In this paper, I will attempt to reconcile Immanuel Kant's claim that, in order to survive, humans have to believe in progress despite all empirical evidence to the contrary and Immanuel Levinas's claim that after Auschwitz we can no longer believe in a "Happy Ending." This contradiction has led to a surprisingly common morally nihilistic response to the evils of the world: "I don't want to hear/see that. It only depresses me." By analyzing this response, we see that we need *some sort of* belief in progress in order to survive, but at the same time this belief is unreasonable. I will, therefore, argue that in order to reconcile this contradiction and also avoid moral nihilism, we cannot believe in progress, yet insofar as it allows us to respond to the evils in the world, we must function *as if* progress exists.

Kant – Belief in Progress is Necessary

In his introduction to Immanuel Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Robert Merrihew Adams claims that Kant believes that we must continue to have hope despite all empirical evidence to the contrary (xxv). He stresses that Kant believes in "other-worldly hopes," namely that we need to believe that by following the moral law, we are working "for a perfection of [our] own inner moral life" (xxvi). But, if we have hope in achieving moral perfection, and we know that we have not achieved moral perfection (which Kant emphasizes himself on p.34), then we must believe in *inner moral progress*. That is, we must believe that when we act morally, we are improving our moral selves. And, these beliefs must exist unconditionally, despite any empirical evidence.

Adams also, however, refuses to reject the belief in "this-worldly hopes," in hopes grounded in the empirical world. Adams claims that "Kant's moral hope is not *merely* outward looking" (xxvi, my emphasis). He also claims that, "[Kant's moral hope] is...not just for external results, but also, *and no less important*, for a perfection of the agent's own inner moral life" (xxvi, my emphasis). Adams cannot deny this-worldly hopes (hopes for

external results), and by claiming that hope for inner moral progress is no less important than hope for external moral progress, he implies that belief in external and internal moral progress are equally important. We can, therefore, reasonably conclude that Adams claims that Kant believes that hope for internal and external moral progress are both necessary.

Yet, this conclusion is complicated by the fact that Adams is arguing against people who claim that Kant only believes in this-worldly hopes. Adams claims that this-worldly hopes are conditional – believing in external moral progress can be (and is) threatened by atrocities like those of the twentieth century, yet Kant believes that hope is necessarily *un*conditional (Adams, xxv). So, although we must believe in both internal and external moral progress, the belief in external moral progress can be questioned based on empirical evidence. It, therefore, also seems *unnecessary*. If Kant believes that we can start questioning it and reject it from empirical evidence, then it cannot necessary for our survival. Then, why does Adams stress its importance and (arguably) its necessity?

To examine this point, we need to understand how this-worldly hopes and otherworldly hopes interact, a point that Adams does not explore in his summary, but that we find in Kant himself. Kant's claims lead us to the conclusion that this-worldly and otherworldly hopes are both necessary for a belief in the highest good. Kant claims that, in order for us to have any determination in our will, we have to believe that our actions have an effect (34). Kant is working from the assumption that we humans see the empirical world through the principle that every event has a cause (as we learn from studies in pure physics; see: Paton 13), so in order for our will to be moral, we need to presuppose that all of our actions have a moral effect. This end cannot come from the moral law itself because the

¹ If he did not imply equality, he would have written "and far more importantly..." instead of "and no less important."

moral law tells us "how" to act, but not "the whither" (Kant 34, Kant's emphasis).² We, therefore, need to believe in an effect for all of our actions but cannot know what this end is.

We are also not fully in control of this end because we are not fully in control of the world, so our actions can have unforeseen results. Yet, we must still believe that our actions have an end, so we reasonably conclude that the elements outside of our control *also* harmonize with our end, that the unforeseeable results of our actions are also leading, in the end, to the same effect (otherwise it loses its use as "an effect" rather than "a goal"). Hence, we come upon the "idea of an object that unites within itself the formal condition of all such ends as we ought to have (duty) with everything which is conditional upon ends we have and which conforms to duty (happiness proportioned to its observance), that is, the idea of a highest good in the world" (Kant 34). In other words, we develop the idea that following our duty, even if it leads to a temporary result that appears contrary to our end, still eventually leads to this end. If we follow our duty, therefore, our end must be the highest good in the world.³ And, if we believe in a highest good in the world that is partly outside of our control, we must necessarily believe in some benevolent and all-powerful force that can harmonize namely what is in our control and what is not. Therefore, we must believe in God (Kant 34).

