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A New Genesis of Kant's Essay on the Failure of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy

Una nueva génesis del ensayo de Kant sobre el fracaso de todo ensayo filosófico en teodicea

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Abstract: This article presents a new genesis of Kant's essay on the failure of all philosophical trials in theodicy. First, I explain the reason why Kant discredited the problem of theodicy within the realm of philosophical knowledge. After the reconstruction of the contemporary conflict over Kant's essay on theodicy, I argue that the reason for this failure lies in the concept of contra-purposiveness. Second, I explain the origins of the neologism "contra-purposive" in Kant's works. This term was first used in the Analytic of the Sublime. Therefore, I conclude that the sublime served as Kant's conceptual criterion for defining the contra-purposivensss of evil in the essay on the failure of theodicy.

Keywords: theodicy, evil, contra-purposiveness, negativity, sublime.

Resumen: Este artículo presenta una nueva génesis del ensayo de Kant sobre el fracaso de todos los ensayos filosóficos en teodicea. En primer lugar, explico la razón por la que Kant decidió desacreditar el problema de la teodicea dentro del ámbito del saber filosófico. Tras la reconstrucción del conflicto contemporáneo sobre el ensayo de Kant sobre teodicea, sostengo que la razón de este fracaso reside en el concepto de lo contrario a fin. En segundo lugar, explico los orígenes del neologismo "contrario-a fin" en la obra de Kant. La primera vez que este término fue usado fue en la "Analítica de lo sublime". Por lo tanto, concluyo que lo sublime sirvió como criterio conceptual para Kant para definir la contra-finalidad del mal en el ensayo sobre el fracaso de la teodicea.

Palabras clave: teodicea, mal, contra-finalidad, negatividad, sublime.

Introduction

Kant's essay *On the Failure of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy* appeared in the September 1791 issue of the *Berliner Monatsschrift*. It has always been a mystery why Kant, shortly after completing the "critical enterprise" in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), wanted to discredit the problem of theodicy within the realm of philosophical knowledge (di Giovanni 1996; Maier 1923). Indeed, Kant has always presented himself as an advocate of the doctrine

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of the best of all possible worlds, both before and after the first publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). In the *Lectures on Rational Religion*, which were held in the winter semester of 1783/4, Kant states that the doctrine of the best possible worlds is a "necessary maxim of our reason" (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, AA 28: 1098; 2001: 427).[2] This optimism, however, was not only shared with his students; it also played a central role in his reflections on history. In *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784), Kant states that the task of the philosophical reflection on human history is the "*justification* of nature – or better, of *providence*" (IaG, AA 8: 30; 2007: 119).[3] In addition to his writings on history, Kant's optimism also permeates the *Critique of Judgment*. Here, he asserts that "everything *in nature* is good for something" (KU, AA 05: 437; 2000: 304), a statement that inevitably evokes the renowned dictum of Alexander Pope: *whatever is, is right.*

The presence of optimism in Kant's critical writings poses a complex question. If the limits of reason do not preclude the optimistic doctrine, why did Kant dismiss the rational validity of theodicy at the end of his life? This question has triggered a great dispute among Kant's readers. In the literature, there are at least two different standpoints (Dieringer 2007). Some authors try to defend the unity and consistency of Kant's thought by asserting that there is no gap in his reflections on theodicy (Brachtendorf 2002; Busche 2013; Hoesch 2014; Koreck 2021). According to this reading, Kant was and always will be an advocate of the highest wisdom, both before and after the publication of the essay *On the Failure of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy.* In contrast, other authors claim that this essay suggests a drastic change in Kant's career (Schulte 1991; Cavallar 1993; Duncan 2012; Huxford 2020). As they argue, such a failure not only deviates from a basic tenet of the German Enlightenment, namely optimism, but also seems to diverge from Kant's overarching philosophical objectives.

In this article, I advocate for the second interpretation. In my reconstruction, I present two aspects of Kant's philosophy that have received little attention in the aforementioned studies, namely, the concept of negative magnitudes and the feeling of the sublime. On the one hand, Kant's precritical *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy* presents a significant departure from the Wolffian optimistic tradition. Instead of understanding evil as a "mere lack of being" or "goodness", here Kant regards evil as a *positive reality* with

[2] Kant's works are cited according to the indications of the *Kant-Gesellschaft*. English translations base on *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: CUP).

