

The Art of Contentment

Cheshire Calhoun
Arizona State University

We are temporal beings. We are conscious of the temporal unfolding of actual events; we have expectations about how events will or ought to unfold; and we can imagine how counterfactually they might have unfolded. We are also evaluators. We assess the good and bad aspects of our present condition and the present we might have had had things turned out differently. It is part of being an evaluator that we can imagine what would have been (even) better. For such beings, the present persistently offers a plethora of opportunities for discontent.

Given that basic aspects of our nature make us susceptible to discontent, it is no surprise that contentment is often elusive. And it might seem that there is not much we can do to about that. However, while *susceptibility* to discontent comes with the territory of being human, individuals have a hand in the degree to which discontentment pervades their life experiences.¹ Being disposed to be contented, as opposed to discontented, with what the present offers is, I want to suggest, a virtue.

However odd this may seem, there is historical precedent for the view. Eighteenth century Christian moralists took a lively interest in the “art of contentment.”² To be

¹ As happiness researcher Sony Lyumbomirsky points out, almost a century of research indicates that objective features, such as level of wealth, social status, and kinds of life events account for
² See, for example, Smith, Rev. Mr. 1777. *The Great Duty of Contentment and Resignation to the Will of God*. London: Printed for and Sold by the Author, 1777); *Three Short Discourses on the Manner of Christ's Teaching, the Fear of God, and Christian Contentment*, abridged from Leland, Rogers, and Amory by a member of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge

discontent with the earthly life God provides, and to be so despite the promise of eternal, perfect contentment in the afterlife, was, they thought, a vice and a sin. Contentment, by contrast is a religious duty and a virtue, and Contentment with one's present, earthly condition, whatever it happens to be, is both a virtue and a religious duty, a view that continues to have contemporary appeal

As might be expected, a main reason offered for there being a duty of contentment is that discontent rests on the mistaken view "that things might have been better ordained,"³ and "that some other Situation or Circumstances would have been better or happier for us."⁴ If, however, we bear in mind that the God who permits us to be afflicted in this life, is the same God who, out of his goodness and benevolence, will provide us with everlasting happiness, we will realize that present afflictions must also be aspects of his goodness and benevolence. Central to the art of contentment is reflection on both the "awful and adorable excellencies and perfections"⁵ of God and on the way justly inflicted woes and iniquities "improve us in the exercise of virtue,"⁶ thereby qualifying us for the next life. The force of these observations is to suggest that all apparent bads are in fact goods. There are no genuine misfortunes, so we have no warrant at all for discontent.

(Newark: Printed and sold by S. and I. Ridge, 1800?); William Webster, *The New Art of Contentment; contained in an Essay upon Philippians iv. 11.* (London : printed by J. Everingham and T. Reynolds. And sold by Deputy Clarke; and W. Russell, 1754); A Gentleman of Glasgow, *An Essay on Contentment. In which this Important Subject is Treated after a New Manner* (London: Printed for J. Davison, in the Poultry, 1749),

³ *Three Short Discourses on the Manner of Christ's Teaching, the Fear of God, and Christian Contentment*, abridged from Leland, Rogers, and Amory by a member of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Newark: Printed and sold by S. and I. Ridge, 1800?), 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

⁵ Smith, *The Great Duty of Contentment*, 19

⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

This is not the view I plan to endorse. On the contrary, I begin from the assumption that our present condition is almost always an imperfect one. It is part of being an evaluator that we are capable—and often quite correctly so—of imagining what, counterfactually, would have made our present circumstances (even) better. Thus we often take ourselves to have reason both to discontentedly lament unimprovable circumstances and to strive to improve those that are improvable.

Were the warrant for discontent *simply* the presence of some genuine bads, then we would almost always be warranted in responding to our present circumstances with discontentment. Given a nearly universal warrant for discontent, contentment with imperfect conditions would suggest an inability or refusal to acknowledge the negative facts, and thus an inappropriate—and perhaps dangerous—unresponsiveness to reasons. Alternatively, contentment might suggest that the content, despite recognizing genuine bads in their circumstances, are nevertheless willing to lower their sights and settle for less rather than striving for better. In Charles Griswold’s words, “contentment seems to be the road to mediocrity”⁷ and an enemy of appropriate striving. In either case, a disposition to contentment seems an unlikely candidate for a virtue.

Yet time spent around the chronically discontented who, to use the 18th century language, continually “murmur and repine” against their condition, circumstances, and other people, naturally prompts a different thought: The chronically discontent seem criticizable, even when they respond to genuine bads in their circumstances. The problem is not just that the discontent, with their constant complaining and criticizing, are *unpleasant* to be around. Even if they were able to control the outward manifestation of

⁷ Charles Griswold, “Happiness, Tranquillity, and Philosophy,” *Critical Review* 10, no. 1 (1996): 1-32, 17.

their discontent, there seems something deficient in being disposed to focus on what is flawed, inadequate, or disappointing. Nor is the problem that the discontent are *mistaken* in their assessments of what is flawed, inadequate, or disappointing. Often enough they are quite right. Indeed, their being right is part of what makes them difficult to be around; they invite us to become similarly discontent. The problem is that the discontent seem deficient in a capacity for grateful appreciation of what is good even in imperfect circumstances, intolerant of imperfection, and ego-centrally focused on their own welfare. Most fundamentally, the chronically discontent may strike us as having gone wrong not by exaggerating how bad their circumstances are, but in having *misplaced, or at least unnecessarily high, expectations about how good their circumstances must be in order to be good enough to be content with*. It is *that* thought that I intend to pursue.

So we have two main questions before us: What are contentment and discontentment? And is a disposition to contentment really a virtue?—would it make us better people, not just bearers of enhanced well-being? If so, what makes contentment a virtue?

I. Two Types of Contentment

Eighteenth century Christian moralists talked about two fundamentally different kinds of contentment, and it is important to be clear, before turning to our two main questions, how those two kinds of contentment differ and which one is a candidate for a virtue. On the one hand, there's the kind of contentment that many people believe they will have after death--complete and everlasting happiness—and that we fleetingly have in this life--for example, as you lie on the beach, listening to the waves, a warm breeze

blowing over you, and a margarita in your hand. “Ah, I couldn’t be more content!” you might exclaim. This is contentment with *a perfectly good condition* containing no bads that could warrant discontent. This contentment is largely out of our control. It is granted by God or serendipity. As such, it’s not a likely candidate for virtue.

