Rationalizing and social irrationality from a Kantian perspective

Racionalização e irracionalidade social numa perspectiva kantiana

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Abstract: The present paper addresses the relation between, on the one hand, Kant's concept of rationalizing *<Vernünfteln>* and, on the other hand, the concept and phenomenon of social irrationality understood in a Kantian perspective. More specifically, this work argues that one can see in Kant's concept of rationalizing, which is understood by Kant as a form of irrationality, a source of social irrationality and, therefore, a conceptual tool that can help us to address the phenomenon of social irrationality in our society. To accomplish this task, this paper is divided in four sections: an introduction (1), a definition of the concepts of irrationality and social irrationality (2), an explanation of the essential characteristics of Kant's concept of rationalizing as one can find in Kant's works and in the interpreters (3), and a demonstration of the usefulness of Kant's concept of rationalizing for understanding the sources of social irrationality in our society (4).

Keywords: Kant; rationalizing; social irrationality; irrationality; rationality; ideology.

Resumo: O presente artigo aborda a relação entre, de um lado, o conceito de racionalização *<Vernünfteln>* de Kant, de outro lado, o conceito e fenômeno da irracionalidade social compreendido desde uma perspectiva kantiana. Mais especificamente, argumenta-se que se pode identificar no conceito de racionalização, o qual é entendido por Kant como uma forma de irracionalidade, uma fonte de irracionalidade social e, portanto, uma ferramenta conceitual que pode nos ajudar a abordar o fenômeno da irracionalidade social em nossa sociedade. Para cumprir com esse objetivo, este artigo está dividido em quatro seções: uma introdução (1), uma definição dos conceitos de irracionalidade e irracionalidade social (2), uma explicação das características essenciais do conceito de racionalização de Kant tal como elas são encontradas nas obras de Kant e nos(as) intérpretes (3) e uma demonstração da utilidade do conceito kantiano de racionalização para a identificação das fontes de irracionalidade social (4).

Palavras-chave: Kant; racionalização; irracionalidade social; irracionalidade; racionalidade; ideologia.

1. Introduction

The concepts of social *rationality* and *irrationality*, when analyzed from the perspective of a Kantian social philosophy, have proven to be increasingly useful for dealing with the tension between rationality and irrationality that permeates social institutions. At the same time, Kant's concept of *rationalizing <Vernünfteln>* has been increasingly addressed by some of the interpreters of Kant's philosophy in the last decade[2]. Despite the distinctions on the way these different approaches understand the meaning of this concept and its importance within Kant's philosophical work, it is a common place to state that Kant understood the concept of rationalizing as denoting a kind of irrationality, i. e., for instance, "a use of reason that misses its final end, partly from inability, partly from an inappropriate viewpoint" (Anth, AA 07: 200) or even "only an empty use of reason which contains nothing in regard to the true ends." (V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1481) In other words, the idea that a Kantian definition of irrationality encompasses Kant's concept of rationalizing does not seem hard to be defended.

On the other hand, the possibility of seeing Kant's conception of *rationalizing not only* as important for understanding irrationality in general and its sources from a Kantian perspective, *but also* as an important conceptual tool for understanding the sources of social irrationality is a much harder task. In other words, it is not exactly clear whether it is possible to explain social irrationality or, at least, one of its sources, using Kant's concept of rationalizing. The reason for this is that, although Kant's concept of rationalizing clearly fits into the concept of irrationality, the concept of social irrationality not only encompasses or deals with the concept of irrationality, but is much more complex than this last one, accounting not only the "problem" of an activity that contradicts rational principles and the normativity of reason (irrationality), but also the "problem" of "a failure in the process of the gradual development of a natural predisposition to the use of reason" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101), as it will be further addressed. Therefore, irrationality is approached, here, from the perspective of society, i.e., as a harmful way of using reason that infiltrates social relations and institutions, and not merely as an individual phenomenon.

As it is clear, these clarifications show the intricacy of any attempt to show that a kind of *irrational* activity, such as rationalizing, can be used to address a source – let alone an important one – of *social irrationality*. The aim of the present paper is precisely to demonstrate the usefulness of Kant's concept of rationalizing for understanding the sources of social irrationality in our society. As it will become clear, Kant's definition and examples of rationalizing that we find throughout his works show us a harmful practice of human beings that not only occurs in an individual level, but also negatively affects the well-functioning and organization of social relations and institutions, which yields to social irrationality, according to the definition that will soon be addressed. To accomplish this tough task, I divide this paper in three sections, in addition to this introduction (section 1). Section 2 defines the concepts of irrationality and social irrationality according to Joel Klein's approach. The five main features of his account are briefly addressed. Section 3 brings Kant's definition of rationalizing as one can find in his works (3.1), as well as (3.2) the two main interpretations of this concept in Kant's works that one can find in the literature and, finally, (3.3) a synthesis of the main features that constitute Kant's approach to rationalizing. The final section (4), as expected, attempts to demonstrate the usefulness of Kant's concept of rationalizing for understanding the sources of social irrationality in our society.

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[2] See Shel 2009, Guyer 2000, Papish 2018 and Sticker 2021.

2. Social irrationality

To address the concept of social irrationality from a Kantian perspective I will use Klein's (2023) approach, in which we find not only a clear definition of the concepts of social rationality and irrationality, but also a well-grounded explanation of how one can ground these notions in Kant's philosophy.

