

## The Role of Happiness in Kant's Ethics

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Kant, in an unusually non-technical way, defines happiness as getting what one wants.<sup>1</sup> Also unusual in his ethical writings is a lack of discussion on happiness, since one typically thinks of ethics as being inextricably linked to happiness. Kant does not discuss happiness much because happiness is not the basis of his system of ethics, in contrast to most ethical theories which make happiness the aim of morality. However, happiness stills has a role to play in his ethics. In this essay I will discuss how happiness fits into Kant's ethics. First, I will discuss Kant's definitions of happiness. Second, I will explain his reasons for choosing a basis for morality other than happiness. Finally, I will illuminate the different roles that happiness plays in Kant's ethics.

### I.

In *The Metaphysical Principles of Virtue*, Kant describes happiness as “continuous well-being, enjoyment of life, complete satisfaction with one's condition.”<sup>2</sup> This description is not so far removed from the utilitarian definition of happiness—pleasure without pain. Kant expands this idea of

<sup>1</sup> Kant 240.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 593.

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happiness to include “power, riches, honor, even health and that complete well-being and satisfaction with one’s condition.”<sup>3</sup> Kant refers to man’s preservation and welfare as synonymous with his happiness.<sup>4</sup> He calls happiness the complete satisfaction of all one’s needs and inclinations.<sup>5</sup> In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant defines happiness as “the state of a rational being in the world in the whole of whose existence *everything goes according to his wish and will*.”<sup>6</sup> Happiness is not pleasure. It is not the virtuous, joyful feeling associated with living a moral life. Happiness is simply getting what you want. As Warner A. Wick puts it, happiness “lies in the fulfillment of whatever [a person’s] many interests happen to be.”<sup>7</sup> It is important to keep Kant’s definition of happiness in mind when reading his ethics.

## II.

Because of the way Kant defines happiness, one can immediately see some reasons for its powerlessness to function as a basis of morality. First, getting what one wants might mean preventing others from getting what they want, so it seems to be difficult, if not impossible, for everyone to be happy. Thus, if morality is defined in terms of happiness, not everyone can be moral, which seems wrong. This problem arises whenever one seeks to define morality in terms of happiness. The fact that not everyone could be moral if not everyone could be happy follows from the contrapositive of the conditional statement, “If you are moral, you are happy,” which is what happiness-based moral systems like *Eudaimonism* profess.

There is another problem with basing morality on happiness: it appears that people do not know for certain what will make them happy. Kant writes, “The concept of happiness is such an indeterminate concept

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 49.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 59.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 240.

<sup>7</sup> Wick xxviii.

that, although every human being wishes to attain this, he can still never say determinately and consistently with himself what he really wishes and wills.”<sup>8</sup> Kant gives the example of someone who seeks after riches because he thinks it will make him happy, only to find that his pursuit actually results in unhappiness, because of the anxiety, envy, and intrigue that come with it. Another example is someone who seeks after knowledge, only to discover many dreadful things that had previously been concealed from him.<sup>9</sup> As finite beings, we cannot know which actions will result in happiness, for this would require omniscience.<sup>10</sup> The best one can do is to live by words of wisdom extracted from one's experience, such as “frugality, courtesy, reserve and so forth,” in an attempt to be happy.<sup>11</sup> Kant bluntly states, “The problem of determining surely and universally which action would promote the happiness of a rational being is completely insoluble.”<sup>12</sup> This is the case because “happiness is not an ideal of reason but of imagination.”<sup>13</sup>

This inability to choose actions that will undoubtedly result in happiness leads Kant to the following: “The more a cultivated reason purposely occupies itself with the enjoyment of life and with happiness, so much the further does one get away from true satisfaction.”<sup>14</sup> That is, seeking for happiness will not result in finding happiness. For this reason, Kant says that happiness cannot be the moral purpose of rational beings with wills.<sup>15</sup> If it were, instinct would be more efficient than reason in bringing happiness about, because we use instinct to fulfill our inclinations.<sup>16</sup> In this scenario, reason would have no practical use, but would only be used to

