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The Internality of Moral Faith in Kant's *Religion*

Abstract: Wood (1970) convincingly argues that Kant's notion of moral faith is a response to a "dialectical perplexity" or antinomy. Specifically, moral faith is a response to the threat of moral despair. In line with this suggestion, I make the case that moral faith is the resolution of a crisis about how to go on with one's life in the face of the threat of moral despair. If this is right, then we have a potential solution to two related anxieties: (1) why the matter of our moral faith or despair deserves to be a topic of practical philosophy instead of empirical psychology, and (2) how despair could be a real threat even though Kant holds that rational beings could never truly lack faith. But, to fully see how these concerns can be answered, we must go beyond Wood's initial analysis. I first argue that Kant's philosophy suggests two kinds of moral faith: external and internal. I then argue that internal moral faith is analogous to self-contentment (*Selbstzufriedenheit*) in the second *Critique's* practical antinomy. Together, these arguments suggest that moral faith is a response to a real threat of moral despair, and that both dialectically require one another within practical reason.

1 Introduction

For Kant, morality is grounded in reason. However, Kant also claims that morality leads to an unshakeable faith in God's existence. So, he says, while it is reason that grounds morality, morality inevitably leads to religion.¹ Throughout his critical work, Kant argues that religious faith is a necessary attitude – one that is rationally required if we are to conceive of the Highest Good as a possible end of practical reason. His account of exactly how this works changes over time, but his conviction that faith is required by reason does not.

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¹ *RGV* (AA 6:6).

Some dismiss Kant's work on rational faith as the result of a dogmatic adherence to Christian ideology, and thus as unnecessary for understanding his broader account of practical reason.² To be sure, one reason for this is that the attitude of faith prescribed by Kant is indeed puzzling on a first pass. As he states in the B Preface to the first *Critique*, Kant saw that he had to "deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."³ On the surface it might appear as though Kant is making room for a kind of dogmatic theistic knowledge, which of course would directly contradict his later argument that we can pretend no knowledge of God's existence. If this were an accurate account of what Kant means by faith, then indeed it would be tempting to reject his remarks on faith, God, and religion as nothing more than the Christian dogma of his time and place. But Kant's account of faith is subtler than this. For one, faith is a distinctively *practical* attitude, and so not a theoretical judgment. But it is at least equally important to note that faith is not a claim to knowledge at all. Faith in God is, for Kant, a moral attitude that pretends no evidence in favor of the claim that God exists. The superficial rendering of faith as dogmatic thus cannot be maintained.⁴

In addition to the implausibility of the dogmatism charge, it is interesting that the manifestly existentially-deep implications of Kant's account of moral faith are often not fully explored as such. It would seem natural to find, in the secondary literature, a healthy discussion about the influence that Kant's doctrine of faith must have had on the existentialist tradition, for the religious writings of Kant are replete with discussions of such concepts as faith and death. Of course, Kant is traditionally not taken to be any kind of proto-existentialist. For one, the existentialist tradition is usually seen as a rebuke of Kant's philosophical system, for they sometimes explicitly disavow Kant's practical philosophy.⁵ But also, Kant does not himself use the vocabulary of the existentialists. We find no focus, for instance, on questions of meaning and meaningless-

2 As noted in Sussman (2001, 17n., 117n.), Schopenhauer (1903) accuses Kant of "self-mystification"; James (1958) calls this aspect of Kant's philosophy "particularly uncouth"; and Heine (1959) takes an amusing swipe at Kant, suggesting that he squeezed God into his system for the sake of his servant, Lampe.

3 *KrV* (B xxx).

4 N.B. "Moral faith" is not just faith in the existence of God; it is also faith in the immortality of the soul, and faith that I can become well-pleasing to God.

5 This is not to say there is not some deep continuity between Kant and many of the existentialists. In fact, the main point of this paper is to reveal such a continuity. All I mean to point out is that the existentialist story is often cast as anti-Kantian in spirit. For example, despite various debts to Kant, Sartre defines his existentialism as opposed to Kant's conception of human nature (2007, 21–22). On the relations between Sartre and Kant, see: Baiasu (2011).

ness, absurdity, or authenticity. These are concepts that emerged largely within the critical response to Kant's practical philosophy.

