THE PROBLEM OF THE HIGHEST GOOD: KANT AND HOPE IN THE AGE OF ENVIRONMENTAL COLLAPSE

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Vassia, Liam, and Oisín. To my wife, Sarah, I owe everything. Words would inadequately express my gratitude. Thus, I have dedicated this work to her.

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Abbreviations for Primary Sources

Diogenes Laertius

DL	*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* (1972)	

Epicurus

PD	*Principal Doctrines* (1994)	

Hesiod

WD	*Works and Days* (2018)	

Kant

A	*Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*	*Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (2007a)
C	*Briefe*	*Correspondence* (1999)
CPJ	*Kritik der Urteilskraft*	*Critique of the Power of Judgment* (2000)
CPR A/B	*Kritik der reinen Vernunft*	*Critique of Pure Reason* 1781/1787 (1998)
CPrR	*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*	*Critique of Practical Reason* (1996a)
G	*Grundlegung zur Metphysik der Sitten*	*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1996b)
HNDE	"*Geschichte und Naturbeschreibung der merkwürdigsten Vorfälle des Erdbebens, welches an dem Ende des 1755sten Jahres einen großen Theil der Erde erschüttert hat*"	"History and Natural Description of the most Noteworthy Occurrences of the Earthquake that Struck a Large Part of the Earth at the End of the Year 1755" (2012a)
ID	*De mundi sensibilis atque intelligibilis forma et principiis*	*On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World* (1992a)
IUH	"*Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerliche Absicht*"	"Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim" (2007b)
MC	"*Moralphilosophie Collins*"	"Moral Philosophy: Collins's Lecture Notes" (1997c)
MM	*Die Metaphysik der Sitten*	*The Metaphysics of Morals* (1996e)
MMr	"*Moral Mrongovius II*"	"Morality according to Prof. Kant: Mrongovius's Second Set of Lecture Notes" (1997d)
MMV	"*Metaphysic der Sitten Vigilantius*"	"Kant on the Metaphysics of Morals: Vigiliantius's Lecture Notes" (1997a)
NF	"*Naturrecht Feyerabend*"	Natural Right Feyerabend
OFBS	*Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen*	*Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (2007c)
PE	"*Philosophische Enzyklopädie*"	"Philosophical Encyclopedia"

PPH	"*Praktische Philosophie Herder*"	"Kant's Practical Philosophy: Herder's Lecture Notes" (1997b)
R	*Reflexionen*	"Reflections" (2005)
Rel.	*Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*	*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1996d)
RP	"*Philosophische Religionslehre nach Pölitz*"	"Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion" (1996c)
OPA	*Der einzig mögliche Beweisgrund zu einer Demonstration des Daseins Gottes*	*The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God* (1992b)
UNH	*Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels oder Versuch von der Verfassung und dem mechanischen Ursprunge des ganzen Weltgebäudes nach Newtonischen Grundsätzen abgehandelt*	*Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens or Essay on the Constitution of the Mechanical Origin of the Whole Universe according to Newtonian Principles* (2012c)

Lucretius

NT	*On the Nature of Things* (2001)

Plato

Apol.	*Apology* (1997a)
Crit.	*Critias* (1997b)
Rep.	*Republic* (2004)
Tim.	*Timaeus* (1997c)

Sextus Empiricus

AM	*Against the Mathematicians* (2008)

Stobaeus

Anth.	*Anthology* (2008)

INTRODUCTION

1. Motivation

Many people believe they have something called a conscience that guides their decision-making. These individuals regard themselves as duty-bound in various ways; they think that some actions are morally obligatory or forbidden, that under the right circumstances, they can owe it to themselves or to others to behave in certain ways or even to adopt certain dispositions or attitudes. But, of course, conscience is not the only feature of the practical lives of human beings. Those same agents who hold themselves to be under moral obligations also make decisions on the basis of things that interest them materially, from the perspective of their personal happiness. If their consciences typically orient them toward the interests of others, their desires for happiness orient them toward the things they perceive will lead to their own flourishing, the fulfillment of their wants and needs.

Ideally, these two governing practical logics would point in the same direction. That is, a person with a conscience, beset with ineliminable human desires, would be able to conduct a life so that they can fulfill the latter without violating the former. Plausibly, this kind of harmonious practical existence could be called the best for a human being, for it would combine what is thought to be good for the individual with what is thought to be good morally speaking. In other words, the harmony of moral conduct and personal happiness might be considered the highest good for that person and an object worthy of aspiration.[1]

But it is not at all obvious why we should consider such a harmony a relatively attainable or even a merely possible goal. After all, moral conduct and the pursuit of happiness certainly look like different things. Indeed, Immanuel Kant famously argued in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* that truly moral action could only be recognized as such in the absence of concurrent desires, as these might obscure the agent's motive. In any case, if things are as they seem, we could surely never count on achieving the highest good so understood. What assurance could we have that the methods for achieving one of these aims are not at odds with the methods for achieving the other? We might refer to this as "the problem of the highest good."

Yet, aspire to the highest good we nonetheless do, an attestation of its importance. In fact, many of the structures of our every-day lives, personal and communal, are intelligible as tools for approximating the highest good. Practices of praise and blame, reward and punishment, incentive and disincentive are all readily understood as mechanisms for bringing us closer to the possible world in which there is no conflict between the demands of conscience and the desire for well-being. So too are many of our internal techniques of self-exhortation and encouragement: removing temptations, habituating regard for others, guilt, recrimination, pride, self-contentment. More broadly, working with others to create fair and stable social institutions seems to conduce to making the highest good closer to a reality, insofar doing so allows us to acculturate to norms and habits that coordinate the fulfillment of duties and desires. We might even wonder whether this is

[1] Various formulations relating to morality, virtue, duty, obligation, etc. vs. prudence, happiness, desire, inclination, etc. are meant to refer to the same dichotomy, sometimes with an eye toward the practical reasoning involved, sometimes toward the principles and motives, sometimes toward the objects of action. See Ch. 2, § 1, fn. XX for a fuller discussion of this point.

not the point of society, understood not merely as an aggregate but as the cooperative enterprise of living the best lives we can together.

The world, however, frequently intervenes. Not just blind nature but the machinations of our fellow human beings make it such that, despite our efforts, morality and happiness diverge often enough for this to be a tragically recognizable fixture of human life. A good deal of accumulated cultural wisdom addresses the perception that doing the right thing can come at personal cost or that wickedness seems no impediment to material abundance. Yet philosophy often goes farther, and this is the first phenomenon motivating this dissertation. Where art typically seeks to warn, philosophy not infrequently endeavors to console. Confronted with the apparent tension between moral duty and personal happiness, there arises a natural and powerful inclination to avoid the conclusion that it is effectively hopeless to pursue the highest good. Philosophy, if it could show that the potential divergence of virtue and happiness is only apparent, would serve then as a theoretical and psychological shield against this hopelessness. Perhaps too it could be a social tonic in service of the promotion of moral, pro-social conduct, warding off the suspicion that we could be much better off if we consistently placed our desires ahead of the demands of our consciences.

One objective of this dissertation will be to probe the limitations of this consolatory impulse. This is ultimately in service, however, to another objective. Whether philosophical consolation is right, it will be most consequential when the divergence of virtue and happiness is most acute, and this, I argue, occurs when the social patterns contributing to our approximations of the highest good come under stress. The second phenomenon motivating this dissertation is thus the current observable trend toward future instability in human society. The global post-Cold War era has been shaped by a number of destabilizing influences, but most importantly has proceeded against the backdrop of looming environmental degradation. Collapsing biodiversity, increasing pollution, and, of course, a warming atmosphere all point toward a future state of affairs more hostile to the human good life than any in recent history. The coronavirus pandemic that began in late 2019 has revealed the fault lines between and within nations that undermine cooperation, serving as a kind of sobering dress rehearsal for the challenge of coordinating on climate change. Indeed, the pandemic—a volatile mix of social failure, collective and personal responsibility, and the indifference of nature—is itself a fertile site for variations of the problem of the highest good. It is also a possible instance of the effects of human encroachment on the environment, and climate scientists and epidemiologists warn that such pandemics could become increasingly frequent.

All of these threats to well-being, which might be collected under the umbrella of "environmental collapse," contribute to a world in which virtue and happiness diverge more often and more drastically. Chapter 1 of this dissertation begins by considering the role of a more localized disaster, the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, in shaping European Enlightenment thought and nudging Kant in the direction of a problematic understanding of the highest good. Chapter 4 comes full circle by considering environmental collapse as the vehicle for the problem of the highest good for our time. This it does not only by generating severe threats to well-being—which are often random but sometimes occur in inverse correlation to moral desert—but also by undermining the practices we adopt to mitigate everyday threats to the highest good.

We may, now and in the near future, be tempted to this or that strategy of confronting such a challenge. One such strategy is that of philosophical consolation. It is easy enough to understand to motivation to try to reason one's way out of an apparently unpalatable state of affairs. The suspicion I raise after exploring the problem of the highest good is that the traditional mode of

conceptualizing it away, while tempting in the face of adversity, only bears so much strain. When moral and prudential reason seem to consistently point in different directions or when the world allots hardship indiscriminately or even, as is sometimes the case, in inverse proportion to desert, philosophical consolation seeks to conceptually reconcile virtue and happiness to one another. And perhaps, as some traditions have it, such conceptual maneuvering can even have some psychological efficacy. But catastrophe, I think, can stress this strategy past its breaking point. If it becomes too difficult for us to believe in reconciliation—that is, if we become inconsolable—then we will need a different philosophical strategy, one that starts from the acknowledgement that the problem of the highest good is perhaps insoluble.

2. General Place in the Literature

The contributions of this dissertation aim to slot into two lacunae in existing scholarship, one in the history of philosophy, another in environmental philosophy.

2.1. Historical

In Kant studies, the place of the highest good in Kant's system is well-trodden, though it still has received comparatively little attention next to the copiously studied *Critique of Pure Reason* and *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Kant wrote that pure philosophy has three general questions, "What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?" (CPR A805/B833). The first question concerns theoretical philosophy, the second practical philosophy, while the third seems in some way to tie the first two together and serves as a segue to Kant's philosophy of religion. Of course, the question of hope is closely related to the role of the highest good, and it is perhaps because the highest good thereby opens on to the philosophy of religion for Kant that it is relatively neglected, despite featuring prominently in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. After all, many Kant scholars have historically regarded Kant's rational religion as qualitatively inferior to his contributions to metaphysics, epistemology, and secular moral philosophy, and as a liability insofar as it is in any way connected to them.

Defenses of Kant's rational reconstruction of religious concepts do exist. Notable is Allen Wood's *Kant's Moral Religion*, which argues that the attitude of moral faith—the belief in the practical postulates outlined above—is "the *Weltanschauung* of the critical philosophy itself," of a piece with Kant's theoretical and practical commitments (1970, 249). Much work is similarly concerned with the viability of Kant's defense of the rationality of belief in the practical postulates, whether they are extraneous to and interfere with the motive of duty that is central to Kant's ethics, and whether their objects must be conceived of as actual or merely possible (see, e.g., Guyer 2014, 271–73). Other discussions concern the precise relationship between the highest good and the moral law and human moral dispositions (Allison 1990, 171–78); Kant's position appears to undergo revision, and it is not always entirely clear what the dependency status of the moral law to the possibility of the highest good is (see, e.g., Greene 1960, lvii n.).

Oftentimes, contemporary Kantians, particularly those working in ethics, prefer to excise as much religious baggage from Kant as can plausibly be done. As Katrin Flikschuh argues, we can view the two extremes of interpretation as a divide between those who, like Wood, see Kant's philosophy of religion as integral to his critical philosophy and those who think there are insights in Kant that can be entirely separated from the religious components—both the doctrine of the

postulates of pure practical reason and the full rational reconstruction of certain aspects of Christianity (Flikschuh 2010, 96). In Wood's camp, Flikschuh also places John Hare (2002), who, like Wood, argues that Kant's moral religion is indispensable to his ethics but, unlike Wood, sees this as a fatal flaw. In the opposite camp, interpreters such as Onora O'Neill (1996) lean heavily on political interpretations of Kant's doctrine of the primacy of practical over theoretical reason to bypass concerns about moral self-perfection, on which Kant's attempts to rehabilitate concepts such as immortality or divine grace might come to bear.

This split parallels similar battle lines formed over interpreting the concept of the highest good itself and the obligations it generates. Interpretations that lean on the personal tend to see the highest good as a question of desert for personal merit and for that reason emphasize the importance of questions such as Kant's ideal of holiness or the role of a postulated afterlife in the achievement of the highest good. Socio-political interpretations, by contrast, emphasize the social-philosophical strain in Kant's thought, especially the politico-teleological writings, and see the highest good and the duty to promote it as a part of Kant's demand that the human species "moralize" itself (see A, 7:324f.).

Two features of Kant's thinking on the hope, which have been largely overlooked, receive attention in this dissertation. First, little is said on just what the hope Kant seeks to justify is or on what he believes is its practical significance. Where secondary literature has addressed this these topics, they have tended to confuse, to greater or lesser degrees, Kantian hope with belief in the postulates of pure practical reason. Andrew Chignell (2013) is a notable exception here, and I follow him in thinking that (and this should be clear even from the brief exposition in the previous section), hope and belief are distinct for Kant. The answer to the question "What may I hope?" is not, for example, "that a benevolent god exists" or "that I will have life after death," but rather "for happiness in proportion to virtue," which is to say, for the highest good. Disagreement in the literature about the relationship between hope and belief also persists, where they are distinguished. O'Neill interprets Kant as reducing belief (or faith, as she prefers) to a "form of hope" on the grounds that it is through hope in the efficacy of our moral intentions that we can justify belief in the content of the practical postulates (1996, 282–83). I argue, *pace* O'Neill, that this gets the relationship between hope and belief precisely backwards. It is crucial to Kant's conception of moral autonomy that commitment to moral intentions is not predicated on hope. Rather, it is, on Kant's view, the independent existence of moral demands that justifies belief in his practical postulates, and it is belief in the practical postulates that rationalizes hope for the highest good

Second, when Kant scholars have addressed the highest good, they have typically treated it in isolation from the philosophical traditions on which Kant draws. The temptation with as self-consciously architectonic a philosopher as Kant is to assume that each part of the system develops organically from an understanding of the whole. On this assumption, Kant's highest good is a technical concept fit specifically to play a role in his system. This assumption gains strength from the relative paucity of Kant's published remarks on how his account relates to a long history of thinking about the good. In drawing extensively on unpublished and more obscure published writing, this dissertation shows the continuity of Kant's concept of the highest good with its place in ancient sources. This also means that the "problem of the highest good" around which this dissertation is oriented is not a problem for or from Kant *per se* but rather a problem Kant

identifies at the root of a diverse tradition of thinking about a basic feature of human beings' practical lives.

2.2. Environmental

The second position this dissertation attempts to occupy follows from the recognition of the relevance of the problem of the highest good in general but also in the specific context of looming environmental collapse. Since Aldo Leopold (1949) articulated the conservationist's "land ethic," philosophers have sought to address the characteristic concerns of the environmentalist movement in their professional idiom. While concern for the environment as such has been decried[2] as a gateway to "environmental fascism"—a subordination of the interests of humans, especially the least well-off, to the interests of the biotic community writ large—it has, in general, not been difficult to justify regard for non-human features of the world in terms of existing ethical theories. Indeed, even Kant argued for consideration of environmental integrity on the grounds that cultivating a regard for the well-being of animals and an appreciation for natural beauty fostered a fine and empathetic sensibility (MM, 6:443). In the latter half of the twentieth century, more direct defenses of animal welfare or rights and of regard for other features of the non-human natural world have proliferated, whether on consequentialist (Singer 1974), Kantian or deontological (C. Korsgaard 2015), or even virtue-ethical grounds (Hill, Jr. 1983). In this respect, a great amount of the conceptual space has been charted in thinking about the duties, obligations, and responsibilities of human agents toward animals and the environment, human interests aside. That is to say that environmental philosophers and ethicists have put in the work of articulating the aspects of what respect for moral obligations looks like with regard to the environment.

This ground-level work provides a robust moral-philosophical framework. Building on environmental ethics, philosophers can begin to tackle issues surrounding human impacts on the environment as these effects come to fruition. A full moral-philosophical account of the relationships between humanity and the natural world, however, requires thinking not just about what human beings owe directly to the non-human world but also about environmental obligations vis-à-vis impacts on their fellow human beings. As Robert Figueroa and Claudia Mills put it,

> Environmental ethics focuses on the relationship between humans and nature; environmental justice emerged as a concern for both activists and academics when it was realized that this relationship is not constant across all humanity. [. . .] Environmental justice refers to the conceptual connections and causal relationships between environmental issues and social justice. (2001, 426–27)

The natural world is not the only morally relevant patient of human action on the environment. Exploiting natural resources, filling waste sinks, altering ecosystems, and so on all have knock-on effects on other humans (and, indeed, often on the agents themselves). Considerations of environmental justice shine a light on the morally relevant effects of environmental issues on human well-being, especially, as has been the case, on distributive injustices regarding

[2] See, for example, Tom Regan (1983, 18) and Kristin Schrader-Frechette (1996, 63). For a defense of biotic holism against this charge, see J. Baird Callicott (2001).

environmental benefits and burdens (Wenz 1988, 4). These injustices include depletion of resources by one or more individuals or groups at the expense of their usefulness to others, which typically follows pre-existing patterns of domination (Newell 2005); the disproportionate burdening of environmental harms arising from excessive waste on historically marginalized groups (Cole and Foster 2001); harms to future generations through degradation of the environment in the present (Caney 2014); and issues of participatory and representational injustice within the environmental movement (Young 1983).

Thus, the environmental justice literature adds to accounts of environmental duties and obligations by incorporating philosophical analysis of environmental "goods" in regard to their distribution and pursuit by individuals and groups. This goes some way to laying out both components of the highest good in an environmental context and provides the framework for understanding the problem of the highest good at their intersection. The latter, however, is not highlighted in the extant literature. The significance of the problem of the highest good in an environmental context, as I see it, owes to the status of environmental collapse as a potential, largely human-caused, global disaster. In its disastrousness, environmental collapse distributes harms, prevents goods, and disrupts social mechanisms for coordinating well-being and moral conduct. As a human-caused disaster, it is itself an instance of the problem of the highest good inasmuch as distributions of environmental benefits and burdens inversely correlate with environmental and non-environmental ethicality, as environmental justice scholars have long argued.

But there is an additional wrinkle to this story that is typically elided. Human impacts on the environment are not just historical givens but ongoing processes, and looming environmental collapse represents a call to action. Although distributed environmental harms are sometimes associated with obvious violations of environmental duties or other duties of justice, some are, especially in aggregate, associated with behavior not typically thought of as blameworthy. Some argue that this means that many ubiquitous behaviors should be reconceived as violations of environmental duties insofar as they constitute aggregative harms (Kahn 2014). Others note that the complexity of the causal relationships involved in environmental collapse and the distribution of harms may induce further moral harms by providing cover for inaction or backsliding (Gardiner 2006; Lazarus 2009). But in general, contemporary environmental activism and messaging centers on the alleged universal benefits of constraining exploitation of environmental resources for material gain or on creating "win-win" scenarios for tackling climate change (Levin et al. 2012; Cripps 2015; Kelleher 2015). These efforts often rely on the promise of a united or universal human subject for whom environmental collapse is an unmitigated harm of such severity that any remedial action would be preferable (Chaudhary 2020).

By contrast, viewing environmental crises through the lens of the highest good is a way of confronting the potentially irreconcilable contradictions of environmental responsibilities and material goods that will accompany the efforts to reverse climate change, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, slow deforestation and habitat destruction, and halt species extinction. It may turn out that some desiderata of the environmental movement require human beings to sacrifice some of their material well-being for the sake of the integrity of natural ecosystems or the survival of non-human animal or plant species. Others may require some subset of humanity to forego material gain to improve or save the lives of those in another subset, with no real alternative benefit to the former. The wish for a united humanity represents the dream that it will always be in the best

interest of each person or group to fulfill environmental obligations, but this is likely not the case.[3] The problem of the highest good articulates this fear as well as the fear that the environmental damages done may be irremediable. If this latter were the case, then the environmentalist movement would be a tragic coda to modern history, in which human beings fruitlessly attempted to reverse the damages they had caused. Yet many environmentalists would wish to argue that even if this were likely to be true, we human beings have an obligation to make the attempt. This is an outlook more easily accommodated by a non-consolatory philosophy that acknowledges the reality of the problem of the highest good.

3. Chapter Overviews

3.1. Optimism, Epicureanism, and the Lisbon Earthquake

Chapter 1 begins with an examination of one of the most intellectually (not to mention materially) consequential disasters in modern European history, the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. This earthquake, which struck just off the Portuguese coast, dealt a crippling blow to one of the leading European powers of the day, and augured the decline of the ebullient spirit of Enlightenment optimism. The ghastly scale of the calamity inspired a generation of European philosophers, notably Voltaire and Rousseau, to defect from the prevailing view that the trajectory of history provided manifest proof of the philosopher's and theologian's dictum that this is the best of all possible worlds. This latter view, which up to the very year of the quake was the subject of prominent academic discourse—in 1755, the Prussian Academy of Sciences asked for submissions on Alexander Pope's optimism in *An Essay on Man*—might have seemed, up to that point, plausible to a well-heeled European, but in the eyes of many it came up wanting in the face of so much destruction.

During the Earthquake year, Kant happened to be considering the Optimism debate, perhaps having been prompted by the Prussian Academy's essay contest. In this chapter, Kant's early development serves as a kind of case study for the influence of the Earthquake on the complex current of social thought among philosophers of the day. Kant's teacher, the Wolffian Martin Knutzen, introduced him to the major contemporary scientific questions through Newtonian physics, which married well with his interest in Ancient Greek and Latin natural philosophy. Kant's outlook on the world as an early-career scholar was a mix of Epicurean-inspired, atomistic mechanism and Newtonian, predictive empiricism. This led him to initially sympathize with the more materialistic optimism of Pope over the rationalistic optimism of Leibniz.

Yet Kant's early optimistic naturalism was unique in its fatally unstable mix of teleology and mechanism. Following Pope, Kant sought, in observing the natural world, signs of creative and benevolent intelligence; but following Epicurus and Newton, he was committed to nature's explicability in mechanistic terms. His solution, a kind of benevolent, non-occasionalist deism, was challenged by the event of the Earthquake: here, surely, was an indisputable counterexample to the proposition that the world could not be improved upon.

Kant's proposal in his *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* had been that we could observe the intentionality of God in an atomistic and mechanistic universe via the ways in

[3] Cheryl Hall (2013) defends the need for positive visions of a green future alongside an acknowledgement of the losses those futures might have entailed.

which the laws governing the movement of matter conduced to our benefit. In his writings on the Earthquake itself, Kant experimented with the optimistic thought that the same natural laws that caused the devastation in Lisbon were those that made the Earth fertile and hospitable to life. But alongside this defense of the goodness of the natural world we find the suggestion, more indicative of the future direction of Kant's philosophy, that events such as earthquakes signal to human beings that the true locus of value is not in material things, as an Epicurean would have it. Although Kant never fully lets go of the idea that the observation of nature suggests benevolent intentionality (this is relegated to the status of a regulative, rather than constitutive, rational principle after the Critical turn, which is to say that it is reflective of the subject rather than the object of ratiocination), he does soon abandon the attempt to defend the constitutive goodness of natural laws. Meanwhile, Kant's newfound interest in moral philosophy leads him away from his early Epicurean leanings and toward the transcendental theory of value for which he is better known.

3.2. Kant's Commonsense Critique of Stoic and Epicurean Ethics

Chapter 2 begins outlining the terms of what I call the problem of the highest good as a perennial philosophical problem. The canonical statement of this problem is taken from Kant, but the point of this chapter is to present it as a philosophical challenge with a historical pedigree and an extant tradition of responses. In order to do this, I trace the development of Kant's conception of the highest good and its problems through his engagement with historical sources in moral philosophy. This begins with his move away from Epicureanism in the 1760s after having become disillusioned with a materialist theory of value and continues through the 1770s to a comprehensive account of ancient ethical theories and their alleged shortcomings. Kant's review and criticism of the history of moral philosophy is the framework within which he comes to see the highest good as a problematic conjunction of virtue and happiness. What he ultimately ends up with is a view in practical philosophy analogous to that in his theoretical philosophy: that philosophizing about the object of practical reason, the good, without a critique of the rational faculty itself, results in intractable antinomies.

In the 1760s, Kant's notes on moral philosophy and notes taken by students on his earliest lectures on the subject, especially those of Herder, reveal that Kant's dissatisfaction with a materialist theory of value had hardened into a general contempt for empiricism in ethics. According to Herder, he counts the theories of the Epicureans along with that of Hobbes as esteeming human dignity and the good far too low, a natural development from his suggestion after the Lisbon Earthquake that we ought not to look for the source of value in the natural world. Out of these early reflections, however, arises a more sophisticated and broad-reaching view of the various options available to philosophers for characterizing the good. Kant focuses on the views of ancient philosophers for whom the object in ethics is to define "the goal" of life, which is to say, the highest good at which one could aim.

While Kant surveys the various definitions of the good of the ancients—Cynic, Stoic, Hedonist, Epicurean—he believes all of them to be inadequate characterizations of the ideal life of a human being. The ancients typically represented their views on the good through portraits of ideal persons, which is just what human beings would resemble if they pursued only the good and shunned the bad. Each such portrait, in Kant's view, is a distortion of what it would be to live an ideal human life. Kant's argument, I suggest, is not entirely explicit, but can be reconstructed as

centering on a critique of the ancient philosophers' incomplete conception of the human being. This leads Kant to eventually home in on two opposed ideals, which make it into the published discussion on the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*: those of the Epicureans and those of the Stoics. The Epicureans, Kant argues, focus on human beings' sensuous nature in formulating their ideal to the exclusion of their rational faculties. The Stoics, Kant thinks, unjustly exclude that same sensuous nature from their ideal.

As Kant sees it, both mistakes arise from proceeding according to a purely natural conception of the human being. Kant's position seems to be that the ironic result of this is that both camps miss the mark in their characterization of human practical mark. The Epicurean demands too little of a person, the Stoic too much. The former reduces ethical principles to the pursuit of personal happiness while the latter elevates sensuous satisfaction to a consequence of perfect moral conduct. The Stoic error, to Kant, is a less egregious one, but is still nevertheless mistaken in assuming that the locus of rational ethics lies in the mastery of the senses through self-perfection, rather than in respect for human dignity as incommensurate with natural goods. Consequently, both the Epicureans and the Stoics, on Kant's interpretation, collapse the practical distinction between meeting moral obligations and pursuing happiness. Doing so is a strategy for resolving (or, effectively, dissolving) the problem of the highest good—if prudential and moral conduct are one and the same, there is no potential conflict between prudence and morality—and one that Kant thinks is unsuccessful. Instead, he argues, a convincing resolution can only come after a critique of practical reason, which would involve acknowledging the apriority of moral duties and thus the irreconcilability of virtue and happiness in the natural world.

3.3. Kant's Problem of the Highest Good

After having looked at the problem of the highest good as a general philosophical problem—arising out of a need to confront the apparent disharmonies between fulfilling moral obligations and pursuing the satisfaction of personal inclinations—and one with a suite of historical responses, Chapter 3 examines its canonical Kantian presentation in the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Kant came to formulate his conception of the highest good through the conjunction of historical reading and contemporary intellectual currents. The former is examined in Chapter 2, the latter is partially suggested in Chapter 1. During his philosophical prime, Kant was responding to but also shaping the tenor of philosophical debates. One reaction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* was that, in seeking to refute skepticism, Kant actually deepened it—a possibility he seems alive to in his admission in the second 1787 edition of the first *Critique* that, "I had to deny knowledge to make room for faith." Kant was speaking specifically of what he refers to as noumena corresponding to ideas of pure reason (e.g., God, the soul) that most take to objects of religious significance. His critique of the purported metaphysical proofs to knowledge of such objects was, to his mind, in the service of allowing true faith, while putting knowledge itself on a firmer footing. But some readers instead saw in Kant, as in Descartes before him, the undermining of an old philosophical edifice followed by an unsuccessful attempt at raising a new one.

An analogous reaction in the realm of practical philosophy can be seen in the philosophical letters to Kant from Maria von Herbert. For von Herbert, Kant's philosophy had put the apriority of the moral in starkly unmistakable terms yet seemed to provide no direction for a life well-lived. From the point-of-view of the pre-critical philosopher, the banishment of teleology from a constitutive account of ethics (as much as for an account of metaphysics) undercuts the conceptual

resources used to orient human reason in an ethically and epistemically hostile world. The teleological theoretician, when confronted with baffling phenomena, perseveres in the presumption that the world is arranged for us to be able to understand; the teleological ethicist confronted with a practical dilemma presumes an ideal of the good life in pursuit of which the former can be overcome. But as von Herbert discovered in her own experience, duty and the good life may be simply and brutely at odds, with the former annihilating the latter for one committed to obeying the demands of conscience. Von Herbert thus presents a case study for the problem of the highest good.

Kant's presentation of the highest good very much conforms to von Herbert's interpretation. As this chapter explains in detail, the highest good for Kant is the unconditioned object of practical reason, and this in two senses. On the one hand, the highest good is the "supreme good," the necessary condition for all other goods; on the other, it is the "complete good," the encompassment of all possible goods. According to the latter sense, the highest good includes moral virtue as its necessary condition; according to the latter, it includes happiness in proportion to moral virtue, for wherever there is virtue, Kant argues, there is additional good to be had from happiness, and wherever there is vice, happiness is no good at all. But since, *contra* the Epicureans and the Stoics, Kant maintains that virtue and happiness are different in kind and that their pursuit is governed by two distinct sets of practical principles, there is no reason to expect that they will usually coincide. A moral agent may often have to give up on happiness, as von Herbert believed she did, to fulfill moral obligations.

If the highest good is both the unconditioned object of practical reason, the final goal of human life, but also impossible to achieve, Kant says in the second *Critique* that the appropriate response would be skepticism about the good life. That is, one would recognize the validity of the moral law *per se* as a restrictive principle on action but still have no guiding practical orientation in life. This is Kant's "Antinomy of Practical Reason." As in the first *Critique*, Kant's practical philosophy has a destructive and a constructive part. The destructive part lies in the purported refutation of historical ethical ideals that could scaffold a good life—whether naturalistic as with the ancients or supernaturally religious as with the medieval theologians—as bases for moral principles. The constructive part is not only the *a priori* moral law but a substituted account for a hoped-for highest good relying purely on non-epistemic belief in the hypothetical conditions of its possibility. Unlike, say, the arguments of rationalist theologians, who found ethics on the strength of metaphysical arguments about the existence of God, Kant claims that the rejection of those arguments clears the way for accepting a pure moral faith, in which commitment to the highest good overcomes a lack of theoretical knowledge.

Thus, Kant proposes a kind of "practical" solution to the problem of the highest good: instead of knowledge claims underwriting ethical ideals, the antecedent strength of one's commitment to achieving the highest good is supposed to foster faith in the conditions for its possibility—immortality of the soul, existence of God, and free will. Kant believes this strategy for responding to the problem of the highest good is open only to the transcendental idealist, who has rejected the possibility of knowledge of things in themselves and thus has the space to embrace moral faith. Of course, Kant thinks also that the transcendental realist's strategies for resolving the problem of the highest good are no resolutions at all. They flounder either on distortions of the human condition as with the ancients or on metaphysical nonsense as with the rational theologians. Thus, the only possible strategy, in Kant's view, for confronting the problem of the highest good is moral faith. If

moral faith too is implausible, then the problem of the highest good is perhaps just an insolubly tragic feature of human life. The position I tentatively adopt in the following chapter is that although there is no really convincing solution to the problem of the highest good—which is to say that the highest good is an unachievable ideal—there are ways of partially mitigating some forms of it, and that present disastrous circumstances threaten to undermine and overwhelm those mitigation strategies.

3.4. Radical Hope

With the problem of the highest good elaborated in the context of Kant's moral philosophy (Chapter 3) as well as in a comparative historical context (Chapter 2), Chapter 4 considers it as a pervasive feature of human life, beyond the confines of a particular philosophical system. Coming back around to Chapter 1, the problem of the highest good describes the bifurcated status of our practical reason, a bifurcation that becomes especially acute in disastrous circumstances. To note that disasters serve as counterexamples to optimism is also to see, *ipso facto*, that they are vehicles for the problem of the highest good. For not only do disasters cause untold suffering, they also disrupt the fabric of social institutions designed to help us approximate the highest good.

The first goal of this chapter is thus to look at the problem of the highest good in the present era, which is one of looming disastrous threats. The collection of environmental risks causally related to human economic activity are particularly relevant, insofar as they threaten to profoundly disrupt life worldwide. It thus behooves us to think of the problem of the highest good as not simply a feature of the practical life of an isolated individual but as a challenge to the cooperative activity of building a global society in which virtue and happiness can be roughly coordinated. I thus look at how the problem of the highest good features in the lives of collectives as well as individuals. This is preparatory to an examination of the ways in which environmental risks threaten the pursuit of the highest good.

This chapter's second goal is to begin considering what philosophical and affective resources might be available to us in the face of these risks. If, as the preceding chapters suggest, the problem of the highest good is, strictly speaking, insoluble, then many people will likely find philosophical consolation insufficient as the negative consequences of environmental risks compound. Whether this consolation comes in the form of the traditional theoretical modes Kant criticizes or in Kant's own practical-theological mode, its plausibility will become strained under the increasing weight of ecologically associated social disruption. Many will, I think, find themselves "inconsolable."

Put another way, threats to the highest good from environmental collapse seem to overwhelm the possibility of consolation. Many of these threats stem from near-existential risks. Existential risk poses the most extreme version of the problem of the highest good, insofar as it affects the possibility of any good whatsoever. For the same reason, however, it is psychologically, if not philosophically, difficult to give such risk very much consideration. More mundane versions of the problem of the highest good are much more pressing insofar as they may frequently be mitigated, even if not entirely resolved. Placing the problem of the highest good in a social context reveals the extent to which social arrangements can be understood as such mitigation strategies. The intensity of the threat from environmental collapse consists partially in its undermining these strategies and is thus a kind of death by a thousand cuts. This is because environmental collapse is a state of generalized calamity.

But there are also idiosyncratic instantiations of the problem of the highest good that come specifically with the phenomenon of environmental collapse. I divide these into two broad types: unfair distributions of environmental benefits and burdens and problems of anthropic moral hopelessness. The former is closely related to issues of environmental justice. The latter consists in worries about the moral status of humanity writ large. Thus, these categorizations can also be seen as describing environmental versions of the problem of the highest good that arise among human beings and between human beings and non-human nature. In conjunction with the threat of environmental collapse as generalized calamity, these problems constitute a formidable threat to any effort to mitigate the problem of the highest good and challenge the plausibility of philosophical consolation.

If, in the face of such a challenge, one is inconsolable, the ethical question becomes: "What resources are available to help cope with this aspect of environmental collapse such that agents are not morally paralyzed?" One possibility, I argue, is that of radical hope. The form of radical hope that I consider for the remainder of the chapter shares features with Kant's version of hope for the highest good but is independent of the theological terms in which Kant casts that. The principal inspiration for radical hope in the face of environmental collapse is what Jonathan Lear identifies as the virtues of nineteenth and twentieth century Crow leader Plenty Coups. Plenty Coups's virtue of courage is a form of radical hope amidst social collapse that would serve also as a ballast against despair for environmentalists. The radical hope of Plenty Coups has been considered an inspiration for environmentalists before, though exclusively in a virtue-ethical context and primarily as a model for reconceiving thick conceptions of the good life as they become environmentally impossible. I extend the account of radical hope into a general framework for evaluating and reevaluating thick conceptions of both the good life and of environmental obligations and situate it as a response to the problem of the highest good. In this guise, radical hope becomes a tool for conscience-driven humans to reimagine ethical concepts and rebuild them in such a way as to gird efforts to fulfill environmental responsibilities absent the assurance of material reward for doing so.

CHAPTER 1. OPTIMISM, EPICUREANISM, AND THE LISBON EARTHQUAKE

1. The Great Lisbon Earthquake

On the morning of November 1, 1755, Lisbon, as the capital of the Portuguese Empire whose vast colonial holdings included swaths of Africa and South America, was likely the wealthiest city in Europe (Kendrick 1957). By the end of that day, it was almost entirely in ruins. At approximately 09:40 local time, an 8.5-magnitude earthquake had struck about 120 miles west-southwest of the Cape of St. Vincent. Lisbon's distinctive 16th-century Manueline architecture collapsed on its inhabitants, leading that great critic of human artifice, Rousseau, to reflect, "[I]t was hardly nature who assembled there twenty thousand houses of six or seven stories. If the residents of this large city had been more evenly dispersed and less densely housed, the losses would have been fewer or perhaps none at all" (Rousseau 1967).

The first day of November in Catholic Portugal was All Saints' Day, and from 9 to 10 A.M., a considerable number of Lisbon's residents were at mass. Unfortunately, more than three-quarters of the churches in the city were either severely damaged or collapsed with their congregations inside (Aguirre 2012, 38). Less than an hour after the three-and-a-half-minute quake, a historic tsunami flooded the low-lying port. Rushing up the Tagus River, the inundation swept countless survivors who had gathered on its banks into the Atlantic Ocean. The Ribeira Palace, the Portuguese royal residence, which also stood along the banks of the river, was destroyed, along with an immense library and archive housing paintings by Titian, Rubens, and Correggio.

But the inrush of the ocean was still insufficient to quench the fires erupting amidst the ruins. Thousands of candles lit throughout the city for the holiday sparked a firestorm reaching temperatures of potentially up to 1,832°F. The inferno engulfed surviving structures and suffocated those trapped within the rubble up to hundreds of feet away from the blaze (Molesky 2015). The devastation was nearly complete, and not only for Lisbon—which lost possibly 85 per cent of its buildings—but also for surrounding coastal areas. Gigantic waves were reported as far away as Ireland, where a ten-foot tsunami partially destroyed the city wall of Galway. Estimations of the economic impact of the disaster have ranged widely, but modern analysis puts it at between 32 and 48 per cent of the GDP of the Portuguese Empire (Pereira 2009, 477). But the human cost was immense. Initial casualty figures put deaths at between 6,000 and 8,000, and analysis of clergy casualty reports suggests that this estimation is likely accurate for deaths from collapsed structures; an equal number probably died subsequently from directly related causes (Aguirre 2012).[4]

2. Aftershocks

"The Great Lisbon Earthquake" was, according to co-founder of the Disaster Research Center, Russell R. Dynes, "the first modern disaster" (2005). When it occurred, it entirely occupied the attention of the "relevant civilized world" (Kendrick 1957, 25). The impact on the European Enlightenment was profound. The disaster occurred on the cusp of a new era of public

[4] Aguirre (2012, 32ff.) argues that later, larger estimates were inflated due to emotional and ideological reasons. This underscores our focus, which will be on the intellectual and sociological impact of the disaster.

information dissemination: "Age-old fears and myths emerged amidst the terrifying descriptions of ruins in hundreds of tracts written at the time in almost every European language" (Araújo 2006, 1). A truly enormous of quantity of ink was spilled in reflecting, before an insatiable reading public, on the social and philosophical implications of the disaster. For it seemed to many observers that the Lisbon Earthquake was not just a great misfortune but an anti-providential tragedy. The sheer magnitude of calamity of course contributed to this perception, but the incidental details of the earthquake heightened it. The holiness of the date and time, the disproportionate impact on the faithful and the innocent—even the Hospital Real de Todos-os-Santos, the All Saints Royal Hospital in the Rossio Square, burned along with its patients in the very fires set by the candles of the devout—seemed to speak directly against a Europe self-possessed and brimming with philosophic confidence.

