Kant's coherent theory of the highest good

Saniye Vatansever¹

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Abstract

In the second Critique, Kant argues that for the highest good to be possible we need to postulate the existence of God and the immortality of the soul in a future world. In his other writings, however, he suggests that the highest good is attainable through mere human agency in this world. Based on the apparent incoherence between these texts, Andrews Reath, among others, argues that Kant's texts reveal two competing conceptions of the highest good, namely a secular and a theological conception. In this paper, I argue that Kant has a coherent conception of the highest good which applies to two different domains, namely the domain of the individual humans and the domain of the human species.

Keywords Kant · The highest good · The moral world · God · Immortality of the soul · Freedom

Introduction

In the second chapter of the “Transcendental Doctrine of Method,” Kant asserts that “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).¹ Kant states that the first question is merely speculative (or theoretical), and the second one is merely practical. The third question, on the other hand, is simultaneously theoretical and practical. This is because we first need to know the object of our hope and then we need to work towards actualizing that object of hope. According to Kant, questions of hope are always related to

¹ I have used the translations in the Cambridge Editions of the Works of Immanuel Kant in Translation. The abbreviations of Kant's works are as follows: CPR: Critique of Pure Reason; CPrR: Critique of Practical Reason; CJ: Critique of the Power of Judgment; G: Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals; LE: Lecture on Ethics; MM: Metaphysics of Morals.

✉ Saniye Vatansever
saniye@bilkent.edu.tr

¹ Philosophy Department, Bilkent University, Humanities and Letters Building, 06800 Ankara, Turkey

happiness [Glückseligkeit]. So, a more precise formulation of the third question is: What can we hope for if we act as we should and become worthy of happiness? In response to this question, Kant argues that we can hope to attain the highest good, which is a necessary combination of virtue and happiness. While his description of the highest good is more or less coherent across different texts, Kant appears to be incoherent about the question of whether it is possible to attain it through free human action alone. While in some passages he presents a secular conception according to which the highest good is attainable if we all act virtuously, in others he argues for a theological conception that is attainable only when we postulate the existence of God and the immortality of the soul.

Given these apparent inconsistencies in Kant's writings, critics follow two strategies. Some argue that Kant is confused about the highest good and thereby lacks a unified theory of the highest good. I call this strategy 'the deflationary account' because rather than offering a coherent reading of the conflicting passages, the scholars who adopt this view deem Kant's account of the highest good as a mere confusion and disregard the passages in question as either irrelevant to and unimportant for Kant's moral philosophy.² Others, on the other hand, attempt to reconcile the inconsistent passages by identifying two different and competing conceptions of the highest good. That is why I call their reading 'the two-sense account' of the highest good.³

Contra these two strategies, this paper advances—what I call—"two-domain account" of the highest good. Unlike the deflationary accounts, I argue that Kant's conception of the highest is significant for his moral theory because it is a necessary consequence of the moral law. Unlike the two sense-accounts, I further argue that Kant has a univocal and coherent theory of the highest good throughout his three Critiques. On my two-domain account, what appear to be two distinct competing conceptions result from the application of a single conception of the highest good to two different domains, i.e., to the domain of individual humans and the human species.

In what follows, I first examine Andrews Reath's influential reading, which attributes two different senses to Kant's use of the term "highest good", namely a secular and a theological sense.⁴ I briefly explain Reath's two-sense account because it plays a significant role in shaping the current debates on Kant's theory of the highest

² Lewis White Beck defends the deflationary account of the highest good. Following Beck, Thomas Auxter, Jeffrie Murphy, Yirmiyahu Yovel, Lance Simmons and Eckart Förster, also argue that Kant's conception of the highest good is problematic for the following reasons: (1) it leads to heteronomy; (2) given that we cannot know who is truly virtuous we and that happiness is a relative matter, we cannot really promote the highest good; (3) it does not stipulate any new duties, therefore it is not really relevant to ethical considerations and dispensable.

³ John R. Silber, John Rawls and Andrews Reath attempt to dissolve the inconsistency this way.

⁴ Reath is not the only commentator who attributes two senses to Kant's conception of the highest good. In his influential paper, 'Kant's Conception of the Highest Good as Immanent and Transcendent,' John Silber also argues Kant's conception of the highest good has both the immanent and the transcendent use. On Silber's account, the highest good is immanent in that we are morally obligated to *promote* it as far as it lies within our power to do so (1959, p. 478). Hence, when Kant talks about the immanent sense of the highest good, he is talking about *promoting* the highest good in this world through the collaboration of people acting freely. According to Silber, since human capacity is not sufficient to bring about happiness proportionate to the worthiness to be happy, we cannot fully attain the highest good in this world. In this

good. In fact, his reading has divided Kant scholars into two camps. While some, following Reath, defend the secular conception of the highest good, others favor the theological conception of the highest good and argue that the secular conception of the highest good is impossible.⁵ After a brief summary of Reath's interpretation, I closely examine Kant's discussion of the highest good in each of the three Critiques to show the gradual and yet coherent progression in Kant's theory of the highest good.

Two-sense account of the highest good: secular and theological

In his influential paper, "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant" Andrews Reath argues that Kant's texts reveal two competing conceptions of the highest good, namely a secular and a theological. According to Reath, while the theological conception of the highest good consists of a 'state of affairs that comes about in another world through the activity of God,' the secular conception of the highest good by contrast can be described in entirely naturalistic terms as a state of affairs to be achieved in this world through our actions (Reath, p. 601).⁶

An important distinction that Reath points out between the theological and the secular conceptions is that, in the former, Kant stresses the proportionality between two kinds of good, namely virtue and happiness, while in the latter there is not a necessary connection between the two. Instead, the secular conception of the highest good is merely a union (or combination) of virtue and happiness, where happiness is subordinated to virtue (Reath, p. 605). For Reath, we can imagine a state in which people establish just social institutions to ensure that agents who are virtuous are proportionately happy. Hence, the proportionality requirement of the highest

Footnote 4 (continued)

regard, the idea of the highest good or moral world is transcendent. For Silber, the transcendent highest good is a regulative ideal that sets a model or goal for our moral conduct (1959, p. 491). In Silber's account, we are not morally obligated to *attain* the transcendent highest good (or moral world) in full, but only to *promote* it as much as we can. Others who argue that Kant's conception of the highest good is not attainable, rather it can only be promoted include Jacqueline Mariña (2009), Roe Fremstedal (2011) and Ralf Bader (2015).