When answering the question whether a concept of social rationality is present in Kant's philosophy, or whether there could be, "in a Kantian perspective, a specific normative context of the use of reason that could be called social, and which would be distinct from the ethical, the juridical, the political, the epistemological, or the religious ones" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 100), Klein states that a "social normative context" is fundamental and ubiquitous to Kant's philosophy and "constitutes the internal link between the other normative contexts and principles [ethical, juridical, political, epistemological and religious]." (KLEIN, 2023, p. 100) Klein quotes a passage from the *Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim* (IaG) (IaG, AA 08: 18-19)[3] to corroborate the previous statement. The point Kant makes in the excerpt is that the social dimension constitutes the *medium* through which human beings' rational predispositions can develop and progress. The social dimension of human life enables the acquisition and transmission of *enlightenment* through generations. The following quotation from the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* is related to this issue: "The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to *cultivate* himself, to *civilize* himself, and to *moralize* himself by means of the arts and sciences." (Anth, AA 07: 324-5) From these quotations, Klein states, we can identify three central characteristics of the social as related to the enlightenment:

> Firstly, it is related to the activity of people in a society. Secondly, the social element is rooted in a process of discovery (attempts and failures), learning (depuration, intelligibility, and retention of a correct use of a principle to produce a cognition, an action or a skill), and transmission (teaching and learning) of enlightenment. Finally, its aim must be the qualitative development of the different uses of reason and their reciprocal relations, which are promoted by the development of science and art (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101).

For the purposes of this paper, five aspects of Klein's approach must be highlighted:

First, Klein defines social rationality – from a Kantian perspective – as "the processual development of rational predispositions in society throughout several generations" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101) and, consequently, *social irrationality* as "a failure in the process of the gradual development of a natural predisposition to the use of reason" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101). In other words, considering that, for Kant, the development of the rational predispositions in the human beings is grounded in a *social* or *intersubjective* process "of discovery (attempts and failures), learning (depuration, intelligibility, and retention of a correct use of a principle to produce a cognition, an action or a skill),

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[3] "*In the human being* (as the only rational creature on earth), *those predispositions whose goal is the use of his reason were to develop completely only in the species, but not in the individual.* Reason in a creature is a faculty of extending the rules and aims of the use of all its powers far beyond natural instinct, and it knows no boundaries to its projects. But reason itself does not operate instinctively, but rather needs attempts, practice and instruction in order gradually to progress from one stage of insight to another. Hence every human being would have to live exceedingly long in order to learn how he is to make a complete use of all his natural predispositions; or if nature has only set the term of his life as short (as has actually happened), then nature perhaps needs an immense series of generations, each of which transmits its enlightenment <*ihre Aufklärung*> to the next, in or der finally to propel its germs in our species to that stage of development which is completely suited to its aim. And this point in time must be, at least in the idea of the human being, the goal of his endeavors, because otherwise the natural predispositions would have to be regarded for the most part as in vain and purposeless" (*IaG*, AA 08: 18-19).

and transmission (teaching and learning) of enlightenment" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101) throughout generations[4], one can also think, therefore, of a failure into which this social dynamics can fall.

Second, once social rationality concerns the conditions or the adequate means for the realization of rational predispositions in society, *the normativity that is proper to social rationality is connected to prudential and instrumental rationality* (KLEIN, 2023, p. 102)[5]. Moreover,

> *the normativity of social rationality deals* [...] *with public institutions* [...]. Social philosophy [...] engages with the normative, large-scale demands that are institutionalized in social practices. [...] It is the responsibility of social rationality [...] to organize social institutions (such as the family, the school, the workplace, associations, the press, and the internet) in such a way that they may also promote that end [, i. e. the development of rational predispositions] (KLEIN, 2023, p. 115. Added emphasis).

Third, *this "development of rational predispositions" can – and ought to – occur in different contexts* of the human being's life, seeing that rationality expresses itself normatively in different fields (e. g. in the epistemological as well as in the moral field). This way, one can find *social irrationality,* for instance, in the failure of "the [social] conditions for the gradual and constant development and transmission of epistemology and science", or even for "the proper gradual development of morality in society, i.e., *for those principles to have an increasingly correct and proper use in history*" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101).

Fourth, *Klein distinguishes "failures and mistakes" from irrationality*, the former being the result of an improper use of a certain principle, the latter as "a *manner of thinking and acting* grounded on an erroneous principle" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 102), which brings the issue of rationality and irrationality to the methodological field of the legitimate and adequate principles which guide one's use of reason.

Fifth, Klein *identifies a source of irrationality*

> in the tension between animality and human rationality, or between the tendencies toward impulses and physical subjective conditions and the rational predispositions, as well as in the crude manner in which humans find a way to balance those different tendencies and predispositions in a systematic and moral unity (KLEIN, 2023, p. 103).

When not critically enlightened and disciplined, reason is subjugated by these impulses:

> It builds for itself principles that cannot be normatively valid since they have not been critically justified. This is how different types of egoism (logical, aesthetic, and moral, see Kant, Anth. AA 07: 128ff) or even the passions arise (see Kant, Anth. AA 07: 265ff.). In other words, certain impulses of our animality and sensibility tend to guide reason, which then becomes the servant of the passions by assuming and creating for itself strange and illegitimate principles. Social irrationality is this servitude and partiality of reason to animalistic nature and tendencies (KLEIN, 2023, p. 103).

