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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

AN OVERARCHING DEFENSE OF
KANT'S IDEA OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

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For my parents.

Nothing glorifies God more than what is most estimable in the world, respect for his command, observance of the holy duty that his law lays upon us, when there is added to this his magnificent plan of crowning such a beautiful order with corresponding happiness.

Immanuel Kant

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ABSTRACT

The main goal of this dissertation is to develop an overarching defense of Kant's idea of the highest good, against the criticisms pointed out in the English-speaking world, within the framework of the so-called "Beck-Silber controversy."

As it is known, since the second half of the last century, when the "Beck-Silber controversy" started, Kant's idea of the highest good has been subject to a massive attack. These attacks motivated, in turn, the emergence of a counterforce of defenders, a group that I attempt to join through this work. Particularly, I have identified six criticisms against Kant's idea of the highest good, which I have labeled as the problems of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice*, *irrelevance*, and *abandonment*. Thanks to this, we know what a complete defense of Kant's idea of the highest good requires. Now, once with all these criticisms identified, I develop a response to each of them. In that way, I show how Kant's idea of the highest good does not undermine the principle of autonomy; how the highest good has not only a place, but a privileged one in his moral philosophy; how it is possible to promote a world in which happiness is distributed in accordance to virtue; how the problem of injustice is both ungrounded and overestimated; how the highest good is actually relevant for morality; and finally, that Kant did not abandon his idea of the highest good at the end of his life. In this way, I hope having saved the highest good as part of Kant's ethics.

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this dissertation is to develop an overarching defense of Kant's idea of the highest good (that ideal world in which virtue is crowned with happiness) against the criticisms pointed out in the English-speaking world, within the framework of the so-called "Beck-Silber controversy."

As it is known, since the second half of the last century, when the "Beck-Silber controversy" started, Kant's idea of the highest good has been subject to a massive attack. These attacks motivated, in turn, the emergence of a counterforce of defenders, a group that I attempt to join through this work. Now, considering the large amount of secondary literature produced in relation to this topic, and in relation to Kant's philosophy in general, one may ask whether there is something else to say about it. Has not the topic been already exhausted? This I deny, mainly for three reasons.

First, because many of the commentaries found in the secondary literature, instead of clarifying Kant's idea of the highest good, distort it to the extreme in which one wonders whether there is some of Kant's philosophy left. Kant's idea of the highest good, therefore, is always at risk of being buried under these misleading interpretations. Some of the interpretations, for sure, are instead illuminating, working as a good way of access to Kant's idea of the highest good, and to those I am thankful. Nonetheless, if it is still possible to develop a fresh close reading of Kant's idea of the highest good, as I will try in Chapter I, then the risk of burying it is, at least, diminished.

Second, because even though the discussion around this topic is still unified under the umbrella of the “Beck-Silber controversy,” and although Mathew Caswell has, in addition, helpfully divided the interpreters in four groups (the “critics,” the “revisionists,” the “secularizers,” and the “maximalists”) , it is still possible to put more order over the discussion, concretely by identifying and labeling all the criticisms posited against Kant’s idea of the highest good, something that is lacking and that makes it harder, if not impossible, to elaborate not only a defense, but an overarching defense of it. As a matter of fact, in many instances the defenders seem to jump from one criticism to another, without clarifying if the problems at stake are reducible to the supposed irrelevance of the highest good for ethical purposes, or if each criticism deserves a separate response, as is finally the case. This lack of systematization of the criticisms has misled many to say that by responding to the problem of irrelevance the highest good is saved, which is not true. And this is precisely what I am offering in Chapter II: a systematization of the criticisms, a precondition for the referred to overarching defense. Particularly, I have identified six criticisms against Kant’s idea of the highest good, which I have labeled as the problems of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice*, *irrelevance*, and *abandonment*. Thanks to this, we know what a complete defense of Kant’s idea of the highest good requires.

Third, because although some of the criticisms have been already contested in a successful way by the defenders (that is, for instance, the case of the problems of *heteronomy* and *abandonment*), it is still possible to develop new responses to some of them, something that I undertake in Chapter III.

This dissertation, therefore, is divided in three Chapters: the first devoted to a fresh close reading of those sections of Kant's oeuvre in which he talks about the highest good; the second to the identification and labeling of the criticisms found in the secondary literature in the English-speaking world (together with a historical and critical analysis of the defenses found in the same literature); and the third, to an overarching defense of the concept under discussion, a defense that the reader will hopefully find original, accurate, and complete.

Now, this justifies the project undertaken here from the point of view of a historical and critical study of Kant's idea of the highest good. But there is another reason that explains the importance of talking about Kant's idea of the highest good at the beginning of the 21st century, namely the crisis of orientation that is characteristic of our times; in other words, the lack of an answer to the "whither" question, the question of where are we orienting our lives and our world.

Among others, two facts characterize our world, the so-called 'postmodern' world. On one hand, the collapse of the ideal that was characteristic of the Enlightenment, the ideal represented in the faith in progress and in the role of reason in the construction of objective grounds for understanding the universe and for unfolding a universal ethics. On the other hand, the replacement of such an ideal with a way of living that is clearly the sign of decadence: base consumerism. But how this has happened?

Not only the violence that came with the world wars, the holocaust, and the atomic bombs, but also the globalization that came with technology are responsible for killing both the faith in progress and the search for a unique theoretical system that will

explain the metaphysical structure of the universe and even more our role in it (for instance, in the style of Hegel). Television has allowed us to witness, in real time, both gross violence (like the fall of the Twin Towers, or the bombarding of Iraq in 2003) and the existence of so many ways of living foreign to the Western style, that it is impossible to hold the ideal that inspired the European citizen of the 18th century, to hold his naïveté. We are too late for naïveté. Instead, we find ourselves living in the ruins of Modernity, without having been able to find a new ideal towards which to orient our lives. We are not, to be sure, the beneficiaries of Modernity, but its survivors, and we do not know (yet) how to rebuild a new world, a new spirituality to fill the void that, like a black hole, swallows our existence.

This existential void is our tragedy, one that is seriously aggravated by the way that the “priests” of the new millennia, the corporations and their CEO’s, have been allowed to take control not only of the material world, but even worst, of our spirituality. The businessmen appear as the new educators, and wherever they go, whether by television, internet, radio, signboards, etc., they impose the idea that our ultimate desire for meaning can be filled with that which in turn feeds them: namely, consumerism. Having killed metaphysics and religion as trustworthy paths to truth, beauty, and goodness, the new salvation is to be found in base hedonism. We are, more than two thousand years after Plato, still prisoners of the cave, perhaps more prisoners than ever. The object has become the end, and the individual the object. We have become slaves of objects. Is there a worse way of denigration?

So instead of leading us to a meaningful life and to a better world, this hedonistic culture is disintegrating us into as many parts as inclinations we have, and destroying the world through its overexploitation. The mercantilist ideal, hence, is not only empty, a mere appearance without substance, but destructive; it is, literally, killing us without corresponding at all to what we ultimately need, call this the Good, *eudaimonia*, God, *beatitas*, *das höchste Gut*, happiness, or *felicidad*.

But this corrupted ideal has not destroyed, and will never erase, our deepest hunger for meaning. We are still, perhaps more than ever, starving for a new ideal. How to rebuild one? There is, evidently, no manual for it. Nonetheless, we can always look back to what the heroes of thought and spirituality have said about this. We can always take hand of such heritage, learn from it; not in a dogmatic way, for sure, but as one that contains outstanding examples of how an ideal should look. Kant's idea of the highest good can serve, therefore, as a model. His ideal of a moral world in which people are virtuous and deservedly happy is, without doubts, a good example of what kind of world we should be constructing, and hence where to orient our lives. Let's, therefore, study it, learn from it, be nurtured and inspired by it, and perhaps the new ideal, the one that hopefully is already approaching us, crossing the spiritual world from the same fountains of the future, will make its appearance.

CHAPTER I

THE HIGHEST GOOD THROUGH KANT'S OEUVRE

As it is known, the highest good receives special treatment in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), particularly in the “Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason.” Nonetheless, the highest good is a topic that Kant develops in many other works. The three main accounts are found in the Second *Critique*, together with the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781/1787) and the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1794). Sporadic references are also found in other works such as the *Lectures on Ethics*, the *Critique of Judgment* (1790) and *Theory and Practice* (1793). From this it follows that, in order to have a complete account of Kant's conception of the highest good, it is necessary to go beyond the Second *Critique*, and to include in our analysis what Kant has said about it in these other works.

With this in mind (and these materials at hand), this chapter has four goals: first, to present a narrative (non-critical) account of each description of the highest good (including not only its definition, but also the setting of its possibility, the context in which the concept emerges, etc.); second, to outline the logic that lies behind each description (to display its engineering); third, to identify how Kant envisioned the highest good (i.e. to find his “idea” of the highest good, his definition of it); and fourth, to find out if the several descriptions differ or if they, instead, share the same essential components.

So before reviewing the vast discussion that this concept has generated in the English-speaking world, and before entering into a historical and critical analysis of this debate, I would like to present the highest good as Kant did in his works. In other words, I will try to give a transparent account of what is said about the highest good in these texts. In general terms, this will constitute the soil from which we will be able, later in this work, to judge how faithful and accurate have been the interpretations and criticisms of Kant's idea of the highest good given in the secondary literature, and make our own defense of the concept against the "critics."

In relation to its structure, the chapter contains five sections. I will start with the highest good as it is developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Then I will do the same with the Second *Critique*. In a third section, I will present the highest good according to the *Religion*. Next I will compile the minor references found in his other works. Finally, I would defend that Kant held one idea of the highest good, and that each account shares the fundamental elements that are found in the others.

Now, before I begin the first section, I would like to give a warning by highlighting that the narrative accounts that follow, and the corresponding outlining of each account, are not critical. In that sense, the reader will not find a critique of those parts in which it seems that Kant goes too fast, or when a superficial reading would suggest that Kant is not proving his point. On the contrary, the descriptive nature of the accounts that follow are closer to a (implicit, although in some parts explicit) defense than to a critique, since they attempt to clarify what Kant says in relation to the highest good in his works. Hence, like a conservative musician, my intention here is to loyally

follow the “philosophical scores/sheets” that are found in these particular sections of Kant’s books, i.e. to display their “truth” and “beauty.” The purely explicit defense will come later, concretely in chapter III, and will be directed against the problems pointed out by the “critics.” These said let’s start with the highest good as found in the First *Critique*.

The Highest Good in the *Critique of Pure Reason*

The idea of the highest good in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is developed in the second chapter of the “Transcendental Doctrine of Method,” particularly from A804/B832 to A819/B847 (“On the Canon of Pure Reason,” second section). The sole title of this section, which is “On the idea of the highest good (*des höchsten Guts*), as a determining ground of the ultimate end of pure reason,” gives us a first glimpse of Kant’s conception of the highest good. In fact, the highest good here is defined as the determining ground of the final end of reason, which curiously happens to be the same highest good; so the highest good is for Kant both a rightful determining ground of the will, and an end, the most important end of pure reason.

The first paragraph starts with a brief reminder of what Kant claims to have shown so far: the limits of reason in its speculative use; in other words, the human impossibility of answering with scientific certainty the most fundamental questions (the existence and nature of God, for instance, or of the human soul and immortality). Those are ideas that exceed the limits of reason in its speculative use, and hence are unknowable. Nevertheless, Kant does not want to stop his philosophical project here, and invites us to try another experiment, to work out three new questions, namely: a. whether

there is pure practical reason; b. whether pure practical reason can lead us to (and to some extent grant) those ultimate ideas; and c. whether, hence, from its practical interest, reason can attain what in relation to its speculative use it denied to us. The rest of the section is devoted to answering these questions.

Kant begins his “experiment” with that widely known paragraph according to which “all interest of my reason (the speculative as well as the practical) is united in the following three questions: 1. What can I know? 2. What should I do? 3. What may I hope?” (CPR A804/B832). So reason is not only interested (or even primarily) in the epistemological question. There are two other questions that are also fundamental, which belong mainly to the ethical and religious domains (although these are, of course, not completely independent from the epistemological one). Now, as Kant explains, the first question is merely speculative and has been the main topic of his *Critique of Pure Reason*. The second question, in turn, is purely practical, and it belongs to pure reason yet in a moral sense. Finally, the third question, the question of hope, is described by him as both practical and theoretical.

The question of hope is expanded in the following terms: “If I do what I should, what may I then hope?” (CPR A805/B833). This extension gives us a hint of how it is true that the question of hope is both practical and theoretical. In his own words, here

the practical leads like a clue to a reply to the theoretical and, in its highest form, the speculative question. For all hope concerns happiness, and with respect to the practical and the moral law it is the very same as what knowledge and the natural law is with regard to theoretical cognition of things. The former finally comes down to the inference that something is (which determines the ultimate final end) because something ought to happen; the latter, that something is (which acts as the supreme cause) because something does happen (CPR A805/B833).

In simple terms, and anticipating a little bit what comes next, Kant is saying that since there is a duty to promote the highest good, then the latter must be possible, and we may then reasonably hope to partake of it in a future life. That is how, to some extent, the question of hope is both practical and theoretical.

On What Should I Do?

From A806/B834 to A808/836 Kant answers the moral question, i.e. he presents his moral theory in a nutshell, as it will be developed later (mainly) in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals* and in *Critique of Practical Reason*. This will, at the same time, help us to answer the question of hope, because of the dual nature (theoretical and practical) of this question.

Kant starts by defining happiness as the ‘extensive,’ ‘intensive,’ and ‘protensive’ (with regard to duration) satisfactions of all our inclinations. He then advances his well known distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives, although he does not use these terms here. The former he identifies as rules of prudence (which are merely pragmatic) and the latter as moral laws (which are properly moral). By the first we know what to do in order to enjoy happiness; by the second what to do in order to become worthy of happiness. Rules of prudence, according to him, are grounded in experience, whereas the moral laws “can rest on mere ideas of pure reason and be cognized *a priori*” (CPR A806/B835). Kant expressly declares that he believes in the existence of pure moral laws which determine *a priori* the will, i.e. without regard to happiness. He bases his belief in two facts: a. the proofs of the most enlightened moralists (although he does not mention who these moralists are; only Leibniz is mentioned some paragraphs later);

and b. the moral judgment of every human being, “if he will distinctly think such a law” (CPR A807/B835). He will later give better grounds for this belief in the *Groundwork* and in the Second *Critique*. From here he concludes that

pure reason contains – not in its speculative use, to be sure, but yet in a certain practical use, namely the moral use – principles of the possibility of experience, namely of those actions in conformity with moral precepts which could be encountered in the history of humankind. For since they command that these actions ought to happen, they must also be able to happen (...) (CPR A807/B835).

In simple terms, what he is saying here is that, since the moral laws command us to become worthy of happiness, by putting order over our inclinations guided by the light of reason, this must be possible (an argument that resembles the one mentioned before in relation to the highest good, at CPR A805/B833). In other words, here we find Kant establishing the famous principle according to which “ought implies can.”

What Kant does next is to introduce the concept of a moral world (*eine moralische Welt*), which is defined as the world as it would be “if it were in conformity with all moral laws” (CPR A808/B836). This moral world is qualified in five ways by him: a. as possible by appealing to our rational nature (and hence to our freedom); b. as a moral duty, as established by the moral laws; c. as an intelligible world; d. as a practical idea that can and should impact the sensible world “in order to make it agree as far as possible with this idea” (A808/B836); and e. as an object of pure reason in its practical use and a *corpus mysticum* of the rational beings, one that has objective reality “as pertaining to the sensible world (...) insofar as their free choice under moral laws has thoroughgoing systematic unity in itself as well as with the freedom of everyone else” (CPR A808/B836).

Kant finishes this sub-section by asserting what was his goal so far: to answer the second question, the moral question. Our moral duty is defined by him in the following way: “Do that through which you will become worthy to be happy” (CPR A808/B836). Now, Kant has not defined what the moral laws command. For instance, when he says that we ought to become worthy of happiness, he is not telling us the way to do it. This question is not answered with the idea of a moral world, since this is defined in relation to the moral laws, which he has not presented. Of course we know that he will do that in later works, but in strict relation to the First *Critique*, this is a void that must be highlighted. In any case, we know that there is a moral world that is both a duty and an end, and that by promoting such a world we become worthy of happiness.

On What May I Hope?

So far we are supposed to know what our duty is: to become worthy of happiness by promoting the moral world (although we do not know what the moral laws that will shape the moral world command). Now it is the turn of the question of hope to be answered, and that is what Kant aims to show in this sub-section.

The question of hope -as he reiterates at this point- also “concerns the practical interest” (CPR A808/B836). In that sense, it is wrong to think that, for Kant, the moral question is limited to the question of duties. Now, the question of hope is established by him in the following form: do the principles of pure reason that prescribe the moral law according to which I ought to become worthy of happiness also connect this hope for happiness with it? The answer according to Kant is yes, but how is this true?

He starts defending his thesis by saying that just as the moral laws are necessary according to pure practical reason, the personal hope for a world in which virtue will be rewarded with happiness must also be thought as reasonable, according to “reason in its theoretical use (*theoretischen Gebrauch*)” (CPR A809/B837). Hence, in the idea of pure reason, “the system of morality is (...) inseparably connected with the system of happiness” (CPR A809/B837). This, of course, does not mean that the moral action is that which is done for the sake of happiness (that would be utilitarianism or, more broadly speaking, consequentialism), or that the moral action necessarily produces happiness in this world (as the Stoics would defend by equating happiness with contentment, which is the satisfaction of being virtuous, as he explains later in the *Second Critique*). Instead, Kant is only trying to set the foundations of a reasonable hope for the virtuous (since we cannot do without the question of hope, and hence of the final end of all our actions, as he stated at the beginning of the Canon, and as he will make more explicit later in the *Religion*), by pointing to some sort of distributive divinely-based justice, as we will see immediately.

At this point Kant returns to the idea of the moral world (that world in which everybody would act for the sake of the moral laws), and argues that in such a world

a system of happiness proportionately combined with morality can also be thought as necessary, since freedom, partly moved and partly restricted by moral laws, would itself be the cause of general happiness, and rational beings, under the guidance of such principles, would themselves be the authors of their own enduring welfare and at the same time that of others (CPR A809/B837).

But why is this true? We could say, for instance, that because in such a world people will respect (and hence not harm) each other, a fact that by itself contributes to

happiness; also, because to reward virtue is a duty that follows from the moral law (something that will be unfolded extensively in Chapter III). Now, the realization of such a world will only happen if everybody follows the moral law, Kant says; in that sense, it is something that escapes our individual efforts (in other words, is beyond our individual power). Nonetheless, we are still bound by the moral law to promote such a world. Hence, Kant asks: how such a connection between virtue and happiness can still be thought as possible for the individual that acts virtuously? This connection, he asserts, cannot be grounded merely in nature, but still may be hoped for if it is grounded on what he calls a “highest reason” (CPR A810/B838). And this is the moment in which the idea of the highest good is introduced. In his own words,

I call the idea of such an intelligence, in which the morally most perfect will, combined with the highest blessedness, is the cause of all happiness in the world, insofar as it stands in exact relation with morality (as the worthiness to be happy), the ideal of the highest good (*das Ideal des höchsten Guts*). Thus only in the ideal of the highest original good (*des höchsten unsprünglichen Guts*) can pure reason find the ground of the practically necessary connection of both elements of the highest derived good (*des höchsten abgeleiteten Guts*), namely of an intelligible, i.e., moral world (*moralischen Welt*) (CPR A810/B838).

This paragraph is fundamental for the following reasons. First, as it has been mentioned, in it the highest good is presented for the first time in the book (at least under the express title). Second, since in it we find that, for Kant, there is not only one highest good, but two: the original (*unsprünglichen*), which is God, and the derived (*abgeleiteten*), which is the moral world, a world in which virtue is rewarded with proportioned happiness. Third, since in it is established that the postulate of God is required for the highest (derived) good to be possible, at least in its total completion. Now, along with God, Kant adds that a future life is also required as a presupposition to

make complete sense of the idea of the highest good, because the sensible world by itself does not offer to us the desired connection between virtue and happiness. That is how, for Kant, “God and a future life are two presuppositions that are not to be separated from the obligation that pure reason imposes on us in accordance with principles of that very same reason” (CPR A811/B839).

As we can see, God and immortality, two ideas that could not be granted to be objects of knowledge by pure reason in its speculative use, suddenly reappear on the stage as reasonable and even unavoidable presuppositions, thanks to the same pure reason but in its practical use. That is how Kant answers at a stroke the three questions presented at the beginning of the section, namely whether there is pure practical reason, whether the latter can lead us to those supreme ideas such as the ideas of God and immortality, and hence whether pure practical reason can grant to some extent what pure reason in its speculative use denied to us. The answer in all cases is, as we can see, affirmative.¹

Kant then elaborates on how it is true that both God and immortality are two necessary presuppositions. In his view, as rational beings we are compelled either to assume the existence of God and of a future life in the moral world (a world in which happiness will be distributed in accordance to virtue), or “to regard the moral laws as empty figments of the brain, since without that presupposition their necessary success, which the same reason connects with them, would have to disappear” (CPR A811/B839).

As we can see, without those presuppositions not only hope is endangered: even the moral laws are at risk, insofar as they would become pointless if the highest good were

¹ This is just another example of how it is not true that Kant abolished metaphysics, as it is usually repeated in the Academia: his sole intention was to refound it, to lead metaphysics to the so-called “secure path of science.”

impossible. Moral laws are commands, and as commands they carry promises and threats, Kant asserts. Now, in order to carry these things they (the moral laws) must “lie in a necessary being,” namely God, the guarantor of such a “purposive unity” (CPR A811/B839).

In his next move, Kant introduces the concept of “maxims,” which he defines as practical laws “insofar as they are at the same time subjective grounds of actions” (A812/B840). With this definition in hand, he then asserts as necessary that our life should be subordinated to moral maxims. But, he adds, this would not be possible if reason did not connect the moral law with an efficient cause that could grant the highest good, i.e. the moral world. From here he concludes that

without a God and a world that is now not visible to us but is hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approbation and admiration but not incentives for resolve and realization, because they would not fulfill the whole end that is natural for every rational being and determined a priori and necessarily through the very same pure reason (CPR A813/B841).

In simple terms, this passage means that, if the highest good were impossible, the moral agent will lose a moral incentive. This becomes clear if we think of the highest good as a project on which we are engaged. Now, as in any project, if we knew from the outset that the project is impossible, clearly we will lose the required motivation for working on the project, namely the motivation of knowing that our efforts are effective, i.e. that the moral law is possible and not a mere chimera.

With a position that he will keep and repeat in the Second *Critique*, Kant then asserts that neither happiness nor virtue constitute the complete good for reason. Only deserved happiness constitutes the complete good. To prove this he brings up the

example of the “impartial judge,” who will certainly distribute happiness in accordance to virtue if it were in his power. Now why this is the case? Because for Kant “in the practical idea both elements are essentially combined” (CPR A813/B814), but in such a way that virtue shapes happiness, never vice versa. And that is how Kant arrives at his final definition of the highest good as it is developed in the First *Critique*: “Thus happiness in exact proportion with the morality of rational beings, through which they are worthy of it, alone constitutes the highest good of a world (*das höchste Gut einer Welt*) (...)” (CPR A814/B842), an intelligible one that we are called to approach, but that can only be fully brought about by God. And this is how Kant answers the third question, namely the question of hope: in simple terms, if there is a duty to promote the highest good, then we have a moral need to assume that the highest good is possible, which in turn lays the ground for a hope for it, i.e. for the hope that the moral world will eventually happen, and that we will receive happiness as a reward for virtue.

Concluding Remarks

Kant finishes this sub-section by underlining, among other things, how pure reason in its practical use is able to lead us to the idea of God, the highest (original) good, something impossible from its speculative use. In that way, he has answered the three questions pointed at the beginning, namely that there is pure practical reason; that this can lead us to the supreme ideas of God, immortality, etc.; and that pure reason in its practical use is able, at the very end, to reach higher peaks than pure speculative reason, and hence is more successful in relation to our ultimate expectations as human beings (without saying, it is important to clarify, that there are two reasons in conflict: it is one

reason analyzed from different perspectives, namely in relation to its theoretical and its practical uses).

The Highest Good in the First *Critique* (in a Nutshell)

As a way of summarizing and grasping the quintessence of Kant's argument in relation to the highest good in the First *Critique*, we can say that this is unfolded as follows:

1. Reason's ultimate interest is to answer three fundamental questions: What can I know? What should I do? And what may I hope (if I do my duty)?
2. What can I know? Only things as they appear to us (not the things in themselves).
3. What should I do? Become worthy of happiness by promoting the highest good, i.e. a world governed by pure moral laws.
4. In the idea of a moral world happiness and virtue are necessary connected, insofar as people will not harm each other and, furthermore, since people will reward each other's virtue and their own with happiness. The latter is true since the rewarding of virtue is also a duty.
5. The highest good is beyond our power, but is still a duty for us individually (a duty to promote). Hence, how could we think of it as possible? By postulating the existence of God and of a future life.
6. But why is this step (that of recurring to the postulates) necessary? Because, if the highest good were impossible, the moral laws would be pointless, and the moral agent would lose an incentive, the incentive of knowing that his moral efforts are not pointless. Morality, hence, will stand in quicksand without the highest good.

7. That is how we must assume that the highest good is possible: not because we need happiness, but because it is a duty for us to promote it. But this has a collateral effect: we can reasonably hope that the highest good will come to reality, and hence that we will be rewarded for our virtue. So what may I hope (if I am virtuous)? I can hope for the highest good, which therefore appears not only as a duty, but simultaneously as an object of hope.

The Highest Good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*

The Highest Good in the Preface

The concept of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is first mentioned by Kant in the preface. After having explained why his book does not constitute a critique of pure practical reason, but rather a critique of practical reason, he asserts that, together with the existence of the former, transcendental freedom is established (a concept that, in his opinion, is the keystone of the whole system of pure reason). In fact, for Kant freedom is proved by what he qualifies as a fact of reason, namely the moral law. And not only freedom: the concepts of God and immortality also get certainty through practical reason, although in a different degree. That is how pure practical reason happens to be more successful than pure reason in its speculative use, since by means of it we get certainty of concepts that remained uncertain to us by the latter, as we have already seen in the analysis of the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Among those concepts, namely freedom, God and immortality, Kant asserts that the first (freedom) is “the only one the possibility of which we know a priori” (CPrR 5:4), since it is the condition of the moral law. That the latter assertion does not contradict

what Kant said before, namely that the moral law proves freedom, is explained by him in a footnote, in which he clarifies that freedom is the *ratio essendi* of the moral law, while the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom; so each is the condition of the other in a different way.

Now, while freedom is considered the condition of the moral law (to the extent that without freedom it would be impossible for there to be a moral law of self-legislation), the concepts of God and immortality are not. They are, instead, “conditions of the necessary object of a will determined by this law, that is, of the mere practical use of our pure reason; (...) they are (...) conditions of applying the morally determined will to its object given to it a priori (the highest good (*das höchste Gut*))” (CPrR 5:4). That is how we get to the idea of the highest good, which is preliminarily presented here by him as both a necessary object of the will determined by the moral law and an object given a priori by reason.

So the moral law, which is a fact of reason, proves freedom. Freedom, in turn, is the condition of the moral law. Now, a will determined by the moral law (a free will) has an object which is determined a priori: the highest good. But just as freedom was the condition of the moral law, the concepts of God and immortality are the necessary conditions for the highest good. Hence, although there is not any theoretical insight into these supreme concepts, morality leads us to them and compels us to assume their existence (and, even more, they take objective reality as practical knowledge). In other words, for Kant it would be unreasonable not to assume the existence of God and

immortality, which are the conditions of that object which “one ought to set unflinchingly as the aim of one’s conduct” (CPrR 5:5).

