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Rationalizing (Vernünfteln)

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Abstract: Kant was a keen psychological observer and theorist of the forms, mechanisms and sources of self-deception. In this element, I discuss the role of rationalizing/Vernünfteln for Kant's moral psychology, normative ethics and philosophical methodology. My main contribution is to take on the assumption that for Kant rationalizing only pertains to self-deception about one's motives and specific maxims. By drawing on the full breadth of examples of rationalizing Kant discusses, I will show how rationalizing can also extend to general features of morality and corrupt rational agents thoroughly (albeit not completely and not irreversibly). Furthermore, I explain the often-overlooked roles common human reason, empirical practical reason and even pure practical reason play for rationalizing. My discussion reveals that Kant is aware that rationality is a double-edged sword: Reason is the source of morality and of our dignity, but it also enables us to seemingly justify moral transgressions to ourselves, and it creates an interest in this justification in the first place. Finally, I discuss whether Kant is in a position to charge his philosophical opponents with presenting corrupting transformations of morality based on rationalizing rather than principles that can help us withstand the urge to make excuses and invent pseudo-justifications, and whether, in turn, Kant can escape this charge levelled against himself.

Keywords: Kant, rationality, moral-psychology, self-deception, evil,

Keywords: Kant, Ethics, Self-Deception, Reason

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This Element combines two of my long-standing philosophical interests: The ethics of Immanuel Kant and misuses of rational capacities. The significance of the latter phenomenon stretches far beyond Kant scholarship. In fact, it sometimes seems that it is ubiquitous in current public and political discourse, which is frequently dominated by all sorts of emotional and only seemingly rational appeals and partisan arguments. It is here sometimes very difficult to distinguish between unintended factual errors, (self-)deception and pure bullshitting.¹ Moreover, rationalizing is hardly confined to politics and public discourse. One of the most memorable moments of my student days was when one of my professors claimed that ‘Ethicists are the worst people in the world because they know all the excuses’. I think this is a somewhat pessimistic, though, as we will see, very Kantian thought.

Over the years I have had many productive discussions about self-deception and rationalizing with a number of outstanding philosophers and/or friends. I wish to thank especially Jens Timmermann, Adrian Piper, Joe Saunders, Anna Wehofsits, James Camien McGuiggan, Kate Moran, Seiriol Morgan, Brian McElwee, Sarah Broadie, Marcia Baron, Stefano Lo Re, Andre Grahle, Laura Papish, Oliver Sensen, Max Jones and Thomas Sturm. I am fully aware that I have subjected some of these individuals to a great deal of rationalizing about my supposed vegetarianism (I used to eat quite a lot of meat for a vegetarian) and other matters. I hope that some of it at least helped them to better understand the depths of human pseudo-rationality. Listening to my own internal laments about the difficulties of being a half-way decent person was certainly an important source of inspiration for this Element.

I am also grateful to Allen Wood for helpful suggestions based on an outline of my project and to Andy Jones for facilitating the review process with exemplary efficiency. Furthermore, I am grateful to the University of Bristol, Brandeis University, the North American Kant Society, the Immanuel Kant Baltic Federal University, and the Kantian Rationality Lab based in Kaliningrad for providing me with opportunities to present my material. I am especially grateful to Laura Papish and Jessica Tizzard for a very productive exchange during an ENAKS panel organized by Kate Moran at Brandeis University. Finally, I am grateful to Laura Papish, Anna Wehofsits and Joe Saunders for providing detailed feedback on a draft of my manuscript.

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¹ Just so readers don’t misunderstand this as a bipartisan lament that we (citizens of liberal democracies) are more divided than ever, and that both sides of the political aisle are equally bad at speaking truth: It’s the Republicans in the US, Brexiteers and Conservatives in the UK and the far-right/Neo-Nazis in Europe that do more lying and more bullshitting.

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Denn ohne Philosophie wagen heute nur noch
Verbrecher anderen Menschen zu schaden.
(Musil, *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften*, ch.48)

L'hypocrisie est un hommage que le vice rend à la vertu.
(La Rochefoucauld: *Reflexions*, 1998, 97)

So convenient it is to be a reasonable creature, since
it enables one to find or make a reason for everything
one has a mind to do.
(Benjamin Franklin)

The key thing with resolutions is not to keep them.
It's how to revise them once you fail.
(John Oliver on New Year's resolutions)

1. Introduction

According to Kant's biographer Manfred Kuehn (2001: 222), Kant 'had formulated the maxim for himself that he would smoke only one pipe [a day], but it is reported that the bowls of his pipes increased considerably in size as the years went on'. Kant's implementation of his own maxim is here in tension with the aim incorporated into this maxim, which presumably was to limit tobacco consumption. Kant treats the maxim as an externally imposed constraint that must be obeyed to the letter, but not in spirit. The implementation undermines his end without formally renouncing it. Kuehn's anecdote, though it concerns matters of prudence rather than morality, nicely illustrates the subject-matter of this Element: quibbling with rules, trying to outsmart one's better self or, as Kant calls it, 'vernünfteln'/'rationalizing': The use of rational capacities to undermine reason; an exercise of reason that weakens agents' readiness to do the right thing whilst they yet deem themselves committed to morality.