As I will attempt to show, Kant's concept of *rationalizing* not only fits very well into the concept of *irrationality*, but, perhaps, under certain circumstances – namely, when it leads to a failure in

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[4] "This process is closely related to the development of arts and sciences as Kant states in *Anthropology*: The sum total of pragmatic anthropology, in respect to the vocation of the human being and the characteristic of his formation, is the following. The human being is destined by his reason to live in a society with human beings and in it to cultivate himself, to civilize himself, and to moralize himself by means of the arts and sciences (Kant, Anth. AA 07: 324)" (KLEIN, 2013, p. 101).

[5] "After establishing the nature of the end, "the social" can be claimed to address the adequate means for the realization of that end, in other words, the process of the appropriate development of rational predispositions. The quest for the correct thing to do in order to achieve something is an aspect of practical philosophy. Rephrasing, the "how to do something" directed towards the means is a proper issue of hypothetical imperatives, both those of instrumental rationality (how to use things to achieve a certain end) and of prudential rationality (how to use other human beings to achieve a certain end), under a specific moral point of view.4 In other words, the proper normative feature of social rationality has to do with the appropriate means for the full development of natural predispositions of reason in the human species. *It is a matter of both instrumental and prudential rationality, which is subject to that specific moral end*" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 102).

the development of the rational predispositions of the human being throughout the generations, which not always is the case –, it can also be an important source of *social irrationality*.

3. Kant's concept of rationalizing <Vernünfteln>

3.1. Kant's definitions of *rationalizing*

The concept of *Vernünfteln*, often translated into English as rationalizing, was used by Kant in different works and refers to a "misuse" of reason by a rational being in which he engages in reflections that are grounded in an imperfect and unreasonable use of reason, creating an "air of truth" for something that is, in fact, illegitimate from a rational point of view. The main occasions in which Kant introduces a definition of *rationalizing* in his work are the following:

A) Although Kant used *Vernünfteln* and its correlates, in certain moments, in a non-pejorative sense (see KU V: 337n)[6], the term is most used by him with the already mentioned negative meaning, which is the case, for instance, of the *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (Anth), in which the similar *Vernünftlei* – also translated as *rationalizing* – is defined as "a use of reason that misses its final end, partly from inability, partly from an inappropriate viewpoint" (Anth, AA 07: 200)[7], so that "reason is still different from rationalizing <*Vernünfteln*>, [which is] a playing with mere experiments in the use of reason without a law of reason." (Anth, AA 07: 228) Based on these statements, it could be said that one engages in *rationalizing* when one tries to justify certain claims based on false or illegitimate principles (see König, 2015, p. 2506). Still in the *Anth*, Kant states, regarding the reasonableness of believing in the existence of ghosts, that one "can *rationalize* about their possibility in all sorts of ways; but *reason* prohibits the *superstitious* assumption of their possibility, that is, without a principle of explanation of the phenomenon according to laws of experience" (Anth, AA 07: 228).

B) In the *Anthropology Busolt*, Kant states that "'Rationalizing' ought to mean 'using reason', but properly it is only an empty use of reason which contains nothing in regard to the true ends" (V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1481).

C) The Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals (GMS) also provides us with a useful definition of rationalizing. At the end of the first section, after showing us that the principle of morality is already possessed by the "common human reason", Kant addresses the rhetorical question of whether this ordinary reason needs the help of philosophy in moral issues. The answer he gives us is that an innocent reason might need philosophy in order to acquire "access and durability for its precepts" (IV 4: 405), once this innocence, i. e. the "pre-reflective moral condition of common human reason" (Allison, 2011, p. 142), is "easily seduced" (GMS, AA 04: 405). Kant explains that this "seduction" is the result of something that lies in the human condition itself, namely the simple fact that the human being, due to his simultaneously rational and sensible nature, finds within himself a conflict between, on the one hand, the commands of duty – whose precepts are issued "unremittingly" <unnachlaßlich>– and, on the other hand, "the counterweight of his

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[6] In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (KU) Kant states that a "rationalistic judgment" <*vernünftelndes Urteil*> is a necessary but insufficient condition for the faculty of judgment to fall into a dialectic; it merely means "any judgment that declares itself to be universal" (KU, AA 05: 337n). This way, "[a] power of judgment that is to be dialectical must first of all be rationalistic, i.e., its judgments must lay claim to universality, and indeed do so a priori, for the dialectic consists in the opposition of such judgments." (KU, AA 05: 336)

[7] On the same page, Kant seems to consider *Vernünftlei* and *räsonnieren* as interchangeable terms.

needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which he sums up under the name happiness" (GMS, AA 04: 405). This gives rise to a "natural dialectic",

> that is, a propensity to rationalize <*vernünfteln*> against those strict law of duty and to cast doubt upon their validity, or at least upon their purity and strictness, and, where possible, to make them better suited to our wishes and inclinations, that is, to corrupt them at their basis and to destroy all their dignity" (GMS, AA 04: 405)

In short, "to rationalize" is understood by Kant, in the moral domain, as the attempt to find pseudo-justifications that could give the appearance of an agreement between the two opposing demands previously mentioned, which is made through an (obviously) illegitimate modification of the so-called "law of duty". The propensity of human beings to rationalize is what constitutes what Kant called a "natural dialectic". It is "dialectical" because it corresponds to a tension between happiness and morality as two possible determining grounds of an agent's will (see Sticker, 2021, p. 16). It is "natural" because this tension originates in the dual nature of the human being, as rational and sensible.