<sup>8</sup> Kant 70.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 71.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>15</sup> Kant says that happiness is unquestionably a purpose of all rational beings, but it is not the end of morality. See Ibid. 68.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 50–51.

contemplate and delight in the happiness that instinct was able to attain.<sup>17</sup> However, Kant claims that “the true vocation of reason must be to produce a will that is good.”<sup>18</sup> And producing a good will, in fact, *limits* the attainment of happiness in many ways.<sup>19</sup>

The moral principle of one’s own happiness is false for three more reasons, according to Kant. First, “experience contradicts the pretense that well-being always proportions itself to good conduct.”<sup>20</sup> It is false that doing the right thing always results in happiness, as the doctrine of happiness states. In fact, morality often flies in the face of happiness by denying the attainment of one’s desires. Second, it “contributes nothing at all to the establishment of morality, since making someone happy is quite different from making him good.”<sup>21</sup> Many people fulfill their inclinations (and so are happy) without being moral. Kant writes, “Every admixture of incentives taken from one’s own happiness is a hindrance to providing the moral law with influence on the human heart.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, seeking happiness often prevents morality. On the other hand, one can be moral without being happy, since one cannot count on other people to be moral, nor can one count on nature bringing good fortune. The third and most important reason the principle of happiness is false is that “it bases morality on incentives that undermine [morality] and destroy all its sublimity.”<sup>23</sup> Kant writes that the principle of happiness tells virtue “to her face that it is not her beauty but only our advantage that attaches us to her.”<sup>24</sup> This, Kant thinks, is clearly wrong.

These are all legitimate problems with moral theories based on happiness, but the essential problem is even more fundamental. Kant draws the following distinction between the doctrine of happiness and the doc-

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 265.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 91.

trine of morals: "In the first of which empirical principles constitute the whole foundation whereas in the second they do not make even the slightest addition to it."<sup>25</sup> According to Kant, the principle of happiness is based on either physical or moral feeling, both of which are empirical principles.<sup>26</sup> And "*empirical principles* are not at all fit to be the ground of moral laws."<sup>27</sup> This is because morality needs to be universal and necessary (*a priori*), and cannot be based on experience (*a posteriori*).<sup>28</sup> Kant writes, "If the doctrine of morals were merely the doctrine of happiness, it would be absurd to seek a priori principles for it. . . . Only experience can teach what brings us joy."<sup>29</sup> Kant claims that "all apparently a priori reasoning about [the doctrine of happiness] comes down to nothing but experience raised by induction into generality."<sup>30</sup> This generality is hardly useful because countless exceptions must be made to account for everyone's different inclinations. Plus, according to Kant, mere generality cannot be universal and necessary, as moral laws must be. He writes, "Concepts and judgments concerning ourselves and our actions and omissions have no moral significance at all if they contain only what can be learned from experience."<sup>31</sup> Because the concept of happiness contains "only what can be learned from experience," it must have no moral significance at all. Thus, Kant chooses to effectively leave happiness out of his moral theory.

Kant believes that autonomy of the will is the sole and supreme principle of morality.<sup>32</sup> Through his analysis, Kant shows that the moral principle must be a categorical imperative, which commands "neither more nor less than just this autonomy."<sup>33</sup> Consequently, heteronomy of the will in all its forms is "the source of all spurious principles of morality."<sup>34</sup> Heteronomy results when a will determines itself by any law other than the categorical

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 214.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 44-45.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 370-371.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 371.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 370.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 89.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

imperative, usually by choosing an object, such as happiness, by which to determine itself.<sup>35</sup> This relation of object to will allows only hypothetical imperatives: “I ought to do something *because I will something else*.”<sup>36</sup> Contrary to this, the categorical imperative states, “I ought to act in such or such a way even though I have not willed anything else.”<sup>37</sup> The doctrine of happiness leads to heteronomy of the will because the will is determined not by the categorical imperative, but rather by its quest for happiness. Since the sole principle of morality is autonomy and not heteronomy, happiness cannot be the principle of morality.

