

# Reason Inclined: Zones of Indifference in Schiller and Kant

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The feeling of respect is considered to be one of the two key elements of Immanuel Kant's conception of the ethical act, the second being that of the moral law. For Kant, an act is considered to be autonomous, only insofar as it is delivered of any "pathological determination." In this respect, the feeling of respect as the structural companion to the ethical act permits no application to sensuous pleasure and does not concern the matter or content of our actions, but rather their very form. As Kant put it in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, respect is a moral feeling that does not arise from feelings of pleasure and displeasure, or even from indifference for that matter, but is attached to the representation of the form of the moral law. Therefore, the feeling of respect is effected through reason alone, defined as being fully independent of sensuous experience, and thus recognized as universal and necessary. However, although respect has to be understood in the same manner as the moral law itself, i.e., as an element of pure will conditioned by reason alone, one could claim that at its very core it nonetheless cannot be entirely freed from the field of sensibility. The basis for such a claim is to be found in Kant's own line of argumentation in the third chapter of his second *Critique*, titled "On the incentives of pure practical reason," where he describes the central idea underlying his practical philosophy. Kant's primary task is not to demonstrate the apriority of "the ground from which the moral law in itself supplies an incentive," but rather the

apriority of “what it effects (or to put it better, must effect) in the mind insofar as it is an incentive” (Kant 1996a, pp. 198-99). This effect of the moral law, Kant continues, can only be a negative one:

For, all inclination and every sensible impulse is based on feeling, and the negative effect on feeling (by the infringement upon the inclinations that takes place) is itself feeling. Hence we can see a priori that the moral law, as the determining ground of the will, must by thwarting all our inclinations produce a feeling that can be called pain; and here we have the first and perhaps the only case in which we can determine a priori from concepts the relation of a cognition (here the cognition of a pure practical reason) to the feeling of pleasure and displeasure. (Kant 1996a, p. 199)

Although respect is not mentioned explicitly, it nonetheless surfaces in the form of the very effect of the moral law discussed by Kant at the beginning of the same chapter. Respect emerges as an effect of the moral law’s infringement upon sensibility. In a word, respect is the result of the moral law’s suspensive invasion into the field of inclinations. By way of running counter to its opposite, thus (to adopt the very strong word that Kant deploys) “thwarting” it, the moral law inevitably produces an element that Kant calls the feeling of respect or moral feeling (*Achtung*). The most pressing question is thus the following one: Was respect, prior to the moral law acting upon the realm of inclinations, a part of this very realm? It seems that Kant does not provide us with an unequivocal answer to this question, instead adding further ambiguity to his argument by claiming that: “*So little* is respect a feeling of *pleasure*, that we give way to it only reluctantly with regard to a human being” (ibid., p. 202).<sup>1</sup> And precisely herein

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<sup>1</sup> “*Die Achtung ist so wenig ein Gefühl der Lust, daß man sich ihr in Ansehung eines Menschen nur ungern überläßt*” (Kant 1882, p. 93). The fact that the feeling of respect is evoked here “*in Ansehung eines Menschen,*” i.e., “with regard to a human being,” does not weaken my point, for I only bow down in respect of

lies one of the main paradoxes of Kant's ethics: How is it possible that the formal pureness of the moral law, or the autonomy of an ethical act, is in fact accompanied, or perhaps even conditioned by this heteronomous and hence "pathological" companion? In short, how is it possible that Kant situates, in the very midst of a free and autonomous ethical subject, this inherent, yet heterogeneous element, testifying as it does to a conceptual hinging of freedom on its seemingly residual opposite?

From this narrow perspective, Kant's theory of morality in the *Critique of Practical Reason* seems to be pointing to the same paradox as the one developed by Friedrich Schiller in his theory of the beautiful. In his essay "The Danger of Aesthetic Manners," published in the eleventh issue of *Die Horen*<sup>2</sup> in 1795,

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"a human being" insofar as for me he *exemplifies the factual practicability of the moral law*: "His example," writes Kant, "holds before me a law that strikes down my self-conceit when I compare it with my conduct, and I see observance of that law and hence its *practicability* proved before me in fact" (Kant 1996, p. 202).

<sup>2</sup> *Die Horen* was a German monthly literary journal published from 1795 to 1797, edited by Schiller and funded by Johann Friedrich Cotta (who was also Goethe's publisher and Heine's employer). Although Schiller formed an editorial committee consisting of well-established figures of the time, including Fichte, Goethe, Körner, W. Humboldt, and Karl Woltmann, who were initially responsible for accepting and rejecting the submitted articles, it soon became obvious that Schiller took it upon himself to be the journal's sole editor and decision-maker. But more importantly, it became clear that the initial idea, as advertised in numerous German periodicals, to "reunite under the flag of beauty and truth a world that is politically divided," was already in decline. Consequently, and already in the second half of 1795, this resulted both in a series of "outside" attacks, coming mostly from authors who could not publish their work (Friedrich Schlegel, among others), as well as from other proponents of the negative critique (especially Friedrich Nicolai), and "inside" withdrawals from the committee (Fichte left the board and condemned *Die Horen* after Schiller rejected his second contribution to the journal, titled "On Spirit and Letter in Philosophy"). Up until 1797, when the last issue appeared, Schiller published almost exclusively his own work, and at times even wrote reviews of his own essays. For a more detailed account, especially with respect to the role of women writers whom Schiller tried to engage in order to fill the empty pages of the journal, see Besserer Holmgren 2010.

