

## PROBLEMS IN KANT'S TELEOLOGY OF HISTORY

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For Kant the philosophy of history did not represent of primary concern. He came to it only late in his career, and never produced an extended work on the subject. Rather he set out his opinions in a series of short essays, the most important of which is entitled, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View."<sup>1</sup> Yet among speculative philosophies of history Kant's is of considerable importance, the beginning of a teleological tradition of its own. And what I wish to consider are certain aspects of his teleological arguments regarding history. I will begin by setting out a terminology and general thesis. I will then argue that thesis as it applies to Kant's *Idea*, where my conclusion will be that there is a dualism in Kant's teleology which leads to the state but not to morality, contrary to what he would seem to assert.

In *The Strife of the Faculties* (1778), his last completed work, Kant considers the question of whether the human race is constantly progressing. His answer is in the affirmative, and is based largely on his interpretation of the French Revolution. He states his conclusion without qualification: "The human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth."<sup>2</sup> Obviously this optimistic view of human history is a controversial one, and Kant recognizes two alternative views to his own. He states the three possibilities:

The human race is either in continual retrogression toward wickedness, or in perpetual progression toward improvement in its moral destination, or in eternal stagnation in its present state of moral worth among creatures (a stagnation with which eternal rotation in orbit around the same point is one and the same.)<sup>3</sup>

In this passage Kant has described what have come to be called "linear" and "cyclical" accounts of a *pattern* of historical development. In addition, with his reference to the "moral destination" of the human race, Kant includes a notion of the *purpose* of human development. And finally, in a later passage Kant refers to the "disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance toward the better."<sup>4</sup> Here we find Kant's recognition of an historical *mechanism* causally related to the pattern of human development.

It is around these three varieties of meta-historical theories - those concerning patterns, purposes and mechanisms that speculative philosophies of history have traditionally been organized. The speculative philosopher goes

beyond empirical historical inquiry. He attempts to answer questions about *why* history has been as it has, involving himself in the teleological effort to justify the events of history by demonstrating their necessary relation to some ultimate goal.

Teleologies of history may thus be differentiated according to the nature of the goals involved. The two types I will consider may be termed "moral" and "political" teleologies. In the first type history is treated as a progression toward the goal of moral perfection in man. In the second it represents progress toward the perfect system of social relations - the ideal state. These two goals differ to the extent that we can imagine the fulfillment of one without the other. In particular, unless we take personal morality to be identical with civic virtue we can imagine the existence of an ideal state including at least a minority of morally imperfect citizens.<sup>5</sup> And to that extent arguments in support of a political teleology do not necessarily have force in a moral teleology. I take Kant to be employing theories of pattern, purpose, and mechanism to construct a dual teleology of history, with both moral and political ends. And I will now attempt to distinguish his moral and political positions. Further, I will point out what I take to be his error in assuming moral conclusions to follow from arguments for political teleologies.

In terms of the theories set out above, Kant's philosophy of history can be seen to demonstrate the following characteristics: first, a basically linear pattern of progress toward an ultimate goal; second, the mechanism of human passion isolated as the "mainspring" of the progress toward that goal; third, the identification of the goal as the complete realization of human freedom; and fourth, a dual interpretation of human freedom as manifest in both political institutions and individual moral perfection. He sees the state as the primary locus of historical change, the level at which patterns of development are discernable. And further the goal of history — the realization of human freedom — he describes in terms of an ideal level of personal liberty for individuals in a state. World history, he believes, is the story of the development of the free society.

The relation of the mechanism of human passion to patterns of political development is explained by Kant in terms of the operation of natural causal laws governing human behavior. A primitive natural force internal to man — "unsocial sociability" — is causally responsible for, and made manifest in, the changing structures of social relations. This natural force serves for Kant in the role of Divine Providence secularized. And expressed as natural laws it is rational and perhaps discoverable. Thus with respect to his teleology of political evolution Kant is dealing with a set of rational laws of human behavior susceptible, at least in principle, to empirical confirmation.

But beyond the political teleology Kant postulates a moral one, concerning the pattern of mankind's ascent to moral maturity. This maturity consists

in the total freedom of the morally autonomous person. And it is a goal at this level of species destiny that Kant sees as necessary to justify the drama of world history which is initially so disheartening to him. The destructive, chaotic side of human events apparent in that drama *must* play a part in the plan of Nature, but also must be eventually overcome by man. The changes in political structures must be linked to changes in the species itself, the development of the fully realized, morally rational human being. The moral failures of history require a moral redemption, not merely the coming of political justice or rational civil law. And the question then must be, are there in fact grounds for the optimism of his moral teleology? Or is there rather in this work of Kant an implicit "leap of faith" from the level of the free society to that of the moral perfection of the human species. I believe that statements by Kant in *Idea* as well as in *Critique of Judgment* reveal such a leap. I shall begin my consideration of the question by noting a curious contradiction between those two works, and then go on to look at the various theses of *Idea* in an effort to demonstrate the existence of the teleological dualism I have suggested.

