

THE HIGHEST GOOD AND KANT'S PROOF(S) OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

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Abstract: This paper explains a way of understanding Kant's proof of God's existence in the Critique of Practical Reason that has hitherto gone unnoticed and argues that this interpretation possesses several advantages over its rivals. By first looking at examples where Kant indicates the role that faith plays in moral life and then reconstructing the proof of the second Critique with this in view, I argue that, for Kant, we must adopt a certain conception of the highest good, and so also must choose to believe in the kind of God that can make it possible, because this is essentially a way of actively striving for virtue. One advantage of this interpretation, I argue, is that it is able to make sense of the strong link Kant draws between morality and religion.

INTRODUCTION

Kant bases his proof or proofs of God's existence on the premise that the moral law is the foundation of a duty to promote the highest good, where the latter is understood to be happiness in exact proportion to virtue (CPrR 5: 125). This argument has been interpreted in two now standard ways.¹ The first, presented by Lewis White Beck, holds that, contrary to Kant's own words, his proof is not really moral, but rather is based purely on a belief in the "rationality of morals," that is, in the view that any rational observer would think it fitting for virtue to be crowned by happiness and, thus, would include happiness in the highest good (Beck 1960, 275). In this case, the necessity of assuming God's existence would be of the same kind as, and no stronger than, the need to explain how such a fitting picture could obtain. Therefore, since we can evidently strive in every action toward virtue even without thinking the world possesses such aesthetic or

teleological harmony on the whole, Beck concludes that the proof is not fundamentally moral at all. This interpretation is no longer current, perhaps because it does not take Kant's argument seriously enough to shed light on what he wrote.²

The second interpretation, first articulated by Allen Wood but subsequently followed by most commentators who seek to defend Kant's argument, holds the proof to rest on an implicit commitment to the general thesis that one cannot rationally pursue an end that one also deems to be impossible.³ According to Wood, Kant believes this demand for rational consistency to be a necessary logical feature of ordinary practical reasoning. The argument then runs: We have a moral duty to promote the highest good as the combination of virtue and happiness. But without belief at least in the possibility that God exists, we would have to give up this moral end as impossible to attain and thus also could not (rationally) promote it. But if we do not promote it, then we would be morally contemptible in our own eyes.⁴ Consequently, since we cannot accept such a conclusion about ourselves, we must admit that it is possible that God exists.⁵ On this reading, Kant does not prove that we must believe in God, which is what he claims, or even that a moral person must believe in God, but only that a person devoted to morality cannot also be a rational dogmatic atheist.

Wood's interpretation has sometimes been supplemented by the idea that, by guaranteeing the success of our moral endeavors to improve the world, belief in the existence of God has a positive moral function of fighting off doubts and protecting us from despair at the thought that a moral world in which happiness obtains will not be achieved.⁶ However, this argument is morally dubious insofar as this despair is supposed to arise from the thought that happiness will not be achieved, which means we must still be concerned with it in our individual moral deliberations. But as the moral agent must seek to follow the law, which "excludes [his inclination] altogether from calculations in making a choice" and bids him to "put aside entirely the influence of inclination and with it every object of the will" (GMM 4: 400; see also Rel 6: 446, quoted below), he should also be impervious to demotivation by the loss of any such object.⁷ I will argue in a similar way that belief in God helps to fight off doubts and despair, not, however, because it guarantees happiness but rather because it guarantees that no happiness will arise except through virtue, that is, through seeking to exclude personal happiness as a motive altogether from our *moral* deliberations (though certainly not all deliberations).⁸ That is to say, the moral outlook Kant offers us helps to fend off despair not by promising eventual rewards, but by providing us with a rational strategy for gradually reducing our immediate concern for such rewards in the context of moral action.

Although these remain the two standard interpretations, their many difficulties have been well noted in the literature and need not be rehearsed here.⁹ However, I would like presently to point out one hitherto unarticulated difficulty with both accounts, which is that they obscure the deeper unity of Kant's moral and religious thought. Let me explain this briefly. Throughout his mature works, Kant consistently defines religion as "the recognition of all duties as divine commands" (CPrR 5: 129) and, thus, as the recognition of God as the legislator of the moral law. Kant first presents this definition in the second *Critique* as an immediate consequence of his explanation of the postulate regarding God's existence, stating that "in this way [that is, through the moral proof] the moral law leads through the concept of the highest good, as the object and final end of pure practical reason, to religion, that is, to the recognition of all duties as divine commands" (CPrR 5: 129). In the *Religion*, it then forms the basis of Kant's description of the kind of being we must assume in order to explain the founding of a church, or ethical community, namely, it must be a being "with respect to whom all true duties . . . must be represented at the same time as his commands" (Rel 6: 99). Finally, it plays a central role in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, where Kant associates it with the personification of conscience and claims that there indeed exists even a "duty of religion, the duty 'of recognizing all our duties as (instar) divine commands'" (MM 6: 443). In all of these texts, as well as in others,¹⁰ Kant treats the moral proof and the notion of God as the legislator of the law, which he finds to be central to religion, as conclusions from a single argument and, thus, as belonging to one consistent view of the moral role of religion.

Both of the standard accounts of Kant's argument leave this connection inexplicable, indeed so much so that those who subscribe to them are forced to find two different arguments to support what seem to be two unrelated forms of religion.¹¹ The reason for this is that neither account sees the moral proof in the second *Critique* as related in any important way to the development of virtue itself; we must believe, after all, not in order to guarantee the possibility of virtue but rather to guarantee the possibility of happiness proportioned thereto. Kant, however, always connects the definition of religion as the recognition of duties as divine commands directly with moral striving, claiming indeed that this belief will serve to increase the moral incentive itself (cf. MM 6: 444 and MM 6: 487).¹² According to the standard interpretations, it would seem that the ground of religion found in the argument for the postulates and the ground of it that arises from the attempt to increase the moral incentive simply rest on different considerations and serve different functions. But this is evidently not how the matter stands for Kant.

