

Kant's Postulate of the Immortality of the Soul

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ABSTRACT: In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant grounds his postulate for the immortality of the soul on the presupposed practical necessity of the will's endless progress toward complete conformity with the moral law. Given the important role that this postulate plays in Kant's ethical and political philosophy, it is hard to understand why it has received relatively little attention. It is even more surprising considering the attention given to his other postulates of practical reason: the existence of God and freedom. The project of this paper is to examine Kant's postulate of the immortality of the soul, examine critiques of this argument, and show why the argument succeeds in showing that belief in the moral law also obligates one to believe in the soul's immortality.

IN THE *CRITIQUE of Practical Reason*,¹ Kant grounds his postulate for the immortality of the soul on the presupposed practical necessity of the will's endless progress toward complete conformity with the moral law. Given the important role that this postulate plays in Kant's ethical and political philosophy, it is hard to understand

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All in-text citations of Kant's work use the volume and page number of the standard *Akademie* edition (*Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, German Academy of Sciences, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–). Translations of Kant's work in the text are from the following sources (in alphabetical order): *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (CPI), trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000); "Critique of Practical Reason" (CPr), trans. Mary Gregor in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999); *Critique of Pure Reason* (CPu), trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Critique of Pure Reason* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1998); "The End of All Things" (End), trans. Allen Wood in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996); "Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals" (Gr), trans. by Mary Gregor in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999); *Lectures on Metaphysics* (LM), trans. by Karl Ameriks and Steve Naragon in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Lectures on Metaphysics* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001); "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion" (LR), trans. by Allen Wood in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996); "The Metaphysics of Morals" (MM), trans. by Mary Gregor in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999); "Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics" (P), trans. by Paul Carus, revised by James W. Ellington (Indianapolis IN: Hackett, 1977); "Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason" (Rel), trans. by George di Giovanni in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Religion and Rational Theology* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996); "On the Common Saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice" (TP), trans. by Mary Gregor in *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

why it has received relatively little attention. It is even more surprising considering the attention given to his other postulates of practical reason: the existence of God and freedom. My project is to examine Kant's postulate of the immortality of the soul, examine critiques of this argument, and show why the argument succeeds in showing that belief in the moral law also obligates one to believe in the soul's immortality.

The function of this postulate in the second *Critique* is to resolve the dialectic of pure practical reason, the search for the unconditioned object of practical reason. Kant identifies the unconditioned object of pure practical reason,² that which is desired for itself and not for the purpose of attaining anything else, as the highest good. This highest good is the conjunction of virtue, always acting in accordance with the moral law, and happiness, the complete well-being and satisfaction with one's condition (Gr 4:393).³ Since practical reason requires us to aim at the highest good, a connection must exist between virtue and happiness. There are two ways in which these concepts can be connected: either acting in accordance with the moral law and happiness are the same thing, or there exists a causal relationship between the two (CPr 5:111). Kant tells us, however, that both options are *absolutely impossible* (CPr 5:113). The first option involves the claim that these concepts are analytically related. This relationship, however, is impossible because happiness, which is found only *a posteriori*, cannot be the determining ground of the will if it is to attain virtue, for virtue requires that the will be determined *a priori*. Happiness and virtue, therefore, cannot be the same thing. The second option holds that these concepts are synthetic. This relationship, however, is also impossible because happiness arises simply as a consequence of having things go one's way in the sensible world, while morality is the result of a type of causality in the noumenal world. That is, my acting in accordance with the moral law appears to have no bearing on whether or not factors in the sensible world go my way.

The problem of reconciling the relationship between virtue and happiness is the antinomy of practical reason. This antinomy comes about through the apparent

²The *object of the will* is a recurring topic in Kant's philosophy, but one that is not entirely clear. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant begins his discussion of an individual's will with an analysis of desire, a discussion that is mimicked in theorem one of the second *Critique*. When an individual's desire is considered without concern for that which the individual desires, the object of desire or pleasure, desire is will. Kant refers to this, the consideration of desire without concern for the object of desire, as the ground of desire, or will. The ground of desire is the source from which the desire for pleasure, or some object that will ultimately lead to pleasure, arises. Desires, however, are always specific: I desire that bowl of ice cream, I desire knowledge, etc. While desires always entail the desire for something, the ground of desire and object of desire can be considered separately. In an individual's experience, the ground of desire and the object of desire are seen to be united, for our senses cannot distinctly separate them. In essence, the ground of desire and the object of desire can be seen as the passive and active components in willing. The object of the will, therefore, is the object of desire. The will itself is the ground of desire, without any object, or object of the will, being considered—which, of course, is impossible for practical purposes, but useful for theoretical purposes.

