

# THE MORAL ARGUMENT FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AND IMMORTALITY

Kierkegaard and Kant

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## ABSTRACT

This essay tries to show that there exist several passages where Kierkegaard (and his pseudonyms) sketches an argument for the existence of God and immortality that is remarkably similar to Kant's so-called moral argument for the existence of God and immortality. In particular, Kierkegaard appears to follow Kant's moral argument both when it comes to the form and content of the argument as well as some of its terminology. The essay concludes that several passages in Kierkegaard overlap significantly with Kant's moral argument, although Kierkegaard ultimately favors revealed faith over natural theology in general and Kant's moral faith in particular. Whereas Kant uses the moral argument to postulate the existence of God and immortality, Kierkegaard mainly uses it as a *reductio ad absurdum* of non-religious thinking.

KEY WORDS: *religious faith, ethics, natural theology, the highest good, Immanuel Kant, Søren Kierkegaard*

## 1. Background: The Natural Dialectic of Reason

Kierkegaard was clearly familiar with Kant's moral argument (Kierkegaard 1997–, 19:141–43; 2007–, 3:140–42), as well as attempts to ground religion philosophically found in later thinkers like Schelling and Hegel.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Kierkegaard was influenced by Poul Møller's "Thoughts on the Possibility of Proofs of Human Immortality, with reference to the Most Recent Literature Belonging Thereto" (1837) (1997–, 7:159; 17:134; 1992, 1:172; 1967–78, 5:#5201). See also Marks 2010 and Møller 1839–43. Regarding Kant's Danish reception and its discussion of the moral argument, see Thuborg 1951, 150–69; see also Koch 2003, 96, 99, 125–26, 131, 140, 290–307, 312–15, 320–24. Regarding the German reception of the moral argument, see Düsing 1973.

In the following I will try to clarify several difficult passages in Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms by comparing them to Kant.<sup>2</sup>

According to Kant's first *Critique*, reason is inevitably driven to exceed the limits of the understanding because reason seeks wholeness and something unconditioned that explains everything without requiring any explanation itself.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, pure practical reason "seeks the unconditioned for the practically conditioned (which rests on inclinations and natural needs), not indeed as the determining ground of the will, but even when this is given (in the moral law), it seeks the unconditional totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the *highest good*" (1900–, 5:108; 1999b, 226–27). Since both virtue and happiness are rationally required, pure practical reason seeks the highest good, a moral world where virtue leads to happiness (1900–, 5:113–15; 1999b, 230–32). Although happiness and virtue are both necessary, priority must be given to virtue. Instead of doing good in order to become happy (eudaimonism), one should do good for its own sake and then hope for happiness. Happiness should be conditioned by morality, not the other way around (Marina 2000; Denis 2005).

Kierkegaard may very well have been influenced by Kant's analysis of the natural dialectic of reason, although he speaks of God rather than the highest good in this context (Evans 1999, 222–25; see also Green 1994, 179). Kierkegaard (Climacus) suggests that the natural dialectic leads to the question of God, a claim also made by Kant (Evans 1999, 224–25; Westphal 1991, 113). The *Critique of Pure Reason* claims that the natural dialectic of reason leads to the idea of God as a regulative principle, that is, as something that makes it possible for us to bring objects under

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay I will refer to pseudonymous writings as well as writings Kierkegaard penned under his own name, in order to show that these writings overlap when it comes to the justification of faith. I do not deny that there are important differences between the different pseudonyms (and Kierkegaard himself), but I focus on important points where they overlap. My argument only requires that there is some overlap or agreement between the different books in Kierkegaard's authorship, not that the pseudonyms should be taken to represent the same voice or perspective. Also, it seems clear that although Johannes de silentio (in *Fear and Trembling*) and Johannes Climacus (in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*) describe themselves as non-believers, this non-belief cannot simply be attributed to Kierkegaard. Here I am not referring to the faith of Søren Kierkegaard as a historical person (as earlier scholarship often did) but to the position developed by Kierkegaard in his signed works. However, the fact that this position is religious need not prevent Kierkegaard's theory from exploring problems from perspectives of non-believers by using various non-religious pseudonyms. Neither does it prevent Kierkegaard's theory from overlapping with the views of non-religious pseudonyms. Compare Westphal 1991, 106–7.

<sup>3</sup> Compare Kant 1900–, 5:448; 2006, 313–14: "If one assumes that the existence of certain things . . . is only possible contingently, and hence only through something else, as cause, then one can seek the supreme ground for this causality, thus the unconditioned for that which is conditioned, in either the physical or teleological order."

systematic unity. As we will see, the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the lectures go beyond this by claiming that the highest good requires the existence of God.<sup>4</sup>

Whereas Kant speaks of the natural dialectic of reason, Kierkegaard speaks of the dialectic of understanding. Unlike Kant, Kierkegaard does not seem to distinguish between understanding and reason at all; he appears to use the terms loosely rather than technically.<sup>5</sup> Kant focuses on “the unconditioned,” whereas Kierkegaard (Climacus) focuses on the “absolutely different” (1997–, 4:249; 1987, 44; and Westphal 1991, 113). However, the reason why God is characterized as “absolutely different” is that man’s fallen nature, his sinfulness, makes God into someone “absolutely different” (1997–, 4:251; 1987, 46–47; and Westphal 1991, 114).<sup>6</sup>

Kierkegaard (Climacus) claims that although dialectic cannot reach the Absolute (God) as such, it can nevertheless point toward it. The highest passion of the understanding lies in transcending itself (by transcending its limits) and becoming faith. He is careful to point out, however, that worship of the absolute does not belong to dialectic (1997–, 4:242–44, 249, 252–53, 7:444–45; 1987, 37–39, 44–45, 47; and 1992, 1:490–91). Kierkegaard (Climacus) does not want to use dialectic, rationality, or philosophy to justify Christian faith. Rather, their role consists of leading us to paradoxes and anomalies that can prepare the way for Christian faith. So dialectic and the understanding are supposed to lead to problems that can only be overcome by Christian faith. In Kant, this corresponds to the claim that the dialectic of reason (in its practical use) leads to the antinomy of practical reason (1900–, 5:107–48; 1999b, 226–58), an antinomy that can only be resolved by moral faith. Kant’s view is that we are led into a labyrinth from which the key of moral faith is required for escape (1900–, 5:107; 1999b, 226). But while Kant finds room for religious faith—even

<sup>4</sup> In the “Dialectic” of the first *Critique* Kant argues that unless we put the principles of reason to a regulative rather than a constitutive use, we end with antinomies, paralogisms, and amphibolies. F. C. Beiser claims that “the regulative status of the idea of the highest good, its binding force as a duty of practical reason, requires that we give the ideas of God and immortality constitutive status. Since, however, granting them constitutive status is justified only on *practical* grounds, the argument remains consistent with the Transcendental Dialectic, which forbids constitutive status only on *theoretical* grounds” (2006, 618 (quoted), 613).

<sup>5</sup> After a survey of Kierkegaard’s books, Andrew Burgess concludes that “the term *Fornuft* [reason] is simply not part of the working technical vocabulary of his published works during the early period when [*Philosophical*] *Fragments* [1844] were written. Moreover, when he does begin to use it—late in religious works [in 1848–50], and rarely—it appears to be synonymous with *Forstand* [understanding]” (1994, 120, see also 118; Fremstedal 2010, 196–200).

<sup>6</sup> In this context, Climacus and Kierkegaard also cryptically refer to Kant’s critique of the ontological proof for the existence of God (1997–, 4:245, K4:240; 1987, 40, 190; 1968–78, 5, 59–60 [B 5, 3]; and Green 1992, 14–16).

Christian faith—in pure practical reason, Kierkegaard depicts rationality and philosophy as clearly distinct from Christianity.

