

Kant on The Highest Good and Moral Arguments

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Abstract

Kant's accounts of the Highest Good and the moral argument for God and immortality are central features of his philosophy. But both involve lingering puzzles. In this entry, we first explore what the Highest Good *is* for Kant and the role it plays in a complete account of ethical life. We then focus on whether the Highest Good involves individuals only, or whether it also connects with Kant's doctrines about the moral progress of the species. In conclusion, we look into three ways of articulating the moral argument for God and immortality that take our commitment to the Highest Good as their point of departure.

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1. What is the Highest Good?

Consider the case of "Agatha" (from Greek for 'good'), a virtuous person who lives under an oppressive authoritarian regime. One day, a representative of the regime visits Agatha and tells her that she must provide false testimony against her neighbor: if she does not comply, then she and her family will suffer. Agatha believes that lying in this case would be wrong. This is in part because she believes that the lie would treat her neighbor as a

mere means to the end of her own self-preservation, as well as to the various nefarious ends of the regime. Agatha does not particularly like her neighbor, and she suspects that the neighbor would betray her if the tables were turned. Nevertheless, Agatha doesn't lie, and she and her children suffer the consequences.

Agatha's story might seem to provide a fairly complete account of the moral features of a virtuous action: there is an agent, a principle, a choice, and an outcome. Somewhat perplexingly, Kant (in all three *Critiques*) rejects this intuitive thought and insists that every virtuous action is *also* related to an ultimate object that is *not* merely some combination of the good will, its intention, the action, and its local effects. Why?

As we will see, Agatha's story is incomplete, according to Kant, because it lacks reference to the "final end" [*Endzweck*] for which she acts, something regarding which one could say: "Ah, so that is *ultimately* what Agatha is acting for!" Kant thinks that identifying such a "final end" is important: it is "undeniable" (he asserts) that in addition to a form "every volition must also have an object and hence a matter" (*KpV* 5:34; cf. *TP* 8:279n and *RGV* 6:4). Obviously a local final end, for Agatha, is telling the truth and preserving her neighbor from false accusation. But Kant thinks that there is *also* an ultimate final end for *all* moral volitions. In other words, *whenever* one acts morally, one's action connects to a grand final purpose that is *also* the end of any other moral agent's action. This is what he calls "the Highest Good" – it is, in addition to any local ends, the proper "matter" of *all* actions whose "form" is the moral law – that is, actions done from respect for duty alone. All moral actions are done for the sake of bringing about the Highest Good. It is where the virtuous buck stops.¹

¹ Kant defines a final end in the third *Critique* as one "which needs no other as the conditions of its possibility" (*KU* 5:434).

Let's unpack this further: Naturally every particular instance of moral volition in space and time has some contingent, material end (helping that Samaritan collapsed on the road ahead). But a particular moral volition is moral *not* because of its contingent end, or because the agent may independently desire that end. Rather, the *morality* of the volition consists in the way it expresses what everyone ought to do in every circumstance, and regardless of their desires. It is this "form" that is shared by every moral action. But this means, for Kant, that there must be a universal "material" object that corresponds to that universal form. Put another way: because the *a priori* and *unconditioned* moral law is the form of moral action, only an object that unites the "matter" of *all* such actions can be the final end of any of them.

We might take issue with that argument. But suppose we grant it: what object or end would suffice? Kant's answer is that every time Agatha acts on the moral law, she is acting not *merely* for the sake of the local end (telling the truth to the regime today), but rather also for the sake of "the Highest Good, as the object and *final end* [*Endzweck*] of pure practical reason" (*KpV* 5:129). Moreover, to be truly *final*, this object must be the "unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason" (*KpV* 5:108), which leads Kant to make a move that has been a persistent point of debate and confusion for interpreters ever since. For in his articulation of what this unconditioned totality includes, Kant argues that the Highest Good must be conceived of as a "*mixtum compositum*" of two elements: the agent's virtue (or, perhaps, the set of all her morally good actions), and her happiness. Kant is quick to note that her happiness has to be not just morally permissible, but also proportional to (and thus conditional on) her degree of virtue: "[For] virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the Highest Good for one person,

and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy)” (*KpV* 5:110). Let’s consider each of these elements in turn.

First, *virtue*. It might seem trivial to begin here, especially since Kant is famous for saying that the only unconditionally and intrinsically good thing is a morally good (virtuous) will. In other words, virtue alone, or action done from duty, is the *only* thing that can be called good in an objective sense:

What we are to call good must be an object of the faculty of desire in the judgment of every reasonable human being, and evil an object of aversion in the eyes of everyone; hence for this appraisal reason is needed, in addition to sense. (*KpV* 5:61)

If we all merely followed instinct or pure pleasure, then there would be much satisfaction but no further point or purpose to it. This is why Kant refers to the moral law as the “*supreme condition of all good*” (*KpV* 5: 62 and 5:110). The Highest Good, then, must take its point of departure from there. Moreover, and this is more controversial, it looks like the Highest Good, in order to be *highest*, must have moral *perfection* as a constitutive element. That is, the object that represents the final goal of all moral striving must contain 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). Any lesser state would not represent one in which there is a perfect match between our wills and the moral law. This makes sense: the Highest Good is the object or “matter” corresponding to the “form” of the unconditioned moral law, and so it must be a state in which “behavior should simultaneously conform to the utmost with the

moral law” (*FM* 20:294). (Note: this is a “maximalist” conception of the Highest Good, and not everyone accepts it – more on that below.)