³A second, similar definition of happiness is presented in the second *Critique*: 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 (CPr: 5:124, emphasis removed). This definition, while being similar to the one presented in the *Groundwork*, presents us with a number of small differences that, while interesting, will be set aside for the purposes of this examination.

contradiction between the necessity of attaining the highest good and the impossibility of practically assuring our happiness when we act in accordance with the moral law. Simply put, although attaining the "highest good is absolutely required for morality, it appears to be impossible to reach. This conclusion leads Kant to a startling realization: if the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote [the highest good], must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false" (CPr 5:114). If the foundation of Kant's ethical theory is correct, then we know that there must be some way to resolve this antinomy. Postulating the immortality of the soul addresses one component of the antinomy, a rational being's ability to attain virtue (i.e., always acting in accordance with the moral law).⁴

A postulate of practical reason is "a *theoretical* proposition, [although] not demonstrable as such insofar as it is attached inseparably to an *a priori* unconditionally valid *practical* law" (CPr 5:122). Although these postulates proceed from the moral law, Kant suggests that they are not theoretical dogmas (CPr 5:132). Rather, they are "conditions of the necessary objects of a will determined by [the moral] law, that is, of the mere practical use of our pure reason" (CPr 5:4). In attempting to clarify this position, Roger Sullivan suggests that these postulates are assumptions that "our moral reason both entitles and inexorably commands us to believe to be true, for they are required in one way or another by the moral law in our reason."⁵ Christine Korsgaard adds, "Since practical reason supports belief in the postulates, practical reason takes up the metaphysical tasks that theoretical reason had to abandon."⁶ In essence, Kant is claiming that while it is not possible to show that the postulates themselves are true, it is possible to show that our belief in them is rational. In fact, it is not simply that we are able to possess rational belief in the truth of the postulates, but Kant tells us that if we are to take seriously the demand to attain the highest good, then we *must* believe in their truth (CPr 5:132). This understanding is adequate for our purposes, but it is also necessary to understand what role these postulates play in Kant's theory more generally.

From a practical point of view, these postulates amount to a type of knowledge, but the kind of knowledge we get from them, or what Kant uses to justify this claim, is not entirely clear. He believes that we have a great deal of knowledge about what we find in the sensible world, and for a claim to be true in this world means that it fits our sense data relevant to whatever claim is being made. On this issue, Ralph Walker notes:

The principles of pure understanding are laid down by us as standards constitutive of the world of appearances, and it is to this that they owe their status as synthetic *a priori* truths. Now the postulates of pure practical reason are likewise synthetic *a priori*, though

⁴The second component of the antinomy, a rational being's ability to attain happiness in conjunction with this action in accordance with the moral law, is addressed by Kant's postulate of the existence of God. Immortality, on its own, does not provide us with an answer to the antinomy, but it does provide a necessary piece which ultimately, or so Kant suggests, makes resolving the antinomy possible.

⁵Roger J. Sullivan, *Immanuel Kant's Moral Theory* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989), p. 142.

⁶Christine Korsgaard, *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), p. 30.

they do not belong to the world of appearances. They have a similar part to play: they are constitutive not of the phenomenal world but of what we might call the moral world. The moral world is a construction not out of our sensory evidence but of those beliefs which morality, or pure practical reason, requires in us.⁷

Walker is not suggesting that these postulates, by coming from all of us, yet from each one of us, have some existence in the sensible world. Rather, they are objects that make up the moral world, a world that is shared by all rational individuals. Therefore, because we are all members of this moral world we must believe in their truth.

Understanding the role that these postulates of practical reason play in Kant's philosophy, we can now turn to immortality itself. Kant's argument, presented at CPR 5:122–5:124, can be constructed as a straight-forward deduction:

1. A will capable of being determined by the moral law has the production of the highest good in the world as its necessary object. *Assumed premise for proof*
2. Complete conformity with the moral law (i.e., one's maxims and dispositions) contains the command to produce the highest good. *Follows from (1)*
3. Complete conformity with the moral law must be possible. *Follows from (2)*
4. Complete conformity with the moral law is holiness. *Definition*
5. Holiness must be possible. *Follows from (3) and (4)*
6. Holiness is a perfection of which no rational being is capable at any moment while existing in the sensible world. *Understood from (4)*
7. Holiness can be found only through an endless progress towards complete conformity with the moral law. *Follows from (5) and (6)*
8. The practical object of the will is this endless progress towards complete conformity with the moral law. *Follows from (1) and (7)*
9. The soul of the rational being is that which wills. *Definition*
10. The endless progress of the will is possible only by presupposing that the soul continues endlessly as well. *Follows from (8) and (9)*
11. It is possible for the will to attain the highest good only through the presupposition of the immortality of the soul. *Follows from (10)*

⁷Ralph C. S. Walker, *Kant* (London UK: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978), p. 139.

