Kant’s Moral Philosophy and the Role of the Highest Good

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Abstract

KIRAN BHARDWAJ: Kant’s Moral Philosophy and the Role of the Highest Good
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Described as the union of complete virtue and complete happiness in accordance with such virtue, the concept of the highest good draws together Kant’s account of moral virtue with special features of humans: our need for happiness and hopes for justice. However, the highest good fails to perform its function in Kant’s theory if either of two strong criticisms holds: if it is inconsistent with Kant’s account of moral motivation, or if it is unimportant in moral action. I argue that a historical survey of Kant’s explanation of the highest good shows how improved argumentation in the later works helps Kant to resolve any apparent inconsistency. And while the highest good is not important in everyday moral action, I conclude that we should use it to resolve worries about the futility of moral action. As a result, the highest good has an undeniably central role in Kant’s ethics.
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List of Abbreviations

C1: Critique of Pure Reason
C2: Critique of Practical Reason
C3: Critique of the Power of Judgment
Gr: Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals
MM: The Metaphysics of Morals
Introduction

Kant’s moral philosophy features two concepts of the good: the supreme good and the highest good. The first, the supreme good, is action with respect to the formal nature of the moral law—for humans, this would consist in our perfect moral virtue (C2 64/66 and 110/114). The second, the highest good, is a rich conception of the good tailored to the human condition. Described as the union of complete virtue and complete happiness in accordance with such virtue, the highest good draws together the supreme good with special features of humans: our need for happiness and hopes for justice.

But how can it be appropriate to have two definitive concepts of the good? There must be a priority of one over the other, the two concepts must apply in different contexts, or some other explanation. The highest good is in the more precarious position. While the supreme good fits with Kant’s description of the moral law, and thus is central to Kant’s account of morality, the highest good is examined less rigorously and less often in the texts. Further, those arguments concerning the highest good have had a checkered history, particularly marked by a dispute centering on claims made by Lewis White Beck in his A Commentary on Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason. Overall, Beck argues that certain claims Kant makes about the highest good are inconsistent with other parts of Kant’s moral

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1 Moral virtue is more complicated than ‘acting upon the moral law’, however. As Kant writes in the Doctrine of Virtue, it also requires a consistent fortitude or strength of will to act upon the moral law (MM 6:380/146).
philosophy. We may wonder whether the highest good is worth preserving as a worthwhile component of Kantian ethics, or whether it should be set aside as a curiosity of Kant’s theory.

In order to set out Kant’s preliminary explanation of the role of the highest good, I will consider Kant’s description of the two concepts of the good in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The highest good is described as having certain features: i) that it incorporates virtue with proportional—and thus deserved—happiness, ii) that is used as a ground for moral faith\(^2\), and iii) it has the role of an end of human striving. The second feature—the transition between Kant’s moral philosophy and his moral religion—could easily spin off into a discussion of unmanageable proportions. So while I will mention the direction of Kant’s work, I will not attempt to consider the relationship between the highest good and religion with any complexity. I will rather be concerned with Kant’s arguments about the highest good and its place in Kantian ethics.

What does Kant positively argue for, then? The highest good is importantly related to the moral law, yet also sets out a vision for a possible moral world. Thus, the third mentioned feature—the highest good as an end of human striving—must, if Kant’s argument is not to be inconsistent or incomplete, rely on a distinction between Kant’s account of moral motivation and what Kant notes is an unrelated, but very human, concern with consequences. In order to make the case for this distinction, I will rely on three places in Kant’s works from the early 1790s: a short yet dense section of the preface to the *Religion*, and several sections of the *Critique of Judgment* and the essay “On the Common Saying: ‘This May be True in Theory,\(^2\)

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\(^2\)The primary object of Kant’s discussion is faith in the existence of God. A related concern is in the belief in the immortality of the soul (*C1 A827/B855/649*, among others). However, the argument for moral faith in the existence of God depends on the whole concept of the highest good, while the argument for moral faith in our immortality does not depend on the whole concept of the highest good. Thank you to Robert Adams for pointing this out to me.
but it Does not Apply in Practice”. This distinction can help resolve any perceived tension between the two concepts of the good, by allowing us to understand what is involved in Kant’s concept of moral action in general, and Kant’s conception of moral action for us.

I will also consider a further complaint about not the consistency, but the importance of the concept of the highest good: after all, everyday moral action does not need to be aimed at the highest good. Then why does Kant see the need for the further end at all? For Kant’s argument to be successful, Kant must do two things: first, establish that rational beings necessarily construct a ‘systematic unity’ of all the ends we have (even if this is not consciously or purposefully), and second, establish that our everyday duties coordinate with this unified, complete end.

I conclude that the way we should think of the highest good as part of everyday moral action is not that it should be taken into account in every action, but rather we should use it to resolve worries about the futility of moral action and any resulting moral despair. What this would mean is that the highest good not only serves as a transition to the moral religion, but also has an undeniably central role in Kant’s ethics itself. Overall, I believe that the highest good is a central, and compelling, feature of Kant’s moral philosophy—one deserving of more than a peripheral glance.

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3 While Kant’s terminology is opaque, the language of ‘systematic unity’ comes from C1 A808/B836/637-8. In this section, Kant seems to be concerned with the coordination issues of free agents. A first issue is that of one’s own ends: we know from experience that a single person’s myriad ends and purposes cannot be simultaneously satisfied. In that case, why think that all my ends can be consistent at all? Another issue is about the coordination of multiple free agents. Why think that all the actions taken by these individuals will not be chaotic or at cross-purposes? Kant takes the systematic unity to be the satisfaction of all those ends consistent with morality in a single, complete end—a harmonization of one’s own will with itself and with others. The discussion returns again at C1 A815/B843/641-2, where Kant presents the idea of God as necessary to bring about this kind of unity.
1. The Two Concepts of the Good

The highest good for human beings is complete virtue (that is, acting upon the moral law⁴), and complete happiness in proportion to that virtue (C1 A813/B841/640-1; C2 110-11/115). Given the perceived rigor of Kant’s ethics, this description counters a possible misconception of what the good is in his moral philosophy: the highest good for human beings is not moral virtue alone.⁵ Acting upon the moral law is fundamental to right action, but morality is the ‘supreme good’, rather than the highest good. The highest good, given its description, contains the supreme good.

Whatever the concept of the highest good does, it does not allow us to dispose of the supreme good as a freestanding concept, but neither is the supreme good a sufficient concept of the good to serve all of Kant’s purposes. Both, in some sense, are definitive concepts of the good despite the fact that the highest good is defined with respect to the supreme good. So what is the argument for the combination of virtue (the supreme good) and happiness into the ‘highest good’? And why do these two concepts of the good nonetheless have independent force in Kant’s moral theory?

The two earlier Critiques both give answers to the first question in the sections in which Kant introduces the highest good: particularly, the Canon of the Critique of Pure Reason and the Dialectic of the Critique of Practical Reason. Both of these works supply preliminary results, but neither fully gives a fruitful argument for why the highest good is

⁴ See footnote 1.

