

Making Sense of Kant's Highest Good

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Commentators on Kant's highest good can be divided into two camps: those who believe it is unnecessary, importing an "extra-moral addition to Kant's theory [...] one designed primarily to serve religious purposes"¹ and those who affirm its importance for Kant's project. Those who affirm its importance have often observed that Kant developed two notions of the highest good, one immanent and one transcendent. Silber's influential article on the immanence and transcendence of the highest good defines this transcendent aspect as the total realization of the highest good, the achievement of which is beyond human power, and contrasts it with the highest good as immanent, "which specifies man's actual moral obligation"². He argues that the concept of the highest good as transcendent functions to maintain "the normative character of the good"³, that is, it is "the measure that man uses in assessing the limits of his capacity"⁴. On this reading the highest good as transcendent is understood as something that transcends the powers of finite individuals and as such is simply treated as a regulative ideal. Little attempt is made to understand the highest good as transcendent systematically in terms of its being both an unconditioned condition and the perfect or consummate good, and as such the ultimate *telos* of the natural world. This has resulted in an impoverished grasp of both the concept's differences from, and interrelationships with, the highest good as immanent, as well as of its central importance in Kant's ethical system.

Other recent attempts to come to grips with the two conceptions have generally been dismissive of the significance of the highest good as transcendent. It has typically been portrayed as simply an other-worldly state of affairs in which God distributes happiness in accordance with virtue. Andrews Reath, for instance, dubs this Kant's "theological" interpretation of the highest good and characterizes it as a "state of affairs that comes about in another world through the activity of God"⁵. The theological conception assumes "the existence of another world in which a

¹ Thomas Auxter, "The Unimportance of Kant's Highest Good", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979), 121–134.

² John R. Silber, "Kant's Conception of the Highest Good as Immanent and Transcendent", *The Philosophical Review* 68 (1959), 460–492; 485.

³ *Ibid.*, 479.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 484. Silber's other work on the highest good will be discussed in part II of this paper.

⁵ Andrews Reath, "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant", *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, October 1988, Volume 26, No. 4, 593–619; 601.

system for distributing happiness in proportion to virtue is already in place”⁶. This understanding of the highest good has been rejected by many commentators for two reasons. First, as Reath notes, insofar as the crucial element in this conception has to do with God’s activity, it cannot function as a guide to human conduct;⁷ Yirmiyahu Yovel, quoting Guttman, notes further that given this conception “one wonders how there can be a duty to realize the highest good”⁸, since it occurs in another world and is something brought about by God’s activity and not our own. For this reason Yovel believes Kant to have abandoned the next worldly account and substituted for it one in which it becomes a regulative ideal for conduct in this world.⁹ Second, the proportionality between virtue and happiness in the highest good threatens the transcendental freedom established in the analytic with a foreign and eudaimonistic element: as Reath puts it, it is difficult to avoid seeing it as “a system of rewards and punishments”¹⁰. For these reasons, those scholars who recognize the importance of the highest good generally focus discussion on the highest good as something to be achieved in this world, and do not consider its other worldly interpretation an important feature of Kant’s system.

It is important to note that on this account empirical elements (namely happiness) are simply transferred to an other-worldly dimension. I will argue, however, that a systematic exposition of how the highest good as transcendent differs from the highest good possible in the world reveals there really is no place for these empirical elements outside of the phenomenal world. Reath’s account and others like it thus provide us with a defective conception of the highest good as transcendent. No doubt Kant is himself partially responsible for such a state of affairs, since he sometimes simply extended the empirical conditions present in this life (the need for empirical happiness) into the next. This is particularly true of early accounts of the highest good developed by Kant in the later sections of the *Critique of Pure Reason* and of some of Kant’s statements in the second *Critique*. Nevertheless, as I hope to show in this paper, Kant finally arrived at a definite systematic understanding of the differences between the highest good as transcendent, that is, as an un-

⁶ Ibid., 602.

⁷ Ibid., 608. Silber makes a related point in his article, “Kant’s conception”, 474 f.

⁸ Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, (Princeton University Press, Princeton: 1980), 72; he quotes Julius Guttman’s *Kant’s Gottesbegriff in seiner positiven Entwicklung*, (Berlin: Reuther und Reichard, 1906, 67 f.).

⁹ So Yovel, “The highest good and the given world no longer signify two different worlds but two states, present and ideal, of the same world. In other words, the highest good becomes a historical goal. [...] The highest good is our own world brought to perfection. It is not the transcendent world of God, but like the given world it has temporal existence and empirical constituents.” Ibid., 72.

¹⁰ Reath, “Two Conceptions”, 610. Much the same criticism was already made by Schopenhauer, who believed that if happiness is thought of as an element of the highest good, it remains a secret article, a reward furtively desired by the moral person – thus reintroducing heteronomy into Kant’s ethics. Schopenhauer, *Werke*, 621.

conditioned condition,¹¹ and the highest good in the world in which the two are sharply distinguished: when the highest good is thought of as immanent, it is a *synthetic* concept composed of virtue and *empirical* happiness; however, the highest good in its transcendent aspect is such that both its components must transcend the world of sense. A considered view of Kant's mature views on the subject will show that we cannot really make sense of the highest good as immanent without referring to its transcendent sense. The highest good in the world has meaning only insofar as it refers to its ultimate *telos*, itself standing outside the world of sense; this implies that the highest good as transcendent is its principle and more important sense.

In order to deal with all the relevant issues, the paper will be divided into three parts. In the first part of this paper I will trace the fundamental characteristics of the two conceptions of the highest good. I will do so by taking a very close look at Kant's grappling with the Dialectic of pure practical reason. As we investigate it we will see that there are strains and elements of inconsistency in Kant's account as it finds development both in his first and second *Critique*. Nevertheless, important features of Kant's systematic project deriving from his most fundamental critical principles eventually led him to a resolution of his views, especially concerning the character of the highest good as transcendent. Reflection on the character of the latter will enable us to carve out an understanding in which the two concepts are sharply distinguished and their role vis à vis one another clearly delimited. Furthermore, this sharp delineation of the two concepts will enable us to see a problem with Kant's understanding of the highest good as immanent having significant consequences for his argument for the existence of God.

In the second part of the paper I discuss the *function* of both notions of the highest good. Here I show why the highest good is a *necessary* object of practical reason and how it relates to the categorical imperative. Against those commentators who argue that the highest good can be dispensed with, I defend Kant's claim that "the impossibility of the highest good must prove the falsity of the moral law also"¹². On the other hand, I also argue against those who would affirm the importance of the highest good by claiming that it adds content to Kant's ethical formal-

¹¹ Kant introduces the subject of the highest good by noting that it can be taken to mean either the supreme good (*supremum*), because it is an unconditional condition, that is, is subordinate to no other, or the perfect good (*consummatum*). Its latter sense denotes "a whole which is yet no part of a yet larger whole", *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. by Lewis White Beck, (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1993), 116; henceforth Prussian Academy Edition pagination will be noted immediately following the volume number in brackets: [5: 110]. The latter includes both virtue and happiness; I will argue that when both components are thought of as complete they are holiness and bliss. When Kant first introduces the concept he considers it in terms of virtue and happiness, where virtue is the condition of happiness (117; [5: 110 f.]). However, later on in his discussion he equates the highest good with an intelligible world (139; [5: 132]). The problem and its consequences will be discussed in more detail below.

¹² *Ibid.*, 120; [5: 114].

ism. The results of this inquiry will show that while Kant is correct in affirming that the highest good is a necessary object of practical reason, the concept — in particular that of the highest good as immanent — must undergo certain revisions if it is going to fit consistently into Kant's overall project. In my third section I will continue to reflect on how the two notions of the highest good are related to one another, why the highest good as transcendent is its principle significance, and how a commitment to the possibility of this interrelationship also commits one to an understanding of the natural world which requires the existence of God.

I. Two Conceptions of the Highest Good

In the first *Critique* Kant had defined the highest good as happiness in proportion to one's worthiness to be happy and had already noted that this proportionality does not exist in this life. The highest good was then presented as an object of hope: belief in God assures us that it will be realized in the next world. At this point the possibility of happiness is simply transposed to a future life.¹³ It is only in the Dialectic of his second *Critique* that Kant began to struggle with the implications of thinking of the highest good as both the consummate good and as an unconditioned condition: here he endeavors to show *why* the highest good cannot be achieved in this life. In the process he attains crucial insights respecting the nature of both happiness and virtue and how they relate to one another when they are synthesized in the highest good.

