Must “Self-Conceit” be Self-Conceited? : Making more of Kant’s notion of immorality

Catherine M. M. Smith

Abstract

Many have read self-conceit as it appears in Kant’s account of respect as primarily constituted by the failure to properly respect others. However, this reading is in tension with Kant’s clear textual concerns about self-degradation, and the conception of immorality it gives overlooks important ways in which people can find it difficult to do what they ought. I argue instead that self-conceit is a happiness-emphasizing conception of self, which overvalues the inclinations. When life goes well, this self-conception and the standard of assessment that it implies do lead to the opinion that one is worth more than others. When life goes badly, however, they lead to the opposite (and no less harmful) misunderstanding.

Introduction

In Act 3 of Lorraine Hansberry’s play A Raisin in the Sun, Walter Lee Younger tells his family that he thinks they had better accept money from the white neighborhood committee that has been pressuring them to leave the area. Although the family is on the verge of owning their house after generations of saving, financial troubles have hit, and the message from the neighborhood committee is clear: they are not welcome to stay. These are solid prudential reasons to leave. Walter’s family, however, suspects that they are not good enough: his mother asks him to think about how this decision will make him feel. 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 his monologue, Walter demonstrates to himself and to the audience of the play what his mother already knows: that there is an important, albeit unfair, sense in which his decision to take the money would be immoral. There is no straight-forward sense in which it would be arrogant. There is no straight-forward sense in which Walter would be placing his own needs and
desires before the more important claims of other people. But in taking the money, Walter would be wronging himself.

Hansberry’s play is read by the vast majority of high-schoolers in the United States, and it documents an experience that is in no way unheard of or exceptional. And yet when we think about immorality and about the characteristics that lead people to act immorally, we often overlook cases like this one. Instead, we occupy ourselves with cases in which people are hurting others, privileging their own perspective, approaching the world as though they were the only important thing in it. It is important to talk about these latter kinds of examples. Some of the most obvious cases of immoral action, ones we have an urgent need to address, seem to be driven by such arrogant disregard for other people. But it is not only arrogant people who find themselves with powerful temptations to act in ways that they themselves would consider, on reflection, to be immoral.

Immanuel Kant was well aware of this. Despite his insistence that even the most common human understanding has access to the moral law, he acknowledges that many of us do the wrong thing sometimes, even when we know it’s wrong. Further, it seems that Kant should fully endorse the idea that people can be immoral by degrading themselves, not just by degrading others. But in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant introduces as the root of our moral failings a tendency he calls “self-conceit” (*Eigendünkel*). Many authors have held that this tendency is a false understanding of ourselves which ranks us above all others, leading us to think that only our own wants and needs matter.\(^1\) This reading is understandable, given the name of the

\(^1\) Stephen Engstrom, Allen Wood, and Andrews Reath are three examples, whom I will discuss in section three. Even some authors who do not think that to be self-conceited is directly to rank oneself above others nonetheless agree that self-conceit must involve unconditional esteem for oneself that *implicitly* ranks oneself above others. Frederick Neuhouser (2008) affirms this sort of interpretation, for example, when he writes that people often misinterpret Rousseau’s concept of amour-propre because they take it to be the same as Kant’s concept of self-conceit. As Neuhouser understands it, self-conceit “can be defined as taking one’s own happiness—rather than the moral law, which also takes the happiness of others into account—as the supreme criterion for action [and] since this
tendency and given Kant’s penchant for making our alleged preoccupation with our desires sound self-cherishing. “[I]f we look more closely at the intentions and aspirations in [human action],” he comments, “we everywhere come upon the dear self” (4:407).

But this view of immorality seems like it could be general only if we avert our eyes from cases like Walter’s. One possible reaction to this would be to conclude that Kant had a very limited and inaccurate understanding of immorality—and I am not going to argue here that his understanding of immorality was fully adequate to the complexity of human life. However, I think we underestimate Kant’s theory if we think it is limited in precisely this way. Kant acknowledges the moral dangers of degrading oneself, deferring automatically to authority, and generally failing to treat oneself as the equal of others. The command to respect oneself appears many times throughout his work, sometimes with what seems like over-zealous rigor. Even to sell your hair, he warns, might be to violate that duty (6:423). It would be surprising if this same philosopher had fallen prey to the error of thinking that immorality is only an issue for the arrogant—a doctrine that pairs naturally with the claim that to be morally good is to be humble and unpresupposing.

In light of that, my project here will be to present and argue for a new interpretation of self-conceit as it appears in the third chapter of Kant’s Critique of Practical Reason. According to my interpretation, Kant holds that we are self-conceited in only a rather technical sense. He holds that we assign too much (and the wrong kind of) importance to what he calls our “inclinations:” we tend to assess our actions, ourselves, and our lives as though fulfilling these inclinations—and hence achieving happiness—were of primary moral importance. On this
understanding of self-conceit, it can actually result in both overly low and overly high opinions of oneself, depending on how happy one is. This reading, I argue, is not only better suited to Kant’s texts overall, but also leaves him with a better moral theory than the standard alternative.

In section 1, I outline the role self-conceit plays in Kant’s moral theory and argue that, in order to play this role, self-conceit must be a tendency found universally in human beings, and that it must play a significant part in all cases of immoral action. In section 2, I argue that because both these claims must be true of self-conceit, we have good reason to hope that it is not the same as the kind of arrogance that involves an assertion of superiority over others.

In sections 3 and 4, I discuss Kant’s claim that self-conceit is closely related to “all the inclinations taken together” and his claim that self-conceit results from our tendency to make self-love “lawgiving and the unconditional practical principle.” Although these texts give us some reason to read self-conceit in the arrogance-based way that many authors do, they also support my alternative interpretation. In section 5, I argue that Kant’s texts reveal that he was very much aware of the human struggle with self-debasement and deference, as well as arrogance. I also explain how my reading of self-conceit encompasses both struggles.

