

Kant's Favorite Argument for Our Immortality: The Teleological Argument

Alexander T. Englert
Princeton University
aenglert@princeton.edu

Abstract

Kant's claim that we must postulate the immortality of the soul is polarizing. While much attention has been paid to two standard arguments in its defense (one moral-psychological, the other rational), I contend that a favorite argument of Kant's from the apogee of his critical period, namely, the teleological argument, deserves renewed attention. This paper reconstructs it and exhibits what makes it unique (though not necessarily superior) in relation to the other arguments. In particular, its form (as third-personal or descriptive, beginning from observations) and related force of assent (as a subjectively universal reflective judgment) set it apart from the other arguments. My goal is to establish that any engagement with Kant's immortality postulate must include equal consideration of the teleological argument in order to be complete.

0 Introduction

Kant's claim that we have grounds to postulate the soul's immortality is polarizing to say the least. Indeed, a bevy of interpreters consider it an absurd thesis that rests on a contradiction of Kant's own making.¹ Detractors target the two standard arguments that appear in the first and second *Critiques* respectively, one moral-psychological and the other

¹ E.g., Silber (1959, 475), Beck (1960, 268), and Allison (1990, 171-172).

rational. And yet Kant deploys a third argument in his critical period, which has received scant attention and remains undertheorized:² namely, the teleological argument. It is odd that this third argument is overlooked. Not only is it entirely unique relative to the other arguments, but moreover there is evidence that I present below indicating that it was a personal favorite of Kant's, which he endorsed in both published and unpublished works from the critical period.

In this paper, I reconstruct the teleological argument, explore the evidence for Kant having held it during the critical period, and set it in relation to the other arguments on offer. I argue that for Kant the teleological argument was not merely an amendment or a “side” of a separate argumentative “coin” relative the others, but rather notable in terms of its form and force.³ It is an argument that stands on its own and begins with our natural existence, as well as how we must judge our overarching purpose. Indeed, its unique status must have made it tantalizing for Kant. For rather than dependent on our moral psychology or the rationality of willing, it depends on a reflective-teleological judgment about our final purpose as human beings. My goal is to present a full-fledged account for why Kant favored this argument and, thereby, establish that any engagement with Kant's endorsement of immortality must include equal consideration of the teleological argument in order to be complete.

² Few have discussed it. Basaglia (2011) explores its history but does not provide a full philosophical discussion of it. Dyck (2015) explores it in the context of the lectures on metaphysics, and Proops (2021) argues that a form of it in the B-edition of the first *Critique* yields doctrinal Belief (for why this is mistaken, see footnotes 47 and 57 below). Finally, George (1995) provides a short philosophical analysis, which – to my mind – makes a straw man of it.

³ “Force” is an unfortunately vague term, which I use throughout, to avoid using a related but non-apt term, namely, “persuasiveness.” Persuasiveness is not right since one can be persuaded by invalid arguments or remain unpersuaded when facing arguments that are admittedly strong. Instead, by *force* I mean the overall quality of an argument that influences its reception, based on its scope (i.e., whether it ought to be valid for some or all), starting point (i.e., whether it is based on a priori or a posteriori considerations), and the form of assent that obtains as a result of its success (opinion, knowledge, faith, or something else).

First, I present preliminary points about the inscrutability of immortality relative to experience, which help to explain why the teleological argument is unique (section 1). I, then, present the two standard views about the immortality postulate (section 2). While detailing these I highlight their shared form and particular deficiencies. I then reconstruct the teleological argument in detail and point out that, while having its own weaknesses, it does not share the deficiencies of the standard arguments (section 3). Since many will have *prima facie* doubts about the teleological argument's textual standing, I correct the misconception that it is missing from Kant's published, critical works (section 4).

1 Immortality's Inscrutability and Experience

Initially, it is important to note that the teleological argument aligns with the others in a crucial respect. All three, namely, depend on the impossibility to prove or disprove the soul's immortality by direct appeal to concrete evidence in experience or special insights of what comes after. And yet, relative to this common foundation the teleological argument distinguishes itself by inferring from experience nonetheless: the resulting epistemic state (i.e., form of assent) arising from this inference I bracket for now but discuss below in subsection 3.3. This section sets the common foundation and points to where the teleological argument stands apart.

To begin, the common foundation of all three proofs is that no theoretical evidence reveals definitively the soul's immateriality and immortality (or mortality for that matter). We do not see souls in the world. And as Kant argues in the first *Critique's* paralogisms chapter, our introspections that reveal the logical simplicity and necessity of the "I think" (i.e., transcendental apperception) do not support conclusions about the metaphysical status of the soul as a substance. And as for what lies outside sensibly given

experience, we have no access whatsoever. As Kant notes in the *What real progress?* essay: “all experience can be engaged only in life, i.e., if soul and body are still linked together; hence we are absolutely unacquainted with what we shall be, and be capable of, after death, and so cannot know the separated nature of the soul at all” (AA 20:309).⁴ And in his metaphysics lectures from the 1790s, Kant repeatedly admonishes listeners to remain skeptical of anyone claiming perspicacity past death: “Cutting off all further pondering on this is the best remedy, that we can say: another world means only another intuition of the same things [...] therefore we also cannot hope to be transferred to any place in it” (AA 28:445-446). There is no way to *know* that the soul is immortal or mortal via direct appeal to intuitions.

Yet it is a good thing for the proofs that we cannot know whether we are immortal or not. Without the ability to know, we have space for rational faith (*Glaube*) or grounds for another form of assent stronger than opining, weaker than knowledge, but also unique in that it does not lead to rational faith.⁵ And, moreover, it is because of the absolute inscrutability of the hereafter that Kant can block objections to immortality based on conceptual inconsistencies. By respecting the barrier of inscrutability, Kant can bracket questions of how exactly we continue to exist⁶ or achieve tasks (i.e., act morally)⁷ in non-spatiotemporal (i.e., noumenal) terms. For Kant, there is no way to represent the content

⁴ As is standard, 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* (formerly, *Königlichen Preussischen*) *Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin* (1902 –). The first number refers to the volume, while the number(s) after the colon to the AA pagination. With the exception of the first *Critique* – for which I use the Kemp Smith translation – all other translations refer to the Cambridge editions of his collected works unless otherwise noted. Also, I omit the “AA” reference when citing the first *Critique*, as it is clearly marked by the “A/B” pagination.

⁵ A trend has arisen to translate *Glaube* as “Belief,” where the capital “B” designates its difference from “belief” as used in contemporary epistemology, e.g., Chignell (2007) and Pasternack (2011). Despite the trend, I prefer “faith” and refer to it as such throughout.

⁶ Cf. Greene (1960, lix), George (1995, 675-676), Yovel (1980, 113).

⁷ Cf. Caird (1889, 303) and Allison (1990, 173).

of immortality in any detail.⁸ As he says in the *End of All Things*, we cannot grasp anything in this sphere at all “because we entangle ourselves inevitably in contradictions if we want to take a single step out of the sensible world into the intelligible one” (AA 8:334). Any such metaphysical musings make for philosophical sport but possess no experiential import.

For the two standard arguments, this absence of theoretical evidence provides the space to postulate immortality (and God) based on practical needs. We cannot *know*, but this theoretical indeterminability allows us assume it (and God) as a matter of practically motivated faith. But for the teleological argument, a distinguishing characteristic of its form is that rather than abstracting completely away from experience, it instead begins *from* experience through reflective judgments. Kant writes of it in the *Dohna-Metaphysik* lectures (1792-1793): “The best proof [of immortality] would be the one – immediately from the nature of *human beings* (not of nature as such). [...] we can refute all objections to the maintaining of a future life, but can furnish only one proof for it, the moral-teleological” (AA 28:688-689). And from the *Metaphysik L₂* (1792)⁹: “The [teleological] proof, from the analogy of nature with other living beings in general, is the best of all that has ever been introduced for the soul. It is based on experience” (AA 28:592). I analyze below exactly how the teleological argument begins from experience. For now, it is important to note that the way it is grounded in experience must maintain the same commitment to immortality’s fundamental inscrutability and lack of direct theoretical evidence.

⁸ Tizzard (2019, 6) thinks immortality provides “rational content,” namely, the “real possibility of the highest good” to maintain our moral disposition. It is unclear to me why this should count as mental content.

⁹ For the dating of this, cf. AA 28:1346.

2 The Standard Arguments

To illustrate the teleological argument, it is important to juxtapose it with the standard arguments. For beyond possessing a unique form that begins with experience, the teleological argument stands apart in other significant respects.

The standard arguments do not begin from experience but rather with our moral obligations and their concomitant object, namely, the highest good. For Kant, the highest good is the only object adequate as an aim whenever we act on the moral law. Kant defines it as the synthesis of two, non-analytically linked elements: first, virtue as the supreme good, and, second, happiness (according to our worthiness to be so) as the complete good. There are many questions regarding whether we must conceive of it as proportional or maximal, personal or social, etc, which I cannot detail adequately here.¹⁰ For my present purposes, what matters is that Kant thinks we cannot help but commit to producing this object, and that we must do all in our power to achieve virtue (as the only element of the highest good whose realizability is within our complete control). If the virtue we seek in the highest good consisted in merely giving the old college try, then our soul's immortality would not be morally pertinent. Kant, however, equates our pursuit of virtue with not merely demanding humanly possible virtue, but with moral *Vollkommenheit*, which in German means both moral "completion" and "perfection," and which Kant identifies as equivalent to "holiness" [*Heiligkeit*] (see, e.g., AA 5:128-129). And this degree of completion, Kant asserts, never comes to pass in this lifetime since it is a "perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence" (AA 5:122). Our incapacity for holiness in this lifetime combined with the obligation to achieve it, provide the set-up for postulating immortality.

