

A Kantian Sovereignty of Attention as a Therapy for Mental Illnesses

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Abstract

The article suggests that the Kantian account of mental illnesses is part of his study of logic in an attempt to claim, above all, that they hinder the training of attention, which will later allow us to publicly pursue knowledge. To this, the author elucidates the epistemic place that Kant gives to attention (*Aufmerksamkeit*) in his transcendental, metaphysical, and anthropological remarks, given the important role it plays in the public elaboration of knowledge. Addressing the place that Kant gives to mental weaknesses and illnesses in his anthropology lessons, the article sheds light on some correlations between these pathologies and attention, considering that mental weaknesses, as well as, mental illnesses warp, or are caused by, the fragile attention with which we direct our thoughts. This permits to shed light on a Kantian ideal related to the sovereignty of our attention, understood as a condition of possibility of the individual autonomy.

Key words

Immanuel Kant, Attention, Sovereignty, Mental Illnesses, Mental Weaknesses.

Introduction

Attention had not been perceived as a problem until the 19th century, when an increase in population density, the reduction of periods of time involved in communication and transportation, and the perceptive transformations brought about by technological advancements in the field of entertainment —mostly in film— and in the workplace —e.g.

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the mechanical conveyor belt— led to the need to train, teach, and master attention with increasing expertise. Marx already noticed that, in his time, it was common for workers to get to their work stations one morning to find a new model of loom, coal or steam engine, dumbfounded as to how to use it, which hopelessly led them to lose one of their body parts in their novel and hard-pressed attempts to keep their jobs (Marx 1992, pp. 181-91). It was necessary to train, teach to read and write, medicalize and bureaucratize that enormous mass of people amid that hectic 19th century; it was necessary to come up with an agent that could handle the new demands of social coordination and synchronization, which is why there came an unusual need to train, catch, direct, and even seize people's attention (Crary 2001, pp. 11-80; Beller 2006).

Until then, this peculiar human faculty, found at the root of every conscious activity, had gone unnoticed to a great extent in medical, psychological, and especially, philosophical observations. This whole matter is shown by the fact that Georg Steiner, around 1978, turns to that painting that Jean-Siméon Chardin entitled *Le philosophe lisant*, to condemn the fact that in our day and age people no longer read as they did in the 18th century; the simple act of being constantly interrupted by a phone call, text or voice message, or an e-mail, hinders the celebration of that ceremony during which a philosopher exchanges pleasantries with a lengthy —and surely expensive— book, and dressed in stylish fur, with a hat on, in the company of his hourglass, enshrouded in silence and solemnity, takes on the task of *focusing his attention* on reading, or rereading (Steiner 2009, Chap One). Our time, however, seems to have led us by the hand to an ecstatic sort of attention, spread over different and simultaneous activities, thus developing a multitasker's attention portrayed very well in Édouard Manet's *Le balcon*, where two ladies and a man observe something that is not within the frame, but outside of it; the characters in the painting are purely non-thetic consciousness, as Sartre would say, they are outside themselves, and it has to be like this, considering the speed at which the hectic 19th century changes in transportation, urban life, technology and mass society are taking place.

Anyone would claim, however, that being able, to a certain degree, to direct our attention is part of any ideal of autonomy, inasmuch as it is that which we pay attention to that ultimately leads us to become who we are. Paying attention to a good, successful and happy life coach, paying attention to human misfortune taking place all the time across the planet, paying attention to mainstream series when we watch them throughout the day, weeks, or entire months, being interested in Hollywood celebrities' personal lives, or worrying about our friends and loved ones' concerns and joys dictates to a great extent what kind of people we ultimately become. If, as many assert, one of the characteristics of our time has to do with turning attention into one of the most desired and sought-after capitalizable resources given its high profitability, then it makes sense to wonder whether or not achieving *sovereignty over our attention*, choosing what and who to grant the grace of our gaze, is perhaps one of the most important ethical and political ideals. As David Foster Wallace put it:

The really important kind of freedom involves attention, and awareness, and discipline, and effort, and being able truly to care about other people and to sacrifice for them, over and over, in myriad petty little unsexy ways, every day (...) The only thing that's capital-T True is that you get to decide how you're going to try to see it. You get to consciously decide what has meaning and what doesn't (...) The trick is keeping the truth up-front in daily consciousness (Foster Wallace 2008).

