



The early development of Kant's practical notion of belief

Lewis Wang

To cite this article: Lewis Wang (23 Mar 2024): The early development of Kant's practical notion of belief, *Inquiry*, DOI: [10.1080/0020174X.2024.2332892](https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2332892)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0020174X.2024.2332892>



Published online: 23 Mar 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 51



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



The early development of Kant's practical notion of belief

Lewis Wang

Department of Philosophy, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

In the first *Critique*, Kant famously holds a novel practical notion of Belief (*Glauben*) as assent justified not by evidence but by practical considerations. This paper examines the early development of Kant's practical notion of Belief prior to the first *Critique*. It aims to make clear what prompted Kant to develop this notion in the first place, and how this notion came to assume its crucial role in Kant's critical system. This development, I argue, has two main steps. The first is his introduction of a practical notion of Belief in mid-to-late 1760s. I argue that he did so because he regards this notion as a useful tool to get ordinary people to justifiably commit to the existence of God and an after-life. The second step is Kant's abandonment of the objective validity of his logical proof of God around 1772. This step elevated Belief from a merely useful means to the only justified way to commit to the existence of God and an after-life. This second step, I argue, is closely connected to Kant's pivot to the view that the objective validity of concepts requires sensibly given objects, and it is motivated by Kant's concern with subject-cancelling real repugnance.

ARTICLE HISTORY Received 30 December 2023; Accepted 15 March 2024

KEYWORDS Kant; belief; critique of pure reason; pre-critical

Belief (*Glauben*), for the critical Kant, is the kind of assent (*Fürwahrhalten*) to propositions that is justified not by evidence but by practical considerations.¹ It occupies an important position in Kant's critical system because for the mature Kant, Belief is the only justified form of assent for the existence of God and an after-life. Kant's notion of Belief has received much attention lately from Kant scholars.² In particular, scholars have discussed the non-evidentialism it contains,³ its relation to Kant's philosophy of

CONTACT Lewis Wang  kwang39@bu.edu  Department of Philosophy, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

¹To distinguish Kant's notion of *Glauben* from the notion of belief in contemporary philosophy, in this paper I denote the former invariably with 'Belief', i.e., with the first letter capitalized.

²See Stevenson (2003), Chignell (2007a), Chignell (2007b), Pasternack (2010), Pasternack (2011), Pasternack (2014), Gava (2019), and Chance (2019).

³See Chignell (2007a) and Chignell (2007b).

religion,⁴ and its relation to transcendental idealism.⁵ Most of the works on this notion so far, however, have focused on Kant's mature notion of Belief in the critical period. Very little attention has been paid to how Kant develops this novel notion of Belief from the notion of Belief prevalent as his time, namely assent based on testimony.⁶ Although it has been pointed out that various aspects of Kant's mature theory of Belief are anticipated and likely influenced by his predecessors, such as Meier and Crusius,⁷ these observations, by themselves, can neither explain what motivated Kant to propose a notion of practical justification, nor how its development is related to the broader pre-critical development of Kant's philosophy.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the early development of Kant's practical notion of Belief. The central questions it aims to answer are what prompted Kant to develop this notion in the first place, and how this notion came to assume its crucial role in Kant's critical system. This development, I argue, has two major steps. Kant first introduced a practical notion of Belief in mid-to-late 1760s, when he has not yet given up the hope of logically proving and thus knowing the existence of God and an after-life. Through a reading of his 1766 essay *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, I argue that Kant first developed a practical notion of Belief because he regards it as a useful means to get ordinary people, who may be uninterested or practically unable to attain philosophical knowledge, to justifiably commit to the existence of God and an after-life. The second step of this development is Kant's abandonment of the objective validity of his logical proof of God around 1772. It is due to this change that Belief evolves from a merely useful means to the only justified way to commit to the existence of God and an after-life. This second step, I argue, is closely connected to Kant's pivot to the view that the objective validity of concepts requires sensibly given objects. Both steps or changes of view, I argue, are motivated by Kant's concern with what Andrew Chignell calls subject-cancelling real repugnance.

This paper proceeds as follows. Section I introduces Kant's account of Belief in the first *Critique*. Section II reconstructs the two-stepped development of Kant's practical notion of Belief. Section III discusses the

⁴See Pasternack (2010) and Pasternack (2011).

⁵See Chignell (2014b) and Pickering (2016).

⁶The only exception I am aware of is Pasternack (2011). Pasternack focuses, however, on how Kant further limits the scope of Belief in the 1790s; he spends only two paragraphs on how Kant develops his notion of Belief in the 1760s and 1770s. This paper, by contrast, will set aside the former, and focus only on the latter.

⁷See Dyck (2018), Gava (2019), and Chance (2019).

motivation behind Kant's introduction of a practical notion of Belief in mid-to-late 1760s. Section IV discusses Kant's abandonment of the objective validity of his proof of God around 1772, and how it is motivated by Kant's concern with real opposition or repugnance.