[3] See also the 1786 essay *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*. Kant's conclusion is clearly optimistic: "the result of an oldest history of humanity attempted by philosophy is contentment with providence and with the course of things human on the whole – which does not start from good and progress toward evil, but develops gradually from the worse toward the better; and each of us, for his part, is called upon by nature itself to contribute as much as lies in his power to this progress." (MAM, AA 08: 123; 2012: [175]).

own ontological grounds. This standpoint presents a notion of evil that resists the optimistic relativization. For this reason, I shall try to reconstruct the concept of evil as presented in the essay on theodicy by employing the conceptual framework provided by the concept of negative magnitudes. On the other hand, I will consider the Analytic of the Sublime as an *aesthetic preamble* to the essay on theodicy. The notion of 'contra-purposiveness' (*Zweckwidrigkeit*), which Kant uses to characterize both the sublime in the third *Critique* and evil in the essay on theodicy, will shed light on the connection between these two different concepts. I addition, I will justify the connection between the sublime and evil in light of the history of aesthetics. Philosophers like Moses Mendelssohn, for instance, turned the negative experience of evil into one of the main sources for describing the sublime. The analysis of the concept of contra-purposiveness from an aesthetic approach will thus serve both to argue that there is a change in Kant's views on theodicy and to clarify the genesis of such a failure.

The emphasis on the second aspect endeavors to address a hiatus in Kant's intellectual career. Following the publication of the third *Critique*, Kant's publication output ceased – a notable departure from his prolific productivity during the 1780s. The essay on theodicy is Kant's first contribution subsequent to the publication of the *Critique*, which appeared together with his response to Eberhard's critiques. Insight into Kant's concerns during this period can be gleaned from a letter addressed to Biester, the editor of the *Berliner Monatsschrift*. In a letter from December 1789, Kant says that he "now [has] a work of about only one month to complete" – the *Streitschrift* against Eberhard – "then I will rest for some time and fill it with some elaborations, in case they are decent to your monthly journal" (AA, 11: 117). This period of rest resulted in both the essay on theodicy and the essay *On Radical Evil in Human Nature* which first appeared in the April issue of 1792. Kant's original intention was to publish more essays in Biester's journal. However, due to Wöllner's edict on religion, he decided to publish these essays in a single volume, namely the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. The essay on theodicy is never mentioned in Kant's correspondence. However, Biester made a trip to Poland and Prussia in 1791, during which he was supposed to have met Kant in Königsberg. The editorial discussion on this essay could have happened during this visit.

Given the uncertainty about the origins of the essay on the failure of theodicy, I think it is worth considering the hypothesis that such a failure may have been motivated, among other possible factors, by the concept of the sublime. In the initial section of this article, I lay out the main issues of the ongoing debate surrounding Kant's essay on the theodicy. Subsequently, in the second section, I counter objections seeking to argue against a change in Kant's views on theodicy. In support of this argument, I argue that the concept of negative magnitudes underlies

Kant's conception of evil in 1791. In other words, I argue that Kant's concept of evil in this late essay cannot be philosophically relativized. Finally, in the third section, I elucidate the relation between Kant's essay on the failure of theodicy and the Analytic of the Sublime.

1. Laying Out the Conflict Over Kant's Essay on Theodicy

The starting point of the conflict over Kant's 1791 essay on the failure of theodicy is Schulte's (1991) interpretation. According to Schulte, the concept of contra-purposiveness is the reason for the failure of theodicy. Indeed, this concept carries a central meaning in this essay. It is the technical term for whatever may be "opposed" to God's wisdom (MpVT, AA 08: 256; 2001: 25). Its importance becomes evident at the very beginning of the essay: "By 'theodicy' we understand the defense of the highest wisdom of the creator against the charge which reason brings against it for whatever is contra-purposive in the world" (MpVT, AA 08: 255; 2001: 24). Therefore, the contra-purposive is the reason why theodicy is needed.

Kant interprets this term in three different ways, each of which brings a charge against the rationalistic moral attributes of the highest being, namely "holiness," "goodness," and "justice" (MpVT, AA 08: 256-7; 2001: 25). Kant understands this term as (a) the "absolute contra-purposive, or what cannot be condoned or desired either as end or means", (b) the "conditionally contra-purposive, or what can indeed never coexist with the wisdom of a will as end, yet can do so as means," and, derived from these two kinds of contra-purposiveness, (c) the "disproportion between crimes and penalties in the world." It is important to note that these three kinds of contra-purposiveness, as Schulte (1991) and Dieringer (2009) have argued, are used against arguments that Kant himself held during his philosophical career both before and after the Copernican turn, as in the *Lectures on Rational Religion* and his writings on the philosophy of history. According to the mentioned authors, Kant's rejection of these arguments in 1791 would make quite evident a crucial turn in his philosophical reflections on theodicy.

