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Khafiz Kerimov*

Providence and Prudence in Kant's Theology and Ethics

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Abstract: This article seeks to reevaluate Kant's treatment of prudence in his ethics, challenging prevalent interpretations that relegate prudence in Kant to mere technique (skill). Scattered across Kant's texts, there are indications that prudence (practical judgment) fulfills an essential function in Kant's ethics: by negotiating the contingencies of an uncertain world, prudence adapts the moral imperative to mutable circumstances. However, Kant is convinced that despair is inevitable for humans, when confronted with the inherent uncertainty and indifference of the natural world. The only remedy against this despair for Kant is faith in a providential God: Kant introduces reliance on God's providence to reconcile human practical reason with chance and nature's capriciousness. The article thus underscores the inseparable link between human prudence and God's providence for living a moral life in the Kantian sense.

Keywords: Kant; prudence; providence; reflective judgment; highest good

> Why does Kant reject prudence outside of morality? To answer this question would be to rewrite Kant's entire practical philosophy [réécrire la philosophie pratique de Kant tout entière].
>
> Pierre Aubenque, "La prudence chez Kant" (p. 196)

1 Introduction: The "All-Destroying" Kant

It is uncertain what Moses Mendelssohn had in mind when he applied the epithet "all-destroying" to Kant (der alleszermaler-Kant) in the "Preface" to the *Morning Hours*. Most likely, Mendelssohn had in mind Kant's destruction of theistic proofs in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. But Mendelssohn could have referred, with equal success, to Kant's treatment of prudence (prudentia, Klugheit) in the *Groundwork* (and elsewhere) (2011, p. xix). Kant seeks to show that the imperatives (counsels) of

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prudence offer but very tentative means for a false practical end: physical happiness.[1] Ultimately, prudence is not a virtue but a technique for Kant, and an unreliable one at that, and Kant seems to exclude prudence from the sphere of practical philosophy (morality) in the strict sense. In this essay, by contrast, I seek to show that such an interpretation of Kant's treatment of prudence is rather superficial: in Kant's ethics prudence holds a rightful position that does not compete with the moral imperative but complements it. However, the support for my view is regrettably scattered across Kant's lesser-known texts (or less-explored sections of certain major works), frequently requiring a level of hermeneutic reconstruction. By engaging in such reconstructive work, I hope to show that in a world filled with uncertainties the moral imperative would be dysfunctional for Kant, i.e., it could not bring about the ultimate end, the highest good, without a certain kind of prudence. Indeed, this "other" prudence in Kant's system, akin to, but distinct from, the prudence condemned in the *Groundwork*, is necessary for navigating a world characterized by contingency.

The notion of prudentia shares a common origin with that of providence (providentia or "looking ahead"), even though in standard philosophical usage prudence is frequently treated as antithetical to providence (which carries an almost exclusively theological meaning): in a world providentially governed by God, there is neither place nor need for human prudence.[2] It is noteworthy in this regard that Aristotle, the "father" of the ethical concept of prudence (φρόνησις), formulates his theory of prudence within a theological framework centered on an indifferent God (Prime Mover) who never intervenes in the moral order of the universe. In this article, I seek to show, on the other hand, that for Kant human prudence is not possible without divine providence, that is, without practical faith in God's provision for the virtuous. My aim is then to present a new look at Kant's ethics, one that would serve as a corrective to those contemporary criticisms of Kant that charge his theory of morality as unresponsive to human finitude, too cold toward normal human concerns and inflexible in relation to circumstance. So, while Kant's prudence helps human beings respond to mutable circumstances, Kant's providentialism acclimatizes the categorical imperative to the psychological needs of human beings. By placing trust in God's providence, humans acquire hope in the ultimate triumph of

1 Kant's criticism of prudence applies, Aubenque suggests, to "the entire Occidental moral tradition, from Plato to Wolff" (2014, p. 187, this and other quotations are my translations). By establishing a non-eudaimonistic (even anti-eudaimonistic) moral foundation in the categorical imperative, in his practical philosophy Kant indeed seems to have turned his back on the history of ethics.

2 To be sure, the etymology of 'prudentia' and 'providentia' is not part of my argument here, properly speaking, but it is interesting to consider in light of the conceptual relationship between these terms in philosophical usage from the Greeks to Kant.

reason and morality: the arrival of the kingdom of God or, as Kant calls it, the highest good. In this way, Kant elaborates a notion of ethical subjectivity prepared for the uncertainties of practical life.

The essay moves through three main stages. In Section 2, I explain the relationship between the highest good and the goals of morality (in the Doctrine of Virtue): the purpose of the highest good for Kant is synoptic in that it offers an all-encompassing view of where morality leads the human species. Then, the highest good and the duties of virtue are convertible in the Kantian system: Kant's insights regarding one frequently extend to the other, and vice versa. So, in Section 3, I show that the prudence (or, equivalently, practical judgment) that Kant introduces in the Doctrine of Virtue is equally required for the promotion of the highest good. Ultimately, this means that there are not one but two regimes of prudence in Kant: the prudence of the Doctrine of Virtue is essential for attuning the moral imperative to the mutable conditions of an uncertain world. Next, in Section 4, I show that for Kant acting with prudence requires the encouragement of the faith in God's providence; otherwise, moral despair is inevitable. In the article's conclusion, by contrasting Kant's prudence with the Aristotelian and Stoic forms of φρόνησις, I underscore the unique link between providence and prudence in Kant's thought.

2 The Teleology of Practical Reason and the Highest Good

The *locus classicus* of Kant's critique of prudence is Section II of the *Groundwork*, where Kant makes a distinction between hypothetical and categorical imperatives. All precepts that aim at happiness (prudential deliberation) belong to hypothetical imperatives, Kant explains, representing "the practical necessity of a possible action as a means to achieving something else that one wants (or that at least is possible for one to want)" (*GMS*, 4, p. 414.12ff). By contrast, the categorical imperative commands (or prohibits) an action absolutely, as universally necessary: "[Act] only according to that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (*GMS*, 4, p. 421.6ff).

Kant proposes that the goal of happiness could be assumed in all finite rational beings from natural necessity. In this, the imperatives of prudence seem to approach the universality of the categorical imperative (i.e., the pursuit of happiness is the universal law for human beings). However, the universal character of happiness is deceptive, for even though the desire for happiness is presumed *a priori*, the ideal of

happiness is indeterminate and unstable.[3] Ultimately, even if nature were cooperative in satisfying human desires, human beings left to themselves would fail to gain lasting happiness. As far as happiness is concerned, human beings sabotage themselves, constantly vacillating in their desires, making themselves their own greatest adversaries. But not only could the ethics of prudence not generate universal practical laws (but only tentative counsels, Rathschläge), the desire for happiness also jeopardizes human commitment to the moral law by rivaling it. Human beings are subject to the powerful inclination to happiness that continually tempts them to transgress the duty of morality (cf. *GMS*, 4, p. 405). Hence, duty frequently involves acting against self-interest, and prudential deliberation must be restricted by the moral imperative. It is necessary to do the right thing, Kant insists, even if doing so infringes on one's happiness and well-being; a perfect (holy) Kantian agent would transcend finitude in renouncing the desire for happiness *in totum*.