Second, *happiness*. This is the puzzling element: why does Kant include it in the Highest Good, given his anti-eudaimonism? Kant suggests that there is something inconsistent in the idea that a perfectly virtuous person lacks perfect happiness:

For, to need happiness, and to be also worthy of it, and yet not to participate in it cannot be consistent with the perfect volition of a rational being that would at the same time have all the power, even if we think of such a being only for the sake of the experiment. (*KpV* 5:110)²

The thought here again is this: We are looking for an object or “matter” that is fully adequate to the “form” of the universal moral law. We have seen that it must be an outcome in which the agent achieves perfect virtue (again, this is granting maximalism). But would an “impartial reason, which regards a person in the world generally as an end in itself” (5:110) be able to leave it at that? Kant argues that an omnipotent and perfectly rational being would also include happiness (the satisfaction of our desires) in proportion to the agent’s *worthiness* to be happy. And so if we achieve perfect virtue in the Highest Good, then we also enjoy perfect happiness. This combination is the heart of the Highest Good, and Kant thinks that this “combination is cognized as *a priori* – thus as practically necessary and not as derived from experience” (*KpV* 5:113). Apart from the rather vague

² And, *mutatis mutandis*, from the *Groundwork*: “a rational and impartial spectator can never be pleased by the sight of the uninterrupted prosperity of a being graced by no touch of a pure and good will” (*GMS* 4:393).

gesture at what God would do in a perfect world, however, Kant does not make it clear what this *a priori* cognition consists in. There are a few prominent ways of supplementing his account in the commentary literature.

The first takes the passage just quoted to indicate that there is an intrinsically valuable connection between happiness and virtue such that, when the two do not align, there is a deficiency in the world that a “perfect volition” would have reason to resolve. This might be cashed out in terms of the idea of justice as fairness. A world in which everyone is moral but everyone is also unhappy – a kingdom, as it were, of *distraught* ends – would not be fair, and would not be the complete and final object of fully moral will. An impartial, omnipotent, moral will seeks to maximize the good *justly* and so would not allow such an imbalance. There would be something unfair about it, just as it is unfair when the virtuous suffer and the wicked prosper in our world. Such proportionality between virtue and happiness is thus, as Mark Johnston puts it, “deeply valuable and intrinsically so” (2019, 50). Johnston thinks that we are responding to this intrinsic value every time we feel “ethically-motivated disgust” at some unfair disproportion between virtue and happiness.

On this reading of Kant, then, only a state that manifests a strict and non-accidental proportionality between morality and happiness could be the “complete” Highest Good and final end for practical reason. If proportionality were *lacking*, then we again would face a situation in which an intrinsic and metaphysically possible good is missing from the Highest Good. One drawback of this account, from a Kantian point of view, is that it seems to make the proportional relationship between virtue and happiness good in itself, whereas Kant seems to think that only virtue is unconditionally good.

But there are other readings of how to bring happiness into the complete object of pure practical reason, each of which also establishes a conditioning relation to morality. For example, Stephen Engstrom (1992) argues that Kant finds happiness *itself* to be of *moral* value under certain conditions. On Engstrom's reading, "self-love" or the desire for happiness "is a natural propensity both to pursue one's own happiness and, in pursuing it, to claim it to be good" (760). But if this claim is ever *rationally justified*, as Kant seems to think it is, then our happiness must be connected to the only truly good thing: the good will. This in turn means that the actions that lead to this good (our happiness) must be universalizable – i.e., actions whose underlying principle ("maxim") is such that any rational will could adopt it. Hence, the same practical rationality that validates various selfless actions can validate *some* self-loving ones, as long as self-love itself is always "subordinated" to the moral law. If the self-loving actions result in happiness, then that too can be counted among the objective goods (762). This is supposed by Engstrom to show why happiness must be included in the *complete* and final end -- the Highest Good.

A third alternative: Ralf Bader argues for the "necessary connection" (2015, 187) by saying that happiness "is good to the extent to which it is combined with virtue and is to be included in the complete good to that extent" (2015, 187). However, for Kant, desire-satisfaction or happiness *per se* is not good; outside of a connection with morality it is not even partially constitutive of the Highest Good. So Bader thinks that we can only be rationally motivated to seek happiness if we ground that pursuit in virtue: "happiness can only be an object of practical reason and can only be good to the extent to which the person is virtuous" (2015, 186). Moreover, "having a certain amount of happiness without having the corresponding 'level' or 'amount' of virtue would not be something good but would instead conflict with the necessary connection" (2015, 187). Counterintuitively,

perhaps, Bader concludes that any happiness that exceeds an agent's level of virtue, even if the agent is *highly* virtuous, would "lack value." Virtue, in Bader's words, places "a ceiling on what is good" (2015, 198). This has a corresponding effect on our reasons:

That is, rather than determining what people deserve and then ensuring that they end up with what they deserve, people have reason to pursue happiness only to the extent to which it is deserved. (2015, 198)

So for Bader we have reason to pursue all and *only* the happiness of which we are morally-worthy. But such happiness must be part of Highest Good.

These three options do not exhaust the ways of reading Kant's claim about the connection between happiness and virtue in the Highest Good. They do show, however, that there are ways of incorporating happiness into Kant's moral psychology while preserving the priority and unconditional status of the good will.

For Kant, this doctrine of the Highest Good as the unique final object of the rational will leads immediately to theology. Kant insists in the second *Critique* that "[b]y a concept of an object of practical reason, I understand the representation of an object as *an effect possible through freedom*" (*KpV* 5:57, emphasis added). The Highest Good, then, is conceived as an effect of free action. And yet producing both elements (virtue and happiness) in perfect proportion and in a non-contingent way is more than finite beings can accomplish, certainly in one lifetime. Hence, we are led to postulate (a) the existence of a supreme free being (God) who can bring about this perfect and non-accidental proportion, and (b) a "future life of the soul" in which we can make ourselves perfectly worthy and also (we hope) enjoy such a blessed state. Exploring the Highest

Good's role in Kant's moral arguments for these "postulates of practical reason" is the topic of section 3 below.

Having discussed what the Highest Good is, for Kant, and why he thinks it is required for a full account of rational morality, we turn now to some further puzzles surrounding the doctrine.

2. The Highest Good for Whom?

We have seen that the Highest Good is a perfectly proportioned combination of virtue and happiness. We have also discussed why and in what sense the Highest Good is supposed to be the final object of all our moral action. But there is still a question as to when and for whom the Highest Good obtains. How does this pursuit (and perhaps realization) of individual goods connect with the collective efforts of other rational creatures (and God) to achieve the Highest Good overall?

