

THE MORAL CONCEPT IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF KANT

Gheorghe DĂNIȘOR*

Abstract. The fundamental works in which Kant expounds his theory are *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and in addition *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*. In the first of the three, Kant does nothing more than demonstrate the limits of speculative knowledge, that which bestows access to the world of the phenomenon, but which can circumvent the element in itself. Theoretical knowledge is limited to patterns of sensitivity, diversity, placing it under categories enabling the apparatus through which we think. In order to eliminate any confusion regarding the abovementioned elements, Kant, using a footnote, clarifies the connection between morality and freedom: freedom is without a doubt the *ratio essendi* of moral law, but that the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom. Kant deliberately draws attention to the fact that freedom and, as a consequence supreme Good, cannot be conceptualised. The so-called Kantian constructivism relies on this pattern of devising freedom as a principle which cannot be demonstrated, the pillar of the entire construction. Good will is what makes *duty*, *categorical imperative*, and even *freedom* possible. Good will has no connection to human sensitivity, it is a concept based on pure reason. This idea leads us to emphasize that Kant wants to demonstrate in his work regarding morality that man becomes free through a detachment from his bodily inclinations. This is a modern perspective. Modernism is dominated by the novelty of founding principles within the subject. Thus, subjectivity becomes the dominant force. But modern subjectivity produces as well the concept of relativism. There is no single or absolute truth, but rather truths individually manufactured that interfere from birth onto a space which exists based on a horizontal arrangement. Last, but not least, there is a modern subjectivity of freedom which is associated to the concept of autonomy.

Keywords: Kantian constructivism, freedom, subjectivity, good will, moral concept.

The fundamental works in which Kant expounds his theory are *The Critique of Pure Reason* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*, and in addition *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*. In the first of the three, Kant does nothing

* Correspondent Member of the Academy of Romanian Scientists, University Professor PhD, University of Craiova, diana.danisor@yahoo.com.

more than demonstrate the limits of speculative knowledge, that which bestows access to the world of the phenomenon, but which can circumvent the element in itself. Theoretical knowledge is limited to patterns of sensitivity, diversity, placing it under categories enabling the apparatus through which we think. There are also the ideas of reason which, though not constitutive, impose a regulatory dimension indicating a certain direction which leads to unity of thought. “This procedural course of action allowed Kant to rescue the absolute availability of knowledge with the price of renouncing the knowledge of the world in itself. The pure forms of knowledge are not efficient unless referring to sensitive data – content or « matter », as Kant expressed it – being bound to these forms, our intellect can only know things as presented, as they appear to us, not as they truly are.”¹

In the phenomenal world, the law of causality governs or occurrences based on necessity. In this world, *there can be no talk of freedom*. Yet “beyond this real or possible experience also known as nature, there is another world, that of things in themselves, and apart from that, the world of that which must be (*sein soll*) from a moral standpoint. The limits of theoretical reason are therefore not the limits of practical reason, beyond the realm of theoretical reason, there lies the realm of practical reason, beyond the phenomenal world lies the world of things in themselves, and on top of the stringent world of necessity, freedom reigns supreme as the fundament of morality”².

In *The Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant predicates that “the concept of freedom, its very reality are all demonstrated through an apodictic law of practical reason, constituting the key to the entire core of a construction of a system of pure reason, even that of speculation, while all the other concepts (God and immortality), remaining within the boundaries of these simple ideas, are now bound to it, gaining alongside it consistency and objective reality, meaning that their possibility is demonstrated through the fact that freedom does indeed exist; as this idea is manifested through moral law.”³

In order to eliminate any confusion regarding the abovementioned elements, Kant, using a footnote, clarifies the connection between morality and freedom: “Lest we believe that there are inconsistencies afoot, were I to name freedom right now as the condition of moral law, and then, in this paper, state that moral law is the condition through which we can primarily *become aware* of freedom, I wish to

¹ N. Bagdasar, *Studiu introductiv la Critica rațiunii pure*, Editura Științifică, București, 1972, p. X.

² Idem, p. XI.