Since the human desire for happiness is unrenounceable, Kant seeks to accommodate this desire to the categorical imperative. Or, equivalently, Kant seeks to accommodate the demands of duty to human finitude. Such a marriage between duty and happiness is accomplished by Kant, first, in the Doctrine of Virtue (in the *Metaphysics of Morals*), second, in the concept of the highest good (most notably, in the *Critique of Practical Reason*).[4] However, as I hope to show, there is a convergence (although not a reduction) between Kant's Doctrine of Virtue and the "highest good" argument. Kant opens the Doctrine of Virtue with something like a deduction of teleology (duties of virtue):

> pure practical reason is a faculty of ends [ein Vermögen der Zwecke] generally, and for it to be indifferent [indifferent] to ends, that is, to take no interest in them, would therefore be a contradiction, since then it would not determine maxims for actions either (because every maxim of action contains an end) and so would not be practical reason. But pure reason can prescribe no ends a priori without setting them forth as also duties, and such duties are then called duties of virtue. (*MS*, 6, p. 395.22ff)

Since human practical reason is finite, it is impossible for it not to have ends, or rather it is impossible for it not to have the end of happiness. However, this does not mean that practical reason is doomed to strive for the objects of inclinations, for pure reason, too, generates goals (practical objects). This is indeed how Kant introduces

3 Cf. Kant's argument for the indeterminate character of the ideal of happiness (*qua* the ideal of the imagination rather than the idea of reason) in *GMS*, 4, p. 417ff. Cf. also Timmermann 2007, p. 67f, as well as Klein 2021, p. 85.

4 In this way, as Barney puts it, in this way "the moral law gives back to us, in rationalized form, the end which it had seemed to take away" (2015, p. 164). It is important to note that the order in which I approach Kant's engagements with happiness is not chronological but pedagogical: I find that approaching Kant's highest good as a corollary of his theory of virtue makes both more intelligible.

the so-called duties of virtue, pure practical goals that provide a counterweight, as it were, to those pathological goals that inclinations impose on humans:

> since the sensible inclinations of human beings tempt them to ends (the matter of choice) that can be contrary to duty, lawgiving reason can in turn check their influence only by a moral end set up against the ends of inclination, an end that must therefore be given a priori, independently of inclinations. (*MS*, 6, p. 380.19ff)

Since the desire for happiness is unavoidable for finite beings, for instance, Kant introduces mutual beneficence as a balancing force "set up against" the pathological desire for happiness. Beneficence answers the human desire for well-being without yielding to pathological self-love: I help others in case of need, others help me in case of need. As Kant explains,

> The reason that it is a duty to be beneficent is this: since our self-love cannot be separated from our need to be loved (helped in case of need) by others as well, we therefore make ourselves an end for others; and the only way this maxim can be binding is through its qualification as a universal law, hence through our will to make others our ends as well. The happiness of others is therefore an end that is also a duty. (*MS*, 6, p. 393.12ff)

Similarly, Kant introduces perfection as a duty to approach holiness, the condition releasing the human being from the yoke of inclinations (though holiness is impossible for human beings) (cf. *MS*, 6, p. 387.12ff).[5] In this way, Kant's system of duties reconciles the moral imperative with the fact of finitude: while the human being ought to strive to reach holiness, mutual beneficence alleviates the pressures inflicted by pathological inclinations.

The initial standpoint from which Kant examines moral teleology in the *Religion* treatise closely resembles that of the Doctrine of Virtue: the teleological (goal-oriented) nature of finite practical reason. Yet, Kant's analysis in the *Religion* takes a different path, ultimately leading to the concept of the highest good (rather than the duties of virtue). Kant insists that

> it cannot possibly be a matter of indifference to reason how to answer the question, *What is then the result of this right conduct of ours?* Nor to what we are to direct our doings and nondoings, even if granted this is not fully in our control, at least something with which they are to harmonize. (*RGV*, 6, p. 6.2ff)

So, it is not just that finite practical reason unavoidably pursues goals, there is also reason's tendency to look for the *final* goal. This gathering point of human action is

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5 The duty of perfection also includes natural or technical perfection, skill and technique, for the fulfillment of moral ends frequently requires skill as "the capacity to realize all sorts of possible ends" (*MS*, 6 ,p. 392.5f).

for Kant the highest good, understood as "an object that unites within itself the formal condition of all such ends as we ought to have (duty) with everything which is conditional upon ends we have and which conforms to duty (happiness proportioned to its observance)" (*RGV*, 6, p. 5.7ff). The idea of the highest good is a synthesis of, first, *all* duties of virtue and, second, the (imagined) final outcome that arises from universal virtuous conduct. In the last analysis, the highest good offers a picture of a world, where all human beings have 1. attained the perfection of virtue; 2. gained happiness as a reward for it.[6] In the Dialectic of the second *Critique* Kant writes incisively 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. … Now, inasmuch as virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person, and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes the *highest good* of a possible world, the highest good means the whole, the complete good. (*KpV*, 5, p. 110.27ff)

So, the *Metaphysics of Morals* focuses on the duties of virtue (goals of morality), the first Preface of the *Religion* treatise explores the ultimate aim of finite practical reason, the highest good.[7]

This is what distinguishes Kant's approach in the *Religion* vis-à-vis the approach in the *Metaphysics of Morals*: the aim of the highest good is synoptic in that it provides human beings with an indispensable (from the standpoint of reason) vision of the whole. In Kleingeld's words, thanks to the highest good, "instead of only looking at single maxims in isolation one thus obtains an all-encompassing end and sees one's individual moral efforts as contributions to that final end, the highest good" (1995, p. 106). But, as I would suggest, this whole is nothing other than the system of the duties of virtue (elaborated by Kant in the Doctrine of Virtue). As Kant explains, the highest good "does not increase the number of morality's duties" but serves as "a special point of reference for the unification of all ends" (*RGV*, 6, p. 5.23ff). The idea of the highest good, explains Kant, "meets our natural need, which would otherwise be a hindrance to moral resolve, to think for all of our doings and non-doings takes as a whole some sort of final end which reason can justify" (*RGV*, 6, p. 5.15ff). It is vital to note, then, that in the *Religion* treatise, too, the highest good acts as

6 Thus, the highest good answers the question: "what sort of world [a moral agent] would create, were this in his power, under the guidance of practical reason" (*RGV*, 6, p. 5.30f).

7 It is worth noting, however, that while the *Religion* treatise and the *Metaphysics of Morals* share, as it were, the starting point of the discussion of the virtue of self-perfection, the *Religion* proceeds from there to a discussion of grace and afterlife (e.g., it is only in eternity that perfect human virtue is conceivable, cf. Part II), not to mention Kant's discussion of an ethical community as a means of sustaining virtue (cf. Part III), while the *Metaphysics of Morals* does not.

the balancing force to the pathological goals that would otherwise hinder human commitment to duty. Ultimately, the highest good, in Kant's view, serves as a means to counterbalance humanity's inextirpable desire for happiness, which could potentially compete with virtue as a ground of motivation. This is achieved by promising human beings future happiness rethought as standing in a subordinate relationship to virtue. The highest good is a mechanism, as it were, for mitigating the pathological side of human nature by providing it with what it seeks "in rationalized form."[8] In this way, human practical agents find it easier to sacrifice pathological satisfaction for the sake of duty, and as I have already suggested, these sacrifices are often absolutely necessary. But this is not to say that the Kantian subject must completely turn her back on the pursuit of happiness. That is, although the pursuit of happiness could not be a duty in the strict sense for Kant, seeking happiness ought to be considered an indirect duty: "that of warding off poverty insofar as this is a great temptation to vice" (*GMS*, 4, p. 388.26ff).