Schiller considers it doubtful that morality could be based only on a feeling for the beautiful, i.e., on a feeling that has no guarantee other than taste, because morality must never have any other foundation than its own (see Schiller 1795).<sup>3</sup> In his “The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners,” however, published in the same journal in 1796, he does not hesitate to attribute to taste the ability of indeed contributing to moral progress (see Schiller 1902). Without the feeling for the beautiful, Schiller affirms and henceforth strongly holds, there would be no moral progress, only morality grounded in itself. This “element of self-critique” is strikingly elegant in its simplicity: if in 1795 any recourse to feeling is to be excluded on the grounds of the self-groundedness of morality, in 1796 it is due to this same self-groundedness that morality is in danger of losing its ground. In this respect, both Kant’s feeling of respect and Schiller’s feeling for the beautiful do not merely figure as conceptual companions and guarantees of the proper ethical act, but also serve as an answer to a much bigger and arguably central ethical problem: How does one bring together reason, which demands unity, and nature, which requires individuality and plurality (Schiller)? How does one reconcile the heterogeneity of the laws of appearances, which follow the principles of understanding, and the domain of freedom (Kant)?

In spite of this similarity and close proximity, Schiller and Kant in fact offer two different answers that consequently imply two different theories of morality. Provisionally put: for Schiller, the moral act arises by virtue of taste, whereas for Kant it arises

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<sup>3</sup> Chronologically speaking, the essay appeared after Schiller gave up poetic production and followed the publications of his well-known essays on aesthetics and Kantian philosophy. By that time, it had become clear to Schiller that in order to find concrete solutions to the ethical problem he will once again have to redefine the opposition between “the necessary” and “the accidental,” which was so massively present especially in his “Kallias or Concerning Beauty: Letters to Gottfried Körner” (Schiller 2003), and later in “An die Freude,” as well as in his “Die Freundschaft.” For a detailed periodization of Schiller’s work, see Royce 1978.

by virtue of respect. Without taste, an act would simply dissolve itself into the “delightful illusion,” to deploy one of Schiller’s terms, while without respect, a moral act would merely “seem to be” a moral one, to bring forward one of Kant’s emphases. In the aesthetic world, Schiller writes, every natural being is a “free citizen and has the same rights as the most noble in the world of aesthetics,” and therefore “coercion may not take place even *for the sake of the whole*—everyone must *consent*. In this aesthetic world, which is quite different from the most perfect Platonic republic, even the gown I wear on my body demands respect for its freedom from me, much like a humble servant who demands that I never let on that he is *serv*ing me” (Schiller 2003, p. 170). The thought behind this quote is significant and represents an important stepping stone in overcoming the theories of the beautiful developed by Edmund Burke, Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten, and Moses Mendelssohn.<sup>4</sup> However, Schiller was aware that in order to be in pace with recent theoretical discoveries one has to not only expose the insufficiency of sensuous-subjective and rational-objective theories, but also shed new light on the prevailing theory of that time, the one elaborated by Kant in his *Critique of Judgment*. Like many of the then arduous thinkers of liberty and heirs of Rousseau’s thoughts on the relationship

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<sup>4</sup> In the “Kallias Letters,” Schiller lists four theories and essential features of the beautiful: the sensuous-subjective theory of Burke, the rational-objective theory of Baumgarten and Mendelssohn, the subjective-rational theory of Kant, to which he then adds his own, sensuous-objective theory of the beautiful: “It is worth noting that my theory is a fourth possible way of explaining the beautiful. Either one declares it subjective or objective; and either subjective sensual (like Burke among others), subjective rational (like Kant) or rational objective (like Baumgarten, Mendelssohn and the whole crowd of men who esteem perfection), or, finally, sensuous objective: a term which will mean little to you at this point, save if you compare the other three forms with each other. Each of the preceding theories reflects a part of experience and clearly contains a part of the truth, and the error seems merely to be that one has taken the true part of the theory to coincide with beauty itself” (Schiller 2003, p. 146).

between human nature and convention, Schiller, too, had to face the ongoing debates on aesthetics and those surrounding Kant's critical project, especially his third critique. But in challenging Kant, Schiller approached Kant's system all but systematically. He took the basis of Kant's systematic system, so to speak, as the very basis of his own point of departure but then in turn—as if forgetting all about this adoption—developed arguments that opposed this basis, and sometimes even his own line of argumentation. It is well said of Schiller that his strength was not so much in discussing but in creating, in the way by which he was building his system.<sup>5</sup> The sentence quoted above that evokes “the gown I wear on my body” demanding “respect for its freedom from me” bears witness to this.