12. Therefore, we are morally obligated to believe that the souls of finite, rational beings are immortal.

Follows from (11) and (1)

The focus of the remainder of this discussion will be to determine whether or not this argument is sound. We begin with step (1) of the argument, which is taken from the preceding section in the second *Critique* and has three parts: first, what a will capable of being determined by the moral law is; second, what production of the highest good is; third, what an object of the will is. The object of the will, as noted previously, is what the will desires. In all cases, the object of the will is the “matter of a practical principle” (CPr 5:27), but in some cases the will is determined by empirical principles and cannot provide grounds for universal laws (CPr 5:21). In other cases, when the form of a practical principle is the determining ground of the will, the will is determined by an *a priori* respect for the moral law.⁸

When a will is completely determined by an *a priori* respect for the moral law, then this will is good. The cultivation of a purely good will, however, is not what Kant identifies as the highest good. For Kant, “virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person, and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of the person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the *highest good* of a possible world” (CPr 5:110–11). It is important to note that he presents two different categories of the highest good in this passage: the highest good for a person and the highest good of a possible world. Further, it is this second category that is directly relevant to our discussion of immortality, for, as Kant notes to begin his argument, “The production of the highest good *in the world* is the necessary object of a will determinable by the moral law” (CPr 5:122, emphasis added).

Gordon Michalson attempts to simplify Kant's understanding of the highest good by describing it as “virtue and happiness existing in proper proportion.”⁹ This simplification, however, is not only incomplete, but also appears to conflate the two categories that Kant presents. The highest good for a person is the possession of virtue and happiness. That is, one has attained the highest good when he is both virtuous

⁸The concept of *respect* is both subtle and central to Kant's main problem of explaining how we can have moral experience. Kant's first use of the term appears in a footnote of the *Groundwork*, where he pinpoints this feeling somewhere between the noumenal and phenomenal worlds. Unlike other feelings that are reactions to stimuli in the phenomenal world, respect is stimulated by an individual's own recognition of the moral law within himself. In Kant's words, Immediate determination of the will by means of the law and consciousness of this is called respect (Gr 4:401n). The question that concerns us here is what function respect fulfills in Kant's theory. While explaining its function is difficult because the actions of a noumenal self are outside of time and cannot be observed, respect appears to assist an individual in promoting his own dignity, compelling him to recognize the moral law. In the second *Critique*, Kant writes: Respect is a tribute that we cannot refuse to pay to merit, whether we want to or not; we may indeed withhold it outwardly but we still cannot help feeling it inwardly (CPr 5:77). Ultimately, the possibility of moral accountability turns on this concept of respect—one can be held morally accountable because respect compels him to recognize what the moral law requires, but whether or not an individual acts in accordance with it is a decision of that individual's autonomy. For more on Kantian respect, see William Sokoloff's “Kant and the Paradox of Respect,” *American Journal of Political Science* (2001): 768–79, esp. pp. 770–73.

⁹Gordon Michalson, *Fallen Freedom: Kant on Radical Evil and Moral Regeneration* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), p. 21.

and happy. In this context, Kant presents a robust definition of virtue, where one is virtuous if and only if he *always* acts in accordance with the categorical imperative (i.e., moral law) from moral motivations. However, when it comes to happiness, he tells us explicitly that no “necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of moral laws” (CPr 5:113–14). The highest good for a person, then, is attained when he always acts in accordance with the moral law *and* has things go his way in the world, even though there is no necessary connection between the two. By comparison, the highest good for the world is attained when a perfect relationship between virtue and happiness is exhibited. In this condition, an individual who possesses perfect virtue would attain complete and total happiness; an individual who possesses perfect vice or viciousness would attain the exact opposite; and everyone else in between would receive happiness in proper proportion to his virtue.

