


**KANT: ENLIGHTENMENT, EDUCATION AND HUMAN AUTONOMY**

**KANT: ESCLARECIMENTO, EDUCAÇÃO E A AUTONOMIA HUMANA**

**KANT: ILUSTRACIÓN, EDUCACIÓN Y AUTONOMÍA HUMANA**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper analyzes Immanuel Kant's thought, highlighting the connection between enlightenment, education, and autonomy as foundations for educational development and the construction of human freedom. Enlightenment, according to Kant, is the way out of self-imposed minority—that is, the inability to think for oneself—a condition overcome through the public use of reason and the courage to be autonomous. Education, in this context, is not merely the transmission of content, but a historical and ethical process that forms the individual for rationality, requiring discipline, instruction, and moralization. Finally, autonomy is presented as the central principle of Kantian morality; it is acting according to laws that reason itself recognizes as universal, as imperative, constituting the ultimate purpose of education. Training for autonomy is, therefore, a practical, ethical, and political requirement, and is the foundation of a truly enlightened society.

**Keywords:** Kant. Enlightenment. Rationality. Autonomy. Education. Morality.

**RESUMO**

Este trabalho analisa o pensamento de Immanuel Kant, destacando a articulação entre esclarecimento, educação e autonomia como fundamentos para a formação educacional e construção da liberdade humana. O esclarecimento, segundo Kant, é a saída da menoridade autoimposta, ou seja, da incapacidade de pensar por si mesmo, condição superada por meio do uso público da razão e da coragem de ser autônomo. A educação, nesse contexto, não é apenas uma transmissão de conteúdos, mas um processo histórico e ético que forma o indivíduo para a racionalidade, exigindo disciplina, instrução e moralização. Por fim, a autonomia é apresentada como o princípio central da moralidade kantiana, é agir segundo leis que a própria razão reconhece como universais, como imperativas, constituindo a finalidade última da educação. A formação para a autonomia é, portanto, uma exigência prática, ética e política, sendo a base de uma sociedade verdadeiramente esclarecida.

**Palavras-chave:** Kant. Esclarecimento. Racionalidade. Autonomia. Educação. Moral.

**RESUMEN**

Este artículo analiza el pensamiento de Immanuel Kant, destacando la conexión entre la Ilustración, la educación y la autonomía como fundamentos del desarrollo educativo y la

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construcción de la libertad humana. La Ilustración, según Kant, es la salida de la minoría autoimpuesta —es decir, la incapacidad de pensar por sí mismo—, una condición superada mediante el uso público de la razón y la valentía de ser autónomo. La educación, en este contexto, no es simplemente la transmisión de contenidos, sino un proceso histórico y ético que forma al individuo para la racionalidad, requiriendo disciplina, instrucción y moralización. Finalmente, la autonomía se presenta como el principio central de la moral kantiana; es actuar según leyes que la propia razón reconoce como universales, imperativas, y constituye el fin último de la educación. La formación para la autonomía es, por lo tanto, un requisito práctico, ético y político, y la base de una sociedad verdaderamente ilustrada.

**Palabras clave:** Kant. Ilustración. Racionalidad. Autonomía. Educación. Moralidad.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

This article is the product of reflections made in the discipline "Contemporary Educational Thought", offered in the Graduate Program in Education of the State University of Santa Catarina, which studies the classics of modern education and their influences on contemporary educational thought.

Immanuel Kant's educational proposal is anchored in the project of Enlightenment or Enlightenment, which understands education as a process of enlightenment and an instrument of emancipation, freedom and moral and intellectual adulthood of the subject and humanity. And although he did not address the subject of education much, dedicating himself mainly to philosophy, he bequeathed to posterity a fundamental educational work entitled "On Pedagogy" - written for a summer course taught at the University of Königsberg between 1776/77, in which he presents his reasons for understanding education as a process of humanization, given that "Man is the only creature that needs to be educated" (Kant, 1991, p. 11).

