

Kant on free thinking and its boundaries

Mikhail A. Ivanov^{1*}

¹Moscow Aviation Institute (National Research University), Department of Philosophy, 4 Volokolamskoe shosse, 125993 Moscow, Russia

Abstract. The concept of “free thinking” in the context of Kant’s philosophy presents a theoretical and practical problem. Kant applies the concept of freedom primarily to practical reason and moral philosophy, but elements of freedom (in thinking) can be identified in other sections of his teaching. Free thinking, according to Kant, can be interpreted as thinking activity conducted in the absence of any prerequisites, utmost unboundedness and independence, but having definite boundaries in various areas. The analysis of this ambivalence of free thinking is carried out in such sections of Kant’s teaching as theoretical knowledge, the area of everyday thinking, the social field and the work of artistic genius. One of the tendencies revealed as a result of this analysis is Kant’s desire to postulate the unconditionality of the freedom of thought in different areas, and then to formulate minimum constraints on it. Thus, while proclaiming unlimited freedom “to use his mind and speak on his own behalf” in the social sphere, Kant admits only two restrictive principles: the requirement of scientific knowledge and the presence of goodwill. The most important component of free thinking in the teachings of Kant is the principle of *sapere aude*, which acts as the trigger-mechanism and the foundation of free thinking, as well as the evidence for its sociality and non-mechanistic nature. Research shows that, through the concept of *free thinking*, Kant implicitly formulates the ideal of free thinking, which manifests historical continuation and has lasting value.

Keywords: freedom, Enlightenment, *sapere aude*, ideal of free thinking

1 Introduction

In Kant’s teaching the concept of freedom correlates with the sphere of morality. A moral act is an act performed solely on the basis of the moral law and in accordance with the tenets of practical reason. The motive of such an act is connected with a manifestation of “free causality”. Acts or motives based on any other causality (cognitive, sensible, etc.) are not moral in the context of Kantian philosophy. Consequently, freedom is impossible in any kind of activity in which there is no free moral causality according to Kant. And yet Kant uses the concept of “freedom” with regard to the sphere of cognition, society, artistic activity, etc.

* Corresponding author: ivanovmikhail@gmail.com
ORCID: 0000-0002-2183-4173

Thus, he speaks of *free thinking* as the condition of the enlightenment of humanity (*WA*, AA 08: 35; Kant, 2006, p. 17).

In what sense and on what grounds, in the context of Kantian philosophy, can one speak about freedom in thinking, or about free thinking? This is the question I consider in this paper. My main thesis is that Kant's concept of "free thinking" expresses a certain *ideal*, in which thinking follows the principle of *maximum of freedom with a minimum of restrictions*.

Interpreting Kant's concept of freedom, one can say that freedom, *first*, is a unity of independence and dependence. "Independence" means that it is not conditioned by the real sensible world; "dependence" means that moral actions are conditioned by the moral law, a manifestation of pure will "in which moral concepts and laws have their source" (*MS*, AA 06: 221-223; Kant, 1996, pp. 20-23).

The *second* feature of Kant's understanding of freedom is, I believe, a certain relationship between independence and dependence, manifested in the maximisation of independence and the minimisation of dependence. Free causality is not conditioned by anything other than itself. It does not depend on nature, society, the human's sensible world etc., and depends only on the moral law and essentially boils down to the categorical imperative.

The *third* specificity of freedom manifests itself in arbitrariness, self-conditioning, the capacity to launch a string of causalities without pre-existing grounds in this string, or to initiate a string of causalities of a different quality and in a different respect.

The *fourth* feature of the concept of freedom has to do with a certain activity of the will in resisting external dependencies, which manifests the individual's capacity to act in accordance with duty (moral law) contrary to inclinations.

The above properties of freedom, while they do not exhaust the diversity of Kant's treatment of the concept, may play an important methodological role in considering the concept of free thinking.

Kant interprets the concept of "thinking" as cognition, a thought process following the rules of logic, a conscious or not quite conscious procedure, as representation (Heidegger, 1968, pp. 246-247). It is not my aim to analyse all forms of thought activity. My aim is to analyse, in the context of Kant's philosophy, the key forms of thought activity in terms of the concept of freedom in the sphere of *cognition, daily life and in the sphere of artistic creative activity*.

