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# Kantian Objectivism and Subject-Relative Well-Being

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### Abstract

When discussing well-being, subject-relative concerns are intuitively important ones. In this article, I argue that Immanuel Kant's theory of well-being can be satisfactorily subject-relative, despite his emphasis on objective moral well-being. Because the specifics of agents' situations affect agents' moral endowments, duties regarding moral well-being can be altered for subject-relative reasons. When it comes to thinking about the well-being of others, the important Kantian notion of respect for rational agents ensures that this will be decidedly subject-relative, too, and, what is more, that this will be aimed specifically at natural well-being (happiness).

### Résumé

Lorsque l'on parle de bien-être, les préoccupations relatives au sujet semblent intuitivement importantes. Je soutiens que la théorie du bien-être de Kant peut être considérée de manière satisfaisante comme étant relative au sujet, malgré l'accent qu'il met sur le bien-être moral objectif. Parce que les spécificités des situations des agents affectent leurs attributs moraux, les devoirs concernant le bien-être moral peuvent être modifiés pour des raisons liées au sujet. Lorsqu'il s'agit de penser au bien-être d'autrui, la notion kantienne de respect des agents rationnels garantit que celui-ci sera résolument subjectif et, qui plus est, qu'il visera spécifiquement le bien-être naturel (bonheur).

**Keywords:** well-being; happiness; Kantian ethics; indirect duty; moral endowments

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## 1. Introduction

When thinking about well-being, subject-relative concerns are intuitively important ones. L. W. Sumner captures this intuition well:

Welfare assessments concern what we may call the prudential value of a life, namely how well it is going *for the individual whose life it is*. This realization of prudential evaluation to the proprietor of the life in question is one of the deepest features of the language of welfare: however valuable something may be in itself, it can promote my well-being only if it is also good or beneficial *for me*. Since an account of the nature of welfare is descriptively adequate only if it is faithful to our ordinary concept, any serious contender must at least preserve the subject-relativity which is definitive of prudential evaluation. (Sumner, 1996, p. 20)

In more general ethical conversations, we are typically considering the *good in itself*; but, as Sumner points out, we tend to shift to consider a subjective *good-for* when thinking specifically about well-being.

If to think about well-being requires making certain subjectivist concessions, we might expect someone like Immanuel Kant to be uninterested in joining the contemporary conversation on the topic. The counsels of prudence, Kant says, are merely contingent, whereas the commands of morality are categorical (see, e.g., Kant, 1998, A800/B828, A806/B834; Kant, 2012, 4: 417–418; Kant, 2015, 5: 26, 5: 36) — and it is easy to infer from Kant's (or, at least, Kantians') lofty moralistic tone an implicit discouragement of subject-relative prudential concerns.

The clash between Kantian objectivism and an intuition like Sumner's is obvious. Indeed, denying the significance of the good 'in itself' for well-being seems almost intentionally anti-Kantian: it is intuitive in a discussion of well-being to disregard the good in itself in favour of the good-for, but Kant famously rejects the good-for in favour of the good in itself. At this point, we might anticipate some difficulty in fleshing out a satisfyingly subjective Kantian conception of what is good for agents — could Kant be unable to accommodate individuality in his theory of well-being?

In this article, I will argue that Kant's theory of well-being can accommodate subject-relativity in a couple of ways, despite his notorious objectivism. I will begin by considering Kant's remarks on happiness and the implications of these for a Kantian conception of well-being. Front and centre will be Kant's firm belief in the problematic indeterminacy of our ideas of happiness and his subsequent shift from a familiar discussion of *natural well-being* to one of *moral well-being*. Conventional assessments of Kantian ethics might have us expecting that Kant will be unconcerned with leaving room for personal matters in so shifting the conversation about well-being to this moral ground. However, I will argue first that Kant's notion of moral well-being is better able to accommodate agent-specific concerns than Kantians have hitherto recognized. Second, I will point out that, in spite of this moral shift in discussions of *one's own* well-being, Kant maintains the importance of the natural well-being of *others*, and I argue that the important Kantian notion of respect for rational agents ensures that this part of his theory of well-being will also be decidedly

subject-relative. I will conclude with some anticipatory remarks on how Kant's ideas might fruitfully figure in the contemporary conversation about well-being.