⁵ Kant was very definitive in countering this misconception: a contemporary critic had accused him of asserting that adherence to the moral law is the one and only ultimate end for man. Kant responded that the ultimate end is neither human morality nor happiness, but “the highest good possible on earth, the union and harmony of them both” (“On the Common Saying” 64-5).
necessary for morality for human beings. If this is the case, then discussions of the highest good that solely refer to these two works do not fully settle the concept of the highest good within Kant’s moral philosophy.

1.1 The Two Concepts of the Good in the *Critique of Pure Reason*

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant begins his introduction of the highest good by discussing the three practical postulates: of the immortality of the soul, freedom, and the existence of God (*C1 A798/B826/631*). In the context of this work, Kant has already noted that these concepts are at the heart of the fundamental questions of metaphysics, yet we can’t know, just by reasoning, that they are true. Yet Kant already has announced the position that he will further develop in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: practical reason can appropriately set these three concepts as practical postulates.

Kant indicates that when we consider ‘the supreme end’, we are concerned only with moral interests (*C1 A801/B829/632-3*). But in the Canon, Kant directs us to a further question: if I do what I ought to do, what may I hope? This question is intended to be both practical and theoretical. Reason can serve us in two ways: it can lead us to our own happiness (when I act on rules of prudence), and it can lead us to what we must do in order to be worthy of happiness (by acting upon the law of morality) (*C1 A806/B834/636*). Kant has spent much time asserting the importance of the latter for us as rational beings, and that as a result moral virtue is the supreme good.
But the importance of happiness to us cannot be permanently deferred or ignored. So after the question of what I ought to do is resolved, in hoping I am directed to happiness⁶ (\textit{C1} A805/B834/636). But so as not to undermine the importance of the supreme good, Kant is interested in a possible ‘systematic unity’: a unity of the moral law and the happiness compatible with the moral law. As a result, Kant develops a conception of the moral world: the world as it ought to be, as conceived by “referring to the sensible world, viewed, however, as being an object of pure reason in its practical employment” (\textit{C1} A808/B836/637 and A809/B834/636). The moral world refers to the world, but then idealizes it into what we might think of a utopian vision. That way, we get the best of what human experience has to offer, as Kant has framed it: the fulfillment of morality \textit{and} deserved happiness for all rational beings. Such a vision also would prove to harmonize our experience as both free \textit{and} as members of an empirical world.

This moral world must be accepted as an end, Kant asserts.⁷ And if one accepts it as a necessary end, it is equally necessary that one accept the conditions of its attainment, since one cannot give it up as an end (\textit{C1} A823/B851/647). The practical postulates, then, are the conditions for such a moral world (\textit{C1} A810-11/B838-9/638-9). Kant writes that “without a God and without a world invisible to us now but hoped for, the glorious ideas of morality are indeed objects of approval and admiration, but not springs of purpose and action. For they do

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⁶ Kant’s definition, at this point in the text, is that happiness is the satisfaction of all our desires with respect to their manifoldness, degree, and duration (\textit{C1} A806/B834/636).

⁷ Of course, this leaves open the way in which this must be accepted as an end: perhaps an end to be pursued intentionally as an aim? Or, as a single end—a ‘unity of ends’—which plays the fundamental role in a teleological conception of the world? In the \textit{Religion}, Kant suggests more of the latter view, grounded on a view that we necessarily think about purposes, and so seek a unified end. Here, he speaks of ‘ultimate ends’ rather than ‘purposive unity’, but it seems plausible to think the same issue is at stake (\textit{R FN} 6:7/36).
not fulfil in its completeness that end which is natural to every rational being and which is determined *a priori*, and rendered necessary, by that same pure reason” (*C1* A813/B841/640).

This passage is ripe for consideration. As Beck did, it is possible to read especially the phrase “not springs of purposes and action” as an indication of Kant’s troubles with explaining moral motivation. This reading led Beck to reject the concept of the highest good as inconsistent as a practical part of ethics. I think it is better to see it as part of Kant’s consideration of the importance of the human concern with consequences in a way that does *not* commit him to its role as motivation. (I will consider this further in section 2.3).

The vision of the highest good is intended to be a compelling one: the moral world leads “to the purposive unity of all things, which constitute this great whole, in accordance with universal laws of nature (just as the former unity is in accordance with universal and necessary laws of morality), and thus united the practical with speculative reason.” (*C1* A816/B844/642). Kant argues that we seek this purposive unity due to the nature of our will—yet Kant does not discuss what *about* the will’s nature requires such purposive unity. I wish to highlight this concept of purposive unity in the first Critique, because it features heavily in the arguments for the highest good in later works, but there with description of what in the will’s nature leads to such a conception of a moral world.

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8 “But the former purposive unity is necessary, and founded on the will’s own essential nature, and this latter unity [of design in nature] which contains the condition of its application *in concreto* must be so likewise” (*C1* A817/B845/643).
1.2 The Two Concepts of the Good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*

The *Critique of Practical Reason* presents the concept of the highest good as the “unconditioned totality of the object of the pure practical reason” (C2 108/112). As in the first Critique, this ‘totality’ goes beyond the formal features of the moral law, which requires that “only the form of maxim be universally legislative” (C2 109/113). There is a perfect harmony, Kant asserts, between the moral law and the highest good as the object of the practical reason, as long as we understand the priority of the first (C2 110/114).

Kant argues that in this way the “concept of [the highest good] and the idea of its existence as possible through our practical reason are likewise the determining ground of the pure will” (C2 109-110/114). But this way of putting the relationship opens a question: how can the concept of the highest good and the idea of its existence as possible through our practical reason also be the determining ground of the pure will? One might think that the character of the highest good and the moral law, even if the one is defined with respect to the other, are so distinct that it would not allow for this result.

Part of the claim, of course, relies on the fact that we are (like in the first Critique) speaking about the human will: *our* practical reason, not reason for any rational being. After all (as Kant continues in the next section) for finite rational beings such as ourselves, virtue is *not* “the entire and perfect good as the object of the faculty of desire”. In order to complete the good for such beings, happiness is required as well (C2 110/114). The highest good is, on Kant’s view, practically necessary in order to combine these two concepts of virtue and

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9 In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant defines the will as the faculty of desire (C3 5:172/59). That is, “the faculty for being through one’s representations the cause of the reality of the objects of these representations” (C3 FN 5:177/65).
happiness. The motivation for such a combination is that he, again, has established the priority of the importance of virtue, yet also appreciates the importance of happiness (on the condition that it is deserved).

Perhaps Kant’s clearest expression of what proposition is entailed in this “connection” is what he says a rational being would will: “to be in need of happiness and also worthy of it and yet not to partake of it could not be in accordance with the complete volition of an omnipotent rational being” (C2 110/114-5). In a certain group of rational beings—those who are rational (and therefore may be moral or not), yet are also finite (and so in need of happiness)—an individual who is worthy of happiness ought to be happy. This view contrasts with the ancient Greek schools, as characterized by Kant: each school selected either virtue or happiness as fundamental and then asserted that the other element was part and parcel of the other: thus, “To be conscious of one’s maxims as leading to happiness is virtue” and “To be conscious of one’s virtue is happiness” (my italics, C2 111/115). Unlike the Greek schools, Kant both wishes to assert that happiness and virtue are distinct, but also that both are elements of the highest good.