I propose that one reason why these existentialist themes are not read into Kant's work is that it is too easy to see the moral law as, in Kant's own eyes, sufficient to determine the meaning or purpose in one's life. How could a rational being, as such bound by the moral law, ever be in a position to call into question the meaning of one's life? Or whether there is anything to do in the face of despair *except* simply carry out the duties prescribed by the moral law? Nobody ever said that the morally good life would be easy, hence the real possibility of despair. And, as Allen Wood has aptly put it: "[Your] despair is not positively justified, but neither is there any reason in the world itself why [you] should not despair."⁶ That is, while despair may not be *called for*, it is always a real psychological threat due to the sheer difficulty of being good. So, even if Kant does think that some form of faith is important in helping us to achieve our practical ends, it may not be entirely clear why.⁷ Why, that is, should I have faith rather than despair, except for some entirely instrumental reason? Or, to put the question another way: isn't it clear that whether I am faithful or in despair is beside the point, and that the real issue is only whether I am dutiful?

In any case, Kant insists that we, as rational humans, must have moral faith in God's existence. In fact, I am entitled to say that *I am morally certain that God exists*.⁸ In addition to the first puzzle, there is another kind of strangeness here. On the face of it, the attitude of faith is one that is meant to lend us a kind of moral resolve.⁹ But then how is faith possible unless moral despair is possible? And, in turn, how is moral despair possible unless one can *lack* faith? Because Kant's view seems to be that we cannot truly lack faith on pain of giving up our rational status, it appears that moral despair is no *real* threat; or, at least, nothing but a contingent psychological pathology that inflicts the morally weak-willed. But then the issue of how to have faith in the face of despair is also not a real issue. Kant, however, seems to hold both that moral faith is rationally necessary *and* that moral despair is a real threat.¹⁰

Wood has convincingly argued that Kant's moral faith is, in an important sense, a response to moral despair, and thus that moral despair is a real threat.¹¹ And, according to Wood, this response must be understood as a response to a

⁶ Wood (1970, 160).

⁷ Cf. Sussman (2015).

⁸ *KrV* (A 829/B 857).

⁹ *KU* (AA 5:452).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Wood (1970).

practical antinomy. If he is right (as I believe him to be), then we must understand how to resolve the apparent tension in Kant's views that I have just described. I believe a case can be made that moral faith is the resolution of a crisis about how to go on with one's life in the face of the threat of moral despair. If so, then we have a solution to both of the above anxieties. That is, we can say both that faith is rationally necessary (not a merely contingent, though perhaps instrumentally useful, psychological state) *and* that the rational necessity of faith does not make the threat of despair an impossibility. Instead, as we will see, faith and the threat of despair require each other.

Accordingly, my paper consists of two basic parts. I will first argue that Kant's practical philosophy suggests a distinction between two kinds of moral faith: a shallower ("external") faith, as well as a deeper ("internal") faith. This will give us a first pass at understanding (a) why moral faith is so important, indeed necessary, for Kant's practical philosophy, and (b) how moral faith and moral despair dialectically require one another.

Second, I will argue that while Wood usefully demonstrates that moral faith is the resolution of a kind of antinomy, his explanation of the antinomy does not sufficiently capture *internal* moral faith. Specifically, I argue that the notions of moral faith and self-contentment (*Selbstzufriedenheit*) are analogous notions across the antinomy of despair and the practical antinomy of the second *Critique*. If I am right, then there is a kind of moral faith and corresponding threat of despair that have their source in practical reason, where I believe other interpretations (e.g., Wood's) construe faith and despair as primarily contingent psychological states.

2 Internal and External Moral Faith in Kant's *Religion*

I will begin by introducing Kant's notion of moral despair. In the third *Critique*, Kant describes the atheist as someone who would necessarily confront the impossibility of morality:

[...] he can, to be sure, expect some contingent assistance here and there, but never a law-like agreement in accordance with constant rules [...] Deceit, violence, and envy will always surround him, even though he is himself honest, peaceable, and benevolent; and the righteous ones besides himself that he will still encounter will, in spite of all their worthiness to be happy, nevertheless be subject by nature, which pays no attention to that, to all the evils of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death, just like all the other animals on earth [...] The end, therefore, which this well-intentioned person had and should have had before his

eyes in his conformity to the moral law, he would certainly have to give up as impossible; or [...] he must assume the existence of a moral author of the world, i.e., of God, from a practical point of view. (*KU* AA 5:452)

