TRANSCENDENTAL ANTI-THEODICY

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Abstract

This essay examines the possibility of arguing transcendentally for anti-theodicism, i.e., the view that theodicies seeking to justify or excuse God’s allowing the world to contain evil and suffering ought to be rejected. In particular, it will be suggested that a certain kind of moral criticism of theodicies can be given a transcendental formulation. The occasionally shifting roles of the transcendental, the empirical, and the transcendent will thereby also be discussed. Finally, the question of truth – a general issue in transcendental argumentation – will be briefly explored from a pragmatist perspective in relation to the possibility of moral testimony and the acknowledgment of others’ suffering.

1. Introduction

This essay examines the ways in which transcendental arguments – or, more generally, transcendental reflection and inquiry – can be put to work in philosophical attempts to understand the conditions for the possibility of appropriately acknowledging human suffering and its moral relevance. In particular, I will suggest that the opposition between theodicy (religious or secular) and anti-theodicy – i.e., what can be regarded as the main opposition in attempts to explore the problem of evil and suffering – ought to be investigated from a transcendental point of view. It will be argued that theodicies should be rejected not only for straightforwardly ethical but, at the meta-level, for transcendental (conceptual and even metaphysical) reasons and that a commitment to anti-theodicy is a necessary (transcendental) condition for the possibility of seriously occupying the moral perspective itself. Hence, my essay joins the tradition of moral criticism of theodicies that can be traced back to Immanuel Kant’s “Theodicy Essay” (1791), and even all the way back to the Book of Job, which Kant comments upon, with more recent representatives among, e.g., post-Holocaust ethical thinkers developing Jewish responses to the Holocaust (such as Emmanuel Levinas, Hans Jonas, and Richard Bernstein), Wittgensteinian moral philosophers and philosophers of religion (such as D.Z. Phillips), and even pragmatists (especially William James). These Kantian anti-theodicies cannot be discussed in any great detail here, but I will try to identify a relatively
widely shared albeit usually merely implicit transcendental strategy of argumentation at work in such moral criticisms of theodicies.

Generally, we may say that theodicies seek a justification, legitimation, and/or excusing of an omnipotent, omniscient and absolutely benevolent God’s allowing the world (His creation) to contain evil and suffering. Classical formulations can be found, e.g., in Augustine’s appeal to God’s having created human beings with the freedom of the will as the reason why there is moral evil, and in G.W. Leibniz’s *Theodicee* (1710), according to which God could not have created any better world than the one that he, choosing from among all possible worlds, did create; hence we live, according to Leibniz, in the best possible world, and while there may be some evil there, it is necessary for the overall good. In the Platonic tradition, the very existence of evil is typically denied, or at least its full reality is restricted: evil is merely the absence of goodness, rather than enjoying any positive reality in itself. Even though Platonism is unpopular today, various free will and “soul-making” theodicies and “defenses” thrive in scholarly literature (cf. Plantinga 1977, Hick 1978, van Inwagen 2006, Stump 2010).

The mainstream approach to the problem of evil in contemporary Anglo-American (broadly analytic) philosophy of religion is, indeed, strongly theodicist in the sense that providing a theodicy or a defense is regarded as a requirement for any acceptable form of theism. Conversely, by *anti-theodicism* we may designate the rejection of the very project of theodicy and of the theodicist desideratum – typically for moral reasons. Theodicist reactions to evil and suffering usually seek to respond to what is called the “argument from evil”, i.e., the case against theism appealing to the empirical reality of evil as a premise in an evidential argument that needs to be defeated by the rational theist. What I am calling anti-theodicism does not simply maintain that such theodicist responses fail but that there is something wrong with the theodicist requirement itself, and this calls for a transcendental investigation.

While the anti-theodicist philosophies and philosophers mentioned above cannot be discussed in detail in a brief essay, it needs to examined at a general level whether, and in what sense, the ethical arguments against theodicies presented by such post-Kantian thinkers and traditions – arguments seeking to determine the deep moral inappropriateness of theodicies – are, or could be reconstructed as, transcendental arguments. The basic structure of a successful anti-theodicist transcendental argument will therefore have to be sketched. In addition, the question of what degree of truth can be achieved by employing transcendental arguments will be approached by proposing that in this context the relevant notion of truth should be rearticulated in *pragmatist* terms covering not only the notion of

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1 The difference between a theodicy and a defense is that the latter only claims that, for all we know, God could have morally acceptable reasons to allow evil and suffering, without claiming that he in fact has those reasons in the actual world, while theodicies claim to tell a true story about the reasons God has for allowing evil and suffering. See, e.g., van Inwagen (2006).
propositional factual truth but more broadly something that can be called “moral truth” (and truthfulness).²

Thus, my discussion will, by examining the specific case of transcendental arguments concerning the appropriate ethical acknowledgment of suffering (and of the moral truth of experiences of suffering), contribute to the more general re-evaluation of the possibility of transcendental argumentation within an overall pragmatist philosophical framework (which, however, I cannot articulate in any detail here). I therefore also hope to reach metaphilosophical results concerning what I propose to call the contextual relativity, or the perspectival character, of the distinctions between the transcendental and the empirical on the one hand, and between the transcendental and the transcendent on the other. We may also speak about the (pragmatically) shifting roles of the empirical, the transcendental, and the transcendent. To address these issues, the argument of the paper will unfold in four sections (sections 2-5 below), before a brief concluding section will tie the threads together.

One of the implicit aims of this essay is to show that a transcendental criticism of theodicies is significantly stronger than the “merely” straightforwardly moral critique we find in some recent “meta-theodical” literature (e.g., Tilley 1991, Trakakis 2008) emphasizing the ways in which theodicies are morally problematic because they may sanction evil instead of contributing to fighting evil in the contemporary world. Those (non-transcendental) moral arguments against theodicies are highly important and welcome, but they do not seek to show that the very possibility of a moral perspective on reality and on other human beings becomes threatened if we adopt a theodicist worldview.³ It is right here that transcendental anti-theodicism, as we may call it, emerges as a considerable strengthening of the case for moral anti-theodicism. It needs to be examined, however, in what sense exactly moral arguments against theodicies can be transcendental. I will also try to show that a proper appreciation of their transcendental character is facilitated by our seeing the transcendental and pragmatic strategies as working in close collaboration.

