

The role of limitation and the language of the intelligence in Kant

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Abstract. The precept “know thyself” in *The Metaphysics of Morals* is used by Kant as a guide for human beings to determine their limits and abilities with regard to reaching freedom and autonomy. This precept is also found in the first *Critique* when Kant deals with the inquiry that reason must conduct upon itself. The discipline that reason must impose on itself in the first *Critique* is indispensable in order to establish its own area of activity, and to try to determine its internal conflict, originating in the transcendental illusion that reason itself creates. In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* and in the *Lectures on Pedagogy* one discovers the same situation as it relates to the human being who enters into society: the person has to limit herself and her wild freedom. This type of limitation is productive because through it human beings can discover something about themselves. Limiting their actions requires human beings to shed their mask of morality and analyse the true intentions behind their actions. In the light of this, it is possible to establish two different analogies. One concerns the way in which reason deals with its illusion and the way in which the human being does the same with the illusion produced in society (which in *Anthropology* Kant calls *moral illusion*). The other analogy concerns the type of discipline that both reason and the human being impose on themselves.

Keywords: narcissism, reason, transcendental illusion, moral illusion, know thyself, discipline

1 Introduction. Reason and its discipline: The figure of the teacher

One of the distinctions that can be found in Kant’s work is that between teacher and student. On reading the first *Critique* these two figures seem to be given a comparative treatment with respect to their distinct approaches to gaining knowledge. In the first *Critique* Kant writes that the student is a plaster cast of a living human being, since he merely simulates a certain vivacity of thought (*KrV*, A 836 / B 864). Indeed, he can imitate his master; however, his style of learning is inadequate because he memorises concepts without thinking or reflecting. His attitude is characterised as imitative and passive. By contrast, the teacher is described as

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the one who possesses the capacity for productive thought as he is an active thinker. However, there is more to be seen in this description than is immediately apparent.

In the *Prolegomena*, Kant considers the figure of the teacher as the intended recipient of his words (*Prol.*, AA 04: 255). Moreover, the teacher assumes an ideal connotation for Kant when such a figure is placed in a future context. The teacher exemplifies the advocated development in everyone, since this figure is constructed by Kant as someone who has the courage to recognise his limits. The use of the substantive “courage” seems quite exaggerated if it is not put into the proper perspective. Here, the figure of the teacher has nothing to do with conducting a lesson or with knowing many things. Instead, this ideal representation is constituted as one of independence, self-determination and critical inquiry, and can lead one to discover one’s own limits and abilities. It relates therefore to those who have the courage to be critical of their convictions, to those who want to overcome certain dogmas and those willing to question themselves. Therefore the figure of the teacher also becomes the ideal of good self-government, since he is aware of his deepest nature (through critical inquiry) and is thus able to govern himself, by knowing the parts of himself to be considered as allies, and those to be treated as enemies of his own intellectual and spiritual growth.

This kind of investigation has its roots in a precept which is found in *The Metaphysics of Morals* and which recalls the Greek imperative that invites one to conduct a self-analysis, or *know thyself* (*MS*, AA 06: 441-442), a precept that requires discipline, self-criticism and honesty. “Knowing thyself” implies a training that begins from sources of knowledge and leads a person to the discovery of limits beyond which it is not possible to go. Knowing thyself implies dealing with one’s own illusions that generate deceptions and which can invalidate the acquisition of knowledge. This relates to the theoretical field with respect to what one can know and to the practical field with regard to the principles that drive a person’s actions. In Kantian theory the illusion that a human being can develop has certain aspects; firstly, it is a harbinger of deceit when one is not aware of its presence. Nonetheless, if the illusion is recognised and identified, it helps the individual to take a step forward into self-knowledge, because the resolution of the illusion allows him to trace his limits.

