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LIVING IN THE SHADOWS: DEBATING MEANING IN A POST-RELIGIOUS WORLD

ABSTRACT: *The Shadow of God* combines history and philosophy in a way that is, unlike Hegel, fundamentally pluralistic. It presents the period of German Idealism as a time when philosophers aimed to bring faith and reason together through the idea of autonomy. At the same time, the tensions endemic in that process led to a transfer of individual hope from an afterlife of reward or punishment to participation in a collective, historical process. This article responds to a series of critical questions: Does the book assimilate consolation and reconciliation? Does it sufficiently distinguish knowledge and justification? Does it open the possibility for a reaffirmation of the individual? Does it underestimate the potential for a secularized Kantian philosophy to bring together equality, justification, and community? Does its interpretation of Kant give a place for his account of historical progress? Is awareness of the way in which theodicy came to be historicized helpful in understanding contemporary democracy and its discontents?

Keywords: alienation; freedom; ethics; history; immortality; justification; meaning; morality; reconciliation; secularization; theodicy; Kant; Hegel; Joshua L. Cherniss; Rainer Forst; Samuel Goldman; Susan Meld Shell; Bernard Yack.

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As the breadth of the contributions by my distinguished readers shows, *The Shadow of God* can be read from quite different directions. Let me start by explaining why this is so and why I welcome it. In this way I can introduce the book's central arguments and methodological commitments.

History and Philosophy

In bringing history and philosophy together into a single enterprise *The Shadow of God* stands in a tradition that was initiated by Hegel. It may be helpful, then, to contrast our views.

For Hegel, philosophy (or “*Wissenschaft*” as he calls it) has four fundamental features.

- (1) It is holistic. All of its elements interact with and mutually support one another.
- (2) There is no sharp line between philosophy and the empirical sciences (history included among them).
- (3) *Wissenschaft* embodies a distinctive form of reasoning of a higher kind: “reason,” in contrast to “understanding;” “thought” rather than “*Vorstellung*” (representation).
- (4) *Wissenschaft* moves along a rigorous, determinate path from simplicity to complexity and—in a way that seems paradoxical when viewed from the standpoint of *Vorstellung*—returns to simplicity.

Very briefly, *The Shadow of God* affirms the first two features of Hegel's philosophy while rejecting the third and the fourth, because it rejects the underlying metaphysics of *Geist* (“Spirit”) on which they depend.

The Shadow of God embodies the view that philosophy is a search for a kind of “reflective equilibrium” among beliefs, attitudes, values, and even practices (what I call *doxai*). Thus while,

like Hegel (and, indeed, Plato), I see philosophy as aimed at self-understanding, I do not believe that we are converging on a single, shared truth. On the contrary, the aim is to reach consistency in a rather broad sense—that set of *doxai* that we (each of us, individually, or all of us in common) can inhabit with some degree of comfort, understanding that, in the end, human beings adopt their views of the world and attitudes to life for reasons broader than factual truth and logical consistency, undeniably important though they both are. From which it follows that there is also no single starting point for philosophical reflection.

Alternative Possibilities

In an interview about *The Shadow of God* at the time of its publication (see Rosen and Marshall 2022), I remarked that it can be read backwards as well as forwards. Thus, the story that it tells of how an idea of history as a shared, collective project displaced (at least, in part) an earlier conception of human beings facing an afterlife of reward or punishment gives an interpretive clue to the otherwise puzzling claim made by Theodor Adorno that Auschwitz was the moral equivalent in the twentieth century of the Lisbon Earthquake in the eighteenth. After Auschwitz, such a collective view of history was no longer tenable—or so we might interpret Adorno as claiming. In this way, the book looks backwards as a way of understanding the present.

But I might also have said that it is a book that can be read upwards as well as downwards. An earlier version started with two general methodological discussions and, though those chapters were excised, the book still opens with methodological reflections. Yet at the heart of the book is a historical narrative. Baldly put, it is a story about how new ideas about human beings and their place in the world came on the scene, initially among philosophers (Kant, Fichte, Hegel) but also others who, if they are included as philosophers at all, are generally treated as

peripheral to mainstream narratives of its history (Diderot, Burke, Herder, Schiller). These, in the broad sense of that term, ideological ideas spread to be immensely powerful if often no-longer-visible ingredients within radical, conservative, and liberal thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. One could see the book's methodological issues as arising from the attempt to articulate that narrative in a cogent and convincing way.

You might say too that the book could have been written inwards as well as outwards. Philosophical problems as I understand them can be taxonomized from the very, very broad to the quite specific. Thus, I take the book to be held together by two extremely general problems. First, there is the question of theodicy. That can be understood as the standing need human beings have to find a meaning for their lives in the face of human finitude or, more narrowly, as the need to reconcile death and suffering with belief in a single, omnipotent deity. Then there is the Euthyphro dilemma, taking it not just as a question about piety and the gods (is something beloved by the gods because it is pious or pious because the gods love it?) but as a more general challenge about the connection between morality and the will; one that any account of morality, theistic or secular, must face in one form or another.

These twin problems frame the way that one of the very oldest problems in philosophy—what is freedom?—came to be articulated by Kant and his successors. Freedom, they believed, cannot be arbitrary—that would not be a kind of freedom “worth wanting” in Daniel Dennett's perceptive phrase. Nor can it be merely a subjective conviction, possibly in conflict with a broader and more comprehensive perspective on reality. Even if that perspective is not accessible to human beings or one that we could live by, its very existence is corrosive of our deepest convictions—particularly so if we have to be free enough to be justly judged by a divine judge.

Moreover, just such a conception of freedom is required for us to be able to think of God himself as free: his decisions must not be capricious, but nor can they be imposed on him by an

“external” necessity. Hence the same “model” of freedom as *autonomy*—to be free is to be “subject to a self-given law”—applies to both human beings and the deity (or, in Hegel’s case, *Geist*) provided that we read the “self-givenness” of that law not as a kind of choice or mundane willing but as something that emerges from human beings’ (or God’s) inner nature.

The interpretive work of the book starts, however, with a detailed account of one of the most specific and complex parts of Kant’s philosophy, his theory of transcendental freedom. The intention is to use that interpretation to move outwards and support my general claim that Kant is deeply concerned with questions of human responsibility in the face of divine judgement; and that this, in turn, forms a part of Kant’s own, very distinctive, “post-Lisbon” account of theodicy.

Historically too, the book might have been written from the outside in. As I make clear in *The Shadow of God*, a book from which I have profited is Boyd Hilton’s *The Age of Atonement*. Hilton gives there a dense survey of British attitudes towards economics and society in the early to mid-nineteenth century, focusing particularly on evangelical political writings and sermons. He brings out the important role played by a kind of what one might call natural-law retributivism, something that he connects back, rightly I think, to Bishop Butler. Similarly, a different scholar might have been able to write a book that went from the varieties of ideas about history and the individual present in nationalistic, radical, conservative, and liberal social thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to the origins of modern conceptions of historical immortality in Diderot, Herder, Schiller, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel.

Three further methodological points are worth emphasizing.

First, *embeddedness*. Holism does not mean that there are no arguments in philosophy, but it does mean that arguments are typically *enthymematic*—dependent on background premises that are not spelled out. Sometimes they are not spelled out because they seem to the author too obvious to need stating; sometimes because the author is not even reflectively aware of them. It is

a central task of philosophy as I understand it to bring such background elements into the foreground. (“*Das Bekannte überhaupt ist darum, weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt*”: what we are familiar with we don’t, for that very reason, recognize, as Hegel says.)

And this is why history is valuable. The past is indeed a foreign country; they think differently there. What is taken for granted in one historical context is not in another and the effort to reveal such assumptions is inevitably reflexive. Moreover, we are connected to that past, and times of transition were also, typically, times when *doxai* were more contested and, hence, more open to view than they later became. Germany in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was just such a period, I believe. Those who try to understand its complexities are exploring a world whose mixture of strangeness and familiarity brings our own assumptions into relief.