I. Kant on belief in the first *Critique*

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant introduces the concept of Belief in the Canon chapter of the Doctrine of Method as part of his three-fold division of assent. Assent or holding-to-be-true (*Fürwahrhalten*), for Kant, is a broad kind of propositional attitude that includes any endorsement of a proposition's truth, regardless of how confident or justified one is in that endorsement. Kant distinguishes three stages of assent: opinion (*Meinen*), or assent 'with the consciousness that it is subjectively as well as objectively insufficient'; Belief (*Glauben*), or assent that is 'only subjectively sufficient and is at the same time held to be objectively insufficient'; and knowledge (*Wissen*), or assent that is 'both subjectively and objectively sufficient' (A822/B850).⁸ Understanding Kant's critical notion of Belief thus requires us to understand the notions of objective and subjective sufficiency.

For Kant, objectively sufficient assent is assent based on sufficient objective grounds. By objective grounds, Kant means considerations that speak to the truth of a proposition. According to the taxonomy he provides in *Jäsche Logic*, objective grounds include things like experience, testimony, mathematical and philosophical demonstrations, and immediate certainty (Log 9:70–1). These are all considerations that make a proposition more likely to be true. In the terminology of contemporary epistemology, they all count as evidence. To say that Belief is objectively insufficient, then, is to say that it lacks sufficient evidential support.

Not every objectively insufficient assent, however, counts as Belief. An assent due to wishful thinking or biases, for Kant, is a mere *persuasion* (*Überredung*), which is a 'mere illusion' (*bloßer Schein*) (A820/B848). Belief, by contrast, is *justified*. According to Kant, for an assent to count as Belief, it must serve as necessary means to some significant practical aim (A823/B851). This aim and its significance are what makes the Belief, as its necessary means, justified. The subjective sufficiency of

⁸The *Critique of Pure Reason* is cited standably by the page numbers in its A/B editions. All other works of Kant are cited by their location in the *Akademie Ausgabe* (Kant 1900 ff). When possible, all translations are from the *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Translations of those lectures and notes that are not translated in the Cambridge Edition are mine.

Belief is thus a form of practical justification.⁹ To say that Belief is objectively insufficient but subjectively sufficient, then, is to say that although it does not enjoy sufficient evidential support, it is nevertheless practically justified as necessary means to some significant practical aim.

Kant distinguishes three kinds of Belief in the first *Critique* with three different kinds of aims. Firstly, there is pragmatic Belief, or Belief necessary for a contingent practical end, such as saving a patient, making a business deal, or winning a battle.¹⁰ Then, there is doctrinal Belief, or Belief necessary for some significant theoretical end, which Kant regards as an ‘analogue’ of pragmatic Belief (A825/B853). Kant’s main example here is the Belief in God as a wise author, which is necessary for assuming the purposiveness of nature as ‘a guide for the investigation of nature’ (A826/B854). But the central and most important kind of Belief for Kant is no doubt moral Belief, which is justified as necessary means for the reason-dictated, ‘inescapably fixed’ end of acting in accordance with moral laws (A828/B856). The two most fundamental moral Beliefs, for Kant, are Beliefs in the existence of God and an after-life. According to what has come to be known as Kant’s *moral argument*, Kant thinks that acting morally requires us to presume there to be another world in which our actions have moral consequences, i.e. a world in which one’s happiness is proportional to how worthy one is of happiness. Kant calls such a world the ideal of the highest good, and he thinks that this ideal requires us to have moral Belief in the existence of an after-life in this other world, and in God as the only being that can make everyone’s happiness proportional to their worthiness to be happy (A810-1/B838-9).¹¹

II. The history of Kant’s notion of belief

In the previous section, I provided a brief synopsis of the account of Belief Kant provides in the first *Critique*. As Pasternack (2011) has noted, the concept of Belief is not Kant’s invention. Rather, Kant inherits it from Meier, who inherits it, in turn, from Wolff. In his *German Logic*, Wolff says that ‘by Belief [*Glauben*] I understand the assent [*Beyfall*] one gives

⁹Here I bracket the debate on whether we need to posit multiple types of subjective sufficiency. Stevenson (2003) and Chignell (2007b) both posit multiple types of subjective sufficiency for different types of grounds, while Pasternack (2014, 44–5, footnote 7) thinks there is only one kind subjective sufficiency, namely the mental assent of firmly holding a proposition to be true, but it can rest on different kinds of grounds.

¹⁰See A814/B852, Log 9:67, and V-Lo/Dohna 24:750 respectively.

¹¹For a recent overview of readings of Kant’s mature moral argument, see Englert and Chignell (forthcoming). This rough summary stays neutral on these different readings.

to a proposition in virtue of another's testimony' (*GL*, ch.7, §3). Similarly, in his *Auszug aus der Verunftlehre* – which Kant uses as the textbook for his logic lectures – Meier defines Belief as 'the assent [*Beyfall*] that we give to a matter on the basis of a testimony' (§206). This notion of Belief as testimony-based assent is likely what Kant possessed at the start of his career, as is evident from a *Reflexion* from mid-1750s¹²:

But we must cognize much historical cognition, which lies at the basis of philosophy, by Belief [*Glauben*], e.g. we must Believe [*glauben*] that what Rømer and other philosophers after him say about the phenomena of Jupiter's satellites is true, in order to infer from it something about the nature of light (R1632).