According to Kant, the starting point, both of self-investigation and the acquisition of theoretical knowledge, is related to honesty (or sincerity) towards oneself with respect to a survey of the principles which drive one or of the theory that one is constructing.¹ As we read in the second *Critique* about someone who writes and argues his thesis, Kant states that if he worked with a little more frankness (*Offenheit*) he would avoid many mistakes and consequent fatigue, because in the absence of sincerity he is forced to elaborate an illusory construct (*Blendwerk*) (*KpV*, AA 05: 106). The same can be noted with respect to what Kant says in the second *Critique* about the criticism that reason (both practical and theoretical) makes of itself, because here also Kant highlights the necessity of demonstrating a certain sincerity (*Aufrichtigkeit*) and non-concealment on account of its internal contradictions. As Kant claims in the first *Critique*, when someone becomes aware of his own ignorance regarding something (objects, boundaries of sciences or our limits) this does not put an end to research; on the contrary, it establishes the basis from which one starts, as well as becoming the very cause that drives one towards research.

In the lecture notes taken by Kant’s students of his university courses in ethics, sincerity is not only important for the human *consortium* (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA 27: 542), but becomes indispensable in any kind of investigation that is carried out. Therefore, when one is seeking any type of knowledge it is important to know where one may be lacking or in which field

¹ La Rocca highlights how sincerity towards oneself is related to conscience through the degree of reflection that the individual is able to undertake on himself. Therefore sincerity is bound to a self-examination that leads the subject to clarify the origin of the reasons behind his belief, or what the nature of these reasons is (La Rocca, 2016, pp. 29-30; see also pp. 25-27).

one is ignorant. Introspection can start only from a certain intellectual and spiritual honesty, i.e. from a certain sincerity with oneself and which needs to occur in every field of research. However, in order to do this, the person needs courage to overcome the barrier of the belief that he possesses the truth in any field without having a *quid iuris*.

2 The Narcissism of reason: Narcissus and reason

As Kant states in the second *Critique*, working on one's illusions lets one see the labyrinth that we have built for ourselves, managing "to search for the key to escape from [it]" (*KpV*, AA 05: 107; Kant, 1996, p. 226). The teacher represents that ideal of wisdom and self-seeking, of knowledge of its limits, by submitting himself to a discipline which is rather humiliating because no one is happy to reveal his weaknesses to himself. As one may read in the first *Critique*, Kant anthropomorphises the human's reason and describes the path that it must take in the same terms as he describes the figure of the teacher. Reason must follow the words of Delphi's oracle, and submit itself to a criticism and a discipline which are indeed humiliating, as Kant states in the "Discipline of Reason" within the first *Critique* (*KrV*, A 710 / B 738; A 795 / B 823).

The Kant reader is familiar with the image of the tribunal, used by Kant to describe the way in which reason submits itself to criticism (*KrV*, A 751 / B 779). Reason is considered, through an analogy, as both the accused and the judge in its court case. Using a modern terminology and speaking in psychological terms, the same situation can be described (*via* an additional analogy to understand what reason is doing when it subjects itself to criticism) as a kind of psychological therapy.

As in the tribunal, where reason plays simultaneously the role of the accused and the judge, in a psychoanalytic session reason performs both roles: it is the subject of analysis as well as the analyst. Moreover, it is also possible to consider what reason discovers about itself, in terms of its transcendental illusion,² as a disease, classifiable as the product of a narcissistic structure. Indeed, by following the reading that psychoanalysis gives to the myth of Narcissus in Ovid (1998, pp. 61-66; see also Semi, 2007), it is possible to affirm that, like Narcissus, reason is also stuck in a perpetual illusion since they both project themselves onto external *objects* to which they will never be able to have access. However, unlike Narcissus who finds his death when he discovers that the *object* for which he strives is himself, reason discovers its own limits and extends its power in the right direction. Therefore reason engages in therapy because it needs to recognise its own narcissism in order to be healed from its self-inflicted disease. In its session of psychoanalysis, reason undertakes a criticism that leads it to discover its own illusion. Through transcendental dialectic reason finally recognises that God, the soul and the world are mere projections of its will for completing itself as a system. Once it discovers its limits, these can no longer be regarded as limitations in a proper sense. Indeed, what reason can discover *via* criticism is a new concept of limit in terms of its relationship with a part of itself recognised as pure will and as such resisting objectification.

