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The Role of the Death Drive and Mystical Tendency in Kant's Ethics

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Abstract

This paper explores the intersection of the death drive and mystical tendency within Immanuel Kant's ethics. By examining Nietzsche's critical perspective, the paper aims to uncover the underlying motivations in Kant's moral philosophy. The paper argues that Kant's division of human beings into phenomenal and noumenal selves, and his concept of practical reason, reflect a deeper mystical tendency. This tendency aligns with the death drive, suggesting that Kantian ethics may be a tool for the living being to achieve its original, inanimate state. The analysis integrates psychoanalytic and philosophical discourses to offer a more complex interpretation of Kant's ethics, proposing that it embodies a form of mysticism driven by the death drive.

Keywords: death drive, Kant, mysticism, Nietzsche, Yoga

Introduction

In addition to philosophers, there are many other authors who have tried to understand Kant's ethics. Particularly interesting are the psychoanalysts' interpretations of Kant's ethics on the basis of the death drive. But if we look back in the history of philosophy, forgetting for the moment the concepts and theories, or, as we could say with the later Wittgenstein, the language games of Freud and Lacan, we remember that one of the loudest critics of the character of Kant's ethics was already Nietzsche. If we really want to understand its inherent character and its hidden sources together with psychoanalysts, we should consider Nietzsche's hammer-critical notes as a first indicator of these hidden sources, because they are not so much shaped by contemporary language games and could be philosophically very accurate. They might also reveal something that is not so much taken into account today, but which may have shaped Kant's ethics as its inherent, though

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perhaps unconscious, motives. In the present paper, we would like to highlight what we will call the mystical tendency in Kant's ethics. This doesn't mean that we should forget the psychoanalytic discourse at all, in fact the opposite is true, because we believe that some of Nietzsche's ideas and those of others could enrich this discourse and help us to understand not only Kant's ethics itself, but secondarily also the behavior of those who tend to follow it. The aim of this paper is to add another possible piece to the endless mosaic of understanding and to expand our possibilities for interpreting Kant's ethics in a more complex way.

Nietzsche's protopsychoanalytic notes

Nietzsche (2005, p. 9) evaluated Kant's ethics as an expression of something very antithetical to life on the premise that underlies almost all of his vitalist philosophical thought: "Whatever is not a condition for life harms it." Kant's ethics for him was an example of philosophical thinking, that is directly against life because of its promotion of deontological and universalist principles. Nietzsche (2005, pp. 9–10) wrote: "*Virtue*, *duty*, *goodness in itself*, goodness that has been stamped with the character of the impersonal and universal valid – these are fantasies and manifestations of decline, of the final exhaustion of life, of Königsberg Chinesianity. The most basic laws of preservation and growth require the opposite." What we should note here is that when Nietzsche speaks of preservation and growth, it is directly related to life. Thus, it is certain that deontological principles, as the opposite, must be directly related to the opposite of life, which is death. Although Nietzsche is not so direct here and doesn't provide an exact word for what he is saying, it is clear from his expressions that death is what actually underlies Kant's ethics and could be considered its essence or *moving principle*. The quoted passages are from Nietzsche's *Antichrist*, published in 1895, exactly twenty-five years before the publication of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in which he wrote extensively about the death drive, though he still didn't connect it to Kant's ethics. Nietzsche did this in his own way. However, he didn't use the same terminology as Freud, because he couldn't. But terminology doesn't matter so much in this case, because in essence Nietzsche (2005, p. 10) was trying to express the hidden presence of what we can now call the death drive, for example when he talked about the so-called *anti-nature as instinct*.

Kant as a transitional figure

Nietzsche's words would serve as a necessary mirror for Kant, who on the one hand very convincingly recognized that the human being has the ability to think and act against itself, against nature in itself, against any empirical motive, and that this is the only way by which we should identify its thinking and acting as ethical.

On the other hand, he didn't explain so convincingly how it is possible for human beings to have this special faculty, which he called practical reason. In order to explain it, Kant divided human beings into what Foucault (2002, p. 347) later called "a strange empirico-transcendental doublet." Kant divided human beings into phenomenal and noumenal being, which he already did in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, where he wrote that

