

“The taking-something-to-be-true [that] cannot be communicated”: remarks on the (lack of) communicability to understand the problem of social irrationality

[“O considerar-algo-verdadeiro [que] não se pode comunicar”: observações sobre a (carência da) comunicabilidade para compreender o problema da irracionalidade social]

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Abstract

Since learning how “to make use of your *own* Understanding” (WA, AA 08: 35), and “seeking the supreme touchstone of truth in oneself (i.e., in one’s own Reason)” (WDO, AA 08: 146, footnote) – in a word: to enlighten oneself – is a process; and since Reason, in such a process, “needs attempts, practice and instruction” (IaG, AA 08: 19), it is only slowly that one can arrive at Enlightenment (cf. WA, AA 08: 36). As a matter of fact, the process of Enlightenment involves culture, i.e. the cultivation of the human being and his or her rational predispositions. And of fundamental importance in this process are communicability, participation and publicity – i.e., the possibility of making an idea public. Now, since these abilities are so important for Enlightenment, everything that does not allow the communication of ideas and thoughts to each and every human being is diametrically opposed to this process. This seems to be the case with the phenomenon of social irrationality and cognitive vices. The present paper aims to highlight how the problem of (lack of) communicability proves essential to understanding the phenomenon of social irrationality.

Keywords: social irrationality; vice of subreption; communicability; Enlightenment.

Resumo

Uma vez que aprender a “fazer uso de seu *próprio* Entendimento” (WA, AA 08: 35), e a “procurar em si próprio (isto é, na sua própria Razão) a suprema pedra de toque da verdade” (WDO, AA 08: 146, nota de rodapé) – em uma palavra: iluminar-se – é um processo; e uma vez que a Razão, em tal processo, “precisa de tentativas, de exercício e de aprendizagem” (IaG, AA 08: 19), é apenas lentamente que se pode chegar ao Esclarecimento (cf. WA, AA 08: 36). De fato, o processo de Esclarecimento envolve a cultura, i.e., o cultivo do ser humano e suas predisposições racionais. E de fundamental importância neste processo são a comunicabilidade, a participação e a publicidade – i.e., a possibilidade de tornar uma ideia pública. Ora, uma vez que estas habilidades são tão importantes para o Esclarecimento, tudo o que não possibilita a comunicação de ideias e pensamentos para todo e qualquer ser humano é diametralmente oposto a este processo. Este parece ser o caso do fenômeno da irracionalidade social e dos vícios cognitivos. O presente artigo tem como objetivo destacar como o problema da (falta de) comunicabilidade se mostra essencial para a compreensão do fenômeno da irracionalidade social.

Palavras-chave: irracionalidade social; vício de subreção; comunicabilidade; Esclarecimento.

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1.

“The greatest” – Kant claims in the second chapter of the *Canon of pure Reason* –

and perhaps only utility of all philosophy of pure Reason² is [...] only negative, namely that it does not serve for expansion, as an *organon*, but rather, as a discipline, serves for the **determination of boundaries**, and instead of discovering truth it has only the silent merit of **guarding against errors** (KrV: A 795; B 823).³

As a matter of fact, such a “determination of boundaries” seems to be nothing but the very critical task of Kantian philosophy. For, if one admits that “critical” derives from the verb *krínō* <κρίνω>, i.e., to separate (Bailly, 1935, p. 688), Kant’s critical philosophy seeks nothing but a separation: of legitimate from illegitimate thinking, aiming to know “how much I may hope to settle [with Reason] if all the material and assistance of experience are taken away from me” (KrV: A XIV). And this attempt, of answering with pure Reason the questions of Reason itself, Kant admits, may on the one hand seem a “pretentious and immodest” claim; on the other, however, it is an enterprise which is

incomparably more moderate than those of any author of the commonest program who pretends to prove the simple nature of the *soul* or the necessity of a first *beginning of the world* <Weltanfang>. For such an author pledges himself to extend human cognition beyond all bounds of possible experience (KrV, A XIV).

Now, to raise ourselves “beyond all bounds of possible experience” with our *a priori* cognition (KrV: B XXI), Kant points out elsewhere, is the wish of Metaphysics, that “battlefield of [...] endless controversies” (KrV: A VIII); that

battlefield [...] that appears to be especially determined for testing one's powers in mock combat; on [which] no combatant has ever gained the least bit of ground, nor has any been able to base any lasting possession on his victory [for] there is no doubt that up to now the procedure of metaphysics has been a mere groping, and what is the worst, a groping among mere concepts (KrV: B XV).

The controversies of Metaphysics seem “endless” precisely because this discipline completely exceeds our human capacities. Independent of all experience, Metaphysics “is nothing but the inventory⁴ of all we possess through pure Reason, ordered systematically” (KrV, A XX). Thus, it is it, the Metaphysics, the discipline that is concerned with constituting the system of pure Reason, with presenting the whole of philosophical knowledge under a unity, under a “systematic interconnection” (KrV: A 841, B 869). Kant’s philosophy, in turn, is “incomparably more moderate” than any other philosophical program – so Kant himself believes – because “it is a treatise on the method, not a system of the science itself”, i.e., of pure Reason, “catalog[ing] [its] entire outline [...], both in respect of its boundaries and in respect of its entire internal structure”, Kant’s philosophy does nothing but “the entire preliminary sketch” of such a system (KrV: B XXII).

However, one might ask, how would such a sketch be drawn? And to that Kant will answer: insofar as Reason “has insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design”; insofar as it “tak[es] the lead with principles for its judgments according to constant laws”; insofar as it “compe[ls] nature to answer its questions, rather than letting nature guide its movements by keeping Reason, as it were, in leading-strings”; finally, insofar as Reason approaches nature

² I would like to stress at the outset that the terms “Reason”, “Judgment”, “Understanding”, “Imagination” and “Sensibility” are capitalized whenever they refer to faculties.

³ The references to Kant’s works follow the guidelines laid down by the *Akademie-Ausgabe*. As for the emphasis, *italics* refer to the original works; **bold** are my own emphasis.