Contemporary research identifies various types and approaches to Kant's category of freedom. Thus, Igor S. Narsky (1993, pp. 12-21) distinguishes seven types: 1) theoretical freedom as the transcendental capacity of reason to order and construct experience, 2) the same capacity aimed at empirical experience in the form of voluntary submission to necessity, 3) transcendental freedom as moral agitation, the striving of the soul to feel itself to be moral in the world of phenomena and experience, 4) "anarchic freedom", i.e. spontaneous decisions and actions, 5) legal freedom, 6) freedom of religious conscience and 7) freedom of the activity of an artistic genius. This and other works present valuable material characterising Kant's concept of freedom, its manifestation and role both in Kant's teaching as a whole and in its various parts (Motroshilova, 2005, pp. 196-207; Greenberg, 2016, p. 145; Porkeddu, 2018). My approach is different: I consider freedom through the prism of thinking; in other words, I analyse thinking from the viewpoint of freedom and in the totality of certain spheres of activity – cognitive, social and artistic.

2 Freedom in cognition

To describe Kant's treatment of the manifestation of the concept of freedom in the sphere of cognition it is necessary to clarify to what extent this concept, as unconditioned causality, as moral law, functions in the cognitive process, or to what extent (fully or partially) the above properties of the concept of freedom are involved in various forms of the cognitive process.

If cognition is seen as the answer to the question, “What can I know?” in terms of cognising reality, then freedom as following the moral law (categorical imperative) has no place in cognition. The arbitrariness of freedom can merely distort the cognitive process. If what ought to be determines what is, invades and orders reality as it should be, cognition of the world will diverge from the path of truth. Kant, of course, delimits these two spheres (the world of nature and the world of freedom). Freedom cannot be defined by natural laws, it is autonomous. At the same time, in delimiting nature and freedom, Kant leaves an opening for their interaction: the world of freedom *should* have an influence on the world of nature, “yet the latter **should** have an influence on the former, namely the concept of freedom should make the end that is imposed by its laws real in the sensible world” (*KU*, AA 05: 175-176; Kant, 2000b, p. 63).

The above influence should be considered not as a direct instruction to the scientist on how to seek out adequate knowledge (i.e. constructively, heuristically), but as a regulatory influence on cognition, as the possibility of being its external check and motivator.

All knowledge, according to Kant, begins with experience, but is not reduced to experience. The activity of the cognitive capacity is induced by objects “that stimulate our senses and in part themselves produce representations, in part bring the activity of our understanding into motion to compare these, to connect or separate them, and thus to work up the raw material of sensible impressions into a cognition of objects that is called experience” (*KrV*, B 27; Kant, 1998, p. 136). The reworking of the raw material of sensible impressions constitutes a manifestation and to some extent “freedom” with respect to them. Does this happen automatically, or is conscious action (as the condition of freedom) also involved? Kant notes that we can become aware, not at once, but through prolonged exercise, of what cognitive abilities introduce into the sensible material (*ibid.*).

If we are aware of the impact of cognitive capacity on the sensible material and can tell one from the other, this means that we are able, to this or that degree, to control this process, register correct or incorrect use of cognitive capacities, their transgression of the limits of experience etc. In any case activity of consciousness (“freedom” with regard to the raw material of sensible impressions) exists, although this freedom does not have all the properties of freedom (in particular, its moral aspect).

The impact of our cognitive capacity on experience (sensible material) in Kant’s epistemology is considerable. It is a measure of the impact of *a priori* forms of sensibility, the categories of understanding, that Kant says that we give the laws to nature and not vice versa (*Prol*, AA 04:320; Kant, 2000a, p. 112). Moving in the same direction, Hegel (1991, pp. 35, 37) sees *a priori* forms in theoretical cognition as a manifestation of free thinking in relation to experience.