In this paper, my aim is to reconstruct Kant's conception of the highest good by considering the impact that pursuing it is supposed to have on one's moral disposition, that is, on one's virtue, before looking at the structure of the argument in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. I have adopted this strategy because I think the failure of the standard interpretations stems from Kant's own failure to make sufficiently clear the deep moral reason for including happiness in the highest good or the manner in which this reason is embodied in the argument presented in the second *Critique* and elsewhere. What I will attempt to show is that we must adopt such a conception of the highest good—so also must choose to believe in the kind of God that will make it possible—because this is essentially a way of striving for virtue itself. I will argue on the basis of this that the two seemingly different foundations for religion in Kant stem from a single unified conception.

Before proceeding to the argument itself, I wish to note that I do not mean to argue that the account I will articulate is the only one that can be found in Kant's texts; indeed, the sheer number of attempts Kant made to clarify the argument renders it likely that several different strategies were employed at different times.¹³ My aim is rather the more modest one of clearly presenting one strategy of proof that has hitherto gone unnoticed by commentators. And yet, somewhat less modestly, I will suggest that this strategy possesses several advantages over its rivals. Namely, I will argue that (1) it is clearly not subject to the usual objections of introducing a nonmoral incentive; (2) it is consistent with the role Kant attributes to moral postulation in several central texts; (3) it provides an illuminating reading of Kant's main presentation of the argument in the second *Critique*; and, finally, (4) it suggests a natural way of understanding the unity of Kant's moral and religious thought. This final point will perforce remain merely a suggestion in this paper, as its full defense would require a much more extensive investigation.

1. THE MORAL IMPACT OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant constructs the highest good from what he says are two "heterogeneous" elements: namely, happiness as the ideal object or systematic sum-total of the objects satisfying our natural inclinations and perfect virtue, that is, the complete conformity of our wills to the moral law. As he points out, these two objects are not heterogeneous because they are composed of different materials but because they answer to or are the objects of "quite heterogeneous" kinds of motives, which "are so far from coinciding that they greatly restrict and infringe upon each other in the same subject" (CPrR 5: 112). In other words, pursuit of happiness and of perfect virtue cannot have one and

the same object, simply because to have happiness as one's object is not to be motivated by the moral law and to be motivated by the moral law is not to be motivated by sensible inclinations and, thus, not to have as one's object their systematic sum-total under the idea of happiness. So the heterogeneity of the objects reflects the heterogeneity of the motives that would have these as their objects.

Now, one might expect from this that Kant would, at least for practical purposes, tell us we must exclude happiness altogether from the object of our will. The simple reason for this would be that morality bids us, through an absolute command, to seek to conform our disposition—that is, our motives—entirely to the law itself; for “moral worth, must be placed solely in this: that the action takes place from duty, that is, *for the sake of the law alone* [*blos um des Gesetzes willen*]” (CPrR 5: 81, emphasis added; also GMM 4: 390, CPrR 5: 71). Thus, although such a state can never be achieved, the moral law's ultimate command still

consists subjectively in the purity (*puritas moralis*) of one's disposition to duty, namely, in the law being by itself alone the incentive, without the admixture of aims derived from sensibility, and in actions being done not only in conformity with duty but also from duty.—Here the command is “be holy.” (MM 6: 446)¹⁴

So it would seem that inclusion of happiness in the object of our will, in any form, could only detract from our observance of this command. But as we all know, Kant does not exclude happiness at all. Rather, to the consternation of not a few, he argues that happiness must be included in the highest good and indeed in an exact proportion with virtue. What is worse still, the reasons for this inclusion seem at best to be irrelevant to morality and at worst to corrupt what should be one's moral disposition.

As I said in my introduction, I will leave the examination of these reasons until after I take a closer look at what Kant says accepting his view of the highest good will achieve. The reason for this is that, if one looks closely at the texts, I think the answer is both surprising and puzzling. What we find is that, so far from thinking this inclusion might corrupt the moral incentive, Kant clearly believes it will serve to *purify* and *strengthen* it. I have in mind two key texts. The first is found in the Dialectic of the second *Critique*, where it plays the role of transitioning between the moral proof and the definition of religion. In it, Kant comments on how his proof perfectly agrees with the moral outlook and indeed also with the concept of the highest good that we find in Christianity. This agreement, he says, consists, first, in that in both “the moral law is holy (inflexible) and demands holiness of morals, although all the moral perfection that a human being can attain is still only virtue, that is, a disposition conformed with the law from respect for

the law" (CPrR 5: 128). So in both Kantian and Christian morality, the law absolutely commands that one act from no motives other than moral ones. Second, they agree in that both hold the "worth of a disposition completely conformed with the moral law is infinite, since all possible happiness in the judgment of a wise and all-powerful distributor of it has no restriction other than a rational being's lack of conformity with their duty." And, third, both agree that happiness does not naturally arise from virtue alone and so seek to supplement "this lack . . . by representing the world in which rational beings devote themselves with their whole soul to the moral law as a kingdom of God, in which nature and morals come into harmony . . . through a holy author who makes the derived highest good possible." And now Kant continues, quite remarkably, to say finally that both agree in holding that, in this life, the moral law must be the "archetype of their conduct in every state," whereas "happiness cannot be attained at all in this world . . . and is therefore made solely the object of hope," so that "the proper incentive to observing them [that is, moral laws] [is placed] not in the results wished for *but in the representation of duty alone*" (CPrR 5: 129; final emphasis added).¹⁵

