

# Virtue Is Its Own Reward: Kant on Moral Contentment

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**ENG Abstract:** In the last few decades, Kantian scholars have increasingly drawn attention to the fact that, for Kant, virtuous persons do not do their duty with disgust, but rather that they experience a special moral contentment (*moralische Zufriedenheit*). However, Kant does not seem to have been very interested in this moral contentment, so what we find are rather allusions, often difficult to reconcile, than an elaborated account of moral contentment. This article offers a systematic reconstruction of the concept. Through close analysis of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* and related writings, I show that moral contentment is neither a pathological nor properly moral feeling (the feeling of respect), nor can it be reduced to the absence of reproaches of moral conscience. Rather, it is a uniquely moral kind of "negative satisfaction": an indirect enjoyment of inner freedom, made possible through independence from inclination, and it appears as directly connected to Kant's specific conception of virtue understood as one's moral strength in fulfilling one's duty.

**Keywords:** Kant; moral contentment; feeling; respect; moral conscience; virtue; freedom.

**Summary:** Introduction. 1. What moral contentment is not: a feeling or the mere absence of pangs of conscience. 2. The genuine nature of moral contentment. 3. Conclusion. 4. References.

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## Introduction

One of the lines of argument employed by those who in the last few decades have tried to show that the image of Kant as a cold philosopher opposed to feelings is erroneous is to highlight that according to Kant virtuous persons do not do their duty with disgust, but rather that they experience a special moral contentment (*moralische Zufriedenheit*), "a state of contentment and peace of soul in which virtue is its own reward" (MS, AA 6: 377).<sup>1</sup> As already Paton pointed out, for Kant "it is a mark of genuine goodness if we do our duty with a cheerful heart" (Paton 1967: 50). However, Kant does not seem to have been very interested in this moral contentment experienced by virtuous persons, so what we find are rather allusions, often difficult to reconcile, than an elaborated account of moral contentment. Kant, for example, in some places speaks simply of the absence of what seem to be the pangs of the moral conscience (KpV, AA 5: 116), in other places of a negative contentment, not related to moral conscience (KpV, AA 5: 118), and in yet other places of a positive feeling of pleasure strictly speaking (KpV, AA 5: 38; MS, AA 6: 391). It is also unclear who experiences this moral contentment: Kant at times appears to suggest that only a virtuous person, after practicing virtue for a certain time, can experience moral contentment; yet his own explanation of moral contentment sometimes seems to imply that moral contentment is necessarily related to all actions done out of respect for the moral law. Clearly, moral contentment is a problematic concept that calls for further clarification. And although in recent years there have been some publications that not only mention its existence but deal with it more extensively, they generally focus on some specific aspect of Kant's ethics related to moral contentment and thus leave unaddressed some important questions about the nature of moral contentment.<sup>2</sup> This article is intended

<sup>1</sup> All references to Kant's works cite the volume and page (and sometimes line) numbers of the Academy edition (Kant 1900ff). I quote from the Cambridge Edition of Kant's works and use the following habitual abbreviations: Br = Letters, GMS = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, KpV = *Critique of Practical Reason*, KU = *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, MpVT = *On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*, MS = *Metaphysics of Morals*, RGV = *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, TP = *On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice*, VT = *On a recently prominent tone of superiority in philosophy*.

<sup>2</sup> See Elizondo (2016), who focuses on the relationship between moral contentment and happiness (or well-being), and Walschots (2017), who offers a broader discussion of moral contentment (and I draw on his approach in this article) – however, Walschots'

to complement (and at times counterbalance) these publications: I want to explore the nature of this moral contentment and clarify who can experience it, resolving the aforementioned tensions in the Kantian corpus.<sup>3</sup>

