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Kant and the Wisdom of Oedipus

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Abstract

In “The Wisdom of Oedipus and the Idea of a Moral Cosmos”, Raymond Geuss contrasts the non-moralised worldview of Ancient Greek tragedy with the attempt of philosophers to defend a moral *cosmos*, i.e. a well-ordered, coherent moral world. Geuss calls this a “philosophy of good news” because it depicts the world as not indifferent to our moral concerns and efforts. Kant would be such a philosopher of good news, offering “perhaps the thinnest and most minimalistic version of the gospel”.

The aim of this article is not mere criticism of Geuss’ interpretation of Kant, but a reflection on the *demandingness* of Kant’s conception of morality. I argue that Kant’s moral philosophy embraces a fundamental aspect of the tragic worldview: it does not rule out the possibility that moral requirements become extremely demanding. However, I argue that demandingness is not intrinsic to morality, but due to *contingent* aspects of the circumstances. Although Kant rules out collision between grounds of obligation, it may be *de facto* impossible to comply with a specific duty that is very stringent without having to sacrifice other moral commitments or even one’s own happiness. Since injustice and lawlessness are often the causes of moral demandingness, the rule of law is the best means to reduce demandingness. I conclude that despite demandingness, morality can provide *meaning* to our existence. This meaning, and not the hope in happiness in the afterlife, is the actual good news of Kant’s moral theory.

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1. From Tragedy to Moral Cosmos²

In his article “The Wisdom of Oedipus and the Idea of a Moral Cosmos”, Raymond Geuss (2014) discusses the pre-philosophical worldview of the Ancient Greek poets. The article is inspired by two poems by Pindar quoted by Bernard Williams in the dedication and at the end of his *Shame and Necessity: the Eighth and Fourth Pythians*. Geuss translates the lines of the Eighth Pythian as follows:

We humans have a very brief time of life; we live only for one day. What then can any human being ever finally amount to? And what is forever beyond our grasp? Man is the shadow of a dream. But when a god gives him glory, a bright light plays over him and the span of his life is easy to bear. (Geuss 2014: 196)

These lines suggest a *tragic* world: a world which is largely indifferent to human interests, moral efforts and desert. This world is *non-moralised*: it does not assume a connection between desert and happiness. Whether a “bright light” illuminates the span of our brief lives or not does not necessarily depend on our moral desert or character. It’s a matter of *luck* which can often seem cruel and unfair. There is also something mysterious and impenetrable about the forces that govern the world, which the human mind cannot fully grasp.

Later, philosophers came to regard the universe as *cosmos*, a well-ordered whole. Geuss calls the attempt of philosophers to argue for such a coherent moral world *euangelion* or “philosophy of good news”. This is a *moralised* worldview because it postulates a degree of *harmony* between the world and our moral interests. The world is conceived as minimally adjusted to our ethical aspirations. “At some level of the world’s constitution there is something to be discovered that makes ultimate sense of our concerns” (Williams 2008, 164). Pindar’s Fourth Pythian offers a contrast to this worldview:

² Previous versions of this paper were presented at the *Society for Women in Philosophy Germany* (SWIP Germany), Berlin, at the Oberseminar “Aktuelle Forschungsthemen der Praktischen Philosophie” LMU Munich, at the conference *Kant and Moral Demand-ingness* at the University of Southampton, and at the conference *Moral Progress*, Munich School of Philosophy. I would like to thank the audiences for their comments, in special Mara-Daria Cojocaru, Hilkje Charlotte Hänel, Zübeyde Karadağ-Thorpe, Nora Kreft, Brian McElwee, Joe Saunders, Robert Steiner, Martin Sticker, Catherine Wilson, and an anonymous referee of the *Yearbook Practical Philosophy in a Global Perspective* for their very constructive feedback.

Take to heart what can be learned from Oedipus:
If someone with a sharp axe
hacks off the boughs of a great oak tree,
and spoils its handsome shape;
although its fruit has failed, yet it can give an account of itself
if it comes later to a winter fire,
or if it rests on the pillars of some palace
and does a sad task among foreign walls,
when there is nothing left in the place it came from. (Williams 2008: 167)

The poem is an *epinikion*, a choral poem for public performance celebrating the victory of King Arkesilaos of Kyrene at the chariot race in the Pythian Games. Kyrene was a small Greek polis in Libya. Arkesilaos had just survived a coup d'état (*stasis*), leading him to ostracise several local nobles. The city was still in turmoil. Pindar offers him political advice, in which he recommends that Arkesilaos brings back Damophilus, one of the exiled noblemen. The passage cited by Bernard Williams is taken from the transition between the first part of the poem, praising the family and ancestors of Arkesilaos and stressing their God-given right to rule Kyrene, and the second part which suggests a solution to the political troubles of Kyrene, namely, the return of Damophilus. In the passage, the poet tells Arkesilaos *to learn from the wisdom of Oedipus*.

