

Primacy of the Individual as the Bearer of Moral Law: The Psychoanalysis of Otto Rank and Kantian Ethics

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Summary

Otto Rank posed the human question of the search for permanence by means of the symbolic life, which includes belonging to a group that the individual identifies himself or herself with. Historically, this has been seen in the tribe, the clan, the nation, etc., as a unit that needs to be asserted in opposition to other groups. Ernest Becker emphasized that this affirmation of the symbolic value of the belonging to a group needed the denial of the value of others. In fact, Otto Rank saw in it the real source of conflict and warfare¹.

However, insofar as Rank can be considered an exponent of German idealism, we must assume a space of freedom of the individual, which can be conceived of as grounded in Kantian moral philosophy. Thus, if what characterizes the human subject are the choices freely made by reason, we find that the human being in Rank's works has a freedom of choice, a thought we can identify as the product of Kantian influence. Therefore, I intend to present Rank's texts as consistent with Immanuel Kant's legacy, mainly regarding practical reason. We can assume that, through these choices in relation to moral acting, the affirmation of the being of the individual does not necessarily require the overcoming of the other—that is, dispensing of violence—although it indeed sheds new light on the violence within society.

1. Otto Rank, *Beyond Psychology* (New York: Dover Publications Inc, 1958), 40.

Considering Ernest Becker's views of violence and society in conjunction with Otto Rank's emphasis on the individual as the bearer of moral law, a Kantian influence, there is solid ground for the observation that social ordering is a human construction. Rather than a neutral entity, social ordering generates nuclei of power to empower some at the expense of the majority. From this study, we must conclude that, to foster ethics, these social relationships need to become more akin to the moral law that lies in the individual.

Introduction

The work of Otto Rank brings many challenges for those who study it. Although highly rich in the meaning and depth of analysis, Rank's concepts are diffuse throughout his work. Moreover, after Rank was excluded from the Vienna Psychoanalytic Society, it seems he knew he would not be understood, and, as E. James Lieberman stated in his biography of Rank, *Acts of Will*, he was considered a pariah². This may pertain to the fact that he had no way of forming a school or having his own students.

Of utmost importance in his books is the inclusion of philosophy, especially that of the great ethicist Immanuel Kant; of Arthur Schopenhauer, who demonstrated the world as an expression of the will; and the young Friedrich Nietzsche, the great pragmatist who saw that the necessity of the affirmation of being—itself based on the will, the only existing subject—had primacy over the conceptual or moral judgement of that expression.

The question of death and finitude, as posed by Otto Rank, considers the search for a symbolic solution to the problem of the permanence of the individual, since in the world of nature this solution is impossible. Thus, according to Rank, all symbolic

2. E. James Lieberman, *Acts of Will: The Life and Work of Otto Rank* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1993), 286.

construction has, as its primary task, to place the human being above nature, which includes a connection with the symbolism of permanence of the groups in which the individual participates. This participation, such as in the clan, the tribe, or the nation, functions as a means of ensuring permanence by means of collective immortality, that is, through the group. This symbolic immortality needs to place the collectivity above nature and above other collectivities, and, drawing from this thought, Ernest Becker emphasizes one aspect in Rank's work, namely, the challenge in achieving the symbolism of permanence of "our" group. Therefore, there is the propensity to justify the debunking, disqualifying, victimization, and even destruction of the other.

Foundations of Otto Rank's psychoanalysis and the question of permanence

According to Otto Rank, the expression of the will in the human being, contrasting with his or her finitude and mortality, only finds a possible resolution through the symbolic repertoire of culture. The role of the individual in the legitimate development of himself or herself is to find expression in a creative way by contributing to the symbolic repertoire of the community.

The creative individual, the *artist*, produces meaning that validates his or her own expression in the world. The individual does so against the pressure for conformity, and has an inner experience of the dynamic of will, guilt, and affirmation, to achieve his or her goal. However, the individual will not disassociate himself or herself from the community. Although Rank's emphasis is strongly on the individual, the individual's expression underlies an environment steeped in culture. We must assume, in that environment, the presence of a symbolic repertoire that is collective by its very nature. Therefore, this is an environment already akin to a collection of symbolic meanings, an environment that welcomes individual contributions to it. It is precisely this connection with the community that differentiates the creative and productive individual from the

neurotic one, who lacks this connection³. The neurotic, instead of creatively and positively affirming his or her will and value, will feel the difference sorrowfully, perceiving it to be a reflection of his or her inferiority and displacement from the collective.