3.2. A (brief) "state of the art"

A short look at the state of the art of Kant's concept of *rationalizing* can help us to further clarify this issue. In the last decades, there has been an increase in approaches to this topic. While the approaches of Shell (2009) and Guyer (2000) addressed this topic briefly, authors such as Laura Papish (2018) and Martin Sticker (2021) provided more detailed approaches. Papish's and Sticker's approaches are especially useful for the purposes of this paper and will, therefore, be addressed.

3.2.1 Laura Papish

Although Papish is attempting to show us the role of the human being's rationalizations for the phenomenon of moral self-deception, Papish's account seems to be broad enough to encompass not only moral *rationalizing* but also *rationalizing* in theoretical matters. After stating that rationalizing, for Kant, means a "misappropriation of our cognitive powers to the detriment of reason's true or final ends" (PAPISH, 2018, p. 73-4), as we find in the already mentioned passage of *Anthropology Busolt*, Papish says that, following some of Kant's statements in Wiener and Dohna Logic, "it seems that he describes the true end of reason as wisdom in the logic lectures because 'wisdom' [*Weisheit*] can account for how reason has both theoretical aims such as truth and practical aims concerning morality and prudence" (PAPISH, 2018, p. 78n). In addition, Papish writes that Kant's concept of *rationalizing* presupposes the introduction of a "desirable cognition" or "hoped for justification" into the reasoning process (PAPISH, 2018, p. 74), which evidently contradicts reason's end of wisdom, and that rationalizing "involves a shift in attention to a more attractive and true yet comparatively less relevant alternative cognition" (PAPISH, 2018, p. 75). All these characteristics that Papish attributes to rationalizing allow its application to both moral and theoretical fields, even though it highlights the fact that this harmful activity always has its root in a moral issue.

The three examples of *rationalizations* that Papish finds in Kant's works are also useful for the present approach. The first one is found in *Toward Perpetual Peace,* in the appendix *On the disagreement between morals and politics with a view to perpetual peace,* when Kant discusses about the meaning of a legitimate political practice and argues against the so called "political moralist", opposing it to the "moral politician". While the last "takes the principles of political prudence in such a way that they can coexist with morals" (ZeF, AA 08: 372), the former "frames a morals to

suit the statesman's advantage" (ZeF, AA 08: 372). While the last, in problems of practical reason, begins from a formal and unconditional practical principle, the former begins from a material one (ZeF, AA 08: 376-7), wrongly trying to derive from experience or the "mechanism of nature" the principles of right and politics. That's why, Kant says, the principle of the political moralist is merely a "technical problem", which takes perpetual peace as a matter of "natural good", whereas that of the moral politician is a moral one (ZeF, AA 08: 377). Finally, Kant states, while it is a principle of moral politics "that a people is to unite itself into a state in accordance with freedom and equality as the sole concepts of right" (ZeF, AA 08: 378), which is based upon duty instead of prudence, the political moralists "reason subtly" *<vernünfteln>*, i. e. they rationalize

> about how the natural mechanism of a multitude of human beings entering into society would invalidate those principles and thwart their purpose, and also try to prove their contention against them by examples of badly organized constitutions of ancient and modem times (e.g., of democracies without a representative system) (ZeF, AA 08: 378).

The political moralists, Papish stresses, "introduce a new and, to them, more desirable cognition that respects the truth of the original cognition concerning our internal, *a priori* moral principles of public right while refusing to stay focused on that truth" (PAPISH, 2018, p. 74).

The second example Papish provides us concerns Kant's argument, in the *Doctrine of Right* (MS, AA 06: 318), against those who engage in historical inquiries about how their sovereign came to power. These, Kant says, are "pointless subtle reasonings *<Vernünfteleien>*", considering "this genetic point does not contradict arguments about the sovereign's right to rule" (PAPISH, 2018, p. 74).

Papish's third and last example concerns Kant's essay *What is Enlightenment?*, in which the philosopher of Königsberg states that an officer who, when receiving an order from his superiors, decides, while on duty, to engage in subtle reasoning *<vernünfteln>*, i. e. to rationalize about its appropriateness *<Zweckmäßigkeit>* and utility (WA, AA 08: 37). As Papish writes, Kant

> is quite clear that these officers do not directly assert that their superiors hold their position unlawfully. This would be a lie that directly contradicts what the officers know to be true, so instead the officers pose questions about the demands issued by these authorities in a way that only a private citizen should (WA 8:37). As with Kant's other examples, the rationalization in question involves a shift in attention to a more attractive and true yet comparatively less relevant alternative cognition (PAPISH, 2018, p. 74-5).

