A Philosophy of Life: Kant on Happiness and Morality

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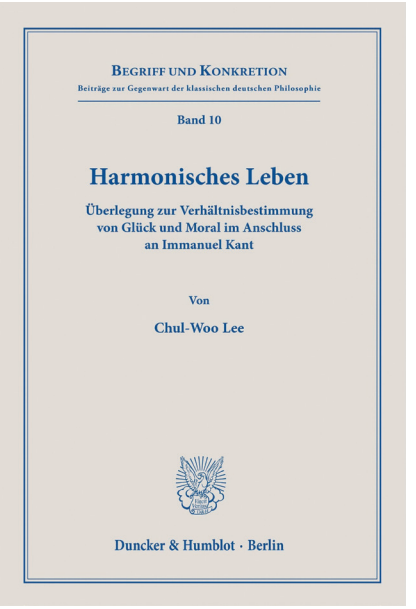

Immanuel Kant succinctly defines happiness as the fulfillment of one's desires. Happiness is the satisfaction of our inclinations, even of pleasure and contentment. That much is clear. Less clear, however, is the role that happiness plays in Kant's discussion of moral ends and the highest good. Happiness can be understood as a natural end of our actions, but as a necessary and sufficient rational and moral end, things get more confusing when reading Kant. We can certainly understand happiness in natural terms, as the satisfaction of our practical needs, and it may be possible to understand the origin of the concept of happiness in rational terms, but Kant, according to much research, seems to be quite adamant in distinguishing between happiness and virtue. The former concept refers to our awareness of a sense of bliss that accompanies us as we live our lives. However, this concept is often dependent on a particular time and place. What makes

me happy may not be the case for someone else. The second concept, that of virtue, is a condition of good will. Good will is the unique moral principle that chooses to use virtue for moral ends. Virtue thus implies an obligation that may well be different from our desire for happiness. According to Kant, these two concepts are often incompatible, and one of the central problems of moral philosophy is to make sense of this distinction. Fortunately, we now have a book by Chul-Woo Lee that helps to clarify Kant's understanding of happiness and the ultimate good based on virtue. Lee's original argument is that Kant presents autonomous moral action in terms of a dissonance-harmony thesis. That is, the relationship between happiness and morality is one of both dissonance and harmony. Through the doctrine of postulates, Kant attempts to unify happiness and morality. This is a doctrine "in which the possibility of realizing the harmonious unity of happiness and morality is secured by the existence of God and by the immortality of the soul as a condition of the self-responsible attainability of happiness" (p. 307). Nevertheless, Lee argues that Kant also emphasizes human autonomy insofar as we can believe that the consequences of moral action are very often happiness. Lee concludes that although happiness and virtue often coincide, there remains a distinct possibility that their paths will diverge in certain circumstances, and that therefore happiness is not sufficient for the highest good. The relationship between morality and happiness is therefore one of both harmony and dissonance.

I hope that Lee's book will soon be translated from German into English, as it deserves a wider audience that would benefit greatly from his presentation. The book consists of two chapters. The first deals with the question, "Whether and to what extent morality can lead to happiness?" This chapter serves to conceptually outline what Kant means by happiness, to offer some non-Kantian conceptualizations of happiness, and to introduce Lee's dissonance-harmony model of the highest good. Here we find one of Lee's central arguments. He writes that "Kant's dissonance-harmony conception of the highest good implies a comprehensive real empirical understanding of happiness, which is mediated and realized through application-oriented moral activities" (p. 80). Lee emphasizes the importance of this real empirical understanding of happiness by comparing Kant's thought with the respective Socratic and Aristotelian conceptions of happiness. In short, the Socratic understanding of happiness is a model based on the coincidence of morality and happiness. Lee argues that the Socratic critique of the Sophist view, which views the

relationship between morality and happiness amorally and skeptically, is correct. Socrates, however, argues that a morally good life is a happy life. Lee notes, however, that "even this Socratic view cannot be considered entirely correct, since morality is not a sufficient but only a necessary condition for the good life" (p. 29). Ultimately, the point of the book is to distinguish Kant's own consideration of morality and happiness. The same is true of Lee's discussion of Aristotle, who at first seems to be talking about the same thing as Kant, since both seem to be trying to find a way to understand the good life in terms of both physical and moral goods. In this sense, Aristotle "refers to the 'harmonious' unity of happiness and morality, which can be understood as a critical suspension of the Sophistic contradictory-incompatible and the Socratic identical-sufficient, accidental determination of the relationship between the two" (p. 50). Here Lee helps to clarify Kant's critique of eudaimonia as a moral theory. The crux of Kant's critique of eudaimonism, according to Lee, is Kant's displeasure with happiness as a principle of moral action. That is, happiness is set up as the very principle of morality (p. 71). Since happiness is inherently a heteronomous concept, one that depends on time and place, it cannot serve as a universal principle of morality because it dissolves the difference between virtue and vice (p. 73). Lee is aware that Kant may have misunderstood what was a practical for a theoretical concept of happiness in terms of a principle for life by understanding eudaimonism in terms of egoism and hedonism. Nevertheless, "Kant wants to consider human happiness not only in terms of the foundation of morality, but also in terms of the existential significance of autonomous moral action" (p. 77). Here we see Lee's thesis coming together. Although scholars commonly (mis)understand Kant's opposition of happiness and virtue in terms of moral philosophy alone, Lee reminds us that there is a place for a discussion of Kant and morality when we begin to understand it in terms of an ethics of the good life, keeping in mind the highest good as the goal of autonomous moral action.