One response to this question conceives of the Highest Good primarily in *individualistic* terms – with the afterlife as the locus of completion. It is an individualistic model because it views the Highest Good as obtaining whenever *any* individual actually achieves self-perfection accompanied by proportionate happiness. No individual can, Kant insists,³ attain perfect virtue in this life. Hence we postulate a future life in which

³ "Complete conformity of the will with the moral law is, however, *holiness*, a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence" (*KpV* 5:122). And: "The distance between the goodness which we ought to effect in ourselves and the evil from which we start is, however, infinite, and, so far as the deed is concerned – i.e. the conformity of the conduct of one's life to the holiness of the law – it is not exhaustible in any time" (*RGV* 6:66, see also 6:61). Kant seems to remain agnostic in the *Religion* about whether Jesus Christ, the "Holy One of the Gospel," was actually morally perfect in life: "Now if a human being of such a truly divine disposition had descended, as it were, from heaven to earth at a specific time, and had he exhibited in his self, through teaching, conduct and suffering, the *example* of a human being well-pleasing to God, to the extent that such an example can at all be expected from outer experience [...]: even then we would have no cause to assume in him anything else except a naturally begotten human being" (*RGV* 6:64). Still, even if we cannot know whether the Holy One was in fact holy as a human being: "Yet such a divinely disposed teacher, though

our individual striving continues indefinitely. This effectively makes the Highest Good for *me* come apart from the moral progress of others (in this or the next life).

We have been working in an explicitly maximalist mode thus far: where *perfect* virtue and *perfect* happiness are the constitutive parts of the Highest Good. But some commentators think that Kant allows that *some* of us do not achieve perfect virtue, and thus do not enjoy perfect happiness, even in the Highest Good. Or perhaps *none* of us achieves perfect anything – we just do our best and get our just rewards. These are *non-maximalist* conceptions. Thus a non-maximalist, individualist model has each of us being happy in proportion to his or her virtue, but without requiring that the virtue or the happiness be perfect.

Non-maximalist models confront questions about how anyone could regard such a *bonum* as truly *summum*. If we contrast a world in which there is perfect justice but not complete happiness (because some remain unworthy of it) with a world in which there is both perfect justice and complete happiness (since all have earned it), then surely the latter – by including more virtue and proportional happiness – is *higher* in the sense of including *more* goodness overall. That is the fundamental maximalist intuition (admittedly, it is not shared by members of the tradition, like Augustine and Leibniz, who thought that in a perfect world it is important for there to be some bad people who are fairly *unhappy*, in order to manifest divine justice).

Individualistic conceptions of the Highest Good – whether maximalist or non-maximalist – have trouble with Kant’s doctrine about the moral law being the form of *all*

in fact totally human, would nonetheless be able to speak truly of himself *as if* the ideal of goodness were displayed incarnate in him (in his teaching and conduct)” (RGV 6:66 emphasis added, see also the note on 6:80 where Kant discusses whether virgin birth would somehow free Jesus Christ from the radical evil rooted in human nature).

rational action (one that requires a “matter” that includes *all* rational agents). They also seem to ignore Kant’s views regarding the progress of the species as a whole. In his philosophy of history he seems to think that there are grounds for thinking that humanity is progressing morally, and that perpetual peace might be on the (distant) horizon (note here the similarities to some religious traditions that profess universalist soteriologies, e.g., some versions of Christianity, Unitarianism, and Mahayana Buddhism). But can that historical story be completely distinct from the story about the Highest Good?

This last question leads to another way of interpreting the Highest Good doctrine by shifting the focus from the individual to the *species*. Collectivist models of the Highest Good typically make the locus of completion exclusively this-worldly and naturalistic. On such models, after an indefinite number of generations, rational creatures manage to approximate the Highest Good on their own through laws and institutions that reform actions, reward virtue, and punish vice. Thus there are some future individuals, at the limit-end of the process, who live in a just society that incarnates the Highest Good, at least as far as it can be established by collective human efforts.⁴ These lucky few will still need to act virtuously of their own free will, but they will also reap the benefits of a truly just society.⁵

⁴ They will still, presumably, lack complete control over disease and natural disasters, however, and so the Highest Good will not be *perfectly* proportional: some of the virtuous may still disproportionately suffer. Indeed, there will be absolutely no guarantees of the proportion obtaining between virtue and happiness. Also, if the species must be “immortal” to achieve this, then one might wonder the extent to which this reading could be called “naturalistic.”

⁵ Kant is clear in a section of *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) titled “The Problem of Progress is not to be Resolved Directly through Experience” that even future generations will never attain a point at which moral behavior is guaranteed (*SF* 7:83). There will be great improvement, i.e., a vastly increased number of good *deeds*, but this may occur “without the moral foundation in humanity having to be enlarged in the least; for that, a kind of new creation (supernatural influence) would be necessary” (*SF* 7:92).

An influential reading along these lines has been offered by Andrews Reath. Reath refers to conceptions with a locus of completion in the afterlife as “theological” and the species-focused, naturalistic conception as “secular” (1988, 594).⁶ While both are arguably present in Kant’s texts, Reath claims that the secular conception ultimately becomes Kant’s main view:

We will see that both versions [i.e., the secular and theological] are visible in almost all the relevant texts. However, the theological version is more prominent in the earlier works, such as the first and second *Critiques*, while the secular version is predominant in the third *Critique* and later works. This allows us to conclude that historically, Kant’s thought about the Highest Good develops in the direction of the secular conception, even though the theological version is never completely dropped.⁷

On the secular conception of the species’ progress towards a morally perfect future, then, the Highest Good obtains for some individuals (in either a maximalist or non-maximalist way), but only for those individuals at the limit-end of the process. Proponents of this view, then, sacrifice perfect *distributive* proportionality along with the non-naturalistic elements of the theological conception, since a lot of individuals will perish before the Highest Good is achieved. By dropping God (or karmic law, etc.) as the perfect

⁶ For an indispensable etiology of the “rise of the secular interpretation,” which traces it to Rawls’ *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* (2000) and the call for a “secular ideal of a possible realm of ends that can be [...] realized in the natural world” (317), see Pasternack 2017. Pasternack also argues that Kant never abandoned his theological commitments as conditions of the Highest Good’s real possibility.

