

Why Kant's Hope Took a Historical Turn in Practical Philosophy

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Abstract. In the beginning of his critical period, Kant treated the perfect attainment of the highest good—the unconditioned totality of ends which would uphold the perfect proportionality between moral virtue and happiness—as both the ground of hope for deserved happiness and the final end of our moral life. But I argue that Kant moved in the direction of de-emphasizing the latter aspect of the highest good, not because it is inappropriate or impossible for us to promote this ideal, but because the endless pursuit of it offers no prospect of moral satisfaction. I take this change as one possible reason for him to shift his focus toward social and political progress in history because its main subject is the human species, which is immortal in some sense.

Keywords: highest good; history; hope; human species; immortality; Kant; moral argument; moral satisfaction; moral psychology

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I propose the hypothesis that Kant's hope took a historical turn late in his career—that, in his practical philosophy, the focus of his hope shifts from an otherworldly religious object to this-worldly social and political progress. This may give the impression that I am trying to build on Andrews Reath's influential view that there are two distinct conceptions of the highest good in Kant—what Reath calls the theological and the secular (or political) conceptions—because Reath contends that the theological version tends to be favored in Kant's earlier writings while later writings gravitate toward the secular one (Reath 1988).² Even though I argue that Kant moved in the direction of de-emphasizing the concept of the highest good as theologically construed, this is not based on substantial agreement with Reath, as I dispute his claim that these two allegedly distinct conceptions cannot be reconciled. Thus, while I do not see his objections to the theological conception of the highest good as prompting any notable shift in Kant, I highlight another consideration leading him to downplay our otherworldly pursuit of the highest good late in his career. This change stems from his growing worry that, if we are preoccupied with our perfect attainment [*Erreichung*] of the highest good in the afterlife, our life would be devoid of moral satisfaction [*Zufriedenheit*].

In §2, I discuss the relation between the concept of the highest good and Kant's answer to the question of “What may I hope,” explaining how the highest good is better understood as the ground of hope rather than its main object. I also discuss the change in his moral argument between the first *Critique* version and the later ones. In §3, I address Reath's objections to the theological conception of the highest good, with a focus on his worry about what he calls “a principle of moral desert” (Reath 1988, p. 612). I show that the principle of moral desert remains a staple in Kant's practical philosophy, which implies that social and political progress in history can be understood as continuous with our eschatological promotion of the highest good. In §4, I examine the contrast between Kant's second *Critique* view of our moral life as infinite promotion of the highest good and his apparent move away from the postulate of immortality later, and I make sense of this shift by noting his worry about the prospect of moral satisfaction given the second *Critique* commitment to immortality. In §5, I show that Kant's later writings seem to indicate his move away from the moral argument, which would be understandable given the considerations brought up in §4. In §6, I finish by

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² Reath's view harkens back to Yirmiah Yovel's argument that “from the third *Critique* on, “Kant's conception [of the highest good] changes” (Yovel 1980, p. 72).

explaining how the shift discussed in §§4–5 represents the turn away from our focus on the eschatological promotion of the highest good in practical philosophy, even though it does not signal Kant's abandonment of the eschatological hope for full actualization of this ideal. And I explain why this shift does not affect his commitment to continuous social and political progress toward perpetual peace in history. This is what I mean by the historical turn of Kant's hope.

2. Kant's Answer to the Third Question

As is well-known, in the first *Critique*, Kant presents the following three questions as capturing all interest of his reason:

1. **What can I know?**
2. **What should I do?**
3. **What may I hope?** (CPR, A805/B833)

It is in Kant's discussion of the third question that the ideal of the highest good and the moral argument based on this ideal are introduced. So the ideal of the highest good has much to do with his account of hope. But exactly how does this ideal figure into his account?

In the first *Critique*, Kant writes that "happiness in exact proportion with the morality of rational beings, through which they are worthy of it, alone constitutes the highest good of a world," because it represents the "systematic unity of ends" that harmoniously combines both kinds of good in our life, morality and happiness (CPR, A814/B842). But the present sensible world does not ensure such proportionality between morality and happiness, so the world of the highest good—what Kant calls an intelligible or moral world—is "a world that is future for us" (CPR, A811/B839). And for this ideal to be *fully attained*, the existence of someone who can serve as "the ground of the practically necessary connection of both elements of" the highest good also needs to be presupposed (CPR, A810/B838). So the ideal of the highest good leads to the two postulates of the afterlife and God—someone with the attributes such as omniscience and omnipotence to assess everyone's level of moral virtue and to ensure appropriate dispensation of happiness eventually—as the necessary conditions of its attainment, and this is how this ideal gives rise to Kant's moral argument for the existence of God.

This state of perfect proportionality between morality and happiness for all finite rational beings achieved beyond history is what Reath calls the theological conception of the highest good, whereas the highest good becomes "a social goal to be achieved in history" in the secular conception, which implies that only "the individuals of a particular historical era would experience the Highest Good" (Reath 1988, p. 603). While Reath consistently associates the theological conception with the proportionality between happiness and morality, he notes that this is not the defining characteristic he has in mind. This is because the secular conception can also be construed along these lines by treating the historical era of the highest good as the one in which social institutions effectively allocate happiness in proportion to morality, although he objects to such a construal of our social goal in Kant. Rather, it is the participation of *all* finite rational beings who have ever existed in the highest good that truly sets apart the theological conception from the secular one, in which only individuals of advanced historical eras get to enjoy the fruits of the highest good. The ideal Kant lays down in the first *Critique*, given the emphasis on its taking place in the future world, is what Reath dubs the theological conception.

Because Kant's presentation of the moral argument gets going by raising the third question of hope in the first *Critique*, some readers have identified the highest good as the main object of hope in Kant (e.g. Mariña 2000, p. 332). But I think, strictly speaking, the highest good in itself should not be treated as the main answer to this question. This is because Kant explains that, by the third question of "What may I hope," what he means is the question of "If I do what I should, what may I then hope" (CPR, A805/B833). Given his basic premise that "all **hope** concerns happiness" (CPR, A805/B833), the hope entertained by those who have become worthy of happiness has to do with the enjoyment of happiness commensurate with their levels of morality. In short, the main object of hope is *happiness that has become deserved* through moral virtue. This is why Kant, in one place, describes the highest good as the state of affairs in which "everyone has cause to hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his conduct" (CPR, A809/B837). So the main object of hope is not so much the highest good as deserved happiness, but, in Kant's scheme, this hope will come to fruition only because the highest good, as the system of apportioning happiness with everyone's moral virtue, will be in place in the future. So the highest good, as the ground of our hope for deserved happiness, is not thinkable apart from the proportionality between happiness and morality.

Toward the end of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant adds a fragment of a moral catechism that he thinks should be valuable for the pupil beginning in moral education. In this dialogue between the teacher and the pupil, Kant introduces a distinction between "a sure hope" and "a wish" to claim that a necessary presupposition of the divine moral ruler, who "apportions happiness in accordance with a human being's merit or guilt" (MM,

6:482), is required to turn our wish for deserved happiness into a sure hope. If we go along with this distinction between a hope and a wish,³ we can also say that the assumption of the highest good in the future serves as the ground of hope for deserved happiness because it is a necessary part of our moral life.