¹⁰ For a fuller analysis, see Englert & Chignell (forthcoming).

2.1 The Moral-Psychological Argument

The first standard view assumes the reason for believing in our immortality arises from our moral psychology. There are many variations of this sort of argument at present. But broken down into a simple form, it goes as follows:

*The Moral-Psychological Argument*¹¹

1. The moral law commits us to realize the highest good (HG). (Transcendental Philosophical Assumption)¹²
2. If the HG is to be realized, then we must be able to become morally perfect.¹³
(Definitional Corollary of HG + Ought-Implies-Can)
3. We cannot become morally perfect in this lifetime despite every effort. (Fact of Human Experience)
- C1. Thus, the HG cannot be realized in this lifetime. (2,3)
4. We cannot fully commit psychologically to (or remain motivated to pursue) a project if we think that its completion is impossible.¹⁴ (Assumed Fact of Human Psychology)

¹¹ Beiser (2006), Chignell (2020; forthcoming, 9-11), Fugate (2014a), Guyer (2000, 361-371), and Pasternack (2017) are contemporary standard-bearers for this view, albeit with significant differences in the details.

¹² This premise is vague. Some will push for specifying that we have an extra duty to promote (or attain) it. I don't think we have an extra duty to pursue the highest good. But left vague this could also be consistent with duty interpretations. Also, there is a longstanding debate about whether the moral law binds us to merely promote or realize the highest good. I favor, in general, the stronger commitment (i.e., its realization). In the set-up of the immortality postulate argument in the second *Critique*, Kant uses "produce," which I think indicates realization as the goal. Further, if it were mere promotion, immortality would not be required: "The production of the highest good in the world is the necessary object of a will determinable by the moral law" (AA 5:122). And in the set-up of the dialectic as well: "It is a priori (morally) necessary to produce the highest good through the freedom of the will [...] In the highest good which is practical for us, that is, to be made real through our will" (AA 5:113). And in the third *Critique*: "we have a ground for assuming, from a practical point of view, that is, in order to apply our powers to realize it, its possibility, realizability [*Ausführbarkeit*], hence also a nature of things corresponding to that end" (AA 5:455).

¹³ This constitutes our contribution since virtue is the only condition within our control. The second condition, complete happiness, is not within our control, and leads to the second postulate of God.

C2. Thus (to avoid C1), we are psychologically required to believe that our moral progress does continue beyond this lifetime in a future world for the sake of remaining committed (or motivated) to realizing the HG. (1,2,4)

Premises (1.) and (4.) do the heavy lifting. Premise (1.) asserts that we are committed to will the HG. Alas, everything we know about this life indicates that we cannot fulfill this commitment. Premise (4.) leverages an ostensible fact about our moral psychology, namely, that we cannot maintain motivation or resolve to pursue a project that we feel impossible to complete. This allows us to form belief in immortality and salvage our moral efforts through hope that the conditions obtain that make the highest good possible.

This view has support in the literature and is associated either with the moral arguments in the first or third *Critique*. It can run with either a *motivational* or *dispositional* interpretation of premise (4.).

By the *motivational* interpretation, one means that Kant thinks the command of the moral law is insufficient without extra motivation or incentive to bring us to act. A version of this interpretation is clearly on display in the first *Critique* and early lecture notes before the *Groundwork*.¹⁵ While present in the early critical period, these motivational or incentivizing arguments disappear after Kant's development of a pure ethics where respect alone ought to motivate us. Kant's philosophical reasons for abandoning this motivational version are clear.

¹⁴ Chignell (forthcoming) plays a variation on this theme by claiming that immortality is due only to a personal need. He adds, for instance, a "for me at least" (14) caveat to the conclusion and thinks that immortality may help certain people, but remain superfluous for others: "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)" (14). This has its costs, though, since it sacrifices the practical necessity of the argument. Just because I need something doesn't make it practically necessary. And – ultimately – the very grounds of faith in an afterlife are related to the practical demand that we achieve moral perfection (every last one of us).

¹⁵ See, A812/B840; AA 29:917-918.

By the *dispositional* interpretation of Premise (4.), one means that Kant thinks the command of the moral law is sufficient, but we might nonetheless require some psychological support to commit fully to a moral life. There are many versions of a dispositional moral-psychological argument at present, which see it mostly evidenced in Kant's third *Critique* and other texts from the 1790s.¹⁶ By focusing on our "disposition" [*Gesinnung*] or the need to keep up our "resolve" (*EntschlieÙung*) as opposed to our immediate motivations, this argument might appear to avoid the issues facing the motivational interpretation. And it clearly does in an important respect. On such readings, it is not that we require further incentivization, but rather it is our moral-psychological frailty or proneness to despair that demand faith in the conditions of the highest good's real possibility.¹⁷

While there are passages from the third *Critique* that can be read as supporting this reading,¹⁸ the textual evidence is ambiguous as there are just as many passages in the same sections of the third *Critique* and other 1790s works that stand in tension with it. Indeed, in the moral proof from the third *Critique* Kant does not begin with our moral frailty, but rather explicitly with our "moral teleology" (AA 5:447), which leads us to postulate the conditions for morality's final end so that our "moral thinking" might be "coherent"

¹⁶ See, Guyer (2000, Chapter 10), Chignell (2020, forthcoming), Ebbals-Duggan (2016), Fugate (2014a & 2014b, 315-328), Pasternack (2017), and Sussman (2015), for varieties of the view that the highest good and its conditions are needed to ward off despair or refocus us on morality. Tizzard (2019), while adamantly against a purely "psychological" reading, seems to me also in this camp. She writes: "Without it [immortality], the hopelessness of our moral vocation in being directed towards an impossible end cannot help but weaken our sense of the intelligibility or cohesiveness of moral life, hampered as it is with theoretical doubts" (2019, 14). The lack of this content, Tizzard contends, has the "power to stop us in our tracks" (2019, 5). Guyer, Chignell, and Tizzard seem the closest to the reconstructed argument above.

¹⁷ Wood (2020) attacks versions of this interpretation, I think, unfairly in that he treats them as aiming at our "weak moral motivation" (41n11). But it is not really motivation that these readings leverage, but rather *frailty* or *despair* – hence he is conflating two different moral-psychological needs.

¹⁸ E.g., three in the third *Critique* (one at 5:446, and two at 5:452-453), and one from the *Religion* (6:5).

[*konsequent*] (AA 5:450-451n). And explicitly against the dispositional interpretation – in the *Religion* he states bluntly:

All human beings could have enough to go on [i.e., without the conditions of the HG], if they would only (as they should) uphold the precept of pure reason in the law. What need have they to know the results of their moral actions and trials which will be brought to pass by the course of things in the world? (AA 6:7n, my emphasis).¹⁹

Textually, then, we might have doubts about the moral-psychological argument from the 1790s. And philosophically, I think that many versions of the moral-psychological reading set conditions on the unconditioned status of the moral law due to ostensible facts about moral psychology that permit us to seek succor in the numinous beyond.²⁰

2.2 The Rational Argument

The second standard view is that we do not require belief in immortality in order to remain motivated or committed to moral action, rather we require it due to a rational constraint on what it means to will. Wood (1970) presents the argument in *Kant's Moral Religion*, though he has recently honed it further without changing the basic structure.²¹ Rather than motivational, he states that, “The importance of the relation between belief and action for Kant is that it is a *rational* relation” (1970, 20).²² The rational constraint is that in setting an end we are rationally committed to believing it is possible. If I don’t believe my end (i.e.,

¹⁹ For more passages along these lines, see the first preface to the *Religion* (e.g., AA 6:3-4).

²⁰ Ebbals-Duggan (2016), Fugate (2014a), and Pasternack (2017) present readings that do not set conditions.

²¹ In Wood (2020), he remains explicitly committed to it and states that he thinks it “was largely right” (2020, 30ff. and 31n7). He also, though, thinks his interpretation of the moral argument secures only God as a postulate rather than immortality. Even in the second *Critique* – he argues – “the realization of the highest good for each of us is located no longer in a future life but in a natural order governed by divine providence” (2020, 46). Indeed, he thinks immortality is abandoned from the third *Critique* onwards (2020, 46n14).

²² For similar interpretations see, Beck (1960, 267), Bojanowski (2016, 189), and Suprenant (2008, 90).

the highest good) is possible, then I am irrational and “according to my own beliefs I *should* (in a logical, but not a moral sense of ‘should’) give up my pursuit of the highest good and my obedience to the moral law” (1970, 30). This is what Wood – in reference to a phrase used in Kant’s lectures on religion from the early 1780s – calls the *reductio ad absurdum practicum* argument. And something like this argument is on clear display in the dialectic from the second *Critique*, where Kant asserts that if the highest good is not realizable, then the moral law “must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false” (AA 5:114).

