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Demoralization and Hope: A Psychological Reading of Kant's Moral Argument

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ABSTRACT

Kant's "primacy of the practical" doctrine says that we can form morally justified commitments regarding what exists, even in the absence of sufficient epistemic grounds. In this paper I critically examine three different varieties of Kant's "moral proof" that can be found in the critical works. My claim is that the third variety—the "moral-psychological argument" based in the need to sustain moral hope and avoid demoralization—has some intriguing advantages over the other two. It starts with a premise that more clearly coheres with Kant's mature account of moral motivation, and it invokes plausible empirical-psychological theses to motivate a commitment to the full-blown classical deity—the result Kant clearly wanted. From the point of view of its structure, I think this third variety of moral argument also has the most by way of contemporary interest.

0. THE PRIMACY OF THE PRACTICAL

The idea that "practical" (i.e., prudential or moral) considerations can justify "theoretical" commitments regarding what exists is hardly original to Kant.[1] Pascal is the *eminence grise* in this discussion, although for Kant it was likely the Pietist philosopher-theologian Christian A. Crusius who provided proximate inspiration.[2] Still, Kant and his various followers (especially J.G. Fichte) played a major role in developing and promoting the idea. As a result, the "primacy of the practical" as well as the nature of "practical arguments" became topics of great interest in nineteenth-century Germany, as well as in the Idealist and Pragmatists movements in Anglo-America.[3]

The conclusion of a practical argument is not an existence claim. It is a claim, typically formulated in the first person, about *what I am defeasibly justified in committing to regarding what exists.* Thus, not all arguments based in practical considerations are practical arguments. The oldest metaethical theory of all—Divine Command Theory—starts with some facts about morality and concludes with a full-blown theistic existence claim. So it's a theoretical argument about practical issues, not a practical argument.

Within the domain of practical arguments, Kant was not a fan of prudential wagers: he denounces them as "insincere" and "inner lies" (6:430).[4] His preferred form of practical argument is *moral.* In writings from the 1780s and 1790s, he seems to articulate at least three different versions of his "moral proof," as we'll see. Each version starts from facts about my moral

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obligations, hopes, and needs, and concludes with the claim that I have defeasible moral justification for faith/trust/acceptance (*Glaube*, which I render as "Belief") that God and the future life of the soul exist.[5]

The aim of this paper is to examine the structure of these three varieties of moral argument. My claim is that the third variety—the "moral-psychological argument" based in the need to sustain moral hope and avoid demoralization—has some intriguing advantages. It starts with a premise that more clearly coheres with Kant's mature account of moral motivation, and it invokes plausible empirical-psychological theses as the basis for Belief in the full-blown classical deity—which is the result Kant wanted. From the point of view of its structure, I think this third variety of moral argument also has the most by way of contemporary interest and appeal.[6]

1. FIRST CRITIQUE: HOPE AND FEAR, CARROTS AND STICKS

Kant starts his discussion of the moral proof in the first *Critique* by listing the three questions that motivate his entire critical philosophy:

> [A]ll interest of my reason (the speculative as well as the practical) is united in the following three questions:
>
> 1. What can I know?
> 2. What should I do?
> 3. What may I hope? (A806/B833)

The question about hope unites the first two: it is "simultaneously" theoretical and practical—it "concerns happiness" but "finally comes down to the inference that something *is . . . because something ought to happen*" (A805–806/B833–34, original emphasis).

This needs spelling out. Note, first, that Kant connects hope with desire for happiness; a few lines later he says that "all hoping is for happiness," where happiness involves the satisfaction of empirical and intellectual desires. But our "unconstrained craving for happiness" inevitably comes into conflict with morality: we hope for amounts and kinds of happiness that we ought not have[7] One of the key rational constraints on hope, then, is that the happiness we hope for must be compatible with morality. More than just compatible: Kant thinks that "the Highest Good" (*summum bonum*) for which we may hope is a "mixtum compositum": a composite state in which happiness is *conditional upon* and *precisely apportioned* to moral worth in a *nonaccidental* way. Thus:

> everyone has grounds to hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his conduct . . . . (A809/B837)

Now if we lived in a "moral world" of perfectly rational human beings, then we would all meticulously follow the categorical imperative and collectively produce a just society in which each is worthy of maximal happiness. But even in that utopian context, generating a perfect and nonaccidental connection between worthiness and happiness would be tricky, given our vulnerability to disaster, disease, and death.[8] In the present immoral world, it is impossible for us to parcel out happiness justly. Thus Kant thinks the production of the Highest Good must be superintended by

> an intelligence in which the morally most perfect will, combined with the highest blessedness, is the ground of all happiness in the world just insofar as it stands in exact proportion to morality (as the worthiness to be happy). (A811/B839)

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This intelligence works in mysterious ways, and has apparently decided not to establish perfect justice in the here and now: in our world, some of the most virtuous people suffer terribly, while many of the wicked eat, drink, and make merry on Wall Street. This means, says Kant, that we "must also accept *(annehmen)* the [moral world] to be a world that is future for us." "Acceptance," in this context, is a synonym for "Belief." Thus,

> God and the future life are two presuppositions that are not to be separated from the obligation that pure reason imposes on us in accordance with principles of that very same reason. (Ibid.)

