**Kant’s Politics of the Highest Good**

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**Abstract:** Kant’s discussion of the highest good is subject to continuous disagreement between the proponents of two interpretations of this concept. According to the secular interpretation, Kant conceived of the highest good as a political ideal which can be realized through human agency alone, albeit only from the *Critique of Judgment* onwards. By way of contrast, proponents of the theological interpretation find Kant’s treatment of the highest good in his later works to be wholly coherent with the discussions of this concept found in the second *Critique*. In their view, however, Kant never conceived of the highest good as a political ideal, and some go as far as to argue that it is the work of God alone (Beiser 2006). In this paper, I defend a theologico-political account of the highest good that avoids the pitfalls of these two readings. Against the theological interpretation, I argue that our duty to promote the highest good does have political implications. Against the secular reading, I claim that it can nonetheless only be promoted, and not realized, through human agency.

Two conflicting interpretations of the highest good dominate contemporary scholarship on Kant’s later writings. Some interpreters downplay the theological underpinnings of this concept and argue that in the works following the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant primarily conceived of the highest good as a secular political ideal realizable through human agency alone (Yovel 1980; Rawls 2000; Reath 1992). Although Kant underlined, in the second *Critique*, that the existence of God is a precondition of the proportionality of happiness to virtue, it is often argued that this theological conception of the highest good is no longer dominant from the *Critique of Judgment* onwards, including in his works dedicated to religion itself. The opposing interpretation, which has recently been restated by Lawrence Pasternack (2017), sheds doubt on the existence of a so-called secular account of the highest good in Kant’s later writings, and presents the totality of his writings on this subject as infused with theological elements (see also Beiser 2006). According to this perspective, there is no shift in Kant’s conception of the highest good between the second *Critique* and the third, and his later writings still bear the mark of the importance he placed on moral faith during the 1780s.

Objections can be formulated against each of these two interpretations. *Pace* the proponents of the secular interpretation, one can show that there is indeed evidence that Kant never abandoned the proportionality of happiness to virtue as a defining feature of the highest good, and that an account of this proportionality condition necessarily relies on the postulate of the existence of God. Simply put, proponents of the theological interpretation are right to claim that Kant remained committed to the theological ideas he expressed in the *Critique of Practical Reason* throughout his later life. Yet, the theological interpretation is incomplete, as it does not provide us with a satisfactory account of the relationship between Kant’s discussions of the highest good and his political writings. It more precisely leaves an important question unanswered: why did Kant repeatedly mention our duty to promote the highest good in his social and political works if he rejected the idea that it can serve as a political ideal?

In this paper, my main objective will be to define the political implications of the obligation to promote the highest good, which Kant famously describes as a duty ‘of the human race towards itself’ (*Rel.* 6:97). More specifically, I will argue that as the ‘unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason’ (*KpV* 5:108), the highest good is a practical ideal that relates to both the political duties laid out in the *Doctrine of Right* and the social duties discussed in the last two books of the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. By serving as ‘special point of reference for the unification of all ends’ (*Rel.* 6:5), the highest good sheds new light on our individual duties as finite rational beings, including the political obligations defined in the *Rechtslehre.*

While arguing this claim, I will not side with the proponents of the secular interpretation, but rather seek to reconcile some central claims of both the secular and theological interpretations. The idea that the highest good serves as a social and political ideal in Kant’s philosophy, I contend, does not contradict the unitary account of such a concept defended by the proponents of the theological interpretation. Contrary to Reath (1988), we do not need to postulate a shift in Kant’s conception of the highest good between the second and the third *Critiques* to coherently conceive of the highest good as a concept of political significance. Yet, it should be noted from the start that my argument does entail that Kant’s account of the highest good is not secular, as the possibility of its realization relies on theological elements in all of Kant’s writings, including his later political works. In a nutshell, Kant’s conception of the highest good is both political and theological – or *theologico-political* – and the idea that we have a duty to *promote* it is perfectly compatible with Kant’s claim that God is the only being who can create a state of affairs in which this good could be realized.

I take my interpretation to have two main advantages over the two previously mentioned. First, like the theological interpretation, it dissolves the tension between Kant’s later political writings and the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Contrary to proponents of the secular interpretation, Kant’s discussions of the highest good form a coherent whole from the second *Critique* to the *Metaphysics of Morals*.[[1]](#endnote-1) Unlike the theological account, however, it clarifies the relationship between Kant’s political works and his moral philosophy by explaining how the creation of a ‘rightful condition’ [*rechtlicher Zustand*] and of an ‘ethical society’ [*ethische Gesellschaft*] enables rational beings to pursue happiness and virtue, the two main components of the highest good. While Pasternack’s restatement of the theological interpretation underlines the importance of creating such a society, it obliterates the properly political dimensions of our duty to promote the highest good.[[2]](#endnote-2) However, as we will see, the social and political implications of this obligation are inseparable, as the ethical society discussed in the *Religion* is only made possible by the creation of a political state.

After some brief remarks on the nature of the highest good [Section 1], I show where both the secular and theological interpretations of the highest good are lacking [Sections 2 and 3]. I then lay the basis of my alternative account of the highest good, which simultaneously allows for its theological, political and social dimensions [Sections 4 and 5].

1. **The highest good: preliminary remarks**

 In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant defines the highest good [*höchste Gut*] as ‘happiness in exact proportion to morality’ (*KpV* 5:110).[[3]](#endnote-3) Although strength of will in moral action (i.e. virtue) must be seen as the supreme good [*oberste Gut*], the highest good understood as the completegood [*vollendete Gut*] must include happiness, which is itself described as ‘the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence *everything goes according to his wish and will*’ (*KpV* 5:124). From this definition arises a problem: while the *Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason* presents the highest good as the final end [*Endzweck*] of pure practical reason, the *Analytic* has already established that actions committed for the sake of happiness are not virtuous for in such cases, respect for the moral law is not the determining ground of the will. Moreover, nothing in the sensible world allows us to believe that actions which are virtuous will necessarily be rewarded with happiness. Thus, ‘no necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of moral laws’ and our own practical reason therefore seems to command us to pursue an impossible end (*KpV* 5:113-114). At first sight, the highest good appears to be unattainable, but in Kant’s view, a reason which would prescribe itself an unrealizable end would be thoroughly contradictory. If the end of practical reason is unreachable, we must conclude that its fundamental law is ‘directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false’ (*KpV* 5:114).