## 2. Kant on Happiness: Abandoning Natural Well-Being

Remarks on happiness, generally negative, appear early and often in Kant's body of work. However, the fact that Kant's remarks are mostly negative in character is not indicative of a shallow engagement with the issues involved, familiar caricatures of Kant as arch-rationalist to the contrary notwithstanding. Kant's model of happiness is far from a straw man.

In the first *Critique*, Kant describes happiness as "the satisfaction of all our inclinations" (Kant, 1998, A806/B834) and Kant develops this same basic definition across various later works. In the *Groundwork*, Kant lists "[p]ower, riches, honor, even health" as examples of inclinations we might want satisfied in our pursuit of happiness (Kant, 2012, 4: 393). Importantly, though, Kant concludes this list of familiar components of well-being with a non-specific inclination: "entire well-being and contentment with one's condition" (Kant, 2012, 4: 393, emphasis added). Kant leans into the last item on this list in both the second *Critique*, where he calls happiness "a rational being's consciousness of the agreeableness of life uninterruptedly accompanying his whole existence" (Kant, 2015, 5: 22, emphasis added) and *The Metaphysics of Morals*, where he calls happiness not only the "greatest" but the "whole desire in [an agent's] life," and characterizes this as "continuous" and "complete" (Kant, 2017, 6: 480).

Clearly, Kant is not working with the shallowest possible conception of happiness. The straw man we might have expected would perhaps have simply followed every fleeting whim, perpetually in the present and happy only insofar as he is immediately gratified. But this is not what Kant suggests. First, even the specific separate inclinations Kant lists in the *Groundwork* (power, riches, honour, health) do not speak to a conception of happiness as particularly *present* gratification — the freedom to indulge one's whims that comes with status, money, and an able body would be more obviously immediate. Second, and more significant, Kant does not call happiness the satisfaction of any one or the other of these specific separate inclinations, but rather "the unification of all ends that are given to us by our inclinations into [a] single end" (Kant, 1998, A800/B828). For Kant, happiness involves inclinations rationally sorted into an ideal system of greatest extent, intensity, and duration (Kant, 1998, A806/B834) — it is something neither immediate nor simple.

And yet, Kant chooses to disregard concerns for happiness even so rationally construed. As early on in his body of work as he discusses happiness, we find Kant offering a moral psychological remark for thinking that happiness should not receive any special place in our conception of well-being: "[h]appiness alone is far from the complete good for our reason. Reason does not approve of it (however much inclination may wish for it) where it is not united with the worthiness to be happy, i.e., with morally good conduct" (Kant, 1998, A813/B841). Importantly, he goes on to admit that "morality alone ... is also far from being the complete good" (Kant, 1998, A813/B841). These reflections lead Kant to posit a "highest good" of "virtue and happiness together" (Kant, 2015, 5: 110). This notion of the highest

good is, properly speaking, Kant's full conception of well-being: well-being, according to Kant, has both a *natural, empirical* component (happiness) and a *moral* component (morally good conduct, worthiness to be happy). However, he predictably emphasizes the fact that, within this broader conception, the moral aspect remains "supreme" (Kant, 2015, 5: 110). This is what I refer to as the 'moral shift' in Kant's thinking about well-being.

Before considering this moral shift in more detail, the following terminological clarifications will help bring into relief what we have covered so far. According to Kant, a typical, subject-relative, prudential account of well-being is but one component of a two-part highest good; the second part is a moral one, and this satisfies our moral psychological need to feel worthy of happiness in order to be doing well. Within the Kantian framework, then (and thus the remainder of this article), 'well-being' is a general term referring to Kant's 'highest good' version of that concept; 'natural' and 'moral well-being' refer to those two parts of general well-being; and 'happiness' is synonymous with natural well-being. One more distinction needs to be made: I said that Kant betrays the moral shift in his thinking about well-being when he calls moral well-being the 'supreme' aspect of the highest good — this is because, in so exalting moral well-being, he is, I think, distinguishing between our *concern for* our well-being and our *duties regarding* our well-being, and asserting that the latter overrides the former. This last distinction will be made clearer as we continue, but for now we have what we need to understand the moral shift in Kant's thinking about well-being.

