

The progress of reason as an end of social rationality in Kant?

[O progresso da razão como um fim da racionalidade social em Kant?]

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Abstract

The essay investigates whether from a Kantian perspective, we can gain insights for a deeper understanding of the concept of social rationality. One strength of Kant's approach is to distinguish from a concept of mere formal rationality an emphatic account of reason as a faculty of human beings, anchored in human nature and destined to be fully developed. By distinguishing two dimensions in which the progress of reason is seen by Kant as the highest aim of nature – first, as ultimate end of nature, then, as final end of nature –, we can achieve an extended concept of social rationality, denoting not only a means for the promotion of the progress of reason but also the heuristic idea of a social reason itself, a kind of social reasonableness.

Keywords: social rationality; progress of reason; Kant; teleology; reasonableness.

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At first sight, this title might cause irritation. Even before determining what exactly should be understood by the terms “progress of reason” and “social rationality” – if we roughly consider the first expression to designate some kind of process by which thinking beings acquire more and more rational skills and the second one equally roughly to refer to some state of society that we desire – doesn’t it seem more logical to put it the other way round: that the progress of reason were the means by which social rationality is realized.

A different kind of objection could point to the apparently tautological character of any means-end relationship between something called “reason” and something called “rationality”, considering that both terms derive from the Latin word *ratio*, standing for reason, calculation, information, relation, and principle.

With this essay, I try to respond to both objections. While the first one will be explicitly discussed, I hope to implicitly rebut the second one as well.

I will start with some reflections on the concept of social rationality (1). Then, discuss the idea of the progress of reason in some of Kant’s works (2), before finally, suggesting an account of social rationality in a Kantian perspective wherein the question of how to assess or measure social rationality, as well as the problem of methodological egoism in social rationality, will be briefly addressed (3).

1.

During the 20th century, the concept of rationality came to supersede the concept of reason in large parts of philosophical discourse. To underline this, many examples could be given from the instrumental rationality at the center of Max Weber’s sociology (cf. Weber, 1978, p. 24–26), John Rawls’s “deliberative rationality” in his *A Theory of Justice* (cf. Rawls, 1999, p. 365–372), as well as, Jürgen Habermas’ belief, in his *Theory of Communicative Action*, that all modern, post-metaphysical tendencies of philosophy converge into the striving for a theory of rationality (cf. Habermas, 1995, p. 16) – just to mention a few.

This notion of rationality can be said to correspond to the notion of reason similar to the way “morality” corresponds to “morals” or “modernity” to “modern age.” That is to say, in all cases where newer expressions increasingly get implemented into our discourses, expressions that more or less recently superseded their respective older, traditionally more loaded words. It is noteworthy that these newer expressions tend to be built from the adjective (rational, moral, modern) deriving from the corresponding noun (reason, morals, modern age) that appeared in the older expression.

On the one hand, this conceptual shift takes account of changes that occurred in our self-conception as human beings, changes inspired both by natural and social sciences, and thereby guarantees that we can maintain the discourse about what it means for us to be reasonable or rational despite our becoming skeptical of whether there is a distinguishable human power that *makes* us reasonable or rational. This aspect is highlighted and explained by the German philosopher Herbert Schnädelbach, whose philosophical work has a main focus on the philosophy of rationality:

A new term came to replace an old one. ‘Reason’ sounds antiquated, ‘rationality’ not at all. Talking about reason can be suspected of engaging into metaphysics, while the subject of rationality seems to be scientifically sound. ‘Reason’ is evocative of terms like consciousness, soul, spirit, i.e., of psychological entities that are of no use anymore for today’s psychology. Rationality, however, is accepted by psychology as its object of inquiry even if psychology understands itself as pure behavioral science. Rationality, then, is the empirically measurable dispositional property of persons and systems. This is how rationality replaced reason (Schnädelbach, 1984, p. 8, my

translation).

From this point of view, we can say that the conceptual shift from reason to rationality updated the older concept for our modern purposes: By talking about “rationality”, the concept of reason is freed from problematic metaphysical burdens, and thereby allowing us to continue philosophizing about it without needing to worry.

