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Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good

Kant's account of the highest good is often regarded as a failure. He argues that the highest good comprises both virtue and happiness, and he also claims that we have a duty to promote it.¹ These claims raise difficult questions. First, given that the account of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is phrased, in part, in terms of individual happiness in proportion to virtue (that is, in terms of desert), it would seem that any duty to promote the highest good would require us to act as moral judges in a way that Kant himself adamantly rules out as impossible. Furthermore, the inclusion of happiness seems to introduce "non-moral goods" into the highest good (Beck 1960: 242–3), and this makes it hard to see how Kant could consistently call it a moral duty to promote it. Finally, Kant claims that this alleged duty goes "beyond" obedience to the moral law and that it cannot be analytically derived from the moral law (*RGV* 6:7n.; *Gemeinspruch* 8:280n.). This makes it even harder to see how this duty can be justified, and what exactly this duty amounts to.

In this essay, I argue that there is a valid argument, on the basis of premises Kant clearly endorses, for the conclusion that it is a duty to promote the highest good, and I explain what this duty consists in. Because the main difficulties for such an argument are often considered to stem from the inclusion of happiness in the highest good, it is necessary to examine why he regards the highest good as consisting of both virtue and happiness. This, in turn, requires a clear account of what Kant means by 'good' in the first place, and the conditions under which, on his understanding of 'good', happiness is indeed good. Therefore, I start by examining Kant's distinction between 'good' and 'pleasant', and his account of what is good (section 1). This provides the key to understanding why happiness, as one of the two constituent parts of the highest good, is good – indeed morally good – and not merely pleasant. The answer lies in the fact that it is a duty to promote the happiness of others (section 2). Building on Kant's account of the good and the highest good, I then reconstruct a valid argument to the effect that it is a duty to promote the highest good. I illustrate the structure of the argument with an example that illuminates why this is a genuine duty even though it is 'not contained in the moral laws' and how it goes beyond obedience to the Categorical Imperative even though it does not add a separate duty (section 3). Kant's improbable-sound-

¹ *KpV* 5:113, 114, 125, 129; *KU* 5:429, 450, 471n.; *RGV* 6:5, 7n.

ing combination of claims starts to make sense only once we approach his account of the highest good via his account of the good (section 3).

For the purpose of this paper, I draw on a distinction between two different conceptions of the highest good that are found in Kant's moral theory (Reath 1988; Kleingeld 1995). In many of his discussions of the highest good, Kant defines it as a *moral world*, by which he means a world populated by fully virtuous agents whose virtuous action causes happiness (*KrV* A808/B836; *RGV* 6:5; *Gemeinspruch* 8:280n.). At other times, most notably in the Dialectic of the second Critique, he discusses the highest good "in a *person*" (*KpV* 5:110, emphasis added), defining it as happiness in proportion to virtue. The first conception of the highest good can more easily be developed on the basis of the principles of Kant's moral theory than the second. In this essay, I limit my discussion to the conception of the highest good as a moral world. Kant's conception of the highest good "in a person" requires separate treatment.² Progress in our understanding of Kant's conception of the highest good as a moral world may also shed light on the idea of the highest good 'in a person', but this issue lies beyond the scope of this essay. Furthermore, I do not address the issue of the *possibility* of the highest good, or associated issues regarding the nature, role, and justification of the postulates of God and immortality.³ Instead, I focus on the preliminary issues of the *concept* of the highest good and, especially, the *duty* to promote it.⁴

1 Is Happiness Good? And What is Good Anyway?

In order to understand why happiness is part of the highest good, we need to understand *why*, and in what sense and under which conditions, happiness, as part of the highest good, is deemed *good*, and not merely *agreeable*. The distinction between 'good' and 'agreeable' is of fundamental importance to Kant's moral theory, for reasons that I shall clarify, in this section, on the basis of Kant's discussion with Hermann Andreas Pistorius (1730–1798).

Kant starts the *Groundwork* with the famous claim that the only thing that can be held to be good without limitation is a good will (*GMS* 4:393). He also claims that his conception of a good will can already be found in every "natural

² See Engstrom 1992 for a detailed discussion. In Kleingeld 1995, I suggest an account of why Kant, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, discusses the highest good "in a person" in terms of the proportionality between virtue and happiness (Kleingeld 1995: 108).

³ See Willaschek 2010 for a discussion of the postulates.

