

Kant's Idea of History

Kevin E. Dodson

In 1784, just three years after the appearance of the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant published his short article "The Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. This essay, along with the essay "What is Enlightenment?," initiated a series of reflections on human history that span the entire critical period. Given his well-known hypochondria and the ambitious philosophical project he had set for himself, Kant's purpose in devoting his time and attention to history at this point must have been a particularly compelling one for him. In this paper, I shall examine that purpose and situate the "idea for a Universal History" within the framework of the critical philosophy in general and the doctrines of the first *Critique* in particular.

It is my contention that the teleological conception of history Kant lays out in the essay is designed to reconcile the determinism of nature with the freedom of moral agents in such a way as to establish the practical possibility of ideal civil society. This is necessary in order to establish that we have an obligation to promote that ideal. In the first two sections of my paper, I present the problem that Kant's philosophy of history is designed to solve. I shall begin with a discussion of Kant's conception of an idea of practical reason and then consider such ideas in the light of the third antinomy, the conflict between freedom and determinism. Following that, I shall discuss the solution that Kant develops in that essay. Finally, I shall discuss the rationale Kant presents for this solution and conclude with some observations as to the status of these speculations within Kant's critical philosophy. Kant's use of teleology here is essentially practical and not theoretical in that it does not provide us with any knowledge of the future course of human affairs. We are justified in thinking in this way solely on grounds derived from the needs of our practical reason. AS I have already noted, human history is a topic that Kant continually returned to in his later work, but even though my focus is on the "Idea for a Universal History" as it relates to and arises out of the first *Critique*, the position developed therein is consistent with and anticipates the views expressed in these later writings.

I.

The starting point of our discussion is the theory of ideas as presented in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Kant occupies the position of a transitional thinker within the history of western philosophy. He is deeply attached to the tradition of rationalist metaphysics, but the epistemological position he propounds in the first *Critique* is one of the most trenchant critiques of that very same tradition. Torn between the limits imposed upon reason and knowledge by his own epistemology and his unwillingness fully to relinquish rationalist metaphysics, Kant searches for some way of reconciling these conflicting demands. The theory of ideas is the means by which Kant attempts to effect this reconciliation.

Kant quite self-consciously appropriates the term 'idea' from Plato,¹ and employs it as a technical term with two distinct senses that correspond to Kant's division between theoretical and practical reason. I shall postpone discussion of the theoretical employment of ideas until later and restrict myself to their practical employment at this point in my exegesis. Insofar as we are concerned with practical reason, an idea is constitutive of an end for moral agents. It is inherent in the nature of an idea that nothing in experience "is ever to be met with that is coincident with it."² But even though such an ideal can never be fully realized, we can gradually approximate it through our collective efforts and are obligated to do so.

The relevant example here is the idea of the social contract, which defines the ideal state or civic commonwealth that is the appropriate goal of moral action. The ultimate end of a moral politics is the abolition of war and the establishment of an enduring peace among rational agents. This is achieved by replacing the arbitrary violence of the state of nature with a juridical condition in which disputes are settled by appeal to public law, i.e., by the establishment of civil society as defined by the idea of the social contract. In the first *Critique*, Kant describes the ideal commonwealth as "a constitution allowing the greatest possible human freedom in accordance with that of all others."³ This constitution is in turn possible only within the context of a lasting and secure peace guaranteed by a league of states.

This leads one quite naturally to wonder whether history is friendly to such activity. Is the course of history such that all our best efforts to improve society will come to naught or does it favor us in this regard? If the former is the case, then Kant presents us with an impossible task; but if it be the latter, then we may take heart in spite of all our setbacks

and failures. Unless it is possible for us to approximate the ideal, the ideal is an empty figment of the imagination, for it can not be practical. But given Kant's thoroughgoing determinism in the realm of appearances, including history, the process of approximation must not only be possible but necessary. Kant is then faced with the task of somehow reconciling our obligation to promote the ideal civil commonwealth, an obligation presupposing our free activity as rational agents, with the determination of all events in the natural world, human actions included, in accordance with laws of natural necessity.

II.

In order fully to understand the philosophical task confronting Kant, we must consider the conflict between freedom and determinism as presented by Kant in the third antinomy of the "Dialectic of Pure Reason" in the first *Critique*. The thesis of this antinomy asserts the existence of a causality of freedom characterized by absolute spontaneity, whereas the antithesis denies the existence of a causality other than that of natural necessity. Kant's division of being into phenomena (the realm of nature) and noumena (the realm of freedom) enables him to resolve the conflict between freedom and determinism as expressed in the third antinomy. As noumenal agents we are free and subject to the dictates of pure practical reason, even though when considered as phenomena our actions are causally determined in strict accordance with universal laws of natural necessity. We may be held responsible for our actions because as noumena we construct phenomenal nature through the activity of synthesis.