The Highest Good in the Analytic

The highest good is mentioned at least twice in the “Analytic of Pure Practical Reason.” Concretely in Chapter I of the Analytic (“On the Principles of Pure Practical Reason”), Kant tells us how “the moral law in fact transfers us, in idea, into a nature in which pure reason, if it were accompanied with suitable physical power, would produce the highest good (*das höchste Gut*) (...)” (CPrR 5:43). Two basic ideas are captured here; in the first place, that the concept of the highest good follows from the moral law; and second, that the highest good seems to be ultimately possible (in its totality) under the existence of pure reason and suitable physical power (one that exceeds ours, as has been anticipated in the First *Critique* and as will be repeated in the “Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason”).

The concept of the highest good is also mentioned in Chapter II of the Analytic (“On the Concept of an Object of Pure Practical Reason”), this time in relation to the ancients, who in Kant’s opinion erred by placing the highest good as the keystone of morality, i.e. as the proper determining ground of the will, without having identified the moral law first as its unconditioned condition. This, in his opinion, leads to heteronomy, and that is precisely what he tries to surpass by arguing that it is the moral law that determines what is good, and not vice versa. He does not deny, we already know, the importance of the concept of the highest good for morality, but this is a concept that must come later. In his words, the highest good is

an object which can much later – when the moral law has first been established by itself and justified as the immediate determining ground of the will – be represented as object to the will, now determined a priori in its form; and this we will undertake in the Dialectic of pure practical reason (CPrR 5:64).

It is precisely in the “Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason” where Kant presents his most developed account of the highest good, and that is the topic of the next sub-section.

The Highest Good in the Dialectic

Preliminary Remarks

Just as pure speculative reason seeks the unconditioned for the theoretically conditioned, so pure reason in its practical use does. The kind of problems that this generates in the former case, and how they are resolved, was the main topic of the First *Critique*. Now Kant wants to approach the same phenomenon at the level of morality. Pure practical reason, he asserts, also has its dialectic, since “it seeks the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the highest good (*des höchsten Guts*)” (CPrR 5:108). As we can see, and as he clarifies, this search for the unconditioned condition is not satisfied by the moral law, which works as the determining ground of the will. Instead, the attention is turned at this level to what he calls the object of pure practical reason, i.e. the highest good.

But before he enters into the Dialectic, Kant makes a fundamental preliminary remark: he clarifies how the highest good can be considered the determining ground of the will without bringing heteronomy into morality. First he reminds us of what he has already explained in the Analytic, namely that the moral law is the sole proper determining ground of the will. The moral law determines what is good, and not vice versa. No empirical object can determine the will without bringing heteronomy with it.

That is why the highest good, as object of a pure practical reason, cannot be considered the determining ground of the will. In other words, it cannot take the place of the moral law. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which we could say that the highest good is the determining ground of the will. This is possible, Kant says, since the moral law is part of the highest good; moreover, is its supreme condition. In his own words,

it is, however, evident that if the moral law is already included as supreme condition in the concept of the highest good, the highest good (*das höchste Gut*) is then not merely object: the concept of it and the representation of its existence as possible by our practical reason are at the same time the determining ground of the pure will because in that case the moral law, already included and thought in this concept, and no other object, in fact determines the will in accordance with the principle of autonomy (CPrR 5:109).

That is how the highest good happens to be both the determining ground of the will and the object of pure practical reason.

The Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason

Kant starts chapter II of the Dialectic by clarifying the distinction between the complete good and the supreme good, considering that both could be identified as the highest good and hence lead to confusion. The supreme good is virtue, since it is the “condition which is itself unconditioned;” but virtue cannot be considered the complete good “as the object of the faculty of desire of rational finite beings” (CPrR 5:110). Instead, the complete good must also include happiness as one of its components. In order to prove this he refers us, as he did in the First *Critique*, to the idea of an “impartial judge,” who will necessarily agree in this respect. Explaining this a little more, any impartial reason with enough power to proportion virtue in accordance to happiness will

find it improper not to do it. This is how he arrives at his first substantial definition of the highest good (in the Second *Critique*, at any rate):

virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person (*des höchsten Guts in einer Person*), and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the highest good of a possible world (*das höchste Gut einer möglichen Welt*) (CPrR 5:110).

As it is established, the highest good is composed by both virtue and happiness, with virtue as its supreme component. Happiness, it is important to clarify, is also good, but not unconditionally good, i.e. not good in itself. The highest good could also be considered both in relation to a person and to a world, and these views are not opposed. In fact, in this case we are seeing the same phenomenon from two perspectives: from the perspective of the individual that is a member of that ideal world, and from the perspective of the ideal world as a whole, all its members included.

So far we have a basic definition of the highest good. The next question that needs to be solved is how the highest good is practically possible. In Kant's words, "two determinations necessarily combined in one concept must be connected as ground and consequent, and so connected that this unity is considered either as analytic (logical connection) or as synthetic (real connection) (...)" (CPrR 5:111). In the ancient world, the Stoics and the Epicureans considered that the unity was analytic, i.e. that the pursuit of happiness and of virtue were identical. They only differed at the moment of deciding which element was more fundamental (the ground of the other). For the Epicureans, happiness was fundamental, and hence they argued that to strive for happiness is to be

virtuous; for the Stoics, on the other hand, virtue was fundamental, so they propose that to be virtuous leads to happiness. As Kant explains in relation to this,

the Stoics maintained that virtue is the whole highest good, and happiness only the consciousness of this possession as belonging to the state of the subject. The Epicureans maintained that happiness is the whole highest good, and virtue only the form of the maxim for seeking to obtain it, namely, the rational use of means to it (CPrR 5:112).

Nevertheless, they were mistaken, according to Kant, insofar as they looked for unity in two heterogeneous forces. Virtue and happiness are in fact so heterogeneous that they often collide in a person's ordinary life. That is why the moral law requires from us to put limits on our inclinations when the satisfaction of them implies treating the others or ourselves as mere means, and not as ends. The virtuous action makes us worthy of happiness, but many times requires that we renounce happiness. It could even require from us that we sacrifice our lives. Now, if this is true, the answer to the question "how is the highest good practically possible?" (CPrR 5:112) remains hidden.

The analytic union of happiness and virtue, as has been shown, is not possible; hence, that union must be a synthetic one. This we know a priori, not from experience. We know both that the highest good is practically necessary and that the union of its components must be synthetic. Therefore, Kant concludes, "the deduction of this concept must be transcendental. It is a priori (morally) necessary to produce the highest good (*das höchste Gut*) through the freedom of the will: the cognition of its possibility must therefore rest solely on a priori grounds of cognition" (CPrR 5:113).

So far Kant has shown us the following: a. the highest good is the complete good, understood as happiness in proportion to virtue both for a person and for a possible world

(virtue being the supreme good); b. a synthetic union of happiness and virtue is required; and c. the deduction of the conditions of the possibility of the highest good must be transcendental. He then presents the antinomy corresponding to this dialectic at numeral 1 of Chapter II of the Dialectic.

The Antinomy of Practical Reason

The fact that the combination of the elements that shape the highest good must be a synthetic one leaves us with two possibilities: either the desire for happiness is the basis of morality, or virtue causes happiness. The first possibility Kant qualifies as absolutely impossible, since our inclinations are the basis of heteronomy, the opposite of morality. The second possibility is also impossible since virtue does not necessarily produce happiness (happiness being the consequence of rules of prudence, not of the moral law). Now, if the highest good happens to be impossible, Kant argues, the moral law must be regarded as false:

since the promotion of the highest good (*des höchsten Guts*), which contains this connection in its concept, is an a priori necessary object of our will and inseparably bound up with the moral law, the impossibility of the first must also prove the falsity of the second. If, therefore, the highest good (*das höchste Gut*) is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false (CPrR 5:114).

This point clearly resembles that found in the First *Critique* (CPR A811/839), as we have seen before. What is at stake here, once again, is nothing less than the success of the categorical imperative, that “fact of reason” that proved freedom, freedom that in turn was qualified by Kant at the beginning of the Second *Critique* as the “keystone of the whole structure of a system of pure reason” (CPrR 5:4). Therefore, it is not only the

moral law that is at risk: the whole system is endangered. This explains the urgency of a proper solution of the antinomy, i.e. of this apparent conflict of practical reason with itself.

In relation to this, it is important to clarify that the moral law is still a fact of reason, which does not depend on anything else, as Kant has shown in the *Analytic*. Nonetheless, in its fullness, as completing its aims it requires the possibility of its highest end. This is what Kant means when he says that, without the highest good, the validity of the moral law is endangered.

Critical Solution of the Antinomy

The solution is found at numeral II of Chapter II of the *Dialectic*. According to Kant, to say that virtue is the cause of happiness is only conditionally false for humans, since we also partake of the intelligible world, i.e. since we are not merely members of the sensible world. That we also partake of the intelligible world is shown first by the fact that we can reasonably think of ourselves as *noumena* in the world of understanding (as it was shown in the First *Critique*), but mainly thanks to the moral law, which is a “purely intellectual determining ground of my causality (in the sensible world)” (CPrR 5:115).

Hence, as he states,

it is not impossible that morality of disposition should have a connection, and indeed a necessary connection, as cause with happiness as effect in the sensible world, if not immediately, yet mediately (by means of an intelligible author of nature), a connection which, in a nature that is merely an object of the senses, can never occur except contingently and cannot suffice for the highest good (CPrR 5:115).

From this it follows that the highest good, i.e. the synthetic union of virtue and happiness, in which the former produces the latter, is practically possible. And that is

how the validity of the moral law is reasserted, this time in relation to its ultimate goal. Here we also see that the connection between the two elements is not an immediate one, but mediated. The latter makes sense since, as it was shown in the *Analytic*, and as it has been mentioned before, virtue does not necessarily grant happiness in our ordinary lives. The connection, then, will be thrown by Kant to a future life, and granted by the original highest good, namely God, as we will see later.

Now, in this same section Kant brings the concept of “contentment with oneself” (*Selbstzufriedenheit*) to the scene, seemingly as an example of how virtue (freedom) can be the immediate source of some enjoyment, which is, nevertheless, neither compared with happiness, nor with holiness. Contentment is the (negative) satisfaction with one’s existence that accompanies the self-awareness of being virtuous. Now, despite the fact that the feeling of contentment is the result of being autonomous, i.e. of putting the moral law above our inclinations, this cannot be an example (and hence a proof) of virtue as source of happiness, because happiness is the satisfaction of our inclinations. In other words, it is a positive feeling, whereas contentment is qualified as a negative one, in the sense that it is the result of freedom and not of the satisfaction of an inclination. They (contentment and happiness) have different sources and hence different natures. But Kant also wants to clarify how contentment is not yet beatitude (*Seligkeit*), which requires complete independence from the inclinations. Nonetheless, according to Kant, contentment is closer to beatitude than to happiness, since both beatitude and contentment have the same origin: independence from needs, self-sufficiency.

At the closing of this sub-section, Kant claims to have solved the antinomy of pure practical reason by showing that the highest good can be thought as possible. Now he wants to “set forth the grounds of that possibility” (CPrR 5:119), both in relation to what is in our hands, namely virtue, and what is in greater measure beyond our power, namely happiness as a reward for that virtue.

The Postulates of Freedom, God, and Immortality

As a preamble of his account of how the postulates of God, immortality, and freedom are practically necessary, Kant clarifies how pure reason in its practical use has primacy over pure speculative reason (Chapter II, numeral III). He does that for an important reason. Kant wants to make clear that he is not contradicting himself or denying the conclusions arrived in the First *Critique*, namely that the ideas of God, immortality, and freedom surpass our cognitive capacity, and hence are unknowable from the speculative point of view. This is still true, but if the same pure reason in its practical use regards those ideas as necessary (as Kant has already shown at the end of the First *Critique*, and will argue again), we cannot simply discard them. What is required here is to establish which of them prevails: either pure speculative reason or pure practical reason (which is, at the very end, the same reason analyzed from two different perspectives, in relation to its uses). Otherwise, a conflict would arise: pure reason in two of its different uses will be fighting against itself. Kant’s solution goes as follows:

one cannot require pure practical reason to be subordinated to speculative reason and so reverse the order, since all interest is ultimately practical and even that of speculative reason is only conditional and is complete in practical use alone (CPrR 5:121).

This conclusion is fundamental, not only because in this way Kant is saving the coherence of his whole philosophical system (there is no contradiction in postulating the ideas of God, immortality, and freedom as practically necessary), but mainly because he is asserting that ethical interests prevail over epistemological ones.

Once he has made this point clear, Kant starts his defense of the postulates, starting with that of immortality (Chapter II, numeral IV). The practical necessity of the postulate of the immortality of the soul is defended in the following way. As we know, the supreme condition for the highest good is virtue, but virtue in what degree? For Kant a “complete conformity of the will with the moral law” (CPrR 5:122) is required; in other words, holiness. Holiness is what the moral law requires from us, but this generates a problem, since human beings, as rational but finite beings, are not capable of holiness at any time of their lives. On the contrary, holiness can only be thought as possible in an endless progress, which in turn is only possible in beings that are immortal souls. Therefore, Kant asserts, “the highest good (*das höchste Gut*) is practically possible only on the presupposition of the immortality of the soul, so that this, as inseparably connected with the moral law, is a postulate of pure practical reason” (CPrR 5:122).

Now, this idea of holiness as a state attainable only through an endless progress is useful for Kant not only because it –to some extent- grants an idea that was not possible to secure from the speculative perspective (namely, the immortality of the soul), but also for religious purposes. Without this postulate (and hence without this moral vocation) one could either become indulgent with respect to the moral law, or else get the false illusion that it is possible to attain holiness in this life. “In both cases” –Kant asserts- “constant

effort to observe precisely and fully a strict and inflexible command of reason, which is yet not ideal but true, is only hindered”; and he continues: “for a rational but finite being only endless progress from lower to higher stages of moral perfection is possible” (CPrR 5:123).

All this in turn leads to the idea of hope. In other words, this justification of the postulate of immortality of the soul makes it reasonable for finite rational beings like us to hope for that immortality, thanks to which we will be able to approach holiness, which in turn is commanded by the moral law and is contained in the highest good as its supreme condition. In Kant’s words, humans “may hope for a further uninterrupted continuance of this (moral) progress” (CPrR 5:123)².

The postulate of the immortality of the soul, as we can see, follows from the moral law and grants what is in greater degree within our power in relation to the highest good, namely virtue. Now it is necessary to understand how the second element of the highest good, i.e. happiness in proportion to virtue, could be possible. And here the postulate of God appears on the scene (Chapter II, numeral V).

Once again the moral law leads us to an idea or postulate that could grant the highest good, this time in relation to its subordinated component and from the standpoint of an impartial reason. This postulate is no other than God. The argumentation starts with a definition of happiness: “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 (...)” (CPrR

² The fact that he asserts that immortality is also an object of hope could be thought as problematic, insofar as immortality seems to have a stronger status as a necessary postulate, and hence as an idea over which we have practical knowledge. Now, to say that immortality is an object of hope does not necessarily contradict that it is also a necessary postulate of reason. Nonetheless, it is important to have in mind that immortality is not only an object of hope, but first and primarily a postulate.

5:124). But the moral law, as it was established in the *Analytic*, commands from another dimension, i.e. the *noumenal* world. Therefore, there is no obvious way to conceive virtue as a necessary sufficient cause of happiness in the natural world. In relation to this, Kant denies that humans are able to bring about that connection completely: in his words, a rational being that belongs to the sensible world “cannot by his will be a cause of this nature and, as far as his happiness is concerned, cannot by his own powers make it harmonize thoroughly with his practical principles” (CPrR 5:124). Nevertheless, the highest good must be possible, since we are obliged to promote it (and we know that, for Kant, ought implies can (CPrR 5:30)). Hence, there must be a way thanks to which the highest good could be conceived as possible. Kant finds that the only plausible possibility is to refer to the concept of an author of nature, i.e. God, considered as “a cause of all nature, distinct from nature, which contains the ground of this connection, namely of the exact correspondence of happiness with morality” (CPrR 5:125). And that is how “the postulate of the possibility of the highest derived good (the best world (*der besten Welt*)) is likewise the postulate of the reality of a highest original good (*eines höchsten ursprünglichen Guts*), namely of the existence of God” (CPrR 5:125).

At this point we can ask if there is an obligation to believe in God. For Kant this is not the case. For him it is morally necessary to assume his existence, but this necessity is a subjective one (it is a need, not a duty). God is not the ground of morality, but rather the principle of autonomy is the ground. So the postulate of God is neither a duty nor the foundation of ethics. From the standpoint of speculative philosophy it is just a hypothesis, but thanks to the highest good it is elevated to the condition of a “pure rational belief.” So

just as it was reasonable to postulate the immortality of the soul, now it is reasonable to postulate the existence of God. And this is how the possibility of the reality of the highest good is completed, as Kant asserts at 5:126.

This previous explanation also allows Kant to explain why the Stoics and the Epicureans failed in their attempt to explain the possibility of the highest good. The Epicureans failed from the beginning, since they chose the wrong principle as the ground for morality, namely happiness. The Stoics, on the other hand, were right in the principle (virtue), but committed two mistakes. First, they thought that perfect virtue was possible in this life, and second, they took contentment as equivalent to happiness (that is to say, they left happiness out of the highest good). Christianity, on the contrary, is seen by him as a doctrine which is closer to his ethics.

Kant also highlights how the moral law, through the idea of the highest good, leads to religion. He even says that the moral law must be considered a divine command, “because only from a will that is morally perfect (...) and at the same time all-powerful, and so through harmony with this will, can we hope to attain the highest good (*das höchste Gut*), which the moral law makes it our duty to take as the object of our endeavors” (CPrR 5:129). This does not imply heteronomy, Kant reasserts, since the highest good (which includes happiness as one of its components, and which leads to the postulates of immortality and God), as an object of a morally determined will, follows from the moral law. The moral law is still the keystone of the moral system, the piece that holds the whole edifice together. That is why he insists that morals is not a doctrine of how to become happy, but of how to become worthy of happiness. Nevertheless, there is

a sense in which it can be said that morals can be defined as a doctrine of happiness. As

he explains with this respect,

when morals (which merely imposes duties and does not provide rules for selfish wishes) has been set forth completely, then –after the moral wish, based on a law, to promote the highest good (*das höchste Gut*) (to bring the kingdom of God to us) has been awakened, which could not previously have arisen in any selfish soul, and for the sake of this wish the step to religion has been taken- then for the first time can this ethical doctrine also be called a doctrine of happiness, because it is only with religion that the hope of happiness first arises (CPrR 5:130).

From this it also follows, according to Kant, that the final end in God’s creation of the universe is the realization of the highest good, i.e. happiness as a reward for virtue (not as a result of mere beneficence). In fact, if the final end were happiness as a result of mere beneficence, then God could be the object of love, but not of respect and adoration. His plan, then, consists in the gradual sanctification of human beings, together with the final “crowning (of) such a beautiful order with corresponding happiness” (CPrR 5:131). And from this it also follows that “in the order of ends the human being (and with him every rational being) is an end in itself” (CPrR 5:131).

Now, what about the postulate of freedom? Kant does not dedicate much time to it in the Dialectic, perhaps because it received all the attention in the Analytic, and because it is not only a necessary presupposition for the possibility of the highest good but, as has been said, because it is the keystone of the whole system. Without freedom, nothing is left. Hence, before we start to talk about the highest good, the postulate of freedom must have been established. Kant indeed establishes its possibility through that fact of reason which he calls the moral law. So it would be pointless to repeat what he said in the Analytic about it. Nonetheless, he has some things to say about the postulate

of freedom, concretely in Chapter II, numeral VI. At 5:132, Kant asserts that the postulate of freedom follows “from the necessary presupposition of independence from the sensible world and of the capacity to determinate one’s will by the law of an intelligible world, that is, the law of freedom”. Immediately, at 5:133, Kant also reaffirms that the reality of the postulate of freedom “lays down through the moral law and with it the law of an intelligible world as well.”

Now, as should be noticed, and as Kant highlights, pure practical reason gets further than speculative reason. At the speculative level, the concepts of God, immortality, and freedom led to problems of paralogsms, antinomy, and ideal. The main victory at that level perhaps was that those ideas could not be denied as chimeras by the unbeliever, since he was as unable to demonstrate their non existence as the believer was. Their existence, at the practical level, on the contrary, has gained objective reality, although this does not imply a cognitive extension from the speculative standpoint, “for we thereby cognize neither the nature of our souls, nor the intelligible world, nor the supreme being as to what they are in themselves” (CPrR 5:133). Kant dedicates a great part of the rest of the Dialectic (namely, Chapter II, numeral VII) to explaining how it is possible to think of an extension of pure reason from the practical perspective without expanding its cognition for speculative purposes.

Numeral VIII of Chapter II serves to make some final clarifications. The ideas of God, immortality, and freedom are only hypotheses from the speculative perspective, which are the consequence of a need of pure reason to attain the unconditioned condition in the cognitive sphere (i.e. from a natural need to answer the most fundamental human

questions, e.g. the question of the first cause of the universe). From the practical perspective, on the other hand, there is also a need, but this follows from a duty, namely that of promoting the highest good, duty that in turn is based on the moral law, which is a fact of reason. Now, if it is a duty to promote the highest good, then it must be possible, and hence we have to figure out the conditions of that possibility, which happen to be the same ideas of God, immortality, and freedom. Insofar as the duty is based on a fact of reason, it does not need further support, Kant says. In other words, the duty to promote the highest good is objective, and we are compelled to obey it as rational beings, without additional conditions. Nonetheless,

the subjective effect of this law, namely the disposition conformed with it and also made necessary by it to promote the practically possible highest good (*das höchste Gut*), nevertheless presupposes at least that the latter is possible; in the contrary case it would be practically impossible to strive for the object of a concept that would be, at bottom, empty and without an object (CPrR 5:143).

The need of pure speculative reason led us to the ideas of God, immortality, and freedom as hypotheses. These hypotheses are rational opinions that help us to satiate our unlimited hunger for knowledge, but without a scientific certainty. The need of pure practical reason also led us to those same ideas, but as postulates, i.e. as necessary assumptions for the possibility of the highest good, whose promotion is commanded by the moral law. Hence, the postulates are not, as in the speculative realm, the consequence of curiosity and hence of a choice, but are instead necessary according to the moral law. The postulates, hence, do not appear “for the sake of a discretionary speculative purpose but of a practically necessary end of a pure rational will, which does not here choose; instead, it obeys (...)” (CPrR 5:143).

In the second part of numeral VIII, Kant insists in remarking that there is not a duty to believe in the possibility of the highest good. For Kant, “(...) speculative reason must concede it without being asked” (CPrR 5:144), but from this doesn’t follow a command on believing. Speculative reason must concede it, in his opinion, since “no one can want to maintain” that the distributive justice that is promised in the highest good “is impossible in itself” (CPrR 5:144). Now, to deny the supreme condition of the highest good, namely virtue, is senseless since it implies to deny the moral law, but the case of the second element, i.e. happiness in proportion to virtue, is different. In the latter case there is no need of a command for its possibility, since speculative reason does not deny it, but

the way in which we are to think such a harmony of the laws of nature with those of freedom has in it something with respect to which we have a choice, since theoretical reason decides nothing with apodictic certainty about it, and with respect to this there can be a moral interest which turns the scale (CPrR 5:145).

Reason finds it impossible to conceive of a necessary connection between virtue and happiness in the world, but this impossibility is only subjective. In other words, although we cannot conceive such a connection, we still cannot prove by scientific methods that there is not such a connection. So how are we justified to recur to the postulate of God as the condition for such connection? In Kant’s opinion, this resort to God is the consequence of a “subjective condition of reason” (CPrR 5:145), namely that this is the only way in which our reason can conceive of a perfect connection between virtue and happiness. The manner in which this connection is possible, therefore, rests on a choice, “in which a free interest of pure practical reason decides for the assumption of a wise author of the world” (CPrR 5:146). Kant closes this sub-section by saying that, if we

consider both that the promotion of the highest good and the assumption of its possibility are objectively necessary, and that the way in which we conceive of its possibility (namely, through God) lies in our choice, hence “the principle that determines our judgment about it, though it is subjective as a need, is yet, as the means of promoting what is objectively (practically) necessary, the ground of a maxim of assent for moral purposes, that is, a pure practical rational belief” (CPrR 5:146). In consequence, the postulate of God is not a command but a pure practical rational belief, a belief that can vacillate but never be denied as impossible.

The Highest Good in the Dialectic of the Second *Critique* (in a Nutshell)

As we did in relation to the highest good in the First *Critique*, now we outline the way Kant unfolds the highest good in the Dialectic of the Second *Critique*:

1. Reason in its practical use (as in its theoretical use) seeks the unconditioned for the practically conditioned, under the name of the highest good.
2. The highest good is both the whole object of a pure practical reason and the determining ground of the will.
3. The highest good is the determining ground of the will only insofar as it contains the moral law as its supreme element.
4. Virtue is the supreme good, but only the highest good is the complete good, since it also includes happiness. To this even an impartial reason will agree.
5. The highest good for a person and for a world is happiness in proportion to virtue (the later being the condition for the former).
6. The union of both elements must be a synthetic one.

7. Since the sensible world fails to clearly support this synthetic union, the deduction of the possibility of the highest good must be transcendental.
8. Antinomy: The synthetic connection of virtue and happiness cannot be grounded merely in nature. Now, if the highest good were impossible, the moral law would be directed to imaginary ends and hence be regarded as false (since the latter commands the promotion of the former).
9. Solution of the antinomy: that virtue produces happiness is only conditionally false. If we consider ourselves as part of the *noumenal* world, as the moral law suggests and proves, then it is not impossible to think of virtue as the cause of happiness in the sensible world through the postulate of God.
10. From the solution of the antinomy, the highest good can be thought as possible. But what else is required for its possibility?
11. Immortality of the soul is required, since the highest good requires holiness, something that can only be attained in an endless progress.
12. God is also required, since it is not in our hands to bring the highest good into complete existence, especially in relation to proportionate happiness.
13. To believe in God is not a duty, but something subjectively necessary for moral purposes. It is, also, a rational belief.
14. The moral law, in this way, leads to the idea of the highest good and to religion.
15. The highest good is, for Kant, “God’s final end in creating the world” (CPrR 5:130).

The Highest Good in the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*

The Highest Good in the Preface to the First Edition

The highest good is re-approached by Kant in the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, and the first reference is found in the preface to the first edition. Kant starts his book by restating what he has said before in relation to the purity of morality, his ethics of intentions, namely that “on its own behalf morality in no way needs religion” (REL 6:4). This is because ethics is founded, according to Kant, on pure practical reason. We can know what our duties are without reference to any subjective end. Otherwise, instead of autonomy, heteronomy would reign. Nonetheless, Kant continues, it could be the case that morality has a necessary reference to a special sort of end, an end that does not ground morality but that follows from it as its consequence.

Kant is convinced that the latter is true. Reason, he thinks, cannot be indifferent to the results of our morally right actions. Kant is not, we know, a consequentialist (least of all a utilitarian); nevertheless, we do need to answer the question of, as Kant puts it, “What is then the result of this right conduct of ours?” (REL 6:5). It is not enough, he says, to know how to act: the “whither” aspect of morality is also fundamental. In other words, for Kant we cannot do without answering the question of where we are orienting our lives, what object we are aimed at realizing. He insists that the right action is done merely out of duty, in direct relation to the moral law, and not with reference to any object. Nonetheless, once the categorical imperative guides us in our ordinary lives, we could legitimately ask (and our reason compels us to ask) what the effect is of such

disposition of the will (what kind of object/end are we promoting while doing the right thing).

The end or final goal is for Kant the highest good, which is defined as

the idea of an object that unites within itself the formal condition of all such ends as we ought to have (duty) with everything which is conditional upon ends we have and which conforms to duty (happiness proportioned to its observance), that is, the idea of a highest good in the world (*die Idee eines höchsten Gutes in der Welt*), for whose possibility we must assume a higher, moral, most holy, and omnipotent being who alone can unite the two elements of this good (REL 6:5).