Second, *open questions*. Hegel, like Plato, thinks that conflicts in everyday thought point upwards to their resolution in a higher, purified realm. But I take very seriously the idea, implicit in the idea of reflective equilibrium, that how we respond to such conflicts is an open question. As Hilary Putnam put it in a brilliant aphorism, one philosopher’s *modus ponens* is another philosopher’s *modus tollens* (quoted in Rosen 2022, 16). Even if you and I both recognize the same conflict, how each of us deals with it may be different. That is why, when philosophers talk about what “we” do or do not think, that is usually a defeasible generalization (or perhaps an expression of optimism) rather than a necessary truth.

Third, *charity*. Since Donald Davidson, writers on the history of philosophy have often invoked his “principle of charity” in interpretation. I am not convinced that an idea originally introduced to apply to a situation of “radical translation” adapts very well to thinking about philosophy. Davidson’s own initial example (how can we help but think that “*es regnet*” means “it is raining”?) affirms how far human beings must share some very basic, everyday truths—not

beliefs about epistemology or metaphysics! Nevertheless, it is important to note that any principle of charity in the interpretation of philosophy could be taken in different ways. Does charity mean treating past philosophers as sharing what *we* take to be true? An alternative form of charity might be to be more generous to *their* powers of consistency.

Kant is a case in point. Should we dismiss, as so many modern Kantians do, Kant's own preoccupation with transcendental freedom because we (again that word!) do not share it? Or would it be more "charitable" to see why he has strong reasons to believe that it is essential to his project? *The Shadow of God* is written with a commitment to that second kind of charity: to try to look sympathetically at what is distinctive, perhaps even alien, about thinkers of the past.

In short, *The Shadow of God* is neither a systematic philosophical treatise nor a sequential historical narrative but a book that consciously reaches out in different directions. Whether that makes things easier for the reader or more difficult is not for the author to say.

Reconciliation

Let me start with a point made by Joshua Cherniss in his deeply engaged and thought-provoking essay.

Cherniss questions my use of the word "reconciliation" to encompass all of the things that might be covered by a conception of philosophy as a way (or ways) of "*mit der Welt fertig werden*" ("coming to terms with the world"). It is a point that I want to concede. As it stands—and particularly so, given the extent to which I embrace the connection between philosophy and religion—the word "reconciliation" evokes an affirmative attitude towards reality. That, of course, is what we find in Hegel, but also in Spinoza (*amor Dei intellectualis*) and even the

radically anti-religious Nietzsche (*amor fati*). And yet is it true that philosophy, when it is successful, should reconcile us to the world?

Surely, someone who claims to draw inspiration from Adorno should be the last person to make such an assumption! If Adorno is right and we live in a world that is deeply morally flawed, then it is wrong to reconcile ourselves to it, even if we believe that there is nothing that we can do to change it for the better. In my defence, I do write that, “[although] ideologies are ways of giving existence meaning, that they are forms of reconciliation, as Hegel would call them . . . we should not be misled by that word into assuming that they are always peaceful and accepting of reality. On the contrary, ideologies may be both scientifically absurd and horrifyingly destructive (think only of Nazism)” (Rosen 2022, 19).

But I do not explain how people may be ideologically *unreconciled* and the other phrase I use—“giving existence meaning”—also needs more explanation—exactly *how* do they “give existence meaning”?, you might ask. What I say is negative—that “ideologies are not . . . abandoned without loss,” but I do not give any detailed account of what is lost or why. In what follows, let me, with Cherniss’s help, add a few more thoughts.

I agree with Cherniss that we should not assimilate *reconciliation* and *consolation*. Although *The Shadow of God* does not make the distinctiveness of consolation explicit as perhaps it should have done, it is, I think, implicit in the simple, tripartite schema of Dionysianism, Apollonianism, and Socratism sketched in Chapter 2. Thus, when Nietzsche describes the Greek contemplation of the beauty and happiness of the Olympian gods as “the only satisfactory theodicy” (quoted in Rosen 2022, 34) this is surely, a consolation for death and suffering. Likewise, when Bertrand Russell talks of mathematics offering human beings the chance to escape the “terrible sense . . . of exile amid hostile powers” and the “all-but omnipotence

of alien forces” by the contemplation of a realm of absolute truth, he too is describing a form of consolation. (quoted Rosen 2022, 207)

I am not sure that the line of division between reconciliation and consolation is always a sharp one. A successful theodicy reconciles human beings by showing them that suffering is a product of the goodness of a just and loving God, but not all reconciliation has to be about moving to a standpoint from which we can see what looks bad to be really, in some way, good. Does tragedy reconcile or console? Perhaps we can (and should) learn to accept the bad without denying its badness. In that case, reconciliation comes close to consolation. Nevertheless, I agree that, in general, the two are not just the same thing.

Consider mourning. When we feel the pain that comes from the loss of someone dear to us, we may, perhaps, be consoled when we think of the value of everything that they did in their life, but that thought, at the same time, makes the pain of loss even more intense. The Stoic urges us to reconcile ourselves to what we cannot change. To that, I respond, with Hume (and surely Adorno would have agreed):

Your sorrow is fruitless, and will not change the course of destiny. Very true: And for that very reason I am sorry. (Hume 1988, 174)

There is a great deal more to be said about this, and I commend Cherniss’s essay as a starting-point for reflecting on it.

Socratism

Another point on which Cherniss is, I think, right to press me concerns what I call “Socratism.” It is a term, of course, taken from Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, Socratism is very close to the

“principle of sufficient reason,” the idea that everything in the world is ultimately connected within a single framework of explanation, which, in turn, points back to a single “author of nature.” But, as Cherniss rightly says, understanding is one thing and justification (or legitimation or reconciliation) another. Is it right to move from one to the other?

The point is important, since I refer to Kant as engaged in a “project of justification” that is fundamentally “Socratic” and that this leads him to pursue what I call a “Socratic” conception of religion. For Kant, what is incomprehensible cannot be justified. That is why we can see his philosophy, in metaphysics as much as ethics and politics, as aimed at overcoming “the alienation of arbitrariness.” Yet if comprehensibility is a necessary condition for justification, that does not mean that it is sufficient.

Nevertheless, understanding can have its own kind of value, even when what is understood is not justified by that understanding (perhaps, indeed, its unacceptability becomes even more apparent). That idea is implicit in Adorno’s (obviously paradoxical) epigraph in his *Minima Moralia*: “Where everything is bad it must be good to know the worst.” And this, returns us to Cherniss’s earlier point. Knowledge in this case offers consolation, not reconciliation.

It is also worth saying that the idea of the knowability of the world is not neutral. To follow the Nietzsche of *The Birth of Tragedy*, for Socratism, it is an essential part of the goodness of the world that it should be knowable. On his account, it was Kant and Schopenhauer who challenged the confidence in the correspondence between thought and reality and left us in the modern predicament by which, if there is a reality “out there” (call it the *Ding an sich*) it can never be captured fully, and we are left, at best, with a set of *ad hoc*, instrumental constructions that we use to find our way about and to control the world.

Certainly, this is a common reading of Kant (it goes back, I think, at least to Kleist). It is the Kant we find in Adorno when he calls Kant a “nominalist” (an interpretation of Kant that he

took, I think, from his teacher, Hans Cornelius). But, as I read him, for Kant, however precarious it may have been, the conviction that the world was knowable was an essential part of its goodness, and this is something that forms part of his continuity with his Idealist successors. How best to interpret Kant in the light of that conviction is the question I had in mind when I mentioned at the very end of *The Shadow of God* that there might be an equivalent in epistemology and metaphysics to the Euthyphro dilemma as I described it in moral philosophy.

