

The Ambiguity of Kant's Concept of Happiness

Thomas Marshall
Neumann College

My analysis of Kant's concept of happiness is motivated by a concern with the role it plays in his ethical system. Typically in ethics, happiness can be viewed as either subjective or objective. The former claims that happiness is a feeling of some sort or other; and it may or may not play a role in ethics. For the latter, happiness is not equated with feelings or the fulfillment of inclinations. In addition, it is taken as the reason or incentive to live a moral life. There are to be two issues that arise when examining Kant's concept of happiness. First, because he generally takes happiness to be subjective, he found it almost impossible to find a place for happiness in his ethical system. Second, because he tried to accommodate the need for happiness in ethics, his use of the concept ends up being ambiguous. This second point indicates that while he primarily understood happiness as subjective, he also used the term in ways that did not coincide with a subjective account. Kant's struggle with the concept indicates that he recognized a viable ethical system must analyze the concept, if for no other reason that its motivational value.

In order to understand Kant's use of the concept of happiness, we must begin with his concept of the *summum bonum*, which was *happiness in proportion to virtue*.¹ The highest good, then, would appear to be a synthesis of virtue and happiness.² However, as we shall see, a synthesis is not what Kant had in mind. Given this initial formulation, one assumes that the highest good necessarily connects the attainment of happiness to living a virtuous life. However, Kant thought that, "striving for happiness provides a ground for a virtuous disposition is absolutely false." However, he continues that, "a virtuous disposition necessarily produces happiness is not absolutely

¹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. L.W. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Co., 1983), p. 115.

² Other words besides *synthesis* have been used to describe this relation. H. Jones in *Kant's Principle of Personality* calls it a union of the two (p. 104). L.W. Beck in *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason* and H.J. Paton in *The Categorical Imperative* both use the term *bonum consummatum* (complete good) to describe the relationship. Beck and Paton take the *summum bonum* to be some kind of additive concept where virtue and happiness equal the *summum bonum*. Whatever word is used, the point is clear: there is supposed to be some special relation between the two concepts that yields the concept of the highest good. I am inclined to think that Kant himself did not really understand this relation clearly. Hence, we are not sure how to characterize it. I think if he clearly understood this relationship, he would have considered it a synthesis because virtue and happiness form an entirely new, and systemically more important, concept of the *summum bonum*.

Reason Papers 26 (Summer 2000): 21-28. Copyright © 2000

false."³ By this he means that it is false in the sense of "causality in the world of sense," but it is not absolutely false because there is another mode of existence for a rational being than the world of sense. Kant was thinking of some other level of existence where the human will is subject to the moral law as a pure intellectual determining ground. So, Kant concludes that, "the highest good is the necessary highest end of a morally determined will and a true object thereof."⁴ The highest good, then, is the goal of all rational beings.

There is a critical flaw in Kant's conception of the highest good. The problem is that moral good is not necessarily, nor in any important way, connected to happiness. Of course, one could claim that moral good is a necessary condition for happiness because without it one would feel self-contempt, and, consequently, not be happy. However, this is only a negative condition, and does not imply that if one does not feel self-contempt, one will be happy. This lacks the force needed for a positive conception of happiness.

Kant claimed that the attainment of the highest good is the "moral wish" of every rational creature. One may drop a coin (virtuous conduct) into the moral wishing well, but there is no guarantee, or even likelihood, of the wish coming true. Happiness, in this conception of the summum bonum, is much too passive because it provides no incentive to act morally. Part of the role that happiness plays in most ethical systems is to provide some motivation for moral action. There may be a level of attractiveness to Kant's theory that does not qualify as happiness; however, this is unlikely because the attractiveness of an object and the happiness it will engender cannot be separated.

Subjective Concept

Kant's primary concept of happiness is crudely subjective. For example, he stated, "in this Idea of happiness all inclinations are combined into a total sum."⁵ On this account, happiness is nothing more than the satisfaction of the sum total of one's inclinations. The more inclinations satisfied, the happier a person is. Since, desire is a subjective state, it follows that happiness, which is nothing but the fulfillment of desires, is also a subjective state. Kant's certainty about this matter is exemplified in the claim that, "men cannot form under the name of happiness any determinate and assured conception of the satisfaction of all inclinations as a sum."⁶ It follows that if happiness is a function of a person's desires, there cannot be a determinate concept because there are as many different and conflicting desires as there are persons.

3. Kant, op. cit., p. 119.

4. Ibid.

5. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. By H.J. Paton (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), p. 67. See also *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 129.

6. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 67.