Freedom in cognition is manifested at the methodological and constructive levels: “They [natural scientists, M.I.] comprehended that reason has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design; that it must take the lead with principles for its judgments according to constant laws and compel nature to answer its questions, rather than letting nature guide its movements” (*KrV*, B 10; Kant, 1998, p. 109). The methodological activity of reason manifests itself in the possibility of different approaches to the object of cognition, in the existence of a prior research programme (reason “itself produces according to its own design” what it sees, a strategy of investigation), an independence of reason from nature (it moves forward, compelling nature to answer its questions, rather than letting nature guide its movements”). At the same time reason is not arbitrary in its approaches and strategies. It acts in accordance with the principles of its judgments.

The activity of the cognising subject is particularly apparent in the constructive area. Kant writes: “A new light broke upon the first person who demonstrated the isosceles triangle (whether he was called “Thales” or had some other name). For he found that what he had to do was not to trace what he saw in this figure, or even trace its mere concept, and read off,

as it were, from the properties of the figure; but rather that he had to produce the latter from what he himself thought into the object and presented (through construction) according to a priori concepts, and that in order to know something securely a priori he had to ascribe to the thing nothing except what followed necessarily from what he himself had put into it in accordance with its concept" (*KrV*, B 09; Kant, 1998, p. 108). Here we also see the unity of freedom and conditioning: the figure is constructed, but "according to constant laws"; only that being ascribed to things which necessarily follows from what is encompassed by the researcher in accordance with his understanding. Stressing the dependence of cognition on *a priori* forms, Kant points to the activity of the cognising person: his ability to understand the specificities and possibilities of their use; such mental operations are impossible to accomplish mechanically, calling as they do for conscious efforts of the will as acts of freedom.

The activity of the cognising subject pointed out by Kant has been confirmed by the growing role of theoretical cognition in modern science, the relative independence of theoretical inquiry from empirical data, and constrictiveness as a methodological strategy. Twentieth-century science says that "Physical concepts are free creations of the human mind, and are not, however it may seem, uniquely determined by the external world" (Einstein and Infeld, 2008, p. 33), that the world is oriented toward revolutionary transformations in knowledge, "crazy" ideas and constant scientific revolutions.

Kant's concept does not only exhibit elements of freedom in epistemological cognition. Theoretically, as has been noted, it allows of moral freedom. Kant believes that "nature must consequently also be able to be conceived in such a way that the lawfulness of its form is at least in agreement with the possibility of the ends that are to be realized in it in accordance with the laws of freedom" (*KU*, AA 05: 175-176; Kant, 2000b, p. 63). This approach paves the way for freedom in terms of ethical influence on scientific activity, and not only through external ethical regulators, but also through internal ones. Ethical factors motivate the cognitive process; they are found in the categories of organised scepticism, scientific integrity etc. (Merton, 1973, pp. 267-280). These ethical regulators do not have a heuristic character (Ivanov, 2018, pp. 25-27), i.e. their impact is not constructive but regulative, to use Kant's terminology.

3 Freedom of thinking in the social sphere and in day-to-day experience

Freedom of thought in the social sphere and in daily life can be illustrated by the work *Answering the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* In it Kant identifies two levels of freedom: the *first* is "the public use of one's reason" – each citizen is seen as a social subject regardless of his civil position and office. At this level, a person must have unlimited freedom of speech and public expression. Here he speaks on his own behalf. The only restrictions of this freedom are a grounded opinion (the scientific approach) and the ethical aspect ("carefully examined and well-intentioned thoughts"): "by allowing every citizen [...] the freedom to comment publicly, that is, through writings, in his capacity as a scholar, on that which is flawed in the present arrangement" (*WA*, AA 08: 37-39; Kant, 2006, pp. 18-20).

The *second* level of freedom has to do with a person's performance of civil or official duty. Kant calls this level "the private use of one's reason". Here, common interests require additional restrictions of freedom of thought. Thus, a military officer has to obey orders instead of reasoning on the feasibility or usefulness of this order. However, outside the sphere of his official duties, acting as a citizen, "He cannot, however, justifiably be barred from making comments, as a scholar, on the mistakes in the military service" (*WA*, AA 08: 37; Kant, 2006, pp. 18-19). The same applies to people in other occupations.