Identity and Hope in the Future

Cherniss (2023, 1) uses these points to make an interpretive proposal. Could not the ideas that he finds in my book be mobilized in favour of what he calls a “reaffirmation of the value of the personal”? As Cherniss (ibid., 14) writes, “Rosen does not exactly make this case, though much of what he says suggests that he is sympathetic to it.” Indeed he is. I would like to take this opportunity to say a little more about this idea here and, at the same time, to respond to a criticism of *The Shadow of God* made by Fabian Freyenhagen that Cherniss discusses.

In his review of *The Shadow of God* for the *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, Freyenhagen (2022) raised the question whether moral action requires hope in the future. Following Moses Mendelssohn and Adorno against Kant and Rainer Forst, Freyenhagen denies that it does, and he gives the example of Jean Améry, a captive of the Nazis in a labour camp, who hit back against his tormentors even in a completely hopeless situation. Améry did so, says Freyenhagen, not out of the hope of achieving some effect thereby: “the purpose of the act lay in the act itself and, thereby, in the objectification of [his] dignity” (Freyenhagen 2022).

I was surprised to find this example used in criticism of *The Shadow of God*, since, as Freyenhagen himself notes, I myself considered a very similar case in my 2012 book, *Dignity: its*

History and Meaning. (Rosen, 2012) The example that I discussed there is the obligation to treat the dead with dignity. That case is puzzling. On one natural view, all moral duties must be in some way beneficial for those towards whom they are directed—at least, in protecting them from a possible harm. Joseph Raz (and he is distinctive only in making this more explicit than most philosophers do) calls this the “humanistic principle”: that “the explanation and justification of the goodness or badness of anything derives ultimately from its contribution, actual or possible, to human life and its quality” (Raz 1986, 194, quoted in Rosen 2012, 130). But who benefits when we treat a dead body—the body of a dead person—with dignity?

Having explored and rejected some possibilities (that the duty embodies a kind of indirect consequentialism; that the dead person benefits even if they cannot know that they do) I argue that this is a counter-example to Raz’s “humanistic principle”: that the duty to treat the dead with dignity is indeed a duty without a beneficiary. And the best way to understand it, I suggest, is as something like Kant’s idea that we have duties towards ourselves (what Bernard Williams dismisses as a “fraudulent item”). As I write:

That we might have such a duty towards things—corpses or fetuses, for example—that are not themselves human and will not benefit from our behaviour towards them seems to me persuasive even if we do not think of humanity in the transcendental terms that Kant does. Such duties are principally symbolic: they require us to act in ways that *express* respect. And I am not put off by the thought that it may well be that we are being asked to express respect when there is no one else there to become aware of that expression. Our duty to respect the dignity of humanity is—on this I agree with Kant—fundamentally a duty towards ourselves. By which I mean, not that we are benefited when we observe our duties, but that

our duties are so deep a part of us that we could not be the people that we are without having them. (Rosen 2012, 157)

If this sounds very much like the position advocated by Freyenhagen himself, then this is because, or so it seems to me, it is!

So, in my view, not all moral action has to be aimed at achieving some beneficial end, or, a fortiori, be part of a wider framework of future hope. Where, then, do we disagree? I think that what troubles Freyenhagen is my suggestion that there may nevertheless be some latent relation of dependence between the practice of morality and the existence of humanity. Perhaps, as Cherniss suggests, Freyenhagen is himself also committed to some such view. If, as he says, the purpose of Améry's act of defiance was to express his moral identity and agency, then "what would be the purpose of moral expression, if there was no one to express it *to*?" (Cherniss 2023, 12). But, as I see it, the possible dependence is more of a transcendental kind.

Giving Existence Meaning

One expression that I used sparingly in *The Shadow of God* (though, obviously, did not avoid completely) was that of giving life a meaning. It is not just that this is a question to which so many different answers have been given (worship your creator; discover the truth; join together in community with others—to name a few) but there is a doubt if it is a question that requires an answer at all. Why should one's life have "a meaning"? What would it even be for it to "have" one? These are good questions, but *The Shadow of God* does, I think, contain an answer. In short, we would do better to think of the problem of the meaning of life not as an enquiry with a

positive goal so much as a response—or a set of responses—to a perception of meaninglessness, the erosion of value.

The book considers, and rejects, R.M. Hare’s well-known assertion that the idea that “nothing matters” is incoherent. Hare’s main supporting claims are, first, that, so long as human beings continue to exist, they will make choices and hence have values. Yes, but what *kind* of “values” will those be? Will they include moral or aesthetic ones? Secondly, Hare says, denying or asserting the objective existence of moral values makes no difference to how we respond to them. But is that true? Even admitting that the *content* of value could be the same in both cases, there is still the question of what claim, if any, moral value makes on us. That is the question of the status of morality and its force is not so easily dismissed.

Thus, *pace* Hare, the fear that life might suffer a catastrophic loss of value is not just the sort of thing that threatens young Continental Europeans who have read too much Sartre. Indeed, we can usefully interpret Kant himself as offering a set of responses to what he fears as a loss of meaning. As I read him, although Kant does give the idea of personal immortality an important place, it is not the threat of personal extinction that he finds threatening.

As stated above, I interpret Kant as someone who saw the world as, in Robert Boyle (1674) ’s phrase, “God’s epistle written to mankind.” Within that “Socratic” framework of intelligibility, two things threaten to undermine the value of existence for Kant: the non-existence of justice: “For if justice disappears, there is no longer any value in men’s living on earth” (Kant 1797, 6:332); and the threat of fatalism—a threat that exists whether the external determination of human action lies in the chance configuration of causal laws and initial conditions at the beginning of the universe or in mankind being the handiwork of a purposeful “supreme artist” [“*der oberste Meister aller Kunstwerke*”] (Kant 1788, 5:101).¹

Notable, on the other hand, is that Kant is not troubled by the absence of relational values. He willingly accepts the loneliness implicit in an impersonal but intelligibly just God—a being “whose eye was never dimmed with tears” (Schiller, quoted in Rosen 2022, 201). Nor does he seem even to grasp, let alone feel, the desolation, so poignantly expressed by Maria von Herbert, that comes with the absence of romantic love (see the discussion of Maria von Herbert’s exchange of letters with Kant in Rosen 2022, 218 and 220).

The Extinction of Humanity and the Realm of Doxai

But another phenomenon not considered by Kant that threatens a general erosion of value is the threat of future human extinction. It is striking that this is already apparent in Diderot’s comment to his friend Falconet that if we were told that a comet would wipe out the human race in a thousand years’ time, only the belief that the prediction was mistaken would give us any reason to on with any form of human culture more advanced than “planting cabbages” (on the Diderot-Falconet debate, see Rosen 2022, ch. 9).

Clearly, we are here in the realm of *doxai*. On this, four remarks.

First, *doxai* may not be universally shared. This is apparent even in the Diderot-Falconet debate: Falconet professes himself untroubled by the idea of future human extinction.

Second, the *doxai* that support a particular attitude or moral judgement are not necessarily the same in all people. Think only of the very different reasons people have to think of human beings as bearers of moral rights.

Third, *doxai* may be buried, hidden even from those who hold them. That does not make them less powerful, of course, but it does make the processes by which the interpreter claims to reveal them more precarious.

Finally, *doxai* may be not even potentially propositional. Cherniss contrasts the role played by *doxai* with “*mythoi* and *exempla* ... narratives and exemplary figures whose power goes beyond argument.” By my lights, however, those too are kinds of *doxai*.