Kant begins *Idea* with the statement:

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.<sup>6</sup>

He next asserts the possibility of discerning a "regular movement" in aggregates of human action, pointing to examples concerning the regularity of marriage rates and the like. In the second paragraph he states that the philosopher, not finding a conscious purpose among men in history, must go on to seek a "natural purpose in the idiotic course of things human."<sup>7</sup> He then closes his introductory remarks with an analogy to the work of Kepler and Newton. He says that we must wait for Nature to produce the man who will discover the natural plan in history, as she produced Kepler, "who subjected . . . the eccentric paths of the planets to definite laws," and Newton, "who explained these laws by a universal natural cause."<sup>8</sup> Up through this point in the essay, then, the reader is clearly led to believe that Kant has in mind the discovery of universal laws in history (like Kepler), and the further reduction of those laws to a single causal principle. The projected approach is an empirical one — a project of the Understanding. What is needed is the "Newton of history" to discover the ultimate causal principle governing human action. Such an interpretation is clearly endorsed by at least one commentator, B.T. Wilkins, in his claim that the passage reveals Kant's essay to be directed to another Newton, who will "explain the laws of history in terms of a 'universal natural cause.'"<sup>9</sup> Yet here we

must notice the obvious disparity between this interpretation and the famous passage from the *Critique of Judgment*:

We may confidently assert that it is absurd for men . . . to hope that maybe another Newton may someday arise, to make intelligible to us even the genesis of but a blade of grass from natural laws that no design has ordered.<sup>10</sup>

This passage appears in the context of Kant's discussion of the regulative employment of teleological explanations of natural phenomena. And it would seem that the weight of evidence is on the side of accepting this statement as the more accurate reflection of Kant's views. It was written after *Idea*, and occurs in the context of a more careful discussion. And further, much of the rest of *Idea* clearly suggests the importance of a teleological explanation of historical events over a causal one. In support of this view we may note at the end of the second paragraph of *Idea* Kant's call for a Newton of the natural *plan* of history. Concentrating on the teleological implications of the term, 'plan', we might view the analogy as moving between the causal and teleological levels of explanation. If we do so, we interpret the "teleological Kepler" as the person who gives teleological accounts of various parts of Nature. And thus the "teleological Newton" describes the purpose of the whole of Nature.<sup>11</sup> While this would make the analogy work, it nevertheless leaves us uncomfortable, I believe, about Kant's initial discussion of determinate laws and the examples of marriage rates and such in the first paragraph. If these mechanistic, causal laws constitute the subject matter for the "Kepler of history" then the work of a "teleological Newton" would fail to bear the same relation to that subject matter as is exhibited in the relation between the actual Kepler and Newton. And the analogy would thus fail.

Thus regarding Kant's introductory remarks to *Idea*, I think we must say that they are at best misleading as to the type of historical account he is proposing. The body of the essay, the nine theses, would seem to make it clear however that his approach is fundamentally a teleological one — built on an idea of Reason, not a concept of the Understanding, and thus regulative rather than constitutive in nature. Either way, however, the explanatory principles involved are assumed to be rational.<sup>12</sup> Let us then consider the nine theses.

In the first three theses<sup>13</sup> Kant asserts his basic teleological principle, that the natural capacities of all creatures develop to their natural ends, *viz.*, movement toward perfection in Nature. Human reason is not an exception, and moves toward its perfection through the life of the human species. The state of rational perfection is not, however, described in detail by Kant. There is movement toward the goal, recognized only as the full development

of the rational capacities of some group of individuals at some point in time. But, in light of the third thesis, it would seem possible that man should exercise his creative reason in such a way as to move away from the goal. If he achieves perfection freely, then he must also be free to choose less than perfection.

In the fourth thesis<sup>14</sup> Kant sets out the mechanism of historical development in the species, "unsocial sociability." This expression refers to the inclinations of men to oppose as well as cooperate with each other — the propensity to group together in societies combined with the propensity to isolation. These conflicting inclinations, manifest in human emotions, act as the "mainspring" of historical progress toward orderly social arrangements. Men must constantly work to fortify and improve society, in that their unsocial propensities are constantly causing social dissolution and disruption. Thus the concept of unsocial sociability plays the role of an explanatory device to account for the birth and continued development of human society. It is, for Kant, part of the nature of man to act in ways which result in the formation, development, and destruction of social units. And as such these inclinations are part of Nature's plan.