## 1. What moral contentment *is not*: a feeling or the mere absence of pangs of conscience

Kant devotes most space to moral contentment in the explanation of the antinomy of practical reason in the second *Critique*, when he asks how it is possible that both the Stoics and the Epicureans were able to identify happiness and morality. The explanation for the identification is that morality does indeed provide pleasure. However, Kant immediately clarifies that it is a special type of pleasure – it is “a negative satisfaction (*Wohlgefallen*) with one’s existence, in which one is conscious of needing nothing” (KpV, AA 5: 117). Now, what exactly does it mean that moral contentment is a “merely negative” pleasure? We will see later how this reconciles with other places mentioned in the introduction, where Kant seems to imply otherwise, but in this place Kant clearly means to say that moral contentment is not a feeling properly speaking.<sup>4</sup> Kant distinguishes – if we do not count the feeling of the beautiful, the merely contemplative, disinterested feeling, whose true nature he did not yet know at the time of writing the second *Critique* –<sup>5</sup> between two basic types of feeling: pathological feeling and moral feeling. As he explains in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, “pleasure that must precede one’s observance of the law in order for one to act in conformity with the law is pathological (*pathologisch*) and one’s conduct follows the order of nature; but pleasure that must be preceded by the law in order to be felt is in the moral order” (MS, AA 6: 378; see also VT, AA 8: 395 FN). Now, moral contentment clearly cannot be a pathological feeling, i.e. passive, sensibly dependent (from *pathos* in Greek). As Kant explains, pathological feeling – a “delight” (*Vergnügen*), as he calls it in the *Critique of Judgment* (see KU, §5) – is produced by an object that agrees “with the subjective conditions of life” (KpV, AA 5: 9 FN) and is therefore capable of satisfying a need (*Bedürfnis*) of ours (see KU, AA 5: 210.20f and GMS, AA 4: 413 FN). That is, we experience delight when an object satisfies some need we have.<sup>6</sup> It should be therefore clear that moral contentment has to be of a different kind; if it is really *moral*, it cannot be due to a prior need that man seeks to satisfy. As Kant insists, we act morally precisely when we “pay attention not to the interest in the object, but merely to that in the action itself and in its principle in reason (the law)” (GMS, AA 4: 413 FN), that is, we act morally when we act from duty. And indeed, Kant explicitly says in the description of moral contentment that “it does not depend upon the positive concurrence of a [pathological] feeling” (KpV, AA 5: 118).<sup>7</sup>

Regarding the other type of feeling, moral feeling, the situation is more complex. Kant is not very clear on the question whether there is only one kind of moral feeling (the feeling of respect) or whether there are several – his above distinction between pathological feeling and moral feeling could be compatible with both readings. I argue elsewhere (Kolomý 2023) that there is only one properly moral feeling, the feeling of respect; here I want to show why moral contentment cannot be identified with it, as some interpreters claim (see, e.g., Beck 1960: 224, 229f or Himmelmann 2011: 112ff). It is true that there are some reasons to identify moral contentment with the feeling of respect. To begin with textual evidence, Kant – in the *Analytic* of the second *Critique*, in the first passage of the whole book in which he mentions the existence of moral contentment – actually seems to identify it with the feeling of respect when he says that it “belongs to duty” “to establish and to cultivate this feeling, which alone deserves to be called moral feeling strictly speaking” (KpV, AA 5: 38).<sup>8</sup> Kant explicitly says that moral contentment is a feeling and furthermore says that it is the only feeling that can be called moral: it should therefore be the feeling of respect, the moral feeling *par excellence*.

Additionally, the description of moral contentment in the explanation of the antinomy of practical reason in a way resembles the description of the feeling of respect in the third chapter of the *Critique*. Kant explains that moral contentment has its origin in the enjoyment of freedom, that comes from acting by one’s own reason and not from inclinations. According to Kant, human beings have inclinations, that is, pathological desires that

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article does not offer an exhaustive account either, as it focuses primarily on Garve’s critique of Kant, related to moral contentment. See also Himmelmann (2011), who deals with moral contentment in her book on happiness in Kant. The problem with Himmelmann’s account, however, is that she conflates moral contentment with the feeling of respect (see also below).

<sup>3</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Multilateral Kant Colloquium “The Space of Feelings: Kant and His Legacy”, held in Parma and Ferrara in 2023. One line of argument from that presentation – concerning the relationship between moral contentment and happiness – has since been developed to such an extent that I now treat it in a separate paper. Accordingly, in Kolomý (forthcoming), I examine the relationship between moral contentment and happiness; in this article, by contrast, I focus on the nature of moral contentment and the textual tensions within the Kantian corpus. I would like to thank two anonymous reviewers for this journal for their comments, which have helped to improve the article.

