



Con-Textos Kantianos

ISSN-e: 2386-7655

<https://dx.doi.org/10.5209/kant.88703> EDICIONES
COMPLUTENSE

Review of *Happiness in Kant's Practical Philosophy: Morality, Indirect Duties, and Welfare Rights*

Bryan Lueck¹Review of: Pinheiro Walla, Alice, *Happiness in Kant's Practical Philosophy: Morality, Indirect Duties, and Welfare Rights*, Lanham, MD, Lexington Books, 2022, 204 pp. ISBN: 978-1793633545

As the title of her book suggests, Alice Pinheiro Walla's aim is to clarify Kant's conception of happiness and to describe the role that it plays in his moral, political, and legal philosophy. This, of course, is no easy task. Kant himself never offers a sustained, detailed account of happiness; what we have instead are relatively brief remarks scattered throughout his writings. And making the problem worse is the fact that some of these remarks seem, if not straightforwardly contradictory, then at least difficult to reconcile. Pinheiro Walla's book is devoted to resolving these tensions, with each chapter focusing on a different interpretive difficulty.

In the first chapter, which lays the foundation for all the rest, Pinheiro Walla focuses on two of Kant's claims, both of which capture something essential about the place of happiness in his moral philosophy but that also seem to be in tension with each other. The first is that happiness is an "end that can be presupposed as actual in all rational beings... according to a natural necessity" (Pinheiro Walla 7, citing 4:415). The second is that happiness cannot be the natural end for finite rational beings like us. What can it mean both to affirm that we necessarily pursue happiness as an end and to deny that happiness is our natural end? One possible answer is that the first claim is true of us *qua* finite, i.e., *qua* beings whose faculties of desire are sensuously affected, while the second is true of us *qua* rational agents. On this sort of account, the natural necessity of pursuing happiness as an end would impose itself on us from outside our faculty of reason. Our task as moral beings would be to struggle against that non-rational necessitation. Pinheiro Walla rejects this familiar account, arguing instead that both of these claims are implications from Kant's conception of what it means to have a finite rational will. Willing, on Kant's account, requires not just a formal principle but also a material one: without the latter the will would not be practical, and so would not be a will at all. The matter of the will is always some object that promises pleasure. As Kant argues explicitly in the *Groundwork*, in order genuinely to will some end we must also will the means necessary to its realization; to desire the object without willing the means to its realization would be merely to wish for it (4:417). Now as long as we are simply wishing and not willing, we do not need to form a determinate conception of happiness for ourselves. The object of our wish, then, would be happiness as the unrepresentable idea under which "all inclinations unite under one sum" (4:399). But the end of our willing is necessarily some determinate, realistically achievable conception of happiness. The "natural" in the natural necessity of making happiness our end, then, refers to the nature of a finite rational will and not simply to our non-rational animal nature. The reason supporting the second of the two apparently conflicting claims—that happiness cannot be our natural end—is spelled out in the well-known teleological argument from the *Groundwork*. While many Kant scholars regard this argument as something of an embarrassment, Pinheiro Walla finds in it a vitally important insight about the relationship between morality and happiness. If it is true that nature has given us practical reason because it is most fit for some purpose, then it cannot be the case that its natural end is the pursuit of happiness. That end would be better achieved by instinct. The end that can be achieved only by practical reason is the good will. This once again suggests a familiar picture of Kant's ethics as pitting morality against happiness. But Pinheiro Walla argues convincingly that this picture is wrong: it is because happiness is not the natural end of reason that morality and happiness are merely contingently, and not necessarily, incompatible. If we took happiness to be our natural end, then we would conceive morality and happiness as necessarily incompatible. Moreover, we would inevitably become embittered by the realization that reason was so ill-suited to its supposedly natural end. It is actually for the best then, both from the point of view of morality and of happiness, that the latter is not our natural end.

