

The Unconscious as Root of Kant's A Priori Sentimentalism

Piero Giordanetti

In this paper I shall argue that the concept of the unconscious plays an important role in Kant's ethical thought and constitutes the basis to which he appeals on many occasions when he tries to justify the structure of moral consciousness, although he does not devote a special section or chapter to this subject. I will first try to legitimate the idea that since the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* Kant's moral theory has been based on the very important role of feelings and that it cannot be considered as absurd or as contrasting either with the intentions or with the results achieved by the philosopher to interpret his ethical position as a particular kind of sentimentalism. Second, I will focus my attention on the relation between Kant's "sentimentalism" and the relevant functions that unconscious processes fulfill within moral consciousness. The aim of this paper is to shed new light on elements that could make possible a wider and more thorough revaluation of dimensions in Kant's philosophy that have been either in part or wholly neglected: ethical sentimentalism and its relation to the unconscious.

1. Kant's Rationalistic Ethics in the *Critique of Pure Reason*

The ultimate lines of the "Introduction" to the first edition of the *Critique of pure reason* give evidence for the conception that moral philosophy cannot be regarded as a part of transcendental philosophy.

The chief target in the division of such a science is that absolutely no concept must enter into it that contains anything empirical, or that the a priori cognition be entirely pure. Hence, although the supreme principles of morality and the fundamental concepts of it are a priori cognitions, they still do not belong in transcendental philosophy, for, while they do not, to be sure, take the concepts of pleasure and displeasure, of desires and inclinations, etc., which are all of empirical origin, as the ground of their precepts, they still must necessarily include them in the composition of the system of pure morality in the concept of duty, as the hindrance that must be over-

come or the attraction that ought not to be made into a motive. Hence transcendental philosophy is a philosophy of pure, merely speculative reason. For everything practical, insofar as it contains incentives, is related to feelings, which belong among empirical sources of cognition.¹

The reason for the strict distinction between moral and transcendental philosophy is here reduced to the function of the sentiments in moral philosophy; they are “motives” of moral action. The comprehension of the foundation of Kant’s thesis will, thus, strictly depend on the meaning that the philosopher intended to assign to the two concepts we are dealing with. Hence, it will be necessary to ask what “motive” means for Kant in 1781 and what shape his conception of sentiment assumes. I will then investigate the reason why he connects them and sees them as a central link in the inner articulation of his system.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason* there is only a trace of a negative conception of feeling. Feeling always has to be considered as being of an empirical and subjective nature and cannot have any positive function for knowledge. In the chapter “On the Canon of Pure Reason” in the “Transcendental Doctrine of Method” section of the first *Critique*, Kant writes:

All practical concepts pertain to objects of satisfaction or dissatisfaction, i. e. of pleasure or displeasure, and thus, at least indirectly, to objects of our feeling. But since this is not a power for the representation of things, but lies outside the cognitive power altogether, the elements of our judgments, insofar as they are related to pleasure or displeasure, thus belong to practical philosophy, and not to the sum total of transcendental philosophy, which has to do solely with pure a priori cognitions (CPR A 801 note, p.675).

In this passage Kant reiterates that the constitutive elements of judgments formulated in the practical field are represented indirectly in the sentiments because they concern objects of pleasure and displeasure, of joy and pain: however, the feeling does not belong to the representative faculty, it cannot be included in the domain of cognition because there is no possibility of establishing a connection between a feeling and a cognitive power. So, moral philosophy, which concerns the faculty of desire and the will, cannot leave aside the link to feeling, and exactly for this reason it cannot be included in a transcendental philosophy, whose object is represented from pure a priori cognitions.

1 Cfr. CPR A 14/15. Translations from the *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* (CPR, first edition A, second edition B) are taken from Kant (1998). If not otherwise mentioned all citations from Kant’s works refer to the Akademie Ausgabe (AA) of Kant’s *Gesammelte Schriften* (1900ff).

We now move on to the concept of "motive". Once we have established that practical philosophy cannot be assumed as a constitutive part of moral philosophy, it is necessary to clarify how it would be possible to answer the fundamental question of morals, the question: "what ought I to do?" What ought to be the "motive" of moral action? Kant gives two different answers. We can refer, first of all, to individual happiness. It is the fulfillment of the totality of our inclinations and concerns, their multiplicity, their degree and their duration; it is a practical, pragmatic, and empirical law as a rule of prudence. It suggests "what we shall do if we want to enjoy happiness" and it can be grounded only on experience because only through a posteriori experience can we achieve the knowledge of the nature of our sensible inclinations. In the passage of the "Introduction," the term "motive" indicates the mere empirical nature of inclinations connected with happiness.