³ Imm. Kant, *Critica rațiunii practice*, Editura Științifică, București, 1972, p. 90.

reiterate that freedom is without a doubt the *ratio essendi* of moral law, but that the moral law is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom. For moral law would not be primarily designed within our sense of reason, were we not to allow ourselves to embrace freedom (though it may not imply contradiction). Were freedom not to exist moral law could not be found within us.”⁴

Loyal to Aristotle’s model of perceiving logic, Kant, in the abovementioned statements, views freedom as belonging to the theoretical side (*theoreo*), meaning to that part of logic which cannot be demonstrated but which is known in itself, and morality belongs to the demonstrative part (*apodictic*), meaning that part which deals with proving that which is true. Kant deliberately draws attention to the fact that freedom and, as a consequence supreme Good, cannot be conceptualised. The limitation of human knowledge consists of the fact that “it cannot scrutinise the necessity of that which exists or occurs, neither that of what must (*soll*) happen, if there is no emphasis on a principle or condition under which it exists, occurs or must occur”⁵. Under such a posture, reason is in an endless process of searching “The unconditional necessity, being forced to accept it beyond any means of making it conceptual”⁶.

Kant states that “we are not to be blamed for our deduction on the supreme principle of morality, but rather be faced with an objection related to human reason in general, a factor which cannot render the concept of an unconditional practical law in accordance with its absolute necessity”⁷. This uncontested nature of the unconditional practical law is due to the fact that in the field of morality we must not search for the fundamentals of conditions which support a particular interest, as morality exists as such only because of the fact that its purpose is to surpass those human inclinations which bear no connection to reason. “And therefore we – claims Kant – in truth cannot conceive the unconditional practical necessity of the moral imperative, but we can conceive however its *non-conceptual dimension*, and this is all anyone can ever ask based on a philosophy which strives to move forward towards the very limits of human reason”⁸.

In other words, thinking must come to a full stop in order to, in an endeavour of metaphysical focus, designate the self as a regulative and not a

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 83.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 84.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

constitutive pillar of conceptual development. Once more, we must state that Kant, considered to be the one who undermined traditional metaphysics, aligns himself to the concepts of Aristotle and Middle Age's scholars, according to which logic has a theoretical part with the meaning of *theoreo* (contemplation, passing), undemonstrated, yet paradoxically demonstrative, holding in itself the sciences. In modern ages, thinkers have abandoned the theoretical aspect of logic and resorted only to its demonstrative, formal aspect. This fracture produced mainly by late modernity is due to the fact that "the logic transformed within a formal system no longer holds this theoretical dimension and becomes a simple juxtaposition of sides, a coherent yet relevant connection of *symbolic* expressiveness, forming a system"⁹. The separate demonstration of the *theoreo* "is deprived of mental content, lacking the active intellect which should fill and fulfil it from an ontological standpoint, rendering capabilities of hierarchic organisations within the field of study"¹⁰.

The fact that Kant showed such preoccupations stems from the way in which he conceives freedom as the pillar of morality. Firstly, he views freedom as a non-empirical concept. Freedom, according to Kant, is nothing more than an "Idea of reason whose objective reality within itself is problematic"¹¹. All these considered, the path of freedom from a practical standpoint is the only trajectory usable in our behaviour. The concept of freedom is a presupposition next to which human behaviour cannot be designed. Freedom is regulatory and by no means constitutive of the demonstration Kant makes regarding morality. Freedom in itself as a domain of understanding cannot be demonstrated but without it no demonstration is possible with respect to human behaviour. Freedom exists and we make reference to it, yet we can "never conceive how freedom is possible"¹². In the world of understanding, which includes freedom, we are dealing with will, a concept which eludes the chain of natural causality. It is in fact an analysis of will within itself, without making any reference to an object, otherwise we could not be talking about will. Will is manifested as a placement beyond natural inclinations and in this respect it is nothing less than pure will. The will Kant predicated lies beyond motivation. Because "were reason to strive to find itself in

⁹ A. Dumitriu, *Teoria logicii*, Ed. Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, 1973, p. 332.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 333.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 75.

the world of understanding as an object or reason, it would surpass its limitations and allocate onto itself the power to know something it knows nothing about”¹³.

In other words, according to Aristotle’s concept, in which logic presents itself as a theoretical aspect (in the sense that thinking must stop somewhere, the object of this stop cannot be demonstrated) and a demonstrative aspect, meaning a scientific one. The first aspect, the theoretical one, acknowledges the existence of a principle known within itself, which cannot be demonstrated, but without which science would be rendered impossible. In this way, according to Aristotle, the theoretical principle of logic is the principle of all scientific principles. All these aside, it is not pertinent in the demonstration upon which science relies.

Kant uses the same procedure when he states that “reason would surpass its limits, were it to dare explain to itself how pure reason can be practical, which would be the same thing as the problem of explaining *how freedom is possible*”¹⁴. It can only be made available as a hypothesis necessary to reason in order to place itself as a pure intellect beyond and in opposition to effects of sensitivity. Explanations are only possible in the domain of natural causality, but where all determinism ends in accordance with the laws of nature, we find the end of any further explanations. Therefore, freedom begins where demonstration ends.