In section 6, I address the biggest worry for my reading: that it does not explain what exactly is self-conceited about self-conceit. I argue that even on my reading, there is still something self-conceited about the tendency. Although self-conceit does not entail that agents will always think they are better than others, it does involve an overestimation of human nature.

1. Self-Conceit’s Role in Kant’s Moral Theory

First, a caveat. Kant uses the word “self-conceit” throughout his work in different ways. For most of this paper, I am going to be focusing on only one of those uses. That instance occurs
in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, in Kant’s 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). The tendency Kant calls self-conceit here is an important part of his story about how the moral law can be an incentive for us. Because my interpretation of self-conceit will focus on making sure that it can play its role in this story, I am going to explain what Kant means by incentive, and what it would mean for the moral law to be an incentive for us, in a little more detail.

An incentive is something like a motivation: it moves a person to act.² Many of the incentives human beings experience come from what Kant calls their “sensibility.” We are sensible in that we are physical beings who can sense or be affected by the physical world around us. The facts about what we want to do are often determined by our sensibility: what tastes we like, what harms or nourishes us, what we find pleasant or unpleasant to experience. The desires we form on this basis are what Kant calls our “inclinations.”³ I am “inclined” to act in a certain way to the extent that my desire to act that way is based in my impression of how it would make me feel. The thought that a certain action would be pleasurable, or would relieve some pain, is often an incentive for human action.

However, the things that human beings morally ought to do are determined not by their sensibility, but by their rational nature. This means that what is morally right is not always pleasant, and that we are not always sensibly inclined to do it. Hence, although we always *ought* to act in accordance with the moral law, we do not always want (or decide) to do so. If the moral law can *itself* function as an incentive, however, then our awareness of what we ought to do can itself move us to actually do it, independently of our inclinations. Kant argues that the moral law

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² Kant defines it as “the subjective determining ground of the will of a being whose reason does not by its nature necessarily conform with the objective law” (5:72).
³ See 4:414fn. Kant also sometimes refers to these, unsurprisingly, as “sensible desires.”
can be an incentive. It becomes one, he explains, by calling up a moral feeling he calls “respect.”

This brings us back to the topic of self-conceit: according to Kant, we experience respect for morality because the moral law strikes down self-conceit.

In the following quote, Kant explains that self-conceit is one of two types of “self-regard” that are made up by our inclinations:

All the inclinations together (which can be brought into a tolerable system and the satisfaction of which is then called one’s own happiness) constitute⁴ regard for oneself (solopsismus). This is either the self-regard of love for oneself, a predominant benevolence toward oneself (Philautia), or that of satisfaction with oneself (Arrogantia). The former is called, in particular, self-love; the latter, self-conceit. (5:73)

It is, according to Kant, the moral law’s ability to limit self-love—and hence to delegitimize self-conceit—that leads us to experience respect for it:

[The moral law] is… an object of respect inasmuch as, in opposition to its subjective antagonist, namely the inclinations in us, it weakens self-conceit; 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)⁵

The victory of the moral law over all of the inclinations, and thereby over self-conceit, makes dramatically apparent to us the fact that in the face of moral considerations, all of our other concerns can become irrelevant or petty to us. Hence, we feel respect for the moral law. Our respect is premised in part upon our previous (and recurring) impression that this could not happen. Our impression that our inclinations are all-important, an impression encoded presicely

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⁴ The German word that Kant uses here is “ausmachen,” which can be translated several different ways. It can mean “to compose or make-up,” “provide the material for,” “to represent,” “to account for,” along with “to constitute.” My project does not hang specifically on this translation, however. Whether one’s own conception of happiness “provides materials for,” “represents,” or “constitutes” one’s self-regard, it remains an open question how this relationship is fully spelled out.

⁵ Another similar description of this process occurs at 5:75-76: “[T]he representation of the moral law deprives self-love of its influence and self-conceit of its illusion, and thereby the hindrance to pure practical reason is lessened and the representation of the superiority of its objective law to the impulses of sensibility is produced and hence, by removal of the counterweight, the relative weightiness of the law (with regard to a will affected by impulses) in the judgment of reason [is also produced].”
in our self-conceit, is part of what makes the moral law’s toppling of these considerations riveting.

Although self-conceit is a hindrance to morality, then, it is also an essential part of our experience of respect. This relationship between respect and self-conceit motivates two theses that support my reading of self-conceit. The first thesis is what I will call the Root thesis:

**Root:** Self-conceit is the driving force behind human immorality.

Because self-conceit is involved in the production of respect, and the moral law should be at least capable of calling up respect in the face of any temptation to act morally wrongly, self-conceit must be active in any case in which immoral actions seem attractive to human beings.

It may seem from what we have covered so far that self-love alone can incline people to act immorally, and so that some immoral actions could be motivated purely by self-love instead of by any kind of self-conceit. However, Kant’s text indicates that the destruction of self-conceit is particularly important. For example, in the passage above (5:73), Kant discusses exclusively the way our contemplation of the moral law interacts with our self-conceit, leaving self-love to the side. This emphasis makes sense because the limitation of self-love is precisely a limitation that prevents it from crossing over into self-conceit. It is only when self-love’s influence over us leads us to think that it should win out in conflicts with the moral law that it becomes problematic. In this sense, our immorality involves self-conceit. Our self-love is immoral only to the extent that it pushes us to become self-conceited.