Essentially, Kant's philosophy of history is the application of the resolution of the third antinomy to the historical development of society. He reveals this in the opening lines of the "Idea for a Universal History":

Whatever concept one may hold, from a metaphysical point of view, concerning the freedom of the will, certainly its appearances, which are human actions, like every other natural event are determined by universal laws. However obscure their causes, history, which is concerned with narrating these appearances, permits us to hope that if we attend to the play of freedom of the will in the large, we may be able to discern a regular movement in it, and that what seems complex and chaotic in the single individual may be seen from the standpoint of the human race as

a whole to be a steady progressive though slow evolution of its original endowment.⁴

The "Idea for a Universal History," then, represents Kant's attempt to lay out a philosophical framework for the interpretation of history from the perspective of the establishment of the perfect civic constitution, a point he alludes to in the footnote to the title of the essay,⁵ while remaining within the constraints of his determinism. This political ideal is the "standpoint" from which the history of the "human race as a whole" is seen to be "a steady progressive though slow evolution of its original endowment."

In order for the idea of the social contract to be practical, Kant must demonstrate that civil society can be gradually transformed into a closer and closer approximation of the ideal defined by the contract. Since one is not obligated to do that which one cannot do, one would not be obligated to promote the end of perpetual peace if one's actions could not possibly contribute to its realization. Thus Kant must demonstrate that it is possible to establish an enduring peace if one's actions could not possibly contribute to its realization. Thus Kant must demonstrate that it is possible to establish an enduring peace in accord with the social contract, or at least its gradual approximation. But given his thoroughgoing determinism, the entire course of history is determined in accordance with universal laws of nature, and consequently any thing or event that is contrary to the operation of those laws is impossible, not logically impossible but causally impossible. Thus, in order to prove that perpetual peace can be achieved, Kant must demonstrate that the process of history will inevitably lead to a closer and closer approximation of the ideal. In order to show how this is to come about, the historical process must be described purely in terms of natural necessity, which is what Kant sets out to do in his "Idea for a History."

III.

Until this point in my discussion, I have used the term 'idea' in its practical sense, that is, I have been concerned with ideas of practical reason. But if we are to understand Kant's conception of history, we must examine the theoretical employment of ideas, for this is the sense in which the term is used in the title of Kant's essay. In their theoretical use, ideas are not constitutive but regulative in that they provide "a rule or principle for the systematic unity of all employment of the understand-

ing."⁶ An idea of theoretical reason does not define an end of action, as in the case of an idea of practical reason; rather it regulates the way one thinks about and investigates the phenomenal world. As such, an idea of theoretical reason is

... really only a heuristic, not an ostensive concept. It does not show us how an object is constituted, but how, under its guidance, we should seek to determine the constitution and connection of the objects of experience.⁷

Kant's idea for a history, then, is essentially a framework for regulating the way we think about human history. It enables us to connect disparate historical events together in such a way that they form a systematic unity based on the conception of the ideal state as the telos of history. Thus, "this idea may . . . serve as a guiding thread for presenting as a system, at least in broad outlines, what would otherwise be a planless conglomeration of human actions."⁸

Though teleological in character, this framework involves an essentially mechanistic view of human interaction. The social evolution of the species, while possessing a telos, is governed by strict natural necessity. Nature provides the mainspring of cultural and political development in the form of humanity's unsociable sociability—"their propensity to enter into society, bound together with a mutual opposition that threatens to break up the society."⁹ Social interactions are analogous to the interaction of physical matter in that both are governed by opposing forces of attraction and repulsion. This characteristic draws persons into society with each other, but it also makes that society tumultuous. Human beings are drawn into society by "an inclination to associate with others, because in society [each person] feels himself to be more than man, i.e., as more than the developed form of his natural capacities."¹⁰ But countering this natural inclination of attraction is a force of repulsion in the form of each person's desire "to have everything according to his own wish." Expecting opposition from all quarters, individuals are forced to overcome their natural slothfulness and develop their talents to the fullest.

Without the regulation of human affairs, human society is impossible, for the unsociable nature of persons will always place the existence of society at risk. The constant quarrelling among different persons, each seeking to have his or her own way, produces a continual disorder that threatens to tear apart the fabric of social life. Consequently, individuals

are eventually forced to submit themselves to public law backed up by irresistible force in order to overcome their perpetual discord and maintain the continued existence of society. This is reinforced by external pressure from other peoples, which makes civil society necessary for mutual self-defense against external aggressors.

