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The Unpleasant Pleasure of Virtue: A Conflict Model of Kantian Eudaimonism

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Abstract

This paper examines the pleasant state of virtue in Kantian eudaimonism. I investigate how Kantian virtue can be eudaimonistic for finite agents, for whom conflict is never eliminated. I argue that the pleasant dimension of virtue is realized not through harmony between reason and sensibility, but as a pleasant state that is structurally dependent on a negative sensible moment of displeasure for finite agents. Drawing on Kant's account of rational feelings, I show how virtue's pleasantness does not erase conflict, but is instead intelligible within a non-harmonizing conflict model of Kantian eudaimonism—one that finite agents inevitably face.

Keywords: Kant, Eudaimonism, Virtue, Rational Feelings, Cheerfulness, Pleasure

Introduction

The question of whether virtue secures happiness has long motivated ethical theorists. In the eudaimonist tradition, happiness (*eudaimonia*) is the fulfilled life that virtue itself constitutes (Aristotle 1999, Annas 1993). Aristotelian eudaimonism typically treats the virtuous agent as one whose desires are harmonized with reason, so that acting well is characteristically pleasant and largely untroubled by conflict. Conflict belongs not to full virtue but to mere continence (Burnyeat 1980; Hursthouse 1999). At first sight, Kant seems to stand apart from this tradition. According to the familiar picture, Kant rejects eudaimonism and stands as the exemplar of the deontological tradition: ethics concerns acting from duty as commanded by the moral law rather than pursuing happiness (Irwin 1996, Wood 2000; Sticker 2020). As Sticker emphasizes, Kant's main opponent in these contexts is a wide range of forms of eudaimonism[1]. On this picture, the virtuous agent is above all disposed to comply with duty; because we are finite, sensuous beings, this requires subordinating inclination to reason and thus involves struggle and conflict. Virtue, Kant emphasizes, is a form of self-constraint: human beings are tempted to transgress the moral law, and acting morally demands resistance to inclination. Since Schiller's famous complaint, this image has encouraged the caricature of the Kantian virtuous agent as a figure of somber, monkish asceticism who performs duty reluctantly (Schiller 1793).

Recent scholarship has complicated this caricature. Kant himself associates virtue with a cheerful heart and with moral pleasure, and interpreters have recovered these neglected strands:

responses to Schiller (Beiser 2005; Baxley 2010b; Guyer 2023), links between sublimity and cheerfulness (Merritt 2017; Winegar 2013), and accounts of self-contentment (Walschots 2017), and readings that treat respect as a kind of moral pleasure (Elizondo 2014; Holberg 2016). More recently, interpreters have reexamined the affinity between Aristotelian and Kantian ethics. By highlighting continuities with Aristotelian eudaimonism, they have proposed a Kantian eudaimonism—not an empirical pursuit of agreeable satisfaction, but the realization of a rational, non-empirical form of happiness through virtue itself (Grenberg 2022; Elizondo 2023). I take this broad picture to be right. Kantian virtue can indeed involve a pleasant state, and this pleasantness is best understood as rational and non-empirical rather than as an agreeable, sensuous satisfaction. The present paper develops this eudaimonist line of interpretation by clarifying what is distinctively Kantian about virtue's pleasantness for finite agents, focusing on the place of sensible displeasure within Kant's conflict model of virtue.

My claim is that Kantian virtue can involve a pleasant state without adopting a harmony model: the pleasant dimension of virtue must be explained from within Kant's conflict model for finite agents. Specifically, virtue's pleasant state stands in a non-causal dependence relation to sensible displeasure: displeasure does not produce pleasure, but the pleasant state of finite virtue would not be intelligible as such without an unpleasant moment bound up with conflict. This is the structural claim. To make this dependence relation intelligible in Kant's own terms, I draw on Kant's account of rational

feelings—especially respect and the sublime— to show how the pleasant state of virtue can be realized without eliminating an unpleasant moment of sensible displeasure, which remains structurally integral to finite virtue. At the phenomenological level, by contrast, agents can differ in how burdensome conflict feels and in how salient sensible displeasure is, especially across stages of moral maturity. Making this structural–phenomenological distinction explicit clarifies, in Kant's own terms, how finite virtue can remain structurally conflictual without being experienced as persistently oppressive. In doing so, I aim to develop recent reconstructions of Kantian eudaimonism (notably Grenberg and Elizondo). They rightly emphasize affinities with Aristotelian eudaimonism and show how Kant can regard virtue as itself a source of happiness. I build on this broad picture while clarifying what is distinctively Kantian about virtue's pleasantness, namely, that for finite agents virtue remains a disposition under conflict, and that its pleasant state is not intelligible without an unpleasant moment of sensible displeasure intrinsic to that conflict.

This paper is organized as follows: In §1, I set out the puzzle by reconstructing the familiar picture of Kantian virtue as duty, self-constraint, and conflict, and by contrasting it with the Aristotelian harmony model. In §2, I survey Kant's own descriptions of a pleasant dimension in virtue—a cheerful heart, moral (self-)contentment, and moral pleasure— and set them in conversation with recent reappraisals in Kant scholarship. In §3, I develop Kant's account of rational feelings, focusing on respect and the sublime, in order to clarify an affective structure that makes virtue's

pleasant state intelligible in non-causal dependence on sensible displeasure. In §4, building on this framework, I articulate a non-harmonizing conflict model of Kantian eudaimonism and sharpen its structure by distinguishing a structural from a phenomenological level. The conclusion summarizes the argument and states the paper's contributions.

1. Kantian Virtue in Conflict and the Problem of Pleasantness

For many eudaimonists, pleasure belongs to full virtue because desire is harmonized with right reason. By contrast, Kant's conflict model of virtue characterizes finite virtue as a moral disposition under resistance, requiring strength to act from duty against inclination. The problem, then, is to explain what kind of pleasantness this can be for finite agents, if virtue is structurally conflictual rather than harmonized. In this section, I sharpen the question by contrasting Kant's conflict model of virtue with the Aristotelian harmony model, and by clarifying what is meant by talk of virtue's pleasantness.