Nevertheless, even in the Dialectic Kant did not completely think through the implications of his understanding of the highest good as the unconditioned and consummate good, that is, as transcendent, nor did he fully realize how this concept stood in tension with an understanding of the highest good as a *synthetic* concept. Because of confusions respecting the two conceptions of the highest good, Kant did not see that his argument for the existence of God, as developed in the Dialectic, does not work (this is not to say, however, that the argument cannot be salvaged through some revisions). In order to show why the argument as it stands does not work, and how its failure is connected with a confusion respecting the two concepts of the highest good, I will develop two points in this section: a) throughout the Dialectic, Kant elaborates the highest good as a *synthetic* concept; in fact, the antinomy generated therein depends on this understanding of the highest good; moreover, *Kant unfolds the Dialectic by developing the character of the highest good as*

¹³ In the first *Critique*, Kant notes, "Morality, by itself, constitutes a system. Happiness, however, does not do so, save in so far as it is distributed in exact proportion to morality. But this is possible only in the intelligible world, under a wise Author and Ruler. Such a Ruler, together with life in such a world, which we must regard as a future world, reason finds itself constrained to assume [...]." Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1929), 639; A 811/B 839.

consummate and as an unconditioned condition in terms of his development of the concept as synthetic; b) a critical elucidation of what is involved in the highest good as both an unconditioned condition and as consummate shows that this understanding of the highest good – what I will label its transcendent aspect – is *not* one which involves the synthesis of two heterogeneous concepts.

I a. The Highest Good as a Synthetic Concept and its Exposition in the Dialectic

As I will argue below, the culmination of virtue (holiness) joined to the consummation of happiness (bliss) is the highest good in its transcendent aspect. As such an ultimate goal, the highest good is not fully realizable in the empirical world. To believe that such an ideal of reason can become manifest in the world of appearances is the source of the Dialectic of pure practical reason, which demands the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned thing.¹⁴ Since practical reason concerns itself with objects that are to be made real through its exercise, the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned thing must in this case be understood teleologically: it is the ultimate goal of all moral human striving, i. e., the highest good. As such an unconditioned goal, it is that for the sake of which all other practical actions are undertaken. The Dialectic of pure practical reason arises when this goal, which as an unconditioned condition cannot pertain to the world of appearances, is thought of as the final goal of appearances realizable *in* the empirical world.¹⁵

In the Dialectic Kant notes that both Stoicism and Epicureanism were attempts to delineate the conditions of the possibility of how the highest good, as such an unconditioned totality, could be achieved while we are still members of *this* world. The Epicurean tried to account for this possibility through the belief that virtue was a means to the rational pursuit of happiness, while the Stoic did so by equating consciousness of virtue with happiness. Both schools of thought failed because they were only able to explain this possibility through collapsing the differences between the sources for virtue and happiness. Stoics and Epicureans alike believed virtue

¹⁴ At the very beginning of the dialectic, Kant notes: “In both its speculative and practical employment, pure reason always has its dialectic, for it demands the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned thing, and this can be reached only in things in themselves.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 113; [5: 106 f.].

¹⁵ Michael Albrecht mentions Kurt Nitzschke’s analysis of this antinomy, which sheds an interesting light on its underlying structure: “Da die Antinomie der reinen praktischen Vernunft die empirische Möglichkeit des höchsten Gutes prüft, sind ihre beiden Sätze *gleich berechtigt*. Eine weitere Parallele zur *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* liegt darin, daß das höchste Gut alle Merkmale einer *Idee* aufweist, was in der Auflösung der Antinomie deutlich wird: Da das höchste Gut nicht Endpunkt einer Reihe der Erscheinungen sein kann, ist es, obwohl Ziel des empirischen Handelns, nicht im Bereich der Empirie erreichbar, sondern – dank der intelligiblen Geltung, die Ideen zukommt – in einer intelligibelen Welt.” *Kants Antinomie der praktischen Vernunft*, (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1978), 37.

and happiness were *analytically* combined, that is, they thought that virtue and happiness could be attained through one and the same maxim. While the Epicurean defined virtue in terms of the quest for happiness, the Stoic equated happiness with consciousness of virtue. As Kant remarks, “the concept of virtue, according to the Epicurean, lay already in the maxim of furthering one’s own happiness; the feeling of happiness, for the Stoic, was, on the contrary, already contained in the consciousness of his virtue”¹⁶.

Because the moral law is unconditioned, it implies the transcendental freedom and membership in an intelligible world of all rational natures bound by it. Epicureanism could not account for the achievability of the highest good in the empirical world because it failed to recognize the *unconditioned* nature of the supreme good, i. e., the moral law. It thus failed to capture the *transcendent* nature of the first element of the highest good, but instead reduced virtue to a *means* towards happiness, i. e., to councils of prudence. Stoicism too, was an attempt to delineate the conditions of the possibility of the highest good in this world. Recognizing that we are capable of virtue in our present condition, it accounted for the possibility of achieving the highest good in this world by equating happiness with consciousness of this virtue. It thus ignored that we are finite rational beings of *needs*, and that consequently consciousness of virtue is not the same as happiness.

However, the highest good as immanent, that is, as something realizable in the empirical world, is a *synthetic* concept, one comprised of two heterogeneous elements.¹⁷ Because the pursuit of virtue and the pursuit of happiness are two different actions, my maxim to act virtuously will not necessarily coincide with those maxims I may form in pursuing happiness. Thus, my endeavor to become virtuous will not guarantee my happiness. Moreover, precisely because the two elements of the highest good are different, while virtue is its supreme condition, my maxim to act virtuously may require that I give up my happiness.

An investigation into the underlying reasons governing the heterogeneous nature of the two components of the highest good, virtue and happiness, reveal why the pursuit of virtue does not *ipso facto* guarantee happiness, while the pursuit of happiness will not automatically make a person virtuous. Important in this respect is Kant’s remark that:

If a rational creature could ever reach the stage of thoroughly liking to do all that moral laws require, it would mean that there was no possibility of there being in him a desire which

¹⁶ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 118; [5: 112].

¹⁷ As Kant notes, “Two terms necessarily combined in one concept must be related as ground and consequence, and this unity must be regarded either as analytic (logical connection) according to the law of identity or as synthetic (real connection) according to the law of causality. The connection of virtue with happiness can, therefore, be understood in one of two ways. Either the endeavor to be virtuous and the rational pursuit of happiness are not two different actions but absolutely identical; in this case no maxim is needed as ground of the former other than that needed for the latter. Or that connection is predicated upon virtue’s producing happiness as something different from the consciousness of virtue, as a cause produces an effect.” *Ibid.*, 117; [5: 111].

could tempt him to deviate from them, for overcoming such a desire always costs the subject some sacrifice and requires self-compulsion, i. e., an inner constraint to do that which one does not quite like to do. To such a level of moral disposition no creature can ever attain. For since he is a creature, and consequently is always dependent with respect to what he needs for complete satisfaction with his condition, he can never be wholly free from desires and inclinations which, because they rest on physical causes, do not of themselves agree with the moral law, which has an entirely different source.¹⁸

Our *happiness* has to do with our finite condition as beings of needs. As such, it concerns the lower faculty of desire, itself determined in the order of causes. It is thereby conditioned by the *receptivity* of the inner and outer senses, viz., our susceptibility to pleasure and pain. Happiness, for Kant, is always *empirical* happiness, i. e., satisfaction with our condition insofar as we are finite agents conditioned by sensibility with respect to what we desire.¹⁹ The nature of this receptivity, upon which the susceptibility to pleasure and pain is based, entails that the will allowing it to become its fundamental determining ground is heteronomous, i. e., allows itself to be determined by a causal principle (i. e., nature) lying outside of the will itself.²⁰ Virtue, on the other hand, concerns the spontaneity, as opposed to the receptivity, of the will. Insofar as virtue and the inclinations stem from two distinct faculties of human nature (spontaneity and receptivity), the maxims made in the pursuance of each will not necessarily coincide.

The starting point for Kant's argument that we must assume a wise and beneficent author of nature if the highest good is to be possible is the fact that both of its components differ in nature and origin. Only Christianity, according to Kant, correctly grasped the completely heterogeneous nature of the two elements comprising the highest good. Because happiness refers to contentment with our state insofar as we are beings affected through our senses, its source, i. e., the world of nature and appearances, is completely different from that of virtue, which is possible insofar as we are members of an intelligible order. But if the highest good is

¹⁸ Ibid., 87; [5: 83–84].

