

# Kant's theory of the highest good

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## I Introduction

The highest good is the culmination of Kant's ethical theory. It systematically combines all objects of practical reason, integrating everything that is good into an unconditioned totality. By doing so, it bridges the dualisms between moral and pathological value, between duty and prudence, as well as between virtue and happiness. It thereby gives rise to a unified necessary system of ends.

This paper provides a systematic account of Kant's theory of the highest good. In particular, it addresses the following questions:

1. Why is happiness included in the highest good?
2. In what way are we meant to bring our dispositions into complete conformity with the moral law?
3. Why should happiness be distributed in proportion to virtue?
4. In what sense is the highest good something that we are meant to bring about?
5. Why does the validity or bindingness of the moral law presuppose the possibility of the highest good?

The account developed in this paper considers the highest good to be the object of practical reason, which results from the combination of the object of empirical practical reason, namely happiness, and the object of pure practical reason, namely virtue. While virtue is the supreme and unconditioned good (moral good), happiness is the conditioned good (pathological good), making happiness in accordance with virtue the complete good (section 2). Virtue is to be understood as an extensive magnitude that concerns the proportion of actions that issue from a good will, allowing us to see the requirement to bring our dispositions into complete conformity with the moral law as following from applying the requirement to act on the categorical imperative to the totality of our actions. This complete conformity amounts to the extensional equivalent of holiness, and

it can only be approximated in an infinite series that is such that the proportion of bad actions becomes diminishingly small (section 3). The proportionality between happiness and virtue is explained in terms of the conditionality of the goodness of happiness together with the necessary connection that must obtain between happiness and virtue in the highest good, given that this connection is cognised a priori. In short, proportionality of goodness together with the obtaining of a necessary connection between the elements of the highest good yields proportionality of distribution (section 4). By appealing to the distinction between the highest good in a person and the highest good of a world, we can see that everyone is commanded by the categorical imperative to bring about the supreme good in one's own person, namely to become virtuous and acquire a good will, and that everyone is commanded by the pragmatic imperative to bring about the conditioned good in one's own person, namely to take the means that are required for becoming happy to the extent to which one is worthy of happiness. The complete good of the world, on the contrary, is not the object of the will of any finite creature but only an object of the will of God (section 5). Finally, by considering the highest good as a necessary system of ends, we can see that practical reason has to presuppose the possibility of such a systematic unity of ends if it is not to be in conflict with itself, something that would undermine the very source of morality. In this way, one can make sense of the idea that the possibility of the highest good has to be presupposed if morality is to be binding, without compromising the unconditional and categorical nature of morality (section 6).

It should be noted that the analysis provided in this paper is restricted to the theory of the highest good developed in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, since this is the most systematic and well-grounded of Kant's attempts to come to terms with this difficult notion.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, discussions preceding the discovery of autonomy, such as Kant's treatment of the highest good in the *Doctrine of Method* of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, suffer from inadequacies since they assign a motivational role to the expected happiness that is meant to result from virtuous behaviour. On the other hand, later discussions confound things by bringing in extraneous considerations that do not play any foundational role insofar as they introduce teleological elements and try to integrate the highest good into Kant's theory of history and politics.

## 2 Supreme, conditioned and complete good

Practical reason (the will) has objects. These are represented as effects possible through the causality of freedom (cf. 5:57). When we act, we are causally efficacious on the basis of maxims that we have freely adopted, thereby bringing about

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<sup>1</sup>For a helpful account of Kant's discussions of the highest good preceding the *Critique of Practical Reason*, cf. Düsing: 1971, pp. 7-27.

certain effects in the world. The intended effects (the ends at which the maxims aim) are the objects of the will, the objects of practical reason (= the good).

Pure practical reason does not have an object provided to it that then gives rise to a principle, namely a principle of how to realise the end. Instead, pure practical reason is the source of a law, namely the moral law, which provides its own object. In other words, pure practical reason determines its object, rather than being determined by the object. Empirical practical reason, on the contrary, has its objects given to it empirically. Its ends are set by our sensible side, in particular by our inclinations. These ends then determine the principle on which the will is to act to realise them. Thus, in the moral case the principle determines the object (= the moral good), while in the pathological case the object (= the pathological good) determines the principle (cf. 5:62-65).

This difference corresponds to the distinction between autonomous willing and heteronomous willing. In the former case, the principle of volition is specified by reason which then determines what is good. In the latter case, what is good is specified by sensation which then determines the principle of volition. That is, whereas autonomous willing is characterised by a self-imposed principle that precedes and determines the good, heteronomous willing is such that the externally fixed good precedes and determines the principle.

Practical reason in its empirical application, accordingly, has ends provided to it by our sensible side (these ends can be integrated together in the end of happiness, since happiness consists in nothing other than the maximal satisfaction of one's inclinations (cf. A806/B834)), while it provides its own end in its pure application. The end of empirical practical reason is happiness. The end of pure practical reason is virtue (having a good will).<sup>2</sup>

These two ends are not reducible to each other but are independent and represent the fundamental dualism between sensibility and reason, between prudence and morality, that lies at the foundation of Kant's ethical system. Yet, at the same time, they are not disconnected but instead stand in a conditioning relation insofar as happiness has value and is to be pursued only to the extent to which it is had by someone who has a good will. In other words, the end of pure practical reason (the moral good) is the condition of the end of empirical practical reason (the pathological good).

The object of pure practical reason is virtue. This is an unconditioned good, a good that is valuable under all circumstances, and it is, moreover, the condition of all other goods. It is accordingly the supreme good, in that there is no good that is higher than it, no good that conditions it. The object of empirical practical reason, on the contrary, is happiness. This is a conditioned good, a good that is only valuable when accompanied by a good will. It is a good the goodness of

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<sup>2</sup>While having a good will is the object of particular choices, virtue is the object of the totality of choices (cf. section 3).

which is conditional on the unconditional goodness of the good will.<sup>3</sup>

This conditioning relation obtains because for something to be good is for it to be an object of the will, and for the will to have objects it needs to be the case that the will is not involved in a practical contradiction, which, in turn, requires that the will not adopt non-universalisable maxims. Put differently, to have a bad will amounts to acting on a non-universalisable maxim and thus amounts to having a will that is in a contradictory state and as such cannot have any object. That is, a bad will is a will that is in a practical contradiction insofar as reason requires universalisability yet impermissible maxims are such that they lead to contradictions when universalised. Yet, practical reason needs to be in a coherent state in order to apply the rational concept 'good' and hence cannot consistently apply this concept to anything unless the practical contradiction is removed. Accordingly, happiness can only be an object of practical reason and can only be good to the extent to which the person is virtuous, i.e. to the extent to which that person subordinates self-love to morality.<sup>4,5</sup>

The complete good of practical reason incorporates these two heterogeneous goods in a way that respects the conditioning relation that obtains amongst them. It consequently consists in happiness in accordance with virtue, i.e. it contains both happiness and virtue whereby happiness is subordinated to and dependent upon virtue. This complete good is the unconditioned totality of the object of practical reason, since it does not leave out anything that is good but contains everything that is an object of the will (cf. 5:110).<sup>6</sup> Happiness is thus included

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<sup>3</sup>This does not mean that happiness derives its goodness from the good will, that goodness is conferred upon it by the good will. Instead, happiness is good in virtue of how it itself is on condition of being had by someone who has a good will. The source of its goodness resides within itself, even though the condition of its goodness is extrinsic (cf. Bader: manuscript).

<sup>4</sup>Section 3 explains how the notion 'virtue' is to be understood and how it can be a matter of degree, even though having a good will that is in a coherent state v. having a bad will that is involved in a practical contradiction is a binary matter. In particular, virtue turns out to consist in the overall evaluation of an agent's character and is thus a function of facts about the agent's will throughout his or her life. Since the goodness of happiness at a time is function of the agent's will at that time, and since the extent of the goodness of happiness throughout a life is a function of the goodness of happiness at the various times at which the life is lived, the extent of the goodness of happiness ends up being a function of the virtue of the agent.

<sup>5</sup>Attempts to explain the conditionality of the value of happiness, not in terms of a bad will not having any objects due to being in a contradictory state, but in terms of the permissibility constraints imposed by the categorical imperative run into the problem that they can only explain the conditions under which we can pursue happiness as an end, but are unable to explain the conditions under which happiness itself is good. The categorical imperative only limits the way in which happiness is pursued, but does not explain why happiness itself is only good when had by someone who has a good will. This problem becomes particularly pressing when it comes to explaining why happiness that is had by someone who has a bad will fails to be good when the happiness is due to luck or due to the actions of others and not in any way the result of impermissible actions.