As a starting point, consider Schiller's well-known epigram, which has often set the tone for how Kant's ethics is received:

Gladly I serve my friends, but alas I do it with pleasure

Hence I am plagued with doubt that I am not a virtuous person

To this, this answer is given:

Surely, your only resource is to try to despise them entirely

And then with aversion do what your duty enjoins.[2]

Whatever Schiller's exact target, the epigram functions as a caricature of Kantian virtue: it suggests that for Kant the virtuous person is one who fulfils duty reluctantly, suppressing feeling and acting under a pall of aversion. In the same context, Schiller charges Kant's morality with a 'dark, monkish asceticism,' implying that rational control of feeling leaves no room for a genuinely pleasant dimension in moral life (NA: 284)[3].

Schiller's complaint presupposes a contrasting ideal of moral psychology. On Schiller's view, virtue is best expressed when reason and sensibility are brought into harmony, so that acting rightly is done with inclination rather than experienced as self-constraint. By contrast, Kant denies that virtue consists in such harmony. He defines virtue as the strength to act from duty in the face of inclination, and thus as a disposition that retains an element of conflict for finite agents.

Setting the caricature aside, Kant's own account of virtue is defined by duty, rational governance of sensibility, and the conflict this governance entails. Kant's theory of virtue is fundamentally built on the opposition between reason and inclination. For human beings to be virtuous, they must maintain a moral disposition based on duty, guided by reason rather than being swayed by

the temptations of their feelings or inclinations. This is because virtue represents an ideal for finite rational beings and signifies a character that adheres to moral laws with firm resolve. Therefore, Kant expresses virtue as 'strength'. Virtue, as defined by Kant, is the 'strength of a human being's maxims in fulfilling his duty' (MM, 6: 394). Kant immediately adds that strength is recognizable only by the obstacles it can overcome—and in the case of virtue, these obstacles are natural inclinations that 'can come into conflict with the human being's moral resolution' (MM, 6: 394). He further describes virtue as 'the moral strength of a human being's will in fulfilling his duty' (MM, 6: 405)[4]. This strength is highlighted by controlling feelings and inclinations that oppose the moral law through reason.

At the core is Kant's insistence that, for finite agents, virtue is a disposition in conflict rather than a harmony without resistance. It is a standing disposition to comply with duty under reason's rule despite inclination. As Kant explains, 'his [the human being's] proper moral condition, in which he can always be, is virtue; that is, moral disposition in conflict, and not holiness in the supposed possession of a complete purity of dispositions of the will' (CPrR, 5: 84).

Accordingly, Kant characterizes virtue as rule over oneself—not merely refraining from being ruled by feeling, but positively bringing sensibility under reason's command (MM, 6: 408). Kant's theory of virtue takes the form of the mastery of reason over feelings because he believed that people do not fulfill their duties willingly, but rather '*ungern*' (reluctantly) because they feel a resistance to the compulsion of duty (cf. MM, 6: 379, 386)[5]. In short, Kant's conception of virtue can

be understood as a conflict model of virtue, in which moral strength is required to control the inclination to resist the moral law in inner conflicts. Kant's concept of virtue is fundamentally characterized by the tension between reason and sensibility, requiring moral strength to subordinate feelings and inclinations to the demands of duty. Because humans are rational, they can represent the moral law as an obligation; yet, because they are also sensible, they cannot completely free themselves from feelings and inclinations that oppose those demands. For this reason, even a virtuous agent's conformity to the law bears the form of a command—the categorical imperative—rather than a spontaneous harmony of desire and reason (Baxley 2010b, 116-118).

By contrast, on the Aristotelian harmony model of virtue, full virtue is understood not as a standing disposition in conflict but as a state in which desire is brought into harmony with right reason. These Aristotelian theses—(i) harmony rather than domination, (ii) pleasure as characteristic of virtue, and (iii) the continence/virtue distinction—will serve as a reference point for what follows.

On the Aristotelian picture, the virtuous agent's desires are harmonized with right reason, so that acting well is characteristically pleasant and largely untroubled by inner conflict; conflict marks continence rather than full virtue (VII.1–10; esp. 1145b12–1146b28)[6]. Moreover, in this Aristotelian tradition the virtuous person takes pleasure not because virtue brings an external reward, but because desire is attuned to right reason (II.3, 1104b13–1105a3; X.4–5). Aristotle describes this pleasure as the proper completion of excellent activity (X.4–5). On this view, the presence of pleasure is evidence of

formed character, whereas its absence signals a merely continent agent. By these lights, Kant's virtue theory appears to repudiate a eudaimonistic conception in which virtue simply includes a pleasant cast of mind: for finite, sensuous beings, virtue centrally involves self-constraint and resistance to inclination rather than affective concord.

Against this background, I will argue that Kant can acknowledge a pleasant dimension of virtue without adopting a harmony model. The relevant pleasure is a feature of the virtuous state itself, and it stands in a non-causal dependence relation to sensible displeasure: displeasure is not what produces the pleasure, but an unpleasant moment that cannot be eliminated from the structure of finite virtue in conflict. In this way, the pleasantness of Kantian virtue is intelligible not by displacing conflict or sensible displeasure, but by retaining it as a constitutive condition.

Before turning to the account of how virtue's pleasantness is to be understood for finite agents, §2 reconstructs Kant's own descriptions of a pleasant dimension in virtue—cheerfulness, (self-)contentment, and moral pleasure. The aim is to clarify the sense in which Kant takes virtue itself to involve a pleasant state. §2 thus prepares the way for the subsequent analysis. With this clarified, the remaining question—taken up in §3—is how such pleasantness can be compatible with the reluctance involved in duty and with the conflictual disposition that virtue entails.

2. Kant's Descriptions of Pleasure in a State of Virtue

This section specifies the target of the discussion: the pleasant dimension Kant attributes to the virtuous agent. While this point is increasingly recognized in the literature, my aim here is simply to lay out Kant's own descriptions of the pleasant state that accompanies acting from duty—cheerfulness, (self-)contentment, and moral pleasure—and to note their scope and limits.