But what *is it that can be learned from Oedipus*? Geuss points out that one can learn from Oedipus only if one thinks of him and his life as being like the oak tree of the poem (Geuss 2014: 210). An oak tree has natural conditions for flourishing, but the tree in the poem is described as being deprived of those conditions. It has been dismembered and carried away from its native place. It could not bear fruit and flourish in the natural way. It is doing the thankless job of supporting a roof or burning for the benefit of the householder. Nevertheless, though it could not flourish, the oak tree “can give an account of itself”. By supporting a heavy roof or burning, the oak tree has “showed its mettle” and “what it is made of”. It is a sad tree but nevertheless an excellent one which has revealed its strong, noble nature. Similarly, Oedipus was excellent, even though forces outside his control were against him.³ There is a clear gap between his decisions and the results of these decisions. He acted as best he could, in light of the

³ For the purposes of this paper, I will set aside Freud's interpretation of the Oedipus story and focus on Geuss' and Williams' philosophical interpretations of the views of the Greek tragic poets.

knowledge he had, but ended like the oak tree, in a condition worthy of pity, surrounded by violence, blinded, exiled and devoid of descendants. Oedipus tells us of virtue under circumstances that are inimical to the agent's interests and wellbeing. *Virtue does not guarantee flourishing.*

In contrast, "philosophies of good news" reassure us that the world is at least minimally congenial to our moral efforts. Moral agents can thus "be at home" in the world. Geuss argues that Kant is also one of the "philosophers of good news", offering a minimal version of the "gospel". Why does Geuss view Kant as a philosopher of good news?

We cannot *know* that the external world of nature would even in principle show itself malleable to our ethical aspirations, and this is to some extent chastening. On the other hand, however, we can know first that nature has a systematic and rational structure and second that our ethical life is fully coherent, fully intelligible to us, and under our control. We can't *know* what the actual outcome of our action in the world will be, but, Kant holds, that is morally not relevant because we can know clearly what our duty is and this is morally sufficient. Furthermore, we can have not "knowledge" but a rationally grounded hope that all will turn out for the best if only we do our duty. (Geuss 2014: 206)

I take Geuss to have the following aspects of Kant's moral theory in mind:

- (1) common human understanding has a "moral compass" at hand, which can guide us in discovering what we are required to do (GMS IV: 404).⁴ This is the Categorical Imperative;

⁴ Kant's works are cited according to the volume and page number of the standard "Academy Edition" of Kant's complete works (*Kants gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Prussian/German Academy of Sciences, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter, 1902–). Unless otherwise stated, all translations are from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*. Translated and edited by Mary J. Gregor, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996. I use the following abbreviations of Kant's works: GMS (*Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* / *Groundwork to the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1785)

KpV (*Kritik der praktischen Vernunft* / *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788)

MS (*Die Metaphysik der Sitten* / *the Metaphysics of Morals*, 1797)

SF (*Der Streit der Fakultäten* / *The Contest of the Faculties*, 1798)

TP ("Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis" / "On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice." 1793)

ZEF (*Zum ewigen Frieden: ein philosophischer Entwurf* / *Toward Perpetual Peace: A philosophical Sketch*, 1795)

- (2) moral worth depends solely on the *form* of our maxims. The fact that we cannot control all the consequences of our actions is secondary, if not altogether irrelevant for moral evaluation;
- (3) Kant's postulates of practical reason give us at least the *hope* that our moral efforts will bear fruit. If things don't work well in this life, in terms of happiness we can hope for an afterlife and some divine adjustment between our moral efforts and happiness.

The main reason for Geuss's reading of Kant as a "philosopher of good news" seems to rest on Kant's reassurance that even though we can have no knowledge of the noumenal world and of the totality of causal connections in nature, moral knowledge and moral worth are *immune* to ignorance and uncertainty in regard to those external conditions. It is hard to see how this epistemological aspect of moral cognition would be any "good news" for moral agents when it comes to being "at home" in the world. In the following, I will object to Geuss's interpretation of Kant as a "philosopher of good news". I will argue that (1) does not exclude the possibility of morality being quite demanding for agents, requiring them to sacrifice their happiness and even their lives to moral demands. Further, (2) does not eliminate the possibility of *moral residue* for irreproachable Kantian agents when their actions do not have the expected effects, or when they require us to set aside other moral concerns. Moreover, (3) the postulates of practical reason in Kant function more as requirements of *consistency* for the theory as a whole than "good news" for moral agents.

