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### More than a feeling

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## More than a feeling

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According to rationalist conceptions of moral agency, the constitutive capacities of moral agency are rational capacities. So understood, rationalists are often thought to have a problem with feeling. For example, many believe that rationalists must reject the attractive Aristotelian thought that moral activity is by nature pleasant. I disagree. It is easy to go wrong here because it is easy to assume that pleasure is empirical rather than rational and so extrinsic rather than intrinsic to moral agency, rationalistically conceived. Drawing on underappreciated elements of Kant's moral psychology, I sketch an alternative form of rationalism, according to which moral activity is by nature pleasant because at least some pleasures are by nature rational.

**Keywords:** Kant; rationalism; moral agency; feeling; pleasure

According to rationalist conceptions of moral agency, the constitutive capacities of moral agency are rational capacities. So understood, rationalists are often thought to have a problem with feeling. If the moral agent is nothing but a rational agent, then, it seems, the moral agent must be devoid of feeling: cold, bloodless, and austere. To this extent, Kant's infamous example of the unsympathetic man who acts only from duty is a paradigm of rationalism. Reason is all; feeling nothing.

Put so starkly, this familiar charge misses its mark. For, if the central claim of rationalism is, again, that the constitutive capacities of moral agency are rational capacities, then rationalism does *not* imply that moral agents are – much less must be – without feeling. After all, there are many roles that feeling can play in moral agency without thereby belonging to its nature. For example, feelings may be enabling conditions for the development of moral powers; they may ease the deployment of these powers by reducing impediments to their exercise and reinforcing their proper practice; or they may simply be natural, psychological concomitants of moral activity in beings such as us. In all of these ways at least, feeling can play a role – even a positive and necessary role – in moral agency without being essential to it.

While this rationalist reply serves to refute the crudest charge of austerity, it invites a more sophisticated rejoinder. For, even if the rationalist allows feeling a

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place in moral agency, it still might seem that she casts it in the wrong role. It is not enough, one might think, for the moral agent to have feelings. Those feelings must be part of what it is to be a moral agent. That is to say, feelings must be intrinsic rather than extrinsic to moral agency; and to the extent that the rationalist denies this claim, her view must be found wanting.

There are many reasons one might press this anti-rationalist line. Consider one familiar reason with an especially distinguished pedigree. Aristotelians, for example, claim that correct action requires correct feeling. If you do not feel the right way about how you are acting, then you are not acting in the right way. Of course, different actions may call for different feelings, but one feeling is common to all good actions, helping to mark them out as a kind, and that is pleasure. As Aristotle says, pleasure is not ‘added [to virtuous activity] as some sort of extra decoration; rather, it has its pleasure within itself’ (2000, 1099a17–1099a19). To act well is to act gladly; that is (part of) the nature of good action. If this is right, then it seems that rationalists really do have a problem. For, while the rationalist can, as I have suggested, admit that feelings play a positive and necessary role in moral agency, the relationship between these feelings and moral activity seems entirely extrinsic – if not an extra decoration, then at least a kind of add-on, attendant to the activity rather than belonging to the activity itself, by its very nature.

How, then, might a rationalist respond to a criticism of this kind? The most obvious response would be to reject its motivating thought and deny that feelings are as important to moral agency as Aristotelians think. But I want to consider another response, one that has been largely neglected: to accept the motivating thought and admit that the feeling of pleasure, at least, is intrinsic to moral agency.

Now, this may seem a very odd thing for a rationalist to say. Yes, one might think, this response has been largely neglected, and with good reason. It is incoherent! For, if rationalism is the view that the constitutive capacities of moral agency are rational capacities, then doesn’t the extrinsicness of pleasure follow straightaway from the definition of rationalism? After all, the capacity for pleasure seems the paradigm of a non-rational capacity, and pleasure itself the paradigm of a non-rational state: a simple sensation, an internal impression, or something of the sort. If empiricism is true anywhere, surely it is true here. What could be more obvious?

This rhetorical question captures, I believe, the dominant attitude in recent moral philosophy, where the non-rational nature of pleasure is less a substantive thesis, in need of elaboration and defence, than a bit of psychological common sense. But it is worth asking, I think, whether this quiet consensus is warranted – whether, in particular, the rationalist is right to concede pleasure to the empiricist before arguing, as she then must, that pleasure, so understood, plays no essential role in moral agency.

Consider, by way of comparison, closely related debates about desire, where it is now widely recognized that disagreements about the role of desire in rational

agency often reflect deeper disagreements about the nature of desire itself. The rationalist here does not simply concede desire to the empiricist before going on to argue that desire, so understood, plays no essential role in rational agency. Rather, she defends rationalism, in part, by challenging the empiricist understanding of desire itself.<sup>1</sup> So far as I can see, rationalists about moral agency have, by and large, not adopted a parallel strategy with respect to pleasure. Why? One reason, clearly, is the philosophical consensus to which I have already alluded. But the deeper reason, I think, is that it remains obscure what the alternative view of pleasure is or even could be. Without such a view, the consensus seems secure and the argumentative possibilities set.

My aim in this paper is to advance our understanding at just this point – to sketch a non-empiricist account of pleasure, according to which pleasure is, at least in part, a rational state. I will do this by applying what has always seemed to me a sound philosophical maxim: in order to move forward, it is helpful to look back. This maxim seems especially applicable here, since it was not always the case that pleasure was understood as essentially empirical. Many of the great rationalists of the past did not understand pleasure in this way, and I will try to motivate my anti-empiricism by reflection on one of the great figures in this tradition, Kant.