### III.

We have seen why Kant rejects the doctrine of happiness. But surely happiness still holds some position in Kant’s ethics—we cannot simply ignore our desire for happiness. Kant agrees: “To be happy is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being.”<sup>38</sup> Kant reconciles the desire for happiness with the demands of morality in the following passage:

The human being is not thereby required to *renounce* his natural end, happiness, when it is a matter of complying with his duty; for that he cannot do. . . . Instead, he must abstract altogether from this consideration when the command of duty arises; he must on no account make it the *condition* of his compliance with the law prescribed to him by reason.<sup>39</sup>

Here Kant explains that one must obey the moral law even when it will not satisfy one’s inclinations. Sometimes happiness and duty will coincide, but

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 159.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 281–282.

it is vital to act from duty alone by ignoring the pull of one's inclinations. Kant writes, "Pure practical reason does not require that one should *renounce* claims to happiness but only that as soon as duty is in question one should *take no account* of them."<sup>40</sup> For example, it is in the interest of a shopkeeper to have honest prices to attract customers. But if his reason for being honest is to increase his happiness, he is not acting from duty, and so is not acting morally. He must choose to be honest *in spite of* his inclinations to be honest, and act solely from duty.<sup>41</sup>

Although happiness should not be the ultimate aim of rational beings, it is still a duty, at least in some sense. Kant writes, "To assure one's happiness is a duty (at least indirectly); for, want of satisfaction with one's condition, under pressure from many anxieties and amid unsatisfied needs, could easily become a great *temptation to transgression of duty*."<sup>42</sup> However, the duty of promoting happiness is only one duty among many, not the ultimate duty, and it can be overridden by other duties. Kant writes, "Happiness is not *the only thing* that counts."<sup>43</sup> And Kant is clearly still rejecting the doctrine of happiness, even when he allows that happiness "can even in certain respects be a duty,"<sup>44</sup> because he then writes, "However, it can never be a direct duty to promote one's happiness, still less can it be a principle of all duty."<sup>45</sup>

Kant rejects the doctrine of happiness, but he does not deny that happiness is an end of all rational beings. But what is the point of morality if it will not make one happy? Kant claims that a moral life will *not* necessarily result in a happy one. However, he does say that a moral life will eventually result in a certain *satisfaction* with oneself.<sup>46</sup> Once one achieves the level of morality wherein one finds joy in obeying the moral law, then one should cultivate this satisfaction.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 214.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 53.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 189.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 214.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 215.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 171.

Such satisfaction is similar to a feeling of joy. However, this joy which is found in virtue is simply a byproduct of doing one's duty, not the motive. Kant writes, "When a thoughtful human being has overcome incentives to vice and is aware of having done his often bitter duty, he *finds himself* in a state that could well be called happiness, a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward."<sup>47</sup> This happiness is *not*, as the *eudaimonist* claims, the motive for acting virtuously.<sup>48</sup> If one only does one's duty to receive the reward of peaceful happiness, then one is in reality not acting virtuously. Kant writes, "An action from duty has its moral worth *not in the purpose* to be attained by it but in the maxim in accordance with which it is decided upon."<sup>49</sup>

If morality is not about making oneself happy, what is it about? Kant states, "Morals is not properly the doctrine of how we are to *make* ourselves happy, but of how we are to become *worthy* of happiness."<sup>50</sup> What does Kant mean by worthy? He says "Someone is *worthy* of possessing a thing or a state when it harmonizes with the highest good that he is in possession of it."<sup>51</sup> He explains that "worthiness to be happy is that quality of a person, based upon the subject's own will, such that a reason giving universal laws . . . would harmonize with all the ends of this person."<sup>52</sup> Further, "All worthiness depends upon moral conduct."<sup>53</sup>