Against happiness-focused conceptions of well-being, Kant objects that even rationally informed, systematic conceptions of natural well-being remain problematically *indeterminate*. The first aspect of Kant's indeterminacy objection to the helpfulness of happiness for thinking about well-being has to do with the inter- and intra-personal inconsistency of ideas of happiness. Disagreement in matters of happiness is always possible, and thus happiness is an unhelpful target for practical reason. Kant explains this objection in the second *Critique*:

[A]lthough the concept of happiness *everywhere* underlies the practical relation of *objects* to the faculty of desire, it is still only the general name for subjective determining grounds, and it determines nothing specific about it although this is all that matters in this practical problem. (Kant, 2015, 5: 25; see also Kant, 2012, 4: 399)

Happiness is essentially subject-relative: though all agents want it, each agent wants something different in wanting it. Indeed, even a single agent may want different things at different times, though all the while wanting only happiness (Kant, 2012, 4: 418). Admittedly, we probably see no problem making such an indeterminate concept an important aspect of our well-being — after all, we already saw Sumner *require* a certain subjectivity in any plausible account of well-being. We might, then, simply call this a non-problem for those unsympathetic to Kant's own highly objectivist leanings.

However, Kant does think that he has a more philosophically rigorous reason for calling our conceptions of happiness problematic. In the *Groundwork*, the

indeterminacy objection is described as an instance of the general Kantian problem of *empirical uncertainty*: in calculating the course of action that would bring us the greatest happiness, we “only act according to empirical counsels ... which experience teaches *on average* advance well-being most” (Kant, 2012, 4: 418). The probabilistic language reminds us of Kant’s Hume-inspired scepticism about empirical principles: the ever-elusive nature of empirical ‘certainty’ is what leads Kant to call problems of happiness “completely insoluble” (Kant, 2012, 4: 418). In this light, the objection may seem less like a personal hang-up of Kant’s: if the indeterminacy objection is a more general point about the limits of knowledge gleaned from experience, we might be more willing to grant it some credibility as a reason to be sceptical of the helpfulness of conceptions of happiness for thinking about well-being.

Admittedly, though, even this more principled line of argument will likely persuade only those already sympathetic to Kantian rationalism; the rest of us are unlikely to abandon concern for our natural well-being just because Kant has pointed out that this is empirically based. This is why I think that conceiving of Kant’s moral shift as involving a distinction he makes between *concerns for* and *duties regarding* well-being is so helpful. Recall that Kant thinks the counsels of prudence are merely contingent, whereas the laws of morality are categorical. The Kantian point that moral principles command more strictly than empirical ones is familiar, and we can understand in light of this what Kant is doing in making the moral shift in his thinking about well-being. If there are any *duties* regarding well-being, then these will override any mere *concerns for* well-being; and, according to Kant, there *are* duties regarding specifically moral well-being; therefore, moral well-being overrides natural well-being. Understood against the backdrop of Kantian rationalism, this assertion of the supremacy of moral well-being becomes an instance of the ‘command trumps counsel’ remark we saw in the introduction to this article. Even if we remain unconvinced of the need for this moral shift, we can at least understand it — it is, after all, very typically Kantian. Moving forward, then, we should bear in mind that, when Kant makes prescriptions about first-personal well-being, he is referring to *duties regarding* this.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps surprisingly, in light of this moral shift, Kant thinks that natural well-being figures in first-personal moral well-being in a novel way: Kant thinks that we have an *indirect* duty to secure our happiness for the sake of our moral well-being. This notion first shows up in the *Groundwork*: “[t]o secure one’s own happiness is one’s duty (at least indirectly); for lack of contentment with one’s condition ... could easily become a great *temptation to transgress one’s duties*” (Kant, 2012, 4: 399). In the second *Critique* Kant clarifies a positive aspect of this argument: we have an indirect duty to secure our happiness “because happiness (to which belong skill, health, wealth) contains means for the fulfillment of one’s duty” (Kant, 2015, 5: 93). A helpful explanation of the indirectness of the duty to secure one’s own

