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# The Modal Status of Kant's Postulate of God's Existence

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THE MODAL STATUS OF KANT'S POSTULATE OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

by

Mathew J. Snow

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at

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# THE MODAL STATUS OF KANT'S POSTULATE OF GOD'S EXISTENCE

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Mathew J. Snow

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Under the Supervision of Professor Julius Sensat

Kant is traditionally read as arguing that moral agents are rationally required to postulate the *actual* existence of God, but contemporary commentators' reconstructions of the argument only seem sufficient to warrant postulating the merely *possible* existence of God. There have been three attempts to address this seeming lacuna between what the argument is *supposed* to justify and what it *does* justify. Allen Wood defends the traditional interpretation – that Kant postulated the *actual* existence of God. M Jamie Ferreira proposes a revisionary interpretation – that Kant postulated the *possible* existence of God. Finally, Paul Guyer simply criticizes Kant for postulating the *actual* existence of God when his argument only justifies postulating the *possible* existence of God. I argue that Allen Wood's defense is insufficient to ground the appropriate propositional attitude toward the postulates while M Jamie Ferreira's proposal cannot pass as a reading of Kant. Nonetheless, I argue that Kant need not be criticized because the seeming lacuna does not arise if we are sufficiently sensitive to the modality of the judgment Kant takes to be required for rational pursuit of the highest good.

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## §0. Introduction

Immanuel Kant's argument for the postulate of God's existence in his *Critique of Practical Reason* has been subjected to much scholarly scrutiny, yet at least one crucial component has been taken for granted and left inadequately elaborated; the upshot of his argument is typically taken to be that moral agents are rationally required to postulate the *actual* existence of God, but contemporary commentators' reconstructions of the argument only seem sufficient to warrant postulating merely the *possible* existence of God. There have been three attempts to address this seeming lacuna between what the argument is *supposed* to justify and what it *does* justify, Allen Wood defends the traditional interpretation by proposing Kantian reasons for postulating the actual existence of God. M Jamie Ferreira, on the other hand, takes a revisionary approach and argues that, contrary to the traditional interpretation, Kant himself took the conclusion of his argument to be that rationality requires only the postulation of the possible existence of God. Finally, Paul Guyer takes a critical approach by conceding that Kant's conclusion, that God *actually* exists, goes beyond what his argument justifies, i.e. that God *possibly* exists.

In what follows, I will argue that none of these accounts are satisfactory and propose my own. Those who defend the standard interpretation have hitherto alluded to Kantian reasons for belief in the actual existence of God that are insufficient to ground belief as Kant conceives it. The revisionist interpretation, on the other hand, relies on scant textual evidence and fails to make sense of the overwhelming textual evidence in favor of the standard interpretation. Rather than concluding, as Guyer does, that Kant's conclusion outstrips what his argument justifies, I propose that the problem suggested by commentators ultimately arises from insensitivity to the modality of the judgment Kant believes is required for rational pursuit of the highest good.

Kant argues that practical reason requires us to realize the highest good which therefore must be believed to be possible. The only way we can conceive and believe that the highest good is possible, on Kant's account, is on the condition that God exists. In light of this, on the standard interpretation, the Kantian moral agent is rationally required to believe that God exists. The problem is supposed to be that postulating the mere *possibility* of God's existence is sufficient for the moral agent to believe in the possibility of the highest good. Yet this cannot be the case since Kant holds rational pursuit of the highest good to require the agent's *assertoric* judgment, i.e. the agent must take it to *actually be the case*, that the highest good is really possible whereas agnosticism about God grounds only the agent's *problematic* judgment, i.e. the agent takes it to *possibly be the case*, that the highest good is possible. As a result, postulating the mere possibility of God's existence fails to satisfy practical reason's requirement.

This paper will proceed as follows. In §1, I will briefly summarize Kant's argument for belief in the existence of God, explicate the problem that traditionalists, revisionists, and critics alike identify and respond to, and criticize Allen Wood's response on behalf of the traditional interpretation. After ruling out that response, I will argue against the revisionist interpretation proposed by M Jamie Ferreira by calling into question the textual evidence she presents in favor of that interpretation and criticizing her attempt at reconciling textual evidence cited in favor of the traditional interpretation with the revisionist reading in §2. Finally, in §3, I will argue that the purported problem is predicated upon insensitivity to the modality of the judgment Kant holds is rationally required for pursuit of the highest good.

## **§1. The Traditional Interpretation and Its Lone Defense Heretofore**

### **§1.1. Kant's Argument for the Postulation of God's Existence**



Kant argues for the postulation of God's existence in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. He defines a postulate as “a *theoretical* proposition, though not one demonstrable as such, insofar as it is attached inseparably to an a priori unconditionally valid *practical* law.” (CPrR 5:122) In this case, the theoretical proposition inseparably attached to the unconditionally valid practical law is that ‘God exists’. The traditional interpretation of Kant’s argument for the connection of this proposition with that unconditionally valid practical law runs roughly as follows:

**P1:** Human beings must act according to the moral law.

**P2:** The moral law requires human beings to take the highest good as the ultimate end of all their moral efforts.

**P3:** Human beings must believe, then, that the highest good is really (i.e. more-than-logically) possible as a result of their moral efforts.

**P4:** Human beings can believe the highest good to be really possible as a result of their moral efforts only if they believe that the two states of affairs constitutive of the highest good are really possible: (a) complete moral perfection of the will, and (b) happiness apportioned according to virtue.

**P5:** Human beings can *believe* that state of affairs (b) is really possible only if they can *conceive* of (b) as possible.

**P6:** Human beings can conceive state of affairs (b) as really possible only on the presupposition that God *actually* exists.

**C:** Therefore, human beings must presuppose that God *actually* exists.

P1 and P2 follow quite clearly from all Kant’s writing on practical philosophy. P3 follows from the fact that Kant thinks belief in the real possibility of an end is a necessary condition for rational pursuit of that end which, in this case, is required by the moral law (P2). By ‘real possibility’ Kant means that an object can (be made to) exist that corresponds to the concept in question – in this case, the highest good. This is contrasted with ‘logical possibility’, which Kant takes to apply to a concept when its content is non-contradictory. Real possibility presupposes logical possibility with the added condition that the laws governing the world

allow an object corresponding to that concept to (be made to) exist. Kant takes belief in the real possibility of the highest good to be rationally required for pursuit thereof.<sup>1</sup>

P4 follows from Kant's definition of the highest good as a world in which human beings are perfectly virtuous and enjoy happiness insofar as they are virtuous. P5 follows from Kant's endorsement of the conceptual claim that one cannot believe a state of affairs to be (really, i.e. more-than-logically) possible if one cannot even conceive it to be (really) possible.<sup>2</sup> Finally, P6 supposedly follows from Kant's claims to the effect that the only way we can conceive the systematic connection between happiness and virtue requisite for the highest good, i.e. that human beings enjoy happiness in direct proportion to their virtue not merely contingently but *because* they are virtuous, as possible is through a non-empirical causality whose will corresponds to the moral law and is sufficient to achieve this, i.e. God.<sup>3</sup>

### §1.2. The Purported Problem Posed by Agnosticism

The existence of God, then, is inseparably attached to the moral law as a necessary condition for the possibility of practical reason's object. The purported problem with this argument that I would like to address regards P6. Ferreira, Guyer, and Wood all wonder whether P6\* might not be a suitable substitute for P6, furnishing only the conclusion C\*.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, NF 16:515 where Kant says that the necessity of "belief [in the postulates] is the necessity of assuming the objective reality [i.e. real possibility] of a concept of the highest good, i.e. the possibility of its object as the *a priori* necessary object of the power of choice." For more on the equivalence of objective reality and real possibility, see footnote 9. Unless otherwise noted, I will henceforth use 'possible' in Kant's sense of real possibility.

<sup>2</sup> This is apparent from Kant's conception of the antinomy of practical reason – the antinomy just is that since, at that point, we cannot conceive of the highest good as possible (before the postulates), then happiness apportioned according to virtue must be seen as impossible. (CPrR 5:113-4)

<sup>3</sup> On this point, Kant says that "[the proposition], that a virtuous disposition necessarily produces happiness, is false *not absolutely* but only insofar as this disposition is regarded as the form of causality in the sensible world" (CPrR 5:114).

**P6\*:** Human beings can conceive of state of affairs (b) as really possible only on the presupposition that God *possibly* exists.

**C\*:** Therefore, human beings must presuppose that God *possibly* exists.

That is, belief in the real possibility of God's existence seems sufficient to conceive of state of affairs (b) as really possible (as well as the highest good as a whole when supplemented by the postulate of immortality).

Ferreira, for example, argues that P6\* is sufficient for conceiving of, and believing that, happiness apportioned according to virtue is possible by applying an axiom of modal logic to a set of claims to which Kant is committed. This axiom is that anything that is necessarily implied by something possible is itself possible or, equivalently, if  $p$  necessarily implies  $q$ , then possibly  $p$  implies possibly  $q$ . Kant's remarks about the nature of God suggest that the existence of God necessarily implies that happiness apportioned according to virtue will be realized. This seems implied when Kant says that "to need happiness, to be also worthy of it, and yet not to participate in it cannot be consistent with the perfect volition of a rational being that would at the same time have all power" (CPrR 5:110). Given that God is conceived by Kant as such a rational being, it seems that God's existence would, of necessity, be sufficient for the actualization of happiness apportioned according to virtue. The application of the axiom of modal logic, then, implies that the possible existence of God implies the possible realization of the happiness apportioned to virtue – the element of the highest good for which God's existence was postulated.