> The human being, who this way regards himself as an intelligence, thereby puts himself in a different order of things and in a relation to determining grounds of an altogether different kind when he thinks of himself as an intelligence endowed with a will, and consequently with causality, then when he perceives himself as a phenomenon in the world of sense (as he also really is) and subjects his causality to external determination in accordance with laws of nature. Now he soon becomes aware that both can take place at the same time, and indeed must do so. For, that a thing in appearance (belonging to the world of sense) is subject to certain laws from which as a thing or a being in itself it is independent contains not the least contradiction; that he must represent and think of himself in this twofold way, however, rests as regards the first on consciousness of himself as an object affected through the senses and as regards the second on consciousness of himself as an intelligence, that is, as independent of sensible impressions in the use of reason (hence as belonging to the world of understanding). (Kant, 1998, p. 61)

For Kant, therefore, we as human beings, although still composed of the empirical elements, are capable of following the imperatives of practical reason because of our participation in the intelligible world as a thing in itself. Even if we accept this division, the question remains, how is it possible that there is an independence of these two divided parts of the human being? How is it possible that the empirical being is able to think and act independently of itself only because it belongs to a different order of things than that which is empirical in nature? There must be some connection, even if it is invisible to Kant. It seems that Kant's investigation of the faculty of practical reason is not as new as it was supposed to be, because such an interpretation of the human being as a being that contains some *divine particle* is present in all the previous history of the Judeo-Christian tradition, which considers the human being as the *Imago Dei*. We can also find an analogy in ancient Greek philosophy, which generally considers human beings to be endowed with the faculty of λόγος, a structure that, as a special type of being, they share with the entire universe. Thus, human beings participate in something that fundamentally transcends them, be it God or the κόσμος, as the Greeks would say. What is new in Kant is the use of the language game of the Enlightenment, by which changes the superficial, formal linguistic structure of what he says in his ethical works in comparison with the previous philosophical and religious tradition, but not the deeper and very well-hidden content of these works. We will see later that Nietzsche discovered this hidden tendency in Kant's ethical thought. One of

the contemporary philosophers who emphasized the same tendency was Rorty (2004, p. 198), for whom "Kant is a transitional figure – somebody who helped us get away from the idea that morality is a matter of divine command, but who unfortunately retained the idea that morality is a matter of unconditional obligations." This is not just an unfortunate substitution, however, because, as Rorty (2004, p. 198) continues, following Nietzsche and Baier, "the Kantian notion of unconditional obligation is borrowed from an authoritarian, patriarchal, religious tradition." The substitution mentioned is therefore not unimportant one, because in a way it maintains this previous tradition by making it more appropriate for those who are more sensitive to the rational discourse of the Enlightenment.

Towards psychoanalytic interpretation

It is necessary to see Kant's situation in its historical context. When he created his ethical system, he had to be imprisoned in the language and thought patterns of his own time and those of his predecessors, just as we are all imprisoned in our own time, which is quite normal. Only historical distance allows us to hermeneutically rethink our own predecessors, just as our own successors will be able to rethink us. Now we have another language game with which we can better understand Kant's ethics, and that is the language game of psychoanalysis. So, we can use some explanatory terms that Kant did not use in his time, although Nietzsche foresaw them. One of them is the death drive. We could agree with McGowan (2024, p. 102), who interprets the above situation as describing the lack of Kant's explanation of why we are able to obey our practical reason: "What Kant could not yet conceive as the condition of possibility for adherence to the moral law is the death drive, the drive of the subject to find satisfaction in acting against its own interests rather than for its own good or the good of the community." The death drive is a notion of Freud's psychology, which came later than Kant's ethics, so it's normal that Kant didn't consider something like the death drive. What is interesting in McGowan's expression is the notion of satisfaction.

It is not so common to think about satisfaction when we talk about Kant's ethics, because we often tend to substitute the word *satisfaction* with the world *pleasure*. Kant himself often wrote about the absolute exclusion of all empirical elements of pure ethics, and this was also a reason why he rejected the notion of moral sense or moral feelings from it. If he could admit some feeling, it had to be a feeling that was completely detached from our empirical being and related only to our obedience to the imperative. Kant (2002, p. 103) called this *feeling* respect for the moral law, and "the effect of this law on feeling is merely humiliation." We certainly cannot call this feeling and its effect *pleasure*, but we could call it *satisfaction*. If this is the form of satisfaction McGowan was talking about, which we cannot replace with pleasure, then we must consider the death drive as an

important link between the two parts of the originally divided human being, which is actually not as divided as Kant presented to us. We could interpret human being as an empirical being (if we have to use Kant's words) or as a form of natural matter that is driven by the death drive through the process of its living state in order to return to its original state, which is the state of death. If we take into account the death drive, we will be able to see Kant's ethics not as something that is somehow connected to the non-empirical world, but as an intellectual tool by which the actual living being tries to achieve its original dead state. From this point of view, there is no separation, there is no division, there is no empirical-transcendental doublet. There is only the actual living being and its death drive, which is expressed through deontological ethics. Since Kant's ethics is based on the subversion of our own self-interest, which Kant called pathological, there must be some principle that explains this possibility of turning against ourselves. According to McGowan (2024, p. 100)

> it is this self-destruction that provides the existential basis for our morality. As a result, moral questions are first and foremost questions of the unconscious, not of consciousness. Recognizing the formative role that the death drive plays in our moral capacity should transform how we think about morality itself and its link to the unconscious. This is clearest in the case of Kantian morality.