Schiller transfers freedom from the domain of the human being to that of nature, that is, to the domain where beauty is supposedly always already present. In addition, he transfers it to objects that are not natural givens, such as the gown. Freedom is thus seen not as something that pertains only to the subject or her actions, as was the case in Kant, but as a phenomenon already present in the natural world. Everything, including the gown that I now wear, can be seen as a feature of freedom, as participating in freedom, and in fact demanding it, as soon as one unveils the traits of beauty in the objects of the natural world. This clearly opposes Kant's view that respect “is always directed to persons,

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<sup>5</sup> In corroboration of this line of thought, Dieter Henrich refers to Wilhelm von Humboldt's letter of August 15, 1795, in which Humboldt reports to Schiller on how his *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* were received by one of their readers: “Someone said to me, after the usual tribute of praise, that he did not understand your work and that its obscurity is of a worse sort than, for example, Kant's. For one reads Kant with great difficulty and stops doubtfully at every sentence; but, once one has struggled through, he knows distinctly what he has read. In the case of your work the reader readily accepts each individual sentence, and thinks that he has understood everything equally well; but if he asks himself afterward what he has read, he does not know how to articulate it” (quoted in Henrich 1982, p. 237).

never to things” (Kant 1996a, p. 202). And even in considering things as nonpersons—insofar as they trigger affective responses such as love, fear, and admiration—it would never have occurred to Kant to claim that a gown could be counted among them. In fact, all of Kant’s examples refer to natural objects (more precisely, to certain qualities of natural objects) in the narrow sense of the term: horses and dogs may awaken love, the sea, the volcano, and a beast of prey trigger fear, while lofty mountains and heavenly bodies may trigger admiration. These objects are nonpersons, and are hence incapable of triggering respect, but the gown is even less than that, not even a nonperson (and hence a natural object), but rather a nonobject of the natural world. Despite this, however, the difference distinguishing Kant from Schiller is perhaps smaller than it appears to be. As we have seen, respect is not directed at the person in his or her empirical and phenomenal individuality, but rather refers to a person only insofar as this person *exemplifies the factual practicability of the moral law*. In this regard, respect could in fact be seen as directed at a person as *the nonobject of the natural world*, that is, as the objectal (as opposed to objective) form of appearance of the moral law in the natural world. According to Kant, respect cannot be directed at the person insofar as she belongs to the world of natural objects; it can only be triggered by something that, observed from the point of view of the world of natural objects, is strictly speaking a nonobject. Is the person evoked by Kant the gown of the moral law?<sup>6</sup>

In a letter to his friend, Christian Gottfried Körner, of February 8, 1793, in which he formulates what is today most commonly recognized as a proper Schillerian ethical, as well as aesthetical, stance, Schiller sums up his thoughts in a single catchphrase: “Beauty is thus nothing less than freedom in appearance” (Schiller 2003, p. 152). Here, Schiller holds that freedom is the immediate

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<sup>6</sup> For Kant, to be sure, the difference ultimately amounts to two different types of causality, as presented already in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

ground of the beautiful and that beauty can be found in the free unveiling of the form: not because beauty would unveil itself in a specific way or because it is formed by the sensible perfection of the objects in nature, but because the form itself appears to the subject's imagination as being freely unveiled (cf. Henrich 1982). From the standpoint of the subject, every object in the natural world can be seen as an end in itself and thus as displaying its autonomy. If for Kant all sensuous qualities of an object that pertain to the natural world are suspended, Schiller's nature always already possesses beauty and exhibits autonomy. Along these lines, Wolfgang Iser has argued that because freedom is not seen as a privilege of the human being but is already a natural fact and an objective property of natural things, the aesthetic experience implies respect for everything that is seen as a figure of freedom. Thus, for Iser, aesthetic experience is not only a manner of approaching freedom, but also leads to a formulation of a specific kind of ethics: to an "ethics of universal freedom" and an "ethics of universal respect."<sup>7</sup> For Henrich and Josiah Royce, on the other hand, the focus of Schiller's views is not so much on respect but rather on love and friendship.<sup>8</sup> In a letter to Körner from December 21, 1792, Schiller expressed a desire to advance his theory of the beautiful, which he presented in Jena during the winter of 1792-1793, and invited Körner to join him in this enterprise in the form of an exchange of letters

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<sup>7</sup> "In this way, aesthetic experience leads to an ethics of freedom. We ought to see all things as figures of freedom and accordingly treat them with respect. Freedom is the basic character of Being. The aesthetic attitude grasps this basic character and recommends an ethics of universal respect. Here Schiller obviously transcends occidental limitations and advocates an ethical perspective that is better known in East Asia (cf. Daoism and Buddhism)" (Iser 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Although the notion of respect is not to be completely neglected in Schiller, it nonetheless does not have the same prominent status as it does in Kant's ethics. Freedom in the appearances (that is one with beauty) has absolute priority over respect, for what are to be respected are freedom's demands and the desires that freedom imposes on us.



