

A Common Root for Arrogance and Self-degradation: Self-conceit in Kant's Moral Theory

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1. Introduction

Kant outlines “self-conceit” in the second *Critique*, in his discussion of “what [the moral law] effects (or, to put it better, must effect) in the mind insofar as it is an incentive” (5:72). His hope in this passage is to show how it is possible for us to be attracted to morally right actions *because of* their moral character—not merely by associating them with our amoral sensible desires, or “inclinations.” Kant argues that it is possible for us to know a priori that we can be attracted to morality in this way. We can know this, according to him, because we can know that the moral law will strike down what he calls our “self-conceit” and that this will call up our respect. Many commentators¹ have understood self-conceit, which plays such an important role in this story, as a kind of arrogance. I will present an alternative reading of self-conceit, however, on which it can be seen to be bivalent, resulting in arrogance only under certain circumstances. I think this alternative reading is necessary in order to attribute to Kant a moral theory which recognizes that immorality can come in both arrogant and self-degrading forms.

2. Inclinations and Self-conceit

Self-conceit is, according to Kant, one of two types of regard for oneself that are constituted by the system of desires that makes up our conception of happiness. In self-conceit, our conception of happiness is said to constitute “*satisfaction with oneself*” (5:73). Throughout the passage in question, Kant uses this term interchangeably with “self-esteem.” According to Kant, our inclinations should never constitute our self-assessment, as they do in self-conceit. But it is not obvious what it actually means for this kind of constitution to happen. Esteem is distinct from affection or well-wishing—it requires not just good feelings, but the judgment that someone or something measures up well according to some standard or other.² It is not obvious how we could proceed from our system of wants to any such judgment about ourselves.

One theory about how this happens is offered by Stephen Engstrom (2010). He argues that the leap in reasoning between the conception of happiness we build on the basis of our inclinations and our esteem for ourselves is made by taking the fact that we have a conception of happiness at all as grounds for the belief that we are superior to others. Our consciousness of our capacity to “determine what is good, what counts as an end, an object worthy of concern or pursuit” (Engstrom, 107) gives rise to self-conceit, as we come to think of ourselves “as worthy of esteem on account of [our] cognitive power thus to determine an end” (108). But the thought that we are exactly as rational as we are, or exactly as capable of setting ends and determining the good as we are, cannot really give rise to any positive self-evaluation—as previously mentioned, esteem requires that we compare well relative to a standard. Engstrom concludes that “[s]elf-conceit’s esteem for self can therefore only be indirect, through depreciatory judgments concerning others” (109). That is, we must take *others* as the standard if we are to judge ourselves as worthy of respect on the basis of our ability to set ends. In so concluding, Engstrom

¹ See Reath (2006), and Wood (1996, 1999) among others. Korsgaard (1998) and Herman (2005) describe self-conceit as a kind of unfalsifiable self-esteem, which also implies a kind of arrogance-based understanding of it.

² Engstrom (2010) also notes this aspect of esteem (109).

agrees, at least on this point, with several other commentators on Kant (including Allen Wood and Andrews Reath) that self-conceit must involve human arrogance—a kind of tendency to think oneself better than other people.³

But we could also follow the requirement that esteem requires a standard in another way. Instead of supposing that self-conceited agents take others as their standard, self-conceited agents could construct their own standards from their conception of happiness. They could do this by esteeming themselves based on how well their actual state matches up with the ideal state of happiness they imagine on the basis of all their inclinations taken together. In this case, humans will be “self-conceited” if they pursue happiness because they conceive the achievement of happiness as identical with *not only* their well-being, but also their worth. They will have a high opinion of themselves only if they judge that they are relatively happy or making good progress towards being happy. If they are not so fortunate, they will actually judge themselves to be worth less than their happier peers.

3. Lawgiving and Self-Conceit

Whichever interpretation is correct, self-conceit involves an error. According to Kant, a good will is defined by alignment with the moral law. But in self-conceit, the agent’s self-assessment is independent of any *moral* assessment. According to Kant, we make this mistake because we are subject to the following error:

[W]e find our nature as sensible beings so constituted that the matter of the faculty of desire (objects of inclination, whether of hope or fear) first forces itself upon us, and we find our pathologically determinable self, even though it is quite unfit to give universal law through its maxims, nevertheless striving antecedently to make its claims primary and originally valid, just as if it constituted our entire self. This propensity to make oneself as having subjective determining grounds of choice into the objective determining ground of the will in general can be called *self-love*; and if self-love makes itself lawgiving and the unconditional practical principle, it can be called *self-conceit*. (5:74)

Because of the obviously powerful impression that our physical existence makes on us, we tend to treat our sensible desires as something more unconditionally important than they really are. According to Kant, we do so by tending to act as though they are objective, applying to “the will in general”. The German phrase which Kant uses here, “*des Willens überhaupt*,” is ambiguous, as is the English translation, between something like “the wills of all rational beings,” and something like “the will end-of-story.”