Modifying the above argument after C1. produces the rational argument:

The Rational Argument

1. The moral law commits us to realize the highest good (HG). (Transcendental Philosophical Assumption)
 2. If the HG is to be realized, then we must be able to become morally perfect. (Definitional Corollary of HG + Ought-Implies-Can)
 3. We cannot become morally perfect in this lifetime despite every effort. (Fact of Human Experience)
- C1. Thus, the HG cannot be realized in this lifetime. (2,3)
- 4.* It is a rational requirement of willing that the ends we set are possible. (Rational Constraint on Willing)
- C2.* Thus, we are required to believe that our moral progress can continue beyond this lifetime in a future world *for the sake of acting rationally* to realize the HG (1,2,4*).

This argument rests on the rationality of acting. Since we cannot in this life fulfill our duty to produce the highest good (but must if we are to continue acting rationally), a solution must be found so that the moral law is not rendered invalid. While we cannot give up the moral law – which stands firm as a fact of reason in the second *Critique* – we can abandon our notion that this lifetime is the only “time” for moral matters. Premise (4.*), therefore, permits us to supersede the results from the modus tollens argument leading to C1. The rationality of willing demands that we assume immortality for the sake of avoiding an irrational result: that is, willing the impossible.

As with the moral-psychological argument, this reading is textually supported, primarily in the second *Critique*, though it can also be read into the third *Critique*. It likely supplanted the motivational argument from the first *Critique* because of its better fit within Kant’s developing moral theory.²³ But this exact argument is arguably not present in the third *Critique*.²⁴ In the third *Critique*, Kant asks after his presentation of the moral proof whether one would need to give up acting morally if there were no God. He writes: “No! All that would have to be surrendered would be the **aim** [*Beabsichtigung*] 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” (AA 5:451). Hence, by the third *Critique*, it appears that one would still have to recognize the truth of the moral law even if one thinks that the highest good’s conditions are impossible, while in the second, one would be entitled to treat them as “imaginary” and “false” (AA 5:114).

Connecting the passage from the third *Critique* with other texts from the same period, I believe sets the rational argument on a better, albeit different footing: I will refer

²³ See Beiser (2006) for a historical account of this shift.

²⁴ Wood (2020) disagrees and thinks that the argument in the third *Critique* is “essentially the same as that in the second *Critique* [...] But it is given a different and larger context” (2020, 49).

to it as the rational argument's *updated version*. First, the moral law's validity as a binding principle must be recognized regardless of one's views of the highest good. This is a shift away from the rational argument version explicated in the second *Critique*. According to the updated version, we must be rational when acting from duty, even if we lack faith in the highest good's real possibility. And this is necessary to vouchsafe the self-sufficiency of the moral law. As Kant notes in the *Religion*: "[moral laws] even necessitate us to abstract completely away from their success when faced with a particular action (RGV 6:3). And it is not that we require the highest good's real possibility "for morals, but rather that it is necessary **through** their morality" (KU 5:450-451n). Thus, abstracting away from the highest good in determining action, as it were, is a key feature of the updated version. We remain rational *agents* without the highest good's real possibility. But we as rational *beings* also have a need to connect causes with effects. And through morality, we seek an object for practical reason to account for the effect of our moral striving even if this is not important when faced with particular actions. The rational argument might still work then through amending (C2.*) to state that it is necessary "for a fully rational account of action." This argument would be the best of the standard versions to my mind, though how to spell it out requires a study of its own.²⁵

2.3 Form, Force, and Deficiencies of the Two Standard Arguments

The form, force, and deficiencies of the two standard arguments can now be marked out so that the teleological argument can occupy its relative position in the next section.

²⁵ See Englert (ms.) for my reading of the moral argument in the third *Critique* as an attempt to ground a coherent [*konsequent*] worldview.

In regards to form, the moral-psychological and rational arguments, as well as their variations, represent famous extensions of what one could call an *agential argument*. An argument belongs to this form if hope for a future life is postulated because of an ostensible need of our volition or will (based on our moral obligations) that is permitted in the absence of evidence for or against. That is, the priority of the practical permits us to form beliefs that are backwards fitting. We ought to be perfectly virtuous and find nothing in experience that supports or denies it, thus we may postulate a state of continued striving onto the world to come.

As for force, both arguments differ. Most versions of the moral-psychological argument appear dependent on *a posteriori* facts about human psychology. On some readings, one might or might not require faith in immortality to firm up one's resolve, but it is available should one need it.²⁶ On other readings, it provides a means for overcoming the first degree of radical evil by refocusing us on morality.²⁷ It acknowledges essential frailties that meet humanity where it is. In both cases, though, it appears that the scope of the argument is limited in its relevance due to whether individuals require it. That is, its necessity is contingent on the person in question. Not so for the rational argument. It rests on a claim about what *every* being requires if willing is to be rational. Everyone must assume immortality along with moral striving since the highest good (of which immortality is one condition) is practically necessary through our morality. However, the force is different

²⁶ E.g., Chignell (forthcoming): "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 in doing so" (forthcoming, 11). Or as he puts it as a premise in the reconstructed argument: "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]" (forthcoming, 13).

²⁷ E.g., Fugate (2014a) who thinks that the highest good distracts us from having to think about happiness, thereby freeing us to focus on morality alone, and Pasternack (2017) for whom it is a stabilizing force that solidifies our orientation to morality, which would otherwise be hindered.

depending on which version of the argument one endorses. It is obviously strongest in the second *Critique*, where without it one is essentially irrational in acting morally. The way the rational argument shows itself in the third *Critique* as the updated version, however, shows more nuance. According to it, we can act rationally without faith in immortality, but we can only count ourselves as fully wise to how experience hangs together by including it in our – as it were – belief system. It appears in this updated version that the highest good plays an important role in how we contemplate as philosophical beings, rather than in playing a role in practical reasoning about actions as such.

Some deficiencies of the moral-psychological argument I have noted above. Perhaps faith in immortality could help people shore up resolve after it has been established. But if it is the fact of our psychology that is supporting the proof, then it is unclear how practical necessity should follow. And – depending on one’s intuitions – it might seem to be a flat-out noble falsehood (or dangerously close to one), with no independent support apart from our desire for it to be so. But needing a noble falsehood or a wish-fulfilling construct on top of the moral law would seem to indicate that the moral law is, in fact, insufficient on its own. Moreover, it is clear that Kant thinks the faith we form in God and immortality are more than mere noble falsehoods.

The updated version of the rational argument – if disconnected from the validity of the moral law when facing particular actions – establishes the practical necessity of the highest good without influencing the truth of the moral law as valid in determining us to act. But what does this sort of reflective stance about the coherency of moral thinking have to do with universal, rational experience? It is not immediately obvious. By abstracting away from experience, this argument might seem aloof relative to life since it is not immediately clear why we need the highest good at all. Much hangs on interpreting what

Kant means by “coherent moral thinking.” It might be the case that we must think of a possible effect for our willing that requires more than this life, but do we *all* need to think this to form a coherent view of our lives as natural beings? Without anything else about this life offering support for the claim, it might seem – as some interpreters note²⁸ – an ad hoc set-up to get us immortality and God by fixing the results from the start.²⁹ The magician, as it were, had the rabbit in his hat the whole time. It might, however, ally itself with an independent argument that points to the same conclusion but which begins in nature. That is, it might find a venerable ally in the teleological argument.

3 The Teleological Argument

Prima facie, the set-up of the teleological argument as beginning from experience seems paradoxical: What is it about this life that permits us to postulate an afterlife? The short Kantian answer is that when assessing organisms and their predispositions we must impute certain ends as necessary for explaining their very possibility via analogical moves of judgment. And the same move holds when we judge the presence of pure practical reason in our nature as an essential predisposition.³⁰ Whenever we judge reflectively, further, we operate under the assumption that nature is rational. And it would be irrational if nature provided predispositions with ends that cannot ever be realized. With pure practical reason,

²⁸ See, e.g., Reath (1988, 606) and Sussman (2015, 220).

²⁹ Kant himself mentions such a charge in the second *Critique* regarding Thomas Wizenmann, who “disputes the authorization to conclude from a need to the objective reality of its object” (AA 5:144n). Kant – writing in the mostly rational argument phase of his thought – thinks that the determination of our “need” by the moral law, which “binds every rational being” (AA 5:144n), presents a different case since it is, essentially, not a need that is up to us.

³⁰ I will speak here – as Kant does in the biological context – of pure practical reason as a “predisposition,” as opposed to “faculty.” I agree with Frierson (2014) that references to *Naturanlagen* or *Vermögen* are domain-specific, while referring to the same phenomenon: “When [Kant] turns from biology to psychology proper, these natural predispositions (*Naturanlagen*) are recast in terms of psychological ‘faculties’ (*Vermögen*) or ‘powers’ (*Kräfte*)” (2014, 52).

though, we have a predisposition that points to an end that requires infinite progress.³¹ We must judge, therefore, that this pure practical faculty, like other arrangements in nature, will continue to develop towards its end. While one might think that this argument can be collapsed back into the rational argument detailed above, I will give reasons below for why it cannot.³²

3.1 The Argument in Outline

While Kant includes the teleological proof in published works, in particular the second edition of the first *Critique*, his most detailed exposition of it in the critical period occurs in his 1790s lectures on metaphysics.³³ I focus on the *Metaphysik Dobna* (1792-1793) and *Metaphysik K₂* lectures (early 1790s) in particular, because they display each step of the argument clearly. The argument has three main premises and a conclusion. I first present the argument from the *Metaphysik K₂* lecture notes and include a numbering of the key premises and conclusions in square brackets:

[1.] The proof of the immortality of the soul is grounded on the principle of the analogy of nature. Nature has placed in all living organic beings no more predispositions than what they can make use of. The faculties, their organs, are not given any larger than they can make use of. It would be absurd to assume predispositions in nature of which no use can be made. [2.] In the animal everything is purposive. [3.] With a human being it is otherwise, for he can extend

³¹ Kant also thinks that our pure theoretical faculty (i.e., reason in its cognitive employment) requires an infinite time beyond this lifetime.