For theological conservatives and reformists alike, the quake was quite clearly a message from God to the remaining inhabitants of the ruined imperial capital. As Benigno Aguirre puts it,

> Father Gabriel Malagrida interpreted the earthquake as divine retribution for the city's lack of devotion, urging Lisboans to repent and renounce [the Marquês de] Pombal's Enlightenment philosophy. [. . .] Dutch Calvinists and other Protestants used the same religious logic to draw different conclusions. According to Wesley, God was displeased and offended by the cruelty of the Portuguese Inquisition and widespread idolatry. (Aguirre 2012, 32)

But the more secular *philosophes* faced a home-grown intellectual challenge. As Edgar Brightman puts it, "The Lisbon earthquake came to a Europe enlightened, rationalistic, optimistic. The optimistic phase of eighteenth-century thought was most seriously disturbed by the catastrophe" (Brightman 1919, 500). Pope and Leibniz had been the eighteenth century's prophets of Enlightenment optimism—the view that this world is the best of all possible worlds. The Lisbon Earthquake seemed decisive evidence to the contrary. Voltaire's Candide, "terrified, dumbfounded, bewildered, covered with blood, quivering from head to foot, said to himself: 'If this is the best of all possible worlds, what are the others?'" (*Candide*, Ch. VI).[5] As Adorno argues in *Negative Dialectics*, "[t]he earthquake of Lisbon sufficed to cure [Voltaire] of the theodicy of Leibniz" (2014, 361).

But the Lisbon Earthquake also helped shape one intellectual current in the career of an aspiring young Prussian academic by the name of Immanuel Kant. Despite everything written on Kant's mature ethical system starting from his 1783 *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, very little investigation has been made into the early phases of his ethical thought, which in fact grow directly out of his meditations on the intellectual aftermath of the disaster in Lisbon. As an early-career scholar, Kant wrote mainly scientific treatises, but this turned out to be an avenue into the debates convulsing the European intelligentsia following the earthquake. Kant emerged not only as a scientist—whose three essays on the earthquake Benjamin argues, "probably represent the beginnings of scientific geography in Germany" (1999)—but initially as a staunch defender of Enlightenment optimism. Kant's route to this position went through his Newtonian scientific training but also through his Classical education.

[5] Translation is by Richard Aldington, revised by Haskell M. Block (Voltaire 1956).

Not coincidentally, however, Kant's engagement with Epicureanism was also the beginning of a long engagement with the history of ethics. For Epicurus and his followers, the project of philosophical naturalism was intimately tied with the project of living well, of reaching the state of *ataraxia*, in which fortune causes no disturbance of mind. Kant's early ethical reflections, in tandem with his Epicurean naturalism, attempt to carry this torch as far as he believes it can plausibly go. When he eventually becomes dissatisfied with the prospects of Epicureanism, it is in the context of beginning to think carefully about the human being and its place in a world that does not—as the Lisbon Earthquake seemed poignantly to suggest—have any particular care for its aspirations. The intellectual path that for Kant begins with thinking and writing about "the first modern disaster," culminates in the formulation of what I argue can eventually be called Kant's "problem of the highest good." It is, in short, the problem that Kant believes human beings face when they realize that there is no relationship in the course of nature between their moral worth and their material well-being. It represents the sweeping rejection of the optimistic worldview that, somehow, we will live well for living right.

3. Kant Early Epicureanism

Compared with the literature on Kant's appropriation of other ancient philosophical themes, itself not large, there is a relative paucity of material on Kant and Epicurus.[6] Nonetheless, we have abundant evidence of the impact of Epicurus and his followers on Kant's intellectual development. The writings of Epicurus himself exist only in fragmentary form, though Kant likely read the extant letters.[7] It is thus also likely that he was familiar with the doxography of Diogenes Laertius in the *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, which contain the surviving Epicurean letters and are an important source of information on post-Classical ancient philosophy in the Mediterranean.[8] But it was with Classical Latin sources with which Kant was most familiar and which he read in the original language (Nussbaum 1997, 4 fn.10).

On the young, pre-critical Kant, who, as we will see, especially interested in natural science, it would have been the Epicurean philosophical poem *On the Nature of Things* (NT) that exercised the most profound influence. A didactic poem written in dactylic hexameter by Titus Lucretius Carus (Lucretius) during the first century BCE, *On the Nature of Things* expounds the principles of Epicurean physics—atomism, mechanism, and the doctrine of the *clinamen* or atomic swerve—and its ethical implications, chiefly that the goal of life is pleasure in serenity. Its importance for Kant's scientific thought and his orientation toward the intellectual debates of the day is affirmed by his own admission in an ambitious early treatise entitled *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (UNH). In this work, an attempt at a general account of the constitution of the entire natural world, Kant says, "I will [. . .] not deny that the theory of Lucretius, as well as of his predecessors, Epicurus, Leucippus, and Democritus, has much in common with mine" (UNH, 1:226). For the Epicureans, their atomistic naturalism bore ethical implications; the followers of

[6] See, however Pierre Aubenque (1969), Peter Fenves (2003, passim), Denis Thouard (2003), James I. Porter (2007, 176–83), and Eric Baker (2007, 285–86).

[7] He is supposed, for example, to have referenced Epicurus's "Letter to Menoeceus" in his lectures on ethics (MC, 27:250).

[8] As suggested by his familiarity not only with many of the doctrines of the Hellenistic philosophers but also with the various anecdotes about their lives transmitted to posterity by Diogenes (e.g., MC, 27:250, 395; MMr, 29:603 MMV, 27:484, 647).

Epicurus defended their physical theories with an eye toward establishing conclusions about the good as well as the proper attitude a human being should have toward the world.

As with the ancient Epicureans, so with their Enlightenment-era descendants who revived ancient philosophical naturalism within the framework of post-Baconian empirical science. In other words, it should come as no surprise that Kant's early sympathy for a doctrinal naturalism reminiscent of the metaphysical theories of Epicurus and Lucretius, went hand-in-hand with more empirically minded views in ethics (relative, that is, to the anti-sensual ethics for which he later came to be known).[9] But Kant later rejects Epicurean naturalism not only as an account of the constitution of the cosmos but also its suitability as a fundamental basis for ethics. In fact, Kant comes to believe that the Epicureans and their philosophical rivals, the Stoics, both organized their ethical programs around an account of the final end of human existence. Kant, following the scholastic tradition, calls this practical concept "the highest good." In Kant's view, Epicureans and Stoics alike determined moral principles as just those practical principles that would achieve their respective conceptions of the highest good when consistently followed. According to Kant in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, this strategy in ethics can be described as providing a "material determining ground" for the principle of morality. Material ethical theories vary broadly in their account of the determining ground, and the mature Kant rejects all of them on methodological grounds. Yet he thinks that some are less plausible than others: Epicureanism—an ethic "of physical feeling" (CPrR, 5:40)—belongs to the class of empirical ethical theories that are "obviously not at all qualified for the universal principle of morality" (CPrR, 5:41).

How is it that Kant goes from Newtonian defender of Enlightenment Optimism to transcendental idealist and critic of the history of moral philosophy? The familiar picture of Kant's mature theoretical philosophy is that problems of skepticism and intractable metaphysical debates in modern philosophy led him to a middle path between theoretical empiricism and rationalism. Something analogous is the case in practical philosophy. Insofar as Epicureanism and Stoicism are the practical counterparts to empiricism and rationalism, Kant came to realize that neither could avoid engendering a kind of (apparently) intractable practical problem. In particular, the problem with which Kant is concerned arises in the face of events exactly like the Lisbon Earthquake. When nature presents us with irrefutable proof that it runs its course indifferent to our moral aspirations, that bad things happen to good people (and vice versa), Kant comes to think that we become susceptible to skepticism or even nihilism in ethics. He puts it thus in the second *Critique*: "If [. . .] the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false" (CPrR, 5:114).[10] The highest good to which Kant here refers is what he calls the object of pure practical reason, which is to say, the necessary object of a will

[9] As well as in aesthetics, argues Baker with regard to Kant's "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" (2007, 285–86).

[10] This is not to say either that the course of Kant's thought was *determined* by worldly events or that the Lisbon Earthquake marks a watershed moment in which Kant decisively rejects his earlier views. A careful consideration reveals that Kant continued to defend optimism well after the earthquake. Moreover, he did not come to a firm conviction on the principles of ethics until much later in his career. What I am prepared to argue in what follows is that Kant's ethical thought germinated in the context of his natural scientific work, and that this in turn was sensitive to the human implications of natural phenomena. What I am especially interested in is the optimistic origins of a worldview that, in its full flowering, is fundamentally pessimistic as regards the natural order. We will see what this pessimism consists in as we continue.

determined to adhere to the moral law. In Kant's view, the highest good is a world in which agents follow the categorical imperative and in which their moral rectitude is adorned with personal happiness. Events such as the Earthquake seem insurmountable threats to the possibility of such a state of affairs. For, even if all rational beings were supremely moral, there is no guarantee that their prosperity could not be undeservedly interrupted.

4. The Optimism Debate

Kant's early writings—the period of the 1750s and 60s—are dominated by contributions to theories in natural science rather than by the overtly philosophical concerns of the later critical period.[11] Kant's pronounced intellectual interest in the natural world was fostered by his early teacher Martin Knutzen, who died in 1751. Knutzen, a Wolffian rationalist, introduced Kant to new developments in mathematics, astronomy, and Newtonian physics and likely inspired Kant's first work, *Living Forces*, in 1747. In 1755, Kant defended two Latin dissertations in Königsberg—*On Fire* and *New Elucidation*—to secure the teaching rank of *Privatdozent*. A year later, in 1756, Kant unsuccessfully applied to fill Knutzen's position as *Professor extraordinarius* in logic and metaphysics, but the effort produced a third dissertation, the *Physical Monadology*, which concerned matters in the physics of space and geometry. Amidst this flurry of dissertating, Kant arranged in 1755 to anonymously publish his *Universal Natural History*, which failed to reach a wide audience thanks in part to the publisher's declaration of bankruptcy. Nevertheless, Kant was very much a member of the natural scientific vanguard of the day, which promised first to make ever more intelligible the course of nature and, eventually, to subject it to human control.

In conjunction with these scientific trends, another philosophic debate was decisive in forming the intellectual tenor of the era. This debate was the one over optimism—the view that we live in the best of all possible worlds—the definitive statements of which are found in Leibniz's 1710 *Theodicy* and Pope's 1732–34 *Essay on Man* (though the debate preceded both works). Leibniz's and Pope's works were, to be sure, not strictly naturalistic. Their optimism included a role for the wise direction of a benevolent creative god. Still, the nature of this role varied, and the leading scientists of the day, notably Isaac Newton himself, allowed for the possibility of divinity alongside the explicability of the natural world. It is easy to see how these two propositions dovetailed into a metaphysically optimistic worldview. That this is the best of all possible worlds was, in Leibniz and Pope, an intrinsically a theological assertion, but one that, for many, gathered evidentiary support through the success of the scientific enterprise. The conciliatory type might suppose that divine providence had left humankind a natural order amenable to its self-forged aspirations.

But in 1755, the Lisbon Earthquake gave the optimism debate a new dimension. In particular, European intellectuals grappled with whether the immense suffering of the disaster could ever be conceptually reconciled with faith in a simultaneously benevolent and all-powerful creative god.

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[11] It would be easy to overstate one aspect of the distinction here. The demarcation of strictly philosophical from natural-scientific inquiry was not yet in effect in the Enlightenment era of natural philosophy, and such a disciplinary divide would not have figured into Kant's conception of his intellectual activity. Moreover, according to his views on the nature of science in general—which included, as a subclass, scientific inquiry into the natural world—Kant would have excluded from that class some of what we now customarily call natural science. For an overview of Kant's conception of science as it relates to our own, the "General Introduction" to the Cambridge Kant volume, *Natural Science*, is useful (Kant 2012, xiv–xvi).

The Lisbon Earthquake, in other words, reopened the theological problem of evil for a new generation. Kant was more sympathetic to Newton than to Leibniz, and he obliquely entered this debate with the publication of three essays on the natural aspects of the quake, which contained passing philosophical reflections on the same. But Kant had already begun to wrestle with the relationship between naturalism and religious faith—not coincidentally a central question in the Epicurean tradition—prior to the quake itself in the lead-up to the publication of his *Universal Natural History*.

Despite Newton's deistic compromise between science and faith, the conciliators were always on shaky ground. The success of the new physics had threatened to obviate the need for religious faith as a mode of explanation. But the Newtonian compromise itself was vulnerable to the fresh challenge of the Lisbon earthquake. If the god of the philosophers and the deists (let alone the god of the Christian churchgoer) actually existed, it would imply, as Voltaire put it, "a discourse [. . .] as cruel as the earthquake was tragical," a discourse, that is, that so much destruction and death was "all for the best" (1877, 468).[12] One response to the challenge of innocent suffering is of course to disavow optimism and to concede the imperfection of the universe. But this was not Kant's approach during his naturalistic phase. Rather, Kant's position was conciliatory in a way that distinctly echoed the efforts of the Epicurean poet Lucretius. Even as Kant diverged from Lucretius in quite significant ways, he shared the goal of squaring the cosmic indifference of atomistic mechanism with the possibility of human beings achieving their final ends.

Insofar as we might articulate something like an Epicurean "optimism," it would be quite different from the Leibnizian rationalist version. An Epicurean optimism, in particular, would have no grounds for holding that this world is the best of all possible ones, and in this sense, to an *Aufklärer*, "optimism" would be a misnomer applied to Epicureanism. But in a very different sense, Epicureanism could be described *colloquially* as optimistic inasmuch as it maintains that the ills of the world do not prevent us from attaining our ends (i.e., those ills cannot, for the sage, prevent a pleasant life, which the Epicurean regards as the highest good). Kant's contributions to the optimism debate is sympathetic with his early theoretical views. Although he does argue for the optimistic thesis in the Enlightenment sense, that this is the best of all possible worlds, his Newtonian leanings incline him to reject the Leibnizian view and declare for Pope instead. As Kant sees it, Leibnizian optimism rationalizes away *apparent* evils at the level of the particular by appealing to the *real* perfection of the whole. By contrast, Popean optimism instead seeks to defend the goodness of the particulars themselves.[13]

5. Kant's *Reflections* on Optimism

[12] Voltaire's famous *Candide, or Optimism* constitutes his well-known rebuke of Leibnizian optimism. This remark, however, is found in the "Preface" to his earlier "Poem on the Disaster in Lisbon in 1755," published scarcely a month and half after the earthquake itself.

[13] It is worth noting two things. The first is that Kant's views are neither as consistent nor as well-articulated at this stage of his career as they are in his mature, systematic works. In light of this first observation, the second thing to note is that there is some room for quibbling with Kant on his own conception of his position. To be sure, Kant affirms his debt at this stage to the writings of the Epicureans, but also insists on some irreconcilable differences between himself and them. There are indeed some important dissimilarities, which we shall document, but it is also possible that there are sympathies between the position Kant is trying to work out and the tendencies of the Epicureans of which Kant is not fully aware.

The prize-essay competition from the *Royal Prussian Academy of Sciences* for the earthquake year was, quite coincidentally, on the theme of the optimism of Pope, and was announced July 27, 1753, in the *Hamburger freyen Urtheilen und Nachrichten*. Kant did not ultimately submit an essay for consideration, but it seems the competition announcement nonetheless induced him to reflect on the question of optimism as represented by the phrase "Everything is good." The textual fruits of his consideration are found in three fragmentary, handwritten *Reflections* from 1753–54 in Kant's personal copy of G. F. Meier's *Excerpt from the Doctrine of Reason*. The *Reflections* are numbered 3703–05 in Volume 17 of the *Academy Edition* of Kant's writings.

Reflection 3703 (17:229–30) is apparently an exegetical sketch of an argument from Pope's *Essay on Man*. The argument is that the world is not especially inimical to the virtuous as compared to the vicious and that, "Self-love [*Eigenliebe*], combined with love of God and of one's neighbors, constitutes the happiness [*glük*] of human beings." *Reflection* 3704 (17:230–36), entitled "Outline of Optimism," compares Leibniz with Pope and declares the latter's position to be superior, while *Reflection* 3705 (17:236–40), "Defects of Optimism," provides two further criticisms of the Leibnizian view. The second of these criticisms is presented from an Epicurean perspective. Taken together, the *Reflections* suggest that if had Kant written an essay for the competition, he would have sought to defend optimism in general—understood as the view that this world is the best of all possible—and to defend Pope's account against Leibniz's in particular.

In *Reflection* 3704, Kant compares Leibniz and Pope directly. Using "*Optimismus*" to specifically designate Leibniz's view in contradistinction with Pope's, Kant defines *Optimismus* as "the doctrine that justifies the existence of evil in the world by assuming that there is an infinitely perfect, benevolent, and omnipotent original Being" (17:230–31).[14] Thus, according to Kant's reading of Leibniz, *Optimismus* is the view that reasons *from* the existence of an original Being (with all the requisite attributes: omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence, etc.) *to* the evaluation of the world it has created as necessarily being of the best quality. This line of reasoning faces its primary challenge in its apparent tension with the manifest existence of apparent defects in the world. That is, *Optimismus* has to say something about the problem of evil. The Leibnizian strategy is to rebuke the complaint of the existence of evil as a product of the limited perspective of finite beings such as ourselves. As Kant puts it in his summary of the Leibnizian position, aspects of the world that strike us as imperfections are turned, by God, "to the advantage of the whole, so that the displeasure that they arouse when they are viewed in isolation is completely outweighed in the whole by the compensation that the divine goodness is able to institute" (17:231).

In Kant's view, the Leibnizian strategy is, in fact, tantamount to the admission that such imperfections are indeed "true evils [*ware Uebel*],"[15] albeit ones for which God can be excused (17:233).[16] What confidence could we have in the justice of this exoneration? Moreover, what

[14] For clarity, I will use "*Optimismus*" to refer to Leibniz's view and "optimism" to refer to Pope's.

[15] They are, colloquially, evils, maladies, flaws, ills, or "bads." Kant here uses the same word, *Übel*, that he will contrast in the second *Critique* with moral evil, *Böse* (*CPrR*, 5:59–60).

[16] If something *appears*, from a partial perspective, to be an evil, but *in fact* contributes to the goodness of the whole, it is at least questionable in what sense it could be called a true evil. Kant's view in these *Reflections* seems to be that it is an unacceptable affront to God's goodness to suppose even that our perception of evil is accurate only insofar as it is a partial one. To use a rough analogy, it is as if Kant is arguing that when we observe a stick halfway submerged in water as apparently crooked, it is not simply that our senses mislead us about the shape of the stick but that we are indeed misreading the sensory reports themselves. Kant will later revise or at least clarify his position (see § 6 below) so

confidence could we have in the compossibility of worldly ills with the existence of a benevolent, omnipotent, and creative divinity? The answers to these questions must in turn rest on our confidence in our understanding of the nature and existence of that divine entity. Thus, the plausibility of Leibnizian *Optimismus* is grounded in abstract propositions about the God of the philosophers, and this is, in Kant's view, its principal defect. "As for the rest of those," he says, "who are willing to acknowledge that contemplating the world reveals traces of God—they remain troubled" (17:233). Rationalist metaphysicians may be confident in the veracity of Leibniz's theodicy, but for the laity—those perhaps most in need of philosophical optimism—the doctrine of *Optimismus* is far too esoteric.

For this purpose, Kant prefers Pope's defense of optimism. According to Kant's interpretation, Popean optimism seeks to explain how various supposed worldly ills are, in fact and when rightly considered, beneficial to humanity. The key difference between the Leibnizian and the Popean approach is, in effect, the mereological level at which the *apologia* occurs. In Leibniz, theodicy is addressed at the level of the whole, in Pope, at the level of the particular.[17] From Voltaire's perspective, Popean optimism is crueler still than Leibnizian *Optimismus*, for it seeks even to censure the phenomenological experience of woe. Nonetheless, Kant dismisses a would-be complainant thus: "[L]et us listen with contempt to the lamentations of those to whom, so they think, heaven has not granted a satisfactory share of perfections" (R 3704, 17:235). By refusing to concede the reality of apparent troubles, Kant hopes to invert the direction of Leibniz's reasoning. Rather than reason *from* God's existence and nature as a premise to *Optimismus* as a conclusion, Kant thinks that he can reason instead *from* optimism about the world *to* truths about God as a conclusion. He makes this clear in *Reflection* 3705:

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as to exclude this interpretation. When Kant writes on optimism in connection with the Earthquake itself, he will seem to be arguing (a) that we can acknowledge our perception of some events as qualitatively bad (for us) while denying the verisimilitude of this perception and (b) that this is still a different kind of optimism than Leibnizian *Optimismus*, insofar as Leibniz concedes the existence of "*ware Uebel*" that are, so to speak, unavoidable defects in this, the best of all possible worlds when considered as a whole. The thought that we have some control over our attitude toward things that seem, according to sensory reports, to be ills is an assumption foundational to Epicurean ethics. The Epicurean "four-part cure" (see § 7 below) enjoins us to change our thinking about what is and is not evil. Thus, if I am right that Kant is, at this stage in his career, being influenced by certain Epicurean inclinations, it is fitting that he would be drawn to such a line of thought about apparent evils as this.

[17] This, anyway, seems to be Kant's reading. Whether it is accurate is another matter entirely. It is not at all clear that Pope's position is as far from Leibniz's as Kant thinks it is. Consider this distinctly Leibnizian verse in the *Essay* (Pope 2016):

> Respecting man, whatever wrong we call,
> May, must be right, as relative to all.
> In human works, though labour'd on with pain,
> A thousand movements scarce one purpose gain;
> In God's, one single can its end produce;
> Yet serves to second too some other use.
> So man, who here seems principal alone,
> Perhaps acts second to some sphere unknown,
> Touches some wheel, or verges to some goal;
> 'Tis but a part we see, and not a whole" (Epistle 1).

> The second chief mistake of *Optimismus* consists in the fact that the evils [*uebel*] and irregularities that are perceived [*wahrgenommen werden*; lit., "taken as true"] are only excused on the assumption that God exists; the mistake consists, therefore, in having first to believe that an Infinitely Benevolent and Infinitely Perfect Being exists, before one can be assured that the world, which is taken to be His work, is beautiful and regular, instead of believing that the universal agreement of the arrangements of the world, if they be acknowledged to exist in and for themselves, itself furnishes the most beautiful proof of the existence of God and of the universal dependency of all things on Him. (17:238)

We should recall that these notes were written in preparation for a never-completed submission to the 1755 *Academy* essay competition, just prior to the earthquake in Lisbon, and ask whether Kant himself was confident in the truth of such a remarkable optimism. The evidence is mixed. For in the same note, Kant raises the most pertinent objection to this argument, namely the implausibility of its minor premise, that the word is indeed "beautiful and regular." Interestingly, Kant places that objection in the mouth of a hypothetical Epicurus:

> [The world] everywhere contains within it, and that in more than half the cases, absurdities and abhorrent irregularities. I do not accept your subterfuge, according to which it is to be supposed of this wisdom [God] that it has, for example, organized some parts for wise purposes, while using other parts to conceal the evidences of its supervision. (17:238–39)

The fragment ends shortly thereafter, with no direct indication as to what Kant thought of this objection.

6. Epicurean Atomism and Making Sense of the Natural World

It may be that the gravity of the Lisbon earthquake served as a dramatic demonstration to Kant of the seriousness of the Epicurean objection. The second of three largely scientific essays he published in the aftermath of the disaster was titled "History and Natural Description of the most Noteworthy Occurrences of the Earthquake" (HNDE).[18] At first blush, Kant seems, in this essay, to have reversed his position from the Optimism *Reflections*. In the opening paragraphs, he says that a natural catastrophe such as the one in Lisbon "humiliates the human being by allowing him to see that he has no right—or, at least, that he has lost the right—to expect only pleasant consequences from the laws of nature that God has ordained" (HNDE, 1:431). But there is still, even in this essay, the quasi-Popean suggestion that perhaps calamities are at least edifying. And, in true Popean fashion, Kant ends his essay with a section "On the Uses of Earthquakes," which details the various boons afforded to the human species by the occurrence of earthquakes (HNDE, 1:455–58).

A careful inspection reveals, if not a subtle shift from the earlier Optimism *Reflections*, then at least a significant clarification of his position. In *Reflection* 3704, Kant implicitly opposes an *appreciation for the regularity and harmony of natural laws* with a *dissatisfaction with their outcomes*. Now,

[18] "Geschichte und Naturbeschreibung der merkwürdigsten Vorfälle des Erdbebens" (Kant 2012a).

after the quake and by contrast, Kant allows that these two attitudes may coexist, that is, that they are not explicitly contradictory. The regularity of nature, he thinks, still furnishes a proof for the existence of God. But we can affirm this teleological perspective on the world while also admitting the sometimes-baleful consequences of those same natural laws.

The teleological argument for the existence of God is close to Kant's heart. Although he later disavows it after the critical turn of the 1770s–1780s, he afterwards allows that it may serve as a propaedeutic for a legitimate, moral theology (CPJ, 5:442).[19] But in the 1750s he affirms teleology as *constitutively* true. A fuller illustration of his position is found in the *Universal Natural History*. By dint of its advantageous, harmonious, lawlike regularity, nature serves to demonstrate the existence of an intelligent, creative, and wise Being. The "free thinker [*Freigeist*]," that is, the atheist, says Kant, argues that all of the regularity of nature as well as the advantages thereof reaped by human cunning can be readily explained in purely natural terms, by appealing to the regular relations of matter. The predictable winds that carry ships to and from land, the cycles of rain that make otherwise barren earth arable, and so on, none of these phenomena require the invocation of an intelligent overseer. Kant does indeed avow the explicability of nature in naturalistic terms, but to the free thinker he responds, "Matter, which determines itself through its most universal laws, by its natural behavior or, if one wishes to call it so, by a blind mechanism, creates good consequences that appear to be the plan of a highest wisdom" (UNH, 1:225).[20]

n the preface of the *Universal Natural History*, Kant explicitly draws a connection between his defense of the explanatory power of blind mechanism and the atomism of the Epicurean tradition:

> I assume the matter of the whole world to be universally dispersed and I make complete chaos out of it. I see matter form in accordance with the established laws of attraction and modify its motion through repulsion. Without the assistance of any arbitrary inventions, I enjoy the pleasure of seeing the creation of a well-ordered system of the world we have before our eyes that I cannot help but regard it as the same. [. . .] / Like those philosophers [Epicurus, Leucippus, and Democritus], I posit a first state of nature as a universal dispersion of the original material of all world-bodies, or atoms as they call them. (UNH, 1:225–26)

But it is also where he makes clear the fundamental source of one important divergence from the ancient Epicurean tradition. After all, hallmark of the Epicurean school is the conviction that the natural world exhibits no evidence of divine intervention whatsoever. We know that Epicurus said

[19] Cf. also *Critique of Pure Reason*: "[The physico-theological] proof always deserves to be named with respect. It is the oldest, clearest and the most appropriate to common human reason. It enlivens the study of nature, just as it gets its existence from this study and through it receives ever renewed force" (CPR A623/B651).

[20] Like Newton, Kant would argue that an appeal to the forces governing the behavior of matter would be necessary to explain natural phenomena, an idea never well-accounted for in Epicurean physics. In particular, Kant made an earlier appeal to the idea of dynamic, "living" (as opposed to merely mechanical) forces in mediating a dispute between Leibnizians and Cartesians in his earlier *Living Forces*. To the extent that this idea survives into Kant's later metaphysics of nature, it is not clear, *pace* Frederick Beiser, how the appeal to living forces and natural history in the *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* is intended to avoid Newton's theism. For, as we will see below, Kant too makes a place in his system for a theistic hypothesis to explain what he sees as the providential arrangement of both matter and the forces governing it.

that natural phenomena occur, "without any [god] helping out and ordaining or being about to ordain [things]," which is to say, that the gods do not trouble themselves about such things, for taking trouble is at odds with their blessedness ("Letter to Herodotus," 10.76–77; cf. "Letter to Pythocles," 10.97).[21] Lucretius is even more explicitly at odds with Kant's sympathy for teleology. He writes, "To assert [. . .] that the gods purposely prepared the world and its wonder for the sake of human beings [. . .] is preposterous. For what benefit could immortal and blessed beings derive from our gratitude, that they should undertake to do anything for our sake?" (NT, 5.158–68). According to the Epicureans, it is a mistake to infer from the apparent regularity and harmony of the natural world that its laws were set down intelligently. In fact, says Lucretius, the attentive observer can uncover is ample evidence of counter-purposiveness in the natural arrangement of things: "In supposing that the gods have arranged everything for the benefit of humanity, these thinkers[22] have obviously deviated far from the path of sound judgment in every respect. For even if I had no knowledge of the primary elements of things, I would venture to deduce from the actual behavior of the sky, and from many other facts, evidence and proof that the world was by no means created for us by divine agency: it is marked by such serious flaws" (NT, 2.176–82).[23]

A fundamental conceptual challenge for any mechanistic account of the natural world is this: the mechanist who posits an initial steady state—for example, that universal dispersion and complete chaos that Kant describes—must somehow account for the transition from that initial state to the manifest organized dynamism we see around us. This challenge is especially acute for the ancient atomists who, metaphysically speaking, posit only atoms and void. The question for them, in short, is "What sets the atoms in motion at the start?" Cicero tells us that Epicurus innovated on Democritean atomism when he realized that if, as the atomists believed, all atoms fell through the void at the same rate and in a straight line unless otherwise impeded,[24] then no atoms would ever interact. That is, they would not "bump into" one another and accrete into the complex agglomerations of atoms that make up the objects of our experiential world. To solve this problem, Epicurus argued, "that the atom makes a very tiny swerve, the smallest divergence possible; and so are produced entanglements and combinations and cohesions of atoms with atoms, which result in the creation of the world and all its parts" (*On Ends*, 1.18–19).[25] This doctrine, of the atomic swerve or *clinamen*, was widely panned by contemporary critics of Epicureanism. Yet it at least makes comprehensible how the universe could transition from its initial steady state without external intervention.

It is precisely in this hypothesis that Kant locates the difference between himself and the ancient atomists. With the doctrine of the *clinamen*, Kant argues that the Epicureans "made this blind coincidence the origin of all living creatures and really derived reason from the lack of

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[21] Translations of Epicurus are taken from The Epicurus Reader (Inwood and Gerson 1994). The citations refer to Book 10 of Diogenes Laertius.

[22] Lucretius refers to Plato and the Stoics.

[23] Cf. *NT*, 5.195ff., where Lucretius repeats this passage with minor alterations and follows it with descriptions of the myriad flaws (from the perspective of humanity) in the natural order: the deserts, mountains, and dangerous wild beasts (5.200–07); the intractability of the remaining arable land (5.208–18); the proliferation of disease and death (5.220–22); the abject helplessness of young animals, including human being (5.223–35).

[24] Epicurus did not introduce the notion of a force to account for this downward movement. Lucretius merely notes the phenomenon and makes the empirical generalization that all corporeal things naturally move downward (*NT*, 2.184–215).

[25] *De Finibus*. Translation is Rackham's (Cicero 1914).

reason" (UNH, 1:227). Kant, for his own part, advances a version of what is today called the nebular hypothesis. In the first instant of universe, matter is at rest and unformed into composites. Thereafter, this state is immediately disturbed by "essential" attractive and repulsive forces that vary based on relative material densities (UNH, 1:264–66). When considered in themselves, these forces seem to be present for no reason (UNH, 1:263). But when considered in light of the state of ordered complexity into which they bring the cosmos, they point to the existence of a creative intelligence (UNH, 1:331–34). Thus, the principal difference between the mechanistic naturalist Kant on the one hand and Epicurus and Lucretius on the other occurs at the level of first physical principles.

Notwithstanding the significant theological divergence that this difference yields, Kant is not distant from the Epicureans in all substantial respects. The most important theoretical point on which Kant and Epicurus are allied is the rejection of divine intervention in the course of nature. Indeed, the very fact of this agreement perhaps explains why Kant was initially at pains to defend the Popean variant of optimism: that the fixed course of nature, like an elaborate contrivance, is so sagaciously designed that it requires no occasional intervention to bend it toward the good. In this way, Kant wishes to embrace Epicurean determinism while at the same time rejecting the main thrust of the "Epicurean" criticism of optimism he presents in *Reflection* 3705, as well as in the *Universal Natural History* (UNH, 1:333).

Later, Kant will more pointedly emphasize the importance of this difference between his own position and that of the ancient atomists, implying that, philosophically, he is only superficially related to them. He also says later that "the atomistic system of *Democritus* and *Epicurus* bears quite a different relation to the inference that the world has a Creator to the one we have outlined" (OPA, 2:148).[26] Yet Kant has more in common with Epicureanism then he perhaps realizes or admits. It may seem odd from a contemporary perspective to suppose that this point of agreement—the immutability of natural laws, which is to us an obvious proposition—indicates anything of great significance. But Kant apparently thought that it did, and he explicitly contrasts his position with that of the divine interventionist. Posing the question of whether the good consequences of natural occurrences ought to be attributed to the "essential determinations of the eternal natures" and the "universal laws of motion" or to an "external hand," Kant claims that the consensus among philosophers of his day is to opt for the latter (UNH, 1:332). Like the Epicureans, who thought that it would be beneath the dignity of a divinity to interfere in the course of nature, Kant offers theological reasons to reject interventionism. Specifically, against philosophers who think that to deny God's intervention into natural affairs would be "to contest God's governance of the world," Kant thinks that acknowledging the beauty and harmony produced by the regular, uninterrupted course of nature elevates the dignity of nature and so also of its author (UNH, 1:332).[27] But even more important is a conceptual point: to deny the regularity of nature, Kant argues, is to deny the very existence of nature. Instead, "there will be only a god in the machine bringing about the changes of the world" (UNH, 1:333). And, with a

[26] This quotation is taken from *The Only Possible Argument in Support of a Demonstration of the Existence of God*, from 1763, eight years later (Kant 1992b).

[27] Kant also has more philosophical reasons for adopting this position. In a revealing early indication of his sensitivity to issues of disciplinarity, Kant complains that admitting the possibility of divine intervention would be to subordinate natural science to theology, and force "natural scientists [*Naturforscher*]" "to make an apology before the judgment seat of religion" (UNH, 1:333).

now familiar argument, Kant insinuates that to posit divine intervention would be to abdicate the project of explaining the course of nature and instead to try "to hide a sluggish lack of knowledge behind a pious face" (UNH, 1:334).

7. The Ethical Implications of Epicurean Naturalism and the Lessons of the Lisbon Earthquake

Kant's insistence on the assumption of divine noninterference (that is, beyond the initial setup of the cosmos) is part of a broader orientation toward nature that outlives many of his early views. That is, Kant remains a committed methodological naturalist in the realm of explanation well after he repudiates dogmatic naturalism in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (i.e., as an account of things in themselves). I wish to highlight here one aspect of this orientation that emerges acutely for Kant in the aftermath of the earthquake, for it is illustrative of the parallels that remain between Kant and the Epicureans despite their theological differences.

I refer to the Epicurean injunction against superstition. The first part of the Epicurean *tetrapharmakos*—the "four-part cure," which the Epicureans advertised as a philosophical balm for all anxiety, is, according to Philodemus of Gadara, "Don't fear god."[28] The reason why not is plain in light of Epicurean naturalism and is cited in the *Kyriai Doxai* or *Principal Doctrines* (PD):[29] "What is blessed and indestructible has no troubles itself, nor does it give trouble to anyone else" (PD 1, 10.139). As Epicurus saw it, a primary cause of unhappiness in his contemporaries was their omnipresent dread of offending unseen divine or pseudo-divine forces. Under the weight of such dread, all the various infelicities and even calamities of life, which would otherwise be easy to bear (PD 4, 10.140), instead augur powerful malevolence. But if, as the Epicureans argue, it is contrary to the very nature of the divine to even contemplate the affairs of mortals, then there is nothing special to fear about a bad turn of events. That nature follows a fixed course without reference to the boon or bane of any one individual is profoundly liberating to a mind beset with superstitious fears. In the Epicurean school, knowledge of nature becomes akin to a Kantian "counsel of prudence." Understanding the fixity of nature becomes the rallying cry for a contest ultimately in service to Epicurean equanimity, for it eliminates the paranoia generated by ignorance of the true causes of things. Lucretius says that Epicurus "marched far beyond the blazing battlements of the world" through his understanding and brought back "knowledge of what can arise and what cannot, and again by what law each thing has its scope restricted and its deeply implanted boundary stone. So now the situation is reversed: superstition is flung down and trampled underfoot; we are raised to heaven by victory" (NT, 1.72–79).

The "Epicurean" objection to optimism Kant raised at the end of *Reflection* 3705—that lawlike nature exhibits to us not harmony and beauty but hostility and violence—had reappeared in the *Universal Natural History*, written prior to the earthquake:

> If the natures of things bring about nothing but disorder and nonsense through the eternal laws of their essences,[30] then precisely by this will they prove the character of their independence from God [. . .] On the contrary, let us conclude

[28] Herculaneum Papyrus 1005, 4.9–14. Kant would not have had access to the Herculaneum Papyri, but the idea in 1005 is present in the *Principal Doctrines*.

[29] Cited by maxim number and pagination in Diogenes Laertius.

[30] This is a distinctly Lucretian formulation, for Kant is once again responding here to the objections against providence from the Epicurean.

> with greater propriety and correctness as follows: Nature, left to its own universal properties, is fertile in many beautiful and perfect fruits which not only show correspondence and excellence in themselves but also harmonize with the entire realm of their beings. (UNH, 1:333).

Yet Kant's explicit disdain for the Epicurean objection does not reappear after this. When Kant turns instead to reflect on the calamity of the earthquake, something very much reminiscent of an Epicurean pharmaceutical occurs to him: "Even the terrible instruments by which disaster is visited on mankind [. . .] are planted in nature by God as a proper consequence of fixed laws no less than other accustomed causes of discomfort thought to be more natural merely because they are more familiar" (HNDE, 1:431). Against the theologians of the day, who feared the Lisbon earthquake as a portent of God's wrath, Kant now acknowledges the disaster *as a disaster*, but no less born of the regularity of nature than the many boons he had earlier been keen to emphasize. Following Epicurus in this regard, naturalism can be a philosophical tonic even if it cannot define catastrophes out of existence in true Popean fashion.

