On the Philosophical Incoherence of a Duty to Promote the Highest Good

Abstract: According to Kantian moral religion, because there is a duty to promote the highest good, we are warranted in believing in God and immortality. However, this article shows that the duty to promote the highest good is incoherent, and that popular conceptualizations of the highest good cannot avoid this incoherence. After arguing, additionally, against attempts to ground Kantian moral religion on the highest good in some role other than the object of duty, it is shown that Kant seems to have been aware of the original problem, suggesting an explanation for why he abandoned the highest good around 1800.

Kantian moral religion is supposed to flow from two premises: (1) the highest good, a world in which all are virtuous and happy, is a necessary object of the will, and (2) God and immortality are jointly necessary for the possibility of the highest good (Höwing, "Kant on Opinion, Belief, and Knowledge," 201; Wood, Kant's Moral Religion; Wood, Kant's Rational Theology). In this article, it is argued that premise (1) is subject to an objection that scuppers Kantian moral religion at its base. More specifically, it is shown that the traditional grounds for the necessary possibility of the highest good are incoherent, and that alternate grounds that have been suggested either do not serve Kant's purposes, or are philosophically and/or exegetically bankrupt.

1   The Duty to Promote the Highest Good

The highest good, according to Kant, is a world in which the supreme good, virtue, is connected with happiness. Importantly, according to Kant, the connection between virtue and happiness in the highest good is synthetic, not analytic, and, more specifically, virtue is the cause of happiness–in the highest good, agents are morally perfect and perfectly happy and, further, this moral perfection is the cause of the perfect happiness (KpV, AA 05: 107-114).[1] Kant then argues that, because the highest good is a necessary object of the will, it must be possible, and he uses this to mount an argument for belief in God and immortality.

Kant does not think that the highest good is a logically necessary object of the will, nor does he think that humans have the highest good as an object of the will as a result of some sort of natural necessity.[2] Rather, he thinks that the highest good is a morally necessary, or obligatory, object of the will, one that agents ought to have (as a duty) even if they might not actually, and the evidence for this spans the gamut of his published works (Tomasi, "God, the Highest Good, and the Rationality of Faith," 120). For example, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that "it is a priori (morally) necessary to produce the highest good through freedom of the will" (KpV, AA 05: 113.09-10, emphases omitted); that "the promotion of the highest good is an a priori necessary object of our will and inseparably bound up with the moral law" (KpV, AA 05: 114.02-04, emphases omitted); that "we ought to seek to promote the highest good" (KpV, AA 05: 125.03-04, emphases omitted); and that it is "a duty for us to promote the highest good" (KpV, AA 05: 125.25, emphases omitted).[3] Similarly, in the *Critique of*

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[1] All citations to Kant's text use the convention of a two- to four-letter abbreviation for the title, 'AA' for Akademie Aufgabe, a number denoting the Akademie volume being referred to, a number denoting the pages of the volume referred to, and, in some instances, a number denoting the specific lines on the page referred to. Thus, the citation in the sentence to which this note is appended refers the reader to pages 107-114 in the academy edition of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, which is in volume 5. This pagination runs in the margins of most modern translations of Kant's works. The abbreviations I use are as follows: KpV-*Critique of Practical Reason*; KU-*Critique of the Power of Judgment*; RGV-*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*; MS-*Metaphysics of Morals*; TP-*On the Common Saying*; and GMS-*Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*. All translations are my own.

[2] The highest good, as object of the will, thus differs from happiness, which Kant thinks that humans (imperfectly rational beings) have as an end as a matter of natural necessity (Pinheiro Walla, Happiness in Kant's Practical Philosophy, chapter 1).

[3] These references, as well as the ones in the two succeeding sentences, are owed to (Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 43n12).

the Power of Judgment, Kant claims that "the moral law...makes it obligatory for us to strive for" the realization of the highest good (KU, AA, 05: 450.04-09, emphases omitted); and that "the moral law imposes [it upon us] to promote" the highest good (KU, AA, 05: 471.09, emphases omitted). Finally, in the *Religion within the Boundaries of mere Reason*, Kant claims that "everyone ought to make the highest possible good in the world his own final end" (RGV, AA 06: 07.04-05, emphases omitted).

But now, without taking a stand on the precise nature of the highest good, the mere fact that it is supposed to include both an agent's moral perfection, P, *and something else, which is not equivalent to P*, can be used to note that the content of the highest good exceeds the commands of morality, for the commands of morality end precisely with an agent's moral perfection. From this it follows that any duty to realize the highest good, or even to promote it, is incoherent.

