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A Kantian perspective on moral duty concerning far distant generations: from noumenal freedom to phenomenal law

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ENG **Abstract:** This article carries out a Kantian reading of our possible duties towards future generations. The moral value of this discussion, which at present cannot be dissociated from the phenomenon of climate change, will be analysed under three headings: a comparison with the aesthetically sublime feeling of *Enthusiasmus*, an assessment of the possibility of establishing moral duties towards an indeterminate object, and a study of the role of culture in moral progress. The possibility of such moral guidance promoting action will then be considered: the obstacles in this respect show the necessity of shifting the discussion of duties towards future generations from the moral to the legal sphere, where Kantian theory shows great potential. This wide-ranging view finally aims to highlight the role of interrelation and co-determination in Kantian dynamic thought.
Keywords: Kant, moral duty, sublime, intergenerational justice, legal theory.

Una perspectiva kantiana sobre el deber moral con respecto a generactiones futuras: de la libertad nouménica a la ley fenoménica

ES **Resumen:** En este artículo se llevará a cabo una lectura kantiana acerca de nuestros posibles deberes con respecto a generaciones futuras. Se analizará el valor moral de esta discusión, que en la actualidad no puede disociarse del fenómeno del cambio climático, en un análisis sostenido en tres apartados: una comparación con el sentimiento estéticamente sublime del entusiasmo, una valoración sobre la posibilidad de establecer deberes morales respecto de un objeto indeterminado, y un estudio del papel de la cultura en el progreso moral. A continuación se estimará la posibilidad de que dicha guía moral promueva la acción: los obstáculos en este respecto evidencian lo necesario de trasladar la discusión sobre los quehaceres con respecto a generaciones futuras del ámbito moral al legal, donde la teoría kantiana muestra un gran potencial. Esta mirada amplia aspira, por último, a destacar el papel de la interrelación y la co-determinación en el dinámico pensamiento kantiano.
Palabras clave: Kant**,** deber moral, sublime, justicia intergeneracional, teoría legal.

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Introduction

Our duties towards future generations constitute one of the most contentious areas of debate in contemporary ethics. The debate around this issue has been prompted by climate change and the question of what kind of world will be left to those who will succeed us: worried that our efforts towards mitigating environmental damage will be sabotaged by competing short-term interests, advocates for longtermism argue that we should set our moral scope not on the next generation, or even the one after that, but in a future so far distant that we cannot fathom what the needs or priorities of its inhabitants will be. The monstrous distance in time invoked by longtermism begs an obvious objection: what should, or rather, can we do for generations so far removed from us? Thus, the main spanner in the works of longtermism concerns representation, or its impossibility: if we cannot constitute a picture of our moral relata, what is the point of any philosophical reflection on the subject? Wouldn't we be engaging in purely unproductive speculation?

This article sets out to offer some reflections on the matter from a Kantian perspective. Section §1 discusses the problem of representation (or lack thereof): on the basis of the Kantian description of *Enthusiasmus*, it will be proposed that moral duties towards these generations constitute the kind of experience of the sublime that results from the advancement of culture. Therefore, although it does not lead us to any particular representation, it would evidence a moral advancement promoted by culture which, although it does not provide concrete prescriptions for these generations, it reveals a moral substratum and the capacity of culture to unravel it. Furthermore, this regard for all of humanity independently of races and borders fits the Kantian principle of cosmopolitism.

But even if we know we must do something, how can this long-term duty lead to action? Section §2 deals with this matter by arguing that it is problematic to place the discussion about our duty towards distant generations on the level of moral individualism. Section §3 discusses an alternative: as detailed in Pinheiro Walla's exhaustive research on the response to the challenges of climate change from a Kantian perspective, Kant's legal theory offers valid and interesting alternatives to the shortcomings of the purely ethical appeal[1]. It will be concluded that the tools offered by Kantian philosophy to understand and act upon the challenges brought by climate change provide a clear picture of the role co-determination and interrelation play in Kantian thought.

1. Moral duties towards far distant generations and the sublime

The discussion about longtermism and its possibilities constitutes a lively and interesting debate, given its close relationship to the pressing issue of climate change and its consequences. However, its very premise leads to its main rebuttal: can we truly speak of a moral duty towards non-existing subjects, even we cannot make a representation of them and their needs? In this section, it will be argued that there are good reasons to consider that seriously contemplating our moral duties towards future generations might be considered an experience of the Kantian sublime. To do so, this section will provide a detailed account of an analogous experience of the sublime: that of *Enthusiasmus*, the feeling shared by spectators of the French Revolution. This analysis will display the elements that constitute an experience of the sublime, with emphasis on the role of reason and the lack of a presentation constructed by imagination (§1.1), the role of culture in bringing about this experience of the sublime (§1.2), and the moral component of disregarding ethic, familiar, or cultural ties in those towards which we have a moral duty (§1.3). If the argumentation is successful, contemplating our duties to future generations would demand an effort of reason that surpasses the limits of imagination, corroborating Kant's theses on the practical use of reason, and suggesting that the debate about our duties towards far distant generations might even act a sign of moral development. This would also cast a light on the role culture plays in moral advancement and raise relevant implications of the Kantian notion of cosmopolitan right.

