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Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant

ANDREWS REATH

1.

KANT'S NOTION of the Highest Good has always been a subject of some controversy.¹ But in my opinion, it has attracted controversy of the wrong sort. Scholars disagree whether the Highest Good belongs in Kant's moral theory, or has any importance there. But these questions cannot be resolved until one has settled an issue that is clearly more fundamental, though less often asked: What is the Highest Good and how is it to be understood? What is essential to the doctrine and what is not? Commentators have tended to underestimate the complexity of the interpretive issues which the texts present, with the result that the philosophical significance of the Highest Good has been obscured. I suspect that disagreements about its proper role in Kant's moral

¹ Citations to Kant's works will give the page in a translation followed by the page in the Prussian Academy edition of Kant's *Gesammelte Schriften*. They are included in parentheses in the body of the paper where possible. The abbreviations and translations used are as follows:

Gl *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1964).
Idea *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, in *Kant's Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). [This collection includes several essays.]
KpV *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956).
KrV *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965).
KU *Critique of Judgment*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952).
LE *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Louis Infield (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1979).
MdS *The Doctrine of Virtue: Part II of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964).
PP *Perpetual Peace*. See *Idea*.
Rel *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. T. M. Greene and H. H. Hudson (New York: Harper & Row, 1960).
TP *On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice*. See *Idea*.
WO *What is Orientation in Thinking?*, in *The Critique of Practical Reason and Other Writing in Moral Philosophy*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

theory can often be traced to differences in interpretation that have not been clearly articulated. My suggestion is that one should be able to produce agreement about the soundness of the notion simply by finding the right interpretation. The first step here is to show that what Kant intended by the Highest Good remains an open question.

Kant conceived of the Highest Good as the final end of the Moral Law, which moral conduct ought to promote in the long run. Both critics and defenders of the notion have taken it for granted that it should be understood as a world in which happiness would exist in proportion to virtue. There is also some consensus that Kant conceived of this state of affairs as occurring in another world, rather than in the world of sense. Both features have been found deeply problematic. The idea of a proportionality of virtue and happiness seems to lead to heteronomy, and it is difficult to see how to integrate an otherworldly end of this sort into the rest of Kant's moral theory. This conception of the Highest Good is indeed found in the texts. The critics have thought that by pointing to its flaws, one could dismiss the entire doctrine. However, since the texts contain another version of the Highest Good which is not affected by these difficulties, one can conclude that they have done so prematurely. On the other hand, sympathetic commentators have tended to defend the notion at the expense of overlooking some troubling textual problems. Defenders of the Highest Good must also acknowledge that there are elements in Kant's treatment of it that one would not expect to find there, and which seem inconsistent with other features of his view.

This paper has several aims. I want to argue that the Highest Good need not be viewed as a theological notion, and that the proportionality of virtue and happiness is not essential to the doctrine. I will show how we may defend a conception of the Highest Good which treats it as an end to be achieved through human agency, and that combines virtue and happiness, though not by a relation of proportionality. I will do so by showing that there are different conceptions of the Highest Good in the texts, both a "theological" conception and a "secular" (or political) conception, and will suggest a rationale for taking the latter as the best expression of Kant's view. Furthermore I wish to develop a defense of the Highest Good that explains why the notion has so often been dismissed. One wonders why so many commentators have found it obviously flawed, and a departure from Kant's considered views, while others are inclined to accept it without question. The approach of distinguishing two distinct strands to Kant's thought offers a partial explanation, as well as suggesting a way to defend the doctrine as a whole. The theological conception does seem open to a number of objections. But since they do not affect the secular conception, the best way to defend the Highest Good is to show that the secular version states what is essential to the view, and is the one to which Kant

is committed, given the other things that he says about the Highest Good. This is what I shall do.

I begin in section 2 by outlining the procedure that Kant follows in defining the Highest Good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. An understanding of how the Highest Good is introduced in that work will show that it is intended to be an end that is constructed out of the Moral Law, and will indicate some constraints on its proper interpretation. Next, in section 3, I will distinguish two competing conceptions of the Highest Good. My aim here is to examine the different strands which occur in the texts, and to offer some suggestions about the development of Kant's thought on this subject. In sections 4 and 5, I will argue that something like the standard objections to the doctrine do apply to the theological conception, and that this version does not naturally follow from the Moral Law. But since the secular version can be derived from the Moral Law, we are free to treat it as Kant's view. Moreover, it is a stronger notion in important respects. The final section sketches a positive account of this version of the Highest Good, and briefly considers some of the contributions it can make to Kant's moral theory as a whole.

2.

One measure of the importance of the Highest Good to Kant is that he takes it up in almost all of his major works.² He thought of it as an ideal that followed straightforwardly from the Moral Law, consistently with his fundamental principles. As I will try to show, the basic idea is that one arrives at a conception of the Highest Good by looking at the ends prescribed by the Moral Law, or the kinds of ends that can be contained in moral conduct, and ordering them in a systematic way. Or one could consider the state of affairs that would result over time if all individuals acted from a shared body of moral principles. Though we find different descriptions of the Highest Good throughout Kant's works, all converge in the idea of a morally perfect world, in which events take place according to moral laws, and moral conduct is successful in achieving its ends.³

Kant never doubted that the Highest Good has a legitimate place in his moral view. In this section I will try to justify Kant's confidence in the notion by analyzing how it is introduced in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, and placing

² The important discussions of the Highest Good are found in the following works: *KrV* B 834–B 847; *KpV*, "Dialectic", esp. 111–36/107–132; *KU*, 108–130/442–59, 142–47/469–73; *Rel* 3–7/3–8, and 85–98/93–107; *TP* 64–68/277–84, and 87–92/307–314. See also *WO* 298–99/139–40; *PP* 108–124/361–80; and *Idea*, esp. Propositions 6–9.

³ I argue for this interpretation in my Ph. D. dissertation, *Morality and the Course of Nature: Kant's Doctrine of the Highest Good*, (Harvard, 1984).

it in the larger context of that work. An understanding of the procedure by which it is defined is essential to an understanding of its place in Kant's moral theory, and gives us guidelines for its proper interpretation.

We should focus initially on Kant's concept of the good as an "object of pure practical reason," developed in chapter 2 of the "Analytic" of the second *Critique*. He opens this discussion by defining an "object of practical reason" as an "effect possible through freedom"—meaning, presumably, any end at which an agent could direct an action (*KpV* 59/57). It would follow that an object of *pure* practical reason would be one that could result from the *moral* use of freedom—i.e., an end of morally good conduct. This interpretation is confirmed when Kant goes on to say that one decides whether something is an object of pure practical reason by judging whether one can will the action that would bring it about. The sense of the passage and the ensuing discussion is clearly that the good refers to any object or end that a person could will in accordance with the Categorical Imperative. An end or state of affairs is a moral good if it can be the end of an action that is morally good, or the object of a person's moral intention.⁴

There are two further points to note about this discussion. In judging whether an object is morally good, we need not consider whether we have the physical ability to bring it about, but only whether there are moral grounds for willing the actions that would bring it about. As Kant says, the "moral possibility of the action takes precedence . . ." (*KpV* 60/58). In short, a conception of the good can be an ideal that surpasses our abilities, as one would expect.

⁴ One influential interpretation reads Kant as saying that the *only* objects of pure practical reason, and so the *only* moral goods, are actions, or their form. In this vein, Beck writes that "the object of pure practical reason is not an effect of action but the action itself; the good will has itself as object." See his *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 134. John Silber argues for this view in "The Copernican Revolution in Ethics", in *Kant: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), esp. 287–90. Yirmiahu Yovel follows Silber's interpretation in *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 44–46. R. Z. Friedman also relies on this view in "The Importance and Function of Kant's Highest Good," in *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 22 (1984): 325–42. See 326, 327 ff., 336. However it is clearly not Kant's view that the good will is the "sole moral good," as Silber writes, or that it can only have itself as object. For one thing, this seriously underestimates the importance of Kant's duties of virtue, especially the duty to promote the happiness of others. (Cf. *MdS* 43–47/384–88, 51–54/391–94.) In the passages under discussion, Kant does say that an action done in accordance with the Moral Law is *good in itself* and that the will "whose maxims accord with this law is *absolutely and in every respect good*" (*KpV* 64/62; Kant's emphasis.). But this certainly allows for the end of an action to be a moral good, when the action is in accordance with the Categorical Imperative. Kant only means to assert that the moral goodness of an object or end must be judged relative to an action or maxim by which it can be produced. For a criticism of Beck's interpretation which develops this alternative, see Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 62–68.