Cheerfulness in Virtue without Harmony: Kant's Reply to Schiller

To clarify Kant's own characterization of virtue's pleasant dimension, I begin with Kant's reply to Schiller. Kant's explicit remarks counter the Schillerian caricature: while virtue for finite agents is a disposition in conflict, he nonetheless ascribes to the virtuous agent a cheerful frame of mind—now widely noted in the literature (see Beiser 2005, 180–181; Baxley 2010b,103-106; Guyer 2023, 471–473). In the first section of the *Religion*, Kant characterizes what he calls 'the aesthetic constitution, the temperament so to speak of virtue,' and he does so in a way that responds directly to Schiller's critique (R, 6: 23f). Kant denies that the truly virtuous person is 'weighed down by fear and dejected'—the 'slavish frame of mind' of monkish gloom—and instead insists that 'a heart joyous in the compliance with its duty (not just complacency in the recognition of it) is the sign of genuineness in virtuous disposition' (R, 6: 24). The point is not to relax the rigor of duty, since the finite agent still confronts resistance, but to characterize the frame of mind that accompanies virtue: joy and cheerfulness rather than servile dejection.

The *Doctrine of Virtue* states the point explicitly under the heading of ethical ascetics (*exercitiorum virtutis*). Kant writes:

> The rules for practicing virtue (*exercitiorum virtutis*) aim at a frame of mind that is both valiant and cheerful in fulfilling its duties (*animus strenuus et hilaris*). For, virtue not only has to muster all its forces to overcome the obstacles it must contend with; it also involves sacrificing many of the joys of life, the loss of which can sometimes make one's mind gloomy and sullen. But what is not done with pleasure but merely as compulsory service has no inner worth for one who attends to his duty in this way and such service is not loved by him; instead, he shirks as much as possible occasions for practicing virtue. (MM, 6: 484)

Kant immediately condemns the opposite approach as 'monkish ascetics'—a 'cheerless', gloomy training that makes virtue itself a hated object of aversion and drives adherents away from it (MM, 6: 485). The cheerfulness at issue is achieved through the consciousness of freedom that accompanies the exercise of reason in overcoming inclination, and it is realized within the framework of virtue as a conflictual disposition. According to Kant, a virtuous person becomes cheerful when reason properly controls sensible feelings and establishes a moral disposition to follow one's duty. 'Ethical gymnastics, therefore, consists only in combating natural impulses sufficiently to be able to master them when a

situation comes up in which they threaten morality; hence it makes one valiant and cheerful in the consciousness of one's restored freedom' (MM, 6: 485). Thus, the cheerfulness Kant endorses presupposes neither the erasure of conflict within virtue's conflictual structure nor an appeal to a harmony of inclination with reason; it is the cast of mind in complying with duty, grounded in the agent's consciousness of freedom exercised in overcoming inclination.

The point is directed precisely the Schillerian image: Kant denies that a slavish, dejected frame of mind is fitting for the virtuous agent. Yet, unlike Schiller, this cheerfulness does not presuppose a harmony of reason and inclination. It is a frame of mind in the compliance with duty, compatible with virtue as disposition in conflict. To refine this description of the pleasant state proper to virtue, I next examine Kant's remarks on 'moral (self-)contentment' and 'moral pleasure'.

(Self-)Contentment in the *Critique of Practical Reason*

Turning to (self-)contentment, Kant holds that compliance with duty under the moral law produces a positive feeling about a state of oneself: 'I certainly do not deny that frequent practice in conformity with this determining ground can finally produce subjectively a feeling of contentment with oneself (*Zufriedenheit mit sich selbst*)' (CPrR, 5: 38). He clarifies the kind of contentment at stake as an analogue of happiness that accompanies consciousness of virtue, not hedonic enjoyment:

> Have we not, however, 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? Yes! This word is contentment with oneself, which in its strict meaning always designates only a negative satisfaction with one's existence, in which one is conscious of needing nothing. Freedom, and the consciousness of freedom as an ability to follow the moral law with an unyielding disposition, is independence from the inclinations, at least as motives determining (even if not as affecting) our desire, and so far as I am conscious of this freedom in following my moral maxims, it is the sole source of an unchangeable contentment, necessarily combined with it and resting on no special feeling, and this can be called intellectual contentment (CPrR, 5: 117-8).

These passages fix the point at issue as an intellectual contentment grounded in the consciousness of freedom under the law. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, this feeling of contentment is referred to as 'negative'. This is because it is a state of freedom from the troubles of satisfying unstable inclinations, achieved by being independent of them (cf. CPrR, 5: 119). As a result, it is a state of absence of discontent.

Beyond (Merely Negative) Self-Contentment: Moral Pleasure[7]

Kant then makes explicit, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*, a pleasant state consequent upon virtuous agency: 'when a thoughtful human being has overcome incentives to vice and is aware of having done his often bitter duty, he finds himself in a state that could well be called happiness, a state of contentment and peace of soul (*Zustande der Seelenruhe und Zufriedenheit*) in which virtue is its own reward (*Lohn*)' (MM, 6: 377). This parallels the *Critique of Practical Reason*'s account of self-contentment: a feeling that accompanies the retrospective consciousness of having fulfilled one's duty (Walschots 2017). Kant describes it as 'a state that could well be called happiness,' but not in the empirical sense of satisfied inclination.

On this basis, the 'reward' here is not external but the pleasant state of virtue itself. Kant also speaks of a moral pleasure that surpasses mere negative self-contentment: 'there is a subjective principle of ethical reward, that is, a receptivity to being rewarded in accordance with laws of virtue: the reward, namely, of a moral pleasure that goes beyond mere contentment with oneself (which can be merely negative) and which is celebrated in the saying that, through consciousness of this pleasure, virtue is its own reward' (MM, 06:391). Crucially, Kant treats this pleasant state as consequent upon virtue rather than antecedent to it. The consciousness of having complied with duty must obtain first, and only then does a contented or pleasurable state function as an ethical reward (see Cohen 2018, 15; Elizondo 2016; Walschots 2017). Here the pleasant state is still tethered to prior dutiful action—

receptivity to a pleasure in one's virtuous condition—yet Kant signals a positive dimension (moral pleasure) in addition to the negative characterization of contentment.