If this is right, then moral agents' assent to the proposition that 'God *possibly* exists' is sufficient to conceive of, and believe that, happiness apportioned according to virtue is possible. Yet this is supposed to be the connection the proposition that 'God (actually) exists' is supposed to have to the moral law that rendered its postulation necessary. Since Kant holds that moral agents are rationally required to postulate all and *only* those theoretical

propositions that are theoretically undecidable and inseparably tied to the moral law, and the connection the latter is supposed to furnish seems to be accomplished by the former, then the traditional interpretation would have it that Kant concludes we must postulate a proposition that is stronger than practical reason requires. As Allen Wood writes, “if the basis of the argument is that we must hold that the highest good is *possible*...then it would seem that making the highest good an end does not rationally commit us to the actual existence of God, but only to the *possibility* that there is a God.” (Wood 2005, 182)

### §1.3. Against the Lone Traditionalist Defense

Surprisingly few commentators mention, let alone address this problem.<sup>4</sup> Of those that do, Allen Wood is the only one who offers any comments to the effect that Kant was justified in asserting the existence of God as a postulate of practical reason. Wood suggests that, although assent to the proposition that ‘the existence of God is possible’ is sufficient for belief that the highest good is possible, “it is equally evident that Kant thinks assent to

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<sup>4</sup>The only commentators who mention it are Allen Wood (1970, 1991, and 2005), M Jamie Ferreira (1983 and 2013), Paul Guyer (2000 and 2006), Lewis White Beck (1960), and Peter Byrne (2007). Byrne does not endorse any particular position and, instead, only points out that it is a problem. Beck, on the other hand, seems to assume the traditionalist reading without explanation. The other three, as I’ve mentioned, are those to whom I wish to respond. Marcus Willaschek (2007) seeks to respond to the problem of agnosticism, but does not conceive of it as formulated here. Willaschek wonders whether it is “sufficient to *hope* that the ontological presuppositions of our moral duties are fulfilled, where ‘hope’ is a doxastic state weaker than belief such that hoping that *p* is incompatible with believing that *p* and compatible with not believing that *p*.” He argues that an agent who merely *hopes*, without positively believing, that God exists cannot consistently believe that it is possible to realize the highest good given that a Kantian moral agent “believes that it is possible to realize the highest good only if God exists”. Although I think Willaschek is on the right track, his formulation and resolution of the problem of agnosticism is not sensitive to the problem as articulated above. Presumably, a rational requirement for hoping that *p* is believing that *p* is possible (even if one believes that *p* is not, in fact, the case). In this case, hoping that God exists rationally requires a belief that God’s existence is possible. The formulation of the problem above suggests, contra Willaschek, that this belief is already sufficient for belief that the highest good is possible.

the actual existence of God is better suited to a properly moral disposition” (Wood 2005, 182). Wood articulates in an earlier work how he conceives of belief in the actual existence of God as “better suited” to such a moral disposition. He claims that “although [agnosticism] may be in a minimal way compatible with the pursuit of the highest good, it is far from the most appropriate and rational attitude for the moral man to hold. It is far better – and more honest – for him to recognize the positive commitment he has adopted in choosing to pursue the highest good, and to maintain a genuine belief in God and a future life as conditions for the conceivability of this end as a practical possibility.” (Wood 1970, 31-2)

Wood is right that belief in the actual existence of God seems to cohere better with the belief that the highest good is possible than mere agnosticism regarding God’s existence does. Nevertheless, this greater coherence enjoyed by the theist as opposed to the agnostic is insufficient to ground the doxastic attitude appropriate to the postulates of practical reason, i.e. belief. Kant defines belief in contrast to opinion and knowledge in the *Critique of Pure Reason* and draws on that definition in the sections following the argument sketched above. He takes all three attitudes to be a form of “taking something to be true” and distinguishes them by the grounds on which the agent takes that something to be true. Opinion is defined as the taking something, e.g. a proposition, to be true on grounds that the subject consciously cognizes to be both subjectively and objectively insufficient for taking that thing to be true. Knowledge, on the other hand, is taking something to be true on grounds that the subject consciously cognizes to be both subjectively and objectively sufficient grounds for his doing so. Belief, in contrast, is taking something, e.g. a proposition, to be true on grounds that the subject consciously cognizes to be *subjectively sufficient* though *objectively insufficient*.

Roughly, objectively sufficient grounds for taking something to be true are those that provide evidence for the object or state of affairs in question. Subjectively sufficient grounds for taking something to be true are those that have sufficient non-epistemic merits for the subject.<sup>5</sup> Those non-epistemic merits can be of three kinds: (1) pragmatic – i.e. the agent’s assent that *p* is a hypothetically necessary condition for his attaining some contingent *practical* end, (2) theoretical – i.e. the agent’s assent that *p* is a hypothetically necessary condition for his attaining some contingent *theoretical* end, and (3) moral – i.e. the agent’s assent that *p* is a necessary condition for the possibility of his attaining some *necessary moral* end. Kant is clear that moral agents’ assent to the postulate regarding the existence of God is based on subjectively sufficient moral grounds. That is, assent to that postulate is supposed to be a necessary condition for rational pursuit of the highest good, a necessary moral end.

The argument outlined in §1.1 was meant to establish the postulate regarding the existence of God as rationally required for the possibility of realizing the highest good as the necessary and ultimate end of all moral efforts. The problem outlined in §1.2, however, left us with two potential formulations of that postulate: the proposition that ‘God (actually) exists’ and the proposition that ‘God possibly exists’. Wood admits that assent to the latter proposition is already sufficient to satisfy the rational requirement of belief in the possibility of the highest good. If that is the case, then the traditionalist must put forth *another* subjectively sufficient moral ground for assent to the former proposition. Yet what Wood proposes is nothing of the sort. Even if he is right that belief in the actual existence of God coheres better with belief in the possibility of the highest good and devout pursuit thereof, i.e. it would “more rational” to assent to the proposition that ‘God exists’, this would not

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<sup>5</sup> How to precisely understand Kant’s notion of subjective and objective sufficiency is a complicated issue I cannot address sufficiently here. For more detailed accounts, see Chignell (2007a and 2007b) and Sessions (2003).

provide a subjectively sufficient moral ground of assent unless the increased rationality enjoyed by the theist is somehow of indispensable moral import.

Wood's suggestion, of course, may not be wholly devoid of moral import. As he says "devoted pursuit of one's final moral end might be better served by a confidence that the highest good will at last be attained" despite the fact that "the bare minimum reason requires is belief that it is possible of attainment" (Wood 1992, 405). He does not, however, spell out how pursuit of the highest good is better served by belief that the highest good will be attained, in lieu of a positive belief in the actual existence of God, let alone how such a belief is morally indispensable. I am skeptical that, provided the problem proposed in §1.2 is a real problem, the traditionalist has the resources to render belief in the actual existence of God morally indispensable.<sup>6</sup> Before ruling out that possibility outright, however, I will examine how a traditionalist might try to defend the indispensability of belief in the actual existence of God.

#### **§1.4. Against Re-Appropriating Kant's Moral Criticisms of Atheism**

Although they are not present in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant issues three main criticisms of atheism in other works ranging from *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* to his *Lectures on Ethics*.<sup>7,8</sup> These three main criticisms are that atheism: (1) deprives the atheist

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<sup>6</sup> Ultimately, I will argue that belief in the actual existence of God *is* morally indispensable because it is rationally required in light of the end practical reason requires us to realize. This indispensability is precisely what is articulated in the argument sketched in §1.1, but a traditionalist appeal to that sort of indispensability is ruled out if the problem proposed in §1.2 is a real problem as Wood takes it to be. In §3, I will show why that problem is predicated upon equivocating two senses of possibility.

<sup>7</sup> In the following discussion, what I refer to as agnosticism is what Kant calls skeptical atheism (the position that concedes the inability of theoretical arguments to establish the existence of God without asserting that God does not exist), while what I refer to as atheism is what Kant calls dogmatic atheism (the position that asserts that God does not exist).

of important incentives to morality, (2) leads the atheist to moral despair, and (3) corrupts the moral character of the atheist. If any of these criticisms can be brought to bear on agnosticism and show that the agnostic is deprived of something morally indispensable, then they would provide subjectively sufficient moral grounds for taking the proposition that ‘God (actually) exists’ to be true. I will discuss each of these criticisms in turn.

The first criticism is that atheism deprives the atheist of important incentives to morality. Kant suggests this criticism in his lectures on the philosophical doctrine of religion where he says:

“Natural morality must be so constituted that it can be thought independently of any concept of God, and obtain zealous reverence from us solely on account of its own inner dignity and excellence. But further it serves for this if, after we have taken an interest in morals itself (we) take an interest also in the existence of God, a being who can reward our good conduct; and then we obtain strong incentives which determine us to observe moral laws.” (LPR 1003)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Denis (2003) and Hare (2006) each list four main criticisms of atheism. I omit the fourth one Denis mentions because Kant specifies up front that it applies to dogmatic atheism, implying that it does not apply to skeptical atheism, i.e. what I here refer to as agnosticism. I also omit the first criticism Hare mentions because it is clear how it misses the agnostic. That criticism is that atheism removes the ground for belief in the possibility of being good. This is because human beings have an innate propensity to evil in preferring happiness to duty. Divine assistance is required to accomplish a “revolution of the will” in this respect. Yet, the same line of reasoning in §1.2 can be cited here; if the agnostic believes that it is possible that God exists, then he is justified in taking it to be possible that such a revolution of the will will be accomplished through divine intervention. I do not take this list to be exhaustive of Kant’s criticisms of atheism, but they are the most prevalent in his texts, readily recognized, and widely discussed. Denis argues that these criticisms are not even valid for atheists on the basis of an alternative conception of the highest good she takes to be apparent in Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (450, 453), *Toward Perpetual Peace* (65, 88-90) and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (R 5, 93-100). Andrews Reath (1988) and Thomas Pogge (1997) expound such a conception of the highest good while Stephen Engstrom (1992) argues against it. For arguments to the effect that atheists are susceptible to Kant’s criticisms, see Palmquist (2000) and Hare (2006). Whether or not these criticisms apply to atheism is not my concern here, however, and I will thus limit myself only to the purchase of these criticisms on agnostics.

<sup>9</sup> The assertion that Kant criticized atheism because it deprives the atheist of important incentives to morality might seem to clash with his mature moral philosophy where he asserts that the only properly moral incentive to duty is duty itself. What he seems to have in mind here, however, is a helpful supplement to that incentive rather than a substitute.



The incentives in this case derive from the hope of reward for good conduct furnished by God. The atheist is deprived of this incentive because he outright denies that God exists and therefore cannot be moved to act on the prospect of divine reward for good conduct. The agnostic, on the other hand, need not be. If hope is understood as a positive doxastic attitude toward a proposition that falls short of assent, but requires only the belief that the proposition is possibly true, then this is open to the agnostic. The agnostic assents to the proposition that ‘the existence of God is possible’, and given what was argued in §1.2, is thereby warranted in assenting to the proposition that ‘the highest good is possible’. It follows from that then that the agnostic can take divine reward for good conduct to be possible as that is one constitutive component of the highest good.

Yet if that is the case, then the agnostic can positively *hope* for divine reward for good conduct even though he does not positively *believe* that this reward will come to pass. Although hope for, and belief that, God will reward good conduct are compatible attitudes, it would be extremely odd if hope for some object or state of affairs *required* belief in that same object or state of affairs. Indeed, paradigmatic instances of *hope* are precisely those in which the subject lacks sufficient grounds for belief. It seems, then, that the agnostic’s agnosticism need not disqualify him from hoping for divine reward for good conduct. What’s more, even if the agnostic were, for some reason, deprived of the incentives provided by such hope, Kant does not make any claims to the effect that those incentives are morally indispensable. If anything, his insistence that the only proper incentive to duty is duty itself suggests that such incentives *are* dispensable for, or at least orthogonal to, morality.