I will show that Kant's moral philosophy does not reject, but wholeheartedly *embraces* the wisdom of Oedipus. The only hope of a moral cosmos of some sort in Kant's theory is in the implementation of a *global rule of law*. This is however a generational task, whose enjoyment may be at best reserved to future generations.

2. Demandingness in Kant's Moral Theory and Greek Tragedy

When an upright man is in the greatest distress, which he could have avoided if he could only have disregarded duty, is he not sustained by the consciousness that he has maintained humanity in its proper dignity in his own person and honored it, that he has no cause to shame himself in his own eyes and to dread the inward view of self-examination? This consolation is not happiness, not even the smallest part of it. For, no one would wish the occasion for it on himself, or perhaps even a life in such circumstances. But he lives and cannot bear to be unworthy of life in his own eyes. This inner tranquility is therefore merely negative with respect to everything that can make life pleasant; it is, namely, only warding off the danger of sinking in personal worth, after he has given up completely the worth of his condition. It is the effect of a respect for something quite different from life, something in comparison and contrast with which life with all its agreeableness has no worth at all. He still lives only from duty, not because he has the least taste for living. (KpV V: 88)

Being moral is often frustrating and disappointing, simply because it will involve having to refrain from satisfying one's inclinations. Unless one is a perfectly virtuous agent, whose inclinations never conflict with but always conform to moral requirements, an agent will experience morality as *imperative*. The Aristotelian ideal of virtue as a harmonious relation between moral requirements and the agent's inclinations is not considered a realistic option by Kant, although he argues for an indirect duty to cultivate feelings that can counteract inner struggle and make moral agency less difficult.⁵ However, depending on the circumstances, morality may require *more* than merely ruling out the satisfaction of an inclination; it may also impose additional costs on the agent's permissible interests and well-being.

⁵ I understand the role of the indirect duty to cultivate feelings which support morality (such as sympathy for the plight of other human beings) as *filling a motivational void* that could be occupied by an opposing inclination. Cultivating these feelings is thus a way to reduce struggle in our compliance with duty. See Paul Guyer, who observed that while we are not allowed to let ourselves be *governed* by inclination, we are not forbidden to let reason use one set of inclinations to govern another. Guyer, Paul. (1993): *Kant and the Experience of Freedom: Essays on Aesthetics and Morality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 379.

This is illustrated in the quoted passage's idea of an upright person in distress, which could have been avoided if the agent had disregarded duty. The agent is in distress not merely because she must refrain from satisfying an impermissible inclination; instead, she must sacrifice something that would be *permissible* all things being equal, and that, given her moral character, she would be even *worthy* of, namely her permissible interests as a finite rational being, as well as her wellbeing, which is a fundamental interest. It is therefore important to emphasize two distinctions when it comes to moral cost: either the agent will have to refrain from satisfying an inclination and/or she may additionally have to sacrifice permissible interests. This distinction is significant to moral demandingness, and to my knowledge has not been stressed in the literature; impermissible inclinations and incompatible interests that are otherwise permissible are usually conflated or insufficiently differentiated.⁶

I will show that the latter form of incompatibility is merely *contingent* i. e., dependent on the specific external circumstances. In principle, there is no conflict between morality as Kant conceives it, and happiness, as long as *inclinations contrary to duty are excluded*. Inclinations contrary to duty are those that would require the agent to make an exception for herself in regard to a principle she must will all others to accept and inclinations that go against the ends rational beings in general must commit to. In other words, these are inclinations the satisfaction of which would either violate *reciprocity requirements* or subvert the *conditions of practical rationality in general*, giving rise to perfect and imperfect obligations respectively. Just as the subordination of imperfect to perfect grounds of obligation is supposed to rule out conflicts of duties, the subordination of happiness to morality should *in principle* ensure their co-possibility.⁷

⁶ There may be a difference in the *degree* of demandingness depending on how much the interest that needs to be sacrificed is *fundamental* to one's wellbeing. But the permissible interests I have in mind need not be reduced to the fundamental interests of finite agents. In this paper, I will thus speak of permissible interests in general, while assuming that the more these interests are fundamental to the agent's wellbeing, the greater the cost to the agent who must sacrifice them. The important point is that a virtuous agent *deserves* to satisfy her permissible interests, whether fundamental or not.

⁷ The view I am defending is thus that although there is *no conflict* between morality and happiness when happiness is subordinated to morality, they may nevertheless not be *co-possible*, given external, contingent factors. Ideally, however, the absence of conflict should enable co-possibility.