The texts suggest two related but distinct pleasant states associated with virtue. On the one hand, cheerfulness is a joyous disposition of the mind in complying with duty. It is the attitude of a person who, rather than being dejected by the resistance of inclination, can fulfill duty cheerfully and with pleasure. On the other hand, (self-)contentment and moral pleasure are more reflective and retrospective. It is the consciousness of one's state as having successfully acted from duty. Yet both are positive affective states sustained by rational self-relation—the consciousness of freedom and of reason's authority—rather than by hedonic stimulation or any harmony between inclination and reason.

Given virtue as a disposition defined by conflict with inclination, how should we understand the pleasant state Kant attributes to the virtuous agent? The point at issue is not a harmony of inclination and reason, but a pleasant state that is fully compatible with virtue's conflict under the law's command. The further task is to locate the sensible moment of displeasure within virtue's conflict and to clarify its role in making virtue's pleasant state intelligible for finite agents who still encounter inclination's resistance. My claim is that this pleasant state does not presuppose the disappearance of conflict; rather, it is intelligible only in non-causal dependence on an unpleasant sensible moment bound up with that conflict. Conflict therefore remains structurally integral to finite virtue, even if its burden and the salience of displeasure vary with moral maturity—a phenomenological point I take up

in §4. To motivate the structural claim, §3 turns to Kant's account of rational feelings and their affective structure, drawing on existing scholarship to show how a distinctively moral pleasure can be realized.

3. Rational Feelings and Pleasure by Means of Displeasure

The task, then, is to articulate an affective structure consistent with Kant's commitments to finite agency and virtue in conflict. I argue that Kant's theory of rational feelings—above all respect and the sublime—provides precisely such a structure. These feelings illuminate how a pleasant state can be intelligible within conflict without eliminating the negative sensible moment. In what follows, I reconstruct their structure and argue that they exemplify an affective structure in which the unpleasant moment within conflict functions as a constitutive condition of a distinctive moral pleasure.

Recent work already draws on respect and the sublime to suggest a pleasant state to Kantian virtue (cf. Winegar 2013, Elizondo 2014, Holberg 2016, Merritt 2017). These discussions also make plausible the articulation of a rational pleasure that is not simply a sensible reward. What remains less explicit, however, is how the unavoidable negative sensible moment that finite virtue involves is to be located within that pleasant state. I grant that Kantian moral pleasure can be articulated as distinctively rational and, in an important sense, not reducible to sensibility; my focus is the further question of how this rational pleasantness is to be understood when virtue is itself a standing conflictual

disposition. I therefore develop these insights by making explicit the structural role of sensible displeasure: the unpleasant aspect of finite virtue is a constitutive condition on which the pleasant state of finite virtue depends. My aim is not to dispute these recent discussions but to clarify it at this structural point.

On the view defended here, rational feelings provide the affective process that makes it possible for the virtuous agent to find her own moral state pleasant while preserving the persistence of sensible displeasure. The account not only preserves Kant's core constraints—duty's command-form, virtue as a disposition in conflict, and finitude—but also shows that virtue's pleasantness is intelligible only under the constitutive condition of the negative sensible moment of displeasure within conflict.

What are 'rational feelings'? Cohen (2018) characterizes rational feelings as autonomously generated by reason in practical self-legislation—not passively received like sensuous feelings that arise from external stimulation and belong to the natural order (G, 4:401n; CPrR, 5: 75; MM, 6: 377). The paradigm is respect[8]—not a sensible incentive but an affect 'produced by reason', arising with the law's authority over inclination (CPrR, 5: 75). As Cohen points out, the feelings of respect 'consists in both a feeling of pleasure and a feeling of pain' (Cohen 2018b: 8). It shows that rational feelings do not trade pain for pleasure but hold them together.

I now develop this point directly through two worked examples: respect and the sublime.

Read together, they show that, for finite agents, the pleasant state at issue stands in a non-causal dependence relation to the sensible displeasure within conflict, which remains in place and serves as a constitutive condition of the moral pleasure. The discussion draws on passages from the *Critique of Judgment* (for the contrast between empirical pleasure and a non-empirical pleasure identical with a law-determined state of mind) and from the *Critique of Practical Reason* (for the structure of respect and intellectual contentment).

Respect and Sublime

Respect is not an empirical feeling but an a priori one that reason itself produces in the will's determination by the moral law. Respect counts as a rational feeling not because it would be a bare sensation, but because it yields a distinctive affective state—a favorable stance toward one's own moral condition—generated through the affective work of reason. Kant characterizes respect in the *Critique of Judgment* as 'a special and peculiar modification of this feeling, which will not coincide exactly either with the pleasure or with the displeasure that we obtain from empirical objects' (CJ, 5: 222). What is distinctive is a new kind of affective state that is neither empirical pleasure nor mere displeasure. For finite agents, the law's constraint on inclination has a sensible aspect that is felt as displeasure, while the very same practical determination also involves consciousness of reason's authority over sensibility. In this way, the resulting moral pleasure is not produced by the displeasure,

but is inseparable from the felt restraint that belongs to virtue under conflict. Thus, Kant can also describe respect in terms of 'a subject that can sense in itself obstacles in sensibility but at the same time superiority over them through overcoming them as a modification of its condition' (CJ, 5: 267).

As I take Elizondo (2014) to be arguing, the pleasure at stake is non-empirical and active, inherent in rational activity rather than a passively received agreeable sensation. Kant himself allows that, in the determination of the will by the law, the state of oneself can be 'itself already the feeling of pleasure and identical with it' (CJ, 5: 222). Although stated in an aesthetic context, what matters is the formal point: a law-determined state of mind can itself be (and be felt as) pleasure. Following Elizondo, we can extend definition of active pleasure as a state in the aesthetical context to the moral case (Elizondo 2014, 433-435). The pleasant dimension at issue is non-empirical and active, grounded in the agent's state as rational and elevated. In this setting, empirical (sensible) pleasure is not at issue. On the contrary, the law's determination induces sensible displeasure. But this negative sensible moment of displeasure is not external to the pleasant state; it is a constitutive condition of the pleasant state at issue. At the rational level, the same condition that produces pain in sensibility occasions a consciousness of freedom and law, and thereby a pleasure inseparable from that sensible displeasure.