That said, the book has an interpretive possibility about the nature of value to explore:

Instead of thinking that values are willed or built into the absolute nature of reality perhaps we should see them as being constituted within human communities. In that way, they will have something of the objectivity that realists want without the commitment to the existence of a domain of timeless moral facts. (Rosen 2022, 285)

It is striking that such a conception of objectivity (what is objective is independent of the standpoint of particular individuals without being wholly independent of humans and their cognitive capacities) is modern, something that emerged—largely thanks to Kant, of course—at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

More generally, the idea of a “view from nowhere” looks like a *doxa* derived from an inherited, theological idea: that of divine omniscience. Heidegger makes the suggestion that the assumption of the continuing existence of a public world of experience after our death—what phenomenologists call the “*Lebenswelt* [life-world]” is a kind of “flight”—something that enables us not to face the radical consequences of our own extinction. Derek Parfit’s claim that, in getting rid of the illusion of an abiding self, he was able to diminish his fear at the prospect of his own extinction by entering a public world of experience, rather than being driven back into a private world of ephemeral qualia, looks like exactly what Heidegger was describing. Of course,

sometimes bad philosophy is just bad philosophy, but in this case I can't help believing that Parfit's jump in reasoning was given spurious plausibility by its connection with an unrecognized, post-religiously motivated *doxa*.

So perhaps the sense that human extinction would be a great moral catastrophe comes from an awareness of how far community-based objectivity depends on the continued existence of some community. If that is right, then there may be powerful subterranean reasons connecting the continuation of humanity with human beings today that do not depend on the hope of future progress.

The Reaffirmation of the Personal?

Returning now to Cherniss's suggestion that *The Shadow of God* contains the resources for what he calls a "reaffirmation of the personal," I can, at least, sketch a response. I am entirely favourable to the basic idea. However, "the personal" means several different things.

In the first place, as Cherniss notes, there is the fact that the whole of the book is personal. It is the author's own exercise in an extended kind of "reflective equilibrium"—although it is not intended just for readers who will end up at the same point as me. This is especially so when it comes to those matters at the end of the book that try to map the situation in which "we" now find ourselves. To summarize, let me make four points, each of which Cherniss himself also makes on my behalf.

- (1) The idea of historical immortality necessitates neither the submission of the individual to some supra-individual collective project of self-realization nor the abandonment of critical reflection for the dissolution of the moral agent into the lukewarm soup of

traditional *Sittlichkeit*. There are plenty of versions of historical immortality that assert the value of individuality and diversity. Indeed, as Cherniss notes, the revolutionary version of historical immortality spawned its own kind of heroic individualism (Castro's "History will absolve me," for example).

(2) Then there is the book's commitment to pluralism. As explained, "pluralism" comes in different forms and strengths. Pluralism about goods is almost banal but pluralism about values is not—at least, when we do not think of "values" as kinds of goods. Not only do I think that different values can simultaneously lay claims upon us, but I think that they are typically values *of different kinds*.

(3) I am committed to the view that individuals have intrinsic value, a kind of respect-worthiness that is independent of the choices that they make or the goods that they produce. I am perfectly well aware that this is a commitment that stands "in the shadow of God": a secular re-interpretation of the religious doctrine of man being made in God's image. But for me, at least, it is basic and self-standing.

(4) Finally—and I am grateful to Cherniss for bringing this out—there is a kind of individualism associated with the commitment to understanding. One of the open questions for reflective equilibrium is reflection itself. Why engage in it at all? If you believe that philosophy leads you from error to a unique realm of shared truth, and that through that human beings are brought to moral knowledge, the answer is obvious. In the other direction, if you see philosophical reflection as corrosive of a lost world of integral faith and authentic experience, then the case against it looks strong.

The Shadow of God shares neither conviction. However, it does align itself with a Nietzschean idea. A familiar feature of Nietzsche's thought is that, Socratism having come to the point that its failure is evident, the way is open for a new kind of "post-truth"

Dionysianism. Less noticed, however, is that Nietzsche nevertheless continues to embrace “the desire for certainty as his inmost craving” (Nietzsche, quoted in Rosen 2022, 246). Thus the refusal to live “without first having given themselves an account of the final and most certain reasons pro and con” (ibid.) becomes a form of personal self-assertion independent of the conviction of the ultimate rationality—or even knowability—of the world. That is why, at the very end of the book, I quote Orwell that “‘The truth is great and will prevail’ is a prayer rather than an axiom” (Orwell, quoted in Rosen 2022, 307).

The Case for Kantianism

In his trenchant but very generous contribution, Rainer Forst responds to *The Shadow of God* with three things: a description, a diagnosis, and a challenge. The challenge is a deep one and I fear that I shall not have the resources to do it justice fully.

Forst (2023, 2) describes *The Shadow of God* as a “negative-dialectical” narrative of secularization, its purpose being “to achieve historical-philosophical understanding in order to open up the space for radical critical reflection.” It is a label I happily accept, but let me make two comments.

The framework by which Forst classifies narratives of secularization is principally an evaluative one: is secularization to be seen as progress, decline or some mixture of both? But the aspect that is most important for me is explanatory: whether one looks at secularization endogenously or exogenously. In looking at secularization endogenously, I am setting myself against the dominant view, shared by both critics of secularization and its advocates, that sees secularization as the outcome of the conflict between, putting it loosely, religion and science (or some combination of science, technology, and economic change).

The narrative of *The Shadow of God*, however, looks at the process from the perspective of the project of rational justification that is present within religion itself. Rather than taking for granted the modern assumption that “faith” and “reason” are always in conflict, it looks at the attempt to bring faith and reason together within a single worldview—and the tensions that carries within itself. Applying this framework to German Idealism is made more complicated because it is also a story about how far German philosophy has been permeated by attempts to extend the notion of reason itself beyond allegedly over-narrow Enlightenment conceptions of it—to move to “*Vernunft*” from “*Verstand*,” from “instrumental” to “communicative” reason, and so on. In taking such an endogenous approach to secularization, *The Shadow of God*’s intellectual predecessors are Hans Blumenberg and, in their own way, the Horkheimer and Adorno of *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

My second point is that my “negative-dialectical” balancing of affirmative and critical aspects of secularization is a *situated* one. To answer the question whether secularization has been a story of progress or decline, we have to ask first: from whose point of view? Plato, Aristotle and Augustine would certainly have a different evaluation of the modern world from Adam Smith, John Stuart Mill, or John Rawls. A “strong progressive” answer is that the modern world represents an advance, not just in science and politics but also in moral self-understanding, so it is the modern evaluation of modernity that we should accept. Yet the critics of secularization also make an objectivist claim for their own standpoint. For an important kind of social conservatism—think Nietzsche, Carlyle, the early Thomas Mann, T.S. Eliot, and Heidegger—the mark of the modern world is that it has sacrificed what makes human existence truly valuable in exchange for material goods and egalitarian political values. In this process, or so it is claimed, the greatest loss has been awareness of that loss itself.

The epitome of strong progressivism is, of course, Hegel, but it is also, I think, there in Habermas. On the other hand, as I read him, the original “negative-dialectician,” Adorno, is, at the least, extremely sensitive to the anti-modernist idea of experiential loss (“*Das Leben lebt nicht*”—“life is not living”) while remaining on the Left. This is one reason why Adorno’s political and social perspective is so elusive, I think. (I wonder whether Habermas would agree with that last judgement.)

My own “negative-dialectical” position, for what it is worth, stands much more firmly than Adorno on the side of the moderns. I suspect that images of the past as a haven of authentic experience (community, the *ontic logos*, self-transcendence through symbolic art, and so on) are largely post-romantic back-projections onto a history that was, in its own way, as anxious and conflicted as (as well as, quite obviously, even more violent than) our own. Furthermore, I share the modern, Kantian commitment to human equality and justification in relationships of authority. Nevertheless, I do not claim that my commitment is supported by a history of moral progress.

Forst is right to note that my objective is to find a situated reflective equilibrium between, in William James’s phrase, “live options.” Aristotle’s conviction that human beings are marked by radical differences in natural capacity that justify differences in treatment up to and including slavery is, for me, most certainly not one of them. But nor do I think that liberal egalitarianism is uncontestable. To try to examine the alternatives as dispassionately and candidly as one can seems to me essential.