The second chapter of the book is much longer than the first and contains five sections that substantiate Lee's harmony-dissonance model of happiness and morality. The first section examines Kant's moral system in his "Lectures on Moral Philosophy" and asks why Kant seems to shift his position from the highest good to the principle of morality over time. Lee argues, however, that this is less of a shift than it first appears. The principle of morality, as an objective realization of virtue, also reveals a theory of the highest good (p. 94). Lee states that "it is a human task to live

according to the highest good. The moral philosophical consideration of the principle of morality, i.e., the objective realization of the moral good and the subsequent autonomous action, is the first and most important step toward the highest good" (p. 95). Lee develops this in the remainder of the first section of this chapter. The second section examines the justification of morality in terms of the relationship between good will and happiness. Lee shows that this relationship is conditional. Lee writes that "good will has not only an undifferentiated, purely dissonant relationship to happiness, but also a harmonious-intentional, ethically conditional relationship" (p. 150). In the third section, Lee presents "the moral-qualitative conceptualization of happiness as a consequence of the activity of good will mediated by the moral sense of respect" (p. 230). This is where Lee's main thesis comes together, in that he is able to show that happiness does not simply coincide with virtue, nor is happiness incompatible with virtue, but that this relationship is understood by Kant to arise in the tension between the two. That is, moral happiness is not to be understood purely in terms of empirical self-satisfaction, but neither is happiness to be understood purely divorced from any practical consideration of the highest good. Theory and practice are conditionally related. The second chapter's fourth section helps to clarify this dialectical relationship in terms of the highest good, which, according to Lee, is a philosophically inclusive concept of happiness. In his own words, "To this end, I have above all interpreted the highest good as a philosophically inclusive concept of happiness, in which morality functions as a necessary condition for happiness - as the object of an indirect duty and as a consequence of moral action" (p. 256). In the second half of this section, Lee shows how Kant's postulates of freedom, immortality, and the existence of God help clarify Kant's exposition of autonomous morality. He references the postulates in the following way:

> (i) The postulate of freedom secures the objective reality of the existence of the moral world acting through the moral law. (ii) The postulate of the immortality of the soul points to the ethical implication that the autonomous moral action within physical time is reified by its supratemporal effect, so that the realization of the highest good basically refers to the moral activity of the autonomous subject of action. (iii) The postulate of the existence of God is about the divine wisdom that leads to the highest good through the moral law (pp. 302–303).

The chapter's final section serves as the book's conclusion and provides a clear exposition once again of Lee's central thesis.

Lee's book is a welcome and unique contribution to the debate over Kant's understanding of happiness and virtue. Lee clearly understands that Kant's examination of human morality is ultimately not simply a philosophical theory based on a principle, but a practical application of principles based on reason. In other words, Kant's moral philosophy can be understood as a philosophy of life. I am convinced that this book will help to challenge scholarship that ignores or downplays Kant's readings of happiness. Moreover, Lee pays more attention and takes more seriously than most how Kant's doctrine of postulates serves to include happiness as part of Kant's moral philosophy. Lee clearly shows how the relationship between the realization of the highest good and autonomous moral action is established. Thus, for Lee, Kant remains the philosopher of human freedom. For Kant, the doctrine of postulates "cannot be addressed directly in eudaimonistic ethics, but rather within the framework of autonomous ethics of the will or maxims, the highest good functions not as a moral principle, but rather as a point of orientation in life that points to the comprehensive ethical attitude of a human agent" (p. 303). In other words, Lee shows how Kant's postulates orient and guide human action toward the highest possible good, and how this, in turn, makes room for an integration of happiness and morality.

Lee's monograph is not without its problems, but I believe that these problems do not detract too much from the book. For one thing, the book is a bit bloated. Lee repeats himself too often where he could have simply added to his argument without having to repeat his previous points. Nevertheless, the German of the book is impeccable and easy to read. Lee certainly engages with Kant's texts, but close readings of his moral writings are surprisingly sparse. However, this could be explained by the fact that this is a book for those who are already well versed in Kant. Probably the most controversial point in Lee's argument is his use of Kant's doctrine of postulates. I imagine that such objections will fall into three commonly expressed areas, although I will leave it to Kantian scholars to determine for themselves whether such criticisms are appropriate today in light of Lee's presentation. The first criticism is one that Lee recognizes and addresses: the fact that the concept of happiness, being empirical, has no place in pure practical reason. Lee addresses this insofar as he recognizes that Kant doesn't derive the

highest good and its associated happiness from the moral law, but that the highest good arises from the self-reflection of a finite human being in light of his ability to follow the moral law in light of the theological postulates. Second, if it is true that the basis of moral need is one's desire for God as articulated in the postulates, then it becomes problematic to argue from this need to a universal moral law. Third, it could be argued that belief in God is utterly impossible within Kant's critical system, since we are always redirected to empirical reality. God is beyond this reality and, consequently, without meaning. At best, we approach God apophatically. These are all familiar and even contemporary objections to Kant's use of the postulates, but objections that Lee is aware of and, as noted, addresses.

Again, one hopes that Lee's comprehensive and thorough study of Kant's moral philosophy will be translated into English sooner rather than later, so that this important and original work will be available to the widest possible audience. It is a very readable and absorbing book. I learned a great deal from working through it, and I thank the author for this thoughtful and thorough exposition. I highly recommend it.

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