⁵ Those who defend some version of a secular conception of the highest good include Thomas Auxter (1988), Rawls (2000), Gerald Barnes (1971), Steven G. Smith (1984), Andrews Reath (1988), Harry van der Linden (1988), Onora O'Neill (1997), John Rawls (2000) and Pauline Kleingeld (1995, 2016), Paul Guyer (2003, 2005). Contra the secularizers, those either completely deny the possibility of the secular conception of the highest good or argue for centrality of the theological conception of the highest good for Kant include Jacqueline Mariña (2009), Roe Fremstedal (2011), O'Connell (2012), Ralf Bader (2015).

⁶ Like Reath, John Rawls argues that the apparent conflict in Kant's texts arises from the conflation of the moral world and the highest good, which are, on his view, two distinct objects of the moral law. On Rawls' reading, the idea of a moral world is a secular idea that is attainable in this world through the common will of the rational agents acting freely under the moral law (*Lectures*, p. 312). The conception of the highest good, on the other hand, which requires that happiness should be proportionate to virtue, according to Rawls, requires an omnipotent Will, so that it establishes causality between nature and morality.

good, namely the proportionality of happiness to virtue in the world can be achieved through mere human agency via secular means.

What leads Kant to the theological conception of the highest good, for Reath, is the assumption that all people will attain the highest good (Reath, p. 603). In Reath's reading, the theological conception of the highest good has two requirements: (1) all individuals are virtuous and (2) happiness is distributed in exact proportion to virtue. Since these requirements cannot be satisfied for everyone in the empirical world through freedom alone, the theological conception describes an otherworldly goal. According to Reath, the theological conception of the highest good lacks a clear basis in Kant's philosophy and does not fit in with Kant's other commitments. On Reath's view, the theological conception of the highest good cannot be generated from Kant's philosophy internally, and thereby, it 'represents a departure from Kant's basic principles' (Reath, p. 613). That is why Reath favors the secular conception of the highest good over the theological conception. For Reath, the secular conception of the highest good represents Kant's mature view of the highest good (Reath, 601).

One problem with Reath's interpretation is that he doesn't give a satisfactory account for why Kant comes up with two distinct senses of the highest good. Instead he simply offers the following speculation for this distinction:

I have simply tried to show that two distinct versions of the Highest Good are found in the texts. I do not have a completely satisfactory explanation as to why Kant vacillated between these two views, though I would offer the following speculation. The theological conception is a traditional Christian notion, and perhaps a holdover from Leibniz. Kant would likely have wanted to find a place for it in his philosophical system, [...] to provide rational foundations for various Christian doctrines in morality. [...] I would like to think that Kant was led to emphasize the secular version as he became more aware of the tension caused by the presence of the theological in his moral view. (Reath, p. 608-609f)

As is clear, Reath attempts to resolve the apparent conflict in the texts by claiming that Kant's conception of the highest good has two distinct senses, one of which supposedly represents Kant's mature view and better conforms to his overall project. In the following section, I offer an alternative interpretation of the highest good and argue that even though Kant appears to present two distinct senses of the highest good, he has a coherent theory which he carefully develops throughout his three Critiques.

Two-domain account: the highest good for individuals and for humanity

In order to show that Kant has a univocal theory of the highest good, in this section, I closely examine his account of the highest good in his three Critiques. As will be clear, Kant has only one conception of the highest good, namely a state in which maximum virtue causes proportional happiness. The apparent incoherence, as I argue, is not due to incoherence in Kant's theory of the highest good, but rather

due to his implicit assumption that the possibility of attaining the highest good in the individual domain requires distinct preconditions than attaining the highest good in the domain of humanity [Menscheit]. As will be clear, while discussing the highest good of the individual Kant makes explicit reference to God and immortality of the soul. When he focuses on the highest good of humanity [Menscheit], on the other hand, he makes implicit reference to God and immortality of the species giving the reader the false impression that there is a distinct secular conception of the highest good.

Kant's Account of the highest good in the first Critique

In the first Critique, immediately after raising the question of hope, Kant introduces the idea of a moral world as the object of hope and identifies it with *the highest good*. He describes the moral world as a system of self-rewarding morality:

In the moral world, [...] such 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. But this system of self-rewarding morality is only an idea, **the realization of which rests on the condition that everyone** does what he should. (CPR A809-10 / B837-38, first emphasis added.)

In other words, if we all do what we should, we can hope for a moral world in which free and virtuous actions cause proportional happiness. The realization of this self-rewarding moral world depends on one condition only, namely that everyone acts morally. That is, if the society is maximally and completely virtuous, which is a possibility that does not require any supernatural assumption other than transcendental freedom, the moral world would necessarily follow.⁷

If we are—as free agents—capable of acting out of respect for the moral law, we ought to believe in the possibility of *everyone* acting virtuously as well. Since the moral law equally commands all members of the community to act virtuously, it must be (logically) possible for everyone to follow this command. Given that the moral law commands us to help others with the satisfaction of their morally permissible needs and we also know that happiness, for Kant, is the satisfaction of physical and intellectual desires and needs (A806/B834), we can see why Kant thinks that there is a necessary connection between collective virtuous conduct and the proportional increase in collective happiness. The underlying assumption here is that collective virtuous conduct would prevent not only moral evil, but also the natural evil. Since each member would feed those who are hungry and clothe those who are naked, everyone would be fed and clothed by others as well. Similarly, since everyone would cultivate their talents as the moral law commands, the society would improve technologically, medically and scientifically, which in turn would prevent

⁷ Kant makes the same point in the *Groundwork* (G, 4:438).

the suffering from natural evils. Thus, there is an a priori conceptual connection between the universal validity of the moral law for each human being equally and the moral world. If it is (logically) possible for the moral law to be efficacious and be the ground of our actions, then the moral world as the consequence of the moral law must also be (logically) possible. Hence, we should believe in the possibility of the self-rewarding moral system as the logical consequence of our collective human agency. That is precisely why in response to the question “If we all act as we should, what may we hope for?”, Kant answers that we may hope for a moral world (or highest good of the world) in which happiness is proportionately combined with morality. In fact, as Kant argues, we can a priori cognize how complete virtue of the society can cause general happiness and how the “rational beings under the guidance of such (moral) principles would themselves be the authors of their own enduring welfare and at the same time that of others” (CPR, A810/B838).