⁷ Reath 1988, 601. Compare Guyer 2018, 168-178, and Wood 2020, 46n14.

scorekeeper who grants happiness justly and non-accidentally to each individual in the afterlife, the secular Highest Good excludes the countless individuals who operate as stages along the progressive way.

In *Idea of a Universal History with Cosmopolitan Intent* (1784), Kant seems to endorse this picture: he says that all current individuals are merely preparing the “steps on which the latter [generations] may bring up higher the edifice” (*IaG*, 8:20). Thus only members of these 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 labored” (*IaG*, 8:20). However, while Kant does suggest here that only the species attains the final end, he never explicitly disavows the postulate of individual immortality (it is present in all three *Critiques*, as well as in later works including the *Opus Postumum*).⁸ Setting the textual situation aside, the secular conception also delivers a less-than-Highest Good: the truly *Highest* Good would be one that includes all of humanity – that is, every individual, instead of just members of the furthest-flung generations.

In short, there are strong arguments for thinking that secular conceptions do not deliver the full-fledged *Highest* Good. And yet there is something right in them as well. For even if the Highest Good requires all of us and God in a future life, the moral law commands that each of us do our best to produce the Highest Good – now and without delay. Further, secular conceptions are correct to emphasize that Kant thinks the collective Highest Good plays a key role in how we reflectively conceive *this* world. In the third *Critique* (1790), Kant says: “[I]f creation has a final end at all, we cannot conceive of it except as having to correspond to the final end of morality” (*KU*, 5:453-

⁸ For more on whether the doctrine of immortality survives in the later Kantian works, see Beiser 2006, Bader 2016, 187 and Pasternack 2017, 441-443.

454).⁹ So if we judge the Highest Good to be the final end of creation (which Kant thinks we are permitted to do¹⁰), then it seems like we can no longer view it as *merely* any one individual's final end, but rather *also* as a collective end – something we produce together. There is a teleological-social dimension to Kant's late-career reflections on the Highest Good, and a firm link between our moral perfection as individuals and the moral perfection of the species in nature:

We also find in *ourselves*, and even more in the concept of a rational being endowed with freedom (of its causality) in general, a **moral teleology**, [... and] this moral teleology concerns us *as beings in the world and thus as beings connected to other things in the world*, upon which this very same law prescribes us to direct our judging, whether as ends or as objects in regard to which we ourselves are ends. (*KU*, 5:447, emphasis added; see also *KU*, 453)

Kant is saying here that we cannot help but regard our moral striving as a systematic affair -- connected with the moral progress of others and embedded in nature as a system of ends (according to Kant's arguments in the third *Critique*). Though we – as individuals – typically attain the Highest Good after we have shuffled off the mortal coil, we also typically start off with a this-worldly communal effort. The secular reading's mistake is to claim that the moral progress of the species in nature is *wholly* constitutive of the

⁹ See also *KU*, 5:435 and *RGV*, 6:60. This facet of Kant's doctrine is prominent in Kant's works from the early 1790s, including the third *Critique*, *Religion*, and *On the Common Saying* essay.

¹⁰ See §§85-87 of the *KU*.

Highest Good. The best solution, it seems to us, is to advocate a hybrid view according to which the production of the Highest Good involves nature as a first stage in the here-and-now, but then transfers to a second stage in the hereafter.¹¹

3. Moral Arguments about the Highest Good

Kant is famous for attempting (in the first *Critique*) to overthrow the classical arguments for the existence of God: the cosmological, ontological, and design arguments. He offers specific arguments against each one, but also thinks that each oversteps the limits on human cognition and knowledge. Nevertheless, in all three *Critiques*, Kant is quick to add that such knowledge-claims have to be “denied” to “make room” for rational Belief (*Vernunftglaube*) (Biv).¹² Crucial and common to all of these “moral arguments” is the claim that the final object of our pure practical reason is the Highest Good.

In this section we look at three main varieties of Kant’s “moral proof” that can be discerned in the critical texts.¹³ Each starts with a claim about our moral obligations and then invokes the doctrine of the Highest Good along the way to the conclusion that Belief in God and the future life of the soul is *prima facie* morally justified. The first variety appeals to threats and promises implicit in divine justice and doesn’t seem to reflect

¹¹ Many further puzzles remain here. For example, if we did not have this teleological perspective on nature, would we need to think of nature being related to the Highest Good at all? And even if the Highest Good has its first stage in nature, is there a certain minimum rate of progress that has to obtain in order for it to count as Highest? How much of the Highest Good is in nature and how much in the future life? Also, wouldn’t the *Highest* Good be the one with *no* progress required – that is, the one that is already perfected? Thanks to Ralf Bader, Anil Gomes, and Andrew Stephenson for questions on these issues, which we simply set aside as homework.

¹² *Glaube* is a voluntary state of assent (*Fürwahrhalten* - lit., holding-for-true) that a subject takes up for non-epistemic reasons; it can guide deliberation, action, and assertion in certain contexts (or in all contexts, depending on the content). We translate it as “Belief” with a capital “B” to emphasize that it is a technical Teutonic term, distinct from our contemporary concepts of “belief” and “faith.” For more on Kant’s conception of Belief, see Chignell 2007, Pasternack 2011, Höwing 2016, Gava 2019, and Wood 2020, ch. 2.

¹³ Portions of this section are adapted from Chignell 2023b.

Kant's considered views about moral motivation. The second regards morally justified Belief in God and the afterlife as a result of the command to will the Highest Good, together with a version of the ought-implies-can principle. The third variety – the “moral-psychological argument” – invokes plausible empirical theses as the basis for hope about the Highest Good and Belief in the kind of God who would bring it about.¹⁴

A. First Model: Hope and Fear, Carrots and Sticks

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

[A]ll interest of my reason (the speculative as well as the practical) is united in the following three questions:

1. What can I know?
2. What should I do?
3. What may I hope? (A806/B833)

The question about hope unites the first two because it is "simultaneously" theoretical and practical – it “concerns happiness” but “finally comes down to the inference that something **is...because something ought to happen**” (A805-6/B833-4, original bold).