Forst’s challenge is that I am too quick to dismiss the project of Kantian ethics: “[Rosen] appears to think that if one invests such (so to speak) supernatural normative powers into that capacity called practical reason or into the idea of morality, such investment must be of a religious nature” (Forst 2023, 4). Against this, his own view is that “the (unfinished) Kantian

enterprise is to establish a morality of equal respect as an *autonomous* imperative of practical reason without any requirement of religious faith or quasi-theological argument” (ibid.). His question to me is: “if you think ... there is no moral truth accessible to the rational faculties of finite humans, because that view would *necessarily* imply a belief in a just God, my question is: Who exactly stands in the shadow of God? You or me?” (ibid.).

Behind this criticism is a diagnosis: he fears that I believe that “*any* universalist form of morality that emphasizes human dignity could and can be thought of *only* in quasi-theological philosophical terms. This kind of thesis would have to conclude that moral universalism, once it is no longer buttressed by such theology, is a mere fantasy, a remnant of past times” (ibid., 3).

On this I would like to push back. As I explained in the first chapter of *The Shadow of God*, as well as in my response to Cherniss above, I do not think that we should reject any *doxai* that can be shown to have religious roots just for that reason (see, e.g., Rosen 2022, ch. 1; and my response to Cherniss above).

Although showing the connection back to religious ways of seeing the world can help one see why something that is contestable may nevertheless seem (or have seemed) obviously true, my view is that how to respond to that revelation is an open question. It is not that the *doxai* that Kant embraces are open to criticism *because* he embraces them as part of a religiously motivated world-view; rather his religiously-motivated world-view leads him to embrace *doxai* that are questionable on other grounds. While I agree with Nietzsche that we should look for “the shadow of God” as part of our practice of critical interpretation, it does not follow that we must, as Nietzsche goes on to say, also “vanquish his shadow.” To reject whatever can be shown to have religious sources just for that reason would be a sort of foundationalist anti-foundationalism.

Specifically, I do not think that it is true that you have to believe in God to believe that there is a “moral truth accessible to the rational faculties of finite humans.” Indeed, in my opinion

Ronald Dworkin's *Religion Without God* is a model of just such a position (see Dworkin 2013; and my review of it for *The Nation*, Rosen 2014). I think that Forst assimilates me too much to Nietzsche in another way, as well. Looking at the criticisms of Kant's own moral philosophy and modern Kantian moral philosophy discussed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 7, he reads me as someone who "transforms a *hermeneutic* interpretation of the Idealists into a *general* position about morality"—a "morality critic" like Nietzsche in the nineteenth century or Williams in the twentieth. (Forst 2023, 3) But that is not quite my position.

It is true that the chapters that Forst has in mind are critical not just of Kant but of modern Kantianism too, and it is also true that the modern Kantianism on which I focus is that of John Rawls and his students. So there is a possibility that there exist other forms of modern Kantianism that do not face the problems I see in Rawls-inspired Kantianism. But before I give my views on that matter, let me explain what I see those problems as being.

At the beginning of Chapter 5 I quote Onora O'Neill's description of her turn to Kant as part of a search for "a decision procedure for picking out morally acceptable principles" (O'Neill, quoted in Rosen 2022, 104). I argue that this search fails, as even modern Kantians (I mention Barbara Herman and Allen Wood, as well as O'Neill herself in later writings) apparently concede. Kant himself, I argue, gets to determinate answers—many of which, like his absolute prohibition on suicide, retributive theory of punishment and revulsion at homosexuality, modern Kantians find extremely unpalatable—only by using that notorious term that haunts German philosophy of the time, "*Bestimmung* [determination, vocation, end]" in order to import teleology into his system (see Rosen 2022, 340n39).

One thing that separates "us" from Kant, is apparent moral disagreement. Kant, as I see him, is committed, for religious reasons, to the view that not only is morality objective but it is shared by all mankind, inasmuch as they must have sufficient direct access to it to be properly

held to account for any failure to observe it. Moral disagreement is not proof of the falsehood of moral objectivity, of course, but, if disagreement exists, it does present an extremely serious difficulty for those, like Forst, who believe in moral objectivity. Moreover, I reject the idea that the way to reconcile the existence of moral disagreement with belief in moral objectivity is to compare morality, as Derek Parfit does, with mathematics—that is, to see morality as containing truths that an expert can demonstrate but that will defeat the capacity of the ordinary person to understand.

For the kind of theism in which Kant believed—that morality is part of the essential nature of a just God but is independent of him and discoverable by human beings—it is clear why morality must be something that everyone can grasp. But even if you think that morality is objective but natural, that human beings have become aware of it as a result of some combination of biological and social evolution, the thought that it should contain truths that are as opaque and elusive as quantum mechanics and that we need books with titles like *Intricate Ethics* to disentangle them for us, strikes me as completely implausible. Hence my assertion in *The Shadow of God* that the idea that the Kantian categorical imperative is a “decision procedure” to resolve apparent moral conflict is to “enlist him in a project that is ours not his” (Rosen 2022, 109).

But that, Forst will say, is Rawlsian Kantianism. What about the Kantianism that I am advocating? To answer in full detail would be to extend the conversation beyond even the generous space given to us by this journal, so I can do little more than state my own position.

Why should it only be from a religious point of view, Forst asks, that we can believe that there is “moral truth accessible to the rational faculties of finite humans”? Although I do think that the vehemence with which Parfit (2011, 155) asserts that “it *would* be a tragedy if there was no single true morality” marks it as the emotional cry of an ex-believer desperately trying to fill

the void left by an absent God, that does not mean that he—and Ronald Dworkin, and T.M. Scanlon, and Forst himself—are not right and that some form of moral realism is not true. I just do not believe that there exists a “capacity called practical reason” that is invested with “(so to speak) supernatural powers” that will “establish a morality of equal respect as an *autonomous* imperative of practical reason” (Forst 2023, 4).

Nevertheless, I can go part of the way towards Forst—although I am sure that he will not be happy that I stop where I do! Forst (2023, 5) speaks of the “‘noumenal’ (non-empirical and moral) status of being ... an equal authority.” As he says, “the term for that normative status is ‘dignity’” (ibid.). I argue in Chapter 5 of *The Shadow of God* that the best interpretation of Kant’s moral philosophy is as bringing together a series of potentially distinct ways of respecting the intrinsic worth of human agency or their “dignity” (Rosen 2022, ch. 5), as you can call it. But one does not have to see human agents as ultimately, transcendently free to endorse respecting dignity in that way. One can maintain such a modestly non-metaphysical conception of the intrinsic value of human agency without accepting moral realism.

Similarly, I agree that it is a “mark of the moral” that, when we engage in moral reasoning, we accept a burden of justification. But, first of all, there is a wide range of value-informed and normative reasoning that we can call “ethical” rather than “moral” where it is not the case that objective, common reasons are essential (another matter about which I agree with Williams). Moreover, even where justification is required, I do not believe that there is a necessary convergence on a single set of judgements. This may be a long way from the objectivist moral realism Forst himself espouses, but it is not a rejection of the moral enterprise as such.

Autonomy

At this point, I should like to bring Bernard Yack into the discussion.

Where Forst thinks that I have been too quick to criticize Kant, Yack, while largely endorsing my critique of Kant, thinks that I have been too ready to assimilate the later German Idealists to Kant. To summarize Yack's subtle and sympathetic reconstruction of my argument, he thinks that I chart the way in which "a powerful theory about autonomy and human dignity" turns into "a far from reliable device for resolving moral dilemmas" (Yack 2023, 3).

As just explained, I am sympathetic to using reflective equilibrium to develop a broadly speaking "deontological" account of moral judgement that does not draw on the metaphysics of transcendental freedom but still treats human agency (dignity) as a basic value. My objections are two-fold.

(1) If you do not go the whole way with Kant and root human dignity in transcendental freedom, I am sceptical of trying to find foundations for "noumenal" agency elsewhere—by invoking the idea of "practical reason," for example, as Forst does. I am with Williams that the ethical egoist who denies the force of moral claims is not open to objection for being inconsistent or in other ways violating the canons of "practical reason."

