a rethinking of the relation between ethics and metaphysics, as well. In this sense, our explorations in the philosophy of religion provide us with a valuable case study of a fundamental concern about the relations between two (traditionally separate) philosophical sub-disciplines that we should, in my view, seek to integrate. Yet, such integration should not sacrifice pragmatic pluralism about the multiple perspectives we pragmatically need for an adequate understanding of religion.

This essay is organized as follows. I will first (section 2) very briefly explain, on Kantian grounds, why we should reject traditional (metaphysical) versions of theism, especially the kind of rational “proofs” of God’s existence that pre-Kantian philosophers – and even some contemporary philosophers – have employed. I will then (section 3) present the Kantian (and pragmatist) “moral argument” for theism, drawing particular attention to the question of whether this argument should be understood as metaphysical, ethical, or both. Section 4 continues the discussion of the relation between these aspects of theism in terms of the Kantian idea of the primacy of practical reason, while section 5 briefly takes up the problem of evil in this context, before the concluding remarks on relativism and pluralism in section 6.

2. The dialectical illusions of traditional theism

Even though I do not want to downplay the importance of David Hume as a major critic of theism, in my view Kant is obviously a turning point in the history of the philosophical criticism of traditional metaphysical theism. In the first *Critique*, Kant effectively challenged the legitimacy of the standard arguments (ontological, cosmological, and physico-theological) for God’s existence.⁶ There is no need to go through this familiar terrain here in any detail. It is sufficient to note that, according to Kant, the most serious flaw in the “ontotheological” proof, according to which God

⁶ See the chapter on the “Ideal of Pure Reason” in the Transcendental Dialectics of Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (A = 1st ed., 1781; B = 2nd ed., 1787), ed. Raymund Schmidt (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1990), A567/B595ff. Regarding the cosmological argument, see also Kant’s discussion of the Fourth Antinomy. The most comprehensive recent study on Kant’s philosophy of religion is Peter Byrne, *Kant on God* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), which includes detailed discussions of Kant’s criticisms of the theistic proofs as well as his “positive” account of moral faith. I will not, however, examine interpretive controversies concerning Kant’s actual position; I will only provide the needed background for my own Kantian-cum-pragmatist developments. Obviously, there are philosophers of religion who view Kant’s arguments very critically; see, e.g., Alvin Plantinga, *Warranted Christian Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000). Kant’s success in combating the traditional proofs is thus not at all universally acknowledged. I cannot engage in such controversies here; my argument should be read as an hypothetical one starting from the proposal to take seriously Kant’s approach to theism.

must exist, because a being the greater than which cannot be imagined must necessarily exist, is the confused assumption that existence is a “real predicate”, denoting a property in the same way as predicates like “red” or “heavy” denote properties of individuals. The idea of an *ens realissimum*, a being with all perfections (that is, all positive predicates), is in the ontological proof illegitimately “hypostatized” into an object, although such a mysterious, transcendent object can never be given to us in experience. Reason naturally, inevitably, arrives at this idea, but the crucial error is made when the existence – indeed, necessary existence – of a corresponding entity is inferred. The “cosmotheological” proof (or family of proofs), in turn, relies on the ontological one by identifying the assumed necessary ground of all contingent beings with the *ens realissimum*. Whether the cosmological argument is formulated in terms of causal concepts (i.e., by invoking God as the “first cause”) or merely, as Kant does, in terms of the supposed need to postulate a non-contingent being to ground all contingently existing ones, it amounts to a breach of the transcendental bounds of reason Kant has defended in the bulk of the first *Critique*. Finally, the physico-theological (or teleological) “design argument” fares no better, and few philosophers today take it seriously, given the obvious ways in which the universe does not seem to be well designed.⁷ And even if it did so seem, the Kantian response is to point out that the one who postulates a cosmic designer for the totality of the world again illegitimately steps out of the bounds of sense set by the transcendental inquiries of the *Critique*. The “natural theology” of the physico-theological proof is as speculative and as seriously guilty of unjustified and unjustifiable transcendent assumptions as the “transcendental theology” involved in the ontological and the cosmological proofs.

The traditional theistic proofs are examples of reason’s natural tendency to seek the “unconditioned” beyond the series of conditioned entities and events we come up with in the empirical world. Insofar as we remain at the level of mere “ideas” (concepts), there is no problem, and our tendency to form the idea of the unconditioned – in its various forms – is unavoidable. Problems arise when reason finds itself compelled to postulate the unconditioned object of such an idea. Such a move to a metaphysical unconditioned is, Kant tells us, simply beyond the capacities of human cognition. Human reason’s habit of formulating ideas leading to “transcendental illusion” is natural and inevitable, but the theistic proofs are fallacies the avoidance of which is both possible and necessary for a critical thinker. According to leading contemporary interpreters of Kant, such as Henry Allison and Michelle Grier, the actual source of these fallacious inferences, in addition to the unavoidable transcendental illusion, is the (avoidable) commitment to *transcendental realism*, the

⁷ Again, it is best to set aside here the obviously pseudo-scientific arguments used by creationists and ID believers. Scientifically, there is no genuine debate between creationist “design” theories and Darwinian evolution, as the latter is the only – though of course not perfect – explanation we currently have for the development of life; religiously, moreover, a faith that needs the “make-believe” that it is science would be poor faith indeed.

doctrine that the world as the object of (possible) experience is the world as it is in itself. This doctrine fails to draw the crucial transcendental distinction between things as they are in themselves (that is, things as they would be when abstracted, *per impossibile*, from the conditions required for representing them) and appearances, the form of which is constituted by the human cognitive faculty (sensibility and understanding).⁸

If Kant is right, there is no rational hope in constructing either purely conceptual (a priori) or empirically premised (“design”) “proofs” for the existence of God. It would be irrational, or uncritical at least, to build one’s religious faith on the basis of such hopeless demonstrations. Kant’s critical system as a whole has been rejected by many, perhaps most, contemporary philosophers, but even strongly anti-Kantian thinkers usually find Kant’s attack on theistic metaphysical speculation convincing. Many have concluded that theism is not rationally defensible at all, and that atheism ought to be maintained instead. Others have concluded that, given the impossibility of defending God’s existence by reason, faith should be adopted “irrationally”, or perhaps “arationally”, quite independently of reason and its capacities. This is the fideist solution, intended to contrast with evidentialists’ demand for proof, evidence, or rational legitimation.⁹

It is this post-Kantian dialectics between evidentialism and fideism that I want to, at least to some extent, question here. In short, I will be arguing in the rest of this paper that while it is both intellectually and religiously illegitimate – even superstitious or pseudo-religious¹⁰ – to seek religiously neutral rational proofs and/or evidence for God’s existence, the theism vs. atheism issue should not, and cannot, be reduced to an “arational” choice, either, into a mere matter of faith totally independent of reason. A critical, both intellectually and religiously respectable, perspective on this issue may be found, I will argue, if we are prepared to view the problem as *both ethical and metaphysical*, in a way that draws no principled dichotomy between these aspects of the problem. Thus, I will take my lead from Kantian considerations of practical reason. Obviously, I will be suggesting that we can learn a great deal from Kant’s reflections on theism and its relation to

⁸ See Michelle Grier, *Kant’s Doctrine of Transcendental Illusion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism: An Interpretation and Defense – Revised and Enlarged Edition* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2004; 1st ed. 1983). These commentators emphasize both the hypostatization charge against the theistic proofs and the view that transcendental realism is the ultimate *proton pseudos* in the fallacious inferences reason is entangled with (not only in the theistic case but also in the Paralogisms and the Antinomy, with which we cannot deal here). Grier’s reading of the “Transcendental Dialectic” seems to have influenced Allison’s, who has revised some of his arguments from the first edition (1983) of his book in the second edition (2004).