⁴ The argument in this essay elaborates and partially modifies the account I sketched in outline in Kleingeld 1995: 96–7.

sound understanding” and that it needs not so much to be taught as only to be clarified (*GMS* 4:397). As the title of the first section indicates, Kant starts his argument in the *Groundwork* from “common moral rational cognition”.

In his review of the *Groundwork* Pistorius criticizes Kant for proceeding in this way. He complains that Kant should have first explained what he means by ‘good’, and that an appeal to general public agreement can never be philosophically decisive. Pistorius asks: “What is good anyway?” (*Was ist überhaupt gut?*). This question is ambiguous and could mean “what does ‘good’ mean?” or “which objects are good?” It seems that Pistorius has both in mind. He writes:

“In this regard I wish the author had liked to discuss first of all the general concept of what is good, and to determine more precisely what he understands by it; because obviously, we would first have to agree on this before we can make out anything concerning the absolute value of a good will. Therefore, I am entitled to ask first: What is good anyway, and what is a good will in particular? Is it possible to conceive of a will that is good in itself and regarded without relation to any object? If one says: good is that which is generally approved and valued, then I am permitted to ask further why it is approved and valued, does that happen rightly [mit Recht] and with reason [mit Grunde] or not? General unanimous approval, if this would occur or be possible on anything, would never be able to count as the ultimate decisive reason for a philosophical researcher” (Pistorius, *Rezension der Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 449).⁵

Pistorius criticizes Kant for following a bad method. He claims that we cannot determine whether a will is good unless we have first determined what is good, and that we cannot determine what is good unless we have first settled on a definition of ‘good’.

Pistorius has the impression that Kant’s appeal to widespread intuitions about the unconditional goodness of a good will, in the first section of the *Groundwork*, implies that he develops his moral theory on this basis. This, Pistorius claims in the quoted passage, is bad philosophy: morality cannot be grounded in mere intuitions that just happen to be widespread. A philosophical grounding of morality should be able to provide an account of what is good *and why*. It should be able to provide the *reason* why something that is widely claimed to be good is indeed *rightly* regarded as good. Anything less is beneath the professional standards of philosophy.

Furthermore, Pistorius believes that it is impossible, without the help of “material” presuppositions, to provide such an account of what is morally good. He asserts that we cannot decide whether a will is indeed good except by reference to the goodness of the *object* or *purpose* of this will. If lawfulness as such were suffi-

⁵ The translations of the quoted passages from Pistorius’ review are my own.

cient to make a will good, Pistorius adds, then a will could be called good even if it obeyed a bad law, and this would be absurd. Therefore, he writes,

“it must be a good principle, a good law, obedience to which makes a will good. [...] we must finally arrive at some object or at the final end of the law, and we must also make use of the material [aspect], because we cannot make do with the formal [aspect] of either the will or the law” (Pistorius, *Rezension der Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*, 449).

Kant feels the sting of Pistorius’ criticisms and replies extensively in the second chapter of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, addressing the question “what is good?” in both senses.⁶ In response to the call for conceptual clarification, he refers to the German semantic distinction between “the good” (*das Gute*) and “well-being” (*das Wohl*) (*KpV* 5:59–60). Other languages, such as Latin, do not have separate words for these, which leads to confusion, Kant argues, because saying that an action is good (or evil) is fundamentally different from saying that it serves our well-being (or our ill-being). In the latter case, we say something about the expected effects of an action on our *feeling* of pleasure or displeasure. To say that some course of action is *good*, by contrast, is to say that there is sufficient *reason* to act in this way. This is true regardless of whether the action is judged good in light of some antecedent end or good in itself (*KpV* 5:58). In both cases, the question whether an action is good differs from the question whether I regard it as conducive to pleasure. Thus, I may decide to take a course of action towards which I feel aversion, because on the basis of practical reasoning I recognize that doing so is good. Kant gives the example of someone who needs to undergo surgery: he regards this as an *ill* (*Übel*) and as highly unpleasant; yet on the basis of his reasoning he nevertheless declares it to be *good* to undergo it (*KpV* 5:61).

Given the conceptual distinction between the good and the pleasant, and given the fact that the judgment that an action is good – whether good in light of an antecedent end or good in itself (morally, unconditionally, absolutely) – requires reference to reasons for action, it follows that it is impossible to ground a moral theory in a conception of the good that somehow *precedes* rational standards. Unless we can give a *reason* in support, the assertion that a certain object is morally good would be merely arbitrary – philosophical footstamping without rational warrant. If the assertion is grounded in feeling, moreover, the alleged good would actually be pleasant, and it would not deserve to be called good – let alone absolutely and unconditionally good. In order for something to deserve being called *morally good*, therefore, we need to be able to indicate *why* it is good,

⁶ See Kant’s comment in the Preface, *KpV* 5:9.

and such an account necessarily has to rely on rational standards. Therefore, morality cannot be grounded in a 'material' conception of the good, independently from underlying rational criteria. Instead, as Kant claims to have shown in the first chapter of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, the principle of morality is a formal a priori principle of pure practical reason itself.

