

# Restoring Kant's Conception of the Highest Good

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**ABSTRACT** Since the publication of Andrews Reath's "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," most scholars have come to accept the view that Kant migrated away from an earlier 'theological' version to one that is more 'secular.' The purpose of this paper is to explore the roots of this interpretative trend, reassess its merits, and then examine how the Highest Good is portrayed in Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. We will see that it is in this text, more so than any other, that Kant develops his most philosophically sophisticated account of the Highest Good. Because of the central significance of Kant's doctrine of the Highest Good for both his ethical theory and philosophy of religion, this paper therefore seeks to provide an important corrective to the current received views.

**KEYWORDS** Kant, Highest Good, ethical community, practical postulates, God, immortality, religion

## I. INTRODUCTION

KANT'S DOCTRINE OF THE HIGHEST GOOD is among the most perplexing and most controversial aspects of his practical philosophy. There is widespread disagreement about exactly what the Highest Good is, how Kant argues for it, and what function it is supposed to fulfill. While the many disputes over this doctrine stretch well beyond the problem of how its duty is compatible with the Kantian principle that 'ought implies can,' this principle may, nevertheless, be seen as their common root.

Time and again, Kant tells us, first, that since we have a duty to promote the Highest Good, it must be possible; and, second, that its possibility depends on the practical postulates concerning God and immortality. We find these two claims in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the *Critique of Judgment*, the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the Theory/Practice essay, "Real Progress," and so on.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>To some, this claim may seem controversial, as some interpreters prefer to read the Highest Good as a secular doctrine. Nevertheless, the evidence is overwhelming that Kant remained invariably committed to both postulates. We will discuss this issue throughout the paper, but those who find this claim unlikely and would like to consider the evidence for it right away may begin with: *CPyR* 5:113–15; *CJ* 5:450–2; *Rel.*, 6:7n; *Rel.*, 6:99–101; *TP* 8:279; *RP* 20:298–99. We will return to these passages and consider them with great care as we move forward through this paper.

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The obvious conundrum right up front is that we would think ‘ought implies can’ says something about the relationship between the duties to which *we* are subject and the powers *we* have to act for their sake. But if the possibility of the Highest Good depends on God, that is, if the ‘can’ of ‘ought implies can’ requires God, then we face the question of what the ‘ought’ prescribed to *us* could amount to? That is, what, if anything *can* we do for its sake?

It is this quandary that has given rise to most of our current interpretative positions and debates concerning the Highest Good.<sup>2</sup> Some have responded by rejecting one or more of the practical postulates, so that the ‘can,’ just like the ‘ought,’ is set solely on our shoulders.<sup>3</sup> Others have recommended that we reject the doctrine altogether, concluding that it is best removed from Kant’s practical philosophy,<sup>4</sup> or at most regard the Highest Good as some sort of architectonic principle and pay little to no attention to the duty that presumably attaches to it. Finally, there are still some who want to preserve the whole of the doctrine, and so want to find a way to overcome the seeming incoherence of an ‘ought’ whose ‘can’ depends not on us but on God.<sup>5</sup>

The goals of this paper are three-fold. First, we will explore the early interpretative work that led, in time, to the ascendancy of the so-called ‘secular conception’ of the Highest Good. We will consider, in particular, how early concerns with the relationship between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ in our duty to promote the Highest Good led many to the view that the doctrine’s ‘theological conception’ is philosophically untenable. Second, we will consider the popular view that Kant himself, by the late 1780s or early 1790s, began to distance himself from the theological conception in favor of a more mature ‘secular conception’ of the doctrine. However, we will see that the textual evidence used to support this view is terribly slipshod and cannot stand up against careful scholarly analysis. Third, we will then move on to a defense of the theological conception. We will there see how the dominant philosophical objections to this conception of the Highest Good are due to early interpretative errors regarding the nature of our duty to promote the Highest Good, errors that have become deeply embedded and oft repeated through subsequent scholarship. With these errors corrected, we will then defend a model of the relationship between ‘ought’ and ‘can’ in our duty to promote the Highest Good that is both textually well-founded and also one that is able to overcome the key challenges to the doctrine that have arisen over the past five or six decades.

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<sup>2</sup>The key stage-setting works include Silber’s “Immanent and Transcendent,” and Beck’s *Commentary*, 242–55.

<sup>3</sup>One of the key papers advancing this view is Reath’s “Two Conceptions.” See also Guyer, *Nature and Freedom*, 289. Reath’s view has its roots in the lectures of John Rawls. See the latter’s *Lectures*, 313–17. I take Guyer to be the leading advocate of the view that the Highest Good’s principal importance is in its architectonic role. See also Engstrom, “Complete Object.”

<sup>4</sup>See Auxter, “Unimportance,” and Simmons, “Albatross.” Beck might also be listed among those who see little value in the doctrine.

<sup>5</sup>See, for example, Mariña, “Making Sense”; Beiser, “Moral Faith and the Highest Good”; O’Connell “Happiness Proportioned”; Villarán “Overcoming”; Caswell, “*Gesinnung*”; Palmquist, “Kant’s Religious Argument”; Bader, “Kant’s Theory of the Highest Good”; and Barney, “Inner Voice.”

This paper will begin with a brief review of the doctrine and some of the key components of its interpretative legacy. We will then consider the textual basis for the thesis that, in response to the aforementioned difficulties with the relationship between 'ought' and 'can,' Kant eventually migrated from an earlier 'theological' version of the Highest Good to a far more mundane, this-worldly, 'secular' conception.<sup>6</sup> Lastly, we will then develop a more textually accurate account of doctrine and its duty, one that, for Kant, is patently religious in character.

## 2. THE HIGHEST GOOD AS IDEAL AND AS DUTY

Let us begin with a few helpful distinctions and abbreviations. First, out of the body of literature on the Highest Good, we find numerous distinctions drawn between its two aspects or elements. They have been variously characterized as its "immanent and transcendent conceptions," its "ectypical and archetypal forms," and its two elements, "one a demand and the other a promise."<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I would like to distinguish between the Highest Good as an ideal state of affairs, or *HGi*, and the Highest Good as a duty, or *HGd*. Second, as the Highest Good contains the synthesis of morality and happiness, their connection is usually depicted in accordance with what I would like to call the Principle of Proportionate Distribution, or *PPD*. Let us, thus, use *HGi* to refer to an ideal state of affairs in which *PPD* obtains, in which there is a proportionate distribution of happiness in accordance with moral worth.<sup>8</sup>

Following the above nomenclature, the problem to be addressed in this paper is to determine what, if *HGi* is the state of affairs in which *PPD* obtains—and Kant repeatedly asserts that *PPD* is placed in God's hands and not ours—could it be for us to act on *HGd*? If Kant postulates God for the sake of *PPD*, then what is left for us to promote? Do we contribute to *PPD* or does *HGd* call upon us to promote *HGi* in some other way?

With regards to what we *cannot* do, Kant writes, for example, that *PPD* can be "determined neither by the nature of the things in the world, nor by the causality of actions themselves and their relation to morality" (A 810/B 838).<sup>9</sup> That is,

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<sup>6</sup>The theological conception includes the claims: (a) Kant understood the Highest Good as including a distribution of happiness in accordance with moral worth, and (b) Kant took God and immortality as necessary for this distribution. These two issues serve as the core points of contention between the secular and theological conceptions of the doctrine. Much of this paper's sects. 2–4 will examine this disagreement. Sects. 5–6 will then expand beyond these focal elements of theological conception, and turn to the "division of labor" between God and humanity so as to better understand our duty to promote the Highest Good.

<sup>7</sup>These refer respectively to Silber's "Immanent and Transcendent"; Wike and Showler, "Archetype-Ectype"; and Insole "Irreducible Importance." I further discuss these various renderings in ch. 1 of my *Religion: Interpretation Defense*.

<sup>8</sup>While some interpreters prefer to soften *HGi*, rendering it as just the maximization of happiness and moral worth, without a principled distribution of the former in accordance with the latter, *PPD* is, nevertheless, to be found throughout the critical period, as are the postulates which Kant sees as necessary for it to obtain. I will return to some of the textual debates below, but whether one is looking at the salient works of the 1780s or 1790s, the evidence abounds that *PPD* stands as a defining feature of the doctrine (e.g. A 809/B 837; *CPrR* 5:110; *CPrR* 5:145; *CJ* 5:471; *Rel.*, 6:8n; *Rel.*, 6:99; *WDO* 8:139; *TP* 8:281).

<sup>9</sup>As an empirical thesis, we see that the laws of nature do not follow the laws of justice. In addition, Kant's earlier analysis of causality on a priori grounds excludes norms from nature: "In nature

even if “everyone do[es] what he should” (A 810/B 838), such a distribution is still beyond our capabilities. Likewise, in the second *Critique*, Kant claims that “no necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of the moral laws” (*CPrR* 5:113). Similarly, in the *Religion*, Kant writes that our “human capacity does not suffice to effect happiness in the world proportionate to the worthiness to be happy” (*Rel.*, 6:8n).

Hence, for the sake of *PPD*, Kant postulates God as the agent of this distribution and postulates a “future life” as the domain where God’s moral order is realized. Our “human capacity does not suffice,” and therefore “an omnipotent moral being must be assumed” (*Rel.*, 6:8). This is Kant’s view throughout the critical period. In all three *Critiques*, in the *Religion*, and in various essays of the 1790s, he repeats the point in numerous ways, but always to the effect that *HGi* “without the assumption of God and immortality . . . [would be] unfounded and empty” (*CJ* 5:471).<sup>10</sup> God (and immortality) thus make *HGi* possible, but if that is so, where then does this leave *HGd*? That is, what, if anything, *can* we do for its sake?

### 3. PROPOSALS AND PROBLEMS

As our starting point in exploring the nature and content of *HGd*, let us begin with some of the more familiar proposals and problems discussed in the existing literature. These include how *HGd* has been rendered as an imperfect duty, the objection that we may not be able to act on *HGd* (even as an imperfect duty), and the viability of the so-called ‘secular’ conception of the Highest Good.

#### 3.1. *HGd as an Imperfect Duty*

One widely accepted thesis is that *HGd* is best understood as a duty to “promote” or “strive” towards the Highest Good, rather than a duty to actually realize it in full (e.g. *CPrR* 5:125; *CJ* 5:471; *RP* 20:298).<sup>11</sup> Just as with our duties to be charitable and to further our talents, we in neither case are obligated to realize them in full. Our duty to charity does not shoulder us with the complete elimination of

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the understanding can cognize only *what exists*, or has been, or will be. It is impossible that something in it *ought to be* other than what, in all these time-relations, it in fact is. . . . We cannot ask at all what ought to happen in nature, any more than we can ask what properties a circle ought to have” (A 547/B 575). Of course, the third *Critique* turns to the question of a final end of nature, but even there, the judgment, as reflective, is a projection on our part onto nature. Moreover, there too we do not expect justice to be realized in nature and thus Kant repeatedly appeals to our “future life” (*CJ* 5:460, *CJ* 5:469, *CJ* 5:471n, etc.).

<sup>10</sup>As I will discuss in sect. 4, those who claim that Kant migrated away from the postulates of God and/or immortality lack legitimate textual evidence. Moreover, we can find throughout the 1790s far more positive evidence of Kant’s commitment to the postulate of immortality than in the 1780s. This evidence includes the litany of references to immortality in the final section of the third *Critique*, passages from the *Religion*, “The End of All Things,” “Real Progress,” Theory/Practice, the “Proclamation” essay, and more. In addition to the discussion found later in this paper, see also ch. 1 (plus pages 150–52) of my *Religion: Interpretation and Defense*.

<sup>11</sup>This widely held view appears first in Silber’s “Immanent and Transcendent,” and has become a staple of most of the literature on the Highest Good. I certainly agree that *HGd* is an imperfect duty, but as briefly discussed here, its status as imperfect is not on its own sufficient to overcome the abiding concerns with the division of labor between God and humanity.

all unmet human needs; nor does our duty to further our talents demand that we gain perfect mastery over even one, never mind all, of our nascent abilities. Our duty is instead to promote these ends, and thus is discharged through some level of conscientious effort towards them.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, we may take *HGd* as an imperfect duty, and so while Kant postulates God and immortality as necessary for the full realization of *HGi*, our duty demands just that we do what we can in its pursuit—perhaps leaving the rest to God.

Nevertheless, taking *HGd* as an imperfect duty is, at best, just a first step. On its own, it neither tells us what sort of actions we are to pursue, what is left to us versus God, nor how *HGd* is related to *HGi*. Moreover, many have doubted whether Kant should have assigned to us a distinct duty to promote the Highest Good at all, for it is an ongoing question as to whether *HGd* can, as put by Lewis White Beck, “exist as a separate command.”<sup>13</sup> To some, the problem is that the duty is superfluous, assigning nothing new or unique; while for others, the difficulty is more extreme, a command that we cannot even begin to act upon. Eventually, I will present my own rendering of *HGd* as an imperfect duty, but let us first look at a few key moments in its interpretative legacy, beginning with the concern that even as an imperfect duty, it still violates ‘ought implies can.’