Kant's notion of Belief underwent a major change in mid-to-late 1760s. In a set of notes Adickes dates to 1764–70, Kant's practical notion of Belief makes its debut in his oeuvre under the name of rational Belief (*Vernunftglaube*) or practical Belief (*praktische Glaube*), which Kant distinguishes from historical Belief (*historische Glaube*), or Belief based on testimony. For example, in R2446, Kant defines rational Belief as that

in which the assent has the same degree as in knowledge, but is of a different kind, as it stems not from the cognition of grounds in the object, but from the true need of the subject with regard to the theoretical as well as the practical use of reason.

Similarly, Kant claims in R2448 that an assent 'is only called a Belief when it is practically sufficient albeit logically insufficient. [...] Rational Belief alone can be distinguished from knowledge', because 'it rests on a practical basis'. Finally, in R2451, Kant says that 'practical belief is decided and completely certain, so that its affirmation of something as true is complete *in sensu practico* and cannot receive any supplement even through the grandest grounds of speculation'.¹³ These passages suggest that Kant first developed his practical notion of Belief in mid-to-late 1760s.

This historical claim, if true, naturally gives rise to the following question: what motivated Kant to posit this new kind of Belief? The most natural answer, I think, is that Kant was motivated by some kind of

¹²Note that, in this paper, I accept Erich Adickes' dating of Kant's *Reflexionen* without question. This is not to claim that there are no reasons to be skeptical of Adickes' datings, but I shall leave that philological question aside here. Instead, I shall assume Adickes' dating, not only because it is the only way we can give any dates to Kant's *Reflexionen*, but also because it does seem to yield a coherent and interesting historical account of the development of Kant's notion of Belief. For Adickes' explanation of his own dating method, see AA 14:xxx – xlvi. See also Guyer, Bowman and Rauscher's introduction to the Cambridge edition of *Notes and Fragments*, xxiii–xxv.

¹³See also R2450, R2788, *Dreams* 2:373.

concern with our commitment to the existence of God and an after-life. After all, we have mentioned that for the critical Kant, the primary and most important instances of Belief are our moral Beliefs in God and an after-life. And this answer is indeed textually plausible. It is supported by the fact that most of Kant's early examples of practical or rational Belief are Beliefs in God and an after-life.¹⁴ It is also supported by the fact that Kant's moral argument for God and an after-life also makes its debut right around this time when Kant first developed his practical notion of Belief.¹⁵

One may be tempted to further speculate that the concern that motivated Kant to develop a practical notion of Belief in the 1760s is the same concern he has with God and an after-life in the first *Critique*, namely that we cannot logically prove, and thus cannot know, their existence. This would be true if we follow Abaci's (2019) claim that by late 1760s, 'Kant was already convinced that [his] argument failed as an objectively valid demonstration of the necessary existence of God' (212). The argument Abaci refers to is Kant's 'only possible argument' (hereafter OPA) for the existence of God, which Kant proposes in his *Beweisgrund* essay in 1763. OPA is an unorthodox ontological argument. It tries to prove the existence of God not from the concept of existence, but from the concept of real possibility. Roughly put, it purports to show that real possibilities presuppose an absolutely necessary being as their real ground, and this being is *ens realissimum*, or God. But like traditional ontological arguments, Kant's OPA is still a proof of God from mere concepts. In the first *Critique*, by contrast, Kant prohibits any such conceptual proof of existence. Instead, he holds that the cognition of anything's existence requires actual perception (A225/B272). He also says specifically regarding OPA that 'it cannot establish the objective necessity of an original being, but establishes only the subjective necessity of assuming such a being.' (V-Phil-Th/Pölitiz, 28:1034). If Abaci is right that this aspect of his critical view goes back to late 1760s, then it is indeed plausible that this is what motivated Kant to develop a practical notion of Belief, insofar as he must appeal to such a notion to commit to God once he rules out logical or merely conceptual knowledge of its existence.

Abaci's historical claim, however, is textually unwarranted.¹⁶ In the *Inaugural Dissertation* of 1770, Kant claims that intellectual concepts –

¹⁴See R4251, V-Lo/Blomberg, 24:149, V-Lo/Phillipi 24:421, 24:434.

¹⁵Cf. R4253, R4254, R6674, *Dreams* 2:373.

¹⁶Abaci's reading is primarily based on a set of *Reflexionen* from late 1760s, in which Kant (allegedly) claims that God is a necessary hypothesis. Abaci cites R4113, R4244 and R4253, but these are bad

which he later calls the categories in the first *Critique* – naturally lead us to think of an exemplar of all realities, namely a maximally perfect being. This being is God, and he is, ‘insofar as He really exists, the principle of the coming into being of all perfection whatsoever’ (ID, 2:396). If we follow Allison (2015, 60) in reading Kant as identifying perfection with reality here, then although Kant does not reiterate OPA *per se* in the *Inaugural Dissertation*, he is nevertheless endorsing its conclusion as an objective truth. That is, Kant claims in 1770, as he does in *Beweisgrund* in 1763, that a most real or most perfect being, i.e. *ens realissimum*, is the real ground of all possible realities, and that being is God. It is thus clear that Kant has not yet given up on the objective validity of OPA in 1770. This conclusion is further corroborated by a set of notes dated to 1769–71, in which Kant seems to be reiterating and endorsing OPA.¹⁷ In fact, Kant remains committed to the objective validity of OPA at least until 1772, as we find the following remark in *Logik Phillipi*¹⁸:

When I accept a proposition without proof, but it is proven in another science, it is called a lemma. For example, that there is a God is a lemma in morality. It is proven in natural theology. (V-Lo/Phillipi, 24:468; see also V-Lo/Phillipi, 24:434)

The same point is also made in *Logik Blomberg* from roughly the same time, in which Kant says that ‘logical certainty of the existence of God can also be attained, although such a thing is very hard’ (V-Lo/Blomberg, 24:200; see also V-Lo/Blomberg, 24:231).¹⁹ Insofar as OPA is the only logical proof of God that Kant has ever endorsed from 1763 onward, it seems that in both lectures Kant still takes OPA to be a valid logical proof of the existence of God.

In another *Reflexion* dated also to 1772, however, Kant seems to abandon the objective validity of OPA by explicitly rejecting any logical inference to absolute necessity. According to him, ‘all judgments are either logical or real. The latter are about existence and, when they concern absolute necessity, cannot be cognized by the principle of contradiction’ (R3814; see also R4567). Kant puts this even more clearly in a note from 1773–5:

examples. Part of what Abaci cites from R4113 to prove his point is in fact a later addition that Adickes dates to 1773–78, and I do not see any mention of hypothesis in R4244 and R4253.

¹⁷See R4242, R4244, R4246, R4256, R4258, R4113.

¹⁸The date ‘May 1772’ appears on the title page of *Logik Phillipi*. Here I follow Schlapp’s (1901, 19) assessment in support of this dating.

¹⁹Although we can date *Logik Blomberg* at best to 1770–75, the text it shares in verbatim with *Logik Phillipi* suggests that they are closely related (cf. Adickes 1911, 43–4). If my subsequent claim about Kant’s change-of-view on OPA around 1772–73 is correct, then *Logik Blomberg* must be from no later than 1772, which supports Schlapp’s (1901, 27) conjecture that it is from 1771.

[T]he concept of all reality as a substratum of reason is necessary for us; but we cannot on that account regard a highest reality as necessary in itself [...] The existence of a thing can never be proven from mere concepts, since existence is not one of the predicates and since from concepts nothing but relative affirmation or negation, not the absolute positing of the thing together with its predicates, can be inferred (R4729).

What this suggests historically, I think, is that Kant underwent a second change of view around 1772. He rejected OPA as a valid logical proof due to his worry about the objective validity of the concept of *ens realissimum*, that is, whether it relates to anything real at all. Instead, he started to take it as a necessary concept that our reason must presume. With OPA leaving the stage, the moral argument now becomes the only viable path towards rational commitment to the existence of God for Kant, and hence moral Belief becomes the only justified attitude towards the existence of God.

To summarize, in this Section I showed that the development of Kant's practical notion of Belief takes two steps: he first introduced this notion in mid-to-late 1760s, and subsequently promoted it to the central position it later holds in Kant's critical system around 1772–73. This two-stepped historical account leaves us with two questions. Firstly, if Kant has not yet given up on logically proving God in mid-to-late 1760s, why did he posit a practical notion of Belief, which he does not need yet for commitment to the existence of God? Secondly, what was it around 1772–73 that made Kant lose hope in the objective validity of OPA? I shall try to answer these questions in the next two sections.

Before moving on, however, let me note that 1772 is not the end of the pre-critical development of Kant's notion of Belief. As Pasternack (2011) has observed, in *Logik Blomberg* Kant has not yet abandoned Meier's testimony-based notion of Belief. He did not do so, in fact, until late 1770s (cf. R2470). Instead, in the decade after he first introduced practical Belief, he simply juxtaposed it and historical Belief under the same umbrella.²⁰ Kant seems to have realized quite early, however, that insofar as historical Belief is theoretically rather than practically justified, it is closer to knowledge than to practical Belief. In R2448 from mid-1760s, Kant says that 'historical Belief cannot actually be opposed to knowledge, for it can itself be knowledge [...] Rational Belief alone can be distinguished from knowledge [because] it rests on a practical basis'. There is thus no wonder why Kant later corrects himself and rejects historical Belief.

²⁰See R2462 for a possible reason for this.

III. The usefulness of belief

In the previous section, I suggested that what motivated Kant to introduce a practical notion of Belief in 1760s is likely some kind of concern with our commitment to God and an after-life. In this section, I argue that this concern is how ordinary people, for whom philosophical knowledge may be too difficult or simply uninteresting, can nevertheless be rationally committed to God and an after-life. I further argue that Kant regards moral Belief as a useful means for addressing this concern. To show this, I turn to Kant's 1766 essay *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, not only because it is his only major publication in mid-to-late 1760s, but more importantly because it contains an illuminating discussion of moral Belief (*moralische Glaube*) in an after-life.

