

Kant's Conception of *Selbstzufriedenheit*

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It is not often mentioned that Kant has a place in his moral philosophy for a particular kind of satisfaction associated with being a virtuous person. As he claims in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant believes there is a special word for the kind of “satisfaction with one’s existence ... that must necessarily accompany consciousness of virtue”, namely “*self-contentment* [*Selbstzufriedenheit*]” (KpV AA 05:117.25-28, translation modified).¹ That virtuous action is accompanied by this feeling of satisfaction could be problematic, however, because one might object that virtuous action is only performed in order to experience the feeling of satisfaction that results from so acting. Kant was aware of this objection and did not think that his conception of self-contentment was vulnerable to it. In general, however, what exactly Kant’s conception of self-contentment amounts to is unclear and the limited secondary literature disagrees about its meaning and significance. My primary aim in this paper is thus to clarify Kant’s conception of self-contentment. I do so by placing the term in the context of Kant’s answer to the above-mentioned objection, which was made by Kant’s contemporary Christian Garve. I begin by illustrating the main features of Kant’s concept of self-contentment before turning to Garve’s objection and Kant’s response to it. I conclude by clarifying the differences between self-contentment, respect for the moral law, and Kant’s concept of moral pleasure.

1. Self-Contentment

Kant explicitly describes self-contentment as “a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward” which occurs “[w]hen a thoughtful human being has overcome incentives to vice and is aware of having done his often bitter duty” (MS AA 06:377.20-22). As

¹ Where available, all English translations of Kant’s works use *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, eds. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. All other translations are my own.

mentioned, he also claims it is “a word that does not denote enjoyment, as the word happiness does, but that nevertheless indicates a satisfaction with one’s existence, an analogue of happiness that must necessarily accompany consciousness of virtue” (KpV AA 05:117.25-28). Kant clarifies the way in which self-contentment is different from happiness in his lectures on religion:

Pleasure with one’s condition is called well-being, and insofar as this pleasure relates to the whole of our existence it is called happiness. [...] The pleasure with one’s own person is called self-contentment [Selbstzufriedenheit]. What is characteristic of us is what freedom consists of. As a result, the pleasure with one’s freedom or with the quality of one’s will is self-contentment. If this self-contentment reaches over our entire existence, then it is called bliss [Seligkeit]. (V-Th/Volckmann AA 28:1191.7-16)

As this quotation makes clear, while happiness has to do with pleasure and well-being, self-contentment relates to the quality of our own person, i.e. our will and the extent to which we exercise freedom and our satisfaction with ourselves in this respect.

The distinction between contentment and happiness can be further clarified if we look closer at how the exercise of freedom is related to contentment. Kant clarifies this link in the second *Critique* when he claims:

[f]reedom, and the consciousness of freedom as an ability to follow the moral law with an unyielding disposition, is *independence from the inclinations* [...] and so far as I am conscious of this freedom in following my moral maxims, it is the sole source of an unchangeable contentment [...] and this can be called intellectual contentment. (KpV AA 05:117-8.31-01)

Kant goes on to distinguish intellectual from “aesthetic” contentment, namely the satisfaction of the inclinations. In fact, he claims that contentment is not the right term to use in the latter case because “the inclinations change, grow with the indulgence one allows them, and always leave behind a still greater void than one had thought to fill. Hence they are always *burdensome* to a rational being, and though he cannot lay them aside, they wrest from him the wish to be rid of them” (KpV AA 05:118.4-9). This is significant, for it is due to the fact that the inclinations are burdensome that we can understand

how consciousness of this ability of a pure practical reason [freedom – M.W.] through a deed (virtue) can in fact produce consciousness of mastery over one’s inclinations, hence of independence from them and so too from the discontent that always accompanies them, and thus can produce a negative satisfaction with one’s state, that is, *contentment*, which in its source is contentment with one’s person. (KpV AA 05:118.24-30)