This may seem a strange strategy, since Kant is often taken to be, if not an implacable foe of pleasure in moral life, then at least a clear proponent of the kind of rationalism I am trying to move away from – one according to which moral feelings are, at best, empirical effects of a rational cause. While there is no question that such feelings loom large in Kantian moral psychology, the truth, I think, is more complicated. For, as I shall argue, there are places in Kant's work where he is at least tempted by a more resolute rationalism, one that allows reason alone to give rise to pleasure, independently of any effect on sensibility.<sup>2</sup> Though I cannot fully defend this account here, either as an interpretation of Kant or as the truth about pleasure, by sympathetically elaborating it, I hope to show that it is worthy of philosophical attention. If this is right, then rationalists about moral agency may well have more resources at their disposal than either they or their critics have thought.

## I

Kant famously divides the mind into three faculties: the faculty of cognition, the faculty of desire, and the faculty of pleasure and displeasure. The faculty of cognition is the faculty through which we know the world. The faculty of desire is the faculty through which we change the world. And the faculty of pleasure and displeasure is the faculty through which we ... well ... it's not exactly clear. Indeed, Kant himself seems to acknowledge this, noting that pleasures, unlike cognitions and desires, resist straightforward definition. As he says, 'one can only specify what results they have in certain circumstances, so as to make them recognizable in practice' (Kant 1996c, *MS* 6:212).<sup>3</sup>

Kant's explicit reason for this conclusion is that pleasures and displeasures are feelings, 'merely subjective' representations that 'express nothing at all in the object but simply a relation to the subject' (1996a, *KU* 5:203, 5:206; 1996c, *MS* 6:212). What he is most concerned to deny is the view that pleasure is a mode of cognition or supplies any representational content suitable for cognition. Where cognitions purport to represent objects veridically, pleasures have no such representational ambition. They merely indicate the disposition of the subject with respect to its representation of objects.

By asserting the essential subjectivity of pleasure, Kant is self-consciously rejecting a certain traditional view. According to this view, which Kant associates especially with Leibniz and his followers, pleasure is a perception of perfection. Understood in this way, pleasure turns out to be, in Kant's terms, objective rather than subjective: answerable to its object just as much as any other cognitive representation.<sup>4</sup> As Kant sees it, such cognitivism about pleasure is a philosophical non-starter. To be pleased by the taste of a peach, he thinks, is not to represent the taste as perfect, or to represent it as anything at all. It is simply to be struck by the taste and to react to it in certain characteristic ways.

Given such claims, it is easy to think that Kantian pleasure is not just a feeling; it's a *mere* feeling, something like the internal impressions or sentiments of Locke, Hume, etc. Kant further encourages this view by apparently assigning feelings, one and all, to sensibility. As he says, feeling in general is 'the effect of a representation (that may be either sensible or intellectual) upon a subject and belongs to sensibility, even though the representation itself may belong to the understanding or reason' (Kant 1996c, *MS* 6:211). For example, the fact that the pleasures of philosophy have their source in ratiocination and the pleasures of French fries in gustation does not bear on the nature of these pleasures; in particular, the former is not promoted above the rank of the sensible simply on account of its lofty origin. Kant is thus strictly egalitarian about pleasures. High-born or low-born, they are all the same. As effects upon a subject, they are all sensible.

In a way, this shouldn't be a terribly surprising conclusion, as it seems to reflect Kant's general way of making out the distinction between the rational and non-rational aspects of mind, between intellect and sensibility. At its heart, this distinction is supposed to reflect the difference between those faculties and representations through which the subject is active and those through which the subject is passive. The operations of the intellect are 'doings' of which the subject is the agent. The operations of sensibility are 'undergoings' of which the subject is the patient (Kant 1998, *KrV* A19/B33, A50/B74). Put in these terms, Kant's claim that feelings are, one and all, sensible seems tantamount to the claim that feelings are, one and all, modes of passivity. This, I suggest, is why Kant moves so easily from the idea that feeling is the effect of a representation upon the subject to the idea that feeling belongs to sensibility. To feel pleased is to be affected, not to act but to be acted upon by some representational stimulus. If this is right, if pleasures are mere feelings – subjective, sensible states of mind – then it really does appear

that, for all his rationalist convictions, Kant remains an empiricist about pleasure. There is, it seems, simply nothing else for pleasure to be.

Now, if you have even a cursory familiarity with Kant's practical philosophy, you might think that this cannot be the whole story. Though he may be an empiricist about most feelings, he must allow at least one exception, and a very important one for my purposes: the famous feeling of respect. For, Kant is quite clear that respect is a feeling unlike any other, a feeling that bears an *a priori* necessary relation to reason itself. But if respect is so related to reason, one might think, such a feeling cannot answer to the above characterization, in which case the general account of feeling is not so general after all.

It is quite true that respect is more intimately tied to reason than other feelings; it is, we might say, just the feeling of reason active within us. But it is not at all clear, I think, that being in this way rational is enough to render respect exceptional. For again, if sensibility is to be understood in the way I have suggested, then the sensibility of feeling is simply a function of its passivity; to feel is to be affected. But this is almost always how Kant describes respect: as the effect of the law upon the subject (Kant 1997b, *G* 4:401), as what the law must effect in the mind (Kant 1997a, *KpV* 5:73), as the effect the law exercises upon feeling (Kant 1997a, *KpV* 5:74), etc. Thus, though respect may be quite special – not 'received by means of influence' but 'self-wrought by means of a rational concept', as Kant puts it in the *Groundwork* – insofar as it is an effect upon the subject, it belongs to sensibility (Kant 1997b, *G* 4:401). If this is right, then despite its exalted origin, respect is not a challenge to Kant's general empiricism about pleasure. It is an instance of it.