In the fifth thesis Kant tells us more about this plan. He states in explaining that thesis:

The highest purpose of Nature, which is the development of all the capacities which can be achieved by mankind, is attainable only in society, and more specifically, in the society with the greatest freedom. . . . Nature demands that humankind should itself achieve this goal like all its other destined goals. Thus a society in which freedom under external laws is associated in the highest degree with irresistible power, i.e., a perfectly just civic constitution, is the highest problem Nature assigns to the human race; for Nature can achieve her other purposes for mankind only on the solution and completion of this assignment.<sup>15</sup>

Here we see an important relation between the political and moral teleologies. But the development of the free society, with its perfect constitution, is but a step on the road to greater achievements by man. That society is the "springboard" from which he moves to the full development of his natural, rational capacities. Now to be sure, those capacities are undergoing development as he works toward a solution of "the highest problem Nature assigns to the human race." But only upon the successful completion of that task can he hope to achieve the highest point of development for which Nature has given him potential. From this standpoint, then, the unsocial sociability of man is a mechanism driving him to create the free society, which society is itself the end of one line of development and the beginning of another. This passage would seem to make it clear that Kant does not

take the perfection of the social order to constitute or signal the full development of man's rational and other capacities. The free society is only one of the steps toward that broader species-goal.

What then does the fifth thesis mean for the structure of Kant's argument? I suggest that it reveals the dualism of his teleology.<sup>16</sup> The central subject of *Idea* is the formation and perfection of the state. But Kant's political teleology is only one part of the suggestion he is making in *Idea* to the philosophical historian. History has traditionally been written in terms of the rise and fall of states. This is the information available, the field in which any historian, philosophical or otherwise, must operate in constructing a "universal history". Yet the development of even the most perfect state cannot justify the spectacle of human misery which has preceded it. Only species perfection, as Kant sees it, can perform this function. Thus the material of the historian, the empirical data available regarding the development of the state, is brought together with its own purposive justification: the perfection of the state is made a "sub-plot" in the larger drama of the perfection of man himself.

Correspondingly, the mechanism of unsocial sociability has a dual role. It is part of the larger moral teleology, but is also a heuristic concept giving clues to a body of causal laws at the political level. The teleology of the state is such that it may "give way" to mechanistic explanation. The goals of the free society and the perfect civic constitution act as heuristic devices to promote insight into causal relations between historical events, seen initially "as if" they were leading toward those goals.<sup>17</sup> And it is only with this interpretation, I believe, that we can convincingly relate the opening remarks of the essay regarding mechanistic explanation with the following nine teleological theses. The actions of men, the appearances of will, are subject to natural causal laws. These laws are exhibited at the group level, in the area of societal formation and development, and are a function of the mechanism of unsocial sociability. That part of man's nature was instituted by Nature and is part of her plan, causally operative in history in ways that are in principle discoverable.

In the explanation of the seventh thesis there are several remarks which give further support to the notion that Kant has in mind a dual goal of the sort I have outlined. He says:

Until this last step to a union of states is taken, which is the halfway mark in the development of mankind, human nature must suffer the cruelest hardships under the guise of external well-being.<sup>18</sup>

The context would indicate that this "last step" refers to the formation of a union of states. From the wording of the seventh thesis itself<sup>19</sup> we might be led to believe that such a union is the halfway point in the development

of the perfect civic constitution. But in that case what sense does it make to describe it as the *last* step? I would propose, instead, that Kant is suggesting that the formation of a union of states is the last step in the political development of man, halfway to the point of moral perfection in the species. He says in the next paragraph that indeed we are civilized, "but to consider ourselves as having reached *morality* - for that, much is lacking."<sup>20</sup> And shortly thereafter he goes on to state that "everything good that is not based on a morally good disposition, however, is nothing but pretense and glittering misery."<sup>21</sup> Presumably this indictment would include the international union of states and the perfect civic constitution.

In his remarks cited above, as well as in the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant reveals his moral teleology. It is a teleology which does not give way to causal explanation. It is the teleology of faith, access to which Kant has denied to the Understanding. The goal of the morally autonomous man, then, is one which is beyond the scope of Nature's direct control. Man cannot be made to be free in this ultimate sense. In the eighth thesis of *Idea* Kant states that history can be viewed as the realization of Nature's plan to "bring forth a perfectly constituted state as the only condition in which the capacities of mankind can be fully developed."<sup>22</sup> And here we come to the crux of the argument. Has Kant shown that the existence of the free society and union of societies is a condition of man's complete moral maturity? Can the political teleology rightly be considered a subsection of the moral teleology? Or are the two in fact separate systems of patterns, purposes and mechanisms? As we have seen, the connecting link between the two is clearly to be found in the mechanism of unsocial sociability. Not only does this tendency (or better, set of tendencies) bring men together in society, but combined with intelligence it brings them to the realization of the necessity of each person's respect for the freedom of others. Yet this brings man only to the point of an intelligent utilitarianism. He becomes prudent, but not necessarily moral. Kant does not claim the development of the free society to be a sufficient condition of the moral perfection of the species; and further, there would seem to be no successful argument for the claim that it is a necessary condition. E. L. Fackenheim reaches essentially the same conclusion when he states that Kant is ultimately forced to the position that "history, despite whatever progress it may exhibit, is merely 'glittering misery,' 'fact without value.'" Kant does not succeed in justifying history as the progression toward moral man. The moral teleology does not include as a necessary element the political. Kant refers to both as parts of Nature's plan, but only the political is under Nature's control. Regarding the ultimate development of his species to moral freedom, man is on his own.<sup>24</sup>