But why is this assumption of the highest good practically necessary? In the first *Critique*, Kant suggests that, without its full realization in the future, the moral law cannot help but lack *authority* for us. Thus, he claims that, without God and the afterlife, “the majestic ideas of morality are [...] objects of approbation and admiration but not incentives for resolve and realization” (CPR, A813/B841). Along the same lines, he states that moral laws cannot function as commands unless they are backed up by “**promises and threats**” (CPR, A811/B839).⁴ But his view is that the moral law actually produces categorical commands, so we can confidently assume that the highest good will be in place in the future because this is what provides morality with the requisite promises and threats; the necessity of this assumption is derived from the actual authority of the moral law for us. Kant’s strategy here betrays the relevance of the highest good to his second question of “What should I do,” as this ideal is what provides the moral law with the authority of ‘should.’ So the assumption of the highest good is first established in our answer to the second question, and this is how it can serve as the ground of hope when dealing with the third question.

However, by the time of finishing *Groundwork*, Kant no longer subscribed to the view that the moral law depends on impending promises and threats for its authority and incentive. Instead, he started regarding the moral law as authoritative on its own, and it came to be conceptualized as capable of functioning as an incentive for us just by inspiring our respect for it.⁵ But then why does the highest good still have to be maintained as necessary? In the second *Critique*, Kant starts emphasizing the status of the highest good as the *necessary object or end* of morality—what we are dutifully bound to promote and produce through moral strivings. As noted above, the highest good, as the systematic unity of ends, already had this status in the first *Critique*, where it is also described as “the whole end that is natural for every rational being and determined *a priori* and necessarily” (CPR, A813/B841). But when trying to establish the necessity of the highest good in the first *Critique*, Kant stresses its function as the source of moral authority and incentive. While the Kant of *Groundwork* and the second *Critique* would not endorse this strategy, he nevertheless thinks that morality must have an object because every will has to be directed at something. So the highest good is what a morally determined will, as opposed to a will determined by natural inclinations, aims at; it is “the necessary highest end of a morally determined will and is a true object of that will” (CPrR, 5:115).⁶

What underlies this understanding of the highest good is Kant’s position that “every volition must [...] have an object and hence a matter” (CPrR, 5:34). What is also at work is his view that “[t]wo determinations *necessarily* combined in one concept must be connected as ground and consequent” (CPrR, 5:111), as the highest good represents the combination of happiness and morality, the two kinds of the good we set as our objects of volition. When configuring this systematic unity of ends, Kant thinks that it is morality that must serve as the ground because “a will whose maxim always conforms with [the moral] law is *good absolutely*, [...] the *supreme condition of all good*” (CPrR, 5:62). In contrast, happiness is “not [...] good absolutely but only with reference to our sensibility, with respect to its feeling of pleasure and displeasure” (CPrR, 5:62), so it occupies the role of consequent in the concept of the highest good. But it still must be included as part of this concept specifying the final end of our moral life; otherwise, our moral life fails to have as its object “the whole, the complete good” (CPrR, 5:111).⁷

Thus, between the first *Critique* and the second *Critique*, Kant’s explanation of why the highest good is a necessary assumption in our moral life changes, but the fact that he regards it as necessary remains the same. If so, his approach to the third question in the first *Critique* that appeals to this ground of hope can stay intact as well. And his 1793 letter to Carl Friedrich Stäudlin supports my interpretation that Kant’s approach did stay intact. In this letter, which was sent to Stäudlin along with a copy of *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant introduces this work as his attempt to complete his answer to the third question of hope (C, 11:429). Some readers of Kant have found this remark puzzling because they do not see hope as a major topic of *Religion* (e.g. Palmquist 1993, p. 310). But this work deals with the question of *how* humans can achieve moral virtue, and this is relevant to our hope for happiness. Again, moral virtue is not the main *object* of hope, but it is still part of the explanation of how we can partake in deserved happiness given the necessary

³ Here I follow the analysis of Kant’s account of hope in Blöser 2019, pp. 57–63.

⁴ See also the following passage in the first *Critique*: “Since there are practical laws that are absolutely necessary (the moral laws), then if these necessarily presuppose any existence as the condition of the possibility of their **binding** force, this existence has to be **postulated**, because the conditioned [...] is itself cognized *a priori* as absolutely necessary” (CPR, A633–634/B661–662). Here the existence being postulated refers to that of God as the ground of the necessary connection between morality and happiness in the highest good.

⁵ This shift from the first *Critique* version to the second *Critique* version of the moral argument is covered in more detail in Chignell 2022, pp. 62–66.

⁶ John Silber stresses that this need to determine an object of volition is “a human need” that stems not from the demand of the moral law by itself but that of the human situation of having to practice morality as a rational-sensible being (Silber 1963, pp. 192–193). To make this case, he refers us to the following line in Kant’s ‘Theory/Practice’ essay: “this concept of duty does not have to be grounded on any particular end but rather *introduces* another end for the human being’s will, namely to work to the best of one’s ability toward the *highest good* possible in the world” (TP, 8:279).

⁷ In the first *Critique*, Kant also stresses that either happiness or morality alone fails to constitute “the complete good” (CPR, A813/B841).

assumption of the highest good. Even if we presuppose that the highest good will obtain in the future, if it turns out that everyone is bound to the fate of moral corruption, there will be no room for hope for prolonged happiness. This is why Kant's account of how we can escape moral corruption in *Religion* completes his answer to the third question. So, in Part One, Kant discusses how we can overcome the radical propensity to evil every human allegedly starts with,⁸ while Part Two deals with the question of how the divine judge who examines our moral conduct can find certain humans well-pleasing.

In Part Three of *Religion*, Kant moves on to argue for the necessity of an ethical community. Reath sees this part as advancing the secular conception of the highest good instead of the theological one; according to him, this part “is one of the clearest references to the Highest Good in which it takes an institutional, or political form” (Reath 1988, p. 606), even though Kant distinguishes the ethical community from juridico-civil states operating in the world (R, 6:94–100).⁹ But Kant explains the significance of this ethical community partly in terms of preventing individuals who have overcome radical evil from *relapsing* into evil. Because he thinks that we are left too vulnerable to the attack of the evil principle in the ethical state of nature, we must take part in establishing an ethical community to prevent our relapse, which would involve the corresponding loss of happiness in the future. Thus, an ethical community has its rightful place within Kant's first *Critique* approach to the third question based on presupposing the future proportionality between morality and happiness, so I suspect that he had no intention of advancing a different conception of the highest good that is at odds with the earlier one here.¹⁰

If the secular conception is all there is to the ideal of the highest good, this implies that many morally virtuous individuals who have become worthy of happiness but are stuck in wrong eras would never get to enjoy this happiness, but this is not Kant's attitude when addressing the third question. Thus, while the secular conception may be a serviceable option if we treat the highest good solely as the final end of morality, it cannot adequately function *as the ground of hope for deserved happiness*. For the ideal of the highest good to perform this double duty, it has to be theological rather than merely secular or political if we go along with Kant's claim that the present world fails to exhibit the necessary connection between morality and happiness.