So once again we find that the highest good is envisioned as a moral world in which happiness will be proportioned in accordance to virtue, through the grace of God. Kant also speaks here about the highest good as the final end of all things, an idea that is fashioned by morality itself, without increasing by it “the number of morality’s virtues,” but providing these virtues “a special point of reference for the unification of all ends” (REL 6:5).

In order to prove how the idea of the highest good follows from morality as necessary, Kant once again considers the example of the “impartial judge” (as he did in the First and Second *Critiques*, as we have seen). The example goes as follows. Human beings can hardly avoid asking themselves what kind of world they would create if they had the power. If the person is morally well disposed, Kant thinks, he would certainly depict a world in which happiness will be proportioned in accordance to virtue. He would—as a morally well disposed person who, because of that, is compelled to judge with impartiality—even will this world, according to Kant, even at the risk of renouncing a part of his happiness, “since the moral law wills that the highest good (*das höchste Gut*) possible through us be actualized” (REL 6:5). In this way, Kant asserts, “the human being

evidences the need, effected in him by morality, of adding to the thought of his duties an ultimate end as well, as their consequence” (REL 6:6).

This is how he also arrives at the crucial assertion that “morality (...) inevitably leads to religion” (REL 6:6), and through religion to the idea of God as a moral lawgiver and as guarantor of the highest good.

The final reference made to the highest good in the preface is found in the footnote that immediately follows from the assertion that morality leads to religion. There Kant asserts that the proposition of God as guarantor of the highest good is a synthetic a priori proposition, and asks how it can be justified. In this way, he also wants to reinforce the idea that morality leads to religion. He starts his argumentation by making a distinction between an end and a law. The first is the object of inclinations, whereas the second, the object of respect. An objective end is in turn defined as an end that follows from reason alone (and in that sense it is distinguished from an ordinary end). An ultimate end, on the other hand, is “the end that contains the inescapable, and at the same time sufficient, condition of all other ends” (REL 6:6). Happiness is the “subjective ultimate end of rational beings belonging to the world” (REL 6:6). We desire happiness by nature, and hence it is senseless to sustain that we have a duty to pursue our own happiness. On the other hand, we have a duty to promote the highest good, which is an objective end (an end not determined subjectively, but objectively by the moral law). The latter is, according to Kant, a synthetic practical proposition a priori, “since it is a proposition that exceeds the concept of the duties in this world, and adds a consequence (an effect) of these duties that is not contained in the moral law and cannot, therefore, be

evolved out of them analytically” (REL 6:7). The latter is true since the moral law commands without regard to ends. Once again, we do not need anything else than the moral law in order to know what our moral duties are. Nonetheless, we cannot escape asking about the effects of our actions. We cannot do without an end, in which we look for something we “can love, even though it is being proposed to them through reason alone” (REL 6:8). And that is how the moral law “extends itself on its behalf to include the moral ultimate end of reason among its determining grounds” (REL 6:8). This is the same as to say that the duty to promote the highest good is a synthetic proposition a priori “introduced by the moral law itself, and yet through it practical reason reaches beyond the law” (REL 6:8). This proposition is possible since the moral law is taken here with reference to beings that cannot do without ends. Now, since we are not capable of fully bringing about the highest good, the existence of God is assumed. In this way, morality leads to religion.

The Highest Good in Part Three of the *Religion*

Preamble

The concept of the highest good in the *Religion* is revisited in its third part, entitled “The victory of the good principle over the evil principle, and the foundation of a kingdom of God on earth” (REL 6:93). At this point in the book, Kant has already explained both the existence and nature of an evil principle in human nature, and the struggle between this and the good principle (the principle of autonomy, or the categorical imperative). He starts this section of the book by saying that the most that a well-disposed person can get from this battle against the evil principle is freedom: “that

he be free (...), this is the highest price that he can win” (REL 6:93). Nevertheless, this does not imply that the evil principle could be eliminated. The moral battle is a permanent one, one for which we have to be always ready. Our freedom is always in peril. Kant also thinks that we are in this fight due to our own fault. Hence, in order to find a way, the best way, to fight the evil principle, it is necessary to understand the causes of this undesirable (from the perspective of the good) moral war. In relation to this, Kant appears to have a very optimistic view of humanity: we have an “originally good predisposition” (REL 6:93); it is life in community which constitutes the source of the evil principle. In that sense, he is very close to Rousseau. In his own words, “envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature (...) as he is among human beings” (REL 6:93). While in isolation, on the contrary, we are in peace. Now, this rather negative view of life in community is moderated and superseded immediately, when he explains the way in which we could overcome the principle of evil. In fact, according to Kant, it is only in community that the good can overcome evil. Without what he calls an ethical community, the individual will always be in peril of falling prey to the evil principle. In his own words,

the dominion of the good principle is not otherwise attainable, so far as human beings can work toward it, than through the setting up and the diffusion of a society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue –a society which reason makes it a task and a duty of the entire human race to establish in its full scope (REL 6:94).

This ethico-comunal constitution/entity (*ein ethisches gemeines Wesen*), also known as the ethical community, which will later be identified with the highest (derived) good, and which is also called an ethical state, a kingdom of virtue, and an ethico-civil

society, cannot exist without a political community, Kant asserts, but it is different to the extent that its unifying principle is virtue, i.e. the good principle (instead of merely ‘public juridical laws’). To this Kant also adds that the idea of such an ethical community is objective insofar as it is grounded on pure practical reason, through the duty that we have to promote it.

The Ethical State of Nature

Next Kant wants to describe what he understands as an ethical state of nature (which is in turn necessary in order to conceive how to get to an ethico-civil state). He starts with a distinction between: a. a juridico-civil (political) state; b. a juridical state of nature; c. an ethico-civil state; and d. an ethical state of nature. In that way, just as a. and b. are opposed, so c. and d. are.

Kant makes it clear that both in the juridical and the ethical state of nature the “individual prescribes the law to himself” (REL 6:95) (without the involvement of third parties); in that way, he is his own judge. He also emphasizes that to be in a juridico-civil state does not imply that its members are in an ethico-civil state. They (the members of the political state) could perfectly well be in an ethical state of nature, and it is desirable, according to Kant, that they have that choice. The political state, hence, cannot command its citizens to create or be part of an ethico-civil state. As he emphatically states in this regard, “woe to the legislator who would want to bring about through coercion a polity directed to ethical ends!” (REL 6:96). Of course, it is the ideal that the members of a political state be also part of an ethical community, which would stand “over and above the political one” (REL 6:96), but this cannot be commanded by law. Finally, Kant

clarifies that only a community united by the good principle in which all human beings are part can be properly called an ethical community. This is because ethics is universal. Any smaller community united by virtue can be recognized as one that strives for the ethical community, but is not as such one.

The Ethical Community as a Duty

It was already established at 6:95, that to join the ethical state was a duty. From 6:97 to 6:98 Kant returns to that idea. In his opinion, both the juridical and the ethical state of nature are moments of war. In the first case, we find human beings fighting against each other; in the second case, on the other hand, we find the good principle fighting against the evil one. The problem of the ethical state of nature (in distinction with the ethico-civic state) is that there humans have not yet adopted the good as their unifying principle. It is only when humans adopt the good principle as their supreme law that the ethical community emerges, and it is only in this state, as it has been said, that the evil principle can be superseded. Now, just as it is a duty to leave the political state of nature, it is also a duty, according to Kant, to leave the ethical state of nature, and hence to promote the ethical community. From here two crucial additions follow: first, the special (*sui generis*) nature of this duty; and second, the identification of the ethical community as the highest good. In his own words:

here we have a duty *sui generis*, not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race towards itself. For every species of rational beings is objectively – in the idea of reason- destined to a common end, namely the promotion of the highest good (*des höchsten Guts*) as a good common to all (REL 6:97).

So the highest good is now presented as equivalent to the ethical community, and the duty to promote it as differing from all other moral duties both “in kind and in

principle” (REL 6:98). Basically, it is different from all other duties insofar as the ethical community cannot be brought about by the effort of one morally well-oriented individual, but rather through the effort of all humans towards such a common goal, a goal that even then we cannot know if it is in our hands to attain. He completes this new approach to the highest good by saying -as he said in the First and in the Second *Critiques*- that its realization cannot be thought as possible unless we presuppose the existence of God, i.e. “of a higher moral being through whose universal organization the forces of single individuals, insufficient on their own, are united for a common effect” (REL 6:98).

The Ethical Community and God as its Legislator

In a juridico-civil (political) state, the citizens take the role of the lawgiver (a concept that for Kant seems to include that of a judge), and its laws are directed to promote what Kant calls the legality of actions. The case of an ethico-civil state is different. With regard to the goal of the moral laws, they are not oriented towards the legality of actions, but towards the morality of them. On the other hand, in relation to its lawgiver, this role cannot be assigned, as in the political state, to the members of the community. Another kind of legislator is needed here, namely a divine one. The postulate of God as legislator is required because the morality of actions (which is determined by the moral intention) cannot be seen, since they are internal. Hence, we will never be able to judge the morality of our fellow’s actions. In other words, moral laws escape human jurisdiction. Only God is conceivable as able to know the heart of people, and hence to determine whether our actions were moral or not, and -as Kant adds- “as must be in every community, give to each according to the worth of his action” (REL 6:99). We must

assume here that what God is supposed to distribute is happiness, the second element of the highest good, according to what we have seen in his earlier works, although he does not mention the word explicitly.

In this way Kant concludes that all moral duties must be seen at the same time as divine commands. As he explains, an “(...) ethical community (*ein ethisches gemeines Wesen*) is conceivable only as a people under divine commands, i.e. as a people of God, and indeed in accordance with the laws of virtue” (REL 6:99).

Kant closes his remarks in relation to the ethical community by insisting that its realization does not fully depend on human effort, but that God is required for that. Nevertheless, he insists that we must act as if everything depended on us (not only as a collectivity, but even as individuals), since only in this case can we hope for its ultimately divine completion; therefore, “the wish of all well-disposed human beings is (...) ‘that the kingdom of God come, that His will be done on earth’” (REL 6:100).

The Highest Good in the *Religion* (in a Nutshell)

The way the highest good is presented in the preamble of the *Religion* could be outlined as follows:

1. Morality is self-sufficient; it does not need any end as its grounding, nor religion, in order to determine what our duties are.
2. Nevertheless, morality has a necessary reference to an end, “not as the ground of its maxims, but as a necessary consequence accepted in conformity with them” (REL 6:4).

3. There is an end that proceeds from morality, since reason cannot be indifferent to the question of the consequences of moral actions.
4. This end is the highest good, a moral world in which virtue will be rewarded with happiness, ultimately through God.
5. The idea of the highest good is seen by Kant as the final end of all things.
6. The highest good for Kant does not add new moral virtues, “but rather provides them with a special point of reference for the unification of all ends” (REL 6:5).
7. That the idea of a moral world is the ideal world is something to which any impartial and well-oriented person will agree.
8. Morality, in this way, leads to religion, and through religion it reaches the idea of God as the guarantor of the highest good.

The way the highest good is presented in part three of the Religion could, in turn, be outlined as follows:

1. Two principles fight against each other in our moral life: the good and the evil principle.
2. The most that we can attain if we follow the good is to be free, although the fight never ends.
3. The evil principle does not arise in isolation, but in community.
4. Nevertheless (and at the same time because of that), the evil principle can only be superseded in community, through the establishment of a social goal: the emergence of an ethical community, i.e. a community under the laws of virtue, united under the good principle.

5. This ethical community is identified by Kant as the highest good.
6. The duty to promote the ethical community is different in kind and in principle from all other duties, since it is one which cannot be brought about by individual effort. It must be set as a social goal, but even then it will escape human effort. That is why the postulate of God is required as a guarantor of the highest good.
7. Also, in an ethical community we cannot be regarded as legislators (concept that for Kant include that of a judge), since moral intentions are invisible and hence cannot be the object of public laws. Hence, only a supreme lawgiver can be the legislator of such a world, and the moral laws must be regarded as his commands. This supreme lawgiver would also be able to know people's intentions, in order to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue.
8. The highest good, for Kant, is beyond our power, but we must act as if it were in our power to realize. Only then can we have a reasonable hope that it will come some day, insofar as only then we will deserve the justice that comes with it.

References to the Highest Good in Other Works

Together with those three referred works, we find Kant's references to the highest good in other publications (namely, the *Critique of Judgment*, *Theory and Practice*, and the *Lectures on Ethics*). In what follows, I will present those sporadic references, in order to have the whole mass of raw materials in our hands.

The Highest Good in the *Critique of Judgment*

The highest good in the *Critique of Judgment* appears in the "Methodology of the Teleological Power of Judgment." The first reference is found in §84 ("On the final end

of the existence of a world, i.e., of creation itself”), where Kant asserts that the human being is “the only natural being in which we can (...) cognize, on the basis of its constitution, a supersensible faculty (freedom) and even the law of the causality together with the object that it can set for itself as the highest end (the highest good in the world (*das höchste Gut in der Welt*))” (CJ 5:435). So once again the highest good appears as the highest end for human beings, beings who are part of the natural world but nevertheless partake of a world of freedom.

The concept also appears in §86 (“On ethicotheology”), where the highest good is defined as “the existence of rational beings under moral laws” (CJ 5:444).

A third reference appears in §87 (“On the moral proof of the existence of God”), where Kant reasserts that the moral law “determines for us, and indeed does so a priori, a final end, to strive after which it makes obligatory for us, (...) the highest good in the world (*das höchste Gut in der welt*) possible through freedom” (CJ 5:450). This definition resembles that of §86, and is mediated immediately, when Kant repeats that the postulate of God is necessary for its complete actualization (being consequent with what he said in the First and Second *Critiques*, and in the *Religion*, as we have seen).

The final reference is found in §91 (“On the kind of affirmation produced by means of a practical faith”), where Kant argues that there are “three kinds of cognizable things: matters of opinion (*opinabile*), facts (*scibile*), and matters of faith (*mere credibile*)” (CJ 5:467). It is in the matters of faith that the highest good reappears. Matters of faith are for him those objects which are conceived a priori through pure practical reason, without extending speculative cognition. The highest good is one of these objects,

which is characterized this time as an object “to be achieved in the world through freedom” (CJ 5:469). Now, since the sensible world does not promise the complete achievement of such a moral goal, the postulates of God and immortality of the soul are postulated, and hence are also considered as objects of faith. The highest good, then, is not only regarded as object of the moral law, but also as an object of faith. In this way, he makes more explicit what he has been suggesting in his former works, namely that although we have a duty to promote the highest good, this will come to complete existence under the intervention of God in a future life, and hence must be regarded as an object of (reasonable) faith.

The Highest Good in *Theory and Practice*

As it is known, in section I of *Theory and Practice*, Kant replies to Professor Garve’s criticisms of his moral theory, in respect to the relation of theory and practice. In this context, he starts his response by explaining his moral theory in a nutshell. He basically reminds us that, according to him, morals is the science that teaches how to become worthy of happiness. Nonetheless, as he clarifies, this does not imply that we have to renounce happiness overall, but only when our inclinations collide with the moral law. He even asserts that it is impossible for finite beings like us to renounce happiness. What we ought to do is to distinguish our inclinations from the moral law and put the latter in the first place. In that sense, it is not true that for him, as Garve argued, virtue is the sole final end for human beings, and hence the creator’s sole end. Instead, as he clarifies, “neither human morality by itself nor human happiness by itself is the creator’s sole end, but rather the highest good possible in the world (*das höchste in der Welt*

mögliche Gut), which consists of the union and harmony of the two” (TAP 8:279). So the highest good is once again presented as the final end both for God and for humanity, composed by happiness in proportion to virtue.

To this Kant adds that the moral law is not grounded on the highest good, but that the former introduces the latter as an end that is also a duty. In this way, we are obliged “to work to the best of one’s ability toward the highest good possible in the world (universal happiness combined with and in conformity with the purest morality throughout the world)” (TAP 8:279). Nevertheless, as has been repeated again and again, it is not in our power to actualize the whole highest good, but only part of it. As he says in this respect, “it is within our control from one quarter but not from both taken together” (TAP 8:279). That is why both God and a future life reappear on the scene as necessary postulates.

He finishes his references to the highest good with the radical assertion that “in the question of the principle of morals the doctrine of the highest good (*höchsten Gut*), as the final end of a will determined by this doctrine and conformed with its laws, can be completely passed over and set aside (as episodic)” (TAP 8:280).

The Highest Good in the *Lectures on Ethics*

Other references to Kant’s idea of the highest good are found in his *Lectures on Ethics*. These, as it is known, are not Kant’s direct writings, but his students’ notes. They are, still, his own thoughts, as he explained them to an audience. Hence, it seems proper to include them in our analysis.

For instance, in the notes taken by G. L. Collins, corresponding to the course given by Kant in the winter semester of 1784-5, in the section entitled “On the Ethical Systems of Antiquity,” we find him saying: “What does the highest good (*höchste Gut*) consist in? The most perfect world is the highest created good. But the most perfect world involves the happiness of rational creatures and the worthiness of these creatures for such happiness” (LE 27:247). He then invites us to imagine a world full of morally good people that, nonetheless, do not enjoy happiness; or, on the contrary, a world of people that actually enjoy happiness without deserving it. Neither world could match the idea of the highest good, a world that requires happiness (physical good) in proportion to virtue (moral good).

In the notes taken by C.C. Mrongovius, corresponding to the course given by Kant in January, 1785, we find Kant explaining to his students that the good will (virtue) cannot be considered the complete good. Virtue is certainly unconditionally good, but does not constitute the whole of goodness. In his own words, “the highest good is unconditionally good, and also comprises the whole of goodness” (LE 29:599). Virtue is certainly the “greatest worth of the person” but not the “greatest state,” which is happiness. Hence, only “virtue combined with happiness is the highest good” (LE 29:599).

Finally, other references are found in the notes taken by J. Vigilantius, corresponding to the course that Kant gave in October 1793. There we find Kant explaining how the Stoics and the Epicureans placed the highest good either in happiness or in virtue alone, subordinating one principle to the other. Against this Kant argues that

“none of the assumed principles is sufficient by itself; they have to be united, and this by a supreme being, a sovereign ruler of the world, and hence by belief in a deity, and in His power to accord man morality and happiness in due proportion” (LE 27:484). He also asserts that if the highest good were impossible, then the endeavors of the virtuous one “would be pointless, and virtue an empty delusion” (LE 27:483).

Later in the same notes we find Kant saying that

the highest good has two elements: morality and happiness. The possession of the highest good under which we can participate in it (though in fact we can do so partialiter only, and to an approximation), consists in the two necessary requirements; to be conscious of being adequate to the moral law, or to be worthy of happiness; and at the same time to be sure of having the prospect of being able to participate in happiness (LE 27:646 – 647).

At 27:717 we find Kant defining the highest good as “morality coupled with happiness to the maximum possible degree.” In this same section, he asserts that, since morality does not empirically grant happiness, God is required as a postulate for this connection to be possible. He literally says that man “does not have in his power to become happy thereby in due proportion” (to virtue), which must be kept in mind.

Kant’s Idea of the Highest Good

As we can see, for Kant the highest good is something fundamental both for ethics and for his philosophical system overall. The highest good appears in all his most important works (with exception of the *Groundwork*). Now, the fact that the highest good appears in more than one work does not imply that Kant held different versions of it. As we have seen in these narrative accounts, and the corresponding outlines, for *Kant the highest good was conceived as a moral world that we must promote and may hope for in a “future” life, in which happiness will be ultimately distributed as a reward for virtue*

through God. Of course, if we take some of the references separately, even within each book, it could appear as if Kant held different versions of it, but an integrated, contextual and articulated interpretation shows that this is how he envisioned the highest good.

In relation to the inner structure of each description (the engineering), the three main accounts (and the other references) share the fundamental components of it (although the *Religion* omits some of them, which does not necessarily mean that they were rejected later by Kant, as I will try to explain). For instance, in the two First *Critiques* and in the *Religion*, the idea of an impartial judge/reason is used in order to show that the highest complete good cannot be virtue alone, but virtue and proportional happiness (CPR 813/B841, CPrR 5:110, REL 6:5). Also, in the three accounts the postulate of God appears as necessary for foreseeing the highest good as possible (CPR A810/B838 – A814/B842, CPrR 5:515, 5:124 – 5:133, REL 6:5 – 6:6, 6:98 – 6:10). The postulate of immortality appears in both the First and the Second *Critiques* (CPR A811/B839 – A814/B842, CPrR 5:115, 5:122 – 5:123, 5:132), although not in the *Religion*. Now, this does not necessarily imply that Kant abandoned this idea. In fact, the description of the highest good in the *Religion* is not incompatible with the postulate of immortality. In addition, both in the First and the Second *Critiques*, the argument according to which the impossibility of the highest good would make the moral law pointless, and would in turn affect the agent's motivation for working towards such a moral project, is included (CPR A811/B839 – A813/B841, CPrR 5:113–5:114, CPrR 5:143), although this is not mentioned in the *Religion*. Now, as in the case of the postulate of immortality, the fact that these problems do not appear in the *Religion* does

not necessarily imply that Kant changed his mind in that respect. Another argument would be that Kant thought as unnecessary to discuss these issues again, insofar as it was extensively discussed in his former works, which seems more plausible.

Now, what about the location of the highest good? In all cases it is something that is supposed to happen in a future life. Now, does this imply that it will happen in an afterlife or, on the contrary, is something to be expected for this world? In all cases, we know, the postulate of God is necessary for its completion, which determines that the highest good, for Kant, is always at the same time a religious concept (and not merely an ethical one). Nonetheless, in many sections he speaks of the highest good “in the world,” which could make us think of it as an ethical but still earthy goal reserved for a future generation of humans. If this were the case, then the highest good would not be expected for all humans (to start, not at all for all those who are already dead). As we will see in the next chapter, there are many interpreters that try to defend a similar version of the highest good. Now, is this really the case, or is the highest good for Kant something to be expected for all humans, and not merely in a future life but in an afterlife? I sustain that the latter interpretation is more plausible. We have, for instance, sections in which Kant is explicit in this respect. Taking the *Critique of Practical Reason* as an example (particularly in numeral II of Chapter II of the Dialectic), there we find Kant highlighting as strange that “philosophers of both ancient and modern times could (...) have found happiness in precise proportion to virtue already in this life (in the sensible world), or persuaded themselves that they were conscious of it” (CPrR 5:115). But perhaps the more convincing argument is related to the postulate of immortality. In fact, if we think that

perfect virtue, which is the supreme component of the highest good, cannot be attained unless an endless progress is guaranteed (which in turn requires an immortal soul), as Kant states both in the First and Second *Critiques*, then how could be the case that the highest good is something to happen in this life, in this world? We are mortals, and hence it is impossible for us to attain holiness already in this life. Hence, unless our soul continues its path towards perfect virtue after this life, and hence in another world, the highest good will never be actualized.³

A critic of this defense of the highest good in an afterlife will repeat those sections in which Kant speaks of the highest good “in this world,” which clearly undermines, to some extent, our interpretation. In this case, a further defense is demanded. In relation to this I would say that perhaps Kant was more Christian than we think, and that when he talked of the highest good “in this world” he had in mind the resurrection of the body, as this is promised in the Scriptures. If this were the case, then we will still be talking of an afterlife, although it would be a life to happen in this world. The best evidence for this interpretation is that it harmonizes the seemingly incompatible references to the highest good “in this world” and in a “future life,” which we find in Kant’s works, even within a same text. Also, it is known that Kant was a devoted Lutheran, member of the Pietism movement, so it would not be surprising that he believed in the reincarnation of the body.

With this we have completed the four goals established for this chapter, which were to present a narrative account of each description of the highest good, to outline the

³ The answer to the question of how it will be possible to improve in virtue in an afterlife is not answered by Kant.

logic that lies behind them, to identify Kant's idea of the highest good, and to find out if the inner structure (the engineering) of each description differs so broadly as to make every account different from each other (which we have denied).

Now, this variety of references still could explain, to some extent, the big controversy generated in the secondary literature in the English-speaking world. On one hand, we find a group of critics, who have made an influential case against Kant's inclusion of the highest good in his ethical system. On the other hand, there are the defenders, who differ in their way of shielding the highest good against those attacks.

The next chapter will be devoted to analyzing the existing discussion in the secondary literature, in the English-speaking world. The goal will be threefold: to place ourselves in the discussion, to identify the criticisms in an ordered and complete way (something that is lacking), and to see how successful the defenders have been in their attempt to save Kant's theory of the highest good. This will in turn show us if a complementary defense is still required.

CHAPTER II
CRITICS AND DEFENDERS OF KANT'S
IDEA OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

As it is known, Kant's concept of the highest good has been an important matter of dispute in the English-speaking world since the second half of the last century. Particularly, the discussion started back in the 60's with the so-called "Beck-Silber controversy." Briefly, in 1960 L.W. Beck published a book entitled *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, in which among other things he alleged the practical unimportance of Kant's idea of the highest good. In his opinion, the highest good does not help us to answer the question of "What should I do?" Hence, it is unimportant for Kant's ethical system. This criticism motivated John Silber to write a response, which is contained in his article "The Importance of the Highest Good in Kant's Ethics." Since then, many scholars have jumped into the discussion, some defending the highest good, and others joining Beck in his criticisms.

Following Matthew Caswell's reading of this discussion, as presented in his article "Kant's conception of the highest good, the *Gesinnung*, and the Theory of Radical Evil," we can divide the interpreters of Kant's concept of the highest good in four groups: the "critics," the "revisionists," the "secularizers," and the "maximalists." According to the "critics," the highest good is practically unimportant or even harmful to Kant's moral system. Against them, the "revisionists" consider that the highest good is morally

important since it corrects some problems found in the rest of Kant's ethics, (for instance, in the *Groundwork*, the *Analytic of the Second Critique*, etc.). The "secularizers" also try to save the highest good as part of Kant's ethics, but argue that it only makes sense in a secular version, i.e. without the religious elements that Kant attaches to the concept. Finally, the "maximalists" defend the highest good in its theological version, but try to avoid the mistakes committed by the "revisionists" (problems that will be explained in this chapter). In this sense, the "maximalists" do not believe in the secularization of the highest good.¹

In this chapter I will develop both a historical and a critical review of the aforementioned discussion. I will start with the referred "Beck-Silber controversy," not only as a historical exercise, but also in order to root our own contemporary revision of the matter. I will also present the problems pointed to by the "critics" in a systematized way (something that is lacking in the secondary literature, and that obscures any attempt to overcome the criticisms they raise). Together with these problems, I will present the attempts made by the "revisionists," the "secularizers," and the "maximalists" to

¹ In relation to the "maximalists," Caswell refers us to Bernhard Milz, particularly to his book entitled *Der Gesuchte Widerstreit*, 310–311, where in Caswell's opinion Milz establishes the conditions for a "maximalist" interpretation. Among other things, there Milz mentions how the ethical importance of Kant's idea of the highest good has been put into question since at least 1795, through J. Ch. Greilings. In Milz' words, "Kant, and even more, his interpreters, have tried to give to the highest good an essential ethico-philosophical function (...): the highest good belongs, according to the thesis, to the moral law like the matter to the form, or like the completion of ends in the world towards their principle." Now, in Milz' opinion, "the highest good is not an intrinsic element of Kant's moral philosophy, neither its foundation via formal principles, nor its material part." It is precisely this problem, in his opinion, that explains the manifold of criticisms (and defenses) found in the English-speaking world against Kant's assertion that the highest good is important for ethics, as Milz tells to his German-speaking audience, discussion that is patent for him "in articles with titles such as 'The Importance of the Highest Good,' 'The Unimportance of Kant's Highest Good,' und again 'The Importance and Function of Kant's Highest Good'" (personal translation).

overcome these criticisms. A critical reading will show us how the “revisionists” and the “secularizers” have not been able to supersede all of them. It will also show us how a stronger “maximalist” defense can still be developed.

