

Gadamer on Kant and the problem of prejudice: a critical reading¹

[Gadamer sobre Kant e o problema do preconceito: uma leitura crítica]

Claudia Laos Igreda²

Pontificia Universidad Católica del Perú, GIKFS (Lima, Peru)

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Abstract

The hermeneutical rehabilitation of prejudice carried out by Hans-Georg Gadamer, often understood as a response to the modern reduction of prejudice to a mere source of error, contributes to recovering the role of tradition as a source of truth. However, his conception of prejudice seems to overlook the contribution of Immanuel Kant in relation to his distinction between prejudices and preliminary judgments. Kant's sustained reflection on these topics shows a remarkable proximity with Gadamer with respect to the acknowledgment of a permanently autocorrective and anticipatory awareness that accompanies every ongoing process of judgment. Moreover, in contrast to Gadamer — who refers to true and false prejudices — Kant also draws a thin but sharp line between preliminary judgments and prejudices, thereby introducing a critical criterion.

Keywords: prejudice; provisional judgment; German Enlightenment; error; illusion.

Resumo

A reabilitação hermenêutica do preconceito realizada por Hans-Georg Gadamer, frequentemente entendida como uma resposta à redução moderna do preconceito a uma mera fonte de erro, contribui para recuperar o papel da tradição como fonte de verdade. No entanto, a sua concepção de preconceito parece negligenciar a contribuição de Immanuel Kant em relação à sua distinção entre preconceitos e juízos preliminares. A reflexão contínua de Kant sobre estes temas mostra uma notável proximidade com Gadamer no que diz respeito ao reconhecimento de uma consciência permanentemente autocorretiva e antecipatória que acompanha todo o processo em curso de julgamento. Além disso, em contraste com Gadamer — que distingue entre preconceitos verdadeiros e falsos — Kant também traça uma linha fina, mas rigorosa, entre juízos preliminares e preconceitos, introduzindo assim um critério crítico.

Palavras-chave: preconceito; juízo provisório; Iluminismo alemão; erro; ilusão.

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² PhD in Philosophy from the University of Santiago de Compostela (2021). E-mail: laoscm2022@gmail.com. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5919-176X>.

Preliminary note

Kant's reflections on preliminary judgment and prejudice within the field of applied logic neither invalidate nor diminish the richness of Gadamer's contribution to hermeneutic philosophy, whose ontological scope is not affected by the reading of the relatively little-known Kant that I offer in the present contribution. Nonetheless, relating both thinkers in connection with Kant's reflection on prejudice within the context of his broad and robust conception of judgment may help clarify the interpretative scope of Kant's account of prejudice.

In what follows, the discussion is developed in four sections that present Kant's conception of provisional judgment and prejudice in parallel with that of Gadamer, within a framework that critically revisits Gadamer's reading of Kant, while also highlighting the dialogical dimension of the Kantian thought and its openness to the philosophical tradition.

1. On prejudice of authority and tradition

According to Gadamer's reading of the Enlightenment, there is a division of prejudices that explicitly refers to Descartes and implicitly to Kant. On the one hand, in relation to Descartes, there are prejudices of overhastiness, understood as a source of "errors that arise in the use of one's own reason" and thus avoidable through the methodical use of reason. On the other hand, both in relation to Descartes and especially to Kant, there are prejudices of authority, "responsible for one's not using one's own reason at all" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 279).

The prejudice of authority leads us directly to the well-known essay *What Is Enlightenment?* (1784) and, along with this, to the Kantian principle of autonomous thought, which consists in thinking for oneself. However, to associate only these two types of principles with the Enlightenment, even though they are central to this process according to the history of the effects of modernity, is overly reductive. Even more problematic is identifying the prejudice of authority only, or mainly, with the struggle against the propensity for the old and for tradition. For Kant, what is commonly translated as "prejudices of authority" <Vorurteile des Ansehens>, (Log, AA 09: 78-79) and can also be translated as prejudices of reputation includes the authority of persons, the authority of the multitude, and the authority of time. Crucially, the latter encompasses both excessive esteem for the old and uncritical esteem for novelty.