There are two possibilities to unify two distinct concepts into another: analytic, and thus self-contradictory to deny because the pursuit of virtue and happiness are identical (which Kant has rejected). The alternative is that it is a synthetic connection “predicated upon virtue’s producing happiness as something different from the consciousness of virtue, as a cause produces an effect.” (C2 111/115). Kant’s solution to the problem of two distinct elements of the highest good, then, is to conceive of them as combined as cause-and-effect: when one is virtuous (or not), the resulting effect is that one will be happy in exact proportion to one’s worthiness to be happy.
But establishing any connection between virtue and happiness, even one of cause and effect, is troublesome. Kant notes that in the work of the Analytic, the maxims of virtue and those of one’s own happiness are heterogeneous, and so “strongly limit and check each other” (C2 112/117). This discordance between virtue and happiness is Kant’s reason, indeed, for asserting that their connection in the highest good must be synthetic (C2 112-3/117). Kant flatly denies that the pursuit of virtue can be identical to that of happiness or vice versa. If that were the case, then when a person sought out happiness, she would be virtuous—but on Kant’s definition of virtue as action in accordance with the moral law, that is impossible. Nor does a virtuous person or a vicious person receive her just reward (in the world as we have experienced it thus far)—we can point to cases in which good people suffer greatly, or bad people live happy lives. As a result, Kant says that because the combination of virtue and deserved happiness in the highest good cannot be analytic, it must be synthetic. Furthermore, Kant asserts that the highest good is an \textit{a priori} concept (C2 113/117). So in these assertions, we see the bones of an \textit{a priori} argument for the proposition that virtue and deserved happiness are combined in the highest good as Kant indicates. However, it isn’t a particularly satisfying argument—the reasons, especially for thinking about the \textit{a priori} argument, are fairly scant.

Kant does think that his solution to the antinomy of practical reason is a satisfying reason to assert virtue and happiness are connected as cause and effect (because the highest good “concerns a practical good, i.e., one that is possible through action” (C2 113/117)). The antinomy allows Kant to acknowledge that happiness can never bring about morality, nor morality guarantee happiness. But because the highest good is an “a priori necessary object of our will and is inseparably related to the moral law”, the highest good must be possible in
order for the moral law not to be false (C2 113-14/118). But what, exactly, we must necessarily will about the highest good is left unspecified here. And there are multiple possibilities: we must necessarily will that we in every action try to achieve the highest good, that we must bring about the highest good, &c. Perhaps the best fill-in is that I must will that the actions in this world of morality, considered as a whole, should ultimately lead to the highest good.

Kant resolves the antinomy of practical reason similarly to the antinomy of pure reason, in which Kant had articulated a distinction between the world regarded as appearances and the world in itself. In this antinomy, Kant argues that we know we cannot have a necessary connection between a virtuous disposition and happiness in the empirical world. However, Kant seems to think that our conception of ourselves as noumenal gives us enough room to say “it is not impossible that the morality of intention should have a necessary relation as cause to happiness as an effect in the sensuous world” (C2 114-5/119). (Here, Kant also indicates how the postulate of God makes this possible).

The resolution of the antinomy is intended to indicate how, even though virtue and (deserved) happiness may seem difficult or impossible to relate in the desired way (and are so, in the empirical world), this problem may be resolved via the distinction between the phenomenal and noumenal worlds, and the articulation of the practical postulates. That is, one proposition in the antinomy can be taken in two ways: “The effect of [complete] virtue is (proportionate) happiness” is false when empirical causation is at issue, but possibly could be true when noumenal causation is at issue (C2 114/119).

10 In the Religion, Kant will assert that the relevant proposition is that I make the highest possible good in the world my own ultimate end. I think that we should read what is involved here similarly: that it should not be an end I aim at in achieving every duty, but rather a coordination of all ends. This point will return in section 4.
Kant’s conclusion is this: “if we inquire into God’s final end in creating the world, we must name not the happiness of rational beings in the world but the highest good” (C2 130/135). This mention of a ‘final end’ again appropriately shows the indication of the importance of a similar development of what was described as ‘purposive unity’ in the first Critique. But again, I find that the account of why we are drawn towards a unified final end, and the further articulation of the *a priori* argument that Kant sets up here, are both more fully formed in the later works.

So I conclude this survey of the accounts of the two concepts of the good in the first two Critiques. Both passages establish a clear connection between the two goods. In both, the highest good is integrated with the demands of the supreme good (the good directly established by the moral law). Yet there are certain holes in the theoretical construction of the highest good, which must be in good condition for Kant to assert that the highest good is practically necessary. While Kant is quick to appeal to the harmony that the highest good would bring about, there are insufficient details about what in the nature of the human will demands that we seek such harmony. And likewise, there is an *a priori* argument for the highest good that is here insufficient.

In the next section, I will detail what significant claims Kant makes about the highest good—some of which have already been mentioned here. In later sections, I will show what

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11 A place within the text of the second Critique that indicates Kant’s interest in a ‘perfect systematic unity’ is at C2 91/94, in the Critical Elucidation of the Analytic.

12 As he does assert: “in spite of this apparent conflict of a practical reason with itself, the highest good is the necessary highest end of a morally determined will and a true object thereof; for it is practically possible, and the maxims of this will, which refer to it by their material, have objective reality.” (C2 115/119).
theoretical arguments or reasons Kant develops or suggests can be derived for why we should consider the highest good our end.

2. Features of the Highest Good

In this section, I wish to discuss the claims that Kant makes about the highest good, as evidenced by the materials of the two earlier Critiques. There are three features that are the most significant: first, that the proportionality of happiness to moral virtue is essential to the highest good, second, that our moral need to take the highest good as an end is a ground for moral faith, and third, that the highest good is an important end of human striving.

The first feature is built into the content of the highest good, and is interesting in that it focuses on the notion of desert. The second demonstrates how the highest good provides the transition to rational faith. The last feature is of the most interest in this thesis, for although Kant has made some preliminary arguments for the highest good as an end of human striving, he has not given satisfactory arguments why he assumes this is the case.

2.1 Proportionality to ensure happiness is deserved

One of the most conspicuous features of the description of the highest good is the proportionality of happiness to moral virtue. Kant repeatedly articulates the moral importance of happiness’s direct proportion to merit—in other words, a principle of retributive justice.
This, of course, is a deeply controversial principle.\textsuperscript{13} “[The moral law] takes no account of desires, and the natural means to satisfying them, and considers only the freedom of a rational being in general, and the necessary conditions under which alone this freedom can harmonise with a distribution of happiness that is made in accordance with principles.” (\textit{C1 A806/B834/636}). It is interesting that Kant claims that not only is the moral law a principle of freedom, but also that deserved, permissible happiness is assessed with respect to freedom—what is compatible with the ‘freedom of a rational being in general’.\textsuperscript{14}

For happiness to fall under the auspices of the moral law, human moral action would have to bring about appropriate results in the empirical world that are compatible with, and guided by, the prescription of the moral law. As a result, the everyday empirical needs that are important for us to have fulfilled, meaningful lives must all be coordinated. (This is the case even if we, in acting on duty, are not supposed to be influenced by these needs, nor can say that such coordination will be a result of our moral action). But how are we to do this? Kant answers: “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” (\textit{C1 A811/A839/639}). In

\textsuperscript{13} One way to lessen the bite of the controversy is to say that even though we consider desert to be important, we need not try to judge and bring about this ourselves. As Stephen Engstrom points out, Kant is committed to the idea that if there is a necessary connection between virtue and happiness, there also must be a necessary connection between vice and lack of happiness (764). The argument for intermediate cases, then, comes from the feature that virtue and happiness can be a matter of degree. However, it is a separate question about whether we should ourselves try to proportion happiness to virtue. Engstrom points out that if we try to limit or diminish the happiness of the vicious, this is contrary to the virtue of beneficence (768). I would also note that it sets up the questions of “Who am I to judge?”—we have limited knowledge about other people’s motives, purposes, and even their actions, which sets up limits to how correctly or sensitively we could bring about appropriate happiness (or lack thereof) to others and ourselves. In his paper, Engstrom makes an excellent argument that denies that we have a duty to proportion happiness to virtue, even if we have a duty to bring about the highest good (772).