In the thought of Kant (1724–1804), reason, freedom, and morality constitute the fundamental pillars for understanding humanity. One of the central concepts of his thought is that of Enlightenment, whose classic definition is presented in his 1784 text, "Answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?". For Kant, Enlightenment is "the liberation of man from his self-imposed immaturity (Unmündigkeit)" (Kant, 2012, p. 145).

Minority, or immaturity, according to Kant, is not a natural condition, but is something self-imposed through human laziness and cowardice to think for oneself. This leads individuals to prefer the convenience of tutelage to the effort to use reason. When Kant (2012, p. 145) uttered his famous phrase "*Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to use your own mind (*Verstandes!*)", he intended to summarize the Enlightenment, because to use one's own mind means to become an autonomous subject.

The author recognizes that human reason, although capable of formulating universal judgments *a priori*, finds limits, especially when it deals with abstract issues such as God and freedom. However, limits do not invalidate reason or the capacity for judgment, but point to their practical use, that is, if we have *a priori* judgments, then we can start from moral imperatives that can guide our actions. In this sense, if there is no possibility of empirical contact with God or freedom is not materialized, our rationality will manifest judgments and values that are valid and which will lead us to actions that will be good and universally applied. This definition leads to the well-known Kantian imperatives that lead the subject to **act as if**

**the maxim of his action should be erected into a universal law of nature**, but must **act in such a way that humanity is treated, both in your person and in the person of others, always as an end and never as a means**. For the individual subject, the corollary of this is that my reason will provide my freedom to the extent that I autonomously follow rational precepts for action. It is in this context that Enlightenment reveals itself as an ethical and also educational project, in which the individual must learn to act according to rational principles that, autonomously, he himself recognizes as valid, but taking into account life in society.

In this work we will see that, at first, Kant defines enlightenment as the overcoming of self-imposed minority, a minority in which the individual, out of laziness or cowardice, depends on others to think. It will be highlighted that rational autonomy requires courage to use one's own reason, but this process is not only epistemological, but also moral, as it implies liberation from heteronomy, which requires a continuous effort of reflection and ethical action. In this way, clarification is a practical and educational project, based on freedom and individual responsibility.

In a second moment, we infer that for Kant, education plays a role in which the human being overcomes his initial condition of animality and develops his rational and moral potentialities. Hence his insistence on saying that the condition of humanity is not a natural given, but a historical achievement, built through a formative process that involves discipline, instruction and moralization. The school, in this case, is not only a space for the transmission of knowledge, but an environment for training freedom, where individuals learn to think critically and act autonomously.

In this sense, autonomy emerges as the main goal of Kantian morality. To be autonomous means to act according to maxims that can be universalized, regardless of subjective emotional inclinations or external pressures. This autonomy is the result of an educational process that prepares the subject to resist heteronomy. In this way, Enlightenment, education and autonomy are linked in Kant's thought, forming three fundamental elements for the realization of human freedom.

In summary, we will explore these three concepts in an articulated way. We will approach Enlightenment as a moral project, highlighting its relationship with the overcoming of minority and the public use of reason. We will examine the role of education as a mechanism for the formation of humanity, analyzing its disciplinary, cognitive and ethical aspects. Finally, we will discuss autonomy as the purpose of moral formation, demonstrating

how it highlights Kantian ideas of freedom and practical rationality and how much they transcend the centuries, revealing vivid contemporaneity.

## 2 ENLIGHTENMENT AS A MORAL PROJECT

Kant summarizes the Enlightenment from the definition that we must free ourselves from self-imposed minority. Minority, or immaturity, is understood as the inability to make use of one's own understanding without the direction of others, and its overcoming is not related to a lack of reason, but rather to the courage and determination to use it. It is not a natural or legal minority (Filho, 2019, p.62 - 63), but a condition that man, out of comfort or lack of courage, imposes on himself.