The argument can be reconstructed like this (where "GFL" stands for "God and the Future Life"):

(1) I ought to will that the Highest Good obtains, where the Highest Good is a composite state of affairs involving an exact and nonaccidental proportion between how happy each agent is, and the degree to which they are morally worthy of happiness. [Independent argument]

(2) If I ought to will that the Highest Good obtains, then I am morally justified in having substantial practical hope that the Highest Good obtains. [Premise]

(3) Substantial practical hope that *p* involves a firm assent that *p* is practically possible—i.e., that the agents and powers in the *actual* world can make *p* true. [Conceptual truth]

(4) So I am morally justified in having either "logical conviction" (hereafter "belief") or "Belief" (*Glaube*) that the Highest Good is practically possible. [1, 2, 3, Kant's taxonomy of firm assents]

(5) The actual existence of GFL is part of any account of how the Highest Good is practically possible. [Premise]

(6) So I am morally justified in having either belief or Belief that GFL exists. [4, 5]

(7) For any *p,* a belief that *p* requires sufficient epistemic justification in order to be justified in any way. [Evidentialism[9]]

(8) There is no sufficient epistemic justification either for or against the existence of GFL. [Transcendental Dialectic]

(9) So belief that GFL exists is not justified in any way. [7, 8]

(10) In the absence of sufficient epistemic justification for or against *p,* a Belief that *p* can be based on sufficient moral justification. [Kant's account of Belief]

(11) So I am morally justified in having the Belief that GFL exists. [6, 9, 10]

Regarding (1), a familiar objection is simply: why ought we will the *complete* Highest Good construed in this way, rather than just the *promotion* or *approximation* of it? Why am I not permitted simply to will my part, rather than the whole shebang? The objection is pressing but storied, and I won't linger over it here.[10]

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We've already looked at the idea behind (2): we inevitably hope for happiness, for ourselves and others, but that "craving" is only morally permissible if the happiness is proportionate to our virtue or "moral worth." So rationally speaking, we *may* hope for the Highest Good, but not for one iota of happiness beyond.[11]

Regarding (3): the kind of "possibility" presupposed by substantial practical hope is not just logical or even real possibility but what Kant himself later calls "realizability" *(Ausführbarkeit)* (5:455) or *"practical* possibility" (5:112; 5:115; 5:126). In other words, when we substantially hope for a practical end, we (according to Kant) assume that the end is *realizable* by the agents and powers in the *actual* world.[12]

But why must the assumption take the form of an assent, much less a firm one? This is just hope, after all, and ordinary hope requires merely that the subject is not certain that *p* is impossible, or at most presupposes or "takes for granted" that *p* is possible. Willaschek exploits this to argue, against Kant, that "we are not rationally required to believe that the Highest Good is practically possible, but rather required *not* to believe that [the Highest Good] is practically impossible." Thus Willaschek thinks the argument fails: not believing that something is impossible is insufficient to ground positive Belief in the existence of its realizability conditions.[13]

It's true that hope *simpliciter* cannot require full-blown assent to its object's possibility. Consider Goldbach, who knows that mathematical conjectures are, if true, then necessarily true. Goldbach can surely hope that his conjecture is true, without ipso facto believing it is possibly true. For otherwise his hope would immediately ascend into full belief that the conjecture is (necessarily) true—the worst sort of mathematical bootstrapping.[14] Most of our ordinary hopes, too, do not require a full-blown modal belief.[15]

But in (3) Kant draws on the psychologically plausible thought that deep, life-structuring ("substantial") practical hope involves something more: at the very least, a firm commitment to the object's practical possibility. In other words, forming substantial practical hope that something will obtain involves taking the idea of it to have, as Kant goes on to say in this passage, "objective practical reality" (ibid.). In the third *Critique* he calls it "subjective reality" (5:453).[16] The "taking" in question is not a mere hypothesis or entertaining—it's a firm assent (holding-for-true).

In Kant's taxonomy of assents, as (4) says, the only firm attitudes available are belief ("logical conviction") and Belief ("practical conviction," "trust," "acceptance"). (7)–(10) are then just a summary of Kant's critical efforts, with respect to supersensible items, to retain his evidentialism about belief and at the same time allow that nonepistemic grounds justify Belief. This is what he means when he says that he had to "deny knowledge in order to make room for Belief" (Bxxx). I will call these the *Belief-directed premises* and won't examine them in detail.

(5) is obviously a lynchpin. Kant claims in the first *Critique* that the ground of the Highest Good in which we Believe must be "a *singular*, *most perfect*, and *rational* primordial being, [the existence] of which speculative theology could not on objective grounds give us even a *hint*, let alone *convince* us" (A815/B843, original emphasis). But the argument he provides goes by too quickly. For even if the requirement that happiness and moral worth be *nonaccidentally* apportioned rules out any fully "secular" conception of the Highest Good,[17] it's not clear how the argument motivates Belief in the existence of anything more than a benevolent Architect of Nature. Why couldn't some being (or committee of beings) that is fully in control of nature, and deeply benevolent, but not omni-anything, set up the correlations? Further still, why is a being *required* at all: why wouldn't a law that meticulously connects degrees of virtue to degrees of happiness be sufficient? Indeed, why couldn't *nature itself* be playing a very long game that will, on its own, ultimately resolve into justice—i.e., why couldn't nature be what J.G. Fichte called a "living moral order"?

This "shrunken God" objection to Kant's moral argument is also familiar.[18] If the argument justifies Belief in the *actuality* of anything at all (already controversial), it's not obviously going to be the classical monotheistic God.