1.1. The sublime, the aesthetically sublime, and *Enthusiasmus*

When thinking about what constitutes a sublime experience, the emblematic image evokes the awe one feels when contemplating the vastness of Nature, the infinite distances of the starry night sky. However, according to Kant, the moral law within us is just as vast: can experiences of the sublime arise from contemplating our moral duties? To answer this question, a significant source of material can be found in the analysis that Kant provides about the feeling of *Enthusiasmus*. In this peculiar affection, the spectators of the French Revolution experience an enthusiasm that, according to Kant, reveals a moral disposition which proves mankind's innate moral character, constituting a sign of the advancement of society towards the good. Thus, while there is a reaction to a concrete event (the French Revolution), what propitiates the enthusiasm itself is a non-representable relata, the fruit of reason pushing the imagination beyond its limits. As described by Kant:

> Now if we add to a concept a representation of the imagination that belongs to its presentation, but which by itself stimulates so much thinking that it can never be grasped in a determinate concept, hence which aesthetically enlarges the concept itself in an unbounded way, then in this case the imagination is creative, and sets the faculty of intellectual ideas (reason) into motion, that is, at the

[1] Kant's legal theory, while central, is far from the sole resource for uncovering valuable rules and perspectives on this issue. Muñoz Sánchez (2017) offers a compelling exploration of politics through the Kantian notion of judgment, while Gómez Franco extends this trajectory by delving into the potential of Kantian imagination. Together, these contributions weave a broader framework, hinting at the wickers available for constructing Kantian approaches to political thought.

> instigation of a representation it gives more to think about than can be grasped and made distinct in it (although it does, to be sure, belong to the concept of the object). (KU, AA 05: 315)

It should be noted that the presentations that elicit the experience of the sublime are not restricted no physical objects, as it can include "cognitive achievements" (Menningaus et al., 2019). In the peculiar case of *Enthusiasmus*, the cognitive achievement is the realization of freedom as self-determined will, whose self-provided norms constitute the ground for the rational causality of the moral law (Korsgaard, 1996). According to Kant, freedom cannot provide a concrete presentation, for then we would be speaking of a natural determination that could be accounted for by theoretical reason, but which would impede the spontaneity of the will. It is thus understood that freedom, "independent of the law of causality, in the strictest, that is, transcendental sense" (*Cfr*. KpV, AA 05: 29), can only be presented by analogy, or acting as a *schema* between the phenomenal and noumenal *homo*. When *Enthusiasmus* is elicited by the events of the French Revolution, reason goes beyond this initial stage towards the idea of freedom, and imagination fails to construct a representation. Kant makes the following observation on the irrepresentable component of the sublime and the stretching of the imagination it involves:

> There need be no anxiety that the feeling of the sublime will lose anything through such an abstract presentation, which becomes entirely negative in regard to the sensible; for the imagination, although it certainly finds nothing beyond the sensible to which it can attach itself, nevertheless feels itself to be unbounded precisely because of this elimination of the limits of sensibility; and that separation is thus a presentation of the infinite, which for that very reason can never be anything other than a merely negative presentation, which nevertheless expands the soul. (KU, AA 05: 274)

Kant thus labels *Enthusiasmus* as aesthetically sublime, since it aims at an ideal that cannot be reduced to a manifold of intuitions subsumable under a concept: it constitutes a form of schematism in which the imagination is "disembodied" in an effort to conceive an image that presents the unpresentable. This is why, according to Kant, historical signs, given the ideal nature of that to which they point, cannot occur in the pure hypotypicality of theoretical reason, where formal intuition is subsumed under the concept; they occur, alternatively, in analogical presentations in which, given that intuition cannot present anything as an object, we access the unknown from something similar. The demonstrative sign would here act as a *schema*, a means by which concepts can be applied to formal intuitions. It is this notion of the symbol as *schema* that Lyotard contests in his rejection of Kant's historical aspirations, which the former dismisses as an illusion born of the appearance that signs constitute examples or *schemas* (2009, p. 98).

Getting down to the details, in *The Conflict of the Faculties* Kant argues that the reception of the French Revolution by its spectators demonstrates a common moral character of the whole human race that allows to hope for progress towards the good (SF, AA 07: 85-87): the enthusiasm with which the Revolution is received reveals a moral disposition among the spectators. This *Enthusiasmus* is defined by Kant as constituted by an affective involvement in the good which, since it involves this overstepping of the capacities of the imagination, is an aesthetically sublime emotion (KU, AA 05: 271-272). The fact that it is labelled as an *Affekt* (Anth, AA 07: 270) means that it is not entirely or truly sublime, for it constitutes a "state of mind [which] *appears* to be sublime", but that does not merit "any delight on the part of reason" (KU, AA 05: 272; emphasis mine), even though "reason still always handles the reins" (Anth, AA 07: 254). Reason retains its capacity to rule over the inclinations so that the concrete object to which the enthusiastic *Affekt* is directed —the idea of the good— does not induce a disordering of desires that leads to the dangerous passion of fanaticism (*Schwärmerei*). Therefore, *Enthusiasmus* is not a mere intensification of sensibility; the presence of an idea beyond all possible presentation is required, which in turn necessitates the intervention of reason.[2] *Enthusiasmus* thus requires the participation and governance of reason, to which it owes its "reflective and strategic" component (Wehofsits, 2016). If reason were to be overthrown by the sheer intensity of emotion, the experience of the sublime would consequently be suspended, for it cannot begin and end on a pure emotional impulse: according to Kant, no agitation of the mind can be called sublime "if they do not leave behind a disposition of mind that, even if only indirectly, has influence on the consciousness of its strength and resolution in regard to that which brings with it intellectual purposiveness" (KU, AA 05: 273).

Clewis addresses this apparently contradictory distinction between aesthetically sublime and truly sublime by analysing the different implications of both denominations. Firstly, both *aesthetically* sublime and *truly* sublime experiences involve the aforementioned "stretching of the mental powers through ideas of reason in conjunction with imagination" (Clewis 2018, p. 190). Secondly, and more importantly in establishing a difference between the two, "sublime" can also point to an elevation over mere sensibility, pointing at the Kantian notion of reason as apart from nature, and capable of raising above it. Due to *Enthusiasmus* being an *Affekt*, it involves a crucial component of sensibility that makes it incompatible with being truly sublime. This ties the concept to another key Kantian distinction, which refers to the difference between interest and disinterestedness: whereas aesthetic feelings, such as the contemplation of beauty, are disinterested —the subject does not feel the need to act upon it—, *Enthusiasmus* has a motivational component. But as observed by Clewis, Kant also points out that *Enthusiasmus* is disinterested.[3] How can it show this feature while having