Thus, Enlightenment is not only an epistemological issue, because the lack of decision and courage to use reason refers to a question of action, connecting minority to morality. It is, therefore, a practical problem, an act of courage and determination to use reason. The maxim "*Sapere aude!*" synthesizes the Kantian project, which is an invitation to rational autonomy. However, the philosopher recognizes that the majority remains in the minority due to laziness and cowardice, stating:

It's so comfortable to be immature. If I have a book that takes the place of my understanding, a pastor who has a conscience for me, a doctor who decides about my diet, etc., then I don't even have to try. I don't need to think, when I can just pay; others will take charge of the tiring work in my place. (Kant, 2012, p. 145)

Thus, the philosopher points out that man himself can be held responsible for this minority to the extent that he is unable to think for himself. Kant had already established the limits of reason in the field of theoretical knowledge, showing that human reason, when investigating itself, recognizes its own limits. In his critical work, Kant establishes that reason is capable of elaborating synthetic judgments *a priori*, that is, in pure reason (without the need for sensory experiences) it is possible to have intrinsic knowledge in it. The *Critique of Pure Reason* is a vast work, but at the beginning Kant mentions that human reason has a priori judgments that are independent of experience, and some of these judgments are pure. In this way, he describes:

[...] we will henceforth designate by *a priori* judgments, not those which do not depend on this or that experience, but those in which absolute independence of any and all

experience is verified. Of the *a priori* knowledge, those in which nothing empirical is mixed are pure. (Kant, 2001, Introduction. B3)

For Kant, some knowledge must be grounded as universal and necessary, as is the case of mathematics and physics, and there is no need for sensory experimentation. However, within his epistemology, there is a very important difference between *a priori* and pure knowledge. *A priori* judgments are valid independently of experience, and may also include empirical concepts, while pure knowledge is that *a priori* that is completely free of any empirical element, such as logical forms or intuitions of space and time. For example,  $7 + 5 = 12$  is, for Kant, pure *a priori* knowledge, because its truth does not depend on observations, whereas the proposition "All bodies have extension" is a *priori knowledge*, but it is not pure, because it is a logical, universal statement, in which the predicate is contained in the subject; but the concept of "body" presupposes empirical data, whereas the experience of material bodies is necessary. This distinction is essential to his theory, as it establishes that structures such as space, time, and certain categories are *pure a priori* conditions, and from these pure, *a priori* structures, experience becomes possible.

Even though there are *a priori* categories in reason, Kant sets limits to reason, stating that there are very abstract issues, such as freedom or God, for example, that go beyond the theoretical reach. Reason is systematically organized to seek answers even for those categories that we cannot know empirically. With this, Kant begins to point to another possible use of reason, which is the practical use, linked to morality. Faced with the possibilities of reason, man is able to distinguish what is right or not doing what is wrong. For example, even if an individual feels the desire to murder someone, reason will imperatively dictate that a murder is not a logical and universal action to be taken and, therefore, is not a morally good action. Thus, by following this imperative of reason, the individual will be exercising the freedom not to act in a morally wrong way.

It is in this context that Enlightenment must be understood. According to José Edmar Lima Filho (2019), Kant defines Enlightenment based on the concepts of "minority" and "guilt", and does so in this way, as he understands them within the practical universe. "Minority", also according to Filho (2019), is not simply a biological or legal phase, overcome with age (from 17 to 18 years old, for example), but an existential condition of dependence, in which the individual delegates the use of his or her own understanding to others. The "guilt" for this condition indicates that permanence in it is by choice - or, more precisely, by lack of courage and decision (Filho, 2019). Kant argues that minority is perpetuated due to human

laziness and cowardice, characteristics that make individuals accept the tutelage of others and prefer comfort to freedom. According to the author:

Laziness and cowardice are the causes why so great a number of men, after Nature has long since freed them from an alien direction (*naturaliter maiorennes*), nevertheless willingly remain under the tutelage of themselves throughout their lives. It is also the causes that explain why it is so easy for others to become their guardians. (Kant, 2012, p. 145)

In this way, the Kantian Enlightenment is not limited to a matter of acquiring knowledge, but is deeply linked to moral autonomy. The enlightened individual is the one who makes public use of his reason, who thinks for himself, who rejects the tutelage of external authorities and who acts according to principles that he himself recognizes as valid. Thus, Kant establishes the freedom of public use of reason as the basis of the maturity of the individual, because "[...] For this clarification, however, nothing is required but freedom. And the most harmless among all that can be called freedom, namely: that of making a public use of one's reason in all matters" (Kant, 2012, p. 146). This implies a departure from heteronomy, that is, from submission to external rules, towards autonomy, the fundamental principle of Kantian morality, later developed in the work "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals".