This antinomy leads Kant to the two postulates of pure practical reason, which are subjectively necessary theoretical propositions that rational beings must accept to make sense of their *a priori* obligations, including the duty to promote the highest good. As Kant writes, ‘we *ought* to strive to promote the highest good (which must therefore be possible)’ (*KpV* 5:125). To allow for this possibility, however, we must assume the immortality of soul and the existence of God.

How does the moral belief in the existence of God remove contradictions from the idea that the highest good is ‘the necessary object of a will determinable by the moral law’ (*KpV* 5:122)? As I suggested, one obstacle to the coherence of this idea is that nature does not seem to be conducive to the proportionality of happiness to virtue. In our everyday experience of the world, we meet immoral individuals who appear to be content as well as sorrowful virtuous agents. The idea of God as the moral author of the world allows practical agents to believe that the proportionality condition can nonetheless be fulfilled *by him*: ‘if the world is the product of an intelligent creator,’ the agent thinks, ‘it must be so that virtuous individuals will be rewarded for their behaviour.’ It would be false to claim that such a reasoning leads to knowledge, as it only gives rise to rational belief [*Glaube*]. Yet, in Kant’s view, rational belief in the mere possibility of the highest good is sufficient for us to accept that our duty to promote it is real, and that the moral law is therefore not a ‘phantom of the mind’ [*Hirngespinst*] (*KU* 5:472).

1. **Realizing the good through human action: the secular interpretation of the highest good**

Did Kant remain faithful to his treatment of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason* from the *Critique of Judgment* onwards? Proponents of the secular interpretation argue that he did not. According to an influential reading, there are in fact two conceptions of the highest good in Kant’s practical philosophy: the theological conception of the second *Critique* sketched in the previous section and a later secular conception in which the proportionality of happiness to virtue – the possibility of which is warranted by the postulate of God’s existence – is no longer a component of the highest good. Andrews Reath thus argues that in the writings of the 1790s, ‘the highest good need not be viewed as a theological notion,’ and that ‘the proportionality of virtue and happiness is not essential to the doctrine’ (Reath 1988: 594). According to his perspective, unlike the theological interpretation of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the secular account found in later works is also thoroughly political. Indeed, a careful reading of Kant’s late works such as the *Critique of Judgment* and the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* would show that in such writings, he portrayed the highest good as a social and political state of affairs to be achieved in this world through human activity alone.

Yirmiyahu Yovel (1980: 72) similarly argues that Kant significantly modified his account of the highest good from 1790 onwards:

In the first two *Critiques,* Kant tends to think of the highest good as a separate world, transcendent to our world and, in fact, a sort of critical and rational version of the notion of the next world […] However, from the third *Critique* on, Kant's conception changes. The highest good becomes the ‘final end of creation’ itself, i.e., the consummate state of *this* world. Its realization is conceived as ‘the kingdom of God on *earth*’ and despite its infinite remoteness, it involves a concrete synthesis, to be realized *in time,* between the moral will and empirical reality.

Such a transformation of Kant’s conception of the highest good would be the result of a deep shift from the first stage of Kant’s practical philosophy, where he envisions the moral will as pure and devoid of any content, to a second material stage in which he is mostly interested in ‘objectified moral *praxis* including such systems as politics, jurisprudence, education, etc.’ (Yovel 1980: 79). In this later period, happiness would lose its position as the empirical element of the highest good and would be replaced by the more general representation of the realization of noumenal freedom in the sensible world.

It is true that Kant only specifies the relationship between our social and political obligations and the general duty to promote the highest good from the *Critique of Judgment* onwards. However, this late specification does not support the claim that Kant traded a theological conception of the highest good for a secular one in his later works. As I would now like to show, there are five theological features of Kant’s early characterizations of the highest good that, according to the proponents of the secular interpretation, are no longer of central importance in his later descriptions of the concept. It is my intention to demonstrate, however, that all of these features play a decisive role in Kant’s later reflections, and that there is therefore no need to postulate a shift in his account of the highest good.

 *(i) Happiness as a component of the highest good*. As I just noted, Yovel argues that in Kant’s later works, the objectification of morality replaces happiness as the second component of the highest good. Yet, there is strong evidence that Kant conceives of happiness as a component of the highest good in both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and his subsequent works. In the *Critique of Judgment*, for instance, he defines ‘the highest and best thing in the world’ as the ‘happiness of rational beings harmoniously coinciding with conformity to the moral law’ (*KU* 5: 459), using a turn of phrase which is strongly reminiscent of his discussion of the highest good in the second *Critique*. In even later works, he sees no need to modify the definition of the highest good found in the second and third *Critiques*. In the *Religion*, he characterizes it as happiness proportioned to the observance of duty (*Rel.* 6: 5) and in *On the Common Saying*, as ‘universal happiness combined with and in conformity with the purest morality’ (*TP* 8: 279).

It would be difficult to deny that Kant was deeply preoccupied, as Yovel insists, by the question of knowing how transcendental freedom can have effects in the phenomenal world. However, this does not support the conclusion that Kant eventually came to conceive of the manifestation of freedom in nature as the highest good itself. On the contrary, textual evidence suggests that the definitions of this concept found in the *Critique of Practical Reason,* the *Critique of Judgment*, the *Religion* and *On the Common Saying* are very similar.