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2 Hence Lyotard's observation: "emotional tension is necessary but not sufficient for the sublime" (1991, p. 155)

3 "It is simply the mode of thinking of the spectators which reveals itself publicly in this game of great revolutions, and manifests such a universal yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other, even at the risk that this partiality could become very disadvantageous for them if discovered" (SF, AA 07: 85).

motivational power? Lewis solves this problem by underlining that the spectators who feel *Enthusiasmus* are disinterested in some senses, since "they are not actively contributing [but] they are not impartial (in this sense they *are* 'interested'), for they want republicans to win". (Clewis 2018, p. 203). Finally, a key observation is made by Clewis when underlining the futural nature of this modality of the feeling, for "the spectators are not enthusiastic about the past as such, but about emerging possibilities—reflection on which the imagination, the faculty of possibility, plays an active role. Like hope, enthusiasm is oriented towards the future" (*Id.*, p. 204).

Regarding its historical implications, Kant states that *Enthusiasmus* constitutes a historical sign ("*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*"; SF, AA 07: 85) which points to a community whose members have advanced far enough in a culture —the common project that, as expressed in KU, AA 05: 265, makes us receptive to ideas— to cultivate and communicate an idea of freedom in accordance with the principles of pure practical legislation (Wood, 1970; Jiménez, 2018). According to Kant, *Enthusiasmus* as an event (*Begebenheit*), constitutes a sign that shows that it is possible to reconstruct history according to an end ordered *a priori* by a germinal reason that orients us towards "the ultimate purpose of humanity, the morally good" (KU, AA 05: 299) and makes human beings intervening agents in effective reality. The conditions of possibility of this sign would validate, in Kant's account, the meta-narrative of moral progress, a belief that, as observed by Kleingeld (2001), operates both as a regulative idea and a practical postulate.

1.2. Realizing our moral duty towards distant generations as a product of culture

As stated by Kant, in order to conceive the idea towards which the emotion is directed in the experience of *Enthusiasmus*, the intervention of culture is necessary: it articulates the irrepresentable horizon that imagination fails to reach, but towards which reason aims. This should not lead us to think that, in itself, the sublime is a product of culture: the sublime is rooted in human nature and our predisposition to being affected by practical ideas. In addition to its role in the constitution of ideas, culture is also defined as a way to "[attune] the spirit to ideas" (KU, AA 05: 326); however, whereas a culture of skill is the foremost condition for an aptitude to promote purposes—enthusiastic *pathos* in its episodic unleashing retains an aesthetic validity: it is an energetic sign, a tensor of desire (Lyotard 2009, pp. 81-82) that involves action—, according to Kant a culture of discipline is necessary to undertake its mandates.[4] "Culture" is thus understood as "the deliberate approach to reason, the concern for it, in its positive character, along with awareness of its limitations" (Rotenstreich 1989, p. 303). The fact that receptivity to ideas such as freedom originates from a society of discipline, duty, and limits, must not surprise the Kant reader for, as Dierksmeier points out:

> With Kant came into use a conception of freedom that establishes the necessary limits to liberty not as negations of freedom but as its manifestations. The rationale behind this notion is that limitless freedom is a *contradictio in adiecto*. Freedom, in order to be real, has to have a *gestalt*; it cannot be exempt from any structure, which is why Kant says freedom, not to be heteronomously orientated, must be autonomous. Freedom has to be a law unto itself. The fact that freedom has to be given some form and contour is, therefore, no reduction of liberty. The crucial question is not whether but rather what kind of limits personal liberty should have (2006, p. 81).

The fact that numerous proposals regarding future generations and the sensible use of Earth's resources revolve around concepts such as "degrowth" and the planet's environmental limits, that we talk about our "duties" or "obligations" towards future generations, all point to an element of responsibility that understands, just like Kant does, that limitless freedom is a contradictory monster that devours itself. For us to be free is to make good use of that freedom, so future generations might also enjoy it without the environmental, economic, or political constraints that come from extreme weather and its consequences. According to Kantian parameters, culture thus makes us receptive to this notion of freedom and to the idea that we have certain duties towards future generations. We shall go back to this notion of freedom as a result of interdependent constraints on a later section.

It should also be noted that culture allowing us to acknowledge new ideas with an involvement in freedom, morality, or practical reason, does not mean that the moral component in mankind progresses in itself. In Kantian thought, as underlined by Kleingeld (1999), the universal validity of moral principles involves that reason cannot progress, but those predispositions for its use certainly can: in the case at hand, culture has advanced sufficiently so that the moral endeavour is not circumscribed to existing persons but includes all future generations, involving a use of reason that was not previously acknowledged, and a realization of the possibility of moral progress by going beyond the margins of mere actuality to aim for a state of welfare that includes all those who are yet to come. This interpellation of morality is what makes us susceptible to our duty towards future generations, regardless of whether they are linked to us in any familiar, social, cultural, or traditional terms, which takes us to the next point.

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4 "This other condition could be called the culture of discipline [Zucht (Disziplin)]. It is negative and consists in the liberation of the will from the despotism of the desires, a despotism that rivets us to certain natural things and renders us unable to do our own selecting; we allow ourselves to be fettered by the impulses that nature gave us only as guides so that we would not neglect or even injure our animal characteristics, whereas in fact we are free enough to tighten or to slacken, to lengthen or to shorten them, as the purposes of reason require". (KU, AA 05: 432)

1.3. Irrepresentability and morality

The literature regarding our duties towards future generations coincides in its necessarily indeterminate nature (Weiss 1990; Slaughter 1994; Johnson 2003; Herstein 2008; Thompson 2010; Huda 2019). The moral challenge stem from epistemic one: as stated by Tarsney (2023), our forecasting abilities are not capable of shaping the face of the world future generations will inhabit, which means that any proposal regarding our duties and obligations towards them must first justify not only the appropriateness of its measures, but its very necessity. This indetermination, according to some authors, is not absolute: we might not know what to do, but we do know what should be not done, and the harm we are causing (Barry 1989), and we can make reasonable assumptions and derive reasonable implications from them by focusing on those future generations that will be affected in a significant manner by our actions (Reichenbach 1992, pp. 215-216). Pasek (1992) suggests that we should aim towards principles rather than obligations, since specific obligations require a defined object, but principles only answer to practical reason, while D'Amato's argument for cultivating a sense of obligation that goes beyond our calculations regarding how it will benefit present or future persons (1990, p. 198).