⁴ Such an inventory would, according to Kant, be divided into four parts: ontology, rational physiology (“doctrine of nature of pure Reason”), rational cosmology, and rational theology (cf. KrV: A 845, B 873).

with its principles in one hand, according to which alone the agreement among appearances can count as laws, and, in the other hand, the experiments thought out in accordance with these principles – yet in order to be instructed by nature not like a pupil, who has recited to him whatever the teacher wants to say, but like an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them (KrV: B XIII).

Kant’s critical philosophy is, in this sense, “the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human Reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*), and the philosopher is not an artist of Reason but the legislator of human Reason” (KrV, A 839, B 867): a legislator serving a court, that “is none other than the *Critique of pure Reason* itself” (KrV, A XII). It is, then, through the sieve of this court that the philosophy of pure Reason allows its “silent merit” to shine: to prevent us, to keep us away from errors. Errors among which we can consider the “cognitive vices”.

In order to try to highlight how and in what sense the lack of communicability, publicity and participation can help in understanding the causes of social irrationality and cognitive vices, as well as, on the other hand, the culture of these skills is essential to the idea of a progress of the humankind, collaborating, therefore, in its process of Enlightenment, this paper begins by showing that, although “vice”, in general, is a recurrent – and, it can be argued, plurivocal – topic in the *Corpus Kantianum*, a specific kind of vice seems directly related to the problem of social irrationality: the vice of subreption (*section 2*). Roughly describable as a “taking-the-(merely)-subjective-for-objectiv”, a vice of subreption seems to fall short of that touchstone that distinguishes science from both faith and opinion: namely, the possibility of communicating and rendering a judgment, a thought or an idea true, i.e., valid not only for the subject, but for each and every rational human being. And by losing such a “connection with the truth”, such a judgement also loses the criteria of communicability, publicity and participation (*section 3*). Without these criteria, however, any and every thought proves to be a problem not only for communication, in a more general way; rather, it also shows itself to be an obstacle on the path towards humankind’s adulthood: its Enlightenment (*section 4*).

2.

On “vices”, in general, Kant seems both prolix and inconstant: he deals with the subject in different works, but with different emphases – sometimes more, sometimes less in-depth. From pre-critical writings – such as *Dreams of a spirit-seer* (cf. TG, AA 02: 339; 372), *Universal natural history and theory of the heavens* (cf. NTH, AA 01: 329; 347; 357; 365), and *The only possible argument in support of a demonstration of the existence of God* (cf. BDG, AA 02: 104) – to the texts of his philosophical maturity – such as the three *Critiques* (cf. KrV: A 779, B 807; KpV, AA 05: 38; 88; KU, AA 05: 314; 327), the *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (cf. GMS, AA 04: 442; 458) and the *Religion within the boundaries of mere Reason* (cf. RGV, AA 06: 24 ss, footnote; 26-7; 31; 33-4; 37-8; 47-8; 58; 120) – passing through the *Anthropology from a pragmatic point of view* (cf. Anth, AA 07: 149; 171; 276; 298; 301; 325) and *The metaphysics of morals*, to stay with few examples, we find some lines on this topic. It is, however, in the latter – i.e., in *The metaphysics of morals* – where Kant seems to typify, to index, in the *Doctrine of the elements of ethics*, vices, opposing them to duties of each and every human being. It is there where Kant lists for us not only habits contrary to the duties to oneself, but also those contrary to the duties we have towards other human beings.

Attempting against the “duty of a human being to himself as an animal being” i.e., the duty of self-preservation, we have, e.g., the vices of “**murdering oneself**” <*Selbstentleibung*> (MS TL, AA 06: 422), and “**mai[ming]** <*verstümmeln*> oneself” (MS TL, AA 06: 423) – the former would be the vice of “willfully killing oneself” (MS TL, AA 06: 422); the latter, of the deprivation “of

an integral part or organ” (MS TL, AA 06: 423). In addition to these, Kant mentions the vices of the “**defiling oneself by lust**” <Selbstschändung> or “lewdness” <Unkeuschheit> (MS TL, AA 06: 424), and “**stupefying oneself** <Selbstbetäubung> **by the excessive use of food or drink**” (MS TL, AA 06: 427) – respectively: “the unnatural use of [one’s] *sexual inclination*” (MS TL, AA 06: 420), and the “*excessive consumptions*” (MS TL, AA 06: 420), such as “*drunkenness*” <Versoffenheit> and “*gluttony*” <Gefräßigkeit> (MS TL, AA 06: 420), which weaken “one’s *capacity* for the natural (and so indirectly for the moral) *use* of one’s powers” (MS TL, AA 06: 421).

Contrary to “human being’s duty to himself merely as a moral being” (MS TL, AA 06: 428), i.e., “without taking his animality into consideration” but taking into account only “what is *formal* in the consistency of the maxims of his will with the *dignity* of humanity in his person” (MS TL, AA 06: 420), Kant quotes the vices of **lying** <Lüge>, **avarice** <Greiz> and **servility** <Kriecherei> or **false humility** <falsche Demut>. The first one, as a refusal “and, as it were, annihilat[ion] of [one’s] human dignity”, makes the human being something of “even less worth than if he were a mere thing; for a thing, because it is something real and given, has the property of being serviceable so that another can put it to some use” (MS TL, AA 06: 429); the second one would be the restriction of “*one’s own* enjoyment of the means to good living so narrowly as to leave one’s own true needs unsatisfied” (MS TL, AA 06: 432) – which can be understood as a narrow-mindedness concerning the development of one’s dispositions as a rational being –; and, the third one refers the denial of one’s own self-esteem and moral dignity (cf. MS TL, AA 06: 435), the disregard of the human being “as a *person*, that is, as the subject of a morally practical Reason [that] exalt[s] him or her] above any price” (MS TL, AA 06: 434).

Opposed to the duty of love <Liebespflicht> towards other human beings, we have, e.g., according to Kant, the vices of misanthropy <Menschenhase> (MS TL, AA 06: 458): **envy** <Neid>, **ingratitude** <Undankbarkeit> and **joy at the misfortune of others** <Schadenfreude>. These concern, in turn and respectively, the “propensity to view the well-being of others with distress” (MS TL, AA 06: 458); the undermining or devaluation of “those who [...] have preceded us in conferring benefits” (MS TL, AA 06: 459); and, in the face of “the misfortune of others or their downfall in scandal”, an immediate rejoicing “in the existence of such *enormities* destroying what is best in the world as a whole, and so also to wish for them to happen, is secretly to hate human beings” (MS TL, AA 06: 460).