However, some relationship between the good and human agency is implied when the good is defined as the possible object of a person's moral intention, even when the latter is not limited by what lies within our actual powers. In defining an object of practical reason as an "effect possible through freedom," Kant commits himself to the view that only states of affairs that we can imagine as the possible results of human action are included in what is morally good. One decides whether an object is morally good by asking whether one could will an action directed towards it. But it would make no sense to talk about willing an action directed at an object, even hypothetically, unless it were something that we could imagine as a result of human agency. The second point, then, is that Kant's definition of the good should indicate that it should apply to possible human ends.⁵

It is this concept of the good that allows for the introduction of the Highest Good in the "Dialectic" of the second *Critique*; the latter, in fact, is just an extension of the former. When the Highest Good is first mentioned it is referred to as "the unconditioned totality of the object of pure reason," or as I shall abbreviate it, the *unconditioned object* of the Moral Law (*KpV* 112/108). This term can be explained quite simply. Where the good, as object of pure practical reason, refers to an end that could result from the moral use of freedom, the unconditioned object, or Highest Good, would be just that—the *highest* good that could result from the moral use of freedom. The unconditioned object should be interpreted as the totality or the complete set of ends that could result from moral conduct. In this way the Highest Good can be seen as a construct of reason in its characteristic activity of introducing systematic unity into a body of given material—the material here being the ends that can be contained in or could result from moral conduct (*KpV* 112/108). It is derived by a further use of reason on the ends of moral conduct, once the Moral Law has been formulated and we know what those ends are.⁶ Here we can see that a notion of the Highest Good is implicit in his moral theory from

⁵ I should make it clear that by "possible human ends," I mean to include ends that could be the results of human conduct under ideal conditions. This is the result of taking the two conditions mentioned in this paragraph together.

⁶ Many commentators who doubt whether the Highest Good has any practical significance as an end for human conduct are troubled by the fact that it is never mentioned in any of the formulations of the Categorical Imperative. (See, e.g., R. Z. Friedman, "Good," 330.) Here we see a simple explanation. Since the Highest Good is an object defined by the Moral Law, it *cannot* be introduced until after the law has been formulated. Thus we should not expect it to appear in any of the formulations of the Categorical Imperative. On this see *KpV* 65 ff./63/ff., especially 67/64: "But only much later, when the moral law has been established by itself and justified as the direct determining ground of the will, can this object [the highest good] be presented to the will . . . This we shall undertake in the Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason."

the start, and that *some* notion of the Highest Good follows simply from the fact that moral conduct is directed at ends.⁷

In introducing the Highest Good as the unconditioned object of the Moral Law, Kant simply extends his earlier notion of the good in an obvious way. But what keeps the Highest Good uncontroversial at this initial stage also limits its use. At this point the notion is too abstract to play a significant role in the moral theory, and it is necessary to state in more detail the ends that it will contain and the way in which they are to be ordered. This can be done by ordering the interests by which human beings are moved, and the different sorts of ends that they can pursue in acting from the Moral Law. Thus, Kant's next step is to "define this idea practically—i.e., sufficiently for the maxims of our rational conduct" (*KpV* 112/108). The purpose of this "practical definition" is to work out the content of the Highest Good, so that it can become an object of our endeavors. This is what Kant goes on to do in the succeeding pages, since it is only after this point in the text that he begins describing the Highest Good in terms of a combination of virtue and happiness.⁸ What he says, and continues to say in the rest of the "Dialectic," is that it will involve a proportionality of virtue and happiness, or a "necessary connection" between virtue and happiness. We can infer that this description is the result reached by Kant's "practical definition" in this work. In other words, it is a conception of the Highest Good that is supposed to follow when one works out the content of the initial idea, that of the unconditioned object of the Moral Law.

It is important to see that there are two levels of description operating in this passage. Kant begins with a general description of the notion ("the unconditioned object"). This initial description indicates how it is related to the Moral Law, while at the same time suggesting a procedure for filling out the details (here systematizing the ends that can be contained in moral conduct).

⁷ On this see the following remark: "For, in fact, the moral law ideally transfers us into a nature in which reason would bring forth the highest good were it accompanied by sufficient capacities; and it determines our will to impart to the sensuous world the form of a system of rational beings" (*KpV* 45/44). The movement towards the Highest Good in the second *Critique* as a whole can be described as follows. The "Analytic" opens with an account of the Moral Law. The concept of an *object* of pure practical reason can then be defined in terms of this *principle*. This puts Kant in a position to take up the definition of the *unconditioned object* of the Moral Law in the "Dialectic." (Here note that it is in the process of defining the Highest Good that pure practical reason encounters its "dialectic.")

⁸ Specifically I would say that the "practical definition" occurs in the passage in which Kant says that the highest or "perfect" good would, in addition to virtue, require happiness "in the judgment of an impartial reason, which impartially regards persons in the world as ends-in-themselves" (*KpV* 110/114). Kant arrives at a description of the content of the Highest Good by asking what would accord with the judgment of an impartial reason. I take the "complete volition of an omnipotent rational being" to correspond to the unconditioned object of the Moral Law. Both are ways of representing the realization of the ends of moral conduct in their totality.

Such a description articulates the *concept* of the Highest Good, and should be taken as stating the essential idea. He then uses the suggested procedure to derive a more concrete description which specifies its content, and it is in this way that Kant comes to refer to the Highest Good in terms of a combination of virtue and happiness. While descriptions of the latter sort are the most frequently employed in the rest of the text, it is clear that they are derivative; it should be possible to trace their development from the concept of the Highest Good. There are reasons to take this two stage procedure as representative of Kant's considered views, and as having some authority on how the Highest Good is to be interpreted. Not only is the second *Critique* the text in which Kant offers the most explicit account of the Highest Good. This same general pattern is also found in the relevant discussions in the first and third *Critiques*. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the Highest Good is referred to as the *moral world*—the ideal of a world in which all individuals act from the Moral Law. He then goes on to suggest that in such a world, the happiness of all would result from the virtue of all, acting from a shared system of moral principles, and in this way comes to describe its content in terms of a combination of virtue and happiness.⁹ As in the second *Critique*, the notion is first introduced in an abstract form, from which a description of its content can then be derived.

What I have tried to establish so far is that attention to how the Highest Good is introduced in the second *Critique* (and elsewhere) shows that it is an end to be constructed out of the Moral Law. This implies, first, that it should initially be conceived as a state of affairs that could result from human agency. Here we should consider my earlier point about Kant's concept of the good. If the good refers to possible human ends, the same condition should apply to the Highest Good as well. Second, the procedure by which Kant defines the Highest Good indicates that a description of its content should be derived from the content of the Moral Law, and should involve some ordering of the ends that figure in Kant's conception of moral conduct. Thus, a conception of the Highest Good whose content cannot be traced to the Moral Law is not a proper description of the Highest Good. These are points to bear in mind as we continue.

The position developed so far can be clarified by contrasting it with a different, and I believe mistaken, interpretation of the function of the Highest

⁹ As Kant says, "I entitle the world a *moral world*, in so far as it may be in accordance with all moral laws; and this is what by means of the freedom of the rational being it *can be*, and what according to the necessary laws of morality it *ought to be*. . . . [This] is a practical idea, which really can have . . . an influence upon the sensible world, to bring that world, so far as may be possible, into conformity with the idea" (*KrV* B 836). I will discuss this idea further in section 6. Note also that in the *Critique of Judgment*, it is introduced as the final end of the Moral Law, before any account of its content is supplied. See *KU* §§ 87–88, esp. 118/450.