Despite having these scanty grasps, what we ignore is enough for authors such as Hyde (2023) to reject the mere possibility of longtermism as a serious ethical discussion: in his scathing criticism of MacAskill's "What we owe the future", the author states that "the future is simply too large to think about in any detail. [...] The idea that we can even be morally concerned about what is a million years away, yet again obliged to do something about it, is utter folly" (2023, p. 149). Among other sources, he bases this conclusion in two Kantian arguments: that the "formula of humanity" expressed in the *Grundlegung*[5] "[refers] to conscious persons with moral autonomy who are, crucially, alive" (2023, p. 132) and that Kant states that "ought implies can" (KrV, 548), thus leaving longtermism out of moral and ethical consideration. But Kantian sources can also add some nuance to Hyde's remarks, and even refute some of his points.

Hyde is quite right in his warning of grounding moral duties towards future generations in the formula of humanity... if said humanity is exclusively understood on the phenomenal level: in that case, only those who are alive should be taken into consideration. However, the situation changes if humanity is understood at the noumenal level of moral agency, as "humanity as an end in itself". Flikschuh provides a solid analysis on this matter: firstly, she criticises Niesen's (2005) bifurcation between the "rights of human beings" (*das Recht der Menschen*) and the "Right of humanity" (*das Recht der Menschheit*), arguing that it seems more plausible to derive the former from the latter since

> the innate right to freedom is an *a priori* moral right which, as such, cannot pertain to our phenomenal nature as individual members of the human race. Indeed, except colloquially, Kant never speaks of persons as having rights "naturally", i.e. in virtue of our sensibly given nature. He typically speaks of the moral concept of Right. Moral concepts differ from empirical concepts in lacking all reference to sensible intuition. In contrast to empirical concepts, the content of moral concepts is non-sensible, or intelligible. (Flikschuh 2009, p. 437)

In a similar note, Eterović argues towards going beyond a presentist reading of the formula of humanity by promoting the development of "our dispositions as parts of a wider community that embraces all human beings not just in this present moment but also through the history of humankind" (2021, 330), which according to him means that we have "obligations to further and promote moral progress" (*Id*., p. 331). The conceptualization for "humanity" in the "formula of humanity" thus depends on the level of its inferences, whether noumenal or phenomenal.

Moreover, Sánchez Madrid argues for the idea of a Kantian defense of inter-generational justice not from the formula of humanity, but from his comments on progress and hope found in *Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis*; particularly from a paragraph that, due to its depth will be quoted in its entirety:

> Although in the usual order of things it is not in the nature of the human being to relinquish his power by choice' it is still not impossible in pressing circumstances. Thus it can be considered an expression not unbefitting the moral wishes and hopes of people (once aware of their inability) to expect the circumstances required for these from providence, which will provide an outcome for the end of humanity as a whole species, to reach its final destination by the free use of its powers as far as they extend, to which end the ends of human beings, considered separately, are directly opposed. For, the very opposition of inclinations to one another, from which evil arises, furnishes reason a free play to subjugate them all and, in place of evil, which destroys itself, to establish the rule of good, which, once it exists, continues to maintain itself of its own accord (TP, AA 08: 312)

References to the limited role of the providence, the free use of [humanity's] forces, and the connection between reason and the rule of good, leads Sánchez Madrid to argue for a Kantian shift of the concept of the highest Good from a theological framework to a political one. In addition to this, our collective and unavoidable tendency towards representing future generations allows for considering "the intergenerational character of imagination, which anticipates [their] material and symbolic needs" (2023, p. 18). From this premise, Sánchez Madrid claims that the "Kantian defense for the conceptual right to hope [involves] the

5 "Now I say that the human being and in general every rational being exists as an end in itself, not merely as a means to be used by this or that will at its discretion; instead he must in all his actions, whether directed to himself or also to other rational beings, always be regarded at the same time as an end" (GMS, AA 04: 428).

anticipation of an inter-generational temporality" (2023, p.22) which involves a responsible anticipation of the consequences of our actions.

To further rebate Hyde's position on the idea that "ought implies can", it could be argued that disregarding a moral sign due to our incapability to extract concrete solutions from it incurs in the same confusion between the noumenal level of freedom and the phenomenal level of the specific actions that should be undertaken. As claimed in the previous section, an experience of the sublime might arise from an event that points at an irrepresentable freedom. The events of the French Revolution and the following *Enthusiasmus* state no specific "ought", but they reveal and open a moral space in which freedom is understood as a way of intervening in the world and in history, neither of which conclude at the present generation. Realizing that we have moral duties towards future generations opens up an image of the future not as the mere succession of causal events, but as a space to be influenced by our current actions.