The Kantian promotion of the critical use of reason does not imply a radical rejection of tradition, nor that there is in his thought "a mutually exclusive antithesis between authority and reason" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 279), which is, for Gadamer, the basis of the Cartesian distinction between prejudices. In this sense, although Gadamer admits that German Enlightenment popular philosophy has often limited the pretensions of reason, recognizing the authority of the Bible and the Church, he argues that the true consequence of the Enlightenment is "the subjection of all authority to reason" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 279).

Actually, Kant would fully agree with Gadamer when he states that, although authority usurps the place of one's own judgment, this fact "does not preclude its being a source of truth" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 280). The reason for this lies in the doctrine of the impossibility of total error³, found in the German Enlightenment, to which Kant gives an original form. In simple and concise terms, this doctrine states that every error in which human reason can commit is only partial. From the logical dimension of this doctrine, it means that even when we err, we use true rational principles that correspond to universal human reason that is, reason shared equally by all human beings. Consequently, this doctrine also has a communicative and dialogical dimension that affects how we should approach others, whether they are contemporary

³ On this topic, see Hinske (1980) and Laos (2020).

interlocutors or ancient philosophers, and, of course, their writings. One of the texts where this is expressed very clearly is the passage on philosophy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which states:

One can only learn to philosophize, that is, to exercise the talent of reason in following its universal principles through certain available exercises; yet always with the reservation of reason's right to examine them in their own sources and to confirm or reject them (KrV, A 838/B 866).

The message of this quotation is compatible with Gadamer's statement that "the authority of persons is ultimately based not on the subjection and abdication of reason but on an act of acknowledgment and knowledge" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 281). In Kant's passage above, the reference to the "exercise of the talent of reason" and its basis in certain "available exercises" refers precisely to those attempts carried out by thinkers within a wide philosophical tradition. Likewise, the invocation of the "right of reason" to examine those exercises in their own sources, and to confirm or reject them, corresponds to an attitude of "acknowledgment and knowledge" claimed by Gadamer. If one considers how the passage begins, dialogue with those exercises is not optional but necessary, since it is recognized in these efforts both the presence of a shared rationality and the impossibility of total error in its findings. In other words, for both authors it is impossible to step outside tradition. In section 4, it will be shown how the prejudices of self-love and logical egoism, which Kant places at the opposite extreme of the prejudices of authority, are situated within the dialogical dimension of his doctrine of partial error.

2. Provisional judgement in Kant and productive judgement in Gadamer

Kant, like Gadamer, is familiar with the jurisprudential sense of prejudice <praejudicium> or prior judgment <judicia praevia>, as a pre-decision of a court ruling before the final verdict (Gadamer, 2004, p. 273). However, given the critical imprint of his thought with respect to prejudice <Vorurteil>, Kant begins to distinguish prejudice from prior judgment in order to name the latter "provisional judgment" <vorläufiges Urteil>. This distinction is developed by Kant in the mature period of his thought. A provisional judgment is a kind of judgment in which there are more reasons in favor than against the truth of something, but not yet sufficient for a determinative judgment (Log, AA 09: 74). As we can observe, this characterization of provisional judgment is quite close to the conception that, according to Gadamer, corresponds to the original meaning of prejudice as "the judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 273). However, while Gadamer attributes to prejudice an intrinsic evaluative neutrality that can be either positive or negative, Kant undertakes a more detailed analysis insofar as he links it with the doctrine of holding-to-be-true and, therefore, with degrees and forms of certainty.

The fact that in provisional judgments there are more reasons in favor than against the truth of something, although these are not sufficient, transforms these judgments, for Kant, into hypotheses for inquiry, thereby revealing their heuristic dimension. In that sense, these judgments resemble what Gadamer terms "productive prejudices that enable understanding" (Gadamer, 2004, p. 295). However, for Kant, the fact that the reasons for provisional judgments are not sufficient for a decisive judgment also makes them "a consciously held problematic judgment" (Log, AA 09: 74). This last aspect of provisional judgment is the least developed in Gadamer, because it is more directly linked, in Kant's case, to the control that this kind of judgment must exercise over what Kant calls prejudice.