Finally, with regard to the “duties of virtue toward other human beings arising from the respect due them” (MS TL, AA 06: 462), Kant points out the vices of **arrogance** <Hochmut>, **defamation** <Afterreden>, and **ridicule** <Verhöhnung>: the first one would be a “demand that others think little of themselves in comparison with [us]”, “a solicitation on the part of one seeking honour for followers, whom he thinks he is entitled to treat with contempt” (MS TL, AA 06: 465); the second one – also called by Kant “backbiting” <übele Nachrede> – concerns an “the immediate inclination, with no particular aim in view, to bring into the open something prejudicial to respect for others” (MS TL, AA 06: 466); and the third one relates to the “*wanton faultfinding* and *mockery*, the propensity to expose others to laughter, to make their faults the immediate object of one’s amusement [...] in order to deprive [them] of the respect [they] deserves” (MS TL, AA 06: 467).

Now, Kant offers us this whole inventory of vices, of this “brood of dispositions opposing the law”, of these “monsters [one] has to fight” (MS TL, AA 06: 405) in the practical sphere – particularly, in the *Doctrine of Virtue*: it is there that he tells us, in a very broad way, that “it is when an intentional transgression [of a duty] has become a principle that it is properly called a *vice* (*vitium*)” (MS TL, AA 06: 390). It is, however, in the *Doctrine of Right* where he tells us of another vicious behaviour that, I believe, comes closest to the aforementioned cognitive vices.

This is because it is also a kind of “vice”, Kant considers,

a common fault <ein gewöhnlicher Fehler der Erschleichung> (*vitium subreptionis*) of experts on right to *misrepresent*, as if it were also the objective principle of what is

right in itself, that rightful principle which a court is authorized and indeed bound to adopt for its own use (hence for a subjective purpose) in order to pronounce and judge what belongs to each as his right, although the latter is very different from the former (MS RL, AA 06: 297).

Such a “~~taking-the-(merely)-subjective-for-objective~~” is an error, a fault that Kant points out in different areas. In his moral philosophy, for instance, he tells us of “an optical illusion in the self-consciousness” with respect to what determines the will in moral action. In what sense? Kant recognises that “moral disposition is necessarily connected with consciousness of the determination of the will *directly by the* [moral] *law*”. And, he follows, “consciousness of a determination of the faculty of desire <Begehrungsvermögen> is always the ground of a satisfaction in the action produced by it” (KpV, AA 05: 116) – a satisfaction, Kant seems to suggest elsewhere, in the “represented connection of the subject” i.e., of his or her will, with “that which is good absolutely and in all respects, namely the morally good” (KU, AA 05: 209).

As a matter of fact, “since this determination has exactly the same inward effect [...] of an impulse <Wirkung eines Antriebs> to activity, as a feeling of the agreeableness <Annehmlichkeit> expected from the desired action would have produced”, Kant recognizes, “we easily look upon what we ourselves do as something that we merely passively feel [that satisfaction, that agreeableness] and take the moral incentive <die moralische Triebfeder> for a sensible impulse <sinnlicher Antrieb>” (KpV, AA 05: 116-7). However, he points out, such a satisfaction arising from the awareness of the determination “is not the determining ground of the action: instead” – he follows – “the determination of the will directly by Reason alone is the ground of the feeling of pleasure, and this remains a pure practical, not aesthetic [i.e. sensible], determination of the faculty of desire” (KpV, AA 05: 116). To consider the contrary, i.e., that it is satisfaction that is the determining ground of action, would be to “demea[n] and defor[m] the real and genuine incentive, the law itself – as it were, by means of a false foil – by such spurious praise of the moral determining ground as incentive as would base it on feelings of particular joys (which are nevertheless only results)” (KpV, AA 05: 117).

If so, that “optical illusion in the self-consciousness” to which Kant was drawing our attention does not seem to be anything other than this: the illusion of mistaking the moral motive for the sensible impulse; of taking a subjective satisfaction – and not the objective law itself – as the determining ground of moral action. And to hold what is done driven by sensible impulse as the principle, as the determining ground of moral action Kant calls a “*vitium subreptionis practicum*” (HN, AA 15: 454) – i.e., a practical vice of subreption.

Such a vice of subreption entails, then, providing false reasons, false grounds in order to justify something.⁵ But this confusion between subjective and objective can take place, one can argue in two ways: if one takes the sensible for the intelligible, or if one takes the intelligible for the sensible. In the first case, this means taking sensible impressions, of the senses, i.e., sensations for a thought of objective validity; in the second, taking merely subjective thought as empirically and objectively valid.

Now, to take the impression of the senses – or sensations – as an objective thought, as an objective and therefore universally valid principle, is the ethical problem mentioned above – namely: that to remain in the field of sensations, of feelings undermines the understanding of morality itself, i.e. its rational basis. As a matter of fact, if morality revolved around the conservation of the subjects, their satisfaction, their welfare (cf. GMS, AA 04: 365), “[they] needs and inclinations, the entire satisfaction of which [they] su[m] up under the name happiness” (GMS, AA 04: 405), to all this “an implanted natural instinct would have led much more certainly” (GMS, AA 04: 396) than Reason.

However, to ascribe to morality the principle of happiness is, for Kant, rather problematic: for well-being is not ruled by to a good conduct; for it is entirely different to make a person happy

⁵ Kant will say elsewhere that a vice of subreption “gives the Understanding a false direction” (EEKU, AA 20: 222).

and to make them good; and, above all, because, in this way, one “bases morality on incentives that undermine it and destroy all its sublimity” (GMS, AA 04: 442) – and such a sublimity follows from the fact that morality has to be valid for all rational beings, “and *only because of this* be also a law for all human wills. On the other hand, what is derived from the special natural constitution of humanity – what is derived from certain feelings and propensities [...] – that can indeed yield a maxim for us but not a law”; “the sublimity and inner dignity of the [moral] command” – Kant goes on lines below – “is all the more manifest the fewer are the subjective causes” (GMS, AA 04: 425).⁶

On the other hand, if one takes the intelligible for the sensible, placing the “Understanding before appearance”, “reflection before intuition”, Kant will say, “one thus deprives the Understanding of its rights” (HN, AA 15: 92). In which sense? In the sense that the proof of the objective reality of a concept [through which we think something] depends, precisely, on its reference to intuitions (cf. KU, AA 05: 351).