² A close reading of these quotes presents an interesting series of questions: why do Kant's translators put a "the" in front of "whither" but not "how"? Does Kant put one in the German? Is he trying to signify something? I cannot fully answer these questions, but there is, perhaps, one grammatically-based answer. These words are grammatically parallel (they are both adverbs functioning as nouns), so we expect either a "the" in front of both or neither. But, the Oxford English Dictionary, when defining them, includes a "the" in the definition for the adverbial noun "how" but not for "whither." The Oxford English Dictionary defines "how" as: "The way or manner (in which)," and it defines "whither" as "Place or state to which a person or thing moves or tends." So, in order to make the terms completely parallel, Kant's translators would have to put a "the" in front of "whither" (so that it would read: "The place or state to which...") but not in front of "how" (so it would still read: "The way or manner (in which)"). So, the "the" completes a parallel rather than complicating one. But, this investigation leads us to another question, completely unrelated to the questions I am investigating in this essay: why should the adverbial noun of "how" have a "the" in the definition, while the adverbial noun of "whither" does not?

³ We must remember that, for Kant, following the moral law *is* morally good, so if everything harmonizes with the end of following the moral law, this end must be the highest good.

The key to this-worldly and other-worldly hopes, therefore, is the belief that by following moral law (which is an inwardly moral improvement), we are acting towards the highest good in the world, which is necessarily external because it involves things outside of our control. By inwardly improving, the external world improves also. The belief that our moral selves are progressing leads necessarily (if we think that Kant's argument is sound) to the belief that the world is progressing.

Kant's argument for our need to believe in both internal and external progress looks, therefore, like this: If we (a) necessarily view the world through cause/effect, then (b) we need to believe in an ultimate moral end for our actions, which, because (c) morality itself does not tell us what this end is, means that (d) this end is not the basis for morality (an important point for Kant). We also know that (e) some things are outside of our control, so in order for us to B, (f) we have to believe that somehow all of our actions are harmonized with the actions outside of our control. If (g) we are following the moral law, then (h) our end (ie: B) must be the highest moral good, such that in order to believe in F, (i) we must believe there is a morally good and omnipotent God harmonizing what we cannot control with what we can so that we can fulfill H/B. Because (j) in order to will morally, we cannot stop believing in H/B despite any empirical evidence, (k) H/B must be partly a belief in an internal moral highest good (ie: "a perfection of our own inner moral life" [Adams xxvi]), but also, because of E, (1) H/B must also be partly a belief in an external moral highest good. Finally (here is my addition), because (m) the belief that we can work towards a highest good is a belief in progress, (n) we must necessarily believe in both internal moral progress and external moral progress.

Levinas – Belief in Moral Progress is Impossible

For Levinas, after witnessing Auschwitz (and other twentieth century atrocities), we can no longer believe in moral progress. He writes, "It still cannot be concluded that after Auschwitz there is no longer a moral law, as if the moral or ethical law were impossible, without promise. Before the twentieth century, all religion begins with the promise. It begins with the 'Happy End'" (qtd. in Bernstein 168). His goal is to conceive of a moral law that does not include the "promise." The promise for a "Happy End" for Levinas is the promise that despite any suffering we may encounter, the world will be better later on (in Heaven, in a more morally developed future, etc.).