This needs spelling out: Note, first, that Kant connects hope with desire for happiness. This explains why the third question is a “theoretical question” about what

¹⁴ Perhaps there are not just these three varieties. AE points out that with regards to the immortality of the soul, there is also a fourth argument in the critical period -- namely, the teleological argument (see, Englert 2023b and Proops 2021). However, AC thinks that this is not a *moral* argument, and does not see space for a fourth variety, beyond the three detailed here.

exists (A805/B833): “all hoping is for happiness,” where happiness involves the satisfaction of desires. One of the key rational constraints on hope, though, is that the happiness for which we hope must be proportional to our virtue: “everyone has grounds to hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his conduct...” (A809/B837). This is why the third question is also practical in nature. For the theoretical answer to what I *may* or *must* hope (Kant’s language at times suggests that we are required to hope for this¹⁵) hinges on the all-important caveat, “if I do what I ought to do” (A805/833). From the start of his critical period, therefore, Kant sees these ends of action (happiness and virtue) as intrinsically linked. Indeed – and uncharacteristically when compared with his later moral theory – Kant also suggests in the first *Critique* that this link explains why we can be motivated to do what we ought to in the first place.

But why do we need God for this? Kant suggests that in a utopian “moral world” of perfectly rational human beings, it is conceivable that

freedom, partly inspired and partly restricted by moral laws, would itself be the cause of general happiness, since rational beings, under the guidance of such principles, would themselves be the authors both of their own enduring well-being and of that of others. (A809/B837)

¹⁵ Take for example Kant’s insistence that answering the third question is “necessary”: “I maintain that just as the moral principles are necessary according to reason in its *practical* employment, it is in the view of reason, in the field of its *theoretical* employment, no less necessary to assume that everyone has ground to hope for happiness in the measure in which he has rendered himself by his conduct worthy of it” (A809/B837).

In short, if we all meticulously followed the categorical imperative and collectively produced a just society in which each is worthy of maximal happiness, then we might generate a perfect and non-accidental proportion between worthiness and happiness.

“But,” Kant continues, “such a system of self-rewarding morality is only an idea, the carrying out of which rests on the condition that *everyone* does what he ought” (A809-10/B837-8). Such a moral world, when faced with the hard facts of human history, not to mention facts about disease and natural disasters that are not under our control, turns out to be merely an “idea.”¹⁶ In the present world of immorality and vulnerability, it is all the more difficult for us to parcel out happiness justly. That’s why Kant thinks the production of the Highest Good must be superintended by:

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

God, as a morally perfect and supreme will, could succeed where human nature and the natural laws appear to fail. But the ultimate resolution would have to occur in a future life. Thus:

¹⁶ Saniye Vatansever suggests that in the moral world we would become so good at medicine and climate science that we would be able to “prevent the suffering from natural evils.” That strikes us as a fairly tall order, and out of keeping with Kant’s pessimism in his “Theodicy” essay and the “End of All Things.” See Vatansever 2021, pp. 267-8. Compare Chignell 2022.

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

In sum: since only God could bring about such an exact and non-accidental proportion, and it looks like this can only happen (given what we know about history) in the context of a much longer life, we have moral justification for Belief in God and the future life.

There are familiar, philosophical objections to this argument. First, there are the questions we considered in Section 1 about how to explain the “necessary consequence” relation between virtue and proportionate happiness. Second, there are questions about the nature of the deity required to bring about the Highest Good: Why is a full-blown infinite supreme deity required in order to make the Highest Good realizable? Why isn’t a less august or “shrunken” deity (or a karmic law, or Fichte’s “living moral order”) just as good for these purposes?

A different kind of objection arises from the astonishingly *unKantian* insistence in these first *Critique* passages that the appeal to divinely appointed happiness or misery in the afterlife is required for moral *motivation*, and that this is why the Highest Good includes proportional happiness. Kant says the following:

Thus without a God and a world that is not now visible to us but is hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approbation and admiration *but not incentives for resolve and realization* (Gegenstände des Beifalls und der Bewunderung, *aber nicht Triebfedern des Vorsatzes und der Ausübung*) because they would not fulfill the whole end that is natural for every rational being and

determine *a priori* and necessarily through the very same pure reason.
(A812/B840, emphasis added)

He even explicitly mentions *consequences*, both positive and negative, as necessary in order for the moral laws to function as “commands”:

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

This is a striking claim to a Kantian ear: it depicts morality’s commands as motivating only in so far as happiness is vouchsafed for the virtuous -- carrots and sticks seem to be offered as incentives to do the right thing. And so it depicts our moral action as motivated not by respect for the moral law alone, but rather also by the promise of glory and the fear of perdition.¹⁷ While apparently at odds with later developments in Kant’s critical ethics, this formulation fits with his very early conviction that morality depends on feelings to motivate us. We see this earlier in the A-edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*:

What has chiefly to be kept in view in the division of such a science [i.e., one of critique], is that no concepts be allowed to enter which contain in themselves

¹⁷ Guyer (2000) suggests, by contrast, that the Highest Good plays no motivational role, even in the first *Critique*: “But Kant made it clear beginning with the ‘Canon of Pure Reason’ of the *Critique of Pure Reason* – published four years before *Groundwork* – that the complete *object* of virtuous action, although not its *motive*, is the highest good” (386).

anything empirical, or, in other words, that it consist in knowledge wholly *a priori*. Accordingly, although the highest principles and fundamental concepts of morality are *a priori* knowledge, they have no place in transcendental philosophy, since the concepts of pleasure and pain, of the desires and inclinations, of free will, etc. have to be presupposed. Transcendental philosophy is therefore a philosophy of pure and merely speculative reason. All that is practical, so far as it contains motives, relates to feelings, and these belong to the empirical sources of knowledge. (A14-5, emphasis added)

