

# KANT'S CRITIQUE OF CULTURE: NORMATIVITY, CONFLICT AND THE FORMATION OF THE CRITICAL SELF

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**Abstract.** *This paper offers a reinterpretation of Kant's critique of culture by focusing on the ambivalent meaning of reason's awakening from nature, between instrumental domination and moral potential. By foregrounding this ambiguity of rationality, autonomy emerges as a fragile and educable critical capacity grounded in the constitutive non-coincidence of the individual with her cultural determinations and moral vocation. On this basis, the paper interprets Bildung as a conflictual process of formation oriented towards the formation of a critical self. The paper thus advances an immanent account of moral normativity, according to which normativity emerges through critical engagement with the present.*

**Keywords.** *Bildung; Critique; Normativity; Education; Culture*

## 1. *What Kind of Normativity? Towards Normativity as Immanently Emergent through Critique*

Kant's reflections on culture have been received through two dominant and sometime convergent interpretive frameworks. On the one hand, they are frequently read, often in a polemical register, as part of an Enlightenment narrative that links the awakening of reason from nature to a linear development of humanity. On the other hand, Kant's reflections on culture have been integrated into a moral-purist interpretation of his philosophy, in which autonomy is treated as a purely rational ideal and culture is assigned a secondary or merely instrumental role, sharply distinguished from the normative core of morality.

Within the first strand of reception, Kant's account of culture is situated within a progressivist Enlightenment framework that

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construes the emancipation of reason from nature as a cumulative historical movement toward moral and political maturity. This reading has been articulated in classical interpretations of Kant's philosophy of history and cosmopolitanism, emphasizing the teleology of reason and the gradual realization of freedom<sup>1</sup>. In recent decades, however, this narrative has become the object of sustained postcolonial and decolonial critique. Such scholarship has forcefully exposed how Enlightenment accounts of rational progress are entangled with Eurocentrism, colonial hierarchies, and epistemic exclusion, and how universalist narratives of development often function to marginalize non-European forms of life and knowledge. Within this critical horizon, Kant's conception of culture is frequently read polemically as legitimizing a civilizational logic in which non-European societies appear as deficient or immature stages of humanity<sup>2</sup>. While these critiques rightly problematize the political and epistemic implications of Enlightenment progress narratives, they often presuppose a reconciliatory reading of Kant's concept of culture, one that this paper seeks to complicate from within Kant's own critical framework.

Alongside this progressivist reception, Kant's idea of culture has also been interpreted through a moral-purist lens that sharply separates autonomy from its social and historical conditions. In this strand of interpretation, autonomy is treated as a purely rational ideal grounded in self-legislation and in a formal understanding of

<sup>1</sup> For reconstructions of Kant's philosophy of history in relation to a progressivist Enlightenment framework, see G. Cavallar, *Kant's Embedded Cosmopolitanism: History, Philosophy and Education for World Citizens*, Berlin-München-Boston, de Gruyter, 2015; P. Kleingeld, *Kant, History, and the Idea of Moral Development*, «History of Philosophy Quarterly», XVI (1), 1999, pp. 59-80; Y. Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980.

<sup>2</sup> For postcolonial and decolonial critiques of Enlightenment narratives of progress, and of Kant's place within them, see W.D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham, Duke University Press, 2011; R. Bernasconi, *Who Invented the Concept of Race?*, in *Race*, ed. by R. Bernasconi, Oxford, Blackwell, 2001, pp. 83-103; D. Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2000; G.C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present*, Cambridge (Massachusetts), Harvard University Press, 1999.

moral principles, abstracted from processes of cultural formation and historical mediation. Moral normativity is primarily analyzed in terms of the validity and justification of principles, while culture, anthropology, education, and social practices are relegated to a secondary or instrumental role. Within this framework, autonomy appears as a self-sufficient rational achievement, and culture figures either as an external obstacle to moral purity or as a neutral background for the application of already constituted moral principles. Pure practical reason is thus treated as a normative tool in a strong sense: moral principles are understood as fully determinate in themselves, such that the institutional, social, and political world can be built - or at least assessed - on their basis, and the human being can be educated in light of them<sup>3</sup>.

The progressivist and moral-purist readings of Kant inform vast and complex interpretive debates, each of which could be addressed independently. It is not the aim of this paper to intervene directly in any one of them as such. Rather, with respect to these two strands of reception, I seek to question what appears to be a shared assumption concerning the status of normativity. Despite their differences in focus, both strands tend to treat the world as an external field of implementation, rather than as a constitutive dimension of subjectivity and normativity themselves. Both presuppose that normativity is secured independently of cultural formation, either as the teleological unfolding of reason in history or as the formal authority of pure practical reason, and that the empirical world functions primarily as a horizon of realization or application.

<sup>3</sup> Among moral-purist interpretations see C. Korsgaard, *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Oxford-New York, Oxford University Press, 2009; Ead., *The Sources of Normativity*, Cambridge (Mass.), Cambridge University Press, 1996; O. O'Neill, *Bounds of Justice*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009; Ead., *Towards Justice and Virtue: A Constructivist Account of Practical Reasoning*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996; S. Anderson-Gold, *Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2000; B. Herman, *A Cosmopolitan kingdom of ends*, in A. Reath, B. Herman and C. Korsgaard (Eds.), *Reclaiming the History of Ethics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, pp. 187-213, 1997; J. Rawls, *Kantian constructivism in moral theory*, «The Journal of Philosophy», LXXVII (9), 1980, pp. 515-572.