This promise for Levinas, is the central aspect of theodicy. Bernstein describes Levinas's definition of theodicy as, "the temptation to find some sort of justification, some way to reconcile ourselves to useless, unbearable suffering and evil" (169). In order to justify suffering, we believe that this suffering is a step towards something better. Theodicy exists both spiritually and secularly. Religions promise a positive result for all good actions, like heaven or nirvana, such that no matter what suffering exists in this world, it is not useless because by overcoming it, one is in a much better position afterwards. From the secular side, "Atheist progressivism...was confident...in the efficacy of the Good which is immanent to being, called to visible triumph by the simple play of natural and historical laws of injustice, war, misery and illness" (Levinas qtd. in Bernstein 169). In other words, we can see that good is eventually triumphing over evil based on the fact that injustice (etc.) are, over time, disappearing. For example, after the genocide of the Holocaust, not only is it more difficult to get away with genocide anywhere in the world, but the Jews have been given the power to defend themselves against genocide (along with more minor forms of oppression). So, Israelis are in a better position than they (or their ancestors) were before the Holocaust. Both spiritual and secular theodicy explain suffering that would

otherwise seem useless by claiming that it leads to something better that would have been impossible (or at least more difficult) without it.

Theodicy is also apparent, Levinas argues, in Kant's philosophy. Kant argued against theoretical theodicy because it claims things about God that we can never know (his benevolence, omnipotence, etc.; see: Bernstein 169), whereas Kant is always careful to only talk about the necessity *of our believing* in such a Being, not in His actual existence. Levinas argues, however, that Kant's claims are still a form of theodicy, but of *practical* theodicy. The belief that we need to believe in a benevolent God is as much a theodicy as the belief in a benevolent God itself. As Bernstein says, "Lurking in the background [in Kant] is still the idea of reconciliation; the 'promise' of being worthy of what Levinas calls 'the Happy End'" (169-70). This idea of reconciliation is Kant's idea of the highest good. With Kant, in order to follow the moral law we need to retain the belief that we are working towards an end *that we will eventually achieve*.⁴

All of these forms of theodicies (spiritual, secular, theoretical, practical) have the same problem. They attempt to justify suffering. Just like we saw with spiritual and secular theodicies, the Kantian theodicy is a response to suffering. It is something, as we saw, that we need to continue believing despite all empirical evidence to the contrary (hence, despite all suffering). We respond to suffering by saying that this suffering somehow fits into our ultimate end (the highest good in the world), even if we do not understand it. Levinas claims that we can no longer justify suffering. The atrocities of the twentieth century *cannot* fit into a progressing system. As Bernstein claims in his critique of Hegel, "There is something hollow, something almost obscene, in thinking that Auschwitz can be

⁴ If it did not matter whether we achieved the highest good or not, this good would not be an "end" as Kant means the word. Our belief in an end is, as we saw, based on our need to see the world in terms of cause/effect, so we must believe that this end is just as necessary (supposing the right means) as an object's acceleration due to gravity.

interpreted as a necessary moment in the dialectical realization of Spirit or humanity" (73). To call Auschwitz (or any atrocity) necessary for the realization of some greater good is inconsistent with the actual experience of evil. One of the defining moments of evil, Levinas claims, is its "excess" (qtd. in Bernstein, 174). It goes beyond our ability to reason it. We can never fully understand Auschwitz, so we can never fit it entirely into a progressive system. In other words, suffering, as we experience it, is to a certain extent *unjustifiable*, and therefore all theodicies (which attempt to justify suffering) necessarily fail. And, the "promise" of a "Happy End" is a theodicy, so we can no longer believe in it. Kant's "highest good" that we work towards is a fallacy that we can no longer accept.

Clarification of the Contradiction and Objections to it

To review: Kant claims that, in order to will anything, we need some sort of direction, some end towards which we believe we are progressing. We work towards both internal and external moral progress, and we need to hold on to the belief in some sort of progress despite any empirical evidence to the contrary. Levinas denies our ability to believe in progress after Auschwitz (an empirical event). We can no longer believe that there is some (happy) end towards which everything is progressing because we cannot reconcile a belief in external progress or a belief in a benevolent, all-powerful, God with the external evidence of twentieth century atrocities. In other words, in order to be able to will morally, we have to believe in progress (according to Kant), in which (after Auschwitz) we can no longer believe (according to Levinas).

