

Theodicy and the pre-Critical Kant

G. Huxford

King's College, London, Affiliate  

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.105716>

Received: 28-10-2025 • Accepted: 16-12-2025

ENG Abstract: This paper rests on my claim elsewhere (see Huxford, 2020) that Kant was concerned with the fundamentals of theodicy throughout his career and not just in the short 1791 essay devoted to the subject. It sets out Kant's positions, developed in the period before the publication of his first Critique, regarding these fundamentals, namely God's existence, the nature of evil and the reality of free will. Some of these positions were maintained through Kant's career, others were either present only in embryonic form or abandoned altogether. Three issues dominate. First, Kant downgraded physical evil to natural harm. Second, evil was ontologically real being a negative value on the scale of goodness. Third, Kant continued to advance theoretical theodicies after the publication of his first Critique thus leaving a serious disconnect when his work is viewed in toto. I regard Kant's thought on these fundamentals to be exploratory. So this paper does not attempt to pull his thoughts together into pre-Critical theodical "system", although elements of such can be discerned.

Summary: Introduction. The Existence of God. Man's Freedom as a Pre-Requisite for Morality. Physical Evil. The reality of evil. The Possibility of Philosophical Theodicies. The Happiness of Evil Men. Conclusion. Bibliography.

How to cite: Huxford, G. (2026). Theodicy and the pre-Critical Kant. *Con-Textos Kantianos. International Journal of Philosophy*, 23, 9-18. <https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.105716>

Introduction

A theodicy is an attempt to reconcile the two apparently irreconcilable premises set out in the Problem of Evil (PE). These are: first, that there is a God who is held to have the attributes of omniscience, omnibenevolence and omnipotence (OG), second that evil exists in our world. Kant set out his definitive, 'authentic' theodicy with *On the Miscarriage of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*¹ (1791) but this work did not suddenly appear out of a clear blue sky. I contend that he was already concerned with the fundamentals of any would-be theodicy in his pre-Critical period. Further, in a number of cases, this concern led to conclusions of lasting significance in his subsequent career. My intention in this paper is to substantiate these claims. The three fundamentals of theodicy are (i) the existence of God and His attributes, (ii) the existence and nature of evil and its source, and (iii) for some attempted theodicies, the existence of free will able to choose between good and evil. Drawing on Kant's pre-Critical writings, I will examine examples of each fundamental. Although a detailed examination of *Miscarriage* is out of scope to this paper, I will refer to it at times in order to examine whether Kant's formative thought relevant to theodicy was of lasting significance or not.

The watershed formed by the publication of Kant's first *Critique* is often portrayed as a solid boundary in his thought but, with respect to theodicy, it is more permeable. In my view, it is not helpful to place the boundary between Kant's formative and definitive thought on theodicy at the same point as that for his epistemology and metaphysics. In consequence, some reference to the earlier part of his Critical period is useful where such works pre-date *Miscarriage* again to establish whether Kant's concerns were of lasting significance or not. This applies especially to the possibility for Kant of "philosophical" theodicies.

Examination of six key questions will provide a comprehensive picture of Kant's pre-Critical thought on theodicy and demonstrate the relevance of this relatively unconsidered material to his later authoritative

¹ Hereafter *Miscarriage*. This is the conventional abridged title and I conform to this practice here. However, Michel Despland uses *On the Failure of All Attempted Philosophical Theodicies*. In my view, 'Miscarriage' is capable of sending the wrong signal as it commonly suggests a legal process which delivered the wrong verdict, usually a guilty one. At no point does Kant advance the notion that God has been falsely found innocent or guilty on the charge that He has allowed evil in the world; in other words, no verdict is pronounced. Indeed Kant stresses that it is the court of theoretical reason which fails to deliver what it promised. Also 'failure', the direct translation of *Mißlingen*, is more indicative of Kant's conclusion(s) on the theodicies he examined.

1791 stance on the subject. While Kant never doubted the existence of God, he was concerned about a lack of proof. In a similar vein, when he considered man's freedom as a pre-requisite for morality, he was troubled that a satisfactory proof was missing. Two questions concerning evil will be examined, namely, for Kant, was physical evil really evil at all? And further, was evil ontologically positive in contrast to evil being regarded as a privation of the good? Philosophical theodicies were firmly rejected in *Miscarriage* but to what extent were they entertained by the pre-Critical Kant? Finally, how did Kant view the seeming happiness of evil men?

We now move forward to a detailed examination of these six questions.

The Existence of God

Despite being so self-evident that it runs the risk of being overlooked, the fundamental of God's existence must be included in any discussion of the pre-Critical Kant's thoughts on theodicy. Without establishing that God exists, or at least coming to a belief that God exists, there is no need for a theodicy since there is no PE. However, this fundamental does not require an exhaustive examination as at no point in his career did Kant provide any evidence that he doubted God's existence. Quite the reverse, he affirmed this at multiple points in his writings. Given the scope of this paper and thus limiting ourselves to his pre-Critical period, examining Kant's approach to the possible proofs of God's existence² is a good means of unearthing the abundant evidence which supports my assertion.

In *Reflections*, Kant gives a first indication that he regards such a proof as unnecessary. He does not question God's attributes of goodness, wisdom, or power, regarding them as 'sufficiently well known from other indisputable reasons' (*Ref* AA 17:232). Unfortunately, Kant does not set out these reasons or their source. From such we would know whether Kant was relying upon an unstated theoretical proof of God's existence or was just assenting to those attributes normally assigned to a theistic God in eighteenth-century Europe. This is reinforced later in the same *Reflection* in which his concern for theodicy's success being predicated on any theoretical proof of God's existence is clear:

Thus, the properties of God are placed in safety to the satisfaction of those who have enough understanding and sufficient submissiveness to applaud the metaphysical proofs of the Divine Existence. As for the rest of those who are willing to acknowledge that contemplating the world reveals traces of God – they remain troubled (*Ref*, 17:233).

