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## Kant as a Carpenter of Reason: The Highest Good and Systematic Coherence

### Introduction

At the end of each *Critique*,<sup>1</sup> Kant deploys the highest good as a key element in the moral proof of God's existence and immortality of the soul. While interpreters disagree on the merits of Kant's arguments in the first and second *Critiques* respectively, there is at least a general consensus about the importance of the highest good relative to the arguments. The same cannot be said for the highest good in third *Critique*, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where consensus is lacking about what the highest good's function is and, consequently, divisiveness when it comes to answering a central question, namely: What is the highest good actually *good for* in the third *Critique*?

Two well-established answers to this question articulate the highest good (and the postulates as the conditions of its realizability) as either, one, validating the bindingness of the moral law or, two, aiding the overcoming of radical evil. Since many have already developed and discussed these views, I bracket them and turn to a new angle of approach, namely, that the highest good's value might be primarily in aiding the creation of a systematic outlook in philosophical contemplation.<sup>2</sup> This value, I show, was further signaled through Kant's use of a term whose meaning he thought obvious. The term's

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<sup>1</sup> I refer to the *Critique of Pure Reason* by the A/B pagination. All other references refer to the *Akademie Ausgabe* (AA) of his collected works in 29 volumes by the *Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (1902 – ). The first number refers to the volume, the number(s) after the colon to the AA pagination. Unless noted, all translations refer to the Cambridge editions of his works.

<sup>2</sup> In the third *Critique*, the highest good also serves a role in determining matters of faith [*Glaubenssachen*] (see AA 5:469), but this – I think – is not exhaustive of its function therein.

meaning has shifted, however, obfuscating much of his original intent. The term in German is, *Bündigkeit*, and comes originally from the carpentry trade, in which it denoted a well-made structure of beams fit together in mutual support. I show how this term was synonymous with “coherence” [*konsequent sein*] for Kant and illuminated, in a metaphorical sense, what he took to be the highest goal of philosophy, namely, constructing a systematic outlook through contemplation. The resulting picture shows that Kant thought philosophers must be both legislators and carpenters of reason. And the highest good could serve as the *Bauplan*, or blueprint, in which all the beams of transcendental idealism (its necessary cognitions, judgments, and ideas) fit together towards a common purpose, namely: the construction of a world that combines all the domains of experience in a well-fitting manner, oriented towards the good.<sup>3</sup>

First, I explain the highest good’s importance and its place in the third *Critique* (Section 1). Then, I analyze historical evidence for seeing the highest good as important for *konsequent* thinking (Section 2). Finally, I articulate why *konsequent* or coherent thinking is the highest desideratum of philosophy, how the carpentry metaphor elucidates it, and why the highest good is important for achieving it in the third *Critique* (Section 3).

## 1. The Highest Good in third *Critique*

I first introduce the general form of the highest good (1.a.). Then I situate it within the third *Critique* (1.b. and 1.c.).

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<sup>3</sup> For systematic readings, see, Düsing (2013, 155ff), Sweet (2022), and Zammito (1992, esp. Ch. 17).

### *1.a. The Highest Good*

Kant thinks that we need the highest good because every volition must have an object or end.<sup>4</sup> And when searching for the object of moral volitions, no circumscribed end in the world could adequately correspond to the moral law's demand. Instead, with every moral action, Kant thought, we intend the production of, as stated in the second *Critique*, "the highest good, as the object and *final end* [*Endzweck*] of pure practical reason" (AA 5:129). Because the moral law is a universal form of volition, its corresponding object must also be universal. Naturally, every particular act has some contingent, material expression, such as helping a collapsed Samaritan on the road ahead. But the particularized moral volition is not moral because of its contingent content, which would make it hypothetical, but because of its form. Therefore, every particular moral action, irrespective of its specific content, ultimately aims towards a single objective that represents what would result if all volitions shared this universal form.

What is the nature of this object? To qualify as the "unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason" (AA 5:108), a final end must – Kant thinks – include not only every morally obligatory action but also every morally permissible objective good. As a result, the highest good is a "mixtum compositum" of two elements whose "combination is cognized as a priori – thus as practically necessary and not as derived from experience" (AA 5:113), namely: the agent's virtue and happiness that is proportionate to and therefore dependent on the agent's virtue. Only the totality of virtuous actions

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<sup>4</sup> "Now it is indeed undeniable that every volition must also have an object and hence a matter" (AA 5:63). See also AA 6:4 and 8:279n.

and other morally conditioned goods meets the requirements for the highest good to qualify as the final end for morality; otherwise, it would be *too* circumscribed an end for the universal form of moral volition.

Furthermore, God enters the picture since we only control our own virtue. But if the total object is practically possible (i.e., realizable), then we must postulate God who has structured the world such that a proportionate amount of happiness corresponds to our degree of virtue. This postulate ensures the provision of all morally permissible goods so that a complete amount of goodness obtains. And further still, since we are obligated not merely to be morally proficient but rather morally perfect, Kant thinks, we must postulate an afterlife in which we morally progress until we become one with the goodness prescribed by the moral law.

This quick sketch of the highest good and its conditions raises many questions and avenues of interpretation. I subscribe to the view that the *highest* good is best interpreted in maximalist terms, although Kant's own position is ambiguous.<sup>5</sup> By *maximalist*, I mean that it represents a state in which every person (eventually) attains moral perfection and proportionate happiness in a world to come for which one's lifetime constitutes an important opening act.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In the *End of All Things* (1794), Kant waffles between "dualistic" and "unitist" views of the afterlife, treating both as live options. A dualist thinks some are saved and others damned, whereas all are saved according to the unitist. Although Kant says we ought to act "*as if*" dualism is true, for practical reasons, since unitism might "lull us too much into an indifferent sense of security" (AA 8:330), he finishes agnostically regarding their respective theoretical superiority. Using fear of Hell, however, as an incentivization strategy is not easily squared with Kant's tenet that only actions done from duty count as truly moral. I thank an anonymous reviewer for pushing me on this.

<sup>6</sup> Pasternack (2017) shows well that the highest good "in the world," need not be restricted to nature as the domain of all sensible experience: "for there are numerous passages where [Kant] uses 'world' far more broadly than just in reference to this physical-causal order" (445). That said, nature is still the immediate arena of moral life. We can only attain moral perfection fully in an infinite striving in a moral afterlife.

Philosophically, the maximalist view has much in its favor. For one, were we to postulate that *only a few* can achieve moral perfection and enjoy proportionate happiness, then this good would be *sub summum* in relation to a possible world in which something obtains akin to religions professing universalist soteriologies, e.g., some denominations of Christianity and Mahayana Buddhism. Without the maximalist view, moreover, it is unclear how the highest good could qualify as each and every individual's object in a practically necessary way across time. Only if we all *can* attain it completely regardless of when and where we are in history is it practically necessary in the strongest sense. That is, if only a far-flung, future generation achieves the highest good after I die, then my virtue is (at best) only circumstantially and, thus, contingently related to future states of happiness.<sup>7</sup> A necessary combination would require, however, that there be a synthetic unity a priori between my virtue and a proportionate degree of happiness thereto. This entails the immortality of each individual if we are thinking of the *summum* of every possible *bonum*. And, further, without the maximalist reading it would be unclear how perfect proportionality, which I take it follows from the highest good's universal and necessary constitution, could otherwise result.<sup>8</sup> If left non-maximalist, that is, the highest good will never obtain qua *summum*, since this requires that the world (including the sensible and supersensible domains) is structured to enable that all of our actions connect with the highest good's completed production. And since the highest good's complete production requires happiness proportionate to virtue, this entails

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<sup>7</sup> Kant endorses such a view in his essay, *Idea of a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent* (1784), but never seems to take it up again minus immortality for the rest of his career.