## 2. The Antinomy of Practical Reason and Despair

Kant interprets the highest good as a moral world where virtue leads to happiness (1900–, 5:113–15; 1999b, 230–32). Also, the highest good takes the form of a society of the virtuous, the ethical commonwealth (1900–, 5:127–29, 6:97–102; 1999b, 242–44; 2001g, 132–36). It has been argued that Kierkegaard has a similar notion of the highest good to that of Kant, since both conceive of the highest good not only as a moral world, but as a society of the virtuous and the happy.<sup>7</sup> However, it is not clear that the highest good results from the dialectic of reason in Kierkegaard as it does in Kant. Indeed, since Kierkegaard lacks a concept of pure practical reason, he cannot see the highest good as resulting from the dialectic of pure practical reason as Kant does. Thus, although Kierkegaard appears to agree with Kant's claim that the highest good is necessary, he is somewhat less clear about what makes it necessary (see, for example, Fremstedal 2011).

If the highest good represents a purpose we are obliged to promote, this leads to several problems. First, morality or virtue is undermined by our tendency (*Hang*) to be motivated by happiness.<sup>8</sup> Second, virtue does not necessarily lead to happiness in the world.<sup>9</sup> Finally, the individual on its own is incapable of realizing the ethical commonwealth, since this is a society consisting of all who are virtuous. Since it is problematic to realize all the different parts of the highest good, the highest good itself seems impossible; promoting it therefore seems meaningless. This very problem

<sup>7</sup> Regarding Kierkegaard, see Glenn 1997, 260–61; Evans 1999, 142–47; and Fremstedal 2011. The social nature of the highest good, the kingdom of God, has received little attention in Kierkegaard scholarship. Older scholarship tended to see Kierkegaard as being concerned with the single individual, not society. Recently, Marks (2010, 177) has described Kierkegaard's approach toward immortality as “individualistic,” something that seems questionable (although Marks does not explain what is meant by “individualistic”). Much of the newer Kierkegaard scholarship (for example, Grøn 1997; Søltoft 2000) has challenged the picture of Kierkegaard as an individualist, an acolist, or a solipsist. Yet it is still not generally accepted that Kierkegaard has a conception of an ideal society. I suggest, however, that the highest good serves exactly such a role.

<sup>8</sup> This is a theme Kant develops in his doctrine of radical evil. See Wood 1970, 105–16, esp. 115. Regarding the importance of radical evil for Kierkegaard and his notion of sin, see Fremstedal 2012.

<sup>9</sup> In Kant, see 1990, A811/B839; 1900–, 5:113–15, 5:128, 5:145, 8:257, 8:261, 27:302, 28:1072–74, 28:1076–77, 28:1081–82, 28:1089–90, 29:623–24, 29:777; 2007a, 680; 1999b, 230–33, 243, 256–57; 2001e, 25–26, 28–29; 2001a, 92–93; 2001d, 406–10, 413–15, 419–21; 2001a, 241–42; 2001b, 133. In Kierkegaard, see for instance 1997–, 4:123, 156; 7:125–26, 129–144; 1983a, 27, 63; and 1992, 1:134–35, 138–155.

threatens to undermine morality itself, according to Kant. In the second *Critique*, Kant describes this problem as the *antinomy of practical reason* (1900–, 5:113–19; 1999b, 230–36; and Wood 1970, 104–16, 124–29). This antinomy takes the form of the highest good appearing *necessary and impossible* at the same time (Beiser 2006, 601; Milz 2002, 328–31). Although Kierkegaard does not use Kant’s technical terminology, he does seem to point to an antinomy wherein the highest good is both necessary and impossible (Fremstedal 2010). Instead of referring to an antinomy of reason, however, Kierkegaard typically interprets the impossibility and necessity of the highest good in terms of despair (*Fortvivelse*). Despair is something self-inflicted through sin and a result of suffering hardship and injustice (1997–, 9:252, 9:261, 10:117–24; 1998, 252, 262; 2009b, 106–13; and Fremstedal 2010, 152–53).<sup>10</sup> More generally, Kierkegaard argues that pre-Christian positions collapse not only because of evil or sin, but also because virtue does not lead to happiness, and the individual is unable to realize the ethical commonwealth on its own (Fremstedal 2010, 141, 152–54). Although this is quite different from Kant’s technical way of describing it, even Kant points to similar problems and alludes to despair (*Verzweiflung*) in this context (1900–, 28:1076; 2001d, 409–10).<sup>11</sup>

### 3. Kant’s Moral Argument for the Existence of God and Immortality

Kant thinks that the moral argument for the existence of God and immortality solves the problem of the highest good appearing necessary and impossible by arguing that the impossibility is only apparent. Kant resolves the antinomy by arguing that events in the world are phenomena, not noumena. The highest good is impossible if the phenomenal world is all there is. Yet the highest good is possible if it is assumed that human beings have a noumenal will that acts on the phenomenal world, as well as a transcendent cause that mediates between the noumenal will and its phenomenal effects (1900–, 5:114–15; 1999b, 231–32; and Beiser 2006,

<sup>10</sup> Regarding the concept of despair in *Sickness unto Death* as involving both activity and suffering, see Grøn 1997, 143–53. Regarding the concept of sin, see Green 1992, 150–81 and Fremstedal 2012.

<sup>11</sup> Although Kant does not offer a systematic analysis of despair, he and his commentators tend to rely on a conceptualisation of despair (for example Marina 2000, 354; Wood 1970, 160). Reiner Wimmer takes Kant to say that unbelief is to be considered as despair not only at the psychic-empirical level, but also at the noumenal level, adding that this is despair in the Kierkegaardian sense (1990, 159, see also 158, 68, 156, 206). Kant himself describes despair briefly as “a temporary dementedness [*Unsinn*] in someone who is hopeless” (1900–, 2:268/2009b, 73–74).

601). This means that the highest good requires not only a free will that acts on the world, but also a God who lets virtue result in happiness.<sup>12</sup>

Kant postulates the existence of God and immortality in order to show how it is possible to be moral in a consistent and rational manner (1900–, 5:451; 2006, 316–17). The postulates are meant to indicate conditions of possibility for free and rational actions; these actions presuppose the existence of the highest good *and* the conditions for reaching it (God, immortality, and freedom<sup>13</sup>). Kant's argument for the postulates is based upon an inference from the *possibility* of a purpose to the *existence* of its (transcendental) ground (see Guyer 2000, 350–51, 347–48; Kant 1990, A823–24/B851–52; Kant 1900–, 5:143; 2007a, 686–87; and 1999b, 254). Thus Kant infers God and immortality from the highest good (see 1900–, 5:132, 143; 1999b, 246, 254–55).

Kant relies on a *reductio ad absurdum practicum* argument—that is, an argument that attempts to show that someone who denies its conclusion violates a duty. Kant argues that someone who denies the postulates of God and immortality violates the duty to promote (*befördern*) the highest good (see 1900–, 27:531, 28:1083; 2001a, 291–92; 2001d, 415; Beiser 2006, 604; and Wood 1970, 28–29, 106). Kant does this by arguing that without God and immortality one is led into a twofold practical absurdity or practical dilemma (1900–, 28:1072, 29:777–78; 2001d, 406–407; and 2001b, 133–34).

The first horn of the dilemma takes the form of being motivated by happiness, something that amounts to being a scoundrel (*Bösewicht*). Kant criticises this position on the grounds that it “throw[s] away and despises the law of virtue” and “give[s] way to vices” (1900–, 28:1072, 29:777–78; 2001d, 406–07; and 2001b, 133–34).

<sup>12</sup> Although Kierkegaard does not subscribe to Kant's transcendental idealism (see Knappe 2004, 17–51), his notion of finitude comes close to that of Kant. Like Kant, Kierkegaard holds that “human reason fails through its essential finitude to be an absolute (perspectiveless) perspective of the world. If . . . the Kantian distinction between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds is that between the ways one world appears to God and to us, then the Kantian dualism is fundamental to Kierkegaard's epistemology too” (Westphal 1991, 89; see also Evans 1982, 75).

<sup>13</sup> Whereas the postulates of the existence of God and immortality state conditions of possibility for the highest good, the postulate of freedom states a condition of possibility for acting at all (see 1900–, 4:447–48, 5:3–5, 29–31; 1999a, 94–96; and 1999b, 139–40, 163–65). The following argument appears to be implicit: Premiss 1: We should promote the highest good. Premiss 2: God and immortality (as concepts with non-empirical origin) are necessary conditions for this. Conclusion: We must postulate the God and immortality. This argument appears to have the form of a *transcendental* argument. Although Kant seems to use transcendental arguments in his practical philosophy, the Introduction to the first *Critique* appears to reserve the term “transcendental” for use within the context of theoretical philosophy. For literature on and discussion of this issue, see Palmquist 2008, esp. 273–75, 296–97.

