

**KANT'S UNIVERSAL HUMAN REASON.  
A POLYPHONIC, FUNCTIONAL, AND OPEN CONCEPT**  
*Razão universal humana kantiana. Um conceito polifônico, funcional e aberto*

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**Resumo:** Este artigo tem como objetivo investigar o conceito de "razão humana universal" (*allgemeine Menschenvernunft*) kantiano pelo aprofundamento em seus escritos publicados e não publicados. Baseando-se em visões lógicas e antropológicas de Georg Friedrich Meier, Kant desenvolveu um modelo de razão que reuniu demandas do Iluminismo para o aumento do conhecimento e luta contra os preconceitos, sem, no entanto sucumbir à perversão da verdade absoluta. A razão pode ser encontrada em todos, uma vez que não é exclusiva, mas todos tem acesso a ela apenas em parte, dado que os seres humanos inevitavelmente a seguem, sem, no entanto estarem cientes disso, devido a preconceitos e pontos de vista particulares. Na medida em que, a razão kantiana exige autonomia e comunicação, e é de persistente validade cultural e teórica, como é provado pelo pensamento de Hannah Arendt.

**Palavras-chave:** Immanuel Kant. Georg Friedrich Meier. Hannah Arendt. Razão universal humana. Egoísmo lógico. Pluralismo.

**Abstract:** This paper aims to investigate Kant's concept of 'universal human reason' (*allgemeine Menschenvernunft*) by delving into his both published and unpublished writings. Relying on Georg Friedrich Meier's logical and anthropological views, Kant developed a model of reason which met the Enlightenment's demands for increasing knowledge and fight against prejudices, without however succumbing to the perversion of absolute truth. Reason can be found in everybody since it is non-exclusive, but everybody has access to it only in part since human beings unavoidably follow, without however being aware of it, preconceptions and private views. Insofar, Kantian reason requires both autonomy and communication, and is of persistent cultural and theoretical validity, as is proved by Hannah Arendt's thought.

**Keywords:** Immanuel Kant. Georg Friedrich Meier. Hannah Arendt. Universal Human Reason. Logical Egoism. Pluralism.

## 1. Introduction

The concept of ‘reason’ (*Vernunft*) pervades Kant’s work in all its forms, from printed works to manuscripts, from letters to the transcripts of lectures. It occurs in an epistemological context, where it is juxtaposed to the ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*), in a moral context, where it is used to denote the act of legislating, and in anthropological and logical contexts, where it is the touchstone in verifying the validity of knowledge. In spite of and beyond all these many perspectives, which may seem disconnected from each other, it is possible to discern structural features in Kant’s conception of ‘reason’ which make it possible to understand its function within the critical system, but also and above all to see its current theoretical and cultural relevance.

To achieve this, our attention will turn first to the occurrences of ‘universal human reason’ (*allgemeine Menschenvernunft*) within Kant’s corpus and sources (§ 1); then to the conceptual plexus that forms around this concept and includes other key-notions, such as ‘pluralism’ (*Pluralismus*) and ‘broader way of thinking’ (*erweiterte Denkungsart*) (§ 2); lastly, in conclusion, to the persistent cultural and theoretical validity of the model thus obtained in the light of the twentieth-century’s most striking revival of this conceptual plexus: Hannah Arendt (§ 3).

## 2. Universal Human Reason

In the language of Kant, the noun ‘reason’ is almost always accompanied by qualifying adjectives, of which ‘pure’ (*rein*) and ‘practical’ (*praktisch*) are the two best known examples. In the present context, however, it is necessary to focus on a different pair of adjectives which usually excite less interest, but will serve to paint a less epistemologically-biased picture of Kantian thought on this topic, and which indeed turn up in the most disparate contexts. They are ‘universal’ (*allgemein*) and ‘human’ (*menschlich*), the latter often being incorporated into the noun *Menschenvernunft*. A survey of Kant’s *Lectures on Logic* and *Anthropology*, three *Critiques*, letters and minor essays yields some highly significant passages where the ‘universal human reason’ (*allgemeine Menschenvernunft*)

becomes a sort of theoretical plumb line to gauge the successfulness of every analysis undertaken – it bears repeating – in fields that are not necessarily contiguous.