² It might seem that the issue of truth is not as urgent when we are considering transcendental arguments in the moral realm as it is in the “theoretical” (epistemological) realm focusing on external world or other minds skepticism (with the challenge of Stroud 1968 still on the agenda; cf. Stern 1999). In a sense this is so, as we are definitely not interested in any (challenged) inference from how we must think to how the world actually is independently of our thought. It is not clear that such a distinction makes much sense in the moral sphere, which is based on human thought. However, anti-theodicy is a deeply metaphysical topic, too, and I will argue that in this case we should draw metaphysical conclusions from an ethical argument. The general entanglement of ethics and metaphysics I would be willing to defend (e.g., Pihlström 2009) cannot be explored here, though.

³ Note that a theodicist worldview need not be committed to theism or even to a theological exploration of the problem of evil and suffering. There are secular theodicies, and we may in a broad sense understand theodicism as a commitment to any project of excuses or legitimizing apparently meaningless suffering – if not in a theistic context, then possibly in the context of some kind of historical teleology or other secular overarching scheme.
2. In what sense can anti-theodist arguments be transcendental?

Let me first examine the sense in which arguments focusing on the moral inappropriateness of theodicies might be regarded as transcendental arguments. First, it may seem that moral anti-theodicism is typically based on the following kind of basic argument taking different forms in different specific anti-theodist positions:

(i) The morally adequate acknowledgment of other human beings’ experiences (especially their experiences of suffering) is a moral duty (for all moral agents).

(ii) Theodicies do not appropriately acknowledge experiences of suffering. (More specifically, theodicies are a form of ethical non-acknowledgment of another suffering human being.)

(iii) Therefore, theodicies prevent us from performing our moral duty.

(iv) Therefore, theodicies are ethically inappropriate and ought to be rejected (for moral reasons).

However, this is hardly a proper transcendental argument referring to the necessary conditions for the possibility of the moral point of view. A truly transcendental form of anti-theodicism could, rather, be based on something like this:

(i) Adopting a moral point of view on other human beings (or the world in general) is possible only if others’ suffering (or their experiences of suffering, or the truthful communication of such experiences) is recognized (or acknowledged).⁴

(ii) Recognizing (acknowledging) the other’s suffering presupposes that suffering sincerely experienced as meaningless and/or absurd is not explained away or justified in terms of any externally imposed (e.g., narrative) structure of meaningfulness.

(iii) Theodicies justify, or explain away, (all) suffering as part of an externally imposed, allegedly harmonious (either theological or secular) total narrative, thus giving suffering a meaning or function not manifested – and not recognized – in the experience of suffering.

(iv) Therefore, theodicies do not enable us to recognize (acknowledge) others’ suffering. In particular, they fail to recognize the sufferer’s inability to recognize any meaning or function in her/his suffering.

(v) Therefore, theodicies prevent us from adopting (occupying) a moral point of view.

(vi) It is possible for us to adopt a moral point of view (because we actually do so).

(vii) Therefore, theodicies must be rejected (not only for moral but for transcendental reasons).

⁴ In this essay, I will skip the questions concerning the relation between recognition and acknowledgment, except for the brief remarks below in section 5.
In brief, insofar as we do occupy a moral perspective at all, or are even able to do so, we cannot coherently subscribe to any theodicy. The conclusion (vii) follows for (meta)ethical and transcendental reasons, not for moral reasons alone (though these are inseparable here). The key premises, requiring lengthy elaboration (impossible in this essay), are, arguably, premises (ii) and (iii), which basically claim that theodicies are forms of ethical non-acknowledgment, failures to recognize others’ suffering, especially the sufferers’ sincere experiences of the utter meaninglessness of their suffering.

This argument takes different forms depending on whether we locate it in the writings of post-Holocaust Jewish philosophers like Levinas (2006), Bernstein (2002), or Jonas (1996), who frequently refer to the moral scandalousness or even obscenity of theodicies – to the sheer “disproportionality” (as Levinas puts it) of theodicies in comparison to the sufferings of the twentieth century – or in those of Wittgensteinians like Phillips (2004), examining the “grammar” of moral and religious language games; or in the pragmatist tradition, e.g., James, who emphatically rejects especially Hegelian philosophers’ denials of the full reality of evil in Pragmatism (1907). All these different anti-theodicists, I am suggesting, provide us with some version of the same argument, maintaining that it is morally problematic at best, and immoral or obscene at worst, and therefore morally impossible, to even try to offer a theodicy. It is not only a moral duty to reject theodicies but, more strongly, theodicies lead us out of the moral sphere.

In some thinkers, especially Jonas and James, we may find quite explicitly metaphysical conclusions based on a transcendental argument starting from ethical premises: both, for instance, are willing to radically rethink the concept of God – to defend an idea of a finite or (in Jonas’s terms) “self-contracting” God – on the grounds of the undeniable reality of meaningless suffering (see James 1907; Jonas 1996; cf. Pihlström 2014, chapter 3). James (1907, chapter 4) also defends pluralism and attacks monism for ethical reasons, arguing that the latter, unlike the former, leads to the irresolvable theodicy problem. In this sense, for these very different philosophers, metaphysics can in the end be based on ethics, rather than the other way round (cf. Pihlström 2009). In particular, it is impossible to deny at a metaphysical level the full, shocking reality of evil; there is, as Jonas puts it, “nothing more real” than the wasted humanity of the camps of the twentieth century.