The second horn involves holding morality to be self-sufficient. This takes two forms: either one denies that happiness is different from morality, or one denies that that happiness is needed at all. Kant describes the former as a Stoic and the latter as a virtuous *Phantast* or a fool (*narr*) (1900–, 5:111–12, 29:777–78; 1999b, 229–30; and 2001b, 133–34).<sup>14</sup> The Stoic is said to strain “the moral capacity of the *human being* . . . far beyond all the limits of his nature,” and to assume “something that contradicts all cognition of the human being” (1900–, 5:127; 1999b, 242; see also 1900–, 28:1072; 2001d, 406–7). The Stoic tries to raise “himself above the animal nature of the human being,” and be “sufficient to himself” (1900–, 5:127n; 1999b, 242n). This fails since the moral agent is not only a free rational being but also a natural and sensuous being. The point seems to be that the Stoic lacks something to mediate between moral freedom and nature. Thus, the question as to whether or not everything necessary for growth in virtue will be provided by nature is left unresolved.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, he who denies the importance of happiness is a fool or a *Phantast*, since he denies his own nature and “expect[s] no consequences which are worthy of” his conduct (1900–, 29:777; 2001b, 133; see also 1900–, 28:1072; 2001d, 406–7). Kant concludes that without (belief in) a God who rewards virtue, one is led to an “unstable condition [*schwankender Zustand*] in which one continuously falls from hope into doubt and mistrust” (Kant 1900–, 28:1151, translated in Kain 2005, 134). The point seems to be that one is prone to give up hope, especially when virtue appears to result in unhappiness.

Kant claims that the possibility of doubting the happiness that belongs to the highest good would be equivalent to doubting the moral law itself (1900–, 5:144; 1999b, 255–56; see also 1990, A811/B839; 1900–, 28:1116–17; 2007a, 680; and 2001d, 442–43). If virtue does not lead to happiness

<sup>14</sup> The usual translation of “*Phantast*” is “visionary” or “dreamer. Kant writes, “The Epicurean said: to be conscious of one’s maxim leading to happiness is virtue; the Stoic said: to be conscious of one’s virtue is happiness. For the first, *prudence* was equivalent to morality; for the second, who chose a higher designation for virtue, morality alone was true wisdom” (1900–, 5:111; 1999b, 229; see also 1900–, 27:249–52; 2001a, 45–48). In *Lectures on Metaphysics* and *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, the first is described as a scoundrel rather than an Epicurean. The second is described as a virtuous *Phantast* and fool (*narr*) rather than a Stoic. However, the argument is essentially the same: *either* one is motivated by happiness, *or* one holds morality to be self-sufficient.

<sup>15</sup> Marina adds the following example: “[M]y ability to interact with others depends on a certain level of my own health as well as theirs; a certain level of physical well-being is a precondition for the ability to carry out any projects at all. And it is undeniable that *some* needs (the satisfaction of which go under the name of happiness) must be met if we are to be able to continue to progress at all. Moreover, the realization of goals designed to facilitate positive interaction among persons or groups also depends on factors outside my control, some of which have to do directly with nature itself (for instance, a hurricane can destroy a hospital) and others which have to do with the dynamics of human interaction” (2000, 350).

at all, if the highest good is impossible to realize, “then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false” (1900–, 5:114–15; 1999b, 231–33; see also 1900–, 27:483; 2001a, 254). Kant is reported to have said that “without a supreme ruler [the moral law] would have no worth or validity [*Werth und Gültigkeit*]; so I shall consult, not speculative grounds, but my own needs [*Bedürfnisse*], and can satisfy [*Genüge*] myself no otherwise than by accepting it” (1900–, 27:313; 2001a, 100–1). Without a God that makes the virtuous happy, “all subjective necessary duties which I as a rational being am responsible for performing will lose their objective reality” (1900–, 28:1072; 2001d, 406–7), meaning that they are impossible to realize (compare 1900–, 5:396; 2006, 266–67; and Beiser 2006, 619). Thus, without God, the realization of our moral duties is supposed to be impossible. The function of the postulate lies in assuring the moral agent that his moral efforts are not doomed to failure.<sup>16</sup>

#### 4. The Postulation of God in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*

Kierkegaard’s non-Christian pseudonym Climacus claims that instead of trying “to find God objectively” by basing religion on knowledge, one should find a subjective way of justifying religious belief (1997–, 7:183;

<sup>16</sup> This argument has been criticised on the grounds that promoting the highest good only requires that it is *possible* to realize and that it is *possible* for God to exist (as someone who is able to make it possible). Thus interpreted, the argument requires *agnosticism* (or religious scepticism) rather than theism (compare Ferreira 1983, Denis 2003).

Kant, however, endorses theism, writing that the highest good “is possible only under the condition of the existence of God” (1900–, 5:125; 1999b, 240–41). The reason for this seems to be that logical possibility (the absence of contradiction) is insufficient, since a coherent phantasy will not do. A “real possibility” is required, meaning that the highest good needs to have its ground in something that *actually* exists. It must have its ground in the existence of an object with the power sufficient to produce this possibility (Guyer 2000, 345–71). Thus, we need an object that makes the highest good possible. Kant suggests that the hope for the highest good would be a mere wish without such an object (1900–, 6:482; 1999c, 595; see also 1900–, 5:130; 1999b, 244–45), and concludes that the only condition of the possibility of the highest good that is conceivable for us is God and immortality (1900–, 5:469–70; 2006, 333–34). What makes the realization of the highest good possible must be “the cause of all nature,” yet “distinct from nature” (1900–, 5:125; 1999b, 240–41). Since happiness is not something that can be realized only by moral action, one must assume the existence of an almighty being who makes it possible for ethics to correspond to happiness (1900–, 6:5–6; 2001g, 58–60). God must be *omniscient* in order to know our hearts and motives; he must be *omnipotent* in order to arrange the whole of nature to accord with morality; and he must be a *moral* being who rewards virtue (1990, A814–15/B842–43; 1900–, 5:140, 5:444, 28:1012; 2007a, 681–82; 1999b, 252–53; 2006, 310; and 2001d, 356–57). Kant claims that “what remains of the concepts of which we think of a pure intelligence [*Verstandeswesen*] is nothing more than what is required for the possibility of thinking of a moral law; thus there is indeed a cognition of God but only with practical reference” (1900–, 5:137; 1999b, 250).



1992, 1:200). On Kant's account, this is exactly what faith amounts to: namely, that one holds something to be true on subjective and practical grounds, not on objective grounds (by relying on knowledge). Kant suggests that since we cannot decide objectively or theoretically whether God or immortality exists, we can decide the matter on subjective and practical grounds—something Kierkegaard (and Climacus) seems to agree with wholeheartedly.<sup>17</sup>

Indeed, *Postscript* refers explicitly to Kant at this point (Kierkegaard 1997–, 7:502; 1992, 1:552–53).

Climacus explains the subjective justification of religious belief by saying:

God is indeed a postulate, but not in the loose [*ørkesløse*, lit. pointless] sense in which it is ordinarily taken. Instead, it becomes clear that this is the only way an existing person enters into a relationship with God: when the dialectical contradiction brings passion to despair and assists him in grasping [*omfatte*, lit. compassing] God with “the category of despair” (faith), so that the postulate, far from being the arbitrary, is in fact *necessary* defence, self-defence [*Nødverge*]; in this way God is not a postulate, but the existing person's postulation of God is—a necessity [*Nødvendighed*]. (1997–, 7:183n; 1992, 1:200n)

Climacus criticises ordinary postulates for being pointless while defending the existing person's postulation of God.<sup>18</sup> In Kant's moral argument, the term postulate refers to “the possibility of an *object* itself (God and the immortality of the soul)”. This is different from the use of postulates in mathematics (geometry), since the latter refers not to an object but to “the *possibility of an action*” whereby one constructs an object (1900–, 5:11n; 1999b, 145n; and Düsing 1973: 61, 83). Similarly, Climacus's postulate concerns the possibility of God rather than the possibility of constructing a geometrical object. Climacus claims that God is subjectively necessary rather than objectively necessary, practically necessary rather than theoretically necessary.