The pairing of these two adjectives, or rather, the resulting expression ‘universal human reason’ serves to convey a specific message which at once makes use of and transforms an idea that was central to the Enlightenment: on the one hand, reason is ‘universal’, insofar as it is non-exclusive and is a characteristic that everyone possesses; on the other, reason is ‘human’, insofar as everyone has access to it only in part, in accordance with their own personal perspective, which is perforce limited. Everyone therefore has the tools to formulate correct judgments and further the pursuit of the truth, because reason is not a privilege of the few but a prerogative of all; yet no one can claim to be self-sufficient in this process because the reason that is ‘universal’ is also ‘human’, and as such it is determined and deformed by individual points of view and prejudices.

This conviction took root probably towards the beginning of the ‘Sixties in correspondence with the anti-intellectualist development that began more or less mid-decade and may be attributed to readings of Rousseau and Spalding,<sup>1</sup> and remained consistent throughout the entire period of Kant’s production. The source for the development of the idea is Georg Friedrich Meier, an author on whose texts Kant lectured at the University of Königsberg for approximately forty years, studying both the *Vernunftlehre* and related *Auszug* (1752), and the *Beyträge zu der Lehre von den Vorurtheilen des menschlichen Geschlechts* (1766).

Meier speaks of the “universal human understanding [*der allgemeine Menschenverstand*]” (*Vernunftlehre*, p. 143, § 129), stating that “in no man is reason a universal reason [*eine allgemeine Vernunft*]”, and even that “the most reasonable man of all is such only in relation to certain objects of reason”, whereas “in respect of all other things he judges in the same hesitant, blind and impetuous manner a child would do” (*Beyträge*, p. 125).<sup>2</sup>

Kant is influenced by both Meier’s idea and his ‘lexical mobility’, and to start with he does not set upon a fixed expression, using both of Meier’s nouns, *Verstand* and *Vernunft*,

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<sup>1</sup> Kant himself refers to Rousseau in this regard (AA, XX, p. 44). On this see Schmucker (1961, p. 178), Zammito (2001; 2002, pp. 92, 114-115), and Bacin (2006, pp. 5-6). However, there is some evidence that Johann Joachim Spalding’s work *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* also played a certain role in promoting Kant’s anti-intellectualistic turn, cf. Macor (2013a, pp. 202-205).

<sup>2</sup> On Meier’s thought see Gawlick (1989), Schenk (1994), Pozzo (2000; 2005), Cataldi Madonna (2007), Godel (2007, pp. 94-106, 164-179).

interchangeably.<sup>3</sup> In his letter to Lambert of 31<sup>st</sup> December 1765, Kant mentions the “touchstone of the universal human reason [*allgemeine menschliche Vernunft*]” (AA, X, p. 55), while in the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer elucidated by Dreams of Metaphysics*, released a few months later and already in press by December 1765, he resorts to the locution “universal human understanding [*allgemeiner menschlicher Verstand*]”, in reference to the impulse “to shift the focal point” of our tendencies “*outside ourselves* and to locate it in other rational beings”; this “makes us so heavily and so universally dependent on the judgment of others, and causes us to regard the approval or applause of others as so necessary to perfecting our own good opinion of ourselves”, a tendency which cannot be explained away through mere vanity, but is rather the mark of “our dependency on the *universal human understanding*” (AA, II, p. 334; TP, pp. 321-322).