On the other hand, if we superficially reflect on what happens in the transition from the concept of reason to the concept of rationality, then we notice that something might get lost here: Max Weber’s instrumental rationality, to take up this example again, is a purely formal rationality. In the chapter “Basic sociological terms” of his book *Economy and society*, the notion of reason itself is not once mentioned (cf. Weber 1978 3–62). John Rawls, who, with his “deliberative rationality,” also considers a formal concept of rationality, shows himself as even more skeptical when he wishes to reduce the remaining concept of rationality to principles of rational choice instead (cf. Rawls 1999 361). Even Karl-Otto Apel, who provides one of the most rigorous and ambitious theories of rationality in philosophy today, has a concept of rationality that is, although universal, merely methodical and, therefore, in a sense, formal: While arguing against a methodological rationality, he favors methodical rationality (*methodische Rationalität*) instead (cf. Apel, 1973, p. 1).

We only need to turn to Kant to see that reason can very well be thought of in science and even in philosophy without necessarily ‘substantializing’ it into a specified metaphysical entity. In Kant, we find an emphatic account of reason as a faculty (*Vermögen*). The specifics of this Kantian approach manifest themselves in his paying attention to the fact that it is indeed problematic to want to study reason merely as some object of investigation among others – because reason is at the same time, and necessarily, the subject of all investigation. Thus, before we can ask what is the objective nature of reason, we must – if we follow Kant – make sure we know the subjective nature of reason, that is, its scope and its limits. Starting from this insight, Kant further develops his transcendental account of reason, with the central idea that reason is limited, or rather, that it must limit itself to the scope of possible experience in the theoretical sphere, or else to a form of knowledge that is merely hypothetical, although necessary, in the practical sphere.

From this rough description we can see that if we think of reason as a faculty, the term “rational” as its derived adjective very generally can be understood in at least three ways.

(I) First, as it is applied to the objectively measurable *results* of reason, in the respective spheres (theoretical or practical). “Rational” would feature here as a predicate applicable to thoughts or actions respectively.

(II) Second, as a name for the still objectively judgeable *exercise* of reason. In this sense, the term appears in adverbial form, such as when we would speak of someone proceeding “rationally”.

(III) Third, as applied to *reason as a subject itself*. By calling something “rational”, we would then allude to a potential reasonableness that is present in a given situation and could be actualized if certain circumstances were met.

This third aspect is what I think is usually getting lost in our discourses on rationality. In focusing on the state and the procedure of rationality, which is not wrong, they do not yield the whole picture – at least if we agree that we can relinquish the idea of a substantialized reason without having to stop talking about reason altogether.

Having considered the concept of rationality in some detail, the question now arises what is meant by the term “social rationality”. It seems to me that social rationality usually designates either a state of achieved social rationality (1) or a procedure of social rationalization by which

a state of social rationality is realized (2). Furthermore, it can be conceived of as either applying to a collective (a) or to individuals (b).

(1) Social rationality as a *state* can mean

(a) structures present in a well-working *collective* (such structures would be called socially rational insofar as they are well-grounded and correspond to or promote some ideal of our collective social life),

(b) the mindset of an *individual person* who can harmoniously interact with others (such a mindset would be called socially rational insofar as it enables the individual to function as a member in a well-working society).

(2) Social rationality as a *procedure* can point to

(a) a process of coordination of *individuals* to make them form a prosperous, socially rational collective,

b) the education of the individual enabling her to increasingly act in accordance with others, that is to say, making her more and more socially rational.

It can be easily seen that social rationality as a state (1) corresponds to the first (I) of the earlier mentioned components of the term “rationality”, and social rationality (or rationalization) as a procedure (2) corresponds to the second (II) aspect. While in rationality in general, we can at least imagine the third (III) aspect of the term to be present, this becomes doubtful when it comes to *social* rationality: Trying to think of a faculty of social reason seems to lead to inescapable ambiguities concerning the question whether we are talking about a collective or an individual faculty of reason; or if both, in what relation they stand.

I will come back to this problem later when I ask if we can, from a Kantian perspective, add to the two aspects of social rationality a third component, integrating a stronger relationship with the concept of reason into the concept of rationality. Trying to do this will bring along the idea that social rationality can (or, in the Kantian perspective, even has to) be thought of as having the purpose of what we can call the progress or development of reason, which is going to be the focus of the following section.