<sup>1</sup> Indeed, this probably goes for Kant’s treatment of third-personal well-being, too, if less exclusively. As we will see, notions of mere concerns do figure more prominently in Kant’s theory of third-personal well-being; admittedly, though, these figure within an account of a first person’s duties regarding a third person’s well-being. At any rate, it makes sense not to include Kant’s theory of third-personal well-being here if only to better set up what is to immediately follow in this article.

happiness comes in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, where Kant explains that, in the cases he has in mind, “the end is not the subject’s happiness but his morality” (Kant, 2017, 6: 388). Morality is the ultimate aim of appropriate Kantian concerns for happiness, and thus remains the supreme element of well-being.

To summarize: from Kant’s duties-first perspective on well-being, natural well-being matters only indirectly, only insofar as it influences our moral well-being. At this point, the easy move for commentators is to bite the familiar Kantian bullet of harsh objectivism. Jens Timmermann, for instance, remarks that, though an indirect duty to secure one’s own happiness completes “a strong and articulate conception of what makes a distinctly *human*, rational life go best ... , a Kantian theory of the ‘good human life’ ... would be highly objectivist” (Timmerman, 2006a, p. 528, emphasis added). Timmermann continues: “[t]here is nothing individual or personal about this ideal,” as it ultimately has everything to do with agents’ rational moral activity (Timmerman, 2006a, p. 528). The language of ‘conception’ and ‘theory’ is helpful: though Kant’s full *conception* of well-being has a significant subject-relative component, his *theory* of how we ought to pursue our own well-being does not lean into this prudential dimension. So much for Sumner’s intuition about subject-relative well-being!

It is perhaps not obvious, though, that all agents will require *exactly the same* things to be able to function well morally, to have moral well-being. Could this be an in-road for individuality in moral well-being? In the next section, I will consider this possibility.

### 3. Indirect Duties and Individuality: Subject-Relativity in Moral Well-Being

Alice Pinheiro Walla (2015) has argued that there are cases in which the indirect duty to secure one’s own happiness becomes *direct*. In arguing for this possibility, I think that Pinheiro Walla is unpacking an extreme case of the intuition that different agents might need different things to be morally well.

Before addressing Pinheiro Walla’s argument, let me say a little more about Kantian indirect duties. In quoting Kant’s explanation of the indirectness of the duty to secure one’s happiness above, I suggested the most obvious interpretation of indirect duties: these are indirect because they ultimately aim at the end of moral well-being (Kant, 2017, 6: 388; Timmermann, 2006b). Examples of other indirect duties include those to conscience, pleasure at moral behaviour, sympathy, sensitivities to animals and nature, and other related ‘moral endowments.’<sup>2</sup> Pinheiro Walla leans into the language of moral endowments in noting that indirect duties “involve some natural feature of human beings that we can neither create nor manipulate at will, although these natural features may allow *cultivation*” (Pinheiro Walla, 2015, p. 35). Kant himself confirms that “[t]o have these predispositions cannot be

<sup>2</sup> Kant discusses conscience and pleasure at moral behaviour (“moral feeling”) at *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 2017) 6: 399–403; this is the most explicit passage on moral endowments, and though sympathy and sensitivity to animals and nature do not appear here (these are to be found at *The Metaphysics of Morals* (Kant, 2017) 6: 456–457 and 6: 442–444 respectively), they are described very similarly, and are often treated as further moral endowments than those listed at 6: 399–403. Pinheiro Walla lists these all together (Pinheiro Walla, 2015, p. 35), so I follow her in doing that here.

considered a duty” in any straightforward sense because, when they are had, they are had *naturally* (Kant, 2017, 6: 399). To be clear, Pinheiro Walla agrees that these moral predispositions support moral well-being; she disagrees, however, that this is the fact in virtue of which they get their status as indirect duties.<sup>3</sup>