Ostensibly, *Dreams* is a polemic against Emmanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish visionary and clairvoyant. But its real purpose, as Kant himself makes clear, is to show that metaphysics has no hope unless it becomes 'a science of the limits of human reason', i.e. unless we cease to venture beyond the boundary of what we can possibly know (*Dreams*, 2:368). More specifically, Kant warns us not to conflate the sensible and the intelligible realms, and especially not to apply concepts and laws that are derived solely from our experience to merely intelligible beings such as immaterial spirits.²¹ This, according to Kant, is because we have no data for showing that our empirical concepts and laws apply in the intelligible realm. To simply assume or hypothesize that they do, for Kant, is 'inventing these relations in a creative or chimaeric fashion', and metaphysics based on this hypothesis is nothing but 'philosophical fabrications' (*Dreams*, 2:371; 10:72). Kant's critique of uncritical metaphysics in *Dreams* thus culminates in the 'practical conclusion' that we should cease hypothesizing about objects beyond the limit of human reason, because no knowledge, but only delusions, could ever result from it (*Dreams*, 2:368).

After offering his readers this advice, Kant ends *Dreams* with another practical conclusion, namely that we should simply do good things for their own sake rather than for any reward in a future world. This advice is a response to a common hope-based practical justification of spirit-talks, which Kant summarizes as follows:

[T]he claim is likewise commonly made that a rational understanding of the spirit-nature of the soul is very necessary to the conviction that there is life

²¹Cf. Schönfeld (2000, 243–4) and Allison (2015, 40–1).

after death, and that this conviction, in its turn, is necessary if one is to have a motive for leading a virtuous life (*Dreams*, 2:372).

Earlier in the *Dreams*, Kant gestures implicitly at this justification through a dogmatic metaphysician persona. This persona explains that the central psychological motive behind the almost ubiquitous acceptance of spirits is 'hope for the future', and he admits that this inclination of hope is 'one which I cannot easily eliminate' (*Dreams*, 2:349–50). This persona further claims that spirit-talks 'have a significant weight when placed in the scale-pan of hope', and philosophy should 'stand in sympathy [*in Sympathie stände*]' with this inclination (*Dreams*, 2:350). With this latter claim, Kant's persona implies that hope is not only an explanation but also a practical justification for spirit-talks.

Kant never denies that hope for an after-life is ubiquitous, or that it commonly leads people to accept spirits. He does deny, however, the hope-based argument above. The key premise of that argument is that the hope that one's moral actions will be rewarded in a future world is necessary for one to be motivated to act morally in this world. In anticipation of his critical moral philosophy, Kant rejects this premise by arguing that one who does virtuous things for future rewards is not truly virtuous, because her motivation is impure. Good or virtuous actions, Kant explains, are good in themselves and not in virtue of any future reward. One who truly loves virtue, then, should do good actions for their own sake without regard to any future reward. He who only acts virtuously for future rewards, Kant proclaims, only 'loves the advantage of actions which present the appearance of virtue, while hating virtue itself' (*Dreams*, 2:372).

After rejecting this common hope-based argument for spirits, Kant offers his own hope-based moral argument for an after-life:

But there has never existed, I suppose, an upright soul which was capable of supporting the thought that with death everything was at an end, and whose noble disposition has not aspired to the hope that there would be a future. For this reason, it seems more consonant with human nature and moral purity to base the expectation of a future world on the sentiments of a nobly constituted soul than, conversely, to base its noble conduct on the hope of another world. Such is also the character of *moral Belief* [*moralischer Glaube*] [...] (*Dreams*, 2:350, translation modified).

This argument has two premises. The first, which is clear from this passage, is that it is part of what it is to be a moral person that she hopes for a moral world in which moral actions are rewarded and

immoral ones are punished. The second and more implicit premise is that we all ought to be moral. From these two premises it follows that we all ought to hope for such a moral world. And that, Kant thinks, entails via ought-implies-can that, insofar as this moral world is clearly not the one we currently live in, we are justified to accept the existence of a future world, or otherwise no hope for a moral world is possible. This mode of acceptance or assent Kant calls moral Belief.

Kant has high hope for moral Belief. According to him, 'it alone and uniquely is fitting to man in whatever situation he finds himself, for it leads him directly to his true purposes' (*Dreams*, 2:373). Here we should remember that, as previously argued, Kant has not yet given up on the hope of proving the existence of God and an after-life in this period.²² Thus, when Kant speaks of moral Belief as uniquely fitting for men, he cannot mean that it is the only justified kind of assent for the existence of an after-life. Instead, I find it plausible to read Kant as making a more practical point, namely that moral Belief is the only justified kind of assent for an after-life that is *practically* possible for *everyone*. Knowledge through philosophical proofs is difficult. Such proofs often involve unfamiliar, abstract, and difficult concepts such as *ens realissimum*. Understanding them may require years of education and intellectual training, and most people in Kant's time cannot afford that. Moreover, most ordinary people simply have no interest in such knowledge because it does not directly bear on their life. Thus, although Kant in 1766 still thinks that everyone has the rational capacity to know the existence of God and an after-life, he recognizes that most people are *in practice* unable or unwilling to attain that knowledge. If to justifiably commit to God and an after-life requires philosophical knowledge of their existence, then most ordinary people would have to choose between irrational, blind faith, or skepticism and impiety. These are two options that Kant is equally uncomfortable with. What Kant wishes to achieve, as I read him, is thus to allow everyone to commit rationally to the existence of God and an after-life 'in whatever situation he finds himself', i.e. even in the absence of the knowledge of their existence (*Dreams*, 2:373)

