

When Reason Began to Stir... –Kantian Courage and the Enlightenment

Quando la razón comenzó a moverse... — El coraje kantiano y la Ilustración

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Abstract

In his answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?”, Kant argues that we must have the courage to use our own reason and imputes failure to do so on laziness and cowardice. Why exactly does the call for emancipation require resolve? This paper follows Foucault in defining Enlightenment as a modern ethos that adopts the ephemeral as a way of being. Contrary to the French philosopher, however, we argue that this permanent critique of oneself and of the world creates a void that leaves us trembling before nothingness. If Enlightenment requires courage, then, it is precisely to urge us to remain steadfast in the practice of freedom and to not shy away from the dangers it imposes. Courage, in short, is resolve before the abyss of freedom. Too long have we confined Kant to an ossified, rationalistic framework, thankfully impervious to human anguish for some, regrettably incapable of it for others. If anything, this paper wants to uncover the deep, existential tones of his conclusions on modernity, and it will do so through an examination of his account of courage.

Key words

Kant; Enlightenment; Courage; Foucault; Baudelaire; Despair; Freedom; Modernity.

Resumen

En su respuesta a la pregunta *¿Qué es la Ilustración?*, Kant argumenta que tenemos que tener coraje para usar nuestra propia razón e imputa la incapacidad para ello a la pereza y cobardía. ¿Por qué exactamente la apelación a la emancipación requiere esta resolución? Este artículo sigue la

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definición de Foucault de la Ilustración como un *ethos* moderno que adopta lo efímero como modo de ser. Contrariamente al filósofo francés, sin embargo, argumentamos que esta crítica permanente de uno mismo y del mundo crea un vacío que nos deja inermes ante la nada. Si la Ilustración requiere coraje, ello equivale a aconsejarnos ejercitar con entereza la libertad y no amilanarse ante los peligros que esta impone. El coraje, dicho brevemente, resuelve ante el abismo de la libertad. Hemos confinado durante demasiado tiempo a Kant a patrones osificados, racionalistas, considerándolo afortunadamente impermeable a la angustia humana para algunos, desgraciadamente incapaz de ello para otros. Este artículo pretende de manera principal descubrir los tonos profundos y existenciales de sus conclusiones sobre la Modernidad, de la mano de un examen de su abordaje del coraje.

Palabras clave

Kant; Ilustración; coraje; Foucault; Baudelaire; desesperación; libertad; Modernidad

INTRODUCTION

As the duty of distancing ourselves from experience in order to formulate and abide by a law that is by definition a priori and unconditionally binding, Kantian ethics is often portrayed as obdurate and inflexible, if not altogether impracticable. It has all the makings of a scene from *Babette's Feast*, where the austerity of life and the characters' exertions to repress their most basic desires is so absurd it appears comical to the viewer. In other words, Kant's morality is universal and rigorist to the extent that he seems to be asking us to abstract not only from our inclinations, but from our humanity as well, almost as if he articulated its *formal* conditions outside of the *human* condition.

Widespread, this view is nevertheless inaccurate as it fails to account for Kant's sustained meditation on what it is to be a human being, which we know from his *Logic* to be the underlying query of his critical philosophy. One of the various tangible manifestations of this concern in his works may be found in his essay: "What is Enlightenment?"¹ Kant's characterization of both the process and the period in this piece is well-known: enlightenment is the release from our "self-incurred tutelage", that is, from our inability to use our reason without the guidance of an external authority (8:35). What remains obscure is the cause he gives for this self-inflicted servitude: a lack of *courage*. At first sight, this only serves to confirm the above impression of intransigence, if not to portray Kant as downright abrasive in his call for emancipation, as he brusquely imputes failure to "cowardice" and "laziness".

These remarks, however, deserve much more scrutiny. Why is it, precisely, that enlightenment requires courage? It cannot be for the sake of freedom itself, for Kant has made abundantly clear in his writings that it is "self-sufficient", in that no incentive or any other device is necessary "to recognize what our duty is or to impel its performance" (RGV, 6:3-4). It is not freedom that requires resolve, then, but the subject exercising it. Of

¹ Henceforth in the text: *WE*.

course, this could very well be for the simple fact that moral obligation is demanding, at times even daunting, and so requires strength of will for its performance, an observation that is in itself quite unoriginal in the history of philosophy. Yet Kant places this discussion in a very specific context. We are living in an “*enlightened age*”, he says, where we have “clear indications” of an increased public freedom and where the obstacles towards emancipation “are gradually being reduced” (5:40). As such, the call for courage is not made in a vacuum: it is addressed *specifically* to the *modern* subject who is asked to break the bonds of “external direction” and “finally learn to walk *alone*” (5:36, my italics). Held to be “dangerous” and “arduous” to the “far greater portion of humankind” (5:35), this undertaking is a daunting one indeed. In sum, when Kant compels us to “have the courage to use (our) own reason” (5:35), he is in fact articulating a new way of being. Courage, as he redefines it in the Enlightenment essay and throughout his writings, represents the particular disposition of the modern human being, his *solitude* and distress before the adversity of autonomy. Too long have we confined Kant to an ossified, rationalistic framework, thankfully impervious to human anguish for some, regrettably incapable of it for others. If anything, this paper wants to uncover the deep, existential tones of his conclusions on modernity, and it will do so through an examination of his account of courage.

Foucault was perhaps the first to understand that the Enlightenment essay was a reflection on what it is to *be* modern, that instead of describing a period in history, it was in fact fleshing out a new “attitude” or “mode of relating to contemporary reality” (Foucault 1984, p. 39). The first section of this paper will examine this ontological dimension, explaining how exactly *WE* articulates a new way of being. The second section demonstrates why adopting this new attitude requires courage, for Kant. Comparing his writings on freedom with some of Baudelaire’s poetry exposes the abyss that opens before us when we embrace freedom as a way of being. Defined as a permanent critique of oneself and of one’s world, the modern ethos reveals existence as groundless and in constant need of retransfiguration. No doubt this is exhilarating, but there is something daunting – perhaps even frightening – in this undertaking as well, as is convincingly illustrated in the Book of Job. The last section will address contemporary readings of *WE* and Kantian courage. Rigorous and instructive, they have nevertheless confined enlightenment to an egalitarian and inclusive liberal framework that provides us with the means to manage the growing diversity of contemporary society. As such, they completely overlook the veritable threat again stone’s independence: despair, generated in Kant’s writings by solitude, distress, and radical evil. Courage, in sum, is the resolve to continue embracing freedom in the face of these dangers, and so it does not merely supplement the modern attitude, it *defines* it.