2.

We can find the idea of the progress of reason as a purpose in Kant in the essay “An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?” (1784). Here, Kant is taking up the main philosophical concern of his time, which is the problem of progress, and, more precisely, the question whether there is a progress of reason which could rightfully be called Enlightenment.

In order to understand the quite revolutionary character of the position Kant is assuming towards this problem of progress, we can take a brief glance at the philosophy of Enlightenment of his time. In most parts – with the famous exception of Jean-Jacques Rousseau – Enlightenment philosophy rests upon a very optimistic stance in questions of progress.

The idea of humanity striving continuously towards its own moral perfection as knowledge increases has been perhaps most famously developed by Nicolas de Condorcet in *Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* (1795 posthumous). But also the authors of the *Encyclopedia*, the Enlightenment project *par excellence*, were guided by this idea, as confirmed by Denis Diderot’s announcement in 1765 of the publication of the final volumes of the *Encyclopedia* – a text where Diderot speaks unambiguously of the happy revolution that Enlightenment thinkers bring to human history. In both cases, in Condorcet and in the kind

of self-assuring procedure that the Enlightenment accomplishes with the *Encyclopedia*, the idea of progress is brought to and expressed in its highest form: as it is made entirely dependent on the ability and good will of rational beings to emancipate themselves. The objective progress in history follows naturally from the subjective progress of the human mind.

Kant, in “An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?,” certainly is not denying the idea of the progress of reason that is called Enlightenment. On the contrary, he takes his time to explain and to promote the Enlightenment agenda. But at the same time, he specifically does so in a new way: by taking one step back and asking what are *the conditions of possibility* of the progress of reason. In the essay, Kant’s complex answer to this question is already foreshadowed by his alluding to human nature “whose original vocation lies precisely in such progress” (AA 8:39).

This idea of the progress of reason, or Enlightenment, as the vocation or the destination of human nature, we find in more elaborated form in the essay “Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim,” which dates from the same year as the Enlightenment essay. In this text, Kant asks more explicitly how it is possible for us to conceive of a universal history in which we are embedded. Only in relation to such a conceivable universal history could a judgment be spoken concerning the question whether we live in a time of development to the better or to the worse.

It is not Kant’s intention to present a certain version of history, either optimistic or pessimistic. Although we can say that he is finally taking sides in this question (opting for a concept of history as an advancement rather than a decline, in contrast to, for example, Moses Mendelssohn), interestingly, his starting point in the “Idea...” is exactly the opposite of an optimistic premise: The text starts with the observation that the ways humans act are far from being rational. From this observation, it is hard to see how it is that we indeed do have a history – it should seem much more probable that our individual actions, that are often thoughtless, therefore uncoordinated and often even opposing and negating each other, should result in a chaos.

Consequently, Kant asks how it is possible that we nevertheless conceive of a discernible history of mankind. His answer is, in short, that this is possible if and only if we think of nature as having the progress of reason for its purpose. Kant’s argument has a transcendental and a teleological part, and I will explain one after the other, in order to make clear why Kant considers the progress or development of reason as an end of nature.

I begin with the transcendental argument, which has the classical structure of a transcendental argument in Kant: It starts with naming a problem or question – in this case, the concept of history –, analyzes the state we are in – consisting of a bundle of individual actions that to a large extent are not rational at all –, and it concludes by stating that in order to solve the problem in the given state we have to think about things a certain way, that is, we have to consider the state that we are in under a certain idea. In our case, this means: If there is to be something like history instead of a mere chaos of unrelated events, we must think of our individual actions as guided by a purpose, a purpose pursued by nature that concerns and involves mankind as a whole.

In the introduction to the first version of the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), we find this argument in more detail: First, Kant makes clear why a concept of history is of such a great importance to us – for otherwise, we could not trust our experience. Although the introduction to the first version of the *Critique of Judgment* focuses on the consequences of this problem in the theoretical sphere, we can easily extend the argumentation to the practical sphere: If we could not trust our actions to have an discernible effect in the sensible world and to be of a certain permanence, that is, to not in general be thrown over at the next opportunity by our fellow human beings, we would not have the motivation to act at all. But since we do act, we obviously

rely on the belief that effective acting is possible. As soon as we want to reassure ourselves about this belief, we must assume nature as acting purposefully. The two most important corollaries of this assumption are that 1. the laws that structure our experiences stay the same over time (in the theoretical sphere), and that 2. nature has a defined purpose with mankind, a purpose that forms the condition of possibility for our individual actions (in the practical sphere).