The *Critique of Practical Reason* offers the most explicit account of respect as a rational feeling, making clear that the law's determination introduces an immediate sensible displeasure or pain that belongs within the generative process of respect. It is 'produced by reason' and therefore not

a pleasure in the empirical, passively received sense (CPrR, 5: 76f)[9]. As a feeling arising from reason's own activity, it is practical rather than pathological. While *Critique of Practical Reason* explicitly denies that respect is a feeling of pleasure, this denial targets only empirical pleasure. At that stage, 'pleasure' is restricted to a passively received agreeable sensation. By contrast, in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant acknowledges that a law-determined state of mind can itself be pleasant in a non-empirical sense. The same law-determined state is, on the empirical–pathological side, displeasing to sensibility, yet at the practical level it can be described as pleasant. Respect, as a rational feeling, essentially includes an unpleasant moment, which is a constitutive feature of the pleasant state of virtue at issue for finite agents.

We shall therefore examine how respect arises by means of sensible pain. Analytically, three moments can be distinguished (CPrR, 5: 75–79; cf. Noller 2019). (i) When the will is determined by the moral law, the immediate sensible effect is displeasure or pain: the law restricts every inclination, and this is felt in sensibility as a negative effect. At this stage the law is experienced as an external constraint upon the sensible self. (ii) This affective impact yields humiliation (*Demütigung*): a lowering of self-love/self-conceit and a concomitant heightening of the practical esteem for the law—'an effect of the pure practical law,' which Kant even describes as a kind of 'intellectual contempt' for the sensible self. Here the agent acknowledges the law's authority over inclination. (iii) Within that awareness, respect arises as a positive affect toward the law's intellectual ground: the agent recognizes

the law as self-legislated by pure practical reason.

Respect displays two analytically inseparable moments, a negative and a positive effect that operate together[10]. Determination of the will by the moral law brings respect for the law; as a rational feeling, this at once becomes a favorable evaluation of the rational, lawgiving self. Kant himself describes this as practical elevation and self-approbation:

> As submission to a law, that is, as a command (indicating constraint for the sensibly affected subject), it, therefore, contains in it no pleasure but instead, so far, displeasure in the action. On the other hand, however, since this constraint is exercised only by the lawgiving of his own reason, it also contains something elevating and the subjective effect on feeling, since pure practical reason is the sole cause of it can thus be called self-approbation with reference to pure practical reason (CPrR, 5: 80–81).

Thus, the consciousness of constraint is, for sensibility, displeasing. But the same law-determination also has a positive practical aspect: respect involves the recognition of the moral law's supreme authority over inclination, and with it a distinctive attitude in which the agent takes the law as authoritative for herself. This positive aspect should not be reduced to a pleasant sensation, since Kant explicitly denies that respect is either sensible pleasure or pain. What it involves, rather, is an elevating

self-relation: in being determined by the law, the agent becomes conscious of herself as capable of acting from duty, and thus as standing under a higher practical vocation than her inclinations would allow. Importantly, the claim is not that respect as such is pleasure, but that the law-determined moral condition it constitutes can be pleasant in a distinctively rational way for finite agents. As Elizondo's discussion of the *Critique of Judgment* helps bring out, this law-determined state can be described as pleasant in a non-empirical, rational, and active sense.

Within this complex affective state, the displeasing sensible moment is not something that is later traded off for a separate pleasure. The agent's elevation and self-approbation can sustain a genuinely pleasant dimension in her moral condition. In this non-causal sense, the pleasant dimension stands in a dependence relation to the unpleasant sensible moment: without the felt constraint that marks finite agency, the pleasantness of this elevated moral self-relation would not be intelligible as the pleasantness characteristic of virtue under conflict. Accordingly, even if respect is not itself classifiable as either pleasure or pain, it is widely recognized that it has an affectively complex structure involving both pleasure and pain for finite agents (Elizondo 2014; Holberg 2016; Cohen 2018)[11]. In this way, respect shows how a pleasant dimension can belong to virtue without relaxing the command-form of duty or the characterization of virtue as a disposition in conflict.

To sharpen the structure of rational feelings, I turn to the feeling of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*. On Kant's account, sublimity does not lie in objects themselves but in the mind's

disposition when it confronts magnitudes or powers that overwhelm imagination and strain its presentation (lofty mountains, boundless space, violent storms). What is 'sublime' is the subject's response—our struggle to comprehend and the stance it elicits—rather than any empirical property of the object (CJ, 5: 245–46).

The process is structurally parallel to respect but articulated in the aesthetic context. (i) There is a sensible displeasure: imagination finds itself inadequate to a rational idea. (ii) Imaginative inadequacy orients the mind beyond sensibility toward reason's idea: the subject becomes aware of a supersensible vocation—namely, reason's lawgiving capacity to take that idea as law (CJ, 5: 257). (iii) From this self-relation there arises a pleasure—an elevation tied to the agent's awareness of her rational capacity. Kant explicitly characterizes the resulting effect as a 'pleasure that is possible only by means of a displeasure' (CJ, 5: 260) and as one that 'pleases immediately through its resistance to the interest of the senses' (CJ, 5: 267).

Analyzing Pleasant Dimension of Virtue through Rational Feelings

Kant's account of rational feelings provides a framework for articulating a non-empirical pleasantness that is consistent with duty's command-form and with virtue as a disposition in conflict, since the pleasant state at issue remains structurally integral to sensible resistance rather than secured by its disappearance.

Consider self-contentment and moral pleasure. This is, fundamentally, a feeling about one's state—the awareness of oneself as able to comply with duty—not a passively received sensation from external stimulation. The affective state is generated when the agent becomes conscious of rational freedom in bringing inclination under the law. In this sense, its describability as a feeling depends on the affective process that rational feelings make possible. Respect describes the affective modification that accompanies the will's determination by the moral law; the sublime articulates, in the aesthetic context, an elevation tied to the subject's supersensible vocation. On this basis, the pleasant state proper to virtue is best described in terms of rational feeling, while the unpleasant moment remains, at the empirical level, a constitutive condition of how this pleasantness is intelligible for finite agents.