Once the principle of morality has been established, however, Kant argues, this principle can be used to develop an account of what is morally good. This is what he calls the "paradox of method" in a critique of practical reason (*KpV* 5:62–3). This paradox consists in the fact that it is impossible for a conception of the good to *ground* moral principles, and that the conception of the good must instead *follow* the determination of moral principles. He adds that this methodological insight explains why he starts his *Critique of Practical Reason* by considering moral principles, in the first chapter – showing both that no material principle qualifies as a suitable basis for a moral law and that an a priori principle of pure practical reason does qualify as the moral law – and why he discusses the notion of the good only afterwards, in the subsequent chapter.

What, then, is the good, on his conception? The good is what we have reason to do, whether conditionally (dependent on antecedent ends) or unconditionally (morally, absolutely). Strictly speaking, the object of practical reason is always an action or a way of acting, and never a thing (*KpV* 5:57, 60). Actions, in turn, may be directed to the realization of something, of course. In such cases, the *object of practical reason* is the action, and the *object of the action* is the realization of the thing. If the action is good, then the object of the action may also be called good by virtue of the goodness of the action. In that case, the goodness of the object of the action derives from the goodness of the action.

The object of *pure* practical reason is that which is good "absolutely" and "in every respect and without any further condition". Again, strictly speaking this is a "way of acting" (*Handlungsart*), not a thing (*Sache*) (*KpV* 5:60), because it is that way of acting which it is *morally possible to will* (*KpV* 5:58). Whether it is *physically possible* to act in such a manner or achieve the end at which the action is directed, is a different matter (*KpV* 5:57–8). In other words, Kant equates the question whether an action is *morally good* with the question whether it is an *object of pure practical reason* and with the question "whether we are allowed to will [*wollen dürfen*] an action which is directed to the existence of an object if the object were within our power" (*KpV* 5:58, translation altered). In other words, morally good action is action under the guidance of the moral law.

The upshot of Kant's account of the good, for the question regarding the moral status of happiness, is the following. Promoting happiness is *morally good* (that is, it is an object of *pure* practical reason) if and only if it is morally allowed to will it. Furthermore, the mere fact that we desire our own happiness

does not justify calling happiness *good* – it does not even justify calling it a “non-moral good”.

2 From the Good to the Highest Good

In the Dialectic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant proceeds to a discussion of the “highest good”, which he defines as the “unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason” (*KpV* 5:108). In the Analytic, Kant determined the *good in itself* formally as *the object* of pure practical reason, that is, as action under the guidance of the moral law. He now determines the *highest good* as *the unconditioned totality of the object* of pure practical reason (*KpV* 5:108). On the basis of the conception of the object of pure practical reason as action under the guidance of the moral law, the *highest good* is the world in which all rational agents universally act under the guidance of the moral law. What would the world be like, if every moral subject always acted as the Categorical Imperative demands?

According to Kant, this is a natural question for finite rational beings to ask. Reason always seeks the unconditioned, striving – also in its practical employment – to establish systematic unity and totality (see Watkins 2010; Kleingeld 1998a). In this case reason forms the idea of a moral world, by synthesizing the totality of moral demands into a single moral ideal (*KrV* A808/B836). Kant argues that the resulting notion of a moral world, as the highest good, has two elements. First of all, it includes virtue, as the “supreme” good, that is, as that which is unconditionally good. In order to be the “complete” good, however, Kant adds, the highest good must also include happiness. The two elements are to be connected in such a way that the first is the cause of the second (*KpV* 5:110).

It is not surprising that Kant designates virtue as the “supreme” good. The highest good is conceived as a world in which all agents act morally, so virtue is necessarily part of it. Moreover, moral agents have the duty to strive for their own perfection, so doing so is clearly a morally *good* way of acting and virtue is clearly an object of pure practical reason. Hence, universal virtue is included in the “absolute totality” of the “object of pure practical reason”.