So much, then, for the first criticism of atheism. Kant’s second criticism of atheism is that it leads the atheist to moral despair. This criticism comes through in one of the most

famous passages of Kant's *Critique of the Power of Judgment* where he considers the repercussions of atheism for the otherwise moral man. Regarding such a man, Kant says:

“How would he judge his own inner purposive determination by the moral law, which he actively honors? He...would merely unselfishly establish the good to which that holy law directs all his powers. But his effort is limited; and from nature he can, to be sure, expect some contingent assistance here and there, but never a lawlike agreement in accordance with constant rules (like his internal maxims are and must be) with the ends to act in behalf of which he still feels himself bound and impelled. Deceit, violence, and envy will always surround him, even though he is himself honest, peaceable, and benevolent; and the righteous ones besides himself that he will still encounter will, in spite of all their worthiness to be happy, nevertheless be subject by nature, which pays no attention to that, to all the evils of poverty, illnesses, and untimely death, just like all the other animals on earth, and will always remain thus until one wide grave engulfs them all together (whether honest or dishonest, it makes no difference here) and flings them, who were capable of having believed themselves to be the final end of creation, back into the abyss of the purposeless chaos of matter from which they were drawn. – The end, therefore, which this well-intentioned person had and should have had before his eyes in his conformity to the moral law, he would certainly have to give up as impossible.” (CPJ 5:452)

Since the atheist denies the existence of God, and it is abundantly clear that merely natural laws are insensitive to virtue and the realization of the ultimate end of all moral efforts, the atheist is susceptible to despairing over, or losing hope in, the possibility of the highest good. Kant does not intend to issue a prediction about the attitudes of the atheist in light of his commitments as such, but instead only points out he will find his lack of belief in the existence of God leaves him in a rationally unstable condition “in which one continuously falls from hope into doubt and mistrust.”

As argued regarding the first criticism, however, the agnostic *can* have hope for the highest good. Although his commitment merely to the possibility of God's existence falls short of ensuring him that the highest good will come to pass, and so leaves open the possibility for doubt, he need not despair about its possibility. After all, he believes that the highest good *is* possible in light of his belief that the existence of God is possible. While entertaining doubt about the possibility of the ultimate end of practical reason may not

cohere ideally with pursuing that end with all one's strength as the moral law requires, it does not seem necessarily debilitating to that pursuit. Insofar as uncertainty and doubt about whether the highest good will come to pass are not, of necessity, debilitating to promoting the highest good with all one's strength, avoidance of these doubts through theism does not provide subjectively sufficient moral grounds for assenting to the actual existence of God.

This is already enough to address Kant's third criticism of atheism because it depends upon the second. The third criticism is that atheism corrupts the moral character of the atheist. This criticism is suggested by Kant's remarks immediately following the passage from the third *Critique* quoted above. Kant says that the "nullity of the only idealistic final end" that is implied by atheism "cannot occur without damage to the moral disposition". The corruption of the atheist's moral character, in other words, follows from despair about, or denial of, the possibility of the highest good. The upshot of the problem discussed in §1.2 and reiterated throughout this section, however, to which this criticism might be re-appropriated, was precisely that the agnostic *can* believe the highest good to be possible and need not accept his ultimate moral end as a null and idealistic end. Insofar as this criticism of atheism turns on the nullity of the highest good for him, it does not apply to the agnostic.

Since none of these criticisms of atheism can be brought to bear on the agnostic in such a way that deprives him of something morally indispensable, then the traditionalist seems to be left without any resources for furnishing Kant's postulation of the actual existence of God as opposed to its mere possibility. In light of this, one might conclude that Kant failed to justify the postulation of God's actual existence despite his argument for it. Rather than condemning Kant for concluding something stronger than his argument justified, however, one might question whether, contrary to the traditional interpretation,

Kant only wished to argue for the postulation of the possibility of God's existence. M Jamie Ferreira argues that Kant only argued for the postulation of God's possible existence and it is to her account I will now turn.

## §2. The Revisionist Interpretation and Its Inadequate Account of the Text

### §2.1. Prima Facie Textual Evidence for the Revisionist Interpretation

In defense of her revisionist reading of Kant, M Jamie Ferreira primarily cites three passages as providing evidence for that reading. These three passages all occur in two consecutive paragraphs in Kant's preface to the *Critique of Practical Reason*. There, Kant says:

“Now, the concept of freedom, insofar as its reality is proved by an apodictic law of practical reason, constitutes the *keystone* of the whole structure of a system of pure reason, even of speculative reason; and all other concepts (those of God and immortality), which as mere ideas remain without support in the latter, now attach themselves to this concept and with it and by means of it get stability and objective reality, that is, their *possibility* is *proved* by this: that freedom is real, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law.” (CPrR 5:3-4)

In the following paragraph, Kant says:

“[the ideas of God and immortality] are, nevertheless, conditions of applying the morally determined will to its object given to it a priori (the highest good). Consequently their **possibility** in this practical relation can and must be *assumed* although we cannot theoretically cognize and have insight into them.” (CPrR 5:4, bold added)

And finally, later in that paragraph, Kant says:

“by means of the concept of freedom objective reality is given to the ideas of God and immortality and a warrant, indeed a subjective necessity (a need of pure reason) is provided to assume them, although reason is not thereby extended in theoretical cognition and, instead, all that is given is that their **possibility**, which was hitherto only a *problem*, here becomes an *assertion* and so the practical use of reason is connected with the elements of the theoretical.” (Ibid, bold added)

Admittedly, these passages do provide some prima facie evidence in favor reading Kant as postulating merely the possibility of God's existence, but before conceding this point, a closer look at the context of these remarks is necessary.

These remarks occur in the fifth paragraph of the preface to the second *Critique*. He begins the preface with an explanation of the title of the work, namely why it is not titled a *Critique of Pure Practical Reason* instead of *Critique of Practical Reason* simpliciter. After all, “[practical reason’s] parallelism with the speculative seems to require the first” and, further, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he suggested that the latter is what is necessary.<sup>10</sup> Kant claims, however, that the second *Critique* “has merely to show that there is pure practical reason, and for this purpose it criticizes reason’s entire *practical faculty*.” (CPrR 5:3) If the second *Critique* succeeds in showing that pure reason really is practical, then he says “[practical reason] proves its reality and that of its concepts by what it does” (Ibid). The following three paragraphs provide an outline of how reality is provided to pure reason’s concepts in light of its being practical.

This context makes clear the role that Ferreira’s passages play in the preface. They are not meant to be statements that express the full content of Kant’s postulates. In fact, not once in this context does he even use the term ‘postulate’. Instead, his statements strictly concern only the result of pure reason’s being practical for the *concepts* of God, freedom, and immortality – not whether *objects* corresponding to these concepts must be thought to exist. That is, pure reason’s being practical establishes transcendental freedom, which in turn gives objective reality of the concepts of God and immortality, i.e. proves their real possibility.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> He even goes so far as to title the third section of that work “Final step from metaphysics of morals to the critique of pure practical reason.”

<sup>11</sup> Kant’s terminology here is somewhat surprising. ‘Objective reality’ might be taken, *prima facie*, as equivalent to asserting the existence, i.e. the reality, of an object corresponding to the concept in question. If that were the case, then these passages would provide clear evidence in support of the traditional interpretation of Kant’s postulate of the existence of God – the interpretation I am defending from Ferreira here, and so would count in favor of my position. Kant is clear, however, that ‘objective reality’ is equivalent to ‘real possibility’. Note that in the first passage above, he says that the “objective reality [of God and immortality], that is, their *possibility* is *proved* by this: that freedom is real”. This equivalence is

This is clearly what is expressed in the first passage. As Kant says there, the “objective reality [of the ideas of God and immortality], that is, their *possibility* is *proved* by this: that freedom is real”. The second passage more precisely draws out the relation between freedom and the ideas of God and immortality where the former is known a priori “because it is the condition of the moral law” while the latter are “only conditions of the necessary object of a will determined by this law”.

Finally, the third passage pertains to what theoretical cognition gains as a result of the objective reality, i.e. possibility, granted the ideas of God, immortality, and freedom. Unsurprisingly, all theoretical cognition gains from this is “that their possibility, which was hitherto only a *problem*, here becomes an *assertion*”. That is, without its connection to the necessary object of a will determined by the moral law, the concept of God might be logically possible, i.e. a concept with non-contradictory content, and so we might issue the problematic judgment, i.e. the judgment that it *might* be true that God’s existence is possible. With its connection to the necessary object of a will determined by the moral law, however, the concept of God is given determinate content of such practical significance that we have subjectively sufficient grounds for issuing the assertoric judgment, i.e. the judgment that it is *actually* true that God’s existence is possible. Understood in context, then, these passages should not be construed as qualifying the modal status of the postulate of God’s existence; they only concern how the concept of God acquires objective reality, i.e. real possibility, as a result of pure reason’s being practical. They do not establish, however, that all pure practical

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evident elsewhere, e.g. CPR A223/B270, NF 5688, and MM 6:382. I believe what Kant has in mind is clearest in MM 6:382 where he says “that the concept of a thing is possible (not self-contradictory) is not yet sufficient for assuming the possibility of the thing itself (the objective reality of the concept).” A concept has objective reality, then, if and only if an object corresponding to it is possible. In turn, an object is possible if the laws governing the world are consistent with that object’s existence.

reason rationally requires the moral agent to accept is the possibility of God's existence, i.e. what the moral agent must postulate.

## §2.2. Passages Postulating the Possibility of God

This, however, does not exhaust all the textual evidence in favor of the revisionist reading. Ferreira also cites two passages in which Kant incontrovertibly talks about postulating the possibility of God. The first also comes from a footnote in preface to the second *Critique* pertaining to terminology, where he says:

“But the expression, a *postulate* of pure practical reason, could most of all occasion misinterpretation if confused with the meaning that postulates of pure mathematics have, which bring with them apodictic certainty. The latter, however, postulate the *possibility of an action*, the object of which has been previously theoretically cognized a priori with complete certitude as *possible*. But the former postulate the possibility of an *object* itself (God and the immortality of the soul) from apodictic *practical* laws, and therefore only on behalf of a practical reason, so that this certainty of the postulated possibility is not at all theoretical, hence also not apodictic, i.e., it is not a necessity cognized with respect to the object but is, instead, an assumption necessary with respect to the subject's observance of its objective but practical laws, hence merely a necessary hypothesis.” (CPrR 5:11n)

This passage clearly poses a more serious problem for the traditional interpretation as it pronounces the postulates of pure practical reason to assert “the possibility of an *object* itself”. Attention must be paid to what Kant intends to accomplish in this passage, however. He is here distinguishing the postulates of pure practical reason from those of pure mathematics and drawing attention to the conceptual danger posed by *not* distinguishing them appropriately. The conceptual danger posed by not distinguishing them appropriately is mistaking the postulates of pure practical reason as being apodictically certain as those of pure mathematics are. The apodictic certainty of the latter derives from their necessity for the possibility of an action, i.e. construction in intuition, “previously theoretically cognized a

priori with complete certitude as *possible*". The former are only necessary for an apodictically certain *practical* law, but are not themselves apodictically certain.