Kant presents the atheist as someone who, if she were consistent, would see morality as pointless. She either must give up on the project of morality, since its final end would be impossible, or give up atheism.¹² Moral despair, on Kant's view, would therefore be a kind of confused state – the state of seeing the moral law as both valid for us but also pointless in virtue of the world's apparent counter-purposiveness to our moral ends. In order to “remain attached” to our moral vocation, we must assume the existence of those conditions of the possibility of morality's final end (perfect happiness in accordance with perfect virtue = the Highest Good¹³) including God and immortality: God, because only a supremely intelligent being could fix the laws of nature so as to be not only compatible with, but friendly to our moral pursuits; and immortality, since we are required to become holy, a disposition not achievable in time, leaving us an infinite task of constant progress. Avoiding moral despair is thus at the very center of what Kant has to say about the relationship between morality and religion.

Surprisingly then, Kant explicitly addresses the possibility of moral despair only once in the *Religion*. When he does, Kant is addressing what he calls the ‘second’ of three difficulties for the idea that humanity could ever become well-pleasing to God. Because we have an innate propensity to evil, becoming well-pleasing to God involves making a “fundamental improvement” in one's disposition (*Gesinnung*).¹⁴ Insofar as we have made the fundamental improvement, we can be sure to constantly advance towards moral perfection.

Now the question is: how could we persevere in our moral pursuits when there is no certainty that we in fact have a *Gesinnung* constantly advancing in its goodness? Without any confidence that we can continuously do better, Kant thinks, moral perseverance would be impossible.¹⁵ Nevertheless, a kind of self-observation makes it possible to generate the confidence to go on with one's moral pursuits. By comparing our past actions with our resolve to be morally good, Kant thinks it is possible to have at least some evidence that one is on the right path:

[...] a human being who, from the time of his adoption of the principles of the good and throughout a sufficiently long life henceforth, has perceived the efficacy of these principles

¹² Cf. *KpV* (AA 5:114).

¹³ *KpV* (AA 5:110).

¹⁴ *RGV* (AA 6:68).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

on what he does, i.e. on the conduct of his life as it steadily improves, and from that has cause to infer, but only by way of conjecture, a fundamental improvement in his disposition: [he] can yet also reasonably hope that in this life he will no longer forsake his present course but will rather press in it with ever greater courage, since his advances, provided that their principle is good, will always increase his *strength* for future ones. (RGV AA 6:68)

Under the right conditions, then, we *become entitled* to hope that we are on the right moral path. Kant then goes on to describe the individual who has consistently failed in his moral pursuits. Such a person, Kant thinks, “can reasonably entertain no hope of improving, even if he still had to live longer in this world [...]”¹⁶ The hope Kant speaks of here is available only to those who have earned it. But it is not only the scoundrel who faces hopelessness and “boundless [...] misery.”¹⁷ When death is imminent, nobody is entitled to this hope:

For then, in the absence of further conduct upon which to base our judgment of our moral worth, even those empirical proofs of the genuineness of an improved disposition are entirely lacking, and the unavoidable consequence of a rational estimate of our moral state is a feeling of hopelessness (which, however, human nature itself, because of the obscurity of all views that transcend the limits of this life, takes care that it does not turn into wild despair). (RGV AA 6:71)

As in the third *Critique* passage, such hopelessness, on its face, seems to threaten our ability to persevere. But even while we may feel hopeless about our goodness, human nature prevents us from falling into “wild despair” (*wilde Verzweiflung*).

I want to argue that even in the good case – the case of empirically-acquired hope through self-observation – what Kant has *so far* said does not fully capture the importance of moral faith and despair in his practical and religious philosophy. That is, in addition to the hope that one could generate under the right circumstances, Kant must also leave room for a deeper, less contingent sort of hope. I will briefly explore why.

The hope Kant speaks of in the ‘second difficulty’ is quite limited. Such hope is granted only under the conditions that the person has lived a “sufficiently long life” and has “perceived the efficacy of these [adopted] principles on what he does.” But it is unclear how long one’s life needs to have been to meet the first condition. And the fact that this hope is generated through having already lived a life yielding apparently good results already presupposes an ability to continuously apply the moral law in a confident way. We would unlikely have

¹⁶ RGV (AA 6:69).

¹⁷ Ibid.

the luxury of this hope-generating retrospective if it weren't for a prior resolve in our ability to carry out the moral law's command.