(Schiller 1849, pp. 204–06). The letters weren't published during Schiller's lifetime, but when they finally appeared we learned that in them Schiller started advocating a slightly different and far more mature position than the one from his fictional correspondence in *Philosophische Briefe*. Its aim, however, stayed almost exactly the same: to show how true morality arises only against the backdrop of the unification of reason with sensibility, of the unification of the self with the other, and how freedom reflects itself in that which is sensibly represented.

As Josiah Royce has argued with respect to the *Briefe*, Schiller understands friendship as both an “utter surrender of self” to a radical other and as an “utter abandonment of self” to the needs of nature (see Royce 1978). According to Schiller himself, the consequence of such a vision of friendship leads to the highest possible freedom and self-consciousness of the subject experiencing beauty. But if we bring this thesis to the last, instead proposing a psychoanalytical reading of the notion of the subject, according to which the subject is already radically other to herself and hence needs no externalization in (the) empirical other(ness) in order to constitute herself, one can claim that Schiller's idea of friendship essentially disavows the true nature of freedom and self-consciousness, while leading either to the idea of narcissism or of the subject's complete impenetrability to herself.<sup>9</sup> The subject's utter surrender of herself to a foreign power, of which Royce is speaking—a “noble soul” at all times capable of ignoring her pathological interests—is only possible if we presuppose a universe of ideal subjects, namely a world in which morality

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<sup>9</sup> For Henrich, the only way to adopt Schiller's idea of externalization is to understand his notion of subject as the subject who “plays itself into the object”: “[R]eason, the heart of subjectivity, turns out to need an externalization, a passively received external counterpart, which from the point of view of Kantian dualism cannot but be described as inclination and sensibility; but this amounts to nothing less than a brute fact of attraction opaque to the self” (Henrich, 1982, p. 250).

isn't even a question. And this is precisely what Schiller does. In his attempts to establish a connection between reason that is lacking affectivity and sensibility that is lacking reflectivity, he repeatedly brings forward the notion of the Ideal: "Schiller speaks about 'Ideal' whenever he wishes to bridge the difference between emotionless reason and unreflective sensibility, between a beautiful form and sublime energy" (Henrich 1982, p. 256). Therefore, what has to be rejected in Schiller's understanding of friendship, and consequently in his theory of aesthetic morality, is the subject's submission to the (empirical) particularity of the other, the very externalization of herself, since the subject already *is* external to herself, i.e. the very form of externality to herself.

In line with this hypothesis, one also has to reject the relationship between Julius and Raphael from the *Briefe* as an image of a harmonious moral subjectivity and instead insist on the impossibility of their encounter, on a gap that is not only inherent to the subject as such but fundamentally separates him, i.e. Julius, from the numerically different other. In a word, two main characters, Julius and Raphael, can never properly meet *for Julius can never meet himself*. This puts Schiller's ideas of friendship and love in a slightly different perspective, one that comes close to that proposed by Henrich. In his essay "Beauty and Freedom," Henrich holds that since love is reason's *inclination* to unite itself with the sensible, Schiller's ethics can only lead to an "ethics of the beautiful soul."<sup>10</sup> In contrast to Kant, for whom the capacity of

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<sup>10</sup> "Schiller understands love, quite generally, as the unification of reason with sensibility. In the case of beauty this is quite unproblematic, for freedom, a concept of reason, is meant to mirror itself in what is sensibly represented, and if in the case of the aesthetic, the act of objectification appears as an act of sensualization, then it makes good sense for Schiller to define love as the inclination of reason to unify itself with the sensible object. [...] Here Schiller ascribes an inclination to reason, applying to reason exactly the sort of psychological concept which properly belongs to sensibility according to the Kantian theory Schiller endorsed. When Schiller says that only the pure spirit can love, but also that love is an inclination, this is a blatant contradiction in a Kantian position.

reason spontaneously produces representations, while in the case of sensibility the subject is merely a passive recipient in relation to the world, Schiller was determined to adopt this Kantian view and at the same time advocate the objectification of reason. On this point, Schiller falls short, and instead of proving that what is taken to be objective is not a mere outcome of subjective fantasy, he starts introducing into his edifice first the ideal of friendship, then the ideal of love, and finally the notion of ideal taste. As quoted above, the Ideal is the notion with which Schiller tries to link together two irreconcilable domains, namely “unreflective sensibility” and “emotionless reason.” Here one cannot overlook how Schiller, when trying to synthesize reason and sensibility, thus attempting to bridge the distinction between “beautiful form and sublime energy,” actually brings forward and links *two negative terms*: reason deprived of its affective counterpart, and sensibility deprived of its capacity for reflection. In other words, Schiller attempts to join reason *without* affects with sensibility *without* reflection.