Non-moral interests can never compete with moral worth, since moral goodness is *unconditional* and thus always has lexicographical priority. There is however a significant difference between what I will call *moral incompatibility* and *contingent incompatibility*. Understanding this distinction can help us make sense of Kant's seemingly absurd claim that there are no conflicts of duties.⁸

In the passage quoted earlier, the agent must choose between maintaining his moral integrity by doing what he knows is right, and his wellbeing. This is a contingent form of incompatibility between happiness and morality: giving up one's happiness is not a necessary means for doing the right thing. Morality and his permissible interests are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but only *accidentally* so.

Moreover, if an agent is moral, she is also *worthy of happiness*. However, it may paradoxically be the case that, in order to become worthy of happiness, she will be required to sacrifice her happiness. Although the agent has the consciousness of having done the right thing and acknowledges that "life with all its agreeableness has no worth at all" compared with having to live without integrity, Kant acknowledges this self-satisfaction cannot replace her natural need for happiness. Kant does not say that the agent is permitted to violate morality when her life or happiness is at stake. However, he is honest to concede that this would mean an irreparable loss to a finite rational agent. We may understand and consequently *excuse* such an agent for not having the moral strength to carry out the unrelenting commands of morality, when they turn out to be extremely demanding; moral demands themselves, however, remain *unconditionally binding* despite the costs and vulnerability of the agent.

Some Kant scholars have defended a view of moral normativity called *silencing*. This means that moral considerations have the normative force to make non-moral reasons normatively *void*: when they contradict morality, they simply cease to be reasons altogether (Timmermann 2007: 19)⁹. However, I will object that this does not apply

⁸ "(...) but since duty and obligation are concepts that express the objective practical *necessity* of certain actions, and two rules opposed to each other cannot both be necessary at the same time—rather if it is one's duty to act according to one of them, to act according to the opposite one is not only no duty, but even contrary to duty—a *collision of duties* and obligations is not even conceivable (*obligationes non colliduntur*). (MS VI: 224).

⁹ See also von Ackeren, Marcel and Martin Sticker (2015). "Kant and Moral Demand-

to the *permissible* non-moral interests of virtuous agents when they happen to be contingently incompatible with morality, especially when these are fundamental human interests¹⁰ and not mere whims or preferences. Silencing applies to inclinations when the maxim incorporating that inclination cannot be universalized without contradiction. The duty arises from the impossibility to universalize that maxim, as its *negation*.

In contrast, silencing does not apply to contingent conflicts between morality and one's permissible interests. It is just contingently the case that we cannot have it both ways. We thus have *overridingness*, but not silencing. This means that a ground of obligation may override the permissible interests of an agent when they contingently collide, but these interests need not lose their normative force. They have merely been overridden. It is precisely because these interests continue to be normatively significant that God must ensure that they will follow as effects from virtuous conduct in an afterlife (I will discuss Kant's postulates of pure practical reason in the next section).

In another paper, I argued that demandingness in Kant's moral theory is not internal to moral demands. Demandingness is very often *contingent* (Pinheiro Walla 2015). This means that while moral demands remain the same across different scenarios, the specific circumstances will determine whether the requirements will be too demanding for the agent in question. Being truthful in a well-ordered society is certainly much easier than in a society in which persons are allowed to instrumentalize the truthfulness of others for their own evil ends. In an unjust society, one's commitment to morality may make one vulnerable and even endanger one's life. However, the vulnerability arising in such scenarios has nothing to do with the moral requirements themselves. They arise from the unfavourable *circumstances* in which the agent finds herself, namely, an environment in which there is a common and overt practice of taking advantage of

ingness", In *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 18, 75–89. Von Akeren and Sticker derive demandingness from Kant's strong version of overridingness as silencing.

¹⁰ By fundamental human interests I understand for instance the interest to preserve one's life, to be free from psychological and physical violence, to have adequate means of subsistence, to cultivate and be able to protect personal relations such as one's family and children, to lead a life that is minimally pleasant and meaningful to the agent, etc. ... Kant himself does not provide a list of fundamental needs, although he does speak about "true needs" without spelling out what he means by this notion (see for instance MS VI: 393 and VI: 432).

the vulnerability of others. In such circumstances, it may indeed be permissible to limit one's duty of truthfulness with reticence, in order to protect oneself (Pinheiro Walla 2013).