So, if there are some immoral actions that do not have self-conceit at their basis, the fact that respect can only arise in cases in which the agent is subject to self-conceit would mean that

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6 Other commentators on self-conceit have taken note of the fact that Kant assigns it this dual role, as both harm and help to our moral agency. See for example, Stephen Engstrom (2010, 118); Barbara Herman (2005, 31). Camilla Serck-Hanssen (2005) presents a similar picture of our immoral tendencies, although her focus is on something Kant calls “radical evil,” instead of on self-conceit (see 65).
there are some cases in which human beings considering immoral actions were incapable of experiencing respect. This would be bad for Kant. Although the details of what exactly respect is and what makes it important to moral action are controversial, he makes it clear that it is important. At times he writes as though without respect, it would be completely impossible for us even to think morally. He claims, for instance, that we “must have respect for the law within [ourselves] in order even to think of any duty whatsoever” (6:403), and refers to respect as that which represents actions as duties to us (6:402) and as “identical with consciousness of one’s duty” (6:464). Our respect for the law is also, for Kant, the source of our true respect for ourselves. Respect reveals to us that although we are capable of immoral actions, we are also the kinds of beings who are free to positively take an interest in acting morally well (5:80-81). This revelation about what we are calls up “reverence” for ourselves (5:87).

If Root were false, there would be some ways of being drawn to immoral action that would make it impossible for respect to reach us. Morality would be incapable of reminding a person in these circumstances of their own moral nature and calling them to action. Although this

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7 Engstrom also notes that Kant’s description of how respect arises depends upon the presence of self-conceit (2010, 118). He argues, however, that this poses no problem for Kant’s theory of moral motivation because it is only due to self-conceit’s opposition to morality that any explanation of the moral law’s functioning as an incentive is required in the first place. Part of my argument in this paper is that only my reading of self-conceit can really allow for this defense because only it fully accounts for the subjective forces that oppose morality in us.

8 The process that Kant describes in this part of the Critique clearly describes the arising of a feeling: it involves stages of pain, and Kant is explicit that respect depends upon “sensible feeling, which underlies all our inclinations” (5:75). But the process itself is also triggered by a judgment about what we ought (morally) to do. Commentators disagree about whether both the feeling and the judgment are necessary for moral behavior on Kant’s view, or whether only the judgment is needed. Commentators who see respect’s affective component as utterly necessary include Ina Goy (2007), Stephen Darwall (2008), and Josephine Nauckhoff (2003). Others, however, argue that it is the rational judgment which does all of the incentivizing, while the feeling accompanying this state is something of a side-effect. See, for example, Paul Guyer (1993, especially Ch.10); and Andrews Reath (2006). All authors, however, agree that respect is important, if not as a necessary component in moral action, then as an aid to such action and to the achievement of virtue.

9 This observation is supported especially by Janelle DeWitt’s (2014) account of respect, on which respect amounts to a recognition of how morally right actions harmonize or fit with the rational and free part of ourselves. Owen Ware (2014) also argues that in respect, we become aware that we are free to act morally. According to him, the process of this awareness involves pain because our path for realizing that we are free to act morally includes the realization that we have used our own freedom in the past to act immorally (see 5-18).
might not mean such agents could not act morally well at all, it would mean that they would require other incentives (or perhaps a forceful, alienating will to obey) to motivate themselves to action.

The second thesis Kant needs because of the relationship he posits between self-conceit and respect is what I will call the *Pervasive* thesis:

**Pervasive:** *All human beings tend towards self-conceit.*

If it turned out that some human beings were not subject to self-conceit, these human beings would also not be capable of experiencing respect.\(^{10}\) This possibility is inconsistent with what Kant claims in the passage at hand. Further, if *Root* were true and *Pervasive* false, that would mean that, because all immorality had its source in self-conceit (as *Root* claims), and some human beings did not experience self-conceit (as the denial of *Pervasive* entails), some human beings would be free from the flaw that gives immorality much of its draw for human beings. Hence, they would be free from the struggle to avoid immorality. Aside from the fact that this seems implausible, Kant explicitly claims that no human beings are completely free from the tendency to want to do immoral things.

*Root* and *Pervasive* would be unnecessary if, in his discussion of respect, Kant indicated that this was just one way respect could be experienced. He does not do this. Hence, the error that he labels “self-conceit” must fulfill these theses. I have indicated that many interpretations of self-conceit analyze it as arrogance that assumes superiority over others—a kind of unconditional self-admiration that makes one’s own self seem to be the most important thing in the world. I will now explain why this trait could not fulfill *Pervasive* or *Root*.

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\(^{10}\) *Pervasive* also must be true in order for Kant to be right that we can know a priori—that is, independently of any empirical survey—that respect will arise in all people, as Kant also claims at 5:73.
2. Arrogance is Not Enough

The standard reading of self-conceit cannot plausibly fulfill *Pervasive* because human beings do not all suffer from inextinguishable pride that comes at the expense of their proper respect for others. Some human beings are mired instead in self-doubt and the sense that they are not important. Feelings of worthlessness are listed as a symptom of major depressive episodes and disorders, for example.11 Human societies are also often laced with oppressive practices that impress upon some groups of people the claim that they are inferior. There is a large literature describing personal experiences with oppression and the way oppression targets one’s sense of self-worth.12

Martin Luther King Jr.’s letter from Birmingham Jail provides one example. In the letter, King explains his impatience with those who are urging that he and others involved in the Civil Rights Movement be less aggressive in their call for change. The letter conveys a broad spectrum of factors that come together to make oppression demeaning:

Perhaps it is easy for those who have never felt the stinging darts of segregation to say, "Wait." But… when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six year old daughter why she can't go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her eyes when she is told that Funtown is closed to colored children, and see ominous clouds of inferiority beginning to form in her little mental sky… when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading "white" and "colored"… when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of "nobodiness"—then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait.13

Although the fact that some human beings are made to endure these kinds of conditions does not disprove *Pervasive* on the standard reading of self-conceit, it forces upon it the implausible

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11 See, for example, the American Psychiatric Association entry on depression at http://www.psychiatry.org/depression, as of 23 Jan. 2015.
12 See, for instance, Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Albert Memmi’s *Dominated Man* (1971), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), or, much more recently, George Yancey’s “Whiteness and the Return of the Black Body” (*Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 2005), among others.
13 The entire letter can be read at various websites online, including Martin Luther King Jr. Online <http://www.mlkonline.net/speeches.html>, where many of King’s other speeches and writings can also be found.
corollary that even the individuals who wrote testimonies like this tended to think they were superior to others. This is, at the very least, a difficult position to maintain.

