

# God's Awful Majesty Before Our Eyes: Kant's Moral Justification for Divine Hiddenness

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## Abstract

The problem of 'divine hiddenness' arises from the lack of an explanation for why an all-loving God would choose not to make his existence evident. I argue that Kant provides a compelling solution to this problem in an often overlooked passage located near the end of the second *Critique*. Kant's suggestion is that God's revealing himself would preclude the development of virtue because we would lose the experience of conflict between self-interest and the moral law. I provide a reconstruction and defence of Kant's argument, and I explain why it is consistent with his overall position in the second *Critique*.

**Keywords:** God, divine hiddenness, virtue, freedom, gallows

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## 1. Introduction

Kant famously argued that despite our persistent impulse to seek a secure epistemic justification for theistic belief, the limits of pure reason preclude the possibility of theoretical proof (or disproof) of God's existence. Although our perpetual ignorance of the divine is frustrating, Kant suggests that it is to be celebrated rather than lamented. Near the end of the second *Critique*, he describes the practical consequences that would arise if our powers of reason were not limited in this way. Kant argues that if we had theoretical knowledge of God, 'reason would have no need to gather strength to resist the inclinations', because the visible threat of divine punishments and rewards would ensure that self-interest and the objective law always appeared to us in perfect harmony. Without any opportunity to experience conflict between prudence and the law we could never come to appreciate the *dignity* of the latter as something that is objectively given yet *self-imposed*. We thus could not experience *respect* for the moral law as the determining ground of our will. Since moral worth (on which alone the worth of the world depends) could not

exist under such circumstances, Kant goes on to suggest that God deserves just as much veneration for the cognitive limitations he has placed on us as he does for the cognitive abilities he has granted us (*CpV*, 5: 147–8).<sup>1</sup>

Kant's claims about the moral benefits of our ignorance of God are significant in at least two respects. First, they are highly relevant to what philosophers of religion call the problem of 'divine hiddenness'. Given that knowledge of God's existence would deter us from worshipping false idols, provide substantial emotional consolation and disincentivize harming one another, it is difficult to understand why an all-powerful, all-loving deity would not make his existence evident.<sup>2</sup> Some philosophers take this as strong grounds for scepticism about the existence of the God of the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>3</sup> Kant's suggestion that ignorance of God is necessary for virtue is a *prima facie* plausible solution to this problem. Second, Kant's claims about the incompatibility of theistic knowledge and genuinely moral conduct may shed light on some contentious interpretative issues such as the deduction of freedom, the relationship between inclination and moral worth and the difference between practical faith and theoretical knowledge.

In this article, I argue that Kant's account of the practical effects of awareness of God significantly reduces the force of the challenge arising from divine hiddenness. I claim that, insofar as we accept the basic tenets of Kantian value theory and moral psychology, we should accept Kant's explanation of God's hiddenness as a conclusive solution to the problem. Further, even those who are not sold on the relevant aspects of Kantian doctrine should find divine hiddenness less troubling in light of Kant's argument, as it constitutes a reasonable explanation of God's choosing not to reveal himself that is in principle compatible with his perfect rationality and omni-benevolence.<sup>4</sup> One of the upshots of my interpretation and defence of Kant's argument is that the second *Critique* is a more unified text than is sometimes thought. If my reading is accurate, then Kant's discussion of God in the Dialectic is both constrained and informed by the account of freedom provided in the Analytic.

The article is organized as follows. In section 2 I recount Kant's discussion of the moral benefits of our ignorance of God and provide a reconstruction of his argument. In sections 3–6 I explain the motivations for the individual premises and respond to potential objections. In section 7 I attempt to resolve the apparent tension between Kant's moral justification for divine hiddenness and his claim that we must accept the existence of God as a postulate of practical reason. A brief conclusion follows.

## 2. Kant's Moral Justification for Divine Hiddenness

Kant's discussion of the moral significance of our ignorance of God occurs near the end of the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason in the second *Critique*. The section is titled 'On the Wise Adaptation of the Human Being's Cognitive Faculties to His Practical Vocation'. Kant aims to explain why it is actually a good thing that we cannot have all the theoretical knowledge we long for. One of the questions we most want to have answered is that of God's existence. Although it is natural to assume that knowledge of an omnipotent, perfectly just creator could have nothing but positive consequences, Kant argues to the contrary that the practical effects of such knowledge would be unfavourable. He provides the following account of these effects:

[I]nstead of the conflict that the moral disposition now has to carry on with the inclinations, in which, though after some defeats, moral strength of soul is to be gradually acquired, *God and eternity with their awful majesty* would stand unceasingly *before our eyes* (for what we can prove perfectly holds as much certainty for us as what we are assured of by our sight). Transgression of the law would, no doubt, be avoided: what is commanded would be done; but because the *disposition* from which actions ought to be done cannot be instilled by any command, and because the spur to activity in this case would be promptly at hand and *external*, reason would have no need to work itself up so as to gather strength to resist the inclinations by a lively representation of the dignity of law; hence most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, only a few from hope, and none at all from duty, and the moral worth of actions, on which alone in the eyes of supreme wisdom the worth of the person and even that of the world depends, would not exist at all. As long as human nature remains as it is, human conduct would thus be changed into a mere mechanism in which, as in a puppet show, everything would *gesticulate* well but there would be *no life* in the figures. (*CpV*, 5: 147)<sup>5</sup>

Here Kant grants that theoretical knowledge of God's existence would have the practical benefit of eradicating transgression of the law. However, this benefit arises at the expense of the possibility of our developing virtue. Because of the looming threat of eternal punishment (as well as the allure of reward), self-interest and the demands of the objective practical law would always appear to us as coinciding. Without experiencing a conflict between prudence and the law, there would be no opportunity to recognize the dignity of a moral law that we *freely* impose upon ourselves. Hence we

would not experience *respect* for the law as the determining ground of our will. Without the ability to feel respect for the moral law, human beings could not cultivate a genuinely moral disposition. Since virtue is the only object which could serve as the divine purpose of creation, it is no wonder that God would choose not to make his existence evident to us.