Kant's view here is that morality – even while based on *a priori* knowledge of moral laws – depends on motivation rooted in feelings like “pleasure and pain.” Belief in God and future life, therefore, are essential at this stage, for without them we could not hope for proportionate happiness and, thus, would lose all motivation to do as we should. In *Groundwork* (1785), Kant would clearly reject this view. And although this version of the argument is still present in the B-edition of the first *Critique* (1787), it must be handled with care since that part of the book is still in its 1781 state (Kant apparently ran out of time to edit the Canon chapter for the second edition). While perhaps unKantian, this version of the moral argument in the Canon offers key insights into the development of Kant's ideas.¹⁸

B. Rational Coherence and Ought-Implies-Can

¹⁸ For a story about how Kant moved from his original position (that morality cannot undergo critique) to his full-fledged *a priori* ethical theory, see Förster 2012.

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

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

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

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

From there Kant can move quickly via reasoning we adduced above: rational Belief in the practical possibility of the Highest Good grounds rational Belief in the actuality of God and the future life. Kant summarizes it as follows (using “acceptance” (*Annahme*) as a synonym for Belief):

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

That is the argument in a nutshell. But there are questions about the ought-licenses-commitment-to-practically-can principle in (2). First, what is “practical possibility” (or “objective possibility” as Kant puts it in the passage)? Why can't we be obliged to will an end that we take to be merely *logically* possible, without any commitments to its real possibility, much less its “realizability” (*Ausführbarkeit*) (5:455) or “practical possibility” (5:112; 5:115; 5:126)?

Kant's idea here is that there would be something fundamentally irrational about willing the realization of an end or object that is not possible through our freedom, i.e., that is not, at least in principle, “practically, objectively” possible. Hence, for a moral action to be rational, its object, which Kant thinks is the Highest Good, ought to be realizable, even if God's help is required. On the other hand, if the Highest Good is viewed by the agent as *not* practically, objectively possible, even if it is logically and metaphysically possible – a status that is shared by minotaurs and fairies – then there will be, Kant thinks, a question about whether it is practically rational to follow the moral law at all.¹⁹ Kant writes:

¹⁹ Wood (1970, 2020) is a major proponent of the rational coherence view. He notes, e.g., in that “the importance of the relation between belief and action for Kant is that it is a *rational* relation” (1970, 20). If I think it is objectively impossible to realize the Highest Good, then “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” (Wood 1970, 30).

If, therefore, the Highest Good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false. (*KpV* 5:114)

Kant's view is that there are *rational* conditions on what is required to will something – that is, to put one's energy, time, and sweat into the production of it in the world. And there does seem something irrational, perhaps, about willing something that one views as *merely* logically possible, not to mention impossible.²⁰

It is also noteworthy, second, that in this version of the argument Kant continues to regard the Highest Good as the proper object of the will (in (1)). "We ought to strive to promote the Highest Good (which must therefore be possible)" (5:125). But why *ought* we will the composite state when morality alone, apart from any connection to happiness, is now clearly supposed to be sufficient for moral motivation? Why not just will the moral law and *hope* for the Highest Good? Here we might revert to one of the arguments in Section 1 above according to which pure practical reason *must* include happiness as part of its total object. In that case, though, we also have to add a caveat to the argument: namely, that though we *promote* the whole object due to certain intrinsic values of proportionality or the goodness of seeking morally-conditioned happiness, we are only responsible for that which is directly within our free control: namely, virtue.

²⁰ That said: AE thinks that in the third *Critique* and *Religion* Kant seems to retreat from this position somewhat. In the third *Critique*, he asks whether a lack of practical possibility would allow us to abandon the moral law as a principle of determining action. He responds to his own question with a rare blast of emphasis: "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" (*KU* 5:451).

Finally, does this argument do any better with the shrunken God objection, mentioned earlier, according to which a lesser deity, or a committee of such, or a "living moral order" could do the job that Kant wants God to do? In the second *Critique*, Kant does not seem to offer much in response to this; indeed, he even seems to concede that reason "nevertheless cannot prove - that is, set forth sufficiently on objective grounds - the impossibility of [the Highest Good being produced] via the universal laws of nature" (5:145). More discussion of Kant's moral theology would be required to address this question further.

C. Demoralization and Psychological Bulwarks

A third kind of moral proof is arguably visible in Kant's works from the 1790's, including the third *Critique* (1790), the "Theory and Practice" essay (1793), and *Religion within the Limits of Mere Reason* (1793).²¹ In these texts, Kant appeals to hope for the the Highest Good and Belief in God and the future life as essential for sustaining moral hope in the face of frailty and finitude.

In *Religion*, for instance, Kant might be read as saying that, for many of us, sustaining moral effort requires the substantial practical hope that justice will roll down like the waters someday, and even that our moral efforts are making some small contribution to it doing so. We have a

²¹ There are admittedly passages in these texts that still sound like the second version (see e.g. *KU* 5: 450-1 where Kant speaks of "the moral argument as an argument for consistency in reasoning"). And there may be ways in which the two arguments could be combined. See Chignell 2023b for more discussion.

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

By speaking of a “natural” rather than a “rational” need, Kant seems to invoke an empirical-psychological fact. For many of us, most of us perhaps, the prolonged experience of injustice – of a world-history in which the wicked hoard resources and the virtuous are often miserable – could naturally hinder our ongoing moral *resolve*, even if reason and the law provide a sufficient moral *incentive*.²² By distinguishing between resolve (*Entschliessung*) and incentive (*Triebfeder*) in this way, the argument avoids the unKantian aspects of the first version. And for those who find the second version implausible or incoherent, this approach might be more attractive in that it focuses on familiar facts about human psychology. This third version of the proof, then, combines the *a priori* claim that we ought to will the moral law alone with an empirical-psychological claim about what some of us need in order to avoid “demoralization.”²³ It’s

²² AE thinks that there are other ways of reading the “natural need.” Though Kant does note that it might lead to a hindrance of moral resolve, the need itself which is natural seems – on an alternative reading that AE favors – to refer to the need of determining an object for our willing: “For in the absence of all reference to an end no determination of the will can take place in human beings at all, since no such determination can occur without an effect” (*RGV* 6:4). This description (which follows the introduction of the natural need) seems more akin to the need expressed for an ultimate end (period) in the second *Critique* argument. If that’s right, then it would have universal status as a need for all rational beings. If it is a need for only those experiencing psychological distress due to their own frailty in the face of systemic injustice, then whence the practical *necessity*?