3.2.2. Martin Sticker

Two important differences between Papish's and Sticker's accounts must be highlighted. *First,* while the former denies that *rationalizing* can lead the subject to an absolute (false) certainty in his incorrect reasoning, assuming that rationalizers are able to recognize their need for help, the later, on the other hand, although recognizing the virtues of this view insofar as it stresses that the rationalizer always grasps, to some extent, the irrationality of his reasoning, defends that the last perspective underestimates the dangers of the impact of *rationalizing* in one's capacity to correctly reflect on moral matters (STICKER, 2021, p. 39-40). *Second*, while Sticker, rather than making a broad approach that encompasses both theoretical and practical spheres, focuses his account of Kant's concept of *rationalizing* on the moral sphere, i. e. on its effect on the agent's grasp of morality, as well as on the necessary conditions for an agent to rationalize against moral

commands[8], Papish's account, although without explicitly stating that, seems to encompass both theoretical and practical rationalizing.

Despite these differences with respect to Papish's account, the most important point for us is that Sticker seems to understand *rationalizing*, at least in the moral sphere, in a similar way as Papish but focusing on "different paradigmatic cases of the same phenomenon" (STICKER, 2021, p. 8). While Papish helps us to find everyday cases of *rationalizing* in the political and social sphere, Sticker focuses on Kant's extreme examples of *rationalizing*, namely his discussions of eudaemonistic theories and religious practices. The complementarity of both accounts and, therefore, their usefulness for an understanding of the meaning of the harmful phenomenon of *rationalizing* within Kant's philosophy will become evident.

In the following, I will briefly reconstruct two elements of Sticker's approach which will be useful for our understanding of the meaning of the harmful phenomenon of *rationalizing* within Kant's philosophy, as well as for its application to contemporary problems of social irrationality, namely Sticker's analysis of *rationalizing* as a moral corruption and the connection he makes between the concepts of *rationalizing* and *ideology*.

Concerning the first element, Sticker focuses his analysis of *rationalizing* on the way Kant addresses the term at the end of the already briefly discussed first section of the GMS. This way, Sticker considers that "[r]ationalizing ultimately amounts to challenging the 'validity' [10] of the moral law" (STICKER, 2021, p. 16-7), which, as he states, does not lead to the conclusions that the rationalizer renounces his commitment to morality. On the contrary, the rationalizer rationalizes precisely with the aim of reconciling two contradictory although (for him) important demands: the rational and the sensible one. The rationalizer does not accept either the pain of giving up his sensible desire or the pangs of conscience for not being rationally justified. The interest in being rationally justified, Sticker states, "is rooted in an agent's acknowledgement of the authority of duty and pushes them to devise excuses and pseudo-justifications" (STICKER, 2021, p. 30). With this purpose, the rationalizer modifies his conception of morality into a "better one", which precisely means the *corruption* of the moral law mentioned by Kant (GMS, AA 04: 405). Sticker considers that this *rationalizing* is divided into two possible strategies, namely questioning the *purity* and the *strictness* of duty. As one can easily anticipate, the former concerns casting doubt on the idea that "nothing empirical [...] functions as criteria for moral evaluation" (STICKER, 2021, p. 18) and that obligatory actions must be motivated by respect for the moral law; the later concerns the idea that (perfect) duties never admit of exceptions.

Concerning the second elements, it is useful for this work the connection Sticker identifies between these "apparent justifications" that characterize *rationalizing*, on the one hand, and the concepts of *ideology* and *uncritical philosophy*, on the other hand. When addressing the possibility of an agent being deceived or confused due to his *rationalizing*, Sticker asserts that although, for Kant, an agent can never think that his moral transgressions are fully justified, they can find "subjective reasons" (V-MS/Vigil, AA 27: 617) or "subjective grounds of consolation" (V-MS/Vigil, AA 27: 618-9) for these violations. These reasons are subjective insofar as they lack the

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[8] "'Rationalizing', as I will use the term, is self-deception about *moral* matters. There are other kinds of self-deception, such as about what is prudent, one's capabilities and social standing and maybe even about purely theoretical questions. Self-deception about these issues, however, requires a framework different from the one that explains rationalizing in my sense, since these other forms of self-deception are not driven by a rational interest in being morally justified" (STICKER, 2021, p. 6).

objective force of those reasons that *ought to* be accepted by others and by oneself when impartially analyzed (STICKER, 2021, p. 38). In other words, they are merely "apparent justifications" or

> psychological means to cope with one's failure to live up to the demands of the moral law. They share important structural properties with genuine justifications; they are meant to apply to all agents in relevantly similar circumstances, and they cover a multitude of similar cases. [...] Apparent justifications therefore do not merely seemingly sanction one-off transgressions, but potentially condone systematic violations of the moral law (STICKER, 2021, p. 38).

This "systematicity" of pseudo-justifications, Sticker recalls us, is expressed in Andrews Reath's statement that *rationalizing* or "the influence of self-love on the will is sustained by an ideology of sorts, which enables individuals to view their maxims as objectively acceptable reasons." (REATH, 2006, p. 21) Sticker understands the ideological aspect of *rationalizing* as its capacity to form "a system of beliefs" or a set or propositions that support each other, which is precisely what makes it more difficult for the rationalizer to be corrected or challenged in his false beliefs. Nevertheless, Sticker still recognizes that the kind of "certainty" that the rationalizer has need to be different from the kind of certainty that justifiable reasons can provide:

> Certainty can also be merely subjective, namely the kind of unwarranted certainty that a fallible and imperfect agent might have in a belief even though this belief is, in fact, unjustified. Certainty of the latter kind can be the result of rationalizing or of other mistakes in reasoning, and such a certainty can be psychologically powerful, action-guiding and difficult to overcome (STICKER, 2021, p. 40).

