

# Correcting the Caricature: God and Kant

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This paper will offer a simple propaedeutic to several salient aspects of Kantian ethics and rational theology in order to demonstrate the necessity of God in Kantian ethics. It will be argued that the loss of God fatally compromises Kantian morality. In pursuit of this end, clarification will be offered for some commonly misunderstood or neglected elements of Kantian ethics which are essential to a holistic view of Kantian morality and essential to the integration of Kantian ethics into a coherent worldview which incorporates his rational theology. The argument advanced in this paper seeks to demonstrate that theism and reason are not at cross purposes, and that a rationalistic system of ethics may in fact include God in a prominent and deeply meaningful way.

Kant conceives of a position commonly known as the “argument from morality” which acknowledges that the divine being is in fact closed off to our limited knowledge through speculative reason, but whose existence can be postulated as a necessity of practical reason and our relation to the moral law. While this is not so much a proof as a justification, it is nevertheless found rationally as a postulate of practical reason, a necessary condition of, and for, morality. This is achieved through the ultimate possibility of the *summum bonum*, something which does not seem possible, yet is necessary for our dedication to the moral law.<sup>1</sup>

This is, accordingly, a *need from an absolutely necessary point of view* and justifies its presupposition not merely as a permitted hypothesis but as a postulate from a practical point of view; and, granted that the pure moral law inflexibly binds everyone as a command (not as a rule of prudence), the upright man may well say: I *will* that there be a God, that my existence in this world be also an existence in a pure world of the understanding beyond natural connections, and finally that my duration be endless; I stand by this without paying attention to rationalizations, however little I may be able to answer them or to oppose them with others more plausible, and I will not let this belief be taken from me; for this

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Cameron Galbraith, *Kant and Theology: Was Kant a Closet Theologian?* (Bethesda, Maryland: International Scholars Publications, 1996), 12–14.

is the only case in which my interest, because I *may* not give up anything of it, unavoidably determines my judgment.<sup>2</sup>

In Kant's view, it is not rational to pursue something unless the thing which is being pursued is actually obtainable. The *summum bonum* is the necessary combination of moral virtue and happiness, yet there is no clear correlation between moral worth and happiness so far as can be determined through one's experience of the world. There must necessarily be some other force which ensures and guarantees that the necessary connection between one's moral worthiness and happiness somehow sees fruition. Thus, the postulates of practical reason emerge. Morality necessarily entails God. This is not because morality is derived from God as the divine command theory would state, but rather, without God, morality loses its grounding and becomes irrational. The moral law is rational, and binds agents categorically; as such, it is ordered to the universal, entailing not only that moral agents should act on maxims which can be universalized, but also that they should also seek to develop "holy wills" in perfect conformity with the moral law. Second, while working to develop a perfectly holy will entails doing one's duty, duty itself is non-consequentialist, and thus is not a guarantor of happiness. In fact, quite the contrary is true, and the virtuous person must often choose duty over happiness. Nevertheless, it is rational to assume that virtue and happiness ought to be paired together. Therefore, it becomes necessary to postulate a supreme being who facilitates this pairing. It is through God's necessary relationship to morality and the *summum bonum* that what little one can know of a supersensible reality, such as God, can be found. This argument from morality provides a rational basis for belief in God and also helps to insulate morality from corruption. Morality is still directly the result of the rational legislation of the autonomous moral agent. If the moral law were merely a blind obedience to God's directives, and one were to undertake such adherence from a desire for reward or a repulsion for punishment, one would be acting heteronomously and utterly obliterate any moral worth one's actions might have had.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the postulate of God serves another practical purpose. Without God, morality becomes hopelessly unfounded. Mere adherence to the moral law without the possibility of the *summum bonum* amounts to little more than delusion. It is clear that in the Kantian formulation one conforms to the moral law for no reason other than it is one's duty to do what is right as ordained by reason and that to act on account of one's own happiness

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<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, chap. 2, § 8 (5:143) in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and ed. Mary J. Gregor, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 255.