1. THE MODERN ETHOS

Foucault has continually engaged with Kant’s philosophy, beginning with his *these complémentaire* on the *Anthropology*, a text he himself introduced, translated and

eventually published with Vrin in 1964. He was equally absorbed with the essay on the Enlightenment, dedicating a paper on the subject in 1978 at the Société française de philosophie² as well as part of his 1983 seminar at the Collège de France. We also find a more detailed study of the piece in *The Foucault Reader*, which he wrote just before his death. Foucault has of course been a fierce critique of the German philosopher, accusing him of having provided the tools of oppression with his all-encompassing reason and separated history from philosophical investigations or truth claims. Still, as Fleischacker suggests, the sincerity of his admiration for Kant should not be doubted, and his treatment of the *Aufklärung* is nothing short of an example in “hermeneutical brilliance” (Fleischacker 2013, p. 108).

An intriguing remark made by Foucault in his 1983 seminar hints at the novelty of the Enlightenment: it is noteworthy, he says, that the *Aufklärung* was self-identified, that it became conscious of itself by naming itself (Foucault 1994, p. 679). It is this same type of reflexivity that we find at work in Kant’s essay, where the originality of his thought lies not so much in *what* he says about his own epoch as in *how* he decides to treat it, that is, the manner by which he weaves a new rapport to the immediate. Obviously, other philosophers have sought to reflect on their own present, but their point of view remained *situated* or connected to a specific age and concrete society they attempted to understand. Such reflections were often meant to uncover the uniqueness of a particular community, anticipate its impending doom or predict its forthcoming glory (Foucault 1984, p. 33). Kant’s project in *WE* is different: he is not looking to understand the present for the sake of some other end, but on its own behalf. “He is looking for a difference, says Foucault. What difference does today introduce with respect to yesterday?” (*Ibid.*)

Foucault does little to unpack this rather sibylline formula, although a clue as to what he means can be found in his working hypothesis: “This little text [i.e. *WE*] is located in a sense at the crossroads of critical reflection and reflection on history. It is a reflection by Kant on the contemporary status of his own enterprise” (p. 38). We know that the said enterprise – critical philosophy – is supported by three pillars that have taken the form of the following questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What can I hope for? In each case, Kant sets out to explore the potentialities of reason as well as its limits, for instance what it can and cannot know, what it can and cannot hope for, among other inquiries. The innovation of critical philosophy, then, consists not so much in using reason to decipher the mysteries of the universe, but to meditate upon the use of reason itself; it is not just reason that reflects, but reason that reflects on the conditions of its own possibility. In this way, Kant provides us with the most achieved form of modernity: what persists in human existence, its *Grund* as it were, is neither provided by history in the form of tradition, nor revealed by nature as a divinely orchestrated cosmos. This ground is not even the *product* of reason. Indeed, if Descartes’ method uses doubt as a magnifier in his

² The conference was later published in the *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie*, t. LXXXIV, 1990, 84, 2.

investigation to uncover the *res cogitans*, Kant refuses to close the case and turns the search itself into the object. In other words, instead of a means to discover an answer, critical inquiry becomes a *way of being*, it turns into a “critical ontology”.

For Foucault, this type of reflexivity is especially resonant of Baudelaire, whose “consciousness of modernity is widely recognized as one of the most acute of the nineteenth century” (p. 39). A few decades earlier, Sartre had already insisted on the latter’s efforts towards self-awareness. “Baudelaire was the man who never forgot himself. He watched himself see; he watched in order to see himself watch” (Sartre 1950, p. 22). This said, if the poet can see his arms and hands, he could never catch a glimpse of his own eye, lest he duplicate himself (pp. 25-26). Consequently, concludes Sartre, Baudelaire “was the man who chose to look upon himself as if he were another person; his life is simply the story of the failure of this attempt” (pp. 27-28). Such an interpretation may be representative of other art works, such as Escher’s *Drawing Hands*, for instance. Following Foucault’s reading, however, it completely misses the point regarding Baudelaire’s poetry. Granted, the latter does depict modernity as “the ephemeral, the fleeting, the contingent” (quoted in: Foucault 1984, p. 39). Yet his uncommon flair lies not in this diagnosis, but in elevating transience into a “heroization of the present” (p. 41). Simply put, a passing moment is also an *unfettered* moment, free from any tradition or institution – metaphysically speaking – that pre-colors or taints our life perspective. As such, the ephemeral is not a flaw, but the uninhibited opportunity to continually transfigure the world and oneself in the process. Baudelaire, then, does not deplore the contingent as superficial, he *wills* it, or as Foucault claims, he adopts an *attitude* towards it, a “deliberate, difficult attitude (that) consists in recapturing something eternal that is not beyond the present instant, nor behind it, but within it” (p. 39). “*Hélas! La musique se ride!*”, lamented Victor Hugo about Mozart’s *Requiem*. There are many spectators, many *flâneurs*, capable of sharp, sardonic remarks on flitting fashions and passing fads. Few become actors who transform the waning moment into a practice of freedom where one constantly reinvents oneself. As a response to Sartre, we could argue that Baudelaire, in the end, was not so much trying to surprise himself in the act of creating, as define creation as his very mode of existence.

It is at this point that Baudelaire’s poetry and Kant’s critical philosophy come together. Their respective work is not simply another commentary on our times, but itself the expression of a different relationship to the present and to oneself altogether (p. 41). Foucault’s exceptional lucidity is to have realized that both authors were not so much articulating a relevant opinion on modernity as a specific disposition towards it, a philosophical *ethos* earlier referred to as critical ontology, which we can now understand to be “work carried on by ourselves upon ourselves as free beings” (p. 47). Looking to define more precisely what he means by attitude, Foucault declares it to be “avoluntary choice made by certain people; (...) a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task” (p. 39). The idea that there should be any form of “belonging” associated with a

modern ethos seems to be at odds with what has just been said. Yet in his seminar of 1983, we learn that it is not at all linked to a particular doctrine or tradition, nor is it a question of belonging to a human community in general (Foucault 1994, pp. 680-681). What we have here, instead, is an attachment to detachment, to the practice of liberty that consists in “the permanent critique of ourselves”.³ Hence, with both Baudelaire and Kant, we witness the emergence of a modern ethos that does not merely “accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments”, but takes “oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration” (Foucault 1984, p. 41).

