

# ON THE SUBJECTIVITY OF KANTIAN MORAL BELIEF AND ITS PRIVATE CHARACTER

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**Abstract.** *Kant's conception of moral Belief appears to involve an inner tension; on the one hand, he ascribes to Belief the status of conviction or universal validity, while on the other he describes it as having a private, 'only for myself' character. This paper argues that Belief indeed encompasses both aspects and that the tension between these two dimensions is only apparent. As the paper shows, this seeming conflict can be explained by appealing to the non-epistemic character of the grounds of Belief and the distinction between the act of Believing and the content of Belief.*

**Keywords.** *Belief; Assent; Conviction; Subjectivity; Moral Disposition*

Kant's conception of moral Belief appears to involve an inner tension; on the one hand, he ascribes to Belief the status of conviction or universal validity, while on the other he describes it as having a private, 'only for myself' character<sup>1</sup>. In this paper, I will argue that Belief indeed encompasses both aspects and that the tension between these two dimensions is only apparent. As I will show, this seeming conflict can be explained by appealing to grounds of Belief and the distinction between the act and the content of Belief<sup>2</sup>. I begin by sketching Kant's conception of Belief

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<sup>1</sup> Luca Fonnesu highlights the private dimension of moral Belief in *Kant on Private Faith and Public Knowledge*, «Rivista di Filosofia», CVI (3), 2015, pp. 361-390, pp. 380-381.

<sup>2</sup> The German *Glaube* or *Glauben*, as Kant uses it, is not easily translated into English. It is a matter of debate whether *Glauben* plainly involves belief in the contemporary sense, namely as the attitude we have whenever we take something to be the case or regard it as true. As a translation of *Glaube*, 'faith' seems overly

as a mode of holding-to-be-true and the position Belief occupies within his taxonomy of propositional attitudes (section 1). I then turn to the peculiarity of both moral Belief as a form of assent and its grounds (section 2), clarifying its subjective character and hinting at the distinction between it and wishful thinking. Finally, I argue that the alleged privacy and deep subjectivity of Belief should be viewed as a mark of its freedom and that moral Belief is also trust in reason (section 3)<sup>3</sup>.

### 1. *On the taxonomy of propositional attitudes*

Throughout his works, Kant presents Belief (*Glaube*) as a legitimate mode of assent or holding-to-be-true (or holding-for-true) (*Fürwahrhalten*), namely a type of attitude that a subject can take toward «the judgment through which something is *represented as true*»<sup>4</sup>. In a famous, dense and much discussed passage in the first *Critique* (1781), Belief is distinguished from two other attitudes, namely knowledge and opinion:

*Having an opinion* is taking something to be true with the consciousness that it is subjectively *as well as* objectively insufficient. If taking something to be true is only subjectively

narrow since, in principle, *Glauben* is not restricted to matters of faith. To avoid misunderstanding, I shall therefore follow Andrew Chignell (cf. A. Chignell, *Belief in Kant*, «Philosophical Review», XL (1), 2007, pp. 323-360, p. 335 n.) in translating Kantian *Glaube(n)* as ‘Belief’ with a capital B.

<sup>3</sup> Kant’s works are cited throughout the text according to the Akademie-Ausgabe (AA) – I. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, (ed. by) vol. 1-22 Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 23 Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, from vol. 24 Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Berlin, 1900ff) – with an indication of the standard abbreviation, the volume and page number, with the exception of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV, A and B).

<sup>4</sup> I. Kant, *Logik*, in AA 09, p. 66; Eng. trans. by J. Michael Young, *The Jäsche logic*, in I. Kant, *Lectures on logic*, translated and edited by J. M. Young, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 570 (hereinafter referred to as *Log*).

sufficient and is at the same time held to be objectively insufficient, then it is called *Believing*. Finally, when taking something to be true is both subjectively and objectively sufficient it is called *knowing*<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> *KrV* A 822/B 850; Eng. trans. and ed. by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood, *Critique of pure reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 686. Cf., among other contributions, the invaluable book by M. Capozzi, *Kant e la logica*, Napoli, Bibliopolis, 2002, pp. 541-569; L. Stevenson, *Opinion, Belief or Faith, and Knowledge*, «Kantian Review», VII, 2003, pp. 72-101; Chignell, *Belief in Kant*; L. Pasternack, *Kant on Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, London and New York, Routledge, 2014, ch. 1; Fonnesu, *Kant on Private Faith*; T. Höwing, *Kant on Opinion, Belief, and Knowledge*, in *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy*, ed. by T. Höwing, Berlin, De Gruyter, 2016, pp. 201-222; L. Mileti Nardo, *Forme della certezza. Genesi e implicazioni del Fürwahrhalten in Kant*, Pisa, ETS, 2021, who also offers an accurate reconstruction of the historical background of the concept of assent. The rather complicated development of the use of the word *Glaube* in Kant's work is described in L. Pasternack, *The Development and Scope of Kantian Belief: The Highest Good, the Practical Postulates and the Fact of Reason*, «Kant-Studien», CII (3), 2011, pp. 290-315. Moral Belief – the form of assent that is our focus here – is a species of this general attitude. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant claims that «[o]nly in a *practical relation* [...] can taking something that is theoretically insufficient to be true be called Believing» (*KrV* A 823/B 851; Eng. trans., p. 686). Belief is distinguished by the fact that it is a 'taking something to be true' in a way that is sufficient for acting. Here as in other texts in which the reference to a practical relation is meant in a wider sense, including 'pragmatic' situations in which one must decide on a course of action in relation to arbitrary and contingent ends, 'moral Belief' (cf. A 828/B 856; Eng. trans., p. 688) refers to Belief in the *moral-practical* domain of the «absolutely necessary ends» of morality (cf., e.g., *KrV* A 823-824/B 851-852; Eng. trans., p. 686 and *Log*, AA 09, pp. 67-68 n.; Eng. trans., p. 572) – an attitude that concerns claims regarding a small group of objects (the highest good, the existence of God and the immortality of the soul). Other forms of Belief, such as the so-called «doctrinal Belief» in extraterrestrial life (cf. *KrV* A 826-828/B 854-856; Eng. trans., pp. 688-689. On this notion cf. Capozzi, *Kant e la logica*, pp. 557-560; A. Chignell, *Kant on Theoretical (or 'Doctrinal') Belief and the Status of Metaphysics*, «Studi Kantiani», XXXVII, 2024, pp. 105-126) and Belief in testimony, gradually fade into the background or are abandoned or absorbed into opinion (evidence for this

Kant introduces this as a distinction among the «three stages» that «taking something to be true, or the subjective validity of judgment», has «in relation to conviction (which at the same time is valid objectively)»<sup>6</sup>. All three stages, namely opinion (*Meinen*), Belief (*Glaube*) and knowledge (*Wissen*), involve assent, meaning that if someone opines, Believes or knows that *p*, she takes *p* to be true, in the sense that *p* has subjective validity for her.

Unfortunately, Kant is not as clear as we might hope regarding the meaning of the terms he uses to contrast these modes of holding-to-be-true – namely ‘subjectively sufficient/insufficient’ and ‘objectively sufficient/insufficient’. One might be tempted, following Lawrence Pasternack, to treat ‘objective sufficiency’ as an epistemic notion (namely as meaning that the ground of the assent is sufficient to guarantee its truth) and ‘subjective sufficiency’ as referring not to the grounds of assent but to our orientation toward the proposition at issue, that is, to the psychological state of firmly holding a proposition to be true<sup>7</sup>. This is not entirely convincing, however, as ‘subjectively sufficient’ is a status that can also be attributed to grounds. In the case of opinion, for example, it is true that one does not firmly hold a judgment to be true; nevertheless, one may still have a ground that makes it reasonable to assent to the judgment. Opining, we read in the *Jäsche Logik*, «is holding-to-be-true based on a ground of cognition that is neither subjectively nor objectively sufficient»<sup>8</sup>.