¹⁹ This is stressed by Michael Albrecht: "Daraus scheint zu folgen, daß jede inhaltlich bestimmte Materie des Wollens, auch wenn sie nicht in dessen Maxime aufgenommen wird, letztlich Glückseligkeit zum Ziel hat. Im Hinblick auf die 'Dialektik' ist diese Feststellung genauso wichtig wie die folgende: Die Glückseligkeit ist in der *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* offensichtlich *empirische* Glückseligkeit; für die menschliche Vorstellung hat sie ihren Ort ausschließlich in der Sinnenwelt. Gerade weil 'alle Bestimmungsgründe des Willens, außer dem einigen reinen praktischen Vernunftgesetze (dem moralischen), insgesamt empirisch sind,' gehören sie 'also zum Glückseligkeitsprinzip' (A 167). 'Es kommt [...] was unsere Natur als sinnlicher Wesen betrifft, *alles* auf unsere *Glückseligkeit* an' (A 107). Denkt man an mögliche frühere oder an spätere Positionen Kants, so kann man sagen, daß es für den Kant der *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* die Möglichkeit einer 'intellektuellen' oder 'moralischen' (nichtsinnlichen) Glückseligkeit nicht gibt." *Kants Antinomie der praktischen Vernunft*, 51 f.

²⁰ This analysis of heteronomy has been convincingly developed Andrews Reath in his article "Hedonism, Heteronomy, and Kant's Principle of Happiness", *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 70 (1989), 42 f.

possible, then it must also be possible that virtue and happiness are *necessarily* combined. The differences in origin between virtue and happiness, however, imply that the two only can be necessarily contained in the same concept if we think of them as combined *synthetically*. Their connection is not logical, such that one of the concepts analytically contains the ground of the other, but *real*. When this connection is real, the two concepts comprising the highest good are necessarily combined in virtue of some third thing, i. e., the causal law.

Recognition of the synthetic character of the highest good, however, only clearly sets up the nature of the antinomy confronting pure practical reason, which seeks the unconditioned *totality* of its objects. Such an unconditioned totality, according to Kant, must include *both* elements of the highest good. Given the heterogeneous nature of the two elements comprising the highest good as immanent, this totality can be thought of in two ways: "Therefore, the desire for happiness must be the motive to maxims of virtue, or the maxim of virtue must be the efficient cause of happiness."²¹ That the former assertion leads to the overturning of the possibility of morality Kant had shown in the *Analytic*. If the highest good is to be possible, then, it can only be if virtue is thought of as the efficient cause of happiness.

The fact, however, that virtue and happiness are really the province of two different orders, that of an intelligible world and that of appearances, again poses difficulties for our understanding of how the two elements of the highest good are necessarily causally related to one another. The problem is thus: how can our free causality as members of an intelligible world have an influence upon the world of sense, itself completely determined in the order of efficient causes? The achievability of the highest good depends on the possibility of this relation between the two orders. At face value, however, this relationship seems to be impossible, since as Kant notes, "every practical connection of causes and effects in the world, as a result of the determination of the will, is dependent not on the moral dispositions of the will but on knowledge of natural laws and the physical capacity of using them to its purposes; consequently, no necessary connection, sufficient to the highest good, between happiness and virtue in the world can be expected from the most meticulous observance of the moral law"²². The finitude of my knowledge concerning the infinite effects of each of my actions, and the limits of my physical powers both have as a consequence that the most careful observance of the moral law will not necessarily promote the highest good.

According to Kant, however, the proposition that virtue should be the efficient cause of happiness is only false if I assume that the only kind of causality that holds for the world and the rational beings that find themselves in it is that which pertains to appearances. As far as we can judge empirically, however, this kind of causality has no regard to our moral purposes. Yet the fact that the moral law and its bindingness upon me opens up another dimension of which I am a part, viz. that of an

²¹ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 120; [5: 113].

²² *Ibid.*, 120; [5: 113].

intelligible world, allows me to assume that the natural world in which I find myself is not merely ordered in accordance with the laws governing the world of sense. Kant argues that "it is not impossible that the morality of disposition should have a necessary relation as cause to happiness as an effect in the sensuous world; but this relation is indirect, mediated by an intelligible Author of nature. This combination, however, can only occur contingently in a system of nature which is merely the object of the sense and as such not sufficient to the highest good"²³.

At this point, let us note that Kant has arrived at the need to postulate God's existence through his analysis of the highest good as a synthetic concept, and that here *he seems to find a place for the highest good in the world of sense*. Yet later on in the dialectic Kant comes to a revision of this conclusion, commending Christian ethics for understanding bliss as attainable only in eternity:

The holiness of morals is prescribed to them [Christians] even in this life as a guide to conduct, but the well-being proportionate to this, which is bliss, is thought of as attainable only in eternity. This is due to the fact that the former must always be the archetype of their conduct in every state, and progressing toward it is even in this life possible and necessary, whereas the latter, under the name of happiness, cannot (as far as our own capacity is concerned) be reached in this life and therefore is made only an object of hope.²⁴

As I note below, Kant will also come to the conclusion that happiness is not proportioned to virtue in this life in the *Critique of Judgement*. Insofar as the highest good is not realizable in the empirical world, it is an object of hope. In my next section I will discuss the implications of this next worldly account, which stands in tension with Kant's development of the concept of the highest good as synthetic.

Ib. Implications of the Highest Good as a Consummate and Unconditioned End

The fact that the second element of the highest good must be thought of empirically poses some problems for Kant's doctrine of the highest good as developed in the Dialectic, which as the unconditioned and consummate end of all human striving cannot without contradiction be thought of as a goal realizable in the empirical world. While its unconditioned nature rests in the fact that its first constituent, i. e., the moral law, is subject to no conditions, as *consummate* it implies that a supreme degree of happiness cannot without contradiction be thought of as realizable in the empirical world, which by its very nature is subject to continual change. Kant came to this realization in his 1794 essay "The End of All Things":

Were we to understand the moral and physical state of the human being in this life in the best possible way, namely, as a continual approach and progress towards the highest good (which is marked out as his destiny), he cannot, however, (even given the consciousness of

²³ Ibid., 121; [5: 114 f.].

²⁴ Ibid., 135; [5: 128 f.].

the unchanging character of his disposition) connect the prospect of a perpetually enduring change of state (moral as well as physical) with satisfaction. For the condition in which he now is ever remains an evil compared to the better state which he is ready to enter; and the representation of an infinite progress towards this final goal is at once the prospect of an endless series of evils, which, although outweighed by a greater good, do not constitute satisfaction, which he can only imagine when this goal [i. e., the highest good] is finally achieved.²⁵

The final end of the human being, the highest good, cannot be thought of as an event subject to the same conditions as all other experiences in the spatio-temporal continuum. Achievement of both its formal and material elements (i. e., virtue and happiness in the supreme degree, or holiness and bliss) consists of complete contentment with our condition. Once such a state is reached, a change in condition is undesirable. Achievement of such a state would thus make time, as the condition of change, unnecessary, since no other goal towards which the human being is teleologically ordered can be thought. Thus, achievement of the highest good (holiness and bliss) must indeed constitute the end of the world as we know it, i. e., the world of appearances subject to change. As an unconditioned goal whose both components have a transcendent dimension, the highest good cannot without contradiction be thought of as itself pertaining to a series of conditioned ends. As a final end transcending the sensible world, it is an idea of reason. While it is no doubt true that in the *Dialectic* Kant speaks as if he cannot conceive of anything other than an endless progress in virtue,²⁶ here he also frequently refers to the highest good as the Kingdom of God, which he then even equates with an intelligible world.²⁷ This no doubt poses a serious problem for Kant's development of the concept, whose second constituent, i. e., happiness, is first and foremost understood empirically.²⁸

²⁵ Immanuel Kant, "Das Ende Aller Dinge", [translation mine]. Volume 8 of the Prussian Academy edition: [335]. The text is translated in its entirety by Ted Humphrey in *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1983). The passage can be found on p. 99 of that translation.

²⁶ Kant notes that "only endless progress from lower to higher stages of moral perfection is possible to a rational but finite being." *Critique of Practical Reason*, 129 [5: 123]. Nevertheless, even here Kant has not lost sight of the fact that what prevents creatures from attaining to a holy will is the world of sense on which they depend, since such beings will have needs determined by the receptivity of the inner and outer senses which do not necessarily coincide with the moral law. In accordance with this insight he writes that "the perfect fit of the will to moral law is holiness, which is a perfection of which no rational being *in the world of sense* is at any time capable" (italics mine), 128 [5: 122]. Presumably, if our continuing existence could only be one of an endless progress in virtue, this would only be because the afterlife, like our present existence, is one in which we depend upon a world of sense.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 139; [5: 132] where Kant writes of "the necessary condition of such an intelligible world by which it may be the highest good", as well as p. 144 [137] where he equates the Kingdom of God with an intelligible world.