Good. There is some tendency to think that the Highest Good is introduced for the purpose of providing a "synthesis" between two heterogeneous kinds of goods, so as to avoid an undesirable dualism. On this view, moral ends and natural ends are thought to represent divergent kinds of goods, whose combination into a single conception poses a problem which is solved by the concept of the Highest Good.¹⁰ However, this view misunderstands the role of the Highest Good, specifically by overlooking the fact that it is intended as an end to be derived from the Moral Law. A conception of the Highest Good is constructed by systematizing different kinds of ends, but as they are structured by the Moral Law. The Moral Law combines these two kinds of ends into a single scheme by subordinating the natural to the moral. But it is only because this ordering is already established by the Moral Law that these ends can be combined in this way. The role of the Highest Good, then, is not to effect a synthesis of heterogeneous goods, but to supply a conception of our moral ends in their totality. Any "synthesis" that may occur would come from the activity of pure practical reason, as it combines different kinds of ends into a single scheme.

3.

Kant's descriptions of the Highest Good vary within given works and from one work to another, and it is sometimes difficult to see the thread that runs consistently throughout. The procedure outlined in the previous section best explains his intentions, and suggests a way of relating the different descriptions that he employs. However, at a certain point, we find elements that do not fit readily into this pattern. I believe that the only way to explain this is to conclude that there are in fact competing conceptions of the Highest Good in the texts, which he is unable to combine with success. This section is devoted to developing this thesis, through an examination of the relevant texts. I will begin by distinguishing two versions which occur in the text, both a "secular" conception and a "theological" conception. The secular version is a final end which Kant derives from the Moral Law along the lines just sketched. This notion is easily accounted for, and seems consistent with the basic features of his moral theory. The basis for the theological version in Kant's moral theory

¹⁰ Such a view is suggested by John Silber. See "The Importance of the Highest Good in Kant's Ethics," *Ethics* 73 (1963): 184 ff., 193–194. Yovel also appears to consider such a view; see *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, 37. Silber and Yovel also argue that the Highest Good is introduced to give content to the Categorical Imperative, as a principle that is purely formal. (See Silber, "Highest Good," 183 ff. and Yovel, 43–46. Such a view seems equally untenable. As I am trying to argue, if the Categorical Imperative generated no content of its own, it could not define a final end. Kant should not be entitled to any conception of the Highest Good according to an interpretation that treats the Moral Law as a purely formal principle.

is less clear, however. It appears to be an adaptation of a traditional Christian notion, as is seen, for example, in Leibniz's notion of the City of God.¹¹ Once these conceptions have been distinguished, I will discuss how they are related and will explore some of the tensions between them. We will see that both versions are visible in almost all the relevant texts. However, the theological version is more prominent in the earlier works, such as the first and second *Critiques*, while the secular version is predominant in the third *Critique* and later works. This allows us to conclude that historically, Kant's thought about the Highest Good develops in the direction of the secular conception, even though the theological version is never completely dropped.

By a "theological" interpretation of the Highest Good we may understand the following. Any reasonably complete description of this state of affairs must bring in some theological notions—for instance, the existence or activity of God, or such concepts as that of an afterlife or another world. One must appeal to some such notions as soon as one asks for any details about the nature of this state of affairs—for example, about the ends that individuals would enjoy, or the circumstances under which they are fulfilled. For our purposes, the important feature of a theological conception of the Highest Good is that it would be a state of affairs that comes about in another world through the activity of God. By contrast, a secular conception of the Highest Good can be described entirely in naturalistic terms, as a state of affairs to be achieved in *this* world, through *human* activity. Kant thought that, ultimately, we cannot fully understand how even the secular version of the Highest Good would be possible without the postulate of a moral author of the world, who orders the laws of history in a certain way. Even so a reasonably complete description of this state of affairs can be given in naturalistic terms. We can say how it would come about and what it would involve by referring exclusively to human conduct and ends. It is a secular conception in that a complete description does not require any agency or mechanisms beyond the order of nature as we know it.

Some clarification may be needed here. A secular version of the Highest Good need only view it as an end that could result from human conduct under favorable conditions—e.g., if all human beings were to act from the Moral Law, and their conduct were coordinated in appropriate ways. This is the point that is expressed by saying that a complete *description* of this state of affairs can be given in terms of human agency, and this is sufficient to distin-

¹¹ For Leibniz' notion of the City of God see *Discourse on Metaphysics*, §36; *Monadology*, §§86–90; *Principles of Nature and Grace*, §§ 15–18; and Leibniz' letter of October 9, 1687 in the *Correspondence with Arnauld*, in *Leibniz: Philosophical Writings*, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1973), 74.

guish it from the theological version. Even where Kant has a secular version in mind, he thought that we could not meaningfully conceive of it as a real possibility without adopting a belief in a moral author of the world, who ordered the laws of history so as to support progress towards this end in time. But there remain irreducible differences with the theological version. The latter could not result from human conduct under any circumstances. We can see this by noting that we cannot even say what the theological version would involve, or be like, without bringing in some theological notions (such as the activity of God). But we can say what the Highest Good would be like in its secular form—what ends it would involve, and how, within that state of affairs, they would be achieved—by referring only to human actions.

When Kant gravitates towards a theological conception, the two components of the Highest Good are the virtue of all individuals, and happiness distributed in proportion to virtue. This conception is introduced in roughly the following way. Kant thought that the Moral Law generates a duty to promote the Highest Good. But as far as we can see, events in this world do not support the possibility of its second component, and we have no reason to expect that happiness will ever exist in proportion to virtue (Cf. *KpV* 129f/124). So that it will remain rational for us to act on this duty, we postulate the existence of God, who establishes a necessary connection between virtue and the proportionate amount of happiness, thus guaranteeing the possibility of the second component in another world.¹² In short, our inability to imagine the Highest Good occurring in this world leads us to posit its possibility in another. The theological conception supports this possibility by assuming the existence of another world in which a system for distributing happiness in proportion to virtue is already in place. All individuals who develop a good will (in this life) will eventually enjoy happiness as well, as a result of the laws of that world. It will be in this world that the Highest Good is realized, and primarily through the activity of God.

It is not the proportionality of virtue and happiness *per se* which leads to a theological interpretation of the Highest Good. One could construct the idea of a historical state of affairs in which social institutions were arranged to promote happiness in proportion to virtue. Its practicality aside, if this state of affairs were ever realized, the individuals of a particular era would enjoy happiness in proportion to virtue due to the arrangement of existing social institutions. This system of institutions might serve as a social ideal which individuals in the present sought to promote as the final end of moral con-

¹² This in brief is the "moral argument," or *absurdum practicum* argument for faith in the existence of God. The best published account of this argument of which I am aware is by Allen W. Wood, in *Kant's Moral Religion* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1970), 25–34, 100–153.

duct. This would be a secular conception, because one can describe how a state approaching a proportionality of virtue and happiness would exist, by referring to the arrangement of social institutions and the conduct of individuals. In the previous example, the Highest Good becomes a theological notion when we postulate its existence in another world.

A feature which would always lead to a theological conception is to view the Highest Good as a state of affairs in which *all* individuals eventually take part. The only way to accommodate such a conception is to see it as occurring in another world, and it may be that the desire to include all individuals is part of the motivation behind the theological conception. On the secular conception, the individuals of a particular historical era would experience the Highest Good, even though it might only result from the efforts of many earlier generations. From one point of view this might seem unfair. But it is worth noting that there are places where Kant is willing to accept this conclusion, as disconcerting as he might have found it.¹³

This observation shows that the theological interpretation of the Highest Good and its description in terms of a proportionality of happiness and virtue are conceptually independent. Proportionality could be the basis of a secular ideal, and Kant may occasionally adopt such a view. To simplify, I will ignore this possibility and will treat proportionality as the description associated with the theological interpretation. On this version, the Highest Good would be realized in another world in which a proportionality of virtue and happiness is established (for all individuals) through the activity of God.

