

*Stefano Pinzan**

Freedom and Sensibility in Kant: An Anthropological-Psychological View

Abstract

Scholars disagree about whether and how Kant manages to avoid dualistic outcomes in the relation between freedom and sensibility within the moral agent. If he does not – if he portrays a moral agent who must judge and act without taking emotions, sentiments, and passions into account – then authors such as Blackburn can rightly argue that Kantian ethics loses sight of the concrete individual, whose sensibility has a fundamental role, taking part in the definition of her specific identity. I argue that this portrait comes from a disputable and incomplete reading of Kant's works. There is no dualistic outcome in the relation between freedom and sensibility in Kant. My aim is to show that there is a bridge between the rational and the sensible elements within the Kantian agent and that it can be reconstructed by analysing Kant's works on ethics, aesthetics, and anthropology. Specifically, those elements must be thought of as in accordance, not in opposition, because sensibility is necessary for Kant's ethics to be effective, both for the agent's awareness of the moral law and for the agent's motivation.

Keywords

Kant, Sensibility, Respect, Aesthetics, Anthropology.

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to show that sensibility has an essential role in Kant's ethics. I argue against the view in which Kant opposes freedom – that is, the autonomy of practical reason – to sensibility. If it were impossible to outline a non-dualistic relation between freedom and sensibility, various criticisms could be rightly directed at Kant.

The article proceeds as follows. First, I summarise the criticisms against Kant with regard to his willingness to disregard the sensible-natural component of the moral agent (§2). This leads to the realisation of a totally rationalistic ethics that applies to abstract moral agents belonging to an

* Università Vita-Salute San Raffaele, Milano

intelligible world in which personal identity is set aside in favour of impersonality. To make these criticisms clear, I use an evocative metaphor suggested by Blackburn. I then show how the criticisms come from an incomplete and disputable reading of Kant's works (§3), mostly restricted to the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (henceforth *Groundwork*). It is important to grasp the aim of *Groundwork* to avoid falling into misunderstandings that could lead to a mistaken image of the Kantian agent.

I then present a path that goes through not only Kant's works on ethics but also into his aesthetic and anthropological ones; this path reveals how the sensible dimension is fundamental for the Kantian subject to make morality effective, both for the agent's awareness of the moral law and for her motivation. The path starts from respect (§4), which is the actual bridge between freedom and sensibility and the only moral feeling, as it allows the agent to subjectively grasp the moral law through its effect on her sensibility. And yet, a moral feeling is not the only way to become aware of our supersensible destination. The aesthetic experience can also bring about an understanding of morality, providing a sensible image of it. In light of these observations, I analyse the agent's experience of the beauty and the sublime (§5). The analysis leads to the notion of character as the alignment of natural inclinations with the moral agent's noumenal nature (§6). Character enables us to achieve a person's unity – that is, the realisation of the person as a finite rational being.

2. The Split between the Autonomous Moral Agent and the Empirical Subject

For Kant, the fundamental principle of morality must be sought not in the empirical and sensible world but in pure and a priori philosophy. The autonomy of a moral agent is her ability to stand freely in front of sensible incentives, avoiding their imposition on her will and instead taking the moral law as ultimate ground. Freedom is referred to the intelligible world in which the subject takes part thanks to her noumenal character. However, as a sensible being, the subject also takes part in the phenomenal world, and she is subordinated to the same natural necessity to which all other beings in nature are subordinated. Her action, “understood as phenomenon, is explained with an eye to empiricist-inspired questions about the nature and origin of particular desires and their ability to physically move us”¹. Kant thus writes in *Critique of Pure Reason*:

¹ J. Tizzard, *Kantian Moral Psychology and Human Weakness*, in “Philosophers’ Imprint”, vol. 21, n. 16, June 2021, p. 2.

And then for a subject of the world of sense we would have first an empirical character, through which its actions, as appearances, would stand through and through in connection with other appearances in accordance with constant natural laws, from which, as their conditions, they could be derived; and thus, in combination with these other appearances, they would constitute members of a single series of natural order. Yet second, one would also have to allow this subject an intelligible character, through which it is indeed the cause of those actions as appearances, but which does not stand under any conditions of sensibility and is not itself appearance².

To some critics, the portrait that Kant paints is one of a subject with a Janus-like personality³, one face facing the phenomenal world of natural necessity and the other freely facing the eternal course of reason. Kant must provide evidence of a concrete relation between freedom and nature; otherwise, freedom cannot have any effect and therefore the subject cannot make any judgment or take any moral action.