Back to the Roots: The Beck-Silber Controversy

As it is known, although Silber is the one that started the discussion by arguing that Kant held an immanent and a transcendent conception of the highest good, and that both have a justified place in his philosophy (as explained in his article “Kant's conception of the highest good as immanent and transcendent”), it was Beck who started the controversy. In his earlier referred to book, Beck approaches the topic under discussion with three questions, two of which are relevant in this respect: is the highest good the determining ground of the moral will? Is there a moral necessity (duty) to seek and to promote it? He answers both questions negatively.

With regard to the first question, he argues that the categorical imperative is the only determining ground of the moral will. In his words, “it is only the law as a necessary component of the highest good that is the determining ground (of the will). (...) the highest good is not an independent determining ground of the will in addition to or in place of one of its components.”² Now, he even goes further and suggests that to put the highest good as a determining ground of the will would be to undermine the principle of autonomy, which as we know constitutes the heart of Kant’s moral theory. In the best

² Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, 243.

case, Beck asserts, the hope for the highest good “may be psychologically necessary to a semblance of morality,”³ but nothing more. Never a determining ground of the will.

In relation to the second question, he denies that there is a duty to seek and to promote the highest good, with the following arguments. First, none of the forms of the categorical imperative have the highest good as its content. Second, the highest good is not included among those ends that are also duties in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. Finally, the highest good does not exist independently from the moral law: “For suppose I do all in my power (...) to promote the highest good, what am I to do? Simply act out of respect for the law, which I already knew.”⁴ For Beck, I cannot do anything with regard to happiness (to distribute happiness in accordance to virtue), since that exceeds my powers, being a task that only God can perform.

That is how he concludes that the highest good is unimportant for practical effects. It serves, though, for architectonic concerns. The recognition of the architectonic importance must be highlighted, since in it Beck still recognizes that the highest good serves some purpose in Kant’s philosophical system. As he explains in this regard, “it (the highest good) is important for the architectonic purpose of reason in uniting under one idea the two legislations of reason, the theoretical and practical, in a practical-dogmatic metaphysics wholly distinct from the metaphysics of morals.”⁵

³ Ibid., 244.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 245.

In sum, Beck argues that the highest good is not the determining ground of the will; that if it were so, it would undermine the principle of autonomy. Also, there is no duty to seek and promote the highest good. Moreover, it would be even impossible to attempt to promote it, since we cannot provide happiness in proportion to virtue. Hence, it is unimportant for practical purposes.

These commentaries, as is well known, motivated Silber to write a response. Briefly, Silber disapproves of Beck's criticisms of Kant's idea of the highest good, and asserts its importance, both for practical effects and for the understanding of the Second *Critique*.

Silber starts by arguing that, for him, it is obvious that, in our daily lives, we promote the highest good. Examples such as raising children, serving on juries, and grading papers are for him ordinary cases in which we, as human beings, are able to proportion happiness in accordance with virtue. His central thesis is that the highest good "while following from the moral law, adds content to the abstract form of the categorical imperative and gives direction to moral volition."⁶ The justification of this claim is developed in four movements.

The four-folded argumentation is opened by the claim that the "good" is the unifying concept of the Second *Critique*, i.e. is the concept that gives unity to the various parts of this book. This is something that Beck did not take into account, and perhaps the source of his so called "erroneous" interpretation (at least, according to Silber) of Kant's idea of the highest good. In this respect, as Silber suggests, for Kant the concept of the

⁶ Silber, "The Importance of the highest good in Kant's ethics," 183.

good –as a material object of the will– was necessary to give concrete direction to moral volition. In this way, Kant related himself “to the classic tradition in ethics.”⁷

Nevertheless, he changed the tradition by arguing that the good must be determined by the categorical imperative, the formal moral law (instead of deriving the duties from any idea of the good, which for him always results in heteronomy); otherwise, the good could not be posited as an obligatory object of the will. That is how, in Silber’s opinion, “he (Kant) sought to provide, by means of the application of the moral law to the condition of man, material content for the good as this necessary object.”⁸ This constitutes the first step of Silber’s argument. The second and third go as follows. According to the author, in Kant’s attempt to provide material content for the good, virtue appeared as an end which is also a duty that, although identified as the supreme good, does not give the referred material content. In Silber’s words, “that *bonum supremum* (virtue) cannot function as a sufficiently determinate object of moral volition or provide material content to it.”⁹ Kant then argued that, like virtue, the happiness of others is also both an end and a duty (in fact, only when we consider the happiness of others as an end, does our own happiness, which is a natural good, gain legitimacy). In this way, Kant happened to identify two ends that follow from the moral law. In a fourth and final movement, Silber argues that the next task for Kant was to reach the unity of these two ends, a task that, in his opinion, Kant solved with the concept of the highest good, a material object “determined formally

⁷ Ibid., 185.

⁸ Ibid., 195.

⁹ Ibid., 189.

by the moral law as applied to the material of human desire.”¹⁰ That is how the highest good appeared as the material object derived from the moral law which is necessary to give concrete direction to moral volition.

In simple terms, as we can see, the most significant claim made by Silber is that, for him, the highest good adds content to the abstract formalism of the categorical imperative.

The Critics

Preamble

As previously stated, after the “Beck-Silber controversy” started, many have jumped into the discussion. It is necessary, in any case, to start with the problems pointed out by the critics, since the work of the “revisionists,” “secularizers,” and “maximalists” has been devoted to overcome those criticisms. In relation to this, as a preamble, it is important to highlight that the criticisms have not been properly systematized. In other words, there is no clear list or summary of the main criticisms pointed against Kant’s concept of the highest good, and this weakens any chance of victory on the side of the defenders. For instance, for many of those aiming to defend Kant, the only problem that needs to be solved is that of the supposed ethical irrelevance of the highest good (Silber, for instance). Well, as we will see, the problem of irrelevance is one among a list; so while the highest good has been the victim of a massive attack, the defenders have not been able to identify in a proper way every one of the enemy’s weapons. It is urgent,

¹⁰ Ibid., 195.

then, in order to counterattack, to have a clear knowledge of the real power of the enemy, i.e. to know his weapons. Otherwise, the probabilities of victory are minimal.

The group of the “critics” is led by Beck and those who, following him, believe that the highest good is unimportant or even harmful to Kant’s ethical system. Caswell includes in this group L.W. Beck, Jeffrie Murphy, Thomas Auxter, Yirmiyahu Yovel, Lance Simmons, John Rawls and Eckart Forster. In relation to this list, I would like to make some preliminary comments.

First, I would not include Lance Simmons for the following reason. In his article entitled “Kant’s Highest Good: Albatross, Keystone, Achilles Heel,” Simmons distinguishes between three groups of interpreters of the highest good: those for whom it contributes little to the final success of Kant’s ethics, those for whom it is a crucial piece of his system, and those for whom it is Kant’s Achilles heel. Now, as he expressly mentions, “no attempt to adjudicate between them will be made; we will simply consider, in bare outline, three pure positions concerning the role of the highest good in Kantian ethics. Distinguishing between these three approaches is the main work of this paper.”¹¹ Therefore, it seems improper to include him among the “critics,” assuming, as Caswell does, that Simmons places himself among those for whom the highest good constitutes Kant’s Achilles heel.¹²

The case of Yovel is, in turn, particular and hence deserves separate attention. Caswell presents Yovel as a critic of Kant’s theory of the highest good otherwise

¹¹ Simmons, “Kant’s Highest Good: Albatross, Keystone, Achilles Heel,” 358.

¹² Caswell suggests this when he refers, in his article, to the pages in which Simmons develops the third approach.

unsympathetic to his ethical system. The fact that Yovel is in fact a critic of Kant's moral philosophy overall places him in a special situation for the purposes of this work. Let me try to explain why. In his book *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, among other things, he presents a criticism of Kant's theory of the highest good. Briefly, he argues that the highest good suffers from a problem of deduction. In his own words, "there is no continuous passage from the formal to the material imperative"¹³ (i.e. from the formal moral law to the highest good as a duty). For Yovel, this problem is rooted in a deeper one: Kant's supposed dualism of human nature (dualism of nature and reason). This is, in his opinion, what impeded Kant from constructing a coherent and complete theory of the highest good. In other words, for Yovel the issue is that the idea of the highest good cannot follow from the moral law given Kant's dualism. As he explains, "had reason been conceived as intrinsic to the empirical world, had each been grasped as mediating the other within a single process, these difficulties would not have arisen; but then we would be discussing Hegel, not Kant."¹⁴ Yovel is, therefore, a "critic," but his criticism points at Kant's whole philosophical (or at least ethical) system. Therefore, any attempt to respond to Yovel would imply making a defense of Kant's ethical system as a whole, which exceeds the scope of this work.

The case of Auxter is problematic for the following reason. He is traditionally considered a mere "critic." Nonetheless, as will be explained later, he could also be considered a "secularizer," since he tries to extract a secular version of the highest good

¹³ Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, 272.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 274.

out of Kant's works, and gives value to it. His criticisms are directed against the theological version, but not to what later has been known as the secular version of the highest good. Nonetheless, since my reading could be contested (the whole tradition considers him a mere "critic"), and since his criticisms to the theological version of the highest good are relevant, he will be kept under the group of "critics."

Finally, some preliminary words in relation to John Rawls. He also believes that there are two versions of the highest good in Kant's works, and expressly criticizes them. In his own words, "both conceptions of the highest good –the full highest good and the highest good of a particular world- are, I think, inconsistent with Kant's account of the moral law."¹⁵ Nonetheless, at the same time Rawls seems to coincide with the "secularizers," as will be explained later. Nevertheless, since he expressly denies the importance of both (alleged) versions of the highest good, I am keeping him as a member of this group. I will also keep him in this group since he raises a new criticism, as we will see.

Next I will try to sketch the position of all the mentioned authors, with the exception of Simmons and Yovel, for the given reasons. This will allow us to list and name the criticisms, an urgent and so far undone task.

Jeffrie Murphy

In 1965 Jeffrie Murphy joined the "critics" through his article entitled "The Highest Good as Content for Kant's Ethical Formalism (Beck vs. Silber)," concretely by

¹⁵ Rawls, *Lectures on the history of moral philosophy*, 314.

criticizing Silber's response to Beck, and Silber's position overall with regard to the highest good. Basically, he raises four criticisms against Silber.

The first resembles one of the criticisms that Beck pointed to against Kant: if the highest good is the determining ground of the will, then heteronomy follows.

The second objection highlights the impossibility of promoting the highest good, in similar terms to those presented by Beck, who saw the impossibility in our inability to give happiness as a reward for virtue, since it was the "task of God." Murphy highlights an additional reason for this alleged impossibility. As is known, for Kant "we can never, even by the strictest examination, completely plumb the depths of the secret incentives of our actions. For when moral value is being considered, the concern is not with the actions, which are seen, but rather with their inner principles, which are not seen" (GMM, 4:407). Murphy makes this point in order to argue that, if we cannot know whether a person is virtuous, it is futile to be required to promote the highest good. The most we can do, in his opinion, is to judge the legality of actions and to proportion happiness in accordance to that, but only God is able to know human intentions. Therefore, it is wrong to claim that there is a duty to promote the highest good.

The third criticism is directed towards Silber's assertion that "to promote the highest good accords with common moral experience."¹⁶ The examples that Silber gives, as we know, are those of rearing children, serving on juries and grading papers. For him, these are cases in which we are actually promoting the highest good (proportioning happiness as a reward for virtue). Nevertheless, Murphy is much more skeptical; for him

¹⁶ Murphy, "The highest good as content for Kant's ethical formalism (Beck 'versus' Silber)," 108.

in these cases we are, at best, rewarding or punishing the legality of actions “in the hope of encouraging (or discouraging) their recurrence.”¹⁷ In no way are we rewarding or punishing the morality of dispositions. That is how Murphy claims that if there is any duty to promote the highest good, it is not a moral duty. Hence, the highest good only serves to answer the question of “What may I hope?” and not of “What should I do?” (serving the former, as Murphy says, for “extra-moral theological purposes,”¹⁸ and hence being irrelevant for ethics).

Now, after presenting these three criticisms, Murphy makes a broader attack against Silber. In his words, “the whole posture of Silber’s concern is uncalled for.”¹⁹ As has been mentioned, Silber thought that it was necessary to find some content for Kant’s formalism, and he found it in the highest good. Nevertheless, in Murphy’s opinion, “the context of common moral experience gives all the content necessary (...) to fill out and give direction to Kant’s formalism.”²⁰

It is important to notice, though, that like Beck, Murphy gives some value to the idea of the highest good. In his case, he considers that it serves to answer the question of “What may I hope?” which is not an ethical one, in his opinion.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 109.

¹⁸ Ibid., 102.

¹⁹ Ibid., 110.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 102.

Thomas Auxter

Another classic “critic” of Kant’s theory of the highest good is Thomas Auxter who, in 1979, published an article entitled “The Unimportance of Kant’s Highest Good.” Through his article he joined Beck and Murphy in his criticism of Silber (and Kant by extension). As he mentions in his introduction, like Beck and Murphy, he wants to begin with the Kantian assumption according to which “impossibility implies no obligation,” and from there will offer reasons why Kant must renounce his claim that there is a special duty to promote the highest good. His most concrete and original strategy is explained by him in the following way: “(...) I will argue that the case against using the highest good as a moral standard becomes even more convincing when we examine Kant’s account of the process by which practical reasoning takes place.”²² The highest good could serve, he admits like Murphy, for religious purposes (and hence to answer the question of “What may I hope?”), but it is useless for practical judgment.

Basically, he presents two criticisms. By the first Auxter adds a new argument to the charge of impossibility, which was previously stated by Beck and Murphy (the former alleging that the crowning of virtue with happiness is the task of God and the latter remarking that for Kant virtuous intentions are obscure, which makes impossible for humans to judge who deserves happiness). In Auxter’s own words, “since the highest good does not discriminate between actions appropriate to a human being and those appropriate to God, it does not tell us what we ought to do and hence is not suitable as a

²² Auxter, “The Unimportance of Kant’s Highest Good,” 122.

guide for conduct.”²³ On the other hand, the highest good cannot have any beneficial effect on moral motivation, since, for Kant, no object can improve the moral quality of personal motivation. Otherwise, we would have to give prevalence to heteronomy over autonomy. For Kant, instead, as Auxter reminds us, the only valid moral motive is the respect for the moral law. For instance, in the *Groundwork* we find Kant saying that “an action done from duty has its moral worth, not in the purpose that is to be attained by it, but in the maxim according to which the action is determined” (GMM 4:399).

Now, although it is true that Auxter discards the highest good with the theological elements that Kant regards as necessarily attached to it (as we have seen in Chapter II), he nevertheless seems to give some value to another version of the highest good, what he identifies as the “ectypal world” and what we nowadays call the secular version of the highest good, that which in Auxter’s opinion is found in the *Analytic of the Second Critique*. As will be mentioned later, according to this version, the highest good is a social goal that can be attained in this world, only through collective human effort, instead of a moral world in which happiness will be received as a reward for virtue through God, in a future life. This version, in his opinion, does not suffer from the difficulties found in the theological version of the highest good. I make this point since it is usually overlooked. In fact, commentators usually regard Auxter as someone who

²³ Ibid., 128.

completely discards the practical function of the highest good, without noticing that he gives value to the secular version of it.²⁴

John Rawls

John Rawls also has placed himself among the “critics” of the highest good, as his book *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy* shows. Rawls believes with Kant in a secular ideal of a realm of ends, in which virtue would be somehow connected with happiness, since it is foreseen as a world of self-rewarding morality. This follows, in his opinion, from our duties to pursue our own virtue, our natural perfection, and the happiness of others. Nevertheless, he disagrees with Kant that in such a realm of ends “people are to act so as to make happiness strictly proportional to virtue.”²⁵

Rawls claims to have identified two versions of the highest good in Kant’s works: the “full highest good” and the “highest good for a social world.” In both versions proportionality is included by Kant, in Rawls’s interpretation. Now, both versions of the highest good are, for him, inconsistent with Kant’s account of the moral law. He accuses Kant of not even showing how they follow from the moral law and how they can be the a priori object of the pure will. The element of proportionality in Kant’s highest good is based, according to Rawls, in the idea of impartial reason, which is for him “foreign to Kant’s constructivism. Further, the highest good is incompatible with the idea of the

²⁴ For instance, in his article “The Highest Good in Kant’s Psychology of Motivation,” Mark Packer alleges that for Auxter both versions of the highest good are unimportant, which is not true. Especially in section IV of his article, Auxter makes clear that the highest good as the ectypal world makes sense for practical purposes. From here we could legitimately assert that Auxter is not merely a “critic” but also a “secularizer” of the highest good. Traditionally, he is usually only considered as a “critic,” so it is important to clarify this point.

²⁵ Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 313.

realm of ends as the constructed object of the moral law: it cannot be that constructed object, for there is nothing in the CI-procedure that can generate precepts requiring us to proportion happiness to virtue.”²⁶ He finally makes reference to the obscurity of inner motives and alleges that any attempt to bring happiness in proportion to virtue would be arbitrary, and so contrary to the categorical imperative. In this way, complementing Murphy’s claim that it is impossible for human beings to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue because of the referred obscurity, he alleges that any such attempt would be even arbitrary, and hence, unjust.

Now, as we will see with the “secularizers,” it seems that Rawls could have been in agreement with them, since they usually propose a secular version of the highest good as a social goal attainable through human effort, and where proportionality is excluded. In other words, this seems to be identical with the secular idea of a realm of ends where happiness is favored, although not necessarily granted for the just in a proportionate way.

Eckart Forster

The last “critic” in the Anglo-Saxon discussion around Kant’s theory of the highest good seems to be Eckart Forster who, in his book entitled *Kant’s Final Synthesis*, argues that Kant finally thought of the highest good as an unimportant element in his theory, since he did not make any substantial reference to it in his unfinished work: the *Opus Postumum*. In his own words, “(...) the concept of the highest good, so central to Kant’s earlier writings on ethics and religion, is now mentioned only in passing.”²⁷ Even

²⁶ Ibid., 316.

²⁷ Forster, *Kant’s Final Synthesis: An Essay on the Opus Postumum*, 144.

the idea of God as distributor of happiness in proportion to virtue was dismissed by Kant at the end, in Foster's opinion. Under this view, it would be unnecessary to continue any discussion with regard to Kant's theory of the highest good, since he dismissed it at the very end.

What Foster is suggesting, in other words, is that Kant himself at last became a "critic" of his own idea of the highest good, by regarding it as irrelevant, which motivated him to (almost) abandon it. Therefore, the work of the defenders is worthless: they should not be defending Kant's idea of the highest good, since Kant himself took it out from his philosophical system as a pivotal element.

Criticisms in a Nutshell²⁸

In my personal reading of these criticisms, I maintain that there are six types of apparent problems related to Kant's theory of the highest good, problems that now I list and name: the problems of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice*, *irrelevance* and *abandonment*.

The problem of *heteronomy* is explained by Beck when he asserts that to present the highest good as the determining ground of the moral will would be to posit heteronomy as the core principle of ethics, since the highest good includes happiness as one of its components. It is also explained by Auxter when he says that the highest good does not have beneficial effects on moral motivations, since only the conformity with the moral law serves as proper moral motive.

²⁸ I am not mentioning here all of Murphy's criticisms, since all of them except one are directed toward Silber's defense of the highest good, not to Kant directly.

The problem of *unsuitability* is also pointed out by Beck when he argues that there is no duty to promote the highest good, since it is not contained in any of the formulations of the categorical imperative, and it is not included among those ends that are also duties in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In other words, what Beck is saying is that the idea of the highest good does not fit in Kant's ethical system, being instead an arbitrary later addition that must be removed. Rawls joins this criticism by arguing that the duty to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue does not follow from the moral law and it is even incompatible with it and with the "realm of ends" that we ought to pursue. Kant justifies this duty with reference to an impartial reason, but this is a foreign element in his theory, in Rawls's opinion.

The criticism of *impossibility* was also first pointed out by Beck when he mentioned that there is nothing a person can do in order to distribute happiness in proportion to virtue, and that such distribution is something that corresponds, in any case, to God. This criticism was later reinforced by Murphy, with the argument that, for Kant, we cannot know whether a person is virtuous; because of that, we cannot promote the highest good which requires distributing happiness in proportion to virtue. Auxter has also contributed to this criticism, by saying that the highest good does not tell what we ought to do, since it does not discriminate between actions that correspond to God and those appropriate to human beings. To this charge of impossibility I will add the one pointed out by R.Z. Friedman, who is not a "critic," but believes with Beck that there is no duty to promote the highest good. As he reminds us, happiness for Kant is a relative

concept. Therefore, it would be impossible to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue, since we can never determine what makes somebody happy.

The charge of *injustice* was pointed out by Rawls. As we have seen, in his opinion, since we cannot know whether a person is virtuous, any attempt to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue would imply an arbitrary/irrational action.

The accusation of *irrelevance* was pointed out by Beck by saying that since the highest good does not add new duties, and cannot be the determining ground of the will, it is unimportant for ethical purposes.

Finally, the charge of *abandonment* was presented by Forster, according to whom Kant finally abandoned his theory of the highest good, since he did not mention it in a substantial form in his final unfinished work: the *Opus Postumum*.

As we can see, Kant's theory of the highest good is not merely problematic because of its apparent *irrelevance*. There are many other problems that are also at stake here. The work of the "revisionists," "secularizers," and "maximalists" has been precisely oriented to the solution of (some of) these problems.

The Revisionists

The "revisionists," as has been briefly explained, consider that the highest good is morally important since it corrects some supposed problems found in the rest of Kant's ethics (for instance, in the *Groundwork*, the *Analytic of the Second Critique*, etc.). Here Caswell mentions three authors: John Silber, Mark Packer and R.Z. Friedman. Since Silber's position has already been presented, in what follows I will only present Packer's

and Friedman's arguments. I will close this section with some criticisms to this way of interpretation.

Mark Packer and the Problem of Motivation

As we know, Silber's response to Beck constitutes the first effort in the English-speaking tradition to defend the importance of Kant's theory of the highest good after the attack of the "critics" started. He is considered a "revisionist," since for him the highest good solves the problem of formalism (and hence "corrects" a supposed problem found in the rest of Kant's ethics). The second "revisionist" that appeared on the scene was Mark Packer, who argued that the highest good solves a problem of motivation, since the mere form of the moral law is not capable of motivating enough the human will. Briefly, his argument goes as follows.

Distancing himself from Auxter, Packer argues that the highest good is a regulative idea, not a constitutive concept of moral action. To this he adds that Kant's theory of obligation does not exhaust his moral theory, as Auxter also thought. In Packer's opinion, Kant's concept of duty needed to be complemented by a moral psychology, considering that the moral law is applied as a command to finite beings. It is precisely the highest good that is the element that conjoins the psychological account of the human will with the concept of moral obligation. Therefore, its function is crucial to the practical effectiveness of the moral law and for the completion of his moral theory.

The problem faced here is established in the question of "how a formal principle of obligation legislated by noumenal reason can activate the sensuous will, which is part

of humanity's sensuous nature."²⁹ In order to solve this problem, according to Packer, together with the deontological approach of ethics developed in the *Groundwork* and in the *Analytic of the Second Critique*, a psychology of the will was also required. Otherwise, "the formal conditions of morality (...) can have no motivating influence in the human will."³⁰ In other words, just as happiness for its own sake is not moral (since it leads to heteronomy), the mere form of the categorical imperative is not motivationally enough for human beings. The problem, in Packer's opinion, is solved by Kant with the introduction of the idea of the highest good, one that

unites into a single moral concept the deontological thesis of Kant's foundation theory and its psychological application to the human will. (...) Ethics cannot possibly work as a directive for human conduct, Kant suggests, if it is either a rational deduction of duties or a purely eudaemonist doctrine.³¹

The highest good, from this perspective, is seen as a regulative idea that grants the incentives to moral conduct. We are obliged to follow the moral law, but as finite beings we cannot do so without happiness. Since the highest good contains both elements under a proper hierarchy (virtue being its supreme component), it works as a proper moral incentive.

Now, the highest good in its full expression for Kant was unattainable unless we posit the postulates of immortality and God. Immortality would allow us to approach perfect virtue, whereas God appears as the grantor of the deserved reward: happiness in proportion to virtue. Hence, the highest good, together with the postulates related to it

²⁹ Packer, "The Highest Good in Kant's Psychology of Motivation," 113.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 115.

(the postulates of God and immortality) and religious faith constitute for Kant, in Packer's opinion, "indispensable factor(s) in human motivation,"³² elements that complete his ethical theory.

R.Z. Friedman and the Problem of Subjectivism

As we have repeated, in Silber's opinion the highest good solves the problem of formalism. R.Z. Friedman is one of those for whom Silber was right in his attempt to defend the importance of the highest good (and hence in responding Beck), although for different reasons than his. Therefore, he disagrees with Silber in the opinion according to which the highest good provides a material content to the formality of the moral law. He gives two reasons for this.

First, he agrees with Murphy in that, if we follow Kant's claim that we are not capable of knowing the virtuousness of anybody, it seems to follow that there cannot be any duty to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue. To this he adds that happiness for Kant is a relative concept, and this also makes it impossible to promote the highest good. In Friedman's words, "the complete relative character of human happiness makes the attempt to apportion it impossible."³³ To this, it is useful to remember Kant's own words with regard to happiness: "(...) the concept of happiness is such an indeterminate one that even though everyone wishes to attain happiness, yet he can never say definitively and consistently what it is that he really wishes and wills" (GMM 4:418).

³² Ibid., 117.

³³ Friedman, "The Importance and Function of Kant's Highest Good," 329.

In relation to Beck, Friedman agrees with him that the highest good does not posit new duties. There is no duty to promote happiness in proportion to virtue. Our only duty is to be virtuous.

Now, against Beck, Friedman considers that, although only the moral law establishes our duties, this does not mean that the highest good is of no importance in Kant's moral system. It is not a practical concept, but it has practical consequences. To say that the highest good is morally irrelevant would be similar to saying that the concept of freedom has no practical consequences and hence is morally irrelevant, which is absurd. It is absurd since, while the concept of freedom is irrelevant for the way in which we make moral decisions, it is still relevant for the moral agent. To deny freedom would imply denying the moral law. It is the same with the highest good. The impossibility of the highest good would imply the falsity of the moral law.

Concretely, Friedman argues that the highest good is important because it is the necessary condition for the objectivity of the moral law. How does he build his argument? In his own words,

if the fate of the morally worthy and the morally unworthy does not reflect their relative worthiness, the principle which enjoins moral worthiness cannot be understood to be connected to the moral agent's condition of existence. Lacking this connection the moral law cannot be understood to be objective. Rather, the law must be discarded as an empty projection of the agent's mind. The objective status of the moral law requires the causal connection between worthiness and the agent's condition of existence and it is precisely this connection which is provided by the highest good.³⁴

The claim, then, is that without the highest good, the moral law would not be objective, a claim mainly (although in our opinion wrongly) based on Kant's affirmation

³⁴ Ibid., 326.

that “if (...) the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false” (CPrR 5:114). Instead of claiming that without it Kant’s ethical system would suffer from formalism, in this case the claim is that it would suffer from subjectivism. This argument places him among the so called “revisionists” under the classification that we are using.

Revisionists’ Burdens

As we have seen, for Silber the highest good solves the problem of formalism of the moral law. The highest good, then, gives the necessary content to it, which otherwise would be empty. For Packer, on the other hand, the highest good solves a problem of motivation: the moral law does not have enough motivational force. Finally, Friedman considers that the highest good is necessary since, without it, the moral law would be subjective. So he points to the problem of subjectivism.