Now, I have stayed very close to the text here in order to show that Kant clearly expresses the view that both Christianity and Kantian morality place happiness in the highest good, not to fulfill any rational need to believe that virtue will be crowned with bliss, but precisely so that we need not concern ourselves with happiness at all in our specifically moral deliberations. In other words, by framing happiness as conditioned by the demand to absolutely conform our disposition to the law, and thus as possible only if we do not concern ourselves with it in cases of moral deliberation,¹⁶ can we even hope for it to be attainable. As the last quoted line in particular makes evident, this doctrine of happiness is supposed to have the function of eliminating it as a motive and thus of making our motive "the representation of duty alone." So the impact that the doctrine of the highest good is supposed to have is, in fact, moral and is indeed to further the moral purity of one's disposition.

This same idea is expressed, though more extensively, in the *Religion* where Kant compares one who would do one's duty for hope of reward, thus not for moral reasons, and one who would do it for moral reasons alone. Regarding the latter, Kant writes that

the judge of the world declares as the true elects to his kingdom those who extend help to the needy without it even entering their minds that what they are doing was also worthy of recompense . . . precisely because they were acting without attention to it, and we can then clearly see that when the teacher of the Gospel speaks of a recompense in the world to come, he did not mean thereby to make this recompense an incentive to actions but only (as an uplifting rep-

resentation of the consummation of divine goodness and wisdom in the guidance of the human race) an object of the purest admiration and greatest moral approval. (Rel 6: 162)

Again in this text, the idea is that the image of the highest good as the combination of virtue and happiness agrees, as it must, with a moral disposition that looks away from happiness altogether. They are most virtuous and thus most worthy of happiness “precisely because they were acting without attention to it [that is, recompense or happiness].” If, for such a person, happiness is in some sense an object of hope, then it is obviously not the regular kind of hope that is accompanied by an immediate desire for its object, because, in this case, there would necessarily be an admixture of prudence in our motives and these, therefore, would not be pure. So the highest good, once again, has the function of framing happiness in a way that dislodges its natural function of providing motives to moral choices. In the last part of this particular passage, Kant even suggests this way of framing happiness will have the positive impact of inspiring “the purest admiration and greatest moral approval.”

Hence, Kant clearly gives the highest good a motivational role, but—and here is the apparent puzzle—its motivational role seems simply to be to make the moral law itself our sole motive in choosing and acting, that is, its role is to further virtue itself. For, on the one hand, Kant asserts that only the moral law itself makes the inclusion of happiness necessary (CPrR 5: 109) and, consequently, also that the effect of this inclusion will be to purify and strengthen the moral incentive itself. Kant is also clear, however, that, in this role, happiness cannot at all provide an additional supplement to the moral incentive, for the simple reason that any motivation whatsoever that would stem directly from a desire for happiness could only hamper the purity of the moral incentive. And, as Kant explains very clearly in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the moral incentive itself consists precisely in the dislodging of all sensible incentives from their motivational roles by the pure consciousness of the moral law, and thus in a kind of painful humiliation for sensibility as a whole, which he terms “respect” (CPrR 5: 78–79). So if the moral law requires us to include happiness in the highest good, this inclusion must somehow support this humiliation of sensibility, even though, in its *normal* function (when not included in the highest good, where it is conditioned by virtue), the concept of happiness is precisely the rational goal of the complete satisfaction of sensibility itself.

To make sense of this, we must recognize that central to Kant's doctrine of the moral incentive is the view that it springs forth by itself and as an almost unconquerable motive to action, when sensible inclinations are moved out of its way (CPrR 5: 79–80, CPrR 5: 152–57). Kant treats

this idea most extensively in the Doctrine of the Method in the second *Critique*, where we find the following passage:

All the admiration, and even the endeavor to resemble this character [that is, the character of a virtuous person], here rests wholly on the purity of the moral principle, which can be clearly represented only if one removes from the incentive to action everything that people may reckon only to happiness. Thus morality must have more power over the human heart the more purely it is presented. From this it follows that if the law of morals and the image of holiness and virtue are to exercise any influence at all on our soul, they can do so only insofar as they are laid to heart in their purity as incentives, unmixed with any view to one's welfare, for it is in suffering that they show themselves most excellently. But that which, by being removed strengthens the effect of a moving force must have been a hindrance. Consequently every admixture of incentives taken from one's own happiness is a hindrance to providing the moral law with influence on the human heart. (CPrR 5: 156)

Here Kant is considering the effect that a representation of virtue can have on the mind. In the first line, he observes that such a representation brings forth the moral incentive within us to the very extent that it represents the action as arising independently from incentives of happiness. From this, he constructs the following argument: (1) The moral law must have its own intrinsic power, which becomes manifest when sensible incentives are removed. (2) If, when something is removed, something else is strengthened, then the former must be a hindrance to the latter. (3) Therefore, since the removal of sensible incentives increases the moral incentive, these must have been hindrances to it. In these last two points, Kant makes a moral use of the physical model of the composition of forces, something found throughout his writings going back to the pre-Critical period.