*(ii) The highest good as proportionality*. Reath (1988: 594) suggests that in Kant’s later works, the highest good is still defined as the combination of virtue and happiness, though not predominantly ‘by a relation of proportionality,’ Yet, as Pasternack (2017: 443-447) recently argued, such an interpretation is not easy to reconcile with Kant’s writings of the 1790s, where he repeatedly presents the proportionality condition as a component of the highest good. In the *Religion*, for example, he writes:

…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 the ruler of the world, under whose care this would come about, i.e., morality leads inevitably to religion (*Rel.* 6: 8n).[[4]](#endnote-4)

Here, the function played by the postulate of the existence of God is precisely the same as in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Rational beings can be virtuous through the exercise of their noumenal freedom, they can also seek happiness through the fulfillment of their personal ends, but only a divine being can make it so that virtue will be the ground of happiness. Interestingly, Reath believes that the proportionality condition need not lead to a theological interpretation of the highest good even though he himself defends a secular interpretation in which the proportionality condition plays no role. As he explains, it would indeed be possible to ‘construct the idea of a historical state of affairs in which social institutions were arranged to promote happiness in proportion to virtue’ (Reath 1988: 602). In such a state of affairs, the activity of God would no longer be required in order for the proportionality condition to be met. Yet, as the passage from the *Religion* quoted above indicates, Kant still believed, in the 1790s, that only an omnipotent moral being can ensure the proportionality condition. Finite rational beings do not have the power to distribute happiness in proportion to virtue for they can be certain neither that they themselves act from duty nor that they are correct when they ascribe specific motives to others. As Kant makes clear in the *Groundwork*, the motives of our actions are never transparent to us and it is always possible for sensible desires to disguise themselves as respect for the moral law.[[5]](#endnote-5) Attempts to distribute happiness and suffering proportionally to virtue therefore rely on a mistaken belief in our own omniscience when only the moral author of the world has both the knowledge and power required to ensure proportionality. For this reason, we must believe in the existence of a being ‘who knows the heart in order to penetrate to the most intimate parts of the dispositions of each and everyone and, as must be in every community, give to each according to the worth of his actions’ (*Rel.* 6:99).

*(iii) Human action and divine assistance*. The secular interpretation rests on the claim that Kant first conceived the highest good as ‘the eternal work of God,’ but eventually came to portray it as a historical task of mankind which could be realized through human agency alone (Yovel 1980: 78). There are two main reasons to resist this affirmation. First, Kant always considered human freedom to be a necessary albeit not sufficient condition of the realization of the highest good. Such an idea is central not only to his later works, but also to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, where rational beings are described as lawgiving members of a kingdom of morals for whom ‘it is a priori (morally) necessary to produce the highest good through the freedom of the will’ (*KpV* 5: 113). In fact, in even earlier works of the critical period such as *What is Orientation in Thinking?*, the importance of human freedom to the realization of the highest good is underlined: such a good, Kant argues, is ‘possible in the world insofar as it is possible *only through* *freedom*’ (*WO* 8: 139). Here, the realization of the *bonum* *consummatum* is not conceived of as the work of God alone, but as a joint endeavour.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Second, Kant’s later political writings shed doubt on the thesis that he eventually came to conceive of the highest good as a worldly state of affairs to be realized through human agency alone.In *On the Common Saying*, he mentions that happiness combined with pure morality is ‘within our control from one quarter but not from both taken together’ (*TP* 8: 279). One must therefore conclude that the practical postulates laid out in the second *Critique* still holds, and that we must therefore believe in a moral ruler of the world and in a future life to allow for the objectivity of our duty to promote the highest good. Kant’s essay on *Perpetual Peace* is also telling in this regard, as human striving toward the good is there characterized as depending on ‘divine intervention or collaboration [*concursus*],’ the concept of which is appropriate and necessary ‘from a morally practical point of view’ (*PP* 8: 361-362).[[7]](#endnote-7)

In both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and Kant’s later works, the highest good is therefore described as a state of affairs which human beings have the duty to *promote* while being conscious that their efforts will not bring about its *realization*. In the later sections of this article, my main task will be to give content to this idea by showing how our duty to promote the highest good relates to Kant’s social and political philosophy.

*(iv) The universal scope of the highest good*. How many rational beings need to be happy in order for the highest good to obtain? One important view in the contemporary secondary literature is that throughout his life, Kant conceived of the highest good as a state of affairs in which *all* rational beings are virtuous and happy. In such a state of affairs, happiness and virtue would not only be proportioned, but also maximized.[[8]](#endnote-8) Against this suggestion, Reath argues that the highest good designates a situation ‘in which all individuals eventually take part’ in the second *Critique* and earlier works, but not in Kant’s later writings. In his view, conceiving of the highest good as the maximization of virtue and happiness ‘always leads to a theological conception’ as the only way to accommodate it is to see the highest good ‘as occurring in another world’ (Reath, 1988: 603). Yet, in later works, the maximization condition would be marginalized and the highest good would correspond to a state of affairs in which all individuals subordinate their individual ends to the moral law without necessarily be happy. In a nutshell, the maximal happiness of all would no longer be a component of the highest good.

This claim is difficult to reconcile with Kant’s later writings on conceptual grounds. As Reath notes, both virtue and happiness (i.e. the satisfaction of our individual ends) have value, the former unconditionally and the latter only conditionally, that is, provided that it conforms to the moral law. If this is true, a state of affairs in which all rational beings are maximally virtuous *and* happy will have more value than the situation described by Reath, in which only some virtuous rational beings are happy. Yet, as the *complete* good (that is, a ‘whole which is not part of a still greater whole of the same kind’), the highest good simply cannot be surpassed in value (*Kpv*5: 110), so it must correspond to a state of affairs in which all rational beings are virtuous and happy. In other words, all state of affairs in which at least one moral agent is not perfectly virtuous and perfectly happy can by surpassed in value by one in which all are, only the latter fits with Kant’s own definition of the highest good according to which such a good is second to none. This explains why in the *Religion,* Kant identifies the highest good with an ethical society that includes the ‘totality of human beings’ (*Rel.* 6: 96). I reserve a more detailed discussion of the nature of such a society for later parts of this article, but we already have reasons to believe that in Kant’s view, the highest good is necessarily all-encompassing.

