

BOOK REVIEWS AND NOTICES

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Volker Dieringer. *Kants Lösung des Theodizeeproblems. Eine Rekonstruktion* (Forschungen und Materialien zur deutschen Aufklärung 22). Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 2009.

[Volker Dieringer. *Kant's Solution to the Problem of Theodicy. A Reconstruction*. Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog Publishers, 2009.]

Volker Dieringer's monograph *Kants Lösung des Theodizeeproblems: Eine Rekonstruktion* (FMDA 22), based on his PhD thesis, offers a detailed appreciation of the celebrated, albeit still controversial, argument of Kant's brief essay "On the Failure of all Philosophical Attempts in Theodicy". Dieringer intends this work to serve as a systematic contribution to contemporary debates in philosophy of religion. Referring to a conceptual distinction common in analytic philosophy, the author opts to view Kant's mature approach to the topic as a "defence" of moral theism rather than a "theodicy" proper. As Dieringer shows, Kant revokes his earlier attempts at rational theodicy, denying reason the very capability of seeking grounds for a holy, good and just God permitting evil. However, by so limiting the capacity of human reason, Kant purports to give a principled defence of moral theism from all atheistic refutation, as experience can be invoked neither to prove nor to disprove, in principle, the existence of a benign deity.

After briefly delineating Kant's historic translation of rational theology into practical rationality, in the introduction to his two-part study, Dieringer puts forward his basic claim that there is a break between Kant's own earlier endeavour to give substantive reasons for a benevolent and just God allowing evil to exist and flourish, and his later, more modest, assertion that evil as such poses no logical contradiction to the possibility of rational belief in the existence of a moral deity. In the first part of his monograph, Dieringer demonstrates that Kant initially espouses what Allison terms a "theological eudaimonism" (39): if the moral law, besides being the source of moral judgement, is also to be the "incen-

tive" (*Triebfeder*) of our actions, then practical reason must assume the existence of a moral world order, in which our ethical "worthiness to be happy" (*Glückswürdigkeit*) corresponds to our *de facto* sensual happiness. Consequently, the existence of God, as well as of a future life, must be postulated to bridge the apparent gap between these two principal halves of the "highest good", for which practical rationality strives. However, as the author rightly points out, this "theological eudaimonism" not only effectively undermines Kant's overall concern with moral autonomy, but its underlying moral theism also adds urgency to the question of theodicy, which Kant, well aware of the difficulty, sets out to address, in depth, in his lectures on rational theology, delivered in 1783/84. Closely following the most reliable postscript, the so-called *Religionslehre Pölitz*, Dieringer establishes that Kant, at that time, still advocated an ethical theodicy based upon the necessary hope for the actual realisability of the *summum bonum*. Thus, if it were not for a benevolent God reconciling man's ethical worthiness to be happy with his actual happiness, man would end up torn between an *absurdum pragmaticum* on the one hand and an *absurdum morale* on the other, with the categorical imperative of autonomous morality undermining the pragmatic one of happiness and vice versa. If man chose to follow the categorical imperative, he would be compelled to neglect the pragmatic one stipulating his innate pursuit of happiness. As a consequence, he would have to act like a "dreamer" whose rational hope for eventual justice would be continually frustrated. If, on the other hand, he resolved to obey the dictates of personal fulfilment at the expense of the categorical demands of morality, he would show himself a "villain" (48f.). Dieringer goes to some length to prove that, given Kant's premises, the dilemma presented is, in fact, a genuine one. Without any hope that the highest good will be realized, man would indeed be obliged to implement a moral imperative that he lacks the incentive to put into concrete action. In his lectures on rational theology, moreover, Kant gives a thorough account of his moral theism based upon God's three principal attributes. God, according to Kantian ethical theology, is to be seen as the holy legislator, the good sovereign and the righteous judge. As regards his essential holiness, God is completely governed by the moral law. Hence, his desire for man's happiness, designated by his goodness, is constantly checked by his uncompromising adherence to the moral law. The fact that he metes out happiness, only in ac-