Now, as Caswell notes, these attempts to defend the importance of the highest good fail for the following reasons. First, with regard to the alleged problems of motivation and subjectivism, both Packer and Friedman “must either ignore or judge as inadequate the solutions to the (referred) problems (...) offered in the *Analytic of the Second Critique*.”³⁵ Concretely, Packer must ignore or deny that the feeling of respect is the only proper and sufficient incentive of the will, whereas Friedman must do the same with Kant’s assertion that the moral law is a “fact of reason.” Silber’s alleged problem of formalism constitutes a bigger departure from Kant’s theory, though, since the latter

³⁵ Caswell, “Kant’s Conception of the Highest Good, the *Gesinnung*, and the Theory of Radical Evil,” 186.

never thought of the formal nature of the moral law as a problem (for instance, as a problem that leaves his moral theory as an empty one). Another reason for dismissing Silber's position, I would add, is given by Murphy, for whom "the context of common moral experience gives all the content necessary."³⁶ As we can see, all these three interpretations contradict Kant's main claims, so they must be dismissed. None of them have been able to overcome the criticisms posited by Beck and his followers.

In relation to this I would also say that, in most of the cases, the "revisionists" seem to focus their defense of the highest good in the replies they offer to the charge of *irrelevance*. Hence, their defense does not include a response to the other criticisms, namely those of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice*, and *abandonment*, which are also in need of a response (although, to be fair, the problems of *injustice* and *abandonment* appeared later). In sum, the defense developed by the "revisionists" is not only inadequate but also incomplete: none of them have been able to overcome the criticisms offered by Beck and his followers.

The Secularizers

As Caswell explains with this respect,

a leading trend in the interpretation of the highest good, especially in the English-speaking literature, attempts to extract a 'secularized' version of the highest good from Kant's account. The secularizers hope to save the highest good by divesting it of its difficult religious features, including Kant's idea that in the highest good, happiness will exist in proportion to virtue.³⁷

³⁶ Murphy, "The Highest Good as Content for Kant's Ethical Formalism (Beck 'Versus' Silber)," 110.

³⁷ Caswell, "Kant's Conception of the Highest Good, the *Gesinnung*, and the Theory of Radical Evil," 186.

In simple terms, the “secularizers” see the highest good as a moral world possible through human effort in which happiness will be favored, but not necessarily granted. As secularizers, they do not consider the postulates of God and immortality as necessary, and proportionality is sacrificed in most of the cases.

Among the “secularizers,” Caswell includes Gerald Barnes, Mary-Barbara Zeldin, Steven G. Smith, Andrews Reath, Harry van der Linden, Onora O’Neill (together with Korsgaard, who follows her interpretation), and Paul Guyer. In relation to this list, I would add Philip J. Rossi and Pauline Kleingeld. Also with this respect, I am not so convinced that Zeldin belongs to this group, insofar as she defends the inclusion of the postulate of God as a condition for the possibility of the highest good. In her own words, “if (a) we are to do our duty and thus promote the *summum bonum* (...) we must postulate that God exists.”³⁸ Now, if she includes God in her scheme, it is hard to see how she could be considered a mere “secularizer,” when Caswell himself has described this group as one that divests the highest good from its religious features (a definition that I support).

In what follows I will present two of the best cases of “secularist” interpretations of the highest good: the ones presented by Reath and by Kleingeld. This will help us in two senses. First, it will give us a sense of how the “secularizers” have partially succeeded in their attempt to solve the problems related to Kant’s theory of the highest good, as I have listed and named them. In fact, I will try to show how they actually solve

³⁸ Zeldin, “The Summum Bonum, The Moral Law, and the Existence of God,” 45.

those problems. Second, it will allow us to build up our criticisms against this current of interpretation.³⁹

Andrews Reath and Two Versions of the Highest Good

In his article “Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant,” Reath argues that it is possible to find two versions of the highest good in Kant’s works: a secular and a theological. From here he develops a defense of the secular version. As he explains, he wants to argue that “the highest good need not be viewed as a theological version, and that the proportionality of virtue and happiness is not essential to the doctrine.”⁴⁰ He favors the secular version insofar as it is not subject to the criticisms raised among commentators (especially if the element of proportionality is left aside). He also defends that Kant moved from a theological version to a secular one during his lifetime.

According to Reath, Kant does not combine with success the two (supposed) versions of the highest good. Two aspects distinguish them, related to the capability of deriving the highest good from the moral law (problem of *unsuitability*), and with their attainability (problem of *impossibility*). In relation to the first problem (*unsuitability*), the secular version can be constructed out of the moral law without problems. On the contrary, the basis for the theological version is less clear, in his opinion. In relation to the second problem (*impossibility*), the theological version presents the highest good as a state of affairs to be attained in a future life through God. The secular version, by

³⁹ It is important to clarify that while presenting Reath and Kleingeld’s positions I will not criticize each of their arguments. Instead I will try to show how through the secularization of the highest good they happen to overcome the problems raised against the highest good by the “critics.” The criticism of their position – i.e. of that of the “secularizers” – will come in a second stage, at the end of this sub-section, and will be directed against their position overall, i.e. against the secularization itself.

⁴⁰ Reath, “Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant,” 216.

contrast, can be described in naturalistic terms, achievable in this world through human activity. Concretely, the secular version will happen if “all human beings were to act from the moral law, and their conduct were co-ordinated in appropriate ways.”⁴¹ Reath recognizes that, for Kant, even the secular version would depend on God, but he rejects this necessity. Therefore, while in the theological version the highest good could not result from human agency, under the secular interpretation it is possible to say what the highest good would be like, and how it could be achieved through human action.

In Reath’s opinion, it is not the element of proportionality which leads to a theological version, but its location in another world. He thinks it is possible to imagine a state of affairs in this world in which happiness is given as a reward for virtue in a proportional way. The necessity to locate the highest good in another world happens when we envision the highest good as a state of affairs that all humans will enjoy. Perhaps the desire for this absolute inclusion is the motive for the theological version, in his opinion. In contrast, “on the secular conception, the individuals of a particular historical era would experience the highest good, even though it might only result from the efforts of many earlier generations.”⁴² This could seem unfair, but it does not contradict other Kantian postulates, in Reath’s opinion.

According to Reath, the secular version is mainly found in the *Critique of Judgment* and the *Religion* (!). Here the highest good is seen by Reath as attainable in history through human efforts (for instance, with well designed institutions). It is

⁴¹ Ibid., 221.

⁴² Reath, "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," 223.

presented as a social goal in which, furthermore, the element of proportionality is not essential:

it implies no necessary connection between virtue and happiness, but instead describes the highest good as a union of two distinct ends, one of which is subordinate to the other. The first would be the moral perfection of all individuals, and the second the satisfaction of their permissible ends.⁴³

The ethical community that Kant mentions in the *Religion* is the clearest example, for Reath, of the highest good in its secular version, where in his opinion it takes an institutional/political form. Its rationale, then, seems to be much clearer than that of the theological version. That the theological version has an unclear rationale is explained in part by the ungrounded inclusion of proportionality in the picture, in Reath's opinion.

Reath also presents a developmental reading of the highest good in Kant's oeuvre. He highlights that the theological version is predominant in the First and Second *Critiques*, whereas the secular version is predominant in the Third *Critique* and later works, surprisingly including the *Religion*, as it has been referred. From here he proposes that, "historically, Kant's thought about the highest good develops in the direction of the secular conception, even though the theological version is never completely dropped."⁴⁴

Now, the referred distinction of the two versions of the highest good is the base for his subsequent criticism of the theological version. According to the first criticism, the theological version leaves limited role to human agency; therefore, "it is no longer a

⁴³ Ibid., 224.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 221.

state of affairs that we can adopt as an end for our conduct.”⁴⁵ We can become virtuous, but not bring happiness in proportion to virtue (problem of *impossibility*). The second criticism is related to the possibility of deriving the highest good from the moral law as an end that is also a duty (problem of *unsuitability*). Concretely, the element of proportionality is not grounded in any base, in his opinion. The idea of proportionality seems to follow from a principle of moral desert, “but no reasons were ever given for thinking that the moral law generates such a principle.”⁴⁶ It is less sustainable that this principle is independent of the moral law, since this is the keystone of the whole system of morals, according to Kant.

The advantage of the secular version, as Reath presents it, is that it does not suffer these criticisms (*unsuitability* and *impossibility*). Moreover, it could be argued that it contributes to Kant’s moral theory. The highest good here appears as an ideal of social cooperation. If everyone acted from the moral law, individuals would be able to achieve their personal ends, since others would not harm them or interfere in their goals. In addition, people will be more interested in others’ happiness, in the common good. In sum, “when the implications of the secular conception are fully developed, the highest good becomes an important social ideal that makes a substantive contribution to Kant’s moral theory.”⁴⁷ In this way, Reath also responds to the criticism of *irrelevance*.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 227.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 234.

As we can see, for Reath the secular version, in contrast to the theological version, is not subject to the criticisms of *unsuitability*, *impossibility* and *irrelevance*. The problem of *heteronomy* is not responded to, as well as that of *injustice* (although, it is fair to say, this problem appeared later). Nonetheless, the problem of *injustice* is indirectly solved with the exclusion of the element of proportionality. Now, it is interesting to note that Reath leaves aside the element of proportionality not because of its relation to the problem of *impossibility* (according to which we are not able to give happiness in proportion to virtue), but because of a problem of *unsuitability*: it is a principle that (presumably) is not grounded in the heart of Kant's ethical system.

Pauline Kleingeld and the "Connecting Problem"

As Kleingeld explains at the beginning of her article entitled "What Do the Virtuous Hope For? Re-reading Kant's Doctrine of the Highest Good," her aim is to develop a deduction of the duty to promote the highest good, and to make sense of happiness as part of it, without contradicting the basic postulates of Kant's ethics. Also, she attempts to unfold the cause of the seemingly different versions of the highest good found in Kant's works.

In her words, "according to Kant, knowledge of one's duty leads to a *need* to relate one's moral action to a final end,"⁴⁸ which happens to be the highest good as a moral world. The inclusion of an end in his system does not lead to heteronomy since it follows the moral determination of the will and since it is not motivationally decisive. That is how she answers the charge of *heteronomy*. Now, in the First *Critique* Kant

⁴⁸ Kleingeld, "What do the Virtuous Hope for? Rereading Kant's Doctrine of the Highest Good," 92.

presents this end for the first time, a sort of secular version of the highest good, in Kleingeld's opinion. The idea is to bring the sensible world into conformity with the moral world. How? Through respect for the moral law. Now, in that world happiness will be necessarily connected with virtue (the latter producing the former), considering that people will live in harmony and will even promote the general happiness. The problem of *impossibility*, hence, is also responded to. Now, in this way the horizon of a moral agent shifts: "instead of only knowing how one ought to act, and instead of only looking at single maxims in isolation, one thus obtains an all-encompassing end and sees one's individual moral efforts as contributions to that final end."⁴⁹ In this resides –to some extent- the practical importance of the highest good as a moral world. As we can see, in this initial conception of the highest good, the problems of *heteronomy*, *impossibility* and *irrelevance* are contested.

What Kleingeld tries to do next is to derive the duty to promote the highest good. In her opinion, nowhere does Kant formally derive this duty. She reminds us of Beck's criticisms, according to which the highest good is not contained in the moral law and, even if it were contained, it does not add new duties. Kleingeld tries to reconstruct the derivation of such a duty while avoiding such criticism. Her argument goes as follows:

1. It is a duty to act in accordance with the categorical imperative.
2. Acting in accordance to the categorical imperative, and only acting in accordance to the categorical imperative, promotes the highest good (understood as a moral world).
3. Therefore: Promoting the highest good is a duty.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 96.

That is how she answers the problem of *unsuitability*. To this, the author adds some clarifications, most of which are recalled here. First, the duty is to promote, not to realize the highest good, since individual moral agency cannot lead to the full attainment of it. The only way to attain it is if everyone acts morally. That is how the criticism of *impossibility* is weakened even more. Second, “the duty to promote the highest good ‘broadens’ and ‘extends’ the perspective of duty, and this extension is brought about not by the introduction of a new moral principle, but by the rational construction of the idea of a moral world.”⁵¹ This second point, as can be noticed, reinforces the defense of the highest good against the criticism of *irrelevance*. Third, if the highest good is understood not as a moral world, but as happiness in proportion to virtue, a problem arises, since we cannot know inner intentions. As a consequence, the claim that there is a duty to promote such a world would be subject again to the charge of *impossibility*. Now, for Kleingeld there is not a need to hold this view, as we will see. Fourth, the validity of the second premise depends on whether the highest good is possible or not. If it is impossible, as Kant asserts, the moral law would be false. “This is why the question of the possibility of the highest good becomes essential to Kant.”⁵² This is the problem that the author attempts to solve next, through a revision of the development of the concept of the highest good in Kant’s works.

When the highest good is seen as a moral world, as in the First *Critique*, it appears to be possible through the morally well oriented actions of all human beings, according to

⁵¹ Ibid., 97.

⁵² Ibid., 98.

Kleingeld. In fact, if all acted morally, as it has been mentioned, happiness will be favored (since nobody will harm each other, for instance). In her opinion, the question that Kant needed to address at that point –if he wanted to set once and for all the possibility of the highest good– was “the question of whether a moralization of humankind is possible.”⁵³ Nonetheless, regrettably according to Kleingeld, Kant did not approach this question here, but instead turned attention to what she calls the “connection problem,” “i.e. the problem of the connection between virtue and happiness in an imperfect world. Kant argues that a noncontingent connection of virtue and happiness can be assumed only if one assumes the existence of God and of a ‘future world’.”⁵⁴

As Kleingeld argues, the problem of the connection between virtue and happiness in a moral world (and hence of the possibility of the highest good) is specially explained in Kant’s later works, such as the Third *Critique*, the *Religion* and *Perpetual Peace*, where Kant “works out the problem of the possibility of promoting a moral world.”⁵⁵ Regrettably for Kleingeld, in the Second *Critique* Kant focused even more on the so-called “connecting problem,” i.e., on the question of how the connection between virtue and happiness would be possible for an individual. It is here that the element of proportionality enters on the stage as a core issue, to the extent that the highest good happens to be re-defined as happiness in proportion to virtue, which for Kleingeld is a mistake. The problem of happiness for an individual (proportionality included) is not so

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 100.

important. It highlights the question of “What may I hope?” and not the most important one: how could we bring the real world closer to the moral one? She does not deny the importance of the question of hope, but regrets that Kant paid too much attention to it.

As we can notice, Kleingeld responds to the criticisms of *unsuitability* and *impossibility* by presenting the highest good as a moral world attainable through human effort, in which happiness will be promoted, although not necessarily in a proportionate way. The criticism of *injustice* is also indirectly solved –as in the case of Reath– by the exclusion of the element of proportionality. Nonetheless, in distinction with Reath, the element of proportionality is left aside –among other reasons, as we have seen– because of its relation to the problem of *impossibility* (and not merely because of a problem of *unsuitability*). The problems of *heteronomy* and *irrelevance* are also responded to, so we can say that Kleingeld’s defense is almost complete (insofar as no response to the problem of *abandonment* is given, although, as in other cases, this criticism appeared later).

Secularizers’ Achilles heel

As we can see in these two examples, the “secularizers” seem to succeed in the solution of the problems of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice* and *irrelevance*. This seems to be enough to be satisfied and close the discussion (although a response to the problem of *abandonment* would still be necessary). But this is not the case. There are several problems related with this way of interpreting Kant’s theory of the highest good.

The first problem is pointed out by Caswell: secular interpretations are always at risk of being so compatible with Kant's ethical system that the problem of *irrelevance* remains always as a shadow. This assertion, as weird as it sounds (since precisely the secularizers leave out essential components of Kant's account of the highest good, such as the element of proportionality, and the religious postulates), can be understood in the following way. In their attempt to save the highest good through its secularization, this group of interpreters tries to show that the highest good is just a harmonized compilation of the duties described in other works by Kant, mainly in the *Groundwork* and in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (namely the duties of pursuing one's own virtue and the happiness of others). In this way, if the highest good is just a repetition of what Kant has said before, then it is irrelevant for ethical purposes, since nothing new is added: we already know what we should do without the need of bringing the highest good onto the stage. At least, this is what seems to be argued. In my opinion this is true: any secularist interpretation is always at that risk. But to be at risk does not mean that the risk cannot be avoided. For instance, the argument that Kleingeld gives for the importance of the highest good as an ideal of a moral world seems to be strong: "the duty to promote the highest good 'broadens' and 'extends' the perspective of duty, and this extension is brought about not by the introduction of a new moral principle, but by the rational construction of the idea of a moral world."⁵⁶ I believe, then, that a secular interpretation can succeed in solving the problem of *irrelevance*.

The second problem pointed out by Caswell is stronger:

⁵⁶ Ibid., 97.

when we deny the theological nature of the highest good, we deny Kant almost all the significance he clearly believed the highest good had, as the link between morality and rational religion. Of course, we are greater friends of the truth, but the rejection of so much of Kant's thought should be undertaken as a last resort.⁵⁷

And this is related to another problem, namely that no matter how much these interpreters try to find a secular version of the highest good in Kant's works, there is not such a thing. In other words, there are not two versions of the highest good (a secular and a theological), as has been shown in Chapter I of this work. In fact, Kant held one idea of the highest good, from the First *Critique*, to the *Religion* and the Third *Critique*: that of a moral world in which virtue is rewarded with happiness, a world that is both a duty and an object of hope for humans, and that ultimately can only be conceived as possible in its total completion through God in a future life. So instead of directly facing the problems of *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, and *injustice*, the secularizers look for an easy way out by taking out a pivotal element of the concept, namely proportionality (the element that inspires those criticisms), and by forcing Kant's texts in order to argue that Kant moved from a theological version of the highest good to a secular one, which is not accurate at all.

Another point that can be made against an exclusively secular version of the highest good is related with the problem of *impossibility*. In a few words, it seems too naïve or arrogant to think that something like an ideal moral world would ever happen on Earth only by human effort. That is how the postulate of God comes back, as the only possible grantor of the highest good. And, if the postulate of God is back, then the highest good turns out to be theological again, even if it is seen as a moral world that must be

⁵⁷ Caswell, "Kant's Conception of the Highest Good, the *Gesinnung*, and the Theory of Radical Evil," 187.

realized on Earth (and not in an afterlife). With regard to this point, it is important to remember that, for Kant, the highest good that we are discussing is always a “derived” one, never the original. The original highest good is precisely God, the grantor of the derived version. In this way, even if we want to argue that Kant held an earthly version of the highest good, this is also subjected, according to him, to theological elements. This is pretty clear in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where Kant claims, as we have seen before, that “(...) only in the ideal of the highest original good can pure reason find the ground of the practically necessary connection of both elements of the highest derived good, namely of an intelligible, i.e., moral world” (CPR A810/B838 – A811/B839). This is also mentioned in the Second *Critique*, where Kant says that “the postulate of the possibility of the highest derived good (the best world) is likewise the postulate of the reality of a highest original good, namely of the existence of God” (CPrR 5:125).

In relation to the charge of arrogance or naiveté on the side of the “secularizers,” John Hare has made a good case. In his article “Kant and the Rational Instability of Atheism,” he argues that this secular view is not consistent in itself. In his own words,

the “human effort alone” part has been more or less unique in human history to the last century and a half. This has been at once the most educated and the most brutal period of human history. I am not arguing for the causal claim that atheism produces brutality, but for a Kantian modesty about what humans, given the propensity of evil, can accomplish on their own. Has Marxism or laissez-faire capitalism or any other human system produced the world of our dreams?⁵⁸

Finally, let’s pay some attention to the literal meaning of the concept of the highest good. The highest good recalls a perfect state of being. Now, if the highest good is seen as a state of affairs in the world in which happiness will only be favored, but not

⁵⁸ Hare, “Kant on the Rational Instability of Atheism,” 75.

granted for the just ones, how could we keep calling this the highest good? The highest good as understood by the “secularizers” is for sure a better state of affairs than that in which we actually live, and hence it could be seen as a social goal. But I do not see how we could keep calling it the highest good, i.e., a perfect world, as Kant understood it. The adjective “highest” included in the concept determines that there is nothing superior to that, and the secular version does not fit this characterization. In relation to this, it is important to notice that Kant was not talking about a highest “possible for humans by humans” good, as if it were a mere social goal. His vision of the highest good was much more grandiose: he envisioned the highest good as nothing less than the ultimate end of all things. That is why we have to take the adjective “highest” seriously, if we want to remain Kantians.

The secularizers’ attempts, therefore, as beautiful as they could sound for some (insofar as they foresee an ideal attainable through human effort), finally fail. The challenge, therefore, is to develop a defense of the theological version of the highest good; i.e. we have to find out if the theological version of the highest good (Kant’s idea of the highest good!) is necessarily prey to the problems pointed out by the “critics,” especially those of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice* and *irrelevance*, or if those criticisms are, after a careful analysis, ungrounded.

The Call for a “Maximalist” Interpretation

As we have seen, Kant’s concept of the highest good has been the subject of several objections. The problems of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice*, *irrelevance* and *abandonment* seem to undermine the idea. That is how the “critics” argue

that the highest good does not serve to answer the question of “What should I do?” It could serve, they admit, for architectonic purposes or for answering the question of hope, but is not useful for “practical” purposes. It is not, in sum, an ethical concept, but at most, a religious one.

In their attempt to solve these problems, the “revisionists” failed by denying (or ignoring) some of the main postulates of the *Groundwork* and the *Analytic of the Second Critique*. Also, they failed by not answering all of the criticisms, but in most of the cases only that of *irrelevance*. The case of the “secularizers” is interesting since they seem to succeed in the solution of most of the remaining problems, but they are in turn subject to several objections.

That is how it seems that the only possibility left, if we want to defend Kant’s concept of the highest good as part of his ethics, is to succeed in a “maximalist” interpretation; in other words, to defend the highest good against the criticisms in its theological version, without secularizing it. The challenge is to find out if the problems of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice* and *abandonment* can be solved with a “maximalist” interpretation. There have been several attempts to defend the highest good in this way. Some of the “maximalists” mentioned by Caswell are Allen Wood, Terry Godlove, Stephen Engstrom, and Sharon Anderson-Gold. Caswell himself identifies his essay as a maximalist defense. Now, to this list I will add the defense given by Victoria Wike. In what follows, I will give a quick review of some of these attempts, and see how successful their interpretations are.

In Chapter 3 of his book *Kant's Moral Religion*, Wood responds to Beck's criticism of *irrelevance* by saying that "the demand of reason that we make the highest good our end, is in effect a demand that we find for ourselves a single purpose for our lives, a final purpose which our reason entitles us to regard as the ultimate meaning and goal of the entire world,"⁵⁹ an argument that I find convincing. Wood also responds to the problem of *unsuitability*, in the following terms. Briefly, in Wood's view the highest good as a duty is just a harmonized compilation of the duties to promote the moral good, which he sees as a duty to promote both one's own and other's virtue (and not merely one's virtue, as it is established in the *Metaphysics of Morals*), and the natural good, which he sees as a duty to promote happiness in proportion to virtue "for myself and for others."⁶⁰ This view inspires him to elaborate the "Cambridge University Example," which he builds in order to respond to Beck's claim that there is no such duty to promote the highest good, since it is not contained as a duty in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In his words, "Beck's error here is quite like that of the man who denied that Cambridge University was a real educative institution because he failed to find it housed in any of the buildings on the campus."⁶¹ My response to the problem of *unsuitability* parallels Wood's, but is unfolded in a different way, as we will see in the following Chapter. Wood's defense, in any case, is insufficient insofar as he does not answer the problems of

⁵⁹ Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion*, 98.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 95.

heteronomy, impossibility, injustice, and abandonment (although he cannot be blamed for a lack of response in the two latter cases, since they emerged later).

Godlove, in turn, has also built a “maximalist” defense of the highest good. In his article entitled “Moral Actions, Moral Lives: Kant on Intending the Highest Good,” Godlove attempts to overcome the classic discussion around the idea of the highest good by focusing on an interpretation based on the *Religion* and the *Third Critique*. He considers that Kant developed –that is, changed– the justification of the importance of the highest good (and hence his theory of moral theism) in three periods: the first period corresponding to the highest good as presented in the *Lectures on Ethics* and the *First Critique*; the second period corresponding to the highest good as found in the *Second Critique*; and the third period corresponding to highest good as developed in the *Religion* and the *Third Critique*. The last account is the one that allows overcoming the classic discussion, according to the author. In other words, it is in this period that Kant successfully explains the ethical relevance of the highest good and of the religious elements that are attached to it.

Concretely in the *Religion*, in Godlove’s reading, Kant makes a fruitful distinction between two actions: the immediate and the mediate action. The immediate is related to the concrete action that I perform in this moment; for instance, to tell the truth. The mediate action is related to the final end of all actions: the highest good. “Thus, in acting, I intend to tell the truth, and I intend to further the highest good.”⁶² Both have the same motivational ground (the moral law), but different ends. Now, in Godlove’s opinion, it is

⁶² Godlove, "Moral Actions, Moral Lives: Kant on Intending the Highest Good," 55.

only when we take the highest good as the final goal of our life, i.e. when we foresee the second effect of every moral action (the highest good); it is only then that we adopt a moral life (understood as “more than a brute concatenation of otherwise independent moral actions”⁶³). So the highest good is important insofar as it enriches our life, transforming it into a really moral one, one oriented towards a final overarching goal.

In relation to this, also, theism is not necessary if we engage ourselves only in immediate actions. On the contrary, theism is crucial when we engage ourselves in a moral life, i.e., in a moral life oriented toward the highest good, since the latter is only possible through the intervention of God. Otherwise, we would be intending something that we know or believe to be impossible. In sum, for Godlove God is irrelevant to the exercise of practical reason, but is crucial for a moral life, i.e., for a life oriented towards the highest good.

From this reading the charge of *irrelevance* is, as in the case of Wood, superseded. Nonetheless, he denies that there is a duty to crown virtue with happiness,⁶⁴ which is not loyal to Kant’s idea of the highest good. To this extent, and to the extent that he does not answer the other problems at stake, his defense is both inappropriate and incomplete (although, as in the case of Wood, he cannot be blamed for not responding to the problems of *injustice* and *abandonment*, since these appeared later).

Turning to Engstrom’s defense, he asserts that the highest good becomes important “when to our concern regarding how we should act we add the further concern

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 57.

(...) regarding whether our actions will lead,"⁶⁵ following what Kant says in the *Religion*. In this way, he gives a strong argument to overcome the problem of *irrelevance*. He also responds to the problem of *impossibility*, according to which we cannot distribute happiness in accordance to virtue, mainly because of the obscurity of moral intentions. Nonetheless, his solution happens to be wrong. The way he tries to supersede that problem is by equating the duty of beneficence with the duty to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue, which seems inaccurate, to say the least. In his own words: "no problem arises if it is possible for us to aim at happiness proportioned to virtue without making any assessments of person's moral dispositions. This is possible if the duty to proportion happiness to virtue and the duty of beneficence coincide."⁶⁶ To this extent and to the extent that he does not respond to the other problems at stake (although, as in the former cases, he cannot be blamed for not responding to the problems of *injustice* and *abandonment*) his defense fails.

In relation to Wike's defense, she gives successful responses to the problems of *heteronomy* (by explaining how in Kant's idea of the highest good there is only "apparent" heteronomy, but not real⁶⁷), *unsuitability* (by arguing that the highest good commands "no more than the moral law although it surely commands in a different way than the moral law,"⁶⁸ insofar as it is a collective duty), *impossibility* (by asserting that the duty is to promote and not to attain the highest good, and that for Kant "questions

⁶⁵ Engstrom, "The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory," 780.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 772.