Hidden mysticism

Now we have to return to Nietzsche, because what we are pointing out here is still only a part of the whole picture of what constitutes Kant's ethics as its inherent principle. Although Nietzsche spoke of the anti-natural instinct and saw in it the principle that is opposed to life, he linked this indicator with something that he considered to be inseparable from it. For him, this was religion, but, as we will see, the most appropriate term is mysticism as the basis of every formally structured religion. "The theologian instinct was the only thing that came to its defense! – When the instinct of life compels us to act, pleasure proves that the act is right: and this nihilist with the intestines of a Christian dogmatist saw pleasure in objection" (Nietzsche, 2005, p. 10). What Nietzsche considers here to be a Christian dogmatist who sees pleasure in objection (which is, of course, Kant) might be called a masochist in contemporary terminology. See, for example, McGowan (2024, pp. 106–107) when he speaks of the psychological primacy of masochism to sadism. The idea of Kant and Kantian ethicists as masochists can also be found in Rorty (2004, p. 200), where he says: "The idea of a law-giving faculty called *reason*, it seems to me, lingers on […] masochists who want to hold on to a sense of sin while still enjoying the comforts of a clean, well-lighted, fully mechanized, Newtonian universe." The masochism of Kant's ethics fits very well with the interpretation of its foundation by the notion of death drive, and it is still applicable to the specific

satisfaction or feeling mentioned by Kant, which is the respect for the moral law with the effect of humiliation.

It's not by chance that Nietzsche speaks of the *theologian's instinct* and considers Kant as someone who is "a nihilist with the intestines of a Christian dogmatist." This is the point that should lead us to such an interpretation of Kant's ethics, which could complement the psychoanalytic approach with an important aspect that is not often considered in analyses of it, and which can explain the expression above, when we spoke of a Kant's ethics as a tool of the living being/matter trying to reach its original dead state. This interpretation will be made on the basis of what we can call a mystical tendency in Kant's ethics. The mysticism was probably unrecognized, or at least unattributed, by Kant himself. However, Kant (2002, p. 93) admitted that "the mysticism [concerning practical reason] is in fact still compatible with the purity and sublimity of the moral law, and, besides, stretching one's power of imagination all the way to suprasensible intuitions is not exactly natural and commensurate with the common way of thinking, so that on this side the danger is not so general" as in the case of empiricism. Mysticism thus seems to be compatible with rationalism in Kant's ethics. And this makes even more sense when we look at Kant's ethics through the lens of the death drive.

It is certainly clear that when we speak of mysticism, we do so in its original sense as the experiential foundation of religion, in the sense of a spontaneous, directed (through ascetic practices), or desired experience leading to a sense of union with transcendence, and not in its strange, New Age meanings. Considering mysticism as the basis of Kant's ethics is not only a result of Nietzsche's notes on the hidden religiosity in it, but it is also inspired by our reading of Zupančič's interpretation of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Zupančič is not interested in mysticism here, but some passages from her text might be interesting to interpret in this context, especially passages related to the following Freudian expression (1981, p. 38): "If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that *the aim of all life is death* and, looking backwards, that *inanimate things existed before living ones*." From this point of view, life seems to be just an accidental episode between the two states of inanimate matter. The original state of matter thus seems to be a state without living energy, a static state of eternal peace, but in some cases, including human beings, accidentally disturbed by what we call life. Since, as Freud says, every living thing has only one goal–to die–we can conclude that this primordial inanimate matter, which is also the case with human beings, seems to have only one goal: to return to its primordial, dead state. Zupančič (2017, p. 97) asks: "So what is life, if we accept and follow these Freudian reflections and spell out their implications? Life has no ground or source of its own. It is something that happens to the inanimate, it is an accident occurring

in the inanimate (possibly due to its own inherent contradiction or inconsistency)." And she continues poetically as follows: "Life is but a dream of the inanimate. More precisely, it is a nightmare of the inanimate (its nightmarish disturbance), since the inanimate wants nothing but to be left alone." (Zupančič 2017, p. 97).

