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Autonomy as the Foundation of Learning in Kant and Paulo Freire

Abstract: This article aims to relate the concept of autonomy in the educational philosophy of the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, more specifically in *Lectures on Pedagogy* (1804), and in the educational philosophy of the Brazilian educator and philosopher Paulo Freire, more precisely in *Pedagogy of Autonomy: Knowledge Necessary for Educational Practice* (1996), in order to understand how autonomy can be understood and used as a tool to support the teaching-learning process, aiming at learners capable of thinking for themselves, of being critical, and, thus, having the means to become enlightened citizens and moral agents. For this purpose, the article is divided into three sections: (i) and (ii) analyze each philosopher's approach to education and autonomy, and (iii) relates the concept of autonomy in these pedagogical projects.

Keywords: Autonomy, Education, Teaching-Learning, Kant, Freire

Introduction

Education is the means by which the individual can reach his majority, in other words, through which he can become enlightened. Within the Kantian educational perspective, education has the function of enlightenment and morality, of intellectual and moral autonomy, of thinking for oneself and giving oneself moral laws. This thinking for oneself means seeking within oneself, that is, seeking in reason, the touchstone of truth. It is a matter of assuming the project of enlightenment (*Aufklärung*) as a maxim. As in Kant, autonomy for Paulo

Freire¹ is fundamental to an effective educational project, capable of transforming and emancipating. It is on the basis of this perspective that the article presents its proposal for an analysis of the concept of autonomy in both philosophers.

Giving oneself laws – this is the definition of autonomy.² Although it is a concept whose definition, apex, and foundation lie in Kant's practical philosophy, according to Zatti (2007), historically its notion was already considered in Ancient Greece. In Plato, for example, the notion of autonomy did not have the moral character it acquires in the Modern historical-philosophical period; however, his reflection on self-mastery contributed to the later conception of autonomy as self-determination. Machiavelli, in turn, presents a pioneering concept of political autonomy by combining two meanings, namely, freedom from dependence and the power of self-legislation. Another important contribution was the notion of autonomy presented by the Enlightenment thinkers, who gave voice to reason, to mathematics and to experience, avoiding the dogmas and superstitions arising from Scholasticism. All these notions, together with the notion of autonomy presented by Rousseau in his *Social Contract* and in *Emile*, or *On Education*, were fundamental for the definition of autonomy presented by Kant in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*,³ namely, "autonomy of the will is the property that the will has of being a law to itself (independently of any property of the objects of volition)."⁴ For Kant, on the one hand, reason must guide sensible inclinations, therefore the will must be determined by practical reason. On the other hand, reason itself, as a faculty, needs exercise and development. Education is one of the paths to the development of rationality and of various human capacities. Moral education is the key to the transformation of

¹ Paulo Reglus Neves Freire (1921–1997), born in Recife/Pernambuco – Brazil, was a Brazilian philosopher and educator who, through his proposals for critical pedagogy and liberating education, defended education as a means of transforming the individual and his reality. Freire criticized traditional education and developed adult literacy methods aimed at autonomy and political engagement.

² For Schneewind (1998), Kant was responsible for conceptualizing morality as autonomy. According to him, Kant's assumptions about the human condition can still be used today. For more on research into the concept of autonomy, see Schneewind, J. B., 1998. *The Invention of Autonomy*. Cambridge University Press.

³ All references to Kant's works are made according to the edition of the Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (AA). According to the model: GMS, AA 04:445 (abbreviation of the work, volume number and page number) and according to English translation.

⁴ GMS, AA 04:440 / Kant, I., 1993. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals: With, On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, p. 44.

the agents' way of thinking and the foundation for the construction of a moral character.⁵

In turn, in Paulo Freire's pedagogical proposal,⁶ autonomy plays a fundamental role in social transformation. According to Freire, the transformation of the student into a socially active subject capable of freeing themselves from heteronomy and oppression is possible through a critical and transformative education. Thus, we can find similarities with the Kantian proposal, since both believe in human progress and in the development of human capacities through education.

In light of the above, the guiding question of the article is: how can autonomy, as conceived from the perspective of Kant and Paulo Freire, contribute to the teaching-learning process? Guided by this question, the article is divided into three sections. In the first section, the focus of the discussion is the approach to the concept of autonomy according to Kant. The second section addresses autonomy from Paulo Freire's perspective, and the last section focuses on the relationship of the concept of autonomy in the two pedagogical proposals, with an emphasis on the teaching-learning process. Finally, in the conclusion, some fundamental distinctions and similarities between Kant and Freire are outlined in order to consolidate the proposed analysis.