Likewise, Rank asserts that artistic expression is collective in its origin. In primitive societies, the work of art was social rather than individual, reflecting the communal partaking of the pleasurable experience of the affirmation of the human will inside the world⁴. Thus, the individual offers content to the community, re-signifying and re-elaborating the pre-existing symbology, to bring legitimate and sincere meaning to his or her place in the world. The individual becomes, increasingly, a subject that brings meaning to life, in a social world that is fulfilled by shared meaning. Symbology is, thus, a means of social integration for the individual. But let us observe the directions that the personal will can take. Kantian thought would lead us to conclude that the individual needs to seek autonomy, which entails affirming the right to make his or her own choices. Heteronomy is the negation of the subject, and autonomy is his or her affirmation. It becomes necessary, therefore, to deny everything that can debunk the person. Often, the tendency is to think of this as submission as imposed from the outside world, although, with the influence of Immanuel Kant, Rank asserts that biological determinisms, insofar as they are like the concept of *inclinations* in Kantian moral philosophy, are also perceived by the subject as a coercion against individual will. At this point we can introduce some of Ernest Becker's positions. In Becker's view, this affirmation of the symbolic aspect can be viewed as the construction of an *alter-*

3. Otto Rank, *Truth and Reality*, trans. Jessie Taft (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1978), 173.

4. Otto Rank, *Art and Artist*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 1989), 397.

*organism*⁵, which means a symbolic nature that overlaps with the biological organism, to remove from consciousness the remembrance of the biological limits to existence. As we have already seen, so far as biological perpetuation is impossible, it will be necessary to search for symbolic perpetuation—the denial of death.

An important unfolding of the denial of death will be the mechanisms of social division between “we” and “they,” which will have the function of separating those who are supposed to deserve immortality (“we”) from those who are supposed to be the outcasts of the world and who deserve to be discharged—in other words, “they.” Becker grounds himself on Otto Rank when he tells us that the desire for permanence in the human being seeks a symbology of collective immortality so that personal immortality can be assured through the permanence of the clan, the tribe, the nation, or the like. From the point of view of the need for symbolic permanence, this is the origin of the victimization of all the human collectives that are considered different, as well as the real origin of warfare. According to Rank, when a group feels the need to consider itself a special one, above all the others, that has the fate to offer symbolic permanence exclusively to its peers, then it becomes permissible, indeed consistent, to “exclude the different ones from the blessings of eternity”⁶.

Otto Rank’s psychoanalysis and the legacy of Kant

The will, as understood by Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, was not the only important consideration for Otto Rank. Also, important to him were *acts* of will, capable of being made by an autonomous subject who has choices. Autonomy is the ability of reason to make choices, the moment it confronts itself and needs to get answers to the question: “how should I act?”. In the criticism exercised at this point, that

5. Ernest Becker, *La Lucha Contra el Mal*, trans. Carlos Valdés (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1992), 20.

6. Rank, 1958, 41.

is, within the boundaries of what can be known or thought by the human being, Kant made morality a practical subject of reason, placing a boundary on the seduction of useless metaphysical speculation.

In Kantian philosophy, the distinction between what can be known and what can only be thought of is basic. All things that can be known can be thought of, but there are things that can be thought of but cannot be known. Knowledge comes from the sensible world, and thus we cannot know that which does not give us any sensory impression. In this way, Kant tells us that speculative reason, when it seeks to know what does not generate sensible experience, finds nothing, and from there everything that is said will be metaphysical—that is, in Kant’s words, deception and illusion from speculative reason. Thus, it is important to note that what creates illusions is pure reason, insofar as it deals with an activity of which it has no sensible experience, which is, therefore, mere speculation. On the other hand, when reason has only itself and is confronted with the question “how should I act?”, without being able to be guided by objects of sensible intuition, it will have to stand as the reason of a being who makes choices. At that point, it becomes practical reason, for actions will now be moved by choices, elected by means of freedom: “practical is all that is possible by freedom”.⁷ At this point, the question would arise: but would this seemingly free choice not be moved by forces to which the subject himself has no access? What Kant places here is the problem of speculative reason in relation to things of which one has no sensible experience. When speculative reason tries to understand what does not generate sensible experience, the product of its activity can only be illusion. According to Kant, speculative reason created ancient metaphysics. Therefore, if there is a drive for practical choice, in the absence of any sensible experience, it is only possible, in terms of pure reason, to speculate about the