After these nominal definitions of the concept of the contra-purposive, Kant proceeds to refute all kinds of arguments that attempt to defend divine wisdom. Since none of these vindications pass the critical examination, Kant concludes this "juridical process before the forum of philosophy" as follows: "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 this world teaches" (MpVT, AA 08: 263.01-05; 2001: 30). As it becomes clear, the experience of negativity in this world cannot be devalued by any vindication of the highest wisdom. Hence, Schulte (1991: 385) concludes, the experience of the contra-purposive is the reason for the failure of philosophical theodicy.

Schulte's interpretation of the concept of the contra-purposive has been harshly criticized by several scholars. These objections come from Brachtendorf (2002: 66), Dieringer (2009: 96), Busche (2013: 235) Hoesch (2014: 327) and Koreck (2021: 214). The reasons these scholars present can be summarized in two points. (1) First, the contra-purposive cannot be the reason for this failure because, according to Kant, there is no element of experience that can act as an accusation against divine wisdom. This objection is valid, for this same question is addressed by Kant. After affirming that those arguments in favor of theodicy must fail, he says that the contra-purposive cannot act as an accusation against God. As he puts it, "[…] although, to be sure, as objections, so far as our reason's inherent insight regarding them goes, neither can these doubts prove the contrary" (MpVT, AA 08: 263.05-08; 2001: 30).

Furthermore, this objection arises from Kant's thesis that the limitations of human understanding appear to be the primary cause of this failure: "in order to bring this trial to an end *once and for all*, it must yet be proven that at least a negative wisdom is within our reach – namely, insight into the necessary limitation of what we may presume with respect to that which is too high for us" (MpVT, AA 08: 263; 2001: 30). This transcendental argument for the failure of theodicy, which was also considered by Schulte (1991: 391) is reminiscent of the main concern of the *Critique of Judgment*, namely the *Übergang* between nature and freedom. To develop this argument, Kant draws on these realms of philosophical reasoning to describe two different ways of conceiving of divine wisdom – it can be either "artificial" or "moral." According to this argument, the reason for the failure of theodicy lies in the inability of our understanding to possess a proper concept of the "unity" of the artificial and moral wisdom.

(2) The second objection to Schulte's thesis is based on the hypothesis that the contra-purposive is "implicitly" present in the *Lectures on the Doctrine of Rational Religion*, which were held after the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (in the winter semester of 1783/4). Following this objection, the concept of the contra-purposive cannot be the reason for the failure of theodicy because in the *Lectures* theodicy succeeds despite its implicit presence. Indeed, here Kant presents himself as an advocate of divine wisdom. However, according to the Copernican turn, he develops the optimistic doctrine within the boundaries of reason and without resorting to the ontological proof of God: "it is possible to recognize the doctrine of the best world from maxims of reason alone, independently of all theology and without its being necessary to resort to the wisdom of a creator in proof of it" (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, AA 28: 1098; 2001: 427). Consequently, optimism gets rid of rational *tours de force* and becomes transcendental, that is, a "necessary maxim of reason." According to Kant, we "can and must assume for reason's sake that everything in the world is arranged for the best, and that the

whole of everything existing is the best possible one" (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, AA 28: 1098; 2001: 427).

Furthermore, Schulte's critics attempt to contextualize the essay on theodicy within moral theology, which Kant defines as the "attempt to infer from the moral ends of rational beings in nature (which can be cognized a priori)" to the supreme "cause" of nature and its "properties" (KU, AA 05: 436; 2000: 303). Even though Kant rejects any theoretical demonstration of God's existence, he affirms that this "ideal" is still valid in the practical realm of reason. In contrast to rationalistic attempts to reconcile faith and reason from a mere theorical standpoint, Kant reinvents this epochal conflict by thinking of faith from the perspective of the moral autonomy of reason. Consequently, as Schulte's critics state, this practical theology underlies the "authentic theodicy" that Kant defines at the end of the essay (MpVT, AA 08: 264; 2001: 31). This authentic theodicy, as the "dismissal of all objections against divine wisdom," has been interpreted as the "practical re-foundation" (Brachtendorf 2002: 58, 74) of Kant's theodicy, since it has in common with moral theology that it is a "pronouncement of the same reason through which we form our concept of God – necessarily and prior to all experience – as a moral and wise being" (MpVT, AA 08: 264; 2001: 31). Thus, while the rationalistic, doctrinal theodicy is doomed to fail due to the limits of human understanding, it remains the possibility of a practical theodicy – one based on the moral autonomy of reason.