This understanding of happiness was a continual theme throughout Kant's work. For example, in the *Critique of Pure Reason* we find, "happiness is the satisfaction of all our desires, extensively, in respect of their manifoldness, intensively, in respect of their degree, and protensively, in respect of their duration." (806a-834b). In the *Doctrine of Virtue* we find, "only our natural impulses to food, sex, rest, and activity, along with the natural impulses to honor ... can tell us in what we have to posit that satisfaction."⁷ Here, again, we see that he takes happiness to be nothing more than the satisfaction of one's sum total of desires. Beck explains this tendency by saying that, "a state of happiness is one in which there is continuous satisfaction of all desires."⁸

Because of his subjective understanding of happiness, Kant thought that happiness could play no role in being a foundation for an ethical system. As a subjective concept, happiness is indefinable in general, as well as in most particular cases. Hence, it can never be the foundation for an ethical system because it cannot be clearly defined. Given his subjective understanding of happiness, Kant had a difficult time finding a place for happiness in his system. In most teleological ethics, happiness plays an important role because it is the incentive, or ultimate end, for that system. Happiness cannot play this role in Kant's system. That he was aware of this problem is evident. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* he asks the question "what may I hope?" His answer is enlightening: "all hoping is directed towards happiness" (806a-834b). He knew that all people look to happiness as their final end, their supreme good; yet, because of his subjective account he did not see how it could play such a role. As a result, he grappled with the problem of happiness and ethics in a variety of ways. His ambivalent relationship with the concept of happiness led him to describe happiness in a variety of ways that were seldom consistent with his subjective account.

Ambiguity

The second, and more internally problematic, issue arises out of Kant's realization that people have to be motivated to act ethically. His attempt to deal with this reality leads to the ambiguity of his concept of happiness. Although, as noted above, he maintained a crudely subjective account of happiness, it is possible to find other accounts as well. Others have identified at least two versions of happiness in Kant's work. This leads to two problems. The first is that such ambiguity makes it difficult to determine whether Kant had a consistent concept, and, second, we cannot be sure how he wanted to use happiness in his system.

7. Immanuel Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, trans. By M.J. Gregor (Philadelphia: The University of Pennsylvania Press, 1964), pp. 12-13.

8. Lewis W. Beck, *A Commentary on Kant's Critique of Practical Reason*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1966), p. 72.

H.J. Paton mentions the likelihood that there are at least two concepts of happiness found in Kant.⁹ The first is the subjective account mentioned above. On this account happiness is primarily hedonistic in nature, and is thought to be nothing more than the greatest possible amount of uninterrupted pleasure throughout one's life. The second account is akin to what is often called the constitutive account of happiness. In this account, Kant takes happiness to be the realization of various ends in an organized and systematic life. Onora Nell makes the same point: "happiness is not a separate end, but the form of all ends an agent may desire."¹⁰ If happiness is not a separate end, and if it is the form of all ends, then it must be necessarily connected to virtue. If happiness is the form of all ends, then it must include the end of developing the good will because being virtuous for duty's sake is one of a person's ends. It will, therefore, be a part of the form of all one's ends. If so, then being virtuous will be a constitutive element of happiness. Of course, Kant argued that the purpose or end of reason is to develop the good will, and not for use in seeking happiness. This too, is changed because now reason has its role in attaining happiness through doing one's duty for duty's sake. This account sounds Aristotelian where what were thought means to happiness, are really elements of happiness. In the Kantian system, this is an attempt to link virtue and happiness in an important and necessary way.

However, the above account does not exhaust the ambiguity of Kant's account of happiness. There are at least two other concepts lurking in his work. The first I wish to examine is found in what Kant called "worthiness to be happy." This concept is found in his formulation of the summum bonum. He claimed that, "virtue and happiness together constitute the possession of the highest good for one person, and happiness in exact proportion to morality."¹¹ This appears to be the constitutive account of happiness mentioned above; however, it is really quite different. If this formulation of the greatest good were entirely constitutive, then happiness would be inextricably bound up in its constitution. Kant's formulation makes it only one *part* of the greatest good, and a secondary one at that, as we shall see. What detracts from the constitutive nature of this formulation, and causes us to find a third concept of happiness, is that importance of this concept is dependent upon two other conditions. First, Kant claimed that happiness, "is not of itself absolutely good in every respect but always presupposes conduct in accordance with the moral law as its condition."¹² Second, he claimed that, "the highest good is practically possible only on the supposition of the immortality of the soul."¹³

9. H.J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967, 6th ed.), p. 85.

10. Onora Nell, *Acting on Principle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), p. 101.

11. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 115.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*, p. 127.