2. THE ABYSS OF FREEDOM

The *Aufklärung* text is a compelling invitation to use our own reason and free ourselves from the shackles of external direction. From the preceding section, we now know that through this call, Kant is actually framing the attitude of modernity as the permanent critique of ourselves. This ethos adopts the ephemeral as its way of being, implying that: i- modern existence is no longer predicated upon an immemorial tradition or natural principle it looks to reenact or imitate; ii- this groundlessness or, at the very least, absence of *arkhé*, is in fact an opening to continually re-transfigure reality and reinvent ourselves in the process. In a word, the modern attitude is the posture that continually seeks to unmask imposture. So why should this require courage, to recall the initial query of this paper? At this point, Foucault is of little help to continue with our investigation. Is it his apprehension towards humanism? This amorphous “set of themes” “has always been obliged to lean on certain conceptions of man borrowed from religion, science, or politics”, he claims, and as such seems to preclude the “mode of reflective relation to the present” he is trying to establish as the basis of Enlightenment (p. 44). Is it his archeological method, which seeks “to treat the instances of discourse that articulate what we think, say, and do as so many historical events” (p. 46)? This would indeed be at odds with a transcendental approach, which emphasizes subjectivity and, as such, connects moral integrity to the incessant practice of self-introspection. Whatever the reasons, he appears to completely overlook the conditions in which the modern attitude is effectively adopted, almost as if he had emptied critical ontology of its... ontology, or at least of the particular manner in which it is *experienced* by the human being.⁴

The possibility of a “permanent creation of ourselves” is so emphasized in Foucault, so inebriating perhaps, it has shrouded the context in which this ethos is effectively embraced, an experience that is the condition of both its adoption and its re-

³Foucault 1984, p. 43. On page p. 44, Foucault insists that “at the heart of the historical consciousness that the Enlightenment has of itself” is the “principle of a critique and a permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy.”

⁴In the above definition, he does speak of a “difficult attitude”, but adds very little – if anything at all – to explain why this should be the case.

actualization: the kind of solitary distress that beckons courage. This oversight is particularly striking in his commentary of Baudelaire. The modern man for the latter, sustains Foucault, is not the one “who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself” (p. 42). After having carefully and meticulously fleshed out the new creative attitude articulated in the poet’s work, this characterization suddenly seems anticlimactic, if not summary. It seems as though Foucault creates a fracture between a certain experience of nothingness and the act of writing, or to use another reference, as if a life-affirming will to power should dispense with an earlier agonistic struggle with life. Yet the poet’s writings do not appear to confirm this caesura, quite to the contrary. Baudelairean *Spleen* – how could one neglect it in the context of this discussion? – laments the defeat of Hope who weeps before Anguish, atrocious and despotic as she plants her black flag on the poet’s bowed skull.⁵ We also feel his sense of void when we read, in *Recueillement*: “Be quiet and more discrete, O my Grief. You cried out for Evening; even now it falls: a gloomy atmosphere envelops the city, bringing peace to some, anxiety to others” (XIII).

What is more significant is the recurrence in his works of the figure of the abyss. *L’homme et la mer*, for instance, evokes a *free* man who will always cherish the sea as the mirror of his soul, the two “tenebrous and discrete”, one and the other a “bitter abyss” (XIV). “Both of you are gloomy and reticent; Man, no one has sounded the depths of your being; O Sea, no person knows your most hidden riches, so zealously do you keep your secrets!” (*Ibid.*). Elsewhere, he wonders whether beauty, with its infernal and divine gaze, comes down to us from the heavens or rises out of the abyss (*Hymne à la beauté*, XXI). We could also remark that Baudelaire went through the trouble of translating Edgar Allan Poe’s *Arthur Gordon Pym*, whose hero is irresistibly attracted to the abyss.⁶ Even more notable, however, is his poem *Le gouffre*, where Baudelaire engages with the deeper and darker Pascalian themes. The philosopher has his “gulf” that moves with him, he says, before exclaiming: “Alas! all is abyss, – action, desire, dream (...) Above, below, on every side, the depth, the strand, the silence, space, hideous and fascinating...” (XI). Echoing Pascal’s infinite silence of the eternal spaces, these lines speak of the poet’s spirit, “haunted by vertigo” and envying the insensibility of nothingness (*ibid.*).

What to make of this? Modernity is no doubt the opportunity to continually produce the world and our own selves. It would not be misleading to see this act of creation as an opening, a breach that continually exposes the groundlessness of our preconceptions and, as such, opens the possibility of transfiguration. Baudelaire clearly understood that this space of emptiness, this abyss, was the condition of the “permanent creation of ourselves in our autonomy”, as Foucault uncovered, thus transforming the ephemeral into his *façon*

⁵Baudelaire, *Spleen*, LXXVIII. All translations are from William Aggeler (1954), which I have found to be the most accurate and poetic: *The Flowers of Evil* (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild). I have occasionally modified the translation, indicating such instances. The poems will be quoted by their title followed by their number as established by Claude Pichois, Paris, Gallimard, 1964.

⁶ See in particular Chapter XXIV of Poe’s *Les aventures d’Arthur Gordon Pym*, translated by Charles Baudelaire, Roger Asselineau (ed.), Paris, Aubier Montaigne, 1973.

d'être. Yet he also measured with disquieting lucidity this immense gulf, which appears before us as soon as we embrace this posture. We have another illustration of this nothingness in his draft for a preface to the *Flowers of Evil* where, looking back on his poems, his creation, he writes: "I aspire to an absolute rest and to a *never-ending night*. (...) To know *nothing*, to teach *nothing*, to will *nothing*, to feel *nothing*, to sleep and sleep again, such is today my only wish. A vile and disgusting wish, but sincere".⁷ To be clear, modern attitude not only presupposes emptiness, it *creates* the void itself by accepting as sole foundation the continual exercise of critical reflection. This permanent creation of ourselves, this *freedom* as practice and as way of being, is now part of the modern landscape. Vertiginous, it takes the shape of an abyss that appears as stirring as it is frightening.