This way of understanding reason has a lot to do with the myth of Narcissus, who found in the reflection of his image someone different from himself to love and yearn for, not having understood that what he was admiring was nothing but himself. In his image reflected in the water, Narcissus was searching for completeness, just as reason seeks its completeness in obtaining knowledge of such objects. The crux of the matter, both for reason and for Narcissus, is that neither of them is able to recognise the completeness of itself given by an external *object* for what it really is, namely an illusion. Narcissus and reason consider their

² See Grier (2001) and Ivaldo (2016, pp. 75-84). With regard to the transcendental illusion as well as for an in-depth analysis of the Kantian terminology of deception and illusion see Basile (2018, pp. 410-426).

projections of themselves to be something distinctly and surely obtainable. When Narcissus and reason discover that the object (or the objects) of their longing are nothing more than a projection of themselves, Narcissus ends his agony in suicide; this act corresponds to the gaining of self-knowledge. Narcissus achieves knowledge of himself only at the moment when he dies, as Tiresias predicted. The same path is found in reason's discovery, since it enshrines the end of narcissism in itself. Tiresias' words are very important because Narcissus in the myth is symbolic of one who cannot see himself but only others, yet, at the same time, other people are the only means by which Narcissus can see himself. The game is that he is unaware of this form of projection until he recognises his face in the reflection in the water. Only at that moment does Narcissus liberate himself from his illusion. The death of narcissism in reason means it is reborn with awareness of its own limits as well as of its power because, when reason recognises its projections, it reaches knowledge of itself which corresponds to the ideal of inquiry and self-knowledge regarding the source of its own deception.

3 The role of discipline in civil society and covert narcissism

The human being in society is also subject to a latent and covert narcissism configured as a non-recognition of his own limits. This corresponds with a non-recognition of other people as subjects, indeed they are seen only as a means for the narcissist's ends as well as resources to supply his narcissistic needs. In Kantian theory, civil society is described as governed by a moral illusion which is very similar to the kind of illusion reason finds in itself; certainly, it is a type of projection of internal mechanisms considered to be objective rather than subjective.

In *Anthropology* and in the *Lectures on Pedagogy* the same situation with relation to reason and its limits can be found regarding the person who enters into society, as, according to Kant, the individual must limit himself and his wild freedom if he wants to enter into society.³ This type of limitation is productive because through it the human being can discover something about himself. In this respect, it is possible to establish an analogy between the way in which reason deals with its illusion and the way in which the human being does with the illusion that is produced in society, named by Kant in *Anthropology*, "moral illusion" (*Anth*, AA 07: 151).

The first analogical relationship that can be found involves two types of illusion, these being transcendental and moral illusion. Both are self-generated illusions which become deceptions of self-knowledge if a person is unable to identify their nature. These illusions are based on mistaking what is only a subjective principle for an objective principle, in the case of reason, considering its ideas to be real objects, and in the case of the individual, exchanging his inclinations or appetites for objective practical laws. In both instances a strict discipline and criticism must be imposed on reason and on the individual in order to allow them to recognise the illusion as such, even though it cannot be deleted once and for all.

Criticism as "catharsis", as Kant writes in the first *Critique*, can be used as an activator of transcendental illusion through the role of discipline (*KrV*, A 486 / B 514).⁴ This is similar

³ Hohenegger (2013, pp. 138-139) notes how this self-examination that the individual carries out can be already found in the pages of the first *Critique* with regard to reason.

⁴ In Kant, the term "catharsis" appears in the first *Critique* to indicate the liberating state of reason from the *inclination* that leads reason to create the transcendental illusion. The reference is obviously analogical and is based on the catharsis that the spectator experiences while identifying himself with one or more characters of the theatrical representation that he watches. On the concept of catharsis in the first *Critique* and in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries see Tonelli (1995, pp. 13-14; 1978, pp. 119-148). On the concept of catharsis in ancient Greece see Giosi (2008, pp. 179-194) and Localzo (2003, pp. 67-84).

to how a particular theatrical scene leads the observer to experience different emotions, or how the same scene can provide a sort of temporary liberation from one's feelings, whilst stimulating the person to contemplate his identity and his way of considering things.