The approach of Hans-Georg Gadamer in recognizing the temporal and historical dimension of the human sciences and of the human condition itself restores to prejudice an ontological-hermeneutic status that operates as an epistemic mediation between tradition

and the ongoing configuration of meaning, within which we are always already inextricably embedded. In order to carry out this task, Gadamer must confront the prejudice against prejudices that emerges in modernity as one of its most hegemonic features. Thus, the section in which Gadamer vindicates the authority of tradition and develops his critique of the foundational project of modern science – that is, its attempt to divest itself of all prejudices – bears as its heading a central idea: “Prejudices as conditions of understanding” (Gadamer, 2004, p. 278).

Now, returning to the parallel with Immanuel Kant, it can be said that, if prejudices are for Gadamer conditions of understanding, Kant’s provisional judgments function as something like the heuristic-critical condition of knowledge, but also of understanding. Let us now consider the passage in which the approximative, perspectival, and self-corrective character of provisional judgment in Kant is expressed:

It is admirable how every determinative judgment is preceded by a provisional one. When we read, we first spell out the words, and in the same way we act in all other domains. We never judge immediately in a determinative manner, since this would require a complete concept of what the object is – something, however, we do not possess at first sight. Before attaining it, we must first consider the object from all points of view *<allen Gesichts Punkten>* and select those that correspond to all its appearances. I see a house from one of its sides. Here I do not yet have a representation of the whole house, but only of how the house appears to me from precisely this side. I must view it from all sides, and then there arises in me the idea of a house that is entirely different from all the appearances *<Erscheinungen>* I have so far had. Provisional judgments belong to all our knowledge and are continually made. However, when one takes them to be the true grounds of a determinative judgment, then an illusion arises from this, and that is error (*Phil Enz*, AA 29: 24-25).

Kant adopts here the standpoint of someone who is faced with the observation of an object for the first time, as a first-time observer would do. In this case, the referent of the provisional judgment is an empirical object (“a house”) rather than a text. Certainly, the example is limited insofar as it does not consider whether the observer already has a prior representation similar to a house as shelter. Nevertheless, what deserves to be emphasized, beyond the perspectival observation of the object, is the essayistic, provisional, and evaluative character of our approach to it.

Moreover, attention should be drawn to the implicit presence through which we constantly generate and reformulate provisional judgments that accompany our knowledge. As La Rocca (2001, p. 335ss) points out, the returns provided by preliminary judgments are due to a complex process of self-regulation. Furthermore, such judgment also involves awareness of the provisionality of its formulations, and requires deliberation concerning the legitimate use of principles in each case. That is to say, it consists in a constant readjustment of our assessments, which does not occur arbitrarily, but according to rules and criteria grounded in the object in question. Nothing in this type of judgment is at odds with the structure of pre-understanding that Gadamer inherits from Heidegger. On the contrary, insofar as it serves to formulate hypotheses of knowledge, the preliminary judgment has an anticipatory dimension, regardless of whether it operates with content taken as a presupposition for such hypotheses or with our universal way of knowing, for example, *a priori* knowledge.

As La Rocca has pointed out, a view with which I agree, the preliminary judgment can be either an actual judgment or merely a principle for judging. It is important to retain this distinction in order to grasp its partial – and more importantly, its essential – difference from prejudice. Given the awareness that we possess only provisional judgments, and alongside the possibility of suspending judgment, we can also formulate modalized judgments. An example of such a judgment is “the planets appear to be moving backwards” (*Prol*, AA 04: 291). What matters in such cases is that we maintain awareness of the provisional character of the judgment due to its lack of sufficient grounds. In this sense, the process of self-regulation mentioned

above at once reveals its cathartic and preventive dimension in relation to prejudice and error⁴. It is only when we lose the awareness of not having sufficient reasons to convert it into a decisive judgment that an illusion arises, which can lead us to error.