⁹ In my terminology, fideists are (at least in most cases) theists, believing in God’s existence in a way which distinguishes sharply between reason and faith (and rejecting all attempts to provide reasons for such a faith), whereas evidentialists can be either theists (if they maintain that there are sufficient rational reasons – sufficient evidence – in favor of the theistic hypothesis) or atheists (if they maintain that there are no such reasons or evidence). In principle, evidentialists can also adopt agnosticism, if they require that theism must be supported by reasons but find no such reasons compelling, either way – at least not yet, in the present state of inquiry.

¹⁰ See, e.g., Sami Pihlström, “Religion and Pseudo-Religion: An Elusive Boundary”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62 (2007), 3-32.

morality. It is only from the perspective of our moral life, that is, from the perspective of what Kant called practical reason, that theism arises as a rationally legitimate (and potentially religiously legitimate) response to the problems we experience. Nevertheless, we need to go beyond Kant, toward something like the pragmatism defended by William James and some of his followers, if we want to fully trace out the pragmatic, ethico-metaphysical aspects of theism.

3. Transcendental arguments for theism – metaphysical, ethical, or both?

Kant himself was a religious believer. Furthermore, he was not a mere “deist” in an Enlightenment style – in the manner of, say, Voltaire – but a theistic believer in a “living God”. We may even say that he maintained the metaphysical view that there is a living God, even though (as we just saw) he vigorously attacked previous “pre-critical” metaphysicians’, especially Leibniz’s and Wolff’s, desperate attempts to prove the existence of such a transcendent deity. We are not here interested in the details of Kant’s own religious and/or theological views, nor in his Christian (specifically Protestant) background, but in his *postulates of practical reason* (namely, the freedom of will, the existence of God, and the immortality of the soul). It is, in particular, from the perspective of my proposal to (re-)entangle ethics and metaphysics in the philosophy of religion that this Kantian topic deserves scrutiny. We may ask, for instance, whether the postulates are defended by Kant (in the second *Critique*) by means of a *transcendental argument*, and if so, how that argument differs from the arguments defending the categories and other “epistemic conditions”¹¹ of objective cognition (as presented in the first *Critique*). Even more importantly, we should ask whether the defense of the postulates in the *Dialectics* of the second *Critique* leads to a metaphysical position according to which God exists. I want to approach this question by suggesting that Kant’s postulates are *both*

¹¹ Although I am using Allison’s notion of epistemic conditions here (see Allison, *Kant’s Transcendental Idealism*, especially ch. 1), I am not implying that I would agree with him that the transcendental conditions for the possibility of experience, cognition, or representation that Kant is examining would be *merely epistemic* in the sense of being entirely *non-metaphysical*. Rather, I would urge that the critical philosophy, even in its core areas such as transcendental idealism, is (partly) a metaphysical project, though of course not “metaphysical” in the sense in which traditional pre-critical metaphysics was firmly rejected by Kant. Allison and some other recent interpreters – including, e.g., David Carr, *The Paradox of Subjectivity: The Self in the Transcendental Tradition* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) – in my view tend to read Kant too anti-metaphysically, construing transcendental idealism and transcendental philosophy more generally as merely methodological or epistemological views. Such a total rejection of metaphysics (theistic or not) is not necessary for a Kantian transcendental philosopher. This is a vast issue and cannot be settled here. In contrast to Allison’s and Carr’s anti-metaphysical accounts of transcendental philosophy, let me just note that I find J.J. Valberg’s identification of the transcendental self with what he calls “my horizon” – with similarities not only to Kant but to Wittgenstein and Heidegger as well – much more promising, especially because this approach is not restricted to epistemology but leaves room, within transcendental philosophy, for metaphysics (which Valberg heavily engages in) and also for topics in the philosophy of religion (which he does not deal with). See Valberg’s recent book, *Dream, Death, and the Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

metaphysical *and* ethical – indeed, in a way in which the metaphysical and ethical aspects of them, or these two “aspects of theism”, are inextricably intertwined.

Even a paradigmatic case of a metaphysics built on ethics can be found in Kant’s doctrine of the postulates of practical reason. Although this is not Kant’s own way of putting the matter, we might say that this doctrine presupposes *transcendental idealism*: the world is not absolutely independent of us but is responsive to our ethical (or more generally valuational) needs and interests, or “in the making” through such needs and interests.¹² We structure reality in terms of what the moral law in us requires; there is no pre-structured, “ready-made” world that we could meaningfully engage with. Notably, what I am here labeling transcendental idealism is a broader doctrine than the one defended in the “Transcendental Aesthetic” of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, because I am not merely following Kant in regarding space and time as properties of appearances (rather than as properties of things as they are in themselves) but more widely suggesting that the reality we find ourselves living in, is structured by us – not merely by our “cognitive faculty” but also by our various practical interests and purposes.¹³ But *is* this structuring really metaphysical, or should we simply confine ourselves to an ethical, pragmatic, account of the Kantian postulates? Is there “really” a God, or are we just entitled to act “as if” there were one?

I cannot examine in any close detail the way in which Kant constructs his famous “moral argument” for the existence of God and the immortality of the soul in the “Canon of Pure Reason”¹⁴ and in the Dialectics of the second *Critique*.¹⁵ Rather, I will directly take up the question concerning the metaphysical status of Kant’s postulates. It is clear that, as mere ideas of pure reason (“transcendental ideas”), the concepts of God and the soul lack “objective reality”. At best, these

¹² I am here deliberately taking some distance to Kant’s actual position and redescribing Kantian views by employing terminology adopted from William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (1907), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1975). Orthodox Kantians (as well as Jamesians) would of course find my Jamesian rearticulations of Kant problematic, but I do not see any problems here, insofar as my main interest lies in the systematic issue of theism rather than in historical scholarly questions. Some work has, however, been done on the historical relations between Kant and James: see Sami Pihlström, “Synthesizing Traditions: Rewriting the History of Pragmatism and Transcendental Philosophy”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 23 (2006), 375-390. Let me also note that Peter Byrne, in his *The Moral Interpretation of Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), explicitly compares Kant’s moral argument for God’s existence with James’s “will to believe” argument (see ch. 7). My approach is quite different, though, because I do not focus on “The Will to Believe” (but, rather, on *Pragmatism*) and because I view James’s own ideas “transcendentally”. Furthermore, a critic might point out that Hegel (as well as, possibly, the opposition between Hegel and Kierkegaard) would have to be taken into account when moving from Kant’s philosophy of religion to James’s. Again, I must simply note that not everything can be done in a single paper; the role played by Hegel at the background of pragmatist philosophy of religion deserves a separate study.

¹³ Or, to put the point in a more properly Jamesian manner, these needs, interests, and purposes are always already at work within our cognitive faculty itself; there is no pure cognition independently of practical orientation in the world. This is pretty much what pragmatism is all about: all experience, cognition, or representation is inseparably embedded in human practices, or habits of action.

¹⁴ See Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A795/B823ff.