 *(v) The highest good as realizable in a future world*. The relationship between Kant’s account of the highest good and the Christian concept of a future world is the subject of some disagreement. According to the secular interpretation, there is a fundamental difference between Kant’s discussion of the highest good ‘in *a* world’ in the first two *Critiques* and his treatment of the highest good ‘in *the* world’ from the *Critique of Judgment* onwards*.* While the former expression rests on the representation of a transcendent world separate from nature which strongly resembles the religious notion of the Kingdom of God in heaven, the latter implies that the highest good can be realized in the physical-causal order. Before 1790, Kant would have offered a critical and rational version of the Christian paradise, but the change in vocabulary is taken as evidence by some that in his later writings, ‘the highest good and the given world no longer signify two different worlds but two states, present and ideal, of the same world’ and becomes ‘a historical goal’ (Yovel 1980: 72).

It is unlikely that Kant ever believed that the highest good could be realized in the sensible world. The *bonum consummatum* requires universal virtue and universal happiness, but works such as *Religion within Boundaries of Mere Reason* make it clear that human beings will always be tempted to transgress the moral law. By so arguing, Kant remains faithful to the ideas expressed in the *Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason*, where he explains that holiness (i.e. perfect virtue) cannot be reached in nature and that we must therefore believe in the immortality of soul. Indeed, we can only allow for the possibility of a finite rational being reaching holiness if we suppose her existence to be temporally infinite. Along with Kant’s continual insistence on the idea that the proportionality condition can only be ensured through the activity of an omnipotent moral being, the postulate of immortality and the idea of an afterlife is part of what makes Kant’s conception of the highest good theological. How these ideas relate to his discussion of the ‘ethical society’ as a rendition of the highest good in *Religion III* will be the object of section V.

In general, Kant’s remarks which may be interpreted as relying on traditional Christian theology are not scarcer in his later writings than in the second *Critique*. In his political works, he still argues that the possibility of highest good rests on the rational belief ‘in a moral ruler of the world and *in a future life*’ (*TP*: 279). Yet, even if such remarks were indeed scarcer, it would be incautious to put so much weight on a change of terminology between the second and third *Critiques*. Once this question, I side with Pasternack. As he explains, it is a mistake to consider that Kant uses ‘in the world’ to refer the physical-causal order, thereby excluding things that belong to the world of understanding such as post-mortem existence. Not only does Kant use the expression ‘in the world’ in writings where he undoubtedly links the highest good to a future eternal life (*KrV* 5: 122; *RP 20*: 298), but he also warns his readers not to conflate ‘Welt’ with ‘Natur.’ As Pasternack (2017: 446) notes, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

He begins by distinguishing between ‘two expressions, world and nature, which are sometimes run together’ (A 418/B 446). And then, to help distinguish the two, he limits the meaning of ‘nature’ to ‘the unity in the existence of appearances’ (A 419/B 447), but then assigns to ‘world’ a ‘transcendental sense,’ such that when dealing with ‘cosmological ideas,’ can use ‘world’ to extend more broadly, beyond just the phenomenal, to the ‘sum total of existing things’ (A 419/B 447).

All things considered, there is therefore no reason to consider that the phrase ‘in the world’ is meant to exclude the possibility that the highest good be realized in a future life.

In summary, we can formulate objections against each of the five main arguments used to defend the view that Kant eventually marginalized the account of the highest good found in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and developed a thoroughly secular one in his later works. On the contrary, from the second *Critique* onwards, Kant continuously argued for the necessity of an *ethicotheology* and his discussion of the highest good systematically relies on such a view. As he explains, ‘the final purpose that morality imposes upon us cannot exist without theology, for then reason would be at a loss with regard to that final end’ (*KU* 5: 484). However, I would now like to argue that the theological interpretation of Kant’s account of the highest good – especially the one defended by Beiser – may unfortunately incite us to neglect the social and political implications of this concept. The highest good is not a secular notion, but proponents of the secular interpretation are right to portray it as a social and political ideal.