²⁸ The problem is clearly pointed out by Albrecht: "Die 'Harmonie' von 'Natur und Sitten' (A 232, vgl. A 262) kann schon deswegen nicht das höchste Gut als Gerechtigkeitsidee identifizieren, weil eine solche Harmonie nicht das höchste Gut selbst, sondern dessen

Already in the second *Critique* Kant distinguishes happiness from bliss. While happiness depends “upon a positive participation of feeling”, bliss is “a complete independence from inclinations and desires”²⁹. This remark demonstrates another reason why the highest good, insofar as it is thought of as the *perfect* coincidence of virtue and happiness in the *supreme degree* (more precisely speaking, of holiness and bliss), must be thought of as an ideal of reason, i. e., as transcending the world of sense. Insofar as we are bound to the physical body, our needs and desires are grounded in causes that do not necessarily coincide with the moral law. Because of this, our status as moral agents can only be one of virtue, that is, a constant state of vigilance and constraint, lest the unruly inclinations overpower us and become the determining ground of the will. This in turn implies that a complete contentment with our condition, where “everything goes according to wish and will”³⁰, can only necessarily coincide with a complete fitness of intentions to the moral law once this complete fitness is *all* that is willed. Such a state, however, is bliss, i. e., a *complete* independence from the inclinations and desires grounded in physical causes, and which do not, as such, necessarily coincide with the moral law. This perfect coincidence of holiness and bliss is thus an ideal of reason.³¹ Happiness in proportion to virtue is a degree of it, it being an ideal which can be approached only asymptotically in this life.

If we understand Kant in this way, no doubt a serious problem emerges. For if the highest good is principally understood as transcendent, then Kant's doctrine will amount to a kind of Stoicism, in which holiness analytically contains the ground of bliss. Yet Kant's quarrel with the Stoics was precisely that they had failed to take into account our *present* condition as beings of needs. Their failure to take into

Voraussetzung ist (A 232, A 262). Sie wird darüber hinaus nicht nur durch die Bezeichnung als ‘beste Welt’, sondern auch als ‘Reich Gottes’ (A 230–A 232) näher charakterisiert. Die Beziehung zwischen jenen Begriffen und dem des höchsten Gutes ist allerdings sehr eng; so wird z. B. das höchste Gut mit dem Reich Gottes gleichgesetzt (A 230). Damit tut sich aber eine Schwierigkeit auf, die hier noch nicht erörtert werden kann: Das Reich Gottes wird als ‘intelligibele Welt’ verstanden (A 246), was zunächst unauffällig scheint. Hiervon ist der Begriff des höchsten Gutes nicht nur wegen seiner Gleichsetzung mit dem Reich Gottes betroffen; auch das höchste Gut selber wird ‘intelligibele Welt’ genannt (A 239). Demgegenüber ist vorläufig festzuhalten, daß die Problematik des höchsten Gutes gerade in seinem Bezug auf die Welt der Naturgesetzlichkeit (und nicht auf eine intelligibele Welt) besteht.” Albrecht, *Kants Antinomie der praktischen Vernunft*, 101, note.

²⁹ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 125; [5: 118].

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 131; [5: 124].

³¹ It is not only an ideal of reason; it is also the end to which the world is teleologically ordered. This end, however, stands *outside* of the series of empirical events occurring in time. For this reason, Yirmiyahu Yovel's account of the highest good as the final end of creation is misguided insofar as he understands this final end to be the “consummate state of *this* world”, that is, he conceives of it as “the kingdom of God on earth”, noting that “despite its infinite remoteness, it involves a concrete synthesis, to be realized *in time*, between the moral will and empirical reality”. Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, 72.

account this condition both misled them to believe that holiness could be achieved *in this life* and to conflate happiness and bliss.³² Kant correctly notes that there is a big difference between contentment with one's moral worth and empirical happiness, and in this life we cannot do without the latter. Yet in correctly taking note of what the Stoics had failed to account for, that is, in acknowledging the need for *happiness* in this life, Kant made the mistake of supposing that it was necessary in the next. This prevented him from seeing the implications of his own system: the highest good as an object of hope, and as therefore belonging to the next world cannot contain any empirical elements and is not synthetic. If we understand happiness in the special sense that Kant grants to it, it plays no role in the highest good as transcendent but instead must be replaced by bliss.

Throughout the Dialectic, Kant flip-flops between an understanding of the highest good as "the kingdom of God", (the highest good in its transcendent aspect) and the highest good as synthetic, and therefore, as immanent. Whereas the former understanding of the concept refers to a goal, the nature of which implies that it cannot be achieved in this life, the latter understanding of the concept concerns our present condition. As such, it must take into account our condition as beings of needs, our capacity for suffering, and our perpetual subjection to the temptation to value the fulfillment of our needs more highly than the moral law.

However, as Kant himself freely admitted, happiness in proportion to one's worthiness to be happy does *not* exist in the empirical world. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant himself makes mention of the problem of the unjustified suffering of the virtuous; it is problematic, therefore, to assume that because there is a moral author of the world, happiness is in fact in some mysterious way proportioned to virtue in this life. This assumption cannot but lead to an immoral lack of concern with the fate of others and a failure to alleviate their suffering, for if, after all, everyone gets what they deserve in some mysterious way, then there is no point in trying to change the conditions prevalent in the world.

Now if it is true that the notion of the highest good as transcendent looks very Stoic, while the highest good as immanent (happiness in proportion to virtue) does not exist in this life, we must conclude that Kant's arguments as they are presented

³² So Kant, "The Stoics, on the other hand, had chosen their supreme practical principle, virtue, quite correctly as the condition of the highest good. But as they imagined the degree of virtue which is required for its pure law as completely attainable in this life, they not only exaggerated the moral capacity of man, under the name of 'sage', beyond all the limits of his nature, making it into something which is contradicted by all our knowledge of men; they also refused to accept the second component of the highest good, i. e., happiness, as a special object of human desire. Rather, they made their sage, like a god in the consciousness of the excellence of his person, wholly independent of nature (as regards his own contentment), exposing him to the evils of life but not subjecting him to them. (They also represented him as free from everything morally evil). Thus they really left out of the highest good the second element (personal happiness), since they placed the highest good only in acting and in contentment with one's own personal worth, including it in the consciousness of moral character." *Critique of Practical Reason*, 133 f.; [5: 126 f.].

in the Dialectic respecting the practical need to posit God's existence come to a dead end. Since happiness cannot really be a constituent of the highest good as transcendent, all of Kant's insights concerning the heterogeneous character of the two elements of the highest good really do not apply to it. And since the two elements are not heterogeneous, there is no need to posit God's existence in order to combine them. On the other hand the existence of God does not change the fact that *in this life* happiness is not proportioned to virtue. We might put the matter another way: there does not seem to be any place, either in this life or in the next, for the highest good as a synthetic notion, one in which empirical happiness plays a role. It thus seems that the antinomy which Kant traces in the Dialectic does not succeed in motivating a problem which can only be solved by postulating the existence of God.

It is regrettable that Kant did not more carefully sort out the two dimensions of the highest good in the Dialectic of the second *Critique*, i. e., its immanent and transcendent aspects. Only in his essay of 1794 did he fully come to grips with the implications of understanding the highest good as both an unconditioned condition and as consummate. Yet although Kant's arguments motivating the need to postulate the existence of God are invalid as they stand, a careful look at the way both the highest good as immanent and transcendent *function* will reveal that the highest good as immanent, and therefore as a synthetic notion, plays a crucial role in Kant's system. While it is no doubt true that we will have to revise our conception of it in some ways, an exploration of its role reveals that it still remains a necessary but problematic notion, one which will generate the practical need to postulate the existence of God.

II. *The Functions of the Highest Good as Immanent and Transcendent*

The foregoing discussion has provided an analysis of the heterogeneous character of the two components of the highest good as immanent; it has also established that when the highest good is thought of as transcendent, or as an unconditioned condition, there is a coincidence between holiness and bliss. In this section I wish to discuss the *function* of the highest good as both immanent and transcendent, how these two conceptions relate to the categorical imperative, and how they relate to one another.