⁶⁷ Wike, *Kant on Happiness in Ethics*, 138.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

about physical abilities and powers are not relevant to considerations of categorical commands”⁶⁹), and *irrelevance* (by saying that the highest good “is of practical importance in defining the final goal of the will, of morality, and of helping human beings to recognize the communal nature of that goal”⁷⁰). As in the cases of Wood, Godlove, and Engstrom, she was not compelled to give an answer to the problems of *injustice* and *abandonment*, insofar as these criticisms appeared after her book was published, but she does answer all the other problems, for which her defense could be called a complete one, at least at the moment in which it was launched. The reader will note to which extent the defense developed in the next Chapter differs from hers, although there are more positive connections than disagreements.

The defense of Anderson-Gold, in turn, is also interesting but not loyal to Kant (although she argues the contrary). It is powerful insofar as she gives a good argument in defense of the practical importance of the highest good: it is necessary, she asserts, for the overcoming of evil, insofar as this emerges as a consequence of living among others, as Kant says at the beginning of book 3 of the *Religion*. Nonetheless, in some sections she seems to be too close to the “secularizers,” concretely by her understanding of the highest good as a social goal in which the element of proportionality is left aside. The way in which she distinguishes herself from the “secularizers,” and remains a “maximalist,” is by recognizing that God has a valuable place in the overall picture. In her words, “the God of the *Religion* functions (...) as the Moral Bondsman of a universal

⁶⁹ Ibid., 140.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 148.

and enduring community.”⁷¹ Where I think she is wrong is when she maintains that Kant changed his view on the highest good in this later work. In that way, instead of defining it as a moral world in which happiness will be distributed as a reward for virtue, the highest good, according to her, was now presented by Kant just as a moral world in which the element of proportional happiness was not included anymore. As she says in this respect,

in book 3 of the *Religion*, the highest moral good is defined as a social good, a unification of dispositions into a community under principles of virtue. With respect to the social good, references to a physical happiness exactly proportioned to virtue (with the retributivist connotations rejected by Auxter) are absent.⁷²

This is not accurate at all. Kant clearly maintains his vision of the highest good as a moral world in which happiness will be granted for the virtuous in the *Religion*, book 3 included. This is clear from the very beginning of the book, namely the preface to the first edition, in which Kant speaks of the highest good as

an object that unites within itself the formal condition of all such ends as we ought to have (duty) with everything which is conditional upon ends we have and which conforms to duty (happiness proportioned to its observance), that is, the idea of a highest good in the world, for whose possibility we must assume a higher, moral, most holy, and omnipotent being who alone can unite the two elements of this good (REL 6:5).

Also, in book 3 of the *Religion* Kant speaks about the necessity, in the ethical community (the highest good), of a divine legislator who will, “as must be in every community, give to each according to the worth of his actions” (REL 6:99). So it is very misleading to say that the highest good of the *Religion* is a different one from that of the *First and Second Critiques*.

⁷¹ Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*, 51.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 8.

In sum, I do not disagree with her claim that the highest good is ethically important insofar as it is required for the overcoming of evil. Nonetheless, I do not share the view that Kant abandoned his conception of the highest good as a moral world in which proportional happiness has a place. So even though her defense solves the problem of *irrelevance*, she fails by giving an erroneous interpretation of Kant's idea of the highest good, and by not responding to the other problems at stake.

Transition Towards a New “Maximalist” Defense

In Caswell's opinion, “these defenses differ widely in the substance of their interpretation, but all suffer from an inability to account for the necessity of the highest good for practical reasons.”⁷³ This is what justifies, in his opinion, his new “maximalist” defense of the highest good. What is required from the “maximalists,” according to him, is to show what difference it makes for a moral life to strive for the highest good, and to believe in the postulates attached to it. From here he develops his own “maximalist” interpretation. Concretely, he argues, as Anderson-Gold does, albeit through different roads, that the highest good is ethically important for the “revolution of the heart,” a revolution that is in turn required for the eradication of evil (as this is argued in the *Religion*). The problem in his case is that he does not approach the other problems, but only that of *irrelevance*, an error that, as we can see now clearly, is very common among the defenders, starting with Silber.

Now, I do not want to take Caswell's general attitude in relation to the “maximalists.” In other words, I do not want to say that all of them –Caswell included–

⁷³ Caswell, "Kant's Conception of the Highest Good, the *Gesinnung*, and the Theory of Radical Evil," 187.

have failed in their attempts to overcome the problems attached to Kant's concept of the highest good by the "critics." On the contrary, I found that each of the "maximalists" have something interesting to say in defense of the highest good, with their particular limitations. Within these lines, I think that any further defense, such as the one that I want to develop in the next chapter, does not have to deny the others in order to find a place in the discussion. There is no reason to think, for instance, that there must be only one argument that proves the practical importance of a theological version of the highest good. Now, this does not mean that I agree with all the arguments and readings presented by the "maximalists." For instance, I am not persuaded by Godlove's thesis that Kant changed his view on the real importance of the highest good at least three times. Nonetheless, I do find his theory of the double-effect action very interesting. And the same happens with the other interpreters. So instead of denying all their arguments, I am calling for the consolidation of the "maximalists" as a platoon. The enemy's weapons have been identified. In addition, we already know the only road that could lead us to victory. It would be irresponsible if, for the sake of our personal glory, we deny the value of our fellow combatants and disintegrate our philosophical militia. On the contrary, the more reasons we can collect for defending the highest good against the criticisms (as long as these are truly justified), the stronger we will be. That said, the moment has arrived for me to jump to the first line of combat, since the others have already done their part. If everything goes as expected, both their position (that of the other "maximalists") and mine will be enlightened by each other, and the criticisms will be finally superseded.

CHAPTER III
AN OVERARCHING DEFENSE OF
KANT'S IDEA OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

A genetic study (i.e., a study of the origins) of the discussion around Kant's idea of the highest good in the Anglo-Saxon world has shown us that most of the criticisms against Kant's inclusion of it in his moral philosophy were initially postulated by Beck. In fact, except for the criticisms of *abandonment* and *injustice* (which is, nonetheless, related to that of *impossibility*), and despite the fact that most of the other criticisms were complemented and reinforced by later commentators, Beck was the one who first pointed out the criticisms of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, and *irrelevance*. Beck's interpretation, hence, constitutes the seed from which the body of this controversy has emerged. That is why I propose, in order to supersede this controversy, to return to that seed, that origin, and to see if the discussion was not misled since the beginning. In other words, perhaps by throwing light onto Beck's interpretation, it will become clear that the discussion over the last fifty years has been, to some extent, a misunderstanding generated by an original erroneous interpretation of Kant's idea of the highest good.

As it is known, through those criticisms Beck denied two things. First, he denied that the highest good can be considered the determining ground of the will, insofar as it would bring *heteronomy* back to the stage, given that the highest good is defined by Kant

as an object that has happiness as one of its components. Second, he denied that there can be a duty to promote the highest good, which for him is reducible to a duty to crown virtue with happiness,¹ because of the problems of *unsuitability* and *impossibility*, i.e., because the idea of the highest good does not fit in Kant's ethics, insofar as it is neither contained in any of the formulations of the categorical imperative nor in those ends that are also duties in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, being instead a later arbitrary addition to his system (problem of *unsuitability*), and because there is nothing we can do in order to distribute happiness in accordance to virtue, that being a task reserved for a Supreme Being (problem of *impossibility*). Now, insofar as the concept of the highest good does not add new duties, and since in his opinion it cannot be considered the determining ground of the will, Beck concluded that the highest good is unimportant for moral purposes (problem of *irrelevance*).

Now, in his critical analysis Beck committed, in my opinion, at least four interpretative mistakes. First, he did not understand the consistency of the argument that Kant gives in order to justify how we could think, without bringing *heteronomy* back to the system, that the highest good is a proper determining ground of the will. Second, he did not see how a duty to crown virtue with happiness follows from the moral law and how, thanks to this, the idea of the highest good is constructed out of the latter, having not only a place, but a privileged one in his moral philosophy. In other words, Beck did not see how the highest good is "latently" present in the various formulations of the categorical imperative, insofar as the latter is the highest good in its embryonic stage, as

¹ Denying, in this way, that we promote the highest good not only by rewarding virtue, but by honoring all the duties that follow from the moral law.

it will be explained later. Instead, Beck seems to have thought of the highest good as an ungrounded idea that Kant arbitrarily added to his moral system from outside, from which an unjustified duty to crown virtue was then deduced, when it is the other way around. Third, Beck assumed that, for Kant, the duty to crown virtue with happiness is an infallible one, one of similar status as, for instance, the duty of not lying. Fourth, it is clear that, for Beck, the moral question is reducible to a question of duties. Therefore, if a concept, such as that of the highest good, does not help to answer the question of “What should I do?” by adding new duties, then it is morally irrelevant. In this way he denied, for instance, Kant’s clarifications in the *Religion*, where he asserts that, although the highest good does not add new duties, it is still important for ethics insofar as it answers the “whither” question. Beck’s reductionism of the moral question is patent in his claim that “the concept of the highest good is not a practical concept at all.”²

It is this erroneous reading of Kant that has misled, in turn, many of the commentators that came later. The “critics” that came after Beck have given more reasons to deny that the highest good can be considered the determining ground of the will insofar as it will undermine the principle of autonomy (first interpretative mistake), without paying careful attention to how Kant himself anticipated and responded to this potential criticism. Also, the “critics” have empowered the claim that the highest good does not fit in Kant’s ethics (second interpretative mistake), and have gone even further by saying that the idea of the highest good is incompatible with “the idea of the realm of

² Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, 245.

ends as the constructed object of the moral law.”³ In addition to this, the “critics” have followed Beck in the belief that Kant thought of the rewarding of virtue with happiness as an infallible duty (third interpretative mistake), something that they criticize because of the problem of *impossibility*. Moreover, the later interpretation has affected even some of the defenders, Silber being the most emblematic because of his assertion that the crowning of virtue with happiness is something that we do frequently in our ordinary lives (for instance, when rearing children, serving on juries, and grading papers), as if it were something unproblematic. But when we realize that Kant never thought of the duty to reward virtue as an infallible one, but instead softened such a duty and finally transposed the referred crowning to the “realm of hope,” then the criticism of *impossibility* disappears, insofar as it is grounded on that assumption, i.e., the criticism can only subsist under the presupposition that the duty to promote the highest good implies an infallible duty of distributing happiness in accordance to virtue, instead of a fallible one. Finally, the “critics” that came later also denied, as Beck did, the ethical importance of the highest good under the conviction that the moral question is only a question of duties (fourth interpretative mistake). For instance, the latter was stated by Murphy when he developed his defense of Beck against Silber. In his words, “(...) Kant’s introduction of this notion (the notion of the highest good into his ethical corpus) was unnecessary and ill-advised, serving as it does extra-moral theological purposes (...).”⁴ And this is why they were not able to solve the criticism of *irrelevance*, but instead adhered to it and reinforced it. Beck was right, we must admit, in suggesting that if the

³ Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, 316.

⁴ Murphy, “The highest good as content for Kant's ethical formalism (Beck 'versus' Silber),” 102.

highest good does not add new duties, then it is necessary to explain how it is still important for ethics.⁵ The problem in this case was that, for him, there was not any moral importance left, ignoring those sections in which Kant makes clear how the highest good is important for morality although not precisely because it adds new duties.

In addition to this, Beck's sowing of suspicion into Kant's idea of the highest good has also opened the door for new criticisms, specifically those of *abandonment* and *injustice*, which also demand an answer. So he is also, albeit indirectly, responsible for these criticisms.

The challenge of the defenders, then, is six-fold. First, we have to show how Kant was consistent with his ethical system overall while asserting that the highest good can be considered the determining ground of the will. In this way we will supersede the problem of *heteronomy*. Second, we have to demonstrate that the duty to crown virtue with happiness follows from the moral law and that, thanks to this, the idea of the highest good is constructed out of the latter; in other words, we have to demonstrate that the moral law is the highest good in its embryonic stage, and hence that the latter has a privileged place in his ethical system. In this way, we will overcome the problem of *unsuitability*. Third, we have to show that the crowning of virtue with happiness does not remain as an infallible duty for humans in Kant's moral system, but as a fallible one, till the point in which it also becomes a matter of hope. If we can do this, then it will be easy to show how the criticism of *impossibility* disappears, since it is grounded on that assumption.

⁵ Here we formally agree with Beck not to the extent that there is no duty to crown virtue with happiness, as he thinks, but insofar as the duty to reward virtue follows from the moral law, and not independently from the idea of the highest good, as if the latter were another "fact of reason" independent from the categorical imperative, instead of its constructed object.

Fourth, we have to show how the criticism of *injustice* posited by Rawls is both ungrounded –mainly through the reminder that Kant’s ethics is an ethics of intentions, not of consequences– and overestimated. Fifth, we have to demonstrate how it is true that the highest good is still important for ethics even though it does not add new duties, and hence overcome the problem that has attracted most of the attention in the secondary literature: namely that of *irrelevance*. Sixth and finally, we have to say something in relation to the problem of *abandonment*, the weakest of the criticisms, which nonetheless demands a response if we want to qualify our defense of Kant’s idea of the highest good as a complete one.

The Highest Good as Determining Ground of the Will

As we have said, at the end of Chapter I of the *Dialectic of the Second Critique* Kant speaks about the highest good as the determining ground of the will, something that, as we know, Beck regards as a mistake. The problem here is how Kant dares to speak of the highest good, which is defined by him as the “whole object of a pure practical reason” (CPrR 5:109), as the determining ground of the will, when in the *Analytic* of the same book he systematically insisted that no object, but only the formal moral law could be considered a proper determining ground of the will. This is precisely what makes Beck uncomfortable. In his opinion, to consider the highest good, which is an object that, moreover, has happiness as its subordinated component, as the determining ground of the will is to “surrender autonomy,”⁶ since only the moral law has that role in Kant’s ethics. In this consists, in a nutshell, the criticism of *heteronomy*.

⁶ Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, 244.

In relation to this, as we have seen in Chapter II, this criticism was later reinforced by Auxter, who maintained that “the highest good cannot have a beneficial effect on the motives of a subject, because no object can improve the specifically moral quality of a motive.”⁷

The ironic side of this criticism –ironic for us, the defenders– is that Kant himself anticipated this criticism, and responded to it.⁸ That is precisely what he does when he clarifies, in the same section of the *Dialectic*, how the highest good could be regarded as the determining ground of the will, without contradicting the fundamentals of the *Analytic* i.e., without bringing *heteronomy* back to the system. There he insists that “the moral law is the sole determining ground of the pure will” (CPrR 5:109), and that it is not because the highest good constitutes the whole object of pure practical reason that it must be regarded as the determining ground of the will. He even is very explicit in warning his readers of any misunderstanding when it is about moral principles, since in relation to them “the slightest misinterpretation corrupts dispositions” (CPrR 5:109), and he reminds us that no object can determine the will prior to the moral law without producing *heteronomy* instead of autonomy.

But there is a sense, he adds, in which we could say that the highest good is the determining ground of the will. In his own words:

if the moral law is already included as supreme condition in the concept of the highest good, the highest good is then not merely object: the concept of it and the representation of its existence as possible by our practical reason are at the same time the determining ground of the pure will because in that case the moral law,

⁷ Auxter, “The Unimportance of Kant’s Highest Good,” 130.

⁸ The following argumentation has been previously developed in similar terms by Wike.

already included and thought in this concept, and no other object, in fact determines the will in accordance with the principle of autonomy (CPrR 5:109).

In simple terms, it is not because the highest good is foreseen as an object that it is presented as the determining ground of the will, but because the moral law is included as its supreme component. In other words, if there is an object that has the moral law as one of its components, and moreover, as its supreme component, as in the case of the highest good, then there is a sense in which it could be said, without undermining the principle of autonomy, that such an object is a proper determining ground of the will. It is not, therefore, that the highest good (merely/primarily) as an object is the determining ground of the will, a case in which we would have better reasons to discuss if such a concept undermines the principle of autonomy. But this is not the case.

But Beck did not see the consistency of Kant's argument. On the contrary, in his opinion this way of putting things opens the door for the misunderstanding that Kant is trying to avoid. But insofar as Kant himself clarifies this point, and hence leaves no place for such a misunderstanding, I do not see why we should disregard his proposition, namely that the highest good could be thought as the determining ground of the will insofar as the moral law is the unconditional part of it.

In sum, Kant is clearly not bringing *heteronomy* back to his system. He expressly mentions that; hence, any criticism that insists on this issue (such as that of Auxter) is pointless, to say the least. There is no *heteronomy* if the idea of the highest good as the determining ground of the will is properly understood. As Wike says in relation to this, "there is only 'apparent' heteronomy here."⁹

⁹ Wike, *Kant on Happiness in Ethics*, 138.

The problem of *heteronomy*, therefore, is superseded in this way. Kant himself faced it with success. Nevertheless, in addition to this, and as a complementary defense, if we can show how the idea of the highest good can be plainly constructed out of the moral law or, using another image, if we can prove that the moral law is the highest good in its embryonic stage, as I will try to do in the next sub-section, then we will have another reason to dismiss the criticism of *heteronomy*. Why? Because the highest good would be understood as the constructed object of the moral law, or as the moral law in its completion, concretely as a world in which the categorical imperative and all the concrete duties that follow from it (including, for sure, a duty to crown virtue with happiness) are actualized by humans. In that case, the highest good would be distinguished from other objects in a fundamental way: it will not be a mere object but, as Wike says, “the moral law objectified, understood as a completed object.”¹⁰ Therefore, to pursue and even to desire such an object would never mean to subordinate our reason to our ordinary inclinations, but to pursue and desire the “good” as rationally dictated.

From this point of view, hence, to pursue the highest good would imply exactly the same as to honor the categorical imperative. So let’s see if the idea of the highest good can be constructed out of the moral law. Now, if we can do this, then we will not only reinforce our response to the criticism of *heteronomy*, but at the same time we will overcome the problem of *unsuitability*.

The Moral Law is the Highest Good in its Embryonic Stage

At this point we encounter the problem of *unsuitability*. As we know, according to Beck the idea of the highest good does not fit in Kant’s ethics, insofar as the highest good

¹⁰ Ibid.

is neither contained in any of the formulations of the categorical imperative nor in those ends that are also duties in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, being instead a later arbitrary addition to the system. In this way, Beck did not see how the highest good was “latently” present in the various formulations of the categorical imperative, insofar as the latter is nothing less than the highest good in its embryonic stage, having not only a place, but a privileged one in his ethical system.

This criticism, we have seen, was later reinforced by Rawls, who argued that the idea of the highest good is incompatible with that of the “kingdom of ends,” which as we know is included in one of the formulations of the categorical imperative (GMM 4:433). Moreover, in Rawls’ opinion the idea of an “impartial reason/judge,” from which Kant highlights that the highest good understood as the complete good must include happiness, and not only virtue, is something foreign to Kant’s core ethical system, a theological import that he (Rawls) regrets.

In relation to this criticism, as it has been briefly mentioned, it seems that Beck thought of the highest good as an ungrounded moral idea (i.e., one independent from the moral law) that Kant arbitrarily added in a later stage to his ethical system, from which an unjustified duty to crown virtue was then deduced. In such a presupposition, the idea of the highest good seems to appear as a sort of additional “fact of reason,”¹¹ one floating around in the noumenal world, independent from the moral law. In this view, the moral law would, on one side, command us to become virtuous, whereas the idea of the highest good would command, as an independent source of duties, the rewarding of such virtue.

¹¹ Others have later expressly proposed this. For instance, Murphy, “The highest good as content for Kant’s ethical formalism (Beck ‘versus’ Silber),” 104.

The supposed lack of ground of the idea of the highest good would be precisely the ground of his criticism: only the moral law can be a source of duties. But is this reading appropriate? No. The idea of the highest good, as explained by Kant as early as in the First *Critique*, is an idea constructed out of the categorical imperative; moreover, it is the categorical imperative in its total completion, objectified or, in other words, its constructed object. The highest good is nothing less than the world as it would be if all the duties that follow from the moral law were honored by all humans, including a duty to reward virtue with happiness. Let's remind ourselves how this is stated in the First *Critique*. There the moral world, which is a duty for us to promote, is defined by Kant as "the world as it would be if it were in conformity with all moral laws" (CPR A808/B836). Later he says that in the moral world a

system of happiness proportionately combined with morality can also be thought as necessary, since freedom, partly moved and partly restricted by moral laws, would itself be the cause of the general happiness, and rational beings, under the guidance of such principles, would themselves be the authors of their own enduring welfare and at the same time that of others (CPR A809/B837).

As it can be noticed, here Kant is saying that, among the duties that follow from the categorical imperative, there is one of rewarding virtue. He does not show how this is the case, but he certainly believes it.¹² That is why a moral world would be a world in which people are good and also rewarded for their goodness (insofar as the rewarding of goodness is also a way of becoming good, i.e. part of virtue, and not merely because we desire happiness). Finally, after having defined the moral world in these terms, Kant identifies it with the highest (derived) good (CPR A810/B838). Now, from this it is clear that Kant constructs the idea of the highest good out of the categorical imperative: the

¹² We will work on this derivation later in this sub-section.

highest good is the moral world, a world where the categorical imperative is fully actualized by all humans. The highest good, therefore, is not an independent idea that has no connection with the moral law, or that is even incompatible with it, as Rawls believes. It is, on the contrary, the moral law in its total completion.

As we can see, contrary to Beck's presupposition, we do not have to determine if the idea of the highest good was expressly included in any of the formulations of the categorical imperative, in order to determine if there is a duty to promote it, a duty that he narrows to one of rewarding virtue. It is the other way around: we have to see first how a duty to crown virtue with happiness follows from the moral law in order to see that the idea of the highest good is the constructed object of the moral law, and hence that the highest good not only fits in Kant's moral philosophy, but has a privileged place in it. In this way, we would overcome the problem of *unsuitability*. The demonstration that such a duty of rewarding virtue follows from the moral law, in fact, constitutes the "Rosetta stone" for such a construction. Why? Because if the crowning of virtue were not a duty, then we would be able to construct, out of the categorical imperative, the idea of a moral world in which people are good, but not deservedly happy, insofar as nobody would be required to reward virtue. The duty to promote the moral world, i.e. highest good, integrates in one idea (includes) all the particular duties that follow from the categorical imperative, and not only a duty to crown virtue with happiness, as Beck believes. In that sense, we promote the highest good by guiding our lives with the light of the categorical imperative.¹³ But if we cannot see how a duty to reward virtue with happiness is included

¹³ To this extent, I agree with Kleingeld when she says that we promote the highest good only by honoring the categorical imperative, as I have referred in Chapter II of this work. What distinguishes us, apart from

among the duties that follow from the categorical imperative, then the idea of the highest good as a moral world in which virtue is rewarded would not follow from it. This is, therefore, our next and fundamental task: to show that a duty to crown virtue with happiness follows from the moral law.

To this purpose, let's refer to the categorical imperative itself, using the so-called "formula of universal law," which is presented in the *Groundwork* in the following terms: "act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" (GMM 4:421); a formula that is rephrased almost immediately as follows: "act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature" (GMM 4:421); and let's apply these formulas within the context of an educative institution, and particularly with the case of the grading systems that are not only applicable to subject matters such as mathematics or history (cases in which what is rewarded is not virtue, as Silber thinks, but knowledge), but also to the behavior of the students, something common at the high school level in Latin America. Professors there are supposed to grade the conduct of their students. From here we can imagine the case of a professor who has a negative disposition towards a particular student for reasons that he cannot explain, and who, because of that, does not want to give him an "A" as a reward, although the student deserves it because of his outstanding conduct during the academic year. Now, paraphrasing the argument that Kant uses in the example of beneficence to others (although here we are working with an example of "rewarding virtue"), we can say that, if such a way of thinking were to become a universal law, grading systems would

the fact that she is a "secularizer," is that she did not see that a duty to crown virtue with happiness also follows from the categorical imperative, as I will try to show immediately.

probably still subsist (in fact, we cannot deny that in some cases the justice required in such grading systems is not actualized, but they have not disappeared). But, as Kant says, even though

it is possible that a universal law of nature could subsist in accordance with that maxim, still it is impossible to will that such a principle should hold everywhere as a law of nature (GMM 4:423).

This is the case –and we are here, it is important to remember, paralleling the way in which Kant literally justifies the duty of beneficence to others– because a will resolved in this way would contradict itself, inasmuch as cases might often arise in which one would want to be rewarded for one’s own virtue and in which one would deprive himself, by such a law of nature springing from his own will, of all hope of the deserved reward he wants for himself.

This seems to be the case: a maxim according to which virtue will not be rewarded with happiness can become a universal law of nature without contradiction (moreover, the world seems to be governed by such a law, as we frequently witness in cases where good people suffer the tragedies that come with earthquakes, sicknesses, etc.); nonetheless, there is no possibility of willing that such maxim “should be raised to the universality of a law of nature, because such a will would contradict itself” (GMM 4:424). In the case of our imaginary professor, he would never will that such a maxim becomes a universal law, because he is in turn subject to the evaluation of the students and of his superiors. He would like, in such cases, to be graded fairly and rewarded if his performance is good; so if he applies his wicked maxim, he will think of it merely as an exception for his own benefit.

This way of identifying a duty of beneficence, whose method I use to derive a duty of rewarding virtue, is clearly developed by Kant in these terms. Nonetheless, some could object that this is a consequentialist defense, and hence that Kant is not being consistent to his own ethical system in this particular case. If this were the case (something in relation to which I am not completely convinced), then a further justification is required. Why, then, can one not will without contradiction that a maxim of not rewarding virtue in a particular case should become a universal law, without taking into account our natural desire for receiving happiness as a reward for virtue? For this we can complement what is established in the “formula of the universal law” with the “formula of the end in itself,” which is presented by Kant in the following terms: “Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means” (GMM 4:429). With both formulas at hand, we could argue that the agent would contradict himself inasmuch as cases might often arise in which he will deserve to be rewarded for his own virtue, and will be in the moral necessity of demanding such reward, not because he desires the latter, but fundamentally because he, as a rational being, cannot deny to himself that such justice be actualized in his favor; otherwise, he would be treating himself as a mere mean, and not as an end. Therefore, it would be logically (and not merely naturally) impossible for him to will that such a principle should hold as a law of nature, depriving himself of the distributive justice that he will eventually deserve. Reformulating what we said first, in the case of our imaginary professor, he would never rightly will that such a maxim becomes a universal law, because he is in turn subject to

the evaluation of the students and of his superiors. He would demand, in such cases, to be graded fairly and rewarded if his performance is good, and not merely because he desires happiness, but because he is also obliged to demand justice for himself, as a way of treating himself as an end, and not merely as a mean.

Now, from this we can conclude that it is a duty “not to grade conduct unfairly,” insofar as the maxim according to which I will grade conduct unfairly does not pass the categorical imperative test. Now, this duty of “not grading conduct unfairly” can be rephrased in positive terms, namely by saying that it is a duty “to grade conduct fairly,” which is an example of rewarding virtue. Hence, grading conduct fairly, i.e. rewarding virtue could be included among those duties that Kant calls “imperfect duties,” if we are with Kant in this, his way of identifying concrete duties out of the categorical imperative. It is an imperfect duty and not a perfect one insofar as the contradiction lies in the will of the agent, and not in the maxim itself.

Let’s now see if the same duty can be specified from another formulation of the categorical imperative, particularly the “formula of the end in itself,” which has been recently quoted. The professor that denies the proper reward to his student because of his antipathy for him is clearly using him “merely as a means to an end which the latter does not likewise hold” (GMM 4:429). In this case, the end that the professor is pursuing is the wicked satisfaction of making his student unfairly miserable, an end that the student will never hold, insofar as he “cannot possibly concur with my (the professor’s, in this case) way of acting toward him and hence cannot himself hold the end of this action” (GMM 4:429); and in fact, would the student hold such a wicked end? Definitely, no. Now, if

grading unfairly is a particular case of treating a human being (in this case, the student) as a mere object, and hence such a maxim does not pass the “categorical imperative test,” we can say that it is a duty “not to grade conduct unfairly,” a duty that, rephrased in positive terms, equates to a duty “to grade conduct fairly,” or to reward virtue.

