

KANT, HISTORY, AND THE IDEA OF MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Pauline Kleingeld

Immanuel Kant defends a teleological view of history. While granting that knowledge of the general direction of history as a whole is impossible, he argues that we do have reason to assume, as a regulative principle, that history is characterized by the development of the rational potential of humankind. On his view, this rational development manifests itself in progress not only in the arts and sciences, but also in politics, education, religion, and morality. Moral development is to culminate in the "moralization" of humanity and the transformation of society into a "moral whole."¹

The fact that Kant attributes only regulative status to this view, however, does not absolve him from the exigencies of conceptual consistency. Indeed, despite its weak epistemic status, Kant's philosophy of history has been criticized as incompatible with central tenets of his moral theory. To many commentators, the very idea of moral development has seemed inconsistent with some or all of the following basic Kantian tenets. First, his notion of rational development has been said to be incompatible with his claim that the moral law is unconditionally and hence universally valid (the *universal validity problem*). Second, his notion of rational development, especially the notion of 'moralization', seems to run counter to his thesis that moral agency is noumenal and hence atemporal (the *atemporality problem*). Finally, the notion of moral progress seems to contradict the dignity and moral equality of all humans by declaring some 'freer' than others (the *moral equality problem*).

Although few philosophers today share Kant's view of history, the attempt to answer these charges should not be regarded as a matter of purely historical interest. If these charges cannot be answered, they jeopardize the coherence not only of Kant's philosophy of history, but of his moral theory as well. Two imperatives

central to Kant's moral theory are the moral command to strive for one's own perfection, and the command to promote the highest good, which Kant calls a 'moral world' (C1, A808-819/B836-847), 'humanity under moral laws' (C3 V, 448f.), and an 'ethical commonwealth' (Rel VI, 131). These moral imperatives must be regarded as incoherent if Kant's notions of rational development and moral progress contradict the universal validity of the moral law, the atemporality of moral agency, and the moral equality of all humans.² After all, striving for a moral world is striving for moral progress. If the notions of moral progress and rational development lead to problems of *conceptual* inconsistency, then they are problematic regardless of whether Kant speaks of the reality or the possibility of such development and progress.

In this paper, I argue that the charges of inconsistency stem largely from an insufficient understanding of Kant's model of rational development. Taking the universal validity problem as a point of departure, I start by examining what the 'predispositions for the use of reason' consist in and how Kant thinks they develop over the course of history. I then explain how this account allows us to solve the two other problems. I end with a discussion of Kant's reasons for assuming that there is historical progress.

It is not my aim here to fully vindicate Kant's philosophy of history. In fact, Kant's pre-Darwinistic teleological model is outdated. Furthermore, the assumption that human behavior is gradually becoming more moral has lost the empirical plausibility Kant still thought it had. But the question of whether Kant can consistently conceive of rational progress at all is more fundamental than the discussion of his specific view of history, and it is this more fundamental question that is at issue here.

For the sake of argumentative focus, I concentrate on the notion of rational, especially moral development as such and abstract from most of the details of Kant's view of history. Let me just highlight some of the most important features of the latter here, in order to provide a background for the discussion in the following sections.³ The main ingredient of Kant's regulative "idea" of history is the view that nature (both physical and psychological) occasions humans to use their reason and exercise their freedom of will. As a result, humans develop their rational predispositions, which leads to progress in all areas in which reason is employed, from science to politics to morality and religion.

This developmental process is not a smooth one. On Kant's view, humans have a peculiar psychological characteristic, which he calls

"unsocial sociability." This is a mixed inclination to social interaction *and* to isolation and conflict. The resulting social antagonism leads to consequences that are so harmful that people will leave the state of nature for self-interested reasons and create a state that will regulate their interaction according to laws. The same dynamics of self-interest, in turn, will lead states to wage war at first, but later pursue an international federation to bring about peace.