The text on the Clarification also shows that this autonomy does not occur automatically. It is not age or the accumulation of information that makes one enlightened, but the active exercise of reason, the continuous effort to think and act on one's own. Kant (2012) points out that many remain in minority for their entire lives and even feel comfortable in it, precisely because this condition avoids the effort to think autonomously.

In this way, it is not possible to adequately understand the problem of Enlightenment without integrating it into the moral problematic. It is not only an epistemological question, as this problem is rooted in the practical use of reason and the ideal of autonomy, which reinforces the importance of education and ethical training as means for the full realization of human enlightenment. Thus, Enlightenment can be defined as a moral, practical and educational task, which requires courage, discipline and perseverance.

### **3 EDUCATION AS THE FORMATION OF HUMANITY**

Kant's view of education presents some interesting propositions about the formation of humanity. The author understood education as an essential mechanism for the development of the intellectual and moral autonomy of the individual. For Kant, education is

not limited to the mere transmission of knowledge, but must cultivate critical and reflective capacity, allowing the human being to leave his condition of intellectual and animalistic dependence and reach adulthood, preparing the subject to think for himself.

In the writing "On Pedagogy", the author reflects on the idea that education is fundamental for the formation of the human being as a full and moral individual. Kant emphasizes that man's humanity is not something innate, but rather built through education. Without education, the human being would remain in a state closer to animality, guided only by his instincts. Education is the process that develops reason, morality and culture, which allows man to realize himself as a rational and autonomous being. According to the author:

Man cannot become a true man except by education. He is what his education does. It should be noted that he can only receive such an education from other men, who have received it equally from others. Therefore, the lack of discipline and instruction in certain men makes them very bad masters of their pupils. (Kant, 1999, p.15)

Education is a social process that passes from generation to generation. No one educates alone, because we depend on those who came before us to transmit knowledge, values and discipline. This creates a chain of formation in which each generation is responsible for the next. Kant also warns about the lack of discipline, because if educators have not been well trained in terms of discipline and instruction, they will reproduce these failures to their students.

Integrated into the Enlightenment thought of his time, as he knew the works of the encyclopedists, having been influenced by Rousseau's "Émile", for Kant, man (as a species) is not born human, but becomes human through an educational process that demands, among other things: I. discipline, to control his impulses; II. instruction, to develop cognitive capacity; and III. moralization, for correct action (Kant, 1999). This process demands that individuals be educated with discipline from childhood, so that they overcome their state of animality and reach a state of rational, moral and autonomous humanity, because, according to the author:

Discipline is what prevents man [...] from deviating from humanity, through his animal inclinations [...] Savagery consists in the independence of any law. Discipline submits man to the laws of humanity and begins to make him feel the force of the laws themselves. But this should happen very early. Thus children are sent to school early, not so that they may learn anything there, but so that they may become accustomed to sitting quietly and to obeying punctually what is commanded them, so that in the



future they may not actually and immediately follow their every whim. (Kant, 1999, p. 15-18)

In order not to lose the context of Kant's statement and attribute to him only a teacher of Prussian morals, it would be interesting to consider the current difficulty of teachers and parents in proposing to students and children some discipline that, in the end, means dealing with the limits of the particular will for the sake of the collectivity. Apparently, the author extends the idea of autonomy even to passions and desires, which if they are not self-regulated, become impediments to any coexistence.

A dimension of education that is both disciplinary and political is perceptible here, insofar as children are disciplined at school so that they learn to be enlightened and rational citizens. To avoid a merely moralistic interpretation, Kant understands that the human being is a project under constant construction, dependent on a historical process of improvement and that "it is not enough to train children; it is urgent that they learn to think" (Kant, 1999, p.27). In other words, it is necessary to carry out a pedagogy that allows children to overcome, through education and discipline, their "animalistic" state. Through an educational process, children will leave their states of instinctive nature to become citizens, being able to march towards an enlightened, autonomous and adult-bearing state.

