Alexander T. Englert, *The Reality of the Ideal: A Study of Kant's Highest Good*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2025, pp. 344, £ 64.00, ISBN 9780197785997

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Alexander T. Englert's *The Reality of the Ideal: A Study of Kant's Highest Good* offers a comprehensive study of one of the most debated and controversial concepts in Kant's moral philosophy: the highest good. While the notion has traditionally been interpreted in connection with moral motivation, practical deliberation, or the postulates of practical reason, Englert proposes a different reading of its systematic role within Kant's critical philosophy.

The book advances a clear thesis. The highest good, Englert argues, does not primarily guide moral action. Rather, it provides a contemplative standpoint from which rational agents evaluate themselves, the moral condition of the world, and the coherence of experience as a whole. In developing this interpretation, Englert's main contribution lies in articulating a broader theory of Kantian practical ideals and in showing how the highest good functions as a rational substrate that silently grounds our moral experience and the construction of a philosophical worldview.

The book is structured in three parts, each pursuing a specific aim while contributing to the development of the book's central thesis.

The first part of the book lays the conceptual foundations of Englert's interpretation by reconstructing Kant's distinction between ideas and ideals of reason. Englert shows that while ideas function as rules that guide reason, ideals represent individuated archetypes that embody the complete realization of such rules. On this basis, he proposes that the highest good should be understood not merely as a regulative idea but as a practical ideal, that is, an individuated model of moral perfection that functions as a rational substrate within our moral experience.

According to Englert, practical ideals do not directly guide particular actions. Rather, they operate in the background of reason by providing standards of comparison through which we assess the moral condition of ourselves and of the world. In this sense, ideals perform a double role. Negatively, they serve as a measure of the moral deficiencies of the empirical world. In this way, they allow us to recognize the gap between the moral ideal and its imperfect realization in experience. Positively, they represent a reserve of moral potential that sustains the possibility of hope and moral progress.

Within this framework, Englert draws attention to what he calls the "moral epistemic gap": the problem of how we can meaningfully judge agents as morally good or bad within the phenomenal world if morality itself properly belongs to the noumenal domain. Since freedom cannot be given in sensible intuition, it becomes unclear how we can nevertheless evaluate individuals as morally progressing based on empirical observation. To address this difficulty, Englert advances the controversial proposal that a moderated form of intellectual intuition is required to grasp the ideal archetypes that ground our moral judgments. Englert himself characterizes this claim as a "minor heresy", a telling expression that reflects how unusual the proposal is within Kant scholarship and that he introduces to explain how empirical agents can be compared with an ideal moral maximum. According to this account, intellectual intuition does not function like divine intuition, which creates objects, but rather operates retrospectively, making sense of our already existing capacity to perceive moral value and progress in the world. In this way, it functions as a non-sensible standard for "deficiency-tracking", allowing us to measure the gap between empirical reality and the ideal maximum. Ultimately, this appeal to intellectual intuition supports Englert's moral realism by ensuring that ideals are understood as objectively valid rational substrates rather than as mere heuristic fictions.

The second part of the book offers a historical reconstruction of Kant's treatment of the highest good across the critical period. This reconstruction is crucial for Englert's broader argument, as it allows him to show that the highest good should not be understood as a fixed doctrine, but rather as an ideal whose role within the system evolves alongside the maturation

of Kant's critical philosophy. Englert traces this development through three stages.

In the early critical period (1781-1786), corresponding to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the highest good appears as a "mere ideal", conceived as an intelligible moral world entirely distinct from the order of nature. At this stage, its role remains largely motivational, insofar as the moral law seems to require the postulates of God and immortality in order to render the proportional distribution of happiness to virtue conceivable.

A decisive shift occurs in the late 1780s in response to the criticisms of Hermann Andreas Pistorius. Confronted with the objection that a purely formal moral law would otherwise remain a "vacuous tautology", Kant reinterprets the highest good in the *Critique of Practical Reason* as the final end of the will. In this context, the highest good no longer functions as a psychological reward, but as a condition for the rational coherence of moral agency: if the highest good were impossible, acting morally would itself appear irrational.

