

## A DEFENCE OF THE NEED FOR THE POSTULATES OF THE EXISTENCE OF GOD AND IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL IN KANT'S ETHICS

UMA DEFESA DA NECESSIDADE DOS POSTULADOS DA  
EXISTÊNCIA DE DEUS E DA IMORTALIDADE DA ALMA  
NA ÉTICA DE KANT

Humberto Schubert Coelho

**Abstract:** The ideas of the immortality of the soul and of God as the guarantor of moral order are proposed by Kant as postulates of practical reason, figuring among the most hotly debated points of his philosophy. Traditionally, the main charge against the postulates lies in the supposition that they are unnecessary and, arguably, cultural additions to an otherwise stable and laudable proof of moral autonomy and the moral law. In this paper, however, with some support from Johann G. Fichte and Karl L. Reinhold, I argue that both postulates, as depicted in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, are in fact logically necessary within the Kantian framework for the rational consistency of the world.

**Keywords:** Immortality of the soul; critical ethics; religion; postulates.

**Resumo:** Figurando entre os pontos mais calorosamente debatidos da filosofia, as ideias de imortalidade da alma e de Deus como garantidor da ordem moral foram propostas por Kant como postulados da razão prática. Tradicionalmente, o principal ataque contra os postulados parte da pressuposição de que eles seriam adições desnecessárias e, possivelmente, puramente culturais ao que, de outro modo, já seria uma prova estável e respeitável da autonomia e da lei moral. Neste artigo, no entanto, com apoio de referências de Johann G. Fichte e Karl L. Reinhold, argumento que ambos os postulados da Crítica da razão prática são, de fato, logicamente necessários para garantir a consistência racional do mundo dentro da estrutura filosófica kantiana.

**Palavras-chave:** Imortalidade da alma; ética crítica; religião; postulados.

## THE PROBLEM THAT GIVES RISE TO THE POSTULATES:

After realizing the weakness of ethical theories in the face of the challenge imposed by the most recent sceptical criticisms thereof, primarily as a consequence of accusations by Hume, Immanuel Kant embarked upon the extenuating endeavour of presenting true scientific grounds for morality.

The design of a critique of practical reason essentially consists of the defence and analysis of the possibility of the will being the foundation of change for itself, constituting moral autonomy and self-determination of the rational being without any driving force other than the consciousness of the practical function of reason in respect of its means of choice and execution of actions, worthy of the status of rational beings [KpV 15].

The powers of practical reason, however, are not exhausted in this ground-breaking task, also suggesting, therefore, a complement of meaning and a justification of morality in terms of practical life and the universal search for happiness [KpV 107-113].

The consequence is that practical reason necessarily conceives a kind of adequacy between happiness and merit that only good will, expressed as virtue, can provide<sup>1</sup>. Thus Kant defines as the highest good (*summum bonum*) this rational expectation of harmony and integration between morality and the order of the world. This state of things, in turn, depends on<sup>2</sup> two other conditions: (1) perfect adequacy between merit and a proportional state of deserved happiness is not plausible without a supreme and most perfect being that grants this clearly unearthly condition; and (2) both the different environment required by the aforementioned condition and the time required for the soul to achieve the fullness of merit, calls for an indefinite extension of lifespan.

Another relevant element of Kantian moral reasoning is the “fact of reason.” According to Kant, it is inevitable that we must acknowledge that the whole question of human behaviour results in a fundamental discussion about the existence or otherwise of rational, categorical law with imperative character over human action in general. The constitution of this law, however, requires the acceptance of human freedom as a prerequisite, so that freedom and free agents are rendered a fact of practical reason. As a consequence, every rational being recognizes himself as a member of a community established by reason among all rational beings in a “kingdom of ends”, where humanity affirms itself as the maximal values for reason itself.

1 Kant defines virtue precisely as deserving of happiness [KpV 110]. Later, in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, virtue would be presented as the capacity to overcome inclination and act out of duty (KANT, 1919, p. 218-224 [380-384]), a connotation that also attests to the primacy of the supersensorial character of the rational entity over its sensual constitution. As is evident in the subsequent discussion on the errors of epicureans and stoics (in the *Critique of Practical Reason*), Kant argues that the greatest problem of ancient ethics was the naïve identification between virtue/merit and happiness, which inevitably resulted in the reduction from one element to the other.

2 This dependency derives from the impossibility to deduce the highest good analytically, for the nature of the concepts of merit and happiness are extremely different [KpV 113], resulting in the need for a synthesis between them.