Does Kant's tableau of modernity also depict the act of emancipation as a deep precipice, an open space of transfiguration experienced simultaneously as exhilarating and forbidding? Imputing the persistence of tutelage on laziness and cowardice, it seems at first sight that his sketch of freedom has emphasized the details of the act at the expense of the individual performing it. Yet a careful examination of his writings might suggest otherwise. A first hint is uncovered in the celebrated formula, *Sapere aude!* Quoted from Horace's *Epistles*, the full passage reads as follows:

«For why do you seek to remove with such haste that which hurts your eyes, when you defer from year to year from curing that which gnaws your soul? He has the deed half done, who has begun. Dare to know: begin. He who postpones the time for righteousness, is like the peasant who waits for the river to flow by: yet runs and will continue to run, flowing forever». (Epistles, I, 2, 37-43)⁸

If anything, these lines highlight the adversity that is inherent to rectitude, hence the spur to overcome one's hesitation, which in Horace takes the form of the following imperative: *Begin!* Were it a walk in the park, the first step would not necessitate such impellent encouragement. Kant, then, does not quote this motto randomly: "It is so easy not to be of age", he admits, concomitantly (8:35). For anyone "to work himself out of the life under tutelage which has become almost his nature is very difficult". It is as if making "only an uncertain leap over the narrowest ditch because he is not accustomed to that kind of free motion" (8:36), he continues, in what is most probably an explicit reference to the above verses.

⁷This draft for a preface is found in Baudelaire (1964), *Les Fleurs du mal*, "Projet de préface pour *Les Fleurs du mal*", texte établi et annoté par Claude Pichois, (Paris: Gallimard), p. 222. I have translated the passage myself. The italics are also mine.

⁸I have translated this passage myself. The original reads as follows: *Nam cur quae laedunt oculum festinas demere; si quid est animum, differs curandi tempus in annum? Dimidium facti qui coepit habet: sapere aude: incipe. Qui recte vivendi prorogathoram, rusticus expectat dum defluatamnis; at ille labitur et labetur in omne volubilis aevum.*

Our release from servitude in Kant suddenly appears much more arduous and demanding. Still, one would be hard pressed to distil from these lines the same type of acrid anxiety that simmered in Baudelaire's poetry. Other works, however, engage more profoundly with freedom as it is experienced by the human being, notably in *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*,⁹ which proposes a philosophical exegesis of the first two chapters of Genesis. This short piece discusses the end of *innocence* and our passage – for better or for worse – towards independence. Its initial claim is rather standard: at first, we were guided by instinct alone, “that voice of God which is obeyed by all animals” (8:111). Soon, however, “*reason began to stir*”, adds Kant, almost ominously (*ibid.*, my italics). This is nothing short of a moment of consciousness, the “eye-opener” whereby we realize that we have the power of choosing. We now recognize that we can adopt a different “*way of life*, of not being bound without alternative to a single way, like the animals” (8:112). The human being can think and choose *otherwise*; he can always question, judge and appraise his decisions or his acts. His life is the story of an alternative he is continually forced to address, and this permanent critique becomes the very mode of his existence.

What is especially noteworthy in *CB* is how the discovery of such reflexive freedom is framed. Initially, perhaps, it creates a “moment of delight”, “but of necessity, anxiety and alarm as to how he was to deal with this newly discovered power quickly followed” (8:112). The first exercise of freedom, then, is “an alteration of condition which is honorable, to be sure, but also *fraught with danger*”, for we are suddenly thrown into “the wide world, where so many cares, troubles and unforeseen ills” await us (8:114). In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, his other existential text, Kant articulates the initiation to autonomy in similar fashion: “To be sure, the first attempts will be crude, and in general also bound to greater hardships and dangers than when still under the command but also the care of others (...)” (6:188n). There is no denying the forceful appeal of Kant's call for moral and political emancipation. This promising awakening, however, has its shadow. Freedom is not merely programmatic, as if limited to the initial excitement of transgression or the youthful enthusiasm of one's rebellion against the establishment. As liberating as it may be, the absence of external direction is also felt as a deep “distress which threatens our moral fiber” before a newfound, and exponential, responsibility only the “thoughtless” can ignore (8:120-121). The guardians did present, after all, the advantage of supplying us with the framework to structure our conduct, now left groundless. As such, if Baudelaire and Kant can be brought together in a discussion on freedom, it is not only because they both see it as a critical ontology, but also because they portray the human being engaged in this practice as daunted before the scale of the undertaking. “He stood as it were, at the brink of an *abyss*.¹⁰ Until that moment instinct had directed him toward specific objects of desire. But from these there now *opened up an infinity* of such objects, and he did not yet know how to choose between them” (8:112, my italics). These are the

⁹ Henceforth in the text: *CB*.

¹⁰ *Abgrund* in the text, that is to say, without ground.

words of the philosopher, though they resonate of the poet's angst. Their modernity has been to uncover the abyss behind the ephemeral, and to measure themselves against it.

In light of this, we can better appreciate why human beings “apparently foreswore and decried as a crime the use of reason, which had been the cause of all these ills” (8:113), and would consequently wish for a return into permanent immaturity. In fact, the discovery of reason may very well generate, concurrently, its hatred –what Kant has called *misology* –, for we immediately realize it brings more trouble than it does happiness (GMS, 4:395). It is the concern for such an outcome that explains why the philosopher holds the figure of Job in such high esteem, praising him as a moral exemplar. He is, of course, a model of unqualified resilience in the face of utter affliction. For all his miseries and torments, remarks Kant admiringly, he remains unwavering: “Till I die, I will not remove mine integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live”.¹¹ The Book of Job, however, not only relates the story of a just man who suffers; it also narrates an experience of nothingness. As Philippe Nemo suggests, Job's afflictions reveal more than the undeserved suffering of the righteous; they also disclose his powerlessness before a situation he does not control. He finds himself completely helpless before the hardships, the deaths, the betrayals, and the sickness that suddenly plague his life. He represents neither their cause – indeed, it is *God himself* who wagers with Satan! –nor their solution. Behind this impotence, argues Nemo, lies an excess of evil [*mal*] that “unhinges all human know-how and hurls it into the abyss, precipitating the appearance – a veritable apparition – of the abyss in which the whole world sinks” (Nemo 1998, p. 86).