This provides us with an essential clue to Kant's overall argument. If the moral incentive is self-manifesting or if its strength can be increased almost without bound by removing sensible incentives that would otherwise oppose it, then perhaps the inclusion of happiness in the highest good somehow aids in this removal by dislodging the *ideal rational object* of all sensible motives—happiness itself—from its natural motivational role for practical reason. In other words, since the object of practical reason, according to Kant, is the end that guides it in making choices and in designing practices for cultivating its own disposition (as means to this end), the inclusion of happiness in the highest good—where it is absolutely conditioned by virtue (that is, by the cultivation of a disposition purified of sensible inclinations) and, as such, cannot guide us to make choices and design practices increasing our nonmoral

incentives without becoming self-defeating—would seem to provide the perfect rational strategy for striving toward virtue in the case that the rational concept of happiness cannot be entirely avoided. On this reading, the necessity of the inclusion of happiness in the highest good would follow from the same necessity that Kant terms a duty of virtue (MM 6: 390–93); for if thinking happiness as part of the highest good serves to increase the moral incentive itself (by providing a rational strategy allowing the cultivation of a character able to choose independently of sensible incentives), then it will fall under the general command to further the morality of our disposition “with all our might” and thus by all available means (MM 6: 393). What we would be doing by thinking of happiness in this way is essentially framing for ourselves a conception of happiness that would undermine its role as a source of motivation and its tendency to cultivate our sensible incentives and, by clearing this space for the moral incentive itself, would allow it to manifest its own intrinsic strength without impediment. Kant calls the former the “negative perfection of the will insofar as in an action from duty no incentives of inclination have any influence on it,” which is initially something painful but is then followed by the uplifting consciousness of the ruling power of the law within us (CPrR 5: 160).

Yet can it possibly be the case that the reason for including happiness in the highest good is, in fact, to eliminate it as a motive for action? On the face of it, that would seem like quite a paradox. But it is no more of a paradox, I think, than the fact that a universal attractive force like gravity can push material bodies apart, for example, push a hot-air balloon away from the earth. The appearance of paradox in this case arises from one’s ignorance of the same internal machinery that, when discovered, not only explains away the paradox but even shows the effect to be a necessary consequence of the law it seems to contradict. In a parallel way, a paradox would only truly arise in Kant’s doctrine of the highest good, if it were his view that including happiness in the object of our will would necessarily mean being motivated by it. As we have seen, however, belief in the existence of the kind of God Kant describes makes it possible for us to have happiness as part of our object without its being a direct source of motivation, since it is built into the very concept of God that he will grant happiness only to the extent we are worthy of it, where being worthy of it *just means* willing for the sake of the law to the exclusion of incentives of happiness. Indeed, in this case, including happiness in the highest good is necessary precisely to prevent it from generating nonmoral incentives.

The doctrine of moral purity—the doctrine that a person must exert all her effort to prevent such incentives from influencing her moral choices—clearly requires us to make sure as far as we can that no sen-

sible incentives are mixed into our motives in moral deliberation. And if we believe that an omniscient, omnipotent, and righteous moral being exists, and thus hold it as a true proposition that ultimately our own happiness will depend on and be directly proportioned to the degree of moral purity (virtue) in our actions, then we can for the first time consistently combine happiness and virtue in the same rational goal of striving. This is possible because, in practice, pursuing happiness now rationally becomes for us nothing but willing virtue, that is, seeking to obey the moral law to the exclusion of all our present or future sensible incentives, though only under the assumption that God exists. For it is precisely God's power to proportion happiness to virtue that makes this combination rationally possible without detriment to our pursuit of virtue and without collapsing the distinction between it and happiness. Moreover, one cannot object to this theory that the inclusion of happiness in the highest good ruins the moral incentive by mixing it with a prospect for happiness because genuinely pursuing virtue just means seeking to disregard sensible incentives in any particular moral choice. Of course, for this to work psychologically, we must think of God as being able to judge the inner degree of our virtue, that is, the purity of our will, and this is precisely the reason Kant gives us for having to think of the highest ground of the union of morality and happiness as an omniscient and just moral being.¹⁷

Put another way: Consider a person who believed that an omniscient moral being had her entire fate in his hands, that this being would provide her with happiness only to the extent that the moral law was her sole incentive and that having the moral law alone as her incentive means cultivating herself in such a way that she could, to the best of her ability, be certain that her moral choices were free from all influence by sensible inclinations. Now, if she decided to follow the law as a way of achieving happiness—that is, the rational goal of a systematic sum-total of inclinations—this person would undoubtedly immediately see the futility of this strategy. For God would know that her true motives were based on inclinations and would deny her happiness accordingly. And if she momentarily made the mistake of thinking she really could pursue virtue in order to achieve happiness, then, although this might at first lead her in the direction of virtue (Kant admits such nonmoral leading-strings temporarily as stimulants), if she were eventually led by this to the actual pursuit of virtue, to the cultivation of a strength of character to choose what the law commands unmixed with sensible incentives, then eventually she would have to leave behind the former conception of happiness, which was genuinely incompatible with virtue, in favor of one absolutely subordinated to virtue, which would then not be the object of desire but of hope. This new space cleared of sensible

incentives, Kant thinks, would be filled automatically by the moral incentive. In this way, belief dislodges happiness from the natural motivational role it would otherwise have and thereby indirectly fosters the moral incentive within us. It should be noted that this does not mean that a person is to give up all prospect of happiness, something Kant thinks is rationally impossible, but only that she is to transform this prospect, through such belief, into something that is merely the object of a rational "hope" and that, as such, can no longer produce obstacles to the moral incentive.