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A third familiar objection arises from the *Critique's* astonishingly *un*Kantian insistence, in his argument for (1), that an appeal to divinely appointed happiness or misery in the afterlife is required for moral *motivation*:

> Thus without a God and a world that is not now visible to us but is hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approbation and admiration *but not incentives for resolve and realization (Geqenstande des Beifalls und der Bewunderunq, aber nicht Triebfedern des Vorsatzes und der Ausiibunq)* because they would not fulfill the whole end that is natural for every rational being and determine *a priori* and necessarily through the very same pure reason. (A812/B840, emphasis added)

He even explicitly mentions *consequences,* both positive and negative:

> Everyone also regards the moral laws as *commands*, which, however, they could not be if they did not *connect appropriate consequences with their rule a priori,* and thus carry with them *promises and threats* (*Verheissungen und Drohungen*). (A811/B839, emphasis added; compare *Collins* lectures 27:285)

This is a striking claim, especially to a Kantian ear: it seems to depict God using both carrots and sticks to incentivize his free, fragile creatures to do the right thing. And thus it *seems* to depict our moral action as motivated not by respect for the moral law alone, but rather also by the promise of glory and the fear of perdition. Some commentators see this as an early and underdeveloped theory of moral motivation that Kant would later come to reject; others try to make it fit with his mature moral psychology.[19]

There's clearly more to say, but this is at least a glance at three longstanding problems with the moral argument as formulated in the first *Critique.* First, it's not clear why we ought to will the *entire* Highest Good rather than just our part, or an approximation to it. Second, even if the argument does (via the concept of practical possibility) deliver Belief in the *actuality* of a ground of the Highest Good, it doesn't obviously deliver Belief in a single supreme deity. Third, even if it does deliver Belief in a single supreme deity, the latter is one that Kant himself might later regard with suspicion—a God who employs both promises and threats to keep us on the straight and narrow.

2. SECOND CRITIQUE: RATIONAL COHERENCE AND OUGHT-IMPLIES-CAN

Whatever he meant in the first *Critique,* by the time he wrote the *Groundwork* (1785) and the second *Critique* (1788), Kant had clearly settled on the idea that *pure* practical reason is sufficient to motivate us all by itself. In other words, the moral law should be a sufficient rational motive. As a result,

> everything remains disinterested and grounded only on duty, and there is no need to base it on incentives of fear and hope, which if they became principles would destroy the whole moral worth of actions. (5:129)

The key innovation in this second formulation is a variation on the principle of ought-implies-can. Thus:

(1) I ought to will the Highest Good. [Premise]

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(2) If I ought to will the Highest Good, then I am morally justified in having a firm assent that the Highest Good is practically possible. [Ought-licenses-commitment-to-practically-can]
(3) So I am morally justified in having a belief or Belief that the Highest Good is practically possible. [1,2]

From there Kant uses the lynchpin premise (which was [5] above) and the Belief-directed premises ([7]–[10] above) to arrive at his desired conclusion.

This is the most famous version of the proof, and I won't try to discuss it (or the commentary literature on it) in detail here. It is worth noting, however, that hope has fallen out of the story: this formulation starts with obligation, then goes via ought-licenses-commitment-to-practically-can directly to Belief in the realizability conditions. That seems interpretively unfortunate, because the moral proof is somehow supposed to provide an answer to the question "What may I hope?"[20]

Another reason the loss of hope is problematic is that there are questions about the ought-licenses-commitment-to-practically-can principle itself. Kant says that

> It is a duty to realize the Highest Good to the utmost of our capacity; therefore it must be possible; hence it is also unavoidable for every rational being in the world to accept what is necessary for its objective possibility. The acceptance is as necessary as the moral law, in relation to which alone it is valid. (*KpV* 5:144n [compare *Rel* 6:50])

But what is "objective possibility" here? Why can't we be obliged to will an end that we take to be merely *logically* possible, without any commitments to its real possibility, much less its practical realizability? I suggested above that a life-structuring practical *hope* for an outcome involves commitment to its practical realizability. But in the absence of such hope we may still be required to will what we take to be a logically possible lost cause.[21]

It is also noteworthy that in this version of the argument Kant continues to regard the Highest Good as the proper object of the will (in [1]). "We ought to strive to promote the Highest Good (which must therefore be possible)" (5:125). But why *ought* we will the composite state when morality alone, apart from any connection to happiness, is now clearly supposed to be sufficient for moral motivation? Why not just will the moral law and *hope* for the Highest Good?

A simple solution here says that a just outcome—one in which morality is apportioned to happiness—is simply *better* than one where there is an equal amount of virtue but the virtuous perpetually suffer. It is a world where the ends of our sensible nature (happiness) are in perfect harmony with the ends of our practically rational nature (morality)—and justice has been done. So we ought to set as our end the better outcome—the Highest Good—rather than following the moral law alone, even though our *incentive* is the moral law (alone!). The problem for this solution is that what makes the Highest Good "better" than a world in which we are all moral but not maximally happy is simply that, well, we are all deservedly happy. Perhaps such a concern for justice can motivate nonconsequentialist practical reason; if not, this solution threatens to collapse into the apparently heteronomous picture considered in the last section.

Another family of solutions says that morality itself has a "material" or "constitutive" end—perfect justice in the form of the Highest Good—and so in virtue of willing the moral law (alone!), we somehow count as willing the end as well. When I will to keep my promise to take out the trash, I will the various means and ends: me going from room-to-room collecting, stepping outside to the bins, the trash being out, and so on. But they, the means and the end, are not the *motive* for acting—rather, keeping my promise is. The secondary literature is full of complicated defenses of this kind of solution, and I can't wade further into the debate here.[22] Suffice it to say that it remains controversial whether Kant can avoid having happiness (the trash's being

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out on the curb) be part of our motive, rather than being (somehow) just exceedingly tightly bound up with it.

Finally, this version of the argument does no better with the shrunken God objection, raised earlier, according to which a lesser being, or a committee, or a "living moral order" could do the job that Kant wants God to do. Indeed, in the second *Critique* Kant even seems to concede that reason "nevertheless cannot prove—that is, set forth sufficiently on objective grounds—the impossibility of [the Highest Good being produced] via the universal laws of nature" (5:145). Wood tries to answer this objection on Kant's behalf by arguing that we should take his talk of "postulation" in an almost mathematical sense—the argument itself shows merely that we need *some* sort of ground of the possibility of the Highest Good, and we then leap by postulate past the shrunken God and into the classical theological picture. But such a leap can hardly be attractive to reason. I'll argue below that the moral-psychological version of the argument fares better against the objection, precisely because it invokes not reason but *empirical* psychology against the shrunken God.