2. Rejecting the Objections: On the Intelligibility and Negativity of Evil

Despite the claims against Schulte's interpretation, it is possible to see that these objections also present some inconsistences. To address them, I will concentrate on two points. First, although any element of nature cannot act as an accusation against divine wisdom, Kant also describes evil as pertaining to the *intelligible world*. Second, even though evil plays a role in the *Lectures on Rational Religion*, its meaning has nothing to do with the concept of contra-purposiveness. In contrast to the concept of evil and negativity in the *Lectures*, where evil is a "mere lack of being", Kant understood the reality of the contra-purposive in the essay on the failure of theodicy as a *negative magnitude*, that is, as a reality with positive ontological grounds. As Huxford (2020) and other scholars have argued (Schulte 1991: 394-5; Heimsoeth 1966: 228), the positive reality of the contra-purposive is one of its main philosophical features.

2.1. Against the First Objection: Evil Has a Rational Origin

Only the last two kinds of contra-purposiveness (b, c) pertain to the realm of experience, whether in nature or in society. In contrast to these evils, the first kind (a), the "absolute contra-purposive," has its reality in the intelligible world of freedom. As Kant suggests at the very end of this essay, evil also resides in the "heart" of man (MpVT, AA 08: 271.17; 2001: 37). Undoubtedly, this passage can be easily interpreted as a preface to the essay on *Radical Evil in Human Nature*, which was published in the same journal only seven months after the essay on the failure of theodicy. In contrast to Leibniz' theodicy, Kant cannot reduce moral evil (*malum morale*) to metaphysical evil (*malum metaphysicum*) (Cf. Leibniz, *Causa Dei* etc., § 29). In doing so, Kant would need to resort to metaphysical fictions which would also undermine the very foundations of human morality. If the reality of evil is a secondary effect of metaphysical necessity, there is no place for moral responsibility, that is, for freedom. In the previous works to *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant formulates this problem as follows:

> If everything was based on the sensibility of our nature, then physical or metaphysical harm would be the cause of evil. But then no evil would be our fault but the fault of nature. The accountability is based on the concept of freedom and presupposes independence from determination by natural causes. (VARGV, AA 23: 101.20-25)

According to this passage, moral evil must reside within human freedom. This suprasensible meaning of evil plays the central role in the 1792 essay on radical evil. As Kant says in a footnote, the "appropriate proof" of the universality and necessity of evil in human nature, in other words, its 'transcendental deduction,' is carried by the concept of "intelligible deed" (RGV, AA 06: 39.22-26; 2001: 85). In one of the last additions to this essay, Kant defines it as an "intelligible deed, cognizable through reason alone apart from any temporal condition" (RGV, AA 06: 31.32; 2001: 79). In other words, evil has "rational origin" (*Vernunftursprung*) (RGV, AA 06: 43.12; 2001: 88).

The integration of evil into practical reason was already denounced by J. A. Eberhard. He claims that the "intelligible fact" of radical evil, its introduction into the "intelligible world," is "incomprehensible," for this world is supposed to be "unchangeable and incorrigible" (1794: 41). In fact, especially in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, Kant affirms that all "my actions as only a member of the world of understanding would […] conform perfectly with the principle of autonomy of the pure will" (GMS, AA 04: 453.25-27; 1999: 100). The moral law, in turn, is what "determines" the nature of this "intelligible world." The intelligible moral fact of practical reason "points to a pure world of the understanding and, indeed, even *determines* it *positively* and lets us cognize something of it, namely a law" (KpV, AA 05:

43; 1999: 174). Thus, not only for critics as Eberhard but also for the public opinion, the introduction of evil into the kingdom of ends (*regnum gratiae*) must have been controversial.

Solving this philosophical aporia, however, is not my aim. My sole objective was to argue that, as evil assumes intelligible reality, the first type of contra-purposiveness, absolute evil, is unrelated to experience. Therefore, the first objection to Schulte can be dismissed.