Holding a judgment to be true undoubtedly involves some degree of commitment to its truth or of conviction; otherwise, one

change is provided by Pasternack, *The Development*). Cf. *Log*, AA 09, p. 73 n.; Eng. trans., p. 576 and I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, in AA 05, p. 469; Eng. trans. by P. Guyer and E. Matthews, ed. by P. Guyer, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2000, p. 333.

<sup>6</sup> KrV A 822/B 850; Eng. trans., p. 686.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. L. Pasternack, *Kant on Opinion: Assent, Hypothesis, and the Norms of General Applied Logic*, «Kant-Studien», CV (1), 2014, pp. 41-82, pp. 42-45.

<sup>8</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 66; Eng. trans., p. 571.

must refrain from assenting to the judgment<sup>9</sup>. But states of conviction are connected to what makes assent reasonable – I will call this a ‘ground’<sup>10</sup> – or what makes it rationally appropriate for the subject to assent to the judgment, which can be either true or false. As Thomas Höwing observes, this suggests that when Kant distinguishes between opinion, Belief and knowledge as modes of assent, he is thinking about the different ways in which a ground might make it rationally appropriate for someone to assent to a judgment, where the expression ‘subjective sufficiency/insufficiency’ refers to the (normative) force of the ground for the subject<sup>11</sup>. In other words, Kant may be distinguishing modes of assent according to their level of justification – levels that determine strength of conviction, which is an important aspect of the distinction between modes of assent. A more detailed formulation of the distinction between modes of assent found in the *Jäsche Logik* will help us to fill in this interpretation.

### 1.1. The assertoric character of Belief

In the passages at issue, the distinction between modes of assent is formulated in light of a distinction between certainty and uncertainty. Kant first argues that while truth is «an *objective property* of cognition», assent or holding-to-be-true concerns «*subjectively*» the representation of something «as true», and therefore «the relation to an understanding and thus to a particular subject». He then distinguishes between «two kinds» of holding-to-be true «in general», that is, «*certain or uncertain*»:

<sup>9</sup> This aspect of *Fürwahrhalten* is emphasized in B. Dörflinger, *Der Gottesglaube im Kontext der moralischen Vernunftreligion Kants – eine eingeschränkte Art des Fürwahrhaltens*, «Aufklärung», XXXVI, 2024, pp. 399-414.

<sup>10</sup> Without delving into the details of Kant’s epistemology, I take a ground to be empirical evidence, testimony, rational demonstration, or some other form of warrant that can support a claim. When such a ground becomes objectively sufficient, it provides the epistemic justification needed for the claim to count as knowledge.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Höwing, *Kant on Opinion*, *passim*.

Certain holding-to-be-true, or *certainty*, is combined with consciousness of necessity, while uncertain holding-to-be-true, or *uncertainty*, is combined with consciousness of the contingency or the possibility of the opposite. The latter is again either *subjectively as well as objectively* insufficient, or *objectively insufficient* but *subjectively sufficient*. *The former* is called *opinion*, *the latter* must be called *Belief*<sup>12</sup>.

Following this clarification, Kant introduces his taxonomy of modes of assent:

Accordingly, there are *three kinds or modi* of holding-to-be-true: *opining*, *Believing*, and *knowing*. Opining is *problematic* judging, Believing is *assertoric* judging, and knowing is *apodeictic* judging. For what I merely opine I hold in judging, with consciousness, only to be problematic; what I Believe I hold to be *assertoric*, but not as objectively necessary, only as subjectively so (holding only for me); what I *know*, finally, I hold to be *apodeictically certain*, i.e., to be universally and objectively necessary (holding for all), even granted that the object to which this certain holding-to-be-true relates should be a merely empirical truth<sup>13</sup>.

In this passage, the distinction between modes of assent is related to the modality of judgments. As Höwing observes, Kant seems to be mapping, in modal terms, the kind of relation that holds between a ground, the subject of an assent and the assent itself<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the passage introduces the scope of the validity of the

<sup>12</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 66; Eng. trans., p. 571.

<sup>13</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 66; Eng. trans., p. 571. This last claim is slightly puzzling given that Kant usually associates apodictic judgment with logical necessity or cognition «from grounds *a priori*» (I. Kant, *Logik Dobna-Wundlacken*, in AA 24, p. 735; Eng. trans. by J. Michael Young, *The Dobna-Wundlacken logic*, in I. Kant, *Lectures on logic*, trans. and ed. by J. M. Young, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 470. Hereinafter referred to as *V-Lo/Dobna*). We can assume that in the case of an empirical truth Kant presupposes that others have access to the ground that makes my assent (not my judgment) necessary.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Höwing, *Kant on Opinion*, p. 208.

assent – «for all» or «only for me» – as an element that distinguishes Belief from knowledge.

Roughly, when I represent something as true in the mode of opining, my assent is in no way required. Opining is uncertain and both subjectively and objectively insufficient. This does not mean that it is arbitrary, however. As I have hinted, holding a judgment to be true involves a certain level of conviction. This is precisely what Kant claims when he observes that «I must never undertake to have an opinion without at least knowing something by means of which the in itself merely problematic judgment acquires a connection with truth»<sup>15</sup>. When Kant writes that opining is problematic judging, he likely means that although the subject has access to knowledge that offers epistemic support for a judgment, the subject is nonetheless conscious of the possibility of the opposite, and thus it is up to her whether to assent to it. By contrast, the subject represents something as true in the mode of knowing when her assent is based on a ground that, giving access to truth, makes that assent necessary not only for her but for all<sup>16</sup>.

In the case of Belief, what Kant says may appear puzzling. He describes this assent as «assertoric judging». Yet how is assertion possible if the holding-to-be-true is uncertain? How can a subject affirm the truth of a judgment if she is conscious of the possibility of the opposite? The passage suggests that this happens in response to a subjective necessity, which means that the assent to the judgment is based on a ground that requires the subject to assent but would not necessarily require others to do so. The subject does not hold as objectively necessary what she Believes. This suggests that the ground of her Believing is different from that of knowledge; that

<sup>15</sup> *KrV* A 822/B 850; Eng. trans., p. 686.

<sup>16</sup> As Höwing (cf. *ivi*, p. 209) suggests, it is worth recalling Kant's claim in the *Prolegomena* that objective validity and necessary universality are "interchangeable concepts" (I. Kant, *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik*, in AA 04, p. 298; Eng. trans. G. Hatfield, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2004, p. 51).

is, it is a non-epistemic ground<sup>17</sup>. But then what is its character, such that, allowing for the possibility of asserting something uncertain, this ground can be the source of subjective necessity? Before turning to this question, let us take stock.

We have seen that Kant regards knowledge as both objectively and subjectively sufficient; it is the form of assent with the highest degree of justification and is therefore held with certainty in the sense of maximal confidence in its truth: «*certainty* is combined with consciousness of necessity»<sup>18</sup>. If sufficiency – both objective and subjective – is the justificatory mark that separates knowledge from all other propositional attitudes, then both Belief and opinion (or the judgements to which the subject assents in holding these attitudes) lack epistemic justification, and thus they are uncertain holdings-to-be-true and should be accompanied by an awareness that they could be false. Or at least this seems to be so, as while opinion is an uncertain holding-to-be-true, Belief implies a kind of certainty and is «the subjectively inalterable assertion of truth»: «we are convinced that neither we ourselves nor any other person will ever be in possession of greater grounds for the opposite»<sup>19</sup>.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. I. Kant, *Wiener-Logik*, in AA 24, p. 896; Eng. trans. by J. Michael Young, *The Vienna logic*, in Kant, *Lectures on logic*, p. 341 (hereinafter referred to as *V-Lo/Wiener*).

<sup>18</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 66; Eng. trans., p. 571.