¹⁵ See Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (1788), in Kant, *Werke in Zehn Bänden*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), A223ff.

ideas can be employed *regulatively*, not *constitutively*. This, however, is only the point of view that theoretical, speculative reason offers to the matter. From the perspective of practical reason – which, famously, is ultimately “prior to” theoretical reason in Kant’s system¹⁶ – there is indeed some kind of “reality” corresponding to these concepts (or ideas). The epistemic status of these concepts, when transformed into postulates of practical reason, is, to be sure, quite different from the status of the actual constitutive, transcendental conditions of any humanly possible experience, such as the pure concepts or categories of understanding and the forms of pure intuition (space and time), explored in the “Transcendental Analytic” and the “Transcendental Aesthetic”. We may say that the latter kind of concepts necessarily structure, according to Kant, the (or any) human, experienceable, cognizable world, that is, any objects or events we may conceivably encounter in this world. There would be no world of objects at all, at least no world we would be able to cognitively represent, in the absence of such structuring principles and categories. However, the postulates of practical reason also structure – in an analogical though definitely not identical manner – the human world as a world of ethical concern, deliberation, and action. The key idea here is that this “structuring” is not “merely ethical” but also metaphysical. Another key idea is that this structuring is, because of its uniquely ethical and metaphysical status, also transcendental.

In a recent article, Frederick Beiser has offered one of the most insightful interpretations of Kant’s defense of “moral faith” as a genuinely metaphysical perspective on the reality of God and the immortal soul. He insists, against a number of commentators viewing Kant’s philosophy of religion in a deflated “thisworldly” and immanent manner, that Kant’s notion of the highest good, or *summum bonum*, is irreducibly theological, quite explicitly derived from the Christian tradition, especially Augustine and the idea of a “City of God”.¹⁷ These notions, after all, refer to a situation in which there is a harmony between the duties set by the moral law and the happiness of moral agents acting on the basis of, or out of respect toward (i.e., not merely in accordance with), this law. Beiser accurately summarizes Kant’s argumentation as follows:

1. We have a duty, set by the moral law, to promote the highest good (*summum bonum*).
2. We have to presuppose the conditions for the possibility of the highest good.
3. God’s existence is a condition for the possibility of the highest good.

¹⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, A215ff. Here, the word “ultimately” – my word in this context rather than Kant’s – is crucial, because we can observe the priority of practical reason only after having done some work of theoretical reason, that is, after having become convinced of the futility of the speculative theistic proofs and having thus seen the need for a different, pragmatic, approach.

¹⁷ See Frederick C. Beiser, “Moral Faith and the Highest Good”, in Paul Guyer (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 593-599. See *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A810-811/B838-839, for Kant’s characterization of the *summum bonum*.

4. Therefore, we have to presuppose the existence of God.¹⁸

This argument, on Beiser's reading, is an argument *absurdum practicum*, as distinguished from an argument *absurdum logicum*. Unlike the latter, that is, unlike traditional arguments of the form *reduction ad absurdum*, it does not purport to show that denying the conclusion would yield a logical contradiction or lead to incoherence but that denying the conclusion would result in a breach of one's moral duty (which itself, according to Kant, is a necessary demand of reason). According to Beiser, the Kantian moral law and the moral faith based on the concept of the highest good are, though epistemically independent of each other (in the sense that one can, and indeed must, be committed to the duties morality sets us entirely independently of the highest good, and thus independently of theism), nevertheless logically dependent: the possibility of acting on the basis of the moral law presupposes moral faith, because it is a condition set by the law itself. We can know, independently of any religious standpoints, that the moral law binds us, or that we are absolutely committed to the duties set by it, but according to the *absurdum practicum* argument we cannot really act on the basis of that law unless we presuppose God's existence and the immortality of the soul.¹⁹ As the moral law requires us to pursue the *summum bonum*, it necessarily requires us to pursue whatever is required for this goal to be possible (pursuable) for us, and here both God's existence and the immortality of the soul enter the picture. The harmony of morality (moral virtue) and happiness could never be achieved, and would not even be a possible goal, in the absence of God. Moreover, this would not be a pursuable goal if there were no (potentially) "infinite progression" toward such a harmony in immortal life.

This is an argument I find essentially pragmatist, and indeed it resembles James's reflections on the will (or right) to believe and on the pragmatic need to postulate a divine reality. Beiser, however, in my view too sharply differentiates Kant's views from James's, construing the latter (in a typically misleading fashion) as "merely pragmatic" and immanent, thus not genuinely metaphysical in the sense in which he reads Kant's views as metaphysical.²⁰ He fails to see that James, too, can be interpreted as a pragmatically theistic metaphysician pretty much along Kantian lines, if we understand his "pragmatic method" not as a method of simply getting rid of metaphysical pseudo-issues (in which case this method would be little more than an early version of the logical positivists' verificationist theory of meaning) but as a method of making explicit, of

¹⁸ Beiser, "Moral Faith and the Highest Good", p. 604. (This is not a direct quotation of Beiser's formulation of Kant's argument but my own paraphrase.) See Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A223-237. See also Byrne, *Kant on God*, especially chs. 5-6, for a critical perspective on Kant's arguments for moral faith – a perspective very different from Beiser's.

¹⁹ Beiser, "Moral Faith and the Highest Good", pp. 606-607.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

“distilling”, the pragmatic core of metaphysical disputes that would otherwise remain obscure and interminable.²¹

When holding, with Kant, that God’s existence and immortality are postulates of practical reason, we mean, roughly, that they are some kind of necessary auxiliary presuppositions needed for morality to be and mean what it is and means for us, presuppositions without which the highest good, which is set as a duty to us by the moral law, could not be realized. For Kant, these presuppositions are both subjectively necessary needs or interests of reason and objective requirements of morality arising “from within” the moral law dictated by reason itself. We can never know anything about God or the soul as they are in themselves, *qua Dinge an sich selbst*; we cannot know anything about them in the sense in which we can know something (a lot) about the empirical things and events constrained by the transcendental conditions of possible experience, either; we can only “know” (or, rather, must postulate) them as objects required for the purposes of practical reason – purposes which, however, are, famously, primary to those of theoretical reason. I believe Beiser is correct when he emphasizes that Kant’s defense of the postulates is not merely pragmatic or “immanent” in the sense of being detached from metaphysics and from the Christian, specifically Protestant, tradition that Kant had inherited and to which he contributed. The moral world in which the highest good is ultimately realized is readily comparable to the heavily metaphysically loaded notions of the City of God and *corpus mysticum*.²² Kant is, then, genuinely a

²¹ See William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy* (1897), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1979). Beiser’s misconstrual may result from the fact that he focuses only on the James of “The Will to Believe” (see *ibid.*, ch. 1), ignoring James’s discussions of our need for a moral order, and more generally of the ethically “energizing” function of theism (see the essays, “The Sentiment of Rationality” and “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”, also in the same volume James published in 1897; see also James, *Pragmatism*, especially chs. 3 and 8). For two excellent recent readings of James’s “theological postulate” and its moral relevance (without any detailed comparisons to Kant, unfortunately), see Todd Lekan, “Strenuous Moral Living”, and Michael R. Slater, “Ethical Naturalism and Religious Belief in ‘The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life’”, both available online in *William James Studies* 2 (2007), <http://williamjamesstudies.press.uiuc.edu>. Other in my view important – though definitely not unproblematic or uncontroversial – recent treatments of James’s philosophy of religion include Richard Gale, *The Divided Self of William James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), and Wesley Cooper, *The Unity of William James’s Thought* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2002), plus a number of more specialized studies on such issues as James’s pluralism, panpsychism, radical empiricism, etc. Admittedly, James’s way of arguing for the practical need or requirement of theism for the purposes of a fully moral life is – as Lekan’s and Slater’s papers also remind us – more empirical and psychological than Kant’s a priori approach; yet, a case for a pragmatic-transcendental reconstruction of Jamesian ideas can be made, and this paper, though no close reading of James, is part of such a reconstructive attempt.