To make this more concrete, five components of the highest good can be distinguished: (1) an agent's own moral perfection; (2) all other agents' moral perfection; (3) an agent's own happiness; (4) all other agents' happiness; and (5) the causal relations that tie an agent's happiness to moral perfection. These different components will be explored in greater depth below. The point for now is that the commands of morality, by definition, end with (1): by definition, it cannot be morally requisite to do more than to achieve moral perfection-- any agent who is morally perfect has, *eo ipso facto*, fulfilled all commands of the moral law that apply to her. It follows immediately that, if there is a duty to promote the highest good, then (2)-(5) must be subsumed entirely under (1).

As shall be seen below, commentators have various proposals for this subsumption project, such as appealing to the Kantian duty of beneficence in order to argue that a morally perfect agent will promote others' happiness. However, this article will show that these proposals, although ingenious, fail, and they fail, broadly speaking, for the same reason: they omit some one or other aspect of the highest good, leaving the duty to promote the highest good (necessarily, if frustratingly) out of reach. In fact, as also shall be shown here, Kant seems to have been aware of this.

Before exploring this in greater depth, it is perhaps useful to disambiguate the problem being posed here from two related ones.

First: according to Bojanowski, there can be no duty to realize the highest good because (i) ought implies can, and (ii) it is not the case that "we have sufficient power to bring about the highest good in the world through our own actions" ("Life Without Death," 184). However, the problem raised here is logically prior to Bojanowski's. The argument here is that, even if it were possible for agents individually to realize the highest good, there still can be no duty for agents to do so because such a duty would be logically incoherent, and this is so independently of abilities.

Second: Beck argues that there can be no duty to realize the highest good because it includes happiness, and happiness is a non-moral good (A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason, 242-243). This objection is closer to the one posed here than Bojanowski's (and has been grappled with extensively in the literature on the highest good).[4] But, the problem raised here is logically prior to Beck's as well. Even if happiness were a moral good, there still can be no duty for agents to realize the highest good, because the logical incoherence of such a duty is not related to whether happiness is a moral good. To see this, note that (a) moral perfection is a moral good; (b) the highest good includes all agents' moral perfection; and (c) for any two distinct agents, X and Y, X's moral perfection is distinct from Y's moral perfection. From these three premises, it follows that the highest good exceeds any individual agent's moral perfection, and the logical incoherence noted above looms, independently of considerations of happiness and whether it is a non-moral good.[5]

Let me try to make this more perspicuous by rephrasing it. The problem raised here is not that the highest good exceeds an agent's physical or psychological abilities. Indeed, that hardly would be an objection to Kant:

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[4] See (Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 33-39) for discussion and references.

[5] It is perhaps worth pointing out that these three premises can be retooled in terms of moral virtue or moral goodness and, provided that the highest good includes, as a proper part, the *subject's* moral perfection or perfect virtue (which it does on Kant's account), the conclusion still follows.

Kantian moral religion trades on precisely this fact (for example, the necessity of divine assistance for the realization of the highest good is supposed to generate a warrant for belief in God). The problem raised here is conceptual: the highest good includes moral perfection as a proper part; if an agent is morally perfect, then she (by definition) has fulfilled all of the commands of morality; therefore, no agent can have a duty to do *more* than attain moral perfection; but, if the highest good includes moral perfection as a proper part, then a duty to promote the highest good would be a duty to do more than attain moral perfection; therefore, no agent can have a duty to promote the highest good.

This kind of formal problem, where a duty is incoherent because its object falls outside the scope of duty, arises elsewhere in Kantian ethics. It is sometimes noted that, if the duty to perform duties from duty is formulated with wide scope (i.e., it is a duty to perform all duties from duty), then it generates a vicious regress inasmuch as it takes itself as object (Walschots, "Kant and the Duty to Act from Duty," 2022). Similarly, Kant argues that agents cannot have a duty to act from conscience because this would necessitate a second faculty to monitor the first (MS, AA 06: 401.17-18). And, more notoriously, Kant argues that there can be no right to revolution because this would mean that the supreme power of the land does not wield supreme power (MS, AA 06: 219.27-28).

The four problems assimilated here (the problem with the duty to promote the highest good; the problem with the duty to act from duty; the problem with the duty to act from conscience; and the problem with the right to revolution) are not precisely the same, but they do share a common factor: they are all formal, and the incoherence in all of them arises, more specifically, from the fact that something about them generates an illicit self-reference. Let us now try to find a way around this problem as it applies to the duty to promote the highest good.

2   A Systematizing End, not a Duty in Itself

Beck famously asserts that "it is seriously misleading to say that there is a command to seek the highest good which is different from the command to fulfill the requirements of duty" (Beck, <u>A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason</u>, 245). According to Beck, there is no *sui generis* duty to promote the highest good. Rather, the highest good is a concept that organizes and systematizes an agent's duties. In other words, the highest good is the referent of the successful fulfillment of the totality of an agent's duties and, as such, the highest good may be conceived as the object of all of an agent's moral duties taken together.