The moral world (or the highest good of the world), then, is logically possible under the condition that everyone acts virtuously. When the society is completely virtuous, complete virtue causes proportional happiness. This secular conception of the highest good, according to Kant, is (logically) possible under the condition of freedom alone. In other words, the moral world is logically possible if we as “intelligible characters” [*causa noumenon*] (A539/B567), who are outside of all the conditions of sensibility and the series of appearances, can act out of respect for the moral law and cause changes in the phenomenal world (A446/B474). Transcendental freedom, then, is the only supernatural precondition for the logical possibility of the highest good of the world, which is the highest good at the societal level.⁸

For the purposes of this section, it suffices to note that Kant in the first Critique introduces the idea of the societal highest good as a state in which collective moral conduct causes collective happiness, and argues that this ideal state is a logical consequence of the validity of the moral law for everyone. Since there is a necessary ground-consequence relation between collective virtuous conduct and general happiness, we can infer that this necessary relation between virtue and happiness also guarantees their proportionality. Following Eoin O’Connell, I will call this feature of the highest good the proportionality thesis. Note that the proportionality thesis of the highest good does not entail that people are unhappy to the degree that they are vicious.⁹ Kant is only committed to the necessary connection between collective virtuous conduct and general happiness. He does not argue that there is a causal connection between evil conduct and unhappiness. Given that evil conduct usually causes happiness of the evil-doers, the latter is harder to prove. Note also that, the highest good requires complete virtue or maximum amount of virtue. Hence, in addition to the proportionality thesis, it involves the maximality thesis. In the

⁸ For Kant’s account of transcendental freedom please refer to CPR A446/B474.

⁹ According to O’Connell, the proportionality thesis means that people ought to be happy to the degree that they are virtuous and unhappy to the degree that they are vicious (O’Connell 2012, p. 258). Contra O’Connell, we should read the thesis to point out the causal connection between virtue and happiness only.

context of the highest good of the world, the maximality thesis entails that the highest good is a state in which every human being in the world acts virtuously.

Even though it is logically possible to create this moral world through mere collective human agency, Kant argues that it is thus far conceived to be merely an intelligible, yet a practical idea (A808/B836). Even though we have not yet created this world, Kant asserts that the highest good (or the moral world) is not essentially an intelligible idea, but has been conceived that way so far. While in the first Critique the idea of the moral world is thus far conceived to be merely an intelligible world, as we will see in the following sections Kant maintains that it is really possible for the later generations of human species to create this moral world by gradually overcoming the obstacles to morality, i.e., weaknesses in our nature with every new generation.

This secular conception of the highest good, which does not presuppose the existence of God and immortal souls, only answers the question of hope for a moral community in which everyone acts virtuously, but fails to answer the question of hope for the individuals who do not presently live in such a moral world. Thus, an individual might ask “If I behave so as not to be unworthy of happiness, how may I hope thereby to partake of it?” (CPR, A809/B837) Since not everyone acts in accordance with the moral law, even if I do as I should and consequently become worthy of happiness, I cannot rely on others to contribute to my happiness. Hence, despite my virtuous conduct I may lead a miserable life either due to natural or moral evils. In response to the question of hope for the virtuous individual living in a morally imperfect world, Kant argues that the realization of the highest good at the individual level cannot be conceived unless we assume that God and a future life exists:

But since the obligation from the moral law remains valid for each particular use of freedom even if others do not conduct themselves in accord with this law, how their consequences will be related to happiness is determined neither by the nature of the things in the world, nor by the causality of actions themselves and their relation to morality; and the necessary connection of the hope of being happy with the unremitting effort to make oneself worthy of happiness that has been adduced cannot be cognized through reason if it is grounded merely in nature, but may be hoped for only if it is at the same time grounded on a **highest reason**, which commands in accordance with moral laws, as at the same time the cause of nature. [...] Now since we must necessarily represent ourselves through reason as belonging to such a world, although the senses do not present us with anything except a world of appearances, we must assume *the moral world to be a consequence of our conduct in the sensible world*; and since the latter does not offer such a connection to us, we must assume the former to be a world that is future for us. Thus 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 [*Principien*] of that very same reason. (CPR A810-11/B838-39 emphasis added)

In other words, since there are no laws of nature guaranteeing the necessary connection between individuals' virtuous acts and their happiness in the sensible world where not everyone acts virtuously, the virtuous individual can hope to be happy

and attain the highest good only in a future life. The highest good of the individual, i.e., the state in which the individual will be happy in proportion to her virtue “is possible only in the intelligible world, under a wise author and regent” (CPR, A811/B839).

According to Kant, it is important to prove that the highest good for the individual is possible or attainable because the highest good is a logical consequence of the moral law. Even though the moral law itself does not make any reference to the consequences of our actions, reason, according to Kant, always connects causes with their effects. Thus, reason connects the moral law with its effect in the world both at the societal level and at the individual level. If there is a ground-consequence relation between the moral law and the highest good, we can infer that if the ground is valid, the consequence must follow. Hence, if the moral law is valid and binding for individuals even when not everyone is acting as they should, the consequence of the individuals’ moral conduct, i.e., the highest good of the individuals must also be possible (CPR, A812/B840). This is because if the highest good of the individual is impossible (either in this world or in a future world), we would have to accept that the moral law is not binding for such an individual and it is a mere “empty figment of the brain” (A810-11/B838-39).

The problem, however, is that while we can a priori cognize how maximally virtuous community of rational beings under the moral law can bring about proportional general happiness through freedom alone, we cannot a priori cognize how an individual’s virtuous actions can make her proportionally happy (A810/B838). That is precisely why Kant thinks that the highest good of the individual (who is not a member of a completely moral community) is not possible unless we make certain theological assumptions.