<sup>8</sup> I agree with Beiser (2008), Englert & Chignell (forthcoming), Fugate (2014a, 2014b), and Pasternack (2014, 2017), and disagree with Guyer (2016), Reath (1988), and Wood (2020) for whom individual immortality is eventually replaced by the immortality of the human species. For my take on conceptualizing the afterlife see Englert 2023.

God to guarantee that the world, in the broad sense noted, is ordered rationally.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the highest good is – as I read it – fundamentally bound up with theology in Kant’s thought. We must begin with all our power to realize morality in nature, but morality points beyond to the noumenal. For the *highest* good to obtain, there must be more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in a naturalistic philosophy.

Turning to the third *Critique*: I see this maximalist conception of the highest good, as it were, come down closer to earth and influencing our judgments about how our moral teleology and free actions in nature relate to creation as a whole. Our moral teleology, as Kant refers to it, is after all partially embedded in nature. And thus it must connect with the way we judge nature as a unified system in which we act. This might seem at odds with the maximalist reading just proposed since its supposition of a personal afterlife is outside sensible nature. Yet even if the highest good requires individual immortality (to be properly maximalist), one’s future life must stand in a continuity relation with moral striving in this lifetime.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, morality must fit into nature, despite heterogeneous laws, since nature is the first stage in which we ought to be moral. The question, therefore, is how to construct a unified model of experience in which nature and freedom harmonize. It is this question that Kant takes up at the end of the third *Critique* and which I now analyze.

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<sup>9</sup> These entailment relations are logical since for Kant we are dealing with relations between thoughts and concomitant assents.

<sup>10</sup> The afterlife remains the main locus of the highest good’s realization for individuals. That is not to say that inter-generational projects are any less important. However, I do not think the main purpose of the highest good in the third *Critique* is to build a stabilizing community for morality, though that arguably is a part of the story, see, e.g., Moran (2011, 2012), Sussman (2015), and Sweet (2013).

### *1.b. Reflective Judgments and Contemplation*

Stage setting is required about the general purpose of the third *Critique* in order to understand the highest good's place within it.

To begin, in the third *Critique* Kant investigates our power to judge and whether it has an a priori principle that might explain certain claims we make when judging objects as beautiful, states as sublime, or organisms as self-determining unities. Kant believes there is such a principle, namely: purposiveness [*Zweckmäßigkeit*], which underlies a unique class of judgments that arise whenever represented objects engage our imaginations in ways beyond standard objective judgments. Kant refers to this unique class as *reflective* judgments in contrast to *constitutive* judgments, which are those where a perfect fit holds between sensible appearances and the concepts (i.e., categories) provided by the understanding. Constitutive judgments are preconditions of representing an object of possible experience at all.

Reflective judgments are those employed based on a need to go beyond the pure categories of experience (which suffice for constitutive or determining judgments). We lack a perfect fit between the sensible appearances and our concepts. The appearing object – as it were – overloads our cognitive capacity. Or put differently: some objects, once synthesized as representations of possible experience, engage us beyond basic constitutive judging. For instance, beautiful objects hold our attention by inviting further assaying and lingering. There is more to an object that is beautiful, as it were, than meets the (initial) eye(ing). To understand how it holds our attention and affects our cognitive faculties in such a pleasurable way, we search for what could account for its possibility. Then, via the imagination

and analogy, we import concepts to think about the object that enable our making fuller sense of it. This process is a pleasurable, self-reproducing free play of one's mental faculties that is enjoyable *for its own sake*. It has what Kant refers to as the "mere form of purposiveness," even if it brings about no further purpose beyond this pleasurable state (AA 5:221). Moreover, in adjudging the possibility of experiences of beauty, the transcendental philosopher arguably<sup>11</sup> imputes purposiveness as involved in explaining the possibility of such aesthetic experiences in the first place – as if such attunements between subject and object were so arranged precisely for this purpose of attaining such pleasurable states (see, in particular, AA 5:220). That is, cognizing beautiful objects requires conceiving of them as if they and our cognitive faculties are so determined to produce precisely such experiences, namely, the enjoyment of lingering with them and plumbing them for deeper meaning.

In another way, this principle of purposiveness enables us to judge organisms since we cannot make sense of certain features of them (ourselves included) by mechanical laws alone. Our constitutive judgments leave too much of the organism unexplained. Indeed, in order to make sense of them (Kant thinks) we cannot help but judge them as organized *as if* they are self-organizing unities determined by a reciprocal relation between part and whole. For this reason, Kant notes that we judge organisms as "natural ends," and indeed as that which "first provide objective reality for the concept of an *end* that is not a practical end but an end of *nature*" (AA 5:376). Put more simply, we cannot help but judge them as organized by an internal purposiveness of the parts being there *for the sake* of the whole.

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<sup>11</sup> This is my own interpretative gloss of §§10 - 12 of the third *Critique*. But they are notoriously difficult to decipher and, of course, open to varying interpretations.



Finally, reflective judgments, while not counting as objective knowledge claims about possible objects of experience, are nonetheless not merely up to *me* and *my* imagination. Because they are grounded in the shared, a priori principle of purposiveness, we may claim a “subjective universality” (AA 5:212) for these judgments. That is, we can claim a universal validity for them such that we can expect others to agree with us. Still, they ultimately have to do with the way represented objects affect us as opposed to how objects must be constituted to possibly affect us in the first place (which is what constitutive judgments enable).

Turning now to the highest good, it enters at the end of the work in the Doctrine of Method of teleological judgment where Kant analyzes how we can properly apply the a priori principle of purposiveness and reflective judgments to experience writ large. While he has shown that beautiful objects and organisms elicit reflective judgments in us, Kant thinks that when we seek to understand nature as a whole, namely, as the system out of which organisms emerge, in which beauty is experienced, and in which our lives as moral beings are embedded, we are naturally led to question why it exists. We are led, namely, to search for the final end of creation itself. And to answer this question, Kant thinks we must also judge reflectively just as we judged certain parts of nature.<sup>12</sup> That is, based on our employment of purposiveness to find all the ends of nature, we operate tacitly under the working hypothesis that *all* of nature (as a unified system) must be connected or tuned in to the same game of ends. This requires engaging our imaginations, but in a rule-guided manner abiding by the same principles at work when judging parts of nature reflectively.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf. for a helpful analysis of this Watkins (2019, esp. Chapter 8) and Ameriks (2013, esp. Chapter 11).

In this process of applying reflective judgment to creation as a whole, Kant demonstrates what is best described as a form of “calm contemplation,” in which the philosopher is reflectively judging the whole of creation. Though Kant uses “contemplation” mostly to refer to aesthetic judgments,<sup>13</sup> he also references cases in which it can apply to judgments that take up big-picture or “last” questions such as: “to marvel at the greatness of God, for which a mood of calm contemplation and an entirely free judgment is requisite” (AA 5:263). This sort of contemplation, I contend, produces a specific train of reflective thought terminating in the highest good as a common point of reference.

### *1.c. The Highest Good as a Beziehungspunkt for Contemplation*

What end could serve as the final end of creation? In §§81-86, Kant answers this question with what I will refer to as his *ethico-teleological reflection*. This line of reflection reveals Kant, as it were, performatively testing the coherence of various systematic outlooks and, ultimately, settling with one centered on the highest good.

Kant proceeds by process of elimination. He takes up various perspectives about what end might serve until he discovers a dissonance or lack of fit with other judgments. For example, what if there were *no* final end at all? Drawing out the consequences to test this thought, he asserts that one would have a model of creation that – while not impossible – would exhibit the world as “a mere desert, existing in vain without a final end” (AA 5:442). Albeit logically consistent (since we could, e.g., conceive of morality as a mental delusion and purposes as mechanistically explainable in such a “desert”), this does

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<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., AA 5:209, 247, 258, and 292.

not produce a model that coheres well with our moral and reflective-teleological judgments that are subjectively necessary. Hence, we should contemplate further.