In this manner, actually, and even considering the social and spatial differences that we are dealing with here, Kant understood, in a way, the role that attention plays in the public pursuit of knowledge —*Wissenschaft*. While this is a somewhat underlying concern, it is also true that the emphasis he places on order, process, method, and rules necessary to think correctly is found in most of his writing; this emphasis of his can be found throughout his transcendental, metaphysical, as well as his anthropological observations, and the latter, in turn, permeate his views on mental illnesses. I understand, and this is the main suggestion that I stand by here, that his account of mental illnesses is part of his study of logic in an attempt to claim, above all else, that they hinder the training of attention, which will later allow us to publicly pursue knowledge —whether it be scientific, ethical, political, or of any other nature. In order to address this idea, I will start by elucidating the meaning and epistemic place that Kant gives to attention in his transcendental, metaphysical, and anthropological remarks, given the important role it plays in the public pursuit of knowledge (1). Addressing the place that Kant gives to mental weaknesses and illnesses in his anthropology lessons about logic, I will shed light on some correlations between these pathologies and attention (2), considering that mental weaknesses as well as mental illnesses warp, or are caused by, the fragile attention with which we direct our thoughts (3). Kant’s belief that all knowledge has to be public, and that mental weaknesses and illnesses are, above all else, hurdles for the common pursuit of knowledge, allows me to shed light on a Kantian ideal related to *the sovereignty of our attention*: an ideal that is presented as a condition of possibility of the individual autonomy (4), which, in our time, seems to take on an unusual importance for social criticism (5).

1. *Aufmerksamkeit* and Metaphysics.

It makes sense to start by noticing that *Aufmerksamkeit*, term which Kant usually uses to refer to the act of paying attention or focusing the mind, is ambiguous, in the same way that it occurs with equivalent translations in other languages; *Aufmerksamkeit* can be used either to mean to direct our eyes towards something, noting, in this manner, the avoidance of some error that can be regarded as serious (note A XIII; and A 801/B 82) or in situations where one wants to make reference to the perceptive task of setting our eyes on an object, thus avoiding being distracted from the experience. The second meaning is the one I am interested in addressing, inasmuch as Kant does not always differentiate between the act of focusing one’s attention and the act of *bringing* attention to something, which is why we must be mindful of the textual and thematic contexts in which he uses *Aufmerksamkeit*.

Secondly, the rupture of subjective attention —or that of the researcher— are constantly brought up by Kant, whether it be to show how a speculative statement —such as the existence of a *necessary being*— may fallaciously captivate “the commonest human understanding,” (A 590/B 618) whether it be to direct the young man or woman’s attention to moral law or to their own freedom (KpV, AA 05: 159, and 161) or to explain how beauty excites, catches, and holds —and sometimes, distracts— our attention during rumination (KU, AA 05: §12, 222; §14, 225; §29, 266/67), Kant observes something that we can all notice all the time, that is to say, that our mind/gaze is most of the time directed towards elements outside of ourselves, and not by our own will. Nevertheless, what is really important here is to delve into the regulated and autonomous idea of attention which Kant always assumes, yet few times actually specifies. We know very well, actually, that his idea of applied logic “deals with attention, its hindrance and consequences, the cause of

error, the condition of doubt, of reservation, of conviction, etc.”,¹ and thus entails rational matters as well as empirical and psychological ones (A 55/B 79), which is why we need to stop here for a moment.

Kant understands that logic can be general, as well as “of the peculiar use of understanding.” While the former “contains the absolutely necessary rules of thinking (...) without regard to the difference of the objects to which it may be directed”, the latter forms an *Organon*, considering it contains the set of methodological principles and procedures that lead to the pursuit of knowledge in a given field. Within general logic, in turn, our philosopher differentiates pure logic, which deals with the workings of our understanding without considering all of those empirical conditions under which it operates—understood as a *Canon* of understanding and reason— from the aforementioned applied logic, which, though general in relation to objects, is characterized for fostering a *Catarticon* of common understanding (A 53/B 77-8) which is applied in its analytics as well as in its dialectics; while it focuses on the formal criteria of truth with regards to the former, regarding the latter, it addresses the rules that allow us to condemn the deceptions involved in all which superficially adjusts to such criteria (*Logik*, Introduction I and II).² Bearing this in mind, it is easy to understand why Kant appeared to be so sure about being on the right path to reinstating metaphysics; his predecessors had completely mixed up the different dimensions of logic when they took *Canon* for *Organon*, using it with the purpose of producing a specific type of knowledge.³ For this reason, the direction of attention is so important in applied logic: it is defined, precisely, as the faculty—somewhat empirical, somewhat transcendental—to choose empirical or mental stimuli to define an object of attention to think of or judge, thus leaving other possible stimuli outside of our conscious perceptive radar. In many cases, this choice of stimuli happens automatically, yet in other cases, it happens voluntarily, which takes on a fundamental importance. For several reasons, Kant understands that the constant wandering of the speculative reason of his time occurs for not taking care of the course of its ideas, and for not being aware of the proper rules and procedures that publicly create knowledge related to metaphysics, physics and chemistry, ethics, aesthetics, and politics. Hence his interest to establish a critique of reason that allows it to avoid, within the theoretical field, the quagmires produced by the “natural” and “inevitable” *transcendental illusions*:

Logical illusion, which consists in the mere imitation of the form of reason (the illusion of fallacious inferences) arises solely from a failure of attentiveness to the logical rule. Hence as soon as this attentiveness is focused on the case before us, logical illusion entirely disappears (A 97).