<sup>17</sup> C. S. Evans argues at length that Kant and Kierkegaard both rely on the following structure:

- 1) God is a possible object of rational belief, but theoretical reason is inadequate to resolve the issue of religious truth;
- 2) It is impossible to be indifferent or neutral toward religious truth; and
- 3) Religious truth can be justified on subjective and practical grounds (1982, 9–13, 74–75, 77–78, 83, 165–73, 178–80).

Kant says that “to *orient* oneself in thinking in general means: when objective principles [*Principien*] of reason are insufficient for holding something true, to determine the matter according to a subjective principle [*Princip*]” (1900–, 8:136n; 2001f, 10n).

<sup>18</sup> Small Rapic appears to overlook this, reading this note as *dismissing* Kant's doctrine of the postulate of God's existence without explaining why the postulate is problematic (2007, 43n).

Elsewhere in *Postscript*, Climacus writes:

In fables and fairy tales there is a lamp called the wonderful lamp: when it is rubbed, the spirit appears. Jest! But freedom, that is the wonderful lamp. When a person [*Mennesket*—man] rubs it with ethical passion, God comes into existence for him. And look, the spirit of the lamp is a servant (so wish for it, you whose spirit is a wish), but the person who rubs the wonderful lamp of freedom becomes a servant—the spirit is the Lord. (1997–, 7:129; 1992, 1:138–39)

Climacus suggests that “rubbing” freedom with ethical passion makes God come into being for the individual. He then goes on to say that being motivated by happiness (that is, eudaimonism) is not to “rub” freedom correctly, suggesting that God does not come into being for someone unless she is motivated by the good for its own sake (1997–, 7:129; 1992, 1:139). As is clear from “Purity of Heart,” Kierkegaard agrees with Kant that being motivated by fear of punishment or hope of reward is not proper moral motivation. Only doing good for its own sake, or acting out of duty, qualifies as proper motivation (see Kierkegaard 1997–, 8:139–40; 2009c, 24; Hannay 1993, 225–27; Pattison 2005, 99–102; and Evans 1982, 105). Religiousness does not consist in God serving the individual, but rather in God assisting someone who strives to be moral. Rather than being an anti-realist and subjectivist who thinks that God comes into being when the individual “rubs” freedom, Climacus only says that God comes into being for the individual. More specifically, God comes into being for the striving person who despairs, as something that makes it possible to overcome despair. Climacus defends religious faith on the grounds that it is *self-defence* (Nødverge) *against despair*. This is in line with the famous analysis in *Sickness unto Death* according to which it is only religious faith that makes it possible to consistently avoid despair (1997–, 11:195–96; 1983b, 81). Presumably, it is only God, someone for whom everything is possible, who can guarantee that there is always hope.

Nevertheless, commentators have struggled to make sense of and justify the central claim that non-belief involves despair (Theunissen 1993, 22–23, 41–42, 56; Grøn 1997, 125–32). Although this difficult issue cannot be solved here, a brief reconstruction of one key element can be sketched. First, Kierkegaard (as well as Climacus and Anti-Climacus) subscribes to what Kant calls moral rigorism, the doctrine which asserts that one is infinitely guilty if one is not morally perfect.<sup>19</sup> Second, Kierkegaard seems to approve of Kant’s doctrine of radical evil (1997–, 20:88–89;

<sup>19</sup> Kant 1900–, 6:22–25, 6:72, 27:302; Kant 2001g, 71–74, 112–13; Kant 2001a, 92–93; Kierkegaard 1997–, 7:383, 4:342, K4:401, 24:390; Kierkegaard 1992, 1:420–21; Kierkegaard 1980, 36; Kierkegaard 1967–78, 1:#998. I agree with Green’s thesis that Kierkegaard (as well as Climacus and Haufniensis) endorsed moral rigorism. See Green 1985, 70–71 and 1992, 150.

1967–78, 3:#3089);<sup>20</sup> at the very least he holds all humans to be infinitely guilty and sinful (1997–, 4:459–60, 7:242–43, 7:383; 1980, 161; and 1992, 1:266–67, 420–21). However, if one is infinitely guilty it is not clear how one is capable, through one’s own resources alone, of improving oneself. Kant describes the problem in the following way: “evil is radical, since it corrupts the grounds of all maxims; as a natural propensity, it is also not to be extirpated through human forces, for this could happen only through good maxims—something that cannot take place if the subjective supreme ground of all maxims is presupposed to be corrupted” (1900–, 6:37; 2001g, 83–84). However, Kant insists that one knows (for practical purposes) that one should do one’s duty. Hence, it is also possible to do one’s duty. This approach to the problem amounts to “cutting the knot (by means of a practical maxim) instead of disentangling it (theoretically)” (1900–, 6:109; 2001g, 141–42).

Kierkegaard agrees with Kant’s view that evil is “not to be extirpated through human forces,” but rather than following Kant in “cutting the knot,” Kierkegaard adds that the only solution lies in divine grace as it is found in the Christian revelation. Breaking from Kant, Kierkegaard says that our sinfulness and guilt render our natural capacities completely inadequate for fulfilling the ethical task. This has the consequence that nobody can avoid the “despair of necessity” and the “despair of finitude,” types of despair that take the form of an inability to break with an evil past (1997–, 11:153–57, 149–51; 1983b, 37–42, 33–35).

Thus, Kierkegaard’s point is that the existence of evil leads to the need for divine grace. To some extent, even Kant would accept this (1900–, 6:44, 66–67, 72–76; 2001g, 89–90, 107–9, 112–16): Kant’s doctrine of radical evil suggests that we fall short of the perfection required by moral rigorism, even after having turned from evil to good. Since sins already committed cannot be repaid (see 1900–, 6:72; 2001g, 112–13), there appears to be a need for atonement or forgiveness in order to become perfect or well-pleasing to God (Marina 1997, 390). Kant appeals to grace in order to explain how even those with a good disposition can attain moral perfection or be well-pleasing to God when the propensity (*Hang*) towards evil remains. The propensity toward evil persists even after the adoption of a good disposition, leading to temptations and moral frailty. There is still a need for justification, and therefore conceptual space for divine grace, since, with respect to being perfect or well-pleasing to God, a genuine gap remains after we have done all that we can (Allison 1995, 173–75).

On Kierkegaard’s view, the determinative element in salvific revelation is the entry of God into time—that is, the incarnation. Kierkegaard sees

<sup>20</sup> For more details, see Fremstedal 2012.

grace as historically bestowed, something Kant does not seem to do. So rather than disagreeing on the necessity of grace, Kant and Kierkegaard disagree about what role history, revelation, and the sacraments play in the giving and receiving of grace.<sup>21</sup> Kierkegaard fears that we will be trapped in sin and despair unless revelation and the sacraments indicate that grace is actually given to us. Kant, on the other hand, sees such reliance on revelation and the sacraments as highly problematic: theoretically, this involves a supernatural experience that is impossible; practically, it can foster moral passivity, since it fails to make it clear that human agency must take the initiative by doing good.

*Postscript* interprets the realization of the highest good as our absolute telos (see Kierkegaard 1997–, 7:524, 353–59, 388; 1992, 1:502, 387–94, 426–27), whereas Kant describes the highest good as our final end (*Endzweck*) (see Evans 1999, 142–47; Fremstedal 2011).<sup>22</sup> However, the analysis of guilt and suffering in *Postscript* makes it clear that the highest good lies beyond our reach (Kierkegaard 1997–, 7:366, 392–446; 1992, 1:402, 431–92). Kierkegaard (Climacus) therefore concludes that, when it comes to the highest good, we are capable of doing nothing. Nevertheless, everything is said to be possible through the Christian God (1997–, 7:390–91; 1992, 1:429–30). The role of religious faith here lies not only in overcoming despair, but also in overcoming the apparent impasse created by the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of realizing the highest good. This means that the postulate in *Postscript* overlaps with Kant's moral argument regarding terminology, form, and content; both Kierkegaard (Climacus) and Kant postulate the existence of God on practical and subjective rather than theoretical or objective grounds. For both, the role of God lies in making the highest good possible in spite of its apparent impossibility. Both rely on a *reductio ad absurdum* argument in which non-belief leads to the absurdity that the highest good is both necessary and impossible. Although the basic form and content of the argument is common to both thinkers, there are differences as well. In opposition to Kant, Kierkegaard says that our sinfulness has the consequence that our natural capacities are completely inadequate for fulfilling the ethical task. Whereas Kant attempts to show that someone who denies the argument's conclusion violates a duty, Climacus tries to show that denying its conclusion involves despair. However, avoiding despair might be seen as not only desirable but obligatory, since despair can undermine moral agency.