<sup>3</sup> Galbraith, *Kant and Theology*, 12–15.

constitutes a spurious maxim based upon inclination, for morality “is not properly the doctrine of how we are to *make* ourselves happy but of how we are to become *worthy* of happiness.”<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, without some view of desert, or a real connection between moral worth and happiness (the *summum bonum*), moral despair would set in, and one would come to believe that there would be no real point in being moral, and further, there would be no moral accountability. The virtuous and the wicked would all meet the same end in the dust of eternity. Kant demonstrates the futility of such moral enterprise in the *Critique of Judgment*, where he envisions a truly moral man who does not believe in God and seeks to act in accord with his moral duty with no consideration of his own happiness or profit.

Deceit, violence, and envy will always surround him, although he himself be honest, peaceable and kindly; and the righteous men with whom he meets will, notwithstanding all their worthiness of happiness, be yet subjected by nature which regards not this, to all of the evils of want, disease, and untimely death, just like the beasts of the earth. So it will be until one wide grave engulfs them together (honest or not, it makes no difference), and throws them back—who were able to believe themselves the final purpose of creation—into the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter from which they were drawn. The purpose, then, which this well-intentioned person had and ought to have before him in his pursuit of moral laws, he must certainly give up as impossible.<sup>5</sup>

Kant would never accept an *absurdum practicum*,<sup>6</sup> and while he believes duty itself to be a sufficient motivator for morality, it is also clear that as a practical matter the *summum bonum* must also be achievable, and thus one may say with conviction that there is a God, purely from practical necessity and a moral faith grounded in hope, for God is necessary to provide the possibility that moral virtue and happiness coincide, and that moral worth and happiness correspond. “But the subjective effect of the this law, namely the disposition conformed with it and also made necessary by it to promote the practically possible highest good, nevertheless presupposes at least that the

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<sup>4</sup> Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, chap. 2, § 5 (5:130), p. 244.

<sup>5</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (4:452), trans. J.H. Bernard (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, Inc., 1951), 303.

<sup>6</sup> *Absurdum Practicum* is a Kantian term which refers to an absurdity in practical reason, whereby “it is shown that anyone who denies this or that would have to be a scoundrel.” See Immanuel Kant, *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion*, pt. 2, § 2 (28:1083), in *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen Wood and George Di Giovanni, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 415.

latter is *possible*; in the contrary case it would be practically impossible to strive for the object of a concept that would be, at bottom, empty and without an object.<sup>77</sup>

To draw out the necessity of God to Kantian ethics, it is helpful to examine some pertinent objections and to respond to them. One of the best known critics of the argument from morality is the atheist philosopher J.L. Mackie, who argues in his *Miracle of Theism* that the argument from morality is flawed because while the *summum bonum* entails that there be a God by necessity, we can just as easily reach the conclusion that there is no God and therefore no *summum bonum*.<sup>8</sup> However, what Mackie does not account for is that Kant notes that the *summum bonum* is necessary for the very notion of moral enterprise, leaving it the crucial middle term upon which all morality hinges. Kant explicates this position in the *Critique of Judgment* where he asserts that while one cannot conclude that he is free from his duty if he should come to the view that there is no God, a man who does not believe that the *summum bonum* is possible is left with moral despair and is unable to do his duty as noted in the passage above. As such, he must act on the moral faith that this highest good is in fact achievable, and that his moral strivings are not in vain. Thus, he must for practical purposes at least posit the idea of God, for his own finite agency is limited and cannot bring this highest good into being, while his experience of the world would also indicate that there is no direct relationship, causal or otherwise, between moral worth and happiness. Consequently, such a man would find himself needing to postulate a God, for the very idea or concept is critical to morality. On this point, Allen Wood clearly and simply states that “we do not believe the highest good to be possible because we *want* it to be possible; we believe it to be possible because we *must* do so if we are rationally to continue our pursuit of it.”<sup>9</sup> A duty for the sake of duty or an obligation for the sake of obligation would be viciously circular and that is not at all what Kant asserts. Moral agents recognize that they ought to do their duty because they rationally recognize the objective value of a morally good will which conforms to what reason demands. The morally good will fulfills human nature as free and rational beings, for in being moral we are truly free, where conversely acting according to inclination and heteronomy diminishes our freedom and thus goes against our nature

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<sup>7</sup> Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, chap. 2, § 8 (5:143), p. 254–55. It may seem as though heteronomy is an issue here, given that it may seem that the *summum bonum* taints one’s action by orienting the will through a desire for happiness. Objections to this and the other main lines of argument will be addressed as the argument unfolds.