The transcripts of the *Lectures on Logic* faithfully reflect this lexical fluctuation, even within a single group of notes, where the nouns ‘understanding’ (*Verstand*) and ‘reason’ (*Vernunft*), mostly accompanied by the adjective *allgemein*, but also in rarer cases by the less common *gemeinschaftlich*, alternate without any discernible distinction (cf. e.g. AA, XXIV/2, pp. 552, 628, 794, 833, 871, 874). However, it is the concept of ‘universal human reason’ (*allgemeine Menschenvernunft*) that progressively gained currency in the Kantian lexicon as an anthropological and logical notion. Its role is not merely to describe; it does not aim simply to give account of the fact that reason belongs to everyone and no one at the same time. It is more radically functional, in that it contains the rules of behavior that are to be followed.<sup>4</sup>

In *The Vienna Logic*, which may be dated with some degree of certainty to the early ‘Eighties, Kant recalls the argument set out in the *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*:

Providence has directed, however, that we expound our judgments to universal [human] reason [*allgemeine Menschenvernunft*], and has placed in us the drive to do this. [...] If it does not happen that we lay our thoughts before universal human reason, then we have cause to call into question the validity of our judgments, because we do not wish to follow nature's wise precept that we test our truth on the judgments of others. (AA, XXIV, p. 874; LL, p. 323)

Evidently, Kant has a clearly marked objective to identify a sort of ‘functional structure’ of “universal human reason”, which by its very nature is afflicted with

<sup>3</sup> On Meier’s influence on Kant see: Hinske (1993), Rumore (2005, pp. XXXI-XXVI), Macor (2013b).

<sup>4</sup> For an initial treatment of the concept ‘universal human reason’ in Kant, see: Hinske (1980, pp. 35-43; 1990, pp. 85-86; 1998, pp. 74-90).

“imperfections” (*Refl* 2269, AA, XVI, p. 293). It is no coincidence that the clearest argument in this connection may be found in *The discipline of pure reason with regard to its polemical use*:

One can regard the critique of pure reason as the true court of justice for all controversies of pure reason; for the critique [...] is rather set the task of determining and judging what is lawful in reason in general in accordance with its principles in its primary institution.

Without this, reason is as it were in the state of nature, and it cannot make its assertions and claims valid or secure them except through *war*. The critique, on the contrary, which derives all decisions from the ground-rules of its own constitution, whose authority no one can doubt, grants us the peace of a state of law, in which we should not conduct our controversy except by *due process*. What brings the quarrel in the state of nature to an end is a *victory*, of which both sides boast, although for the most part there follows only an uncertain peace [...]; but in the state of law it is the *verdict*, which, since it goes to the origins of the controversies themselves, must secure a perpetual peace. [...]

[...] human reason [...] recognizes no other judge than universal human reason itself [*allgemeine Menschenvernunft*], in which everyone has a voice. (*KrV*, A 751-752/B 779-780; *CPR*, pp. 649-650)<sup>5</sup>

In other words, ‘universal human reason’ already contains an indication of how to relate to the others’ ‘universal human reason’, which is equally as reliable because it is ‘universal’, and equally as limited because it is ‘human’. The only genuine attitude is one that is rooted in the awareness of the twofold nature of reason, which is at once necessary and insufficient, without radicalizing the positive moment, i.e. without undue absolutization, but also without hypostatizing the negative, and denying thereby the individual the possibility of attaining the truth.

Structurally speaking, human reason is dual and dynamic in that it is divided internally into two functions that are different but interwoven, and must always keep the interrelation active. It confirms the validity of autonomous thought, a typical Enlightenment objective, while setting limitations designed to prevent it from falling back into a sort of solipsistic

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<sup>5</sup> As usual, passages from the *Critique of Pure Reason* are referenced by numbers from ‘A’, the first edition of 1781, and/or ‘B’, the second edition of 1787. Kant’s other writings are referenced using the following abbreviations: *Allgemeine Naturgeschichte und Theorie des Himmels*=*NTH*; *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*=*Anth*, *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?*=*WA*, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*=*GMS*, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*=*KU*, *Logik*=*Log*, *V-Lo/Philippi*=*Logik Philippi*, *Reflexion*=*Refl*, *Was heißt sich im Denken orientieren?*=*WDO*. The abbreviations of critical edition and translations are listed in the bibliography.

