

# Book Review - Happiness in Kant's Practical Philosophy: Morality, Indirect Duties, and Welfare Rights by Alice Pinheiro Walla

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Kant is probably one of the most misunderstood philosophers in the history of Western thought. Some of the most well-known and pervasive objections to Kant's practical philosophy often rest on considerable misunderstandings of his central theses or a poor and superficial reading of his work. A common misconception is that in Kant's practical philosophy there is no place or role for human happiness. In *Happiness in Kant's Practical Philosophy: Morality, Indirect Duties, and Welfare Rights*, Alice Pinheiro Walla dispels this misunderstanding by elucidating Kant's conception of happiness (understood in broadly hedonist terms) and showing that, for Kant, the pursuit of happiness plays an important role in our personal and collective lives. This means that, far from endorsing an ascetic ideal of the moral agent, as it is commonly thought, Kant's system embraces an ideal of the human life in which there is significant space, and even a duty, to pursue pleasurable endeavours. Somehow surprisingly, in Pinheiro Walla's reading, Kant's ethics is arguably less demanding than standard interpretations of Aristotelian and Utilitarian ethical theories.

*Happiness in Kant's Practical Philosophy* is a rigorous book that elucidates Kant's often implicit and scattered views about happiness, dismantling its apparent contradictions, and clarifying the implications these views have for Kant's moral, legal, and political philosophy. One merit of this book is that it engages with a wide range of Kantian texts and covers a wide range of issues across various domains of Kant's philosophy. I won't be able to cover all the theses and arguments that are defended in the book in this short review. Instead, my focus will be on reconstructing Pinheiro Walla's claims that the pursuit of happiness has value and plays a central role in the life of a Kantian moral agent because "living a moral life can actually help us navigate the uncertainty of happiness and provide guidance, structure and meaning to our lives, individually and collectively" (p. 2).

Kant's alleged hostility to human happiness is often based on his rejection of the principle of happiness as the basis of human morality, an argument that Pinheiro Walla examines in chapter two. Famously, Kant argues that an adequate moral theory must be one that takes seriously the common understanding of morality as unconditional binding. For Kant, this means that "autonomy of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws" (*KpV*, AA 05: 33). Kant is thus the first theorist to take autonomy as the supreme principle of morality. Kant argues that all prior ethical theories are based on the principle of heteronomy, that is, they presuppose a prior object of the will to be authoritative and can only generate hypothetical, and thus, conditional imperatives. Kant also claims that all heteronomous theories are subordinated to the principle of happiness (*KpV*, AA 05: 22). These claims have led to Kant often being interpreted as maintaining that

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the pursuit of happiness is incompatible with morality. Pinheiro Walla, however, resists this conclusion by emphasising the distinction between heteronomy and eudaimonism. Heteronomy is a specific model of the will, which places the normative source of morality outside of the will. Eudaimonism is a theory of motivation, which states that we are always motivated to pursue our own happiness. Kant's criticism of eudaimonism in moral theory is aimed at all theories that presuppose material principles as the basis of morality. It is primarily a criticism of conceptions of moral motivation that make the motivation for moral conduct something other than the thought of duty. Virtuous agents come to believe that the motivation to act morally is in fact the feeling of satisfaction with oneself which usually accompanies awareness of having acted morally. However, this feeling of contentment can only come about as awareness of having acted from duty. Thus, these theories are ultimately self-undermining. Kant's anti-eudaimonism in moral theory ultimately entails that morality cannot be reduced to happiness, but crucially Kant also argues that the feeling of self-approval that we derive from our awareness of moral motivation cannot replace the human need for happiness (*KpV*, AA 05: 88). Against ancient conceptions that identify virtue and happiness, Kant argues that "the highest good must be understood instead as a synthetic connection between two heterogeneous, irreducible components" (p. 55). This allows us to carve a conception of morality which can be compatible with a conception of genuine human happiness, without reducing one to the other. Kant's rejection of happiness as the foundation of morality should not be confused with a hostile attitude toward human happiness in general and an attempt to eradicate happiness from the moral life.