And this is where Kant finds hope useful. Recall that Kant observes through his persona that most people come to accept an after-life not through philosophical arguments, but through the inclination of hope. Although Kant rejects the common hope-based justification for an after-life via the premise that hope is necessary for moral motivation,

²²See also Allison (2015, 34–5).

he does recognize that hope for surviving death is ubiquitous and hard to eliminate, as it is deeply rooted in our nature. This, he thinks, offers us not a problem, but an opportunity. It allows us to build a legitimate argument for an after-life that 'stands in sympathy' with our inclination of hope, and thus has an appeal for everyone and not just the philosophers (*Dreams*, 2:350). This argument must preserve, from the common hope-based argument that Kant rejects, the idea that the commonly held hope for a future life is morally required. Meanwhile, it must also find a non-motivational story for why hope is morally required.

That is precisely what Kant's moral argument intends to achieve: instead of taking hope as a necessary means for moral motivation, Kant's argument takes hope simply as part of what morality requires. Insofar as people recognize this and that our reason-dictated 'true purposes' are to act morally and live a virtuous life, Kant thinks that his argument should easily convince people of the existence of an after-life – and by a similar moral argument, of God, too. As he puts it in *Logik Blomberg*, while logical certainty of the existence of God is very hard, 'all men, however, can attain moral certainty, even without great logical speculations. If only we sharpen someone's moral judgments, we can thereby easily bring him to the conviction of the existence of God' (V-Lo/Blomberg, 24:200; see also V-Lo/Phillipi, 24:434). By sharpening moral judgments, Kant means to bring people to consider 'that here on earth happiness is not always a consequence of good behavior, hence another world is to be hoped for in which this will occur' (V-Lo/Blomberg 24:200). In other words, Kant thinks that if we get people to recognize that a world in which moral actions are rewarded is what we morally ought to direct our natural hope for a future world towards, i.e. something we morally ought to hope for, then people can easily accept the existence of God and an after-life as moral Belief without any delusion or false view about moral motivation. In other words, for Kant in the 1760s, moral Belief in God and an after-life is something practically useful because this assent is firm, rational, and something everyone can be easily brought to because it agrees with our natural inclination of hope for surviving death. Although it is not quite knowledge yet, Kant thought it is good enough for most ordinary people.

IV. The threat of real opposition

I now turn to the second step of the development of Kant's notion of Belief, namely his abandonment of OPA as an objectively valid proof of

God. To start, it should be noted that this change-of-view is not a singular event. Instead, it occurred in the context of Kant's broader concern with the objective validity of pure, intellectual concepts in general. In his famous letter to Marcus Herz on February 21st, 1772, Kant tells us that he is concerned with the question of how our representations could relate to any real object (10:129). This question of objective validity is particularly pressing for intellectual concepts that have their origin solely in our understanding, because they neither cause anything to exist (unlike intellectual intuitions) nor are caused by anything to exist (unlike sensuous representations). Kant tells Herz that his solution to this problem consists in, in Allison's (2015) words, 'determining the intellectual concepts in a systematic manner' (100). How Kant thought this could solve the problem of objective validity is a question I cannot address here.²³ But at least one thing is clear from the letter, namely that what drives Kant to this solution is the same aim he had in *Inaugural Dissertation*, namely, to allow for knowledge of merely intelligible objects from pure, intellectual concepts alone. Kant claims, for example, that he arrives at his solution to the objective validity problem in 'searching [...] for the sources of intellectual knowledge, without which one cannot determine the nature and limits of metaphysics' (10:132). He also describes his endeavor as 'mak[ing] the understanding's pure insight dogmatically intelligible' (10:135). Both claims suggest that Kant was still committed to purely conceptual metaphysical knowledge in February 1772.

As is evident from a set of notes dated to 1772–73, however, Kant soon abandoned the solution he mentioned to Herz, and opted instead for *sensible givenness* as his new solution to the objective validity problem. In R4634, Kant claims that 'in every experience there is something through which an object is given to us and something through which it is thought' (see also R4633). That through which an object is given to us, Kant tells us, is sensation or intuition (see R4629, R4634, R4636).²⁴ Intellectual concepts or concepts of the understanding now cease to be vehicles for knowledge of merely intelligible objects. Instead, they become concepts that 'do not contain anything other than that by means of which all experiences are possible', and 'they are not valid of things in general, but yet of everything that can ever be given to us through experience' (R4634). No room seems to be left for purely conceptual knowledge of God and souls.

²³But see Allison (2015, 99–100) for a reading that I am sympathetic with.

²⁴Unlike later in the first *Critique*, Kant has not yet clearly distinguished between sensation and intuition in these notes.

