

# Kant's Two Moral Arguments for the Existence of God, and the Problem of Realizability of the Highest Good

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In this paper, I will introduce Kant's moral argument for the existence of God, which he expounded in his Critique of Practical Reason, and state the strengths and weaknesses of this argument. Then, I will describe how Hegel attacks Kant's moral argument by targeting his postulate of the immortality of the soul. Finally, I will argue that although Hegel's criticism of the moral argument in the second Critique is legitimate, Kant's moral argument about the existence of God in the third Critique remains sound insofar as the highest good is presented in a different domain in the third Critique is realizable. In this way, I will show that even if the highest good in the individual domain is suspended, the highest good in the species domain introduced in the third Critique is sufficient to assume the existence of God.

In the Critique of Practical Reason, Kant states that a rational being with a will determined according to the moral law must have the goal of attaining the highest good. Furthermore, he claims that the attainment of the highest good can only be achieved when the will is entirely determined by the moral law (CPrR, 5:122).<sup>1</sup> However, according to Kant, a rational being in the sensible world cannot reach this perfect state, i.e., the highest good, because it means holiness. That is, although a person can act according to the moral law all his life, the time he spends in the world is insufficient to reach the highest good (CPrR, 5:122). Nevertheless, Kant also states that pursuing the highest good is commanded by the moral law, and in this sense, if it is presented to us as something we ought to realize, it must be realizable (CPrR, 5:122). As a solution to this problem, Kant proposes the postulate of the immortality of the soul. Accordingly, even if we cannot reach the highest good in this world, we must assume that our existence will continue in another dimension, and we will reach the highest good there in eternity (CPrR, 5:122).

Immediately after the postulate of the immortality of the soul, Kant proposes a second postulate in relation to this one. By emphasizing that the highest good is "happiness proportioned to morality, i.e., virtue," Kant argues that happiness isn't always a byproduct of virtue in this world and that no rational being has the power to ensure the harmony between moral principles and happiness (CPrR, 5:124). This appears as a problem, and Kant presents his postulate of the existence of God to solve it. He

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<sup>1</sup> CPrR: Critique of Practical Reason.

claims that we must assume that there is a being that assures this harmony between virtue and happiness (CPrR, 5:124). Moreover, since reaching the highest good in this world is impossible, we must also assume that there is a place, i.e., the afterlife, in which acting under the moral law leads to happiness in proportion (CPrR, 5:125). In this sense, Kant asserts that God ensures both the existence of the afterlife and the apportioning of happiness to virtue there (CPrR, 5:125). Finally, Kant claims that if we do not assume the immortality of the soul and the existence of God, it would be impossible to realize the highest good, and that would be the falsification of the moral law, which is unacceptable (CPrR, 5:125).

We can formally write Kant's argument as follows:

1. Moral law commands us to pursue the highest good.
2. Highest good must be realizable. (Ought implies can)
3. Attaining the highest good (fully completion of virtue) is not possible in this world as it requires holiness.
4. We must postulate the immortality of the soul, i.e., the afterlife.
5. As the highest good is happiness proportioned to virtue, and we cannot ensure harmony between them, there must be a being to ensure it.
6. We must assume that there is God as the guarantor of the afterlife in which virtue proportionally leads to happiness.

One striking point is that Kant's argument does not claim that God necessarily exists. The moral argument only asserts that we must assume that God exists. As Kant states that a posteriori cognition, i.e., experience, is necessary to claim that something exists, he does not claim that God exists and does not provide proof of God's existence. Kant appeals to the moral law, and he only gives us a reason to believe in the existence of God.

Kant accepts that the highest good, which should be realizable, is not realizable in this world and postpones the realizability to eternity by assuming the immortality of the soul. He throws the solution to this problem into a realm of which we have no knowledge. In this sense, the postulate of the immortality of the soul appears as a kind of ingenious trick rather than solving the problem, and it seems to be the weak point of Kant's argument because it is a postulate that can be easily rejected. Moreover, since this postulate and the realizability of the highest good ground the postulate about the existence of God, if it is refuted, there is no reason for us to assume the existence of God.