That Kant is amongst the troubled is clear from his identification of two serious weaknesses in Leibnizian theodicy with its key contention that, despite the presence of evil, the world is the best that God could have actualized from all the possible worlds He contemplated (VBO AA 02:29)³. First, he ponders how 'perfections, each of which on its own would increase God's pleasure, become incompatible with one another' (*Ref* AA 17:233). Going further, Kant questions whether there is "metaphysical necessity" to which even God must yield with its implied questioning of His omnipotence. The second weakness, and in my view the more serious one, becomes apparent when Leibniz's theodicy is set alongside one of the most common attempted proofs of God's existence. If one starts from the belief that God exists, one can argue à la Leibniz that the evils which result from *disorders* in the world are unavoidable for God in Creation. However, given the disorder in the world which evil represents, one cannot concurrently reverse the argument and argue from the perceived *order* in the world to God's existence. The result would be a "deadly embrace" with no result.

The power of this argument is not diminished by Kant's seeming endorsement of Leibniz's theodicy in his later *Optimism*. In this, Kant demonstrates to his satisfaction three crucial propositions which are contained in the Leibnizian position.

- i. That there is a singular best possible world
- ii. That God would, acting from his nature, choose such a world, and
- iii. That our world is that best possible world.

This conclusion is strongly supported by the following dismissive statement: 'if anybody were so bold as to assert that the Supreme Wisdom could find the worse better than the best, or that the Supreme Goodness should prefer a lesser good to a greater...I should not waste my time in attempting a refutation' (VBO AA 02:33). Kant is clearly endorsing the Leibnizian system, from both a philosophical standpoint and a personal one. This stance can be seen from the passage cited and its continuation (VBO AA 02:34) in which Kant states that he is 'happy to find myself a citizen of the world which could not possibly have been better than it is'. Put simply, it would be incoherent for Kant to state this without at least a belief that God exists. It is also useful to further examine this topic in the later *Only Possible Argument*⁴. First, he identified the possible sources from which a proof could come:

² Indeed the well known rejections of the three most common attempted proofs to be found in the first *Critique* can be found in nearly fully developed form in *Only Possible Argument* (BDG AA 2:82).

³ Such a stance was not confined to Christianity. Al-Ghazali initiated a long running dispute in Islamic scholarship when he judged this world the best possible which God could have created. The dispute centred on the extent of God's power, the necessity of Creation and the concept of an 'optimum'.

⁴ *Only Possible Argument in support of a demonstration of the Existence of God*. In this work the origins of the eventual rejection of the ontological argument can also be seen, including the well-known 'existence is not a predicate' (BDG AA 02:82).

All arguments for the existence of God must derive from one or other of two sources: either from the concepts of the understanding of the merely *possible*, or from the empirical concept of the *existent*... What has to be proved, namely, is the existence, not merely of a very great and very perfect first cause, but of the Supreme Being who is above all beings. (BDG AA 02:155)

Second, in a number of pre-Critical works he revisited the possibility of a convincing proof of God's existence and the need for such. He explored various potential proofs from possibility⁵ and would-be teleological proofs⁶ but always found these less than convincing, twice dismissing the need for such a proof in *Only Possible Argument*:

I do not esteem the use of such an endeavour...so highly as to suppose that the most important of all our cognitions, there is a God, would waver or be imperiled if it were not supported by deep metaphysical investigations (BDG AA 02:65).

It is absolutely necessary that one should convince oneself that God exists; that His existence should be demonstrated, however, is not so necessary' (BDG AA 02:163).

Kant states further that, despite proofs which meet the demands of common sense, 'scholars feel the lack of a demonstration' (*ibid*). With these three statements he is clearly endorsing his earlier stance in *Reflections* that a proof was unnecessary. Nevertheless, he was caught in a grey zone between, on the one hand, a faith in God not requiring a proof of His existence and, on the other, his desire as a philosopher to establish such a proof following the demands of reason which for Kant were paramount. He had yet to realize that the inadequacy of these attempted proofs was inbuilt because they are based on the theoretical employment of reason rather than its practical employment.⁷ However, I maintain that none of these early considerations led Kant to doubt God's existence. If there were doubts they concerned any potential proof not God's existence *per se*.

Man's Freedom as a Pre-Requisite for Morality

Freedom and its possibility is a recurring theme in Kant's corpus. One excellent definition is given in notes dating from his pre-Critical period. In these Kant states: 'Freedom consists in the subjective independence of the power of choice from everything that influences our senses internally and externally' (HN AA 17:590⁸, 4549). Additionally, Kant always held that mere compliance with the strictures of the moral law, even the achievement of perfect goodness, without such a choice and thus without the ability to do otherwise is not morality⁹. One confirmation of this is also to be found in his notes, 'The supreme principle of morality is the correspondence of free actions with the original and universally valid laws of the power of choice' (HN AA 17:484, 4254). In other words, the moral law and the freedom to commit moral evil are bound together inextricably. The pre-Critical Kant had not yet attained one of the crucial insights of his Critical philosophy, namely his resolution of the third antinomy in the first *Critique* (cf. A448-451), that is to say; we are free in the intelligible world yet sensibly determined. Indeed, in the later *Miscarriage*, there is a strong echo of this conclusion in descriptive terms in Kant's response to theodicy IIIc stating that there is 'no comprehensible relation between the inner grounds of the determination of the will...according to the laws of freedom and the...causes of our welfare independent of our will according to the laws of nature' (MvPT AA 08:282). Unsurprisingly, without this insight, Kant in his pre-Critical period struggled to convince himself that we are indeed free as morality requires but he did give a strong hint of his eventual position, once again in his notes: 'Liberation of the unity of reason from the restrictions of its empirical use makes possible its transcendental use.' 'And the ground of this synthesis is the freedom of reason from the restricting conditions of sensibility, which is a negative principium of morality...' (HN AA 18:5, 4849).