⁵ Kant develops his concept of character in *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (1798), which has specific types and definitions. Specifically regarding moral character, it is possible to find Kant's explanation of its connection with moral education, for example, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), in the Doctrine of Method. "The Doctrine of Method as a path to the construction of a genuinely moral attitude serves as a teaching – a pedagogical method – for the construction of a moral character. The pure moral motive is the only motive that can ground this character. Since it is necessary to make the moral law concrete in the world, the Doctrine of Method serves as an intermediary between the normative and the descriptive, between morality and applied ethics." (Marques, L. F. P., 2023. *A Doutrina do Método como um processo contínuo de tomada de consciência e ajuizamento moral*. In: *Comentários às obras de Kant: crítica da razão prática*. Florianópolis: NéfipOnline, pp. 497–498.) – my translation.

⁶ "Paulo Freire made an extremely important contribution to education, especially in countries where situations of oppression are a marked feature, as is the case in Brazil. He formulated an educational proposal that seeks to transform the student into a subject, which implies the promotion of autonomy. His method proposes literacy, an education that leads to awareness of one's own social condition. Awareness would make social transformation possible, through the praxis of action and reflection. We would then have a subject emancipated from an oppressive social condition. In Freire's view, liberation from heteronomies, normally imposed by the unjust and/or authoritarian socio-economic-educational order, is a necessary condition for autonomy." (Zatti, V., 2007. *Autonomia e educação em Immanuel Kant e Paulo Freire*. Porto Alegre: Edipucrs, p. 10.) – my translation.

1. Educational Autonomy⁷ according to Kant

For Kant, education is an art, and every art can be taught. The human being, for him, is neither good nor evil by nature, but possesses dispositions for good and propensities for evil.⁸ Therefore, the human being has dispositions and propensities for both paths; that is, the agent must adopt the moral law as his fundamental maxim, otherwise his action will not be from duty, and if he has as a fundamental maxim to follow self-love (*Eigenliebe*), the agent may commit immoral actions. Assuming a possible “innate neutrality of human nature,” considering innate dispositions and propensities, education can be used as a tool in the moral development process of human beings, assisting them in constructing a way of thinking capable of subjecting sensibility to reason, self-love to practical reason.

Kant, in *Lectures on Pedagogy* (1804), states:

Now we come to the question whether the human being is by nature morally good or evil. He is neither of the two because by nature he is not a moral being at all; he only becomes one when his reason raises itself to the concepts of duty and of law. However, one can say that originally he has impulses to all vices in himself, for he has inclinations and instincts which incite him, although reason drives him in the opposite direction. Therefore he can only become good by means of virtue, that is, by self-constraint; although without impulses he can be innocent.⁹

⁷ It is necessary to clarify that the concept of autonomy analyzed in this article is not the strictly normative concept as a supreme principle of morality as developed by Kant in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, but rather the more general concept of autonomy, linked to the Kantian moralization project, that is, to the project of elucidating tools that serve as aids for society to move away from a pathological whole and towards a moral whole, as Kant mentions in the *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective*: “And here all of the talents are gradually developed, taste is formed, and, even, through continual enlightenment, the beginning of a foundation is laid for a manner of thinking which is able, over time, to transform the primitive natural predisposition for moral discernment into definite practical principles and, in this way, to ultimately transform an agreement to society that initially had been pathologically coerced into a *moral whole*” IaG, AA 08:21 / (Kant, I., 2006. *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective*. In: P. Kleingeld, ed. *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 7.)

⁸ RGV, AA 06:26 and RGV, AA 06:29 / Kant, I., 1998. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*. In: A.W. Wood and G. di Giovanni, eds. *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason and Other Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 74–77.

⁹ Päd, AA 09:492 / Kant, I., 2007. *Lectures on Pedagogy*. In: G. Zöller and R.B. Louden, eds. *Anthropology, History, and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 478–479.

The human being needs education both for his enlightenment and to achieve morality; he is the only creature that needs to be educated.¹⁰

For Kant, most animals require nourishment and protection, but not *care*, as is the case with the human being.¹¹ An animal is everything that can be by instinct, but the human being needs to dispose of his own reason. “The human species is supposed to bring out, little by little, humanity’s entire natural predisposition by means of its own effort.”¹² Therefore, the human being truly becomes human through education; he is what education makes of him. This education must always become better with each generation so that future generations advance a step toward the moral improvement of the species, toward the perfection of humanity. The project of an educational theory starts from a hopeful idea of improvement, that human nature can always become better. In Kant’s words,