7. Immanuel Kant, *Crítica da Razão Pura*, trans. Manuela Pinto dos Santos and Alexandre Fradique Morujão (Lisbon: Calouste Gulbenkian, 2001), 650.

nature of such a drive, which would lead to the creation of a new metaphysics of moral choice. In opposition to this, Kant emphasizes the fact that reason, when asked “how should I act?”, must follow the way of the practical use:

[Reason] Perceive objects that have a great interest for it. It enters the path of pure speculation to approach them, but they flee before it. Possibly, more success is to be expected in the only remaining path, that is, of practical use.⁸

Therefore, practical necessity overrides speculative theorizing, for, if we have no way of knowing, we are still forced to act, and we see the relevance of the question of practical action. Taking into consideration the absence of sensible experience when reason is faced with the choices of “how should I act?” this space of freedom needs to be postulated:

. . . to know whether reason itself, in the acts by which it prescribes laws, is not determined in turn by other influences, and if what, in relation to the sensitive impulses, is called freedom, could not be, in relation to higher and distant causes, in turn, nature, in no way concerns us from the practical point of view, for we only ask reason, immediately, for the rule of conduct; it is, however, a simply speculative question, which we can put aside, since for our purpose we have only to do or fail to do. We thus know from experience practical freedom as a natural cause, namely as a causality of reason in the determination of the will . . .⁹

Thus, in experience, the human being, while not having access to the noumenon as an object, is grounded on the intelligible world of the noumenon for his or her practical action. According to Kant, that which is practical is provided by freedom, which exists independently of the sensible and causal conditions of phenomena. Thus, even if the concept is, according to Kant, “theoretically empty,” since it can have a moral utility, that is, a practical application, it cannot be neglected as a drive of human action and must therefore be thought of as real, despite of the fact that it cannot be known:

8. Ibid., 645.

9. Ibid., 650.

[T]he concept of an entity that has free will is the concept of a *causa noumeno*. . . Now the concept of an empirically unconditioned causality is, in fact, theoretically empty (without an intuition suited to it), yet always possible, and refers to an indeterminate object; although, on the other hand, it is given meaning in the moral law, therefore in a practical relation, so that in truth I do not possess any intuition that determines the theoretical objective reality, but it does not fail to have an effective application, which can present itself concretely in provisions or maxims, that is, to have practical reality that can be indicated.¹⁰

These practical choices will always reveal the major picture of the subject's belonging to a universe that has meaning by the action of the human being, and this meaning is actively shared by validating and revalidating the meaning that the individual partakes with the community, and, in turn, the meaning the community partakes with the individual. Thus, a meaning that is largely attributed by the individual is equally validated by the community, which requires from everyone a contribution to that creation of shared meaning.

Autonomy and freedom

The central issue will be the treatment given to autonomy as an exercise of the will by the human being. According to the Kantian legacy, Rank gives a real role to autonomy, which must be well understood to situate the sense of Rank's theorizing within the history of thought. Here, it is relevant to remember that, in the preface to his book *Dawn*, Nietzsche, criticizing Kant, points out the fact that he has placed such morality in a place where it would be unscathed, dependent on a world that would be, by its turn, indemonstrable:

. . . [Kant,] to give place to his "moral empire," found himself obliged to add an indescribable world, a logical "beyond" – that is why he needed his Critique of Pure Reason! In other words, he would not have needed her, had there not been one thing that mattered most to him – to make the "moral world" unassailable . . .

10. André Gustavo Ferreira da Silva, Luís Lucas Dantas da Silva, "Kant: A Formação Moral como uma Tarefa Histórica da Espécie Humana," *Espaço Pedagógico* vol. 21, no. 1 (Passo Fundo: Universidade de Passo Fundo, 2014), 133.