3. Continuity between This-Worldly Progress and the Highest Good

According to Reath, both the theological and the secular conceptions of the highest good incorporate the two components of morality and happiness. As I just explained in §2, in the former conception, they are to be harmoniously combined by way of proportionality, with morality as the ground and happiness as the consequent. But Reath finds this proportionality to be a problematic aspect that does not fit well with the rest of Kant's practical philosophy, and this is why Reath prefers the secular version as the better expression of the essence of the highest good. He takes issue with this proportionality for at least three reasons. First, according to him, this proportionality “seems to lead to heteronomy” (Reath 1988, p. 594). Second, he claims that this proportionality “is an ordering that we do not see elsewhere in Kant's view” (Reath 1988, p. 606). Third, “the theological version leaves only a limited role to human agency,” which is in tension with Kant's description of the highest good as an end we ought to promote and produce (Reath 1988, p. 610).

Thus, Reath wants to read Kant as progressively moving away from the theological conception to the secular one in his later works such as the third *Critique* and *Religion*; the latter allegedly subordinates happiness to morality by insisting on “the satisfaction of [only] individuals' morally permissible ends” rather than any ends that would enhance happiness (Reath 1988, p. 604).¹¹ But even Reath cannot help but admit that the theological conception of the highest good based on the proportionality between moral virtue and happiness lingers. In *Religion*, for instance, the highest good is still presented as the unity between duty and “happiness proportioned to its observance” (R, 6:5).

Given such an explicit mention of the proportionality between our two ends, it is difficult to think of Kant as moving toward a conception that does not involve this aspect. This is also because there is no strong textual evidence that the three worries Reath raises about the theological conception have prompted Kant to move away from it. First, concerning the heteronomy worry that it would be “difficult to avoid seeing [the proportionality] as a system of rewards and punishments that would inevitably” corrupt the moral incentive (Reath 1988, p. 610), I think Kant would respond that having this system as the object of morality does not

⁸ In contrast to his earlier writings in practical philosophy where he tends to present moral virtue as something within our control, in *Religion* Kant leaves open the possibility that supernatural assistance may be needed for us to fulfill the duty of overcoming radical evil (R, 6:44–52). Regarding this assistance, Kant claims that, if a human has done all he could for self-improvement, he can “hope that what does not lie in his power will be made good by cooperation from above” (R, 6:52). So even when it comes to achieving moral virtue, there is room for hope, although I would argue that this hope is not Kant's main answer to the third question.

⁹ For a similar position, see also Moran 2012, pp. 76–80.

¹⁰ This suspicion is reinforced by the fact that the preface to the first edition of *Religion* opens with a recapitulation of the moral argument based on his understanding of the highest good as the unity between duty and “happiness proportioned to its observance” (R, 6:5).

¹¹ It is customary to trace Reath's treatment of the highest good in Kant to John Rawls' critique of it, which is laid out in Rawls 2000, pp. 313–17.

mean that our maxims are *determined* by it (Reath 1988, p. 610). In §2, I introduced Kant's view that every volition must have an object and hence a matter. But right after stating this view in the second *Critique*, he goes on to clarify that "the matter is not, just because of this, the determining ground and condition of the maxim" (CPrR, 5:34). So he tries to preserve the possibility that our maxims can be determined by their lawful form even when they are directed to the highest good as their object.¹²

For Reath, the second worry about whether the proportionality between moral virtue and happiness has its rightful place in Kant's philosophy is more serious. Reath thinks that this proportionality follows from what he calls "a principle of moral desert," but he then points out that Kant does not explain how "the Moral Law generates such a principle" (Reath 1988, pp. 611–612). However, Kant frequently refers to morality as the worthiness to be happy,¹³ and, once this view of morality is in place, the principle of moral desert naturally seems to follow.¹⁴ This view of morality as worthiness to be happy is maintained through *Opus postumum*, where he describes the moral duty as showing "the transgressor his own reprehensibility (unworthiness of being happy)" (OP, 21:13). More tellingly, he conceptualizes God as a personal "substance which judges according to [moral] laws (by exonerating or condemning men), declares men worthy or unworthy of happiness, and makes them partake of it in consequence" (OP, 21:125). So this conception of God as the judge who wills the perfect proportionality between happiness and moral virtue is a staple throughout Kant's critical period.¹⁵ Of course, we can wonder whether the principle of moral desert fits with the rest of his practical philosophy, but there seems to be no indication that the worry about this fit has driven him to a conception of the highest good that does not rely on this principle.

What lies behind the third worry about whether we can plausibly regard the promotion of the highest good as *our* duty when it is construed in terms of the proportionality between moral virtue and happiness is the unmistakable empirical observation that we do not wield sufficient control over the distribution of happiness involved in the perfect attainment of this proportionality; only God defined as omnipotent and omniscient can ensure such a state of affairs. What also comes into play is Kant's opacity thesis that we cannot ascertain exactly which maxims are undergirding our observable actions, not to mention others' maxims. This inscrutability of our hearts, a long-standing tenet of Kant,¹⁶ calls for the presupposition of God "who scrutinizes the heart" to fully instantiate the highest good (R, 6:67). But if we cannot tell whether anyone is being truly moral at any given moment in the sense of having the right kind of maxim, how can we go about achieving the proportionality between morality and happiness? This third worry is vividly captured by Lewis Beck when he declares that the highest good "is the task of a moral governor of the universe, not of a laborer in the vineyard" (Beck 1960, p. 245). In response to this worry, Lawrence Pasternack tries to make sense of the highest good as our duty by interpreting Kant as proposing a division of labor between God and humans; its component of morality is within our control, while only God can bring about the other component of perfectly apportioned happiness (Pasternack 2017, pp. 448–450). But, if this strict division of labor were what he had in mind, Beck would find it "seriously misleading to say that there is a command to seek the highest good which is different from the command to fulfil the requirements of duty" (Beck 1960, p. 245). And Reath follows these footsteps as he claims that the theological version of the highest good "leaves only a limited role to human agency" because, while "[i]ndividuals do contribute to the Highest Good in this scenario by developing their own moral perfection[,] the happiness in the Highest Good would not exist through our efforts" (Reath 1988, p. 609).

Many readers of Kant, including Pasternack, think that humans should not harbor any intention of making the world approximate toward the perfect proportionality between moral virtue and happiness, as they are keen on emphasizing our inability to inspect the maxims.¹⁷ If so, I find myself sympathizing with Beck's impression that there is something misleading about describing the highest good as our duty even if it may not be technically wrong. But morality already involves caring about others' happiness in a certain way, so it seems difficult to maintain a strict division between the project of morality and that of apportioning

¹² Lewis White Beck expresses his doubt about whether Kant successfully shows that an object of morality can avoid necessarily determining the will in Beck 1960, pp. 242–44. But, regardless of how we assess this position of Kant now, there seems to be no indication that he subsequently grew worried about it to the point of changing his conception of the highest good.