If we would like to provide a foundation for moral philosophy, we cannot ground it on the motive of happiness but it is necessary to single out a second type of motive. If it is true that practical philosophy, having to do not with the faculty of knowledge but with the faculty of desire, is constrained to presuppose feeling, it is also true that there is the possibility of indicating a realm in which the motive of morality can be set in direct relation to the idea of morality and is hence a priori. The concept of the worthiness of happiness is a true ethical law because it does not need inclinations and their satisfaction and regards freedom of a rational, non-sensible being, in general, not individually and it analyzes the necessary conditions through which freedom can agree with happiness. This is an a priori dimension that is grounded upon ideas of pure reason. Kant calls this an a priori *corpus mysticum*, a term that he derives from Leibniz: inclinations and individual sentiments are banned from this world in which impediments to morality which derive from the weakness and impurity of human nature can be removed. The *corpus mysticum* is merely a practical idea which exercises an influence on the sensible world and allows to reduce it to that idea. It is thus that Kant expresses his distinction between an empirical and a pure motive of the will: "The practical law from the motive of happiness I call pragmatic (rule of prudence); but that which is such that it has no other motive than the worthiness to be happy I call moral (moral law)" (CPR A 806/B834 677). "I assume that there are really pure moral laws, which determine completely a priori (without regard to empirical motives) i.e. happiness) the action and omission, i.e., the use of the freedom of a rational being in general" (CPR A 807/B835 678).

The problem that the discussion on the theme of the *Bewegungsgrund* has to face is uniquely that of the objective reality of morals and freedom of a rational being in general: the treatment of the *Bewegungsgrund* and the introduction of the concept of the worthiness of happiness is the analysis of the necessary conditions solely by virtue of which freedom can harmonize with happiness (CPR A 806/B834). “What ought I to do?,” this is the question raised by moral philosophy. The answer sounds: “do that by which you would be deserving of being happy.” The objective reality of freedom is hence proved through the concept of the pure principles of morality and is realized in an intelligible world. Sentiment does not play any role in this process of demonstration, which appeals exclusively to the concept of reason and of rational beings and moves away from anything that has a relation to the sensible.

The theme of the *Bewegungsgrund*, thus, constitutes the true object of the second question and is abandoned as soon as Kant passes to the third. Now he asks “what can I hope” and so he transcends the limits of moral philosophy by facing a problem which is both moral and speculative. Although happiness has been excluded from the a priori theory of the motive of morality, it cannot be denied that the interest of reason is in any case connected with the idea of happiness. The task of the research will be to define in what happiness may consist if we want to avoid that it is interpreted empirically. Up to this point we have dealt only with the “motive” (*Bewegungsgrund*) of morality but we have not yet treated the theme of the incentive (*Triebfeder*). Now Kant affirms that “without a God and a world that is now not visible to us but is hoped for, the majestic ideas of morality are, to be sure, objects of approbation and admiration but not incentives for resolve and realization, because they would not fulfill the whole end that is natural for every rational being and determined a priori and necessarily through the very same pure reason” (CPR A 813/B 841 681). The argumentation leads us from the *Bewegungsgrund* to the *Triebfeder*. Even in this context Kant avoids any reference to sentiments that are always regarded as empirical. The reality of the moral law and the reality of happiness concern man as a rational being, whereas the link between morality and his sensible nature cannot be resolved.

If we now turn to the initial citation and to the reason of the exclusion of moral philosophy from the transcendental system, we can grasp why feeling has been connected with the concept of the *Bewegungsgrund*: feeling is empirical and concerns empirical happiness which Kant contrasts with the worthiness of happiness and only the theme of the motive is an object of moral philosophy whereas the incentive pertains to both

moral and speculative philosophy. Feeling is an individual sensation or impression that differentiates one human being from another and cannot serve as the basis of a universal and necessary judgment. In part 2 we will see that this rationalistic conception of morality which tends to exclude all sentiments from the a priori dimension of the moral system has been radically altered by Kant in the second *Critique* and that this significant modification has been caused by the introduction of the idea that it is possible to derive a priori sentiments from the idea of moral. In these pages, I will not discuss the reasons why and the different documents in which this modification is documented but will rather concentrate my attention on the new theory².

