

Passions and social irrationality

[*Paixões e irracionalidade social*]

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Abstract

In this paper, I analyze the concept of passions in Kant, trying to answer the question: are passions good for society or are they the source of evil and irrationality? I begin by showing the danger of passions, if compared with affects. In the *Anthropology*, as well in the *Religion*, Kant claims that passions are the evil we should fight against. More than inclinations, or affects, the evil principle refers to passions. However, in the *Idea for an Universal history with a cosmopolitan aim*, Kant admits that passions are good for society. They are not the cause of their irrationality, but the possibility of the development of the natural predispositions of human being. I claim that we have two distinct answers in Kant, and I try to understand this ambiguity.

Keywords: passions; irrationality; history; morality; vainglory; greed.

Resumo

Neste artigo, analiso o conceito de paixões em Kant, buscando responder à questão: as paixões são benéficas para a sociedade ou são fonte de mal e irracionalidade? Começo mostrando o perigo das paixões, quando comparadas aos afetos. Na *Antropologia*, assim como na *Religião*, Kant afirma que as paixões são o mal contra o qual nós devemos lutar. Mais do que inclinações ou afetos, o princípio do mal refere-se às paixões. No entanto, na *Ideia de uma história universal de um ponto de vista cosmopolita*, Kant admite que as paixões são benéficas para a sociedade. Elas não são a causa de sua irracionalidade, mas a possibilidade de desenvolvimento das predisposições naturais do ser humano. Eu afirmo que temos duas respostas distintas em Kant, e procuro compreender essa ambiguidade.

Palavras-chave: paixões; irracionalidade; história; moralidade; vanglória; ganância.

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People think of Kant as having a moral portrait of human being, as someone who mostly acts according to the moral law. If we accept this intrinsic moral and good-hearted representation, we fail in understand essential features of Kantian account. First, that the moral law acts upon the human mind as an imperative, not as a natural way of behaving. Second, that Kant has a normative ethics, he says what we ought to do not what we generally do. Third, that he has a theory about human passions that show they are forces who oppose the moral law.

The danger of passions

In the *Anthropology*, in comparing affects with passion, Kant shows the strong and damaging effects of it (Anth, 7:252).

Affect works like water that breaks through a dam; passion, like a river that digs deeper and deeper into its bed. Affect works on our health like an apoplectic fit, passion, like consumption or emaciation. Affect is like drunkenness that one sleeps off, although a headache follows afterward; but passion is regarded as a sickness that comes from swallowing poison, or a deformity which requires an inner or an outer physician of the soul, one who nevertheless knows how to prescribe remedies that are the most part radical, but almost always merely palliative (Anth, AA 7: 252).

Affects are less harmful than passions: affects are like drunkenness, while passion is a disease resulting of taking poison, or a deformity which requires a physician. Affect is less permanent than passion: it is like an apoplectic convulsion, while passion is a consumption or atrophy. Besides that, the remedies prescribed by a physician to passions are radical, but palliative. It seems that, while one can get rid of affects or cure them, passions, however, are never really healed.

Although passions can be considered a disease of the mind, they can imitate reason:

Since the passions can be coupled with the calmest reflection, one can easily see that they must neither be rash like the emotions, nor stormy and transitory; instead, they must take roots gradually and even be able to coexist with reason (Anth, AA 7: 266).

Passions are not transitory and stormy like affects, but they can coexist with reason and deliberation, forming principles and/or maxims upon them.

A passion is a sensible desire that has become a lasting inclination (e.g., hatred, as opposed to anger). The calm with which one gives oneself up to it permits reflection and allows the mind to form principles upon it and so, if inclination lights upon something contrary to the law, to brood upon it, to get it rooted deeply, and so take up what is evil (as something premeditated) into its maxim. And this evil is then properly evil, that is, true vice" (MS, AA 6:408).

Passion is responsible for forming evil maxims, based on reflection and premeditation. They are not like affects, that are only frailty, inclinations that make us act against moral law in a stormy way.

Passion as the last and strongest moment of desire

What is the place of passion in the faculties of the mind? It is usually considered the last, and strongest, moment of the faculty of desire. According to the *Anthropology* Krüger, the kinds of faculty of desire are propensity, instinct, inclination and passion. (V-Ant/Mensch, AA 25:1339). Propensity is the origin of desire, that "can occur even if the desire is not there yet". As examples, we have the north people's tendency to drink strong drinks. The second is

instinct (*Instinkt*), which consists in a desire without previously knowing the object by which it is satisfied, e.g., a child's instincts desire for milk. The third kind is inclination (*Neigung, inclinatio*), is a habitual desire, and exemplified with the desire to play games or drink. If an inclination is too strong, it becomes a passion (*Leidenschaft, passio animi*), which is the last degree of the faculty of desire. Passion is the "inclination which can hardly, or not at all, be controlled by reason" (Anth, AA 7:251), and "with passion, one is not able to compare the inclinations with the sum of all other ones" (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1340).