It also occurs that in civil society the individual has to impose the same conditions that reason applies to itself (in order to discover and treat the transcendental illusion). This task is useful to trigger in the individual the will to undertake a conscious criticism of himself regarding the real motivations behind his actions, even though he cannot entirely remove his moral illusion but will from time to time have to judge his motivation in light of extant moral laws in himself.

Through these analogical relationships, however, it is possible to trace some differences: one of the most important is related to the way in which reason and the human being in society confronts discipline. If both (reason personified through analogy and the human being in society) feel humiliated by having to adopt a disciplining of themselves, since this is a negative and limiting coercion, the way in which reason and the individual in society impose discipline on themselves is different. In the case of reason, one is dealing with a conscious and necessary self-imposition, and in the case of the human being in society this discipline is also self-imposed but not accepted, since it is not deliberately self-imposed, but instead, initially, it is acquired in that it is dictated from the outside (the social context) (*Anth*, AA 07: 268). It is only later that the adoption of discipline by the individual becomes something that he consciously chooses and which he considers necessary in order to arrive at self-government. In this respect it is possible to distinguish conceptually two types of discipline, one external and one internal.

What can be described as *external discipline* (of which Kant speaks in §82 of *Anthropology*) characterises the entry of the human being into society, since, Kant writes, it makes man patient. Therefore, what man learns from discipline is the limitation of his freedom (*Päd*, AA 09: 442).

On the other hand, what is named *internal discipline* arises when the human being is able to develop critical thought, i.e. when he is able to be aware of its true purpose.⁵ This self-control arises from an awareness in the individual, which he cannot accomplish by drawing the principles from within. Kant says in the *Lectures on Pedagogy* that it is necessary for the human being to find good teachers in his life so that he can develop critical thought and manage to identify the real causes of his actions (*Päd*, AA 09: 477). In the first *Critique* one discovers that reason imposes on itself discipline and criticism when, according to Kant's analogy between reason and the development of a human being, it is possible to say that reason becomes adult and mature (*KrV*, A 761 / B 789). Only in this phase of its life can reason manage to establish a tribunal in order to judge itself. It follows then that, just as reason has to reach its maturity, so this must also happen to the human being in society. The necessary conditions must be created in order to encourage the human being to set up his own discipline and to listen to his own inner court, namely his conscience.

⁵ Here the discipline used is attributable by analogy to the type of discipline which reason must use as in the first *Critique*. Here, with the term "discipline", Kant means a certain *educational rigour* rather than teaching (*KrV*, A 710 / B 738). What reason is learning from discipline is the use of coercion on itself in order to place limits on its dominion. Discipline, therefore, can be configured as a negative side of education, having as its purpose the prevention of error which reason could make (*KrV*, A 709 / B 737). This discipline has to do not so much with the content as with the method of knowledge. Ferrarin points out how Kant inserts the discipline of pure reason in the first chapter of the "Transcendental Doctrine of the Method"; since reason's knowledge begins only from its understanding of being the cause of its own illusion, discipline is therefore precisely the first step to be taken for "the determination of the formal conditions of a complete system of pure reason" (*KrV*, A 708 / B 736; Kant, 1998, p. 627; cf. Ferrarin, 2015, pp. 38-39; see also La Rocca, 2003, pp. 199-215).