But Kant does not follow the Epicureans fully to their theological conclusions. Instead, reflecting on the earthquake seems to have eventually led him down a different path—one that would eventually form the basis of Kant's later wholesale rejection of Epicurean ethics. But in the late 1750s at least, Kant affirms a kind of cosmic teleological optimism about the whole course of nature. The lessons of events like the Lisbon Earthquake, he says, are to draw our attention away from our empirical existence as a source of value (HNDE, 1:431; 1:460). In this way, Kant temporarily and tenuously marries a quintessentially Epicurean dictum to what is apparently a precursor to his instinct to transcendentalize value: "The human being is not born to build everlasting dwellings on this stage of vanity. Since his entire life has a far nobler aim, how well does this harmonize with all the destruction fit into this that allows us to see the transience of the world" (HNDE, 1:460).[31] But because human beings *qua* natural entities are subject to the immutable laws of nature no less than anything else, it is groundless to presume to interpret this or that event as a special providential sign. Kant ends his concluding remark on the earthquake with the suggestion that natural disasters are "part of God's plan" for the good. But this is the case in a general rather than in a particular way, and, moreover, it is left to human agency to actively bend their natural circumstances toward the good (HNDE, 1:461).[32]

8. The Limits of Optimism

This marriage of Epicurean naturalism and proto-ethical-transcendentalism persisted in the Kant's early thought for as long as he had not thought too deeply about fundamental principles in ethics. We can see that Kant was already primed to turn away from the empirical as the source of value in his suggestion that nature suggests to human beings its malignant indifference to their aspirations.

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[31] Brightman asks whether such passages foreshadow Kant's mature views regarding "the transcendental element in morality" or whether they simply reference a belief in an afterlife (1919, 511–12). Given the connection between the two views in Kant's mind, it seems odd to suggest that it is merely one or the other.

[32] And so, it would seem, Kant's tortuous development through competing considerations and influences brought him back around from Popean optimism closer to something a little closer to Leibnizian *Optimismus*, with the important caveat that the view strongly rests on an empirical foundation and, specifically, the observation of the world leading to a judgments about God, *despite* incidental banes to human beings stemming from the course of nature.

But the turn was not immediate. For several years after the earthquake he continued to cling to the fundamentals of Enlightenment optimism. In 1759, Kant even published a defense of Leibnizian optimism against certain metaphysical objections: that there could be no single most perfect world ("Attempt at some Reflections on Optimism," 2:27–35). When Kant makes the transcendental turn decisively, it is the death knell for Kant's broad sympathy for both Epicureanism and optimism. Kant's biographer, Ludwig Borowski, writes that Kant, "with genuinely solemn seriousness, bade me think no more of this writing on optimism, urging me, should I ever come across it anywhere, not to let anyone have a copy but to withdraw it from circulation immediately" (Borowski 1804, 58–59n.).

Until that later decisive break from Epicureanism, Kant makes some characteristically "un-Kantian" assertions. For instance, the late Kant declares that the tendency to make self-love into a condition for compliance with the moral law itself constitutes the radical propensity to evil in human nature (Rel., 6:36–7).[33] But the early Kant entertains the idea that it is, in fact, providential that the great mass of humanity is primarily self-interested. In *Reflection* 3704, he writes, in a Popean formulation, "Self-love, which has as its only purpose one's own pleasure, and which seems to be the manifest cause of the moral disorder that we observe, is the origin of that beautiful harmony that we admire" (17:234). This idea also appears nearly a decade later in Kant's 1764 *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (OFBS).[34] There, he argues that it is highly advantageous that most human beings "always have their dear self before them as the sole focal point of their efforts." Unsettlingly, Kant suggests that these self-interested people form a kind of morally inert substrate that nevertheless serves as a foundation for the common good: "they give demeanor and solidity to the whole" (OFBS, 2:227). But this same work also contains unmistakable prefigurations of Kant's mature moral philosophy, especially the suggestion that "[t]rue virtue can only be supported by principles which, the more general they are, the more sublime and noble they become" and that these principles consist in a feeling "of the beauty and the dignity of human nature" (*OFBS*, 2:217).

The latter remarks seem a natural growth of the germ of that idea planted in Kant's head in the aftermath of the Lisbon earthquake: namely, that if the regular laws of nature potentially work to both the great benefit *and* to the great detriment of human beings, then perhaps the source of value is not to be found in nature at all. Kant's eventual rejection of Epicureanism is the culmination of an intellectual process that seems to begin with this retreat from the senses in ethics, as this is when Kant first becomes cognizant of the implicit posed threat posed to the interests of human beings by an indifferent cosmos. The value of humanity, increasingly in Kant's mind, exceeds nature. The human being itself does not outstrip its natural existence by virtue of its loftier moral aspirations, but they do mean that Kant must finally and decisively reject the Epicurean doctrine that pleasure is the good.

Klaus Reich argues that it was Kant's engagement with Plato that led him to reject Epicureanism by 1770 in his Inaugural Dissertation (1939, 344–45). I have no doubt that this was a part of the story. *Contra* Reich, however, this transition was not, as he characterizes it, "a violent break with the position Kant adopted in moral philosophy in the years from 1762 to 1767" (Reich 1939, 341). For one, if we are to trust the pen of Herder, Kant proclaimed in his lecture course on practical philosophy in 1763 or 1764 that "Hobbes followed the plan of Lucretius and Epicurus,

[33] *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft* (Kant 1996d).

[34] *Beobachtungen über das Gefühl des Schönen und Erhabenen* (Kant 2007c).

whose principles were of less nobility, by far, than those of the Stoics" (PPH, 27:3). One of Kant's contemporaneous handwritten notes declares that all of the ethical ideals of the ancients—and so, *a fortiori*, the ideal of the Epicureans, which Kant characterizes in the same note as an "ideal of sensuality"—were "ideal chimeras" (R 6584, 19:95–96).

It seems instead that the 1760s in all were a decade of philosophical flux for Kant, during which he settled on no firm position in ethics. I suggest the reason for this is that Kant was struggling (and failing) to reconcile the spark of his conviction that value must be something transcending mere nature with his earlier view that the world, *this* world, of earthquakes and other disasters, is the best of all possible ones. The transcendence of value cuts against both Epicureanism and against Enlightenment optimism alike. Against the Epicurean, it is a chastisement of their deflated ethical expectations. The Epicurean claims that the highest good is something mundane and its fulfillment concomitantly easy. The comparison Kant makes with Hobbes is instructive in this regard. For Hobbes too is a kind of dark optimist in this deflationary sense. A truly just social order *is* possible under an authoritarian sovereign; one need only revise one's expectations of one's fellow citizens downwards. Likewise, for the Epicurean, the good, pleasure, is possible through *ataraxia*. Lucretius argues for the possibility of a unique kind of pleasure in watching a storm-tossed ship from the safety of the coast. Without denying the suffering of the sailors onboard, the Lucretian looks on serenely, "effectively fortified by the teaching of the wise" (NT, 2.9). The good is attainable in this tempestuous world, the Epicurean says, if one withdraws inward.

Against the Enlightenment optimist, Kantian transcendentalism in ethics says, in the end, that the imperfections of nature or the "crooked timber" of humanity merit no *apologia*; the natural course of things, after all, is not the ultimate source of the good. If the corollary of Kant's turn away from nature in ethics is that optimism is a redoubt not worth defending, then what takes its place is, if not pessimism, then decided *non*-optimism. Perhaps the natural world is not the worst of all possible worlds, but there is no point in pretending it is the best. In his *Toward Perpetual Peace* in 1795, thirty or so years later, Kant posits that the practical man, "for whom morals is mere theory," will object to the fancy of perpetual peace among human beings on the grounds that, "he pretends to see in advance, from the nature of the human being, that *he is* never *going to will* what is required in order to realize that end leading toward perpetual peace" (8:371, emphasis original). Kant concedes the point, but only insofar as one denies the existence of morality: "Admittedly, if there were no freedom and no moral law based upon it and everything that happens or can happen is instead mere mechanism of nature, then politics [. . .] would be the whole of practical wisdom, and the concept of right would be an empty thought" (TPP, 8:372).

Many political philosophers now regard Kant as an optimistic intellectual forebear, one who gives legs to the modern impulse to regard social and moral progress as inevitable and to view history, as Pauline Kleingeld puts it, "with a confirmation bias" (2012, 160). But they almost always embrace this position while discarding what Kant apparently regarded as its *conditio sine qua non*, namely, the capability of the human being to freely choose to act on the moral law in contradiction to its natural impulses.[35] But without noumena, Kant has no consolatory project to take the place of optimism.

[35] As, for example, Andrews Reath (1988) does, when he suggests that both a "theological" and a "secular" conception of the highest good can be found in Kant's writings, and that Kant himself moved away from the former as he matured.

The tension that emerges especially in the wake of pointless or perhaps even anti-providential suffering is thus between our desire for a pleasant material existence and our intuition that there ought to be some connection between our material well-being and our moral worthiness. The Epicurean strategy of resolving this tension is to deny the difference between the two. But for Kant, at least, this tack loses its plausibility when the course of nature so egregiously wrenches them apart. By the time he matures as an ethical theorist some twenty years later, Kant has his own strategy for resolving this tension, the "problem of the highest good." Kant's solution will involve affirming the difference between our material and our moral interests, acknowledging that in the course of nature they often fail to coincide, and gesturing beyond his early naturalism for a potential site of reconciliation. But his path to this position is not straightforward and involves much more than simply rejecting Epicureanism. In the next chapter, I detail Kant's path toward a critique not only of Epicureanism but also of the ancient ethical position most diametrically opposed to it, namely, Stoicism.

CHAPTER 2. KANT'S COMMONSENSE CRITIQUE OF STOIC AND EPICUREAN ETHICS

1. From Optimism to the Problem of the Highest Good

In Chapter 1, we saw that Kant's early embrace of an optimistic naturalism was influenced by his engagement with the history of philosophy. The event of the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, however, potently illustrated the limits and challenges of philosophical optimism. Kant wrote no fewer than three essays on the event, and although their content was largely scientific, I argued that there is evidence within (and elsewhere) that the Earthquake triggered a subtle shift in Kant's thinking. This shift began with the awareness of the world's radical indifference to our moral ends. It culminates in Kant's articulation of a perennial philosophical problem I call the "problem of the highest good." The problem of the highest good is the fact that—due either to the natural indifference of the cosmos or to the artifice of our fellow human beings—moral rectitude is, in general, causally unrelated to our experience of personal happiness. Perhaps in practice they are even at odds.

Kant's progression toward articulating this problem is mediated by continuous engagement with the history of ethics. In the ancient period, at least two philosophical schools, the Epicurean and the Stoic, grappled with what is essentially equivalent to the problem of the highest good. Starting from quite different premises, both concluded that this problem was illusory, that happiness and moral worth, "virtue," are not unrelated, let alone in conflict, for, at bottom, they are reducible to one another. Insofar as their positions might be called "solutions" to the problem of the highest good, I propose to refer to them as "analytic" solutions. This is because both Epicureans and Stoics represent the "highest good"—for the ancients, the final end of human beings—as an *analytical* unity of two *prima facie* heterogeneous components, moral virtue and personal happiness.[36] In other words, according to the Epicureans and the Stoics, these two

[36] What precisely Kant himself means by "virtue" and "happiness" will be addressed later in greater detail. Suffice it to say, for now, that he does not conceive of them in especially revisionary terms. Virtue (*Tugend*) refers to *moral* virtue. Kant understands this as the capacity to overcome incentives to act contrary to the moral law. In the "Doctrine of Virtue" of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant suggests the Latin translations *virtus* or *fortitudo moralis* and defines fortitude (*Tapferkeit*; *fortitudo*) as "the capacity [*Vermögen*] and considered intent to resist a strong but unjust opponent" (MM, 6:380). In wishing to capture the concept of moral fortitude in his use of "virtue," Kant intends the term to refer to not to excellence of character generally, but to the particular kind of excellence that consists in the stable disposition to do one's moral duty regardless of the presence of competing considerations. Unless otherwise indicated, "virtue" will refer to Kant's conception of moral virtue. Happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) refers, broadly, to the satisfaction of desires, and is related to the feeling of pleasure; in the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, the final representative of his numerous lecture courses on anthropology, Kant describes happiness as "ease and good living" (A, 7:325).

In this chapter and elsewhere in the dissertation, when discussing the problem of the highest good, I will employ such various formulations as "virtue and happiness," "duty and interest," "obligation and well-being" only in order to emphasize different connotative aspects of the phenomenon. At base, all such formulations are synonymous restatements of the basic framework from Kant, namely, that humans are concerned with two practical ends—being virtuous and being happy—because practical reason responds to two different kinds of incentives—moral and prudential (i.e., relating to the well-being of the individual). In this latter vein, the difference between the two different modes of practical reason might be stated variously as "moral and non-moral," "moral and prudential," or simply "morality (or virtue) and prudence." No subtle differences in meaning are thus to be inferred by these terminological

components are merely *apparently* heterogeneous; in reality, they are the same. The Epicurean argues that virtue *just is* the observance of the rules of prudence; the Stoic argues that prudence *just is* the observance of the rules of virtue.

In the present chapter, I chart the progress of Kant's analysis and eventual rejection of this position. In his mature ethics, Kant will argue forcefully that virtue and happiness are strictly different practical considerations. As such, the problem of the highest good is a pointed one for the mature Kant. If virtue and happiness are different, after all, then they may diverge, and we human beings face the possibility that we cannot achieve all of our practical ends, that we cannot count on being good *and* happy. Kant's evolution to this position runs through a sustained engagement with the ancient ethical systems he ultimately criticizes. Understanding this engagement is not just a matter of interest to the intellectual historian but is philosophically significant because Kant offers little in the way of explicit argument against Epicureanism and Stoicism in his major published works. But by looking at handwritten reflections and student lecture notes, we can piece together a coherent Kantian critique.

2. Kant's History of (Practical) Reason

As Kant argues at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, human (theoretical) reason undergoes a historical development in which its objects, origins, and methods are disputed by partisans for one of two aspects of human cognition: receptivity and spontaneity (CPR A853/B881).[37] By the time Kant wrote the *Critique of Practical Reason*, he had boiled his view on the history of ethics down to a similarly dichotomous presentation. With regard to the objects, origins, and methods of *practical* reason, one finds the best representative of receptivity in the sensuous ethics of the Epicurean school. By contrast, the champions of the spontaneous, rational capacity of the human mind are the Greek Stoics. The analogy of the histories of theoretical and practical philosophy does not end here, however. When Kant surveys the history of metaphysics in the first *Critique* from the point-of-view of transcendental idealism, he says that "on the whole of its labors hitherto, [it] presents to my view edifices, to be sure, but only in ruins" (CPR A852/B880). To be a partisan for only one side of human cognition to the exclusion of the other is, for Kant, to doom one's philosophical system to fatal and insoluble problems. This turns out to be the case, in Kant's view, just as much in practical philosophy as it is in theoretical philosophy. That is, Kant argues that Epicurean and Stoic ethics serve as opposed factions in the history of ethics and that both camps fail to recognize the intermixing of receptivity and spontaneity in human practical reason.

The equivalent in ethics to the quicksand of the "Transcendental Dialectic" of the first *Critique* centers on the practical idea of the highest good. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant defines the highest good as "the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason" (5:108). As a concept, the highest good is formally similar to Aristotle's "that at which all things aim." Indeed, Kant says that the branch of inquiry concerned with the determination of the concept of the highest good is the "doctrine of wisdom," that is, *philosophy*, "in the sense in which the word was understood by the ancients" (CPrR, 5:108). If the highest good can then be

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variations. The reasons why Kant sees these two broad aspects of human agency as strictly different in kind and thus potentially opposed to one another is the subject, in part, of this chapter the following.

[37] The classical view of Kant, attempting to chart a course between empiricism and rationalism, finds its support in his representation of this clash of two broad camps of philosophers.

characterized as the *complete fulfillment of human practical interests*, a problem emerges. Human beings are essentially driven by both moral and by prudential concerns, yet the two do not always appear to intersect. On the contrary, our pursuit of virtue and our pursuit of happiness appear, at best, to be unrelated; at worst, they can at times actually conflict with one another. The question then naturally arises: "How is the highest good possible for us?"

I argue that a venerable tradition in ethics is to deny the very existence of the problem. This tradition finds its archetypical representatives from the schools of the ancient Epicureans and Stoics. As we will see in more detail, Epicurean ethics holds that the highest good, the totality of our practical aims, is simply pleasure. Insofar as we take ourselves to be—in addition, that is, to the achievement of pleasure—practically concerned with something else called moral virtue, it naturally follows that we are mistaken from the Epicurean perspective. Whatever it is we call virtue is just an aspect of the prudential practical principles that tend to lead to happiness. In this way, the Epicurean holds that the highest good is a unitary concept. As such, there is no problem of the highest good, which arises only on the assumption that our ends are heterogeneous and potentially in conflict. By contrast, Stoic ethics maintains that the highest good is virtue alone. By parity of reasoning, then, there is no problem of the highest good for the Stoic either. The pursuit of virtue just is also the pursuit of whatever we colloquially call happiness.

Discussing the concept of the highest good in the "Dialectic" of the second *Critique*, Kant frequently invokes Epicureanism and Stoicism as a foil for his own position, namely, that our practical interests in happiness and in virtue are radically distinct. The ancient schools, inasmuch as they deny this foundational Kantian premise, pose a very substantial challenge to Kant's ethics. Yet, when the time comes, Kant's dismissal is perfunctory:

> One must regret that the acuteness of [the Epicureans and the Stoics . . .] was unfortunately applied in searching out identity between extremely heterogeneous concepts, that of happiness and that of virtue. But it was in keeping with the dialectical spirit of their times, which sometimes misleads subtle minds even now, to suppress essential and irreconcilable differences in principle by trying to change them into disputes about words and so to devise a specious unity [*dem Scheine nach Einheit*] of concept under merely different names; and this usually occurs in cases where the unification of heterogeneous grounds lies so deep or so high, or would require so complete a transformation of the doctrines assumed in the rest of the philosophic system, that they are afraid to penetrate deeply into the real difference and prefer to treat it as a diversity merely in formulae. (CPrR, 5:111–12).

We might be tempted to say that Kant's rejection of the Epicurean and Stoic conceptions of the highest good is ultimately rooted in highly theoretical and sometimes abstract disputes more fundamental issues: the nature of the human being; its diverse faculties; the character of the moral law, that is, the argument for the categorical imperative. And this is certainly true. After all, Kant's mature account of the highest good follows his own, technical account of practical reason in the Analytic of the second *Critique*.

Yet, to leave it there would be to invite the reversal of Kant's very own aspersions of his opponents onto himself. That is, we might wonder whether his own conception of the highest good is not born of a hesitation to effect "so complete a transformation of the doctrines assumed

in the rest of the philosophic system" (CPrR, 5:112). This is especially pertinent for a philosopher as self-consciously systematic as Kant is. But more importantly, we might lament that an opportunity had been lost to contest the nature of a fundamental philosophical concept on its own terms. That is to say, that the nature of the highest good—whether, in encompassing all of our practical ends, it is a unity or a multiplicity—seems too important a question to consider solely on the basis of antecedent systematic commitments. To the Stoic who insists that virtue and happiness really are the same end, the Kantian ought not simply say, "Read the *Groundwork* and the 'Analytic' of the *Critique of Practical Reason*."

Deciding such questions definitively may involve systematic considerations, but that is no reason not to wonder whether there are less theoretically encumbered arguments to be made about the nature of basic concepts. Thus, I argue for the utility of searching out the pre-theoretical reasons *why* Kant came to reject the "analytic" solution to the problem of the highest good. Kant claimed that reading the skeptical challenge of Hume interrupted his "dogmatic slumber" (Pro., 4:260). The significance of this influence is well-understood when it comes to informing Kant's view that the "edifices" of the history of speculative philosophy lay in ruins. By the same token, we might ask: What philosophical challenge led Kant to survey the history of moral philosophy too as just so many failed systems? And what reasons could we have for concurring, even if we do not share his other philosophical commitments?

In the previous chapter, I made the case that the implications of the Lisbon Earthquake set Kant on a path that would lead to his rejection of Epicureanism in particular and all sensual accounts of ethical principles in general. In the present chapter, I argue that this trajectory leads to a critique not only of the Epicurean conception of the highest good but of the Stoic conception as well. This critique, not made explicit in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, emerges instead during Kant's sustained meditations on the history of ethics. The relevant materials are chiefly fragmentary *Reflections* as well as student lecture notes rather than published works; Kant did not write history of philosophy for publication in the contemporary sense. In surveying the tangled web of historical reflections available we can see the persistence, from an early stage, of Kant's interest in the problem of the highest good. In conjunction with the previous chapter, this lends support to the conclusion that the problem of the highest good occupies a central and overlooked place in Kant's ethics. After surveying the development of Kant's views, I attempt to bring out what I see as the core of Kant's dissatisfaction with the ancient assumption of the homogeneity of the highest good.

3. Coming to a Systematic Understanding of Ancient Ethical Theory

The 1760s and 70s mark a period in which Kant's ethical thought becomes focused on systematizing his own views in relation to those of his intellectual predecessors. Kant published actively in the 1760s, but the most important primary sources for our purposes are the fragmentary and tentative notes taken both by himself and by his students.[38] One of his habits during this time

[38] Kant first lectured on moral philosophy as a *Privatdozent* in 1756 when he offered a course titled simply *Ethik*. The earliest extant student notes are those of later interlocutor Johann Gottfried Herder, probably from the winter semester of 1763/64. The title of the course was *Ethik und Moral nach Baumeister*, though it is thought that the reference to Baumeister is a mistake; Kant seems to have lectured, as he would continue to do in later courses, from two texts by Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, *Initiae philosophiae practicae primae acroamatice* and *Ethica philosophica*. A

is to explore different possible taxonomies of ethical systems according to various organizing principles. One such organizing principle that emerges for Kant during this time—the one that eventually makes it into the canonical account in the *Critique of Practical Reason*—is that of the highest good. The second *Critique* presents a highly simplified classification of non-critical (i.e., pre-Kantian) ethical systems into two competing accounts of the concept of the highest good. On one side, there is the Stoic view, which takes obedience to ethical principles ("virtue") to be the entire highest good. On the other, there is the Epicurean view, which substitutes happiness in place of virtue as the highest good (CPrR, 5:111). In contrast to this later presentation, Kant's earlier attempts include a much broader array of ethical systems, particularly ancient ones, and offer a much finer-grained analysis. Though we are interested in Kant's views on Epicurus and the Stoics in particular, the first joint discussions of these schools in Kant's writings occur in the context of such wide-ranging doxographies.

3.1. Moral Feeling and Epicureanism in the Herder Notes

A first stop for a consideration of Kant's developing views in ethics is Herder's lecture notes from (most likely) the winter semester 1763/64. Other scholars have observed that these notes, to the extent they can be taken at face value,[39] reveal that Kant had become preoccupied with the problem of motivating moral action.[40] This concern turns out to be a persistent one for Kant, as it foreshadows his effort in the second *Critique* to show how, *pace* Hume, pure reason might move a person to action. In the meantime, however, it indicates Kant's concern, as Patrick Frierson puts it, "with developing a properly *human* ethical theory" (2015, 37, emphasis in the original).

This is entirely consistent with the observation in Chapter 1 that Kant was first drawn into moral philosophy through his reflections on optimism and the Great Lisbon Earthquake of 1755. The Earthquake represented to Europeans a potent illustration of the divergence of physical well-being and moral worth—in this case, measured by religious devotion, as the quake occurred during mass on a Catholic holy day. One lesson Kant purported to draw from this event was to not seek out value on the material plane (HNDE, 1:460). Kant was thus set on the path toward the transcendentalization of value that would characterize his mature ethics. But as a naturalist at this stage of his development, Kant is keenly aware of the need to account for the behavior of human beings as creatures with sensible inclinations and impulses, even when they behave with moral aspirations in mind.

In Epicureanism, Kant sees an attempt to explain moral motives purely in terms of motives of self-interest:

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great number of Kant's handwritten notes on ethics are found in the pages of Kant's copy of the former textbook. For a full discussion of Kant's teaching activity, see Steve Naragon (2018).

[39] The Herder notes are indispensable for discerning Kant's philosophical development during a period in which he published little by way of practical philosophy. They are also valuable in their own right, insofar as they were taken by a significant philosopher during an early stage of his own education. Unfortunately, these two virtues are somewhat at cross-purposes. As J. B. Schneewind notes, "Partly because he may have allowed his own thoughts to interpret Kant's, Herder's notes are not altogether reliable. He worked them over at home, and he may have put words into Kant's mouth" (Schneewind 1997).

[40] See, e.g., Patrick Frierson (2015, 36).

> Hobbes followed the plan of Lucretius and Epicurus [. . .]. And likewise, the majority of Germans relate everything to self-interest, since it is fine to derive everything from a single *principium* [. . .]. It was argued (1) that here we put ourselves in the other's shoes, and the deception of fancy creates this pleasure, which arises, not directly, but indirectly, from the other's pleasure. [. . .] (2) It is said that the pleasure we have in [the welfare of others] is merely our own end, and a more refined self-interest. (PPH, 27:3–4).

Consider, then, the problem that arises for Kant. For the proponent of the Hobbesian or the Epicurean position, it is easy to naturalistically account for moral behavior: "The fool hath said in his heart that there is no such thing as justice, and sometimes also with his tongue" (*Leviathan*, 15.4). Against the fool, Hobbes had argued that the state could be so organized as to make it in everyone's personal material interest to adhere to the rules of justice. Epicurus too, using different strategies, defended the position that to effectively seek one's personal well-being is to act virtuously. But according to Herder, Kant has no patience for this position. And it is perhaps easy to understand why if Kant is now inclined to set moral values apart from prudential ones.

Thus, in the Herder notes, we witness Kant's consistent characterization of Epicurean ethics going forward, namely, that it reduces moral principles to principles of self-interest. Kant also imputes to Epicureanism the same methodological motive for this reductionism that he would in his dismissal of the Epicureans and the Stoics in the second *Critique*—namely, explanatory parsimony.[41] It is highly revealing to watch Kant argue against this characterization of an ethic of self-interest.[42] As Herder records it, Kant is keen to establish the inadequacy of the Hobbesian-Epicurean theory presented here as both a psychological explanation of moral motivation and a theory of value. More specifically, two positions are under consideration. The first, a form of egoism, is that we act morally, when we do, because at base we perceive it to be in our interest to do so. The second, a pleasure theory of value, is that the moral goodness of actions rests on their conduciveness to our pleasure. Kant will need to rebut both of these positions if he is to eventually rebut the Epicurean conception of the highest good as consisting in the maximum of pleasure. He endeavors to do so here in preliminary fashion.

The two propositions attributed to egoism are, first, that we sympathetically experience pleasure (or displeasure) as a result of another person's pleasure (or displeasure) through an exercise of the imagination and, second, that the pleasure we experience in another's pleasure is actually pleasure in the satisfaction of our *own* ends. Against the first proposition, Herder attributes the following counterargument to Kant. The imaginative exercise of putting ourselves in the place of others is an aid to the vivacity of our own feelings, in relation to theirs, but the efficacy

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[41] Cf. CPrR, 5:111–12, and the discussion thereof in § 2.

[42] That is, despite the fact that it is at least a contestable characterization of Hobbes, the Epicureans, and indeed the German people. Certainly it is a defensible reading of Hobbes to say that his philosophical aim to ground moral obligations in rational self-interest (see, e.g., Gauthier 1979, 547). On the other hand, it is not clear where Hobbes is supposed to rely on the imaginative moral psychology Kant describes for this purpose. The same seems to be the case for Epicurus, who is supposed to have said in the *Principal Doctrines*, "The just life is most free from disturbance, but the unjust life is full of the greatest disturbance" (PD 17, 10.144). Diogenes Laertius reports that according to Epicurus, "The virtues [. . .] are chosen because of pleasure, and not for their own sake, just as medicine is chosen because of health" (10.138). Again, however, it's not clear that Epicurus endorsed the sympathetic moral psychology that Kant talks about here.

of this exercise presupposes an underlying, disinterested moral aspect to the faculty of feeling. "I have no pity," Kant says, "for Damiens's misfortune, though I do for that of Julius Caesar, since Brutus, his friend, murdered him" (PPH, 27:3–4).[43] Against the second proposition, Kant argues that to explain pleasure merely in terms of pleasure is to provide no explanation at all. It is manifestly obvious that we do experience pleasure (or displeasure) prompted by the pleasure (or displeasure) of others. But, in Kant's view, an analysis of the patterns of our sympathies reveal a disinterested concern for moral worth. Kant thinks that although, for example, we sometimes experience displeasure in response to another's displeasure, we are not apt to have this sympathetic response of the other's displeasure is seen as deserved.[44]

With regard to the pleasure theory of value, Kant has the following to say:

> Free actions are good (1) in virtue of the consequences, and (to that extent) physically good; (2) in virtue of the intention and (to that extent) morally good. The measuring-rod is very different in the two. Small will and great capacity is less morally good even in great benefactions. Great will and small capacity is morally better, even in benefactions that are small. We esteem moral acts, not by their physical effects, but for their own sake, even when they are self-interested, and not always when disinterested. (PPH, 27:4)

The claim foreshadows Kant's later anti-consequentialist one: the moral worth of actions is not based upon their physical consequences. From context we might surmise that the consequences Kant refers to in (1) would be the production of pleasure. The counterargument Kant supplies is cursory and perhaps even question-begging. He says that if we assessed the worth of actions in accordance with their effects rather than the intent behind them, "the morally good would be [worth] less than the physically good. But this contradicts feeling and emotion" (PPH, 27:4). However, we are not so much interested right now with the strength of Kant's arguments as we are with what they exhibit about the development of Kant's ethical thought. In this light, it is clear

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[43] Kant is likely referring here to Robert-François Damiens, who was publicly tortured before being drawn and quartered in Paris for the attempted regicide of Louis XV in 1757.

[44] Note that the same argument is made in the opening pages, and lays the foundation for Kant's conception of the highest good as happiness conditioned by moral worthiness, of *Groundwork* I: "[A]n impartial rational spectator can take no delight in seeing the uninterrupted prosperity of a being graced with no feature of a pure and good will, so that a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition even of worthiness to be happy" (4:393). The "problem" of moral pleasure would continue to draw Kant's attention as late as the 1790s, when he addresses it most systematically in the *Religion*, for it invites the objection to a Kantian ethic that there simply is no such thing as action done for the sake of duty; rather, there is always some covert self-interest involved even in the most apparently selfless of deeds. John Silber argues that Kant's mature conceptual analysis of the human faculty of the will into the discrete capacities of *Wille*, pure practical reason, and *Willkür*, the executive capacity of free choice, allows him to differentiate once and for all moral and non-moral feeling, and to formulate his best argument against egoism. The distinct form of pleasure, moral pleasure, that we experience when we do the right thing for its own sake presupposes that very ability to do the right thing for its own sake, which is to say, for *Willkür* to freely choose to obey the categorical imperative originating in *Wille* (Silber 1960, cvi–cxi). To put it differently, if moral pleasure is the source of dutiful action—we act morally *because* it makes us feel good—then it is not moral pleasure, which occurs when we feel good *because* we acted morally. And we would not feel good *because* we acted morally if we did not implicitly acknowledge the authority of moral demands independent of their utility for us; we would simply feel good. It is not hard to see the similarity in form between these later arguments and the rudimentary arguments in the Herder lectures where Kant is first trying to isolate the peculiarity of the moral dimension to our practical lives.

that Kant is becoming suspicious of what he will later characterize as the "subordination" of the moral to the prudential in the Epicurean conception of the highest good. But he is also explicitly aware of the tension existing between the practical supremacy of the moral over the prudential and our affective need for the "physical good."

3.2. The Ideal of the Highest Good: Reflections

A much clearer picture emerges as Kant begins, from the mid-1760s and into the 1770s, to record copious notes comparing the ancient systems of moral philosophy in his copy of Baumgarten. It is here that the ideal of the highest good or *summum bonum* emerges as an organizing principle according to which Kant maps out the philosophical terrain. In the context of ancient ethical debates, the highest good is understood and often referred to as the goal of a well-lived life, or simply, "the goal," or "the end."[45] In the ancient period, the highest good was generally assumed to be coextensive with happiness. Thus, debates surrounding the nature of the highest good were essentially also debates about the nature of happiness and the proper means thereto.[46]

For Aristotle, this is the concept of *eudaimonia*. For Epicurus, the highest good or the goal is pleasure. In his "Letter to Menoeceus," Epicurus says, "Pleasure is the starting-point and goal of living blessedly. For we recognized this as our first innate good" (DL, 10.128–29). For the Stoics, the highest good is said to be moral virtue. The Stoic formulations are more varied than the Epicurean, and the Stoic school contains greater ideological diversity. In general, however, the Stoics regard the highest good as the same formal concept but differ from them in their identification.[47] Additionally, the Stoics, more so than the Epicureans, maintain more complicated taxonomies of various goods, and, like Aristotle, they differentiate immediate and mediate goods (DL, 7.94–98). With regard to the highest good itself, at least one Stoic, Herillus of Carthage, is

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[45] As we see, for example, in Diogenes Laertius on the Stoics (e.g., 7.37, 160, 165). The Stoic Chrysippus is known to have written a work on teleology usually translated as *On Goals* or *On Ends*, as did Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum—On the Ends of Good and Evil*. This latter work was likely one of Kant's primary sources for information on ancient, especially post-Classical ethics (Kant 2005, 603n.22).

[46] Thus, e.g., the second century CE empiricist skeptic Sextus Empiricus, discussing the Stoics, simply equates debates about happiness with debates about the goal of life (AM 7.158).

[47] As Stobaeus tells us, when he says,

> "Goal" is used in three senses by the members of this [the Stoic] school: for the final good is said to be the goal in standard scholarly language, as when they say that agreement is the goal; and they say that the target is the goal, for example, they speak of life in agreement [with nature] by reference to the associated predicate; in the third sense they say that the ultimate object of striving is a goal, to which all others are referred. (*Anthology* 2.6b). Translations of sources on the Stoics are taken from Inwood and Gerson (2008).

The Stoic conception of the highest good is considerably more intricate than that of Epicurus. So, for example, the Stoics draw a distinction between the highest good in the sense of the right end, on the one hand, and in the sense of the physical condition of one who has adopted the right end (Anth., 2.6c). There are various Stoic accounts of complex systems of primary and subordinate virtues—practices and traits that aim at the highest good (Anth., 2.5). The mention to the "standard scholarly language" made by Stobaeus suggests strongly to us, however, that the various participants in the debates surrounding the highest good understood themselves to be referring to the same cluster of concepts and concerns: the final end of human action, the most effective means of attaining it, and the traits of character associated with the good life.

reported to have said that the highest good is knowledge, though he did not specify what kind of knowledge (DL, 7.37). But the Phoenician, Zeno of Citium—widely regarded as the founder of the Stoic school and as the transitional figure between the earlier Cynicism and Stoicism—provides the first statement of the general Stoic position, namely that the goal is "to live in accordance with nature." Diogenes Laertius argues that, for the Stoics, this is just the same as living virtuously, since the Stoic view is that "nature leads us to virtue" (7.87).[48] But for both the Epicureans and the Stoics, much of the task of ethics was seen as correctly defining the highest good and articulating the kind of life we should lead in light of it.

In one of the first notes from the mid-1760s, Kant compares the ethical ideals of the Cynic, the Epicurean, and the Stoic:

> Diogenes [of Sinope, the Cynic]'s ideal of the highest good [*de summo bono*] was negative, namely: no pain and no vice, the minimum of means. The [ideal] of Epicurus [was] negative with regard to virtue, and the highest good [*summum bonum*] of Zeno [was negative] with regard to happiness. (R 6583, 19:94)

If Diogenes encourages us to avoid pain and avoid vice, then Epicurus encourages us to avoid virtue, and Zeno encourages us to avoid happiness. This is a peculiar interpretation of the ancients if taken literally and much at odds with Kant's later view that Epicureanism and Stoicism both encourage us to pursue an ideal of the highest good that represents a unity of what we normally call virtue and happiness. The meaning of a contemporaneous note is clearer. Kant writes,

> That one is well-situated and well-behaved.
>
> Means to the first: sensible pleasures; to the second: virtue.
>
> [. . .]
>
> Happiness and the good, morality, together make up the *summum bonum*. (R 6584, 19:95)[49]

[48] Note that this poses a problem for Kant's interpretation of Stoicism: if by "the virtuous life," the Stoics mean the life in accordance with natural impulses (as opposed to artificially created ones—here the influence of Cynicism is evident on Stoic ethics), it is not obvious that Kantian virtue can be conceptually anything like Stoic virtue. Thus, it is also not obvious why Kant should want to make the Stoics stand in for the view that the highest good consists in adherence to abstract principles even at the expense of pleasure. This will be more fully dealt with in § 4.2 below.

[49] The source of Kant's conception of the highest good as consisting in the conjunction of virtue and happiness has been, in the past, a topic of some speculation. Andrews Reath, in his seminal "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," argues that this conjunction is extraneous to Kant's highest good, suggesting that it is a vestigial piece of Christian theology, perhaps imported from Leibniz (1988, 601, 608–09n.20). It is not surprising that Kant interpreters have missed the essential connection between Kant's initial conception of the highest good and his readings in Ancient ethics, as the marginalia in which the latter is reflected is little studied. That the idea of the highest good as the conjunction of virtue and happiness is there in Kant's writings from the very start suggests further that it was never an accidental feature of his account. The few interpreters who have reviewed this material come to similar conclusions regarding the importance of the ancients to Kant's conception of the highest good; on this score, see Klaus Düsing (1971) and Stephen Engstrom (2015).

What follows is a series of short characterizations and criticisms of various ancient systems, in which Kant highlights the implausibility of each proposed ideal for either neglecting the human need for happiness or the demand to be virtuous or both.