It has to be stressed that no person should be deprived of free public expression, indeed Kant argues that it is a citizen's duty to air his thoughts about mistakes and shortcomings, to suggest improvements of this or that type of activity and sphere of life, including criticism of the government (*WA*, AA 08: 39-41; Kant, 2006, pp. 20-22).

Free thinking in the social sphere implies a well-thought-out, scientific statement of a "citizen of the world", addressed to the entire reading public (*WA*, AA 08: 35-39; Kant, 2006, pp. 17-20). These restrictions protect thinking from abuse, "lawlessness" and subjectivism. At the same time, thinking is conditioned by social and ethical prescriptions. It should not be "ill-intentioned", slanderous or meet with general disapproval; it must take into account the interests of various groups and be generally benevolent (*ibid.*).

Kant's logic of defining the boundaries of the public use of reasoning to some extent follows the slogan: "Argue as much as you want and about whatever you want, but obey!" In other words, unlimited freedom of thought is proclaimed and then conditions and limitations on thought are formulated.

Kant's thinking about *the private use of free thought* is largely negative: he believes that most people do not have the courage to think freely. He concentrates on defining the boundaries of free thought. He identifies subjective and objective, internal and external obstacles to free thinking. The subjective obstacles are laziness, fear, habit and lack of will. Why think freely (independently) if someone else can do it for you – be it "a book that reasons for me" (*ein Buch, das für mich Verstand hat*) or "statutes and formulae" (*Satzungen und Formeln*) (ready-made schemes and methods one can use thoughtlessly), fear of being independent both in actions and thinking, inability to solve one's problems without outside help – all this paralyses thought and turns one into a spiritual slave. Kant places particular importance on subjective factors. He argues that the human being is himself to blame for his unenlightened state (unfreedom): it is not lack of reason that made people unfree but lack of determination and courage to use their reason (*WA*, AA 08: 35-36; Kant, 2006, pp. 17-18).

The external and objective restrictions on free thinking, according to Kant, are: lack of education and breeding (a person has not been taught to think freely); the activities of various tutors who guide thinking; social prejudice. Social factors are particularly important for freedom. Kant thinks that, given free thought in society, a person gradually learns to think freely by himself (*WA*, AA 08: 36; Kant, 2006, p. 18).

It will be seen that Kant radicalises the concept of free thinking and seeks to make thinking unconditional, minimising and even eliminating any and every boundary, anthropological and social, internal and external, cognitive and value-specific. His words about a book that "thinks for me" or "statutes and formulae" as abuses of one's natural gifts and shackles for free thought are a graphic example. These words can be interpreted as the renunciation of all amassed knowledge and methodology, and as a denial of uncritical adoption of knowledge or its mechanistic use ("mechanical tools"). The second interpretation is more likely. However, the first also makes sense: starting from scratch, not being constrained by anything, being original.

Kant places particular emphasis in the functioning of free thought on the slogan *sapere aude* (*WA*, AA 08: 35; Kant, 2006, p. 17). Interpreting it as courage (*Mut*), audacity and daring, Kant stresses the importance of personal factors of freedom. Courage as will resting on moral foundations is the trigger of free thinking, a condition of its realisation.

Summing up Kant's views on free thinking, I have revealed its internal and external factors. On the one hand, free thinking depends only on the person, his/her courage and audacity in using his/her reason privately and publicly. Kant argues that thinking is autonomous and that the human being fails to reason freely through his own fault. On the other hand, free thinking is conditioned by external factors, social taboos on public expression of one's thoughts. These opposing factors are very important. In one of his works Kant gives priority to external factors: "Thus one can very well say that this external power

which wrenches away people's freedom publicly to *communicate* their thoughts also takes from them the freedom to *think* [...]" (WDO, AA 08: 144; Kant, 1996, pp. 15-16).

The primacy of social factors of free thinking, of course, does not diminish the importance of the *sapere aude* slogan (to which Kant devoted such inspiring lines). In any case, this contradiction spells out the need to consider the above inter-connected factors in their entirety.