There is something acutely modern – indeed contemporary –about Job's story, as testify the numerous artistic, cinematic and philosophical works inspired by his plight. If his experience is significant for Kant, it is because the Biblical hero epitomizes the agonistic struggle against nothingness. “What is most important”, claims the philosopher, is that Job is at first portrayed as a being “at peace with himself in a good conscience” (8:265). What follows, however, is nothing less than the breakdown of order, that is to say, the collapse of the logic that made sense of his world and, with it, of his life. Job discovers, dramatically enough, that both the just and the wicked “shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them” (Job, 21:26). His ontological markers fall to ruin, leaving him “trembling” in his flesh (Job, 21:6) and unsettled before the meaninglessness of his afflictions. Yet “in the midst of his strongest doubts”, praises Kant, he remains sincere and resolute (8:267). In a peculiar passage, he adds:

«There is little worthy of note in the subtle or hypersubtle reasonings of the two sides; but the spirit in which they carry them out merits all the more attention. Job speaks as he thinks, and with the courage with which he, as well as every human being in his position,

¹¹Job, 27: 5-6, quoted in MpVT, 8:267. In the text, Kant cites only the first part of this passage followed by an ellipsis. I have simply added the last verse.

can well afford; his friends, on the contrary, speak as if they were being secretly listened to by the mighty one (...).» (8:265)

What both parties are saying is irrelevant. In the end, it is the fact that Job continues to reason despite his distress that characterizes his heroism. Facing his torments, he has two choices: he can disavow reason through misology or superstition (i.e. the belief by which he thinks he can seduce God through rites and rituals into favouring him); or he can embrace reason regardless of his sufferings, remain composed in the midst of his afflictions. Job chooses the latter, as if his ultimate consolation was not an illusory theodicy that would conveniently justify his misfortunes, but the critical ethos that refused them the last word by getting the better of him. Herein lies his courage.

The reader will recall that in the very first paragraph of *WE*, Kant does not merely suggest we should use our own understanding, he compels us to have the courage to do so and frames this as the rallying call of the Enlightenment. Why such emphasis on resolution? This was our initial question and we are now in a better position to articulate an answer. On the first hand, with Foucault we have outlined enlightenment as a modern attitude consisting in the perpetual transfiguration of the world and of oneself, an ethos we adopt as a way of being. On the second hand, we have equally insisted that this critical ontology reveals the void of existence. A permanent critique consistently exposes the contingency of moral principles or the transience of traditions, in short, it reveals groundlessness. It is true that it opens for the human being a space of creation; in doing so, however, it confronts him with nothingness. As such, the practice of freedom is as stirring as it is daunting. Courage, then, is the “moral strength of the will”, but of the *human being's* will more specifically (MS, 6:405), confronted as he is with the fright of emptiness. “Anxiety, anguish, horror, and terror are degrees of fear, that is, degrees of aversion to danger”, says Kant. Courage, he continues, is precisely “the composure of the mind to take on fear with reflection” (Anth., 7:256); it “has he who in reflecting on danger does not yield; brave is he whose courage is *constant* in danger” (*ibid.*). In a word, courage is rational resolve before the vertigo of the abyss; it is “relief from preceding anxiety” (MS, 6:440), as for Job who stands upright despite the weight of his afflictions, weary though never trodden. In this sense, courage is the indispensable virtue of the being who wishes to embrace freedom, and so it does not merely qualify the modern attitude, it *defines* it.

3. DESPAIR PRECEDES EQUALITY

A number of thought-provoking studies have recently proposed scrupulous and particularly useful examinations of Kant's notion of Enlightenment. Despite the many exegetical differences of their respective works, there is an underlying consensus in their analysis that is rather striking: the *Aufklärung* is what provides some sort of liberal framework to help us respond to the growing pluralism of contemporary society. In *Kantian Courage*, for instance, Nicholas Tampio reminds us that the intention of the

Enlightenment, generally speaking, was to propose a solution to the brutal and murderous violence that devastated Europe during the wars of religion. Now for all the considerable differences between the Thirty Years War and current fundamentalism, religious militancy today equally poses an urgent problem that begs immediate attention (Tampio 2012, p. 7). Enlightenment considered as an ethos is precisely what “empowers us to construct theories to envision a way out of the looming religious wars of the twenty-first century” (p. 15). This is made possible by the kind of courage advocated by Kant in *WE*, which “demands that we reconceptualize political discourse to reflect the new religious diversity on the ground” (p. 29). In short, Kantian courage provides us with the kind of political and moral elasticity to face and address the particular problems of our historical context, much in the same way the European philosophers of the historical Enlightenment displayed the necessary open-mindedness to overcome the religious violence of their own epoch (p. 40).

Despite obvious philosophical differences, Samuel Fleischacker’s *What is Enlightenment?*, continues in a similar vein. He claims in his work that the “thinking for oneself” articulated in *WE* “simply ensures that all our views, including the ones on which we most profoundly differ, are accepted freely, and kept open to further discussion” (Fleischacker 2013, p. 30). He acknowledges the strong Rawlsian and Habermasian undertones behind this perspective, declaring that these schools of thought “take up the minimalist version of Kantian enlightenment, trying to find appropriate rules to foster a free and responsible public discussion among people with very different religious and philosophical doctrines” (p. 39). Proposing a periodization of enlightenment, he sustains that if for Plato the process involved an ascent towards a better way of leading one’s life, modern enlightenment came “to be used for what happens once one replaces a trust in religious leaders with a commitment to the science”. Kant’s essay, however, is distinctive “for the strong freedom of the press that it advocates (...), for its individualism, and for the fact that it identifies enlightenment with a kind of act, rather than a kind of theory” (p. 12).