Moreover, given the unlikelihood that our present condition *is* perfect, those who claim to be contented because their condition is perfectly good are likely to be victims of delusional thinking. Exactly this thought is at the center of Barbara Ehrenreich’s *Bright Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America*.⁸ The cultural promotion of positive thinking, whether on self-policed breast cancer chat sites, in the new mega churches, or in corporate culture has gone hand in hand, she argues, with delusional thinking. Ehrenreich, herself having suffered from breast cancer, caustically observes the way that cancer victims are encouraged to avoid negative thinking.

In the most extreme characterization, breast cancer is not a problem at all, not even an annoyance—it is a ‘gift’ deserving the most heartfelt gratitude. One survivor turned author credits it with revelatory powers, writing in her book *The Gift of Cancer: A Call to Awakening* that “cancer is your ticket to your real life. Cancer is your passport to the life you were truly meant to live.”⁹

More dangerous was the delusional positive thinking that kept in play the outrageous mortgage lending practices that ultimately ended in an economic crash. In short, if contentment is, as Charles Griswold suggests, “a state of mind severed from an

⁸Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bright-Sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking has Undermined America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

appraisal of the truth of the matter,” then contentment cannot be a virtue.¹⁰ The negative features you refuse to acknowledge in order to be content with a “perfect” condition are ones you should acknowledge.

So let us set aside contentment with a perfectly good condition.

The second kind of contentment that 19th c. Christian moralists focused on was contentment with one’s present earthly condition, whatever it happens to be. This is the contentment one might find even in the face of failure, painful infirmities, and in general, unsatisfied wants¹¹ where one recognizes the badness of one’s condition and thus its imperfections. This is contentment not with a perfectly good condition, but with a *good enough* condition. Because achieving this sort of contentment is a challenge, it looks a better candidate for virtue. Indeed, the 18th c. Christian moralists routinely offered St. Paul’s affirmation “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content,” as the model for such virtuous contentment.¹² Such contentment, some argued, better suits the reality of the human condition: “The present Life is so full of Uncertainty, Disappointment and Afflictions, that it is in vain to attempt making ourselves happy by bringing our outward Circumstances to be in all Respects agreeable to our Wishes.”¹³ Given that pinning our hopes for happiness and contentment on our desires being perfectly satisfied is unlikely to be met with success, the only realistic option for achieving contentment is to “enjoy with a grateful Heart the natural Comforts and Satisfactions of Life”¹⁴ and to “turn our View to every Consideration that may awaken a

¹⁰ Griswold, “Happiness, Tranquillity, and Philosophy,” 17.

¹¹ Smith, Rev. Mr. 1777. *The Great Duty of Contentment and Resignation to the Will of God*. London: Printed for and Sold by the Author, 1777), 37.

¹² Philippians 4:11.

¹³ *Three Short Discourses on the Manner of Christ’s Teachings*, 24.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Sense of Gratitude in our Minds; and thus, by cultivating an active, thankful and chearful [sic] Spirit, effectually debar the very Entrance of Discontent into our Bosoms.”¹⁵

It is a disposition to the latter sort of contentment—contentment with imperfect conditions--that I want to explore as a virtue.

II. What are Contentment and Discontentment with Imperfect Conditions?

Contentment and discontentment, I suggest,

1. are dispositions to engage in *counterfactual thinking* about one’s present condition
2. include a “*good enough*” (contentment) or “not good enough” (discontentment) judgment
3. where counterfactual thinking about and assessment of one’s present condition are a function of one’s *expectation frame* about the level of desire satisfaction one is “entitled” to expect and in relation to which one’s present appears comparatively good, thus good enough...or not.
4. are *stances* toward the evaluative facts
5. are *practical (or quasi-practical)* attitudes connected with an inclination to resistance or non-resistance to the imperfections of our condition
6. and are *value appreciating* attitudes. In particular, contentment is a form of propositional gratitude.

1. Counterfactual thinking about the present. Some emotional attitudes are, centrally, dispositions to engage in counterfactual thinking. Regret is a disposition to

¹⁵ Gentleman of Glasgow, *An Essay on Contentment*, 26.

think counterfactually about how things might have turned out otherwise in the past. Hope is a disposition to entertain possible futures and to prefer one of them. Contentment and discontentment with an imperfect present resemble regret and hope in this respect. The discontented are disposed to imagine how the temporal unfolding of events might have proceeded differently, producing a present condition that better satisfies their desires. The discontented home-buyer imagines having ended up with a home with a better view (“If only the one down the street had been available!”) or with a lower sales price (“If only home prices weren’t inflated!”). Thus, the discontented think “Things could have been better!” The contented, by contrast, imagine how the temporal unfolding of events might have proceeded differently, producing a present condition that does not satisfy their desires at all or satisfies them less well. The contented home-buyer imagines homes that she looked at and could have ended up buying had her present, better home not been on the market. Thus the contented think, “Things could have been worse!”

To be disposed to this sort of counterfactual thinking does not mean that the contented and discontented always *do* entertain such thoughts. But they are at least disposed to acknowledge the relevance of particular sorts of counterfactual thoughts. The discontent, for example, readily accept others’ observations to the effect, “Well, that could have turned out better for you!” and resist consoling observations to the effect that things could have turned out worse.

The disposition to deploy counterfactual thinking distinguishes contentment and discontentment from being pleased or glad and from being displeased or unhappy. The contented’s and discontented’s evaluative assessments are comparative: “This is comparatively good. It could have been worse!” “This is comparatively bad. It could

have been better!” By contrast, being pleased, glad, displeased, unhappy require only a positive or negative assessment of desire satisfaction: “I got what I wanted,” “I didn’t get what I wanted.”

