



THE AMBIGUITY OF KANT'S CONCEPT OF THE HIGHEST GOOD: FINDING THE CORRECT INTERPRETATION

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The aim of this paper is to resolve the tension between Kant's doctrine of the highest good and his entire philosophical system. The concept of the highest good is the first major ambiguity of the doctrine. There are three pairs of ambiguities: immanent-transcendent; justice-perfection; and individual-community. They are able to form eight combinations. Corresponding to the various combinations and conceptions of the highest good, interpreters also conceive different reasons for the necessity of the doctrine as well as various conditions of its applicability. For example, some emphasize its religious dimension, whereas others understand it in the political sense. In this paper, I adopt a different approach in understanding the highest good's systematic meaning as the moral confirmation, and suggest that only a transcendent, perfect and communal concept of the highest good can provide the most consistent doctrine. Additionally, it explains the importance of the different branches (such as philosophies of religion and of politics) of Kant's system.

I. INTRODUCTION

The concept of the highest good has proven to be a thorny issue in interpreting Kant's moral philosophy for some time. The so-called "highest good" in a standard understanding consists of "happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy)" (KpV, 05: 110).¹

¹ References to Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* use the A (first edition) and/or B (second edition) pagination. References to other works of Kant give abbreviation, volume and page number from *Immanuel Kants gesammelte Schriften, Ausgabe der königlich preußischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, Germany: Walter de Gruyter, 1902–). Abbreviations: Pro = *Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik*; GMS = *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*; KpV = *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*; KU = *Kritik der Urteilskraft*; RGV = *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*; EaD = *Das Ende aller Dinge*; ZeF = *Zum ewigen Frieden*; V-Mo/Collins = *Vorlesung-Moral Collins*; V-Mo/Mron II = *Vorlesung-Moral Mrongovius II*. All English translations of Kant's works are from the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP: 1992–) except author's own translation of *Moral Mrongovius II*.

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To put it in simple terms: a morally good man should be able to obtain the happiness he deserves. Furthermore, Kant determines that the promotion of this concept “is an a priori necessary object of our will and inseparably bound up with the moral law,” and if this is not possible, then the moral law is “fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false” (KpV, 05: 114). According to this claim, Kant further requires us to postulate God and immortality, which are deemed necessary conditions for the availability of the highest good, as the objects of a special kind of belief, known as moral faith. This moral faith constitutes the heart of Kant’s moral theology and his rational religion. This is the basic scheme of Kant’s doctrine of the highest good. However, these declarations strongly violate our standard impression of Kant’s moral philosophy. Given that according to Kant’s moral doctrine of duty, the highest principle of morality concerns neither the possibility of realizing the objects of moral actions, nor whether the results of these actions bring any happiness to humans, how could the validity of the moral law be decided by the availability of the highest good in association with the implication of happiness?

Faced with these difficulties, there are two main tendencies in defending Kant’s doctrine of the highest good among multiple different interpretations. Some fundamentalists seek to emphasize the importance of the religious dimension of Kant’s moral philosophy and see moral faith as vital to the doctrine of the highest good. By contrast, secularizers try to cut off the connection of the doctrine of the highest good from moral faith and the philosophy of religion, instead interpreting this doctrine as only a specific application of Kant’s moral philosophy, usually via his political philosophy.² Nevertheless, I think it is no accident that the doctrine of the highest good relates to Kant’s religious-theological and political-juridical philosophy at the same time. Perhaps it is the case that both sides play a key role in making this doctrine reasonable.

In order to deal with this issue, however, we must confront another problem: there is, at least on the surface, no fixed meaning of the highest good in Kant’s

² Beiser describes these secularizers as such: “True to their antimetaphysical program, these scholars have defended a completely secular and immanent conception of the highest good, according to which it is simply a goal of human striving that need not involve the beliefs in the existence of God or immortality” (Frederick Beiser, “Moral Faith and the Highest Good,” *The Cambridge Companion to Kant and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge, 2006) 589).

writings.³ Across his works, Kant endows this concept with different definitions and descriptions. This diversification of the concept of the highest good also affects the inner consistency of the doctrine and its centrality to Kant's moral philosophy. I think the debate between different interpreters is also amplified by their comprehension of the different conceptions of the highest good from different fields of Kant's entire philosophical system.

The main purpose of the present paper is to identify the conception of the highest good that can best form a consistent doctrine and explain its necessity for Kant's philosophical system. Besides the Introduction (I) and the Conclusion (VIII), the paper will consist of the following parts: (II) I will note that there are ambiguities within this concept in three different aspects according to Kant's texts, and as a result we could logically form eight combinations of the concept; (III) I will summarize four possible interpretations of the necessity of the highest good in Kant's philosophical system and their theoretical weaknesses according to academic texts;⁴ (IV) I will survey two ways of understanding the possibility of the highest good and their theoretical difficulties, respectively; (V) I will evaluate the given interpretations with the different combinations of conception, necessity, and possibility of the highest good according to the analysis in the first three parts and set out the criteria for a successful interpretation; (VI) I will point out that the

³ Many interpreters also mention this problem. For example, Beck and O'Connell are conscious of the difference between the juridical and maximal conceptions of the highest good (Lewis White Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press) 268; Eoin O'Connell, "Happiness Proportioned to Virtue: Kant and the Highest Good," *Kantian Review* 17-2 (2012): 257), Silber, Auxter and Wike & Showler discuss the conceptions of the highest good as immanent and transcendent (John R. Silber, "Kant's Conception of the Highest Good as Immanent and Transcendent," *The Philosophical Review* 68-4 (1959): 469–492; Thomas Auxter, "The unimportance of Kant's highest good," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 17-2 (1979): 121–34; Victoria S. Wike and Ryan L. Showler, "Kant's Concept of the Highest Good and the Archetype-Ectype Distinction," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 44 (2010): 521–33), Wood, Zeldin and Kleingeld distinguish the reference of the highest good to the individual from to a sociality (Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1970) 93; Mary-Barbara Zeldin, "The Summum Bonum, the Moral Law, and the Existence of God," *Kant-Studien* 62-1 (1971): 43–54; Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant on 'Good', the Good, and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," ed. Thomas Höwing, *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy* (Berlin/Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2016) 34). All of the above distinctions are collected together by Yovel, Smith and Bader (Yirmiahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980) 30, 48n, 51–54; Steven G. Smith, "Worthiness to be Happy and Kant's Concept of the Highest Good," *Kant-Studien* 75 (1984): 173; Ralf M. Bader, "Kant's Theory of the Highest Good," ed. Joachim Aufderheide and Ralf M. Bader, *The Highest Good in Aristotle and Kant* (Corby: Oxford University Press, 2015) 188).

⁴ Smith also enumerate four different understandings of the necessity of the highest good, but it seems that his last understanding of the highest good as justice could be reduced to his third understanding of the highest good as the content of the moral will Smith (1984): 168–90.

sole possible successful interpretation of the necessity of the highest good is to interpret it as moral confirmation; (VII) Connected with the last part, I will suggest that the only consistent conception of the highest good is to understand it as a transcendent, perfect, and communal concept. Under this interpretation, both religious-theological and secular-political dimensions have their necessary and specific functions to make the highest good possible, so that no parts of Kant's philosophy should be seen as obsolete or redundant.

II. AMBIGUITY OF THE CONCEPT OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

A. *The Concept of Justice and Perfection*

The first ambiguity pertains to the intension of the highest good. If we only emphasize the "exact proportion" in the definition of the concept of the highest good, then the highest good only means "good for good, bad for bad," and requires no flawless virtue and highest degree happiness. I would refer to this kind of highest good as a concept of justice. This understanding is not evident in general interpretations, but there are some suggestive passages in the original texts that might support such a reading. For instance, in the chapter "On the concept of an object of pure practical reason" in the *second Critique*, Kant uses the example of "someone who likes to vex and disturb peace-loving people finally gets a sound thrashing for one of his provocations" (KpV, 5: 61), and notes that everyone—even the individual concerned—will take this as good in itself in accordance with their reason. This description is an example of the highest good as a concept of justice, because, for Kant, the highest good is just the corresponding happiness to virtue "in the judgment of an impartial reason" (KpV, 5: 110). In this scene, although the man has neither virtue nor happiness, he is diminished on account of him doing a bad thing. This situation still conforms to the exact proportion between virtue and happiness required by an impartial reason and to the primary definition of the highest good.