Peace, both within and between states, is the condition under which the predispositions of humanity can be further developed, because peace provides a more hospitable environment for enlightenment and moral education than does war. On Kant's view, once moral education is improved and enlightenment takes hold of the broad population, the peace that was established out of self-interest and remained fragile because of that basis will finally be endorsed for moral reasons and thereby made durable. Thus, as a result of the unsocial sociability,

all talents are gradually developed, taste is formed, and by continued enlightenment a beginning is made with the foundation of a way of thinking that will over time transform the crude natural predisposition for moral discernment into determinate practical principles, and that will thus be able finally to transform a pathologically-coerced agreement to a society into a moral whole. (Idea VIII, 21)

Thus, rational development is ultimately to culminate in the self-transformation of society into a moral community.⁴

Kant sees his teleological view of history confirmed (not proven) by the facts. He lists the "constant growth in civil liberty" (Idea VIII, 27), the "regular process of constitutional improvement in our part of the world" since the Greeks (Idea VIII, 29), and calls Frederick the Great the first monarch who "emancipated the human race from tutelage" (WE VIII, 40). He thinks that his own critical philosophy has finally turned metaphysics onto the path of a progressive science and formulated the true principle of morality. As for religion, he calls the current era "the best" in history, and declares that the public sphere is now enlightened about the principles of true religious faith, and that we may expect "a continuous approximation to the church that will unite all humans forever, and which is the visible representation of an invisible kingdom of God on earth" (Rel VI, 131-2). New Socratic pedagogical methods have been developed, and once these become widely used, "human morality should soon be doing better" (TP VIII, 288). Already, Kant thinks that "in our era, in comparison with all previous

ones, the human race has truly progressed considerably even morally towards the better" (TP VIII, 310).

This account of some of the central tenets of Kant's view of history should suffice for now. As they become relevant, other details of Kant's philosophy of history will emerge below.

I. RATIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE UNIVERSAL VALIDITY PROBLEM

Situating him close to Hegel, some commentators have suggested that Kant took the view that "reason is historicized,"⁵ meaning that reason itself develops over time. Yirmiyahu Yovel, the main defender of this interpretation, also thinks this view is "untenable" within Kant's philosophical framework.⁶ It is easy to see why. If reason itself were to change in any significant way, the moral law would change too, since it is the fundamental principle of practical reason. Such a view, however, can be defended by Hegel, but not by Kant. Hegel defends a view of history along such lines, arguing that history includes a dialectical development of different forms of "ethical life." For Hegel, Kantian 'morality' with its emphasis on rational, universally valid principles, is but a stage in this process, albeit a high one. But for Kant, who argues that the moral law is universally normatively valid—at all times, in all places, for every rational being—it is impossible to allow for different moral principles and forms of 'ethical life' being justified at different stages in history. According to Kant, there is only one moral principle, and "unless we wish to deny to the concept of morality all truth . . . we cannot dispute that its law is of such widespread significance as to hold, not merely for human beings, but for all rational beings as such—not merely subject to contingent conditions and exceptions, but with absolute necessity" (Gr IV, 408). So it seems that Kant cannot consistently defend the notion of rational development without giving up the universal validity of the moral law.

I shall argue that the universal validity problem can be solved. On Kant's view, it is not reason that develops, but rather the *predispositions for the use of reason*. In order to adequately understand how this distinction between reason and the predispositions for its use provides the key to solving the universal validity problem, I start by examining his notion of a development of rational predispositions [Anlagen].

Kant generally distinguishes three modes of the use of reason, with three corresponding predispositions: the technical, pragmatic, and moral employments of reason. The telos of the development of

the predispositions for these uses of reason is, respectively, skill [Geschicklichkeit], prudence [Klugheit], and morality. The process of their development is called 'cultivation', 'civilisation,' and 'moral education' [moralische Bildung] or 'moralisation'.⁷

On Kant's view, all predispositions [Anlagen] in an organism are destined to develop fully some day. The human predispositions for the use of reason "develop" just as others do, except that their development takes longer. Unlike physical predispositions, which can in principle be developed during the life of an individual, rational predispositions require countless generations for their full development. According to Kant, they can be completely developed only by the species, not the individual (Idea VIII, 18).

The general description of development as a teleological process does not yet determine how exactly this process should be conceived. Development can be conceived either as growth and strengthening, or as the continuous emergence of new organic structures, or any combination of these two.⁸ In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant takes the first view. He says that the growth of an organism occurs "not by the addition of a new member, but by the rendering of each member, without change of proportion, stronger and more effective for its purposes" (A833/B861). Especially the phrase "without change of proportion" suggests that all essential elements are already in place at the start.