One might argue that Levinas has disproven Kant's claims about a necessary highest end by pinning it as a theodicy, or that Kant should dismiss Levinas's argument because it is based on an empirical event (and our hope should not be affected by empirical events), or that the two positions are simply irreconcilable. Levinas, we saw, claims that

Kant's moral philosophy is a theodicy because it believes in a happy end (the highest good) and thus justifies suffering as a means to that end. We can no longer accept theodicies because suffering cannot be justified, so (for the sake of honesty) we must dismiss Kant's claims about a highest end, thus dismissing his belief in hope. Kant then responds by claiming that Levinas is too imbedded in the phenomenal world when he looks at the experience of evil. We need to hope *despite* our experiences, so no amount of exploration into the experience of evil can eliminate the possibility of such a hope.

To answer the first of these objections, we need to stress the necessity of *belief* in Kant. As human beings we need to justify suffering, but this fact about ourselves says nothing about whether such a justification exists. If Kant accepted Levinas's claim that suffering cannot be justified, then he would claim that we have to, partly, fool ourselves if we want to will morally. It is true that, according to the ethic of honesty, we can no longer believe in progress, but in order to even explain why we desire honesty, we resort to a belief in progress (Levinas is, after all, progressing our understanding of morality, which is only useful if we believe that this understanding will also help us to act more morally in the future, ie: to progress morally). Thus, Kant's argument does not necessarily justify suffering; it only claims that we have a need to do justify it in order to will morally (even if we can no longer fulfill that need). At the same time, Kant would likely concede that, the atrocities of the twentieth century are irreconcilable (by our reason) with the belief in a highest good. Such a reconciliation may exist (through God's reason), but it is a devastating blow to our (imperfect) hope. Perhaps, he would argue that we can still retain hope, but he would have to concede that, for many human beings (Levinas included), the blow to hope is deadly. In other words, the loss of hope in the twentieth century may not be unconditional, but it is at least wide-spread enough to necessitate Levinas's philosophy of morality without hope.

The Morally Nihilistic Response

If we cannot morally will without believing in progress, yet we can no longer believe in progress, then the obvious question is: are we able to will morally any longer? This question is, according to Bernstein, at the heart of Levinas's philosophy (168). His conclusion is that, because we can no longer justify suffering in anyone (neither in ourselves nor in others), we can more seriously understand suffering in the other person, so we are more aware of our moral obligation to help them (Bernstein 172). The question remains, however: how is this response possible without the belief in progress, the belief that we can stop the suffering of the other and thus slightly reduce suffering in general?

In view of this question and the contradiction behind it, we see two general responses to evil after World War II: on the one hand, a growing demand for rights and equality and a growing awareness and concern for the evils of the world, and on the other, a growing apathy towards evil. This apathy is epitomized by the following response to evil: "I know that the world is awful, but it just depresses me. Don't talk to me about it!" This response is what I call the Morally Nihilistic Response because it is a failure to morally will anything, so it is the natural response to our inability to believe in progress. This fact also makes it an interesting response to analyze.

In order to understand it, we should first understand more thoroughly why we can no longer believe in progress. Bernstein's description of Levinas's argument fails to explain exactly what it is about Auschwitz that disallows us the ability to believe in progress. After all, the Jewish holocaust is predated by the American holocaust, and if evil has always been an excess, it has never allowed us to believe in progress. Although one

might argue that there is something unique to the evil exemplified by the Jewish holocaust. the main difference between previous evils and contemporary evils is our awareness of suffering. With the advance of the communication age, as the news becomes more accessible and (at least in the United States) more geared towards depicting suffering, we become more aware of the excess of evil and our inability to synthesize it. Whereas thinking about the American holocaust as a holocaust is relatively new in Western thought, the horror of the Jewish holocaust was wide-spread and almost instant as news spread outside of the area controlled by the Nazis (see, for example, Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem, responses to the killings in Denmark and Italy, pgs. 171-180).⁵

The growing mainstream communication of suffering has also led to a growing discussion about the suffering that the media and mainstream thought are *not* showing, especially on college campuses. Not only are these facts overwhelming, they are also often contradictory. What popular media reports and what other sources (like friends and underground media) report sometimes differ drastically, or at least emphasize facts differently. The result is an overwhelming amount of information about evil that we are not sure we can trust about things happening in a distant place (because we experience them through media and discussion, not firsthand) coupled with the knowledge (from Levinas's argument) that none of this evil will ever be permanently eradicated. People are confronted with an unknowable, unvanquishable, distant, unquantifiably massive evil. It is no wonder that a common response is to shrink away from it and say, "Don't talk to me about that! I know it's there, and talking about it depresses me!"