This, it might be thought, short-circuits the problem raised in the previous section in a way highly favorable to Kant: it concedes that there is no duty to promote the highest good in itself (i.e., in the way that seems to generate incoherence), but it nonetheless preserves the idea that the highest good is in some sense morally necessary. Call this the Systematizing End solution:

> SES   The highest good is a systematizing end for an agent, systematizing all of an agent's moral duties, not a morally necessary end in itself.

The SES has two distinct advantages that are worth noting.

First, there is a historical precedent, one that predates Kant, for treating the highest good as a systematizing end as per the SES. For example, according to Cicero, "[o]nce, however, we understand the highest ends, once we know what the ultimate good and evil is, then we have a path through life, a model of all our duties, to which each of our actions can thereby be referred" (Cicero, <u>On Moral Ends</u>, V.15-16, 123).[6] Although the highest good is no longer widely discussed in contemporary ethics, it is a mainstay of Western practical philosophy

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[6] This reference is owed to (Louden, "Aristotle and Kant on the Highest Good," 113). However, although Louden thinks that both Kant and Aristotle hold that "one of the key functions of the highest good is to serve as a conceptual means for achieving rational order in one's practical life" ("Aristotle and Kant on the Highest Good," 116), Louden maintains that the passage to which this note is appended shows that "Cicero treats the highest good as the criterion for right action, and this in turn is precisely what Kant regards as the...[error] of the ancients" ("Aristotle and Kant on the Highest Good," 113; and again at 116-117). Louden's reading of this passage from Cicero seems mistaken: when Cicero says that the highest good provides us with an object toward which each of our actions can be referred, he does not seem to be saying that the highest good should be used as a criterion for right action. Rather, Cicero seems to be assigning to the highest good the same exact systematizing role that the SES does.

that goes back at least as far as Aristotle, and Kant not only was well aware of this; he self-consciously situates his discussion within this tradition (KpV, AA 05: 111.18-119.23). This provides circumstantial evidence that Kant might have been aware of the SES and have picked it up from other philosophers.

Second, there is some direct textual evidence for ascribing the SES to Kant. For example, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant defines the highest good as "the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason" and as "the whole object of a pure practical reason" (KpV, AA 05: 108.11-12 and 109.21-22, all emphases omitted).[7] Similarly, in *On the Common Saying*, Kant claims in a footnote that the highest good fulfills "the need for a final end given through pure reason and dealing with the entirety of all ends under one principle" (TP, AA 08: 280.17-18). These three texts suggest that perhaps Kant regarded the highest good as the systematizing object of a good will, exactly as per the SES.

In addition to this, it is worth pointing out that many commentators follow Beck's lead, maintaining, as per the SES, that the highest good is a systematizing end. For example, Engstrom writes that "the duty to promote the highest good coincides with the ends Kant identifies as an individual's duties--one's own moral perfection and the happiness of others" and, further, that "the promotion of these ends exhausts an individual's contribution to the highest good" (Engstrom, "The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory," 776, quoted in Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 44).[8] Similarly, Wood maintains that the "[p]ursuit of the second component of the highest good [namely, happiness] is, in effect, beneficence limited by justice [i.e., a proper part of the moral perfection in the first component of the highest good]" (Wood, Rational Theology, Moral Faith, and Religion, 402, quoted in Barney, "The Inner Voice," 167). And Sussman, like Engstrom, suggests thinking of the highest good as "the complete and systematic fulfilment of our duties of beneficence and moral perfection," noting that this is not merely "the sum of the duties we derived from considering particular maxims of action...[but rather] what comes of those duties once we go beyond thinking about particular practical problems and consider how our most basic practical concerns stand to one another" (Sussman, "The Highest Good," 220).

However, the SES does not solve the problem raised in the previous section of this article. If the highest good outstrips morality such that, even if an agent successfully fulfills all of her duties (and even if God exists and the agent is immortal), there is, necessarily, still more to do to realize the highest good, then there not only cannot be any moral command to realize the highest good in itself, but the highest good cannot serve as the organizing goal or systemizing end of morality, for there always (necessarily) will be a remainder. Wood's suggestion of assimilating the happiness component of the highest good to the duty of beneficence goes some way toward meliorating this problem, toward bringing the highest good under the penumbra of morality, but it does not go far enough: for one thing, the highest good includes global happiness, and that far outpaces Kantian beneficence; and for another thing, the highest good includes others' moral perfection, and that far outpaces an agent's own moral perfection.

In the *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that agents have wide duties to promote their own natural talents and to promote others' happiness, and in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant argues that there are two morally necessary ends that all agents ought to adopt: their own perfection, and others' happiness (GMS, AA 04: 422.37-423.35; MS, AA 06: 385.32). This indicates that, in a world in which all of an agent's morally necessary ends are satisfied, not only will that agent be morally perfect, but, more, other agents will be happy.