4 Free thinking in the activity of an artistic genius

"[...] only production through freedom [...] should be called art"
(KU, AA 05: 303; Kant, 2000b, p. 182)

Kant's concept of an artistic genius is another example illustrating the ideal of free thinking. The work of an artistic genius is totally free: a genius creates original art works without looking back on any models and rules (KU, AA 05: 508; Kant, 2000b, pp. 186-187). However, for an original work of art not to be meaningless, it must be organised according to a rule. Because an original (inimitable) work of art cannot borrow any rules from outside, the genius has to find the rule within itself. "Genius is the talent (natural gift) that gives the rule to art" (KU, AA 05: 508; Kant, 2000b, pp. 186-187). Kant links the rule with the *nature* of genius, the happy combination of its natural endowments, and maintains that the rules for its works are laid down by nature. However, Kant does not consider a work of art to be a product of instinctive acts similar to those of beehives. Works of art are created by the human being and one cannot but see manifestations of reason in them (KU, AA 05: 303; Kant, 2000b, p. 182). Kant names these manifestations: a genius has to know a great deal, study other works of art, but not in order to imitate them, but to get a stimulus for his own originality. According to Kant, a genius needs reason, taste, imagination and spirit (KU, AA 05: 319-320; Kant, 2000b, pp. 196-197).

Imagination looms large in the creative process. Kant describes richness of imagination as arbitrariness and freedom which, unless it is based on laws, "produces nothing but nonsense" (KU, AA 05: 319; Kant, 2000b, p. 196). According to Kant, reason as law and a check on imagination is esthetic power of judgment. The esthetic power of judgment, interacting with imagination (through a play of reason and imagination) does not only set the bounds of imagination, but orients it in accordance with the principle of wisdom (KU, AA 05: 319; Kant, 2000b, p. 196).

Kant explains the specificities of esthetic wisdom: it is not based on a concept, it fixes the significance of an object for the subject's cognitive abilities, it is not deliberate, to name but a few. The capacity of esthetic judgment and taste (appreciation of beauty) guides a genius (steers it along a certain path, i.e. in terms of practicability). Practicability can be reinterpreted in terms of harmony, agreement between the whole and its parts (i.e. essentially in the formal-structural way). "[Genius] displays itself not so much in the execution of the proposed end in the presentation of a determinate **concept** as in the exposition or the expression of **aesthetic ideas**, which contain rich material for that aim, hence the imagination, in its freedom from all guidance by rules, is nevertheless represented as purposive for the presentation of the given concept" (KU, AA 05: 317-318; Kant, 2000b, pp. 195-196). Thus, the principle of practicability (wisdom) is on the one hand a check on imagination and on the other, a factor of freedom of the regulative act in forming an esthetic idea.

Ethics is another manifestation of the genius's creative freedom. To create an original art work a genius must have courage (*Mut*) and audacity (*Kühnheit*) (KU, AA 05: 317-318; Kant, 2000b, pp. 195-196). These virtues help him to break free of traditions, established rules and models and form the foundation of his freedom and originality. "This courage is a merit only

in a genius, and a certain **boldness** in expression and in general some deviation from the common rule is well suited to him" (*KU*, AA 05: 317-318; Kant, 2000b, pp. 195-196). Characteristically, Kant also uses the term "courage" (*Mut*) as a condition of free thought in his work on enlightenment (*WA*, AA 08; Kant, 2006).

An important regulative principle in the work of a genius is the ideal of *beauty*. The creation of a work of art is regulated not only structurally and functionally (a pointer to its practicability), but by orientation toward a certain type of beauty. Although Kant does not consider the ideal of beauty to be a manifestation of "pure" beauty, he sees this ideal as the supreme value of his philosophy and esthetics. For Kant the ideal of beauty is in fact only a free human being, i.e. a moral person who himself (freely) determines his goals by reason, a person who is "only that which has the end of its existence in itself" (*KU*, AA 05: 233; Kant, 2000b, p. 117).

Thus, having proclaimed supreme freedom in art (creation through freedom) and shown its manifestation in the work of a genius (originality, freedom from traditions, rules and models, the functioning of imagination) Kant marks its boundaries: the implementation of the principle of wisdom, the manifestation of reason (taste, capacity of judgment) and the orientation toward a *certain* ideal of beauty.