It has become a classical objection to Kant that the highest good is an empty concept lacking specific content:

> For suppose I do all in my power – which is all any moral decree can demand of me – to promote the highest good, what am I to do? Simply act out of respect for the law, which I already knew. I can do absolutely nothing else toward apportioning happiness in accordance with desert – that is the task of a moral governor of the universe, not of a laborer in the vineyard. (Beck 1996, p. 244f)

But this criticism fails to recognize that the purpose of the highest good never was to introduce substantive content (besides the duties of virtue) but to offer a σύνοψις, as it were, a holistic view, of practical reason in the world. And although the concept of the highest good enables me to do "absolutely nothing else" than that "which I already knew," it is essential that, thanks to the highest good, I accede to a synoptic vision of the practical good. Consequently, as synoptic, Kant's highest good is nothing but a short-hand for the duties of virtue (in the *Metaphysics of Morals*) viewed from the perspective of the whole. In this way, the highest good could be thought as a *sui generis* duty of humankind: although no single human being could produce the highest good, it is, as Palmquist has it, "a harmonious whole that unites the multitude of different human wills" (2009, p. 16). The highest good is a whole resulting from the harmonious alignment of many (pursuing the duties of virtue): "though we each obey our private duty, we might indeed thereby derive an accidental agreement of all in a common good" (*RGV*, 6, p. 151.14ff). However, it is this difficulty of uniting the multitude of human intentions into a single whole that will compel (as I am about to

8 Once again, cf. Barney 2015, p. 164.

show) Kant to postulate God's existence (in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and elsewhere).

Kant's concept of the highest good is fraught with ambiguities, however, for it is not clear whether it pertains to a condition achievable in this world or a post-mortem beatitude. Relatedly, it remains uncertain whether the highest good ought to be understood as a regulative ideal (asymptotically approached) or something lending itself to complete actualization. At worst, Kant must view human trust in the realizability of the highest good as its own reward: in Schiller's words, "Hope thou hast felt, – thy wages, then, are paid."[9] Though in recent years the concept of the highest good as the post-mortem state of satisfaction has gained an upper hand in Kant scholarship, it is vital to remember that the import of practical faith for Kant is ultimately immanent, this-worldly. Tomaszewska puts it in a very fair way, "even the 'theological' readings of the highest good cannot wipe out the fact that Kant attributed a 'this-worldly' purpose to [faith] – namely, the moral improvement of finite rational agents" (2022, p. 168). For Kant, practical faith should not result in theological quietism or escapism, a patient waiting for the world to come (the sophism of lazy reason or ignava ratio, as it were): "If it is your fate to recover from this illness, then that will happen whether you employ a physician or not" (*KrV*, A689/B717. n.) Indeed, the moral good for Kant resides in a virtuous life in this world "rather than … salvation in the world to come – even if we should believe in the world to come to make sense of our moral efforts in this world" (Tomaszewska 2022, p. 132). From this perspective, therefore, whether human beings seek ultimate justice in the future (that is continuous with the present) or post-mortem, the objective of Kant's ethical framework is to participate in mutual beneficence and improvement in this life, in this world.

In the last analysis, this means that even if the highest good = post-mortem salvation, there is still a need for a σύνοψις (the gathering point) of practical goals in this life. There is still a need for the highest good in this world (however it is labeled, ultimately)! Though salvation in the world to come might be the ultimate object of human hope, it is essential for human reason to view its practical efforts in this world as effective and contributing to a whole. It would be impossible for human beings to not fall into despair, that is, were all practical intentions effectively swamped out by natural causes or the actions of other humans. As Korsgaard explains, "[in] the phenomenal world the results of our actions are determined not just by our own intentions, but by the forces of nature and the actions of other persons. Our attempts to realize the good are often diverted by these other forces" (1996, p. 28). But to think of best human efforts as effective (prevailing over nature, harmonizing with the

9 "Du hast gehofft, dein Lohn ist abgetragen." Then, the highest good *qua* mechanism for mitigating the pathological character of human beings would be, in the last analysis, a mechanism of deception.

actions of others) in the future, is to envisage nothing other than the highest good in this world or, at least, an (asymptotic) advance toward it. So, there is a sense in which Kant's practical system requires not one but two highest goods (paradoxically, perhaps): there is a post-mortem highest good (eternal bliss) in heaven, but there must also be a highest good in this life (advancement toward uprightness and reduction of suffering). It is this-worldly "highest good" that provides the σύνοψις of the essential goals of morality (the duties of virtue), and the difference between the highest good and the duties of virtue might ultimately be perspectival.

3 Kant's Other Prudence

In the opening of the Doctrine of Virtue Kant highlights a distinction between the duties of right and the duties of virtue. Duties of right prohibit actions; duties of virtue encourage actions. For example, the duty of truth-telling prohibits telling a lie under any circumstances; the duty of beneficence encourages taking part in the welfare of others. Significantly, when it comes to the duties of virtue, there is room for deliberation and choice: there exist multiple courses of action realizing the goal of pure practical reason. Kant explains it as something like the following:

> [If] the law can prescribe only the maxims of actions, not actions themselves, this is a sign that it leaves a playroom [Spielraum] (*latitudo*) for free choice in following (complying with) the law, that is, that the law cannot specify precisely in what way one is to act and how much one is to do by the action for an end that is also a duty. (*MS*, 6, p. 390.3ff)

At this juncture, facts of context, sensitivity to circumstance, make way into Kant's theory; virtue is not a matter of an algorithmic deployment but rather results from deliberation. As Timmermann explains, "in the realm of imperfect duty, moral action can be a complex affair. The ends prescribed by duty … need to be realized. This realization is driven by moral concerns, but the enactment is not itself moral" (2022, p. 74). The enactment of imperfect duties is, rather, a matter of instrumental or prudential deliberation. As far as the duty of self-perfection goes, for instance,

> no rational principle prescribes specifically *how* far one should go in cultivating one's capacities (in enlarging or correcting one's capacity for understanding, i.e., in acquiring knowledge or skill). Then too, the different situations in which human beings may find themselves make a human being's choice of the occupation for which he should cultivate his talents very much a matter for him to decide as he chooses. (*MS*, 6, p. 392.11ff)

Indeed, some actions are more effective in achieving the intended outcome while others, despite the best of intentions, may fall short. The full nature of an action only achieves transparency in retrospect, in light of those consequences (sometimes

unexpected) that it produces in the world. In the last analysis, Kant's Doctrine of Virtue is a matter of a flexible back-and-forth between maxims, actions and the mutable realm of human action.