**3. A city of God? The theological interpretation of the highest good**

In its most influential version (Beiser 2006), the theological interpretation of Kant’s account of the highest good rests on three claims that contradict the secular interpretation. I endorse the first of these claims, which has already been discussed in the previous section: Kant’s discussion of the highest good in his later works is consistent with his treatment of the concept in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. We need not affirm, therefore, that he came to reject the theological underpinnings of his early account during the 1790s. The second claim is that Kant’s conception of the highest good is ‘fundamentally Christian, indeed Protestant’ and that it is ‘utterly contrary to his intention to interpret it as secular and humanist’ (Beiser, 2006: 590). According to Beiser, Kant saw his entire ethics as Christian doctrine and his theory of the highest good is essentially a moralized version of the Augustinian notion of the city of God. Not only is the existence of God posited as a practical postulate, it is argued, but the justification of such a postulate closely resembles the Old Testament, more precisely the ‘ancient lament of Job: Life is unfair, and we live in an unjust world where the vicious prosper and the virtuous suffer’ (Beiser 2006: 597). In this context, justice can only be restored through divine intervention. The third central claim of the theological interpretation is the most problematic. After considering its religious underpinnings, Beiser (2006: 603) goes on to argue that Kant’s account of the highest good is thoroughly apolitical: ‘unlike his more idealistic successors, Kant does not think that the highest good can be a political ideal, one achieved through the state.’ Once again, I find this statement to be in tension with Kant’s discussion of the highest good in his later writings, at least when it comes to his political works and the *Religion*. Although it is true that Kant did not believe the highest good to be achievable through human agency alone, this affirmation does not entail that it cannot serve as a political ideal. In fact, my intention is precisely to argue that it does; although Kant never conceived of the highest good as realizable through human agency alone, he nonetheless believed that human beings have the duty to socially and politically promoteit, that is, to work toward and get nearer to its achievement by behaving both as good moral agents and as good citizens. Kant makes references to the highest good in all of his major political works, most notably in *On the Common Saying* and in his essay on *Perpetual Peace*, but also in the *Doctrine of Right*, where he speaks of the ‘highest political good.’[[9]](#endnote-9) In the *Religion*, our duty to promote the highest good is also unequivocally described as a collective enterprise, for it ‘will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole toward that very end’ (*Rel.* 6: 97-98). The resulting union can more precisely be described as an ‘ethical society’ (*ethische Gesellschaft*) or ‘Kingdom of Virtue’ (*Reich der Tugend*) in which all rational beings have the obligation to live together (*Rel.* 6: 95). If we take these remarks seriously, a main interpretative concern should be to identify the social and political implications of our duty to promote the highest good and to explain how this general duty relates to the ones discussed in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the following section, my suggestion will be that in Kant’s view, the promotion of the highest good requires the creation of both a free political state and a rational church, which constitute together the political and social circumstances in which the highest good can be approximated by moral agents. In other words, only in these two forms of associations – one of which presupposes the other – can human beings be the most virtuous and the happiest, at least as long they remain within the confines of the natural world.

1. **Virtue, freedom and happiness: The political implications of the highest good**

In his political writings, Kant defines our obligation to promote the highest good as ‘the duty to bring it about as far as we can thatsuch a relation (a world in keeping with the moral highest ends) exists’ (*TP* 8: 280). Buthow, precisely, can the highest good serve as an ideal in the social and political lives of rational beings? My suggestion is that our general duty to promote the highest good relates to the particular duties discussed in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (Kleingeld, 2016), including our obligation to enter what Kant describes as ‘a rightful condition’ [*rechtlicher Zustand*] in the *Doctrine of Right*, that is, a political state in which the outer freedom of all is secured. More precisely, I contend that our duty to enter a rightful condition is both a necessary (albeit not sufficient) condition of the highest good and an efficient mean to promote it.

Let us first consider the idea that creating a lawful association with other rational beings is a necessary condition of the highest good. If this is true, rational beings will not be in a position to bring about the highest good as far as they can except in a political state in which citizens are free. Certainly, entering a rightful condition will not exhaust their duty to promote the highest good, as this requires them to fulfill *all* of their duties, including the ones laid out in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. In fact, we will see in the next section that living in a free political association with other human beings does not even exhaust the collective dimension of our duty to pursue the highest good, which is not solely political, but also social. This means that rational beings are not only required to enter a rightful condition, but also to create ethical associations within the confines of the political state even though no individual or organisation can legitimately coerce them to do so.

Nevertheless, virtue – that is, strength of will in the fulfillment of our duties – requires us to live in a free political state. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant makes it clear that we have a duty to leave the state of nature. As he writes, ‘a civil constitution, though its realization is subjectively contingent, is still objectively necessary, that is, necessary as a duty’ (*TP* 6: 264). A rational being living side-by-side with others in the state of nature who would refuse to enter a rightful condition could therefore not comply with the full requirements of virtue for she would remain oblivious to an imperative of her own reason: ‘You ought to enter this condition’ (*TP* 6: 306). Insofar as virtue is itself a component of the highest good, this entails that such a good cannot be promoted elsewhere than in a free political state, for a community of rational beings living outside the state would necessarily be an association of individuals who fail to comply with at least one of their duties.

We should also note that the political implications of the duty to promote the highest good extend well beyond the obligation to enter a rightful condition. Not only are rational beings morally obliged to live in a political state which warrants them a certain level of outer freedom, but the political states to which they belong have the duty to enter a federative union with the citizens of other states in order to promote the ‘highest political good’ [*höchsten politischen Gut*]: perpetual peace (*MM* 6: 355).[[10]](#endnote-10) Only within a federative union which is ‘given *a priori* and is necessary by principles of right,’ Kant explains, is ‘the harmony of politics with morals’ possible (*PP* 8: 385). To be clear, Kant does not identify perpetual peace with the highest good as such, as only the highest good, not perpetual peace, requires the proportionality of happiness to virtue. We must rather say that the pursuit of perfect virtue, without which the highest good cannot exist, requires us to strive for peace, even though the primary bearers of this duty are not ordinary citizens, but political leaders. Yet, if the highest good requires virtue, and virtue itself requires life in a political state as well as the struggle for perpetual peace, it follows that the highest good requires life in a political state and the struggle for perpetual peace. It is in this very sense, I contend, that our political duties are necessary conditions of the highest good.

Interestingly, Kant not only conceives of life in a rightful condition as a necessary condition of the highest good, but also portrays it as efficiently promoting the happiness and virtue of subjects bound by the rule of law. It is well known that in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, Kant argues that promoting the happiness of others is a duty of virtue for all rational beings. By way of contrast, the role played by happiness in Kant’s political writings often goes unnoticed. This is surprising given that he describes the proper task of politics as nothing other than to ‘conform with the universal end of the public (happiness)’ and ‘to make the public satisfied with its condition’ (*PP* 8: 386). In other words, a political state helps its citizens seek happiness by protecting their freedom to pursue their individual ends provided that they do not infringe on the freedom of others while doing so. Evidently, the increase in happiness which results from the creation of a rightful condition cannot be the ground of our duty to enter this condition, for Kant’s reasoning would then be heteronomous. We must rather say that the moral law provides us with this duty, the likely effect of which will amount to a general increase in happiness. Throughout his life, Kant struggled to make his readers understand that his practical philosophy does not prohibit the quest for happiness, but rather encourages it. In the *Groundwork*, he goes as far as stating that rational beings have an indirect duty to assure their own happiness as unsatisfied needs could easily become a temptation to transgress our duties (*G* 4: 399).