2.2. Against the Second Objection: Evil Has Its Own Grounds

The second objection is based on the fact that, for Kant, the negativity of evil has never posed a threat to his optimism. Accordingly, although the concept of contra-purposiveness does not explicitly appear in the *Lectures on Rational Religion*, it is possible to construct its meaning from the different arguments that Kant offers there for casting doubt on divine providence (Brachtendorf 2002: 66; Dieringer 2009: 96; Busche 2013: 235). In fact, not only in the *Lectures* but also in the essays on the philosophy of history and in the third *Critique*, evil poses no threat to either man or God. Influenced by the historical optimism of Lessing's treatise on the *Education of the Human Race*, evil is for Kant not an impediment to the proper course of history; it acts as a driving force: "Thanks be to nature, therefore, for the incompatibility, for the spiteful competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess or even to dominate! For without them all the excellent natural predispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped" (IaG, AA 8: 21.26-29; 2007: 112). The idea of evil as the driving force of history also comes to light in some passages of the "Critique of the Teleological Judgment." Following Kant, it

> is even good for us to consider in this light things that are unpleasant and in certain relations contra-purposive for us. Thus one could say, e.g., that the vermin that plague humans in their clothes, hair, or bedding are, in accordance with a wise dispensation of nature, an incentive for cleanliness, which is in itself already an important means for the preservation of health. (KU, AA 05: 379.20-25; 2000: 251)

Even war has a positive and constructive meaning for human history. In a similar way to *Idea*, Kant claims in the third *Critique* that war is "inevitable," it is a "deeply hidden" and "intentional effort of supreme wisdom" to "establish" (KU, AA 05: 433; 2000: 300) the way for, as he says some years later, an "eternal peace," or, in Lessing's words, an "eternal gospel."

Even though Kant has always found a solution to problem of evil during the critical period, Schulte's critics have not considered the different senses that the negativity of evil has for Kant. In the *Attempt to Introduce the Concept of Negative Magnitudes into Philosophy*, two different concepts of evil appear, which, in turn, correspond to two different conceptions of negativity.

Before highlighting the two different concepts of evil, it is important to keep in mind the purpose of this early essay, for it was revolutionary for his contemporaries. As is well known, Wolff's rationalist school turned the principle of contradiction into the supreme principle of metaphysics. Accordingly, since the whole of reality is supposed to be constructed and derived ontologically from this first principle, it is unthinkable that there could be realities that contradict each other or that the concept of nothing could have a positive real meaning.

Against this dogmatic interpretation of the principle of contradiction, Kant argues that contradictory realities are possible and form part of common experience. In addition to the "logical opposition," whose consequence is "nothing at all," Kant proposes a "real opposition," which results in "something." From this empirical perspective, negative magnitudes "are not negations […] but something truly positive in itself, albeit something opposed to the positive magnitude" (NG, AA 02: 169.17-20; 1992: 209). This positive definition of negativity is fundamentally incompatible with the rationalistic equation of reality and perfection. As Leibniz famously states, "perfection is nothing more than the magnitude of positive reality" (*Monadologie*, § 39). Then, it should be controversial that imperfect and negative realities such as evil or pain could have a positive ontological value, for it would follow that imperfections have their ontological origin in the highest being (for the incompatibility between negativity and optimism, see Geyer 1983; 1982; and Schönberger 1998). Kant expresses this idea with a discernible tone of irony: "we have seen […] that displeasure is just as positive as pleasure, but who would call it a perfection?" (NG, AA 02: 198.30-31; 1992: 236). Against the rationalist school of Leibniz, Kant defines the reality of evil in the essay on the concept of negative magnitudes as something positive:

> The error into which many philosophers have fallen as a result of neglecting this truth is obvious. One finds that they generally treat evils as if they were mere negations, even though it is obvious from our explanations that there are evils of lack (*mala defectus*) and evils of deprivation (*mala privationis*). Evils of lack are negations: 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. (NG, AA 02: 182; 1992: 221)

Despite this early insight into the positive nature of the negativity of evil, Kant returns to the rationalist standpoint in the *Lectures on Rational Religion*. In contrast to the "good," which has a "germ" and is "self-sufficient," in these *Lectures* Kant regards evil as "incompleteness in the development of the germ toward the good. Evil has no special germ; for it is mere negation and consists only in the limitation of the good" (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, AA 28: 1078; 2001: 441). In turn, this understanding of evil is conditioned by a weak understanding of negativity.