.. [Kant] believed in morality, not because it was demonstrated by nature and history, but despite being incessantly contradicted by nature and history.¹¹

However, this was a position that Kant clearly assumed, pertinent to the characteristics of the phenomenon and the noumenon, that is, while reason perceives in the sensible world *what happens* (phenomenon), in the intelligible world reason perceives what *should happen*, according to the practical laws of reason itself, and will therefore endeavor to succeed in the sensible world, as reason so establishes. Reason is, therefore, a *law-giving reason* and will become the practical use of that reason according to the laws of freedom, that is, autonomously, and not triggered by objects of the sensible world. Thus, Kant believes in morality not because it is demonstrated by nature and history, but precisely because it is not demonstrable by nature and by history, that is, by sensible experience. In this way, the will, consistent with the reason it needs to express itself as practice, needs to affirm the moral world within the world of phenomena. The will becomes *the practical use of reason*, that is, the affirmation of the autonomous choices of the human being, turning the empirical world, as much as possible, a space for the affirmation of these values:

I call the moral world, the world insofar as it conforms to all moral laws (as it *can be*, according to the freedom of rational beings, and as it *should be*, according to the necessary laws of morality). The world is, thus, thought only as an intelligible world. . . . In this sense, then, it is a simple idea, albeit a practical one, that can and should really have its influence in the sensible world, to make it as much as possible according to this idea.¹²

Therefore, we must conclude that the moral world is realized not as a continuity of the external world of phenomena, but an affirmation of the inner will, that is, of the noumenon, in the face of the obstacles that the outside world offers to that expression. Thus, if the individual has the legitimacy to express an inner world that is not an

11. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Aurora*, trans. Antônio Carlos Braga (São Paulo: Escala, 2007), 17–18.

12. Kant, 2001, 653.

extension of the world of phenomena, but rather is defined as an opposition to external coercion, he has a space of freedom that needs to be taken into consideration also in the question of symbolic permanence. One can see how much Rank's thinking becomes accessible by taking this Kantian context into account.

Permanence and power in Ernest Becker

Ernest Becker is one of the great theorists about human destructiveness within the social sciences, focusing not on the instinctual aspect, concerning a medical and biological paradigm, but on the symbolic and cultural aspect. This question begins with the fact that the human being is conscious of his or her own finitude and thus has the consciousness of death. This awareness of finitude comes into conflict with the human capacity for symbolization in the question of creating the representation of his or her own ending. The individual sees himself or herself, at this moment, with the tension of being at once a biological being and a symbolic being. Discomfort arises with the condition of being a finite animal, which at the same time has a symbolic capacity, and thus can build a world of images that surpasses the earthly constraints.

In all situations in which an individual finds himself or herself confronted with this paradoxical reality, the individual perceives it as a contradiction and a threat, and tends to deny his or her finite condition, necessitating, for that goal, to deny the biological reality—hence, the denial of death. Adding to this, the question is not only dying, but to die and remain forgotten, that is, to be insignificant in history, having no importance for a world that can exist without him. As Becker writes, “to have importance is to be enduring, to have life”¹³. Thus, following the thought of Otto Rank, Becker asserts that symbolic systems exist to raise the human being above nature, so that the symbolic being realizes, at least in the consciousness of daily life, an

13. Becker, 1992, 35.

overcoming of the biological being. To allow this, this overcoming allows necessary meanings of permanence on the fragile and fallible biological being. To this end, Becker tells us that culture coats the individual with an *alter-organism*—or, symbolic permanence.

Therefore, shared symbolic systems, which are legitimate in relation to an organism that has symbolic capacity, will also be committed to the task of denying finitude. But what could have been simply the sincere construction of the symbolic representations, pertinent to a being who possesses this faculty, will become a falsification of reality. It is necessary to emphasize that, being the other differentiated, his or her symbolic systems can be a challenge to the affirmation of the symbolic systems to which the individual attributes legitimacy. At this point, the other becomes a threat, for he can assert being in a different or opposite way, concerning another culture or another world view, and thus threatening the validity of the world view adopted by the individual.