We know very well that the transcendental illusions of reason itself are responsible for taking their theoretical function to a dead end. But the excesses encouraged by cosmological, psychological, and theological ideas are far from being mere metaphysical

¹ The translated excerpts from Kant’s texts have been taken from available English versions. See the bibliography for more information about editions used.

² In the letter that he addresses to Moses Mendelssohn on April 8th, 1766 with the purpose of explaining, and to a degree, asking of his opinion on his *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Illustrated by Dreams of Metaphysics*, published that very year, Kant already insists on the need to keep that *Catarticon* of understanding in the face of spurious metaphysical claims. I will circle back to this.

³ It is also curious that Kant takes on a similar task here—or the very same one—to the one which Aristotle (1928) had developed in his “sophistical refutations” and which Daniel Kahneman (2011) had systematized, closer to our time, about thinking fast and thinking slow in discussions about cognitive psychology.

problems, inasmuch as these excesses encourage clear political dangers, such as the establishment of institutions, groups and schools that brag about having privileged access to those ideas, thus privatizing that “pseudo knowledge,” and seriously hurting the publicity of reason itself. In order to thoroughly understand how sensitive this subject is, it is wise to remember that publicity is not a mere addition to knowledge —*Wissenschaft*— but an integral part of its pursuit; Kant emphasizes time after time that all theoretical and practical knowledge are already somehow embedded in our common sense, even in that of the most uncultured farmer in eastern Prussia (B XXXIV). For this reason, towards the end of “The Canon of Pure Reason,” Kant arrives at the conclusion that the *telos* of knowledge about the world is justified by the practical idea of the highest good, clarifying something which, in a way, already is at the core of all of people’s beliefs, that is to say, the belief in the possibility of a future life, and the existence of God as the provider of the moral world:

But do you demand then that cognition that pertains to all human beings should surpass common understanding and be revealed to you only by philosophers? (...) in what concerns all human beings without exception nature is not to be blamed for any partiality in the distribution of its gifts, and in regard to the essential ends of human nature even the highest philosophy cannot advance further than the guidance that nature has also conferred on the most common understanding (A 831/B 859).

For this reason, Kant takes on the task of coming up with a method to take advantage, in both a positive and a negative way —this is what the critique is about—, of the faculties of our reason. Outlining as precisely as possible the types of justification that our opinions about the world —cosmological idea— ourselves —psychological idea— and what we are to expect —theological idea— entail with regards to what we are able to do —idea of freedom—, our philosopher thought he was contributing to some sort of therapy of pure reason, i.e. to the reestablishment of the publicity of knowledge —remember this redundancy: to Kant, there is no knowledge without publicity. And so, this is how the conscious direction of our attention enters the scene.

Kant shows that we must take care of the attention of our ideas, and at the same time, of our mental processes, so as to avoid falling in the private realm, thus distorting the proper use of our reason. As we will see later, the impossibility to communicate our way of perceiving and conceptualizing the world is precisely how a weak and mentally ill man differs from a reflexively trained man and a healthy one respectively (Anth, AA 08: §§ 45-53). The discipline of reason is the kind of therapy Kant offers, and also urges, to use during the pursuit of any kind of knowledge. All of chapter one of “The Transcendental Doctrine of Method” focuses on this issue, i.e. exercising care in our reason by complying with its own rules, without the need to deny its inherent antinomies and paralogisms, since “Without attention to this [a priori synthetic capacity of the human cognition] the proofs, like water breaking its bank, run wildly across the country, wherever the tendency of hidden association may happen to lead them” (A 783/B 811).