I first begin with a discussion of a this-worldly conception of the highest good, one which includes empirical happiness as one of its constituents. In this regard, how are we to make sense of Kant's statement that the highest good is a *necessary* object of practical reason, and that furthermore, "the impossibility of the highest good must prove the falsity of the moral law also"? Commentators have been very divided on this issue. On the one hand there are those who follow John Silber³³

³³ Silber's articles on this issue include the following: "The Importance of the Highest Good in Kant's Ethics", *Ethics* 73 (1962–63), 179–195; "Kant's Conception", (cited above), "The Metaphysical Importance of the Highest Good as the Canon of Pure Reason in Kant's Philosophy", *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Summer 1959; and "The Copernican Revolution in Ethics: The Good Re-examined", *Kant-Studien* 51 (1959–60), 85–101.

(i. e., Yirmiyahu Yovel, Allen Wood, and Mary-Barbara Zeldin) in affirming that the highest good is a necessary object of practical reason insofar as it adds *content* to Kant's ethical formalism.³⁴ According to Silber, left without the highest good as its compliment, Kant's ethical formalism entails "the paradox of willing the willing of nothing"³⁵. Kant sought to remedy this problem through a reestablishment of the unity between the natural and the moral good, a unity achieved in the concept of the highest good in which the *matter* of moral willing is to be found. Most importantly, the highest good stipulates ends that it is our duty to adopt, ends which the moral law, because of its formal character, cannot itself enjoin.³⁶

This claim is directly opposed by Lewis White Beck, Jeffrie Murphy, and Thomas Auxter.³⁷ They maintain that the concept of the highest good enjoins no duties that are not already stipulated by the moral law. As a result, the notion is unnecessary and dispensable, serving as it does only "extra-moral theological purposes"³⁸. In particular, they criticize Silber's view that one of the obligations the promotion of the highest good entails is the apportioning of happiness to virtue; this is an impossible duty to fulfill, since we have no insight into other people's motives and dispositions. In what follows I hope to show that while this line of thinking is correct in affirming that the concept of the highest good does not enjoin any new duties, Kant is still justified in claiming that the highest good is a *necessary* object of practical reason.

In his early articles, Silber developed the influential view that the good will "is itself the object of the will, and in its act of volition it wills nothing more or less than its own perfection (free willing) as an end that is also a duty"³⁹. However, as Kant notes in the second *Critique*, the very notion of practical perfection rests on

³⁴ Yirmiyahu Yovel develops a position similar to Silber's in his important book *Kant and the Problem of History*; see also an earlier version of his first chapter in the book, "The Highest Good and History in Kant's Thought", *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 54, 1972, 238 f. Allen Wood depends on Silber's understanding of the importance of the highest good for his reconstruction of Kant's moral argument for the existence of God in his book *Kant's Moral Religion*, (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1979) 94 f., and Mary-Barbara Zeldin argues that the kingdom of ends provides a necessary supplement to the formality of the moral law in her article "The Summum Bonum, the Moral Law, and the Existence of God", *Kant-Studien* 62, 1971, 43–54.

³⁵ Silber, "Importance of the Highest Good", 190.

³⁶ Yovel goes so far as to state that "[...] the moral law cannot be identified with the mere categorical imperative. It already must be this higher type of law, embodied in the imperative to realize the highest good, that transcends the boundaries of the former and cannot be reduced to it". Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, 43.

³⁷ Lewis White Beck was the first to take this position in his *Commentary on Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1960), p. 242 f.; Jeffrie G. Murphy's article "The Highest Good as Content for Kant's Ethical Formalism: Beck vs. Silber". *Kant-Studien* 56 (1965–66), 102–110, is a fine discussion of the issues at stake in the debate; cf. Thomas Auxter, "The Unimportance of Kant's Highest Good".

³⁸ Murphy, "The Highest Good as Content", 102.

³⁹ Silber, "Importance of the Highest Good", 186.

the idea of the sufficiency or fitness of this perfection to some determinate end.⁴⁰ This means that the concept of perfection can only be filled out in reference to some end; without such a reference, the notion loses all content. Hence, Silber concludes, Kant has not yet provided us with “an object of moral volition with material content”⁴¹ in the analytic of the second *Critique*, and we must look elsewhere, i. e., in Kant's doctrine of the highest good, to find it.

While Silber is correct in noting that for Kant the good will is itself the object of the will, he is wrong in concluding that this implies that by itself Kant's ethical formalism comes up empty handed in providing concrete guidelines for the will. What Silber has failed to note is that while the categorical imperative merely requires the form of lawlikeness of our maxims, and as such is itself devoid of all material content, it assumes the agent's subjective principles of action (i. e., maxims) as its “matter” and requires that only those maxims that are universalizable be acted upon.⁴² Once the premise is added (a premise that Kant takes for granted in the passage quoted above) that the will in fact acts according to subjective principles or maxims, i. e., self imposed general policies through which the will exercises its causality, then it becomes clear that the categorical imperative functions as a *second order* principle which selects among an agent's maxims. In commanding that the will conform to universal law as such, it commands that only those maxims that are universalizable be acted upon. As such, the categorical imperative provides a concrete guide to moral action.

Silber is certainly right when he notes that “as it is applied in a specific volition, the moral law can only prescribe the form of its own universality to which material, supplied by the faculty of desire, must be added.”⁴³ He goes wrong, however, when from this he infers that the highest good, as the synthesis of the moral and natural good, is what provides content to Kant's ethical formalism. This is because the *bonum supremum* in the highest good, i. e., the condition of the good will, is really what does all the work in selecting among an agent's maxims and guiding moral action. Hence the highest good, as a synthesis of concepts, does not do any extra work which the categorical imperative by itself does not already perform.

This implies that the highest good does not require the fulfillment of any duties not already contained in the moral law. Yet this does *not* mean that the highest good has no function, and that Kant was simply ill-advisedly introducing an extra-moral theological concept in his ethical theory when he claimed that the highest good is a necessary object of practical reason. In what follows I provide a brief argument for what I understand to be the correct reading of what Kant means by this.

⁴⁰ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 42; [5: 41].

⁴¹ Silber, “The Importance of the Highest Good”, 187.

⁴² See H. J. Paton's discussion of this issue in his book *The Categorical Imperative*, (Chicago: 1948), 73.

⁴³ Silber, “Importance of Kant's Highest Good”, 191.

Kant's notion of the highest good joins together two kinds of necessity: the necessity under which we stand as finite sensible beings in *need of* happiness, and the unconditioned necessity of the moral law, which limits and orders those ends that we do have under the headings of the permissible, the forbidden, and the obligatory. Now since the moral law is merely formal and must be so if it is to be given *a priori*, it cannot itself contain any *ends*, i. e., what Kant calls the matter of the will. Yet without such matter, the moral law would be empty (*in much the same way that concepts without corresponding intuitions are empty*). Our desire for happiness is the material principle of the will; ends are the matter supplied by our nature as finite sensible beings standing in need of happiness. The moral law simply organizes and limits those ends that we do have, in much the same way that the categories order sensuous intuitions. Kant's language in the *Critique of Practical Reason* with respect to the function that the moral law performs is strikingly parallel to his language concerning the categories. Indeed, he compares the function of the moral law and the categories which it generates to the categories of the understanding, noting both similarities and differences, when he writes:

These rules [of practical reason] contribute nothing to the theoretical use of the understanding in bringing the manifold of (sensuous) intuitions under one consciousness *a priori*, but only to the *a priori* subjection of the manifold of desires to the unity of consciousness of a practical reason commanding in the moral law, i. e., of a pure will.⁴⁴

Now, all our ends are in some way or another related to our final end, namely happiness. This end is final insofar as it is not willed for the sake of anything else. Insofar as this end is *conditioned* and *limited* by the formal principle of the moral law, it is the *highest good*. But if this is what is meant by the highest good, the highest good cannot add any new duties to those contained in the moral law. It is merely the synthesis of the conditions which the moral law imposes upon our striving for happiness with this very striving for happiness itself. The content — happiness, which the highest good joins together with the conditions of the moral law is, taken by itself [without reference to the moral law] non-moral, i. e., morally neutral.⁴⁵

Now were following of the moral law (as a merely formal principle) to have the consequence that happiness could not be achieved, so that the highest good, as the synthesis of our final material end (namely happiness) with the moral law and as conditioned by it, were itself impossible, this would imply that the moral law was a mere deception. Kant makes this remark in various places, in particular at the very beginning of the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. There he states: "Since now, the furthering of the highest good, which contains this connection [namely, that between virtue and happiness] is an *a priori* necessary object of our will and is inseparably related to the moral law, the impossibility of the highest

⁴⁴ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 67; [5: 65].