<sup>6</sup>The highest good is not to be understood as an organic unity but rather as the combination of two distinct kinds of good that stand in a conditioning relation. There is no additional value

in the highest good because it is intrinsically good (when it is deserved), and if it were left out then the resulting good would be incomplete.<sup>7</sup>

Given the conditionality of the value of happiness, happiness is only an object of practical reason and hence something that is good to the extent to which it is had by someone who has a good will, who is virtuous. This implies that happiness is good to the extent to which it is combined with virtue and is to be included in the complete good to that extent. The conditioning relation forms the basis of the requirement that the extent of happiness included in the complete good is determined by the extent of virtue that is to be found therein. In the complete good happiness will accordingly be proportional to virtue. The proportionality requirement implies that given a certain 'level' or 'amount' of virtue, practical reason judges a corresponding amount of happiness to be good and one of its objects. Having this 'level' or 'amount' of virtue without the corresponding happiness would leave out something good and would constitute an incompleteness, while having a certain amount of happiness without having the corresponding 'level' or 'amount' of virtue would not be something good but would instead conflict with the necessary connection that holds between the components of the complete good (cf. section 4).

The concept of the highest good is an a priori rational concept that contains both happiness and virtue, whereby the combination of these two components is not analytic insofar as one is contained in the other, but is instead synthetic insofar as two distinct and heterogeneous elements are combined. Given that the connection between happiness and virtue in the highest good can be established a priori by reason, it follows that it must be a necessary connection. It follows further that happiness and virtue form a rational and necessary system of ends. Accordingly, if the highest good is to be realised, then happiness and virtue must stand in a necessary relation to each other. This has important consequences, in that any merely accidental or contingent relation between the elements of the highest good is inadequate and does not classify as a realisation of this a priori concept. That is, should the distribution of happiness by sheer chance happen to end up such that the proportionality requirement be satisfied, then the resulting situation would not classify as a realisation of the highest good. Instead of merely corresponding to virtue, happiness has to result from virtue.

The requirement of there being a necessary connection amongst the elements undermines secular accounts, such as the one proposed by Reath: 1988, that make the realisation of the highest good accidental and contingent. Such accounts can at best yield the result that certain forms of behaviour and the existence of certain kinds of institutions are likely to lead to a situation in which

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in their combination, i.e. there is no value above and beyond the goodness of the components.

<sup>7</sup>This explanation as to why happiness is included differs markedly from accounts that appeal to the duty of beneficence in explaining its inclusion. Section 5 argues that considerations regarding the duty of beneficence cannot play a role in the specification of the highest good.

happiness and virtue are proportionately distributed. Yet, such a situation would not classify as a realisation of the highest good. The highest good requires not only that happiness be distributed according to virtue, but that this distribution be based on a necessary connection. Otherwise, though the components of the highest good would be realised, the highest good itself would not be realised, since the components would not be adequately related to each other. In other words, what is required for the highest good to be realised is not merely an external relation to the effect that the distribution of the happiness component be proportional to that of the virtue component, but rather that the components be internally related.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, states of affairs that are indistinguishable in terms of the external relations obtaining amongst their components can differ in terms of whether they classify as realisations of the highest good. Any accidental and contingent connection between happiness and virtue that simply happens to accord with what is required by the highest good is consequently insufficient and does not give rise to a rational and necessary system of ends.<sup>9</sup>

The complete good results from the combination of the unconditioned good together with the conditioned good. The former is the moral good and is identified with virtue, while the latter is the pathological good, which amounts to happiness that is had by someone with a good will (cf. R6876). The complete good thus consists in happiness in accordance with virtue. This can be understood in two ways, depending on whether one focuses only on the proportionality aspect or also includes the maximality aspect.

**RESTRICTED COMPLETE GOOD:** The restricted complete good is realised if happiness is distributed in accordance with how virtuous people actually are. The level of virtue is held fixed and happiness is distributed accordingly. Such a situation satisfies the proportionality requirement and ensures that nothing that is good, given the actual level of virtue, is left out.

**UNRESTRICTED COMPLETE GOOD:** The unrestricted complete good is realised if people are as virtuous as they should be and if happiness is distributed accordingly. In this case, there will be complete virtue together with complete

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<sup>8</sup>The relation has to be internal in the sense of being intrinsic to the pair – not in the sense of supervening on the intrinsic properties of the relata, or in the sense of being analytic – and is accordingly compatible with dependence on God. (The notion of internality is thus distinct from the one that Barney has in mind when she says that proportionality is “caused not by any internal causal relation between [virtue and happiness], as in the ancient systems, but only externally, by a rational will determined to make it so” (Barney: this volume, section 2).)

<sup>9</sup>It might be suggested that room for a non-accidental and non-contingent connection opens up once history is conceived in teleological terms. This kind of proposal, however, is problematic in that, as we will see in section 5, the proportionality component of the highest good must be realised in the case of each individual. In particular, there must be a necessary connection in the case of each person between that person’s virtue and that person’s happiness, which implies that the highest good is realised in individuals and not in the species.

happiness. Such a situation satisfies not only the proportionality requirement by including all that which is conditionally good, but also satisfies the maximality requirement.

The distinction between these two understandings of the complete good matters insofar as we need to distinguish how happy people should be, given how virtuous they actually are (what proportionality requires), from how happy people should be, given how virtuous they should be (the ideal). In particular, this distinction between proportionality and maximality is important for understanding the antinomy of practical reason and the respective roles of the two postulates.

The antinomy consists in the conflict between the claim that the highest good is possible and the claim that the highest good is not possible. This conflict can be distinguished into two specific antinomial conflicts corresponding to the two aspects of the complete good.

First, the claim that maximality is possible because it is the object of practical reason conflicts with the claim that maximality is not possible.<sup>10</sup> This conflict can be dissolved by distinguishing the absolute from the relative impossibility of the second thesis, holding that maximality is not absolutely impossible but only impossible relative to the supposition of the agent's finite existence. Accordingly, one can avoid this conflict by bringing in the postulate of the immortality of the soul, which makes room for the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law in an infinite progression.

Second, the claim that proportionality is possible because it is the object of practical reason conflicts with the claim that proportionality is not possible. Given the heterogeneity of the components of the highest good, the connection between them cannot be analytic but must instead be synthetic a priori. In particular, the components need to be connected by a causal relation (cf. 5:113). Yet, it would seem that the requisite causal connection between the elements of the highest good cannot obtain. On the one hand, it is impossible for virtue to result from happiness. On the other, the causal effects of virtue seem to be a contingent matter and hence would seem to rule out the possibility of a necessary connection. Kant claims that while the first connection between happiness and virtue is absolutely impossible, the second is only conditionally impossible insofar as there cannot be such a connection if rational beings are only thought to exist as members of the sensible world (cf. 5:114). Since the assumption required for the conditional impossibility is false, a resolution of the antinomy of pure practical reason becomes possible insofar as the antithesis can be rejected. In particular, one can then avoid the conflict by bringing in the postulate of the existence of God, which makes room for a necessary connection between happiness and virtue, where virtue is the ground of happiness.

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<sup>10</sup>As we will see in section 3, this impossibility is to be explained in terms of the propensity to radical evil.

In particular, Kant holds that the apparent contingency of the relation between virtue and happiness can be avoided if God, as an intelligible author of nature and as the ground of all possibility, creates the world such that a non-contingent relation between virtue and happiness obtains.<sup>11</sup> Hence, the realisation of the highest good, that is, the realisation of a situation in which happiness and virtue non-accidentally stand in a causal relation that is such as to yield a distribution of happiness that is proportional to virtue, is only possible if the world is structured by God in such a way that happiness and virtue are related in this way, ensuring that happiness ends up being distributed proportionately to virtue. God can in this manner ensure that the causal effects of virtue establish a non-accidental connection between virtue and happiness in the way specified by the highest good, i.e. proportionally, thereby making it possible for the highest good to be realised.

The requirements of proportionality and the requirements of maximality thus map onto the two postulates of practical reason. On the one hand, maximality regards morality and is concerned with what we ought to do, and hence with what we must be like if we are to be able to do so, namely be immortal, to make it possible for us to completely conform our dispositions with the moral law and thereby realise the ideal. On the other, proportionality regards happiness and is concerned with what we can hope for, and hence with what the world must be like if ends are to constitute a systematic whole, namely that God arranges things in such a way that happiness is distributed proportional to virtue.

Since God cannot make us virtuous, God cannot bring about the unrestricted complete good but can only realise the restricted complete good by ensuring that proportionality obtains. Put differently, God is only responsible for proportionality and not for bringing about the ideal. Ensuring that the condition of the unrestricted complete good is satisfied is something that is up to us since it is by our free choices that we determine whether we are virtuous or vicious. The possibility of the unrestricted complete good thus requires both proportionality and the possibility of maximality, thereby making it the case that both the existence of God and the immortality of the soul have to be postulated.