In a nutshell, at the denouement of Kant's reflective contemplation a superior model comes into view. First, Kant determines what sort of end is required. Accounting for the possibility of why creation exists requires an end outside of nature, since only such an end could condition without requiring its own condition. Only an end, that is, unconditioned by space and time, could successfully serve as the condition of nature and all creation itself: "A **final end** [*Endzweck*] is that end which needs no other as the condition of its possibility" (AA 5:434). Here, Kant thinks we find a felicitous potential for interconnection between natural and moral areas of experience. For in §§84-86, he develops the position that only one final end arises in our search for a final end of creation, namely: moral nature as such<sup>14</sup> and morality's corresponding object, or, the highest good as an unconditioned system of ends. Concluding with a weighty claim, unprecedented in any of his previous works, Kant asserts that we cannot help but judge the highest good as the final end of creation: "[I]f creation has a final end at all, we cannot conceive of it except as having to correspond to the final end of morality" (AA 5:453-454).<sup>15</sup> This conclusion, moreover, makes good on a promise from the Introduction of the third *Critique*, namely, that it will provide a "ground of the **unity**" that "makes possible the transition" between our theoretical and practical employments of reason (AA 5:176). This requires unpacking.

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<sup>14</sup> Since it is the only thing of which we are aware that sets ends for the sake of those ends themselves and these ends are *not* derived from sensible (spatiotemporal) experience.

<sup>15</sup> See also AA 5:435 and AA 6:60.

How precisely can the final end of morality, the highest good, unify practical and theoretical reason? The answer in brief: it represents a “*Beziehungspunkt*,” or common point of reference, by straddling both domains in judgment. I show this from each side respectively.

Starting with the theoretical side: Kant thinks there is a need to think of nature in both mechanical and teleological terms as unified. If the universe were merely an order of mechanical laws determining collisions of matter, it would be pointless. Moreover, we could not make sense of organisms were they to arise based on mechanical laws alone (see 1.b.). For this reason, in §80 of the third *Critique*, Kant argues that without “subordinating” the mechanical order to the teleological, we would have an incomplete account of much that goes on in the world. But nothing in nature obviously establishes how these two orders could be unified. Indeed, even if focusing exclusively on the existence of natural ends, one would not find an overarching answer as to why creation exists. Working only with nature, that is, we would be unable to ground a completely coherent system of ends, accounting for both and why they exist together. If searching through the “nexus of ends discovered in [nature] with ideas of reason [...] we can form no common reference point for all these natural ends [*gemeinschaftlichen Beziehungspunkt aller dieser Naturzwecke*], no sufficient teleological principle [*kein hinreichendes teleologisches Prinzip*] for cognizing all the ends together in a single system” (AA 5:440-441).<sup>16</sup> But one cannot merely throw in the towel and cease contemplating how and why these orders exist and cohere. This is why Kant thinks that our theoretical study of the mechanical and teleological domains requires postulating a “primordial organization” that stands outside of the mechanical order, while employing said order to

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<sup>16</sup> Translation altered to reorder “sufficient teleological principle” in line with the original German.

bring about a system of ends (AA 5:418). There must, therefore, be some idea that can provide for a purposeful unity of nature's mechanistic determination and the self-constituting processes of natural ends, an idea that can provide a ground for unifying the two orders and thereby explain their possibility.

Here, Kant recommends the highest good. First, it is a final end outside nature. Second, it provides a point towards which all mechanistic and teleological order might ultimately work towards: creation might be here, that is, for the sake of realizing the good, as an end that is totally unconditioned by space and time. And for the good to become real, there must be a reality habitable by purposes.

Prima facie, Kant chooses the highest good because he thinks it is the *only* final end we know. In the *Religion* (1793), he writes: "For through this *alone* can an objectively practical reality be provided for the connection of purposiveness from freedom with purposiveness of nature – which we cannot at all do without" (AA 6:5). But beyond a lack of other choices, the account has an appealing simplicity. A nature with its own internal purposiveness can welcome moral purposes to boot, while simultaneously gaining an answer for why it exists in the first place. In contemplating theoretically how nature can hang together as a whole – i.e., such that the mechanical and purposive orders are harmonious and not merely consistent but mutually co-founding of a total system – the highest good fits well as a unifying point even though it is of practical origin. And the fact that it is of practical origin does not infect the model with any problematic claims since we are in the sphere of reflective judgments, playfully linking together concepts for the sake of calm contemplation. And as Kant notes, any inference from analogy about ends in nature is explicitly an analogy with ends in the practical use of reason anyway (cf. AA 5:375).

Turning to the practical side: the way that the highest good organizes the practical domain mirrors how it organizes the theoretical domain. We, as spatiotemporal agents, are determined, qua phenomena, by the same deterministic, mechanical laws of nature that one begins with when contemplating nature. As rational beings, however, we are conscious that we ought to form that very same nature according to the moral law. The path that led to the highest good as necessary for our contemplation of nature provides a means for our contemplation of how the practical, with its unconditioned laws, can be cognized as a domain that stands in a harmonious relation to nature. As Kant notes, it is in how we judge purposively the whole of nature that allows us to cognize it as equally a habitat for *moral* ends. It is “the power of judgment,” which then “provides the mediating concept between the concepts of nature and the concept of freedom, [... namely], in the concept of a *purposiveness* of nature; for thereby is the possibility of the final end, which can become actual only in nature and in accord with its laws, cognized” (AA 5:196). And the fact that we have only one final end to organize our contemplation of nature’s order allows us to treat one and the same final end as straddling domains in judgment. Nature needs a final end to ground its own possibility as a system of mechanistic laws and teleological ends, and morality has a final end that must seek to realize itself in nature. In reflective judgment, we can zero in on one and the same final end, the highest good, as operative to connect both domains.

To designate this unifying role, Kant refers to the highest good as a “common reference point [*Beziehungspunkt*]” (AA 5:440-441) for all ends (natural and moral) in one system. The same language recurs in the *Religion*, where he states that the highest good “does not increase the number of duties, but provides them with a special point of reference [*Beziehungspunkt*] of the unification of all ends”

(AA 6:5). This point of reference is not the result of a one-off reflective judgment about, say, a property of an organism serving some end, but rather a recurring ground employed in meta-reflective judgments. When properly brought together, one's contemplation delivers a systematic outlook arranged around a center point that interconnects the whole in meaningful ways. Through the highest good, Kant finds a terminus in which all domains of experience can interconnect to form a single system out of the respective sub-systems. Just as Sellars (1963) put it, Kant also thinks that the goal of philosophical contemplation "abstractly formulated, is to understand how things in the broadest possible sense of the term hang together in the broadest possible sense of the term" (369).

Beyond unifying practical and theoretical reason, the highest good provides the added bonus of handily grounding how our reflective judgments of the beautiful, sublime, and organic also fit into the same systematic outlook. And, further, it points us towards the divine, making room for rational Belief. The highest good, as it were, acts as a grand central station that can connect *all* the elements of reason into *one* system, one view of the world. This terminus of the ethico-teleological reflection began with the question of how to apply teleological judgments to nature as a whole. The process revealed Kant modeling how a systematic outlook of experience might arise in contemplation. How Kant continues the doctrine of method, however, is perplexing. Instead of letting things rest with how we ought to judge reflectively, Kant pivots to provide a moral proof for God's existence, which elicited immediate confusion from Kant's contemporaries and has perplexed interpreters ever since.

## 2. Garve's Confusion and Kant's Attempt to Correct It

After the ethico-teleological reflection, Kant continues in §87 with the moral proof of God's existence. The argument's focus remains on our "moral teleology" (AA 5:447) and the need to make "moral thinking ... coherent" (AA 5:451n) or the need to "conceive" [*vorstellen*] how two necessary judgments "harmonize" [*zusammenstimmen*] with each other when reflecting on experience and the last questions of existence (AA 5:450). Apropos to a critique about the power to judge and its proper application to nature as a whole, the proof proper seems, *prima facie*, about achieving coherency between necessary judgments that might not appear to reciprocally support each other. However, the section is messily organized and not clearly articulated, thus allowing its interpretation in at least two ways (2.a). Consequently, this obfuscates the contemplative function of the highest good. I illustrate through a historical episode how this messy proof has caused confusion since Kant's own day (2.b.). However, Kant's response to the confusion is informative in understanding why he found the highest good essential for coherent thinking (3.c.).