As I said a moment ago, this is almost always how Kant describes respect. As this phrasing suggests, it is not always how he does so. Indeed, there is at least one place, in §12 of the third Critique, where he explicitly repudiates the claim that respect is an effect upon the subject. At issue in this section is whether there are, or even could be, *a priori* grounds for connecting a representation and a feeling as cause and effect. Kant is clear: there can be no such grounds because causal relations can be cognized only empirically. But, as Kant himself notes, this unequivocal stance might seem at odds with his previous account of respect, where, as we've seen, he seems to characterize the relation between moral reason and moral feeling in explicitly causal terms. After all, he does say in the second Critique that we can 'see a priori that the moral law can exercise an effect on feeling ...' (Kant 1997a, *KpV* 5:74). In the third Critique, however, Kant insists that we see no such thing. For, what we cognize here is not a causal relation at all. And why not? Because, as he says, 'the state of mind of a will determined by something ... is in itself already a feeling of pleasure and *is identical with it*, thus it does not follow from it as an effect' (Kant 1996a, *KU* 5:222, my emphasis; cf. Kant 1996b, *KU EE* 20:207). That is, the moral feeling is not an effect of the law. It just is the state of mind an agent is in when her will is determined by the law.

Notably, Kant doesn't trouble himself to explain this curious claim. He simply moves on to draw an analogy between this account of moral feeling

and the account of aesthetic feeling that is his real concern in these passages. Just as the state of mind of a will determined by the law is identical with a feeling of pleasure, so ‘consciousness of the merely formal purposiveness in the play of the cognitive powers of the subject in the case of a representation through which an object is given *is the pleasure itself . . .*’ (Kant 1996a, *KU* 5:222; my emphasis). That is, aesthetic pleasure is not an effect of the purposive play of the cognitive faculties. It just is the state of mind an agent is in when her faculties are in such play.

Now, neither of these identity claims is independently transparent, and the analogy doesn’t seem much help. Indeed, the direction of explanation that Kant seems to favour here – using the moral case to illuminate the aesthetic one – seems especially unhelpful, since, as we have seen, Kant’s description of the moral feeling here seems at odds with what he says elsewhere. That said, Kant’s claim that there is a kind of pleasure that is not an effect on the subject but is identical with (the consciousness of) a certain psychological activity is very suggestive.<sup>5</sup> For, it indicates that, his many categorical claims about feeling and sensibility notwithstanding, Kant at least sometimes countenances the possibility of a pleasure that bears no constitutive connection to sensibility.<sup>6</sup> In order to understand this possibility better, I will reverse Kant’s direction of explanation; instead of using the moral case to illuminate the aesthetic one, I will use the aesthetic case to illuminate the moral one.

## II

According to Kant, judgements of beauty are pleasure-based judgements. That is to say, we judge objects beautiful not because they possess some unique property or set of properties. We judge them beautiful because our representation of them arouses a certain pleasure in us. Yet, despite their reliance on pleasure, which, as we’ve seen, is merely subjective, Kant does not think that judgements of beauty are merely subjectively valid. When I stand atop a mountain and judge the vista beautiful, I am not judging it beautiful to or for me alone. Rather, Kant says, I speak in a ‘universal voice’ and so at least implicitly demand that other people who represent the same object in the same circumstances judge as I do. In this way, judgements of beauty are akin to cognitive judgements. But while the universality of cognitive judgements is relatively easy to explain, the universality of judgements of beauty is not. After all, cognitive judgements are grounded in objective features of nature, features to which our cognition must conform. By contrast, judgements of beauty are grounded in feelings, subjective features of our minds.<sup>7</sup> The question Kant wants to ask and answer about such judgements is how could a judgement based on something subjective be *intersubjectively* valid? How, to wit, are judgements of beauty possible?

Kant’s answer to this question is, needless to say, quite complicated. Indeed, I will say very little about it, at least not directly. What I want to focus on, rather, is the view of pleasure that I think Kant presupposes in his answer. Again, the key



issue is how there could be a pleasure that could ground a claim that others should feel and so judge as I do. The worry, I take it, is that if the pleasure were of the familiar sensible variety, then the best we could say when we make an aesthetic judgement is that others who share our sensibility *will* find the object beautiful but not that they *should*. Mere sensibility could perhaps ground a rational expectation but not a rational norm. In order to generate such a norm, the pleasure must not have its source in mere sensibility, in what happens to us. Rather, it must have its source in other parts of the mind, namely those connected to what we do, and so, in Kant's view, to our intellect.

Kant's thought is that rational norms apply fundamentally to rational activities. It is probably the case that you should believe in evolution, resist the reactionaries on your local school board, etc. But it is not the case that you should like the taste of chocolate. Of course, you can cultivate such a taste, and maybe you should. But this is to demand an activity that will put you in a position to have a certain experience, not to demand the experience itself. If this is right, then the kind of demand that Kant thinks is implicit in judgements of beauty cannot be addressed to sensibility. It must be addressed to the intellect – indeed, to an activity of the intellect, which is exactly what Kant thinks. This is Kant's famous free play of the cognitive faculties, the psychological source of pleasure in the beautiful.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as I already noted, Kant thinks that this pleasure is no mere effect of the free play. It rather consists in our consciousness of it (Kant 1996a, *KU* 5:222).<sup>9</sup> If this is right, then Kant would have found precisely what he was looking for: a pleasure that can be genuinely demanded, because the pleasure is nothing more than the consciousness of a rational activity.