Return to the inanimate. Example of yogic mysticism and the search for analogies

But why should we interpret it in the connection to mysticism? In the history of human practices around the world, we can find many examples of attempts to fulfill this "dream of the inanimate." Many of them are described in the works of cultural anthropologists such as Eliade. Let us see how he interpreted the mysticism present in yogic practices, which can be considered a perfect example of what was mentioned above. Of course, yogic practices are not obviously connected to the Judeo-Christian tradition that preceded Kant's philosophy, but this is not so important. We don't want to connect Kant with Indian mysticism, but through the Indian mysticism present in yoga, we can highlight some important analogous aspects that we can also find in Kant. Thus, we will be able to reformulate Nietzsche's word and say that Kant was a philosopher with the intestines of a mystic. We cannot provide a detailed analysis of Eliade's work, and it is not so important here, but we can certainly point out some interesting details.

> Even the most elementary of yogic techniques, *āsana*, has a similar goal; for if one is ever to become conscious of the 'totality' of one's body, felt as a 'unity,' one can do it only by practicing one of these hieratic postures. The extreme simplification of life, the calm, the serenity, the static bodily position, the rhythmical breathing, the concentration on a single point, etc. —all these exercises pursue the same goal, which is to abolish multiplicity and fragmentation, to reintegrate, to unify, to make whole. (Eliade, 1958, p. 97)

Āsanas are bodily postures and serve as a fundamental step in attaining the state of *Samādhi*—yogic union with Being or the Divine. What is important here is how Eliade interprets them as hieratic postures in which the matter of the human body seeks to simplify its life to the point of transcending fragmentation. He implies that what causes the fragmentation or division of matter is its life, this aforementioned accident of the inanimate. This is the reason why *askesis* has an important place in many religious and philosophical practices. It serves as a tool to reduce the symptoms of life. And this is something that is incredibly similar or analogous to Kant's ethics. From this point of view, Zupančič's expression of life as a "nightmare of the inanimate" makes sense. According to Eliade (1958, p. 54), the "hieratic position of the body imitates some other condition than the human; the yogin in the state of *āsana* can be homologized with a plant or a sacred statue;

under no circumstances can he be homologized with man *qua* man, who, by definition, is mobile, agitated, unrythmic." Eliade's examples of plants or sacred statues are not accidental; they represent stillness. This is the only one of the possible examples in which we can see how the initially inanimate matter in the form of the human being strives to reach its initial state and tries to give up its symptoms of life in the mystical practices.

Examples from yoga may seem strange here, but they describe a possible mystical context that we want to emphasize and use as an analogy here. This mystical context is closely related to the death drive, because the death drive underscores any mysticism that has as its goal some form of union of being, which can be interpreted as a constant return to a form of inanimate through the expression of the death drive. What if we consider Kant's ethics as a possible form of such hidden mysticism and a tool of the death drive? Only if we take into account Nietzsche's words from the above quotations will it make sense why he speaks of "theologian's instinct" and "the intestines of the Christian dogmatist", now reformulated by the expression 'intestines of a mystic' when he speaks of Kant's ethics. Even if Nietzsche didn't write it explicitly, he recognized the mysticism inherent in Kant's ethics, as well as the death drive when he talked about the anti-nature instinct. This mysticism in Kant's ethics was also recognized by the novelist and philosopher Rand (1984, ch. 10, unpaginated), who saw Kant's ethics as an expression of the "subconscious process by which Kant makes recruits for mysticism." We can say that at the heart of all mysticism is an attempt to find, even unconsciously, a primordial state, which, according to Freud, is a state of inanimate matter. Mystical practices can thus be seen as a way of dying. There are, of course, many ways to deal with this. While yogis could use some physical practices, Kantians could use the ethics elaborated by their teacher Kant. But isn't goal the same?

If we admit that Kant's ethics undermines life and is guided by the death drive, we will also be able to admit it to the status of a special kind of mysticism. Or rather, we will be able to regard practical morality based on Kant's ethics as a form of mystical practice that undermines one's life and is guided by the death drive, trying to lead to the primordial state of inanimate. Death drive can take many forms. Whether it is yogic practices or Kant's ethics, it could still be the same in the heart, though different in its particular expression. Therefore, we can conclude our analysis with the words of Zupančič (2017, p. 106) that "the death drive is what makes it possible for us to die differently. And perhaps in the end this is what matters, and what breaks out from the fatigue of life: not the capacity to live forever, but the capacity to die differently. We could even paraphrase the famous Beckettian line and formulate the motto of the death drive as follows: Die again, die better!"

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