<sup>4</sup> Let us recall that for Kant, feeling (*Gefühl*) is – together with the faculty of cognition (*Erkenntnisvermögen*) and the faculty of desire (*Begehrungsvermögen*) – one of the three basic faculties to which all capacities of the soul can be reduced (KU, AA 5: 177). Logically, when we speak of feelings in general, we are referring to the acts of this faculty. What is characteristic of the feelings of pleasure (*Lust*) and displeasure (*Unlust*) is that they “involve what is merely subjective in the relation of our representation and contain no relation at all to an object for possible knowledge of it” (MS, AA 6: 212, cf. also KU, AA 5: 206). That is, feeling expresses the subjective aspect of representations in relation to our state: in relation to some representations, we experience pleasure or displeasure.

<sup>5</sup> We know this from a letter to Reinhold of December 1787 (Br, AA 10: 514.26–35).

<sup>6</sup> It is thus also understandable that Kant, in the *Anthropology*, says that delight must always be preceded by pain: “*pain must always precede every enjoyment*; pain is always first” (Anth, AA 7: 231.25f).

<sup>7</sup> This is also the reason why moral contentment cannot, strictly speaking, pertain to *happiness*, which Kant defines as the sum of the satisfaction of inclinations (GMS, AA 4: 399; 405). For a detailed analysis of the relationship between moral contentment and happiness, see Kolomý, forthcoming.

<sup>8</sup> The German original says: “[...] dieses Gefühl, welches eigentlich allein das moralische Gefühl genannt zu werden verdient”.

correspond to a prior need,<sup>9</sup> but the problem is that these can never be completely satisfied: the inclinations, Kant says, “change, grow with the indulgence one allows them, and always leave behind a still greater void than one had thought to fill” (KpV, AA 5: 118). In other words, it is impossible to satisfy them completely: when one tries to satisfy one, another arises, or the first grows even more. That is why –Kant explains– inclinations “are always burdensome (*lästig*) to a rational being” (KpV, AA 5: 118.08ff). Therefore, when one acts through his higher faculty of desire, from duty and not from inclinations, he experiences a special kind of pleasure – Kant uses the word *Zufriedenheit*, *contentment* (sometimes also *Selbstzufriedenheit*, *self-contentment*). However, it is a merely negative pleasure because one does not satisfy any previous need that had to be fulfilled; one is simply glad to avoid the need-satisfaction mechanism of the lower faculty of desire and to act prompted by one’s own reason – that is, to act through the higher faculty of desire; as Kant says, one “is conscious of needing nothing” (KpV, AA 5: 118)<sup>10</sup> and experiences it as an enjoyment of freedom: “freedom itself becomes in this way (namely indirectly) capable of an enjoyment” (KpV, AA 5: 118).

Now, based on these affirmations, it is indeed not surprising that some interpreters identify moral contentment with the feeling of respect. It is precisely in the chapter on respect that Kant speaks about self-approbation (*Selbstbilligung*) as attributable to a person who “cognized himself as determined solely by the law and without any interest, and now becomes conscious of an altogether different interest subjectively produced by the law, which is purely practical and free” (KpV, AA 5: 81; my emphasis). It indeed seems that this positive aspect of the feeling of respect –Kant contrasts this self-approbation with the displeasure (*Unlust*) contained within the feeling of respect– is grounded precisely in the enjoyment of one’s own freedom, which Kant later discusses more explicitly when addressing moral contentment. Moreover, when Kant extols the moral incentive at the end of the incentive-chapter, he explicitly mentions Epicurus, whom he usually associates with moral contentment.<sup>11</sup> Kant literally says that “so many charms and attractions of life may well be connected with this incentive that even for their sake alone the most prudent choice of a reasonable Epicurean, reflecting on the greatest well-being of life, would declare itself for moral conduct” (KpV, AA 5: 88).