While Kant says that the postulates of pure practical reason postulate the possibility of an object itself, nothing he says here implies that this is *all* they postulate. The traditional interpretation holds that Kant postulates the actual existence of God. Insofar as the actual existence of God *requires* or *presupposes* the possibility of God's existence, this passage is perfectly compatible with that reading. That is, the postulate of God's actual existence (assent to the proposition that 'God actually exists') requires the postulation of God's possible existence (assent to the proposition that 'God possibly exists'). The traditional interpretation, then, is completely compatible with statements to the effect that practical reason postulates the possibility of God so long as those statements do not suggest that that possibility is *all* that is postulated.<sup>12</sup>

With this in mind, we can turn to the second passage Ferreira proposes as evidence for the revisionist reading in this regard. In section VII of the Dialectic, titled "How Is It Possible to Think of an Extension of Pure Reason for Practical Purposes without thereby also Extending Its Cognition as Speculative". There, Kant says,

"In order to extend a pure cognition practically there must be a purpose given a priori, that is, an end as object (of the will) that, independently of all theoretical principles, is represented as practically necessary by an imperative determining the will immediately (a categorical imperative), and in this case that is the *highest* good. This, however, is not possible without presupposing three theoretical concepts (for which, because they are only pure rational concepts, no corresponding intuition can be found and consequently, by the theoretical path, no objective reality): namely, freedom, immortality, and God. Thus by the practical law that commands the existence of the highest good possible in a world, the possibility of those objects of pure speculative reason, the objective reality which the latter could not assure them,

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<sup>12</sup> Further, in this particular case, it would serve his purposes to highlight the parallel between the postulates of pure practical reason and pure mathematics in order to make clearer his point about the difference in their certainty as opposed to obfuscating the issue with talk of existence.



is postulated; by this the theoretical cognition of pure reason certainly receives an increment, but it consists only in this: that those concepts, otherwise problematic (merely thinkable) for it, are now declared assertorically to be concepts to which real objects belong, because practical reason unavoidably requires the existence of them for the possibility of its object, the highest good, which is absolutely necessary practically, and theoretical reason is thereby justified in assuming them.” (5:134-5)

This passage again establishes only that the possibility of God is postulated for its connection to the highest good, but *not* that this is alone sufficient to satisfy the rational requirement entailed by the moral necessity of realizing the highest good. He says that extending a pure cognition practically presupposes three concepts that must, therefore, be postulated as having objective reality, i.e. real possibility. He concludes this passage by specifying the increment received by theoretical reason as a result of the reality conferred on those ideas by practical reason, i.e. that those concepts are “declared assertorically to be concepts to which objects belong.”

Finally, note the *justification* for this assertoric judgment – “because practical reason requires the **existence** of them for the possibility of its object, the highest good”. By ‘them’ here, Kant cannot mean the mere real possibility of those *concepts*, for Kant consistently throughout his corpus declares that “every existential proposition – that is, every proposition that says of a being of which I frame a concept, that it exists – is a synthetic proposition, that is, one by which I go beyond that concept and say more about it than was thought in the concept, namely that to this concept *in the understanding* there corresponds an object *outside the understanding*.” (CPrR 5:139) To say that practical reason requires the *existence* of something, then, is to say that there must be something outside the understanding that corresponds to a specific concept in the understanding. In this case, Kant is claiming that practical reason requires the existence of freedom, immortality, and God. This is the *exact opposite* of what Ferreira claims this passage to be saying by taking it as evidence that Kant only takes practical reason to require the possibility of God’s existence.

### §2.3. Supposed Textual Evidence From Kant's *Religion*

Finally, Ferreira and Allen Wood call attention to a footnote in Kant's *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* as supporting the claim that all the necessity of realizing the highest good rationally requires is the possibility of God's existence.<sup>13</sup> There, Kant says:

“With this definition [of religion as the recognition of all our duties as divine commands], some erroneous interpretations of the concept of religion in general are obviated. First, so far as theoretical cognition and profession of faith are concerned, no assertoric knowledge is required in religion (even of the existence of God), since with our lack of insight into supersensible objects any such profession can well be hypocritically feigned; speculatively, what is required is rather only a problematic assumption (hypothesis) concerning the supreme cause of things, whereas with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work [the highest good], what is presupposed is an *assertoric* faith, practical and hence free, that promises a result for the final aim of religion; and this faith needs only the *idea of God* which must occur to every morally earnest (and therefore religious) pursuit of the good, without pretending to be able to secure objective reality for it through theoretical cognition. Subjectively, the *minimum* of cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must alone suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being.” (R 154)

In this passage, Kant is concerned with dispelling the notion that religion, as he has defined it, requires the theoretical cognition of assertoric knowledge of the objects of religion. Kant staunchly denies, here and elsewhere, that knowledge is required for religion. Strangely, Kant does not complete the contrast between this misguided conception of religion and his own

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<sup>13</sup> Although I count Allen Wood as a traditionalist insofar as he holds Kant to have argued for the postulation of God's actual existence, he does acknowledge some evidence for the revisionist reading. He says, “there are also some subtle variations in Kant's statements of the conclusion of the moral argument, which relate to some serious questions about how strong a conclusion the argument establishes. If the basis of the argument is that we must hold that the highest good is *possible*...then it would seem that making the highest good an end does not rationally commit us to the actual existence of God, but only to the *possibility* that there is a God. Kant sometimes seems to agree with this, insisting that the ‘minimum of theology’ needed for religion and moral conduct is not an ‘assertoric faith’ but merely the belief that God *possibly* exists (R 6:154, cf. Ak 28:998). But it is equally evident that Kant thinks assent to the actual existence of God is better suited to a properly moral disposition than this ‘minimum.’” (Wood 2005, 182)

by explicitly specifying what he takes to be the minimum cognition required for religion. Instead, he delineates the minimum cognition rationally required “with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work”.

Ferreira and Wood both take this passage to indicate that the assertoric faith referenced in this passage takes as its object only the proposition that ‘it is possible that there is a God’.<sup>14</sup> Ferreira, for example, says that “Kant returns to [formulating the postulate of pure practical reason as the merely possible existence of God] when he makes his commonly remarked-upon suggestion that religion ‘needs merely *the idea of God*...it need not presume that it can certify the objective reality of this idea through theoretical cognition. Subjectively, the *minimum* of cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being.” (Ferreira 2013, 22)

There are three objections I take to this interpretation, however. First, as Ferreira notes, this passage pertains to what *religion* requires which is an entirely separate question from what our duty to realize the highest good requires, although I will argue that they actually coincide. Second, despite this coincidence Ferreira unjustifiably takes what is required for the assertoric faith presupposed by our duty to realize the highest good, i.e. the theoretical cognition that ‘it is possible that there is a God’, to be the entirety of the *content* that assertoric faith takes as its object. Third, Ferreira does not properly appreciate what the content of that cognition is; ‘it is possible that there is a God’ is a problematic judgment that amounts only to the attribution of logical possibility rather than real possibility or objective reality. The very passages she provides as evidence for her reading above, however, make abundantly clear that the ultimate end the moral law sets before us requires the real

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<sup>14</sup> ‘Faith’, here, is equivalent to ‘belief’ in the sense elaborated earlier. The German word Kant uses is ‘*glaube*’ which can be translated as either belief or faith. In the context of religion, the latter is predominantly used.

possibility, or objective reality, of the concept of God. As a result, the purported evidence for the revisionist reading actually rule out the reading Ferreira provides of this passage.

Regarding the first objection, as stated above, the purpose of this passage is to clarify what Kant's definition of religion requires so far as theoretical cognition is concerned, in contrast to how others might conceive of religion. While others take an assertoric knowledge to be required for religion, Kant says "no assertoric knowledge is required in religion". Although Kant does not explicitly say what is required for religion here, he does elsewhere, and it is just what Kant asserts to be that cognition which "must suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being". In his *Notes and Fragments*, Kant says:

"Religion is the **moral** disposition (not the pragmatic disposition) insofar as it is grounded on the **cognition of God**. There is to be sure **no religion without cognition of God**; but this certainly does not need to be knowledge; it can merely be a pure idea of God that is morally correct (although as speculation full of error), and, second, it need only contain the conviction that it is at least possible that there is a God, or beyond that a firm belief. For the former morality is not yet required; but if it is there, then in combination with that problematic judgment it can yield religion. For the latter a morally good disposition is already required." (NF 18:516)

Here it is clear that the cognition required for religion is only (1) "a pure idea of God that is morally correct" and (2) "the conviction that it is at least possible that there is a God". In support of this, Kant says that "the mere possibility of God's existence is already sufficient for moral religion" (NF 18:515). The question of what is sufficient for religion, as "the recognition of all our duties as divine commands," however, is an entirely different question than what is sufficient for morality.

Indeed, the former concerns what is theoretically necessary for us to view our duties *as if* they were divine commands, and this hypothetical way of viewing our duties requires the actual existence of a divine commander no more than, for example, viewing nature *as if* it were purposively designed requires the actual existence of a purposive designer. Kant's

argument for the postulate of the existence of God seems to suggest that morality requires more than this mere hypothetical, i.e. assent to the theoretical proposition that ‘God (actually) exists’ on subjectively sufficient moral grounds. If R 154 is taken to be a passage about what *religion* requires, as the context clearly suggests and Ferreira admits, there still remains the entirely separate question of what morality requires.

Despite this distinction, it *does* seem that R 154 delineates what morality requires. Kant says that “with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work [the highest good], what is presupposed is an *assertoric* faith...and this faith needs only the *idea of God*”. He concludes by saying that “the *minimum* of cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must alone suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being.”

The second objection to Ferreira’s interpretation is that there is a distinction to be made between what rational pursuit of the highest good presupposes assertoric faith *in* and what that assertoric faith *needs*. Since Ferreira reads this passage as a formulation of a postulate of pure practical reason, she assumes that what assertoric faith is *in* and what assertoric faith *needs* amount to the same thing; she reads Kant as claiming that assertoric faith *needs*, because it is required by morality and the end it sets for us, to take as its object the possibility of God’s existence. That is, we must have assertoric faith in the possibility of God’s existence. On my interpretation, however, what assertoric faith must be *in* and what that assertoric faith *needs* diverge in this context. This is because Kant is trying to set out what religion and morality *need by way of theoretical cognition*. After all, the assertoric faith or belief Kant claims we must have in the second *Critique* was made purely on practical grounds, but nonetheless must presuppose something by way of theoretical cognition. What this is can be made clear once the third objection is put forth.

We have, thus, two competing readings of R 154. Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that Ferreira's reading is right; assertoric faith need only consist in the cognition that 'it is possible that there is a God'. Ferreira does not appreciate of what this cognition is so far as Kant is concerned. To say 'it is possible that there is a God' is to issue a problematic judgment regarding the assertion that 'there is a God'. Kant defines problematic judgments as "those in which one regards the assertion or denial as merely **possible** (arbitrary)" (CPR A74/B100). The modality of this judgment "contributes nothing to the content of the judgment...but rather concerns only the value of the copula in relation to thinking" (Ibid). As such, "the problematic proposition is therefore that which only expresses logical possibility" (Ibid). Logical possibility, on the other hand, is just the modal status conferred upon a concept so long as it has non-contradictory content.

In this case, then, the cognition that 'it is possible that there is a God' is just a modally qualified judgment about the truth of the proposition 'there is a God' that expresses only the logical possibility of the copula without contributing anything to the content of the judgment, e.g. objective reality or real possibility to the idea of God. Yet this is precisely what Ferreira's reading *needs* that judgment to do. That this is how Kant conceives of the cognition that 'it is possible that there is a God' is evident in the *Notes and Fragments* passage presented above that parallels R 154 where he says that the minimum cognition for religion requires is (1) a "morally correct" idea of God and (2) "the conviction that it is at least possible that there is a God, or beyond that a firm belief". The next sentence reads: "For the former morality is not yet required; but if it is there, then in combination with that problematic judgment it can yield religion." There might be disagreement about what the 'former' refers to in this case, but what is unambiguous is the statement that if morality is

there, then combining it with the problematic judgment ‘it is at least possible that there is a God’ can yield religion.