<sup>21</sup> I am indebted to an anonymous referee's comments on this point. See also Green 2007, 181–85, 189, 191; Evans 1982, 76, 90, 123, 163, 174–75; Fremstedal 2012; and Fremstedal 2010, 143–46.

<sup>22</sup> Many of Kierkegaard's predecessors also interpreted the highest good as one's telos or vocation (*Bestemmelse*; *Bestimmung*) (see Koch 2003, 96; Thuborg 1951, 57, 119).

Several commentators have read the postulate in *Postscript* as a commentary on Kant.<sup>23</sup> In the draft for this footnote, however, Kierkegaard does not refer to Kant, as one would expect, but to Frans Hemsterhuis (1721–90) (1968–78, 6:127 [B40, 23])—a Dutch philosopher of whom Kant was aware (see Kant 1900–, 10:455; 2007c, 257). The new critical edition of Kierkegaard’s works identifies the source as a dialogue concerning the existence of God (1997–, K7:213 refers to Rohde 1967, cat. #573–75, and to Hemsterhuis 1782–97, 2:127–28, 185–88, 216–18, 236–39). However, this dialogue seems quite different from the postulate in *Postscript*, for several reasons. First, Hemsterhuis does not appear to use the relevant terminology (for example “postulate,” “subjective necessity,” or “highest good”). Second, it is not clear that Hemsterhuis employs a practical and subjective argument; instead Hemsterhuis refers to a geometrical demonstration and theoretical arguments, as well as to a “pure conviction of feeling” (1782–97, 2:217–19). As is well known, both Kant and Kierkegaard (including Climacus) criticise theoretical arguments for the existence of God. Finally, I cannot see that Hemsterhuis develops a *reductio ad absurdum* argument that reduces non-belief to a practical absurdity, as Kant and Kierkegaard do. However, Poul Møller can be seen as presenting a practical *reductio ad absurdum* argument (1839–43, 162, 164, 176, 210). But this is an argument for immortality—not the existence for God—in which the absurdity takes the form of suicide and nihilism, rather than an antinomy in which the highest good is necessary and impossible. Since *Postscript* interprets our telos as the realization of the highest good, it seems that Climacus’s postulate lies closer to Kant than either Hemsterhuis or Møller. Since Kierkegaard was familiar with Kant’s moral argument, Kant therefore seems a more likely source than Hemsterhuis or even Møller.<sup>24</sup>

## 5. Immortality

There are two lines of interpretation of immortality, each of which is found in both Kant and Kierkegaard’s authorships. One line of interpretation takes immortality to be the continuation of this life and a condition for the realization of the highest good. Another sees it as radically different from this life, as the state in which the highest good is fully

<sup>23</sup> Rasic reads it as a comment on Kant (2007, 43n), while Green says that Kierkegaard follows Kant in postulating God’s existence (1992, 139). However, Green hardly offers evidence for this controversial claim.

<sup>24</sup> We can only speculate as to why Kierkegaard refers to Hemsterhuis instead of Kant. Green goes so far as to argue that Kant’s influence on Kierkegaard has gone largely unacknowledged because Kierkegaard himself *intentionally* hid his debt to Kant, possibly due to “the anxiety of influence, the fear of being regarded as derivative” (Green 1992, xviii, 212, 214, 216).

realized. On this account, the afterlife is not a condition for the realization of the highest good; rather, the highest good itself involves an afterlife.

The first line of interpretation can be found in *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Either/Or II*. Kant's argument for the existence of immortality in the second *Critique* is based on the assumption of adequate time to fully realize the moral law. Kant says that the hope for an endless duration is justified when ethics demands an endless progression toward complete fulfilment of the moral law (1900–, 5:128, 132; 1999b, 243, 246). This is an argument that Kierkegaard's ethicist alludes to in *Either/Or* (Green 1992, 20):<sup>25</sup> "I cannot become ethically conscious without becoming conscious of my eternal being. This is the true demonstration of the immortality of the soul. It is fully developed, of course, only when the task [*Opgaven*] is congruent with the duty [*Forpligtelsen*], but that to which I am duty-bound for an eternity is an eternal task" (1997–, 3:257; 1990, 270). Elsewhere, the ethicist interprets our duty in terms of working and making a good living: "It is the destiny [*Bestemmelse*] of every human being to make a good living. If he dies before he does that, he has not fulfilled his destiny . . . the destiny of making a good living cannot be that he is supposed to die but, on the contrary, that he is supposed to live well on his good living—*ergo* man is immortal" (1997–, 3:265; 1990, 279).

The second line of interpretation assumes that the highest good cannot be fully realized in this world unless the world is radically transformed. Since virtue does not necessarily lead to happiness in this life, and since all virtuous agents are not united in a commonwealth, a different state is needed in order to realize the highest good. However, the highest good is not necessary some supernatural realm beyond the earth. Frederick Beiser explains:

Scholars have debated the ontological status of Kant's ideal of the highest good, asking whether it is noumenal or phenomenal, transcendental or natural, other-worldly or this-worldly. . . . This entire discussion proceeds from a false premise, one that betrays ignorance of the Christian tradition. The false premise is the common assumption that these realms are exclusive. . . . the city of God does not exist in heaven, in some supernatural realm beyond the earth; rather, it exists on the earth and in this world; but on the earth and in this world insofar as it is *completely transformed by the second coming of Christ*. We should view Kant's ideal of the highest good in a similar light. It always meant for him, as he described it in *Religion*, "the kingdom of God on earth." But this does not imply, as modern scholars

<sup>25</sup> A passage Green does not refer to (Kierkegaard 1997–, 19:141; Kierkegaard 2007–, 3:140–42) strongly suggests that Kierkegaard was familiar with this argument (although his knowledge may rely on secondary sources). The argument was also used by the Danish Kantian Johannes Boye (Thuborg 1951, 60). However, Møller attributes this type of argument not to Kant, but to I. H. Fichte, referencing *Die Idee der Persönlichkeit und der Individuellen Fortdauer* (1834) (Møller 1839–43, 247–49).

believe, that the earth will remain natural; it is rather that the divine will come down to earth, which will be completely transformed. Once we realize this simple point, we have no reason to think that Kant is inconsistent, or that he changed his views in the 1790s. (2006, 599)

This transformation involves the full realization of virtue, that virtue leads systematically to happiness, and the unification of all virtuous in a commonwealth. The unification of the virtuous appears to refer not only to those living today but to humankind as a whole, so that the transformation involves a new creation (Wimmer 1990, 70–71, 196–97). The old world goes under and a new world is created. Also, the highest good involves overcoming the dualism between freedom and nature by realizing freedom fully in the world. The ethical commonwealth goes from being a militant and invisible church to a triumphant and visible one. Kant says that we can see how things really are after we are dead: those who are virtuous see themselves as being already in heaven (1900–, 28:445; 2001b 292–93; see also 1900–, 2:363; 2007b, 349–50).

Unlike the ethicist, Kierkegaard follows the second line of interpretation when he appears to identify immortality with the highest good (1997–, 10:230–35, 219; 2009b, 222–28, 211). His point seems to be that since a full-fledged realization of the highest good is not possible in this life, it requires an afterlife in which all virtuous agents are happy and societally united. He stresses that immortality is not the continuation of this life, but the separation of the just and the unjust (1997–, 10:216; 2009b, 208). The difference between justice and injustice is not shown (*udvises ikke*) here, but in the hereafter (1997–, 10:215–21; 2009b, 207–13).<sup>26</sup> Although we cannot see who is just in this life, this will become clear in the afterlife.