Both notions, i.e., unreflective sensibility and emotionless reason, are described in negative terms, the first with “un-”, the latter with “-less.” In one of his commentaries on Beckett’s *Unnamable*, Eric Santner has suggested that “un-” can be understood as a signifier of “falling out of sense.”<sup>11</sup> Schiller’s sensuous subject has indeed always already fallen out of sight, and out of mind, so to speak—i.e., it has fallen both out of sensibility, and out of reason, that is, out of herself. Schiller’s subject is “out of both,” in the midst of this peculiar nothingness, and detached from any

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[...] // In order to understand the theoretical conditions under which Schiller’s philosophizing takes place, it is now important for us to note that in his ethics of the beautiful soul he finds himself in the same situation as when he tried to interpret the objectification of the self in beauty” (Henrich, 1982, pp. 249, 252).

<sup>11</sup> Eric L. Santner and Mladen Dolar, Seminar on “Creaturally Modernism: Freud, Kafka, Benjamin, Beckett,” Department of Germanic Studies, University of Chicago, Chicago, Autumn 2017.

possible positivity. Rather than the unity of two negatively described concepts that Schiller is looking for, the effective result of his endeavor is *a state of complete alienation*.<sup>12</sup> The search for this identity, if we adopt Adorno's vocabulary, takes place in a no man's land, in a zone of complete indifference between the inner and the outer. The only way to think them as a unity is effectively to think them against the backdrop of the concept of the Ideal. Consequently, this then enables us to read Schiller's theory of morality against the grain of his initial intentions as brought forward in "The Danger" and in "The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners." Zdravko Kobe has interestingly suggested in a private communication that Schiller's ethics implies, from the very outset, a specific kind of illusion, an illusion that is in fact imposed on us by the moral law itself. In the latter of the two aforementioned essays, Schiller has argued that by violating the moral laws we would at the same time violate the natural order of things. If the highest good demands realization of the good (as a moral end), and if its side effects include happiness (as a natural end), then acting against nature means acting against the moral end. Hence our duty as moral subjects to take care of the physical order of things, that is—to *pretend that we are moral*. What essentially insists on an illusion, while imposing on us the imperative to feign morality, is strictly speaking the law itself. In short, it is love, reason's inclination, "the law-giver" itself, that demands that we act in accordance with the illusion represented

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<sup>12</sup> Here I am referring to one of Adorno's notes on Beckett's *Endgame* in which he employs the notion of "zone of indifference" to indicate how Beckett's pure identity becomes the identity of annihilation: "*Endgame* takes place in a zone of indifference between inner and outer, neutral between—on the one hand—the 'materials' without which subjectivity could not manifest itself or even exist, and—on the other—an animating impulse which blurs the materials, as if that impulse had breathed on the glass through which they are viewed. [...] // [P]ure identity becomes the identity of annihilation, identity of subject and object in a state of complete alienation" (Adorno 2007, pp. 127, 128).

by the Ideal of love. But my claim is not simply that Schiller's ethics amounts to a "mere illusion," but rather the following one: the Ideal (of love in the "Letters," of friendship in the *Briefe*, and of taste in "The Moral Utility of Aesthetic Manners"), by way of which Schiller tries to close the gap between unreflective sensibility and emotionless reason, is not yet the illusion itself.<sup>13</sup> Instead, our suggestion would be that the Ideal represents not the illusion itself but rather the *form of an illusion* yet to be created by the subject, the form of illusion that enables the subject "to play itself into the object."<sup>14</sup>

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After this detour, let me now return to Kant, and to the problem of the feeling of respect as he conceives it in his second critique. The feeling of respect has to do, on the one hand, with one of the fundamental premises of Kantian ethics, which states that one has to insist on the radical irreducibility of the Pure to the Pathological. Kant's radical break with the traditional conception of morality can only take place against the backdrop of this irreducibility, the late conception of which was one of the main reasons why Kant didn't succeed in including moral philosophy in his system of transcendental philosophy sooner. In order to satisfy this condition, Kant had to undertake the task of subtracting from "the highest principles and their fundamental concepts" the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, which pertain

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<sup>13</sup> *Pace* Kant 1997, p. 229: "All ideals are fictions. We attempt, *in concreto*, to envisage a being that is congruent with the Idea. In the ideal we turn the Ideas into a model, and may go astray in clinging to an ideal, since it can often be defective."