So far we saw that, in the first Critique, Kant describes the highest good of society as a moral world in which complete conformity to the moral law by everyone causes proportional general happiness. This moral world, according to Kant, is a logical consequence of the moral law. Therefore, if it is logically possible for the moral law to have a normative force on our actions, we need to admit that the moral world is logically possible as well. We can a priori cognize how the moral world, i.e., the highest good at the societal level is attainable when everyone acts as they should. In order to conceive the logical possibility of the highest good of the individual, on the other hand, we need to postulate the existence of God and a future life (CPR, A811/B839). Without these presuppositions the highest good of the individuals living in a morally imperfect world would not be possible, and consequently the normativity of the moral law for those individuals would be undermined.

In the first Critique, then, Kant initially responds to the question of hope with a secular conception of the highest good, but he ends the discussion with a theological conception of the highest good. The transition from the secular to the theological conception of the highest good is not due to the impossibility of the secular conception in the sensible world, but rather due to Kant’s concern for individuals who do not live in a maximally virtuous community. That is, Kant wants to show that virtuous individuals who do not currently reside in a community of all virtuous agents can hope to attain the highest good in another world through divine assistance.

Kant's account of the highest good in the second critique

As we saw above, in the first Critique Kant argues that the highest good is the logical consequence of the moral law, and therefore, if it is logically possible for the moral law to have an influence on our actions, the highest good must also be logically possible. In the second Critique, rather than explaining how it is logically possible, Kant explains how the highest good is practically possible (CPrR, 5:112). Given that “it is a priori (morally) necessary to produce the highest good through freedom of the will,” in the second Critique Kant’s aims to explain how the highest good is attainable through our actions (CPrR, 5:113). As he argues, since the moral law commands us “to promote or realize” the highest good (CPrR, 5:109), practical impossibility of the highest good would mean the falsity of the moral law¹⁰:

Now, since the promotion of the highest good, 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 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, emphasis added)

Note that while in the first Critique Kant focuses on the a priori ground-consequence relation between the moral law and the highest good, in the second Critique he argues for the cause-effect relationship between the two. Hence, if the moral law is efficacious on our will, the highest good must be a practical result of our moral conduct in the world. For the practical impossibility of the highest good means that the moral law is directed at imaginary ends and even if it is logically valid and coherent, it is not a factual law. In order for the moral law to be a practical law, the highest good as its effect must be practically possible.

Having distinguished between the highest good for the individual and for the society in the first Critique, Kant rephrases this distinction more explicitly in the second Critique:

Now, inasmuch as virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the **highest good in a person**, and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the **highest good of a possible world**, the latter means the whole, the complete good. (CPrR 5:111, emphasis mine)

As is clear, Kant’s conception of the highest good applies to both the domains of the individual and the world—or, as I refer to it—the societal domain. After

¹⁰ As will be clear, while the moral law commands the individuals to act in a way that promotes the highest good in the world, it commands the human species (or the mankind [*Menschheit*]) to realize the highest good in the world.

distinguishing these two domains, Kant in the second Critique focuses exclusively on the practical possibility of the highest good of the individual.

The highest good [summum bonum], according to Kant's second Critique account, is the complete good consisting of the combination of two heterogeneous goods, namely the unconditioned supreme good (virtue) and the conditioned good (happiness) (CPrR, 5:110). By happiness [Glückseligkeit], Kant means satisfaction of all inclinations and natural desires including both the intellectual and the physical (CPR, A806/B834).¹¹ By virtue [Tugend], on the other hand, Kant means "morality" (CPrR, 5:112) and "worthiness to be happy" (CPrR, 5:110). But the most appropriate description of virtue in the context of the highest good would be "morally lawful conduct" (CPrR, 5:111). In the second Critique, Kant equates virtue with virtuous actions as opposed to virtuous character. In response to the Stoics, who equate consciousness of virtue with happiness (CPrR, 5:112), Kant argues that virtue at most produces the feeling of self-contentment (CPrR, 5:119), and he explicitly identifies virtue with 'virtuous actions' when he writes: "From this we can understand how consciousness of this ability of a pure practical reason through a deed (virtue) can in fact produce consciousness of mastery over one's inclinations" (CPrR, 5:119, emphasis added).¹² By using virtue to mean 'virtuous conduct' or 'virtuous behavior', Kant's conception of virtue in the second Critique diverges from his account of virtue in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, where virtue is thought to be a capacity [Vermögen] or strength of the will to act out of moral duties (MM, 6:405). Nonetheless, Kant's description of the highest good in the second Critique is consistent with his first Critique account of the highest good. In both texts, the highest good is described as combination of two kinds of goods, or, more specifically, as a necessary combination of virtuous conduct with happiness.

Unlike Epicureans and Stoics, who define happiness and virtue in terms of one another, Kant stresses that they are two heterogeneous elements that are necessarily combined, hence their connection cannot be an analytic connection of identical goods (CPrR, 5:113). Instead, in the highest good of the individual, happiness and virtue are synthetically connected through the law of causality (CPrR, 5:113). Since there is a causal connection between the two, either happiness causes virtuous conduct or vice versa. As Kant points out, the former option is not possible because if one acts virtuously in order to be happy, then that person's real motivation is not respect for the moral law, but rather happiness. Since actions motivated by happiness do not have any moral worth, it is absolutely impossible for happiness to cause or lead to moral conduct (CPrR, 5:113–14).

¹¹ In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant distinguishes two kinds of happiness, namely natural and moral happiness (MM 387). Based on the parallel distinction in the *Lectures on Ethics* (LE, 27:644), Fremstedal distinguishes happiness as a concept of nature [Glück] from bliss [Seligkeit] as a concept of freedom. *Glückseligkeit*, on his reading, is a bridge between nature and freedom (Fremstedal, 160). On his reading moral happiness or *Glückseligkeit* becomes identical with the highest good. Contra Fremstedal, I take the term *Glückseligkeit* to signify mere physical and sensual satisfaction and at best to mean a long lasting happiness as opposed to a mere gratification [Glück].

¹² The relevant part of the text in German reads as follows: "wie das Bewusstsein dieses Vermögens einer reinen praktischen Vernunft durch Tat (die Tugend)."