\textsuperscript{14} Note that in the Doctrine of Virtue in the \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, Kant states that it is a duty to take the happiness of others of one of our main ends. (\textit{MM 6:387-8/151-2}).
other words, *deserved* happiness—proportioned to one’s moral virtue—can solve what Kant sees as a problem: how happiness (necessary for us as empirical beings) can be appropriate, given how he conceives of us as moral beings. Of course, asserting the importance of the proportionment of happiness to virtue is not sufficient to bring about results, especially given our limitations of knowledge, time, and ability—one reason that Kant sees that moral faith is necessary for us to be satisfied about the relationship of the two elements of the highest good.

2.2 As the ground for moral faith

In the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant wrote that the “achievement of the highest good in the world is the necessary object of a will determinable by the moral law” (*C2* 122/126). (I will discuss this further in 2.3.) But rational beings such as ourselves are unable to accomplish either part of the highest good: we cannot make sufficient progress towards perfect moral virtue, and we cannot correctly proportion happiness to morality (*C2* 122/126-7, 124/128-9). As a result, we must postulate that two things are the case: that our souls are immortal, giving us the chance to endlessly progress towards moral perfection, and that God exists and will proportion happiness to moral perfection (*C2* 123/127, 124/129).

So the two practical postulates (not including the postulate of freedom, which plays a very different role in Kant’s ethics) are important—Kant probably would say inseparable—corollaries to the proposition that the highest good is the necessary highest end of a morally determined will (as stated at *C2* 115/119). Kant’s conception of rational faith is developed because of the importance of the highest good.
Of course, Kant wants to maintain that morality has authority independently of religion. That is, one must acknowledge the validity of the moral law whether or not one believes in the existence of God (C3 5:450-1/316). However, Kant was not particularly worried that atheism would be a likely temptation—partly because he believed that the highest good, and the postulates that stem from it, are “irresistibly imposed” on us by practical reason (C3 5:451/316). But the practical postulates prevent one from thinking that moral action is hopeless—as moral belief, they guarantee that the ultimate result that we hope and strive for is attainable (C3 5:450-1/316, 5:452/318).

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15 The text reads: “This proof [Note: Kant has just come to the end of a proof, the conclusion of which is “that we must assume a moral cause of the world (an author of the world) in order to set before ourselves a final end” (C3 5:450/316)… is not meant to say that it is just as necessary to assume the existence of God as it is to acknowledge the validity of the moral law, hence that whoever cannot convince himself of the former can judge himself to be free from the obligations of the latter. No! All that would have to be surrendered in that case would be the aim of realizing the final end in the world (a happiness of rational beings harmoniously coinciding with conformity to the moral law, as the highest and best thing in the world) by conformity to the moral law.” (C3 5:450-1/316). In other words, if one is (irrationally) an atheist, one must still be moral—but one must give up the belief that the highest good is possible.

16 The text reads: “But the one requirement of the final end, as practical reason prescribes it to beings in the world, is an end irresistibly imposed upon them by their nature (as finite beings), which reason would subject to the moral law as an inviolable condition, and would also have universally known in accordance with that law, and thereby makes the promotion of happiness, in consensus with morality, into the final end.” (C3 5:451/316-7). Lara Denis reads Kant, both in the Critique of Judgment and the Critique of Practical Reason, as thinking our belief in God is rationally necessary, but we have no duty to believe in God—strictly speaking, only to promote the highest good (Denis 201). If Denis is correct, then this helps make sense of this passage: Kant acknowledges the possibility of a person (irrationally) failing to believe in God. However, Kant’s conception of practical reason is such that if we are to be rational, we must believe in God.

17 Other commentators have worked to separate out the notions of the highest good and moral faith. Andrews Reath, for example, argues that there may be a secular ‘hope’ that we can legitimately act for—making moral action not absurd—yet which doesn’t require the full-blown theological hopes of the practical postulates (Reath 600-1). In other words, Reath rejects the need for moral faith in favor of a secular social ideal (Reath 617).
2.3 As an end of human striving

The main focus of this paper is one further claim Kant makes about the highest good, namely that it is an end we ought to hold (in some way). In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant concluded: “Since, now, the furthering of the highest good, which contains this connection in its concept, is an a priori necessary object of our will and is inseparably related to the moral law, the impossibility of the highest good must prove the falsity of the moral law also” (114/118). In that statement, Kant indicated both how the moral law and “the furthering highest good” are rationally inseparable, but the description also suggests that it is important that we strive to bring it about—even if actually achieving the highest good is impossible for us. Likewise, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had indicated that the concept of the moral world is a practical idea—it ought to have an influence in the empirical world “to bring that world, so far as may be possible, in conformity with the idea.” (C1 A808/B836/637).

But there are various ways to conceive of the highest good as an end of human striving, some better and some worse. And the way that this end is conceived can radically change one’s interpretation of the highest good.

One first issue to resolve is how the highest good ought to play a role with respect to moral action. Occasionally, Kant is unclear about what he sees as the proper role for the highest good—as a supplementary source of motivation, or as distinctively rounding out moral action in a different way? Recall the passage, already mentioned, which indicates that we need the highest good as a source of purpose and action:
(A) “It is necessary that the whole course of our life be subject to moral maxims, but it is impossible that this should happen unless reason connects with the moral law, which is a mere idea, an operative cause which determines for such conduct as is in accordance with the moral law an outcome, either in this or in another life, that is in accordance with our supreme ends. Thus without a God and without a world invisible to us but hoped for, the glorious ideas of morality are indeed objects of approval and admiration, but not springs of purpose and action. For they do not fulfill in its completeness that end which is natural to every rational being and which is determined a priori, and rendered necessary, by that same pure reason.” (CI A812-3/B840-1/640).

The phrase, “springs of purpose and action”, prepares us to expect that on Kant’s view, without the highest good (as assured by the practical postulates), morality will be lacking in purpose and action. Kant has a major problem, if so—Kant has staked very heavily on the moral law being sufficient for moral motivation. So how do we make sense of this claim about purpose and action, without it affecting the claim about the motivation of the moral law?

A similar passage worth consideration is at the end of the first chapter of the Dialectic of the second Critique. Here, Kant writes that the moral law is the sole determining ground for the pure will (C2 109/113). And yet, even after making this strong initial claim about the role of the moral law, he writes that:

(B) “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.” (C2 109-110/114).