In this context, of course, Kant is talking about the minimum cognition necessary for religion. Yet Ferreira takes the exact same minimum of cognition to be the object of assertoric faith that must alone suffice with respect to our duty to realize the highest good. Insofar as Kant takes this cognition to be a problematic judgment that expresses only logical possibility, Ferreira’s reading of this passage entails that assertoric faith in the logical possibility of God, i.e. its non-contradictory conceptual content, is enough to fulfill the rational requirement that falls out of our duty to realize the highest good. Notice, however, how this blatantly contradicts all the purported textual evidence for the revisionist reading presented in §§2.1 and 2.2.

Those passages clearly claim that we are rationally required to take the concept of God to have real, i.e. more-than-logical, possibility in light of our duty to realize the highest good. In the *Dialectic*, Kant says “thus by the practical law that commands the existence of the highest good possible in a world, the possibility of those objects of speculative reason, the objective reality which the latter could not assure them, is postulated.” (CPrR 5:134-5) As he says in the Preface to the second *Critique*, “by means of the concept of freedom objective reality is given to the ideas of God and immortality and a warrant, indeed a subjective necessity (a need of pure reason) is provided to assume them” (CPrR 5:4-5). These passages clearly establish the rational necessity of taking the idea of God to have objective reality, i.e. real possibility. Further, that is precisely what Ferreira takes them to establish. If this is the case, however, assertoric faith must be *in* at least the real possibility of God, above and beyond the mere logical possibility of that concept. Yet Ferreira’s reading of R 154 entails that assertoric faith must be *in* only the logical possibility of God, once it is

specified what the cognition ‘it is possible that there is a God’ consists in so far as *Kant* is concerned.

How Ferreira wants to interpret R 154, then puts the passage at odds with all her other evidence for the revisionist reading. She, then, must give up either her reading of R 154 or else her reading of those other passages. I argued in §§2.1 and 2.2 that Ferreira’s reading of those passages was right *except* that they do not provide evidence that the postulate of God’s really possible existence is sufficient for morality and obviates the need to postulate God’s actual existence; They clearly do express the rational requirement to believe God’s existence to be really possible, but nowhere in those passages does Kant claim that that belief is sufficient for morality. Yet Ferreira’s reading of R 154 would require her to give up even this uncontested point about those passages she cites. It seems, then, she would be better off adopting a different reading of R 154.

I propose that R 154 is read in the following way. Kant’s concern in the passage is to specify the minimum cognition religion and morality need “*so far as theoretical cognition and profession of faith are concerned*”. That minimum cognition is exactly what Kant says it is here – that ‘it is possible that there is a God’. Now, he says “with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work [the highest good], what is presupposed is an assertoric faith, practical and hence free, that promises a result for the final aim of religion”. Notice that the assertoric faith in question here is *practical* and, thus, need not reduce to what theoretical cognition can furnish. Of course, that *practical* faith first needs some cognition by way of theoretical reason. To say that the assertoric *practical* faith *needs* some cognition by way of theoretical reason *is not* to say that the assertoric *practical* faith is only *in* that theoretical cognition. This is the distinction operative in the second objection to Ferreira’s reading. Kant does not specify here what assertoric practical faith is *in*, just that



that faith “promises a result for the final aim of religion”, i.e. the highest good (conceived in religion as the kingdom of God, though the state of affairs constituting it is the same as before).

What that practical faith is in is, of course, what is at issue here. If we maintain the reading of the passages in §§2.1 and 2.2 as requiring assertoric faith in at least the real possibility of God, then R 154 should not be read as a statement of what assertoric faith must be *in*. Instead, Kant talks about what that assertoric faith *needs*. He says that it needs “only the idea of God which must occur to every morally earnest pursuit of the good, without pretending to be able to secure objective reality for it through theoretical cognition”. Assertoric faith needs this idea to (1) be that which is necessary for morally earnest pursuit of the good, and (2) be theoretically cognized as logically possible, i.e. what is expressed by the cognition that ‘it is possible that there is a God’.

Theoretical cognition of the logical possibility of the idea of God is necessary for faith, but it is not the sole object of it. That it is not the sole object of it is established by the passages in §§2.1 and 2.2. That it is necessary for faith follows from the fact that, assertoric faith must at least be in the real possibility of God if not in God’s actual existence. Faith in either the real possibility or actual existence of God *requires* that the idea of God contain no intrinsic conceptual contradictions. Although the content of that idea is determined by what is practically necessary, whether the content of that idea contains any contradictions can be decided by theoretical reason. Theoretical reason, then, can cognize the idea of God “that must occur to every morally earnest (and therefore religious) pursuit of the good” as logically possible, i.e. accept that ‘it is possible that there is a God’. By this, practical reason gains the *entirety* of what it needs by way of theoretical reason in order to furnish the assertoric *practical* faith that promises a result for the highest good. It in this sense that “the *minimum* of

cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must alone suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being.” From a practical standpoint, more might be rationally required of the moral agent, e.g. that the existence of God is really possible or, further, that God actually exists, but the moral agent will be in a position to meet those rational requirements in light of the subjectively sufficient moral grounds for assenting to those modally stronger claims *so long as* the modally weaker claim ‘it is possible that there is a God’ is theoretically cognized.<sup>15</sup>

That this is what Kant has in mind is suggested by his comments scattered throughout his corpus that say the moral agent can postulate the existence of God on practical grounds since that concept is not contradictory. In one of the passages Ferreira cites, for example, he says that “for practical purposes it is sufficient for [the assumption of the objective reality of God] that [the idea of God] contain[s] no intrinsic impossibility (contradiction).” (CPR 5:4-5) In the *Critique of Judgment*, for example, he says “[the moral agent] must assume the existence of a **moral** author of the world, i.e., of God, from a

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<sup>15</sup> An even stronger reading than this might be plausible. In another footnote in *Religion*, Kant claims that “agreement with the mere idea of a moral lawgiver for all human beings is indeed identical with the moral concept of duty in general, and to this extent the proposition commanding the agreement would be analytic” (R 6:6n). In that case, the final sentence of R 154, that “the *minimum* of cognition (it is possible that there is a God) must alone suffice for what can be made the duty of every human being” could be read as claiming that moral agents have a duty to theoretically cognize the logical possibility of God. Indeed, this is the only duty we have regarding that idea; taking that idea to have objective reality and, further, to posit an object outside the understanding that corresponds to it, are matters of faith and, although rationally required as such, are not commanded by duty. Hare (2006) reads the passage in this way, although he is not sensitive to the fact that the possibility cognized in this instance is merely logical. Perhaps this is why he does not bring R 6:6n or any other passages to bear on this issue. It might be objected that Kant says that “there can be no duty to assume the existence of anything” (CPrR 5:125). Yet such a cognition would not constitute an assumption regarding the existence of anything, but only the non-contradictoriness of a concept suitably specified by the needs of morality. In any case, neither this reading nor the one proposed above take Kant to claim in R 154 that the cognition that ‘it is possible that there is a God’ to be all that is rationally required by pursuit of the highest good.

practical point of view, i.e., in order to form a concept of at least the possibility of the final end that is prescribed to him by morality – which he very well can do, since it is at least not self-contradictory” (CPJ 5:453) These passages suggest that all practical reason needs by way of theoretical reason to furnish the assertoric faith it rationally requires is the logical possibility of God.

If this reading is right, then this passage does not support Ferreira’s revisionist interpretation of Kant as postulating merely the possibility of God’s existence. This is because Kant takes the minimum *theoretical* cognition required for religion and morality to be the problematic judgment that ‘it is possible that there is a God’ which expresses only the logical possibility of the copula. Any reading that takes this cognition to be all that assertoric *practical* faith must take as its object “with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work”, as Ferreira’s does, plainly contradicts the passages in §§2.1 and 2.2. Dispute about whether those passages establish the postulation of God’s objective reality, i.e. real possibility, *and nothing further* aside, they clearly establish that at the least the postulation of that real possibility is rationally required.

At the same time, since this passage does not specify what the object of assertoric practical faith is, let alone its modal status, it cannot be taken to constitute evidence against the revisionist interpretation either. Indeed, the revisionist can adopt my reading of R 154 and consistently claim that Kant postulates solely the real possibility of God’s existence. Even so, spelling out what the theoretical cognition that ‘it is possible that there is a God’ consists in for Kant, i.e. a problematic judgment that expresses logical possibility, entails that this passage cannot be cited as evidence for either the traditional or revisionist interpretation.

This exhausts the textual evidence Ferreira cites in favor of the revisionist interpretation. None of this necessarily rules out the revisionist reading as a possibility,

however. The passage in Kant's *Religion* analyzed in this section cannot be used to support either the traditional or revisionist interpretation. The passages in §§2.1 and 2.2, on the other hand, suggest that Kant holds the postulation of the real possibility of God to be rationally required in light of the end morality requires we set for our moral efforts. Yet those passages said nothing to the effect that this postulate is all that morality requires. Indeed, insofar as there is evidence to the effect that morality requires the postulation of God's actual existence, then morality inevitably requires the postulation of God's possible existence. More precisely, if pure practical reason requires assent to the proposition that 'God (actually) exists', that assent presupposes assent to the proposition that 'God's existence is really possible'. In this way, the traditional interpretation of Kant's argument can make sense of all the passages Ferreira presents. The question remains, however, whether the revisionist interpretation can make sense of textual evidence that seems to favor the traditional interpretation.

#### **§2.4. Against the Revisionist Account of Traditionalist Evidence**

Evidence in favor of the traditional interpretation far surpasses the mere five passages Ferreira cites. The majority of passages that seem to support the traditional interpretation occur in the Dialectic of the second *Critique* and the Appendix of the third *Critique*. This should come as no surprise given that these are the two places where Kant *makes his argument* for the postulates and so we should expect this to be where he elaborates just what those postulates are. In the Dialectic of the second *Critique*, for example, he says:

“Consequently, the postulate of the possibility of the highest *derived* good (the best world) is likewise the postulate of the *highest original good*, namely of the existence of God. Now, it was a duty for us to promote the highest good, which, since it is possible only under the condition of the existence of God, connects the presupposition of the existence of God inseparably with duty; that is, it is morally necessary to assume the existence of God.” (CPrR 5:125)

There are too many passages like this one to go through and analyze them all, so let this one suffice as an exemplar.<sup>16</sup> This passage makes clear that the postulate of pure practical reason that follows from the necessity of realizing the highest good is the *existence of God*. Since the revisionist interpretation holds that Kant only required the postulation of the real possibility of God, it must put forward some plausible way to make sense of passages such as these, especially since they occur in Kant's major works where he actually argues for the postulates.