An outline of a theory of education is a noble ideal, and it does no harm if we are not immediately in a position to realize it. One must be careful not to consider the idea to be chimerical and disparage it as a beautiful dream, simply because in its execution hindrances occur. An idea is nothing other than the concept of a perfection which is not yet to be found in experience – as is the case of a perfect republic governed by rules of justice. Is the latter therefore impossible? If our idea is only correct, then it is by no means impossible, despite all of the obstacles which stand in the way of its execution. [...] Now the idea of education which develops all the human being’s natural predispositions is indeed truthful.¹³

To educate according to the idea of humanity is to teach that one must act “in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of another, always at the same time as an end and

¹⁰ “Kant’s proposal for education is to discipline the will. At the same time as man is born with a disposition to follow impulses and vices, he is born with the law within him (Zingano, M. A., 1989. *Razão e História em Kant*. São Paulo: Brasiliense). Education must have rationality as its objective, because the rational being can enact universal law for himself, achieved by learning to exercise the rules on a theoretical and practical level. One of the fundamental aspects in the Kantian vision would be discipline for the achievement of autonomy, because through its man would emerge from animality to humanity.” (Brandão, J., Guariniello, S. Q., 2017. *Immanuel Kant e Paulo Freire: a escola, os educandos e a questão da autonomia*. *Lumen et Virtus*, 8(19), p. 175) – my translation.

¹¹ Päd, AA 09:441 / Kant, I., 2007. *Lectures on pedagogy*, *ibid.*, p. 437.

¹² Päd, AA 09:442 / *Ibid.*, p. 438.

¹³ Päd, AA 09:444-445 / *Ibid.*, pp. 439–440.

never simply as a means.”¹⁴

According to Manfred Kuehn (2012), educability is an essential process for Kant’s philosophy. He states that for Kant

educability is not just one of the essential characteristics of human beings, but the most important one of all. It has not just moral, but also political implications that go far beyond the needs of any particular government or state. The well-being of humanity in the long run depends on it.¹⁵

Education is capable of promoting both scientific and technical development as well as human development; however, in order for the individual to reach such development, they must be active, that is, each individual must seek the exit from their immaturity.¹⁶ This immaturity, for Kant, is understood as the inability to use one’s own understanding without the guidance of another. In this sense, one may mention the famous opening sentence of the essay on *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* “Sapere aude! Have the courage to make use of your own intellect!”¹⁷ Therefore, this exit consists in thinking for oneself and being able to assume the conduct of one’s own life in an autonomous and responsible way. Ultimately, to be free in order to be autonomous.

According to Robinson dos Santos (2007), Kant understands education as a fundamental process through which the human being is constituted as such. Education is, therefore,

a knowledge connected to experience that must be guided and planned in connection with ethics. Kant emphasizes that it is of utmost importance that this knowledge, which is part of practical Anthropology, be studied with a view to its constant improvement, and it does not matter that this process never

¹⁴ GMS, AA 04:429 / Kant, I., 1993. *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals: With, On a Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns*, *ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁵ Kuehn, M., 2012. Kant on Education, Anthropology, and Ethics. In: *Kant and Education Interpretations and Commentary*. New York: Routledge, p. 66.

¹⁶ I agree with Menezes that: “Aufklärung identifies itself deeply with this educational project, because its ideals of humanity and autonomy, without it, would be doomed to chimera. Transforming itself into a philosophy of education, it assumes this project as the vehicle that improves humanity to the point of no longer needing external authority and superstition as shields for its minority. Believing in the possibility of a man educated for freedom is what allows Aufklärung to be structured as a process.” (Menezes, E., 2014. Kant: Esclarecimento e Educação Moral. *Cadernos de Filosofia Alemã*, 19(1), p. 144.) – my translation.

¹⁷ WE, AA 08:35 / Kant, I., 2006. *An Answer to the Question: What Is Enlightenment?* In: P. Kleingeld, ed. *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 17.

reaches completion. For this very reason, the relation between pedagogy and knowledge becomes necessary and vice versa. Pedagogy must be in constant dialogue with the various spheres of knowledge, drawing upon the progress achieved in different fields, as well as being itself a knowledge that reflects upon its own foundations.¹⁸

It is through education that the human being must be disciplined, cultivated, civilized, and moralized. These are, therefore, the four fundamental stages of the education of the human being.

Among the sources of knowledge are, on the one hand, sensibility – through which objects appear to us – and, on the other, the understanding – through which objects are thought. In this context, bodies are in relation to the pure forms of sensible intuition, namely space and time. Through the relation of these forms with the sources of knowledge, we are capable of formulating concepts. Thus, knowledge *begins* in sensibility, passes through understanding, and is completed by reason.¹⁹ Thinking of the individual as belonging both to the sensible and intelligible world, they are both capable of knowing through the senses and of being influenced by sensibility; for this reason, Kant proposes a twofold education, namely a disciplinary one – which he calls negative – and an instruction – which he calls positive. It is also through discipline that autonomy is attained.