The principal pre-Critical work where Kant tried to establish his position on freedom was *New Elucidations*¹⁰ in which he asserts that:

[I]n the case of the free actions...in so far as they are regarded as determinate, their opposites are excluded; they are not, however, excluded by grounds which are posited as existing outside the desires and spontaneous inclinations of the subject as if the agent were compelled to perform his actions against his will...and as a result of a certain ineluctable necessity (PND AA 01:400).

Nevertheless, the pre-Critical Kant remained concerned that the origin and nature of freedom have not yet been pinned down to the satisfaction of philosophers:

...even today the philosophers have not yet succeeded in explaining the concept of freedom in terms of its elements, that is to say, in terms of the simple and familiar concepts of which it is composed (UD AA 02:282).

⁵ BDG AA 02:152 and PND AA 01:395.

⁶ NTH AA 01:331 and BDG AA 02:96.

⁷ In the remainder of this paper I will use the conventional terms 'theoretical reason' and 'practical reason'. However, there is a risk that these terms suggest there are two reasons with separate natures. There is only one reason and what the conventional terms refer to is its two different *employments*. This is especially important in any treatment of *Miscarriage* in which much turns on differentiating between these two employments.

⁸ Use of Kant's notes in this paper is restricted to those definitively dated to be pre-Critical. The number of the note is also given in addition to the normal reference.

⁹ A later example is to be found at MS AA 06:383, see also HN AA 18:465, 6133.

¹⁰ Full title: - *New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition*.

In sum, the pre-Critical Kant regarded freedom as essential for morality but had yet to find an argument by which this freedom could be incontrovertibly demonstrated. This has implications for so-called “free-will” theodicies where God is excused responsibility for evil because He could not have created a world in which man could choose to act in accordance with the moral law without also giving the freedom to do otherwise.

Physical Evil

In the evaluation of any theodicy, it is imperative that the evil which is being addressed is clearly identified and, equally, that claimed evils which are not so, are explicitly excluded. Kant’s starting point was the Leibnizian triad of metaphysical, physical and moral evils and the possible relationship between them. For Leibniz there was a clear link between moral and physical evil:

It is therefore not God who is the cause of moral evil: but he is the cause of physical evil, that is, the punishment of moral evil. And this punishment, far from being incompatible with the supremely good principle, of necessity emanates from that one of its attributes, I mean its justice, which is not less essential to it than its goodness (§155/H220)¹¹.

Many people trying to come to terms with the catastrophic Lisbon earthquake of 1755 took the same view. Indeed, in *Miscarriage* with his treatment of the allegorical story of Job, Kant states that Job’s friends held this view (MvPT AA 08:265). Kant had already given signs of rejecting this in 1753 in *Reflection* 3703 in writing that ‘if the universal laws are supposed to be limited in their application to the relation of the pious and the ungodly, then tell me this: Who then are the pious’ (Refl AA 17:229). By 1755 the rejection had become unequivocal:

One offends completely against this [our love for our fellow man in his misery], however, when one... regards such fate as imposed punishment that will hit the concerned cities for their evil deeds and when we view these misfortunes as the goal of the avenging God (GNVE AA 01:459)¹².

That this rejection was a permanent move on his part can be seen in the later *Only Possible Argument* where Kant provides this confirmation in which he also distances himself from the position of Alexander Pope who held that the fixed laws of nature were such that they also encompassed moral behaviour:

...the occurrence of these events [destructive forces]...is sufficiently grounded in the constitution of nature, according to a universal law. But the vices and moral corruption of the human race are not *natural* grounds connected with these events, nor are they to be numbered among the laws in accordance with which they take place...the event in question was a misfortune, not a punishment: man’s moral conduct cannot be a cause of earthquakes according to natural law, for there is no connection here between the cause and the effect (BDG AA 02:104).

This rejection has a strong foundation in an earlier work, *Universal Natural History*¹³. In this Kant argued convincingly that, relying on Newtonian mechanics, the laws of nature are constant¹⁴ and unchanging with respect to both time and geography. In this work he steered a steady course between the Scylla of a purely mechanistic world with the laws of nature independent of God and the Charybdis of each aspect of Creation having been put in place by God’s direct action and continuously maintained thereafter¹⁵. Rather, Kant held that God’s understanding had provided the laws of nature which then acted to produce the world we observed (NTH AA 01:332). For Kant this meant no diminution of God’s role in Creation. He confirmed this stance in *Only Possible Argument*:

Everything which is produced by nature, in so far as it tends towards harmoniousness, order and usefulness, agrees...with God’s purposes. But it also displays the characteristic of having originated from universal laws. The effects of such universal laws extend far beyond any such individual case. (BDG AA 02:143)

Kant stressed that not even God departs from these laws in order to punish moral delinquents. A corollary, but not one emphasised by him, was that this stance undermined the possibility of miracles. After all, if God did not intervene to punish the morally evil, it would be inconsistent of Him to do so for a beneficial effect.¹⁶ Thus ‘where nature operates in accordance with necessary laws, there will be no need for God to correct the course of events by direct intervention’ (BDG AA 02:110).