⁴⁵ See Lewis White Beck's discussion of the issue in *A Commentary*, 242.

good must prove the falsity of the moral law also.”⁴⁶ This statement has been a stumbling block for many of Kant's readers. Lewis White Beck, for instance, states that “Kant simply cannot have it both ways. He cannot say that the highest good is a motive for the pure will, and then say that it is so only under the human limitation that man must have an object which is not exclusively moral.”⁴⁷ What Beck has failed to see is *why* Kant believes that the highest good is a *necessary object* of the will, and why, were it impossible to achieve, this should prove the falsity of the moral law.

It should first of all be pointed out that Kant is quite clear that the highest good can provide a *moral* incentive to the will only insofar as the moral law is already included within it. Kant clearly says as much in the following passage:

But it is self-evident not merely that, if the moral law is included as the supreme condition in the concept of the highest good, the highest good is then the object, but also that the concept of it and the idea of its existence as possible through our practical reason are likewise the determining ground of the pure will. This is because the moral law, included and thought in this concept, and no other object, determines the will as required by the principle of autonomy.⁴⁸

The end of every finite will, namely happiness, is morally neutral and provides no moral content to the moral law. However, when our striving for happiness is conditioned by the moral law, then the will has a moral end. It is the fact that this end [happiness] is conditioned by the *moral* law that makes this end, which by itself is non-moral, a *moral* end, i. e., the highest good. The highest good, then, according to Kant, is a motive for the *pure* will only insofar as its concept already contains the moral law; in the concept of the highest good, there are not extrinsic, material, grounds which are thought of as the supreme incentive to the pure will. The supreme incentive to the pure will, even when it makes the highest good its end, is the moral law. The highest good as the necessary object of the will simply means: all the ends which the will in fact has are determined and ordered through the categorical imperative, and that furthermore, *this limiting and ordering of the will's ends through the moral law is not itself determined by any ends that the will has in fact adopted*. Thus the moral law, as the ultimate non-material determining principle of the pure will, cannot be adopted as a *means* to the achievement of any end, as in the case of *prudential maxims*, where a practical principle is a means to achieve happiness. To adopt the moral law as an incentive and as a principle of the causality of the will is to order the ends that the will already has through it. However, this ordering principle (i. e., the moral law) is not itself determined, or adopted for the sake of, any end which the will in fact has.

Thus far we have shown why the highest good in no way reintroduces heteronomy into the will — an objection to this concept which lies at the root of Beck's

⁴⁶ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 118.

⁴⁷ Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary*, 244.

⁴⁸ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 114; [109–110].

criticism, quoted above. We have yet to show why Kant believes that “if the highest good is impossible according to practical rules, then the moral law which commands that it be furthered must be fantastic, directed to empty and imaginary ends, and therefore inherently false.”⁴⁹ In other words we have yet to show why the highest good is a necessary object of the will whose impossibility would prove the falsity of the moral law. Now the impossibility of the highest good [happiness in proportion to virtue] cannot *directly* imply the falsity of the moral law, for the moral law does not command that any end should in fact be realized by us when this is beyond our power, but rather it demands that the law of lawlikeness be imposed on the maxims which we adopt. In other words, according to Kant an individual may still be virtuous even if, due to circumstances beyond his control (for instance, death at the hands of a torturer) not a single one of his moral ends were realized.

However, there is another way in which the impossibility of the highest good does imply the falsity of the moral law. Insofar as the ends of the will must ultimately relate to its one final end, namely happiness, were *happiness* thought of as *impossible* when the moral law is followed, the will would be left with no ends whatsoever. Since the moral law itself, as a purely formal principle, can provide the will with no ends or matter, if the following of the moral law were to *exclude* the possibility of happiness *altogether*, (that end for the sake of which all other ends are adopted), the will would have no ends and the moral law would be useless and invalid, *for it would no longer have any matter to limit and organize*. This is because were our final end (happiness) excluded by the moral law, all our other ends, willed as a means to happiness, would be pointless. This is what Kant means in the *Religion* when he tells us that unless we posited a necessary object for the will, namely the highest good, while the individual would indeed know *how* to act, he would not know *whither*.⁵⁰ In other words, while the moral law would indeed provide him with the requirement of the lawlikeness of the causality of his will, his will could not be directed towards any goals. These goals must themselves be supplied by the material principle; the moral law, as a purely formal principle, can only determine such ends that the will already has in accordance with moral categories.

In less technical terms, were I to believe that in general, it was *impossible* to follow the moral law and to achieve happiness, and were I to believe that this impossibility extended not only to myself but to all finite rational agents, the result could only be despair. In completely foregoing the prospect of happiness, I might still have limited ends, such as eating, working, and paying the rent. But insofar as these ends would be devoid of any joy whatsoever, and insofar as they could not promise the prospect of any such joy, such ends, even if in accordance with the

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 118; [114].

⁵⁰ *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. by Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson, (New York: Harper & Rowe, 1960), 4.

moral law, would be flat and meaningless, and a life devoid of happiness or the prospect thereof would be an endless agony. Were I to believe that the moral law excluded the possibility of happiness, I could then conceive of no ultimate end that would be possible to moral agents in general (that for the sake of which all other ends are adopted) and thus even our limited aims would lose their point.

It is important to note that this understanding of Kant's ethics does not imply that the only ends I will ultimately have are those determined by the lower faculty of desire. Running the test of the categorical imperative on maxims geared towards ends, themselves determined by the lower faculty of desire, will also yield forbidden and obligatory maxims, since a person is required to adopt the opposite of a maxim that is forbidden. Among other things, this would imply that I cannot consistently will the universalization of the maxim that I should not be concerned with the furthering of the ends of others, in short, with their happiness, for this would entail that I should will that others not be concerned with the furthering of my ends. I must, therefore, make the happiness of others my end also. Yet this stance towards the happiness of others can only be arrived at given the fact that I already have maxims, themselves containing ends that are given in virtue of my condition as a finite being of needs. It is through applying the universalizability test to my (possible) maxim to further my own happiness alone that I see that a maxim of non-beneficence is forbidden, and that I am required to adopt its opposite – to further the happiness of others as well as my own. Hence it is only through an application of the categorical imperative to possible *given* maxims that I can arrive at some definitive content respecting what I must do,⁵¹ in this case the obligatory nature of the maxim to concern myself with the happiness of others. This means that we cannot leave happiness, that is, the fulfillment of at least some of our subjective ends – our own and that of others – out of the picture: if it is impossible, then the moral law loses its point.

Our results thus far may seem to conflict with our claims in section one. For there we stated that the highest good as transcendent is its principle significance. Yet it is precisely here where happiness drops out of the picture! The moral law still functions as a law in the case of a holy will; it is simply no longer an imperative. Here we have a case in which happiness has ceased to play a role, yet, according to Kant, the moral law is still valid. Might this not invalidate the fruits of our investigation thus far? The answer to this difficulty has to do with the fact that in this case happiness – which for Kant principally has to do with inclinations and desires – is replaced by bliss. We can, then, revise our conclusions and generalize in the following way: if the *well being* of the rational agent is impossible (and this well being may consist in either happiness or bliss) the moral law loses its point. And for this reason some version of the highest good, whether it be immanent or transcendent, is a necessary object of practical reason.

⁵¹ Much the same was noted by H. J. Paton in his book *The Categorical Imperative*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1948), 143.

We might ask further: what is the function of the moral law when the highest good in its transcendent aspect has been achieved? Obviously here the moral law does not order needs and desires given to it from outside, i. e., grounded in empirical causes lying outside the will and hence connected with the physical body. Whatever ends the holy will may have, they are *necessarily* in accordance with the moral law. A clue is provided in Kant's description of the second formula of the categorical imperative as providing a *material* for the moral law, namely, the rational being is an end in itself and has absolute worth.⁵² If all rational wills were holy wills, each rational being would be directed to, and delight in, the sheer *presence* of every other rational being; barring all merely *subjectively* conditioned desires, there would be nothing to distract rational agents from a full appreciation of each other's absolute worth. Hence, not only would such a world be one of perfect harmony, it would also be one of perfect love in the agapic sense. Here *only* the rational beings as ends in themselves provide the matter for willing.