<sup>14</sup> "[A]n act of objectification is at work in this so-called play of the imagination. Its play is no longer the play of the subject with itself, occasioned by the intuition of an object; instead, in this act the subject plays itself entirely into the object. The intentional state of the subject is an objective one" (Henrich 1982, p. 247).

to the field of the empirical, as well as to demonstrate that it is possible to determine a priori the relation of cognition to the feelings of pleasure and displeasure. In other words, Kant had to demonstrate that the moral law as the objective determination of the will also determines the will subjectively. In addition to this—and this goes hand in hand with the previously mentioned task—we are confronted with yet another insistence, that is, with Kant's continued effort to include in his ethical edifice an element that, insofar as it represents the missing element not only of his moral philosophy but of transcendental philosophy as such, has the capacity to also determine the will subjectively.

The genesis of this notion can be traced back to Kant's early lectures and writings. Strictly speaking, it is not the genesis of the notion of respect itself that one can retrace, but rather the genesis of a feeling that is yet to become respect, while also encompassing its conceptual opposite, the entire field of inclinations. In his "Inquiry Concerning the Distinctness of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morals" from 1762, Kant laid great stress on the concept of obligation and its possible practical foundation. Influenced by Francis Hutcheson's moral sense theory, Kant formulated the question of whether it is the faculty of cognition or rather a feeling that decides on the principles of obligation.<sup>15</sup> The question remained unanswered up until 1764 when Kant published his "Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime" in which he rejected the possibility of the necessity of moral obligation depending on feeling, since the former can never

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<sup>15</sup> "The ultimate fundamental concepts of obligation need first of all to be determined more reliably. And in this respect, practical philosophy is even more defective than speculative philosophy, for it has yet to be determined whether it is merely the faculty of cognition, or whether it is feeling (the first inner ground of the faculty of desire) which decides its first principles" (Kant 1992, pp. 274-75). For a more detailed view of the development of Kant's practical philosophy and other influences on Kant's early theoretical discussions of morality see Wood 1996; Gregor 1963; Schneewind 1997; Guyer 2000; and Paton 1946.

rest on an empirical foundation. At the beginning of his book, Kant insisted on the universal value of “*feeling for the beauty and dignity of human nature*,”<sup>16</sup> but then a couple of passages further reconsidered its prospects by claiming that feelings of pleasure, i.e., feelings of the sublime and of the beautiful, cannot be regarded as being universal and thus part of the practical philosophy proper, for it is impossible to reach a common understanding on what is beautiful, since the feeling is not uniform.<sup>17</sup> As argued by Wood and Henrich, Kant later further strengthened this position by claiming that “even if people were unanimous in their moral feelings, the necessity of moral obligation could never rest on such a merely empirical foundation” (Wood 1996, p. xv; cf. Henrich 1994, pp. 55-87).

Between 1765 and 1768, while focused solely on establishing the metaphysical foundation of his moral doctrine, and while beginning to announce his book on the metaphysics of morals, Kant took a different view of the principles of morality. In view of our initial hypothesis, this period is quite significant, because it is when Kant proclaims for the very first time that the immediacy of feeling, although still distinct from the knowledge arising from the analysis of the concepts, can lead to a specific

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<sup>16</sup> “Thus true virtue can only be grafted upon principles, and it will become the more sublime and noble the more general they are. These principles are not speculative rules, but the consciousness of a feeling that lives in every human breast and that extends much further than to the special grounds of sympathy and complaisance. I believe that I can bring all this together if I say that it is the *feeling of the beauty and the dignity of human nature*. The first is a ground of universal affection, the second of universal respect, and if this feeling had the greatest perfection in any human heart then this human being would certainly love and value even himself, but only in so far as he is one among all to whom his widespread and noble feeling extends itself. Only when one subordinates one’s own particular inclination to such an enlarged one can our kindly drives be proportionately applied and bring about the noble attitude that is the beauty of virtue” (Kant 2007, p. 31).

<sup>17</sup> “[I]t is impossible to arrive at concordant sentiments because the feeling is not at all concordant” (ibid., p. 38).

kind of knowledge, and—more importantly—that the principles of morality can in fact be given empirical origins. During the so called “silent period,” he began announcing the publication of his book on the metaphysics of morals even more persistently. It has been noted that in the 1770s Kant systematically worked on establishing a system whose practical segment would rest on a priori principles (cf. White Beck 1960, pp. 7-9), and considered the possibility of constituting the formal principles of morality on the idea of universality. And precisely during this period Kant also started considering the possibility of connecting the metaphysical foundations of morality with the concept of the will’s freedom. Upon the publication of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, when the normative foundation for his theory of ethics was almost completely set, Kant nonetheless omitted moral theory from transcendental philosophy because he held that the concept of duty depends both on a priori principles and on empirical concepts. The question of how exactly to install morality as a cognition in transcendental philosophy was gradually resolved in the coming years, while remaining still deeply connected with the above-mentioned irreducibility, with the following questions: How can the moral law determine the will directly? How can the moral law be both a subjective and an objective determination of the will? And finally, a task that is at stake in these questions, how is freedom possible? In *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, published in 1785, Kant slowly started carrying out his promise from the silent period and his first critique. The *Groundwork* thus represents Kant’s first systematic attempt to posit a pure science of ethics, *and at the same time* to introduce into his moral edifice the notion of respect (see Kant 1996b). Here, respect is considered a feeling “spontaneously produced by a concept of reason,” but it is only in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that the notion gains its full capacity to emancipate itself from its presupposed empirical origins:



What is essential in every determination of the will by the moral law is that, as free will—and so not only without the cooperation of sensible impulses but even with rejection of all of them and with infringement upon all inclinations insofar as they could be opposed to that law—it is determined solely by the law. So far, then, the effect of the moral law as incentive is only negative, and as such this incentive can be cognized a priori. For, all inclination and every sensible impulse is based on feeling, and the negative effect on feeling [...] is itself feeling. [...] // [S]ensible feeling, which underlies all our inclinations, is indeed the condition of that feeling we call respect [...]. (Kant 1996a, pp. 199, 201)

To be able to act in accordance with the categorical imperative, that is, for our acts to be considered moral and not merely legal or pathologically motivated, one has to break with the order of the pathological. To break with the realm of pathology means to break with all sensibly motivated inclinations; however, this break with the realm of feeling subsequently brings about a feeling of its own, a feeling of the break with feeling, hence a negative feeling that Kant calls pain. Here, things get complicated even further. It would seem that Kant posits not two, but three distinct orders of feeling. First, the order of the pathological, and its corresponding feelings of pleasure and displeasure, i.e., the entirety of inclinations he subsumes under the notions of “self-love” and “self-conceit,” with which the second *Critique*, for it to be a critique of pure practical reason, has to rupture (ibid., p. 199). Second, the feeling of pain, or the negative feeling, which results immediately from this rupture, i.e., a feeling considered to be the sensuous effect of the absence of sensible inclinations, or a result of the break with the order of the pathological. And third, a positive feeling derived from the negative one, from the absence or from the fundamental lack of the pathological. This latter feeling Kant calls the feeling of respect. In other words, Kant starts off by distinguishing the feeling of respect from the rest of the inclinations, but in doing so posits three sorts of feelings: positive feelings or feelings of

inclination such as love, fear etc.; the negative feeling that he calls pain; and a feeling described as a positivization of this negativity, that is, respect.

In her *Ethics of the Real*, Alenka Zupančič has argued that the feeling of respect “indicates that the law is ‘nearby’, it indicates the ‘presence’ of the moral law, the subject’s ‘close encounter’ with the moral law” (Zupančič 2000, p. 140). Respect is a minimal sign of the presence of the moral law, or of the pureness of the pure (practical reason). On the other hand, one could argue, respect can also be understood in terms of signaling the opposite, its absence: respect indicates that the lack of the pathological is “nearby,” it indicates the absence of the pathological, the subject’s close encounter with this lack. Respect is thus a minimal sign of an absence of the pathological; it is a sign of a lack, or even a signal of a lack, if we deploy Lacan’s famous definition of anxiety as “a signal of the Real” (Lacan 2014, pp. 157–69). However, if Kant more or less convincingly demonstrated the relationship between the negative feeling of pain and the positive feeling of respect, one cannot overlook the precise phrasing from the paragraph quoted above, in which Kant goes on to say that “sensible impulse is based on feeling,” which “underlies all our inclinations.” Moreover, he adds in a paragraph already quoted, that “*So little* is respect a feeling of *pleasure*, that we give way to it only reluctantly.” So again: How is it possible that Kant situates, in the very midst of a free and autonomous ethical subject “a *little* feeling of pleasure,” a pinch of sensibility? In what follows, I suggest interpreting this specific deadlock of Kantian ethics, this problem of the radical irreducibility of the realms of the pure and the pathological, against the backdrop of Lacan’s famous statement about the impossibility of the sexual relationship, whereby the impossibility will not be approached in the context of the relationship as such, but instead by way of focusing solely on the varieties of modalities proposed by Lacan (see Lacan 1999).

Lacan describes the inexistence of the sexual relationship by way of introducing three types of modalities, namely those of

necessity, contingency, and impossibility. By bringing them into a specific relation to affectivity as the structural illusion of every love relationship, he indicates the possible way of its inscription. Let me quote from the very last paragraphs of *Encore*:

“To stop not being written” is not a formulation proffered haphazardly. I associated it with contingency, whereas I delighted in [characterizing] the necessary as that which “doesn’t stop being written,” for the necessary is not the real. [...] I have also defined the sexual relationship as that which “doesn’t stop not being written.” There is an impossibility therein. It is also that nothing can speak it [...]. // I incarnated contingency in the expression “stops not being written.” For here there is nothing but encounter, the encounter in the partner of symptoms and affects [...]. Isn’t that tantamount to saying that it is owing only to the affect that results from this gap that something is encountered, which can vary infinitely as to level of knowledge, but which momentarily gives the illusion that the sexual relationship stops not being written? (Lacan 1999, pp. 144, 145)