Indeed, the link between freedom and self-contentment lies in the connection between freedom and independence of the inclinations. Acting freely and independently of the pull of the inclinations means being free from the burden of the inclinations. This results in what Kant calls a “negative satisfaction”, i.e. a kind of satisfaction consisting in the absence of something painful or unsatisfying. Once one masters one’s inclinations, one can be “content with oneself”, i.e. one can be satisfied with oneself as having removed the burden and influence of the inclinations. With this in hand it also becomes clear how Kant distinguishes happiness, on the one hand, and self-contentment, on the other, from bliss [Seligkeit]. Shortly after the above quoted passage from *Religionsphilosophie Volckmann*, Kant claims that

[s]elf-contentment is created from morality, as opposed to happiness depending on physical conditions. No creature has the natural forces in its control such that it can make them coincide with its self-contentment. One would therefore never ascribe to a creature the highest level of self-contentment or with other words bliss [Seligkeit]. (V-Th/Volckmann AA 28:1191.24-30)

Only complete independence from the inclinations can result in bliss, meaning this is something unachievable in this life by human beings, given we are both rational and sensible. Although we cannot achieve bliss as rational and sensible beings, we can achieve both happiness and the imperfect version of bliss, namely self-contentment.

We have now seen how self-contentment is both analogous to happiness but is also not equivalent to happiness itself. Self-contentment is perhaps the closest thing to bliss or complete independence from the inclinations that human beings can experience. Self-contentment itself, however, is not so easily attained either. As Kant claims in the second *Critique*:

one must first value the importance of what we call duty, the authority of the moral law, and the immediate worth that compliance with it gives a person in his own eyes, in order to feel that satisfaction in consciousness of one’s conformity with it and bitter remorse if one can reproach oneself with having transgressed it. (KpV AA 05:38.24-29)

In other words, self-contentment is not something experienced along with the performance of every virtuous action, rather it is only experienced once one has achieved or acquired the virtuous disposition. This will be important once we turn to Kant’s answer to Garve’s objection. Before turning to Garve, however, it is important clarify *when* exactly one experiences the satisfaction of self-contentment if not after performing a virtuous action, and also how one goes about attaining it.

Kant states that for those who are not yet virtuous, “I certainly do not deny that frequent practice in conformity with this determining ground can finally produce subjectively a feeling of satisfaction with oneself” (KpV AA 05:38.34-36). As stated in a previous quotation, self-contentment can only be experienced once one already values the authority of the moral law. In other words, one must already possess the virtuous disposition or be a virtuous person to experience self-contentment. This means that self-contentment can only be experienced from a condition that one has to acquire, namely the virtuous disposition. Only after many attempts of trying one’s best, and therefore perhaps very late in life, is one capable of feeling “content with oneself” and experiencing the satisfaction of having attempted to be as virtuous as possible. Indeed, given Kant’s thesis that we can never know our true motives (see e.g. GMS AA 04:407.01-4), being content with oneself is not a matter of knowing one *is* a virtuous person and *has* without a doubt acted virtuously, rather it is a matter of knowing that one has tried one’s best to be motivated by duty alone and only when one has become the kind of person who has and does try their best to be so motivated does one experience self-contentment.

Now that we have an at least cursory understanding of Kant’s conception of self-contentment, we can turn to an important objection raised by Christian Garve, an objection to which Kant is vulnerable as a result of positing the existence of a certain kind of satisfaction associated with being virtuous. As I will show, however, Kant’s understanding of self-contentment avoids the issue raised by Garve in a relatively satisfying way.