Another example appears in "The End of All Things". In this work, Kant discusses the last day and the last judgment, after which the highest good should be accomplished in combination with the usual understanding of his doctrine of the highest good, which views it as "the beginning of the (blessed or cursed) eternity" (EaD, 8: 328). In the case of cursed eternity, this expression shows the possibility of a kind of highest good that contains neither virtue nor happiness, but only a proportion of their absence. Otherwise, Kant assesses two systems pertaining to this future eternity: "one is that of the unitists, awarding eternal blessedness to all human beings (after they have been purified by a longer or shorter penance), while the other is the system of the dualists, which awards blessedness to some who have been elected, but eternal damnation to all the rest" (EaD, 8: 328–329). Although Kant thinks that one cannot decide which one is theoretically true and

both systems have their own disadvantages, he still prefers the dualists for the practical aims since the unitistic system would easily weaken human beings' moral striving (EaD, 8: 329). If we accept the dualistic system about the afterlife, the concept of justice of the highest good is the only way to conform to it.

However, it seems that most often Kant conceives of the highest good as a combination of perfect virtue and highest degree happiness. For example, he describes the ideal highest good of God in the *first Critique* as "the morally most perfect will, combined with the highest blessedness" (A810/B838), while in the *second Critique* he describes the highest good of creatures as follows: "the greatest happiness is represented as connected in the most exact proportion with the greatest degree of moral perfection (possible in creatures)" (KpV, 5: 129–130). I read this kind of highest good as a concept of perfection. According to this view, the highest good can no longer be "good for good, bad for bad," and the aforementioned examples of the provocative man and of the last judgment can no longer be seen as the realization of the highest good.

B. The Concept of Individual and Community

The second ambiguity appears in the extensional object of the highest good. We know that Kant's fundamental determination of the highest good is: "Virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person" (KpV, 5: 110). In this determination, in which Kant sees the bearer of the highest good as *a person*, it seems that the highest good can be said to be realized as long as the exact proportion between virtue and happiness happens to a person. In this sense, the pure practical reason commands people to promote their *respective* highest goods. Most uses of the concept of the highest good in the *second Critique* are, in this sense, for example, Stoic and Epicurean, which Kant compares to his own position, since they also concern the individual good. This kind of highest good I refer to as a concept of the individual.

On the contrary, when Kant contrasts the highest original good and the highest derived good, what he always contrasts with God (the highest original good) is not an individual, but an ideal world, like "an intelligible, i.e., moral world" (A811/B839), "the best world" (KpV, 5:125). The detailed determination of this concept of the world can firstly be found in "On the Canon of Pure Reason" in the *first Critique* that the world as highest good consists in rational beings that benefit from each other because of their own morality (A809/B837). In this world, the mere proportion between virtue and happiness in one person is no longer enough, since the task of promoting of the highest good, as Kant says in the *third Critique*, is the aim to combine universal happiness with "the most lawful morality of all rational beings in this world" (KU, 5: 453). This means one should no longer only seek one's own virtue and deserved happiness, but also seek the same for all other persons.

Furthermore, if we consider Kant's work from the later period, we can see in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* that this universal highest good consists not only in the simple fact that the universal happiness of everyone is in conformity with their morality, but also in a *special constitution* within them, namely an *ethical community*, which is "a universal republic based on the laws of virtue" (RGV, 6: 98). This thought shows that the highest good cannot be brought about yet, even when everyone strives for their moral perfection. The reason, which constitutes Kant's focal point in the third part of *Religion*, is that one cannot get out of an ethical state of nature and achieve moral perfection alone. Instead, the help of others is necessary. Therefore, an individual's mere striving for moral perfection is not enough, it lacks a way of organizing human beings into a community. This would be a necessary way for them to complete their virtue and deserve their own happiness. For Kant, it is a specific duty that cannot be achieved by the power of an individual; it can only be realized by the power of the human species as a whole: "Now, here we have a duty *sui generis*, not of human beings toward human beings but of the human race toward itself" (RGV, 6: 97). We call this kind of common highest good a concept of community.

C. The Concept of Transcendent and Immanent

The final ambiguity emerges in the possibility of the realization of the highest good. In the *second Critique*, Kant clearly claims in many places that the highest good cannot be realized in this sensible world, but must be attained only in the afterlife, in an intelligible world. For example, in "The Immortality of the Soul as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason," Kant points out that the moral perfection of virtue, namely holiness, is impossible in our sensible life (KpV, 5: 122). In "The Existence of God as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason," Kant also points out that happiness (beatitude) in conformity with perfect morality likewise cannot be attained in this world (KpV, 5:129). In other words, the highest good is impossible in this sensible, empirical world; rather it is only possible in a supersensible world, as long as neither perfect morality nor the highest degree happiness is possible in the former. In this sense, the concept of the highest good is a transcendent concept.

Nevertheless, in the *third Critique*, notably Kant does not mention the afterlife so much and instead begins to articulate "the highest good in the world" (KU, 5: 450). In combination with the teleology in the *third Critique*, it seems that there is continuity from the nature of this sensible world to the highest good as the final end of the same world, and thus the highest good should also be possible in *this world*. In addition, Kant also places the common highest good with the ethical community, discussed in *Religion*, under the title of "Philosophical representation of the victory of the good principle in the founding of a Kingdom of God on earth" (RGV, 6: 95). Similarly, this suggests that the highest good should be possible

on earth, in our empirical world. This kind of highest good can be defined as an immanent concept.

Summary

According to the aforementioned three pairs of ambiguities, occurring in three different dimensions, we can form eight logically possible concepts of the highest good with different conceptual implications. The possible combinations are as follows:

The highest good	Justice	Perfection
Individual + Immanent	The exact proportion between virtue and happiness of a person that can be realized in this sensible world	The highest degree happiness in conformity with the perfect virtue of a person that can be realized in this sensible world
Individual + Transcendent	The exact proportion between virtue and happiness of a person that can only be realized in a supersensible world	The highest degree happiness in conformity with the perfect virtue of a person that can only be realized in a supersensible world
Communal + Immanent	The exact proportion between virtue and happiness of a community that can be realized in this sensible world	The highest degree happiness in conformity with the perfect virtue of a community that can be realized in this sensible world
Communal + Transcendent	The exact proportion between virtue and happiness of a community that can only be realized in a supersensible world	The highest degree happiness in conformity with the perfect virtue of a community that can only be realized in a supersensible world

We can use this frame to undertake further analysis and to classify different interpretations. In fact, the problem of ambiguity of the concept of the highest good cannot be solved in isolation. In order to answer this question, we should also consider why the doctrine of the highest good is necessary for Kant, and how the highest good can possibly be in conformity to his other philosophical doctrines. Once answers have been provided for these questions, we can then decide which concept of the highest good is more consistent with Kant's philosophy as a whole.

III. THE NECESSITY OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

A. The Highest Good as the Interest of Reason as a Whole

This interpretation is based on the *first Critique*. In this work, Kant situates the concept of the highest good under the title of "On the ideal of the highest good, as a determining ground of the ultimate end of pure reason" (A804/B832) and summarizes all interests of reason under three questions. The doctrine of the highest

good aims at the third question: “What may I hope?” This question can be seen as referring to the ultimate end of pure reason because it relates to theoretical and practical interests of pure reason and their conjunction at the same time, which already covers all uses of pure reason in the way that Kant thought at that time (A805/B833). The answer to this question is just the highest good as the proportion between virtue and happiness, so that the request for the highest good as an object of hope is an a priori interest of pure reason according to its ultimate end, as long as it necessarily seeks the completeness and the unity of all its interests (A809/B837). According to this description, the request for the highest good does not depend on any moral requirement or relevant practical uses. It would be just a theoretical object that reason, after its fulfillment of the moral requirement, will hope to realize.

However, this interpretation would reduce the necessity of the highest good, since as an expected object it must not have a real possibility. It seems that there would also be no influence on Kant’s systems in the theoretical and practical fields, respectively, even if we do not consider this concept of the highest good. Taking these factors into account, this role does not conform to what Kant assigns to the highest good, namely that the moral law would be false once the highest good was impossible.