Having shown that it is absolutely impossible for happiness to cause virtue (CPrR, 5:113–14), Kant argues that the highest good must be a state in which virtuous actions [Tugendgesinnung] cause happiness [Glückseligkeit]. Yet, this option also seems impossible because there are not any empirical laws of nature connecting virtuous actions with happiness and we cannot a priori cognize how the highest good would be possible for our empirical selves.¹³ An individual agent's happiness, as Kant asserts, depends not upon her moral dispositions, but rather upon her knowledge of the laws of nature and her ability to use this knowledge for her purposes. In other words, there is not a necessary connection between one's virtuous conduct and one's happiness in the world (CPrR, 5:113–14). This means either that the highest good is impossible, or that we need to assume the existence of some other conditions for its possibility. Since the impossibility of the highest good would mean the falsity of the moral law, the first option is unacceptable (CPrR, 5:114). Kant argues that this antinomy of practical reason can be solved only if we recognize that the existence in the empirical world is not the only kind of existence for rational agents (CPrR, 5:114). If we conceive of ourselves merely as members of the empirical world, we cannot conceive of how it is possible for the virtuous conduct to cause happiness. If, on the other hand, we conceive of ourselves as members of the noumenal world as well, we can conceive (yet still cannot cognize) how the highest good is practically possible for the individual will (CPrR, 5:114). This is because as members of the noumenal world, we are not subject to empirical laws, but rather to the laws of freedom, which in turn can make the highest good practically possible for us under certain noumenal preconditions.

Since the highest good is defined as a state in which maximum (or complete) virtue causes proportional happiness, Kant first needs to establish that it is practically possible for an individual to attain complete virtue, i.e., holiness. As he puts it, "the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law is the supreme condition of the highest good" (CPrR, 5:122). Thus, it must be possible for us to attain holiness through our actions. Notice that while complete conformity of all individuals to the moral law is a precondition for the highest good at the societal level, the complete conformity of all of our actions to the moral law, i.e., holiness of the individual, is a precondition for the highest good at the individual level. In response to the maximality requirement of the highest good, Kant argues that since no individual in the sensible world is capable of holiness at any moment in their life, the possibility of complete virtue or holiness depends upon the possibility of an endless progress of the will towards holiness. This endless progress in turn is possible only if we assume both (1) the capacity to determine one's will by the moral law, namely transcendental freedom and (2) the possibility of an endless progress toward the complete conformity of the will to the moral law. In other words, complete virtue (or holiness),

¹³ According to Ralf Bader, the requirement of there being a necessary connection between virtue and happiness undermines the secular accounts of the highest good, such as the one proposed by Reath (1988). Bader argues that in secular accounts of the highest good, the realization of the highest good is accidental and contingent. (Bader 2015, p. 5) That is why, he advocates the theological conception of the highest good and argues that the highest good is realized at the individual level not at the species level (Bader 2015, p. 6 footnote 9). Bader also thinks that the secular conception of the highest good is impossible.

and consequently the highest good of the individual, is practically possible only under the noumenal conditions that we are free and have immortal souls.

Since Kant already argued for the possibility of transcendental freedom in the first Critique, in the second Critique he argues that endless progress toward the complete conformity of the will to the moral law is possible only on the presupposition of the existence of the same free agent acting endlessly, which requires having an immortal soul (CPrR, 5:122). The immediate question is: How can endless progress of the will in infinite time be considered as equivalent to a state of holiness? In order to understand Kant's answer to this question, we need to remember that for Kant virtue [Tugend] in the context of the highest good is not a disposition or a capacity [Vermögen], rather it is the complete set of virtuous activities constituting the character of the person. Similarly, [Gesinnung], in this context, does not refer to the enduring character of the person that underlies her actions.¹⁴ It rather refers to an attitude or collection of deeds and it is freely chosen to the degree that each action is freely chosen. Consequently, Tugendgesinnung as a component of the highest good is not some kind of virtuous disposition of the will that would continuously change from one degree of intensity to another in time. Rather, by Tugendgesinnung Kant means the whole set of virtuous actions, which depends on free choice of the agents to act virtuously and it can change as the moral worth of actions constituting the entire set of actions changes.¹⁵ To put it differently, Tugendgesinnung in this context has an extensive (as opposed to intensive) magnitude. This, in turn, means that complete virtue or holiness is not the state of maximum degree of virtue. Rather it is a state in which one's virtuous actions are equivalent to one's total number of actions.

Since we have sensible intuition, we can only represent the endless progress towards holiness as an infinite series of actions in which there is constant convergence towards complete conformity of actions to the moral law. In an infinite series of actions, progress towards holiness can be represented as continual decrease in the difference between the number of virtuous actions and the total number of actions, which would in an infinite time get infinitesimally small, and thereby, can be considered as zero. Thus, we can conceive how holiness of the individual is practically possible in an infinite series of actions, where the difference between total number of actions and the number of virtuous actions get infinitesimally small, and thereby, can be ignored. Since holiness is conceivable for us only under the presupposition of an endless progress in an infinite series of actions, the immortality of the soul

¹⁴ According to Henry Allison, one might think that "*Gesinnung* refers to the enduring character or disposition of an agent, which underlies and is reflected in particular choices" (Allison 1990, p. 136). In fact, one might equate it with the innate intelligible (noumenal) character that is responsible from our phenomenal actions. (Allison 1990, p. 137-38) However, as Allison points out this conception of an enduring and fixed (noumenal) character which determines the phenomenal actions is incompatible with Kant's claims that (i) *Gesinnung* is freely chosen and (ii) *Gesinnung* can change. That is why Allison argues that by *Gesinnung* Kant means "an agent's fundamental maxim with respect to the moral law", which is both freely chosen and can change in time (Allison 1990, p. 140).