Kant's discussion of these issues is undeniably striking and provocative. In order to properly assess its philosophical merits it will be helpful to schematize the argument so that the premises can be evaluated piecemeal. The following is my proposed reconstruction, which I call the Moral Justification for Divine Hiddenness (MJDH):

- (1) The development of virtue requires an experience of conflict between self-interest and the moral law.
- (2) God's revealing himself would preclude all experience of conflict between self-interest and the moral law.<sup>6</sup>
- (3) God's revealing himself would preclude the possibility of virtue. (From 1–2)
- (4) Without the possibility of virtue, human existence would be meaningless.<sup>7</sup>
- (5) God's revealing himself would render human existence meaningless. (From 3–4)
- (6) A perfectly rational deity would not choose to render human existence meaningless.
- (7) God's keeping himself hidden is consistent with his perfect rationality. (From 5–6)

In the next four sections I motivate and defend the substantive premises of MJDH (1, 2, 4 and 6). Then in section 7 I discuss a possible inconsistency between MJDH and Kant's overall position in the second *Critique*.

### 3. Premise 1

#### *The Good Will*

Premise 1 states that the development of virtue requires an experience of conflict between self-interest and the law. In order to appreciate the motivation for this claim it will first be necessary to explicate Kant's notion of good willing, which is a type of volition characteristically exercised by virtuous agents. The clearest elucidation of the 'good will' is located in section 1 of the *Groundwork*. Here Kant tells us that good willing is something above and beyond the consistent performance of right actions. An agent who does the right thing with regularity might do so only out of considerations of prudence, as illustrated by the example of the prudent shopkeeper (G, 4: 397).

In contrast, the good will is revealed only when an agent acts from the motive of *duty*. Kant defines duty as ‘the necessity of an action from respect for law’ (G, 4: 400). To act from respect for the law is to act from recognition of an objective requirement of reason without regard for any object of desire (G, 4: 400). An agent who has respect for the law is not only *capable* of setting aside inclinations, she makes it her maxim to comply with the law even if doing so should infringe upon *all* of her inclinations (G, 4: 401, emphasis added). Because good willing is the manifestation of respect, in order to understand why virtue requires an experience of conflict between self-interest and the law it will be necessary to investigate the origins of respect.

### *Respect*

In Chapter 3 of the Analytic in the second *Critique*, Kant claims that respect is the means through which the moral law becomes an incentive for finite rational beings. This occurs in two stages. The first stage is that of recognizing that the objective law is a constraint on one’s inclinations. Kant describes this occurrence as follows:

First, the moral law determines the will objectively and immediately in the judgment of reason; but freedom, the causality of which is determinable only through the law, consists just in this: that it restricts all inclinations, and consequently the esteem of the person himself, to the condition of compliance with its pure law. (CpV, 5: 78)

The experience of the law as constraint on one’s inclinations is in itself unpleasant. However, the second stage of the law becoming one’s incentive has a positive affective component. The agent recognizes that the constraint provided by the authority of the objective law is *self*-constraint. It is not one’s contingently given inclinations that demand obedience; nor is it an external authority figure. Rather, what gives the law authority is one’s own reason. Because the authority of the law has its source in one’s own reason, the individual becomes conscious of the will’s ability to *freely* submit to it. In becoming conscious of this freedom one first experiences respect for the *moral law*. Kant explains this process as follows:

On the other hand, however, since this constraint is exercised only by the lawgiving of his *own* reason, it also contains something *elevating*, and the subjective effect on feeling, inasmuch as pure practical reason is the sole cause of it, can thus be called *self-approbation* with reference to pure practical reason, inasmuch as he cognized himself as determined to it solely by the law and

without any interest, and now becomes conscious of an altogether different interest subjectively produced by the law, which is purely practical and *free*; and his taking this interest in a dutiful action is not advised by any inclination; instead, reason through the practical law absolutely commands it and also produces it, because of which it has a quite special name, that of respect. (*CpV*, 5: 80–1)

These remarks help us to understand how the feeling of respect arises through consciousness of our freedom. But the account is not complete without an explanation of how we become aware of the fact that we are obligated by a law *we give to ourselves*, and thereby in possession of positive freedom. How do we come to rationally judge that we are not bound by our sensible nature and the laws of the empirical world?

Earlier in the *Critique*, Kant offers a powerful and compelling answer to this question. The suggestion is that we gain insight into our positive freedom through attentive reflection on the difference felt between, on the one hand, conflicts between different self-interested motives, and on the other, conflicts between self-interest and the law.<sup>8</sup> This idea is made vivid when Kant asks us to consider an example of someone who has convinced himself that he is incapable of overcoming his lust. Were we to ask this man whether he could control his impulses if a gallows were erected in front of the house where he sees the opportunity to act on his lust, and he were to be hanged immediately should he succumb, Kant claims that ‘one need not conjecture very long what he would reply’ (*CpV*, 5: 30). But if we were to ask this individual whether the threat of those same gallows would force him to obey a corrupt prince who orders him to slander and ruin an innocent person, he would at least consider it possible to overcome his desire to live. Kant notes that the Gallows Man could not know for certain how he would respond to the threat, but the crucial point is that he recognizes his *ability* to sacrifice his life for the sake of morality:

He would perhaps not venture to assert whether he would do it or not, but he must admit without hesitation that it would be possible for him. He judges, therefore, that he can do something because he is aware that he ought to do it and cognizes freedom within him, which, without the moral law, would have remained unknown to him. (*CpV*, 5: 30)

Shortly after offering the Gallows Man example, Kant claims that consciousness of a fundamental law which serves as a determining ground ‘through the *objective* form of a law as such’ may be called a ‘fact of reason’.