If development consists in nothing but growth and strengthening, this has important implications for the application of the concept of development to the predispositions for the moral use of reason. For then Kant can defend not a Hegelian view of historical development, but the view that our capacities of judging and acting morally, which are always already present in an unrefined form, are gradually improved and strengthened.

And this is indeed what we find in his texts on history. In the "Idea for a Universal History," Kant attributes to the humans in the earliest stages of history not a different, but a rough or "crude," uncultivated predisposition for moral discernment (Idea VIII, 21). In "Conjectural Beginnings of Human History," he similarly claims that at the beginning of history, humans understood, "although only dimly," that they ought to regard their fellow humans as ends (CB VIII, 114, cp. also Anth VII, 324; C3 V, 458).

This is not to say that they also have a correct reflexive grasp of the principle of morality. Although Kant thinks that ordinary people throughout history have had an unrefined but basically good sense

of moral obligation, he also holds that the history of the theoretical attempts by theologians and philosophers to formulate the exact principle and foundation of morality is filled with errors (Gr IV, 403-4, 441).

If Kant conceives of rational development as the strengthening and improvement of rational faculties that are the same for all humans, his developmental theory can be squared with the universal validity of the moral law. He thinks that even the earliest humans had a consciousness of moral obligation that was less refined than but structurally similar to that of later generations. On the premise that all humans have a moral consciousness that is structurally similar, Kant's analysis of the consciousness of moral obligation in the *Critique of Practical Reason* applies to all humans equally, regardless of their developmental level.

II. DEVELOPMENT AND THE MORAL EQUALITY PROBLEM

Although Kant does not think that reason itself changes, one might still think that his moral theory is compromised by the view that the rational *predispositions* of humans are said to *change*. If they did, earlier generations might seem to be less fully human than later ones. For even if all humans are capable of acting morally, the development of predispositions would seem to imply that they are not *equally* capable. But if this were the case, it would threaten human moral equality. If humans are not all equally capable of acting morally, they cannot all have equal moral standing.

In fact, Kant holds just this sort of view when he compares men and women.⁹ He regards women as an anomalous kind of human being whose moral predisposition never fully develops, and whose perpetual immaturity justifies a permanent condition of tutelage. His arguments for women's inequality are in flagrant contradiction to his general theory about "humans," however, and they are notoriously weak. For current purposes, the question is whether he holds a similarly problematic nonegalitarian view about earlier generations.

This question leads us to Kant's theory of biological inheritance. Because if the 'development of predispositions of the species' [Anlagen der Gattung] means that humans of different eras have *different predispositions*, this would imply a difference in their moral status. For if some generations *enter* the world with more highly developed moral faculties than others, this would seem to imply that some are better able to recognize and obey the moral command than others. As we shall see, however, Kant has a biological

theory on which it is possible to say that humans of all eras¹⁰ can be said to share the exact same predispositions.

Kant defends the theory of *generic preformation* (or 'epigenesis theory'). Assuming the view that life emerges out of lifeless matter is "contrary to reason,"¹¹ and rejecting occasionalism and individual preformationism for giving too great a role to God,¹² Kant opts for the view that God merely "preformed" the *species* of organisms when he created the world, giving each its predispositions, which subsequently allow them to develop and reproduce on their own (C3 V, 424). Thus, God's "original organizing" activity does not extend to each and every individual organism, but only to the first exemplars of each species. After creation, nature does everything itself.

Kant also thinks that after creation the essential predispositions with which members of a species are born do not change. External influences can modify the development of individuals and explain differences between exemplars of the same species, but they cannot produce a change in heritable essential qualities. The essential predispositions given to each species at creation are all inherited.¹³

Although he sometimes allows for an advance in development of a predisposition to be transmitted biologically to later generations, Kant does not think this is the case for the rational predispositions. With regard to human skin color, he hypothesizes that later generations are born in a further developed state. He defends the hypothesis that there once was a root species [Stammgattung] which had undeveloped predispositions for different skin colors. After humans spread out over the face of the earth, this predisposition developed in accordance with the demands posed by the different climates, leading to increasingly different skin tones.¹⁴ He is clearly committed here to a multi-generational process of development, the results of which are inherited. With regard to the human rational faculties, however, Kant does not conceive of development in this way. He motivates this simply by referring to the fact that empirical evidence does not support such a view (CB VIII, 110f.). Later generations do not enter this world in a state in which they have developed their ability to use reason any further than previous ones.