Moreover, this account explains why “the postulate of the possibility of the *highest derived good* (of the best world) is at the same time the postulate of the actuality of a *highest original good*, namely the existence of God” (5:125). This

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<sup>11</sup>The fact that the relation between virtue and happiness is not immediate due to the involvement of God (cf. 5:115) does not undermine the requisite internality since virtue is what causes happiness, whereas God is merely that which makes it the case that virtue causes happiness. That is, God is not an element in the causal chain, but is involved by making the causal connection between virtue and happiness possible in the first place. Accordingly, God’s involvement does not imply that virtue is only a distal cause of happiness. God’s role is in this way analogous to that played by laws of nature, which do not undermine the intrinsicality of causation, even though they are external to the events that stand in causal relations, since the laws are not causes but are instead the things that make it the case that events stand in causal relations.

claim may at first sight appear dubious, since it might be asked why it is the case that the possibility of the highest good requires the actuality of the existence of God, rather than merely requiring the possibility of the existence of God (cf. Wood: 1970, p. 135).

In response, we can note that the possibility of the highest good, understood as the unrestricted complete good, requires the actuality of proportionality, and thereby the actual existence of God, together with the possibility of us approximating complete virtue, and thereby our actual immortality. Put differently, the actuality of God is required to guarantee proportionality, while the actuality of immortality is required for us to be able to approximate complete virtue. The difference between these two presuppositions derives from the fact that the realisation of the supreme good depends on us, whereas the realisation of the proportional good depends on God (cf. R6451). This matters because the possibility of the highest good has to be understood such that it must be possible for us to realise it, in the sense that whether it is realised is a function of our actions and choices. In order for that to be the case, the requirements that are not within our control must actually be met. That is, to the extent to which the realisation of the highest good depends on us (on practical reason itself), it presupposes the possibility of its realisation. To the extent to which it is independent of us (independent of practical reason itself), it presupposes the actuality of its realisation. Since only virtue is up to us, the proportionality requirement must actually be satisfied and not merely possibly be satisfied.

In short, in order for it to be possible for us to realise the supreme good, we must actually be immortal, thereby making it possible for us to act in such a way as to bring our dispositions into complete conformity with the moral law, while in order for it to be the case that happiness is proportional to virtue, God must exist and make it so.

### 3 The complete conformity of dispositions

The maximality component requires each person to completely bring his or her dispositions into conformity with morality. Since the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law is practically necessary, it has to be possible. Yet, it is only possible for finite moral agents to endlessly progress towards perfection, and thereby in the limit realise the complete conformity of dispositions, on condition that they are immortal. Accordingly, it follows that the possibility of this practically necessary complete conformity is dependent upon the immortality of the soul.

In order to make sense of Kant's argument, conformity of dispositions with the moral law has to be understood in terms of the extent to which one's actions (or better: choices) issue from a good will. In particular, the extent of conformity is understood in terms of the proportion of the number of actions adopted on

the basis of a disposition that accords priority to the moral law. To assess how virtuous an agent is, one compares the number of good actions with the total number of actions performed by that agent. The greater the number of actions based on the correct priority ordering, the greater the conformity of dispositions with the moral law. In the limit, complete conformity amounts to there being a 1:1 ratio.

The notion of virtue at play in the argument for immortality (as well as in Kant's discussion of the highest good in the *Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason* more generally) is thus to be understood as referring to an extensive magnitude.<sup>12</sup> In particular, it refers to an extensive magnitude that is concerned with the extent to which one's actions issue from a good will.<sup>13</sup> It is accordingly distinct from that of an intensive magnitude, understood as moral strength of will, that features in Kant's discussion in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, for instance when he notes that "[v]irtue is the strength of a human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty" (6:394; also cf. 6:405).<sup>14,15</sup>

According to Kant, our imperfection is bound up with our finitude. We are imperfect insofar as we are finite creatures that have needs resulting from our sensible side that can clash with the requirements of morality, thereby making the conformity of our dispositions with the moral law contingent.<sup>16</sup> Because of our imperfection morality is prescriptive for us and takes the form of an imperative that necessitates our will, whereas in the case of a holy will morality is descriptive and entirely non-contingent. As a result, it looks like achieving perfection is

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<sup>12</sup>Virtue is an extensive magnitude insofar as it is a magnitude that is aggregated out of different parts that are mereologically distinct, i.e. separate items that can be considered independently of each other, and thus unlike an intensive magnitude that applies to a single item by itself (independently of any part-whole structure). That is, we are concerned with a feature of the series that is a function of all of its members, rather than with a progression pertaining to particular members of this series. (Usually, in the context of Kant's philosophy, extensive magnitudes do not have a natural unit. Instead, they are given a conventional measure, due to the continuity of space and time. This also applies to virtue if the individuation of actions is likewise considered to be something that can be given a conventional measure that allows for an arbitrary choice of units, given that any temporally extended action can be carved up in different ways and can either be understood as being based on one choice or on a multitude of choices.)

<sup>13</sup>It is worth noting that at 5:122 Kant speaks plurally about the complete conformity of dispositions (*Gesinnungen*) in a will, which suggests that he is concerned with an extensive magnitude.

<sup>14</sup>The impropriety of importing the *Metaphysics of Morals* notion of virtue into the argument of the *Critique of Practical Reason* is also evidenced by the fact that he notes in the later work that "[v]irtue itself, or possession of it, is not a duty" (6:405). If this notion of virtue were at play in the argument for the immortality of the soul, it would be rather difficult to make sense of the claim that the possession of virtue is practically necessary.

<sup>15</sup>The intensive notion can be understood as characterising a phenomenal analogue or manifestation of the underlying noumenal extensive notion.

<sup>16</sup>The contingency resulting from having a sensible side is not, by itself, sufficient for accounting for the propensity to radical evil (cf. 6:35).

impossible for us since this would require us to overcome our finitude, which would amount to a transformation of our nature. We would have to stop being sensible creatures with needs in order for the conformity of our dispositions with the moral law to be no longer contingent, but this is impossible given that we are essentially finite.

Kant, however, holds that there is an alternative path to perfection that is compatible with finitude. This alternative route consists in having an infinite amount of time to achieve perfection. The extensive magnitude resulting from aggregating an infinite number of choices can add up to perfection, even in the case of a finite sensible creature in whose case compliance with the moral law is contingent. Having an infinite number of choices makes it possible for us to achieve the extensional equivalent of the situation in which a will that is not afflicted by finitude finds itself, namely a situation in which there is a 1:1 ratio between the number of good actions and the total number of actions. In short, immortality allows us to achieve the extensional equivalent of holiness.<sup>17</sup>

Accordingly, we can see that we never reach a situation in which particular choices follow with necessity from the moral law and in which the moral law loses its prescriptive character and instead becomes descriptive. This kind of perfection at a particular moment in time is not possible for us since we are essentially finite and hence imperfect. It is “a perfection of which no rational being of the sensible world is capable at any moment of his existence” (5:122). Instead, we can only achieve perfection in an infinite series of actions.

Perfection is then not to be found as an element of the series but is rather to be identified with the series itself. It is this series of choices considered as a whole that God intuitively views as a unity when atemporally viewing a life, making it possible for holiness “to be found whole in a single intellectual intuition of the existence of rational beings” (5:123). The intuitive intellect views the entire existence in a single intuition by performing the limit operation, thereby turning the potential infinity into an actual infinity, allowing God to view what is for us an indefinite progression as a completed series. Though at each moment in time an agent will

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<sup>17</sup>This account has the effect that it is always possible to approximate holiness. No matter how many bad choices one has made (as long as one is dealing with a finite number of choices), it will still be possible to make enough good choices to bring it about that the proportion of bad actions becomes diminishingly small. Accordingly, it will always be possible to bring one's disposition into complete conformity with the moral law. This ensures that, even though it is contingent on our choices whether the highest good is in fact realised, it is not contingent on our choices whether it is possible for the highest good to be realised. Put differently, we cannot undermine the possibility but only the actuality of the highest good. (The highest good here is understood in its unrestricted sense, i.e. as incorporating both (i) maximality in the form of the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law, and (ii) proportionality in the form of happiness being distributed in accordance with virtue. Since the proportionality component is ensured by God, it follows that the restricted sense of the highest good, which does not include the maximality component, is realised independently of our choices and as such is not contingent on what we do.)

only have made a finite number of choices, if the series is viewed atemporally as a completed whole, then it can be equivalent to perfection.

The series of choices can thus be viewed from two different perspectives. On the one hand, there is the phenomenal perspective from which the series is construed as an endlessly progressing temporal series. At any moment of time an agent will always only have made a finite number of choices and the series is thus always only potentially infinite. From this point of view, one can approximate perfection by getting closer and closer to it but never actually achieve it. As regards the noumenal perspective, on the other hand, the series is viewed not from a particular point within the series, but from an external perspective from which one views the series as a completed whole. The series in this case constitutes an actual infinity and it is from this point of view that perfection can be not only approximated but achieved.

Understanding virtue as an extensive magnitude in this way makes room for these two ways of considering the series of choices and thereby allow us to explain how God can intuit the series as a completed whole. By contrast, any account that understands virtue as an intensive magnitude will not be able to explain the claim that the endlessly progressing series is considered as a unity. Such an account would in the limit find holiness as a member of the series and thus would not need to hold that God atemporally views an agent's existence as a unity.