This paper challenges that shared framework by interpreting culture itself as a conflictual site in which normativity does not precede social life, but emerges immanently through critique. The position defended here emphasizes Kant's social, historical, anthropological, and pedagogical writings as essential to understanding his conception of practical reason and autonomy. It focuses primarily on the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, read in dialogue with *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim, An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?*, the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, and the *Lectures on Pedagogy*<sup>4</sup>. Taken together, these texts show that autonomy cannot be conceived as a purely inward or self-sufficient achievement of rational will, detached from the social world. Rather, practical reason appears as a critical capacity that emerges, is exercised, and is tested within concrete forms of cultural life.

Attending to these writings complicates readings that isolate moral normativity from processes of individual formation and collective interaction, such as civilization, acculturation, enlightenment, public discourse, and antagonism. By foregrounding Kant's social writings, the paper resists a moral-purist interpretation that treats culture as merely instrumental or external to morality. Instead, it shows that Kant conceives practical reason as immanent to cultural processes and oriented toward critique rather than toward the construction of a rationally perfected social order. Autonomy thus emerges as an exercise that constitutes the critical self: a fragile and educable capacity to distance oneself from what one has become, to contest existing norms, and to reopen the question of freedom from within the world one inhabits.

Recent Kant scholarship has increasingly emphasized the role of culture, history, and social mediation in practical reason. A major corrective to moral purism is found in Robert Louden's *Kant's Impure Ethics*<sup>5</sup>, which argues that Kant's moral philosophy requires

<sup>4</sup> Kant's works are cited throughout the text according to the Akademie-Ausgabe – I. Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, (ed. by) vol. 1-22 Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, vol. 23 Deutsche Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, from vol. 24 Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen, Berlin, 1900ff – with an indication of the standard abbreviation, the volume and page number.

<sup>5</sup> See R.B. Louden, *Kant's Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings*, New York-Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000.

supplementation by anthropology, pedagogy, and empirical knowledge in order to be applicable to human beings. Rather than seeking to supplement pure ethics with empirical content or to render moral principles more effective in practice, this paper focuses on the internal tensions within Kant's concept of culture itself. Anthropology, history, and pedagogy are not treated as auxiliary domains, but as sites in which the conflictual structure of freedom and reason becomes visible. From this perspective, the emphasis shifts away from the 'impurity' of ethics understood as a corrective to moral formalism, and toward morality as a critical possibility that must be continuously enacted in the lives of individuals. More generally, the paper seeks to shift the debate from application to immanence: normativity does not stand above culture, awaiting a more or less adequate realization in social life, but is forged through critique from within cultural contradictions.

Important contributions have also reconstructed Kant's idea of progress by claiming it essential for grounding constructivist accounts of practical normativity (Ypi)<sup>6</sup>, or by interpreting it as a fragile, conflict-driven learning process irreducible to both natural teleology and moral certainty (Honneth)<sup>7</sup>. While these accounts are crucial for foregrounding immanence, the present paper shifts the emphasis away from progress as a justificatory horizon and toward the critical significance of normativity itself.

On this view, morality as a possibility of critique does not originate from a purely rational impulse. Rather, it arises from real, lived conflicts within cultural life, from the tensions between transgression and conformity that individuals encounter in their own practices, roles, and forms of self-realization. It is from this perspective that the paper focuses on the formative activity of *Bildung* as a conflictual process of self-formation internal to culture itself.

In this sense, autonomy does not consist in an ongoing process of moral purification, nor in the approximation to a fully rational ideal. Instead, it takes shape through sustained engagement with the

<sup>6</sup> L. Ypi, *The Moral Ought in Conjectural History*, «Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy», XXVII (6), 2024, pp. 991-1010.

<sup>7</sup> A. Honneth, *The Irreducibility of Progress: Kant's Account of the Relationship between Morality and History*, «Critical Horizons», XVIII (1), 2007, pp. 1-17.

constitutive incongruence of the human being, as the capacity to reflect upon, take distance from, and critically interrogate one's own formation. Autonomy is thus conceived as a critical capacity that remains fragile, educable, and fundamentally open.

This conception rests indeed on the fact that the individual never fully coincides either with her culturally mediated determinations or with her moral vocation<sup>8</sup>. The space opened by this non-coincidence prevents, on the one hand, complete absorption into existing norms, and, on the other, the reduction of autonomy to the prescriptive authority of moral principles. It is within this gap that the possibility of immanent critique is continuously generated and sustained.

Accordingly, the aim of *Bildung* is the formation of a critical self that remains irreducibly exposed to conflict, tension, and opacity within cultural life itself. *Bildung* does not indicate the realization of a pre-existing rational essence of the human being, nor its historical unfolding, even when such unfolding is understood as processual and never fully completed. Rather, it names the critical work of the self upon herself: a work directed at her own historicity and at the forms that both enable and constrain subjectivity. This work is neither automatic nor guaranteed. It must be actively made possible through education, and it is exceedingly difficult precisely because the prevailing cultural order constitutes the material and symbolic horizon within which individual self-realization takes place. The very elements that form the individual also tend to stabilize conformity and reproduce existing modes of domination.

In this sense, *Bildung* indicates the possibility of opening a conflict between the inherited and the possible, the familiar and the not-yet-thought. It does not describe a humanistic abstract ideal, but a real fracture between the individual and the world: a fracture that is always present and constitutive of individuality itself, yet always in need of reactivation through critical reflexivity. It is within this gap that the very possibility of immanent critique is inscribed.

<sup>8</sup> For Kant, individuality is marked by a constitutive non-correspondence with the universal moral genre: an irreducible incongruence between what the individual is, what she desires, and what she ought to be. This non-correspondence is a structural feature of modern subjectivity, and it is fundamental for understanding the very possibility of critique.