Kant was a keen psychological observer of this phenomenon, and the dangers it poses are a major theme in his moral philosophy. Consequently, his discussion of rationalizing will help us better understand a number of important aspects of his philosophy. Firstly, practical philosophy is supposed to function as an 'antidote' (Wood 2002: 28) against rationalizing. Understanding rationalizing will illuminate the *purposes that moral principles and theories serve*, and will help us understand what the role of the philosopher is for moral improvement.² Secondly, the concept of rationalizing is central for our understanding of Kant's engagement with his *academic colleagues and the popular philosophers* whom he considers to advocate sophisticated forms of rationalizing. Moreover, he criticises religious

² Wood (2017: 20-6, 74) correctly stresses that Kant's ethics is not primarily supposed to serve a theoretical or intellectual purpose, but to address *moral* flaws. Most recently Callanan (2019) has argued that the discussion of the natural dialectic, in which Kant introduces rationalizing, is central to a correct understanding of the *Groundwork*. Kant here parts way with Rousseau who is sceptical that philosophy can ever help agents to become and remain moral, whereas Kant argues that philosophy can and must perform this function.

institutions and practices because they propagate and encourage mistaken beliefs about moral responsibility.³ Thirdly, Kant's discussions of concrete examples of rationalizing offer instructive *case-studies for how our moral reasoning can go wrong*. A detailed look at these examples will enhance our understanding of Kant's conception of the workings as well as deficits of our rational faculties. Fourthly, throughout his discussions of the various *dialectics* that our reason is subject to and that necessitate critiques of our rational capacities, Kant describes fundamental mistakes in reasoning labelled 'rationalizing'.⁴ Kant is interested in the impact of rationalizing on all aspects of our use of reason. However, due to constraints of space, I will focus on the practical dimension.

In this Element, I will take a detailed look at the examples of rationalizing Kant provides, his own explanations of the underlying process and at the effects rationalizing has on agents' grasp of

³ A secular example for this phenomenon we can find in a New Yorker cartoon in which a number of men in a business meeting ask their secretary, Miss Dugan, to send in an expert who can tell right from wrong. Wood (2017: 17), from whom I take this example, analyses this as follows: These men 'are about to do something they know is wrong. Yet they are tempted to do it anyway, no doubt on the ground that doing it serves 'the greater good' (the firm's, the university's, or just their own). They are in a quandary because they are tempted to think that this 'greater good' might justify (perhaps only 'just this once') their doing what [...] they know perfectly well is wrong. The call to Miss Dugan is an admission that, in their condition of moral weakness, the shallow 'cognitive' (i.e. the 'cost-benefit' or 'greater good') part of their brains has so disoriented their good judgment that they no longer know what they know and what they don't. But at least they do know that they no longer know what they know; that last pitiful shred of human decency shows itself in their desperate plea for help, comically masquerading as a dignified professional request for outside expertise'. There are many other contemporary examples from politics, public discourse, and the private sector as well as institutions of education to which Kant's analysis of rationalizing applies.

⁴ This is most apparent for the natural dialectic in G, IV: 404.37-405.19, which I will discuss in detail in sec.3. In the First Critique, rationalizing is presented as an exercise of rational capacities without awareness of their dialectical nature, resulting in antinomical claims (A/B, 422/450, see also A/B, 63/87-8, 421/448-9). In the Third Critique, Kant explains rationalizing as the act of claiming *a priori* universality for one's judgements, which can lead to a dialectic of opposing judgements (CJ, V: 337.5-8, see my sec.2.1).