2. Mental illnesses and the public pursuit of knowledge.

Some assert that mental illnesses —along with visionaries and children’s thinking— somehow make up the counterpart of the public aspect, and thus, the transcendental aspect, of reason that Kant starts to develop and systematize as of his first *Critique*. Around the time that Michel Foucault argued in 1964 that *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* could only be thoroughly understood opposite the transcendental subject model that Kant presented in his first *Critique*, the role that madness may or may

not have played in the critical thinking of our philosopher has become at least visible (Foucault 2008, pp. 11-79). Additionally, Foucault's view is still highly accepted, and it is believed that it illustrates pretty well how Kant seems to have identified his transcendental subject model with a view of mental health that is never explicit. Within this interpretative chain, Monique David-Ménard (1990), for example, has underlined that *Essay on Maladies of the Head* of 1764, along with the subsequent *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer...* of 1766, foreshadows Kant's concern about protecting his beloved metaphysics from superstitions, religious obscurantism, and especially, from dementia. In other words, were not the claims of the rationalist metaphysics of his time too supportive of the ones that embrace the alleged revelations of a theosophist such as Herr von Swedenborg? (TG, AA 02: 342).⁴ Every allegedly privileged access to some object that one way or another concerns all of human kind has to be unfounded, according to Kant, from the very moment in which one refuses to submit its epistemic nature to public scrutiny.⁵

We know that the general observations that Kant holds with regards to mental weaknesses and illnesses are systematized in his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*. After taking notes of his observations regarding amentia —*Unsinnigkeit*— and dementia —*Wahnsinn*— that overstimulate imagination, and insania —*Wahnwitz*— and vesania —*Überwitz*— which distort judgment, he asserts that:

The only universal characteristic of madness is the loss of *common sense* (*sensus communis*) and its replacement with *logical private sense* (*sensus privatus*); for example, a human being in broad daylight sees a light burning on his table which, however, another person standing nearby does not see, or hears a voice that no one else hears (Anth, AA 08: § 53).

No adept reader of Kant's texts would be surprised by this view, and based on that, it may not be too relevant to insist on this otherwise essential idea. Over and over again, the renowned philosopher from Königsberg has stressed that every type of knowledge, whether it be theoretical or practical, must be pursued publicly, offering reasons worthy of being shared, discussed, reviewed, and accepted:

For it is a subjectively necessary touchstone of the correctness of our judgments generally, and consequently also of the soundness of our understanding, that we also restrain our understanding by the *understanding of others*, instead of *isolating* ourselves with our own understanding and judging *publicly* with our private representations, so to speak (Anth, AA 08: § 53).

This emphasis of his can be found, as I have done here, throughout his *Critiques* and in several of his shorter texts, as well —Cfr. WA; WDO. However, what is often not found in Kant's account of mental weaknesses and illnesses is the underlying role that attention plays. He specifically notes that a peculiar trait of these mental conditions is to hinder our mastery of the direction of our ideas, experiences, and decisions. *Hypochondria* as well as *mania*, i.e. the two types of dementia that Kant finds, are characterized for differentially

⁴ Go back, again, to the letter that Kant addresses to Moses Mendelssohn on April 8th, 1766. At the same time, it is important that, in his refutation of problematic idealism, Kant understands that the experiences of a dreamer as well as those of a delusional man are figments of their imagination based on “previous outer perceptions (...) according to its particular determinations and through its coherence with criteria of all actual experience” (B 278/9).

⁵ In the letter that Kant addresses Carlota von Knobloch on August 10th 1763, it becomes clear how astonished our philosopher was when he learned that the “incident about Herr von Swedenborg” had been publicly disseminated —“*meant for publication*”— and he is sorry he did not get a chance to personally interview such a unique personality.

partializing our control over the direction our mind takes, sometimes hyperfocusing our attention —*hypochondria*— other times seizing it by creating a rule that causes thought to be consistent with itself, but opposing the rules of the experience —*mania*—, Kant seems to always relate the inability to master our attention to the inability to control our reason:

The defects of the cognitive faculty are either *mental deficiencies* or *mental illnesses*. Illnesses of the soul with respect to the cognitive faculty can be brought under two main types. One is *melancholia* (hypochondria) and the other is *mental derangement* (mania). With the *former*, the patient is well aware that something is not going right with the course of his thoughts, in so far as his reason has insufficient control over itself to direct, stop, or impel the course of his thoughts (...) – Mental derangement indicates an arbitrary course in the patient’s thoughts which has its own (subjective) rule, but which runs contrary to the (objective) rule that is in agreement with laws of experience (Anth, AA 08: § 45).

As we can see here, Kant believes there is a sort of intermediate realm between the total focus of our attention and its total arbitrariness which could allow us to direct the course of our thoughts healthily —a mental matter— as well as critically —a philosophical matter. And it’s precisely what is between attention and distraction that he intends to outline by means of applied logic, and within it, by means of the *Catarticon* of common understanding. In no way does Kant urge us to remain focused on our thoughts all the time, for it would be neither beneficial for our health nor practical.⁶ If I understand this correctly, he seems to be encouraging us to train our attention so that we can use it at the right time to deal with matters that deserve our attention, under the proper terms, and according to the proper procedures, so we can later share our unique way of perceiving, feeling, and interpreting the world with those we interact with: it is about one of the conditions of possibility of the public pursuit of any kind of knowledge. And this is precisely what I would like to interpret as an *ideal of sovereignty of our attention*.