It is difficult to state, from a Kantian point of view, what degree of criticism a rationalizer deserves, once he seems to be partly deceived and partly conscient that there is some problem in his reasoning – especially in moral matters, in which the grasping of one's duties is easily carried out by the agent.

To finish this subsection, I bring the two paradigmatic examples of the extreme cases of *rationalizing* and *corruption* in the moral field that Sticker addresses. The first example concerns the "kind of rationalizing" that leads the agents to "eudaemonistic forms" of morality. Sticker recalls us the of Kant's critics of Christian Garve's moral theory in the essay *Theory and Practice* (TP, AA 08: 284-5). Garve would have confused the moral concept of duty and the human being's pursuit for happiness, once he cannot conceive other motivation for actions than this one: "[h]e has adopted the wrong metaphysical framework to understand the possibility of acting from duty" (STICKER, 2021, p. 41). The second of Sticker's examples concerns the idea that religious practice can also be an important source of ideology: it "creates supposed grounds of excuses, apparent justifications and means to seemingly escape one's responsibility" (STICKER, 2021, p. 41-2) To illustrate that, Sticker mentions Kant's "inquisitor case", which regards an individual that, due to his religious faith, decides to take someone's life (RGV, AA 06: 186).

Despite the richness of Sticker's account, it must be stated that Kant's concept of *rationalizing* can be broadly addressed – similarly as Papish did –, in a way that comprises not only its manifestation in the moral field as a harmful or illegitimate kind of moral reflection, but also in the theoretical sphere. In other words, if we consider the already addressed general definitions of the concept of *rationalizing* provided by Kant (see section 3.1 and 3.2.1), we cannot fail to define *rationalizing* as a type of prejudicial use of reason that can be done, in principle, in all the spheres that reason introduces itself normatively through the establishing of the principles for a correct or objective judgment. Kant's broad definitions of *rationalizing* (Anth, AA 07: 200; V-Anth/Busolt, AA 25: 1481), as well as his already mentioned amusing example of the *rationalizing* about the existence of ghosts through a dismissal of a "[rationally required] principle of explanation of the phenomenon

according to laws of experience" (Anth, AA 07: 228), show us the scope of his application of the concept.

3.3. Essential aspects of rationalizing

In order to make Kant's concept of rationalizing clear and emphasize all its essential characteristics, five points must be highlighted:

A) Concerning a presupposition for the concept of *rationalizing*, a *rationalizing* subject is always *making use* of reason – even though an illegitimate or sophistical one – or is, to some extent, committed to reason. Although this might sound like a truism, it still is important to highlight that the *rationalizing* activity is necessarily made by rational beings, once it is characterized precisely by a use of reason against itself. One could state that rationalizing is, to some extent, a non-critical use of reason. Similar to this statement is the idea that *irrationality* or *contradiction* is something that cannot be carried out by non-rational beings, once only *non-rationality*, instead of *irrationality,* comes from them.

B) In Kant's works, *rationalizing* seems to have a close relation with the concepts of dialectic and illusion, once the "misuse" of reason that characterizes *rationalizing*, if not always, at least has a tendency to lead the subject to have a false or distorted understanding of the demands of reason – however, this relation between *rationalizing* and dialectic or illusion is not always indicated by Kant in the moments he addresses the *rationalizing*[9].

C) As already addressed at the end of the last subsection, Kant thought of *rationalizing* as a prejudicial use of reason that can occur both on the practical and the theoretical spheres, i.e. in all the spheres in which our reason has a normative force.

D) *Rationalizing* is usually taken by Kant to be an *individual* activity, i.e. a misuse of reason through the construction of illegitimate principles carried out by a rational subject in his personal reasoning on practical or theoretical matters. Kant's example of the public officer whose *rationalizing* is directed to his superiors in order to challenge their authority (WA, AA 08: 37) seems to be the only case of *rationalizing* illustrated by Kant that explicitly involves a dialogical scenario. Nevertheless, one can still think of the possibility of *rationalizing* activity being carried out publicly without exceeding the limits of Kant's philosophy, namely when one person attempts to convince another through rationalizations.

E) *Rationalizing* seems to always involve a moral problem: the choice to disrespect reason's normativity and the limits established by its critic with the aim of satisfying some personal desire. Therefore, one cannot rationalize without having some level of responsibility for that.

4. Rationalizing and social irrationality

As already addressed in the second section of the present paper, the concept of *social* irrationality is more complex than that of irrationality *in general*. The reason for that lies on the fact that, whereas the latter denotes the rationally illegitimate activity of adopting inappropriate or false principles, the former, in its definition, refers to a failure in the gradual development of the rational predisposition of the human being, which encompasses the irrational activity of adopting illegitimate principles

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[9] While in the mentioned passages of the *Anth* the concept of rationalizing is not connected to that of dialectic or illusion, in the GMS this relation is unequivocal (GMS IV: 405).

but is not limited to it. The "social" aspect of both concepts of *social rationality* and *social irrationality* states that, in dealing with these concepts, one is addressing the social or intersubjective conditions for the development of the rational predispositions throughout generations.