The fate of transcendental arguments of the kind sketched here depends on the more general question concerning the relation between ethics and metaphysics. I have argued elsewhere not only for the view that pragmatism may yield a grounding of metaphysics in ethics both generally (cf. Pihlström 2009) and in the philosophy of religion in particular (cf. Pihlström 2013) but also, more specifically, that according to James an anti-theodist approach to evil and suffering is a necessary condition for the possibility of

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5 For some more detailed discussions, see, e.g., Pihlström (2013), chapter 5; (2014); and (2016).
adopting the moral point of view in the first place (for pursuing what James called the “strenuous mood”), and thus even for the employment of his pragmatic method, which seeks to analyze the proper meaning of metaphysical and other theoretical concepts in terms of their potential ethical relevance (cf. Pihlström 2016). We may even say that for James the pragmatist entanglement of ethics and metaphysics is based on a “framing” of the pragmatic method by the problem of evil and suffering. The ethical point of view on the world is not even available to us unless we take the reality of evil and suffering seriously – that is, unless we are willing to acknowledge our fellow human beings’ experiences of suffering (including their experiences of being victims of deliberate moral evil) and willing to abandon all theodicies.

Now, why doesn’t an argument like this generalize to anything morally problematic? Imagine that someone argues – perhaps quasi-transcendently – from there being something (deeply, seriously) morally problematic about some particular way of thinking, X, to non-X being a necessary condition for the possibility of occupying a (deep, serious) moral perspective at all. This would be parallel to the argument for anti-theodicy as a condition for the possibility of morality. Why doesn’t anything immoral turn out to be a violation of the conditions for the possibility of morality? Can we no longer draw a distinction between morality and immorality within the moral sphere, or from the moral perspective; is the very possibility of that perspective inevitably at issue as soon as we adopt a transcendental approach to these questions?

Well, the short answer is that in some sense it is. This is, we might say, what morality is like for us – or more precisely what its foundationlessness and overridingness are like in our lives and our moral vocabularies. In considering what an appropriate moral response to some situation is, we are in a sense inevitably, though usually implicitly, also considering what it means, or is, to respond morally to anything. Morality, moreover, is largely (though not exclusively) about dealing with evil and suffering. The problem of evil and suffering (as I have suggested in more detail in James’s case) frames moral philosophy generally, or even philosophy generally. This is why it is crucially important to investigate it in transcendental terms characterizing the conditions for the possibility of ethically responsible thought in general. I would be willing to extend this suggestion to the metaethical proposal that moral philosophy is about “negativities” more generally – evil, suffering, death, guilt, and the contingent, finite, limited, vulnerable, and incomplete overall condition of the human being. At least we might say (quasi-transcendently again) that an appropriate acknowledgment of such negativities is a necessary presupposition for us to be able to engage in moral argumentation and serious moral deliberation.

It is also important that we speak about our ability to occupy a moral perspective, or the availability of the moral perspective for us, rather than about the possibility of the moral perspective itself in neutral terms. What
we are interested in here is the way in which we – as the kind of finite, vulnerable creatures for whom suffering is a reality that cannot be wiped away – are able to view the world we live in (our own lives and those of others) from a moral perspective. We are not primarily interested, for instance, in the metaphysics of “moral facts” independently of human experience. This is not to say that we would have to reject moral realism; on the contrary, we might very well be committed to a (say) pragmatically grounded form of moral realism (cf. Pihlström 2005), according to which the objectivity of moral values is a humanly given element of the reality we live in. Any transcendental argument in this area of life and reflection must, however, examine the constitutive conditions of our ability to be involved in moral thought and deliberation, that is, of our ability to occupy the moral perspective (or to be seriously committed to the requirements of morality), rather than (per impossibile) the metaphysical structures of any humanly neutral moral reality.

My proposal to view anti-theodicism as transcendental in a way contains an invitation to think about ethics in general not primarily as a system of moral rules or principles that could be applied to moral disagreements and employed in order to categorize actions, ideas, or practices as morally good or bad, or right and wrong, but rather as an unending search for an appropriate way of speaking about the world (or life, which, as we recall, are one and the same thing according to Wittgenstein’s Tractatus, § 5.621), especially about other human beings and their experiences – that is, as a continuous search for a proper moral language-use and an examination of its (transcendental) conditions and limits.\footnote{Note, however, that nothing here is intended to provide us with any reductive definition of ethics; on the contrary, my characterization of ethics as a search for an appropriate language-use is rather explicitly circular in the sense of employing the notion of moral appropriateness. Note also that this way of thinking about ethics does not follow any neat separation between ethics and metaethics. In trying to think (“metaethically”) about what ethics is or means for us we are always already engaged in an ethical task.} Suffering clearly lies in the core areas of moral language. Our attitude to (actual or possible) suffering, manifested in our ways of speaking, largely determines the status of our moral language-use. Insofar as the transcendental argument proposed above is plausible, theodicist language is not simply morally inappropriate but leads us to a perspective from which we can no longer so much as occupy the moral point of view characterized by its distinctive language-use enabling us to distinguish between moral appropriateness and inappropriateness. We are, then, in a constant danger to step outside morality in our thought, talk, and actions (even though, paradoxically, there is a sense in which this is impossible, as any attempt to move beyond morality can only be morally judged). It is a crucial part of our search for an appropriate moral language to be aware of this danger and try to avoid it.