Awareness of a law that is objective and unconditional yet also self-imposed is given this label because it cannot be deduced via empirical intuition or prior consciousness of freedom (which we do not have). Rather, as the Gallows Man illustrates, the fact of reason 'forces itself upon us of itself as a synthetic a priori proposition' (*CpV*, 5: 31). When the Gallows Man faces a choice between death and the giving of false testimony, he immediately feels a constraint on his will that is altogether different from his sensible inclinations or even his love of life. This *feeling* of constraint provided by pure reason plays an important epistemic role in becoming aware of the difference between empirical and moral determinations of the will:

The dissimilarity of determining grounds (empirical and rational) is made known by this resistance of a practically lawgiving reason to every meddling inclination, by a special kind of *feeling*, which, however, does not precede the lawgiving of practical reason but is instead produced only by it and indeed as a constraint, namely through the feeling of a respect such as no human being has for inclinations of whatever kind but does have for the law. (*CpV*, 5: 92)<sup>9</sup>

That we feel constrained by considerations that directly oppose our pursuit of happiness in a given circumstance is what makes us aware of our ability to do something simply because we *ought* to. It is only during an experience of conflict that the moral law can 'infringe' upon our self-love such that we recognize the superiority of the former and thereby catch a glimpse of our positive freedom (*CpV*, 5: 74).<sup>10</sup>

This account of our ability to discern our autonomy lends substantial support to the idea that an experience of moral adversity (in the form of conflict between self-interest and the law) is a prerequisite for development of virtue. If human beings never felt a conflict between the demands of the law and their desire for happiness it is hard to imagine how we could have any reason to believe we are capable of overcoming the latter for the sake of the former. But once we have experienced such conflict and feel an incentive to action that is completely independent of our self-interested nature, we begin to understand that what differentiates us from other finite creatures is something beyond our intelligence; for we are beings capable of overcoming our animal nature and even our love of life in order to comply with the dictates of pure practical reason. In reflecting on this fact the objective law presents itself to us as having a certain *dignity*, and appreciating this dignity is the first step on the path to becoming genuinely moral.<sup>11</sup>

The suggestion that an experience of conflict between self-interest and the law is crucial for developing virtue looks especially plausible when we return to the context of MJDH. Suppose we had knowledge of an omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly just deity. Under such circumstances we would presumably be no less capable of recognizing the requirements of the objective practical law. And given our knowledge of a divine lawgiver we would undoubtedly experience the requirements of the law as a constraint on our inclinations. But because we would know that obedience to the law coheres with our long-term self-interest (due to God's punishments and rewards), the constraint of the law would not be felt as *self*-constraint. We would never have the elevating experience of realizing that we possess a capacity for sacrificing everything we hold dear simply because reason demands it – the Prince's gallows would not have its intended effect if the Almighty himself were presiding over the proceedings in plain view. Under circumstances in which self-interest and obedience to the law *always* appeared to us in perfect harmony (as they would with knowledge of God), we would lack epistemic access to both the supremacy of the law over inclinations as well as our freedom to act from the law-giving of our own reason. For all we could know, it would be impossible for finite rational beings to overcome their desire for happiness. This explains why Kant claims that if duty and self-interest always appeared to us as in alignment, 'the former [would] effect nothing at all, and though physical life might gain some force, the moral life would fade away irrecoverably' (*CpV*, 5: 89).

The preceding defence of premise 2 reveals that there is greater unity within the second *Critique* than initial appearances might suggest. On the surface, it is not obvious how the discussion of God in the Dialectic is connected to the central line of argument presented in the Analytic. But we now see that Kant's views on freedom and moral motivation constrain and inform the theistic ideas presented in the Dialectic. The experience of conflict between self-interest and the law is necessary for gaining insight into our freedom, and this necessity helps to explain why an all-wise creator would prefer to remain opaque with respect to theoretical reason. Given the means by which insight into our freedom is possible, it should be entirely unsurprising that we are unable to obtain theoretical knowledge of the divine.

### *Virtue and Moral Adversity*

Though I have focused on the importance of the experience of conflict between happiness and morality for insight into freedom and the feeling of respect, we must bear in mind that the full development of morality in human beings, i.e. the development of *virtue*, requires further experience of

moral adversity even after the agent first gains awareness of her autonomy. This is because the very concept of virtue entails the overcoming of obstacles to morality via strength of will (*MS*, 6: 380; *VpR*, 28: 1081), and the development of this strength requires practice (*MS*, 6: 397).<sup>12</sup> It is important for finite rational beings to develop virtue because our sensible nature and innate propensity to privilege our inclinations make us perpetually susceptible to transgressing the law. However, the fact that we must struggle to overcome our needs and inclinations is also that which allows us to appreciate the exalted value of morality. The moral worth of our actions is most readily seen in those cases in which our inclinations do not make it easy to do the right thing.<sup>13</sup> And the fact that virtue requires continual effort explains why we cannot help but think that the virtuous *deserve* happiness (*CpV*, 5: 110). If conforming one's will to the law did not require internal struggle and the occasional sacrifice of happiness, the value of morality would be null. As Kant remarks in the *Lectures on Philosophical Theology*: 'To sacrifice one's peace, one's powers, and one's advantage when the external laws of morality demand it – only that is true virtue, and worthy of future recompense. If there were no disproportion at all between morality and well-being here in this world, there would be no opportunity for us to be truly virtuous' (*VpR*, 28: 1081).<sup>14</sup>

The fact that becoming virtuous is an ongoing struggle leads Kant to the conclusion that the immortality of the soul is a necessary 'postulate of pure practical reason'. The grounds for believing in immortality are provided by the fact that finite rational beings are unable to attain complete virtue during their earthly existence. Since complete conformity of the will with the moral law is a necessary condition for the 'highest good' (i.e. a state of affairs in which everyone is completely virtuous and consequently completely happy), it is necessary to assume that moral progress will continue in the afterlife (*CpV*, 5: 122). This point gives rise to a concern over the cogency of Kant's views about virtue and divine hiddenness. The suggestion that ignorance of God is necessary for the development of virtue appears to be in tension with his claim that the struggle for virtue must continue into the afterlife. If existence in the afterlife includes knowledge of God, and God's hiddenness is necessary for the development of virtue, then the development of virtue could not continue in the afterlife.<sup>15</sup>

Two avenues of response are available. The first involves interpreting MJDH as claiming that God's hiddenness is necessary only until the individual has an initial experience of conflict between self-interest and the law. Once the agent has this experience she can develop respect for the law and be moved by this respect even after obtaining knowledge of God

and recognizing that lawful conduct always coheres with self-interest. One problem with this reply is that it makes it difficult to understand why God does not reveal himself to individuals upon their initial experience of conflict and the resulting feeling of respect for the moral law.<sup>16</sup> This would presumably provide all the benefits of knowledge to those agents without interfering with their moral development. Perhaps the explanation here would be that knowledge of God being conferred upon some individuals would jeopardize the moral progress of others. If God's existence were made manifest to some, this would presumably become common knowledge and thereby preclude others from having the necessary experience of conflict between self-interest and the law.