Kant's ethics is seen by many critics as one that does not refer to the moral subject as a concrete individual. Specifically, in the *Groundwork* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, concreteness seems to be sacrificed in the name of formalisation. Kant's ethics is considered an exclusively rationalistic ethics that judges all that comes from the sensible world as a risk to the autonomy of the moral subject and thus something to refuse and rule out. Here the risk is that of holing up into the intelligible world, in which the moral subject is considered stripped of her sensibility, that is, of what makes her a member of the world of nature. Pauer Studer summarises this argument against Kant as follows:

Kant's moral subject is a 'disembodied and unencumbered subject' in an intelligible world separated from the sensible world. Since he defined moral persons by a single characteristic – their power of reason – he abstracts from concrete individuals [...] How can something which has validity for beings separated from their empirical character be relevant for persons who are part of an everyday world?⁴

At stake here is the role of sensibility, of passions and feelings. Kant seems to refuse to recognise these as constitutive elements of the subject because, if taken into consideration, they could produce the heteronomy of will which hinders the possibility of the latter to determine itself through duty alone.

² I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, P. Guyer and A.W. Wood (ed., trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1998, p. 536 (A539, B567).

³ See R.O. Röseler, *Kant's Theory of Freedom as an Ethical Postulate*, in "Monatshefte", vol. 39, n. 5, 1947, p. 326.

⁴ H. Pauer Studer, *Kant and Social Sentiments*, in "Vienna Circle Institute Yearbook 2", 1994, p. 280.

For instance, Williams thinks that because of Kant's aim for impartiality, the German philosopher falls into impersonality by abstracting from the identity of the persons involved⁵. The individual person has a set of desires and projects that constitute her character, but Kant's ethics favours an abstract approach that denies the centrality of subjective experience, of personal identity constituted by one's character, history, and motivational complex. For Williams, basing morality on this conception of the subject makes Kant incapable of understanding people's real moral lives.

This critique can be summarised with an evocative metaphor suggested by Blackburn, in which he compares the person to a ship worked by a crew composed of desires, affects, passions, and feelings. The will is the captain of the ship. Blackburn writes the following about the will:

This is the Captain, the will, yourself as an embodiment of pure practical reason, detached from all desire. The Captain himself is free. But he always stands ready to stop things going wrong with the crew's handling of the boat. Sometimes, it seems, the happiest ship will have no crew at all, but only a Captain, for, making surprising contact with Stoic and Buddhist thought, Kant holds that it is only with complete independence from inclination and desires that bliss is possible⁶.

Blackburn infers that for Kant the best ship is one with no crew, probably because in some pages of *Groundwork* it seems that the Kantian agent must set her sensibility aside in favour of pure rational deliberation. In particular, in his example of the philanthropist, Kant argues that a man with his soul inclined to sharing with others, who feels satisfaction in spreading joy to those around him, cannot act in a proper moral way:

The maxim lacks moral content, namely that of doing such actions not from inclination but *from duty*. Suppose, then, that the mind of this philanthropist were overclouded by his own grief, which extinguished all sympathy with the fate of others, and that while he still had the means to benefit others in distress their troubles did not move him because he had enough to do with his own; and suppose that now, when no longer incited to it by any inclination, he nevertheless tears himself out of his deadly insensibility and does the action without any inclination, simply from duty; then the action first has its genuine moral worth⁷.

⁵ See B. Williams, *Moral Luck*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981.

⁶ S. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1998, p. 243.

⁷ I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, M.J. Gregor (ed., trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1997, pp. 11-12 (398).

For Kant, it is the apathetic person that – without any inclination to suffer for others’ pain and thus to help out of her emotional participation – performs the fully moral action. The will, the Kantian Captain, is described by Blackburn as “a peculiar figure, a dream – or a nightmare – of pure, authentic self-control”⁸. What Blackburn is trying to say is that the ship needs its crew; it is impossible to have a ship with only a captain. In fact, people have a practical identity formed by their desires and attitudes, which should not be eliminated in the action. Kant’s view is thus abstract and dangerous to the agent’s integrity.

3. Understanding *Groundwork*

These arguments against Kant rest on a disputable reading of *Groundwork*, in which Kant is trying to find the fundamental principle of morality. The example of the philanthropist and all the other examples have a heuristic role⁹. Kant takes into consideration two extremes: on one side, the person who acts motivated only by inclinations (the philanthropist); on the other, the person who is motivated only by pure practical reason. Paton calls this “the isolation method”, which is used by Kant because actions performed on the basis of immediate inclination and those performed on the basis of duty could be confused:

Hence in order to be quite certain that we are judging the value of actions done for the sake of duty, he asks us to remove the immediate inclination and assess the value of action in its absence [...] To use such a method of isolation is by no means to assert that where an inclination is present as well as a will to do one’s duty, there can be no moral worth in an action¹⁰.

The example of the philanthropist shows how a person who acts only on the basis of inclination – even if acting in conformity with duty – is uncertain whether her action is correct or demanded. She might act rightly, or she might not. This is because, as Herman says, “the connection between sympathy and helping someone is not fortuitous; the connection between helping someone and doing what is right is”¹¹. The philanthropist who acts exclusively on the basis of feelings does not have the

⁸ S. Blackburn, *Ruling Passions: A Theory of Practical Reasoning*, cit., p. 247.

⁹ See P. Guyer, *Schopenhauer, Kant and Compassion*, in “Kantian Review”, vol. 17, n. 3, 2012, p. 417.