If one of the three questions on which the whole interest of Reason dwells is “*what can I know?*”, Kant flatters himself that he has “exhausted all possible replies to it, and finally found that with which Reason must certainly satisfy itself and with which, if it does not look to the practical, it also has cause to be content” (KrV: A 805, B 833), namely: I can know what enters my sensible intuition through the pure forms of Space and Time and is adequate to the pure concepts of the Understanding through the transcendental Judgment. This is the entire legitimate theoretical use of Reason in forming empirical cognition of phenomena; a use with which “we might perchance be content” or should have to do so by “necessity, if there is no other ground on which we could build [legitimate cognition]” (KrV: A 236, B 295), than in the domain of pure Understanding. And by “domain” I mean here that which, referring to a cognitive faculty, dictates the principles to its objects (KU, AA 05: 174). Thus, the domain of the Understanding is the legislation by means of concepts of (or in relation to) nature – as object of the senses (cf. KU, AA 05: 195).

To place thought **before** (or, perhaps, **above**, or even **apart from**) appearances deprives the former of all its rights because, one might think, it subtracts from thought all its legitimate field of action. This is the very reason why Kant considers that *Transcendental Logic* corresponds to a “Logic of truth”: precisely because it deals with the legitimate use of what we have to build empirical cognition on what is sensibly intuited, occupying itself “with laws of the Understanding and Reason, [...] solely insofar as they are related to objects *a priori*” (KrV: A 57, B 81). In addition, not surprisingly, the first part of that *Transcendental Logic* goes from “the guideline <Leitfaden> to the discovery of all pure concepts of the Understanding” (KrV: A 66, B 91) to the conclusion that “we cannot *think* any object except through categories [and, furthermore,] we cannot *cognize* any object that is thought except through intuitions that correspond to those concepts” (KrV: B 165).

This is, as a matter of fact, the difference that Kant establishes between **cognizing** merely **thinking**. For “cognition”, he says, requires two elements:

first, the **concept**, through which an object is thought at all (the category), and second, the **intuition**, through which it is given [, so that] if an intuition corresponding to the concept could not be given at all, then it would be a thought as far as its form is concerned, but without any object, and by its means no cognition of anything at all would be possible, since, as far as I would know <wüßte>, nothing would be given

⁶ Similar is what can be observed, for instance, in aesthetics: if one keeps the judgement within the framework of sensory sensations, of what delights <vergnügt> or not the senses (KU, AA 05: 207), the satisfaction connected to such a judgement is therefore a pathologically conditioned one (KU, AA 05: 209), i.e., conditioned by the rejoicing or aversion that the object provokes in one’s senses. Indeed, it does not seem to make sense to call “agreeable” or “disagreeable” something that does not affect my sensations positively or negatively. But, if so, the “considering-something-agreeable” or not rests on a private feeling, and here the Latin maxim seems to prevail: *de gustibus non est disputandum* – for the validity of the delight is limited solely and simply to the one who judges.

nor could be given to which my thought could be applied⁷ [...] [, for the] thinking of an object in general through a pure concept of the Understanding can become cognition only insofar as this concept is related to objects of the senses (KrV: B 146).

In short, if there is no intuition to “objectify”, i.e., to give objective reality to a concept, the latter “contains only the subjective of thought, that is, the copula of the predicate in relation to the subject” (HN, AA 20: 349). And, in this case, this thought, this merely subjective concept, without intuitions, does not count as cognition.⁸

Now, what seems to be common to both vicious behaviours, i.e., to both vices of subreption, of providing spurious grounds in order to justify judgments is that, in both cases, one remains in the subjective realm (whether from a sensible point of view, or from an intellectual point of view). And, as a consequence, the judgments, arising from such biased *modi operandi*, seem to be the case of private judgments: judgments that are not subjective, but – and this seems important to be stressed – *merely* subjective.

What I am calling here “merely subjective” judgments are those that are valid only and exclusively for the one who judges. And, in this case, they differ from both judgements of objective validity and judgements of intersubjective validity. Of the first case are the judgments of logical, determined validity: judgments that rest on concepts and criteria valid for each and every person. Such are both the judgments of cognition – which rest on concepts and intuitions – and moral judgments – since the moral law, for Kant, has an objective ground, as a “*factum*” of Reason (KpV, AA 05: 31), and therefore the judgements, which are based on this law, are objectively determined, consequently, of objective validity. Of the second case, in turn, are the judgments of aesthetic validity: a subjective common validity <*Gemeingültigkeit*> (KU, AA 05: 214), which does not refer to the object and its concept “considered in its entire logical sphere, and yet it extends it over *the whole sphere of those who judge*” (KU, AA 05: 215). Such judgements could claim universal validity because they would be “sanctioned by transcendental grounds” (Zammito, 1992, p. 113), i.e., by the formal constellation of our a priori cognitive faculties. Of this kind are, according to Kant, aesthetic judgements-of-taste about the beautiful: judgements about “that which, without concepts, is represented as the object of a *universal* satisfaction” (KU, AA 05: 211).

In turn, private judgments <*Privaturteil*> are those that are valid solely for the subject that judges, rejecting both objective and intersubjective validity, and thus making any arguing impossible.⁹ It is noteworthy, however, that Kant draws a distinction between “to argue” <*Streiten*> and “to dispute” <*Disputieren*> on some about something as follows:

[they] are certainly alike in this, that they try to bring about unanimity in judgments through their mutual opposition, but they differ in that the latter hopes to accomplish this in accordance with determinate concepts as grounds of proofs, and so assumes objective concepts as grounds of the judgment (KU, AA 05: 338).

⁷ It would therefore be an empty thought (cf. KrV: A 51, B 75), i.e., without objective reality.

⁸ This is the reason why, it may be argued, Kant will assert that “all mathematical concepts are not by themselves cognitions, except insofar as one presupposes that there are things that can be presented to us only in accordance with the form of that pure sensible intuition” (KrV: B 147).