5 Conclusion

I have tried to reveal the features of free thinking and its boundaries in Kant's teaching: in cognition, in social and daily life, and in the activity of an artistic genius. My study has shown that the concept of "free thinking" is based on the unity of intellectual (cognitive, instrumental) and socio-ethical elements.

In the sphere of knowledge free thinking manifests itself in the functioning of cognitive abilities in shaping sensible data and experience, in methodological and constructive activity of the cognising subject and in the potential of ethics to influence the cognitive process.

In the social and day-to- day sphere free thinking manifests itself in people who are able to think without constraints and publicly express their opinion while adhering to the criteria of scientificity and good will.

In the activity of an artistic genius freedom is manifested through originality and the functioning of imagination as part of esthetic power of judgment and taste, while being mindful of practicability and the idea of beauty.

The overall tendency in Kant's defining of free thinking is a commitment to maximising untrammeled thinking and minimising its boundaries which, coupled with ethical factors, represents an *ideal of free thinking* – not fully realisable, but to varying degrees possible in various spheres and under varying historical conditions.

My study has shown the relevance of the concept of "free thinking" and its intransient value. The ethical and intellectual components of free thinking, the balance of creativity, criticism and social-humanitarian concerns, provide, in my opinion, important benchmarks for the modern world and its historical perspective.

References

- Greenberg, R., 2016. *The Bounds of Freedom: Kant's Causal Theory of Action*. Berlin & New York: De Gruyter.
- Einstein, A. and Infeld, L., 2008. *The Evolution of Physics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F., 1991. *The Encyclopaedia Logic: Part I of the Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences with the Zusatze*. A new translation with Introduction and Notes by T.F. Geraets,

- W.A. Suchting and H.S. Harris. Indianapolis & Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc.
- Heidegger, M., 1968. *What is Called Thinking?* (1954). A Translation of *Was heißt Denken?* by F.D. Wieck and J.G. Gray with an Introduction by J.G. Gray. New York, Evanston & London: Harper & Row.
- Ivanov, M.A., 2018. On the Functional Specificity of Scientific Cognition Values. In: I.T. Kasavin, T.D. Sokolova, P.D. Tishchenko, E.G. Grebenshchikova and I.Z. Shishkov, eds. 2018. *History and Philosophy of Science at the Time of Change. In 6 Volumes. Volume 6.* Moscow: Russian Society of History and Philosophy of Science, pp. 25-27, [online] Available at: <<http://rshps.ru/books/congress2018t6.pdf>> [Accessed 10.10.2020]. (In Rus.)
- Kant, I., 1996a. *What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?* In: I. Kant, 1996. *Religion and Rational Theology*. Translated by G. di Giovanni, edited by A.W. Wood and G. di Giovanni. Cambridge: Cambridge University, pp. 1-18.
- Kant, I., 1996b. *The Metaphysics of Morals*. In: I. Kant, 1996. *Practical Philosophy*. Edited by M.J. Gregor, translated by A.W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 353-604.
- Kant, I., 1998. *Critique of Pure Reason*. Edited and translated by P. Guyer and A. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant I., 2000a. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics That Will Be Able to Come Forward as Science* (1783). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant I., 2000b. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Translated by P. Guyer and E. Matthews. Edited by P. Guyer. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kant, I. 2006. *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* In: I. Kant, 2006. *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, pp. 17-22.
- Merton, R.K., 1973. *The Sociology of Science: Theoretical and Empirical Investigations*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Motroshilova, N.V., 2005. Paradoxes of Freedom in Kant's Philosophy: Their Relevance. In: *History of Philosophy Yearbook'2004*. Moscow: Nauka, pp. 196-207. (In Rus.).
- Narskii, I.S., 1993. Kant's Category of Freedom. *Kantian Journal*, 1(17), pp. 12-19. (In Rus.).
- Porcheddu, R., 2018. Kants Freiheitsargument. Diskussion von Heiko Puls: Sittliches Bewusstsein und Kategorischer Imperativ in Kants Grundlegung. Ein Kommentar zum dritten Abschnitt. De Gruyter, 2016, 318 S. *Kantian Journal*, 37(2), pp. 64-89.