However, considering our moral duties towards unborn persons is far from a novel concept: concepts such as "tradition", "lineage", "family reputation", and "nation" involve some concern about how our present actions might affect those that shall come after us. But duty towards future generations has the potential, if thinking far enough into the future, of moving beyond those future generations with whom we share any kinds of bonds, since the further we look into the future, the weaker our connection with the individuals who inhabit it (Thompson 2010, p. 20). This shift means assuming conditional rights to their fullest extent, for, as observed by Bandman, by attributing them to future generations we recognize "that rights are not confined to those who are near and dear to us in space and time" (1982, p. 101); or, as it can be added, near and dear to us due to their involvement in structures aimed at preserving certain characteristics. The desire to perpetuate certain characteristics vanishes in the moral duty towards *all* future generations, highlighting the autonomy of pure practical reason:

> *Autonomy* of the will is the sole principle of all moral laws and of duties in keeping with them [...]. That is to say, the sole principle of morality consists in independence from all matter of the law (*namely, from a desired object*)[6] and at the same time in the determination of choice through the mere form of giving universal law that a maxim must be capable of. That *independence*, however, is freedom in the *negative* sense, whereas this *lawgiving of its own* on the part of pure and, as such, practical reason is freedom in the *positive* sense. (KpV, AA 05: 33)

If we envision future generations as linked to us by culture, race, nationhood, or even family bonds, we can represent certain aspects of them: those characteristics serve as a "ground rod" to avoid facing the negative emotions involved in the experience of the sublime, for no matter how much reason pulls at imagination, when the vertigo and awe are too much to handle, the latter can always reject its pull by returning to the safe sphere of the familiar. In the case of nationhood, one can think that no matter how much time passes, future generations will continue to identify in a certain manner and participate in certain traditions. Thus, imagination is never threatened to leave the comfortable realm of the known experience.

Thinking of future generations with no social or cultural attachment towards them also fits Kant's project for a universal cosmopolitan condition,[7] which can be understood as "the only way to speak of a moral culture" (González 2010, p. 299). Kant's idea of cosmopolitan right (*ius cosmopoliticum*), understood as the result of a worldwide union towards universal laws,[8] is guided by the same practical reason that grounds duty. With the Kantian idea of cosmopolitism in mind, it can be argued that duty towards all future generations has a stronger moral component than considering obligations towards "future generations *related to me*",[9] as in the concepts of nation or race, for it meets the Kantian commitment towards the primacy of practical reason, the idea of each person as an end-in-themself, and the highest good as the ideal of freedom (Zammito 1992, p. 307). Furthermore, by conceiving future generations as transmitters of a culture, a race, or a tradition, they are also expected to preserve those characteristics: therefore, they are considered to be the elements through which something more important is conveyed, which is what must be preserved. The future generations with whom I am related are thus understood as the means for the preservation of a series of elements, an idea that is in direct contradiction with the Kantian paradigm of a kingdom of ends. Hoping for future generations to carry out the same characteristics as I do can also have an even more self-centered meaning: the egotistical aspiration to save a part of oneself through others, which brings us back to the instrumental use of those future generations.

This does not mean that disregarding the characteristics of far distant generations means that one actively *wants* certain features, or all features, to disappear. Cosmopolitism does not mean sociocultural erasure or flattening under a monoculture. On this topic, Arcos Ramírez (2004) makes an important observation by considering cosmopolitism in the light of Kant's patriotism, arguing that with this proposal, Kant is not advocating for an exclusively universal love that *only* allows for bonding with abstract humans devoid of

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6 Emphasis mine.

7 "Although this state body for now stands before us only in the form of a very rough project, nevertheless already a feeling begins to stir in all members, each of which has an interest in the preservation of the whole; and this gives hope that after many transforming revolutions, in the end that which nature has as its aim will finally come about—a universal cosmopolitan condition, as the womb in which all original predispositions of the human species will be developed" (IaG, AA 08: 28).

8 "This right, since it has to do with the possible union of all nations with a view to certain universal laws for the possible commerce, can be called cosmopolitan right" (MS, AA 06: 353).

9 As Kant states, "the direct opposite of the principle of morality is the principle of one's own happiness made the determining ground of the will" (KpV, AA 05: 35).

all factual characteristics. Arcos Ramírez argues that Kant is not a naïve universalist who believes morality reaches the peak of human potential when we become desensitized to our fellow man or woman. Feeling and thinking about future generations no matter their characteristics is not contradictory with feeling and thinking about the wellbeing of those close or related to us: it is only contradictory if we believe that, in carrying on a certain set of characteristics with which I identify, those generations bearing those features are more worthy of rights and consideration than those that do not. Neither is contradictory with imagining future generations not as a single homogenized culture, but as a variety of cultures and social groups whose specific content we cannot imagine.

2. We know, but will we do? The motivational force of duty

The fact that the philosophical community is in the midst of looking for answers regarding how to make the lives of future generations better —or, at the very least, not worse— supports Kant's point that, contrary to the experience of aesthetic judgement, which elicits restful contemplation, the mind feels agitated and prone to action when experiencing the aesthetically sublime. This point, related to the motivational capacity of moral duties and the feelings that accompany them, has led to analyses on duties towards future generations from a perspective centred on individuals, their motivations and emotions. This section will discuss some of these perspectives, in order to help clarify a few relevant issues, before outlining the reasons why it is appropriate to approach the response to this moral challenge from another section of the Kantian corpus.

In his research on our duties and responsibilities towards future generations, Huda (2019) starts from two premises: firstly, the difference established by Birnbacher (2009) between moral emotions —such as love of humanity— and immediate emotions —such as group solidarity—. Secondly, the thesis by Care (1982), which states that the nonparticularity of future generations does not have the capacity to interest existing generations, whereas we can foster feelings such as solidarity and loyalty to those generations that we can "put a face on". Huda argues that rationalistic motives, which he identifies at least to some extent with Kantian thought —he refers to the categorical imperative as an example of such—, as too abstract, or too strong to implement, which makes him move towards a proposal that deals with what he calls the motivation problem by including direct motivations towards effectively existing people. Care's point is that, although the call of duty towards a nonparticular humanity might rank higher in Kant's scale of moral righteousness, it lacks the motivational power to elicit action.