Further problems arise when we consider Root. If we read self-conceit as interpersonal arrogance, then Root claims that self-conceited pride is the moral problem for human beings. But debasement is an equally serious obstacle to human virtue.14 Consider the following case: a secretly insecure bully lashes out at her classmates not because she thinks they are putting on airs, but because she thinks they genuinely are smarter, more attractive, and overall better than she is. By scaring and hurting her classmates, she manages to gain a kind of respect from them that is, as far as she believes, the closest thing to equality with them that she could ever have. In her mind, this is the only way that she can avoid all of them noticing her (she believes) obvious flaws, teasing her, and laughing behind her back.

There are other cases, even if this bully case seems implausible. Immoral action does not always involve directly harming others—it can also involve failing to stand up for them. For every bully, there will also likely be bystanders: people who believe that what is going on is wrong, and yet who cannot bring themselves to stop it. Here, a lack of self-importance can be just as morally dangerous as arrogance. The motivation behind bystandance can easily come in the form of trouble convincing oneself that one has the status, knowledge, or capacity to say that something is wrong.

Because Kant wants self-conceit in this technical sense to play a role which requires it to fulfill both Pervasive and Root, we have reason to think more closely about what exactly is self-
conceited about it. In order to see whether or not Kant’s texts necessitate the standard interpretation, we have to return to the details of how exactly self-conceit works.

3. Systems of Inclinations and Self-Conceit

Self-conceit, recall, is one of the two types of self-regard that Kant claims are tightly related to our inclinations. In self-love (the first type of self-regard), our inclinations constitute our self-benevolence, whereas in self-conceit (the second type), they constitute our self-satisfaction. There is something restrictedly appropriate, on Kant’s view, about our inclinations constituting self-benevolence (as they do in self-love), whereas they can never appropriately constitute self-satisfaction (as they do in self-conceit). He claims that the moral law only limits self-love, whereas it destroys self-conceit in a more thorough way (5:73). So far, though, we have not gone into much detail about exactly how inclinations are related to these two types of self-regard.

Stephen Engstrom (2010) offers one explanation of how our inclinations are involved in self-love. According to Engstrom, people develop self-love when they learn that they are a necessary condition of the pleasure they experience when they fulfill their inclinations. They come to care for themselves on this basis: as facilitators of happiness. On Engstrom’s reading, self-benevolence is an attitude we have towards ourselves: a kind of affectionate feeling. However, Kant also sometimes discusses benevolence in terms of a program for action. When Kant discusses our duty to love our neighbors in the Metaphysics of Morals, for instance, he suggests that we ought to think about this duty as a duty to benevolence “as conduct” (6:401). Although we cannot control whether we feel emotional love towards other human beings, we can control how we treat them—and we must treat them well. When Kant claims that we tend to let
our system of inclinations constitute our self-benevolence, he could mean that in self-love, we allow our inclinations to similarly influence our actions. In other words, self-love could amount to adopting a commitment to act in accordance with inclination—to care well for oneself specifically as a being with sensible wants and needs.

On either Engstrom’s reading or the conduct reading, self-love is not completely misguided. We are sensible beings with inclinations, and we value that aspect of ourselves. That, however, is not all we are. So the moral law limits self-love. It adds a proviso: inclinations may guide our action or ground love for ourselves, but they cannot do it alone—they must be regulated, in turn, by the moral law.

In the case of self-conceit, however, inclinations are tied up not with the agent’s self-benevolence, but rather with their “self-satisfaction.” Kant uses this term interchangeably with “self-esteem.” The esteem of self-esteem differs from the love of self-love in that esteem involves a positive assessment of something. We must compare esteemed objects to some standard, and they must earn their esteem by comparing well.\(^\text{15}\) It is this kind of earned self-assessment which, according to Kant, our system of inclinations ought not even partially constitute. But there is an open question about how our inclinations could in any sense constitute (however mistakenly) such an assessment. Some leap of reasoning is required to move from facts about what one wants to a conclusion about what kind of esteem one has earned.

According to Engstrom, our inclinations play a role in our (self-conceited) self-assessment when we take the mere fact that we have a conception of happiness as confirmation that we are superior to others. As he explains it, in self-conceit, we come to think of ourselves

\(^{15}\) Engstrom also notes this characteristic of esteem, in contrast to affection (see 2010, 109). He makes the further point that esteem as an aesthetic judgment is also relative to the subject: “it lies in feeling, in one’s consciousness of the effect one’s own comparison of the object with oneself has upon oneself” (ibid). I am going to be leaving the aesthetic aspect of judgments of esteem implicit in this discussion—I believe nothing turns on it for my purposes.
“as worthy of esteem on account of [our] cognitive power… to determine an end” and form conceptions of the good (2010, 108). But, as we noted, esteem requires a point of comparison against which the esteemed object looks good, and the observation that one has the power to set ends does not readily suggest one. Engstrom concludes that “[s]elf-conceit’s esteem for self can therefore only be indirect, through depreciatory judgments concerning others” (109). In other words, the self-satisfaction we build in self-conceit can only be built on the belief that our capacities prove others inferior. Thus, self-conceit must be arrogance of the kind that assumes superiority over others.

Engstrom is not alone in thinking that self-conceit must have something to do with a judgment that we are better than other people. According to Allen Wood (1999), for example, Kant believes that human beings first learn to esteem themselves on the basis of their superiority over nonrational animals. This leads them to want to use similar grounds to claim superiority over other human beings, and this illicit claim is what Kant means by self-conceit (241). Andrews Reath (2006) also sees self-conceit as interpersonal arrogance, describing it as “a disposition to assign oneself a standing to treat oneself and one’s subjective concerns as objective reasons that one does not and cannot acknowledge in others…to accord oneself a special standing to make claims on one’s own behalf in virtue of one’s superior worth” (25, emphasis mine).