The so-called Kantian constructivism relies on this pattern of devising freedom as a principle which cannot be demonstrated, the pillar of the entire construction. But this construction does not simply focus on practical reason, but also on theoretical reason, Kant’s effort being that of unifying the endeavour of pure reason with practical reasoning. Bearing in mind the way in which he conceives freedom, the result is an emergence of justification and speculative reason. And because this reasoning is first and foremost practical, the result is the superiority of practical reason over its theoretical counterpart. In this way, freedom becomes the principle to rule all scientific principles and constitutes the regulatory idea based on which theoretical knowledge is made possible alongside practical behaviour. In this respect, the realm of morality is situated in the world of understanding, becoming common ground not only for human behaviour but for scientific knowledge as well.

We can therefore, unequivocally affirm that freedom, as a principle which cannot be demonstrated, is the key to the entire Kantian theoretical system. And

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 77.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

because through morals we become aware of freedom, we can deduce that morality must constitute the basis of every theoretical endeavour. Freedom is the *ratio essendi* of morality and morality is the *ratio cognoscendi* of freedom.

Upon establishing the role of freedom as a regulatory principle of Kantian thinking, we will see the construction of a system of practical reasoning in the philosophy of Kant.

Kant builds his system in three stages: *The establishment of the metaphysics of morality*, within which two transitions occur, namely *The transition from the moral knowledge of common reason to philosophical knowledge* and *The transition from the metaphysics of morality to the critique of practical reason*, continuing onto *The Critique of Practical Reason*. Within the metaphysics of morality, Kant tries to capture the concept of *good will*. This concept is viewed as accountable for the entire Kantian system because it is the source of other fundamental concepts of the system such as *duty*, *categorical imperative*, and even *freedom*. Good will has no connection to human sensitivity, it is a concept based on pure reason. “From everything which is possible in this world and even outside it, nothing can be deemed as good with the exception of good will”¹⁵. Good will is a positive factor not only due to the fulfilment of objectives but also through the spectrum of volition, it is good in itself and evaluated as such, within carefully discerned parameters.

Good will is included in the concept of *duty*. Kant distinguishes between the actions performed *in accordance with duty* and those performed *out of duty*. Duty can be performed out of mere selfishness, whilst an action performed out of duty bears no human inclination, only pure volition. In order to illustrate this idea, Kant provides several examples. “It is therefore in accordance with duty that the grocer will not demand unreasonable fees from his unexperienced customers, but rather have a fixed price, so that when a child buys from him, he is as good as any other customer. Therefore, everyone is served in honesty. But this is by no means sufficient in order to believe that the merchant acted out of duty and principles of honesty; his own self-interest demanded it. Therefore, the action was not performed out of duty, but out of cold selfish calculations.”¹⁶ Another example: “Should misfortune and dismay utterly engulf the lust for life; should the unfortunate individual, strong of heart, more outraged regarding his faith rather than humiliated as a result, wish for death, yet preserves it without loving it, not

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

out of fear but duty, then his predicament bears moral content.”¹⁷ These two examples show that for an action to be moral, it must not stem from the satisfaction of certain inclinations in accordance with duty, quite the opposite, contrary to such inclinations, out of a sense of duty. Only the latter contains moral value.

“Duty, according to Kant, is the necessity to undertake an action out of respect for the law”¹⁸, and “respect is the upholding of values which harm self-love. Therefore, we are dealing with something which is not considered the object of inclination or fear. The object of respect is the law exclusively, namely that which we must impose upon ourselves as a necessity onto itself”¹⁹.

What Kant wants to demonstrate in his work regarding morality is the fact that man becomes free through a detachment from his bodily inclinations. We can therefore subtly say that he does nothing more than resurrect the concepts of Plato and Aristotle, only to extract two examples regarding the liberations of the soul from the body. In this respect, Kant proves a great deal of consistency, a fact which is due to Kantian rigour with respect to morality. Taking into consideration that knowledge is subordinated to morality, the result is that any act of knowledge is nothing more than an act of purification which culminates with freedom. The purpose is purification, and the obtained liberty is the supreme purpose of any human being.

In *The Metaphysics of Morals* and *The Critique of Practical Reason*, there is another goal that Kant fulfills, namely the social contract. It is well known that our philosopher is a keen supporter of the social contract, but he differentiates himself from all other supporters by placing good will at the foundation of this contract, in other words benevolence, not the need (the non-will), as others acted before him. Because the non-will is a denial of will, and the social cohesion is a result of fear, Kant expects a horizon of results based on good will and moral duty, thus pushing selfishness and fear out of the picture. Good will is opposite to non-will and is the one which secures social cohesion.