¹³ For instance, see CPR, A806/B834; CPrR, 5:110; CJ, 5:450; R, 6:8n.

¹⁴ Even Reath cannot help but admit that talk of morality as worthiness to be happy "suggest[s] a proportionality description of the Highest Good" (Reath 1988, p. 604n).

¹⁵ See also Proc, 8:418–419. Lawrence Pasternack also treats many of the passages I bring up in this paragraph as the ground of his objection to Reath's argument (Pasternack 2017, pp. 443–445). See also Brown 2020, pp. 198–199.

¹⁶ E.g. G, 4:407; CPrR, 5:47; MM, 6:392–393. Anastasia Berg challenges this common interpretation of Kant by distinguishing between self-opacity and our ignorance of others' maxims to claim that, concerning the former, we can have some epistemic access although we are vulnerable to self-deception (Berg 2020, pp. 569–71). But this ignorance of others' maxims is here sufficient to raise the question of how we can promote the proportionality between moral virtue and happiness of everyone.

¹⁷ See also Taylor 2010, pp. 13–18 and Brown 2020, pp. 199, 211. But there are other readers like John Silber, who is comfortable claiming that everyone "is obligated [...] to strive for the realization of happiness in proportion to virtue in the lives of all men"; he brings up the case of a criminal who turns himself in as a concrete example of how this realization can be approximated (Silber 1963, p. 195). Allen Wood, even while strongly emphasizing the inscrutability of our maxims in Kant, also allows that "we can [...] act in certain ways that tend to make happiness proportionate to worthiness" (Wood 2020, p. 38). For an even more daring case for our promotion of proportionality, see Villarán 2013, pp. 32–38.

happiness to everyone all the way through. In *Tugendlehre* (the Doctrine of Virtue), the second half of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues for an end that is also a duty as a viable concept, and he goes on to note that such ends are “one’s own perfection and the happiness of others” (MM, 6:385). He then lays out various duties of virtue, all concerned with these two classes of ends. So fulfilling duties pertaining to the happiness of others is an inevitable part of our moral life, and we are naturally led to ask whose happiness we should prioritize and which of their happiness-related-ends we should focus on. But when figuring out our answers to these questions, it is difficult not to have something like the principle of desert in mind to guide our decision-making.

The highest good is the state of perfect proportionality between moral virtue and happiness, but it also represents the systematic unity of ends. If so, what Reath identifies as the secular conception of the highest good—the project of satisfying individuals’ morally permissible ends—should count as the way available to us right now to promote the highest good, while God can be conceptualized as the being who ensures the culmination of this project in such a way as to bring out the perfect proportionality.¹⁸ And the end of perpetual peace, the most important ideal in Kant’s political philosophy, is an end we should be especially focused on in this project, as progress in this regard provides the context in which individuals can freely cultivate moral virtues and pursue their happiness, the two components that make up the highest good.¹⁹

Thus, even if we do not consciously try to improve the level of proportionality between moral virtue and happiness, I think we can plausibly consider ourselves as promoting the highest good when we attend to the ends of our own perfection and happiness of others, especially if we have the principle of desert in mind in our promotion of these ends. On top of this, I am inclined to think that we can make *some* positive impact on this proportionality through our this-worldly project of political progress as Kant understood it, because it is to be guided by something like the principle of moral desert. In his *Rechtslehre* (the Doctrine of Right), the first half of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, he stresses *distributive justice* as the condition of bringing humanity out of a state of nature; according to him, a “condition that is not rightful, that is, a condition in which there is no distributive justice, is called a state of nature” (MM, 6:306). The shift in human history from the nomadic lifestyle to the settled one calls for “the law which is to determine for each what land is mine or yours”; this must proceed “only from a will in the civil condition (*lex iustitiae distributivae*), which alone determines what is *right*, what is *rightful*, and what is *laid down as right*” (MM, 6:267). This is why distributive justice is presented as what should dictate “the decision of a court in a particular case” of dispute (MM, 6:306). So the establishment of distributive justice in society, as the condition of possibility for “*public right*” (MM, 6:306), represents a giant step forward in human history.

Implementation of the principle of moral desert in society can also take place by way of a system of handing out appropriate punishments. In *Rechtslehre*, Kant claims that punishment should not be primarily for the sake of some ulterior motive such as educating the wrongdoer or protecting the society from further harm; instead, punishment “must always be inflicted upon him only *because he has committed a crime*,” as resorting to a consequentialist justification of punishment would amount to treating the perpetrator “merely as a means” (MM, 6:331). Right after making this point, Kant declares: “if justice goes, there is no longer any value in human being’s living on the earth” (MM, 6:332). Then he proceeds to claim that appropriateness of punishment should be determined by “the principle of equality” (MM, 6:332), which leads him to state bluntly that if someone “has committed murder he must *die* [because] there is no substitute that will satisfy justice” (MM, 6:333). Here, again, it is difficult to avoid the impression that this view of punishment and justice goes hand in hand with what Reath calls the principle of moral desert.²⁰

And this political project based on the principle of moral desert actually bears a great deal of similarity with the promotion of the highest good in our cooperation with God. In *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, Kant is reported to have said that his moral argument leads to the conception of God as someone who possesses “the moral perfections of *holiness, benevolence and justice*” (LR, 28:1073). This is because the state of the highest good is to be brought about by having divine benevolence, which aims to spread happiness, limited by justice according to the standard set by holiness. So divine justice consists of “this *limitation of benevolence by holiness* in apportioning happiness” (LR, 28:1074), and this is why God aims to effect the perfect proportionality between moral virtue and happiness eventually. And Kant reportedly went on to state his preference for construing divine justice as giving rise to “an *actus of iustitiae distributivae*” rather than vindictive punishment, although he acknowledged his comfort with the expression “*poenae vindicativae*” for this (LR, 28:1086). So the highest good, which is generally depicted as God’s way of rewarding the virtuous, can also be understood as God’s punishment of the morally corrupt

¹⁸ Regarding the highest good, Kant insists that we have “the duty to bring it about as far as we can *that* such a relation (a world in keeping with the moral highest ends) exists” in the ‘Theory/Practice’ essay (TP, 8:280). See also R, 6:101.

¹⁹ Étienne Brown advances an account of how the political quest for perpetual peace supports our pursuit of moral virtue and happiness (Brown 2020, pp. 207–210). Partly based on this account, he also objects to Reath’s division between the theological and the secular conceptions of the highest good to claim that Kant’s concept is best characterized as theologico-political. I take myself to be offering a similar kind of interpretation.