However, this is not the only way to explain the relationship our inclinations have to our self-assessment. Instead, we can understand self-conceit as a tendency to overvalue our own inclinations, taking the conception of happiness they help us construct as a guide for how to earn esteem for ourselves.16 This reading of self-conceit still respects the observation that esteem

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16 This interpretation makes the relationship between self-esteem and inclinations similar to the relationship between self-benevolence and inclinations as I suggested we understand it. In both cases, the inclinations are used to present
requires comparison. Instead of supposing that self-conceited agents take others as their point of comparison, however, it suggests that they esteem themselves based on how well their actual state matches up with the ideal state of happiness they construct on the basis of all of their inclinations taken together. In other words, they tend to mistake the measure of their happiness for the measure of their worth.

The claim that people tend to measure their worth in terms of their happiness may seem unintuitive. However, if we examine it more closely, we will see that it is actually rather familiar. Even if we do not fully consciously endorse this claim, many of our natural reactions to happiness and unhappiness seem to presuppose it. It is not uncommon to conclude directly from one’s achievement of happiness that its mere existence proves that one has earned it—and thus earned esteem. This is one of the facts about us that makes it difficult for us to recognize our privileges. We tend to feel proud of ourselves for being able to acquire the things we want—even in cases in which the acquisition had little to do with our own skill. We can see this familiar leap of reasoning in the old poem: “Little Jack Horner sat in the corner, eating a Christmas pie; he put in his thumb, and pulled out a plum, and said, ‘What a good boy am I!’” Kant sees this as a natural way to think, too. He notes that “[p]ower, riches, honor, even health and that complete well-being and satisfaction with one’s condition called happiness, produce boldness and thereby often arrogance as well unless a good will is present which corrects the influence of these on the mind” (4:393).

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a program for action. In the case of self-benevolence, the program is one that the agent adopts as what they will do; in the case of self-esteem, the program is one that the agent adopts as (in addition) what they believe they ought to do.

17 Human happiness, as Kant explains elsewhere (6:27), is comparative: our judgments about how happy we are depend on how other people around us are doing. (I argue elsewhere that this comparativity is due to the way humans use their rational capacities to extend and alter their originally instinctively determined desires, and that it does not indicate that people are actually directly concerned with being better than other people.) Because human happiness is comparative, the self-conceited standard will also involve comparisons with other people. That is not what is wrong with it, however. Comparisons with others in and of themselves are not problematic, on Kant’s view.
Just as the good life can feed into arrogance, circumstances which compromise happiness can feed into a sense of personal worthlessness. Here we can turn again to oppressive social conditions as an example. Oppression is often accompanied by intense restrictions on the abilities of people to pursue important components of their conceptions of happiness. Some forms of oppression trap individuals in poverty or refuse them the chance to pursue education and satisfying careers. These conditions place limits on the extent to which oppressed individuals can achieve the kind of happy state that fuels pride so naturally, according to Kant, and maintaining a base-line of self-esteem in these conditions can be very difficult. Unsurprisingly, movements working to change conditions for oppressed people often focus especially on pride.

It is actually quite natural for human beings to weave together their state of happiness and their sense of value as a person. Arrogance is a vice that tends to assail us when we look around ourselves and see luxury and endless opportunities—but when we find ourselves struggling to make ends meet, it is more likely that we will have to fight to convince ourselves we still deserve to be treated with respect. Since the error Kant calls “self-conceit” is supposed to be something to which all human beings are subject, it would be good for Kant’s theory if the error he meant to refer to was this tendency to respect oneself (or chastise oneself) on the basis of one’s prudential achievements alone.

4. Errors in Law-Making

Kant also offers a description of the error that underlies our tendency to be subject to self-conceit. My proposed reading of self-conceit remains promising when we examine this description. Before I explicate the description in more detail, a brief note on Kant’s vocabulary is necessary. In this passage, “subjective determining grounds of choice” refers to our inclinations.
These are “subjective” in the sense that they are what happens to be the case for each of us, based on our own experience of what is pleasurable and what is not. An “objective determining ground,” however, is something we have reason to act on not because of our personal preferences, but because of sharable, universal considerations. So, when Kant contrasts ourselves “as having subjective determining grounds of choice” with ourselves “as having objective” ones, he is contrasting our physical selves with our purely rational or moral selves.

According to Kant, we are led into self-conceit by the following error:

[W]e find our nature as sensible beings so constituted that…objects of inclination, whether of hope or fear… [come to] us, and we find our [sensible] 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 powerful impression that our physical existence makes upon us, Kant claims, people act as though their inclinations justify objective laws for what he calls “the will in general”.

The German phrase Kant uses, “des Willens überhaupt,” is ambiguous, as is the English translation, between something like “the wills of all rational beings,” and something like “the will generally.” These two options lead to two very different ways of understanding what it means to make the claims of self-love into something law-giving for the will in general. If we understand “the will in general” as a general will encompassing all rational beings, then making the claims of our self-love law-giving would have implications for the wills of others in particular. In that case, self-conceited agents would make self-love law-giving by legislating it to other agents, claiming that they are required to serve the self-conceited agent’s self-love.
If we understand “the will in general” as the agent’s own will generally, on the other hand, then making self-love lawgiving would have implications primarily for self-conceited agents themselves. The self-conceited agent would legislate their own self-love to themself, requiring of themself that they serve it, with all the force with which they are actually required to obey the moral law.\(^{18}\)

This distinction between the two ways we might think of human beings as mis-assigning ought-claims gets to the root of the difference between self-conceit understood as interpersonal arrogance and self-conceit understood as an overvaluation of inclinations. In the first case, what is objectionable about self-conceit is precisely the agent’s orientation towards others. Their error is thinking that others owe them too much and that they owe others too little. 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 (or assigning ought-claims) 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 (directly) a mistake about what others owe them. And our second model of legislation only requires each agent to look out for themself, implying at most that each person’s own inclinations are important to that person. What is being asserted in this case is not really the value of any one individual over others, but rather the superior importance of the *inclinations* of each individual over the other components that make them up. In assigning self-love as an objective law to themselves, self-conceited agents also assign

\(^{18}\) Andrews Reath (2006) also introduces this distinction between two ways of legislating self-love (24). Reath prefers the second reading, whereas I will be arguing here for the first.
themselves a standard against which they can measure up well or poorly: the standard requires them to satisfy their inclinations, and hence, to be happy.