If we understand “the will in general” as a “general will,” encompassing all rational beings, then making self-love law-giving would have implications for the wills of *others* in particular. In that case, self-conceit would make self-love law-giving by legislating itself to other agents, requiring that they serve the self-conceited agent’s own self-love. If we understand “the will in general” as the agent’s own “will generally,” on the other hand, then making the claim of self-love lawgiving would have implications primarily for the self-conceited agent himself. Self-love would legislate itself to the self-conceited agent, requiring that they serve their own self-love with all the force with which they ought, in fact, to obey the moral law.⁴

³ See Reath (2006) and Wood (1996, 1999).

⁴ Andrews Reath (2006, 24) also introduces this distinction.

This distinction between the two ways we might think of human beings as mis-assigning laws gets to the root of the difference between the two ways of understanding self-conceit that I have presented in this paper. In the first case, what is objectionable about self-conceit is precisely the agent's orientation towards others. Their error is located in what they think about what others owe them. This understanding of self-conceit, then, fits most naturally with Kant's text if we understand law-giving in the first sense, as giving laws to others. On that reading as a whole, the mistake that the self-conceited agent makes is in thinking that everyone else is required to serve them, without any thought to what is owed in return.

In my proposed alternative, self-conceited agents make an error about the significance of their own inclinations for themselves—not (most fundamentally) a mistake about what others owe them. And our second model of legislation only requires each agent to look out for themselves, implying at most that each person's own inclinations are important to themselves. What is being asserted in this case is not really the value of one individual, but rather the superior importance of the *inclinations* of each individual over the other components that make them up. In assigning self-love as a law to themselves, self-conceited agents also assign themselves a standard of perfect conformity to the laws of prudence, against which they can measure up well or poorly.

Going forward, I am going to label these two versions of self-conceit as follows:

***Self-Conceit**_{Arrogance}: unconditional satisfaction with oneself, believing oneself to be superior to others. One pursues one's happiness out of baseless self-satisfaction without concern for others because one has made one's own self-love a law for all others.*

***Self-Conceit**_{Misvalue}: taking one's conception of happiness as a standard for self-assessment. One takes oneself to be earning self-esteem in pursuing one's own happiness, because one conceives of one's self-love as a law for oneself, conformity to which is the condition of one's worth.*

4. Moral Motivation and Self-Conceit

Self-conceit plays an essential role in Kant's story about how "respect" comes about. Respect is a moral feeling which occurs in rational beings for whom it is possible to act otherwise than in conformity with the moral law. Because respect amounts to an attraction to morally right action as such, it helps such agents to act morally correctly. Respect also involves a kind of aversion to morally wrong actions, but the attraction element is important for what our capacity to respect tells us about ourselves. Kant believes respect can reveal to us that we are the kinds of beings who are suited to moral action, who are free to positively take an interest in doing our duty according to the moral law, even though we are not necessitated to do so (5:80-81). Respect is very important in Kant's system, then, both because of the way in which it supports our moral actions and because of how it helps us connect our conception of ourselves with the moral law.

Kant claims that we can be certain of the human capacity to experience this important feeling because we can know a priori that contemplation of the moral law will limit our self-love and completely uproot our self-conceit. This process draws our attention to the way in which, in

the face of moral considerations, all of our other concerns appear irrelevant or petty. It is this awareness that brings about our respect for the moral law, and thus, its attractiveness to us.

Here, Kant explains the relationship:

[S]ince the law is... something in itself positive—namely the form of an intellectual causality, that is, of freedom—it is... an object of *respect* inasmuch as, in opposition to its subjective antagonist, namely the inclinations in us, it *weakens* self-love; and inasmuch as it even *strikes down* self-conceit, that is, humiliates it, it is an object of the greatest *respect* and so too the ground of a positive feeling that is not of empirical origin and is cognized a priori. (5:73)

Kant's description of the process by which respect arises in us reveals that self-conceit is a necessary precondition for our ability to feel respect for the moral law, although it is also originally a mistake. Even though in self-conceit we substitute happiness for morality, it is the removal of self-conceit which makes us aware of the power morality has over us.

Based on the fact that self-conceit is supposed to play this role, the following thesis must be true of it. I will call it the *Root* thesis:

Root: Self-conceit is present as the root of each case of human immoral action.

If there are some immoral actions that do not have self-conceit at their basis, then the fact that respect can only arise in cases in which the agent is subject to self-conceit would mean that there are some cases of immoral action in which the moral law was incapable of functioning as an incentive. In these cases, awareness of what morality commanded would not be able to remind the agent of their own moral nature, or attract them of itself, as it is supposed to be able to do. Although this might not mean such agents could not act morally well, other incentives or perhaps a forceful, alienating will to obey would be required.

In the rest of this paper, I will argue that Self-Conceit_{Arrogance} cannot accommodate the *Root* thesis. Self-Conceit_{Misvalue} avoids the problem I will present, because it applies to both agents who are very happy and take this as a justification for arrogance *and* agents who are very unhappy and take this as a justification for degrading themselves.