This point can be sharpened. It might be argued that the proper frame of analysis here, in considering the highest good, must be based on the supposition that there are no moral, physical, or, perhaps, even logical constraints on our beneficence. The question we must ask is: supposing that we had at least all of the power that it is logically possible to have--suppose, in short, that we are Gods--what would Kant say that beneficence requires of

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[7] These references are owed to (Basaglia, "The Highest Good and the Notion of the Good as Object of Pure Practical Reason," 30).

[8] In a later publication, Engstrom seems to advocate the solution examined in the next section of this article, that the highest good represents the totality of the successful pursuit of all duties of all agents: "virtue and happiness are represented [in the highest good] as so related that universal happiness follows as the collective effect of universal virtue" (Engstrom, "The Determination of the Concept of the Highest Good," 106). It is possible that he is unaware of the difference between these two. It is also possible that he changed his mind.

us, with regard to the happiness of others? Framed as such, it seems that Kantian beneficence might require universal happiness, exactly as per component (4) of the highest good in the enumeration of components in the previous section of this article.9

Two things should be said in response to this.

First, it is at least not obvious that the Kantian duty of beneficence does require us to promote all others' happiness, or that, if it does, it requires us to promote all others' happiness equally. The key here is the word 'all': when we are talking about the highest good, this quantifier is unbounded, including not only all agents around right now, but all agents who ever have existed or will exist, past, present, and future, anywhere, any time. If, as will be argued in the next section of this article, Kantian beneficence is not as demanding as this, then this duty cannot be used to subsume component (4) of the highest good (global happiness) under (1) (an agent's own moral perfection); there is going to be a remainder.

The second point that should be made is that Kant is adamant about the idea that, on the one hand, agents cannot have a duty to promote their own happiness (component (3) of the highest good), and, on the other hand, agents cannot have a duty to promote others' moral perfection (component (2) of the highest good). For example, consider what Kant says in the Doctrine of Virtue, immediately after claiming that agents ought to promote their own virtue and others' happiness:

> ...one's own happiness is an end which, indeed, all humans have...but this end can never be regarded as duty without contradicting itself...just the same there is a contradiction in making the perfection of another into my end and holding myself duty-bound to further it. (MS, AA 06: 386.01-10, emphases omitted)

From this it may be seen that, on Kant's account, regardless of the duty of beneficence, there are at least two crucial components of the highest good that fall beyond the purview of the SES: an agent's own happiness, and all other agents' moral perfection. It follows that there cannot be a duty to promote the highest good.

Now, to be fair, some have argued that, on a proper understanding of the foundations of Kantian ethics, there is a duty to promote one's own happiness (Kahn, "Kant and the Duty to Promote One's Own Happiness," 2022). But, this is not a widely accepted position (Kahn, Kant, Ought Implies Can, the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, and Happiness, part 3). Moreover, even if it is accepted, we are still left high and dry regarding all other agents' moral perfection.

Of course, some might object that, if *every* agent has a duty to promote her own moral perfection, then perhaps the highest good consists in the systematization of *all* agents' moral duties. However, this is no longer the SES; this, in fact, constitutes a rejection of the SES. So, this new proposal will be assessed in the next section of this article.

3   An End Systematizing All Agents' Duties

A close variant of the SES, one more popular in recent secondary literature than the SES itself, might be thought, for reasons gestured toward at the end of the previous section, to obviate more successfully the problem raised here. This variant says that the highest good systematizes not merely a single agent's duties and moral ends, but the duties and moral ends of all agents. Call this the Systematizing Universal Ends solution:

> SUES   The highest good is a systematizing end for all agents, systematizing all moral duties for all agents.

That is, if we take the totality of the successful pursuit of all moral duties of all agents, then, according to the SUES, we get the highest good.

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9 This point is owed, in substance and in form, to an anonymous reviewer for *History of Philosophy Quarterly*.

For example, according to Kleingeld, the highest good "is the world that all moral agents, acting under the direction of the moral law, bring into existence when it is in their power to realize the object of their actions," and she concludes several pages later that "the highest good is defined as the world that would be brought into existence by universal virtue (if our powers were sufficient to achieve our ends)," and that "[o]nly once we conceive of the absolute totality of everything that is morally demanded by the Categorical Imperative do we come to conceive of the highest good as the final end of moral agency" ("Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 40, 44, and 47, respectively). Along the same lines, Marwede asserts that the highest good "can be understood as the totality of morally good ends to be promoted by virtuous agents" ("Kant on Happiness and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 67). Louden claims that, on Kant's account, the highest good is "both a representation of, and a way of bringing unity and coherence to, human beings' obligation to create a moral world" ("Aristotle and Kant on the Highest Good," 115). And Yovel writes that, with the highest good, reason synthesizes "the multiple moral intentions of all moral agents and the chains of objective consequences" into a totality (Kant and the Philosophy of History, 40, quoted (approvingly) in Louden, "Aristotle and Kant on the Highest Good," 115).