There is another aspect which needs to be addressed here, namely that the work of Kant is an exploration of human inwardness. That’s why morality is an internal act, it does not rely on external relationships but rather the finding of the self and once humanity through a process of deep internalization.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 18.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

Only through self-knowledge, through purification, can we meet the other, thus performing a political act. Meeting the other takes place as a result of the exploration of personal inwardness.

The relations instituted on a social level belong to an inwardness which spills outwardly and encounters the others in a communion of human values. No other supporter of the contract has ever achieved such an endeavour. They were reduced to the external level of human interactions without the possibility to penetrate the deep intimacy of the human being.

That's why rights were afforded greater authority compared to morality, whereas in the case of Kant the opposite applies, namely morality belongs to the world we can understand, while the attributes of the phenomenal world deals with the external relationships of people.

Man cannot find himself or society unless adhering to the common good which is nothing else than an expression of human inwardness. This is Kant's intimate belief and his work is proof of this belief.

In this sense, modernism is dominated by the concept of relativism. There is no single or absolute truth, but rather truths individually manufactured that interfere from birth onto a space which exists based on a horizontal arrangement. This element is tributary to the fact that modernism seeks out its founding principles within the subject. Thus, subjectivity, becomes the dominant force.

With regard to the concept of freedom, it is associated to the concept of autonomy. From this perspective, Kant states that "Can freedom be nothing else than autonomy, namely the prerogative of will to be its own law?"²⁰ This is how "through the simple analysis of moral concepts, we can more adequately demonstrate that the abovementioned principle of autonomy is the sole principle of morals. Because, the manner in which the principle opens up to us must be a categorical imperative and this commandeers no more and no less than this autonomy."²¹

It's very important to specify that this concept, from the standpoint of autonomy, entails a limitation of freedom, a sense of servitude to universal law. This liberty, however, is preserved because freedom is the prerogative of will to be its own law. Therefore, man is not independent but autonomous, because he is in communion with a universal law of reason.

²⁰ Imm. Kant, *Critica rațiunii practice, op. Cit.*, p. 65.

²¹ Mircea Flonta, Hans-Claus Keul, *Filosofia practică a lui Kant*, Editura Polirom, București, 2000, p. 40.

Through this manner of thinking, Kant detaches himself from the concept of independence as presented in the *Monadology* of Leibniz, which states that “One cannot explain, by any means, how a monad can be altered, changed on the inside by another monad, seeing as nothing can be transposed in it; nor can we conceive an internal movement inside it that can be provoked, directed, amplified or diminished, as it is possible with compound things where there are changes between parts.”²²

From this quote, we can clearly detect Leibniz’s difficulty to conceive a relationship between monads. Based on this model, relationships between individuals in society are not possible. In view of this fact, one cannot conceive morality that will lead to social cohesion, a very rare element, essential to human nature. There is, however, a pre-established harmony in accordance with divine laws, but this harmony is not able to institute relationships between monads.

Therefore, it is important to say that modernity has followed down the path of monadology, which instituted the concept of independence but not the concept of autonomy.

This way, through the exacerbation of independence, the result was an atomisation of the individual who perceives himself as separate from other people, separate from the state, society and even the vastness of the Universe.

It is not relevant to address the influence of the concept of independence as it applies to relevant pattern of human behaviour. Separating man from everything and everyone leads to the crippling of social cohesion and exposure to political manipulation. The concept of morality is also brought into question.

Following along Leibniz’s trajectory, the German philosopher Schopenhauer predicated that Kant’s vision was inherently self-centred, thus commandeering the conclusion that we are dealing with nothing more than “a stringent form of heteronomy.”²³

²² Leibniz, *Opere filosofice*, vol. I, Editura Științifică, București, 1972, pp. 509-510.

²³ John Rawls, *Liberalismul politic*, Editura Sedona, București, 1999, pp. 109-110.

REFERENCES

- Bagdasar, N., *Studiu introductiv la Critica rațiunii pure*, Editura Științifică, București, 1972
Dumitriu, A., *Teoria logicii*, Ed. Academiei Republicii Socialiste România, București, 1973
Flonta, Mircea, Hans-Claus Keul, *Filosofia practică a lui Kant*, Editura Polirom, București, 2000
Kant, Imm., *Critica rațiunii practice*, Editura Științifică, București, 1972
Leibniz, *Opere filosofice*, vol. I, Editura Științifică, București, 1972
Rawls, John, *Liberalismul politic*, Editura Sedona, București, 1999
-