Such is the place of judgment in Kant's Doctrine of Virtue: "because of the latitude it allows in its imperfect duties, [the Doctrine of Virtue] unavoidably leads to questions that call upon judgment to decide how a maxim is to be applied in particular cases" (*MS*, 6, p. 411.10ff). Kant defines practical judgment as a power "by which what is said in the rule universally (*in abstracto*) is applied to an action *in concreto*" (*KpV*, 5, p. 67.30ff).[10] In a footnote in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant underlines the association between practical judgment with prudence (Klugheit):

> [Duties] of virtue have a latitude in their application (*latitudinem*), and judgment [Urtheilskraft] can decide what is to be done only in accordance with rules of prudence [Regeln der Klugheit] (pragmatic rules), not in accordance with rules of morality (moral rules). In other words, what is to be done cannot be decided after the manner of narrow duty (*officium strictum*), but after the manner of wide duty (*officium latum*). (*MS*, 6, p. 433.n)

There is a gap between the universal and the concrete at the heart of Kant's Doctrine of Virtue, and practical judgment or, equivalently, prudence seeks to bridge this gap.[11] This is the latitude (playroom) for judgment in the duties of virtue; prudence does not rival the moral imperative but enables it to operate in variable circumstances. Prudence is foresight anticipating the course of action that will be most effective from the standpoint of virtue. When it is a matter of prudential deliberation, "judgment [Urtheilskraft] provides another (subordinate [untergeordnete]) maxim (and one can always ask for yet another principle for applying this maxim to cases that may arise)" (*MS*, 6, p. 411.15ff).[12] Although this potential infinite regress (endemic to judgment) is paradoxical, and Kant himself recognizes it in the first *Critique* (cf. *KrV*, A133/B172f), Kant's solution is to treat judgment as a natural gift or a special

10 Yet, nothing like a theory of practical judgment is offered in the second *Critique* by Kant. As Herman has it (2018), Kant "does not offer an account of how practical judgment is to select one rather than another way of enacting principles of duty. An adequate account of practical judgment should surely offer more" (p. 132).

11 Kant's association of the power of judgment with prudence is neither accidental nor limited to the Aristotle footnote in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (6, p. 433.n). Cf., for example, 25, p. 1296.28f; 25, p. 1481.18ff; 25, p. 539.14f; *R* 6195, 19, p. 205.17f (Kant also discusses Christina of Sweden in this context in *VA*, 7, p. 198). See also *TP*, 8, p. 276.9ff. Concerning this association, see Schwaiger 1999, p. 118, as well as p. 139, but also Graband 2015, p. 182. Cf. also Nelson 2004, p. 312, who completely misses Kant's association of prudence and practical judgment (although practical judgment might be broader than Klugheit in scope.)

12 Cf. O'Neil 1983, p. 394. As Klein (2021, 87) puts it: "The power of judgment acts by giving a maxim that helps one to choose the appropriate means for a particular situation."

talent. Prudence could not be taught, though it could be refined (sharpened) by experience.[13] There is no algorithm encompassing the application of practical maxims; in an unpredictable world of human action, the sole recourse is *Klugheit*.

In the first *Critique* or the second *Critique* Kant does not distinguish between kinds of judgment; in the *Critique of Judgment*, on the other hand, Kant introduces a new species of judgment, reflective judgment. Indeed, there are not one but two species of judgment in Kant's third *Critique*:

> The power of judgment in general is the faculty for thinking of the particular as contained under the universal. If the universal (the rule, the principle, the law) is given, then the power of judgment, which subsumes the particular under it … is determining. If, however, only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found, then the power of judgment is merely reflective. (*KU*, 5, p. 179.19ff)

Though Kant's categories (introduced in the *Critique of Pure Reason*) provide the spatial-temporal framework for the objects of perception, it is not possible to derive nature's diverse forms from the categories. "Particular laws, because they concern empirically determined appearances, cannot be completely derived from the categories, although they all stand under them" (*KrV*, B165).[14] So, there is a gap between the categories (the universal) and nature's diverse shapes and forms (the particular), which reflective judgment seeks to bridge by fitting nature's diverse forms to the pure concepts. If there are many modifications of the categories in experience, then reflective judgment is called upon to discover them and bring them to conceptualization. In seeking to attune the moral imperative to variable practical situations, Kant's prudence must combine the functions of reflective and determining judgment. Since the application of a wide duty is not entailed by the law, practical judgment must first appraise a practical case: for example, having noticed miserable poverty, the beneficent agent must decide whether to intervene or not (and if so, to judge how). This is where reflective judgment enters the scene, for it is not enough to judge that poverty calls for beneficence: in Klein's words, "circumstances must be evaluated in order for the state to decide if it should provide housing to the poor or give them a certain amount of money so that they might choose for themselves where to settle" (2021, p. 92).[15] Providing subordinate maxims is not just a matter of determining judgment issuing directives from above, as it were; it also requires the bottom-up approach of Kant's reflective judgment. In the *Critique of Judgment* Kant seems to recognize the existence of the practical power of reflective judgment (to which I will return):

13 Cf. Klein 2021, p. 84.

14 Cf. Guyer 1997, p. 37.

15 Cf. also Timmermann 2022, p. 73.

> [for] the theoretical power of reflective judgment, the physical teleology from the ends of nature was sufficient to prove an intelligent world-cause [although the proof is not entirely adequate]; for the practical power of reflective judgment, this is accomplished by moral teleology by means of the concept of a final end which it is compelled to attribute to creation from a practical point of view. (*KU*, 5, p. 456.11ff)

This is how prudence prepares the duties of virtue for practical application in the medium of contingency, by fitting the particular to the universal.[16] As Klein has it, "prudence stands as a central element of mediation between what should be done (the realm of freedom) and what is (the realm of nature, in the sense of the empirical conditions that frame the possible choices for our action in a specific situation)" (2021, p. 88).

Clearly, the prudence that Kant introduces in the Doctrine of Virtue ought not to be confused with the prudence that Kant "destroys" in the *Groundwork* (the hypothetical imperative of happiness).[17] So, while in the *Groundwork* Kant opposes the hypothetical imperatives of prudence to the moral imperative (as its rival), in the Doctrine of Virtue Kant recognizes the indispensable function that practical judgment fulfills in the execution of imperfect duties (ultimately, the highest good as the gathering point of the duties of virtue). As Brandt has it, "the categorical imperative of a wide or imperfect duty, which requires the cultivation of mental powers as well as prudence [Klugheit], is not to be confused with the domain of the hypothetical imperatives of prudence" (2005, p. 118). At this juncture, there are not one but two species (or, better, regimes or modes) of prudence in Kant's thought: on the one hand, there is eudaimonistic prudence ("destroyed' by Kant), on the other hand, there is the "other" prudence of the Doctrine of Virtue.[18] At the end of the day, it is one and the same prudence (as a genus) that could be aimed at either happiness (self-love) or virtue, but it is prudence in the regime of virtue that attunes the moral imperative to the variable circumstances of an unpredictable world, furnishing it with a foresight (by no means unfailing) that it would otherwise lack.

4 From Prudence to Providence

There is an essential difference between reflective and determining species of judgment, and this difference has a crucial role in shaping how prudence operates in

16 See also Timmermann 2022, p. 51.

17 Kant expels this prudence outside of the field of practical philosophy in the strict sense in the unpublished Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment*: *EEKU*, 20, p. 199, but also *MS,* 6, p. 217. On this point, see Aubenque 2014, p. 203, but also Timmermann 2022, p. 48: "Kant banishes instrumental reason from the realm of practical reason altogether."