### 2.a. *A Messy Proof*

It is tantalizing that §87, the moral proof for God's existence, with its diminutive five pages has caused so much confusion about the highest good's role in the third *Critique*. Indeed, two interpretive trends have emerged that are quite at odds. One camp thinks that Kant employs the highest good as extending his argument from the *Critique of Practical Reason*, namely, that we require the highest good – as Allen Wood (2020) puts it – in order to be rational in our willing albeit in a "different and larger context"



(49).<sup>17</sup> It is based in short on the premise that whatever we will must be possible for our willing to be rational. I call this view the *rational view*. The other camp thinks that Kant's argument in the third *Critique* is based on moral-psychological needs that we have as finite rational beings with a propensity to radical evil or despair.<sup>18</sup> This I will refer to as the *moral-psychological view*.

These two competing views arise because the argument can be read differently depending on where one sets the emphasis. The first portion of §87, which I will refer to as the *proof proper*, begins with a discussion of how we can square our moral teleology with nature. This might appear to support the rational view at first glance. But Kant, after seeming to conclude the proof with three stars marking a caesura, provides the following remark:

*This proof[...] is not meant to say that it is just as necessary to assume the existence of God as it is to acknowledge the validity of the moral law, hence that whoever cannot convince himself of the former can judge himself to be free from the obligations of the latter. No! All that would have to be surrendered in that case would be the **aim** of realizing the final end in the world [...]. Every rational being would still have to recognize himself as forever strictly bound to the precept of morals; for its laws are formal and command unconditionally, without regard to ends. (AA 5:450-1, emphases added)*

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<sup>17</sup> See also, Bader (2016), Beck (1960, 273n35), Bojanowski (2016), Engstrom (1992), Esser (2016, esp. 249 & 255), Suprenant (2008), Tomasi (2016), and Wood (1970).

<sup>18</sup> Diverse reconstructions of the moral-psychological view abound. Some argue that, while not motivating us to be moral, Kant thought we nevertheless require assurance that our moral striving is not hopeless in order to persist. Examples of this view are Adams (1987), Denis (2005), Guyer (2000, 361-371), Beiser (2006, 616), Sussman (2015), and Chignell (2020; 2023). Others, like Fugate (2014a) and Pasternack (2017, 50-55), think that rational Belief in the highest good is needed to combat our propensity to radical evil by removing obstacles that hinder moral action. Finally, Ebels-Duggan (2016) has a view that fits neither group since the moral-psychological benefit arises from how rational Belief can resolve "a full-blown practical conflict" that has nothing to do with action (92).

The lines emphasized seem to undermine the view that the exact same sort of argument as in the second *Critique* is occurring in the proof proper. They indicate instead that there is no rational constraint on our willing that requires us to assume the existence of immortality and God.

Kant then continues after this clarifying remark with a discussion of what would happen if someone failed to believe in an afterlife and God. He provides an example of a virtuous atheist (his example is Spinoza) and asks: “How would [Spinoza] judge his own inner purposive determination by the moral law, which he actively honors?” (AA 5:452). Kant answers on the virtuous atheist’s behalf that either he “would certainly have to give up as impossible [the end of morality]” (AA 5:452) or, assuming he somehow maintained his commitment, he would suffer “damage to [his] moral disposition” (AA 5:452-453). Without belief in the conditions of the highest good (God and a future life), a virtuous atheist would have a worldview in which all striving was, essentially, pointless, which in turn would produce hindrances to moral behavior. This passage has been the primary focus of moral-psychological interpretations.

It is therefore unsurprising that this proof has caused confusion. If one looks to the proof proper it might seem as if the rational view is *prima facie* correct. But the remark after the three-star caesura seems to undermine this reading, at least the bit about it playing an important role for vouchsafing the moral law’s validity. Subsequently, the virtuous atheist example appears to shift the argument into the domain of moral-psychology. For it is the “damage to our moral disposition” and “hindrance to being moral” that we are trying to avoid by Believing in the highest good’s realizability thanks to immortality and God. A quasi duck-rabbit illusion appears in play. Focus on the proof proper without considering what comes after the caesura and one faces an argument with some family resemblance to the rational

view from the second *Critique*; focus, by contrast, on what comes after the caesura and it appears that it is the moral-psychology of the agent that requires the highest good and its postulates.

A historical episode reveals that confusion about the proof began immediately after the third *Critique*'s publication. How Kant attempted to clarify his position, I will argue underscored the highest good's importance for coherent thinking.

### *2.b. Garve's Confusion about the Proof*

Kant published the third *Critique* in 1790. Though a huge success, Kant's contemporaries were just as confused by the moral proof as interpreters are today. Indeed, Kant was confronted by an early misinterpretation of his proof by a highly esteemed contemporary and friend, namely, Christian Garve. Once confronted with Garve's interpretation of his work in 1792, Kant immediately sought to clarify his view.

Garve's interpretation is in his 1792 work, *Versuche über verschiedene Gegenstände aus der Moral, der Litteratur und dem gesellschaftlichen Leben*.<sup>19</sup> In a lengthy remark placed at the end of Volume One, Part I of the work, Garve describes his confusion about the highest good in the third *Critique*. He begins by noting that there is a theoretical debate about whether "moral perfection [*moralische Vollkommenheit*]" (1792, 111) or happiness constitutes the final end of creation. He goes on to argue that those who endorse the former, namely, Kantians, have a problem. On the one hand,

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<sup>19</sup> No translations of Garve's work into English exist, so all translation are mine.

they want “the observance of the moral law to be – without any consideration of happiness at all – the only final end of creation” (1792, 111). And yet:

They are even agreed that the virtuous person – during his unselfish obedience to the moral law – never can nor may lose sight of that point of view [including happiness]. Never may, I say, because otherwise the transition to the invisible world, which leads to the certainty of the existence of God and immortality, is completely lost; a certainty, in fact, which according to the theory of these philosophers themselves is actually necessary in order to give the moral system support and stability. The virtuous person, therefore, strives – according to these principles – unceasingly to be worthy of happiness but – in so far he is truly virtuous – never to be happy. (1792, 111-112)

Garve highlights that happiness for Kantians appears baked into moral actions (whether admitted or not) in order to account for how one can sustain moral commitment. It is not because we need happiness as a reward for acting morally, but rather because it is the crucial element of the highest good that we ourselves cannot bring about. To ensure its possibility, we require God and immortality. Without God and immortality, there is no highest good as well as, in turn, no “support and stability.” Garve here is suggesting that – despite remarks to the contrary – psychological needs seem to drive the inclusion of the highest good along with our need that it be completed. Some form of wishful thinking, Garve insinuates, is in the offing, as he shifts back and forth between seeing a duck and a rabbit.

2.c. *Kant's Response to Garve*

Thanks to Garve's criticism, Kant sought to clarify the highest good's fit in his theory as enabling coherent thinking as a unique philosophical desideratum. Indeed, he responded in a flurry of activity from 1792 to 1793. One change in particular from the second edition of third *Critique* (1793) is relevant for my purposes,<sup>20</sup> namely, an addition composed in 1792 as a direct response to Garve.