Negations are in the *Lectures* "nothing but limitations of realities. For no negation can be thought unless the positive has been previously thought. How could I think of a mere deficiency, of darkness without a concept of light, or poverty without a concept of prosperity?" Hence, negative realities as evil or pain are not independent of the "highest being," but mere limitations:

> Thus if every negative concept is derivative in that it always presupposes a reality, then every thing in its thoroughgoing determination as an *ens partim reale*, *partim negativum* also presupposes an *ens realissimum* with respect to its realities and negations, because they are nothing but limitations of the highest reality. (V-Phil-Th/Pölitz, AA 28: 1014; 2001: 359)

These quoted passages make clear that the *Lectures on Rational Religion* and the essay on negative magnitudes have two different conceptions of evil, which, in turn, correspond to two different interpretations of negativity. The conception of negativity, as something positive and real, underlies the concept of evil in the essay on theodicy. As Huxford has recently argued, the examination of Kant's late essay on theodicy schows that "Kant no longer accepted metaphysical evil conceived as limitation but regarded evil solely as something with a positive ground" (2020: 83). Kant does not try to relativize the negative meaning of evil; instead, he invalidates all arguments that attempt to downplay its value. Using the same terminology of the essay on negative magnitudes, Kant states in 1791 that evil, the contra-purposive, is "opposed" (*entgegengesetzt*) (MpVT, AA 08: 256.11; 2001: 25) to God. Finally, the positive reality of evil will be fully developed shortly thereafter, in the essay on radical evil, where Kant draws a parallel between evil and the concept of negative magnitudes (Genazzano 2023: 72).

In conclusion, the underlying negativity of the concept of negative magnitude serves as the foundation for the concept of evil in Kant's essay on theodicy. Consequently, the second argument against Schulte's interpretation can be refuted: the negativity associated with evil in the *Lectures* does not carry the same connotation as in the essay on theodicy. Beyond addressing the issue of the negativity of evil, it becomes imperative to investigate the origins of the concept of contra-purposiveness in Kant's oeuvre – a task hitherto unexplored by scholars. As alluded to in the introduction, I contend that the first systematic elucidation of the concept of the contra-purposive in Kant's writings takes place in the Analytic of the Sublime.

3. The Missing Link: The Contra-Purposiveness of the Sublime

In this section, I argue that the criterion for determining the concept of evil in the essay on theodicy was conceived by Kant in the Analytic of the Sublime, which was one of the last parts

of the *Critique of Judgment* to be written. Although the concept of contra-purposiveness appears for the first time in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (KpV, AA 05:157.15)[4], it gained a central meaning in 1790. Kant uses this neologism to describe the objective quality of the sublime. According to him, the sublime object is "contra-purposive (*zweckwidrig*) for our power of judgment" (KU, AA 05: 245). Therefore, the sublime is opposed to the principle that constitutes the power of judgment. The natural purposiveness, that is, the "causality of a *concept* with regard to its *object*" (KU, AA, 05: 220; 2000: 105), is disrupted in this experience.

The negativity of the sublime, its contra-purposiveness, appears to present a challenge within Kant's aesthetic framework. In the preliminary considerations on the concept of the sublime, Kant says that the Analytic of the Sublime is a "mere appendix" to the critique of aesthetic judgments. This degradation of the concept of the sublime is not only characteristic of the Kantian aesthetic theory but is also a fundamental feature of the German development of this concept. This can be observed in the significant challenges that Burke's theory of the sublime posed for Lessing and Mendelssohn (Furniss: 2009). In my view, the demotion of the sublime to a "mere appendix" of the critique of the aesthetic judgments suggests that Kant was not able to fully integrate the category of the sublime in his own theory. As Odo Marquard (2003: 31) has suggested, the feeling of the sublime is the "aesthetic failure of aesthetics".

Before explaining the connection between evil and the sublime, it is necessary to point out a characteristic of the third *Critique*. Besides the transcendental turn of optimism in the *Lectures on Rational Religion*, it is important to underline that the very transcendental principle of judgment, the purposiveness of nature, which makes possible the judgments of the beautiful and the sublime, relies on the doctrine of the pre-established harmony. In reply to the rationalistic critiques of Eberhard, Kant openly admits that the critique has "definitively shown" that without the Leibnizian "doctrine of the pre-established harmony" no experience is possible (ÜE, AA 8: 249.26-29). In view of the "transcription" and "translation" (Cassirer, GW 08: 227; see Allison 2013) of the doctrine of the pre-established harmony into transcendental philosophy, it becomes clear why the project of the *Critique of Pure Reason* is, as Kant puts it, an "apology for Leibniz" (ÜE, AA 8: 250.36). Hence, the sublime disruption of the harmony between concepts and objects has a *parallel meaning* to the problem of evil in the context of the pre-established harmony. It is remarkably that Kant defines the purposiveness of nature with almost the same words as Mendelssohn's definition of the pre-stablished harmony. According to Mendelssohn's *Philosophical Dialogs*, the theory of the pre-established harmony

