

# Kant's Concept of Happiness: Within and Beyond Usefulness

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**YUZO HIROSE**

Graduate School of Education, Kyoto University

## INTRODUCTION

There is still tenacious criticism of Kant's notion that he placed greater priority on following moral law rather than on pursuing happiness. In a well-known statement about this problem over happiness to Kant, Schiller stated: 'Scruples of Conscience. Ever I ask my friends to oblige, and, unluckily, like it; For then conscience asks:- where does the virtue come in? Conclusion. Only one method I see, do what you can to despise them; Then you may sulkily yield all that a conscience demands' (Schiller, 1901, p. 330). Schiller thought that Kant wanted us to choose either morality or happiness in our actions. Schiller oversimplified the human act, but there are still researchers who think that Kant denied the value of happiness in the end.<sup>1</sup>

However, Kant never said that happiness is valueless; rather, he affirmed the necessity of happiness in human life. Paton recognized Kant's view of happiness as follows: 'The common view that Kant underrated the value of happiness is a complete mistake: if anything, he rated it too high' (Paton, 1947, p. 43).

Then, what does Paton's view imply and what on earth is happiness in Kant's mind? In this paper, I attempt to clarify the complex concepts of happiness in Kant's thought<sup>2</sup> and suggest that Kant condemned only the principle of happiness and supported two concepts of happiness in different dimensions. Through this consideration, a systematic notion on how to think about happiness in human development and in an educational context will be shown.

## BASIC FEATURES OF HAPPINESS IN KANT

It is remarkable that almost all philosophers who are opposed to many other themes agree that human beings are pursuing their own happiness as the ultimate end of their life. Kant accepts this general notion as the major premise in discussing happiness. In *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant indicates that 'To be happy is necessarily the demand of every rational but finite being and therefore an unavoidable determining ground of its faculty of desire' (Kant, 1996, p. 159).

However, we cannot correctly know or suggest what happiness is in general. We can give some examples of something that is similar to happiness, such as health, honor or wealth, but we cannot regard wealth as the same as happiness. Happiness depends on people and that is why happiness is quite undeterminable and accidental. That is 'one can form no determinate and sure concept of the sum of satisfaction of all inclinations under the name of happiness' (p. 54).

Furthermore, we often wish to be happy, but we cannot completely express what we really wish or want. We often find that happiness can bring disappointment because we feel we are still not happy. Through this assumption, one's happiness changes from time to time and place to place and also according to one's development.

## HAPPINESS AS SENSITIVE CONTENTMENT

Kant considers happiness as obscure, but to regard it as such is obvious and certain. With respect to this point, Kant does not give up trying to describe the concept of happiness. Kant suggests, 'it is just in this idea [happiness] that all inclinations unite in one sum' (p. 54), and also 'a rational being's consciousness of the agreeableness of life uninterruptedly accompanying his whole existence is *happiness*' (p. 156). Thus, according to Kant, the concept of happiness can be summarized as sensitive contentment of totality of inclination such as pleasure and desire.

We now should pay attention to two things. First, Kant shows that happiness is not contentment of *simple* inclination or pleasure but that of the *sum* of inclination. In this argument, 'sum of inclination' does not mean 'sum of all inclination we can count in general' but 'sum of all inclination that one person has in mind'. We occasionally meet the person who insists that fulfilling only particular inclinations makes one happy, but indeed the person attempts to fulfill the sum of one's total inclinations. Following Kant's train of thought, if the person is an actor and wants to grow to be an attractive actor, to have family and to spend good times with them, to earn decent money, and to be healthy, happiness for that person means satisfying all these desires and not any more (it is not necessary to satisfy the inclination to an honor or other things in this case). Therefore, 'sum of all inclination' is a subjective opinion. Kant refers to this point in his Lectures on Ethics as follows: 'All happiness and unhappiness are dependent on us and on the way our sense accepts it. If we consider this happiness in our lives, we will notice that the essence of happiness is a delusion' (Kant, 1924, p. 182).

Second, Kant discusses that a concept of happiness is derived from sensitive and empirical matters. Kant indicates that 'all the elements that belong to the concept of happiness are without exception empirical, that is, they must be borrowed from experience' (Kant, 1996, p. 70). We cannot order to be happy with strict necessity because happiness is constituted with material elements, and we need empirical and contingent wisdom in order to insight and realize the happiness.

Generally speaking, in philosophical discussions, happiness is thought of as the ultimate end of human life, which is related to the ethical realm. Therefore, happiness is often identified with good. In Kant's discussion, however, happiness is explicitly distinguished from morality in our actions. If we pursue our sensitive happiness, we must depend on substantial matters. On the other hand, in realizing morality, we should follow autonomously moral law without thinking of any substantial motivation in our maxim. According to Kant, the former leads us to the principle of happiness in which we put our motivation for happiness at the highest level and subordinate the motivation of moral law to that of happiness.<sup>3</sup> The latter leads us to a moral principle in which we give motivation of moral law top priority. Therefore, the difference between principle of happiness and moral principle does not come from the substance of motivation but comes from a subordinate relationship.<sup>4</sup>

However, this distinction does not mean that we should eradicate our inclination to happiness. Fundamentally, we cannot do this. Kant affirms the inclination to happiness but denies the principle of happiness. In Kant's view, 'The distinction of the *doctrine of happiness* from the *doctrine of morals* ... is the first and most important business incumbent upon the Analytic of pure practical reason' (p. 214).