<sup>19</sup> I. Kant, *Handschriftlicher Nachlaß*, in AA 18, p. 288; Eng. trans. by C. Bowman, P. Guyer, F. Rausher; ed. by P. Guyer, *Notes and Fragments*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 272). At times Kant's stance is more nuanced. He notes that it may be that I cannot Believe in a future life, for example, but have reason enough «to act as if such a thing were the case. – Thus there is a reason that is adequate from a practical point of view, although the theoretical reason is inadequate for me; and, as concerns the latter, I may well doubt it» [Kant, *Nachlaß*, in AA 16, p. 395, Reflexion 2503 (1790s.); Eng. trans. in *Notes and Fragments*, p. 46 (hereinafter referred to as *Refl*). In the third *Critique*, this attitude is called «dubiety (*Zweifelglaube*)». In using this expression, Kant seems to emphasize the limited character of assent in which a lack of conviction «on the basis of grounds of speculative reason» can be outweighed, in light of «a critical insight into the limits of speculative reason», by a «practical affirmation (*Fürwahrhalten*)» (KU § 91, in AA

This asymmetry hints at a difference between the grounds of the assent. According to Kant, when someone assents to a proposition in the mode of opinion, she has no grounds that require her assent. Nevertheless, opining involves having some epistemic grounds in favour of the opined proposition. As Höwing observes, an opinion must be based on facts that are available to a subject «in the mode of knowledge and that provide at least weak to moderate epistemic support for the proposition in question»<sup>20</sup>. This does not seem to hold true for Believing. Here, it is worth recalling Kant's observation, addressed to the metaphysicians, regarding the proposition 'God exists': «enough remains left to you to speak the language, justified by the sharpest reason, of a firm *Belief*, even though you must surrender that of *knowledge*»<sup>21</sup>. Clearly, if Belief had nothing to do with reasons or grounds, the notion of truth would be inapplicable; conversely, if the assent at issue were nothing but a matter of (objective) reasons, the notion of Belief would be inapplicable. Kant hints at a justification «by the sharpest reason», which seems to make room for an ontologically committal Belief in the existence of God<sup>22</sup>. At the same time, however, he does not regard this justification as epistemic. But then what kind of justification is it, and how can it ground a «subjectively inalterable assertion of truth»?

05, p. 472; Eng. trans., p. 336). This would be assent combined with doubt, a wavering in Believing (cf. I. Kant, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*, in AA 05, p. 146; Eng. trans. and ed. by M. Gregor, revised by A. Reath, *Critique of Practical Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2015, p. 117 [hereinafter referred to as *KpV*]). The notion of *Zweifelglaube* deserves more than a mere mention in a footnote; for reasons of space, I can only hope to deal with it in a future paper.

<sup>20</sup> Höwing, *Kant on Opinion*, p. 214.

<sup>21</sup> *KrV*, A 744-745/B 772-773; Eng. trans., p. 646. The passage echoes Kant's famous «I had to deny *knowledge* in order to make room for *faith*» (*KrV*, B XXX; Eng. trans., p. 117). In Kant's view, *Wissen* and *Glauben* are mutually exclusive: «If you know that *p*, you cannot *glauben* that *p*, and *vice versa*» (Höwing, *Kant on Opinion*, p. 201, n. 3).

<sup>22</sup> For a deflationary, less ontologically committal reading of Belief, cf. P. Rumore, *Kant, Religion, and the Psychology of Reason*, «Lexicon Philosophicum», Special Issues, 2024, pp. 295-304, p. 301.

## 2. *On the grounds of Belief*

Let us return to Kant's taxonomy of modes of assent. Belief as a mode of holding-to-be-true occupies a kind of middle ground between opinion and knowledge. Like knowledge, Belief has a ground that requires the subject who possesses it to assent; like that of opinion, however, such a ground does not require the possible assent of all others: «what I Believe I hold to be *assertoric*, but not as objectively necessary, only as subjectively so (holding only for me)». Belief is only subjectively sufficient. I can be certain of or firmly committed to the truth of the proposition that I Believe, but the fact that I hold what I Believe to be true only for me suggests that the ground of my Believing does not deliver epistemic justification: it requires *me*, but not others, to accept the truth of a judgment for which I lack sufficient theoretical justification. As Kant notes: «I find myself obliged to think in this fashion»<sup>23</sup>.

To understand what is distinctive about the ground of Belief, it is helpful to consider the following remark. Discussing Belief in God, Kant claims that since «it depends on subjective grounds (of moral disposition) I must not even say '*It is* morally certain that there is a God,' [...], but rather '*I am* morally certain'»<sup>24</sup>. To say '*it is* morally certain' would be to imply that I possess grounds that demand everyone's assent<sup>25</sup>. However, Kant limits the scope of

<sup>23</sup> Kant, *Nachlaß*, in AA 16, p. 482 (Reflexion 2716 [1780-89]). By *Belief*, Kant observes, «we understand an assumption [...], which is necessary only because it is necessarily implied by an objective practical rule of conduct» (I. Kant, *Welches sind die wirklichen Fortschritte, die die Metaphysik seit Leibnitzens und Wolf's Zeiten in Deutschland gemacht hat?*, in AA 20, p. 297; Eng. trans. by P. Heath, *What real progress has Metaphysics made in Germany since the time of Leibniz and Wolff?*, in I. Kant, *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781*, ed. by H. Allison and P. Heath, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, p. 386).

<sup>24</sup> *KrV* A 829/B 857; Eng. trans., p. 689.

<sup>25</sup> The *Logik Dobna-Wundlacken* (1792) puts the point as follows: «Certainty is the objective sufficiency of holding-to-be-true. In the case of Belief it is subjective. There I can only say: *I am* certain. But in the case of certainty: *It is* certain, this is universally valid» (*V-Lo/Dobna*, in AA 24, p. 734; Eng. trans., p. 470). On the

certainty to the subject who claims that God exists, as if the (normative) force of the grounds of the assent had a grip on her alone. What makes these grounds *subjective*, holding «only for me»?

Kant refers to them as grounds «of moral disposition». If we take this to mean a decision to act in accordance with the moral law and consider its implications, we can gain a sense of the subjective character of the grounds at issue. A *locus classicus* in this regard is a section of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788) in which, under the title «On Assent (*Fürwahrhalten*) from a Need of Pure Reason»<sup>26</sup>, Kant describes Belief as a positive epistemic attitude towards a judgment, in which justification is supplied not by empirical or theoretical evidence but – strange as it may seem – by a need of pure practical reason itself.

### 2.1. The *casus extraordinarius*

Roughly, a need of pure practical reason is a need «based» on the duty «of making something (the highest good) the object of my will so as to promote it with all my powers»<sup>27</sup>. As for what the highest good is, it may suffice to recall that it is a distribution of happiness in accordance with moral worth. Kant claims that the moral law requires us to promote this end, but he also acknowledges that in doing so, reason finds itself in an awkward position. For while reason affirms the moral duty to realize the highest good, it also confronts the *subjective* impossibility of conceiving of a world in which, as that end requires, happiness is fully proportionate to moral worthiness<sup>28</sup>. Since the moral law obliges us to promote this end, we must presuppose – as a need of practical reason – at least that it is possible, as «it would be practically impossible to strive for

notion of moral certainty and its historical roots, cf. L. Fonnesu, *Kant on 'Moral Certainty'*, in *Kant und die Aufklärung*, ed. by L. Cataldi Madonna, P. Rumore, Hildesheim-Zürich-New York, Olms, 2011, pp. 183-204.

<sup>26</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 142; Eng. trans., p. 114.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *ivi*, p. 145; Eng. trans., p. 116.

the object of a concept that would be, at bottom, empty and without an object»<sup>29</sup>.

Thus a need of reason functions as a subjective principle of determination – a principle that both compels and justifies us in assuming certain things: not only the possibility of the highest good but the *conditions* of its possibility, namely, insofar as reason can discern them, «God, freedom, and immortality»<sup>30</sup>.

The core of Kant's argument is clear (although whether it is valid is another matter): we have a duty to make the highest good the object of our will<sup>31</sup>. To doubt the possibility of this object «would be tantamount to calling in question the moral law itself»<sup>32</sup>; hence we must presuppose the conditions that make it possible<sup>33</sup>. This supposition is «*a need from an absolutely necessary point of view*», namely from the

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, p. 143; Eng. trans., p. 115.