It is possible to say that, in primitive societies, the feeling of permanence was achieved relatively harmlessly. Becker mentions John Huizinga and his book *Homo Ludens*¹⁴, which stated that, for the primitive man, life was a joyful play, an everyday assertion of the value of everyone that protects the sense of value of each person together with the community, being “a rich and joyous dramatization of life”.¹⁵ Because there was nothing in these societies to compare with the legal, police, or military system of contemporary societies, it was sufficient that a discouragement should be exercised,

14. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens*, trans. João Paulo Monteiro (São Paulo: Perspectiva, 2000), 53.

15. Becker, 1992, 38.

by means of the customs, in the sense that no one became too much above average, and consequently, a threatening overly powerful individual¹⁶.

Becker associates the advent of the great social stratification with the increase of the cultural emphasis in the individual. The reason is that, previously, the human being possessed the whole universe as a stage for the assertion of his or her value, but, progressively, he or she will only have the other person to validate or invalidate the construction of the individual self-esteem. We should note that, in nature, an individual always found affirmation, not because its elements (sun, moon, stars, forest, etc.) could not speak and contradict the individual, but because *everything in nature is an affirmation of being*. We can understand this by the thought of Schopenhauer, where the world is the *thing in itself*, the will, presenting itself in many disguised appearances.¹⁷ By reading Rank, we can conclude that the true human values are the values of the affirmation of being. Thus, the man of ancient societies could easily feel “at home” in the world, but if, and only if, the symbolic capacity of his or her organism was properly backed up.

However, from the growing social division of labor, Becker argues that increasing asymmetry of power will accompany the scale of the construction of social inequality. Now, in a very asymmetric scenario, it becomes increasingly feasible to invalidate, discredit, disqualify, or even destroy, the other.

We can include, in this regard, the social construction of the *scapegoat* that must be sacrificed for the sake of community safety.¹⁸ Ernest Becker continues this aspect of Rank’s work by adding new contributions and building the path to what is now the

16. Becker, 1992, 145.

17. Arthur Schopenhauer, *O Mundo como Vontade e como Representação*, trans. Jair Barboza (São Paulo: UNESP, 2005), 160.

18. Becker, 1992, 180.

mortality salience and the *terror management theory*¹⁹. One can thus verify the question of the exclusion of the other as a way of realizing a denial of mortality, as posited by Otto Rank and later developed by Ernest Becker.

In relation to the correct understanding of Otto Rank, the problem that Becker's understanding offers is the absence of a space of freedom. In Rank, this space of freedom exists as part of the influence of Immanuel Kant. As we have already stated, recognizing the Kantian heritage, and consequently German idealism, in Rank's thought can begin to clarify and deepen the understanding of many aspects of his work.

Violence from the denial of death and its possible overcoming

According to Hans Vaihinger, Nietzsche's radical doubts originated in the Kantian conception that one cannot know the *thing in itself*.²⁰

We can then conceive of the magnitude of this doubt, as Nietzsche tells us, and here we shall give the following example of this uncertainty about the reality of the world: suppose that there is in the world an object with a red color, although it appears to our eyes as being yellow, as the world possibly does not present itself to our senses as it really is. In turn, our senses are imperfect, and the eyes perceive the object as being green. The nervous stimulus, from the eyes to the brain, distorts the perception of the object, and our consciousness interprets it as being blue. So, with all this uncertainty about the world, let us now think of the relationship of two people, who we will call individual A and individual B. Both are willing to make their mutual relationship an ethical one. Individual A, at one point, says, "I have dignity; therefore, you should treat me with proper respect." Then, individual B could argue: "Wait, I'm going to get into

19. Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg and Tom Pyszczynski. "Tales from the Crypt: on the Role of Death in Life." *Zygon*, vol. 33, no. 1 (Chicago, Illinois: March 1988), 20.

20. Hans Vaihinger, *A Filosofia do Como Se*, trans. Johannes Kretschmer (Chapecó: Argos, 2011), 633.

the world of phenomena, to find evidence that what you said is true.” However, in the world of phenomena one can only find that which generates a sensible experience, which is to say that nothing can be found about the moral world. With this emptiness, individual B can doubt individual A, and thus discredit him, disqualify him, and, consequently, oppress and, possibly, try to destroy him.

This consideration can give rise to several questions. In Rank, we see a compliance with the Kantian perspective, where we have the predominance of inner reason over coercion exerted by the sensible world. In addition to such a conception, making full sense within the post-Kant German idealism, Rank himself classified his psychoanalysis in this way, by placing it as an affirmation of the will of the individual, despite external constraints against the expression of one’s will.