³² In the *Metaphysik Mrongovius* lectures (1782-1783), albeit predating his reflective turn in 1787, Kant distinguishes the “teleological” argument explicitly from the “moral” rational argument. After detailing the teleological argument (AA 29:914-916), Kant writes: “Now comes the moral proof. All moral proofs abstract away from the nature of the soul, though they do not deny its immateriality” (AA 29:917).

³³ Below I detail the appearance of this argument in Kant’s published works. For the various iterations of the arguments from the same period of lecture notes, see: AA 28:442, 592, 687 & 29:915. Also, it should be noted that Kant worked with versions of the teleological argument in lectures from the 1770s. Due to the focus of my paper on the critical period, though, I leave these to the side.

his faculties, raise himself up to the nebulae, feel himself called to ponder over them, but he can make no use of this in life, other than that he knows this. With respect to the faculty of desire there is a predisposition even worthier of admiration in human beings. Namely, a human being damns himself and explains duty as holy, without advantage, indeed even if damage rather arises for him from it. We find in us a summons to sacrifice the greatest advantages, without receiving in life the slightest advantage for it. Here is a predisposition in human nature, and this is just as purposive, according to the analogy of nature, as all predispositions of nature. [C.] We thus infer a future life where the use of these predispositions and their end can first be attained. For should a human being sink back into chaos with the other animals, then these predispositions, of which he can make no use in life, would be placed in him wholly without purpose. (AA 28: 765-766)

Though Kant's portrayal of the proof varies sometimes in details, the basic form persists in all instances in which he presents the proof. Premise 1 establishes that when judging organisms in nature by analogy, we cannot help but be led by the assumption that they are rationally structured according to ends or purposes. And nothing is in vain. Premise 2 establishes that in animals we find a match between the ends for which certain predispositions are present and their use. Premise 3 states that there are predispositions in human nature that present an anomaly, for they can never be fully used to attain their end in this lifetime (especially pure practical reason, but theoretical reason too). This leads to the conclusion [C.] that we must infer a future life in which our rational faculty can fully develop its power to achieve its end (especially in the practical sphere). I spend the rest of this section unpacking these in more detail.

In premise 1, Kant establishes what could be referred to as his Teleological Principle of Sufficient Reason (TPSR) or, as he explicitly refers to it in the third *Critique*,

“*hinreichendes teleologisches Prinzip*” (AA 5:440-441). While this principle is at the heart of Kant’s critical theory of teleology, I can only sketch it here since a detailed account would require its own study.³⁴ To begin, we cannot form *constitutive* judgments about ends in nature. Nevertheless, when we judge organisms (ourselves included), Kant thinks that we cannot explain or grasp them by reference to mechanical laws alone.³⁵ Breitenbach’s (2009) take is helpful here: “Kant’s discussion [of teleology] shows that our very *conception* of living nature inevitably presupposes teleological concepts. In this sense, the very *possibility* of organisms can only be grasped in teleological terms” (2009, 44-45). Organisms, as self-organizing wholes and their parts, whose function we can only explain in relation to the total organism, require that we impute certain purposes on analogy with our own practical reason. I describe what Kant means by analogy below, but in brief: we must think of practical reason as a faculty that – if accompanied by suitable powers – *would* gradually realize its ends,³⁶ and this way of thinking we discover is also at work via analogy in explaining the possibility of organisms because we cannot help but employ the same form of judgment. That is, for each individual or part thereof, we operate with an assumption that there must be some end for which it is present and which it will realize if unhindered.³⁷

³⁴ I bracket concerns with Kant’s arguments in relation to modern debates about teleology and biology. For insightful treatment of this question, see Breitenbach (2009), Ginsborg (2006), McLaughlin (1990, 2001), and Zammito (2006).

³⁵ There is debate about what Kant means by mechanical laws that I also leave aside here, see Ginsborg (2004) and Breitenbach (2008).

³⁶ That is, our practical reason is ends-directed but connected with our freedom to conform or deviate from its determination by the moral law. This relation we impute to natural ends but *without* any connection to free choice. The real possibility of natural ends, in other words, is not open to doubt. Instead, the analogy rests on the form of our judgment that assumes the gradual, inevitable realization of the end once decided upon (*ceteris paribus*).

³⁷ With only the science of his day to work from, Kant endorsed an epigenetic theory according to which certain powers waited to unfold towards certain ends through stages. These potential powers, which Kant refers to with terms like “germs,” “seeds” [*Keime*], or “predisposition” [*Anlage*], stand for the final causes that we analogically impute into nature and think of as organized to bring about specific ends. If brought about, then, they will realize the “determination/vocation/destiny” [*Bestimmung*] of the predisposition. The seeds and predispositions are *hypothetical* entities, imputed for the sake of our explanations of why certain organisms are constituted as they are. We can only impute them because they, as immanent causes, remain beyond what can

And this principle is not limited to investigating organisms, but rather represents a principle that guides us when exploring nature and its products in general. As Kant posits in the third *Critique*, we must investigate nature under the working hypothesis that: “we will ultimately have reason to assume as the principle for research into nature that there is nothing in nature at all without an end” (AA 5:454). The idea is that because the possibility of organisms requires conceiving of their possibility in teleological terms, we must also be led by a principle that seeks out *all* such relations in nature.³⁸ Importantly, this principle does not establish that every part of nature is driven by its own inner teleology, but only that we must operate as if it is in order to understand the entire context in which organisms exist.

Premise 2 builds on premise 1 by appealing to its successful application. Kant thinks we successfully track appearances according to the TPSR. Our investigations of organisms, that is, bear out our default presumption of ends at work by finding coherent explanations of life forms by appeal to purposes. Judging organisms as developing for the sake of becoming fully mature members of a species as well as certain parts and predispositions being adapted for the sake of helping in this survival, prove invaluable in making sense of organisms and their growth. While nothing strikes us as odd when we find the ruins of an abandoned mining operation in the mountains, we would find it extremely odd to find a species of animals that starts out as larvae, begins to develop, but then suddenly freezes or reverts through former phases in incomprehensible ways. Even vestigial limbs like tailbones or adaptations of oddball mutations like Stephen Jay Gould’s example of the panda’s “thumb,” Kant would argue, presuppose the TPSR to the extent

be known by appeal to cognitions of that which is given in space and time. I leave aside questions about whether Kant in earlier or later phases (i.e., in the *Opus postumum*) had a more dogmatic notion of teleology in mind, cf. Adickes (1925, 466-469).

³⁸ See Watkins (2019, esp. Chapter 8) for a detailed analysis of this point. See also, AA 28:687, 29:915.

that we seek to understand vestigial limbs by a purpose they served for ancestors in the distant past and adaptations by the purpose they serve currently *for which* they were “picked out” by natural selection. As Kant puts it in the *Metaphysik Dobna*: “[Nature] has placed in no being predispositions that would go further than the ends, so that proportion persists between the predispositions and their use” (AA 28: 687).³⁹ The TPSR, therefore, leads us to judge that predispositions and the ends they help realize in animals run their course automatically *ceteris paribus*, thus leading to the proportionate realization of their determined end [*Bestimmung*]: “Animals fulfill their vocation [*Bestimmung*] automatically and unknowingly” (AA 9:445) and “in the case of all other animals [besides human beings], when they are left to their own devices, each individual fully attains its entire determination [*Bestimmung*]” (AA 7:324). A complete life of an ant or fish – for Kant – is its drive-to-survive, reproduction, and natural growth through life stages to ensure the species’ continuation, all of which follow a more or less organized course towards the production of other individuals (*ceteris paribus*).

In premise 3, Kant applies premise 1 to human beings. We must judge ourselves – like animals – as teleologically organized. Thus, we must apply the TPSR to every part of our nature. In this self-evaluation, Kant thinks that we find more at work than the mere drive-to-survive, or as he notes in the *Metaphysik Mrongovius* (1780s): “Now in human beings there are predispositions of the soul that do not at all attain their determination in this life” (AA 29:915). While Kant thinks that both theoretical and practical reason fail to reach complete use in this life, he emphasizes pure practical reason and its complete end as *the* predisposition of human nature that most obviously fails to reach its full potential in this

³⁹ See also: “But we find in nature that everything not only has its end, but rather is also determined to develop completely and to attain its complete end, because it actually attains it. Animals have instincts which are exactly suited to their desires” (AA 29:915).

lifetime. Or as he puts in the *Metaphysik Dobna*: “We have amazing predispositions [...] the most sublime of them all is the faculty of desire – morality. The command of duty” (AA 28:687). And as Kant refers to it in the *Metaphysik K₂*, “Here is a predisposition in human nature and this is just as purposive according the analogy of nature as every predisposition of nature” (AA 28: 766). So, if we seek to account for this predisposition of pure practical reason and its end [or *Bestimmung*] in human nature via the same rule as in premise 1, we will infer about it in the same exact way we infer about animals and their organization.