The upshot of this is that humans of all eras enter the world with the exact same rational predispositions. This conclusion has clear advantages in light of Kant's moral theory, and that may have been another reason why he endorses it. Had he conceived of the development of rational predispositions on analogy with the purported development of skin color, he would have had to regard

humans of different eras (and perhaps humans of different cultures, or some other difference in moral 'environment' analogous to climate) as having increasingly different moral potential.

III. DEVELOPMENT AS A LEARNING PROCESS

Given Kant's view that these predispositions themselves do not change over the course of generations, the question arises: What does it mean to say that they develop over time? If later generations do not come into the world in a further developed state, how does the development of the rational predispositions take place?

Kant argues that the development of human rational faculties is a *learning process*. The results of this process are transmitted to the next generations not biologically, but educationally, mediated through pedagogy as well as through social and cultural institutions. Every individual, and every generation "[starts] again from its ABCs and must again move through the entire distance which had already been covered" (CB VIII, 117 n., cp. Anth VII, 325f.). Although it is not literally true that they have to take all the steps taken before, later individuals need to appropriate the skills and knowledge acquired by previous generations. Only then are they in a position to add a step.¹⁵

In this historical process, humans learn, for instance, how to defend themselves against natural dangers. They also learn that it is mutually advantageous to subject themselves to laws, nationally and internationally. Kant suggests, as a prospect for the future, that once there is peace, even if it is brought about by mere self-interest, people can and will channel the energies that went into warfare to better causes, which will lead to further rational development. Thus, he claims that peace is a precondition for the *full* development of *all* human predispositions (Idea VIII, 22, 25).

Education plays a crucial role here. Education develops in history, too, which gives the historical learning process a cumulative and self-reinforcing quality. In his *Lectures on Pedagogy* and in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant claims that the Enlightenment has produced, for the first time in history, pedagogical methods that encourage children to think for themselves and be morally autonomous. The older, authoritarian methods aim at producing blind obedience, leading mainly to behavior that is guided by the inclination to avoid punishment and earn rewards. The new methods take a Socratic, maieutic approach, and Kant develops his own version in the Doctrine of Method of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.

Teachers cannot *cause* pupils to choose a moral disposition, of course, but they can do much to help them feel their own worth and recognize what duty demands. Then pupils become aware of their own moral vocation and this "gives [the pupil's] mind a power, unexpected even by himself, to pull himself loose from all sensuous attachments" and act morally (C2 V, 152). Kant considers this new pedagogical method the key to moral progress (Ped IX, 441, 444; C2 V, 153; cp. also TP VIII, 288). Given peace, freedom, and improved moral education, the preconditions are there for humans to transform society from a merely legal order, initially established on the basis of inclinations, into a 'moral whole.' Kant does not claim this ideal state will ever be fully realized, but he does argue that it can be approximated.

Kant's assessment of the situation in his own era is expressed in the "Idea for a Universal History" as follows: "We are *cultivated* to a high degree by art and science. We are *civilized* to the point of excess [bis zum Überlästigen] for all kinds of social courtesies and proprieties. But for us to consider ourselves *moralized* very much is still lacking" (VIII, 26; cp., Ped IX, 451). Yet some moral progress has been made, and in later essays he claims that humankind has already progressed through several stages of morality [Stufen der Sittlichkeit] and even that "our era" is morally superior to all previous ones (TP, VIII 310; End VIII, 332). His belief in the power of good education plays a large role in this optimism.

But Kant's characterization of history as a learning process leads to two new questions. The first is whether this characterization can be reconciled with the timelessness of noumenal agency (the atemporality problem). The second question is whether the conception of history as a learning process does not lead to another version of the equality problem. I start with the first question.