2. *The (not) good enough judgment.* Fortified by the thought that things could have been worse, the contented view their condition as good enough; fortified by the thought that things could have been better, the discontented, view their condition as not good enough. *But what makes a condition good enough? When is contentment with an imperfect condition appropriate?* The warrant for contentment cannot be the complete absence of genuine bads. This would be to assume that only a perfect condition warrants contentment. What we are looking for is an account not of perfect contentment, but of contentment with imperfect conditions.

A tempting alternative thought is that there is, along the scale of value gradations, some qualitative degree that marks the boundary between what is good enough, despite there being higher possible qualitative degrees, and what is not good enough. The good enough *falls high enough* on the scale. So one need only tote up the goods and bads, arrive at an all-things-considered judgment of the degree of goodness, and check to see whether this reaches or falls short of the “good enough” mark. John Lachs takes this approach in his essay “Good Enough.”¹⁶ In his view, the good enough reaches the mark of the “clearly excellent,” even if less than perfect.¹⁷ Thus the good enough is not simply what will do, or what is adequate, or what reaches a minimal level of acceptability.¹⁸ Something is good enough, he claims, when it “simply [does] not need to be better than it

¹⁶ John Lachs, “Good Enough,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 23, no. 1 (2009): 1-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

[is]; it [is] plenty good and thus good enough.”¹⁹ Settling for the good enough in this sense permits one to have both high standards and to “dissolve the eternal dissatisfaction that permeates Western industrial society and substitutes joy in the immediacies of life for all-encompassing guilt.”²⁰

The difficulty with this view is not only that it sets the mark for “good enough” too high to capture many quite ordinary cases of being reasonably contented with the good enough, but that it thinks that there is *a* mark to be set. Instead, one wants to know “Good enough *in relation to what?*” Lachs is interested in a good enough relative to having high standards without being unrealistically perfectionist. Satisficing offers a different measure: good enough in relation to finite cognitive and temporal resources. Both Lachs’s high standards frame and the satisficing frame are expectation-setting frames: What level of desire satisfaction ought one to expect if one has high standards? What level of desire satisfaction ought one to expect under conditions of limited cognitive and temporal resources? But, as I shall detail in a moment, there are plenty of other yardsticks for measuring the good enough. So the choice of “clearly excellent” as the mark of the good enough seems arbitrary.

Moreover, to search for a single qualitative degree that marks the boundary between the good enough and the not good enough is to assume that there is one, determinable fact of the matter about whether one’s present condition is good enough or not. One might however think, as I do, that there is no such fact of the matter. Whether one’s situation is good enough or not depends entirely on the expectation frame one begins from: The good enough is as good as could be expected *given* a particular

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 7.

expectation frame. Relative to some frames, your condition will be good enough. Relative to other frames, the same condition will not be good enough.

Here is a little illustrative story: My father always ordered apple pie when we ate out. He happened to have extremely high normative expectations about the quality of pie a restaurant should deliver. Those expectations were nearly always (severely) disappointed. His pie was never good enough. It could have been better. I, all too familiar, with this recurrent scene of discontent, sometimes thought to myself, “From a statistical point of view, mediocrity is what one might expect. Surely some of these pies are a cut above the statistical norm and better than one could expect!” We approached pies with different expectation frames leading us to reach different good-enough judgments.

Of course, you might think that in any given situation, there is some *one* expectation frame that you *ought* to be using. So even if “good enough” is relative to expectation frame, there is indeed one, determinable fact of the matter about whether your current condition—the current pie, for example—is good enough. That fact is to be discerned by identifying the one correct expectation frame. So let’s turn briefly to expectation frames.

3. *Expectation frames.* By “expectation frame” I mean an operating view about what we are, loosely speaking, “entitled” to expect in the way of desire satisfaction or degree of goodness. It’s an “operating” view in the sense that it influences whether goods or bads are salient, the direction of counter-factual thinking (could have been better, could have been worse), and where the bar for good enough is set. A high normative standards frame, like my father’s or Lachs’s is one possibility. An expectation frame

based on statistical probability is another. The satisficing frame is yet another. And there are even more: what one has been led to expect on the basis of others' promises or guarantees; what befits one's status or role; what would be natural and normal even if not statistically normal; what a person with particular virtues, such as frugality, humility, or compassion, ought to expect; what someone of one's gender, class, profession, talents should be able to expect; what given the hand of luck in life one should expect.

Return now to the pie. Was it good enough? In relation to what? High normative standards? The restaurant's promise of the "world's best pie"? The statistical norm for restaurant pies? Your grandmother's pies? What the global poor might expect to eat? None of these seem clearly *the correct* expectation frame. My father was not clearly wrong to base his expectations on high normative standards. Nor was I wrong to have expectations based on statistical probability. These are simply different bases for thinking one is entitled to expect a particular degree of goodness in restaurant pies. What he and I confronted was the option of choosing either one of the contentment-promoting expectation frames or one of the discontentment-promoting expectation frames. That there are a variety of deployable expectation frames doesn't mean that there is never something to be said for or against particular expectation-frames, a point that will be central in the part III discussion of the virtue of contentment.

4. *A stance toward the evaluative facts.* If contentment and discontentment depend on the particular expectation frame one uses to determine the good enough, this suggests that contentment and discontentment are themselves stances toward the evaluative facts of one's condition.

Consider this temporal unfolding of events: It is 12:04 and I am waiting for my delayed flight out of New York and thinking I can still make my connection in Philadelphia and get home to Phoenix. At 12:05 my flight is cancelled. I proceed to the USAirways customer service desk and am rebooked through Charlotte on a flight that will still reach Phoenix but three hours later than originally planned with a long layover in Charlotte.

I think contentedly to myself: Whew! It could have been a lot worse. I could have been stuck overnight in the airport or a hotel with only dirty underwear in my suitcase. Good thing I only have carry on luggage, so I don't have to worry that my luggage might not be rebooked on the same plane. Now I have more time to read the gripping novel I brought. Since I won't have time to grocery shop and do laundry when I get home, I can just visit with the cats. And there will be plenty of time in Charlotte to find a nice lunch. I wonder if the other people on this cancelled flight were so lucky?