B. *The Highest Good as Moral Incentive*

This interpretation is also based primarily on the *first Critique*. In “On the ideal of the highest good, as a determining ground of the ultimate end of pure reason,” Kant also claims that morality by itself cannot move us to perform its own requirements. Its ideas would just be “objects of approbation and admiration but not incentives for resolve and realization” (A813/B841), if the highest good as a whole end of pure reason were impossible. Only when the conditions (“a God and a world that is now not visible to us”) (ibid.) of the possibility of realization of the highest good are given will we have the incentive to perform our moral duties. In summary, these incentives are just the feelings of “**promises and threats**” (A811/B839) brought about by the anticipation of “good for good, bad for bad,” which is just the realization of the proportion between virtue and happiness as the appropriate consequences, commanded by the moral law.

This doctrine conforms to Kant’s distinction between *principium diiudicationis* and *principium executionis* in his early lectures on ethics: “We first have to take up two points here: (1) the principle of appraisal of obligation, and (2) the principle of its performance or execution” (V-Mo/Collins, 27: 274). According to this distinction, the moral law is the *principium diiudicationis* that helps us to discern the duties, but it is not the *principium executionis* and cannot move us to perform said duties. By contrast, in order to perform our duties, we also need the

feelings, affected by the possibility of the highest good. In this sense, the possibility of realization of the highest good is inevitable for Kant's moral philosophy. Otherwise, morality would be merely a castle in the sky whose duties would be impossible to carry out.

However, it seems as if Kant has already given up this doctrine after his publication of the *Groundwork of The Metaphysics of Morals* in 1785. In his critical moral philosophy, the moral law alone can provide the incentive to perform actions and to ascribe them moral worth: "We have also shown above how neither fear nor inclination but simply respect for the law is that incentive which can give actions a moral worth" (GMS, 4: 440).

C. *The Highest Good as Moral Duty*

The interpretation of the highest good as a moral duty is mainly based on the *second Critique*. In "The Existence of God as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason" and "On Assent from a Need of Pure Reason," Kant repeatedly mentions that the promotion of the highest good is our duty: "Now, it was a duty for us to promote the highest good; hence, there is in us not merely the warrant but also the necessity, as a need connected with duty, to presuppose the possibility of this highest good" (KpV, 5: 125, cf. 126, 129, 142, 143 footnotes). This interpretation clearly draws out the close connection between the moral law and the highest good, while explaining why the moral law would be imaginary and false if the highest good were impossible: *Because the moral law would fall into self-contradiction if it were to command something impossible*. The validity of this connection is based on the so-called "Realizability principle" of "ought implies can".⁵

There may be no controversy that Kant sees the highest good as a duty. However, this interpretation still faces four difficulties in respect of the whole doctrine of the highest good: (1) Kant does not explain how the duty to promote the highest good is derived from the formulas of the moral law, (2) even if we accept that we can derive a duty about the highest good from the moral law, this duty requires only "the promotion of the highest good," not "the realization of the highest good." According to the former, we need not presuppose the possibility of the highest good, but only the possibility of our ability in conformity with the maximization of human abilities in general, in order to execute this duty, (3) even if the realization of the highest good is a duty, there is still a problem insofar as

⁵ Wood has a clear exposition of this principle: "Now suppose there is an end that as a rational agent I am morally bound to set myself. In that case, I can neither rationally abandon this end nor rationally pursue it without believing that it is possible of attainment through the actions I take toward it. Under these circumstances, I have good reason, independently of any theoretical evidence, for holding the belief that my moral end is possible of attainment, and for holding any other belief to which this belief commits me" Wood (1970) 401.

the concept of possibility here remains ambiguous. If only the logical possibility of the highest good were required for this duty, then the complete doctrine of the highest good cannot be established. Since the logical possibility of the highest good is only based on the principle of non-contradiction and is simply true, we do not need to postulate any further conditions of the highest good. Naturally, Kant is also aware of this difficulty and denies that the logical, contingent possibility of the highest good in the sensible world is sufficient for his doctrine: “A connection [between morality and happiness] which, in a nature that is merely an object of the senses, can never occur except *contingently* and cannot suffice for the highest good” (KpV, 5: 115). But there is still a problem as to whether the realizability principle implies a stronger possibility with the necessary causal relation between morality and happiness, and (4) even if this stronger sense of the possibility is assumed in the realizability principle, we can still doubt the reasons with which the postulates are bestowed on the duty of realizing the highest good in order to make it possible. The other normal duties cannot be necessarily realized in this sensible world either, but we do not set any postulates for them.

D. The Highest Good as Moral Confirmation

This interpretation is seldom noticed because it does not appear in Kant’s officially published works. Instead, it appears in his lecture on ethics: *Moral Mrongovius II* in 1784–5.⁶ In this lecture, Kant distinguishes the *ground of motive* (*Bewegungsgrund*) from the *ground of confirmation* (*Bestätigungsgrund*) of morality, when he talks about the moral reward. For him, the moral reward is not a ground of motive, but a ground of confirmation of the correctness and truth of the moral law.

The rewards do not have to be presented as ground of motive, otherwise this is merely a prudent behavior, but as ground of confirmation of the correctness and truth of the moral laws. Even the most virtuous, if he were in a world where he was unhappier, the more virtuous he would be, it would not be lacking in the ground of motive, but of confirmation. I usually do not know if my

⁶ These are student notes from one of Kant’s courses on ethics in the winter of 1784–85 at the University of Königsberg. They are supplied and edited by Krzysztof Celestyn Mrongowiusz at the age of 20. The importance of this course is that the manuscript of the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* was being prepared for publication at the same time. Therefore, these notes present many same theme of the *Groundwork*, like the good will, the categorical imperatives and autonomy, and can be seen as belonging to Kant’s mature moral philosophy in his critical period. Otherwise, they also refer to the themes of religion, the highest good, reward and punishment on that the *Groundwork* does not focus. These are directly related to our topic and thus worth to note. The more detailed informations about this work can be found in Jens Timmermann, “Mrongovius II: A Supplement to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*,” ed. Lara Denis and Oliver Sensen, *Kant’s Lectures on Ethics: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018) 68–83.

moral is a chimera (an ideal of the romancing imagination), if there would not be a reward; Thus, a great objection would be against the moral principles. We see the certainty of the principle as a priori, and we can confirm it from the consequences a posteriori. (V-Mo/Mron II, 29: 637, translated by author)

Firstly, we can be sure that the concept of reward is just a concept of the highest good or at least its partial concept. Kant defines the reward as follows: "Reward is a physical good, which is awarded because of the moral good or for the reason that one is worthy of this good. It is the promotion of happiness, whereof the reason consists in the worthiness of the person" (V-Mo/Mron II, 29: 635, translated by author). This definition is just a proportion between virtue and happiness, namely the concept of the highest good. Secondly, this description of the reward is just like that of the highest good in the *second Critique*, namely that one would doubt the moral law if it were impossible to fulfill. Thirdly, the reward must not be given a priori, but can be presented through experience.

According to the distinction between the ground of motive and the ground of confirmation, we can be sure that Kant does not hold that the reward and the highest good function as moral motivation; rather they can be understood in terms of the meaning of the ground of confirmation, which remains obscure. Perhaps we can better understand this concept through a comparison with Kant's use of it in the theoretical cognition that even the reality of a priori cognition of nature that precedes all experience can also be confirmed by experience: "Here we are not concerned with such things [the hyperphysical objects] at all, but rather with that cognition of nature the reality of which can be confirmed through experience, even though such cognition is possible a priori and precedes all experience" (Pro, 4: 296, cf. 329). Here, the point is made clear that pure theoretical cognition does not depend on experience, but experience can confirm the reality of theoretical cognition. We can think that pure theoretical cognitions provide the law of nature and thus determine the natural world, but they do not provide the contents that are determined by these laws. Without these contents, we cannot conceive the real world and the functions of the natural laws on it. Only experience gives us the real examples of the functions of the natural laws, and because of this we can confirm that the world is real and hence that the application of the natural laws on it are real too. This is what is meant by confirmation.