### 3.2. *HGd as Impossible*

Advanced first by Beck, and then repeated throughout the ensuing decades of literature, is the contention that scaling *HGd* back to an imperfect duty may still not be enough to satisfy ‘ought implies can,’ for, as many contend, it is beyond our capabilities to even begin to act upon this duty. The problem here is not that it is beyond our power to realize *HGi* in full, nor is the problem that we are unable to bring some amount of happiness to others. It is rather that we cannot reliably assess one another’s moral worthiness, and thus lack the cognitive resources needed to participate in the realization of *PPD*. As Kant so famously asserts, “[t]he real morality of actions (their merit and guilt), even that of our own conduct . . . remains entirely hidden from us” (A 551/B 579; see also *Gr.*, 4:407), and so when he postulates God, Kant is not merely turning to God to make up for our limited causal powers, but also because God alone “knows the heart” (*Rel.*, 6:99; see also A 815/B 843; *CPvR* 5:140).

God is thus postulated by Kant not merely as the distributor of happiness, but also the judge of who is worthy; and so, from Kant’s perspective, in whatever way we are to help promote *HGi*, it seems that he is leaving it to God to assess who is worthy and who is not. Beck, accordingly, claims that “I can do absolutely nothing towards apportioning happiness in accordance with desert—that is the task of a moral governor of the universe. . . . It is not *my* task”;<sup>14</sup> and in sympathy

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<sup>12</sup>This is how John Silber, the progenitor of so much of our interpretative legacy, approached *HGd*, stating that “man is obligated not to attain in full, but rather to approximate the highest good to the fullest possible degree,” (“Immanent and Transcendent,” 478). Unfortunately, this conception of *HGd* was quickly smothered by another, one that links it to *PPD*. Even in Silber’s subsequent works, we see him making such a shift as well. See, for example, his “Importance.”

<sup>13</sup>Beck, *Commentary*, 244.

<sup>14</sup>Beck, *Commentary*, 244–45.

with this point, we see interpreters from Jeffrie Murphy to Sharon Anderson-Gold reiterating it. As the latter puts it, “our epistemological limitations render us incapable of making the type of moral assessment of worthiness necessary to be ‘just distributors’”<sup>15</sup> and so, it is concluded, “if we cannot know this, it is futile to ask that we promote the highest good.”<sup>16</sup>

From the detritus of a tornado’s aftermath, to the distended bellies of impoverished children, we can gather the information required to direct our efforts on behalf of our duty to be charitable. Likewise, we can discover where our talents lie by assessing how well and how quickly we advance in various skills. But the analogous content with regards to a duty to promote *PPD* is not something that is available to us. Hence, as so many have argued, conceiving of *HGd* in terms of *PPD*, as if our duty to promote the Highest Good required us to distribute happiness in accordance with moral worth, runs afoul of ‘ought implies can.’

Various strategies have developed in response to this challenge. Besides just abandoning the doctrine, or at least its duty, a few have hoped to make opining about moral worthiness a sufficient basis for action.<sup>17</sup> But it does not seem to me that this view has ever caught on. It certainly does not capture Kant’s own views, given both his claims about our epistemological limitations as well as his postulation of God as not merely the distributor of happiness, but also the judge of worthiness.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, in my view, attempts to salvage *HGd* in this way do not do Kant any favors, for, as I will later argue, they perpetuate one of the key errors in our interpretative legacy; namely, the assumption that *HGd* involves a duty on our part to promote *PPD*. But before we turn to my reading, let us look at what I think is the most widely supported response to the problem at issue, a response which is quite different from my own, but nevertheless likewise also dissociates *PPD* from *HGd*.

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<sup>15</sup>Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil*, 31. Given Kant’s theory of punishment, I take it that we are capable of making negative judgments about an agent. The problem at issue here concerns our ability to make positive judgments, and thereby determine who merits happiness. In other words, insofar as we are unable to determine whether or not an agent is acting from duty and/or has undergone a “change of heart,” then we lack the cognitive resources needed to participate in the realization of *PPD*.

<sup>16</sup>Murphy, “The Highest Good as Content.” This problem appears frequently throughout the literature and has met with various responses. See, for example, Friedman, “Importance and Function”; Wike and Showler, “Archetype-Ectype Distinction”; O’Connell, “Happiness Proportioned”; and Villarán, “Overcoming.”

<sup>17</sup>In the so-called “Second Difficulty” of part 2 of the *Religion*, Kant discusses the worry that, if one can make no assessment of one’s moral worthiness, one could fall to despair (*Rel.*, 6:66–71). He there suggests that, from due observation of improved conduct, one can “conjecture” that there has also been an improvement in one’s disposition. He develops this point for the sake of a psychological need we have; one that will help motivate further efforts—but cautions, as in prior works, that we can neither actually observe the ground of our willing nor have any certainty about its status. I take it that such conjectures at best offer some psychological salve to those worrying about the efficacy of their moral striving and thus some hope that their efforts have not been pointless. But such “conjectures” remain just that, without the certainty that Kant claims is needed for moral judgment (*Rel.*, 6:186). This is, further, not a point of debate that I regard as constructive, for as I argue, linking *HGd* with *PPD* (and thus with a need to discern moral worthiness) is a long-standing interpretative error. Nevertheless, there is a recent string of papers that have sought to resurrect our role in *PPD* by allowing our conjectures about moral worthiness to be sufficient. See Villarán, “Overcoming,” and O’Connell, “Happiness Proportioned.” See also Denis, “Autonomy and the Highest Good.”

<sup>18</sup>The recent papers by Villarán and O’Connell have attempted to save *HGd* as a duty to promote *PPD* by allowing us to in one manner or another judge moral worthiness. Villarán maintains that even

3.3. *Forsaking PPD—The Rise of the Secular Interpretation*

While some interpreters continue to struggle with the above problem, seeking out some way, despite our cognitive limitations, for us to contribute to *PPD*,<sup>19</sup> many others have followed John Rawls, who contends that “it is simply not our business to judge the overall moral character of others or to try to estimate their worthiness.”<sup>20</sup> For Rawls, then, ‘ought implies can’ is preserved through reimagining the Highest Good without *PPD*, rendering it instead as a secular this-worldly state of affairs in which there is both maximal happiness and maximal morality, but without a principle to bring the two into a synthesis. Both God and immortality thus lose their significance, becoming superfluous to the social policies that are to facilitate moral development and spread happiness. But since there is no judgment of moral worthiness involved, Rawls explicitly decries “[m]atching happiness with virtue” and, believing that Kant’s philosophical theology cannot be “reworked so as to make it consistent with his moral philosophy,” he thinks it best to remove the postulates and thus render the Highest Good as a “secular ideal of a possible realm of ends that can be . . . realized in the natural world.”<sup>21</sup> To help distinguish this from *HG<sub>i</sub>*, which, as defined above, includes *PPD*, let us refer to this secular form of the doctrine as *HG<sub>s</sub>*.<sup>22</sup>

In his “Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant,” Andrews Reath develops *HG<sub>s</sub>* at length, describing the Highest Good as something to be realized in this

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if we grant that we lack the cognitive powers to reliably judge moral worthiness, we can still frame the intention to try, regardless of the depths of our fallibility (33–34). O’Connell, by contrast, follows Lara Denis, noting that there are some empirical indicators of one’s character, and these can be used to assess moral worthiness (273–74). Of course, both these papers are built upon the assumption that *HG<sub>d</sub>* is shaped by our contribution to *PPD*, a thesis that I consider to be a root problem in our interpretative legacy. Second, while it may be granted that there are some instances where we have empirical clues to a person’s moral worthiness, Kant’s point in the *Groundwork* and elsewhere is that these clues cannot allow us to distinguish between actions merely in conformity with duty and actions from duty—the pivotal basis for moral worthiness. While we may be justified in some of our negative moral assessment (i.e. an action that would violate the moral law is one that would not be performed by a morally worthy individual), if we cannot reliably distinguish between actions merely in conformity with duty versus from duty, I do not see how we can be charged with a duty that allegedly demands such judgments from us.

<sup>19</sup>Such a strategy underlies both O’Connell’s “Happiness Proportioned,” and Villarán’s “Overcoming.” The pro-theological conception literature that follows Silber’s immanent-transcendent distinction likewise falls into this problem. See, for example, Mariña, “Making Sense”; Hare’s discussion of the Highest Good in *The Moral Gap*, esp. 71–90; and more recently, the account of our ‘local’ and ‘imperfect’ contributions in Barney, “Inner Voice.”

<sup>20</sup>Rawls, *Lectures*, 316. Although Rawls uses this epistemic limitation to advance his secular version of the Highest Good, our inability to assess moral worthiness, as noted above, has served for Beck, Murphy, and others, as a central objection to the doctrine—hence, we see here how central the association between *HG<sub>d</sub>* and *PPD* is to our interpretative legacy.

<sup>21</sup>Rawls, *Lectures*, 317. This attitude towards the positive elements of Kant’s philosophy of religion has been a long and widely held view. The key purpose of my recent book *Religion: Interpretation and Defense* is to show that it is wrong.

<sup>22</sup>I am here treating *HG<sub>s</sub>* as excluding *PPD*. While a secular position does not necessarily have to deny *PPD*, most of the literature that develops a secular account of the doctrine does forgo *PPD*. Correspondingly, the literature that seeks to preserve *PPD* tends to (though does not necessarily have to) adopt both Kant’s postulates of God and immortality. Hence, while in theory *HG<sub>i</sub>* might be possible without one or both of these postulates, I take it that Kant not only regards them as both necessary, but in the literature those views that endorse *HG<sub>i</sub>* (and thus *PPD*) likewise accept the postulates.

world, a secular “ideal of social cooperation”<sup>23</sup> committed to the “restructuring of existing social institutions in accordance with moral principles.”<sup>24</sup> Reath further argues that this rendering of the Highest Good is actually found in the corpus and that Kant migrated to it by the start of the 1790s.<sup>25</sup> He appeals to 5:450 in the third *Critique*, where Kant describes the Highest Good as “in the world,” and further cites a few instances where Kant does not mention proportionality, but instead writes of “a happiness of rational beings harmoniously coinciding with conformity to the moral law” (*CJ* 5:451).<sup>26</sup>

I will turn to the textual issues behind HGs in the next section, but one key philosophical concern that may be here raised against its variant of HG*d* is that it makes this duty superfluous—not impossible per se, for in its social-secular form, it is something we can promote, but, as so many have argued, ultimately commands nothing distinct or new.<sup>27</sup> Despite other difficulties with *PPD*, it was at least able to give HG*d* a unique content, requiring us to act in such a way as to distribute happiness in accordance with moral worth. But if HGs is just the aggregation of morality and happiness, then its correlated duty may be nothing more than shorthand for what the *Metaphysics of Morals* identifies as our two duties that are also ends: namely, to pursue moral perfection in ourselves and happiness in others (*MM* 6:385–86). Likewise, given that we have duties to foster moral education and social justice, it is far from obvious where there is any unique content for HG*d*. Absent its ties with Kant’s grander project, with *PPD* and the postulates, it seems left as just a term to reference a cluster of social duties.<sup>28</sup>

I do not intend any of this to diminish the importance of these duties, but rather press that if we accept the secular account of the doctrine, then there is really nothing, or perhaps hardly anything, that remains of Kant’s portrayal.<sup>29</sup> Of course, many find this revisionism acceptable on philosophical grounds alone,

<sup>23</sup>Reath, “Two Conceptions,” 615.

<sup>24</sup>Reath, “Two Conceptions,” 617.

<sup>25</sup>A less radical version of the thesis that in the third *Critique* Kant began to render the Highest Good as realized in *this* world is also proposed by Yovel in *Kant and the Philosophy of History*. See pages 72–75. Note that Yovel directly explains this transition in relation to the problem of ‘ought implies can.’ Yovel, however, differs from the more recent secularizing trend in that he thinks that Kant remains—however problematically—attached to the postulates of God and Immortality.

<sup>26</sup>Moreover, some have also appealed to the *Anthropology*’s “Highest Moral-Physical Good,” for it likewise concerns just their union rather than their realization in accordance with *PPD*. See for example, Formosa, “Highest Moral-Physical Good.”

<sup>27</sup>We find this objection in Beck’s *Commentary* and in a number of papers appearing in the decades to follow, such as Auxter, “Unimportance”; and, Simmons, “Albatross.”