3. Prejudice and preliminary judgement in Kant

In the *Logic* we can read:

Prejudices are provisional judgments insofar as they are taken as principles. Every prejudice must be regarded as a principle of erroneous judgments. From prejudices, not prejudices arise, but erroneous judgments. It is therefore necessary to distinguish false knowledge resulting from prejudice from its source, namely prejudice itself. Thus, for example, the significance of dreams is not in itself a prejudice, but rather an error that originates in the universally accepted rule: what occurs sometimes occurs always, or must always be regarded as true. This principle, under which the significance of dreams also falls, is a prejudice (*Log*, AA 09: 75).

To understand the first statement of this passage it is necessary, first, to remember what was pointed out in the second part of this exposition, that provisional judgements could be of two types: principles to judge and factual judgements. The distinction Kant establishes between prejudice as a principle of erroneous judgments with respect to false knowledge aims to direct our attention to how the subjective principle or rule operates within us: in the specific case of the example, as a form of universalization. Even when the content of the resulting judgment is true, the mere fact that provisional judgments or prejudices, insofar as they function as principles, are taken as valid principles or as determinative judgments without sufficient grounds renders them, for Kant, illegitimate and thus prejudices.

What should be clear is that, while all prejudices are provisional judgements, not all provisional judgements are prejudices. The crucial difference, in a strict and rigorous sense, is that prejudices cannot, for Kant, be genuine judgments, such as it is expressed in the following passage of one of the *Lectures of logic*:

A prejudice is never a singular proposition, for example: "The apple does not fall far from the tree." This is not itself a prejudice, but merely a consequence of it. For no prejudice is a proposition, but only a maxim for deriving propositions from it (*VLo/Dohna-Wundlacken*, AA 24: 737-738).

What Kant is pointing out is that such individual judgments are not, as such, prejudices; rather, the prejudice lies in the unfounded maxim that makes us believe that children inevitably inherit the vices of their parents. The fact that Kant denies that a prejudice can be a *proposition* certainly implies the identification of the categorical type of judgment with determinative judgement, that is, with a judgement that is made with the claim of truth⁵. The sphere of what does not fall within the scope of determinative categorical judgment is, therefore, that of problematic judgment, which may operate with modalized actual judgments or be conceived simply as principles of judgment, accompanied by the awareness of insufficient grounds.

4. Gadamer and Kant facing the critical question: time and illusion

The problem of the "critical question", as termed by Grondin (2003, as discussed in Bárcenas, 2017), is summarized in the question: how do we distinguish true prejudices from

⁴ On this topic, see Capozzi (2006, p. 123-181).

⁵ On this topic, can see Capozzi (2002, p. 448ss).

false ones? The answer that Gadamer offers, roughly speaking, involves bringing prejudices to consciousness in order to control them in some way, suspending their validity (Gadamer, 2004, p. 298)⁶. Coincidentally, this is one of the functions that Kant assigns to the awareness that accompanies provisional judgement⁷. If the provisional judgments that accompany inquiry arise from consciously insufficient grounds (*VLo/Dohna-Wundlacken*, AA 24: 737), the suspension of judgment is the resolution not to allow a preliminary judgment to become a determinative judgment (cf. *VLo/Wiener Logik*, AA 24: 860). Nonetheless, Gadamer points out that due to the fact that prejudices and previous opinions are not at our disposal, the interpreter is not in a position to distinguish for themselves the productive prejudices from those that are not (Gadamer, 2004, p. 295). Because the situated character of the interpreter prevents him from distancing himself from the situation in which he is immersed, the interpreter cannot distance himself from it (Gadamer, 2004, p. 295).