Ferreira begins by attempting to undermine the traditionalist reading of Kant's existence-talk as unjustified on his own terms. To this end, she points to section VII of the second *Critique*, where Kant says:

“Thus by the practical law that commands the existence of the highest good possible in a world, the possibility of those objects of pure speculative reason, the objective reality which the latter could not assure them, is postulated; by this the theoretical cognition of pure reason certainly receives an increment, but it consists only in this: that those concepts, otherwise problematic (merely thinkable) for it, are now declared assertorically to be concepts to which real objects belong, because practical reason unavoidably requires the existence of them for the possibility of its object, the highest good, which is absolutely necessary practically, and theoretical reason is thereby justified in assuming them. But this extension of theoretical reason is no extension of speculation, that is, no positive use can now be made of it for *theoretical purposes*. For, since nothing further is accomplished in this by practical reason than that those concepts are real and really have their (possible) objects, but nothing is thereby given us by way of intuition of them (which can also not be demanded), no synthetic proposition is possible by this reality granted them.” (CPrR 5:134-5)

Notice that this is the same passage analyzed in §2.2. There, I argued that it is necessary to note: (1) that Kant is drawing out what theoretical cognition gains as a result of practical reason's postulating the objective reality, i.e. real possibility, of the concept of God, and (2) that this does not establish that practical reason only rationally requires the postulation of

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<sup>16</sup> Other places in which Kant makes explicit that practical reason rationally requires the postulation of the *existence of God* include, but are not limited to: CPrR 5:125, 5:132, 5:134, and 5:139; CPJ 5:450, 5:451-2, 5:452-3, 5:457, and 5:469; LPR 28:1012, 28:1072, and 28:1083; NF 18:260, and 18:458; and R 6:6n.

God's real possibility. What is important for Ferreira's purposes at this point, however, are the two claims that "no positive use can now be made of [the real possibility of God] for *theoretical purposes*" and "no synthetic proposition is possible by this reality granted them".

In light of these two claims, she points to Kant's claim later in the same section that:

"It is absolutely impossible to cognize the existence of this being [i.e. God] from mere concepts, because every existential proposition – that is, every proposition that says, of a being of which I frame a concept, that it exists – is a synthetic proposition, that is, one by which I go beyond that concept and say more about it than was thought in the concept, namely that to this concept *in the understanding* there corresponds an object *outside the understanding*, which it is absolutely impossible to elicit by any inference." (CPrR 5:139)

This passage makes clear that every existential proposition is a synthetic proposition, and yet in the previous passage Kant claimed that no synthetic proposition is made possible by the objective reality given to the concept of God by its connection to the moral law. Ferreira takes this to be evidence that the traditionalist reading of Kant's existence-talk is unjustified on his own terms. Yet she for some reason excludes the next few lines of CPrR 5:139 that undermine precisely that point. The very next line reads as follows:

"Thus there remains for reason only one single procedure by which to arrive at this cognition [i.e. the synthetic proposition that God exists], namely, as pure reason to start from the supreme principle of its practical use (inasmuch as this is always directed simply to the *existence* of something as a result of reason) and determine its object. And then, in its unavoidable problem, there is shown not only the **necessity of assuming such an original being** in relation to the possibility of this good but – what is most remarkable – something that was quite lacking in the progress of reason on the path of nature, *a precisely determined concept of this original being.*" (Ibid 5:139, bold added)

Contrary to Ferreira, Kant claims that we can arrive at cognition of the existence of God by the needs of *practical* reason. Kant seems to find the fact that practical reason furnishes "a precisely determined concept of this original being" more remarkable than the necessity of assuming such an original being, but that does not at all undermine that assumption's indispensability.

Ferreira makes no attempt to square the contents of this passage with the CPrR 5:134-5, but the traditional reading can easily reconcile them. In CPrR 5:134-5, the two points Ferreira fixated on were that “this extension of theoretical reason is no extension of speculation, that is, no positive use can now be made of [the real possibility of God] for *theoretical purposes*” and “no synthetic proposition is possible by this reality granted them”. Two things need to be noted here. First, Kant says no use can be made of the real possibility of God for *theoretical purposes*, but this does not rule out the possibility that that possibility might be used for *practical purposes*. Second, Ferreira again omits a key passage in her analysis in which Kant explains *why* no use can be made of that possibility for theoretical purposes. He says, “for, since nothing further is accomplished in this [i.e. the postulation of the real possibility of God by practical reason] than that those concepts are real and really have their (possible) objects, **but nothing is thereby given us by way of intuition of them** (which also cannot be demanded), no synthetic proposition is possible by this reality granted them.” (CPrR 5:134, bold added)

The connection here is that all extension of theoretical cognition with regard to the ideas of God, freedom, and immortality, requires that something be given by way of intuition. Since nothing is given by way of intuition from the postulation of the real possibility of God, then no extension of theoretical cognition, in the form of synthetic propositions or determining its theoretical application, can follow. It is for that reason that Kant says “no positive use can be made of [the objectively real concept of God] for *theoretical purposes*.” The postulates of pure practical reason, as their title suggest however, are not assented to for theoretical but rather *practical purposes*. Further, CPrR 5:139 clearly states that the needs of practical reason furnish cognition of the synthetic, existential proposition that ‘God exists’.

When CPrR 5:134-5 is taken in context and properly understood as denying only that the real possibility of God can be used to extend cognition for *theoretical purposes*, then it cannot be used to undercut the traditionalist interpretation of Kant's postulate as the *existence* of God as unjustified on Kant's own terms. Nonetheless, she offers a positive reinterpretation of passages pertaining to the existence of God based a specious recasting of Kant's conception of practical belief that is textually groundless and renders her reading completely incoherent. She begins by distinguishing between a theoretical belief and a practical belief. A theoretical belief, for Ferreira, is assent to a proposition that is *used* theoretically, while a practical belief is a "hope" that a proposition is true that is not used *theoretically* but *practically*. In this case, she believes that the real possibility of God is held as a *theoretical belief*, while the existence of God is held as a *practical belief*.

Recall the quote from earlier in this section, however, where Kant clearly said that "no positive use can now be made of [the postulated real possibility of God] for *theoretical purposes*." Somehow it escapes her that the argument she tried to make against the traditional interpretation above as unable to ground Kant's existence-talk was predicated on precisely that point! Furthermore, Kant is equally clear that the attitude toward the postulates of pure practical reason, i.e. precisely what she is arguing that the real possibility of God *counts as*, is *practical belief*. Take, for example, what he says in Section VIII of the second *Critique* entitled On Assent from a Need of Pure Reason:

"Now, since the promotion of the highest good, and therefore the supposition of its possibility, is *objectively* necessary (though only as a consequence of practical reason), while at the same time the manner, the way in which we would think it as possible rests with our choice, in which a free interest of pure practical reason decides for the assumption of a wise author of the world, it follows that the principle that determines our judgment about it [i.e. the assumption of a wise author of the world], though it is *subjective* as a need, is yet, as the means of promoting what is *objectively* (practically) necessary, the ground of a maxim of assent for moral purposes, that is, a *pure practical rational belief*." (CPrR 5:145-6)



While this passage suggests the postulation of the existence of God beyond that idea's real possibility, what is important is that the very ground on which Ferreira takes Kant to postulate the real possibility of God is described by Kant himself as a "ground of a maxim of assent for moral purposes, that is, *a pure practical rational belief*." In her own words, "the theoretical belief that God really-possibly exists is required by the need to believe in the real possibility of the highest good".

Not only, then, does the postulation of the real possibility of God's existence not meet her own criteria for theoretical belief, but the ground on which that possibility is postulated is precisely what Kant takes to justify, and be necessary for, practical belief. Even so, she still proposes a reinterpretation of Kant's notion of practical belief that would render Kant's existence-talk compatible with her contention that he only requires the postulation of God's possible existence. Unfortunately, this reinterpretation fares no better. Rather than reading the term 'practical' as specifying the sort of ground on which the Kantian moral subject bases belief in the postulates, she assumes that it specifies what use the attitude of belief serves. Once this use is specified, she claims, we see that this species of belief is actually akin to hope.

Ferreira claims that "the 'practical' is what is 'to be made real through our will (CPrR 5:113), so reason in its practical employment can only issue imperatives to behave in particular ways. In this case, this means acting in ways which promote the highest good, or equivalently, ways which amount to 'acting as if' God exists. It is important that, for Kant, striving to promote the highest good and 'acting as if God exists' are materially equivalent. Such action is 'practical belief' in God's existence." (Ferreira 2013, 16) That is, the theoretical proposition that God exists, when taken up as a "practical belief" in Ferreira's sense, only serves the purpose of rationally allowing the agent to act as if that proposition were true. In

this case, so acting would constitute rationally striving to realize the highest good. With this in mind, she concludes that, “for Kant, a ‘practical belief’ is acting out a ‘hope’. A ‘hope’ that God exists is a hope that the highest good will be realized, and it is constituted by striving for the highest good.” (Ibid 16)

Notice, first, that Ferreira cites virtually none of Kant’s texts in expounding this as *his* view. The one quote she uses is taken from a context that is incommensurable with the context in which she applies it. Kant is not concerned with defining the term ‘practical’ in CPrR 5:113 as that term might modify a propositional attitude. Instead, he is concerned with setting out the antinomy of practical reason and says, “in the highest good which is practical for us, that is, to be made real through our will, virtue and happiness are thought as necessarily combined...” In this context, Kant sets out what it means for a state of affairs, e.g. the highest good, to be “practical for us”, i.e. that that state of affairs is to be realized through our will. Ferreira provides no explanation as to why ‘practical’ might have the same meaning when ascribed to a propositional attitude.

That is not to deny, of course, that the postulates play an important part in our acting so as to make the highest good real; this is only to deny that the role played by the postulates in making the highest good real exhausts what ‘practical belief’ is, i.e. renders assent to those theoretical propositions unnecessary for practical purposes, allowing them to be objects of mere hope. This account blatantly ignores, and does not even attempt to make sense of, Kant’s explicit statements concerning, and definitions of, belief in any of his works. It is there that the traditional reading draws its evidence regarding how to understand Kant’s conception of belief and a revisionist reading along these lines would be remiss to leave those passages unexplained.

Beyond this hardly inconsequential oversight, one would expect Kant to be more explicit about the equivalence of practical belief with hope, especially considering, as Ferreira points out, Kant uses the term ‘hope’ sixteen times in section V of the second *Critique* titled “The Existence of God as a Postulate of Pure Practical Reason”.<sup>17</sup> Given its extensive use in this context, one would expect that if Kant envisioned hope as playing the role Ferreira insists it does, at least one of those instances would suggest that practical belief-in is essentially equivalent to hope-for the existence of God. Unfortunately for Ferreira, the object of hope, in every single instance where that term is used, is the highest good. Specifically, in each instance, Kant expresses something, e.g. the postulate of God’s existence, as a necessary condition for moral agents’ hope to realize the highest good. For example, Kant says that “I cannot hope to produce [the highest good] except by the harmony of my will with that of a holy and beneficent author of the world.” (CPrR 5:130)

Interpreting Kant’s conception of practical belief in the existence of God as a *hope* that God exists, therefore, seems to be textually groundless. On top of that, Kant makes clear that the postulates are a matter of practical belief. Since Ferreira wants to argue that Kant only postulates the real possibility of God’s existence, and the ground for the postulates is a need of practical reason for practical purposes, then the real possibility of God’s existence would merely be hoped for as well. I will argue in §3 why belief in, let alone hope for, merely the real possibility of God’s existence is insufficient for belief in the real possibility of the highest good. For Ferreira, however, belief in the real possibility of God’s existence was necessary for belief that the highest good is possible for the reason articulated in §1.2, i.e. if God’s existence necessarily implies the realization of the highest good, then the

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<sup>17</sup> Ferreira notes his mentioning “hope” thirteen times, though I’ve combed through the texts and identified sixteen total.

possibility of God's existence implies the possibility of the realization of the highest good. It is for this reason that she tries to cast belief in the real possibility of God's existence as *theoretical*, but this cuts against the very passages she uses to undermine the traditional interpretation that say no theoretical use can be made of the real possibility of God's existence which is postulated for *practical purposes* alone.