To understand why this change stands out, it is important to note that Kant found the first edition of the third *Critique* more or less good enough as evidenced in his correspondence with his publisher at the time. Because the first edition was something of a bestseller when it appeared in 1790, it quickly sold out. François Théodore de Lagarde, Kant's publisher, felt an urge to ramp up sales with the second edition and suggested to Kant in correspondence that they market it with a "second and improved edition" subscript under the title. On October 2, 1792, Kant responded, and forbade "adding the phrase 'second *improved* edition' to the title of the edition [...] since it is not completely honest" (AA 11:359, my translation). Kant's reason? The additions are too few in number and not significant on their own to serve as a "special impetus for its purchase" (AA 11:359, my translation). While minor and selective in one sense, this also tells us that the changes target issues that Kant found unclear and important enough to alter in an otherwise well-pleasing work.

One addition is a long footnote attached to the final line of the proof proper of §87, i.e., right at the end of the concluding line: "es sei ein Gott.\*". The importance of this footnote might easily be overlooked, which is why I cite it at length:

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<sup>20</sup> I focus on the change to the third *Critique*. But Kant also responded in the preface to the *Religion* (see AA 6:3-4, 7n) and the *On the Common Saying Essay* (AA 8:279).

This moral argument is not meant to provide any **objectively** valid proof of the existence of God, nor meant to prove to the doubter that there is a God; rather, it is meant *to prove that if his moral thinking is to be coherent [konsequent], he must include* the assumption of this proposition among the maxims of his practical reason. – Thus it is also not meant to say that it is necessary to assume the happiness of all rational beings in the world in accordance with their morality **for** morals, but rather that it is necessary **through** their morality. (AA 5:450-451n, emphasis added<sup>21</sup>)

First, Kant’s last sentence clearly refutes Garve’s reading as overemphasizing the psychological need for wishful thinking (though it also could refute some versions of the rational view since it insinuates that the validity of the moral law stands irrespective of the highest good’s realizability). The moral proof is not there *for the sake* of securing our morality, but rather because it is “necessary **through**” morality. Second – and most important – Kant in the emphasized portion tells us that the main body of the proof is about *konsequent* moral thinking. And by the term, “konsequent,” Kant had a special technical sense in mind, hidden in a terminological phrase that connects good philosophy with the metaphor of carpentry.

### 3. Kantian Coherence and the Highest Good

The highest good serves as a *Beziehungspunkt* for building a systematic outlook in contemplation (Section 1). But the moral proof, following the ethico-teleological reflection, caused confusion in Kant’s

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<sup>21</sup> I change the Cambridge translation in one respect, namely, to change the translation of *konsequent* from “consistent” (as in the translation) to “coherent.” They are distinct terms as I show below.

own day about the highest good's function in the third *Critique*. Kant corrected Garve by highlighting that the proof is for *konsequent* thinking (Section 2). To end, I connect Sections 1 and 2 by showing that building a systematic outlook requires the achievement of *konsequent* thinking in contemplation. To do so, I describe *konsequent* or coherent thinking (3.a.), how it makes sense of the proof proper in §87 (3.b.), and why Kant thought that coherent thinking was worth the effort required to achieve it (3.c.).

### 3.a. *Bündigkeit and the Philosopher as a Carpenter of Reason*

Thanks to Garve, Kant clarified his position. The highest good is important – as indicated from the clue in the added footnote – for the sake of coherent moral thinking. But what does it mean to think coherently? Though too subtle for Garve to notice and – to my knowledge – overlooked ever since, Kant thought that he was being clear by employing a term that, for him, had an unmistakable, synonymous meaning with an elucidating metaphorical dimension. By *konsequent* thinking, Kant thought it would be obvious that he was seeking not mere consistency, but rather systematic coherence.

Though often translated as “consistent,” *konsequent* or coherent thinking indicated a much more onerous intellectual activity, indeed the ultimate goal of philosophy. For instance, Kant asserts in the second *Critique*: “To be coherent [*Consequent zu sein*], is the greatest obligation [*Obliegenheit*] of a philosopher and yet the most rarely found” (AA 5:24). And in the third *Critique* when discussing the *sensus communis logicus*, Kant with the third maxim of proper thinking, i.e., the “coherent way of thinking” [*konsequente Denkungsart*], repeats that it is “the most difficult to attain” (AA 5:295) of the

three maxims.<sup>22</sup> He refers to it as “3. *Jederzeit mit sich selbst einstimmig denken*” (AA 5:294).<sup>23</sup> While there is a *prima facie* temptation to translate “einstimmig” as consistent, one must proceed cautiously. Already, the fact that Kant insists that this form of thinking is the most difficult to attain indicates that it goes beyond mere consistency, or the law of non-contradiction. Instead, this way of thinking is the most difficult because it requires the exploration of interconnections between various judgments of experience to check whether they, beyond consistent, can further support each other in a mutually reinforcing manner. That is, that they stand in a meaningful “reciprocal relation” (AA 5:447) as he notes in third *Critique*’s moral proof. This is clearer in the original German. “Einstimmig,” with its literal meaning of “of-one-voice” or “one-voiced” and related term “zusammenstimmen” or “voicing-together” (which is used to also indicate the result of konsequent thinking in the third *Critique*), evokes the musical imagery of a harmony between notes and voices singing together to create a unified harmonic product. While apt, I turn away from the musical metaphor to focus on the metaphor that Kant most often thinks in terms of when referring to konsequent thinking and which more clearly represents what defines coherence as a philosophical desideratum, namely, a carpentry metaphor that has been lost from interpretive view.

The key clue for this metaphor comes in the form of Kant’s definition of *konsequent* as meaning the same as *bündig*. For example, in his *Dohna Logik* from 1792 (delivered as he was responding to Garve and drafting the footnote added to the second edition of the third *Critique*), Kant identifies the two as

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<sup>22</sup> The first is the maxim to think for oneself and the second to think from the perspective of another. All three presuppose that one is not self-contradictory.

<sup>23</sup> These three maxims are repeated also in the *Anthropology* (AA 7:200) and *Jäsche Logic* (AA 9:57). Melissa Merritt (2018, 78-79) provides an excellent resource for tracking other instances of the three maxims.



synonymous: “*Bündig* means the same as *konsequent*, that everything stands in *nexu*, in connection [*Zusammenhänge*]. The coherent is the highest thing in the use of our cognition – to be consequent” (AA 24:735).<sup>24</sup> And one arrives at this highest goal, Kant clarifies, when a series of cognitions that are in tune with “logical laws” can “hang together” [*zusammenhängen*] as a “system” (AA 24:736). In Reflection 2440, Kant scribbled together: “*bündig*, in connection and system, in proofs” (AA 16:368). And in the *Anthropology Starke 2* lectures from 1790-1:

Bündigkeit is very different from the thoroughness of judgment. For *bündig* properly means that one in the *use* of all his principles is unified and coherent [*ein stimmig und consequent*]. Thus, a text is called *bündig* if all the principles in it are in exact agreement with how it is carried out. [...] Coherent [consequent] judging is the greatest perfection of the use of reason. (AA 25:1563-4, my emphasis)

Achieving coherent thinking, therefore, is the goal of philosophy that seeks to make out of a consistent set of cognitions, a harmonious system in which all parts are related together in a reciprocal manner by working towards a common goal. Coherence entails consistency, but the reverse does not hold. For one can have a consistent set that can be put to absolutely no unified purpose or “use” in forming a systematic whole in which the parts contribute to creating something greater than their mere summation. With *Bündigkeit*, one seeks to create a systematic outlook, as indicated in Section 1. And while this might seem like a minor semantic point, the identification of “*konsequent*” with “*bündig*” is crucial for understanding Kant’s notion of coherence. While “*bündig*” in contemporary German means

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<sup>24</sup> See also his Reflection 2437, where he notes their identity: “*bündig*, consequent” (AA 16:367).

“succinct” or “compact,” the meaning in Kant’s day pertained to carpentry. And it was from this literal, artisanal meaning of the term that Kant derived his figurative, logical meaning.