¹⁸ Santos, R., 2007. Educação Moral e Civilização Cosmopolita: Atualidade da Filosofia Prática de Kant. *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación*, 41(4), p. 5 – my translation.

¹⁹ Regarding the relationship between sensitive intuitions and educational theory, Gary B. Herbert states that: “Kant’s explanation of the organization of sensuous intuitions under the forms of sensuous intuition is the analogical template for understanding his theory of education. We are told by Kant that “morality is a matter of character” (LP: 9:486), and also that the fundamental objective of education is the “formation of character,” i.e., keeping promises, acting with dignity, and respecting the rights of others (LP: 9:487). Promoting character requires that the child “be allowed to think for himself, and to enjoy a certain amount of freedom, although still obliged to follow certain rules [...] [W]e must allow the child from his earliest childhood perfect liberty in every respect [...] provided that in acting so he does not interfere with the liberty of others” (LP: 9:454). Freedom is fundamental to character and dignity because it is only a person whose choices are freely made who can keep promises and be held accountable for what he does. Character is to the child what space and time, the a priori forms of sensuous intuition, are to objects. Just as only the spatially and temporally determinate object can become an object to which the categories of understanding can be imputed, so also it is only a person of character who can be obligated, i.e., whose past and future actions can be imputed to him. Character transforms the child into a moral subject to whom the categories of free causality can meaningfully be applied. The existence of an inner, unobservable autonomy is not something we need to verify. It is enough to know it as a necessary condition of the attributes of character which we can observe.” (Herbert, G. B., 2012. Bringing Morality to Appearances: Kant’s Theory of Education. In: *Kant and Education Interpretations and Commentary*. New York: Routledge, p. 91.)

Kant, in the Päd, lists the four stages of education in human beings, they must:

1) be disciplined. To discipline means to seek to prevent animality from doing damage to humanity, both in the individual and in society. [...]; 2) The human being must be cultivated. Culture includes instruction and teaching. It is the procurement of skillfulness. The latter is the possession of a faculty which is sufficient for the carrying out of whatever purpose. [...]; 3) It must be seen that the human being becomes prudent also, well suited for human society, popular, and influential. This requires a certain form of culture, which is called civilizing. [...]; 4) One must also pay attention to moralization. The human being should not merely be skilled for all sorts of ends, but should also acquire the disposition to choose nothing but good ends. Good ends are those which are necessarily approved by everyone and which can be the simultaneous ends of everyone.²⁰

Education is an art that requires practice, it must be perfected over several generations, so that one generation educates another. For Kant, good education is the source of all good in the world. Human beings are capable of acting according to maxims and deviating from their impulses, which stem from self-love (*Eigenliebe*).

Specifically regarding the first stage, according to Robinson dos Santos (2007),

Discipline may be considered as a preamble to education and fulfills a propaedeutic function for morality. In itself, discipline means merely a process of heteronomy, through which the student is not only accustomed to obedience and even to familiarity with rules for acting, but gradually develops in themselves the understanding of the necessity of self-discipline.²¹

Discipline subjects human beings to the laws of humanity and begins to make him feel the force of these very laws. "Discipline prevents the human being from deviating by means of his animal impulses from his destiny: humanity. [...] it is merely negative, that is to say, it is the

²⁰ Päd, AA 09:449-450 / Kant, I., 2007. *Lectures on pedagogy*, ibid., pp. 443-444.

²¹ Santos, R., 2007. *Educação Moral e Civilização Cosmopolita: Atualidade da Filosofia Prática de Kant*. *Revista Iberoamericana de Educación*, p. 5 - my translation.

action by means of which man's tendency to savagery is taken away.”²² I agree with Santos (2007) that, as the stages of education develop, discipline ceases to be external – grounded in the authority of another – and becomes internal, that is, it becomes obedience to reason, to oneself, and the individual becomes capable of discovering autonomy within.