Faced with this difficulty, Gadamer considers that, along with other factors, it is principally the distance in time which allows us to filter out illegitimate prejudices and distortions of true sense, which will be replaced by new sources of sense (Gadamer, 2004, p. 279ss). Kant would partially agree with the consideration of distance in time as a factor in overcoming prejudices, although only taken from a negative perspective, as can be seen in *What is Enlightenment?* In this work, after describing how the public were sown with prejudices by teachers, they then take revenge on those sowers, affirm: “Thus a public can only attain enlightenment slowly” (WA, AA 08: 36). Besides, Kant is also conscious of the human capacity for reinstalling epochal prejudices when he affirms: “it will never produce a true reform in ways of thinking; rather, new prejudices will serve, just like the old ones, as leading-strings for the unthinking masses” (WA, AA 08: 36). Indeed, the context in which Kant offers this explanation is one that contrasts a regime of freedom with one brought about by revolution, the latter being precisely what would foster the reinstatement of new prejudices. However, the programmatic Enlightenment dimension of autonomous thought in Kant – aimed at promoting the progress of humanity – is articulated with full awareness of its tension with the conflictual character of social interaction within the human species in history, as illustrated in *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*.

A reading that updates Kant in relation to his conception of prejudice may well extend beyond the specific context that opposes a regime of freedom to one established through revolution. This latter issue has not only retained its relevance but is continually rearticulated through new relations of domination and power, now manifesting in multiple and unprecedented forms on a global scale. All of this entails understanding, with Gadamer, the emerging senses that seek to take shape, as well as those already established; and, with Kant, the task of discerning them.

In that sense, beyond time, there is another factor of especial interest in Kant’s approach, concerned with the determination of truth and the prevention of error: reflection and investigation. A previous study has documented the written sources from Kant’s *Logic* and *Lectures on Logic* that make it possible to develop an interpretation of the relationship between these mental operations and prejudice, which I summarize below (Laos, 2020, p. 107-134). Reflection is proposed as an antidote against prejudice as a source of error. Although there are many other senses in which Kant uses this concept, reflection, oriented to prevent errors, is understood as a mediate or immediate comparison of reason with its principles, but also with subjective maxims that can arise from different sources. Among the principal sources of prejudice Kant considers: imitation, custom and inclination. Precisely, Kant refers to prejudice by imitation in some works as the propensity to the passive use of reason or to the mechanism of reason. However, as we can see from the previous explanation about reflection, this does not

⁶ For Gadamer, this suspension operates at the hermeneutical level as a space of questioning. However, the author only suggests this idea without making its connections to the rest of his arguments more explicit.

⁷ The modalization referred to in the previous section entails, in my opinion, a form of suspension, namely that of determinative judgment.

mean that there is no use for reason. What we have is an uncritical comparison of subjectively assumed maxims, or in some cases, unconscious maxims.

Returning now to what was anticipated in section 1, Kant precisely situates the prejudices of authority mentioned there within the group of prejudices by imitation and distinguishes them from prejudices of self-love or logical egoism, which he situates on the opposite side (*Log*, AA 09: 80). Prejudice of logical egoism consists of considering the concordance of one's own judgement with that of others as unnecessary or dispensable. That is, unlike prejudices of authority, in logical egoism there is an inclination or preference for one's own understanding, for example, one's own system of thinking. For Kant, scholars are prone to this type of prejudice.

It is important to stop and consider this type of prejudice, because this allows us to highlight that, although the fight against prejudices of authority is based on the principle of autonomous thinking – “to think by oneself” – the fight against prejudice of logical egoism is based on the principle of broad thinking, whose principle is “to think in the place of the other”⁸. Both are considered by Kant rules for avoiding error (*Log*, AA 09: 57). Having said that, the *Logic* does not expose all the prejudices that Kant considers; there exists a very important one, the prejudice of common understanding, and it consists of taking the phenomenon for the thing in itself⁹, as is explained in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (*KrV*, A 740/B 768).

As can be observed, unlike Gadamer, Kant considers in his division of prejudices a wider diversity of sources, some of which concern aspects of applied logic and anthropology but also transcendental philosophy. And, although he does not seem interested in elaborating the strictly logical dimension together with the anthropological one, he does have a proposal for identifying, preventing and counteracting the errors that prejudices can cause. This proposal consists of detecting and fighting the illusion that is hidden in them. However, this illusion is of a different kind from that called transcendental illusion, which, as is well known, has its seat in reason and is unavoidable, although that does not make the error to which it leads unavoidable as well”¹⁰. Using the conceptual pair subjective/objective in the *Logic* Pölitz (*V-Lo/Politz*, AA 24: 548), Kant distinguishes the subjective side of prejudice as propensity to persuasion and the objective side of this as illusion <*Schein*>, which is set as the principle of truth. This distinction involves, on the one hand, becoming aware that one is merely holding an opinion without sufficient subjective or objective principles, and on the other, evaluating the content of that which is put forward as a principle of truth and which, as a principle of illusion of truth, can cause an erroneous judgement or a distorted understanding.