cordance with an individual's worthiness to be happy, marks him as the righteous judge, which last quality, thus, specifies the mediation between the first two. It is with reference to these attributes of the moral deity that Kant defines the three fundamental objections that may be raised against moral theism: the existence of moral evil conflicts with God's holiness, that of physical evil calls his goodness into question, and the disproportion between crime and punishment impugns his justice. As Dieringer shows, Kant, in his early theodicy, generally adopts a threefold strategy, first denying the grievance the atheist puts forth, then tracing it back to necessary metaphysical evil and, lastly, offering a reason for a moral deity allowing evil to occur. Thus, with reference to the first atheistic indictment, he attributes moral evil wholly to man's succumbing to his sensual nature which, as a feature of his essential deficiency as a creature, is strictly inevitable. God, moreover, cannot but permit man's freedom to err, as the latter's free choice is indispensable to God's overall providential aim, the moral perfection of the whole of mankind. Similarly, Kant's approach to the question of physical evil, as well as justifying pain, as an unavoidable complement to sensual happiness, revolves around physical misery being defined as an incentive for man to strive for his ethical worthiness to be happy. The same holds true for the atheistic denial of God's justice: not only do the pangs of conscience that a wicked person is bound to experience prevent his attaining any happiness, but the apparent disproportion between individual morality and outward success also serves as an indispensable means to the divine end of promoting man's disinterested goodness, which, otherwise, might be pursued exclusively for the sake of personal contentment. Moreover, Kant expressly likens his postulate of a world in which the laws of nature and those of morality are eventually revealed to accord with one another, to Leibniz' celebrated tenet that ours is the best of all possible worlds. Kant holds that God, being good, cannot but have created the best possible world, with the latter being exactly the one designated by the universal *summum bonum* of his own theological postulates. Kant substantiates this idea by adopting God's universal perspective from which, Kant contends, the good by far outweighs the evil both physical and moral. Having outlined Kant's basic theodical strategy, Dieringer convincingly points out its overall failure, namely that the idea of God allowing evil, pain and flagrant injustice stands in undeniable contradiction to the basic premises of moral the-

ism. It is not surprising, therefore, that Kant chose to return to the manifest aporias of his moral theism later on.

The second half of Dieringer's study is devoted to Kant's defence of ethical theology in the third Critique and in his essay on theodicy. Dieringer shows that Kant expounds a new distinction between pragmatic and moral maxims, the first no longer belonging to practical rationality proper, but to man's empirical nature instead. Moreover, introducing the concept of "respect" (*Achtung*), he eventually views the moral law as being its own incentive, thus finally jettisoning his earlier aporetic eudaimonism in moral theology. On the basis of this unequivocal separation of the phenomenal and noumenal realms, Kant comes to view the problem of theodicy more clearly as rooted in the apparently irreconcilable tension between two completely distinct laws, i.e. those of morality and those of nature, which, in terms of religious philosophy, translate into God's moral and creative wisdom, respectively. Contrary to his earlier position, Kant, in his theodicy essay, no longer assumes the role of the moral theist, but that of reason itself judging the conflicting claims of the atheistic and theological positions. Moreover, his judicial hearing is characterized by a remarkable scepticism *vis-à-vis* his earlier arguments in favour of rational theodicy. Thus, he rejects any attempt either to deny the evil or grievance in question or, more significantly, to assign to it a larger divine purpose. As reason itself declares, there is in fact no denying the scandal of ubiquitous moral evil, which the atheist, in his accusation, adduces as an obstacle to man's belief in a holy creator. Moreover, the idea that from God's perspective manifest moral evil might ultimately serve a morally superior aim, strikes Kant as downright repulsive. Neither is it plausible that a good deity, bent on our happiness, should create beings subject to considerable suffering, which, on the whole, can generally be seen to outweigh their enjoyment by far. Likewise, the moral theist cannot reasonably reject the atheist's argument that the disproportion between crime and punishment apparently belies divine justice in the world. Injustice and the well-being of the wicked, as Kant now points out, can neither be dismissed as being impeded by the culprit's inevitable remorse, which, considering the latter's lack of ethical zeal, probably fails to materialize, nor explained as a means to promote the good man's moral progress, which would contradict God's goodness. Notwithstanding his more sceptical stance, Kant is still at pains to refine his earlier