Specifically, Kant contrasts Epicureanism and Stoicism with regard to their ideal of happiness, and here we ought to interpret Kant's "*Glückseeligkeit*" in some instances as referring vaguely to a pleasurable existence and in other instances as referring to happiness in the sense of the end of life (see above). For example, Kant begins by saying that the means to becoming materially well-situated ("*Daß man sich wohl befinde*") are sensible pleasures ("*sinnliche Vergnügen*"), while the means to behaving well ("[. . .] *wohl verhalte*") is virtue ("*Tugend*"). Kant says that for Epicurus the ideal is pleasure to the exclusion of virtue: "happiness in the enjoyment of the greatest pleasure *without moral striving*" (ibid., emphasis mine).[50] For the Zeno the Stoic, by contrast, the ideal is virtue, rightness "*rectitudo*," to the exclusion of pleasure: "happiness in the greatest virtue *without physical pleasure*" (ibid., 19:95, emphasis mine).[51] Reformulating, Kant says that the Epicurean ideal is one of sensuality [*Wohllust*], while the Stoic is one of good conduct [*Wohlverhalten*] (ibid.).[52]

More importantly, we also see the first instance of the attribution of what could be called the "analytic unity thesis" regarding the highest good. That is, Kant says that Epicureanism and Stoicism present two symmetrically opposed strategies of reductionism with regard to the highest good: both schools argue that what *prima facie* appears to be a compound of wellbeing and good conduct is revealed by philosophical investigation to be a simple practical concept. The Epicureans reduce the highest good to wellbeing: "*good conduct* consists merely in the ~~striving~~ aim of actions toward *wellbeing*" (ibid., emphasis mine). The Stoics reduce it to good conduct: "*wellbeing* is an agreement of our lusts with *good conduct*" (ibid., emphasis mine).

Since this analytical unity thesis is the position that Kant will principally argue against, it is worth pausing to review Kant's mature, theoretical argument for the conceptual distinctness of happiness and virtue. In the 1785 *Groundwork*, Kant argues that moral imperatives have a distinct modality (G, 4:414–19. That is, Kant believes that moral imperatives command categorically, while prudential imperatives ("Act thusly to obtain happiness") command hypothetically (hypothetical, that is, upon our status as needy, empirical beings for whom happiness is a concern). If this is true, then virtue—acting morally—must be different *in kind* from happiness—acting prudentially. Read as a counterargument to an Epicurean or a Stoic, this would be, so to speak, an external critique. It is not convincing to anyone not antecedently in agreement with Kant that moral imperatives command categorically, and there is no evidence that the ancients thought that they did. In a certain light, the analytic unity thesis about the highest good can simply be understood as the rejection of this premise.

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[50] For Diogenes the Cynic, happiness is "the lack of pain" and avoidance of non-necessities, while morality is "the absence of vice" (R 6584, 19:95). The Cynic ideal, Kant says, is the ideal of the least artificial life possible: "Maximum of happiness in the *minimo* of needs and simplicity [. . .] *minimum* of moral striving to be morally good, in which lusts are also at their *minimum*" (ibid.).

[51] It should be noted, that both the Epicurean and the Stoic ideals (not to mention that of the Cynic) are naturalistic ethical ideals, at least as Kant interprets them. They are natural because the conceived means to achieve the highest good are entirely natural, in contrast to what Kant calls the mystical ideal of Plato (R 6584, 19:94–95).

[52] Kant then says that by *Wohlverhalten*, he means "the relation of behavior to our moral requirements, i.e., to our conscience" (R 6584, 19:96). Whatever the actual positions of the Stoics, Kant apparently has in mind, when he says that the Stoic ideal consists entirely in good conduct, the position that he will eventually identify, in the second *Critique*, with the view that from a practical perspective, morality is "all that matters."

As Kant reads them, the ancients argue that an account of the highest good is either an account of why acting rightly is in our best interests (the Stoic) or, alternatively, why pursuing our best interests in the most effective way is acting rightly (the Epicurean). Against this view, Kant maintains that it is *not* always in our personal best interest to act morally. Thus, he cites Juvenal approvingly (CPrR, 5:159): "count it the greatest iniquities to prefer life to honor and to lose, for the sake of living, all that makes life worth living" (*Satire*, 8.79–84). This perspective suggests a kind of interest in our doing the right thing, but it is entirely different from the view of Epicurus when the latter says, "The just life is most free from disturbance" (*PD* 17; DL, 10.144). The Kantian-Juvenalian view also differs from that of the Stoics, whom Diogenes Laertius reports believed that the virtues "are both instrumental and final goods [. . .] in that they produce happiness [. . .] and in that that they fulfill it" (DL, 7.96–97). Even Plato holds to the common ancient view that virtue and happiness, which ordinary folk regard as distinct considerations, are intimately, perhaps inseparably connected. Thus, in the *Republic*, Socrates claims that justice belongs to the finest and most complete class of goods, "the one that anyone who is going to be blessed with happiness must love both because of itself and because of its consequences" (*Republic* 2, 358a1–3).

So, the position that Kant orients himself against in the ancient era is that there is no difference in kind between the moral and the prudential as practical concepts. To deny this difference is to dissolve the problem of the highest good. There is no need for either an Epicurean or a Stoic to worry about the possible divergence of virtue and happiness because they are, at bottom, the same end, and they consequently prescribe the same practical principles. Epicureanism and Stoicism thus represent a kind of optimism, albeit not of the cosmic, theological variety of Pope and Leibniz. Instead, Epicureanism and Stoicism offer a personal, naturalistic optimism in the guarantee that following the correct practical principles—defined by the highest good—will guarantee the complete attainment of personal human ends. To reject this view as he does, Kant would need to show, on independent grounds, why it is implausible to regard the highest good as an analytic unity of happiness and virtue. Kant never makes such an argument in an explicit, clear, and sustained manner. However, as I will argue in the following section, there is such an argument implicit in his continual complaints about ancient ethics that they are unsuited, in one way or another, to human nature. What emerges from this line of criticism is the Kantian view that a properly human conception of the highest good is one that recognizes it as a *synthetic* unity of two irreducibly distinct dimensions of our practical existence. In Kant's view, a believable solution to the problem of the highest good starts from this recognition.

4. Human Nature and the Ideals of the Ancients

In a note from the mid-1760s, Kant says, "The ancients all had the error of making chimeras out of their *ideals*" (R 6584, 19:96, emphasis mine). Kant will later, in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, contrast an idea (*Idee*) with an ideal (*Ideal*). Whereas an *idea* is an abstract concept of pure reason, its corresponding *ideal* is an individuated representation, "an individual thing that is determinable, or even determined, through the idea alone" (*CPR* A568/B596). An ideal stands in the same relation to its corresponding idea as an individual thing stands in relation to the concept it instantiates. As examples from the history of philosophy of the employment of ideals, Kant offers the Neoplatonic doctrine (which he misattributes to Plato himself) of the *forms* as *individual ideas* in the divine understanding. He also offers the thought-construct of the Stoic sage. Hence, the *ideal of*

humanity would be the representation of an individual embodying, "out of each [pair of] opposed predicates," those and only those that correspond to the *idea of humanity's perfection* (ibid.). Since ideas as Kant defines them are constructs of pure reason alone, they cannot be instantiated in appearance. An ideal for Kant is thus necessarily the representation of a non-real individual.

4.1. The Concept of an Ideal

The question that then arises is whether we ought we to model our own lives on such ideals. Late in his career, Kant seems to say "Yes": "[I]t is our universal human duty to *elevate* ourselves to [the] ideal of moral perfection" (Rel., 6:60–61, emphasis original). That is, we must (morally) adopt the embodiment of human moral perfection as the pattern for our own behavior; Kant argues that Jesus Christ is the correct *Urbild*—original image—for this purpose. Earlier, in the first *Critique*, the role of ideals is a little more complicated. On the one hand, "we have in us no other standard for our actions than the conduct of this divine human being, with which we can compare ourselves, judging ourselves and thereby improving ourselves" (CPR A569/B597). On the other, he says, "to try to realize the ideal in an example, i.e., in appearance, such as that of the sage in a novel, is not feasible and even has about it something nonsensical and not very edifying." This is because, he continues, the inadequacy of our imitation of the ideal arouses the suspicion toward the idea upon which it is founded "by making it similar to a mere fiction" (CPR A570/B598).

This latter advice seems unsatisfying. What else could judging and improving ourselves according to a standard be other than an attempt to realize that standard? In fact, the tension between the necessity of ideals and the inadequacy of our imitations thereof is a direct anticipation of the "Antinomy of Practical Reason" and, indeed, the problem of the highest good in the second *Critique*. There, Kant says, analogously, that the apparent impossibility of realizing the highest good in appearance undermines confidence in the moral law (CPrR, 5:114).[53] And yet, we still hold ourselves to moral account. It is perhaps the case that Kant's suspicion of the employment of ideals in ethics in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is owing to the fact that Kant had not yet conceived his later resolution to the problem of the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. That is, Kant's suggestion in the second *Critique* and afterward is that we might employ ideals insofar as they point us ethically toward the noumenal. And this fits with the claim in the second *Critique* that we have a practical reason (as it happens, specifically in order to be able to explain the possibility of achieving the highest good) to believe in the immortality of the soul, the existence of God, and freedom of the will.

In the meanwhile, Kant's analysis of ideals sheds light on what it is about the ideals of the ancients he might see as chimerical in the 1760s. All of the ancient ideals that Kant discusses, save one, posit their ideals as purely naturalistic ones. For the Cynic, the ideal is a life of simplicity and the avoidance of artifice; for the Epicurean, a pleasurable life; for the Stoic, a life of wisdom and virtue. Each of these represents an effort to articulate an ideal natural human being. Only for Plato, Kant says, is the ideal a non-natural one. In a note from the end of the 1760s, he writes, "the ground of the highest good [for the Ancients] is either in nature or in community with the highest being. The former *principium* is natural, the second mystic. The latter is the Platonic theory" (R 6601, 19:104). Kant is never a Platonist in ethics, but one thing that the Platonic

[53] What is cast in terms of an ideal of behavior—a morally perfect human being—in the first *Critique* is cast in terms of an ideal of outcome—a morally perfect world—in the second *Critique*.

account gets right from Kant's perspective is this: Platonism posits the grounds of the highest good beyond an idealized account of the human being *qua* natural organism only. If this interpretation is correct, we would expect to see Kant represent the Platonic ideal of the highest good in similar terms to his own, which, indeed he does. In another contemporaneous note, Kant says that the Platonic mystical ideal of the highest good is effectively, like his own later ideal, an ideal of holiness, of supersensible influence. "Holiness," he says, "sees well-being as blessedness. Results from community with God." In a later addition to the note, he adds a slight modification: "Platonism: with God through nature; Christianity: through supernatural means. Philosophy or fantasy. Enthusiastic, fantastic, mystical" (R 6611, 19:108–10). That is, Platonism and Christianity both argue for the necessity of the assumption of a *more* perfect being to explain the possibility of the highest *human* good.[54]

It is not, however, that Kant believes that the proper ethical ideal should exclude our natural existence. Rather, I suggest that, in Kant's view, the principal shortcoming of the non-Platonic ancient ethical ideals is their *exclusive* naturalism. By restricting themselves purely to the idea of merely human perfection *qua* organism as a source for their ideals, the Epicureans and the Stoics both end up with a conception of the highest good that is, somewhat ironically, unsuited to human nature.[55] The argument might run something like this.[56] Kant's mature view of the human being is a deeply dualistic one.[57] As he puts it in the second *Critique*, "The human being is a being with needs, insofar as he belongs to the sensible world [. . .] But he is nevertheless not so completely an animal as to be indifferent to all that reason says on its own and to use reason merely as a tool for the satisfaction of his needs as a sensible being" (5:61). In this context, we might surmise that to take the first conjunct, neediness, to exhaust human nature is to be something like an Epicurean. To adopt the spirit of the second conjunct—of the elevated status, so to speak, of reason—in the same way is to be a Stoic. One says that we are our only animality, the other that we are our only our morally practical reason (our "personality," as Kant will later designate it). Both views capture an aspect of humanity but, when taken for the whole, result in a caricature.

Importantly for the Kantian argument, its targets need to recognize the verisimilitude of the description of human nature. Epicurus is not unaware that human beings take themselves to be accountable for acting rightly, nor is Zeno or Chrysippus unaware that human beings have certain

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[54] *Nota bene*. Again, this does not mean that Kant is straightforwardly endorsing Platonic ethics any more than he straightforwardly endorses Christian ethics. The point here is just that Kant thinks that a convincing account of the possibility of the highest good will involve an extra-human contribution.

[55] Compare Kant's recorded remark in the Collins moral philosophy lecture notes from the 1770s: "The ancients had no greater moral perfection than that which could come from the nature of man; but since this was very defective, their moral laws were also defective. So, their ethical system was not pure; they accommodated virtue to human weakness, and hence it was incomplete" (27:251). This is confirmatory of the hypothesis that Kant's criticism of ancient ethics is grounded in a criticism of the source for their ideals. On the other hand, it also indicates that Kant's position was not fully coherent at the time: the accusation of accommodation is more apt for the Epicurean than for the Stoic, as Kant himself reads the latter on many occasions.

[56] The remainder of this section serves as an overview of the argument in § 4.2.

[57] As Allen Wood argues, Kant's position on the duality of the human being does not entail a kind Manicheanism about the human condition (1970, 2ff.). The two dimensions of human theoretical and practical experience are captured in his favored formulation "finite rational being" (cf. Ch. 1, § 4.1). The joint finitude and rationality of the human being present possibilities for tension around which our moral conundrums arise, but they are not in some sense diametrically opposed.

unquenchable sensible needs. But in constructing their ideals and beginning from one of these aspects or the other, they are forced by common sense (so the argument goes) to introduce what they have omitted through the back door. Epicurus tells us that we do the right thing by seeking happiness; the Stoics that we are happy when we do the right thing. But if we begin with a *full* picture of human practical reason as Kant sees it, we cannot conceive of the highest good as an ideal of merely human perfection at all. This is because the Kantian picture of the human being is as a creature that is subject, in principle, to a possibly bifurcated practical existence, one in which its interest in happiness is potentially at odds with its interest in acting morally. To put the point somewhat poetically, there is no strict ideal of human perfection because the human harbors a practical contradiction. For Kant then, it is hard to envision the naturalistic ideals of the Stoics and the Epicureans as ideals at all. Instead, the idealized sages of the ancients begin to look not like perfect human beings but like distortions. Kant, who had been primed to turn away from naturalism in ethics during his reflections on the Lisbon Earthquake, is thus lead to search beyond the human organism for an ethical ideal.

In so doing, he conceives of one that he believes is actually better fitted to the bifurcated nature of the human being. Kant's compound conception of the highest good is simultaneously stricter than that of Epicurus and more humane than that of the Stoics. It does not coddle us into thinking that the pursuit of our own pleasure is *per se* the virtuous course of action. But we are also not expected to pretend that we are happy when we suffer for the sake of virtue. This, in broad strokes, captures the essence of what Kant sees as his alternative conception of the highest good against those of the ancients. Its better suitability to what he sees as the human condition forms the core of his implicit argument against an analytically unified conception of the highest good. I have reverse-engineered the argument to a certain extent here, working backwards from Kant's mature conception of the human condition for the purposes of clarity. We can now turn back to the texts for evidence of the development of this line of thought.

4.2. Kant's Understanding of Ancient Ideals

In 1770, Kant defended his Inaugural Dissertation, *On the Form and Principles of the Sensible and Intelligible World*. There he sharply delineated for the first time in his career the human faculty of sensibility from that of the understanding. Not coincidentally, Kant also firmly characterizes the highest good as *problematically* involving both virtue and happiness. It seems likely that the crystallization of this thought coincided with his conclusion, against the empiricists on one side and the rationalists on the other, that the human being has multiple, irreducible mental faculties. Further underscoring the parallels between Kant's theoretical and practical thought, he is inclined to criticize his philosophical interlocutors in ethics on the grounds that they conflate distinctions in kind. Thus, we see in 1769–1770, that Kant says that the ethical ideal of the ancients is that of the highest good, and that when this ideal is a combination of virtue and happiness, these "are either so subordinated that happiness is a necessary consequence of virtue or virtue is a necessary form of the means to happiness" (R 6601, 19:104).[58] He repeats this claim in a separate,

[58] Adickes suggests this *Reflection* could also be from the period of 1764–68, but it is closer thematically to other notes more probably from around 1770. Moreover, the striking parallelism with the developments in Kant's theoretical philosophy suggest the later date. But, of course, intellectual development is not always linear or straightforward.

contemporaneous note, suggesting further that the impetus to this subordination arises because these two practical interests, virtue and happiness, often come into conflict with one another (R 6607, 19:106). Thus, Kant suggests that Epicurean and Stoic ethics take the form that they do because those philosophers implicitly recognized the threat of the problem of the highest good.

Later, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant presents Epicurus and the Stoics as archetypical of ancient approaches to the highest good. At an earlier stage in Kant's thinking, he listed them alongside a number of other alternatives: as we have seen, there is the Cynic ideal of simplicity and Platonic mysticism (R 6584, 19:95; R 6601, 19:04; R 6607, 19:106; R 6611, 19:108); Kant later mentions too the Cyrenaic hedonism of Aristippus (R 6611, 19:109; R 6616, 19:111). But it is clear that there is something definitive about the philosophical significance of the Epicurean-Stoic opposition in Kant's mind. Both seek to account for the whole highest human good by effectively reducing virtue and happiness to one another.[59]

It is no small matter, in Kant's view, whether virtue, with the Stoics, or happiness, with the Epicureans, is given primacy, even if many of the first-order normative prescriptions yielded by the two theories are similar. Kant himself will effect a different kind of "subordination," of happiness to virtue, in his account of the highest good in the second *Critique*, arguing that virtue is the *supreme* good, even if not the *whole* highest good by itself (CPrR, 5:110). Thus, Epicurean ethics comes under fire from Kant to a degree that Stoic ethics does not. "The ideal of Epicurus," he says, "is false according to the pure rules of morals and thus in the theory of moral principles [*principii*], although it is correct in its ethical teachings" (R 6607, 19:106–7). In his Inaugural Dissertation, Kant definitively confirms this rejection of moral sense theory, arguing that moral principles are cognized by the pure understanding. Thus, he concludes, "Epicurus, who reduced [moral philosophy's] criteria to the sense of pleasure or pain, is very rightly blamed" (*ID*, 2:396).[60]

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[59] As such, their resulting ideals are not, in Kant's eyes, *entirely* different: both theories, after all, regard the highest good as the final end, so they both regard it as occupying the same practical space in our lives; and both theories argue that the highest good is the real unity of two apparently different phenomena. If the Epicurean says that we act virtuously when we effectively strive for happiness, while the Stoic argues that are happy when we strive for virtue, what difference is there in the final accounting? Perhaps not surprisingly, at the level of practice, the prescriptions for the good life offered by the two schools are not substantially different. Kant is often at pains to dispel, especially to his students, the caricature of Epicureanism as a philosophy of profligate hedonism (see, e.g., MC, 27:395).

[60] To be sure, Kant wields his eventual characterization of moral principles as formal against Epicureans and moral sense theorists on one side and against Stoics and rationalists on the other, all of whom he regards, according to the argument of the second *Critique*, as committing a methodological error. And even as Kant is becoming increasingly critical of Epicurus in the early 1770s, he is also formulating his critique of rationalist perfectionism not only as tautological but as conflation of the principles of truth with those of morality (R 6624, 19:116). In this *Reflection*, we get the hint that Kant is grasping at a kind of difference between ancient and modern ethics that has sometimes been characterized as the difference between an ethics of character ideals and an ethics of principles. Wood, for example, emphasizes this heavily (2015, 126–31) But this distinction can be easily overstated, for both ancient and modern ethics, as I argue in Chapter 3, commit the same kind of crucial methodological mistake. Wood leans heavily on Kant's remarks in the 1784/85 Mrongovius moral philosophy lecture notes, that the moderns have investigated the basis of morality through an inquiry into "[t]he principle of morality, or the logical principle [. . .] from which all moral laws may be derived" (MMr, 29:621), while (by contrast, it is implied), "The ancient Greeks concentrated the determining of the principle of morality on the question: What is the highest good?" (MMr, 29:599). The former claim need not be read as implying the excision of the concept of highest good from modern moral philosophy. But if it does, it is superseded by the later second *Critique*, in which Kant says, "The moderns, with whom the question of the highest good *seems* to have gone out of use or at least to have become a secondary matter, hide the above error (as in

Kant's views on the nature of moral principles eventually serve to ground an important external critique of his competitors and to explain why, in his judgment, their ethical theories are incorrect. However significant for Kant's ethics these maneuvers are, they do not get to the heart of the argument I am interested in here. Kant's mature ethics presupposes a number of other theoretical commitments and thus does not meet the Epicurean and Stoic conceptions of the highest good on neutral ground, so to speak. For that, we must look instead to Kant's more intuitive, less theory-laden criticisms. These, I argue, emerge more clearly from Kant's struggle to make sense of the human condition. Specifically, Kant becomes concerned about the suitability of the Epicurean and Stoic conceptions of the highest good, *qua* an analytical unity of virtue and happiness, as ideals for human ethical life, and this because he thinks both ultimately fail to capture the human condition in its fullness.

4.3. Kant's Critique of Ancient Ideals

With regard to the Stoics, Kant says that their teaching "is the truest of pure morals, but the least fitted to the nature of the human being" (R 6607, 19:106). We can ask whether by "nature" here, Kant means the entire character of the human being or its merely its physical aspect? That it is the latter becomes clear when he continues with a contrast with Epicurean materialism: "The Epicurean [teaching] is less true, but more completely fitted to the inclinations [*Neigungen*] of human beings" (ibid.). Since the Epicureans base their conception of the highest good on the rules of prudence, "special laws of morality were dispensable [for them]"; conversely, "to the Stoics, special laws of prudence were dispensable" (R 6611, 19:109). One needs only be prudent, for the Epicurean, to be virtuous, or virtuous, for the Stoic, to be prudent. As Kant puts it slightly differently, the Epicurean posits the good in the satisfaction of inclinations, the Stoic in the mastery of them.

Kant thus relates the two aspects of what he himself ultimately takes to be the highest good to the two opposing poles of Epicureanism and Stoicism. The Epicurean takes the adroit fulfillment of human inclinations to be exhaustive of the highest good, the Stoic, the suppression of those same inclinations. The Stoic's deployment of virtue aligns with Kant's *Tugend* insofar as sensible inclinations can potentially come into conflict with moral commands. In that case, the triumph of the moral over the prudential is a necessary condition for the highest good (CPrR, 5:110). The Epicurean's happiness aligns with Kant's *Glückseligkeit*, the harmonious satisfaction of natural inclinations. These inclinations are, in themselves, good and even necessary for us as natural creatures. The branch of practical reason that concerns their fulfillment is the species of instrumentally practical reason Kant calls *Klugheit* (Rel., 6:58).[61] But if, as Kant is inclined to think, the highest good requires the coordination of these two really distinct poles and not their reduction to one another, then what the Epicureans and Stoics give to us in their ethics is merely a facsimile of an ethical ideal, a false promise of one component of the bipartite highest good through the fulfillment of the other.

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many other cases) behind indeterminate words; *but one can still see it showing through their systems*, since it always reveals heteronomy of practical reason, from which an *a priori* moral law commanding universally can never arise" (CPrR, 5:64–65, emphasis mine).

[61] Kant later faults the Stoics for, as he sees it, unnecessarily denigrating the inclinations, which are not bad in themselves (*Rel.*, 6:57).

But of course, the question in contest is whether indeed the highest good is really bipartite or unitary, and the Epicureans and the Stoics claim the latter. Thus,

> Epicurus placed the ends of all virtuous as well as vicious actions merely in the relationship of the objects to sensibility, i.e., to the satisfaction of inclinations, and he distinguished virtue only through the form of reason with regard to the means.
>
> Zeno [the Stoic] posited all ends of virtuous actions merely in the intellectual and the conquest of the whole of sensibility.
>
> According to him, self-approval was the whole of true happiness. (R 6621, 19:115).

Kant thinks that the attempt to thus reduce virtue to happiness or happiness to virtue is smoke and mirrors. "Common sense" interjects into the history of philosophy in the voice of Adeimantus in the *Republic*: "justice and temperance," he says to Socrates, "are fine things, but difficult and onerous" (Rep., 364a1–2). Kant is aligned with Plato's brothers as he is with Juvenal when they invite us to recall the pre-philosophical wisdom of the poets, who say, "that unjust deeds are, for the most part, more profitable than just ones" (Rep., 364a4–5). Moreover,

> Vice in abundance is easy to get,
> The road is smooth and begins beside you,
> But the Gods have put sweat between us and virtue (Hesiod, *Works and Days* 287–9).[62]

In rebuke, Plato's Socrates constructs an elaborate rational psychology in order to illustrate why the most vicious disposition of the soul must necessarily result in the profoundest unhappiness. That is to say that a commonality between Plato, Epicurus, and the Stoics is the thesis that the vicious life is not only not virtuous but also imprudent, effectively resolving the problem of the highest good. But if Plato's solution is a kind of synthetic one—insofar as it gives a causal account of how vice leads to unhappiness—the later Hellenistic solution is not really to resolve as to dissolve the problem of the highest good at its source. Virtue and prudence, they insist are simply different names for one and the same species of practical reason, whose final object is a simple unity.

In this way, the practical significance of the ideals of Epicurus and of Zeno becomes clear. If true, their ideals recommend to us either a life that finds its virtue in effectively pursuing happiness or one that is effectively happy simply in the consciousness of its moral impeccability. But Kant is now prepared to claim that no such life is possible, in principle, for human beings. Consequently, these ideals must be chimerical. Apparently satisfied at last with his analysis of this trend in ancient ethics, the flurry of Kant's *Reflections* on Epicurus and the Stoics slows to a trickle. In the Collins lecture notes, Kant pithily encapsulates his reading: "Epicurus promised man contentment with himself, if he would only contrive that his condition be happy. Zeno promised

[62] Quoted by Adeimantus in *Republic* 2 (364c8–d2).

man contentment with his condition, if he would only contrive that he be contented with himself" (27:251).

On the other side of the 1770s, "Kant's Silent Decade," the criticism of the ideals of ancient resurfaces in its final, concise, and cogent form. It is the common-sense objection, drawn from experience, that the happy are often morally dubious while the morally upright often suffer, sometimes in spite of but sometimes because of their virtue. Moreover, this is not, as the Epicureans and the Stoics must insist to remain consistent, an illusion. The apparent joy that vicious people are sometimes observed to experience is not necessarily counterfeit happiness. The apparent pain that often affects the virtuous as much as anyone else is not a phantasm that can be dispelled by the consciousness of their moral rectitude. That this is Kant's position is made clear in a terminological discussion in the second *Critique*:

> The German language has the good fortune to possess expressions that do not allow this difference to be overlooked. For that which the Latins denominate with a single word, *bonum*, [German] has two very different concepts and equally different expressions as well: for *bonum* it has *das Gute* and *das Wohl*, for *malum* it has *das Böse* and *das Übel* (or *Weh*), so that there are two very different appraisals of an action depending upon whether we take into consideration the *good* and *evil* of it or our *well-being* and *woe* (ill-being). (5:59–60).

Kant might, for example, concede to the Stoic in the throes of an attack of gout, that the pain experienced is no *evil*. But, he insists, the Stoic is still *miserable*.

Does the criticism have any purchase on its intended targets? It seems that both Epicurus and the Stoics concede an *apparent* difference between moral rectitude and physical well-being. We ought to again acknowledge the diversity of doctrine among the Stoics and, to a lesser degree, the followers of Epicurus. However, there certainly seem to be strains in both schools that match Kant's characterizations. Recall that the Stoics typically defined virtue as living in accordance with nature. Certainly, one might be tempted to read this claim in light of the Cynic inheritance of the Stoics, and Kant's account would be rendered inaccurate if the Stoic dictum, "in accordance with nature," generally meant something a Cynic ideal of "naturalness." This would then have to be understood as an ideal of resisting the alleged corrupting influence of the arts (R 6611, 19:108–110) à la Rousseau's first "Discourse," for which Kant labeled him a "subtle Diogenes" (MC, 27:248). Other source material, however, suggests that, by "in accordance with nature," the Stoics meant something rather different and not at all dissimilar to Kant's own conception of moral virtue. Diogenes Laertius reports that the Stoics view virtue as that which "is worth choosing for its own sake, not because of some fear or hope of some extrinsic consideration" (7.89). Moreover, he quotes a Stoic source as saying that the good is "that which is perfectly in accord with nature for a rational being, *qua* rational" (7.94). We can recognize here some of Kant's own commitments about the nature of morally practical reason: it is concerned not with what is hypothetically worth choosing in light of some other good, but with what is categorically choice-worthy, that is, for its own sake. The fundamental principle of morality is an *a priori* principle of *reason*. Both of these passages, importantly, go on to say that the Stoics in general were not only committed to certain "deontological" (to use an anachronism) principles in their treatment of virtue, but also to the view that Kant criticizes them for: namely, that virtue is happiness itself. "Happiness lies in virtue," they

say, "insofar as virtue is the soul [so] made [as to produce] the agreement of one's whole life" (DL, 7.89), and virtue's "supervenient byproducts are joy and good spirits and the like" (DL, 7.94).

On the Epicurean side, there is no doubt that the tradition understands Epicurus as having taught that the good lay in pleasure, rather than in intrinsically choice-worthy rational principles. This is clear from Diogenes Laertius's reports that Epicurus explicitly claimed that, "The virtues too are chosen because of pleasure, and not for their own sakes" (10.138). Athenaeus of Naucratis says that in Epicurus's lost *On the Goal*, he wrote, "One must honor the noble, and the virtues, and things like that, if they produce pleasure. But if they do not, one must bid them goodbye (*Deipnosophists* 12, 546ef). And in the extant original material, the teaching is similar. In his "Letter to Menoeceus," Epicurus says, "[O]ne must practice the things that produce happiness, since if that is present, we have everything, and if it is absent, we do everything in order to have it" (DL, 10.122). And later in the same essay, he confirms that "pleasure is the goal," though adds (as Kant stresses whenever he wishes to defend Epicurus), "we do not mean the pleasures of the profligate or the pleasures of consumption [. . .] but rather the lack of pain in the body and disturbance in the soul" (DL, 10.131). Thus, for Epicurus, pleasure is the primary good, and virtue, it turns out, a necessary and sufficient means thereto; counterfactually, however, we would not and ought not choose the virtues if they did not reliably lead to happiness. As an empiricist, Epicurus asserts this as a claim from experience. So, the Epicurean view that virtue leads to happiness is not the same as the Stoic view that virtue simply constitutes our happiness. Rather, for the Epicurean, pleasure is the final goal of life, the highest good, and we are virtuous when we are happy because the virtues merely name truly prudential principles.

To sum this up then, we can at least defend Kant's view that the Stoics and the Epicureans represent two different, opposed strategies for attempting to dissolve the problem of the highest good. More important, however, is whether the criticism of the implausibility of these strategies could gain traction with a Stoic or an Epicurean. The core of this critique lies in the common-sense observation that these two practical considerations appear to often diverge in the course of human life.

But can an Epicurean or a Stoic even recognize this criticism if, as they claim, they view happiness and virtue as one and the same practical concept? Kant gives no direct voice to this question. But I think the answer depends on whether we are persuaded that a Stoic or an Epicurean sage—the schools' respective practical ideals—has really persuaded himself[63] of this assertion. In the course of this discussion, the hypothesis has emerged that the Epicurean and Stoic conceptions of the highest good are born of a conciliatory aspiration and that the ethical theories of Epicureans and the Stoics are, in a sense, consolatory projects. The Stoic wise man tells us that we need not lament the *apparent* suffering of the virtuous, for they do not really suffer.[64] The Epicurean sage tells us that we need never worry about our moral self-esteem so long as we effectively pursue pleasure: we are sure to be doing the right thing. The problem of the highest good is only a problem in one's thinking. The Epicurean and Stoic promise is that the dilemma can be dissolved by a revolution in one's practical conceptions.

The problem is that these claims are unstable, and the tentative unification of virtue and happiness easily comes unraveled. Epicurus admits that the wise man on the rack "will moan and

[63] I use the masculine pronoun here as the ideal is gendered in the original sources.

[64] The Epicurean also claims this to be true, insofar as virtue is viewed to be the necessary means to happiness. "[E]ven if the wise man is tortured on the rack, he is happy," Epicurus taught (DL, 10.117).

groan" (DL, 10.117). Does Epicurus expect us to believe that torture is not "a disturbance," from which the just life is alleged to be most free (*PD* 17; DL, 10.144)? That it is not a displeasure or could not be even a punishment, the kind for fear of which alone he tells his followers to avoid injustice (*PD* 33; DL, 10.150)? Is there no conceivable circumstance, we might ask the Epicurean, in which it might be more *prudent*, perhaps due to fortune or the machinations of one's enemies,[65] to commit an injustice (according to broadly accepted conceptions of the virtues) and thereby *risk* punishment rather than pursue the path of virtue and *guarantee* it? Epicureanism's critics have long doubted whether the Sage Epicurus himself would go so far: "[I]n the *Puzzles*, Epicurus asks himself whether the wise man will do some things which the laws forbid, if he knows that he will escape detection. And he answers: 'the plain statement [of the answer] is not easy.'" That is, as Plutarch alleges, "I will do it, but I do not wish to admit it" (*Against Colotes*, 1127d).

Conversely, for the Stoic, virtue is supposed to be exhaustive of the highest good. Virtue is the goal of life, and thus, "happiness lies in virtue, insofar as virtue is the soul [so] made [as to produce] the agreement of one's whole life" (DL, 7.89). Virtue, according to the Stoic, produces happiness in itself (DL, 7.96–97). But it seems that for the Stoic to be consistent, such happiness must exclude what Kant calls "*Wohlbefinden*." For if we are in possession of virtue, we must, according to the Stoic view, be in possession of happiness, even in the most intense of physical agonies. Pleasure is, according to the Stoic Cleanthes, "not natural and does not have value in life," while Archedemus says it is natural "in the way that armpit hairs are natural but does not have value" (*AM* 11.73). Perhaps, but can we believe the Stoics when they say, as Sextus Empiricus reports, that since virtue is exhaustive of the good (AM 11.22–24), health (and anything related to it) is not only—in the schematic of the Stoics—an "indifferent" (AM 11.61), but not even a "preferred indifferent" at that? The Stoic cannot admit health or any kind of physical well-being into the class of preferred ends, however implausible this seems, since, as Sextus argues, "to say that [health] is a preferred indifferent is tantamount to claiming that it is good, since they practically differ only in name" (AM 11.64). We can rightly doubt that even the most committed Stoic could consistently maintain a taxonomy of goods that excludes *all* purely physical considerations from happiness. But this is all the wedge that is needed to prise virtue and happiness apart.

5. Kant's Highest Good in Perspective

What I have tried to do in this chapter is to shed light on the analysis of the development of Kant's conception of the highest good in light of his historical studies. When the Kantian concept of the highest good is broached in the secondary literature, it is sometimes done so in isolation, and for understandable reasons. The *Critique of Practical Reason*, which contains the first definitive treatment of the concept, is a highly technical and architectonic work. But as the preceding confirms, Kant's conception of the highest good is not just deeply indebted to a historical tradition of ethical thought, it is also intimately tied to his evolving views on the problematic human condition.

[65] A thought-experiment from Kant himself: "[A]sk [someone] whether, if his prince demanded, on pain of [. . .] execution, that he give false testimony against an honorable man whom the prince would like to destroy under a plausible pretext" (*CPrR*, 5:30).

Thus, I have focused in this on a synoptic view of the development of Kant's view of the highest good. Doing so reveals that he came to his view through engagement with the history of philosophy—not as a historian in the contemporary sense, but in the tradition of Aristotle, who detected, in the soil of his predecessors, the seeds of his own germinating thoughts. This explains why Kant came to frame his technical discussion of the highest good in the second *Critique* around an opposition between the Epicureans and the Stoics. Each, he thought, picked up on one dimension of the practical life of the human being: on one side, a desire for pleasure and ease rooted in our physical, finite nature; on the other, a rational concern for doing the right things, independent of our inclinations, and rooted in our pure practical reason. Both, in Kant's view, carried the respective practical ideals to excess and ended up unsuccessfully attempting to square the circle of a practical conundrum. That conundrum, the problem of the highest good, is the fear that arises most acutely when we witness good people suffering and vicious people prospering. It is the fear that our moral condition is unrelated to our physical well-being and thus, that it is impossible to consistently and coherently achieve our final ends.

Kant's treatment of the problem of the highest good rejects two kinds of solutions. The solution examined here is one that gets short shrift in the second *Critique*. This is the solution to, or rather the dissolution of, the problem of the highest good found in the writings of the Epicureans and the Stoics. They argue that happiness and virtue, although in appearance different, are in reality the same, and thus that virtue can be explained in terms of happiness or happiness in terms of virtue. Kant's criticism of this solution—that a conception of the highest good as an analytical unity yields an unrealistic and, moreover, inhuman ethical ideal—is found in a careful look at Kant's scattered *Reflections* on his ancient predecessors. The other solution Kant rejects, which will be discussed in the next chapter, is a synthetic solution. The synthetic solution to the problem of the highest good says that happiness will *causally* lead to virtue or vice-versa. Kant thinks that, as a causal claim, it is refuted by experience. This refutation results in the Antinomy of Practical Reason and a concomitant loss of faith in the moral law.

Both of these solutions might be called "theoretical solutions" to the problem of the highest good. They are *theoretical* insofar as they rely on descriptive claims that lead to the conclusion that the problem of the highest good is illusory. They are *solutions* insofar as their success would leave us satisfied in the knowledge that our interest in happiness and our concern for virtue are never, in fact, at odds. If we believe that one *is* the other, our satisfaction is immediate. And if we believe that the one *causes* the other, we may expect their coincidence in the future. Kant's turn away from these positions—ubiquitous in the ancient period but also common in the European debates over optimism in which Kant participated—is a turn away from the venerable tradition in philosophy that all our practical ends can be simultaneously achieved.

CHAPTER 3. THE PROBLEM OF THE HIGHEST GOOD

1. The Significance and Problem of the Highest Good

In the "Dialectic" of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant says, "If [. . .] the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false" (*CPrR*, 5:114). By the "highest good," Kant means the distribution of happiness—the satisfaction of needs and inclinations—on condition of virtue—adherence to the moral law. *Prima facie* this seems a striking contrast to his insistence, in the *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, that "reason issues its precepts unremittingly, without thereby promising anything to the inclinations, and so, as it were, with disregard and contempt for those claims" (G, 4:405). More broadly, it seems that, according to one standard interpretation, the quintessence of Kantian ethics is the assertion that happiness is contemptible in comparison to the moral law. Yet, in the second *Critique*, Kant argues that if practical reason could not conceive the possibility of reconciling happiness to virtue, then it would be condemned to moral skepticism to the point of nihilism. I call this Kant's "problem of the highest good."

1.1. Two Reactions to the Highest Good

Kant is not a nihilist. *Ergo*, he believes that the highest good is possible, and that the "Antinomy of Practical Reason," which concerns the highest good's apparent impossibility, is indeed itself merely apparent. This is to say that Kant believes that human practical reason—split, in his view, between its desire for happiness and its call to virtue—is not thereby irreconcilably in conflict with itself. Our practical reason is bifurcated, yes, and we can never reduce our moral interests to our prudential ones (or vice-versa, though the temptation in that direction is less). But we are not doomed to live forever under the Damoclean sword of having to irrevocably choose between our happiness and our duty, if and when they should diverge. The problem of the highest good is soluble.