This passage led Lewis White Beck to clarify that what Kant meant here was not that the highest good was an alternative source of moral motivation. (Beck worded this even more harshly: he accused this passage as being an “inept” way of making a point (Beck 243).) But Beck jumps straight from the language of ‘determining grounds’ to that of motivation. It
seems to him inconsistent with the rest of Kant’s theory that the highest good plays any role in motivation (Beck 244).

And Beck is correct in saying that Kant cannot consistently hold that the highest good is a motive for the pure will. The worry is that if the highest good serves as an *incentive* to make certain decisions and bring about certain actions (I will perform such and such action because I want to bring about the highest good), it, if it functions like any other empirical incentive, would undermine how we can conceive of ourselves as *free* moral agents. Beck’s error is that in reading these passages as making a point about motivation, he misses any alternative explanation about the highest good. As a result, Beck rejects the claim that the highest good can also be a determining ground of the will.

However, Beck moves too quickly. Kant does make two claims: 1) the moral law is the sole ground for determining the pure will, and 2) the idea that the highest good is possible through practical reason is *also* the determining ground of the pure will. This seems contradictory. However, we can perhaps clarify that there are two possibilities: speaking of the rational will in general, and speaking of the rational will of human beings or other finite rational beings. We postulate that we, as free beings, can determine what to do solely based upon the moral law. But our experience as rational beings who are, in some sense, also subject to the empirical world is such that that we cannot and should not leave out our empirical needs when giving a full account of morality.

Instead, Kant may be pointing to a feature of human experience that does *not* commit him to a view that the highest good serves as moral motivation. Rather, Kant conceives of the highest good as unifying moral purpose and action in the world into a single ideal object which meets a natural need. That unification is not necessary as part of motivating us to
action, but it is a way of making our empirical features compatible—and harmonized in the way promised in the first two Critiques—with the moral motivation indicated by the postulate of freedom.

In the next section, I wish to consider the arguments of the later works: the *Religion*, the *Critique of Judgment*, and the essay, “On the Common Saying”. They more clearly articulate the missing pieces in the earlier Critiques—particularly in filling out a conception of the human will, and offering clearer *a priori* arguments for the highest good. But there is a distinction made in these later works that can more clearly illuminate the two earlier Critiques, and which explains Kant’s language of ‘purpose’ without committing him to untenable views about motivation.

Let me begin by setting out this distinction on its own, and then illustrating how this may work in reference to the two problematic passages above, (A) *C1* A812-3/B840-1/640 and (B) *C2* 109-110/114. Moral motivation, Kant argues, can look very similar to sensuous motivation. However, in postulating the existence of free will, we must also postulate the existence of moral motivation that is *not* sensuous determination. There is both a sensuous determination of the faculty of desire, as well as a pure practical determination—the first characterizes action with regards to empirical incentives, and the second characterizes moral action (*C2* 116-7/121).

Kant may have meant that the idea of the highest good as possible, if it likewise determines the pure will, does more than just characterize a formal feature of morality for noumenal, free agents. Because part of the content of the highest good involves deserved happiness, it necessarily takes into account the cause-and-effect nature of the description of

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18 We have various needs, many of which conflict with each other and with the needs of others. Also see footnote 3.
phenomenal, and empirically determined agents. If so, the highest good serves as a way of thinking how to unify these two features: noumenal freedom and empirical causation.\(^{19}\)

But we must be careful in saying that the highest good plays a *motivational* role in moral action. It depends upon what we mean by motivation. If the proposition that the highest good must be the consequence of my action is *all* that is involved in moral action, then Kant would be in trouble as Beck thought: in that case, the highest good compromises Kant’s account of autonomy. But the other possibility is that we are, first and foremost, moral beings and can think of ourselves as making free choices. This has to do with the account that Kant develops about the moral law. But we are also empirical beings. As such, we are *secondarily*, but still *necessarily* concerned with the consequences of our moral action in the empirical world (which is distinct from what motivation may have inspired it). The highest good then aids us to conceive of the results of our moral action (which, in line with the postulate of freedom, was morally motivated).

If we read Kant as offering this view of the highest good, then we can make better sense of passages from Kant’s earlier works, which read as if Kant is making claims about motivation that are inconsistent with his overall moral philosophy. Kant’s description of the highest good as not only objects of approval, but also “springs of purpose and action”, could then be read as indicating that we care about, perhaps even as a rational requirement, such a complete end. Further, even Kant can consistently make the claim that the highest good *can* serve as the determining ground of the pure will (which is itself worth doubt) is an indication of how the pure will works for the human condition, there is a remaining story to fill in about

\(^{19}\) Naturally, this fits well with Kant’s project of the Antinomy of Practical Reason.
the will. Kant’s view of the highest good is clearer in the later works of the early 1790s. So I will continue by working through those arguments in order to illustrate this distinction.

Beck made an argument that says that Kant cannot have it both ways: the highest good cannot both serve as a motive, while the moral law is the sole motive for moral action. But we may accept, with Beck, that the highest good cannot serve as a motive—and instead, think of it as a required, unified conception of what the empirical world would be like if the rational beings in it were to always act morally, without this conception being the motivation for moral action. In this way, Kant can have both claims, without disturbing his argument about moral motivation.

3. The Later Arguments

Thus far, I have reviewed the arguments for the connection between the two concepts of the good, indicated major claims Kant makes about the highest good, and set out the distinction that I think is essential to understanding the role of the highest good in Kant’s moral philosophy—namely, that the highest good responds to our sensitivity to the results of moral action in the empirical world, in a way importantly distinct from moral motivation.

However, while this distinction may make better sense of the arguments of the first two Critiques, another question is what textual basis there is for this distinction. In the earlier Critiques, the highest good is presented as important because it provides a harmony of reason. The argument relies upon an assertion that the highest good is the object and final
end of practical reason. But these early works are not as precise in their language and clear in their argumentation. Attention to later works can give us a richer account of why we may take the highest good as a serious and essential component of Kant’s moral philosophy.

The passages in the *Religion, Critique of Judgment*, and the essay “On the Common Saying” use a more explicit account of purposiveness to explain the relationship between the moral law and the highest good. Through this section, I will try to argue how these later arguments more clearly articulate why Kant is not committed to the highest good to be motivation, but instead another role based on ends.

3.1 The relationship between the moral law and the highest good

One of the most important indications of how Kant wishes to argue for the highest good as our end comes in a section and extensive footnote in the preface of *Religion within the Boundaries of Pure Reason*. Kant writes: “But although on its own behalf morality does not need the representation of an end which would have to precede the determination of the will, it may well be that it has a necessary reference to such an end, not as the ground of its maxims but as a necessary consequence accepted in conformity to them.” (*R* 6:4/34). This description clearly establishes that moral motivation must *not* be brought about by maxims determined by an empirical end (not even one such as the highest good, if it is such an empirical incentive). And yet, morality can also allow for the consideration of an end as a necessary consequence of our free moral action, provided that it meets certain criteria: it must an end that conforms with all our moral actions. The highest good is such an end, and is special as a “point of reference for the unification of all ends” (*R* 6:5/35). Why and how it
would be *necessary* consequence remains to be explained, as does how, precisely, we are to ‘accept’ it.