¹⁰ H.J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1948, p. 49.

¹¹ B. Herman, *The Practice of Moral Judgment*, Harvard University Press, London 1993, p. 30.

necessary internal connection between the basis and the rightness of the action. That is why her maxim has no moral content.

Thus, in reality Kant develops his arguments in full awareness that moral actions are overdetermined¹². Human beings are finite rational beings. They are not infinite rational beings, since their will does not immediately determine itself according to the moral law. They are also different from nonhuman animals, which are driven only by impulses. Human beings, as finite rational beings, have impulses and inclinations, but they also have the ability to rationalise when it comes to their will's determination¹³. Feelings such as compassion and sympathy may be among the agent's incentives, but the final incentive (the one that brings the agent to act) must be the moral law.

Now, I want to go further by arguing that sensibility also has a crucial role in Kant's ethics. In fact, the impossibility of a positive role of sensibility depends, according to the critical readings mentioned above, on Kant's inability to coordinate the world of freedom with the sensible world of nature, without excluding each other. However, when we consider more of Kant's work, we see that freedom and nature (and thus also sensibility) can have a concrete relation. We need to find evidence of this positive relation, and this is done by taking an anthropological-psychological path, whereby I show how freedom is to be found in nature and how it needs sensibility in order to be reflected in the subjective experience of the Kantian moral agent. Furthermore, it is also possible to go back from the world of nature to that of freedom, thanks to aesthetic experience, as Kant writes, mostly in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*.

4. Respect

Freedom needs sensibility in its various forms to be reflected in the experience of the moral agent so that the agent can become aware of her noumenal dimension and its potential. First, we must analyse how freedom can be effective in nature. Respect – a particular feeling, namely the only moral feeling, that has a constitutive role in Kant's moral theory – is the obvious starting point, since “any consciousness of obligation depends upon moral feeling to make us aware of the constraint present in the thought of duty”¹⁴.

¹² On the debate regarding overdetermined actions, see M.W. Baron, *Kantian Ethics Almost without Apology*, Cornell University Press, New York 1999.

¹³ See C. Bagnoli, *Vulnerability and the Incompleteness of Practical Reason*, in C. Strahele (ed.), *Vulnerability, Autonomy, and Applied Ethics*, Routledge, London 2016.

¹⁴ I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, L. Denis (ed.), M.J. Gregor (trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 171 (399).

In fact, respect is the only moral feeling because it is the sensible consequence of the law's representation, and so it is different from other pathological feelings, which instead come before the law's representation: "Though respect is a feeling, it is not the one *received* by means of influence; it is, instead, a feeling *self-wrought* by means of a rational concept and therefore specifically different from all feelings of the first kind, which can be reduced to inclination or fear"¹⁵.

Therefore, respect is the bridge between the objectivity of the moral law and the subjectivity of the agent as a finite rational being who can become fully aware of morality only after its influence on her sensibility. Respect is "morality itself regarded subjectively as an incentive inasmuch as pure practical reason – by rejecting, in contrast to self-love, all of self-love's claims – imparts authority to the law, which now alone has influence"¹⁶.

Here it is important to dwell on the concept of *incentive*. Respect arises from the awareness of the moral law. The law is the pure will's determining ground, so it is a noumenal cause of action, but its efficacy as an incentive can be only a phenomenal cause. Kant distinguishes between grounds (*Bewegungsgrund*) and incentives (*Triebfeder*):

Thus the moral law, just as through practical pure reason it is a formal determining ground of action, and just as it is indeed also a material but only objective determining ground of the objects of the action under the name of good and evil, so it is also a subjective determining ground – i.e., an incentive – for this action, inasmuch as it has influence on the sensibility of the subject and brings about a feeling that furthers the law's influence on the will¹⁷.

For Kant, respect is not the incentive of moral action. The moral law is the incentive of moral action; it is what should ultimately subjectively determine the will. The fact is that as an incentive, the law manifests itself through moral feeling. Indeed, the only way to acquire "moral interest"¹⁸, which is the interest for the moral law, is through the effect of the law that manifests itself subjectively in the form of moral feeling. Respect therefore plays a central role in Kant's moral theory, as the feeling that makes practical reason effective. Conceptual knowledge of the law is thus not enough for the subject to make it the determining ground of her will; sentimental recognition is also needed. Moral life could not even exist without respect because we could not have access to the subjective

¹⁵ I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 14 (401).

¹⁶ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, M.J. Gregor (ed., trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, p. 63 (76).

¹⁷ *Ibidem* (75).

¹⁸ *Ivi*, p. 66 (79).

experience of morality, to the awareness of acting autonomously through moral maxims. Indeed, Kant writes that the human being “must have respect for the law within himself in order to even think of any duty whatsoever”¹⁹. As Berg argues, respect “is the foundational act of practical self-consciousness”²⁰.