2. Kant's Pure Ethical Sentimentalism in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. The Discovery of A Priori Feelings

I shall try to show, first, that Kant's demonstration of the objective reality of morality is not fulfilled by the introduction of the fact of reason, but that for this sake Kant needs to appeal to other four theories. In order to prove that the moral law exists, Kant establishes a strict relation between rational consciousness of morality and feelings. He introduces in the first place the feeling of respect. Further he develops the idea that respect leads to a feeling of satisfaction. Thirdly, he appeals to the feeling of the exigency of reason in the section, the "Dialectic of Pure Practical Reason," and, finally, he theorizes the union of all these feelings in the concept of the heart of the individual which is treated in the "Doctrine of Method" section. This constitutes what might be called Kant's a priori ethical sentimentalism in the second *Critique*.³

What does it mean for Kant that the concept of moral consciousness is an innate feature of human beings? He determines moral consciousness by denying that the consciousness of morality can be considered an intellectual intuition, because this would mean to admit that human beings are able to achieve a knowledge that pertains only to God. He denies further that our awareness of the moral law could be defined as an a priori sen-

2 On this problem, see Klemme (2010, 11–30).

3 It should be added that the new conception of morality presented in the second *Critique* is anticipated in the "Preface" to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1787 in which Kant proposes to regard his new theory as a Newtonian revolution. See Giordanetti (2003).

sible intuition because moral consciousness has nothing to do with space or time. The last possibility of identifying morality and intuition could be to regard moral consciousness as an empirical intuition, but in this case, too, Kant is explicit and does not accept that moral consciousness could be set on the same level as psychological intuition.

I purpose that when he addresses the theme of our consciousness of the moral law he has the intention of underlining that this consciousness is the result of the relation between a priori reason and a priori feelings. By this way of reading the text, the third part of the “Analytic” does not include a moral psychology nor the application of the moral law to human beings as is often maintained, but rather is part of the justification of the reality of moral reason. Since human beings are endowed both with sensibility and reason, their consciousness of the universal law of the morality can be represented to them only through cooperation between the superior and the inferior faculty of desire. In different passages of his work he refers to the consciousness of morality not only as a rational objective knowledge but also as a particular sensation, as an a priori feeling. In order to maintain these theses, it is useful to refer to a passage of the “Critical Elucidation of the Analytic of Pure Practical Reason,” in which Kant states that he could carry out “very well and with sufficient certainty,” “the justification of moral principles as principles of pure reason by a mere appeal to the judgment of common human understanding” because there is “a special kind of feeling,” which is able to make known the difference between empirical and rational determining grounds, between good and evil. This feeling is not to be confused with the feeling of gratification or pain that arouses desire, because it is a special kind and doesn’t have an empirical origin in our bodily experience. The special kind of feeling is the feeling of respect that does not precede the lawgiving of practical reason because it is not produced by the senses nor by objects acting on them, but is produced only by reason. This is the reason why “no one, not even the most common human understanding, can fail to see at once, in an example presented to him, that he can indeed be advised by empirical grounds of volition to follow their charms but that he can never be expected to be anything but the pure practical law of reason alone.”⁴ These passages show that it is not misleading to interpret Kant’s moral consciousness as grounded not only on reason but also on the feeling of respect and that the latter has not merely to be regarded

4 Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant (1997, 78), AA 5:92.

as the subjective part of morality, but also plays a very important role in the justification of the reality of the moral law for human beings.

The analysis of the a priori genesis of the feeling of respect is not the terminal point of the argumentation of the second *Critique*; this work pays also attention to another particular feeling when it gives its first answer to the problem of the "Antinomy of the Pure Practical Reason." In that context, Kant elaborates on the idea that there is a way to demonstrate the possibility that happiness necessarily corresponds to virtue. Although it is not possible to show the existence of a necessary connection between virtue and happiness in the mechanical course of natural events, the particular nature of the feeling of respect can lead us to another particular feeling, which Kant calls "contentment with oneself." This word does not denote enjoyment as the word happiness does, but indicates rather a satisfaction with one's existence, an analogue of happiness that must necessarily accompany the consciousness of virtue.

The genesis of this feeling is analogous to the genesis of the feeling of respect. If we ask what the moral law in its majesty produces in us, we can answer this difficult question by referring to an initial feeling of empirical pain, which is soon followed by a feeling of a priori pain. The feeling of empirical pain arises from the fact that the majesty of the moral law acts on us producing the humiliation of our inclinations. This discloses to us the realm of freedom, because we are now free to feel an attraction for the law of God. In an analogous way, the feeling of respect produces a feeling of satisfaction, which makes sensible incentives worthless. This feeling is neither beatitude nor empirical happiness, but is merely a negative pleasure that consists in having consciousness that we do not need things that are present in nature, but only our freedom. As the feeling of respect the contentment derives from the humiliation of the sensible inclinations that is made possible by the feeling of respect.