Turning now to the secular conception, this version treats the Highest Good as a social goal to be achieved in history, through human agency and the ordering of social institutions. This conception emerges most noticeably in the *Critique of Judgment*, where references indicate quite clearly that Kant understands it as an end in this world, which we should strive to bring about. One key passage reads as follows: "The Moral Law . . . also defines for us a final end, and does so *a priori*, and makes it obligatory to strive towards its attainment. This end is the *summum bonum*, as the highest good *in the world* possible through freedom" (*KU* 118/450; Kant's emphasis). This theme is found elsewhere in the third *Critique*, and in later works, for example, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*.¹⁴

¹³ See *Idea* 44/20, 50/27; and *TP* 89f/309f.

¹⁴ There are several places where Kant stresses the advancement of the Highest Good by human beings. In the passages following this citation leading up to the discussion of the Spinozist, Kant says that without religious faith we would be led to abandon "the *premeditation* [*Beabsichtigung*] of the final end to be effectuated by the pursuit of the moral law, that is the premeditation of a happiness of rational beings harmoniously associated with such pursuit, as the highest good in the world." Elsewhere in the third *Critique*, Kant refers to the *summum bonum* as an object "which

Of equal significance is the fact that Kant appears to adopt a different description of the content of the Highest Good in most of these works. For example, he writes: "This *summum bonum* is formed by the union of the greatest welfare of the rational beings of the world with the supreme condition of their good, or in other words, by the union of universal happiness with the strictest morality" (*KU* 122/453).¹⁵ We find the same idea expressed in the *Religion*. Kant writes that morality "is necessarily related to such an end, taken not as the ground but as the [sum of] inevitable consequences of maxims adopted as conformable to that end. . . . Hence the end is no more than an idea of an object which takes the formal condition of all such ends as we *ought* to have (duty) and combines it with whatever is conditioned, and in harmony with duty in all the ends which we *do* have (happiness proportioned to obedience to duty), that is to say, the idea of a highest good in the world" (*Rel* 4/5). Here I take Kant to be saying that the Highest Good would comprise both ends required by the Moral Law and those of our personal ends that are in conformity with it. The second element could be called "happiness conditioned by morality"—in other words, the satisfaction of individuals' morally permissible ends.¹⁶ I will

is meant to be realized in the world through our actions in conformity to that law," and "which has to be realized in the world through freedom" (*KU* 122/453, 142/469) Cf. *WO* 298/139. See also *TP* 65/279, where Kant refers to the "highest good possible on earth" in several places. Nor, as I argue below, is the idea entirely absent from the second *Critique*.

It seems to me that passages in this vein, as well as the many instances in the second *Critique* where Kant refers to the duty to further the Highest Good, present serious problems for R. Z. Friedman's interpretation. Friedman denies that the Highest Good is an ideal for the transformation of the existing world, or that it adds to a person's moral responsibilities ("The Importance and Function of Kant's Highest Good," 326, 329–330, 336). This, I believe, mistaken view comes in part from holding that goodness of character is the only aim of moral conduct on Kant's view. (I discuss this in note 4 above.) There can be no doubt that Kant wanted to view the Highest Good as end that human beings are to promote, and that is a fact we should try to account for. One of the strengths of the secular interpretation that I develop is that it shows how Kant can view the Highest Good in this way without inconsistency. I also differ with Friedman on the following point. One can view the Highest Good as a final end without thinking that it is supposed to provide a material content that complements the otherwise purely formal character of the Moral Law (See his discussion, 326 ff.). As I see the texts, the Highest Good is a systematization of the content of the Moral Law, which can be generated by individuals applying the Moral Law to their conduct. If the Moral Law could not generate any content, there could be no place for Highest Good in Kant's theory (On this see note 10 above.).

¹⁵ Cf. also *TP* 65/279, where the Highest Good is described as "the universal happiness of the whole world, combined with and in keeping with morality."

¹⁶ Compare this passage from the *Religion* with the following passage from the third *Critique*: "Consequently, the highest physical good possible in the world, and the one to be furthered as the final end so far as in us lies, is *happiness*—subject to the objective condition of harmony [*Einstimmung*] of the individual with the law of *morality*, regarded as worthiness to be happy" (*KU* 118/450). In each of these passages there are elements that suggest a proportionality description of the Highest Good—the parenthetical mention of "happiness proportioned [*angemessen*] to obedience to duty" in the first, and the mention of worthiness to be happy in the second. However

treat this as the rendering of the content of the Highest Good in its secular interpretation.

It is important to see that this rendition of the Highest Good is quite different from what is seen in the theological version. On the most natural reading, a “union of universal happiness with the strictest morality,” or “happiness conditioned by morality” is not a proportionality of virtue and happiness. It implies no necessary connection between virtue and happiness, but instead describes the Highest Good as a union of two distinct ends, one of which is subordinate to the other. The first would be the moral perfection of all individuals, and the second the satisfaction of their permissible ends.

To clarify this point, each version contains the two components of virtue and happiness, with happiness a subordinate end of conditional value. The important differences may be elaborated as follows. In the theological version, happiness is subordinated by making the legitimate satisfaction of a person’s ends proportional to his or her degree of virtue. The proportionality is thus a relation between the virtue of an individual’s character and that individual’s happiness. This suggests that it is through a person’s moral character that his or her ends take on value. The reason for valuing a person’s happiness lies in the person’s degree of virtue, rather than the goodness of the person’s ends. By contrast, in the secular version, happiness is subordinated by making the permissibility of an end the condition of its satisfaction, or value. This is not a relation between the moral character and the happiness of an individual, but involves, rather, a relation of the individual’s ends to the Moral Law, as the principle that determines when an end is legitimately pursued. Virtue and happiness have no particular connection, except to the extent that the Moral Law offers guidance on the relative weight of our moral and natural interests. Finally, the value of an individual’s ends is not determined by that individual’s degree of virtue, but by the goodness of the ends themselves. Personal ends are of value when limited by moral concerns, simply as the ends adopted by a rational being.

The rationale behind the secular conception is easy to see, and at first glance seems the most natural way of filling out the concept of the Highest Good. On Kant’s moral view, human beings are moved by two kinds of interests, moral and natural, which can be combined into a single scheme by giving priority to the moral. The result is a scheme of conduct in which people pursue two kinds of ends. The first will be ends required or prescribed by the

these are ambiguous, and *angemessen* in the passage from the *Religion* can also be rendered as “appropriate,” “fitting,” etc. Moreover, other features of these passages suggest the quite different way of including happiness which I go on to describe—happiness conditioned by morality, or the satisfaction of permissible ends.

Moral Law, including the individual's own moral perfection; and the second will be their own happiness, limited by considerations of duty. This is a scheme of *moral* conduct in that it is shaped by an ordering that comes from the Moral Law and is regulated at the highest level by moral principles. But natural interests and ends will have a role in such a scheme when properly subordinated to moral considerations. The description of the Highest Good associated with its secular version comes directly out of this conception of moral conduct, since its two components are just the two kinds of ends that figure in Kant's conception of moral conduct. It is thus the description that one would expect to follow from the idea of the unconditioned object of the Moral Law, which I have interpreted as the totality or complete set of ends that can be contained in moral conduct. In the next section I will argue that this is a reason to prefer the secular over the theological version as the best expression of Kant's views on the Highest Good. While the secular version seems to follow naturally from Kant's conception of moral conduct, it is not clear what basis the theological version has. This is in part (I will argue) because the proportionality of virtue and happiness is an ordering that we do not see elsewhere in Kant's view. Such considerations support the conclusion that Kant imports the theological conception into his view from outside, and that it is not generated internally.