⁹ Taking advantage of the aforementioned example (cf. footnote 6), let us take into consideration, once again, the judgement about the agreeable. If, as said above, “agreeable” is what satisfies **my** inclinations, **my** preferences, not only does it not seem to make sense for someone to want to argue about it, in order to say that what I call pleasant is not so, i.e., that something does not satisfy my preferences, even if I judge it as such; rather, **it does not seem to make sense either for me to want to impute to others the validity of this judgement**, because it is a judgement that concerns only my private satisfaction. As a matter of fact, if a certain wine, a certain food, a certain colour, a certain sound delights someone, one should bear in mind that it is agreeable to him or her, whereas for another it may not be the case. To quarrel, Kant points out, about “the judgment of another that is different from our own in such a matter, with the aim of condemning it as incorrect, as if it were logically opposed to our own” (KU, AA 05: 212), would be foolish. This is because the judgement about the agreeable, although it is an aesthetic judgement (cf. KU, AA 05: 21), involves a pleasure of merely private validity, so that “with regard to the agreeable, **the principle everyone has his own taste (of the senses) is valid**” (KU, AA 05: 212) and, for this very reason, it does not seem worth (or does not even seem to make sense) wasting time, i.e., arguing about it.

The absence of concepts, then, makes dispute impossible, but not arguing;¹⁰ the absence of a common subjective validity, on the other hand, renders both disputing and arguing impossible. Now, what makes dispute possible is a logical basis, based on concepts; what, in turn, makes discussion possible seems a – between inverted commas – “minor” requirement: that something be valid beyond the very subject that judges, i.e., that his or her judgment can be, at some level, communicated. As a matter of fact, this would be, according to Kant, the “touchstone” (KrV: A 820, B 848) for distinguishing science from faith and opinion.

3.

Kant states in *Section Three of the Canon of pure Reason* that, concerning the validity of a judgement, the “taking-something-to-be-true” <das Furwahrhalten>, although it “may on objective grounds, [it] also requires subjective causes in the mind of [the one] who judges” (KrV: A 820, B 848). And this subjective assent, in turn, may concern either the particular nature of the subject, or a judgment of subjective validity – but not in a solipsistic way. In the first case, it would be a **persuasion**, i.e., nothing but “a mere semblance, since the ground of the judgment, which lies solely in the subject, is held to be objective”. Hence, he follows, “such a judgment also has only private validity, and the taking-something-to-be-true **cannot be communicated**” (KrV: A 820, B 848); in the second case, however, it would be a **conviction**, and it may refer to a subjectivity **common to all beings endowed with healthy Reason** (which would confer objective validity on it).

Nevertheless, seen solely as an appearances of the mind of the one who judges, persuasion and conviction do not differ (cf. KrV: A 821, B 849). The difference between them arises, precisely, in the possibility of **universalizing** this “subjective”, i.e., “the possibility of **communicating** it and finding it to be valid for the Reason of every human being to take it to be true” (KrV: A 820, B 848), verifying whether it concerns something that is not restricted to the subject.

Now, if, on the one hand, Kant states that the “the subjective validity of judgment [...] in relation to conviction (which at the same time is valid objectively)” (KrV: A 822, B 850) has three degrees (namely: **opining** <Meinen>, – as subjectively and objectively insufficient assent; **believing** <Glauben> – as objectively insufficient but subjectively sufficient assent; and **knowing** <Wissen> – as sufficient assent both subjectively and objectively), on the other hand, he seems to consider that every thought must have “a connection with truth” (KrV: A 822, B 850) if it is not to consist of a pure play of the Imagination. But what can this maintenance with the truth mean also there, where, precisely, we do not have an objective principle?

In order to answer this question, perhaps we should appeal to what is presented to us in *The Discipline of Pure Reason* with respect to hypotheses. For there Kant claims that “if the Imagination is not simply *to enthuse* but is, under the strict oversight [i.e., guidance] of Reason, *to invent*, something must always first be **fully certain and not invented**, or a mere opinion, and that is the possibility of the object itself” (KrV: A 770, B 798). And “possibility of the object itself”, Kant states elsewhere, is nothing but the “general rules of unity in the synthesis of appearances, whose objective reality, as necessary conditions, can always be shown in experience, indeed in its possibility” (KrV: A 157, B 196). This means, then, that it is a matter of **guiding**

¹⁰ Which is why Kant will say that “it is possible to argue about taste (but not to dispute)” (KU, AA 05: 338). For although there is no determinate concept involved, there is, supposedly, an objectively valid ground of determination – namely: “the subjective conformity to ends <Zweckmäßigkeit> in the representation of an object without any end (objective or subjective), consequently the mere form of the conformity to end in the representation through which an object is given to us, insofar as we are conscious of it” (KU, AA 05: 221), i.e., “the feeling (of inner sense) of that unison in the play of the powers of the mind [the free and harmonious play of the Imagination and the Understanding (KU, AA 05: 217ss.)], insofar as they can only be sensed” (KU, AA 05: 228).

one’s thinking according to the logical forms of pure thought in general, which (even without a proper application to phenomena) “contain the grounds of the possibility of all experience in general from the side of the Understanding” (KrV: B 167).

It might be interesting, in all this, to note that Kant stresses the need to start from something known in order to “anchor” thought, preventing it from straying completely from the realm of what has theoretical dignity and succumbing to daydreaming.¹¹ As a matter of fact, he states that even when simply opining – i.e., in a judgement according to insufficient grounds both objectively and subjectively –,

I must never undertake to have an opinion **without at least knowing something** by means of which the in itself merely problematic judgment acquires a **connection with truth** which, although it is not complete, is nevertheless **more than an arbitrary invention**.¹² Furthermore, the law of such a connection must be certain. For if in regard to this too I have nothing but opinion, then it is all only a game of Imagination without the least relation to truth (KrV: A 822, B 850).

It is such a “*least relation to truth*” that seems to make a judgement fit to be communicated – or, at least, communicable –, i.e. fit to be valid beyond the person who utters it. And precisely this, I believe, is a problem in the case of cognitive vices.