But here is our first step: Kant has indicated that there is a split in how we need to conceive of the moral determination of the will. The order of priority must be kept straight: moral action must be grounded solely on the motivation of the moral law, as conceived of in the postulate of freedom. And yet, the determination of the will must involve (Kant argues) some reference to an end as a consequence—presumably, that after we have freely determined what is right or wrong to do, we consider the results of doing so. The reason that this ‘end as a consequence’ is important is because for us, determinations of the will occur without an effect in the empirical world (*R* 6:4/34). That is, we consider ourselves to be moral beings. But we also are empirical beings, subject to (as Kant conceives it) deterministic laws of cause and effect. So even if we postulate that we are free to act morally, we are still concerned with the consequences of our moral actions as they play out in the empirical world.

Of course we get a more careful presentation than in the *Critique of Practical Reason* of how the highest good could determine the will. In the second Critique, Kant had stated that both the moral law and the concept of the possibility of the highest good could be determining grounds of the pure will. But in the *Religion*, we get a more sensitive relation of the highest good to the work of the will. Here, even if we must consider our will determined with reference to the moral law (freely), we cannot leave our consideration of moral action *at* that, and so also must consider results in the empirical world (cause-and-effect) (see *R* 6:5/34).
The concept of the highest good helps to make sense of both free moral action \textit{and} cause-effect causality.\footnote{Kant himself doesn’t unequivocally say this, but the disparate nature of noumenal freedom and empirical causation seems to be guiding his comments here (the parallel of the Antinomies of Pure and Practical Reason strongly indicates this reading is correct). He does say: “only in this way [in the concept of the ultimate end of all things] can an objective practical reality be given to the combination, which we simply cannot do without, of the purposiveness [deriving] from freedom and the purposiveness of nature.” (\textit{C3} 6:5/35)—in other words, he attends to both the noumenal realm and that in the phenomenal realm, and indicates that we cannot do without the combination. In the footnote to this section, Kant also distinguishes between what rule of pure reason in the moral law, and the ‘limitation’ of human beings in that we are always concerned with results—which I read to be referring to our empirical limitations (\textit{C3} \textit{FN} 6:7/36).} However, Kant continues by writing that even if we determine how to act with reference only to the moral law, such a determination only instructs us \textit{how} to act—not \textit{whither} (\textit{R} 6:4/34). By Kant’s description of moral motivation, the formal condition of the moral law must be sufficient to bring about action. However, it does not give us guidance on the likely future of our moral action. “Whither” is a question for those beings that are moral, but also think in terms of effects of actions.

We do clearly have our desired distinction, however: moral motivation must not be with reference to a morally worthy end, but exclusively with respect to the formal feature of the moral law.\footnote{Or as in “On the Common Saying”: “The incentive which men can have before they are given a specific goal (or end) can obviously be none other than the law itself, through the esteem which it inspires (irrespective of what ends one may have and seek to attain through obedience to the law). For the law, as the formal aspect of will, is all that remains if we discount the will’s particular content” (\textit{FN} 67).} However, Kant writes that human reason is also concerned with the question: “What then is the result of this right conduct of ours?” (\textit{R} 6:5/34). This question, presumably, is why Kant suggests the previous arguments: we think about what will happen as a result of moral action because despite the fact that we are moral beings, we are consequence-oriented as empirical beings. Thus, even if we have already settled on the appropriate thing to do (and presumably have sufficient motivation to do it) we still are...
concerned with the consequences of the appropriate thing to do. If I am good, I still hope that the results of my action will also be good.

Kant has thus argued that we have an ideal consequence or effect of our moral action that we can refer to: the highest good. This is an object that harmonizes the formal condition that we ought to act upon (duty) with the particular ends we have that also conform to duty (proportioned happiness) \((R\ 6:5/34)\). In other words, this ideal object is an end which meets a natural need. And Kant must continue to insist that the belief that the complete virtue of all will bring about the highest good is not a ground of morality, but is derived from morality \((R\ 6:5/34)\).

To recap, this concept of the highest good was presented as a way to unify Kant’s formal statement of the moral law with thinking about duty in a system of morally required and morally permissible ends. But Kant also suggests that the highest good is the only way that “an objective practical reality be given to the combination, which we simply cannot do without, of the purposiveness [deriving] from freedom and the purposiveness of nature” \((R\ 6:5/35)\). So Kant requires a further explanation for why the peculiarities of the highest good work in such a way so that it is the only way possible, and why we cannot do without “purposiveness”. To do so, we should move to a work written a few years prior, the *Critique of Judgment*.

The *Critique of Judgment* focuses on the faculty of judgment. This faculty is described as what combines the two parts of philosophy (theoretical and practical) into one whole, by mediating between two faculties, reason and understanding \((C3\ 5:176-7/64)\). The feature of judgment that is supposed to do this work is purposiveness, which explains how
the representation of the object can lead to the object itself \((C3\ 5:220/105)\). Kant believes that we use purposiveness as an explanatory measure, whether there is a purposeful agent or not: “An object or a state of mind or even an action, however, even if its possibility does not necessarily presuppose the representation of an end, is called purposive merely because its possibility can only be explained and conceived by us insofar as we assume as its ground a causality in accordance with ends” \((C3\ 5:220/105)\). But this is a feature of how humans (and presumably, beings like us) must think about action in accordance with ends.

There is an important difference between the kind of purposiveness that may be useful in conceiving of morality (“practical purposiveness”) and the consideration of purposiveness of nature under empirical laws (“purposiveness of nature”) \((C3\ 5:180/68,\ even\ more\ clearly\ in\ the\ First\ Introduction\ 20:243/43)\). Practical purposiveness has to do with human art and morals \((C3\ 5:180)\). It is conceived of as the determination of a free will—but practical because the concept of a faculty of desire as a will must be given empirically. Nonetheless, the principle of practical purposiveness is \textit{a priori} \((C3\ 5:182/69)\).

This feature of practical purposiveness, if Kant is right about its necessity for the human will, must be the reason why Kant asserts that the highest good is a necessary ultimate end for us. In that case, that the highest good is considered to be the unification of all our ends allows it to serve as the single, complete, unified purpose that Kant thinks is a requirement of practical reason. We are constituted in such a way, he argues, that we both focus our ends in such a way and must believe that this end is possible. Thus, the ‘highest good as a necessary end’ mediates between the moral law and the empirical world, but not as motivation.
Because the faculty of judgment is supposed to mediate between what the understanding does and reason does, we can patch together a conception of deterministic causality in accordance with the causality of freedom.

“The effect in accordance with the concept of freedom is the final end, which (or its appearance in the sensible world) should exist, for which the condition of its possibility in nature (in the nature of the subject as a sensible being, that is, as a human being) is presupposed. That which presupposes this a priori and without regard to the practical, namely, the power of judgment, provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, which makes possible the transition from the purely theoretical to the purely practical, from lawfulness in accordance with the former to the final end in accordance with the latter, in the concept of a purposiveness of nature; for thereby is the possibility of the final end, which can become actual only in nature and in accord with its laws, cognized.” (C3 5:196/81-2).