I do not believe Kant supports the ideal of “having to take over our attention” — which I find throughout *Infinite Jest* as well as in the David Foster Wallace quote I used in the introduction of this chapter— insofar as he does not believe this is possible, or even recommendable.⁷ Rather, he seems to support an ideal related to attention which is linked to the idea of “sovereignty,” inasmuch as the goal is not to control our own mental or psychological matters, but to *redirect* them.⁸ From this standpoint, according to Foster Wallace, it would not be about trying to *take over* our attention, but rather, about being capable of *redirecting* it when necessary, with regards to those objects that deserve our

⁶ We have textual evidence to support this argument. Firstly, in his *dietetics*, Kant recommended we distract ourselves deliberately, and even let the free inner workings of our faculties take over, at least once a day (SF, AA 07: 109-10; Anth, AA 08: § 47). Secondly, his stance on how to mentally deal with some physical discomforts is well known —Kant tells us how he always had difficulty breathing due to his flawed chest— especially, diverting our attention from them by carrying out some mental activity that is not too fatiguing (SF, AA 07: 104; Anth, AA 08: § 50). This is also shown by the fact that his friend Christian Garve supports the exact opposite, thus flirting with an exaggerated mentalism —see the letter that Garve addresses to Kant in mid-September, 1798, and the famous response Kant sends him the following September 21st.

⁷ Even though the suggestion of finding this sort of ideal here is still appealing, since many understand Kant’s ideal of autonomy under the Rousseauian principle of achieving ownership over oneself —Berlin 2004, pp. 171-260. In one of the many reflections Kant offers about *attention* and *abstraction* in his *Anthropology Lectures*, he asserts that, generally speaking, it is always good to have all of our mental strengths under control (V-Anth/Menschenkunde, AA 25: 900).

⁸ Heinz Kohut and Philip F. D. Seitz, for example, have supported the idea of “sovereignty” in psychoanalysis discussions relating to *Ego*, in order to avoid a Freudian ideal of autonomy that perceives in conscience, reflection, or I, an *owner* of all inner matters Heinz Kohut and Philip F. D. Seitz (2011, pp. 344-5).

attention, according to proper rules. This is precisely what the Kantian ideal of achieving sovereignty over our attention is about, and which underlies many of his texts.

3. The peculiar anthropological nature of attention.

It is not by chance that it is precisely in his anthropology lessons where Kant stops to more calmly explain what he understands by attention. Especially given how different it is from other disciplines which study that which nature has caused human beings to become, Kant points out in the second introductory paragraph of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, “pragmatic knowledge of man aims at what man makes, can, or should make of himself as a freely acting being”.⁹ In this context of subjective self-making, Kant made it quite clear that attention was not yet another cognitive and perceptive faculty among others, but instead, it was actually found at the very core of one of the most important activities of human reason: abstraction. Kant says:

For a man to be able to make an abstraction from a sense impression, even when the sense impression forces itself on his senses, is proof of a far greater faculty than just paying attention, because it gives evidence of a freedom of the faculty of thought and sovereignty of the mind in having the condition of one’s sense impressions under one’s control (*animus sui compos*). In this respect the faculty of abstraction is much more difficult, but also more important than the faculty of perception when it encounters sense impressions (Anth, AA 08: § 3).¹⁰

Kant asserts here, as a matter of fact, that the nonsense of our attention makes us constantly unhappy, insofar as “it is a peculiarly bad habit of our faculty of perception to observe too closely, even involuntarily, what is faulty in other people” and ourselves.¹¹ Hence it is necessary to exercise our attention—which, in this context, means being able to abstract those matters that define the representations with which our mind operates—and rid ourselves of such an unsettling natural condition. However, attention does not exactly relate to abstraction, as Kant notes that:

- 1.) If I raise these representations to as high a degree of clarity as possible. Attention does this.
- 2.) If I extract from all the other representations in the vicinity so much clarity that they become completely obscured and only the one [representation] remains. That is abstraction. Abstraction is not a lack of attentiveness; its purpose is merely negative – it is an activity, as I keep away other representations [so] that their impressions do not act on my consciousness (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1239-40).

Hence his assertion that: “A human being abstracts involuntarily when he pushes away all ideas that run through his head and he clings to one so strongly that he cannot let it go. – Hypochondriacs are this way; *the human being has control over these follies only in a healthy condition*–” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1240, *highlights added*). Let’s take advantage

⁹ It is also curious that in order to emphasize this self-making that human beings can foster based on the always flawed knowledge they have, or may have, about themselves, Kant insists, in his anthropology courses in the 1770’s, on the existence of a third faculty that would go along with receptiveness as well as free will; so, Kant pointed out the existence of a subjective “power” that had to be developed in order to possess our faculties, i.e. to “put everything in motion” (V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: § 11).