There's a lot more to say about this "rational coherence" version of the moral proof. My point is simply that it requires some fairly fancy argumentation to explain why we *ought* to will the complete Highest Good, instead of just *willing* the moral law and *hoping* for proportional happiness. It also relies on a controversial ought-implies-can principle, and offers no philosophically satisfying response to the shrunken God objection.

3. THIRD CRITIQUE AND RELIGION: BULWARKS AGAINST DEMORALIZATION

The third version of the moral proof can be found in Kant's works from the 1790s, including the third *Critique* (1790), the "Theory and Practice" essay (1793), and *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason* (1793).[23] In these texts, as I read them, the proper object of our will is no longer the composite Highest Good, but rather the part of it that is under our control—namely, our own moral virtue. That is an improvement: by framing the object of our will in this way, we avoid the problem (from the first *Critique*) of how happiness can be part of our *rational* incentive, and how we avoid heteronomy if it isn't. We also avoid the problem (from the second *Critique*) of coming up with extremely complicated hylomorphic or constitutivist accounts of why we *ought* still will the complete Highest Good, even if the moral law is a sufficient rational incentive.

In *Religion,* Kant offers the following as the rational essence of the ancient doctrine of providence:

> Each must, on the contrary, so conduct himself as if everything depended on him. Only on this condition may he hope that a higher wisdom will provide the fulfillment of his well-intentioned effort. (6:101)

This is an anti-quietist picture: we must not sit back and let providence or nature take its course; rather, we ought to act as if "everything depended on us." Still, for many of us, sustaining such moral effort requires the substantial practical hope that justice will roll down like the waters someday, and that our moral efforts will make some small contribution to it doing so.[24] We have a

> natural need, which would otherwise be a hindrance to moral resolve *[Hinderniß der moralischen Entschließung],* to conceive some sort of final end of all our doings and nondoings taken as a whole, one that reason finds justifiable. (6:5)

By speaking of a "natural" rather than a "rational" need, I think Kant means to invoke an important psychological fact. For many of us, most of us perhaps, the prolonged experience of

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injustice—of a world history in which the wicked hoard resources and the virtuous are often miserable—will be a hindrance to our ongoing moral *resolve,* even if reason and the law provide a sufficient moral *incentive.*

The third version of the proof, then, combines the a priori claim that we ought to will the moral law alone with an empirical claim about what some of us need in order to avoid what I'll call "demoralization."[25] Demoralization is, first,

> (a) a *general despair* in the face of the clear unlikelihood that full justice will be done anytime soon and that our individual efforts will make a difference or lead to measurable improvements in that regard.

And as a result of this, second, we are demoralized in another sense: we experience

> (b) a *psychological loss of resolve* to do what we continue to think we ought to do.

It's not that overwhelming injustice and our perceived inefficacy make us think (as a consequentialist might) that working for justice is no longer required (since doing so won't make a difference). Rather, it's that the rank injustice of the massive systems of which we're inexorably a part, combined with the awareness of our acute impotence to change them, threaten to sap our resolve to keep trying. They threaten, in other words, to push us into the first grade of radical evil, which is

> the general weakness of the human heart in complying with adopted (*genommener*) maxims, or the *fragility* (*Gebrechlichkeit*) of human nature . . . I incorporate the good (the law) into the maxim of my power of choice (*Willkür*); but this good, which is an irresistible incentive objectively or ideally (*in thesi*), is subjectively (*in hypothesi*) the weaker (in comparison with inclination) whenever the maxim is to be followed. (6:29)

For example: suppose the moral law demands that I donate money to the poor. This is then a sufficient rational incentive to donate, regardless of actual outcomes. Still, as a matter of psychological fact, most of us *also* have a "natural" need to hope that our altruism is effective: it would be a "hindrance to our resolve" year after year if we cannot reasonably hope that the poor actually benefit from our efforts. Thus, even in a Kantian context, a morally good person will care about the *consequences* of her actions, and not just about the rectitude of her actions (or intentions). Kant is not a consequentialist, of course, but he does ascribe to most of us a *consequence-dependent moral psychology.*

In the third *Critique,* Kant offers one of his more lyrical presentations of this version of the moral proof. He describes a righteous atheist "like Spinoza" whose moral "strivings have limits" when confronted with "all the evils (*Übeln*) of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death"—including the fact that the righteous and the unrighteous alike will be "hurled back into the abyss of purposeless material chaos (*Schlund des zwecklosen Chaos der Materie*) from which they all were drawn" (5:452). When faced with this recognition, the righteous Spinoza has two options: either he will

> certainly have to give up his end [of being righteous] as impossible; or, if he would remain attached to the appeal of his moral inner vocation and not weaken (*schwächen*) the respect, by which the moral law immediately influences him to obedience, by the nullity (*Nichtigkeit*) of the only idealistic final end that is adequate to its high demand (which cannot occur without damage to the moral disposition), then he will have to accept (*annehmen*) the existence of a moral author of the world (*Welturheber*), i.e. of God, from a practical point of view.

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I read "impossible" here in a psychological sense: it "damages the moral disposition" and "weakens" our respect for the law not to be able to hope that, ultimately, the arc of history bends towards justice. But if even the righteous Spinoza cannot maintain his moral resolve without such practical hope, how much less so the rest of us?

