

Amazon review:

John Silber, *Kant's Ethics. The Good, Freedom, and the Will*; De Gruyter: Boston/Berlin 2012

Wrong on a very high level

Silber is for me a highly esteemed author to whom in my opinion the Anglosaxon Kant research owes the first comprehensive information about Kant's doctrine of the highest good. I agree without reservation with what a reader of the book once wrote in a review: „A lucid, beautifully written, and highly readable presentation of Kant's ethics and moral philosophy. This book is the product of 50 years of philosophical reflection on Kant -- the nodal point in modern philosophy, and ranks with the very best works on Kant -- avoiding the jargon and formalism of so many commentaries. Serious readers will not be disappointed.“

Silber also had the clear judgement that Lewis White Beck's interpretation isn't ten-able. But unfortunately, his own interpretation, too, is not tenable.

For Beck, the *Dialectic* part of the *Critique of Practical Reason* (CprR) is in principle completely superfluous; one can ignore it. The second Critique is concluded with the *Analytic*.

Silber, however, makes, as it were, the opposite mistake: the part of the *Dialectic* belongs for him, as the part of the *Analytic* does, to Ethics. When he speaks e.g. of our duty to seek the happiness of others, he refers to the *Analytic* and to the *Groundwork*. Rightly so; this thought is completely effected within the scope of the *Analytic*; it has got nothing to do with the doctrine of the highest good, – like most of Silber's considerations. In my view, Silber misunderstood this doctrine as strongly as Beck did, though, it is true, in a different way.

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Silber's writings contain quite a lot of accurate and appropriate considerations; and everybody who wants to acquaint himself with Kant's moral philosophy can learn a lot from Silber. That's exactly why I take Silber also as being so important within the sphere of English Kant literature. But – it may sound paradoxical – there are in his writings, again and again, serious mistakes of fundamental significance by which, at the end, inspite of all that is correct (although also a lot wrong) in detail, the whole becomes wrong.

I regard Silber's main mistake to be a complete misjudging of what Kant intended with his doctrine of the highest good. Silber's talking of an *immanence* of the highest good is as striking a proof for this as is his talking on the one hand of the alleged duty of man „to achieve the total realization of the highest good“ (p. 187), and on the other hand of the realization of it in *this* world.

The „kingdom of freedom“ or „kingdom of morals“ (CprR, Akad. Ed., vol. 5, p. 82), subject of the *Analytic* of the CprR, turns into the „realm of grace“ (*Critique of Pure Reason* [CpR] vol. 3, B 840) or the „kingdom of God“ (CprR 05.128), subject of the *Dialectic*, a realm in which there is, in addition to the rule of the moral law, the rule of the law of proportionality of happiness and worthiness to be happy. As Leibniz, Kant distinguishes it from the „realm of nature, where, to be sure, rational beings stand under moral laws but cannot expect any success for their conduct except in accordance with the course of nature in our sensible world.“ (CpR B 840)

This (invisible) „kingdom of God“ would be a realm in accordance with the ideal of the highest good, „where a harmony has to be thought of between the consequences of our concepts of nature and those of the concept of freedom, thus between the consequences of two completely different faculties under completely heterogenous principles in us [...] which, however, as the Critique teaches, can't by any means be comprehended out of the nature of beings in the world, but, as at least for us an accidental correspondence, only through an intelligent cause of the world.“ (Akad. Ed., vol. 8, p. 250) In other words: The connection of virtue with happiness (of freedom with nature) is „*in this life* (in the sensible world)“ (CprR 05.115) „*impossible* because 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.“ (CprR 05.113-4)

Silber's misjudgment of Kant's doctrine particularly reveals itself in his assertion: „Kant must be interpreted to hold that humans are obligated not to attain in full, but rather to approximate the highest good to the fullest extent possible.“, basing his statement on Kant (CprR 05.144): „We have a duty to realize the highest good as far as it lies within our power to do so.“ (p. 190-1) What he, however, fails to notice, is that even with the utmost of our capacity“ (that's how Kant himself says it) we ourselves can still only contribute to the *supreme good*, i. e. to virtue as worthiness of happiness, but never anything to a proportionate happiness. When Kant speaks with regard to the *highest good* of our duty, he says, for the most part, it is true, only, „to promote“; but he always has that alone in mind and even can't have anything else in mind, least of all „to produce“ or „to attain“. By which means, then, should human beings attain, even only approximately, a distribution of happiness adequate to its worthiness? They would already completely fail with the attempt to identify for themselves, and for others, any kind and degree of happiness and of its worthiness as well. Silber's assertion: „We are obligated, thus, to attain only as much of the highest good as possible.“ (p. 191) misses totally Kant's teaching. A bit of highest good, conceived as *proportionality* having the force of law, is in principle impossible.

The impossibility of an immanence is implied in the very concept of the highest good to which is given expression in the antinomy of the *Dialectic*. Without God there could be no highest good and speaking of its partial, but at any rate *direct* promotion would be irrelevant. Thus, the highest good remains absolutely transcendent. Immanent would only be the compliance with the moral laws and, implied in that, a possible *indirect* promotion of the highest good as the final end of all moral action. Due to the impossibility (in *principle*) to attain happiness adequate to morality, also a world in which everybody meticulously would obey the moral laws could never become a world of the highest good. As is well known, the kingdom of God, or the realm of grace, is not of this world.

Unlike Beck, Silber wants to save the *Dialectic*. But all his considerations with regard to the highest good belong into the *Analytic*. He thus, always and rightly so, speaks of *Ethics*, which is however not part of the *Dialectic*. The purely practical ethical question: „what should I do?“ is answered in the *Analytic*. The *Dialectic*, however, deals with the quite different, simultaneously practical and theoretical question: „what may I hope?“. (see CpR B 833) For the ethical considerations there is no need for a postulate of God's existence. Therefore, the *Dialectic* is de facto superfluous also for Silber with his ethical considerations.

Silber deals with the highest good as if belonging to the *ethical* considerations of the *Analytic*, while this only provides the clue to answer the theoretical question raised in the *Dialectic* (cf. CpR B 833). Kant's doctrine of the highest good is the conclusion and coronation of his doctrine of man both a natural and therefore dependent being and subject to laws of freedom. Kant presented the core of the matter already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: For the answer to the question: What may I hope?, „the issue is whether the principles of pure reason that prescribe the law a priori also necessarily connect this hope with it. I say, accordingly, that just as the moral principles are necessary in accordance with reason in its *practical* use, it is equally necessary to assume in accordance with reason in its *theoretical* use that everyone has cause to hope for happiness in the same measure as he has made himself worthy of it in his conduct, and that the system of morality is therefore inseparably combined with the system of happiness, though only in the idea of pure reason.“ (CpR B 837) And therefore the „ethical doctrine also [can] be called a doctrine of happiness, but not until having „been set forth completely“ and „the step to religion has been taken“. (CpR 05.130)

By the by, Silber even believes (p.186) to have found a „clear example“ of Kant's confusion with regard to the moral argument (in CpR 143–4n). In fact, Kant's annotation, the rejoinder to Wizenmann, shows his mastery in giving, as it were, in a nutshell, the quintessence of a quite complicated matter. At least for somebody familiar with Kant's teachings this annotation is crystal-clear. Silber's devastating appraisal therefore only shows that he had to contend with difficult problems of understanding.

For details of my own reading of Kant's doctrine see my essay in: Annual Review of Law and Ethics, 8 (2000) 437-531.