I argue that educational discipline is not contrary to autonomy; it is a path toward autonomy, for through it the individual learns to guide their will by their own reason. It follows, therefore, that as the individual learns to discipline themselves, they are capable of giving themselves laws – which, from a Kantian perspective, are moral laws. Thus, the aim of discipline in Kant is not to standardize bodies or promote blind obedience in individuals; on the contrary, the aim of the use of discipline (whether educational or other types) is to serve as a tool for the process of moralization and the construction of moral character.²³

Therefore, autonomy, in its definition, means the property of the will of being a law unto itself. Based on this, one of the main roles of school education is to educate students so that they may reach and achieve autonomy, for in doing so they will not only be capable of becoming enlightened but also of expressing their individualities and creativity, since they will be capable of thinking for themselves, of being critical and self-critical. For this, it is necessary to teach how to think. Knowing how to think is fundamental to autonomy. Kant, in the *Critique of the power of judgment*, lists three maxims that may serve as guidance: “1. To think for oneself; 2. To think in the position of everyone else; 3. Always to think in accord with oneself. The first is the maxim of the unprejudiced way of thinking, the second of the broad-minded way, the third that of the consistent way.”²⁴ The first is the maxim of a reason that is never passive. It is freed from prejudices and superstitions, thus preventing reason from becoming passive and guided by another. The second requires an enlarged thought, capable of placing itself in the standpoint of others. Finally, the third way of thinking, the consistent one, can only be achieved through the combination of the first two; it is thinking in agreement with oneself. The

²² Päd, AA 09:443 / Kant, I., 2007. *Lectures on pedagogy*, ibid., pp. 438 – 439.

²³ For more on the theory of discipline in Kant's practical philosophy, see Marques, L. F. P., 2024. *Discipline and Reason: The Theory of Discipline in Kant's Practical Philosophy*. Doctoral dissertation.

²⁴ KU, AA 05:294 / Kant, I., 2002. *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 174.

Kantian pedagogical proposal is a project that aims not only at discipline and instruction but also at humanity, autonomy, and morality.

2. Educational Autonomy according to Paulo Freire

Danilo Streck and Evaldo Pauly (2010), in the *Paulo Freire Dictionary*, analyze the concepts of pedagogy in Freire. According to Streck (2010), the qualification of the term pedagogy for Freire is diverse and there is not a single pedagogy; it may be of hope, of conflict, of dialogue, and of autonomy. According to him,

Pedagogy is situated within the scope of this tension, in which practice and theory are in permanent dialogue. In this sense, pedagogy refers to concrete educational practices carried out by educators, professional or not. It comes to be the very act of knowing, in which the educator plays a testimonial role in the sense of redoing before the students and with them their own process of learning and knowing. At the same time, pedagogy refers to a set of knowledges, always linked to practice.²⁵

This vision oriented toward educational practice, which implies the teaching process as a two-way path in the relationship between educator and student, is found in *Pedagogy of Autonomy* (1996). According to Pauly (2010),

today, in Brazil, common sense accepts the thesis that school could be another instrument for reducing youth violence and disseminating a more civilized morality. This is the classical ethical function of the school in the Democratic Rule of Law. Freire resumes this ethical thesis because he likewise proposes that the dignity of the human person is neither a favor granted by the State nor a gift from the Divinity. The ethics of teaching is not a heteronomous decision; on the contrary, human dignity is an ethical value collectively constructed by autonomous subjects. Freire follows the modern tradition of Enlightenment since his notion of autonomy resembles that of Kant [...]. Autonomy is an ethical commitment that establishes demands for both student and educator [...] Autonomy presupposes an emancipatory conception of education.²⁶

²⁵ Streck, D., Redin, E. and Zitkoski, J., eds., 2010. *Dicionário Paulo Freire*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, p. 374 – my translation.

²⁶ Pauly, E. L., 2010. Pedagogia da autonomia. In: *Dicionário Paulo Freire*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, p. 376 – my translation.

Autonomy is a commitment to the emancipation of oneself and of society, for the human being is a social, political, ethical, and transformative being. Even though education itself has its limitations, despite the human inability to know everything, despite its “unfinished” nature, education liberates and forms in the subject a conception of oneself as capable of transforming both oneself and one’s own reality.

Paulo Freire conceived pedagogy as linked to autonomy, that is, to the possibility of the subject being autonomous. For him, it is necessary that the subject understand themselves as a subject of history, create their own representations of the world, and think about how to solve their problems; “thus, autonomy is a process of decision and humanization that we construct historically, based on various, countless decisions that we make throughout our existence.”²⁷ In this sense, autonomy is fundamental for the construction of a more just, egalitarian, and democratic society. An autonomous subject is capable of expressing their consciousness, their voice, and having a place in society and political participation. Autonomy is not defined only by the freedom to think for oneself and the capacity to be guided by principles that accord with one’s own reason, but also involves the capacity to act, to realize oneself as a conscious and active individual.