<sup>28</sup>In his “Two Conceptions,” Reath suggests that HG*d* gains its unique content through the promotion of the ethical community (see 617). As we shall see, I hold a similar view, but for different reasons. So long as the ethical community is understood as a secular social ideal, it is not clear how it is not just reduced to the means for what the *Metaphysics of Morals* identifies as our two ends that are also duties (one’s own moral perfection and the happiness of others). My alternative position identifies, instead, a distinct problem advanced in the *Religion*’s third part, a problem that serves as the basis for HG*d*’s content.

<sup>29</sup>While the charge of emptiness may carry some weight, it still may be argued that the secular account’s thesis that the Highest Good is an aggregation of happiness and morality still adds something to Kant’s practical philosophy, for once we consider these two ends together, even if they are not linked through *PPD*, we nevertheless would have to concern ourselves with the practical issues of how to maximize both together, how in our promotion of one, we do not negatively impact the other, etc. Of course, such a balancing game may be seen as already part of any dealings with imperfect duties, and the ‘Highest Good’ may be taken as the name of one specific balance that must be struck.



believing that there is no saving its more religious form. Moreover, particularly through Reath's "Two Conceptions," many have come to believe that Kant himself became uncomfortable with *HGi*, and in time migrated away from it.<sup>30</sup>

Through the rest of this paper, I will seek to re-balance the debate between the secular and theological versions of the doctrine, first by showing that the textual grounds for the former are far weaker than what has been thought the case, and then by demonstrating that the latter, when properly understood, does not in fact yield any conflict between its rendering of *HGd* and 'ought implies can.' Hence, while it is commonly believed that the theological version cannot be sustained in light of its philosophical failings, we shall see that, when properly understood, it offers a far better response than *HGs* to the most enduring philosophical difficulty associated with the Highest Good. Moreover, while this is hardly the place to assess the overall merits of the positive aspects of Kant's philosophy of religion,<sup>31</sup> let us not forget that the question of this paper has considerable bearing on this segment of the Kantian project, for it is by way of the Highest Good that "morality inevitably leads to religion" (*Rel.*, 6:8n).<sup>32</sup>

Accordingly, through sections 5 and 6, we shall correct a key misunderstanding of Kant's theological portrayal of the doctrine, showing how its rendering of *HGd* is not guilty of violating 'ought implies can.' But first, let us take a closer look at the textual argument used to support the thesis that Kant himself abandoned one or more of the postulates, and came to adopt a secular, this-worldly, version of the doctrine.

#### 4. INTERPRETING THE TEXT

There are two textual claims most frequently used to support the secular interpretation. First, it is alleged that in some passages Kant explicitly presents the Highest Good as *merely* the maximization of morality and happiness, absent *PPD*. Second, it is argued that passages where Kant refers to the Highest Good as "in the world [*in der Welt*]" indicate that he came to see it as obtaining in this life, in this physical-causal order, rather than in some post-mortem plane of existence.<sup>33</sup>

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Although this may be related to how our duty is understood within *HGs*, and it may very well have its supporters for various philosophical reasons, as we will discuss through the remainder of this paper, it is not Kant's own view.

<sup>30</sup>See also Guyer, *Nature and Freedom*, 289; Kleingeld, "Virtuous Hope"; and, Kate Moran, *Community and Progress*, 48–79.

<sup>31</sup>There are, of course, many different readings of Kant's philosophy of religion, from those who regard its positive elements to be fundamentally incompatible with Transcendental Idealism, to those who prefer to reduce its contents to just moral symbolism, to those who take quite seriously Kant's claim in the B-Preface of the first *Critique* that one of the drivers behind his critical turn was to establish the "limits to knowledge" in order to "make room for faith" (B xxx). I discuss the dominant interpretative positions at length in *Religion: Interpretation Defense*.

<sup>32</sup>This turn to religion goes far beyond just the postulates. In the *Religion*, Kant refers to a broader "Pure Rational System of Religion" that has its basis in the Highest Good. This system includes not only the postulates and various other familiar tenets (such as Radical Evil), but also, as we shall see in sects. 6 and 7, a sophisticated ecclesiology, developed primarily through parts 3 and 4 of the *Religion*. Absent a proper understanding of the Highest Good, and absent a defensible treatment of its theological form, these aspects of Kant's thought will continue to be viewed as "wobbles" rather than major contributions to the philosophical study of Christian doctrine.

<sup>33</sup>The first type of passage, the denial of *PPD*, helps to remove God from the Highest Good, for if happiness is not going to be distributed in accordance with moral worth, then we no longer need

Beginning with the first textual claim, the contention is that in passages where the Highest Good is presented without mention of *PPD*, Kant is advancing a different conception of the Highest Good, one that rejects this element of the doctrine. For example, we find in the third *Critique* passages describing the Highest Good as “a happiness of rational beings harmoniously coinciding with conformity to the moral law” (*CJ* 5:451) and “happiness, insofar as it is consistent with duty” (*CJ* 5:471). Similarly, from the Theory/Practice essay, there is a passage where the Highest Good is described as “universal happiness combined with and in conformity with the purest morality throughout the world” (TP 8:279).<sup>34</sup>

As these all link morality and happiness without mention of *PPD*, it is argued that, by 1790, Kant saw the error of his ways and began to articulate a new vision of the Highest Good. Unfortunately, though, none of the passages used in support of this thesis have Kant explicitly denying *PPD*. Rather, it is just not mentioned. Hence, one can challenge this interpretative strain by responding that Kant’s merely not mentioning *PPD* does not warrant the claim that he rejected this element of the doctrine. It may be absent in three or four passages, but that is, at best, ambiguous; and given the dozens of occasions throughout the corpus where we can find it, including passages in the same texts as the above, it is quite plausible that Kant simply did not always repeat in full what he has said so many times already.

To help reinforce this challenge, we should note that, in those texts where Kant allegedly was moving away from *PPD*, he nevertheless mentions or implies *PPD* in passages surrounding those where he allegedly denies it. In the third *Critique*’s discussion of the Righteous Atheist, for example, *PPD* is at least implied—for if the Atheist can fall to despair in the face of “all the evils of poverty, illness and untimely death” (*CJ* 5:452), then the Highest Good is thereby advanced because of the hope for justice in a “future life.” In addition, we find through the final section of the third *Critique* and its closing General Remark, more than a dozen references to God and immortality as necessary for the Highest Good (see esp. 5:469–79).

But perhaps the most telling textual rejoinder comes out of the Theory/Practice essay, for while *PPD* is not mentioned in “universal happiness combined with and in conformity with the purest morality throughout the world” (TP 8:279), one need only read the footnote that follows, as it makes clear that the Highest Good “contains no prospect of happiness absolutely, but only of a proportion between it and the worthiness of a subject” (TP 8:280n).

Evidence for *PPD*’s abandonment is thus highly questionable. Three or four passages, extracted and cited as they are, may create the appearance of a change of mind. But is that how we should read them? Not only do the passages at issue contain no explicit denial of *PPD*, but also, time and again, *PPD* is affirmed in

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a being able to judge such worth. The second type of passage is, all the more clearly, directed at the postulate of immortality, and perhaps even more than the first, many interpreters welcome its (alleged) abandonment. In addition to Reath’s “Two Conceptions,” see Guyer’s *Nature and Freedom*, 289. See also my discussion of the latter passage type in ch. 1 of *Religion: Interpretation Defense*

<sup>34</sup>This is actually a common passage to cite for those others who wish to advance a secular account of the Highest Good and one without *PPD*. However, as discussed below, neither is this positive evidence that Kant rejected *PPD*, nor does it even exclude *PPD* once one merely reads on to the footnote that follows this passage, where *PPD* is present.

subsequent passages. Not only does it reappear in the third *Critique* and Theory/Practice, but *PPD* is a routine part of Kant's further discussions of the doctrine through the 1790s (e.g. *Rel.*, 6:5; *Rel.*, 6:99; *Rel.*, 6:161; TP 8:280n; "Proc.," 8:419, etc.). Hence, unless one presumes that Kant changed his mind as he moved from one line to the next, blind to his own inconsistencies or completely unsettled about how to view the Highest Good, it seems far more appropriate to accept that in the three or four passages on the Highest Good where *PPD* is not mentioned, he is there just providing a partial depiction of the doctrine, one that is more fully articulated in the ensuing lines of text, as well as in dozens of other passages.

Let us now turn to *CJ* 5:450 and those kindred passages where Kant depicts the Highest Good as "in the world." It has been argued that this passage and those that follow mark a shift in Kant's understanding of the doctrine, a withdrawal from its former characterization as obtaining in a "future life" and instead as something for this life, in this physical-causal order. Such an interpretation, however, depends upon how the phrase "in the world" is understood, and while it seems natural enough to assume that "in the world" does refer to this life, it is nevertheless still an assumption, one made without any investigation of how Kant uses the phrase elsewhere in the corpus.

But once a study is made of how the phrase is used, it is far from obvious that Kant intended this alleged meaning, for there are numerous passages where he uses "world" far more broadly than just in reference to this physical-causal order. In the Canon of the first *Critique*, for instance, he uses 'world' in reference to the afterlife and/or some non-sensible reality—such as the "world that is future for us," (A 811/B 839) and "a world that is not now visible to us but is hoped for" (A 813/B 841). In the second *Critique*, Kant describes the Highest Good as obtaining within a "pure world of the understanding beyond natural connections" and then goes on to characterize a person's duration within this world as "endless" (*CPrR* 5:143). Moreover, in the "Real Progress" essay, Kant uses the exact same phrase as the one at issue, "the highest good in the world" and describes our mandate to "conform to this final end" as dependent on "a future eternal life" (RP 20:298).<sup>35</sup>

But I think the most telling passage comes out of section 4 of the second *Critique*'s Dialectic, the section specifically devoted to the postulate of immortality. Its opening sentence, in fact, depicts the highest good as "in the world," even though what is under discussion in this section is not the order of nature but our post-mortem existence. Since "[t]he production of the highest good in the world" requires and is realized through the "endless progress" (*CPrR* 5:122) made possible through the postulate of immortality, it should hardly be assumed, as has been the case with *CJ* 5:450, that Kant uses "world" to refer to this life and this order of things.

Lastly, to help overcome any remaining fears that the Highest Good, realized both "in the world" and in a "future life," is somehow contradictory, we may turn to a passage from the first *Critique*, where Kant explicitly discusses his use of the term.

<sup>35</sup>In full, the passage reads: "I believe in one God, as the original source of all good in the world, that being its final end;—I believe in the possibility of conforming to this final end, to the highest good in the world, so far as it is in man's power;—I believe in a future eternal life, as the condition for an everlasting approximation of the world to the highest good possible therein" (RP 20:298).

He begins by distinguishing between “two expressions, world and nature, which are sometimes run together” (A 418/B 446). And then, to help distinguish the two, he limits the meaning of “nature” to “the unity in the existence of appearances” (A 419/B 447), but then assigns to “world” a “transcendental sense,” such that when dealing with “cosmological ideas,” one can use “world” to extend more broadly, beyond just the phenomenal, to the “sum total of existing things” (A 419/B 447).

Hence, just as we see later in the first *Critique*, then in the second *Critique*, and beyond, Kant’s portrayal of the Highest Good as obtaining “in the world” and yet in a “future life” is no contradiction and suggests no vacillation. Our post-mortem existence remains “in the world,” for *Welt* has a use quite different from *Natur*. This is why, even in his discussion of the postulate of immortality, he can depict the Highest Good as not only “in the world,” but as realized through the “endless progress” made possible through our “future life.”

The above analysis shows that the common reading of *CJ* 5:450 has been made far too hastily, without due attention to how Kant uses ‘world’ or ‘in the world’ within the corpus. But before moving on, let me add one last point. Those who claim that *CJ* 5:450 marks a shift in Kant’s understanding of the Highest Good reinforce that claim with another, namely, that Kant retreats from the postulate of immortality in the 1790s. If true, that would offer some positive evidence, otherwise lacking, that we should read “in the world” in terms of this shift.

It does not, however, take much to challenge this additional claim, for there are far more texts and far more detailed discussions of the Postulate in the 1790s than in the 1780s. Contrary to what has been alleged, one finds the Highest Good linked with the immortality of the soul continually through the texts of the 1790s, including the third *Critique*, where it can be found more than a dozen times through its final section. It is mentioned briefly in the “Theodicy” essay of 1791 (8:262, 8:269n), in multiple passages throughout the *Religion*, in “The End of All Things” (8:328–30), in the *Conflict of the Faculties* (7:40, 7:44, etc.), the 1796 “Proclamation” Essay (8:418–19), as well as in “Real Progress” (20:298). Time and again, throughout the decade, Kant continues to discuss the immortality of the soul, characterizes the Highest Good as dependent upon and obtaining through it, and even discusses the guiding principles through which we may or may not speculate about the details of what existence would be like in this future life (*Rel.*, 6:69n; ET 8:328–30).