epistemological perversion.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, on the one hand, “the supreme touchstone of truth” resides “in oneself (i.e. in one’s *own* reason)” (*WDO*, AA, VIII, p. 147n.; *RRT*, p. 18, italics are mine), on the other it is found to exist also outside of us and our reason, as a “*criterium veritatis externum*” (*Anth*, AA, VII, p. 128; *AHE*, p. 240). In this latter case, it is to be sought in the ‘reason of others’, which acts as a corrective for inevitable mistakes individual reason will unavoidably make due to the myopia that a single viewpoint necessarily entails: man must “compare his prejudices with those of others and determine the truth based upon a relationship of concordance with the reason of others” (*V-Lo/Philippi*, AA, XXIV, p. 428), and “test his judgment by the understanding of others” as a necessary “touchstone” (*Anth*, AA, VII, p. 128; *AHE*, p. 240), otherwise bear the penalty of the uncertainty caused by the merely subjective, and therefore illusory nature of his convictions.

Autonomous thought and emancipation from authority, but also from other forms of heteronomy such as the tyranny of passions or the hasty judgment, are not sufficient to ensure man’s effective growth in knowledge. If “Enlightenment” is “*the human being’s emergence from his self-incurred minority*” (*WA*, AA, VIII, p. 35; *PP*, p. 17) and “the maxim of always thinking for oneself” (*WDO*, AA, VIII, p. 146n.; *RRT*, p. 18n.), in other words, “liberation from superstition”, there is a further rule to prevent this liberation becoming the start of another form of subordination: “To think in the position of everyone else” (*KU*, AA, V, p. 294; *CPJ*, p. 174).

Clearly, the concept of ‘universal human reason’ is not merely functional in that it contains an indication of how we must proceed in the pursuit of knowledge, but also explicitly polyphonic and open. Polyphonic because it is intrinsically plural and cannot be cut off from the judgment of others, open because it is conscious of this multi-voiced nature, it respects it and makes it the basis of reasoning: it is not only a matter of listening, because we in fact put ourselves in the perspective of others. In Kant’s own words, “reason is not designed to isolate itself, but to enter into community [*Die Vernunft ist nicht dazu gemacht, daß sie sich isolire, sondern in Gemeinschaft setze*]” (*Refl* 897, AA, XV, p. 392).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> On the key idea of ‘autonomous thought’ (*Selbstdenken*) in Kant and in the German Enlightenment see: Hinske (1986), Otto and Zammito (2001), Micheli (2007), Macor (2010, pp. 73-99).

<sup>7</sup> On the contrary, in the *Analytic of Principles* of the first *Critique* Kant defines the understanding as “an island, [...] enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself” (*KrV*, A 235/B 294; *CPR*, p. 339). On this passage see Sgarbi (2013, pp. 164-165) and Macor (forthcoming).

### 3. Pluralism and Broad-Minded Way of Thinking

The duplicity of the universal human reason gives rise to a series of concepts which become crucial for Kant and which ensure enduring validity to the logical and anthropological, but also more generally cultural, reflection which underlies it. It is a complex of notions which Kant develops in answer to the need to hold in consideration both the ‘universality’ and the ‘humanity’ of reason, causing him to spell out by articulating them the consequences implied in the model presented above. They are among others: ‘pluralism’ (*Pluralismus*) and ‘broad-minded way of thinking’ (*erweiterte Denkungsart*). Kant thematizes these concepts in the same contexts as the ones in which he speaks of the need to resort to the judgment of others, whether positive or negative, on the basis of the structure and nature of universal human reason.

More or less simultaneously to the growing interest in universal human reason, the *Reflections on Logic* and the transcriptions of the *Lectures on Logic* show a parallel and correlated investigation into the “participatory reason [*theilnehmende Vernunft*]” (*Refl* 2147, AA, XVI, p. 252; *Refl* 2564, AA, XVI, p. 418).