(2) Kant is a moral monist, although one of a very special kind. There is only one absolute, intrinsic good, and everything else is (in subtle and often non-obvious ways) dependent on that single, basic good. Reject that, however, and the possibility of genuine moral disagreement becomes much more stark. And, to repeat, if there is genuine, basic moral disagreement, is that not a threat to moral realism?

But what about morality itself? Is it still, as Forst thinks I think, intrinsically alienating? On this matter, my interlocutors clearly read me (and Kant) in different ways.

(1) Forst thinks that there is a tension between personal ends and the requirements of morality, but that this is inevitable and does not impugn the Kantian project.

(2) Yack, to the contrary, thinks that I am right to emphasize the “Kantian dichotomy between human freedom and natural necessity” as a deep problem for Kantianism, but he thinks that I mistakenly extend the scope of this dichotomy to include Kant’s idealist successors in it.

(3) Cherniss, speaking on behalf of Isaiah Berlin, appreciates the Kantian demand for justification as flowing from a basic commitment to non-paternalism, but shares with me the rejection of what I called Kant’s “value-monism” (the idea that only the “good will” has “dignity,” as opposed to “price”). Cherniss worries, however, that my focus on collective forms of reconciliation makes me less sensitive than I should be to the claims of individual self-assertion embodied in ideas of “duty” and “obligation.”

Very briefly, I come closest, I believe, to Cherniss. Still, as Forst points out, I present positively the criticisms of Kant made by Schopenhauer, Williams, and the young Hegel. How can I do that without myself being a “morality critic”?

The answer is that those quotations are taken from Chapter 7, whose subject is not Kant’s moral theory in general, but a particular aspect of it: his conception of freedom as *autonomy*. My argument, to repeat, is that the idea of freedom as being subject to a “self-given law” fails if we understand that as meaning that the law was willed or chosen, but that it makes better sense if we

take autonomy as meaning acting from a necessity that is part of one's own essence, not imposed from outside.

This conception of freedom as acting from inner necessity gives an elegant solution to the problem of divine freedom—God is not arbitrary, but nor is he constrained—but it faces a deep problem as an account of human freedom: human beings are only autonomous in this sense if morality is taken as the human essence; the *autos* is shrunk into the *nomos*. How essential is that to Kant?

Yack thinks that it is. It reflects the detachment of the Kantian self from the realm of natural necessity. For Forst, on the other hand, although there is indeed a dilemma, the dilemma is not disabling for Kantianism. It arises only in those cases when our personal projects and desires come into conflict with moral norms, he argues:

We might even go so far as to say that the very *point* of morality is to create that alienating experience in order to induce a reasoned difference between, on the one hand, our personal motives, interests, and values and, on the other hand, the requirements of a universal morality: that we do what is justifiable to all without special (unjustified) consideration for some, including ourselves. (Forst 2023, 5)

If I understand him right, Forst's modification of Kantianism is that, while it may be mistaken to shrink our selfhood into morality, it is still morally required that we bring the wider and more personal aspects of ourselves into line with moral norms. This is the position taken by Schiller in *On Grace and Dignity* and it is in many ways appealing. Schiller considered himself to be a Kantian, so he was, no doubt, taken aback by the vehemence of Kant's rejection of his idea

of bringing “duty” and “inclination” into harmony (see the discussion on pages 212-13 of *The Shadow of God*).

I see no objection in principle to attaching Kantianism to a more metaphysically moderate kind of moral psychology, but I do think that it comes at a price. What Kant thought—I think correctly—was that in trying to bridge the gap between duty and inclination Schiller would undermine his own radical view of human responsibility and freedom. Forst, clearly, does not agree since he continues to use the term “autonomy” freely, even while at the same time denying that morality has to be seen as the essence of the self. Yet what he can then mean by “autonomy” is not fully clear to me.

Yack and German Idealism

The question of autonomy brings me to Yack’s criticism of my depiction of German Idealism. Although I do not accept it, I am sympathetic to one thing that it brings to the fore.

Since the time of Hegel, accounts of the development of German Idealism have been dominated by ... Hegel. The narrative presented in the *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* that leads from Königsberg to Jena, in the persons of Reinhold and then Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel himself, is well set. Distinguished works framed by it include Dieter Henrich’s *From Kant to Hegel*, Frederick Beiser’s *German Idealism*, Paul Franks’s *All or Nothing*, and Eckart Förster’s *The 25 Years of Philosophy*. For what it is worth, my own *Hegel’s Dialectic and Its Criticism* is written very much within that framework.

However, my pluralism about philosophy naturally goes together with pluralism about narratives of its history. Instead of treating German Idealism as a debate with Kant about knowledge, mind, and world, it might mean looking at the period as a struggle between different

views of the self and of the good life: on the one hand, a Kantian-Christian view, centred on the self as a morally responsible agent; on the other, a consciously Hellenistic ideal of the integrated self. For that story we would need to look, not just at philosophers in the narrow sense of the word, but at Winckelmann, Herder, Schiller, Hölderlin, and, above all, Goethe. If Yack is trying to re-orient our understanding of German Idealism to give a more prominent place to such questions, then I am with him. Nevertheless, I am not persuaded by his criticism of *The Shadow of God*.

Yack claims that I overlook the way in which taking Kant's conception of freedom seriously "led Hegel, and most of the famous German idealists, to try to move beyond the dichotomies between freedom and natural necessity that grounded it" (Yack 2023, 9). This criticism turns on what we understand Kant's conception of freedom to be. As we have seen, we can usefully look at it on two levels. On the one hand, Kant needs a conception of freedom by which human beings can be properly judged by God. As the following quotation from "The End of All Things" makes clear, that means that there is—there must be—a distance between human beings' agency—that for which they can justly be held responsible—and the contingent features of reality, including their empirical selves. The latter become just a part of the moral environment within which agents have to work:

Who knows enough to decide whether if we subtract from the causes of a presumably well-led course of life everything which is called the merit of fortune—such as an innately kind temperament, the naturally greater strength of his higher powers (of the understanding and reason, to tame his drives), besides that also his opportunity, the times when contingency fortunately saved him from many temptations which struck another—who knows if he separates all these from his actual character (from which he

must necessarily subtract them if he is to evaluate it properly, since as gifts of fortune he cannot ascribe them to his own merit)—who will then decide, I say, whether before the all-seeing eye of a world-judge one human being has any superiority over another regarding his inner moral worth? (Kant 1794, 8:329-30)

Abandon the idea of facing divine judgement for one's actions in an afterlife and it is possible to bring together a "Kantian" conception of moral duty as something that sometimes requires one to act "with dignity" against one's own feelings, with a Goethean ideal of integrated personality. That is just what Schiller does. But there is also the idea of autonomy. It is this aspect of Kant's conception of freedom, I argue, that Hegel and the other famous German idealists took most seriously.

The three friends from the Tübinger Stift, Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling, trained in theology as they were, realized very early that the Spinozan idea of "free necessity" was just what was needed to bring reason and freedom together in the divine will (the idea was there waiting for them in *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, which they read avidly, of course). As Spinoza's Substance and Kant's unitarian God (among other ingredients) were transformed into Hegel's conception of *Geist*, the ideal of freedom as full self-determination remained, even though the "God" that is self-determined is now fully in the world and needs the participation of finite human beings to come to its full self-realization. Hegel conveys this in his frequent use of the phrase "*bei sich selbst in seinem Anderen*" (being at home in its other) to describe the essential characteristic of freedom.

But what about the individual? For Spinoza, God alone has "free necessity." For Kant, the individual also has autonomy because the essence of the individual is identified with the moral law. Hegel does not shrink the *autos* into the *nomos*, however, and to this extent Yack is right to

say that he moves beyond the dichotomy between freedom and natural necessity at the level of the individual. Yet it is a key argument of *The Shadow of God* that Hegel returns to a position much closer to Spinoza: only *Geist* is fully at home in otherness, so only *Geist* is fully free:

[*Geist*] is consciousness, free because within it beginning and end coincide. ...