However, there are three things about the SUES that are noteworthy.

First, there is still a gap between the totality of the fulfillment of all agents' moral ends and the universal happiness required for the highest good: universal fulfillment of virtuous ends does not guarantee universal happiness. To see why this is so, suppose that the world has ten people in it, and suppose that all ten people successfully fulfill the duty of beneficence; this does not entail that all ten people are happy, for neither the duty of beneficence, nor any other part of morality, requires that the happiness promoted be spread out universally, proportionately, evenly, or, in fact, at all. In the Doctrine of Virtue, Kant suggests that, in fulfilling the duty of beneficence, an agent may "vary the degree [of her beneficence] greatly, without injury to the universality of the maxim, in accordance with the difference in the objects of...love (one of which might be closer to...[her] than another)" (MS, AA 06: 452.06-09). Kant's remarks here are difficult to interpret. But, he seems to be suggesting that the duty of beneficence permits us to privilege the happiness of those whom we care about the most. For example, Toast may, consistent with the duty of beneficence, concentrate her energies on promoting the happiness of her family and friends. This means that, in our hypothetical world of ten people, even if there is universal virtue, there might not be universal happiness--only eight of the ten might be happy. Moreover, there need be nothing nasty, lamentable, or non-ideal about this: it could simply be the case that two of the ten have chosen to live as hermits.

It is important to disambiguate this point from a related one. As noted in the previous section of this article, some might object to the idea that Kantian beneficence requires us to promote the happiness of all other agents, at all times and all places. This objection might be made on doctrinal grounds, on the basis of arguments about how duties in general, and the duty of beneficence in particular, are derived from the Categorical Imperative.[10] Alternatively, it might be made on the basis of a close examination of texts in which Kant discusses beneficence (e.g., Kant never suggests that we have a duty to promote the happiness of long dead agents). It even might be made on the basis of considerations of the highest good: after all, if every agent had a duty to promote the happiness of all other agents, there would be a tremendous amount of redundancy in the highest good, as every agent's happiness would be realized by every other agent.[11]

However, that is not the objection being made now. The objection being made now is that, even if there is a duty to promote the happiness of all others, on Kant's account, this duty can be discharged while playing favorites. And, because there is no guarantee--logical, physical, or moral--that these favorites will add up in any systematic way, the highest good is not the totality of the successful realization of all duties of all agents: the SUES is false.

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[10] An argument in this direction, although with a different target, can be found in (Kahn, "Obligatory Actions, Obligatory Maxims").

[11] Given the theological justification generally given in Kant's time to the value of simplicity in theory choice, this redundancy, which presumably would redound on the God of Kantian moral religion (inasmuch as this God, at least on some formulations of the argument, is responsible for the causal architecture that connects moral perfection to perfect happiness), could be a serious doctrinal problem.

Some might push back at this point. In particular, some might argue that, even if the original problem raised above has not been solved, progress has been made. Whereas the gap between individual duties and the highest good cannot be bridged (section 1), not even when we take the totality of these duties (section 2), the gap between the totality of all agents' duties and the highest good looks to be bridgeable even if not always bridged. Thus, it might be argued, the move from the SES to the SUES is a move in the right direction, even if we have not moved far enough. This leads into the second thing that is noteworthy about the SUES.

Recall component (5) in the section 1 enumeration of the components of the highest good: the causal relations that tie an agent's happiness to moral perfection. As noted at the outset of this article, the connection between virtue and happiness in the highest good is not supposed to be accidental on Kant's account. Barney makes this point vivid with an analogy:

> Think of a student, Annie, who works hard on a paper. Annie wants two things: to write a good paper and to receive a good grade. If she writes a good paper and gets a C, she will be pleased in one respect and disappointed in another. If she writes a bad paper and gets an A, she will again be partly pleased but also disappointed—disappointed in herself and perhaps in her professor as well. Now imagine that she writes a good paper and receives an A; but she then learns that the paper was never read by Professor Careless, who assigns grades by a roll of the dice. In this case, both of Annie's desires, as initially specified, are satisfied. Yet surely this outcome will be at least as insufficient and frustrating as the other two. So something was missing from the initial characterization: Annie did not want two things, to write a good paper and to get a good grade, but a single complex thing: to get a good grade as a result of having written a good paper. The conditionality specified by the causal link is itself a part of the object of desire. (Barney, "The Inner Voice", 174)