So what was traditionally termed “physical evil” was, for Kant, not evil at all but rather the workings of the laws of nature, unchanging with respect to both time and place, but nevertheless with harmful effects on humans:

¹¹ References to Leibniz’s *Theodicy* are given as section number/page number from the Huggard translation.

¹² In the letter to Voltaire upbraiding him for his treatment of the Lisbon Earthquake, Rousseau quite independently adopts the same stance on physical evil vs. harm as does Kant. I thank my co-contributor Shterna Friedman for this observation.

¹³ *Universal Natural History and theory of the Heavens or Essay on the Constitution and Mechanical Origin of the Whole Universe according to Newtonian Principles*.

¹⁴ In this Kant was agreeing with Alexander Pope who states ‘Mark what unvaried laws preserve each state, Laws wise as nature, and fix’d as fate’ (III, 5).

¹⁵ For some, not just God’s initial direct action in creation, but His continued direct action in the world, also a recurring theme in Islamic philosophy.

¹⁶ God’s defenders with respect to miracles could still claim that He is nevertheless not bound by any requirement for consistency and is free to do as He wishes because He is omnipotent.

Even the terrible instruments by which disaster is visited on mankind, the shattering of countries, the fury of the sea shaken to its foundations, the fire-spewing mountains¹⁷, invite man's contemplation, and are planted in nature by God as a proper consequence of fixed laws (GNVE AA 01:431).

Thus Kant concluded that nature's harmful effects on humans were no longer evil - *Böse* but rather harm - *Übel* and he gave no indication in subsequent works of departing from this standpoint¹⁸. Kant explicitly re-inforced this point later in his treatment of Job's troubles in *Miscarriage*. God had given Job vision of both sides of His wisdom in Creation, not only the beautiful but also the horrible side 'among which also harmful and fearful things...yet with respect to other things and human beings themselves as destructive, counter purposive'. (cf. MvPT AA 08:266).

Another corollary of Kant's position on physical evil can be found in his stance on the centrality of man in creation, or, more strictly speaking, man's non-centrality. If the laws of nature are unchanging, then how can humans expect that God would or should intervene to prevent any harmful effects of these laws on them? This expectation rested on the false premise that humans formed the centerpiece of God's creation. In common with Leibniz and agreeing with Pope, Kant rejected any such anthropocentric premise. Leibniz asked: 'shall God, whose laws concern a good so universal that all of the world that is visible to us perchance enters into it as no more than a trifling accessory, be bound to depart from his laws, because they today displease the one and tomorrow the other?' (§205/H255). While Pope, whose attempted theodicy Kant had evaluated in his *Reflections* (3703-5) of 1753-4, states 'Has God, thou fool! worked solely for thy good, thy joy, thy pastime, thy attire, thy food?' (III, 2)¹⁹. Kant used his second Earthquake Essay to remove all doubt on the subject:

[T]hereby, it humbles humanity...to expect from the laws of nature that God has ordered purely agreeable consequences, and it probably teaches also in this manner to see: that this playground of his desires should not contain the objective of all his [God's] intentions²⁰ (GNVE AA 01:431).

In sum, Kant's stance on this topic did not change through his career and indeed it is in *Miscarriage* itself that one confirmation can be found in his discussion of the story of Job as highlighted above. (cf. MvPT AA 08:266).

The reality of evil

If Kant "inherited" the Leibnizian triad of evil (§21/H136), then he soon became concerned about both the origin and nature of other kinds of evil than physical. Included in the triad and with a long philosophical history with neo-Platonic roots was the concept of metaphysical evil. Its key attribute is that evil is a privation, a lack of good. Kant was concerned about how a privation, being an absence, could nevertheless still be ontologically positive, in other words, how a non-existence could exist? For example in *Optimism*, he states that 'negations can never be numbered among the qualities of a reality' (AA VBO 02:31). In his pre-Critical period, Kant downplayed metaphysical evil but did not yet explicitly reject it. But he did so in his rejection of attempted theodicy 1c²¹ in *Miscarriage* which is similar to the Leibnizian treatment of God's antecedent and consequent will. The former means that God wills no evil, but the act of Creation unavoidably involves creating beings with limitations which are the condition of the possibility of evil. Thus God only allows or permits evil consequent upon creation without wanting evil *per se*²²:

...since even for God it was impossible to prevent this evil without doing violence to higher and even moral ends elsewhere, the ground for this ill...must inevitably be sought in the essence of things, specifically the necessary limitations of humanity...hence the latter can also not be held responsible for it (MpVT AA 08:259).

In other words, if evil was inherent in the act of creation, then God was at least an accomplice in the origin of evil (if not its ultimate cause), a position completely at odds with a triple objective in Kant's philosophical system of (a) retaining a place for God and (b) there being constant laws of nature (cf. NTH AA 01:223) but (c) with the responsibility for moral evil still resting with humans. Without explicitly using the term "metaphysical evil", again Kant clearly rejects this concept in *Miscarriage* in dismissing attempted theodicy 1b '...founded on the limitations of the nature of human beings...the evil would thereby be justified...since it could not be attributed to human beings for which they are to be blamed' (MvPT AA 08:259). Kant came to recognize that creatures' necessary limitations were not evil as such but simply the condition of possibility of evil. In short, the pre-Critical Kant considered the concept of metaphysical evil but not yet explicitly rejected it.

Kant also examined the ontology of evil in *Negative Magnitudes*. Here he introduced the key differentiation between two types of opposition. First, logical opposition 'consists in the fact that something is simultaneously affirmed and denied of the very same thing. The consequence of the logical conjunction is *nothing*

¹⁷ Lisbon had indeed suffered earthquake, tsunami, and fire on All Saints Day 1755.