Or perhaps I think discontentedly to myself: Good grief! I'm getting home three hours later, and I won't be able to take care of grocery shopping and laundry tonight. Now I have three hours on uncomfortable seats in Charlotte airport trying to read with TVs blaring and other passengers talking on cell phones. I have to call my pet sitter and let her know I'll be late, and now I have to pay more for parking. And to top it off, I'm going to have a five-hour flight to Phoenix squished in a middle seat. What's wrong with airlines these days?

The two me's know all the same facts about what makes this unfolding of events good and what facts make it bad. As I'm basking in the thought that I've escaped having to grocery shop and do laundry tonight, I'm cognizant that this means these tasks will

have to be added my work day tomorrow. As I'm dreading five hours in that middle seat, I'm aware that I'll get to spend more hours than planned reading my gripping novel.

The facts, which are a mixed bag of goods and bads, do not by themselves decisively warrant being contented over being discontent, or being discontented over being content. Instead, I seem presented with an option: it is up to me which expectation frame to employ and thus which stance I take toward the facts—being content with the present situation or being discontent with it. In the event, I happened to have employed a low-expectation frame governed by memories of sleeping on the airport floor and tracking down baggage that had gone off on a different flight and by thoughts of the low odds of large numbers of passengers getting rebooked onto efficient alternative connections. I don't mean to suggest that there was anything deliberate about my frame adoption. But I do mean to suggest that which kinds of frames we are disposed to adopt is open to cultivation. And it is precisely this fact that opens up a space for contentment to be a virtue.

In suggesting that contentment and discontentment are not dictated by the facts of the matter—in this case by an all things considered assessment of the goods and bads of one's present condition—I here follow Adrienne Martin's analysis of hope and despair as stances that are not dictated by the facts of the matter—in that case, by probability assessments of the desired outcome transpiring.²¹

Martin observes that two people who desire the same outcome can “both agree it is extraordinarily unlikely. One looks at the situation and says, ‘I grant you it is *possible*, but the chance is only one in a thousand!’ The other says, ‘I grant you the chance is only

²¹ Adrienne M. Martin, *How We Hope: A Moral Psychology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

one in a thousand, but it is *possible!*”²² The former despairs, the latter hopes. The difference between the two is not in their subjective probability assessment or in how much they desire the outcome but in how they Gestalt the probability assessment, or as I would say, how they frame it—either in terms of the extreme unlikelihood of the outcome or in terms of its possibility.²³ The hopeful person, employing the possibility-frame, treats the low probability as good enough to “license” activities related to the hoped-for outcome: “turning one’s attention and thoughts—especially by constructing fantasies—to the outcome; feeling a positive sense of anticipation—feeling ‘hopeful’—about it; and relying on it in one’s plans—though only with a back-up plan.”²⁴

Content and discontent have a similar structure. Two people who share the same subjective assessment of the goods and bads of the same present condition may frame those goods and bads differently. Using an expectation frame within which the present outcome is ‘good enough’ licenses reflecting on all the ways in which, counterfactually, things might have turned out worse and focusing appreciatively on the positive features of one’s situation. It also provides the rationale for *feeling* appreciatively content with one’s present condition.

5. *A quasi-practical attitude.* R. Jay Wallace introduces the notion of a “quasi-practical attitude” in his analysis of regret.²⁵ Given that the circumstances that occasion regret are now in an unalterable past, deliberation about what one would have done cannot be focused on forming an intention to act now. Wallace suggests that regret is nevertheless a quasi-practical attitude insofar as reflection on what one would have done

²² Ibid., 45.

²³ Ibid., 23.

²⁴ Ibid., 69.

²⁵ Wallace, *The View From Here*, 55-65.

differently, could one return to the past, can yield conditional intentions for the future: this is what I would do were I in that situation again. In her analysis of hope, Victoria McGeer works out a different conception of quasi-practical attitudes:

although there may be nothing we can do now to bring about what we desire, our energy is still oriented toward the future, limitations notwithstanding. Our interests, our concerns, our desires, our passions, all of these continue to be engaged by what can be; hence, we lean into the future, ready to act when actions can do some good....²⁶

Adrienne Martin works out yet a third conception of what a quasi-practical attitude might be. The activities licensed by hopeful and despairing stances may be largely or entirely internal, taking the form of fantasies about the hoped for outcome, including imagining what one would do if the hoped for future transpires.²⁷

The general idea here is that emotional attitudes can have a practical dimension even when there are no present action options they could motivate and even when their rationales do not figure into deliberation about present action. That practical dimension includes the formation of conditional-intentions, a preparedness to act were there an option to do so, and internal non-goal oriented activities.

This notion of a quasi-practical attitude is useful in understanding discontent. *Sometimes* discontent is a straightforward practical attitude. That your present condition is not good enough—for example you find yourself seated behind a large person who blocks your view of the movie screen—is a (defeasible) reason for framing and acting on the intention to change seats. Much discontent, however, is impotent. The temporal

²⁶ Victoria McGeer, “The Art of Good Hope,” *Annals, AAPSS* 592 (March 2004): 110-127, 104.

²⁷ Martin, *How We Hope*, esp. pp. 61-71.

unfolding of events has produced a present condition that you are simply stuck with, as I was stuck with a less good rebooked flight. In impotent discontent there are no action options to deliberate. But there are still quasi-practical dimensions to this attitude. The discontentment-stance licenses dwelling in thought and imagination on the better, counterfactual unfolding of events; and this naturally invites thoughts about what you would have done if the better counterfactual present had obtained and on the fact that now you can't do those things. These may be frustrated actual intentions (in my plane example, intentions to grocery shop and do laundry that night) or frustrated conditional intentions ("If I had a better income, I would...; but since I don't have a better income, I can't...").