The transcendental anti-theodicy argumentation sketched here can be compared to Kant’s (1781/1787) arguments in the “transcendental dialectic” of the First Critique, examining the transcendental illusions of human reason (i.e., the paralogisms, the antinomies, and the ideal of pure reason). These are, from
Kant’s critical point of view, desperate albeit humanly natural or even unavoidable attempts to think about the world as a totality, from a theocentric perspective. So are theodicies: they are attempts to interpret the meaning of suffering from an imagined yet humanly unattainable divine perspective. In contrast, Kantian critical philosophy – and transcendental anti-theodicism – occupies a resolutely human, anthropocentric perspective. From this finite human standpoint, there can be no overall theocentric justification, explanation, or legitimation for suffering. Moreover, we might say that occupying the anthropocentric perspective and giving up theodicist illusions is a way of “seeing the world aright” in the sense of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus* (1921, § 6.54). Anti-theodicism incorporates a change of perspective, an essentially new way of seeing *everything* (in contrast to theodicist attempts to provide meaning for suffering). It is in this sense that it can be considered transcendental. This “seeing the world aright” is itself an unending ethical quest, perhaps comparable to the Levinasian idea of the infinity of one’s (my) ethical responsibility for the other.

In making us unable to “see the world aright” in this ethically demanding sense, theodicies violate the necessary conditions for the possibility of the moral point of view in a manner resembling the way in which the transcendental illusions of reason analyzed by Kant violate the transcendental conditions for the possibility of cognitive experience outlined and defended in the “transcendental analytic” of the First Critique. The illusory theodicist way of viewing the world “wrongly” is precisely the way of viewing it from a God’s-Eye-View unavailable to us (or attempting, in vain, to do so).  

3. The relativity of the transcendental vs. empirical distinction

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously writes in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1921, § 6.421): “Ethics is transcendental.” This should be read in the context of another important statement in the same book, the one about logic being transcendental and “pervading the world” (§ 5.61) – and of course also in the context of the equally famous yet puzzling identification of ethics with aesthetics (§ 6.421). Qua transcendental, ethics (like logic) is, we might say, constitutive of our relation to and engagement in the world in general, including any ontology or metaphysics we are able to develop – this, indeed, is what the kind of transcendental argument imagined in section 2 above incorporates as its key idea and presupposition. This view could be compared to Levinas’s (1974) well-known suggestion that ethics, primarily consisting in the infinite duty toward the Other, is a “first philosophy”, preceding ontology.

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7 On the distinction between theocentrism and anthropocentrism as a key to Kant’s transcendental idealism, see Allison (2004).
8 The importance of Kant for the rejection of theodicies has of course been generally recognized (see, e.g., Bernstein 2002, Neiman 2002), but the structural similarity between anti-theodicism and Kantian transcendental argumentation (including the criticism of transcendental illusions) has not, as far as I know, been emphasized in the literature.
and epistemology, or indeed subjectivity itself (without taking here any stand on the very interesting interpretive question concerning the availability of a transcendental reading of Levinas’s moral thought).

The anti-theodicist argumentation defended here obviously presupposes that we can ask the further question about the constitutive or necessary conditions for the possibility of ethics itself. What makes ethics possible, or what do we have to presuppose in order for ethics to be possible (for us, as the kind of beings we are)? This question must make sense insofar as it is plausible to claim, as I just did, that the very possibility of occupying the moral point of view necessarily presupposes anti-theodicism – and thus taking evil and suffering seriously. However, there could be other constitutive presuppositions, too. There may, indeed, be an indefinite number of constitutive criteria or transcendental conditions that ethics itself – or the seriousness of the ethical, or the possibility of occupying a moral point of view – presupposes, such as the possibility of experiencing guilt and remorse, the possibility of forgiveness, or, of course, anti-theodicism. We may say that ethical seriousness presupposes that we do not adopt any too easy “happy end” view on evil and suffering but take them seriously in a proper ethical sense – which also entails taking them ontologically seriously. Therefore, ethics does not simply precede ontology but is entangled with it in a relation of reciprocal containment or interpenetration. The transcendental thus cuts both ways, or in other words, a condition’s being transcendental (in contrast to its being merely factual or empirical, or being itself “conditioned”) depends on our perspective of inquiry. From a certain perspective, ethics is transcendental, i.e., a condition necessary for the possibility of our engagement in any ontological structuring of reality (or, arguably, for any other genuine engagement in human practices whatsoever), while from another perspective, ethics itself presupposes an ontology in which the reality of evil and suffering is not denied but is duly acknowledged. This is a (paradoxically) fundamentally antifoundationalist view in the sense that there is no final transcendental or metaphysical bedrock for our views on the transcendental status of ethics. It is the kind of understanding of the transcendental that we might develop within a pragmatist transcendental philosophy (cf. Pihlström 2003, 2013).

Let us, in order to more clearly see the depth of this issue, consider a reflexive question: insofar as anti-theodicism is a transcendental condition for the possibility of morality, how can we argue ethically for anti-theodicism itself (against what we may take to be the moral corruption involved in theodicies)? We must already occupy a moral perspective – the perspective we are simultaneously arguing to be possible only due to anti-theodicism, the outcome of our argument – in order to be able to do so. We need such a

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9 For a pragmatist transcendental philosopher, it would be important to characterize the notion of engagement in more detail. Here the key point is that even the most theoretical practices require engagement, which in turn requires an ethical perspective.
moral perspective in order to be able to offer support for the crucial premises of our transcendental argument, (ii) and (iii). We must, hence, be committed to the moral point of view and its seriousness in order to be able to argue for morally grounded anti-theodicism, or (at a higher meta-level) for the view that such anti-theodicism is itself a necessary condition for the possibility of the moral point of view that we are (already) occupying. Anti-theodicism and the moral perspective are, thus, co-constitutive. There is a kind of circularity at work here, which can, however, be considered benign, or self-strengthening, rather than vicious. Anti-theodicism and the (possibility of occupying the) moral perspective presuppose each other; neither can be regarded as more fundamental or primary in relation to the other. (Compare the basic Kantian idea that there must already be experience in order for us to be able to show transcendentally how it is possible. Similarly, we must already be able to occupy a moral perspective on reality in order for us to be able to show transcendentally – reflexively, through a moral argument – how that perspective is available for us.)