Kierkegaard says that a “new argument for immortality” is that you are immortal because you are going to be judged. However, this is not a theoretical proof or something which can be described from an external or detached perspective (1997–, 10:221, 10:214, K10:190, 20:289; 2009b, 212–13, 205; and 1967–78, 5:#6096).<sup>27</sup> It can only be understood within

<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, there exist several commentators who deny that Kierkegaard believes in personal immortality and resurrection. See the criticism of Harrison Hall, Don Cupitt, and D. A. Phillips in Marino 2001, 61–76. See also Marks 2010, 145, 169–71.

<sup>27</sup> Marks situates the new argument for immortality in the Danish debate over immortality by focusing on the role of Poul Møller (Marks 2010, esp. 145, 158–59, 168–69, 181). Marks see Socrates and Møller as Kierkegaard’s forerunners, leaving out Kant, Hemsterhuis, I. G. Fichte and I. H. Fichte. However, the move away from objective proofs toward the ethical import of immortality found in Møller was anticipated by Kant. Møller (1839–43, 180) himself refers to the “moral proof,” saying that it has been given a more scientific form by Fichte. However, Marks claims that what Kierkegaard finds missing in the “old” arguments about immortality is the relation to concepts like sin, fear, anxiety, desire, grace, and judgement (2010, 145). My view is that Kierkegaard’s concepts of anxiety and sin do go

the practical perspective of the agent who is concerned with doing his duty; this point is clearly reminiscent of Climacus's postulate, as well as of Kant's moral argument. Although the argument itself is less than clear, Kierkegaard seems to think that having a good disposition is insufficient, since ethics also requires that justice is done, that there be a judgement. Elsewhere in the same work, Kierkegaard states, "Just as Christianity demonstrates, precisely from all the disapprobation [*Miskjendelse*] and persecution and wrong the truth must suffer, that justice must exist (what a marvelous way of drawing conclusions!), so also in the extremity of hardship [*Trængselens Yderste*], when it squeezes most terribly, there is this conclusion, this *ergo*: *ergo*, there is an eternity to hope for" (1997–, 10:122; 2009b, 111). This passage seems to say that we must hope for an afterlife because of hardship and suffering in this world. If one's telos includes not only virtue but also happiness (bliss), and virtue does not necessarily lead to happiness in this world, one must hope for an eternity wherein virtue leads to happiness so that the highest good can be realized. A similar point is made in *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits*:

The Apostle Paul declares (1 Corinthians 15:19), "If we hope only for this life, we are the most miserable [*Elendigste*] of all." This is indeed the case, because if there were no eternal happiness [*Salighed*—bliss] in a life to come, the person who for Christ's sake renounces all of the world's goods and bears all its evil would be deceived, dreadfully deceived. If there were no eternal happiness in the life to come, it seems to me that just out of compassion for a person like that it must come into existence. (1997–, 8:329; 2009c, 228; see also 1997–, 7:355n; 1992, 1:389n)

Kierkegaard's claim about renouncing "all of the world's goods," parallels Kant's claim that it would be impossible to sacrifice many gratifications (*Vergnügen*) of this life and to adhere to the purest virtue without having faith in God and another world (1900–, 29:778; 2001b, 133–34). If both virtue and happiness are necessary (although priority should be given to

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beyond Kant, although they nevertheless belong to a post-Kantian context, and overlap with Kant to a large extent, as does other central concepts (Fremstedal 2010 and 2012). Marks describes the interest in immortality in terms of desire, something that can be misleading, since Kierkegaard—like Kant—endorses moral purity, not eudaimonism (compare Hannay 1993, 225–27; Pattison 2005, 99–102; and Evans 1982, 105). The present essay tries to supplement Marks's fine essay by including the existence of God, Kant, and the social nature of immortality (the kingdom of God). I agree with Marks (2010, 181) that Kierkegaard is more concerned with doctrine than is often claimed by existing scholarship. But I believe this tendency is mainly found in Anglophone scholarship that focuses on the pseudonymous authorship (see Barrett 2008), since much of the Scandinavian and German scholarship is quite different, especially the literature on the upbuilding writings. As an example of a contemporary Kierkegaard scholar concerned with doctrine, one might mention Niels Jørgen Cappelørn at the Søren Kierkegaard Research Centre in Copenhagen; see Cappelørn n.d.



virtue in order that only the virtuous can expect happiness), then ethics requires not only a moral disposition, but also the genuine prospect of happiness. Kierkegaard seems to rely on this type of Kantian argument in the passages we have examined, including his so-called “new argument.” And like Kant, Kierkegaard appears to see the argument as based on moral needs, not wishes (see Evans 1982, 178–79, 188–90). However, Kierkegaard hardly articulates a very clear argument. For instance, *Postscript* merely states that “ethically everything culminates in immortality, without which the ethical is merely custom and habit” (1997–, 7:162; 1992, 1:175). This cryptic statement seems to say that without a judgement, without happiness and unhappiness, salvation and damnation, ethics ultimately loses its binding force.

## 6. The Need for a Purposive Moral Order

Kant suggests that if the world consists of an amoral and purposeless chaos, then we are neither capable of being moral nor of orienting ourselves in thinking (1900–, 5:452–53, 458–59; 2006, 317–18, 322–24). He states that “if we depart from” purposiveness or “the teleological doctrine of nature,” then a “desolate chance [*trostlose Ungefähr*]” takes the place of the guideline of reason (1900–, 8:18; 2009a, 109). Elsewhere, he describes this lack of purposiveness as a “restless whirlwind” or “an eternal vortex” (1900–, 15:951; 2009c, 189–90).

Similarly, Kierkegaard (*de silentio*) writes:

If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying [*til Grund for*] everything there were only a wild, fermenting power [*Magt*] that writhing in dark [*dunkle*] passions produced everything . . . if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair? If such were the situation, if there were no sacred bond that knit humankind together, if one generation emerged after another like forest foliage . . . —how empty and devoid of consolation would life be! But precisely for that reason it is not so. (1997–, 4:112; 1983a, 15)

Kierkegaard (*de silentio*) states that if an amoral and purposeless empty force lies at the ground of everything, then we would have to despair, since then life would be “empty and devoid of consolation.” In a characteristic way, however, he concludes that this cannot be the case: presumably, because the amoral and purposeless force is reduced *ad absurdum*. The absurdity, however, takes the form of existential despair rather than merely a contradiction or antinomy. In order to avoid despair, we must disregard the idea of purposelessness as the ground of all reality. We avoid despair by assuming the existence of what is characterized (above) as “an eternal consciousness” and “a sacred bond that knit[s] humankind together” as well as what is (later) described as an “eternal divine order”

and “the world of spirit” (1997–, 4:123–24; 1983a, 27). The latter is clearly the idea of a moral world, a world where virtue leads to happiness.<sup>28</sup> This moral world also appears to be associated with a “sacred bond” that “knit[s] humankind together” (1997–, 4:112; 1983a, 15) something that may be interpreted as the kingdom of God, or a commonwealth of the virtuous. In any case, it seems clear that purposelessness is contrasted with the highest good (the synthesis of virtue and happiness). The upshot is that in order to prevent despair we must assume that the highest good is possible, with the corresponding result that virtue can lead to happiness (and individuals are united in a society). Although *Fear and Trembling* does not state explicitly what makes the highest good possible, the book focuses on Abrahamic faith, interpreting it as something that makes possible the realization of the highest good (Fremstedal 2010, 135–43). Again, the point seems to be that the alternative to religious faith is despair. This is in line both with Kant’s moral argument as well as with *Postscript* and *Sickness unto Death*, but it suggests that the solution lies within Abrahamic faith. (Islam is not discussed, so the focus lies on Judaism and Christianity.) Elsewhere, Kierkegaard says that if we are not to lose everything, we must will the existence of a loving God (1997–, 8:364–65; 2009c, 268).<sup>29</sup> However, Kierkegaard’s understanding of a loving God seems explicitly and exclusively Christian, something which appears to go beyond Kant’s moral faith.