When consulting the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* compiled by the Brothers Grimm, both meanings of *bündig* are present. The main, literal meaning is the term carpenters used to describe the ideal formation of an edifice by “exactly placed and connected carpentry beams.” The secondary, figurative meaning, which takes its cue from this literal meaning for craftspeople, applies it to logic as pertaining to the “often abstract, from itself connecting, setting [of] determinations and inferences.”<sup>25</sup> The clincher for the importance that this term possessed for Kant is evident in the fact that one of the listed sources of *bündig*’s second, figurative meaning by the Brothers Grimm (as well as its nominalization, *Bündigkeit*) is none other than Immanuel Kant. Thus, a coherent proof for Kant goes beyond the mere non-contradiction of judgments. It is, indeed, as the above passages noted the *highest* goal of philosophy, because it shows how all judgments fit together, as it were, like beams in a well-made house.

Once one is tuned into *Bündigkeit* or coherence in this sense, one finds it used throughout Kant’s works in the logical sense. In the *Preface* to the second *Critique*, Kant writes of Hume that he knew “how to draw conclusions from [principles] with all logical *Bündigkeit*” (AA 5:13).<sup>26</sup> And most importantly, one notices that Kant even sandwiches his moral proof in §87 of the third *Critique* between

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<sup>25</sup> This and the previous passage are my translations from the *Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm*, entry “Bündig;” the first, literal meaning is “von genau gefügten und verbundenen zimmerbalken,” while the figurative meaning is “häufig abstract, von sich bindenden, fügenden bestimmungen und schlüssen” (<https://woerterbuchnetz.de/>). Note: these are the definitions from the original dictionary and not the *Neubearbeitung* that was undertaken in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

<sup>26</sup> Translated in the Cambridge edition as “validity.”

two explicit references to coherence in this sense.<sup>27</sup> As already mentioned, Kant adds the footnote to the second edition in which he underscores that the proof is about the coherence of our moral thinking at the end of the proof proper. This addition, however, must have seemed redundant to Kant. For when one looks to the beginning of the proof proper in §87 where Kant is setting things up, he employs the term *Bündigkeit* to describe what he is attempting to show already in the first edition. Right at its start, he writes of the proof proper: “We will first describe the progress of reason from that moral teleology and its relation to the physical [teleology] to theology, and will subsequently consider the possibility and coherence [*Bündigkeit*] of this sort of inference” (AA 5:448, emphasis added).<sup>28</sup> Thus, after having just finished the ethico-teleological reflection, coherence or *Bündigkeit* was on Kant’s mind: the systematic outlook of philosophy depended on the structural integrity of how everything fit together in a mutually supporting manner. If read in this light, the proof proper can be read as Kant’s attempt to complete the edifice of philosophy by testing the systematic outlook of the foregoing philosophical contemplation. It is about testing whether the object of morality and value in the world are coherent given what we otherwise judge about nature. And if this final check is successful, then the highest good’s function in grounding a systematic outlook of the whole of experience can persist in unifying the two domains and even throwing a bridge to religion.

It is worth lingering with *Bündigkeit* and *konsequent* thinking to unpack their shared philosophical significance. First, both only apply to wholes that are organized relative to an idea in Kant’s

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<sup>27</sup> Kant also uses *Bündigkeit* in this logical sense at the end of the third *Critique*’s doctrine of method, see AA 5:480. For other such logical uses in published works, see AA 8:196, 200; 9:6, 59; 16:578, 579.

<sup>28</sup> Translation altered to replace “cogency” with “coherence” for *Bündigkeit*.

sense. This is the key difference from mere consistency, which lacks any reference to a unifying idea. One could, that is, arbitrarily determine a logically consistent group by thinking A and B together if A and B do not stand in contradiction to one another. But this, on its own, does not entail that A and B are coherent or *bündig*. To be coherent in Kant's sense, A and B must be mutually related to a third concept (an idea) C that explains why A and B are present and related as they are. While the former, consistency, sets a low cognitive bar in which A and B need not support each other towards a common end, coherency requires that A and B stand in a relation determined by the unity in which they are parts. Two beams – before being fit together into a frame of a house – might, when piled in the lumberyard, be considered consistent since they can stand in community, occupying a shared space and time. Similarly, one can maintain two thoughts consistently even if they do not *fit* well together or mutually support one another.

Take, for example, two consistent thoughts that do not cohere well: I could judge, say, that exposure to aesthetic experiences is essential to a good life but also judge that avant-garde art is “not true art” when compared to classical forms. There is nothing inconsistent in these judgments. One could cease contemplation and move on. However, there is a tension here, a lack of *Bündigkeit*, since one notices that many avant-garde aesthetic experiences are valued. Further, one might suspect that artists working with both forms would, in essence, agree with the first judgment about the value of aesthetic experience in general. Here, one might feel challenged to continue reflecting. Indeed, coherent thinking entails the second maxim of the *sensus communis logicus* for Kant, which means we must consider how others think to achieve coherence, or take account “of everyone else's way of representing in thought”

(AA 5:293).<sup>29</sup> So ceasing contemplation about avant-garde art would not produce coherent thinking. But if one reflects further with the question, “Might avant-garde art contribute to a good life through aesthetic experiences of a different kind than I am familiar with?” one might discover that the former judgment (about the value of aesthetic experience in general) is now not only connected with more forms of art, but further is stabilized by having a richer account of aesthetic experience on the whole. As Susan Sontag puts it in *Styles of Radical Will* (1969), modern avant-garde art often employs silence, emptiness, and reduction to highlight aspects of experience that go unnoticed in classical forms:

These programs for art’s impoverishment must not be understood simply as terroristic admonitions to audiences, but rather as strategies for improving the audience’s experience. The notions of silence, emptiness, and reduction sketch out new prescriptions for looking, hearing, etc. – which promote a more immediate, sensuous experience of art or confront the artwork in a more conscious conceptual way. (1969, 12-13)

Adjusting the judgment about avant-garde art, therefore, could harmonize the two judgments so that they fit together. And if so, there is a new-won stability for one’s overall view that aesthetic experience is valuable since one’s revised judgment of the value of avant-garde art reinforces the original judgment about the value of aesthetic experience in general.

Kant, though, has grander aspirations for coherence in philosophy. Indeed, Kant wants to create a systematic outlook in which the world comes into view, as opposed to improving merely the coherence of one sub-system. This explains why he refers to it as the hardest intellectual activity that is the most

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<sup>29</sup> See the third *Critique* (AA 5:294) where he refers to the second maxim as: “2. To think in the position of everyone else.”

rarely found in philosophers. For it requires a much deeper examination of one's views. This is why the carpentry metaphor is so illuminating. Building a structure represents a long labor. And if multiple beams, stacked in the lumberyard, are fit together for the purpose of supporting a roof along with all the other building materials, this relation is of a completely different quality than their haphazard coexistence. In systematic relations that are well-fitting according to a plan, if one abstracts away from the plan (the roof) and thinks of isolated parts as constituting a mere set with no further relations, one will fail to understand essential features of their relation and their reason for being present at all in the edifice at hand.

### *3.b. The Proof Proper Reconstructed*

If read as establishing coherence or *Bündigkeit* between our judgments, the proof proper from §87 can be read as revealing the highest good's importance for how we think.

Evidence for this is in the passage above, which highlights coherent thinking as the purpose of the proof proper as indicated by the term, *Bündigkeit*. With bracketed letters this time to indicate which aspects of experience are in play, it again states: "We will first describe the progress of reason from that [a] moral teleology and its relation to the [b] physical [teleology] to [c] **theology**, and will subsequently consider the possibility and coherence [*Bündigkeit*] of this sort of inference" (AA 5:448, emphasis added). The areas of experience noted in [a] and [b] have been connected already in the ethico-teleological reflection, representing morality and nature respectively as two domains that share the highest good as a common point of reference. The proof proper will explore the "progress" from these two connected orders of experience to [c] theology, which aims to test the "possibility and *Bündigkeit*

of this sort of inference.” Hence, from the get-go the stakes are clearly about coherency in thought. And this explains why in the proof, Kant notes that our moral teleology “concerns us as beings in the world, upon which this very same law [i.e., the moral law] prescribes us to direct our *judging*” (AA 5:447, emphasis added). The proof indicates that, while involving our moral teleology, the stakes of its success pertain more generally to judgments about the unity of nature and morality.

