

Reality of the Ideal: A Study of Kant's Highest Good

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Summary

Immanuel Kant claims that whenever we act on the moral law, we engage in a collective project to bring about a world that we can only grasp in reason. The resulting image of an ideal world, Kant calls, the “highest good.” Since Kant’s time, this ideal has challenged philosophical interpretation. What, after all, is its use, if (as Kant often claims) the moral law is sufficient to determine how we should act? What is the highest good actually *good* for in everyday life? In contrast to standard readings, which see the highest good’s main importance related to action, *The Reality of the Ideal* presents a fresh perspective according to which the highest good’s primary importance is for certain moments of contemplation, both local and global in scope. On the one hand, it is important locally as a point of comparison that enables us to judge moral progress or degrees of morality (and its opposite) in experience. On the other hand, it becomes important globally as a point of reference in relation to which we can construct a harmonious worldview. In both instances, it ultimately serves as a perfect point of comparison for an imperfect world. These contemplative moments, in sum, show the highest good to be an ineliminable feature of experience, anchoring a deep sense of meaning and how the whole of experience might fit together coherently. Out of this analysis, it also becomes clear that while not existing in a standard sense, the ideal is anything but a fiction. Rather, the reality of the ideal persists as a fundamental feature of lived experience.

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