Similar forces are at work with respect to different states. Every state exists in a state of nature with every other state. By its very existence, each state constitutes a threat to its neighbors, which must constantly prepare to defend themselves against that threat. Eventually, open warfare amongst neighboring states breaks out. The continual devastation of recurring wars and the bankruptcy generated by constant preparation for war will eventually lead states to the conclusion that they must leave the state of nature prevailing in the international arena and construct political institutions that will rectify that situation. Thus, states will slowly be led to enter into a federation of states from pure self-interest and not from any considerations of right.

The establishment and spread of republicanism serves to strengthen and greatly advance this process, for republican regimes are inherently inclined against war. Further, Kant argues that no state "can neglect its internal cultural development without losing power and influence among the others," a loss that in the prevailing state of nature among states could threaten its very existence. Thus, rulers are forced to reform the governments of their respective states not from good intentions but out of concern for their own survival. These reforms inevitably lead to the organization of existing civil societies in accordance with the principles of right, thus greatly increasing the freedom of individuals with beneficial effects for the entire society. Kant adopts the position of Adam Smith here: the private pursuit of self-interest is coordinated by the invisible hand of the market to produce the greater good of the whole. Any interference with personal freedom would have dire consequences for the strength of the state, for "when the citizen is hindered in seeking his own welfare in his own way, so long as it is consistent with the freedom of others, the vitality of the entire enterprise is sapped, and therewith the powers of the whole are diminished."¹¹ In order to strengthen their economic position, then, existing states will undertake to reform themselves by adopting republican constitutions, the only constitutions that accord with the principles of justice, and republicanism will slowly spread across the face of the Earth.

This, in brief, is the process that Kant expects to lead to world peace, and at no point in his depiction of it does he allow moral motives to enter into his scheme. Since pure practical reason belongs only to noumenal agents, Kant cannot allow himself the liberty of attributing such motives to phenomenal historical agents. Only natural causes, i.e. sensuous motives, are acceptable in the characterization of this historical process.

IV.

Reason possesses no compelling theoretical interest in formulating any conjectures about the direction of history, rather, as we have seen, this interest is derived from practical considerations alone. The teleological conception of history provides us with "a consoling view of the future (which could not be reasonably hoped for without the presupposition of a natural plan),"¹² but we do not derive from it any knowledge of the future course of events, a point Kant makes quite clear in his later writings, to which we now turn.

The application of teleology to history in Kant's essay both anticipates and illustrates the fully-elaborated doctrine of teleology in the *Critique of Judgment*. There, freedom is seen as the supersensible substrate of the sensible world, with teleology uniting the freedom of agents with the mechanism of nature:

Hence an immense gulf is fixed between the domain of the concept of nature, the sensible, and the domain of the concept of freedom, the supersensible, so that no transition from the sensible to the supersensible (and hence by means of the theoretical use of reason) is possible, just as if they were two different worlds, the first of which can not have any influence on the second, and yet the second is to have an influence on the first, i.e., the concept of freedom is to actualize in the world of sense the purpose enjoined by its laws. Hence it must be possible to think of nature as being such that the lawfulness in its form will harmonize with at least the possibility of the purposes that we are to achieve in nature according to laws of freedom. So there must after all be a basis uniting the supersensible that underlies nature and the supersensible that the concept of freedom contains practically, even though the concept of this basis does not reach cognition of it either theoretically or practically and hence does not have a domain of its own, though it does make possible the transition from our way of thinking in terms of principles of nature to our way of thinking in terms of principles of freedom.¹³

The transition from freedom to nature is provided by the concept of the telos or purpose of history. Through this concept, we are provided with no theoretical knowledge, rather, it serves as the basis for a practical faith in the prospects for the success of our historical endeavors, a faith that is necessary for action.

Kant stakes out the same position in *Perpetual Peace*, where he maintains that we possess no theoretical insight into the direction of history for "we do not infer or observe this providence in the cunning contrivances of nature." Such insight would require an understanding of the supersensible that is beyond our reach. Instead, we must supply the design from our own minds, in accordance with the ends specified by practical reason, and "conceive of its possibility by analogy to actions of human art." Thus, while the telos of history "is transcendent from a theoretical point of view, from a practical standpoint, with respect, for example, to the ideal of perpetual peace, the concept is dogmatic and its reality is well established, and thus the mechanism of nature may be employed to that end."¹⁴

Our thinking about the teleology of history, then, is regulated by our need to assume the possibility of the ideas and ends specified by practical reason. Thus, Kant's conception of the telos or direction of history provides us with the hope that our actions will be efficacious in contributing to the slow and gradual evolution towards peaceful coexistence within ideal civil society.

NOTES

1. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1965), p. 310.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 310.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
4. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," in *On History*, ed. by Lewis White Beck, (New York: Macmillan, 1988), p. 11.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 11