As Kant points out, education can be described as an art that improves over time, benefiting from the accumulation of knowledge transmitted over generations. In a passage from "On Pedagogy" (Kant, 1999), the author suggests that each new generation, by inheriting the knowledge and experiences of the previous ones, is in a more advantageous position to promote a more effective and harmonious education. This continuous acquisition allows the rational potentialities of individuals to be developed in a balanced way and in line with their essential purposes, so that the natural potentialities of humanity (which concern not instincts, but reason) are developed in a balanced way and in line with its purposes. Here is its definition:

Education is an art, the practice of which needs to be perfected by several generations. Each generation, in possession of the knowledge of the preceding generations, is always better equipped to carry on an education which will develop all the natural dispositions in the right proportion and in conformity with their purpose, and thus guide the whole human species to its destiny. (Kant, 1999, p.19)

In this way, according to the philosopher, education led humanity as a whole towards its ideal destiny, that is, the full realization of its capacities and purposes. The central idea is that education is a collective process, in which the progress of one generation serves as a foundation for the next, which guarantees an increasingly complete development aligned with human goals.

Kant understands, therefore, education as an indispensable element for the fulfillment of man's moral destiny. He states: "The human species is obliged to extract from itself little by little, with its own forces, all the natural qualities that belong to humanity" (Kant, 1999, p.12). Kantian pedagogy reflects a deep and systematic view of education as a process of humanization, since it defends an integral education that combines discipline, instruction and morality. In this sense, it is also highlighted that one of the objectives of education for Kant is to aim at the rational autonomy of the individual.

#### **4 AUTONOMY AS THE PURPOSE OF TRAINING**

In this topic, we will seek to demonstrate that the formation [*Bildung*] for autonomy is the purpose of education. As we have already seen, for Kant, autonomy is the fundamental principle of morality. A subject is autonomous when he acts according to the categorical imperative, which consists of a universal law that he himself, rationally, recognizes as valid. In view of this, human rationality is fundamental with regard to the formation of categorical imperatives that will guide moral action. In the Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals, Kant states:

The autonomy of the will is the property that the will possesses of being law for itself (regardless of the nature of the objects of will). The principle of autonomy is, therefore, to always choose in such a way that the maxims of our choice are understood, at the same time, as universal laws, in the act of willing. That this practical rule is an imperative, that is, that the will of every rational being is necessarily bound up with it as a condition, cannot be demonstrated by the pure analysis of the concepts implied in the will, because that is a synthetic proposition; it would be necessary to go beyond the knowledge of objects and enter into a critique of the subject, that is, of pure practical reason; In fact, this synthetic proposition which prescribes apodictically, must be capable of being known entirely a priori. (Kant, 1964, n.p.)

According to Kant, the autonomy of the subject occurs when his action can be considered a law for himself, universally and independently of desires, interests or external objects. This means that the moral subject acts not by sensible inclinations or impositions of

others, but by rational principles that he himself recognizes as universal. Autonomy requires that we act in such a way that the maxims of our will (our subjective intentions) can be valid as universal laws, that is, that they are valid for all rational beings. To the extent that I act in a rational and universal way, I have freedom, because I am acting autonomously, without a conditioning factor or dependence on an external, heteronomous authority or object.

This autonomy is a rational capacity that needs to be developed, and this is where education comes in as a crucial element in Kantian thought. For Kant, true education must form individuals capable of thinking and acting for themselves. As we have seen, in "What is Enlightenment?", Kant defines that "Immaturity is the inability to employ one's own understanding without the guidance of another" (Kant, 2012, p. 145), education, therefore, must free the individual from heteronomy and immaturity and lead him to autonomy and intellectual maturity, in which he acts out of rational conviction, not by coercion.