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Anyone who wants to endorse this conception of Kant's practical philosophy as one that is not hostile to human happiness still faces an obvious and serious difficulty, which Pinheiro Walla addresses in chapter two. Kant, of course, is committed to the view that "autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws" (5:33). Every moral philosophy that does not take autonomy as its supreme principle—which is just to say, every moral philosophy prior to Kant's—is based on the principle of heteronomy. And every moral philosophy that is based on the principle of heteronomy, according to Kant, is subordinated to the principle of happiness (5:22). From here it is a very short step to two conclusions: that all non-Kantian moral theories are eudaimonistic in that they are explicitly committed to the pursuit of happiness and that the pursuit of happiness is incompatible with morality. Pinheiro Walla resists this step by emphasizing the slight but important distinction between heteronomy and eudaimonism: the former is a theory about the normative source of morality—namely, that it originates outside the will—and the latter is a theory about motivation—that we are motivated only by considerations of our own happiness. With this distinction in mind we can see that heteronomous moral theories are not necessarily explicitly committed to eudaimonism, but that the latter nevertheless follows from the former. Why does this matter? Because if we take the good to be a source of normativity external to our wills, then we will never be able to think of ourselves as having acted virtuously. The contentment that we feel as a consequence of our virtuous action will appear to us as having been the incentive for that action. But this is self-undermining: if we believe that the feeling of contentment was the incentive, then we cannot view that act as really having been virtuous in the first place. And if we do not believe that the act was virtuous in the first place, then we lose the cause of our contentment. The key lesson of chapter two, then, is remarkably similar to the key lesson of chapter one: it is a good thing, from both the point of view of morality and of happiness, that eudaimonism is false. Far from signaling a hostility to happiness, Kant's strong anti-eudaimonist position makes sense of the compatibility of morality and happiness in a way that no heteronomous moral theory can.

Chapters three and four are devoted to those passages in which Kant does explicitly endorse happiness as a moral end. Chapter three focuses on Kant's claim that "to secure one's own happiness is one's duty (at least indirectly)" (4:399). Given Kant's commitment to the view that all finite rational beings pursue happiness according to a natural necessity, what can it mean to say that we have a duty to do so? How can we make sense of a constraint to do what we already do anyway? Pinheiro Walla's strategy for answering these questions is to begin by clarifying the meaning of an indirect duty. She makes a highly compelling argument for the view that indirect duties pertain to dispositions and feelings that "*cannot be activated on command*" (Pinheiro Walla, 78). There can be no direct duty to be happy right now, as this is beyond our control, but we can be constrained to cultivate a general disposition to happiness. But once again, don't we all do this naturally? Pinheiro Walla's surprising answer is no. She introduces a distinction, which she takes to be implicit in Kant's account, between subjective and objective happiness. Objective happiness refers to the "basic ends of our animal nature that have an impact on our moral integrity," whereas subjective happiness refers to what we just happen to desire (Pinheiro Walla, 82). As Kant's example of the gout sufferer in the *Groundwork* is meant to show, it frequently happens that human beings pursue the latter but not the former. The problem with this, from the specifically moral point of view, is that an unhappy disposition can prevent us from resisting the inclinations that arise as obstacles to moral agency. Someone who does not secure her own objective happiness, then, should not be understood merely as imprudent, but rather as violating a duty to herself as a moral being.

The fourth chapter addresses a number of different issues connected to the duty to adopt others' happiness as our own end. I would like to focus here on Pinheiro Walla's discussion of just one of them. There is a common view of Kantian ethics, articulated most forcefully by Bernard Williams, that sees it as requiring strict impartiality. Applied to the duty of beneficence, this would require that we promote the happiness of all persons equally, regardless of whether they are perfect strangers, our closest loved ones, or even ourselves. Such an impartial duty to promote happiness would work to the detriment of each agent's own happiness, allowing "no space for the pursuit of personal projects and human flourishing" (Pinheiro Walla, 98). This conception reinforces the popular view of Kant's practical philosophy as one that is hostile to human happiness. Pinheiro Walla, though, gives us strong reasons to think that Williams's conception is simply false. Once again, the distinction between willing and wishing is important to a proper appreciation of Kant's position. Wishing, he points out, "costs us nothing" and so in that sense we "can be *equally* benevolent to everyone" (6:452). But we cannot will to do so, keeping in mind that to genuinely will is to will the means. One way to think about the implication of this point is that since we cannot help everyone equally and impartially, it is permissible to focus on those closest to us. But Pinheiro Walla argues that this does not adequately capture Kant's point. Focusing on the happiness of those closest to us should not be seen an exception to the duty of beneficence; rather, the fact that some are closer to us than others is the source of special obligations. These obligations are special not in the sense that they are grounded in a competing principle but rather in the sense that they are special applications of the same general duty of beneficence. It is simply not the case, then, that for Kant "the moral point of view is specially characterized by its impartiality and its indifference to any particular relations to particular persons" (Williams, 2).