According to Englert, this development culminates in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, where the highest good is reinterpreted as the final end of creation. Through the concept of reflective judgment, it comes to serve as a mediating principle between the domains of nature and freedom. At the same time, Kant progressively relocates the highest good away from the immediate sphere of moral deliberation, assigning it instead a broader contemplative role in the construction of a coherent philosophical worldview.

The third part of the book presents Englert's most original contribution by shifting the focus from the role of the highest good in moral action to its function within contemplation and the construction of a coherent worldview. Englert argues that Kantian reason is driven not merely by the demand for logical consistency but by a deeper need for systematic coherence (*Bündigkeit*), understood as the harmonious integration of the various domains of reason. In this context, the task of philosophy is described as a constructive activity: the philosopher acts as a "carpenter of reason", assembling an architectonic structure of thought in which the different elements of experience mutually support one another.

The highest good functions thus as a unifying ideal that allows rational agents to integrate the domains of nature, freedom, aesthetics, and religion into a coherent worldview.

Such a worldview is not simply a theoretical representation of reality. It is an active intellectual achievement that satisfies a fundamental rational need for orientation and meaning. Although the cognition of the highest good remains theoretical in form, Englert argues that it possesses a distinctive practical significance *in potentia*: by revealing the unrealized moral potential of the world, it shapes how agents understand their place within it and strengthens their capacity to act systematically rather than in isolated moral episodes.

The book concludes by defending the reality of Kantian ideals against fictionalist interpretations, most notably Hans Vaihinger's "philosophy of as if". For Englert, ideals are not useful fictions but objectively valid rational substrates that ground our capacity to interpret the world as morally meaningful and systematically oriented toward the good.

One of the most compelling aspects of Englert's interpretation lies in his attempt to characterize the kind of cognition that underlies the construction of a coherent worldview. In particular, his proposal to understand this form of cognition as a kind of theoretical cognition that is objectively practical offers a promising way of accounting for the systematic role of the highest good within Kant's philosophy. On this view, the cognition of the highest good remains theoretical in form, since it concerns the structure of reality as a whole, yet it possesses a distinctive practical significance insofar as it orients the agent within that reality. Such a form of theoretical cognition with practical potential is precisely what makes possible a coherent worldview, understood as "a harmonious model of reality in accordance with a final end that mediates two domains of rational legislation by the lingua franca of ends" (p. 256). In this respect, Englert's account successfully illuminates how the doctrine of the highest good can contribute to the unity of reason without functioning as a direct principle of moral deliberation.

At the same time, one of the most controversial aspects of Englert's account concerns his appeal to a moderated form of intellectual intuition. While this move allows him to address the so-called "moral epistemic gap", it also introduces a significant tension with Kant's well-known rejection of intellectual intuition for finite rational beings. Englert argues that some form of intellectual intuition is necessary in order to explain how we can access ideal archetypes and compare empirical

agents with a moral maximum. However, it remains unclear whether such a move is strictly required. The explanatory framework developed in the book might arguably function without this assumption, if ideals were instead interpreted as regulative standards of reason that guide moral comparison without requiring direct cognitive access to them. Englert explicitly counters such an alternative by arguing that without an immediate intuitive grasp of the Ideal as an individuated "yardstick", the discursive intellect would lack the substrate required to perform what he calls "deficiency-tracking". Without such a substrate, it would remain unexplained how we are able to perceive degrees of moral progress or failure within the empirical world.

A plausible alternative to Englert's appeal to intellectual intuition can be found in Andrew Chignell's account of Kant's "one-world phenomenalism". Chignell argues that certain moral features function as "straddlers", properties that both things really have and appear to us to have, thereby allowing moral character to "shine through" empirical actions. On this view, moral evaluation does not require a special intellectual intuition of a singular archetype; rather, it proceeds through defeasible inferences from phenomenal appearances to the underlying moral reality. While Englert criticizes such approaches for risking a collapse of the noumenal-phenomenal distinction, Chignell's model nevertheless suggests that the comparative structure of moral evaluation might be explained without postulating intellectual intuition. If so, the explanatory strengths of Englert's framework could largely be preserved while avoiding the tension with Kant's well-known claim that intellectual intuition does not belong to finite rational beings.