This idea of nature as a rational subject, as having purposes to itself, has the status of a heuristic yet necessary assumption. It is not certain in the way an analytic truth is certain, but it is necessary with the same necessity that is present in our having to consider our actions as potentially effective in order to act at all.

But until now, we only have the idea of *nature* as pursuing ends in general, and the specification that nature must have a purpose with mankind. What we do not have at this point of the argumentation is an answer to the question why *reason*, or the progress of reason, should be the highest purpose of nature.

This is being solved by another kind of argument that complements the transcendental one – an argument of a teleological kind. As it has already been established by the transcendental argument, regularities in nature (may they be physical events or the results of free actions) are to be considered under the idea of them serving a purpose of nature. We therefore have the heuristic idea of “nature [that] does nothing superfluous and is not wasteful in the use of means to its ends” (*Universal History*, AA 8:19). One of the regularities that we can find in nature is that human beings can be rational. Thinking of nature as indicated in the quotation just cited, we can take human nature as intended to be developed and fully realized.

In other words, the teleological character of the argument lies precisely here: that we observe human being’s disposition of being rational and infer, by use of the heuristic idea of nature acting purposefully, from the presence of this disposition that it must serve a purpose. This purpose, in the case of a disposition, is easy to determine: it is realizing and developing the dispositional potential more and more towards its full realization.

In the “Idea...”, the concept of end or aim (*Zweck*) remains rather vague: Kant calls the “development of all the predispositions in humanity” the “highest aim of nature” (AA 8:22).

This concept of purpose or end, which is key to understanding Kant’s teleological argument, is deepened and explained further in the last section of the *Critique of Judgment*, the “Methodology of teleological judgment”.

In §§ 83 and 84, after Kant has introduced the category of purposefulness as a heuristic assumption on the nature of nature, the concept of the “highest aim of nature” is given two different interpretations: in § 83, as an “ultimate end [*letzter Zweck*] of nature” and, in § 84, as a “final end [*Endzweck*] of nature”. What is the difference between the ‘progress of reason’ being the *ultimate* end and the *final* end of nature?

§ 83 of the *Critique of Judgment* has the title “The ultimate end of nature as a teleological system”, and Kant is very straightforward in the determination of this ultimate end of nature; he calls it culture: “[O]nly culture can be the ultimate end that one has cause to ascribe to nature in regard to the human species” (AA 5:431).

It is important to be clear on how the genitive in “ultimate end of nature” is to be understood here: as a *genitivus subiectivus* meaning that nature as a subject pursues culture as its ultimate end.

Kant defines culture as “[t]he production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general (thus those of his freedom)” (ibid.), meaning, as we see, all kinds of ends, not necessarily moral ends. He further divides the concept of culture into two components that have to come together to bring about culture in its fullest sense, a culture of “skill” (ibid.) and

a culture of “discipline” (AA 5:432). I will come back to the Kantian notion of culture later. For now, it is only important to retain that the first way in which we can say that the progress of reason is an end of nature is by understanding the progress of reason as culture, as the development of the aptitude of human beings to be rational, that is, to set themselves purposes of all kinds.

Yet this is not the *full* development of the predisposition of reason. “Progress of reason”, in the sense that is to be identified with the *ultimate* end of nature, is a *genitivus obiectivus* that could be reformulated as “progress in reason”, meaning a mere immanent progress that does not allow for any criteria to judge the effects of this process itself. At this point, nothing guarantees that having a culture does mankind any good. Kant expresses this uncertainty when he states that “the end of nature itself, even if it is not *our* end, is hereby attained” (AA 5:432, my emphasis).

In § 84 of the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant turns to the final end or purpose of nature and explains what distinguishes it from any other end, including ultimate ends: “A final end is that end which needs no other as the condition of its possibility” (AA 5:434).