Following these premises, Huda's criticism of rationalistic motives is grounded on their lack of capacity for encouraging action: while he does not make any judgment about the moral validity of rationalistic motives, when addressing an example laid out by Partridge (1980) —Russian peasants refusing to eat grain reserved for future generations during the 1921 famine and the Siege of Leningrad—, he finds them as rare and difficult to be used as the basis for our responsibility towards future generations. Huda's thesis that rationalistic motives towards future generations do not have the sufficient motivational force, and that emotions play a way larger part in this, has been convincingly supported by the work of Díaz (2023), who concludes from his experimental study that moral emotions not only co-occur in moral actions, but that they have a far greater motivational force than moral beliefs, to the point that the latter have very little motivational force, especially when the stakes are high. In addition to this support, Huda's thesis can be backed by another source, although probably an unexpected one: Kant himself. In §28 of *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant coincides with Birnbacher and Care in their assessment of love towards all of humanity having little motivational force:

> Now the benevolence present in love for all human beings is indeed the greatest in its extent, but the smallest in its degree; and when I say that I take an interest in this human being's well-being only out of my love for all human beings, the interest I take is as slight as an interest can be (6: 452).

The key to a successful moral intervention seems to be having a clear moral goal set by duty, with emotion providing the motivational force to carry out what reason shows us to be the best course of action. Both are required in order for action to take place. It is true that according to Kant it is reason, and reason alone, who can cross the threshold that separates the aesthetically sublime and the sublime, nature and freedom, experience and action. However, it still requires the motivational force of emotions. On the other hand, as explained by Thomason (2017), while emotions do play a role in morality, their cultivation is not enough in order to develop moral behaviour, and reason is always necessary to guide them. Just as the cultivation of emotions can be a noble by misguided task, merely encouraging or increasing the intensity of the emotion does not work either:

> [...] not only are the sentimental man's feelings unfree, they are also ineffective. Kant's worry is that one whose feeling of sympathy for others is mere sentimentality, will not connect his feelings with action. The sentimental man might be too overcome by emotion to assist those suffering. Indeed, he might even avoid those who suffer, so as to avoid the personal pain caused him by seeing others suffer. Thus sentimentality does not *facilitate* the fulfilment of our duty of beneficence; rather it might well deter us from fulfilling our duty (Mathias 1999, p. 262).

Thus, characterizing Kant as categorically opposed to any emotion and their role in motivation is just plain wrong: Kantian scholars have provided good arguments for ideas such as the virtuous element of some moral emotions, such as respect (Cohen 2018). Kant himself only warns about the dangers of emotions if they overcome reason and take its reins, hence becoming passions (Sussman 2001; Sherman 2014; González 2015), and as exposed in *Moral Mrongovius II*, affections such as sympathy play an active role in moral action

by identifying those who need help the most —we have already covered how the universal moral value of individuals does not stripe them of their particular circumstances—. If Kant himself, despite his deontologist principles, still allows for emotions, affections, and feelings —always under the tutelage of reason— to have the roles that have been described throughout this paper, it would be imprudent to disregard them in the name of keeping a Kantian perspective.

Having clarified the necessary role of emotions and reason, and their respective roles, we find ourselves in a compromising situation. We cannot leave emotions without the supervision of reason, but in the case of our duty towards very distant generations, reason places us before a duty with little to no emotional attachment. This apparent contradiction has led some authors, such as Birnbacher, to propose a kind of compromise: if reason impels us to care for the welfare of future generations, but we only feel the necessary attachment to mobilize our actions with our direct descendants, a "chain of love" can be forged, so that each generation cares for the next: thus, generation by generation, we would fulfil the duty entrusted by reason while guaranteeing the motivating power of emotions to promote the necessary actions. However, as argued by Ojanen, "reliance on the chain of love would likely emphasize near-term adaptation policies at the cost of genuine mitigation, leading to exacerbated future damages" (2019, p. 12), trying to confront the current paradigm of short-term actions with an alternative set of short-term actions motivated by affection.

So, after so much consideration, are we at a dead end? Is being aware of our moral duties towards future generations a mere sign of the depth of our moral capacity, but doomed to be sterile when it comes to eliciting action? Does reason sabotage itself by proposing a goal so distant that we are unable to put our emotional and motivational muscles to work on it? Before becoming discouraged, it is worth realizing that so far we have been looking for answers to these questions in the realm of ethics and morals, and focusing on motivation and particular emotions. Perhaps, if the picture looks so bleak, it is because we are looking in the wrong domain of Kantian philosophy. After all, basing the success or failure against climate change on the righteous response to the call of duty by particular individuals sounds dangerously naïve. What, then, is the alternative? One of the best analysis of this matter from a Kantian perspective, while putting forward valid proposals, is Alice Pinheiro Walla, whose thesis in this regard will be the focus of the next point.

3. Cosmopolitan right and duty towards future generations

In her reading of Kant, Pinheiro Walla rightly observes that the ground of Kant's legal theory is our condition as spatial beings, corporeal agents sharing a physical space: this notion, succinctly summarised by Huber as "structural significance of embodied agency under conditions of spatial constraint" (2017, p. 1), provides key insights of Kant's global thinking and cosmopolitism[10]. In this regard, climate change highlights the necessary interconnectedness between all people on the planet, so that every action has consequences for the agency of others. While freedom and its signs pertain to our noumenal dimension, Kant's legal theory deals with our phenomenal selves; therefore, "as embodied beings in space, the internal quality of one's maxim is secondary; what is important is that one's action can coexist externally with the equal freedom of choice of another; that is, we do not violate another's authority over her own domain of external freedom" (Pinheiro Walla 2020, p. 107). The absolute character of freedom, which can be glimpsed in the experience of the sublime, displays our possibilities without telling us in what way to materialize them: that is the reason why it can afford to deal with the indeterminate, to challenge and break imagination, and to work through signs and analogies. The phenomenal sphere on flesh and bones has to deal with how to bring "the external exercise of freedom of a plurality of persons under a system of external freedom, that is, in accordance with universal laws which can regulate these interactions" (Pinheiro Walla 2016, p. 168). In order to support her reading on the matter, Pinheiro Walla quotes Kant, in a passage that deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