Returning to step (1) of the argument, what is left to account for is Kant’s notion of a will capable of being determined by the moral law. Simply put, a will capable of being determined by the moral law is the will of a rational being. What separates rational beings from non-rational beings is the ability to act without simply being determined by the sum of their needs in the sensible world. In other words, a rational being can do something not because he has to, but because he ought to. In this case, one’s will, or the ground of one’s desire to do something, is being determined by an *a priori* respect for the moral law. Finishing this analysis of step (1), it is not enough simply to say that Kant begins postulating the immortality of the soul by starting with a finite rational will subject to the moral law, but that virtue, as an object of this will, is incomplete. Happiness, conjoined with virtue to form the highest good, is also necessary.

Step (2) of the argument follows from (1), for if the will is to produce the highest good, it must be able to conform its maxims and dispositions completely to the moral law. What is now in question is whether this type of complete conformity of the will to the moral law is possible. Kant argues that it is “a duty for us to promote the highest good,” and because we have a duty to act in a certain manner, we are able to act in that manner (CPr 5:125).¹⁰ In other words, one cannot have a moral obligation to perform an action if he is unable to perform that action. In this way, step (3), complete conformity of the will with the moral law must be possible, is seen to follow directly from (2).

The first serious objection to Kant’s argument can be made at step (4), which provides a definition necessary to arrive at his conclusion. Concerning the movement from (3) to (4), Henry Allison observes that there is a “noted shift from virtue to holiness as the required moral component of the highest good.”¹¹ Allison continues, suggesting that even if we were to understand virtue not as holiness, but as the “resolute pursuit of holiness,” Kant’s problem concerning this potential shift is not resolved. He writes:

¹⁰For more on Kant’s philosophy of *I can because I must*, see TP 8:287–88. Specifically, That the human being is aware that he can do this because he ought to discloses within him a depth of divine predispositions and lets him feel, as it were, a holy awe at the greatness and sublimity of his true vocation.

¹¹Henry Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Freedom* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990), p. 172.

What is supposedly required for the realization of the highest good is not simply the pursuit of holiness . . . but rather its actual attainment. Moreover, it is clear that the postulation of immortality is of no help here, since the most that it allows for is the possibility of endless progress. Thus, in his effort to justify this postulate, it appears that Kant shifts unannounced first from virtue to holiness and then from holiness to unending progress in the pursuit of it.¹²

Allison has presented us with two objections, so let us take them one at a time. The first, concerning the movement from (3) to (4), is that there appears to be an unjustified shift from virtue to holiness when examining the content of the highest good, and this shift is not simply a matter of semantics. This objection, however, can be dismissed fairly easily, as it is subject to the same mistake that was made by Michalson. In raising this objection, Allison has conflated Kant's two-fold understanding of the highest good, the highest good for a person and the highest good for a possible world, and thereby makes a category mistake when discussing individual virtue inside of the discussion of immortality. The first step in Kant's argument clearly identifies that what is relevant in the discussion of immortality is not the highest good for a particular person, which is related to virtue, but the highest good in the world, which related to holiness. Virtue never enters into this discussion, and so no unwarranted shift is ever made in his argument from virtue to holiness.

~~The second objection raised by Allison concerns the ability to attain the highest~~ good. Specifically, there appears to be a shift in Kant's argument from actually attaining holiness to simply pursuing holiness. This objection, which appears more problematic than the first, is rooted in Kant's comments concerning holiness, especially those suggesting that holiness "is an idea that can be contained only in an endless progress and its totality, and hence is never fully attained by a creature [in the sensible world]" (CPr 5:123n). However, since Kant's argument concerns immortality as a postulate of practical reason, his focus is on what is possible for finite, rational beings, and this is "only [an] endless progress from lower to highest stages of moral perfection" (CPr 5:123). An individual is morally obligated to make continual progress towards the will's complete conformity with the moral law (i.e., maxims and dispositions). Holiness, however, as discussed in Kant's lecture notes, "is unattainable by man [alone], it is based upon a belief in divine assistance" (LE 27:251). Since one cannot be under a moral obligation to actualize a condition if the power to do so is out of his control, holiness cannot be the final step that one is morally obligated to take. Rather, Kant believes that we must do everything within our power, and then hope that, in the end, we will attain holiness by divine assistance.