I am going to label these two readings of self-conceit as follows:

**(Personal)Self-Conceit:** Unconditional satisfaction with oneself, seeing oneself as superior to others, out of the implicit belief that one’s own self-love is lawgiving for all agents and that one must therefore have a privileged value compared to others.

**(Sensible)Self-Conceit:** Satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with oneself premised solely on how happy one is, based in the implicit belief that one’s self-love is lawgiving for oneself and that one’s inclinations are of privileged value compared to one’s other characteristics.

Most commentators have understood self-conceit in the (Personal)Self-Conceit way. One reason (Personal)Self-Conceit is appealing is that it sounds a lot more like what we usually mean when we call someone self-conceited. I will discuss that problem for (Sensible)Self-Conceit in Section 6. Another reason (Personal)Self-Conceit is appealing, however, is that it frames Kant’s moral theory in a way that is more amenable to contemporary moral thought. Kant’s portrayal of the immoral person as someone who unduly prioritizes sensibility and his claim that the moral problem with humanity is our tendency to neglect our own rationality seems to miss the fact that morality has important things to say about how we relate to others. (Personal)Self-Conceit helps with this problem by framing the overvaluing of sensibility as really just a way of valuing oneself over others. Since it is much easier for us to see how the

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19 Not all recent authors have readings of self-conceit which follow (Personal)Self-Conceit. For example, Owen Ware (2013) argues against the claim that self-conceit is identical to a tendency to think of oneself as superior to other human beings. On the other hand, Ware does not draw out the ambiguities I have noted here and does not see self-conceit as an immoral tendency (see 2013; 2, 11, and 18), whereas I do. There are also authors who see immorality in Kant’s theory as embodied by something more like (Sensible)Self-Conceit than (Personal)Self-Conceit, but who focus entirely on what Kant calls “radical evil” and do not directly engage with self-conceit and its role in the production of respect. In their assessment of radical evil, Pablo Muchnik (2009) and Jeanine Grenberg (2005) both emphasize the fact that it cannot be fully understood on the model of interpersonal arrogance. Because (Sensible)Self-Conceit does have moral implications and thus is tied to Kant’s writing on radical evil and immorality in general, it seems to be friendly to these views. Yet another author who rejects the characterization of self-conceit as primarily rooted in arrogance is Kate Moran (2014). I discuss her work in more detail in footnote 24.
person who demands that others bend to their will is immoral, (Personal)Self-Conceit seems to bring Kant’s theory closer to common-sense morality. However, I have shown that (Personal)Self-Conceit is inconsistent with both the Root and Pervasive theses in ways that reveal it to fall short of the conception of immorality we want, even in common-sense terms. Turning to the text, we will see that it also falls short of the conception of immorality Kant wanted.

5. Textual Problems for (Personal)Self-Conceit

Kant indicates in a variety of texts that he is concerned about the human tendency to belittle oneself. One such text is Kant’s “An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?” In this text, Kant describes enlightenment as “the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority” (8:35). A self-incurred minority is, according to Kant, a state in which one refuses to use one’s own reasoning “not [because of] lack of understanding but [because] of lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another” (8:35). He reports that this state is encouraged by the guardians of a great part of human society, who make sure that their wards have an exaggerated impression of how dangerous it is to reason for oneself (8:36). Kant does not label self-incurred minority a moral flaw. However, it is only in emerging from this condition that human beings can think for themselves and confidently use their own reason. Since using one’s own reason is essential to moral behavior according to Kant, self-incurred minority functions as an obstacle to moral virtue, and thus as something respect ought to be able to aid humans in overcoming.21

20 This is “minority” in the sense of being a “minor” or child.
21 To the extent that an agent in a self-incurred minority fails to use reasoning at all, of course, they would be unable even to arrive at the “I ought” judgment that must precede the feeling of respect. However, I think this is an exaggeration of what such a condition would require. Kant believes that human beings are moral creatures, after
Kant’s concern about our tendency to think too little of ourselves is also displayed in his discussion of duties to the self in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. In his justifications for the prohibitions against suicide, masturbation, excessive use of drugs and alcohol, and even lying and avarice, Kant insists that the problem with these actions is that they degrade or “throw away” one’s self. These actions and states, according to Kant, are morally unacceptable because they make one into a “mere means” (6:423) and “like a mere animal” (6:427); they “debase” one “beneath the beasts” (6:425) and leave one with “even less worth than… a mere thing” (6:430). Kant could not have thought that the mistaken psychology that permits these acts always involves the assertion that the agent in question is *better* than all other rational beings.

Kant’s discussion of servility is also illuminating. Servility is Kant’s word for the state we are in when we fail to demand decent treatment from others. Behaving servilely, according to Kant, violates the moral requirement not to let our “insignificance as a human animal… infringe upon [our] consciousness of [our] dignity as a rational human being” (6:435). Kant even suggests that this flaw is more pervasive in people than arrogance. At the end of his discussion of servility, Kant considers a worry about the “elation of spirit” or “esteem for [oneself]” that arises in proper moral respect. The worry is that such esteem is too similar to arrogant self-conceit and that as a result, humans would do better to try to temper it (6:437). He responds as follows:

> Preferential tributes of respect in words and manners even to those who have no civil authority—reverences, obeisances (compliments) and courtly phrases marking with the utmost precision every distinction in rank… does not all this prove there is a widespread propensity to servility in human beings? (6:437).