Analogously to the oak tree, the Kantian agent can be excellent and yet be deprived of happiness. Precisely those circumstances will let her good will shine even brighter: it is easier for us to presume moral motivation in agents who have nothing to gain, only to lose. This is why Kant often uses examples of inner struggle, where agents must suppress inclinations or accept costs: not because Kant believes morality is intrinsically demanding, but because those examples enable us to clearly discern genuine moral motivation. Since all plausible material incentives are excluded, the agent's motivation to act can be no other than an impressive and pure respect for the moral law. However, the ideal situation would be one in which the Kantian agent also has the conditions for thriving as a human being, not only because she also has needs and interests as a finite being, but because she also *deserves to be happy*.

Consider a famous example of the demandingness of perfect duties in Kant's moral theory. Kant imagines an educator telling a ten-year-old child the following example:

One tells him the story of an honest man whom someone wants to induce to join the calumniators of an innocent but otherwise powerless person (say, Anne Boleyn, accused by Henry VIII of England). He is offered gain, that is, great gifts or high rank; he rejects them. This will produce mere approval and applause in the listener's soul, **because it is gain. Now threats of loss begin.** Among these calumniators are his best friends, who now refuse him their friendship; close relatives, who threaten to disinherit him (he is not wealthy); powerful people, who can pursue and hurt him in all places and circumstances; a prince who threatens him with loss of freedom and even of life itself. But, so that the measure of suffering may be full and he may also **feel the pain that only a morally good heart can feel very deeply**, represent his family, threatened with extreme distress and poverty, as *imploping him to yield* and himself, though upright, yet with a heart not hard or insensible either to compassion or to his own distress; represent him at a moment when he wishes that he had never lived to see the day that exposed him to such unutterable pain and yet remains firm in his resolution. (KpV V: 155–6, my emphasis)

The aim of this example is to illustrate pure moral motivation in moral education. It is important to note how Kant constructs the example: it involves three different levels of sacrifice. First, the moral

agent is offered recompenses if she agrees to incriminate an innocent person. Her refusal to let herself be bribed is sufficient for producing a feeling of approval in the young pupil. Kant then proceeds to the next level. Now the agent is threatened with increasing losses *to her own person*: refusing to give false testimony will cost her friendships and connections in society, her inheritance, her freedom and maybe her *life*. Now the moral action comes with considerable costs (contingently imposed by the evil prince and not intrinsically required by morality), including not only a threat to wellbeing and physical integrity, but possibly also loss of life. Nevertheless, the agent remains firm in her moral resolution and the pupil is raised from approval to admiration and amazement for the moral strength and integrity of such an agent.

The highest level is suffering in its “full measure”. The moral action will now impose sacrifices to the *family* of the moral agent: extreme distress and poverty. To make things worse, the agent is not only conscious that the family will be affected; Kant also imagines the family *imploring* him to yield. Why is this suffering “in full measure”? Kant suggests that this is a kind of suffering which affects *moral* agents more deeply than others. Not only must the agent fight his feelings of compassion towards his family to the point of wishing “he had never lived to see the day that exposed him to such unutterable pain”. The agent is also aware of a devastating moral conflict. While refraining from false testimony and providing for one’s family is perfectly compatible all things equal (and most of us will succeed in discharging both duties in the course of our lives), under the circumstances he cannot do both. The prince will make sure that compliance with duty will be artificially followed by the imposition of costs on the family of the agent. Punishment and reward both artificially connect an event to another as cause and effect.

This is not a conflict of *grounds of obligation*, since grounds of obligation cannot actually conflict in Kant’s moral theory. This holds even in cases of demandingness. Telling the truth does not preclude providing for one’s family and making them happy, if all token actions falling under this description are permissible ones. But in a society where princes are above the law and thus have the power to use persons as mere tools for their wicked deeds, both duties can become *contingently* incompatible. This passage is evidence that moral agency in Kant does allow *moral residue*, even when the agent is doing nothing other than respecting the priority of perfect grounds

of obligation over imperfect ones. Because providing for one's family is not impermissible and in fact a duty, the agent is justified in feeling under a terrible conflict, albeit a contingent one. The agent knows, however, that refraining from making false testimony, which would cost an innocent life, must be given priority over the comfort of one's family, when these are incompatible. Moreover, Kant suggests that the *better* the moral agent, the *more she will suffer* under such a conflict. This explains why we have suffering in its full measure in this case.

Has the upright man's wellbeing and the wellbeing of his family become impermissible under the circumstances? Clearly not. His wellbeing and that of his family is merely *contingently* incompatible with what morality requires. The upright man of Kant's example lives in a world in which princes can their subjects to make false testimony against innocent persons, with threats to their wellbeing, physical integrity, and even to their life; it is a society in which one's innocent family can be punished if you do not follow the tyrant's orders. In sum, this is a world in which complying with ordinary moral demands can be extremely costly.