Allen Wood concurs with this analysis of Kant's position. He writes, "It is not quite accurate to say that Kant has *substituted* 'endless progress' for 'holiness' as a component of the highest good. For he does say that holiness itself is to be 'found' or 'met with' . . . in an endless progress." He continues, "Kant cannot mean that holiness is actually a term or member of this series, for this would be simply to affirm

¹²Ibid., pp. 172–73.

that holiness is attainable within this progress, which is what Kant has denied. And it could hardly be said that holiness was attained at the *end* of an *endless* progress” (1970: 119). Wood’s observations further support Kant’s movement from (5) to (6), and so it seems incorrect assert that Kant argues that holiness is attained as a result of this endless progress, the crux of Allison’s objection.

To recapitulate the argument thus far, a rational will has the production of virtue and happiness existing in proper proportion as its necessary object. However, the conjunction of complete conformity of the will with the moral law and happiness is not possible because it is holiness, and holiness cannot be attained by sensible, rational beings. This statement is problematic because, as the highest good, it must be possible to attain holiness. Step (6) of the argument, then, shows us how attaining the highest good, as the object of the will, would be possible for rational beings. Specifically, Kant notes, “Since [complete conformity of the will with the moral law] is . . . required as practically necessary, it can only be found in an *endless progress* toward that complete conformity” (CPr 5:122).

The problem remaining is to explain why holiness can be found only in an endless progress. Contrary to the Platonic and some Christian views of the soul, upon death the soul for Kant does not enter a blissful afterlife where it is no longer tempted to do wrong—that is, an afterlife where the soul becomes holy. Rather, as Otfried Höffe notes, the struggle to act morally, contrary to temptations, continues indefinitely after the death of the body.¹³ Therefore, an individual’s will can never become holy on its own because the soul is always tempted to do wrong. What the will can do, however, is hope to continually progress toward holiness through the uninterrupted progress of the soul during and even beyond life (CPr 5:123). Kant adds:

The moral law is holy (inflexible) and demands holiness of morals, although moral perfection that a human being can attain is still only virtue, that is, a disposition conformed with the law *from respect* for law, and thus consciousness of a continuing propensity to transgression or at least impurity, that is, an admixture of many spurious (not moral) motives to observe the law, hence a self-esteem combined with humility; and so . . . nothing remains for a creature but endless progress, though for that very reason he is justified in hoping for his endless duration. (CPr 5:128)

As we have seen, this progress is not asymptotic in the sense that holiness can be found at the end of the endless progress, where one is able to move closer and closer to holiness over time. Rather, the progress is continual, and while an individual cannot hope to ever “be fully adequate to God’s will . . . he can hope to be so in the endlessness of his duration (which God alone can survey)” (CPr 5:123–24).

Step (7) picks up on this point, for if one can never obtain holiness, then while the theoretical object of the will is still holiness, the practical object is the endless pursuit of holiness. It is at this premise, however, where Wood raises a serious objection.

attempts to show how it is possible to attain holiness. Wood writes:

¹³Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant* (Albany NY: State Univ. of New York Press, 1994) p. 203.

It is plain, however, that in order to formulate a postulate which adequately avoids the error of the first antinomy, it will *not* be sufficient for Kant merely to postulate that an eternal progression is possible. He must also indicate how this progression, or the supersensible disposition which corresponds to it, can *count* for the attainment of holiness.¹⁴

An answer to this objection that concerns what would have to count for holiness has already been alluded to. In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant writes, “for God, [endless progress] is the same as actually being a good human being” (Rel 6:47), and, further, “human moral constitution pleasing to God is actually to be found in the [infinite] series” (Rel 6:67n). However, these solutions are not explicitly found in the second *Critique*. Rather, at CPr 5:123, Kant suggests a similar solution to this objection, but his comments are not as explicit as those found in the *Religion* essay.¹⁵ In these passages, a point on which I agree with Sullivan, Kant suggests that we must believe that “commitment to the good principle [would] be regarded by God in his atemporal intuitions ‘as equivalent to possession’ of holiness.”¹⁶

From these passages, however, it is not clear what Kant means when he suggests that we must believe that the infinite progression counts as holiness in the eyes of God, for certainly he cannot be suggesting that God has informed him that this progress is sufficient. In addition to God never being tempted to act contrary to the moral law, Kant also tells us that God is a being of pure reason. In this light, it is necessary to make sense of what Kant means by *in the eyes of God*, or, in his own words, “which God alone can survey” (CPr 5:123). Survey, here, is best understood as *determining the form of* that which is being surveyed. Rewritten, the comment reads: *which the holy will alone can determine the form of*. It is clear that Kant does not believe that an active God-being is looking down upon a will’s infinite progress, and then thinking to itself that this progress is good enough. Rather, God’s existence outside of time allows for this complete survey of an individual’s moral progress to take place.¹⁷ Instead of this progress being seen temporally, God sees it as one, timeless instant. In this way, the holy will is able to determine the form of this moral progress, and assess its completeness, in ways that temporal beings are not.

