

### ***Synopsis:***

This paper is about Immanuel Kant's notion of the "predisposition to humanity." Kant introduces this notion in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and marks it out as a comparative form of self-love. Because of our predisposition to humanity, according to Kant, human beings are unable to think of themselves as happy if others are better-off than they are. Kant claims, further, that it is this tendency which leads human beings to care so much about the opinions of others. Allen Wood has argued that Kant's definition of the predisposition to humanity reveals that he thinks human beings are fundamentally arrogant creatures who wish to be superior to other human beings, even though other human beings are all, morally speaking, their equals.

In the following paper, I argue for a different interpretation of the predisposition to humanity in an attempt to help Kant avoid the thesis that all human beings think they deserve superiority over their peers. After introducing the predisposition to humanity as Kant describes it, I will explain how we can understand each of the two elements of the predisposition—attention to the states of others and attention to the opinions of others about oneself—without positing the sort of all-pervasive human arrogance which I believe to be implausible.

First, I will explain how Kant's account of our rational faculties can help him explain why we care about the states of others. According, to Kant, rationality provides us with the ability to imaginatively compare goods that we instinctively want with new goods, extending our desires beyond the limits assigned to them by nature. Without adding anything further to this faculty, it can account for our tendency to direct our attention to the states of other human beings when assessing our own happiness. As Kant makes clear, imaginative comparativity allows us to extend our desires not only to objects which resemble the *objects* we already desire, but also to

objects which seem to be beneficial to *creatures* who resemble us. As such, this capacity can clearly account for our tendency to want what other human beings have without the help of the claim that we think we are or ought to be *superior* to them.

Then, I will explain how our dependency on other human beings for the achievement of our goals can lead us to be instrumentally interested in their good opinion. Because, as human beings, we have many desires that outstrip our own finite reach, we often require the help of others in order to get what we want. If others think well of us, they will be more likely to help us. This provides us with a reason to care about the opinions of others. Further, Kant is explicit about the fact that relationships with other human beings are important to us for their own sake, as they make up an important element of human life and happiness. Since good relationships also require the good opinions of others, our social tendencies also account for the fact that we pay close attention to the opinions of others.

As such, I think that we can understand why Kant defines the predisposition to humanity as he does without attributing to him the pride-based view of human nature and its flaws that is presented by Allen Wood. I will also note along the way a few problems that I see with Wood's own interpretation—particularly that it seems to run counter to other parts of Kant's text, in which he claims that *all* of humanity's natural predispositions are actually predispositions to the good.

## *Comparativity and Superiority in Kant's Theory of Human Nature*

### **1. Introduction**

In one of Immanuel Kant's later texts, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, he offers a definition of what he calls the "predisposition to humanity" (see Kant, *Religion*, 6:27).

Here is Kant's definition of the predisposition to humanity:

The predisposition to humanity can be brought under the general title of a self-love which is physical and yet *involves comparison* (for which reason is required); that is, only in comparison with others does one judge oneself happy or unhappy. (Kant, *Religion*, 6:27)

This description of Kant's understanding of humanity has led some readers, most notably Allen Wood, to conclude that on Kant's understanding of human nature, humans are deeply prideful and ambitious creatures, driven by a desire to be superior to others. However, I think that this understanding of human nature is overly dark, and that Kant's text does not commit him to it. In the following paper, I will argue for an alternative way of reading and explaining Kant's understanding of humanity. On this reading, our happiness takes the strange shape that it does in part because of our rational capacities and in part because of our socially dependent natures—but not because of any innate desire to be superior to others or an innate tendency to believe oneself to deserve such superiority.