The leading idea in developing a transcendental argumentation strategy in this context in the first place is that we may view an anti-theodicist response to the reality of evil and suffering as necessary for our capability of occupying a moral perspective. Theodicism allegedly justifying innocent suffering could, thus, be argued to violate the necessary conditions that make morality itself possible for us, and thus to step out of the moral language-game. Hence, in developing this transcendental argument and the resulting transcendental anti-theodicism, we must critically examine the challenge of co-constitutivity. We have to make sense of the fact that anti-theodist argumentation is itself essentially ethical, appealing to ethically appropriate acknowledgment of suffering, and therefore dependent on the availability of the moral point of view that is at issue here, while simultaneously reflexively constituting the possibility of engaging in any such ethical argumentation at all.

Now, my proposal here, very briefly, is that only a pragmatically enriched transcendental method can make sense of the idea that anti-theodicism transcendentally constitutes the moral point of view while itself constitutively depending on moral argumentation emerging from that point of view (whose availability must therefore have already been presupposed). A pragmatically pluralist argumentation strategy enabling us to switch the (transcendental) perspective or “direction” of argumentation is needed to make sense of this. The co-constitutivity of anti-theodicism and morality requires us to be able to change the direction of our transcendental argumentation. This requires, in turn, a pragmatically perspectivalist understanding of the method of transcendental argumentation. Such a methodological position thus in a sense emerges as a meta-level transcendental condition for the possibility of transcendental moral anti-theodicism.

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10 As well as, arguably, out of genuinely religious language-games, at least according to Wittgensteinians like Phillips (2004).
The kind of foundationlessness relevant here may be illuminated by another remark we find in Wittgenstein. In *Culture and Value*, he says that life can lead us to believe in God—and he adds that by “life” he means certain experiences of life, such as sufferings of a certain kind (Wittgenstein 1980). Now, sufferings, or the mere awareness of the evil and suffering there is in the world, may also lead us to lose religious faith, though not as a conclusion of an argument. From the Wittgensteinian point of view, the issue is hardly one concerning what the mainstream analytic theodicy discourse calls the “argument from evil”; sufferings would not lead us either to God or away from God because of the success or failure of such theoretical arguments. Yet, the empirical reality of suffering could play a transcendental role in relation to religion and ethics (and thus act as an element of transcendental arguments).

The metaphilosophical moral of this is that there is no fundamental unchanging a priori structure of the transcendental. Something (e.g., ethics) is transcendental relative to something else (e.g., ontology), and something (e.g., anti-theodicism) may in turn be transcendental relative to ethics itself, while on the other hand transcendentally depending on our already occupying the moral perspective from which we may be able to argumentatively defend it. Everything depends on our pragmatically established perspective of inquiry. In this sense, transcendental philosophy is here subordinated to a certain kind of perspectival pragmatism allowing a critically self-reflective plurality of perspectives guiding our inquiries—and our lives. As the co-constitutivity of morality and anti-theodicism briefly discussed here requires us to be able to switch our perspective of transcendental argumentation, such a pragmatic perspectivalism itself emerges as a meta-level condition for the possibility of transcendentally establishing ethical anti-theodicism.11

4. The transcendentalité of the transcendent

Not only do the roles of the empirical (or factual) and the transcendental occasionally shift, as they do, e.g., in Wittgenstein’s *On Certainty* (1969), where empirical-sounding propositions such as “I have two hands” or “I have never been very far from the surface of the earth” may take the role of grammatical rules, resembling transcendental principles governing meaningful language-use within a certain form of life, while remaining in principle open to historical transformation and reinterpretation. Another key distinction relevant here, the one between the transcendental and the transcendent (highly central in Kant) may also become shifting and perspectival in an analogous way. Insofar as the transcendental

11 Subordinating transcendental argumentation to a meta-level pragmatism requires that we view transcendental arguments as in principle fallible. Much more would have to be said here about the “pragmatic a priori” and contextualized, relativized transcendental principles that have been discussed in the context of epistemology and philosophy of science (cf. Pihlström 2003).
boundaries of human experience and meaningfulness are not categorically fixed once and for all, ahistorically and immutably – that is, insofar as the transcendental may itself be “conditioned” from a different point of view – then the transcendent, which by definition lies beyond the boundaries of the empirical or factual (beyond their transcendental limits, that is), might also in some special cases be drifted into the realm of non-transcendence, when seen from an appropriate perspective.

Analogously and perhaps more importantly, something empirical or transcendental may in some special cases even take the role of the transcendent. In particular, the shocking reality of meaningless human suffering may not only play a transcendental role demanding us to adopt a moral perspective on the world but even a transcendent role demonstrating that the world, as experienced by us, is not at all under our control, perhaps not even categorizable by us, i.e., that there is ineffability and mystery in it. We might say that Gregor Samsa’s turning into an insect breaks the boundaries of the empirical, the transcendental, and the transcendent in Franz Kafka’s Die Verwandlung. Or consider Kafka’s Der Prozess, particularly the parable about the man waiting outside the Law (“Vor dem Gesetz”). He just waits and waits, until the door is finally closed in front of him. We might say that here his remaining (forever) outside the law amounts to his being in a transcendent sphere where law and its immanent norms are not operative but where there is only room for something like transcendent guilt (cf. Pihlström 2011), as distinguished from empirical or factual (e.g., legal) guilt, i.e., for the kind of metaphysical truth about one’s “case” (i.e., the truth about which crime one is actually guilty of) that Josef K. in The Trial desperately seeks to find out but inevitably fails.12