All discontent, whether practical or quasi-practical involves a refusal of the present, which is not good enough. Tamar Shapiro suggests that inclination presents us with a "Do this!" To have an inclination, say thirst, is to see objects in an imperatival mode, for example, to see water as to-be-drunk, and thus to experience inclination as issuing the imperative "Drink this!"²⁸ Similarly, the nonsatisfaction of desire might be said to involve seeing the imperfect situation in the imperatival mode—"Resist this!" The discontentment stance licenses acceding to this imperative. Things are not good enough, so they ought to be resisted. The most effective way to comply with this demand is to change the world. When that's not possible and we are simply stuck with the not-good-enough, the "Resist this!" demand nevertheless persists. Resistance then takes other forms—complaining, blaming, ruminating about the bads, and imagining the

²⁸ Tamar Shapiro, "The Nature of Inclination," *Ethics* 119(2009): 229-256; and "Foregrounding Desire: A Defense of Kant's Incorporation Thesis," *Journal of Ethics* 15 (2011): 147-167.

counterfactual better. This inclination toward avenues of resistance is the *restless mind* of the discontent.

Similar points apply to contentment. Operating with an expectation frame within which imperfect conditions nevertheless appear good enough, the bads are unlikely to trigger a “Resist this!” inclination. Even if they do, the contentment stance licenses not acceding to this imperative. Things are good enough. That one’s condition good enough is a (defeasible) reason for not framing and acting on intentions to alter one’s present condition. Contentment is a practical attitude insofar as the constitutive good enough judgment contributes to deliberation about when *not* to act. Deciding when not to act is important to rational practical activity, since not acting with respect to one feature of one’s situation frees up time and resources, including cognitive resources, to act with respect to another.²⁹ Like discontent, however, contentment may often be a *quasi*-practical attitude, providing the rationale for internal non-goal oriented activities of gratefully appreciating the goods, and reflecting on how things might have gone worse.

6. Value Appreciation. The analysis of contentment offered so far—in terms of counterfactual thinking about how things could be worse, expectation-frames, a ‘good enough’ judgment, and a practical or quasi-practical attitude—is not complete. Where in all of this, one might ask, is the *contentment*, the positive affective attitude that is kin to being happy or pleased?³⁰ To see the problem, recall that the focus has been on

²⁹ As Goodin notes of settling for the good enough, “When settling for something we know or suspect to be suboptimal in this way, we typically do so simply to ‘clear the decks’ so we can focus on other matters for a time” (Goodin, *On Settling*, 29).

³⁰ Writing on happiness, Charles Griswold points out that it is “a legitimate demand in a discussion of happiness...that the notion be explicitly linked up with some view of what it feels like to be happy” (Griswold, “Happiness, Tranquillity and Philosophy,” 12). It is equally a legitimate demand in a discussion of contentment that the notion be linked up with some view of what it feels like to be contented.

contentment with imperfect conditions. Nothing about the imperfect situation precludes experiencing the inclinational imperative “Resist this!” even if one refuses to accede to that imperative because the present condition is good enough. Thus, much of the account provided so far seems consistent with begrudgingly *contenting oneself with* one’s present condition, but not being *content with* it. What can be said about *this* aspect of contentment beyond observing that it is a positive affective attitude?

Let me suggest for now that contentment and discontentment are valuing appreciating attitudes that go beyond the judgments “Good enough” and “Not good enough.” The contented affectively *appreciate* the goodness of their present condition even if they may *acknowledge* its imperfections. The discontented affectively *appreciate* the badness of their present condition, even if they may *acknowledge* that it is not wholly bad. Affective contentment with one’s present condition is a form of propositional gratitude. The contented gratefully appreciate the goods of their present condition, goods that wouldn’t have been present in an alternative temporal unfolding of events, a point to which I will return.

III. The Virtue of Contentment

Is a disposition to contentment—that is, a disposition to employ expectation frames that enable us to see our condition as good enough—a virtue? Are there reasons for *not* employing discontentment-promoting expectation frames? And are there reasons *for* employing contentment promoting-expectation frames?³¹

³¹ In phrasing the question this way, I am assuming that we are talking about people who are capable of correctly assessing the good and bad features of their condition. One might, of course, be disposed to inflate the good and ignore the bad. And this, sure enough, would tend to have the *effect* of making us more rather than less content.

The question of whether contentment is a virtue is not the question we might have been expecting. We are used to thinking that virtuous attitudes are ones that *hit the target*, that get the evaluative facts right. Arrogance is a vice because it gets the evaluative facts about one's own moral status in relation to others wrong. Cowardice is a vice because it gets the evaluative priority one's own safety in relation to other goods wrong. In the case of contentment, however, I've suggested that the evaluative facts do not by themselves determine what is good enough—and thus a proper object of contentment. Once we pick an expectation frame, we *can* determine what is good enough. But it looks like there will generally be many reasonable expectation frames to choose from. Thus if a disposition to contentment is a virtue and a disposition to discontentment is a vice, it is not because there is one correct target that contentment hits and discontentment misses. So the argument for a virtue of contentment will have to take a different form.

I am going to proceed in three steps. In the first two steps, my aim is to undercut a natural temptation to think that discontentment is generally a good thing: If conditions are imperfect, wouldn't it be a good thing to resist them? I'll begin by arguing that discontentment is sometimes the result of using *morally ineligible* expectation frames. Ineligible expectations frames are ones that no one should ever use. Then I'll argue that discontentment is sometimes the result of using *morally eligible* but nevertheless *morally criticizable* expectation frames. In the third step I'll take up the positive argument for deploying contentment-promoting frames: a disposition to contentment is a *corrective* to a bias against appreciating the good.

Ineligible expectation frames. Many vices involve inflated normative expectations about what one is entitled to. And thus, a disposition to discontentment is

often symptomatic of vice. The snobbish, socially proud, and arrogant have inflated views about their own value that distort their normative expectations about who should recognize them and what special attention and privileges they should receive. Those accustomed to power and spoiled by privilege may come unwarrantedly to think that things *ought* to go exactly as they wish them to go. They take mere disappointment as sufficient to make their condition not good enough. The envious not only want no one to fare better than themselves, but may come to believe that no one *ought* to do so. So too may the greedy not only want more than what others receive but may come to hold the normative expectation that they ought to have more.

Thus cultivating a disposition to employ contentment-promoting frames may be central to overcoming these kinds of vices.

Criticizable expectation frames. Even when the discontent use morally eligible expectation frames—ones that are not inherently flawed--their choice of expectation frame may nevertheless be criticizable. The chronically discontented are often vulnerable to one of three criticisms: that they fail to use sufficiently enlarged expectation frames, that they ignore the role of luck in how things turn out, and that they are intolerant of imperfection.