18 As Timmermann (2022) suggests, prudence thus understood fulfills "an auxiliary role … in moral thought and action" (46).

Kant's thought. As Kant explains in the Introduction to the *Critique of Judgment* that, unlike the determining species of judgment, reflective judgment requires a transcendental *a priori* principle. This foundational principle for the reflective power of judgment (in its theoretical mode) is known as the principle of nature's purposiveness. Since nature's diverse shapes and laws are not derivable from the categories, nothing guarantees that nature will exhibit sufficient order (lending itself to empirical concept formation). Outside of the categories, there remains an enormous *a posteriori* realm, potentially so diverse as to make it impossible to organize it into concepts. Kant paints a counterfactual picture of a nature, dazzling in its diversity, exceeding human comprehension (a cognitive "nightmare" scenario):

> For it may certainly be thought that, in spite of all the uniformity of things in nature in accordance with the universal laws, without which the form of an experiential cognition in general would not obtain at all, the specific diversity of empirical laws of nature together with their effects could nevertheless be so great that it would be impossible for our understanding to discover in them an order that we can grasp, to divide its products into genera and species in order to use the principles for the explanation and the understanding of one for the explanation and comprehension of the other as well, and to make an interconnected experience out of material that is for us so confused (strictly speaking, only infinitely manifold and not fitted for our power of comprehension). (*KU*, 5, p. 185.23ff)

Kant introduces the principle of nature's purposiveness in response to the "nightmare" scenario, and it runs something like the following: "for all things in nature empirically determinate concepts can be found" (*EEKU*, 20, p. 211.26f).[19] Thus, it stipulates nothing other than nature's fittedness for human cognition, nature's "suitability for … the power of judgment … for finding in the immeasurable multiplicity of things in accordance with possible empirical laws sufficient kinship among them to enable them to be brought under empirical concepts (classes)" (*EEKU*, 20, p. 215.18ff). This is why the principle is an *a priori* principle, meaning that it cannot be borrowed from experience but must exist prior to it, requiring a transcendental deduction.[20]

Kant's deduction of purposiveness in the *Critique of Judgment* is unlike Kant's deduction of the categories (in the *Critique of Pure Reason*). It has an objective and universal basis, because it responds to human reason's essential need: the experience of nature. Since the understanding lacks the legislative power over the natural

19 Cf. Allison 2003, p. 170f, on Kant's articulation of the principle of nature's formal purposiveness in *EEKU*, 20, p. 211 and the associated footnote.

20 Such is the link between systematicity (requisite for concept formation, that is, sorting natural objects into genera and species) and purposiveness: nature is only cognizable if it is a system, but nature is only a system if it is designed (or conceived thus). In this regard, Kant's purposiveness just means "designedness": "the correspondence of a thing with that constitution of things that is possible only in accordance with ends" (*KU*, 5, p. 180.32ff).

realm, however, the "purposiveness" principle is only a subjective, regulative maxim. It is, in other words, but a self-imposed guideline for reflection on nature's empirical forms (though this does not prevent Kant from treating it as a real transcendental principle). Kant's deduction of purposiveness

> does not seek to show that the world actually contains kinds of unity and completeness – which would amount to its being systematically governed by unitary and comprehensible laws, as though purposively designed. Instead, it aims to show that we are justified in proceeding as if it did, and indeed that we must believe (or 'presuppose') that it does. (Walker 2006, p. 247)

So, it looks like Kant's principle by no means offers an ontological remedy to the "nightmare" scenario; it only provides the human being with the assurance (confidence), indispensable for the power of judgment, that nature is comprehensible, graspable.[21]

Insofar as reflective judgment in Kant requires a transcendental principle (purposiveness), and Kantian prudence incorporates reflecting judgment, it would not be surprising if prudence, too, required a transcendental principle, something akin to the principle of nature's purposiveness (for human cognition). But if Kant introduces the principle of nature's purposiveness by way of the "nightmare" scenario (nature's incomprehensible chaos), nowhere in his ethics does Kant seem to present an equivalent scenario. Or so it seems.

It would make a lot of sense, I submit, to interpret Kant's Antinomy of Practical Reason (in the second *Critique*) as pointing toward something like a practical "nightmare" scenario. Fairly recently, such readings of the practical antinomy have been offered by Korsgaard and Sussman – that is what I base my reading of Kant's practical faith on. The antithesis of Kant's practical antinomy claims that virtue does not necessarily result in happiness in the phenomenal world:

> any practical connection of causes and effects in the world, as a result of the determination of the will, does not depend upon the moral dispositions of the will but upon knowledge of the laws of nature and the physical ability to use them for one's purposes; consequently, no necessary connection of happiness with virtue in the world, adequate to the highest good, can be expected from the most meticulous observance of moral laws. (*KpV*, 5, p. 113.29ff)

Ostensibly, this means that my decisions and choices seldom yield the outcomes that I intend, ultimately, the highest good (the ultimate object of a morally determined will). External factors and causes frequently jeopardize humans' best efforts at

21 In Butts' (1990) words, "[what] reflection needs is assurance that the conditions of its own employment can be satisfied … We want epistemological surety that there are discoverable empirical laws" (p. 7f).

attaining the highest good – this is how the antithesis of Kant's practical antinomy plays out in practical life.[22]

So, it is difficult to see how the highest good might be realized by human beings, despite the best of intentions. It seems like a fantastical, futile project. This is how Korsgaard breaks down Kant's practical antinomy in the second *Critique*:

> In the phenomenal world the results of our actions are determined not just by our own intentions, but by the forces of nature and the actions of other persons. Our attempts to realize the good are often diverted by these other forces. It is this that gives rise to the antinomy. … [If] your attempts are always diverted by other forces, that thought [the Highest Good] is, as Kant says, false and fantastic. (Korsgaard 1996, p. 28f)

If phenomenal nature "[gives] our acts all sorts of unintended consequences, effectively swamping out or neutralizing any real contribution [to the Highest Good]," then the highest good is certainly unrealizable (Sussman 2001, p. 142).[23] Beiser writes incisively, and in a similar vein: "No single individual alone, no matter how fortunate or virtuous … could ever be sure of taking one step toward the Highest Good. He could not know that others would assist him; and even if they did, he could not know that nature or fortune would ever cooperate" (2006, p. 598).[24]

It is possible to raise an objection against this reconstruction of Kant's practical antinomy: the picture of a recalcitrant, hostile nature contradicts the experience of practical life. This is how Sussman articulates this objection: "The world seems to display a comprehensible degree of order, and … the differences that most of our acts make do not go very far beyond what we can anticipate" (2001, p. 143). As far as the form of the objection is concerned, the same criticism has been waged against Kant's deduction of the principle of nature's purposiveness: Kant's "nightmare" scenario of a nature exceeding human cognition is meaningless, since the realm of *a posteriori* nature is stable enough for humans to generate concepts (which is what they successfully do all the time). Kant's transcendental principle of purposiveness might indeed appear as superfluous, redundant: "Why isn't nature's conceptualizability something that we come to discover through our success in conceptualizing it, rather than something that we have to assume in advance of our conceptualizing activity?" (Ginsborg 2017, p. 72). By the same token, Teufel suggests: "[the] threat of chaos envisioned is ultimately rooted in ontology, while the transcendental-philosophical

22 As Timmermann (2022) has it, "what is prudent is difficult to ascertain because of manifold uncertainties of our fate" (p. 72).