IV. MORAL LEARNING AND THE ATEMPORALITY PROBLEM

Some authors have argued that Kant's conception of history as a learning process does not solve the tension between his moral philosophy and his philosophy of history. Michel Despland has formulated the charge as follows:

[R]eason, autonomy, and morality are presented in the philosophy of history as arising within a process, whereas the laws of the practical employment of reason, or the laws of morality, are deduced transcendently in the second Critique and are found a priori; it is thereby implied that they are above the time process and are "eternally valid" . . . The philosophy of history . . . undermines the

distinction between objectively practical and subjectively practical. The philosophy of history shows how the "objective" moral law was "subjectively" learned by the race, or by some in it, only at some point in the process of history. . . . But this standpoint in the philosophy of history makes of morality something embedded in the historical process, related to, say, historical experience . . . and this cannot but appear to be in tension with the rather timeless standpoint of the *Critique of Practical Reason*.¹⁶

According to Despland, Kant cannot have it both ways: morality cannot be both valid a priori and the result of a historical learning process.

If formulated in this way, however, the tension between the "timeless" and the "historical" can easily be dissolved. The case for a purported contradiction rests on a failure to distinguish adequately between the *creation* and the *discovery* of a moral principle. In saying that history is a learning process in which a crude capacity for moral discernment develops into a refined one, Kant is not claiming that the moral demands are *created* at a point in time, but rather that they gradually come to be *fully understood*. This is a plausible distinction to draw. The fact that one does not immediately fully understand something but has to learn it does not mean that it was not true or valid before one learned it. Similarly, the fact that a clear understanding of morality as autonomy is the result of a long historical learning process is not by itself incompatible with the absolute and timeless validity of the moral law. For Kant, the normative validity of the moral law does not depend on its being subjectively recognized as such. Conversely, what is objectively valid does not become less so if it is (subjectively) learned to be so only at a certain point in time. Thus, Kant's philosophy of history does not blur the distinction between 'objective' and 'subjective'.

Kant makes this point himself in a different context, namely, in a discussion of the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment*. He says: "The fact that [a judgment of the sublime] requires culture does not imply that it is generated by culture and introduced into society, say, by mere convention" (vgl. C3 V, 265). Similarly, the fact that moral judgment requires some historical development ('culture') does not imply that it is generated by this process and introduced into society by mere convention. Instead, on Kant's view, it is grounded in reason.

A parallel remark can be made with regard to Kant's own philosophical project. Kant situates his own philosophical project historically as the product of a long development (e.g., C1 A852-856/B880-884 and the essay "Toward Perpetual Peace in

Philosophy"). He claims that his transcendental philosophy definitively explicates principles of which people had always already had a vague awareness. But by formulating the true principle of morality in a philosophically rigorous way for the first time in history—Kant claims no less than this—he does not turn morality into something contingent and something “introduced merely by way of convention.” In the second *Critique*, for example, Kant insists that he is not presenting an entirely new principle of morality. Instead, he compares his derivation of the categorical imperative to a mathematician’s derivation of a formula (C2 V, 8 n.). For Kant, unlike Hegel, it is not morality which needs to go through a historical process, but our understanding of it.

These considerations not only make it possible to answer Despland’s objection, but they also show that Kant should not be interpreted as merely wanting to develop a moral principle “for his own time,” as Allen Wood might be taken to suggest. Wood claims that “[t]here is nothing ahistorical about Kantian ethics. It has a historically situated understanding of itself, and is addressed to the specific cultural needs of its own age.”¹⁷ Clearly Wood is right that Kant has a historically situated understanding of his own project. But he can hardly mean to say that Kant makes morality historically relative, since that would go both against Kant’s claim that the moral law is unconditionally valid and against Wood’s own insightful interpretations of Kant’s work. But if Kant’s claim of unconditional validity is to be taken seriously, we must acknowledge that there is *something* ahistorical about Kant’s philosophy of history.

By elevating the absolute validity of the moral principle above historical contingency, Kant gives his philosophy of history an ahistoric core. The moral principle does not come into existence at a certain time—in that sense it is indeed timeless. It ‘merely’ becomes clearer over time. It was and has always been objectively valid, since it is grounded in reason, but it is only gradually subjectively acknowledged and understood as such.

Kant’s claim of the absolute validity of the moral law is of course highly contested in the current philosophical debate. For present purposes, however, the main point is that this claim is compatible with the notion of moral development, as long as one conceives of this development as a learning process.