The notion of purposiveness can help us understand how Kant sees why we must conceive the world as agents who consider themselves free moral agents (noumenal), but also subject to a deterministic world (phenomenal). The power of judgment mediates between the ‘concepts of nature’ and ‘the concept of freedom’—which I read to be indicative of how the human beings both are sensible beings, and free beings. Because Kant considers this mediation between understanding and reason to be required, and because on his view this mediation is only possible through the concept of a possible final end (at least conceptually, an effect of moral freedom in the empirical world), the highest good, as that final end, must thus serve a significant role within the scope of his ethics. Kant’s argument is set up so that, without the highest good, he has an incomplete account of morality. For this reason, it is

22 In the later part of the Critique of Judgment, Kant wishes to discuss the ultimate end of nature in a teleological system. In section 83, Kant describes a two-part end of nature: the happiness and the culture of the human being, culture being the kind of aptitude involved in setting ends according to form (C3 5:430/297, 5:431/299)—an aptitude that characterizes morality. But this sounds familiar—it is a description of the highest good in slightly different terminology.
important to consider the highest good to be a central issue in Kant’s ethics, and not merely an adjunct to the ethics.

So we have a concept of the highest good that is the ultimate or final end of nature. Kant continues (in section 84) by describing the character of our faculty of freedom as unconditioned and independent, but also as aimed at ends, and so it can set for itself the object of the highest good in the world (C3 5:435). As a result, we can consider a moral teleology: we can compare the empirical world to a conceived moral world and the possibility of its accomplishment. In Kant’s words:

“The moral law, as the formal rational condition of the use of our freedom, obligates us by itself alone, without depending on any sort of end as a material condition; yet it also determines for us, and indeed does so a priori, a final end, to strive after which it makes obligatory for us, and this is the **highest good in the world** possible through freedom.

The subjective condition under which the human being (and, according to our concepts, every rational finite being as well) can set a final end for itself under the above law is happiness. Hence the highest physical good that is possible in the world and which can be promoted, as far as it is up to us, as a final end, is **happiness**—under the objective condition of the concordance of humans with the law of **morality**, as the worthiness to be happy.” (C3 5:450/315).”

I would also like to mention one last, clear statement of how Kant conceives of the highest good as an end for us in “On the Common Saying: ‘That May Be True in Theory, but it Does Not Apply in Practice’”. This essay was written in the same period as the Religion and the Critique of Judgment. There are two points I would like to draw out before returning to the Religion. First, here Kant explicitly states that moral faith (belief in the practical postulates, which are for the sake of striving towards the highest good) is not a **motive** for the general concept of duty (65)—another confirmation that Beck was misled in his concerns about the highest good. This should again accentuate that Kant did not see a role for the
highest good as motive, but rather that the concept of duty gives us occasion to strive towards the highest good.

Second, Kant again expressly states that the highest good (as the ultimate moral end) is necessary for human beings. The details are slightly different then elsewhere, but here he states: “the necessity of an ultimate end posited by pure reason and comprehending the totality of all ends within a single principle (i.e., a world in which the highest possible good can be realized with our collaboration) is a necessity experienced by the unselfish will as it rises beyond mere obedience to formal laws and creates as its own object the highest good.” (FN 65). So it seems that in these works from the early 1790s, Kant is very clear on two points: the highest good as our end is necessary given the kind of beings we are, but does not play the role of a motivation for duties.

3.2 The a priori arguments

In the earlier Critiques, I had mentioned that one insufficient attribute of the discussion of the highest good in the earlier Critiques was the lack of an a priori argument. Yet in the Preface to the Religion, we finally get an indication of how he would like to develop such an argument. Here, we get a two-step argument for two propositions. The first is that it is a synthetic a priori proposition to say that one should make the highest good in the world one’s own end. The second is that it is also a synthetic a priori proposition that we have sufficient practical reason to believe in God, and therefore a highest good in the world. This second proposition, going back to our features of the highest good, is illustrative of how Kant saw the highest good as the ground for faith.
3.2.1 The argument that the highest good ought to be one’s end.

Kant defines an ultimate end as “[t]he end that contains the inescapable, and at the same time sufficient, condition of all other ends” (R 6:6/35). Then, Kant makes an assertion: that one’s own happiness is the subjective ultimate end of rational beings belonging to this world (R 6:6/35). In other words, Kant sees us as empirically striving for—not only wanting, but trying to bring about—our own complete happiness without exception.

But he stresses that we need a further argument for the proposition that every human ought to make the highest possible good in the world his own objective ultimate end. Kant writes that this further argument is necessary since the proposition “exceeds the concept of the duties in this world, and adds a consequence (an effect) of these duties that is not contained in the moral laws and cannot, therefore, be evolved out of them analytically.” (R 6:7/35). Duties require no end that would motivate action (R 6:7/36). If they did, it would lead us into the argument that Beck worried about—that this commits us to the idea that in order to act on duty, we must have some incentive.

In that case, why does Kant think that we should go beyond duty to conceive of an ultimate end that goes so far beyond the particulars of a single duty, or the formal conditions of duty? The reason is: “it is one of the inescapable limitations of human beings and their practical faculty of reason (perhaps of that faculty in all other worldly beings as well) to be concerned in every action with its result, seeking something in it that might serve them as an
end” (R 6:7/36). The moral law requires certain duties. And yet, human moral action must be not only postulated as motivated by the moral law, but also framed with reference to an end.23

3.2.2 The argument for the necessary lawgiver

Immediately after concluding the previous argument, Kant continues to the further conclusion: “if the strictest observance of the moral laws is to be thought of as the cause of the ushering in of the highest good (as end), then, since human capacity does not suffice to effect happiness in the world proportionate to the worthiness to be happy, an omnipotent moral being must be assumed as ruler of the world, under whose care this would come about, i.e., morality leads inevitably to religion.” (R 6:8/37).

So this argument for the existence of God is a further conclusion built upon the last—we must be able to bring about the highest end (as it is necessary). So we postulate the existence of a being that can do so. And this practical postulate is based upon human faculties and human experience. But what is important in the argument for this postulate of God is not the content—that it is an omnipotent being of a certain sort—but its function: that something in the world serves the purpose of necessarily bringing about the highest good.

I have argued that the later developments of the Religion and Critique of Judgment provide a fuller explanation of why Kant found the role of the highest good to be so important to his moral philosophy, despite the fact that it is separable from the moral law. That reason is hinted at in the earlier Critiques: it is due to the structure of the human will, and how as

23 “The proposition itself is possible… only because it contains the a priori principle of the cognition of the determining grounds of a power of free choice in experience in general, so far as experience, by exhibiting the effects of morality in its ends, gives an objective, although only practical, reality to the concept of morality as having causality in the world.” (R 6:7-8/37).
empirical beings we are necessarily concerned with consequences, or ends in a system of cause and effect. This is the reason that the concept of practical purposiveness—a central feature of the Critique of Judgment—is so important for realizing why the highest good is essential to morality for humans. The a priori argument for the highest good would then need to be developed from this basis: the role of ultimate ends for the human will.