Further, as rational, sensible beings, individuals cannot survey moral progress in this manner. Therefore, when we act, we should do so in accordance with what we have knowledge of or can rationally hope for, not in accordance with ungrounded or

¹⁴Allen Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1970), pp. 120–21.

¹⁵There is another objection that receives some attention in the literature, but is not significant enough to warrant more than a brief discussion here. Most notably forwarded by C. D. Broad, this objection is directed towards the entire argument. He suggests that the notion of perfection, or reaching some end of an endless series, is contradictory since it appears that perfection can be achieved and not be achieved, at the same time. See his *Fives Types of Ethical Theories* (New York NY: Harcourt Press, 1930), p. 140. As S. Körner points out, however, the weakness of Kant’s argument seems unlikely to exist in this type of logical contradiction, since one can view an infinite series as being complete in mathematics. See his *Kant* (Harmondsworth UK: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 166.

¹⁶Sullivan, p. 142.

¹⁷For more on Kant’s understanding of God as an eternal being, see LR 28: 1043–45.

irrational ideals. This reading is supported by Kant in the section before his comments about God's survey of the endless progress:

In default of [the proposition about the moral vocation of our nature], one either quite degrades the moral law from its *holiness* by making it out to be *lenient* (indulgent) and thus conformed to our convenience, or else strains one's calling as well as one's expectation to an unattainable vocation, namely to a hoped-for full acquisition of holiness of will, and so gets lost in enthusiastic *theosophical* dreams that quite contradict self-knowledge; in both cases, constant *effort* to observe precisely and fully a strict and inflexible command of reason, which is yet not ideal but true, is only hindered. (CPr 5:122)

By trying to understand the specifics of the moral law, something we cannot understand, we only hinder what we are actually able to do (i.e., continual self-progress) by becoming distracted with goals that we substitute for holiness. In other words, Kant's comment that it is God alone who can survey our progress allows us to focus on what we are able to do (i.e., improve ourselves over time) and not on something beyond our abilities (i.e., determining how close we are to holiness). What we may hope, then, is that we are able to improve ourselves indefinitely over time, and this hope is rational if the moral law is real. Infinite progress of the will, which will be coupled with the immortality of the soul, is what we must reasonably hope for, and may reasonably believe, if we desire to be adequate to the holy will.

Arriving at the conclusion of Kant's argument is now fairly straightforward. Step (9) provides us with a definitional understanding of the soul. The concept here is simple enough: in order for there to be a will, there must be something that wills—this something is the soul. This simple understanding of the soul leads to step (10), positing that the endless progress of the will is only possible by presupposing the endless continuation of the soul as well. (10) logically follows from (9) because if the soul must make indefinite progress through willing, then this situation is possible only through the eternal existence of the soul. Therefore, Kant concludes that it is only possible for the will to hope to attain the highest good by presupposing the immortality of the soul, step (11). Kant's conclusion, that we are morally obligated to believe that the souls of finite, rational beings are immortal, follows directly from (11).

Having reached the conclusion of Kant's argument, it is now possible to address an objection that was ignored during our initial discussion. This objection, presented by Yirmiahu Yovel concerns the relation between an individual's body, his existence in the sensible world, and the highest good. He suggests something quite startling about what Kant's theory would force us to believe. Specifically, he argues that the only way the endless progression of the will could take place is through the immortality of the *body*, in addition to the immortality of the soul. Yovel writes, "If virtue is not a holy will but a good disposition in conflict—and the adversary in this conflict is always the natural inclinations—then the attainment of virtue would also require the immortality of the *body*."¹⁸ The important point of this argument is that a being of pure reason, what Yovel argues the individual becomes upon death

¹⁸Yirmiahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980), p. 113.

in Kant's theory, would no longer be subject to temptation. Since Kant claims that the will's endless progress is marked by temptation to act contrary to the moral law, with these temptations coming from natural or sensible inclinations, there must be something that continues with the will that is subjected to these inclinations. Yovel infers from Kant's discussion of the will and immortality that what is subject to these inclinations, specifically in the sensible world, is necessarily the body of the rational being. Therefore, in order for the will Kant describes to be tempted continuously, the body must exist endlessly as well.