For Kant, civil society provides the right circumstances to incline the human being to listen to his inner court because in civil society all of the elements that are necessary for activating an individual's critical faculties can be found. If the social context is governed by an external court which represents the judgment that each individual makes towards his fellow-citizens, the singular individual will tend to judge himself by comparing his actions with the actions of others, attempting to imitate those behaviours that he believes other people would appreciate (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA 27: 283-297). In this way they would be more likely to judge him positively. It follows that this type of behaviour would generate a good image of the person who would behave in society as an actor, putting on a mask and creating an illusion of morality. In this way the individual's attitude can be compared to that of a student. Just as a student who learns something without reflecting on what he is learning, the individual in society imitates moral actions without reflecting on why he acts in certain ways or on what the real motivations may be. Consequently, the individual hides his true self from his fellow-citizens by simulation and dissimulation of his real intentions. However, each human being also tends to conceal many facets of himself from himself, thereby creating an illusion of morality in himself (*Anth*, AA 07: 151-152).

It is possible here also to apply the analogy of the figure of Narcissus. While with regard to reason, narcissism is linked to projections and self-power (these elements refer to the conceptual system of human reason, which creates objects from something that is merely conceptual), in the case of narcissism in society, self-power and projections are related to people. In society, as seen with Narcissus, the individual projects an external image of himself, aimed at receiving admiration and consensus from his fellow men. This mechanism of projection is a self-delusion that the person applies to himself because the image produced is different from that of his real self. Consequently, the person struggles to know himself. This is a major component which can be ascribed to the concept of moral illusion in Kantian theory.

Reading *Anthropology*, however, one discovers that external moral illusion is not always harmful. The appearance of morality can help someone to reflect on the intentions that lay behind his actions. As has been mentioned, each individual can judge others only based on what they show about themselves. However, when someone shapes a moral image of himself, this type of strategy does not always work for the best. Each person has in himself a moral law and he tends to look for examples of it externally. So, at this point, it is not important whether the other person is moral or is only pretending to be moral.⁶ What is important is that the individual can reflect on his inner motivations when he considers someone else as an example of morality. Furthermore, it should be important to find teachers who can help the individual to develop the capacity for critical thought and appropriate self-governance. In this way, the individual is able to reflect on his own actions and realises that it is not necessary to simulate or pretend to be good or bad, according to the desire for personal gain. He must discover in himself the existence of a constant and universally valid criterion so that he does not have to change his criteria on each occasion to suit the whim of his own inclinations. This would be detrimental to the human being because without discipline of his inclinations, he cannot achieve anything, and will thereby remain a puppet of his imagination (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA 27: 360). On the contrary, the maturation of a constant internal criterion for monitoring his own actions is precisely what brings a human being to the formation of moral character.

4 Conclusion

In society and with respect to self-control “we have a double authority over ourselves, the disciplinary and the productive” (*V-Mo/Collins*, AA 27: 362; Kant, 1997, p. 139). This is

⁶ Regarding the relationship between moral illusion and the people's behaviour see Basile (2017) and Hakim (2017).

what Kant describes as a form of autocracy, wherein lies “the power that the soul has over all its faculties and the entire situation” (*ibid.*). If external discipline is understood as a constraint arising from external forces, internal discipline is a discipline born of the internal forces of the same subject. However, both disciplines have in common another element, namely the limitation of the imagination. This is of great importance because Kant states in the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* that the freedom of the human being is a capacity for choice which follows in parallel the power of reason, and constitutes and nourishes desire by means of imagination (*MAM*, AA 08: 110-111). Indeed, desire takes the form of something unlimited, because the power of human imagination is unlimited. Furthermore, it is no coincidence that in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* and in the second *Critique* Kant speaks of happiness as an ideal of imagination. Since it is constituted and fed by the most varied desires, it tends to infinity, being able to create unlimited desires. This relationship between inclination and imagination produces a vicious circle where the entrance into society implies a limitation in the human being of the same appetite.

However, through the concept of internal discipline, Kant suggests that this limitation should not be configured as an external constraint, but rather as an internal constraint arising from the individual's will. It follows that this is possible by curbing his own imagination as long as he tries to stop it whenever he feels it is feeding his inclinations. This is the fundamental point on which, according to Kant, self-control is founded. Self-control does not consist in trying to eradicate something that can never be eradicated, since it is a characteristic of human beings. It consists in controlling, directing and removing nourishment of our appetitive faculty accordingly, so that the person can make it his ally and no longer his enemy.

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