One could compare this to the case of attempting to forget something. If one tries to do so, perhaps by repeatedly telling oneself to forget the matter, ignoring it when it arises in conversation, and so on, then this will inevitably have the very opposite of its intended effect. In the same way, granting that God exists, obeying the law on the basis of one's sensible incentives, that is, in pursuit of happiness directly, will inevitably have the very opposite effect due to God's omniscience and justice. To forget successfully, one must rather find a way of distracting oneself not only from the object to be forgotten but even from the desire to forget it. In this way, we may forget only by allowing the immediate desire to do so to ebb away. Consequently, we will very likely forget at the very moment when we no longer have any particularly strong desire to do so. This is not a paradox but a simple and familiar psychological strategy made possible by our ability to recognize in reflection (reason) that here no immediate desire can be effective and then to act on this recognition by choosing to do things that do not further incite this desire. By means of reflection, we can similarly recognize that, if a Kantian God exists, then seeking happiness in the context of our moral choices would be directly self-defeating. This must, in turn, show us the rational futility of all practices that would further strengthen our desire for happiness and thereby open up a space for consciousness of the moral law to manifest its intrinsic motivating power. When this happens, we can expect to be rewarded with happiness at some point, but perhaps only when we desire it least of all.

The final step of Kant's argument, which I will treat more fully below, is then for us to realize simultaneously (1) that adopting this view of happiness will have such a salutary effect on our moral incentive, (2) that we have the duty of virtue to strive with all our might toward moral purity, and (3) that we cannot think the possibility of the highest good entailed by such a view of happiness without belief in a certain kind of God. The consequence of holding these three propositions to be true is that we will recognize it as morally necessary to commit ourselves to the belief in God's existence as the best means to developing virtue. This fits the texts so far examined, but does it also fit Kant's deduction

of the highest good in the Dialectic and his proof of God's existence in the second *Critique*?

2. THE EQUIVALENCE OF THE IDEA OF A PURE BUT HUMAN WILL AND OUR PURSUIT OF THE HIGHEST GOOD (THAT IS, THE TRANSCENDENTAL DEDUCTION OF THE HIGHEST GOOD)

If the above conception of the highest good is correct, then it must be possible to prove that willing the law in its fullest extent, that is, perfectly conforming one's will thereto in regard to all possible choices, means having this conception of the highest good as one's object. There are, however, already two independent reasons for thinking this must be the case. The first lies in Kant's claim that to be motivated by the highest good is exactly the same as to be motivated by the moral law itself (CPrR 5: 109–10), while the second consists in the dual claims found in several places in Kant's moral writings that (1) the ultimate goal of the moral agent is to become as close to holy as possible and that (2) the ultimate goal of the moral agent is to promote the highest good. If these are both our ultimate end, then they must amount to the same thing, in which case striving to promote the highest good must be equivalent, from the perspective of the moral agent at least, to seeking to conform one's own will entirely to the command of the law.

But a third and more direct route is available to us if we keep in mind the motivational role I have ascribed to the highest good. For, on the basis of it, we can now see another way in which the second *Critique*'s moral proof might be interpreted. Namely, if we look not at the short passage that has received the most attention (CPrR 5: 124–25), in which Kant is essentially summarizing a number of points made earlier in the Dialectic, but rather examine the earlier and more lengthy arguments to which it points us, we find the following. In Chapter I of the Dialectic, Kant makes the fundamental observation that, although he had previously seemed to be arguing that a genuine moral disposition abstracts from all ends, this is not his considered position. Rather, ends just are the sources of motives; to have an object is to be motivated by it, and, to be motivated, one must have an object in view. So, even the pure will must have an object as its determining ground (CPrR 5: 109–10). Kant's considered position is, thus, that a moral disposition must abstract from all ends that would be given *prior to or as a condition of* the choice of an action; the moral law, by contrast, produces its own object, which is termed the "highest good." In regard to this highest good, Kant explains,

[T]he concept of it and the representation of its existence as possible by our practical reason are at the same time the *determining ground of the pure will* because in that case the moral law, already included

and thought in this concept, and no other object, in fact determines the will in accordance with the principle of autonomy. (ibid., second emphasis added)

Now, notably, Kant here has not yet said anything about the finite rational will or about the constitution of this idea of a highest good; rather he speaks of the pure will and of what its object must be. He has indeed merely made the argument that obeying the moral law will be and must be equivalent, for the pure will, to its willing some kind of highest good and, thus, that conformity of a pure will's disposition to the law must be equivalent to its being determined to action by the representation of some kind of object.

Only in Chapter II do we find that the highest good, not merely for a pure will but for one that is also the will of a finite rational being, must also contain happiness in exact proportion to virtue. The short argument Kant gives for this is, namely, that virtue must be the supreme condition as the Analytic proved, and so must be the supreme good, "but it is not yet, on that account, the whole and complete good as the object of the faculty of desire of *rational finite beings*" (CPrR 5: 110; emphasis added). Even an unselfish rational being, Kant claims, will necessarily have happiness as a *possible* object and thus as a possible determining ground of its choices. But just a page prior in Chapter I, Kant has shown that being determined by the representation of the highest good in general must be equivalent to being determined in complete conformity with the moral law itself. Consequently, it now follows that, if happiness is necessarily an object of finite rational willing and the highest good for this being must again be such that willing the highest good is equivalent to conforming oneself entirely to the moral law, then the highest good for such a being must, for strictly moral reasons, include all even merely possible objects of such a will, *but* in such a way that they at the same time do not give rise to anything other than moral incentives. Another way to put the same idea is that, if we were to exclude happiness from the highest good, then we would necessarily, because of the structure of our finite practical reason, retain a view of happiness that would generate nonmoral incentives.¹⁸ If we understand this to be Kant's basic idea, then we can see why he can move almost immediately in Chapter II from this to the claim that, in the highest good, not only is happiness included, but it is included precisely in proportion to or as conditioned by virtue.