## HAPPINESS IN THE HIGHEST GOOD

### *Happiness as self-contentment*

As we saw above, to pursue sensitive happiness is affirmed as long as it exists in a condition of morality, thus not in the principle of happiness but in moral principle. In this state, for the first time, we are allowed to satisfy the sum of our inclination. However, we do not only have this sensitive contentment but also have one which is related to the state where we put morality on the highest level and our sensitive happiness second. If we are autonomously conscious of morality without eliminating our pursuing sensitive happiness, which is only forgiven under the condition of morality, we will have another contentment.

we can understand how consciousness of this ability of a pure practical reason (virtue) can in fact produce consciousness of mastery over one's inclination, hence of independence from 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 (p. 235).

In this sense, there are two kinds of contentment in Kant's thought: (1) contentment of sensitive and susceptible inclination, and (2) contentment of personality (morality). He calls the latter self-contentment (*Selbstzufriedenheit*) (p. 234), for it is not linked to sensitive inclination.

We often try to satisfy our own sensitive inclination, but we are not always satisfied with that state. Suppose that we are extremely satisfied with our life with respect to health, wealth, and skill, through making anyone else poor. Can we then really be satisfied and happy? This question itself shows us that happiness as the contentment of inclination does not make people happy enough. In other words something others are required. Kant indicates that it is contentment of personality. In the above case, if we regard others not only as a means but also as an end, we will be sufficiently satisfied with our life.

Therefore Kant's concept of happiness consists of two kinds of contentment: sensitive contentment and self-contentment. This happiness is regarded as happiness in the highest good.

### *Happiness as a component of the highest good*

Kant puts morality under another term 'virtue' in the context of a real human action, suggesting that virtue is further identified with the 'worthiness to be happy' (p. 228).

However, virtue is not the same as happiness, but is *equivalent* to happiness. If we have both virtue and happiness, we can reach the highest good. Kant states:

Now, inasmuch as virtue and happiness together constitute possession of the highest good in a person, and happiness distributed in exact proportion to morality (as the worth of a person and his worthiness to be happy) constitutes *the highest* good of a possible world, the latter means the whole, the complete good, in which, however, virtue as the condition is always the supreme good, since it has no further condition above it, whereas happiness is something that, though always pleasant to the possessor of it, is not of itself absolutely and in all respects good but always presupposes morally lawful conduct as its condition (p. 229).

We can understand this quotation with regard to happiness as follows: (1) The highest good has its elements—virtue and happiness. As we relate this to what was stated above, virtue is the worthiness of being happy. (2) Happiness is not first element of the highest good but the second. This shows that when we act for the highest good, we cannot possess happiness as the determining ground of will but moral law because, if we act with happiness in determining ground of will, we will depend on substantial things, which is contradictory to moral action.

Especially with regard to determining ground of will, virtue and happiness are asymmetrical, although both constitute the highest good. In Kant's view both virtue and happiness are equivalent but quite different species, and even with the same subject, both restrict and conflict with each other.

### THE MEANING OF HAPPINESS IN THE HIGHEST GOOD

It is very curious that Kant placed happiness as a part of the highest good. Kant could have thought that the highest good was equal to following moral law, but he did not. In these discussions about happiness, it seems that Kant was arguing about how to live in the real world, not in a simplified ideal world. We human beings cannot avoid pursuing happiness, which is not only sensitive but also in the highest good.

Then, what is the meaning of this happiness in the highest good? I will discuss especially the following point: happiness with virtue acts on us quite differently from sensitive happiness, that is, to break the chains of usefulness in our life. This shows the modern significance of Kant's discussion about happiness.

In order to clarify features of happiness in the highest good, I will contrast happiness in the highest good with sensitive happiness.

(a) To pursue sensitive happiness only depends on a hypothetical imperative.

When we act from pursuing our sensitive happiness, we depend on substantial matters that are empirical and accidental. In this state, we act with contingent wisdom based on experience. Therefore, we need empirical wisdom from this real world. To act with the following empirical matters means that the action does not have objective necessity. It means in Kant's context that we follow a hypothetical imperative, which does not have necessity like the categorical imperative does.

We cannot regard this action, which is considered pursuing sensitive happiness, as an ultimate end because it intends to the action in which we will have happiness in the highest good. In other words, the action of only pursuing sensitive happiness becomes the means to achieve the ultimate end. Therefore, if we pursue sensitive happiness, we have to follow the hypothetical imperative, which provides us the means to reach the ultimate end.

(b) Happiness in the highest good is related to the categorical imperative.

As we saw above, happiness in the highest good includes self-contentment of one's own personality, which occurs from following moral law. In Kant's discussion, morality emerges when one has the motivation for following moral law that determines ground of will; particularly that moral law is a categorical imperative and orders us to follow moral law straightforwardly. Happiness in the highest good comes after acting to follow moral law. In this sense, happiness in the highest good is of course not a categorical imperative but is connected with it.