As mentioned in the introduction, Kant’s account of the highest good has been the target of many objections, however, because of his inclusion of happiness into the notion of the highest good and because of his claim that it is a duty to promote the highest good. How can happiness be designated as *good*, rather than as pleasant? Moreover, is it consistent for Kant to claim that it is a *duty* to promote the highest good if the latter includes happiness? I shall address these questions in turn, starting with Kant’s inclusion of happiness in the highest good.

Several strategies for defending Kant's inclusion of happiness in the highest good are found in the literature. Some authors have argued that happiness, in the highest good, is *limited* to the satisfaction of one's morally *permissible* ends (Reath 1988), which means that its inclusion does not run counter to moral demands. Others have argued that we regard virtue alone as less good than virtue plus happiness, because we desire happiness, and therefore – so the argument goes – the *highest* good must also include happiness (this line of reasoning is suggested, among others, by Beiser 2006: 595). On both of these interpretations, however, happiness is included on the basis of the expectation of its *agreeableness*, and not because of its moral *goodness*. Moreover, if happiness is included in the highest good on the basis of our desire for it – even if this desire is limited to what is morally permissible – this still makes it hard to see how we could have a *duty* to promote the highest good.⁷

A very different strategy for defending Kant's inclusion of happiness in the highest good could be thought to be possible on the grounds that Kant argues that it is a *duty* – albeit an “indirect” one – to promote one's *own* happiness insofar as it is necessary for the sake of morality (*KpV* 5:93; *GMS* 4:399). If promoting one's own happiness (even if only to a degree) is a duty, then this would seem to warrant designating happiness as *good*. Nevertheless, this strategy for defending the inclusion of happiness in the highest good does not succeed. Kant defends the indirect duty to promote one's own happiness on the basis of the fact that one may be tempted to violate the moral law if even one's most basic human needs are not met. The concept of the highest good as a moral world, however, is derived exactly by *abstracting* from such temptations (*KrV* A808/B836); its first element is perfect virtue. Therefore, the indirect duty to promote one's own happiness (to a certain degree) cannot explain the inclusion of happiness in the highest good.

Furthermore, the indirect duty to promote one's own happiness is *limited* to the degree that doing so is required for the sake of morality. By contrast, Kant's definition of happiness includes the *complete* realization of *all* of an agent's ends. In the *Dialectic of the Critique of Practical Reason*, he defines happiness as follows:

⁷ An additional difficulty for this strategy is that if happiness is included in the highest good on the grounds that virtue-plus-happiness is preferable to virtue-without-happiness, this does not explain why Kant calls the relation between virtue and happiness in the moral world a necessary *causal connection*. For happiness might then in principle also be brought about by other means than by virtuous action. It could, for example, be regarded as a reward or supplement distributed by God (see Beiser 2006: 595–9).

“Happiness is the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence *everything goes according to his wish and will*, and rests, therefore, on the harmony of nature with his whole end as well as with the essential determining ground of his will” (*KpV* 5:124).

This definition is important in two other respects as well. First, Kant defines happiness in terms of the harmony between an agent’s ends and the state of the world, not in terms of how the agent feels. Agents count as happy when things go the way they want them to go. Second, the reference to “essential determining grounds of the will” indicates that happiness should not be understood merely as a matter of the satisfaction of morally permissible contingent desires. When happiness is conceived as element of the highest good, that is, as the happiness of *virtuous* agents, it also includes the realization of their *moral* ends.

This, in turn, suggests a different strategy for making sense of Kant’s inclusion of happiness in the highest good, a strategy which yields a rather straightforward explanation. If we conceive of that which is *morally good* as the object of *pure* practical reason, and of *the highest good* as the “unconditioned totality” of this object, then the highest good is, as Kant puts it in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, the “world [which one] would *create*, were this in [one’s] power, under the guidance of practical reason” (*RGV* 6:5). The highest good, then, is the world that all moral agents, acting under the direction of the moral law, bring into existence when it is in their power to realize the object of their actions. In order to know what this world comprises, therefore, we should examine what morality demands that we do; that is, we should look to our list of duties. This list includes our own moral perfection first of all, of course, and, as we saw above, Kant includes virtue in the highest good. It is also the *duty* of every moral agent, however, to promote the *happiness* of others by adopting others’ (permissible) ends as their own. Kant argues on many occasions that promoting the happiness of others is a duty (*KpV* 5:34–5; *GMS* 4:423; *MS* 6:385–8, 453). And in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant designates “one’s own perfection” and the “happiness of others” as the two “ends that are at the same time duties” (*MS* 6:385–8).