What I would refer to, here, as a “cognitive vice” – in the context of social irrationality –, concerns an unreflective group-thinking, which involves, among other factors, suggestion and/or collective contagion. It would be a (social) phenomenon in which a group of individuals share a given (subjective) conviction, taking it for granted (i.e. as something objective). And it is in this kind of “vice” that, it could be argued, some modern problems are rooted – such as negationism, mysticism/pseudoscience, post-truth, etc.

Now, the question revolves (or seems to revolve) around something that, at first, does not seem to have an objective ground – i.e., it would not have an interpersonal basis –, valid beyond the individual subject. It seems to be, rather, something that orbits within the realm of beliefs, opinions, convictions, etc.

By itself, that would render the phenomenon of social irrationality something particularly curious. And this is because, on the one hand, as “social”, it involves two or more individuals sharing the same thought; on the other hand, however, this same “shared thinking” does not seem something fit to be shared, i.e. shareable: for it lacks (or seems to lack) the criteria of “**communicability**” <Mitteilbarkeit>, “**participation**” <Teilnehmung> and “**publicity**” <Öffentlichkeit, Publizität>¹³. In this sense, it could be argued, social irrationality is, to a great

11 Kant also argues in terms of a (subjective) need <Bedürfnis> to “anchor” thought – although not in the same context, namely: in an exposition on the right of argumentation based on such a need of Reason to adapt itself “on its cognitions of supersensible objects” (WDO, AA 08: 134) – in the essay *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?*. There he states that Reason does not, unless it allows itself to fall into fantasies, see itself as devoid of Laws – even if these are the most general Laws of Understanding. As a matter of fact, “if Reason will not subject itself to the laws it gives itself, it has to bow under the yoke of laws given by another; for without any law, nothing – not even nonsense – can play its game for long” (WDO, AA 08: 145). This is because the final implication of the extreme freedom of thought, Kant follows lines below, when it “proceed[s] in independence of the laws of Reason”, is nothing other than to “destro[y] itself” (WDO, AA 08: 146). So that “the unavoidable consequence of *declared* lawlessness in thinking (of a liberation from the limitations of Reason) is that the freedom to think will ultimately be forfeited”, and whoever initially delights in the absence of legislation falls into a delusional “enthusiasm” <Schwärmerei> (WDO, AA 08: 145).

12 With this, Kant seems not only to argue for a certain hierarchy among convictions (<knowing><believing><opining>); he also seems to suggest a supposed fourth order of that “taking-something-to-be-true”, on which he does not dwell because, one could be argued, it has no theoretical dignity, since it is something even **less than an opinion** – namely: “an arbitrary invention”.

13 Although both “Öffentlichkeit” and “Publizität” could easily be translated as “publicity”, there is a significant difference between these terms. While the former seems to refer more broadly to a “*bringing-into-light*”, a “*making-visible/public*” – applied to a wider scope –, the latter seems to be restricted to a practical realm. As a matter of fact, “[Publizität] is about action, and more specifically political action! It is not the activity of bringing a carrot into the light of day that would have the quality of “Publizität”, but the making visible of maxims and deeds in the field of

extent, an “unsocial” phenomenon.

This is because there is a deficit, if not a deliberate unconcern to make certain ideas universally valid. One thus remains in the realm of belief and opinion, short of science; in the realm of conviction, short of certainty. Nevertheless, what provokes no little surprise is the fact that, within a “microcosms” these convictions are indeed shared, communicated and even disseminated by and among its members.

In the light of this, the attempt to understand the phenomenon of social irrationality, I believe, involves explaining (or trying to explain) how cognitive vices are able of being communicated. However, answering such a question – i.e., how beliefs, opinions and intentions can be shared between different individuals – may not be so simple. This is because if, on the one hand, the *modus operandi*, i.e., the mode of reasoning of these individuals does not comply with the maxims of “the common human Understanding [i.e., of the “common sense (*sensus communis*)”]” (KU, AA 05: 293); on the other hand, one might argue, it could be a case of what Kant calls “positive Unreason” <*positive Unvernunft*> (Anth, AA, 07: 216).

By saying that this is reasoning that does not comply with the rules of common human Understanding, I am taking into account what, according to Kant, “as merely healthy (not yet cultivated) Understanding, is regarded as the least that can be expected from anyone who lays claim to the name of a human being” and whose possession “is certainly not an advantage or an honor” (KU, AA 05: 293); that whose maxims are “to think for oneself” (i.e., in a *unprejudiced way*); “to think in the position of everyone else” (in a *broad-minded way*); and “always to think in accord with oneself” (in a *consistent way*) (KU, AA 05: 294)¹⁴.

On the other hand, it could be said to be a positive Unreason because, rather than being an “absence of rules <*Regellosigkeit*>” (HN, AA 16: 780), it is the use of “another rule, a totally different standpoint”, faraway “from the *Sensorio communi*”, in which, nevertheless, there is a “principle of unity [...] so that the faculty of thought does not remain idle” – a principle which, “although it is not working objectively toward true cognition of things, it is still at work subjectively” (Anth, AA 07: 216).

Whatever the case may be, it is because it seems rooted in prejudices and because it does not take

account (*a priori*) of everyone else’s way of representing in thought, in order as it were to hold its judgment up to human Reason as a whole and thereby avoid the illusion which, from subjective private conditions that could easily be held to be objective, would have a detrimental influence on the judgment (KU, AA 05: 293),

that the phenomenon of social irrationality seems to run into the problem of the communicability of ideas. And as such, this phenomenon presents itself as a hindrance to the Kantian critical project.

political action. “Publizität” is a *political* buzzword before which even the heads of the people bend down in their state wigs <*ein politisches Schlagwort, vor dem in ihren Staatsperücken sich selbst des Volken Häupter bücken*> (Blesenkemper, 1987, pp. 30-1). Thus, while “Öffentlichkeit” may refer to the ability to communicate, i.e. to make public ideas, propositions, maxims, norms of behaviour, etc. – which also applies, it can be argued, to judgements-of-taste (cf. KU, AA 05: 214) –, “Publizität” seems to have a juridical-political share. This becomes clear in Kant if, for instance, one takes into account that, for him, the “*transcendental formula* of public Right” is that “all actions relating to the rights of others are wrong if their maxim is incompatible with publicity” (ZeF, AA 08: 381), and, furthermore, that “all maxims which need publicity (in order not to fail in their end) harmonize with **right and politics combined**” (ZeF, AA 08: 388).