In comparison with pure theoretical cognitions, the moral law is much further from the empirical world. The objects that it determines directly are not in the phenomenal world, but in another world, namely an intelligible world. Hence, the validity of the moral law does not depend on the reward that is originally conceived in the phenomenal world as well. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see what relation exists between the moral law and the phenomenal world in which we actually live and act. If the moral law only relates to our intelligence, but not to the world and our concrete moral experiences in it, then as beings living in the

phenomenal world we cannot but doubt whether the phenomenal life is meaningless or whether this mere spiritual normativity is merely a delusion of our own mind. In this situation, if we believe in the highest good, the happiness that it requires can establish a relation between the moral and the phenomenal world and make the moral world no longer seem like a castle in the sky, because the happiness as a reward can be seen as a confirmation of moral worth through the sensible manner that a person, as a finite rational being, can better accept.

However, this interpretation faces some difficulties. Firstly, it comes up against a constraint. For if we accept the transcendent concept of the highest good, then the required happiness also happens in a supersensible world, and as a result, the moral law loses its connection to the phenomenal world again. Secondly, it remains obscure to what extent the doubt over the moral law, on account of its nonsensible character, is effective. Is it a priori? Is it anthropologically universal? Or does it only occur in certain individuals? The different answers relate to the different degrees of necessity of the highest good.

IV. THE POSSIBILITY OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

A. The Conditions of the Transcendent Highest Good

Already in the *first Critique*, Kant plainly points out that the highest good cannot be realized in the sensible world, thus its possibility can only consist in a supersensible world. In other words, this possibility in the supersensible world is guaranteed by God and the afterlife (A811/B839). In the *second Critique*, Kant explains in more detail the reasons for the highest good needing these two presuppositions. The first element of the highest good is virtue, whose realization sits in complete agreement of the disposition with the moral law. However, this is a condition of moral perfection and holiness that no sensible being can ever attain; at best they can constantly make progress toward this aim, and as such the realization of this perfect state can only be conceived in an infinite progression of life, that is to say, via the immortality of the soul (KpV, 5: 122). Thus, the immortality of the soul is the first condition of the possibility of the highest good.

Concerning the second element of the highest good, namely happiness, Kant thinks that only the presupposition of existence of God can guarantee the required happiness, because only an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent and eternal author of the world can fairly evaluate the human dispositions and always distribute the corresponding happiness according to their virtues. Therefore, the highest good can only be possible in a moral world governed by God (KpV, 5: 128). Thus, the existence of God is the second condition of possibility of the highest good.

However, there are still some difficulties and constraints in deploying these two postulates to guarantee the possibility of the highest good in relation to its

ambiguities and necessity: (1) The postulate of the immortality of the soul is necessary because it makes a morally endless progression of possible life. However, the progression presupposes the alteration in time and the time belongs to the form of sensible intuition in Kant's system, which seems to be contradictory in respect of conceiving an alteration in a supersensible world, (2) it seems that the immortality of the soul is only necessary for the perfect concept of the highest good. If the highest good is merely a concept of justice, this means that the realization of the highest good consists only in the proportion between virtue and happiness according to the concept of justice, but does not require perfect virtue and the highest degree happiness. Certain rewards and punishments after the last judgment in conformity with the given virtues of everyone is already enough for this realization and one need no longer assume an infinite progression of moral life, (3) the existence of God is necessary for the highest good not only as a concept of justice, but also as a concept of perfection. Moreover, not only individual happiness but also the happiness of the whole community must depend on Him. Nevertheless, such happiness, guaranteed by God in a supersensible world, seems to contradict Kant's usual definition of the concept of happiness. The basic determination of happiness, for Kant, is "that all inclinations unite in one sum" (GMS, 4: 399), and the inclination means: "The dependence of the faculty of desire upon feelings" (GMS, 4: 414 footnote). According to this view, the content of happiness is based on the empirical inclinations and thus essentially belongs to the sensible world, even though this concept by itself might not be an empirical one. In this sense, to claim that there is a supersensible happiness seems to be something of a paradox. But Kant simply claims that God guarantees the required happiness in a supersensible world. Perhaps he is also conscious of this question, because sometimes he uses the concept of beatitude instead of happiness. Does this mean that there is a *sui generis* happiness, which is essentially different from happiness in the sensible world? What is its precise determination? Is it compatible with human nature? All these questions have to be answered in order to establish the possibility of the transcendent highest good, and (4) as mentioned in the previous section, if the highest good only has a transcendent possibility, then it is obvious that it cannot function as moral confirmation. This is so because the core of this function is to convince us that the moral law has a relation to our concrete life in the sensible world, to avoid the doubt that the moral law is merely a delusion of our own making. However, since the transcendent highest good can only be realized in an afterlife, we cannot see its relation with this world at all.

B. The Conditions of the Immanent Highest Good

Kant plainly claims in many places in the *first* and *second Critiques* that the highest good can only be realized in the afterlife. Nevertheless, even in these same

works, there are hints of the realization of the highest good also relating to the nature of this world. For example, in the *first Critique* Kant mentions that the hope of the highest good still relates to nature, only it must have the highest reason as its cause (A810/B838). In the *second Critique*, Kant's description of God as the condition of the possibility of the highest good also relates to the aspect of nature (KpV, 5: 125). In these examples, God as the required condition of the possibility of the highest good is described as the cause of nature, implying an immanent concept of the highest good so that God arranges the connection between virtue and happiness through the nature of this world. This is because nature belongs to the sensible world and the highest good should have nothing to do with the state of nature, if it can only be realized in a supersensible world.

It is possible that these examples still do not provide strong evidence since Kant also mentions the connection between nature and morals in "a kingdom of God" (KpV, 5: 158). This implies that the expression of nature does not necessarily refer to a sensible world, although it is difficult to understand to what exactly a supersensible nature might refer. In any case, there are still other descriptions of the highest good that more concretely support the possibility of it obtaining in this world. For example, Kant mentions in the *first Critique* that the same sensible, natural world under the control of God can at the same time be seen as an intelligible, moral one, as arising out of the idea of the highest good (A815-6/B843-4). In the *second Critique*, he also points to the possibility that the corresponding happiness as an effect in the sensible world results from the morality of disposition as an intellectual cause (KpV, 5: 114–115). Both of these examples describe the possibility of the realization of the highest good in this sensible world.

We can find the more apparent tendency of the immanent understanding of the highest good in the *third Critique* that the sensible world can have the purposiveness of nature through the principle of the reflective power of judgment. This purposiveness of nature should further be determined by a moral ultimate purpose that is only possible under a moral theology. This course shows the procedure by which a person develops her understanding of this world from a sensible to an intelligible one and finally infers from it the possibility of the immanent highest good. It is also remarkable that Kant hardly mentions the afterlife in the *third Critique*.

However, the purposiveness of nature and the moral theology in the *third Critique* are still incapable of setting out the concrete procedure of the generation of harmony between nature and morality, and since their inconsistency, at present, is a fact, we can only believe that it will happen in the future. It is also hard to explain how the deserved happiness of mortal human beings can be distributed in time. Thus, the immanent possibility of the highest good is not unproblematic either.

V. THE EVALUATION OF THE GIVEN INTERPRETATIONS OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE HIGHEST GOOD ACCORDING TO ITS CONCEPT, NECESSITY, AND POSSIBILITY

Let us now survey the available interpretations according to the previous classification of the different concepts and understandings of the highest good. Regarding the first ambiguity, despite some interpreters mentioning the distinction between the just concept and the perfect concept of the highest good, almost no one sees the concept of justice as what Kant really had in mind or sought to thematize in his system theoretically.⁷ This might be because reason always seeks perfection and perfection already implies justice. Hence, if there were the perfect highest good, then there would also be no problem of injustice.