> All human beings are originally in common possession of the land of the entire earth (*communio fundi originaria*) and each has by nature the will to use it (*lex iusti*) which, because the choice of one is unavoidably opposed by nature to that of another, would do away with any use of it if this will did not also contain the principle for choice by which a particular possession for each on the common land could be determined (*lex iuridica*) But the law which is to determine for each what land is mine or yours will be in accordance with the axiom of outer freedom only if it proceeds from a will that is united originally and a priori (that presupposes no rightful act for its union). Hence it proceeds only from a will in the civil condition (*lex iustitiae distributivae*), which alone determines what is right (*recht*), what is rightful (*rechtlich*), and what is laid down as right (*Rechtens*). But in the former condition, that is before the establishment of the civil condition, but with a view to it, that is provisionally, it is a duty to proceed in accordance with the principle of external acquisition. Accordingly, there is also a rightful capacity of the will to bind everyone to recognize the act of taking possession and of appropriation as valid, even though it is only unilateral. (MS, RL, AA 06: 267.04–23)

Throughout this paper, it has been mentioned in several instances that the literature on our moral duties towards future generations —as a topic deeply related to climate change— has displayed a tendency

[10] The spatial dimension here intersects with a central theme in Kantian political, legal, and ethical thought: mutuality. Heyd (2009) underscores the role of mutuality as an intrinsic feature of the conditions of justice, framing it through various philosophical lenses and linking it, in Kant's case, to the foundational respect for others (161). Attas, in the same volume, challenges the extension of mutuality to intergenerational contexts, contending that the lack of "mutual unenforceability of obligations" (191) undermines its viability as a basis for intergenerational justice without significant revision. Both arguments draw on Rawlsian interpretations, which continue to shape much of the discourse on these issues.

towards motivations, personal responsibilities, and how an individual should answer to the interpellation of duty. Pinheiro Walla also points at this tendency, describing it as characteristic by Anglophone Kantians not acquainted with Kant's legal theory (2020, p. 100). The preceding mentions about cosmopolitan right and cosmopolitism were not capricious: as Pinheiro Walla reminds, this notion states that "to deny life-saving occupation of space to another being, who is in principle just as entitled as anyone else to any place of the earth, would be to contradict the very justification for the territorial rights of states" (Pinheiro Walla 2016, p. 175). Man-made climate change and those policies that could close off adaptation possibilities to climate change refugees would therefore "impact on the external freedom of other persons in a way that is incompatible with their equal external freedom" (Pinheiro Walla 2020, p. 108).

Pinheiro Walla rightly points out that applying a theory of individual duties to a problem of a global character (a tendency she diagnoses as endemic in the English-speaking reception of Kant) is problematic. For the author, the categorical imperative is not such an effective formula for dealing with this challenge, preferring to base it on Kantian legal theory "due to its ability to justify externally enforceable duties and its focus on political-juridical institutions" (Pinheiro Walla 2020, p. 101). Thus, from her perspective, proposals such as Schönfeld's (2008), with his naturalistic reading of the categorical imperative, so that moral values reflect natural facts about people, and which leads to the proposition that the Kantian formula of the kingdom of ends must include future generations, is based on a fundamental error: understanding the categorical imperative as a requirement of prudential consistency, rather than as a requirement of principle consistency. A premise such as Schönfeld's, based on the notion that "if I want my action to be possible in the future, I must adopt only environmentally sustainable maxims" (Pinheiro Walla 2020, p. 104), can only lead to hypothetical imperatives. But these kinds of imperatives

> presuppose that we are already committed to the end in question (because we happen to desire or want it) and command us merely to take the necessary means to that end's realization. This might work in the case of environmental policies if we are already motivated and committed to pursue environmental goals. But it cannot command us to adopt the end categorically, if we do not care about it (Pinheiro Walla 2020, p. 104).

The author this invites her readers "to reflect about the limitations of a purely ethical, individual approach to a collective, global problem and what individuals and collective agents can be rightfully coerced to do" (2020, p. 105), while pointing out that Kant himself is aware of this distinction, which sets the basis for his differentiation "between the domain of individual virtue and the domain of coercible juridical obligations in his late work *The Metaphysics of Morals*". This distancing from moral individualism is aligned with Flikschuh's reading of cosmopolitism as a matter of right,[11] rather than of freedom. As the author points out, "the liberal conception of personal autonomy as rational self-determination – as the capacity to choose and pursue one's own conception of the good – tends to be conflated with Kant's principle of moral autonomy as self-legislation" (2009, p. 428); this predominantly Anglophone perspective has been challenged by the conception "of moral autonomy as a constraint upon the pursuit of personal autonomy" (*Id*., p. 429). In this sense, it is worth noting to what extent Kant raises the necessary combination of aspects: between reason and emotions, between individual virtue and legal obligations, between the noumenal character of freedom and legislation that must be applied to phenomenal entities that share a space. In contrast to the stereotypical image of Kant as an inflexible, almost dogmatic author, this enquiry shows a Kant who understands the necessary character of mutual correspondence, sceptical of universal formulas that only apply to a single sphere or faculty. In the case at hand, throughout the research, the contributions of different authors have been collected on why a moral motivation is doomed to failure, particularly when its account is of an indeterminate nature. Pinheiro Walla rightly detects that this does not mean that we should throw in the towel, but that legal and juridical theory should be directed to where morality points:

> Our task is to regulate the relations among those equal spheres of freedom, thereby integrating them in a coordinated system. Moral motivation alone cannot secure this coordination, since the task at hand requires more than the quality of my volition. Having a plurality of well-meaning drivers does not secure a well coordinated traffic system. It is not a matter of individual character or good will, but of external regulation (Pinheiro Walla 2020, p. 106).