On this basis, a cheerful frame of mind in complying with duty can also be explained by rational feelings[12]. The constraint that produces sensible displeasure (the restraint of inclination) simultaneously brings an awareness of freedom. Exercising freedom within a struggle in which sensible desires are subordinated, the agent occupies an affective state whose pleasantness is independent of passively received, hedonic satisfaction: it is a pleasant state that reason itself generates. Hence the 'cheerful heart' Kant attributes to the virtuous agent in his reply to Schiller is not a sign of harmony with inclination, but the affective manifestation of rational self-government under constraint (R, 6: 23; MM, 6: 484–85). This is why, in Kant's account, rational feelings include an unpleasant sensible moment bound up with the conflict. In this sense, cheerfulness is sustained by a pleasure in

one's own virtuous condition: not an agreeable sensation, but a practical satisfaction in being governed by the law, which can accompany compliance with duty without presupposing any harmony with inclination.

Read in this way, rational feelings clarify the kind of pleasant state at issue in Kantian virtue. The pleasure belongs to the agent's rational condition rather than to sensible satisfaction, yet it is not intelligible for finite agents apart from the negative sensible moment that accompanies virtue's conflict with inclination. In this non-causal sense, virtue's pleasantness stands in a dependence relation to sensible displeasure: the unpleasant moment is not eliminated, but remains structurally integral even when its phenomenological salience can recede.

The next section develops this point into a non-harmonizing Kantian conflict model of eudaimonism. It introduces the structural–phenomenological distinction explicitly and uses it to situate recent reconstructions of Kantian eudaimonism (especially Grenberg and Elizondo). While those accounts rightly emphasize affinities with Aristotelian eudaimonism, I argue that Kantian virtue remains structurally conflictual for finite agents, and that this supports a more distinctively Kantian conflict model of eudaimonism that keeps a distance from Aristotelian harmony.

4. Conflict Model of Kantian Eudaimonism

By "eudaimonism" I mean, in a broad sense, the view that virtue stands in a constitutive

relation to an agent's happiness or well-being, such that a fully virtuous state is not only morally right but also, in an important respect, a source of happiness for the agent. As set out in §1, a familiar Aristotelian way of making this plausible appeals to a harmony model of virtue: in full virtue, desire is formed in concord with right reason, so that acting well is characteristically pleasant and sustained without the kind of inner conflict that marks mere continence.

The aim of this section is to articulate a distinctively Kantian version of eudaimonism that does not rely on that harmony-based picture. I argue that Kantian virtue remains structurally conflictual for finite agents, and that virtue becomes pleasant not by eliminating struggle, but that for finite agents the cheerful, pleasant state proper to virtue is realized only on the constitutive condition of sensible displeasure within virtue's standing disposition in conflict. This yields a non-harmonizing conflict model of Kantian eudaimonism that preserves Kant's commitments to finitude and struggle while explaining how the virtuous agent can nonetheless be cheerful.

At first sight, speaking of a pleasant dimension in Kantian virtue may seem at odds with Kant's rejection of eudaimonism—if by that is meant making happiness the determining ground of morality (see., Wood 2000; Sticker 2020). But what Kant denies is an empirical, sensuous eudaimonism. This does not preclude a form of pleasure that belongs to virtue itself. Recent work has developed this line under the heading of 'Kantian eudaimonism'.[13] To clarify what such a view can amount to, I begin by engaging two prominent reconstructions (Elizondo; Grenberg). Their proposals

plausibly highlight affinities between Kantian ethics and Aristotelian eudaimonism, but they also invite a further question about what is distinctive in Kant's case once virtue is treated as virtue in conflict.

Elizondo argues that the apparent clash turns on an equivocation about happiness. For Aristotle, eudaimonia is 'living well and doing well' (I.4, 1095a18–19)—a fulfillment constituted by virtuous activity itself (Elizondo 2023, 657). For Kant, by contrast, 'happiness' names the sum of satisfied inclinations and the agreeableness they produce. These are very different concepts (Elizondo 2023, 658). Thus, much of what Aristotle calls happiness is not absent from Kantian ethics; it simply does not appear under the name of happiness. Put in Elizondo's framework: while Aristotle and Kant are speaking about different things when they speak about happiness, they speak about the same thing when Aristotle speaks about happiness and Kant speaks about morality. 'While Aristotle is not, by Kant's lights, a eudaimonist, Kant is, by Aristotle's lights, a eudaemonist (Elizondo 2023, 656, 664).'

The thought is that, for Aristotle, happiness is not a hedonic state but living and doing well through praxis—activity that is its own end and is good insofar as it constitutes acting well. So even if Kant rejects eudaimonism when "happiness" is understood as an empirical, sensuous end, an Aristotelian can still regard Kant's moral philosophy as eudaimonistic in substance, since it is centrally a practical philosophy of how to live and act well. I take Elizondo's rapprochement between Aristotle and Kant to be fruitful, since it clarifies how much of what Aristotle calls happiness can be located

within Kant's practical philosophy once happiness is understood in Aristotelian terms. It brings into view important continuities that are easy to miss if "eudaimonism" is read only as the pursuit of empirical satisfaction.

However, once Kantian virtue is kept in view as virtue for finite agents—virtue as a standing disposition in conflict—an additional, distinctly Kantian feature emerges. On the Aristotelian harmony model, the pleasantness characteristic of full virtue is naturally explained by the alignment of desire with right reason, and persistent inner conflict is treated as a mark of continence rather than full virtue. Kant cannot appeal to that explanatory route. For finite agents, the pleasant state Kant associates with virtue is intelligible only on a different structure: a pleasure that depends on sensible displeasure as its condition within conflict. In this sense, the view developed here sketches a non-harmonizing, conflict model of Kantian eudaimonism—one that preserves Elizondo's broad rapprochement while making clearer what, in Kant's case, resists assimilation to Aristotelian harmony.