### **2. Humanity**

Allen Wood's view, as expressed in "Kant versus Eudaimonism" and elsewhere, is that Kant believes our interest in happiness is dependent upon our understanding happiness as something that can help us claim to be better than other people. He cites Kant's definition of the

predisposition to humanity in section 5 of his paper “Kant versus Eudaimonism,” for example, as evidence for the claim that on Kant’s theory, happiness is attractive to human beings only as a way of asserting superiority over each other. Wood also expresses this view in *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, marking out ambition as the most basic form of immorality in human beings, and writing that it “involves three distinct but closely related things: (1) a tendency to think yourself better than others, (2) a desire that others think of you as better than they are, and (3) a desire to be better than they are” (Wood, *Thought*, 263). He also writes in the paper “Self-Love, Self-Benevolence, and Self-Conceit” that we have a desire to be happier than others, which “also makes an *objective* claim to *superior self-worth*” (Wood, *Self-Love*, 147). However, I think that Kant’s texts allow for a different explanation of how the comparative element enters into human happiness.

Kant’s definition of humanity is at least not straight-forwardly an endorsement of the view that human beings desire superiority at a basic level. In the passage in which Kant introduces the concept of humanity in the *Religion*, he goes on to write that while the peculiar, comparative type of happiness we have produces “the inclination to gain worth in the opinion of others,” this inclination is originally one for “merely equal worth: not allowing anyone superiority over oneself, bound up with the constant anxiety that others might be striving for ascendancy”, and yet “from this [that is, the anxiety that others might be trying to rise above one] arises gradually an unjust desire to acquire superiority for oneself over others... for the sake of security, as a preventive measure” (6:27). So, what is primary in human nature, according to this text, is only a desire to be and be seen as the *equal* of others. That desire is combined with the fear that others will constantly be trying to make themselves better-off.

So, Kant's definition of the predisposition to humanity indicates that although human beings may be interested in happiness simply because it would be agreeable to experience, they will be unable to experience it if they are surrounded by other human beings who think little of them or are better off than they are. The question is why human beings are disposed to have their would-be happiness poisoned if others do not like them or seem to be better off than they are. I will present the explanations that I believe Kant can give for these claims one at a time. First, I will explain why human beings care about how the status of others compares to theirs. Then, I will explain why they care about the *opinions* others have of them.

### 3. *Comparing States*

One of the reasons that Wood gives for his interpretation of Kant is that he believes the posit of a deep-seated human obsession with superiority is needed in order to explain why we care so much about the states and opinions of others. In his article "Self-Love, Self-Benevolence, and Self-Conceit," Wood suggests that pride must be at the root of our humanity because pride is the explanation for the fact that human beings use their rational skills to compare themselves and their states with other human beings (see Wood, *Self-Love*, 146). The more basic sort of rational comparison we make is one that Kant presents very clearly in his interpretation of the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, in his essay "Conjectural Beginning of Human History." Kant begins his exposition of the story by suggesting that we think of the "voice of God" as the natural instincts of the original human animals—instincts which non-rational animals follow without question (Kant, *Conjectural*, 8:111). For Kant, the moral of the story of Adam and Eve, in which the original human beings deviate from the voice of God, is that "it is a peculiarity of reason that, aided by imagination, it can invent desires not only *without* a corresponding natural urge, but

even *contrary* to it” (ibid). The way that reason manufactures such desires is by allowing the rational agent to imaginatively compare things that he or she instinctively wants to other objects, thus potentially extending the desire for the original object to something new.

For Kant, then, the story of Adam and Eve represents the very first time that human beings used their rationality to break loose from instinct and form their own plans and conceptions of what would be good for them. Of that occasion, Kant writes:

Perhaps it was only a fruit, the sight of which invited him, through its similarity with other agreeable fruits that he had already tasted, to experiment. Or perhaps an animal whose nature was fit for the consumption of the fruit also provided an example for him, on whom, however, such consumption had an opposite, harmful effect, and was consequently resisted by a natural instinct in him. (8:112)

Adam and Eve, on this understanding of the story, become attracted to the fruit on the forbidden tree possibly because it resembles other objects (the fruit of the other trees) that they find satisfying naturally. Alternatively, the attraction comes from observing another animal which bears some similarity to them (the snake, presumably) finding the fruit satisfying.