If what I have argued is right, then Ferreira's reading is internally incoherent, fundamentally at odds with Kant's conception of the postulates and the practical belief moral agents are rationally required to have in them, and textually groundless. Indeed, I have argued that none of the passages presented by Ferreira even suggest that Kant postulates *only* the real possibility of God's existence, although he nonetheless requires them as postulates, while her attempt to make sense of Kant's talk of practical belief in the existence of God has absolutely no textual basis and is positively problematic. It is certainly possible that a revisionist reading of Kant's postulates could somehow make sense of Kant's talk of practical belief without being positively problematic, but the arguments in this section significantly undercut the pool of passages available to support the revisionist reading as such. Indeed, if it is right, it undercuts the entirety of textual evidence supporting the revisionist reading that has been brought to bear so far. Granted, the lack of textual evidence in favor of the revisionist reading of Kant as postulating only the really possible existence of God does not necessarily damn it. Insofar as that reading aspires to represent Kant's actual view, however, such textual evidence is utterly indispensable; no reading of Kant that purports itself to capture Kant's own view can be taken seriously unless and until it can provide textual evidence to that effect.

### §3 The Problem with the Purported Problem Posed by Agnosticism

### §3.1. The Modality of Judgments Regarding the Postulates

In light of the lack of textual evidence for the revisionist reading, combined with the traditional reading's failure to justify Kant's postulation of the existence of God, one might conclude simply that Kant argued for the postulation of God's existence yet only succeeded in justifying the postulation of God's *possible* existence. This is what Paul Guyer concludes when he says "[the arguments for the existence of immortality and God] suffer from a number of problems, most deeply that the mere *possibility* of the 'highest derived good' may not require the *actuality* of the 'highest original good' or God." (Guyer 2006, 237). This would be premature, however, if it could be shown that postulating merely the possible existence of God was insufficient for rational promotion of the highest good. Once the modality of the *judgment* Kant holds to be rationally required for pursuit of the highest good is delineated, it is clear that postulating the merely possible is insufficient for that rational pursuit.

Kant defines modal concepts as they apply to judgments in the *Critique of Pure Reason* as follows: "**Problematic** judgments are those in which one regards the assertion or denial as merely **possible** (arbitrary). **Assertoric** judgments are those in which it is considered **actual** (true). **Apodictic** judgments are those in which it is seen as **necessary**." (CPR A74-5/B100) That is, possibility can be used as a predicate to qualify the value ascribed to a judgment. As Kant says, "The modality of judgments is a quite special function of them, which is distinctive in that it contributes nothing to the content of the judgment (for besides quantity, quality, and relation there is nothing more that constitutes the content of a judgment), but rather concerns only the value of the copula in relation to thinking in general." (CPR A74/B100) Thus, 'possibility' can be used in a sense that qualifies the value of a judgment in relation to thinking. Most important for present purposes is that a

problematic judgment is one that is regarded as “merely possible” whereas an assertoric judgment is one that is regarded as “actual (true)”.

The modality of judgments plays a key role in the problem presented by agnosticism in §1.2. Recall that, at least in Ferreira’s presentation of the problem, it was based on an axiom of modal logic – namely that if  $p$  necessarily implies  $q$ , then possibly  $p$  implies possibly  $q$ . In this instance, if the existence of God necessarily implies the realization of happiness apportioned according to virtue – that component of the highest good the possibility of which is supposedly why God’s existence is postulated – then the possibility of God’s existence implies the possibility of happiness apportioned according to virtue. It is incredibly important to note, however, that modal operators in modal logic qualify only the *truth* of propositions and cannot be embedded in, or made to qualify, the *content* of those propositions.

That is, modal logic studies how the expressions such as ‘it is necessary that’ and ‘it is possible that’ behave in deductive systems. With this in mind, the axiom of modal logic that Ferreira cites is just ‘if (it is necessary that God’s existence implies that happiness will be apportioned according to virtue), then (if it is possible that God exists then it is possible that happiness will be apportioned according to virtue)’. Since, as was argued in §1.2, the antecedent of this axiom is true, then the moral agent who assents that it is possible that God exists is justified in concluding with the consequent – it is possible that happiness will be apportioned according to virtue. As pointed out in §2.4, however, the judgment that ‘it is possible that happiness will be apportioned according to virtue’ or that ‘it is possible that the highest good will be realized’ is a *problematic* judgment, i.e. one whereby the subject regards the assertion as possibly true.

Now, it should be noted that regarding the assertion as possibly true entails that the subject takes the copula to be possible in some sense. On this point, Kant is clear that “the problematic proposition is therefore that which only expresses logical possibility (which is not objective)” (CPR A75/B101). Yet *logical* possibility falls short of *real* possibility. On the distinction between the two, Kant says,

“I can **think** whatever I please, provided only that I do not contradict myself, i.e., as long as my concept is a possible thought, even if I cannot give any assurance whether or not there is a corresponding object somewhere in the sum total of possibilities. But in order to ascribe objective validity to such a concept (real possibility, for the first sort of possibility was merely logical) something more is required. This “more,” however, need not be sought in theoretical sources of cognition; it may also lie in practical ones.” (CPR Bxxvi)

Thus, the moral agent who accepts that ‘it is possible that the highest good will be realized’ is committed to there being nothing contradictory in the copula that says the highest good will be realized, but this is not the same as saying that the highest good is *really* possible.

In order to say that a concept has real possibility, in contrast, the agent must hold that the concept has a possible object that corresponds to it.<sup>18</sup> Kant says that the necessity of “belief [in the postulates] is the necessity of assuming the objective reality [i.e. real possibility] of a concept of the highest good, i.e. the possibility of its object as the *a priori* necessary object of the power of choice.” (NF 16:515) The problematic judgment that ‘it is possible that the highest good will be realized’ only expresses for Kant the logical possibility of that copula, i.e. there is nothing contradictory in it, but does not amount to the assertoric judgment that ‘the realization of the highest good is really possible’, i.e. that there is a possible object that corresponds to the concept of the highest good.

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<sup>18</sup> To reiterate from earlier, an object corresponding to a concept, e.g. the highest good, is possible so long as the laws governing the world are consistent with the existence of that object.

That this is the case is made especially clear through Kant's claim that the postulates of pure practical reason are *necessary conditions* for the real possibility of the highest good. For example, he says that "the postulates receive objective reality through an apodictic practical law, as necessary conditions of the possibility of what it commands us *to make an object...*" (CPrR 5:135). He repeats this in numerous places, each time explicitly affirming that "the above-mentioned postulates concern only the physical or metaphysical conditions – in a word, those which lie in the nature of things – of the *possibility* of the highest good..." (CPrR 5:143).<sup>19</sup> If the postulates really are necessary conditions for the real possibility of the highest good, then the agnostic who assents only to the real possibility of those necessary conditions, e.g. the existence of God, cannot assertorically judge that the highest good is possible. This is because the highest good would not be really possible *unless* God existed, and since he only judges that God might exist, without taking a position on whether God *actually* exists, then he cannot assertorically judge it to *actually* be the case that the highest good is possible.

With this in mind, one possible objection to my treatment of the problem proposed by agnosticism is hereby obviated. It might be claimed that while modal logic pertains to the deductive behavior of expressions like 'it is possible that' and 'it is necessary that' and such are paradigmatic expressions of what Kant calls problematic judgments, those behaviors are paralleled by how real possibility works such that the real possibility of God implies the real possibility of the highest good. In fact, perhaps couching the problem as one grounded in modal logic is not necessary at all insofar as the real possibility of God implies the real possibility of the highest good.

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<sup>19</sup> See also CPrR 5:4-5, 5:125, 5:133, 5:135, 5:136, 5:143, and 5:143n; CPJ 5:457, 5:469, and 5:470.



This cannot be the case for Kant, however, for recall the quote from R 154 that said “whereas with respect to the object toward which our morally legislative reason bids us work [i.e. the highest good], what is presupposed is an *assertoric* faith, practical and hence free, that promises a result for the final aim of religion.” (R 154) This demonstrates the fact that Kant requires *assertoric* faith or belief in the possibility of the highest good. Since “assertoric judgments are those in which [the judgment] is considered as **actual**” (CPR A74/B100), then assertoric faith or belief in the possibility of the highest good is unavailable to the agnostic insofar as he does not take as actual a necessary condition for the real possibility of the highest good to actually be the case.

If this is right, then we can see why Kant held that the postulation of God’s existence was rationally required; in order to have assertoric faith or belief that the highest good is possible, i.e. take it to *actually* be the case that the highest good is possible, the moral agent must also have assertoric faith or belief in the necessary conditions of its possibility, i.e. take it to *actually* be the case that the necessary conditions for the highest good’s possibility in fact obtain, including the existence of God. Although assertoric belief or faith in the real possibility of God seemed sufficient, *prima facie*, for belief in the possibility of the highest good, without postulating the stronger claim that ‘God exists’, the agnostic cannot assertorically believe that the highest good is *really* possible. All agnosticism ultimately furnishes is the problematic judgment that ‘it is possible that the highest good will be realized’ which is essentially equivalent to expressing the logical possibility of the copula. It is not at all equivalent, however, to the assertoric judgment that ‘the highest good is possible’ since this rationally requires assertoric belief in the necessary conditions for that possibility. Insofar as Kant took assertoric belief in the possibility of the highest good to be rationally

required, then, it follows that assertoric belief in the existence of God, as a necessary condition of that possibility, is also rationally required.

### §3.2 – Remarks on Rationally Requiring Assertoric Belief

Even if assertoric belief in the possibility of the highest good rationally requires the postulation of God's existence, it might be wondered whether assertoric belief in the possibility of the highest good is itself rationally required. Paul Guyer, for one, says that Kant's conception of rationality regarding pursuit of the highest good is too strong; Kant claims that our pursuit of the highest good rationally requires belief that the highest good is actually possible, while Guyer suggests that rationality only requires "the *absence* of any reason to believe that it is *impossible* to achieve that goal". If Guyer is right, then that weaker conception of rationality might not require the postulation of God's existence.<sup>20</sup> In what follows, I will consider Guyer's objection and what it might entail for the postulate of God's existence.