But how, one might reasonably ask, is this possible? How could there be such a pleasure? The key to answering this question is to notice that, in the third Critique at least, Kant seems to be working with a rather different account of pleasure than the one sketched above. He says: 'The consciousness of the causality of a representation with respect to the state of the subject, for maintaining it in that state, can here designate in general what it called pleasure . . .' (Kant 1996a, *KU* 5:220).<sup>10</sup> As with all such Kantian definitions, this one is not easy to parse. The first thing to notice is the claim about consciousness. To be pleased by my representation is to be conscious of that representation. But of course not just any consciousness of any representation will qualify as a pleasure. So what makes the difference? What Kant says makes the difference is the causality of a representation with respect to the state of the subject, for maintaining it in that state. What he means, I think, is something like this.

When I take my first sip of a nice wine, I have a gustatory sensation, a taste. This taste is such that my attention is drawn towards it, not simply as something to consider but as something to savour. I want to prolong the experience, and when it fades, to have it again. In this case, the representation, the taste, does something to my psychology – in particular, it engenders a syndrome of psychological responses, all of which are directed towards persisting in that state. As Kant puts the point elsewhere, such a representation engenders the 'effort for

maintaining its state of representation' (1997c, *VM Dohna* 28:675). Such effort may include actions undertaken to preserve one's state – such as refusing the swill that is also making the rounds – or to cause its recurrence – such as asking for a refill. But it is, in the first instance, psychological, expressed in a kind of sustained attention to one's state that need not involve volition at all.

As with wine, so, Kant thinks, with beauty. When I look at a beautiful flower, petals kissed by the morning dew, the representation engages me. I am arrested. If I am in the garden, I will stand still, staring. If I am recalling yesterday's viewing, I will close my eyes, attending in memory to the delicate arrangement of petals, the dazzling array of colours, etc. In all these ways, I 'linger', as Kant says, 'over the consideration of the beautiful because this consideration strengthens and reproduces itself' (1996a, *KU* 5:222). That is to say, when I represent the flower, I am in a state of mind that, so to speak, generates its own momentum, manifested by my attention, focus, and engagement. According to Kant, this familiar pattern of psychological response just is pleasure in the beautiful.

Now, if this is the right way to understand Kant's operative view of pleasure in the third Critique, then his view there is rather different than the simple empiricist account I identified earlier. While the idea there seemed to be that pleasure was a mere feeling, the effect of a representation upon a passive subject, the current view shifts pleasure in a decidedly active direction. For, to be pleased *is* for one's psychology to be active – to be in a state of mind that, as it were, propels one forward. Strikingly, this is true even of clearly sensible pleasures, such as the pleasure of wine.

Nonetheless, Kant certainly wants and needs to maintain a distinction between ordinary pleasures of the senses, on the one hand, and aesthetic pleasures, on the other. Given what I have hitherto said, we should expect this distinction to be made out in terms of modes of passivity and activity, and so I think it is. The core idea is roughly this. Though pleasure is always bound up with psychological activity, not all psychological activities are active in the same way. In particular, even if we construe the pleasure in terms of a kind of activity, we need not attribute this activity to the subject herself. There are cases in which the representation takes on a kind of life of its own. It is directing my psychic course, and I am simply, as it were, along for the ride. Though my mind is active, *I* am not active, at least not directly. The activity is *in* me but not *of* me. In this way, I think, though the pleasure may be tied to activity, it is nonetheless passive rather than active.

This is not the case with aesthetic pleasures. For, as I explained earlier, in the case of pleasure in the beautiful, what pleases, Kant thinks, is not my sensible representation of the object. Rather, what pleases, properly speaking, is the representational activity that is occasioned by the sensible representation, the free play of the cognitive faculties. While the free play is not voluntary, Kant thinks that it is nevertheless something that I do. It is an activity of mine, attributable to me as an exercise of my core cognitive powers. But if so, then when my faculties are in free play, I am active rather than passive. My representations do

not determine the course of my cognitive life. I do. Moreover, if the activity of free play generates its own psychic momentum, as Kant assumes, then this momentum is actually generated by me, and so, plausibly, the pleasure that manifests this momentum is active too.

Of course, why exactly Kant thinks that the free play generates its own momentum depends on what exactly he takes the free play to be. This is a notoriously difficult issue, about which I have little to say. What is important for present purposes is simply what this possibility shows us about the connection between rational activity and pleasure. For, if we grant Kant's assumption that the free play is an activity that generates such momentum, then it seems that we can now understand how and why Kant might think that he has found in the free play the key to his aesthetic project: a pleasure that can be rationally demanded because the pleasure is no more than the phenomenological face of rational activity itself.