Pinheiro Walla’s specific interpretation of the indirectness of indirect duties will explain why she emphasizes the importance of the moral endowments for indirect duties. On Pinheiro Walla’s telling, indirect duties are duties to do things that cannot be done *from duty* in the special Kantian sense (Pinheiro Walla, 2015, p. 34). In the *Groundwork*, Kant distinguishes between an action’s being done *in conformity with duty* and its being done *from duty* (Kant, 2012, 4: 398). Kant’s most famous illustration of this distinction is the case of the naturally sympathetic “friend of humanity” who finds “an inner gratification” in beneficence, and acts beneficently so as to feel that moral pleasure (Kant, 2012, 4: 398, 4: 460–461). Though beneficent actions so motivated *conform with duty*, they are not done *from duty*; moral endowments — such as sympathy — are inclinations “on the same footing as other inclinations” (Kant, 2012, 4: 398), and any action done from inclination is not done from duty. This is why Pinheiro Walla flags the importance of the moral endowments for understanding indirect duties: indirect duties are indirect precisely because they involve moral endowments, which, as inclinations, provide motivation over and above the motive of duty.

In light of this, the remark in the *Groundwork* that to secure one’s own happiness is *at least* an indirect duty (Kant, 2012, 4: 399) is important to Pinheiro Walla. The duty to secure our happiness *can be* indirect, and most of the time it is, because Kant thinks that we are naturally inclined to secure our happiness (Kant, 2012, 4: 399) — i.e., most of the time we secure our happiness *in conformity with*, but not *from*, duty. We can, however, imagine cases in which we do *not* want to secure our happiness, especially where this is construed as radically long-term the way we saw Kant characterize happiness above. Pinheiro Walla focuses on Kant’s example of the gout sufferer, who can reasonably prefer short-term enjoyment even if it makes long-term well-being — or even longer *life* — less likely. In such a case, the gout sufferer’s duty to secure his own (long-term) happiness becomes direct: he has to do it for the sake of his moral well-being, only now, in the absence of a supporting inclination, it must be done *just* from duty. Pinheiro Walla’s analysis of the gout sufferer’s case is similar to the way Kant treats cases of suicide. Obviously, the argument is similar — sometimes we need to care for ourselves and prolong our lives *just* from duty, whether we want to or not. But there is another, more subtle similarity: Kant analyzes suicide as the “annihilat[ion of] the subject of morality in one’s own person,” a “root[ing] out [of] the existence of morality itself from the world, as far as one can” (Kant, 2017, 6: 422–423); likewise, if we completely disregard our natural well-being, we might lose *the very possibility of moral well-being*. So, the indirect duty to secure our own happiness is particularly important for our moral well-being because it is in a certain

<sup>3</sup> Though Pinheiro Walla explicitly frames her interpretation of indirect duties in contrast to Timmermann’s (Pinheiro Walla, 2015, p. 35; Timmermann, 2006b), I do not think that someone more sympathetic to Timmermann’s interpretation would be unable to accept what I go on to argue in this article. More on this toward the end of this section.

sense the foundation of *any* moral well-being — and, importantly, there are situations in which this duty can come to the forefront as a direct duty.

Importantly, Pinheiro Walla thinks that this is the *only* case in which duties regarding well-being are so altered: “the indirect duty to secure one’s happiness differs from the other indirect duties” in that it sometimes becomes direct (Pinheiro Walla, 2015, p. 37). This is perhaps surprising — after all, the other indirect duties are supposed to be significant for moral well-being, too, and Pinheiro Walla acknowledges this. Pinheiro Walla may well be right that the other indirect duties never become direct the way the duty to secure one’s own happiness does; however, this does not mean that the other indirect duties in service of moral well-being are never reprioritized for agent-specific reasons.

Kant himself offers a remark to suggest this idea in a discussion about sensitivity to animals. Kant imagines that the butcher’s profession “dulls his shared feeling of [animals’] suffering and so weakens and gradually *uproots* a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality” (Kant, 2017, 6: 443). Earlier, we saw Kant say that agents should not be blamed for not possessing moral endowments: these are natural, and, as Pinheiro Walla emphasized, we cannot create these in ourselves at will. However, Kant clearly thinks that we *can* be held responsible for *losing* moral endowments: these can be uprooted through desensitization and neglect. Surely, we should expect agent-specific reprioritizations of indirect duties in the face of such threats to moral endowments and, in turn, moral well-being — imagine that Kant’s paradigm butcher becomes so desensitized to the sufferings of animals that he begins to lose his sensitivity to the sufferings of persons! It seems appropriate to say that the butcher’s occupation makes it so that the duty to develop some sensitivity to animals is more important to him than it is to others. More generally, the butcher may need to be more intentional than most about finding ways to exercise his sympathetic moral endowments — given the specifics of his situation, his personal moral well-being requires this.