However, despite these parallels and passages that seem to identify the two phenomena, I argue that moral contentment cannot be identified with the feeling of respect. Mainly for the following reason: while the feeling of respect is experienced by everyone –as Kant says, “[the law] makes even the boldest evildoer tremble” (KpV, AA 5: 80.01)–, only he who actually acts for the sake of the law also experiences the moral contentment since he acts for the sake of the law of *his own* reason and does not depend on his inclinations.<sup>12</sup>

It seems to me that the underlying problem is that Kant was, in fact, not particularly interested in moral contentment. After all, it is a rather marginal topic and Kant deals with it mainly to explain the errors of *other* philosophers. Such is the case with the first reference to moral contentment in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in Remark II of Theorem IV of the Analytic, where Kant argues against taking happiness as the determining ground (*Bestimmungsgrund*) of the will and in this context also mentions the theory of moral feeling (or moral sense) proposed by Hutcheson and other British moral sense theorists. And the same is true of Kant’s main explanation of moral contentment, which, as we have already noted, is embedded in the resolution of the antinomy of practical reason, where Kant wonders how it is possible that both the Stoics and the Epicureans were able to identify happiness and morality. What we find, then, in Kant’s discussions is a mixture of several related phenomena, often confused with one another. I have already argued elsewhere (Kolomý 2023: 108–10), in discussing moral feeling, that Kant in Remark II of Theorem IV of the Analytic in fact confuses moral contentment with the feeling of respect – this is the explanation for the above passage, which calls moral contentment the only moral feeling strictly speaking (KpV, AA 5: 38). Kant conflates moral contentment with the feeling of respect here because he seems to be convinced, on the one hand, that the positive, pleasurable aspect of the moral feeling of the British moral sense theorists to whom he refers in this passage actually corresponds to moral contentment,<sup>13</sup> and, on the other hand, that the British moral sense theorists (as well as Epicurus) were, at heart, virtuous – although they theoretically maintained that they acted for the sake of the pleasure that moral actions promise,<sup>14</sup> in practice they acted out of respect, the only possible moral incentive.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Strictly speaking, the term “inclination” means *habitual* sensible desire (see RGV, AA 6: 28.28; MS, AA 6: 212.23; Anth, AA 7: 251.05). However, Kant frequently uses it in a broad sense, as a general term for all human sensible desires.

<sup>10</sup> This also explains why Kant emphasizes that inclinations that impel us to act in accordance with the moral law and which we could therefore in a sense call “good” inclination, are burdensome as well. Kant says that “inclination is blind and servile, whether it is kindly or not [...]. Even this feeling of compassion and tender sympathy, if it precedes consideration of what is duty and becomes the determining ground, is itself burdensome to right-thinking persons, brings their considered maxims into confusion, and produces the wish to be freed from them and subject to lawgiving reason alone” (KpV, AA 5: 118.14–23).

<sup>11</sup> Whenever Kant mentions moral contentment he speaks of Epicurus’ “cheerful heart”, see KpV, AA 5: 115; MS, AA 6: 485.

<sup>12</sup> For the same conclusion that moral contentment cannot be identified with the feeling of respect, see also Walschots (2017: 299 FN 7).

<sup>13</sup> “For the rest, as the human will is by virtue of its freedom immediately determinable by the moral law, I certainly do not deny that frequent practice in conformity with this determining ground can finally produce subjectively a feeling of satisfaction with oneself; [...] but the concept of duty cannot be derived from it” (KpV, AA 5: 38).

<sup>14</sup> Although Kant’s text suggests such an interpretation of the British moral sense theorists, this does not appear to reflect their actual view, see Kolomý (2023: 109).

<sup>15</sup> As Kant says in relation to Epicurus, “there is always present here the ground of an error of subreption (*vitium subreptionis*) and, as it were, of an optical illusion in the self-consciousness of what one *does* as distinguished from what one *feels* – an illusion that even the most practiced cannot altogether avoid” (KpV, AA 5: 116). For a more detailed explanation of this confusion of moral contentment with the feeling of respect, see Kolomý (2023: 108–10) – see also note 16, however.