This means that the progression is not to be understood as involving a situation in which one approaches holiness in the series, where each member of the series gets progressively better. Put differently, it is not a progression in which one is getting more and more virtuous (understood in terms of an intensive magnitude), insofar as one acquires a stronger and stronger will. Instead, the progression concerns the series as a whole, since we are dealing with an extensive magnitude. The agent becomes more and more virtuous in that the series itself, rather than its members, gets better insofar as the proportion of good actions increases. In the limit, the proportion of bad actions becomes diminishingly small, allowing one to get closer and closer to perfection, asymptotically approaching a 1:1 ratio in an infinite progression.

Understanding virtue as an extensive magnitude is thus crucial for making sense of the claim that perfection is only to be found in an endless progress. The notion of virtue that treats it as an intensive magnitude is of relevance when one is concerned with particular actions, with the particular choices that constitute the members of the endlessly progressing series. However, when one is concerned with the series as a whole, rather than with the members of the series, then one has to appeal to an extensive magnitude that is determined by aggregating the members of the series. This is because intensive magnitudes are not amenable to the application of the requisite aggregative procedures. They cannot be aggregated in such a way as to yield a situation in which an endless progression amounts to a

complete conformity when it is viewed atemporally as a whole.<sup>18</sup> Since the requisite kind of aggregation can only be performed when dealing with an extensive magnitude, given that such magnitudes are cumulative in character, we can see that, in this context, virtue is not to be understood in terms of strength of will.

At this point, it might be objected that the extensive characterisation does not yield the right result and is to be rejected, on the basis that it is not necessarily the case that an endless progress is required if a 1:1 ratio is to be achieved, given that any agent will classify as being perfect on this account as long as he has not made any bad choices yet but has only acted on the basis of moral maxims. While it is true that no endless progress would be required if one could start out acting morally, Kant holds that there is a radical innate evil in human nature and that humans have a natural propensity to evil (cf. 6:29-39). As a result, we all in some sense start out as bad, thereby making it the case that an infinite number of choices is required to overcome this initial badness.

The understanding of virtue as an extensive magnitude also allows us to make sense of the way in which the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law is practically necessary. As Kant notes, “the *complete conformity* of dispositions with the moral law is the supreme condition of the highest good” (5:122). The complete conformity of dispositions is required because it is an object of pure practical reason and as such constitutes a component, in fact the supreme component, of the highest good (which when appropriately combined with the object of empirical practical reason, i.e. happiness, yields the complete good). Though perfection is not directly commanded by the categorical imperative, it is nonetheless practically necessary insofar as it is an object set by practical reason.

The requirement to be virtuous (in the sense of bringing about the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law) is not directly given by the categorical imperative, but results from practical reason when it concerns itself with the totality of one’s actions. The categorical imperative commands in the case of every choice that the principle of action be universalisable and based on giving priority to morality over self-love. It tells one in the case of each particular action how one is to behave, namely that one is to act morally, making it the case that the action in question issues from a good will. In this way, the categorical imperative is concerned with particular choices and is accordingly not directly concerned with the overall character of a person.

Perfection, however, comes in when reason considers not particular actions but the totality of actions, making an assessment of one’s overall character. Reason considers one’s character not as it is manifested in this or that particular action, but one’s overall character as it is manifested in one’s life considered as a whole.

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<sup>18</sup>Kant distinguishes aggregation from coalition, noting that the former mode of composition only applies to extensive magnitudes, while the latter only concerns intensive magnitudes (cf. B201 footnote).

In striving for an unconditioned totality, reason concerns itself with all of the actions or choices made by an agent, requiring all of them to be morally determined, which amounts to a complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law. Analogously, the object of any particular action, “the effect possible through freedom” (5:57), will be a particular object, a particular effect. Only the totality of choices has the supreme/complete good as its object, and only this totality requires the complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law. Perfection thus turns out to be the supreme component of the object of the totality of one’s choices.

The fact that perfection is concerned with a totality and as such only enters the picture when concerned with the supreme/complete object of practical reason should not come as a surprise, given that we are dealing with the *Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason*, where we end up when reason strives for the unconditioned. While theoretical antinomies arise when considering the world as a totality, practical antinomies arise when considering the agent (as well as the object of practical reason) as a totality. If the complete conformity of dispositions were construed differently, it would be difficult to make sense of why this discussion was located in the *Dialectic* and how it could give rise to an antinomy.

Since this totality is determined by aggregating one’s choices, we can see once again that perfection is to be understood as an extensive magnitude. An account of virtue that treats it as an intensive magnitude, accordingly, has difficulty in explaining why perfection is practically necessary. On the one hand, this cannot be explained by appealing to the categorical imperative, given that this imperative commands us to act on universalisable maxims rather than to achieve ever greater moral strength of will. On the other, it cannot be explained by appealing to the unconditioned object of practical reason, since it would seem that there is no totality corresponding to an intensive magnitude that could play an analogous role to that played in our account by the totality of actions in determining the supreme/complete object of practical reason.

Accordingly, if one were to approach Kant’s argument with the moral strength of will notion of virtue, one would quickly end up with the view that Kant was guilty of illicitly switching from virtue to perfection. For instance, Beck claims that “Kant has, I believe, confused the ‘supreme condition’ (*bonum supremum*) of the *summum bonum*, which is virtue, with the supreme perfection of virtue, as though his definition of the *summum bonum* were the conjunction of perfect happiness with the perfection of virtue (i.e., holiness). . . . Only through the substitution of the maximal for the juridical conception of the *summum bonum*, can we say that a state of holiness must be attainable, even in infinite progress. Neither the Kantian text nor the Christian doctrine, which Kant is here rationalizing, nor the voice of duty itself requires the maximal conception” (Beck: 1960, p. 268 & p. 270). Similarly, Allison objects that there is a “shift from virtue to holiness as the required moral component in the Highest Good. . . . Unfortunately, Kant

supplies absolutely no explanation for it; so that one is left with the strong impression that the whole account is artificial in the extreme” (Allison: 1990, p. 172). Such unfortunate conclusions can, however, be avoided once one understands virtue as an extensive magnitude, allowing one to interpret Kant as propounding a coherent and well-founded argument, rather than as being implicated in muddled confusions.

Allison complains that “in his effort to justify this postulate, it appears that Kant shifts unannounced first from virtue to holiness and then from holiness to unending progress in the pursuit of it” (Allison: 1990, p. 173). As we have seen, such misgivings are misguided. On the one hand, the switch from virtue to perfection/holiness is due to the fact that the supreme object consists in an extensive magnitude corresponding to the totality of an agent’s choices and as such amounts to the “necessary completeness of the first and principal part of the highest good” (5:124). On the other, the switch from holiness to unending progress in the pursuit thereof is due to the fact that, without a transformation of its nature, a finite creature subject to the propensity to evil can only achieve the extensional equivalent of holiness by having an infinite number of choices, allowing it to acquire an extent of virtue corresponding to that of holiness. Accordingly, we can explain in what sense holiness can “be found in an *endless progress* toward that complete conformity” (5:122).

## 4 Happiness proportional to virtue

The proportionality aspect consists in the two elements of the complete good, namely virtue and happiness, being proportionally related. People should get what they deserve and be happy in proportion to the extent to which they are virtuous.

At this point, one might ask where the proportionality requirement comes from and why precisely it is that the two components of the highest good need to be linked in this way. Kant has often been criticised on this score and many interpreters have taken him to appeal to an independent principle of proportional justice. If this were the case, then Kant’s theory of the highest good would be highly problematic, in that it would bring in extraneous elements that could not be derived from the universalisability criterion and would hence not have any place within Kant’s moral philosophy.

Accordingly, the objective is to provide a foundation and justification for the proportionality requirement that appeals to resources internal to Kant’s practical philosophy. Such an account needs to satisfy the desideratum that the notions of justice and desert do not end up playing any foundational role but instead turn out to be characterisable in terms of Kant’s theory of the good. That this is what Kant had in mind is suggested by his claim that “[s]omeone is *worthy* of possessing a thing or a state when it harmonises with the highest good that he is

in possession of it" (5:130, also cf. R6113). That is, worthiness is understood in terms of the highest good rather than vice versa.

To make sense of Kant's proportionality claim both virtue and happiness have to be a matter of degree since the proportionality requirement could otherwise only be understood as stating that those who have a good will deserve complete happiness, while those who have a bad will deserve complete suffering. This might be taken to support the idea that when Kant is speaking about virtue in the context of the highest good he has in mind the notion of virtue understood as strength of will that he develops in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (cf. Engstrom: 1992, pp. 762-767). However, as we have already seen, this is not the notion of virtue that is operative in this context. The highest good is concerned with virtue understood as having a good will and not with virtue understood as strength of will. This follows from the fact that the complete good is the combination of the supreme good, which is the good will (cf. 4:396; also cf. 29:599), and the conditioned good, which is happiness. As Kant frequently states, the condition of the value of happiness, the condition of worthiness of being happy is having a good will.