In some of Kant’s four examples of moral action in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, he also seems to indicate more of a concern with what an agent’s self-legislation...
implies for their *self*-respect, than for what it implies for their respect of others. Consider first the example of the unfortunate man who “wishes for death and yet preserves his life without loving it, not from inclination or fear but from duty” (4:398). Kant writes that the reason suicide is not permissible in this case is that the man is a human being, and “[a] human being… is not a thing… [and] cannot, therefore, dispose of a human being in [his] own person by maiming, damaging or killing him” (4:429).22 There are other ways Kant could have assessed this case, many of which would have attached the wrongness of the man’s potential suicide to an elevation of his own wants and needs over those of others. He could have pointed out the likelihood that the man’s suicide would cause others sadness or guilt, or referred to a duty not to abandon others.23 This would frame the man’s suicide as something selfish and arrogant, incompatible with his duty to respect others. The most salient thing to Kant, however, was that the man could not commit suicide and respect *himself*.

All these elements in the text run against (Personal)Self-Conceit, according to which the conflict between self-conceit and the moral law comes down to a conflict between selfish arrogance and an appreciation for the needs of others. (Sensible)Self-Conceit has a textual advantage because it can encompass immoral action rooted in both pride and self-degradation.

6. (Sensible)Self-Conceit and the Text

If we read self-conceit as (Sensible)Self-Conceit, we read Kant as saying that those who are self-conceited make the mistake of associating how happy they are with how good they are or how much they are worth. This means that for lucky individuals who are able to achieve what they want in life, their luck will be accompanied by arrogance. These individuals will believe

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22 The example of the man who fails to develop his talents has a similar structure (see 4:430).
23 In fact, Kant was aware of these possible lines—see 6:422.
themselves to be living up to the highest standard set for human beings and will believe they have earned superiority over anyone who has not done so.

But (Sensible)Self-Conceit also allows for the possibility that humans will be discontented with themselves and view those around them as more worthy of respect than they are. The false standard set by (Sensible)Self-Conceit dictates that anyone who is particularly unhappy is failing to do what they ought to do as a human being. It implies that such unhappy individuals are not as valuable as other people: if they need to degrade themselves before others in order to achieve their basic wants and needs, then, according to (Sensible)Self-Conceit, this is exactly the behavior that is appropriate for them. In other words, (Sensible)Self-Conceit also encourages servility and other wrongs motivated by a sense of worthlessness. Both the reminder to respect others and the reminder to respect oneself are capable of striking down (Sensible)Self-Conceit.

There is one very obvious textual problem for (Sensible)Self-Conceit, however. Kant chose to call this tendency “eigendünkel”: that is, quite straightforwardly, self-conceit. Kant uses this term elsewhere in a variety of ways. Demanding that others respect one more than they respect themselves (6:462), crediting oneself with a good will when in fact one has only been wishing to do good things (27:358), and assuming that one can fulfill the moral law “quite purely by [one’s] own efforts” (without the aid of God) (27:350), among others, are all labeled self-conceit. These things are not identical, but they all involve assigning credit where it is not due. On the face of it, this works against my hope that Kant has given us an account of immorality that goes beyond other-degrading arrogance. However, on closer inspection, my reading of self-conceit as it appears in the second Critique does fit in among these other uses of the term.
After Kant has introduced the feeling of respect, he emphasizes the importance of the fact that we feel respect, instead of spontaneous liking, for the moral law:

The moral level on which a human being... stands is respect for the moral law. The disposition incumbent upon him to have in observing it is to do so from duty, not from voluntary liking or [as something he] undertakes unbidden, gladly and of his own accord; and his proper moral condition, in which he can always be, is virtue, that is, moral disposition in conflict, and not holiness in the supposed possession of a complete purity of dispositions of the will. (5:84)

Here, Kant explains that respect for the moral law stands in contrast to another type of disposition toward morality, which is not possible for us: liking. But in (Sensible)Self-Conceit, we presume that we have exactly such a disposition. By identifying what the moral law commands of us with what we want, we act as though we have the sort of nature that naturally aligns perfectly with the moral law. In a sense, this is arrogant.

Kant uses the term “self-conceit” to refer to this variety of arrogance elsewhere. He uses self-conceit in this way, for example, in his discussion of “moral enthusiasm,” which involves the insistence that morally good actions are done (or should be done) from liking:

By exhortation to actions as noble, sublime, and magnanimous, minds are attuned to nothing but moral enthusiasm and exaggerated self-conceit; by such exhortations they are led into the delusion that it is not duty—that is, respect for the law whose yoke... they must bear, even if reluctantly—which constitutes the determining ground of their actions... but that it is as if those actions are expected from them, not from duty but as base merit. (5:84-5)

This way of thinking leads people, according to Kant, to a “fantastic cast of mind, flattering themselves with a spontaneous goodness of heart that needs neither spur nor bridle” (5:85). The problem with thinking that we are naturally morally good in this way is not that it would be unfortunate if it were true. The problem is that it is not true. In acting as though it were, we end
up being morally careless. The type of arrogance that Kant calls self-conceit in this passage is exactly the type of arrogance implicit in (Sensible)Self-Conceit.24

There are also further textual advantages to (Sensible)Self-Conceit. Recall that Kant claims that in self-love and self-conceit, our sensible self asserts itself “as if it constituted our entire self” (5:74; my section 4). This description implies that self-conceit is most fundamentally a misinterpretation by individuals of what they are and what kinds of things can be expected or required of them because of that. It is difficult to explain why a tendency to interpersonal arrogance would be based in the illusion that our sensibility is all we are. However, this

24 In noting that self-conceit is arrogant in this regard, I approach another contemporary interpretation of self-conceit in Kant. Kate Moran (2014) argues that self-conceit is conceited not in its dismissal of others, but in its pretensions to moral perfection. However, on her reading, self-conceit involves a warping of moral principles designed to make sure that we can always reassure ourselves that we are perfectly virtuous. This in turn leads self-conceited agents to demand too much respect of others (if they happen to be around), since self-conceited agents believe they are perfect and hence morally superior to (imperfect) others. Nonetheless, self-conceit is not fundamentally the arrogant assertion of oneself over others (see 434).