Hegel is one of the philosophers who reject this postulate of Kant. As Mills points out, Hegel agrees with Kant that the highest good must be realizable. It is absurd for Hegel, too, that the moral law commands the realization of the highest good but that the realization of it is impossible (Mills, p. 198). However, Hegel criticizes Kant's solution to this realizability problem. As Mills asserts, Hegel's critique begins by explaining Kant's understanding of morality. Hegel states that Kant thinks of immoral behaviors as conforming to our sensible inclinations and moral behaviors as subordinated to reason (Mills, p. 199).

Further, Hegel asserts that a rational being can attain the Kantian highest good only when his inclinations are entirely subordinated to reason. And highest good is seen by Kant as something that can only be realized in the afterlife, as we have explained (Mills, p. 200). Mills reports that this poses a problem for Kant. Because Hegel claims that if morality is subordinating inclinations to reason, no moral action can be performed in the absence of inclinations. And if we consider that we will be non-sensible beings in the afterlife, we will not have inclinations (Mills, p. 200). In this sense, performing a moral action is impossible in the afterlife, and thus moral progress is impossible. And if that is the case, the highest good is not realizable either (Mills, p. 200).

Hegel reveals the contradiction in Kant's argument by shooting him with his own gun. Indeed, Kant claims that the highest good can be attained in the afterlife. However, the fact that he does not provide any information about the afterlife strengthens Hegel's objection. Because if we are going to be non-sensible beings in the afterlife, it goes against Kant's definition of morality. Kant should have seen this contradiction and at least made a distinction between morality in the afterlife and this world. However, we do not see that. In this sense, if we listen to Hegel, we must consider that the highest good cannot be realized in the afterlife. Besides, as Kant claims, the highest good is not realizable in this world either. So the highest good is by no means realizable. And if that is the case, we have no reason to assume the existence of God. As a result, one could argue that Hegel's objection challenges the concept of the highest good in Kant's philosophy, potentially undermining it. Consequently, Kant's argument regarding the existence of God may be called into question.

Hegel's objection successfully demonstrates the non-realizability of the highest good and refutes the moral argument with all its postulates. However, this does not require that the concept of the highest good be removed entirely from Kant's philosophy. Besides the second Critique, Kant speaks of the highest good in many of his works. As we shall see later in the article, we can consider Kant's highest good in two domains: the individual and the species; and in this article I will basically argue that

the inaccessibility of the highest good in the individual domain does not affect the realizability highest good in the species domain. But before delving into the topic at hand, it's worth noting that there is much debate about the importance and definition of Kant's concept of the highest good.

For example, Beck questions the importance of the concept of the highest good in Kant's practical philosophy. He argues that the highest good is of no significance neither as the determining ground of goodwill nor in the practical application of moral law (Beck, p. 245). Unlike Beck, Reath acknowledges that the concept of the highest good plays a vital place in Kant's moral philosophy. Reath claims that besides the theological concept of the highest good, Kant also has a concept of the secular highest good (Reath, p. 601). He argues that according to the theological highest good concept, the highest good is something that can be reached in another world and with the help of God. In contrast, according to the secular highest good concept, the highest good is reachable in this world with the actions of humanity (Reath, p. 601).

Apart from these interpretations, I think Saniye Vatansever gives the best interpretation of Kant's concept of the highest good. According to Vatansever, Kant has a coherent concept of the highest good (Vatansever, p. 266). She defines Kant's concept of the highest good as "a state in which maximum virtue causes proportional happiness" (Vatansever, p. 266). Moreover, she states that the highest good applies to two different domains. Vatansever argues that in the second Critique, Kant enounces the highest good in the individual domain, and in the third Critique, he enounces the highest good in the species domain (Vatansever, p. 267). Accordingly, Kant postulates the immortality of the soul and the existence of God for the highest good in the individual domain to be realizable. In contrast, he postulates the immortality of species and the existence of God for the realizability of the highest good in the species domain (Vatansever, p. 281).