Admittedly, the case of the butcher does not seem *as* problematic as the case of the gout sufferer or the suicide: only a *part* of the butcher’s moral well-being is uprooted, not the very possibility of his moral well-being. Moreover, any time the butcher ‘practices’ being motivated by his sympathetic feelings, his motivation is indirect in Pinheiro Walla’s sense — i.e., it is not being done *from* duty in that special Kantian sense, but rather *in conformity with* duty *from* the motivation of his feeling of sympathy, however insignificant his endowment of this may be. However, I think that this is only a problem if we want to stick to Pinheiro Walla’s description of agent-specific alterations to duties regarding well-being as occurrences of special direct duties. If we simply want to acknowledge that the point of indirect duties is to draw attention to the importance of the moral endowments for moral well-being, it will be enough to note that the specifics of agents’ situations can alter the priority of these indirect duties insofar as they can significantly affect agents’ moral endowments. The butcher’s duty to cultivate his sensitivity to animals does not need to become direct in Pinheiro Walla’s sense in order for it to figure more prominently in our conception of what is important for the butcher’s moral well-being.

So, even though Kant’s theory of first-personal well-being makes duties primary, it is not for this reason ‘highly objectivist’ — at least, not on a fine-grained analysis.

Duties regarding our moral well-being, though they always remain supreme, are sensitive to agents' specific situations and the effects these have on agents' moral endowments; thus, moral well-being will require different things of different agents in the fulfilment of their indirect duties. Though this may not be respecting agents' personal *concerns* for their well-being — their personal ideas of happiness — it is nevertheless respecting their individuality, and this is certainly a more subject-relative aspect of Kantian well-being than we might have expected to find.

There is, however, an aspect of Kantian well-being that can (indeed, *must*) respect agents' personal ideas of happiness, too — namely, its *other-regarding* aspect. I will consider this in the next section.

#### 4. Beneficence, Respect, and the Well-Being of Others

In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant famously divides duties of virtue into self-regarding and other-regarding duties — more specifically, these are duties aimed at “*one's own perfection*” and at “*the happiness of others*” (Kant, 2017, 6: 385). Within the first branch of this division, there are duties regarding both one's natural and one's moral perfection (Kant, 2017, 6: 386–387, 6: 444–447). Though natural and moral perfection are not the same things as natural and moral well-being,<sup>4</sup> these duties — unsurprisingly, given what we have seen thus far — remain ultimately aimed at moral well-being. But it is not so with duties aimed at the happiness of others. As the return of the language of happiness should signal, other-regarding duties of virtue will be concerned with exactly what Kant has been so keen to reject thus far: personal conceptions of *natural* well-being, in all their previously problematic indeterminacy.

To understand why Kant does not think that our duties regarding the well-being of others must be as exclusively morally focused as those regarding our own well-being, we will need to look to that all-important Kantian ethical notion of *respect*. Famously, Kantian respect is due to all agents simply by virtue of their humanity, their rational capacity to autonomously set ends for themselves (see, e.g., Kant, 2012, 4: 428–429; Kant, 2017, 6: 392). “The principle ... of the **respect** [agents] owe one another,” Kant says, tells agents “to keep themselves *at a distance* from one another” (Kant, 2017, 6: 449). To express it colloquially, we are to *give others space*; more precisely, respect requires that we allow all agents to exercise their capacities to set and pursue their own ends. Because working on moral well-being just means learning to set *good* ends and to choose *good* means to these, respect ensures that the project of moral well-being is *each agent's own*, not to be interfered with. Kant is explicit about this: “[t]he happiness of others includes their *moral well-being* ..., and we have a duty, but only a negative one, to promote this” (Kant, 2017, 6: 394<sup>5</sup>). “[T]he [*moral*] *perfection* of another human being,” Kant says, “consists just in this: that

<sup>4</sup> Moral perfection may, actually, be the same thing as moral well-being — or, at least, the ideal perfection of it. The duties regarding natural perfection have to do with such things as developing talents “as means to all sorts of possible ends” (Kant, 2017, 6: 444); as we have already seen, though, even prudential ends ought to remain in service of moral ones.