Chapter five addresses questions relating to the demandingness of Kant's moral philosophy. Pinheiro Walla characterizes the chapter as a digression and in a sense it is, given that its central concern is not happiness. But

it does focus on a highly counterintuitive implication of the duty to beneficence and Pinheiro Walla's treatment of that potential problem does shed light on the role of happiness in Kant's practical philosophy. The problem, briefly, is this: perfect duties always have normative priority over imperfect duties like the duty to beneficence. It seems to follow, then, that "one should not save persons from a burning house if doing so would require using the neighbor's garden hose without her permission" (Pinheiro Walla, 123). But this seems absurd: surely at least in this case the duty to beneficence should trump the duty to respect others' property rights. If an imperfect duty can sometimes trump a perfect one, though, then we lose the point of distinguishing between the two kinds of duties. How should we deal with this difficulty, by revising the meaning of perfect and imperfect duties or by biting the bullet and acknowledging the counterintuitive implications of the distinction? Pinheiro Walla accepts neither of these alternatives. The key to her solution is the idea that under certain very specific circumstances the latitude that characterizes imperfect duties is reduced to zero. Under normal circumstances, it is entirely plausible to claim at the same time that I am committed to beneficence and that I choose to forgo a given opportunity to promote somebody's happiness. But if I find myself in a situation where only I am able to save a person who is facing imminent death, and I am able to do so at little cost to myself, I cannot choose against saving the life while still claiming a commitment to beneficence. Even though the duty to beneficence is imperfect, I must fulfill it in this case; my latitude for choice is zero. But what if I can only save the life by appropriating my neighbor's property without permission? Does my imperfect duty not trump my perfect duty to respect her property? Pinheiro Walla insists that it does not. If I take the property, I will still have violated a perfect duty, but the violation in this is excusable. The fact that the duty to beneficence is imperfect, then, does not entail that considerations of happiness must always give way when they are in tension with our perfect duties.

The sixth and final chapter is the only one that examines the place of happiness in Kant's political philosophy. On the one hand, it might seem that there should be very little to say on this matter, as Kant explicitly rejects happiness as a basis for external lawgiving (8:290). It is not the law's function to promote subjects' happiness but rather to secure their right to pursue happiness as they see fit individually. For the state to do more than this, he thinks, would be despotism. On the other hand, though, Kant does acknowledge that the supreme commander has the right to impose "taxes to support organizations providing for the *poor*, *foundling homes*, and *church organizations*, usually called charitable or pious institutions" (6:325-326). Recent decades have seen much scholarship devoted to reconciling these conflicting claims. Pinheiro Walla rejects one influential argument according to which the state has a duty to aid the poor in virtue of its duty to ensure the conditions of citizens' civil independence. She puts forward several different arguments against this view, the simplest and most straightforward of which is that dependence on state aid is incompatible with civil independence. Pinheiro Walla instead argues for a position somewhere between the minimalist, night-watchman account of the Kantian state and the more recent welfare interpretations: the head of state does not have a duty to aid the poor, but the poor do have an unenforceable right of equity that the head of state may recognize by means of redistributive taxation.

I believe that this book constitutes an important contribution to Kant scholarship. Pinheiro Walla presents an interpretation of Kant's conception of happiness that renders his scattered remarks on the topic consistent and that also fits plausibly within his practical philosophy as a whole. In addition to this, Pinheiro Walla contributes in surprising ways to our understanding of happiness itself. To many it would seem obvious that Kant's practical philosophy should be the last place to look for a nuanced, plausible account of human happiness. Pinheiro Walla, though, gives us good reasons to think that this common view is mistaken. Finally, and just as importantly, the book motivates a shift in the Gestalt of Kant's moral philosophy generally. Concepts like duty and autonomy retain their central place, but happiness and the pursuit of non-moral ends are no longer relegated to the periphery. In sum, I believe that Pinheiro Walla's book is a major achievement and I recommend it highly.

References

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