The education for autonomy proposed by Freire aims not only at learning, but at conquering. The conquest of autonomy occurs through lived experiences, expressions of freedom, and decision-making. Differently from modern autonomy, Freire – more clearly and strongly – links it to a socio-political-pedagogical perspective. In this way, he understands autonomy as a socio-historical condition of a liberated people, that is, a people emancipated from the oppressions of its time. Therefore, to be autonomous is to be liberated from oppressive structures. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), the necessity of the conquest and struggle for autonomy becomes evident, in Freire’s words: “The liberation that they will not reach by chance, but through the praxis of their quest; through the knowledge and recognition of the need to fight for it.”²⁸

According to Freire, education is formation; the human being is not born ready and finished, and needs education for the construction of the self as an active subject. In other words, “What I mean is

²⁷ Machado, R. C. F., 2008. Autonomia. In: *Dicionário Paulo Freire*. Belo Horizonte: Autêntica Editora, p. 57 – my translation.

²⁸ Freire, P., 1983. *Pedagogia do oprimido*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, p. 32 – my translation.

that education, as formation, as a process of knowledge, of teaching, of learning, has become, throughout the human adventure in the world, a connotation of its nature, being gestated in history as the vocation for humanization [...].”²⁹ To educate is to form. And the human being has a vocation for humanization. Education is not limited to the construction of technical-scientific knowledge, but also of citizenship, of social action; therefore, content cannot be disconnected from the moral and aesthetic formation of the human being. Education for autonomy has as one of its primary tasks the creation of means for the exercise of autonomy, that is, it must provide conditions for students to understand and assume their socio-historical condition, capable of creating, transforming, thinking, communicating, and feeling. In this sense, autonomy is not self-sufficiency, but being connected to others, to the other, to the social dimension, to action, a dynamic between theory and practice.

There is a close relationship in this pedagogical proposal of autonomy with society and all its structures; therefore, it is necessary to explore the relationship between authority and freedom. For Freire, for example, the teacher is an authority; however, this authority must be based on competence. For there to be a relationship between discipline, authority, freedom, and autonomy, it is necessary to break with authoritarianism – understood as the abuse of authority.³⁰ For Freire, autonomy is the point of equilibrium capable of establishing the legitimacy of this relationship. Autonomy is, therefore, a dialectical process of constructing individual subjectivity, which depends on interpersonal relationships developed in the social space, on lived experiences. Freire believes that the construction of autonomy must “be centered on experiences that stimulate decision and responsibility, that is, on experiences that respect freedom.”³¹ These allow for the development of autonomous subjectivity, capable of generating a respectful and committed relationship among individuals that encompasses all exist-

²⁹ Freire, P., 2003. *Política e educação*. São Paulo: Cortez, p. 20 – my translation.

³⁰ “Therefore, the discipline of the will is a difficult but necessary practice. It is through it that internal authority is constituted from the internalization of external authority (cf. idem, p. 35), which will allow freedom to fully live its possibilities, which include the construction of one’s own autonomy. The experience of the dialectical tension between freedom and authority shows us that they may not necessarily be antagonistic to each other.” (Zatti, V., 2007. *Autonomia e educação em Immanuel Kant e Paulo Freire*. Campinas: Autores Associados, ibid., p. 57.) – my translation.

³¹ Freire, P., 1998. *Pedagogia da autonomia: saberes necessários à prática educativa*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, p. 121 – my translation.

ing social relations, whether school-related, familial, or social.

Freire seeks not only education, but also the liberation of the oppressed. This liberation is individual – someone cannot liberate someone else; thus, such liberation occurs through a responsible self-configuration aimed at autonomy. As they realize this self-configuration, active subjects are able to suppress their oppressions, to free themselves from the social bonds that once limited them.³² This is an autonomous construction of conscientization. It is necessary, according to Freire, to have critical knowledge of the obstacles that hinder and limit autonomy; it is necessary to overcome heteronomous conditions. It is through this process that active subjects are capable of transforming themselves and society; to seek autonomy is not only an individual or educational duty, but a political one.

Freire proposes a problem-posing and dialogical educational approach. He does not view students as repositories of content, but as capable subjects. Therefore, paths must be promoted so that the student can be a subject and build their own autonomy. According to Freire, “no one educates anyone else, nor do we educate ourselves alone: we educate each other in communion, mediated by the world.”³³ Education constitutes itself as dialogical as far as it centers the dynamic in doing and in thinking about doing. Therefore, autonomy requires communion between educator and student, methodical rigor, research, curiosity, and creativity. Dialogue is fundamental to the act of creating and recreating the world; therefore, for education to be able to create the means for the student to reach their autonomy, it must be dialogical.