I offer here a reconstruction of the proof as primarily about the coherence. I take Kant’s cue that the proof can “easily adapt to the form of logical precision” (AA 5:450), as he notes after the caesura:

*The Proof Proper Reconstructed*

1. Philosophy ought to provide a coherent account of experience as a whole.<sup>30</sup> [Philosophical Demand]
  2. Judging experience as a whole leads to two necessary ideas, [a] MORALITY<sup>31</sup> and [b] NATURE,<sup>32</sup> that ought to figure into a coherent account.<sup>33</sup> [Fact of Experience & 1]
  3. A coherent account between [a] and [b] requires the highest good as a common point of reference. [Result of Ethico-Teleological Reflection & 2]
  4. The highest good can only be thought as really possible if we postulate a further idea, namely, [c] GOD, as “another causality.”<sup>34</sup> [Philosophical Postulate & 3]
- C. Therefore, we must Believe in God in order to do as we philosophically ought to do, namely: provide a coherent account of experience as a whole.<sup>35</sup> [1 & 4]

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<sup>30</sup> By “experience as a whole,” I mean the totality of one’s theoretical and practical cognitions.

<sup>31</sup> As an intelligible system organized by the moral law directed towards realizing the highest good as its practically necessary object.

<sup>32</sup> As the sensible world organized by laws (constitutively) and by a physical teleology (reflectively).

<sup>33</sup> Kant indicates this, I believe, throughout the proof with his references to how morality and nature should stand in “reciprocal relation” (AA 5:447) or “harmonize” (AA 5:450, 452) relative to the highest good.

<sup>34</sup> See AA 5:450.

<sup>35</sup> See AA 5:450n.

Since I have already spent time discussing the first three premises (see sections 1.c. and 3.b.), I'll briefly clarify premise (4) and the conclusion.

Premise (4) covers familiar ground from the previous critiques by postulating that only God could ensure that the highest good is possible. While Kant continues to posit the same here (see, AA 5:450), it is situated within a contemplative context in the proof proper. That is, in judging how morality and nature can coherently fit together we require the highest good. And this means that we must have a means for conceiving of the highest good as more than a mere idea. In contrast to the first *Critique*, then, this proof is not predicated on the requirement of securing our motivation to act morally.<sup>36</sup> And, contrary to the second *Critique*, Kant is not concerned with vouchsafing the validity of the moral law's bindingness.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, as he notes right after the caesura, the proof proper "is not meant to say that it is just as necessary to assume the existence of God as it is to acknowledge the validity of the moral law" (AA 5:450). Instead, Kant is concerned – as is appropriate in a critique on the power to judge – with testing a structure of interrelated inferences to see if a coherent whole can result in holding them together in contemplation.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> E.g., "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* 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). See also A811/B839, and the *Collins Lectures* (mid-1770s) AA 27:285.

<sup>37</sup> E.g., "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. (AA 5:144n). See, also, AA 5:114.

<sup>38</sup> I acknowledge the appeal in seeking a unity between Kant's various arguments across the three *Critiques*. To my mind, however, the evidence best supports Kant's views shifting over time.



Turning to the conclusion, what does the “must” mean? The “must,” on my reading, follows from a theoretical instance of *ought* that Kant employs when it comes to the demand of reason. For he insists that it is incumbent on us to provide a coherent account. That Kant thought we had theoretical obligations as rational beings is evidenced in the first *Critique*: “[T]hat therefore a certain systematic unity of all possible empirical concepts [...] *must* be sought; is a school rule or logical principle, without which no use of reason would take place” (A652/B680, my emphasis).<sup>39</sup> Thus, reason imposes on us the demand to seek a coherent, systematically unified picture of the whole. And because we ought to, we must seek every philosophically justifiable avenue that enables us to do so. Here, the only way to do so is to Believe in God. We are, therefore, required by reason to postulate God but – pace the rational view – not for the validity of the moral law, but rather for securing the only idea in relation to which we can form a well-built, coherent model of the whole of experience.<sup>40</sup> The *must* has to do with the theoretical demand that we build a sturdy edifice, a world in which we feel at home with necessary judgments standing in relations of mutual support in working towards a common end.

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<sup>39</sup> See A653/B681. This is also indicated by various forms of the teleological argument for immortality, which Kant connects with a demand that a complete theoretical system be achieved in lecture notes, see, e.g., A827/B855, as well as AA 28:442-3, 687-9, 756-7; and 29:914-7.

<sup>40</sup> Tomasi (2016), who thinks that the ‘must’ “originates from the feeling that we have no alternative but to assume that ‘there is a God’ [...] when making sense of the moral necessity of aiming at the highest good” (122), is on the right track and refers to how this might lead us to casting our “worldview in religious language” (125). But ultimately, the *must* in the proof is weightier than a mere “feeling,” which would be contingent on one’s sensibilities. Indeed, it is requirement that all seek a coherent model of experience through philosophy. One might also ground this ‘must’ based on Kant’s reference to a “*need*” of reason from the *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* essay (AA 8:136).

### *3.c. The Value of Constructing a Philosophical Worldview as a Carpenter of Reason*

Even if we ought to search for *Bündigkeit*, it is not immediately clear what differentiates a life in which it is actively sought and one in which it is spurned. This brings us back to the question with which the study began: What is the highest good actually *good for* in the third *Critique*? Based on the preceding analysis, I conclude by sketching out the result and key virtues that Kant thought made the laborious task worthwhile.

First, the final product of this contemplative process to form a coherent systematic outlook leads to a philosophical *worldview*. And the highest good is good for enabling such a worldview to form because it represents the idea that serves as a – so to speak – *Bauplan* [blueprint] in which all the parts of experience fit together as unified towards a common purpose, which in turn bring a world first into view. The term “worldview,” which originated as a translation of the German term *Weltanschauung*, is quite apposite to describe this systematic outlook. As has been well noted, Kant not only coined the term, *Weltanschauung*, but further developed it as a technical term, with many connected variations, such as *Weltbeschreibung*, *Weltbetrachtung*, *Weltbegriff*, and *Weltgebäude*.<sup>41</sup> The term *worldview*, in various guises, is central to Kantian theory. And it is, furthermore, explicitly related to the contemplative search for a final end of creation at the end of the third *Critique*. Indeed, the result of one’s contemplative practice at the end of the ethico-teleological reflection that Kant emphasizes – but which the Cambridge translation leaves without emphasis – is a reflective standpoint relative to the whole of

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<sup>41</sup> For its coining by Kant and employment as a technical term, see the entry on *Weltanschauung* in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* compiled by the Brothers Grimm, as well as Meier (1967), Naugle (2002), and Englert (2022).

experience that Kant refers to as a “*Betrachtung der Welt*” (AA 5:378, second and third editions) or “*Weltbetrachtung*” (AA 5:446, first edition).

A distinctive mark of Kant’s transcendental idealism as involving rational carpentry is the notion that the production of a world is up to each individual. The world is not given. But the world is also not a mere construct either, parading as if it were given. Rather out of the given elements of experience, each of us must take up the tools of reason if we are to inhabit a world, and an intelligible one at that. Kant asserts as much in *Opus potumum*, explicitly employing the verb *zimmern*, which means literally to create or make out of wood: “Whoever wants to cognize the world must first build it [*zimmern*] and indeed in himself” (AA 21:41).<sup>42</sup> And from the same fascicle in connection with *Weltbeschauung*, Kant writes: “A *cosmotheoros*<sup>43</sup> who creates the elements of knowledge of the world himself, *a priori*, from which he, as, at the same time, an inhabitant of the world, constructs [*zimmert*] a world-vision [*Weltbeschauung*] in the idea” (AA 21:31). Or, from the second fascicle (which was written much earlier than the first): “It is, however, impossible to construct (*zimmern*) a system out of mere empirical concepts. Such would always be a tossed-together aggregate of observations” (AA 21:161, my translation).<sup>44</sup> It serves my purposes well that Kant speaks of constructing a worldview using a term from woodworking. Yet, the carpentry imagery saturates other ways that he articulates this idealistic modeling of the whole of experience in so far as he speaks of the end product as a “*Weltgebäude*” or, literally, *world*

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<sup>42</sup> My translation since it is not included in the Cambridge edition. The first use of “world-view” in English is a translation of Kant’s *Weltanschauung* in Orr (1893).