Additionally, as Christine Korsgaard observes, the fact of reason, cannot depend on a favourable outcome to motivate the moral agent or ignore the fact that the complete inexistence of such an outcome makes the world “morally defective” (KORSGAARD, 1996, p. 27-29).

There are two problems with this situation. On the one hand, confusing hope, in the fulfilment of the highest good, with grounds for action, perverts the very morality of the law into a relative, consequentialist maxim. On the other hand, to ignore the fact that reason is disappointed by the non-realization of the highest good is to fail to comprehend the essence of the concept of virtue, that is, a strong rational claim for merit [KpV 113]. Thus, not understanding, or misunderstanding, the transition from the law to the highest good has to do with the rupture of the very rigorous, conceptual path that Kant builds to connect the law to the *kingdom of ends*, and to a dignity that reason recognizes in agents who follow the moral law and are fit for the kingdom of ends. In short, reason *cannot* expect from us a behaviour and a state of things that reason itself concedes is impossible. Therefore, it automatically “imposes”, as a solution to this antinomy, an alternative scenario in which its expectations make sense.

#### *THE PURPOSE OF THE POSTULATES OF PRACTICAL REASON:*

Kant acknowledged that “the realization of the highest good in the world is the necessary object of a will determined by moral law” [KpV 122]. This, however, presupposes that we have gone beyond the realm of the understanding of the phenomenal world into bolder designs of reason in the search for the wholeness of its functions, which can only take place dialectically, but which also has the advantage of offering a “vision of a superior, invariable order of things” [KpV 108]. Just as knowledge was underpinned by the Transcendental Analytic of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, morality was grounded on the corresponding analytic pertinent to practical reason, but similarly, and by pure accident, reason finds the condition to aspire to more than the mere technical task of analysing the conditioning towards an “unconditioned totality of the object of pure practical reason” [KpV 108], expressed through the idea of the highest good. In other words, after the analytical task of grounding ethics, reason still aspires to a higher and total vision of the “cosmic meaning” of ethics.

As seen above, this absolutely necessary adequacy between virtue and happiness cannot fail to be plausible without disavowing the reason which calls for it. Consequently, the highest good has to be conceivable, which in turn demands very specific conditions.

So, God, immortal souls and freedom are postulated with a view to the intelligibility of human action and the world in which it takes place (DÜSING, 1971, p. 14-17) (KORSGAARD, 1996, p. 30), and simply abandoning them means, as a consequence, giving up on the rational design of giving sense and meaning to the whole of human existence.

So, the postulates of God and the immortality of the soul, commonly regarded as elements of natural theology, are rooted in practical reason. At the outset, reason confirms the concept of God as a horizon of intelligibility and reliability of moral order (GUTTMANN, 1906, p. 71), and in the second phase, immortality fills the gap between this universal moral order and our suspicion of unfeasibility of sanctity by everyday man [KpV 122]<sup>3</sup>, hence affirming the coherence and sustainability of the ideas that man has about his place in the bigger picture of moral reasonableness.

In both cases, the postulates help to signify the notions of God and immortal soul as ethical ideas, but never allowing an inversion of priorities between them and the highest good, as suggested by Schopenhauer in his prized work. Here, Schopenhauer advocates the idea that the postulates provide the conditions to sustain the concept of the highest good, which has much to do with a not very discrete, and quite recurrent, pre-supposition that Kant produced the concept of highest good precisely with the intention of introducing the “theological” notions of God and immortality in his moral doctrine (RECKI, 2016, p. 85-86).

No less forcefully, Kurt Sternberg asserts that immortality is unequivocally an idiosyncratic Kantian obsession, which is evident from the continuity between his pre-Critical and Critical phases. One could hardly launch a worse attack than claiming that the weakness spotted in another author is his coherence throughout life, but oddly enough, it is the kind of evidence many critics find in Kant's presentation of “religious” ideas. Without any evidence to the contrary, Sternberg concludes that “God and the immortality of the soul do not belong in Critical ethics” (STERNBERG, 1912, p. 47-48).

However, criticism of this nature ignores both the spirit and the letter in the Critique of Practical Reason, which emphasizes the reasons and the unfolding of the postulates as corollaries of the concept of the highest good.