Where are these two conceptions found, and how do they figure in the development of Kant's thought about the Highest Good? The theological version is most evident in the first and second *Critiques*, while, as we have just seen, a secular version is by and large adopted in the third *Critique* and afterwards. This includes the *Religion*, surprisingly enough. In addition to the passages cited above, the discussion of the "Ethical Commonwealth" in Book 3 of the *Religion* is one of the clearest references to the Highest Good in which it takes an institutional, or political form. The Ethical Commonwealth is initially defined as a society founded on moral principles which are publicly recognized and followed, and it is implied that its institutions are aimed at realizing various moral ends (such as good character and good conduct on the part of individuals, as well as certain forms of social harmony). Kant stresses that it is a social goal to be achieved through the collective efforts of all human beings (*Rel* 86f/94f, 89/97f). He identifies it with the "Kingdom of God on earth," and argues that its proper institutional form is that of a "rational church" (*Rel* goff/98ff). Even so, the Ethical Commonwealth is a secular conception in the sense that it is a community of human beings organized under a particular institutional structure.¹⁷ The Ethical Commonwealth seems to represent a

¹⁷ I discuss this notion further in section 6. The passages cited earlier in this section are from the Preface to the First Edition. To be sure, there are passages in the *Religion* which touch on the

significant development in Kant's thought, which, when taken with other texts, suggests that he is moving towards the adoption of a secular conception. However, the picture is not that simple. In fact there are indications of both versions in nearly every text in which this subject is taken up. Even in the later works which emphasize the secular version, the theological version is mentioned at certain points, even if obliquely.¹⁸ In addition, the earlier discussions contain elements that require a secular interpretation. Kant does not seem to have gotten completely clear about, or to have fully resolved, the ambiguities in his thought. If he was aware of these two strains, he must have thought that they converged. But this does not appear to be so.

The extent of this ambiguity, and the tensions which it causes, can be illustrated, again, by the second *Critique*, where we see that both versions appear side by side, and that a shift occurs from one to the other. Kant refers to the Highest Good as "the highest good which is practical for us, i.e., one which is to be made real through our will" and as a "practical good, i.e., one that is possible through action" (*KpV* 113/109, 117/113). Furthermore, Kant says throughout the "Dialectic" that we have a *duty* to pursue the Highest Good. Such passages require a secular version, since it makes no sense to view the Highest Good as an end that we are to promote unless it is a state of affairs that we can envision as the result of our conduct. (This is especially so if there is to be a duty to promote the Highest Good, as Kant insists.) However, he shifts to a theological interpretation when it is a question of its realization. In the discussion from which I was just quoting, he is led to say the following: "When we see ourselves obliged to seek the possibility of the Highest Good at such distance—namely, in the context of an intelligible world . . . it must appear strange that philosophers of both ancient and modern times have been able to find happiness in very just proportion to virtue in *this* life" (*KpV* 119/

Christian doctrine of rewards and punishments in another life (Cf. 63n/69n, 66f/72f, 124–26/134–36, 149f/161f.). But, I would argue, close attention to the texts shows that these passages are not part of Kant's treatment of the Highest Good in this work, but rather are independent discussions of the proper interpretation of certain aspects of Christian doctrine and scriptural symbolism.

¹⁸ Thus all I can say is that the theological version is de-emphasized, and that the secular version becomes more prominent and is suggested by the leading ideas of different texts. Alongside the passages in, e.g., the third *Critique*, the *Religion*, and *Theory and Practice* which support the secular version, and include happiness in the form of the satisfaction of permissible ends (happiness conditioned by morality), we still find hints of a proportionality of virtue and happiness. Representative passages are cited in note 16 above. In addition we continue to find references to the immortality of the soul, which also suggest the theological conception. In the third *Critique* see, e.g., 142–43/469, 145n/471n, and 146n/472n. But also note that these references are confined to §91, and that Kant gives no formal argument for the postulate of the immortality of the soul as he does in the second *Critique*.

115). Kant's phrasing here makes it quite clear that at this point he conceives of the Highest Good as coming about only in another world.

Both here and in a similar passage in the first *Critique* Kant begins by viewing the Highest Good as an end to be promoted in this world. But when he imagines its realization, he conceives of it as a state of affairs in another world that would result from divine agency.¹⁹ Whether or not he is aware of this shift, it changes the notion substantially, since we are no longer the principle agents. While Kant must have assumed that there was continuity between these two notions, they have very different functions. The secular version is an ideal by which to guide our conduct. It tells us to aim at bringing about a world in which individuals can develop a morally good character, and have the ability and means to achieve their permissible ends. Further concrete guidance would follow from determining what arrangement of social institutions is needed for the realization of these ends, and how best to bring these arrangements into existence. The theological version, on the other hand, supports a commitment to moral conduct of individuals by offering assurance that what they cannot attain on our own will be supplemented by God, and that the imperfections and injustices of this world will be corrected in another (where virtue leads to happiness).

Moreover, a kind of incoherence appears in the picture of moral conduct which results when both conceptions are found together, as they are in the second *Critique*. Consider the following passage where Kant says that we ought to promote the Highest Good in this world, even though its possibility must be deferred to another: "But the possibility of the Highest Good . . . cannot be given under the laws of sense, even though the practical consequences of this idea, i.e., the actions which are devoted to realizing the Highest Good, do belong to this world" (*KpV* 124/120). In such a view individuals would strive for an end in this world, which they have no reason to think is possible, while hoping for a state of affairs in another which will compensate for the shortfall of their efforts. Morality now straddles two worlds. While our actions occur in this world, their morally significant consequences are deferred to another, so that the immediate results of our efforts are not ultimately matters of great concern.²⁰

¹⁹ Cf. *KrV* B 838–39. Initially Kant outlines the idea of a "system of self-rewarding morality" in which "freedom, partly inspired and partly restricted by moral laws, would itself be the cause of general happiness." But by the end of this passage he says that "we must assume that moral world to be a consequence of our conduct in the world of sense . . . and therefore to be for us a future world."

²⁰ In this section I have simply tried to show that two distinct versions of the Highest Good are found in the texts. I do not have a completely satisfactory explanation as to why Kant vacillated between these two views, though I would offer the following speculation. The theologi-

4.

In this section I will develop a critique of the theological conception by arguing that there are internal grounds for rejecting such a notion. It is inconsistent with certain features of Kant's moral view, as is often thought, but also with the intentions behind the concept of the Highest Good. I will consider two objections which apply to the theological version of the Highest Good. One considers the implications of its conceiving of the Highest Good as the result of divine, rather than human agency, the other of the fact it describes its content in terms of a proportionality of happiness and virtue. In each case there is no reason to think that the Highest Good should take this form, given the way in which it is introduced and the purposes which it is to serve. At the end of this section I will also touch briefly on certain respects in which the secular conception presents a more acceptable moral ideal.

The first objection is that the theological version is inappropriate as a conception of the Highest Good, because it is no longer a state of affairs that we can adopt as an end for our conduct. It makes no sense to adopt a state of affairs as an end unless we can see ourselves as the agents who would bring it about. But the theological version leaves only a limited role to human agency. Individuals do contribute to the Highest Good in this scenario by developing their own moral perfection. But the happiness in the Highest Good would not exist through our efforts; nor is the connection between virtue and happiness an arrangement that we further, since it already exists.