If it is a *moral duty* to promote the happiness of *others*, then the highest good, conceived as an ideal moral world populated by virtuous agents, does include the happiness of *all*. In a moral world, I promote the happiness of others, and others promote mine. The happiness of each is good in the eyes of the others, and *vice versa*. This means that the virtuous agents in this world collectively aim at the happiness of *all*.⁸ In this way, the inclusion of happiness in the highest

⁸ This duty is restricted to promoting the morally *permissible* ends of others, and so it might seem to lead to the problem that the others’ conception of their happiness comprises more

good can be defended on the grounds that the moral law demands that it be promoted. This in turn means that happiness, brought about by virtuous action, is indeed morally *good* and not merely pleasant.⁹

This interpretation of Kant's grounds for including happiness into the highest good is confirmed by passages in which Kant says as much. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant describes the highest good in terms of a moral world in which rational beings, "under the guidance of such [moral] principles, would themselves be the authors both of their own enduring welfare and at the same time that of others" (*KrV* A809/B837). This world is a "system of self-rewarding morality", and it is an idea "the realization of which rests on the condition that *everyone* do what he should" (*KrV* A809/B837). The rational inhabitants of this world are virtuous: they all act under the guidance of moral principles, and their virtuous activity *causes* general happiness.

If happiness is included in the highest good on the grounds of duty, this also explains Kant's use of *causal* language describing the relation between virtue and happiness. It is often overlooked that Kant calls happiness, as component of the highest good as a moral world, an "effect" or "result" of virtue (*KpV* 5:115, 119; *RGV* 6:7n.), as being "caused" by virtue (*KpV* 5:111, 114). These expressions suggest that happiness is indeed conceived as the end and the result of virtuous action.¹⁰

In sum, the highest good, when conceived as a moral world, is the world that moral agents would bring into existence if their agency faced no obstacles, that is, if all moral agents were fully virtuous and their actions would achieve their moral ends. The highest good includes happiness because morality demands that we make the happiness of others our end, while making it a duty on the part of others to promote ours (as part of their duty to promote the happiness of others). Thus conceived, the idea of the highest good as comprising both virtue

than moral agents are willing to endorse. Because Kant conceives the agents in the ideal moral world as fully virtuous, however, these perfect agents will not have morally impermissible ends, and so this problem does not emerge.

9 Importantly, this point also sheds light on Kant's inclusion of happiness in the notion of the highest good "in a person". Kant justifies this on the grounds that a virtuous person's happiness is good in the eyes of *another* rational being who is impartial and perfect. Here, too, the virtuous person's happiness is called morally good because the *other* imagined rational being regards the virtuous person as an end and wills the virtuous person's happiness (*KpV* 5:110).

10 This is not the *only* way in which Kant speaks of the connection of virtue and happiness: when discussing the highest good for an *individual* (the highest good "in a person", *KpV* 5:110), Kant mentions God as the cause of happiness (e.g., *KrV* A810/B838, A812/B840). But as mentioned in the introduction, in this essay I focus on the notion of the highest good as a moral world.

and happiness is defined completely in terms of that which is morally good, that is, in terms of action under the guidance of the moral law.

On this interpretation, developing the idea of the highest good requires a specific form of rational activity, namely, thinking through what morality requires and then *synthesizing* this into a single ideal. It requires determining systematically what way of acting the moral law requires, which leads to the insight that moral agency can be brought under the most general headings of pursuing our own moral perfection and the happiness of others. The idea of the highest good is developed by pure practical reason, when it extends itself “beyond observance of the formal law to production of an object (the highest good)”, that is, when it conceives of the world that universal moral agency would realize and then conceives that world as its final end (*Gemeinspruch* 8:280n.; cf. *RGV* 6:7n.). The idea of the highest good is formed by thinking through which duties the application of the moral law would yield, and then developing the idea of the world that would be brought into existence by universal virtue.¹¹ It is an idea that “rises out of morality and is not its foundation; it is an end which to make one’s own already presupposes ethical principles” (*RGV* 6:5).

3 The Duty to Promote the Highest Good

Kant’s claim that it is a *duty* to promote the highest good is, on the face of it, very puzzling, even when it is related to a moral world instead of to a proportional relation between individual virtue and happiness. It raises the question whether this duty is just another way of saying that we have a duty to obey the Categorical Imperative, or whether it goes beyond this. On the one hand, it would seem that it cannot be an additional duty, over and above the duty to obey the Categorical Imperative. If it were, this would seem to imply that the latter is not fully sufficient as a guide in moral matters after all, because there would be at least one duty in addition to what it tells us to do. On the other hand, if the duty to promote the highest good does not go beyond the duty to obey the Categorical Imperative, then what is the point of mentioning this duty at all? Kant’s argument regarding these matters is very brief, and any interpretation of it will have to rely not merely on textual evidence but also on philosophical (re)construction.