In the same way, as Barney points out, the highest good is not the mere conjunction of two things, moral virtue and happiness; it is, rather, a single complex thing, happiness as a result of moral virtue. An agent's happiness, on Kant's account of the highest good, is supposed to be the reward for her virtue, for her worthiness for that happiness. Thus, an agent's own virtue is supposed to be the cause of her happiness. And now recall, from the previous section of this article, that, on Kant's account, it is absurd for an agent to have a duty to promote her own happiness. Even overlooking the point made about the distribution of happiness in the SUES, the SUES makes a mess of the highest good causal connection between virtue and happiness. It follows that the highest good cannot be equated with a totality consisting of the synthesis of the successful pursuit of all moral ends: there is still a remainder, a part of the highest good that remains out of reach.

The third thing that is noteworthy about the SUES is that, in moving from the systematization of all of an individual agent's duties (the SES) to the systematization of all duties of all agents (the SUES), a new problem arises. The SUES cannot be a morally necessary object of the will for any individual, or for any community of individuals. The easiest way to see this is to return to a point made in the previous section of this article: for any two distinct agents, X and Y, it is not (and cannot be) a moral duty for X to attain Y's moral perfection. This is one of the reasons why the SES falls short of the highest good. But, it also cannot be a community's duty to attain Y's moral perfection. So, even if the previous two points fall and the SUES is correct (i.e., the highest good really is the totality of all duties of all agents), there cannot be a duty to promote the highest good, exactly as per the thesis of this article. Indeed, this point can be established by an alternate argument, one that makes no appeal to the fact that there can be no moral duty for one agent to attain another agent's moral perfection: the SUES is the amalgamation of all duties of all agents, and nobody supposes that all agents have numerically the same duties--so, once again, as a matter of logic and definition, any duty to promote the SUES is incoherent, quite independently of the fact that, as argued above, the SUES is not equivalent to the highest good.

Now, a proponent of the SUES might maintain that, even if there cannot be a duty to promote the SUES, it nonetheless can serve as a foundation for Kantian moral religion. The basic idea here is that, the SUES, even if it falls short of the highest good, nonetheless is necessarily possible; this necessity is generated from a sort of moral-

agglomeration of all commands across all agents; and this necessity is sufficient to ground the belief in God and immortality that forms the basis of Kantian moral religion.

The problem with this line of reasoning arises with the agglomeration. Kant's justification of moral religion appeals to a realizability principle, according to which it is rational to pursue an end only if we believe in the conditions of its realizability (Willaschek, "Must We Believe in the Realizability of Our Ends?").[12] Moving from a duty to promote the highest good in itself to the SES requires the realizability principle to accommodate the agglomeration of duties, if not in their bindingness, then at least in their compossibility (McConnell, "Moral Dilemmas," section 5). That is, if the highest good represents the totality of an individual agent's duties, as per the SES, then, to ground Kantian moral religion, the realizability principle must be modified accordingly: we have to say that it is rational to pursue the members of a set of ends individually only if we believe in the conditions of their agglomerated (collective) realizability. This, in itself, already faces well-known objections (e.g., if X has made conflicting promises, it might be possible for X to fulfill each one individually, but it is not possible for X to fulfill both together) (McConnell, "Moral Dilemmas"). But, if the highest good represents the totality of all duties for all agents, as per the SUES, then the realizability principle must be modified further: it must be argued that it is rational for X to pursue a proper subset of a set of ends individually only if X believes in the conditions of their realizability when agglomerated with all other agents' sets of moral ends. From this it may be seen that, even independently of the fact that the SUES falls short of the highest good, and even independently of the fact that there can be no duty to promote the SUES, the SUES faces insuperable philosophical problems as a basis for Kantian moral religion--exactly the issue that will be seen in the next section of this article, when we turn to alternate attempts in the secondary literature to use the highest good to ground Kantian moral religion.

4   The Highest Good as Fulfilling Some Nonmoral, or Morally-Instrumental, Need

Various commentators have suggested an alternate approach to Kantian moral religion. In particular, they have suggested that, although there is no duty to pursue the highest good, not directly, not as per the SES, and not as per the SUES, nonetheless the highest good has a positive role to play in Kant's practical philosophy. Here are five such suggestions:

1. Sussman proposes that "we have to be committed to the highest good because it offers us 'something to love' in morality" ("The Highest Good," 215).
2. Bader maintains that the highest good "is required for a science of freedom to be possible," and he goes on to explain that, in "both theoretical and practical reason, the relevant domain has to form a systematic whole to allow for a systematic body of knowledge of objects...and of the laws governing them, where the map of the respective science is provided by the relevant table of categories" ("Kant's Theory of the Highest Good," 211).
3. Reath argues that the highest good is necessary to realize the social conditions that, in turn, are necessary to realize fundamental moral ends ("Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," 617n30 and 619).[13]
4. Fugate asserts that the duty to promote the highest good is the best way to promote virtue within ourselves ("The Highest Good and Kant's Proof of God's Existence," 151).[14]
5. Barney contends that the highest good should be interpreted as an object of hope and that, as such, it should ground a "non-doxastic 'seeing as'" ("The Inner Voice," 178n38).