On the one hand, the adequacy of the concept of *rationalizing* to the concept of *irrationality* addressed in the second section is easily justifiable. On the other hand, to address the adequacy of the former concept to that of social *irrationality* is much more complicated, once the latter involves more elements.

Concerning the adequacy of *rationalizing* with the concept of *irrationality*, as one can see from the definition and examples provided, Kant's concept of *rationalizing* concerns an illegitimate use of reason – i. e. one that contradicts its end, namely, wisdom – or its misappropriation through the inadequate introduction of a "desired cognition" or "hoped for justification" in the reasoning process. If Kant's definition seems to lack sufficient clarification, it can be further elucidated from the already mentioned examples of *rationalizing*. There, one can note that Kant is addressing an appropriation of reason which is essentially characterized by the call for a rationally rejectable principle or "way or reasoning" with the aim of constructing an appearance of truth and reasonability for what is not. Therefore, the problem of the *rationalizer* is not of a misapplication of a legitimate principle, but of a creation of false principles of reflection, which can be made in different contexts of rationality. Moreover, *rationalizing* encompasses both theoretical and practical fields – those in which reason imposes normativity. This, along with the just addressed definition of *rationalizing*, attests its fitness to the concept of irrationality, which can be not only practical, but also theoretical irrationality.

Regarding the relation between *rationalizing* and *social* irrationality, it depends upon the fact that the phenomenon of *rationalizing*, in the different contexts and ways in which it manifests itself, disturbs the development of the human being's rational capacities, i. e. puts hindrances in the process of achieving and/or transmitting a degree of enlightenment to future generations. To address the possibility of such a phenomenon, it might be useful to introduce a scheme that differentiates contexts and ways of *rationalizing*. With such scheme, we will take a step in the direction of understanding the way *rationalizing* can spread in society and, therefore, the potential harm such activity to the development of rational predispositions through generations. In other words, we will be closer to comprehending how *rationalizing* can affect the social spaces and institutions that are important for the development of rational predispositions, which leads to a problem of social irrationality.

The construction of the mentioned scheme will take into consideration (a) a distinction in the object of *rationalizing* and (b) a distinction in the actors of *rationalizing*. Regarding (a), such distinction occurs between *rationalizing* in the (a1) moral and in the (a2) theoretical sphere – i.e. regarding moral and theoretical matters or objects. Regarding (b), such distinction is made between *rationalizing* as a (b1) private, a (b2) public and an (b3) intersubjective activity. With a (b1) private form of *rationalizing* it is understood the *rationalizing* that is carried out alone by the individual in his solitary reflections. With (b2) a public form of *rationalizing* it is understood the *rationalizing* that is made by one or more *rationalizing* actors over one or more *non-rationalizing* deceived or misled agents. Finally, with a (b3) intersubjective form of *rationalizing* it is understood the *rationalizing* that is shared between two or more *rationalizing* actors, i. e. a *rationalizing* reflection or reasoning that is made communally. This way, one can rationalize:

(b1) *privately* or "to oneself"

(b1a1) in *moral* matters. This is the case when the subject carries out a private *rationalizing* reflection on moral matters, regarding either his past or future choices, with the aim of constructing a form of morality better suited for his subjective desires. Examples of this in Kant's works are Kant's already mentioned passage of the "natural dialectic" in the GMS (4: 405) and his understanding, also already mentioned and present in the *Doctrine of Right*, that "a subject *ought not to rationalize* for the sake of action [*werktätig vernünfteln*]" (MS, AA 06: 318) about the origin of "the supreme authority to which it i subject" (MS, AA 06: 318). Kant's concern, here, is not exactly with publicizing such rationalizations or using it to argue with others, but with the subject that, "having pondered over the ultimate origin of the authority now ruling, wanted to resist this authority" (MS, AA 06: 318); in other words, he is discussing about private instead of public or intersubjective rationalizing. Nonetheless, of course, one could also think of someone rationalizing about the same issue to another instead of to oneself.

(b1a2) in *theoretical* matters, which means carrying out a private rationalizing reflection on theoretical or non-moral matters with the aim of providing justifications for the unjustifiable according to principles of reason. Kant's already mentioned example of rationalizing about the existence of ghosts seems to be an example of this (Anth, AA 07: 228).

(b2) *publicly* or "to others"

(b2a1) in *moral* matters, i.e. when one attempts to deceive someone else – regarding moral matters – through a *rationalizing* strategy of argumentation, leading the other to a misleading moral thinking in order to satisfy some personal interest. Kant's already mentioned example of the public officer seems to be the illustration of an *attempt* of such a way of *rationalizing* (WA, AA 08: 37). Moreover, Kant's also already mentioned example of the "political moralist" perhaps can also fit here. The "political moralist" provides illegitimate or false principles through which he pretends to seemingly ground a conception of the state and of public institutions, i. e. of politics that is better fitted to his personal interests (ZeF, AA 08: 372, 376-8). However, this nefarious figure does not aim to deceitfully prove these false ideas to himself, as in the case of a private way rationalizing, but to the others, in order to infect their moral convictions and bring them to agree with him in his pursuit of his personal interests.