<sup>30</sup> Ivi, p. 142; Eng. trans., p. 114. As Kant notes, the «possibility of the highest good as the object of the power of choice» is the «practically necessary presupposition of an object», and «hence» also «of the condition of this possibility (God, freedom, and immortality). This is a subjective necessity of assuming the reality of the object for the sake of the necessary determination of the will. This is the *casus extraordinarius*, without which practical reason cannot sustain itself with regard to its necessary end» (*Refl*, AA 16, p. 514, Reflexion 2793 [1790-1804]; Eng. trans., p. 52).

<sup>31</sup> An anonymous reviewer rightly pointed out to me that it may be doubted that we have a duty to promote the highest good, given that it is not completely in our power to attain it. Therefore, my formulation may be too strong. Our duty is to obey the moral law, whatever its consequences and without proposing to us an end. Yet actions have ends as well as grounds, and if one asks what end morality is ultimately conducive to, or what end is assigned to us by practical reason, the conclusion should be that it is the highest good. Promoting the highest good is no different from acting in accordance with the moral law. Admittedly, this question is more complex than these simple observations suggest, but I cannot adequately deal with it here. It is discussed in depth by P. Kleingeld, *Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good*, in *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy*, pp. 33-50, and B. Recki, *Kant on Happiness and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good*, ivi, pp. 71-88.

<sup>32</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 144; Eng. trans., p. 116.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. ivi, p. 142; Eng. trans., p. 114.

point of view of moral duty<sup>34</sup>. Therefore, although we can neither refute nor «prove God, freedom, and immortality by [our] speculative reason», we are, on the basis of that need, justified in presupposing them as theoretical claims that «speculative reason must concede»<sup>35</sup>. That God exists is a theoretical assumption; when related to the intelligibility «of an object given to us by the moral law (the highest good), and consequently of a need for practical purposes», however, «it can be called Belief». Indeed, Kant points out, it is «a pure rational Belief since pure reason alone (in its theoretical as well as in its practical use) is the source from which it springs»<sup>36</sup>. It is a *Belief*, let us recall, insofar as it involves taking something to be true in a way that is «sufficient for acting»<sup>37</sup> (as we have seen, a relation to action is integral to Belief).

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 143; Eng. trans., p. 115.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 144; Eng. trans., p. 116. Kant's argument could also be rephrased as follows: if observance of the moral law is to be conceived of as the cause of the realisation of the highest good (as an end), then, since humans are incapable of effecting happiness in proportion to worthiness on their own, the existence of a future life and of a God, under whose providence this could come about, must be assumed. According to Kant, we are justified in supposing them «not merely as a permitted hypothesis but as a postulate from a practical point of view» (Ivi, p. 143; Eng. trans., p. 115). As is well known, Kant calls those propositions to which we assent in the form of Belief «postulates». These are theoretical propositions that, though not demonstrable as such, are attached «inseparably to an a priori unconditionally valid *practical* law» (ivi, p. 122; Eng. trans., p. 99). For interpretation, cf. M. Willaschek, *The Primacy of Practical Reason and the Idea of a Practical Postulate*, in *Kant's 'Critique of Practical Reason': A Critical Guide*, ed. by A. Reath and J. Timmermann, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 168-196. That the objects of rational Belief are presuppositions necessarily connected to the moral law and the end of the highest good suggests – as Georg Sans emphasizes – that moral Belief, as a mode of holding-to-be-true, is not incompatible with the form of logical deduction (cf. G. Sans, *Wissen und Glauben bei Kant – ein historisches Missgeschick?*, in *Kant und die Philosophie in weltbürgerlicher Absicht. Akten des XI. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, ed. by S. Bacin, A. Ferrarin, C. La Rocca & M. Ruffin, Boston, De Gruyter, 2013, pp. 937-947, p. 941).

<sup>36</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 126; Eng. trans., p. 102.

<sup>37</sup> *Refl*, AA 16, p. 514 (Reflexion 2793 [1790-1804]); Eng. trans., p. 51.

If reason is the source of Belief, however, as Kant emphasizes at the end of the section I am referring to, assent to the proposition ‘God exists’ is a «a voluntary [*freiwillig*] determination of our judgment». I will return to this aspect of Belief. For now, it is enough to point out that this aspect of assent depends on the way in which we conceive of the highest good as possible, and this «rests with our choice, in which a free interest of pure practical reason decides for the assumption of a wise author of the world»<sup>38</sup>. As we read in a note written by Kant: «The disposition to the moral laws leads to an object of the power of choice determinable by pure reason. The assumption of the feasibility of this object and thus of the reality of its cause is a moral belief, which is necessarily affirming something to be true freely and in a moral respect, as the fulfilment of one’s ends»<sup>39</sup>.

To sum up, pure practical rational (or moral) Belief arises «from the moral disposition»<sup>40</sup> – or, more precisely, from a combination of a decision to act according to the moral law and therefore from one’s moral interest and a lack of theoretical evidence concerning the truth of certain facts (the conditions of the object of the moral law). As a representation of something as true, it is a cognitive state; however, its ground has a non-epistemic character<sup>41</sup>. This aspect, namely the fact that «my interest [...] unavoidably determines my judgment»<sup>42</sup>, is unique to Belief, since in the case of knowledge and opinion convincing proofs or facts that provide some epistemic support for the judgment determine the assent or make it rationally appropriate for the agent. This connection to one’s moral interest is also the reason why Kant often uses the first person when speaking of

<sup>38</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 145-146; Eng. trans., p. 117.

<sup>39</sup> *Refl*, AA 16, p. 515 (Reflexion 2794 [1790-1804]); Eng. trans., pp. 52-53.

<sup>40</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 146; Eng. trans., p. 117.

<sup>41</sup> To be sure, moral Belief «contributes nothing to cognition» [*Refl*, AA 16, p. 512, Reflexion 2790 (1790-1804)]; Eng. trans., p. 51; it is not «a particular source of cognition. It is a way of consciously affirming something to be true in an incomplete fashion», characterized by the relation that it has, «as cognition, to acting» (ivi, p. 513, Reflexion 2793 [1790-1804]; Eng. trans., p. 51).

<sup>42</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 143; Eng. trans., p. 115.

Belief and claims that the certainty of Belief is not universally valid. As I will argue in the next section, it is also why, although what I Believe «I hold only for me», this assent is not mere ‘persuasion’ (*Überredung*).

### 3. *The subjectivity of Belief*

On this issue, Kant’s argumentation may appear slightly slippery. The section of the first *Critique* that treats the distinction between opinion, knowledge and Belief opens with the following statement:

Taking something to be true is an occurrence in our understanding that may rest on objective grounds, but that also requires subjective causes in the mind of him who judges. If it is valid for everyone merely as long as he has reason, then its ground is objectively sufficient, and in that case taking something to be true is called *conviction*. If it has its ground only in the particular constitution of the subject, then it is called *persuasion*<sup>43</sup>.

He then claims: «I cannot assert anything, i.e., pronounce it to be a judgment necessarily valid for everyone, except that which produces conviction»<sup>44</sup>. Given that Belief holds ‘only for me’, this appears to imply that Belief is a form of persuasion and thus that it has «only private validity». On the other hand, as we have seen, Kant also regards Believing as a form of *assertoric* judging, and assertion involves pronouncing a judgment to be valid for everyone. What, then, distinguishes the ‘only for me’ of Belief from the private validity of persuasion?

#### 3.1. Belief, wishful thinking and conviction

Let us first briefly consider how Kant conceives of persuasion. A passage from the *Wiener Logik* may suffice for this purpose<sup>45</sup>. Here, persuasion is described as

<sup>43</sup> *KrV*, A 820/B 848; Eng. trans., pp. 684-685.

<sup>44</sup> *Ivi*, A 821-822/B 849-850; Eng. trans., p. 685.