We might have, in general, two reactions to this aspect of Kant's moral philosophy. On the one hand, it would be a splendid thing if we could achieve the highest good, and it remains a popular legacy of Kant to regard the future of the human race, in both moral and prudential terms, in a hopeful light. Kant, it seems, provides a model for combining an uncompromising theory about the nature of moral rules with a radically hopeful outlook on the attainability of the highest good. Moral imperatives for Kant are uniquely categorical in their modality. They precede and restrict rather than derive from the pursuit of the good. Nevertheless, Kant's view is that, with divine assistance the latter can be so systematically integrated into a moral course of action that we can eventually achieve a harmonious state of affairs in which happiness follows on and adorns moral rectitude.

What is notable about many Kantians who hew to this vision is not what they adopt but what they reject from Kant's own treatment of the highest good. What makes the highest good so problematic—the apparent impossibility, judging from experience, of achieving or perhaps even coming close to achieving it—is also what induces Kant to posit its solution in the extraordinary doctrine of the postulates of pure practical reason (or "practical postulates"), the immortality of the

soul, the existence of God, and freedom of the will (CPrR, 5:122–34). In nearly every case where Kant casts a hopeful eye toward the future of humanity, some reference to the noumenal, and indeed religious, conditions of that hope follows not far behind.[66] In contrast, most present-day "hopeful" Kantians reconstruct the highest good in secular, if not entirely naturalistic terms. Accordingly, the highest good—or whatever is to take its place as the moral end of humanity—is redefined in less ambitious terms, as perpetual progress in approximating an ideal ever more closely, perhaps.[67]

On the other hand, some interpreters take seriously the tension that Kant himself apparently saw between hope and naturalism, what Frederick Beiser calls "the crisis of the Enlightenment" (1987, 1). In this context we might think of the first and second *Critiques* as each containing the statement of a challenge—the same challenge, in fact, in a theoretical and then in a practical guise—for the pre-modern, Aristotelian *Weltanschauung*. Allowing teleological explanation into the organon of reason allows human beings see themselves and their concerns reflected in the world. As many of his contemporaries saw it, Kant dealt this conceit a fatal blow. When reason critiques itself, it indeed finds itself reflected back in the world, but only as it appears. With regard to the constitution of things in themselves, we can never be sure that we are "at home" in the world. The

[66] See, for example, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: "[W]e must assume a moral cause of the world [. . .] in order to set before ourselves a final end, in accordance with the moral law; and insofar as that final end is necessary [. . .] is it also necessary to assume [. . .] that there is a God" (5:450) and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*: "Morality inevitably leads to religion and through religion extends itself to the idea of a mighty moral lawgiver outside the human being" (6:6). Note that we are here discussing the conditions or assumptions under which Kant thinks that human beings can be hopeful about the possibility of the highest good. It is very uncertain what the practical postulates objectively entail, if anything, but Paul Guyer puts the salient point well: "the postulates of pure practical reason must ultimately understood as natural products of teleological judgment that can and must be put to work in the interest of reason to allow sensibility to cooperate with the interests of reason" (2000, 371). That the practical postulates are the noumenal assumptions Kant considers to be subjectively necessary—necessary for us to plausibly regard ourselves and our societies as working toward something both morally permissible and in accordance with the interests of human beings as natural creatures—is made especially clear in the "Theory and Practice" essay: "duty does not have to be grounded on any particular end but rather introduces another end for the human being's will, namely to work to the best of one's ability toward the highest good possible in the world [. . .] which, since it is within our control from one quarter [i.e., virtue] but not from both taken together [i.e., combined with happiness in accordance therewith], exacts from reason belief, *for practical purposes*, in a moral ruler of the world and in a future life" (8:279).

[67] The Rawlsian School, so to speak, comprises the most prominent defenders of a purely secular reconstruction of Kant's concept of the highest good. John Rawls himself proposes that the highest good be taken as a secular and naturally achievable ideal (2000, 317); Onora O'Neill conceives of moral progress as "a this-worldly, shared and historical, perhaps incompletable task" (1996, 286); and Andrews Reath elaborates on the highest good as an "ideal of social cooperation" (Reath 1988, 615). In a similar vein, even interpreters before and after Rawls more sympathetic to Kant's apparent commitment to the highest good as a foundation for rational religion prefer to find, if possible, a secular core to the doctrine. John Silber in one paper argues for viewing the highest good in two lights: in one as a transcendent attainment of the highest good as a regulative ideal of conduct and in another as immanent human striving for the highest good as a constitutive requirement of morality (1959). Allen Wood also suggests room for ambiguity and argues that Kant sees the transcendent aspect of the highest good as able to be immanently manifested in the form of a philosophy of religion that is at the same time a social philosophy (1970, 191). More recently, Katrin Flikschuh has argued for an interpretation of Kantian faith (*Glaube*) that retains "transcendent connotations" but is ultimately non-religious (2010, 98). Lawrence Pasternack (2017, 443–47) has recently argued that textual evidence is thin that Kant ever endorsed a "secular version" of the highest good in which, Reath claims, the synthesis of happiness and virtue in a proportional relationship drops out.

purposiveness that structures our experience of the world is not, as Aristotle supposed, a deep facet of reality, but merely an epiphenomenon of the peculiar kinds of rational animals we are.

Kant never faltered in his conviction that his transcendental idealism certified teleological judgment, in both theoretical and practical philosophy, as a legitimate if circumscribed feature of human reason. Thus, the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (§§ 87–91) ends with a definitive restatement of a "moral proof" for the existence of God resting on its necessity for us to achieve our moral ends. Kant, in other words, thought that the restriction of teleological judgment to a merely regulative status resolved philosophical problems without undercutting its utility either to science or morals. But this opinion was not widely shared by his contemporaries, who saw the road to general skepticism in Kant's critical philosophy.[68] They, like Kant, perceived that mechanistic naturalism posed an existential philosophical threat to notions like the possibility of the highest good. But they thought that Kant could not paper over the gap between our aspirations and our capabilities—moral and epistemic—that he himself exposed.

We are, in a sense, descendants of this reaction. In natural science, teleological judgment generally has given way to the predictive power of modeling and formal methods. In Kantian ethics too, the teleological component has fallen out of favor. Thus, many interpreters regard the highest good as superfluous to the essence of Kant's ethics, if not actively in contradiction with it. According to this view, if Kant has identified the moral law in the intrinsic value of humanity and the form of imperatival universality, we are entitled to ask: What could the highest good possibly add to moral philosophy? Of what else do we need assurance? The moral law, after all, is the supreme principle of practical reason; its domain, says Kant, is the entirety of our practical lives. The highest good and our hopes for achieving it would seem, for secular Kantians, to be a mere description of ethics in the natural world. Anything further requiring metaphysical extravagance to support it—the Kantian edifice of hope for the highest good, say—would seem to be an answer in need of a question.[69]

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[68] See Beiser (1987, 1–15) for a general overview of the dialectical positions taken by Kant's contemporaries and successors in Germany.

[69] This highly critical view had its heyday in the second half of the twentieth century. Their usual target was Silber's vigorous and repeated defense of the centrality of the concept of the highest good to Kant's ethics (Silber's (1963) critique of Lewis White Beck's (1960) criticism of Kant's account of the highest good in *A Commentary on Kant's* Critique of Practical Reason is concise and representative of this side of the debate). Beck had argued that Kant cannot claim that it is a duty to promote the highest good understood as a proportionality of happiness to virtue, because the actual apportioning could only be done by "a moral governor of the universe" (i.e., a Kantian god). Thus, the concept of the highest good as Kant understands it adds no content to our ethical lives beyond the commandment to comport oneself in accord with the categorical imperative, which can get on perfectly well on its own (1960, 244–45). Jeffrie Murphy (1965) comes down on the side of Beck, namely, that the highest good is extraneous to the core of Kant's ethics, and additionally argues that the *content* it is supposed to give to a human will (which, when morally determined, is so in virtue of the *form* its maxim; see, e.g., TP, 8:279–80) is at odds with common, everyday moral experience: that is, that the project of actively trying to bring about an earthly proportionality of virtue and happiness would be destructive to the kinds of praxis (especially at the level of politics) Kant ultimately endorses. Thomas Auxter (1979) concurs, and argues further that the natural impossibility of the highest good (*ex hypothesi*) precludes it from serving as a moral ideal. Auxter argues that a moral ideal must guide practical judgments in subsuming sensible, particular circumstances under intelligible, universal rules and, thus, must not be such that the sensible particulars could never conform to the intelligible universal rules proposed (1979, 123–29). Nor can Kant's highest good, as Silber had previously argued (1959, 486–92), serve as a merely regulative ideal of action to encourage moral striving, at least insofar as it contains happiness, for this would subvert the purity of moral motivation (Auxter 1979, 129–31).

1.2. The Case of Maria von Herbert

But the question for which the edifice of Kantian hope is the answer is most poignantly raised by Maria von Herbert. Von Herbert's first letter to Kant, delivered by Ludwig Borowski in 1791, details a paradigmatic Kantian instantiation of a conflict between virtue and happiness: von Herbert's dutiful disclosure of a lie leading to the loss of a friend and bitter self-recrimination. Von Herbert implores Kant to "either damn me or give me solace," for "the metaphysic of morals including the categorical imperative, doesn't help a bit," even though she believes it to be true (C, 11:273–74). In his response the next year, Kant cannot help but provide some consolatory pablum. If the lost friend is true, Kant says, he will in time forgive von Herbert her lie and more firmly love her for her subsequent honesty; if he does not, "his affection was more physical than moral and, in view of the transient nature of such a love, would have vanished in time all by itself" (C, 11:334). But he urges von Herbert to focus not on seeking solace but on squaring her moral accounts and—conformably to the doctrine of the highest good—suggests that the rebuke of her conscience is rightful so long as it comes from a place of pure moral consideration and that she does not dwell on it to the point of making "one's whole life useless by continuous self-reproach" (C, 11:334).

Equally interesting is von Herbert's follow-up letter in 1793. In it, von Herbert tells Kant that he was correct in his prediction: the friendship was restored. Yet now it leaves her cold, as she confronts a new and more existential problem:

> I get an empty feeling that extends inside me and all around me, so that I am almost superfluous to myself. Nothing has an allure, and even getting every possible wish I might have would not give me any pleasure, nor is there a single thing that seems worth the trouble of doing. I feel this way not out of displeasure but from weighing the amount of sordidness that accompanies everything good. I wish I were able to increase the amount of purposeful activity and diminish the purposeless; the latter seems to be all that the world is concerned with. I feel as if the urge to really do something only arises in me in order to be smothered. [. . .] Don't think me arrogant for saying this, but the commandments of morality are too trifling for me; for I should gladly do twice as much as they command, since they get their authority only because of a temptation to sin and it costs me hardly any effort to resist that" (C, 11:401).

As Rae Langton puts it, "[von Herbert's] passion, the turbulence, has vanished. Desolation has taken its place, a 'vast emptiness,' a vision of the world and the self that is chilling in its clarity, chilling in its nihilism" (1992, 494). In Langton's view, von Herbert prefigures the Schillerian challenge to Kant's ethics, that the supposedly intrinsic worth of morality is in fact dependent upon there being inclinations to overcome. Kant's epistemological synthesis of rationalism and empiricism consists in the interaction of the understanding and sensibility. "If only," Langton says, "Kant had effected a similar synthesis in the moral sphere: for if it is true, as he says, that inclinations without reasons are blind, it seems equally true that reasons without inclinations are empty. [. . .] We need both" (1992, 498). As it is, von Herbert would seem to be an example of Susan Wolf's (1982) tragic Kantian saint and, in her very person, a *reductio ad absurdum* of Kantian ethics.

Of course, the Herbertian-Schillerian challenge is only intelligible as an objection if it is Kant's view that in the sphere of practical reason, humans must make do with the moral law alone. While that does seem to have been more or less the view of a once-dominant trend in Kantian ethics, it is not Kant's. On the contrary, the purported contemptibility of the inclinations is the thought that Kant wishes most strenuously to avoid when discussing the highest good. What else could be the significance so much dialectical gymnastics to explain the place of happiness and the satisfaction of the inclinations in what Kant calls the object of pure practical reason? As he argues, with regard to the practical postulates, in his *Theory and Practice* essay (two years after von Herbert's first letter, as it happens), "It is not as if the universal concept of duty first gets 'support and stability' only on the presupposition of both [a moral ruler of the world and a future life] but rather that **only in that ideal of pure reason [the highest good] does it also get an object**. For duty is nothing other than the *limitations* of the will to the condition of a giving of universal law" (8:279–80, emphasis original, boldface mine). To put it crudely, the moral law, in Kant's view, only tells us how we must act. It does not by itself answer the question, "But to what end?" And in this sense, Kant may as well have been speaking directly to von Herbert, for this would seem to be her own question.[70]

Might von Herbert's correspondence point toward a different kind of challenge? Let us return to her first letter, which so exactly captures what I am calling the problem of the highest good. If von Herbert's subsequent letter is evidence, her distress is not of that morally specious kind about which Kant cautions in his reply—self-reproach "for a mere imprudence [. . .] regret [of] having done your duty on this occasion" (C, 11:333)—but indeed a true moral regret. Moreover, von Herbert had recognized, while her friend shunned her, the irreducible character of the loss her dutiful honesty had cost her. To Kant, she says, "The reasons you gave in your books were sufficient to convince me of a future existence—that is why I have recourse to you—only I found nothing, nothing at all for this life, nothing that could replace the good I have lost" (C, 11:273). Von Herbert acutely grasps the problem that underlies the "Antinomy of Practical Reason." The radical separation Kant points to, in the *Groundwork* and in the "Analytic" of the second *Critique*, between the principles of morals and the principles of prudence, entails that in this life we exist always with the threat that the two will radically diverge.

It is a remarkable tendency of human practical reason to deny the possibility of this divergence, which seems so plausible and obvious in the abstract, whenever it manifests in the particular. Langton argues, *contra* Kant, that von Herbert ought to have lied to preserve the friendship, not merely from a prudential but also from a moral perspective. Under morally non-ideal circumstances—and patriarchal Europe surely counts—our duty may be to act *strategically* in service to an ideal, rather than to imitate the ideal itself (1992, 504). Yet it was von Herbert herself, not Kant, who determined she had a duty to honesty to her friend. And by von Herbert's

[70] Kant was not actually speaking to von Herbert. Langton is entirely right in her contempt for Kant's response to von Herbert's second letter, which he seems to have read, if at all, in light of Johann Erhard's assessment that she had been carried away into moral enthusiasm (*Schwärmerei*). Kant never replied and instead shamefully forwarded von Herbert's letters to the daughter of a friend to serve as a cautionary tale. As Dilek Huseyinzadegan (2018) argues, a truly *Kantian* feminism must be alive to Kant's view on what it is to be human, insofar as it forms the basis of his moral philosophy but thus also threatens, in its Eurocentrism, to leave us with subtly hegemonic ethical concepts. The ignominy of Kant's treatment of von Herbert here is increased if I am correct, as von Herbert's articulation of her psychic distress seems to underscore the centrality and significance of Kant's cherished concept of the highest good. In particular, von Herbert here poignantly illustrates the essential aspect of the Kantian conception of the human being I emphasize in this chapter—its practical division between duties and desires—and Kant cannot see it in her.

testimony, it was the fact of the lie *per se*, not its content as Langton implies (1992, 503–4), that disrupted her relationship (C, 11:273). Perhaps Langton is nevertheless right. But what is it that impels us to engage in such subtle apologetics? Is it really so terrible to countenance the possibility that virtue and happiness might genuinely point in opposite directions?

1.3. Kant's Proposed Solution

I suggest that the answer is "yes," and I think Kant agrees. Kant thinks our practical reason exhibits a remarkable but very explicable propensity, a "natural dialectic," he calls it, "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" (G, 4:405). It is worth noticing that such a propensity would have to be a moral one. If it were merely self-serving, it would not be to reconcile duty to inclination but to cast the very concept of duty aside as irrelevant. Instead, this natural dialectic is a manifestation of our rational commitment to conceiving of the highest good as possible. The "Dialectic" of the *Critique of Practical Reason* is essentially Kant's architectonic argument for both the need and the possibility of hope for the highest good.

Although the debates of the last half century over the status of that concept in Kant's ethics have been illuminating in many respects, they have, in my view, largely bypassed its real significance. When they discuss the doctrine of the highest good, Kant scholars have tended to focus on its relation to the categorical imperative. That is, they have wondered in what way Kant means to use the highest good to flesh out his normative views on what we ought to do. But the importance of the concept of highest good for Kant really lies at the problematic juncture of its dearness to human beings and its apparent unattainability. This is to say that it is the *problem* of the highest good that especially occupies Kant's attention and that the articulation of this problem and his hopes for its resolution represent one of Kant's most important contributions to the history of ethics, at least by his own lights.

More specifically, Kant's account of the highest good is oriented by two points. The first is that in its synthesis of distinct but ineliminable and irreducible interests—virtue and happiness—the possibility of the highest good represents a perennial challenge for human reason. The second is that the history of ethics is defined, in large part, by a series of unsuccessful efforts to answer that challenge. Kant thinks that each such attempt is more or less an example of a methodological error in ethics caused by what he calls "a paradox of method in a *Critique of Practical Reason*" (CPrR, 5:63). The methodological error, which I call the "priority error," that Kant has in mind is the very natural method in ethics of first representing the human good—the content of our true happiness—and thence deriving ethical principles as just those rules of conduct most conducive to that good.

The priority error is born from the temptation to assume that human practical life is unified rather than bifurcated. Ethical doctrines that commit the priority error precede a description of virtue with a description of happiness, and by deducing the former from the latter, they would thereby purport to resolve the problem of the highest good. For if the principles of virtue are just those precepts that conduce to happiness, there is no threat of a split practical existence and no problem of the highest good. We could expect the highest good to obtain simply in our adherence

to moral laws.[71] Against this, Kant's insists that the principles of virtue and those of prudence are different in kind. This leads him to posit the highest good explicitly as an object always of hope and never of expectation. A certain kind of rational hope is thus Kant's own proposed solution to the problem of the highest good.

2. Kant's Conception of Practical Reason and its Object

But in order to understand why Kant thinks the possibility of the highest good represents a problem, it is necessary first to understand the concept's place in Kant's account of practical reason. We saw in Chapter 2 that Kant does not invent the concept of the highest good to fit into his architectonic; he comes to it instead through the history of ethics. Nonetheless, when Kant does articulate his mature views on the nature of practical reason, he finds that the highest good—as he had been thinking about in conversation with the ancients—is a natural candidate for a keystone position. In particular, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant designates it as the object of pure practical reason.

2.1. Objects of Practical Reason

More specifically still, Kant says at the outset of the "Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason," that the highest good is the "unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason" (CPrR, 5:108). What is an object of practical reason? In the "Analytic," Kant writes that an object of practical reason in general is "an effect possible through freedom"; further, "to appraise whether something is an object of *pure* practical reason is only to distinguish the possibility or impossibility of willing the action by which, if we had the ability to do so [. . .] a certain object would be made real (CPrR, 5:57; emphasis original). The distinguishing mark of an object of pure practical reason then is its relationship to the will. All objects of practical reason are potential effects of action, but only objects of pure practical reason bear a definite relation to the will even in the absence of the capability to bring them about.

Kant thinks that pure reason in general is the source of the principles according to which human reason carries out its particular theoretical or practical functions. To determine the nature of the objects of these different functions, Kant thinks it is necessary for reason to carry out a critique of its operations and so to ascertain the limits of its domain. In a critique of theoretical reason, the rational function to be examined is that of cognizing objects, and the goal is thus determining whether the objects of the senses can be validly subsumed by the understanding under concepts. Kant thinks that a critique of this faculty reveals that reason gives principles *a priori* to intuition and to understanding such that things appear to us under the pure forms of intuition of space and time. They can then be subsequently cognized via general concepts of the understanding, themselves instances of pure conceptual forms provided by reason. Kant settled on the term *Kategorien* for the latter; an earlier, more literal name during the development of the first *Critique* was *Titel des Denkens*, "headings of thought" (see, e.g., R 4672, 17:635; R 4678, 17:661; PE, 29:34).

[71] This is the view Kant attributes in various guises, to a number of moral philosophers, but most importantly to the Epicureans and the Stoics. We will mention Kant's views on these schools in passing, as they are part of the story of the *Critique of Practical Reason*. But Kant's reactions to Epicurean and Stoic ethics in the context of the problem of the highest good are the explicit focus of Chapter 2.

By contrast, practical reason is not solely concerned with cognition. Instead, Kant says, practical reason has to do with "its own ability *to make [objects] real* (conformably with cognition of them)" (CPrR, 5:89; emphasis original). With theoretical reasoning, an object precedes its representation; when reasoning practically, the representation precedes the object. In Kant's mind, this accounts for a principal difference between the *Critique of Pure Reason* and the *Critique of Practical Reason*, namely, that while the objects of theoretical reason must be described prior to determining the principles of their cognition, the reverse is true for practical reason (CPrR, 5:90).[72] In other words, Kant argues that when carrying out a critique of practical reason, we allow for the possibility that pure reason can determine general practical principles even in the absence of a determination of the object.

With this in mind, we can understand the status of an object of *pure* practical reason. To abstract from the question of the physical possibility of a given effect of human agency and to consider only a hypothetical object's relation to the will and to the faculty of desire and aversion would be to investigate the possibility that pure reason can determine practical principles prior to having an actual object in mind. Something becomes an object of practical reason *in general* when it *contingently* is the object of desire or aversion, "and experience must judge about this," Kant notes (CPrR, 5:57–8). An object of *pure* practical reason, however, would be *necessarily* an object either of desire or aversion, regardless of the possibility of bringing it about. Such an object would thus to be determined according to some *a priori* principle. In the case that an object has a necessary relationship with the faculty of desire, it is good; if with the faculty of aversion, evil (CPrR, 5:58).

Ultimately, the animating question of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, is whether pure practical reason has an object at all, that is, whether the will can determined according to an *a priori* principle instead of by the sensible inclination presented by objects of desire or aversion as they materially affect us and as our contingent dispositions toward them might vary. Kant thinks that this is a question that naturally and inevitably presents itself to any rational being. It can simply be expressed as the question, "Is there something desirable in itself; something that is not merely possibly or actually desired by someone somewhere but something necessarily worthy of being desired by anyone with cognitive and practical capacities like my own?" It is the question Aristotle asked in Book I of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. The ubiquity of the question is betrayed by our ordinary practical discourse, and indeed, Kant argues that even the German language "distinguishes the *agreeable* from the *good* and the *disagreeable* from the *evil* and requires that good and evil always be appraised by reason and hence through concepts" (*CPrR*, 5:58; emphasis original). In other words, everyday discourse betrays a pre-theoretical conviction that there very well may be an object of pure practical reason.

2.2. The Practical Unconditioned

In our everyday life, we recognize that all sorts of things we experience are subject to conditions. Socrates is mortal because human beings are mortal, I would not be damp if it were not raining, and so on. For every such inference, the manifest conditioned gives occasion for a rational agent to

[72] That is, not that we need to describe things as they are in themselves before describing our epistemic relationship to them, but that we must first recognize that what we are dealing with in cognition is objects as they appear to us.

seek a condition in experience, and each uncovered condition can again be considered as a manifest conditioned. Thus, we ask: Why are human beings mortal? Why are biological life forms mortal? And so runs the chain of conditions on, apparently *ad infinitum*.

At this point the thought occurs to us that there might be something unconditioned, something that is the condition of all the manifest conditioned but does not itself have a condition. Kant calls such thought-entities "pure concepts of reason" or "transcendental ideas" (CPR, A321/B378). In a note from the later 1770s, Kant remarks that a pure concept of reason is "[t]he concept of the totality of synthesis in accordance with the categories of relation" (R 5555, 18:231). In other words, a pure concept of reason is a concept of the complete set of conditions under which we make judgments. The entities that would correspond to such concepts are manifestly *not* given to us in experience. Nevertheless, the concepts themselves can nevertheless serve to "introduce formal unity of reason into our cognition" (R 5555, 18:232). That is, it is a natural extension of the function of reason to seek the unconditioned, even as doing so leads it to make (as Kant alleges) illegitimate theoretical judgments about things beyond any possible experience. This is because the activity of systematically making sense of the world by inferring from conditioned to condition points reason in the direction of the unconditioned, toward "the absolute totality in the synthesis of conditions" (CPR, A326/B382).

This extension of reason toward the unconditioned is the basis of what Kant in general calls the "dialectic" of the *pure* use of reason and the source, in theoretical philosophy, of transcendental illusion.[73] "Pure reason," Kant says, "always has its dialectic whether it is considered in its speculative or in its practical use; for it requires the absolute totality of conditions for a given conditioned, and this can be found only in things in themselves" (CPrR, 5:107). The conditioned objects of theoretical and of practical reason are different, but, formally, reason operates homologously in both domains, seeking to make judgments about the manifest conditioned according to general principles. In the theoretical use of reason, judgments are governed by the categories and refer to objectively cognized relations between conditioned and condition. In the practical use of reason, judgments are governed by imperatives rather than concepts and refer to the conditional relationships between objects with respect to their relation to the faculty of desire.

And in the practical use of reason, we are just as much pointed toward the practically unconditioned. In the dialectic of pure practical reason, the question is, "Why do I desire this object (or not)?" Or, in other words, "Why *ought* this object be?" Kant argues that the practically conditioned "rests on inclinations and natural needs," which is to say that the answer to this

[73] Michelle Grier is the pioneering interpreter in understanding the connection between the operations of reason and the unavoidability of transcendental illusion. Grier argues that, for Kant, transcendental illusion arises from two principles of reason—"P1," which commands that the understanding find the unconditioned for any given conditioned, and "P2," which states that a given conditioned entails the givenness of the unconditioned that ultimately grounds it (2001, 119–22)—when combined with the assumption of transcendental realism. The acceptance of P2 is rooted in its necessity for the real use of P1 by the understanding, in itself only a subjectively necessary principle for the use of reason, on the objects of cognition. Thus, we are led to slide from a subjective and formal principle (P1) to an objective, "transcendental" principle (P2) concerning the existence of unconditioned objects beyond any possible experience. The slide from P1 to P2 is, as Henry Allison suggests, is as unavoidable as an optical illusion: it is constitutive of understanding a conditioned that one cognizes its condition, and to avoid the illusion by refusing to seek conditions is akin to avoiding an optical illusion by closing one's eyes (2004, 331). Kant's solution is to argue that, although the illusion is unavoidable, its deceptiveness is not, and the illusion is deceptive only on the assumption of transcendental realism (Allison 2004, 332; cf. A. Wood, Guyer, and Allison 2007, 26–27). Why this is the case also for transcendental illusion in practical philosophy we will see below.

question is usually "because it pleases me" or "because I need it to survive" (CPrR, 5:108). But such conditions can themselves once again be interrogated as objects only conditionally related to the faculty of desire. "Why ought things be such that they please me or are conducive to my survival?" we might very well ask. We are again faced with a looming regress into which the concept of the practical unconditioned steps forward.

2.3. The Concept of the Highest Good

Kant wishes to reserve the terms good and evil for only those objects of practical reason that have a necessary relation to the faculty of desire. As Andrews Reath puts it, "[t]he sense of the passage and the ensuing discussion [at CPrR, 5:57ff.] is clearly that the good refers to any object or end that a person could will in accordance with the Categorical Imperative" (1988, 596). The operative feature of the good for Kant is thus the modal condition of necessity. It is the place of pure as opposed to empirically conditioned practical reason to judge what, if anything, bears a necessary relation to the faculty of desire. This is because, Kant says in the "B Introduction" to the first *Critique*, necessity is the exclusive mark of the *a priori*, and pure cognition is *a priori* cognition "with which nothing empirical is intermixed" (CPR B3). Hence, if an object bears a relationship of necessity to the faculty of desire, this must be judged *a priori*, in abstraction from this or that empirical inclination.

So, the good is what can be judged by pure practical reason to be necessarily related to the faculty of desire. What about the *highest good*? Since the highest good is Kant's designation for "the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason," the highest good must be a "pure concept of reason" or a "transcendental idea." It is, namely, an idea that could serve as a point of reference for practical reason in order to introduce formal unity among its objects. It is the practical concept of that object for the sake of which all other objects of practical reason are desired and that is not desired for the sake of any other object. The concept of the highest good arises from the dialectical movement of practical reason toward the practical unconditioned, the practical "absolute" (cf. CPR, A324–7/B380–3). Such is the formal characterization for the highest good as the object of pure practical reason, though it is not yet actually a determination of it.

In sum, the practically conditioned is that which has an empirically determinable relationship to the faculty of desire, "rest[ing] on inclinations and natural needs" (CPrR, 5:108). The practical unconditioned, the good, has a necessary relationship with the faculty of desire. Kant's use of the term "highest good" conveys the concept's transcendental significance as the object of the dialectic of practical reason. It also serves to directly connect Kant's discussion to a tradition of thinking about the "*summum bonum*." Kant thinks that existing conceptions of the *summum bonum* arise in past philosophical systems engaged in the dialectical operations of practical reason, though they do so without the advantage of a critique of practical reason. In Kant's view, this leads past philosophers to an important mistake in the determination of the highest good.

3. The Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason

We have now a formal description of the highest good, and we know that Kant sees the concept of the highest good as the site of a potential philosophical problem. More specifically, this problem arises through the effort to determine this concept, which is to say that it arises for us because of a subjective difficulty we encounter when trying to conceive of the highest good as an achievable end

of action. The effort to do so, insofar as it is an effort to judge about the practical unconditioned, is the "Dialectic" of practical reason. Kant maintains that there is an asymmetry between theoretical and practical reason in their dialectical modes and, in an important sense, holds that the latter succeeds in determining its unconditioned object where the former fails. Thus, although neither the practical nor the theoretical unconditioned are objects of experience, the practical unconditioned generates the problem of the highest good through its necessary relationship to the will in such a way as to demand a response over and above that of the "Dialectic" of theoretical reason. To see why, we will need to look more closely at the difference between the two.

3.1. Why Is It Not a Critique of "Pure" Practical Reason?

In the "Introduction" to the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant says that "pure reason, once it is demonstrated that there is such a thing, needs no critique" (CPrR, 5:16), and thus that the appropriate title for the work is not, as might be expected, "Critique of Pure Practical Reason." Rather, he suggests, the *Critique of Pure Reason* is only so named insofar as a critique of theoretical reason is prompted by "the suspicion, which was afterwards confirmed, that [the *pure* cognitive faculty] might easily lose itself beyond its boundaries, among unattainable objects, or even among contradictory concepts" (CPrR, 5:15). Pure theoretical reason, if it is understood as the cognition (*Erkenntniß*) of objects entirely abstracted from their empirical conditions, is chimerical. This is simply to say that Kant thinks that in the first *Critique*, the "Transcendental Dialectic" of pure theoretical reason settles the question, in the negative, of whether we can cognize things in themselves. True, pure reason can think (*denken*) its transcendental ideas, unconditioned entities derived from the dialectical use of reason's forms of inference. But ideas of pure reason are, definitionally, of entities of which we could have no experience. Consequently, the objects of the ideas of pure reason are ones for which we could have no epistemic grounds on which to affirm their existence.

With pure *practical* reason, the case is different. The task set to a critique of practical reason is that it "has merely to show *that there is pure practical reason*, and for this purpose it criticizes reason's entire *practical faculty*" (CPrR, 5:3; emphasis original). As Kant puts it, practical reason is concerned "with the determining grounds of the will," and a will "is a faculty either of producing objects corresponding to representations or of determining itself to effect such objects [. . .] that is, of determining its causality" (CPrR, 5:15). Thus, the principal question of a critique of practical reason is whether reason is capable of determining the will to act, even in the absence of an external object bearing a relation to the faculty of desire. If it is, then the result of the critique is that pure reason can indeed be practical. A will determined by pure practical reason would, in Kant's view, be a "free" will, insofar as the will would free from external influence in its determination. Moreover, *pure reason* would be practical insofar as it proved itself capable of influencing the will without presenting the will with an object of desire or aversion, which Hume thought to be the only role played by reason in action.[74] Kant's proposed explanation for the

[74] When reason is empirically practical, Kant thinks that it is simply concerned with identifying features and relations among objects insofar as these are relevant to our desires. Compare this to Hume's argument from *A Treatise of Human Nature* that reason is the slave to the passions, in effect a very concise account of the empirical practicality of reason:

practical efficacy of pure reason is that the will can be determined through an *a priori* moral feeling of respect for a rational practical principle, namely, the categorical imperative (CPrR, 5:71–89).

It is not my desire here to defend or criticize Kant's view on this score. The important point regards the status of the highest good. Kant thinks that once it is satisfactorily demonstrated that pure reason can be practical, the outcome of the critique of practical reason diverges from that of the critique of theoretical reason. There arises no suspicion, to Kant's mind, that the objects of pure practical reason—goods and evils—will turn out to be chimerical like the objects of pure theoretical reason—immortal souls, creative deities, and the rest. Suspicion of the latter was one of Kant's stated motivations for the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the result of which was the claim that pure reason operating dialectically yielded nothing knowable. Hence, the first *Critique* is specifically a critique of *pure* theoretical reason.

The difference in our aims as theoretical and as practical reasoners reveals why this is intuitively the case. When reasoning theoretically, we seek to cognize objects: to determine what they are. What Kant calls his attempt at a Copernican revolution in philosophy is the thought that we cannot cognize objects as they are in themselves, in abstraction from their mediation by our sensible intuition (CPR Bxvi). But when reasoning practically, we are not at all concerned with the nature of objects but only with their relation to the determination of our own will. The question then is not whether these objects exist, which we could only determine theoretically on the basis of experience, but whether we ought to make them exist, even if we have never had any experience of them. If, as Kant believes, practical reason can determine that the will ought to act in a certain way even in the absence of a representation some empirical object, then whatever object would result from the action of that will must be beyond reproach, presuming, that is, that this object is a possible effect of action. After all, this would be a representation not of something that *is* present in experience but of something that *ought* to be. And crucially, the determination of this object of pure practical reason, the highest good, could only be made after to the determination of the will by a pure rational principle.

3.2. Pure Practical Reason's Dialectic

What if the assumption of capacity to bring the object of pure practical reason about on the part of the agent turns out to be false? Pure practical reason, like pure theoretical reason, has a dialectic that arises from its natural tendency to seek out its unconditioned object (CPrR, 5:107–9). But the suspicion in the dialectic of practical reason is not that its object is *per se* an empty thought-entity; rather, it is that, while its existence is conceivable, it will never come about. It is the height of metaphysical folly, Kant thinks, to make theoretical claims about entities beyond any possible experience. But it is no problem, at first anyway, to aspire to bring something about—in this case,

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> 'Tis obvious that when we have the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object, we feel a consequent emotion of aversion or propensity, and are carry'd to avoid or embrace what will give us this uneasiness or satisfaction. 'Tis also obvious, that this emotion rests not here, but [. . .] comprehends whatever objects are connected with its original one by the relation of cause and effect. Here then reasoning takes place to discover this relation; and according as our reasoning varies, our actions receive a subsequent variation. (Book 2, Part 3, § 3; SB 414)

It is the answer to the question of whether we are capable of volition in the absence of "the prospect of pain or pleasure from any object" that does much of the work differentiating Kant and Hume in practical philosophy.

the highest good—not yet present in experience. It is only when we consider what it would take to make the highest good possible that a dialectical problem arises. This problem looms even after the critique of practical reason has confirmed that there is such a thing as pure practical reason, that the principle reason gives to the will *a priori*, the categorical imperative, is valid and binding considered in itself. Pure practical reason "seeks the unconditioned for the practically conditioned [. . .] not indeed as the determining ground of the will, but even when this is given (in the moral law), it seeks the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, under the name of the *highest good*" (CPrR, 5:108).

Furthermore, the dialectic of pure practical reason ("in determining the concept *of the highest good*," as Kant describes it) results in an antinomy of the same etiology as that which causes pure theoretical reason to become enmired in contradiction (CPrR, 5:109; emphasis original). In theoretical philosophy, Kant argues that the pursuit of the theoretical unconditioned leads to a kind of "natural and unavoidable illusion which itself rests on subjective principles and passes them off as objective" (CPR A298/B354). Pure theoretical reason overextends itself by assuming that its principles hold good, not only for thinking about things insofar as they are subject to the conditions of our cognizing them, but also for things as they are in themselves. The utility of a critique of theoretical reason is to expose this as a "logic of illusion" that embroils reasoners in fundamentally intractable metaphysical disputes (CPR A293/B249). Pure practical reason too extends toward its unconditioned object. It too yields an apparently intractable antinomy that requires a critique of practical reason to resolve. Kant expresses this requirement in the second *Critique* under the title of a "paradox of method," which is, "namely, that the concept of good and evil must not be determined before the moral law (for which, as it would seem, this concept would have to be made the basis) but only (as was done here) after and by means of it" (CPrR, 5:63; emphasis original).

To ignore this paradox, which I designate the "priority error," is, in Kant's view, at the root of the intractability of the Antinomy of Practical Reason. The paradox of method and the priority error express the content of Kant's critical turn in practical philosophy.[75] Kant does not explicitly

[75] Since John Rawls, interpreters have described Kant's view as ascribing priority to the right over the good, where this means, according to Rawls, "that conceptions of the good must answer to certain prior constraints springing from pure practical reason" (2000, 231). If we are to take Kant's discussion of the paradox of method at face value, it seems that this must be true in some sense. However, I suspect that quite a bit of discussion surrounding this point has misconstrued the significance of the priority claim. The statement of the priority of the right to the good in the *Critique of Practical Reason* is a statement of explanatory, rather than metaphysical priority (CPrR, 5:62–3). Kant argues that determining the good prior to the right forecloses, as an avenue of investigation, the possibility that principles might be moral in virtue of their form, rather than their content (i.e., rather than the end they aim at), and thus that pure reason can be practical. So, there is a sense in which, if Kant is correct, that constraining conceptions of the good according to pure principles is a trailblazing move: previous moral thinkers could not have done this, insofar as they did not have an adequate theory of the practicality of pure reason.

But there is another sense in which Kant is not—and does not take himself to be—historically innovative. As I have argued, a critique of practical reason is not necessary, in Kant's view, to conceive of the (highest) good as somehow involving both virtue and happiness. Thus, one does not need to read the second *Critique* to think that the colloquial "good" is somehow formally constrained. On the contrary, we see Kant repeatedly affirming that many among the ancient philosophers were aware of this. He puts it thus in one passage in the lecture notes from the 1770s:

> The ancients saw perfectly well that happiness by itself could not be the one highest good, for if all people might secure this happiness, without distinction of the just from the unjust, then there would indeed be happiness, but no worthiness of the same, and if the latter is included,

reference the idea of a Copernican Revolution in philosophy in the second *Critique*, but it is nonetheless still an apt metaphor. Kant's ambitions for a Copernican Revolution in theoretical philosophy rest on the hope that accounting for the contributions reason makes to human cognition can resolve longstanding metaphysical questions. Analogously, he hopes that accounting for pure reason's contributions to human desire and agency—that is, observing the paradox of method and avoiding the priority error—will resolve an ancient and intractable difficulty in ethics. This difficulty, the "Antinomy of Practical Reason," is that of determining the object of pure practical reason in such a way that it is not an impossible fantasy. As Kant puts it, "the question, *how is the highest good practically possible?* still remains an unsolved problem" (CPrR, 5:112; emphasis original).