The famous "absurdum practicum" argument from the lectures on metaphysics can also be read in this way:

> If we assume moral principles without presupposing God and another world, then we trap ourselves in a practical dilemma. Namely, if there is no God and no other world, then I must either constantly follow the rules of virtue, [and] then I am a virtuous dreamer, because I expect no consequences which are worthy of my conduct—or I will throw away and despise the law of virtue, tread all over morality because it can bring me no happiness, I will give way to my vices, enjoy these enjoyments of life while I have them, and then I form a principle through which I become a knave (*Bösewicht*). We must thus decide to be either fools or knaves.—This dilemma indicates that the moral law that is written in our reason is inextricably bound with a Belief in God and another world (*mit einem Glauben an Gott und eine andere Welt unzertrennlich verbunden sey*). (*Metaphysik Mrongovius* 29:777–78)

Someone like the righteous Spinoza is a "dreamer" or "fool" because he does not "expect consequences" of his actions. The suggestion is that such a foolish state is psychologically unstable, and may ultimately push even the most virtuous person into knavery.

Another essay from this period, "Theory and Practice" (1793), also connects the ability to resist futility and demoralization with the preservation of hope for justice:

> It does not matter how many doubts may be raised against my hopes by citing history—doubts which, if they were proved, could move me to desist from a task so apparently futile; as long as these doubts cannot be made quite certain I cannot exchange the duty for the rule of prudence not to attempt the impracticable. (8:309)

The "doubt" here is that ultimate justice will be done. As long as that doubt is not "certain" (that is, as long as we can still Believe that the Highest Good is practically possible), then our resolve-sustaining hope survives and we avoid demoralization.

The third version of the proof thus goes like this:

(1) I ought to do what is morally right. [Independent argument]
(2) For me at least, it would be *demoralizing* in the first sense (i.e., it would lead to despair and dejection) not to be able to have substantial practical hope that there is a "moral world order" by which the Highest Good will come about, for then I would have to regard it as certain that the entire history of the world will not be just, no matter what I do. [Empirical premise, conditions on hoping]
(3) Such demoralization has an enervating effect on my resolve, and is thus *demoralizing* in the second sense: other things equal it threatens my resolve to perform the actions that I take to be morally required. [Empirical premise]
(4) Demoralization (or "fragility") of this sort is seriously morally disadvantageous. [1, 2, 3]
(5) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage, for me at least, in being able to have substantial practical hope that the Highest Good will obtain. [4]
(6) Substantial practical hope that *p* involves a firm assent that *p* is practically possible—i.e., that the agents and powers in the *actual* world can make *p* true. [Conceptual truth]

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(7) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage, for me at least, in being able to have belief or Belief that the Highest Good is practically possible. [5, 6, Kant's taxonomy of assent]
(8) The actual existence of GFL is part of any account of how the Highest Good is practically possible. [Premise]
(9) Therefore, there is serious moral advantage, for me at least, in being able to believe or Believe that GFL exists. [7, 8]

From there, via the Belief-directing premises, Kant arrives at the conclusion that Belief (though not belief) that GFL exists is defeasibly morally (though not epistemically) justified, for me at least.

"For me at least" sounds strange, but Kant is explicit: already in the first *Critique* he says, "I must not even say 'It is morally certain that there is a God', etc., but rather 'I am morally certain' etc." (A829/B857, original emphasis). The moral certainty that results from the proof has an irreducibly *subjective* aspect—it is based in *my* psychological needs (though of course many of those needs will be shared by others). That's why it attaches to Belief rather than belief.[26]

Let's look again at the key premises. I've already said something about (2) and (3). They are empirical claims, and they will not be true of everyone. But Kant thinks that such moral pillars—more steadfast in their efforts than even the righteous Spinoza—are fairly rare.

Once again, (8) (which is the counterpart of [5] in the first formulation) is clearly a lynchpin, and raises the specter of the shrunken God. But on this score I think the "moral-psychological" version of the proof has an advantage: it is based not in conceptual facts about what *can* ground what, but in empirical facts about what average human agents require to sustain moral resolve. The history of religions suggests that many people would report that the existence of a godless but still moral world order—even the *necessary existence* of one—might be impressive to them but also insufficient for sustaining resolve. As a matter of psychological fact, they are unable to soldier on in the moral life unless they can regard this order as both *intended and superintended* by a being who is also intimately aware of and cares about their efforts, who arranges for their encouragement in various ways, who ensures that there are exemplars in history and scripture for them to emulate, and who might even show the occasional mercy when they fail. They have a psychological need, in other words, to conceive of the order as governed not by tit-for-tat impersonal laws but by a personal superintendent who does things for reasons, sets up the system from a motive of both justice and love, and recognizes individual efforts, great and small.[27]

Even granting this, an objector might say, can't such people find an equal amount of psychological sustenance in the thought that the world is superintended by a shrunken God: an extremely strong, smart, and well-intentioned creator, even if it isn't quite the omni-God of the philosophers? Here again I think the moral-psychological version of the proof offers a unique way to resist the objection. For it may be that as a matter of fact, many morally sensitive people need the superintendent of the moral order to be *perfectly* good, so that their dependence on that order can be absolute and not provisional. Sustaining their hope might also psychologically require that the system be conceived as *entirely* stable and not in principle vulnerable to disruption through some mistake or intervention of a stronger or smarter power. This would then lead via the argument spelled out above to Belief in a perfectly good, all-powerful, and all-knowing superintendent of the universe.