²² Beiser, “Moral Faith and the Highest Good”, pp. 597, 618-619. Although this is no study on James, it might be suggested, to continue the brief comparison between Kant and Jamesian pragmatism (see the previous note), that there are Kantian overtones in James’s (*Pragmatism*, ch. 3) notion of an “eternal moral order” of the universe, which he sees as a deeply seated human need. Cf. also *ibid.*, ch. 8, for a “meliorist” view of the possible though not inevitable “salvation” of the world; see also the discussion of these issues in Sami Pihlström, *“The Trail of the Human Serpent Is over Everything”: Jamesian Perspectives on Mind, World, and Religion* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America [Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group], 2008). A fuller account of these issues in James would require a discussion of his famous work, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1985), which does briefly take up Kant’s

theist, a theistic metaphysician, and maintains that the very possibility of morality in the sense in which it is set to us as a task – more precisely, the possibility of pursuing what the moral law necessarily requires – really presupposes a metaphysical commitment to the existence of God, even though this commitment can rationally and legitimately only be made from the perspective or standpoint of practical (instead of theoretical) reason. It is important to notice that metaphysics and ethics are deeply entangled here. Somewhat controversially Beiser argues, furthermore, that the hot scholarly debates over whether Kant’s ideal of the highest good is noumenal or phenomenal, or transcendent or natural, or other-worldly or this-worldly, are misguided, assuming a false premise according to which these are mutually incompatible alternatives; insofar as we are dealing with a truly Christian ideal here, both alternatives can be realized, as the world will eventually be completely transformed through Christ’s second coming.²³

We hardly need to go that far, whether or not Kant himself did. Yet, we have to realize that Kant’s defense of the postulates and of “moral faith” through them is still a *transcendental* justification for a kind of metaphysics, though not a justification for any *transcendent* metaphysics postulating mysterious objects for the contemplation of (mere) theoretical reason.²⁴ However, the transcendentalism at work in the arguments for the postulates is now found within our practices of moral deliberation under the guidance of the moral law, or the categorical imperative. If theistic metaphysics (or immortality as another component of such metaphysics) is understood as requiring justification from the point of view of speculative, theoretical reason, then all that results will be paralogisms and the errors involved in the traditional proofs for God’s existence, criticized in the first *Critique*. The true Christian metaphysician avoids *such* metaphysics, but s/he does not need to, and should not, if Kant is correct, avoid ethically inspired pragmatic metaphysics. Practical reason may, according to Kant, legitimately widen the scope of the ideas left problematic by theoretical reason and render their objects real;²⁵ the concepts and objects postulated by practical reason may even be constitutive, instead of being merely regulative, as the ideas of pure reason must remain in their only theoretically legitimate employment.²⁶ Thus, practical reason may turn reason’s ideas from a merely regulative use into a constitutive use, which does not, however, make those ideas dogmatic principles to be avoided by critical metaphysicians.²⁷ In a fully transcendental sense

postulates, among other things. James’s *Pragmatism*, however, is the best source for the development of “Kantian pragmatism”.

²³ Beiser, “Moral Faith and the Highest Good”, p. 599.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 589-590.

²⁵ Cf. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, A238-240.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, A244.

²⁷ See Beiser, “Moral Faith and the Highest Good”, pp. 613, 620. It might be noted in passing that Charles Taylor’s defense of theism in the closing pages of his major book, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), and elsewhere, is an interesting case of a modern transcendental

(though not, again, exactly in the same sense in which the categories and the *Anschauungsformen* are transcendental), the postulates must be invoked to “structure” the world we – morally speaking – live in. The need to embrace these postulates, particularly theism, is something that arises, to use J.J. Valberg’s expression, from within “our horizon”, which for us opens up the world.²⁸

The Kantian argument for God’s existence, even though it is a moral argument, remains transcendental in the sense of examining necessary conditions for the very possibility of certain humanly given phenomena (in this case, morality). I would even go as far as saying that Kant, or the Kantian metaphysician (including even James, when seen as an unorthodox quasi-Kantian pragmatist metaphysician), argues transcendently for the need to postulate transcendent objects or principles (such as God), even though the transcendence involved in them can only be legitimately postulated (immanently) “from within” the practices of morality that transcendently require them. It is possible to defend a transcendent postulation, or the postulation of transcendence, by means of transcendental reasoning or reflection, though some people will at this point undoubtedly protest that such transcendence is not transcendent enough, that it is a mere pale shade of the real thing. Well, this is all transcendence we can have in the Kantian setting. No illegitimate speculation about the metaphysics of pre-given, dogmatic principles or entities (structured prior to our moral point of view) is needed or even possible. The crucial conclusion at this point is that Kant’s defense of “moral faith” – as a form of theism – is both metaphysical and ethical. In an adequate account of theism, these “aspects” should be synthesized in a Kantian manner. Jamesian pragmatism, though different from Kant’s transcendental philosophy in obvious ways, joins in this synthesizing effort.

4. Theism, ethics, and metaphysics: the primacy of practical reason

We thus, finally, arrive at the basic argument of this paper. This argument has already emerged in my reflections above: if we want to employ the Kantian strategy in defending theism in terms of, or from the standpoint of, practical reason, then we need to soften the boundary between metaphysics

approach to the issue of theism; cf. also his later works on religion, for example (dealing with James), *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002). The Taylorian transcendental argument is readily comparable to the Kantian postulates. Cf. here especially the explicitly transcendental reading of Taylor by D.P. Baker, “Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: A Transcendental Apologetic?*”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47 (2000), 155-174; see Pihlström, “*The Trail of the Human Serpent Is over Everything*”, ch. 2, for some critical discussion. For Taylor’s analysis of what transcendental arguments are, see his paper, “Transcendental Arguments” (1979), in Taylor, *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), ch. 2; cf. also the critical examination in Sami Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental: A Pragmatic View* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus/Humanity Books, 2003), ch. 6.

²⁸ See Valberg, *Dream, Death, and the Self* (cited above), especially the introductory chapter, in which the concept of the horizon is explained.

and ethics. The metaphysical aspects of theism must be fully integrated into its (possibly even more fundamental) ethical aspects. Alternatively, the ethical aspects of the problem can be seen as fundamental by seeing *them* as metaphysical in an important sense: it is, precisely, the way we ought to structure the world we live in that will lead us to embrace, or avoid, theistic postulations. The metaphilosophical status of the issue of theism must, hence, be thoroughly rethought in terms of this metaphysics–ethics entanglement. To paraphrase Kant, a theistic (or, indeed, atheistic) metaphysics without ethics would be blind, whereas a merely ethical reconceptualization of the issue – in which the metaphysical element would be totally lacking – would be empty.

In addition to Kant’s doctrine of the postulates, another example of the entanglement of metaphysical and ethical perspectives on the issue of theism is the one already invoked in passing, namely, William James’s pragmatism.²⁹ James has not usually been read as a Kantian thinker, but his position, especially regarding theism and immortality, can also be fruitfully compared to Kant.³⁰ From a pragmatist point of view, as much as from the Kantian one, ethics and metaphysics are profoundly entangled. Moreover, in our Kant–James comparison, it is extremely important to emphasize the primacy of practical reason, as has been done above. Religion, or theism, is pragmatically legitimated as a postulate needed for morality, for our ethical life and practices. Yet, no theological ethics in the style of, say, divine command theory can be rationally accepted by a critical moral philosopher. It would amount to putting the cart before the horse to hold that ethics could be grounded in or based upon theology (or religious revelation). What we need, according to both Kant and James, is *moral theology* – a theology based on ethics, rather than vice versa. Any attempt to base ethics on theology, or religion, would be an example of heteronomy instead of autonomy (in Kantian terms), but the only critical and rational way to provide a basis for theology is the ethical way.