Many will want to pause here. Teleological judgments, after all, should begin from experience. And while we *see* webbed feet or Batesian mimicry – as Kant claims in his *On the Use of the Teleological Principle in Philosophy* (1787) – “the use of the teleological principle with respect to nature is always empirically conditioned” (AA 8:182). That means we must infer from some given intuition to an end that explains its possibility. But pure practical reason as a mental faculty with an end determined by pure concepts might seem the precise opposite: it is, that is, empirically unconditioned. And yet, our moral predisposition we do know in an exceptional way. As Kant says in the third *Critique*, our moral predisposition (freedom) counts “among the *scibilia*” since it can “be established through practical laws of pure reason, and, in accordance with these, in real actions, and thus in experience” (AA 5:468, see also 442). There are many obscurities here and questions as to how we can experience ourselves as possessing a moral predisposition given the limits of Kant’s transcendental idealism.⁴⁰ Important for my purposes is that Kant thought it a fact that we

⁴⁰ Important to note in this context is that this passage from the third *Critique* about our knowledge of our moral predisposition through the moral law is followed by Kant claiming that immortality of the soul remains an “object of faith,” or *Glaubenssache* (AA 5:469), which is in line with the standard arguments. I discuss below how the teleological argument need not be viewed as superseding or replacing the standard arguments, which allow that there be a further form of assent at work with the teleological argument.

had a moral predisposition as a species that could feature as an object of inquiry for our reflective judgment on a par with other possible objects of experience.

Returning to the argument, in working through premise 3 (applying the TPSR to human beings) we encounter a teleological mismatch when we reflect on our moral predisposition. For we inevitably – as the TPSR pushes – seek to explain why it is in us. The answer is that it is there for realizing a final end in which it is our part to attain perfect virtue, which – in turn – Kant says requires an infinite progress (see, e.g., A808/B836; AA 5:43; 5:435). But we cannot attain perfect virtue in this lifetime.⁴¹ The TPSR, therefore, hits a snag when it comes to accounting for our moral predisposition.

The argument concludes with an inference. The TPSR does not simply throw in the towel when judging our moral predisposition: “Nothing is in vain – this is the principle [*Grundsatz*] – the ends of organization should be fulfilled in this life or in a future one” (AA 28:687). With this lifetime out of consideration, we must infer by analogy that it *will* attain its full use beyond this lifetime: “Therefore the end must be attained in another life” (AA 28:687). Were we not to infer this way, then – as Kant notes in the *Idea of a Universal History* essay – it would amount to a “contradiction in the teleological doctrine of nature” (AA 8:18). Judging our moral predisposition reflectively, then, we cannot help but think of it as destined for full expression, either in this lifetime or the afterlife. And it cannot be in this lifetime. Thus, we must persist past death since nature is rationally organized.

3.2 The Argument’s Form

The form of the teleological argument can now be discussed more concretely. The argument begins from experience, from our judgments of nature as a kingdom of ends and

⁴¹ See, A569/B597; AA 5:43, 6:61.

the sorts of natural predispositions we find within ourselves. The key difference of the teleological argument is here in view: I begin with a reflective judgment about humanity's moral predisposition. We are observing human nature from a third-personal perspective and investigating it teleologically. It is a fact that we have pure practical reason, and we find a specific final end built into it. When we judge reflectively about why there *is* this faculty, we then come to the conclusion that leads us to assume that the world must be deeper than the appearances indicate. The fact that we pass away without completing the end indicates that nature would be fundamentally irrational, that is, has set us on a wild goose chase, were we not capable of completing morality's final end. The oddity of this moral predisposition is striking in that it can only be realized given infinite time. And stranger is that it is not only a fact of our constitution as natural beings, but further aimed (at least significantly) at realization *in* nature writ large. We note that a rule of reflective teleological judgments is that any end entails its gradual progress to completion. And we infer – via the same teleological rules – that morality must reach a completed end state by the same rule. But its completed state is a state of perfection impossible for a life marked by physical and sensible deficiencies. Hence, the time for its completion must come after death. By analogy, and not by opinion or rational faith, I assume that I and everyone else will live on. And in every instance, it is not an agential need or perspective that is supporting the proof, but rather a teleological perspective as I view myself qua object in nature.

In contrast to the agential forms of argument, there is no backwards fit here. It proceeds in a linear fashion based on an inference from experience and necessary forms of how we judge ends in nature. It is not because we are obligated to be morally perfect that we must assume that life (or better put: afterlife) accedes to our practical needs in order to follow through on the moral law's command. There is no appeal to the ought-implies-can

principle, which we need in the standard arguments. Instead, the proof is based on description as opposed to prescription. That is, it begins with the fact that I, as a moral being, have this moral predisposition and then moves to the question of why it is here. In the *Metaphysik Dobna* (1792-1793), Kant writes:

Immortality is the necessity of a future life from the natural constitution of the human being (not merely from an extraordinary decree), thus all human beings will live in the future because it *lies in their nature*. [...] This properly teleological proof is noble [*herrlich*]. (AA 28:688, my emphasis).

It is not the case that this proof operates on the need to establish the real possibility of our final moral end (as in the rational argument). Instead, it operates on the need to make theoretical sense of our moral predisposition. As a fact of our constitution, it marks us as on a path parallel to nature in so far as we are progressing towards an end, but separate from nature in that this end must be conceived as standing outside the conditions of space and time. Or as he concludes in his discussion of the teleological argument from the *Metaphysik L₂* (1792): “Thus it is quite obvious that the soul of the human being is not created for this world alone, but rather also for another future world” (AA 28:592). With the backward facing aspect of the standard views, there is nothing in experience pointing towards our immortality except, perhaps, the empirical wishes of some for it to be so. With the forward facing form of the teleological argument, we find a predisposition embedded in human nature and judge it as we do other purposive parts of nature.

3.3 The Argument’s Force

The force of the argument requires more extensive analysis since it depends on Kant’s theory of analogy. A quick appraisal might make it seem that Kant merely adopts the

argument proposed by the Scottish philosopher David Fordyce in *The Elements of Moral Philosophy* (1754).⁴² Fordyce – whom Kant admired and credited with the proof’s basic outline – discusses first the progress that we observe from the fetus to the child, and from the child to the adult, as well as the manner that we find already in the fetus so much that awaits full expression later in life. By analogy with these other phases and parts of humanity, he claims that we are justified in judging this life with its unfulfilled potentials as equally indicating a future stage of expression (1754, 292). Without Kant’s theory of analogy, however, this argument is quite different from the nuanced one that we must attribute to the Kantian version (from 1787 onwards at least).

Rolf George – one of the few philosophers who has analyzed Kant’s teleological argument in detail⁴³ – suggests that Kant misuses analogy along the lines of Fordyce’s proof (1995, 674-675).⁴⁴ George does not argue that Kant is working with a false analogy per se, but rather with an analogy that “loses all plausibility” (1995, 675) since it compares “the physical endowments of animals, like horns and wings, and mental capacities [of us]” (1995, 675). George’s point is that the functional relations are not obviously similar between a physical phenomenon and a mental phenomenon – especially since the latter should in some way only reach its full completion beyond this life. But this appraisal of the analogy could only apply to Fordyce. With Kant, the analogy does not hold between two things that appear to function alike or probabilistic inferences based on comparisons of ostensibly similar features of animals and humans. Instead, an analogy holds for Kant when

⁴² See, AA 29:916, and 28:687-688. Kant kept a 1757 German translation of it his personal library, see the Kant Research Group of Western Ontario’s online catalogue of Kant’s personal library (<http://publish.uwo.ca/~cdyck5/UWOKRG/kantsbooks.html>).

⁴³ Besides George, Basaglia (2008, 2011), Dyck (2015), and Proops (2021) are the only others of whom I am aware that have given the teleological argument any close scrutiny in relation to Kant’s critical project until now. Hahmann (2018, 16n2; 36n64) mentions it in a footnote but assumes that it is a holdover of a precritical argument.

⁴⁴ Though George does not fault (or mention) Fordyce for a mistake that he attributes to Kant.

we employ the same rule of reflection to assess heterogeneous functional relations. There is no direct similarity between the functions of a horn and morality, though both are facts of experience for Kant. There is, though, a similarity in so far as we must employ the same rule (the TPSR) when assessing morality as a fact of human nature, just as we inevitably apply that same rule to other organisms and their parts.

This misunderstanding is useful, though, in highlighting the unique form of analogy at work in reflective teleological judgments in the third *Critique*. The analogy is connected with the role of the imagination and Kant's theory of symbolism therein (AA 5:351-352). For certain things and ideas do not allow us to directly cognize them through intuitions. Consequently, to explain their possibility we *must* engage the imagination to supply a symbol with which we then judge these in a concrete manner. Further, it is not that there must be a perfect similarity between symbol and the symbolized. Rather it is the "mere rule of reflection" that is at work in picking out a symbol that we "by means of an analogy" apply "to an entirely different object" (AA 5:352). And though between the two objects (or functions) "there is, of course, no similarity," Kant maintains that there is a similarity "between the rule for reflecting on both and their causality" (AA 5:352). There are interpretive issues around the question of how to understand the rule of reflection here, as well as its identity across judgments of heterogeneous objects, both of which require further analysis.⁴⁵ Important for the teleological argument is that this rule of reflection connects diverse faculties and organizations regardless of whether they are physical or mental, part- or whole-related, etc. It does not search for similar properties or functions, but rather seeks similarity in the form of judgment applied to dissimilar things.⁴⁶ And since

⁴⁵ For an excellent study see, Matherne (2022), as well as Allison (2001, 44-46).