V. MORALIZATION AND THE TIMELESSNESS OF NOUMENAL AGENCY

Someone might now object that the argument in section four applies only to the development of *insight* into what is morally demanded, but that the real problems start with Kant's claim that there is an increase in *moral behavior*. Kant rarely discusses this type of progress. He is in fact better known for seeking to dampen the feeling of moral superiority of his contemporaries, by invoking, for example, the somber diagnosis of the "cool-headed observer" at the beginning of the second part of the *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals* (Gr IV 407). But as we saw in section three, Kant certainly holds out the prospect of moral progress for the future, and he sometimes even suggests that some progress has already been made.

This notion of moral progress conjures up a whole series of questions related to the fact that, in his discussion of the third Antinomy in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant argues that moral agency is noumenal, and thus not only timeless but also unknowable. That seems to make his assertion that humans' capacity and resolve to act morally increase over time doubly problematic. Because an agent's moral disposition [Gesinnung] is noumenal, insight into any improvements in its quality is impossible. And because this disposition is noumenal, it is timeless, which would seem to make it meaningless to speak of it as undergoing change in history. Thus, the third Antinomy would seem to forbid Kant from speaking of an increase in moral behavior.

But Kant does indicate a way in which we can think and speak about dispositions. First, he does not claim the status of knowledge for his assertion about increasing morality. Many of his texts on history start with the claim that we cannot obtain knowledge of the course of history as a whole (e.g., TP VIII, 307-8; CF VII 83). And in the introduction to the "Idea for a Universal History" he makes it clear that his view on progress should be understood as a regulative idea for heuristic purposes. Even after having shown examples that would seem to confirm his view of history, he claims that the idea is "useful," not that it is true (Idea VIII, 29).¹⁸

Moreover, in the first Critique, he explains that although we cannot know the character of an agent's noumenal disposition, we nevertheless have to "think" it as being "in accordance with" the empirical character of the agent. And we conceive of the empirical character on the basis of the agent's actions (C1 A540/B568). This move from the empirical to the noumenal level—in thought, not knowledge—is what underlies our very practice of moral blame and

praise. For if I blame someone else for immoral behavior, all I have to go on are this person's actions as appearances. Kant's statements about moral improvement in history can be similarly interpreted as referring merely to how we conceive of the disposition of future generations, on the basis of given or even expected appearing actions.¹⁹

At a deeper level, Kant's notion of moral improvement faces another problem, namely, how to even 'think' a change in a timeless moral character. The very concept of change seems to imply temporality. Kant himself acknowledges that the possibility of noumenal change is indeed incomprehensible. But, he says, for moral purposes we have to regard it as possible (e.g., *Rel VI*, 44-53). Here he falls back on his argument that nothing can be known about the noumenal character, and he assumes that if nothing can be known about it, there is no reason to rule out the possibility of moral improvement, even if our cognitive powers are inadequate to grasp it.

VI. THE EQUALITY PROBLEM REVISITED

Perhaps the most frequently leveled criticism against Kant's philosophy of history is that the notion of moral improvement conflicts with the idea of the equality and dignity of all human beings. Emil Fackenheim has criticized Kant for making "the free achievements of some [the] means to the freer achievements of others."²⁰ He sees a twofold problem for moral equality. First, if Kant says that humans gradually become more free in the course of history and that earlier generations transmit their insight to later ones, he is forced to qualify the concept of freedom historically. But this is inconsistent with Kant's calling every human agent free without qualification. Second, since earlier generations pass their insight on to later ones without themselves being fully able to act morally, this reduces earlier generations to mere means to progress from which later generations profit.²¹

The merits of Fackenheim's objection depend crucially on whether the notion of moral progress entails that we should regard agents of the past as less free. But Kant denies this. As we saw in section two, even early humans are said to be fully free, to have the ability to act morally, and to have a generally correct sense of right and wrong.

But this answer seems to trade one version of the moral equality problem for another. For the notion of moral progress, in combination with the claim that past generations were no less free than more developed ones, commits Kant to saying that earlier generations are more morally blameworthy than later ones. This is simply

implied in his talk of moral progress. But later generations do profit from the achievements of earlier ones. Because history is a learning process, clearer moral insight and improved moral education enable later generations to lead more virtuous lives than earlier ones. Therefore, someone might wish to reformulate Fackenheim's objection and charge that it is *unfair* morally to condemn earlier generations who do not have this educational advantage and who cannot help falling short in comparison to later ones.