Respect is therefore a particular feeling, produced by a fact of reason, but, “in order to have an effect on a finite human being it must function as an analogue of sensibility. It must mimic the pathology of sensibility”²¹. For Kant, the proper moral phenomenon is precisely the feeling of respect: it is a sensible experience, specific to the emotional – and thus embodied – subject’s dimension, but it is caused by freedom as the dimension independent from the phenomena of the subject’s life. The moral law is nothing more than freedom that moves itself, but since it exists only in the concrete person – that is, in a body capable of causal freedom – what happens is that when freedom determines the will, the will is determined, as a subjective and psychological phenomenon, by respect, which is the causal power of freedom: “We have, rather, a *susceptibility* on the part of free choice to be moved by pure practical reason (and its law), and this is what we call moral feeling”²². So, respect is entirely sensible, but it is caused by (freedom’s) power, which is caused by nothing sensible.

As a sensible experience, respect is a compound feeling that induces a twofold emotional reaction in the subject. First, the awareness of the law shows the paucity of a subject’s inclinations, which try to impose themselves on the pathologically determinable self by feeding the faculty of desire. Kant recalls that this “propensity to make oneself as having subjective determining grounds of choice into the objective determining ground of the will in general can be called *self-love*; and if self-love makes itself lawgiving and the unconditional practical principle, it can be called *self-conceit*”²³. Respect breaks down the subject’s self-love by acting on her conscience and provoking a negative feeling of humiliation that Kant also defines as intellectual disdain. Second, however, there is the elevation of the subject, who also becomes aware of her freedom, namely, her ability to autonomously determine herself to act, making the moral law the only determining ground of the will. According to Kant, the person is subjected to her own *personality*, that is, “freedom and independence

¹⁹ I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, cit., p. 173 (403).

²⁰ A. Berg, *Kant on Moral Respect*, in “Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie”, vol. 103, n. 4, 2021, p. 23.

²¹ C. Wellmon, *Kant and the Feelings of Reason*, in “Eighteenth-Century Studies”, vol. 42, n. 4, 2009, p. 566.

²² I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, cit., p. 171 (400).

²³ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, cit., p. 62 (74).

from the mechanism of the whole of nature, regarded nevertheless as also a capacity of a being subject to special laws – namely pure practical laws given by his own reason”²⁴. Thus, the positive feeling of elevation follows and is provoked by respect; through it we feel the sublimity of our supersensible existence – and thus of our superior determination – combined with the awareness of our sensible existence.

It is clear how respect “is regarded as the *effect* of the law on the subject, and not as the *cause* of the law”²⁵. Nevertheless, the experience of the law’s effect on the subject is phenomenologically prior to the awareness of the law and thus also of its cause. In the individual experience, the sense of deserving or owing respect precedes the awareness that this depends on one’s ability to act in accordance with the self-determination of will. As Grenberg writes, respect as a phenomenon is “a felt moment *in* time that points us to an intelligible object *outside* of time”²⁶. In the subject, moral experience appears in feeling before reason, where finally the proper logical and normative order can be rebuilt (respect arises from the self-legislating will that precedes it). Therefore, the effectiveness of the moral law in the phenomena’s world is granted by the experiential priority of the feeling of respect:

The dissimilarity of determining grounds (empirical and rational) is made known by this resistance of a practically lawgiving reason to every meddling inclination, by a special kind of *feeling*, which, however, does not precede the lawgiving of practical reason but is instead produced only by it and indeed as a constraint, namely, through the feeling of a respect such as no human being has for inclinations of whatever kind but does have for the law²⁷.

In conclusion, respect allows one to acquire awareness of freedom as the ability to act autonomously. Respect, therefore, is the *ratio cognoscendi* of the moral law, which is its *ratio essendi*. Through respect we must understand the need for the interaction between the sensible and supersensible dimensions of human nature. For the moral law, which is related to the noumenal dimension, to have an effect on the agent and on her will’s determination, requires a feeling that, even though it is a particular one, reproduces the pathological influence of all other feelings. It is from sensibility “that the *subjective experience of morality*, namely of the value represented by the consciousness of being able to act according to a law

²⁴ Ivi, p. 71 (87).

²⁵ I. Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, cit., p. 14 (401).

²⁶ J.M. Grenberg, *The Practical, Cognitive Import of Feeling. A Phenomenological Account*, in K. Sorensen, D. Williamson (ed.), *Kant and the Faculty of Feeling*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 50.

²⁷ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, cit., p. 75 (92).

of freedom, arises”²⁸. Furthermore, other pathological feelings should not be eliminated from moral experience; the aim of respect is also the alignment of these feelings with the conduct dictated by the moral law.

5. The Aesthetic Experience

Respect is the means through which morality shows itself to a subject; it is felt by provoking an effect on her sensibility. But respect is not the only way sensibility and morality relate to each other. Kant claims that there is also the possibility of accessing to the knowledge of one’s supersensible destination through aesthetic experience. This can happen because human beings are “sensuously affected, embodied rational beings. Our sensory experiences and the feelings and thoughts aroused by these experiences form an integral part of our identity: a part that in turn plays multiple roles in human morality”²⁹.