The question that Wood seeks to answer is how the tendency to make these sorts of rational comparisons could have developed into a tendency to compare one’s state with the state of other human beings. As he understands it, the development of this further comparative tendency began with humans’ realization that their ability to transform their own desires by means of reason gave them a status higher than non-rational animals. Kant writes that after human beings realized within themselves “a capacity to choose a way of life for [themselves] and not, as other animals, to be bound to a single one” (8:112), they were “completely raised...above [their] society with animals” (8:114). At this point, the paradigm human being of

Kant's story "no longer viewed [non-rational animals] as his fellows in creation, but rather as means at his will's disposal and as tools for attaining any chosen ends" (ibid). So, the human capacity to use reason comparatively led human beings to understand themselves as valuable beings and as beings *higher* in value than all non-rational animals.

According to Wood, this simultaneous realization of self-worth and of *higher* worth than non-rational animals is the catalyst for the predisposition to humanity, in which humans begin to look to the states of others in order to determine their own value:

When the human being thinks of his dignity or absolute worth by contrasting himself with the other animals, he expresses it in a *comparative* judgment, asserting the superiority of his natural being over that of brutes and other nonhuman natural things.

This prepares the way for the self-conceited assertion of his natural superiority over other *rational* beings or (what is equivalent to this) of the priority of his natural desires over the universal laws of reason." (Wood, *Thought*, 241)

What is significant about our original ability to use rational comparativity, according to Wood, is that it provides us with our very first opportunity to esteem ourselves, and this esteem comes hand-in-hand with the judgment that we are superior to other (non-rational) animals. This leads us to associate our esteem for ourselves with superiority over other beings, and we greedily extend that esteem for ourselves to an illicitly high self-esteem, in which we assert ourselves even over other rational beings, who are our equals. This sense of our superiority over others leads to a need to confirm it for ourselves and others, and thus, we come to care about others' states and compare them to our own.

On this interpretation, we care about the states of others because we think that we deserve to be in a *better* state than them. We believe that this is the ground of all our worth as human

beings. The sense that we need to confirm our superiority in this way takes over our psychology to such an extreme extent that even our desire for happiness becomes just a desire for happiness as a ground for and confirmation of our superiority. All of this, however, goes beyond what Kant comments on when he discusses comparativity. In the Adam and Eve story that he recounts in the *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*, Kant does not note any tendency of human beings to go too far with their new-found superiority. In fact, he notes exactly the opposite, that the human's newly acquired view of animals implied "(however vaguely) the thought of its contrary: that he may not [act as he did towards non-rational animals] to another *human being* but should rather regard the latter as an equal recipient of the gifts of nature," since it implied that he was now the equal of all rational beings. (Kant, *Conjectural*, 8:114).

And the text supplies us with an alternative explanation about how our uniquely human type of comparativity came about. We have seen from the story of the Garden of Eden that on Kant's view reason gives us the ability to imaginatively manufacture new desires for ourselves. We often do this by examining objects around us for similarities between them and the objects we already know to be satisfying to us. We can also do it, however, simply by seeing that beings that are similar to us in some way find an object, however foreign, satisfying. This is how Kant understands the scriptural claim that the snake had something to do with the eating of the forbidden fruit, recall (8:112). Other human beings bear an obvious similarity to us: they are of the same species. When we see them enjoying anything at all, we have some grounds to be curious about how that object might benefit us: a new desire is produced to have the object or something like it ourselves.

This factor on its own is enough to make us add the acquisition of this object to our conception of happiness and to make us feel that we have not completely achieved an ideal state



of happiness yet. On this understanding of the transition between, first, rationally comparing unfamiliar objects with familiar ones in order to form new desires to, second, comparing our own *state* with that of others, the catalyst is simply reason itself, given the circumstances that the reasoner is a human being. The catalyst need not be reason *combined with* a deep-seated irrational pride.