<sup>8</sup> John Leslie Mackie. *The Miracle of Theism Arguments for and against the existence of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 106–11.

<sup>9</sup> Allen W. Wood. *Kant’s Moral Religion* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1970), 187.

by reducing us to mere animal objects subject to being determined by antecedent physical and psychological causes. Morality is an orientation of the will towards the good, in particular, the *summum bonum* is the end the will is targeting when it acts in conformity with its moral duty. Kantian duty with its strongly felt imperative ought—an imperative ought so profound and unyielding that it demands conformity without exception even in the most dire of circumstances—must be grounded on at least the possibility of this highest good. Such an obligation could never be based on finite goods which are merely pleasant or subjectively satisfying or even valuable for their own sake, for in each of these cases the finite nature of such a good would yield a finite obligation. How else could Kantian ethics provide such a deeply non-consequentialist and obstinately inviolable obligation? How could we be compelled by a law to obey even to the thwarting of all of our inclinations or in spite of the looming threat that the world may perish? Only by the orientation of our will to the highest good, the *summum bonum*, can our moral strivings find the appropriate basis for such an implacable duty. Without the *summum bonum*, we would be limited to a world of finite goods, and while those goods might be able to impose upon us some kind of value response or possibly even an obligation, nevertheless those realities would be insufficient to posit a truly inviolable duty. Other goods might be of greater worth, or perhaps of comparative worth. In such a world, duty becomes contingent and relative. Furthermore, what would be the basis of value in this world without the *summum bonum* or God?

The most damning thing of all is the loss of desert. The *summum bonum* itself assures that worth and happiness coincide, resulting in a necessary harmony between the two aspects of the good, virtue and happiness. Removing the possibility of such a harmony results in a bifurcation of the good, and its split aspects are individually insufficient for morality.

Consequently, either the desire for happiness must be the motive to maxims of virtue or the maxim of virtue must be the efficient cause of happiness. The first is *absolutely* impossible because... maxims that put the determining ground of the will in the desire for one's happiness are not moral at all and can be the ground of no virtue. But the second is *also impossible* because any practical connection of causes and effects in the world, as a result of the determination of the will, does not depend upon the moral dispositions of the will but upon knowledge of the laws of nature and the physical ability to use them for one's purposes; consequently, no necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of moral laws. Now, since the promotion of

the highest good, which contains this connection in its concept, is an *a priori* necessary object of our will and inseparably bound up with the moral law, the impossibility of the first must also prove the falsity of the second. If, therefore, the highest good is impossible in accordance with practical rules, then the moral law, which commands us to promote it, must be fantastic and directed to empty imaginary ends and must therefore in itself be false.<sup>10</sup>

Removing God and the *summum bonum* breaks Kantian ethics and topples the postulates like dominoes. If perfect virtue along with perfect happiness correlated by desert is no longer possible, it stands to reason that it is no longer possible to perfect the human soul since perfect virtue is no longer attainable. For this reason, the second postulate, immortality of the soul, is also lost, since it follows that if human perfection in terms of virtue is no longer possible, one can no longer postulate the eternity needed to cultivate that perfection. “Ought implies can” works both ways, and no one can be obliged to pursue what is impossible, nor can one reasonably postulate what would be necessary to accomplish something unattainable. In this way, it becomes clear just how important God and the *summum bonum* are because their removal breaks Kantian ethics and leaves the moral universe a barren wasteland while at the same time bleeding into other aspects of a coherent worldview, thus diminishing the value of the human person as well. As for happiness, Kant himself asserts that morality is not and cannot be a system by which our own happiness or the happiness of others is pursued.<sup>11</sup> Put simply, any schema whose purpose is simply to maximize human happiness without regard for desert cannot be properly called moral.