While Kant may have had, at one moment or another, second thoughts about the Postulate, and might have at some point considered a this-worldly account of the Highest Good, we have looked at the textual evidence usually employed to make the case, evidence that, as we have seen, is negative at best. However popular this reading of the doctrine has become, it has gained such standing without due study of the corpus. By contrast, the religious reading, if we may call it that, can be found throughout the corpus, directly and unambiguously affirmed. Kant’s view on these things may make some uncomfortable, and many of us might prefer to advance a more secular alternative, but the textual argument used to support HGs, despite how often it is referenced, cannot stand up to scrutiny.

Given how much of the recent scholarship is invested in the secular conception of the Highest Good, it will surely be difficult for some to accept that their view

is without textual merit. Yet no challenge has here been made to the advance of a quasi-Kantian alternative. My argument through this section has been, rather, that there is no textual support for the secular conception of the Highest Good and thus it is time to stop attributing such a view to Kant. Of course, one still may argue that, regardless of the preceding textual argument, the theological position is ultimately philosophically untenable, and thus a secular corrective is still required. While I have no objection to a secular alternative to Kant's understanding of the Highest Good (for surely it would comport better with the secular preferences of the field), as I hope through the remainder of this paper to show, there are adequate textual resources to rebut the prevailing criticism of the theological conception of the doctrine. Hence, not only, as I have thus far argued, did Kant not abandon this conception, but he also did not have to. As we shall see, this conception neither makes *HGd* incompatible with 'ought implies can,' nor does it leave *HGd* as either empty or superfluous.

However, before we turn to my positive defense of the theological conception, let us take a moment to review the key points we have thus far discussed.

(i) Much of the secondary literature has recognized two elements within Kant's doctrine. I have proposed that these elements are best rendered as *HGi* (Highest Good as an ideal state of affairs) and *HGd* (Highest Good as duty).

(ii) Early Anglophone literature on the Highest Good has encumbered subsequent scholarship with various interpretative errors. Key among them is the presumption that *HGd* is promoted through our doing what we can in fulfillment of *PPD*.

(iii) This key error has led many to question the coherence of the theological conception of the Highest Good. In particular, Kant's postulation of God for the sake of *PPD* has led to the charge that *HGd* is not compatible with 'ought implies can.'

(iv) Much of the recent literature on the Highest Good has been struggling over how to preserve 'ought implies can.' One of the most widespread strategies has been to reject *PPD* and, with it, dismiss the need for the postulates of God and immortality. Some of those who advocate for rejecting *PPD* claim that Kant himself came to reject it as well as one or both of the postulates.

(v) However, as proposed above (and as will be discussed more fully below), Kant never presented *HGd* as involving us in *PPD*. Hence, the problems arising from this association are not due to Kant's actual doctrine, but are, rather, artifacts of the secondary literature.

(vi) Moreover, contrary to the popular view that Kant himself migrated away from *PPD* as well as the postulates of God and immortality, a careful look at the corpus warrants the dismissal of the (putative) evidence used to support this alleged migration.

(vii) Consequently, there is but one conception of the Highest Good in the Kantian corpus: the theological conception. Contrary to claims made by the proponents of *HGs*, Kant never withdrew *PPD* as necessary for *HGi*, nor ever withdrew either the postulate of God or immortality as necessary for *PPD*.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>As we will soon discuss, there is more to the theological conception than just these points. They are, nevertheless, at the heart of the divide between the secular and theological conceptions.

5. *HGd* AS A DUTY TO MORAL WORTHINESS

The secularization of the Highest Good comes, as I have argued, at a heavy price. While it does offer a solution to the problem of ‘ought implies can,’ the result is a diluted doctrine, one that offers no distinctive content to the duty. Moreover, and perhaps most persuasively, the textual evidence used to support this interpretation is meager and superficial. Of course, if (as Rawls and others believe) there were no better options available, if the religious version of the doctrine suffered from irredeemable flaws such that our only hope would be to abandon it in favor of the secular reading, then we might have good cause to pursue the latter. But, in my opinion, no such recourse is necessary, for there is a philosophically tenable and very straightforward religious reading, a reading that has somehow been neglected despite being present in the text,<sup>37</sup> a reading that can cut through the mess left to us by the secondary literature of the past five or six decades.

As I have argued, much of the interpretative legacy is built upon the impression that *HGd* assigns to us a duty that is beyond our capabilities. And as a result, the religious reading seems encumbered by the apparent claim that the ‘ought’ assigned to us depends on a ‘can’ assigned to God and not us. Likewise, much of the philosophical force behind the secular reading comes from the need to preserve the logic of ‘ought implies can’ and circumvent the seeming error that Kant made in his more religious moments. But these challenges, in my opinion, are more the result of our interpretative legacy than the text itself. While I grant that Kant was not always clear about the nature of our duty to promote the Highest Good, and there are passages where it does seem as if we are assigned a duty that is beyond us, there are still other passages that help to clear up this mess, passages suggesting that our role in the realization of *HGi* is other than through the promotion of *PPD*.

What I would like to propose, therefore, is that while we have a duty to promote *HGi*, this is not to be equated with our having a duty to promote *PPD*—for our role in the realization of *HGi* is not the same as God’s. God is postulated as the agent through which happiness comes to be distributed in proportion to moral worth. But we do not share in such efforts, for, as argued above, we do not have the capacities necessary to even attempt such a project. So, while God is responsible for the distribution of happiness in accordance with moral worth, we are responsible for something else, some other element of *HGi*, namely, a responsibility to become morally worthy. That is something that does fall within our power<sup>38</sup> and that is

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<sup>37</sup>I take it that Beck, more so than Silber, is responsible for thinking of *HGd* as directed by *PPD*. Silber does not discuss the actual content of *HGd* at length, but his view in 1959 seems to be that *HGd* centrally concerns our moral striving (and the importance of not expecting too little of oneself in that regard). By contrast, (as noted earlier) by 1963, Silber seems to fall onto the *PPD* bandwagon in his “Importance.” In particular, Silber proposes that *HGd* requires one to self-regulate one’s own happiness in proportion to one’s moral worthiness (see 194).

<sup>38</sup>There is a debate in the literature as to whether Kant saw us as capable of becoming morally worthy through our own efforts or whether a “divine supplement” is also required. Given that *HGd* demands just that we strive towards this end, I am here only concerned with the ‘power’ to strive in this way rather than whether or not the end can be fully achieved without God’s assistance. I discuss these issues briefly in sect. 7.3. For more robust discussions of how my reading of divine aid relates to the wider debate on the topic see *Religion: Interpretation Defense* as well as my “Kant on the Debt of Sin.”

how Kant describes the division of labor between ourselves and God in various passages.<sup>39</sup>

For example, in the second *Critique*, Kant writes: “the moral law led to a practical task . . . namely, that of the necessary completeness of the first and principal part of the highest good, morality. . . . The same law must also lead to the possibility of the second element of the highest good, namely happiness proportioned to that morality” (*CPrR* 5:124). Kant then goes on to explain that the two postulates for the Highest Good, God and immortality, correspond to this division of labor. God is postulated as the distributor of happiness; immortality is postulated (in this text) as necessary for our becoming worthy of that happiness.<sup>40</sup>

The same division of labor is expressed in the following from the Theory/Practice essay: “this concept of duty . . . introduces another end for the human being’s will, namely to work to the best of one’s ability towards the *highest good* possible in the world . . . which, since it is within our control from one quarter but not from both taken together, exacts from reason belief, for *practical purposes*, in a moral ruler of the world and in a future life” (TP 8:279). Although less explicit, the point here is that morality and happiness “taken together” are not within our control. Only one is, and that is, as Kant here puts it, “the purest morality throughout the world” (TP 8:279).

Third, towards the opening of the *Religion*’s third part, after explaining that the “ethical community” is “a work whose execution cannot be hoped for from human beings but only from God himself,” Kant then sets the stage for much of the rest of the *Religion* by pressing for the importance of our contribution to this ideal. As in previous texts, we need God because only he “knows the heart” and can “give to each according to the worth of his actions” (*Rel.*, 6:99); and yet, Kant continues, “human beings are not permitted on this account to remain idle in the undertaking. . . . Each must, on the contrary, so conduct himself as if everything depended on him” (*Rel.*, 6:100–101).

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<sup>39</sup>Note that the above account of a ‘division of labor’ is different from the ‘partnership’ between God and humanity Palmquist discusses in “Kant’s Religious Argument.” In that paper (and in some of his other works), Palmquist proposes that divine aid is necessary to the ethical community, for without it, we could not come into the moral unity Kant discusses in part 3 of the *Religion*. Note that Palmquist also attributes this view to Hare in “Recognizing” though it is not there explicit. I am generally sympathetic with Palmquist’s thesis that Kant endorses divine aid in the *Religion*, though our understanding of the nature of this aid and the reasons for it differ. See my discussion of the ethical community in sect. 7 of this paper. See also the concluding chapter of *Religion: Interpretation Defense*.

<sup>40</sup>I add the parenthetical “(in this text)” because in the second *Critique*, the postulate is meant to make possible our eternal striving towards moral perfection. However, in the 1790s, Kant claims that our efforts to become morally worthy should be regarded as taking place in this life alone, while the happiness that we come thereby to deserve is then granted in the next. We may see this shift as a result of another shift, namely, from moral perfection to the change of heart as the condition that must be met for us to become “well-pleasing to God.” For example, in the *Religion* Kant writes, “at the end of life our account must be completely closed, and nobody may hope to make up there for what was neglected here” (*Rel.*, 6:71n). In “The End of All Things” he writes, “it is wise to act *as if*. . . the moral state in which we end this one, along with its consequences in entering on that other life—is unalterable” (ET 8:330). Hence, in the 1790s, the Postulate of Immortality functions as it did in the first *Critique*: as the venue for *PPD*. The struggle to become “well-pleasing to God” is thus, in the 1790s, to be understood as our charge in this life and not, as presented in the second *Critique*, something which depends upon an eternal striving in the next.

In all three of these passages, there is a division of labor presented. One part, element, or “quarter” is within our control and assigned to us, while its other part is beyond our power and is, rather, assigned to God. Admittedly, these passages are not utterly transparent in meaning. But if they were or, more generally, if Kant were clearer about the nature of *HGd*, we would not be where we are today. And yet, my thesis, that in the division of labor over the establishment of *HGi*, God is charged with the distribution of happiness while we are charged with becoming worthy of that happiness, seems surprisingly absent in the debates,<sup>41</sup> even though it is such a natural way to understand the salient passages and unravel the problem.

#### 6. BRINGING CONTENT TO *HGd*

My proposal that *HGd* is to be understood as a duty to become morally worthy satisfies a number of desiderata. First, and most importantly for the aims of this paper, it overcomes the problem of ‘ought implies can.’ Second, while Kant definitely could have presented the matter far more clearly, it nevertheless does fit well with those passages articulating a division of labor between our role and God’s. However, an obvious objection is that it, just as much as the secular renderings of *HGd*, does not seem to offer any new content, anything that distinguishes it from our other duties. Thus, it may still succumb to the objection of emptiness or superfluity, for it may also be, to use Beck’s phrase, “without any distinctive content of its own.”<sup>42</sup>

However, the proposal I am here offering does not end with just the above claim that *HGd* is to be understood as a duty to moral worthiness. If that were so, then I think the charge of emptiness or superfluity might have to be conceded.<sup>43</sup> Fortunately, this is not where we are left, for beyond the *Critiques*, we still have Kant’s *Religion*. From its new argument for the Highest Good contained in the First Preface, through the ecclesiology of its third and fourth parts, it is far and away where Kant presents the details of *HGd* most fully, exploring its foundations, its

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<sup>41</sup>As noted previously, this is a claim occasionally found in the literature, including Silber’s “Immanent and Transcendent,” but far more frequently, and even in Silber’s “Importance,” we see *HGd* instead linked with *PPD*. Again, to avoid a possible confusion, the division of labor defended here presents God as responsible for *PPD*, while our moral worthiness rests on our shoulders. Palmquist has described a “partnership” between God and humanity, but that partnership is not about *PPD*. It rather concerns the issue of whether God in some way facilitates our establishment of the ethical community—and so provides us with the means we then need to become morally worthy. I will discuss this “partnership” in sect. 7.3.

<sup>42</sup>See Beck, *Commentary*, 244. Alternately, it may be contended that Beck has oversimplified, and so the duty as represented in the second *Critique* may still add something: for in this text the duty was not merely to heed the moral law but to pursue “the complete conformity” of one’s disposition with the moral law (*CPrR* 5:122). As Kant here equates this with Holiness, we may understand *HGd* as requiring as well the adjustment of our inclinations so that they come into “complete conformity” with the demands of morality. That is, unseen by Beck, this is as much about virtue as it is about our formal principle of willing.

Yet, even with this emendation, *HGd* may still fall to the same objection. Just as we find the duty to moral perfection articulated in the *Metaphysics of Morals* as one of our ends that is also a duty (see *MM* 6:383), its derivation does not clearly need the vastness and drama of the broader doctrine.