This paper therefore advances an account of normativity as immanently emergent through critique. On this reading, normativity emerges as a critical capacity activated within the lived conflicts of social and cultural existence. It takes shape as an unstable and fragile practice that must be continuously reactivated in and through concrete situations. Understood in this way, normativity does not have a foundational or justificatory role. It is never fully achieved, guaranteed, or secured once and for all. This is, deliberately, a weak form of normativity: one that does not emerge automatically, that depends on education, reflexivity, and the capacity for self-distancing, and that may also fail to emerge altogether.

## 2. *Culture, Nature and Reason's Awakening*

Kant situates the emergence of culture within a dual trajectory of instrumental domination and moral potential, highlighting the ambivalent meaning of reason's awakening from nature. I consider this ambivalence to be of the greatest importance.

In the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, we encounter one of Kant's rare and explicit praises of Rousseau. In this text, Kant identifies culture, understood as both civilization and the progressive emancipation from the immediate tutelage of nature, as the site where a structural and inevitable conflict emerges, rooted in the dual way reason and freedom are given to human beings.

On the one hand, culture is the domain of instrumental reason: a reason that produces, divides, organizes, and harnesses nature as a means for its own ends. It generates technical progress, institutions, civil life, and the division of labor, and with them the forms of power, prestige, inequality, alienation, and exploitation that structure modern social life. At the same time, culture opens the space for the potentially endless cultivation of individual passions and inclinations, and for the emergence of an indeterminate, yet endlessly further definable sense of the 'mine'.

Modern individuality thus takes shape within a complex network of social and symbolic mediations. Even those dimensions that appear most personal (like desires or aspirations) are formed

through social roles, the labor of others, shared expectations, inherited knowledge, and language itself. The ‘mine’ is therefore not a pure, self-originating essence awaiting realization, but a historically and socially constituted form of individuality. It contains an irreducible opacity: an interiority that is neither fully transparent to itself nor entirely available to conscious mastery. Precisely for this reason, it can function as an internalized mechanism of domination, a subtle form of passive self-conformity in which the subject affirms as personal what is in fact sedimented through external structures.

On the other hand, for Kant culture is also traversed by a profound tension with practical reason, the faculty that makes human beings capable of autonomy: of acting according to principles not dictated by interest or advantage, but grounded in the idea of dignity and universality.

It is within this constitutive ambivalence that Kant situates the historical and social condition of modern humanity. Culture is a vehicle of freedom, but also a potential instrument of domination; it shapes individuals, yet it can simultaneously obscure and distort their development; it cultivates reason, but it can also hinder reason’s path toward true autonomy<sup>9</sup>. It is precisely within this tension that the possibility – not guaranteed, but nevertheless possible – of a critical trajectory through *Bildung* emerges. *Bildung* thus becomes the means by which culture can be engaged reflectively, opening a space for emancipation within the very structures that both enable and constrain it.

<sup>9</sup> In line with this Kantian text, Schiller writes: «In the very bosom of the most exquisitely developed social life egotism has founded its system, and without ever acquiring therefrom a heart that is truly sociable, we suffer all the contagious and afflictions of society. We subject our free judgment to its despotic opinion, our feeling to its fantastic customs, our will to its seductions [...]. Civilization, far from setting us free, in fact creates some new need with every new power it develops in us» (F. Schiller, *Über die Ästhetische Erziehung des Menschen in einer Reihe von Briefen*, in F. Schiller, *Sämtliche Werke (10 Bände)*, ed. by H.-G. Thalheim, Berlin, Aufbau-Verlag, 2005, vol. 8, pp. 316-317; Engl. trans. by E.M. Wilkinson and L.A. Willoughby, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*, Oxford, Clarendon press, 1967, p. 27).

In the *Conjectural Beginning*<sup>10</sup>, reason awakens from nature in the form of a restlessness, not driven by necessity, but as a free deviation from what instinct («the voice of God»<sup>11</sup>, as Kant writes) had hitherto prescribed. It is a minimal, almost imperceptible gesture: a 'why not?', a mischievous movement of curiosity that breaks the immediacy of natural adherence and opens the path toward individuality and arbitrariness. Reason discovers that it can desire something beyond necessity, that it can long for the superfluous, the luxurious, the symbolic. In this movement, it experiences itself for the first time, recognizing itself as a faculty of infinite desire, a power capable of transcending the limits imposed by a reality that, from this moment onward, will appear as external: nature. It is here that the irreversible process of distancing from nature begins: once awakened, reason can no longer return to a state of pure immediacy. I take this power for limit-transcendence to be the most general and decisive determination of reason in Kant<sup>12</sup>; it belongs to both instrumental and practical reason.

For Kant, reason introduces a rupture in natural life by enabling symbolic and purposive action, thus inaugurating human freedom. Reason manifests itself as the capacity to go beyond the given, to interrogate natural impulses, to intensify pleasure through cultural mediation, and to attribute meaning and value only to what it constructs: the world of custom, sentiment, art, and social life<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed analysis of this text and an up-to-date bibliography, see the recent work by O. Lenczewska, *Kant on the History and Development of Practical Reason*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2025.

<sup>11</sup> I. Kant, *Mutmaßlicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte*, AA 8, p. 111; Eng. trans. by A.W. Wood, *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, in I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. by G. Zöllner and R.B. Louden, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 165.