So, Kant's concept of the greatest good is further conditioned by God. These conditions lead to two entirely different concepts of happiness, and make it difficult to find a coherent understanding of happiness. This leaves us with two questions. First, what is more important, worthiness or happiness? Second, what kind of happiness could God give us?

If we consider "worthiness to be happy" as Kant understood the phrase, one is inclined to think that *worthiness* is more important in the formulation than *happiness*. This is apparent when we recall that happiness is to be apportioned according to worthiness; and, more importantly, worthiness is determined by one's adherence to the moral law determined by a good will. Kant certainly made this clear when he said, "a good will seems to constitute the indispensable condition of our very worthiness to be happy."¹⁴ Concerning this issue, Beck said that, "the moral value lies in the worthiness, not in the enjoyment."¹⁵ If this is the case, we must ask what is the point of adding happiness to this formulation? None, it seems, since the entire focus is on worthiness. Recall that "virtue and happiness together" constitute the greatest good. On this account, however, it appears that worthiness alone will suffice. If Kant really meant "virtue and happiness together," then happiness would be a constitutive element of the greatest good. By focusing on worthiness, Kant makes happiness a reward, and not a constitutive element. The very meaning of *worthiness* makes this inevitable. It is a concept that involves reward or payment of some kind, and involves being deserving of something. Obviously, worthiness is the primary focus on Kant's formulation, and there is no real reason to mention happiness as anything more than a reward for a job well done. This means that the greatest good is based on worthiness alone, and the payment is happiness. Of course, Kant cannot accept this option since it would devalue the concept of a good will because it might be motivated for the reward and not by the moral law alone. Hence, the only possible explanation consistent with Kant is that happiness really plays no role in the greatest good.

However, let us consider what happiness would be if we accept his concept of "worthiness to be happy." Let us suppose that, contrary to the above, there is some content to his concept of happiness in this formulation. If we do, we find another concept of happiness lurking in Kant's system based on the kind of reward we might receive for being worthy. This condition, mentioned above, is based on some reward given to us by God, which assumes the immortality of the soul. God rewards us for a virtuous life, and immortality assures that we can be rewarded. However, if this happiness is something given to us by God, it is certainly not the same as the subjective concept that Kant generally holds. I cannot hope to state what such a concept might consist of, but it is certainly something more sublime than inclinational happiness. In this case, happiness is something we seek, but know not what it is. To this extent, it is like his account of inclinational happiness. The important point is

14. Ibid. p. 61.

15. Beck, op. cit., p. 244.

that whatever it is one is worthy of, it is something radically different from the other concepts of happiness that can be identified.

These possibilities show the ambiguity of Kant's concept of happiness, which makes it difficult to determine what he meant. When determining the foundation for ethics, he used a subjectivist account that he rightly rejected. When focused of the entire good of persons, happiness became a necessary complement of virtue. Kant used the concept as a foil in one case and a reward in the other. This ambiguity reveals Kant's struggle with the issue of motivation in his ethical system. Speaking of happiness as a reward in the afterlife was Kant's attempt to provide a motivating factor that was not as sterile as duty for its own sake.

Another problem with "worthiness to be happy" concerns its role in the motivation to be moral. Kant claimed that, "the highest good may be the entire object of a pure practical reason, i.e., of a pure will, it is still not to be taken as the determining ground of the pure will; the moral law alone must be seen as the ground."¹⁶ So, the highest good is not an independent determining ground in addition to or in place of the moral law. If it were, the good will would lose its force as the sole unconditioned good. The highest good can, and must, be the object of the moral will; and because of the finite and sensible nature of persons, the concept of the highest good is necessary to the moral disposition.

The problem is that if the highest good is not a determining ground of the moral will, then it is a superfluous concept. Although it may be necessary as an object for the pure practical will, the necessity is a formal or logical one; as such, it carries no real weight for a sensible creature. If it is to be anything more than a necessary condition in this formal sense, then it contradicts what Kant said concerning the motives for a moral action. If we take the highest good as a motivating factor, it contradicts what he said about the good will. We would have to assume that it is in some way good in itself, but only the good will is good in itself. Since an action is good only in so far as it is done for the sake of duty, we could not, without contradiction, take the highest good as any kind of motivating factor. If we did, we are forced to conclude that there is an action done from something other than duty that is good. Therefore, we seem obliged to conclude that the role of happiness in Kant's concept of the summum bonum is either meaningless or contradictory.