The first chapter clarifies Kant's fundamental assumptions about happiness, which are often tacitly presupposed in his works, but rarely overtly discussed, and then provides a reconstruction of Kant's "overall" conception of happiness. Pinheiro Walla starts her reconstruction by providing an analysis of two seemingly contradictory claims that Kant makes about happiness. On the one hand, Kant claims that happiness cannot be the *natural* end of finite beings with the capacity of practical reason (*GMS*, AA 04: 395). On the other hand, Kant also affirms that happiness is an end humans have according to a *natural necessity* (*GMS*, AA 04: 415-6). On the standard reading, the natural necessity of pursuing happiness as an end arises from our finite nature while our natural end as rational beings is morality. Pinheiro Walla rejects this standard picture, showing instead that both claims follow from Kant's conception of the finite *rational* will. Finite rational willing has two aspects, a formal and material one. The formal aspect of willing refers to the possibility of the will to conform to universal laws and to act from the recognition of this universal validity. However, determination by a pure formal principle is not sufficient for action. To act in the world, I also need to adopt *ends*, which constitute the material aspect of willing. Particular "willings" or acts of choice presuppose ends which are incorporated into one's maxims of action. Without this material aspect, the will would not be practical, and thus would not be a will at all. Kant claims that adopting an end analytically implies the commitment to take the means for its realization (*GMS*, AA 04: 417). Without the commitment to the realization of our ends, willing turns into mere *wishing*, which involves simply desiring an object without intending to act to bring it about. Mere wishing leads to a conception of happiness as an unrealistic ideal of imagination in which "all inclinations [are united] in one sum" (*GMS*, AA 04: 399).

The matter of the will is provided by our inclinations understood in hedonist terms as desires to obtain pleasure. The inclinations provide the matter for the adoption of our non-moral ends. However, since having an end necessarily involves one's commitment to its realization, in order to realize our non-moral ends and satisfy some of our inclinations, we need to form a determinate material and realistic conception of our happiness. As Pinheiro Walla puts it "because we have a plurality of ends which are incompatible with each other or must be realized in different times, agents are confronted with the task of forming a conception of the ends that constitute their happiness, in a more or less coherent hierarchy" (p. 10). We can see that the "necessity" of forming a determinate and realistic conception of one's own happiness understood as the well-defined sum of compatible ends, arises from the structure of

finite willing itself and is not imposed externally from our non-rational animal nature. While each agent's material conception of happiness would differ and agents would also differ in their ability to form a coherent model of happiness and live up to it, the formal concept of happiness is constitutive of human agency as ends-oriented, that is, required by the structure of finite rational willing. This means that the pursuit of happiness belongs to our essence as finite rational beings and there is no normative requirement to adopt happiness as an end. The normative requirement to prioritise our happiness understood as a coherent sum of ends, when it conflicts with the satisfaction of our more immediate momentary desires, applies only to agents who have adopted overall happiness as their end and it follows from the hypothetical imperative to seek the necessary means for the realization of one's ends, not from a requirement of prudential reason.

Pinheiro Walla then turns to explain Kant's claim that happiness cannot be the end of nature for human beings (GMS, AA 04: 395). This claim is the conclusion of a teleological argument from the *Groundwork*, an argument that is often considered an embarrassment even by defenders of Kant's moral theory. Adopting the perspective of the teleological principle of natural efficiency, Kant argues that we cannot assume that happiness is the highest end of nature for humanity since instinct seems to be a more efficient capacity for the attainment of our happiness than reason (GMS, AA 04: 395). However, the fact that our reason is not merely contemplative but also has a practical use provides the ultimate evidence for the claim that happiness cannot be the highest end of humanity. The only end that reason is best to promote "by itself" is the good will, which must be seen as the natural end for human beings. Kant argues that happiness is not an ideal of reason but an ideal of imagination. The concept of happiness is ultimately an *indeterminate* concept. Human cognitive limitations mean that we cannot foresee all external consequences of the achievement of our ends and the impact that this can have on our happiness. For example, we may realize an end only to find out that it is incompatible with other important ends that are constitutive of our ideal of happiness. Moreover, cognitive limitations mean that our own desires are not transparent to us, so we may be mistaken about what we really want and find out that realising an end does not bring us happiness after all. Thus, we must revise and correct our conception of happiness throughout our lives: "our urges and feelings (...) require a good deal of self-scrutiny and interpretation, and not least a certain amount of bitter life experience" (p. 18).