<sup>43</sup> Adickes (1920, 140) notes that this is most likely inspired by Christiaan Huygens’ posthumous work, *Cosmotheoros, oder weltbetrachtende Muthmassungen von deren himmlischen Erdkugeln und deren Schmuck* (1698, my bold font), which was translated into German with this title for the second edition in 1743.

<sup>44</sup> Since it is not included in the Cambridge translation.

*building*: “Matter with its purposiveness constitutes a *Weltgebäude*” (AA 21:100, my translation).<sup>45</sup> Later in the same fascicle, while discussing “the bringing together” [*Zusammennehmen*] of ideas into a total system, Kant continues: “That is the way it is with a *Weltgebäude* as a totality” (AA 21:138, my translation). In sum: Kant thinks that to possess a worldview, we must take up the task of constructing it with philosophical precision and honest inclusion of all necessary elements thereof.

Beyond a demand of reason, Kant provides many hortatory remarks to encourage worldview construction for self-loving reasons. I end with a sketch of three reasons that it is good to possess a world rather than none. As sketches, though, they naturally require further analysis in future studies.

First, Kant thinks there is an inherent value in producing something with perduring quality. Kant contrasts true philosophizing from the theorizing of a scholarly dilettante. While the philosopher seeks coherence, the dilettante is content with a hodgepodge of judgments that – while not contradictory – are also not mutually supporting and unified towards a common purpose. The dilettante, as Kant notes in the first *Critique*, has a scattered view of experience, a “mere aggregate,” whereas the philosopher has parts that are meaningfully related “under one idea” (A832/B860). In the first *Critique*, he notes:

[T]here is also a *Weltbegriff* (*conceptus cosmicus*) that has always grounded this term [i.e., philosophy], especially when it is, as it were, personified and represented as an archetype in the ideal of the *philosopher*. From this point of view philosophy is the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*), and the philosopher is not an artist of reason but the legislator of human reason. (A839/B867).

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<sup>45</sup> See also AA 21:101.

Now in this early period, well before the third *Critique*, Kant had not yet developed his theory to the point where all types of experience could form a coherent totality because he did not yet realize that purposiveness was an a priori principle of reason. Thus, Kant says here that there is no need to be an “artificer” of reason because he has not yet developed his mature ethical, aesthetic, biological, and religious theories. But with the second and third *Critiques*, he encountered new, sovereign areas of rational legislation for the philosopher to fit precisely together, indeed, as a carpenter of reason. And it is the highest good that he thinks is the best blueprint for constructing a well-fitting structure of beams. With the third *Critique*, therefore, Kant realizes and, subsequently, continues to insist until the end that the philosopher must be both a legislator *and* an artificer of reason. And if done well, one inhabits a framework of interrelated, necessary judgments of experience that mutually support each other. The art of constructing a systematic outlook goes well beyond what a dilettante produces since the mutual support between the elements in the system creates a stability of lasting quality, well-suited to convoke others to orient their research and volitions towards the good.

Another value of constructing a worldview is that it satisfies a deep need we have as rational beings. In the *Vienna Logic* (1780s), for example, he describes the value of philosophy while alluding metaphorically to carpentry:

Only philosophy can provide this *inner satisfaction*. It closes the circle, and then it sees how all cognitions fit together *in an edifice*, in rule-governed ways, for such ends as are suited to humanity. (AA 24:800, emphases added)

And from much later, Kant notes in the *Opus postumum*:

Without transcendental philosophy one can form for oneself no concept as to how, and by what principle, one could design the plan of a system, by which a coherent whole could be established as rational knowledge for reason; yet this must necessarily take place if one would turn rational man into a being who knows himself. (AA 21:7)

The idea that Kant expresses is the familiar one from the Western tradition, namely, that the unexamined life is not worth living. Though not necessarily producing anything in externality, such wisdom expresses an intellectual virtue whose satisfaction adds to the quality of one's life. And this relates back to the first virtue of creating a system of perduring quality since such a system will satisfy us perhaps more deeply than one that is less stable or collapsing in on itself.

Finally, Kant hints that all activities are enriched and augmented when joined in a coherent system. Kant in the *Metaphysik L<sub>2</sub>* (1790-1) notes: "One can never become a philosopher without cognition; but *cognitions alone never* constitute a philosopher; there must be a purposeful unity of his skill here, and an insight into the agreement of this skill with the highest ends. (AA 28:534). And in *Metaphysik K<sub>3</sub>* (1794-5), Kant says similarly that, "herein lies the ground that metaphysics absolutely must be cultivated, because otherwise the whole end of *all cognitions of theoretical and practical* reason cannot be fulfilled. [...] In short, no human being can be without metaphysics" (AA 29:948, emphasis added). In a motto: The theoretical without the practical is inert, but the practical without the theoretical is dumb. All our pursuits – both theoretical and practical – might be more potent if we are wise in the ways of how they interrelate. One might *be* morally better if one has theoretical knowledge that improves one's striving. And, *mutatis mutandis*, one might find deeper meaning in one's theoretical pursuits if connected with moral goodness. This synergistic perspective could also explain why at one

point, Kant in the *Dobna Logik* (1794-5) states: “Coherent [*Bündig*]: when this proposition hangs together with the previous ones in a series of a system. – The more coherent [*konsequenter*] a person of dangerous maxims is, the more destructive he is” (AA 24:737). Imagining someone with good maxims in a coherent system, then: such a person might have a more elevated, meaningful, and powerful life than someone who lacks coherence. Related to the Platonic goal of a well-ordered soul, Kant is interested in attaining a well-ordered experience. And the highest good, he thinks, is good for helping us to build an abiding structure in which all of our cognitions find a secure fit.

## Conclusion

Let us return to the question: What is the highest good actually *good for* in the third *Critique*? For those who find the two predominant interpretations unsatisfying, a third alternative is now available. The highest good in the third *Critique* is primarily good for enabling the construction of a harmonious worldview. It is important for philosophical contemplation without any direct connection to action. This alternative will appeal to those who intuit something new afoot with the highest good in the third *Critique*, which aspires to more than a simple expansion of its role from the second *Critique*. This new interpretation can also resolve the worries of those who see certain moral-psychological interpretations as undermining the sovereignty of the moral law. The highest good in Kant’s final *Critique*, by contrast, becomes enmeshed in a task of philosophical meditation and imbricated with the process of creating a well-ordered experience through mental carpentry.

Further, this sketch opens a new field for applying Kant’s unique notion of *konsequent* thinking to everyday experience, regardless of one’s views on the highest good. Kant thought that we, as

philosophical beings, find deep satisfaction in coherent thinking. And, while a proponent of his own system and the highest good, he also emboldened all to philosophize independently, thus opening the possibility for alternative worldviews. Must we all be carpenters of reason? Certainly not, if thinking in terms of bare survival. But ought we be? Here, Kant's answer is yes, as it affords the opportunity to feel more at home in the world. It promises the prize of being able to achieve new patterns of thought that enrich one's life. Inhabiting a coherent worldview, in short, might enable new ways of feeling, as well as reveal new connections for those who ponder life's thorniest questions, even if no easy answer is found and no useful actions result. For those with a strong Kantian bent, the highest good lends itself well as a blueprint for constructing such a view of the whole.

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