[4] See also the use of this term in other passages: AA, 06:243, 06: 425, 06: 28.

claims that the "order and connection of concepts is one and the same with the order and connection of things." (JubA: 01: 11). In a similar manner, Kant defines the purposiveness of nature in 1790 as the "causality of a *concept* with regard to its *object*" (KU, AA 05: 220).

The transcription of the pre-established harmony into the transcendental principle of the purposiveness of nature is is far from superficial. Indeed, this translation could plausibly be one of the reasons why the doctrine of the best possible worlds remains perceptible in the third *Critique*. The intersection between aesthetics and theodicy was also characteristic of Baumgarten. In his early *Meditationes philosophicae de nonnullis ad poema pertinentibus*, Baumgarten states that the poet must recreate the law-fulness that the philosopher finds in the world: "We observed a little while ago that the poet is like a maker or a creator. So the poem ought to be like a world. Hence by analogy whatever is evident to the philosophers concerning the real world, the same ought to be thought of a poem" (*Meditationes*, § 68; 1954: 63). Poetry must be ruled by the optimistic doctrine of the best possible worlds, and the discipline of aesthetics aims to investigate this cosmic harmony in works of art (Franke 2018: 9-64).[5]

However, Mendelssohn was the first German philosopher to develop the connection between sublime objects and the problem of evil. In a commentary on the Lisbon earthquake, maybe the greatest natural catastrophe of the 18th century, Mendelssohn argues that the contemplation of this disaster can produce pleasure if the spectator keeps a distance from it. The "imperfect, evil, and deficient always arouse a mixed feeling," which is composed of a "dissatisfaction" and "satisfaction" (JubA, 01: 387). At the beginning of his *Rhapsody*, he says:

> We disapprove of the evil that has occurred; we wish that it had not happened or that it stood in our power to make things right again. Once, however, the evil has occurred, and if it has occurred without our being in any way responsible for it and without our being able to prevent it, then we are powerfully attracted to the representation of it and long to acquire that representation. Lisbon's demise in the earthquake attracted countless people to take in the sight of this terrible devastation with their own eyes. (1997: 131-32; JubA, 01: 387)

Another aspect that must be considered is Mendelssohn's reception of Burke. One of Burke's most significant concepts is the feeling of delight, the translation of which posed a challenge for both Lessing and Mendelssohn. In his review of Burke's *Enquiry*, Mendelssohn translates the term *delight* as *Frohsein*. "A German could be above this innovation, since our language

[5] To understand the connection between the sublime and the problem of theodicy, it may be also helpful to consider how philosophers of the rationalistic tradition such as Baumgarten, Meier, and Mendelssohn deal with negative realities. According to Baumgarten, "if when a thing is posited, imperfection is also posited, then it is an EVIL. Hence, negations are an evil" (*Metaphysica*, § 146). Likely, Meier affirms in his *Metaphysics* that "each negation is something evil" (*Metaphysik*, § 135). These negations, as something evil, were understood by these rationalistic philosophers as mere lack and absence of being and not as something with its own ontological grounds, as Kant will later argue in the essay on negative magnitudes.

has a word that expresses this sensation. We say: I am glad that it is over, etc. by this, we also express the pleasure that arises from the liberation from a displeasure." (JubA 04: 218). He bases this translation on Wolff and Baumgarten. Wolff defines in his *Psychologia empirica* the word *hilaritas* as a joy emerging from a non-present evil: "Gaudium ortum ex eo, quod malum sit praeteritum, vel metus mali evanuerit, dicitur Hilaritas" (1968: 646; § 855). Wolff's German translation of this term is *Fröhlichkeit*. Mendelssohn, however, finds Baumgarten's translation of *hilaritas* as *Frohsein* more suitiable. In his *Metaphysics*, Baumgarten says: "Gaudium ex malo non amplius imminente est Hilaritas" (1757: 261; § 682). These passages unequivocally illustrate how the category of the sublime became closely intertwined with the problem of evil within German aesthetics. This proximity between the sublime and evil allows us to consider, from a historical perspective, the hypothesis that the Analytic of the Sublime may have served Kant as a criterion for addressing the contra-purposive in the essay on the failure of theodicy