I do not intend to discuss here if “these postulates might be dismissed as unnecessary additions to an already complete moral view” (LIPSCOMB; KRUEGER, 2010, p. 11), for this would imply shifting our focus from the postulate itself to the more systematic question about the theoretical sustainability of the concept of the highest good.<sup>4</sup> However,

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted here that Kant assumes this unfeasibility as obvious, either because it is not empirically observed or because the adequacy between the will and the moral law presupposes a state different from the basic anthropological condition, which involves a conflict between the law and passions.

<sup>4</sup> There are even attempts to maintain the concept of the highest good through the extrapolation of the principle of perfectibility to the social sphere, shifting hope in individual development to hope in the development of social relations between individuals (LIPSCOMB; KRUEGER, 2010). On the other hand, as observed by James Krueger, these diversions prove to be perverse, for what is at stake in the concept of the highest good is definitely not just human perfectibility, but the warranted rational expectation of its ultimate effective fulfilment by the supreme judge, and this is something that no social order, and actually nothing in the terrestrial order, could ever promise. God's role, then, is not to offer a supernatural utopia as an option to the more mundane ones, but a hierarchical safeguard of “exact adequacy” between happiness and merit, only conceivable by means of supra-human legislation (KRUEGER, 2010, p. 149; 158; 166-168; 170). Krueger's conclusion, however,

as the intention of this paper is to explore the postulate of immortality of the soul, it was necessary to consider the relationship between this and the postulate of a moral order given by God and the conception of the highest good that demands said postulates.

Similarly, it would be fruitful to debate the theory of the apparent abandonment of the idea of immortality in Kant's later works (GUYER, 2016), but, as we shall see later, the reaction of representative philosophers of the day (Reinhold and Fichte) seems to place far greater emphasis on the significance of the postulates than on later arguments, such as the more reticent vision of *The Religion in the Limits of Mere Reason*.<sup>5</sup>

#### MORAL PURISM AND THE POSTULATE OF IMMORTALITY:

Noticeably, Kant does not treat the immortality of the soul as a religious idea, nor did he dedicate much space to it in texts such as *Lectures on philosophical theology* and the Transcendental Dialectics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. This supports the impression that, for him, the idea of immortality could only be properly treated by the moral doctrine, not by religion (WOOD, 1978, p. 8-25), including rational/natural religion. Nonetheless, this was not a very original position in his day and age.

In 1746, Georg Friedrich Meier made a strong case for the impossibility of a “mathematical proof” of the incorruptibility of the soul, concluding, in his *Thoughts on the condition of soul after death*, that the only rational support for immortality was the need for moral foundation (DYCK, 2018). At this time, the proof of immortality through the idea of incorruptibility of the soul was the mainstream theory on the subject, and Meier's objection to it was received with significant apprehension.

In 1766, Christian August Crusius, in his *Essays on the necessary truths of reason*, would sustain that the most plausible reason for the preservation of the integrity of personality lies in its condition of perfectibility, which God could not have implanted in us without sufficient reason, which is also confirmed by an instinct in us that suggests the need for infinite growth (CRUSIUS, 1766).<sup>6</sup> This latter argument remains popular enough to be en-

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confirms the indispensability of the postulate of God while threatening the postulate of the immortality of soul, because Kant suggests that it required *another world* for its fulfilment.

5 Additionally, as adroitly realized by Andree Hahmann, the idea or the impression that Kant capitulates from the postulate of immortality in his *Religion in the boundaries of mere reason* is challenged head on by other texts that revisited the concept, as in the *Proclamation of the imminent conclusion of a treaty on the perpetual peace in philosophy* (HAHMANN, 2017).

6 Crusius does not tackle the immortality of the soul in the chapter dedicated to natural and theoretical theology, but in the part dedicated to pneumatology, where he starts by claiming that “spirits are the purpose of the world” (CRUSIUS, 1766, p. 851). Contrary to matter, in which the cause of its perishability and degradation lies in the absence of spontaneity, soul is essentially a substance characterized by will, which permits it to be free, while also preserving it from a degradation similar to the one to which material bodies are subjected (CRUSIUS, 1766, p. 929-938). As much as God desires the ordaining of matter, lifeless and determined, He desires with greater strength the progress and ordination of spirits, that is, their intellectual and moral progress. However, considering them to be free beings, God cannot desire that they reach this state of excellence, virtue and well-being

thusiastically advocated by J. W. von Goethe (SCHOLZ, 1934), for example, at a time when it had already been overshadowed by the Kantian philosophy.