(b2a2) in *theoretical* matters, i.e. when one attempts to deceive someone else – regarding theoretical matters – through a *rationalizing* strategy of argumentation, leading the other to a misleading conception about a theoretical matter.

and (b3) *intersubjectively* or "with others"

(b3a1) in *moral* matters. One rationalizes intersubjectively in moral matters when two or more persons have a common rationalized conception and/or engage in a shared *rationalizing* reflection on moral matters. Through this form of *rationalizing* one can find in the other support for his own rationalizations. For instance, when a rationalizing subject finds himself inside a bubble constituted by persons that share the same *rationalizing* thinking and, in this way, do not keep in touch with conceptions that deconstruct their *rationalizing* certainties.

(b3a2) in *theoretical* matters, when two or more persons have a common rationalized conception and/or engage in a shared *rationalizing* reflection on theoretical matters. As in the intersubjective *rationalizing* in moral matters, one can find here a strong support for his own rationalizing.

The previous scheme makes it clear the scope of the harmful effect of rationalizing. However, until now rationalizing seems to be merely an irrationality in both moral (ethical and juridical) and theoretical matters, either privately, publicly or intersubjectively, but not specifically concerning social irrationality, at least not according to the definition already addressed.

Let us give one step behind and briefly recall a crucial feature of social rationality already addressed. As seen, Klein states that social rationality concerns "the processual development of rational predispositions in society throughout several generations" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101), while the "social" concerns the appropriate means for the realization of this end. Thus,

> [i]t is the responsibility of social rationality [...] to organize social institutions (such as the family, the school, the workplace, associations, the press, and the internet) in such a way that they may also promote that end [, i. e. the development of rational predispositions] (KLEIN, 2023, p. 115).

Consequently, "the normativity of social rationality deals [...] with public institutions" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 115), and social irrationality, as it is more than clear at this point, concerns a hindrance or failure in this organization and, therefore, in the mentioned process.

Let us now turn back to the concept of rationalizing as it is addressed by Kant in his different works. Let us also consider the scheme previously constructed, which helped us in understanding the different contexts and ways in which Kant's rationalizing might occur. It seems to be the case that the harmful activity of rationalizing is not only detrimental from an individual point of view, but also from a social point of view, i.e. from the point of view of the well-functioning of social institutions. To state that rationalizing is individually or subjectively harmful merely means that the irrationality that constitutes this activity affects the way the rationalizer, as an individual, reason about a certain matter. On the other hand, to affirm that rationalizing is harmful for a certain social institution means that it is no longer – if it ever was – or, at least, it is less oriented to promote the development of the rational predispositions of the individuals that pertain to the community in which this institution operates. Considering that rationalizing is characterized by the creation of an apparently rational reasoning based on illegitimate or false principles with the aim of reaching a personal end, there is no reason not to think on the social institutions as potential victims of this harmful way of reasoning, once these same institutions are subject to the correct or incorrect, benefic and detrimental leading of individuals. The appropriate organization of social institutions aiming for the promotion of the development of rational predispositions is not something that belongs to the nature of the functioning of these institutions. On the contrary, an institution may very well be used to promote irrationality.

Kant's examples of rationalizing might once again be useful. While the "officer case" illustrates a misuse of one's capacity to criticize an authority through a rationalizing argumentation that corrupts the workspace, the "political moralist case", which is even more expressive of what is being dealt with here, instances a corruption of political social institutions by those who try to submit them to their personal interests, which in this case is not done through coercion as in a seizure of power, but through a deceitful argumentation and the construction of spurious principles that make their political thinking more adequate to their personal ends. If the political moralist comes to control the state, i. e to organize and orient its functioning, this will hardly agree

with the rational organization of a social institution aiming for the development of its member's rational predispositions.

5. Concluding Remarks

The present paper argued that Kant's concept of *rationalizing <Vernünfteln>* can be understood as a conceptual tool to address the phenomenon of social irrationality in our society. After clarifying how one can address the concepts of *irrationality* and of *social irrationality* within Kant's philosophy, as well as Kant's conception of *rationalizing* and its inherent relationship with the notion of irrationality, the paper defended that we could use the concept of rationalizing to comprehend the way social irrationality manifests in our society.

Social irrationality, as addressed, concerns "a failure in the process of the gradual development of a natural predisposition to the use of reason" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101), so one can find social irrationality in the failure of "the [social] conditions for the gradual and constant development and transmission of epistemology and science" and for "the proper gradual development of morality in society, i.e., for those principles to have an increasingly correct and proper use in history" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101). Moreover, as seen, irrationality concerns "a manner of thinking and acting grounded on an erroneous principle" (KLEIN, 2023, p. 101). On the other hand, Kant's concept of rationalizing is defined as a rational being's "misuse" of reason in which one engages in moral or theoretical reflections grounded in an illegitimate or non-critical use of reason, possibly leading him to have a false or distorted understanding of the demands of reason. Finally, considering the different contexts and ways of rationalizing addressed and its capacity to affect the social spaces and institutions that are relevant for the development of rational predispositions, it becomes clear how rationalizing can spread in society and hinder the development of these predispositions through generations, leading to social irrationality.

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