Nevertheless, these types of non-ethics—views akin to something like a Utilitarianism or Rawlsianism—are the best that can be found in a world without the *summum bonum*, and thus without God, which would fatally undermine the moral enterprise, making the most rational or appropriate view one of nihilism or egoism such as one would find in Nietzsche or Rand. A humanist might object that there are reasons to show concern for others or to work for mutual enrichment. However, this is delusion as Nietzsche rightly points out.<sup>12</sup> While it is true that some people might cooperate out of necessity and self-interest, it does not follow that cooperation would be the most rational course of action in all situations. Only the weak would consistently

<sup>10</sup> Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, chap. 1, § 1 (5:113–14), p. 231.

<sup>11</sup> On this point, it is important to clarify the importance of happiness in Kantian ethics, which will be addressed later in this analysis.

<sup>12</sup> Such reasoning is indicative of the Nietzschean position which is articulated through his works such as *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and *On the Genealogy of Morals*.

cherish cooperation, and even then would abandon it when it became advantageous, while the only others who follow such a path would be those who have falsely accepted the lie of morality perpetuated by the weak in order to shackle them, along with those who only seemingly buy into the spirit of cooperation as a façade so that they might more easily manipulate others. If the Nietzschean superman would choose to eschew cooperation for his own benefit, if he could truly inflict his will upon others and take what he desires with impunity, and if, most crucially, there were not even the possibility of the *summum bonum*, thus eliminating any objective basis for desert, rendering justice a falsehood and hope a lie, how could anyone say that what he is doing is wrong? In such a world, there would be neither goodness nor duty; no morality at all. Someone could object that the Nietzschean superman is not being fair, but with no objective values, why should anyone cherish fairness or even principle, especially when an individual may be strong enough to secure a greater share of his own happiness without reprisal in what has become an amoral zero-sum game? The *summum bonum* is the very thing which establishes desert, and without it, fairness is a fantasy for the foolish. Life would be like poker, and one would play to win.

Within the realm of Kantian ethics there is an objection to the zero-sum game. After all, would not consistently following the categorical imperative serve to make the *summum bonum* a reality even without divine agency? In reply, there is much to be said. First and foremost, the distinction must be made that the *summum bonum* does not consist in merely rewarding virtue and punishing vice. Rather, it is perfect virtue and perfect happiness bonded together by worth, hence the perfectly happy agent is perfectly virtuous and as such *deserves* to be perfectly happy. It is not sufficient to merely promote a connection between the two aspects of the good, nor to approximate their union extrinsically, but rather, for it to be truly the *summum bonum*, the relation between the two must be *intrinsic*. Given the known constitution of the universe, it is clear that such an intrinsic connection lies beyond the efficacy of human agency alone. Second, Kant himself notes that even the most scrupulous adherent of the moral law could not count on others to uniformly or consistently follow that law.<sup>13</sup> Third, it is not possible for human beings to bring about the *summum bonum*, because it is not possible for human agents to unfailingly adhere to the categorical imperative. This will require some clarification. Surely, if agents *ought* to be moral, then they *can* be, for if conforming to the law were beyond their power, deviating from it would not be something for which they could be called blameworthy. This

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<sup>13</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* § 2 (4:438–39), in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. Mary J. Gregor, The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 87–88.

is another crucial distinction which will unfortunately have to be addressed in only a cursory way for brevity's sake. The answer lies in Kant's concept of radical evil. Man is evil by nature, and as a member of a fallen race has inclinations which are contrary to the moral law.<sup>14</sup> Thus, in spite of his best moral efforts, it is inevitable that even the best of us fails in his moral strivings due to the human condition and this moral affliction. Conversely, God has no duty, because God has a perfect holy will and thus never feels the tug of inclinations contrary to the law. As such, when we form our maxims in conformity to the categorical imperative we align it with the moral law as it would be rationally willed by all moral agents, including God. Thus, our duty is rightly understood as a divine command, which intensifies the force of the imperative ought.