3. The Postulates of Practical Reason and the Paradox of Morality

I will now turn to the question whether Kant's postulates of pure practical reasons have any good news for moral agents. Pure reason seeks to make sense of the whole picture. It therefore requires the absolute *totality of conditions* for a given conditioned (KpV V: 107). It is no different when it comes to moral matters: it seeks the unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason, which the Ancient Greeks named the *highest good*. Kant redefines the ancient concept of the highest good in light of his moral theory and critical philosophy.

This total object of pure practical reason must incorporate *the objects of our will*. Our finite nature leads us to want happiness, but our reason sets a further object for our will: morality. Unlike the Stoics and Epicureans, Kant rejects an identification between the two elements of the highest good (i. e., a reduction of happiness to virtue or of virtue to happiness). Since virtue and happiness are irreducibly heterogeneous ingredients (based on radically different principles), they must be somehow *combined* in the highest object of pure practi-

cal reason. If they are not to be reduced to each other their relation cannot be *analytic*: it must be *synthetic* instead. Virtue and happiness must be connected as cause and effect. Further, virtue must be the condition of happiness, and not the other way around, since this is the only way to preserve *both* elements (happiness as the condition of virtue would automatically eliminate the possibility of moral motivation and thus of morality). Happiness cannot possibly be the cause of virtue. But *in principle*, virtue could be the cause of happiness (it is merely *contingently* not the case). As a matter of experience, we *know* that virtue does not necessarily cause us to be happy in this world. Although virtue makes us worthy of happiness, it may require us to give up happiness for the sake of virtue. Call this the *paradox of morality*. As I have shown, this “requirement” is contingent, not intrinsic to morality. Nevertheless, it creates a problem for Kant’s moral theory.

Since a being *worthy* of happiness also *wants to be happy*, Kant needs to provide a solution for the paradox of morality. He must explain why one can *hope* to be happy even though morality may require one to give up any prospects of happiness in this world. Firstly, how are we to achieve the virtue which is the supreme condition of the highest good? We are finite, imperfect rational beings. We cannot achieve perfect virtue in this life, no matter how hard we try. For this, we would need an infinite progression towards perfection that is impossible within the short span of our lives. Kant “bites the bullet” and argues that, since realizing the highest good is a duty, we must postulate the immortality of the soul (KpV V: 122). Secondly, we must also show the possibility of the second element of the highest good, namely happiness as an effect of virtue, in proportion to moral worth. For this we must postulate the existence of God (KpV V: 224), since there is no causal connection between morality and happiness in the natural world.

It is well to note here that this moral necessity (to accept the postulates of pure practical reason, APW) is *subjective*, that is, a need, and not *objective*, that is, itself a duty; for, there can be no duty to assume the existence of anything (since this concerns only the theoretical use of reason). Moreover, it is not to be understood by this that it is necessary to assume the existence of God *as a ground of all obligation in general* (for this rests, as has been sufficiently shown, solely on the autonomy of reason itself). (KpV V: 125–6)

We must bear in mind that the alleged “moral cosmos” enabled by Kant’s notion of the highest good and the postulates of pure practical reason is not meant to *determine* the will (which is the task of the moral law alone) or to ground moral normativity (which can only be derived from the autonomy of the will). One can hardly see how the postulates of practical reason could function as a consolation or guarantee for moral agents that our moral effort will bear fruit. We can hope for happiness in accordance to virtue in an afterlife, but we *must not* and in fact *need not* rely on this hope for moral agency itself. The postulates are what reason *needs to assume* in order to make sense of the highest good and of the whole picture, no more. The search for totality by pure practical reason thus has the primary purpose of *systematicity*: it is primarily a need of *reason*, not of moral agents qua agents. The postulates of pure practical reason offer a solution to the wisdom of Oedipus (that virtue does not guarantee happiness in this world) in the form of a rational *hope*, taking place in an afterlife that is not that of religion, but as required by reason. This hope takes the form of a *hypothetical conditional*: if p then q. There is no theoretical proof that p or q are the case, but there is nothing ruling out p or q as logically impossible. This is all we need for hope not to be irrational. We can thus hope that even if the most excellent agents among us end up like the sad oak tree of Pindar’s poem, they will be able to flourish as they deserve in an afterlife. But we don’t even *have* to assume this. *Believing* the postulates of pure practical reason is necessary neither for moral action nor for the justification of morality. They are not necessary for our moral practice. Morality reveals itself as a *fact of reason* for us regardless of these assumptions.