¹⁵ For the purposes of this paper, it suffices to claim that reading of "*Gesinnung* as the entire set of an agent's free actions" is valid for Kant's discussion in the second Critique only. I do not claim that Kant has a uniform conception of *Gesinnung*. In her paper "Kant's *Gesinnung*" Julia Peters offers a reading that overlaps with mine. However, rather than the second Critique, she focuses on the passages from the Religion (Peters 2018, p. 511).

becomes a necessary precondition for the practical possibility of holiness, and consequently, for the practical possibility of the highest good for the individual (CPrR, 5:123).¹⁶

While maximum virtue (or holiness) is a necessary precondition, it is not a sufficient precondition for the highest good of the individual. The second requirement of the highest good is the necessary connection between virtue and happiness (CPrR, 5:124). Although we can a priori conceive the causal relation between collective virtuous conduct and the general happiness of the society, we cannot conceive how one's holiness can be the cause of her own happiness without postulating the existence of an all-knowing, all powerful and all-good God, who knows who is truly virtuous, has the power to grant them proportional happiness, and is good enough to do so (CPrR, 5:125). As is clear, while the postulate of the immortality of the soul and transcendental freedom are necessary presuppositions for the satisfaction of the maximality requirement, the existence of God is a necessary presupposition for the satisfaction of the proportionality requirement for the highest good at the individual domain. That is, without postulating the existence of transcendental freedom and an immortal soul, we cannot conceive of how one's moral actions can cause one's holiness, i.e., how the complete conformity of one's actions to the moral law is practically possible. Similarly, without God who can ensure the necessary connection between virtue and happiness, we cannot conceive of how virtue can cause proportional happiness. That is why the practical possibility of the highest good of the individual requires not only the existence of freedom, but also the theological postulates of the immortality of souls and the existence of God.

In brief, Kant in the second Critique argues that the highest good as the necessary connection between maximum virtue and happiness is practically possible. Since his discussion in the second Critique focuses on the individual will, Kant presents us with a theological conception of the highest good and explains how happiness can be a practical consequence of virtuous conduct under certain theological presuppositions. Since the highest good of the individual is possible only when we consider our noumenal selves in a future life, Kant does not say anything about the real possibility of the highest good, i.e., whether the highest good is attainable in the sensible world. After all, if the highest good is an effect of the moral law in this phenomenal world, Kant needs to show that the highest good is really possible in the phenomenal world. The problem, however, is that, as Kant explains in the second Critique, nature seems utterly unconcerned with our happiness. Thus, we are not yet justified in thinking that nature will cooperate with our moral intentions, and that we will be able to bring about the intended changes in the sensible world because the moral law does not determine the consequence of our actions. In order to show that the moral law is efficacious in the sensible world and the highest good is really possible, Kant in the third Critique argues that nature conforms to our moral goals, which in turn allows him to conclude that it is rational to believe in the real possibility of the highest in the phenomenal world.

¹⁶ Although he does not mention infinitesimals, Ralf Bader also explains how the endless progress of our immortal souls can achieve holiness in a similar fashion. For a detailed account of his explanation, see "Kant's Theory of the Highest Good" in *The Highest Good in Aristotle and Kant* (2015).

Kant's account of the highest good in the third Critique

As we saw, in the first Critique, Kant introduces the distinction between the (secular) highest good of the world, which is possible through freedom alone and the (theological) highest good of the individual, which is possible through freedom, God and the immortality of the soul. Kant's main concern on the first Critique is to show that both the secular and the theological conceptions are the logical consequence of the moral law, and thereby, if the moral law is logically possible, its consequence must also be logically possible. In the second Critique, on the other hand, he focuses on the (theological) highest good of the individual and argues that if the moral law is binding and can influence our actions, the highest good should be *practically possible* as well. In the third Critique, as we shall see, Kant focuses on the highest good of the world (as opposed to highest good of the individual) and argues that the highest good of the world is really possible in this phenomenal world. In this respect, with his third Critique account of the highest good he argues that the secular conception of the highest good, namely the intelligible idea of the moral world is in fact realizable in the phenomenal world if we think of this world as progressing towards that telos indefinitely. As will be clear, what appears to be the secular conception of the highest good of the world implicitly relies on similar theological presuppositions, such as the existence of God and the immortality of the human species.

In order to show that the highest good of the world is really possible, Kant first points out that nature helps us attain our moral goals. In the second part of the third Critique entitled "Critique of Teleological Judgment," Kant argues that nature serves us to achieve our moral goal because nature's telos coincides with our moral telos, namely the highest good of humanity. This means that the realms of nature and freedom are united in their shared telos. This shared telos has a twofold function: first it explains why nature exists as it is and not otherwise; and second it justifies our belief that the highest good can be attained in nature as a result of our moral conduct.¹⁷

In the second part of the third Critique, Kant argues that when nature is judged to be merely composed of efficient causes governed by mechanical laws, we cannot sufficiently explain why there are these efficient causes and mechanical laws as opposed to others. This is because the whole of nature could have formed itself in a thousand different ways (CJ, 5:360). Similarly, when we think of nature as a sum of objects connected with efficient causes only, each object becomes a contingent part of the whole and we cannot explain why they exist as opposed to others. Similarly, we wonder why things happen in this way, but not otherwise (CJ. 5:434). In response to the question "why the events happen as they are," if one answers because there are mechanical laws determining the events, one can further ask: Why do those mechanical laws of nature (and not others) obtain? This is because the efficient causes or mechanical laws cannot sufficiently explain the existence of this particular set of empirical objects and laws.

¹⁷ As Kant states in the *Groundwork*, while teleology allows us to judge nature as a system of ends and by doing so explains why certain contingent things exist, morality allows us to think of an ideal world which can be realized in the empirical world through human conduct (G, 4:436 n).

Since the sufficient explanation for why we have this system of empirical nature (as opposed to another) cannot be explained with reference to nature's own lawfulness, we need to appeal to a cause outside of nature determining it according to some final cause or telos [Endzweck] (CJ, 5:435). Only then we can judge that in order for nature to attain its telos, nature must have this particular empirical order. In other words, nature's telos restricts nature to a particular empirical form (CJ, 5:422). When we judge that nature has a telos or objective purposiveness, we can also judge that each object in nature is necessary to achieve its telos. Thus, not only the existence of particular empirical order, but also each part in that order would be judged to play an essential role for the telos of the whole. Thus, due to the demand of reason for sufficient explanation for the existence of a particular set of empirical laws, reflective judgment unifies diverse empirical objects and mechanical laws under the same telos, and thereby, judges different empirical forms to be parts of an organic whole. Similarly, parts of some individual objects are unified under the concept of some natural end. Thus, through the faculty of judgment both nature as a whole and various objects in nature are judged to be organisms (CJ, 20:249).¹⁸

We can only think of nature as directed towards some end if we think of it as having been produced in accordance with a concept or telos; but this implies that we must think of nature as having been created by an intelligent world-cause or a Deity (CJ, 5:389). In other words, the teleological conception of nature also leads to the thought that nature is designed by God in accordance with an objective purpose or a telos. Only then the faculty of reason, which always seeks the unconditioned, can have the sufficient explanation for the existence of a telos in nature (CJ, 5:401). For the existence of organized beings and the finality of nature in general is not conceivable without representing nature as a designed product of an intelligent cause, i.e., God (CJ, 5:400). That is why we judge that both the mechanical and the teleological laws are ultimately grounded on (or conditioned by) divine laws. So, in response to the question "Why did God create this world with this particular set of empirical order as opposed to another one?", we can answer that "because this world conforms to God's purpose best" or "that this world achieves its telos best."