²⁰ Eoin O’Connell also connects criminal punishment to the need for proportionality between moral virtue and happiness (O’Connell 2012, pp. 272–274).

by withholding happiness from them, and Kant sees this as an expression of divine distributive justice based on the principle of moral desert.²¹

If we recognize the similarity of this-worldly political progress to our willing of the highest good in that both are guided by this principle of moral desert, it is no longer necessary to hold onto Reath's sharp divide between the secular and the theological conceptions of the highest good. Instead, we can think of the latter as continuous with the former. In the present world, our society as a whole seems to have a duty to establish a court with a greater level of distributive justice that equitably determines who gets what and dispenses appropriate punishments to criminals, regardless of whether we hold onto the principle of equality championed by Kant. However, no matter how closely we can monitor everyone's external actions, there is an obvious limit on actualizing the ideal of distributive justice at present, because humans cannot scrutinize the heart to inspect the maxims underlying these actions. So the court of a state can and should focus on external actions which can be regulated by juridical laws, but even here, we cannot realistically expect humans to practice distributive justice perfectly. But I think it is still plausible to regard our efforts to increase the level of distributive justice practiced by the court as a way of approximating the ideal of the highest good. And if the highest good is to be fully attained in the afterlife, we can think of the institutional progress we have made in the present world as preserved in this eschatological attainment.

4. Kant's New Eschatology?

Thus, *contra* Reath and many others, I see no clear divide in Kant between the secular and the theological conceptions of the highest good. He seems to think that defining the object of our morally determined will as the highest good does not necessarily lead down the path of heteronomy because this object does not necessarily determine our volition. And he persists in treating the perfect proportionality between moral virtue and happiness as a desirable state of affairs whose eventual actualization is ensured by God. Finally, I think it is plausible to consider ourselves as capable of making some contribution to promoting the highest good by fulfilling various ends and improving the practice of distributive justice in society. So I do not interpret these three worries about the theological version of the highest good as prompting Kant's move away from this version.

However, I do think there is a change in Kant's view, although I suspect that it is not for the reasons discussed so far. More specifically, I see the focus of his practical philosophy shift from the eschatological attainment of the highest good to the social and political progress in history. So the shift I suggest actually resembles the one proposed by Reath, although I understand this shift as becoming crystallized after *Religion*, while he thinks Kant's transition is mainly exhibited in the third *Critique* and *Religion*. And I do not claim that the shift in Kant after *Religion* involves abandoning the principle of moral desert. Then what does this shift consist of, and what is his reason for it?

While there can be several reasons for this shift, in the rest of this paper, I zero in on one possible reason that indicates a substantive revision in his account of our moral vocation. For this, we need to revisit Kant's moral argument in the second *Critique*, which I discussed briefly in §2. In this version, he stresses the status of the highest good as the final end of morality which we ought to promote and produce. Simply put, it is our duty to will the highest good wholeheartedly, as such a will can be understood as solely determined by the moral law. For us to hold onto this statement of duty, the object of our willing must be treated as at least possible; if not, "it would be practically impossible to strive for the object of a concept that would be, at bottom, empty and without an object" (CPrR, 5:143). So the highest good cannot come out as a state of affairs that is self-contradictory or impossible, and Kant thinks that postulating divine existence and the afterlife is the only way to make sense of this possibility. However, maintaining the highest good as a possible state of affairs is not sufficient for us to hold onto our duty to will the highest good. Per Kant's famous ought-implies-can principle, it also must be possible for us to *will* the highest good, which means that it must be possible for our will to be determined solely by the moral law. So complete conformity with the moral law "must therefore be just as possible as its object is" (CPrR, 5:122).

But Kant also holds that no human, as a *sensibly affected* rational being, "is capable at any moment of his existence" of such complete conformity with the moral law (CPrR, 5:122), even though this is what the moral law demands. So he suggests that "only in an endless progress can we attain complete conformity with the moral law," but this requires "the *existence* and personality of the same rational being continuing *endlessly*," that is, "the immortality of the soul" (CPrR, 5:122). But how can we be said to *attain* this complete conformity—what can be called holiness or moral perfection—given the assumption that we are not capable of reaching it at any point in time? Kant answers that "[t]he *eternal being*, to whom the temporal condition is nothing, sees in what is to us an endless series the whole of conformity with the moral law" (CPrR, 5:123). This is how we can

²¹ Kant's point in the 'Theodicy' essay that "the disproportion between crimes and penalties in the world" we observe calls into question God's "*justice*, as *judge*" also supports this interpretation (MT, 8:257).

appear well-pleasing to the divine judge who is ultimately responsible for distributing happiness. Thus, in the second *Critique*, Kant strongly emphasizes that the afterlife needed for full instantiation of the highest good has to take the form of *immortality* or endless progress, while it is no accident that, in the first *Critique* where he is not so focused on viewing the highest good as the end of our moral strivings, he does not draw out the inference of immortality from the moral argument, even though he consistently lists it as one of the three final objects of the speculative use of reason.²²

So while divine existence is concerned with the possibility of the highest good as a state of affairs, the immortality of the soul is presupposed in the second *Critique* to preserve our capacity to will the highest good wholeheartedly. However, Kant does not always seem ready to offer the same kind of robust affirmation of the postulate of immortality in his later writings even though he never wavers from his commitment to the afterlife. In the third *Critique*, immortality is mentioned a few times as an object of faith based on the moral argument, but the explicit argument for it is not reiterated (CJ, 5:469–474). In *Religion*, Kant seems to reaffirm his commitment to immortality and the underlying second *Critique* account of divine judgment when he claims that, “because of the *disposition* [which has become good],²³ we can think of the infinite progression of the good toward conformity to the law as being judged by him who scrutinizes the heart [...] to be a perfected whole even with respect to the deed (the life conduct)” (R, 6:67). The impression we get here is that our moral life involves the infinite pursuit of individual moral perfection and the highest good of the world. But what Kant writes immediately afterward calls this reading into question: “And so notwithstanding his permanent deficiency, a human being can still expect to be *generally* well-pleasing to God, at whatever point in time his existence be cut short” (R, 6:67). So immortality no longer seems *required*; after humans have succeeded at overturning the radical propensity to evil to possess the good disposition, this disposition seems sufficient to ensure that we would fare well in divine judgment, even if the goodness of the disposition is not maximally strong.²⁴

A more clear-cut shift away from the immortality of the soul as a practical postulate appears in the essay “The End of All Things,” published a year after *Religion*. Here, instead of the eschatological model of “a time proceeding to infinity,” Kant advances the alternative view of “an *end of all time*”—time coming to a halt, so to speak (EAT, 8:327). And when time goes, *alterations* also go, “for if there were still alteration in the world, then time would also exist” (EAT, 8:333). Now, this end of all time does not involve the complete annihilation of individuals; rather, it just marks “the beginning of a duration of just those same beings as *supersensible*, and consequently as not standing under conditions of time” (EAT, 8:327). And those who have come to prioritize our moral or intelligible existence over the sensible one can be “represented [...] as striking up always the same song, their ‘Alleluia!’ [...] by which is indicated the total lack of all change in their state” (EAT, 8:335).²⁵

Why does Kant move from the earlier eschatological view of endless progress toward perfection to the new one based on time coming to a stop in “The End of All Things”? In this essay, he states that “reason in its (practical) intent toward its final end can never have done enough on the path of constant alterations” (EAT, 8:334). This stands in sharp contrast with his second *Critique* emphasis on infinite progress as our way to meet the moral demand for holiness. And if this shift has to do with doubts about whether endless progress can be sufficient in terms of meeting the final end of morality, the following worry about the earlier eschatological view naturally follows:

Even assuming a person’s moral-physical state here in life at its best — namely as a constant progression and approach to the highest good (marked out for him as a goal) —, he still (even with a consciousness of the unalterability of his disposition) cannot combine it with the prospect of *satisfaction* in an eternally enduring alteration of his state (the moral as well as the physical). For the state in which he now is will always remain an ill compared with a better one which he always stands ready to enter; and the representation of an infinite progression toward the final end is nevertheless at the same time a prospect on an infinite series of ills which, even though they may be outweighed by a greater good, do not allow for the possibility of contentment; for he can think that only by supposing that the *final end* will at sometime be *attained* (EAT, 8:335).