Discontentment is often a product of failing to use sufficiently enlarged expectation frames. Eighteenth century Christian moralists criticized the discontent for failing to use a sufficiently *temporally* enlarged frame. Limiting their view to an earthly life, the discontent frame expectations about the level of suffering they ought to be able to expect to be free of; and finding that their own lives don't meet those expectations, they judge their condition not good enough. But from a temporally enlarged perspective that

includes earthly and eternal, blissful, heavenly life, they ought not to expect to be free from even large amounts of earthly suffering, since this earthly life is but a moment in eternity. “For, what are the momentary Pains and Afflictions of this Life, when compared with *the Glory which shall be revealed hereafter?*”³²

In a similar but more secular vein, one might think that the discontented are often criticizable for failing to use a sufficiently *socially* enlarged frame. Limiting their view to their own social group, they frame socially comparative expectations (based on statistical frequency for the group, or group-based ideals of well-being) about the kinds and severity of bads they ought to be able to expect to be free of; and finding that their own lives don't meet those expectations, they judge their condition not good enough. But from an enlarged perspective of what lives are expectably like across all social strata as well as globally and of how dramatically worse off many persons are, they ought not to be discontent. In the face of global poverty, deprivation, and human rights insecurity, “murmuring and repining” about distinctly middle class woes is criticizable. Maintaining the narrow, group-based expectation frame bespeaks dullness both to one's own privilege and to others' deprivations.

A closely related point might be made about using lateral and upward social comparison frames under conditions of global environmental crisis. Determining what one ought to be able to expect in the way of satisfaction of consumption-related desires by looking to one's affluent peers rather than to what would be globally fair to present

³² *Three Short Discourses on the Manner of Christ's Teaching, the Fear of God, and Christian Contentment*, abridged from Leland, Rogers, and Amory by a member of the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (Newark: Printed and sold by S. and I. Ridge, 1800?), 31.

and future humans and non-humans is morally criticizable. Maintaining an expectation frame calibrated to the lives of one's affluent peers bespeaks dullness to the consequences of high consumption and the importance of eco-injustice.³³

The discontent are also often criticizable for using expectation frames that are insensitive to the role of luck in how one's present condition turns out. Contentment and discontentment, I have suggested, are stances taken toward the way that the temporal course of events has unfolded to yield a mixed array of goods and bads with respect to some feature of one's present condition. Whatever that feature is—the pie delivered to one's table, one's income, the state of one's projects, one's health—it will be partly a matter of good or bad fortune that one's present condition is the way it is. Psychologists, Maria Miceli and Christiano Castelfranchi, suggest that there is a common bias towards translating “the epistemic *should* into the deontic *ought*. That is, what in probabilistic terms, should happen, and I want to happen, turns into what is due, what I deserve and I am entitled to obtain.”³⁴ The result is resistance to accepting disappointments, i.e., discontent. To the extent that this bias underlies discontent, the discontented are criticizable for being insufficiently sensitive to the role of luck in bad outcomes and for

³³ Several writers, for example, have argued for interpretations of traditional virtues—frugality, temperance, simplicity—that are consistent with eco-justice (Nash, “Toward the Revival and Reform of the Subversive Virtue” *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 15 (1995) 137-160; Wensveen, “Attunement: An Ecological Spin on the Virtue of Temperance,” *Philosophy in the Contemporary World* 8, no. 2 (2001): 67-78; Joshua Colt Gambrell and Philip Cafaro, “The Virtue of Simplicity.” *Journal of Agricultural and Environmental Ethics* 23 (2010): 85-108.). On their views, one ought (in my terms) to adopt an expectation-frame with respect to consumption of material goods that is shaped by considerations of what a person ought to expect given the limits of the planet and the present and future needs of other species and global humanity. There is an interesting 19th c. literature that is critical of luxury consumption. See John Davidson, “Luxury and Extravagance,” *International Journal of Ethics* 9, no. 1(1898): 54-73; Henry Sidgwick “Luxury,” *International Journal of Ethics* 5(1894): 1-16; and, on the history of critiques of luxury consumption, Christopher Berry, *The Idea of Luxury: A Conceptual and Historical Investigation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³⁴ Miceli and Castelfranchi, “Acceptance as a Positive Attitude,” 117.

having unwarranted normative expectations about the extent to which they should be free from experiencing bad luck.

By contrast, because the contentment stance licenses appreciative attention to the goods in one's present, imperfect condition it seems more likely to be sensitive to the role of luck. The contented find cause to be grateful that the temporal unfolding of events has proceeded as it has, since it could have turned out worse.

Finally, the discontented are often criticizable for their *intolerance of imperfection*. While there is nothing inherently objectionable about having high, including perfectionist, standards, there is something objectionable about deploying those standards against persons so that one ends up chronically discontent with one's fellows. Writing in the 18th century, Benjamin Bell argued that quarreling and discontent with other people has its source in unreasonably perfectionist expectations for what they ought to be like and do. "We must not expect too much of each other," he warns. "We must expect to find something disagreeable in the closest friends, and in the best of men, with which we should patiently bear....At every trifle we must not scorn to take offense; otherwise we shall find enough to quarrel about as long as we live."³⁵ Making allowances for the imperfections of people and the burdens of their situation was important, he thought, to properly setting our normative expectations. Parishioners, for example, should be careful not to take offense against their ministers for reproofing vice, not preparing their sermons well enough, and presenting dry and lifeless sermons. "People should consider that the *best* of ministers are *but ministers* at their best; that they are subject to weakness and infirmities, in common with other men."³⁶ While Bell's concern was with

³⁵ Benjamin Bell, *The Nature and Importance of a Pure Peace* (Windsor, Spooner, 1792), 14-15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 10-11.

the quarreling and unjustified censure that springs from the discontented's perfectionist expectations, less perfectionist expectations also open the door for appreciating the good in our imperfect fellows.