Pinheiro Walla argues that the teleological argument is thus not an embarrassment. On the contrary, it is because happiness is not our natural or whole end, that incompatibilities between happiness and morality are merely contingent and not intrinsic to morality. If we took happiness to be the principle of the will, then the possibility of morality would be excluded as a maxim of subordinating morality to happiness is evil (RGV, AA 06: 31) whereas subordinating happiness to morality does not exclude the possibility of happiness. Having morality as our natural end allows us to see the natural and social evils that plague humanity, not as something that we have no hope to improve, but as presenting us with a moral task, that is, as something we have a duty to address. Paradoxically, the recognition that morality is humanity's supreme good can "bring us closer to contentment than making happiness our 'whole end'" (p. 22).

The third chapter explores Kant's claim that there is an indirect duty to promote one's own happiness (GMS, AA 04: 399) and provides an elucidation of the concept of 'indirect' duties, which constitutes an important contribution to Kant's scholarship. Indirect duties are concerned with dispositions and feelings that are naturally given in human beings but that "cannot be *directly* commanded" although it is nevertheless possible to cultivate them "in a way which can provide support to our capacity of moral agency" (p. 79). Kant's explicit rationale for the duty is to make us less susceptible to temptations to immorality arising from an unhappy life. The underlying idea seems to be that a life of continuous and unbearable discontentment would make the pursuit of morality impossible. At first glance, it may seem that there is no need for an indirect duty to pursue happiness understood as overall satisfaction because, as we have

seen, we already have this end by natural necessity. The problem is that, given the indeterminacy of happiness, it is not always irrational to sacrifice long-term overall satisfaction for the sake of short-term pleasure. Since happiness is an indeterminate end, it is always possible that short-term sacrifices may fail to pay off. Thus, as Kant's example of the gout sufferer illustrates, from the point of view of desire-satisfaction, it is not necessarily irrational to choose to satisfy immediate desires over long-term health. Surprisingly, Kant argues that the gout sufferer has a duty to promote his long-term happiness and to make immediate sacrifices for the sake of his health. Pinheiro Walla explains Kant's position by arguing convincingly that Kant makes an implicit distinction between subjective and objective happiness. Objective happiness refers to "basic ends of our animal nature which have an impact on our moral integrity and thus can be commanded in case of neglect," while subjective happiness simply refers to what we happen to desire (p. 82). Pinheiro Walla argues that securing one's objective happiness can become the object of a direct duty "presumably when the agent feels no inclination to pursue her own happiness and the neglect of her wellbeing has moral relevance" because it either has an impact on her capacity for moral agency or her moral integrity (p. 81). Thus, the indirect duty to promote one's happiness can qualify as a direct duty under specific circumstances. Thus, failing to pursue one's own objective happiness is not merely a failure of prudence, but it can constitute a violation of a duty to oneself as a moral being. Thus, by the end of chapter three, Pinheiro Walla has established that the pursuit of happiness has an important place in Kant's moral philosophy, showing how the adoption of happiness as an end is required from the point of view of the structures of our rational wills and the role that it plays in supporting and maintaining our capacities for morality.

Chapter four turns to analyse Kant's claim that we have an imperfect duty to adopt the happiness of others as our end. As duties of beneficence are duties of commission, which require that we invest time and resources in helping others, this raises the question of to what extent it is permissible to promote one's own happiness and how much we should do to promote the happiness of others. Here again Pinheiro Walla provides an important contribution to the literature by dispelling some common and enduring misunderstandings of Kant's ethics. One enduring misunderstanding is the view that Kantian ethics requires strict impartiality, a view illustrated by Bernard Williams' famous "one thought too many" objection. Williams argues that Kantian ethics requires us to be impartial in choosing which of two drowning people to save, even if one of them is the agent's wife. Impartial immorality would require us to flip a coin instead of straightforwardly giving preference to one's wife. Williams claims that entertaining the idea of flipping a coin in such situation is entertaining "one thought too many" and ultimately a moral vice. On this reading, Kant's ethics would forbid us to give priority to the well-being of those close to us, or even our own well-being, over the well-being of strangers. Williams' picture thus has contributed (to the delight of some students who lack the energy to engage seriously with Kant's texts) to the popular view of Kant's ethics as one that is hostile to human happiness, that is, as a morality that is "self-alienating and allows no space for the pursuit of personal projects and human flourishing" (p. 98). Pinheiro Walla argues convincingly that Williams' picture is simply mistaken.