There is a problem here, though. Is theism (or the “theological postulate”)³¹ here practically (pragmatically) legitimated a priori, by reason’s capacities only (as it definitely is in Kant), or does it receive its legitimation empirically or psychologically, as an attitude de facto “energizing” moral life, because we are the kind of beings we are (as the matter seems to be in James)?³² My suggestion here is that just as Kantian transcendental (critical) philosophy more generally synthesizes the pre-critically opposed epistemological doctrines of empiricism and rationalism, and just as pragmatism, especially in neopragmatist writings such as Hilary Putnam’s, attempts to bridge the gap between

²⁹ See especially James, *Pragmatism*, chs. 3 and 8 (already cited above).

³⁰ See also Taylor’s discussion of James in *Varieties of Religion Today* (the book cited above).

³¹ On James’s “theological postulates”, see the essays by Lekan and Slater cited above.

³² Cf. here, again, the papers on James by Lekan and Slater cited above.

facts and values,³³ we should try to reconcile Kantian (transcendental) and Jamesian (pragmatist, empirical, psychological) ways of justifying theism ethically. I am not saying that such arguments will inevitably or immediately succeed; that would be a much more ambitious claim. What I am suggesting is that the Kantian aspects of theism need pragmatic rearticulation, and that the thus rearticulated pragmatic aspects of theism must not be thoroughly disconnected from the Kantian transcendental work of practical reason. Both the Kantian and the pragmatist see theism as, primarily, a problem of human life. For both, the ultimate question is the moral basis of metaphysics, especially theistic metaphysics. For neither can the theism issue be resolved in total absence of ethical considerations.

I have in the preceding section freely spoken about transcendental arguments when discussing Kant's strategy of defending theism as a postulate of practical reason. We should of course be careful here, and I have pointed out that the argument to be identified in the second *Critique* is not transcendental in the same way in which Kant's arguments for (say) the objective reality of the categories in the first *Critique* are. In fact, Kant himself quite explicitly renounces transcendental arguments in theology. For him, transcendental arguments are above all designed to demonstrate that (and to show how) certain conceptual assumptions are required as preconditions of any humanly possible experience. A transcendent God, if he exists, will inevitably fall beyond such experience. No argument can, as we have seen, justify one's belief in God in the same way in which our belief in, say, causality is rationally justified, or even transcendently demonstrably true – that is, according to Kant, apodictically certain. Thus, in Kant's own sense, the “transcendental argument” for theism as a postulate of practical reason is not a transcendental argument. Kant even says explicitly that we should not resort to transcendental arguments in theology, and he even uses the very expression, “transcendental argument”, in this context, even though it was for a long time widely believed that he never employed this exact wording (which became standard usage only after P.F. Strawson and other twentieth century transcendental philosophers).³⁴

Even so, let us reconstruct the Kantian argument for theism in the following explicitly transcendental shape:

³³ See Hilary Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2002); Putnam, *Ethics without Ontology* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2004); as well as Sami Pihlström, *Pragmatic Moral Realism: A Transcendental Defense* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005); and Pihlström, “Putnam's Conception of Ontology”, *Contemporary Pragmatism* 3:2 (2006), 1-15 (with a response by Putnam in the same issue). Of course, classical pragmatism – e.g., the one articulated in James's *Pragmatism* – attempts to bridge many other classical gaps, including the one between “tough-minded” empiricism and “tender-minded” rationalism.

³⁴ See Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, A627/B655. In their contributions to Robert Stern (ed.), *Transcendental Arguments: Problems and Prospects* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), Paul Franks and Barry Stroud acknowledge David Bell as the one who first observed that Kant does indeed talk about a transcendental argument in the passage cited.

1. Human moral pursuits (that is, pursuing what the moral law requires, or more specifically, pursuing the highest good) are possible *only if* God exists (and, *mutatis mutandis*, if we possess an immortal soul).³⁵
2. Moral pursuits are possible (because actual).
3. Therefore, God exists (and, *mutatis mutandis*, we possess an immortal soul).

It should be clear that theism, even though it is a transcendent hypothesis, is here arrived at through a transcendental-sounding reasoning concerning the conditions necessary for the very possibility of a given human actuality, namely, the pursuit of morality (on the basis of what the moral law requires). This argument yields the properly transcendental aspect of what we may call Kantian theism. Insofar as Kantian theism is “pragmatic”, at least in the sense of relying on the *absurdum practicum* argument identified by Beiser (see section 3 above), what we have here is a transcendental aspect of pragmatic theism. The crucial transcendental reflection needed in support of the argument must, obviously, focus on the major premise (1). The minor premise will be denied only by moral nihilists, whom we would not expect to be interested in our Kantian defense of theism in the first place; at any rate, Kant himself is hardly seriously concerned with defending the possibility (or even the actuality) of morality, which he sees as obvious enough, in need of no philosophical defense. It is the “transcendental how” question³⁶ that he – here as much as in the theoretical philosophy – is asking, and God’s existence, theism, emerges as a response to that question. We may see Kant’s *Dialectics of Practical Reason* as an attempt to offer the support needed for the first premise, though as a reading of Kant this must remain controversial.

Let us, for comparison, attempt the following reconstruction of what might be seen as the Jamesian argument for theism:

1. Human moral pursuits (that is, “morally strenuous living” or the “morally strenuous mood” of life) are possible, in a full, serious, and “energizing” sense, *only if* God exists.

³⁵ The specific problems there might be regarding immortality can be set aside here, as this paper focuses on the issue of theism. For Kant, the two go rather neatly together, and James, too, was deeply interested in defending the possibility of, and the legitimate hope for, immortality. See, e.g., James’s essay “Human Immortality” (1898), in his *Essays on Religion and Morality*, eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1982). Regarding the phrase “only if” in the first premise, it should be noted that God’s existence is here regarded as a necessary but obviously not a sufficient condition for the possibility of moral pursuits. Morality might be impossible for some other reason, e.g., trivially for the reason that humans or other rational beings might not exist at all.

³⁶ For the importance of such a “how” question in Kant’s theoretical philosophy, see Markku Leppäkoski, *The Transcendental How: Kant’s Transcendental Deduction of Objective Cognition*, Stockholm Studies in Philosophy 12 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1993).