### III

Recall, my interest in Kant's aesthetics was merely instrumental. Following Kant's suggestion of an analogy between moral pleasure and aesthetic pleasure, I looked to the latter to illuminate the former. In particular, I was interested in the suggestion that, in both cases, we are to understand the pleasure as identical to (the consciousness of) an activity of mind: in the moral case, the determination of the will by the law; in the aesthetic case, the free play of the cognitive faculties. I hypothesized that if we could understand this identification, we could perhaps have a model for a kind of pleasure that was not merely caused by an intellectual representation but was itself intellectual, a mode of activity rather than passivity. But if the account I just gave is correct, then it seems that this hypothesis passes its test. For, what we have seen is that, at least in the third Critique, Kant identifies pleasure as the consciousness of representational self-maintenance. As I noted, this identification itself already moves pleasure in the direction of activity, but not all the way there, as it is possible for a sub-personal representation to direct the course of psychic life, in which case the subject and so her pleasure are still passive. But if the subject herself is directing her own psychology – if the representational activity that is self-maintaining is, so to speak, maintained by the self – then she is active and so too is her pleasure. The state of mind of a subject who is engaged in self-directed, self-maintaining activity is identical to pleasure because what it is like to be in that state is pleasant. If this is right, then it seems we have found what we were looking for: a pleasure that is intellectual rather than sensible because it expresses our activity rather than merely being a response to it.<sup>11</sup>

The question then becomes: on what grounds does Kant think that we find this pleasure in morals? More specifically, on what grounds does he think that moral activity, which is the source of this pleasure, is self-directed and self-maintaining? That moral activity is self-directed is obvious; it is an activity

of the subject if anything is. That moral activity is self-maintaining may seem rather less clear. To show that it is, I want to begin with some orienting remarks about Kantian philosophy of mind in general. Situating moral activity in this broader framework helps bring out important features of this activity that are otherwise easy to overlook.

Consider Kant's characterization of our psychological faculties as essentially law-governed. This is, in one respect, a rather mundane claim, especially for Kant, for whom lawfulness is a pervasive feature of nature in the broadest possible sense. As he says, 'everything in nature works in accordance with laws' – our faculties are no exception (Kant 1992, *JL* 9:11; 1997b, *G* 4:412). However, Kant draws from this mundane claim a rather surprising consequence. For, according to Kant, it is not merely the case that our faculties are governed by law. It is also the case that our faculties cannot, in their operations, fail to accord with these laws absent external interference. That is to say, the lawful activity of a faculty is the natural state of a faculty, the state the faculty would be in but for impediment.

The fundamental reason for this is that, as Kant puts it, 'no force of nature can of itself depart from its own laws' (1998, *KrV* A 293/B350). In this respect, the operation of our faculties is like the operation of other powers, even the powers of physical bodies, with which Kant explicitly analogizes it. As he says, a moved body will 'always stay in a straight line in the same direction' unless 'another force influences it in another direction' (Kant 1998, *KrV* A293/B350). Of course, a faculty can fail to act in accordance with its laws, just as a body can fail to move in a straight line in the same direction. Kant does not deny this. His point is simply that if these things happen, it can only be because something external to the faculty or the body interfered in its operation. In the absence of such interference, the faculty would act in accordance with its laws just as surely as the body would continue in constant rectilinear motion. Indeed, given its nature, it could not do otherwise. Put another way, the lawful activity of a faculty is, as such, self-maintaining. We require explanation for why it should cease rather than for why it should continue.

What holds of the faculties generally holds *a fortiori* of the will. Like other faculties, the will is governed by essential laws; and like other faculties, the will cannot in its operations fail to accord with these laws, absent interference. But notice: if Kant is right about the connection between autonomy and morality, then the will's essential law just is the moral law. Thus, if the lawful activity of the will is the natural state of the will, then good willing is the natural state of the will, the state the will would be in but for impediment. Of course, in the case of the human will, such impediments are familiar enough. We are psychologically complex beings, who have both intellectual and sensible faculties. Consequently, our wills are subject to sensible influences that distort our appreciation and so application of the moral law. This is why we can will badly.<sup>12</sup> But even for imperfect beings like us, good willing is, as such, self-maintaining. We require explanation for why it should cease rather than for why it should continue, even if such explanations are not hard to come by.

This characterization of good willing is important because it casts moral activity in a rather unfamiliar light. In particular, it puts pressure on the common view that Kantian ethics is an ethics of constraint, according to which moral goodness can be achieved only by overcoming an otherwise reluctant nature. While it is certainly true that Kant thinks that self-constraint is necessary for imperfect beings, it is imperative to see that what is constrained is simply our sensibility, our inclinations and associated feelings. For again, with respect to the proper functioning of the will, sensibility serves as an impediment, something that prevents the will from acting in accordance with its own laws. Put another way, the will *wants* to will well, if only we'd let it. And so, fundamentally, the task of ethics is not one of limitation but liberation, the cultivation of conditions that would allow the will to operate naturally, unimpeded by alien influence. From the perspective of the will, then – that is, from the perspective of the rational agent herself – willing well, and so morally, is not really a matter of acting under constraint. Quite the opposite. It is nothing but freedom itself, just as Kant says.

#### IV

Return, then, to pleasure. Drawing on Kant's discussion of aesthetics, I claimed that there is a kind of pleasure that is nothing but the phenomenological manifestation of self-directed, self-maintaining activity. But if the broadly teleological account of the will I just sketched is correct, then it seems plausible to think that good and so moral willing is such an activity. For, if good willing is the natural state of the will, the state the will would be in but for impediment, then good willing is, as such, self-maintaining. Thus, by Kant's lights, it turns out that good willing is not just pleasant. It is intrinsically pleasant. As an essentially conscious, essentially self-directed, and essentially self-maintaining activity, good willing is also (and thereby) an essentially pleasant activity. This, then, is why Kant says, in the third Critique, that the state of mind of a will determined by the law is identical with a feeling of pleasure. The pleasure is no more and no less than what it is like to will well.<sup>13</sup>

Thus put, this is a rather abstract conclusion, but it has, I think, more familiar psychological consequences. For, when we step down from the high theory and ask how the good-willed agent understands what she is doing and why, it becomes apparent that the forward push, as it were, of the good will registers in the agent's point of view in a specific way. In particular, the motivations of the good-willed agent are keyed not just to the desirable consequences of her action but to the nature of the action itself. That is to say, the agent of good will acts as she does not merely because she welcomes the effect of so acting. She acts as she does because she correctly represents her action as, in itself, good. This is how the agent maintains her good will – by doing what is good because it's good, for its own sake.