It should be pointed out that if this objection poses a problem for Kant, it is not a problem specific to his philosophy of history, but one inherent to the very idea that good moral education can be effective and lead recipients to improve their moral disposition. The objection would apply equally to any comparison of, say, two individuals living in eighteenth-century Königsberg, one of whom is raised by an excellent, Kantian, maieutic pedagogue, while the other is raised in a climate of religious superstition and moral authoritarianism. If, partly as a result of the good education, the first is able to achieve a better character, we would face the exact same issue of whether this "luck" should affect our comparative evaluation.

The reformulated version of Fackenheim's objection is not that Kant is inconsistent, but that he is unfair, which involves a moral evaluation. That raises the question of the normative perspective from which the charge is made, because Kant's moral theory would be shown to be incoherent only if it turned out that Kant would be unfair in his own terms. If, instead, the judgment of unfairness is reached from other than Kantian premises, this would send us back to a discussion at a more fundamental level of moral theory.

Within Kant's framework, however, there is no other option but to bite the bullet. Given that Kant believes every human being to have a basically correct sense of moral obligation, moral progress means that previous generations were morally worse, and that more individuals of those than of later generations let their will be determined by their inclinations. Kant could not (consistently) respond to the charge of unfairness by arguing that earlier generations (or individuals raised by doctrinaire parents) are not fully responsible for the quality of their dispositions. From a Kantian perspective that would be a cure worse than the alleged disease, because it would deprive earlier generations of their moral personhood.

If Kant wants to assume (however regulatively) the actuality or possibility of moral progress, he must also assume the actual or fully to speak of our duty to strive for moral improvement at a social scale. Therefore, he cannot avoid granting the *possibility*

that previous eras were morally worse. Kant goes further and also assumes (regulatively) that there *is* progress, and he does not shy away from drawing the consequences. He claims that both in individuals and in the species, the radical evil in human nature manifests itself in the very first use of reason. Humans have a "propensity to actively desire what is impermissible, while knowing that it is impermissible, i.e., a propensity to evil, . . . which stirs unavoidably and as soon as the human agent starts to use his freedom" (Anth VII, 324). Because this evil is the result of a free decision, the agent bears full blame. As Kant puts it in "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," "The history of freedom begins with evil."²² He regularly characterizes history as the process of "progressing toward the better."²³

But how bad is this, really? Without endorsing Kant's assumption of wholesale moral progress, I would like to suggest that it is perfectly acceptable to blame previous generations for what we, the later ones, perceive as moral failures—if they could have done better, given the theoretical and moral knowledge available to them. It is not unfair, for example, to blame Kant for treating women as lesser human beings. This claim assumes, of course, that he could and should have known better. But that assumption is not far-fetched, given that he phrased his moral theory entirely in terms of what applies to 'finite rational beings,' that the status of women was a matter of debate in his days, that a Königsberger acquaintance of Kant's published a feminist treatise, and that women at the time confronted Kant about his gender stereotypes.²⁴ Even though Kant arguably faced more cultural obstacles in achieving insight into the moral equality of men and women than philosophers today, this neither justifies the nonegalitarian views nor exonerates Kant for defending them.

VII. WHY KANT BELIEVES IN PROGRESS

The *possibility* of rational and moral progress is indispensable in Kant's moral theory. If rational development were impossible, this would "abolish all practical principles" (Idea VIII, 19). Ought implies can, and thus, for example, the command to strive to be morally perfect implies that moral progress is possible for individuals; and because this command applies to every finite rational being, moral progress on a large scale should be regarded as possible.

But it is a long step from 'can' to 'is', and therefore Kant's claim that there *is* progress (even if this claim has only regulative status) cannot be supported by a reference merely to moral duty. Kant

does occasionally take such an approach by arguing that, because we ought to promote moral improvement of the young, we must assume that there is progress in history.²⁵ But this argument is invalid. From the premises that (1) we ought to promote the moral improvement of the young and that (2) ought implies can, it does not follow that (3) the young will improve morally, let alone that (4) progress towards this goal has already been made. As Henry Allison puts this point elsewhere, "Ought implies can, not shall."²⁶ What does follow is only a much more modest claim, namely, that progress must be regarded as *possible*. But this more modest claim does not amount to a teleological view of history, and so it does not lend support to Kant's belief in progress.