2. Human moral pursuits are possible (because actual).
3. Therefore, God exists.

In the Jamesian case, premise (2) is not indubitable, at least not in the way it is in Kant, because we might be in real danger of arriving at a kind of moral nihilism, if we take seriously the “scientific”, materialist view of the world according to which there is merely the “dead”, physical universe without any “higher” or “spiritual” elements. The Jamesian pragmatist – or the philosopher who wants to introduce Jamesian pragmatic aspects into the Kantian defense of theism – cannot take the reality of the moral point of view for granted. Morality *may* turn out to be an illusion. This is a genuine threat in our permanently insecure human existence. There can be no metaphysical guarantees of a “happy end” for the universe we inhabit or even for the significance of a single moment of a human life within it. We can never be absolutely sure, purely intellectually speaking, that there truly is a place for such a thing as morality in our lives.³⁷ However, it is right here that the Kantian (or quasi-Kantian) transcendental aspects of theism – and of morality – return to our picture. It is precisely because of the highly uncertain situation in which we humans must face the world we live in, precisely because we cannot take for granted that there is a place for (genuine) morality in our lives, precisely because nihilism and universal death might be the “be all and end all of all things” (as James sometimes worries), that we *are*, ethically speaking but metaphysically as well, entitled in adopting the theistic belief, which then, *ex post facto*, will (if anything will) be able to render our lives morally significant, after all. It is our very human insecurity, the problematic circumstances we continuously find ourselves in, the precarious yet ethically demanding structure of our lives, that justifies us in employing all the pragmatic methods we might find at our disposal in order to secure the moral significance of our existence. What we have to do here is to employ our active will to believe in the reality of God – to make a Kierkegaardian leap of faith – in order to liberate our moral energies to viewing the world and our lives as ethically meaningful.

It is along these lines that we should, for instance, read James’s defense of theism – and the corresponding criticism of materialism and/or atheism – in the third lecture of *Pragmatism*. The argument can even be seen as (quasi-)transcendental, or transcendental in a pragmatized, somewhat naturalized sense, if we start from the premise that human life as we know and experience it *is* morally significant. That is, if we treat this presupposition as non-negotiable – if we simply refuse to adopt moral nihilism – then we can argue for theism as a precondition of such a “given” actuality of our life that we cannot call into question. The argument will be relativized to contingent

³⁷ This worry is crucially connected with the problem of evil, to which I will return in the next section. It is, above all, the undeniable existence of evil that may lead us to moral nihilism, to give up the pursuit of morality.

situations of human life and to historically transformable facts about what we find significant in our lives – i.e., what we find negotiable and non-negotiable – but it will be a transcendental argument at any rate, at least if we are prepared to soften our notion of a transcendental argument and to blur the boundary between transcendental and pragmatic arguments.³⁸ However, if we do find moral nihilism a “live option” (to use Jamesian language again), then we cannot argue for theism in this transcendental manner. Then we are only justified in adopting theism as the “energizing” source for moral life, as an empirical and psychological “hypothesis” that may, but need not, enable us to view our lives as morally significant in a manner we are unable to view them if we start from atheism.

A lot depends, then, on whether or not we regard moral nihilism as a plausible, or even possible, starting point for our ethical and metaphysical reflections. If we do, then there is no hope for a transcendental argument, even for a pragmatic transcendental argument, in favour of theism. Such an argument can never succeed, if its critic can resort to moral nihilism. Even then, theism may be defensible as the “energizing” solution to life’s moral dilemmas (as James would put it), though. But, more importantly, if we do not find moral nihilism a possible starting point – that is, if our rejection of such nihilism is non-negotiable, as it surely is in Kant, and if, in short, such a nihilism is for us a non-starter – then the Kantian transcendental and the Jamesian pragmatic arguments for theism, in the forms in which I have analyzed them, seem to coincide. In this case, there certainly are crucial pragmatic aspects in the form of theism I have labeled Kantian (whether or not anything I have said does justice to any of these two thinkers).

In both cases, what we arrive at through the ethical transcendental argument is a form of moral theology, instead of any theological ethics (as was already pointed out above). God’s existence is based on the needs and interests of our moral life. Furthermore, in order for such a grounding of a metaphysical thesis in ethical premises to be possible, some kind of (pragmatic) transcendental idealism must presumably be embraced. The metaphysical reality of God cannot, we have seen, be settled independently of ethical considerations. Whether or not there is a God, whether or not a “moral salvation” of the world is possible, whether or not life is meaningful and significant in some deep sense – these issues are not decidable in the absence of moral deliberation and the ethical perspectives we bring into our world and lives. This is what I mean by the suggested “rethinking” of the relation between metaphysics and ethics in the philosophy of religion. Such a rethinking was initiated by Kant in his very important doctrine of the postulates of practical reason, examined above, but it was through James’s pragmatism that a new page was turned in this process.

³⁸ For this “softening” or “blurring”, see, e.g., Pihlström, *Naturalizing the Transcendental*, and “*The Trail of the Human Serpent Is over Everything*” (cited above).

My results in the present inquiry are, hence, indebted to both Kant and James, though I have not sought to interpret any of these two philosophers in scholarly detail in this essay.³⁹

It is roughly in this sense that I am advancing the “primacy of practical reason”, an idea vigorously defended by Kant and inherited by James – though everything James took from Kant he took, so to say, against his own will, because he abhorred Kant’s complex system and heavy transcendental terminology. We must, however, go beyond both Kant and James in arguing not simply for the *primacy* of practical reason in relation to theoretical reason (in the case of theism in particular, or in ethics and the philosophy of religion more generally) but for the deep *entanglement* of practical reason with its theoretical counterpart. There is, after all, only one human reason. It is, in Jamesian terms,⁴⁰ the “whole man in us” (James’s sexist language-use here notwithstanding) that is at work whenever we set out to settle such morally and religiously vital issues as the one concerning God’s existence. There can in the end be no neat separation between the theoretical and the practical faculties of this “whole man”. This is what has in fact been argued above under the rubric of the entanglement of metaphysics and ethics. This is also, accordingly, what I have meant by saying that the defense of theism as a postulate of practical reason (Kant) or as a pragmatic commitment designed to “energize” our moral lives (James) is not “merely pragmatic” (immanent) in the sense of being detached from metaphysics – the realm of theoretical reason – altogether.⁴¹ It is both ethical and metaphysical, and it is right here that the theoretical and practical concerns of reason interpenetrate and (transcendentally) condition one another.

After all, we might even regard the entanglement of theory and practice, or even their inseparability, as a defining characteristic of pragmatism, particularly James’s version of it (even though historical interpretations of the pragmatist tradition remain beyond the scope of this paper). The pragmatist, when reasoning about theism or about anything else, does not naively set practice prior to theory but theorizes in and through practice – and, conversely, attempts to practise whatever s/he theorizes about. Theism, in particular, will then be a truly “live” issue to be lived and

³⁹ A somewhat more scholarly point that could be made here is that there is a hitherto unappreciated analogy between Kantian transcendental argumentation and Jamesian “will to believe” argumentation. Both start from given human actualities and move “backwards” to their conditions of possibility – in quite different ways, but analogously to each other. Just as proper transcendental arguments move from a given phenomenon backwards to a condition needed for the phenomenon to be possible, the will to believe strategy (in the theistic case or elsewhere) also moves backwards to the rational legitimation of the religious experiences and practices which, in turn, enable the believer to view the question about God’s existence as a genuine option in her/his life, an option to which the will to believe strategy can be applied. In neither case do the arguments prove anything for the radical skeptic (or the nihilist) who would dispute the starting point taken for granted. Neither Kant nor James – nor any pragmatist – sees it even possible, let alone necessary, to “respond to the skeptic” either in moral philosophy or in the philosophy of religion. This important point is often overlooked.

⁴⁰ See, again, the title essay of *The Will to Believe*.

⁴¹ Here, as was seen above, I followed Beiser’s account in “Moral Faith and the Highest Good”, though not his account of James’s relation to Kant.

examined. It will be a genuine option, and thus a potential candidate for an issue to be resolved through the will to believe strategy, though any human opinions we may arrive at concerning such a major problem of our (theoretical-cum-practical) reason must remain fallible and controversial – and it is simple pragmatic wisdom to recognize this fallibility.