Lewis White Beck has made this point as an objection to the *duty* to promote the Highest Good, and thinks that it undermines the entire doctrine. Beck claims that, contrary to what Kant thought, there can be no such duty. He argues that the concept of the Highest Good has no practical significance because there is nothing that an individual can do to promote such an end beyond acting from the Moral Law. The supposed duty to promote the Highest Good adds nothing to the duties that we already have, and thus is not a real

cal conception is a traditional Christian notion, and perhaps a holdover from Leibniz. Kant would likely have wanted to find a place for it in his philosophical system, given its place in ordinary moral consciousness and his desire to provide rational foundations for various Christian doctrines in morality. He may have thought that the concept of the Highest Good which does follow from the Moral Law provided this opportunity. I would like to think that Kant was led to emphasize the secular version as he became more aware of the tensions caused by the presence of the theological in his moral view. Jerome Schneewind has argued that there was a growing tendency in the moral philosophy of the 17th and 18th centuries to assign greater responsibility to human agency in the establishment of the moral order. See his "The Divine Corporation and the History of Ethics," in *Philosophy in History*, ed. R. Rorty et al, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984). The development in Kant's views might also be understood by reference the dynamic that Schneewind describes. (Cf. 187–91.)

duty.²¹ This objection does apply to the theological version, and helps illustrate why it is wrong to view it as an end. Beck is pointing out that promoting the Highest Good in this case amounts to no more than acting from the Moral Law and leading a good life. The only duty that one can meaningfully speak of is the duty to promote one's moral perfection (rather than any duty to promote the Highest Good). The point, then, is that the Highest Good is no longer an end that we can pursue in any interesting sense, because it defines no new ends beyond our ordinary moral duties, and issues no specific injunctions to the individual.

Since the Highest Good is introduced as the final end of the moral conduct, it ought to be possible to view it as a state of affairs that could result from human conduct. In this respect, the theological conception requires a departure from one of its defining features. Thus it seems ill-suited to Kant's purposes, and it is difficult to see how any such ideal can be constructed out of the Moral Law. These are reasons to think that the Highest Good is in essence a secular notion, and should be interpreted as such.

The second criticism has to do with the proportionality of happiness and virtue. One of the most common objections to the Highest Good is that this ideal is inconsistent with Kant's principles of autonomy. In the end this may be correct, though not necessarily in the way that most commentators have thought. To see this, we need to look at some of the ways in which this objection has surfaced.

The usual form of this complaint is that this conception of the Highest Good would compromise the autonomy of moral motivation; it introduces an incentive that leads to heteronomy of choice. This objection is sometimes based on a misunderstanding, as when it focuses on the simple fact that the Highest Good includes happiness at all. In this case it mistakenly supposes that Kant cannot allow happiness to have any role in moral conduct. But he did not think this, and nothing that he says commits him to this position.²² The more legitimate concern is this. It is difficult to avoid seeing a proportionality of happiness and virtue as a system of rewards and punishments that would inevitably make an individual's interest in moral conduct heteronomous. As this is a natural issue to raise, it is not surprising that Kant addressed it in several places.

His initial response was that only individuals who do their duty from the motive of duty develop a truly virtuous disposition. Individuals who engage in good conduct for the sake of future happiness will not have made themselves

²¹ Beck, *Commentary*, 244–45.

²² For passages where Kant explicitly rejects this way of construing his views see *KpV* 96/93 and *TP* 65–66/280.

truly worthy of it.²³ In later texts, Kant refines this response by shifting the perception of the proportionality of virtue and happiness away from the framework of reward and punishment. He regards it as a system in which everyone receives his or her due according to an objective moral standard, which anyone would disinterestedly approve.²⁴ Furthermore, Kant cites the fact that happiness would exist only in *proportion* to virtue to suggest that the interest in this system could *only* come from an impartial moral motive. He notes that “it does not hold out any prospect of happiness in the absolute sense, but only of a constant ratio between happiness and the worthiness of a subject” (*TP* 65n/280n). In a similar passage he suggests that a moral individual would will the existence of this state of affairs even lacking knowledge of his character—that is, whether or not he knew the degree of moral perfection which he would possess. He would do so though he might “be in danger of paying in his own person a heavy price in happiness—it being possible that he might not be adequate to the [moral] demands of the idea, demands which reason lays down as conditioning happiness” (*Rel* 5/6). In this case the individual’s motive could not rationally be the hope of happiness. Since there are no grounds for any such hope without a knowledge of one’s character, the motive must be the moral quality of this state of affairs. It is undoubtedly such considerations that lead Kant to say that an interest in the Highest Good “is a wish based on law and one to which no selfish mind could have aspired” (*KpV* 135/130).

One may or may not, in this way, be able to defend the proportionality of virtue and happiness against the objection that it would lead to heteronomy. However, I will not pursue this question, since I think that the real problem lies elsewhere. The deeper issue is that the theological conception relies on an ordering of virtue and happiness not seen elsewhere in Kant’s moral theory. Happiness can have a role in moral conduct, and indeed, there are grounds for viewing it as a moral good, when properly limited by duty.²⁵ This suggests that the satisfaction of permissible ends would be a component of the Highest Good, as seen in the secular version. But in Kant’s account of ordinary moral conduct, no explicit arguments are given for taking a proportionality of virtue and happiness, either as an end, or as a way of ordering different ends or interests. The appropriate question to ask, then, is how this notion finds its way into a conception of the Highest Good. How can this description of the content of the Highest Good be derived from the Moral Law? This way of linking moral and natural ends evidently follows from a principle of moral

²³ Cf. *LE* 53–57: 77–78, 81–82.

²⁴ Cf. e.g., *KpV* 134/129f.

²⁵ For an interesting discussion of this point see Christine M. Korsgaard, “Two Distinctions in Goodness,” *The Philosophical Review* 42, No. 2 (1983): 177–84.

desert. But no reasons were ever given for thinking that the Moral Law generates such a principle, or provides any basis for relating virtue and happiness in this way. Unless such an argument can be given, this rendition of the Highest Good has no foundation in Kant's moral theory. It must instead be a notion that he imports from elsewhere, or which he mistakenly believes to follow from his principles.

It may also be possible that the proportionality of virtue and happiness is derived from a principle of moral desert, but not on the supposition that this principle is a part of the Moral Law. However, this alternative is even less acceptable. This conception of the Highest Good would then be based on a special principle for combining virtue and happiness that is independent of the Moral Law. But Kant cannot recognize any such principle. To allow that there are moral principles that are independent of the law, or prior to it, would violate the autonomy of pure practical reason in a deeper sense, by making it subject to principles that it does not generate out of itself. The Moral Law must be the highest and most comprehensive standard to which we can appeal in matters of moral conduct and ideals.

The suggestion underlying these remarks is that we cannot find a satisfactory explicit justification for the ideal of moral desert that is required to support the theological conception—that an argument establishing it as a sound moral ideal cannot be produced. If so, it should not be given an important role in our interpretation of Kant's moral theory. Admittedly this might seem a major revision, since the notion of moral desert has roots in the background of Kant's views, as is seen in his tendency to equate a good will with "worthiness to be happy."²⁶ But the issue here is how one would establish the principle that happiness ought to be distributed in proportion to virtue. It does not seem to be a good ideal by which individuals should regulate their relations with each other, because of its implicit "moralism." Some commentators have pointed out that Kant's epistemology makes happiness in proportion to virtue an unfeasible ideal for us: given the inscrutability of human motives, it is impossible to know whether an individual has a virtuous character, and thus whether or not he or she deserves to be happy.²⁷ But more than that, it

²⁶ Cf. *Gl* 61/393: "a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of our very worthiness to be happy."

²⁷ This point is made by Jeffrie Murphy, "The Highest Good as Content for Kant's Ethical Formalism," *Kant-Studien* 56 (1965): 107–108. See also R. Z. Friedman, "Good."

Another strength of the secular conception is that by according natural ends an independent value of their own, the secular conception offers a more transparent account of why happiness is included in the Highest Good: it is because natural ends can be morally good, when properly limited by duty. The theological version has no straightforward way of saying why happiness should be a part of the Highest Good, except by referring to a principle of moral desert.

should not be the business of one person to make such judgments about another. Ethical thought should focus on how one should act and what makes actions right, rather than on passing judgment on a person's character. By including happiness in the form of the satisfaction of morally permissible ends, the secular conception avoids these unwelcome implications. My conclusion is that the proportionality of virtue and happiness represents a departure from Kant's basic principles. It does not follow from any principles that are part of the Moral Law, and for that reason is not an acceptable rendition of the Highest Good.