This is not the last feeling whom we meet in the second *Critique*; even when Kant deals with the problem of the postulates, through which he achieves a real demonstration of the reality of God and immortality of the soul, he introduces another type of feeling; the need of reason to which is dedicated chapter VIII of the "Dialectic" section: "On Assent from a Need of Reason." Kant states that postulates can be admitted only if we assume that a need of pure practical reason leads to them. "But in the present case it is a need of reason arising from an objective determining ground of the will, namely the moral law, which necessarily binds every rational being and therefore a priori justifies him in presup-

posing in nature the conditions befitting it and makes the latter inseparable from the complete practical use of reason.”⁵

It is interesting to note that even in the “Doctrine of Method” feelings represent the center of the theory although the horizon has changed. Whereas in the first part of the work we never meet the concept of the heart, in the “Doctrine of the Method of Pure Practical Reason” the analysis relies especially on this concept. In the heart of the individual all feelings that we have encountered until now are acting. The feeling of respect, the feeling of satisfaction and the need of reason build a unity and guarantee the possibility of grounding the reality of the moral law in the human individual. Only on account of this unity does it make sense to speak of a method of education toward the moral law.

After having proved that virtue really exists in the human heart and that pure virtue has much more strength and power on human heart than inclinations based on pleasure and pain, Kant exposes his method of moral education. It should be stressed that this method is not empirical and that Kant is not developing here a mere a posteriori pedagogy, but rather that merely by tracing the outlines of this procedure he is thinking in terms of a two-stage process whose basis lies in the a priori sentiments of the morally beautiful and of the morally sublime. The starting point of Kant’s method is constituted by conversations about morality. Every human being is endowed with sentiment of the propensity (*Hang*) of reason; this leads him to act in accords with pleasure in even the subtlest examination of practical problems; it is worthwhile to note that this proves the existence of a certain interest in the beauty of moral action. The presence of a Socratic component in the attribution of a maieutic function to the conversations between the moral philosopher and the scholar is undeniable. It also seems to me to be evident that as in the *Foundations* and the other parts of the second *Critique* these considerations presuppose the use of the obscure representations of Leibnizian provenance.⁶

5 Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant (1997, 119), AA 5:143 note.

6 In order to prove the real existence of the moral law within the heart of the individual, Kant appeals to the distinction between the right and the left hand, that he has already illustrated in the essay of 1786, “What Does It Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking.” In this essay, Kant lays bare the a priori dimension of the feeling of geographical, mathematical and logical orientation. In all of these cases, Kant maintains that we cannot leave aside subjective feeling, which alone makes the triple orientation possible. Even in this case, subjective sentiment is a priori and orientation in space is not guaranteed from a pure intuition but rather from a pure feeling. This seems to me to be the new element

There are two theses that Kant intends to demonstrate. The first concerns the subject of the action, the second, the observer of it. As to the subject, the idea is that "an honest man" is truthful, without wavering or even doubting."⁷ Whoever would be calumnious because he was offered "gains, great gifts or high rank" or because he was threatened with loss of friendship, freedom and life, could not regard himself as moral, because he would act against the innocence of the honest man against whom he is calumnious. In the case in which he would find himself in an analogous situation, what would be moral is to renounce the calumny. One might however formulate an objection: would it not be against the moral law if a person were disposed toward personal sacrifice or to the sacrifice of his family? It is essential to note at this point that Kant distinguishes between *Wert* and *Zustand*, between "value" and "condition"; only the first can be considered as moral, the second is merely empirical. What could be compromised by honesty is not the value of the honest and truthful person, neither the personal value of his family but only its empirical condition. The sacrifice of the empirical condition is not to be conceived as opposite to the moral law, but is a condition which makes possible an elevation of the value of the subject. Kant is here a scholar of the Stoics and of the Christian idea of humility. This example demonstrates that he who does not submit himself to calumny grounds his action on the feeling of respect for the law and, hence, on the feeling of respect for other human beings. This is the reason why pain can elevate and raise the value of the subject. Again, the feeling of respect is described as constituted by an a priori pain from which follows a feeling of a priori attraction to the moral law. As to what happens in the observer, it is important to highlight that Kant is interested in a priori sentiment and the affects that arise on the basis of it. The scholar of the moral philosopher is not attracted to law only from reason and superior faculties of the soul. He has feelings which are disposed in a climax which leads from the "mere approval and applause," to "admiration, to amazement and to the greatest veneration," and finally to the "lively

that this essay introduces if we compare it with the writing *On the First Ground of the Distinction of Regions in Space* (1768), the *Prolegomena* (1783) and the *Metaphysical Principles* (1786) in which the example of hands has been already adduced. In the writing of 1768, the example was used to prove that space is not a concept but rather an object; in the other two writings Kant appeals to it in order to demonstrate that the distinction between right and left hand does not derive from a concept but rather from an intuition.