The explicit conclusion of the second difficulty is that we can indirectly derive some amount of comfort from a comparison between our past behavior and our resolution to do what is right. This helps us with one difficulty, namely the threat of falling into "wild despair" from a complete lack of confidence in the goodness of our *Gesinnung*. But, taking into consideration the bigger picture, we will see that Kant leaves open the possibility of another type of anxiety and corresponding comfort, which I'll now turn to.

If I am right, there is a more fundamental source of moral faith than an external comparison of one's deeds with the resolution to be good. I propose that Kant himself recognizes this, and not long after dealing with the 'second difficulty.' In the resolution to the 'third difficulty', Kant imagines someone who *has* become well-pleasing to God – i.e., someone who has made the fundamental improvement. Of this person, Kant says:

As regards comfort, such a good disposition already brings it with it (as comfort and hope, not as certainty) to anyone conscious of it in himself. (RGV AA 6:76)¹⁸

Assuming that "comfort and hope" are brought by faith, then Kant is telling us that faith is *already connected to* being conscious of one's good disposition. Or, in other words, faith is not only indirectly generated by empirical observation and inference. The term 'already' is important, since it indicates that the hope does not need to be generated or inferred from experience; that is, there is no more work to be done in such a case. The possession of a good *Gesinnung* appears to be sufficient for being faithful.

Now, Kant does rule out that we can have immediate and certain knowledge of the moral quality of our *Gesinnung*.¹⁹ But I propose that it does not follow from this that we have no immediate (practical) consciousness of ourselves that might be relevant to moral faith. There is reason to think that, for Kant, we can be directly self-conscious of our moral activity in a way that generates faith. But how could this be? I will briefly sketch what I take to be a plausible explanation.

It is without a doubt true for Kant that all rational human beings have the capacity to develop a *Gesinnung* well-pleasing to God:

[...] we were never able to lose the incentive that consists in the respect for the moral law, and were we ever to lose it, we would also never be able to regain it. (RGV AA 6:46)

¹⁸ Cf. *KpV* (AA 5:117–118).

¹⁹ This is Kant's famous "opacity thesis": *GMS* (AA 4:407); *RGV* (AA 6:51).

The loss of the moral law would be moral death. It follows from what Kant says in this passage that even the most evil human being must have it within himself to effect a revolution of the heart, for even the most evil human being is evil only because he has *subordinated* the moral law to inclination.²⁰ He must therefore be conscious of the moral law (though perhaps implicitly, and radically self-deceived with respect to it). All rational human beings can become explicitly conscious of their duty to perfect themselves, and, since ‘ought’ implies ‘can,’ of their ability to become well-pleasing to God.

Now, if I know that I *can* become well-pleasing to God, I am entitled to some form of hope that I *will*. To know that I ought to do my duty is already to be called to act, through the moral feeling of respect for the law.²¹ As such, it is already to set one’s sights on doing the right thing.²² So, even if it is not possible to be immediately certain of the moral quality of one’s *Gesinnung*, it must be possible for one to be immediately conscious of the law and hence the ability to order one’s maxims appropriately. Through such a consciousness, one is already subject to the motive of duty through reason itself. To be so moved is, in turn, already to have hope that one will morally persevere.

If the above considerations are correct, we must distinguish between two kinds of moral faith at work in Kant’s philosophy: (1) the kind of confidence we can have in an empirically verifiable constantly-improving moral disposition over time (the resolution of the ‘second difficulty’), and (2) the kind of comfort already brought along by an immediate consciousness of one’s ability to do what is right. The first kind of moral faith seems to be merely psychological and contingent: he who has such hope has earned it over time; he who doesn’t has failed to earn it. The second kind of moral faith is possessed by all rational human beings as such.

Furthermore, because the role of moral faith is to forestall moral despair, we can say that there are two ways in which moral despair can threaten us. First, there is the threat of “wild despair” in the ‘second difficulty,’ which is the sort of despair the scoundrel would face if it weren’t for human nature. We can now see that this sort of despair is a mere contingent threat. It does not threaten us essentially, *qua* rational human agents.

Second, there is the threat of a deeper kind of moral despair. While in the ‘second difficulty’ Kant imagines someone who earns hope over time, we have seen that there is a sense in which all rational human beings already possess

²⁰ Cf. *GMS* (AA 4:454).

²¹ *KpV* (AA 5:80).