That the crowning of virtue with happiness is for Kant an act of justice (and more particularly, an act of distributive justice broadly understood), and hence an act that harmonizes with the moral law, is confirmed when we remember that, for him, such reward is something that we can rationally hope for through God, and that is even presented by Kant as God’s final end in creation (CPrR 5:130). And this (that the rewarding of virtue is an act of justice that follows from the categorical imperative) is the reason that lies behind the example of the “impartial reason/judge,” the one that Kant uses for the sake of making evident that the highest good must include happiness as its subordinate component, and not only virtue. In fact, as he says in all his major works, an impartial reason/judge with suitable power would find it wrong not to crown virtue with happiness. And why would this be the case? We can say without doubts that because not doing it would be unjust according to the moral law. It is senseless, then, to say that a duty to crown virtue with happiness is incompatible with the moral law, or that the example of the “impartial reason/judge” does not have anything to do with Kant’s core ethical system, as Rawls asserts.

Let’s now insist on the consequence that follows from this demonstration: if it is true that a duty to reward virtue can be specified from the moral law (as other duties are), as I claim to have shown, then the idea of the highest good as understood by Kant can be

constructed out of the moral law (idea that, we must remember, pure practical reason seeks, as the “unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason” (CPrR 5:108). In fact, if it were possible for us to judge the morality of actions and to harmonize the moral laws with the natural ones, and moreover, if we in fact did that, then we would be actualizing the highest good as defined by Kant: as a moral world in which people are not only good, but also rewarded for their goodness. The idea of the highest good, therefore, can be plainly constructed out of the moral law once we see that the duty to crown virtue can be specified from the moral law, without saying, it is important to reassert, that we promote the highest good only by rewarding virtue, but more broadly by honoring the categorical imperative. The highest good, hence, is “latently” present in the categorical imperative, insofar as the moral law is the highest good in its embryonic stage. In other words, whereas the categorical imperative contains as a seed all the particular duties that we must obey, the highest good represents all these same particular duties in their completion. Therefore, it is wrong to say, as Beck does, that “none of the formulations of the categorical imperative have had this content.”¹⁴

From this two things that were promised before follow: first, the reinforcement of our response to the criticism of *heteronomy*, insofar as the idea of the highest good can be thought of not as a mere object, but as the constructed object of the moral law, or as the moral law in its completion; and second, the certainty that the criticism of *unsuitability* was also wrongly posited by the “critics.” There are still, nonetheless, four problems ahead of us, namely those of *impossibility*, *injustice*, *irrelevance*, and *abandonment*. Let’s

¹⁴ Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, 244.

take them one by one in the same order, and see if we can overcome them, as we have already done with those of *abandonment*, *heteronomy*, and *unsuitability*.

The Duty to Crown Virtue is a Fallible One

We just have seen how the duty to crown virtue with happiness follows from the moral law. Next we have Beck's claim that the rewarding of virtue is impossible for humans. Against the problem of *impossibility*, I want to argue two things. First, that Kant did not think of the duty of rewarding virtue as an infallible one. Second, that, in any case, the burden of the proof in this specific issue is on the side of the "critics;" i.e., that since the latter are the ones accusing Kant of having contradicted himself (by asserting both that virtuous intentions are obscure but that, nonetheless, we have an infallible duty to crown virtue with happiness), they are the ones responsible for proving their accusation, and not the defenders, as I will show.

The Fallible Duty to Crown Virtue

According to Beck the rewarding of virtue is impossible for humans, although he does not unfold this idea. He just says that there is nothing we can do for distributing happiness in accordance to virtue, something that, instead, only a Supreme Being could grant. In his words, "I can do absolutely nothing else toward apportioning happiness in accordance with desert—that is the task of a moral governor of the universe, not of a laborer in the vineyard."¹⁵ This problem, nonetheless, was later reinforced by further commentators, as we have seen. Now, among the reasons that the "critics" have posited in order to prove the impossibility of such a thing, there is one that seems insurmountable, namely Kant's own conviction that virtuous intentions are obscure

¹⁵ Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, 244.

(GMM 4:407), which was first highlighted by Murphy. And in fact, if we cannot know other people's intentions, and not even ours, how would be possible for us to judge the morality of actions, in order to reward them? For this an omniscient moral ruler of the world is required.

This idea (that the obscurity of virtuous intentions makes it impossible for us to distribute happiness in accordance to virtue), it is important to remark, has not only been sustained by the "critics" but even by some defenders, including "maximalists" such as Anderson-Gold. As she asserts in relation to this,

our epistemological limitations render us incapable of making the type of moral assessment of worthiness necessary to be "just distributors." Our obligation to 'promote' this type of world cannot mean that individuals should attempt to become the distributing agents.¹⁶

Now, Kant could be blamed for falling prey to the problem of *impossibility* and, moreover, of having contradicted himself, had he thought of the duty of crowning virtue as an infallible one. By an infallible duty I understand one that we are in power to perfectly actualize or, in other words, one for whose improper accomplishment we could be blamed. Many duties are of this nature; for instance, the duty of telling the truth (or of not lying). This duty is an infallible one insofar as it can be clearly seen by me, in every particular situation in which I am required to tell the truth, if I am lying or not, since I am the one that holds the piece of truth that is either revealed or concealed. In other words, in relation to the duty of telling the truth, I can perfectly accomplish what is required from

¹⁶ Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil*, 31.

me: I can't fail.¹⁷ A fallible duty, on the contrary, is one whose perfect accomplishment is not in my control. The duty to crown virtue is one of these, mainly because of the obscurity of moral intentions.¹⁸ We can, certainly, fail in our attempts to crown virtue with happiness, but can we be blamed for such a mistake? Would it not be enough that we try as best as we can? Is not Kant's ethics mainly an ethics of intentions?

It is true that Kant did not develop this distinction, i.e. that of fallible and infallible duties. Nonetheless, we can build such a distinction by ourselves insofar as it does not violate the fundamentals of Kant's ethics, and since, moreover, it helps us to defend his moral system, this time concretely in relation to the problem of *impossibility*. We can also do that insofar as there are hints that lead to this interpretation in Kant's oeuvre, as we will see.

I am of the opinion that Kant softened the duty to crown virtue, not in the sense that we are not so required to crown virtue with happiness when reality puts us in such situations, but in the sense that he was very well aware of our limitations, especially of

¹⁷ Other example of an infallible duty is that of not stealing, insofar as I cannot fail when actualizing such duty. In fact, if I steal, it is not that I failed in my attempts of not stealing, but that I consciously violate the duty that prohibits such action. To take something by distractions, for instance a pencil that I borrowed, is not stealing, but just a mistake. The duty of not killing is another example, insofar as I would violate such duty only if I kill somebody in purpose or by being negligent. I can, of course, cause others' death without intention or negligence, for instance if somebody suddenly jumps in front of my car in the driveway as an act of suicide, but in such cases I would have not violated the duty of not killing, insofar as it was not my fault. The duty of not committing suicide also falls in this category, insofar as I cannot fail in my attempts of not doing it: I can fail in my attempts of committing suicide, but all what it takes in order to not doing it is just not attempting it.

¹⁸ Another example of a fallible duty is the duty to cultivate oneself. I can certainly try to enlarge and improve my "fortunate natural predispositions" (GMM 4:423), but I can certainly fail in my attempts, due for instance to unfortunate hardships, such as sickness, poverty, emotional distress, etc. To put an example, I can have all the intentions to become a professional, i.e. to study a career and by that to improve some natural gift, but my scarce resources could push me to postpone or even abandon those efforts and work for survival instead, as must often be the case in a world where most of people live in extreme poverty. Now, it is clear that if I fail in my attempts of enlarging and improving my natural predispositions for these reasons, I cannot be blamed, insofar as the failure resides not in my intention. The perfect accomplishment of this duty is not under my complete control.

our impossibility of knowing people's moral intentions (he himself is the one that states that virtuous intentions are obscure!). Therefore, for him we are required to try as best as we can to crown virtue with happiness when life puts us in such situations; nonetheless, this duty is a fallible one, insofar as our limited judgment can fail to meet reality, without being our fault. That is why we would never be condemned for making an inexact judgment on this one: a well intended attempt of rewarding will be enough. After all, once again, Kant's ethics is an ethics of intentions. So despite the obscurity of moral intentions, for Kant we are still required to try to reward virtue as far as it is possible for us, always in the hope that our action will match reality, and that a Supreme Being will rectify our mistakes at the very end, when completing his ultimate plan in creating the world which, as we have seen, in Kant's view is the crowning of virtue with happiness (CPrR 5:131).

The *Religion* makes a good case for this claim, namely the claim that for Kant the crowning of virtue was still a duty, although a fallible one, because of our epistemological limitations (concretely in Book III, sections 3 and 4 of the First Division). There we find Kant reminding us that humans cannot be legislators (and judges by extension) of an ethical community, precisely because of the obscurity of moral intentions. For that the postulate of God is required. "The morality of actions," Kant says, are "something internal, and hence cannot be subject of public human laws" (REL 6:98). Nonetheless, despite our epistemological limitations, Kant did not renounce this duty completely, and kept it as a fallible one. In fact, a few paragraphs later we find him saying that, in promoting the highest good, "each must (...) so conduct himself as if

everything depended on him. Only on this condition may he hope that a higher wisdom will provide the fulfillment of his well-intentioned effort” (REL 6:101). Now, in this assertion it is implied that we must act as if the crowning of virtue depended on us, although without ignoring our limitations in this respect, in the hope that God will complete our efforts in an unknown future.¹⁹ This is a clear hint that for Kant there are fallible duties, such as that of rewarding virtue.

As we can see, we are under a fallible duty, but a moral duty at last. And it is reasonable that it remains as a duty, even under such limitation, because the crowning of virtue represents nothing less than the accomplishment of ultimate (distributive) justice in the world,²⁰ and because life frequently puts us in front of situations in which we are called to reward virtue (for instance, in our example of the Latin American high school professor). So what else could we do instead of trying to reward virtue as best as we can, when we are required to? Not even trying? I do not think that this would be a wise, much less realistic solution. We must try as best as we can, always in the referred hope.

Now, the fallible nature of this duty, caused by our inability to perfectly judge the morality of actions, together with our other inability, namely that of thoroughly

¹⁹ The importance of what Bielefeldt calls the “as-if mode of thinking” or “as-if structure” in Kant’s philosophical project is developed in his book entitled *Symbolic Representation in Kant’s Practical Philosophy*. In his own words, “the use of the as-if structure in addressing ideas of reason is of fundamental significance for understanding Kant’s critical philosophizing in general. (...) That is, whenever it comes to represent ideas of reason, all claims of objectifying knowledge must be transformed into the mode of a conscious ‘as-if.’ For only by becoming aware of this as-if structure can the human mind avoid the complementary traps of dogmatism and skepticism. This as-if structure occurs both in Kant’s theoretical and practical philosophy. In the realm of practical philosophy, however it is particularly important since in moral practice the idea of the unconditioned has a constitutive (rather than a mere regulative) function,” 36. He then highlights how the “as-if” structure is present in the various formulations of the categorical imperative.

²⁰ “Justice” in the broad sense of the word, and not in the merely legal sense that Kant sometimes attributes to it.

harmonizing the moral laws with the natural laws (CPrR 5:124), makes Kant transpose the referred crowning from the “realm of virtue” to the “realm of hope.” And that the crowning of virtue is not only a duty but an object of hope is another hint that, for Kant, such a duty is a fallible one. In fact, if it were completely in our hands to actualize the crowning of virtue, then Kant would have not seen the necessity of transposing such crowning to the “realm of hope.” By doing this, Kant is admitting that this duty has a different status than most duties, as for instance the previously referred to duty to tell the truth. It would be absurd to say that the “telling of truth” (as in the case of the “crowning of virtue”) is not only a duty but a matter of hope, something to be expected in a future life through God. And why is this the case? We can say, for instance, that because to tell the truth is something that is, under normal conditions, completely in our hands.

In the Second *Critique*, we know, Kant qualifies the highest good as “God’s final end in creating the world” (CPrR 5:130). There he says that

nothing glorifies God more than what is most estimable in the world, respect for his command, observance of the holy duty that his law lays upon us, when there is added to this his magnificent plan of crowning such a beautiful order with corresponding happiness (CPrR 5:131).

This quote is not only beautiful, but also important in our task of arguing that for Kant the duty to crown virtue is a fallible one, one that was softened by Kant, till the point in which he talked of the crowning as an object of hope, as nothing less than the ultimate goal of creation.

But this is something that the “critics” seem to ignore. For them, Kant thought of the duty of rewarding virtue as any other duty, i.e. not as a fallible one. And that is why they accuse Kant not only of falling prey to the problem of *impossibility* but, even worse,

of having contradicted himself by saying both that virtuous intentions are obscure but that nonetheless we are obliged by the moral law to reward virtue without qualifications. But is this true?

I have tried to prove that this is not the case. But can we do better? In other words, can we undoubtedly prove that for Kant the duty of rewarding duty was a fallible one? This is a hard, if not impossible, task; moreover, it is something that the “critics” are called to prove, if they want to keep the criticism of *impossibility*. Let me try to explain why, for which we have to appeal to what the ancients called *onus probandi*, and what is nowadays known in the legal and scientific sphere as the “burden of proof.”

The Probatio Diabolica

The juridical and scientific doctrine of *onus probandi* (which, as it is known, is traced back to the Romans, and was very influential in medieval disputations²¹) helps us to determine who is responsible to prove the validity of an assertion or an imputation, i.e., to assign the burden of proof. As Crocker²² explains in relation to this, in Common Law this tradition embraces, among other principles, those known as the principles of “tractability of proof” and of “prior improbability.”

According to the principle of “prior improbability,” the burden of proof may be located upon the party who argues that the more unusual event has occurred. An example will help us to understand this principle. We can say that the majority of people in the world do not kill other humans. Therefore, it is assumed that people normally are not prone to kill; the abnormal case is the assassination of a human by another. Therefore, he

²¹ Hahn and Oaksford, “The Burden of Proof and Its Role in Argumentation,” 40.

²² Crocker, “Ethics and the Law’s Burdens of Proof,” 276-280.

who accuses somebody of committing an assassination is the one responsible of proving his imputation, according to the principle of “prior improbability.”

The principle of “tractability of proof,” on the other hand, establishes that the burden of proof may be placed on the one who holds a positive assertion, instead of on the one who holds a negative one. For instance, in the assertion “X killed Y,” the one who accuses is the one called to prove, instead of leaving the responsibility of proving to X, who in such a case would be taken to the absurdity of proving that he did not do something. In fact, negative proofs lead to what the ancients called *probatio diabolica* (the “Devil’s proof”). A *probatio diabolica* is an impossible proof; for instance (in metaphysics), the demand of proving that something does not exist or, as in our legal example, the imposition to the accused of proving his own innocence. This is related to that ancient axiom according to which *affirmanti incumbit probatio*, which could be translated as “the one that affirms must prove,” rule which mirrors that other that says that *semper necessitas probandi incumbit ei qui agit*, which can in turn be translated as “the necessity of proof always lies with the person who accuses.”

Now, how is all this related to our defense of Kant’s idea of the highest good? We are, we must remember, in a crucial state of our defense. The “critics” are accusing Kant of having contradicted himself by having asserted both that virtuous intentions are obscure but that, nonetheless, we have an infallible duty to crown virtue with happiness. On the other side of the discussion, we have built our defense of Kant by saying that he never meant, when he said that there was a duty to promote the highest good, that there was an infallible duty to crown virtue with happiness (and, by extension, that he never

committed the contradiction of saying that we are blind with regard to moral intentions but that, nonetheless, we are obliged to perfectly reward virtue). Now, taking in consideration the principles of “prior improbability,” and of “tractability of proof,” we can ask: are we, the defenders, responsible for proving that Kant never stated that such a duty was an infallible one and that, therefore, he did not contradict himself? Are not instead the “critics” the ones on whom such burden should be placed? Moreover, would not the contrary equate the imposition on the defenders (and Kant’s) side of a *probatio diabolica*? Let’s analyze if this is the case.

According to the principle of “prior improbability,” we have to analyze if the “critics” are asserting something that could be qualified as unusual. In this case, the “critics” are accusing Kant of having contradicted himself by saying both that moral intentions are obscure and that we have an infallible duty to crown virtue with happiness. But what sounds more normal, or expected? To think that Kant (who is probably the greatest philosopher of the last five hundred years, and who asserted that the main responsibility of a philosopher is to be consistent) contradicted himself in such a gross way or that he did not contradict himself, but rather never thought of the duty to crown virtue with happiness as an infallible one? It is clear that the former is less plausible, so according to the “prior improbability” principle,” the “critics” are the ones responsible for proving their assertion that for Kant such duty was an infallible one.

Now let’s analyze if the same conclusion follows from the principle of “tractability of proof.” According to this principle, we remember, the burden of the proof must go to the one that is making a positive assertion. In our case, as we know, the

“critics” are the ones accusing Kant of having contradicted himself by stating the obscurity of moral intentions and next establishing an infallible duty to crown virtue with happiness. Therefore, they are the ones who are called to prove it. The contrary would be to impose on the side of the defenders the so-called *probatio diabolica*.

Now we ask: have the “critics” so far proved that Kant contradicted himself by stating an infallible duty to crown virtue with happiness? Clearly not. Now, in their defense someone could say that this was not something required from them, insofar as the distinction between fallible and infallible duties is not expressly found in Kant’s works. Nonetheless, if they want to keep their accusation after this distinction has been unfolded, it is necessary that they present the corresponding proofs. Meanwhile, we can say that Kant did not do that, and that, therefore, he was not prey either to the problem of *impossibility*, or to the referred contradiction.

In sum, even though we have presented good arguments in Kant’s defense against this particular accusation, the defenders are not responsible for demonstrating that Kant did not contradict himself on this one. On the contrary, the “critics” are the ones who are called to prove their accusation, particularly by proving that for Kant the duty to crown virtue with happiness was an infallible one. Otherwise, the defenders would have to deal with an impossible proof (the *probatio diabolica*), something unacceptable in any trial (or, in this case, philosophical discussion) that claims to be fair.

Further Clarification

If Kant never thought of the duty to crown virtue with happiness as an infallible one, then the criticism of *impossibility* disappears, insofar as it is grounded on the assumption that, for Kant, such a duty is an infallible one.

Now, before going to the next step, I would like to make some amendment to an opinion frequently found in the secondary literature, particularly the claim that the fallible (as it has been qualified in this work) duty to crown virtue with happiness equates with the indirect duty to promote our own happiness and the direct duty to promote other's happiness taken together, as these duties are defined by Kant.²³ Let's hence analyze if that is, in fact, the case (something that I will deny).

The Indirect Duty to Promote One's Happiness

References to the indirect duty to promote one's own happiness are found mainly in the *Groundwork*, the *Second Critique*, and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the *Groundwork* Kant says that "to assure one's own happiness is a duty (at least indirectly); for, want of satisfaction with one's condition, under pressure from many anxieties and amid unsatisfied needs, could easily become a great temptation to transgression of duty" (GMM 4:399). This is restated in the *Second Critique*, where Kant says –after claiming that pure practical reason does not require that one renounce happiness overall, but only to put limits over it if duty is at stake or, in other words, to shape our desire for happiness through the light of reason– that

it can even in certain respects be a duty to attend to one's happiness, partly because happiness (to which belong skill, health, and wealth) contains means for

²³ For instance, Wood, as it has been mentioned in Chapter III.

the fulfillment of one's duty and partly because lack of it (e.g., poverty) contains temptations to transgress one's duty (CPrR 5:93).

In both cases, it is important to clarify, Kant is not contradicting what he has established with great insight, namely that the moral law must shape our strivings for happiness and that, in consequence, the former prevails over the latter (i.e., in relation to what is unconditionally good, the moral law has the last word). It is not the case, hence, that Kant is here contradicting his main lines of thought by calling for an open and unlimited search for happiness, as if the principle of heteronomy will, in the long term, generate that of autonomy. No. What Kant is doing here is simply asserting that happiness is not evil in itself, and that, in a very limited way, it could even contribute to virtue, on one side because well being puts us in a better situation to accomplish our duties (for instance, if I am healthy I am in a better position to help the sick ones) and, on the other side, because the least we suffer of the poundings of life, the fewer reasons we will have to treat others and ourselves merely as means and not as ends (following Kant's own example, if we are not poor, then we will be less inclined to steal).

Now, this duty does not equate with that of rewarding virtue. In fact, in the case of the indirect duty to promote our own happiness, happiness serves virtue (it is a duty since it could favor virtuous dispositions, albeit only under the very limited circumstances and conditions described), whereas in the highest good happiness is seen as the reward for virtue, i.e. virtue justifies happiness. This is explained in detail by Kant in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. There we find Kant saying that, in the case of the indirect duty to promote one's own happiness, "it is not my happiness but the preservation of my moral integrity that is my end and also my duty", and that here "the end is not the

subject's happiness but his morality, and happiness is merely a means for removing obstacles to his morality" (MM 6:388). So in this indirect duty we are not talking of happiness as a reward for virtue at all, but of happiness as a means to virtue, which is something completely different. The indirect duty says "take care of your happiness insofar (and only insofar) as it favors virtue," and not "do justice to yourself by rewarding your virtue with happiness;" these are two different things.

The Direct Duty to Promote Others' Happiness

References to the duty to promote others' happiness are found, also, mainly in the *Groundwork*, the *Second Critique*, and the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In the first mentioned, the duty appears right after the categorical imperative in the "formula of universal law" and in the "formula of the law of nature" is presented, particularly when Kant offers the four examples of concrete duties that follow from the formal moral law, occupying, the duty under discussion, the fourth position (GMM 4:423). As we have already indirectly referred when deriving the duty of crowning virtue, Kant argues that it is not possible for humans to will that a maxim of indifference towards the well-being of others

should hold elsewhere as a law of nature. For a will which resolved in this way would contradict itself, inasmuch as cases might often arise in which one would have need of the love and sympathy of others and in which he would deprive himself, by such a law of nature springing from his own will, of all hope of the aid he wants for himself (GMM 4:423).

This is reasserted later, although in different terms, when using the same example but under the light of the categorical imperative in the "formula of the end in itself" (GMM 4:430). Here the justification goes as follows: humanity might survive if we do not contribute to each other's happiness, but this

would harmonize only negatively and not positively with humanity as an end in itself (...). For the ends of any subject who is an end in himself must as far as possible be my end also, if that conception of an end in itself is to have its full effect in me (GMM 4:430).

Now, as we can see, in both cases Kant is making no reference to a duty to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue. The duty is generally established: to promote others' happiness, without qualification. Kant is not, hence, presenting a duty of crowning virtue with happiness, but a duty of promoting happiness, for the reasons given.

In the Second *Critique* the duty to promote others' happiness is also approached, particularly at 5:34. There Kant asserts that only by including the happiness of others in our personal moral considerations can we individually claim that our personal strivings for happiness are legitimate, and this by way of the moral law which commands that we universalize our maxims. In his own words,

the law to promote the happiness of others arises not from the presupposition that this is an object of everyone's choice but merely from this: that the form of universality, which reason requires as the condition of giving to a maxim of self-love the objective validity of a law, becomes the determining ground of the will (CPrR 5:34).

Now, as in the case of the *Groundwork*, here we are not talking of a duty to proportion happiness in accordance to virtue, but of a duty to promote the happiness of others in general. Also as in the former case, the justification is not the deservedness, but in this case the conditions under which we can legitimately promote our own happiness. So we are under duties that are different and that, because of that, should not be equated.

Finally, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, as in the former cases, the justification of the duty to promote others' happiness makes it different from the vision of happiness as a reward for virtue that is presented in the highest good. The duty to promote others'

happiness in a detached way (i.e., without expecting a retribution) is named “beneficence” in this book. Now, when Kant unfolds this duty, he makes clear that the duty is one of helping the needed people according to one’s means. This is, as can be clearly recognized, something completely different from a supposed duty to proportion happiness as a reward for virtue. In fact, this duty arises because the other is in need, not because the other deserves happiness as a reward for being a good person. In his own words,

the maxim of (...) beneficence towards those in need, is a universal duty of human beings, just because they are to be considered fellow human beings, that is, rational beings with needs, united by nature in one dwelling place so that they can help one another (MM 6:453).

Moreover, we could add that, even if it were argued that we are also supposed to verify that the person in need is morally good, the motivation that justifies the duty is the same: the need, and not the virtuous disposition. The latter will only be a requirement, a condition, not the motive for helping. So again we are talking of two different things.

Now, the fact that there is a duty to promote other’s happiness without qualifications reconfirms that there must be a duty to crown virtue with happiness. Why? Because if I am first of all obliged to take care of other’s well being, with more reason I would be obliged to do it when the other not only needs it, but in addition deserves it. So there is another reason to deny that a duty to reward virtue cannot follow from the moral law, as the “critics” argue.

Kant’s Ethics is an Ethics of Intentions

As we have seen, the problem of *impossibility* is superseded when we realize that the duty to crown virtue with happiness is a fallible one, and that Kant was very aware of

that (unless somebody proves the contrary). Now, the obscurity of moral intentions is something that creates another problem, namely that of *injustice*, as described by Rawls.

As we remember, for Rawls there cannot be a duty to crown virtue insofar as any attempt to reward virtue would imply an arbitrary/irrational action. In other words, any virtue rewarding system will always be a “blind” one; so we will always be at risk of rewarding the wrong people, or in other words, of distributing happiness in the wrong way. So Rawls seems to be worried about the consequences that such a rewarding system would generate.

It is true. A system devoted to the rewarding of virtue would be, for humans, a fallible one. There would be, without doubts, cases of people receiving prizes without deserving them. So how could we respond to this criticism? First and most important, by reminding ourselves that Kant’s ethics is, above all, an ethics of intentions, and never a “consequentialist” theory, something that everybody, including Rawls, will immediately admit. In fact, as Kant states as early as in the *Groundwork*, the categorical imperative is concerned “with the form of the action and the principle from which it follows; what is essentially good in the action consists in the mental disposition, let the consequences be what they may” (GMM 4:416). Therefore, our focus must be primarily the moral agent and his intention in performing the act, and not the consequences of his actions.

In the case of the fallible duty to crown virtue with happiness, what matters is if the moral agent, specifically the one called to crown virtue in a particular situation, is doing his duty of rewarding virtue for the proper motive (i.e., because rewarding virtue is the right thing to do according to the moral law), and as best as he can (despite his

inability of knowing with total certainty people's moral intentions). If he does as best as he can, and does it for the proper motive, then there is nothing else to say. The moral action would have been a good one. So if against his intention he fails in his judgment of the deservedness of the reward, this will not harm the rightness of his action.

It is strange, taking in consideration this basic and radical aspect of Kant's ethics, that Rawls criticizes the duty to crown virtue because of the consequences that such an action could generate. Now, if we add to this that there will be many instances in which the right people will receive their deserved reward, and that, in addition, there will be no cases of people receiving rewards for actions that go against the moral law (for instance, there will be no cases of killers being rewarded for their crime), but only of people that at least "legally" (and hopefully also morally) have followed the moral law, then Rawls' fear becomes even powerless. Finally, we could ask what other choice we have. Not rewarding people's actions? As it has been said before, this sounds unrealistic, insofar as life sometimes puts us in such situations; in other words, the rewarding of virtue, as fallible as it is, is something that belongs to human relationships, so it would be absurd to establish that we simply must stop doing it.

So the problem of *injustice* is, as the others, a misled one. It is, first of all, a criticism that does not pay careful attention to the deontological nature of Kant's ethics; and second, it is overestimated for the three mentioned reasons: first, insofar as the concrete attempts to crown virtue will in many cases match reality; second, insofar as those attempts will never consider the rewarding of crimes or actions that legally go

against the moral law; and third, because the option of not doing anything in rewarding situations seems absurd.

The Ethical Importance of Kant's Idea of the Highest Good

So far we claim to have superseded the problems of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, and *injustice*. Now we turn to the problem that has called most of the attention in the secondary literature: that of *irrelevance*, whose solution we pursue now.