## NOTES

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1. Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View," trans. by L.W. Beck in *Kant on History*, ed. by L.W. Beck (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 11-26. References to this work will be abbreviated in the text as *Idea*. References to works of Kant will include in parentheses page numbers from the standard edition by the *Königliche Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1902-38).

2. Immanuel Kant, *The Strife of the Faculties*, Part II, "An Old Question Raised Again: Is the Human Race Constantly Progressing?" trans. by R. E. Anchor in *Kant on History*, p. 148 (AK 88).

3. *Strife of the Faculties*, p. 139 (AK 81).

4. *Strife of the Faculties*, p. 142 (AK 84). For a contemporary discussion of the concepts of pattern, purpose and mechanism, see William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1964), pp. 61-66.

5. This would seem to be a very real possibility in the Kantian account. For a development of the point see: William A. Galston, *Kant and the Problem of History* (Chicago: U. of Chicago Press, 1975). Galston comments that: "Precisely because justice universalizes actions rather than intentions, it emerges that certain actions can be both immoral and just." p. 201.

6. *Idea*, p. 11 (AK 17).

7. *Idea*, p. 12 (AK 18).

8. *Idea*, p. 12 (AK 18).

9. Burleigh T. Wilkins, "Teleology in Kant's Philosophy of History," *History and Theory*, Vol. V, No. 2 (1966), p. 54.

10. Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. by J.C. Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), Pt. 2, p. 54 (AK 400).

11. Later in *Idea* (P. 20 {AK 25}) Kant asks: "Is it reasonable to assume a purposiveness in all parts of Nature and to deny it to the whole?" He answers that it is not.

12. The principles are rational, but not necessarily obvious in their direct causal operation. The force of the passage from the *Critique of Judgment* thus concerns the proper method of approach to the study of Nature. Kant's teleological approach in *Idea* should not be taken as a denial of the possibility of historical explanation via causal laws at some level.

13. *Idea*, pp. 12-14 (AK 18-21).

14. *Idea*, p. 15 (AK 20).

15. *Idea*, p. 16 (AK 22).

16. For a parallel distinction between the natural and the moral see: H. J. Paton, *The Categorical Imperative*, 3rd ed., (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1958), p. 191.

17. S. Korner makes the point when he states: "The teleological method . . . has also an important heuristic use within the field of mechanistic and, perhaps more generally, nonteleological science. The question for what purpose a thing exists and the teleological answer to it may indeed suggest new mechanistic explanations." *Kant*, (London: Penguin Books, 1955), p.209.

18. *Idea*, p. 21 (AK 26).

19. "The problem of establishing a perfect civic constitution is dependent upon the problem of a lawful external relation among states and cannot be solved without a solution of the latter problem." *Idea*, p. 18 (AK 24).

20. *Idea*, p. 21 (AK 26).

21. *Idea*, p. 21 (AK 26).

22. *Idea*, p. 21 (AK 27).

23. Emil L. Fackenheim, "Kant's Concept of History," *Kant-Studien*, XLVIII (1957) p. 397. Fackenheim states further that: "Kant requires teleology in history, not in order to explain historical facts, but in order to show that they have value. But if this cannot be shown — and only a necessary link between history and morality could show it — then the entire enterprise lies in shambles." pp. 397-98.

24. Galston remarks that: "There is, in short, a gulf between institutional progress and moral progress, between legality (doing what the moral law prescribes) and morality (acting in the right spirit or for the right reasons). Institutional progress goes hand in hand with scientific and technical enlightenment but at its completion results only in a situation that is necessary but not sufficient for moral progress." (p. 240) Here Galston is reporting Kant's position but not endorsing it. For on the next page he asserts that Kant's analysis "implies that the enlightenment that produces institutional progress and eventually peace actually leads to moral regression." (p. 241) I am not sure about the warrant for this strong claim, but I would agree with the implicit denial of the relation of necessary condition between the moral and the political.