Contentment as virtue of appreciation. These reflections on discontentment yield only a limited defense of contentment. Contentment is preferable to the discontent prompted by vicious and morally criticizable expectations. But there will be lots of everyday circumstances where content and discontent seem equally appropriate options. Recall me and my father on the subject of restaurant pies or the two me's in the airport. When discontentment would be neither a manifestation of vice nor of morally criticizable attitudes, what reason is there to seek contentment instead? I turn now to that argument. What I want to suggest is that a disposition to contentment is a virtue of appreciation.

In her pluralistic account of virtues, Christine Swanton proposes that a virtue is a trait "whose possession tends to enable, facilitate, make natural, the possessor's promoting expressing, honoring and appreciating value; or enhancing, expressing, honoring or appreciating valuable objects or states of affairs which are valuable."³⁷ Not all virtues exhibit all four "profiles" of virtue. Compassion, for example, tends toward *promotion* of others' well being; humility is not aimed at promoting anything, but both *expresses and honors* others' equal or greater standing. Other virtues are strongly connected with simply *appreciating* value. Gratitude to benefactors, for example, involves a deep appreciation of the value of the benefactor's good will displayed in the benefit rendered or attempted. Swanton mentions connoisseurship as a virtue of appreciation. And one might think that aesthetic sensibility and the capacity to appreciate

³⁷ Christine Swanton, "Profiles of the Virtues," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 76, no. 1 (1995): 47-72, 50.

the wonders of nature are also virtues of appreciation, even if not moral virtues. The capacity to appreciate what is special, delightful, and interesting in particular individuals—a capacity connected with being able to love and cherish individuals — might also be thought to be a virtue of appreciation.

If there are virtues of appreciation, as seems likely, then contentment is a candidate for such a virtue. Contentment is a close kin to propositional gratitude—gratitude *that* something occurred. In focusing on the goods that would have been absent in a different counterfactual unfolding of events, the contented appreciate the goodness of their present condition. They appreciate their good fortune in having events unfold as they did, when they might have unfolded for the worse.

But why think this sort of value appreciation is an excellence, a virtue? Connoisseurship, aesthetic sensibility, appreciating the value of another's good will or appreciating an individual's unique value all involve appreciating what we might call *marked*, or significant, values. Appreciating the good (enough) fortune of receiving a decent if unexceptional piece of pie doesn't involve appreciating anything of marked value. Indeed, the sorts of goods the contented appreciate are often quite quotidian. And it's not just that these seem trivial values by comparison to, say, the beauty of artworks or awesomeness of nature. It's that there is no apparent *difficulty* requiring a *refined skill* for value appreciation in doing so. So what could be excellent about appreciating everyday goods? It cannot be just that the capacity to appreciate value in all its guises is a kind of excellence. The discontented also appreciate value by being keenly mindful of the bads in their present situation.

Not all virtues of appreciation are virtues because they depend on *refined* capacities to appreciate value. Consider gratitude to benefactors. It takes no refined skill to detect and appreciate a benefactor's good will. Yet we often don't appreciate what others do for us. The problem isn't lack of valuational skill, but rather a tendency *not to notice* the effort and cost that went into rendering a benefit. What makes gratitude a virtue is in part that a grateful disposition serves as a *corrective* to a tendency not to attend to the benefactor but instead simply to enjoy the benefit. In short, if we assume that some virtues are primarily virtues of appreciation and that Philippa Foot hit upon a characteristic feature of virtue when she proposed that virtues "are *corrective*, each one standing at a point at which there is some temptation to be resisted or deficiency of motivation to be made good,"³⁸ then contentment--understood as a disposition to use expectation frames that enable appreciation of goods in one's present condition--would be a virtue if it corrects a prevalent tendency to overlook, discount, or minimize those goods.

A variety of factors contribute to just such a tendency. To begin with, features connected with our being *evaluators* and *doers* work against our even noticing the goods in our present condition. As doers, monitoring failures, obstacles, and setbacks is typically more relevant to achieving our practical aims than is attending to how things are going according to plan.³⁹ Failures, obstacles, and setbacks call for resetting ends or means, while the smooth sailing of our plans can be safely disattended. In addition, to be an evaluator is to think in scalar terms about value, a scale whose endpoint is perfection. For any present good or present balance of goods over bads, we can always imagine what

³⁸ Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices: And Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 8.

³⁹ Thanks to Carmen Pavel for this point about our nature as doers.

would be better and more desirable. There is thus a bias built into being an evaluator towards imagining the better that could have been, and thus toward the counterfactual thinking that supports discontent. Both religious practices of counting one's blessings and the gratitude practices investigated by positive psychologists are well-designed to counter biases in favor of noticing the bads and against noticing the goods in one's present condition.

Perhaps more obviously, we live in a competitive and consumer culture that relentlessly encourages the pursuit of more and better, and the thought that whatever we have now is not good enough. Marketing of consumer goods and services depends heavily on advertising aimed at persuading consumers that whatever they presently have isn't good enough and should be replaced with bigger, better, more luxurious goods. Indeed, it is part of the dynamism of luxury goods that yesterday's luxury becomes today's commonplace as ever greater qualitative refinements of existing goods continuously enter the market.⁴⁰ The result of this dynamism is to encourage disattention to and minimization of present goods and to continuously push the good-enough out of the present and into an aspirational future.

Our culture is also increasingly concerned with ratings—rating your purchases on Amazon, rating visits to websites, rating services, rating your sex life, rating restaurants, rating your Netflix rentals. Requests to rate focus our attention less on what's good about our purchases and experiences than on the importance of *five-star* items and the deficiency of anything less. You're perfectly content with your new shoes, but now you have to rate them and it's obvious they're not five-star shoes: they're not as good as they

⁴⁰ Berry, *The Idea of Luxury*, esp. ch. 1.

could have been. Meritocratic workplaces can be particularly intense *fora* for rating. The average academic spends an enormous amount of time rating—rating papers, manuscripts, job candidates, students, prize candidates, programs—where the aim is to find the very best, by comparison to which the less than best are not good (enough).