More puzzling is Kant’s claim that citizens who live in a free political state are not only more likely to be happy than if they live in the state of nature, but also more *virtuous* given that ‘the good moral education of a people is to be expected from a good state constitution’ (*PP* 8: 366-36). As he denies that we have a moral duty to seek the perfection of others in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, we could be led to the conclusion that it is not the state’s business to make its citizens virtuous. After all, Kant does characterize situations in which paternalistic governments treat their citizens as children as ‘the greatest *despotism* thinkable’ (*TP* 8: 291), and woes the legislator who would want to ‘bring about through coercion a polity directed to ethical ends’ (*Rel.* 6: 96). Perhaps the best way to reconcile these seemingly conflicting statements is to note that Kant did not object to the moral education of young citizens, as his *Lectures on Pedagogy* and the *Methodenlehren* of both the *Critique of Practical Reason* and the *Doctrine of Virtue* suggest, but simply argued that a government should not treat adults as children.[[11]](#endnote-11) A detailed treatment of Kant’s views on education is beyond the scope of this article, but it is still important to our enquiry that he believed that a rightful condition promotes the two main components of the highest good.

The most important way in which rightful conditions promote virtue and happiness is by securing the conditions of outer freedom. Kant’s main task, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, is to specify which obligatory *ends* rational beings must pursue, and the highest good corresponds to a state of affairs in which both these moral ends and the prudential ends individual set for themselves in their quest for happiness are fulfilled. By way of contrast, the creation of the political state aims to secure the *means* that each rational being must possess in order to have the capacity to reach those moral and prudential ends. It is easy to see that a human being deprived of outer freedom will find it nearly impossible to fulfill his duties of virtue: the slave who is forbidden to leave the house and does not enjoy any free time will find it considerably difficult, for instance, to meet her moral obligation to cultivate her natural talents. Taking the normativity of instrumental reason into account, we can also say that it would be irrational for an individual to embrace her duty to promote the highest good without simultaneously wishing to have the means necessary for the realization of her moral and prudential ends. This is at least true in Kant’s view, who explicitly states, in the *Groundwork*, that ‘whoever wills the end, also wills (insofar as reason has decisive influence on his actions) the indispensably necessary means to it that are within his power’ (*G* 4: 417). From this, we can infer that a rational moral agent who wishes to fulfill her moral and prudential aims must wish to possess the outer freedom necessary for them. As Kant is committed to the claim that only a rightful condition can secure the outer freedom of human beings, it follows that a rational moral agent cannot refuse to live in a free political state: only as a citizen is she enabled to pursue the highest good.[[12]](#endnote-12) A free political state is, to use a specifically Kantian locution, a hindering of the hindrances to the pursuit of the *bonum consummatum*. In fact, the compatibility of life under public laws with happiness and virtue allows rational beings to avoid a practical contradiction: if the moral law prescribed us to live in political communities but such communities did not promote the highest good, the moral law would contradictorily prescribe us to create a state of affairs which hinders the realization of its very object.

One possible objection to the view according to which rightful conditions efficiently promote the highest good is to claim that in order to do so, they must not only foster virtue and happiness, but also a proportional connection between them. As we have seen in the second part of this article, indeed, Kant never abandoned the proportionality condition as a defining feature of the highest good. On my reading, however, rational beings ought not attempt to promote proportionality themselves – neither individually nor institutionally – as only an omnipotent moral being has the necessary knowledge to do so. What rational beings must instead do is foster virtue and happiness while having rational faith that such being will fulfill the proportionality condition. In other words, the objection according to which political institutions do not promote the highest good as they cannot ensure proportionality only applies to accounts of this concept according to which happiness must be proportioned to virtue through human agency.

Let me also add that the previous remarks do not amount to the claim that our duty to enter a rightful condition is *derived* from the concept of highest good.[[13]](#endnote-13) As the *Metaphysics of Morals* makes clear, the duty to enter a rightful condition is an enforceable duty of right that stems from the need to secure the conditions of external freedom, most importantly the institution of private property (Ripstein 2009; see also Hodgson 2010). This is the justification offered by Kant in the *Doctrine of Right*, and a rational being can arrive at the conclusion ‘I ought to enter a rightful condition’ without invoking the concept of the highest good. Instead, such a concept will become an essential part of her reasoning if she pushes her reflection further by asking: ‘What does all of this amount to? What can I hope to achieve by fulfilling my duties of right and my duties of virtue?’ And the answer to her question is the following: ‘With the help of God, I can contribute to the creation of a state of affairs in which all rational beings are virtuous and happy as a result; I can help achieve the highest good.’ In the *Religion*, Kant stresses this idea by writing that the highest good serves as a ‘special point of reference for the unification of all ends’ (*Rel.* 6:5). This point of reference allows us to understand which state of affairs will ultimately be promoted by our decision to comply with all duties that stem from the moral law. Although this state of affairs can only be reached in a future life and with the help of an omnipotent being, each must nonetheless ‘so conduct himself as if everything depended on him’ (*Rel.* 6:100-1001). Borrowing a central concept from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, we can say that the highest good is a regulative idea which sheds new light on our moral and political duties by allowing us to understand how our struggle to fulfill them contributes to the ‘unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason’ (*KpV* 5:108).