¹⁸ Kant explicitly de-conflated these two terms for the first time in the second *Critique* and does so in numerous passages in *Miscarriage*.

¹⁹ References in this form are to the Epistle/Section of Pope's *Essay*.

²⁰ Except where stated otherwise all translations in the treatment of the earthquake essays are mine.

²¹ Refers to Kant's theodicy numbering system in *Miscarriage*.

²² Hence the conclusion that God wills all good in *himself antecedently*, that he wills the best *consequently* as an *end*, that he wills what is indifferent, and physical evil, sometimes as a *means*, but that he will only permit moral evil as the *sine quo non* or as a hypothetical necessity which connects it with the best. Therefore the *consequent will* of God which has sin for its object, is only *permissive* (§25/H138).

at all (*nihil negativum irrepresentabile*)' (NG AA 02:171). Second, there is real opposition which he termed *Realrepugnantz*. He illustrated this concept using the analogy of a vessel sailing to Brazil on which the forces of wind and tide are in opposition. This he applied to moral evil where good and evil are opposing "forces" with the magnitude of one attenuated by the other, even to the point of cancelling out each other²³. Again referring to the ontological status of a lack, Kant emphasized that the opposite of "pleasure" is not a lack of pleasure but the ontologically positive "displeasure" (NG AA 02:182), in other words, pleasure with a negative value. This insight allowed Kant to retain the religious differentiation between sins of commission and sins of omission. In the latter case, when we do not do what we know to be good, evil is still present; it has cancelled the good with the result being inaction in which there is still fault:

...there are evils of lack (*mala defectus*) [*absentia*] and evils of deprivation (*mala privationis*). Evils of lack are negations [*absentia*]: there is no ground for the positing of what is opposed to them. Evils of deprivation presuppose that there are positive grounds which cancel the good for which there really exists another ground. Such evils of deprivation are *negative* goods. (NG AA 02:182).

This stance was maintained by Kant through the rest of his philosophical career as is evidenced in *Religion* (cf. RGV AA 06:22n) where he restates this argument from *Negative Magnitudes* in even stronger, unequivocal, terms. Now that evil can also be something ontologically real and not just something inherent in the world through the act of creation, Kant had no choice but to develop an account of human responsibility for evil through freedom. That this formed one of the foundations of his treatment of morality which led eventually to his "moral proof"²⁴ of the existence of God shows that this pre-Critical development was of career-lasting significance.

These first four topics which we have considered so far are ones which illustrate either career long stances for Kant or ones in an embryonic form leading to such an end. In the remaining two, we look at topics where there was a discontinuity, indeed a clear reversal in thought.

The Possibility of Philosophical Theodicies

In *Miscarriage* Kant clearly discriminated between philosophical theodicies which are based on theoretical reason, and his own "authentic" theodicy based on moral, practical, reasoning. Before advancing the latter, he unequivocally rejected the former:

Every previous theodicy has not performed what it promised, namely the vindication of the moral wisdom of the world-government against the doubts raised against it on the basis of what the experience of the world teaches (MpVT AA 08:263).

This statement is in complete contrast to Kant's stance in the pre-Critical period of his career where he accepted such theodicies as possible. Indeed, traces of such possibility persist into the earlier part of his Critical period in the *Pölitiz Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*²⁵. I regard this as evidence of a measured but sure migration away from the Leibnizian triad of evil. Following this migration is of value. His first acceptance of a philosophical theodicy is to be found as early as 1753-54 in his *Reflections* (3703-5):

God's wisdom and goodness nonetheless turns them [the permitted evils as a result of Creation] to the advantage of the whole, so that the displeasure they arouse when viewed in isolation is completely outweighed in the whole by the compensation which the divine goodness is able to institute (Refl AA 17:231).

This is a "net good" theodicy which regards the presence of a particular evil as justified on the basis that the harm done is outweighed by the good that the evil produces and thus God is excused for His allowance of evil. In these same *Reflections* he also endorses the stance of Pope who held that 'whatever is, is right' which implies that defects in the world are only apparent. But this is not a "net good" theodicy but rather a denial of evil and by implication, if correct; there would be no PE to address. Like Kant, Pope maintains that the laws of nature are fixed but, as highlighted earlier, goes further than Kant in arguing that just as physical evil results from the workings of fixed laws, so too does moral evil. Later in *Optimism* Kant endorses the Leibnizian system, an undoubted philosophical theodicy. In this work Kant states that he is 'happy to find myself a citizen of the world which could not possibly have been better than it is' (VBO AA 02:34). It should be noted that Kant later dissociated himself from such an endorsement (cf. BR AA 10:19). This prompts the question of what motivated Kant's change of heart after his well-formulated criticisms of the Leibnizian best possible world five years earlier (cf. Refl AA 17:238).

I do not have a hypothesis for this change of heart but others have advanced possible explanations. It would seem that Kant was embarrassed by *Optimism*. David Walford in the introduction to his translation of *Optimism* being used in this paper cites Borowski, Kant's earliest biographer, as stating when he [Borowski] had enquired about the work:

Kant, with genuine solemn seriousness bade me think no more on optimism, urging me, should I ever come across it anywhere, not to let anyone have a copy but to withdraw it from circulation immediately (2002, lvi).

²³ This is opposed to the situation where no forces are acting and thus the entity is at rest.

²⁴ As affirmed in *Miscarriage* at AA MvPT 08:257n.

²⁵ Hereafter *Lectures*.