That for which the other is, is the same as that other; and thus *Geist* alone is at home with itself in its other. ... Only this is freedom; that is free which is not connected with or dependent on another. (Hegel 1986, pp. 41-42, quoted in Rosen 2022, 222-23)

This leads to a conception of the individual that is different from Schiller's, not because the essence of the self is identified with its moral nature, but because the individual is, in principle, subordinated to the collective identity to be found in the state, and, through the state, the *Weltgeist*. So the distasteful features of Hegel's ethics and politics—his militarism, for example—are, for me, not regrettable blemishes on his theory but fundamental expressions of it. If we have to choose between Kantian loneliness and Hegelian subservience, Adorno (I think), Isaiah Berlin, and I are on Kant's side.

Politics and Progress

Susan Shell's characteristically learned and lucid essay takes *The Shadow of God* in a direction that I myself did not explore: the development of Kant's political thought. I must admit that I have always found Kant's politics hard to interpret, so I am very grateful to Shell for deepening my understanding, if not resolving all of my difficulties.

I am not shocked at the idea that a political thinker should combine Rousseau with Hobbes—indeed, I am very familiar with the claim that Rousseau was a Hobbesian (see Tuck 2017). But Richard Tuck and his followers enlist both Hobbes and Rousseau in a common struggle against rights-based moral universalism. From that perspective, if there are rights at all, then they are held within the state from the sovereign (sleeping or awake) and certainly not outside or against it. So what of Kant—the Kant who says in one of his lectures that ““Human rights [*das Menschenrecht*] are God’s gift to mankind”? The Kant for whom the individual partakes in “*das Weltbürgerrecht* [cosmopolitan citizenship]”?

Moreover, both Hobbes and Rousseau, as I read them, are “actual contract” theorists. A contract, to be valid, must have actuality: for Hobbes, in the tacit consent that comes from continuing to live under the authority of someone who holds the power of life and death over you; for Rousseau, in the agreement of all citizens living under the very particular social circumstances of equality and austerity that he thinks characterizes the society of the *Social Contract*. For Kant, on the other hand, the social contract is an “idea of reason” that, while it is said to be binding on the sovereign, gives those over whom sovereignty is exercised no right to rebel when its provisions are not met.

Then there is history. Neither Hobbes nor Rousseau believed in historical progress. Hobbes certainly lost no opportunity to take sides against the Roman Catholic Church, but otherwise history seems to have been an unceasing series of struggles against human destructiveness, short-sightedness, and superstition. For Rousseau, the modern world is the outcome of a falling away from an earlier situation of virtue. Kant, by contrast, clearly does have a theory of progress. So while I am convinced that Kant is indeed strongly under the influence of both Hobbes and Rousseau, how he can incorporate their ideas consistently is still not fully clear to me.

From the point of view of *The Shadow of God*, the hardest question, it seems to me, is how Kant's vision of historical development can fit (if it does at all!) with his views about human agency and divine goodness. The problem is quite easily stated. The idea that humanity makes progress through "unsocial sociability" (*ungesellige Geselligkeit*) is by no means original to Kant. On the contrary, the idea that the human passions by their very conflicts led human beings from barbarism to civilization was commonplace among the many theorists of historical progress who wrote in France and Scotland in the eighteenth century (Rosen 1996; see also Meek 1976; Hirschman 1977; Viner 1977). Yet these were the theories that Herder criticized so fiercely in *Another Philosophy of History*.

Did Kant, too, instrumentalize the past in the service of the future (as Hannah Arendt alleged)? He was, evidently, well aware of Herder's objection, but his response was not the same as Herder's own. For Herder, each society contains a "centre of happiness" within itself, and the most ethically relevant distinction is not between past and future societies but between those societies that are in some way "natural" ("spontaneous" or "organic") and those that are "artificial" ("imperial" or "mechanistic"). If I am right in *The Shadow of God*, Kant's account of the goodness of the world makes it a matter of freedom, not happiness, and freedom as responsible moral agency is, on my interpretation of Kant, common to all human beings at all times.

But if this is Kant's response to the problem of the instrumentalization of the past, why then does he have a theory of progress at all?

The account that fits best with *The Shadow of God* is that it is one thing for human beings to be morally free and another for them to live in societies that are adequate expressions of that freedom. There is no divine injustice in God placing us in social settings that are unjust (not in keeping with our moral nature) but the conviction that we are, nonetheless, part of a world that is

moving towards justice (as part of the “Church Invisible”) is an expression of hope in divine benevolence and a consolation. Unlike Rousseau, for whom the development of modern commercial society with its material abundance came at the price of the fragmentation of human beings through the division of labour, Kant was not opposed to material progress. Indeed, contrary to Rousseau, he thought that there was a positive connection between wealth and political freedom. But wealth is not an end in itself.

This leads to a schematic picture of Kant’s theory of history that escapes, it seems, the charge of instrumentalizing the past in the service of the future:

- (1) The fundamental moral situation of human beings remains unchanged throughout history.
- (2) Some human societies are more aptly organized to express human beings’ moral freedom and history is moving in that direction.
- (3) Material progress can be a help towards but does not guarantee political freedom.
- (4) The hope of political progress is reasonable and makes history an object of consolation.

But interpreters should be candid about the difficulties for their own interpretations, and here is the one that I see for mine.

Although, for Kant, our characters are, as I have put it, part of the environment we face as moral agents, just as we have duties to improve our material environment, so we also have duties to develop our own characters. For Kant, such changes take place not just at the level of individual lives but socially and historically. Put that thought together with what are, by common consent, Kant’s horrifyingly toxic views on race—that mankind is divided into races with

different essential characters and capacities for development, of which the white is obviously superior to the non-white—and those of us, like Shell and myself, who are sympathetic to the idea of Kant as a universalistic, humanitarian political thinker, should, at the least, be deeply troubled.

Politics and Alienation

The Shadow of God argues that the drive for justification, aimed at overcoming the “alienation of arbitrariness,” brings with it another kind of alienation—the “alienation of impersonality.” My illustration is the way in which, in Kant’s hands, God becomes less and less of a father and more and more an impartial judge. But there is, I believe, more to it than that. Does the idea of justification, with its associated ideas of publicity and accountability, also lead to an impersonal political order from which the individual might reasonably feel alienated?

This would correspond to the picture of “Kantian liberalism” given by Michael Sandel. According to Sandel (1984, 3-4), Kantian liberalism is a political philosophy that seeks a “framework neutral among ends” that does not depend on any “preferred way of life” or “conception of the good” and that does not “presuppose the superiority of one way of life over others.” There is a good deal in Kant to support this picture of politics. The problem of government can be solved, he says famously, by a “nation of devils,” provided that they have understanding (Kant 1797, 8:366). And this is because what matters, above all, is the establishment of a framework of impersonal rules to govern individuals’ otherwise arbitrary choices. Thus, for Kant, “right” is the union of different *Willküre* (powers of choice) rather than being aimed at the direct promotion of human beings’ character or virtue.

Forst does not see this threat, however. According to him, Kantianism requires simply that we “ask whether what we want to do is truly justifiable in an interpersonal-impartial (but not ‘impersonal’) way” (Forst 2023, 6) Since “the force of morality,” he writes, “really is the force of respecting others as equals (and as having equal dignity). It is not obvious why that should be incompatible with community—or with love, for that matter” (ibid., 7).

It is noteworthy that Forst moves here from morality to political values such as “interpersonal justifiability,” “community,” and “respect” in a way that Kant himself, I think, does not. Even if “interpersonal justifiability” is a good way to think about morality, is it a good way to think about politics? I think that there is a significant difference between a politics that takes place within a procedural framework—the “rule of law”—that abstracts from the character and ends of individuals entirely and a politics of personal accountability that would require us to justify our private ends and objectives to others. To me that sounds too much like submitting oneself to the authority of a consciousness-raising group—all the more worrying if you doubt, as I do, that the process of moral justification will in fact converge on a single point of agreement.