¹⁰ See also V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: § 2, Observations.

¹¹ Several times I have thought that this kind of anthropological views from Kant went along with what, according to him, make up the historical and social sources of evil. Bear in mind that he did not believe that evil was a natural human condition, but rather, a result of the influences that inevitably affect human beings as they share a spherical surface that forces them to coexist (RGV, AA 06: 93-4).

of this fleeting assertion to see how Kant links attention issues to mental illnesses. I quote *in extenso*:

To scrutinize the various acts of the imagination within me, when I call them forth, is indeed worth reflection, as well as necessary and useful for logic and metaphysics. But to wish to play the spy upon one's self, when those acts come to mind unsummoned and of their own accord (which happens through the play of the unpremeditatedly creative imagination), is to reverse the natural order of the cognitive powers, since then the rational elements do not take the lead (as they should) but instead follow behind. *This desire for self-investigation is either already a disease of the mind (hypochondria), or will lead to such a disease and ultimately to the madhouse.* He who has a great deal to tell of inner experiences (for example, of grace, of temptations, etc.) may, in the course of his voyage to self-discovery, have made his first landing only at Anticyra. Inner experiences are not like external experiences of objects in space, wherein the objects appear side by side and permanently fixed. The inner sense sees the conditions for its definition only in Time and, consequently, in a state of flux, which is without that permanence of observation necessary for experience (Anth, AA 08: § 4, *highlights added*).¹²

As we can see, forcing as well as neglecting the attention we pay to ourselves and to our thoughts can entirely undermine the possibility to communicate the findings of self-knowledge to others. This becomes clear because, from the beginning, Kant explains that his concern here refers only to the logic of thought, not to mental health as such, which is why, as Foucault suggested, everything related to mental weaknesses and illnesses must be understood opposite the transcendental subject model.¹³ However, this suggestion does not seem to be completely right. According to Kant, it is neither possible nor desirable to remain in abstract focus all the time. It is necessary to shift between the focus of our attention and recreational and healthy distractions in what he often calls “common sense” of “bon sens”:

In order to judge men according to their cognitive faculty (according to their understanding as such) we make a division into two classes: those to whom must be attributed common sense (*sensus communis*), which certainly is not common (*sensus vulgaris*), and men of science. People with common sense are familiar with the principles relating to practical application (*in concreto*). Scientific people are familiar with the principles themselves prior to their application (*in abstracto*). The understanding, which belongs to the first cognitive capacity, is sometimes called horse sense (*bon sens*), whereas the understanding belonging to the second cognitive faculty we call perspicuity (*ingenium perspicax*) (Anth, AA 08: § 6).

Hence, a few lines later, he adds that our faculty to solve a problem with clarity, order, and serenity is related to some sort of logical tact “in which reflection looks at the object from many angles and produces the correct result without being aware of the acts occurring within the mind during this process” (Anth, AA 08: § 6). Kant understands that this faculty is to be exercised, trained, and that people can not only control it when and how it is appropriate, but they can also learn to shy away from it through recreational activities, and above all, regenerative ones; this would make up, in his words, a “mental regimentation”

¹² See also V-Anth/Collins, AA 25: § 4, Observations; and V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1439.

¹³ There is been a heated debate about whether or not Kant's anthropology lectures may be systematized from one single viewpoint. Forcefully restricting the most accurate views, it is worth mentioning those that understand these lectures under the umbrella of a “doctrine of prudence” (Graband 2015; Wilson 2016), or an “anthropology of cognition” (Cohen 2014, chap. 5), or an empirical psychology seen as a “logic anthropology” (Zinkstok 2011). I believe that the suggestions presented here match any of these insights very well.

(Anth, AA 08: § 47). Humans are rational and finite beings, which is why we cannot act as transcendental beings wandering around for extended periods of time. We must rest, get distracted, and recover from the tiring task that setting our eyes on an object entails—for it is an *Objekt*, and not necessarily *Gegenstand*—and abstract everything related to it, dismissing all which is secondary. All of this is particularly important, because according to Kant, few are the times when mental weaknesses and illnesses do not correlate:

One of the mental weaknesses is to be attached, through reproductive imagination, to an idea to which one has given great or lasting attention, and from which one is not able to get away, that is, one is not able to set the course of imagination free again. If this evil is habitual and directed to one and the same object, it may possibly result in insanity (Anth, AA 08: § 47).