By now the tough-minded evidentialist objector will be apoplectic: how can it be acceptable to Immanuel Kant, reason's bulldog, for weak-minded people to go from a mere need to hope for comic justice to full-blown Belief in the existence of the classical deity? Why is this not just rank self-deception or a pernicious form of Feuerbachian wishful thinking? Wood expresses this objection forcefully:

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> Using belief in God to supplement our weak moral motivation is an interpretation of Kant's moral arguments that has been explored by Adams (1987, pp. 144–164; 199, pp. 384–391) and Chignell (2018). That suggests an argument that I regard as fundamentally different from Kant's. That the offered psychological benefit is moral may distract us from the fact that this argument is not fundamentally different from the corrupt bribe offered you to believe that seven is not a prime number. No promised advantage or benefit, even a moral one, could ever give you *any reason whatsoever to assent to God's existence.* It offers an instrumental reason for doing something *corrupt and self-deceptive* to yourself that brings about *non-rational* assent. In Kant's terms, it grounds persuasion (*Überredung*) rather than conviction (*Überzeugung*) (A821/B849).[28]

Mark Johnston agrees. To start with hope for the Highest Good and move from there to a "positive account of what we essentially are is likely to seem to be sheer metaphysical reverie."[29]

The concern is real: even in a context where the practical has primacy, our psychological needs shouldn't turn supersensible metaphysics into a wax nose. Still, I think the argument as reconstructed here offers a few principled things to say in response.

First, Wood is right that there is an air of persuasion here, but Kant himself says that it is permissible to hold onto persuasion in cases where it is subjectively useful. "I can preserve persuasion for myself if I please to do so, but cannot and should not want to make it valid beyond myself" (A822/B850).[30]

Second, remember that this is rational Belief, not belief, so there are no violations of evidentialist norms on *belief* here. An evidentialist like W.K. Clifford might not want to allow Beliefs into our cognitive economy at all, of course, but that is just not Kant's position.

Third, Wood speaks of a "supplement to moral motivation." This ignores the key distinction between motivation and resolve that is on display in the first degree of radical evil. What the moral-psychological argument does is look for resolve-sustaining bulwarks for those who have already "adopted" a moral maxim of the will. True, there may be some moral saints who can sustain resolve even in the face of the "abyss of purposeless material chaos." But these will be few and far between—rarer even than the righteous Spinoza. If they exist at all, then to them Kant's argument has little to offer.[31]

Fourth, there may be others—not quite saints but moral pillars, perhaps—who can sustain their moral resolve in the face of great obstacles by adopting the Fichtean Belief that nature itself will someday bring about the Highest Good. If so, their substantial hopes also do not require Belief that the moral order is superintended, and Kant would simply commend them on their way.

Finally, it is important to see that, even for those non-saints and non-pillars for whom Belief in a supreme superintendent is morally sustaining, Kant is *not* recommending self-deception. We must keep before us the constraints on rational Belief:

(a) there is no persuasive empirical or theoretical evidence for or against the existence of such a being;
(b) the Belief that the argument underwrites is *morally* (not epistemically) justified; and
(c) this moral justification is defeasible to boot.

So if we find out later that there are moral downsides to theistic Belief—that adopting it either constitutes or leads to the violation of some other duty, or fails to sustain the resolve that it promised—then it will have to be given up. Moreover, this is not wishful thinking of the sort that would take a proposition about the supersensible to be true, just in order to feel better (or receive a bribe). It is not that because

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(d) I am inclined *by my commitment to morality* itself to form substantial hope for the practical possibility of the outcome; and
(e) the goal is not to feel better or get rich but rather to receive *essential* moral sustenance.

It's correct that Kant doesn't want us to abuse our theoretical faculties by manipulating ourselves or others into full-blown beliefs (in the ordinary sense) about these matters. The most we can reasonably hold in these contexts are practically motivated Beliefs. Moreover, Kant doesn't reluctantly bring Belief in God and the future life back into the picture because (as Heinrich Heine once suggested) he felt *sorry* for people like his servant Lampe who need to cling to primitive dogmas about just deserts in the afterlife. Rather, he brings Belief back into the picture because he recognizes that many of us—most of us, perhaps—are less righteous than the saints, and more fragile than the pillars. Most of us have a psychological need to cling to substantial practical hopes about the order of things and the trajectory of history (in this world and the next) in order to sustain and stabilize a crucial kind of moral resolve. Thus we "may" have those hopes, and "may" also defeasibly hold the Beliefs required to ground the possibility of their objects.

4. CONCLUSION

Kant's doctrine of the primacy of the practical finds its most powerful expression in his account of moral arguments for theoretical conclusions. Kant is not a full-blown pragmatist: he does not say that all reasons for holding something to be true are fundamentally practical. Small-"b" belief (logical conviction) requires epistemic justification—empirical evidence, theoretical argument, or some other sort of "objective ground."

Kant's doctrine, rather, is that in contexts where we lack sufficient epistemic justification regarding the truth or falsehood of some proposition, we can sometimes "set aside" the projects involved in knowing, and instead appeal to practical considerations to ground assent—even "theoretical" assent about what exists. This, then, is either a qualified evidentialism or a moderate form of pragmatism: yes, belief is governed by evidentialist norms, but Belief can be based in nonepistemic, practical considerations about our moral obligations, hopes, and needs.

Finally, we have seen that Kant's moral argument comes in at least three different varieties. I have argued that the third variety—the one that appeals to key empirical facts about our fragility and resolve—may be the most philosophically cogent, and is certainly the most sensitive to our needs as fragile agents in an unjust world.[32]