5.

I have tried to show that there are two competing conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant's thought. Both are present to some degree in all of Kant's works, though in later periods he gives a greater emphasis to the secular conception. I will now begin to use the results of this survey of the texts, and discussion of their structure, to consider how the tensions are best resolved, and to draw conclusions for how we should interpret the doctrine of the Highest Good. The conclusions will come as no surprise.

I have argued that the theological conception is open to certain criticisms, which make it inappropriate as a conception of the Highest Good. Since it views it as the result of divine agency, it is not a state of affairs that we can meaningfully adopt as an end, and thus cannot serve the purposes for which the Highest Good is introduced. Furthermore, the description of its content in terms of a proportionality of happiness and virtue has no apparent basis in Kant's moral view. But neither of these objections has any obvious bearing on the secular version. In this form, the Highest Good is an end we can pursue, characterized by two ends which represent the two most general categories of ends in the Kantian scheme of moral conduct. They are the moral perfection of all individuals and the satisfaction of their permissible ends. Here we should note that both the *ends* and the *way of combining them* are taken from the conception of moral conduct, and that happiness appears in the conditioned role that the Moral Law assigns to it elsewhere. The secular version thus adopts the ordering of virtue and happiness that is generally characteristic of Kant's moral view.

Two points deserve emphasis here. First, we can see that the traditional objections to the doctrine of the Highest Good are not based on a simple misunderstanding. Much of it has a textual basis, and anyone who wishes to defend the doctrine must recognize this fact.²⁸ We can explain why the doc-

²⁸ On this point I differ with Allen Wood's account of the Highest Good in *Kant's Moral Religion*, with which I am otherwise in general agreement. As I see it, Wood is not sufficiently

trine of the Highest Good is so often rejected out of hand by citing the presence of the theological version in the texts. Second, I have criticized the theological conception primarily by showing that it is not consistent with what Kant says elsewhere about the Highest Good. But these objections do not constitute any overriding weakness in the doctrine as a whole. They do not show that Kant is not entitled to some version of the Highest Good, only that he is not entitled to this one.²⁹

The argument so far suggests an interpretive strategy. The obvious way to defend the doctrine of the Highest Good is to grant that there are real problems with some of what Kant says about it, but show that they apply to a strain which, though undeniably in the texts, is not essential to the view. These are reasons to ignore the theological version to the extent that one can. Because the secular version is most consistent with his initial definition of the Highest Good, and best suited to his purposes, Kant would have done better to have adopted it throughout. Since the secular conception of the Highest Good *can* be constructed out of the Moral Law, we may treat it as Kant's view without distorting his basic intentions. It can certainly claim to capture what is essential to this doctrine.

6.

So far I have discussed the secular conception in fairly general terms. I want to conclude by sketching a positive account of what it would involve, and of how one would go about working out further details, which indicate how it becomes a political notion. I will finish with a comment about the kind of contribution that the Highest Good can make to Kant's moral theory as a whole,

critical of the texts at certain points. He is aware of the ambiguities between the secular and the theological strains in Kant's thought, but he seems to think that they can be reconciled without serious problems. (Cf. 130–32, 191–92.) He also appears to accept the proportionality conception of the Highest Good and the principles of moral desert on which it rests as naturally following from other aspects of Kant's views. (Cf. 89, 93–97, 125–29.)

²⁹ This is how I would avoid the conclusions of Thomas Auxter in his "The Unimportance of Kant's Highest Good," in the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 17 (1979): 121–34. Auxter also finds two senses of the Highest Good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. He distinguishes a version of the Highest Good (the "ectypal world", *KpV* 44f/43f), which has a valid role in Kant's procedure of moral judgment, from an otherworldly ideal that has a primarily religious employment. The latter captures what I have called the theological conception. He takes the proportionality of virtue and happiness as the leading idea, and identifies the result with the concept of the Highest Good found in the "Dialectic." He then goes on to argue that an appeal to any such ideal as a standard of conduct is precluded by various aspects of Kant's procedure of moral judgment. I agree with Auxter in thinking that a proportionality of virtue and happiness is a bad idea which is out of place in Kant's view, and in thinking that the idea of an otherworldly end is problematic in itself. But my approach is to attempt to salvage the concept of the Highest Good by showing that these features represent only one description of the notion, and do not in fact state the essential idea.

when thus interpreted. In working out the political implications of this interpretation, I will take my bearings from two brief, but suggestive, passages. It is noteworthy that one is an early passage and the other a later development; this further supports my contention that the secular strain runs continuously throughout Kant's discussions of the Highest Good. From this point on my discussion will be somewhat schematic. However I stress that the major concepts I mention are all taken from these two texts of Kant.

In the first *Critique* Kant describes the "moral world" as a "system of self-rewarding morality," and makes an interesting suggestion as to how both virtue and happiness would come to exist in that world. He writes:

[In] the moral world . . . such a system, in which happiness is bound up with and proportioned to morality, can be conceived as necessary, inasmuch as freedom, partly inspired and partly restricted by moral laws, would itself be the cause of general happiness, since rational beings, under the guidance of such principles, would themselves be the authors both of their own enduring well-being and that of others. But such a system of self-rewarding morality is only an idea, the carrying out of which rests on the condition that everyone does what he ought, that is, that all the actions of rational beings take place just as if they had proceeded from a supreme will that comprehends in itself, all private wills. (*KrV* B 837–38)

This passage outlines a certain ideal of social cooperation which I shall develop briefly. I interpret Kant to be saying that in a world in which everyone acted from the Moral Law, the happiness of all would result from the conduct of all, when it is effectively guided by a shared system of moral principles. If individuals acted from shared moral principles, a state of equilibrium would result, which would be favorable to individuals achieving their ends. No connection is implied here between an individual's moral character and his or her happiness. Rather a social system would exist which is supported and maintained by the conduct of its members, and the happiness of all would be a consequence of the proper functioning of this system. Nor would individuals promote the realization of this state of affairs by aiming at a connection between virtue and happiness. They would seek to establish social conditions that support moral conduct and the realization of various moral ends; once these conditions existed, the happiness of all would be the natural result. This is clearly a secular conception in that this system is brought into existence and sustained by the agency of human beings: "freedom . . . would itself be the cause of general happiness."

We cannot fully evaluate the claim that an effective system of conduct guided by the Moral Law would lead to the happiness of its members, but at first glance it does not appear to rest on unreasonable assumptions. The passage does not assume that individuals would act exclusively from motives of obligation. They would always act in accordance with the Moral Law, but

would also pursue their own ends within the limits that it sets. The two conditions on the use of freedom appear to correspond, respectively, to what the *Metaphysic of Morals* defines as the duties of virtue and the duties of justice. Freedom would be “inspired by moral laws” in that an individual’s system of ends would include the objective ends (one’s own moral perfection and the happiness of others). It would be “restricted by moral laws” in that the pursuit of personal ends would fall within the limits of what is just.

It is not implausible that individuals would by and large be successful in achieving their ends within a system of this sort. General adherence to the duties of justice would lead people to pursue their own ends in ways that do not interfere with the legitimate interests of others. Moreover, it would likely have an effect on people’s desires that promoted, rather than hindered, their satisfaction. As individuals would be guided by moral concerns, they would be less inclined to pursue ends that are divisive, or harmful to others, and would be willing to accept resolutions to any conflicts that might arise when these resolutions accord with publically accepted principles. Beyond that, the duties of virtue would lead individuals to take a positive interest in the happiness of others, as well as a concern for the common good (the proper functioning of this social system). Having a virtuous character would include, in addition to adherence to public moral principles, a willingness to do one’s share in maintaining this system. Overall one could expect an atmosphere of mutual respect and a shared concern for the interests of all, as well as the high degree of social cooperation needed to make this system work.