On the other hand, although there one can no longer speak of confusion,<sup>16</sup> Kant also deals with several related phenomena without carefully distinguishing them in the incentive-chapter on the feeling of respect. Thus, when he extols the moral incentive at the end of the chapter, he mentions Epicurus and speaks of “so many charms and attractions of life [that] may well be connected with this incentive [of respect]” (KpV, AA 5: 88). Logically, these attractions of life are no longer properly part of respect itself; they are merely consequences of acting out of respect. Therefore, although it is true that both moral contentment and the feeling of respect are related to the experience of freedom –we will see in the next section what this means exactly in the case of moral contentment–, it seems to me that there are also no textual reasons to identify moral contentment with the feeling of respect; what there are, instead, are systematic reasons to reject such an identification. The feeling of respect is, indeed, a feeling that even the boldest evildoer experiences; moral contentment, by contrast, is a merely “negative satisfaction” (KpV, AA 5: 117) in the sense of the mere absence of discontent, accessible only to those who actually act according to the moral law.<sup>17</sup>

And it seems to me that something analogous also occurs in the places where Kant seems to suggest that moral contentment is simply knowing that I have behaved as I should – as we say, we have done something “with a clean conscience.” For instance, in the mentioned explanation of the antinomy of practical reason in the second *Critique*, when Kant asks how it is possible that Epicurus was able to identify happiness and morality, he indeed confirms that “in fact an upright man cannot be happy if he is not first conscious of his uprightness; for [...] the censure that his own cast of mind would force him to bring against himself in case of a transgression, and his moral self-condemnation would deprive him of all enjoyment of the agreeableness that his state might otherwise contain” (KpV, AA 5: 116; see also KpV, AA 6: 38 in relation not to Epicurus but to the British moral sense theorists). In *Theory and Practice*, this time commenting on Garve’s position,<sup>18</sup> Kant also speaks of “moral discontentment (*Unzufriedenheit*)” based on “reproach and purely moral self-censure”, which “can make oneself unhappy” (TP, AA 8: 283 FN). These passages indeed appear to identify moral contentment with the absolution granted by moral conscience.<sup>19</sup> And in fact, Kant’s description of moral conscience in the *Metaphysics of Morals* seems to fit perfectly with the general description of moral contentment: just as moral contentment is a merely “a negative satisfaction” (KpV, AA 5: 117), so too “the blessedness found in the comforting encouragement of one’s conscience is not positive (joy) but merely negative (relief from preceding anxiety)” (MS, AA 6: 440).

Here too, however, I would like to emphasize that Kant nowhere offers a systematic treatment of moral contentment; in the passages where he addresses it, he is simply responding to a broader question: he wants to explain how it is possible that Epicurus (KpV, AA 5: 116), the British moral sense theorists (KpV, AA 5: 38), and Garve (TP, AA 8: 283 FN) were able to argue that we act morally in order to attain happiness.<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, he mentions all the possible advantages of acting morally – and these advantages include both the peace of mind that comes when one acts in accordance with one’s moral conscience (which, however, is not truly a reward but rather the mere absence of reproach), as well as moral contentment properly speaking, defined as “a negative satisfaction with one’s state” (KpV, AA 5: 118). These are different, though obviously related, phenomena: the person who has acted for the sake of the moral law and thus in accordance with his conscience may be “rejoicing at having escaped the danger of being found punishable” (MS, AA 6: 440.29), but he may also experience moral contentment properly speaking by being content to have avoided the need-satisfaction mechanism of the lower faculty of desire and to act prompted by one’s own reason, and thus thereby becoming “conscious of needing nothing” (KpV, AA 5: 118). As Kant says –we will see what this means in the next section– “freedom itself becomes in this way (namely indirectly) capable of an enjoyment” (KpV, AA 5: 118). Nevertheless, it is only this latter phenomenon to which Kant refers when he asks whether we do not have “a word that does not denote enjoyment, as the word happiness does, but that nevertheless indicates a contentment with one’s existence, an analogue of happiness that must necessarily accompany consciousness of virtue” (KpV, AA 5: 117). Only this kind of contentment can be considered, so to speak, a gain

<sup>16</sup> It seems to me that I was mistaken in previously suggesting that self-approbation (*Selbstbilligung*) might be identical with moral contentment (see Kolomý 2023: 110), since it is experienced only when the agent actually acts from duty. It seems that this self-approbation, insofar as Kant speaks of it as “the subjective effect on feeling” and explicitly contrasts it with the negative aspect of the feeling of respect (KpV, AA 5: 80f), should be understood as part of the feeling of respect properly speaking. For a different view, see Sensen (2012: 56), who argues that the “uplifting feeling” of self-approbation arises only “from time to time” and therefore cannot be identical with the feeling of respect properly speaking.