²³ Robert M. Adams uses this term in sketching an empirical-psychological way of reconstructing Kant’s proof in Adams 1987. The presentation here and in Chignell 2023b is influenced by his, though different in many key respects. Other articulations of something like the moral-psychological reading can be found in Guyer 2000, 369, and Pasternack 2014, 50-55. Courtney Fugate (2014) has argued that Belief in God and a future life (while not directly motivating us to act morally) “dislodges happiness from the natural motivational role it would otherwise have and thereby indirectly fosters the moral incentive within us” (147). Ebels-Duggan offers an alternative moral-psychological argument since she finds the moral-psychological benefit as arising from “a full-blown practical conflict” that we confront as agents for

not that overwhelming injustice and our perceived inefficacy make us think (as a consequentialist might) that working for justice is no longer required (since doing so won't make a difference). Rather, it's that the rank injustice of the massive systems of which we're inexorably a part, combined with the awareness of our acute impotence to change things, threatens to sap our resolve to keep trying. This often leads to distraction: we no longer focus on acting from duty alone in an effort to bring about our portion of the Highest Good. It threatens, in other words, to push us into the first grade of radical evil: "fragility" (*Gebrechlichkeit*). In this state "I incorporate the good (the law) into the maxim of my power of choice (*Willkür*); but this good, which is an irresistible incentive objectively or ideally (*in thesi*), is subjectively (*in hypothesisi*) the weaker (in comparison with inclination) whenever the maxim is to be followed" (*RGV*, 6:29). The point is not that we need this bulwark to determine our wills, but rather that it allows us to avoid focusing on unjust features of the world, and to avoid "the danger of seeing that effort as entirely futile in its effects and thereby flagging in it" (*KU* 5:446). Thus, while we are motivated by the moral law alone, we secure our resolve through means that neutralize psychological factors that weaken us (make us subjectively weak, or fragile).

Another example: suppose I interpret the moral law's demand to promote others' happiness as rightly expressed in donating money to the poor. This will then be a sufficient rational incentive to donate, regardless of actual outcomes. Still, as a matter of psychological fact, a significant number of us²⁴ also have a "natural" need to hope that

whom "there is no guarantee that we will be protected from choosing between acting as no decent person would act and allowing what no decent person would allow" (2016, 92).

²⁴ A persisting worry that AE has here is that it cannot make sense of Kant's frequent references to the practical necessity of the moral argument (see, e.g., the conclusion in the third *Critique*'s moral argument: "we *must* assume a moral cause of the world [...] it is also *necessary* to assume" (*KU* 5:450, emphasis added). Kant seems to be claiming universal validity, which does not fit well with the moral-psychological version's claim about the needs that only "most" of us would have. That is, an *a posteriori*

our efforts succeed, and thereby help to realize the Highest Good. Such hope is a bulwark against frailty and loss of focus on following the moral law. In other words, it is a "hindrance to our resolve" for our focus to be occupied by evidence that the system is unjust or no individual can make a real difference. Thus, even in a Kantian context, a morally good person may well care about the *consequences* of her actions, and not just about the rectitude of her actions (or intentions). Kant is not a consequentialist, of course, but he does ascribe to most of us a *consequence-dependent moral psychology*.

If this view is to work, it hinges on the incentive vs. resolve distinction. Considerations about consequences must not enter into the process of morally determining the will itself: that is the domain of the moral law alone. Or as Kant writes in the very same discussion:

All human beings could sufficiently partake of this incentive [to the fulfillment of duty] too if they just adhered (as they should) to the rule of pure reason in the law.

What need have they to know the outcome of their doings and nondoings that the world's course will bring about? (*RGV* 6:7n)

But even if we don't need an *incentive* other than the law, the argument says that our *resolve* might benefit from focused attention on the Highest Good for which we morally

fact about a natural need that some but not all of us have cannot ground a necessity claim. But perhaps there are ways of building an argument for necessity by appeal to radical evil as a *universal* condition. Something along these lines: We ought to morally perfect ourselves. The first grade of radical evil (frailty) hinders all of us. Belief in God and immortality would allow us to neutralize the frailty. Thus, we all ought to Believe in God and immortality. The question, though, is whether it does in fact hinder *all* of us, and this seems like an empirical question. Further, it might seem that resolve is a matter of a transcendently free choice, in which case it would be odd to say that it can be hindered by an empirical, psychological distraction. Thanks to Ralf Bader for this last suggestion. (Note: AC is unmoved by any of this, at present, but leaves further consideration of these concerns for another time.)

act. That attention often takes the form of hope, and rational hope requires an account of its object's practical possibility.²⁵

This version of the argument finds support in the "righteous Spinoza" passage in the third *Critique*. There Kant lyrically describes a virtuous atheist "like Spinoza" whose moral "strivings have limits" when confronted with "all the evils (*Übeln*) of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death" (5:452). When faced with this recognition, the righteous Spinoza has two options: either he will

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

One could read "impossible" here in a psychological sense: it "damages the moral disposition" and "weakens" our respect for the law not to be able to hope that the arc of history bends towards justice. This is because focusing on the alternative might weaken the moral law's power in our deliberations, and thus make us "frail" (again, the first grade of radical evil). And if the righteous Spinoza cannot maintain his resolve without such

²⁵ For an argument according to which hope is partly *constituted* by a certain kind of focus, see Chignell 2023a.

hope, how much less so the rest of us? Kant is arguing that in choosing what to do we must abstract away from the success of our actions. But we may still desire that it has a good effect, and we may also want to know – as he notes in the *Religion* – the “*whither*” of our willing (*RGV* 6:4).²⁶ If keeping our hopes fixed on the Highest Good and maintaining Belief in its realizability conditions staves off the first grade of radical evil, then those Beliefs achieve a defeasible kind of moral justification.