As this problem was defined by Beck, if the highest good does not add new duties, and if it cannot be considered the determining ground of the will, hence it must be regarded as *irrelevant* for moral purposes. But is this conclusion accurate? Kant himself asserts, in the *Religion*, that the highest good does not add new duties,²⁴ and he clarifies in the Second *Critique* that the highest good can be thought as the determining ground of the will only insofar as it has the moral law as its supreme component. We have already seen this. But from this does it follow that the highest good is irrelevant for ethics, as Beck asserts? I do not think that this is the case.

In what follows I will present four reasons to defend the practical importance of the highest good. Briefly, the reasons are the following. First, as Kant says, if the highest good were impossible, the moral law would be pointless, insofar as the highest good is nothing less than the moral law in its total completion; second, the highest good serves as a proper incentive for the moral agent (without bringing *heteronomy* back to the stage); third, the highest good is necessary for the overcoming of evil; and fourth, the highest good is the answer to the “whither” question, which is without doubts a moral one, as Kant states.

²⁴ Once again, the fallible duty to crown virtue follows from the moral law.

Now, I am not saying that these are all the reasons that prove the ethical importance of the highest good. There could be, without doubt, more reasons; but these are the ones that I am focusing on; if they are well grounded, they suffice (even individually) to supersede the problem of *irrelevance*. That said, let me proceed to the final step of this work: that of demonstrating the ethical importance of the highest good.

Without the Highest Good the Moral Law would be Pointless

The first argument that Kant gives for the ethical importance of the highest good in his major works is found in the First *Critique*. There we find him saying that unless we assume the existence of God and of a future life in the intelligible world (which are necessary for thinking the highest good as possible), the “moral laws” would have to be regarded as “empty figments of the brain, since without that presupposition their necessary success, which the same reason connects with them, would have to disappear” (CPR A811/B839). This is reasserted in the Second *Critique*, concretely where Kant presents the antinomy of practical reason, a section in which he says that the impossibility of the highest good must also prove the falsity of the moral law. In his own words, “if (...) the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false” (CPrR 5:113). Finally, in the *Lectures on Ethics* we find Kant saying that if the highest good were impossible, then the endeavors of the virtuous “would be pointless, and virtue an empty delusion” (LE 27:483).

Now, what does Kant mean by this? To make sense of these assertions is one of the most compelling challenges that Kant's ethical system presents to us, but we cannot avoid it, since it is the first reason that Kant gives in order to justify the ethical importance of the highest good. Is he denying, for instance, what he said in the *Analytic of the Second Critique*, namely that the moral law is a "fact of reason" (CPrR 5:31)? This is clearly not the case: the moral law remains for Kant a fact of reason. What he is adding now is that, if the highest good were impossible, it would follow that the moral law which we do find in our reason would be commanding something that will never happen. In other words, the moral law would be presenting and demanding from us to work for a project condemned to failure since the very beginning. To say that the highest good is impossible is equivalent to saying that the moral law is, when foreseen in its total completion, pointless, meaningless. The moral law would be, in this case, a "wounded law," victim of a fatal fate, one that would condemn it to a premature death, or to an unsplendorous growth.

In order to understand this point, we have to remind ourselves how it is true that the idea of the highest good is constructed out of the moral law, something that we have discussed earlier in this Chapter. In relation to this, as we have seen, as early as in the *First Critique*, Kant explains how the highest good is equated with the moral world, a world in which all the duties that follow from the categorical imperative are honored by all humans, including a duty to reward virtue. The moral law, therefore, obliges us to promote such a world. Now, from this it follows that, if the highest good were impossible, the moral law would be a law condemned to failure, insofar as it would be

commanding something impossible. This is what Kant suggests when he says that, if the highest good is impossible, the “moral laws” would have to be regarded as “empty figments of the brain” (CPR A811/B839), as quoted before. And this rationale is the same found in the Dialectic of the Second *Critique*, a section in which Kant reasserts that the duty to promote the highest good emerges from the moral law and that, if the highest good were impossible, the categorical imperative would have to be regarded as “fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends” (CPrR 5:113).

So once we see how the highest good is nothing less than the moral law in its completion, it is easy to understand how, if it were impossible, the moral law would be pointless. The moral law will still be there as a fact of reason, and we will be still subject to its commands. Nonetheless, it would be pointless, insofar as it would be a law condemned to failure. In other words, the kind of world that would be created if all of its particular commands (including the fallible duty to reward virtue) were universally and absolutely accomplished would have to be denied since the very beginning. Therefore, as has been said, the moral law would be presenting to us a project condemned to failure.

In sum, the highest good is nothing else than the moral law in its completeness. By stating how the highest good can be thought as possible (something for which the religious postulates are necessary), therefore, the moral law is saved from being qualified as failed and, on the contrary, gains significance. Without the highest good, on the contrary, the moral law becomes a futile law. This is one of the reasons that explains its importance for ethics.

If the Highest Good were Impossible the Moral Agent will lose an Incentive

The second argument that Kant gives for the importance of the highest good is that, if we knew that the highest good is impossible, the moral agent will lose an “incentive.” Kant points to this in the First *Critique* when he says the following:

thus without a God and a world that is now not visible to us but is hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approbation and admiration but not incentives for resolve and realization, because they would not fulfill the whole end that is natural for every rational being and determined a priori and necessarily through the very same pure reason (CPR A813/B841).

This idea resembles that found in the Second *Critique*, where Kant states that

the subjective effect of this law (the moral law), namely the disposition conformed with it and also made necessary by it to promote the practically possible highest good, (...) presupposes at least that the latter is possible; in the contrary case it would be practically impossible to strive for the object of a concept that would be, at bottom, empty and without an object (CPrR 5:143).

Both assertions are compelling, insofar as they could invite people to think that the problem of *heteronomy* is back, but that is not the case. In fact, Kant is not saying that, without the highest good, the moral agent will lose an incentive because he will not be able to expect to be compensated for his good behavior. The moral agent will, instead, lose an incentive insofar as he will know that by being good he will be engaged in a project (a project which, once again, is depicted by the same pure moral law) that is condemned to failure since the very beginning: the moral project of creating the best possible world.

The moral law, it is necessary to insist, allows us to foresee the kind of world that would be created if everybody would follow its commands. This ideal world (the highest good) can, in turn, be seen as a moral project, the ultimate moral project, one to which we will contribute by being good, i.e., by being virtuous (and we already know that, among

the duties included in the general command of being good, there is one of—fallibly—apportioning happiness in accordance to virtue). Now, as in any project, if we knew from the beginning that it will never be accomplished, it is clear that we will lose an incentive to work towards it. But the incentive in this case is a proper one, i.e. it is not a material incentive, much less a selfish one. It is just the incentive of knowing that our efforts towards creating the best possible world are not pointless.

It is not, hence, because we need happiness that the highest good, when thought as possible, works as an incentive (in this case the criticism of *heteronomy* would be grounded), but because a moral world in which people are virtuous, and in which ultimate justice is accomplished through the fair distribution of happiness, is the world that the moral law establishes as the ideal world, as the world that we should promote; and it is because of that that the possibility of the highest good is morally significant.

This is how we can think of the highest good as an incentive for the moral agent, without bringing *heteronomy* back to the stage. And this is how the ethical importance of the highest good is reasserted.

Here a clarification is required. As Kant establishes in Chapter III of the *Analytic of the Second Critique* (entitled “On the incentives of pure practical reason”), “respect for the moral law is (...) the sole and also the undoubted moral incentive” (CPrR 5:78) for finite beings as humans, a moral feeling that is demanded and inspired by the same moral law (CPrR 5:80). From here we could say that the moral law does not need the idea of the highest good in order to demand and inspire such respect. It produces such feeling by itself. Nonetheless, it can still be argued that the highest good is also, by extension, the

source of such moral feeling, insofar as the highest good is, as we have repeated several times, the moral law in its completion. Under this reading to say that the moral law demands and inspires respect would be, to some extent, equivalent as to say that the highest good demands and inspires respect, insofar as we are talking about the same thing, just different perspectives. Now, when we say that without the highest good the moral agent will lose an incentive, as Kant says in the First *Critique* and in the Dialectic of the Second *Critique* (as has been quoted), he is pointing to something different. Here he is not saying that the moral agent will lose an incentive insofar as the highest good (the moral law in its completion) is the source of that moral incentive which is called respect. Kant is saying that the moral agent will lose the motivation that comes with knowing that his efforts of respecting the moral law (and note here that the moral feeling of respect is already in action, which confirms that Kant is speaking of “incentive” at a different level) are not pointless. The moral law (and the highest good as its constructed object) would still be the source of that moral incentive which Kant calls respect; nonetheless, if the highest good were impossible, the moral agent would lose another incentive, namely the one that comes with knowing that his efforts of respecting the moral law (and with it of building the highest good) are effective.

Now, a superficial reading could suggest that, in this way, I am becoming a “revisionist” and renouncing the “maximalist” view by repeating the argument given by Packer, whose position was briefly presented and criticized in Chapter III, but this is not the case. It is not the case insofar as the way he sees how the highest good serves as an incentive is completely different than the way this is explained here. Packer sees the

highest good as an incentive because of his conviction that we cannot do without happiness, and that the highest good includes such ingredient. In this way he falls prey to the criticism of *heteronomy*. In his opinion, “just as the pursuit of happiness for its own sake is not of itself moral, so, too, on Kant’s account, the mere form of the moral law is not sufficient to encourage moral willing.”²⁵ The highest good, in his view, solves that problem by including both elements, namely the moral law and happiness, with the mentioned negative consequence (that of *heteronomy*). On the other hand, Packer is considered a “revisionist” insofar as he thinks that the highest good complements and even rectifies supposed omissions and problems found in the other sections of Kant’s ethical corpus (particularly the lack of a proper motivational force for willing the “good,” insofar as, for Packer, the moral law is not motivationally enough), something that we have judged as erroneous in the same Chapter, considering that for Kant the moral law is motivationally enough. But here we are neither falling prey to the problem of *heteronomy*, nor becoming “revisionists.” The argument given here for the highest good as incentive is not subject to the problem of *heteronomy*, as I have tried to explain and, furthermore, retains the conditions for being considered part of a “maximalist” interpretation of the highest good, since it does not contradict any of Kant’s main lines of thought.

The Highest Good as Necessary for the Overcoming of Evil

So far, it has been argued that the highest good is morally important since without it the moral law becomes pointless, and since it serves as a proper incentive to the moral agent. These reasons are found, as we know, in the First and Second *Critiques*. Now, if

²⁵ Packer, “The highest good in Kant’s psychology of motivation,” 115.

we look forward into what Kant says in the *Religion*, we can find more reasons that explain the ethical importance of the highest good.

Particularly in Book III of the *Religion*, as has been explained in different terms by Anderson-Gold and by Caswell, Kant argues that the highest good (which now is named the “ethical community,” one that resembles that of the “moral world” found in his previous works) is necessary for the overcoming of evil. In Anderson-Gold’s words, “the ethical commonwealth is the ideal that individuals must propose to one another as the means for overcoming the ethical state of nature,”²⁶ where the evil principle is constantly attacking the good one. For Caswell, in turn, “(...) only the adoption of the highest good as a complete object, as the perfect synthesis of both perfect virtue and complete happiness, is sufficient to overturn evil.”²⁷ Now, here I do not want to enter into the detail of how their approaches differ. Instead, I will go directly to Kant’s work and explain briefly and in my own words how, for him, the highest good is necessary for the overcoming of evil.

As we have seen in Chapter I, Kant starts Book III of the *Religion* by recalling the daily battle, within each individual, between the good and the evil principles. In this struggle, he adds, the most we can attain is freedom. Nonetheless, this battle is never-ending, so we are called to be constantly ready for the battle. Now, in Kant’s search for the causes of the evil principle, he finds that it arises in community, i.e., the evil principle emerges when an individual finds other human beings, and not when humans are in isolation. As he explains:

²⁶ Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil*, 32.

²⁷ Caswell, “Kant’s Conception of the Highest Good, the *Gesinnung*, and the Theory of Radical Evil,” 188.

he (the human being) is poor (or considers himself so) only to the extent that he is anxious that other human beings will consider him poor and will despise him for it. Envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, as he is among human beings (REL 6:93).

Moral dispositions, hence, get corrupted when humans are among humans according to Kant. But that the evil principle arises in community opens the door for its solution at the same level, i.e., at the communitarian level, particularly through the establishment of a society unified under the good principle or, in other words, under the laws of virtue. Otherwise, the individual will never be able to completely supersede the attacks of the evil principle. Kant is convinced, therefore, that unless a society united by the laws of virtue is established –an ideal that constitutes a duty for humans– the evil principle will never be superseded. In Kant’s words, “(...) only in this way can we hope for a victory of the good principle over the evil one” (REL 6:94).

We have seen, in Chapter I, the distinction that, in this same section of the *Religion*, Kant elaborates between the ethical state of nature and what he calls the ethico-civil state (namely a society united under the laws of virtue). According to Kant, it is in the ethical state of nature that ethical dispositions get corrupted among humans. And this is true, for Kant, “even with the good will of each individual” (REL 6:69). And why is this the case? As he asserts, “because of a lack of principle which unites them,” which cause them to deviate, “through their dissensions from the common goal of goodness” (REL 6:69). Now, a community under the laws of virtue, thanks to which the evil principle can be superseded, is also called by him the ethical community, and is equated

with the highest good at 6:97.²⁸ So what Kant is arguing now is that the highest good is necessary for the overcoming of evil, another reason that proves its moral importance.

Whether it is true or not what Kant presupposes, namely that, in isolation, moral dispositions remain pure, the thesis according to which in an ethical community, i.e. in a community united under the laws of virtue, the attacks of the evil principle can be superseded, is strong. As he explains, there are many evils that arise in community, such as “envy, addiction to power, avarice” (REL 6:93). Now, we can individually try as much as we can to not fall prey to these “passions” (as he also calls them); nonetheless, we will always be in peril of relapsing; so unless we and our fellow humans get engaged in the common project of constructing the highest good, i.e. of creating an ethical community, one unified under the good principle, that risk will always be at hand. We are corruptible, so insofar as there are other humans disrupting our originally good moral disposition, instead of helping us in our strivings to become better, we will (individually) never be able to emancipate ourselves from the attacks of the evil principle.

Here we have, therefore, a third reason that explains the ethical importance of the highest good: it is necessary for nothing less than the overcoming of evil, insofar as, unless an ethical community is established, the evil principle will never be superseded.

²⁸ That the ethical community equates with the idea of the moral world, and hence of the highest good understood as a world in which people are good and rewarded for their virtue, is clear from what we have developed before in this Chapter, namely that the highest good is nothing less than a world in which all the duties that follow from the categorical imperative are honored (including the fallible duty of rewarding virtue). Now, this shows that Anderson-Gold is wrong when she argues that the highest good understood as an ethical community in the *Religion* does not include the ingredient of happiness as a reward for virtue. It is true that in the *Religion* Kant does not mention happiness when defining the ethical community, but that happiness still has a place follows from how the idea of the highest good is constructed, and from that section in which he talks about the necessity of the postulate of God for setting the possibility of the highest good, where he says that only a Supreme Being is able to know “the heart, in order to penetrate to the most intimate parts of the dispositions of each and everyone and, as must be in every community, give to each according to the worth of his actions” (REL 6:99).

The Highest Good is the Answer to the “Whither” Question

The final reason that I want to present for the task of demonstrating the ethical importance of the highest good is also found in the *Religion*, concretely in the Preface to the First Edition. In relation to this, as we have seen in Chapter I, in that section of the *Religion* we find Kant saying how morality needs neither religion nor any end (i.e., no material determining ground of the will) “either in order to recognize what duty is or to impel its performance.” (REL 6:4). In this sense, he is being consistent with what he said, for instance, in the Analytic of the Second *Critique*. Nonetheless, he adds, it may be the case that morality has a necessary reference to an end, “not as the grounds of its maxims but as a necessary consequence accepted in conformity with them” (REL 6:4). Now, why would that reference be necessary? In Kant’s opinion, because without such an end the moral agent would be instructed merely “as to how to operate but not as to the whither” (REL 6:4); and, he adds, if that were the case, the moral agent, and moreover, reason itself, would never obtain satisfaction. This end, we already know, is the highest good, so we can say that this idea is also ethically important insofar as it is the answer to the “whither,” i.e., the “where to” question, which is a fundamental moral question for humans (something that, as we have seen in Chapter II, has been previously highlighted by “maximalists” such as Wood, Godlove, Engstrom, and Wike).

What Kant is saying here is fundamental. He is establishing, in simple terms, that ethics is not only about duties, as many commentators believe,²⁹ but also about a horizon, a destination. In Kant’s opinion, we cannot do without an answer to the “where to?”

²⁹ Here Beck is representative of such a view, since for him, insofar as the highest good does not add new duties, it is irrelevant for ethics.

question. As Kant develops further this idea, morality does not need an end in order to determine what the right conduct is; nonetheless,

an end proceeds from morality just the same; for it cannot be a matter of indifference to reason how to answer the question, What is then the result of this right conduct of ours? nor to what we are to direct our doings or nondoings, even granted this is not fully in our control, at least as something with which they are to harmonize (REL 6:5).

And this end, we already know, is the highest good, for whose possibility it is necessary to postulate the existence of God and of a future life, for the reasons that we have already analyzed.

In sum, as Kant says, “it cannot be a matter of indifference to morality (...) whether it does or does not fashion for itself the concept of an ultimate end of all things” (REL 6:5). The highest good is, for him, this final end, one that, moreover, as we have seen before, rises out of morality, i.e., is an idea that can be constructed out of the moral law.

Let me at this point return to what I briefly referred before, namely the tendency, among Kant scholars, to reduce ethics to the dimension of duties. That is precisely the reason why the “critics” disregard the highest good as an ethical concept. The highest good could serve, they admit, for religious purposes, since it is a matter of hope, but not for ethical ones. In relation to this I do not think that this is the case or that for Kant this was the case. It is true that the principle of autonomy and the moral law together constitute the keystones of his moral system, but the latter is not completed by them. As Phillip Rossi says, “there are (...) good reasons for thinking that autonomy is not the

whole story of moral personhood for Kant.”³⁰ In fact, Kant’s ethical system is completed with the inclusion of the highest good as our final destination. Otherwise, we could not make complete sense of our life.

The Preface to the First Edition of the *Religion* shows how, for Kant, it is a fact that morality is also concerned about the results of moral actions, and particularly concerned about the highest good as the final end of all things. It is an illusion, he would say, to think that we can live without asking ourselves about the results of our actions and, more precisely, about our final destination. His genius consists in presenting an end that proceeds from morality, and this allows him to avoid bringing *heteronomy* back to his system. Now, since that final end which is a duty for us can only be thought as possible through the postulate of God, it turns out to be also a matter of (reasonable) hope. That explains how the question of hope is also practical, as he states in the First *Critique*, and how morality leads to religion.

The highest good, then, as the final end of all things, allows us to answer the unavoidable and dramatic question of our final destination. The highest good is nothing less than the ultimate goal of our lives. It is hard, then, to figure how this idea would not be fundamental for ethics. Thanks to the idea of the highest good we can complement what we had first, namely a duty (established by the moral law), with a horizon, a destination, an end, a final and overarching goal (which is grounded on the same moral law, constructed out of it). The picture, the moral panorama, in this way, is complete, and our moral life without doubt enriched.

³⁰ Rossi, “Moral autonomy, divine transcendence, and human destiny: Kant’s doctrine of hope as a philosophical foundation for Christian ethics,” 444.

The ethical question, then, is not only a question of duties, but also a question of destination (the “whither” question). The highest good in Kant’s ethical system appears precisely as our individual and collective destination, something that we must promote and, moreover, something that we can hope for. Hence, the highest good is also important for practical purposes since it is foreseen as an end, as our individual and collective destination. In sum, a good account of ethics must include not only duties, but also a moral final end as one of its components. Kant clearly establishes this.

Kant Did Not Abandon his Idea of the Highest Good

There is one problem left: that of *abandonment*. This problem, as we know, was introduced by Eckart Förster, who argues that Kant finally thought of the highest good as an unimportant element in his theory, since he did not make any substantial reference to it in his unfinished work: the *Opus Postumum*. As we have quoted before, in Förster’s words “(...) the concept of the highest good, so central to Kant’s earlier writings on ethics and religion, is now mentioned only in passing.”³¹ If this were true, it would imply that Kant himself became, at the end of his life, a “critic” of his own idea of the highest good, by regarding it as irrelevant.

In relation to this, Paul Guyer has made a solid response. In his article entitled “Beauty, Systematicity, and the Highest Good: Eckart Forster’s Kant’s Final Synthesis,” Guyer criticizes Forster’s interpretation of Kant’s *Opus Postumum*. Concretely in relation to Forster’s claim that Kant finally omitted any substantial reference to the highest good in his last work, since he thought of it as unimportant, Guyer has contested the following:

³¹ Förster, *Kant's Final Synthesis: An Essay on the Opus Postumum*, 144.

we cannot infer Kant's retraction of the idea of the highest good and the theory of practical postulation from this absence of reference to it; an equally plausible explanation of this absence would be simply that Kant believed he had made his view adequately clear in the two works of 1793 and did not need to revisit it.³²

As we can see, Förster interpretation happens to be a weak one. He definitively goes too fast when he proposes that Kant finally thought of the highest good as not essential to his philosophical system, becoming in this way (although he does not say this, but it is implied) a "critic" of his own idea of it. The alternative interpretation that Guyer gives seems much more sustainable, considering that the highest good is mentioned in all of Kant's major published works. The last of the problems, hence, must also be dismissed.

Conclusions

As we have seen, according to this reading of the discussion in the secondary literature, the "critics" have presented six criticisms against Kant's idea of the highest good, which in this dissertation have been labeled as the problems of *heteronomy*, *unsuitability*, *impossibility*, *injustice*, *irrelevance*, and *abandonment*.

The identification and labeling of the criticisms alone constitutes an important contribution to the discussion around Kant's idea of the highest good, considering that any future commentator will know what is required in order to make a complete defense of this concept (unless, a future "critic" identifies a new potential objection). In fact, like legal attorneys in front of a lawsuit through which their client is being accused, Kant's defenders are called to identify every single accusation posited against the consistency of his philosophical system. Only after this is a complete defense feasible. Therefore, thanks

³² Guyer, "Beauty, Systematicity, and the Highest Good: Eckart Förster's 'Kant's Final Synthesis,'" 212.

to the systematization of the criticisms developed in this dissertation, we now know what a complete defense of Kant's idea of the highest good requires, so as Kant's "attorneys," we are better prepared to represent him in front of the so-called "tribunal of reason."

But this dissertation has targeted more. Once the systematization of the criticism was complete, we were able both to judge the correctness and completeness of other attempts to defend Kant's idea of the highest good, and to elaborate a partially new, but at last overarching defense of it, without contradicting Kant's main premises (as the "revisionists"), or taking out elements of his philosophical system (as the "secularizers"). As a matter of fact, we have responded to every single accusation posited against Kant's idea of the highest good. Let me now repeat, in a sort of synthesis, each response, and hence show how Kant's magnificent idea of the highest good can be saved as part of his ethical system.

In response to the problem of *heteronomy*, we have explained, in harmony with previous defenses,³³ how Kant himself anticipated this criticism by saying that the highest good can be thought of as the determining ground of the will only insofar as it has the moral law as its supreme component. This defense was complemented by showing that the highest good is an object constructed out of the moral law or, in other words, the moral law in its total completion. Therefore, it cannot be considered a mere object, i.e., one that would bring *heteronomy* back to the stage, but "the" object *par excellence* of the will.

³³ Specially, that of Wike.

With regard to the problem of *unsuitability*, we have seen how the highest good is “latently” present in the different formulations of the categorical imperative, and furthermore how it has not only a place, but a privileged one in Kant’s ethical system.

The problem of *impossibility* was solved by arguing how for Kant the duty to crown virtue is a fallible one (but still a duty). I have also argued that the “critics” are the ones responsible for showing that for Kant the duty to crown virtue was an infallible one, falling prey of the problem of *impossibility*, and even contradicting himself by asserting both that moral intentions are obscure but that, nonetheless, we have an infallible duty to reward virtue.

The problem of *injustice* was in turn solved by reminding ourselves that Kant’s ethics is fundamentally an ethics of intentions and not of consequences. We have also seen how this problem is overestimated, insofar as our attempts to crown virtue will in many cases match reality; also considering that no action that goes against the law will be rewarded as a consequence of this duty; and because the option of stopping the rewarding of virtue seems unrealistic, since the reward of good behavior is something common in human relationships.

The problem of *irrelevance* was superseded by showing that the highest good is important for at least four reasons. First, insofar as without the highest good the moral law becomes a failed law; second, insofar as, if the highest good were impossible, moral agents will lose a moral incentive, namely the incentive of knowing that they are engaged in a project condemned to failure; third, insofar as the highest good is necessary for the overcoming of evil, as explained by Kant in the *Religion*; and fourth, because the highest

good answers the “whither” question, the “where to?” question, the question of our final destination, which is, without any doubt, an ethical question, whose answer enriches our moral life.

Finally, in relation to the problem of *abandonment*, we recalled Guyer’s response, according to which we cannot infer from Kant’s omission of a substantial reference to the highest good in his final/unpublished work (which is known as the *Opus Postumum*) that Kant abandoned his idea of it, as Forster argues. This is a precipitated conclusion that can be contested by the counter argument, which seems more plausible: that according to which Kant did not develop his idea of the highest good in a detailed way in this final work again, insofar as he thought that it was sufficiently developed in his former works.

Once all the criticisms have been responded to, Kant’s idea of the highest good emerges again, by its own merit, in its entire splendor, like the sun in the horizon, as it always happens with all those ideas that are both well inspired and wisely unfolded. Not by chance the concept of the highest good has been “the” ethical topic of all the most important heroes of thought before Kant, from Plato³⁴ to Bonaventure.³⁵ One of Kant’s merits was to dare to retake it, with its religious features, nothing less than in the peak of Modernity, a time in which this concept was almost completely abandoned,³⁶ perhaps due to the suspicious attitude towards religion and authorities in general, which was

³⁴ The “Good” in Plato’s oeuvre, we know, is present everywhere. Perhaps the most famous reference to it is the one found in Book VII of the *Politeia*, where Plato symbolically compares the “Good” with the sun in the so-called “Allegory of the Cave.”

³⁵ As is common knowledge, the platonic “Good” is replaced by the Catholic “God” in the Middle Ages, in a tradition that reaches one of its summits in the 13th century with Bonaventure. Bonaventure’s famous masterpiece, the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, contains a vivid example of this parallel.

³⁶ In fact, no important Modern philosopher since Descartes includes the idea of the highest good as a central element for a moral philosophy, or as an ethical element at all.

characteristic of the Enlightenment,³⁷ and not only did he dare to retake the highest good as a philosophical topic, but he did it in a very original way, in a way that was compatible with his so called “deontological” approach to ethics.

Now the question is, will we dare to retake (and even reformulate, if necessary) this idea again, in times where relativism is perceived by many as “politically correct,” in the midst of this crisis of meaning and orientation that is called post-Modernity, in this “desert of our cultural nihilism”³⁸ which is characteristic of our times, our world? Perhaps by doing it, always with the help of the heroes of spirit and their never-ending heritage, we will be able to reconstruct a common destiny, to attain a new account of the highest good towards which we will orient our lives, both as individuals and as a worldwide community; in sum, to foresee something worthy of living and dying for, an idea that will allow us to create a better world, always under the light that shines from the Good.

³⁷ Kant himself was victim of this prejudice, we must recognize, as can be seen in his famous essay entitled “What is Enlightenment.” Nonetheless, he did not turn against religion but, instead, tried to find a rational foundation for it.

³⁸ Peperzak, *Before Ethics*, 115.

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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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