7 Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant (1997, 128–129), AA 5:156.

wish that himself could be such a man.” If we value it from the standpoint of the inclinations, virtue has no utility but is founded merely on the purity of moral character which depends on the purity of the moral principle. The conclusion of these considerations is that morality has much more force on the human heart the more purely that it is represented, although this does not mean that he admits that morality always has to be in contrast with empirical happiness.

When Kant says that “virtue is worth so much only because it costs so much,”⁸ this does not concern a positive definition of morality, as Scheler has objected. It costs much to abandon all that is an obstacle to the realization of the moral law but it does not cost much to embrace the spiritual dimension of the law. Virtue costs much from the standpoint of the inclinations, not from the standpoint of the sublime feelings to which it gives rise in the “listener.” So, moral beauty is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for the moral law having access to the heart and becoming the principle that leads its resolutions. The second exercise, thus, has the task not only of awakening a certain interest, but also of founding a true moral interest, which, as pure interest, is possible only on the grounds of a preceding feeling of a priori pain to which follows an a priori lust, namely, respect. It is significant that Kant connects it, as in the “Dialectic,” to the destruction of needs and inclinations, from which follows a feeling of liberation from the discontentment. The soul is made capable of receiving a sensation of contentment which has a different, namely an a priori origin.

It emerges with clarity that feelings do not have a subordinate role in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, so that we can interpret them as the subjective reflex of the action of reason. Rather, they are essential to the structure of the proof that morality is not a vain chimera, but something that can be translated into practice.

I will now turn to the theme of the unconscious by maintaining that there is no possibility for Kant to justify the reality of moral consciousness through the a priori feelings without adopting the view that the origin of them lies in the *fundus animae*. We become further conscious of the moral law when we are able to produce in us several feelings, namely a feeling of respect, a feeling of satisfaction and a feeling of the exigence. According to the doctrine of the *Faktum der Vernunft*, the fact of reason, which is explicitly introduced in the second *Critique* the philosopher neither needs, nor wants to invent or introduce any new prin-

8 Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant (1997, 129), AA 5:156.

ciple of morality, but only a new formula. The ground for this is that moral consciousness has already been present to all human beings since they were created on the earth and is an essential feature of their nature. The world has never been ignorant of what good and evil are and has never been in thoroughgoing error about this. "But who would even want to introduce a new principle of all morality and, as it were, first invent it? Just as if, before him, the world had been ignorant of what duty is or in thoroughgoing error about it."⁹

The thesis that Kant's theory of sentimental and rational moral consciousness cannot leave aside the admission of the relevant role of unconscious representations and processes in the soul can be strengthened by citing a passage from the *Foundations*, where we read that it is not required "subtle reflection" to distinguish the sensible from the intelligible world. Even "the commonest understanding" is able "in its own way" to note, that there is a difference between the representations which come to us involuntarily, as do those of the senses, and "enable us to cognize objects only as they affect us and the nature of the objects as they are in themselves so that, as regards representations of this kind, even with the most strenuous attentiveness and distinctness that the understanding can ever bring to them we can achieve only cognition of appearances, never of things in themselves. As soon as this distinction has once been made (perhaps merely by means of the difference noticed between representations given us from somewhere else and in which we are passive, and those that we produce simply from ourselves and in which we show our activity), then it follows of itself that we must admit and assume behind appearances something else that is not appearance, namely things in themselves, although, since we can never become acquainted with them but only with how they affect us, we resign ourselves to being unable to come any closer to them or ever to know what they are in themselves."¹⁰ It is very important to stress what Kant says only incidentally and without further argument about it: this distinction can be made by even the commonest understanding for the reason that the commonest understanding, has been endowed with "an obscure discrimination of judgment which it calls feeling."

9 Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant (1997, 7) AA 5:8.

10 Cf. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant (1997, 56) AA 4:451.

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