As we have examined, Kant's concept of the highest good in the individual domain, which he asserts in the second Critique, is not realizable, and this implies that the moral law is false. However, as will be clear, the moral law also commands that the highest good in the species domain should be pursued. Moreover, as I will argue, the fact that this command of the moral law is realizable prevents moral law from being completely falsified. Also, in the third Critique, Kant gives another moral argument for the existence of God concerning the highest good in the species domain.

At this point, I argue that we can reject the highest good in the individual domain because of the contradictions it involves but still conserve the highest good in the species domain. I also argue that even if the highest good at the individual domain is suspended, the highest good at the species domain introduced in the third Critique

is sufficient to assume the existence of God. I will first examine Kant's moral argument in the third Critique to demonstrate all of these.

In the Teleology section of the Critique of Judgment, Kant argues that a mechanistic explanation of nature does not satisfy us because of our peculiar structure of cognition. Therefore, we need a teleological explanation of nature (CPJ, 5:415).<sup>2</sup> In this sense, Kant states that all natural beings except human beings are used as a means for another and claims that none of them can be the final end of nature (CPJ, 5:426). For example, a plant exists to feed a herbivorous creature, and a herbivorous creature exists to feed a carnivorous creature. Therefore, Kant claims that the entire living world exists for humans and that man is the ultimate end of creation. (CPJ, 5:426). Because, for Kant, man is the only creature in the world that can form a concept of an end for himself and perceive all the purposive things with the help of his faculties and make a system of ends out of them (CPJ, 5:427). In other words, Kant asserts that nature has not given man any end, but it has equipped man with many faculties such as understanding, reason, and power of judgment to find an end for himself. In this sense, he claims that everything in nature exists so that man can find his end, and that end would be the end of nature through human beings' connection to nature (CPJ, 5:429).

In the next section, Kant defines this final end as the end that does not need any condition for its possibility (CPJ, 5:434). However, as Kant asserts, everything in nature, outside and inside of man (his thinking nature), is conditioned. Thus, he states that an unconditioned end can only be an idea found in noumena which is freedom. Furthermore, since man is the only creature capable of cognizing the noumena due to his supersensible faculty, he can set this idea (freedom) as his end, the highest end, i.e., the highest good in the world (CPJ, 5:435).

Kant claims that the highest good, i.e., the final end of nature, is provided by reason, and it will be realized when all rational beings in this world act according to the moral law (CPJ, 5:448). In this sense, he argues that the moral law obligates us to strive for the highest good in this world. Therefore, the highest good must be realizable (CPJ, 5:448). At this point, Kant points out the harmony between causality in nature and the purpose obligated by the moral law, namely causality of freedom, and argues that this harmony cannot be a coincidence and must have a reason (CPJ, 5:450). According to Kant, the existence of order in nature seems as if it is specially designed for us to reach the highest good. For this reason, Kant states that to explain this connection, we must assume the moral author of the world, namely God (CPJ, 5:450).

We can write the argument formally in this way:

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<sup>2</sup> CPJ: Critique of Power of Judgment.

1. The moral world, as a final end, is the highest good in the sensible world.
2. Highest good is a duty commanded by reason to strive.
3. If we should realize the highest good, we need to be able to do it. (ought implies can)
4. Highest good is realizable in this world through freedom.
5. The world is hospitable for us to freely engage in moral acts and attain the highest good.
6. We can only explain this harmony between causality in nature and the causality of freedom by assuming the existence of God.
7. We must assume that there is God.