Aesthetic experience can guide us to understand morality. It gives us a sensible image of morality, and, as Guyer argues, human beings “need such images, that although the actual content of the moral law must be deduced by rationality alone we are not creatures who can really be expected to grasp the nature of morality itself by pure unaided reason”³⁰.

Thus, through aesthetic experience one can have a *palpable* experience of freedom³¹. This is mostly because of the key characteristic of *disinterested*: taste is “the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of liking or disliking *devoid of all interest*”³², including moral interest. Because of this characteristic, aesthetic experience serves morality:

Aesthetic judgment must be free of external constraints, including the constraints of morality, but in virtue of this freedom the experience of aesthetic judgment can represent and in some degree prepare us for the exercise of freedom in morality itself [...] The autonomy of the aesthetic is in the service of the primacy of practical reason, but the aesthetic serves practical reason in virtue of nothing less than its freedom from constraint by practical as well as theoretical reason³³.

²⁸ R. Mordacci, *Rispetto*, Raffaello Cortina, Milan 2012, p. 100 (translation mine).

²⁹ R.B. Loudon, *Kant’s Impure Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, p. 108.

³⁰ P. Guyer, *Feeling and Freedom: Kant on Aesthetics and Morality*, in “The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism”, vol. 48, n. 2, Spring 1990, p. 139.

³¹ See P. Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996.

³² I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, W.S. Pluhar (ed., trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2015, p. 53 (211).

³³ P. Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, cit., p. 96.

The object judged by a feeling of pleasure is called *beautiful*. The links between beauty and morality are many in the four definitions of beauty that Kant gives in *Analytic*, so many that the German philosopher argues that beauty is the *symbol* of the morally good. Beauty is the sensible corresponding, in terms of perception, to freedom as the law of ends. Beauty shows the free play of the faculties in their teleological structure. In fact, “*beauty is an object’s form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object without the presentation of a purpose*”³⁴. The subject’s response to beauty is analogous to the judgment of morality because of its immediacy, freedom, and universality³⁵. Nature shows in beauty its noumenal dimension without imposing it as systematic knowledge. Art and beauty show how the world can be oriented to harmony, which is also something at which moral agency aims. Beauty comforts the moral agent with the fact that her effort is also nature’s effort.

In relation to this, as Guyer argues, the difference between beauty and morality is that the response to beauty is represented “to sense rather than through concepts. But since the pure idea of morality is not itself directly representable to sense, this disanalogy does not undermine the analogy between beauty and morality but is rather what requires that the former become the symbol of the latter”³⁶.

In this way, one can argue that beauty is the symbol of morality so that “the particular intuition of a beautiful form indicates the aesthetic freedom which is analogous to moral freedom”³⁷. This conception is grounded on the idea that “the consideration of the beautiful constitutes the meaning, in an empirical-anthropological sense, of the transition from sensuous nature to moral freedom”³⁸.

While the feeling of beauty is the symbol of morality, the experience of the *sublime* is a higher symbol of the morally good due to the fact that it has a direct correspondence with our moral destination. In this case, the intellect is not related to imagination, but reason is. In fact, the sublime is the exhibition of an indeterminate concept of reason.

Even if the object is not the judgment’s determinant, the sublime needs the experience of a different kind of object compared to beauty:

³⁴ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, cit., p. 84 (236).

³⁵ The judgment of an object as beautiful can claim universal validity. This is because the pleasure is not any subject’s inclination, and the judging person feels completely free in the relation with the object. However, what could be claimed is only a subjective universality or necessity because the aesthetic judgment does not come from concepts. See I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, cit., pp. 63-64 (219).

³⁶ P. Guyer, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, cit., p. 316.

³⁷ K. Düsing, *Beauty as the Transition from Nature to Freedom in Kant’s Critique of Judgment*, in “Noûs”, vol. 24, n. 1, March 1990, p. 85.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

The beautiful in nature concerns the form of the object, which consists in [the object's] being bounded. But the sublime can also be found in a formless object, insofar as we present *unboundedness*, either [as] in the object or because the object prompts us to present it, while yet we add to this unboundedness the thought of its totality³⁹.

Yet in the *Observation of the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*, Kant argues that the sublime must always be great and simple, while beauty could also be small and decorated. A person gripped by the sublime is serious and often motionless and astonished. In general, the sublime as a feeling “seems to be seriousness, rather than play, in the imagination’s activity”⁴⁰.

The experience of the sublime is an experience of a complex psychological state, one very different from that felt in experiencing beauty: the subject indeed feels a complex feeling which, despite having an element of pleasure, also has an element of pain. This feeling is described by Kant as a *negative pleasure*. In the sublime the relation is between imagination and reason, where the former is confronted with its limits, forced by the latter to reach its maximum. From this arises the feeling of displeasure: reason forces us to unify in a whole the immensity of the sensible world that we are experiencing, but the power of imagination is not sufficient to satisfy this requirement. In this way, imagination seems to lose its freedom, so the feeling of the sublime acts as a displeasure.