As we have seen, although having a good will is a binary matter, in that one either has a good will or a bad will with nothing intermediate in between, i.e. one either makes duty the condition of self-love or self-love the condition of duty (cf. 6:22 footnote), we can nevertheless account for virtue being a matter of degree insofar as we can consider the multiplicity of choices that an agent has made throughout his life. While any particular choice is either based on a fundamental *Gesinnung* that accords priority to duty and is good or on one that accords priority to self-love and is bad, the totality of choices that an agent makes can be characterised as being more or less good depending on the proportion of choices that are good or bad. By considering a life as a whole, we can assess how prevalent the good will is, i.e. what proportion of the agent's choices are governed by a good will and what proportion by a bad will. In this way, one can make virtue a matter of degree and allow for a proportionality claim admitting of continuous variation, whilst recognising that the supreme good consists in having a good will and is not specified in terms of strength of will. This account accordingly construes virtue an extensive magnitude, rather than as an intensive magnitude.

Once virtue is understood as an extensive magnitude, we can see that one construal of proportionality follows straightforwardly from the conditionality of the value of happiness. Given that happiness is conditionally valuable, practical reason only considers happiness to be good and to be one of its objects to the extent to which it is deserved. This means that conditionality implies proportionality of goodness. The extent to which the condition of the value of happiness is satisfied is given by the extent to which the person is virtuous. As a result, the extent to which happiness is good and to which it is an object of practical reason is determined by the extent to which it is deserved/combined with virtue.

How virtuous someone is determines the extent to which that person's hap-

piness is valuable and the extent to which that person has reason to bring about his happiness. In this way, conditionality implies that the extent to which one has reason to satisfy one's inclinations and ensure one's happiness is proportional to the extent to which one is virtuous. Accordingly, the proportionality claim is not to be understood in terms of there being reason to apportion happiness proportionately, but rather in terms of there being proportionate reason to pursue happiness. That is, rather than determining what people deserve and then ensuring that they end up with what they deserve, people have reason to pursue happiness only to the extent to which it is deserved, given that they only have reason to satisfy inclinations to the extent to which happiness is good, which is a function of the extent to which they are virtuous.

This type of proportionality only yields judgements to the effect that a certain amount of happiness is good, given the agent's level of virtue, and that this amount of happiness is to be brought about. Any lesser amount of happiness would be less than maximally good (given that the level of virtue is held fixed), since it would leave out something that is good. Accordingly, no one will end up with less than they deserve if the highest good is to be realised.

This understanding of proportionality, however, does not yield the judgement that more happiness is contrary to the highest good and that the agent should only have exactly this amount and no more. That is, it does not judge excess happiness to be bad or inappropriate, but simply considers it to lack value. In short, considerations of the conditionality of the value of happiness by themselves only place a ceiling on what is good, rather than requiring that people only have as much happiness as is good, i.e. rather than requiring that the ceiling on how much is good constitutes the ceiling on how much they have.

Yet, this second type of proportionality, which requires that people not only receive at least as much as they deserve but also at most as much and hence exactly as much as they deserve, is what Kant seems to have had in mind. This construal not only requires that virtue be rewarded, but that vice be punished so that everyone be exactly as happy as he or she deserves to be (neither reward nor punishment are our tasks but only relate to God). This understanding of proportionality, which we can describe as 'proportionality of distribution', does not follow from the conditionality of the goodness of happiness, which by itself only underwrites what can be called 'proportionality of goodness'.

It might seem that achieving the result that happiness be distributed proportionally to virtue, such that people end up having neither less nor more than they deserve, would require appealing to the badness of undeserved happiness. If undeserved happiness were bad, then proportionality of distribution would follow. This is because the complete good, on the one hand, does not leave out anything that is good and hence ensures that people do not end up with less than what is deserved, and, on the other, does not include anything that is bad and hence does not involve people having more than what they deserve, given that undeserved

happiness was something bad. In this way, everyone would end up with precisely what they deserved, i.e. everyone would be happy exactly to the extent to which that person's happiness was good and this would be determined by the extent to which the person was virtuous.<sup>19</sup>

Some interpreters claim that the happiness of people who do not have a good will is intrinsically bad. For instance, Wood holds that "the happiness of a wicked person would be bad in itself [. . . in particular,] the happiness of a person with a bad will is bad, just as the happiness of a person with a good will is good" (Wood: 1999, p. 24).

Such an account, however, is problematic since the claim that undeserved happiness is bad does not follow from the conditionality of the value of happiness, but constitutes a substantive additional commitment insofar as it involves a switch from undeserved happiness not being good (i.e. lacking value) to its being bad (i.e. having disvalue).<sup>20</sup> Undeserved happiness would then not simply fail to be a positive object of practical reason, that is, an object of the faculty of desire, but would instead be a negative object of practical reason, that is, an object of the faculty of aversion. This commitment would have to be motivated, yet it does not follow from the explanation provided to establish the conditionality of the value of happiness. (In fact, it conflicts with this explanation insofar as a practical contradiction prevents the will from having objects and as such rules out objects of desire as well as objects of aversion.)

Moreover, this kind of claim is problematic, given that if happiness is intrinsically good on condition that it is deserved, then it cannot be intrinsically bad when it is not deserved. The intrinsic properties of happiness are either (conditional) good-makers or (conditional) bad-makers, but they cannot be both. Having/lacking a good will would have to work differently from a condition of value, i.e. an enabler or disabler that is such that its presence/absence changes the thing from having value to lacking value, and would instead have to be able to change the polarity of the value that is had intrinsically, i.e. change it from being positively valuable to negatively valuable. Yet, if the disvalue of undeserved happiness is not intrinsic, then it is unclear where the badness would come from. And, more importantly, since the highest good is specified in terms of intrinsic value, the (extrinsic) badness of undeserved happiness would not be relevant to

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<sup>19</sup>Engstrom seems to be advocating this kind of view, cf. Engstrom: 1992, section II.5.

<sup>20</sup>Engstrom provides an account of the relation between the will and its object on which "just as the attitude of virtue is the source of goodness, so the attitude of vice or self-conceit is the source of evil" (Engstrom: 1992, p. 766). This claim is based on the idea that avoiding self-conceit extends to avoiding its object. This explanation, however, is problematic since what is to be rejected is not empirical practical reason having happiness as its object but the will having a self-conceited disposition that places claims of self-love above the requirements of duty. Moreover, it considers the good will not merely as a condition of the value of happiness but as the source of its value, thereby threatening to undermine the heterogeneity of the elements of the highest good, as well as the intrinsicality of the value of happiness.

the highest good and would not be able to explain why people do not end up with more than they deserve.

Furthermore, it is difficult to make sense of what kind of badness could be attributed to excess happiness. It could not be pathological badness since it is not bad for the agent.<sup>21</sup> Nor could it be moral badness since such badness resides only in the principle of willing. Accordingly, we can see that if the proportionality requirement could only be established on the basis of an appeal to the badness of undeserved happiness, then it would seem that Kant would have to rely on an independent principle of proportional justice that would underwrite the requisite value judgements and that could not be explained in terms of the principle of universalisability together with his theory of the good.

Fortunately, this kind of commitment can be avoided, since there is an alternative explanation as to how to derive the proportionality of distribution from the proportionality of goodness, without appealing to any claims to the effect that undeserved happiness is bad. In particular, the proportionality of distribution can be seen to follow from the proportionality of goodness on the basis that the connection between happiness and virtue in the highest good is a necessary connection insofar as it is cognised a priori (cf. 5:113).

Virtue has to stand in a necessary relation to happiness, in particular it has to be the ground of happiness. Now, if virtue is not only the condition of happiness being good but also the ground of happiness, then there has to be an internal connection between these two magnitudes. The realisation of the highest good is not a matter of people simply happening to end up with the amount of happiness that they deserve and hence cannot be realised by accident or by correcting the distribution of happiness to ensure that nothing that is good is left out. Instead, it is a matter of there being an internal ground-consequent connection between the unconditional good and the conditional good, and it is because of this that God is required to set up the world in such a way that the distribution of happiness be non-arbitrary but grounded in virtue and hence in what is the condition of the goodness of happiness.

If that which is the condition of the goodness of happiness is also the ground of the existence of happiness, then the existence of happiness will track its goodness and this ensures that the proportionality of distribution will follow from the proportionality of goodness. Put differently, since happiness results from virtue, it follows that that which is the condition of the value of happiness is also the ground of happiness. Facts about virtue accordingly determine both the extent to which someone is happy and the extent to which that person's happiness is good, ensuring that the person is happy to the extent to which happiness is good

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<sup>21</sup>What is good or bad for the agent, i.e. what has pathological goodness/badness, is determined by empirical practical reason, in particular by whether something is an object of the faculty of desire/aversion. Since happiness just consists in the satisfaction of inclinations, happiness can never be bad for the agent, but can only fail to be good (despite being agreeable) when the will is in a contradictory state.

and deserved.