5. The problem of evil

A redescription of the problem of evil – another traditional problem in the philosophy of religion and, moreover, a problem often taken to haunt theism, in particular – is also needed, if we emphasize the Kantian and the pragmatic aspects of the theism issue in the way I have done. The metaphysics of (a)theism, when approached through the kind of pragmatic and/or transcendental arguments that I sketched in the previous section, is inevitably a humanized metaphysics of good and evil, given the essential connection between the postulation of God and the concerns of moral life, or the requirements of the moral law.⁴² However, it is clearly not only the theist who can provide moral reasons for her/his belief; the atheist may offer, and many atheists have in fact offered, a straightforward, and very powerful, ethical argument against God's existence – a kind of "atheological" argument – by relying on the obvious, familiar fact that there is apparently unnecessary evil in the world we experience and live in:

1. If God exists, he is supremely powerful (omnipotent), omniscient, and benevolent.⁴³
2. A supremely powerful, omniscient, and benevolent being would remove or prevent all unnecessary evil and suffering.
3. There is unnecessary evil and suffering.
4. Therefore, there is no supremely powerful, omniscient, and benevolent being.
5. Therefore, there is no God (as traditionally understood).

Here, the empirical and factual premise (3) is usually taken to be obvious enough, although there are theistic believers who (famously) attempt to develop a theodicy by denying that the evil and suffering we undeniably seem to find in our world are unnecessary. I will not discuss this line

⁴² Here we may take our lead from Schopenhauer, who saw evil and suffering in the heart of the human metaphysical (and more generally philosophical) wonder at the existence of the world. See Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E.J.F. Payne (New York: Dover, 1966; originally published 1819-44), Part II.

⁴³ These properties attributed to God can be taken to be simply based on the concept of God. Obviously, the first premise can be disputed, as some process theologians – and, indeed, William James – have done.

of thought here, because I find it implausible and misleading not only in philosophical but also religious terms.⁴⁴ Nor will I discuss those suggestions, such as James's, that deny premise (1), postulating not an infinite but a limited, finite God.⁴⁵ Despite the undeniable interest of such ideas, they are so far removed from any theism that people in the Christian tradition would find a genuine option that they need not be considered at this point.

The crucial issue here, as in the previous sections, is the relation between ethics and metaphysics in the problem framework of evil. In traditional theism, evil poses a logical or evidential challenge.⁴⁶ Thus, the existence of evil challenges the metaphysical view called theism, which operates with the notion of an omnipotent, omniscient, and supremely good being. It is supposed that this metaphysical view can be evidentially tested and evaluated independently of ethical considerations, simply by weighing rationally available evidence for and against it. The reality of evil is taken to be evidence for atheism, or at least evidence against theism (and perhaps in favour of agnosticism rather than atheism). Now, if the kind of argumentation sketched earlier in this paper is even partly plausible, it is a fundamental mistake to view evil in this way. What we are dealing with when dealing with the so-called problem of evil is not simply an evidential (let alone a purely logical) challenge to the rational acceptability (or simply coherence) of the theistic metaphysical hypothesis. What we are dealing with is a fundamental ethical challenge to the ways we humans interpret ("structure") the world we live in. The problem of evil is, above all, an ethical problem, and as such a fundamental challenge for our human form(s) of life, for the ways we interpret and experience our world, and it is precisely for this reason that it is a metaphysical problem as well. It is a problem about how we ought to, or how we can, construe the basic structures of the reality we inhabit. Should we, or can we, morally speaking, postulate an infinitely powerful, supremely benevolent being as the agent finally responsible for all *this*? Should we rather reject such a theistic (and, possibly, theodistic)⁴⁷ postulation? Employing the pragmatic method outlined by James, we should always ask what such questions come down to in practical terms, that

⁴⁴ For interesting debates over the prospects of theodicy, see the exchange between Richard Swinburne and D.Z. Phillips in Stuart C. Brown (ed.), *Reason and Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1977). Phillips, of course, argues against evidentialists' and (as we may call them) theodists' view that evil poses an evidential problem for theism and that a successful form of theism would have to offer a theodicy. (Note that I recognize a problem in my saying that theodistic views are misleading "in religious terms". How can anyone who does not share a religious outlook, or who does not quite consider her-/himself a believer, say anything like that? *This* is in fact part of the problem I am trying to think about, though certainly not fully resolve, here.)

⁴⁵ See ch. 8 of James, *Pragmatism*, and especially William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), eds. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1977).

⁴⁶ See, e.g., classical essays on the topic collected in William Rowe (ed.), *God and the Problem of Evil* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2001).

⁴⁷ My usage of "theodistic" is intended to capture both theistic and atheistic views that regard a theodicy as necessary for theism. According to theistic theodists, such as Swinburne, theodicies succeed, while atheistic theodists regard the problem of evil as an atheological challenge that ought to lead a rational person to atheism.

is, in terms of the potential practical effects their possible answers, or our commitment to such answers, might have in our lives. The “cash costs” (in terms of possible human experience, especially moral experience) of a theodist postulation of an omnipotent, omniscient, and absolutely benevolent deity ultimately responsible for the horrible sufferings of innocent human beings, including children, just because those sufferings are not “real” after all, or are necessary elements of a plan that is generally good, are in my view much higher than the “cash value” such a postulation might have because of its ability to solve certain logical or evidential dilemmas.

A theistic commitment in a world in which there undeniably is unnecessary evil is a very difficult commitment to make, but it *might* render a believer’s life meaningful in a profound sense, and thus help her/him in living further, and in facing the evil there is, even in desperate circumstances. On the other hand, the believer might also find her/his faith being fragmented through experiences of evil and suffering.⁴⁸ There is no easy solution available here; everything depends on the overall moral shape one’s life takes. We again arrive at the conclusion that the metaphysics of theism cannot be regarded as an abstract intellectual matter to be decided in terms of evidence, such as the existence of evil. Rather, the existence of evil constitutes a framework within which we, as moral agents, ought to carefully consider the ethical aspects of any metaphysical commitments we make. We might “structure” reality into such a metaphysical shape that it becomes ethically unbearable; indeed, this is what happens, in my view, in theodist attempts to “defend God” and his scheme of things in the face of “merely apparent” suffering. Philosophical, speculative, rationalizing theodicies are, at worst, an insult against all those who suffer, and philosophers defending them should go back to their libraries and open a couple of crucial passages in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The hopelessness of any philosophical theodicy is not only a conviction shared by Kant and James⁴⁹ but a natural outcome of our Kantian-cum-pragmatic reasoning about theism. If the very possibility of arguing for or against theism requires a morally serious framework, a situation of both individual and social life in which the moral perspective on one’s own agency is taken fundamentally seriously, then one cannot just treat evil as a merely evidential concern. The kind of theism that emerges as a possible result of the pragmatic argumentation examined in the previous sections – that is, the kind of theism that might be defensible as a postulate of practical reason in

⁴⁸ On the highly insecure and easily fragmented nature of religious (and moral) faith, see David Wisdo, *The Life of Irony and the Ethics of Belief* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1993).

⁴⁹ For Kant’s criticism of theodicy, see Immanuel Kant, “Über das Misslingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee”, in Kant, *Werke in Zehn Bänden*, vol. 9, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1983), pp. 173-190. For a useful commentary essay, see Johannes Brachtendorf, “Kants Theodizee-Aufsatz – Die Bedingungen des Gelingens philosophischen Theodizee”, *Kant-Studien* 93 (2002), 57-83. For James’s opposition to especially Leibnizian theodicy, see the first chapter of *Pragmatism*, in particular.