In this way the moral law leads through the concept of the highest good, as the object and final end of pure practical reason, *to religion, that is, to the recognition of all duties as divine commands, not as sanctions—that is, chosen and in themselves contingent ordinances of another's will*—but as essential laws of every free will in itself, which must nevertheless be regarded as commands of the supreme being because only from a will that is morally perfect (holy and beneficent) and at the same time all-powerful, and so through harmony with this will, can we hope to attain the highest good, which the moral law makes our duty to take as object of our endeavors. Here again, then, everything remains disinterested and grounded only on duty, and there is no need to base it on incentives of fear and hope, which if they became principles would destroy the whole moral worth of actions. The moral law commands me to make the highest possible good in a world the final object of all my conduct. But I cannot hope to produce this except by the harmony of my will with that of a holy and beneficent author of the world; and although in the concept of the highest good, as that of a whole in which the greatest happiness is represented as connected in the most exact proportion with the greatest degree of moral perfection (possible in creatures), *my own happiness* is included, this is nevertheless not the determining ground of the will that is directed to promote the highest good; it is instead the moral law (which, on the contrary, limits by strict conditions my unbounded craving for happiness). For this reason, again, morals is not properly the doctrine of how we are to *make* ourselves

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<sup>14</sup> For a clear understanding of this through myriad examples see Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone* (6:33), trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1934), 28–29.

happy but of how we are to become *worthy* of happiness. Only if religion is added to it does there also enter the hope of some day participating in happiness to the degree that we have been intent upon not being unworthy of it.<sup>15</sup>

In light of this point, it becomes essential to unpack the true worth of the postulates and why they are so essential to the Kantian ethical edifice. The *summum bonum* requires the postulates of God and immortality, and morality requires the *summum bonum*. Patrick Kain observes that “if the postulates are to be of any moral use, then morality must not be considered a mere illusion, and if the postulates are to be of moral use in virtue of their propositional form and rational indispensability, as Kant suggests, then the postulates cannot be considered mere ideas or illusions either, at least by their possessors.”<sup>16</sup> The *summum bonum* is an absolutely essential element of practical reason. So what then are the purposes of the postulates? Quite simply, they exist to fulfill the needs of reason. First, the postulate of immortality is essential because the *summum bonum* cannot be attained in this world, but rather must be understood as transcendent. On this point one must again revisit what the *summum bonum* is—namely, perfect happiness and perfect virtue. However, so long as one exists in this world as a bodily corporeal being, perfect happiness is not possible. For one thing, even if all agents were perfectly moral, it does not follow that there would be perfect happiness, as there would still be natural disasters, temperature extremes, famine, etc. In addition to this lack of cooperation from natural forces, one’s own body would conspire against their happiness, being subject to illness, hunger, and fatigue. Thus the only way to describe perfect happiness is bliss, a state in which one is perfectly contented and seeks no change in his state. Bliss is only attainable in an eternity free from natural causal forces.<sup>17</sup> Further, perfect happiness (bliss) is not extrinsically welded onto perfect virtue, but rather, in the *summum bonum*, the two are directly linked. This further cements the notion that the *summum bonum* must be transcendent, because there is no direct relation between virtue and happiness in this world. The final postulate, God, provides the necessary purpose. Someone could object that perhaps the *summum bonum* is attainable through some force of which we are not aware. Perhaps we live in a universe with karma or some other impersonal ultimate principle. This may re-establish some elements of the *summum bonum*, but it does not accurately capture the purposiveness of creation. Only when

<sup>15</sup> Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, chap. 5, § 5 (5:129–30), 243–44.

<sup>16</sup> Patrick Kain, “Realism and Anti-Realism in Kant’s Second *Critique*,” *Philosophy Compass* 1 (2006): 449–65.

<sup>17</sup> Jacqueline Mariña, “Making Sense of Kant’s Highest Good,” *Kant-Studien*, 91(2000): 339–40.

God enters the picture can a reason for the existence of all that is, as well as the moral purpose of rational agents be discerned. Jacqueline Mariña notes that “the only possible purpose of nature adequate to our moral destinies is the highest good. We can, however, only think of nature as directed towards such [a] goal if we think of it as having been produced in accordance with a concept; but this implies that we must think of nature as having been created by a moral, all-powerful and intelligent Deity.”<sup>18</sup>