¹⁴ And such maxims, which can be put, respectively, in terms of “an action independent of the reflecting Judgement”, “an elevation <*Erhöhung*> above oneself as an expansion of consciousness <*Erweiterung des Bewußtsein*>”, and “an identification between the general point of view and one’s own way of thinking” (Kaulbach, 1984, p. 77 ss), “*in nuce* [...] contain nothing less than the normative pragmatics of our Reason, that is, a piece of the theory of Enlightenment” (Kohler, 2008, p. 145). For “the operation of reflection [...] makes it possible to activate the common sense mode of thinking and feeling appropriate to the broad horizon of humanity” (Kaulbach, 1984, p. 143).

4.

The cultivation, i.e., the culture of communicability, participation and publicity of ideas is, one could argue, fundamental in Immanuel Kant's philosophy. Understood both as a process and as the result of a process of “production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general (thus those of his freedom)” (KU, AA 05: 431), the concept of “culture” plays a key role in what might be called the Kantian project of Enlightenment.

If by “production of the aptitude of a rational being” is meant the “to cultivate (*cultura* <*Anbau*>) his natural powers” (MS TL, AA 06: 444), “culture” can be understood as “cultivation of oneself”, i.e., as self-development of the rational being. And for such a development, Kant points out, two principles must be obeyed: “live in conformity with nature’ (*naturae convenienter vive*)” and “‘make yourself more perfect than mere nature has made you’ (*perfice te ut finem, perfice te ut medium*)” (MS TL, AA 06: 419).

Now, to live in conformity with nature implies living according to the ultimate end that nature has reserved for the human race (cf. KU, AA 05: 431). But what does nature have in store for us as beings endowed with Reason? Since nature has been very parsimonious with human beings (giving them “neither the horns of the steer, nor the claws of the lion, nor the teeth of the dog” (IaG, AA 08: 19) to ensure their own well-being), it, nature, does not seem very receptive to our happiness (cf. KU, AA 05: 430). Indeed, if it were so primed for our happiness and well-being, why would it bother to give us anything other than instincts? For, as said above, a natural instinct would seem far more more efficient for this (cf. GMS, AA 04: 396).

However, if, in addition to instincts, nature has endowed us with Reason, and if, moreover, “all natural predispositions of creature are determined sometime to develop themselves completely and purposively <*zweckmäßig*>”, so that “an organ that is not to be used, an arrangement that does not attain to its end, is a contradiction in the teleological doctrine of nature” (IaG, AA 08: 18),¹⁵ since the human being “owes it to himself (as a rational being) not to leave idle and, as it were, rusting away the natural predispositions and capacities that his Reason can some day use” (MS TL, AA 06: 444), he or she has a duty towards himself or herself to develop, to cultivate his or her Reason: this is how the human being becomes “equal to the end of his existence” (MS TL, 06: 446); it is by means of this that the human being, “as an animal endowed with the *capacity of Reason (animal rationabile)*, can make out of himself a *rational animal (animal rationale)*” (Anth, AA 07: 321); and this, above all, is what is meant by that “production of the aptitude of a rational being”, i. e., the cultivation of the dispositions proper to a being endowed with the faculty of Reason.

In this context, to become “*more perfect than mere nature has made you*” seems to imply the recognition of this “duty to cultivate”, and, furthermore, a duty to cultivate Reason as “faculty that can extend itself beyond the limits within which all animals are held” (MaM, AA 08: 112). And such an “extension beyond”, in turn, means “nothing other than the transition from the crudity of a merely animal creature into humanity, from the go-cart <*Gängelwagen*> of instinct to the guidance of Reason – in a word, from the guardianship <*Vormundschaft*> of nature into the condition of freedom <*Stand der Freiheit*>” (MaM, AA 08: 115). And it is in such – and only in such! – a “state of freedom” (freedom from the fetters of animality, and freedom to make use of oneself, i.e., of one’s rationality) that the human being can reach, as it were, his or her “adulthood” (cf. WA, AA 08: 35; MaM, AA 08: 116), i.e., **enlighten** himself or herself.

Yet, as the march of culture, of cultivation, of the development of the human being and his or her rational dispositions, the process of Enlightenment is a lengthy one: it does not take place in the individual, but in the species; not in a human being, but in the humankind.

¹⁵ In a word: if nature were to provide something that serves no purpose, that is not to be used and developed, it would at best be a sort of “spendthrift” nature.

As a matter of fact, if “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 [...] in the individual”, the latter “would have to live exceedingly long in order to learn how he is to make a complete use of [...] such predispositions”: for Reason “does not operate instinctively, but rather needs attempts, practice and instruction in order gradually to progress from one stage of insight to another”. Since, however, this is not the case, i.e., since “nature has only set the term of his life as short”, it “perhaps needs an immense series of generations, each of which transmits its Enlightenment to the next, in order finally to propel its germs in our species to that stage of development which is completely suited to its aim” (IaG, AA 08: 19).

In the light of this, the progress of the human species, as a whole, implies the transmission of knowledge from one generation to the next one: a kind of testament, of cultural-rational heritage that one generation leaves to the following one. And for such a heredity of knowledge, the aforementioned concepts of “communicability”, “participation” and “publicity” – as the “method of Enlightenment” (Habermas, 1990, p. 180), i.e., as the ability to express an idea freely and in a public way – play a fundamental role in this process.¹⁶

Now, if, for the progress of the human species, i.e., for its Enlightenment, the ability to communicate, to participate, and to make public one's thoughts and judgments is essential, whatever works against these abilities, one might argue, works against the process and