Accordingly, the highest good cannot contain any fortuitous or accidental excess happiness, given that the distribution of happiness in the highest good cannot be accidental at all but has to have its ground in facts about virtue. Anything less than what is proportional would not be good. Anything in excess of what is proportional would be arbitrary and groundless. Since such excess happiness would not be grounded in its condition, namely virtue, it would contradict the requirement that the relation between happiness and virtue be necessary. If the highest good is to be possible, i.e. if there is to be a necessary relation between virtue and happiness, then proportional distribution follows.

Any non-proportional relationship between virtue and happiness would be in conflict with the ground-consequent relation connecting these two components of the highest good. The proportionality of goodness, which is due to the conditionality of pathological value, together with the requirement of there being a necessary connection between virtue and happiness in the highest good, consequently implies the proportionality of distribution. Accordingly, the commitment that happiness be distributed proportionally to virtue naturally follows from the conditionality claim together with the idea that the connection between the components of the highest good can be cognised a priori, rather than being an extraneous and unmotivated (or only theologically motivated) addition to Kant's system.

This account does not make it the case that someone's getting more than is deserved is a bad thing but rather that it is inappropriate insofar as it is not compatible with there being a necessary connection between virtue of happiness. It might be objected that if undeserved happiness is not bad, then deserved unhappiness is not good and that this is problematic insofar as it does not seem to mesh well with the claim that those who are vicious should suffer. That is, it might seem that, in order to establish the result that the wicked should be unhappy, one would have to appeal to the claim that their undeserved happiness is bad and that their suffering is accordingly good but that this explanation is not available on the proposed account.

In response, we can note that according them only as much happiness as is good, given how vicious they are, ensures that they will suffer since suffering is nothing other than having little happiness. This is because happiness includes the objects of the faculty of desire as well as of the faculty of aversion and to not have one's inclinations of aversion satisfied is to suffer, i.e. suffering is not a matter of not getting what one wants but rather a matter of getting what one wants not to have.<sup>22</sup> That is, while the satisfaction of inclinations of desire amounts to well-being, the non-satisfaction of inclinations of aversion amounts to ill-being. In

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<sup>22</sup>Speaking of the 'faculty of desire' and of the 'faculty of aversion' is not meant to imply that we are dealing with two separate faculties, but rather that there are two separate ways of relating to one and the same faculty, namely as a positive object of desire or as a negative object of aversion.

this way, happiness, which amounts to the satisfaction of all of one's inclinations, incorporates both the objects of the faculty of desire and of aversion, the former as the things that are to be brought about and the latter as things that are to be avoided, and little happiness is nothing other than suffering.

## 5 Highest good in a person v. of a world

So far we have been speaking abstractly of the object of practical reason. To properly grasp the practical implications of Kant's doctrine of the highest good, we need to distinguish between the highest good in a person and the highest good of a world (cf. 5:110-111). Failure to pay attention to this distinction has led to much confusion as to what our role is in realising and bringing about the highest good.

The unconditioned totality of the object of my will is the highest good in my person. In particular, the object of my pure practical reason is the supreme good in my person, which consists in being virtuous, that is, having dispositions that are in complete conformity with the moral law. The object of my empirical practical reason is the conditioned good in my person, which consists in being happy, whereby my happiness is an object of my will only to the extent to which it is deserved since only to that extent does reason endorse it and only to that extent does it constitute an object of my will. Putting the objects of empirical and pure practical reason together, that is, the conditioned good and the supreme good, in a way that reflects the conditioning relation that holds amongst these goods, yields the complete good in my person, namely happiness in proportion to virtue. This is the unconditioned totality of my good. It does not leave out anything that is good as far as I am concerned.

The highest good of a world consists in the highest good of a person being realised in the case of each and every finite rational being, where one can again distinguish between the supreme good and the complete good being realised in the case of each person. As such, it is not the object of the will of any finite creature but is something of which one can form an idea and something which one can recognise as good.<sup>23</sup> Yet, it is not something that can be an object of my will. In particular, it cannot be an object of my empirical practical reason, since my empirical practical reason is concerned with the happiness that results from the satisfaction of my inclinations and not with the happiness of others (except indirectly). Nor can it be an object of my pure practical reason, since my pure practical reason is concerned with the maxims on which I act and the extent to which I am virtuous, that is, the extent to which the maxims that I act upon result from the law that I have imposed upon myself, and not with the maxims of others. Thus, while the highest good in a person is the object of practical reason

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<sup>23</sup>Put differently, whereas the highest good in the person is an object of practical knowledge, the highest good of the world is an object of theoretical knowledge for us.

of finite beings, the highest good of a world is the object of practical reason of God.

This means that the highest good for a person is to be virtuous and to be proportionately happy, whereby one component is given by that person's rational nature, i.e. virtue (moral good), and the other component is due to that person's sensible nature, i.e. happiness (pathological good). While the totality of the character of the person is a function of the extent to which that person's choices are good, which determines the degree of virtue, the totality of the state of the person is a function of the extent to which inclinations are satisfied, which determines the degree of happiness. As a result, everyone should bring about the highest good in one's own person by acting morally and pursuing one's own happiness within the constraints set by morality.

On the one hand, the categorical imperative requires one to act in such a way that, in the limit, one ends up realising the supreme good in one's own person by becoming completely virtuous. While the categorical imperative does not directly command us to be virtuous, since it does not concern itself with the overall character of a person but instead regards particular choices and maxims, we nonetheless have reason to become virtuous in the sense that we have reason to perform actions, the performance of which in the limit amounts to bringing one's dispositions into complete conformity with the moral law. On the other hand, the pragmatic imperative requires one to act such that (if nature cooperates) one realises the conditioned good in one's own person by becoming happy to the extent to which one is worthy of happiness. Given that the highest good is not an organic unity that has value in addition to the value of its components, there is no additional reason deriving from the combination of happiness and virtue.

The reasons to bring about the highest good in the person are thus reducible to the reasons to bring about its components, namely moral reasons to become virtuous and (conditional) pragmatic reasons to become happy. The former are given by the categorical imperative, which commands unconditionally the performance of actions based on a good disposition, whereas the latter result from the pragmatic imperative, which commands the pursuit of happiness conditionally, namely only to the extent to which doing so is permissible and hence to which it is deserved, ensuring that one does not have reason to pursue undeserved happiness.

The fact that these reasons are reducible in this way implies that no new extra duties or reasons arise at the level of the highest good. Beck is accordingly correct in holding that the command to realise the highest good "does not exist as a separate command, independent of the categorical imperative, which is developed without this concept ... [and that] my task is to realize the one condition of the *summum bonum* which is within my power; it is seriously misleading to say that there is a command to seek the highest good which is different from the command to fulfil the requirements of duty" (Beck: 1960, pp. 244-245). That is, each person has a duty to promote the highest good in the sense that there is a duty to

perform actions that are such that, in the limit, performing all of them amounts to the realisation of the supreme good in the person (and if this is done by everyone, then it will also result in the realisation of the supreme good of the world).

Yet, in addition to the requirements of duty, one also needs to take into consideration the requirements of prudence. The reasons we have for realising the highest good do not derive from morality alone and the highest good cannot be derived from the moral law by itself but only from the categorical imperative and the pragmatic imperative together. In this way, the heterogeneity of the components of the highest good brings with it a corresponding heterogeneity of the reasons to bring about its components, and the pursuit of the highest good can accordingly not solely be a matter of duty.<sup>24</sup>

The highest good of the world, by contrast, consists in every person in that world having realised their personal highest good. This state of affairs is not the object of any finite agent's practical reason but only relates to God, i.e. it is up to God and not up to us to make it the case that everyone is happy in proportion to their virtue. We are not meant to bring about the highest good in other people and thereby are not meant to bring about the highest good of the world (except to the extent to which the highest good in one's own person contributes to the highest good of the world). Neither the virtue nor the happiness of other people is an object of any finite creature's practical reason. Bringing about the highest good of the world is only something that pertains to the activity of God insofar as it is up to God to provide the world with such a causal structure that proportionate happiness is to result from virtue, given that God is benevolent and as such concerned with creating the best possible world.

The relation between happiness and virtue in the highest good can be cognised a priori both in the case of the highest good in the person and in the case of the highest good of the world. In each case, there is a necessary synthetic connection that ensures proportionality (where the connection in the case of the latter is reducible to that in the case of the former). This means that if the highest good in a person is to be realised, then that person's virtue must be the ground of that person's happiness. If the highest good of a world is to be realised, then this relationship between virtue and happiness must hold in the case of each person in that world.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>If the moral law were to be sufficient, then this would imply that we would have moral reasons to ensure our own happiness (beyond any indirect duty) and, moreover, this would threaten to undermine the heterogeneity of the components of the highest good.

