



UNIVERSITY OF
OXFORD

DEPARTMENT FOR
CONTINUING EDUCATION

Philosophy of History

Week 2: Kant's universal history

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two questions

- theoretical question: is a 'universal history' possible?
- practical question: are our practical goals, our moral goals, realizable in history?

Kant's answer

- a universal history is possible insofar as we conceive of history as the domain in which progress is made towards realizing our practical/moral goals
- progress – towards a goal, end, aim or purpose; a *telos* (*Zweck* or *Absicht*) – hence *teleological*

teleology – three initial points

1. Does progress entail teleology?
2. Does teleology entail intentional agency?
3. *Telos* – not necessarily a *temporal* end; for Kant, progress is infinite (asymptotic).

teleological explanation

1. organic entities (organization / behaviour)
2. rational beings, who act to achieve their ends

'Introduction'

- 'Since human beings in their endeavours do not behave merely instinctively, like animals, and yet also not on the whole like rational citizens of the world in accordance with an agreed upon plan, no history of them in conformity to a plan (as e.g. of bees or of beavers) appears to be possible.'

'Introduction'

- 'everything in the large is woven together out of folly, childish vanity, often also out of childish malice and the rage to destruction'
- 'indignation [...] despite the wisdom appearing now and then in individual cases [...] in the end one does not know what concept to make of our species, with its smug imaginings about its excellences.'

‘Introduction’

- ‘Here there is no other way out for the philosopher – who, regarding human beings and their play in the large, cannot at all presuppose any rational aim of theirs – than to try whether he can discover an aim of nature in this nonsensical course of things human.’
- ‘Nature’s aim/intention /plan [*Naturabsicht*]

First Proposition

- ‘All natural predispositions of a creature are determined sometime to develop themselves completely and purposively. With all animals, external as well as internal or analytical observation confirms this. An organ that is not to be used, an arrangement that does not attain to its end, is a contradiction in the teleological doctrine of nature.’

- Universal history - the application of *natural* teleology to *rational* beings
- If human beings are historical because they are rational, why doesn't their history display tranquil and orderly progression?

reason and human historicity

1. the *application* of reason to specific tasks
2. the *development* of reason as a faculty

Reason as natural: human historicity results originally not from the fact that human beings are rational but from the fact that they have the capacity to become rational.

the two 'ideas'

1. from *natural teleology*: the idea of the full development of the capacities of the species;
2. from *rational teleology*: the idea of members of the species coming to be rational world citizens whereby the species acts as a collective agent.

Historical teleology

- Human beings have a genuinely historical existence (due to both the development and the application of reason).
- Human beings will come to have a plan of their own (and thereby move beyond being the unwitting tools of nature's plan).

‘unsocial sociability’

‘The means nature employs in order to bring about the development of all their predispositions is their antagonism in society, insofar as the latter is in the end the cause of their lawful order. Here I understand by ‘antagonism’ the unsociable sociability of human beings, i.e. their propensity to enter into society, which, however, is combined with a thoroughgoing resistance that constantly threatens to break up this society.’ (Fourth Proposition)

- ‘out of such crooked wood as the human being is made, nothing entirely straight can be fabricated’ (Sixth Proposition)
- ‘a civil society universally administering right’ (Fifth Proposition)

realization of the two 'ideas'

- 'One can regard the history of the human species in the large as the completion of a hidden plan of nature to bring about [...] [a] perfect state constitution, as the only condition in which it can fully develop all its predispositions in humanity.' (Eighth Proposition)

'enlightenment'

- special progressive potential of the present
 - 'thus *enlightenment* gradually arises' (Eighth Proposition)
- progressive dynamic of history as a whole
 - 'immense series of generations, each of which transmits its enlightenment to the next' (Second Proposition)

'enlightenment'

- 'If it is now asked whether we at present live in an *enlightened* age, the answer is No, but we do live in an age of *enlightenment*'
 - 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', also 1784

chiliasm [millenarianism]

- ‘philosophy can also have its *chiliasm*; but one the bringing about of which is promoted by the very idea of it, though only from afar, so that it is anything but enthusiastic’ (Eighth Proposition)
- ‘philosophical chiliasm, which hopes for a state of perpetual peace based upon a federation of nations united in a world republic’ (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 6:34)

'chronological unfairness'?

Kant's response:

1. Theoretical gain
2. This 'strange' quality a thing of the past
3. Progress reassures us that our moral efforts are not futile

Ninth Proposition

- ‘[...] a consoling prospect into the future (which without a plan of nature one cannot hope for with any ground), in which the human species is represented in the remote distance as finally working itself upward toward the condition in which all germs nature has placed in it can be fully developed and its vocation here on earth can be fulfilled. Such a *justification* of nature – or better, of *providence* – is no unimportant motive for choosing a particular viewpoint for considering the world.’