Borowski's testimony is important as his biography was read in sketch form by Kant and corrected in places by him (Kuehn, 2001, 10). Ernst Cassirer (1918, 59), on the other hand, dismisses the work as 'no more than a hastily composed, academic occasional piece'. He points, however, to another clue in a footnote. In a letter to Johann Gottlieb Lindner dated 28 October 1759 (cf. BR AA10:19) Kant explains that his motivation for the work was to defend optimism against Crusius. But Martin Schönfeld puts forward a convincing motivation which is consistent with subsequent developments, not for the change of heart in *Optimism*, but rather for Kant's embarrassment:

Only five years after its composition, Kant would reject the *Optimism* essay and his own earlier defense of the Leibnizian concept of evil as the mere absence of good. (The claimed proportionality of reality, relative perfection, and goodness had implied evil is nothing) (2000, 188).

The later work to which Schönfeld is referring is *Negative Magnitudes*, considered above, in which Kant established the reality of evil as described earlier.

The two philosophical theodicies discussed were not the only ones that Kant recognized which the following from *New Elucidation* makes clear:

By thus pruning away the branches which yield an abundant harvest of evils, and, in so far as it is compatible with human freedom, eliminating them, He has in this way shown Himself to be someone who hates all wickedness, but also someone who loves the perfections which can nonetheless be extracted from that source (PND AA 01:405).

In this one passage, Kant is considering the possibility of three classes of theodicy. First, when he draws attention to human freedom he is suggesting a "free-will" theodicy, the essence of which is that, in giving humans the freedom needed to be morally responsible, it is almost certain that some will abuse that freedom to commit evil and that God is not to blame for this. Thus, moral responsibility and moral evil are inextricably linked. Second, eradicating all avoidable evil would result in the production or maintenance of a best possible world *à la* Leibniz. Third, the idea that good or "perfections" can be derived from evil suggests an instrumental account of evil or "greater good" theodicy. Kant also put such a theodicy into the mouth of Titius in the imaginary dialogue in *New Elucidation*: 'God also allowed things to creep into his scheme which, in spite of the admixture of many evils, would yield something which was good and which the wisdom of God would elicit from them' (PND AA 01:404). Indeed, a free-will theodicy could be interpreted as a "net good" theodicy as it could be claimed that God in His foreknowledge elected to create a world with free human beings knowing that the good which would come from that would more than outweigh the evil that would almost inevitably result.

The ample evidence above is drawn from Kant's pre-critical period but the possibilities of a valid philosophical theodicy persist into the early part of his Critical period. These are to be found principally in *Lectures*. At V-Phil-Th/Pöhlitz AA 28:1079 Kant argues for a best possible world on the ground that what is better chooses better. As there can be no being better than God, the world He chose to create cannot be bettered. To endorse the notion that our world is the best possible whilst concurrently recognizing the reality of moral evil is to imply a theodicy under which God is not responsible for the unavoidable residual evil in the world. In addition, Kant is reinforcing his position with the secondary argument that, if a better world was indeed possible, then the creator of our world could not be the entity which contains all perfection or reality and therefore not God. Also in *Lectures*, Kant offers two further short reflections on theodicy. First, he praises the astronomers who have shown that our world is but a part of a much greater whole. This enables him to advance a "limited view" theodicy, or more strictly, a "limited view" defence. Despite the seeming conflict with V-Phil-Th/Pöhlitz AA 28:1079, Kant is recorded as saying that 'if our terrestrial globe were the whole world, it would be difficult to know it to be the best and to hold this by conviction' (V-Phil-Th/Pöhlitz AA 28:1097). It is possible to defend God by claiming, despite the acknowledged evil in the known part of Creation, it is feasible that Creation *in toto* is still the best that can be achieved. However, since this cannot be a full-blown theodicy but only a defence, neither can the argument being advanced acquit God of responsibility for evil in Creation. Second, Kant briefly considers the notion that 'on this earth the sum of pain and the sum of good might just about balance each other'. If he had persisted with this line, a theodicy which sought to excuse God for evil because the net effect of good and evil was zero or positive would have been possible. Kant revisits such a calculus later in *Miscarriage* but only to dismiss it in his consideration of attempted theodicy 2a (MvPT AA 08:259) and thus any theodicy based on this notion. However, as Cassirer (1951, 150) points out, Kant had already explicitly rejected such a calculus by Maupertuis as early as 1763 at NG AA 02:181. This would make his later consideration of such a theodicy in *Miscarriage* puzzling had he been advancing it but he is not; rather he is evaluating one of the prevalent theodicies of his day.

Kant also put forward an "evolutionary" or "moral progression" theodicy, in the same manner as John Hick would echo much later with "soul making" in his influential *Evil and the God of Love* (cf. Hick, 2007, 253-261) where this comes close to explaining evil as means to an eventual good moral state. Kant envisaged a historical process occurring which was put in place by God but man was nevertheless responsible for the evil committed during his progress towards moral perfection, not the "wise creator" who initiated the process. Such a telic theodicy recognizes that evil occurs but this is discounted because of the eventual result. However, the discrepancy between evil being used as a means to the good by man and its possible use by God was noted²⁶. Textual evidence for this to be found not only at V-Phil-Th/Pöhlitz AA 28:1078-79 but also in his Critical

²⁶ Rejected in *Miscarriage* attempted theodicy 1a (AA MvPT 08:258).

period essays *Idea for a Universal History* (cf. IaG AA 08:21) and *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* (cf. MAM AA 08:115-16) both of which predate *Miscarriage* where philosophical theodicies were decisively and finally rejected.²⁷

However, there is in the post-*Miscarriage* work *Towards Perpetual Peace*²⁸ a passage which at first sight appears to undermine any notion of a pre/post-*Miscarriage* boundary regarding possible “moral progression” theodicies. There is an implied “moral progression” when Kant states that any kind of theodicy would be impossible if ‘such a race of corrupt beings’ (ZeF AA 08:380) was incapable of eventual moral improvement. But I regard this as another example of the approach he used in *Miscarriage* namely describing a possible theodicy and then rejecting it. Kant does this when he then clearly states: ‘But this kind of judgment is far too exalted for us; we cannot theoretically attribute our conception of wisdom to the supreme power whose nature is beyond our understanding’ (*ibid*). This is an explicit rejection of a possible successful theoretical/philosophical theodicy which is entirely consistent with the earlier rejection of such theodicies in *Miscarriage*. Thus that work can continue to be seen as the turning point in Kant’s thought on theodicy.