NOTES

1. "Theoretical" here and throughout has to do with *"what exists."* So both *a priori* and *empirical* judgments can be "theoretical" in this sense (A633/B661). Kant's works are cited by reference to the standard *Akademie Ausgabe*: Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1902–) by (volume:page) except for the first *Critique,* which is cited by "A" and "B" edition numbers.
2. See Gabriele Gava, "Kant and Crusius on Belief and Practical Justification," *Kantian Review* 24(1) (2019), 53–75. For discussion of Basedow's pre-Kantian moral argument regarding God and the soul, see Brian Chance, "Kantian Non-Evidentialism and Its German Antecedents: Crusius, Meier, and Basedow," *Kantian Review* 24(3) (2019), 359–84.
3. For a recent anthology of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sources, see David Baggett and Jerry Walls, eds. *The Moral Argument: A History* (New York: Oxford, 2019).
4. How this comports with Kant's own advocacy of "pragmatic Belief" in the Canon is a longer story.
5. Kant uses "acceptance" (*Annehmung*), "practical cognition," and "trust" (*Vertrauen*) in places, but typically he speaks of "*Glaube*." *Glaube* is a voluntary state of assent (*Fürwahrhalten*—lit., holding-for-true) that a subject takes up for nonepistemic reasons; it can guide deliberation, action, and assertion in

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certain contexts (or in all contexts, depending on the content). I translate it as "Belief" with a capital "B" to emphasize that it is a technical Teutonic term, distinct from our contemporary notion of "belief." For more on Kant's conception of Belief, see my "Belief in Kant," *Philosophical Review* 116(3) (2007), 323–60; Lawrence Pasternack, "The Development and Scope of Kantian Belief: The Highest Good, The Practical Postulates and the Fact of Reason," *Kant-Studien* 102(3) (2011), 290–315; Thomas Höwing, "Kant on Opinion, Belief, and Knowledge, in Höwing, ed., *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 201–22; Gava, op cit.; and Allen Wood, *Kant and Religion* (New York: Cambridge, 2020), ch. 2.

6. I've tried to highlight this appeal in "Hope and Despair at the Kantian Chicken Factory: Moral Arguments about Making a Difference," in L. Allais and J. Callanan, eds., *Kant and Animals*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 213–38; and "Inefficacy, Despair, and Difference-Making: A Secular Application of Kant's Moral Argument," in L. Caranti and A. Pinzani, eds., *Kant and the Problem of Morality: Rethinking the Contemporary World* (New York: Routledge, 2022). A few revised passages from those papers reappear below.
7. The "craving" line is from the second *Critique* (5:130). Similarly: "Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence *everything goes according to his wish and will"* (5:124).
8. Saniye Vatansever suggests that in the moral world we would become so good at medicine and climate science that we would be able to "prevent the suffering from natural evils." That strikes me as a fairly tall order, and somewhat out of keeping with Kant's pessimism in his "Theodicy" essay and the "End of All Things." See Vatansever, "Kant's Coherent Theory of the Highest Good," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 89 (2021), 263–83; this quotation from pp. 267–68. Compare Chignell, "Hopeful Pessimism: The Kantian Mind at the End of all Things," in Troy DuJardin and M.David Eckel, eds., *Faith, Hope, and Love: Boston Studies in Philosophy, Religion, and Public Life* 10 (2022), 125–44.
9. Nonevidentialists and even some evidentialists will deny that this is a conceptual truth. But Kant is a conceptual evidentialist about what we would now call "belief' (he calls it "logical conviction")—this is the kind of assent that can count, if true and justified, as knowledge (*Wissen*). See my "Kant's Concepts of Justification," *Nous* 41(1) (2007), 33–63.
10. Kant himself speaks of our duty with respect to the Highest Good in both ways—as that of "realizing," and that of "promoting." Seniye Tilev helpfully counts up the cases of each in the second *Critique* ("What Should We Hope?" *Philosophia* 50 (2002), 2685–706) on the way to arguing that *promotion* is our moral duty and *realization* grounds the duty to *hope* that others will cooperate (see note 11 and associated text).
11. I take no position here on whether the Highest Good must be conceived as "maximal" (involving the most happiness combined with the most virtue) or whether nonmaximal instances of it are acceptable to reason. For a defense of the maxima list position, see Ralf Bader, "Kant's Theory of the Highest Good," in J. Aufderheide and Ralf Bader, eds., *The Highest Good in Aristotle and Kant* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 183–214.
12. Compare Willaschek, "Must We Believe in the Realizability of Our Ends? On a Premise of Kant's Argument for the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason," in Thomas Höwing, ed., *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2016), 223–44.
13. Ibid. 240. Later on the same page, however, Willaschek reverts to this formulation: "In order for it to be *rational for us to believe* that we can realize the Highest Good, we require an account of how, in spite of the antinomy, it is *not impossible* for us to realize the Highest Good" (240, my underline). This is in tension with his earlier claim, and makes trouble for Willaschek's objection. More importantly, it indicates how natural it is to think that *some* sort of positive attitude is required to anchor our deepest practical hopes. Insole also misses this, arguing that the relevant condition on substantial practical hope for the Highest Good is simply that it cannot be the case that "happiness in proportion to virtue is known not to be possible." See Christopher Insole, *Kant and the Divine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 246.
14. Thanks to Laura F. Callahan for discussion here. For an argument that the possibility involved in hope cannot be epistemic possibility either, see Chignell, "Rational Hope, Moral Order, and the Revolution of the Will," in Eric Watkins, ed., *Divine Order, Human Order, and the Order of Nature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 197–218.
15. See Chignell, "The Focus Theory of Hope," *Philosophical Quarterly* 73(1) (2023), 44–63. https://doi.org/10.1093/pq/pqac010.
16. Whereas Willaschek's conception of what is involved in substantial practical hope is obviously too weak, Claudia Blöser's conception seems too strong. She argues that "moral certainty transfers from faith [Belief] to hope because faith refers to the *ground* of sure hope for happiness." In other words, we "*trust without reservation* that our hope will be fulfilled." This elides the distinction between hope and

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expectation—a common move in the Christian tradition, but not, I think, in Kant at his best. (See my "Hopeful Pessimism…," op cit.). I'm effectively proposing a Goldilocks principle between Willaschek's and Blöser's: substantial practical hope involves the positive Belief that its object is *realizable*, but not the Belief that its object *will be* or even *is likely to be* realized. Blöser, "Sure Hope of Attaining Happiness and its Relation to 'Wish' and 'Faith,'" in Beatrix Himmelmann and Camilla Serck-Hanssen, eds., *The Court of Reason: Proceedings of the 13th International Kant Congress* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2020), vol. 1, 1941–49; this quotation from p. 1948.