⁴⁶ Cf. the *Prolegomena* definition, AA 4:357-358, as well as – albeit before his mature theory of reflective judgment via analogy – his *Pölitik* lectures on religion (1783-1784): "This is the noble way of *analogy*. – But

organisms and their parts (including our moral predisposition) can only be conceived of via analogical modes of representation, it is further not the case that it is an optional judgment – assuming, that is, that the transcendental philosopher desires a *full* and coherent account of possible experience.

Consequently, the argument’s force is more difficult to dismiss than that of Fordyce’s proof. The analogy is not based on an implausible comparison of morality, on one hand, and fangs or feet, on the other. We draw an analogy because of a rule of reflection that is identical in two cases that are in every respect dissimilar from each other. And the rule of reflection in judging any organism or part thereof is the TPSR that we find as a necessary guiding principle, namely: that *if* some part of our constitution must be judged reflectively, then its complete use, *ceteris paribus*, must be judged as in the offing. We apply this rule of reflection without issue to animals and their parts, even to our own physical, animal traits. And we cannot help but apply it to our moral predisposition too as a fact of our constitution, for which the rule of our judging remains the same – since it is, after all, something that we know through the *fact* of reason. However, this judgment is only subjective in the sense that it is not constitutive of the represented objects themselves. Still, like any reflective judgment it is not merely subjective as *my* personal view. Rather, it lays claim to a “subjective universality” (AA 5:212), in that “its validity for everyone can be presupposed” (AA 5:211). Kant thinks, in sum, that we cannot say that everyone must judge this way to access our shared reality, but he says that everyone must judge this way if

what does this proceeding *per analogiam* consist in? Analogy does not consist in an imperfect similarity of things to one another, as it is commonly taken; for in this case that would be something very uncertain. [...] If, however, we understand analogy to be the perfect similarity of relationships (*not of things but of relationships*), or in short what the mathematicians understand by *proportion*, then we will be satisfied at once [...] But obviously we will not assume any relations of magnitude (for this belongs to mathematics); but rather we will assume a relation of cause to effect, or even better, of ground to its consequence, so as to infer in an entirely philosophical manner” (AA 28:1023).

they want that reality to be fully coherent. And while more than an opinion or a noble falsehood, it remains epistemically humble in that it does not lay claim to counting as knowledge.

The last point to make about the force of the argument is in regards to the kind of assent [*Fürwahrhalten*] involved. Here, the teleological argument presents an enigma. The conclusion certainly does not lead to knowledge. We have no objective grounds that are sufficient to establish our immortality as a fact. But the resulting state of the teleological argument is also stronger than mere opinion, since it carries the same sort of subjective universality as any form of reflective judgment. Hence, there is arguably some degree of subjective sufficiency that raises it above opining. That leaves rational faith [*Glaube*]. Certainly, the standard arguments lead to rational faith. The moral law provides subjectively sufficient grounds to have faith in our immortality despite no objective grounds providing theoretical support. As he writes in the third *Critique*: “For, as matters of faith, they cannot (like matters of fact) be grounded in theoretical proofs; thus they are to be affirmed freely and only as such are they compatible with the morality of the subject” (AA 5:469n). However, the teleological argument cannot avail itself to this sort of faith, since it is not based on the ought-implies-can principle of the moral law and it is in some ways bound up with theoretical claims about what *is* (though in a nuanced way that has to do with necessary forms of judgment).

Thus, it is not clear what form of assent applies to the teleological argument. Yet, perhaps there are resources in the third *Critique*'s discussion of assent based on theoretical proofs. The first form of proof, based on “rational inference” (AA 5:463), leads to knowledge. The third and fourth forms of proof, as “probable opinion” and “hypothesis” respectively (AA 5:463), are associated with mere opinion. But the second form of proof,

which leads to an assent that is neither knowledge nor opinion, is: “(2) for **inferences** from analogy” (AA 5:463). There must be some form of assent, that is, between knowledge and opinion that fits the form of analogical proof when grounded in how we must judge certain facts via reflective judgment. Whatever this form of assent is, which Kant does not provide, I believe must also be the form of assent involved with the teleological proof. And this would provide a truly unique form of assent with its own characteristic sufficiency that is universally subjective. Spelling this out further would be an interesting project deserving its own study.⁴⁷

3.4 The Argument’s Appeal and Potential

The teleological argument must have been appealing to Kant because of its form and force. In light of the context explored above, the argument can be fleshed out from its initial outline as follows to avoid the concern of a false analogy at work.

⁴⁷ Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting that this might be a case of “doctrinal faith,” as described in the first *Critique* (AA A826-827/B854-855). Even though Kant associates natural theology and physico-theological arguments with this form in 1781, I do not think that doctrinal belief can account for the result of the teleological argument. By the third *Critique* (1790), the sorts of examples that he originally associated with doctrinal faith count only as opinions (see, AA 5:467). And the teleological argument leads to a stronger position since it possesses a subjective universality thanks to the form of reflective judgments at play in it. Proops (2021) is one example of someone who thinks that the argument yields doctrinal belief. Benzenberg (ms.) believes that the argument yields an opinion based on probabilistic inference. I, though, do not think that either interpretations can be the case since it conflicts with Kant’s explicit setting apart of analogy from opinion in the third *Critique*’s discussion of assent. Also, the strength of the analogy in reflective teleological judgments, I think, is different from the sort of probabilistic inferences that go into forming opinions for Kant. The sort of analogy at work here is not between a number of similar things (yielding probabilistic inferential grounding), but between relations of judgment that operate on totally heterogeneous things, albeit with the same form of ground-consequence synthesis (as just argued).

The Teleological Argument

- i. If we account for an organism's or its parts' possibility, then we must judge reflectively by imputing an end for which it (organism or part) is determined. (Principle of Transcendental Philosophy)
 - ii. If we judge an organism or its parts reflectively, then we employ the same teleological rule of reflection as for any such judgment form: namely, that it would be in vain *iff* it cannot mature completely to bring about the end we impute to account for its possibility (i.e., attain its full use), *ceteris paribus*. (Rule of Reflection/TPSR)⁴⁸
 - iii. We seek to account for the fact of our moral predisposition's possibility. (Philosophical Desideratum)
 - iv. As a *fact*, we must judge our moral predisposition reflectively by the same teleological rule of reflection as any such judgment. (HS i, ii, iii)
 - v. Either our moral predisposition must be judged as completely attaining its full usefulness in this lifetime or in a future life. (Corollary of TPSR, iv)
 - vi. In this life, our moral predisposition cannot completely attain its full usefulness. (Fact of Experience)
- C We must judge our moral predisposition as completely attainable in a future life, that is, we are immortal. (DS v, vi)

Kant must have admired the argument's linear form. It flows directly to its conclusion and does not force our existence (and future existence) to fit our moral-psychological needs as

⁴⁸ "Completion" does not entail a static state of permanence, but rather a state in which its complete *use* obtains. Kant would say that animals – *ceteris paribus* – attain the complete use of their bodies and natural determinations through living a full life, including procreation. One could, thus, attain perhaps complete use of morality *and* continue on enjoying this complete use once attained.

the agential form of arguments might appear to do. And the force possesses a strength that occupies a happy medium between the moral-psychological and rational arguments. It is subjective in that it is dependent on *our* form of judging, but this form of judging is not contingent on *a posteriori* facts about anyone personally. Thus, there is a subjective universality that attaches to the judgment. And it is more than opinion or hypothesis because it is not anything that could ever be discovered in empirical experience about which we might venture a guess, gather more evidence for over time, or decide empirically one way or another in the future (as argued in section 1 and subsection 3.3). Instead, it is determined solely through a special argument linked to our reflective form of judgment via analogy. For Kant this is not an objectively necessary judgment, of course, but it would be as strong in form and force as our judgments about the beauty of objects, sublime events in nature, and teleological constitution of organisms. Hence, while not knowledge and not rational faith, it is more than opinion.

Finally, Kant must have seen this argument – even while totally independent – as a venerable ally to his rational argument. While one might very well be led to postulate immortality due to one's obligation, this obligatory source of the need does not find any firm footing in how we judge ourselves as natural beings. The teleological argument, at this juncture, can support the rational argument. In reflectively judging our moral predisposition, we cannot help but infer that the same moral perfection demanded of us by the rational argument is equally portended by our natural-moral constitution. What the one argument prescribes, the other describes. And yet, while reaching a common conclusion, they both have different starting points and lead to different forms of assent.

3.5 Whose Immortality?

Who, though, is the proper subject of this immortality? Recent interpreters such as Guyer (2016) hold that Kant gave up personal immortality in favor of immortality of the species by the third *Critique* and beyond.⁴⁹ What is more, this interpretation is consistent with the teleological argument. The conclusion (C.) speaks, after all, of “our” immortality. As long as the species fulfills morality’s telos, then the end’s completion is attained and its status as final end secured. On Guyer’s reading, because the highest good becomes a social good in this world, it makes sense for the final end of humanity to find fulfillment in the species’s gradual progress. It offers an explanation for why we are here, namely, to fulfill our part in realizing the highest good, but it need not make any further claims about our personal persistence after death. When it comes to the individual, Guyer thinks that Kant becomes concerned not with the ability to attain moral *completion*, but rather complete *conversion* (2016, 168-178). This reading takes Kant seriously when it comes to statements like the following from his *Lectures on Pedagogy*, which he repeated in other texts throughout the critical period: “Not individual human beings, but rather the human species, shall get there” (AA 9:445).⁵⁰ In short, the teleological argument could occupy a more naturalistic ground if one imputes attainment of our final end by the species in the spatiotemporal world, as opposed to us individually in the noumenal beyond.