Kant now suggests that endless progress without ever truly attaining the final end would rule out the possibility of true satisfaction in our moral life, which inclines the practical use of reason to adopt an alternative eschatological view to prevent this dispiriting result.²⁶

²² For instance, see CPR B7, B395n, A798/B826.

²³ In *Religion*, Kant claims that everyone who starts with the propensity to evil must go “through a *revolution* in the disposition” to acquire a good fundamental ground where other subsequent good maxims can take root (R, 6:47).

²⁴ Kant makes it clear that his concept of ‘disposition’ accommodates different degrees of strength in *Religion* (R, 6:71). This is in line with his frequent talk of the strength of virtue in *Tugendlehre*.

²⁵ Christopher Insole argues that Kant’s conception of the highest good in terms of proportionality is a significant departure from the traditional Christian one, “the enjoyment of, and participation in, God” (Insole 2016, p. 18). But this passage in “The End of All Things” suggests the possibility that deserved happiness the morally virtuous receive in the world of the highest good involves such enjoyment of divine presence. See also CPrR, 5:123n and OP, 21:21–23. Jacqueline Mariña also stresses that the happiness we receive in the future instantiation of the highest good takes the form of bliss or beatitude (Mariña 2000, pp. 333–341).

²⁶ The significance of the shift represented in this passage is discussed in Mariña 2000, pp. 337–41. See also Zuckert 2018, pp. 203–204, 207–209.

Perhaps what lies behind this deliberation is Kant's view stated in the third *Critique* that "[t]he attainment of every aim is combined with the feeling of pleasure" (CJ, 5:187); so lack of attainment would naturally lead to displeasure or dissatisfaction. Now, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure is usually concerned with happiness that comes from satisfying our inclinations, but, in *Groundwork* and elsewhere, he admits that fulfillment of duty can also lead to "a feeling of pleasure or of delight"; in fact, he would go so far as to claim that, "[i]n order for a sensibly affected rational being to will" what the moral law demands, capacity for this feeling is "required" (G, 4:460). So maintaining a healthy dose of moral pleasure or satisfaction is crucial for us to persevere in the project of morality, especially when it is opposed by our project of prudence—skillfully obtaining happiness by satisfying our sensibly affected inclinations—in the present world. But, in "The End of All Things," it now dawns on Kant that construing our moral life as endless progress toward the ultimately unreachable goal of holiness threatens to wipe out the prospect of moral satisfaction, which is disastrous from the practical standpoint. Hence a shift to a new paradigm of eschatology.

This shift does not imply that the highest good, as a state of perfect proportionality between moral virtue and happiness, is no longer to be achieved eschatologically. This is because, in "The End of All Things," Kant designates the last day before the stoppage of time as "a judgment day" when "the settling of accounts for human beings, based on their conduct in their whole lifetime" (EAT, 8:328), will take place. So the highest good will get actualized, presumably through divine judgment, and I see no reason to think of Kant as wavering in his commitment to the principle of moral desert here. But what has changed is that the perfect attainment of the highest good is no longer presented as an end *we endlessly strive to achieve*; instead, the divine agency seems to bring about this state of affairs instantly. Of course, it can still be the case that we are duty-bound to will the highest good as our goal, but Kant did not stop there in his earlier writings; rather, he used to treat its perfect attainment as what we eschatologically promote and produce. But, given the new eschatological picture in "The End of All Things," this perfect attainment can no longer be presented as the object of *our* moral vocation.

This shift calls into question Kant's second *Critique* version of the moral argument, which is based on the account of our moral vocation being replaced in "The End of All Things." If all we ought to accomplish in our moral life is to make some progress toward the highest good, this does not yet call for the existence of the divine who also wills this state of affairs, especially if, as I argued in §3, we can plausibly regard ourselves as capable of this progress on our own.²⁷ So what calls for postulating the existence of such a divine being is the *necessity of presupposing our perfect attainment* of the highest good in the future, which Kant deems unthinkable apart from some kind of cooperation with God.²⁸ In the second *Critique*, he argues for the necessity of this presupposition by appealing to the status of the highest good as our moral aim, but the later Kant seems worried that treating the highest good in this way turns out to have more downside than upside in terms of moral psychology. Thus, full actualization of the highest good as our achievement no longer seems to be presupposed, even though Kant continues treating the highest good as a state of affairs that will be perfectly instantiated in the future.²⁹

5. Kant's New Attitude toward the Moral Argument

Did the direction explored in "The End of All Things" take hold as part of Kant's philosophy? Admittedly, this would not be the impression we get when looking at his essay "Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy," published two years after "The End of All Things." In the former, he lists God and immortality, along with freedom, as the "Super-sensible Objects of Our Knowledge" (Proc, 8:418). The first postulate is required for the fulfillment of "the ultimate purpose of the most perfect will (the highest blessedness in accordance with morality)" because God is "the being who is alone able to carry out this proportionate distribution" (Proc, 8:418–419). And Kant states that immortality is "the state in which this consummation can alone be assigned to rational creatures" (Proc, 8:419), which seems to indicate that he is reverting to his second *Critique* position.

However, *Tugendlehre*, published a year after the 'Proclamation' essay, tells a different story because the concept of the highest good and the moral argument based on it are conspicuously missing in this work. I think there are at least three places where their absence is surprising because Kant's appeal to them should be expected given our moral vocation as laid out in the second *Critique*. First, I noted in §3 that Kant lists one's own perfection and others' happiness as the two classes of ends that are also duties in *Tugendlehre*. He then lays out various duties of virtue, all concerned with these two classes of ends. But the expression 'the highest good' is nowhere to be found in this text, which is striking if we consider that it is, as I pointed out in §2, the concept touted as the representative case of an end that is also a duty—the unconditioned totality of all such

²⁷ By appealing to the inscrutability of our maxims, Robert Taylor provides an opposing case for thinking that, without perfect attainment in the future, the highest good cannot serve as our moral goal (Taylor 2010, pp. 13–18).

²⁸ This is why those who defend Kant's moral argument tend to emphasize our cooperation with the divine to achieve the highest good (e.g. Pasternack 2017, pp. 448–455; Wood 2020, pp. 48–49).

²⁹ I also discuss the significance of "The End of All Things" as a departure from the second *Critique* in Woo 2023, pp. 11–14.

ends. While what Kant offers in *Tugendlehre* cannot constitute definitive proof of his rejection of the concept of the highest good, the fact that he chooses not to name the highest good explicitly as the totality of all ends that are also duties is a surprising decision given the importance previously accorded to this concept.