23 See also Korsgaard 1996, p. 28f. In addition to the *Dialectic of Practical Reason*, Korsgaard seems to rely on §87 of the *Critique of Judgment*: *KU*, 5, p. 452.20ff. I believe that in underlining the social aspect of the practical antinomy ("the actions of other persons") Korsgaard must have Section 3 of the *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* in mind. Cf. also Sussman 2001, p. 141.

24 See also Hare 2000, p. 470.

solution proffered is purely epistemic" (Teufel 2017, p. 114). So, it seems that insofar as Kant's "purposiveness" deduction is subjective, it provides an assurance that is empty (without ontological impact). So, if the issue in Kant's "purposiveness" deduction is ontological, indeed, the subjective principle of purposiveness could not be a successful remedy for it. But Kant still includes a deduction of nature's purposiveness in the *Critique of Judgment*, meaning that he views it as indispensable for reflective judgment. For although nature *de facto* displays sufficient order and stability for human cognition to be possible, Kant's concern is *not* nature's empirical stability but subjective doxic attitude. That is, Kant's "purposiveness" principle only assures human beings that they have an ability to organize nature into concepts, without regard to nature's receptiveness to knowledge. And this must be an essential component of human cognitive makeup, answering to Kant's "realizability" principle (in its theoretical mode), staving off the threat of a "theoretical despair" as it were.

My interpretation of the logic of Kant's "purposiveness" deduction is indirectly confirmed by the Dialectic of the second *Critique*: as Kant reveals only very late in the Dialectic, the practical antinomy is not that the highest good is ontologically impossible; it is, rather, that the highest good appears as a Sisyphean task. Kant explains that "the impossibility referred to is *merely subjective*, that is, our reason finds it *impossible for it* to conceive, in the mere course of nature, a connection so exactly proportioned and so thoroughly purposive between events occurring in the world [as to be sufficient for the highest good]" (*KpV*, 5, p. 145.9ff). Ultimately, the antithesis of Kant's practical antinomy has to do with subjective, doxic attitude: no rational being would embark on the project of the highest good, if this project *seemed* destined to fail (no matter the objective possibility of the highest good). Kant formulates this idea as a principle of sorts (for example, in the *Critique of Judgment*): "reason cannot command the pursuit of an end which is known to be nothing but a phantom of the mind" (*KU*, 5, p. 472.25f). Herein lies Kant's principle of realizability (in Willaschek's words), which spells out the irrationality of seeking after the unrealizable: for Kant, it is not "rational to pursue an end the realization of which one takes to be impossible" (2016, p. 228).

This means: to solve the practical antinomy for Kant is to assure practical reason that outcomes (consequences) will not be utterly divorced from intentions.[25] Otherwise, human practical reason would be rendered dysfunctional, losing the very capacity to intend actions in the phenomenal world. (By the same token, what Kant's "purposiveness" principle provides human beings with is the assurance that

25 As some commentators have pointed out, Kant's model of rationality might be too strong, exigent here: "one may … wonder whether Kant is not employing an overly strong model of rationality here. … [For] a reason to believe that a venture must be successful may be more motivation than we generally need to make undertaking it rational" (Guyer 1997, p. 44).

conceptualizing nature is not a Sisyphean task.) It is vital to note here that, as far as human actions are concerned, the issue is not that the stability of the laws of nature might be overturned; rather, the issue is the irreducible possibility of unintended consequences, especially in the long term (as Kosrgaard has explained it, "the results of our actions are determined not just by our own intentions, but by … the actions of other persons [too]"). If I could not take for granted that the consequences of my actions will be as I anticipate them (frequently, and to a sufficient degree), I could not attribute purposes and intentions to myself, I could not employ the intentional idiom, in the first place – practical reason would be destroyed.[26] At this juncture, what is at stake for Kant in the practical antinomy is the very possibility of the practical use of reason – such is my strong, transcendental reading of Kant's antinomy of practical reason. Let me develop this reading of Kant's moral theology a bit further.

There is only one way (available to human beings) to remedy the intractability of nature, and it is the postulate of a beneficent God providentially controlling nature.[27] This is Kant's theological solution: God rescues (vindicates) human attempts at producing the good (that are frequently jeopardized by chance). As Beiser has it,

> What we … need, Kant believes, is that fundamental Christian virtue: hope, or faith in divine grace and providence. We can believe that all our efforts to create a better world will come to something … only if we also assume that there is a divine providence. (2006, p. 604)

This is how divine providence supports (fortifies) human virtue in the Kantian system, by assuring at once the (eventual) fruitfulness of practical efforts in this world and the reward of happiness in the next life (salvation).[28] At this juncture, the purpose of Kantian providence is, for lack of a better expression, "narrative": the structure of providence gathers human actions dispersed in time into a coherent, meaningful whole. By inscribing experience in the providential structure, Kantian faith resolves the Sisyphean time of practical reason in the highest good (be it *post-*

26 Cf. Sussman 2001, p. 170ff.

27 In a certain way, it is not necessary to believe in the existence of God explicitly to promote the Highest Good; it is enough to view nature as potentially accommodating the Highest Good. However, in the final reckoning, the only possible explanation of how nature could possibly accommodate the Highest Good is the existence of a providential God behind the scenes. For a similar logic, cf. Goy's demarcation of biology (which relies implicitly on certain theological assumptions) from theology: "Kant, in his philosophy of biology, consciously does not raise questions that transcend biological investigation: for instance, the question of the ultimate origin of organized nature, and the question of whether the creative elements of nature (formative power and organized materials) themselves are created. Again, this does not rule out the possibility of a theological grounding of organized nature. It simply marks the border between distinct fields of scientific investigation." (2014, pp. 210f).

28 It is interesting that Kant almost never uses the term "providence" in the *Critiques*. Zammito (1992) explains that it "may be simply a question of stylistic grace and common usage" (p. 329).

mortem or immanent to this life).[29] If Kantian God arranges isolated events in time for culmination in the highest good, then no moral effort is fruitless, wasted, and there is genuine hope for salvation (beatitude) in the next life (to inspire virtuous conduct in this world). In this way, faith neutralizes the temptations of self-love in this life (by promising greater happiness *post-mortem*) just as it convinces humans that virtue makes a difference in this world (but possibly only in a distant future).