That Kant considered the three formulations of the categorical imperative equivalent shows how closely he held the first formulation, which imposes certain requirements on the form of a maxim, to be bound up with the second formulation, having to do with the material of willing. The two are inextricably bound together. The contradiction in conception test shows how it is contradictory for the will to set up any end for itself, the achievement of which abrogates the very *conditions* of willing such an end when its maxim is universalized. This requirement is intensionally equivalent with Kant's second formulation of the end in itself since it implies that all rational wills, insofar as they have a capacity to *set* ends, are of unconditioned value, and that no end that is valued merely because it is desired can without contradiction be valued more highly than a rational being itself, the supreme *condition* for all willing and the setting of ends. The strong tie between the two formulations shows clearly that Kant's ethics is no empty formalism without direction: rather, the formality of the first formulation finds its ultimate teleology in the second. The law is made for the rational being, and not the rational being for the law. This close connection between the two formulations allows us to see how the possibility of bliss and happiness are intrinsically tied with the viability of the moral law. If the law finds its telos in the absolute worth of the person as an end in herself, it cannot do so without regard to the *fulfillment* of the person; this leads directly to the issue of the highest good. When the highest good is understood as transcendent, the fulfillment of the person consists completely in other-directedness,

⁵² Kant characterizes the second formula in the following way: "All maxims have [...] a material, i. e., an end; in this respect the formula says that the rational being, as by its nature an end and thus as an end in itself, must serve in every maxim as the condition restricting all merely relative and arbitrary ends", *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Lewis White Beck, (New York: Macmillan, 1985), 62 [4: 436]. For an interesting discussion of the second formulation of the categorical imperative as providing the end or matter of the Categorical Imperative, see Philip Stratton-Lake, "Formulating Categorical Imperatives", *Kant-Studien* 84, 1993, 317–340.

i. e., in universal agapic love. When the highest good is understood as immanent, the fact that we are rational beings of *needs* is key to an understanding of human fulfillment. Hence, part of what it means to consider another as an end in herself in this world is to concern oneself with helping the person to fulfill her permissible subjective ends.⁵³

So far, this interpretation does the work of showing us why either happiness or bliss must be included in the necessary object of practical reason, the highest good. But while it demonstrates the necessity of the perfect proportionality between the two elements of the highest good in its transcendent aspect – holiness and bliss – it has not, however, answered the question of why happiness must be *proportioned* to virtue when the highest good is thought of as immanent. After all, there may be some degree of joy in a person's life, even if it is not as much joy as he or she deserves. The ability to realize *some* ends productive of happiness is enough to ensure that there be some matter for willing, thus ensuring the moral law its function in this life. The issue of the need for the proportionality between virtue and happiness in this life is thus still left open. Yet it is clear that Kant was aware that happiness is not proportioned to virtue in this life; it is for this reason that he thinks of the fulfillment of the highest good as an object of hope. But if this object of hope is the highest good as transcendent, in which empirical happiness has no place, what then of happiness?

In response to this question several things must be noted. First, we must admit that if we think through Kant's system to its logical conclusion, it implies that insofar as happiness is understood as the satisfaction of *merely subjective* needs and desires, it has no place as the ultimate *telos* of the moral law. Insofar as *merely* subjective needs and desires lock us into our solipsistic universe, their fulfillment cannot have any intrinsic connection to the moral law, itself the basis of a definition of the good that can be universally and intersubjectively agreed upon. What place, then, does empirical happiness have? The answer is that empirical happiness can only be a means, and not an end in itself. Our bodily welfare, monetary and professional interests, etc., can only be provisional goods, and are in fact really good only insofar as they afford us the time and opportunity for growth in virtue. *And this means that the highest good as transcendent is the principle significance of the highest good.* As we grow in virtue our desires change from those having to do only with the dear old self, to those which promote the welfare of all rational agents. This of course means that insofar as we have grown in this life, our desires are *transformed*, our disposition moving ever closer towards holiness. Our *fulfillment* is important throughout our lives, but as we grow in virtue what *counts* as fulfillment changes. For instance, a morally immature individual may be concerned to come out on top and to exercise power over others; on the other hand, a person

⁵³ "For the ends of any person who is an end in himself, must as far as possible also be my end, if that conception of an end in itself is to have its full effect on me." *Foundations*, 55; [4: 430].

further along in his or her journey towards holiness will be concerned with mutuality in his or her relationships; in such a case, moral considerations will have *informed* human desire.

This implies further that Kant's understanding of the highest good as immanent needs to be revised. Kant had defined the highest good as happiness *in proportion* to virtue. In this life, however, there is no guarantee of such proportionality; indeed, a commitment to virtue almost insures a certain degree of unhappiness insofar as the virtuous individual must be willing to give up his or her happiness if morality requires it; most of us have probably been confronted with some situation in which being moral means giving up some advantage. What may, on the other hand, be an object of hope for this life is that everything that we need in order to continue to grow in virtue will be provided. While this concept falls short of Kant's proportionality between virtue and happiness, it still involves a synthesis of two heterogeneous elements: the cooperation of nature with our commitment to growth in virtue. How the need to unite these two requires the postulate of God's existence is the subject of the next, and final, section.

III. Implications for our Understanding of Nature

The fact that the principle meaning of the highest good is transcendent implies that we need to understand the empirical world as teleologically ordered towards a final goal, which as *final*, must constitute its end as we know it. Yet even if the world is ordered to an ethico-teleological goal that lies outside it, one in which the final perfection of virtue results in the replacement of the *need* for happiness with bliss, this does not mean that we can dispense with the need for happiness in *this* world. Because of the essential role the physical substratum plays in all our projects, in order for us to be able to make progress in virtue, the order of nature must cooperate. For instance, my 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 would 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 of 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. The principle, transcendent meaning of the highest good as the necessary and final object of pure practical reason thus has implications concerning how we must think of the world of sense in which we presently find ourselves: it must be ordered in such a way that individuals can make progress in virtue, while their pursuance of it will not *ultimately* leave them and all other virtuous agents bereft of the elements of happiness. While the highest good, as an ideal of reason (*perfect* virtue and happiness,

or holiness and bliss) cannot be realized in *this* world, as a necessary object of moral hope it commits the individual to the belief that the course of this world does not proceed merely in accordance with a blind efficient causality, but is rather designed in such a way that its course can bring individuals progressively closer to a realization of the highest good.

As Kant notes in the *Religion*, the concept of the highest good, as the final end of all human striving, provides “a special point of focus for the unification of all ends”. As such, it unites “the purposiveness arising from freedom with the purposiveness of nature”⁵⁴. Because our freedom is exercised *within* the world of nature, our hope that our moral ends can be realized also commits us to the hope that the natural world in which we move and have our being is ordered towards a final *moral* goal. If the world is the arena in which individuals are to work out their salvation, that is, if it is the arena in which we are to make progress towards a realization of the highest good, then practical reason bids us assume that a wise author of nature has ordered it in such a way that everything we need (in terms of our empirical well-being) in order to make progress in virtue, and to thus become worthy of happiness, or more precisely, of bliss, will be provided. Morality thus commits us to the hope that the natural world is ordered in accordance with an ethico-teleological purpose. Were efficient causality the only kind of causality we could ascribe to events in the world, the highest good, as the final end of all human striving, could not be promoted. The laws of nature alone do not allow us to deduce a purpose towards which these laws are ordered and in accordance with which they all harmonize with one another. As far as we are able to judge determinably, efficient causality is blind. Yet each one of our actions sets in motion an infinite train of events in the empirical world affecting numerous other rational agents. As finite knowers, we cannot possibly take these effects into account. However good our intentions may be, our knowledge of nature is limited and cannot be adequate to the promotion of the highest good, which concerns the progress in virtue and the happiness of *all* rational agents. If the highest good is to be possible, then, we must strive after a virtuous disposition, doing what we judge to be right and leaving the rest to divine Providence, thus assuming that God guides the course of nature to bring forth the highest good.⁵⁵

In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant approaches the problem of nature *viz à viz* the highest good from a different, but related perspective. The highest good there ap-

⁵⁴ *Religion within the Limits*, 5.

⁵⁵ Kant notes that “it must be left up to providence to choose the means in regard to the best ultimate end, since, as this must result from the course of nature, what those means are always remains uncertain. For no matter how difficult to believe it may be, where it is absolutely impossible to see with certainty in advance the result of particular means that are accepted on the basis of all human wisdom (which, if it is to be true to its name, must proceed solely toward morality), one must in a practical way believe in a concurrence between divine wisdom and the course of nature, if one is not to give up one’s cherished ultimate purpose”, *The End of all Things*, 101 f.; [8: 336 f.].

pears in relation to his discussion of teleological judgment, primarily concerned with natural organisms and their purposes. Although the teleology of nature, according to Kant, is a regulative concept, it is yet an essential element in our ability to understand nature. A natural organism is grasped teleologically when an understanding of the functioning of each of its parts must make reference to the functioning of the whole organism. In such a case, we must think of the *organization* of the parts of the organism in accordance with a unifying concept allowing us to explain why each part must function as it does in relation to the rest of the organism. But this means that we must think of the organism as caused in accordance with such a unifying concept; otherwise we could not explain the harmony of the functioning of each of the parts, that is, how their functions relate to one another purposively.⁵⁶ Efficient causality alone, having no direction to which it is ordered, is not enough to explain the harmony of purposes which are found in natural organisms. But if in order to make teleological judgments we must assume that natural organisms are caused in accordance with a unifying concept, we must posit either one or many intelligent original beings as their authors.