Second, in *Tugendlehre*, Kant seems more comfortable describing our moral life as *approximating* toward ends that are also duties rather than fully attaining them. For instance, he describes the highest stage of virtue available to humans as an ideal “to which one must continually approximate” (MM, 6:383). In another place, he admits that “[v]irtue is always *in progress*” in the sense that “it is an ideal and unattainable, while yet constant approximation to it is a duty” (MM, 6:409). The most telling passage comes from his discussion of “a human being’s duty to himself to increase his **moral** perfection,” concerning which he writes in the following way: “It is a human being’s duty to *strive* for this perfection, but not to *reach* it (in this life), and his compliance with this duty can, accordingly, consist only in continual progress”; this means that, “*with regard to the subject,*” it gets classified as “only a wide and imperfect duty to himself” (MM, 6:446). Again, Kant’s position here is not in contradiction with his earlier view of our moral life based on the postulate of immortality, but the fact that this eschatological component is not emphasized in this text is noteworthy when compared to the second *Critique*. Kant justifies his position in *Tugendlehre* that moral perfection is only an imperfect duty by reiterating his view that “[t]he depths of the human heart are unfathomable” (MM, 6:447).³⁰ However, even though this opacity thesis was already his tenet in the second *Critique*, this did not stop him from emphasizing our duty for moral perfection as something we ought to *attain* in some sense, because he was willing to think of our moral life as proceeding infinitely. So I take this contrast to be another possible indication of the lasting impact of Kant’s realization in “The End of All Things.”

Third, I want to point out that, toward the end of *Tugendlehre*, Kant advances an argument about God that is different from the moral argument. Here he starts by presenting his definition of religion as “the sum of all duties *as (instar)* divine commands” to point out that the need for this religion is “only subjectively logical” (MM, 6:487). The following is his explanation: “we cannot very well make obligation (moral constraint) intuitive for ourselves without thereby thinking of *another’s* will, namely God’s” (MM, 6:487).³¹ But he contends that this consideration provides us with “the *idea* of God which reason makes for itself,” without leading us to treat God “as a being existing outside our idea, since we still abstract from his existence” (MM, 6:487). So he now seems reluctant to admit the assumption of divine existence as “part of a *purely philosophic morals* (MM, 6:488),” which implies that his purely philosophical discussion of duties of virtues does not include any duty *to God* as an existing intelligence.

Even in the second *Critique*, he describes religion as having to do with recognizing our duties as divine commands; so this definition on its own does not indicate any change. However, in the earlier work, his view is that “the moral law leads through the concept of the highest good, as the object and final end of pure practical reason, *to religion*” as this recognition of divine commands (CPrR, 5:129). But, in *Tugendlehre*, he seems to try to arrive at this definition of religion without relying on the concept of the highest good. And, as a result, he does not take himself to be justified in treating God as an existing being, which is in stark contrast to the second *Critique*, where he explicitly claims that the moral law “must postulate the *existence of God* as belonging necessarily to the possibility of the highest good” (CPrR, 5:124). For someone who subscribes to the moral argument as a way to derive the postulate of divine existence, language in *Tugendlehre* is puzzling, so it should lead to the question of whether Kant remains committed to the moral argument. This suspicion is heightened when we also consider that, in *Opus postumum*, the moral argument is not present, while he repeatedly emphasizes that our duties should be treated as divine commands; here God is predominantly conceptualized as the commander rather than the ground of the necessary connection between happiness and morality.³² And Kant’s reluctance to affirm divine existence is another unmistakable feature of this work, as he seriously considers the possibility of whether God is “a mere thought-object” (OP, 22:117). This would mean that our treatment of moral duties as commands from God does not have to carry the wish “to certify the existence of such a being”; rather, it would suffice “to think all human duties *as if* [they were] divine commands in relation to a person” (OP, 22:120).

These passages prompt me to wonder whether Kant moved in the direction of at least de-emphasizing the concept of the highest good and the moral argument late in his career. At this point, some may be inclined to point out that the moral argument is actually present in *Tugendlehre*, more specifically in the moral catechism I mentioned in §2. In this dialogue between the teacher and the pupil, the teacher reiterates Kant’s long-standing view that “a human being’s [...] worthiness to be happy is identical with his observance of duty,” and he helps the pupil see that we cannot base on this worthiness alone “a sure hope of sharing in happiness”; the pupil realizes that “some other power” has to be “added” for this (MM, 6:482). So does this not reveal Kant’s continuing commitment to the moral argument?

³⁰ This is Kant’s way of explaining why the duty for moral perfection has to be considered wide and imperfect *with respect to the subject*, even though he claims that “this duty is indeed narrow and perfect *with regard to its object* (the idea that one should make it one’s end to realize)” (MM, 6:446).

³¹ This point is based on Kant’s observation earlier in *Tugendlehre* that “*conscience* is peculiar in that, although its business is a business of a human being with himself, one constrained by his reason sees himself constrained to carry it on as the bidding of *another person*” (MM, 6:438).

³² This shift away from the moral argument is also pointed out in Kahn 2015, pp. 327–332; 2018, pp. 70–81.

But the part that follows makes me question this. When the teacher asks whether reason has “any grounds of its own for assuming the existence of such power,” the pupil responds by appealing to the design argument for divine existence, noting that “we see in the works of nature, which we can judge, a wisdom so widespread and profound”; thus, “with regard to the moral order, [...] we have reason to expect a no less wise regime” (MM, 6:482), concludes the pupil. There is no mention of the highest good as the source of moral authority or the final end of moral strivings, which is how the necessity of presupposing its full actualization in the future is justified in the moral argument. So this catechism cannot be interpreted as reaffirming Kant’s commitment to the moral argument,³³ and what actually does the work of justifying the presupposition of divine existence is the design argument.³⁴ What this catechism does suggest is that he continues to think of the perfect actualization of the highest good as relevant to his third question of hope. This perfect actualization remains part of his eschatology, but it is no longer stressed that this is to be achieved through our endless moral strivings in cooperation with the divine, which is an understandable move if he had taken the worry about moral satisfaction in “The End of All Things” seriously.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to show that Kant’s later works exhibit a trend toward de-emphasizing our eschatological production of the highest good, and this trend goes hand in hand with his move away from the moral argument. And I clarified that this does not have to do with worries about heteronomy or the principle of moral desert, as I argued that these potential worries did not bother Kant. But the worry that actually prompted the shift in his eschatology is concerned with our prospect for moral satisfaction when our moral vocation is understood as the endless pursuit of the highest good. As stressed repeatedly, this shift does not imply that Kant no longer hopes for the full actualization of the highest good in the future. It just means that divine agency in achieving this state is much more emphasized in his later works, so what gets dropped is its status as the final end of our practice of morality. This is not because we are incapable of promoting the highest good, but it has to do with the fact that it is unrealistic for us to persevere in this project endlessly without the moral satisfaction of attaining this end.