Building on this Aristotelian-facing way of reading Kantian eudaimonism, Grenberg's (2022) reconstruction sharpens the issue for the present paper. On her 'deontological eudaemonism', happiness is rationally conceived as a non-felt pleasure in the virtually unimpeded exercise of one's rational will—the 'free aptitude' for virtue—so that one is, as she describes, 'cheerful and loving in the exercise of one's proper function of virtue.' (Grenberg 2022, 66) Rather than the sum of inclinations satisfied, it is the unfelt, formal satisfaction of proper functioning in the unimpeded

exercise of one's will. Grenberg frames this state on Aristotle's 'unimpeded activity,' but connects it as 'contentment with oneself'—a formal pleasure identical with the very exercise of virtuous activity (Grenberg 2022, 322, 329). Hence it is described as 'unfelt but pleasant': a phenomenology of acting well rather than a sensible affect produced by desire-satisfaction (Grenberg 2022, 311–12, 319–21). This is distinguished from moral feeling (respect), which is a sensible, conflict-marked affect. By contrast, the pleasure central to her account is characterized by the absence of inner opposition and is associated with the facility or ease of the fully virtuous agent in the unimpeded exercise of her will. Precisely because there is no active opposition within the agent to her commitment to morality, 'this new pleasurable experience of ease or facility emerges' (Grenberg 2022, 320).

I endorse this rapprochement between Kant and eudaimonism. Building on it, my contribution is to clarify how a pleasant dimension of Kantian virtue is intelligible for finite agents who remain subject to command-form duty and to virtue in conflict. To do so, I distinguish two explanatory levels: a structural level and a phenomenological level. Structurally, finite virtue remains virtue within conflict: because we are sensible beings, dutiful agency necessarily includes a negative sensible moment of constraint, and—as the analysis of rational feelings in §3 brings out—even when virtue involves a pleasant state, that pleasantness is intelligible only in non-causal dependence on this unpleasant moment within conflict. This is why an explanation that locates virtue's pleasantness primarily in the absence of conflict can seem to sit in tension with Kant's own way of defining virtue

as the moral condition of finite agents—virtue, not holiness—where resistance is never simply abolished (CPrR, 5: 84; MM, 6: 383).

Phenomenologically, however, the felt salience of that resistance can vary widely with moral maturity: conflict can become far less obtrusive, and dutiful activity can often be experienced with facility or ease. This helps locate both the force and the limit of Grenberg's proposal. I agree with Grenberg that moral progress can bring a phenomenology of "unimpeded" agency in which duty is typically performed without acute inner opposition, and that this captures an important aspect of virtuous life as it is lived. Facility or ease, then, is best treated not as the decisive structural marker of full virtue, but as a variable phenomenological profile of mature virtue. Even when struggle is not salient, finite virtue remains virtue under resistance, and the pleasant state at issue is therefore intelligible not as the upshot of harmony, but as a distinctively practical self-relation that is shaped through conflict. This is the respect in which Kantian eudaimonism, as I develop it, keeps a distance from Aristotelian harmony while preserving Grenberg's central insight about moral maturity[14].

My claim is that Kantian eudaimonism must be articulated from within virtue as conflict. Even when moral maturity brings greater facility, the pleasant state at issue remains structurally integral to, and in that sense depends on, the negative sensible moment that finite virtue cannot shed. The pleasant dimension of Kantian virtue therefore does not mark the disappearance of conflict; it explains how a pleasant state can belong to Kantian virtuous agency under resistance, without any

harmony of inclination with reason. In this way, the view preserves Kant's core commitments while making room for a distinctively Kantian eudaimonism—not a harmony-based model, but a conflict model.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explain how a pleasant dimension can belong to Kantian virtue without denying virtue's conflictual structure. Reconstructing Kant's remarks on a cheerful heart, (self-)contentment, and moral pleasure, I argued that the relevant pleasantness is non-empirical and illuminated by Kant's account of rational feelings. For finite agents, the law's determination of the will has an inseparable sensible aspect: it is felt as constraint on inclination and thus involves a negative moment of displeasure. My central claim has been that this negative sensible moment is not something virtue leaves behind; rather, the pleasant state distinctive of finite virtue is intelligible only in non-causal dependence on it. To avoid conflating structure with lived experience, I distinguished the structural level—where sensible resistance remains integral to finite virtue—from the phenomenological level—where the felt salience and burden of that resistance can vary with moral maturity. On this basis, I have articulated a distinctively Kantian eudaimonism: not a harmony-based ease secured by the disappearance of conflict, but a conflict model of virtue in which virtue's pleasant dimension remains structurally integral to the negative sensible moment that finite agency cannot shed.

This account reframes the familiar caricature of Kant as inhospitable to pleasure or to any eudaimonistic dimension. Without weakening Kant's deontological commitments or collapsing his view into an Aristotelian harmony model, it yields a distinctively Kantian eudaimonism. This reframes the boundary with virtue ethics by showing how the virtuous agent's pleasant state can be accommodated within a deontological picture of agency under conflict. It also sharpens a set of broader questions about the place of pleasure in moral agency, the role of affect in practical reasoning, and the relation between virtue and happiness.

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[1] Sticker's point is that Kant's chief opponent is eudaimonism in a broad sense rather than consequentialism. Moreover, Kant's category of "eudaimonism" is expansive: it can encompass popular philosophy, moral sense theory, (quasi-)religious doctrine, perfectionism and practical philosophy inspired by ancient virtue ethics (Sticker 2020, 213). Sticker rightly notes that Kant often classifies "everyone else" as a eudaimonist, a move that risks overlooking distinctions (Sticker 2020, 213, 216). What matters for present purposes, however, is the fact that Kant frames his moral philosophy as rejecting eudaimonism. This paper argues that, even if Kant rejects eudaimonism as he understands it, his account of virtue nevertheless supports a distinctive (and perhaps surprising) sense in which virtue itself can be eudaimonistic.