4. The Problem of the Highest Good

This is, in other words, the problem of the highest good, and for Kant it is a perennial philosophical challenge that cannot not be satisfactorily answered in the absence of his critical method. To understand why Kant considers it to be a challenge, we must actually determine the content of the highest good and, in turn, the Antinomy of Practical Reason.

4.1. The Highest Good as Consisting of Virtue and Happiness

Kant claims that the Antinomy arises "in the determination of the concept of the highest good." We have already a formal definition of the highest good: the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason. Now we must determine its content. Kant argues that the unconditionality of the highest good can be taken in two senses. If by "highest good," we mean that which is unconditionally—that is, necessarily—related to the faculty of desire, it is moral virtue, "the *supreme* good," Kant designates it. If pure reason can be practical, then it can independently

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> then it is the highest good. The human being can only hope to be happy insofar as he makes himself worthy to be, for that is the condition of happiness that reason itself demands. (MoC, 27:247; cf. R 6607, 19:106; R 6624, 19:116; CPrR, 5:111)

Moreover, this is of a piece with Kant's insistence in the *Groundwork* that the Categorical Imperative is, ultimately, a formalization of what is already present "within the moral cognition of common human reason" (G, 4:403). And although Kant seems to think, in the *Groundwork*, that the moral law requires a kind of deduction, by the time of the second Critique, he has carried his position to its logical conclusion: namely, that the moral law is simply present in everyday moral consciousness as a "fact of reason" (CPrR, 5:31).

The significance of this, I think, is that the conception of the highest good as involving an independent moral constraint is not original to Kant (or, at the very least, he does not consider it to be original). Or, in other words, the Priority Error does not preclude conceiving of the highest good in these terms. Instead, the originality of Kant's account of the highest good lies, as I will argue in § 4, in diagnosing the Priority Error as a stumbling block (via the Problem of the Highest Good) to conceiving the *possibility* of the highest good. Kantians of a Rawlsian bent have sometimes seen, in a "constructivist," non-realist interpretation of Kant's ethics, a potential way to get moral objectivity without metaphysics (e.g., Rawls 1980, 516; O'Neill 1989, x; Korsgaard 1996, 92; O'Neill 2002, 358). In this vein, the priority of the right to the good may be seen as having special significance if it can insulate moral principles from conceptions of the good, so that disputes about the latter do not engender skepticism about the former. But, as I will argue, it seems also to be the case that Kant thinks a major consequence of the Priority Error is *skepticism about the possibility of achieving the good*. Rightly or wrongly, he thinks that no one in possession of common moral reason can fail to notice the command of the moral law.

determine the will to conform to a pure, *a priori* rational practical principle (CPrR, 5:110). A will determined by pure practical reason is a "virtuous" one for Kant, because it esteems the unconditional obligations placed on it by this *a priori* principle higher than any competing inclinations. However, Kant says that virtue "is not yet, on that account, the **whole and complete good** as the object of desire of rational finite beings; for this, *happiness* is also required" (CPrR, 5:110; emphasis original, boldface added).

At this point, we know that the highest good is the necessary object of the human faculty of desire. And, as we saw earlier, a necessary object cannot, in Kant's view, be an empirical one. But human happiness is clearly an empirical phenomenon. How then can happiness be any part of the object of pure practical reason? Or, in other words, how can happiness be a *necessary* object of the faculty of desire? Most philosophers will likely countenance the idea that some of us seem to not desire happiness, though Kant regarded this as false: all human beings, in his view, desire to be happy (G, 4:415; CPrR, 5:25; TP, 8:278; Rel., 6:6n.; MM, 6:386). But this does not resolve the problem, at least by Kant's own lights, since he thinks that the apparent ubiquity of the desire for happiness among human beings is nevertheless not sufficient to ground a moral imperative. A moral imperative, if it is to *command*—as Kant thinks it does—must be a fully *a priori* principle. Otherwise, the imperative would perhaps *advise* about the necessary means to some end, but it would not obligate unconditionally (CPrR, 5:36). For unconditionality, only abstraction from the empirical will suffice. So, to put it another way: if happiness were a necessary, and not merely an actual, object of the faculty of desire, then it could serve as the basis of categorical obligation.

To justify the inclusion of happiness in the highest good, Kant would have to show that happiness can, under certain conditions, be part of the object of pure practical reason without undercutting its unconditionality. Consider Kant's initial explanation, in the second *Critique*, for the inclusion of happiness as a part of the highest good. He says, "[1] to stand in need [*bedürftig . . . zu sein*] of happiness, [2] to be also worthy of it, and [3] yet not to participate in it cannot be consistent with the perfect volition of a rational being that would at the same time have all power, even if we think such a being only for the sake of the experiment" (*CPrR*, 5:110). This claim requires a little unpacking.

First, we must consider what Kant means when he says that human beings "stand in need of happiness." The modality of the "need" here must be weaker than that of the necessity of the moral law or else it would supplant it as the supreme principle of practical reason. In his essay on "Theory and Practice," Kant reiterates his position on the highest good: morality does not require that we cast happiness entirely aside. He argues,

> the human being is not thereby required to renounce **its natural end** [*seinem natürlichen Zwecke*], happiness, when it is a matter of complying with its duty; for that it cannot do, just as no finite rational being whatever can; instead [. . .] it must on no account make it the *condition* of its compliance with the law prescribed to it by reason. (TP, 8:278; emphasis original; boldface added)

The significance of this becomes clear in light of an earlier remark in the "Analytic" of the second *Critique*:

> To be happy is necessarily [*nothwendig*] the demand of every rational but finite being and therefore an unavoidable determining ground of its faculty of desire. For contentment with its whole existence is not, as it were, an original possession and a beatitude [*Seligkeit*], which would presuppose a consciousness of its independent self-sufficiency, but is instead a problem imposed upon it by its finite nature itself because it is needy [*bedürftig*], and this need is directed to the matter of its faculty of desire, that is, something related to a subjective feeling of pleasure or displeasure. (*CPrR*, 5:25).

The human, as a finite rational being, is inherently a *needy* thing. Like all other natural creatures, it is needy in virtue of its finitude. Thus, its "natural end" of happiness is the satisfaction of its contingent desires based on the feelings of pleasure and displeasure it experiences in relation to certain objects. Kant contrasts this happiness (*Glückseligkeit*), the need of which is a symptom of finitude and thus dependency, with beatitude (*Seligkeit*), "which would presuppose a consciousness of [. . .] independent self-sufficiency" (CPrR, 5:25).[76]

So, this is a sense in which happiness is a *necessary* object of our faculty of desire. It follows from the definition of a finite rational being—a natural, needy creature that nonetheless has pure practical reason—that it necessarily desires happiness, explaining clause [1] from 5:110. But for this same reason, the necessity is only subjective. As Kant puts it, the need for happiness afflicts human beings "as a law of nature," but not as a rational principle (CPrR, 5:25). A nonfinite rational being would be bound by the categorical imperative just as we are, but it would not need happiness through the satisfaction of physical desires. Happiness is thus a necessary object only of *our* (i.e., human) faculty of desire. This stands in contrast to the necessity of the moral law, which holds for all rational beings, finite or otherwise. The question is thus, still, "Can happiness be included in the highest good, the object of pure practical reason?" Kant thinks that he can make the case for an affirmative answer, as long as this modal subordination of happiness to virtue is exhibited in the structure of the highest good.

Thus, the condition is added in clause [2], that the human being must be "worthy of happiness." Kant considers "worthiness to be happy" to be extensionally equivalent to "virtue" (CPrR, 5:110). We can now see why that is. In the *Groundwork*, Kant simply calls virtue "a morally good disposition," but in the second *Critique*, he explains that the "proper moral condition" of a human being is "moral disposition *in conflict*." He contrasts this condition with *holiness*, "complete *purity* of dispositions of the will" (CPrR, 5:84; emphasis original).[77] We might ask why virtue rather than holiness is the "supreme good." After all, Kant says a few pages later, "The moral law is *holy* (inviolable)" (CPrR, 5:87). But we know that the highest good is the *object* of pure practical reason. Conforming one's conduct to a formal principle can be an object of the will, but the principle

[76] In a note, likely from the late 1770s, he writes that we "understand nothing of a purely moral happiness or of beatitude," because this could only be the condition of a being entirely beyond the limits of our experience (R 6883, 19:191); and, in another note from the 1780s, written in the margins of Baumgarten's *Metaphysica*: "happiness independent from physical causes is beatitude" (R 6117, 18:460).

[77] Kant's mature conception of the moral condition of human beings is that even the most good-willed sometimes need to be in possession of a kind of moral fighting spirit. Doing the right thing comes to some than to others and easier at some times and in some situations to the same person, but effortlessly at all times to no human being at all. This line of thought only gets more prominent in Kant's thinking over time, receiving further theorization in the *Religion* and in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.

itself cannot be. Putting these pieces together, it seems that for Kant, virtue is precisely striving after holiness: trying to ensure that the law of pure practical reason is actually restrictive on our conduct. That we need to *strive* morally is another way of saying that we are not simply rational, but finitely rational beings, who must choose whether to subordinate our happiness to moral constraints. Granting that this is the way things stand, the supreme good is not holiness but virtue (CPrR, 5:110).

If this is the case, then we already think, in the very concept of the supreme good, the latter's incompleteness. Virtue is the act of subordinating our happiness—what would otherwise be the only necessary object of our will—to formal rational constraints. Yet subordination takes both a direct and an indirect object. That is, one subordinates something *to* something else. Thus, to leave happiness out of the highest good is to leave out the direct object of our pure practical reason. Hence, Kant concludes, [3], that it is irrational to exclude the happiness, which is supposed to be subordinated to virtue, from the concept highest good. Thus, Kant arrives at the second sense of the highest good's unconditionality, its completeness, for it a whole "which is not part of a still greater whole of the same kind" (CPrR, 5:110).

4.2. The Content of the Problem of the Highest Good

Thus, the object of pure practical reason can be conceived of as the practical unconditioned in two respects: either as the "supreme good" or the "complete good." According to the first conception, the practical unconditioned is virtue, which is the *conditio sine qua non* for the worth of all other goods. According to the second conception, the practical unconditioned is happiness itself conditioned by virtue, the sum total of all possible goods actualized in such a way that virtue occupies the position of supreme good. Kant says that "the highest good in a person" is the joint possession of these two whereas "happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality [. . .] constitutes the *highest good* of a possible world" (CPrR, 5:110–11; emphasis original).

Kant does not pause to explain from where he gets the relationship of proportionality, which has been the locus of a good deal of criticism.[78] However, given the argument so far, it should not

[78] Aside from simply being rather distasteful, the main difficulty with adopting proportionality as our end in the highest good is epistemic and has a textual foundation in Kant's views: "[t]he real morality of actions (their merit and guilt), even that of our own conduct [. . .] remains entirely hidden from us" (*CPR*, A551/B579). Silber suggests, *contra* Beck, that the activity of meting out happiness and misery according to worthiness thereof is implicit in everyday normative practices: "in rearing children, serving on juries, and grading papers one tried to do and actually can do something 'about apportioning happiness in accordance with desert'" (Silber 1963, 183; Beck 1960, 244–45). But this misses the full import of the supposed duty. As Murphy argues, in Kant's view, virtue is the measure of desert, and virtue is a property of a disposition (*Gesinnung*) rather than a property of an action (*Handlung*), that is, it is a question of morality rather than legality (Murphy 1965, 107). Kant draws a scholastic distinction between the to, as respectively manifesting in "*virtus noumenon*" and "*virtus phaenomenon*" (*Rel.*, 6:14); it is clear that the former is the kind of virtue that Kant has in mind when speaking of virtue as worthiness to be happy. Since we cannot, according to Kant, be sure even of the virtuousness of our own dispositions (*Rel.*, 6:51), it is unclear how it is even possible for human beings to promote the proportionality of virtue and happiness. Pretending to judge the inner moral worth of our fellow human beings in order to adjust their happiness in light thereof is not only distasteful, but impossible.

Nonetheless, since Reath's "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," some regard the doctrine of proportionality as an extraneous notion tied only to an unattractive theological conception of the highest good. That Kant considers the concept of the highest good as the point of contact between his ethics and his philosophical doctrine of religion via, in part, the necessity of the presupposition of a moral god to effect the highest good indicates that he is fully cognizant of—and, indeed, presupposes—its impossibility as a merely human task. While some

be difficult to see why Kant adopts this view. As a practical concept, the supreme good posits virtue as a *necessary condition* for the *worth* of happiness. Meanwhile, the complete good, posits virtue as a *sufficient condition* for the worth of happiness. Kant's way of putting this is that it is contrary to reason to exclude happiness from the highest good, provided that the condition of virtue is met. If the highest good obtained in some possible world, then that world would be the best of all possible worlds: it would have a maximum of worth. In it, virtue would suffice for the existence of happiness and vice-versa, because where (but only where) there is virtue, there is additional worth to be had in the further presence of happiness. Assuming, as Kant seems to, that both virtue and happiness admit of degrees, proportionality would the correct mathematical relationship between the two.[79]

Thinking the problem of the highest good, once its content is determined, needs virtually no prompting. It is the cynical but apparently well-founded thought that the world in which happiness and virtue always coexist is no possible version of *our* world. It can be put in personal terms also: our virtue is clearly neither necessary nor sufficient for our happiness. Not only is this obvious from experience, it is, moreover, not clear how we could alter our world so that the highest good could obtain. If virtue and happiness are two different objects of practical reason that we must nevertheless think together in the concept of the highest good, Kant argues there are two ways of thinking our way out of this skepticism. The first strategy is to claim that we were wrong in conceiving them as distinct: that the connection between virtue and happiness is, in fact, an *analytic* one, because either the concept of virtue is contained within the concept of happiness or vice-versa. Kant associates the first of these options with the Epicurean school of ethics and the second with the Stoic. The Epicureans, in Kant's view, "maintained that happiness is the *whole highest good*," whereas the Stoics maintained the same regarding virtue (CPrR, 5:112; emphasis original).

Kant says that the ancient schools of philosophy had openly directed their practical theorizing toward determining the highest good without prefacing that effort with a critique of practical reason (CPrR, 5:64). This is just to say that they committed the priority error. That is, the ancients determined the concept of the good first and subsequently based practical principles upon it. One consequence of this is that, in Kant's view, the ancient moral philosophers (and the moderns, but more surreptitiously) asserted principles of heteronomy: they believed that the will was incapable of being determined in the absence of an empirical object (CPrR, 5:64–5). Kant's dismissal of the

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commentators have followed Beck and Murphy in supposing that, when combined with Kant's commitment to "ought implies can," the epistemic impossibility problem is fatal to the duty to promote the highest good (e.g., Sharon Anderson-Gold (2001, 31)), others have taken a different tack. One line of interpretation is to argue that Kant's cognizance of the epistemic impossibility problem eventually led him away from thinking of the highest good as a theological supplement to his practical philosophy and to more or less abandon his initial conception of the highest good as involving a proportionality between virtue and happiness.

In no place, however, does Kant explicitly disavow that the highest good would involve a proportionality of happiness to virtue, and Reath's interpretation of statements of the highest good as being accomplished "in the world [*Welt*]" (e.g., *CPJ,* 5:450) as stating a secular ideal leans on a dubious conflation of *Welt* with *Natur* (Pasternack 2017, 446). Moreover, Kant, he argues, never regarded the duty to promote the highest good as a duty on the part of human beings to distribute happiness in proportion to virtue, as most commentators since Beck have believed, so the alleged epistemic impossibility problem is based on a misunderstanding (Pasternack 2017, 448–50; cf. *CPrR,* 5:122–5).

[79] Courtney Fugate gives a version much the same argument, cast in slightly different terms, in *The Teleology of Reason* (2014b, 321).

possibility of an analytic connection between virtue and happiness is perfunctory in the second *Critique*. He says, "The Analytic [of the *Critique of Practical Reason*] has [. . .] shown [. . .] that happiness and morality are two specifically quite *different elements* of the highest good and that, accordingly, their combination cannot be cognized analytically" (CPrR, 5:112–13; emphasis original). But this conceals a long engagement with the thought that virtue and happiness might, at bottom, be the same practical object. This engagement is dealt with in Chapter 2 of this dissertation.

4.3. The Antinomy of Practical Reason

The alternative strategy for thinking our way out of the problem of the highest good is to posit a *synthetic* connection between virtue and happiness according to the category of cause and effect.[80] Kant argues that this line of thought leads to the "Antinomy of Practical Reason." There are two possible causal connections that could obtain between virtue and happiness: either pursuing virtue causes happiness or pursuing happiness causes virtue. The latter, says Kant, "is *absolutely* impossible" (CPrR; 5:113, emphasis original). To pursue happiness above all is precisely *not* to constrain the will according to an *a priori* moral principle. But the former is also impossible, Kant thinks. The satisfaction of desires in which happiness consists is governed by empirical rather than pure practical reason. The finite rational agent that always constrains its will according to formal moral principles might have its circumstances arranged such that this constraint does not, for some amount of time, clash with its material satisfaction. But there can be no guarantee that these circumstances will hold indefinitely. And when the satisfaction of a sufficiently strong desire is forbidden by a moral principle, unhappiness will follow.

The upshot, then, is that virtue and happiness will never be perfectly aligned, not in the world overall or in a specific individual. Indeed, they might be very far out of sync. Although this second strategy for avoiding the problem of the highest good posits a synthetic, rather than an analytic, connection between virtue and happiness, the hypothetical causal connections are nevertheless reminiscent of the Epicurean and Stoic approaches to determining the highest good. The Epicurean thinks the pursuit of happiness is the whole of virtue, and the Stoic believes the converse. These two approaches, in causal form, constitute thesis and antithesis of the Antinomy.[81]

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[80] Kant's explanation why it must be cause and effect is interesting. It goes back, he says, to the nature of practical reason. Practical reason's objects, even its pure ones, are representations of something that would be brought about through agency, that is, through action. Hence, the relevant category is cause and effect (CPrR, 5:113). But here, the judgment concerns a synthetic causal connection between the free agent and the highest good: if the highest good is a practical concept, it must be of something that we bring about. However, this connection says nothing about the nature of the synthetic connection between the two components of the highest good. Why could we not think that the highest good as a whole is an effect of free action, but that its *parts* are organized according to the other Kantian relational categories of substance or of community? One possible answer is that Kant has already argued that the connection between virtue and happiness is that of necessity and sufficiency. Thus, in the world in which the highest good obtains, the material conditional connecting virtue and happiness is true, as is its converse. If, by hypothesis, virtue and happiness are connected synthetically in the best possible world, these conditionals would have to be true in virtue of causal relationships.

[81] In a striking parallel to the antinomies of the first *Critique* the Epicurean principle is "aesthetic," that is, broadly empiricist, while the Stoic "logical," broadly rationalistic. The two thus correspond respectively to the "Epicurean" and "Platonic" viewpoints found in the antinomies of pure speculative reason (*CPR*, A471/B499). The object of pure practical reason, the highest good, is akin to a practical version of the concept of a world (a

If the Antinomy is not resolved, then the consequence, in Kant's view, is skepticism about the possibility of the highest good; if the highest good is impossible, "then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false" (CPrR, 5:114). Kant here is gesturing toward the risk of a generalized kind of skepticism about practical reason, analogous to the "euthanasia of pure reason" that supposedly results from the antinomies of pure theoretical reason in the first *Critique* (CPR A407/B434). To avoid this threat, which is akin to Maria von Herbert's nihilism, Kant thinks we must believe that the moral end of our practical reason, the highest good, is something that might actually obtain.

Kant's own proposed resolution of the Antinomy also shares similarities with the solutions to the antinomies of pure speculative reason. Specifically, Kant argues that only one of the theses of the antinomy (the "Epicurean") must be entirely false. The other, Stoic thesis is false only for the transcendental realist, that is, only for the philosopher who has not accounted for the *a priori* contributions of reason to its objects and has thus assumed that appearances are identical with things in themselves. For this reason, Kant thinks escaping the Antinomy of Practical Reason requires accounting for the paradox of method and avoiding the priority error. Following a thorough critique of reason, both theoretical and practical, Kant claims we can conclude as follows:

> [T]hat a virtuous disposition necessarily produces happiness, is false *not absolutely* but only insofar as this disposition is regarded as the form of causality in the sensible world, and consequently false only if I assume existence in the sensible world to be the only kind of existence of a rational being; it is thus only *conditionally false*. (CPrR, 5:114; emphasis original).

Even more significantly, I, as a human being, have, "in the moral law a purely intellectual determining ground of my causality (in the sensible world)" (CPrR, 5:115). In other words, Kant thinks that it is entirely in virtue of this fact—that my will can be formally determined—that I have grounds for thinking that one thesis of the Antinomy of Practical Reason is not absolutely false. But I would not be aware of this fact if I had been a transcendental realist, committed the priority error, and assumed that the will can only be determined empirically.

5. Hope for the Highest Good

With the principles of transcendental idealism in play, Kant thinks that we can resolve the antinomy of practical reason and thereby escape the problem of the highest good. The highest good is held to be possible, not in virtue of the causality of nature, but through the moral ontology of things in themselves. We have no epistemic grounds to maintain this of course. That is the thesis of the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant argues instead that we can affirm this in an extension of

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"*Weltbegriff*"). In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that cosmological ideas yield antinomies because they "alone have the peculiarity that they can presuppose their object, and the empirical synthesis required for its concept, as given" (*CPR*, A479/B507). In contrast to the ideas of the soul and of God, a *Weltbegriff* is the "absolute totality" of a series of synthetic judgments, each member of which individually can be empirically cognized. Likewise, we are conscious of our practical demands for happiness and virtue, but in, the concept of the highest good, synthetically combine them into an unconditioned totality.

the domain of reason on purely practical grounds (CPrR, 5:119–21). This is subject to a very important condition, namely, that the theoretical use of reason has not ruled out as impossible the postulates of which practical reason makes use to avoid its own euthanasia (CPrR, 5:120). That is, so long as it does not contradict the assertions of theoretical reason, we can rationally assent to the immortality of the soul, the existence of a moral deity, and the freedom of the will—the conditions under which Kant thinks we can make the possibility of the highest good intelligible. The very particular form of this assent is *Glaube*, belief or faith.

Such is Kant's "practical" solution to the problem of the highest good. The tenets of a rational religion are justified insofar as they allow us to rationally hope for the highest good. This is also the argument that Kant is prepared to give in defense of hope. Survey Kant's conclusions about the highest good, we find that it is the ultimate end and totality of the object of practical reason, the moral lodestar of the human will, and an impossible fantasy if we are transcendental realists. Virtue and happiness are irreducibly distinct practical considerations. They are neither different names for the same thing—the position Kant attributes to the Epicureans and the Stoics—nor are they causally related. If nature exhausts existence, it is either irrational or immoral to have hope at all. For if we are hoping for the highest good, we are irrational. And if we are not, then we are ultimately hoping for some morally unearned boon or bane.

Could Kant have offered any other form of consolation to Maria von Herbert? It is not clear whether she would have accepted it, at least initially. Von Herbert explicitly references the noumenal conditions for rational hope for the highest good as sustaining beliefs. In her first letter, von Herbert writes to Kant, "As a believer calls to his God, I call upon you for help, for solace, or for counsel to prepare me for death. The reasons you gave in your books were sufficient to convince me of a future existence [. . .] only I found nothing, nothing at all for this life" (C, 11:273). Kant's consolations are fit for an age of waning but still robust religious faith. As he famously wrote in the "B" Introduction to the first *Critique*, "I had to deny knowledge to make room for faith" (CPR B xxx). From a secular perspective, it looks more as if Kant has, like Descartes before him, articulated a form of skepticism, intending to defeat it, but doing so perhaps only to the satisfaction of those already inclined to believe.

CHAPTER 4. RADICAL HOPE

1. The Problem of the Highest Good in a Social Context

In this chapter, I have two aims. First, I wish to articulate the terms in which potential anthropogenic environmental collapse can be understood as presenting us, not just as individuals but as a global community, with something I call, from a reading of Kant, "the problem of the highest good." What this effectively means is that humanity faces a set of overlapping circumstances, some of its own making, facilitating a collision of moral obligations (broadly understood) and material aspirations. To explain this, I show how we might scale up the problem of the highest good from a personal dilemma to a generalized social condition, considering it especially as a feature of disastrous circumstances. My second goal is to begin to consider what kinds of affective resources there are for coping with the problem of the highest good. This is, in other words, to consider the question "What may we hope?"—a question Kant believed to be a philosophically basic one.

Two thoughts underpin the framing of this question in this chapter. The first arises from the arguments of the preceding three chapters, which covered the development of Kant's problem of the highest good, the nature of its threat, and the terms on which it might be confronted. My conclusion from this study is that Kant identified a real problem, one which had been taken up by other philosophers before him in different terms; cast doubt the extant solutions of those philosophers; and offered up his own solution that few now find plausible. Thus, the problem of the highest good is effectively unresolved and perhaps, strictly speaking, irresolvable. The second is that the way to think about the problem of the highest good must be transformed from one relating to the concerns of an individual moral agent to a question about how humanity itself ought to regard its uncertain future. Socializing the terms of the problem of the highest good makes it more complicated, but it also, I will argue, offers resources for mitigating it, if not fully solving it.

In outlining the contours of what I have been calling the "problem of the highest good" over the previous chapters, I have drawn specifically on what Kant calls "The Antinomy of Practical Reason" and have sought to explain its place in Kant's ethics. At the same time, I tried to convey that, although the presentation of this problem achieves a particular clarity in Kant's program, it is not unique to his specific philosophical system. Rather, the problem of the highest good as I conceive it is a basic feature of the practical lives of human beings. Kant presents it in especially sharp relief because he consciously derives it from a broad anthropological claim: human beings are a practically bifurcated kind of rational animal. That is, they generally conceive of their lives as pursuits of certain goods but at the same time regard themselves as bound to certain codes of conduct, not necessarily conducive to the achievement of those goods.

Kant infamously makes this dichotomy is as strict as possible. He argues that moral principles are different in kind from those prudential ones governing the pursuit of various goods, and this because if moral principles are derived from some material end, some good, then they cannot have the kind of categorical modality that marks moral imperatives. There is, in principle then, no way to consistently reconcile the principles of morality and of prudence, even though they may often harmonize in the normal course of things. This is the problem of the highest good as it appears in

Kant.[82] But it is not hard to see how something analogous could be conceptualized according to other normative theories. Any ethical system that does not simply *identify* morality with the maximization of personal happiness will have the vocabulary to describe this dimension of human existence: that we should expect that at some points in our lives, doing what we think is right will entail foregoing what we think would be good for us.

So far, I have discussed the problem of the highest good as a feature of the practical life of an individual in very abstract terms, but in practice, it manifests in a social context. This means that when individuals confront the problem of the highest good, it is often features of their social reality that generate conflicts between duties and interests. It also means that, insofar as human beings act socially, the problem of the highest good surfaces just as much for corporate as for individual agents. Of the many ways in which human beings form groups with one another, at least some are such that their constituent members see themselves as parts of a purposive whole. This kind of group might be called a community in Aristotle's sense of the word *koinonia*: an association "established with a view to some good," rather than a mere collection of individuals (Pol. 1.1252^{a}1–2). Sufficiently well-organized communities often have internal sets of norms governing the behavior of individual members and of the community as a corporate entity. It is not difficult to imagine how such a community might find its principles of conduct in conflict with its ends, which would be a kind of socialized version of the problem of the highest good. In other words, when human beings associate with another, they import their split practical personality into the groups they form, allowing for the possible conflict of their communal ends and their established principles.

We might, with some caution, attempt to broaden the scope of this socialized problem of the highest good to encompass even political communities. The need for caution arises from two sources: first, the difficulty in unambiguously defining the good at which political communities aim and, second, the nature of the ethical obligations governing the conduct of states.[83] With even more caution, we might ask whether the problem of the highest good could be generalized to apply to humanity writ large. Is it possible to conceive of the human enterprise as one defined by a potentially insoluble conflict of principled action and the achievement of goods? Even setting aside the difficulty of articulating a coherent concept of humanity as a community in the Aristotelian sense, here is one temptation to answer in the negative. This is because the paradigmatic instances

[82] Dilek Huseyinzadegan draws an important distinction between what she calls "Kantian" and "Kant-inspired" work (2018, 9). Generally speaking, my use of "Kantian" maps onto her "Kant-inspired," insofar as I mean to invoke philosophical concepts generally associated with Kant even if I employ them in different ways. This is mainly the register of references to Kant in this chapter.

[83] The latter difficulty does not negate the existence of the phenomenon. Hobbes declared the affairs of sovereigns, "having their weapons pointing and their eyes fixed on one another," to be at all times a state of war (*Lev.* xiii, 12). Thus, we might suspect that there is no way to formulate the problem of the highest good with respect to political communities because there are no norms governing the external conduct of such communities. But here are meaningful ways in which this is not true. Despite the persistence of barbarity between states, to pronounce that an army has *broken* the laws of war is not—as Hobbes's position seems to imply—a meaningless string of words, but an intelligible statement: there are rules to be broken. It seems entirely reasonable to presume that adhering to proscriptions on certain types of action at the international level amounts to a genuine giving up of advantage. A nation that could avail of illegal weapons or tactics to achieve a strategic edge over its adversaries but chooses not to, even when no one is watching, seems to be trading its advantage for its principles. But even in the absence of international accords, a political community might face some version of the problem of the highest good, if its own internal ideals and its material advantage clash.

of the problem of the highest good at the level of the individual can often be ameliorated by a wider ethical community, in which the tensions between personal virtue and happiness can be mitigated. It is a meager consolation for the individual who suffers for her principles to say that her ethics conduce to the general good. But this is at the same time a good justification for implementing those principles at the level of the community. The same community often elects to detect and punish wrongdoers to mitigate the occasional profits of vice and in this way approaches a concordance between moral and prudential principles.

Analogously, the tradeoff between interest and principle at the level of one community can sometimes be rationalized in terms of the benefits to a respectively larger community or even to humanity in general. But at the level of humanity itself, there would seem to be no broader community to which to appeal. World history, conceived of as the rational project of humanity, is, in Hegel's view, "a court of judgment [*Gericht*] because, in its *universality* which has being in and for itself, the particular [. . .] is present only as *ideal*" (*PR* § 341). Ethical conflicts between the right and the good arise from the deficiency of particular circumstances. Although they are resolved only in the *abstract* for individuals, they are resolved *concretely* in the rational unfolding of Spirit through the course of world history. Hegelian idealism, like Leibnizian rationalism, is a kind of theodicy.

Despite these reservations, in this chapter I am particularly interested in discussing the problem of the highest good in a social context. I think that it is indeed possible to articulate something like the problem of the highest good for the broad kinds of communities—those that from the ethical scaffolding for individuals and smaller communities—and perhaps even for humanity itself, *pace* Hegel. What this would mean is that it is not just each individual but also political, religious, and other kinds of highest-order communities that must reckon with the potential disharmony of their principles and their ends. It would be even plausible to ask whether in some sense humanity itself might find that basic ethical principles diverge from its prosperity. This would not at all be to suggest that there is a unitary "human" experience that could adequately capture the experience of each individual. Nor would it be to suggest that humanity can pretend to relate to its world as a mere object that can easily be manipulated. The problem of the highest good as it relates to communities is a function of their *vulnerability* rather than a representation of their corporate agency, and this vulnerability intersects with and sometimes amplifies personal forms of vulnerability.

The problem of the highest good tends to arise for individuals at points of crisis. It is very much possible to structure a life so to minimize the conflict between ethics and interests. To inculcate virtuous habits, to remove oneself from temptations, to contribute to stably just communities: these are all ways of actively avoiding reasons to ignore one's conscience stemming from personal interest. The disruption of these structures exposes one to the kinds of unpredictable conflicts of virtue and happiness that define the problem of the highest good.[84]

[84] For a lengthy account of the highest good in the context of social institutions designed to achieve it, see Kate Moran's *Community and Progress in Kant's Moral Philosophy* (2012). Moran adopts the view that Kant distanced himself from the theological description of the highest good from the *Critique of Practical Reason* toward one that can explicitly be achieved "in the course of human history" through collective action (2012, 49, 127). By contrast, I am of the view that collective, not to mention individual action, can only achieve an approximation of the highest good. Moran's account is especially interesting for its focus on social mechanisms for working toward the highest good aside from formal and semi-formal systems of approbation and disapprobation, in particular, education and friendship (2012, chaps. 3, 4). Such mechanisms too would plausibly be disrupted in the event of a disaster.

Analogously, the socialized problem of the highest good tends to arise in times of social upheaval. Chapter 1 of this dissertation discussed one strand of the European intelligentsia's reaction to the catastrophic Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, namely the loss of confidence in theodicy. Not only the magnitude of the destruction but also certain incidental features signified the indifference of the natural world to the Catholic moral framework of the city's inhabitants. In short, patterns of behavior, which to a devout Catholic bespeak moral rectitude, were found to have no positive association (and perhaps even a negative one) with the well-being of the unfortunate Lisboans. The Lisbon Earthquake thus served as a potent illustration of the socialized problem of the highest good, in light of which the prevailing program of philosophical Optimism seemed to pale.

Today, we face the prospect of calamity on a global scale and, along with it, various threats to our moral frameworks. It is worth the philosophical risk of attempting to expand the notion of the problem of the highest good to encompass the practical concerns of communities and perhaps humanity itself in order to make sense of these threats. The urgent crisis threating humanity today is the prospect of systemic environmental collapse, and the most widely discussed version of this threat stems rapid anthropogenic climate change. But climate change is only one facet of what might best be described as the impacts of the human species overshooting its ecological supports. As a generalized source of disastrous events and social upheaval, environmental collapse may, through raising the problem of the highest good, strain the credibility of traditional forms of philosophical consolation and demand new conceptual resources.[85]

2. Refusing to Be Consoled

The psychological efficacy of philosophical consolation surely has much to do with its empirical plausibility. In this respect, the most interesting reaction to the Lisbon Earthquake came *against* the philosophers of Enlightenment Optimism. Pope and Leibniz had sought to explain away the ills of the world as merely apparent, so that we might in fact conclude that humanity inhabits the best of all possible worlds. Enlightenment optimism suffered its major setback in European circles in the wake of the Earthquake for a simple reason: the wanton suffering of the Lisboans was too difficult to explain away. It is not hard to imagine that even the more religiously minded might have had trouble reconciling such an event into their worldviews. Even if one antecedently believes

[85] The two important caveats mentioned above regarding the notion of a generalized humanity will apply to the ensuing discussion. For one, we must be wary of assuming anything like a universal human experience of environmental catastrophe. One of the most common misconceptions concerning climate change is that it produces, or even requires, a united humanity," writes Ajay Singh Chaudhary (2020). The failure of much environmental activism and messaging over the past decades had been in its implicit reliance on the universality of the threat of climate change, the notion that no one can afford to ignore the viability of "Spaceship Earth" as our common home. As a clearer picture of the particular threats posed by human impacts on the environment emerges, it is becoming increasingly clear that we are not all vulnerable to the same degree. This fact contributes to the forms the problem of the highest good takes in the context of the environment.

For another, we should be equally wary of assuming a unified object of human agency. As Kelly Oliver argues, "the notion that we can control and master our environment and our globe are part and parcel of the technological worldview that got us into an environmental mess in the first place" (2015, 24–25). The notion that emerged in the space age, that the human species had gotten a conceptual and, ultimately, technological hold over its entire planetary environment is a fiction that continues to drive ecologically destructive thinking. The more we learn about human impacts on the environment, the more it becomes clear how crude and unpredictable are the ways human activity interacts with planetary systems (cf. § 3.1).

that calamities are divinely ordained—that the suffering they cause is merited by the moral corruption of one's community or of humankind in general—it is another matter to go on believing that after having a personal experience of innocent suffering. To a Catholic then, the destruction of churches, the suffering of devout Christians, the fires that consumed much of the city, including the hospital, may all have seemed like refutations of the notion that God imbues the universe with moral order.

In other words, then, the Earthquake served as an example of the problem of the highest good: a stark, undeniable example that happiness and virtue have nothing really to do with one another. This view, accepting the problem of the highest good at face value, might be colloquially called pessimism, though the etymology—from the Latin *pessimus*, "worst"—dissuades me from the appellation. After all, in order to *dis*-believe that this is the *best* of all possible worlds, one does not have to believe that it is the *worst*. So, for lack of a good word, I would designate this as *refusing to be consoled*. To view calamities in light of the problem of the highest good is to confront them as examples of the indifference of is to ought and thus also to deny the consolation of Leibniz and Pope, that this is the best of all possible worlds and that its ills are merely apparent.

2.1. Environmental Collapse as a Vector for the Problem of the Highest Good

What would it mean for us now to refuse philosophical consolation? Before getting into specifics, it is worth sketching the outlines of the most likely source of such a calamity as might strain the credibility of consolation in our own times. To wit, current scientific predictions tell us that the scale of human activity in the modern era is having a catastrophic destabilizing impact on the systems that underpin the Earth's biosphere. The most visible of these impacts are pollution threats, and the most wide-reaching of these is anthropogenic global warming, a side effect of greenhouse-gas-emitting activities, among others. On this subject, Panmao Zhai, Co-Chair of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's Working Group I on the physical science underlying climate change said in 2018 that, "we are already seeing the consequences of 1°C of global warming [over pre-industrial temperatures] through more extreme weather, rising sea levels and diminishing Arctic sea ice, among other changes." Warming of 1.5°C or more "increases the risk associated with long-lasting or irreversible changes, such as the loss of some ecosystems," according to Hans-Otto Pörtner of IPCC Working Group II on climate impacts (IPCC 2018). The *IPCC Special Report on Global Warming of 1.5°C* assigns a "high" degree of confidence to the prediction that global warming will reach 1.5 °C between 2030 and 2052 ("Summary for Policymakers" 2018).[86]

But climate change and its associated impacts on human and non-human well-being are only one aspect of the strain placed on earth systems by human activity. Global warming represents the crossing of one of several "planetary boundaries," defined as the limits of an estimated "safe operating space for humanity with respect to the functioning of the Earth System" (Rockström et al. 2009). Moreover, scientists are concerned that we underestimate the degree to which earth systems are interrelated, such that the impacts of human activity on one have knock-on effects on the others (Lade et al. 2020). That is, the crossing of one planetary boundary affects the solidity of the others. As Lade et al. put it, "The resulting cascades and feedbacks predominantly amplify

[86] For a short, useful overview of the physical science underlying climate change and its associated risks, see Kerry A. Emanuel, *Climate Science and Climate Risk: A Primer* (2016).

human impacts on the Earth system and thereby shrink the safe operating space for future human impacts on the Earth system" (2020, 119). Stress on the systems that support life as we know not only diminishes their capabilities but also diminishes their resilience to further stresses. In other words, not only are we fast approaching the limits of the planet to sustain the biosphere as we know it, we are doing so at an accelerating rate.