Regarding the “shrunken God” objection, the moral--psychological version of the proof also has an advantage: it is based not in conceptual facts about what *can* ground what, but in empirical facts about what average human agents require to sustain moral resolve. The history of religions suggests that many people would report that the existence of a godless but still moral world order - even the *necessary existence* of one – might be impressive to them but also insufficient for sustaining a stable resolve with respect to the Highest Good. As a matter of psychological fact, they are unable to focus on the moral life in the same clear way without assuming this order as both *intended and superintended* by a supreme and perfect being who is also intimately aware of and cares about their efforts, who arranges for their encouragement in various ways, who ensures that there are exemplars in history and scripture for them to emulate, and who might even show mercy when they fail. They have a psychological need, in other words, to orient their moral vision in terms of an order that is governed not by tit-for-tat impersonal laws but by a personal superintendent who does things for reasons, sets up the system from a motive of both justice and love, recognizes individual efforts, and so on.²⁷

²⁶ For an account of how moral wish, as related but different from hope, might also play a role in orienting ourselves towards the Highest Good, see Englert 2017.

²⁷ Some strands of the Vedanta tradition allow that for some people the demands of morality are sufficient not only as rational incentives but also as psychological sustainers. Such people needn't be theists at all. For others, however, it will be crucial to picture moral activity as at the same time a kind of worship or

The upshot, then, is that there may be some moral saints and pillars who can sustain resolve even in the face of the "abyss of purposeless material chaos --" never losing hope or resolve, even in the most horrible of circumstances. But these will be few and far between - rarer even than the righteous Spinoza. If they exist at all (since they seem to stand beyond the reaches of radical evil), then to them Kant's argument has little to offer. Moreover, there may be others - not quite saints but moral pillars, perhaps - who can sustain their moral resolve in the face of great obstacles by adopting (for example) the Fichtean Belief that nature itself will someday bring about the Highest Good. If so, their substantial hopes also do not require Belief that the moral order is superintended by anything above or beyond nature, and Kant would simply commend them on their way. So this third version of the moral argument is empirical in character and somewhat pluralistic in outcome.

Finally, even for those non-saints and non-pillars for whom Belief in a supreme superintendent is morally sustaining, one could argue that Kant is *not* recommending a nefarious kind of wishful thinking, though this worry will remain close to any such view that states an extra need, natural or other, that aids us in acting morally. To reply to such a worry, we must keep before us the constraints on rational Belief:

- (a) there is no persuasive empirical or theoretical evidence for or against the existence of such a being;

love (*bhakti*), attended and encouraged by Krishna. We take it that this is one way to read the main message of the *Bhagavad-gita*. Someone really should write a Handbook entry on Kant and Vedanta philosophy – the conceptual connections in both theoretical and practical philosophy run deep (though there was obviously no direct influence).

(b) the Belief that the argument underwrites is *morally* (not epistemically) justified; and

(c) this moral justification is defeasible.

Regarding (c): if we find out later that there are moral downsides to theistic Belief – that adopting it tends to lead to the violation of some other duty, or fails to sustain the resolve that it promised - then it should be abandoned.²⁸ Moreover, this is not necessarily wishful thinking of the nefarious sort that would take a proposition about the supersensible to be true, just in order to feel better (or receive a bribe). It is arguably not that because

(d) I am inclined *by my commitment to morality* itself to form substantial hope for the practical possibility of the outcome, and thus Belief in what makes it practically possible; and

(e) the goal is not to feel better or get rich but rather to receive important moral sustenance that allows me to maintain my resolve to act virtuously.

Kant doesn't want us to abuse our theoretical faculties by manipulating ourselves or others into full-blown beliefs (in the ordinary sense) about these matters. And Kant is explicit

²⁸ Note: AE finds it strange to speak of abandoning the postulates because of ill effects that Believing them might have on moral behavior. The postulates, after all, are downstream from determining what one ought to do (period), and so AE thinks they are somehow ungiveupable, no matter what the psychological or behavioral consequences. He notes that Kant is careful to distinguish them, as morally consistent, from the content of historical religions.

about the fact that, the moral law must unconditionally motivate us without any appeal to or need of good consequences:

For these laws command absolutely, whatever their consequence; indeed, they even require that we abstract from such consequences entirely whenever a particular action is concerned [...] without proposing to us, or assigning, an end (and a final end) such as would constitute some sort of inducement for it. (*RGV* 6:7n)

The most we can reasonably have in these contexts are practically-motivated hopes and Beliefs that serve an auxiliary role in keeping our eyes on the moral prize. Moreover, Kant doesn't reluctantly bring Belief in God and the future life back into the picture because (as Heinrich Heine once ironically suggested) he felt *sorry* for people like his servant Lampe who need to cling to primitive dogmas about just deserts in the afterlife. Rather, he brings Belief back into the picture because he recognizes that a great many of us are less righteous than the saints, and frailer than the pillars. Most of us have a psychological need to focus on how our actions lead to good results. Kant urges us to accommodate this need by adopting a moral worldview that incorporates practical hopes about the future order of things and the trajectory of history that would take us there.²⁹ With the Highest Good as our hopeful focus, most of us – and perhaps all humans as subject to radical evil – might be better able to sustain and stabilize our moral resolve.

²⁹ “Worldview” here is a technical term. Kant often appears to use it to denote a philosophically coherent picture of the whole of human cognition organized relative to an idea, in this case the Highest Good. For a study of this technical usage of “worldview” see Englert 2023a. This also connects with Sweet’s 2022 recent reconstruction of the Highest Good’s systematic significance in mediating nature and freedom.

Thus we "may" have those hopes, and "may" also defeasibly hold the Beliefs required to ground the possibility of their objects.

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