²² This is, of course, not to say that consciousness of an ‘ought’ is sufficient for carrying out the action. I can *see my way* to performing the action but also fail to *see it through*.

moral faith. Because faith is a kind of resolve to go on with one's moral life, it seems that we must always face the threat of finding it impossible or pointless to go on. So, just as under all circumstances we have some form of moral faith, we are also always threatened by moral despair. We are anxious of a threat of moral despair that is not contingent upon our lifestyle, our psychological peculiarities, or our impending death. There must be an idea of despair that is intrinsic to the rational human agent as such.

The first kind of anxiety and its corresponding form of faith are derived, so downstream, from action together with empirical estimates of our *Gesinnung*. We can thus call this *external* faith and despair, since their connection to the rational subject is essentially relational. The second kind of moral anxiety and its corresponding form of faith are intrinsic to the rational human subject as such. We can thus call this *internal* faith and despair.

We shall see that while Wood's reading is helpful for understanding moral despair as a kind of dialectical threat, he is predominantly concerned with extrinsic faith and despair. But the second kind of moral despair is a deeper kind of threat, and one that needs to be dealt with if moral faith and despair are going to be anything more than contingent psychological states. To see why moral faith is truly *rational*, we must see its connection with rational human beings as such.

3 The Limits of Wood's Account

Allen Wood convincingly argues that we should understand moral despair in terms of its role in a practical antinomy of reason. When we look to sensible nature (the phenomenal world) for evidence that we are on the right moral path, we find a world unsuited for achieving our moral ends:

When the moral man turns to sensible nature with this question in mind, he experiences the perplexity and dismay characteristic of any Kantian "dialectic," and is at once threatened with what we have called the "second antinomy of practical reason." For it is discovered at once that sensible nature exhibits *no* regular moral purposiveness, and the world seems not to reflect in any way the good man's striving to bring about goodness in it. (Wood 1970, 158–9)

This *dialectical* account of despair is consistent with Kant's account of moral despair in the third *Critique*. But what, more specifically, is the "dialectical perplexity"? The thought must be that we are, in some sense, suspended between moral despair and what Kant calls 'moral happiness': "the assurance of the reality and *constancy* of a disposition that always advances in goodness (and never falters

from it).”²³ Dialectical perplexity in this sense is characteristic of the antinomies. In this case, Wood has in mind Kant’s practical antinomy in the second *Critique*.²⁴ For my purposes here, we only need to see that the practical antinomy is, in a couple of important senses, analogous to the antinomy of despair. I will briefly spell out the practical antinomy, and then show how its resolution may help us understand the rational nature of moral faith.

Because we must think of the connection between virtue and happiness as a *synthetic* connection, we must see one as the ground of the other. So, either happiness leads to virtue or virtue leads to happiness. But the first is *absolutely* impossible, since it is ruled out on Kant’s view that what is unconditionally good is the good will and not happiness.²⁵ The second is also impossible, because any state that we wish to bring about in the world depends on the cooperation of the laws of nature, and thus virtue alone is not sufficient for happiness. This, Kant says, suggests that practical reason comes into conflict with itself. But we need to pause here and try to understand exactly why he wants to say this.

The practical antinomy of the second *Critique* is, on the surface, different from the antinomies of the first *Critique*. In the first *Critique*, we are presented with two ‘mathematical’ antinomies and two ‘dynamical’ antinomies. The mathematical antinomies, it turns out, have two false conclusions, while both the conclusions of the dynamical antinomies are possibly true. In other words, the resolution of a mathematical antinomy involves rejecting both the thesis and antithesis, while the resolution of a dynamical antinomy involves accepting both as possible. But the practical antinomy does not say either that the thesis and antithesis are both false or both possibly true. Instead, while the thesis is absolutely false, the antithesis is only *conditionally* false (i. e., it is revealed as possibly true when I think of my existence as noumenon).²⁶ This would seem to place the practical antinomy in a different category altogether. If so, this is perhaps a threat to the idea that practical reason is coming into conflict with itself in the same way that speculative reason did in the first *Critique*. Since the resolution is to take one horn of the antinomy to be true (conditionally), then perhaps we are not to see the original conflict as one that needs to be resolved to begin with.²⁷

But there is an apparent conflict, as I understand the antinomy: we are conscious of the validity of the moral law, but we are at the same time led to believe

²³ *RGV* (AA 6:67).

²⁴ Wood (1970, 158–9).

²⁵ *GMS* (AA 4:393).

²⁶ *KpV* (AA 5:114–115).