Human impacts on the environment are thus the most likely source of the most severe threats to global well-being to date (outside perhaps of the chance of nuclear war). The problem of the highest good represents an additional aspect of these threats. The degradation of the environment makes it harder, for the average human being, to live well, but also, *ipso facto*, to hope for the achievement of some approximation of the highest good. This is partially the result of natural processes, but also a function of social phenomena. In particular, it becomes harder in a warmer world to build and maintain the kinds of social structures that can help to coordinate happiness and virtue.

Environmental collapse is, in short, generalized calamity, and it evokes the problem of the highest good on a global scale. Kant argued to his students that although "the final destiny of the human race is moral perfection" (MC 27:470), we are nevertheless, we are morally justified in hoping that, if that destiny obtained, humanity might also participate in general happiness. "[T]hat will be the kingdom of God on earth," Kant says, "and inner conscience, justice, and equity will then hold sway, rather than the power of authority" (MC 27:241). This would effectively be the achievement of the highest good. It is difficult to offer a full-throated defense of such a teleological claim about the history of the human species after Darwin. Yet, if we are inclined to think that history is even to a small degree influenced by reason, Kant's ideal as it is articulated here does not seem such an unattractive one to hold. And the problem that confronts us as individuals—when life conspires to cause our happiness and our moral obligations to point in different directions—and as communities—when upheaval brings out the worst in people, disrupts social incentives and disincentives, and threatens the credibility of a culture's tools for understanding the world as having an intrinsic moral order—would now seem to confront us as human and historical beings. If it is at all coherent to think about humanity as having moral aspirations, then environmental collapse diminishes the possibility of global well-being, of course, but it also threatens the possibility of attaining anything approximating the highest good.

2.2. The Case for Non-Optimism

It can help to frame the scope of our concern by considering the broadest possible grounds to resist optimism in general. One class of threats to global well-being is sometimes called existential risk. Existential risks are those that could be described as global or perhaps cosmic in scope and terminally destructive in intensity.[87] In the utmost extreme, the extinction of the human species

[87] Nick Bostrom and Milan Ćirković categorize existential risks as a subset of "global catastrophic risks," which "might have the potential to inflict serious damage to human well-being on a global scale" (2011, 1–3). Existential risks are the most extreme tail-end events and, in principle, are the most devastating threats to the human good. I am not focusing exclusively on existential risks in Bostrom and Ćirković's sense.

Conversely, the global catastrophic risks I am most interested in—those pertaining to environmental collapse—are not, in the estimation of most experts, existential. Global warming and ecosystem degradation probably do not portend the extinction of the human species. They do, however, threaten global well-being to serious degree and, as we will see, in such a way as to potentially take us farther from a just distribution of that well-being. Thus, existential risks

represents the decisive end of the human good. Neither virtue nor its hoped-for reward, happiness, would be possible in the complete absence of human beings.[88] Taking the long view, this outcome seems inevitable, but when humans worry about the end of their species, it is usually its *premature* end due to a variety of potential but uncertain threats. *Homo sapiens* may destroy itself through, for example, nuclear war, but it may also suffer an extinction event brought about by an asteroid impact, a supervolcano, or some similar cataclysm. None of these are inevitable or even likely in the long term; indeed, they may even be survivable for the human species if they do occur.

With regard to the inevitable, if moral personality persists in its existence on earth in biological form into the foreseeable future, it still cannot do so indefinitely. Eventually, the expansion of the sun nearer the end of its lifecycle will make the planet uninhabitable; its eventual death will leave the solar system nearly bereft of thermal energy and virtually incapable of supporting life. If, however, humanity were to escape its current solar system, its aspiration toward the good may, in principle, be a fixture of reality *almost* indefinitely. But the second law of thermodynamics is unrelenting. Eventually, the complexity borrowed from the background of the universe for the existence of life must be repaid. At some point in time, however far in the future, personality will cease to be possible, and so, of course will the good.[89]

In the meantime, we face threats of a more uncertain and less existential nature. The cascading risks generated by human exploitation of the environment in the twenty-first century range from mild or moderate with a good degree of probability to severe with a lower degree of probability. All of these risks have physical and moral consequences. I have already suggested how existential threats might have morally salient features. For one, they threaten the possibility of the good itself. From a first-personal perspective, they threaten to undercut the possibility of all philosophical consolation. Certainly, the consolations of Enlightenment Optimism fall away with the extinction of humanity. Non-existential risks associated with human impacts on the environment share these features to a lesser degree: the collapse of the environmental conditions in which human beings evolved does not make all goods impossible, but it does inhibit access to them to a degree. Meanwhile, *some* of the human suffering caused by environmental collapse will be indiscriminate in its distribution, affecting the morally virtuous and vicious indifferently.[90]

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and global catastrophic risks more generally are salient to the problem of the highest good but do not exhaust the kinds of events that threaten our aspirations to the good.

[88] Kant certainly thinks that the categorical imperative is binding on any rational *person*, human or otherwise. Any being with moral consciousness is presented with the moral law as "a fact of reason" (*CPrR* 5:31). So, the extinction of human beings would not spell the end of the good altogether if there are intelligent extraterrestrial species with this consciousness. Moreover, such an extraterrestrial may also be biological and thus needy creatures for whom the satisfaction of their needs would represent an analog of human happiness. It seems likely then that intelligent aliens, if they exist, also face the problem of the highest good; the categorical imperative and the various imperatives of prudence that apply to the satisfaction of their needs will, at times, point in different directions. That is, they would also be aspirational kinds of beings, for whom the highest good is a problematic ideal.

[89] The remoteness of this kind of prospect, whether at the hands a more mundane extinction event far in the future or the cold indifference of entropy, might tempt us to think it inherently uninteresting. Perhaps it is sufficiently irrelevant to us here and now that we are justified in setting it to the side in favor of the consideration of a more proximate risk like environmental collapse. I suspect, however, that the ultimate expiration date on the good eventually will seem the most interesting and dreadful of all questions to whichever questioners still exist at that terminal point.

[90] Not all impacts of environmental collapse are evenly distributed, which is ethically significant, as we will see.

But environmental collapse bears specific kinds of threats that are not present in many other forms of catastrophic risk. On complication is that the phenomena associated with human impacts on the environment raise the question of responsibility. Indeed, a great deal of the philosophical interest in, for example, climate change has to do with who, if anyone, can be considered responsible, to what extent, and for which aspects. Human impacts on the environment can, on one side, be simply viewed as a natural phenomenon through the lens of ecology. This is suggested by the debate over the applicability of the ecological concept of "carrying capacity" to humanity and its ecosystems.[91] With human beings, the question of carrying capacity is fraught. Humans, for one, seem uniquely capable of manipulating and reshaping their social environments (Bookchin 1987, 9). This affords humans a considerable latitude in their consumptive behavior and consequently a high degree of adaptability to their environments. But thinking about the carrying capacity of human beings is further complicated along moral dimensions. We would not be inclined to blame rabbits for overbreeding in the sudden absence of a normal predator, even if the population boom led to the overexploitation of available food stocks and the subsequent starvation (and thus suffering) of the excess rabbit population. But for comparison, suppose, as is not implausible, that the use of fossil fuels has allowed a one-time population boom for human beings—in ecological terms, the exploitation of a non-renewable resource to exceed the planet's carrying capacity for human beings. If this were the case, we should expect a drastic decrease in the human population once that stock is exhausted. Considered purely as a natural phenomenon, it is hard to say why we should assign blame to the authors of such a population boom for the untold human suffering that would ultimately be the result.

But, on the other side, and as a rule, we do not solely regard human behavior in ecological terms. Even if the concepts of the life sciences generally have predictive power over the behavior of human populations, we are nevertheless inclined to regard human behavior in a very different light, one according to which people had the ability to act otherwise than we did. Again, through the use of technology, human beings seem to be able to manipulate the carrying capacities of their environments in ways other species cannot, for example, by substituting one resource with another or by improving the efficiency of the consumption of existing resources. More importantly, humans can control their individual patterns of consumption and reproduction; societies too can implement measures to control these patterns, such that, through social behavior, the human population might be stabilized well below the earth's carrying capacity.[92] It seems natural then to wonder whether and how responsibility might be assigned to the suffering involved in human ecological overshoot, provided the knowledge and tools requisite to prevent it were at hand.

3. Problems of the Highest Good in an Environmental Context

The point then is that we can consider human impacts on the environment—as the proximate cause of various potentially impending catastrophes—not only as purely physical phenomena but also in a practical light, wherein conscious decision-making plays a role in the severity and shape of

[91] Carrying capacity is the maximum population size of a species that can be stably sustained in a given ecosystem. It is determined by the availability of renewable resources for that species to exploit and the capacity of sinks to absorb their waste. Carrying capacity can be briefly exceeded through the exploitation of *non*-renewable resources, but this generally leads to a subsequent population crash. For a concise overview, see Clark Wolf (2001, 365–67).

[92] For a detailed discussion of the dynamics of population in relation to carrying capacity and to the applicability of the concept to human populations, see Ron Pulliam and Nick Haddad (1994).

the outcomes. The possibility of ethical assessment introduces an entirely new set of ways—largely unfamiliar from the example of past natural disasters—in which the calamity of environmental collapse poses the problem of the highest good.[93] We can divide these challenges into two general kinds: on the one hand are challenges relating to *unfair distributions of benefits and burdens*; on the other are challenges of *moral hopelessness*. The first kind of challenge is a function of the uneven global distribution of the causes and effects of environmental collapse. Generally speaking, that is, environmental problems have to do with the overexploitation of resources, but the many of benefits and costs of that overexploitation are unevenly distributed across time and space. If the first kind of challenge relates to the intra-human experience of environmental collapse, the second kind relates the experience of humanity as a whole. This latter kind of challenge has to do with the moral status of humanity writ large and can run in two directions. It is possible that humanity as a whole does everything it can and ought to exist sustainably in the world and still fail to meaningfully mitigate environmental collapse. Inversely, it is possible that humanity finds a way to persist and even prosper, but that it does so at the absolute expense of its responsibilities to its environment and to fellow sentient creatures.

3.1 Unfair Distributions of Benefits and Burdens

The threats associated with human-caused environmental collapse are largely byproducts. in the course of converting the natural world into usable energy for the maintenance and improvement of their lives and for the reproduction of the species, human beings degrade the future usefulness of their environments. To some degree, this usefulness can be replenished in the form of renewable resources, so long as those resources are not used up faster than they can be renewed. Such use is usually called "unsustainable." Other, non-renewable resources are not replenishable on human timescales, such as fossil fuels and metal ores. The byproducts of the conversion of natural resources into useful products thus include both pollution—waste created in the process—and the overall diminishment of the availability of future resources.

Pollution byproducts, of which climate change is now the most significant, can be geographically local or dispersed. Fertilizer run-off from farms, for example, can affect the quality of the local water supply, but its effect can be spread far off by rivers. Greenhouse gas emissions from any part of the globe disperse into the entire atmosphere over time, but their warming effects are felt differentially in different areas of the world. The same is true also for effects such as sea level rise from melting ice or the increase in intensity or frequency of severe weather events. In some cases, the harmful effects redound to their causative agents, for example, greenhouse gas emitters themselves. In other cases, they do not—what economists refer to as negative externalities, as the negative side effects are external to the incentive structure of the agent.

The diminishment of the availability of future resources, upon their present consumption, can also affect both the agent and other parties. Locke argued in the *Second Treatise of Government* that, although God gave the earth to humanity to use in common, it was permissible to cordon off parcels of it for private use, so long as there would be "enough, and as good" left over for the

[93] There is some overlap in the features of environmental collapse that aggravate its threat to the highest good and those that make climate change in particular, as Stephen Gardiner (2006) argues, "a perfect moral storm." This makes sense, of course, and the problem of the highest good is adds another dimension to the vulnerability to moral corruption that Gardiner identifies lurking at the heart of humanity's response to climate change.

enjoyment of others (§ 27).[94] When the demand for resources, relative to the supply, is such that the "Lockean proviso" cannot be met, the use of a resource, particularly a non-renewable one, deprives oneself of its future use and others of its present and future use. This also applies even to renewable resources when the rate of their use exceeds the rate of their replenishment. Both the original consumer and other parties suffer the loss of potential future use, but at least the former has extracted the present use value.[95]

A different but similar phenomenon occurs insofar as we can consider pollution as functionally a kind of resource, a conception implicit in various proposed economic tools, such as carbon taxes, to curb the use of fossil fuels. If it is collectively agreed to limit pollution to a certain amount, then the use of the pollution budget by one agent diminishes its availability to others. Here, the temporal differential between the polluting activities of developed and developing societies represents an unfair distribution of benefits. Post-industrial economies have already used a considerable amount of the planet's "safe" pollution budget to modernize. If there is not enough of that budget left over for developing societies to do the same, then they would be forced *either* to forego the benefits of polluting while incurring many of the costs of developed societies' pollution *or* to inflict more severe global damages from pollution by exceeding the earth's carbon budget through further pollution.[96]

In sum, the distribution of the costs and benefits of the human activities contributing to environmental collapse might be intuitively called "unfair." One factor that might affect our moral assessment of production and consumption is whether polluting activities are requisite for human life and flourishing. There is perhaps a possible world in which the bare maintenance of global human needs, present and future, requires activity of sufficient intensity to threaten the integrity of the planet's ecosystems; but that is not this world. In the actual world, the great bulk of the negative effects of human activity on the environment is a byproduct of economic activity well beyond subsistence-level needs. Indeed, the great bulk of economic activity is, strictly speaking, unnecessary, not only for mere subsistence but indeed even for the achievement of the good life.

Given that this is the case, the unfairness of the distribution of the environmental costs and benefits of human activity seems entirely avoidable from a moral perspective. In general, beneficiaries do not bear much of the costs of their activities, and those that do bear the costs receive few unintended benefits. This is, of course, a structural feature of any negative externality. But there are also injustices that seem contingent on the particular constitution of our world. It may be a matter of *historical* accident that Europe and North America is home to the oldest industrialized economies and, to-date, some of the greatest beneficiaries of the unsustainable use of natural resources. It may also be a matter of *geographic* accident that large swaths of Europe and North America are among the least susceptible to the ravages of anthropogenic environmental collapse. Nevertheless, the coincidence of these two accidents means that, with respect to climate

[94] For Locke, this only applies, of course, in the state of nature and in the absence of positive property laws.

[95] Conversely, is it a cost to present generations of human beings to have to forego the benefits of resource consumption for the sake of future generations? Henry Shue (2015) argues that it is, but not an excessive one given the presence of catastrophic risk.

[96] We could even say, perhaps, that the previous consumption of the planet's carbon budget by rich countries threatens to impose a *moral* cost on developing countries. In order to get the same benefits of polluting that rich countries obtained, developing countries would have to knowingly exceed safe emissions caps.

change for example, Europe and North America are positioned to maximally reap rewards and minimally incur costs as a result of their economic activities.

When all of this is viewed through the lens of the problem of the highest good, we can see that unfair distributions of costs and benefits relating to environmental collapse are vectors for the disassociation of happiness and virtue on a global scale. We might be inclined to think that personal moral evaluation is out-of-place when it comes to structural consumption habits. This seems potentially right to an extent. But if we can at all coherently refer to collective responsibility—and such an assumption seems to be implicit in any normative exhortation directed at political and corporate entities—then it is plausible to say that those societies which have benefited the most from the activities contributing environmental collapse are also among the most responsible. Conversely, some of those societies least responsible stand to suffer the worst effects. In the form of unfair distributions of benefits and burdens, we thus face a globalized version of the problem of the highest good.

3.2. Moral Hopelessness in the Face of Environmental Collapse

The second specific form that the problem of the highest good takes in the context of environmental collapse relates to humanity collectively. We can take a synoptic view of the overall moral and material status of the global community of human beings insofar as it both causes and is affected by changes to its environments. Humans are not the only patients of the effects of their actions. If any non-human sentient animals, non-sentient animals, plants, or ecosystems have moral standing, the harms to these entities caused by environmental collapse multiply the moral wrongs committed.[97] Meanwhile, the nature of the physical processes at work make it such that, at least in some possible outcomes, the harms are irreversible or unmitigable. In light thereof, I will sketch two further instances of the problem of the highest good that might be called problems of moral hopelessness.

In the first scenario, the global community of human beings might work collectively to reverse or mitigate its impacts on the environment. It is possible that our efforts in this respect could be for naught. More likely though is that we are able to mitigate some but not all of the damage in the medium-term. The most important greenhouse gas aside from water vapor, carbon dioxide, is

[97] The tendency in environmental ethics has, naturally enough, been toward greater consideration of the moral status of non-human entities. Accounts of the standing of animals are often given through the lens of traditional moral theories as, for example, Peter Singer (1974) has done with utilitarian ethics and Christine Korsgaard (2015) has done with Kantian ethics by arguing, effectively, that the criteria according to which we recognize the moral standing of our fellow human beings apply also to animals. The dialectic of this extension is noted and taken farther by Kenneth Goodpaster (1978), who argues that the same criteria apply even more widely to include non-sentient animals and even plant life. By contrast, many environmentalists who inclined to a maximal domain of moral consideration—ecosystems, landscapes, species, etc.—follow the tradition of Aldo Leopold (1949) in rejecting traditional philosophical criteria for ethical consideration in favor of a conservationist's mindset and an evolutionary account of ethics that would seem to blur the descriptive and the normative. In any case, there is widespread support among environmental philosophers for thinking that the domain of moral consideration extends beyond members of the human species, and of course there are no shortage of arguments in the canon for an environmental sensibility on purely anthropocentric grounds. Kant's argument that humans are obligated to act with compassion toward sentient creatures and even to cultivate a love for nature on the psychological premise that such habits will help to foster a moral disposition is paradigmatic in this regard (MM 6:443). Even if it is the case that only human beings have moral standing, the rest of the analysis in this chapter applies.

largely absorbed into the oceans, causing acidification. However, a proportion will remain in the atmosphere for centuries after it is put there, continuing to contribute to climate forcing. Thus, even if all carbon dioxide emissions were to cease immediately, the mitigation to climate warming might come too late to save lives and ecosystems imperiled by warming. More concerningly, climate scientists worry about the possibility of "positive feedback loops," earth system processes that might continue to warm the planet even if anthropogenic emissions ceased. Because the processes are not sufficiently well-understood, it is unknown at what point positive feedback loops might kick in, though it is generally agreed that the risk increases the warmer the planet becomes.

The example of climate change illustrates one way in which it might, in certain respects, be "too late" to avoid all of the consequences of environmental collapse we fear. Thus, we face the possibility that we could, as a global community, do "everything right" and still fail in our aims of mitigating harm. If it does turn out that nature is "against us," in the sense that earth systems operate in such a way that the damage inflicted by past generations is effectively irreversible, then we are left with the prospect of a disharmony between well-being—diminished in a warmer or less ecologically stable world—and our merit—having risen to the challenge. If we acknowledge the non-human suffering entailed by environmental degradation as morally considerable, we face a tragic state of affairs in which we were not, as a species, able to right our wrongs. Given that so much environmental messaging relies on the premise that our efforts will largely not be in vain, this poses the kind of motivational challenge of which Kant was keenly aware in his framing of the problem of the highest good. That is, if we suppose that it is our collective duty to try to mitigate harms, the threat of a motivational deficit looms if we become too keenly aware of the likelihood that our efforts will not produce the intended results. We might ask, in other words: What if the task is hopeless?

In the second, alternative scenario, instead of rising to the occasion, we could continue on the economic path of "business as usual." This would assuredly be catastrophic in a number of ways. The degree of global warming we could expect would of course be such as to endanger the livelihoods and lives of the globally most vulnerable. But it would also threaten to critically undercut the basic ecological services upon which human civilization depends. The threat here does not come only from global warming, though that exacerbates the stress on the earth's systems. The unabated urbanization and cultivation of the globe threatens to physically eradicate all manner of ecosystems and drive their inhabitants to extinction. Insofar as human beings depend upon, for example, the services of pollinators to continue to practice agriculture, the degradation of the natural world through deforestation, pesticide and herbicide use, industrial strip mining, and so on imperils the continuation of human existence as we know it.

Yet *homo sapiens* is remarkable for its adaptability, not only physically but also psychologically, and it is entirely conceivable that it could adapt to survive and even thrive on a ravaged planet. In the most fanciful of scenarios, humanity might find its way off of Earth to continue to thrive, leaving a ruined world in its wake.[98] Were this to be accomplished we would not, of course, have achieved the highest good on a global scale—a maximum of virtue and well-being—and this is

[98] This, in fact, is Elon Musk's proposed strategy. Humanity, he thinks, must become a multi-planet species by colonizing Mars so that its projects can survive an extinction event on Earth (Urban 2015). Jeff Bezos's proposal is considerably grimmer and more apropos. He argues instead that human beings will have to live in artificial orbital colonies as a steppingstone to becoming a multiplanetary species. The planet below can meanwhile be stripped for parts.

precisely the point. What we would seem to have instead is the happiness of a morally tarnished species, perhaps mortally so if the price of its happiness was indeed the destruction of our home world. This would be something like the "uninterrupted prosperity" of a vicious being, in which, Kant declares, "an impartial spectator can take no delight" (G 4:393).[99]

4. Radical Hope

Taken all together then, we might say that the impending crises associated with human impacts on the environment problematize the ideal of the highest good on a grand scale. The world in which the sum total of human activities threatens the integrity of basic earth systems is not one in which the highest good can obtain. Kant's basic thought in formulating the problem of the highest good was that this would have been the case even in the normal course of things. But we can say further that the world as we understand it now seems to be one in which even *approximations* of the highest good look unreachable. A world becoming warmer, more politically volatile,[100] in which the basic requirements of life are harder to obtain and scarce resources threaten to divide rather than unite human communities—such a world is one in which King's "arc of the moral universe" threatens to bend away from rather than towards justice (King, Jr. 1968).

Humanity now collectively faces the kind of crisis that undermines theodicean narrative via brute cognitive dissonance. By refusing to be consoled—in part because we are no longer able to believe the consolations—we would come to acknowledge that the world is not structured so as to facilitate the highest good. The suffering that would be caused by environmental collapse afflicts all alike, regardless of moral standing; indeed, it even seems that it may disproportionately affect those least responsible. And it may be that (and supposing we acknowledge such a course of action as morally incumbent upon us) our best efforts to discharge our duties vis-à-vis the environment will not yield tolerable outcomes to well-being, human or otherwise. Conversely, a fortunate segment of humanity could abdicate its responsibilities entirely and succeed in securing its own material well-being.

In short, we confront the problem of the highest good, for which Epicureanism and Stoicism, philosophical mythologies, theodicies, and Kant's practical postulates were intended to be consolations or solutions. What, then, after we abandon these consolations? Ought we maintain or abandon the ideal of the highest good? To do the latter would be to give up on the goal of striving for the happiest and most just world that we can. We could thus, as individuals or factions, focus

[99] It would, of course, not exactly be this. And here is where the difficulty of making normative claims about collectives, in particular one so diffuse as the members of a species, arises. If moral responsibility can be assigned for a problem so global and systemic as anthropogenic environmental degradation, then it is still clear that it cannot be assigned uniformly. Given that this is the case, worries about unfair distributions of benefits and burdens are relevant. The point here is more to capture the intuition that there would be something wrong with the success of the human species if it consciously came at the expense of Earth's biosphere. Whether this intuition is actually correct is another question, but it is nonetheless a vector for the problem of the highest good. Anyone who has this intuition will have to countenance a challenge of hopelessness, that is, one in which the task of working to approximate the highest good on a global scale is made hopeless—in this case through the moral corruption of humanity.

[100] See the "Executive Summary" of the independent report commissioned by the G7 under the German presidency in 2017 on the risks to global stability posed by climate change (Rüttinger et al. 2017). The authors of the report identify seven risk factors to global security: competition for local resources, resource insecurity leading to migration, extreme weather events, market volatilities, water disputes, sea-level rise, and side effects of climate mitigation policies.

instead on our self-interest and try to make the most productive use of a failing world. If our duties to reduce our carbon footprints or protect endangered species look like losing fights, we could simply ignore them. A prudent national strategy might be to maximize carbon footprint in pursuit of technological superiority—to militarize borders to keep out climate refugees, build sea walls, to leave the rest of the world to its fate and raise the drawbridge. Perhaps, that is, we might individually or collectively surmise that moral courses of action are too imprudent. Perhaps the well-positioned might even profit from conflict, scarcity, and looming "climate apartheid."[101] If the highest good or any approximation thereof is well and truly out of reach, why bother with moral duty? The ideal state of affairs toward which it aims is a fantasy. At least, someone might say, I have a chance at pleasure.

If, alternatively, we do not wish to discard the ideal of the highest good, what would it mean then to still hold to it in the face of such rational cynicism? Can it be coherent to do so while refusing to be consoled? My aim in the remainder of this chapter is to suggest a way in which it might be. The route that seems especially promising to me runs through Jonathan Lear's *Radical Hope* (2006), a philosophical anthropology of the Crow under the leadership of Plenty Coups, during an era of cultural and physical destruction. Viewing calamities in light of the problem of the highest good means perceiving not only the threat they pose to our physical well-being but being attuned also to our prospects of making moral sense out of the world. Lear argues that this is precisely the way Plenty Coups regarded the threat the United States government posed to the Crow, and that the successes of his leadership consisted not just in the physical survival of his tribe but in his creative approach to reweaving the moral fabric of the Crow world.

My claim will be that the virtue of *courage* Lear identifies in Plenty Coups's moral creativity can be adapted as a plausible tool for anyone who recognizes the problem of the highest good lurking at the heart of environmental risks and refuses to be consoled. Specifically, I argue that the relevant feature of Plenty Coups's virtue of courage consists in the ability to appropriately thin out one's thick moral concepts without abandoning them. The ability to thin out moral concepts can in turn be applied to ideals such as the highest good, and in this way provides a tool for salvaging those ideals in a world increasingly hostile to them. Thus, the virtue of courage in this sense also qualifies as a form of radical hope.

4.1. Plenty Coups's Virtue of Courage

As Lear tells it, the Crow tribe under Plenty Coups may have faced "a peculiar form of human vulnerability," expressed by Plenty Coups's claim that "nothing happened" after the Crow were forced onto a reservation, away from the buffalo they traditionally hunted (2006, 2–6). According to Lear's interpretation of this statement, the confinement of the Crow resulted in such a total breakdown in the traditional, normatively significant markers of Crow life that it could make sense to refer literally to an end to "happenings." In the event of such a catastrophe, it becomes problematic to ask what the right response would be or what it would mean to live a good life, for the terms in which the right and good are defined (locally, in this case, among the Crow) have lost much if not all of their relevance. For Plenty Coups to have been a great Crow chief in his own time was an entirely different task from being a great Crow chief in the time of his ancestors, because it fell to Plenty Coups to grapple with the intelligibility of the relevant evaluative terms

[101] See the report by the UN special rapporteur on human rights and climate change (Carrington 2019).

themselves. Lear puts Plenty Coups's challenge of leadership thus: "In order to survive—and perhaps to flourish again—[the Crow] had to be willing to give up almost everything they understood about the good life. This was not a choice that could be reasoned about in the preexisting terms of the good life. One needed a conception of—or commitment to—a goodness that transcended one's current understanding of the good" (2006, 92).

Crow life, like any well-defined, comprehensive community, served as a structure for defining and expressing thick normative concepts. Thus, the Crow had a conception of the good life and its associated virtues. The move to the reservation spelled the end of this form of life. Afterwards, hunting buffalo and "counting coup" became impossible.[102] Paradigmatic Crow virtues became unintelligible. The end of the traditional nomadic Crow way of life constituted the end of a world—the world of the Crow, in which "everything counted either as hunting or fighting or as preparing to hunt and fight" (Lear 2006, 40). Given the loss of their ethical framework, Lear argues, although the Crow could continue to exercise practical reason at a basic level, acts could no longer make ethical sense as part of a coherent whole, and things ceased to "happen"; Lear cites another Crow, Two Leggings, as saying, "Nothing happened after that. We just lived" (Lear 2006, 57). Plenty Coups himself lost access to the evaluative terms according to which his chiefdom could be good or bad. In order to fulfill his role as chief excellently, Lear argues Plenty Coups had to transform his own moral psychology through an imaginative exercise in practical reason.

The mechanism by which Lear suggests Plenty Coups might have been able to do this was by thinning out his now-obsolete practical conceptions in order to seek new thick forms, indexed to new social circumstances, for them to inhabit. In particular, Plenty Coups had a dream vision instructing him to adopt the virtues of the Chickadee-person, whose distinctive trait is the quasi-Socratic knowledge that he knows nothing (Lear 2006, 90). The virtue of the Chickadee-person could, Lear argues, appropriately be called a *thin* virtue of courage: not the courage exhibited in a dangerous buffalo hunt or in fighting the Sioux, but the courage of letting go of defunct normative frameworks in the hope of finding new ones. This thin conception of right action is oriented toward a similarly thin conception of the good. Lear hypothesizes that Plenty Coups might have reasoned as follows:

> My commitment to the genuine transcendence of God [*Ab-badt-dadt-deah*] is manifest in my commitment to the goodness of the world transcending our necessarily limited attempt to understand it. My commitment to God's transcendence and goodness is manifested in my commitment to the idea that something good will emerge even if it outstrips my present limited capacity for understanding what that good is. (Lear 2006, 94)

The courage of the Chickadee-person is thus also a form of radical hope. It is not, importantly, a kind of martyrdom. A Crow at the end of the traditional Crow world could simply choose to die for the thick Crow conceptions of the right and the good. Plenty Coups's radical hope instead consists in the acknowledgement that such an act would be meaningless because the framework in

[102] "Counting coup" was a central demonstration of martial bravery among Plains Indians, in which a warrior would strike an enemy with a "coup stick" before slaying him. Other forms existed, such stealing a horse from an enemy tribe in the open. A warrior needed to be daring to count coup in battle, as the extra move before attacking opened him up to a counterattack. Plenty Coups name thus indicated his exceptional merit according to traditional Crow evaluative standards that would become obsolete within his own lifetime.

which it could be interpreted no longer exists. Radical hope in this sense is the commitment to the belief, independent even of good evidence in support, that the right and the good might survive in their barest sense to be once again thickened in the context of a coherent cultural framework.[103]

This virtue of courage is also not the same as mere adaptability. I argued in § 5, for example, that one version of the problem of the highest good in the context of anthropogenic environmental collapse might be the continued prosperity of humanity in spite of its destructive habits. Human beings, that is, are sufficiently adaptable that they might be able to lead pleasurable lives even on a radically degraded planet, on which the environments for all hitherto-existing versions of the good life for human beings had been eliminated. Clinging to the knowledge that one will be able to experience pleasure in the wake of a catastrophe is not courageous in the way that Plenty Coups exhibited courage. Radical hope instead consists in the belief that robust new normative frameworks can be created in the wake of cultural collapse and in the courage to let go of old frameworks.

Radical hope is dependent on genuine knowledge of one's circumstances. Plenty Coups's decision to adopt the posture of the Chickadee-person would perhaps not have been virtuous had there been a realistic path toward preserving the traditional Crow way of life. To abandon one's thick normative concepts needlessly is not courage but cowardice. This fact has some significance for the struggle to mitigate human impacts on the environment. Insofar as some of our thick notions of duties to the environment—conservation, sustainability, respectful appreciation of wild nature—are constitutive of the effort to save it, our challenge is not precisely the same as that of Plenty Coups. Plenty Coups faced an overwhelming and irresistible alien force, the U.S. government, that precipitated the destruction of the Crow way of life. As a result, Plenty Coups had to thin out both his conceptions of virtues and of the good life.

Our environmental challenges are ones of our own making, though equally overwhelming. As such, we may need to make use of the same virtue of radical hope through concept-thinning. It is not clear, however, that we need to target the same classes of concepts. An accurate understanding of what can and cannot be done in the face of environmental collapse can inform a *targeted* concept-thinning. Targeted concept-thinning will consist in the knowledge of which duties and which conceptions of the good need to be thinned out in order to survive as substantial a shock as environmental collapse might deliver. It means that we will need to determine which fights to abandon and which we are duty-bound to stay in, as well as which notions of the good life ultimately conflict with our responsibilities to the environment. Through targeted thinning, we might hope that duties and goods can be re-thickened such that we can hope to coordinate them to the best of our abilities.

4.2. The Virtue of Radical Hope in the Context of Environmental Collapse

The role of hope in confronting environmental challenges has not gone unnoticed, nor indeed has Lear's conception of radical hope specifically. Of particular interest is Allen Thompson's (2010) suggestion that climate change will require us to make use of this version of radical hope in

[103] The anti-evidentialist flavor is shared with Kant's *Glaube*. Plenty Coups could not have conceived of what the survival of the Crow, not just as a physical group but as an ethical whole, through the loss of their normative concepts might look like or how it might occur. Nor, however, did he have good evidence that such a feat was impossible. Radical hope and Kantian *Glaube* do not need to traffic in outright irrationality.

reconceiving environmental virtues "in a warmer and biologically less-rich world" (2010, 47). This challenge is akin to the one that confronted Plenty Coups in that it requires the use of imaginative excellence in manipulating ethical concepts to fit novel circumstances. If the net result of climate change, even in the best-case scenario, is a radical reconfiguration of the global situation of humanity, it stands to reason, Thompson argues, that some current thick conceptions of duties and goods will potentially be out of place.

Thompson adopts Philippa Foot's (2001) natural goodness version of neo-Aristotelian eudaimonism, wherein a reconceptualization of the good for human beings in light of changing environmental circumstances naturally leads to a reconceptualization of virtues (Thompson 2010, 50). Thus, for example, the disappearance from the world of the environmental good of naturalness *qua* autonomy from human influence entails the need to reconceive environmental responsibility, while the unsustainability of fossil-based consumer culture requires us to rethink the material components of the good life.[104] The role of radical hope is in weathering these reconceptualizations without knowing in advance if they will be successful. As Thompson puts it, "radical hope is for the revival of the good, when the goodness one understands is no longer possible" (2010, 51).

Although Thompson's is a virtue-ethical framework, the idea of radical hope as courage through the reconceptualization of thick ethical concepts can be adapted to the framework of the problem of the highest good. Conceptualizing the problem of the highest good is at bottom a tragic framing of the relationship between duties and goods. Rather than deriving prescriptions for action directly from an account of the good life, the problem of the highest good begins with the presumption that, in some cases, the principles of prudence that tend toward the good life and the principles of morals that guide ethical action will diverge.[105] Acknowledging this possibility lends radical hope a new significance, as the link connecting appropriate reconceptualizations of goods and of duties becomes more obscure. The task then is not merely to navigate the loss of thick conceptions of the good life when they become no longer viable. It is also to confront the problem of the highest good through the hope that a world in which some measure of coordination between thick conceptions of duties and of goods can be recovered.

As with risk in general, the problem of the highest good can be conceived according to varying degrees of acuteness. In the most extreme version, the full achievement of the highest good seems truly impossible as a natural state of affairs. Recognition of this prompted Kant to conceive a practical theological solution to the problem of the highest good: belief in the transcendental preconditions for the highest good, as Kant sees it—the existence of God, the immortality of the soul, the freedom of the will—is warranted by the moral necessity of taking the highest good as our

[104] See Bill McKibben (1989) for the famous claim that climate change spells the end of nature. Insofar as anthropogenic warming affects the entire globe, there is no corner of the Earth free from human influence.

[105] The distance between virtue-ethical accounts in general and this framework, which I have adopted from a reading of Kant, varies on this score. There is some evidence for a reading of Aristotle's account of active virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that sees the possibility of the divergence that characterizes the problem of the highest good in exceptional cases. Perhaps the virtues are not sufficient for happiness if we take Priam as a counterexample. On the other hand, it may be that nothing Priam could have done would have averted his fate, so that this is not an example of a divergence between prudential and moral principles but simply an illustration that prudence is not a guarantee. A clearer example of something approaching the problem of the highest good within a virtue ethics would be the necessity of external goods, insofar as their necessity sets up plausible temptation to vice if they cannot, for reasons outside the agent's control, be obtained virtuously.

object, and in turn, belief warrants hope in the reconciliation of virtue and happiness. So far, I have taken it as an unargued-for premise that Kant's theological solution is an unattractive one. Philosophical difficulties aside, if the goal is to access effective conceptual resources for coping with the problem of the highest good, then Kant's theological solution is out of place in a secular age.[106] Barring such a theological solution, however, then the purest version of the problem of the highest good appears to be simply insoluble. No mortal attempt could forever ensure the coincidence of virtue and happiness.

But there is also a more mundane version of the problem of the highest good that is all the more troubling for being somewhat mitigable. As I suggested in § 2 of this chapter, many of our social institutions seem designed to bring about as close an approximation of the highest good as we can. Whenever we incentivize and protect ethical behavior or disincentivize and sanction unethical behavior, we attempt to move closer to the ideal of the highest good in which happiness and moral virtue regularly coincide. The coincidence will not be perfect of course, but well-designed institutions can go a long way toward alleviating especially human-caused divergences of prudential and ethical ends.

Because disasters tend to disrupt the functioning of these highest-good-conducing institutions, they evoke, of course, the purest version of the problem of the highest good but they also pose the more mundane one. But the virtue of radical hope is an aid in braving the loss of the thick ethical concepts that form the moving parts of pro-highest-good social institutions. To rephrase the challenge radical hope seeks to surmount: the thickening of practical concepts is, from the perspective of the problem of the highest good, a two-edged sword. By fleshing out *virtues* in terms of obligations indexed to particular local institutions and *goods* in terms of culturally accepted, desirable courses of a life, we functionally narrow the extension of our ethical terms.[107] The payoff is efficiency: when thick conceptions of obligations and goods harmonize well, they can be ordered into a coherent picture of the good life, buttressed by the incentives and disincentives of local social practices.[108] As Lear explains, for example, "every event in Crow life—even cooking a meal—

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[106] Of course, not all environmental writers agree that theological concepts are out of place in discussing contemporary issues. See, for example, Clingerman and Ehret (2013).