<sup>45</sup> For a more extensive account of persuasion, cf. Nardo, *Forme della certezza*, pp. 318-325.

that holding-to-be-true on the basis of grounds of which one does not oneself know whether they are subjective or objective [...]. We are attracted by something and we call this persuasion, because we cannot give an account of our holding-to-be-true, and cannot say whether the cause of the holding-to-be-true lies in our sense and touches our inclination, or whether the understanding has gotten it from cognition of the object<sup>46</sup>.

Persuasion is further characterized as typical of those «who feed themselves with hope», and it is claimed that allowing oneself easily to be persuaded, or easily persuading oneself, «indicates a shallow mode of thought». As Kant goes on to observe, «[t]his is a major cause of the fact that men find no difficulty in accepting this or that proposition in religion. They persuade themselves easily, although they cannot indicate a ground for this»<sup>47</sup>.

Two elements of persuasion are emphasized in these lines. The first is that one who is persuaded cannot indicate the grounds of her assent, whether they are connected to the senses or to cognition. The second is that persuasion may have extra-logical sources, e.g., hope. These kinds of sources would seem to be particularly relevant to religion, as they make it easy for people to accept «this or that proposition». In this respect, persuasion closely resembles what we commonly call ‘wishful thinking’. Might Belief, then, be a case of such thinking? After all, as we have seen, it constitutes a «voluntary determination of our judgment»<sup>48</sup>.

The passages just quoted suggest what distinguishes Belief from wishful thinking in a negative sense – namely, the kind that takes the form of persuasion. This occurs when individuals take something to be true by allowing their desires «to trespass in a field that belongs

<sup>46</sup> *V-Lo/Wiener*, AA 24, p. 889; Eng. trans., p. 336.

<sup>47</sup> Ivi, p. 890; Eng. trans., p. 336.

<sup>48</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 146; Eng. trans., p. 117. The at least possible overlap of moral Belief and persuasion or wishful thinking is pointed out by Fonnesu, *Kant on Private Faith*, pp. 381-382. Cf. also L. Fonnesu, *Kant on Communication*, «Studi Kantiani», XXXII, 2019, pp. 11-23, pp. 21-22.

exclusively to reason», thereby accepting poor arguments in its favour or downplaying evidence against it<sup>49</sup>. As Kant observes, people sometimes need «something that satisfies» them<sup>50</sup>, yet they cannot articulate the grounds of their persuasion and do not know whether those grounds are subjective or objective. Worse still, they may take them to be objectively valid when in fact they are merely private. In this case, persuasion becomes «the illusion of conviction»<sup>51</sup>, «a mere semblance (*Schein*), since the ground of the judgment, which lies solely in the subject, is held to be objective»<sup>52</sup>, namely as a ground on which conviction can be based. As a consequence, persuasion that creates a false impression of conviction may lead someone to think they know something when they do not<sup>53</sup>.

To be sure, moral Belief can be considered a kind of wishful thinking in one sense, as it involves a certainty that lacks (theoretical) objective grounds and an element of volition enters into the assent<sup>54</sup>. But it is not wishful thinking in a negative sense, as it is grounded in an interest of practical reason: one holds the proposition ‘God exists’ to be true on the basis of grounds one knows to be subjective.

Nevertheless, Kant’s assertions in the first *Critique* may strike some as confusing, for while he seems to imply that Belief as a mode

<sup>49</sup> Cf. H. McCabe, *Faith within Reason*, ed. and introduced by B. Davies op, London, Continuum, 2007, pp. 9-10.

<sup>50</sup> *V-Lo/Wiener*, AA 24, p. 890; Eng. trans., p. 336. “[...] frequently we take something to be certain merely because it pleases us, and we take something to be uncertain merely because it displeases or annoys us” (*V-Lo/Blomberg*, AA 24, p. 198; Eng. trans., p. 157 quoted in Fonnesu, *Kant on Communication*, p. 21).

<sup>51</sup> *V-Lo/Dohna*, AA 24, p. 732; Eng. trans., p. 468.

<sup>52</sup> *KrV*, A820/B 848; Eng. trans., p. 685.

<sup>53</sup> On conviction and persuasion, cf. Capozzi, *Kant e la logica*, pp. 619-624.

<sup>54</sup> Echoing one of the meanings of the Latin *postulo*, Kant writes: «The upright man, may well say: I *will* that there be a God, that my existence in this world be also an existence in a pure world of the understanding beyond natural connections, and finally that my duration be endless». He imagines this person as saying: «I stand by this, [...] and I will not let this belief be taken from me» (*KpV*, AA 05, p. 143; Eng. trans., p. 115). Belief, Kant states, can «often waver even in the well-disposed but can never fall into unbelief» (ivi, AA 05, p. 146; Eng. trans., p. 117).

of holding-to-be-true is not conviction, he also claims that Belief is subjectively sufficient and that «[s]ubjective sufficiency» is called conviction (for myself)<sup>55</sup>, suggesting that conviction arises in the subject when she is aware that she has sufficient subjective grounds to hold something to be true. Assuming he is not being ambiguous, he must, as Andrew Chignell suggests, be operating with different concepts of ‘conviction’, though without explicitly distinguishing them. Kant is presumably implying a distinction that is clearly traced in the *Jäsche Logik*<sup>56</sup>, where it is claimed that, from «observations concerning the nature and the kinds of holding-to-be-true», we can draw the «result» that

all our conviction is [...] either *logical* or *practical*. When we know, namely, that we are free of all subjective grounds and yet the holding-to-be-true is sufficient, then we are *convinced*, and in fact *logically* convinced, or convinced on *objective* grounds (the object is certain). Complete holding-to-be-true on subjective grounds, which in a *practical relation* hold just as much as objective grounds, is also conviction, though not logical but rather *practical* conviction (*I am certain*). And this practical conviction, or this *moral Belief of reason*, is often firmer than all knowledge. With knowledge one still listens to opposed grounds, but not with Belief, because here it does not depend on objective grounds but on the moral interest of the subject<sup>57</sup>.

This passage reaffirms that Belief is a form of holding-to-be-true based on subjective grounds and that, since these subjective grounds «in a practical relation» hold as objective grounds, the stance one takes on what one holds to be true is conviction. The passage further suggests that what allows subjective grounds to hold as objective is the context of a practical relation or their relation to the moral interest of the subject. However, it seems also to imply that

<sup>55</sup> *KrV*, A 822/B 850; Eng. trans., p. 686.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Chignell, *Belief in Kant*, p. 59. Cf. also J. S. Trullinger, *Kant's two Touchstones for Conviction: The Incommunicable Dimension of Moral Faith*, «The Review of Metaphysics», LXVII (2), 2013, pp. 369-403, pp. 383-384.

<sup>57</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 72; Eng. trans., p. 576.

such grounds, in functioning as objective grounds, do not lose their subjective character. Therefore, the certainty they convey will not be «for everyone», but only «for myself»<sup>58</sup>: «*I am certain*».

Clearly, in this case the ‘for myself’ character of conviction cannot mean ‘merely private’, for that would collapse the distinction between conviction and persuasion. Nevertheless, Belief does unavoidably share a feature with persuasion to the extent that it is also a form of holding-to-be-true that «cannot be communicated»<sup>59</sup>. In what follows, I aim to qualify this claim and to disentangle the subjectivity of Belief from the private character of persuasion.

### 3.2. Persuasion, Belief and communication

As we have seen, persuasion is characterized as a holding-to-be-true for which we cannot give an account and whose grounds we are unclear about<sup>60</sup> – specifically, «whether they are merely subjective or also objective»<sup>61</sup>. This gives rise to what Kant calls «the illusion of conviction»<sup>62</sup>, when a subject holds the grounds for assenting to a judgment to be objective, while in fact they stem from her «particular constitution»<sup>63</sup>.