<sup>5</sup> Kant conceives of this negative duty as involving not tempting others and not reproaching them (this is the job of one's own conscience, a moral endowment).

he *himself* is able to set his end in accordance with his own concepts of duty” (Kant, 2017, 6: 386); thus, Kant does not just say that we need not involve ourselves *exclusively* in the moral aspect of the well-being of others — he forbids that we involve ourselves in this at all.<sup>6</sup>

The moral shift having been ruled out for reasons of respect, Kantian beneficence can only work toward the *natural* well-being of others: to be beneficent is to make “the *happiness* ... of others ... one’s end” (Kant, 2017, 6: 452, emphasis added). If we were not relieved enough to see this all-too-human concept make a return to Kant’s theory of well-being, Kant goes on to make an anti-paternalistic clarification: “I cannot do good to anyone in accordance with *my* concepts of happiness ..., thinking to benefit him by forcing a gift upon him; rather, I can benefit him only in accordance with *his* concepts of happiness” (Kant, 2017, 6: 454). This clarification is important to Kant because it ensures that beneficence will not clash with the negative duty of respect discussed above (paternalism in beneficence involves subtly replacing others’ ends with one’s own, and thus implies disrespect); but it should be important to us because it ensures that, when thinking about the well-being of others, we are thinking about something essentially *up to them*. To summarize: when thinking about the well-being of others within a Kantian framework, respect tells us both that we are forbidden from interfering with their moral well-being and that, when we would attempt to further their natural well-being, we must do so according to their own conceptions of happiness. It would seem, then, that Kant’s theory of the well-being of others is prudentially informed and decidedly subject-relative — perhaps Kant can do justice to Sumner’s intuition after all!

We might be surprised, though, at this apparently un-Kantian result. We might wonder, for instance, why Kant’s indeterminacy objections do not crop up again in this discussion of respecting conceptions of happiness. We have seen that respect is due to all agents on account of their being rational end-setters — and the emphasis here has traditionally been on *rational*. Recall, though, that Kant thinks that conceptions of happiness are unhelpful in thinking about well-being because these are based only on inductive empirical reasoning, which is always merely probabilistic. Why must we respect agents’ conceptions of happiness if we know that these are impurely rational? Clearly, Kant thinks that we must.

I do not think that Kant makes a mistake in requiring us to respect others’ imperfectly rational conceptions of happiness — indeed, if imperfections of rationality warranted withdrawal of respect, then Kantian respect would never get off the ground.

As Michael Cholbi (2020) has recently observed, the imperfection of human rationality is borne out by much recent empirical research. In light of this, he considers conceptions of Kantian respect that could withstand these “naturalistic headwinds” (Cholbi, p. 182). Cholbi points out that we cannot get equal respect for all persons if we only grant respect to agents insofar as they are successful in exercising their rational agency. If, for example, one agent tends to have a very accurate conception

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<sup>6</sup> Admittedly, in the passage quoted in this sentence, Kant is not *forbidding* concern for the moral well-being of others, but simply noting that a requirement of this would be self-contradictory. However, in light of the general principle of respect for humanity and the explicitly negative duties regarding others’ moral well-being, I think it is fair to ascribe this more specific line to Kant, too.

of what would make her happy, but another agent tends to go wrong about this, we would, on a success model, be warranted in respecting the mistaken agent less — but this is unacceptable to the Kantian. Similarly, Cholbi doubts that we could define a satisfactory minimum capacity for rational agency. If set too high, such a criterion might force us not to respect certain cognitively impaired persons' ideas about what would make them happy, an intuitively unsatisfying result.<sup>7</sup> Cholbi's preferred model of Kantian respect is what he calls *aspirational constitutivism*: persons are owed respect because they aspire to govern their lives according to reasons they set for themselves. This model satisfactorily downplays the importance of *reason* in its emphasis on personal *reasons*. Indeed, even the agent who explicitly rejects rationally ordered conceptions of happiness in favour of spontaneity and immediate gratification is owed respect on this model: in "an attempt to put reason in what the denier views as its proper place," such an agent is nevertheless setting an end and choosing a means, and thus acting on a reason (Cholbi, 2020, p. 196). On this model, then, even an awareness of the irrationality of agents' conceptions of happiness does not warrant a withdrawal of respect: we are imperfectly rational in all sorts of ways, but this does not change the fact that we aspire to act according to reasons (even if not *reason*), and thus we — and our conceptions of happiness — remain worthy of respect.