At first sight, one of the most obvious points of discord between these two readings would be the apparent Foucauldian position of the former, which connects enlightenment to an attitude rather than an act. Yet by characterizing courage as tolerance before difference, or the ethos that allows us to “confront the singular problems of our day and then construct new solutions” (Tampio 2012, p. 31)¹², Tampio’s interpretation seems as minimalist – in the same Rawlsian sense – as Fleischacker’s. In both cases, the basic political imperative extracted from *WE* is to adjust political discourse in order to address diversity, religious or otherwise, so as to ensure civic harmony. This reading not only predicates social order upon the neutrality of the state, it also defends the universal recognition and accommodation of the entities that compose the community, each dissolved into equal groups contributing their own opinion to public debate. This may outline the basis of a liberal model of political integration, if not constitute an upfront apology of multiculturalism, but does it succeed in highlighting the *originality* of Kant’s answer to the

¹²See also p. 23.

question of the Enlightenment? Although we may discern in it a political program that calls for religious and cultural acceptance – such as is also advocated *at least* as cogently in John Locke or John Stuart Mill, among others –, it leaves little room to a practice of freedom that adopts the ephemeral as way of being. What is more, with its usual recourse to inherent dignity and inalienable human rights, this liberal view – whether conservative or (slightly) more inclined to the left – presupposes a recourse to naturalism that critical ontology precludes. Finally, it is somewhat difficult to see in what way courage is necessary to defend one of the most widespread, run-of-the-mill philosophical doctrine of the twenty-first century. One defended freedom of thought during the period of the Enlightenment at the peril of his life, and although similar risks are incurred elsewhere in the world, Western democracies simply do not pose the same threat. Disputing the ecclesiastical authorities of his time brought Giordano Bruno the death penalty; when academics challenge the establishment today, it brings them tenure. In what way is Kantian courage *still* relevant to us?

In her captivating book, *Kant and the Culture of Enlightenment*, Katerina Deligiorgi approaches *WE* from a different historical angle: instead of reading it on the background of the religious violence that scarred the Enlightenment, she proposes to examine it from the emerging cultural relativism that equally marked it. We know the movement did not remain indifferent to the spectacular discoveries of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which suddenly exposed European society to other customs, new religious practices and different sets of beliefs. Facing breaches within the ethical values that structured their own understanding of the world, authors such as Diderot and Rousseau took to uncover a normative ground of objectivity capable of resisting the growing relativism of the period. We have here the first attempts towards establishing a conception of reason “whose authority is not natural but established through discursive practice” (Deligiorgi 2005, p. 10). As we have seen earlier in this paper, Kant goes a step further, arguing that reason is not so much a faculty that allows us to test the validity of a norm, but the norm itself. In other words, it is not that a more acute exercise of reflexivity will cement with greater solidity the rules upon which society is edified; rather, the exercise of reflexivity itself constitutes the foundational principle. As such, “the strength of Kant’s proposal is that he acknowledges precisely this – namely, that to confront a situation where alternatives are possible and the right thing is neither obvious nor natural is a condition for the exercise of our freedom and not an impediment to it” (p. 156). Deligiorgi therefore makes a case for an “agonistic model of social interaction” where in debating the matter at hand, one is also simultaneously critically addressing the norms that ground the (potential) decision (pp. 90-91).

Despite the undeniable rigor of her argument, there is something in Deligiorgi’s treatment of Kantian enlightenment that also seems to overlook its novelty. To begin with, she shifts the emphasis of the practice of freedom from a subjective experience to a public exercise: “enlightenment amounts to a test of one’s capacity to acknowledge others as having an equal claim to intellectual independence. This is the deepest transformation that

the concept of enlightenment undergoes in Kant's interpretation, *for it no longer means the solitary struggle against error and superstition*, but rather the effort to think with others" (p. 58, my italics). Having done so, she subsequently moves away from the Baudelairian undertones of the modern ethos and intersects with the more pluralist – one is tempted to say Anglo-American – position defended by the aforementioned commentators, depicting enlightenment as a culture indeed, though one that describes "a sphere of social interaction that is not hierarchically structured in the manner of guardianship, but inclusive and egalitarian because what vouchsafes this sphere are the freedoms of participation and of communication" (p. 76). Enlightenment is once more reduced to a mere space of free speech based on the abstract equality of its members, thus overlooking the angst connected with one's *own* use of his understanding. Of course, there is no denying the public ramifications of Kant's call for emancipation. Autonomy is not exercised in a vacuum, but continually measured against the rationality of my peers I am consequently and simultaneously asked to recognize as free and equal. Nevertheless, amplifying the otherwise undeniable political dimension of the *Aufklärung* at the expense of its ethical ground runs the risk of confusing the enemy at hand, the true foe that beckons our courage in order to be defied and overcome.

To that effect, *WE* is unequivocally limpid – in its very first paragraph – as to the immediate threat of enlightenment: not institutional repression such as censorship, but the lack of resolution to use our own reason without direction from another (8:35). *Cowardice* is the cause of our self-incurred minority and the reason "so great a portion of mankind, after nature has long since discharged them from external direction, nevertheless remains under lifelong tutelage" (8:35). Now to impute servitude on pusillanimity is a trenchant if not obdurate verdict, and one is tempted here to remind Kant that other external factors can stand in the way of one's emancipation. This being said, what exactly does he understand by cowardice? It is none other than "*dishonorable despair*" (Anth., 7:256), he contends, an aversion to fear we already know to be of anxiety, anguish, horror and terror. The opposite of courage, then, is not merely a "lack of discipline", as if the veritable trial merely consisted in taming our natural inclinations through force of will (RGV, 6:57). It is, rather, dejection before freedom, to shudder and vacillate before the "irresistible constraints" of duty (MS, 6:405). If Kantian enlightenment is agonistic, then, it is because of an initial struggle – one might say institutive – against "the vices and the brood of dispositions opposing the law". These are the "monsters" we have to fight, illustrates Kant (6:405). As such, virtue does not speak of power against an unconcealed enemy, as the Stoics mistakenly thought (RGV, 6:57); it is what galvanizes our spirits in our confrontation with the holiness of the law and what strengthens the "resolution to bring ourselves ever nearer to conformity to that law according to this noble predisposition in us" (6:184n-185n). Still calibrating his position against the Stoics, Kant does concede that there is indeed courage in taking one's life, such as they display when they choose to free themselves "with peace of soul" from "the pressure of present or anticipated ills" (MS, 6:422). "But there should have been in this very courage, this strength of soul not to fear death and to know of

something that a human being can value even more highly than his life, a still stronger motive for him not to destroy himself” (6:422). This motive, Kant continues, is morality, the capacity for self-legislation or to break with empirical determinism and spark a new beginning. Greater than honor, greater even than life, is freedom. Courage consists in measuring oneself against its majesty, that is, of remaining faithful to its promise and not shying away from its demands.