The ultimate end of nature was still an end *pursued by* nature. There is no reason why such an end, even if it is the “ultimate”, most general one, should not also feature as means in other contexts. As they are both still of the natural sphere, we can imagine culture and the human race being used to bring about ends different than themselves.

If we are talking about the “final end of nature”, this is now a *genitivus obiectivus*, meaning the purpose nature *itself* is serving, instead of the last element of the list of higher and higher ends pursued by nature. This can no longer be a natural purpose; otherwise we would again have an end that could at the same time be means for some other end. We are therefore necessarily looking for something that reaches *beyond* nature but, at the same time, it must be of the kind that it can be *promoted by* nature. There is, says Kant, only one thing on earth that inhabits both spheres, the natural one and the sphere of ends, or of free action, and this is man as a moral being: “[O]nly in the human being, although in him only as a subject of morality, is unconditional legislation with regard to ends to be found, which therefore makes him alone capable of being a final end, to which the whole of nature is teleologically subordinated” (AA 5:435–436).

The “progress of reason” can now be understood as a *genitivus subiectivus* as well: Reason is not only blindly developing further in an immanent process of unfolding its potentials that have been preinstalled by nature, as we have seen above, but it is at the same time the subject of this process, which means that it has to orient and determine itself while developing. In an ideal sense, we can now speak, reading the genitive subjectively, of the progress of reason as *our* end. “Ideal” because it is of course in no sense guaranteed by nature that human beings should act from their ability of being moral all the time.

Thus, for Kant, that towards which we as moral subjects orient ourselves cannot be what seems desirable to us – for this is arbitrary, and would lead, as pointed out in the “Idea...”, to a chaos of individual actions inhibiting and fighting each other. Instead, as we learn from the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), that towards which we orient ourselves in moral acting must be *the condition* of everything that could be desirable on Earth, and this is virtue, the ultimate good (*oberstes Gut*).

3.

It has become clear that the progress of reason can be taken as end or purpose of nature

in two different ways – I summarize what I have said in the second section:

The full development of the *predisposition of reason* in mankind is *the ultimate end of nature* (where nature is, in a heuristic assumption, the subject that sets purposes to itself and, mankind, as the carrier of reason, is the object or medium of the process). At the same time, this is only the precondition for the full development of *reason itself* that can take place in a second step: the progress of humanity itself towards morality as *the final end of nature* (nature featuring in this part of the process as means; while humanity or reason itself is the subject of the development).

What has not yet become clear is what role social rationality could play in the context of the progress of reason as an (ultimate or final) end of nature as described above. In the title, I suggested that social rationality, from a Kantian perspective, has the progress of reason for its purpose. Now, in analogy to what we have seen earlier, we could understand this in two ways: either with the progress of reason (objectively read genitive) as the *ultimate end* of social rationality (subjectively read genitive), in the sense that social rationality as the ‘subject’ of the process promotes the development of the predisposition of reason in humanity, or with the progress of reason (subjectively read genitive) as the *final end* of social rationality (objectively read genitive), in the sense that social rationality itself serves as an end that is beyond itself, i.e., reason as the true subject of morality. In the following, I want to shortly examine both ways of, as I claim, a Kantian manner to think of social rationality, starting with the second one, the progress of reason as the final end of social rationality.

As developed earlier, social rationality from a conceptual point of view could be understood in at least three ways. It seems to me that the first two aspects of the term, social rationality as a state and as a procedure to bring about such a state, which are explicit and well-represented in our actual discourses about social rationality, can both be found in the Kantian concept of culture.

We have seen that Kant defines culture as “[t]he production of the aptitude of a rational being for any ends in general” (KU, AA 5:431). The German term for “production”, *Hervorbringung*, seems deliberately chosen by Kant as to cover both the procedure and its result. Kant could have written “das Hervorbringen”, which, like “producing” in English, could have served to designate only the procedure or, if he had wished to only designate the result, he could have done without a term like *hervorbringen*, simply defining culture as the aptitude of having purposes. For reasons of clarity, from now on I am going to write “cultivation” if I want to point to the procedural character of culture, “cultivated state” when it is about the result of cultivation, and “culture” if I intend to designate both. Culture for Kant is understood as a cultivation of *technical* predispositions aiming to develop what Kant names “skill” (*Geschicklichkeit*) and a cultivation of *practical-moral* dispositions leading to “discipline” (*Zucht*). The corresponding cultivated state, Kant determines as to include art and science.