[107] None of what follows is intended to endorse any kind of moral relativism. The shift from objective ethical principles to culturally specific ones is warranted in the present discussion because the question is not which principles to endorse but how to live in light of the ones that we do. The thought here is that, for most people, conceptions of moral obligations and goods are filtered through culturally specific frameworks of the good life. This is entirely compatible with some of those frameworks endorsing false moral principles. For such frameworks, we might say that its adherents will, on occasion, falsely believe that they face the problem of the highest good. Kant gives such an example in the *Metaphysics of Morals*: owing to the imperfection of his culture's ethical frameworks, an impugned officer exposes himself to the death penalty on the false presumption that he is ethically bound to defend his military honor in a duel (MM 6:336–37). The concept of military honor here is a thickened conception of a certain class of duties, one that Kant thinks contains false principles. But thickening does not always entail the addition of false principles to pure moral ones, and we might suppose that even in a more ethically perfect culture, pure moral principles will be filtered through the institutions of that culture. That is, the sets of obligations and goods readily present to our practical reasoning faculties will often be encrusted with cultural accretions that specify moral and prudential behavior in idiosyncratic, but not necessarily false ways. For our purposes then, considering the way thick, culturally specific conceptions of practical concepts function matters for talking about truly confronting the problem of the highest good.

[108] I have nothing in particular to say about *how* such harmonious frameworks develop historically except that it need not be intentional. That question is one for sociologists. I am interested here only in how they function in our moral psychology.

gained its significance within the larger framework of Crow meaning. [. . .] in traditional Crow life, everything counted either as hunting or fighting or as preparing to hunt and fight" (2006, 40).

The suffusion of ethical significance into everyday life that characterizes a strong and stable culture affords individuals the conceptual frameworks needed to understand mundane tasks as contributing to an approximation of the highest good. When those frameworks are disrupted, however, fine-tuned thick practical concepts become liabilities. In the absence of the social contexts in which the performance of thick obligations and the achievement of thick goods can be facilitated and, in particular, coordinated, the granularity of these conceptions acts instead as a catalyst for the *problem* of the highest good. A Crow warrior, for example, might have felt himself obligated, under traditional Crow conceptions of virtue, to count coup even after having been forced onto the reservation. But instead of being lauded for this by his fellow warriors he would instead have been tried in a U.S. court.

Note that this is conceptually distinct from the specific trauma Lear argues was inflicted on the Crow. The most important aspect of the Crow's cultural devastation for Lear is the becoming *unintelligible* of thick practical conceptions of duties and goods (2006, 35). Thus, for Lear, the Crow warrior on the reservation can no longer actually perform the thick obligation of count coup. That is, he might perform the physical motions once involved in counting coup and even believe himself to have counted coup, but he would believe falsely; the social world in which the relevant physical motions signify counting coup has been destroyed. For this reason, the cultural devastation of the Crow with which Lear is concerned is not the problem of the highest good. Yet although Lear characterizes Plenty Coups's radical hope as a solution to the loss of traditional Crow conceptions of goods and duties, it can also function as a tool for addressing the problem of the highest good. The more mundane version of the problem of the highest good we have been discussing also involves the loss of conceptions, not because they become unintelligible but because they become untenable as a result of disastrous circumstances.

Radical hope is the appropriate response to this loss. Since it is a form of the virtue of courage in a quasi-Aristotelian sense, it is a rational excellence, in particular, of recognizing which thick conceptions of goods and obligations are untenable and which must be tenaciously retained. Underlying this quasi-Aristotelian virtue is a moral disposition of commitment to the highest good itself; radical hope thus also qualifies as virtue in the Kantian sense, *qua* commitment to the moral law. In the context of a total collapse of meaning, as Lear suggests happened to the Crow, the requirements of courage called on Plenty Coups to thin out his ethical conceptions to a sufficiently abstract level so as to divorce them from defunct social structures. Plenty Coups manifested radical hope in the belief that these abstract concepts could, at a later time, be again concretized in a new ethical culture in pursuit of the good.

In the context of widespread social and ecological upheaval as a result of environmental collapse, the requirements of courage call on us to assess the tenability of ethical conceptions—of obligations and of the good life—tied to an increasingly destructive way of life. In some cases, they may become unintelligible, as Thompson suggests. If, for example, the conception of nature as *that part of the world outside the sphere of human influence* becomes non-denoting, then we can no longer incorporate the value of, for example, untrammeled wilderness into our decision-making. In this example, radical hope would perhaps require us to extract the value of autonomy from its concretization in the form of wilderness and to thin it out so that we might reconceptualize and preserve it in a new context.

In other cases, the problem will be that our thick conceptions of obligations and goods no longer successfully synchronize with any regularity. In these cases, according to the Kantian conception of the good, thick obligations take precedence over thick goods. As Kant argues, a subordination of happiness to virtue is already written into the concept of the highest good. When we try to achieve the highest good, we begin by declaring virtue the necessary condition for happiness and attempt to modify our world as best we can to make it also a sufficient condition. For Kant, the impossibility of our completely accomplishing this latter goal leads to a belief that divine assistance will be forthcoming. In the absence of that belief, we might instead call on the psychological techniques of the radical hope of Plenty Coups. The nature of environmental collapse is such that many of our duties toward each other and the environment are still accomplishable. But the impacts of environmental collapse are such that those duties may become increasingly incompatible with the good life as many in the post-industrial world conceive it. Thompson argues, for example

> [M]itigating the damages of climate change will require personal commitment to the struggle against pervasive materialist dispositions, which effectively characterize all of us as members of an industrialized consumer society. [. . .] While it is one thing to intellectually understand strong evidence supporting the view that materialistic dispositions are inversely correlative with subjective well-being [i.e., are not necessarily constitutive of personal happiness], it is still quite something else to recognize many of one's own seemingly ordinary activities or expectations [. . .] may involve an excessive level of indulgence when set against the requirements of ecological sustainability (2010, 51–52).

Contra Thompson however (2010, 44), it is not necessarily clear that materialistic conceptions of the good life will become broadly untenable *per se*. In fact, as I have argued, one baleful aspect of our environmental crisis is that the impacts that might otherwise motivate broad changes in lifestyle are unevenly distributed. Indeed, the worst effects are predicted to strike the places of the globe where the very high-energy lifestyles driving environmental collapse are relatively rare. Meanwhile, high-energy-consumption societies may very well be able to carry on into the foreseeable future.

From a strictly Aristotelian virtue-ethical framework, it would be hard to see why concerns about environmental sustainability insofar as they relate to *other* parts of the world would need to trump local conceptions of the good life. Nor does Thompson's Footian species-level framework seem to help very much, given that there will be no uniform human experience of environmental collapse. Nevertheless, we might think that high-consumption cultures have obligations to curtail their resource and energy usage and that, techno-utopian fantasies aside, fully meeting those obligations would drastically foreclose on the avenues for achieving a consumption-based conception of the good life. The virtue of radical hope, as Thompson observes, manifests here in a commitment in the industrialized world to the belief that some form of flourishing could be realized even with less resource and energy input. Conversely, the problem of the highest good suggests an explanation for why so many of us are resistant to fully meeting our obligations to environment: doing so will be plainly at odds with our traditional conceptions of happiness. The radical hope of Plenty Coups points to a strategy for addressing the concern that fulfilling our duties will mean sacrificing our happiness.

5. Hopeful Pessimism

The message of this chapter then is twofold. First, the problem of the highest good as I have explored it in the preceding chapters is relevant for our thinking about the environmental challenges of the twenty-first century. This in part because the problem of the highest good is a fundamental and pervasive feature of human practical existence. It is also because—coming full circle to the argument regarding the philosophical significance of the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755 in Chapter 1—natural and social disasters serve as a vector for making the problem of the highest good more acute and relevant to our daily lives. The results of human impacts on the environment for many of the world's inhabitants will be just such a state of affairs. Even where impacts will be relatively minor, the state of the world as an effect of human activity will be directly relevant to the possibility of approximating the highest good, as duties and obligations may increasingly conflict with desired life outcomes. Second, and in light especially of this latter point, I have argued that we can either supplant or at least supplement Kant's doctrine of rational hope with what Jonathan Lear identifies as the radical hope of Crow chief Plenty Coups, at least when it comes to the problem of the highest good *qua* avoidable clashes of duties and interests.

In concluding, I would like to consider more generally the practical implications of adopting the stance of radical hope. The basic anthropogenic causes of climate change, pollution, loss of biodiversity, ecosystem degradation, and so on have been well understood for some time. So too, therefore, have the physical mechanisms by which these impacts could be mitigated or reversed. It is mainly the question of political will and possibility that remains unanswered. As I see it, two broad lines of thought here have emerged, which boils the question down to a dilemma. Ought the community of concerned Earthlings—politicians, policymakers, writers, and scientists—take a positive approach, emphasize the physical possibility of reversing human-wrought environmental damage, and seek to downplay, as far as credulity allows, concerns over the potential hardships—reduced material standards of living, major inconveniences, job losses in energy sectors, slowed economic growth or even contraction—involved in this reversal? Or ought they adopt a more somber, "realistic" tone, admit to the monumental difficulty of the task ahead, and own the material consequences that will inevitably follow from true sustainability?[109]

Either of these approaches can be caricatured, but I think it is nevertheless true that the positive program, when it urges environmental action, has recourse especially to our self-interest. This message might go something like this: we can continue on with business as usual, focusing on short-term economic gain or we can instead embrace a bright and sustainable future. Choosing the former is to imprudently neglect the long-term costs of pollution, worsened storms, crop failures, and so on, coming down the pipeline. Choosing the latter is the maximally prudent choice, featuring only a relatively small cost now to transition our infrastructure to reap bountiful rewards later. In other words, mitigating human impacts on the environment is effectively a win-win.

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[109] Two objections may be noted to this dichotomization. First, it is obviously possible, in principle, to adopt a balanced stance, which is to say, to encourage while managing expectations. The question here is one of the unavoidability of *emphasis*, particularly in the context of public discourse, where nuance is inevitably elided in service to dissemination. It seems likely to me that no matter how balanced the message is in its full articulation, as a program it will end up being metonymically associated with one of these two broad attitudes. Second, we should note that there is space within the broader public discourse for multiple competing or even complementary messages. In what follows, I make the case for leaving space for the "realist" attitude, which some might call a "pessimistic" one.

Climate mitigation, global justice, species protection—these are all simply ways of saving money, never mind whether any of it is morally required.

The realists suspect that this kind of green boosterism is wishful thinking. Moreover, as I imagine them, the realists harbor a suspicion that this species of positive thinking is a dangerous gamble. If it turns out that the scale of the challenge is such that there is no way to save both the environment and the economy as we know it, the principal strut in the appeal to material interest is removed. What then do we have to say to those whom we might have hypothetically persuaded to undertake environmental action on economic grounds? Suppose that proposals such as the Green New Deal end up costing economic productivity in the long run? Suppose that, contrary to the claim of UN special rapporteur Philip Alston, there is no *economic* reason to resist something like "climate apartheid," "where the rich pay to escape heat and hunger caused by the escalating climate crisis while the rest of the world suffers" (Carrington 2019). Suppose, in short, that there is no way for us to discharge our obligations to each other in the context of environmental collapse without really sacrificing some our material well-being.

The realists ultimately do not turn away from the problem of the highest good as it is posed by environmental risks. Two argumentative strategies are open to us when we abandon the pretense that our duties will surely accord with our desires for happiness as we traditionally understand the latter. The first is to insist on the precedence of duties over desire, in line with the Kantian conception of the highest good. Perhaps some of the motivation behind the appeal to economic self-interest is founded in the fear that this form of specifically moral exhortation is ineffective. Maybe it is less effective alone than when supplemented by self-interest, but it is surely not entirely ineffective. People are often willing to act against their own interests if they believe it to be in service to a higher cause. But more importantly, in the context of meeting a threat where the scales of probability point in the direction of catastrophe, leaning on moral exhortation is a kind of psychological insurance policy against the fatalism that might arise when our hopes for an easy way out are dashed.

The second argumentative strategy then must be nevertheless to acknowledge the legitimacy of the wish that fulfilling our obligations, as individuals and communities, would bring with it a corresponding measure of happiness. This wish is the answer to Kant's question, "What may I hope?" It is the morally legitimate hope that the discharge of duty does not go unrecognized, so to speak, by the universe. The doctrine of radical hope may be a way of answering this hope more appropriate to our times than Kant's practical postulates. Radical hope is founded on the belief that we can let go of certain thick conceptions of normative concepts to recover them at a later date. With regard to mitigating the effects of environmental collapse, this may predominantly involve abandoning certain conceptions of the good life found to be incompatible with successfully meeting our environmental obligations. Because radical hope is a form of courage, it is well-suited to psychologically ameliorating the problem of the highest good, which presupposes that ethical demands on us supersede our personal wishes for happiness as we envision it. Radical hope, in other words, does not release us from our duties whenever we see that we can still attempt to meet them, but it does aid us in adjusting our expectations for happiness to make the loss of our current conceptions thereof more tolerable.

Earlier in this chapter, I characterized the cognitive attitude that ultimately accompanies radical hope as "refusing to be consoled." To have radical hope is not to be optimistic, at least in the philosophical sense. Indeed, optimism obviates the need for radical hope, insofar as one has

the expectation, on theoretical grounds, that all will work out for the best. Radical hope is not grounded on such an expectation. Plenty Coups could not have pointed to any facts about the world to justify the rationality of holding to radical hope. Nor, of course, could he have been radically hopeful if he had been able to point to any facts that, oppositely, *guaranteed* the failure of his ethical aspirations. One might suggest that the stance of radical hope is, colloquially, "optimistic" insofar as it is aspirational. I think instead that it fits much more naturally with what is often called "pessimism" and, indeed, is often born from it. I resisted the nomenclature of "pessimism" earlier for the reason that it is ambiguous whether we ought to think about pessimism simply as non-optimism or as the expectation of the worst. But colloquially, it seems that the denotation of "pessimism" is rather broad, and in some cases, it might be appropriate to describe the virtue of radical hope as coinciding with pessimism. This would thus be a "hopeful pessimism."

Anthropogenic global warming, ecosystem destruction, and the over-extraction of natural resources all threaten damaging impacts on human beings (especially the most vulnerable globally) and on the biosphere more generally. Some fear that limiting these damages may require certain material sacrifices, whether in the form of more expensive but less destructive technology or in the form of reduced energy consumption and slowed economic growth. Alternatively, others argue that it is possible to protect the environment without material sacrifice. If the latter position turns out to be unwarranted optimism, then an ethic of hopeful pessimism will be essential. Radical hope—which turns out to be, in essence, Kantian hope for the highest good, abstracted from the particular theological context in which Kant developed it—begins with the acknowledgement that our moral obligations are sometimes at odds with our desire for material well-being. If this is a kind of "pessimism," then it is not one that descends into fatalism, for it insists that we hold out hope as long as we work toward our moral aspirations.

Conclusion: The Limits of Hopeful Pessimism

1. Consolation and Philosophical Myths

The attitude of hopeful pessimism I have gestured toward begins from a refusal or an inability to be consoled. In this sense, the hopeful pessimist rejects what I called the analytic solution to the problem of the highest good of the Epicureans and the Stoics. We are possessed with an implicit awareness of our practical condition as human beings, and this involves a sense that the demands of conscience and the motives of inclination are radically different. Moreover, experience teaches that the world is not such as to allow for unity in human practical reason. The same sets of principles can never hope to govern both the pursuit of happiness and the fulfillment of moral obligations. Thus, there is no synthetic solution to the problem of the highest good that does not invoke some supernatural assistance in ensuring the full coordination of moral desert and well-being. Hopeful pessimism rejects the consolations of Enlightenment Optimism too, of course. It would not be pessimism if we thought that all of the ills that could befall a moral agent are merely apparent and that a true understanding of the natural order of things revealed its optimality.

But to bring the attitude of hopeful pessimism into sharper relief, it might help to contrast it to one final alternative. Hopeful pessimism rejects the *unmitigated* consolations of the Epicureans, the Stoics, and the Enlightenment Optimists. It also rejects a more *mitigated* form of philosophical consolation that predates all three. For this, we can turn to a pattern of thought present in Classical Greek philosophy. In this context, Hesiod and Plato combine myth and philosophical argumentation to sketch a justification for expecting the coincidence of virtue and happiness, despite all appearances to the contrary, while not denying the imperfection of the world and its threats to individual aiming for the good. The Hesiodic and Platonic views are, in a way, progenitors of subsequent attempts to conceptualize the problem of the highest good away. From Plato at least, we get an example of how one might motivate moral conduct through a supposed connection with personal well-being, even in an imperfect world. Hopeful pessimism concurs with the assessment of the world but not with the strong connection between morality and well-being. Yet Plato's emphasis on the social conditions for such a connection might still offer some insight for the hopeful pessimist. After looking at Plato and Hesiod, I turn to some final reflections on the limitations of radical hope understood as a purely personal lodestar as revealed by the coronavirus pandemic that began in 2019.

1.1. The Hesiodic View

The impetus to philosophical consolation begins as a reaction to a deep suspicion of providence. This strain of thinking is especially embodied in Hesiod. He writes, in *Theogony*, that men are said to be punished by Zeus for the crimes of Prometheus (Hes. Th. 529–93), as told in *Works and Days*. According to Zeus's plan, Pandora opens a jar and releases all the ills of the world; she catches only hope with the lid. Hope in Hesiod is an inchoate and seemingly irrational affective crutch for bearing Zeus's punishment. Hesiod, for example, asks himself: "Would I be better dead or not yet born? / For this is an Iron Age indeed / Suffering never ceases for our breed" (Hes. WD 176–

79).[110] The moral trajectory of the world, he argues, trends observably downward. The "fifth race" of humans to which the poet belongs is already markedly worse than any of its predecessors, according to his myth, and will only descend further into moral corruption to eventually be destroyed by Zeus (WD 180–201). In *Works and Days*, Zeus represents some imperfect principle of cosmic justice that seems only to haltingly slow the moral decay of the world. And yet Hesiod is nonetheless hopeful, irrationally so, by his own lights. He exhorts his brother Perseus to justice, promising peace and prosperity as its rewards (WD 275–95). But this is an unconvincing appeal immediately following the claim that Zeus punishes entire cities for the misdeeds of one wicked man (WD 240), not to mention Hesiod's aside that he would not wish for his son to be an honest man "in a land / Where crooks and schemers have the upper hand" (WD 271–72). Hesiod's recommendation to his brother rests on a vague and incoherent appeal to Pandora's last gift: "I still have hopes this isn't what Zeus planned" (WD 273).

By attempting to give a properly rational basis for this inarticulate Hesiodic hope, Plato first takes up the mantle of philosopher *qua* consoler. What was an explicitly misogynistic fable in Hesiod—Pandora herself, standing in for woman, embodied the woes of men—becomes, in the hands of Thrasymachus, Glaucon, and Adeimantus in the *Republic*, a generalized challenge of pessimism regarding the condition of the entire human race. Thus, Thrasymachus suggests that justice is, if not a vice, at best "very noble naïveté" (Rep. 1.348c). Glaucon continues this line of argument, alleging that in the minds of most people, "to do injustice is naturally good" (Rep. 2.358e), "that gods and humans provide a better life for the unjust person than for just one" (Rep. 2.362c). Echoing Hesiod, Adeimantus adds: "When fathers speak to their sons to give them advice, they say that one must be just [. . .]. But they do not praise justice itself, only the good reputation it brings" (Rep. 2.362e–363a, emphasis added).

The clincher, however, is this, from Adeimantus: "[M]ost amazing of all are the accounts they give of the gods and virtue, and how it is that the gods, too, assign misfortune and a bad life to many good people, and the opposite fate to their opposites" (Rep. 2.364b). If anything represents a pre-theoretical way of articulating the problem of the highest good, it is surely the suspicion that the governing principles of the cosmos—here represented by the gods—are such as to cause a disharmony between virtue and happiness. That Plato has Adeimantus attribute this claim to private individuals and poets suggests a degree of implicit cultural acceptance and underscores a general awareness of the problem: the discrepancy of merit and fortune and the badness of this discrepancy are accessible to common practical reason.

In the *Republic*, Plato assigns to Socrates the task of answering this question: "How might it be that, despite appearances to the contrary, I can be confident that to be better (morally) is to be better off?" The model of justice as the health of the soul that Socrates defends thus serves as a solution to the problem of the highest good. In light of this model, the inquiry at the start of the dialogue—whether the justice yields well- or ill-being for the individual that practices it—appears, after it has been elaborated, to be "ridiculous" to Glaucon. "How can it be worth living," he asks of the unjust man, "when his soul—the very thing by which he lives—is ruined and in turmoil" (Rep. 4.445a–b). Through the city-soul analogy, this thesis takes on a socialized character of exactly the sort in which we are interested. Not only is there shown to be a correspondence between personal virtue and well-being, but also of a just social order and the commonweal. The *polis* possessing the

[110] Translation by Stallings (Hesiod 2018).

virtues of wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice will "become happy, and bring most benefit to the people among whom it's established" (Rep. 7.541a).

Plato, of course, fears the moral corruption of his *kallipolis*, and he locates its genesis in the temptation to overthrow the right practical reason represented by the guardians at the behest of self-interested factions within the city. And the city's moral corruption is at the same time alleged to be the degradation of its well-being. At its nadir, the city descends into "the most severe and cruel slavery" of tyranny (Rep. 8.564a). This is ultimately a reaffirmation of Plato's consolatory aims. It *must* be that moral degradation results in material degradation, at least if Plato wishes to allay the Hesiodic suspicion. The account of how this happens in *Republic* 8–9 is, for the most part, scrupulously naturalistic, consisting in a vivid socio-psychological description of the woes befalling cities and individuals that submit to increasingly base (and thus vicious) desires. And since Plato cashes out virtue and vice in terms of rational self-mastery, it would seem that the relationship between moral and material well-being defended in the *Republic* has mostly to do with the purported utility of rationality in an imperfect world. The same faculties that allow the philosopher to consider the forms in their purity also allow for accurate navigation of the physical world. The surface-dweller who has seen the sun from the cave analogy, after a period of adjustment, perceives the shadows of the cave better than the cave-dweller (Rep. 7.520c). Plato, in effect, denies the possibility of the gap that threatens to open up in Hesiod between moral and prudential modes of rationality.

This seems to be one way of glossing the Socratic Paradox of Invulnerability, "that a good man cannot be harmed either in life or in death, and that his affairs are not neglected by the gods" (Apol. 41d). In one respect, however, the socio-psychological account—Plato's naturalistic solution to the problem of the highest good—seems too strong. How are we to imagine the metaphorical cave-dwellers getting the upper hand in the first place and subsequently corrupting the *kallipolis*? In another respect, it seems too weak. If the *kallipolis*, not to mention the virtuous individual, is intrinsically vulnerable to decay *qua* material entity, as Plato seems to think it is, this presents something of a loose thread on which a Hesiod can pull.[111] The vulnerability of materiality to corruption cuts in two directions. Destruction indiscriminately awaits the virtuous and the vicious alike. In the interim, a space opens up for the coincidence of prosperity and vice.

1.2. Plato's Myths

To overcome this vulnerability, Plato has recourse to the gods after all. The claim that, after death, the virtuous will be rewarded and the vicious punished with divinities as arbitrators recurs in a number of Plato's dialogues as a sort of argument of last resort against Hesiodic suspicion.[112] To make this argument, Plato crafts his own counter-myths with two primary functions. The first is to reinscribe a principle of cosmic justice, that fate is indeed a function of moral standing. The second function is more subtle. Plato, as well as Hesiod, recognizes the threat to the convergence of virtue and happiness that can arise in times of upheaval. When Hesiod wishes that his son not

[111] "And retribution will indeed withdraw, / Abandoning mankind and the broad roads / Of earth, for the Olympian abodes / [. . .] / Dismal troubles will be left behind / No deliverance from evil for mankind" (Hes. WD 197–201).

[112] This is the animating principle of the varied myths appearing in *Gorgias* (525b–c), *Phaedo* (113e–14c), and of course the *Republic* as well (619). A modified version appears in the *Phaedrus* in the suggestion that earthly existence is a purgatory more severely affecting the unphilosophical (247–49).

be an honest man, it is because he believes he is cursed to live in the cruel age of a degenerate iteration of humanity. This is somewhat analogous to the ascendancy of the warriors and merchants in Plato's *kallipolis*—which is at the same time the corruption of its moral condition—and this occurs only after a bloody civil war that topples the guardians. It is one thing for Plato to claim that the health of the soul is a condition of prosperity for a citizen under a good constitution but quite another to insist on the coincidence of virtue and happiness after a tyrant has usurped a good constitutional government. The worry that Plato shares with Hesiod then is that because the human being faces such a fundamentally corrupted world, the idea that virtue and happiness would coincide is simply laughable. The world is so far removed from the ideal that any possibility for arranging their convergence is fully disrupted. Hesiod's gap between virtue and happiness looks plausible despite the main argument of the *Republic*.

So, the second function of Plato's myths is to face the suspicion that virtue and happiness are unrelated head-on. They do this by reinterpreting the corruption of the material world as itself already a consequence of moral corruption. What Hesiod really fears is that his "Age of Iron" is a final stop on the road to the complete absence of intrinsic moral order. In his myth of the five races of humanity in *Works and Days*, the passing from the world of the first iteration of humankind—"like gods they lived" (WD 110)—initiates a process of moral decay. The imperfect justice of Zeus is simultaneously the last vestige of moral order in the universe and also evidence of a kind of normative entropy that will end in a morally inert world. The full Platonic answer to this fear, I think, can be found in Platos's myth of Atlantis in the *Timaeus-Critias*.

In the *Timaeus*, the titular character relates that the "marvelous royal power" of the Isle of Atlantis once sought to enslave the Mediterranean and was halted in its advance only by an ancient Athens governed by a just constitution. Yet both the army of the ancient Athenians and the island of Atlantis were destroyed in a cataclysm (Tim. 24e–25d). It seems strongly implied in the unfinished *Critias* that this natural disaster was primarily intended by Zeus as punishment for the Atlanteans. According to Critias, the Atlanteans had, at one time, lived under an orderly, divinely arranged constitution, enjoying great wealth and luxury without being morally corrupted (Crit. 121a). "But," Critias says, "when the divine portion [in them] began to grow faint as it was often blended with great quantities of mortality and as their human nature gradually gained ascendancy, at that moment, in their inability to bear their great good fortune, they became disordered" (Crit. 121a–b). In this moment, in other words, the Atlanteans enjoyed prosperity without moral worth, and Zeus determined to punish them.

The cataclysmic event that destroyed Atlantis is thus represented by Plato as a divine sign that justice reigns. Concomitantly, the imperfect state of the world, illustrated by the collateral damage to the Athenians and in contrast to the prelapsarian beatitude of the Atlanteans, is humanity's just deserts for its moral imperfection. We might call the logic of this story a kind of *mitigated* consolation insofar as it assures us not that we live in the best of all possible worlds, but at least in the one we deserve. *Contra* Hesiod, we are not doomed to perpetual moral entropy, even as a state of moral perfection is represented as a lost utopia. The upheavals, personal and communal, that mark the lives of human beings are both reminders of our moral imperfection and opportunities to exercise virtue in the form of rational self-mastery in a fallen world.[113]

[113] The catastrophe inflicted on Plato's Atlanteans was, from their perspective, existential in scope and intensity, as it resulted in their complete destruction, yet it would not qualify as a global catastrophic risk since, in Plato's telling, it affected only the Mediterranean (Bostrom and Ćirković 2011, 3). In this sense, it could be considered in two lights.

The progression from utopia to (deserved) fallenness is mirrored in the *Republic*. Before beginning a review of the decaying progression of city constitutions in *Republic* 8, Glaucon reminds Socrates, "You said that you would class both the city you described [the *kallipolis*] and the man who is like it as good, even though, as it seems, you had a still finer city and man to tell us about" (Rep. 8.543c–d). The finer city to which Glaucon refers must be what he himself had dismissed earlier in the dialogue as a "city for pigs," what Socrates had described a simple and apparently unreflective idyll, whose inhabitants "live in peace and good health, and when they die at a ripe old age, they'll bequeath a similar life to their children" (Rep. 2.372d). Glaucon, having been cured of the same psychic "fever" of a desire for luxury that gripped the hypothetical *kallipolis* at its origin, could, by the end of the *Republic* perhaps, recognize the blessedness of the inhabitants of the city for pigs. But there is apparently no going back to this kind of utopia, and the closing reincarnation myth of the *Republic* underscores this. Plato suggests that souls will spend a long time in a heavenly realm before choosing new lives to live on Earth. These souls, "having lived [their] previous [lives] under an orderly [heavenly] constitution, [participating] in virtue through habit and without philosophy" end up choosing an earthly life of great riches but great misery as a tyrant (Rep. 10.619b–c). In the disorderly earthly world, virtue through active rational self-mastery is necessary to avoid the worst suffering. Plato's message is ultimately that despite the flaws in our world, we ought to be content with our lot and follow the example of Odysseus, who, in Plato's myth, is content with "the life of a private individual who did his own work" (Rep. 10.620c).

So, Plato *qua* consoler seeks to make moral sense of an imperfect world and to thereby offer some measure comfort to its inhabitants. It might be thought that philosophical consolation of this sort must be especially useful in times of calamity. When social upheaval or natural disaster threatens the morally virtuous and vicious alike, disrupts the social mechanisms of reward and punishment, and, in general, reminds human beings of the precarity of their moral endeavors, the problem of the highest good, to which consolation is the response, appears in sharpest relief. In such circumstances, we could be tempted to suspect that no effort on our parts could make it such that happiness is ever more than loosely correlated with moral worth, and this only in times of stability. Allaying this suspicion is precisely Plato's goal in the Myth of Atlantis. The fallen state of the world corresponds to the moral corruption of humanity: it is a baleful state of affairs, to be sure, but better than the alternative in which human beings are subject to *undeserved* ills.

In this sense, we might, again, call Plato's position one of *mitigated* consolation. The story of the divine cataclysm destroying Atlantis not only posits a mechanism for the adjustment of physical circumstances to correlate with moral ones, it also offers a framework for interpreting future disasters—namely, as divine punishment.[114] Most importantly of all, Plato's positive ethics

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From the Atlanteans' perspective, the destruction of their home forecloses the possibility of returning to their original moral state, now reflectively rather than habitually; had they been able to do so, they might have come as close as is mortally possible to the highest good, *deservedly* enjoying an abundance of well-being. From the Ancient Athenians' perspective, the destruction of Atlantis is the manifestation of divine justice. This is a kind of better-than-nothing option: it would have been better, of course, if the Atlanteans had never tried to enslave the Mediterranean world. But seeing as they did, Zeus's retribution ensures at least that the wicked Atlanteans do not enjoy *undeserved* prosperity. The collateral damage during the cataclysm to the Athenians themselves—Plato says that their warriors were all swallowed by the earth (*Tim.* 25d)—is Hesiodic, a sign of that the order of the cosmos is deeply flawed, but, consolingly, still there.

[114] Plato, of course, did not actually live through a cataclysm like the earthquake he describes in *Timaeus*, but he did experience a less mythological calamity in the Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta. It is interesting to

suggests a program for the improvement of both the moral *and* physical condition of humanity by way of the causal conjunction of the two he defends. "Until philosophers rule as kings," Socrates says to Glaucon, "or those who are now called kings and leading men genuinely and adequately philosophize, that is, until political power and philosophy entirely coincide [. . .] cities will have no rest from evils [. . .] nor, I think, will the human race" (Rep. 5.473c–d).

2. Hopeful Pessimism in the COVID Era

Characteristically, hopeful pessimists as I envision them deny Plato's suggestion that the human race will ever have rest from evils, even if philosophers were kings—thus, they are pessimists. But they are also hopeful by way of radical hope. Their hope is not for the full achievement of the highest good but an approximation thereof. Radical hope is a tool that allows the hopeful pessimist to believe that, insofar as at least some human beings are moved by a commitment to fulfilling moral obligations, there is some chance at making the world more just. It also allows the hopeful pessimist to believe that, although there is no way to guarantee, in the midst of some crisis, the survival of specific communal strategies of mitigating the problem of the highest good, it may still be possible on the other side to rebuild a conception of a reasonably tolerable life without having abdicated one's most basic responsibilities.

But there is much more to be said both about the process of rebuilding and about the conditions for its possibility. While this constitutes a separate research project in itself, it might be possible to make some preliminary observations with the pandemic outbreak of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2, which began late in 2019, as a case study. Cases of coronavirus disease-2019 (COVID-19) are still on the upswing worldwide at the time of writing, though unevenly. While some countries—notably, Taiwan, South Korea, New Zealand, and some European Union member states—handled the initial surge of cases with remarkable efficacy (at least so far), others, like the United States and Brazil, languish in ongoing medical catastrophe. Many have already drawn the connection between human impacts on the environment and the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 as a human pathogen from its zoonotic origin (Flavelle and Fountain 2020). Scientists have long warned that climate change could pose infectious disease threats (Patz et al. 1996), and epidemiological data has confirmed an increase in the incidence in infectious disease outbreaks in human populations over the past several decades (K. F. Smith et al. 2014). But the pandemic can be seen not just as an example of the kind of disruptive threat that human impacts on the environment pose but as a preview in its own right of the challenges involved in tackling environmental issues (Archila, Goehl, and Mitchell 2020). That is, mitigating the effects of the pandemic, like mitigating the effects of environmental collapse more generally, calls for sustained, collective action; effective public messaging campaigns; and a systemic reorientation of basic features of our social reality. If the disparate global response to the pandemic represents a pattern on which to predict future responses to the intensifying effects of environmental collapse, we ought to be very concerned.

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note that as a skeptic of Athenian democracy and imperialism on both moral and prudential grounds, the ultimate defeat of his own city in that conflict may have seemed to Plato not too great a violation of the moral order of the universe and perhaps even just deserts. In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, by contrast, we looked at the aftermath of a disaster, the Lisbon Earthquake of 1755, that seemed to a great many observers to be just such a violation. To be sure, some figures in the Catholic Church did interpret the Earthquake in the tradition of mitigated consolation, claiming it to be punishment from heaven for impiety (Aguirre 2012, 32).

Here, the insight from Plato that, in the interplay between the social and political and the personal, happiness and virtue might get some causal grip on one another becomes significant. It is not, of course, entirely surprising that, even if we recognize the distinctness of prudential and moral modes reasoning, their operation can be mutually reinforcing. As noted in Chapter 4, it is often the case that instances of the problem of the highest good can be resolved at a higher level of social organization, which is just to say that the tools of mitigation are the social ones discussed there. One reason for this is that although the moral and the prudential are distinct in relation of an individual agent to itself (or a corporate agent to itself), they are connected in relation of an agent to other agents, an insight shared across ethical theories. Thus, utilitarians of various stripes are enjoined, from a moral perspective, to maximize some function of utility in general, rather than utility in their own persons; Kantians are to not take into account their personal happiness in making ethical decisions, but the happiness of others matters a very great deal; and so on. And so, when it is a collective or a population under consideration, the presence of morality and the presence of happiness are not separate questions. A more moral society *in aggregate* is likely to be a happier one *in aggregate*, even if conflicts between obligations and interests at this or that node in the collective cannot be ruled out *a priori*.

But not only does this cut in the other direction—a less moral society is one with fewer people working toward the happiness of their fellows—it also suggests a key weak spot. Radical hope is a tool for navigating the breakdown of social strategies for mitigating clashes of virtue and happiness with an eye toward rebuilding. We might suppose that Plenty Coups was especially effective in exercising radical hope in part because, as a respected community leader, he was particularly well-placed to oversee a communal transition to new conceptions of goods and duties. This should underscore the importance of situating the exercise of radical hope in a social context. Insofar as radical hope is underpinned by a kind of conceptual work—of evaluating and rebuilding thick ethical concepts—and insofar as concepts are necessarily shared if they are to be practically meaningful, we cannot fall into the trap of thinking that radical hope is in itself a sufficient strategy for confronting ethical dilemmas in the midst of social collapse. This is particularly true if we are tempted to suppose that radical hope can be exercised through a retreat to a purely personal commitment to the highest good. Without communal effort, it seems unlikely that radical hope could be well-founded.[115]

The COVID era gives ample reason for concern and illustrates the shortcomings of moral exhortation in the absence of community strategy and support. The differential responses to the pandemic have revealed the extent of political rot present in current global hegemons and, in particular, highlighted the dangers posed to the effective exercise of radical hope by reactionary right-wing politics. Political theorists will no doubt have much sophisticated analysis on the reasons why powerful governments such as the United States, Brazil, and the UK pursued such nihilistic politics in the early stages of the pandemic, but we can observe immediately that they are

[115] We might see something of a contrast in something like Alasdair MacIntyre's suggestion in *After Virtue* (2007) to weather collapse waiting for a St. Benedict. Strictly speaking, MacIntyre's prescription is not individualistic; instead, he argues, "What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us" (2007, 263). The difference here is that while Plenty Coups sought to guide the entire Crow tribe through a period of physical, social, and conceptual upheaval, MacIntyre thinks that if a wider society is too morally compromised, then it is up to ethical individuals to localize their communal efforts toward the good in a self-consciously exclusionary strategy.

governed by right-wing demagogues running on especially on platforms of xenophobia and a return to mythic, characteristically racist golden ages.

What is notable about this political trend is that these demagogues, even while accusing their opponents of engaging in "identity politics," themselves draw support on exclusionary, identitarian grounds. In the case of U.S. President Donald J. Trump, the focus seems to be on the grievance politics of white men in particular. Perhaps this goes some way toward explaining the disastrously failed COVID-19 containment strategy in the U.S. as compared with other countries: in the early stages of the virus spreading, many seemed to believe that the coronavirus would be exclusively a contagion of the proportionately more racially diverse, dense cities. This is likely only part of the story, of course, as platforms of national greatness have much to fear from acknowledging the severity of a crisis.

Before the pandemic response was effectively politicized along partisan lines, something remarkable seemed to occur in the spring of 2020: entire communities consciously committed, *en masse*, to collective material sacrifice by implementing strict lockdown measures, with the aim of preventing the coronavirus from overwhelming medical systems and killing vulnerable populations. In this respect too, the pandemic looks like a dress rehearsal for mitigating environmental collapse, at least to the realist/pessimist. It seems plausible, for example, that the economic costs of locking down exceeded whatever economic cost might have followed strictly from death and disease. In other words, many did (and still to this point in time) accept a personal sacrifice to fulfill a perceived obligation. But since that point in time, enthusiasm for pandemic mitigation has waned considerably, especially in the United States, where it never reached the levels of other countries. It is easy to see why this is the case for anti-mitigation partisans, but in the absence of effective collective action, the personal cost of social distancing increases while the moral benefit decreases. The relentless nihilism of contemporary right-wing politics seems to conduce against the efficacy of moral action.

And so, we might further fear that societies in the grip of such politics will be particularly hostile to the exercise of radical hope. One danger is that while radical hope functions effectively as an aid to the fulfillment of obligations in times of upheaval, it still relies on a social fabric amenable to collective meaning-making and moral aspiration. Contemporary U.S. right-wing politics seems a blend of white identity politics and radical individualism; both separately are obstacles to ethical community, but together they are particularly potent. For while exclusionary politics pit sub-national communities against one another—in the process likely generating instances of the problem of the highest good at the corporate level—radical individualism tears out the social supports for doing the right thing in difficult circumstances. Such circumstances will not be in short supply.

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