In his response to Christian Garve, Kant makes what I take to be the same argument, explaining that

[w]ithout some end there can be no *will*. . . . But not every end is moral (e.g. one's own happiness is not), but this must rather be an unselfish one; and the need for a final end assigned by pure reason

and comprehending the whole of all ends under one principle . . . is a need of an unselfish will extending itself beyond the observance of the formal law to the production of an object (the highest good). This is a special kind of determination of the will, namely through the idea of the whole of all ends, the basis of which is that *if we stand in certain moral relations to things in the world we must everywhere obey the moral law* . . . In this the human being thinks of himself on analogy with the Deity. . . . The incentive which is present in the idea of the highest good possible in the world by his cooperation is not his own happiness thereby intended but only this idea as end in itself, and hence compliance with it as duty. For it contains no prospect of happiness absolutely, but only of a proportion between it and the worthiness of the subject, whatever that may be. (CS 8: 280–81n)

Here we read that striving to be like the Deity itself, that is, striving to be holy, which is made necessary by the fact that the moral law bids us to “everywhere obey the moral law,” is the same as having the highest good as our object, in which the mere idea of happiness is subordinated absolutely to the condition of subjective conformity with the law. Notice also that Kant again argues from the fact that we must obey the moral law in every possible case (as the “basis” of the determination), to which is added the fact that “not every end is moral,” namely, those falling under the title of happiness, that finally this special object, the highest good, is one in which happiness is included but yet does not generate any kind of nonmoral incentive. Taking the highest good as one’s object serves precisely to help the moral agent “strive to become aware that no *incentive* derived from that [that is, happiness] gets mixed, unnoticed, into the determination of duty,” which is “effected by his representing duty as connected with the sacrifices of its observance (virtue) costs us rather than the advantages it yields” (CS 8: 279).¹⁹

In summary, I take the moral proof to be the following: Striving to have a holy²⁰ will means striving not only to have a will that performs certain duties for the sake of the law but also one that is supremely virtuous, that is, one in which the moral incentive is so strong that it would exhibit such conformity in any and every possible choice in any and every possible circumstance. But this just means having a will for which it is not even possible to have an end that is not absolutely subject to the condition of virtue. As long as the natural conception of happiness itself is not included in the highest good where it is just so conditioned, we by default retain a rational outlook in which the rational idea of happiness can generate competing incentives and practices. The only way to seek to avoid this, then, and to attempt to guarantee happiness will not compete for our attention, is to include it in the highest good but in precisely such a way that makes it incapable of generating incentives

contrary to morality, that is, by asserting the existence of a God who guarantees happiness will be reached only insofar as we are worthy of it. Assuming the existence of such a God will not, of course, guarantee perfect virtue, but it does provide an additional means for seeking to further it within ourselves. And as we have seen, it will do this precisely by combating a primary rational source of nonmoral incentives, thereby clearing a space in which the intrinsic power of the moral incentive can manifest itself. In a word, we have a duty to promote the highest good, not because we must achieve it, but because we must take it as the object of all our endeavors; and the reason for this is that to do anything else would be a less than optimal way of seeking to promote virtue within ourselves. Kant often denies that human beings can be genuine Stoics, even though this would seem to fit the moral ideal, because Stoicism tells us to exclude happiness altogether, which Kant holds to be impossible. If my argument is correct, then Stoicism ultimately fails for Kant because it does not contain the belief in a God that proportions happiness to virtue. The Kantian agent, however, can succeed in acting *as if* he were a Stoic, but only because he believes in just such a God.

3. FROM THE HIGHEST GOOD TO THE PROOF OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

If the above account be accepted, then this sheds new light on the moral proof of God's existence. For, if taking the highest good to be one's object is an essential means to pursuing virtue, then admitting the existence of God, as the only assumption under which the highest good can be thought to be possible, will also be a sign of one's moral earnestness. We will not believe in God because it has been proven either theoretically or morally to be absolutely or objectively necessary to do so, but rather we will choose to believe this and seek to protect this belief from all possible sources of doubt. This choice will then be a free choice undertaken for the sake of increasing our inner observance of the moral law and so will be part of our striving toward holiness. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, we read "the way we would think it [that is, the highest good] as possible rests with our choice, in which a free interest of pure practical reason decides for the assumption of a wise author of the world," and "it follows that the principle that determines our judgment about it, though it is subjective as a need, is yet, as the means of promoting what is objectively (practically necessary), the ground of a maxim of assent for moral purposes, that is, a pure practical rational belief" (CPrR 5: 145–46).

So it is a free choice,²¹ and yet it also has a subjective necessity in that, just as in the duty of virtue to which Kant ascribes religion, it

falls under the command to promote virtue within ourselves “with all our might.” That rational belief is something that must be freely chosen and that is chosen for the sake of furthering our own moral striving is, I believe, essential to understanding Kant’s view of the function of religion as such.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, I would like to return to the topic of the unity of Kant’s conception of religion, which I broached in the introduction. On the account I have sketched, Kant’s moral proof provides the following general structure for the move from morality to religion: The moral law, as an absolute command, founds a duty to seek holiness by all possible means. But since we cannot directly increase the moral incentive within ourselves, this command turns into one for seeking to employ every available means to combat all possible sources of nonmoral motivation and firmly to establish principles of thought and practice that support this project. Moreover, the sources of nonmoral motivations consist not only in sensible inclinations but, more importantly, in the natural tendencies of our practical reason to seek the ideal of happiness. Consequently, just as we should seek to avoid or to restrain our sensible inclinations, we should seek to believe those rational propositions that have the effect of countering and redirecting our otherwise rational pursuit of happiness. Yet specifically to design these practices and beliefs so that they best fulfill this function, there is required knowledge not only of our own individual frailties, which must be combated, but also of those that belong to us as finite rational beings and as human beings. From this point of view, the moral proof of God’s existence is designed to show that, insofar as we are finite rational beings—beings with wills who have other possible ends than moral ones—belief in a certain kind of God is the best suited remedy. Belief in the existence of God as one who *enforces* the moral law, thereby proportioning happiness exactly to virtue, is just what Kant means by viewing all duties as divine commands.