Of course, it seems as though one could object to the proposition that Kantian ethics collapses if the *summum bonum* is a sham by claiming that it introduces inclination and heteronomy and thus corrupts the system, making it self-contradictory. Kant, however, does not posit that God rewards or punishes agents for their conduct, and in fact clearly distances himself from this view. If God directly rewarded or punished moral agents for their conformity (or lack thereof) to the moral law, it would indeed taint all actions with inclination. The outer actions might have the appearance of conformity with the law, but the inner disposition of men’s wills, where the real moral value of their maxims lie would be oriented in such a way that would be indifferent to that law for its own sake, but would rather be directed towards earning a reward or avoiding punishment or loss. As such, their wills would be contra-law, their actions morally suspect, and their worthiness and agency diminished by heteronomy. Allen Wood states this clearly in his book *Kant’s Moral Religion*: “Thus happiness (or any other end, for that matter), if made the motive of the will, results in heteronomous action. Thus happiness must have ‘nothing to do’ with the *motivation* of the will. But this clearly does *not* say that happiness must have ‘nothing to do’ with the ends or objects the morally good man sets for himself in obedience to the law.”<sup>19</sup> If one pursues the *summum bonum* by “banking on it” as an eternal reward—a mere means to enter into the state of bliss—that would be heteronomy, and further, one would violate the categorical imperative in doing so. Suppose someone helps an old lady cross the street or volunteers at a soup kitchen expecting his eternal reward, such a person would be using the people who he ought to have been helping solely out of beneficent duty, and would now be reducing them to a mere means. However, if one were to dispassionately do his duty to help the old lady and feed the hungry at the soup kitchen out of dispassionate respect for what reason demands, expecting nothing in return, then the act has true moral merit. Understood in this way, it can be made plain that the *summum bonum* does not taint Kantian ethics. It is true that there is a hope for happiness, but as Yirmiyahu Yovel points out “the happiness included in the object of my willing is not my private interest but something universal and

<sup>18</sup> Jacqueline Mariña, “Making Sense of Kant’s Highest Good,” 353.

<sup>19</sup> Wood, *Kant’s Moral Religion*, 51.

objective that the moral law demands of me.”<sup>20</sup> The happiness of the agent is an object of his private hope, and is not the determining ground of the will, but rather, the will has for its object the *summum bonum*, which entails that all rational beings be happy in accord with their worthiness of that happiness. The hope of the rational being of sharing in that happiness is not a direct willing of happiness, because he is not really ever certain of his moral worth, and thus is not heteronomous.

Furthermore, Kant is not seeking to engage in Freudian wish fulfillment. The role of God in Kantian ethics is not to make the universe conform to humanity’s needs and longings,<sup>21</sup> but rather, to provide what reason demands. Some commentators, such as Peter Byrne, take issue with Kant’s argument that without the *summum bonum*, the moral law, while still an unconditional demand of reason, would nonetheless be directed to empty imaginary ends. Byrne argues that our moral actions have value even if the *summum bonum* is absent, and that specific moral actions have intrinsic value. Thus, the *summum bonum* is not necessary, and can be considered a kind of asymptotic goal designed to play a regulative or normative role in our practical reason.<sup>22</sup>

This line of argument needs to be addressed. First, it seems odd that Kant would go through all of the trouble of presenting the postulates of practical reason and constructing a robust rational theology which he ties into his ethics if this were not necessary. However, the real problem presented by these types of arguments is that they fail to understand the changes to the moral landscape without God or the *summum bonum*. Kant himself states that there is nothing good other than a good will,<sup>23</sup> and in doing so, demonstrates the *sine qua non* of Kantian ethics which makes it distinct from other systems. When Kant makes that argument, he is noting that there is no good which cannot be misused for an immoral purpose, and therefore no contingent “good” can be called good in a moral sense. Goods of this kind can only be instrumental, and are not good for their own sake, but are to the benefit of some person or another. However, Kant seeks to ground a truly categorically binding duty, and such a duty would necessarily need something other than these contingent “goods,” which can only be pursued

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<sup>20</sup> Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1980), 67.

<sup>21</sup> It should be noted that God is a rational being (in fact, a perfectly rational being), so it would in fact be morally wrong to use or instrumentalize God in this way according to the categorical imperative.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Byrne, *Kant on God* (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2007), 94–97.