Albert Camus quotes parts of the long passage cited above and objects that seeking the truth is not the same as seeking what one wishes for (1975, 42–43). Interestingly, Kant’s moral argument had already met with basically the same objection from Thomas Wizenmann in 1787 (Byrne 2007, 88). In his reply, Kant admits that he infers the existence of God from a need, but he denies that this involves wishful thinking, since it is based on a need of reason rather than inclinations (1900–, 5:143n; 1999b, 255n; see also 1900–, 5:121, 27:321, 727; 1999b, 237–38; 2001a, 106–7, 448). He says that “I *will* that there be a God . . . this is the only case in which my interest, because I *may* not give up anything of it, unavoidably determines my judgment” (1900–, 5:143; 1999b, 254–55). The proof for the existence of God “lies merely in the moral need [*liegt blos in dem moralischen Bedürfniß*]” (1900–, 27:718; 2001a, 441; see also 1900–, 27:549–50; 2001a, 305–7). While Camus and Wizenmann distinguish sharply between reality and wishes, Kant and Kierkegaard may be seen

<sup>28</sup> Elsewhere Kierkegaard describes this moral world as the highest good. See Fremstedal 2011.

<sup>29</sup> Martin Andic (2005, 210) takes this passage from *Upbuilding Discourses in Various Spirits* to mean that God exists because I want it, something which reminds one of Kant’s claim that “I *will* that there be a God” and a life after death (1900–, 5:143; 1999b, 254–55).

as trying to develop a third way by using practical needs to justify religious faith (compare Evans 1982, 1–123, 159–200).<sup>30</sup>

## 7. Natural Theology and Christian Theology

Commenting on Kant's moral argument, Dieter Henrich writes:

To believe that the world order does not allow moral life would be to precipitate absolute despair. For that reason I *do not* believe it. Even if I think that I believe it, I am wrong. I do not believe that this is the case, no matter what I say. To read Kant this way is to encounter a sort of existential philosophy: there are well-founded beliefs that precede and survive all arguments. (2008, 102)

The type of existential philosophy Henrich sketches here comes very close to what we find in Kierkegaard (and his pseudonyms). The notion of belief surviving all arguments appears to be closer to Kierkegaard (and even irrationalism and fideism) than Kant.<sup>31</sup> Kierkegaard and the pseudonyms

<sup>30</sup> In some passages that anticipate the *Postscript* (and Kierkegaard's use of Socrates), Kant says: "If something is very weighty [*erheblich*] for us and of very great importance, so that a great part, indeed, the greatest part of our peace of mind [*Gemüths-Ruhe*] and of our external well-being and happiness [*äußeren Wohlseyns, und Glückseligkeit*] depends upon it, then in this case the mind [*Gemüth*] is just not free enough to consider the matter indifferently and impartially from both sides, to weigh grounds for it on one side and the grounds for its opposite on the other side, to hold the importance of all these various grounds up against one another properly, and to pronounce on their advantage; instead the minds, and often even our understanding, are chained, as it were, and restricted, so that we immediately and readily approve what is advantageous to us and grant it our approval. And, on the other hand, [we] soon reject and disapprove what could cause us harm or sickness" (1900–, 24:158–59; 2004, 125; see also 1900–, 2:349–50; 2007b, 336–38). And: "[N]o more miserable condition for man can be thought . . . that the condition that leaves us undecided [*unentschloßen*] . . . particularly . . . when it affects our interests. . . . Everything that holds us up and makes us inactive, leaves us in a certain kind of inaction, is quite opposed to the essential determinations of the soul" (1900–, 24:203; 2004, 160). Even in the context of utter uncertainty in speculation there can be complete decisiveness in action. Socrates was uncertain whether there was another world, but he acted as if he were certain (Kant 1900–, 24:433; translated in Zammito 2002, 277).

<sup>31</sup> However, Manfred Kuehn misinterprets Kierkegaard when he writes the following (as a critique of Wood): "Kant's faith is entirely different from Kierkegaard's. . . . Kierkegaard's faith *cannot* be justified. The very intention to justify is contradictory to Kierkegaard's project, and, in so far as Kant wants to justify he is already opposed to Kierkegaard. If we then consider that Kant's faith is meant to be rational, the opposition becomes even stronger. But this is not all: Kant makes also very clear that he is on the side of the common man or commonsense. He is with 'the crowd,' opposed to a '*salto mortale*' into faith" (Kuehn 1985, 168). Kierkegaard gives a negative argument for religious faith and is in accord with the common man (*den Enfoldige*) but not with the crowd. Whether Kierkegaard's faith is over reason or against reason remains controversial. It should be kept in mind, however, that Kierkegaard relies on a notion of rationality that is much narrower than that of Kant; Kierkegaard lacks a concept of pure practical rationality and tends therefore to align rationality with prudence and egoism. See Fremstedal 2010, 196–200.

often depict religious faith and hope as something that goes *against* understanding (although understanding represents prudence rather than moral purity for him). However, even Kant's moral faith transcends argumentation, since it is based on the natural dialectic of reason, not merely on arguments that can be redeemed discursively. Hence, it is misleading to speak of Kant's moral *argument* (or moral proof) for the existence of God and immortality.

However, there is a fundamental ambiguity with Kierkegaard's account as I have interpreted it here. What is the status of this type of theology? Does it belong exclusively to Christian faith (and thus presuppose revelation) or does it belong to philosophical theology, as Kant's moral argument does (see 1990, A631–32/B659–60; 1900–, 28:999–1012; 2007a, 583–84; and 2001d, 345–57)? Does the postulation of God's existence belong to what *Postscript* describes as immanent or transcendent religion, to natural or revealed religion? If it belongs to the former, then it is not clear why revelation and something specifically or exclusively Christian is needed, since then it seem that a Kantian rational faith is sufficient. And if it belongs to revealed faith (and *is* specifically Christian), then it is not clear that it relies on a philosophical argument (like Kant's moral argument), since then it is based on revelation and Scripture rather than postulates or arguments.

A note from 1854, a decade after most of the writings we have examined, may shed light on this (even if we cannot absolutely preclude that Kierkegaard changed his views). Kierkegaard says that an argument with the form “X only leads to despair, therefore X is not the case,” involves *arguing by virtue of the human* (1997–, 25:476; 1967–78, 3:#2551). He claims that this type of argument—an argument said to be found in Luther—is not relevant when it comes to what is understood by Christianity in the *New Testament*. Thus, Kierkegaard suggests that this type of reductio argument is not specifically Christian, but rather something that belongs to philosophy or natural theology. If this interpretation is sound, then the postulate in *Postscript*, the argument for purposiveness in *Fear and Trembling*, and the “new argument” in *Christian Discourses* are not specifically Christian. However, this does not necessarily mean that these texts endorse natural religion instead of Christianity. Rather, it means that *alternatives to religious faith are reduced ad absurdum*. However, a defence of religiousness on these negative grounds hardly constitutes a closed case (Kosch 2006, 139). We do not have an argument showing that one particular form of religious belief (for example, Lutheranism) is necessary and that other forms (for example, Kant's moral faith) do not suffice. At best, Kierkegaard's argument shows that non-religious positions fail. Partly for this reason, Kierkegaard goes beyond argumentation by relying on the authority of revelation. Here Kierkegaard comes closer to Møller (and I. H. Fichte) than Kant (compare Koch 2004, 259–64).

This does not mean, however, that there is no role for natural religion in Kierkegaard. Climacus clearly states that immanent religiousness is a precondition for transcendent religiousness (1997–, 7:506, 7:521, 4:258; 1992, 1:556–57, 573; 1987, 55), meaning that revealed faith presupposes natural religion. Natural religion is exemplified by Socrates and taken to involve total guilt-consciousness and an awareness of one’s inability to realize the highest good (1997–, 7:503, 519, 390–91; 1992, 1:554, 571–72, 429–30; and Fremstedal 2010, 139). However, the role of these problems lies in motivating one to become a Christian (Fremstedal 2012; Fremstedal 2010, esp. 187–88). Thus, natural religion prepares the way for Christian existence, even though Kierkegaard ultimately views it as sinful.