²⁷ Thanks to David Sussman & Jochen Bojanowski for helping me to get clearer on this point.

that its object is impossible. As Wood puts it, one way of understanding Kant's practical antinomy is through the notion of death:

What truly threatens us is that the goal which gives our life its moral meaning – the goal of moral perfection – is apparently rendered impossible of attainment by the prospect of death. The permanence and moral reality of the progress [...] is threatened with dissolution into a mere series of feeble and imperfect acts and empirical events [...] (Wood 1970, 178)

This is the very worry Kant addresses in the 'second difficulty': when death is near, we cannot have hope, because we have no remaining time to generate actions from which we can estimate the goodness or badness of our *Gesinnung*. This threatens any assurance of constant moral progress (and thus moral happiness) because it threatens the possibility of moral perfection. For the same reason, as Wood points out, it threatens the possibility of the Highest Good. So, there is indeed an apparent conflict. Practical reason demands infinite moral progress (the moral law is valid), and yet death seems certain to preclude that (the Highest Good is impossible).

To further spell out the antinomy of despair, consider that the dialectical perplexity we face is at once both a forestalling of despair by faith and a kind of anxiety about the possibility of despair. We see a similar suspension, I believe, in Kant's third antinomy of the first *Critique*, the antinomy of freedom. In the antinomy of freedom, Kant argues that the thesis of transcendental freedom and the antithesis of natural causal determination are two equally reasonable ways of describing the world, bringing us to an unacceptable contradiction. The solution is to see that there need be no conflict between the two so long as we see transcendental freedom as belonging to the noumenal and natural causal determination as belonging to the phenomenal.²⁸

This means that by paying exclusive attention to the phenomenal world, I am tempted to conclude that natural causal determination is the final word, and that therefore transcendental freedom is impossible. To look to the phenomenal as the only standard of what is true is to let any consciousness of freedom become background noise or distraction. Now, setting aside that the third antinomy is concerned primarily with freedom in a *cosmological* sense, we can see a perfectly good expression of this dialectic in Kant's *Groundwork*. Here, Kant argues that we must understand ourselves as free in a noumenal or merely intelligible way.²⁹ Here is a way in which one might teach this idea to students:

²⁸ *KrV* (A 444/B 472–A 451/B 479).

²⁹ *GMS* (AA 4:448).

‘Imagine: you become convinced that there is no such thing as free will. You become severely depressed at the thought and refuse to get out of bed, because you think there is no point in doing anything if it is all beyond your control.’

Now, there is supposed to be something absurd about your behavior in this scenario. The absurdity is that while you are convinced, in one sense, that no choice is really yours to make, you are also incapable of seeing your behavior as anything but freely chosen. Your *refusal* to get out of bed must be seen as a choice. Kant commits himself to this when he says:

Every being that cannot act otherwise than *under the idea of freedom* is just because of that really free in a practical respect, that is, all laws that are inseparably bound up with freedom hold for him just as if his will had been validly pronounced free also in itself and in theoretical philosophy. (GMS AA 4:448)³⁰

That is, the practical freedom of rational human beings is constituted by the necessity of their acting “under the idea of freedom.” Moreover, with respect to our example, you *feel* the absurdity of your choice. In fact, it would make the depression all the worse that you cannot simply give up on the idea of freedom. No, you must live with a deep tension between the belief that you are free and, in another sense, the belief that you are not.

I believe the same sort of phenomenological picture can be drawn for the antinomy of despair, at which we have so far only gestured. In the case of moral despair, imagine an addict who engages in some moral self-observation. He sees the perpetual rise and fall of his moral character, sometimes upholding virtue, other times becoming weak to temptation and giving up on virtue. He might even come to realize that it is statistically unlikely that he will make any significant moral improvement over the rest of the course of his life.³¹ In real-

30 An anonymous reviewer has helpfully pointed out that this passage can be seen as problematic for Kant. If we took Kant to be saying that the ‘idea of freedom’ under which we act is a merely psychological idea, then the laws that ‘hold for him just as if...’ do not really ‘hold’ in any interesting sense. But if they do ‘hold for him’ objectively, then it is hard to see how this follows from a mere idea. I cannot say much in the way of interpretation here, but I take it that the idea of freedom under which we must act is not merely psychological, but rational. That is, it would be impossible to act except in such a way that you see your act as free – not because our brains are wired to do this, but because rational first-personhood requires it. There is no practical standpoint from which we can doubt that the “laws that are inseparably bound up with freedom” hold for us objectively. It is worth pointing out, then, that the sense of ‘must’ invoked here is much stronger than that associated with Humean (merely psychological) necessity.