Since I suspect that some will have doubts about the adequacy of this explanation for God's failing to reveal himself to those who have already begun the process of developing virtue, it would be better to pursue an alternative resolution to the apparent inconsistency between MJDH and belief in the afterlife. This reply involves questioning the assumption that gives rise to the appearance of inconsistency. Although we tend to assume that our experience in the afterlife must necessarily include knowledge of God, this can be nothing more than speculation. It is not inconceivable that the cognitive limitations that hinder our earthly existence might continue beyond the grave. And even if God's existence does become evident at some point, there is no reason to believe that this occurs instantaneously. The afterlife might occur in many stages, and perhaps God remains hidden at every stage until the individual achieves complete conformity with the moral law. This possibility alleviates the worry that Kant's claim about the continual progress towards virtue in the afterlife is incompatible with the suggestion that divine hiddenness is necessary for virtue. Moreover, it allows for what is perhaps a more satisfying explanation for God's failing to reveal himself to people immediately following their initial experience of conflict. The explanation is that becoming virtuous requires continual struggle even after the agent gains insight into her freedom and feels respect for the first time. If God were to reveal himself to an agent during her earthly existence, this would stunt her moral development because she would no longer face the obstacles that are necessary for moral development.

#### 4. Premise 2

Premise 2 claims that God's revealing himself would preclude all experience of conflict between self-interest and the law. The motivation for this premise comes from our conception of God as omnipotent, perfectly rational and perfectly just.<sup>17</sup> A being with these divine attributes would presumably

ensure that those who wilfully violate the moral law ultimately pay the price for their transgressions. Kant suggests that the notion that transgression of the moral law deserves punishment is 'an idea of our practical reason' (*CpV*, 5: 37; *KU*, 5: 458). Importantly, the value of punishment is not merely instrumental – it is not merely a means of deterrence or an incentive to obedience. Rather, punishment for violations is good in itself (*CpV*, 5: 37–8, 61). As Kant remarks in the second *Critique*: 'Even the one who received [punishment] must in his reason recognize that justice was done to him, because he sees the proportion between well-being and acting well, which reason unavoidably holds before him, here put into practice exactly' (*CpV*, 5: 61). Because God is perfectly just and fully capable of seeing to it that justice is done, anyone who is made aware of God's existence would recognize that prudence recommends obedience. Hence there would be no experience of perceived conflict between self-interest and the law.

This is not to say that under such circumstances individuals would not experience inclinations and desires that conflict with the demands of morality. Our animal nature would still give rise to urges and impulses to act in impermissible ways. Indeed, it is possible that some might even act on these inclinations despite their belief that doing so is against their long-term self-interest. One reason for believing that transgression would still be possible after God reveals himself is the fact that even those with devout faith occasionally succumb to temptation. If someone who has a strong belief in a perfectly just deity is still capable of immoral action, presumably violations would still be possible were this belief to transform into knowledge.

The fact that the experience of temptation and even the performance of impermissible acts would likely continue after God's existence is made evident might initially appear problematic for MJDH. If temptation and transgression are compatible with knowledge of God, why is God's hiddenness necessary for the development of virtue? The answer is that acquiring virtue does not simply require the experience of contra-law inclinations and the negative freedom to succumb to them. What is required, rather, is that the agent finds herself in circumstances in which obedience to the law appears contrary to prudence. As the Gallows Man example illustrates, it is only the recognition of our ability to sacrifice self-interest for the sake of the law that provides access to our positive freedom and paves the way for the feeling of respect. Knowledge of a deity would eliminate the possibility of viewing a moral obligation as requiring a sacrifice of one's long-term well-being. Thus while the possibility of temptation and transgression suggests that knowledge of

God is compatible with negative freedom, the important point is that such knowledge would preclude access to our positive freedom.<sup>18</sup>

That being said, there is an important objection to premise 2. The worry is that the experience of conflict between self-interest and the law might still be possible after all because it is at least conceivable that a just God would let transgressors off the hook. Indeed, the Christian notion of divine grace centres on this possibility. This appears problematic for MJDH because agents who have been made aware of God might judge that they can obtain the worldly benefits of immoral conduct (e.g. gaining wealth through theft or deceit) without thereby sacrificing happiness in the afterlife, because their violations will be forgiven. Since these agents would thus perceive a conflict between self-interest and the moral law, it may be possible for them to develop a moral disposition despite their knowledge of God.<sup>19</sup>

The problem with this objection is that the notion of divine grace becomes highly problematic under circumstances in which we possess knowledge of God. Given our actual circumstances, the idea of divine grace has some plausibility. The combination of our animal nature and our ignorance of God makes it extremely difficult to overcome sensible inclinations. As Kant explains in *Religion*, the weakness of human beings is our frailty – our tendency to succumb to self-interested inclinations (*Rel*, 6: 30). He notes that we cannot know how much leniency (if any) we might deserve on account of this frailty (*Rel*, 6: 140, n. 442, in Kant 2009). But if God were to make his existence evident it is hard to see how we could deserve *any* leniency. For we would know that there is a supreme being capable of compensating us for any hardships we have to endure in compliance with the law. With possession of this knowledge there would be no reasonable excuse for transgressing. Thus we would not be justified in believing that violating the law is ever consistent with prudence. Further, in order to experience the requisite conflict between self-interest and the law it would not be enough to merely hold out hope for God's grace. The agent would have to feel confident that she will be forgiven, and that transgressing is therefore in her best interest. Unless the agent were confident about this she would not be able to experience the law as something she *freely* imposes on herself. Because there would be no justification for having any degree of confidence in God's forgiveness under these circumstances, the idea of divine grace does not undermine premise 2.<sup>20</sup>

## 5. Premise 4

Premise 4 states that, without the capacity for developing virtue, human existence would be meaningless. This claim is implied by Kant's description

of a state of affairs in which human beings possessed knowledge of God. Because we would not be able to develop morally under such circumstances, Kant claims that life on earth would be akin to a puppet show in which 'everything would *gesticulate* well but there would be *no life* in the figures' (*CpV*, 5: 148). Here it is important to focus on the claim that there would be 'no life' in human beings under such circumstances. One might read this as a claim that we would become mere automatons completely devoid of rationality. But it is doubtful that this is what Kant has in mind. Even without the capacity for genuine morality human beings would still be able to exercise theoretical reason. And we would be no less able to combat our immediate inclinations in order to promote our long-term self-interest. So clearly knowledge of God is compatible with something approximating human life as we know it. This suggests that Kant has something else in mind with the puppet show metaphor.<sup>21</sup> The idea seems to be that the disappearance of morality resulting from knowledge of God would preclude life on earth from containing any inherent meaning or ultimate purpose. Although we could still have pleasant experiences, exercise our rational capacities, and adopt ends of various sorts, none of this would matter if we were incapable of becoming moral. This explains Kant's suggestion that, in the eyes of God, the worth of the world itself depends solely on whether human beings develop their moral capacities (*CpV*, 5: 148).