In an excerpt from *On Pedagogy*, Kant determines four principles that men should seek in education: 1. Be disciplined; 2. To become cultured; 3. To become prudent and, finally, man must, in education

[...] take care of moralization. In fact, it is not enough for man to be capable of all sorts of ends; it is also convenient that he should achieve the disposition to choose only good ends. Good are those ends necessarily approved by all, and which can be the ends of each one at the same time. (Kant, 1999, p.26)

Kant points out that men can be, just like animals, trained, however, it is necessary that they be illustrated, as we saw earlier, that they learn to think from childhood. This will determine the concept of goodness for the philosopher, since only the one who acts autonomously, that is, by himself, freely, using reason according to categorical imperatives, will be good. In this way, Kantian education does not mean training, but training for freedom, preparing the individual to act as an autonomous being and who has the capacity to act with freedom, to live in society.

Education, therefore, has the essential role of developing this autonomy. By forming educated subjects, citizens are also formed who use their rationality and, consequently, citizens who are autonomous and capable of contributing to an enlightened society. In this way, a political dimension stands out as one of the fundamental roles of education in Kant. Kantian moral philosophy and pedagogy are linked to the realization of human freedom with social applicability.

In the context of the author's thought, autonomy occupies a central place both in his moral philosophy and in his philosophy of education, based on human freedom. Education, in its true function, must be oriented not only to instruction or technical development, but, above all, to moral formation, that is, to the ability of the subject to act according to rational principles that he himself recognizes as universal. To educate for autonomy is to educate for adulthood, for the exit from intellectual tutelage, making possible an ethical existence guided by reason. In this sense, the Kantian proposal is evident: to form free human beings, capable of thinking for themselves, enlightened and autonomous.

Although coined at the end of the seventeenth century, such assumptions are extremely important in contemporary times, in the face of sectarianism and fanaticism that represents the reason kidnapped by minority.

Kantian thought, forged in an environment where magical thinking predominated, arose practically isolated in a canton of Germany, the small town of Königsberg, still under Prussian rule, but which spread like wildfire across Europe, inaugurating a new era. Its importance is not only due to the erection of a philosophical work that can be considered one of the main balustrades of modernity, but also to echo the great classical thinkers who place education as the mainspring of the cultural development of humanity. His courage is impressive, because he lives in an environment dominated by religion, military force and capitalism that was taking its first steps, all these agents seeking, in their own way, to control subjects and society. About this, the philosopher says:

But now I hear it exclaimed from all sides: Do not reason! The officer says: do not reason, but exercise! The financier: do not reason, but pay! The priest proclaims: do not reason, but believe! (Only one master in the world says: reason as much as you will, and about what you will, but obey!). That is the limitation of freedom everywhere. (Kant, 2012, p. 146)

As can be seen, the process of emancipation is expensive, as it means contradicting and often breaking with hegemonies of domination.

## **5 FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: CLARIFICATION, EDUCATION AND AUTONOMY**

For Kant, enlightenment is not limited only to the acquisition of knowledge, but is linked to moral autonomy and the overcoming of intellectual minority. We can consider that enlightenment is about the courage to think for oneself autonomously, rejecting dependence on external tutors, heteronyms, who decide in our place. This emancipation demands the

exercise of reason, both in the public domain and in the personal domain. It also demands an education that trains individuals capable of acting freely. Thus, Enlightenment starts from an educational process and autonomy starts from a moral education, which must combat laziness and cowardice in using reason.

Education must maintain discipline, instruction and moralization, transforming human instinctive animality into rational humanity. Kant emphasizes that the human being is not born autonomous, but becomes autonomous through a formative process that requires an effort that must cross generations. The school, in this sense, is not only a space for technical learning, but an environment for ethical training, where children develop the ability to think critically and act according to universal principles. Without this education oriented towards autonomy, enlightenment remains a distant goal, as individuals would continue to be hostages of their desires, their primordial instincts or the authority of others.

Autonomy, in turn, is the axis that articulates enlightenment and education. In Kant's morality, being autonomous means acting according to maxims that can be universalized, regardless of internal or external interests or social pressures. This autonomy is built through education, since it prepares the subject to resist primitive instincts, desires and heteronomous impositions. When Kant states that the autonomous will is the one that gives itself its own laws, he reinforces that true freedom is not the absence of rules, but the ability to follow rationally legitimized norms. Therefore, education that aims at autonomy is also an education for freedom, which is a condition for an enlightened society.

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