The goal to be achieved is to overcome one’s own narrow point of view, which, when made absolute, can degenerate into the exact opposite of autonomous thought, one of the key precepts of the Enlightenment, becoming a full-blown prejudice. Again, the source is Meier, who had seen in the excessive faith placed in one’s own point of view a prejudice which is as damaging as that of “excessive prestige (*praeiudicium auctoritatis*)”, and an equally damaging form of heteronomy: “logical egoism (*egoismus logicus*)” occurs when we accept or reject something, only “because it is we who support it”, it is the fruit of “arrogance and love of self” and predominates in “the greater part of scholars”, despite its being a “prejudice so shameful and pedantic that it does not even merit confutation” (*Vernunftlehre*, p. 277, § 202).<sup>8</sup>

Kant is quite faithful in following Meier, and devotes a significant amount of attention to logical egoism, from the *Reflections* to the *Lectures on Logic* (cf. e.g. *Refl* 903, 1482, 1505, AA, XV, pp. 395, 662, 811; *Refl* 2147, AA, XVI, p. 252; *Vo-Lo/Philippi*, AA, XXIV, p. 428).

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. also *Auszug*, p. 46, § 170. The prejudice of ‘logical egoism’ is an important innovation within the Enlightenment theory of prejudices, and in this regard I refer to: Schneiders (1983, pp. 315-318), Pozzo (2000, pp. 228-232), Macor (2009, pp. 103-104).

In *The Blomberg Logic* “[t]he prejudice of excessive trust placed in oneself is nothing other than *egoism*”, which is called either “*cosmologicus*, when one holds that there is no other thinking being, no world outside me”, or “*logicus*, when ones holds that he alone judges rationally, that no one else is in a position to judge something or better to be able to have insight into it” (AA, XXIV, p. 187; LL, p. 148). Elsewhere, Kant connects these two types of egoism: “The *logical egoist* considers it unnecessary also to test his judgment by the understanding of others”, but in so doing is concerned “with oneself as the whole world”, forgetting that he is in fact a “citizen of the world” (Anth, AA, VII, pp. 128, 130; AHE, pp. 240, 241-242).<sup>9</sup>

The opposite of logical egoism is obviously ‘pluralism’, also ‘logical’, which allows both the Enlightenment claim to independence of judgment and the need, which is equally as important to the Enlightenment, for comparison with the independence of judgment of others. Neither demand is ignored, as they integrate and mitigate each other. It is not a question of erasing the precept of emancipation from the guardianship of others from the Enlightenment’s Decalogue, but rather preventing anti-Enlightenment trends from arising.

The threat posed by logical egoism is, however, only the negative side of the coin, because if it is true that the ‘humanity’ of reason means that no one can claim exclusive rights to the truth, its ‘universality’ means that everyone can at least claim ‘partial’ rights. In other words: no one can be sure of being right, but everyone can be sure of not being wrong.

Indeed, Kant is convinced of the ‘impossibility of total error’ and asserts that “whereas in historical and empirical questions it is possible to be completely wrong, for example if one sets before the birth of Christ something that happened after, in rational judgments [...] one must always be right, if one considers the thing from a well-defined point of view”, and this means not overlooking any opinion whatsoever, regardless of how absurd it may seem at first blush (Refl 2212, AA, XVI, p. 272). “Even in the most unreasonable opinions to have gained currency among men may some grain of truth be found” (NTH, AA, I, p. 227), since “[e]very error in which the human understanding can fall is only *partial* [...], and in every erroneous judgment there must always lie something true. For a *total* error would be a complete opposition to the laws of the understanding and of reason” (Log, AA, IX, p. 54; LL, p. 561).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> I examined the role of cosmopolitanism from this standpoint in Macor (2013b).

<sup>10</sup> On Kant’s theory of the impossibility of total error, see: Hinske (1980, pp. 31-66).

Any thesis must clearly be faced looking first for what is valid, then for what is fallacious. Underlying the “conflict over truth [*Streit über Wahrheit*]” there is “a common interest [*ein gemeinschaftlich interesse*]”, which must be “participatory [*theilnehmend*], and not exclusive [*aufschliessend*], selfish [*selbstsüchtig*] or egoistic [*egoistisch*]”; it must lead to “starting to note what the other is right about” – not about what he is wrong (*Refl* 2213, AA, XVI, p. 273).