<sup>12</sup> In what can be considered a true phenomenology of reason, Kant formulates a general definition of its concept: «The occasion for deserting the natural drive might have been only something trivial; yet the success of the first attempt, namely of becoming conscious of one's reason as a faculty that can extend itself beyond the limits within which all animals are held, was very important and decisive for his way of living» (Kant, *Mutmaßlicher Anfang*, AA 8, pp. 111-112; Eng. trans., p. 165).

<sup>13</sup> It is worth noting that, in the *Conjectural Beginning*, reason does not develop in opposition to sensibility, as certain interpretations of Kantian philosophy sometimes suggest. On the contrary, reason incorporates, reworks, and intensifies

Through its ability to desire and imagine infinite ends, reason discovers that pleasure, too, can be displaced: no longer tied to what is immediately present, but enjoyed through imagination, representation, and anticipation. In this movement, the human being learns to plan her actions, to orient them toward ends not simply given, but posited by reason itself. The future ceases to be a mere time to come; it becomes a motive for action, transforming waiting into intentional structure. Reason thus assumes the form of work: in order to realize its ends, it must transform the world, intervening in nature and subordinating it as a means.

This is the definitive form of modern rationality that Kant helps to outline: an instrumental reason, capable of producing a general reinterpretation of nature in which human beings recognize themselves as ends. Within this framework, reason institutes a hierarchy among living beings, placing human beings at the summit as the only creatures capable of freely setting their own ends. Nature, in turn, is reduced to raw material for human labor, a field upon which the human will is exercised. It is no longer a living totality to which we belong, but an object to be known, manipulated, transformed, and ultimately dominated<sup>14</sup>.

sensibility. For human beings, pleasure is not simply given in the form of natural immediacy; it is enhanced precisely through the mediation of reason and its activity as a faculty of imagination. Reason does not repress pleasure, it appropriates it, transforms it, liberates it from mere instinct, and repositions it within a cultural horizon of which it becomes the author. Thus, for example, sexual pleasure for human beings cannot be reduced to the satisfaction of a biological need, but appears as an experience of artifice, meaning, and feeling. Even the abstention from immediate gratification, such as the refusal of sex, can represent an intensification of pleasure itself, insofar as it is tied to cultural and social values rather than to a purely repressive rationality. In this way, a more complex and multifaceted field of pleasure opens up: love, infatuation, jealousy, obsession, even perversion and masochism, all forms of feeling that reveal the rationally mediated character of sensibility itself. The capacity for abstraction from nature does not entail a denial of corporeality, but rather the possibility of transforming the sensible into meaningful experience, making it an expression of freedom.

<sup>14</sup> Emblematically, Kant writes: «he comprehended (however obscurely) that he was the genuine end of nature, and that in this nothing that lives on earth can supply a competitor to him. The first time he said to the sheep: Nature has given you the skin you wear not for you but for me, then took it off the sheep and put

### 3. *The Ambivalence of Reason and Freedom*

Kant distinguishes between arbitrary will and moral autonomy, arguing that true freedom arises through self-limitation guided by reason. Freedom, in its first form, appears as absolute arbitrariness, a voracious power of appropriation. Yet it is precisely at this decisive juncture in the reflection on modern rationality that Kant introduces the need for a «thought of the opposite»: the impossibility of applying the same logic of instrumentalization to another human being<sup>15</sup>. Where everything else may be treated as a means, human beings must be recognized as ends, equal to me in their participation in the gift of nature, equal in their use of reason, equal in their capacity to labor and transform the world. Here lies the crucial shift: equality between human beings is not posited as an original principle, but emerges through the recognition that abstract freedom must be limited, a power of transformation that must not be exercised against others. From this recognition arises the necessity for an internal constraint on the use of instrumental reason: another human being must never be treated as a mere means, but always as an end in herself. For Kant, it is then within political institutions that this principle must find its concrete realization, as the goal in the establishment of a just society where the dignity of every human being is preserved and affirmed.

This shift opens a new practical horizon, and with it, a new concept of freedom: no longer arbitrary will, but autonomy. Yet this transition is neither linear nor peaceful, nor does it represent a simple overcoming. Rather, Kant shows that the relationship between

it on himself (Genesis 3: 21), he became aware of a prerogative that he had by his nature over all animals, which he now no longer regarded as his fellow creatures, but rather as means and instruments given over to his will for the attainment of his discretionary aims» (Kant, *Mutmaßlicher Anfang*, AA 8, p. 114; Eng. trans., p. 167).

<sup>15</sup> «This representation includes (however obscurely) the thought of the opposite: that he must not say something like this to any human being, but has to regard him as an equal participant in the gifts of nature – a preparation from afar for the restrictions that reason was to lay on the will in the future in regard to his fellow human beings, and which far more than inclination and love is necessary to the establishment of society» (*ibidem*).

instrumental reason and practical reason, between freedom as arbitrary will and freedom as autonomy and human dignity, is both inseparable and inherently conflictual. Both forms arise within the same awakening of reason, and their relation is immediately marked by a tension that is never fully resolved, but continually reopens as a critical possibility, as the individual's capacity to turn reason upon itself and upon the world, to interrogate the grounds of her own actions, and to impose limits upon herself. In this sense, freedom is never simply self-realization; it is always also self-critique, distancing, and an internal struggle with oneself.

This fundamental duality of reason and freedom gives rise to the problem of culture, and with it, the possibility of a *Bildung* that is not mere adaptation. With the awakening of reason and the capacity to imagine and pursue ends not dictated by nature, Kant affirms a new dimension of individuality: one that is no longer exhausted by biological belonging to the human species. At this point, a fracture opens within the human being: the individual no longer coincides with a simple function of the species, but is defined by the capacity to exceed it, to escape its functional patterns through desire, culture, and planning, through which she can realize herself. Whereas animals, guided by instinct, remain inscribed within a logic of necessity, human beings discover themselves capable of creating arbitrary ends, of projecting themselves toward what is not yet, and of shaping themselves in ways no longer determined by immediate natural adaptation. It is through this excess – manifesting as deviation, irreducibility, and non-conformity – that human individuality constitutes itself as an open problem, rather than a given identity. For this reason, in human beings there is never full correspondence between the individual and the species.