One response to Yovel's objection would be that it is no objection at all. His position is that while one may have rational faith in believing that the souls of individuals are immortal, it would be absurd to suggest that their bodies are immortal as well. While Yovel may believe that holding such a position is absurd, this belief is consistent with many Lutheran movements, including Pietism. Franz Albert Schulz, a leading figure of the Pietist community in Königsberg during Kant's time, as well as an individual who personally influenced the religious beliefs of Kant's mother and his family, held this position.¹⁹ Specifically, he believed that an individual's soul was immortal, his body was immortal, and that he would experience everlasting life. Therefore, it could be argued that it is no coincidence that Kant's theory contains some aspects of Lutheran doctrine that greatly influenced those around him.

While such an argument concerning the influences of Pietistic Lutheranism on Kant's philosophy could be made, it appears to be at odds with what we know about Kant historically. As Manfred Kuehn notes, "It is . . . unlikely that Pietism had any fundamental and lasting influence on Kant's philosophy. It is even doubtful that the Pietism of his parents left any significant traces on Kant's intellectual outlook."²⁰ Although Pietism may not have had an influence on Kant's actual philosophical outlook, it is not merely coincidental that these Lutheran elements are present in his writings. Other possible explanations for why Kant incorporated aspects of Lutheranism into his philosophical theory include trying to make his doctrine more comprehensible to a larger audience, as well as trying to placate Frederick William II who was becoming increasingly annoyed by Kant's anti-religious writings.²¹ Whatever the case for including allusions to Lutheranism, what is clear is that Kant has used this language to mask his own beliefs concerning difficult aspects of his philosophy.

In the case of the immortality of the soul, these difficult aspects of Kant's theory address the objection raised by Yovel, as well as similar objections that are based on the process of examining what this future life would look like or where it would take place. Concerning this potential problem of immortality, Kant writes:

Aiming at the highest good . . . lead[s] through the postulates of practical reason to concepts that speculative reason could indeed present as problems but could never solve. Thus it leads to I: the problem in the solution of which speculative reason could do nothing but commit paralogisms (namely, the problem of immortality) because it [i.e., speculative

¹⁹Manfred Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography* (New York NY: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2001), p. 37.

²⁰*Ibid.*, p. 39.

²¹*Ibid.*, pp. 338–39.

reason] lacked the mark of permanence by which to supplement the psychological concept of an ultimate subject, necessarily ascribed to the soul in self-consciousness, so as to make it the real representation of a substance. (CPr 5:132)

Kant's position here is that any attempt to provide an explanation for what the immortality of the soul looks like from a human prospective necessarily goes beyond the limits of our reason. What we do know is that if the moral law is real, then the essence of our being must make endless progress towards holiness. What we do not know, however, and what we cannot know, is what this progress looks like, at least from a human perspective. Therefore, Kant's response to these objections that focus on what it means to say that the soul is immortal is that they are fundamentally misguided. His project was never to prove that the souls of finite, rational beings are immortal, but rather to show that a belief in morality obligates one to have a rational faith in this endless progress, and it is this progress that Kant associates with immortality.

Although Kant believes that an explanation of immortality from a human perspective lies outside the bounds of our reason, he attempts to understand what this progress might look like from the perspective of God. Looking back on the discussion of steps (6) and (7) of the argument, Kant claims that an individual can only hope to attain holiness in the "endlessness of his duration (which God alone can survey)." It was argued that God's existence outside of time allows for a rational being's moral progress to be surveyed as a timeless instant, something which cannot be done by individuals given their temporal existence. This explanation of moral progress appears to lend itself to the claim that, ultimately, moral progress is not part of the temporal world, but rather that it exists outside of time. Edward Caird suggests that this explanation presents a significant problem for Kant's theory. Specifically, if an individual's afterlife is not part of the sensible world in which he lives his life, then Kant encounters a problem of time. This problem is twofold: first, if the afterlife is a continuation of a temporal sequence, then, since that life is not part of the sensible world, it would mean that time is and is not simply a perception made by individuals; second, if this objection is avoided by a claim that the afterlife is not part of a temporal sequence, then we cannot get to immortality through pure reason, and thus it is not a postulate of reason.²²

Caird's argument that the endless progress of the soul would have to take place not only outside of the sensible world, but also inside of time, suggests that time is and is not merely a perception made by individuals. When we look at what Kant has said about the perspectives from which a soul's endless progress is viewed, it is easy to see how his position lends itself to this type of conclusion. When we contemplate our obligation to act in accordance with the moral law, and thereby our obligation to believe that our souls can make endless progress towards the complete conformity with this law, we can only understand this progress as taking place inside of time because our reason does not allow us to view it in any other manner.