Turning to the argument of the *Religion*, insofar as we are not only rational beings but also *human beings*, we evidently belong to a single group whose members are bound together by empirically discoverable laws and regularities. And this interconnectedness is clearly, empirically, a source of possible nonmoral motivations (Rel 6: 93–94). Consequently, for the sake of virtue, since we are bound to seek out all available means to virtue, we are also bound to seek out whatever *communal* means there might be to combating these possible negative influences. That is to say, the individual’s pursuit of virtue leads to the recognition that this pursuit is possible only as a communal one (Rel 6: 94). We are

thus bound to join a “church,” as Kant asserts in the *Religion*, which is then nothing but an ethical community designed to hinder those same nonmoral motives that tend to arise from society, thereby indirectly promoting the development of virtue within each member.

But just like the highest good *in general* (as argued in the *Dialectic*), this *particular* good is not conceivable as possible except through a supplement of power and authority from another being. And again just as with the highest good, the only being suitable to found such a church is a being whose power is used entirely to enforce and effect the inner morality of the members, that is, this being is God as the legislator of the moral law (Rel 6: 99). Thus, as part of our endeavor to cultivate virtue within ourselves, we will freely choose to join an ethical community within which all duties are viewed as divine commands and in which each person seeks to cultivate a sense of community in which all desire for happiness is subordinated, in accordance with this view, to the common project of fighting, as far as possible, the external hindrances to the development of the moral strength of each of its members.

Thus, on the reading here proposed, Kant's argument for the postulation of God's existence is not only continuous with but even provides the general structure for the most natural reading of the more specific proof found in the *Religion*. And both agree in being based in the command to strive to increase the moral incentive within ourselves.²²

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NOTES

1. This is admittedly an oversimplification but a necessary one for my present purpose, which is only to present the grounds for a hitherto neglected way of understanding Kant's argument. I will address some of the alternative interpretations throughout the footnotes to follow. For an excellent summary of the many current approaches, both friendly and unfriendly to Kant's ethics, along with an accurate account of their difficulties, see Caswell 2006. Caswell's own interpretation, however, requires that the existence of radical evil be a premise of the moral postulates, although Kant never once mentions it in the course of his many discussions of the argument. Although this will not do as an interpretation of the text of the second *Critique*, it is not inconsistent with the results of this paper.

All writings by Immanuel Kant are cited by the appropriate abbreviation followed by the volume and page number of *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*.

The following abbreviations will be used: AA = *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, CPJ = *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, CPrR = *Critique of Practical Reason*, GMM = *The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, MM = *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Prog = *What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany Since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff*, Rel = *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Kant are taken from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, edited by Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood, with the exception of those from GMM, which are from the Cambridge translation as revised by Jens Timmermann (2013).

2. This is clear from the fact that his summary of the argument is simply a paraphrase of one half of a paragraph from the CPrR that ignores the main argument that precedes this, as well as the explanations and qualifications that follow. Compare Beck 1960, 274, with CPrR 5: 124. Despite the flaws of his interpretation, I take Beck's insistence that, for the proof to be moral, it must be grounded specifically in a moral necessity to be fundamental and to tell against Wood's interpretation, which sees the proof as based simply on a logical principle of practical reasoning.

3. See Wood 1970; 1978, 22. The clearest account appears in Wood 1992.

4. Notice there is a missing step here. Obviously, we can will what we deem to be impossible, which Wood admits; the only problem is that we cannot *rationaly* do so. Thus, on Wood's view, there is nothing to prevent us from pursuing virtue while not believing that God exists except our desire not to be a virtuous fool, or a "tugendhafter Phantast." The argument is, therefore, really a *dilemma practicum*, as Kant calls it. See AA 28: 385–86, AA 18: 20 (Reflection 4886), AA 18: 194 (Reflection 5477), AA 18: 484 (Reflection 4255), and AA 18: 485 (Reflection 4256). Finally, the fullest discussion is in the Pölitz metaphysics lectures, 290–94.

5. This is not exactly how Wood initially presents the proof, but it expresses the version one gets when all the limitations on its significance, noted by Wood himself, are taken into account.

6. See, for instance, Neiman 1994, 162. On such a reading, happiness is usually included in the highest good simply as the object to be achieved by acting morally. This line of thought is developed most fully in Wood 1970, Engstrom 1992, and Bowman 2003. It is also found in Guyer 2000, 339–42: "Therefore, the highest good, conceived as the condition that would obtain if the kingdom of ends were established, is not a composite of two separate ends, one constraining the other, but is rather the object defined by virtue itself" (340). This gets the argument backward and simply loses sight of how Kant introduces the highest good in the Dialectic itself. The key point is that the highest good is introduced to solve a motivational problem, that is, how happiness and virtue *as objects of desire* can be combined. Consequently, it remains true, *pace* Guyer and others, that this happiness is submitted to a condition within the thought of the highest good itself, because *willing* a world in which all actions accord with the law and in which everyone achieves happiness (and perhaps does what they should so as to achieve it) is still distinct from a world in which all such actions arise from

a truly moral disposition, that is, are undertaken for the sake of the law alone and not for the sake of any happiness at all. See CPrR 5: 112, which clearly contradicts Guyer's claim quoted above:

Now, it is clear from the Analytic that the maxims of virtue and those of one's own happiness are quite heterogeneous with respect to their supreme practical principle; and, even though they belong to one highest good, so as to make it possible, they are so far from coinciding that they greatly restrict and infringe upon each other in the same subject.