<sup>17</sup> And contrary to what one place of the *Metaphysics of Morals* seems to suggest, Kant does not change this conception of moral contentment as a merely negative satisfaction later on. When he speaks, in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in relation to duties of wide obligation, of “ethical reward” as “a moral pleasure that goes beyond mere contentment with oneself (which can be merely negative) and that is celebrated in the saying that, through consciousness of this pleasure, virtue is its own reward” (MS, AA 6: 391), he does so in relation to pleasure that is linked merely to the *recognition* of others and is therefore a different phenomenon from moral contentment strictly speaking. According to Kant, when others express gratitude for our efforts to help them, this is considered a “sweet merit” and goes beyond moral contentment strictly speaking; moral contentment, by contrast, is rather reflected in the “bitter merit, which comes from promoting the true wellbeing of others even when they fail to recognize it as such (when they are unappreciative and ungrateful)” – as Kant explains, “all that it produces is *contentment* with oneself, although in this case the merit would be greater still” (MS, AA 6: 391).

<sup>18</sup> For the dispute between Garve and Kant, see Walschots (2017: 287–90).

<sup>19</sup> There is a proverb in German that corresponds to this phenomenon: *ein gutes Gewissen ist ein sanftes Ruhekissen*.

<sup>20</sup> As I have already pointed out (see note 14), although Kant’s text implies such an interpretation also in the case of the British moral sense theorists, this does not seem to be their true view.

that comes with moral action. For, as Kant emphasizes regarding the reproaches of moral conscience, the evildoer may in fact pay no heed to conscience and still be happy (see MS, AA 6: 438 and MpVT, AA 8: 261).<sup>21</sup>

## 2. The genuine nature of moral contentment

After the above clarifications, we can now turn to the question of *who* can experience moral contentment – a question that will also help us further refine the nature of moral contentment itself. Walschots argues that, for Kant, “self-contentment is not something that can be experienced every time one’s motive is the moral law alone,” but rather “can only be experienced by one who is at least half way to acquiring a virtuous disposition” (2017: 294f). According to him, this is significant because, in this way, Kant –unlike, for example, Hutcheson– “entirely rules out the possibility of acting morally for the sake of self-interest” (2017: 295). However, it seems to me that the matter is more complex. While I fully agree with Walschots that Kant “rules out the possibility of acting morally for the sake of self-interest,” in my view, this holds for a different reason: moral contentment can only be experienced when one acts from duty and, therefore, does not seek it directly. If one were to seek it directly, one would pervert the principle of moral action and, so to speak, convert moral contentment into yet another inclination. In doing so, one would also necessarily deprive oneself of the very contentment that arises when acting independently of inclinations and thus without the discontent associated with them. Therefore, Kant need not, on systematic grounds, reserve moral contentment only for virtuous persons, as Walschots suggests, since he can dismiss the possibility of acting morally for the sake of self-interest from the outset.

I consider it important to point this out, as it seems problematic to reserve moral contentment only for those who are already at least halfway toward acquiring a virtuous disposition – that is, for the *repeated* exercise of virtuous actions.<sup>22</sup> If moral contentment arises from the independence from inclinations, it would seem that, in principle, it should be possible to experience it every time one acts according to the moral law, even if it is for the first time. However, it does seem that Kant, in the texts, appears to reserve moral contentment only for the virtuous.<sup>23</sup> Let us then ask what systematic reasons Kant might have for doing so. A closer reading of the description of moral contentment in the *Critique of Practical Reason* in fact reveals that Kant does not understand moral contentment merely as a negative experience in the sense of the simple absence of discontent linked to the inclinations;<sup>24</sup> Kant seems to refer instead to yet another aspect: what gives rise to moral contentment is, rather, the “consciousness of *mastery* over one’s inclinations” (KpV, AA 5: 118.25f; my emphasis; see also MS, AA 6: 485). According to Kant,

we can understand how [...] [virtue] can in fact produce consciousness of mastery over one’s inclinations, hence of independence from them and so too from the discontent that always accompanies them, and thus can produce a negative satisfaction with one’s state, that is, contentment, which in its source is contentment with one’s person. (KpV, AA 5: 118)<sup>25</sup>