4. Discussion and conclusion

It can be summarized that realizing and contemplating our moral duties towards far distant generations can be lived as an experience of the sublime in which reason, in its practical dimension concerning moral duties, and made possible by the intervention of a culture that contemplates the long-term consequences of our actions and our responsibilities for the environment, points to an ideal of freedom and possibility of intervention in the world that exceeds the representational possibilities of the imagination. The absolute character of human freedom leads us to ponder what our moral duties are towards those generations, even

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[11] Flikschuh's observations regarding the subject of such right are worthy of being mentioned. In her reading of Peter Niesen's Kants Theorie der Redefreiheit, she observes that "Niesen appeals to a distinction in the text between the rights of human beings (das Recht der Menschen) and the Right of humanity (das Recht der Menschheit), suggesting that Kant differentiates between these two types of Right according to their respective bearers. The former applies to 'the human person subject to physical conditions, or homo phenomenon'; the latter pertains to human persons 'merely in virtue of their [noumenal] personality conceived independently of any physical determinants'" (2009, p. 436).

if it opens up more questions than it can provide answers for –much like philosophy itself, on the other hand. But that is, I believe, the crucial point: the experience of the sublime is not supposed to provide answers, but to serve as a reflection of the scope of (in this case, practical) reason.

In the experience of the sublime that arises from natural phenomena, theoretical reason exceeds our capacity to imagine vast magnitudes. In the experience of events (in the case of *Enthusiasmus*) or cognitive achievements in which the absolute character of freedom and the vastness of our duties are conceived, practical reason goes beyond what imagination can represent. This does not mean that sensible phenomena are to be discarded when reason intervenes: in fact, both dimensions of the phenomenal and noumenal *homo* are in play here, as the challenges posed by practical reason are not to be answered by exercising our individual moral fortitude, or by summoning emotional motivation, but by legislating our mutual relations as spatial beings.

The challenge of dealing with the consequences of climate change, of course, is immense. It involves a political, economic, and technical effort which requires a level of coordination, planning and imagination like never before in the history of mankind. However, if the Kantian account of the sublime is to be right, then the magnitude of the task must be followed by an effort of equal magnitude, for "feelings of the sublime precisely activate our determination to withstand these seemingly incommensurate challenges rather than feel dwarfed by them" (Menninghaus et al. 2019). In fact, the experience of the sublime, in order to be described as such, has to leave a trace of resolution and action, of purpose (Menninghaus 1991): if it does not provide awareness of our intervening potential in reality, if it places us as mere passive spectators, we are missing the main element of the experience of the sublime. In this regard, a key difference between the sublime and the beautiful is that the former involves an integration of the unpleasant component of the experience, in a way in which "a counterpurposiveness for imagination turns into a purposiveness for reason" (Wenzel 2009, p. 396). For the sublime to take place, reason must be capable of aiming towards an idea that forces imagination into the aforementioned limit-straining effort. The ought, as pointed out by Hyde, need to imply a can.

Literature on the topic which accepts as a starting point that *something* needs to be done has also asked pertinent questions regarding *what* should be done: even if numerous factors might lead to freeze in stupor over the magnitude of the task, the proposals arising from this moral challenge keep happening, and pointing at new and promising directions. For Kant, the realization of these duties and the subsequent discussion could constitute proof of our innate moral character and the tendency towards the good. From my more modest perspective, and in accordance with Lyotard's diagnosis, it might be too bold to state that they constitute a *schema* of moral progression. However, it does constitute an affirmation of the absolute character of human freedom, and the fact that its appeals to duty can occur even in the absence of concrete representations. This discussion, consequently, can be considered a moral progress as a better understanding of morality, according to the definition provided by Nussbaum (2007). On the other hand, the fact that those future generations do not replicate our characteristics, that we have nothing "at stake" in that distant future, meet the Kantian principle of disinterestedness, inherent in the genuine experience of the sublime, and cosmopolitanism right, which becomes the cornerstone for possible solutions based on the Kantian theory of law, as developed by Pinheiro Walla.

What, then, can be done? What is proposed here, in the light of what has been researched and in order to respond to this immense challenge, involves several considerations. Firstly, to bear in mind that the unrepresentable, those generations far distant from us, are part of the experience of the sublime that opens up in the consideration of our moral duties, while at the same time challenging our capacity to imagine in what way can we envision their needs and provide for them. Secondly, to base the possible answers and proposals not on Kantian moral theory, but on legal theory: if Kant was perceptive enough to contemplate the need for a duality between emotions and reasons, between ethical and legal principles, between noun and phenomenon, how much less should we contemplate it today. Research into Kantian legal theory presents itself as a fruitful philosophical terrain from which to articulate concrete proposals to the legal and political challenges of climate change.

In this sense, the idea of a "chain of love" is based on the motivating component of emotions for our immediate generations in order to successively take advantage of their mobilising capacity, greater than that of reason and any feelings that we might have for generations far away, and thus maintain over time a care for the planet that is bequeathed to our descendants. Given how problematic it is to bet on morality and emotions in this matter, and given the need to constitute a structured legislative framework, perhaps it would be better to speak of a chain of laws, or legislative principles. Love cannot be legislated, but legal frameworks that determine the effects of our spheres of liberty on the spheres of liberty of the people with whom we share planet and consequences can.

Finally, this research shows, in many instances, the dynamic character of Kantian philosophy. This dynamism involves aspects such as the necessary mutual determination between cognitive faculties, the active nature of conceptualization and knowledge in the attuning role of culture, and the interrelation between the noumenal and the phenomenal, contrary to the belief that the Kantian noumenon is but a negative instance with nothing to tell us and nothing to provide but a limit. On an epistemological level, Kant regards experimental science as a discipline in progress, and this nuclear idea has been taken up by Sellars (1963) and his successors to underline that the scientific project, built on empirical concepts, is always a work in perpetual and dialectal progress (Gironi 2015, 2017; O'Shea 1997, 2017). The mutual imbrication of epistemology and morality comes to light in the possibility of our moral decisions and legal frameworks being guided by a better understanding of climate change and its consequences. Therefore, it is worth inviting a reading of Kant that is sensitive to this dynamism: as has been seen throughout this paper, there is no one key ingredient in Kant that can

provide the solution to all problems. Co-determination, the mutual influence between spheres of freedom, or the realisation of morality on the basis of empirical knowledge and legislation are just three instances of the dynamic character of the critical programme.

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