In combination with the second and third ambiguities, most interpreters understand the highest good as the connection between an individual's flawless virtue and highest degree happiness that can only be realized in a supersensible world, whether she is for or against the doctrine of the highest good. This is the classic interpretation according to the *second Critique*. The debate over this interpretation is whether this highest good conflicts with the moral autonomy and whether it can be realized. Critics of the doctrine of the highest good basically adopt a negative stance toward these questions and only acknowledge the meaning of the highest good as the interest of reason.⁸ By contrast, defenders of the doctrine mostly explain the necessity of the highest good through its connection to the moral law and duty.⁹

Considering the other combinations, no interpreters that see the highest good as being realized through a community would interpret it as a transcendent concept. The meaning of the highest good as a concept of community can only be

⁷ Stephen Engstrom, "The Concept of the Highest Good in Kant's Moral Theory," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52-4 (1992): 764–5, Beiser (2006) 599, Thomas Wyrwich, "From Gratification to Justice. The Tension between Anthropology and Pure Practical Reason in Kant's Conception(s) of the Highest Good," *Kant Yearbook* 3 (2011): 91–106 and O'Connell (2012): 257–79 are few interpreters that emphasize the highest good should be a concept of justice.

⁸ For example Beck (1960) 244–5, Jeffrie Murphy, "The Highest Good as Content of Kant's Ethical Formalism," *Kant-Studien* 56-1 (1965): 102–10 and Auxter (1979): 121–34.

⁹ For example Klaus Düsing, "Das Problem Des höchsten gutes in Kants praktischer Philosophie," *Kant-Studien* 63 (1971): 5–42, Zeldin (1971): 43–54, Linus Hauser, "Praktische Anschauung als Grundlage der Theorie vom höchsten Gut bei Kant," *Kant-Studien* 75-2 (1984): 228–36, Jacqueline Mariña, "Making Sense of Kant's Highest Good," *Kant-Studien* 91-3 (2000): 329–55, Marc Zobrist, "Kants Lehre vom höchsten Gut und die Frage moralischer Motivation," *Kant-Studien* 99-3 (2008): 285–311, Courtney Fugate, "The Highest Good and Kant's Proof(s) of God's Existence," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 31 (2014): 137–58 and Florian Marwede, "Kant on Happiness and the Duty to Promote the Highest Good," ed. Thomas Höwing, *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy* (Berlin/Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2016) 51–69.

realized through cooperation of the striving of all human beings. If there is a God that guarantees this realization in a supersensible world, then the function of the community would be meaningless and this concept of the highest good would be violated.

The other possibilities entail understanding the highest good as an immanent concept. There are two approaches in this respect. One begins with the aspect of the individual and reduces the requirement of the highest good as a duty, so that the realization of the highest good no longer means the most exact proportion between virtue and happiness in their highest degree; instead it is only the result of the highest degree of striving within one's power. In this reading, the transcendent concept of the highest good is often only retained in a weak sense, serving a purely regulative function, but as such it does not maintain an immanent understanding in the strict sense.¹⁰ The other approach comprises the authentic immanent understanding that focuses on the commonality of the highest good. This view does not see the highest good in terms of individual duty, but rather as the duty of the entire human species, and it tries to guarantee its possibility through an ideal social and political constitution of the human.¹¹

¹⁰ For example Silber (1959) 469–92, “The Metaphysical Importance of the Highest Good as the Canon of Pure Reason in Kant’s Philosophy,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1 (1959/60): 233–44, “The Copernican Revolution in Ethics: The Good Reexamined,” *Kant-Studien* 51 (1960): 85–101, “The Importance of the Highest Good in Kant’s Ethics,” *Ethics* 73-3 (1963): 179–97, “Der Schematismus der praktischen Vernunft,” *Kant-Studien* 56 (1965) 253–73, “Procedural Formalism in Kant’s Ethics,” *Review of Metaphysics* 28-2 (1974): 197–236, John Beversluis, “Kant on Moral Striving,” *Kant-Studien* 65 (1974): 67–77, Mariña (2000): 329–55 and Wike and Showler (2010): 521–33.

¹¹ For example Gerald W. Barnes, “In Defense of Kant’s Doctrine of the Highest Good,” *Philosophical Forum* 2–4 (1971): 446–58, Yovel (1980) 72, Sharon Anderson-Gold, “Kant’s Ethical Commonwealth: The Highest Good as a Social Good,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 26-1 (1986): 23–32, “God and Community: An Inquiry into the Religious Implications of the Highest Good,” ed. Philip J. Rossi and Michael Wreen, *Kant’s Philosophy of Religion Reconsidered* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana, 1991) 113–31, Gerhard Krämling, “Das höchste Gut als mögliche Welt. Zum Zusammenhang von Kulturphilosophie und systematischer Architektonik bei I. Kant,” *Kant-Studien* 77 (1986): 273–88, Andrew Reath, “Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26-4 (1988): 593–619, “Hedonism, Heteronomy and Kant’s Principle of Happiness,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 70-1 (1989): 42–72, Engstrom (1992): 776–8, Paul Guyer, *Kant on freedom, law, and happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), “Kantian Communities. The Realm of Ends, the Ethical Community, and the Highest Good,” ed. Charlton Payne and Lucas Thorpe, *Kant and the Concept of Community* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer Group Ltd., 2011) 88–120, Kleingeld (2016) 33–49 and David Sussman, “The Highest Good Who Needs It?” ed. Joachim Aufderheide and Ralf M. Bader, *The Highest Good in Aristotle and Kant* (Corby: Oxford University Press, 2015) 215–28.

Regarding the necessity of the highest good, we have seen that the critics at best see the highest good as merely the status of the interest of reason, while most defenders understand the highest good as a moral duty. Most also agree that one can no longer interpret the highest good as a moral incentive after 1785, at which point Kant had established his mature critical ethics. There are still some people who understand the highest good as a moral incentive, but their reason is that it is a moral end required by the moral law. In this sense, because the moral law by itself is the moral incentive, its end can naturally also be understood as the incentive. Hence, this interpretation is not far from the interpretation of the highest good as moral duty.¹² Lastly, there are only a few people who base the necessity of the highest good on more concrete moral experience rather than moral duty, and they can be seen as holding the interpretation of the highest good as moral confirmation.¹³

According to the foregoing analysis, most defenders of the doctrine of the highest good view the highest good through the lens of moral duty, with the chief difference being whether their concept is *transcendent individual*, *immanent individual*, or *immanent communal*. In my opinion, firstly, these different concepts of the highest good as moral duty are not freed from the difficulty of their conceptual contradiction within the whole doctrine: the transcendent individual highest good still confronts the conceptual contradiction of supersensible happiness;¹⁴ the immanent individual highest good gives up the possibility of its genuine concept; the immanent communal highest good cannot guarantee its realization through human activity in the sensible world. Secondly, they all confuse the two senses of the possibility. The possibility required by duty only refers to a *logical possibility* or at best a *high probability* resulting from the moral action, but the

¹² For example Zeldin (1971): 43–54, Mariña (2000): 329–55, Lara Denis, “Autonomy and the Highest Good,” *Kantian Review* 10 (2005): 33–59, Zobrist (2008): 285–311 and Fugate (2014): 137–58.

¹³ For example Wood (1970) 8, 155, Yovel (1980) 40, 65 and 72, Smith (1984): 168–90, R. Z. Friedman, “The Importance and Function of Kant’s Highest Good,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22-3 (1984): 325–42, “Hypocrisy and the Highest Good: Hegel on Kant’s Transition from Morality to Religion,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 0 24-4 (1986): 503–22, Matthew Caswell, “Kant’s Conception of the Highest Good, the *Gesinnung*, and the Theory of Radical Evil,” *Kant-Studien* 97-2 (2006): 184–209, Sussman (2015) 215–28, Andrea Marlen Esser, “Applying the Concept of the Good: The Final End and the Highest Good in Kant’s Third Critique,” ed. Thomas Höwing, *The Highest Good in Kant’s Philosophy* (Berlin/Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2016) 245–62 and Gabriele Tomasi, “God, the Highest Good, and the Rationality of Faith: Reflections on Kant’s Moral Proof of the Existence of God,” ed. Thomas Höwing, *The Highest Good in Kant’s Philosophy* (Berlin/Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2016) 124.