Kant's exhortations to seek comparison with others are all the more significant in the light of these considerations, and the concept of ‘logical pluralism’ thus reveals unexpected depths. The logical egoist is a “Cyclops” who “needs one more eye that will enable him to see his object also from the standpoint of other men” (*Refl* 903, AA, XV, p. 395), and anyone who decides to renounce the “touchstone” represented by the agreement of the “understanding of others” is “abandoned to a play of thoughts in which he sees, acts, and judges, not in a common world, but rather in his own world (as in dreaming)”. Not without reason does Kant see the “only universal characteristic of madness” in the absolutization of the “*logical private sense (sensus privatus)*” (*Anth*, AA, VII, p. 219; *AHE*, p. 322).

The distinction between “mere persuasion” and actual “conviction” is indeed based upon the “possibility of communicating” something and “finding it to be valid for the reason of every human being to take it to be true”, since “I cannot *assert* anything, i.e., pronounce it to be a judgment necessarily valid for everyone, except that produces conviction”, whereas “I can preserve persuasion for myself if I please to do so, but cannot and should not want to make it valid beyond myself” (*KrV*, A 821-822/B 849-850; *CPR*, p. 685).

‘Broad-minded way of thinking’ is therefore an alternative expression aimed at defining the correct pluralistic approach. Not mere tolerance and co-existence, but active participation in the reasons of the other with a view to avoiding error on both sides. The “*broad-minded way of thinking (erweiterte Denkungsart)*” presupposes that one “sets himself apart from the subjective private conditions of the judgment, within which so many others are as if bracketed, and reflects on his own judgment from a *universal standpoint (allgemeiner Standpunkt)* (which he can only determine by putting himself into the standpoint of others)” (*KU*, AA, V, p. 295; *CPJ*, p. 175). “To think oneself (in communication with human beings)

into the place of every *other person*" is "the principle of *liberals* who adapt to the principles of others" (*Anth*, AA, VII, p. 228; *AHE*, p. 333).<sup>11</sup>

Kant goes a step further by saying that comparison with others is a basis for redefining autonomous thought itself, which is not seen as a kind of preliminary to subsequent comparisons with other 'autonomous thoughts', as it is in fact conditioned in its very possibility to exist by the collective and pluralist dimension.

To make use of one's own reason means no more than to ask oneself, whenever one is supposed to assume something, whether one could find it feasible to make the ground or the rule on which one assumes it into a universal principle [*allgemeiner Grundsatz*] for the use of reason. This test is one that everyone can apply to himself. (*WDO*, AA, VIII, p. 146n.; *RRT*, p. 18n.)

The universality of human reason clearly plays a decisive role in promoting this approach, starting from the vocabulary and the use of the adjective 'universal' (*allgemein*). The formulation of the categorical imperative is the clearest instance of the application of this precept, and the awareness of this finally frees Kant from any charge of despotism, moral emptiness, and sterile rationalism.

*I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law. [...] I ask myself: would I indeed be content that my maxim [...] should hold as a universal law (for myself as well as for others)? [...] I ask myself only: can you also will that your maxim become a universal law? If not, then it is to be repudiated, and that not because of a disadvantage to you or even to others forthcoming from it but because it cannot fit as a principle into a possible giving of universal law. (GMS, AA, IV, pp. 402-403; PP, pp. 57-58)<sup>12</sup>*

The dual and dynamic structure of universal human reason thus represents a basis also for the most widely known definition of reason as the legislating faculty in the field of morality and serves to understand the extreme consistency and inner resilience of the Kantian system. Not even in the foundation of morals does Kant depart from the convictions acquired in the process of rethinking the Logic of Meier, and he keeps faith with the Enlightenment agenda while integrating it and moving beyond it in a decisive way. The 'universality' of human reason, and consequently moral law, is anything but an abstract universality divorced from the complexity of mundane reality and artificially juxtaposed to it. It is a universality

<sup>11</sup> On the 'broad-minded way of thinking' see also Zöller (2009) and Keienburg (2011, pp. 154-180).