17. See Andrews Reath's famous distinction between the secular and the theological conceptions of the Highest Good in his "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26(4) (1988), 593–619. See the articles by Bader and Tilev, op. cit., for various arguments that the secular conception is untenable, as well as Lawrence Pasternack, "Restoring Kant's Conception of the Highest Good," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 55(3) (2017), 435–68.
18. See Gordon E. Michalson, *Kant and the Problem of God* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1999).
19. For a discussion of Henry Allison's attempt to argue for a developmental view, and of Allen Wood's effort to reject it, see my "Kant, Wood, and Moral Arguments," *Kantian Review* 27 (2022), 61–70. I now think (thanks to correspondence with Daniel Ranweiler) that in that paper I was too quick to dismiss the first *Critique* picture as clearly incompatible with Kant's mature moral psychology.
20. Rory Phillips defends this formulation but seeks to bring hope back in: "hope gives us a kind of internal warrant to perform actions we would not otherwise be rationally entitled to perform." But I find it hard to see how hope, even hope for the Highest Good, could provide extra "warrant" or "license" for actions that are not commanded by the moral law, unless this is just the sort of "moral resolve" that I discuss in section 3. Rory L Phillips, "Faith without Hope is Dead: Moral Arguments and the Theological Virtues," *Religious Studies* 58(1) (2022), 96–112; this line from p. 102.
21. On ought-implies-logically-can, see Mark Johnston, "Is Hope for Another Life Rational?" in P. Draper, ed., *Contemporary Controversies in Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2019), 47–68; this discussion on p. 51. On the Roycean notion of a lost cause, see Wood, *Kant and Religion*, 35–36.
22. For some recent efforts, see Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good,' The Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," in Thomas Höwing, ed., *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 33–49; Stephen Engstrom, "The Determination of the Concept of the Highest Good," in Höwing, ed., 89–109; Florian Marwede, *Das Hochste Gut in Kants Deontologischer Ethik* (Berlin: DeGruyter, 2018); Christopher Insole, *Kant and the Divine*, ch. 12, op cit.
23. There are admittedly passages in these texts that still sound like the second version (see, e.g., KU 5:450–51 where Kant will speak of "the moral argument as an argument for consistency in reasoning"). I don't mean to claim that Kant self-consciously distinguished the two versions, or even thought of his view as having changed. Thanks to Michael Yuen for discussion.
24. This division-of-labor picture is visible in the second *Critique* as well (5:124). For discussion, see Pasternack, "Restoring Kant's Conception."
25. Robert M. Adams uses this term in sketching an empirical-psychological way of reconstructing Kant's proof in his "Moral Arguments for Theistic Belief," in *The Virtue of Faith* (New York: Oxford, 1987). My presentation here is influenced by his, though different in many key respects. Other articulations of something like the moral psychological reading can be found in Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness* (New York: Cambridge, 2000), 369ff; Pasternack, *Kant's Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason: An Interpretation and Defense* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 50–55. Courtney Fugate offers an interesting variation in which the Belief that God will bring about the Highest Good is required so that we're not *distracted* from the duty to be motivated entirely by the moral law. See "The Highest Good and Kant's Proof(s) of God's Existence," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31(2) (2014), 137–58.
26. See Luca Fonnesu, "Kant on Moral Certainty," in L. Cataldi Madonna and P. Rumore, eds., *Kant und die Aufklärung* (Hildesheim: Ulms, 2011), 183–204.
27. Some strands of the Vedanta tradition allow that for certain people the demands of morality are sufficient not only as rational incentives but also as psychological sustainers. Such people needn't be theists at all. For others, however, it will be crucial to picture moral activity as at the same time a kind of worship or love (*bhakti*), attended and encouraged by Krishna. I take it that this is one way to read the main message of the *Bhagavad-gita*.
28. Wood, *Kant and Religion*, op cit., 41, note 11.
29. Mark Johnston, "Is Hope for Another life Rational?" op cit., 51.
30. The comment is admittedly a bit odd, since "persuasion" (*Überredung*) officially involves a kind of mistake. Kant's point here, presumably, is just that firm assents that lack sufficient objective grounds ("My

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daughter is the smartest kid in the school!") may be permissible in some contexts, as long as we don't try persuade others that there is good evidence for them.

31. Pasternack worries that the requirement to Believe in the Highest Good is "too contingent upon individual circumstances," especially since some people may be "fortunate enough to slide through life without having encountered 'all the evils of poverty, illness, and untimely death'" (*Kant's Religion*, op cit., 54). I think Kant would just embrace the contingency here.
32. My thanks are owed to members of audiences at the Central Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association, American University of Beirut, University of Mainz, Rutgers Center for Philosophy of Religion, the Eastern Study Group of the North American Kant Society, Leuven Catholic University, Stanford University, Northwestern University, University of Illinois-Chicago, Free University-Berlin, Goethe University-Frankfurt, University of Belgrade, Baylor University, and the Moral Sciences Club at Cambridge University. For individual feedback I'm grateful to Farbod Akhlaghi, Chris Benzenberg, Gabriel Citron, Silvia De Toffoli, Alexander Englert, Gabriela Gava, Brendan Kolb, Matthew Kramer, Maya Krishnan, Rae Langton, Lawrence Pasternack, Rory Phillips, Daniel Ranweiler, Andrija Šoć, Daniel Sutherland, Michael Yuen, and Allen Wood.

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