[2] The epigram is from Schiller and Goethe, *Xenien* ("Gewissensskrupel" / "Decisum"); for the original

source, see *Schillers Werke,* Nationalausgabe 1, 357. The English translation quoted here is taken from Paton 1947, 48; see also Baxley 2010a, 1084–1085, and the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "Friedrich Schiller," Notes, note 3.

[3] Quotations from Schiller's works cite from *Schillers Werke*, Nationalausgabe, zwanzigster Band, Hermann Böhlaus Nachfolger, 1962. and are followed by the abbreviation NA and the page number.

[4] Quotations from Kant's works cite the volume and page number of the Academy edition, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Königlich Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vols. 1–29, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902–. I use the translations found in The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992–). Abbreviations used are as follows: CPrR = *Critique of Practical Reason* (in Kant 2015); G = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (in Kant 2012); MM =*Metaphysics of Morals* (in Kant 2017); R = *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and related drafts (in Kant 2018); CJ= *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (Kant 2000). Italics used in quotations represent Kant's own emphasis unless otherwise noted.

[5] Kant makes this point especially clear in the drafts connected to *Religion*, where he argues, against Schiller, that for human beings who recognize the moral law as a form of necessitation, acting gladly or with grace (*Anmut*) from duty is not possible (R, 23: 100).

[6] Quotations from the *Nicomachean Ethics* are by Bekker numbers (book, chapter, Bekker page:line). Throughout, these refer to the Nicomachean Ethics. Translations consulted: Terence Irwin, Nicomachean Ethics, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1999). I cite in text by Bekker numbers; page numbers of translations are omitted.

[7] On one prominent line, Engstrom (2007) treats self-contentment as the same kind of feeling as moral pleasure; Walschots (2017) likewise takes self-contentment to be an instance of moral pleasure. I follow this general kinship.

[8] On the scope of 'rational feelings.' Cohen (2018) emphasizes respect as the paradigm of self-generated feeling in the practical domain and also highlights a theoretical counterpart in the feeling of reason's need. Geiger (2011) likewise treats respect as paradigmatic but argues that the *Doctrine of Virtue* recognizes a richer field of rational feelings—moral feeling, conscience, love, and self-

respect—the so-called moral predispositions (MM, 6: 399). Schönecker (2013) goes further, taking these as basic conditions for grasping the moral law as a categorical imperative.

[9] A similar argument can be found in Groundwork: 'Respect is actually the representation of a worth that infringes on my self-love. Thus, it is something that is considered an object neither of inclination, nor of fear, even though it is at the same time somewhat analogous to both' (G, 4: 401 Anm.).

[10] On a dual-aspect reading of respect, Reath distinguishes an 'affective' side and a 'practical' (or 'intellectual') side, arguing that the latter is motivationally decisive (Reath 2006, 9–14). By contrast, McCarty (1993) and Herrera (2000) emphasize the affective side. More recently, Noller (2019) resists this intellectualist/affectivist dichotomy, construing respect as a process of moral self-formation and appraisal mediated by the dynamic relation between natural feeling (first-order desire) and the rational determination of the will (a second-order volition). I do not enter this debate about respect as a motive.

[11] Elizondo also notes that moral phenomenology is "complex" and "not exhausted" by either sensible feelings or intellectual pleasure: one can be intrinsically pleased in acting well while also feeling bad, since being pleased "does not mean to be only pleased, and nothing else" (Elizondo 2014, 436–437). My point is more specific in the context of finite virtue. For finite sensible agents, for whom virtue is a disposition in conflict, the pleasant state at issue stands in a non-causal dependence relation to sensible displeasure: it is not something that first occurs and then merely coexists with displeasure, but a pleasant state that would not be intelligible as the pleasant state of virtue without the negative sensible moment internal to conflict. In this sense, sensible displeasure is not erased, but remains a constitutive condition of how the pleasant state of finite virtue is realized within rational feeling.

[12] Previous studies connect the sublime to cheerfulness. Merritt (2017) argues that Kant's account of the sublime—whose affective 'vibration' begins with a sensible check and is stabilized by commitment to moral ends—helps explain Kant's claim that virtue is joyous/cheerful, thus shaping the temperament of virtue. Similarly, Winegar (2013) contends that Kant's reply to Schiller centrally relies on the sublime feeling elicited by contemplation of the moral law, which underwrites a cheerful cast of mind consistent with duty. These readings are congenial to my view, but my proposal does not take an aesthetic route. I treat the sublime only as one instance of a more general, dynamic in rational feelings.

[13] On the debate regarding the compatibility of Kant and eudaimonism, see, for example, Enstrom (1996), who argues from the perspective of the highest good that Kant need not completely reject Aristotelian eudaimonism, since the role of happiness in Kant's account of the highest good can be analogized to the role of the constituent good in Aristotle's account of happiness. By contrast, Wood (2000) maintains that Kant ultimately opposes eudaimonism. Some recent literatures locate a Kantian eudaimonism in the connection between virtue and the prudential pursuit of happiness. Holberg (2018) argues that, although moral and prudential reasoning are distinct uses of practical reason, the developmental integration of virtue allows moral reasoning to substantively shape prudential deliberation, so that virtuously informed pursuits of happiness are better both for virtue and for happiness—hence her label, 'quasi-eudaimonism.' Forman (2016) likewise defends a 'moderate cynicism,' on which Kant offers a qualified harmony between virtue and worldly happiness.

[14] It is important not to overlook that Grenberg herself adds caveats: even when virtue is experienced with ease, finite agents should not infer that inner conflict has been definitively overcome; the possibility of relapse and renewed struggle remains (Grenberg 2022, 331–341). In this sense, Grenberg should not be read as assuming that virtue is pleasant only because the unpleasant sensible moment disappears. She allows that, for finite agents, contrary affect can remain and may be mixed with moral pleasure. My claim does not deny these points. Even if virtue is pleasant in the relevant sense, it does not follow that sensible displeasure disappears for finite agents; contrary affect can remain and may be mixed in particular cases. The contribution of the present paper is to make explicit a further claim: by distinguishing a structural from a phenomenological level, I argue that the unpleasant moment is not merely an additional element that may accompany pleasure, but a moment on which the pleasant state of finite virtue non-causally depends.