²²Edward Caird, *The Critical Philosophy of Immanuel Kant, Volume II* (Glasgow, Scotland: J. Maclehose, 1889), p. 303.

From the perspective of the holy will, however, this progress must appear very different from how we would view it ourselves. As Kant notes, “[God] does not belong to the world at all, but is entirely external to it” (LR 28:1042). If God were not isolated from the world in this manner, and thereby isolated from time, then the world would influence God because one who experiences time experiences change (LR 28:1043). This idea that God could be changed by the world is inconsistent with his nature, which can only be discussed through analogy (CPJ 5:456).²³ In trying to explain God’s existence outside of time, we often characterize it as *eternal existence*. However, as Kant notes, this understanding is still insufficient to capture God’s nature because “if I represent eternity as a duration without a beginning or an end, which is just about the most minimal definition of eternity that I can give, then the concept of time is still mixed with it” (LR 28:1044). Therefore, any understanding of God must include God’s existence outside of time, but the limits of our own reason hinder us from providing an accurate account of what this situation entails.

Ultimately, Caird is correct in arguing that Kant’s account of the soul’s infinite progress views time as both a perception of individuals and not a perception of this nature. As we have seen, however, such an understanding of time is necessary if we are to account for our own experience of time and our limited knowledge of God’s nature. Caird’s objection, therefore, should not be seen as an objection, but rather as an observation that allows us to more fully explain Kant’s understanding of how immortality is viewed by us and by the holy will. Due to the temporal nature of individuals, we can only understand the progress of our souls in temporal language, and so we can only view this process as a gradual progression from bad to better over the course of time.

It is clear, however, that God cannot survey our moral progress in this manner. Although we are unable to claim that we have knowledge of what this progress would look like from God’s perspective, it is possible for us to construct an analogy that is consistent with Kant’s theory. As we have seen, Kant believes that God’s survey of our progress takes place outside of time, and so it could be viewed as one, timeless instant. Additionally, even though it cannot be proved, reason obligates us to believe that the existence of an individual as a rational being does not end once his life on earth is over—this existence must be endless, continuing after bodily death and before bodily life (CPu B415). This position is clarified by Kant in his lecture notes: “The beginning of life is birth; but this is the beginning not of the life of the soul, but rather of the human being. The end of life is death, but this is the end not of the life of the soul, but rather of the human being. Birth, life, and death are thus

²³Kant believes that any true understanding of the nature of God lies outside the bounds of human reason. Therefore, as he explains in the third *Critique*, any attempt we make to understand His nature can only be made through an analogy. He writes, Now in order to avoid a misunderstanding that can easily arise, it is most necessary to mention here, first, that we can *think* these properties of the highest being only by means of an analogy. For how would we investigate its nature, nothing similar to which can be shown to us by experience? Second, that by means of this analogy we only think this being, and do not thereby *cognize* it and attribute anything to it theoretically; for that would be something for the determining power of judgment, from the speculative point of view of our reason, in order to have insight into what the supreme world-cause is *in itself*. But what is at issue here is only what sort of concept we are to form of it given the constitution of our cognitive faculty (CPJ 5:456).

only *states* of the soul” (LM 28:283). Therefore, the soul of a rational being exists before the individual’s life and after his death, and its progress is viewed by God in a timeless instant, or as a single point. In this way, it is possible to draw an analogy between the soul and a monad. While an individual perceives his own moral progress inside of time, and, therefore, perceives that his will gradually changes over the duration of his life, the holy will perceives the will of that individual as it is—either as good, bad, or somewhere in between.

The individual, therefore, after recognizing that he is under an obligation to always act from maxims that are consistent with the moral law, understands that satisfying this obligation requires that it is possible for the soul make continual progress towards complete conformity with the moral law. The function of Kant’s postulates, and specifically his postulate of immortality, is not to *prove* that humans are free, that God exists, or that the souls of rational beings are immortal. Rather, the postulates provide us with reasons that allow us to rationally understand our own moral obligations. In the words of Wood, “Moral belief in immortality is not a ‘doting on the beyond’ but a faith required by our rational pursuit of the final end of our immanent moral strivings.”²⁴ It is this faith that is the grounding of Kant’s ethical philosophy. Therefore, while we do not know whether we are free, God exists, or that our souls are immortal, we do know that if the moral law is real, then we must have rational faith in the reality of the postulates.

²⁴Wood, p. 124.