The key question for present purposes is whether there are reasonable grounds for holding that the existence of humanity would be pointless without the possibility of virtue. Some will be disposed to reject this claim because they believe the significance of life inheres in things that do not depend on morality, such as happiness or intellectual achievement. Here it is important to return to Kant's exposition of the good will in the *Groundwork*. Kant claims that not only is the good will unconditionally valuable, it is the *only* conceivable unconditioned good (*G*, 4: 393). He considers the candidate sources of value mentioned above and argues that their worth is always conditional on the presence of a good will. For instance, characteristics of agents widely thought to be desirable such as courage and intelligence can be evil and harmful if they are possessed by a corrupt individual. The same is true of what Kant refers to as 'gifts of fortune' such as power, honour, health and happiness. These things can lead to arrogance and harms if they are not possessed by an agent with a good will, and an impartial spectator would not approve of an evil person possessing them (*G*, 4: 393). If things like happiness, intelligence and courage are devoid of all value when unaccompanied by a good will, then it is highly plausible that the capacity for moral development is necessary for human existence to be worthwhile.

Further support for premise 4 arises from reflection on the significance of autonomy. The idea that self-direction and self-rule are essential for meaningful existence coheres with common consciousness. One of the key insights of the second *Critique* is that we would not be able to view ourselves as genuinely free without experiencing an incentive to action that is completely independent from self-interest (recall the Gallows Man). The moral law provides the needed incentive. It is only by acting from respect for the moral law that we are able to claim our freedom. If we were not able to develop respect for the law and strive for virtue we would be bound to view ourselves as slaves to our own contingently given animal nature. Of course, we could still consider ourselves elevated above the rest of the animal kingdom insofar as we are capable of postponing immediate gratification for the sake of greater personal gain in the future. But this would merely make us more sophisticated and efficient slaves to our own desires. Hence, if we believe that viewing ourselves as genuinely free is a necessary condition for meaningful existence then we should accept the claim that constitutes premise 4.

While I believe these points lend strong support to premise 4, I recognize that not everyone will be convinced. Most of the ideas presented above are distinctively Kantian, and presumably those who are unsympathetic to Kant's value theory and moral psychology will be unmoved. This seems to undermine the power of MJDH as a general solution to the problem of divine hiddenness. Why should those who have non-Kantian views about value and morality be persuaded by Kant's argument?

When considering this objection there are three important points to keep in mind. First, by the time Kant offers MJDH he has already provided extensive arguments in defence of his value theory and moral psychology, both in the *Groundwork* and earlier in the second *Critique*. The considerations raised in those discussions (which go beyond what I have had space to recount here) can be used to supplement MJDH.<sup>22</sup> Second, Kant's conception of virtue is not uniquely compatible with his particular account of right action. The idea that a virtuous agent is someone who gives priority to the demands of impartial reason over self-interest, prejudice or personal attachment accords well with common sense, and it is even consistent with the animating spirit of rival ethical theories such as utilitarianism. Likewise, the idea that developing virtue requires strength and persistence in overcoming obstacles is not unique to Kant.

Third, in order for MJDH to prove useful in overcoming the problem of divine hiddenness it is not necessary that we be convinced that Kant's

conception of virtue and his corresponding theory of value are correct. It is only necessary that we find these elements of Kantian doctrine reasonably plausible. If we at least find these ideas plausible, then we can be satisfied that there is an explanation for God's keeping his existence hidden that is in principle compatible with his possession of the divine attributes. And it is hard to deny that there is at least some plausibility to the thought that distinctively moral conduct is characterized by the agent's being moved by respect for the demands of impartial reason and a willingness to sacrifice self-interest in order to do the right thing. Likewise for the suggestion that without the capacity to become genuinely moral, life on earth would have all the significance of an elaborate puppet show.

## 6. Premise 6

Premise 6 says that a perfectly rational deity would not choose to render human existence devoid of meaning. The motivation for this premise is relatively straightforward. It is hard to imagine a deity creating a race of intelligent beings unless their lives were going to contain some ultimate meaning or purpose. It follows from the conception of God as perfectly rational that his creations would be purposive. Kant takes this as a given, leaving only the question of what God's purpose is. At the beginning of the Second Piece in *Religion*, Kant states unequivocally that the ultimate end of God's creation is the realization of human virtue: 'That which alone can make a world the object of divine decree and the purpose of creation is *humanity* (the rational world being as such) *in its complete moral perfection*' (*Rel*, 6: 60). Given this, it would appear that God's removing the significance of human life by revealing himself and eliminating the possibility of virtue would undermine his own ends.

That being said, one might object that a perfectly rational deity would choose to render life meaningless by revealing himself to us rather than letting us suffer the painful consequences arising from our ignorance. As I mentioned in section 1, God's making his existence known would presumably have significant benefits. Perhaps the most important benefit would be the emotional consolation provided to those who are anxious, depressed, or grief-stricken. The mental anguish that frequently accompanies experience of the calamities of life on earth would likely disappear (or at least greatly diminish) if we became certain of the existence of a perfectly just and omnipotent creator of the universe. We would know that our existence is not limited to life on earth, and that the harms we suffer through natural evils and the transgressions of others will ultimately be compensated.

The crucial question is how plausible it is that God would choose to diminish the amount of suffering at the cost of precluding the possibility of morality. This is not an easy question to answer, as intuitions about the significance of suffering vary. Some would argue that the undeserved suffering of just a single individual could be enough to make the existence of the world unjustifiable. But this sort of view is less plausible on the assumption that there is a divine creator who is capable of providing compensation for undeserved suffering in an eternal afterlife. Assuming Kant is right that morality is a necessary condition for human existence to have inherent meaning, God would face a choice between the following options:

- (1) Eliminate the meaningfulness of human existence in order to significantly reduce the amount of suffering on earth.
- (2) Allow a substantial amount of suffering to continue so that human existence retains its significance, and compensate those who experience undeserved suffering in the afterlife.