⁵ There is much to say here. One might argue that the evil epitomized by Auschwitz is unique because it shows our growing ability to destroy humanity altogether (a claim that Hans Jonas might make). One might also argue that our awareness of evil has not changed at all: the Conquistadores talked about the brutality of Native Americans in the same way that a college student talks about the brutality of the United States government today. The latter may well be more justified than the former, but from this point of view, awareness of evil has not (in fact) changed. I grant these possibilities, but they do not disprove the phenomenon that many people (like moral nihilists, discussed below, and Levinas) have stopped believing in progress. Whatever the reason, these people exist, and we should explore their response to morality.

This response, therefore, manages to (in a way) solve the contradiction between Kant and Levinas. It fulfills Levinas's claim that we can no longer believe in moral progress, and it also fulfills Kant's claim that we cannot will morally without a belief in such progress. It fulfills the latter on two levels: (1) by avoiding empirical evidence of evil, moral nihilists allow empirical events to destroy their faith in progress. Thus, they can will nothing (and, indeed, their refusal to do anything *is* a will to nothingness). (2) In order to continue willing non-morally, they refuse to let empirical evidence infringe on a less moral dream of progress (scientific progress, personal economic progress, etc.). Thus, they continue to will, but do not will morally (and thus, the term "moral nihilists").

This response is, however, amoral at best. It fails under major systems in morality (including those by Kant and Levinas): consequentially, it leads to negative results (if people do not respond to evils, the evils spread, which leads to more suffering).

Deontologically, it is a failure of moral duties, whether these duties are Kantian (this person ignores the moral law) or Levinasian (this person fails his infinite obligation to the other). It does not lead to a flourishing society, as Aristotle demands in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, (because a society in which people do not help each other can easily suffer the same fate as Europe's during the Holocaust – see: Bernstein 172; Aristotle 1), and it obviously fails the ethics of care (after all, this response is characteristic for the *lack* of care that it shows towards suffering). In short, this response is, at the very least, *amoral*, but more likely, it is simply *immoral*.

If I show nothing else in this paper, I would like to emphasize the problem presented by the moral nihilistic response. It is a solution to the contradiction between

⁶ To be fair to Levinas, we should understand that this line of thinking perverts his argument. Bernstein claims that Levinas believes that, when confronted with a world void of theodicy, we should respond ethically (171-172), whereas the moral nihilist responds amorally (and unethically). This amoral response, however, is evidence that some people cannot live up to Levinas's expectations. If the world's suffering cannot be explained, and we fail to ethically respond to it, what response is left to us except to cower and say, "That depresses me! Let's talk about something else!"?

Levinas and Kant that seems to follow naturally. Yet, it is an amoral or immoral solution. It is also a surprisingly common solution. Whenever we ignore homeless people or change the channel when they show starving children in a foreign country and ask for money, we are responding to evil in a morally nihilistic matter. One might argue that simply by placing ourselves in an expensive liberal arts school in the United States, hidden away from the evils in the world, and spending thirty-two thousand dollars a year on our education instead of using it to help prevent suffering, we are *already* responding to evil nihilistically (though this argument has its complications).

Concrete Examples and As-If-Ism

For a concrete example of moral nihilism as well as a potential alternative to it, I will turn to the movie "Before Sunset." In this movie, two 30-year-olds (Jesse and Céline) run into each other after not having seen each other in nine years, and they spend the entire movie discussing their lives and philosophies. Jesse's standpoint, though complex, finally reveals itself to be moral nihilism, while Céline presents an alternative, seemingly contradictory, viewpoint that still allows her to act morally.