¹⁴ Hence Walter suggests a special kind of happiness based on the satisfaction of the higher faculty of desire instead of the normal sensible happiness for the highest good. See Walter Brugger S.J., “Kant und das höchste Gut,” *Kant-Studien* 18-1 (1964): 50–61.

doctrine of the highest good requires a possibility with the *necessary guarantee*. The former does not need necessary realization of the highest good by itself, whereas the latter requires that it can be realized by *certain causes and mechanisms*. Only the latter can establish the complete doctrine of the highest good that includes the practical postulates and the moral theology, but it cannot be grounded in the interpretation of the highest good as moral duty.

Regarding the interpretation of the highest good as the moral confirmation, while it has a certain degree of persuasiveness, it lacks sufficient support within Kant's published works. Furthermore, its most substantial difficulty is that it is still hard to explain this approach in terms of the relation between the highest good and the moral law, namely what influence of the acceptability of the moral law it would result in if the highest good were not possible.

To sum up, the highest good as moral duty cannot further prove the necessity of its realization, whereas the highest good as moral confirmation cannot connect the highest good to the moral law. This forms a dilemma: "Either we accept the interpretation of the highest good as the mere moral duty, then the necessity of the highest good cannot be established, or we adopt the interpretation of the highest good as the moral confirmation, in which case the highest good loses its connection with the moral law." In relation to the possibility of the highest good, we confront another dilemma: "Either we take the transcendent concept of the highest good, meaning that this concept falls into contradiction, or we understand the highest good as immanent, in which case its possibility is hardly able to be accomplished." Solving these twin dilemmas is the primary task that confronts all defenders of the doctrine of the highest good.

Faced with these dilemmas, I think it is worthwhile trying an approach that no one has managed to develop thus far. I suggest that the highest good should be understood as a moral confirmation and a perfect, communal, transcendent concept. In part 5, I will argue why it is necessary to interpret the highest good as moral confirmation and set out the relation between the highest good and the moral law. In part 6, I will explain how a perfect, communal, transcendent concept of the highest good can fulfill the various requirements of the whole doctrine of the highest good, as well as demonstrate that this understanding does not eradicate its contrary concepts in the ambiguities, but rather synthesizes them under itself.

VI. THE INTERPRETATION OF THE HIGHEST GOOD AS MORAL CONFIRMATION

Firstly, we should distinguish the possibility required by a duty from the possibility needed by the complete doctrine of the highest good. The former is weaker than the latter. We can begin to conceive the former possibility with the normal duty. For example, if we encounter a traffic accident and have a duty to save the

wounded from death, we do not need to assume that our actions will always successfully attain this end through a certain mechanism in order to carry out our duty. Here, the possibility according to the realizability principle only demands that the causal connection between our actions and the results, required by duty, is *not impossible*,¹⁵ namely there is a *probability* of the attainment of the end to a *certain degree*.

Applying this to the highest good as moral duty, this duty likewise only requires a certain probability of the realization of the highest good to which our actions can contribute. However, this kind of possibility is not enough for the complete doctrine of the highest good with the practical postulates and the moral theology, because all of our moral actions can already bring about this probability, so that we no longer need God or the afterlife in order to fulfill this duty. In this sense, the interpretation of the highest good as moral duty does not essentially depart from the domain of the theory of moral duty; in doing so, it makes the highest good not so different from the normal duties and thus renders redundant Kant's special arrangement of the doctrine of the highest good.

By contrast, the possibility, needed by the complete doctrine of the highest good, implies a necessary mechanism that guarantees *the causal relation* of the moral actions and *the reality of its end*. Only the requirement of this strong possibility needs the postulates of an afterlife and God as this mechanism, the connection of morality and religion, and we can only find the ground of this possibility in the interpretation of the highest good as moral confirmation, which essentially differs from the theory of moral duty. It provides this possibility according to moral experience rather than moral duty.

I assume that the need of the moral confirmation and its relation to the moral law arise out of the character of the moral law insofar as it is totally independent of experience and cannot be deduced from a higher premise, just as Kant explains its objective validity only through an unprovable "fact of the reason" (KpV, 5: 31).

¹⁵ Willaschek's weakening of the realizability principle is insightful and helpful for us to get this point: "RP5: An agent A is rational in trying to realize some end E by doing D only if A (rationally) does not believe it to be impossible that (i) A's doing D should causally contribute to realizing E and that (ii) a set of causal conditions that are jointly sufficient to realize E (of which A's doing D is a part) obtains" (Marcus Willaschek, "Must We Believe in the Realizability of Our Ends? On a Premise of Kant's Argument for the Postulates of Pure Practical Reason," ed. Thomas Höwing, *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy* (Berlin/Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2016) 239). However, he still insists that even through this weakened principle, the argument for the necessity of the highest good based on the moral duty is still valid because he believes that the antinomy of practical reason exactly proves the impossibility of highest good and thus practical postulates are necessary to solve this antinomy. But I think that the antinomy of practical reason only denies the realization of highest good through necessary mechanisms. This does not mean the highest good is impossible in a strict sense.

This is too abstract and hardly accepted by human beings who have the double character of the sensible and the intelligible world simultaneously. Kant believes that the moral law is already rooted in common human reason, but it is still difficult to grasp the purity of the moral law in the reflective sense. For Kant, this is the task of philosophy.

In the first section of the *Groundwork*, where Kant derives the pure moral law from the common rational moral cognition, he claims: “Despite all the agreement even of common understanding with this idea [the absolute worth of a mere will], a suspicion must yet arise that its covert basis is perhaps mere high-flown fantasy and that we may have misunderstood the purpose of nature in assigning reason to our will as its governor” (GMS, 4: 394). This unstable ground with the addition of the conflict between human sensible needs and inclinations and the purity of the moral law will easily result in the so-called *natural dialectic* (GMS, 4: 405). This resort to human nature creates a major incentive to surrender the validity, purity or strictness of the moral law and to make the duties more suitable to subjective inclinations.

Kant believes that this natural dialectic can be eliminated only by “a complete critique of the reason” (ibid.), as he settles the dialectic in the field of theoretical philosophy. According to the structure of Kant’s critical philosophy in general, I think the natural dialectic is not dissolved in Kant’s theory of moral duty in the *Groundwork* but in the *second Critique*, which includes a complete critique with a doctrine of dialectic. As such, it is just a doctrine of the highest good. If this understanding is correct, then the dissolution of the natural dialectic needs the possibility of realization of the highest good. If the realization of the highest good is possible, then the conflict between the moral law and the sensible world with sensible needs and inclinations would be reconciled and the danger of the natural dialectic would be diminished.

However, this interpretation of the highest good as moral confirmation, or as the resolution of the natural dialectic, still has to answer two concrete questions: (1) Does the natural dialectic happen in everyone’s moral life and thus have universal meaning? (2) How does the possibility of the realization of the highest good concretely overcome the natural dialectic? In fact, this departure of human disposition from the moral law, caused by the natural dialectic, is not a contingent phenomenon that only appears in certain people if we connect it to the concept of radical evil in Kant’s *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. For Kant, radical evil is universally bestowed on every human and named “the propensity to evil in human nature” (RGV, 6: 28). There are three different grades of this propensity to evil: (1) the *frailty*, (2) the *impurity*, and (3) the *depravity* of human nature or of the human heart (RGV, 6: 29).

The three situations are all based on the fact that a human is a sensible being and “to pursue the happiness” is the individual’s most significant unmoral

incentive. Thus all evils arise from the conflict between the moral incentive and this unmoral incentive, namely the conflict between the commitment “to obey the moral law” and “to pursue the happiness.” The frailty means that the incentive “to pursue the happiness” defeats the incentive “to obey the moral law” in the subjective maxim, although the moral law is still the highest principle of judging an action. The impurity consists in that one undertakes moral actions not simply out of “respect for the law” but also as part of one’s pursuit of “happiness.” The depravity is that one accepts the commitment “to pursue happiness” as the highest principle of the action, and in this sense it instantiates radical evil by giving up the moral law as the highest maxim of the disposition. All of these propensities to evil correspond to the description of the natural dialectic set out in the *Groundwork*: “But from this there arises a *natural dialectic*, that is, a propensity to rationalize against those strict laws of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and, where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations, that is, to corrupt them at their basis and to destroy all their dignity” (GMS, 4:405). Through this connection, we can confirm that the natural dialectic is just the propensity to evil in *Religion* that is indeed rooted in human nature and has universality in the human species. So far, we have already answered the first question.