Premise 6 of MJDH implies that God would choose option 2. The thought is that a world containing undeserved suffering that is later compensated, as well as the human capacity for morality, is more choice-worthy than a world containing less suffering but no morality. Of course, those who believe that undeserved suffering can never be justified will disagree. Unfortunately, this is a point at which we are close to intuitional bedrock. But again, we must keep in mind that for purposes of overcoming the specific challenge arising from divine hiddenness it is not necessary to provide an incontrovertible justification for God's failing to reveal himself. The rationality of theistic belief can be preserved (against this particular attack) as long as the justification offered is reasonably plausible. The suggestion that an all-wise deity would place a premium on good willing to the extent that he would deprive us of the benefits of knowledge so that we might become moral meets this criterion.

Even if all this is right, the question of why God does not do more to relieve suffering *without* revealing himself remains. Presumably there is much he could do to alleviate the burdens faced by so many of the beings on earth without precluding the possibility of morality. At the very least, it would seem he could prevent natural evils in the form of diseases and natural disasters. The persistence of these worries illustrates the point that MJDH is not a theodicy. Kant's argument should not be taken as a solution to the problem of evil. Although Kant developed a theodicy during the critical period, he ultimately rejects the possibility of a successful response to the problem of evil in his essay 'On the Miscarriage

of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy' (1791; Kant 1996c). His considered view is that our cognitive limitations prevent us from conceptualizing how the presence of evil in the world is compatible with the existence of a morally perfect God.<sup>23</sup> But this is consistent with believing that a justification for God's hiddenness is within our grasp. MJDH provides an explanation only for why God would not adopt one particular means of preventing a certain class of evils (those which could be alleviated through knowledge of God). Though MJDH is incapable of resolving the problem of evil, if the argument is as plausible as I suggest, the hiddenness of God does not pose an independent threat to the rationality of theism.

## 7. Knowledge vs. Faith

My primary aim thus far has been to defend the individual premises that compose MJDH. However, even if all the premises can be vindicated there remains an important objection to the argument as a whole. As Eric Watkins observes, Kant's account of the practical benefits of ignorance of God appears to be inconsistent with his overall position in the second *Critique* (Watkins 2010: 264). In chapter 2 of the *Dialectic*, Kant notoriously argues that we are justified in believing in God as a postulate of pure practical reason. He argues that our ultimate moral end is not simply to become virtuous, but rather to bring about the 'highest good'. Noting the fact that it is not within our power to proportion happiness to virtue, Kant claims that we must believe that God exists because only God could ensure that the virtuous attain the happiness they deserve (*CpV*, 5: 125). The justification for this belief is practical in that it is only because we are creatures who need to think of our efforts as working towards a final end – and the highest good is the only final end consistent with morality – that we can assume the necessary conditions for its realization. Because theoretical reason remains neutral on the question of the existence of God and the immortality of our souls, our practical need to avoid the discouragement arising from the futility of our moral efforts gives us sufficient reason to believe (*KU*, 5: 450–3).

Kant's claim that it is necessary to accept the existence of God on practical grounds appears to conflict with his claims about the benefits of God's hiddenness. As we have seen, he believes theoretical proof of God would preclude action from duty because we could never have occasion to recognize the dignity of the law as *self*-constraint. But if we come to believe in God's existence on practical grounds it would appear that the same problem arises. If we genuinely accept that an all-powerful,

perfectly just deity exists, how can we experience conflict between happiness and morality?

For proponents of MJDH there are two avenues available in responding to this objection. The first is to argue that Kant's claim that we must accept the existence of God on practical grounds is neither compelling nor necessary for his broader ethical theory. One might pursue this strategy by calling into question Kant's suggestion that in order to rationally strive for a world of complete happiness consequent upon complete virtue we must believe that such a world is possible. While it may be impossible to intend to bring about an end that one believes to be impossible, an impossible end can still serve as an ideal.<sup>24</sup> Even though our doubts about the complete attainment of the highest good would be a source of discouragement, we could still be motivated by the fact that our choices do play a role in determining how close we come to realizing that ideal. Thus it would seem that practical reason can command us to strive for the highest good without our needing to believe in the existence of a God who will ensure that our efforts are successful.

If this is right, the fact that MJDH is in tension with Kant's practical argument for belief in God is no longer troubling because Kant should not have made this argument in the first place. But there is certainly some plausibility to the thought that in the absence of faith, our inability to prevent so many of life's calamities could cause our moral motivation to wane. This is one reason why it is worth pursuing an alternative line of response to the objection under consideration. A second reason comes from the fact that Kant's discussion of our ignorance of God occurs immediately following his claims about the practical grounds for faith. This raises the question of how he could have failed to recognize the incompatibility of these two lines of argument. This puzzle can be avoided if MJDH turns out to be compatible with practical belief in God's existence after all. In the rest of this section I explain why the two are in fact compatible.

Kant goes to great lengths to make it clear that our belief in God and his power to reward virtue are not to be taken as the incentives for moral behaviour. Rather, it is our respect for the moral law that should first give rise to our belief in God. It is only after becoming conscious of our freedom and developing respect for the moral law that we are in position to rationally believe in a divine creator who is capable of rewarding virtue.<sup>25</sup> This practically grounded faith cannot prevent us from having the necessary experience of conflict between happiness and morality

because it arises only after we have had such an experience. Those who have accepted the existence of God because they recognize an obligation to strive for the highest good have already started down the path towards virtue. This would not be possible if the belief in God instead arose from decisive theoretical considerations.<sup>26</sup> Those are the circumstances under which virtue could not be developed and life on earth would be nothing more than an elaborate puppet show. We should thus be glad that we do not possess all the theoretical knowledge we long for. In the concluding remarks of the Dialectic, Kant puts the point thus:

Now when it is quite otherwise with us; when with all the effort of our reason we have only a very obscure and ambiguous view into the future; when the governor of the world allows us only to conjecture his existence and his grandeur, not to behold them or prove them clearly; when, on the other hand, the moral law within us, without promising or threatening anything with certainty, demands of us disinterested respect; and when, finally, this respect alone, become active and ruling, first allows us a view into the realm of the supersensible, though only with weak glances; then there can be a truly moral disposition, devoted immediately to the moral law, and a rational creature can become worthy of the highest good in conformity with the moral worth of his person and not merely with his actions. (*CpV*, 5: 147)

While the foregoing considerations explain why practically grounded faith does not preclude an initial experience of conflict between happiness and morality, a problem remains. As we have seen, the full development of virtue does not occur upon an agent's first gaining insight into her freedom and experiencing respect for the moral law. Becoming fully virtuous is an ongoing struggle that requires the continual experience of moral adversity. Even though practically grounded faith occurs only after the process of cultivating virtue has started, it would seem that gaining belief in a deity would prevent an agent from having any future experiences of moral adversity; for she will believe that sacrifices made for the sake of the law will be compensated and that transgressions will be punished. This suggests that belief in God as a practical postulate may be inconsistent with MJDH after all.