Once we take account of this fact, then I think Kant's conclusion about the pleasantness of good willing should seem rather natural. Consider an analogy.

Imagine a scientist. Call him 'Alex'. Alex has been assigned the task of discerning the relation between two hitherto unknown compounds. He knows this task won't be easy, and after a couple of days, he is banging his head against the wall – at least metaphorically – trying to figure it all out. Then, one day, he gets it. He breathes a sigh of relief and sits back in his chair, pleased. This is a familiar enough scenario. Alex sets out to produce a certain result, he succeeds in producing it, and he is pleased on account of this production.

Now imagine Alex's colleague, Betty. Like Alex, Betty is trying to discern the relation between the two compounds. And like Alex, Betty knows that her task will not be easy. But while Alex is, let us suppose, sceptical of the value of his project – he simply wants to satisfy his supervisor – Betty believes (correctly) that her project is genuinely worthwhile. While she is at turns frustrated and fatigued, she never despairs. For, despite all the hardship she endures, she actually enjoys her work. Then, one day, Betty gets it. She breathes a sigh of relief and sits back in her chair, pleased.

In many ways Betty's pleasure is like Alex's, but in other ways it is not. While they are both pleased when their research comes to an end – when they actually produce a result – only Betty, it seems, is pleased by the activity of research itself. Research makes Alex miserable; Betty enjoys it. Alex is at turns distracted, depressed, and exhausted; Betty is attentive, engaged, and energetic. Of course, she can also become frustrated and worn out. She is, after all, human. But these are deviations from a baseline of satisfaction that is manifested in her almost inertial, though not thereby passive, tendency to persist in her chosen activity. In the absence of occasional intrusions of infelicitous thoughts or the inevitable exhaustion of her physical and psychological resources, the activity of scientific research sustains both itself and her.<sup>14</sup>

What I want now to suggest is that, on the account sketched above, the pleasure of good willing can be helpfully analogized to Betty's pleasure in her scientific research. For, in both cases the agent is pleased not, or not simply, in virtue of bringing her activity to a close, in virtue of bringing about some object. Rather, she is pleased in virtue of undertaking actions that she correctly represents as worth undertaking. She wants to act as she is acting, not merely for the sake of a further end but for its own sake. If this is right, then the idea that good willing is intrinsically pleasant should not seem so peculiar. It is of a kind with the familiar pleasure of engaging in activities that are themselves worthwhile.

Now, to be clear, I do not mean this account of moral feeling to conflict with Kant's more familiar descriptions of moral experience. I simply want to insist that these descriptions are, in an important way, incomplete. For, once we take account of the third Critique, we can see that, in addition to the complicated array of sensible feelings that Kant identifies in the *Groundwork* and second Critique, there is also a *sui generis* intellectual feeling constitutively involved in willing well.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while a full Kantian account of moral phenomenology must include an account of moral sensibility, it is not thereby exhausted by it.<sup>16</sup>

Noting the complexity of moral phenomenology is important, for it helps us see that the present account is not as implausible as it might at first appear. After all, one might say, it isn't always pleasant to engage in moral activity. That's not what it's like, at least not all the time. Doing the right thing can be hard, demanding sacrifices of us, often small but sometimes quite large. Indeed, this might seem to be the kernel of truth in the traditional 'Kantian' account, which I risk losing altogether.

It's undeniable that human practical life can be psychically messy. But this messiness must be kept in perspective. Though philosophers are naturally drawn towards cases of conflict, the fact is that doing the right thing is often quite easy. You see the person in front of you drop her scarf, and you call after her. There is no motivational friction here. You immediately do what you know you should.<sup>17</sup> We often say that people feel good about these small kindnesses, and we're right to do so. The question is how should we understand more difficult cases?

Consider a mother who turns in her wayward son. She did the right thing, let us suppose, and is miserable because of it. Is the Kantian account I have elaborated committed to thinking that, despite her apparent distress, she is after all pleased? Well, it depends on how one understands the question. If she really has acted well – if she really did what was good because it was good, for its own sake – then I think: yes, she is pleased. But it does not follow from this that her overall state is therefore positive, that she is untroubled, with a smile on her face and a song in heart. This is surely perverse, and if the Kantian account implied otherwise, we'd have good reason to dismiss it out of hand.

But the Kantian account does not imply this. For again, even if moral activity is pleasant in the way I have suggested, it does not follow that these pleasures exhaust the contents of our moral consciousness. This may be true for a purely rational being, but it is certainly not true for us. Again, our psychologies are complex. We have both intellectual and sensible faculties. So it should be no surprise that our intellectual activities, including our moral activities, have sensible effects. Sometimes these effects will be positive, but sometimes they will not. Morality can hurt. It can make us feel bad, as the case of the mother clearly shows. But to acknowledge this is not to abandon the view that morality is intrinsically pleasant. Why? Because, I think, one can simultaneously feel bad and be pleased. Indeed, it seems to me that such phenomenological ambivalence is a pretty pervasive feature of human life. On balance, we might be able to pronounce ourselves pleased or displeased, if certain aspects of our experience predominate. But such a verdict does not imply the absence of conflicting feelings. To be pleased (or displeased) does not mean to be *only* pleased (or displeased), and nothing else. The present account respects this complexity.