On my understanding, by contrast, self-conceited agents elevate their wants into law-like obligations. While this guarantees that they will never doubt that they are attempting to do the morally best thing, it does not, as I understand it, mean that they will always judge themselves to be morally successful. This is so because of an important difference between the way that moral decisions (or acts of willing) and prudential decisions (or acts of willing) have their worth. Kant argues that moral respect attaches to the nature of decisions themselves, not to their actual results (the good will is good not because of what it achieves, but because of what it wills). This makes the agent who assesses themself morally in charge of their own self-respect in an important way: their self-respect cannot be withdrawn (on properly moral grounds) as a result merely of the world’s failure to cooperate. By contrast, self-conceit leads people to ground their self-respect in their happiness, assessing themselves on the basis of the prudential merit of their decisions. This kind of merit (and hence respect that is grounded in it) does require the world’s cooperation, since the worth of a prudential decision does depend upon its actual results. Hence, self-conceited respect cannot be guaranteed to an agent even if they fully commit to earning it. Although the self-conceited agent can comfort themself with the thought that their desires always merit fulfillment, they will not always think well of themself in comparison with others—because they will not always be able to fulfill those desires.

Moran supports her reading in part by pointing out that self-conceit is described as solipsistic, and by drawing a comparison between moral self-conceit and logical self-conceit. In both cases, the agent isolates themself by refusing to accept the disagreeing judgments of others, perceiving themself to be correct (logically sound or morally good) despite their lack of real evidence. I do not think Kant always means exactly the same thing by “self-conceit,” so this line of argument exerts somewhat less pressure on my own reading. However, it is also worth noting that self-conceit is still solipsistic on the (Sensible)Self-Conceit reading, in the sense that the agent thinks that they alone have access to their moral obligations and their moral condition (only they can know whether or not they are happy, after all, and inclinations are private evidence, which only provide information about what is required of the agent themself). My reading can also maintain a close parallel between logical and moral self-conceit in that both cases assign mere whims (the logician’s faulty reasoning and the agent’s desires) more legitimacy than they deserve, ignoring the fact that these things (the reasoning or the desires) are not universalizable. My reading just will not support the claim that the self-conceited agent, in so isolating themself, guarantees a positive self-assessment.
description turns out to be particularly insightful if we understand self-conceit in the (Sensible)Self-Conceit way.

According to (Sensible)Self-Conceit, self-love turns into self-conceit when we take all of self-love’s advice about how to feel good and use it to set up a standard of assessment for ourselves. Under this description, self-conceit identifies self-love with the moral law, and thus identifies our inclinations with our rational and our moral capacities. It collapses what are in fact two different elements of our identity into one. Kant’s comment that self-conceit involves mistaking our sensible self for our “whole” self highlights this. It makes clear the primary reason why self-conceit is problematic for us: namely, that the standard of assessment it involves (which makes our value contingent on the inclinations we are able to satisfy for ourselves) is not appropriate for a being who is both sensible and rational.

This collapse of the two aspects of ourselves is, in different senses, an underestimation and an overestimation of ourselves. It is an overestimation, as we have seen, in that it assumes our wants are angelic—always tracking the moral law. But it is also an underestimation, in that we fail to recognize that our sensible passivity is not the full story of who we are. Allowing our will to be determined by our inclinations amounts, according to Kant, to “heteronomy,” since our sensibility is always to some degree contingent and under the control of nature (5:43). By adding to this heteronomy, as we do when we are under the sway of self-conceit, the judgment that it is appropriate for us, we act as though we were less than the free beings we are. We ignore the fact that we have, as Kant puts it, a higher “vocation” than simply to satisfy our sensible desires (5:87), and a worth that is not contingent on the cooperation of nature.

So (Sensible)Self-Conceit leads people to directly degrade both themselves and others. The self-conceited agent degrades all human beings by acting as though the only value humans
have comes from their ability to realize their sensible desires. And their insistence that their sensible desires automatically align with the moral law also buys into the falsehood that it is not good enough to be the kind of being who follows the moral law out of respect, under constraint. In self-conceit, humans seek to be the kind of spontaneously good creatures that they are not. Self-conceit, then, amounts to a deep kind of self-rejection: an unwillingness to accept that the flawed nature human beings really do have is valuable enough in itself.

**Conclusion**

Many have read self-conceit as it appears in Kant’s account of respect as primarily constituted by the failure to properly respect and take notice of others. However, this reading is in tension with Kant’s clear textual concerns about self-degradation, and the conception of immorality it gives overlooks important ways in which people can find it difficult to do what they ought. I have argued instead that self-conceit is a happiness-emphasizing conception of self, which overvalues the inclinations. When life goes well, this self-conception and the standard of assessment that it implies do lead to the opinion that one is worth more than others. When life goes badly, however, they lead to the opposite (and no less harmful) misunderstanding. Self-conceit is prideful in that it treats what is in fact an amoral part of the human being (the sensible part) as though it were moral, using it to determine not only prudential advice, but also what the agent morally ought to do. It is self-shaming, however, in that it rejects the discipline-based form of value that humans *can* have according to Kant, and bases their worth on contingent facts about nature, fortune, and social success.

The moral law corrects this misunderstanding by striking down the prideful aspect of self-conceit, revealing that our sensible nature has no guaranteed connection to the moral law.
But it also uplifts us by reminding us that we are free rational beings, with a moral vocation and a dignity within our control. The respect that these corrections call up in us has a profound and real effect on the way we treat others, if we understand the moral law properly. But first it affects us as individuals, driving us towards the revolution of self that must take place before any truly good relations with others are possible.
Bibliography