¹¹ Relatedly, Kant argues not merely that every rational agent has a duty to promote the highest good, but also that this duty is a duty of the human race towards itself (*RGV* 6:97).

Kant claims that the Categorical Imperative commands that we promote the highest good,¹² but he does not actually spell out the details of the justification of this claim. At first sight it is confusing that he claims that this obligation is based on the Categorical Imperative while also insisting that it is not contained in it or in our particular duties. For example, Kant writes:

“[the claim that humans ought to make the highest good their end] goes beyond the concept of the duties in this world, and adds a consequence (an effect) of these duties that is not contained in the moral laws and cannot, therefore, be developed out of these laws analytically” (*RGV* 6:7n., translation modified).

Here he claims that the duty to promote the highest good “goes beyond” the moral laws: it “adds a consequence” that is “not contained in the moral laws”. Similarly, in “On the Common Saying”, Kant writes:

“The need for a final end assigned by pure reason and comprehending the whole of all ends under one principle (a world as the highest good and possible also through our cooperation) is a need of an unselfish will *extending* itself beyond observance of the formal law to production of an object (the highest good)” (*Gemeinspruch* 8:280n.).

Again Kant speaks of an “extension” that goes “beyond” observing the formal (moral) law. This way of putting it presents two difficulties. First, Kant’s statement that this duty adds something that is “not contained” in the “formal law” (i.e., the moral law) seems to suggest that the duty to promote the highest good is at least partially based on something other than the moral law. If the claim is indeed that there is another source of moral duties, this would run counter to the results of the *Groundwork* and the Analytic of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Second, Kant’s appeal to a “need” to motivate the “extension” seems to be at least as problematic. It seems to indicate that the duty is indeed based on a consideration that is foreign to the rest of Kant’s moral theory, because mere appeal to needs does not suffice to ground moral duties. Given that Kant seems to view the duty to promote the highest good as justified by a need (albeit a “need of the will”) and that he writes that this duty cannot be analytically derived from the formal principle of morality, the duty seems to be on shaky ground.

Some commentators have suggested that the duty to promote the highest good can be defended in terms of its moral usefulness. They suggest that the duty to promote the highest good might be justified by the fact that promoting a moral world would bring about the social conditions needed for realizing fun-

12 *KpV* 5:113, 114, 125, 129; *KU* 5:429, 450, 471n.; *RGV* 6:7n.

damental moral ends in general (Reath 1988: 617 n.30, 619) or that it is the best way to promote virtue within ourselves (Fugate 2014: 151). The problem with any justification of the duty to promote the highest good in terms of some other, more fundamental moral endeavor is conceptual: the highest good would not be the *highest* good if promoting it were morally required in the service of something else, even if, in this case, ‘something else’ is obedience to the moral law itself.

Others have suggested that the duty to promote the highest good does not really amount to a special duty at all. Sometimes this is meant as a criticism (Beck 1960: 244–5), but other authors argue, in defense of Kant’s position, that the duty to promote the highest good “coincides” entirely with the duties Kant identifies as an individual’s duties (Engstrom 1992: 776). This interpretation has the hermeneutic disadvantage, however, that it does not explain in what way the duty to promote the highest good goes “beyond” the duties that flow from the Categorical Imperative, as Kant claims it does.

The analysis, in the previous section, of how the idea of the *highest good* is developed on the basis of the concept of the *good*, however, provides the basis for a valid argument in support of the duty to promote the highest good, an argument, moreover, that also explains how this duty goes “beyond” the list of duties that follows from applying the Categorical Imperative. If the highest good is defined as the world that would be brought into existence by universal virtue (if our powers were sufficient to achieve our ends), this implies not only that moral action promotes the highest good, but also that *nothing else* promotes the highest good. For if *virtue* is the supreme condition of the highest good, it is impossible to promote the highest good in any way independently from the Categorical Imperative. In other words, given how the highest good is defined, moral agency does not promote the highest good accidentally, but necessarily. The highest good is brought about through virtuous action and only through virtuous action, as its supreme condition.

Given that acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative necessarily promotes the highest good, and that the highest good cannot be promoted any other way (that is, it cannot be promoted in a non-virtuous manner), we can formulate the following argument:

1. We ought to act in accordance with the Categorical Imperative;
2. Acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative, and only acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative, necessarily promotes the highest good;
3. Therefore, we ought to promote the highest good.