To properly understand Kant's position, Pinheiro Walla argues, we must pay attention to Kant's distinction between benevolence and beneficence in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. Benevolence as a "feeling of satisfaction in the well-being of others" (MS, AA 06: 450) involves a general love of humanity which can be directed equally to everyone because it simply requires that we "wish others well" without leading to any concrete action. In contrast, beneficence is a form of willing and not a mere wish. As such, beneficence requires that we take concrete actions to help others (MS, AA 06: 393) since we cannot genuinely will the end without also willing the means. In fact, Pinheiro Walla notes, there is a passage which clearly contradicts the strict impartiality interpretation. Kant writes: "[f]or in wishing I can be *equally* benevolent to everyone, whereas in acting I can, without violating the universality of the maxim, vary the degree greatly in accordance with the different objects of my love (one of whom concerns me more closely than

another)" (MS, AA 06: 451-2). According to Pinheiro Walla, the point of the passage is not to allow us to make exceptions to the universal maxim of beneficence by promoting our own happiness and the happiness of those close to us. Instead, Kant is arguing that we have *special obligations* arising from the fact that we are directly responsible for our own wellbeing and the wellbeing of those closer to us. The *Doctrine of Virtue* provides ample textual evidence that Kant did recognize special duties arising from the special relations between individuals, including duties to spouses, parents, offspring, friends, and fellow citizens. These duties do not require a special principle, only the application of the universal principle to particular circumstances (MS, AA 06: 468-9).

Wide duties of virtue possess latitude in the sense that they do not give clear instructions as to what is morally required. While doing too little may count as evidence that one has not in fact adopted a maxim of helping others, and is thus reproachable, we can never do too much when it comes to virtue. Since there is no upper limit for compliance, it is always possible to do more and become more perfect than we are. However, Pinheiro Walla warns against reading this as implying a maximization requirement, arguing that actual perfection is an unachievable task for finite beings. Again, although this is not often noticed, Kant warns against the moral fanaticism involved in striving to achieve perfection in our finite lives at all costs, often attempting to do so by searching for spurious opportunities to act morally and ultimately "turn[ing] the government of virtue into tyranny" (MS, AA 06: 409). Pinheiro Walla argues that as long as we remain firmly committed to the moral principle (i.e., to actually help others), we are not morally required to maximize help. On the contrary, provided that we do not endanger our moral integrity, "depending on the circumstances, prudence is morally permitted to shape the degree to which an agent may choose to comply with wide duties" (p. 106). Contrary to Williams, Kantian moral theory does not require the same level of impartiality as standard Utilitarianism.

Chapter five digresses to consider issues related to the demandingness of Kant's moral theory. It considers a problem that arises from Kant's classification of the duty of beneficence as being an imperfect duty. In Kant's theory, perfect duties always have priority over imperfect duties. Since we are not obliged to perform every act falling under an imperfect duty, we can forgo an opportunity to comply with an imperfect duty for the sake of complying with a perfect duty without facing a conflict of duties. The reverse however does not hold. To comply with an imperfect duty when this presupposes violating a perfect duty would amount to a violation of duty and undermine the moral worth of one's action. However, the normative priority of perfect duties over imperfect duties has an implication which seems to contradict our moral intuitions. It seems to imply that "one should not save a person from a burning house if doing so would require using the neighbour's hose without her permission" (p. 123). The problem is that duties of rescue, which in Kant's theory fell under the duty of beneficence, seem intuitively more pressing than many instances of perfect duties. Taking the intuition seriously would require us to prioritise imperfect duties over perfect ones, at least on some occasions. This raises two worries. First, there is a suspicion that practical deliberation can do without this distinction after all. Second, if duties to help can sometimes have priority over perfect duties and given that I *know* that the world is full of people who need urgent help, then it seems that in urgent cases, helping others is morally obligatory and would always have priority over pursuing my merely permissible end of happiness. On this picture, morality becomes overly demanding after all.