Kant's sense (or, with some qualifications, in a Jamesian sense) – does not leave room for a theodist consideration of the evidential pros and cons of theism in relation to evil. It is, indeed, much more religiously sensitive to detach the topic of evil from the issue of theism altogether, to approach it as an ethical and political problem rather than a theological one,⁵⁰ than to confuse religious thinking by treating the problem as an evidential challenge. If you cannot think about evil within your religious outlook without lapsing into theodicy, then you better not think about it within that outlook at all.

The problem of evil, then, requires rethinking along the lines of the ethics–metaphysics entanglement, just as much as the problem of theism vs. atheism does. In both cases – and the prior case is in a way a special instance or an outgrowth of the latter – a pragmatic approach yields a morally sensitive picture of how we ought to think about such matters of vital importance. This picture maintains a touch of transcendentalism, in a (quasi-)Kantian sense, given the role played by transcendental considerations of what is possible or impossible, or what makes and does not make sense, within human moral life as we know it “from within”. It is worth recalling that William James was never insensitive to the experiences of evil that human beings had to go through in their lives; on the contrary, he saw Leibnizian and Hegelian theodicies as crudely morally insensitive.⁵¹ The unacceptability of theodicism, the ethical unbearability of the alleged need and value of theodicies in the philosophy of religion, is part and parcel not only of the ethics but also of the metaphysics of theism, pragmatically considered.

6. Conclusion

The immediate goal of this paper has been to illuminate some fundamental conceptual, primarily metaphilosophical, issues concerning the status of theism (and the theism vs. atheism dispute) – as well as the meta-level contrast, evidentialism vs. fideism – especially from the perspective of the question concerning the relations between metaphysics and ethics. If my approach is taken seriously, then it turns out that pragmatism and Kantianism will have to be synthesized, and this synthesis will be most valuable because it enables us to pay attention to the emergence of another, even more important synthesis, namely, the one between metaphysics and ethics. Any “Kantian” or

⁵⁰ For insightful recent discussions along these lines, see Richard Bernstein, *Radical Evil: A Philosophical Interrogation* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, paperback ed., 2004; 1st ed. 2002).

⁵¹ See, again, the first chapter of James's *Pragmatism* for a discussion of evil – an often neglected starting point in James's development of pragmatism.

“pragmatic” form of theism worth the name must be an inseparable mixture of metaphysical and ethical commitments – or, better, it must be an ineliminably metaphysical position defended (and in the end only defensible) by means of ethical considerations starting from our moral practices and from the requirements morality sets us (that is, the moral law and the highest good, in Kant, and the need for a strenuous moral mood, in James – though, I must hasten to add, none of this requires us to commit ourselves to the particular moral philosophies defended by these two philosophers).⁵²

It is from the perspective of the synthesis of ethics and metaphysics that I hope we might be able to view theism as a rationally justifiable option for a genuinely religiously inclined person in her/his life circumstances. This “aspectual” justification a believer might arrive at is very different from the kind of justification the evidentialist hopes to be able to provide. Theism can never be justified or rationally defended in terms of the same religiously neutral, fully objective general criteria of rationality that are used, for example, to ground our scientific theories about the empirical world. Theism can only, if at all, be “justified” within the moral life we must (an ethical “must”!) lead in any case, in order to be decent persons (again, an irreducibly ethical commitment that is not based on any prior, or more important, considerations). This insight does not lead us to any unproblematic happy end in our reflections, of course. If it is only from within a life already experienced as morally demanding or challenging that we can so much as hope to reasonably defend theism (or *any* serious view in the philosophy of religion), then one might argue that only someone already committed to something like theism (in a Kantian or Jamesian sense) can be sufficiently open to the arguments I have sketched. If morality is possible only within a framework colored by the theistic assumption, then it might seem that anyone who really takes morality seriously will already have to be a theist, in which case the argumentation referring to the moral status of the theistic world-view would be futile. If, on the other hand, the argument is to be relevant from the perspective of a non-believer, then we must at least agree that the non-believer can take life morally seriously – even struggle to achieve the morally strenuous mood in her/his own secular way – in which case it is simply not true that theism is required for serious moral life, after all.

This problem is closely connected with the issue of *relativism* in the philosophy of religion. I am invoking this problem not in order to solve it but only in order to conclude with an acknowledgment of our need to live with it, and to live up to its depth. The worry may arise that it is only from within a religiously informed perspective that arguments in favour of religious belief

⁵² Because I want to maintain the metaphysical element of theism, though only through ethics, my remarks are implicitly oriented against the currently popular postmodern and “post-onto-theological” attempts to defend a form of religion completely independent of metaphysics. See, e.g., the essays in Mark A. Wrathall (ed.), *Religion after Metaphysics?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), featuring work by leading anti-metaphysical thinkers such as Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo.

can rationally emerge in the first place.⁵³ This paper cannot settle, or even conceptually illuminate, the problem of relativism, but I may have been able to give a glimpse of its urgency in the philosophy of religion, though I have arrived at this particular problem only through an indirect route, by considering the possibility of synthesizing ethical and metaphysical aspects in Kantian-cum-pragmatic defenses of theism. We may conclude by re-emphasizing our need to live, as harmoniously and “strenuously” as possible, with the haunting prospects of relativism, with the fact that we may never be able to justify our religious (or non-religious, or any “weltanschaulich”) commitments in a fully objective manner, to all parties potentially concerned. We have to take seriously the moral task of justification itself before we can even start arguing for, or against, theism. This is, above all, to accept the primacy of the moral point of view we are continuously challenged to occupy – and thus the autonomy of morality in relation to everything else, including religion – but it is this very primacy that renders that point of view deeply metaphysical, inseparably and ubiquitously embedded in everything that goes on in our human lives, in everything (including God) we may be able to find real from within those lives.

Instead of ending up with radical relativism (as fideism threatens to), the present discussion may, I hope, have taken some steps toward a healthy pragmatic *pluralism* in the philosophy of religion. The theism vs. atheism issue cannot be adequately settled from a single, privileged perspective but requires a plurality of perspectives, pragmatically balanced and harmonized in terms of their functional workability in the (would-be) believer’s overall account of the ethico-metaphysical problem of God as a problem of her/his personal life and moral deliberation. These perspectives include, as we have seen, both the Kantian approach to theism in terms of the postulates and Jamesian pragmatism (growing out of the Kantian notion of the “priority of practical reason”), but others might be invoked, too: e.g., John Dewey’s pragmatic naturalism (a development of pragmatism toward secularism),⁵⁴ and the Wittgensteinian quietist, mystical attitude to the world *sub specie aeternitatis* (which, in turn, may be seen as a version of the “natural piety” that Dewey’s naturalism invokes). I believe we must defend the pragmatically pluralist view that all these perspectives – and perhaps others – are needed and that the philosophy of religion, if pragmatically adequate, must hence be thoroughly *antireductionist*. In this paper, I have emphasized the Kantian background of pragmatism, but neither Kantian nor Jamesian resources are alone sufficient for the pragmatist philosopher of religion.⁵⁵

⁵³ See, for some discussion, Sami Pihlström, “Pragmatic and Transcendental Arguments for Theism: A Critical Examination”, *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 51 (2002), 195-213.

⁵⁴ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 1991; first published 1934).

⁵⁵ Acknowledgments [for the sake of anonymity, to be provided only in the final version].