2. Garve’s Objection and Kant’s Response

In his *Essays on Various Topics from Morality, Literature and Social Life* [*Versuche über verschiedene Gegenstände aus der Moral, der Literatur und dem gesellschaftlichen Leben*], Christian Garve claims that according to the principles of some philosophers “the virtuous individual [...] ceaselessly strives to be worthy of happiness, but – insofar as he is truly virtuous – never strives to be happy” (Garve 1792, 111-112).² It is clear, of course, that Garve has Kant in mind. At the time of the publication of Garve’s book (1792), Kant had published both the *Groundwork* (1785) and the second *Critique* (1788), both of which identify acting morally with striving to be worthy of happiness (see e.g. AA GMS 04:393.16-24 and KpV AA 05:110.27-28).

² All translations of Garve are my own.

Garve criticizes the idea of separating the striving to be worthy of happiness from the desire for happiness itself when he famously claimed:

For my part I confess that I grasp this division of ideas very well with my head, but I do not find this division of desires and strivings in my heart; - that it is even inconceivable to me how any person can become aware that his longing to be worthy of happiness is purely separated from the longing for happiness itself – and has therefore performed his duty entirely disinterestedly.
(Garve 1792, 112)

To be clear, Garve’s claim is that it is impossible for anyone to distinguish between these two kinds of desires in themselves. Implied by this, however, is that the desire to be worthy of happiness might just be reducible to the desire for happiness. Kant responds to this objection by distinguishing between two types of pleasure.

In two texts written after the publication of Garve’s book, namely the article *On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy* (1796) and the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), Kant distinguishes between “*pathological pleasure and moral pleasure*” (MS AA 06:378.09). According to Kant, “[p]leasure that must precede one’s observance of the law in order for one to act in conformity with the law is pathological [...] but pleasure that must be preceded by the law in order to be felt is in the *moral order*” (MS AA 06:378.10-14). On the one hand there are the pathological pleasures, the expectation of which can act as a motive to action.³ On the other hand, there is a certain kind of pleasure that only results from acting in accordance with the moral law. This latter pleasure is what Kant calls moral pleasure and it is this concept that plays a central role in Kant’s response to Garve.

At the points where Kant discusses moral pleasure he mentions the position of a certain “eudaemonist” (see VT AA 8:395n and MS AA 6:377.23), who believes that “the pleasure (*contentment*) that a righteous man has in view, in order to feel it one day in the consciousness of his well-conducted course of life (and thus the prospect of his future felicity), is in fact the true *motive* for conducting his affairs well (in accordance with the law)” (VT AA 08:395.note). According to the eudaemonist, then, because the righteous man experiences satisfaction with his well-conducted course of life, this satisfaction and not the striving to be worthy of happiness might be the true motive of the righteous man’s “virtuous” actions. Given the similarity between

³ To be clear, we do not necessarily need to experience pleasure in order for us to desire something, according to Kant. Kant’s distinction between instinct and inclination is meant to capture precisely this point: an inclination “presupposes acquaintance with the object of desire” (RGV AA 06:29.n) whereas an instinct does not (see also Johnson 52 and Höwing 3f.).

this position and Garve's objection, it is likely that Kant has Garve in mind here. Indeed, Kant was perhaps worried about Garve's objection because it was first in the second *Kritik* that Kant discussed the satisfaction associated with virtue. This satisfaction, of course, is self-contentment, i.e. "a satisfaction with one's existence [...] that must necessarily accompany consciousness of virtue" (KpV AA 05:117.25-28). In that Kant had such a concept, Kant would have felt the need to respond to Garve's objection explicitly.

Kant's response to the eudaemonist's objection amounts to the claim that the eudaemonist is reasoning circularly and that the objection is meaningless. In the *Tone* essay, for example, Kant claims the following:

since I must assume him [the righteous person – M.W.] beforehand to be righteous and obedient to the law, i.e., to be one in whom *the law precedes the pleasure*, in order for him subsequently to feel a pleasure of the soul in the consciousness of his well-conducted course of life, it is an empty circle in the reasoning to make the pleasure, which is a *consequence*, into the *cause* of that course of life. (VT AA 08:395.note)