Kant’s moral theory fully embraces the tragic character of morality for the span of an individual life. It does not deny that virtue may come at a very high cost to our lives. But there is nevertheless hope *in this world* for humanity seen as a *species* (*Gattung*).

In the second part of the *Conflict of the Faculties*, titled *The Conflict of the Philosophical against the Juridical Faculty*, Kant revisits a question pursued earlier in *The Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*, *On the Common Saying* and *Towards Perpetual Peace*. The question is whether we can assume that Humanity is “progressing towards the better”. Kant gives a positive answer to this question. However, until 1795, he did not clearly differentiate between freedom of the will and external determination: he stressed the role of providence in making sure that moral progress will gradually happen *whether we*

intend it or not (fata volentem ducunt, nolentem trahunt, TP VIII: 313, ZEF VIII: 365)¹¹. In the *Conflict of the Faculties*, however, Kant presents an entirely new argument for his answer, which remains positive. Kant identifies a progressive moral tendency in the *collective agency* of human beings (Brandt 2003: 119). The development of human history is no longer determined by providence, but is now fully in the hands of agents. The guiding idea for this development is the idea of right (*Recht*) in the form of a Republican constitution. Kant finds the empirical evidence of this tendency for improvement in the *enthusiasm* shown upon the occasion of the French Revolution. The French revolution provided a *sign of history*, a phenomenon in human history “not to be forgotten”. The reason for the enthusiasm is the fact that a people (the French) are seen fighting for the idea of right, namely, for the implementation of a republican constitution. The sympathy experienced by other peoples in the world towards the French Revolution shows that the human race is able to improve morally, not as an increase in moral goodness itself, but as the *gradual realization of the idea of right in human history*. This evidence is valid despite the imperfections of the constitution and all the violence and terror brought about by the revolution. This is also what constitutes the *conflict* between jurists and philosophers. Jurists tend to take the law as it is; they tend to be realists when it comes to jurisprudence and defend the *status quo*. The task of reforming or changing laws is not their task as jurists, but that of the government. They take revolution for what it is: an overthrow of the government, which is always unjust. This seems to be a reason for assuming that humanity is not making any progress at all, but *regressing*.

Kant takes the jurists to be reinforcing the alleged right of sovereigns to use their subjects as mere animals or tools for their own purposes, especially in deploying them for war.¹² This would rule out “progress towards the better”, since war is incompatible with it.¹³ In contrast, philosophers in their role as free teachers of Right (*freie Rechtslehrer*) must show that moral progress towards a republican constitution and peace is not only possible, but that there is also

¹¹ “Fate leads the willing and drags the unwilling”. The source is Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium* (“The Moral Epistles”) 18.4. The saying is attributed to the Stoic Cleanthes.

¹² See MS VI: 344–5, § 55.

¹³ *Ibid.* p. 120.

evidence for this optimistic assumption. For this, we must adopt a different perspective from that of natural events.

When we consider the place of humans in nature, we must become pessimistic according to Kant. He strongly dismisses the idea of human beings being the centre of creation. The natural world is indifferent to our human plight. We occupy no privileged place in nature. However, that *governments* should be indifferent to their subjects and fellow humans is something we must categorically reject.

For in the face of the omnipotence of nature, or rather its supreme first cause which is inaccessible to us, the human being is, in his turn, but a trifle. But for the sovereigns of his own species also to consider and treat him as such, whether by burdening him as an animal, regarding him as a mere tool of their designs, or exposing him in their conflicts with one another in order to have him massacred—that is no trifle, but a subversion of the ultimate purpose of creation itself. (SF VII: 89)

Although Kant argues for the possibility of moral progress of the *species* and not of individuals, the implementation of the *Rechtsidee* nevertheless has considerable consequences for individual moral agency. Just political institutions and well-ordered societies provide the incentives for general good behaviour, at least externally. This means that individuals will be less vulnerable to the wickedness of others. They will not need to choose between their happiness and doing what morality requires, at least not as often as in less ordered societies. These incentives will also expand to the relations between nations, reducing wars and further incentives to take advantage of the vulnerability of others.