In relation to the second question, although radical evil, arising from the nature dialectic, is indigenously bestowed on all human beings, this does not mean that it is irreversible and insurmountable, or else striving toward the good would also be impossible and the moral law would be totally meaningless. After all, the occurrence of the nature dialectic consists in the fact that though the moral duty also requires humans to pursue their own and other people’s happiness, the limitations of nature often prevent them from realizing this end or even create conditions in which the carrying out of moral actions actually damages human happiness. This causes people to continually struggle between two conflicting incentives that bring about different results, and to find many *excuses* and *sophistries* to prove the priority of the unmoral incentive over the moral one, and finally even to accept this priority as a basic principle of action.

Kant does not explicitly spell out these excuses and sophistries, but we can conceive one of them by way of the necessity of Kant’s system: The realization of the moral end cannot be guaranteed in the objective world. This suggests that the objective world has no relation to morality. Therefore, if a human—as a member of this world—still assigns the moral dimension to herself, it is a fantasy. This excuse is based on a presupposition of the teleology of the world, that everything in the world has its use to a final end. Thus, if the world has nothing to do with an end and nothing can have an effect on it, then this end would probably be false and should be seen as a fantasy according to the teleological principle. That is, this would just be a case of the moral law, if the highest good were impossible. The

conflict between this teleological principle and the moral law is not an empirical and contingent one; rather it is an a priori and necessary one because the teleological principle is also based on reason, *in concreto*, the function of the reflective power of judgment. Therefore, this conflict is also a conflict of reason with itself, and the nature dialectic has thus an *a priori excuse* in reason.

However, if people believe that the highest good will finally be realized (although not at the moment of their actions), then, firstly, the conflict between the moral law and human needs and inclinations is no longer an essential one, because in this situation the human will *hope* that the happiness is the natural result of the execution of the moral duty, and thus the temptation to seek an excuse will be considerably reduced and potentially overcome. Secondly, through the possibility of the highest good, the person will believe that the objective world will react to the moral action and the moral end will be guaranteed in it. This means that the conflict between the moral law and the teleological principle will be solved and can no longer be an a priori excuse to justify doubting the moral law. It is just a doctrine of the highest good that can give us the theoretical resources to resist the sophistry of the natural dialectic, through the complete critical reflection that can lead us from radical evil and to return to the way of striving for good once again. This totally conforms to the task Kant assigns moral philosophy in the *Groundwork*:

In this way, *common human reason* is impelled, not by some need of speculation (which never touches it as long as it is content to be mere sound reason), but on practical grounds themselves, to go out of its sphere and to take a step into the field of *practical philosophy*, in order to obtain there information and distinct instruction regarding the source of its principle and the correct determination of this principle in comparison with maxims based on need and inclination, so that it may escape from its predicament about claims from both sides and not run the risk of being deprived of all genuine moral principles through the ambiguity into which it easily falls. (GMS, 4: 405)

To sum up in more everyday language, the moral life is a natural, healthy state of the human being, but the conflict between duty and inclination makes us fall into reflections on morality. This is whence the risk of thoroughly giving up the moral requirements arises: It would arise through various sophistries based on the a priori structure of human nature. In this case, the task of philosophy (for Kant, its ultimate form should be the critique of the rational faculties) is just to give a theory in the thought that can resist various sophistries. All of this leads us to think correctly and helps us to free ourselves from the seduction of the nature dialectic.

At last, we should be clear that the acceptance of the doctrine of the highest good is not identified with the total elimination of evil; rather this doctrine only helps us to overcome radical evil in the strict sense, namely the depravity of the human heart that accepts self-love as the highest principle of action. However, humans will still carry out evil acts because of the frailty or the impurity of the heart. Nevertheless, through this Reformation of the thought, we can say that one

is already on *the way toward the good*, as Kant says: "Who incorporates this purity into his maxims, though on this account still not holy as such (for between maxim and deed there still is a wide gap), is nonetheless upon the road of endless progress toward holiness" (RGV, 6: 46–47). Purity here means the overcoming of the depravity that one merely accepts "to obey the moral law" as the highest principle of action.

In addition, introducing the highest good to overcome radical evil is not identified with the impurity of the human heart that mixes happiness in the incentive in order to execute moral actions. Firstly, happiness in the highest good is limited under the condition of the moral law. Secondly, the impurity of the heart still happens under the moral law as the highest principle of action, but the belief of the highest good is simply there to eliminate the sophistry that distorts the moral law and its commands into a fantasy. In this situation, there is no longer any moral incentive. As such, perhaps we can think of the highest good as a *meta-moral incentive*, whose function is not to directly move us to execute certain duties, but rather to help us to maintain a correct *moral worldview*. The former is only possible under the latter. In connection with the nature dialectic and the theory of radical evil, the doctrine of the highest good obtains its complete meaning. It is important for everyone because of the universality of radical evil, and it has a close connection to the moral law in the sense that it can reform radical evil and prevent the human heart from the sophistry that denies the reality of the moral law.

VII. THE TRANSCENDENT, PERFECT, AND COMMUNAL HIGHEST GOOD

A. *The Transcendent Concept of the Highest Good*

The reasons to adopt the transcendent concept of the highest good are: (1) It is impossible to imagine that the immanent highest good will be realized merely through natural mechanisms or human actions alone, and (2) Even if it will be eventually realized, it can only happen in an infinitely far-off future and as such is meaningless for the current generation of human beings. If there were no afterlife and no God, the highest good would be impossible, at least for the defunct persons. However, as noted, the difficulty of the transcendental understanding of the highest good is that supersensible happiness is incomprehensible; thus its transcendental concept should also not be understood as usual. If, to Kant's mind, Christianity provides a better concept of the highest good than Stoicism and Epicureanism (KpV, 5: 127), then its understanding of the afterlife should be helpful in enhancing the transcendent concept of the highest good.

In fact, Christianity's kingdom of God is not a pure, supersensible world. It is not a paradise with no sensible character and into which human beings will enter

directly upon death; rather it means that the trial of God has come to *this world*. In this time, all the defunct persons will be reincarnated in the same earth and judged: “The sea gave up the dead that was in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead that was in them, and each person was judged according to what they had done” (Revelation, 20:13). Thus, the supersensible world here is not identified with a *nonsensible* world.

Moreover, Kant deploys his description of the last day via the last judgment in his “The End of All Things”, but this is not literally the last day: “judgment day would obviously not be the last day; instead, different days would follow upon it, one after another” (EaD, 8: 328). Instead it is just the entire *transformation of the present world*. Kant thinks that the Christian last day is not a jump across a gap with the incommunicability from the sensible to a nonsensible world, but rather the alteration of the state of the *same world* along a continuous timeline.¹⁶

At the same time, Kant thinks that the idea of the last day derives from the moral course of things in the world. It should relate to an eternal supersensible world, but should also be *made sensible*, in order to be comprehensible (ibid.). Kant does not clearly explain the relative importance of this “making sensible” within his moral philosophy, but he does point out that this is the only way to comprehend the supersensible world. I think it is necessary for people through this “making sensible” to conceive the possibility of the highest good in order to solve the contradiction of the concept of supersensible happiness. Hence, we can say that the “making sensible” of the supersensible world is not a theoretically cognitive means; rather it is necessary for practical faith.

According to this “making sensible” understanding of the supersensible world, the transcendent concept of the highest good can be so understood as a sensible world that is reformed by God. In this case, the afterlife will not be located in another world, but only in the *future world*. The afterlife, in this understanding, cannot only occur through God’s power to overcome the natural limitations against human happiness in the world, covering all human beings from the ancient past to the distant future; it can also make supersensible happiness comprehensible because the human being still remains a sensible character in the afterlife. In this sense, a proper concept of the highest good that can truly be realized must be a transcendent concept that contains a special immanent concept at the same time.

¹⁶ Beiser also mentions this point: “For it is central to Augustine’s theory that the city of God does not exist in heaven, in some supernatural realm beyond the earth; rather, it exists on the earth and in this world; but on the earth and in this world insofar as it is completely transformed by the second coming of Christ” Beiser (2006) 599.