In order to determine whether our moral end can be realized in this world, i.e., whether the highest good is really possible, we need to identify the final end of nature (or the telos of creation) and determine whether it is compatible with our moral end. According to Kant, the telos of nature is not in the empirical nature as everything in empirical nature is conditioned and can only be a relative end, not the final end. Hence the final end of nature must be supersensible. Kant states that human beings as rational moral agents, who have the supersensible capacity of freedom and who are able to set ends for themselves, are the final end of nature (CJ, 5:435–436). That is why the final end of nature (or the creation) is the human being under moral laws (CJ, 5:535, 5:444). In other words, the sensible world exists the way it does and not otherwise so that the human beings as moral and free agents can exist in it.

¹⁸ When judged as individual organisms, objects have *internal purposiveness*; when judged to be a part of nature as an organism, however, each object has *relative purposiveness* (CJ, 20:251).

By the capacity of freedom, in this context, Kant means the capacity for autonomy or self-legislation. Hence, what differentiates humans from other animals is their rational capacity to follow the laws of reason and to set their own ends determined by those laws. In that regard, humans are capable of being free from laws and influences that are external to their own nature and instead act according to the laws that they give to themselves. Hence, in response to reason's question of "why this set of empirical laws (as opposed to another one) exists?", the teleological judgment allows us to judge that this system of empirical nature exists for the human beings under moral laws i.e., for the free (autonomous) human beings whose actions are determined by the moral law. In this respect, we judge that autonomy is both the telos and the determining ground of empirical nature.

So far, we saw that the teleological judgment allows us to think that all empirical laws are conditioned by and ultimately grounded on teleological laws, which are in turn conditioned by an unconditional law that the human beings give to themselves, namely the moral law (or the categorical imperative). In this respect, the teleological principle of reflective judgment connects the sensible realm of mechanical laws to the supersensible realm of the moral law. Thus we judge that there is a hierarchy of different kinds of laws and that there is a necessary harmony between the sensible and the supersensible realms because the latter grounds the former, i.e., morality determines the empirical nature. This harmony between the sensible and the supersensible realms, therefore, is not a mere coincidence. The power of judgment provides a sufficient explanation for this harmony by connecting empirical nature and morality via teleological relationship. The sufficient explanation for why the intelligent world-cause (or God) created this world as opposed to another world is that this one is compatible with moral human beings or humanity [*die Menschheit*], who have unconditional value due to their autonomy (CJ, 5:443). This teleological relationship between nature and morality is precisely why we can judge that nature will be hospitable to our moral goals.

While the sensible and the supersensible realms are in harmony and teleologically connected (through the principle of sufficient reason), they are not yet united and the gulf between these realms remains to be closed. According to Kant, the sensible realm cannot have any influence on the supersensible realm, however, the supersensible realm should have an influence on the sensible nature, meaning that "the concept of freedom should make the end that is imposed by its laws real [*wirklich*] in the sensible world" (CJ, 5:176). This is because reason, according to Kant, has both a theoretical need to know its own telos, and the practical need to bring about that telos in nature. For Kant, it is really possible to satisfy that practical need and to bring about the telos of morality in the sensible world through mere moral conduct. In order to close the "incalculable gulf" (CJ, 5:175) between the empirical realm and the rational realm (or morality), Kant needs to show that empirical nature and morality have a common final end which can be realized in the sensible world. That is why after identifying the telos of empirical realm as the autonomy of humans, Kant argues that it is identical with the end of the supersensible moral realm. By doing so, he finally unites the sensible and the supersensible realms in their common telos realizable in the same realm.

Having determined the final end of empirical nature, namely the autonomy of the human beings, Kant points out that, reason asks: “What is the final end of the human being, or why must the human being exist?” Note that this question is equivalent to asking “why must this world with this telos (as opposed to another telos) exist?” In this regard, reason can still ask for the sufficient explanation for the existence (as opposed to absence) of this world and its telos. As he writes:

But if I ask about the final end of creation: **Why must human beings exist?** then the issue is about an objective supreme end, such as the highest reason would require for its creation. [...] the **human being can thus be the final end of creation only as a moral being**; as far as his state is concerned, **happiness is connected to it only as a consequence, in proportion to the correspondence with that end as the end of his existence.** (CJ, 5:436*, emphasis added)

As Kant writes, human beings do not exist for happiness as happiness can only have a conditional value (CJ, 5:436). Instead humans as moral or free agents exist because morality or autonomy has unconditional or absolute value (CJ, 5:443). Since human beings -as moral agents—have the capacity for autonomy and setting ends for themselves, in response to the question “for what end do human beings exist?”, we need to know the end humans set for themselves. That end is the human being (each rational being in the world) under the moral laws (CJ, 5:444). As Kant puts it “the existence of rational agents under moral laws, can alone be conceived as the final end of the existence of a world” (CJ, 5:450). In other words, God created this world, whose telos is the existence of moral and autonomous agents, because autonomy is intrinsically valuable.