#### ***4. The Opinions of Others***

So far, it is clear how human beings come to care about the states of others and why they cannot feel completely satisfied in their achievement of happiness if others are better off than they are. The next thing to explain is how it is that, as Kant puts it, “Out of this self-love [which judges itself happy or unhappy only in comparison with others], originates the inclination to gain worth in the opinion of others” (Kant, *Religion*, 6:27). Wood’s explanation of this in *Kant’s Ethical Thought* is that we come to care about the opinions of others because we desire to be worth more than them. Since there is no way for us to become worth more than them *in fact*, our only means to thinking ourselves superior to them is to get them to admit our superiority to us (incorrectly) in their opinions of us (Wood, *Thought*, 263). However, I would like to argue for an alternative explanation.

First, I would like to note some problems with Wood’s explanation of our tendency to worry about the opinions others have about us. One problem is that his account of the source of our desire that others think well of us does not explain Kant’s claim that our *original* desire is just that others *not think poorly* of us—which original desire is then aggravated by our paranoid fear that others will do their best to think poorly of us (Kant, *Religion*, 6:27). Another problem is that the claim that humans come ready-made with the sort of pride which could never be morally

acceptable (namely, the kind that degrades others) seems to run up against Kant's insistence that all of our natural pre-dispositions—predisposition to humanity included—are in themselves predispositions to the good (Kant, *Religion*, 6:28). And finally, Kant claims that our inclination to gain worth in the opinion of others arises from our tendency to judge ourselves *happy* or not based on whether or not our condition compares well with the conditions of other human beings. He does not say that our care for the opinion of others comes from our tendency to judge ourselves *valuable* or not based on how our condition compares with that of others. So, it is at least the case that Wood's reading of this passage requires a fair amount of rational reconstruction.

Instead, I would like to argue that on Kant's picture, we care about the opinions of others originally because of our desire to achieve happiness. There are two facts about human beings that explain why the desire for happiness leads to concern about the opinions of others. Firstly, by keeping in good standing with our peers, we make our ability to be on a par with them in terms of welfare more secure. If people believe themselves to be superior to us, they are less likely to be uncomfortable with any dramatic difference there is in our respective states of well-being. The good opinion of others can also lead quite directly to a tendency on their part to help us, so we have some good reason to care about their opinions so long as we have difficult-to-reach and ever-changing goals. The usefulness of other human beings (and thus their good opinion) is only increased given that we have a comparative notion of happiness, since this makes it the case that what we want will often be exactly what others have or know how to acquire.

Secondly, the opinions of others are important to us because they are essential for good relationships with others. Kant is well aware that humans have a direct need for the society of

others. As he remarks about friendship in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, although human beings have their unsociable characteristics, “[t]he human being is a being meant for society” (Kant, *Metaphysics*, 6:471). Human relationships are important to us not merely for their instrumental value, but also for their direct value to us. He even goes so far as to say that any human being who is able to find a truly trustworthy friend with whom he can share his wishes, fears, and secrets, thereby escapes as state in which he is “completely alone with his thoughts, as in a prison” (6:472). One of the important elements of any human conception of happiness, because of the basic human drive for socializing, is community and friendship. And since, as Kant understands it, friendship requires very essentially that the two people in the friendship respect and care for each other equally (see Kant, *Metaphysics*, 6:469), it is clear how opinions are important for this uniquely valuable good. In order to share ourselves and our lives with others, we must also manage to stay, to the extent that we can, in their good graces.

## **5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, Kant’s texts do indeed support the claim that human beings care a great deal about how their own states compare to others’ and about what others think of them. However, Kant also provides a way of explaining this human tendency which does not require claiming that all human beings are prideful or liable to think of themselves as better than others. The rational capacity for imaginative comparison in its more basic form can be seen to be a force that would lead human beings to look to what their neighbors have when forming their conception of what they want—and the human desire for companionship, along with our clear dependence on the aid of others in achieving the other elements of our comparative idea of happiness, is sufficient to explain how we come to care a great deal about what others think

about us. According to Kant it is not immorality, but our finite human nature, which determines our form of happiness.

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