(c) The meaning of happiness as the ultimate end.

Then, what does the notion of happiness, which is related to categorical imperative, mean? If we are conscious of happiness in the highest good, we can describe the realm of the ultimate end itself, and, in this regard, that consciousness breaks our ordinary chains of usefulness, which are found in hypothetical thinking and action. To be conscious of and to pursue happiness in the highest good accompanied by virtue have a categorical character and do not take ordinary usefulness, sensitive happiness, and hypothetical action into consideration.

We usually, or rather always, do something in order to profit from the motivation of sensitive happiness. In this situation, we are in the chains of usefulness. A consciousness of happiness in the highest good breaks these chains and demands us to relate to things not as a means but as itself. For example, if we relate to others when pursuing our sensitive happiness, we regard others as a means to realize our sensitive happiness. Without thinking about that happiness, however, we can confront others in sincerity. This corresponds to the second categorical imperative, '*So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means*' (p. 80). In this way, we come to be able to relate to others and also to the world itself, which is analogous with an experience of beauty. In *Critique of the Power of Judgment* Kant states that the experience of beauty is a concern without any interest.<sup>5</sup>

To break the chains of usefulness can be found in many other philosophical discussions. To break those chains with unconditionally cannot eliminate a danger, such as killing people. In Kant's context, we can go one step further, that is, to show the appropriate direction of breaking such chains, which is related to happiness in the highest good.

(d) The relationship between sensitive happiness and happiness in the highest good.

As we saw in (c), a consciousness of and an act to happiness in the highest good break the chains of usefulness, but Kant does not deny the chains themselves or sensitive happiness. As we saw above, in the second categorical imperative Kant does not deny treating humanity in others as a means in itself, but he demands us at the same time to do it as an end. Kant accepts those chains on one hand, but, on the other hand, he demands us to break those chains. If we are not in such chains, we cannot reach happiness in the highest good, either. Therefore, to pursue sensitive happiness

or to seek useful matters for oneself is a necessary condition to obtain happiness in the highest good.

From an ideal point of view, the two notions of happiness are quite different, but, from the point of view relevant to real human life and development, sensitive happiness lies as a base only from which people can advance toward happiness in the highest good.

## CONCLUSION

It is often thought that Kant denies the value of happiness and entirely opposes utilitarianism. However, Kant only denies the principle of happiness, and he approves of both sensitive happiness and happiness in the highest good, which consists of sensitive component and self-component.

The most essential and important notion in Kant's discussion about happiness is that happiness in the highest good is connected with virtue, and, therefore, that happiness has a categorical character and breaks the hypothetical and ordinary chains of usefulness. This framework of breaking such chains can also be seen in Kant's discussion about beauty, sublimity, judgment and religion.

However, it is also crucial that, in notion, sensitive happiness and happiness in the highest good are quite different, but, in reality, we cannot reach the latter without the former. It is not a choice between two things. Both are required. Some people often pursue only sensitive happiness, like pleasure, without thinking about happiness in the highest good, and others directly pursue happiness in the highest good, without fulfilling their sensitive happiness like a stoic. Kant warns that both cannot reach happiness in the highest good, the ultimate end of human life.

In an educational context, happiness tends to be regarded as unconditional good for children. Parents and teachers try to provide children with happiness, but, if they do so blindly, they may cause children to be put in chains of usefulness or be egoistic. It seems that Kant supplies a clue for thinking about these problems.<sup>6</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 Slote, who supports virtue ethics eagerly, considers Kant's ethic to devalue the happiness or well-being of an agent. (Slote, 1992, pp. 3-57).
- 2 Strictly speaking, Kant argues happiness to be primary in an ethical context (as in *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Moral* and *Critique of practical reason*); however, the contents of the discussions about happiness can be seen in an educational context, for he treats happiness as the notion about how to live in this world or how to reach the realm of happiness in the highest good.
- 3 Kant regards this principle of self-love as egoism. Kant states in *Anthropology*, 'the moral egoist limits all ends to himself, sees no use in anything except that which is useful to himself, and as a eudaemonist puts the supreme determining ground of his will simply in utility and his own happiness, not in the thought of duty' (Kant, 2007, p. 241).
- 4 Kant mentions that 'the distinction between a good man and one who is evil cannot lie in the difference between the incentives which they adopt into their maxim (not in the content of the maxim), but rather must depend upon *subordination* (the form of the maxim), *i.e.*, *which of the two incentives he makes the condition of the other*' (Kant, 1960, p. 31). While a good man acts by following a moral principle, an evil man principle of happiness.
- 5 In *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant states: 'Everyone must admit that a judgment about beauty in which there is mixed the least interest is very partial and not a pure judgment of taste. One

must not be in the least biased in favor of the existence of the thing, but must be entirely indifferent in this respect in order to play the judge in matters of taste' (Kant, 2000, p. 91).

- 6 Especially Kant implies that geographical education plays a significant role in thinking about education for happiness, for it contains the elements that are relevant to both sensitive happiness and happiness in the highest good (May, 1970, pp. 132-151).

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