The horizon of transcendence is crucial here, as no law or legal punishment or even any conventional moral condemnation applied to the perpetrators could be morally sufficient or even appropriate as a recognition (acknowledgment) of the sufferings of the victims of a crime of the magnitude of, say, the Holocaust. Even so, it could still be meaningfully asked whether there is, e.g., a possibility for forgiveness even in such cases. Such forgiveness reaching for the transcendent (which, by definition, can never actually be reached from an immanent perspective) is not, and cannot be, any kind of moral or political duty for us in the empirical world, either the sufferers or the bystanders, and it can even be argued, with Fjodor Dostoevsky’s character Ivan Karamazov, that we have no right to forgive the most horrible crimes; what is at issue here can, then, only be a radical transcendent forgiveness in Vladimir Jankélévitch’s (2005) sense, a forgiveness that goes beyond the immanent sphere of space and time entirely and cannot have any reasons. Indeed, the suggestion that we should or even could forgive the most horrible wrongdoers – or forgive God the fact that the world contains evil and suffering in the way it does – could be regarded as verging on the obscenity of a theodicy. In my view, it makes sense to

12 Analogously, there is, then, perhaps also room (only) for something like transcendent forgiveness in the sense of Vladimir Jankélévitch’s theory of radical forgiveness, which is beyond any reasons and norms (as articulated in Jankélévitch 2005).
think of the Holocaust as a crime and evil beyond any conceivable laws, norms, principles, punishment, trials, etc. – and hence as something transcendent – but not beyond the possibility of transcendent forgiveness. The philosophically striking point here is that an empirical event or process, which the Holocaust undeniably is, can come to play not only a transcendental but a transcendent role in our attempts to reflect on the (transcendental) limits of what we can meaningfully say and do. Our relation to such transcendence, manifested in our practices of ethical language-use and moral deliberation, can then in turn come to play a transcendental role in conditioning the possibility of our moral responses to suffering.

The moral of these reflections is that the postulation of (the possibility of) transcendence may itself be a transcendental condition for a certain understanding of the ethical (cf. again Pihlström 2011). The distinction between the transcendental and the transcendent may therefore itself be as perspectival as the one between the transcendental and the empirical. There is no more absoluteness in this distinction than there is in the “direction” of transcendental arguments, which may shift depending on our perspective of inquiry (cf. section 2 above).

5. Testimony, truth, and the transcendental impossibility of full acknowledgment

These issues, also invoking the notions of truth and truthfulness in relation to the acknowledgment of the suffering of other human beings, should be further connected with the (possibility of) testimony, especially moral testimony (as analyzed, e.g., in Margalit 2002) and martyrdom. Both moral testimony and martyrdom, as has sometimes been remarked, were in a sense rendered impossible in the Holocaust, in which people were murdered anonymously, deprived of any reason to die for anything, and of course of the possibility of testifying about what happened. We have to be careful in analyzing the way in which the concept of truth comes into the picture here. The witness, especially the moral witness, when delivering a testimony about the suffering of her/his fellow human beings (who no longer can testify) testifies of something whose actual (factual) propositional truth corresponding to an actual historical occurrence is, though not irrelevant, not the most important issue. The moral truth of what happened is what really matters in such cases of interpreting and acknowledging suffering. Therefore, we also need to examine the relation between truth and truthfulness (cf. Williams 2002), as this kind of moral truth may have more to do with what is known as the moral quality of truthfulness than with the propositional truth of ethical statements that philosophers contributing to the standard metaethical disputes over moral realism and antirealism focus on. The notions of moral truth and truthfulness may seem to be less clear and messier than the straightforward notion of propositional truth, but the moral
world – the world in which transcendental arguments exploring the availability of the moral point of view are relevant – is rather messy.

What do I mean by speaking about “moral truth” in contrast to (mere) propositional truth? The kind of moral truth (truthfulness) relevant here is, again, a matter of developing a general attitude to the world, not confined to true beliefs about facts or propositional truths about any particular historical event.13 Our adopting an anti-theodist way of thinking about suffering, and about other people’s experiences in general, changes everything in the way we think about, or relate to, the world in general; nothing regarding our attitude to the world remains unchanged, and it is precisely in this sense that we are here dealing with a transcendental matter that can only be adequately thematized in terms of transcendental arguments and inquiries. The transcendental, precisely, pertains to the general framework through which we have to experience and conceptualize anything whatsoever we are able to experience and conceptualize at all.14 Acknowledging, in an anti-theodist manner, the moral truth of survivor testimonies of atrocities such as the Holocaust (to which I am here referring metonymically, letting it stand for any deliberate moral evil inflicted on innocent human beings) plays a transcendental role in being constitutive of our ability to adopt a moral perspective in the first place.

In any case, even then we still need a notion of truth, even if we reach the limits of testimony, or the impossibility of bearing witness – something that Holocaust writers and philosophers investigating the Holocaust (e.g., Primo Levi) have emphasized in different ways (cf. Agamben 2002, Alford 2009). Even the non-testifiability and non-martyrdom of Auschwitz will not, and cannot, destroy the concept of truth. On the contrary, the relevant notion of truth needed here is, I would like to suggest, open to a pragmatist articulation à la William James (1907), precisely because we need to (re)connect the notion of truth – the kind of truth at issue in a transcendental argument addressing our ability to occupy a moral point of view – with the notion of moral truth inextricably entangled with the concept of ethically appropriate acknowledgment of another’s experience. However, a problem continues to haunt us: what if the concept of truth is destroyed in the manner imagined in George Orwell’s novel, Nineteen Eighty-Four (1949), i.e., in the novel’s torturer’s, O’Brien’s, manner? Famously, the protagonist of the story, Winston, is led to believe obvious falsehoods, including 2+2=5, due to indescribable torture as well as the systematic destruction of historical documents and any objective evidence about truths he

13 Note that Williams (2002), though emphasizing the moral virtues of truthfulness and their essential connection to the concept of truth, does not really believe in “moral truth” in a sense comparable to scientific truth.