One of the most tempting expectation frames for determining what counts as good enough—and one that consumer marketing relies on—is the one generated through social comparison. We are naturally social beings, and presumably also naturally status conscious beings. In evaluating what one ought to be able to expect, and thus what counts as good enough, it is natural to look laterally at social peers. Are most of them doing better?⁴¹ It is also natural to engage in upward social comparison with those who have better jobs, better salaries, better homes, more status, better bodies, more stylish clothes, and better vacations. Those with better and more set the standard not only of aspiration but for contentment with one's present condition. Contentment thus gets endlessly deferred to a future present where one will have the more and better as one's present condition appears never quite good enough by comparison to one's social betters.

If contentment qualifies as a virtue of appreciation because it corrects a bias not to notice the good in imperfect situations, then contentment will be in large part a situational virtue. *Some* of the bias that a disposition to contentment corrects for is built into our very nature as doers, evaluators, and status conscious beings. But a substantial portion of that bias is culturally produced.

⁴¹ Looking to social inferiors who are largely faring worse will not, one might suspect, be very informative about what one ought to be able to expect. That social inferiors typically fare worse might only go to show that they have *even more* cause for discontentment, not that one has reason to be content with one's comparatively better lot.

IV. Objectionable Contentment

You may be thinking at this point, “This is all well and good, but surely there are cases where contentment would not be a good thing and where people ought to be encouraged to be discontent.”

Here is one reason for thinking so: Sometimes what enables people to be content is that they expect *too little*. They use normatively distorted expectations frames. So, for example, just as one might criticize the arrogant for using an expectation frame that no one should use, so one might criticize those who have internalized their socially subordinate status for using a normatively distorted frame that no one should use. Some adaptive preferences, for example, depend on wrongly diminished normative expectations; women, the poor, lower castes may think that they ought not to expect to be free from deprivation and abuse and so ought not regard their condition as not good enough. This suggests an important qualification. If a disposition to employ contentment-promoting expectation frames is to be a virtue, it will have to be restricted to *morally eligible* expectation frames. Just as the superiorizing expectation frame of the arrogant is morally ineligible, so will be *morally inferiorizing* expectation frames.

There is no particular oddity in suggesting that a disposition to contentment is a virtue despite the possibility of contentment sometimes being objectionable. Here it is useful to consider analogies between contentment and other trait names for virtues, such as humility, pride, honesty, courage, and industry. All of these traits can take non-virtuous forms. It is “proper,” “appropriate” or “due” humility, pride, etc. that are the virtues. Thus what cases of misguided contentment show is not that a disposition to

contentment is not a virtue, but that this trait, to adopt Foot's words, does not always "operate as a virtue."⁴²

Here is a second objection you might have been thinking about: Wouldn't a disposition to contentment be the enemy of appropriate striving? Contentment, I suggested earlier, is a practical attitude not because it provides us with a reason to improve imperfect conditions, but precisely because it provides us with a reason not to. It is precisely this feature of contentment that has led some to insist that contentment is a bad thing.

I'm inclined to think this concern is misplaced. Those who criticize contentment as the enemy of appropriate striving assume that contentment with one's present condition is incompatible with being motivated to improve one's condition for the future. But this isn't true. Consider the beginning student who is delighted to receive a B on her paper and perfectly content with *this* grade--the paper is her first effort at philosophy and she's done as well or better than she expected. She is moved neither to bemoan the grade nor to argue with the grader. But she nevertheless might exclaim, "Next time, I'll work harder and do even better!" To be contented with one's present condition sometimes just means being satisfied with how the temporal unfolding of events has proceeded *so far*. Thus although contentment's good-enough judgment is a reason not to strive to alter the present, one should keep in mind that conditions that are good enough *now*, may only be good enough under the assumption that they are not enduring conditions.

More importantly, two quite distinct questions need to be kept distinct: 1) What should the ends of my practical activity be and what should I do given those ends? 2)

⁴² Philippa Foot, "Virtues and Vices," in *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 16-17.

What attitude should I have toward the imperfect present? That the imperfect present is good enough given one's expectation frame provides *a* reason not to alter it. It does not necessarily provide a decisive reason. Consider the two me's in the airport. The contented me finds her rebooked flight good enough given her (low) expectation frame for airline service. That's *a* reason for not trying, once she arrives in Charlotte, to find an earlier flight. The question of what to *do*, however, is not to be decided by looking only at one's reasons *for contentment*. Given the original plan to travel efficiently so as to do laundry and grocery shop that evening, there are prudential reasons to try to secure improved flight connections.

In ordinary language, we sometimes do use “discontented” to refer to any instance of seeing ourselves as having sufficient reason to try to improve our condition; and we sometimes do use “contented” to refer (only) to any instance of seeing ourselves as having sufficient reason *not* to try to improve our condition. That usage makes it natural to think that a disposition to contentment is an enemy of appropriate striving, since by definition, the contented would not act to improve imperfect conditions. That usage of “discontent” and “content,” I have been suggesting, fails to capture the nature of these states as *emotional attitudes involving value appreciation*—the kinds of states that the 18th c. Christian moralists recommended as a duty and a virtue, and that I am proposing is a virtue. Given this, it is important to bear in mind that the kinds of reasons that are relevant to answering the question “Ought I to adopt an expectation frame that enables appreciation of the goods in my imperfect present condition?” are not identical with the kinds of reasons that are relevant to the answering the question “What ought I to do given the imperfection of the present?” Suppose, for example, you are a woman working at an

academic institution where there are significant disparities between the salaries of female faculty and the salaries of comparable male faculty. What you ought to do given those inequities and your being positioned to do something about them is to act so as to produce gender equity in faculty salaries. But this does not answer the question of what attitude to have toward those inequities. I have argued that the privileged (as academics are) are criticizable for employing socially comparative expectation frames narrowly focused on their similarly privileged peers and for “murmuring and repining” about the woes local to the privileged. The appropriate expectation frame is a socially enlarged one from whose vantage point it is reasonable to be gratefully appreciative of the goods in one’s present imperfect condition, goods unavailable to the vast majority of workers.

In sum, my aim in recommending contentment as a virtue was not to suggest that we should never be discontent on particular occasions, nor even less that we should cease striving to improve imperfect conditions. It was instead to draw attention to the importance of cultivating a disposition to contentment as a corrective to our biases against, and the vice-induced obstacles to, gratefully appreciating the goods in our almost-always imperfect present conditions.