This reading has its strengths, but there are textual reasons to doubt this could be the whole Kantian story. First, it does not align well with Kant’s continued reiteration throughout his later phase that personal immortality remains a postulate of reason.⁵¹

⁴⁹ As does Wood (2020, 46n14) and, it seems, Moran (2011): “No longer is it [the highest good] something that we must strive for in another life. It is something we can accomplish here on earth” (2011, 92), see, as well as (Moran 2012, 50).

⁵⁰ See also, AA 8:18; 8:61; 9:441; 7:324.

⁵¹ Cf. Pasternack (2014, 35ff) and Palmquist (2013, 928).

Indeed, in some later texts he seems to double down on the claim. Often it is noted that Kant does not make as much of personal immortality after the second *Critique*. For my part, however, we can best explain Kant's general reticence to discuss immortality because of its inscrutability. If he were truly losing interest, he would not continue to reiterate its importance in the middle and late phases of this critical period.

In fact, beyond finding positive mention in both the third *Critique*⁵² and the *Religion*⁵³ (not to mention his lectures from this period), Kant does try and expand on the theme of immortality in later texts: in particular, *The End of All Things* (1794) and *What Real Progress* (~1793-1794). In the former, Kant notes that we are led to posit a "moral duration" past this life, though death's inscrutability bars us from further determination of it (AA 8:327). And in *What Real Progress*, we are led to personal immortality by the concept of teleology and the ultimate purpose of the moral law to form the highest good (AA 20:294). For the sake of our moral progress there must "be a stage of metaphysics for this transition" according to which "we impute" to objects certain supersensible ideas, chief amongst them, the supersensible "after us" (AA 20:295). And this is "Immortality, i.e., the continuance of our existence after us" (AA 20:295). This supports not only the teleological argument for immortality, but further the lasting importance of its personal dimension.

Philosophically, though, I do not think that the teleological argument can exclude the personal dimension of immortality. While the argument certainly can include and be consistent with the human species attaining perfection, it cannot exclude the person's own completion for two reasons. First, if it did, then there would be a sense in which each particular human being would be a means for the species-level project rather than an end in

⁵² See, AA 5:460-461; 5:473-474.

⁵³ See, e.g., AA 6:47-48; 6:60n; 6:67n; 6:135.

itself. And while Kant in the *Idea of a Universal History* essay (1784) explicitly endorsed this view,⁵⁴ from the *Groundwork* (1785) onwards, the suggestion that we might be building an end that only future generations enjoy is never repeated. As ends in ourselves from the *Groundwork* on, *we* must individually bring to completion the demand connected to each command of the moral law: namely, moral perfection.

And, second, our teleological judgment of our moral determination is necessarily both universal and personal. I find the moral law as promising that it is *my* life and actions that demand completion in a final end. Of course, it is a shared object too, but its collective completion is not mutually exclusive with the completion of my part. Indeed, both completions are judged as essentially linked in the highest good that combines *universal* virtue (which must include mine) and complete proportionate happiness based on one's worthiness. Hence, I must judge my potential as equally in need of completion for the full rationality of the moral purpose to find realization. It is interesting that Kant is mostly dismissive of the doctrine of reincarnation or transmigration of soul. Indeed, reincarnation would provide a very clean fix to the problem of how to square the particular and universal determination of moral perfection in the individual and species respectively. For it would allow both the immortality of the individual and the species to be true simultaneously in a teleological sense. That is, both could in such a model achieve moral completion in a non-mutually exclusive manner: the many lifetimes it takes me would be an immortality of my soul required for increasing moral self-perfection; and it would take many generations of individuals self-perfecting themselves to realize the component of the highest good within our power and, hence, fulfilled in the species as a whole. The doctrine of transmigration

⁵⁴ In the *Idea* essay, Kant notes that an individual is but preparing the "steps on which the latter [generations] may bring up higher the edifice which was nature's aim," and only the later generations will "have the good fortune to dwell in the building on which a long series of their ancestors (to be sure, without this being their aim) had laboured" (AA 8:20; see also 8:30).

also finds precedence in the Western philosophical tradition through Pythagoras as well as Socrates and Plato.⁵⁵

4 The Teleological Argument in Kant's Published Works

I turn now to the argument's textual standing. Many assume that the standard views are the only game(s) in town, because they are, as it were, canonized in the critical works. While perhaps some experimenting went on in various lectures,⁵⁶ one might object, none of these supplant the published arguments, particularly, the argument for the immortality postulate in the second *Critique*.

As an initial caveat that I have noted already: I do not think that the teleological argument needs to supplant the standard versions. However, *pave* the mainstream view, the teleological argument is present (sometimes more, sometimes less) explicitly in published works from 1787 on. In particular it is evident in the second edition of the first *Critique* where Kant explicitly includes the (moral) teleological argument in the revised section on the paralogisms. And though not enough to ground a reading on, even in the second *Critique* (written around the same time in 1787) Kant begins to let traces of the teleological argument slip into his argument as augmenting elements. With the third *Critique*, there is enough to view his work there as fully consistent with admitting the teleological argument into the critical canon, though it cannot serve as indisputable textual evidence of its

⁵⁵ For Kant's limited remarks on the doctrine in his lectures on metaphysics, see, e.g.: AA 28:445-446; 28:592-593; and 29:918. Hahmann (2018, 34n58) and Palmquist (2013, 929) suggest this possibility, but not in connection with the teleological argument or in order to validate both its claims.

⁵⁶ Indeed, Kant mentions other kinds of arguments for the immortality of the soul in the lectures and published texts, which are often overlooked in the literature. Many thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out some of these (e.g., the argument from divine justice from the first *Critique*, A811/B839, and AA 8:419).

inclusion. For that reason, I focus mainly on the B-edition of the first *Critique* as providing the proof's textual standing.

The teleological argument in its mature form was not available while writing the A-edition of the first *Critique*. Only in 1787 did Kant realize that teleology was an immanent science of critical philosophy, indeed one that formed the third field of philosophy in general. In a letter to Karl Leonhard Reinhold on December 28, 1787, Kant describes the expanding scope of his transcendental project and the reasons to write a third *Critique*. Kant explains that having found a priori principles for two of the three faculties of mind left him in a position to search for those in a final and third faculty. In the process, Kant recognized the “three parts of philosophy,” namely, “theoretical philosophy, *teleology*, and practical philosophy” (AA 10:515, my emphasis). And in the same time period, one finds some of his loftiest praises of the teleological argument from his lectures on metaphysics.

It is not then surprising that the notion of final ends and teleology took prominent place in his critical works from this period onwards. Indeed, the most explicit proof of the teleological argument's inclusion comes precisely from this period. In the B-edition of the first *Critique* (1787), he includes the teleological argument for the immortality of the soul in the completely rewritten paralogisms. Strangely, after establishing that absolutely no theoretical proof is possible for the soul as a substance, Kant nevertheless praises the teleological argument and presents it in almost the exact same form as expounded on above. I include in brackets a reference to the three premises and conclusion (see subsection 3.1):

[1 & 2] If we judged according to the *analogy with the nature* of living beings in this world, in dealing with which reason must necessarily accept the principle that no organ, no faculty, no impulse, indeed nothing whatsoever is either superfluous or

disproportioned to its use, and that therefore nothing is purposeless, but everything exactly conformed to its destiny [*Bestimmung*] in life – [3] if we judged by such an analogy we should have to regard man, who alone can contain in himself the final end [*Endzweck*] of all this order, as the only creature that [C] is excepted from it. (AA B425)

Kant notes that the moral law and our consciousness of it that reaches “far beyond all the utility and advantage which we may derive from them in this present life” such that one “feels an inner call to fit himself, by his conduct in this world, and by the sacrifice of many of its advantages, for citizenship in a better world upon which he lays hold in idea” (B425-426). And though this is a judgment that we can only make via analogy and which – if treated as constitutive of knowledge – leads to a fallacious conclusion, it is one that Kant thinks nevertheless serves as a “proof” of sorts:

This powerful and incontrovertible proof is reinforced by our ever-increasing knowledge of purposiveness in all that we see around us, and by contemplation of the immensity of creation, and therefore also by the consciousness of a certain illimitableness in the possible extension of our knowledge, and of a striving commensurate therewith. (B 426)

Looking therefore to the second edition of the first *Critique* reveals that the moral-teleological argument for immortality belongs not only to the laboratory of his lecture hall, but to the sanctum of the mature critical works too.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Proops (2021, 179) explores the teleological argument here, but in a way that treats it as ultimately being identical with Kant’s later claims in the Canon chapter that one might have doctrinal belief in immortality. For reasons already offered above (see subsection 3.3 and footnote 47), I do not think that this argument can lead to doctrinal belief. Further, while this argument was added to the B-edition in 1787 when Kant’s thinking about teleology was shifting, the doctrinal belief sections in the canon were not revised for the B-edition. Moreover, Kant foregrounds the presentation of the teleological argument in the B-paralogisms as follows: “The proofs [for immortality] that are useful for the world remain here all in their undiminished

Another, to my mind, explicit reference to the teleological argument as part of his critical theory of teleological judgment comes from the *Jäsche Logic* (1800). After defining inferential judgments via analogy, he notes: “Thus the ground of proof for immortality from the complete development of natural dispositions of each creature is, for example, an inference according to analogy” (AA 9:133). Though not an endorsement of the proof, it certainly links the teleological argument with a legitimate form that he clearly endorses in other contexts.⁵⁸

There are slight differences between the first *Critique* rendition and the many versions in the lecture notes, but – to my mind – no significant ones. He includes reference to our theoretical and practical predispositions and respective *Bestimmungen* as not receiving full use in this lifetime. And it is in virtue of our uniqueness as possessing faculties that require an infinite span to reach completion that we infer (via analogy) to a future life. The form holds and appeals to resources of analogical inference that Kant was working into his proper critical theory.