<sup>43</sup>This concern applies all the more to Kant’s discussions of the Highest Good in the third *Critique*, for while it offers some new insights into the significance of the broader doctrine, it too has almost nothing to say about *HGd* in particular, and so offers no response to the charge of emptiness.



purpose, and the sort of conduct it prescribes.<sup>44</sup> Hence, while the vast majority of scholarship on the Highest Good has been directed to the *Critiques*, especially the second *Critique*, it is rather in the *Religion* where we find Kant's most developed—but comparatively unexamined—account of this doctrine.

### 6.1. *HGd and the Predisposition to Humanity*

For our purposes, in trying to fill out the content for HGd, the pivotal discussion is to be found within part 3 of the *Religion*. Kant there explains why we have this duty, what we must do for its sake, and also that it is not, like our other moral duties, prescribed to us as individuals, but rather is presented as a duty “not of human beings towards human beings but of the human race toward itself” (*Rel.*, 6:97).<sup>45</sup>

In part 1 of the *Religion*, Kant presents our propensity to evil as “woven into human nature” (*Rel.*, 6:30) and thus as a feature of our agency that “cannot be eradicated” (*Rel.*, 6:31). Then, in part 2 (as well as in the General Remark or “parergon” of part 1), Kant discusses what he calls the “change of heart,” the transformation of the moral status of one's *Gesinnung* (i.e. our moral ‘disposition’) from evil to good through the restoration of morality's priority over self-interest in the *Gesinnung*'s “supreme maxim.” Part 3, however, begins with a lengthy caution that there is no release from the propensity to evil. Even those who have undergone a change of heart thus remain “not any the less exposed to the assaults of the evil principle” (*Rel.*, 6:93).

Despite the significance of the change of heart, which through the *Religion* Kant presents as the standard by which we become “well-pleasing to God,” it is not to be conflated with the notion of moral perfection used in the second *Critique*'s treatment of HGd, nor the idea of a Holy Will, nor does it reflect any change in the fundamental structure of our agency. That is, the change of heart does not remove the propensity to evil, nor the many vulnerabilities we have to its influence. Hence, Kant writes that “however much the individual human being might do to escape from the dominion of this evil, he would still be held in incessant danger of relapsing into it” (*Rel.*, 6:94). As such, we must “remain forever armed for battle” (*Rel.*, 6:93).

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<sup>44</sup>Despite the fact that the second *Critique* has long been treated as the Highest Good's locus classicus, I consider this designation to be more a consequence of the secondary literature than something that reflects its place in the overall corpus. The second *Critique*'s approach to the Highest Good is, in my view, more transitional, and actually quite divergent from the views found both prior to it and afterwards.

For example, while its argument for the postulate of immortality turns on the need for eternal striving, in nearly every other published work, the postulate instead serves as necessary for *PPD*. This is how it is portrayed in both the first and third *Critique*, in the *Religion*, and so forth. Moreover, Kant seems to have had a change of mind about two important issues relevant to HGd. In addition to the introduction to the “change of heart,” he explicitly asserts both in the *Religion* and in “The End of All Things” that it is in this life alone where we strive for worthiness. He writes, for example, “at the end of life our account must be completely closed, and nobody may hope somehow to make up there for what was neglected here” (*Rel.*, 6:711; see also ET 8:330). For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see ch. 4 of my *Religion: Interpretation Defense*.

<sup>45</sup>That the duty is corporate in nature is a relevant signal to how HGd is not simply to be identified with one's personal striving for moral perfection, such as it is portrayed in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (*MM* 6:446–47). As we will discuss, the corporate nature of the duty gives it not only a distinctive form, but distinctive practical content. While it might be easy to trivialize Kant's characterization of HGd as corporate in nature, assuming that he merely means that this is a duty which applies to one and all, he certainly means more than this, for it is already in the nature of a Kantian duty that it binds all rational agents. Hence, a corporate duty pertains not merely to an amalgam of individuals engaged in parallel duties, but rather, as we will soon discuss, the corporate nature of the duty pertains to the duty's distinctive relational structure.

Why this is the case, why regardless of the moral status of one's *Gesinnung*, we must remain "forever armed for battle," may be understood in a number of different ways. First, Kant is clear that we can never know the status of our *Gesinnung* (*Rel.*, 6:51; *Rel.*, 6:67–71). We cannot know whether or not we have undergone a change of heart or whether we continue to allow ourselves to be ruled by "the evil principle." Hence, we must continue on doing our best to address our perceived moral failings. Second, the change of heart does not on its own turn us into virtuous agents. While it is the basis upon which we become "well-pleasing to God," Kant repeatedly distinguishes between this more abstract aspect of our moral constitution and the habits of thought and behavior that generally are associated with virtue (*Rel.*, 6:47–48; *Rel.*, 6:57; *Rel.*, 6:75n; *Rel.*, 6:93). Although one who has undergone a change of heart would have a more profound commitment to further their character in this regard, the "new man," the one who has undergone a change of heart, still has—as Kant explains—much work to do (*Rel.*, 6:75n). Third, it may very well not be in our power to *directly* transform our *Gesinnung* (*Rel.*, 6:45; *Rel.*, 6:51; *Rel.*, 6:67). We cannot directly make it happen that a new supreme maxim is established within us. Instead, it seems that this is to be realized more indirectly, such as by addressing the more empirical elements of our moral failings.<sup>46</sup> Then, lastly, I would submit that we may not want to regard the change of heart as a *fait accompli*; rather, the "battle that every morally well-disposed human being must withstand in this life" (*Rel.*, 6:93) includes the danger of recidivism. That is, when Kant writes "however much the individual human being might do to escape from the dominion of this evil, he would still be held in incessant danger of relapsing into it" (*Rel.*, 6:94), the danger seems to go beyond just that we may backslide in our pursuit of virtue (and/or "way of life [*Lebenswandel*]"), but threaten as well the more profound risk that the change of heart could potentially be undone.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>46</sup>I will discuss the issue of divine aid briefly in sect. 7.3. See also my reading of the issue in chs. 4 and 7 of *Religion: Interpretation Defense*, and my "Debt of Sin."

<sup>47</sup>An earlier version of this paper focused specifically on the danger of moral recidivism. However, one of the reviewers for this paper took issue with this claim. She or he recommended that I offer a broader account of the content of *HGd* rather than so specifically identify it with this danger. She or he also noted that in part 1 of the *Religion*, Kant seems to characterize the change of heart as a "single and unalterable decision" (*Rel.*, 6:48) one which is "itself now unchangeable" (*Rel.*, 6:51).

Nevertheless, I worry about putting too much weight on the above passages. My reasons for this are both textual and philosophical. First, such recidivism seems to be what is at stake at the opening of part 3, given that Kant is there discussing our potential relapse into the "dominion of evil" and the "assaults of the evil principle." Second, both passages in part 1 involve conditionals "if by a single and unalterable" and "so far as this new ground (the new heart) is itself now unchangeable." Third, it does not seem compatible with Kant's understanding of moral agency for him to claim that we can lose our freedom over some aspect of ourselves that was formerly within the scope of the will's power. Although the change of heart may perhaps bring with it various moral benefits (see: *Rel.*, 6:68–71; *Rel.*, 6:75n) that help sustain this transformation, it is far from clear that they would make a return to an evil *Gesinnung* impossible.

We remain morally imperfect agents, bearing the very same propensity to evil that shaped our initial *Gesinnung* choice. Kant seems to be emphasizing this very point at the opening of part 3, making clear that even those who have come "under the leadership of the good principle" and so are no longer in "bondage under the laws of sin" are nonetheless still exposed to "the assaults of the evil principle" (*Rel.*, 6:93). Hence, while "once saved always saved" is a tenet of Reformation Theology, it is far from clear that Kant followed in kind.

Although each of these interpretative options could be explored more fully, their upshot is the same. Since our propensity to evil “cannot be eradicated” (*Rel.*, 6:31) for it is “woven into human nature” (*Rel.*, 6:30), there is no end to the demands upon us to remain vigilant against “the assaults of the evil principle.” To this end, Kant wants us to understand the principal vehicle for these assaults so that we can begin to develop a viable response.

Supplementing part I's discussions of the “predisposition to humanity,” and reviving his earlier notion of unsocial sociability (cf. “Idea,” 8:20), Kant sees the assault as embedded within how we as human beings relate to one another. As we learn in part I, our sense of self-worth is comparative, and so we are constantly judging ourselves in relation to others. We seek “worth in the opinion of others” (*Rel.*, 6:27), not just for the sake of approval and acceptance, but also out of our fear that we may be rejected or criticized by another. The consequences of such insecurities, for Kant, stretch beyond just how we relate to one another. As he here writes, as soon as we are “among human beings” (*Rel.*, 6:94), our egos will respond such that we end up “mutually corrupt[ing] each other's moral dispositions and make one another evil” (*Rel.*, 6:94). Thus, Kant here presents the darker side of our predisposition to humanity as closely tied to our propensity to evil.

This is not, however, because we actively seek to corrupt one another, but rather it is because of our psychological weaknesses, our egos' needs and fears, which, when triggered, prompt an inner perfidy through which our egos rise up in self-defense against both the threats that come from the judgment of others and the moral law as well. As can be seen as well in the second *Critique's* account of humility, the moral feeling whereby our awareness of the Law “strikes down self-conceit” (*CPPr* 5:73), we may surmise that the social dynamics that trigger the ego's defenses likewise trigger a response against all norms that challenge its need for supremacy.<sup>48</sup>

It is this challenge, the impact that our social psychology has upon our commitment to the moral law, that serves as the foundation for *Religion's* treatment of HGd. Through his analysis of this consequence of unsocial sociability, Kant advances from the post-mortem and more individuated picture of HGd found in the second *Critique*, to a corporate duty—a corporate solution to a corporate problem, one might say—a collective project to reshape our worldly human relations so as to buffer the triggers that would otherwise undo us. He thus calls upon us to “establish a union which has for its end the prevention of this evil and the promotion of the good in human beings—an enduring and ever expanding society, solely designed for the preservation of morality by counteracting evil with united forces” (*Rel.*, 6:94). Hence, Kant explains that “the promotion of the highest good as a good common to all . . . will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires rather a union of such persons into a whole towards that very end” (*Rel.*, 6:97).

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<sup>48</sup>I discuss the social psychology here more fully in ch. 3 of *Religion: Interpretation Defense*. The position I there advance has its roots in Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*; Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil*; and Frierson, *Freedom and Anthropology*.

6.2. *The Union (Ethical Community) and its Purpose*

The concrete practices employed by this Union (what most of the literature calls the “ethical community”), may be quite variable, but their common purpose is to develop an alternative way for human beings to relate to one another such that our shared commitment to a shared end can offset the psychological threats that are otherwise present within human relations.<sup>49</sup> In most avenues of life, the ends of one individual stand in conflict with those of others, such that the success of one comes at the cost of another’s failure. This is the case in everything ranging from sports to academic success; from business to romance. One team wins, another loses. One person receives the tenure track offer, while others remain stuck as adjuncts. One corporation’s new branding strategies takes market share from its less creative competitors. And one person finds true love while some old flame looks on with jealousy. Even when in some instances the ends of individuals are in harmony, there are still always others who are excluded. Whether we put ourselves, our families, our communities, or our nation first, our lives are filled with competition resulting in disparities in prestige, wealth, liberty, and so forth.<sup>50</sup>

By contrast, a Union devoted to the moral advance of the species is one that is not only all-inclusive, but depends upon a way of being together not shaped by unsocial sociability. Instead of my being threatened by you, fearing that your success will come at my expense, in this Union, you will succeed through my success and vice-versa. As Kant argues in the *Religion’s* first Preface, our promotion of the Highest Good can and should be the “special point of reference for the unification of all ends” (*Rel.*, 6:5). The more that we each center our lives upon this, the less vulnerable we become to morally corrupting triggers, and the less we ourselves serve as triggers for others.

But to repeat one of the central claims of this paper, it is neither the purpose of this Union to participate within the proportionate distribution of happiness, nor its secular counterpart, the maximization of happiness.<sup>51</sup> While participation

<sup>49</sup>Reath considers the Union Kant proposes to be the ethical community, but regards universal happiness as its key goal. While I disagree with his account of the Union’s goals, I agree with other elements of his account, including his recognition that “one’s disposition to act from the Moral Law is strengthened when it is given public support, and when one can count on others to do so as well” (“Two Conceptions,” 617). Reath and I also both see the Union as the object of a “special duty,” thus providing the unique content to HGd seemingly absent in the second *Critique*. However, in contrast to Reath, I contend that Kant regards the fundamental function of this Union, what it is meant to achieve, to be our moral advance. Happiness may be beneficial, of course, but not always. Moreover, many of the conditions that affect happiness fall well beyond what can be achieved through social policy.