As is clear, the highest good offered by Kant in the third Critique is defined as something attainable in this world when all humans act under the moral law. In this sense, we will always have inclinations as we exist in the world as sensible beings, and the highest good will be realized when all people subordinate their inclination to reason. Thus, Hegel's critique that moral actions cannot occur when inclinations do not exist does not apply to the species domain of the highest good. However, whether a world where all people act in accordance with the moral law is realizable is a matter of debate here. Although Kant does not explicitly state this, we can think that the human species also needs a long time to reach the highest good, just as a long time is required for the individual to reach the highest good, as Kant states in the second Critique. In other words, as Vatansever states, we can claim that Kant presupposes the immortality of the species for the realization of the highest good in the domain of the species (Vatansever, p. 267).

This assumption is essential for the validity of the moral argument, just like the postulate of the immortality of the soul in the second Critique. So much so that the realization of the highest good in this world becomes impossible if we cannot justify the immortality of the species. And if it is impossible to reach the highest good, then we can argue that the harmony that Kant claims to exist does not exist either. Thus, we have no reason to assume the existence of God. At this point, it is vital to justify the postulate of the immortality of species, to show that the concept of the highest good in the human species domain is realizable, and to sustain Kant's moral argument in the third Critique. And I argue that the immortality of the species can be justified by considering that humans can adapt to all conditions of nature because of their faculties of reason and understanding.

In his Critique of Pure Reason, Kant describes how the mental faculties of humans, reason and understanding, operate (CPR, A651/B679).<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Kant states that while the faculty of understanding determines the concepts of the objects, reason systematically unites these concepts determined by understanding. In other words, reason systematically organizes all the objects whose concept is determined by understanding (CPR, A651/B679). In addition, Kant claims that reason is necessary for any empirical truth. That is, without reason, we cannot make sense of the contingency of nature (CPR, A643/B671). In this sense, it turns out that the faculties of reason and understanding are precious things that we have to obtain systematic information about our environment. These faculties allow us to distinguish between objects and systematically use them, and in a sense, they help us survive. At this point, we can claim that all developments in human history have these faculties as the starting point. Humans have succeeded in using tools, building shelters and agriculture, etc., because we have these two special faculties.

By allowing us to invent things, our systematic knowledge about the world allows us to adapt to our environment. So much so that when the conditions of the environment change and become disadvantageous for us, we can avoid these changes by using the information we have about the world. For example, primitive people thought of wearing animal furs as a solution to the cold climatic conditions that they were not used to, and in this way, they were able to survive by being protected from the cold. Smallpox, which killed many people in the medieval period, is no longer a serious threat thanks to the vaccine that we found. Further, today, humans are so advanced technologically and scientifically that we are thinking of ways to move to other planets by considering the scenario in which the Earth becomes uninhabitable for us. In brief, when we look at history, we see that humanity is constantly evolving and gaining the ability to adapt to broader environments. Undoubtedly, natural phenomena are contingent, and the risk of human extinction is a perpetual concern. As such, it is impossible to make a definite claim regarding the permanence of humanity. Nevertheless, the faculty of reason that humans possess provides grounds for hope, as it enables us to overcome various difficulties. And I think this gives us a justification for accepting the postulate of the immortality of humanity.

In conclusion, I first introduced Kant's moral argument in the second Critique and noted that there were also problematic parts of this argument and presented Hegel's critique. Next, I conceded that Hegel's critique was successful but argued that it was insufficient to banish the concepts of the highest good and God from Kant's philosophy and falsify the moral law. To support my claim, I have used Vatansever's two-

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<sup>3</sup> CPR: Critique of Pure Reason.

domain account and demonstrated that the highest good in the species domain is not affected by Hegel's critique in terms of being realizable in this world. I then presented an argument to justify the postulate of the immortality of the human species to support the realizability claim of the highest good in this world. Thus, by showing that the highest good at the species level is realizable, I saved moral law from being completely falsified and reinforced Kant's moral argument in the third *Critique*.

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