31 Cf. Sartre (1956, 69–71).

izing that the odds of success are stacked against him, he is understandably quite tempted to give up on the task of moral improvement all together. In seeing that his goal is so far from his reach, he cannot seem to justify going on with the project that morality has set out for him. At the same time, of course, he also sees himself as bound by the moral law. As a result, he feels a deep tension or “dialectical perplexity” with respect to his practical life.

Now, back to Wood. Following Wood's description of moral despair as a dialectical perplexity, we can make sense of the antinomy of despair as something like a deep, actually-felt tension, in ordinary life. But, while Wood's own account of the antinomy of despair is helpful for understanding extrinsic moral faith and despair, it is not yet sufficiently internal in a way that could make sense of the importance of moral faith as it seems to manifest itself in our *second* and more important sense.

Wood argues that it is death and repeated exposure to failed or incomplete moral pursuits that could lead us to moral despair (if it weren't for faith in the existence of God as an intelligence who ensures that the world will be at least minimally cooperative with our moral ends.) As he says, “failure, suffering, and the evils of the world do not so much refute hope as *exhaust* it.”³² Thus, the threat of moral despair is the threat of a kind of psychological exhaustion from being exposed to too much moral failure – not *necessarily* our own failures, but also the failures of others and more importantly the failures of the world itself to cooperate with our good intentions.

To make this more explicit, take his example of a man who commits to correcting unjust housing conditions in his neighborhood.³³ On Wood's account, this man might face the threat of moral despair if it turns out to be extremely difficult to get the world to cooperate with him. And this is why we require faith – because otherwise we would be tempted to give up bringing about a difference in the world. Here, faith is conceived as an unwavering belief that the world is the kind of place that will be cooperative with us (and hence a belief in God – an intellect with the power to ensure this cooperation).

But I think this account of faith undervalues the deep dialectical perplexity of despair in Kant's moral philosophy, and underestimates the distinctively *internal* nature of both moral anxiety and moral faith, for two reasons:

First, often our pursuits are not failures, and incomplete pursuits are not typically any cause for despair. It is evident from ordinary experience that we can see the world as at least partially cooperative with our wills. We sometimes

³² Wood (1970, 160).

³³ Wood (1970, 46–47).

succeed, and we almost never expect that success will be rare – i.e., we know that if we try, we are more likely to be morally successful. In other words, the world does not appear to be so counter-purposive to our moral ends that we cannot expect a reasonable amount of moral success. Calling back the passage from the third *Critique*: “[...] he can, to be sure, expect some contingent assistance here and there, but never a lawlike agreement.”

Second, Wood’s account of the threat of despair does not capture Kant’s own claim that we must approach moral evaluations of ourselves with “fear and trembling.”³⁴ This remark comes in the form of moral advice: too much confidence in the purity of one’s disposition can lead to moral failure; it is better to be deeply concerned with one’s moral status than it is to be complacent. To approach my disposition with fear and trembling is presumably, and at the very least, to see the threat of despair as one grounded in me. That is, I see the threat not as one that comes simply from an uncooperative world, but from my necessary moral deficiency as a fallen being. Approaching my disposition with fear and trembling would be unwarranted if my *Gesinnung* were already good and it was simply the world that was uncooperative. On Wood’s account, we could easily miss this. Consider again his example of the man who seeks to improve his neighborhood’s housing conditions. On Wood’s account, this man may be threatened by moral despair simply through repeated failures due to the counter-purposiveness of the world to his moral ends. Even if this is right, it is orthogonal to the kind of moral anxiety that we might encounter through an attempt at evaluating our own moral disposition (an approach through fear and trembling). The corresponding external faith is also orthogonal to the kind of satisfaction with oneself Kant describes as *Selbstzufriedenheit* (translated as ‘self-contentment’) in the Resolution to the Practical Antinomy. Here Kant writes:

Freedom, and the consciousness of freedom as an ability to follow the moral law with an unyielding disposition, is *independence from the inclinations*, at least as motives determining (even if not as *affecting*) our desire, and so far as I am conscious of this freedom in following my moral maxims, it is the sole source of an unchangeable contentment, necessarily combined with it and resting on no special feeling, and this can be called intellectual contentment. (*KpV* AA 5:117–118)