<sup>50</sup>While Kant certainly does not consider unsocial sociability in all ways to be bad, for it can, for instance, fuel innovation and efficiency (cf. “Idea,” 8:22), the social disparities that nevertheless result trigger our insecurities, inflame our egos, and fuel one or more of the social vices (envy, addiction to power, avarice, schadenfreude, etc.) that Kant enumerates in the *Religion’s* first and third parts.

<sup>51</sup>As noted earlier, in his “Two Conceptions,” Reath presents the ethical community as a social-political vision, one in which our individual pursuit of morality would somehow lead to “the happiness of all” (615). More accurately, the ‘union’ to which Kant refers is the Universal Church, and while I agree with Reath that its mission involves the “support [of] moral conduct” (615), we see time and again throughout the corpus, from the first *Critique* on to the *Religion* and beyond, Kant adamantly rejecting the claim that the happiness that is to be afforded through the Highest Good can come from us. See A 810/B 838; *CPtR* 5:113; *Rel.*, 6:8n; TP 8:279; “Proc.,” 8:419, etc. Of course, some happiness certainly can come through our efforts, but Kant is unwavering in his claim that the hope for happiness associated with the Highest Good calls for “a moral ruler of the world and in a future life” (TP 8:279). Hopefully, readers have found in sect. 4 an adequate rebuttal to those who claim that Kant distanced himself from the postulates of God and immortality in the 1790s.

within this Union may, in fact, bring happiness to our lives, that is not its purpose. Rather, it is intended as the response to the triggers of unsocial sociability—and more fully, it is through this Union that we are to promote the moral advancement of the species.<sup>52</sup>

It is this moral project that fills out Kant's claim in part 3 that we are not to remain idle despite God's role in the Highest Good. For while God alone "knows the heart" and "give[s] to each" according to their worth (*Rel.*, 6:99), and while God is clearly presented as also the only one who can establish the ideal ethical community (what I will below call *ECi*), Kant still presses that each of us must, nevertheless, "so conduct himself as if everything depended on him" (*Rel.*, 6:101). We are not, Kant insists, "to remain idle in the undertaking" (*Rel.*, 6:100), because it is through our efforts that the species is transformed into one worthy of membership in this ideal. Hence, following the division of labor discussed above, while *PPD* is God's responsibility, ours is to reshape our social relations so as to (and in so doing) facilitate the moral advance of the species.

#### 7. THE THEOLOGY OF *HGd*: ETHICAL COMMUNITY AS UNIVERSAL CHURCH

I have thus far provided little detail about the operations of the Union, i.e. what practices and policies it would employ in its service to *HGd*. Instead, my concern through the preceding section centered on its conceptual grounding as well as what is distinct about *HGd*: how it addresses a unique moral problem, how its duty is different from others in the Kantian system, and thus how we may respond to the charges of *HGd*'s alleged emptiness and superfluity. Hence, the paper up to this point has offered a reconstruction and then response to a legacy of interpretation and criticism that finds Kant's doctrine of the Highest Good wanting.

In this final section, we will consider one particular feature of the ethical community, one of distinct significance to this paper's broader agenda. Given that many proponents of *HGs* have likewise recognized a need to collectively address the darker elements of our unsocial sociability,<sup>53</sup> it may be wondered whether there is (or needs to be) anything distinctly religious about the ethical community.

Certainly, we have already seen that there is a key divergence in how the theological and secular conceptions each approach the relationship between happiness and *HGd*. From this follows a similarly significant distinction in the function assigned to the ethical community. But still, the question remains: how

<sup>52</sup>In his *Kant and the Social Authority of Reason*, Rossi likewise correlates our duty to promote the Highest Good with the discussion of unsocial sociability found in part 3 of the *Religion*. I am certainly sympathetic with Rossi's treatment, though develop the connection differently, focusing primarily on the function of the Universal Church in relation to the Highest Good versus how social institutions could become more rational and less coercive. See also Muchnik's brief but interesting discussion of the corporate nature of this duty in *Kant's Theory of Evil*, 64–71.

<sup>53</sup>Reath, for example, holds to the dubious (and, as I have argued, very un-Kantian) thesis that "the happiness of all would result from the [moral] conduct of all" ("Two Conceptions," 615). More recently, Moran claims that "[t]he happiness of the community should follow naturally from the virtue of the community's members" (*Community and Progress*, 83). Lest we forget: "no necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of moral laws" (*CPvR* 5:113). As argued in sect. 4, Kant never withdraws from such a view.

does the theological conception of the Highest Good materially inform Kant's portrayal of the ethical community? Although this is an issue that would benefit from a separate paper in its own right, let me nevertheless offer through this final section an overview of how Kant portrays the ethical community in the *Religion*, especially why he regards it as necessarily religious, and, at least in brief, whether religious belief is needed in order to pursue HGd.<sup>54</sup>

### 7.1. *Kant's Portrayal of the Ethical Community*

To begin, let us first take a moment to consider more carefully how Kant uses "ethical community [*ethischen gemeinen Wesen*]." It may surprise some, but this is a term used nowhere else in the Kantian corpus than in the *Religion*.<sup>55</sup> More precisely, it appears nowhere else than in the *Religion's* third and fourth parts. Most of these uses pertain to a "greatly scaled down" version of an ethical community, in contrast to a representation of the ethical community as an ideal state of affairs, which Kant discusses with greater brevity.

Shortly after his initial introduction of the ethical community, Kant describes this ideal as a "work whose execution cannot be hoped for from human beings but only from God himself" (*Rel.*, 6:100). God, within this ideal, is not only presented as the legislator of the ethical community but as the "one who knows the heart . . . the most intimate parts of the dispositions of each and everyone," and thereby "give[s] to each according to the worth of his actions" (*Rel.*, 6:99). Given how closely the latter quotation suggests *PPD*, it seems quite tenable to understand the 'ethical community' in this sense as equivalent to HG*i*. Accordingly, let us refer to this use of the term as EC*i*.<sup>56</sup>

Kant's second use of the term, the one that will be of primary concern through this subsection, corresponds to the Union as described previously. Unlike EC*i*, this second use is in one regard this-worldly, as it concerns the vehicle through which we are to offset the negative elements of our unsocial sociability and promote the

<sup>54</sup>This final section may seem to some readers extraneous to the paper's main project. I had originally planned to end the paper with sect. 6.2 (and a bit more discussion of how the ethical community and its underlying problematic fills out the content for HGd—now integrated into sect. 7). One reviewer, however, recommended that I more fully address how the theological conception of the Highest Good informs Kant's portrayal of the ethical community. Some readers may concur that this material is essential to the paper's main project, while others might prefer to regard it as more of a supplement or coda. Further discussion of the religious character of the ethical community can also be found in the following: Stroud, "Vital Role"; Frierson, "Providence and Divine Mercy"; and Palmquist, "Kant's Religious Argument." See also ch. 5 of Sweet, *Kant on Practical Life*.

<sup>55</sup>I make this claim not from just a manual perusal of the corpus, but by way of various search string including "ethich\* # gemein\*" using the invaluable *Kant-im-Kontext III* database (# set to a value of 6).

<sup>56</sup>It may seem peculiar to some readers to think of the afterlife as having a 'community' or any sort of social structure. While Kant recommends that our claims regarding the nature of the afterlife should be limited to the little that follows from our practical needs (*Rel.*, 6:69n; ET 8:333), it is important to understand that his religious upbringing was relevantly shaped by a conception of the afterlife that was prevalent through much of Christian history, though one that eventually came to be overtaken by a competing model with more Hellenistic roots. In contrast to the more familiar image of the afterlife as bodiless souls dwelling in Heaven, the Nicene Creed (following the Judaic *Olam Ha-Ba*) represents the afterlife as a resurrection of the dead in the "world to come." Such a representation of the afterlife, as a "New Jerusalem" or Kingdom of God on Earth, was as well quite standard within the Lutheranism of Kant's age, including the Lutheran Pietism to which his family subscribed. For a more detailed discussion of this issue, see Bunch, "Resurrection."

moral development of the species. As such, let us refer to this second use of the term as *ECh*: the ethical community as it falls within our human purview and so serves as the vehicle through which we collectively pursue *HGd*.

While *ECi* is straightforwardly religious, in that it can only be established by God and is shaped by His exercise of *PPD*, the religious character of *ECh* is more intricate. It is, of course, set within the larger religious framework of Kant's doctrine of the Highest Good, and is thus framed within his broader theology, but given that its psycho-social agenda is this-worldly, it is certainly fair to ponder whether or not religion must have practical relevance to *ECh*. Perhaps, then, *ECh*—and likewise our pursuit of *HGd*—need not have anything concretely to do with religious practices or beliefs.

This is certainly the view of most advocates of *HGs* and there is a substantial body of literature that uses Kant's term 'ethical community' as if religion were of no relevance to it. In fact, just as we discussed previously with the secular reconstruction of *HGi*, many proponents of *HGs* have assumed that Kant selects the German term *gemeinen Wesen* ('Community' or 'Commonwealth' in English) in order to telegraph his new-found secular model of the Highest Good.

On this point, Reath, for example, writes, "[t]he Ethical Commonwealth seems to represent a significant development in Kant's thought, which, when taken with other texts, suggests that he is moving towards the adoption of a secular conception."<sup>57</sup> However, as with other attempts to find evidence for a secular shift in Kant's conception of the Highest Good, here too the text belies such agendas. Consider the following.

First, Kant argues that because "we cannot know" if even *ECh* is in our power, we must "presuppose" divine aid in organizing "the forces of single individuals . . . for a common effect" (*Rel.*, 6:98).<sup>58</sup> Second, as Kant explains the characteristics of *ECh*, he is not at all subtle about its inherently religious form. This can be seen even in the titles of sections 3 and 4 of part 3: "The Concept of an Ethical Community is the Concept of a People of God under Ethical Laws" (*Rel.*, 6:98), then all the more transparently: "The Idea of a People of God Cannot be Realized (by Human Organization) Except in the Form of a Church" (*Rel.*, 6:100). Third, as would be expected, both these sections develop the characteristics of the ethical community indicated by their respective titles. Section 3 develops an argument as to why "an ethical community is conceivable only as a people under divine commands" (*Rel.*, 6:99). Section 4, after applying the traditional distinction between the visible and invisible church to *ECh*, then asserts that "[a]n ethical community under divine moral legislation is a church" (*Rel.*, 6:101). Also in section 4, after Kant introduces four requisites for a "true church,"<sup>59</sup> he concludes on their basis that "[a]s church,

<sup>57</sup>Reath, "Two Conceptions," 606–7.

<sup>58</sup>I return to this passage and its role in religious belief below.

<sup>59</sup>These four principles, located at *Rel.*, 6:103, are as follows: Universality (i.e. "no sectarian schisms"—no catechism or doctrinal professions that would not warrant universal agreement); Purity (i.e. the aims of the Church are none other than moral ones); Freedom (i.e. no forms of coercion within the Church or in its relation to the state); Unchangeable Constitution (i.e. its principles of incorporation as a constitution rest solely on a priori principles rather than social or historical contingencies). While it is easy enough to imagine how a secular union could just as well heed these principles, Kant nevertheless devotes most of the remainder of the *Religion* to how religious rituals and practices can and should reflect these principles. This includes how to interpret and make use of scripture, the role of prayer, initiation rituals such as baptism, etc.

therefore, i.e. considered as the mere *representation* of a state [ruled] by God, an ethical community really has nothing in its principles that resemble a political constitution.” Lastly, the opening of part 4 summarizes part 3’s discussion of how “to unite in an ethical community” (*Rel.*, 6:151), reminding the readers that “[w]e have also seen that such a community . . . can be undertaken by human beings only through *religion*” (*Rel.*, 6:151).

Given the above, and given the surfeit of further evidence that could be drawn out of the *Religion*’s additional discussions of the ethical community, it should be apparent that there are no scholarly grounds to presume that Kant’s use of ‘community’ was at all intended as a signal of a secular shift. Hence, however often we find in the literature uses of Kant’s ‘ethical community’ as if it were essentially secular, it should be by this point apparent that such accounts deviate from Kant’s own. Yet, despite the overwhelming textual evidence that Kant saw *ECh* as necessarily religious, it may, of course, still be argued that he erred in this claim—and so perhaps the aforementioned religious features of *ECh* are inessential to (or even at odds with) its moral aims.