Far from the nauseating pop-psychology that lures us into thinking excellence simply requires belief in oneself, courage is the resolution of mind that keeps us steady in the torment of our passage to majority. It will come as no surprise, then, that Kant weaves an intimate relation between courage and hope, both sparking our leap over the aforementioned ditch. We find at least three different examples of this connection. Firstly, the postulate of immortality presses us forward in our exertions to attain moral perfection, instead of forsaking our course when we realize that this goal is unattainable (RGV, 6:68-69). Secondly, piety may “crown” virtue “with the hope of the final success of all our good ends” (6:185). Granted, the latter is an ambiguous concept in Kant, at times containing the concept of an object which we represent to ourselves as “a cause supplementing our incapacity with respect to the final moral end” (6:183), elsewhere defined as belief in the supreme being’s ability to reconcile our virtue with our worthiness to be happy. In any case, it can minimally be taken as that which both helps us stand on our own feet and “opens up for us the path to a new conduct of life” (6:183-184). Finally, in a similar vein though different enough to warrant its own mention, Kant sustains that the historical representation of the Kingdom of Heaven may also be seen in this light, that is, “interpreted as a symbolic representation aimed merely at stimulating greater hope and courage and effort in achieving it” (6:134). Nature and history do contain for the philosopher elements that provide us, as a species, with support in our moral advances, but this is often achieved in absence of the individual or quite simply at his expense.¹³ If the story of Job reminds us of anything, it is that this is of very little consolation in the face of our afflictions, no matter how useful they may turn out to be for subsequent generations. Courage and hope, then, are what spur us forward in the adversity of our ethical exertions and prevent us from collapsing into despondency.

Let us use these last paragraphs to examine more specifically the causes behind such despair, so as to further accentuate the existential tones we are looking to bring out in Kant’s modernity. We know it comes from the practice of freedom as critical ontology, but why is this so distressing, in the end? One of the chief reasons can be attributed to solitude. It is striking that most, if not all of Kant’s texts we have quoted in this paper call for *severance*: *WE* from guardians, *CB* from the womb of nature and Providence, *Religion* from the vicarious effects of grace, and *Theodicy* from soothing illusions. We could of course add the *Groundwork*, which asks us to legislate our conduct by abstracting from the

¹³See MAM, 8:115: “For the individual, who in the use of his freedom is concerned only with himself, this whole change was a loss; for nature, whose purpose with man concerns the species, it was a gain.”

empirical factors that might distort the universality of the moral law, that is, from whatever precedes the subject, be it tradition, culture or revealed religion. Make no mistake: the enlightened individual in Kant takes his *first* steps alone, even if this can imply eventually walking towards a community of equals and social interaction, so to speak. Solitude, in this case, should not be conflated with Capitalism's mythical self-made man, deluded into thinking he is the sole author of his happiness or success. It echoes, rather, Zarathustra's loneliness, who exclaims as he returns to the mountains: "But one day solitude will make you weary, one day your pride will cringe and your courage will gnash its teeth. One day you will cry 'I am alone!'" (Nietzsche 2006, p. 47). There has been considerable work done as of late to highlight the role and place of the social in Kant's writings, not only within the *Aufklärung* text but also concerning radical evil, among other themes in his philosophy. Again, the intention here is neither to belittle his anthropological and political concerns nor the commentaries that investigate them. However, it seems irrefutable that constituting a Kingdom of ends, resisting self-deception, or moving from innocence to majority initially presupposes the subjective experience of freedom, i.e. reason that stirs the subject from his slumber and opens before him the path of autonomy. To let the voice of reason silence the tumult of experience, the call of instinct and the insinuations of the guardians... This is the sound of freedom, and it resonates of solitude before the unknown.

Severance from heteronomy, that is, emancipation from the external sources of authority that legislated in our stead, is thus very unsettling. There is something reassuring in being guided by someone else: not only does he set the itinerary, he can also be held imputable should we err along the way. Hence, to be called to freely engage upon our own path disturbs our peace and comfort. Herein lies a second cause of despair, one that leaves us so "discontented" that we begin longing for a "golden age" where "there is to be contentment with the mere satisfaction of natural needs, universal human equality and perpetual peace: in a word, unalloyed enjoyment of a carefree life, dreamt away idly, or trifled away in childish play" (MAM, 6:122). Freedom, the reader will recall, is the eye opener that interrupts innocence and casts the human being into the wide world. As a result, predicts Kant, "the wretchedness of his condition would often arouse in him the wish for a paradise, the creation of his imagination, where he could dream or while away his existence in quiet inactivity and permanent peace" (6:114-115). More than two centuries before *WE*, Étienne de la Boétie wrote that servitude was not so much attributable to the might of the tyrant as to our own free will. We *like* our chains and often prefer them to an independence that brings with it toils and tribulations. This was also Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor's formidable insight, more appears more perceptive than his prisoner – none other than Christ himself – when he asks:

«Or did you forget that a tranquil mind and even death is dearer to man than the free choice in the knowledge of good and evil? There is nothing more alluring to man than this freedom of conscience, but there is nothing more tormenting, either. (...) Did it never occur to you that he would at last reject and call in question even your image and your truth, if he

were weighed down by so fearful a burden as freedom of choice?» (Dostoyevsky 1998, pp. 298-299).