3. Autonomy as a Teaching-Learning Process

Many interpreters of moral and pedagogical philosophy debate the seemingly contradictory undertaking found in the pedagogical paradox of autonomy, which can be summarized in the following statement: one cannot force people to be free. According to Lars Løvlie (2012),

³² “A person with autonomy is able to emancipate himself. He produces relevance in his actions, defends his point of view in an argumentative manner and understands the truth in movement, being constantly reconstructed; he creates a subjective structure, capable of using rationality and sensitivity in the defense of his individual and collective interests. He is a subject aware of his political condition in the interaction with the world and is able to reveal the phenomena that prevent him from being visible in the decisions he needs to make.” (Silva, L. E., 2009. *Autonomia como princípio educativo. Revista Espaço Acadêmico*, 9(101), p. 106) – my translation.

³³ Freire, P., 1983. *Pedagogia do opriido*, p. 79 – my translation.

The paradox is pragmatic or performative in the sense that there is a clash between what is said and what is actually done; in the speech act “Be spontaneous!” the summons to act freely is contradicted by the implicit command to be free. Examples abound in the field of education, as when a teacher invites students to a free dialogue but insists on determining the rules for the dialogue herself; or when the candidate who sits for an oral exam is told to talk freely, when everyone knows that the examiners wield the criteria for the correct answers. Or in more general terms, if we celebrate the fact that young people are capable of autonomous moral judgment, but take for granted that the teacher is the authority who determines what autonomy is and how it should be practiced.³⁴

This paradox exists due to the duality between internal and external authority, that is, due to self-determination and determination that comes from the other. On the one hand, an infinity of alternatives for the “resolution” of this paradox can be found in pedagogical theories; on the other hand, the persistence of the paradox throughout the history of ideas lies in the dynamism of educational thought – that is, reflective judgment on educational practices that aim at the freedom of human beings in its intellectual aspect, but also immersed in historical, social, and political contexts, requires renewal and resignification. In other words, *normatively* the educational goal is always the same: that human beings become autonomous. But *descriptively*, one must always reflect on *how* this will be implemented.

As I explained in the previous section, in Kant’s educational perspective, education aims at freedom, but it requires, for example, as a first educational step, discipline. In the Kantian view, it is emphasized that discipline is a means for the agent to reach autonomy, and it must never be used so that the will becomes servile. Free judgment and the exercise of freedom must be allowed in the educational process so that the agent, for example, becomes conscious of themselves and of their role in the world.

Given the above, it is evident that education for autonomy has long been proposed by various philosophers and educators – whether it is

³⁴ Løvlie, L., 2012. Kant’s Invitation to Educational Thinking. In: *Kant and Education Interpretations and Commentary*. New York: Routledge, p. 109.

linked to morality, as in the case of Kant, or as a foundation for liberation from oppression and heteronomy, as Paulo Freire conceives. I believe that autonomy is both the goal of education and the path to human progress, the touchstone between being and ought-to-be. It is the key concept capable of providing improvements at both the private and collective level. Therefore, the autonomy that brings forth critical thinking and enlightenment can be achieved through education, by means of teaching and learning.

For Kant, school education is committed to promoting in students the development of their skills, abilities, and faculties – in Kantian terms, to develop the natural dispositions aimed at the use of reason. In this way, students will have a rational formation, self-aware, capable of acting with creativity, and knowledgeable of their rights and duties as citizens. According to Santos (2014), the teaching-learning process, in the Kantian perspective, has a dual role, namely, “to educate oneself for oneself, when education takes on the challenge of forming, in an integral way, the human-individual with their ethical and moral values”, and “to educate oneself for the other, when education is committed to thinking about citizenship in all its breadth and complexity.”³⁵ It is clear that the Kantian project is not limited to education as instruction, but rather as education for morality, for conscious and free action in society, for autonomous action. Thus, it may be considered a pedagogical, moral, and political project.

In turn, Freire believes that in the teaching-learning process, the educator must create conditions for students to be autonomous, must know how to listen to and respect their students, for only then will they avoid an authoritarian practice and instead be a legitimate authority in the classroom. For the educator to reach the highest goal of education, dialogue, listening, and respect are necessary. For Freire, teaching is not the transmission of knowledge but rather the act of problematizing so that learners – together with the educator – construct their knowledge. In his words, “[...] teaching is not the transferring of knowledge, but the creating of possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge.”³⁶

Listening and dialogue are fundamental for autonomy and for knowing how to exercise autonomy. The educator must be attentive to

³⁵ Santos, M. P., 2014. As relações entre ética, moral e educação escolar sob a ótica de Immanuel Kant: uma análise filosófico-pedagógica. *Revista Intersaberes*, 9(17), p. 214 – my translation.