Even if we no longer treat the full actualization of the highest good as the final end of our moral life, it does not affect its status as the ground of hope for the happiness of which we have become worthy. But, in practical philosophy geared toward Kant’s second question of “What should I do,” the importance of the highest good then naturally fades away. At the same time, many later works of his practical philosophy focus on social and political progress in history, which should be understood principally as the project of the human species as a whole rather than individuals. This is clear even from his earlier essay “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” where he claims that human developments happen through “*their antagonism in society, insofar as the latter is in the end the cause of their lawful order*” (IUH, 8:20). Kant’s famous expression “the *unsociable sociability*” refers to the coexistence of our “propensity to enter into society” with this antagonism “that constantly threatens to break up this society,” and it is this unsociable sociability that “awakens all the powers of the human being,” leading us to take “the first true steps from crudity toward culture” (IUH, 8:20–21).³⁵ Thus, even though many individuals undeniably suffer from all the conflicts and wars rooted in this part of human nature, he dares to claim that “the sources of unsociability and thoroughgoing resistance, from which so many ills arise [...] betray the ordering of a wise creator” because they ensure the progress of the human species as a whole (IUH, 8:21–22).³⁶

One possible reason for the shift of focus in his practical philosophy from the otherworldly goal of the highest good to something historical may have to do with the fact that it seems much more *moral-psychologically viable* to try to contribute as much as possible to the progress of the human species in one’s earthly lifespan than to remain endlessly committed to the project of producing the highest good ourselves. In the ‘Universal History’ essay, Kant notes that the human species should be considered “immortal” even if its members “all die,” and this is the consideration that explains why “the older generations appear to carry on their toilsome concerns only for the sake of the later ones, namely so as to prepare the steps on which the latter may bring up higher the edifice which was nature’s aim [...], without being able to partake of the good fortune which

³³ A similar analysis of this *Tugendlehre* passage is found in Kahn 2015, pp. 327–329.

³⁴ This is a surprising move given the fact that Kant consistently presents his moral argument as a superior alternative to the design argument because the former provides what the latter cannot—namely, the determinate concept of God as the one who possesses traditional attributes of perfection (e.g. CPR, A814–819/B842–847; CJ, 5:436–73).

³⁵ See also the following comment Kant makes in *Toward Perpetual Peace*: “What affords [the guarantee of perpetual peace] is nothing less than the great artist *nature* [...] from whose mechanical course purposiveness shines forth visibly, letting concord arise by means of the discord between human beings even against their will” (PP, 8:360).

³⁶ This individual suffering for the sake of the progress of the human species is even more explicitly recognized in Kant’s ‘Conjectural Beginning’ essay where he notes that “the transition from the crudity of a merely animal creature into humanity [...], which for the species is a *progress* from worse toward better, is not the same for the individual” (CB; 8:115).

they prepared” (IUH, 8:20). If the attainment of or at least uninterrupted approximation toward some goal of perfection is to result from humans’ exercise of freedom, perpetual peace and justice in some future age of history would be more appropriate than perfect attainment of the highest good. Not because the former is more practicable than the latter; rather, they are both ideals we cannot fully attain on our own. But the difference is that the immortal human species may be able to remain engaged in a ceaseless practical project that offers no prospect of ultimate satisfaction while mere individuals cannot.³⁷

The contrast between the human species and the individual in terms of immortality in the ‘Universal History’ essay is striking given Kant’s strong case for individual immortality in the second *Critique* published four years later. In the latter work, he tried out an experiment of seeing the individual as leading an immortal life of endless moral progress, but I take him to have abandoned this experiment some time in the 1790s. But this does not imply that he also stopped treating the human species as possessing the kind of immortality affirmed earlier. So there is a sense in which the human species transcends the limits of the individual, which is a fundamental premise of the ‘Universal History’ essay where the following is stated as the second proposition: “*In the human being [...], those predispositions whose goal is the use of his reason were to develop completely only in the species, but not in the individual*” (IUH, 8:18). One of the limits distinguishing the individual from the species has to do with the moral-psychological capacity to remain invested in an ultimately impracticable practical project. This limit makes the immortality of the individual inappropriate from the practical point of view, but the immortality of the human species who transcends this limit can get a different verdict. So, Kant speaks approvingly of the hope that “*the history of the human species*” will work out in such a way that “*it can fully develop all its predispositions in humanity*” (IUH, 8:27). And in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, published fourteen years after the ‘Universal History’ essay, he argues for assuming that “nature wants every creature to reach its destiny through the appropriate development of all predispositions of its nature, so that at least the species, if not every *individual*, fulfills nature’s purpose”; in fact, he goes so far as to claim that “with human beings only the species reaches it” (A, 7:329). This stands in contrast to the picture of the individual life presented in this late work, where Kant claims that “methodical, progressive occupations that lead to an important and intended end [...] is the only sure means of becoming happy with one’s life and, at the same time, weary of life” so that “the conclusion of such a life occurs with *contentment*.” (A, 7:234). Perhaps such an individual gets to enjoy the eternal rest of singing ‘Alleluia!’ to the divine judge afterward while the human species marches on endlessly in history³⁸.

Bibliography

Kant’s works

The following abbreviations are used when citing Kant’s works:

- A: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View (Anthropology)*
- C: *Correspondence*
- CB: “Conjectural Beginning of Human History” (the ‘Conjectural Beginning’ essay)
- CJ: *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (the third *Critique*)
- CPR: *Critique of Pure Reason* (the first *Critique*)
- CPRR: *Critique of Practical Reason* (the second *Critique*)
- EAT: “The End of All Things”
- G: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (Groundwork)*
- IUH: “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” (the ‘Universal History’ essay)
- LR: *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*
- MM: *The Metaphysics of Morals*
- MT: “On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy” (the ‘Theodicy’ essay)
- OP: *Opus postumum*
- PP: *Toward Perpetual Peace: A Philosophical Project*
- Proc: “Proclamation of the Imminent Conclusion of a Treaty of Perpetual Peace in Philosophy” (the ‘Proclamation’ essay)
- R: *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason (Religion)*

³⁷ To be fair to Kant, right after describing the human species as immortal in the ‘Universal History’ essay, he does state that this species “should [...] attain to completeness in the development of their predispositions” (IUH, 8:20). Later in the essay, he also objects to seeing “the history of humankind” as being “in despair of ever encountering a completed rational aim in it” (IUH, 8:30). But in *Rechtslehre* published thirteen years later, he makes the following admission: “*perpetual peace*, the ultimate goal of the whole right of nations, is indeed an unachievable idea. Still, the political principles directed toward perpetual peace [...], which serve for continual *approximation* to it, are not unachievable” (MM, 6:350). This attitude of the later Kant is also noted in Taylor 2010, pp. 6–9.

³⁸ I would like to thank Rachel Zuckert as well as the three anonymous reviewers for valuable comments.

- TP: “On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice” (the ‘Theory/Practice’ essay)

Citation for *Critique of Pure Reason* refers to the standard A/B pagination. For other works of Kant, citation refers to the Akademie Edition volume and page. All English translations are from The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant series.

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