If Kant’s arguments are satisfactory, this patches the initial holes in the arguments for the highest good in the Critique of Pure Reason and the Critique of Practical Reason. Here, we finally see an articulation about what is special about the human will (namely, our attention to ends in the empirical world) that requires that we must necessarily think the highest good possible. We get an explanation of how the highest good is the object of practical reason. We get a proper a priori argument for the highest good. And we see the fulfillment of Kant’s speculations about the importance of ‘purposive unity’.

It also serves to meet some of the initial concerns about why there are two concepts of the good in Kant’s moral philosophy. The supreme good is fundamental for moral philosophy, but for human moral philosophy, Kant thinks it fundamental to frame another kind of good—the good of a unified end that serves to conjoin moral action, and action in the empirical world.
4. The Highest Good and Moral Action

Nonetheless, even if Kant can dodge the worry that the highest good is inconsistent with the remainder of his moral philosophy, he may not be able to dodge the worry that the highest good is unimportant. The duties that Kant writes about—that I must bring about my moral virtue, and the happiness of others (as in the *Metaphysics of Morals*)—are certainly not motivated with reference to the complete highest good. These concrete, detailed duties don’t seem to further the highest good in a complete way—as Kant acknowledges in “On the Common Saying”, the attainment of virtue may be within our power, but not both morality and deserved happiness taken together (65). And Kant is rightly dubious of our ability to bring about our own moral perfection in any finite period of time, much less appropriately proportion happiness to virtue.\(^{24}\) So why go beyond these duties, to conceive of an end of human striving?

Kant needs to have done two things successfully in order to fully respond to this question. First of all, Kant has to give a successful argument that we necessarily need a unity of ends. We can clearly see that Kant was sure of this, but his arguments for a necessary unity of ends in an ultimate end would need to be convincing in a more rigorous assessment than I have done here.

Second, the duties that we do have—the everyday, on-the-ground duties—must coordinate with the concept of a unified end, in a way that if everyone were to fulfill their moral obligations, the world would become more like the one envisioned as the “moral

\(^{24}\) See, for example, *R* 6:66-7/84-5.
Stephen Engstrom’s explanation is one of the most cogent, arguing that we don’t have a separable duty to promote the highest good, but rather as we act on our perfect and imperfect duties, we are acting partially to promote the highest good. The duty that we have to “further the highest good” comes from the attempt to conceive of the totality of pure practical reason’s object as if in the standpoint of a being who creates and orders the world—a coordination of all ends. Here, questions of feasibility are left aside (Engstrom 770). Thus we may conclude that beneficence is suitable for finite beings, but the highest good can be an object only for an infinite being (Engstrom 770). In other words, our everyday moral judgments are conceived of bringing about the highest good—but only in a certain structure, in which we consider the highest good as a unified ultimate end.

In the *Groundwork*, Kant describes the formula of the kingdom of ends as drawing together, into a systematic unity, the formal and material conditions of morality (*Gr* 4:436/237). Yet the vision of the kingdom of ends is likely related to this same unified vision of what the empirical world could be like, if only it was brought into line with morality—the moral world of the highest good. In this way, the highest good could also be conceived of as a heuristic. If we attempt to work through the moral problems we find difficult by thinking of them in reference to the kingdom of ends, this is (by another route) conceiving of them with reference to the practical purposiveness that Kant thinks is essential to how we experience and are conscious of this world.

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25 A unified account of duty would also have to contend with worries about moral dilemmas: whether the highest good is impossible, because various duties conflict. Specifying that one must bring about only the permissible happiness of others is a good first step, but there is a serious issue lingering.

But even if one rejects the notion of the highest good playing a role in our duties and attaining the highest good is clearly out of our grasp, how does Kant conceive of the highest good as important in everyday moral action? Kant was concerned, not with motivation, but with hope. Even if we are convinced that we ought to perform our duties, we may still worry about the futility of that action. All my good actions in the world may not bring about the desired good effects, or have hard consequences.

So the vision of an ultimate end is a consideration of a cure for moral despair. Of course, Kant has also built certainty in, with the postulates of God and the immortality of the soul. We might again recall the passage (A) from the Critique of Pure Reason, where Kant writes that “without a God and without a world invisible to us now but hoped for, the glorious ideas of morality are indeed objects of approval and admiration, but not springs of purpose and action” (C1 A813/B841/640). This view of the highest good makes sense of how the highest good, certified by the practical postulates, can allow us to not think of morality as a Sisyphean struggle. As a result, we can see how the highest good serves not only a function in the transition to the moral religion, but also a central role in the ethics itself. Kant thought of the highest good as a moral vision of purposiveness in the world.

5. Remaining Issues

I would like to conclude by considering two ways of developing how the argument for the highest good could be developed in ways with interesting results for normative ethics.
First, consider the argument for the practical postulates. In the *Religion*, Kant has filled out a Christian vision of moral religion. But the content—that of a deity, and the immortality of the soul—is not the motivation behind the religion. Rather, what does the work is their *function*: that one postulate makes it possible that we may achieve moral virtue, and the other makes it necessary that one receives deserved happiness. But this may mean that Kant would be committed to religious pluralism, provided that the various ways of cashing out the postulates fulfill their functional roles. This would be a result of conceiving of the highest good as a necessary function of the human will: any type of moral belief that the highest good is possible, other things being equal, is just as good as any other.\(^7\)

Further, consider how Kant can fold consequences into his moral theory. This is not to say that what concerns him is how we can achieve the best consequences in assessing the question “What should I do?” This is, obviously, the contrary of what Kant would say—consequences are irrelevant to the morality of a given action in an important way. That is to say, on Kant’s view, certain actions (suicide, adultery, and the like) are wrong no matter what the positive consequences might be. But even while the consequences of other actions may play a role in a maxim (the purpose I intend to bring about in my action, for example), the ultimate criterion of rightness or wrongness of the action doesn’t turn on the consequences, but on how a maxim stands or falls with respect to the moral law. What the highest good does is to present a way for Kant to respond to a deep human need to know what the effect of moral action will be—to envision the consequences in a morally satisfying way.

\(^7\) Kant carefully justifies all the components of his moral religion, which is heavily connected to traditional Christian doctrines, within the text of the *Religion*. So naturally any moral beliefs that could alternatively serve the same functions as Kant’s practical postulates would also have to be carefully evaluated on other grounds. (Ronald Green’s *Religious Reason* does a good job in assessing this possibility).
In other words, this allows Kant to be sensitive to the fact that we care about the consequences of our actions, despite the fact that the moral law itself is not contingent on the probable outcomes of our actions. It is a very different commitment to consequences than that traditionally found in consequentialism. As a result, the view could be argued to be—like consequentialism—one which acknowledges that we cannot make sense of morality without attention to the effects of actions. Yet if one believes the account successful, it may help us to make sense of our concern for consequences while avoiding the traps of the morality of actions hinging on consequences: namely, excessive demandingness with regards to both the amount a moral agent is required to do, and what sacrifices of personal commitments or relationships a moral agent may have make. (Of course, Kant has his own problems with rigorousness, so this is no panacea.) Nonetheless, Kant can acknowledge that we care about consequences, and how his ethical theory is sensitive to what we care about, by making the argument for the highest good. While this does not need to resolve the main debate, it is an interesting counterpoint that helps us make sense of moral sacrifices and the role of hope.
Bibliography