At this point we must add the important question of society and the individual. The bearer of the will is the individual, or at most the community, but never the society. Society seeks to legitimize itself from the remains of the ideologies of immortality that have been useful to the individual and the community. When Rank writes about society, it is never in a way to legitimize it, in a movement of opposition to the individual, because the individual has the primacy, as bearer of the will and the moral law. It is possible here to feel the lack of a more precise conceptualization in Rank’s thought, like that of the *primary groups* and *secondary groups*, such as exposed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann²¹, or of *sociality*, by Michel Maffesoli²², who contemplate groups more immediately familiar and friendly to the individual, in which there exist

21. Peter Berger, Thomas Luckmann, *A Construção Social da Realidade*, trans. Floriano de Souza Fernandes (Petrópolis: Vozes, 1985), 173.

22. Michel Maffesoli, *O Tempo das Tribos: o Declínio do Individualismo nas Sociedades de Massa*, trans. Maria de Lourdes Menezes (Rio de Janeiro: Forense Universitária, 1987), 9.

immediate relations and consensus, as opposed to the socioeconomic system. Those close groups are the ones the individual can rely on for support and protection, differing from the wider society. This larger society, in turn, becomes increasingly strange and threatening to the individual, and it thus takes on the contours of the concept of the socioeconomic system. Rank, for instance, makes it clear how much he considered that therapy could not, at the same time, stand on the side of the patient and the side of society. Society, posited as the formal and impersonal groups, constitutes a force of conformation of the person and the annulment of individuality.

The individual needs to express himself or herself with the help of the culture of his or her community, despite the normativity of the larger, impersonal society. Thus, we could say that the culture of the community, *as long as it is an expression of the will*, favors the expression of the individual will. On its turn, the great society, assuming a normative position, *as long as it is no more an expression of the will*, yearns to place limitations on the individual, which means it craves for social law in place of moral law. Social law, as Rank poses the concept, is the law instrumented by the groups in power for their own benefit, despite having its origin in moral law.

It becomes feasible to think that Rank recognizes society in the same way as Vaihinger's concept of an *intentionally created appearance* (*bewusst gewollte Schein*)²³, from the necessity of asserting an order even though it is known that this order is of a fictional nature. It may be concluded from Rank that he assumes that *society is not a bearer of the reason*. It is evident that Rank believes the will presents itself to the world not through society, but through the individual. Rank places the opposition of the individual and society in the following terms concerning therapy:

23. Vaihinger, 2011, 631.

For against this parent-like representative of the social will is aroused the self will of the weakest patient although it is interpreted by the Freudian therapist as resistance on the basis of his own will and in terms of his own moral and social ideals; that is, something that must be overcome or even broken instead of being furthered and developed. . . . Individual therapy degenerates into a mass education which is based on the traditional world view and the Jewish-Christian morality.²⁴

We see that the individual—in this case, the patient—is in a position of social vulnerability, and moreover, in the face of a will fostered by the society that is historically situated within a specific cultural tradition (in this case, Jewish-Christian, although it could have been any other). Rank considered that the initial pessimism was repeated here in regard of the will, that is, the will is “bad,” “inadequate,” “immoral,” and so on. In that historical context, to the extent that Freud advocated that men should live under a “dictatorship of reason,” this would not be far from the truth.

The problem with this “dictatorship of reason,” contrary to the will, is that it would be heteronomous, coming from external constraints, which would have to control the instinctual life. However, Kantian morality requires the autonomy of the subject, precisely because this autonomy is the capacity of the will to determine itself by reason. That is, autonomy is an individual’s autonomous choice to follow, in the moral world, duty, instead of his or her inclinations. However, the central point in proposing a “dictatorship of reason” is precisely to think of truth as an instance outside the individual. If this instance is society as it stands today, or as it will be in the future, it does not matter as much as a disqualification of the individual against outside powers that presumably have reason, and thus have the right to submit the individual. The valuation of the individual in Rank can be understood as the affirmation that the will is expressed, *par excellence*, through the individual, and not through society. Added to this, we can now conclude that, building on Schopenhauer, will is the force of nature in