Based on his distinction between pathological and moral pleasure, then, Kant argues it is in fact impossible for *moral* pleasure to somehow be the true motive of our strivings to be worthy of happiness. This is the case because it is only when we are already virtuous and motivated by the moral law alone that it is possible for us to experience moral pleasure in the first place. To desire to be virtuous only for the sake of the pleasure that results from having a pure moral motive is precisely not to have the moral motive – it is to be motivated by the desire for pleasure. Indeed, given the nature of moral pleasure it is simply a logical mistake to think one can experience moral pleasure in this way. As a moral pleasure, this is how Kant's conception of self-contentment removes the threat of Garve's objection. Not only this, but insofar as self-contentment is a kind of satisfaction one can only experience from a state that one has to acquire, it would not make sense to expect to experience this satisfaction if one did not yet have the virtuous disposition (which one certainly does not have if one's motive for acting virtuously is the expectation of pleasure). Acting virtuously in order to experience its associated satisfaction would therefore not get one any closer to this satisfaction but would in fact get farther away with every attempt. Every pathologically motivated action is a step away from the virtuous disposition, which can only be acquired with practice and over time. There are therefore two main reasons why Kant's conception of self-contentment is not vulnerable to Garve's objection: 1) as a moral

pleasure, self-contentment simply does not arise if one's motive is the expectation of pleasure, and 2) self-contentment does not arise from the performance of every virtuous action and thus cannot function as a motive in the way the expectation of pathological pleasure can.

We have now seen how Kant's understanding of self-contentment avoided Garve's objection. It remains unclear, however, if self-contentment is just another word for what Kant calls moral pleasure, as has been suggested above, and whether this is how the term has been understood in the existing secondary literature. The rest of this paper will be devoted to answering these questions.

3. Terminological Clarification

Self-contentment has been understood in various ways in the secondary literature. Lewis White Beck suggests that it and the positive side of respect are identical.⁴ Stephen Engstrom claims it is simply a different term for what Kant calls moral pleasure⁵, and others that it is in some way different without specifying precisely in what way.⁶ Kant's concept of moral pleasure on its own at least leaves the question open of whether this is something one experiences after every performance of moral action. Given self-contentment is a kind of satisfaction one only experiences after already being motivated by the moral law alone, it is clear that self-contentment is at least an instance of moral pleasure. Contrary to Engstrom, however, I think it is slightly inaccurate to say that self-contentment and moral pleasure are one and the same. Rather, moral pleasure is a general category or kind of pleasure, namely the kind that is consequent to rather than preceding the law, whereas self-contentment is an instance of this kind of pleasure. From what I have said above I think it is also clear that self-contentment is distinct from the positive side of respect. The positive side of respect is the admiration we have for the moral law in contrast to the pain and humiliation we experience by comparing ourselves to it, meaning it is something we can presumably experience often. Indeed, as the motive we ought to have when we act morally, respect is likely something we ought to feel *every time* we act, whereas, as stated above, self-contentment is not experienced this often, but rather only after one possesses a virtuous disposition. It is also not the awareness of the moral law that produces self-contentment

⁴ See Beck, 229f.

⁵ See Engstrom 2007, 144.

⁶ See Packer 1989, 432, note 11. See also Johnson 2005 and Höwing 2013, 2.

directly, as is the case for the positive side of respect, rather it is the awareness that one has been the kind of person who has tried one's absolute best to act morally over the course of one's life. For these reasons I believe Beck and others are incorrect to suggest that self-contentment and the moral feeling of respect are identical.

In conclusion, self-contentment is Kant's concept of the intellectual satisfaction, analogous to but distinct from happiness, that human beings are capable of experiencing if we have lead a life trying our best to be moral individuals motivated by duty alone. I have argued that, as a kind of moral pleasure, the notion does not leave him vulnerable to objections like Garve's and I hope to have illustrated that it occupies an important, albeit neglected, place in his moral philosophy.

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