Gradually violence on the part of the powers will diminish and obedience to the laws will increase. There will arise in the body politic perhaps more charity and less strife in lawsuits, more reliability in keeping one's word, etc., partly out of love of honor, partly out of well-understood self-interest. And eventually this will also extend to nations in their external relations toward one another up to the realization of the cosmopolitan society, without the moral foundation in mankind having to be enlarged in the least; for that, a kind of new creation (supernatural influence) would be necessary. (SF VII: 91–2)

4. Conclusion

What is alive from the Greek world is already alive and is helping (often in hidden ways) to keep us alive. (Williams 2008: 7)

The first view of a countless multitude of worlds **annihilates, as it were, my importance as an *animal creature***, which after it has been for a short time provided with vital force (one knows not how) must give back to the planet (a mere speck in the universe) the matter from which it came. The second, on the contrary, infinitely raises my worth as an *intelligence* by my personality, in which the moral law reveals to me a life independent of animality and even of the whole sensible world, at least so far as this may be inferred from the purposive determination of my existence by this law, a determination not restricted to the conditions and boundaries of this life but reaching into the infinite. (KpV V: 162, my emphasis)

In the famous closing passage of the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant points out how the infinity of the universe, while inspiring awe and admiration, also inflicts an oppressive sense of one's own insignificance as an individual natural being. Like the starry heavens, sublime and terrifying alike, morality has a similar awe inspiring character: it is something much greater than our animal nature and our short existence on earth. In the face of the greatness of the universe and the sublimity of the moral law, what is a human life?

We humans have a very brief time of life; we live only for one day. What then can any human being ever finally amount to? And what is forever beyond our grasp? Man is the shadow of a dream. (Geuss 2014: 196)

Ancient tragedy can still be seen as part of modern human existence. Not only the natural world is indifferent to us; political systems and social reality can have the same crushing effects on individual lives and projects as fate had for the Ancient Greeks. As Williams notes, "Napoleon remarked to Goethe that what fate was in the Ancient world, politics was in the modern". Similarly, Benjamin Constant argued that if one wants to make tragedy *modern*, one must replace fate by an individual struggling against social structures (Williams 2008: 164).

I have argued in this essay that Kant's conception of morality does not exclude demandingness. It can indeed acquire a tragic character the more virtuous the agent in question. This seems paradoxical because in common opinion and by Kant's own standards, virtuous in-

dividuals are precisely those we regard as *deserving* to be happy. In my conclusion, I will argue for the view that Kant's conception of morality can nevertheless give meaning to our lives, even when it is demanding or tragic. However, the meaning created by morality does neither replace nor compensate the loss of happiness and wellbeing to the agent. We must understand "meaning" as a different value from "happiness." While happiness means the set of conditions leading to overall satisfaction with one's condition, meaning is what enables us to regard our existence in this world as *valuable*, even if it was not a happy existence. And this is precisely what a moral life does for us. Meaning is certainly an important ingredient for happiness, but does not exhaust the list of things that may contribute to a happy life.

What we can learn from Kant is that morality can help us find a meaning in our existence without having to deny the tragic character of our moral vocation. Precisely *when* our existence has a tragic character, the awareness of our moral vocation can raise ourselves from mere animality and we can regard our existence as *necessary*. Instead of being a mere burden on our finite existences, morality may indeed, in more or less hidden ways, help keep us alive.

One may conclude that the meaning to one's life arising from moral compliance can somehow compensate or counteract the loss of wellbeing and happiness resulting from moral compliance under demanding circumstances. I think this is not the case. It would be cynical to believe that "morality is its own reward" when it comes to the plight of other agents, even if from their first personal perspective agents may feel at peace or content with themselves for their moral conduct. This is not to deny that morality is to some extent "its own reward". We have a duty to care about the wellbeing of others, an imperfect duty to adopt their happiness as our own end. I believe this duty is even more stringent in the case of excellent moral agents when they are affected by infelicitous external circumstances, especially when this is the price they have to pay for moral integrity. To view their moral integrity as a reward in itself could lead us to become cynically indifferent to their plight. However, it would be contrary to duty to be indifferent to those who deserve most. There are two reasons for this. The first arises from our imperfect duty to adopt the happiness of others as our own end. One of the constraints on this duty is that the end in question be permissible, both to the agent who helps and to the agent whose happiness is being promoted by another. A morally good agent *deserves* to be happy. Promoting her hap-

pininess is especially commendable and there are lesser moral risks to adopting her non-moral ends as our own. Secondly, the plight of virtuous agents provides us with valuable information as to how we can reform and improve social arrangements as to protect and incentivize moral action. Their suffering tells us what is contingently making living up to moral standards difficult, if not tragic. We have a collective duty as political societies to take their individual fate seriously and ensure that moral integrity is not externally “rewarded” by the destruction of their lives. These individuals need not be moral saints; they may be just decent individuals who are unable to uphold minimal standards of moral integrity due to unequal social arrangements and unjust laws. They are doing us a great service by showing us that there is something deeply wrong with our social arrangements and political organisation. We should come to their support, and thereby indirectly help ourselves and many others to lead happier *and* more meaningful lives.

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