24. Rank, 1978, 22–23.

the individual, being the very manifestation of the being of the universe. In addition, Schopenhauer states that the will, in the human being, is the very foundation of ethics:

From this point of view, it is undeniable that a system that places the reality of all existence and the root of the whole of nature in the will, detecting in this the heart of the universe, will have a great advantage in its favor. For it strikes, traversing a straight and simple path, and even has beforehand, before starting with ethics, what others seek to achieve only with long and always misleading deviations. In fact, this goal is truly unattainable, except through the notion that the force that drives action in nature, which presents this intuitive world to our intellect, is identical with the will in us. Only that metaphysics which is itself originally ethical, being constructed from its own material, the will, is the effective and immediate support of ethics²⁵

In this sense, there is a great change, since ethics, and consequently reason, are found in the individual. Therefore, it is safer to trust the individual than to rely on social structures. From here we can understand the moral law as opposed to social law, which is, according to Rank, used by the groups in power. Therefore, moral law is “the expression of our moral self”²⁶, and as such it does not have to be imposed from the outside—it is self-imposed, aiming at the preservation of the person, both in the physical and symbolic aspects, and is present in the culture of the community. Further, we could add, moral law is pertinent to face-to-face relationships, or any close relations where consensus arises. On the other hand, social law is linked to social stratification and the asymmetry of power and is imposed on the individual from outside: “For the moral law from the beginning was common, that is, popular law, whereas social law was dictated by the group in power”.²⁷

Society, heteronomy, and autonomy

Given the foregoing, the exponent of moral law is the individual. It is here that the will is presented, and, expressing itself as an organism, it needs to be preserved. It is

25. Arthur Schopenhauer, *Sobre a Vontade na Natureza*, trans. Gabriel Valladão Silva (Porto Alegre: L&PM editores, 2013), 209–210.

26. Rank, 1958, 145–146.

27. *Ibid.*, 146.

preserved not only in the physical aspect, but also in the symbolic aspect. The question that Rank presents to us is that, although the individual finds in culture a welcoming space for his or her project of development and expression, society, as a secondary group and detached from the individual, shows itself to be hostile, because society wants not creative expression but conformity. It is against society that the *artist*—the creative individual who affirms difference, that is, individuality, in a productive and constructive way—will fight the hardest struggle.

Therefore, society is not a reflection of moral law. Indeed, factors that deny individual autonomy, such as the need to assert some groups over others, the production of scapegoats, and the heroism that must be done against someone, have as their agent the asymmetry of power conditioned by social stratification that, according to Becker, accompanied the emergence of more complex societies and their social structures. Likewise, primitive societies, little structured in terms of political organization, had mechanisms to prevent some person or group from accumulating a threatening amount of power. If asymmetry is not realized, the lesser conditions are that an individual may wish to assert his or her potency in the world by destroying another. In contemporary, highly stratified societies, the opposite occurs.

Moreover, Rank seems to add to this picture Nietzsche's skepticism in asserting that the so-called truths are at best metaphors, analogies, metonymies, and so on. Although the pragmatic aspect of the first Nietzsche could see in this the value of an affirmation of potency, this affirmation could only be made from the individual, insofar as the organism that expresses the power necessarily is the individual. Therefore, to the extent that any narrative must believe in permanence, and consequently in being, that being that needs to be imagined is closer to the individual, which manifests potency by his or her own condition as an organism that has life.

However, if we are to affirm that moral law is *par excellence* of the individual, we seem to take from society what would be the greatest legitimation of its value, that is, of being the space of a law that imposes itself on the individual and would be, supposedly, morally legitimate. Indeed, Kant thought in this way in terms of civil society, which would ideally have the *republic* as the form of human beings, as beings endowed with rationality, organize themselves in a constructive way.²⁸ In the same way, social ordering had to follow a reason recognized by all the individual consciences, where it became autonomous, and therefore moral, insofar as it was accepted by the freedom of the will of beings who have the use of reason, for the sake of common good:

As Hobbes asserts, the state of nature is a state of violence and arrogance and we must necessarily abandon it to submit to the coercion of laws, which does not limit our freedom but are able to reconcile with the freedom of any other, and thus with the common good. . . . this results from the original right of human reason to know no other judge than the universal human reason itself, where each has its own voice; and, because of this, must come all the improvement of which our state is susceptible . . .²⁹