<sup>25</sup>Engstrom argues that a causal connection between virtue and happiness only applies in the case of the highest good of the world on the basis that "precisely because Glückseligkeit depends on external causes, it cannot be guaranteed by the mere presence of virtue in the individual person" (Engstrom: 1996, p. 130; also cf. Engstrom: 1992, p. 776). However, nature needs to cooperate in the same way at the collective level as at the individual level. The problem of the dependence on nature's cooperation is not restricted to the individual level and can be addressed at that level in the same way, namely through the postulation of God. Moreover, the position developed by Engstrom conflicts with the way in which Kant establishes the existence of a causal relation

This undermines accounts of the highest good that treat it as being (essentially) social in nature since we already have the necessary connection at the level of the individual, requiring no additional independent necessary connection at the social level or the level of the species.<sup>26</sup> In particular, both the fact that proportional happiness is included in the highest good, as well as the fact that it has its ground in virtue, are already to be found at the level of the individual and have to be explained at that level without recourse to claims about the history of mankind or the society in which individuals are to be found.

Moreover, this also shows that the highest good is not founded on the duty of beneficence, in that neither the reason why proportionate happiness is included in the highest good, nor the way in which it is to be realised, makes reference to other people to whom one has a duty of beneficence or from whose beneficent actions one could benefit.

Thus, one cannot get directly to the highest good of the world, but only indirectly via the highest goods of the individual persons in the world. Given that the virtue of other people is not an effect possible through my freedom, since being virtuous is the result of a free choice, it cannot be an object of my will. Similarly, even though the happiness of others can be an effect possible through my freedom, it can nonetheless not be the object of my practical reason, given that I can only incorporate incentives provided to me by my sensible side and hence can only have my happiness and not the happiness of others as an end.<sup>27</sup>

It might be objected that the happiness of others, though not being an object of an agent's empirical practical reason, is an object of pure practical reason, i.e. it is an end set not by inclination but by the moral law. In particular, it has been frequently held that the happiness of other people is an object of practical reason, since we have an imperfect duty of beneficence and since complying with this moral requirement involves making the ends of other people one's own ends. "Pursuit of the second component of the highest good is, in effect, beneficence limited by justice" (Wood: 1992, p. 402; also cf. Guyer: 2002, p. 173).

Yet, this suggestion is problematic, given that the reason why the happiness of others is included in the complete good of the world does not at all match up with the reason why morality requires one to be beneficent and to pursue the happiness

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amongst the elements of the highest good, namely by appealing to the fact that the relation between the heterogeneous components of this concept can be cognised a priori and as such has to be necessary and synthetic, since this argument applies at the level of the individual.

<sup>26</sup>The idea that the highest good is realised at the level of the species becomes prominent in Kant's later works. For instance, in the *Religion* Kant holds that the duty to promote the highest good is a sui generis duty "not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race toward itself" (6:97).

<sup>27</sup>The happiness of others can only be indirectly included, insofar as my happiness may consist in making other people happy, i.e. it can be contingently connected to my desires. Yet, being indirectly included does not suffice for making it the object that is to be brought about insofar as, even if making other people happy is what makes me happy, the end will be for me to be happy.

of others. Happiness is a component of the highest good qua having pathological value (when it is deserved), and not qua being brought about or aimed at by beneficent actions. Happiness is a good (when accompanied by a good will) and as such belongs into the complete good. In other words, it is included in the complete object of practical reason because it is an object of empirical practical reason, which has nothing to do with beneficence. The pathological goodness of happiness does not ground the duty of beneficence and does not give an agent reasons to advance the happiness of others. Instead, pathological goodness only provides prudential reasons for the agent whose happiness is in question.

If one were to moralise happiness and ground the duty of beneficence in the value of happiness (as has been suggested by some interpreters, such as Korsgaard, Wood, and Engstrom, who treat happiness as being ‘simply good’ or ‘good simpliciter’ when it is deserved, cf. Korsgaard: 1996, pp. 118-119, Wood: 1999, p. 407 note 32, and Engstrom: 2009, p. 212), one would risk undermining the heterogeneity of the components of the highest good.

Moreover, such a view would conflict with the idea that morality is based on formal rather than material considerations. According to Kant, the duty of beneficence is based on the non-universalisability of the maxim not to be beneficent.<sup>28</sup> As such, it is based on purely formal considerations and not on material considerations, such as the idea that being beneficent brings about something that is good. What matters, as far as duty is concerned, is not that other people actually become happy as a result of one’s beneficent actions but only that one adopts a maxim to be beneficent. If one’s attempts at helping others should be frustrated, then the resulting situation is unproblematic as far as the categorical imperative is concerned. That is, if I act on a maxim of beneficence but fail to make anyone happy, I will not have failed to act as duty requires. Yet, what matters as concerns the highest good is that people actually be happy in proportion to how virtuous they are.

A further fact that shows that the duty of beneficence cannot be the ground of the inclusion of happiness is that this duty is not subject to the proportionality requirement that is central to the highest good. Beneficence is a wide duty that makes no specification of the extent to which one should be beneficent. Complying with this duty is simply a matter of not adopting a maxim not to be beneficent, i.e. of limiting a maxim of non-beneficence in such a way that it comes to include the happiness of others (cf. 5:34-35). There is hence no requirement to

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<sup>28</sup>The non-universalisability is based on facts about the agent’s finitude and not on the idea that other people have ends and require help. In particular, it is the fact that the person has ends and might require help at some point that makes the maxim not to help non-universalisable, i.e. one ends up in a contradiction in willing from self-love that the principle never to help be universalised since self-love wants it to be the case that the agent be helped. This means that someone who would never need help would not be subject to the duty of beneficence (at least, this follows if it is possible for someone who never needs help to will from self-love never to be helped), yet the highest good would be the same for such an agent.

benefit people in a way that they become happy proportionate to their virtue (a requirement that, at any rate, could not be fulfilled by us, due to our epistemic limitations).

The absence of a proportionality condition can be further brought out by the fact that we do not need to reduce the happiness of those that are vicious and have a bad will. Moreover, not only is it not the case that we need to reduce their happiness, bad people actually fall equally within the scope of the duty of beneficence as people who have a good will. An action of helping a person with a bad will can be subsumed under a maxim of beneficence in the same way as an action of helping someone who has a good will.

It might be objected that the duty of beneficence is restricted to permissible ends (cf. 6:388).<sup>29</sup> This restriction, however, only requires that we should not help others to further ends that can only be realised by employing impermissible means, but it does not affect the realisation of those ends of bad people that can be realised by employing permissible means. (The permissibility of ends is, after all, derivative on the permissibility of maxims.) The duty of beneficence is thus not subject to a proportionality requirement but only to a permissibility constraint.

Thus, while having a good will involves adopting a commitment to beneficence, this does not mean that being beneficent (or the happiness of others that might result therefrom) is an object of pure practical reason. Instead, being beneficent is simply one of the requirements as to how finite rational creatures need to act if they are to have a good will. That is, adopting a maxim of beneficence is part of what makes a finite rational creature have a good will. The object of pure practical reason, by contrast, is that which is brought about by adopting the maxims required by morality, namely the disposition of the will. As Kant notes at 5:66, the object is constituted by the practical categories which have the noteworthy feature that “they themselves produce the reality of that to which they refer (the disposition of the will)”. Pure practical reason is accordingly concerned with being virtuous, with having a disposition that subordinates self-love to morality. Happiness thus classifies as a component of the highest good not in virtue of facts about beneficence but in virtue of being an object of empirical practical reason.

## 6 Postulating the possibility of the highest good

One of the most perplexing aspects of Kant’s discussion of the highest good is the idea that the highest good must be possible if morality is to make sense. For instance, we are told 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” (5:114).

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<sup>29</sup>For instance, Reath appeals to this restriction of beneficence to permissible ends, cf. Reath: 1988, p. 602.

Kant makes it clear that the moral law understood as a *principium diiudicationis* does not depend on the highest good. Moreover, the moral law understood as *principium executionis* does not presuppose the highest good either, since the feeling of respect is seen as providing the incentive for moral action, thereby obviating the need to appeal to the prospect of happiness as a motive for complying with morality (cf. 5:109).<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, the highest good is neither required for identifying what morality commands, nor for providing an incentive to comply with the commands of morality.

Instead, the possibility of the highest good is somehow required for morality to bind us. This makes it the case that morality would ‘in itself be false’ if the highest good should not be possible, given that the moral law is essentially understood as being normative and binding for us. How to make sense of this without undermining the idea that the moral law is an unconditional law of reason is a tricky matter, given that the dependence on the highest good appears to make morality conditional in a way that would seem to compromise its categorical and unconditional nature.

The necessity of presupposing the possibility of the highest good leads Kant to his two postulates of practical reason, namely the postulate of the immortality of the soul, which is required for the supreme good to be possible, and the postulate of the existence of God, which is required for supplementing the supreme good by bringing about a distribution of happiness proportional to virtue in order to arrive at the complete good. Given that these postulates must be presupposed for morality to not be a figment of the imagination, it follows that the epistemic status that attaches to them derives from our belief in freedom, such that they end up being beliefs that are warranted from a practical point of view. This means that the fact of reason indirectly constitutes the ratio cognoscendi of the practical postulates, making freedom the keystone of the system of pure reason (cf. 5:3-4).

