IMAGINATION AND PRACTICAL REASON

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Abstract: The aim of this notes is to point to, and to analyze briefly, some passages of Kant’s practical text where we can find a positive role for imagination in the practical domain of philosophy.

Key-words: Kant; imagination, practical reason

Within the Kantian system, any attempt to establish a positive relationship between imagination and practical reason seems to be doomed to failure, and in a short paper like this what awaits me at the end is almost certain. It is true that in the first Critique and in the Critique of Judgment imagination has a important role – in the third Critique we can even find an important link between imagination and the practical domain of philosophy, but not a central one for practical purposes. The feeling of Beautiful, which comes from the free play of imagination and understanding can symbolize Good, and in the Sublime, the incapacity of the imagination to represent a demand of reason can be an opportunity to enlarge our empirical modes of thought. In the Critique of Practical Reason, however, Kant expressly refuses to assign any role to imagination. In the “Typic” chapter, for example, which has the same function, in the practical domain, as the Schematismus chapter has in the theoretical one, Kant says that it is a function of understanding and not of the imagination to mediate moral law and empirical context. In the Foundations, he says that if there is an ideal of imagination, it is happiness and not virtue.

Despite that, I think we can find, in his texts on the philosophy of history, a positive link between imagination and practical reason, a link that has significance not only for his philosophy of history, but one which can be transposed to the strictly practical domain, by which I mean Virtue and Right. My considerations here are restricted in particular to his philosophy of right. The passages that I believe support my interpretation are the following:

In Anthropology, the imagination is presented, § 34 A, as the faculty of making the past present (memory) (KANT VII, 182), of making the future present (the faculty of prediction and prognosis, § 35 e 36) (KANT VII, 185 a 190) and of linking both past and future to the present (the faculty of designation, § 38) (KANT VII, 191). It is the faculty of making the future present which, without doubt, is most associated with the philosophy of history, since even taking “a look at the past, is only with the intention of making the prediction of the future possible” (KANT VII, 186). It is, then, this perspective which Kant assumes in turning, in 1786, towards a possible beginning of human history. Such an account, we well know, is merely conjectural, a simple exercise of the imagination accompanied by reason (KANT VIII, 109). Better says guided by reason, by the pure
idea of right and of establishing a republican constitution. As Kant puts it in a Reflection, the idea of right is the only permanent thing we have in all social-historical changes.

Another important passage is found in *The Conflicts of Faculties*, when Kant analyzes the feelings of the public in the face of the French Revolution. The French Revolution – and the effect that it has on its observers, the enthusiasm for the affirmation of the rights of humanity – is taken – analytic by reason from a synthesis made by imagination - as a sign of the realization of the ideal of right, since it allows us to see “the idea of a constitution in consonance with the natural law of men (...) more clearly [idea] which is at the foundation of all political forms (...) [and is] the eternal norm for all civil constitutions in general” (KANT VII, 90). Before that, Kant had distinguished between different modes of anticipating the future, which is also a function of imagination and judgment.

But the more important passages for me now are found in *Toward Perpetual Peace*, where we can find practical principle under a consideration of time: “for the prohibition here concerns only the way of acquiring, which from now on (my emphasis) should not hold, but not the status of possession, which (...) was nevertheless in its time (my emphasis) taken to be legitimate according to the public opinion in every state at that time (my emphasis)” (Kant, VIII, 347); and the second one is “thus political wisdom, in the conditions at present (my emphasis), will make reforms in keeping with the ideal of public rights its duty” (KANT, VIII, 374).

It is not, thus, in this presentation, a question of giving primacy to the historical to the detriment of the rational, reducing the latter to the former. Kant warns on more than one occasion of the illegitimacy of such a procedure. Far less is it intended to state that practical reason is measured by history, or that time limits pure practical reason. Of course it is a question of affirming history as a condition for the recognition of practical concepts, but in the following sense: practical concepts do not have their genesis in history and continue to be considered as originally acquired a priori concepts; but only in history, by means of history, do such concepts acquire clarity and distinction, because they are recognized in the context of their application. Stated otherwise, history provides material for reflection, which will then seek the form which organizes it, a form which has its origin in the superior faculties of the mind, i.e., in pure reason. In other words: history – a coherent, systematic discourse regarding human actions, which allow themselves to be subsumed into universal practical principles. Thus, if it is certain that the idea of a perfect civil constitution, for example, does not cease to be a norm for all juridical ordinance, even if there has never been a constitution close to it, it is also certain that subjectively it is necessary to be convinced of the possibility of – and moreover the sense of – establishing such an ideal in the world. Therefore, this second moment of practical judgment is, in its widest sense, as Kant puts it in *Religion*, the action itself of schematizing, i.e, “to make a concept conceivable (fasslich) by means of analogy with something giving in sensibility”.