¹⁶ That such concepts would be essential to the idea of the progress of humanity, this Kant makes quite explicit in his writings on history, politics and right. When inquiring about a possible indicative, as “a historical sign (*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognosticon*)”, that could “demonstrat[e] the tendency of the human race viewed in its entirety” (SF, AA 04: 84), Kant points out that “it is simply the mode of thinking of the spectators which reveals itself publicly in this game of great revolutions, and manifests such a universal yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other, even at the risk that this partiality could become very disadvantageous for them if discovered” (SF, AA 07: 85), which proves such a moral tendency of the human race. In the case of the French Revolution, for instance, since it “finds in the hearts of all spectators (who are not engaged in this game themselves) a wishful participation that borders closely on enthusiasm the very expression of which is fraught with danger [,] this sympathy, therefore, can have no other cause than a moral predisposition in the human race” (SF, AA 07: 85). As a matter of fact, it is not the revolution of the barricades itself – which, as resistance by violence (on the part of the people) to violence (of a tyrannical government), is always unjust and reprehensible (cf. TP, AA 08: 299; SF, AA 07: 86, footnote) – that would point to an indication of such a progress. Rather, it is the revolution – or, more accurately, the **evolution** (cf. SF, AA 077: 87) – of thought, i.e., the free adherence to and enthusiasm for the idea it represents (the idea of a republican right), which would indicate it. In addition to this, since revolution by force is not legitimate, for effective progress it would also be necessary for the citizen to “have, with the approval of the ruler himself, the authorization to make known publicly his opinions about what it is in the ruler's arrangements that seems to him to be a wrong against the commonwealth <gegen das gemeine Wesen>” (TP, AA 08: 304). Indeed, since, even with a view to progress, resisting government by violence is not an option, Kant wonders: “how else [...] could the government get the knowledge it requires for its own essential purpose than by **letting the spirit of freedom, so worthy of respect in its origin and in its effects, express itself?**” (TP, AA 08: 305). Now, if it is the purpose, i.e., if it is the role of government to rule for the sake of “the commonwealth's flourishing, which is required to secure its strength and stability both internally and against external enemies, not in order, as it were, to make the people happy against its will but only to make it exist as a commonwealth” (TP, AA 08: 298-9), and if, however, this same government may “err or be ignorant of something” (TP, AA 08: 304) in the exercise of its function, it can (and must!) have its course rectified by the people! For, Kant states, “*what a people cannot decree for itself, a legislator also cannot decree for a people*” (TP, AA 08: 304). As a matter of fact, if a ruler is to represent the will of the people, then he or she must know what this will is, i.e., he or she must inform himself or herself (and be able to be informed) about the needs of the people. And, in turn, “this can happen by no other means than that of **publicity** in the event that an entire people cares to bring forward its grievances (*gravamen*)” (SF, AA 08: 89). In other words, if the government must make its people progress, make them prosper, and if, for that, it is important that the people make themselves heard, publicity, i.e., the possibility of making ideas public, seems indispensable to the march of progress, i.e., of Enlightenment. For if, Kant is quite explicit, the “*Enlightenment of the people* is the public instruction of the people in its duties and rights vis-a-vis the state to which they belong” (SF, AA 0: 89), the freedom to publicly express ideas, to make a public use of one's Reason is a *conditio sine qua non* of the process of Enlightenment of the human race (cf. WA, AA 08:26 ss): it is through it that the people become “co-legislative <mitgesetzgebend>” (SF, AA 07: 86, footnote) of a government; it is thus that the state can, “reform itself from time to time and, attempting evolution instead of revolution, progress perpetually toward the better” (SF, AA 07: 93). Now, to such a capacity of expressing ideas is given the name of publicity: the possibility of making “general and public judgments”, due to “a natural calling of humanity to communicate with one another <einander mitzuteilen>, especially in what concerns people generally” <vornehmlich in dem, was den Menschen überhaupt angeht>. (TP, AA 05: 305). Publicity, both in Right and in Politics, would then refer to the possibility of confessing publicly (cf. ZeF, AA 08: 381), i.e., of making public an idea, a thought.

Enlightenment itself.

As a matter of fact, under the aegis of Reason, the promotion of such abilities entails the promotion of what the natural drive <Trieb> of each and every person claims (or, at least, should claim) – i.e., the promotion of “sociability”, as something “necessary for human beings as creatures destined for society, and thus as a property belonging to *humanity*” (KU, AA 05: 296-7). On the other hand, the crisis of – or, more precisely, the attempts to discredit – technical-scientific knowledge, as well as its much desired supplementation by unproven ideas and theories not only (seem to) dialogue with concepts such as “social irrationality” and “cognitive vices”, but also seem to oppose all that communicability, publicity and participation promote – or, at least, seek to promote.

If so, such a vicious behaviour stands as a drawback to the culture of what Kant calls “*humaniora*”, i.e., of the ability to “communicate universally” (HN, AA 16: 155) with the ability “to cultivate humanity” (Refl, AA 15:604). For “*humanity* <Humanität>”, he claims elsewhere, “means on the one hand the universal *feeling of participation* <Teilnehmungsgefühl> and on the other hand the capacity for being able to *communicate* one’s inmost self universally” – properties which, “taken together [,] constitute the sociability <Geselligkeit> that is appropriate to humankind <Menschheit>, by means of which it distinguishes itself from the limitation of animals” (KU, AA 05: 355) and enforces the distinctiveness of the human being as a rational being.

Finally, it seems important – though perhaps redundant – to highlight that “**fake news**”, “**self-deception**”, “**pseudoscience**”, “**obscurantism**” and “**post-truth**” – to stay with few examples – are quite current concepts and that orbit the phenomenon of social irrationality and cognitive vices. In order to present, from Kant's philosophy, an analysis and a problematization of the sources of these issues – and, if possible, to point out their eventual solutions – it seems indispensable, therefore, to address **the problem of the communicability of ideas**. And this in order to verify how its lack is not only possible to fit in, but is also important to understand the causes of social irrationality, frustrating a supposed progress of humankind, i.e., that ideal of Enlightenment of the human species, so advocated by Kant.

By doing so, one can humbly aim for a new understanding of Kantian philosophy – not only of its practical, social, political and juridical philosophy, but also of its theoretical philosophy, i.e. of that the so-called “court” (KrV, A XII) of Reason, approaching the broad phenomenon of social irrationality from the “necessary condition of the universal communicability of our cognition, which is assumed in every logic and every principle of cognitions that is not skeptical” (KU, AA 05: 239); by doing so, one can aim at shedding light on the not always recognized actuality of Immanuel Kant's critical philosophy – a philosophy that has, yes, its limitations and obsolescence, but keeps (at least, it was intended to show) its relevance in face of contemporary problems.

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