<sup>23</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* § 1 (4:393–94), 49–50.

with hypothetical imperatives or counsels of prudence. The categorical imperative, which must be followed even to the thwarting of all of one's inclinations, cannot be grounded on such goods. Nevertheless, the will must have an end towards which its acts are directed, and this is another reason why the *summum bonum* is so important to Kantian ethics, as it is the ultimate end pursued in all moral maxims. However, the *summum bonum* itself depends on God, because it is not attainable by human agency and/or natural causality alone, and is only intelligible as the final and ultimate purpose of creation. Without the theological understanding of the ethical teleology of creation, moral despair will set in, because no matter how worthy our moral struggles might have seemed to be, they are ultimately doomed to failure and whatever convictions we may have had about the moral worth of our actions would be little more than splendid nonsense, impotent and futile. Anyone who acted towards such illusory ends would be a pious, but nonetheless, deluded fool who would ultimately meet the same fate as those who utterly disregarded any notion of the moral law. In this way, the postulates of God and of the immortality of the soul satisfy the objective side of reason's needs in pursuing the moral law by making possible the *summum bonum*, thus giving an end worthy of sacrifice and a real purpose to the unconditional demands of the moral law and creation, while hope in sharing in this perfect goodness, covers the subjective needs of rational agents who are nonetheless in need of an incentive, not because they would be orienting their wills in a heteronomous fashion, but rather, because without the possibility of the highest good (which requires God) agents would be afflicted by a crippling despair because all their moral strivings have been directed towards a hollow fantasy.<sup>24</sup>

Further, Kant would assert that no one can actually lay a claim on the *summum bonum*. No man, no matter how upright he may appear or believe himself to be, can actually say with true conviction that he is a morally good man. We have already examined radical evil. However, Kant also notes that there may never have been even a single act which was done from pure duty. Nevertheless, the moral man does his duty to the best of his ability and promotes the *summum bonum* with a hope and trust that God's final purpose for rational beings will obtain and that his moral endeavors are not in vain.

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<sup>24</sup> However, there is a necessary qualification which must be added, as Kain notes in "Realism and Anti-Realism in Kant's Second *Critique*": "Kant attempts to resist giving free reign to all forms of 'wishful thinking': he demands that the postulates be consistent with what can be theoretically cognized, that they spring from a necessary rational need and are tethered down by the moral law which is the basis of that need, and he insists that they are limited to a practical use. Kant does not claim to have proven the reality or real possibility of the postulated objects; just to have established the legitimacy and the rational indispensability of believing that they are really possible and real."

It is due to this profound hope in the *summum bonum* that a man has reason to believe that he can overcome his own innately evil disposition in pursuit of perfect virtue, though that falls beyond the limits of his finite agency and thus may even be able to participate in that joy which is proper to a virtuous rational being, a joy which it is objectively good for the rational being to possess for it is in measure to his worth as a moral agent with the law within him. This hope and trust opens up the beautiful harmony between Kantian rational theology and ethics, whereby Kant can appeal to grace, granting an outlet for God's participation in our arduous quest for holiness and assuring in spite of our inadequacies that ought truly does imply can. "For despite the fall, the injunction that we *ought* to become better men resounds unabatedly in our souls; hence this must be within our power, even though what *we* are able to do is in itself inadequate and though we thereby only render ourselves susceptible of higher, and for us inscrutable, assistance."<sup>25</sup>

The argument presented has hopefully provided some illumination into the necessity of God for Kantian ethics. While it is true that a man who does not believe in God may not absolve himself from duty for that reason alone, the loss of God is also the loss of the *summum bonum*, the crucial middle term which is essential to the very idea of morality, for it alone enables agents to rationally do their duty without a deeply troubling antinomy and a resulting sense of despair and futility. The result of this antinomy is an *absurdum practicum* which utterly breaks Kantian ethics and undermines duty. It has also endeavored to demonstrate that Kantian ethics and rational theology work in tandem, allowing us to discern within the limits of reason alone some attributes of the inscrutable divinity in whom we place our trust. Finally, it has sought to reveal that our duty gives us more than a mere obligation; it gives us hope.

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<sup>25</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone*, pt. 1, § 4 (6:45), trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Company, 1934), 40–41.