Freedom cannot be separated from consciousness of freedom, which Kant calls “an ability to follow the moral law with an unyielding disposition.” And, in turn, this ability is independence from inclination. As such, this free ability is the

³⁴ *RGV* (AA 6:68).

source of intellectual contentment. Now here is how Wood appears to understand the same notion:

His action has moral worth, and he himself will achieve a certain “intellectual satisfaction” or “self-contentment” in realizing this; but such an awareness will not of itself get housing conditions improved, which is after all the end he has set for himself [...] this awareness and self-contentment is no more than an intellectual recognition of the fact that his action has moral worth. It is clear that it is not intended by Kant to substitute for action toward a moral goal, as though what Kant were recommending were not moral striving but a self-righteous and hypocritical moral lethargy. (Wood 1970, 48)

I hypothesize that Wood does not place much emphasis on the role of *Selbstzufriedenheit* in the resolution of the antinomy precisely because he understands it not as a conscious moral *act* but the mere result of one. As such, *Selbstzufriedenheit* is, for Wood, a static mental state that simply indicates the moral worth of one's action, in the way that the oil light in the car indicates that the car is low on oil.

By contrast, I understand *Selbstzufriedenheit* as a conscious moral activity. As per my analysis above, it seems that Kant understands *Selbstzufriedenheit* to be not a mere state of contentment, but a free activity of resisting inclination.³⁵ Kant appears to be saying that this self-contentment is an independence from inclination (also a “mastery” over them)³⁶, and equivalently a consciousness of my freedom. This sounds less like a mere consequence of acting well, and more like the *transparency of my awareness of acting well*. Here is perhaps one way to put the point: I am conscious of my independence from inclination (a negative satisfaction or self-contentment) *through* the act of resisting inclination, not as a result of it. If so, then *Selbstzufriedenheit* is not a state in addition to resisting inclination; it is the act of resisting inclination.³⁷

If I am correct that *Selbstzufriedenheit* is a conscious moral activity, then it is possible to see it as an active *synthesis* of respect for the moral law with our natural state/the state of the world. Or, to put it another way, it is a way of holding together freedom with nature. As such, *Selbstzufriedenheit* can be understood as

35 I should note that “resisting inclination,” for Kant, clearly cannot mean fighting off all inclinations. Although in the *Groundwork* Kant states that all rational beings must desire to be free of inclinations (GMS AA 4:428), his position on this appears to change by the time of the second *Critique*. Here he seems to be concerned with resisting inclinations by preventing them from determining the will. This is consistent with the notion that inclinations can be good. See Ware (2014, 737) on this theme.

36 *KpV* (AA 5:119).

37 Cf. *RGV* (AA 6:76).

an activity of holding *ourselves* together with nature, resisting a fracturing of the two. And this is precisely what we have been looking for in a resolution of the antinomy of despair – i.e., in moral faith. Moral faith, according to Wood, is primarily supposed to enable us to go on with our moral lives in the face of uncertainty, death, and failure. But, as I have argued, it is also supposed to enable us to go on in the face of our essential moral deficiency – the incompleteness that cannot be remedied in time. For this, we need more than external faith. We need a hope that already accompanies all moral acts; an internal faith. This faith that is internal to practical reason as such is analogous to *Selbstzufriedenheit*, given that the latter is an act original to reason that provides us with contentment in possessing a mastery over our inclinations.

If we deepen Wood's approach so as to include an understanding of *Selbstzufriedenheit* as, at the very least, analogous to moral faith, then his insight into the significance of the practical antinomy for understanding the antinomy of despair also deepens. But this requires us to see moral anxiety and its corresponding form of faith as, in its most important sense, original to our own immediate consciousness of the moral law. Thus, it requires us to see moral anxiety and moral faith as, in its most important manifestation, internal to practical reason as such.

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Note on Citation and Abbreviations

Kant's works are cited from The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant. References are to the German text from the Akademie-Ausgabe (AA): I. Kant, *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. königlich preußische (später deutsche) Akademie der Wissenschaften, Berlin 1900f. I have used the following abbreviations:

- [GMS] *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* (AA 4)
- [KpV] *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* (AA 5).
- [KrV] *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (A: 1781 / B: 1787)
- [KU] *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (AA 5)
- [RGV] *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (AA 6)