It is noteworthy that the young Kant also considered natural disasters from an aesthetic perspective (Genazzano 2019: 110). Although he mainly used the natural sciences to interpret the Lisbon earthquake, it is striking that he also used aesthetics to neutralize natural disorders. Since for the young Kant the knowledge of natural laws was the knowledge of divine laws, the chaos of nature cannot call God's highest wisdom into question. In *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* he states that "*God exists precisely because nature cannot behave in any way other than in a regular and orderly manner, even in chaos*" (NTH, AA 01: 228: 2012: 199). Consequently, Kant encourages us to look at these natural disasters with satisfaction: "Let us […] accustom our eye to these frightening upheavals as being the ordinary ways of providence and even regard them with a kind of satisfaction" (NTH, AA 01: 319; 2012: 270).

In addition to the 'theodical' role that aesthetics had during the German Enlightenment, it is crucial to highlight that the rationalist terminology underwent a transformation in Kant's transcendental philosophy. Kant does not speak of "perfection," but of "purposiveness," and neither of "imperfection," but of "counter-purposiveness." However, this difference cannot simply be attributed to a divergence in terminology. As elucidated in the preceding section, the Kantian neologism of contra-purposiveness, which holds a pivotal position in the Analytic of the Sublime, has the meaning of a negative magnitude. Accordingly, the contra-purposive is construed not merely as a deficiency or lack, but rather as something truly positive. In this sense, the Kantian concept of the contra-purposive could be seen not merely as the translation of the concept of imperfection but also the *rehabilitation* of a positive understanding of evil.

Considering that the philosophical discipline of aesthetics fulfilled the function of a justification of divine wisdom against the accusations aroused by the existence of evil in the world, it can be concluded that the failure of aesthetics led Kant to think that theodicy no longer had any relevant role in the philosophical realm of knowledge. Following my hypothesis, the rehabilitation of a positive understanding of the negativity of negations takes first place in the Analytic of the Sublime of the *Critique of Judgment*. The neologism "contra-purposive" is the conceptual expression of this rehabilitation. Thereafter, the contra-purposive experienced a deep development; in the essay on theodicy, it became the technical term for describing evil.

Conclusion

This article has explained the origins of Kant's essay on the failure of all philosophical trials in theodicy. It has been argued that the main reason for this failure is the rehabilitation of a positive understanding of evil, which underlies the concept of contra-purposiveness. The first time Kant attributed a systematic meaning to the concept of contra-purposiveness, however, was in the Analytic of the Sublime. In light of the historical relationship between the sublime and evil, I think it is plausible to conclude that the sublime nature served as Kant's conceptual criterion for defining the contra-purposivensss of evil in the essay on the failure of theodicy.

Nevertheless, despite the title of the essay – *On the Failure of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy* – it is remarkable that Kant, towards its conclusion, delineates the concept of authentic theodicy, that is, a theodicy which has its roots in the practical power of reason. The concept of this authentic theodicy prompts a new inquiry: Why does Kant assert the possibility of a practical, rational theodicy if all philosophical attempts at theodicy are doomed to fail?

On the one hand, it seems that Kant moved the problem of theodicy from the realm of reason to the realm of faith: theodicy "does not have as much to do with a task in the interest of science as, rather, with a matter of faith" (MpVT, AA 08: 267; 2001: 34). Nevertheless, the difficulty lies in the fact that faith for Kant has always been rational. This fact leads to think that theodicy can still be object of philosophical inquiry, as is the case in moral theology. While Kant distances himself from rationalist attempts to reconcile faith with speculative reason, moral theology attempts to reconcile faith from another point of view, namely the practical. Thus, the question to be addressed is whether the faith resulting from authentic theodicy has the same rational status as the faith of moral theology. This question is not going to be answered in this article. This article was only intended to show the reasons for Kant's skepticism regarding the problem of theodicy. What seems clear, however, is that Kant no longer relies on a *discursive* defense of divine wisdom. God's vindication is practical in the literal sense. The authentic

theodicy, the vindication of God's wisdom through practical reason, is "not the interpretation of a ratiocinating (speculative reason), but of an efficacious practical reason". Hence, according to Kant, "it can be considered as the unmediated definition and voice of God through which he gives meaning to the letter of his creation." (MpVT, AA 08: 264: 2001: 32). In other words, the meaning of God's creation is not based on nature but on human action.

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