In summary, the duty to promote highest good has a political dimension insofar as such a good simply cannot be promoted elsewhere than within the confines of a rightful condition that bolsters happiness and virtue by enabling citizens to realize their moral and prudential aims. In the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant even argues that the moral law makes it permissible for a community of citizens to force rebellious individuals to live in a political society with them. Yet, as I suggested earlier, our collective obligation to pursue the highest good also has a social dimension, which precludes the use of coercion (Formosa 2011; Pasternack 2017). Although the *bonum consummatum* is undoubtedly an ethico-theological notion, it is also of considerable importance to Kant’s political and social philosophy. Perhaps the best way to argue this claim is to show that Kant’s discussion of the highest good in the *Religion* brings all of its dimensions together.

**5. Churches as ethical societies: the social dimension of the pursuit of the highest good**

No discussion of the collective implications of our duty to promote the highest good is more detailed than the one found in the third and fourth books of the *Religion*. There Kant imagines a universal ethical society [*ethische Gesellschaft*] of rational beings living under the banner of virtue who would form an ‘absolute ethical whole’ (*Rel.* 6: 96). In fact, he explains that we have a moral obligation to enter such an association with other rational beings, speaking of a ‘duty *sui generis* of the human race toward itself’ to establish a society devoted to the promotion of the highest good as a good common to all (*Rel.* 6: 97). Only then will human beings have a reasonable chance of gaining the upper hand against the radical evil of their very nature and living for the sake of the good.

This ethical society must not be confused with the political community itself. While a *juridico-civil* state comprises human beings who live together under the authority of enforceable public laws, an *ethico-civil* state regroups human beings who live under laws of virtue without being coerced to do so. In other words, it is an association in which we only have a moral obligation to enter, and which the government cannot legitimately force us to create. As we have seen, we are morally entitled to coerce other rational beings to live with us in a political community – i.e. to leave the state of nature as such – but we are not allowed to coerce them into leaving the ‘ethical state of nature,’ that is, a way of life in which one is indifferent to the fulfillment of her duties (*Rel.*6: 95). Nevertheless, it would be false to claim that the *juridico-civil* and *ethico-civil* states are not related to each other, given that the latter presupposes the existence of the former. In Kant’s view, the ethical society can only exist in the midst of the juridico-civil state: ‘without the foundation of a political community, it could never be brought into existence by human beings’ (*Rel.* 6: 94). Although we are now considering the specifically social dimension of the highest good, we are told that we can only hope to fulfill our duty to promote it if we live in a free political state.[[14]](#endnote-14) Once again, life in a rightful condition is described as a precondition of the highest good, as we need to secure the outer freedom of all rational agents in order for them to freely create associations dedicated to the promotion of moral life.

How can a universal ethical society paradoxically exist within the confines of a political state? The answer is that such a community will take the form of a *church*, that is, a society of rational beings who consider themselves to be living ‘under divine moral legislation’ (*Rel.* 6: 101). These remarks are of special importance for our purpose. In Reath’s view, Kant’s discussion of the ethical society in Book III of the *Religion* is one of the clearest references to a secular and institutional conception of the highest good according to which human beings can realize it on earth, and it is my contention that such conception cannot be found in Kant’s later writings.

Indeed, Kant’s statement that the ethical society ‘cannot be realized by human organisation except in the form of a church’ is already a sign that his account of the highest good in the *Religion* is not purely secular. Yet, the characterization of the ethical society as a church is not the main reason to consider that Kant maintained the theological conception of the highest good found in the *Critique of Practical Reason* in his later works. Instead, it is Kant’s discussion of the relationship that exists between what he calls the ‘church visible’ and the ‘church invisible’ that remains the clearest reference to this theological conception. In Kant’s philosophy of religion, the ‘church invisible’ is the idea of the complete realization of the highest good in a ‘union of all upright human beings under direct yet moral divine world-governance’ (*Rel.* 6: 101). This church is deemed ‘invisible’ as it is ‘not the possible object of experience’ (*Rel.* 6: 101). In other words, the church invisible is tantamount to the ‘Kingdom of God on earth’, but as Kant explains, its appearance in the world of senses is unfortunately ‘postponed to an unseen distance’ (*Rel.* 6: 151).

However, the merely noumenal possibility of the realization of the universal ethical society does not dispense rational beings of the obligation to create a phenomenal ‘union of human beings into a whole that accords with this ideal’, that is, a ‘church visible’ which will allow them to collectively promote moral behavior in society (*Rel.* 6: 101). That said, the commendable creation of ‘visible churches’ should not lead their members to lose sight of the idea that any institutional church will remain an imperfect realization of the highest good, that is, the mere ‘schema of the invisible Kingdom of God on earth’ (*Rel.* 6: 151). Kant’s philosophy of religion precludes the idea that the highest good can be realized through human agency, as it portrays all institutional ethical societies as mere approximations of it.[[15]](#endnote-15) In fact, Kant even contends that considering a visible church to be the achievement of the Kingdom of God on earth is an instance of ‘religious illusion’ [*Religionswahn*] (*Rel.* 6: 168). As he writes in Book IV of the *Religion*, all churches are admirable ‘attempts by poor mortals to give sensible representation to the Kingdom of God on earth’, but they deserve equal blame ‘when (in a visible church) they mistake the form of the representation of this idea for the thing itself’. (*Rel.* 6: 175). Church members who believe that the Kingdom of God can be realized on earth through their own religious efforts may be moral saints, but they are nonetheless subject to ‘madness’ [*Wahnsinn*].

Kant’s criticism of religious illusions reminds us that he was a fierce critique of the ecclesiastical institutions of his time. In the *Religion*, he does not conceal his impatience with religious organisations who prioritize symbolic rituals over moral action, that is, who engage in what he calls ‘counterfeit service’ [*cultus spurius*] (*Rel.* 6: 153). The visible churches he incites us to create should therefore be envisioned as associations of individuals who are primarily concerned with promoting morality and happiness rather than with ‘pious observances’ such as pilgrimage or penitence (*Rel.*6: 173). In fact, it will be impossible for rational churches to efficiently promote the highest good if they do not actively promote the happiness of their members.