Kant seems to have thought that the “system of self-rewarding morality” would be the natural consequence of the actions of individuals whose only concern was to abide by the moral law and to carry out their duties individually. Though we should not expect too much from this brief discussion, he does not seem to consider the coordination of the efforts of different individuals, and the institutional structures, that would be needed to bring about and to sustain this system. This gap is made good to an extent in the notion of the Ethical Commonwealth, found in Book 3 of the *Religion*. Without providing much in the way of details, Kant does begin to emphasize the role of social institutions and the need for certain forms of social organization. The Ethical Commonwealth is described as “a society in accordance with, and for the sake of the laws of virtue, a society whose task and duty it is to impress these laws in all their scope upon the entire human race” (*Rel* 86/94). It is also called a “universal republic based on laws of virtue,” which requires “a union of such individuals into a whole toward the same good—into a system of well-disposed men, in which and through whose unity alone the highest moral good can come to pass” (*Rel* 89/97–98). These and similar remarks indicate that Kant sees the Ethical Commonwealth as a society whose institutions are arranged to

embody moral principles and to promote the realization of various moral ends.

Some of the important developments in this passage are as follows. The Ethical Commonwealth is not seen as resulting simply from the efforts of individuals acting from their ordinary duties. It is rather a state of affairs that we must consciously aim to bring about, and the source of a special duty, in addition to the ordinary duties generated by the Categorical Imperative.³⁰ One would act on the duty to promote the Highest Good by working, collectively with others, to restructure existing social institutions in accordance with moral principles. Secondly, Kant suggests that some system of social institutions is needed as a stabilizing force—both as a source of moral education, but also to provide background conditions that are conducive to moral conduct and the maintenance of the moral disposition on the part of individuals. Even individuals of good will might fall into conflicts which undermine their ability to act well, in the absence of appropriate forms of social organization (*Rel* 85 f./93 f., 88 f./97 f.). Certainly one's disposition to act from the Moral Law is strengthened when it is given public support, and when one can count on others to do so as well. As the title of this book of the *Religion* implies, the victory of good over evil (even in the individual) requires the establishment of a certain form of society.³¹

It should be obvious that when the implications of the secular conception are fully developed, the Highest Good becomes an important social ideal that makes a substantive contribution to Kant's moral theory. One can plausibly claim that an account of Kant's moral theory which did not mention the Highest Good, so understood, would be incomplete, and liable to misunderstand some of its fundamental overall aims. It is important to recognize that the Moral Law defines a final end, specifically a social goal of this sort. On Kant's own understanding of it, it is not just a law for individual conduct, but is also to be the basis of a social order in which certain kinds of ends are effectively realized. Progress towards the realization of this state of affairs is a goal of moral conduct, and its aim over time.

³⁰ Cf. *Rel* 89/97: "now here we have a duty which is *sui generis* [*von ihrer eignen Art*], not of men toward men, but of the human race towards itself." See also, especially, the opening paragraph of Bk. IV of the *Religion*, where Kant says that we must make a "special business" of promoting the Ethical Commonwealth, since we cannot count on the required unity resulting from the "accidental agreement of all in a common good . . . [without] a special organization" (*Rel* 139/151).

An argument for such a duty might be developed along the following lines. A commitment to furthering fundamental moral ends could lead one to recognize a duty to promote the Highest Good, once one saw it as providing the social conditions needed for the realization of the former.

³¹ It reads: "The Victory of the Good Over the Evil Principle, and the Founding of a Kingdom of God on Earth."

The doctrine of the Highest Good is one place where Kant can begin to address the problems raised by the fact that we live in a morally imperfect world, which is not conducive to fully rational conduct. Simply put, we live in circumstances in which we cannot count on others to adhere to moral principles and to act as they ought. The result is that different people's choices taken together create conflicts to which there may be no completely acceptable solutions, and that situations arise which seem to make it impossible to act from moral principles. The problem which this poses for Kant is that, in many situations, it may become (or appear to become) irrational for individuals to act from what they recognize as their duty. (Reason may place contradictory demands on the individual which cannot be satisfied.) It might be irrational in the sense that individuals who act from moral principles leave themselves liable to being taken advantage of by others, or manipulated so that their actions have consequences which they do not intend.³² Or it may simply be that moral conduct, as a rule, is ineffective and fails to achieve any good results. The recognition of either kind of fact can be detrimental to moral motivation and erode the individual's commitment to the moral life. Moral conduct will appear pointless, at best, if nothing, or the wrong thing, comes of it more often than not.

Most people think that Kant's moral theory is ill-equipped to deal with moral problems of this sort, and the dilemmas they pose. Much of this is due to the presumption that Kant espoused an unacceptably "rigoristic" interpretation of moral principles. He is widely criticized for requiring strict adherence to very general principles, in a way that allows the agent no latitude to take account of the circumstances, or possible consequences of an action. A similar, but more plausible, criticism is that Kant's view directs individuals to act from principles that one could act from in a Realm of Ends—that is, to act as if we were *now* in a Realm of Ends.³³ It is not clear to me that Kant adopted either form of rigorism, but certain aspects of his view do lend themselves to such an interpretation. In particular, a connection is apparent between a form of rigorism and the theological conception of the Highest Good. If one assumes the existence of another world which is ordered according to moral laws, and in which good character always leads to appropriate consequences, the results one's actions in this world can seem less important. It may even make sense to follow a policy of strict adherence to general principles, that takes only mini-

³² For a discussion of certain aspects of this problem see Christine M. Korsgaard, "The Right to Lie: Kant on Dealing with Evil," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 15 (Fall, 1986).

³³ The first of these criticisms seems entirely implausible, though there may be some support for the second. On this see Thomas E. Hill, Jr., "Kant's Utopianism," in *Akten des 4 Internationalen Kant-Kongresses*, II, hrsg. Gerhard Funke (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1974).

mal regard for the consequences of one's actions. In this way, some form of rigorism and a theological conception of the Highest Good may well go hand in hand, and provide mutual support.

Both versions of the Highest Good can initiate some kind of answer to the problem of the role of moral conduct in an imperfect world. I would simply point out how different the overall orientation of Kant's moral theory will appear, depending on which one chooses. The theological version might suggest the response that, while it is true that good conduct often does not lead to the results for which one hopes, that should not be a matter of great concern. The injustices of this world will be corrected in another, so that all moral agents eventually receive their due. Of course this is just to say that accepting the theological conception seems to remove the need to address the problem of non-ideal circumstances after all.

Proper recognition of the role of the secular, or political, conception of the Highest Good in Kant's moral theory allows a more satisfactory solution, which puts the theory in a better light. Moreover, it seems to be one of the notions that Kant needs to avoid the suggestion of rigorism in his moral view. It allows Kant to address the moral imperfections of the world by proposing a social ideal in which moral conduct is effective in achieving certain ends, to be advanced by a restructuring of the existing social environment. The Highest Good, so understood, would be realized through a system of social institutions which supports the realization of certain moral ends. The aim of this system of institutions would be to create conditions which would be conducive to moral conduct, in part by making it fully rational to act from moral principles. This interpretation of the Highest Good sets as the final end of moral conduct a world in which individuals can act from the Moral Law, and in doing so achieve their intended ends.³⁴

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³⁴ This paper is adapted from the second chapter of my dissertation, *Morality and the Course of Nature: Kant's Doctrine of the Highest Good*, (Harvard, 1984). I would like to thank my advisers, Prof. John Rawls and Prof. Roderick Firth, for their suggestions about various drafts of the dissertation, some of which I hope are reflected in the paper. A version of the paper was presented to the department of philosophy at Georgetown University in February of 1985, and I am grateful for their comments. I am also indebted to Christine Korsgaard for helpful discussion and suggestions at many points, and to the editors of *The Journal of the History of Philosophy*, whose comments and questions led me to make many revisions on the final draft.