The second premise requires a good deal of further clarification, however, especially regarding the nature of the connection between acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative and promoting the highest good. As stated, this premise could seem to posit an *analytic* connection. If acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative is simply synonymous with promoting the highest good, then the connection is analytic. In that case, the argument goes through, but the duty in the conclusion does not go “beyond” the duty expressed in the first premise. “Promoting the highest good” would be just another way of saying “acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative”. As is perfectly clear from the passages quoted above, however, Kant explicitly claims that the duty to promote the highest good *cannot* be derived analytically from the duty to act in accordance with the Categorical Imperative.

On the other hand, if the connection between acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative and promoting the highest good is not analytic, it could seem *contingent*, and then the argument would not go through. If acting in accordance with the Categorical Imperative merely contingently leads to the highest good, then the deontic status of the first premise does not transfer to the third. An example helps to clarify this: If I have a duty to help others in need, and if, when I do help others in need they (contingently) happen to give me flowers with a thank-you note, it does not follow that I have a duty to make others give me flowers with a thank-you note. This is why the second premise includes “necessarily”.

In other words, if the connection between obedience to the Categorical Imperative and promoting the highest good is analytic, the conclusion is valid but the latter does not go beyond the former; and if the connection is contingent, the argument is not valid and does not lead to a duty to promote the highest good.

To avoid both results, the connection stated in the second premise needs to be synthetic and yet necessary (a priori). This is precisely Kant’s contention, however. He writes:

“[T]hat every human being ought to make the highest possible *good* in the world his own *final end* is a synthetic practical proposition a priori, that is, an objective-practical proposition given through pure reason” (*RGV* 6:7n., translation altered).

On the basis of the analysis in the previous section, we are now in a position to make sense of this statement. Because the idea of the highest good is constructed on the basis of the Categorical Imperative itself, the highest good is *necessarily* the result of action in accordance with the Categorical Imperative. The connection is nevertheless *synthetic* because one cannot derive the notion of the highest good by analyzing the Categorical Imperative itself. This is because the idea is developed through a synthesizing operation that involves first conceiving

of everything the Categorical Imperative demands – that is, the moral duties it imposes on us – and then taking the result together into a complete whole. In this sense it is an extension “beyond” the Categorical Imperative.

An analogy may help to make this clearer. Suppose my boss commands that I do what she says. She first gives me one task, and then another, and so on. First she tells me to make a wheel, and then another wheel; then she tells me to weld one metal tube to another tube, at an odd angle; then she tells me to weld a third tube to the first two, and on and on. I may complete each of my tasks just like that, seeing myself as simply following the formal command to “do what she says”, and as carrying out the specific duties of making one wheel, then another, then welding some tubes, and so on. But it would be natural for me to start wondering what my activities are eventually going to amount to – where all of this is going. Knowing the answer would change my understanding of what I am doing. I cannot derive the answer to this question from the injunction to “do what she says”, however. The imperative is merely formal and does not allow the inference to any specific end my boss has in mind. Moreover, a partial list of assignments would leave open many possible outcomes. At the start I might still think that I need to make a large number of wheels, or a bicycle trailer, or a modern work of art. Only once I see the *complete* list of assignments and mentally put all the steps together does it become possible for me to see that I am, in this example, building a *bicycle*. It then becomes possible for me to conceive of each of the partial tasks as contributions to the larger project of building a bicycle by following the specific steps. This project goes *beyond* the formal imperative to “do what she says” and the individual assignments my boss gives me, because it takes the list of concrete tasks as a whole, synthesizing the individual tasks into the overall project of building a bicycle. This conception of the larger project is not analytically contained in the formal requirement to “do what she says”. It “broadens” and “extends” my perspective as an agent from merely doing what she says, completing the individual assignments one by one, to a focus on the final end – I should build a bicycle. Furthermore, this final end is not contingently related to the requirement to do what she says, because the bicycle is a *necessary* consequence of following all the steps she lists (after all, the very end of building a bicycle was established on the basis of the list of steps). Finally, recognizing the overall end of my following the list of particular assignments does not give me license to build just any bicycle in whatever way I see fit. Rather, my task is to build a bicycle following this particular list of steps, by doing what my boss tells me to do.

The analogy is not perfect, of course, because my boss’s imperative is a heteronomous command, it is directed at me rather than at all rational beings, and the bicycle is a product that will have independent existence once it is built (whereas a moral world, because it requires virtue, requires an ongoing effort).