Kant uses inclination both in a broad and in a specific sense; in the first meaning, all empirical incentives can count as inclinations, in the second, inclination is only the third degree of the faculty of desire. Passion is an inclination in the first sense, as an empirical incentive to action. It is stronger than the other inclinations, even the sum of all that, showing its robust and resilient nature.

Natural and Social passions

Kant categorizes passions into natural and social ones. Natural passions are called "burning passions", they are the inclinations for freedom and sex. The social passions are the cold ones: mania for honor (*Ehrsucht*), mania for domination (*Herrschaft*) and mania for possession (*Habsucht*) (Anth, AA 7:272-275).² The passion of freedom is the natural desire not to depend on other people: "whoever is able to be happy only at the option of another person, feels that he is unhappy" (Anth, AA 7:268). It is a natural desire, a desire to keep others far away, and to live "as a wanderer in the wilderness". It is a desire of men in the state of nature, before the civil society is established.

The three main social passions (*Ehrsucht*, *Herrschaft*, *Habsucht*) are related to the three ways of having influence on human beings, And they also have their particular age: "Vainglory/mania for honor belongs to youth, the mania for dominance to manhood, and the greed to old age". All social passions are a way to have influence on other human beings: "by means of honor, we have influence on the opinions of human beings, by means of authority we have influence on their fear, and by means of money we have influence on their interest" (V-Anth/Mensch, AA 25: 1356).

The mania for honor, arrogance, and the flatterers

Kant distinguish love of honor (*Ehrliebe*) from vainglory (*Ehrsucht*):

Vainglory is not love of honor. Love of honor is based on an immediate worth, but vainglory is based on a mediate one, namely, insofar as it is of service for having influence on others in other people's eyes. Love of honor arises out of modesty and is frank, Vainglory is violent, hypocritical. (...) One can thwart the aims of the vainglorious person most easily. One can slight him without even saying anything to him, merely through indifference (AnthM, AA 25:1356-57).

The one who has mania for honor is usually also arrogant. The arrogance needs to be flattered in order to be sure of its value, and indifference is for him the worst reaction. That is the reason why the flatterer can conquer and even destroy powerful man, using this special spell towards the vainglorious person: "Flatterers, the yes-men who gladly concede high-sounding talk to important man, nourish this passion that make him weak, and are the ruin of the great

² Translation of *Ehrsucht*, *Herrschaft*, *Habsucht*: Clélia Martins (Anth, AA, 7:271), ambição, desejo de dominação e cobiça; Robert Loudon (Anth, AA, 7: 271.), mania for honor, mania for domination, mania for possession.

and powerful who abandon themselves to this spell” (Anth, AA 7: 273).

A good flattering is a spell, and powerful men can be destroyed by this. One may ask: how powerful people could be ruined by flatterers, since they are probably not naïve persons? Vainglory, as a passion, makes the subject blind. He wants glory and fame so badly, that his vanity makes him an easy catch for people who knows how to seduce. The flatterers use an idealized mirror, making the vainglorious person drown in his own reflection.

The mania for domination and greed

The mania for domination is caused by a fear of being dominated by others and intend to use force over the others. Kant distinguishes this passion from the indirect art of domination, such as the female art to dominate through charm: “Men dominates by the use of force, women dominate by the use of charm” (Anth, AA 7: 274). In this claim Kant shows his sexist view of women who allegedly dominates by charm and beauty. This is not the mania for domination, that is the search for politically or social power. By having this power, men can dominate by the fear of others:

It starts, however, from the fear of being dominated by others, and is then soon intent on placing the advantage of force over them; which is nevertheless a precarious and unjust means of using other human beings for one’s own purposes: in part it is imprudent because it arouses opposition, and in part it is unjust because it is contrary to freedom under the law, to which everyone can lay claim (Anth, AA 7: 274).

Greed, the passion for possession or money can be explained by the fact that it is a power that people believe replaces the lack of every other power. Wealth can open all doors: “Money is the solution, and all doors that are closed to the man of lesser wealth open to him whom Plutus favors” (Anth, AA 7:274).

Passions and the overcoming the propensity to indolence

Kant has a double standard regarding passions. On the one hand, passions are harmful, because they are considered cancerous sores for pure reason, on the other hand, in *Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim*, passions are responsible for the overcoming of indolence.

The fourth proposition of the idea reads as follows:

The means nature employs in order to bring about the development of all its predispositions is their **antagonism** in society, insofar as the latter is in the end the cause of their lawful order (IaG, AA 8: 21).

This antagonism is the unsociable sociability: man has at the same time a propensity to enter into society, and a resistance to do that. He has a tendency to become socialized, in order to feel more like a human being, but at the same time he wants to isolate himself.