arguments in favour of theodicy. Thus, rejecting an earlier view of freedom as the comparative ability to choose between alternative empirical goods, he now views moral autonomy as a capability that no longer bears on the empirical realm at all, but is completely *sui generis*. Hence, man being autonomous in an absolute sense, God is completely exculpated of moral evil: though inextricably intertwined with man's deficiency as a sensual being, evil may eventually be construed to arise solely from his faulty freedom of choice. In the end, even though the atheist seems to have gained the upper hand in the course of the trial, reason, surprisingly, pronounces that both conflicting positions fail in principle, since the dispute at hand cannot be resolved by human rationality at all. Man, reason elaborates its sentence, can never hope to understand the inner relationship between the empirical world and divine wisdom. Thus, the *a posteriori* evidence of the teleological nature of organisms entitles us to attribute to God a creative wisdom. Likewise, we may credit him with moral wisdom on the *a priori* grounds of the inward moral law. However, what eludes human rationality, in principle, is their unity in the Godhead, which both the atheist and the moral theist silently presuppose in their reasoning. Indeed, as regards the question of theodicy, reason faces an insurmountable dilemma which essentially strips the two opponents of their respective arguments: theoretical reason, grasping the phenomena as objects of experience, cannot but assume an outer intelligible substratum to exist behind them, although, according to Kant's mature critical philosophy, it is unable to comprehend it in any way. Practical reason, on the other hand, possesses insight into its own inner intelligible realm, as is warranted by the moral law. However, even if the reflective power of judgement may imbue nature with purpose and design for the sake of rational explanation, reason as such fails to establish in what way the noumenal world within may also be viewed as the principle of the world without. Thus, Kant arrives at a "transcendental argument" (116) that, as reason declares, will end all quarrels with respect to the question of theodicy: the "causal nexus between freedom and nature" (115) and their assumed unity in the Godhead being beyond our comprehension, neither the atheist nor the moral theist can hope to acquire insight into how God's moral wisdom might manifest itself within the empirical world. However, despite there being no possibility for reason either to justify evil or disprove theism on rational grounds, man may hope for eventual

reconciliation by following moral faith alone, which Kant, famously, calls an “authentic theodicy” (119). As is evidenced by the Old Testament figure of Job, man, confronted with the utter inscrutability of God’s counsels regarding the nature of things and its connection with the moral order, is to trust that God will at last reconcile his worthiness to be happy with his actual bliss. Hence, in his essay on theodicy, Kant adopts an approach that, as Dieringer points out, is both prior to, and independent of, experience. As a consequence, a critical self-analysis of reason *per se* rules out both a theodicy that claims to give plausible reasons for God allowing evil, and the atheistic denial of a moral deity on the grounds of unbearable moral or physical grievances. However, far from advocating scepticism or a general *epoché* in relation to the question, Kant, in so doing, safeguards the practical hope for final justice, thus offering a defence of moral theism.

It is the chief merit of Dieringer’s monograph that it offers a close reading of Kant’s trains of thought, thereby rendering intelligible premises that are often tacitly assumed. Although repetitions are thereby not always avoidable, Dieringer’s searching analysis, incorporating helpful formalizations, always succeeds in clarifying the single arguments as well as the overall aim of Kant’s contribution to theodicy and moral theism. Still, given that the author’s intention is a systematic one, more extensive references to topical debates on theodicy could have been added with benefit. It might have proven interesting, for instance, to discuss in more detail whether empirical evidence may indeed be excluded from a discussion of the vexed question of unjust suffering, as Kant proposes, or whether such an approach simply begs the question, as the atheist will probably retort. The same goes for several historical aspects which Dieringer mentions only in passing, such as Kant’s debt to Leibniz’s celebrated theodicy and Wolff’s rational theology. On the whole, however, Dieringer is to be credited with having provided nothing less than an exhaustive appreciation of Kant’s defence of moral theism. Moreover, in so doing, he has also shed light on the development of Kant’s moral philosophy, revealing a plethora of intriguing details and less well-known aspects that enrich our overall understanding of his practical philosophy.