### 7.2. *Why Kant Regards the Ethical Community as Religious*

Two particularly noteworthy rejoinders to Kant’s religious treatment of the ethical community have been raised by Allen Wood.<sup>60</sup> First, he worries that if religious assent were taken as a necessary condition for membership in *ECh*, then the exclusion of non-believers would compromise *ECh*’s ability to bring *all* of humanity into a corporate unity. For, if one of the “requisites for a true church” (*Rel.*, 6:101) is that it avoids all “sectarian schisms” (*Rel.*, 6:101), perhaps this applies just as well to the divide between theists and non-theists.<sup>61</sup> Second, Wood proposes that the connections between religion and *ECh*, as drawn by Kant, are due more to historical circumstance, particularly how the Enlightenment developed in Germany.<sup>62</sup> Hence, while the evidence is clear that Kant in no way introduced the term ‘ethical community’ in order to telegraph a secular shift, perhaps *we* citizens of the twenty-first century can (and perhaps even should) put all that religious business behind us.

In opposition to both the revisionist readings of Kant and the more philosophically driven objections, there are a handful of papers that defend *ECh*’s religiosity. One such paper is Stephen Palmquist’s “Kant’s Religious Argument for the Existence of God.”<sup>63</sup> In this paper, Palmquist proposes that there is an implicit

<sup>60</sup>Wood, “Struggle against Evil.”

<sup>61</sup>One preliminary response to Wood’s first rejoinder is that membership in the *ECh* will inevitably be subject to various restrictions. While all of humanity ought to become members, and in theory, every human being is a potential member, hardly would an agent bent on fettering or destroying the Union be accepted as a full-fledged member. An agent who, for example, seeks to propagate lies about other members so as to activate the triggers of mutual moral corruption lacks the moral orientation that is fitting with the aims of the Union. Membership requires an alignment with the “essential purpose” of the Union, and just as a morally corrupt agent is at odds with that purpose, perhaps atheists and agnostics too (though for reasons other than failings of their moral character), may not be able to align themselves with *ECh*’s “essential purpose.” As will now be discussed, this, I suspect, is Kant’s view.

<sup>62</sup>Wood, “Struggle against Evil,” 508–10.

<sup>63</sup>See also Frierson’s “Providence and Divine Mercy,” and Stroud’s “Vital Role.”



argument for God's existence present in the opening of part three of the *Religion*—an argument distinct from Kant's standard moral argument which postulates God for the sake of *PPD*. We may thus find in Palmquist the basis for a rebuttal to Wood: rather than just assuming that *ECh* must be religious, Kant provides us with an argument that this must be so. Accordingly, insofar as his argument has merit, we have philosophical grounds for *ECh*'s religiosity, grounds that presumably hold just as well for us as for citizens of the eighteenth century. Let us thus begin to consider why Kant holds that *ECh* must be religious, beginning with Palmquist's reconstruction of the argument found at *Rel.*, 6:97–98:<sup>64</sup>

1. The human species has a unique collective duty to itself, to promote the highest good among all human beings.<sup>65</sup>
2. This new duty must establish a purely ethical community by systematically uniting the self-legislation of *each* person who pursues (however imperfectly) the ideal of his or her own moral perfection.<sup>66</sup>
3. This new duty is unique: we do not know how it would be possible for individual humans on their own to work toward fulfilling it, though we do know the species as a whole *ought* to (and therefore *can*) fulfill it.<sup>67</sup>
4. Therefore (in view of our ignorance), reason needs to presuppose the idea of a higher moral being who can complete the work human individuals cannot reasonably hope to accomplish on their own in fulfilling this unique duty of the human species to itself.<sup>68</sup>

Overall, this is an apt reconstruction of Kant's argument, and though a few comparatively minor adjustments may be in order,<sup>69</sup> let us focus on two significant ambiguities, one in 3, one in 4. Palmquist writes that “we do not know *how* it would be possible for humanity to work towards fulfilling our corporate duty” (my emphasis). This is ambiguous between not knowing the mechanisms involved versus not knowing *if* this work is possible for us at all. What Kant writes is that “we cannot know whether as a whole it [*ECh*] is also in our power” (*Rel.*, 6:98). Hence, while *how* it is possible is also an issue, the actual argument offered by Kant trades on the sheer possibility of our ability to form a “universal republic based on the laws of virtue” (*Rel.*, 6:98). This is salient because if we could know *that* *ECh* is possible for us, but merely could not know *how* it is possible for us, the postulation

<sup>64</sup>The following is taken from “Kant's Religious Argument,” 14–15.

<sup>65</sup>From: “Now, here we have a duty *sui generis* not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race toward itself” (*Rel.*, 6:97).

<sup>66</sup>From: “this highest moral good will not be brought about solely through the striving of one individual person for his own moral perfection but requires a union of such persons into a whole toward that very end” (*Rel.*, 6:97).

<sup>67</sup>From: “we cannot know whether as a whole it is also in our power: so the duty in question differs from all others in kind and in principle” (*Rel.*, 6:98).

<sup>68</sup>From: “We can already anticipate that this duty will need the presupposition of another idea, namely, of a higher moral being through whose universal organization the forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own, are united for common effect” (*Rel.*, 6:98).

<sup>69</sup>I would refine 1 in line with my distinction between *HGi* and *HGd*; I would also describe the function of the ethical community in 2 more generally. Lastly, in 4, I would not describe divine aid in terms of “completing the work” we cannot do on our own. Instead, divine aid may very well come mostly in terms of initial aid that makes it then possible for us to do the rest. That, as I will discuss below, seems more in line with Kant's illustrations of divine aid.

of God (for the sake of *ECh*) is no longer warranted. Instead, the argument moves from our ignorance as to whether *ECh* is in our power, to an affirmation, albeit an ambiguous affirmation, of the need for divine aid.

This second ambiguity is found both in 4 above as well as in the original text. Palmquist writes, “reason needs to presuppose the idea of a higher moral being.” While this accurately captures the text, the ambiguity here is between the postulation of actual divine aid within the workings of *ECh*, versus our needs as agents to affirm that there is such aid. Put differently, the ambiguity is between whether as a matter of the conditions for the possibility of *ECh* that divine aid is needed, versus whether humanity can only come together in *ECh* insofar as there is a shared belief in divine aid. If merely the former, then Wood’s case for agnosticism would hold: even if it is the case that God aids us, it might be the case that agents could deny or be agnostic about such aid without compromising their potential commitment to the moral aims of *ECh*. While human irrationality leaves ample room for inconsistent belief and motivational sets, let me propose that the conclusion of Kant’s argument should be understood in terms of a doxic need, a need whose roots are to be found in part 1 of the *Religion*: namely, the depths of our moral corruption.

In part 1 of the *Religion*, Kant develops the pure rational corollary to the Christian doctrine of original sin and claims as a result that, while a change of heart is possible, how “it is possible that a naturally evil human being should make himself into a good human being surpasses every concept of ours” (*Rel.*, 6:44–45). Likewise, within part 3’s discussion of the ethical community, Kant writes, “how could one expect to construct something completely straight from such crooked wood?” (*Rel.*, 6:100). So, while ‘ought implies can’ mandates that both our individual moral improvement as well as our pursuit of *HGd* must be possible, we are in a difficult situation if we believe that we *may be* so corrupt, so entangled within our own egos and thus so threatened by the interests of others, that we cannot come together to form the Union needed to corporately promote *HGd*. Agents who see humanity in such lights may then be so pessimistic about the ‘can’ here that they dismiss the ‘ought’ as something that, as a result, cannot apply to us. Yet, the alternative that Kant proposes here is not to make a case for our potential, but rather to allay this worry with an appeal to divine aid. Agents, thus, who fear the impossibility of this Union are to hope in the possibility that, *if needed*, the ‘can’ here, at least in part, is underwritten through divine aid.

Notice, however, that (as Palmquist indicates) this argument is distinct from Kant’s standard moral argument in a number of ways. First, the moral argument, as presented in each of the three *Critiques*, is concerned not with the above role of God in securing our united forces in promotion of *HGd*, but rather a different role, namely that of the agent who has charge over *PPD*. Second, the standard moral argument, as it is presented through all three *Critiques*, proposes that *PPD* is *only* possible through God (and a “future life”), whereas the argument here turns to God because of our lack of confidence in our own ability.<sup>70</sup> It is not that we

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<sup>70</sup>Palmquist also points out that religious assent here is encouraged not just for the individual’s moral needs, but “for the sake of our species.” See “Kant’s Religious Argument,” 16; see also his

know we cannot promote HGd without some divine aid, but rather that this is an unknown.<sup>71</sup> As a consequence, the conclusion needs to be more tentative: if ECh is beyond our powers, God must exist to provide us with the aid we require. Or, when expressed in terms of doxic states: if we have intractable doubts regarding whether or not ECh is within our powers, our capacity to establish and further the aims of ECh depends upon our acceptance that God will aid us if and when necessary.<sup>72</sup>

The theology of ECh is thus built upon the model of human evil that we find in part 1 of the *Religion*. As in the above discussion, we see likewise in part 1 that Kant does not flatly deny our capacity to undergo a change of heart without divine aid, but rather claims that if aid is needed, it will be provided.<sup>73</sup> Accordingly, there is nothing inconsistent between Kant's postulation of divine aid for the sake of ECh and his claim that we each must conduct ourselves as if everything depended upon ourselves alone. We do not know where our potential ends, and thus we should never sell ourselves short. If help is needed, though, God will provide.

### 7.3. What sort of Divine Aid is Compatible with HGd?

With the above sketch of how religious assent is relevant to ECh, let us briefly consider one final question salient to ECh's theology: what sort of divine aid is compatible with Kant's claim that our moral improvement must remain essentially in our own hands? For, whatever may be offered by God, "a good human being

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*Comprehensive Commentary*, 264. Unfortunately, the intricacies of Kant's understanding of religious assent cannot here be explored in detail. Interested readers may consult Chignell's work on religious hope in Kant. See, for example, his "Rational Hope." In addition to Chignell's work on the topic, see also my discussion in ch. 1 of *Religion: Interpretation Defense*. My earlier "Scope of Kantian Belief" provides a more general account of Kantian faith/belief (*Glaube*), but for a discussion more specific to religious assent and the ethical community, see sects. 5 and 6 of my "Kant on Faith."

<sup>71</sup>In all three *Critiques*, we find Kant claiming not merely that we cannot know how or if HGd can be realized without God, but more firmly claiming that HGd cannot be realized without God (and a future life). See page 437–38, where I quote the salient passages.

<sup>72</sup>Although similar to the "Motivational Supplement" interpretation of the argument for the Highest Good in the third *Critique*, that argument draws from Kant's standard claim that PPD "is not congruent with the concept of the physical possibility of producing it" (*CJ* 5:450, my emphasis). Nevertheless, both propose that a positive doxic attitude towards God is necessary for an agent's commitment to HGd—either more abstractly, or in its explicit form described through Kant's exposition of ECh. Is Kant correct or is Wood right that agnostics (and perhaps atheists) are just as capable? I suspect that the issue turns primarily on whether or not an agent (consciously) believes that humanity is innately evil. If this is accepted, then an agent should have grave doubts about whether or not it is in our power to establish a Union for all humanity that is not adulterated by our propensity to evil.

<sup>73</sup>One key passage that has been used to attribute to Kant a commitment to the necessity of divine aid appears at *Rel.*, 6:44. In German, it reads, "Gesetzt, zum Gut-oder Besserwerden sei noch eine übernatürliche Mitwirkung nöthig." George di Giovanni has translated it as "[g]ranted that some supernatural cooperation is also needed in becoming good or better." This, however, is a mistake. The German does not use the indicative *ist* but rather the subjunctive (Konjunktiv I) *sei*. By translating *Gesetzt* as 'granted,' it appears that Kant has just accepted the need for divine aid. However, he is not "granting" this need, but is rather introducing for consideration the supposition that there may be such a need (for this is precisely the question at issue in part 1's "parergon"). Pluhar thus more aptly translates the passage in accordance with the German's subjunctive mood: "Supposing that, for him to become good or better, a supernatural cooperation were also needed" (*Rel.*, 6:44). The sentence then continues by stating that even if there were such cooperation, "the human being must nonetheless make himself antecedently worthy of receiving it" (*Rel.*, 6:44). DiCenso also recognizes the difficulties with how this passage has been rendered in English, raising similar concerns with the di Giovanni translation.

cannot be judged *morally* good except on the basis of what can be imputed to him as done by him” (*Rel.*, 6:51). Hence, despite the fact that there are a few interpreters who seek to Christianize Kant by attributing to him a conception of grace whereby God steps into our wills and transforms us from the “old man” who gives priority to self-interest to the “new man” who prioritizes morality, Kant does not seem comfortable with such Augustinianism. Not only is the commitment to our capacity to act from duty a cornerstone of Kantian ethics, but also once we transition from our moral potential with regards to any particular action to our capacity to undergo a change of heart, Kant does not want to give up the possibility that this too is within our own powers. In contrast to the Augustinian model of human corruption that dominates Christian Soteriology, a model that holds that our moral capacity is itself so corrupted that we lose our freedom and become “a slave to sin,” Kant is careful to strike a different balance.<sup>74</sup>

As we will discuss below, there is a place for divine aid in Kant’s Soteriology, but it is not one that substitutes for “our own work” a “foreign influence to which we must remain passive” (*Rel.*, 6:118). This point is made all the more bluntly in the *Conflict of the Faculties*, where after discussing the views of those who regard our inner change as something brought about by divine aid, Kant rebuts, “[y]et they are greatly mistaken in this, since on their view the effect of this power would not be our deed and could not be imputed to us” (*CF* 7:59).<sup>75</sup>

So what, then, can divine aid be like for Kant? According to Palmquist, Kant proposes that *ECh* functions as a “partnership” between humanity in God, a shared effort through which God organizes “the forces of single individuals . . . for a common effect” (*Rel.*, 6:98). While Palmquist is correct that Kant appeals to God as (potentially) helping to organize individuals into a Union devoted to *HGd*, the metaphor of ‘partnership’ suggests too strong of a role for God, as there is here

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<sup>74</sup>A handful of interpreters have promoted an Augustinian reading of Kant on original sin, but Kant is quite clear that original sin is not to be understood in its Augustinian form. There is no corruption of “the morally legislative reason” (*Rel.*, 6:35), nor does the “human being (even the worst) . . . repudiate the moral law” (*Rel.*, 6:36). The “germ of goodness” is thus “left in its entire purity” (*Rel.*, 6:45) even though it has been subordinated to self-love. Our inner corruption does not involve the demise of those features of our agency whose powers could be so mustered as to restore the proper order of incentives: “the human being, who despite a corrupted heart yet always possess a good will” (*Rel.*, 6:44). Hardly could Kant accept a model of original sin that removes our freedom, removes our capacity to act *from duty*, and removes from us the power to overcome inclination.