One might respond to this worry by suggesting that practically grounded faith in God is not an assent of the same degree as theoretical knowledge. Perhaps the fact that those with faith do not *know* that God exists means that they can still face circumstances in which prudence appears to

counsel in favour of transgression. But this would only be possible if the moral faith Kant speaks of were something weaker than genuine belief. And Kant takes the mental state resulting from the moral argument for God's existence to be of the same degree of assent as belief based on decisive theoretical considerations – it is merely a difference in kind (O, 8: 142). Thus if the apparent tension between moral faith and MJDH is to be resolved, we need an alternative explanation of how moral faith is compatible with the experience of moral adversity in a way that theoretical knowledge would not be.

It is highly plausible that, in many respects, coming to have morally grounded belief in God decreases the amount of moral adversity an individual faces. This is precisely why Kant believes we must assume the existence of God as a postulate of practical reason. Believing in a deity with the power to ensure that the ultimate aim of our moral strivings (the highest good) will be realized reduces the risk of our dedication to morality flagging due to a sense of the futility of our efforts (*KU*, 5: 446). However, an agent who comes to accept the existence of God as a postulate of practical reason is still susceptible to moral adversity in ways that an agent with theoretical knowledge would not be. Maintaining practically grounded faith in God requires effort, just as maintaining proper reverence for the moral law requires effort. Because our belief in God is grounded in our desire to maintain our commitment to morality, anything capable of weakening this desire can also weaken our faith. Thus while practically grounded faith cannot be shaken by empirical counterevidence, it can be shaken by familiar foes such as temptation, self-deception and indolence. If we could swallow a pill that caused a belief in God that could never waver, this would have detrimental effects similar to those resulting from theoretical knowledge. But as it happens, we have a belief in God that is only as secure as our respect for the moral law. Thus the key difference between theoretical knowledge and morally grounded faith is that an agent in possession of the latter is not immune from moral adversity. This is why there is no deep tension between MJDH and Kant's overall position in the second *Critique*.

## 8. Conclusion

I have argued that Kant's discussion of the practical implications of knowledge of God substantially reduces the force of the problem of divine hiddenness. Kant makes a plausible case that God's revealing himself would make it impossible for human beings to experience the adversity necessary to develop respect for the moral law and begin down the path towards virtue. Thus, although God's making his presence known would undoubtedly result in more happiness in the world, under such circumstances none of the

resulting happiness could be deserved. While some believe that happiness does not need to be deserved in order to be valuable, it is certainly plausible that a morally perfect creator would place a premium on good willing. Divine hiddenness is grounds for theological scepticism only in the absence of a reasonable explanation for why an all-loving deity would deprive us of the benefits of knowledge. That such knowledge would preclude the development of virtue is just such an explanation.<sup>27</sup>

## Notes

- 1 I use the following abbreviations for Kant's works, with pagination in standard form from the Akademie edition and translations as indicated: *CpV* = *Critique of Practical Reason*, *G* = *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *MS* = *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant 1996a); *KU* = *Critique of Judgement* (Kant 1987); *O* = 'What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?' (Kant 1996b); *R* = *Reflexionen* (Kant 2005); *Rel* = *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (Kant 2009); *VpR* = *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* (Kant 1978).
- 2 Although the problem of divine hiddenness is similar to the problem of evil in certain respects, there are important differences. First, even if there were no evil in the world it would still be puzzling why God does not make his existence evident given the supposed importance of developing a relationship with him. Second, a solution to the problem of divine hiddenness would not constitute a solution to the problem of evil because considerations which might justify God's hiddenness might not justify all of the seemingly unnecessary suffering in the world. For discussion of the relationship between the two problems see Howard-Snyder and Moser 2002 and Van Inwagen 2002.
- 3 Schellenberg 1993; Lovering 2004.
- 4 This point applies not only to those with non-Kantian intuitions about the relevant issues, but also to those of Kant's defenders who might be sceptical about some of the assumptions I attribute to Kant in my reconstruction of his argument.
- 5 This discussion is echoed in *Critique of Judgement* (*KU*, 5: 481), *Lectures on Philosophical Theology* (*VpR*, 28: 1084) and *Reflexionen* (*R*, 18: 55).
- 6 The notion of God's 'hiddenness' is metaphorical, and Kant himself does not speak of God hiding or revealing himself. One might worry that speaking meaningfully about God doing various things such as hiding or revealing himself is incompatible with the tenets of the critical philosophy. However, the problem of divine hiddenness is essentially about our inability to know that God exists. Since Kant's concern in the passage from which MJDH is drawn is about our inability to know, it is clear that his discussion connects with the problem as it is expressed in contemporary philosophy of religion. So although Kant does not employ the 'hiddenness' metaphor, I shall adopt it throughout for ease of exposition. It also bears mentioning that MJDH does not imply that we know that God is hiding himself. If we did have such knowledge, this would imply that we have knowledge of God's existence. The claim is rather that we know that we lack knowledge of God's existence. The aim of MJDH is to explain how this lack of knowledge could be compatible with the existence of a perfectly rational deity.
- 7 The relevant notion of 'meaningless' is objective rather than subjective. The claim is not that human beings would be unable to view their own lives as meaningful, but rather that human existence itself would have no inherent meaning or significance. In other words, the existence of humanity would be without ultimate purpose.