Kant contrasts this case, in which a judgment «has only private validity» and assent to it «cannot be communicated»<sup>64</sup>, with that of theoretical conviction, where the object is the «common ground» on which the agreement of all judgments, «regardless of the difference among the subjects», rests<sup>65</sup>. He then introduces the communicability of the grounds of assent as a criterion for diagnosing the illusory character of persuasion:

<sup>58</sup> *KrV*, A 822/B 850; Eng. trans., p. 686.

<sup>59</sup> Ivi, A 820/B 848; Eng. trans., p. 685.

<sup>60</sup> Cf. *V-Lo/Wiener*, AA 24, p. 889; Eng. trans., p. 336.

<sup>61</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 73; Eng. trans., p. 576.

<sup>62</sup> *V-Lo/Dobna*, AA 24, p. 732; Eng. trans., p. 468.

<sup>63</sup> *KrV*, A 820/B 848; Eng. trans., p. 685.

<sup>64</sup> Ivi, A 820/B 848; Eng. trans., p. 685.

<sup>65</sup> Ivi, A 821/B 849; Eng. trans., p. 685.

[...] the experiment that one makes on the understanding of others, to see if the grounds that are valid for us have the same effect on the reason of others, is a means, though only a subjective one, not for producing conviction, to be sure, but yet for revealing the merely private validity of the judgment, i.e., something in it that is mere persuasion<sup>66</sup>.

How could a similar experiment, aimed at assessing the nature of the ground of our assent, be conducted with regard to moral Belief?

To answer this question it may be useful to start, echoing the theological distinction between *fides qua creditur* and *fides quae creditur*, by tracing a distinction between the *content* of moral Belief and the *act* of Believing<sup>67</sup>. According to Kant, we know «with certainty that no one else can know of any other conditions» that lead «to the end commanded by the moral law, except the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, etc.». We also know that the content of moral Belief «will concern these objects». This means that the content of moral Belief enjoys a necessity that is subjectively sufficient «absolutely and for every one»<sup>68</sup>. Both the adverb ‘absolutely’ and the ‘for every one’ characterization of the subjective necessity emphasize the validity of the content of the Belief without limiting it to particular circumstances or the particular constitution of the subject. This suggests that, like knowledge, the content of Belief can be communicated: we can know what moral Belief is about even if its content is not an object of knowledge. Moreover, we can know the grounds that lead to moral Belief in the existence of God, etc., and the effect that such a Belief can have on people’s minds. Yet things are not so simple. If Belief has grounds that can be acknowledged by anyone, why does Kant deny that it is communicable? Faith, he argues, «yields no conviction that can be communicated

<sup>66</sup> Ivi, A 821/B 849; Eng. trans., p. 685. Alongside the criterion of communicability, Kant also proposes an internal touchstone of conviction: a kind of introspective analysis aimed at understanding whether subjective causes erroneously held to be objective grounds have influenced one’s attitude toward a judgment (cf. *ibidem*).

<sup>67</sup> Cf. St. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 13, 2, 5.

<sup>68</sup> *KrV* A 824/B 852 and A 828/B 856; Eng. trans., pp. 686-687 and 689.

and that commands universal agreement, like the conviction that comes from knowledge»<sup>69</sup>.

### 3.2.1. Communication and universal validity<sup>70</sup>

A possible answer to the question just raised – namely why Kant does not attribute to Belief the essential character of conviction, that is, communicability, though he considers it a form of conviction – can be derived from a comparison with knowledge. For Kant, the paradigmatic case of communicability is that of a conviction “that comes from knowledge”<sup>71</sup>. The following passages from the third *Critique* may help us to grasp this point:

Nothing [...] can be universally communicated except cognition and representation so far as it belongs to cognition. For only so far is the latter objective, and only thereby does it have a universal point of relation with which everyone’s faculty of representation is compelled to agree<sup>72</sup>.

Cognitions and judgments must, together with the conviction that accompanies them, be able to be universally communicated, for otherwise they would have no correspondence with the object: they would all be a merely subjective play of the powers of representation, just as skepticism insists<sup>73</sup>.

In line with the passages quoted above, these passages suggest that reference to an object plays a crucial role in the possibility of communicating conviction. In fact, cognition is communicable in virtue of its relation to an object as something ‘outside of myself’ that, for this reason, can be a common reference for different people<sup>74</sup>. Similarly, it is reference to an object that makes a

<sup>69</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 70; Eng. trans., p. 574.

<sup>70</sup> I thank an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this connection.

<sup>71</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 70; Eng. trans., p. 574.

<sup>72</sup> *KU* § 9, AA 05, p. 217; Eng. trans., p. 102.

<sup>73</sup> *Ivi* § 21, AA 05, p. 238; Eng. trans., p. 122.

<sup>74</sup> On this cf. the analysis in U. Schlösser, *Kants Konzeption der Mittelbarkeit. Über die intersubjektive Stellung von Erkenntnissen und ästhetischen Bewertungen*

representation communicable<sup>75</sup>. The key idea is that the relation to an object offers a kind of external access, without which the bridge to others' minds cannot succeed. It allows us to determine which aspects of our inner states or which of our judgements are communicable.

In light of this, we can conjecture that at least part of the problem concerning the communicability of Belief lies in a lack of reference. In fact, although our concepts of God, divine justice, and so forth – as concepts – can be communicated, and although the arguments for God's existence can likewise be shared, they fail to provide an 'object' that could serve as a point of reference for all, since such arguments are flawed or open to doubt. This absence of a point of reference is presumably why the attitude accompanying the judgement 'God exists' is not communicable: it does not have the character of a conviction "that comes from knowledge". Even the grounds that lead to moral Belief in the existence of God, etc., though they have a rational character, do not inevitably lead to Belief<sup>76</sup>.

If this is correct, then it seems appropriate to distinguish between a broad and a strict concept of communicability. The strict sense is peculiar to cognition, whereas the broad concept applies to all cases where what is at issue is the communication or transmission of content, irrespective of whether that content is valid for everyone. After all, we are not always dealing with exercises of the faculty of judgment that result in knowledge<sup>77</sup>. But if communicability is not,

*in der kritischen Philosophie*, «Kant-Studien», CVI (2), 2015, pp. 201-233, in which it is claimed that communicability should not be identified with subjective universality. They coincide only when, as in the aesthetic case, what is communicated concerns attitudes of 'holding to be valid'.

<sup>75</sup> Clearly, on Kant's view representations have this reference by virtue not of themselves but of a synthetic power of the intellect.

<sup>76</sup> On this cf. B. Dörflinger, *Führt Moral unausbleiblich zur Religion? Überlegungen zu einer These Kants*, in *Kants Metaphysik und Religionsphilosophie*, ed. by N. Forster, Hamburg, Meiner, 2004, pp. 207-223.

<sup>77</sup> This broader meaning of 'communication' is the one implied by Kant when he speaks of the freedom to speak, namely to «communicate (*mittheilen*) our thoughts» to others (I. Kant, *Was heißt: Sich im Denken orientiren?*, in AA 08,

from the outset, conceptually tied to validity – if we can distinguish between formulating a thought and assessing it – then it becomes possible to regard the (problematic) judgment ‘God exists’ as communicable when it is not linked to a claim to validity and as incommunicable when, as in the case of Belief, it is. That said, rational Belief is not wholly without a communicative orientation. As Kant acknowledges, a religion grounded in it possesses “the qualification for universality, inasmuch as by universality we mean validity for every human being”<sup>78</sup>. These considerations may help us to appreciate the difference between the subjectivity of Belief – its ‘for myself’ character – and the «mere private validity (*Privatgültigkeit*)»<sup>79</sup> of persuasion. First, moral Belief and persuasion are radically different with regard to their grounds, as the grounds of the former can hold for everyone<sup>80</sup> while those of the latter are related to the particular constitution of the subject – to her inclinations, preferences, desires, hopes and the like<sup>81</sup>. Second, unlike persuasion, the content of moral Belief passes the test of communicability: it can be recognized as

p. 144; Eng. trans. and ed. A. W. Wood and P. Guyer, *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?*, in I. Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 16 [hereinafter referred to as *WDO*]).