14 Recall what was said about the Wittgensteinian notion of “seeing the world aright” in section 2 above. Compare this also to the medieval notion of transcendentalia still partly at work in the Kantian conception of the generality of transcendental conditions and principles: what the “transcendentals” transcend is not, of course, the boundary of experience (they do not transcend but set it) but the boundaries between all specific ontological and other categories; they concern everything, generally. In this sense ethics is transcendental: it concerns everything in the human world, just like the Kantian categories, for example, cover phenomena generally, all objects and events of possible experience.
takes to be true. Then, arguably, the very idea of a moral witness or moral testimony becomes obsolete, or even impossible. We can fully acknowledge the limits and fragility of testimony and the moral witness only by acknowledging this fundamental insecurity and foundationlessness of the (or any) moral truth(s) that we (can, or could) testify about.

Even anti-theodicy itself in the Kantian sense based on the idea of sincerity or truthfulness, thematized (according to Kant 1791) in the Book of Job (cf. Kivistö and Pihlström 2016), will be vulnerable if the notion of truth is in danger. Kant (1791) praises the Book of Job for highlighting the moral virtues of sincerity and truthfulness (Aufrichtigkeit), which, in contrast to the traditional virtue of patience, he regards as Job’s key virtues in contrast to his friends’ theodician speeches that seek to justify Job’s meaningless suffering by arguing that God must have had a good reason to let him suffer. Such truthfulness can, arguably, be regarded as the point of departure of any anti-theodicy worth the name: we have to – it is our moral obligation to – avoid rationalizing speculations about the alleged meaning or justification of others’ sufferings. But insofar as the notion of truthfulness presupposes the notion of truth, albeit in a pragmatic sense, the challenge of Orwell’s 1984 strikes us with full force. These notions could lose their meaning in a world that would be based on systematic torture and totalitarianism. We can never be fully certain about our ability to continue to acknowledge the other’s perspective on her/his unique individual (or social) suffering. This is also transcendentally constitutive of our moral commitment to “seeing the world aright”.

The impossibility of ever fully acknowledging the “whole truth and nothing but the truth” about the non-testifiable suffering of the martyr, or of any suffering individual, or any moral witness, is a crucial part of the anti-theodician acknowledgment of others’ suffering in general. I would like to suggest, though I won’t be able to develop the idea any further here, that the relevant notion of truth needed here for a proper communication of moral witnessing or testimony, viz., a notion of truth incorporating truthfulness, is the broader pragmatic (Jamesian) notion, not the correspondence notion of truth narrowly restricted to propositional truth.

We may speak about acknowledging such truths or facts as the reality of the world, the existence of God – or another’s suffering. These are “transcendent” in the sense that we can hardly know what exactly they are, or even that they are there to be acknowledged. Within the immanent sphere of human experience (made possible by its transcendental limiting conditions), we may easily speak about our recognizing people, truths, norms, principles, etc., as something – but this recognizing “as” may not

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15 This is also why it is better to focus on negative examples of failures of acknowledgment rather than positive examples of successful acknowledging of others’ suffering. As Margalit (2002) reminds us, cases of non-acknowledgment, rather than acknowledgment, “hurt us into” ethics and politics.
be available to us in the case of the world, God, or evil and suffering. There is a kind of transcendent infinity in these objects of acknowledgment that we can never fully control or adopt within the sphere of immanence. The other's suffering, in particular, demands infinite responsibility (cf. again Levinas 1974, 2006), and this demand can, again, be regarded as a transcendental condition for the possibility of ethics. Somewhat paradoxically, acknowledgment – in contrast to knowledge, or even recognition (which may be argued to require knowledge about the “as” clause in “recognizing as”) – is the morally appropriate notion precisely where it cannot be overarching, precisely when we are invited to observe that there can be no such thing as full acknowledgment. (What would it even mean to “fully acknowledge” the reality of the world, the existence – or non-existence – of God, or the suffering of another human being?) The paradox lies in the fact that acknowledgment is most needed when it is also impossible. It would be a colossal failure of acknowledgment to believe that one could completely acknowledge the other's suffering, or more generally the other's unique human perspective on the world (including its various challenges for appropriate acknowledgment).

However, the impossibility of full acknowledgment does not mean that we would not have the duty to continuously try to develop a truthful and sincere attitude to the other's suffering. On the contrary, the key insight of a pragmatist view of truth may be exactly here: it is by giving up the primacy of (mere) truth (and the mere knowing of the truth) that we can (only) open the space for acknowledgment and truthfulness. This “can” refers to a transcendental presuppositional condition opening up a certain way of viewing, sharing, and responding to the world in general. As explained above, adopting anti-theodicism changes everything in the way we view ourselves, others, and the world we live in. Nothing remains untouched by the realization that there is no excusing of meaningless suffering, no justification for the absurdity of evil. In particular, everything changes as soon as we acknowledge the impossibility of fully acknowledging the utter meaninglessness of others’ suffering, the duty to avoid constructing apparently meaning-bestowing “happy end” stories to account for human catastrophes. Such a transformed attitude to our fellow human beings' lives may, and should, fundamentally transform our existence as such, our way of being in the world with other people.

This impossibility of full acknowledgment and its world- and life-changing character may be comparable to the way in which the loss of a person – for example, the death of a loved one, some concrete and unique individual who has been present in one’s life but no longer is – changes one’s

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16 See Cavell (1979) for an influential discussion of the distinction between knowledge and acknowledgment; from the Cavellian point of view, our basic relation to other human beings (“other minds” or souls) and the world we live in is one of acknowledgment rather than knowledge. Furthermore, on acknowledgment and recognition, see Kovalainen (2015). It could be argued that recognition (Anerkennung) in the standard sense requires knowledge, because one has to know “as” what the other party is to be recognized, whereas acknowledgment in the Cavellian sense does not require this but respects (recognizes, acknowledges) the other’s otherness more openly than recognition. This could be a highly important difference when we deal with issues of evil, suffering, and (anti-)theodicy; cf. also Pihlström (2014).
entire world into something different. It is also comparable to the way in which, according to Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, the world can “wax and wane” as a totality. The good or evil will, Wittgenstein maintains, cannot change the states of affairs the world consists of, but it can change the *limits* of the world, and as these limits *are* the transcendental subject itself – because the metaphysical (transcendental) subject is not an entity in the world but a limit of the world (cf. § 5.632) – one’s anti-theodist attitude of acknowledgment (including the meta-level acknowledgment of the impossibility of full acknowledgment) changes its world, and thus the world, in a fundamental manner.