5. Immorality and Arrogance

If Self-Conceit_{Arrogance} is going to fulfill the *Root* thesis, it must be the case that inflated pride is the root of all temptation to wrong-doing for human beings. However, this is not the case. Immorality is sometimes made attractive by the sense that one is *inferior* (not superior) to others.

Consider the case of the secretly insecure bully at a grade school. She lashes out at her classmates not because she thinks that they are inferior, but because she thinks they are smarter, more attractive, and overall better than she is. By scaring and hurting them, she manages to gain a kind of respect from them that is, as she sees it, the closest thing to equality with them that she could ever have. I think this sort of case is probably very familiar, and its possibility is not without empirical support.⁵ A study conducted in 2005 found strong support for the claim that

⁵ This remains true although the thesis that low self-esteem and aggression has been contested in some research. See Baumeister et al, 2000, for example, which presents evidence for the claim that aggression is actually more closely related to extremely highly inflated egos that have been threatened, with basically no connection to low self-esteem.

there is a relationship between low self-esteem and aggression, for example.⁶ According to the results, low self-esteem was significantly correlated with both aggressive and non-aggressive delinquency, and, contrary to the claims of other recent studies which called the relationship between low self-esteem and aggression into question, this correlation was independent from narcissism (Donnellan et al, 333). Low self-esteem has also been found to be correlated with gang involvement, arguably a locus of aggression (Jagers et al, 2013).

There are other types of cases aside from this sort, however, in which arrogance does not seem to be at the root of immoral action. Consider cases in which people act immorally out of deference or by failing to actively stand up for themselves or others. Even when interfering to stop immoral behavior is possible and would have good consequences, the prospect of doing so can be intimidating. Following through on one's resolve to act in these cases takes confidence in oneself and in one's own moral judgment. Pride is precisely the sort of quality that is morally *useful* in cases like this—it is its opposite which holds us back.

These sources for the attractiveness of immorality are particularly relevant in contexts which we philosophers sometimes neglect. Depression, social stigmatization, and oppression are all conditions which can undermine an agent's sense of self-worth and impede their ability to assert themselves, to trust their own reasoning, and to act—by erecting obstacles both physical and emotional. It is a serious problem for Kant's account if according to it, moral motivation fails, by definition, to reach these contexts. Some of the cases in which it is most obvious that agents really *need* the aid of respect, and in which it is most obvious that it is *present*, are cases in which circumstances *impede* pride in oneself.

Lorraine Hansberry's play *A Raisin in the Sun* provides us with a clear example of the kind of work respect should be able to do. Hansberry depicts a black American family pressured by economic circumstances and a racist neighborhood committee to leave their house in a nice part of town. Near the end of Act 3, the father of the family, Walter, has finally come to the conclusion that fighting is pointless. He thinks they should leave the house that their family has been working to own for generations, in return for money from the committee. Upon hearing about this decision, his family disagrees.

What follows is initially a defense by Walter of his decision, but his defense gradually morphs into a caricature, a deliberate imitation of the obedient black man that the neighborhood committee wants him to be. In this moment, Walter ends up making the case that even given the difficulty and unfairness of the family's circumstances, there is a powerful moral reason not to cave and accept the money. When the moment arrives for him to accept the money later in the play, he does not. If this is not a moment in which respect is at work, then what moment could be?

⁶ The study was conducted by M. Brent Donnellan and others. In their paper, they propose a few different reasons for the lack of confirmation for the hypothesis in other studies, as well, including the note that the effect is small and that aggression in the context of laboratory experiences is different than aggressive behavior in other more normal social settings. They suggest the following interpretation of their results, for example: "the discrepancy between our findings and those of previous lab studies may reflect the fact that individuals with narcissistically high self-esteem are more likely to be aggressive when it is socially desirable (e.g., lab paradigms for assessing aggression, athletic events, some corporate settings), whereas individuals with low self-esteem are more likely to be aggressive when it is socially undesirable and contrary to social norms" (334).

5. Conclusion

We often find it difficult to do what is right because of our tendency to think we are too important to be restrained by the moral law. It can also be difficult to do what we believe to be right, however, because we do not think we are important *enough*. If Kant's conception of immorality has no room for cases like these, then his theory is incomplete: it suffers from an unrealistic insistence that sadness, misfortune, and victimization never become the sources of temptation to act wrongly. If we are able to save Kant from this mistake by reading his text differently, I think we have some reason to do so.

I also think that Kant's texts reveal that he was aware of this sort of moral difficulty, although he did not place as strong an emphasis on it as perhaps he should have. For example, Kant's discussion of servility (6:435) as well as his introduction of the concept of "self-incurred minority" (8:35) make clear that, as he sees it, fear and the belief that one is inferior can sometimes be the things that hold one back from doing—or even allowing oneself to think about—what is right. I will not present a full argument here for the claim that these and others of Kant's texts indicate that he realized immorality is not always arrogant, however. I only hope to have shown you firstly, that self-conceit, despite its somewhat misleading title, is a concept which could admit of two kinds of results: an overly high *or* an overly *low* opinion of one's worth; and secondly, that it is better for Kant's moral theory if we understand self-conceit in that way.

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