Jesse's nihilism stems from a modified belief in progress. He claims that he alternates between believing that "everything is irrevocably screwed up, and that things might be getting better in some ways" (*Before Sunset*). In Levinasian terminology, he alternates between believing in a "Happy End" and not believing in one. To defend this claim, he says, "There's more awareness out there, right? People are going to fight back!" and he cites the growth in awareness of environmental issues leading to conservationist policies (*Before Sunset*). Yet, he also believes that people always remain essentially the same (so they cannot progress) and that the progress of the world is a lot like the progress of individuals (implying that the world cannot progress). And, we learn also that he never

responds to the evils of the world; he only complains about them (*Before Sunset*). Thus, his moral stance is that the world might progress somewhat, but that its essence never changes, and thus he never responds to evil. In other words, he believes that the world can progress to an extent through awareness, but because people are essentially unchangeable, the world's progress is also not essential. There is no happy ending, so he wills nothing morally.

Céline, however, responds to the lack of belief in progress with a reaffirmation to work towards it. When Jesse claims that he sometimes believes in progress, Céline becomes infuriated, citing a series of examples of evils in the world ("the weapon industry is booming; Five million people die every year from preventable water disease", etc. [Before Sunset]). She eventually agrees with Jesse on the example of conservationism, but claims that such a belief in progress (that awareness leads to progress) is dangerous because "an imperialist country can use that kind of thinking to justify their economic greed" (Before Sunset). The danger is that, by believing in progress, we often stop believing that we need to work for it, like Jesse's belief that the world continues to progress while he sits at home and writes his book about love. Yet, her claim to believe in the progress of conservationism is unconvincing; she trails off as she speaks and changes the topic soon afterwards. She believes in progress, but she also (as we saw above) does not.

It is no coincidence that she responds positively to conservationism; her job, as an environmental worker, is to spread it. If she did not believe that our treatment of the environment could progress, she would fall with Jesse into moral nihilism. So, she does not believe that we are making our way towards some sort of "Happy Ending," yet she believes, though unconvincingly, that she can will it into being. In other words, her end is a high good (the spread of conservationism), but her belief in it is only a way to give her

hope. She only works *as if* this end exists. The lack of empirical progress in the world is exactly what pushes Céline to work towards that progress. In our terminology, and more universally, the solution to our inability to believe in progress and yet our need to believe in it in order to will morally is the ability to will *as if* progress exists while still holding the belief that it does not. Or, in other words, we believe in progress when we need to will morally, but always with the implicit knowledge that this progress is impossible.

To better understand this seemingly contradictory claim, we should look at an imperative made by those who experienced atrocities first-hand, which closely parallels my above claim. Maurice Blanchot's account for the wish of everyone in the concentration camps during the Jewish holocaust reads, "Know what has happened, do not forget, and at the same time never will you know" (qtd.in Bernstein 182). We should never forget what happened in the camps, but we can never know. In other words, we cannot know the evil of Auschwitz (it is an excessive evil that cannot be known), but we should live as if we knew, and we should know to the extent that we can. The as-if morality looks almost identical: we cannot believe in progress, but we should live as if this progress existed, and work towards it to the extent that we can.

Conclusion

We saw that Kant's claim that we need to believe in progress in order to will morally and Levinas's claim that we can no longer believe in progress present a contradiction, but one with which we must live. They lead, most obviously, to the moral nihilist, but this nihilistic response is amoral at best, so we need to find a way to respond to it. One option is as-if-ism, the philosophy that we will morally as if progress existed while still knowing that it does not. Granted, this solution might be unfulfilling (and it appears to

⁷ This claim is also one of Bernstein's conclusions: we can never know evil fully but attempt to know it to the extent we can (Bernstein 226).

be in conflict with an ethic of honesty), so perhaps an investigation into another solution is necessary. A good starting place for this investigation is in the essays of Martin Luther King, Jr., which contain a specific moral philosophy that exists after Auschwitz yet does not allow for moral nihilism. Whatever route a future investigation would take, however, one thing is hopefully clear: the contradiction between Levinas and Kant, insofar as they lead to moral nihilism, present a real problem with repercussions in the real world, and we ought to find a non-nihilistic way of reconciling this contradiction.

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