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[12] Willaschek argues that, technically, the realizability principle commits us only to having an account of how our ends are not impossible--but that this technicality may be overlooked in the case of the highest good because "we can conceive of the practical possibility of the highest good if (and only if) there is an intelligible author of the world [and we are immortal]" ("Must We Believe in the Realizability of Our Ends?," 240-241).

[13] This reference is owed to (Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 44).

[14] This reference is owed to (Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 44).

There are other suggestions out there: this list is not intended to be exhaustive. But, understanding why these suggestions fail is instructive. So, they will be assessed, briefly, in the order in which they have been enumerated.

Sussman's suggestion has the virtue that it is rooted in Kant's texts, even if, as he himself admits, that root is somewhat tenuous.[15] However, it faces two philosophical objections, either of which, on its own, is insuperable. First, for precisely the reasons articulated in the previous sections of this article, the highest good cannot offer us something to love *in* morality. The highest good might offer us something to love—but its scope (far) exceeds the scope of morality. Second, and less dramatically, there seem to be plenty of objects in morality to love. Indeed, Kant argues that love of human beings is "a natural predisposition of the mind," one which is necessary "for being affected by duty" (MS, AA 06: 399.11-12). This points toward a more obvious and more natural object of love in morality: the individuals to whom we owe various duties.

Bader's suggestion is exegetically problematic. Kant does claim, as seen above, that the highest good is a duty; but Kant claims exactly nowhere that the highest good is necessary for the possibility of a science of freedom.[16] Of course, Bader might eschew exegesis. However, taken as an independent philosophical doctrine, Bader's suggestion seems even more problematic. For one thing, it runs straight into the agglomeration problems from section 3 of this article. For another thing, it is unclear why anybody would need a science of freedom of the kind Bader describes.[17]

Reath and Fugate can be handled together because they face similar objections. Exegetically, not only does Kant never advance either of these accounts, but, more, both accounts subordinate the highest good to other moral ends, which seems difficult to reconcile even with the term, the 'highest good'.[18] Philosophically, both claims

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[15] As Sussman points out, his suggestion is inspired by a "cryptic" remark that Kant makes in the *Religion within the Metaphysics of Morals* ("The Highest Good," 215; RGV, AA 06: 07.26-28). Sussman argues that Kant oscillates between two different strategies for grounding moral religion: one is based on the claim that there is a duty to promote the highest good, whereas the other is based on the claim that the highest good satisfies some psychological need. According to Sussman, "[n]either strategy coheres with the rest of Kant's thought, however, and his inability to settle on either approach suggests that he had some sense of their inadequacies" ("The Highest Good," 215).

[16] Bader argues that (1) the duty to promote the highest good should be understood as "a duty to perform actions that are such that, in the limit, performing all of them amounts to the realization of the supreme good [i.e., perfect virtue and the acquisition of a good will] in the person" ("Kant's Theory of the Highest Good," 204); and (2) "everyone is commanded by the pragmatic imperative…to take the means that are required for becoming happy to the extent to which one [*sic*] is worthy of happiness" ("Kant's Theory of the Highest Good," 184). Bader's idea is that, if everyone satisfies the moral imperative in (1), everyone will be perfectly virtuous, and if everyone satisfies the pragmatic imperative in (2), then happiness will be in accordance with worthiness thereto. So, Bader argues, if everyone complies with these two imperatives, the highest good will be realized, although the highest good "is not the object of the will of any finite creature but only an object of the will of God" ("Kant's Theory of the Highest Good," 184).

However, there are at least three problems here. First, Kant does not speak of a pragmatic imperative in the *Critique of Practical Reason* account of the highest good, which Bader claims to be analyzing ("Kant's Theory of the Highest Good," 184). The closest Kant gets to this is in the *Groundwork to a Metaphysics of Morals*, when he speaks of counsels of prudence. But, crucially, Kant takes such counsels to be a species of hypothetical imperative and, as such, their binding force rests solely on the fact that humans have their own happiness as an end (GMS, AA 04: 414.12-419.11).

Second, Kant himself, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* account of the highest good, distinguishes between the supreme good (moral perfection) and the complete good (moral perfection plus happiness), which makes it almost unthinkable that, in claiming that there is a duty to promote the highest good, he meant only that there is a duty to perform actions that, in conjunction, realize the supreme good.