Kant links morality with becoming worthy of happiness in a "fragment of a moral catechism" in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In this passage, a teacher uses the Socratic method to teach his student about being worthy of happiness. The teacher asks his student what he would do if he were in charge of all the happiness in the world: keep it or share it?<sup>54</sup> The student of course replies that he would share it, but the teacher helps him see that

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 510–511, emphasis added.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 511.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 55.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 244.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 281.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 244.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 594.

he would not in fact share it with just anyone. For example, he would not “see to it that a drunkard is never short on wine,” because the drunkard is not worthy of happiness.<sup>55</sup> Our reason instructs us what to do to be worthy of happiness—by means of the categorical imperative. For example, the categorical imperative tells us that one should not lie, and that “lying is *mean* and makes a human being unworthy of happiness.”<sup>56</sup> Kant writes, “A human being’s observance of his duty is the universal and sole condition of his worthiness to be happy, and his worthiness to be happy is identical to his observance of duty.”<sup>57</sup> Moral living is worthiness to be happy. But there is a leap from being worthy of happiness to actually being happy. What good is it to be worthy of happiness if one is never actually happy? Is there any sort of cause-and-effect relationship between being worthy for happiness and actually realizing this happiness?

Kant affirms that there is a connection between virtue and happiness, although it is not the connection that the *Eudaimonists* claim. Kant writes, “Virtue and happiness together constitute the position of the highest good in the person.”<sup>58</sup> But how is this necessary combination of virtue and happiness possible? It cannot be, as we have already seen, that the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of virtue are identical.<sup>59</sup> Kant claims that happiness and virtue are “two specifically quite *different elements* of the highest good and that, accordingly, their combination cannot be cognized analytically.”<sup>60</sup> Because their combination cannot be cognized analytically, they must be cognized synthetically.

This leaves two possibilities open: “Either the desire for happiness must be the motive to maxims of virtue or the maxim of virtue must be the efficient cause of happiness.”<sup>61</sup> The first is impossible, as we have already seen. It is the *Eudaimonist* position that Kant previously refuted. The sec-

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 595.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 229.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 230.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 231.

ond is also impossible because the causal connection can only be known through the laws of nature, not the moral laws. Kant writes, “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.”<sup>62</sup> This leaves the puzzling result that the connection between virtue and happiness cannot be analytic, but it cannot be synthetic either. How, then, are they possibly connected?

Despite the apparent hopelessness of the situation, Kant resolves this “antinomy of practical reason.”<sup>63</sup> He explains that the concept of cause depends on time, which we invent. Time does not affect things-in-themselves, such as rational agents with wills, nor does cause. Because of this, virtue and happiness may be connected, but not causally; that is, virtue does not necessarily cause happiness. However, Kant holds that “a natural and necessary connection between the consciousness of morality and the expectation of a happiness proportionate to it as its result can at least be thought as possible.”<sup>64</sup> As the student in the earlier passage says:

We see in the works of nature, which we can judge, a wisdom so widespread and profound that we can explain it to ourselves only by the inexpressibly great art of a creator of the world. And with regard to the moral order, which is the highest adornment of the world, we have reason to expect a no less wise regime, such that if we do not make ourselves *unworthy of happiness*, by violating our duty, we can also hope to *share* in happiness.<sup>65</sup>

Thus, although happiness is not the motivation for virtue, there is indeed “reason to expect” that virtue will lead to happiness.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 235.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 595.

IV.

Happiness plays a much different role in Kant's ethics than in other theories, such as *Eudaimonism*. Kant explicitly rejects the doctrine of happiness, which states that one should act virtuously in order to be happy. Morality is not based on happiness. However, happiness is not completely left out of the picture. One's own happiness is a weak sort of duty, which is an easy one to obey since all men desire happiness. Kant says that morality is not about becoming happy, but rather about becoming worthy of happiness by heeding the call of duty. And those who do so can expect, with some level of certainty, that they will in fact attain happiness.

## References

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