Kant's writings are cited by volume: page.line of the Academy edition, using the following abbreviations: A/B: *Critique of Pure Reason*, Anth: *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, CPrR: *Critique of Practical Reason*, CJ: *Critique of Judgement*, CF: *The Contest of Faculties*, CB: *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, TP: *On the Common Saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice*, OAD: *On a Discovery, according to which any new Critique of Pure Reason is made Superfluous through an Older*, WIE: *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment*, FI: *First Introduction to the Critique of Judgement*, G: *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, JL: *Immanuel Kant's Logic. A manual for lectures edited by Gottlob Benjamin Jäsche*, LB-Prog: *Lose Blätter zu den Fortschritten der Metaphysik*, Eth-C: *Moral Philosophy: Collin's lecture Notes*, Corr: *Letters*, L-F: *Die Vorlesungen des Wintersemesters 1775/76 aufgrund der Nachschriften Friedländer 3.3 (Ms 400), Friedländer 2 (Ms 399) und Prieger*, Eth-K, Kaehler's *Lecture Notes on Moral Philosophy* edited by Stark (2004), Eth-M1: *Lecture Notes Mrongovius I*, Eth-M2: *Morality according to Prof. Kant: Mrongovius's second set of lecture notes*, L-Men: *Die Vorlesung des Wintersemesters 1781/82 [?] aufgrund der Nachschriften Menschenkunde, Petersburg*, Eth-P: *Praktische Philosophie Powalski*, Eth-V: *Metaphysics of Morals Vigilantius*, MM: *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Men: *Einige Bemerkungen zu Ludwig Heinrich Jakob's Prüfung der Mendelsohn'schen Morgenstunden*, MFNS: *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*, OP: *Opus postumum*, P: *Prolegomena to any Future Metaphysics*, Ped: *On Pedagogy*, P-F: *Preparations for The Contest of Faculties*, P-M: *Preparations for The Metaphysics of Morals*, TPP: *Toward Perpetual Peace*, P-PR: *Vorredenentwürfe Religionsphilosophie*, PCT: *Verkündigung des nahen Abschlusses eines Tractats zum ewigen Frieden in der Philosophie*, PM: *Prize essay on the Progress of Metaphysics*, Rel: *Religion within the Limits of Reason alone*, Ref: *Reflections on Anthropology*, RE: *Zur Rezension von Eberhards Magazin (II. Band)*, Ref: *Reflections*, RO: *Remarks on the Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime*, RPT: *On a New Superior Tone in Philosophy*, UPT: *On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy*, MPT: *Miscarriages of all Philosophical Trials in Theodicy*. Unless otherwise noted translations follow the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*, edited by P. Guyer and A. W. Wood. Translations of as of yet untranslated passages and of German secondary literature are my own.

morality, as well as discuss the necessary conditions for rationalizing to be possible and to appear as a promising strategy to agents for dealing with moral commands that can require great sacrifice from them. In doing so, I aim to shed new light on Kant's philosophy in a number of ways.

1) The main contribution of this Element is to challenge the widely shared assumption that rationalizing in Kant only extends to *questions of motivation and specific maxims*. By drawing on the full breadth of examples of rationalizing Kant presents, I will show how rationalizing can lead to a systematically distorted sense of right and wrong Kant labels 'corruption'. When I rationalize, I undermine the grasp the supreme principle of morality has on me, whilst I still believe myself fully committed to morality, albeit to a less demanding moral principle or more lenient conception of morality. There is much more to rationalizing than misrepresenting the strength or source of motives.

2) I explain in what sense rationalizing is a *rational* activity. Empirical practical reason devises pseudo-justifications and finds excuses to promote an agent's sensuous ends at the expense of morality. Paradoxically, the interest in these pseudo-justifications is rooted in rational agents' recognition of the authority of morality. Only agents who recognize the authority of morality are tempted to look for excuses or apparent justifications for their morally dubious actions. My discussion will reveal that Kant was not an arch-rationalist who believed in the power of reason without qualification.⁵ Kant understands that moral failings are not simply the fault of inclinations and of our sensuous side (in fact, they are never simply that). Many instances of moral failure are expressions of fallacious (but not always obviously incorrect) reasoning and even of forms of pseudo-rationality that can be extremely sophisticated. Kant is aware that rationality is a double-edged sword: It is the source of morality and of our dignity, but it also enables us to seemingly justify moral transgressions to ourselves and others, and it creates an interest in such justifications in the first place.

3) I explain how it is possible for a rationalizer to think that committing a moral violation can be *excused* and even *justified*, even though this rationalizer has not completely lost touch with the moral law. This will allow us to maintain that rationalizers are still moral agents and morally responsible for their actions. It will also demonstrate that Kant does not think that corrupted agents are merely in a state of confusion in which they feel a need for urgent philosophical help. They can be in a state of false (though never complete) certainty.

4) I will close with a *critical discussion* of the scope and underlying assumptions of Kant's conception of rationalizing. Such a critical discussion is pivotal, since Kant criticises competing ethical theories for being rationalizations and for reinforcing and encouraging rationalizing. Understanding whether charging a philosopher with rationalizing is a valid criticism, and understanding whether Kant

⁵ That Kant was blindly optimistic about the power of reason is a stereotype that still prevails at least among non-specialists. See, for instance, Haidt (2001) who discusses Kant under the label 'Worship of Reason' and Mercier and Sperber (2018: 17) who count Kant as a philosopher who assumes that 'humans err by not reasoning enough' not by 'reasoning too much'.

is in a position to level this criticism against other theorists, will help us gain a better general understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of Kant's ethics.