As observed by Dieter Henrich (HENRICH, 1963, p. 414), Kant's position differs from that of Crusius as it "purifies" the concept of the perfection of its cognitive and ontological aspects (perfectibility of substance) focusing exclusively on the notion of a moral perfectibility. This reduction of the concept of perfection was to have the immense advantage of accommodating itself inside the boundaries of practical reason, as the postulation of a pure expectation and hope, not interfering in what was defined in the objective ontology of the First Critique.

Although endowed with the superior consistency of his Critical model, Kant's theory on the nature and continuity of the soul is far from radical when compared to the contributions of Meier and Crusius, attempting to unify and purge them of their dogmatic elements.

The critiques applicable to these predecessors, however, would not be effective against the Kantian reformulation of the idea of immortality, for he never makes the leap from a conclusion in favour of a moral, metaphysical demand to a support for theoretical metaphysical demand for God and the immortality of the soul. The lack of understanding of this point is the main source of misplaced criticism against the argument which, more frequently than not, suggests a defection to or a relapse of the Critical effort in favour of supposed dogmatic and theological "wishes", which, the critics conclude, Kant only managed to suppress in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

This argument is unsound, for it departs from the erroneous premise that the postulates represent a subterfuge to rehabilitate the proof of the existence of God and the soul, something directly denied by the explanation itself. In fact, the postulates are perfectly situated inside the Critical design (PASTERNAK, 2017) precisely for being detached from possible theoretical justifications of these concepts (OESTERREICH, 1906, p. 124-125).

The idea of immortality seems to be more a label for the condition of realization of the highest good by rational beings than an idea with intrinsic content, which is expressed by Kant as follows: "For a rational but finite being, only the progress from lower to higher steps of moral perfection is possible" [KpV 123]. The requirement for sanctity demanded it, but Kant does not promise that any positive state of things will actually correspond to sanctity, pointing rather to an "infinite" progress that would not end, even in the afterlife [KpV 123]. Therefore, the idea of an end or conclusion of the moral effort is swept aside in favour of a more active picture of the distribution of happiness in proportion to moral worth.

Essentially, the practical nature of the postulation affirms precisely that it cannot present itself as knowledge about reality, but rather a *posture* and *attitude* towards it. So if we consider the practical postulation as a "form of knowledge," it would never be but a

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without merit, so he necessarily has to consider happiness and fulfilment in harmony with merit; conversely, He cannot allow evil to go unpunished (CRUSIUS, 1766, p. 984-986). The result is that the perfection of God, Who ordained everything for the fulfilment of its purpose, implies the immortality of rational spirits (CRUSIUS, 1766, p. 988; 991).



practical knowledge about the motives to act, not about things and processes in the empirical world. If moral law is the practical reason that justifies and underpins moral action, the expectation of achieving the highest good unfolds its own conditions of realization. These *conditions of realization of the highest good* are, then, assumed by reason as its legitimate postulates, so that reason can succeed in logically integrating the meaning of life to which it so keenly aspires.

In an almost poetical form, the postulates are the part of moral doctrine that authorize rational beings to expect consolation for suffering and meaning for their struggles, affirming that it is rational to suppose that their worth outweighs their cost.

It is no accident that Kant declared as invalid the stoic and epicurean notions of the highest good. They not only lacked logical consistency, identifying the concepts of virtue and happiness instead of clarifying their causal relationship, but, as a result, they also lead to miscomprehension of the ultimate end of practical reason as an ideal of transcendent sanctity and bliss. Implicitly, Kant seems to be defending the ethical superiority of Christianity over the doctrines of the philosophers<sup>7</sup>, since he points to a suprasensible horizon of consolation not much different from the hyperbolic, idealized blessings of the sermon on the mount.

#### ***FAVOURABLE RECEPTION OF THE POSTULATE OF IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL BY REINHOLD AND FICHTE:***

The conclusion of the analysis above is heightened by the concordance in the immediate reception of Kant's practical philosophy. Not only is it clear that the postulates are logically implied by the remainder of the structure of practical reason, as long as it presumes the highest good to be an essential link to unity for the whole of the rational design, but this is exactly what the generation of the first interpreters of Kant thought about this subject.

In *Der Deutsche Merkur* of January 1787, K. L. Reinhold published the third of his letters on Kantian philosophy, with the emphatic claim that Kantian moral view was meant to reconcile morality and religion. The fifth letter, in the second quarter of 1787, was to be entitled *The result of the Critique of Reason concerning the future life* (REINHOLD, 1787).