Pinheiro Walla provides an original solution to the first problem. She argues that under some very specific circumstances the latitude of an imperfect duty can shrink to zero. This happens "when refusing to help would amount to *giving up* one's commitment to beneficence *altogether*" (p. 125). I cannot refuse to save someone's life when doing so would incur very little costs to myself and still claim that I am committed to beneficence in any intelligible way. In this case, even though the duty of beneficence is imperfect, my latitude for choice is zero and I am obliged to perform the helpful act. But what if I can only save the life by violating a perfect duty? Pinheiro Walla argues that we are still not permitted to violate the perfect duty. Instead,



I am merely *excused* to do so, given the circumstances. This ingenious solution allows us to interpret Kant's theory as maintaining that duties of rescue are stringent without collapsing Kant's central distinction between perfect and imperfect duties.

Pinheiro Walla's solution to the second problem appeals to Kant's justification of the duty to help others. Assuming that we usually have a desire to pursue our happiness, we cannot adopt a maxim of indifference to the happiness of others on pain of incurring a contradiction in our willing. The condition of permissibility of the pursuit of one's own happiness is that we also adopt the happiness of others as our end. Thus, we have a duty to adopt the happiness of others as our end because we naturally want our own happiness. This, in turn, requires that the principle commanding beneficence to others must involve *latitude* for compliance. To deny genuine latitude to the duty of beneficence would amount to undermine its very *raison d' être*. This means that we are sometimes permitted to prioritise the pursuit of our own happiness over the needs of others.

The chapter ends with an important observation: often whether morality becomes very demanding is not an intrinsic feature of moral demands themselves but an extrinsic feature regarding the agent's social and political circumstances. As it is well-known, there is a tragic aspect of Kant's moral theory as it can sometimes demand that we completely sacrifice our happiness for the sake of perfect duty. This is more likely to happen under very dire circumstances, such as political turmoil, instability, war and/or oppression, where complying with everyday ordinary duties can become an almost impossible task. If this observation is correct, as I believe it is, morality and happiness are only contingently incompatible, and our task is to create stable political and social conditions where human beings can flourish while continuing to fulfil their duties and pursue their moral ends.

The final chapter of the book analyses the place of happiness in Kant's political and legal philosophy, addressing the question of economic justice in the Kantian state. Kant is clear that happiness, as an indeterminate idea, cannot be the basis for external universal legislation (*TP*, AA 08: 290). Since people have different views of happiness, the state's function is only to secure people's right to pursue their individual conceptions of happiness. For the state to attempt to promote its subjects' happiness would amount to paternalistically imposing a particular conception of the good life on them. Ultimately, this would constitute a problematic form of despotism. At the same time, Kant recognises that "for reasons of state the government (...) is authorized to constrain the wealthy to provide the means of sustenance to those who are unable to provide for even the most necessary natural ends" stating that this should be done "by way of coercion, by public taxation, not merely by voluntary contributions (...)" (*MS*, AA 06: 326). However, Kant's justification of a state duty to aid the poor remains elusive and it is open to different and conflicting interpretations. Pinheiro Walla rejects an influential attempt to ground this duty on the need to secure the conditions of citizens' civil independence, arguing that "it is not clear why dependence on state aid would make subjects independent in the sense required for being one's own master" (p. 148). Pinheiro Walla rejects recent welfare interpretations of Kant's legal and political philosophy. However, she does not endorse a minimalist, "night watchman" interpretation of the Kantian state. Instead, Pinheiro Walla defends a middle ground position according to which although the Kantian state is not concerned with material redistribution "but only with *formal* relations of rights, it can nevertheless recognize the need to redistribute from considerations of equity or fairness, that is from the recognition of the non-enforceable rights of individuals" (p. 151).

Pinheiro Walla's book presents a unified, comprehensive, and novel interpretation of Kant's conception of happiness, a topic that had not previously received the attention that it deserves. In the course of developing and justifying this interpretation, Pinheiro Walla also dispels some common misunderstandings of Kant's practical philosophy, displaying a deep understanding and knowledge of Kant's works, and offering a compelling picture of the Kantian moral agent, one in which happiness and morality can be pursued to the fulfilment

of human flourishing in fair social and political conditions. This book not only provides an important contribution to the literature, but it is also a game changer in Kant scholarship. It is an obligatory reading for anyone wishing to engage seriously with Kant's practical philosophy.