Original sin, for Kant, is not based on a lack or privation on our part, but rather—as he makes quite clear—an “active and opposing cause” (*Rel.*, 6:57). This is a generally overlooked but important point of contrast, one that came as a result of Kant’s careful deliberations on the problem of evil in his 1791 “Theodicy.” We thus see in his Soteriology no restoration of corrupted faculties, but rather something more akin to an awakening through which we recognize this “opposing cause,” and come to address it both as individuals and through *HGd*. For a more complete discussion of Kant on original sin, see chs. 3 and 4 of *Religion: Interpretation Defense*, my “Kant on the Debt of Sin,” and my forthcoming “Hume’s Principle.” Augustinian readings of Kant can be found in Mariña’s “Kant on Grace” as well as Firestone and Jacobs’s *IDKR*.

<sup>75</sup>In Firestone and Jacobs’s *IDKR*, the authors propose a supernaturalist Christology which attributes to Kant’s ethics the view that “only the descent of the prototype can restore the possibility of genuine moral freedom,” (166). Passages which oppose this rendering of Kant’s Christology, however, abound. In addition to the above, see for example *Rel.*, 6:62–66; *Rel.*, 6:119; *CF* 7:43; and *CF* 7:55–59. See also my “Kant on the Debt of Sin,” where I deal with the so-called “conundrum” literature which finds in Kant’s Soteriology a supposed contradiction. As I argue, much of this literature is predicated on a misreading of the “Third Difficulty” in part 2 of the *Religion*.

a danger of undercutting the imputability of moral achievement if God did some of the *moral* work for us.<sup>76</sup> Let us thus pursue an alternative model, one offered by Kant himself—one that presents the divine-human relationship as rather a family (e.g. *Rel.*, 6:102).

It is not at all uncommon for parents to aid their children by arranging the material conditions they then depend on for their success. Consider, for example, the college education of a young adult who receives financial support from his parents, but is still solely responsible for his own learning. The financial assistance does not replace the time or concentration required to master his course materials. The financial assistance does not diminish his intellectual accomplishments: the knowledge gained, the talents cultivated, and the intellectual virtues strengthened. It, rather, more narrowly offers just the means for the child to exercise and develop his own intellectual abilities. Hence, while it might not have been possible for the child to complete his education without parental support, such support does not subtract from the intellectual achievements that are then awarded with a degree.

If we look to Kant's own examples of divine aid, the above analogy seems to fit quite well. When considering what role God may play in *ECh*, we find Kant suggesting such options as the possibility that the founding of a new religion may have been "accompanied" or "adorned by miracles" (*Rel.*, 6:84); that a revelation of some principle that would eventually be derived from reason alone may nevertheless have been "at a given time and a given place . . . wise and very advantageous to the human race" (*Rel.*, 6:155); that some ecclesiastical principle of organization may have been given to us through "a special divine dispensation" (*Rel.*, 6:105); and lastly, that the Gospels portray for us a moral exemplar (*Rel.*, 6:60–62; *Rel.*, 6:128–29), a point hardly to be lost on those familiar with Kant's many discussions of the importance of examples in moral education.

Although Kant repeatedly cautions us that we can never establish on theoretical grounds whether or not an alleged miracle or revelation is authentic, if God were to offer us His aid, the above provides us with a model of how God could aid us without compromising the merit gained from our moral efforts. Just as parents offer guidance, serve as examples, give us some of the resources we need to move forward in our goals, and even protect us from some obstacles (*Rel.*, 6:44), so Kant portrays divine aid (if needed) in such forms. Assuming that our commitment to *HGd* depends upon our acceptance that such aid, if necessary, will be given, we can thus understand why Kant finds value in the rituals and doctrines that reflect a sacred history of God's presence in human history. Insofar as his argument at *Rel.*, 6:98 is most fundamentally about the need to cultivate a *shared* belief—or at least *shared* hope—in divine aid, the religious elements of *ECh* do more than just address our psycho-social dynamics, but also offer for us a shared worldview that

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<sup>76</sup>As Palmquist presents the relation, God completes the work we cannot. See both his "Kant's Religious Argument" and *Comprehensive Commentary*, 268. We will see below that Kant's own illustrations of divine aid with regards to our collective moral progress tend to take the form of providing resources for us to use in furthering this effort, rather than some sort of foreign supplement that moves our wills in a way we cannot. Kant is quite forthright in his opposition to the latter in the *Conflict of the Faculties*. See in particular, *CF* 7:59.

helps to offset the pessimism or even despair that would otherwise be borne from a belief that we are fundamentally corrupt beings.<sup>77</sup>

The secularizing movement should take note of this final point, for we may understand the schism between the secular and religious readings of Kant (or secular and religious worldviews more generally) as ultimately rooted in different views regarding our human moral potential. That is, philosophers who hold humanity in higher esteem may be more attracted to the secular interpretation, whereas those who accept the portrayal of moral corruption found in part 1 of the *Religion* will more likely regard the secularization of the Highest Good as philosophically untenable. Hence, the disagreement between the theological and secular conceptions of the Highest Good may very well not, at bottom, be about the role of God.

Once we put aside the literature that falsely claims that Kant himself expounded a secular model of the doctrine, the proper philosophical dispute is rather about *us*. Kantians who seek to Christianize Kant by reading his account of moral corruption through an Augustinian lens believe that we, both as individuals and as a species, are incapable of the sort of moral improvement he prescribes—absent a transformative act of grace.<sup>78</sup> Kantians who seek to secularize Kant tend instead to believe that we, both as individuals and as a species, are, without any divine aid, capable of the sort of moral improvement he prescribes. However, the position I have attributed to Kant stands between the two. While God is required to realize *PPD*, we do not and cannot know the limits of our moral potential as individuals or as a species, and, given that ignorance, we have an intractable need to cultivate a religious worldview.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, I have sought to defend the theological version of Kant's doctrine of the Highest Good. This defense began with a series of correctives to its

<sup>77</sup>This point also helps to more fully explain why Kant maintains that *ECh* must take the form of a church. The need for belief here is not merely a matter of what an individual must believe for the sake of his own moral efforts, but rather how a shared belief or hope contributes to the psycho-dynamics of the Union. In this way, we may then further understand Kant's endorsements of religious rituals in part 4, since the doxic states at issue are not just a matter of propositional assent, but a way of looking at the world that is meant to inspire. A family around a Seder table, a congregation taking communion, the Muslim Hajj: each reflects and reinforces a worldview shared, and thus a common ground through which the corporate commitment to *HGd* can take form. Let me also note that, while in part 3 Kant hopes for a time when pure rational faith is "freed of all empirical grounds of determination," (*Rel.*, 6:121), this hope (a) pertains to a time of final "victory over evil" (*Rel.*, 6:124), and (b) this end-time hope does not point to a dismissal of religion, but rather the shared acceptance of pure rationalism without the need for the 'arbitrary precepts' of historical faith. For further discussion of the topic, see Frierson, "Providence and Divine Mercy"; Stroud "Vital Role"; Insole, "Kant on Christianity"; and ch. 5 of *Religion: Interpretation Defense*.

<sup>78</sup>As discussed in n. 74 above, Kant deviates from the Augustinian model of original sin on a number of counts, and as a result, neither needs nor even allows for a "foreign influence" that intercedes on our behalf within our own wills (*Rel.*, 6:118; *Rel.*, 6:191; *CF* 7:42–43). In contrast to the sort of Augustinianism that shapes Hare's reading of Kant, in *The Moral Gap*, as well as in contrast to Mariña's "Kant on Grace," and Firestone and Jacobs's *DKR*, see my *Religion: Interpretation Defense*, "Kant on the Debt of Sin," and "Kant's 'Appraisal' of Christianity." In my forthcoming "Hume's Principle," I discuss in further detail the extent to which part 1 of the *Religion* serves as a critique of the Augustinian conception of moral depravity and grace.

interpretative legacy, exposing in particular the original interpretative errors that drove subsequent scholarship to the view that Kant's doctrine must be "reworked so as to make it consistent with his moral philosophy." Hence, rather than having to overcome alleged problems with the theological version, this paper has sought to defend this version of the doctrine by bringing to light the core interpretative errors that have led scholarship to where it now stands—including the widespread belief that Kant himself came to recognize the error of his ways and by the late 1780s or early 1790s began to migrate away from his earlier theological version to a philosophically superior secular alternative. As we have seen, the textual evidence supporting this transition cannot be sustained in the face of due scholarship.

Of course, Kantians unsympathetic with the positive elements of his philosophy of religion may still on independent grounds prefer a secular reconstruction of the Highest Good, but, as I have shown, this reconstruction is not one that is required in order to overcome a putatively flawed doctrine. Hence, rather than a supposed migration from an earlier theological conception of the Highest Good to one that is more secular, this paper has shown that Kant not only continued to maintain his original theological vision of the doctrine, but developed it all the more fully in the *Religion*.

With its claim that the original conditions that led us to an evil *Gesinnung* remain even when that *Gesinnung* becomes good, Kant finally gave us a way to understand the unique content of our duty to promote the Highest Good. With the *Religion's* introduction of our propensity to evil and its expression through our social natures, Kant is thereby able to explain how the moral advance of the species demands that we reshape how we relate to one another. This requires the formation of an ethical community as the vehicle through which we as a species pursue our "*sui generis*, not of human beings towards human beings, but of the human race toward itself" (*Rel.*, 6:97).

In this we find the distinct content for our duty to promote the Highest Good; a duty not towards the proportionate distribution of happiness in accordance with moral worth, but a duty to make humanity worthy of the happiness that is then offered by God and in a future life. Such is the essence of the so-called theological conception of the Highest Good, a conception that instead of being abandoned or marginalized as the critical period advanced, remained not only Kant's sole model for the doctrine, but one that he, over time, all the more richly developed.

Philosophers uncomfortable with such religiosity in Kant are certainly free to oppose his views and offer an alternative secular model of the Highest Good. But the interpretative errors explored in this paper have lingered with us for far too long. As this paper has demonstrated, Kant never migrates away from a theological conception of the Highest Good. There is no secular alternative anywhere advanced in the corpus. Kant does not endanger 'ought implies can' by involving us in *PPD*. With these central misreadings of Kant's doctrine of the Highest Good now defeated, it is my hope that this paper will serve as a new beginning for scholarship on the topic, one that can leave behind the past six decades of confusion.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup>This paper has benefitted from some excellent input from many Kantians. Some of its core ideas are to be found in *Religion: Interpretation Defense*, and the overall framework for the paper arose

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through a symposium on the book at the 2014 Highest Good Workshop, hosted by Emory University's Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry. Later that year, I developed an initial (and much shorter) draft of this paper, which was presented at the Pacific Meeting of the North American Kant Society. Then, in 2015, a somewhat longer version was presented at the University of Alberta and Concordia University (Alberta), my visit generously funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. I would like to thank the organizers and participants at each of these events for their helpful input. In addition, I would like to thank Ralf Bader, Pablo Muchnik, Robert Gressis, Alan McLuckie, Courtney Fugate, and Stephen Palmquist for their helpful suggestions and encouragement. I am indebted to Stephen Palmquist in particular for comments that led me to my treatment of HGd in sect. 7, including a much expanded discussion of the theological elements of ECh.



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