## V

Let's take stock. My aim in this paper was to use Kant's moral psychology as a case study for the alleged defects of rationalist conceptions of moral agency – more



specifically, to query the common thought that such conceptions must assign feeling in general and pleasure in particular an extrinsic role in moral agency. The source of this thought, I surmised, was the usually unstated assumption that pleasure is something empirical rather than rational, an endowment of sense rather than intellect. Through reflection on underappreciated elements of Kant's work, especially in the third Critique, I sketched an alternative, non-empiricist account of pleasure, according to which there is a kind of pleasure that is active rather than passive because it is nothing more than the phenomenological face of self-directed, self-maintaining rational activity. Applied to the case of moral agency, the claim was that good willing is pleasant because good willing is an instance of such activity. Moreover, since the features of this activity that explain such pleasure are themselves essential to it – consciousness, self-direction, and self-maintenance – it turns out that not merely is good willing pleasant. It is intrinsically pleasant. In following Kant, then, in understanding the possibility of a rationalist conception of pleasure, I have also, and thereby, understood the possibility of a rationalist conception of moral agency, which includes pleasure as a constitutive element. To will well is (in part) to be pleased by so willing.

While I have not defended this conception, I hope my exposition of it serves to show that rationalist moral psychology can be richer and more interesting than most have thought. In particular, being a rationalist does not require abandoning feelings such as pleasure, so much as reconceiving of them and their relation to our agency.<sup>18</sup> This, at least, was the traditional rationalist view, and it is worth asking whether our more recent reluctance to take such possibilities seriously is a failure of imagination, as much as anything else. To be clear, in saying this, I mean to challenge both rationalists and their opponents. For, as I said earlier, it seems to me that contemporary rationalists have, by and large, not attempted to question prevailing understandings of pleasure, and so have prematurely ceded this bit of territory to their opponents. If nothing else, I hope reflection on the current account might provoke some resistance on this front. If even Kant of all people makes room for pleasure in the realm of reason, then perhaps his rationalist followers should entertain the possibility of doing so as well.

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## Notes

1. See, for example, Nagel (1970, Chapter V), Scanlon (1998, Chapter 1), and Quinn (1993).
2. I am not, then, simply adding my voice to the growing chorus of feeling-friendly readers of Kant. In particular, I am not simply arguing that Kant accepts a deep intimacy between reason and sensibility, though I believe he does. I am arguing that Kant (at least sometimes) accepts a kind of feeling that belongs *wholly* to reason and *not at all* to sensibility – a kind of feeling that could, in principle, belong to a purely rational being. For discussion of the close relation between reason and sensibility in Kantian ethics, see, for example, Geiger (2011), Herman (2005), Reath (2006), and Wood (1999).
3. I will use the following abbreviations of Kant's works in citations: *Critique of Pure Reason* – *KrV*; *Critique of Practical Reason* – *KpV*; *Critique of the Power of Judgment* – *KU*; *Critique of the Power of Judgment, First Introduction* – *KU EE*; *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* – *G*; *Metaphysics of Morals* – *MS*; *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* – *A*; *Jäsche Logic* – *JL*; *Lectures on Metaphysics* – *VM*; *Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion* – *VPR*.
4. As the reference to Leibniz suggests, this was the paradigmatic rationalist view in Kant's time. That said, I think it's less than obvious that the view deserves this designation. Whether or not it does depends on how seriously we take the *perception* part of perception of perfection – in particular, if we think of it as necessarily bound to sensation. Leibniz himself seems to countenance purely intellectual pleasures, but many of his followers tie pleasure more firmly to the sensible. Historical details aside, the important philosophical point is that cognitivism about pleasure is one thing; rationalism about pleasure is another. (I will have more to say about how I understand rationalism shortly.) For sympathetic discussion of the traditional view, see Beiser (2009).  
 Interestingly, at least one contemporary Kantian, Christine Korsgaard, has tried to revive something like this traditional view, identifying pleasure not with the perception of perfection but the perception of reasons. Her inspiration, however, is not Leibniz or other pre-Kantian rationalists but Aristotle. See Korsgaard (1996, §§4.3.1–4.3.12; 2008, 200–206). In the latter work, at least, she is clear that this perception is an engagement of our passive, sensible natures. As such, her view of pleasure is, I think, not rationalist.
5. I take it that by identifying pleasure with the state of mind of the will determined by the law, Kant is thereby identifying pleasure with the consciousness of this determination. The pleasure isn't the activity, strictly speaking. It is the consciousness of the activity. This seems implied by the analogy with aesthetics, where the identity of pleasure and consciousness is explicit. It also accords with Kant's general view of pleasure in the third Critique, which I will discuss in the next section.
6. Moreover, this is not the only place where Kant discusses this possibility. In his account of divine psychology, Kant (2001, *VPR* 28:1059) is clear that God feels pleasure, which would be impossible if pleasure were always and everywhere sensible.
7. Kant's idealism complicates the contrast here, since, in the case of theoretical cognition at least, the object itself depends on the mind. Kant (1996b, *KU* 5:189) is clear, though, that the dependence on subjectivity exhibited in the aesthetic and theoretical cases is quite different.
8. One might be sceptical of my claim that aesthetic pleasure arises from intellectual activity on the grounds that the free play of the cognitive faculties involves the imagination, which belongs to sensibility. While a full reply to this concern would