- 8 Here I primarily follow the account offered by Jeanine Grenberg (2013). I also draw on the helpful discussion presented by Pauline Kleingeld (2010).
- 9 Note that the claim is not that we are able to determine particular obligations by means of feeling or a ‘moral sense’. Rather, the claim is that we come to appreciate the difference between self-interest and the law through attentive reflection on the experience of conflict between the two. This in turn gives us insight into our freedom. Note further that the appeal to experience is not in tension with Kant’s claim that we cannot gain moral knowledge via empirical means. The relevant experience is not that of empirical objects in space and time; rather, it is a felt *phenomenological* experience. As Grenberg (2013: 196) remarks: ‘Although intuition cannot present supersensible objects, feeling can be understood as an effect of supersensible causes; it thus points mysteriously to those inscrutable supersensible objects which cause it’.
- 10 Though Kleingeld’s (2010: 71) reading of the ‘fact of reason’ diverges on certain points, she agrees that only cases of conflict between self-interest and the law can disclose freedom in the relevant sense.
- 11 This rendering of Kant’s views on freedom and the origins of respect is admittedly contentious. Not only will some be sceptical that the foregoing accurately represents Kant’s views, others who accept the reading on offer may be unmoved by Kant’s claims. Nonetheless, the account outlined above is well-supported by textual evidence, and there is much to be said in favour of the ideas presented (I provide further textual and philosophical support in the rest of this section). This reading also allows for what I believe is the strongest possible reconstruction of Kant’s argument. And as I explain in section 5, in order to overcome the problem of divine hiddenness it is not necessary to find an incontrovertible explanation of God’s choosing not to reveal himself; it is only necessary to find an explanation that is reasonably plausible and compatible with his possessing the divine attributes. Thus even those who have reservations about the deduction of freedom can still accept MJDH as refuge from the sceptical challenge arising from God’s hiddenness. For criticisms of the deduction of freedom see Ameriks 2003; Guyer 2007; Wood 2008. For an alternative reading of the ‘fact of reason’ see Lukow 1993 and Sussman 2008.
- 12 For an illuminating account of Kant’s conception of virtue as struggle towards self-mastery see Baxley 2010.
- 13 This is not to say that, in order for any given action to have moral worth, the agent must feel conflicted prior to performing it. It is plausible that an agent who is antecedently inclined to perform an obligatory action can still do so out of respect for the law. But the crucial point is that this would not be possible if the agent had *never* felt a conflict between her happiness and the law. I thank Anne Margaret Baxley for urging me to clarify this point.
- 14 The necessity of moral adversity for cultivation of virtue does not imply that it is bad for an agent to be disposed to take pleasure in right conduct. The truly virtuous Kantian agent fulfils his duty with a cheerful heart due to ‘having incorporated the good into [his] maxim’ (*Rel*, 6: 23n.) and gaining ‘consciousness of his rectitude’ (*MS*, 6: 388). For helpful discussion see Baxley 2010: ch. 3.
- 15 I thank an anonymous reviewer for alerting me to this worry.
- 16 I thank Glenn Ross for raising this objection.
- 17 Kant argues that our concept of God is given determinate shape as a result of the highest good (complete virtue and complete happiness) being the final object of practical reason. Since God is postulated as the necessary connection between virtue and happiness,

- he must be omniscient, omnipotent, perfectly just, etc. (*CpV*, 5: 140; *KU*, 5: 444). Even if we do not find this suggestion compelling, the possibility of a God who lacks one or more of these attributes is not relevant for present purposes because the problem of divine hiddenness is directed specifically at the conception of a deity in possession of all of them.
- 18 Eric Watkins (2010: 262) provides a reconstruction of Kant's argument according to which God's hiddenness is necessary to preserve freedom because knowledge of God would subject us to a coercive threat. Watkins rightly rejects Kant's argument so understood. However, my reconstruction avoids Watkins's objections because the emphasis is on gaining insight into positive freedom rather than a purported loss of negative freedom.
  - 19 Watkins (2010: 266) discusses this possibility as a potential problem for Kant's explanation of God's hiddenness.
  - 20 A further problem with the appeal to the notion of divine grace is that this idea is historically based on the thought that God is willing to forgive our sins under the condition that we have faith in him (Wilson 1999: 27). Under circumstances in which we have theoretical knowledge of God, the very idea of faith would disappear along with the necessary condition for divine grace as it is traditionally (and most plausibly) understood.
  - 21 It is tempting to read the puppet show metaphor as implying that knowledge of God would result in a loss of negative freedom due to the coercive threat of divine punishment. One problem with this interpretation is that it is conceivable that human beings could still choose to transgress the law despite believing that there will be dire consequences for doing so. This is one reason why MJDH focuses on positive rather than negative freedom. The central claim is not that we could not act wrongly with knowledge of God, but rather that we could not view obedience to the law as a genuine sacrifice.
  - 22 And of course further defence of Kantian doctrine is found in other works such as *Metaphysics of Morals*, *Critique of Judgment* and *Religion*.
  - 23 For helpful discussion of Kant's views on theodicy see Brachtendorf 2002 and Duncan 2012.
  - 24 For a suggestion along these lines see Sussman 2010.
  - 25 The fact that our moral agency provides practical grounds for believing in God actually forestalls a potential objection to MJDH. One might think that an all-loving God would at least provide *some* evidence of his existence in order to spur us on and provide consolation. This would presumably be compatible with preserving our freedom. However, our experience of morality serves precisely this purpose. As Kant puts the point, when respect for the law becomes active and ruling in us, this 'allows us a view into the realm of the supersensible, though only with weak glances' (*CpV*, 5: 417). The respect we feel for the moral law provides both a spur to action and practical grounds for belief in God.
  - 26 The capacity for virtue is also jeopardized for those who become convinced of God's existence before they are mature enough to perceive a conflict between self-interest and morality. If these individuals live their whole lives without experiencing any theistic doubt, they will be unable to develop respect for the moral law. Fortunately, such permanent and unwavering dogmatic faith is likely rare (if it exists at all).
  - 27 Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2013 UK Kant Society Annual Conference, the 2014 APA Pacific Division Meeting, the 2014 Rocky Mountain Ethics Congress and the 2014 North American Kant Society Midwest Study Group Meeting. I thank the audiences at those events for helpful questions and comments.

Thanks to Glenn Ross, Stephen Palmquist, Eric Watkins, Nich Baima, Jason Gardner, Travis Timmerman and two anonymous reviewers for many useful suggestions. I am especially grateful to Anne Margaret Baxley for helping me clarify my interpretations and arguments over the course of several drafts.

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