However, through the experience of the imagination’s impotence, the subject represents the infinite power of reason to herself. This turns pain into pleasure and awakens the awareness of having a supersensible faculty: pure autonomous reason. Here it is a palpable experience of freedom in which one achieves the awareness of one’s rational destination:

Hence, the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation. But by a certain subreption (in which respect for the object is substituted for respect for the idea of humanity within our subject) this respect is accorded an object of nature that, as it were, makes intuitable for us the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive powers over the greatest power of sensibility⁴¹.

The experience that the sublime offers is the awareness of our identity as moral beings. It is a sort of moral self-knowledge of “the fitness of

³⁹ I. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, cit., p. 98 (244).

⁴⁰ *Ibidem* (245).

⁴¹ *Ivi*, p. 114 (257).

the subject for moral ends; it is not about this or that end, but an overall judgment of fitness to ends that exceed natural ends”⁴².

By this description, the experience of the sublime is analogous to the experience of respect: they are both complex psychological states that include elements of pleasure and displeasure. Moreover, Kant, when analysing the structure of moral feeling, sees this relation between respect and the sublime:

This is how the genuine moral incentive of pure practical reason is constituted; it is nothing other than the pure moral law itself insofar as it lets us discover the sublimity of our own super-sensible existence and subjectively effects respect for their higher vocation in human beings, who are at the same time conscious of their sensible existence and of the dependence, connected with it, on their pathologically affected nature⁴³.

To summarise, aesthetic experience gives us the opportunity to reach the supersensible dimension through an experience that starts from the sensible one. Beauty and, even more, the sublime are important to implement our propensity for moral feeling, that is, the subjective awareness of the moral law. In particular, the analogy to respect underlines how important the feeling of the sublime is: the awareness of our moral destination seems also to take shape from the sensible experience of raw nature.

The sublime therefore is crucial to understanding that the moral destination is not only the simple awareness and application of the law but also the achievement of the unity of the person, known in both her sensible and intelligible dimensions. We find this unity in the notion of *character*, which consists in the attempt to build a specific way of realising morality in practice, in which the sensible component, instead of being detached from the subject, is brought into harmony with the intelligible component.

6. Character

Character is the natural end of the anthropological-psychological path taken here. I have underlined how the sensible dimension is fundamental for Kant in allowing the subject to experience the law and thus her supersensible destination as a possible moral being. Respect is of course

⁴² K. Deligiorgi, *How to Feel a Judgment. The Sublime and Its Architectonic Significance*, in K. Sorensen, D. Williamson (eds.), *Kant and the Faculty of Feeling*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2018, p. 178.

⁴³ I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, cit., pp. 73-73 (88).

the best way to understand the relation between morality and sensibility. However, as I have shown, a palpable experience of freedom is also possible through the feelings of beauty and the sublime. Louden writes that “there are a host of phenomenal emotions which, while not the direct *Bestimmungsgrund* of the will, must be present in a virtuous disposition [...] In less Kantian but more Aristotelian terms, these emotions are ones that have been trained *by* reason to work in harmony *with* reason”⁴⁴. This leads to character as the achievement of the person’s unity, “of the unity of the natural and moral orders in the individual, a unity that results in the concrete actualisation of the moral law in the world”⁴⁵.

In the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant distinguishes two meanings of the word *character*:

On the one hand it is said that a certain human being has *this* or that (physical) character; on the other hand that he simply has *a* character (a moral character), which can only be one, or nothing at all. The first is the distinguishing mark of the human being as a sensible or natural being; the second is the distinguishing mark of the human being as rational being endowed with freedom⁴⁶.

As subjects of the sensible world, human beings have an empirical character, and all their actions are explicable by laws of nature. Thus, “in short, our explanations would be no different than for any animal behaviour”⁴⁷. What has to be taken into consideration here is moral character as a way of thinking produced by the same human being. Physical character is the product of nature’s work on us, while moral character requires our active participation:

We are able in and through thought to “step outside” (so to speak) a series of events in the world, including and especially a series of our own actions as these are determined by our desires and external influences, that we are able to judge them morally, to direct them differently in the future as a result of bringing that judgment to bear on them⁴⁸.

For Kant, to have a character means to have “that property of the will by which the subject binds himself to definite practical principles

⁴⁴ R.B. Loudon, *Kant’s Virtue Ethics*, in “Philosophy”, vol. 61, n. 238, 1986, p. 487.

⁴⁵ G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant’s Conception of Moral Character. The “Critical” Link of Morality, Anthropology, and Reflective Judgment*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1999, p. 2.

⁴⁶ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, R.B. Loudon (ed., trans.), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2006, p. 185 (285).