I am not at all sure if Forst himself intends to assimilate the political and the moral in the way I have just suggested, but here I must, reluctantly, break off our discussion, although I hope very much to be able to take it further in the future.

American Liberalism and Progress

When I read Samuel Goldman’s original and thought-provoking essay I had the uncanny feeling that perhaps Goldman had been looking over my own shoulder. An earlier version of *The Shadow of God* contained a final chapter that aimed to bring the argument of the book to bear on contemporary politics. That chapter contained a brief discussion of Theodore Parker, whom I

described as “the first visionary of American progressive liberalism.” Goldman’s essay vindicates, I think, that description, but also explains how complex Parker’s position was.

It is, I agree, instructive to compare Parker with both Schleiermacher and Kant. His religion is in some ways rationalistic, like Kant’s. Human beings are capable of knowing moral truth by their own consciences and this connects them with a divine justice that is (so far as I can tell) the same at all times and places. Parker also seems to have been a Pelagian: human beings are capable of taking right action without the need for assistance from divine grace. On the other hand, the retributive idea of justice that is so prominent in Kant (and in the British heirs of Bishop Butler, discussed by Boyd Hilton in *The Age of Atonement*) seems to have been absent from Parker. Unlike Kant, with his belief in the pivotal role of a Last Judgement, Parker believed in universal salvation—the church in West Roxbury where he preached is now the Theodore Parker Unitarian Universalist Church. Alongside this, as Goldman points out, Parker’s religion was one that must live “partly in the heart” (Goldman 2023, 8). He is, I am sure, correct in tracing this to Schleiermacher, as well as, perhaps, more native American influences such as the Transcendentalists and even Quakerism.

Parker’s politics were clear and principled. He advocated what he called “The American Idea”: “democracy, that is, a government of all the people, by all the people, for all the people; of course, a government after the principles of eternal justice, the unchanging law of God” (Parker, quoted Goldman 2023, 9). Above all, of course, this required the abolition of slavery, the most flagrant contemporary transgression of divine law. As Goldman explains, religion and politics were knitted together in a progressive view of history: “theodicy could only take the form of human progress, inspired by a feeling of obligation to God, while guided by an understanding of His justice” (ibid., 8).

What lessons can we draw from this? Goldman thinks that such historical theodicies have been replaced by “cliody,” which sees history itself as a source of intelligibility and justice. At the same time, Goldman argues, beliefs in historical justification have become more partisan and dogmatic: “The long ‘arc of history,’ devoutly hoped for amidst the turmoil of contemporary events but never a certainty, has become the predetermined ‘right side of history’” (ibid., 14).

I very much agree with Goldman that what is called “liberalism” in the United States owes a great deal to a narrative of historical progress. But is it the detachment of that narrative from its religious origins that has made it more dogmatic and partisan? I doubt it. After all, was the theological progressive liberalism of the nineteenth century any less contentious? What was more polarizing in American history than slavery? The Abolitionists certainly seemed unattractively self-righteous to those who opposed them. But we do not hold that against them—after all, they were right!

In a lecture on progress given in 1989 (a good year for the concept) I explored how the liberal tradition had been connected with a historical view of human nature (Rosen 1989). Very briefly, I argued that at the heart of classical liberalism was the view that the remedy for the destructive forces behind religious conflict was toleration and that liberty itself would be transformative. I suggested that what had brought this historical optimism about human nature—“meliorism,” as George Eliot called it—to a close was the experience of the First World War: the way in which destructive human passions were allied to the power of modern, industrial technology to produce unimagined levels of devastation and destruction.

My speculation was that meliorism survived in the United States because the experience of the First World War did not shake American society to its core as it plainly did in Europe. Thus, a thinker like Reinhold Niebuhr, whose warnings that human nature is also sinful and that innocence can be dangerous, strike the European reader, to put it politely, as rather obvious, is

thought by Americans to be presenting novel and challenging insights. But I now think that that explanation was too simple. After all, the “procedural liberals” (Rawls, Nozick, Dworkin) whom Sandel identifies with Kant were American thinkers too, although not ones whose theories were framed around a historical theodicy or “cliodicy.” How do they relate to the modern, liberal progressivism that Goldman connects back to Theodore Parker?

In “Man as a Progressive Being,” I pointed out that liberalism characteristically has a two-stage picture of historical progress. Consider, for example, Mill’s contrast in *On Liberty* between the time when “mankind have become capable of being improved by free and equal discussion” and an earlier, “barbarous” epoch when “there is nothing for them but implicit obedience to an Akbar or a Charlemagne, if they are so fortunate as to find one” (Mill 1859 [1977], 224). A characteristic metaphor that expresses the idea is that of “leading-strings” (we find it, for example, in Turgot as well as Kant). Human development, like that of a child, can be thought of as divided into two stages: a first, in which the child must be constrained, and a second, at which the leading-strings are discarded, not because development is complete, but because the child is now capable of moving forward independently so that future development can take place in freedom.

The liberalism that we find in Theodore Parker, however, is essentially a doctrine of *emancipation*. For Parker, while slavery still existed, democracy was not a starting-point but a goal. Thus we might make a division of contemporary American liberalism as containing two poles: those who think that the preconditions of liberalism have been achieved and those who do not.

On the one hand, there are those—the thinkers whom Sandel calls “procedural liberals,” but also the pluralists who have dominated American political science for so long—who, while not uncritical of American political life, see its existing institutional framework of democracy and

the constitutional protection of individual rights as sufficient to be, at least, gradually self-correcting. On the other, are those who think of emancipation as incomplete. Either there are important rights-holders whose claims are still ignored (women, gays, lesbians, transsexual people, for example) or else, it is argued, the formal rights guaranteed by the legal system are not sufficient for social justice. At this point, progressivism slides across into radicalism. While each of the two groups can be said to have a historical picture, it is those who challenge the legitimacy of existing institutions because emancipation is still unachieved who are descended most clearly from Parker, it seems to me, and there is no doubt that their voices have become very much louder in recent years.

But theirs is, of course, not the only theo-politics on the contemporary American scene. There is also the view on the political right of America as a community threatened by outsiders who have somehow gained access to and even control of it. The “paranoid style” was identified by Richard Hofstadter with the anti-communists of the McCarthy era, but it is clearly much more permanent, as the proliferation of contemporary conspiracy theories amply documents. It can be traced back, or so I suggest, to evangelical Christianity’s preoccupation with the threat of Satan (“the father of lies”) to the community of the faithful. Put those two strands of theo-politics up against one another and it is no surprise that the United States currently finds itself with a deeply polarized political community in which neither side is prepared to acknowledge the legitimacy and good faith of the other.

These, of course, are speculations on my part and there is certainly a great deal more to be said, but I thank Goldman for carrying the discussion as far as he has.

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I have left it until last to express my gratitude to my interlocutors and to the editors of the *Critical Review* for creating the forum for us to carry on our debate, but by no means is it the least important of the things I have to say.

As I have explained, the conception of philosophy that underlies *The Shadow of God* is both personal (my reflective equilibrium may not be the same as yours) and embedded (carried out under particular circumstances at a particular time). So, although it is written as a monologue—it is, after all, based on a set of lectures—my hope was that its readers would take it as an invitation to take part in a shared process of reflection and evaluation, and that, even where author and reader end up at different points, both of us might find it clarifying. Joshua Cherniss, Rainer Forst, Samuel Goldman, Susan Shell, and Bernard Yack have invested a great deal of thought and effort into accepting that invitation. I have learned a lot from all of them and I thank them most sincerely.

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NOTE

¹ I cite Kant as follows: the year of publication and, after the comma, the volume number and, after the colon, the page number, to the Academy Edition of Kant's work ("Kant 1968").