The presuppositions of the highest good give rise to serious theoretical difficulties and it is not at all clear why it is that the highest good must be possible. To begin with, we can note that it is not possible to simply examine the requirements of morality and identify the presuppositions that must be met if we are to be able to satisfy these requirements. That is, we cannot appeal to an argument to the effect that morality tells us that we ought to act in certain ways and that, since ought implies can, we can infer from its being the case that we ought to act in certain ways that the presuppositions of the possibility of acting in these ways must be satisfied.

Such an argument would hold that since morality does command us to realise the highest good and since the possibility of doing so presupposes that we are

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<sup>30</sup>This view represents a shift from Kant’s discussion of the highest good in the *Doctrine of Method* of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where the highest good functioned as a *principium executionis* and was appealed to in order provide a motivation for following the moral law, something that is no longer needed in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, given the discovery of autonomy and of the feeling of respect.

immortal and that God exists, it would follow straightforwardly that the presuppositions of the possibility of complying with this command of morality would have to be presupposed. Given that it must be possible for us to comply with a command if we are to be bound by it, it follows that we must be immortal and that God must exist if we are actually bound by the command to realise the highest good.

This kind of argument, however, only works for freedom but not for the postulates of immortality and the existence of God. As we have seen, morality and prudence do not demand the realisation of the highest good in the person, let alone the realisation of the highest good of the world, but only that we pursue the elements thereof, namely virtue and happiness. Moreover, such an argument would be problematic, not only because there is no moral command to the effect that we ought to realise the highest good, but also that any 'ought' claims relating to the second component, namely happiness, would only be pragmatic oughts deriving from prudence and not moral oughts based on duty.

Thus, rather than it being the case that we ought to realise the highest good, what is at issue is that the world needs to be such that the realisation of the highest good be possible. As Kant states: "among all the ideas of speculative reason freedom is also the only one the possibility of which we *know* a priori . . . because it is the condition of the moral law, which we do know. The ideas of *God* and *immortality*, however, are not conditions of the moral law but only conditions of the necessary object of a will determined by this law" (5:4). While we must be free in order for it to be possible for us to act out of duty, it must be the case that we are immortal and that God exists in order for it to be possible for the highest good to be realised. Put differently, freedom is a presupposition for the possibility of acting morally; immortality and God, by contrast, are presuppositions for the possibility of the realisation of the object of practical reason

Whilst the problematic nature of this line of reasoning is relatively apparent in the case of the happiness component of the highest good, one might think that the appropriateness of the immortality postulate can simply be a question of what it is that morality commands us to do, a question of what the categorical requirements that bind us require of us. If morality were to command complete conformity of our dispositions with the moral law, then the presuppositions of the possibility of complying with this command would need to be postulated. While various problems would arise regarding the question as to how one is to conceive and make sense of the immortality of the soul, the conditioning/presupposition relation would be straightforward and akin to that involved in underwriting the belief that we are free. In the same way that we need to be free to act morally, we would need to be immortal to bring our dispositions into complete conformity with morality.

Such an interpretation, however, is deeply problematic.

First, it would make the argument for the first postulate differ radically

from that deployed in the case of the second postulate, threatening to undermine the architectonic structure of the *Dialectic*. By contrast, the interpretation of the argument for the immortality of the soul proposed in this paper ensures that we are dealing with analogous structures in the case of both postulates, bringing to the fore the coherence and systematic structure of the *Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason*.

Second, it would conflict with the above-mentioned claim that freedom differs from immortality and the existence of God in that only the former is a condition of the moral law, while the latter are conditions of the necessary object of a will determined by this law (cf. 5:4). That is, it would undermine the claim that the way in which immortality and the existence of God are connected to morality differs from the way in which freedom relates to morality.

Third, it would not be able to explain why this argument is to be found in the *Dialectic* and how it is related to the highest good. This shortcoming results from the fact that it fails to take into account the fact that the complete conformity of dispositions relates to the totality of an agent's choices. As a result, it would commit us to interpreting Kant as making an illicit switch from virtue to perfection.

Hence, we can see that if we are to give a coherent interpretation of the argument of the *Dialectic*, then we need to think of the requirement to bring our dispositions into complete conformity with the moral law not as a requirement that directly issues from the categorical imperative, but as a requirement that derives from the unconditioned object of practical reason.

Thus, freedom is concerned with what the agent must be like if he is to be able to satisfy the requirements that morality imposes upon him and is accordingly directly tied to the categorical commands of morality. The maximality and proportionality requirements of the highest good, on the contrary, are not concerned with the conditions that must be satisfied if we are to be able to comply with the commands of morality, given that the realisation of the highest good is not something that is commanded by morality. The question then again is in what way this unconditioned object can generate such requirements and why it is the case that it must be possible, i.e. why it is that we must postulate the preconditions of its possibility.

Instead of being concerned with the possibility of acting morally, these requirements specify conditions that must be satisfied if morality is to make sense and if its commands are to be binding and valid for us. It is practical reason (rather than morality) that demands that the highest good be possible. In particular, it demands a necessary system of the good, an unconditioned totality, with components standing in necessary relations according to laws. Such systematicity is required for a science of freedom to be possible, since a science is a rational

system of knowledge that is based on an idea rather than a mere aggregate and that can follow the dogmatic method once its foundations have been secured and its principles identified.

In the same way that in the case of theoretical reason a necessary system of concepts, as well as a necessary system of laws of nature (the two of which are connected via the notion of *realitas*), is required for a science of nature to be possible, in the case of practical reason a necessary system of ends, as well as a necessary system of laws of freedom (the two of which are connected via the notion of the good), is required for a science of freedom to be possible. In the case of both theoretical and practical reason the relevant domain has to form a systematic whole to allow for a systematic body of knowledge of objects (in the one case theoretical knowledge and in the other case practical knowledge) and of the laws governing them, where the map of the respective science is provided by the relevant table of categories. Whereas theoretical reason presupposes that a science of nature is possible, which requires that nature forms a systematic whole, practical reason presupposes that a science of freedom is possible, which requires that the object of freedom, namely the good, can be brought into a systematic whole, i.e. that the highest good is possible.

If the good would not exhibit this kind of systematicity, then no such science of freedom would be possible. Reason would then be at odds with itself, thereby threatening to undermine practical reason as a whole. This is because in order for reason to command anything and to yield any judgements, the coherence of reason needs to be presupposed. Accordingly, though morality is categorical and hence unconditional in an important respect, it nonetheless indirectly depends on the possibility of the highest good, insofar as morality is the law of reason and hence requires the coherence of reason, which, in turn, requires the good (i.e. its object) to constitute a necessary system, which is equivalent to requiring the highest good to be possible.

## 7 Conclusion

Thus, we have seen that the *Critique of Practical Reason* contains the basis of a well-motivated and systematic theory of the highest good that does not need to rely on extraneous teleological or theological principles or presuppositions. In particular, we have been able to address the five main puzzles that have been seen as putting into doubt the coherence and adequacy of Kant's conception of the highest good:

1. Happiness is to be included in the highest good because the complete good is the unconditioned totality of the object of practical reason and contains everything that is good, thereby requiring us to include not only what is supremely good and the object of pure practical reason, namely virtue

(moral good), but also what is conditionally good and the object of empirical practical reason, namely happiness (pathological good).

2. The complete conformity of dispositions with the moral law is required when the command to comply with the moral law is taken to apply to the totality of an agent's dispositions, to the agent's character as a whole, requiring that the agent be virtuous in each action. This requires an infinite amount of time since the proportion of bad actions can only then become diminishingly small and only then can the extensional equivalent of holiness be achieved.
3. Happiness is to be distributed in proportion to virtue because happiness is only good and an object of practical reason to the extent to which it is accompanied by virtue, thereby making it the case that the reason to bring about happiness is proportional to the extent of virtue, which in turn gives rise to a proportionality requirement regarding the distribution of happiness, given that happiness and virtue are connected in the complete good by an a priori cognisable necessary connection, requiring virtue to be the ground of happiness.
4. Every person is commanded by the categorical imperative to act morally and become virtuous, which in the limit amounts to bringing about the supreme good in oneself, and by the pragmatic imperative to bring about the conditioned good in oneself, namely to become happy to the extent to which one is worthy of happiness. In this way, everyone is commanded to bring about both elements of the complete good in oneself in a way that reflects the conditioning relation between these elements. There is, however, no command to bring about happiness in accordance with virtue in the case of other people, making it the case that the highest good of the world is only an object of the will of God and not of finite creatures like ourselves.
5. The highest good must be possible if morality is to be valid and binding for us. This is because, even though the highest good neither functions as the *principium diiudicationis* nor as the *principium executionis*, its possibility must nonetheless be presupposed if morality is to bind us since only in this way can there be a necessary system of ends, something that is required if reason is not to end up in conflict with itself, which would undercut the very source of morality. In this way, the commands of morality can be unconditional, yet still presuppose the possibility of the highest good.<sup>31</sup>

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