Kant had foreseen this outcome, and suspected that human reason, in its weariness, would rather rest on the soft “pillow” of empirical satisfaction and in “a dream of sweet illusions (which allow it to embrace a cloud instead of Juno)”, than commit “to virtue in her true form” (GMS, 4:426). Tampio is thus right to see self-love as the enemy of courage (Tampio 2012, p. 38), though only to the extent it is equivalent to the selfish preference for one’s comfort over the exerting demands of freedom.¹⁴

We may identify a third and final reason behind despair in Kant’s writings: radical evil. This is a particularly intricate problem for the philosopher and one that we have examined at length elsewhere (2011). The underlying claim is that there is in “even the best” of us a natural propensity to evil (6:30,32). Kant’s verdict there stands in stark contrast with his defence of autonomy whereby the subject can abstract from empirical determinism and choose his own principle of action. In the latter context, evil seems to be nothing more than the mere subordination of duty to inclination, a sporadic mistake the rational subject can keep from repeating. Kant’s contention however is that this lapse in judgment is not as random as it seems, that it presupposes an initial accord with egoism through which the subject constitutively favours his personal desires to the detriment of duty. In other words, to prefer my needs to the law is itself conditional upon the operation by which I belittle the impact of the former, and relativize the importance of the latter, that is, upon dishonesty. As such, though the resulting action may appear innocuous, the hypocrisy behind it is utterly deleterious, slowly turning into a habit that contaminates my whole being. Propensity, in short, is a predisposition for self-deception, not only an inherent vulnerability to temptation (weakness), but a penchant for seduction whereby we convince ourselves of the virtue of vice. In very evocative terms, Kant thus depicts radical evil as “an invisible enemy, one who hides behind reason” and “secretly undermines the disposition with soul-corrupting principles” (6:57). In sum, evil is *radical* because it gnaws the very root (‘radix’, in Latin) of our disposition; it is *universal* because it corrupts even the best of us; and it is *inextirpable* because its very ruse is to outplay the tool – free will or *Willkür* – that could otherwise be used to deracinate it. Framed in these terms, wickedness drives a wedge between what is and what should be. In Kant’s words, “the distance between the goodness which we ought to effect in ourselves and the evil from which we start” seems “infinite” (6:66), and the subject begins to suspect he may “never be able to become quite fully what he has in mind” (6:68n). Dispirited before an “immeasurable gap” he cannot bridge by his own means, he is left hoping for an external succor bestowed according to his efforts to remain steadfast in his ethical strivings. Kant’s account of radical evil is not always coherent and leaves open a number of questions that deserve further scrutiny, in particular the issue of divine grace. It is remarkable, however, for its

¹⁴ As suggests a footnote in *Religion*: “Those for whom the merely formal determining ground as such (lawfulness) will not suffice as the determining ground in the concept of duty, nonetheless admit that this ground is not to be found in self-love directed to one’s own comfort” (6:3n).

dramatic portrayal of human finitude, highlighting the potential despair that threatens us all, and the necessary courage to not succumb to it.

Faced with solitude, distress and his “permanent deficiency”, one can understand why the human being might be tempted to alleviate the burden that comes with the practice of freedom, to falter in his resolution and surrender to laziness and cowardice. For Kant, this capitulation has quite often taken the form of superstition, that is, the illusory belief of fooling ourselves into thinking we can inflect God’s will or the course of Providence through rites and rituals, thus blurring the lucid sobriety of reason with misleading sophistry, such as is displayed in the rhetoric of Job’s companions. Once more, Kant’s treatment of religious themes is somewhat narrow, yet the underlying intuition that we should use such stratagems to remain under self-tutelage and postpone majority is most pertinent. It is especially useful in understanding the following definition of *Aufklärung*, which has puzzled a number of commentators: “Liberation from superstition is called enlightenment. (...) The blindness that superstition creates in a person, which indeed it even seems to demand as an obligation, reveals especially well the person’s need to be guided by others, and hence his state of passive reason” (KU, 5:294). To ward against such blindness and keep our eyes open as we come of age, no matter how desolate this itinerary appears before us, is one of the key imperatives of Kant’s ethics. Indeed, “moral cognition of oneself, which seeks to penetrate into the depths (the abyss) of one’s heart which are quite difficult to fathom, is the beginning of all human wisdom”, he declares (MS, 6:441).¹⁵

In other words, the officer, the tax collector and the cleric can only exercise decisive influence over our conduct to the extent we have internalized their command as the rightful authority, to the detriment of the voice of our own reason we alienate in the process. Introspection is therefore instrumental in determining not only the integrity of the legislation, but its origin as well. Its purpose is to continually validate the universality of the law and authenticate its author. As such, it is intimately connected to the process of enlightenment: “*Thinking for oneself* means seeking the supreme touchstone of truth in oneself (i.e. in one’s own reason); and the maxim of always thinking for oneself is *enlightenment*” (WDO, 8: 146). When we take the time to measure the abyss that opens before the practice of freedom, and the temptation that follows to turn our back on it, we come to realize that *Aufklärung* does preclude the “solitary struggle against superstition” as Deligiorgi and Foucault both hold; it is rather its condition, as Kant so acutely observes. The culture of enlightenment may very well describe a sphere of social interaction, and perhaps this space is more inclusive and egalitarian than the Athenian agora, the early Christian ecclesiae, or even the early indigenous communities so beautifully described by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Tristes tropiques*, despite the complete absence of embodied, institutional power that characterized them. Still, it seems that the modernity of Kantian

¹⁵And as if to further tie introspection and enlightenment together, Kant explicitly associates wisdom with moral strength and courage:MS, 6:405.

enlightenment lies elsewhere, that it is found, rather, in the particular attitude of the *emancipated* subject, severed from any form of external direction. *Aufklärung* is an *Ausgang* for Kant because the human being begins to walk *outside* the comfort of the beaten path, to legislate *outside* any reference to natural harmony, and if God may still exist in such a world, then the human being is sure to exist *outside* of him. Freedom is an ethos only the brave can embrace; it is a commitment only the courageous can make.

CONCLUSION

This paper followed Foucault in defining enlightenment as an attitude, a modern ethos that adopts the ephemeral as way of being. Contrary to the French philosopher, however, we have argued that this permanent critique of oneself and of the world creates a void that leaves us trembling before nothingness. If enlightenment requires courage, it is precisely to urge us to persist in our moral exertions, to remain steadfast in the practice of freedom and not retreat into immaturity from the fright it may incur, as did Job, righteous despite his afflictions and the apparent groundlessness of his existence. Courage, it is worth repeating, is resolve before the abyss of freedom. Notwithstanding their respective and indisputable strengths, recent commentaries have almost completely overshadowed this deep existential element of Kantian enlightenment, often reducing it to a liberal space of discursive practice that allows for equal participation in the free exchange of ideas, useful notably to address the challenges posed by the growing diversity of Western societies. This is to neglect the despair behind the practice of freedom, an experience of solitude that leaves us weary and dejected before the difficulty of its demands. Enlightenment is a daunting undertaking indeed, for which all have the means, though few have the courage.

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