Yet while physico-teleology may serve as a propaedeutic to theology (i. e., towards a concept of God adequate to the demands of morality), it stops short of what is required. The natural organisms that we find within nature, and the purposes in accordance with which we must think of them, often seem to conflict with one another when nature is taken as a whole.⁵⁷ Indeed, insofar as we can judge nature *on its own terms*, it is one that is “red in tooth and claw”, and is thus in no way adequate to the demands of moral reasoning, which stumbles over the examples of chaos and disharmony that it there finds. We can therefore not reason from nature taken as an effect to an omniscient and beneficent author of the world, but rather, so far as we can judge on such a basis, we can only assume intelligent authors of those sporadic purposes in nature that we are able to discern. Nature can only reveal those sporadic purposes found within it, but cannot reveal its own final purpose, i. e., that end towards which it is ultimately ordered, and which therefore stands outside it. As Kant notes, “Only pure reason can provide a priori a final purpose (because all the purposes in the world are empirically conditioned and [hence] cannot contain what is good absolutely, but only what is good for this

⁵⁶ Kant notes in the third *Critique* that “[...] 90 the whole difficulty about how a thing that has purposes within itself and can be grasped only through them was first produced, rests on this question: What is the unity of the basis [that accounts] for the combination, in this product, of the manifold [elements] *extrinsic to one another*? But this question, as far as it is teleological, is answered sufficiently if we posit that basis in the understanding of a producing cause that is a simple substance. If, on the other hand, we seek the cause merely in matter, as an aggregate of many substances extrinsic to one another, then we have no principle whatever to account for the unity in the intrinsically purposive form of its structure.” *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1987), 306 f.; [5: 420 f.].

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 329; [5: 440].

or that, i. e., for some contingent aim)."⁵⁸ Physico-teleology, therefore, alone does not provide an adequate basis from which to form an adequate moral concept of God, let alone lend to it objective reality. According to Kant, "[...] physical teleology on its own, if it proceeded consistently instead of borrowing, unnoticed, from moral teleology, could not provide a basis for anything but a *demonology*, which is incapable of [providing] a determinate concept [of the deity]."⁵⁹

Reason, which always seeks the unconditioned, demands a final purpose towards which all the conditioned purposes of nature are directed:

Therefore, if we find in the world arrangements in terms of purposes, and we follow reason's inevitable demand to subordinate these merely conditioned purposes to a supreme unconditioned one, i. e., a final purpose, then, to begin with, we are obviously not concerned with a purpose of (i. e., within) nature, so far as nature [already] exists, but with the purpose of the [very] existence of nature and all its arrangements. In other words, we are then concerned with the ultimate *purpose of creation*, and actually, within that purpose, with the supreme condition under which alone there can be a final purpose (where this final purpose is the basis that determines a supreme understanding to produce the beings of the world).⁶⁰

Only through such a final purpose, which as such must stand outside nature, can we bring together and unify the contingent purposes found within nature, i. e., if such purposes are subordinated under a final goal towards which they are directed, and which are thus conditioned by it. The only possible purpose of nature adequate to our moral destinies is the highest good. We can, however, only think of nature as directed towards such a goal if we think of it as having been produced in accordance with a concept; but this implies that we must think of nature as having been created by a moral, all-powerful, and intelligent Deity.

If, on the other hand, God is not posited as the author of nature, we would have no way to conceive of how nature could be directed towards such an ethico-teleological goal, which must lie outside of it.⁶¹ Rather, nature would have to be conceived as the realm of monstrous forces out of whose chaotic eruption organisms ordered to some goal or another would emerge. Without a final purpose towards which these limited goals in nature were directed, however, such goals

⁵⁸ Ibid., 329; [5: 441].

⁵⁹ Ibid., 333; [5: 444].

⁶⁰ Ibid., 332; [5: 443].

⁶¹ An analogous point is made by R. Z. Friedman, who argues that "if there is no connection between virtue and happiness, then we must, according to Kant, acknowledge that moral worthiness or merit will be determined by the agent's compliance with the moral law, while happiness or fate will be determined by the morally blind forces of nature. In the sphere of morality the agent would be obligated to acknowledge the absolute character of the moral law while in the sphere of his finite and temporal existence he would have to acknowledge the exclusivity of the natural law." "The Importance and Function of Kant's Highest Good", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984), 325–342, 338. While there are differences between Friedman's analysis and my own, he is correct in pointing out that if the natural world in which the moral agent moves is not subjugated to the final purposes of morality, then "moral concepts cannot be said to be related to the world in which the individual makes his choices and experiences his life", 337.

would themselves be pointless. In the end the organisms ordered towards these goals would be claimed by the death that awaits us all, disintegrating into the dust from which they came. Were nature not ultimately directed towards an ethico-teleological goal, it would make a mockery of the moral beings it spawned; we would thus have to think of the moral law as a mere product of a fantastic imagination, *itself* a mere product of a blind and purposeless nature, all of whose products will eventually be ruined by death. Were we not to judge the principles of speculative reason (through which the world of nature and appearances is known) as *subordinate* to the demands of practical reason, we would have to think of our practical reason as itself a mere *product* of a nature, which so far as we can judge empirically, is not ordered towards a moral goal. Thus while the moral individual who did not believe in God might attempt to bring about as much good as s/he possibly could,

his effort encounters limits: for while he can expect that nature will now and then cooperate contingently with the purpose of his that he feels so obligated and impelled to achieve, he can never expect nature to harmonize with it in a way governed by laws and permanent rules (such as his inner maxims are and must be). Deceit, violence, and envy will always be rife around him, even though he himself is honest, peaceable, and benevolent. Moreover, as concerns the other righteous people he meets, no matter how worthy of happiness they may be, nature, which pays no attention to that, will still subject them to all the evils of deprivation, disease, and untimely death, just like all the other animals on earth. And they will stay subjected to these evils always, until one vast tomb engulfs them one and all (honest or not, that makes no difference here) and hurls them, who managed to believe they were the final purpose of creation, back into the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter form which they were taken.⁶²

The moral individual who did not adopt the article of faith that nature cooperated with the goal that pure practical reason set before her would eventually have to collapse in despair. For she would have to believe that she, and other individuals like her, were engaged in a project that, irrespective of its moral worth, was doomed to failure. Battling against a hostile and indifferent universe whose cataclysmic upheavals consume the just and unjust alike, and forced to identify herself with the corruptible body, she could only conclude that death and the chaos of nature will eventually claim her and all others like her. Not to grasp the horror of the inevitable annihilation that a purposeless nature poses to a moral yet *finite* individual could only be an intentional blindness. It is to continue to engage in a battle towards the acquisition of virtue, the inevitable outcome of which is known beforehand; as such, it is to display the courage of a fool. If she reasons correctly, she will see that given the premise that she is merely the product of a blind and chaotic nature, the moral law, which had led her to conclude that she was a member of an intelligible world, would have thus been exposed as an idle and fantastic dream. If, on the other hand, she acknowledges her membership in an intelligible world, then she must also conclude that her existence cannot be the contingent outcome of blind

⁶² *Critique of Judgment*, 342; [5: 452].

forces, but that rather she was created in the likeness of the Deity, and that the world in which she finds herself as a member is ordered towards a purpose in harmony with her nature as a moral being. Since she is a finite individual, if she is to be true to the destiny which the moral law and her membership in an intelligible world commits her, she must assume the existence of God. This is not to say that such a person ignores the threat that nature poses, nor is it to say that she remains unshaken by the problem of evil. But such a person will ultimately cling to the faith that in some mysterious way, unfathomable by our finite intelligence, God holds the course of nature in his wisdom and orders it to that final purpose which is alone worthy of moral beings such as ourselves.⁶³

⁶³ I would like to thank Henry Allison, Ann Astell, Michael Gill, Pauline Kleingeld, and Franklin Mason for helpful comments on earlier versions of this paper.