Yet there is an illuminating structural similarity between this example and the duty to promote the highest good. The duty to promote the highest good cannot analytically be derived from the formal Categorical Imperative as such. Only once we conceive of the absolute totality of everything that is morally demanded by the Categorical Imperative do we come to conceive of the highest good as the final end of moral agency. This gives us a new sense of purpose and a new understanding of what we are doing that goes *beyond* the formal command to obey the Categorical Imperative and our list of specific duties taken one by one. Just as the list of partial assignments, taken together as a whole, yields the assignment to “build a bicycle (by doing what she says)”, the absolute totality of all moral duties of all agents, taken together as a whole, yields the duty to promote the highest good (via the argument specified above). Recognizing this requires the distinctive reflective operation of *synthesizing* the “absolute totality” of the object of pure practical reason. This procedure explains why the synthetic relation between the Categorical Imperative and the duty to promote the highest good is not merely contingent but necessary.

The example also illuminates why the duty to promote the highest good does indeed go beyond the Categorical Imperative without circumventing it. When I am faced with a formal meta-command (to do what my boss says) and a long list of discrete tasks, finding out at some point during the process of assembly (but before the end) that I am to build a bicycle does add essential new information about what my assignment consists in, without adding an additional step to the list. “Build a bicycle (by doing what she says)” goes *beyond* the assignment to “do what she says”, without introducing an additional assignment that is generated independently from my boss’s general demand that I do what she says. Similarly, from my perspective as an agent who ought to act in accordance with the Categorical Imperative and who is faced with a long list of discrete moral duties, finding out that I am to promote the highest good does add new information, without adding another separate duty to my list. As Kant put it,

“harmonizing with this final end [viz., the highest good] does not increase the number of morality’s duties but rather provides these with a special point of reference for the unification of all ends” (*RGV* 6:5, translation altered).

One final issue that still needs to be addressed is Kant’s claim that the conception of the highest good is formed on the basis of a ‘need’. As became clear above, Kant writes that the conception of the highest good springs from the will’s “need for a final end” (*Gemeinspruch* 8:280n.). Elsewhere, Kant claims it

“is one of the inescapable limitations of human beings and of their practical faculty of reason (perhaps of that faculty in all other worldly beings as well) to be concerned in every action with its result, seeking something in it that might serve them as an end [...]” (RGV 6:7n.).

The fact that Kant calls this tendency an “inescapable limitation” of human beings might make it sound like a regrettable feature, an anthropologically based shortcoming it is unfortunately impossible to get rid of. If this is how the comment should be read, this might still be seen as causing trouble for Kant’s argument that it is a duty to promote the highest good. However, as the parenthetical comment and Kant’s mention of practical reason make clear, the limitation Kant has in mind is tied to the nature of *reason*, and to human nature only insofar as humans are finite rational beings – not to contingent sensible needs. This relates Kant’s comment to his broader description of reason as having “needs” and “interests” that it cannot dismiss (cp. *KrV* Avii), and in particular to his description of reason as striving for the unconditioned. The “need” of the will – and it is important to remember that Kant equates the will with practical reason – is, then, best understood against this background of Kant’s conception of the nature of reason itself. In the Dialectic of the first Critique, Kant provides an account of the ideas of speculative reason as based on reason’s “need” for systematic unity and completeness (*KrV* Avii, A796/B824). In the Dialectic of the second Critique, the same *rational* tendency leads to the idea of the highest good. The conception of the highest good does not spring from a sensible need, but, rather, from a tendency that Kant regards as characteristic for reason as such, whether in its speculative or its practical employment.¹³

In sum, on the basis of Kant’s account of the good we can explain Kant’s inclusion of happiness in the highest good – at least when the highest good is conceived as a moral world, which is the conception I focus on in this essay. On the interpretation I have argued for, happiness is *morally good* insofar as (and only insofar as) moral agents have a duty to promote each other’s happiness. Happiness is *included in the highest good* because the fully virtuous agents in this “moral world” collectively bring about the happiness of all. On the basis of this interpretation, it is possible to reconstruct a logically valid argument, with premises Kant clearly endorses, in support of his claim that it is a duty to promote the highest good. Finally, this interpretation explains the sense in which

13 On Kant’s terminology of ‘needs’ and ‘interests’ of theoretical and practical reason, see Kleingeld 1998a and 1998b.

this duty goes beyond obedience to the Categorical Imperative without increasing the number of our duties.¹⁴

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