The reference to virtue in this passage is clearly not accidental. As Kant later explains in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, virtue properly means “the moral strength of a *man’s* will in fulfilling his *duty*” (MS, AA 6: 405) – it is essentially the capacity to do one’s duty despite possible obstacles. And since it is the inclinations that obstruct our ability to do our duty, virtue is precisely the capacity to overcome inclinations: the virtuous person has acquired the capacity to overcome inclinations and thus possesses the “consciousness of mastery over one’s inclinations” (KpV, AA 5: 118.25f).<sup>26</sup>

If this is the case, it is likewise unsurprising that Kant connects moral contentment specifically with the enjoyment of freedom – for Kant, as Engstrom has emphasized (2002: 305), one is free only in the possession of virtue (MS, AA 6: 405.30f). As Kant explains, “the less a man can be constrained by natural means and the

<sup>21</sup> In relation to the question whether it can then be said that morality for Kant, in a certain sense, pays off, see Kolomý, forthcoming.

<sup>22</sup> Walschots speaks of someone who is at least *half way* to acquiring a virtuous disposition, in reference to KpV, AA 5: 38, where Kant says that “someone must be at least *half way* toward being an honest man even to frame for himself a representation of those feelings [of contentment (*Zufriedenheit*) in the consciousness of one’s conformity with the moral law, and of bitter remorse if one can reproach oneself with having transgressed it]” (my emphasis).

<sup>23</sup> In any case, the textual evidence also presents its own difficulties, because many of the passages in which Kant suggests that moral contentment is reserved only for the virtuous do not, in fact, seem to refer to moral contentment *sensu stricto*, but rather to the capacity to experience the “satisfaction in consciousness of one’s *conformity* with [the moral law] or the “bitter remorse if one can reproach oneself with having transgressed it” (KpV, AA 5: 38; my emphasis) – that is, to the capacity to hear one’s own moral conscience (see also KpV, AA 5: 116.01–20; TP, AA 8: 283 FN). The only truly clear reference to moral contentment properly speaking in which Kant suggests that moral contentment is reserved only for the virtuous seems to be the reference to Epicurus’ “ever-cheerful heart” in the section on ethical ascetics in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (MS, AA 6: 485).

<sup>24</sup> If this were the case, then this negative experience should indeed be possible for everyone, even for someone who is not virtuous – although, of course, the question arises whether a person who is accustomed to always satisfy his inclinations could genuinely appreciate this independence from them. In the final part of the Doctrine of the method of pure practical reason of the second *Critique*, where Kant seems to refer precisely to this situation, he says that the renunciation of inclinations initially produces rather a feeling of pain (KpV, AA 5: 160).

<sup>25</sup> The passage is ambiguous, but it seems to me that Kant is referring precisely to the fact that it is virtue that “produce[s] consciousness of mastery over one’s inclinations, hence of independence from them and so too from the discontent that always accompanies them”. See also below.

<sup>26</sup> In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant connects virtue with the concept of *autocracy*, defined precisely as “consciousness of the capacity to master one’s inclinations when they rebel against the law” (MS, AA 6: 383). For Kant’s concept of autocracy and virtue in general, see Baxley (2010: 48–84).

more he can be constrained morally (through the mere representation of duty), so much the more free he is" (MS, AA 6: 382 FN).<sup>27</sup> The virtuous person, then, who is independent from inclinations, has acquired "the *inner* freedom to release himself from the impetuous importunity of inclinations so that none of them, not even the dearest, has any influence on a resolution for which we are now to make use of our reason" (KpV, AA 5: 161) and "is conscious of needing nothing" (KpV, AA 5: 117) – is "sufficient to [him]self" (KpV, AA 5: 161).