Further in *Idea*, with respect to the development of reason, Kant puts forward an unambiguous “moral progression” theodicy:

[T]here will be opened a consoling prospect...in which the human species is represented in the remote distance as finally working itself upward toward the condition in which all germs nature has placed in it can be fully developed and its vocation here on earth can be fulfilled. Such a *justification* of nature – or better, of *providence* – is no unimportant motive for choosing a particular viewpoint for considering the world (IaG AA 08:30).

In *Lectures*, Kant also advanced an instrumental theodicy which this time is based on injustice in the world:

But to sacrifice one’s peace, one’s powers and one’s advantage when the eternal laws of morality demand it, that is true virtue, and worthy of a future recompense! If there were no disproportion at all between morality and well-being in this world, there would be no opportunity for us to be truly virtuous (V-Phil-Th/Pölit AA 28:1081).

Here, the instrumental role that evil performs is the creation of conditions which demand that we act in a moral way, whether we decide to do so or not. Indeed, Kant is almost suggesting that we could not be moral without injustice in the world. This extract also has the tone that evil can provide the background to make the good stand out more clearly like a jewel on a dull background. Such a notion is not new having previously been expressed by Leibniz in his *Theodicy* with: ‘[a]nd is it not most often necessary that a little evil render the good more discernible, that is to say, greater?’ (§12/H130). In contrast, Kant unequivocally rejects any possible theodicy of this nature in his consideration of attempted theodicies 2b and 2c in *Miscarriage* (MvPT AA 08:260).

Kant offers yet another possible theodicy when he states that ‘[i]f God commands something for which we cannot understand the reason, then this is because of the limitations of our cognition, and not because of the nature of the commandment itself’ (V-Phil-Th/Pölit AA 28:1114). However we cannot give up our efforts to understand too early without being accused of the lazy reason which he dismisses on several occasions in other works²⁹. Later, Kant will show in *Miscarriage* attempted theodicy 1a that what we cannot do is defend moral evil by calling on a different standard of right or wrong in God’s case, dismissing the claim that ‘...we err whenever we judge what is law only relative to human beings...to be such also when considered from the highest’ (MvPT AA 08:258). Kant reserves some of his strongest language in rejecting such a notion ‘surely it can be freely given over to the detestation of every human being who has the least feeling for morality’ (*ibid*).

Moreover, in the same period Kant offered a free will theodicy with an unambiguous Leibnizian tone in the final sentence with its implied contrast between the antecedent and consequent will of God; in my view, this is without doubt a philosophical theodicy which also reinforces his stance of the necessity of free will for morality:

If...God created the whole world for the best, it was necessary to reply to the objection how moral evil could be found in such a best world, then it is now also our duty to show why God has not prevented evil...the possibility of deviating from the moral law must adhere to every creature...If the human being is to be a free creature...then it must also be within his power to follow or shun the laws of morality. His use of freedom has to depend on him, even if it should wholly conflict with the plan designed for the moral world. (V-Phil-Th/Pölit AA 28:1113)

From the abundant evidence presented above, it is clear that (a) Kant did entertain philosophical theodicies in his pre-Critical period and (b) that his eventual rejection of them in *Miscarriage* was as dramatic a discontinuity as his Copernican Turn in other matters. Such a “Theodical Turn” was not a gradual evolution from earlier ideas. Although out of scope to this paper with its pre-Critical focus, there is still a place for an abridged explanation for this change. It is completely consistent with Kant’s Critical philosophy, the thrust of which in the first *Critique* is that unconstrained pure reason attempts to violate the epistemic boundary and claim knowledge of what it cannot know. The most relevant case is claiming knowledge of God and His attributes which Kant suspects is nothing more than ‘our presumptuous reason failing to recognize its limitations’

²⁷ Kant himself resurrects the notion of moral teleology in *Religion*, not as an attempted theodicy, but rather he writes of an ‘ethical community’, a ‘moral community of God’, as essential in realising the Highest Good, man’s moral telos.

²⁸ Published in 1795 after *Miscarriage*.

²⁹ E.g. A689 and V-Phil-Th/Pölit AA 28:1071.

(AA MvPT 08:255)³⁰. Inherent in philosophical or theoretical theodicies is the inadmissible claim to know God's reasoning with respect to evil in the world. Thus, recognizing the risk of reasoning away moral evil and our responsibility for it in this way, Kant turned to practical reason to provide an "authentic" theodicy characterized by sincerity and intellectual humility.

However, these considerations do not address a grave problem. This is how Kant could advance the theodicy cited above (V-Phil-Th/Pölit AA 28:1113) which is in clear violation of the epistemic boundary previously established in the first Critique. This issue is treated in-depth by Pablo Muchnik elsewhere in this special issue.