It must be observed that Kant is very aware that the task of unveiling the illusory appearance of prejudices is not a task that can be carried out in isolation and, therefore, it is important to understand his thoughts about prejudice within the framework of his dialogical conception of rationality and of his doctrine of the partiality of error. For this reason, in the Canon of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant will argue that, while the external criterion of truth expressed in the principle *consentientia uni tertio consentiant inter se* is not enough in order to provide conviction for knowledge, it is enough to get us out of the state of persuasion (*KrV*, A 821/B 849). Moreover, Kant seems to ground the epistemic duty of extracting appearance in an ethical duty: the duty of virtue based on respect, when he states in the *Metaphysics of Morals*:

On this is grounded a duty of respect for the human being himself in the logical use

⁸ I have discussed this issue in a previous work (Laos, 2024), where I examine how this principle is already implicitly at work in an early text such as *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, along with its connection to the search for an external criterion of truth, illusory appearance, universal human reason, and the phenomenon of conflict in the 1770s.

⁹ On this topic, see Hinske, 1993, p. 103-121.

¹⁰ That transcendental illusion is unavoidable does not imply that no control can be exercised over it. Kant argues that it is possible to keep it from deceiving us, even though it does not thereby vanish (*KrV*, A 297/B 354). Moreover, the error to which it leads can be combated, since error always lies in judgment and is therefore avoidable and corrigible.

of his reason: not to reproach its missteps [...] but rather to presuppose that there must nevertheless be something true in it, and to seek this out; while at the same time uncovering the deceptive appearance (the subjective element in the grounds of determination of judgment, which was through oversight taken to be objective) [...] (MS, AA 06: 463-464).

Let us now return to the critical question. The Gadamerian discovery that the contemplation of a work of art or the reading of a text is an infinite process that presupposes prejudices as conditions of pre-comprehension highlights the positive role that prejudices play in hermeneutics. Nonetheless, it is a real problem to assign principally to time the role of suppressing negative prejudices. As pointed out by Bárcenas (2017, p. 137-138), time can also have a concealing and perpetuating effect on prejudices, principally when they are promoted and respond to instances of power.

Looking now at the distinction between provisional judgements and prejudices in Kant, it is clear that the difference between the two, rather than placing prejudice at a non-propositional level, consists of two different ways of assuming illusory appearance. In this sense, if Kant can contribute something to the problem of the critical question, it is precisely to remind us that we must learn to live with illusion. And, in a manner that not only surrenders to illusion, but also practices the permanent and tireless task of identifying, revealing and dispelling it when it is foreseen that this may lead to error or deception.

Conclusion

Revisiting Gadamer's interpretation of the modern rejection of prejudice, and focusing it on Kant, has made it possible to shed light on aspects of Kantian philosophy that have not yet been sufficiently addressed, as well as to offer a more balanced interpretation that highlights the non-exclusionary character of his conception of prejudice with respect to tradition.

Kant's distinction between provisional judgments and prejudices shows a notable proximity of the former to the epistemic potential that productive prejudices have in Gadamer, although this author does not develop them at that level. Likewise, as a central contribution, it has been shown that, unlike Gadamer, Kant does provide a critical criterion to distinguish between prejudices and provisional judgments. The key to this criterion lies in the capacity to examine and maintain awareness of not having sufficiently well-reflected subjective and objective principles as grounds for making determinative judgments.

Finally, this comparative approach opens up a possible extension toward a dialogue between Gadamer's ontological-hermeneutic perspective and Kant's critical-epistemic conception, which may be relevant for contemporary reflections on the theory of prejudice.

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