B. The Perfect Concept of the Highest Good

However, the previous Christian highest good is a transcendent, individual, just concept of the highest good whereby God contributes to the personal proportion between virtue and happiness directly. Nevertheless, the concept of justice will set a limitation on human moral striving because even if the defunct persons will be resurrected on the last day, God will give his judgment of everyone according to the grade of virtue *during one's lifetime* and send them into the blessed or cursed eternity. This means that there is no more room for people to pursue moral perfection. In respect of the differences between people's lifetimes—meaning that the time given to each person to pursue the end of moral perfection varies—it is not a particularly just or fair arrangement whereby a sole judgment at the beginning of the afterlife decides whether one should fall into blessed or cursed eternity.

We have seen that Kant offers two different conceptions of the afterlife in “The End of All Things”: the unitistic and dualistic systems. According to our classification, the unitist holds the transcendent perfect highest good, whereas the dualist holds the transcendent just highest good. Kant himself does not appreciate the unitistic system and thinks that it weakens the moral law; instead he prefers the dualistic system because of its provision of moral caution. However, according to the requirement of justice, I think the unitistic system is more reasonable. In fact, Kant also recognizes the problem of the injustice of the dualistic system (EaD, 8: 329–330). After all, everyone's qualities of temperament, the environment of growing up, and contingent encounters with people and events are different. Therefore, everyone has different degrees of moral obstacles to overcome in their lifetime. In this light, it does not conform to the principle of justice and fairness, if one's moral worth and deserved happiness are only evaluated in the afterlife *according to one's merit during one's lifetime*. Therefore, considering the inequality of everyone's potential for moral striving and the varying extent of moral obstacles in this world, a more reasonable concept of the highest good is a perfect one. According to the transcendent perfect highest good, everyone can, in the afterlife, according to their merit in a lifetime, through the long or short moral striving, finally attain the same moral perfection and the corresponding beatitude. This analysis demonstrates that the transcendent perfect highest good is a more proper concept because it has covered justice in itself.

C. The Communal Concept of the Highest Good

Furthermore, regarding the ambiguity between the individual and the communal understandings, if we understand the highest good only through the transcendent perfect individual concept, some problems will arise. If we have infinite time in the afterlife to promote our moral perfection, and deserved happiness will directly be guaranteed by God, then: (1) Our actions and moral state in our

lifetime would be trivial—we will easily indulge in evil in our lifetime and simply think to pay the price in the afterlife. This is Kant's reason for preferring the dualistic system, (2) In fact, our duty would not be the highest good, but only moral perfection, because the task of distributing happiness belongs fully to God and has nothing to do with human beings, and (3) Because our deeds in our lifetime would become trivial, we cannot see any reactions in this world to our moral actions, meaning that the assumption of the afterlife is just another castle in the sky that has nothing to do with this life. As a result, this understanding would not only sever all connection between the highest good and the actual world, but also jettison its capacity to act as moral confirmation.

In fact, if we analyze the highest good as the effect of a moral duty (i.e., the belief of the necessary realization of this effect is just the moral confirmation), we will find that it is essentially a communal concept. This effect can be seen to derive from all our duties, especially the duty of benevolence that involves the happiness of others,¹⁷ toward the aspect of ideal generalization of the individual effects of these duties in all human beings. Accordingly, everyone who executes all her duties will become the cause of the happiness of others and the highest good is just the result that should be caused by the human species itself, if all human beings can execute all their duties successfully. Hence, the transcendent perfect highest good should be combined with the concept of the community. In this case, we do not see our deserved happiness in the afterlife as directly distributed by God. By contrast, the afterlife should be an ideal human community insofar as everyone is just the cause of the deserved happiness of everyone. In other words, the human species itself should be the cause of the highest good. This community also cannot be constituted by God, *whose task only consists of making the human afterlife possible and liberating human beings from the natural limitations that hinder them from realizing their moral end*. Rather this community should be established gradually by the striving of every generation of human beings.

Only through this conception of the transcendent perfect communal highest good can we solve the previous problems of the highest good as the transcendent perfect individual concept. Firstly, our deeds in our lifetime are no longer trivial, because we should establish this ideal human community gradually by ourselves

¹⁷ In this sense, the happiness is not as an end itself but only as a relevant object required by the moral duty. This would not make the moral duty heteronomous but would still retain its autonomous character. For a detailed exposition about the relation between the duty of benevolence and the happiness in the highest good one can see Kleingeld (2016) 33–49, Marwede (2016) 51–69 and Stephen Engstrom, “The Determination of the Concept of the Highest Good,” ed. Thomas Höwing, *The Highest Good in Kant's Philosophy* (Berlin/Boston, MA: Walter de Gruyter, 2016) 94n6, 99–103.

through carrying out our duties and through the same strivings of every generation of human beings. Otherwise, the afterlife would be useless in realizing the highest good. Secondly, the distribution of the deserved happiness of everyone would be the effects of our own duty, because we can be the causes of the deserved happiness of one another through an ideal community in the afterlife. Thirdly, the connection of this kind of the highest good with the actual world can be demonstrated by Kant's philosophy of politics and history.

As an example, we can use Kant's view of the necessary appearance of the ideal political organization of a state from human nature in *Toward Perpetual Peace*. For Kant, whether the human is intentional or unintentional, an ideal political constitution will automatically appear in the human social community (ZeF, 8: 366). Because this is the destiny that reason gives to humanity, even if all human beings were to act egoistically, they would finally choose to make an equal and mutually beneficial state, as long as they perform the ideal rational calculation. Kant also thinks that even a state of devils would be the same, as long as they have reason.

In fact, this ideal political community is already a part of the external form of the highest good, because in this community everyone executes their own duties (at least the duties of right) and prevents human happiness from unjust infringement, although one may not be doing this out of duty. Kant also says: "It is not the case that a good state constitution is to be expected from inner morality; on the contrary, the good moral education of a people is to be expected from a good state constitution" (ibid.). This suggests that we can further expect that the more complete highest good can develop on the basis of the ideal political constitution, and that its accomplishment will manifest as an ethical community in that everyone not only obeys the laws of right, but also the laws of virtue (RGV, 6: 94). This ethical community is almost the complete form of the highest good, because in it all moral duties will be executed, and everyone will cause the happiness of everyone else, as long as God revokes the natural limitations that obstruct the realization of human duties. For Kant, the church is just an imperfect imitation of this kind of ethical community in the actual world.

According to this foreseeable progress of human history, the political constitution, and the existence of ethical communities in this world, we can believe that the actual world is not entirely set apart from morality, since such events are all signs of the promotion of the highest good in this actual world and proof of the close connection of our present life with the moral ultimate purpose. This is just the function of the highest good as moral confirmation

According to our previous analysis, then, the combination of the transcendent perfect highest good with the concept of an ideal social community can provide the most consistent doctrine of the highest good. According to the concept of the community, the highest good is firstly developed by the human being itself in a

maximal form, namely an ideal political community. This community has a connection to everyone, because its development is necessary through the striving of every generation of human beings. But this maximal form still falls short of the complete highest good, since it remains an external form of the highest good and is unable to overcome the natural limitations of the human being. In this case, the transcendent concept can help us conceive that God will eliminate these natural hindrances in our afterlife and guarantee that we can be the causes of one another's deserved happiness. Finally, the concept of perfection requires an endless afterlife insofar as we can fairly, through our moral striving, attain holiness, and become worthy of beatitude. Thus, the most reasonable concept of the highest good should be a transcendent perfect communal concept.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that a tenable doctrine of the highest good should, through Kant's concept of the nature dialectic and the doctrine of radical evil, understand the highest good as moral confirmation, for only such a reading can adequately explain the necessity of the highest good and its relationship to the moral law. As a result, the concept of the highest good that best corresponds to this understanding is a transcendent perfect communal one, which entails the concepts of immanence, justice, and the individual at the same time. The concept of transcendence guarantees the complete realization of human happiness; the concept of perfection guarantees a fair amount of space for moral striving; and the concept of the community guarantees the connection with the actual world. This understanding of the highest good neither violates nor abandons any moment of Kant's whole philosophical system. On the contrary, it provides the grounds to explain the necessity and the function of its different branches, just like his philosophies of religion, politics, and history. This is also an indirect proof of the validity of this understanding of the highest good.

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