Frequently, Kant's postulate of God's existence is understood as (using Pasternack's phrasing) "a buttress that helps maintain our commitment to morality" (2014, p. 52). Since human beings are vulnerable in the face of senseless chance, they require extra support: practical faith. Zammito explains: "The core of Kant's argument is the suggestion that man needed Divine Providence in order psychologically to motivate the actual will to persist in the course of virtue" (1992, p. 340). I would like to suggest a stronger reading of Kant's postulate of God's existence, however – that's what I refer to as a transcendental reading of the practical antinomy.[30] Or else, Kant's postulate will remain a mere psychological tool for "[increasing] our effectiveness in the performance of our duty" (Guyer 2000, p. 363).[31] As a result, the significance of Kantian theology would be diminished, as if faith "were just a matter of 'individual need'" (Kuehn 2002, p. 3).[32] In other words, if practical faith only strengthens commitment to the good, then *ex hypothesi* Kantian virtue must be possible even without the postulate of God's existence. Then, the issue with the Righteous Atheist (for example, Spinoza) in §87 of the third *Critique*, who succumbs to despair, would be not atheism but insufficient righteousness (though this defect might be constitutive, unavoidable for finite practical agents such as human beings). By contrast, I would insist that Kantian providence must be viewed as an *a priori* transcendental concept, which, although ultimately a subjective maxim, makes finite practical reason possible in the first place. Although Kant himself does not articulate the postulate of God's existence in these terms, I believe that this is a natural (necessary) development of his philosophical position. If practical reason is related to theoretical reason – there must only be one reason for Kant at the end of the day (otherwise, Kant would be using the term "reason" equivocally) – then it, too, must require a principle guaranteeing that the conditions for its employment are satisfied. If the

29 To echo Augustine, no failure is so great that it cannot be subsumed by Providence: cf. *Enchiridion*, XI.

30 As Zammito (1992) himself admits, "psychological need is not a logical argument" (p. 340).

31 For Guyer, the postulate of God's existence is precisely such an instrument.

32 See Kuehn 2002, p. 3: "Though in his philosophy [Kant] had held out hope for eternal life and a future state, in his personal life he had been cold to such ideas. … It was clear to anyone who knew Kant personally that he had no faith in a personal God. Having postulated God and immortality, he himself did not believe in either. His considered opinion was that such beliefs were just a matter of 'individual need.' Kant himself felt no such need."

lesson of Kant's philosophy of nature is that "nature" as an object of research (experience) is only possible thanks to the theological assumption of intelligent design, Kant's practical system, too, exhibits a reliance on the theology of providence. Nature's purposiveness assures that nature will yield to cognition and concept formation; just so, Kantian providence assures that nature *will not be as intractable so as to expose (jeopardize) the very intentional structure of practical reason.* It's not just about overcoming temporary setbacks and losses, frustrating and demoralizing as setbacks may be. Nor does it matter for Kant's argument that the natural world displays in experience sufficient stability for human action. Kantian providence ensures that the natural order is *a priori* permeable to human intentions, as it were, *before* any empirical evidence even becomes available.[33] This is what is required for finite practical reason to trust in its own material effectiveness in the world (in the face of an unforeseeable future). There is no independent evidence available for establishing that trust, for it must precede action altogether – this is why God's providence must be understood as a transcendental *a priori* principle, not entirely unlike, say, the principle of substance.[34]

Indeed, I would go as far as to argue that this providential framework is unavoidable for all finite rational agents: practical faith makes possible not only Kantian virtue but practical reason *simpliciter*. So, the very possibility of practical reason is grounded in the assumption of God's providence; empirical practical reason, too, requires providential trust (as a bulwark against chance); otherwise, my trust in future consequences would be entirely unjustified. Correspondingly, alongside its other objectives, Kant's theology seeks to limit God's providential control to the highest good: Kant does so by introducing the distinction between faith and idolatry. (This, I would argue, only further confirms, albeit indirectly, my "strong" interpretation of Kant's postulate of God's providence.) Kant shows that the only conceivable final end of creation (providence) resides in the highest good, so appealing to providence only makes sense when pursuing the highest good. In simple terms: God, as Kant understands him, couldn't care less about the human pursuit of happiness, talent or effort! So, to implore God's aid in the eudaimonistic pursuit of happiness amounts to nothing other than idolatry: "a superstitious delusion that the highest being can be satisfied by means other than a moral disposition" (*KU*, 5:459.20ff). Though idolatry is as endemic to the condition of finite rational beings as self-love, in Kant's ethics eudaimonism is left without recourse to God's providence.

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33 This metaphor of permeability I borrow (at least, in part) from Brague 1997, p. 10.

34 It is vital to recognize, however, that Kant's category of substance is constitutive, while the idea of providence is regulative (although, as I am about to show, the assumption of providence is still *practically* constitutive, for actions sustained by the regulative principle of God's providence are actions *all the same*).

Thus, eudaimonism collapses against the arbitrariness of chance. This is how Kant delimits practical faith in §91 of the *Critique of Judgment*:

> The affirmation involved in matters of faith, however, is an affirmation in a purely practical respect, i.e., a moral faith which proves nothing for the theoretical cognition of pure reason, but only for its practical cognition, directed at the fulfillment of its duties, and does not extend speculation or the rules of practical prudence in accordance with the principle of self-love at all [die praktischen Klugheitsregeln nach dem Princip der Selbstliebe]. (*KU*, 5, p. 470.5ff).

Not only does Kant forbid treating the postulate of God's providence as speculative knowledge but he also demarkates practical faith from eudaimonistic prudence (stemming from self-love). Since pure practical reason only endorses those actions that, at the very least, do not conflict with virtue, it only issues the warrant, as it were, for providential faith for the purposes of virtuous conduct. This is of utmost significance: if Kant did not recognize the unavoidability of the providential framework for practical reason *simpliciter*, then he would not be concerned about limiting God's providence to the promotion of the highest good. In turn, if Kant were not concerned about limiting God's providence to the highest good, then the *Critique of Judgment* would not have contained Kant's objection to idolatry and eudaimonism. So, the upshot is: Kant's providential God, the object of practical faith, never aids those eudaimonists who seek happiness as the *summum bonum*.

In the *Critique of Practical Reason* Kant's postulate of God's existence stems from reason; yet, in the *Critique of Judgment* Kant refashions it as stemming from reflective judgment. Kant explains that the assumption that God exists is "made merely for the power of judgment, in accordance with concepts of practical reason, and that as such it is made for the reflective and not for the determining power of judgment" (*KU*, 5, p. 455.21ff).[35] Since the assumption does not postulate God's existence as a knowledge claim, Kant's moral proof indeed belongs to the reflective power of judgment. In this way, Kant reinscribes the postulate of God's existence into the "purposiveness" framework. As Kant has it, the moral proof establishes nothing less than nature's purposiveness, in this instance nature's purposiveness for the highest good: "an intelligent supreme principle for that relation of nature to what is moral in us, in order to represent *nature as purposive even in relation to the morally internal legislation and its possible execution*" (*KU*, 5, p. 448.3ff, my emphasis). But

35 There is nothing surprising about Kant re-classifying the postulate as an assumption of the reflective power of judgment, for the postulate only intends certain practical consequences without establishing knowledge *stricto sensu*: "such an assumption, made in the interest of consistent moral thinking, does not determine anything with regard to the existence of God from a theoretical point of view. The moral proof is not a performance of the determining power of judgment" (Tomasi 2016, p. 125). Cf. also Brandt 2007, pp. 486f.