The central argument of this essay was the confrontation between materialism and spiritualism in Antiquity, ostensibly resulting from the diametrically opposed emphasis on either understanding or sensibility in the many philosophical systems (of Plato, Aristotle, Epicure, the Stoics). Excessive emphasis on sensibility, which experience has shown to be perishable because of its dependence on the organs, pushes the system towards materialism and the expectation of destruction of the soul with the death of the body. Excessive emphasis on understanding, on the other hand, shifts the pendulum in favour of the permanent attributes and forms of the intellect, stimulating the expectation of the rational

<sup>7</sup> An explicit point in the *Critique of Practical Reason* and presented more subtly in other texts.

soul's survival of bodily death. In both cases, however, systems have problems with reconciling the opposite perspective, which is of undeniable importance. This unfavourable state of things would likely be solved, Reinhold believes, by the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Reinhold called his own attempt at clarifying the intense relationship between religion and philosophy, the philosophy of religion. For him, the crises of faith of his time demanded new ways to understand the essential content of religion, that would have been satisfactorily realized by Kant.

A few years later (1790), due to the tremendous success of the letters, approved of even by Kant himself, Reinhold assembled them, and other ideas, in a book that reinforced the overview of his interpretation of Kant. In one of these new letters, Reinhold claims he had no interest in a supernatural view of the soul as a hyperphysical being. This might well correspond to unsophisticated religious belief but, thanks to Kant, philosophy ended up highlighting the moral foundation of the idea of immortality (REINHOLD, 1790, p. 233-235).

Between the tenth and the twelfth letters, Reinhold makes it clear that the big Kantian step forward was to shift the discussion on soul from the barren terrain of spiritual substance (Greek philosophy) to the fruitful and essentially spiritual terrain of morality. This move would achieve nothing less than to bring the pure doctrine of Jesus to its suitable metaphysical expression; and the doctrine of Jesus was a doctrine about the reality of the heart, not of understanding (REINHOLD, 1790, p. 343-344).

The Fichtean reception of this same postulate was not dissimilar. Well aware of Reinhold's contributions, Johann G. Fichte would not insist on returning to the conceptual discussion about religion and morality. Fichte's discrete and almost veiled thoughts on the immortality of the soul have to be discerned more by his silence than by his words, more by his omissions than by his conclusions, which Frank Kuhne understood to be a downgrading of the status of this postulate. According to Kuhne, Fichte may have understood the postulate of immortality as a corollary or mere appendix to the postulate of divine moral order, which was the essential one (KUHNE, 148-156), but in a note on *The vocation of the scholar*, Kuhne concludes his considerations on the postulates of practical reason observing that the one about immortality must have exerted great influence upon Fichte, as it was implicit in his doctrine of the unlimited progress of man (KUHNE, 159).

Fichte's reaction was much more an attempt to clarify than to improve upon or modify the Kantian position, which closely resembles that of Reinhold, and may be summarized as: 1- the belief in immortality is not the foundation of morality, but rather, to the contrary, morality is the foundation of this belief; 2- we have as much evidence of the simplicity and real existence of the soul as of any other substance, in other words, we have none (BERGMANN, 1917, p. 26-27; 28). These markers lead us to perceive Fichte's preoccupation with preserving the Kantian legacy, making a theoretical demonstration of the existence of the soul impossible, and basing all reflection thereon exclusively on practical reason.

In his *Ideas on God and Immortality*, a manuscript that may have been a reaction to



the charges of atheism, the author deduces what he believes to be the necessary consequences of the Kantian principles. He understands, for example, that the exclusion of spiritual substance (such as the divine) does not preclude the possibility that it holds meanings different from the one it has in this world. In this world, where our minds work through the very mechanical criteria of time and space, the soul can either be poorly represented or not represented at all; and even so, we know that, from a different perspective, our soul is but the spontaneity to think and act, not subject to mechanical causation (BERGMANN, 1917, p. 30-31).

Believing that he was not adding much to Kant, Fichte concludes that, after its departure from the flesh, the soul could establish a new order, a new “scenario” or world for itself, more fitting to the realization of its own principles and proportional to its new faculties and constitution.

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**Humberto Schubert Coelho.** Professor adjunto do departamento de filosofia da UFJF, membro dos programas de pós-graduação em filosofia da UFJF e da UnB. Diretor do Núcleo de Filosofia Clássica Alemã. humbertoschubert@yahoo.com.br

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