While it is true that Kant considers several causes of mental illnesses, in particular, physiological ones, and a few social ones (Anth, AA 08: § 53) I would like to examine those which establish a sort of *continuum* between mental weakness and illnesses. This is the case of weaknesses linked to subjective attention, and of some sudden mood swings, such as melancholy [*Tiefsinnigkeit*] (Anth, AA 08: § 50). In this context, it is easy to tell that mental weaknesses which could later lead to madness are developed by means of bad habits, especially those related to stagnant social routines.¹⁴ The caution that Kant exercises all the time when it comes to identifying etiological matters to explain the origin of mental weaknesses and illnesses is intended to not hold people accountable for their own suffering, which is actually meritorious. However, this caution does not keep him from mentioning in one note that “It is an ordinary thing to see a merchant *overextend himself* and dissipate his powers in vast schemes” (Anth, AA 08: § 53): Kant acknowledges that some bad habits generated and regenerated in social interactions may cause mental weaknesses that may later flourish under some sort of dementia. If I am at least partially correct in identifying an inherent correlation between the training of subjective attention/abstraction, mental weaknesses, and madness, it makes sense to venture a rework of the non-physiological—i.e. social—origins of mental illnesses based on the ideal of sovereignty of attention that I have attempted to shed light on. Next, I will clarify the correlation between these concepts.

4. Sovereignty of attention and mental illnesses.

To sum up what I have put forward so far, I have mentioned that Kant only finds one relative universal symptom of mental illnesses: one which involves the impossibility to publicly communicate our ideas and experiences. This evidently entails the idea of “mental health” which pivots around our faculty of decentration, and the possibility to imagine the points of view of those we interact with. In *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, as we know, Kant delves into the swamp of casuistry to shed light on those matters that daily jeopardize or foster our rational faculties, and by extension, our mental health. Most of our mental distress is identified by Kant in our physiology, and in fact, he holds that they are generally hereditary; a few other ones—in an attempt to avoid blaming a mad man for his condition—would be social, or at least circumscribed in the social sphere. Within the latter, Kant noted we can identify mental illnesses caused by the persistence of some mental weaknesses, many of which are linked to the non-training or to the systemic hindrance of subjective attention/abstraction. In this manner, Kant also noticed that one

¹⁴ Marco Costantini (2018, pp. 234-5) has pointed out that Kant does not believe that society and its inherent unrest cause mental illnesses all by themselves, but that social matters determine the conditions in which these evils may arise.

way of overcoming these hassles fell, as we have seen, on the act of learning and exercising rules that regulate the correct course of our ideas, and on the other hand, as we will see next, on the incorporation of healthy social practices.

In his anthropology lessons, which date back to 1784/5, and which we can now access thanks to Mrongovious' notes, we can read that those distractions that seize our attention, as well as the excessive abstraction we sometimes experience when considering a particular matter, can be mitigated by means of specific social practices:

It is a cruel hindrance to thinking. Involuntary abstraction reverberates for a long time, although this reverberation consists of obscure representations. The human being is ill over whatever abstraction it is clinging to, for it weakens the powers greatly. The best means against it is society; the condition of [being in] thoughtless abstraction is a [kind of] thoughtlessness (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1240).

For this reason, Kant concludes a few lines later that “Dementia thus often arises if one always directs his attentiveness to an object for a long time. Melancholics are like this. But it is not allowed in societies at all and is blameworthy” (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1241).¹⁵ The example Kant offers here is one of his favorite: rumor has it that, once visited by a friend, who challenged him, Isaac Newton decided to go for a walk with him, not without eating first. Upon grabbing one of the dishes available there, and finding it was empty, he thought he had been eating from it and decided to go for a walk with his friend; however, his friend disclosed that he had tested his attention by eating the food from both dishes without him noticing (V-Anth/Mron, AA 25: 1241; see also V-Anth/Friedländer, AA 25: 539, and AA 15: 227). Kant's judgment about this kind of mischiefs illustrates very well what I am interested in addressing: “This is a deadly distraction from which one can escape [only] with difficulty”. Here, our philosopher never gets tired of offering examples of socialization, of how we find ourselves forced to be on the lookout for other people's viewpoints: their opinion —it is always good to be interested in knowing how we are perceived by others, how they view us and based on which criteria or rules they do so. Decentration, and not the externalization of oneself, would be the opportunity that socialization offers us to be able to direct the course of our ideas correctly and healthily. And, as far as my understanding goes, this is the main reason why we cannot and must not give up dwelling in the antinomy of our attention: the elastic and always dangerous nature of subjective attention —given its tendency to dissolve as well as to hyperfocus our gaze, and with it, our agency— lies, among other reasons, upon our need to dwell in the world of our own experiences in connection with other people's views. Others question us all the time, and thus get away with seizing our gaze, allowing us either to succumb to the most extreme heteronomy or to establish our autonomy amid that heteronomy by means of the public use of reason. This is the main reason why, as I have said, Kant understands that, regarding our attention, there will always be —and there should always be— something unavailable and uncontrollable about it, and something that jeopardizes the possibility to develop some sort of engineering around it:

A healthy soul is always concerned with something outside itself. *A sick soul is always concerned ever and again with itself, and thus arises fantastic beings and enthusiasm.* Through great attention one is either awkward or affected. One is awkward when in social relations one observes too great a punctiliousness and thus in the end excites mistrust against oneself. One does not know how to show oneself to advantage. But all this comes from paying too much attention to oneself. From this discomfiture it arises that the human being

¹⁵ The term Kant uses here is *Wahnsinigkeit*, in reference to a sort of “delusion of sense.”

makes things worse than he would have otherwise. Not to be awkward is therefore a great advantage (V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1439, *highlight added*).

It is not hard to notice that his anthropology lectures study, among other matters, the dynamics of ordinary human cognition *within* the social sphere. Hence most of his suggestions with regards to everyday knowledge supports matters related to a good coexistence. When it comes to sensitivity, Kant recommends killing time to stimulate the mind, developing the senses of smell and hearing publicly only, seeking novelty to thwart monotony, and even smoking to foster conversation. When it comes to imagination, he suggests having some wine to stimulate it, and avoiding novels that overexcite it, meditating, exercising affinity of ideas and the different types of memory —mechanical, ingenious, and judicious. Finally, with regards to understanding, he asks us to remain in silence publicly when something cannot be closely examined, or a matter cannot be judged from a common standpoint (Anth, AA 08: 125-230). As we can see, all of these recommendations link cognition to social coexistence, insofar as all knowledge understood as such must be generated and regenerated in the public sphere,¹⁶ as I have pointed out in the first part of this essay.

5. Final remarks about attention, mental illnesses, and late modernity.

I have suggested that underneath his transcendental, metaphysical, and anthropological research, Kant always alludes to the need to train our attention in order to be able to direct our thoughts correctly, and then communicate it to others. In this context, mental weaknesses as well as mental illnesses seem to be linked, in one way or another, to partializations of subjective attention, and consequently, overcoming those conditions seems to be linked, in one way or another, to the need to achieve sovereignty over our attention. Given these circumstances, this reading brings on a significant amount of questions. I will only address two of them.

Firstly, we cannot claim that it is completely clear that the weakness of our attention can cause mental illnesses. My rework examines those few excerpts in which Kant suggests that certain social practices —such as those of the merchant— may cause harmful behaviors for the learning of the “logical tact” of common sense, thus causing mental weaknesses, and even mental illnesses. Nevertheless, and without denying what was said earlier, we must add that in most cases, Kant seems to regard the partialization of personal attention as a consequence, and not a cause, of mental weaknesses and illnesses.

Secondly, and as I have stated in the beginning of this essay, no one would hesitate to argue, along with Kant and Foster Wallace, that any kind of personal autonomy imaginable is strengthened, at least to a certain extent, on the foundation of a reasonable development of our faculty to direct our attention: directing and setting our eyes on those things that indeed hold certain value to us. However, we must note that Kant ruminates on attention in a setting marked by presence and permanence, and not by the hysteria of our age. That Kantian ideal concerning the sovereignty of our attention is developed within the same temporal and rhythmic brew that Jean-Siméon Chardin illustrates in *Le philosophe lisant*: it is about an 18th century attention that must attune to the presence of what lies in

¹⁶ Kant is quite convincing about this: “This involuntary distraction is a sickness in which attention is always directed to oneself, and are indulging the thought that awakens displeasure. Human beings who have this sort of subtle distraction and always build castles in the air, are of no use in society and are harmful and a burden on society. Such people are commonly considered the fools of society. For if a distracted person is in society then there is always something to laugh at...” (V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1530).

front of us, and not to the dramatic turmoil that we must deal with in our time on a daily basis. Kant develops his transcendental logic and empirical psychology in a modernity in the making, still stable, and which was barely beginning to be shaken by the French Revolution. This is why it is worth avoiding the naive instrumentalization of that ideal of attention when considering our time.

All in all, however, I suggest that Kant has passed on to us parts of an analysis scheme for the study of mental illnesses which is not at all insignificant: one which establishes a *continuum* between certain types of social interaction and certain types of dementia by means of mental weaknesses linked to personal attention. Updating this analysis scheme for our day and age calls for an endeavor which, unfortunately, I cannot undertake here.

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