However, there is one reflexive reflection to be added. Is the meta-acknowledgment of the impossibility of full acknowledgment itself an ethically appropriate anti-theodist attitude to suffering? Or does it, in the end, run the risk of collapsing back into a theodicy by other means? Does it, more specifically, lead to an infinite regress or question-begging: are we trying to acknowledge others’ suffering fully and completely, after all, when acknowledging the impossibility of full acknowledgment? Is there any place to stop here? Perhaps the honest and sincere response here is *no*. We must self-reflectively and transcendentally examine our own practices and processes of acknowledgment (and meta-acknowledgment) themselves, being prepared to revise them continuously, not being blind to those sufferers’ experiences that actually or potentially question our acknowledgment attempts as insincere, incomplete, or hubristic in their attempted or alleged modesty. (We may, in the end, be like Job’s “friends” precisely when we try to avoid their theodist vocabularies.) Our *failures* of proper acknowledgment should be in our focus, not the successes — and this is, again, a transcendental claim about the necessary conditions for the possibility of morally responding to others at all.

Perhaps somewhat surprisingly, then, all this is intimately connected with the project of engaging in transcendental argumentation (or, more broadly, transcendental reflection) in moral philosophy. This is, we may say, transcendental moral philosophy pragmatically naturalized through the fundamental ethical need to take empirically real evil and suffering seriously while maintaining the philosophical focus in an analysis of the necessary conditions for the possibility of a certain kind of human actuality, namely, the ability to occupy a moral perspective on other human beings, their experiences of suffering, and the world in general. In a quasi-Wittgensteinian sense, we may say that we are here interested in the necessary conditions for the possibility of (a certain kind of) meaningful language-use. It is precisely by emphasizing this that we may come to appreciate the transcendental character of the anti-theodist account of acknowledgment defended here.

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17 A Wittgensteinian caveat here would be that moral language is in a sense not meaningful language at all but goes beyond the limits of language. It might be better to say that moral language-use is, primarily, a *continuous search for meaning*. 
6. Conclusion

This essay has addressed several topics that are all deeply interconnected as features of an analysis of what it means to engage in ethically adequate (truthful) acknowledging of others’ suffering, or a pragmatic-cum-transcendental analysis of the conditions enabling us to appropriately recognize such suffering. We also saw, at the meta-level, that there is something like a transcendental impossibility of full acknowledgment at work in the dialectical situation we are examining. That is, it is part of (or even transcendently constitutive of) our ethically adequate acknowledgment of otherness, especially of the suffering other and the moral truth of her/his suffering, that we admit that we can never fully acknowledge it – let alone recognize it as something specific, claiming to “know” what it is like – i.e., that we duly recognize the limits of even our most sincere attitudes of recognition and acknowledgment.\(^\text{18}\) This is comparable to our being committed to adopting a Wittgensteinian attitude to another human being as an “attitude to a soul” (\textit{eine Einstellung zur Seele}), without claiming to know that the other “has” or possesses a soul (cf. Wittgenstein 1953, Part II, iv), or without claiming to know what kind of \textit{qualia} s/he experiences. This reflection thus also invokes the \textit{transcendental impossibility} of knowing the truth about another’s inner experience; this is what (according to Cavell) amounts to the “truth in skepticism” (or what might also be considered the “truth of solipsism”, according to the early Wittgenstein).\(^\text{19}\) The unavailability of any (full) propositional truth about others’ suffering (or any full knowledge about such truths) is precisely something that a truthful, “morally true” acknowledgment of otherness needs to emphasize, and as philosophical resources to highlight this metaphilosophical moral we need both an enriched, pragmatically perspectival conception of transcendental argumentation and a pragmatic notion of truth rich enough to cover the intuitive ideas of moral truth and truthfulness.

I started from a rather sketchy analysis of the way in which a certain kind of argument seeking to establish the moral \textit{inappropriateness} of theodicies is, or can be interpreted as, a transcendental argument establishing the \textit{impossibility} of a theodicy given our ability to occupy a moral point of view. I ended up, however, discussing broader transcendental issues bringing these reflections onto a metaphilosophical level. In a sense, this inquiry is inevitably metaphilosophical, as what is at stake is the availability of a moral perspective and hence also the possibility of ethical inquiry.

My general conclusion is, then, that mere transcendental \textit{argumentation} cannot morally appropriately account for our need to respond to human suffering, or to acknowledge the suffering other and her/his

\(^{18}\) Thus, we should even acknowledge the necessary limits of our own anti-theodctic project of acknowledgment, including the fact that in some sense even theodicies could be (morally failed yet at least possibly sincere) attempts at acknowledgment.

\(^{19}\) As noted above, Cavell (1979) suggests that a fundamental distinction should be made between knowing and acknowledging. See also the famous passages on solipsism (and its inexpressible “truth”) in Wittgenstein’s \textit{Tractatus} (1921, especially §§ 5.62-5.64).
experiences. Yet, a transcendental perspective on ethics is vitally needed in this area. In investigating anti-theodicy as a moral response to suffering and evil we are engaging in a transcendental reflection on the constitutive features of moral seriousness. Therefore, also the anti-theodicist argumentation sketched above can be regarded as an instance of post-Kantian transcendental anti-theodicy. Pragmatic perspectivalness, moreover, shows us how transcendental anti-theodicism and its ethical grounding mutually “condition” each other. 20

References


20 This paper was partly presented as a guest lecture at FEST in Heidelberg, Germany (February, 2015). Special thanks to Magnus Schlette, Philipp Stoelger, and, as always, Sari Kivistö.