<sup>12</sup> For a rather different, but still interesting approach to this formulation of the categorical imperative see Darwall (2009). For a more historical analysis see Keienburg (2011, pp. 111-116).

founded upon the sometimes contradicting multiplicity of characteristics of human nature and intersubjectivity, so that one must navigate between prejudice and superstition, but cannot ignore it. It is thus not a kind of ‘cure’ for error that annihilates and erases it, but a cure that grows in and thanks to the error, which – as we have seen – may never be a total error. Surprisingly, and contrary to all subsequent misinterpretations, reason in Kant is functional, as it points the way, polyphonic, meaning that it is based upon a comparison between multiple voices, and open, implying in other words a kind of theoretical identification with the other over and above the mere coexistence of different opinions.

Kant is proposing a full-blown cultural model, basing his call for tolerance, respect and integration on the very structure itself of human reason.<sup>13</sup> Unfortunately, his insistence on the necessary ‘universal’ character of reason and moral law has contributed to making them synonymous with careless oversight of the uneven nature of reality, ineffectiveness, and utopia; it is fortunate, therefore, that there have also been voices outside the chorus.

#### **4. Hannah Arendt and Kantian Pluralism**

Given the evidently persistent validity of the pluralist model proposed by Kant, there should be no need for any particular affirmation. But the history of contemporary thought provides it nonetheless, and in the new departure for eighteenth-century scholarship which has been taking place for the last decades it comes as a comfort and support.<sup>14</sup>

Hannah Arendt is one of the most insightful and at the same time – as surprising as it may seem – one of the most historically faithful interpreters of Kant’s thought. However, the innovative and genuinely ‘contemporary’ character that has justly been attributed to Arendt’s thought has overshadowed her indebtedness to the philosophical tradition of the German Enlightenment, in which she was educated and to which she repeatedly claimed to belong.

For me, Germany means my mother tongue, philosophy, and literature. (*Hannah Arendt to Karl Jaspers*, Berlin, 1<sup>st</sup> January 1733, AJ, p. 16)

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<sup>13</sup> For the cultural relevance of Kant’s pluralism and its roots in the Western philosophical tradition cf. Hinske (2009), Macor (2011, pp. 133-137).

<sup>14</sup> As a matter of fact, the criticism of one-sided readings of eighteenth-century claims to truth and universality is currently the focus of philosophical, literary, and theological studies and is leading to a new narrative of the (German) Enlightenment, finally freed from charges à la Horkheimer and Adorno. On this see: Jamme and Kurz (1988); Deligiorgi (2005, pp. 161-169); Cataldi Madonna (2007); Macor (2011); Stockhorst (2013).

I was interested neither in history nor in politics when I was young. If I can be said to ‘have come from anywhere’, it is from the tradition of German philosophy. (*Hannah Arendt to Gershom Scholem*, 24<sup>th</sup> July 1963, *JP*, pp. 245-246)<sup>15</sup>

The focal point of her affiliation is her appropriation of the cultural model of dialogue, the inclusion of the point of view of others, the recognition of otherness, features which in fact give rise to themes which may ostensibly be attributed exclusively to the political and cultural climate of the twentieth century.

In *The Enlightenment and the Jewish Question* (1932), Arendt focused on the duplicity of human reason as the main theoretical and cultural contribution of the German Enlightenment: on the one hand, “reason is shared by all men, is equally accessible to all people in all ages”, and “the universal rule of reason is the universal rule of what is human and humane”, whereas on the other “[p]ure reason [...] is ‘scattered’ across the earth” and “never exists as itself”, but it “shifts, changes”. “This constantly changed shape depends on realities that lie outside human powers, on ‘time, climate, need, world, fate’” (*JW*, pp. 8, 4, 11).