Kant's reinscription of the postulate of God's existence in the framework of reflective judgment produces an intriguing anomaly:

> But when it comes to the practical sphere, such a regulative principle (for prudence or wisdom [für die Klugheit oder Weisheit]) – namely, to act in conformity with something as an end, which given the constitution of our cognitive faculties can only be conceived by us as possible in a certain way – is at the same time constitutive, i.e., practically determining; for the very same thing things which is by no means theoretically determining as a principle for judging the objective possibility of things (the principle, namely, that the only kind of possibility that pertains to our faculty of thinking also pertains to the object) is rather a merely regulative principle for the reflective power of judgment. (*KU*, 5, p. 457.15ff)

In the practical sphere, the regulative versus constitution distinction dissolves, as it were, for actions guided by the regulative principle of God's providence are actions *all the same* (alternatively, God's providence is simultaneously regulative and constitutive). Such is the double nature of Kant's practical postulate in the third *Critique*: the assumption of providence is constitutive from the practical standpoint; otherwise, it is a principle of reflection (in excess of human knowledge). More specifically – and this is crucial for my purposes – Kant suggests that the assumption of providence provides a constitutive (practical) principle for wisdom *or prudence* (*Klugheit*).[36] While Kant identifies wisdom with pure practical reason, it is fascinating that Kant introduces prudence in this context: surely this prudence must refer to a prudence other than that stemming from self-love! By this stage, it should be clear that Kant's prudence in the Doctrine of Virtue and his moral proof for God's existence (divine providence) address the same underlying issue: nature's intractability to just outcomes and the highest good.[37] It appears that there might be a hidden bond (left undeveloped by Kant) between prudence and providence in the *Critique of Judgment*: the assumption of providence provides humans with the (transcendental) confidence that prudence is capable of grappling with (and occasionally conquering) senseless chance.

Recall Kant's apparent introduction of reflective practical judgment in § 88 of the *Critique of Judgment* (*KU*, 5, p. 456.11ff): it has been objected that practical reflective judgment is Kant's *ad hoc* invention, and the *Critique of Judgment* indeed creates the impression that the determining versus reflective judgment distinction only really applies to theoretical judgment.[38] But while it is a veritable ἅπαξ λεγόμενον in Kant's thought, somewhat anomalistic and undeveloped, I would suggest that reflective practical judgment is crucial for Kant's theory of the Highest

36 This is indeed a rarely noticed claim of Kant: cf. Klein 2021, p. 88, fn. 61.

37 I borrow this expression from Sussman 2001, p. 141: "the unpredictability and general intractability of the world."

38 See Brandt 2007, p. 398.

Good: the *simultaneously* regulative and constitutive idea of providence provides human beings with the trust that prudence could grapple with and occasionally conquer fortune. And is the recognition of contingency in practical matters not a surer, indeed unavoidable, path to something like reflective practical judgment – also understood as prudence – in the most proper sense (which would then require its own *a priori* principle, just like reflective theoretical judgment vis-à-vis empirical nature, which Kant's second *Critique* has already elaborated under the name of the postulate of God's existence)?

This is the final synthesis of Kant's ethical thought in the *Critique of Judgment*: if the concept of the highest good is no more than the gathering point of Kant's moral teleology, then by necessity prudence stands in a transitive relation to the highest good, indeed to Kant's providence.[39] So, in Kant's view, human prudence and virtue would not be possible without the (transcendental) encouragement of providence: Kantian providence makes human prudence possible in the climate of chance (otherwise, despair would be unavoidable). Although God's providence is not a substitute for human prudence – it is up to human beings to steer a course for the highest good – for Kant, *acting prudently against chance requires having faith (trust) in God's providence*. Once again, providential faith does not directly guide me in deciding the best way to promote the Highest Good – it only convinces me that my prudent efforts will not be wasted. Indeed, to act is to have faith that my actions will bear the results that I anticipate, and this faith would be empty without the assumption of God's providential control of the cosmos.

5 Concluding Remarks

As I have tried to show in this article, Kant's Critical philosophy redefines the antithesis between human prudence and divine providence: human prudence has no place in a world under God's providence. "The Latin authors were not misguided in translating the φρόνησις of Aristotle and the Greek folk tradition by 'prudentia,' which is, as Cicero reminds us, is a contracted form of 'providentia,'" explains Aubenque in *La prudence chez Aristote*, "for prudence is a human substitute for a failing providence" (1963, p. 95). Aubenque insists on this very original meaning of φρόνησις: prudence is concerned with furnishing a course of action in a world, whose future is undetermined and unforeseeable (for Aristotle, in the sublunary realm).[40] It would be meaningless in a universe whose future is eternally ordered by a timeless decree of a providential God – this is how Aristotle establishes an

39 On this point, see also Klein 2021, p. 90.

40 Cf. Kirkland 2007, p. 130, but also Nussbaum 2001, p. 333.

antithetical relationship between prudence and providence.[41] The domain of Aristotelian φρόνησις is, for lack of a better term, an abandoned world (without providence), a world in which human beings are abandoned to φρόνησις – such is the cosmology of (Aristotelian) prudence. "Left to his own devices by a God [the Prime Mover] removed from the world" writes Aubenque, "the human being has to struggle with the contingency that he cannot completely dominate."[42] But this contingency at once invites human action: a universe without providence is a universe in which human φρόνησις *might* make a difference. Outside this cosmology of chance, the significance of prudence is virtually nullified: for example, and as Aubenque himself shows, while the conceptual identity of φρόνησις is nominally preserved in Stoicism, prudence does not carry the same significance in a Stoic universe. Since for the Stoics the future is determined by a providential God, it is not open to human intervention, to human prudence. As it turns out, φρόνησις in the original (Aristotelian) sense could only survive in a very specific "sublunary" environment of an undetermined, unforeseeable future.

But this picture is transformed profoundly in Kant's Critical philosophy: because nature seems inherently unconcerned with (and frequently impervious to) human intentions (so, Kant places human practical reason in a "sublunary" realm, as it were), Kant insists that human beings require faith in a providential God to engage practically with the world. It is as if human beings could not face the unpredictable, uncertain future without trusting in the providential governance of the world: God's providence guarantees that the natural (phenomenal) order is permeable to human intentions, and that human actions might make a difference in it. In this way, Kantian prudence regains the function of coping with an undetermined future; yet, Kant recognizes that it is God's providence that ultimately makes prudence possible. Human practical reason has this need in the face of a contingent future: the expectation that the future will not be irremediably disastrous (or inscrutable). But the assumption of providence does not entail God's intervention in the "sublunary" world; it, rather, only brings about the conviction that prudence could grapple with, even triumph over, chance (although complete control of chance is impossible). Thus, Kant outlines a singular relationship between providence and prudence in his theology and ethics: the condition for the possibility of the highest good is the assumption of God's providence governing nature, and so providence and prudence in Kant are no longer competitors. On the contrary, in Kant's thought 'prudentia' is a contraction of 'providentia' not in the sense that prudence is a human substitute for God's (absent) providence but in the sense that prudence and providence are, as it were, drawn together (from "contractiō" and "contrahere," drawing together) as collaborators.

41 See Aristotle, *EE*, VIII, 2, 1248a31ff, for his discussion. Cf. also Aubenque 1963, p. 75.

42 Aubenque 1963, p. 176.

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I use the English translations of these texts from *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992 –), with occasional minor modifications.

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