Guyer claims that "it might be perfectly rational to pursue a goal as long as we have good reason to believe that achieving it is *not impossible*, especially if it is important" (Guyer 2006, 237). He argues that to this end, our empirical knowledge of nature is sufficient, in that it can neither entail the necessity of the highest good, nor can it entail its impossibility. Although he does not specify the sense of possibility he has in mind here, it seems reasonable to assume he means *really* impossible, i.e. an object cannot be made real that

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<sup>20</sup> Guyer poses the problem outlined in §1.2 in such a way that it would apply even to Kant's conception of rationality, but if what was argued in §3.1 is correct, then that is not the case. Even so, it seems plausible, *prima facie*, that the problem would arise again if Kant's conception of rationality, which required the postulation of God's existence, was shown to be too strong.

corresponds to the concept, rather than logically impossible, i.e. a concept containing an inherent contradiction, since the latter can be determined from the concept alone.

Importantly, however, his formulations of what rationality requires are not equivalent. Notice how in the first quote above, Guyer claims that rationality only requires “the *absence* of any reason to believe that it is *impossible* to achieve [the highest good]” while he later claims that rationality only requires “we have good reason to believe that achieving [the highest good] is *not impossible*”. In the first instance, rationality would require only a lack of reasons for believing the highest good to be impossible. In the second instance, rationality would require positive reasons to believe that the highest good is not impossible. To further complicate matters, Guyer says nothing of the position the moral agent is rationally required to take in light of these reasons for believing the highest good is not impossible or lack of reasons for believing it to be impossible.

Of course, the two formulations of what rationality requires for Guyer are not mutually exclusive and so they might be taken in combination. Given that Guyer takes his conception of rationality to be weaker than Kant’s, however, it seems like he cannot require positive reason to believe the highest good is not impossible. Indeed, positive reason sufficient to believe that the highest good is not impossible would ground the assertoric judgment that the highest good is not impossible, i.e. that it is possible. To say of a concept such as the highest good that it is not really impossible, i.e. that it is *not* the case that an object corresponding to the concept *cannot* be made real, is logically equivalent to saying it is the case that an object corresponding to the concept *can* be made real. Yet this would be exactly what Kant holds to be rationally required – assertoric belief that an object that corresponds to the concept of the highest good can be made real.

Given how Guyer conceives of his conception of rationality in contrast to Kant's, i.e. as weaker, then it cannot include the requirement that the moral agent needs "good reason to believe that achieving the highest good is *not impossible*". This leaves his conception of rationality as requiring only the "*absence* of any reason to believe that it is *impossible* to achieve [the highest good]". Lacking reason to believe a state of affairs to be impossible would not entail that the moral agent assertorically believes that the highest good is really possible. Instead, it would only ground the moral agent's judgment that 'it is not necessarily the case that the highest good is really impossible' which is logically equivalent to 'it is possibly the case that the highest good is not really impossible' as well as 'it is possibly the case that the highest good is really possible' once the negations are removed.

This is, of course, a problematic judgment of the sort discussed above as all that the agnostic about God's existence could assent to regarding the highest good. The only way to read Guyer's rational requirement as distinct from Kant's, then, is to read it as only requiring the judgment that 'it is possible that the highest good is really possible'. On Kant's terms, this judgment expresses only the logical possibility of the copula coupled with the moral agent's non-denial of the necessary conditions for the highest good's real possibility, i.e. that he not deny the postulates. If Guyer's conception of what pursuit of the highest good rationally requires is right, then assent to the postulate of God's existence is unnecessary whether or not Kant thought otherwise.

This would be too hasty, however. What Guyer seems to have in mind is the claim that a partial belief in success is all that is rationally required in pursuit of a particular end. This claim has been argued for by some philosophers of action, e.g. Richard Holton (forthcoming), who take a subject to partially believe  $p$  if and only if the subject takes  $p$  as a live possibility and takes not- $p$  as a live possibility. In contrast, a subject all-out believes  $p$  if

and only if the subject takes  $p$  as a live possibility and does not take not- $p$  as a live possibility. Guyer seems to cast Kant's conception of rationality as requiring all-out belief that the highest good is possible. He says, for example, that Kant's conception of rationality "require[s] a guarantee of the possibility of achieving a goal that we would rationally pursue", e.g. the highest good. Guyer's conception, on the other hand, seems to require only a partial belief in the possibility of achieving that goal.

Yet the alternative to this view, the view that all-out belief is rationally required for pursuit of an end is not without its proponents, e.g. J David Velleman (2007). The details of this debate need not concern us here, but the fact that there is such a debate in contemporary philosophy of action is significant. If the difference between Kant's and Guyer's conceptions of rationality amounts to whether rationality requires all-out or only partial belief, then the mere fact that Kant's conception presupposes a position on this currently contentious issue hardly constitutes a sufficient ground for criticism. This, of course, may be well worth pointing out, but insofar as the issue is up for debate on its own terms, claiming that Kant's view is objectionable because it presupposes a position on the issue is too quick.

More to the point, however, it is not clear that Kant conception of rationality requires all-out belief beyond partial belief or that Guyer's position even suffices for partial belief in the first place. Kant can be taken to require a "guarantee" of the possibility of the highest good insofar as the moral agent must take it to be the case that the highest good is really possible. This does not necessarily amount to an all-out belief in the possibility of the highest good insofar as it leaves room for belief that the failure to realize the highest good is also a live possibility. Indeed, insofar as the realization of the highest good is contingent upon his own action and potential for failure in conforming his will so as to be perfectly

virtuous, he must regard the failure to realize the highest good as a live possibility as well. If this is the case, then Kant does not even require all-out belief in the possibility of the highest good since that requires regarding failure to realize the highest good as a non-live possibility.

Granted, there is a lot of room for variation in how partial belief is conceived depending on what taking  $p$  to be a *live possibility* consists in, but it certainly seems that failure to realize the highest good would qualify as a live possibility on Kant's view given its dependence on the shape of our wills in conformity with virtue. If that's the case, then Kant's conception of rationality comports with the weaker position in the contemporary debate that requires only partial belief. On the other hand, it is not clear that Guyer's position even suffices for partial belief in the first place. If taking  $p$  to be a live possibility is anything like taking  $p$  to be really possible, then it is Guyer's proposal that seems most objectionable because it entails that rationality requires even less than partial belief. After all, all Guyer's proposal requires is regarding the intended end of action, e.g. the highest good, as *logically possible* and neither affirming nor denying that end as *really* possible. This hardly seems sufficient for regarding that end as a live possibility and it also strikes me as an objectionably weak conception of what rationality requires.

Rational action in pursuit of an end seems to me to require more than the non-contradictory content of the concept of that end coupled with non-denial of the necessary conditions for that end's possibility. It seems to require the moral agent's taking a position on what is *in fact* the case in *his* world – the one in which he is to act so as to make that end real through *his* action. In order for the agent to believe that *he* can act so as to make the highest good real, he must take a position on what is *actually* the case regarding his action and the world by and in which the highest good is to be made real. That is to say, rationality as it pertains to a particular moral agent's pursuit of the highest good requires beliefs about the

world in which he is situated and what is within his power relative to that world such that the highest good can be made real through his action.

This may not entirely settle the matter. As mentioned above, Guyer's objection seems to change from one sentence to the next and it is entirely possible that I have misunderstood his position. From the sense that I can make of it, however, he objects to Kant's rational requirement of assertoric belief in the possibility of the highest good as too strong and proposes a weaker alternative. Yet at best, Guyer's criticism of Kant's rational requirement of assertoric belief amounts to pointing out that Kant presupposes a position on a currently contentious topic. This in itself does not constitute grounds for criticism unless it can be shown that the position Kant presupposes is problematic. Guyer takes Kant's position to be problematic because it requires too strong a conception of rationality, i.e. pursuit of the highest good rationally requires all-out belief that the highest good is possible. Yet it seems that Kant only conceives of rationality as requiring partial belief that the highest good is possible. In the debate over whether rationality requires all-out or only partial belief, then, it would seem Kant takes up the weaker conception of rationality.

Guyer, on the other hand, proposes an alternative conception of rationality that actually falls short of the weaker conception in that debate since the agnosticism he asserts as all that rationality requires fails to establish realizing the highest good as a live possibility. Finally, regardless of how his proposal maps onto the current debate about what sort of belief rational pursuit of an end requires, Guyer's seems too weak in its own right insofar as his conception of rationality requires only the logical possibility of the end of an agent's actions along with his not denying the necessary conditions for his end. If all this is right, then Kant's conception of rationality as requiring assertoric belief in the real possibility of the highest good seems perfectly plausible. At the very least, more needs to be said in order

to call it into serious question. If assertoric belief in the real possibility of the highest good is required by Kant's conception of rationality, then it is also necessary for the moral agent to postulate the actual existence of God.

#### **§4. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have argued in favor of a traditionalist reading of Kant as postulating the existence of God rather than merely the real possibility thereof. The few commentators who respond to the problem posed to Kant's argument by agnosticism outlined in §1.2 fall into three camps. Traditionalists, such as Allen Wood, take Kant to have argued for the postulation of God's existence and attempt to explain why that is so in light of the seeming lacuna between what Kant concludes and what his argument justifies. Revisionists, such as M Jamie Ferreira, take Kant to have argued for the postulation of God's real possibility and attempt to explain why Kant seemed to have postulated God's existence. Finally, critics, such as Paul Guyer, take Kant to have postulated God's existence even though his argument only succeeds in justifying the postulation of God's real possibility.

In §1.3, I discussed the lone traditionalist defense of Kant's postulate proposed by Allen Wood. Wood argued that postulating the existence of God would be more rational and cohere better with the Kantian moral agent's pursuit of the highest good. I argued that even if this is the case, it fails to provide subjectively sufficient moral grounds for belief as the postulates of pure practical reason require. In §1.4, I surveyed possible candidates for subjectively sufficient moral grounds for belief through re-appropriating Kant's criticisms of atheism and argued that none of these succeeded.

In §2, I discussed the revisionist reading of Kant proposed by M Jamie Ferreira. Ferreira argued that Kant postulated merely the real possibility of God on the basis of some



passages from Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* and *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In §§2.1-2.3, however, I argued that these passages are perfectly compatible with the traditionalist reading and fail to establish that Kant postulated *only* the real possibility of God. In §2.4, I evaluated Ferreira's attempts at making sense of passages that seem to provide incontrovertible evidence that Kant postulated the existence of God and concluded that her account failed to make sufficient sense of those passages and was actually internally incoherent.

Finally, in §3.1, I argued that the problem posed by agnosticism introduced in §1.2 to which traditionalists and revisionists respond need not be conceded as grounds for criticizing Kant. On the contrary, the purported problem posed by agnosticism depends on insensitivity to the modality of judgments operative in Kant's argument. According to Kant, moral agents are rationally required to take it to *actually* be true that the highest good is possible whereas the agnostic can only take it to *possibly* be true that the highest good is possible. In §3.2, I defended Kant's conception of rational pursuit of the highest good as requiring the assertoric judgment that the highest good is possible from Paul Guyer's objection that Kant's conception of rationality is too strong. Kant's conception of rationality, however, corresponds with the weakest conception in contemporary debate on the topic whereas Guyer's falls short of even that and seems too weak. This is not to say that Kant's argument for the postulation of God's existence is without its flaws. Indeed, there is much that still might be objected to, but if what I have argued here is correct, then the modal status of Kant's postulate is not among them.

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