Arendt thus adopts the idea that universal human reason is differentiated between individuals on the basis of the same limitations Kant had frequently referred to as insuperable and characteristic of the ‘humanity’ of reason. After the Second World War and the Holocaust, Arendt continued to assert the importance of the German Enlightenment from a cultural standpoint, focusing again on a pluralistic model of knowledge, which became the basis for an overall revision of man and his world. Throughout the period between 1959 and the ‘Seventies, in other words the entire period of her mature thought, the importance of the German Enlightenment showed no signs of diminishing.<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, it appeared to become increasingly relevant and consistent in the way it decisively inspired Arendt in her thinking about politics and, more generally, culture: the traces of a correct understanding of

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<sup>15</sup> That the German tradition of which Arendt speaks here is German Enlightenment is proved not only by the pervasive influence of authors such as Lessing and Mendelssohn, not to mention Kant, but also by the biographical fact that from the late ‘Twenties onwards Arendt pays close attention to the historical, political, cultural, and literary context of the late eighteenth century, frequenting the circle of scholars of German studies that formed in Heidelberg around the figure of Friedrich Gundolf, exchanging views with Benno von Wiese in particular, and the fact that she devoted herself to writing essays on the condition of Jews in Germany in the late Enlightenment and Romantic periods, as well as to the biography of Rahel Varnhagen. For reference, although an in-depth monograph has yet to be written, see: Young-Bruehl (1982), Robertson (1999, pp. 66-69), Macor (2011, pp. 137-140).

<sup>16</sup> Consider for example Arendt’s speech on *On Humanity in Dark Times: Thoughts About Lessing* during the award-winning ceremony for the prize that carries his name (*MDT*, pp. 3-31).

dialogue are identified in eighteenth-century thought, and Kant in particular gradually acquires the status of an almost exclusive interlocutor. As expected, it is the concepts derived from that of ‘universal human reason’ that exert the greatest influence.

According to Arendt, “critical thinking, while still a solitary business, does not cut itself off from ‘all others’”, since “by the force of imagination it makes the others present and thus moves in a space that is potentially public, open to all sides; in other words, it adopts the position of Kant’s world citizen”, and “[t]o think with an enlarged mentality means that one trains one’s imagination to go visiting” (*Lectures*, p. 43). This alignment holds universality as its point of reference, because “[t]he greater the reach—the larger the realm in which the enlightened individual is able to move from standpoint to standpoint—the more ‘general’ will be his thinking”. A point of clarification: “This generality, however, is not the generality of the concept—for example, the concept ‘house’, under which one can then subsume various kinds of individual buildings. It is, on the contrary, closely connected with particulars, with the particular conditions of the standpoints one has to go through in order to arrive at one’s ‘general standpoint’” (*Lectures*, pp. 43-44).

In other words, Arendt fully captures the extremely dynamic character of the Kantian concept of reason and seeks to avoid simplistic and wholesale misinterpretations based on a purely abstract and artificial reading, emphasizing how the individual remains present in this universality, which could not exist without the partiality of individual points of view.<sup>17</sup>

In sum, whether in relation to historical or theoretical investigations, universal human reason proves to be a pivotal concept not only for understanding Kant’s thought, but also if it is to do justice to the German Enlightenment and its persistent validity.

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<sup>17</sup> To be sure, Arendt is not completely free from the common prejudice against Kant’s ethics, as she explicitly complains of its “inhumanity” as something “undeniable” (*MDT*, p. 27). Despite this, she remains one of the first philosophers who fully understood the pluralistic, open, and genuinely modern dimension of the (German) Enlightenment and of Kant as an Enlightenment thinker. Insofar, Arendt’s work is to be acknowledged as a central step within the twentieth-century reading of the (German) Enlightenment towards a new understanding of its legacy. Arendt’s indebtedness to Kant has been the subject of several studies so far (cf. e.g. Dostal 1984; Beiner 2001; Lloyd 2013, pp. 152-154), but an exhaustive investigation dealing with this role of hers within the historiographical tradition is still missing.

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