Yet this non-correspondence is itself doubled: human beings, as individuals, do not fully correspond either to their 'natural' species-being or to their 'moral' species-being, and these two registers are themselves in «conflict»<sup>16</sup>. This double discrepancy is crucial for Kant, and I believe it is decisive for understanding the conflictual nature of freedom itself. Freedom manifests as a rupture, a conflict with what is, a capacity to defer, to deviate, to introduce alternatives.

<sup>16</sup> Kant provides various examples of what he explicitly defines as a «conflict» of the dual nature of human beings; see *ivi*, pp. 116-118; Eng. trans., pp. 169-170.

Freedom first appears as abstract, negative freedom: the sheer possibility of choosing, of setting ends without requiring justification from natural law or objective order. It marks the moment when human beings recognize themselves as capable of positing goals, and in doing so, positing themselves. This initial form of freedom lacks moral orientation; yet it is precisely upon this arbitrary, undirected openness that any possibility of autonomy must be built. Autonomy, therefore, is not simply opposed to arbitrary will; it arises through a working upon it. It represents a higher form of conflict: an active limitation of freedom by freedom itself, a doubling of freedom's inner tension. It is the possibility for individuality to distance itself not only from natural determinacy, but also from her own culturally mediated desires, ends, and interests, which are never simply or authentically 'her own'.

This fracture is the negative yet necessary condition of subjectivity: it is what makes history, education, and transformation possible.

My interpretation of Kant foregrounds the internal fracture of freedom, revealing *Bildung* as the formation of a critical self.

#### 4. *The Conflict Between Acculturation and Moralization: Individuals and Human Species*

Kant's appreciation of Rousseau, in the dense pages of the *Conjectural Beginning*, turns precisely on this point: Rousseau had the profound insight to reveal the «unavoidable conflict»<sup>17</sup> between the process of acculturation and civilization, within which individuals are formed, and the moral destiny of the human being.

Similarly to Rousseau, Kant views the process of acculturation as inseparable from the emergence of vices and evils. It marks a real rupture within the natural order: the introduction of an element of discord from which human history begins, and through which it unfolds. Culture and civilization inaugurate the reign of artifice, inequality, and dissimulation.

<sup>17</sup> Ivi, p. 116; Eng. trans., p. 169.

Yet if culture constitutes the symbolic and value-laden horizon within which the individual can and must realize herself, its formation largely takes place through practices of adaptation and conformation: customs, the adoption of good manners, and the internalization of behavioral maxims that allow, on the one hand, the dissimulation of selfish interests that motivate action, and on the other, the more effective pursuit of personal goals. Civilization, for Kant, thus appears also as a means of manipulating and instrumentalizing others for one's own advantage. Wealth, honor, social prestige, and even self-control become tools through which individuals influence and exploit the actions of others. In this sense, culture becomes a form of strategic adaptation: a conformity to the existing order, an internalization and reproduction of its normative network of interrelationships. Hence the deep contradiction that culture and civilization exhibit with respect to the moral ideal: the imperative to treat others not as means, but as ends in themselves.

Kant is explicit on this point: there is no continuity between civilization and morality. In the *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan aim*, he writes:

We are cultivated in a high degree by art and science. We are civilized, perhaps to the point of being overburdened, by all sorts of social decorum and propriety. But very much is still lacking before we can be held to be already moralized. For the idea of morality still belongs to culture; but the use of this idea which comes down only to a resemblance of morals in love of honor and in external propriety constitutes only being civilized<sup>18</sup>.

Yet as an anti-Rousseauian, critical of modernity but never anti-modern, Kant insists that morality belongs to culture: it cannot be situated outside of it, nor imagined as a return to an original purity or an arrival at a realm of pure rationality. Morality must operate within the cultural, social, and historical horizon in which human

<sup>18</sup> I. Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*, AA 8, 26; Eng. trans. by A.W. Wood, *Idea For a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, in I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. by G. Zöllner, R.B. Louden, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 116.

beings are immersed<sup>19</sup>, yet it cannot be understood as a linear continuation or fulfillment of civilization; it takes shape instead as its immanent questioning.

For Kant, the individual can never assert with certainty that she acts out of pure disinterest. The intentionality of action remains partially opaque, mediated by motivations that she does not fully control, embedded within the cultural system. Precisely for this reason, morality, for the individual living in the world, cannot present itself simply as conscious adherence to a principle – even to the moral law – but only as a critical activity: a reflective activity performed within culture itself. In this sense, it can be said that the individual is an ‘unresolved category’: never entirely transparent to herself, never fully coinciding with her own desires, her context, or the moral destiny of the human species.

It is precisely this structural inadequacy, the impossibility of fully tracing the cultural, emotional, and historical forces that shape her, that renders morality a permanent, reflective practice: a continuous work on oneself that necessarily takes the form of questioning what determines her. In this sense, it is within culture that the very tools for its own critique are produced. Morality thus acquires an ideal value: not as a given, but as a task of critical reflection, a labor in which the individual is always, necessarily, slightly behind. There is always a gap, understood this time as a constitutive insufficiency, between the potential of the human being as a moral genus and the contingent actions of individuals.