³⁶ Freire, P., 1998. *Pedagogia da autonomia: saberes necessários à prática educativa*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, ibid., p. 25 – my translation.

their own practices so that they may see not only themselves as such, but also their students, listen to them, and be able to engage in dialogue with them. Therefore, “to teach is not to transfer the intelligence of the object to the student, but to challenge them so that, as a knowing subject, they become capable of understanding and communicating what is understood.”³⁷ This means that the communication of what is understood begins in the classroom, in the teaching-learning process, so that students may then replicate the process in society and in their interpersonal relationships. The educator must teach how to think and how to express thought. For students to learn to use words and speak in a committed and autonomous manner, to think rightly. One of the educator’s roles in the process of teaching how to think rightly is found in letting it “become apparent to the students that one of the beauties of our way of being in the world and with the world, as historical beings, is the capacity to, by intervening in the world, know the world.”³⁸

Freire’s political-pedagogical project is grounded in the action and reflection of the educator. Pedagogical *praxis* involves the mutual engagement of educator and student in the reflection on the many dimensions of the world, and for there to be effectiveness, there must be harmony between teaching and everyday life. That is why for Freire, education is formation, and is not restricted to school education; it must be centered on experiences that stimulate decision-making and responsibility. Thus, the student acquires the conditions to act in a critical, independent, and creative way. Therefore, the educator must seek coherence between their practice and their teaching. In this sense, for Freire, the educator must respect the autonomy, dignity, and identity of the student, and “in practice, seeking coherence with this knowledge leads me inescapably to the creation of certain virtues or qualities without which that knowledge becomes inauthentic, empty speech, and the arrogant will of the teacher.”³⁹

Final remarks

Chronologically, in attempting to establish a relation between Kant and Paulo Freire, one searches for some mention in Freire’s texts to

³⁷ Ibid., p. 134–135 – my translation.

³⁸ Freire, P. and Shor, I., 1996. *Medo e ousadia: cotidiano do professor*. Rio de Janeiro: Paz e Terra, p. 31 – my translation.

³⁹ Freire, P., 1998. *Pedagogia da Autonomia: Saberes Necessários à Prática Educativa*. São Paulo: Paz e Terra, ibid., p. 69 – my translation.

theoretically ground such a connection. In this sense, it must be noted that there is no direct reference to Kant. On the other hand, indirectly, after readings and mappings of argumentative presuppositions, it becomes evident that Freire, in many instances, approaches Kantian conceptions. The most expressive common point is the aim of forming autonomous subjects, capable of thinking for themselves, thereby attributing strong importance to rationality, freedom, and humanity. The dialogue between Kant and Freire is thus as possible as it is demonstrable; however, one cannot overlook or fail to highlight the distinctions, for they are among the important hallmarks of these two authors as classics in philosophical and educational thought.

One of the similarities between Freire and Kant lies – as shown in previous sections – in the belief that education is formative of the subject. For Kant, the human being becomes human only through education; it is what education makes of them, just as for Freire, who affirms that education is formation, thus forming the subject through educational practices that endure throughout one's existence, in the dialectical process between theory and practice. Both believe in and defend the subject as capable of constructing themselves. Another important point is the rejection of mechanical education and memorization, as well as the importance given to discipline – not understood as an end in itself, but precisely as a means to achieve autonomy, as an educational process that promotes an individual capable of guiding themselves by reason and acting socially. Both conceived pedagogy as a constant dialogue with politics, so that citizens would be capable of knowing, demanding, and exercising their rights.

There are many differences between Kant's theory, especially the pedagogical one, and that of Paulo Freire. Taking the object of analysis in this article as a thematic cut-off point, I would like to point out that the greatest distinction between the perspectives of Kant and Paulo Freire lies in the point of departure. Kant conceives autonomy as stemming from freedom, morality, and the ought-to-be. Freire, in turn, thinks autonomy in an inverted way, that is, starting from oppression, authoritarianism, and heteronomy. Nevertheless, both seek for the individual to overcome the state of heteronomy. Another distinction lies in the fact that for Freire, autonomy is not a presupposition of reason – as it is for Kant – but is linked to historical and social aspects that may either facilitate liberation or limit autonomy.

Thus, it is clear that – both in terms of similarities and distinctions,

as well as in how each philosopher conceives and structures their theory – autonomy is held as a crucial point for human development. Autonomous education is fundamental for achieving social, political, moral, and subjective development. It is through autonomy that the individual is capable of thinking for themselves, of giving themselves their own laws; it is through it that political, social, and historical awareness is achieved. In order to have conscious citizens, engaged and capable of transforming their environment and society, it is necessary not only to have quality education, but also an education whose goal is autonomy.

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