<sup>78</sup> I. Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*, in AA 6, p. 157; Eng. trans. by A. W. Wood and G. Di Giovanni, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 156 (quoted in Capozzi, *Kant e la logica*, p. 617 n. 274).

<sup>79</sup> *KrV*, A 820/B 848; Eng. trans., p. 685.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. also *KpV*, AA 05, pp. 4-5; Eng. trans., p. 4.

<sup>81</sup> This aspect comes out clearly in Kant’s reply to Wizemann, who objected that one cannot infer the existence of an object from a mere need. Kant grants the validity of this objection «in all cases where the need is based upon inclination» but distinguishes these from cases where the need is one of reason, «arising from an objective determining ground of the will, namely the moral law, which necessarily binds every rational being». Since, Kant observes, «it is a duty to realize the highest good to the utmost of our capacity», it must be possible; «hence it is also unavoidable for every rational being in the world to assume what is necessary for its objective possibility» (*KpV*, AA 05, p. 143; Eng. trans., p. 115). I thank an anonymous reviewer for reminding me of the importance of this footnote.

valid by every human being, even though, given its nature, it cannot be epistemically grounded «upon agreement with the object»<sup>82</sup>. With that said, Belief does not – and cannot – pass the test in a crucial respect, as the following passage from the *Jäsche Logik* makes clear:

Thus also on account of its merely subjective grounds, Believing yields no conviction that can be communicated and that commands universal agreement, like the conviction that comes from knowledge. Only *I myself* can be certain of the validity and unalterability of my practical Belief, and my Belief in the truth of a proposition or the actuality of a thing is what takes the place of a cognition only in relation to me without itself being a cognition<sup>83</sup>.

What is truly incommunicable in Belief is conviction, which cannot go beyond the «for myself»<sup>84</sup>, since, unlike logical conviction, practical conviction is connected to an interest of the subject. To further articulate what this means, and to clarify why Kant claims that «one cannot communicate to someone else his own Belief»<sup>85</sup>, we must return to the idea that Belief depends on one's moral disposition.

### 3.3. Incommunicability and freedom of Belief

As we have seen, Kant views an assent as subjectively sufficient when its ground, relative to a given person, rationally requires that person to assent. We have also seen that (moral) Belief as a mode of

<sup>82</sup> *KrV*, A 821/B 848; Eng. trans., p. 685.

<sup>83</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 70; Eng. trans., p. 574.

<sup>84</sup> A slightly different reading of this point is offered by Christopher J. Insole, who claims that «when Kant writes that subjective grounds hold ‘for me’, we need to understand that ‘me’ is a type of ‘every-me’ [...]: ‘me’ refers to every moral subject determining their attitude, in freedom, to the moral law». On his reading, when Kant writes that Belief yields a conviction that is not communicable, «he is doing no more than stating the [...] obvious point that belief is not knowledge» (C.J. Insole, *Free Belief: The Medieval Heritage in Kant's Moral Faith*, «Journal of the History of Philosophy», LVII, 3, 2019, pp. 501-528, p. 521).

<sup>85</sup> Kant, *Nachlaß*, in AA 16, p. 394 (Reflexion 2498).

assent is subjectively sufficient, in his view, and that the grounds of such Belief are connected to (the possibility of the object commanded by) the moral law. I have argued that this connection has an epistemic character in the sense that I can acknowledge that the object of the moral law is the highest good and that, as far as we can tell, the existence of God, etc., is a necessary condition of the achievement of this good. However, this awareness – available to everyone – does not constitute an epistemic ground for holding the proposition ‘God exists’ to be true. It remains inert with respect to assent and cannot disrupt Kant’s balanced state of «undogmatic agnosticism»<sup>86</sup>. A condition for the grounds of Belief to acquire normative force is that a person is committed to the moral law and has resolved to act in accordance with it.

Kant’s moving on to the first person mirrors this peculiarity of Belief. As an explanation of what it means to say that the conviction involved in Belief «is not *logical* but *moral* certainty», he tellingly claims that Belief in God is «so interwoven with my moral disposition, that I am in as little danger of ever surrendering the former as I am worried that the latter can ever be torn away from me»<sup>87</sup>. This

<sup>86</sup> This term comes from Dörflinger, *Der Gottesglaube*, p. 403, who characterizes the position of theoretical reason in light of the refutation of the traditional proofs of God’s existence. In fact, from this refutation it follows that one can assert neither the theistic claim «*There is a highest being*» nor the atheistic claim «*There is no highest being*» (*KrV* A 741/B 769; Eng. trans., p. 644).

<sup>87</sup> *KrV*, A 829/B 857; Eng. trans., p. 689. In the section on assent, when Kant claims that «subjective sufficiency is called *conviction* (for myself)» (ivi, A 822/B 850; Eng. trans., p. 686), he introduces another touchstone of conviction, this time for evaluating subjective sufficiency, namely the exercise of considering how much one is willing to bet on a proposition one holds to be true (cf. ivi, A 824-825/B 852-853; Eng. trans., p. 687). This touchstone looks not to external communication but to a hypothetical wager to reveal the individual’s self-assessment of her own *Fürwahrhalten*. As noted by Mileti Nardo, it also has a second function, namely «to discern between proper moral Belief and pragmatic Belief» (Nardo, *Forme della certezza*, p. 107). As Mirella Capozzi explains, in Kant’s conception the wager tests the strength of pragmatic Belief (cf. Capozzi, *Kant e la logica*, p. 623. On pragmatic Belief cf. ivi, pp. 555-557).

phrasing is revealing. Kant emphasizes the subjective character of a person's commitment to the truth of the proposition 'God exists', as if its assertion were not merely an epistemic act but a moment of moral self-determination – such that refusing to affirm it would amount to relinquishing a part of her identity, understood as inseparable from her devotion to her moral vocation<sup>88</sup>.

This statement requires qualification, however. Moral Belief is not necessarily tied to moral motivation. One may regard such Belief as reasonable and yet remain an unbeliever; conversely, one may find it so deeply interwoven with one's moral commitments as to be part of one's moral identity:

If we look merely to actions, we do not require this Belief. If, however, we wish to extend ourselves through our actions to the possession of the end that is thereby possible, we must assume that this end is thoroughly possible. – Thus I can only say: I see myself necessitated by my end, in accordance with the laws of freedom, to assume as possible a highest good in the world; but I cannot necessitate others by means of these grounds (the Belief is free)<sup>89</sup>.

Moral Belief is not involved in moral motivation. Still, assuming the moral law as a standard of our subjective principles may involve more than merely accepting it as the «supreme determining ground of the will»<sup>90</sup>; indeed, as Pasternack writes, it may involve investing ourselves «in a life-project as well as the worldview upon which it

<sup>88</sup> The claim that «moral certainty», as one reads in the *Dobna-Wundlacken Logic*, «relates to conscience» (*V-Lo/ Dobna*, AA 24, p. 734; Eng. trans., p. 469) may simply mean that, as Burckard Nonnenmacher suggests, knowledge of the intertwinement of a theoretical proposition and a moral self-determination within moral Belief is a presupposition of moral certainty of the validity of the proposition 'God exists' (and the other postulates) (cf. B. Nonnenmacher, «*Vom Fürwahrhalten aus einem Bedürfnisse der reinen Vernunft*». *Zum Verhältnis von theoretischer un praktischer Vernunft in Kants Postulatenlehre*, in *Kant und die Philosophie*, pp. 911-924, p. 923.

<sup>89</sup> *Refl*, AA 16, p. 515 (Reflexion 2793 [1790-1804]); Eng. trans., p. 52.