As a critical form, morality constitutes itself as the possibility of distancing oneself from one’s own desires, from one’s own position in the world, from one’s own cultural conditions. It is the capacity of human beings not to coincide with what they are, to be always something more than the present, to transcend a condition that would otherwise bind them as instinct binds the animal. It is the opening of a space of discontinuity within the very cultural order that constitutes them.

<sup>19</sup> I believe it is possible to argue that this perspective became increasingly central to Kant’s thinking after the publication of the *Critique of Judgment*.

### 5. *Enlightenment and the Public Sphere*

The distinction and connection between the private and public use of reason in Kant's *Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*<sup>20</sup> must be read in this light, as the possibility of an immanent critique. It is crucial to emphasize that, for Kant, the public use of reason is not opposed to the private use as two separate spheres; rather, it assumes and questions it from within. Each individual, as a member of society, always acts on two levels: on the one hand, through private use, she occupies a functional role within an institution - the soldier who obeys orders, the teacher who follows a curriculum, the civil servant who applies regulations; on the other hand, she retains the capacity to critically question that very role, to distance herself from it. It is precisely from within this position that a real but also contingent, conflict can arise: a tension between what the social function demands and what the individual experiences, thinks, and desires (like 'I don't obey this order, because I don't agree', 'I don't want to pay this tax, because I want to use my money differently'). Public use of reason is exercised on this site of tension: it is the possibility of transcending one's role, of acknowledging the conflict running through subjective experience, and of rethinking it from a non-personal, non-functional, non-mechanical point of view.

In this sense, within the social context, we are simultaneously passive and active members. Private use defines the dimension of institutional obedience and adherence to established truths; but it is precisely from within this dimension that the process of emancipation can begin (the exit from the «condition of minority»), by giving reflective, public form to a lived, experienced disagreement.

<sup>20</sup> Kant distinguishes between public and private use of reason. He defines public use as that which an individual exercises «as a man of learning addressing the entire reading public»; private use, on the other hand, is that which «a person may make of it in a particular civil post or office with which he is entrusted» (I. Kant, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*, AA 8, p. 37; Eng. trans. by H.B. Nisbet, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, in I. Kant, *Political Writings*, ed. by H.S. Reiss, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 1991, p. 55).

When a thought becomes public, a qualitative transformation occurs: both the individual and the issue at stake are changed. The 'mine' enters into a collective process of universalization<sup>21</sup>; it is exposed, modified, and becomes the object of communication, interaction, and intersubjective comparison. The «courage to think for oneself» thus must become the courage to think from the standpoint of others, to welcome the gaze of others as a condition of one's own freedom. Through this process, the mediations *bidden* within the 'mine' are reactivated, and the individual can actively participate in the broader process of transformation. In this sense, the public use of reason critically redefines the function assigned to the individual, opening it to a wider horizon, that of intersubjective debate, and reorienting it toward the common good.

It is precisely within the tension between these two uses of reason that modern subjectivity is constituted as a critical figure: not because it is detached from the world (indeed, conflict and what Kant calls «antagonism» can only arise from lived experience), but because it can think itself in relation to the world in which it is immersed without ever being fully determined by it. Autonomy arises then as the ability to question what one is called upon to do, and to give public voice to this reflective dissent. Understood in this way, the public use of reason does not serve to deny one's worldly position, but to make it conscious, and therefore transformable.

This is the transformative power of criticism: the capacity to oppose even that which most intimately shapes us, to dis-identify not only from nature, but from culture itself. It is a practice of distancing and questioning that involves the entire subject, enabling her to look at herself from the outside, to suspend the forces that move her, and to interrogate what she takes to be true. It is the possibility of distancing even from the deepest internal determinations that inhabit and define us, but which do not exhaust what we can become.

<sup>21</sup> On this point see K. Deligiorgi, *Universalizability, Publicity, and Communication: Kant's Conception of Reason*, «European Journal of Philosophy», X (2), 2002, pp. 143-159.

## 6. *To Educate in the Idea of Humanity*

Thinking critically thus opens the transcendental horizon of freedom: the space in which the relationship between individual and world is understood as open, non-necessary, and non-definitive. Every possibility of change, transformation, and new beginning is rooted in this opening. Rationality, from this perspective, is a formative path of self-criticism: a continuous education in humanity that must be activated.

This vision is clearly articulated in the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, where Kant writes:

children should be educated not only with regard to the present but rather for a better condition of the human species that might be possible in the future; that is, in a manner appropriate to the idea of humanity and its complete vocation<sup>22</sup>.

Here, Kant's rejection of a conformist model of education is explicit: education does not mean adapting the individual to what she already is, but enabling her to think what she is not yet, to transcend the given, and to become an active participant in the transformation of the world.

However, this is not simply a matter of conforming to a pre-established plan, even one grounded in reason itself. As Kant emphasizes in his *Idea for a Universal History*, human actions always escape full prediction and control; philosophy can only sketch out a possible tendency, not a determined path. Rationality unfolds unpredictably, making use of the antagonisms between human beings and exploiting the contradictions inherent in action.

The human being, for Kant, is never purely rational; freedom is always entangled with inclination, desire, passion, and contingency, making the interpretation of historical action inherently unstable.

<sup>22</sup> I. Kant, *Pädagogik*, AA 9, p. 447; Eng. trans., R. B. Loudon, *Lectures on Pedagogy*, in I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. by G. Zöller, R.B. Loudon, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 442. See R.B. Loudon, *Becoming Human: Kant's Philosophy of Education and Human Nature*, in *The Palgrave Kant Handbook*, ed. by M. Altman, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 705-727.