In short, circa 1772, Kant not only shifted stance on the objective validity of OPA. He also changed his view on what the objective validity of intellectual concepts requires from their systematic determination to the sensible givenness of their objects. In light of this broader context, it might seem natural to hold, as Abaci (2019, 137–8) does, that what made Kant give up on the objective validity of OPA is this pivot to sensible givenness. According to this line of reasoning, since God or *ens realissimum* cannot be sensibly given to us, we have no guarantee that the conclusion of OPA corresponds to anything real, which means that OPA cannot decisively prove God's existence.

Although this line of reasoning is valid for the critical Kant, it faces a problem as an historical account. It gives rise to a further motivational question which Abaci does not address, namely this: what philosophical difficulty did Kant encounter in the months after his letter to Herz that motivated him to adopt sensible givenness as his solution to the objective validity problem? After all, it seems rather unlikely that Kant would suddenly abandon his project in the *Inaugural Dissertation*, had he not encountered some insurmountable difficulty when working in the direction he mentioned to Herz. I shall now argue that the answer to this further motivational question is the threat of real opposition. I shall further argue, however, that this answer undercuts Abaci's historical account. Instead, on my reading, Kant's pivot to sensible givenness and his abandonment of the objective validity of OPA are two sides of the same coin, and they are both motivated by Kant's realization that we cannot rule out the possibility of real opposition without sensibly given objects.

In the early 1760s, Kant introduces the concept of real opposition (*Realentgegensetzung*) or real repugnance (*Realrepuganz*) as distinct from logical opposition or contradiction.²⁵ Simply put, logical contradiction occurs between a predicate and its negation. Real opposition occurs, by contrast, when two logically *non*-contradictory predicates cancel each other out (*aufheben*) in reality, e.g. two equally strong forces in the opposite direction. Chignell (2009, 2014b) has argued that in addition to this *predicate-cancelling* variety of real opposition, Kant has yet another notion of *subject-cancelling* real opposition in *Beweisgrund*. This latter kind of real opposition, according to Chignell, occurs when two logically non-contradictory predicates make any object that jointly instantiates them impossible in reality.²⁶

²⁵See *Beweisgrund* 2:86, *NM* 2:172.

²⁶The primary example Chignell cites is the real opposition between impenetrability and understanding (*Beweisgrund*, 2:85–6).

Whether Kant has a notion of subject-cancelling real opposition in the early 1760s is a matter of controversy that I cannot discuss here.²⁷ But regardless of the answer to that question, Kant's *Reflexionen* do suggest that he has this notion in the early 1770s. For example, in R4004 from 1769, Kant suggests that there are non-contradictory predicates that are impossible to be synthesized in the same object, which implies that if they are predicated on the same object, the object would be canceled.²⁸ And in R4396 from 1771, Kant distinguishes between 'what is cancelled [*aufgehoben*] in itself' and 'what is cancelled through its idea'. The former, he says, 'does not exist', while the latter 'is impossible'. It seems clear that something canceled through its idea or concept is canceled due to the logical contradiction of its concept, and is thus *logically* impossible. What stands in contrast to it, then, must be something whose existence is canceled due to real opposition, i.e. something *really* impossible.

Kant's *Reflexionen* further suggest that, in this period, he takes objective validity to be equivalent with the lack of subject-cancelling real opposition. Again, in R4396, Kant claims that 'what is possible is that whose concept is not empty, also is not cancelled through itself'. The possibility Kant refers to here is real possibility, insofar as he also equates real possibility elsewhere with the non-emptiness of a concept (see R4372, R4391). And non-emptiness, for Kant, simply means 'that something outside the thought, thus a reality [*Wirklichkeit*], responds to it', i.e. that the concept has objective validity (R4396; see also R4372). Finally, as I just argued, by 'not cancelled through itself' I understand Kant as referring to the lack of subject-cancelling real repugnance. These notes thus suggest that in the early 1770s, Kant takes real possibility, non-emptiness of a concept, objective validity of concept, and the lack of subject-cancelling real opposition to be all equivalent with each other.

Now, in the first *Critique*, Kant holds that the non-emptiness or objective validity of a concept requires its object to be given to us through sensible intuitions (A155/B194; see also A62/B87, A90/B122, B148). This view is clearly a result of the previously discussed Kant's shift to sensible givenness as what objective validity requires around 1772. The question that

²⁷Abaci (2019) and Yong (2014) have argued that the passages Chignell relies on to show that Kant has a notion of subject-cancelling real repugnance in early 1760s in fact are about predicate-canceling real repugnance. See also Stang (2016, 108–9, note 22 and 23) – who believes that subject-cancelling real repugnance is a part of Kant's pre-critical modal theory but does not think it plays a significant role in OPA – for a discussion of some of the passages Chignell (2014a) refers to in his response to Abaci and Yong.

²⁸See also R3989, R3990 and R3997.

Abaci leaves unanswered, namely what motivated this change-of-view, can thus be specified as the following question: what made Kant change from holding that objective validity requires the lack of subject-cancelling real opposition to holding that objective validity requires sensible givenness?