While the final end [Endzweck] of empirical nature is autonomous human beings, the ultimate end [letzter Zweck] of moral human beings is a priori determined by the moral law. Since the moral law applies unconditionally and universally to all human beings, that end is the moral world in which all humans act according to the law, and thereby, autonomously. In other words, the moral world in which everyone acts virtuously and consequently their happiness is conditioned by and in proportion to their virtue (the highest good in the world) is the end of morality (CJ, 5:435). As Kant writes,

The moral law, as the formal rational condition of the use of our freedom, obligates us by itself alone, without depending on any sort of end as a material condition; yet it also determines for us, and indeed does so a priori, a final end, to strive after which it makes obligatory for us, and this is **the highest good in the world** [really] *possible through freedom*. (CJ, 5:450, second emphasis added)

According to Kant, then, the highest good in the world is *really possible* through free human conduct. As mentioned before, in such a moral world maximum or complete virtue causes proportional universal happiness (CJ, 5:436). Note that the ultimate end of the human beings a priori determined by the moral law is identical with the final end of nature, namely the existence of autonomous humans. And this

is precisely how the two separate realms, i.e., the sensible realm of nature and the supersensible realm of freedom can be united through the realization of their shared telos in the world (CJ, 20:246). Accordingly, both empirical nature and autonomous human beings ultimately exist in order to establish a moral world on earth, i.e., the highest good in the world.

According to Kant, this shared telos is really possible because nature helps the human species to attain it by providing the necessary initial conditions for the promotion of this end. More specifically, nature allows the human species to develop the skills necessary for the realization of this end (CJ, 5:432). For example, inequality among men, according to Kant, leads to domination of some people over others, and results with misery. Existence of misery leads humans to establish civil communities, in which constitutions regulate the abuse of free actions of the individuals (CJ, 5:432). The wars among the civil communities force humans to further develop their natural talents, and the calamities of wars lead us to establish the unity of states in the form of a cosmopolitan state to prevent such calamities (CJ, 5:433). In brief, the existence of natural and moral evil allows us to build strength and endurance, which in turn prepares us for a higher moral end than the material end of happiness (CJ, 5:434). As is clear, empirical nature, as Kant argues, is not only in harmony with our moral goals, but also helps us develop our rational skills fully at the species level. Complete development of the rational skills at the species level makes it possible for everyone in the society to act in accordance with the moral law, which in turn satisfies the maximality requirement for the highest good of the world.

Yet, one might worry that no matter which social and political institutions are established, the existence of natural and moral evil would prevent the satisfaction of the proportionality requirement for the highest good at the species level. However, truly virtuous people work not only to eradicate and alleviate the pain and suffering caused by natural and moral evil, but they would also actively work to make others happy. For acting on our wide and narrow duties determined by the moral law means treating ourselves and the others with respect, helping each other, and promoting the happiness of others. Thus, increase in the collective virtuous conduct would proportionally increase collective happiness and decrease suffering due to moral evil. Moreover, in more advanced stages of human history we would be capable of making the necessary scientific and technological advancements allowing us to overcome as much natural evil as possible. In other words, collective virtuous conduct can cause collective happiness because (1) the more virtuous people are less suffering there will be due to decrease in moral evil; (2) since virtue requires people to contribute to the happiness of others the more virtuous people are the happier they will be collectively, and finally (3) virtuous people cultivate their own talents, and thereby learn how to satisfy their needs in a large scale and to prevent natural evils and suffering caused by famine, diseases, floods. etc. That is why if everyone does what they ought to do and act virtuously, collective moral agency would cause proportional general happiness of the human species without God's direct intervention. That is why in the third Critique Kant argues that the highest good of the human species is attainable (or really possible) in the sensible world through freedom.

In the current state of the world, we see that not everyone acts in accordance with the moral law and that we, as individuals, no matter how virtuous we are, can be subject to pain and suffering due to both moral and natural evil. That is why, as individuals, we can only think of the highest good as attainable for us in a future life with the help of God. Unless we assume the existence of God and the immortality of the soul, we—as individuals—do not seem to have a justified reason for believing that we can attain the highest good. The *a priori* conception of the highest good thereby gives the individual hope that she can be happy in another world where her happiness is proportional to her virtue.

As we saw above, theological presuppositions of the existence of God and the immortality of the soul play an explicit role when we are concerned with an individual will. In the case of the highest good of the world, on other hand, the existence of God and the immortality of the human species play an implicit role in making it possible for the later generations of the human species to attain the highest good (or the moral world). In both domains, however, the highest good is attainable if we assume—either directly or indirectly- the existence of freedom, God, and immortality. This means that Kant does not have two different conceptions of the highest good, namely a secular and a theological conception. Rather he holds that we should make direct or indirect appeal to God and immortality depending on the domain to which the highest good applies, namely the individual versus the societal domains.¹⁹

Conclusion

I argued that despite the apparent conflict in his writings, Kant does not have two competing notions of the highest good, one secular and one theological. Instead, Kant has only one conception of the highest good, which signifies a state in which maximum virtue is necessarily combined with proportional happiness. The appearance of two different notions is a result of considering the highest good either from the perspective of the individual, or from that of the species. Hence, Kant's question of hope in the first Critique should be reformulated in two ways: (1) What can I—as an individual—hope for, if I act as I should and become worthy of happiness? and (2) What can we—as the human species—hope for, if we all act as we should and become worthy of happiness? In response to the first question, Kant argues that one can hope to attain the highest good only if one assumes the the immortality of the soul and the existence of freedom and God. In response to the second question, on the other hand, Kant argues that the human species can hope to attain the highest good if they presuppose that human history is an endless progress of freedom towards the realization of nature's telos of the highest good in the world. As we

¹⁹ In 'The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory,' Stephen Engstrom distinguishes two different standpoints to the highest good, namely the standpoint of an individual and the standpoint of a community. He argues that the difference between these standpoints "is due to the fact that, whereas individual morality leads to the idea of the highest good as its consequence, social morality takes this idea as its foundation" (Engstrom, p. 777).

saw in our discussion of the third Critique, one cannot make sense of the teleological conception of nature, i.e., nature as directed toward a politically and morally ideal state, without presupposing an intelligent world-cause, i.e., God. Hence, the possibility of the highest good of the world, for Kant, also depends on the preconditions of freedom, the immortality of the species, and the existence of God as the creator of nature. Since the highest good of the world, which is judged to be really possible for the later generations of the human species, in the phenomenal world, does not require any immediate theological assumption, Kant scholars falsely viewed this secular conception to be a distinct notion from the theological conception of the highest good. As we saw, however, even the secular conception of the highest good of the species implicitly requires the same set of theological assumptions.

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