Conclusion: moral law and autonomy of the individual

Kant has established that, in the world of phenomena, we cannot have contact with the thing in itself, although, when reason is alone in asking itself “how should I act?” it has direct contact with the intelligible world, which becomes, for the practical purposes of reason, the moral world. For these practical purposes, contact with moral law has more “truth” than contact with the phenomenon. Therefore, moral law, according to Kant, is no illusion. We must remember that, even if it is determined by something that does not generate sensible experience, thinking about it would present only speculation, since empirical data are not possible, and thus would be, concerning pure reason, useless. Thus, we see that this would be the moment when pure reason

28. Immanuel Kant, *Filosofia da História*, trans. Cláudio J. A. Rodrigues (São Paulo: Ícone, 2012), 101.

29. Kant, 2001, 616–617.

would produce illusions, just as in the past it produced old metaphysics. This Kantian approach is evident in Rank's thinking and gives fuller meaning to his work. Let's consider, in this context, this short passage from his book *Psychology and the Soul*:

The human psychological universal that has been passed down is after all the soul, our soul-belief – the old psychology we believe in at heart but keep out of mind in modern psychology.

This interpretation accords with the ethnological finding that unlike people with the “modern” world view, “primitives” are oriented toward a spiritual world, not one of reality. The laws of causality play a minor role in primitive mentality; the major role is played by all manner of celestial and supernatural forces that are not part of nature but are projected from self onto nature. As we have become more realistic, we have buried the soul deeper and deeper within, because there was no place for it in the external world. Unlike us, the first people acknowledged the soul, believed in it consciously, and filled the world with that soul-belief. They made the world less real, more like the self.³⁰

How could a “less real” world be more faithful to the self? This is possible because, especially about the choices of the human being, this external reality is also made up of metaphors, analogies, and metonymies, and this is even more ethically significant insofar as these metaphors, analogies, and metonymies generate social stratification, exclusion, and scapegoats. To the extent that reality is at the service of the empowerment of some and the disempowerment of many, it plays a role in the asymmetry of power, and so, at least in terms of moral reason, it is not objective or “scientific,” and it is even less neutral. It is fictional and is likely to be oriented to fulfill the role of victimizing those who have been elected by the hegemonic group to be the outcasts.

From the questioning of the young Nietzsche, Rank assumes that there is no “reality” in complete opposition to an “illusion.” What is considered as reality is also a human construction, as well as being the material that is defined as what is known as the obstacle to the expression of being. In addition to this, we have the element of the

30. Otto Rank, *Psychology and the Soul*, trans. Gregory C. Richter and E. James Lieberman (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 8.

production of asymmetry, in which the group that considers itself “the chosen ones” needs to disqualify the other groups and will often seek to destroy those non-elect.

With all this, reality, in the aspect of human choices, will be the illusion of the group in power that is imposed on the rest of society. In this way, it makes much more sense for the individual to follow the moral law that reason reveals within himself or herself. This moral law also consists of choices that cannot be verified in the empirical world, although they assert themselves as an affirmation of the values of the person, which, from that moment, are extended to the world so that the world is fulfilled with a human meaning, *from self onto the world*, in Rank’s words.

Equally, it is possible to say that this inner certainty, in Rank’s writings, becomes an affirmation of the values of the individual, and not an affirmation of the values of the broader society, in its political system, economic system, and so on. Therefore, we must consider the implication that there is more coherence in the person living by his or her illusion than dying for the illusion of the socioeconomic system, for instance, in warfare. However, Rank could only establish this position insofar as he thought the individual to have an inner space of freedom, which we can understand as derived from Kant’s moral philosophy. If it were not for this, the determinations that move the society, understood as the socioeconomic system, would also move the individual, who, in this paradigm, would have neither autonomy nor freedom. This inner space of will and ethics, made possible by a reason that in its practical aspect is autonomous, enables the values of the self to be present in the world, affirming the human meaning in the world:

In a word, we encounter here for the first time the actual ground of psychology, the realm of willing and ethics in the purely psychic, not in the biological or [social] moral sense, therefore not in terms of any supra-individual force, but of freedom as Kant understood it metaphysically, that is, beyond external

influences.³¹

31. Rank, 1978, 71.

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