⁴⁷ G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant’s Conception of Moral Character*, cit., p. 75.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 77.

that he has prescribed to himself irrevocably by his own reason”⁴⁹. It is an ability inherent in human beings: it is their natural predisposition to personality, to feel respect for the moral law that drives them to take the law as the fundamental ground of the will. In general, all natural predispositions “are not only (negatively) *good* (they do not conflict with the moral law) but are also predispositions *to the good* (they further compliance with that law). They are *original*; for they belong to the possibility of human nature”⁵⁰.

Thus, there is a natural predisposition to the good that requires, however, active participation by the agent to develop into a moral character. Nevertheless, Kant argues that together with the predisposition to the good, human beings also naturally have a propensity to evil. In fact, the possibility of departing from the maxims of the moral law is a natural tendency, and “it can also be named the *perversity* (*perversitas*) of the human heart, because it reverses the moral order in regard to the incentives of a *free* power of choice”⁵¹.

Therefore, as with the predisposition to the good, the propensity to evil is rooted in our nature and depends on a choice (which, in this case, consists of the departure of the will from the moral law). The difference between a good and an evil person is exactly in the determination of their wills, in the choice of the determining ground and incentives. Good character entails building a stable and unitary response to the common enemy, where the good principle prevails on the evil ones; in our souls resounds the order to be better, to make law the supreme grounding of all our maxims.

The point is that the cultivation of that predisposition to the good does not involve taking apart sensibility in favour of pure rational deliberation. In this regard, Kant criticises the Stoics. They thought rightly that the formation of good character stems from the conflict between a good and a bad principle. With the word *virtue* – which appoints at the same time bravery and value and so needs an enemy – the Stoics indicated “that in order to become a morally good human being it is not enough merely to let the germ of the good which resides in our genus develop unhindered, but that a cause of evil located within us and acting in opposition must also be combated”⁵². The problem is that the Stoics were unable to recognise their enemy, which should not be sought in inclinations⁵³. Kant argues that inclinations are surely undisciplined, but they

⁴⁹ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, cit., p. 192 (292).

⁵⁰ I. Kant, *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason*, W.S. Pluhar (ed., trans.), Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis 2009, p. 30 (28).

⁵¹ Ivi, p. 33 (30).

⁵² Ivi, p. 62 (57).

⁵³ Bochicchio argues for the innocence of the body and its inclinations: “Imputing the cause of vice and immorality to sensibility, that is truly unjust and immoral, because it

reveal themselves sincerely to each conscience. The enemy hides beside reason, so that the ground of evil

cannot be indicated as people commonly tend to do, i.e., posited it in the sensibility of human beings and in the natural inclinations arising therefrom [...] Natural inclinations, *considered in themselves*, are *good*, i.e., irreprehensible; and not only is it futile, but it would also be harmful and censurable, to want to eradicate them. Rather, one must only tame them, so that they do not themselves wear one another out but instead can be brought to harmony in a whole⁵⁴.

It is no coincidence that in the *Anthropology*, in the section on the faculty of knowledge, Kant writes an apology for sensibility in which he defends it from such common accusations as that it deceives and confuses people. Here what is evil and blameworthy is the way we relate to sensibility; it is our choice. As Korsgaard argues, “inclination presents the proposal; reason decides whether to act on it or not, and the decision takes the form of a legislative act”⁵⁵. The effect of the moral law, therefore, “is to preclude all inclinations from having a *direct* determining influence on the will”⁵⁶, not to eradicate them from the subject.

Therefore, character is really the unity of the person discussed above:

Inner unity for our conduct of life is ultimately achieved, not in terms of a kind of defeat, or passive subordination of human nature to reason’s causal exercise, but rather by a genuine, cooperative responsiveness that allows for a single, united effort in realizing moral form in its subjective, concrete actualization⁵⁷.

The goal is to create a unified character in which inclinations are disciplined by reason so that they can help us to do what reason demands. The formation of character, “far from opposing nature, requires nature’s cooperation and stands in essential relation to it”⁵⁸

In this way, not only are inclinations not harmful to moral judgment, they can even be harmonically integrated with the moral law, which nevertheless remains the determining ground of the will.

means in a certain way violating the innocence of the body”. V. Bochicchio, *Il laboratorio dell’anima. Immagini del corpo nella filosofia di Immanuel Kant*, Il melangolo, Genoa 2006, p. 149 (translation mine).

⁵⁴ Ivi, p. 63 (58).

⁵⁵ C.M. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution. Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Oxford University Press, New York 2009, p. 154.

⁵⁶ B. Herman, *Moral Literacy*, Harvard University Press, London 2007, p. 13.

⁵⁷ G. Felicitas Munzel, *Kant’s Conception of Moral Character*, cit., p. 131.

⁵⁸ Ivi, p. 260.

For this very reason, in *The Metaphysics of Morals*, and even more in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, Kant carefully analyses emotional life. These analyses allow one to understand that Kant's approach to emotions is not generalised; he "does not have a single theory for emotions, not even a single word for them"⁵⁹. Indeed, Kant distinguishes between affects, passions, and feelings, assessing their different roles and relations with reason.