The Happiness of Evil Men

Another area where there was a discontinuity, perhaps a less serious one, is Kant's considerations of the fate of evil men. In Reflection 3703 Kant questioned whether the evil man suffered disadvantages in this world to offset the benefits from his evil-doing and whether this might alleviate the sense of injustice felt by the upright man (cf. Refl, AA 17:229). In *Lectures* Kant maintains this stance that '[i]f we investigate this closely we find that the disproportion between the two is not really so large. We must not be blinded by the outward glitter that frequently surrounds the vicious person' and '[t]he restlessness of his conscience torments him continually' (V-Phil-Th/Pölit AA 28:1081). Possibly, this could be construed as a type of theodicy since it supports the idea of justice in the world, but it could be easily set aside as having more to do with human psychology than theodicy, since it does not involve God *per se*. It seeks, however, to reassure the good man that there is some justice in the world in spite of everything because the evil man is not as happy as he might seem due to his private turmoil. It is still noteworthy because, if correct, it at least reduces the force of any claim of injustice against God.

By 1791 in *Miscarriage* Kant did treat the topic as an attempted theodicy. However, he completely reversed his standpoint on this subject to be in direct opposition to that in *Lectures*. The theodicy set out in *Miscarriage* 3a attempts to show that the apparent counter-purposiveness of injustice is not so. Kant describes it as '[t]he pretension that the depraved go unpunished in the world is ungrounded, for by its very nature every crime already carries with it its due punishment, inasmuch as the inner reproach of conscience torments the depraved even more harshly than the Furies' (MpVT AA 08:261). But Kant firmly dismisses this, holding that it is based on a misunderstanding where the good person with his/her moral sensitivities projects into the evil person how he/she (the good person) would feel in the same circumstances. Additionally, seeing 'the depraved go unpunished' increases 'the pain that the virtuous must suffer through comparison of his own unhappiness with the happiness of the depraved' (*Ibid.*) which adds to the sense of injustice felt by the good person. Kant dismisses this self-inflicted tortuous dialogue to confirm that the depraved man only 'laughs at the scrupulousness of the honest who inwardly plague themselves with self-inflicted rebukes' (*Ibid.*). What really concerns the wicked man is evading punishment and Kant considers that the occasional reproach that the wicked man might feel does not spring from conscience. Further, Kant holds that any censure is greatly outweighed by the pleasure that evil brings him.

Conclusion

There can be no doubt that Kant's pre-Critical period was a formative one for his thought on theodicy which would eventually come to fruition with *Miscarriage*. Additionally, some of the stances which Kant developed in his consideration of the fundamentals of theodicy were maintained throughout his subsequent career and which had a more wide-ranging influence on his work than solely on theodicy. Two examples of permanence have been illustrated in this paper, his stance on physical evil and on the reality of moral evil. Other areas showed future positions in embryonic form such as in his treatment of freedom as a pre-requisite for morality. Lastly, there were areas where initial positions were reversed. The most significant example here was his abrupt change of his view on the possibility of philosophical theodicies.

Taken together, I conclude that all of the above shows that Kant's pre-Critical works can be profitably mined for material relevant to theodicy in order to form the context for a fuller understanding of his later, definitive, contribution to the subject of theodicy. *Miscarriage*, with its hallmark "authentic" theodicy, thus rests, to an important extent, on these often unseen or unconsidered foundations.

Bibliography

- Cassirer, E. (1918). *Kants Leben und Lehre* (Translated by James Haden 1981 *Kant's Life and Thought*). New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Cassirer, E. (1951). *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Despland, M. (1973). *Kant on History and Religion*. Montreal: McGill - Queen's University Press.
- Hick, J. (2007). *Evil and the God of Love*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huxford, George. (2020). *Kant and Theodicy: A Search for an Answer to the Problem of Evil*. Landham, MD: Lexington.
- Kuehn, M. (2001). *Kant - A Biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Leibniz, G. (1710). *Theodicy*. Translated by E.M. Huggard. La Salle, IL: Open Court (1985).
- Pope, A. (1994). *Essay on Man & Other Poems*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications Inc.
- Schönfeld, M. (2000). *The Philosophy of the Young Kant*. New York: Oxford University Press.

³⁰ This is re-emphasized at AA MvPT 08:263, 08:264 and 08:267.

Kant, Immanuel. Works are cited by volume and page number of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften* (AA, edited by the German Academy of Sciences, Berlin, 1900–), the *Akademie Ausgabe*. Except for the translations of the Earthquake Essays which are mine, all the translations to English are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, General Editors Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1992 onwards).

The individual works from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* which are referred to in this paper are listed below after the abbreviations following the *Kant Studien* system.

Refl:	Reflections on Metaphysics 3703–3705
PND:	New Elucidation of the First Principles of Metaphysical Cognition.
BDG:	The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God.
BR:	Letters (AA 10)
HN:	Handwritten <i>Nachlass</i>
NTH:	Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens, or Essay on the Constitution and Mechanical Origin of the Entire Universe, treated in accordance with Newtonian Principles.
GNVE:	History and natural description of the most noteworthy occurrences of the earthquake that struck a large part of the Earth at the end of the year 1755.
VBO:	Attempt at Some Reflections on Optimism.
NG:	Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes in Philosophy.
UD:	Inquiry concerning the distinctness of the principles of natural theology and morality.
V-Phil-Th/Pölitz:	Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion
IaG:	Idea for a Universal Natural History with a Cosmopolitan Aim.
GMS:	Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals.
MAM:	Conjectural Beginning of Human History.
KpV:	Critique of Practical Reason.
MvPT:	On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy
RGV:	Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason
MS:	The metaphysics of morals
Zef:	Towards Perpetual Peace

The usual exception is made for *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the convention Annn/Bnnn is followed, indicating the page number of the first and second editions respectively.