The most plausible answer to this question, I submit, is that Kant realized in the months after his letter to Herz that there is no other way to guarantee the lack of real opposition than to appeal to objects given through actual experience. In particular, he realized that no matter how systematically determined an intellectual concept is, we cannot rule out, on a merely speculative basis, the possibility that it contains predicates that cannot be co-instantiated in the same object in reality. Instead, Kant concluded that the only way to rule out that possibility for any concept is to witness a real object in which all predicates of that concept are actually co-instantiated. This, I believe, is why Kant shifts to the view that objective validity requires sensibly given objects.

This answer, however, undercuts Abaci's historical account for why Kant abandoned the objective validity of OPA. This is because the objective invalidity of OPA also follows directly from Kant's realization that we can only rule out subject-cancelling real opposition for a concept by actually perceiving an object to which that concept applies. While this is possible for those pure concepts that make our experience possible, insofar as they must apply to everything we experience, it is not possible for other intellectual concepts that do not have this function. We thus cannot guarantee that the concept of God or *ens realissimum* lacks subject-cancelling real opposition. It is for this reason that Kant abandons the objective validity of the concept of *ens realissimum* and thereby of OPA as well.

It should be now clear that both Kant's pivot to sensible givenness as what objective validity requires and his abandonment of the objective validity of OPA follow directly from his realization that to guarantee the lack of subject-cancelling real opposition requires sensibly given objects. There is thus no need to appeal, as Abaci does, to the former change-of-view to explain the latter. Rather, insofar as they are motivated by the same concern, they are nothing but two sides of the same coin.

V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have shown that the pre-critical development of Kant's practical notion of Belief has two steps. The first is his introduction of this notion in mid-to-late 1760s, which I have argued is due to his view

that moral Belief is a useful tool to get every ordinary person to commit firmly and rationally to God and an after-life. The second step took place around 1772, when Kant abandoned the objective validity of OPA due to his realization that we cannot rule out subject-cancelling real opposition for the concept of *ens realissimum*. He thereby elevated Belief to the crucial position as the only justifiable kind of assent for the existence of God and an after-life.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Abaci, Uygur. 2019. *Kant's Revolutionary Theory of Modality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Adickes, Erich. 1911. *Untersuchungen zu Kant's physischer Geographie*. Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr.
- Allison, Henry E. 2015. *Kant's Transcendental Deduction: An Analytic-Historical Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Chance, Brian A. 2019. "Kantian Non-evidentialism and its German Antecedents: Crusius, Meier, and Basedow." *Kantian Review* 24 (3): 359–384. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415419000177>.
- Chignell, Andrew. 2007a. "Kant's Concepts of Justification." *Noûs* 41: 33–63. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0068.2007.00637.x>.
- Chignell, Andrew. 2007b. "Belief in Kant." *The Philosophical Review* 116: 323–360. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00318108-2007-001>.
- Chignell, Andrew. 2009. "Kant, Modality, and the Most Real Being." *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 91 (2): 157–192.
- Chignell, Andrew. 2014a. "Kant and the 'Monstrous' Ground of Possibility: A Reply to Abaci and Yong." *Kantian Review* 19 (1): 53–69. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415413000290>.
- Chignell, Andrew. 2014b. "Modal Motivations for Noumenal Ignorance: Knowledge, Cognition and Coherence." *Kant Studien* 105: 573–597.
- Dyck, C. 2018. "G. F. Meier and Kant on the Belief in the Immortality of the Soul." In *Kant and his German Contemporaries*, edited by C. Dyck, and F. Wunderlich, 76–93. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Englert, Alexander T., and Andrew Chignell. [forthcoming](#). "Kant on the Highest Good and Moral Arguments." In *Oxford Handbook of Kant*, edited by Anil Gomes, and Andrew Stephenson. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Gava, Gabriele. 2019. "Kant and Crusius on Belief and Practical Justification." *Kantian Review* 24 (1): 53–75. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415418000523>.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1900 ff. *Gesammelte Schriften*. Hrsg.: Bd. 1–22 Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Bd. 23 Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, ab Bd. 24 Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. Berlin.

- Pasternack, Lawrence. 2010. "Kant's Doctrinal Belief in God." In *Rethinking Kant*, Vol. 3, edited by Oliver Thorndike, 200–218. Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.
- Pasternack, Lawrence. 2011. "The Development and Scope of Kantian Belief: The Highest Good, The Practical Postulates and The Fact of Reason." *Kant Studien* 102: 290–315.
- Pasternack, Lawrence. 2014. "Kant on Opinion: Assent, Hypothesis, and the Norms of General Applied Logic." *Kant Studien* 105 (1): 41–82.
- Pickering, Mark. 2016. "Kant's Theoretical Reasons for Belief in Things in Themselves." *Kant Studien* 107 (4): 589–616.
- Schlapp, Otto. 1901. *Kants Lehre vom Genie und die Entstehung der "Kritik der Urteilskraft"*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Schönfeld, Martin. 2000. *The Philosophy of the Young Kant: The Precritical Project*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stang, N. 2016. *Kant's Modal Metaphysics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stevenson, Leslie. 2003. "Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge." *Kantian Review* 7: 72–101. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1369415400001746>.
- Yong, Peter. 2014. "God, Totality and Possibility in Kant's Only Possible Argument." *Kantian Review* 19 (1): 27–51. doi:10.1017/S1369415413000289.