On this point, my interpretation runs contrary to Pasternack’s, who denies that promoting happiness is an objective of churches envisioned as ethical unions. While participation within such a church ‘may, in fact, bring happiness to our lives,’ he writes, ‘that is not its purpose’ (Pasternack 2017: 455). In his view, the main function of rational churches is not to promote happiness, but rather ‘the moral advancement of the species,’ that is, universal virtue. Certainly, Pasternack is right to claim that in Kant’s perspective, churches play a crucial in the quest for universal virtue by helping their members resist radical evil, but his remarks are difficult to reconcile with a careful examination of the relationship between the advancement of virtue and the promotion of happiness within his practical philosophy. To see this, let us remember that the *Metaphysics of Morals* assigns to rational beings two ends that are also duties: seeking one’s own moral perfection and promoting the happiness of others. This means that an ethical society the very purpose of which is to promote the moral advancement of the human species musthave happiness as one of its key goals or, more precisely, that each member of a rational church must set herself the objective of promoting the happiness of others, including other members of her church. Indeed, individuals who do not actively seek the happiness of others cannot be envisioned as furthering *complete* virtue for they fail to promote one of the two moral ends that the moral law prescribes to them. *Pace* Pasternack, as associations dedicated to the promotion of the highest good, ethical societies can therefore not solely be conceived of as *accidentally* producing happiness; they must be composed of members who *aim* to foster happiness in others because they desire to promote virtue. Indeed, no quest for virtue can exclude the conscious promotion of the ends of others, provided of course that such ends are compatible with the moral law.

In conclusion, my main contention has been that endorsing the theological interpretation of the highest good may lead us to lose sight of the fact that our duty to promote it can only be fulfilled in a juridico-political state, and that such a duty entails the active promotion of the happiness of others. Nevertheless, proponents of the theological account are right to claim that Kant’s criticism of ecclesiastical institutions never turned into a criticism of rational religion itself, and that he remained committed to theological concepts such as the two practical postulates and the representation of God as the sole being who can fulfill the proportionality condition in the 1790s. From the *Critique of Practical Reason* to the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant never abandoned the idea that practical reason can only conceive of the possibility of the highest good through the postulate of the existence of God, that is, through moral faith. Human reason simply cannot escape ‘the concept of a supersensible being endowed with the properties required for the attainment of the highest good which is aimed at through morality but transcends our faculties’ (*Rel.* 6: 182). This is the crucial point established by Pasternack (2017: 465), and although my intention has been to draw the reader’s attention to the political implications of Kant’s theory of the highest good, nothing in my account contradicts his hope that recognising this idea ‘will serve as a new beginning for scholarship on the topic.’ In the end, my suggestion is that such a new scholarship should not leave the *Rechtslehre* behind. For the highest good is a special point of reference for the unification of *all* ends, and it must therefore allow us to understand how our political ends relate to our moral and social ones.

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1. **Notes**

 It is worth noting that my discussion does not include Kant’s treatment of the highest good in the *Doctrine of Method* of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. As Bader 2015 points out, discussions of the highest good in the first *Critique* are difficult to reconcile with Kant’s later treatments of the subject as the former ‘assign a motivational role to the expected happiness that is meant to result from virtuous behavior.’ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Although Beiser and Pasternack both defend a version of the theological interpretation, there are substantial differences between their views, especially regarding the putative Augustinian influence on Kant’s thought. On this question, see also Mari[ñ](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%C3%B1)a 1997. In what follows, it will become apparent that my own interpretation is closer to Pasternack’s than to Beiser’s. While Beiser explicitly denies that the duty to promote the highest good has political implications, Pasternack simply omits this question. Despite some disagreements discussed in section 5, my own view should be conceived of as a supplement to Pasternack’s. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I use the following abbreviations to refer to Kant’s individual works: *CF* = *The Conflict of the Faculties*, G *= Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, *LP* = *Lectures on Pedagogy*, *KrV = Critique of Pure Reason*, *KpV = Critique of Practical Reason*; *KU* = *Critique of Judgment*, *MM* = *Metaphysics of Morals*, *PP =* *Perpetual Peace*, *TP* = *On the Common Saying: This May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice, Rel.*= *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, *RP = What Real Progress has Metaphysics Made in Germany since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant also reiterates the proportionality condition by stating that the human being is the final end of creation only as a moral being in which happiness exists ‘in proportionto the correspondence with that end’ (*KU* 5: 436). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. This is the idea behind Beck’s (1960) influential objection according to which to duty to promote the highest good is impossible to fulfil. For a discussion of this claim, see Murphy 1965, Friedman 1984, O’Connell 2011, Mari[ñ](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/%C3%B1)a 2000 and Villarán 2013. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. On the idea of a joint endeavour or partnership between God and human beings, see Palmquist 2009. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Here, Kant is criticizing a conception of this *concursus* according to which God has a causal role toward an effect in the sensible world. Instead, he endorses the idea that God offers assistance for our efforts to moral improvement. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Maximization and proportionality are not mutually exclusive. For a discussion of this idea, see O’Connell 2012 and Bader 2015. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. For reasons that I will consider below, however, I do not identify the highest political good (i.e. perpetual peace) with the highest good as such. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For a discussion of the relationship between perpetual p­­eace and the highest good, see Taylor 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Kant advises educators to ‘pay attention to moralization,’ that is, to make sure that human beings ‘acquire the disposition to choose nothing but good ends’ (*LP* 9: 450). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. For a defence of Kant’s statement that outer freedom presupposes the political state, see Hodgson 2010. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. I would like to thank (suppressed for blind review) for prompting me to discuss this objection. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Kant also makes it clear that political authorities have the right to ensure that the constitution of the ethical society does not contradict the duty of its members as citizens of the state(*Rel.* 6: 96). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For a discussion of the duty to approximate the highest good, see Silber 1963. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)