An early passage in which Kierkegaard comments on Kant’s moral argument suggests that Kant argues by “virtue of the human” rather than something specifically Christian.<sup>32</sup> It is stated that Kant

becomes guilty of . . . the anthropomorphism of the understanding. None of the attributes of God have objective reality, I merely imagine him thus because he must be this way in order to be the ideal that can fulfill the postulates of my ethical consciousness. Meanwhile the Christian is convinced that when he names the Trinitarian God it is not a name he has given him, but one which God has given himself. (1997–, 19:142–43; 2007–, 3:141–42)

This passage suggests that the Christian concept of God is “theomorphic,” or God-shaped, whereas Kant’s concept is anthropomorphic.<sup>33</sup> Rather than being our subjective construction, or even an ideal of reason, God has revealed some of his true nature to us. Thus interpreted, the Christian concept of God is more “realistic” and less subjective than Kant’s concept of God.<sup>34</sup> Kierkegaard goes further by saying that Kant’s postulate is based on the *egoism* of the I.<sup>35</sup> This suggests that the moral argument is

<sup>32</sup> However, this passage is from Kierkegaard’s 1837 notes from the lectures of H. M. Martensen (1808–84), an influential Danish Hegelian. If we compare Kierkegaard’s notes to the notes made by an unnamed student (found among Kierkegaard’s papers), the content seems largely the same in the case of Kant’s philosophy of religion. Thus, in this case Kierkegaard appears to report Martensen’s view rather than expresses his own thoughts. Nevertheless, the passage presents an interesting critique of Kant that appears to be essentially in line with Kierkegaard’s later thought (with the possible exception of criticizing the moral argument for egoism). Notes by the unnamed student are available in Pap. II C 25 in Kierkegaard 1968–78, 12:284–94.

<sup>33</sup> The notes from the unnamed student also stresses that Kant’s approach to God is anthropomorphic (Pap. II C 25 in Kierkegaard 1968–78, 12: 287, 290).

<sup>34</sup> Martensen described Kantians who find room for revelation as “quite inconsistent” and as “half Kantians” (Kierkegaard 1968–78, 12:290). Kierkegaard appears to have shared Martensen’s view that there is no room for revelation in Kant. Compare Pap. II C 25 in Kierkegaard 1968–78, 12:284–94; 1997–, 19:141–43; and 2007–, 3:140–42.

<sup>35</sup> At this point Kierkegaard deviates from the the unnamed student attending Martensen’s lectures. See Pap. II C 25 in Kierkegaard 1968–78, 12:284–94. Kant would not agree

based on subjective needs and wishes, not universal interests. As we have seen, this is the classical objection to the moral argument developed by Wizenmann. However, it seems that Kierkegaard himself did not accept Wizenmann's objection later on, since he went on to develop an argument similar to that of Kant (Evans 1982, 1–123, 159–200).<sup>36</sup> But Wizenmann's objection nevertheless fits Kierkegaard's more general demand that one should serve God, not the other way around (Gouwens 1996, 166, 232). Also, a transition to a "theomorphic" concept of God makes it possible to overcome a merely subjective conception of God, and to develop a specifically Christian conception of God, but this approach comes at the cost of relying on revelation rather than arguments and dialectics.

In general, Kierkegaard's approach to religion involves two radically different elements, neither of which can be reduced to each other. On the one hand, Kierkegaard relies on the authority of revelation and does not want to judge Christianity from an external standpoint. This involves staying within the so-called theological circle (see Tillich 1973, 8–11; Kierkegaard 1997–, 19:126–30; and Kierkegaard 2007–, 3:125–29). On the other hand, Kierkegaard and the pseudonyms often argue that there are anomalies or problems within non-Christian existence, and that Christianity avoids these problems.<sup>37</sup> I have argued that these problems or anomalies have not only to do with the problem of evil (guilt and sin) but also with the realization of the highest good in general (Fremstedal 2010). This strategy involves an argumentative structure that is distinct from the theological approach sketched above, since it does not rely on the authority of revelation. This type of strategy only involves a negative argument: non-Christian positions are criticized without offering any reasons for becoming a Christian, except the indication that the alternatives fail. The arguments considered in this essay fit into this category, since they try to reduce non-religious positions *ad absurdum*. However, these arguments do not explain why Kierkegaard favors Christianity

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that the postulate is based on egoism, since this indicates that it based on subjective needs and wishes rather than universal interests. Nevertheless, Kant may possibly concede that his approach is anthropomorphic. Peter Byrne, for instance, argues that the concept of God is a symbol, which is based on analogy with human agents. Also, the concept grace is pictorial and imaginative. Byrne 2007, 64–69, 147–48, 172, 130–31, 125–26; see also Kant 1900–, 6:53, 7:36, 7:43; 2001g, 96–97; Kant 2001c, 262, 267–68.

<sup>36</sup> Marks shows that Kierkegaard (Climacus) criticised Feuerbach's contention that "the resurrection is a realized wish" (2010, 172).

<sup>37</sup> In the case of *Sickness unto Death*, Arne Grøn points to a similar duality (1997, 296–99, 230–32, 364, 407). On the one hand, Anti-Climacus argues that some positions fail on their own terms. On the other hand, he criticizes them on Christian grounds. Whereas the former can be called an internal critique, the latter can be called an external critique. Grøn describes the former as philosophical and the latter as theological.

(much less a specific form of Lutheranism). In order to explain this we need to look at Kierkegaard's theological presuppositions rather than his philosophical arguments.

I believe these two elements are crucial for understanding Kierkegaard's account of faith. Without the negative argument, Kierkegaard cannot even show what motivates one to become a Christian, except in a question-begging manner. However, removing the theological circle appears to have disastrous results for Christian faith, at least given Kierkegaard's conception of it. On Kierkegaard's account, Christianity cannot be reduced to mere human concepts or categories, since it is based on revelation. Christianity relies on divine authority, an authority which transcends discursive argumentation (1997–, 10:199, 15:110, 15:221–25; 2009b, 189; and 2009a, 24–25). Kant, on the other hand, does not seem to rely on this type of duality, since he presents his theory as philosophical (rational) theology, not as a biblical theology that relies on revelation. While both Kant and Kierkegaard do natural theology, Kierkegaard goes beyond Kant by clearly relying on revelation. Kierkegaard can be taken to say that that *if* revealed faith demands suffering and is something which *offends* natural man, then revealed faith *can* be something more than a projection of human needs and wishes. Religion that does not involve the possibility of offense stands in danger of making God serve humanity rather than the other way around (Gouwens 1996, 166, 232). It seems clear that there is a tension between this approach towards religion and Kierkegaard's use of the moral argument, since the latter is not offensive but still tries to represent something more than wishful thinking.

## 8. Conclusion

This essay has attempted to give us new knowledge about the relation between Kant and Kierkegaard, both conceptually and historically. Although it has received little attention, Kierkegaard sketches an argument remarkably similar to Kant's moral argument in *Postscript*, *Fear and Trembling*, and *Christian Discourses*. There are strong similarities between Kierkegaard and Kant when it comes to the form and content of the argument, as well as some of its terminology. Both rely on a *reductio ad absurdum* argument in which non-belief is said to lead to the absurdity that the highest good is both necessary and impossible. For both, the role of God (and immortality) lies in making the highest good possible even though it appears impossible. And both justify faith on practical and subjective grounds, not theoretical or objective grounds. But whereas Kant justifies faith on moral grounds, Kierkegaard sees faith as overcoming despair and sin.

I have argued that Kierkegaard's argument lies closer to Kant than to Hemsterhuis or Møller, and that Kant seems a more likely source than

Hemsterhuis or Møller. This is noteworthy since most of Kant's successors refused to accept Kant's moral argument. Schleiermacher and Schelling, for instance, dismissed the moral argument very early on, whereas Fichte and Hegel dismissed it later when developing their mature theories (Düsing 1973; Spaemann 1974, 974–75). But even though Kierkegaard was familiar with Kant's moral argument, it is still not clear how much he was influenced by it. Instead of subscribing to a Kantian moral theology, or developing a rational theology, Kierkegaard appears to have used an argument similar to that of Kant primarily to criticize non-religious positions. Thus, instead of making a positive case for the existence of God like Kant tried to do, Kierkegaard presents a negative argument to the effect that non-religious positions involve an existential absurdity (despair). Kierkegaard combines this argument with Lutheran presuppositions about revelation and sin that go beyond Kant's rational (moral) faith. Thus, Kierkegaard may be seen as using Kantian ideas to reinforce his own Christian convictions.<sup>38</sup>

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