So, even though Kantian duties regarding the well-being of others are tempered by respect, this does not block their being concerned with others' imperfectly rational conceptions of happiness — indeed, respect demands that they *must* be concerned with this empirical element of others' well-being. Thus, Kant's theory of the well-being of others, too, is far from being 'highly objectivist': in respecting the indeterminacy of others' conceptions of happiness, it respects the subject-relativity of prudential good.

## 5. Conclusion

Clearly, Kant is not as insensitive to the significance of personal subtleties in conceptions of well-being as we worried he might be; thus, we need not shy away from including Kant in the discussion about well-being. We have seen that, even though he emphasizes the moral aspect of first-personal well-being, Kant has the conceptual resources needed to make this satisfyingly subject-relative: because moral well-being is multi-faceted, and because agents' specific situations impact their moral endowments in various ways, each agent is likely to have her own set of priorities — and thus her own set of indirect duties — regarding her moral well-being. We have also seen that the famous Kantian ethical notion of respect prohibits us from making

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<sup>7</sup> Consider, for example, a relative with dementia. Jennifer Hawkins (2014) has considered how we ought to treat a demented person whose current desires do not match the wishes she had expressed (more fully rationally) in an advance directive, expressing concern that respect for autonomy and beneficence will pull in different directions in such a case. On Cholbi's own model of Kantian respect, this is not the case. Admittedly, it is not clear that Kant himself thinks that respect should extend to such persons: in the passage I quoted earlier about paternalism in beneficence, Kant remarks that we need not worry about this in thinking about the well-being of "young children and the insane" (Kant, 2017, 6: 454 — I replaced this qualification with ellipses when I quoted it earlier). This remark is in one of Kant's 'casuistical questions' sections, though, and so should not be taken to be Kant's considered position. Indeed, in light of what Cholbi will go on to clarify, Kant's considered position should be decidedly *not* this.

this same moral shift in our considerations of the well-being of others, and furthermore ensures that beneficence will be happiness-directed and non-paternalistic. We need not abandon our intuitions about the importance of subject-relativity in order to think about well-being within the Kantian framework; rather, we need to abandon our inaccurate preconceptions of Kant as insensitively rationalistic.

Moving forward, then, perhaps some Kantian ideas about well-being could figure fruitfully in the contemporary conversation. As I have already hinted (in footnote 7, where I flag Jennifer Hawkins' case of the dementia patient), it is no longer clear that Kantian respect and beneficence need to butt heads; on the contrary, Kantian respect requires that beneficence cater to the recipient's conception of happiness, imperfectly rational as this may be. The implications of this for thinking about the well-being of the cognitively impaired or deteriorating, and perhaps even of children, could be significant. More generally, but not less significantly, we might take a cue from Kant in thinking about first-personal and third-personal well-being differently. Most theorists of well-being take for granted that we must think about our own well-being and the well-being of others in the same way, but Kant does not take this line. For Kant, general well-being (what Kant calls the highest good) is best served when agents involve themselves with improving the moral aspect of their own well-being and the natural aspect of others' well-being — both aspects of the highest good are still brought about, but through divided efforts. It is harder to foresee the specific impact this novel way of thinking about well-being might have on existing theories, but the idea seems worth exploring; at any rate, these remarks are only preliminary.

Apart from the implications for the contemporary discussion, this article has, I hope, helpfully humanized Kant: the Kantian moral life is not one-size-fits-all, nor is it so strictly rationalistic as to withdraw respect from our all-too-human conceptions of personal happiness. Could-be Kantians will — and committed Kantians *should* — appreciate this result.

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