

## The Highest Good & Ideals in Life

Much contemporary research (and historical reception) of Kant's theory of the highest good interprets it as retreating in later works. Many think it becomes simply a psychological crux in the third *Critique*, while others argue that it vanishes completely by his last, posthumous work, the *Opus postumum*. I think the contrary is true: namely, that the highest good grows in systematic significance in Kant's thought to become a life-orienting ideal rather than a merely moral one by the third *Critique* and beyond (which I argue in my dissertation, *Evolving the Highest Good* 2020). By "life-orienting ideal," I mean that Kant intends for it to stand in a grounding relation to our lives as persons who not only *act* but also cognize, feel, and (may) take up a faith. We might refer to its role in contemporary terms, as providing a *worldview*. How the concept of worldview developed in Kant's thought and was further advanced in Fichte's philosophy of religion is detailed in a paper, "The Conceptual Origin of Worldview in Kant and Fichte" (currently under review).

I refine my position by articulating its advantages in dealing with perennial puzzles surrounding the highest good. For instance, many questions pertain to how the highest good fits with moral psychology. One worry is that the highest good – if not directly guiding actions – is at root a redundant reformulation of the moral law that confuses the agent by including happiness in an otherwise *pure* moral theory. In "How a Kantian Ideal Can Be Practical" (forthcoming in *Inquiry*), I argue for interpreting practical ideals, like the highest good, as standing in a grounding relation to our development as moral individuals. Rather than guiding us, that is, I articulate how ideals enable the possibility of being moral in the first place by (a) revealing the impoverished state of moral affairs, and (b) indicating the moral potential left to realize. This provides a unique role for the highest good and other ideals vis-à-vis our moral psychology without interfering with the function of the moral law. In close connection to this question, I have explored how the highest good as an unattainable ideal in this life caused Kant to refine his conception of wishing ("Dutifully Wishing" 2017 in *Kantian Review*). While we might not be able to directly will the highest good into reality, that is, Kant came to appreciate wishing as an apt vehicle for sustaining a life-long devotion to a collective moral project just out of reach.

A different puzzle that I'm currently working on is fleshing out the justificatory role that ideals – as perfections in reason – play in Kant's moral metaphysics (forthcoming in the *Oxford Handbook of Kant*, with Andrew Chignell). Many interpreters think Kant opposes perfectionism full stop (which is only partially true relative the dogmatic rationalist ethics of Wolff and Leibniz). Yet a major tenet of Kant's highest good is that we should not merely act on the moral law, but further become morally perfect or holy. This demand to become holy – which informs the doctrine of the highest good and much of his philosophy of religion – appears to many as ad hoc or question begging. Without it, though, much of his religious thought loses its justification. I think here again a view of ideals as standing in grounding relations to our character could explain why we remain aimed towards self-perfection. The moral law tells us how to act, but the ideal we carry within ourselves tells us what we must become. This has consequences for his arguments for immortality as well. In a paper under review, "Kant, Teleology, and Immortality," I develop and argue how this perfectionism helps

explain his favoritism toward the teleological argument for the immortality of the soul, which is an argument often overlooked in the literature.

Finally, I'm researching presently Hegel's idea of life. In "Life, Logic, and the Pursuit of Purity" (*Hegel-Studien* 2016), I made the case for interpreting the category of life from his *Science of Logic* as coherently derivable from his dialectical method. One advantage of doing so is that life then possesses an ontological generality that applies beyond what we conventionally think of as alive. I take this as an advantage within Hegel's system since it makes his project consistent with itself (it should not presuppose any empirical organisms as models to derive the categories), on the one hand, and further provides a compelling metaphysical picture that aligns with many elements of his thought. While many have responded favorably to my interpretation, some have been critical. I'm currently working on a companion piece to respond to some of these critiques, "Logical Life Under the Conditions of Space and Time" (in submission as a conference paper), which responds to these challenges and develops my previous thesis further to support a metaphysical reading of the logic. I argue that for Hegel, life is an expansive concept such that even – by our everyday standards – *inanimate* objects (that are capable of physical individuation) are logically alive as entities. Though crazy sounding, the result is consistent with his system and textually evident in his *Philosophy of Nature*.