As Kant explicitly states:

Here there is no other way out for the philosopher – who, regarding human beings and their play in the large, cannot at all presuppose any rational aim of theirs – than to try whether he can discover an aim of nature in this nonsensical course of things human; from which aim a history in accordance with a determinate plan of nature might nevertheless be possible even of creatures who do not behave in accordance with their own plan<sup>23</sup>.

Since human actions produce a spectacle so internally contradictory that no unified rational purpose can be ascribed to humanity as a whole, Kant shifts the analysis to a different, seemingly transcendent register: the level of nature itself, conceived as an intrinsic purposiveness within the order of things. In this move, Kant reconfigures the natural teleology of rationality, offering a conception of rational development of humanity as universal genre that surprisingly seems to not depend on conscious intention.

To conceive of human history as the unfolding of nature's purpose, however, is to reject both the idea of history as blind fate and the notion that it is governed by an external, preordained plan. History is shaped by a latent rational structure that operates immanently through conflict, contingency, and the unintended consequences of human actions.

At the same time, for Kant, the purpose of the human being *qua* rational creature lies in the active use of reason. In contrast to the unconscious teleology of reason as nature's purpose, this teleology is centered on intentionality, reflection, and self-determination.

This dual framework reveals the complexity of the anthropological question.

Unlike the organic unfolding of a seed (a pure organic model), the development of human capacities takes the form of a task, something that must be achieved through deliberate effort. As Kant notes in the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* (1798), the human being is fundamentally self-forming and perfectible: a being

<sup>23</sup> Kant, *Idee*, AA 8, p. 18; Eng. trans., p. 109.

with the capacity of reason who must make herself rational<sup>24</sup>. Reason, in this sense, is not a given attribute but a potentiality that exists only in its actualization. Nature, according to Kant, has been remarkably parsimonious in her provisions, endowing humans with minimal instinctual resources precisely to compel the cultivation of rational capacities. Even basic survival, which in animals is assured by instinct, becomes for the human being a rational challenge, requiring foresight, planning, and labor<sup>25</sup>.

Thus, reason is not a natural disposition akin to possessing claws or horns; it is an activity that extends, reinvents, and surpasses nature.

The human being draws her humanity from within herself: not from what she passively inherits, but from what she actively produces.

The level of rationality as nature's purpose marks a transcendent horizon that remains inaccessible in empirical terms but becomes meaningful as an ideal. It is within this ideal that individuals encounter the image of humanity to be realized, not as a guaranteed outcome, but as an open space of transformation and criticism. Rather than prescribing determinate ends, this ideal sustains the ongoing tension between instrumental reason, which subordinates others to ends, and practical reason, which seeks moral universality. It is thus the horizon that must allow the conflict between instrumental and practical reason to emerge.

<sup>24</sup> «The human being, as an animal endowed with the capacity of reason (*animal rationabile*), can make out of himself a rational animal (*animal rationale*)» (Id., *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, AA 7, p. 321; Eng. trans. by R.B. Loudon, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, in I. Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. by G. Zöllner, R.B. Loudon, Cambridge-New York, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 417).

<sup>25</sup> In the *Lectures on Pedagogy*, Kant notes that the human being is the only animal that requires care from adults, precisely because the child poses a threat to her own natural survival. The newborn's scream, as an expression of freedom that cannot yet be expressed with bodily control, places the infant in danger in the natural world. This early helplessness illustrates the unique condition of the human being: a freedom that initially manifests as vulnerability. See Id. *Pädagogik*, AA 9, p. 441; Eng. trans., p. 437). The image of the screaming child recurs also in Kant's *Anthropology*. See Id., *Anthropologie*, AA 7, p. 328; Eng. trans., p. 423.

It is precisely within this conflict that education finds its proper purpose: the human being is then both capable of and in need of education<sup>26</sup>. *Bildung* becomes the formation of the human being as a moral subject, one who must labor to actualize the ideal of freedom, not in abstraction, but within the concrete limits, contradictions, and antagonisms of social life. In this sense, as a form of a doubled conflict: it must operate within the field of instrumental rationality that structures social life, while simultaneously activating within it the critical tension of practical reason. Education sustains and cultivates this conflict as the very form of autonomy's emergence.

This also implies that the concrete field of human action is always impure, marked by ambiguity, contradiction, and the impossibility of full transparency. In this light, Kant famously asserts in the Fourth Proposition of the *Idea for a Universal History*:

The means nature employs in order to bring about the development of all its predispositions is their antagonism in society, insofar as the latter is in the end the cause of their lawful order<sup>27</sup>.

Or also, in the *Anthropology*:

the characteristic of the human species is this: that nature has planted in it the seed of discord, and has willed that its own reason bring concord out of this, or at least the constant approximation to it<sup>28</sup>.

Rationality, then, emerges through the workings of human will, but not in the form of a consciously determined plan. Rather, it operates through the exploitation of conflict, tension, and even the lowest human motives.

Human capacities, according to Kant, never fully achieve their potential: there is always a shortfall. For this reason, Kant resorts to the notion of a purpose of nature, precisely to articulate the fragility

<sup>26</sup> Id., *Anthropologie*, AA 7, p. 323; Eng. trans., p. 418.

<sup>27</sup> Id., *Idee*, AA 8, p. 20; Eng. trans., p. 111.

<sup>28</sup> Id., *Anthropologie*, AA 7, p. 322; Eng. trans., p. 417.

and vulnerability inherent in any rational history. This apparent weakness nonetheless imposes a responsibility on human beings: it sets before them the task of continually striving to improve.