- require a full account of the free play, I will just say the following at present. Though the free play involves both intellect and sensibility, I believe that it is the intellect, which functions to make use of sensibility, that is the ultimate source of the pleasure. Indeed, if the dialectic is as I have characterized it, it must be. For, if sensibility were the source, it would be impossible to ground the norm of intersubjective agreement.
9. Though I think this is the most straightforward way to read Kant's remark in §12, not everyone agrees that this is the best way to understand the overall account. For example, Guyer (1997) opts for the causal reading, which helps explain why he deems Kant's argument a failure. Others want to take the identity claim more seriously. See, for example, Ginsborg (1991) and Zuckert (2007).
  10. The next clause offers an analogous account of displeasure. Kant continues, '... in contrast to which displeasure is that representation that contains the ground for determining the state of the representations to their opposite (hindering or getting rid of them)' (1996a, *KU* 5:220).
  11. One might worry that by identifying pleasure with the consciousness of activity, I have *thereby* rendered it sensible. After all, one might ask, isn't the agent's pleasure an aspect of her experience? And isn't experience always sensible? While I certainly accept that the agent's pleasure is an aspect of her experience in the sense that what it is like for her to act is pleasant, I do not think this implies that the pleasure is sensible. For, I do not think, and do not think that Kant thinks, that phenomenology and sensibility always go together. This is controversial, but I think Kant would find allies in recent advocates of irreducibly intellectual phenomenology. For an overview of some contemporary discussion of related issues, see Smithies (2013).
  12. It is important here to remember that the will does not only act in accordance with laws. It acts '*in accordance with the representation of laws*' (Kant 1997b, *G* 4:412; Kant's emphasis). Consequently, sensibility does not impede the will like one body impedes another. Rather, sensibility impedes the will by distorting its representations – in particular, by tempting the agent to *misrepresent* laws, including, especially, the will's own law: the moral law. It is this fact that explains why, though wrongdoing presupposes sensibility, it is not imputed to sensibility. For, though we are not responsible for having inclinations and associated feelings, we are responsible for what we make of them, i.e. whether we acquiesce to their distortive influence or whether we work to counteract it, and so attain and employ correct representations of the good. For fuller discussion of the operations of the will and how they go wrong, see Herman (2007) and Elizondo (2013).
  13. I think the account adumbrated here also comports with another of Kant's thoughts about pleasure, viz. that it is the feeling of life (1996a, *KU* 5:204; 1997c, *VM Mrongovious* 29:891; 2006, *A* 7:231). It is not entirely clear how Kant understands life – sometimes he connects it specifically to the faculty of desire (1996c, *MS* 6:211; 1997a, *KpV* 5:9n); sometimes he connects it to the mind more generally (1996a, *KU* 5:204; 1997c, *VM Mrongovious* 29:878) – though it is clearly related in some way to the unimpeded activity of the subject's faculties. If one interprets this in a broadly teleological way, along the lines I've sketched here, then pleasure turns out to be something like the feeling of a faculty's proper functioning. Put this way, the Kantian account of pleasure can begin to look very similar to the Aristotelian account (Aristotle 2000, VII, 11–14). If so, then it should be no surprise that Kant and Aristotle have similar views on the pleasantness of moral activity. On the connection between pleasure and life in Kant, with emphasis on aesthetics, see Zuckert (2007) and Longuenesse (2005).

One potentially worrisome consequence of assimilating the Kantian account to the Aristotelian account is that it seems to imply that the proper functioning of our theoretical faculties should be as pleasant – indeed, in some cases, as intrinsically

pleasant – as the proper functioning of our practical faculties. This seems at odds with Kant's claim that, for example, in the application of the categories, which is surely a kind theoretical well-functioning, 'we do not encounter the least effect on the feeling of pleasure in us ...' (1996a, *KU* 5:187). This is a complicated issue, which I cannot discuss here. Suffice it to say, though Kant is clearly reluctant to think of theoretical well-functioning as pleasant, I am not sure he should be.

14. As I am imagining it, the experience that Betty has is akin to what contemporary psychologists call 'flow'.
15. It is worth noting that hints of the third Critique account appear already in the second. Kant (1997a, *KpV* 5:75) suggests there that reason can give rise to a positive feeling by hindering a hindrance to reason's own activity. It is not easy to see how this view fits with Kant's characterization of such feeling as an effect upon the subject's sensibility. But, more importantly, from the perspective of the third Critique account, this view puts the pleasure in the wrong place. For, if the pleasure were simply the hindrance of a hindrance to reason's activity, then, were reason originally *unhindered*, there would be no pleasure. Indeed, Kant (1997a, *KpV* 5:76) seems to accept this implication; it is part of why he thinks that the moral feeling would not belong to the supreme being. On the present account, by contrast, no original hindrance is necessary and so sensibility plays no essential etiological role. The activity of reason is enough.
16. I know of no place where Kant unequivocally embraces what I am calling the 'full Kantian account of moral phenomenology', with its admixture of sensible and intellectual feelings. I thus hesitate to identify it as Kant's account, or even his mature or considered account, since it is too easy to point to passages where Kant appears to contradict it, even after the publication of the third Critique. (See again my discussion in Section I.) My claim is simply that the full Kantian account is a live and unappreciated option, available to Kant's followers even if never actually accepted by Kant himself.
17. Relatedly, we worry so much about how hard it can be to do right. It would be worth thinking more about how hard it can be to do wrong.
18. I am here restricting my account to pleasure. Whether other feelings can be accommodated in similar fashion is a matter for another day.

### Notes on contributor

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