The ambiguity of Kant's concept of happiness is most likely a result of his struggle with the issue of motivation. He understood that happiness was a motivating factor in morality, and it was essential that people have at least the hope of happiness. More than likely he thought of it as an ideal, something that one can never attain. This is evident in the following passage from the *Critique of Pure Reason* (809a-837b):

It is in the view of reason, in the field of its theoretical employment, no less necessary to assume that everyone has ground to

16. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 113.

hope for happiness in the measure in which he has rendered himself by his conduct worthy of it, and that the system of morality is therefore inseparably, though only in the idea of pure reason, bound up with that of happiness.

Beck claims that this means that, "the highest good is not a practical concept at all, but a dialectical Ideal of reason."¹⁷ As an ideal, the concept of happiness has no important practical consequences other than those drawn from the concept of virtue because all the moral consequences of the supreme good are drawn from the concept of duty. This is clearly stated by Kant when he wrote, "morality, by itself, constitutes a system. Happiness, however, does not do so, save in so far as it is distributed in exact proportion to morality" (811a-839b)

The summum bonum, then, has no practical significance in Kant's system; its purpose is solely architectonic, i.e., it unites a single idea under both theoretical and practical reason.¹⁸ The result is an a priori synthesis of this end into Kant's system of ends, but one lacking any practical consequences because Kant found nothing but a contingent connection between the idea of virtue and happiness. Hence, the summum bonum is the basis for an intelligible, i.e. moral, world. Kant thought we must see ourselves as belonging to the moral world; however, our senses present nothing to us but the world of appearances. Therefore, we must conclude that the moral world is a future world whose entrance is dependent upon our conduct in the world of appearances. Obviously, we cannot attain happiness in this world, the world of sense, because it is impossible to do so. To this degree we may say that Kant presents us with a philosophy of pessimism since it is impossible to be happy in this world, and we can never know if there is some other world in which we can be happy in proportion to virtue.

As if the concept were not ambiguous enough, there is another meaning of happiness that can be found. Kant mentioned a type of contentment that comes from fulfilling a purpose derived from reason alone. He claimed that, "reason, which recognizes as its highest practical function the establishment of a good will, in attaining this end is capable only of its own peculiar kind of contentment."²⁰ This is certainly not the same as happiness, at least not as we have seen it defined up to this point. Further, it is a negative concept only, a contentment or satisfaction in doing without the desires of the inclinational self. Paton says it is "a consolation or inner peace which a man may have even in distress, if he has acted well."²¹ Still, this is not happiness, nor is it the reason one ought to act morally. Kant made this clear when he

17. Beck, op. cit., p. 145.

18. Ibid.

20. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, p. 64.

21. Paton, op. cit., p. 57.

said, "that the consciousness of having done his duty must come first."²² The interesting thing about this passage is that just before saying this, Kant changed from calling this feeling contentment to calling it happiness. He said, "when the reflective man has overcome the incentives to vice and is conscious of having done his often painful duty, he finds himself in a state which could well be called happiness, a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward."²³

It appears as if we can now add another candidate to Kant's growing list of meanings for happiness. In this case, happiness is almost identical to the Stoic concept of tranquility. Of course, Kant rejected the Stoic relation between virtue and happiness.²⁴ Still, the above quote is certainly in the spirit of Stoicism. However we categorize this new concept, it is certain that it is not his subjective account of happiness, nor is it the happiness given by God. Rather, it appears as if virtue is constitutive of happiness. In this respect, the formulation is very much akin to the ancient concept of happiness. Although I think this is a much better concept than his subjective account, it causes serious problems for Kant's system. If virtue and happiness are identical, then happiness can be considered as an end of action. Of course, Kant denies that virtue and happiness are identical.²⁵

We may conclude that Kant's concept of happiness is hopelessly ambiguous, and we are left to wonder why this is so. I believe the ambiguity is the result of his struggle with the need for a practical motivating factor in an ethical system that provided no systemically important place for happiness. This is due primarily to his understanding of happiness as subjective. Being subjective, happiness can have no place in a formal system of ethics; yet he understands that happiness is an influential motivator in human life, perhaps the most influential. This is the essence of the clash between the theoretical and sensual worlds that, according to Kant, we all inhabit. In the end, he admitted, "that in order to bring an untrained and unmanageable spirit into the path of virtue we must first attract it by a view of its own advantage or alarm it by fear of loss."²⁶ This is a clear indication of his struggle with the issue of motivation. The fact that a philosopher of Kant's stature became entangled in the ambiguities of happiness indicates its importance to ethics.

22. Kant, *The Doctrine of Virtue*, p. 34.

23. *Ibid.*

24. Kant, *The Critique of Practical Reason*, p. 115-116.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.* p. 156.