Importantly, this also means that regression is possible in human history. Yet such regressions are not signs of irrationality. On the contrary, they are inscribed within the structure of human rationality itself: human capacities do not unfold in a linear or cumulative progression; they are always vulnerable to interruption, distortion, and reversal. But even these deviations, for Kant, belong to the broader dynamic through which reason seeks its realization. There is no path forward for humanity other than that of a possible improvement, one that unfolds through the processes of culture and civilization, wherein the possibility of moralization has to emerge. However, this development is far from peaceful or harmonious. On the contrary, it is marked by a struggle within struggle: movement in which individuals must distance themselves from the very tendencies that society tends to cultivate, namely, «crudity» and «animality» as forms of uncontrolled egoism and domination, a tendency to the absolutization of the freedom of arbitrary will<sup>29</sup>. Here animality is not simply a return to nature, but a metaphor for a specific form of human existence: the egoistic standpoint of the modern subject, who is oriented only toward the satisfaction of needs, needs that are not natural, but socially generated and imposed. Within this framework, the realization of one's own desires inevitably comes into conflict with the desires of others, producing a logic of mutual exclusion and strategic domination. In this way, the animal standpoint is not only marked by a struggle for self-assertion, but also by a deeper form of passivity: an unreflective acceptance of the existing cultural world and its values as the unquestioned framework and material through which needs continuously emerge and find their satisfaction. In this sense, Kant writes:

<sup>29</sup> This is also a central concern in Schiller's diagnosis of modern society in his *Letters*; see A. Falduto, *Jenseits des Dualismus zwischen tierischer Natur und geistiger Natur: Kants Mensch 'in zweifacher Qualität' und Schillers 'ganzer Mensch'*, «Kant-Studien», CXI (2), 2020, pp. 248-268.

The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to cultivate himself, to civilize himself, and to moralize himself by means of the arts and sciences. No matter how great his animal tendency may be to give himself over passively to the impulses of ease and good living, which he calls happiness, he is still destined to make himself worthy of humanity by actively struggling with the obstacles that cling to him because of the crudity of his nature<sup>30</sup>.

And yet, this condition of animality should not be dismissed as regression. It persists as a powerful and abstract force of obstinacy, a stubborn persistence that reveals something essential about the modern subject:

The human being's self-will is always ready to break out in aversion toward his neighbor, and he always presses his claim to unconditional freedom; freedom not merely to be independent of others, but even to be master over other beings who by nature are equal to him<sup>31</sup>.

On one level, it expresses the immediate, pre-reflective conflict of the individual with the world and with others: a drive to appropriate, to make the world one's own, to assert oneself against resistance. It is the will to possession that characterizes the egoistic standpoint of modernity, a drive to claim the world as one's own. Yet this very impulse ultimately exposes subjectivity to its own emptiness and dependency, revealing that what it seeks to possess lies outside itself, and that its identity is contingent upon a world it cannot fully control or absorb. This site of conflict, rooted in the immanent struggle of individuality with the world, deepens into an internal division that marks the beginning – but not the end – of a critical trajectory. It expresses the necessity that, from within this determined clash, and not as the result of a purely moralistic decision, a path toward transcendence and universality must emerge. This movement does not arise from an abstract choice or external imperative, but from the immanent tension within the self, as it confronts

<sup>30</sup> Kant, *Anthropologie*, AA 7, p. 325; Eng. trans., p. 420.

<sup>31</sup> Ivi, p. 327; Eng. trans., p. 422.

the limits of its own condition and the contradictions embedded in its form of life. It is precisely through this inner fracture that the possibility of transformation can begin to take shape.

For Kant, to educate in the idea of humanity is to form the capacity to orient oneself within this open and uncertain horizon. It is an activity of liberation, one that can only be earned through constant confrontation and the overcoming of what limits us: nature, culture, and ourselves.

## 6. *Conclusion*

In this paper, I have argued that Kant's critique of culture offers the resources for rethinking normativity of practical reason not as a prescriptive authority external to social life, but as a critical capacity that emerges immanently from within cultural lived conflicts. I have shown that Kant situates the process of freedom's realization within the ambivalent terrain of culture, where instrumental domination and moral possibility are inextricably intertwined.

On this reading, *Bildung* becomes a critical category rather than a humanistic ideal of moral purification. It designates a way of engaging the present through its lived conflicts and of forming subjectivity beyond inherited boundaries. Individuality appears as one of modernity's unresolved dimensions: an unfinished process marked by constitutive non-coincidence. The individual never fully coincides with what she is, with the cultural forms that shape her, or with the moral vocation that addresses her. It is precisely insofar as this non-coincidence remains open, when the subject refuses full identification with her roles, habits, desires, and certainties, that critique becomes possible. The formation of a critical self, as the aim of a moral education, thus indicates a practice of remaining at odds with the world: a sustained interruption of what appears settled, natural, or self-evident. As an individual process, it takes the form of an education in restlessness, cultivating the capacity to remain exposed to the questions of what one is, how one has become what one is, and what one might yet become.

Within this framework, autonomy emerges as a fragile and educable critical capacity, exercised through sustained engagement

with the tensions between conformity and transgression, instrumental and practical reason. Normativity, accordingly, is produced as critique, activated within lived contradictions and always in need of reactivation.

True autonomy, on this view, lies in the capacity to transform what shapes us: to render culture an open field of renegotiation, conflict, and renewal. Such freedom is never guaranteed, never fully achieved, and never purely individual. It exists only in relation to others and takes shape as an ongoing commitment to interrogating the present from within. In this sense, Kant's critique of culture offers a demanding and uncertain practice of liberation.