In particular, it is worthwhile distinguishing between affects (*Affekt*) and passions (*Leidenschaft*), with the former considered as not intrinsically evil, in contrast to the latter, which are a real threat to the subject's autonomy:

Inclination that can be conquered only with difficulty or not at all by the subject's reason is *passion*. On the other hand, the feeling of pleasure or displeasure in the subject's present state that does not let him rise to *reflection* is *affect*. To be subject to affects and passions is probably always an *illness of the mind*, because both affect and passion shut out the sovereignty of reason⁶⁰.

Kant writes about illnesses of the mind because both affects and passions act on the subject during the moment of reflection, preventing pure rational deliberation. The difference is that affects immediately exhaust their effect and the subject has the ability to tame and direct them in accordance with the dictates of moral law. In contrast, for Kant, passions are evil dispositions. Moreover, the best form of desire, "even when it aims at what (according to matter) belongs to virtue, for example, beneficence, is still (according to form) not merely *pragmatically* ruinous but also *morally* reprehensible, as soon as it turns into passion"⁶¹. That is because passions act directly on our freedom, taking root as a steady inclination in the subject:

Since passions can be paired with the calmest reflection, it is easy to see that they are not thoughtless, like affects, or stormy and transitory; rather, they take root and can even co-exist with rationalizing. It is also easy to see that they do the greatest damage to freedom [...] No human being wishes to have passion. For who wants to have himself put in chains when he can be free?⁶²

As for feelings, they must be distinguished from passions and affects. Feelings (*Gefühl*) distinguish themselves from affects because

⁵⁹ M. Borges, *Emotion, Reason, and Action in Kant*, Bloomsbury Academic, London 2019, p. 181.

⁶⁰ I. Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, cit., p. 149 (251).

⁶¹ Ivi, p. 166 (267).

⁶² Ivi, p. 165 (265).

they are not related to the instant and because they need some sort of personal reworking. Thus, they can have a positive role, enough to be cultivated, while emotions require discipline⁶³. That is the case with sympathy (*Mitleid*), the participation in another's state of joy or pain, where the human being is regarded "not merely as a rational being but also as an animal endowed with reason"⁶⁴. These feelings, in Thomason's opinion, are "a key part of the development of and the expression of moral sensitivity; they help us to notice when the concerns of morality are salient. They function as a pair of moral eyes that allow us to see where our moral obligations arise in the world"⁶⁵. Thus, sympathetic feelings can and must have a place in the character of the Kantian moral agent in harmony with, and not in contrast to, her intelligible nature.

7. Conclusions

In taking an anthropological-psychological path, I have shown how the sensible dimension is fundamental to access an agent's noumenal dimension.

Respect allows freedom to be reflected within the subject as a subjective experience, making her aware of her ability to act autonomously. The goal of respect is not the rejection of the influence of pathological feelings (the mistake of the Stoics): it is the alignment of these feelings with the determining ground that dwells in the moral law. I have further shown how awareness of our moral destination can also arise from aesthetic experience. In beauty, the free play of the faculties corresponds to freedom as the law of ends. That is why beauty is the symbol of the morally good: nature and moral agency aim at the realisation of the same harmony in the world. With the experience of the sublime, the power of freedom is grasped thanks to its ability to confront nature and to be superior to it. Finally, character is the internal unity achieved by the subject – a unity in which the sensible element does not hinder the realisation of morality but cooperates with the noumenal element.

I can now effectively respond to the criticisms analysed above (§2). Kant reveals the possibility of a concrete relation between nature and freedom, with the latter manifesting itself within the subject's sensible

⁶³ See U. Eran, *Which Emotions Should Kantians Cultivate (and Which Ones Should they Discipline)?*, in "Kantian Review", vol. 25, n. 2, 2020, pp. 52-76.

⁶⁴ I. Kant, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, cit., p. 220 (456).

⁶⁵ K. Thomason, *A Good Enough Heart: Kant and the Cultivation of Emotions*, in "Kantian Review", vol. 22, n. 3, 2017, p. 441.

experience and with the possibility to rise from the former to the awareness of freedom thanks to the aesthetic experience. Thus, the role of sensibility is crucial, and the realisation of a character in which the subject's sensible component is aligned with the intelligible is also one of Kant's main goals.

Furthermore, the impartiality of the judgment does not lead to impersonality (the destruction of each moral subject's specific identity). What is needed is for the subject always to put her agency and her judging under reason's critical examination to perform free and universally valid actions and judgments. As Bagnoli argues, we must understand autonomy "in terms of self-reflexivity, which is the capacity to take a reflective stand on one's own state of mind and action"⁶⁶. Thus, not only is our sensibility fundamental to our experience of the awareness of the intelligible dimension, but it is also part of the process of the maxim's building by orienting the subject in the choice of the object's will.

Returning to Blackburn's metaphor, Kant's ship does not seek to cut out the crew (the sensible components) so that the captain may sail alone. Instead, Kant aims to achieve an internal harmony among all the ship's members, from the crew to the captain. That harmony is best expressed in the idea of character.

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