Third, Kant argues in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that God is necessary in order to create the background conditions that make possible the highest good, which, in turn, is to be realized against these background conditions through our actions; Kant never claims that the highest good is exclusively the object of the will of God. (A further issue, this one more philosophical than exegetical, is that, if the highest good is only the object of the will of God, then it is unclear why we, rather than God, would need to believe in its possibility for the purposes of a science of freedom.)

[17] An additional problem, this one perhaps more at the level of detail, is that, on Bader's own account of the highest good, the latter is expressly *not* necessary for a science of freedom—this is precisely because Bader understands the highest good as the synthetic totality, not only of every individual agent's successful pursuit of virtue (which is what Kant understands as the domain of freedom), but also of every individual agent's successful pursuit of happiness in accordance with virtue (see note 16 above—the point for present purposes is merely that the pragmatic imperative to which Bader appeals is not, on Kant's account, a law of freedom).

[18] This objection is owed to (Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 44).

are empirical, and the preponderance of evidence seems to tell against them. That is, an individual agent's pursuit of the highest good seems neither necessary nor sufficient for realizing the social conditions necessary for the pursuit of moral ends, and promotion of the highest good seems like a highly ineffectual way of promoting virtue within ourselves. But, perhaps most problematic of all: the highest good contains both the realization of fundamental moral ends, and virtue within ourselves, as proper parts--the instrumental role that Reath and Fugate assign to it is, as such, incoherent, and it is so for precisely the formal reasons harped upon in this article.

Barney's suggestion, like Sussman's, has the virtue of being rooted in Kant's texts. But Barney herself concedes that her account "does not require the postulation of God," and so it fails on its own terms as a justification of Kantian moral religion ("The Inner Voice," 178n38). This string of failures suggests that Kant really does need a duty to promote the highest good if the latter is to play its assigned role in grounding moral religion--it is too bad, then, that, if the arguments in this article are successful, such a duty must remain forever out of Kant's reach. However, as we shall see momentarily, Kant seems to have been aware of this in the end.

Conclusion

In this article, it is argued that the duty to promote the highest good is incoherent.

Section 1 explained why there cannot be a duty to promote the highest good in itself: the highest good includes more than an agent's own moral perfection, and, by definition, an agent who has attained moral perfection has fulfilled all of the commands of the moral law.

Sections two and three examined proposals that take the highest good to be the totalizing synthesis, either of the successful pursuit of all moral ends of an individual (the SES), or of the successful pursuit of all moral ends of all individuals (the SUES), and explained why neither strategy is successful. Section 2 argued that, because the highest good includes an agent's own happiness and other agents' moral perfection, neither of which, according to Kant, can be a morally obligatory end, the SES cannot be correct; section 3 argued that, because the duty of beneficence allows us to "play favorites" and because the highest good includes a causal connection between virtue and happiness, the SUES cannot be correct; section 3 argued that, because the SUES agglomerates duties across agents, there can be no single agent that has a duty to promote it; and section 3 argued that this agglomeration also makes it impossible for the SUES to play the role it needs to play as a foundation of Kantian moral religion--it would require a philosophically untenable compossibility principle.

Section four confronted various proposals which assign other roles (other than the role of a morally necessary end) to the highest good in the attempt to ground Kantian moral religion. It was argued that all of them fail philosophically, and most of them also fail exegetically. In closing, it is worth making one final suggestion.

Although, as seen in section 1 of this article, Kant does claim repeatedly, and in many published texts (including texts not quoted here), that there is a duty to promote the highest good, nonetheless, as pointed out by Sussman, Kant also claims, often in these same texts, that the highest good is necessary because it fulfills some psychological need, perhaps one peculiar to humans (Sussman, "The Highest Good"). Moreover, as pointed out by Kleingeld, in an important footnote in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant argues that the highest good "adds a consequence (an effect)" to the successful fulfillment of our moral duties, one which "is not contained in the moral laws and thus cannot be developed out of them analytically," and Kant then claims that, although morality commands us to adopt the highest good as our final end, in issuing this command, practical reason "extends itself beyond" the moral law (RGV, 06: 07.07-08; 07.08-09; 07.33-34, quoted in Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 33). Similarly, in *On the Common Saying*, Kant asserts that, in adopting the highest good as an end, a will is "extending itself yet beyond the observance of the formal laws to the production of an object (the highest good)" (TP, AA 08: 280.19-21, emphases omitted, quoted in Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," 33). All of this suggests that Kant might have been aware, at some level, of precisely the problem raised in this article, and perhaps it helps to explain why, at least according to some (including the present author), around 1800, Kant moved away from the strategy of defending moral religion on the basis of the highest good, trying, instead, to

ground moral religion on the basis of claims about how we ought to make sense of the voice of conscience (Kahn, "Kant's post-1800 Disavowal of the Highest Good Argument for the Existence of God").

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