<sup>90</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 32; Eng. trans., p. 29.

depends»<sup>91</sup>. This is a possible way of reading Kant's idea of extending ourselves through our actions to the possession of the (ultimate) end that is thereby possible. Thus, when Kant emphasizes the intertwining of moral Belief and a person's moral disposition, he seems to have in mind one who «extends» herself through her actions to the end they should ultimately make possible. Such a person might perceive that *her* moral life – that is, *her* commitment to the moral law – would be meaningless if the «unity of ends under the moral law»<sup>92</sup> were impossible<sup>93</sup>. In this sense, moral Belief is a personal answer to the question of the possibility of the ultimate end the moral law commands us to pursue<sup>94</sup>. This personal answer is what is really incommunicable in Belief. It is not the content of moral Belief that is private; whoever holds such a Belief can communicate its content and its grounds. Yet what she cannot communicate is *her* faith, the *act* of Believing, and this is because the *normative* force of its grounds is profoundly interwoven with her decision to be moral, which cannot be objectified.

This brings us back to an important aspect of moral Belief that has already come to light, namely its freedom<sup>95</sup>. If my considerations

<sup>91</sup> L. Pasternack, *Kant on Faith: Religious Assent and the Limits to Knowledge*, in *The Palgrave Kant Handbook*, ed. by M. C. Altman, Basingstoke, Palgrave, 2017, pp. 515-538, p. 529.

<sup>92</sup> *KrV*, A 828/B 856; Eng. trans., p. 698.

<sup>93</sup> This line of thought, according to which Belief may support a person's commitment to the moral law, is emphasized by Kant in § 87 of the third *Critique* (cf. *KU*, AA 05, pp. 451-453; Eng. trans., pp. 316-318), which discusses the case of a righteous atheist «like Spinoza». On this cf. A. Chignell, *Demoralization and Hope: A Psychological Reading of Kant's Moral Argument*, «The Monist», CVI, 2023, pp. 46-60, pp. 52-57.

<sup>94</sup> As Joseph S. Trullinger nicely puts the point, Belief in God makes it possible «to approach the world as a place that is always amicable (*zweckmässig*) to the performance of duty, that is, to be at home in the world» (Trullinger, *Kant's Two Touchstones*, p. 377).

<sup>95</sup> The fact that this assent «is not determined through objective grounds of truth that are independent of the nature and the interest of the subject» means that it is «necessarily free» (*Log*, AA 09, p. 70; Eng. trans., p. 574).

are on the right track, it is possible to claim that the freedom of Belief is somehow the other side of its incommunicability. Moral Belief, Kant states, is not announced «as itself a *command*»: the idea of a Belief that is commanded «is an absurdity»<sup>96</sup>. As we have seen, Kant emphasizes that assent involves an element of volition: «I will that there be a God, that my existence in this world be also an existence in a pure world of the understanding beyond natural connections, and finally that my duration be endless»<sup>97</sup>.

This may seem puzzling, even to the point of rendering the notion of truth inapplicable to Belief – after all, one does not typically *choose* to assent to a truth<sup>98</sup>. This issue is further complicated by a subtle ambiguity that arises at this point. Let us consider how the passage continues:

<sup>96</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 144; Eng. trans., p. 115.

<sup>97</sup> Ivi, AA 05, p. 143; Eng. trans., p. 115. The objective necessity of the promotion of the highest good, and therefore of the supposition of its possibility, does not compel but facilitates a freely held Belief in a wise author of the world. As we have seen, the way in which we conceive of the highest good as possible «rests with our choice» (ivi, AA 05, p. 145; Eng. trans., p. 117).

<sup>98</sup> In the case of a proof, Kant observes, «the will does not have any influence immediately on holding-to-be-true»; «the will cannot struggle against convincing proofs of truth that are contrary to its wishes and inclinations» (*Log*, AA 09, pp. 73-74; Eng. trans., p. 577). However, contrary to the rather natural association of the voluntary dimension of Kantian moral Belief with a deflationary interpretation of the assent as a merely *as if* acceptance, it seems to me that in Kant's view if one really Believes something to be true, «the intuition is that there is something non-negotiable about the assent». Admittedly, as an anonymous reviewer pointed out to me, one must be careful when speaking of 'truth', since in Kant's use of the expression 'holding-to-be-true' what matters is not the term 'true' but the term 'holding', that is, the propositional attitude held by the subject. Nonetheless, there is a connection between holding-to-be-true and truth, and, as Insole observes, one's Belief is a Belief «in the truth of the matter» (Insole, *Free Belief*, p. 522). Cf. *V-Lo/Wiener*, AA 24, p. 851; Eng. trans., p. 304: «In the case of Belief we judge assertorically, i.e., we declare ourselves for the truth, although it is only sufficient subjectively for us, and we cannot convince everyone else of it».

I stand by this, without paying attention to rationalizations, however little I may be able to answer them or to oppose them with others more plausible, and I will not let this Belief be taken from me; for this is the only case in which my interest, because I *may* not give up anything of it, unavoidably determines my judgment<sup>99</sup>.

This statement seems to stand in tension with the view of Belief as epistemically limited, that is, as an «uncertain holding-to-be-true» that is combined «with consciousness of the contingency or the possibility of the opposite»<sup>100</sup>. Kant seems to assume that the Believer can anticipate remaining personally unconvinced by specious arguments against her Belief. Admittedly, this is somewhat puzzling, since the conviction that objections to a proposition will fail is a belief about the *proposition*, not the *Believer*. As Herbert McCabe notes, «believers do not predict that they or anyone else will always be able to see through the arguments brought against their belief» or «that they will personally be unconvinced by specious arguments against their beliefs». Rather, «they merely believe that the arguments in question shall be, in principle, soluble» and that they would be in error if they were convinced by them<sup>101</sup>. The stance of the Kantian Believer is different. Against the background of theoretical reason's 'undogmatic agnosticism', this Believer is certain of her firmness insofar as her Belief rests on her moral interest. A need of pure practical reason has «the *force of law* to assume something without which that cannot happen which one *ought* to set unflinchingly as the aim of one's conduct»<sup>102</sup>: it 'warrants' assenting to 'God exists', etc.

Kantian moral Belief is thus «an expression of modesty from an *objective* point of view, but at the same time of the firmness of confidence in a *subjective* one»<sup>103</sup>. As a *Vernunftglauben*, it is a Belief of reason: «here the ground of holding true is merely subjective,

<sup>99</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 143; Eng. trans., p. 115.

<sup>100</sup> *Log*, AA 09, p. 66; Eng. trans., p. 571,

<sup>101</sup> McCabe, *Faith within Reason*, p. 6.

<sup>102</sup> *KpV*, AA 05, p. 5; Eng. trans., p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> *KrV*, A 827/B 855; Eng. trans., p. 688.

namely a necessary need of reason [...] to presuppose the existence of a highest being»<sup>104</sup>. Yet moral Belief is also a Belief *in* reason, a certain confidence in it: it expresses *my* trust in its self-maintenance. In fact, if I were not rationally entitled to conceive of the possibility of the object that the moral law commands me to pursue, not only would the very meaning of my commitment to it be undermined, but reason itself would risk falling into self-contradiction<sup>105</sup>.

<sup>104</sup> *WDO*, AA 08, p. 141; Eng. trans., p. 14.

<sup>105</sup> In an early *Reflexion*, Kant notes: «The principle of the self-maintenance of reason is the foundation of rational Belief (*Vernunftglaubens*)» [Kant, *Nachlaß*, in AA 16, p. 371 (Reflexion 2446)]. For interpretation cf. R. Langthaler, «Das Prinzip der Selbsterhaltung der Vernunft ist das Fundament des Vernunftglaubens». *Eine frühe programmatische These Kants und ihre spätere systematische Entfaltung*, «Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus», VII, 2009, pp. 58-94, to whom I owe this quote to (cf. *ivi*, p. 62). Cf. what Kant states about «Belief (simply so called)» in a footnote in the third *Critique*: «It is a matter of trusting the promise of the moral law; not a promise that is contained in the moral law, but one that I put into it, and indeed on a morally adequate basis. For a final end cannot be commanded by any law of reason without reason simultaneously promising its attainability, even if uncertainly, and hereby also justifying the affirmation of the only conditions under which our reason can conceive this. The word *fides* already expresses this» (*KU*, § 91, AA 05, pp. 471-472; Eng. trans., p. 335).