The human beings resist the others, because they are driven by their own desires to get what they want. But – here is the turn- this resistance to the others, “driven by ambition, tyranny and greed” is a path from crudity to culture. If men live in “perfect content, contentment, and mutual love”, they will live like beasts and will not develop their rational nature.

Thus happen the first true steps from crudity toward culture, which really consists in the social worth of the human being; thus all talents come bit by bit to be developed, taste is formed, and even, through progress in enlightenment, a beginning is made

toward the foundation of a mode of thought which can with time transform the rude natural predisposition to make moral distinction into determinate practical principles and hence transform a pathologically compelled agreement to form a society finally into a moral whole (IaG, AA 8 : 20).

Kant praises here the passions, as a drive to develop their humanity:

Thanks to the nature, therefore, **for the incompatibility, for the spiteful competitive vanity, for the insatiable to possess, or even to dominate!** For without them all the excellent natural predispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped. The human being wills concord; but nature knows better what is good for his species: it wills discord. He wills to live comfortably and contentedly, but nature wills that out of sloth and inactive contentment he should throw himself into labor and toils, so as, on the contrary, prudently to find out the means to pull himself again out of the latter (IaG, AA 8: 21, Fourth proposition).

In the *Idea for an Universal history with a cosmopolitan aim*, passions work like an incentive to overcome sloth, and to make men more active to work and develop their rational predispositions. While analyzing the fourth proposition of the *Idea*, however, a reader of the *Groundwork* and of the *Anthropology* has a little embarrassment related to this account of passions. In the *Groundwork*, Kant claims that inclinations are usually impediments for the moral actions. In the *Anthropology*, although both affects and passions are considered illnesses of the mind, passions are undeniably worse. How can these cancers of the mind become suddenly a good impulse – the only one – to go from crudity to culture?

Are passions evil or not? Are passions good for society or are they the source of irrationality?

I claim that we have two distinct answers in Kant. One is based on the above quotes of the *Idea*. According to this answer, passions are good for society, they are not the cause of their irrationality, but are the possibility of the development of the natural predispositions of human being.

The other answer comes from *Anthropology* and – more radically – from the *Religion*, where he claims that passions are the evil we should fight against. More than inclinations, or affects, the evil principle refers to passions “which wreak such great devastation in his originally good disposition” (RGV, AA 6:93). Passions are considered here the true evil. Stoics are wrong when they fight against inclinations. Evil cannot be sought in inclinations, but “only in that which determines the power of choice as free power of choice (in the first and inmost ground of the maxims which are in agreement with the inclinations)” (RGV, AA 6: 59).

In this text, he also claims that passions only arise when someone is among other human beings:

If he searches for the causes and circumstances that draw him into this danger and keep him there, he can easily convince himself that they do not come his way from his own raw nature so far as he exists in isolation, but rather from the human beings to whom he stands in relation or association (RGV, AA 6: 93).

Passions are social and come from the comparison among human beings:

He is poor (or considered himself so) only to the extent that he is anxious that other human beings will consider him poor and will despise him for it. Envy, addiction to power, avarice, and the malignant inclinations associated with these, assail his nature, which on its own is undemanding, as soon as he is among human beings. Nor it is necessary to assume that these are sunk into evil and are examples that lead him astray: it suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they are human beings, they will mutually corrupt each other's moral disposition and make one another evil (RGV, AA 6: 94).

Here Kant stresses the social nature of passions, since they are born out of comparison between people. It is not about evil people corrupting a good person, but the corruption of

the good person by herself through comparison and fear to be dominated or despised. Then, someone will become greedy, because he fears that he will be despised because he is poor or dominated because he does have any power.

Also, in the *Religion*, he claims that the civil society is not enough to heal evil, but we need an ethical society. The only way to have the victory of the good principle over the evil one is through “a society in accordance with, and for the sake of, the laws of virtue” (RGV, AA 6: 94).

This society is an ethical society, that differs from the civil society:

An association of human beings merely under the laws of virtue, ruled by this idea, can be called an ethical and, so far as these laws are public, an ethico-civil (in contrast to a juridico-civil society), or an ethical community. It can exist in the midst of a political community and even be made up of all the members of the latter (indeed, without the foundation of a political community, it could never be brought into existence by human beings) (RGV, AA 6:94).

Only an ethical society can lead to full social rationality and the juridico-civil society is a necessary, but not a sufficient condition to that.

Conclusion

Is there a unique understanding of passions in Kant? Are they good or evil for progress? What is the true Kantian conception?

Perhaps we could understand the positive aspects of passions only as conjectural beginning of human history where passions had a good function as something that take men out of their natural inactivity. Once the civil society is stablished, passions are impediments to achieve an ethical society, since they usually work against the moral law. Vainglory, ambition and greed lead to irrationality in human social life. Only an ethical community can show the way to a full rational society.

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