When it comes to the second and third *Critiques*, the proof is less explicit. Still, I think that there are moments in these texts which can be read as indications that the teleological proof was often on his mind. That said, since practical reason is itself teleological in its own employment (setting ends), one must be careful in not over-reading

value, and rather gain in clarity and unaffected conviction by setting aside those *dogmatic pretensions*, in that they place reason in its proper domain, namely the order of ends that is yet at the same time *an order of nature*” (B 424, emphases added). The judgment that is at work in the analogical moves of the argument post 1787 yields a subjectively universal reflection as opposed to a doctrinal dogma. Thanks especially to Christopher Benzenberg for discussions on this topic. He provides excellent analysis of Proops’s treatment of the argument in an unpublished manuscript (ms.).

⁵⁸ Though here I think it is questionable whether Kant is operating with the same form of analogy as in the third *Critique*. Kant writes in a note: “Things of one genus, which we know to agree in much, also agree in what remains, with which we are familiar in some things of this genus but which we do not perceive in others. [...] analogy extends the *given properties* of one thing to several [other properties] *of the very same things*[.]” (AA 9:133). This appears to ground the analogical inference in an empirical homogeneity of many given properties. But this contradicts the account of analogical judgment in the third *Critique* in which it is the rule of reflection and not the perceived properties that grounds analogical inferences.

these as explicit endorsement of the teleological argument. Still, the signs – I think – are there, which I only briefly reference.

Traces of the natural teleological argument, I think are certainly present in the second *Critique*. While it, of course, explicitly contains the agential-rational reading, it is also clear that Kant was thinking of morality more and more in connection with our natural purposive determination as a species. In the immortality argument itself, for example, Kant begins by referring to our commitment to attain “*complete Angemessenheit*” (AA 5:122), which we know only occurs “from lower to higher stages [*Stufen*] of moral perfection [*Vollkommenheit*]” (AA 5:123). In his discussion, a careful reading of the original German points out that natural teleology is playing a supporting background role in the argument. Remembering the manner that *Bestimmung* is often used in connection with *Anlage* as the seed or predisposition that determines the course of our development as natural beings, we see Kant connect immortality with our views of human nature explicitly. He refers to the “proposition about the **moral determination of our nature** [*moralischen Bestimmung unserer Natur*], that only in an endless progress can we attain complete conformity with the moral law” (AA 5:122-123). And in a lengthy footnote, which is meant to support the argument’s intuitive pull, he references “natural perfection” [*Naturvollkommenheit*] to help us understand the need to think in terms of “totality” or completion beyond life (AA 5:123n).

But the most explicit teleological refrains from the second *Critique*, I find, come in the conclusion of the work as a whole. There, Kant writes that the moral law raises each of us up to reveal “a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world, at least so far as this may be inferred from the *purposive determination* of my existence by this law [*aus der zweckmäßigen Bestimmung meines Daseins durch dieses Gesetzes*], a determination not restricted to the conditions and boundaries of this life but reaching into the infinite” (AA

5:162, my emphasis). This on its own might relate to the standard rational argument, of course. But the way he closes the second *Critique* appears to point to how it is equally in how we descriptively assess the very existence of our moral predisposition that allows us to *infer* to a future lifetime. Kant references the moral law as if it were teleologically pointing us to faith from an inference based on our predisposition in analogy with how we judge other theoretical laws from individual instances: “[The example of finding insight into the structure of the world through particulars] can recommend that we take the same path in treating of the moral predispositions of our nature [*der moralischen Anlagen unserer Natur*] and can give us hope of a similarly good outcome” (AA 5:163). Kant draws an analogy between the fact of reason and a falling stone in that – just as we can infer laws of motion from the latter – so too can we infer a grander design and future existence from the former.

Finally, in the third *Critique* from 1790, Kant says immortality or “hope for a future life,” while yielding “absolutely no informative determining judgment” (AA 5:460), is due to a “teleological judging of our existence”:

everything [in connection with the highest good and hope for a future life] is left to the **teleological** judging of our existence from a practically necessary point of view and to the assumption of our continuance as a necessary condition for the final end that is absolutely imposed upon us by reason. (AA 5:460, my emphasis)

Kant, though, does not relate this exclusively to the teleological argument. Still, it is very much in line with it and consistent with it. While this does suggest that some form of the standard rational argument, I think, was always primary in Kant’s thinking, it is still clear that Kant found the teleological argument a veritable secondary avenue that received explicit mention in his critical works, particularly, the second edition of the first *Critique*. The evidence of Kant keeping the teleological argument within the critical enterprise and

his explicit lauding of it (both in the first *Critique* and lecture notes) reveal that it was a personal favorite of Kant's that we must grapple with when understanding his views on immortality.

5 Conclusion

I have argued that one of Kant's favorite arguments for the immortality of the soul during the critical period begins not from our obligation to remain committed to the moral law, but as imputed through our reflective judgments about human nature and its unique teleology in a purely descriptive sense. Rather than self-validating or based on a flat-out contradiction, Kant thought of it as a noble, irrefutable, and humble argument arising through reflections on our place in nature. Our moral calling and rational ability to set ends determine us *as if* we were incomplete parts of a higher order, the completion of which we impute analogically somewhere *after us*. While the argument's dependence on teleology might appear to make it a throwback and only of historical interest, I would like – in conclusion – to identify a strange bedfellow who also thought the proof worthy of pursuit, namely, Kurt Gödel. Gödel's attraction to a form of teleological argument demonstrates the perennial pull and viability of it even into the twentieth century.

In a series of letters written to his mother, Marianne, between July and October 1961, Gödel presents his reasoning for belief in an afterlife.⁵⁹ Mixed in with a dismissal of those who base their beliefs solely on “religious occultism” via the stirrings of the spirit (Gödel, October 6, 1961) as well as requests that his mother send him copies of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Critique of Judgment* (September 12, 1961), Gödel presents an

⁵⁹ Translations are my own. All letters can be found digitalized through the Wienbibliothek im Rathaus: <https://digital.wienbibliothek.at>.

argument for immortality that is based on the unfulfilled potentials that are left incomplete in this life. The arguments is worth citing in it entirety since, to my knowledge, no official translation exists:

In your previous letter you pose the challenging question whether I believe in an afterlife [*Wiederseben*]. On that I can only say the following: If the world is rationally structured and has meaning, then it must be the case. For what sort of a meaning would it have to bring about a being (the human being) with such a wide field of possibilities for personal development and relationships to others, only then to let him achieve not even 1/1000th of it? That would be somewhat akin to someone laying the foundation of a house with the greatest effort and expenditure and then letting everything go to ruin. Does one have a reason to assume *that* the world is rationally structured? I think so. For it is absolutely not chaotic and arbitrary, rather – as natural science demonstrates – there reigns in everything the greatest regularity and order. Order is, indeed, a form of rationality. How are we to think of another life? On that we can naturally only guess. (Gödel July 23, 1961).

And in a follow-up letter in which he further specifies his position to his mother, he asserts:

What I name a theological worldview [*Weltanschauung*] is the view that the world and everything in it has meaning and reason, and indeed a good and indubitable meaning. From this it follows immediately that our earthly existence – since it as such has at most a very doubtful meaning – can be a means to an end [*Zweck*] for another existence. The idea that everything in the world has meaning is, by the way, the exact analogue of the principle that everything has a cause on which the whole of science is based. (Gödel, October 6, 1961)

Thus, we see that Gödel shares Kant's teleological argument for immortality, emphasizing both our unfulfilled potential for intellectual and practical pursuits. And in accordance with

the TPSR, we judge via analogy (in a way that Gödel himself cites in connection with the assumption that we must ascribe causality to everything) that the ends we discover in our nature must find completion in the world if it is rationally organized.⁶⁰ The teleological argument, the assumption that ends are woven throughout the world that must be – for the sake of reason – fulfilled remains a persisting lure for modern minds. However, what this future life amounts to, Kant and Gödel agree cannot be known. Soon after the grounds for inferring a future life on analogy have been established comes the time for philosophy to cease.

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⁶⁰ Though Gödel's claim that we might not even achieve 1/1,000th of our potential might insinuate that the afterlife need not go on for eternity, the basic form remains teleological in structure. But this is a question that would be worth further exploration as to whether it can accommodate an infinite progress as the moral argument seems to require.

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