If Kant’s central premise is that one has to insist on the radical irreducibility of the pure and the pathological, then the essential premise of psychoanalysis, or the ethics of psychoanalysis, is that one has to insist on a radical irreducibility of the Real to the Symbolic, and that the gap between the two orders has to be retained at any cost. However, the quote from Lacan implies that this is insufficient. For the Real is not merely the realm resisting symbolic cancelation, the tendency of the symbolic necessity to absorb it into its universe. The Real is not only that which “doesn’t stop not being written,” but also the realm of irreducible contingency. We encounter in the partner affects, symptoms, small signs of the subject’s banishment from its participation in the symbolic order, small fragments that resist signification, and which retain some kind of elusive and illusory meaning by way of an affect granting the precarious inscription of the nonrelation into the Symbolic order. The affect gives rise to the fundamental

illusion that that which structurally resists symbolic articulation is not only capable of being articulated, thus endowing the object-cause of desire with some flesh and blood, but also—and more importantly—that this emergence of contingency can break with the impossible and shift the negation from “it doesn’t stop *not being* written” to “it doesn’t stop *being* written,” that is from impossibility to a (however illusory) necessity.

Couldn’t one here propose an analogy in regard to Kant’s ethics? Is not Kant’s ethical constellation also subject to such an imaginary illusion? Is the feeling of respect not precisely the very affective element that joins two seemingly incompatible domains? In Lacan’s reading of the sexual relationship, the affect indicates the point of possibility of a passage from the impossible to the necessary. And isn’t this precisely the way—via the introduction of respect as the positivization of the negative feeling, the pure sensible embodiment of the negative—to break away from the pathological, and move toward the pureness of practical reason? It is important to bear in mind that when Kant speaks of the break with the pathological, the negative character of the feeling of the resulting pain is understood in a strictly logical sense: pain is logically, not morally negative; pain is nothing but a sign of a logical operation of the rupture. Here our initial question arises anew: Can one read the feeling of respect as an element of irreducible contingency? With regards to Lacan’s modalities and Kant’s insistence on the disjunction between the pathological and the pure, one could claim that what is impossible in Kant’s ethics is the very field of the pathological, which from the standpoint of the purity and apriority of the moral law precisely cannot and must not stop not being written. The feeling of respect, however, as the structural remainder of this evacuated realm of pathology is precisely an element of the pathological breaking with this logic; it is a contingent moment in which the pathological stops not being written into the moral law. In this regard, one could assert that the feeling of respect is a contingent element of Kant’s

ethics, as well as claim that the felling of respect is a structural illusion of the categorical imperative. Just as in the case of love, where we encounter in our partner affects as something that for a brief moment suspends the impossibility of the sexual relationship, so too in the case of the ethical subject the actuality of the categorical imperative finds its support in the feeling of respect as the structural illusion of the moral act. Respect for the moral law is therefore introduced so as to signal to the moral Law “its trace and its mirage-like path,” without which, that is, without the support of the feeling of respect, the Law would perhaps lose its very formalness, the empty form as its only determination.

To put it in Lacanian terms: Isn't that tantamount to saying that it is owing to the feeling of respect, as the contingent element that results from this gap, that we encounter something, which momentarily gives the illusion that the order of the pathological stops not being written? The gap between the pure and the pathological has to stay open in order for respect to be able to inscribe itself into the field of pure apriority, thus enabling the actualization of the purity of the moral law, its emergence within the world. The moral law has to dirty its hands, so to speak, with that little pinch of affectivity so as to retain both its actuality and the pureness of its determination of the will. (There is no moral law/act without respect for the moral law, and there is no need for respect, if there is no such thing as the moral law, i.e., unless one is first lead to presuppose it.) Moreover, without the moral law as an objective and subjective determinant of the will, and without respect as the structural condition or essential companion to this determination, the subject is free “only in accordance with the *letter* but not the *spirit* (the disposition)” (Kant 1996a, p. 198). Kant, however, insists on closing this gap. By situating moral feeling outside of the domain of the pathological, he in fact closes this gap once and for all, starting to assert the always already a priori nature of respect, defining it as an effect of the moral law, as something that follows or is derived immediately from it. If

earlier we interpreted the feeling of respect as a structural illusion of the moral law, as a point of suspension, we are now faced with the opposite characterization of respect, which, however, forms an impossible unity with the initial characterization. In this respect, respect is not a feeling that, in Kant's own definition, can only derive from a feeling, i.e., from the field of sensibility, but is effectively an a priori affectivity attached to the pure form of the moral law. The initial opposition between reason and sensibility thus proves to entail a more significant task of thinking reason as inclined. In short, it entails the task of conceiving the feeling of respect as both a "form of pure pathology" of reason and a "form of pathological pureness" of sensibility; it entails thinking a difference within this very zone of indifference of reason inclined.

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