As I already indicated, the state brought about by cultivation is by no means without conflict nor is it an especially moral one. Kant, in the cited chapter of the *Critique of Judgment*, says that art and the sciences do not make human beings more moral, but only more civilized (cf. AA 5:433). However, this begs the question of why we should have social rationality at all if it is in such a high degree permeated by social irrationalities of all kinds. The Kantian answer is the one we have seen for the case of nature in general, we only need to apply it to social rationality as a state and as a procedure, both belonging to the natural sphere: Mediated by the heuristic but necessary idea of nature as a purposeful subject, social rationality in these first two aspects of the concept has for its final purpose the progress of reason itself in its orientation towards morality.

What has not yet been discussed is the question of the ultimate end or ends of social rationality and, in connection with this, the question of how social rationality in a society or an individual could be assessed or measured. Of course, it is no longer a question here of social

rationality as a state or procedure, but in the possible third aspect of the concept: as a potential of a certain kind of reason itself, i.e., a kind of social reason.

As long as it is predefined what social rationality is – a *certain* formal procedure, a *certain* desirable state – it is of course easy, if not trivial, to measure. The real question of measurement arises precisely from the questioning of such fixed predefinitions of what should or should not count as social rationality, asking ourselves: How can we say if and to what degree a given situation is socially reasonable or, equivalently, how can we measure social rationality taken in its third aspect?

As a matter of fact, it is merely a heuristic assumption to talk of social rationality as potential social reasonableness, an evolving subject of social reason. Still, we have to make this heuristic assumption as soon as we want to assess the degree of social rationality realized in a given situation.

Again, we can apply what Kant has said in his texts explicitly for the case of nature to social rationality as a part of nature, more precisely, as part of “those [natural] predispositions [of man] whose goal is the use of reason” (*Universal History*, AA 8:18). We can then look at and judge our social reality under the heuristic idea of a social reason taken as a subject which has ends, and, above all, the ultimate end of realizing itself fully in our social reality.

Conversely, this means that if we assess the question of measurement of social rationality, then there still must be *empirical* criteria by which we can judge our social reality, even under the idea of a social reasonableness that realizes itself in the world. This is important to retain, because here we can see that a Kantian theory of social rationality – at least in light of my reconstruction – would not be purely formal, which contradicts a very widespread criticism of Kant.

Finally, I would like to briefly comment on the question I raised in the first section, whether such a social reason would be individual or collective, and add some further thoughts on the problem of methodological egoism in social rationality. I think we could now say that social reason would have to be both individually and collectively instantiated. As *potential* social reasonableness, it is a “natural predisposition” of each individual and has to be realized as such, but it is only in the species, not in the individual, that it shall develop itself *completely*, as Kant writes in the second paragraph of the “Idea...” (AA 8:18).

From here, it becomes clear that Kant’s account of social rationality is not one that allows for any interpretation that bases social rationality on individualistic and egoistic motives alone, aligned and harmonized with each other by some external influence – be it some postulated effective force (one could think of Adam Smith’s thesis of the “invisible hand”) or a merely formal procedure, as in some of the accounts of rationality mentioned earlier in this essay.

In order to measure or increase social rationality in our societies, we cannot solely rely on dynamics belonging to the development of what Kant calls cultivation, whereby individuals are still incapable of setting themselves purposes in general. These purposes have to become moral ones for the full development reason as a natural predisposition in human beings, and, accordingly, for a higher social rationality in all three aspects of the term. The judge or touchstone of this development towards morality, as we have seen, can only be reason itself as it is developing – there is no external or internal authority to determine what the outcome of this process has to look like. In the meantime, and from an anthropological perspective, Kant advocates for “the opposite of egoism [that] can only be pluralism” (*Anthropology*, AA 7:130). Kantian pluralism is about regarding oneself not as isolated and exceptional (as the logical, the aesthetic and the moral egoists do, each in their respective area), but as a member of the species in which reason is to be developed or as “a mere citizen of the world” (*ibid.*).

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