We have to conclude, then, that in Kant's view moral contentment is not a simple absence of discontent linked to the inclinations available to everyone that acts from duty; rather, it appears to be reserved only for the virtuous – it is only in virtue that "freedom [...] becomes [...] capable of an enjoyment," though "indirectly" (KpV, AA 5: 118), because one is conscious that he does not depend on inclinations and can act on the law of his own reason. This also clarifies the name Kant chooses for the phenomenon of purely moral satisfaction: contentment with oneself, *Selbstzufriedenheit* – I am content with myself because I know that I do not depend on inclinations.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, if we understand moral contentment in this way, an objection arises: if moral contentment is based on "consciousness of mastery over one's inclinations" (KpV, AA 5: 118.25f) and therefore on the *awareness* of one's own capacity to act from duty, this at first sight does not seem compatible with the passages in which Kant argues that it is not possible to know the true motives of one's actions (see GMS, AA 4: 407; RGV, AA 6: 51; MS, AA 6: 392, 447).<sup>29</sup> If it is never possible to know whether we act from duty, how can one experience moral contentment linked to our awareness of acting from duty rather than from inclination? Here, however, it must be emphasized that, as La Rocca (2013) has convincingly shown, Kant does not deny the possibility of *any* knowledge of the motives of our actions, but rather denies the possibility of attaining *certainty* about them.<sup>30</sup> Thus, when we genuinely intend to act from duty, we can plausibly suppose that we are doing so; and indeed, in our moral lives there will surely be many situations in which it is evident that our inclinations point in one direction while duty points in another, and if we do our duty, it is very likely that we are in fact acting from duty and not from inclination (see, e.g., Kant's example at the end of the Doctrine of the Method of the Critique of Practical Reason of the second *Critique*, KpV, AA 5: 161). The problem is simply that we can never be sure that we act merely from duty – even in situations where we sincerely believe we have acted from duty, out of respect for the moral law, we can never be certain "that the real determining cause of the will was not actually a covert impulse of self-love (*geheimer Antrieb der Selbstliebe*)" (GMS, AA 4: 407).<sup>31</sup>

### 3. Conclusion

As I have argued, Kant was not particularly interested in moral contentment; for him, it is a rather marginal topic that appears when he tries to explain the errors of other philosophers. Accordingly, his treatment of moral contentment is fragmented, and we can find several contradictory or imprecise formulations of it. Yet a coherent and plausible account can be reconstructed. Moral contentment is not a pathological feeling, nor can it be equated with the feeling of respect or the peace of moral conscience. Rather, it is a uniquely moral kind of "negative satisfaction": an indirect enjoyment of inner freedom, made possible through independence from inclination, and it appears as directly connected to Kant's specific conception of virtue defined precisely as "the moral strength of a *man's* will in fulfilling his *duty*" (MS, AA 6: 405).

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<sup>27</sup> The example Kant gives at this point helps to clarify the point well: "Suppose, for example, a man so firm of purpose and strong of soul that he cannot be dissuaded from a pleasure he intends to have, no matter how others may reason with him about the harm he will do himself by it. If such a man gives up his plan immediately, though reluctantly, at the thought that by carrying it out he would omit one of his duties as an official or neglect a sick father, he proves his freedom in the highest degree by being unable to resist the call of duty" (MS, AA 6: 382 FN).

<sup>28</sup> Now, it must be remembered that, for Kant, one can attain only a *limited* consciousness of independence from inclinations. To become someone "who is aware of no intentional transgression in himself and is secured against falling into any" (MS, AA 6: 485) would be to attain perfect virtue, which, as Kant says, "is an ideal (to which one must continually approximate), which is commonly personified poetically by the sage" (MS, AA 6: 383).

<sup>29</sup> Recent secondary literature usually speaks of the Opacity Thesis. The term was introduced by O. Ware (2009).

<sup>30</sup> In fact, Kant, in the Doctrine of the method of pure practical reason of the second *Critique*, speaks of the exercise "to draw attention, in the lively presentation of the moral disposition in examples, to the purity of will" (KpV, AA 5: 160).

<sup>31</sup> In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant expresses this point in his treatment of the duty of holiness ("be holy"), which consists in striving for "the *purity (puritas moralis)* of one's disposition to duty" (MS, AA 6: 446), as follows: "The depths of the human heart are unfathomable. Who knows himself well enough to say, when he feels the incentive to fulfill his duty, whether it proceeds entirely from the representation of the law or whether there are not many other sensible impulses contributing to it that look to one's advantage (or to avoiding what is detrimental) and that, in other circumstances, could just as well serve vice?" (MS, AA 6: 447). Precisely for this reason Kant seems to refer to the command "*know* (scrutinize, fathom) *yourself*" as the "first command of all duties to oneself" (MS, AA 6: 441).

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