In other words, Kant’s philosophy of history is a moral vision of the world, a moralischen Weltanschauung, discursively constructed, by means of interpreting empirical data, such as
feelings (*ZeF* VIII, 360), in a framework determined by practical concepts. Imagination provides us with a synthesis, but a synthesis ruled by reason. Because it is an effect of the imagination, each synthesis has a provisional value; but to recognize its foundation in Reason is to give it normative status. This implies a constant transition between an immanent and a transcendent perspective within the practical domain of philosophy, and that’s why Kant’s philosophy of history, despite its eschatological accent, is far away from Leibniz Theodicy; which is also the reason why it is not at all a justification of what is, but a mode of thinking about justice within the concept of progress.

It is the transition between an immanent and a transcendent perspective that gives progress its meaning, a transition that reason forces the imagination to fulfill, in the sense that reason does not recognize, in any positive juridical order, a perfect presentation of its model. And in this image of the world, Positives Rechts is always provisional right, because it is determined by socio-historical conditions. But the idea of right, with its origin in reason alone, is the only condition under which we can talk from an experience of justice, it does not matter how imperfect it may be: as Kant says in *Perpetual Peace*: “we can certainly expect in advance that there will be considerable deviations in actual experience from the original theoretical idea”. This does not mean that we are caught in a relativistic position in the face of questions of justice. The progress of right and of its institutions must occur side by side with progress in the enlargement of thinking, of reason’s perspective – every reform in politics, Kant always says, must be preceded by a revolution in thought. If we go back to the Kantian analysis of the sublime, we find that imagination plays an important role in the enlargement of thought, in the sense that it takes us away from natural order towards a supersensible destination. But that would take us far away, and we must come to an end.

As far as I can see, Hannah Arendt was the first person to notice the link between aesthetic and political judgment. But she focuses on the pretension of communicability and the *sensus communis*. We must go a step further and focus on the relationship between the faculties that aesthetic judgments present, a relationship that, in this case, has only subjective reasons, and that cannot count on any objective reasons whatsoever. A precarious relationship, we should say. But as precarious as a political judgment can be, Kant would not accept that we cannot count on objective reasons. It doesn’t matter how difficult the synthesis a political judgment is, its value shall not rely on the private sphere of the judging subject – even in aesthetic judgments, the sphere of the judging subject is not a private one. But political judgments, differently from aesthetic ones, end in a concept, that is to say, end in the clarification of a concept that was, since the very beginning, presiding its synthesis. The concept, of course, is that of a republican constitution, the only one that fits perfectly with the idea of right, and what was especially clarified by the French Revolution, at least in its first moment, was the sense of political representation that is included in it. For the first time in history, the French Revolution gave us a new experience of what representation in politics may be; and for the first time we can say, as Kant does in his preparative works for *Perpetual Peace*, that a true Republic is a system of representative democracy, a new form of thinking about representation in politics.
To bring my short paper to an end, I would like to return quickly to the passages of *Perpetual Peace* I quoted above. None of them talks about a change in action itself, but in the way of perceiving an action: at one moment it looks like something permissible, and then it came to be contrary to the laws of freedom ruling external actions. In the theoretical use of reason, sensibility constrains us in such a way that its limitations cannot be surpassed. In the practical domains, *au contraire*, time is a “contingent” limitation that ought to be surpassed, and can be surpassed, so long as we see it as a task for humanity. This is the perspective worked out in *The Idea for a universal history*. Worked out rhetorically, we may say, but in any case guided, from the beginning, by reason; but that guidance, with the end posit by it, that of humanity, changes the way we normally read Kant’s censure on rhetoric that we find in the *Critique of Judgment*. Anyway, be skeptical in relation to the very possibility of that task, arguing that it is more rhetorical than theoretical, is to decide against the reality of practical reason itself, at least in a Kantian way of thinking. I put an accent on the recognition that it may be more rhetorical than theoretical, because the accomplishment of the ends of humanity cannot be an object of certainty, but only the assumption that we have good reasons to strive for it, and not to despair. A last word: if we want to keep a positive function for the imagination in the practical domain of philosophy, with imagination giving us a moral image of the world, we must consider that this image is more an image of a world that will come to be, than an image that captures our past times as a way of legitimizing. Because to recognize that any answers we find for questions of justice are in some way historically conditioned, means to recognize that we must, as long as we are rational beings, enlarge our view.

**REFERENCES**

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