The position described by Guyer simply cannot be made consistent with Kant's insistence in the Dialectic that happiness and virtue are objects that give rise to absolutely heterogeneous kinds of motivation, and that this is the real reason that they can only be thought as combined in the highest good through a synthetic ground (CPrR 5: 113–14). Packer 1983 develops the quite different thesis that the happiness Kant has in mind is moral contentment. This would clearly undermine the moral proof, which Packer does not discuss, and conflicts with the sharp distinction Kant makes between happiness and moral contentment (CPrR 5: 117–18).

7. Or perhaps better, if the moral agent is not impervious to such demotivation, then this indicates that there is an admixture of motives arising from the desire for happiness in his deliberations, and, to this extent, his action was not undertaken for the sake of the law.

8. Kant thinks that some choices are morally indifferent, such as “meat or fish, beer or wine, if both agree with me” (MM 6:409) and, thus, that happiness can be the basis of such choices. The chief point is that Kant believes that, in morally relevant choices, we must seek to exclude altogether the influence of motives of happiness.

9. A useful account of these difficulties is contained in Byrne 2007, chaps. 5 and 6; Denis 2005; and Beiser 2006. While Wood's argument has proven quite attractive and does undoubtedly capture some aspects of Kant's argument, it has several drawbacks if taken for the whole argument. First, as Wood admits, while the argument is compatible with the idea that belief may have a salutary impact on our pursuit of virtue (Wood 1970, 32), it does not show that belief is necessary for this reason but only in order to maintain practical consistency in our willing. However, Kant consistently maintains that belief is morally necessary precisely because it will have such a salutary impact on the moral incentive (for example, CPrR 5: 145–46, Prog 20: 298–99, CPJ 5: 452–53). Second, as Wood also admits, his version of the argument does not prove even that we must believe the highest good is really possible but only that it is not impossible (because otherwise we would knowingly be pursuing a goal we deemed to be impossible, which would be rationally inconsistent) and, consequently, that it does not show we must believe that God exists but only that it is possible that God exists (Wood 1970, 301; also see Denis 2005, 43). But, again, what Kant actually maintains is that “it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God” (CPrR 5:125). Finally, Wood's argument cannot at all explain why it is central to Kant's argument that happiness be exactly proportioned to virtue

and, thus, ignores the issue, whereas the present interpretation makes this very clear.

10. Kant repeats the argument more fully at Rel 6: 183.

11. See Wood 1970 and Wood 1999, 317–19, which treat the postulate of God's existence and his role as the legislator of the law as entirely distinct issues, despite the fact Kant always treats them as closely related. See also Palmquist 2009, which also treats them as entirely distinct and argues that the proof in the *Religion* is essentially different from that of the postulate.

12. Kant indeed states that the duty of religion “is a duty of the human being to himself, that is, it is not objective, an obligation to perform certain services for another, but only subjective, *for the sake of strengthening the moral incentive in our own lawgiving reason*” (MM 6: 487; emphasis added).

13. Denis 2005 is the best overview of the different possible strategies one might find in Kant's writings. Notably, the interpretation put forward in this paper is not discussed.

14. This fact is sometimes overlooked due to Kant's tendency to contrast virtue and holiness. In such passages, Kant nearly always explains, however, that, although virtue can never be holiness at any moment, holiness is still the model toward which it strives (GMM 5: 85; GMM 5: 122; GMM 5: 128; Rel 6: 161).

15. The reader will note that the argument of this paper rests on a strict or rigorist understanding of moral motivation in Kant. The best, most careful, and, in my view, most accurate version of this view is defended in Timmermann 2009.

16. Notice that my claim is not that, in Kant's view, we should not concern ourselves with happiness at all. This would be far too strong. The key idea is that we should not concern ourselves with it when making a morally relevant decision.

17. I think that Kant is here making use of a quite commonsense way of thinking about moral purity and our relation to God. What better way for a person concerned with happiness and yet at heart committed to her own moral purity (that is, purity of her intentions) to solve this conflict within herself than to think of her happiness as dependent on a being who knows her innermost thoughts and will only give her happiness if she seeks to exclude its influence whenever she meets an actual moral choice? The important point is that failure to solve this conflict will prevent such a person from being fully committed to virtue, and so, to the extent she is so committed, she will chose to resolve the problem through rational belief.

18. Is it necessary or merely possible that the exclusion of happiness would generate nonmoral incentives? Since the role of all objects of rational willing, including happiness, is to guide our choices and practices that further cultivate our disposition for that end, it would seem almost certainly to do so. However, this strong claim is not necessary for my argument since one who genuinely strives to be virtuous would seek to fight this even if it were merely a strong possibility. Thanks to an anonymous reader for raising this question.

19. Quoted also in Guyer 2000, 344.

20. Kant defines "holiness" as where "choice is rightly represented as incapable of any maxim that could not at the same time be objectively a law" and says that it is "a practical idea, which must necessarily serve as a model to which all finite rational beings can only approximate without end and which the pure moral law, itself called holy because of this, constantly and rightly holds before their eyes" (CPrR 5: 32). See also note 11 above.

21. In the *Progress Essay*, which Kant never completed, he makes this very point most forcefully, referring to such belief twice as "a free affirmation" and as one "without which it [that is, belief] would also have no moral value" (Prog 20: 298). Compare this with Wood 1992, 404: "When he describes moral faith as arising from a 'voluntary decision of the judgment', Kant seems to suggest that he thinks (what is clearly false) that we have the ability to believe in God and immortality just by deciding to."

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