Nor could he support this belief by arguing that it is necessary in order to recognize one's moral duty. That would contradict the unconditional validity of the moral imperative. Nor, finally, could he argue that morality commands us to believe there is progress in history. The categorical imperative tells us how we ought to act, not which particular theoretical beliefs we ought to hold. Kant wisely refrains from making either of these last two arguments. But then, how does he support the belief in progress?

In his first text on history, "Idea for a Universal History," Kant develops a teleological model of history, intended to provide a guiding thread for a future historian. At the end of the essay, he claims that there are also moral reasons to adopt this model. Not that the binding character of morality depends on our view of history: If there were no hope of progress, our moral obligation would not cease to exist. But, says Kant, we would have to divert our moral hopes away from this world to "another world." The teleological view of history avoids such this-worldly despair by portraying rational development and moral progress as feasible (Idea VIII, 30). Although he developed the idea of history for theoretical purposes—namely, to provide guidance to a future historian—the "consolation" it brings to the moral agent provides a further motivation to adopt this model of history (*ibid.*).²⁷

The *Critique of Practical Reason* provides logical space for this move. In the Dialectic of the second Critique, Kant argues that recognizing our duty entails regarding it as possible to do it ("ought implies can"), which in turn entails assuming the existence of the conditions of this possibility. But the precise character of these conditions is open to interpretation. They must involve some sort of harmony between the realms of nature and morality, but this harmony can be conceived of in different ways. In the *Critique of*

Practical Reason, Kant says in so many words that we have a "choice" as to how we represent this harmony (C2 V, 144-5). Because nothing can be known in this respect, we are free to represent this harmony in the way that best serves the interest of morality. In the second *Critique*, Kant formulates this harmony in terms of the postulate of God, who is said to have brought about a purposive harmony between the two realms. Kant conceives of this God as a wise "author of the world."²⁸ But if we have a "choice" in the matter, it seems permissible for Kant to further elaborate this "purposive" connection between nature and morality into the teleological view of history, especially because he has already argued that this view of history is theoretically defensible. This elaboration would involve the assumption that nature (the human natural predispositions) leads in the same direction in which morality commands us to go.²⁹ God would then be conceived of as "organizing" the world in such a way that the rational potential of humans can fully develop over the course of the history of the species. And this is exactly the conception that Kant develops in the "Idea for a Universal History."

At this point a final worry might be raised. Although Kant succeeds in avoiding heteronomous dependence of morality on the philosophy of history, this might seem to backfire by taking moral responsibility out of the hands of human agents. If history is regarded as progressive, does that not make doing our duty superfluous? Ever since Hegel, Kant has been criticized for ignoring this problem.³⁰ But the criticism missed the point. On Kant's view, the ability to use reason develops gradually, but this development does not by itself cause humans to be moral in any determinist sense. Each person has to achieve a moral disposition through an individual struggle. Although later generations can benefit from improved education and the insights achieved from earlier ones, any moral progress is the result of spontaneous acts of freedom.³¹

CONCLUSION

Kant's notion of the 'development of the predispositions for the use of reason' is compatible with key aspects of his moral theory, but it is important to realize what makes this consistency possible, namely, a pre-Darwinist view of the structure of development and of the nature of predispositions. I have defended Kant's notion of rational and moral progress entirely in terms of consistency, not truth. It seems clear that Kant's account cannot be defended in unmodified form. Kant recommends epigenesis theory for its "minimal

use of the supernatural" (C3 V, 424). But he still uses the idea of God as designer of the teleological order. Moreover, his model of organic 'development' has become obsolete. Current Kantian moral theory can no longer take advantage of biological theory in the way Kant did.

But the purpose of this paper is to show that Kant's moral theory leaves room for the notion of moral progress, which is an issue that logically precedes any attempts at improving Kant's views on the possibility or actuality of moral progress. That there be room for progress is vital for the moral theories of Kant and Kantians. Even if one gives up belief in actual moral progress, the possibility of moral improvement needs to be consistent at a conceptual level, and this possibility must be assumed or else the demands of morality are irrational. If it is to be possible for Kantian moral theory to present an account of how the moral demands can be realized in the world, and how free moral agency can transform the world for the better, there must be room within the Kantian framework for the idea that rational capacities may develop and that moral conduct may improve over time.

Washington University

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NOTES

References to the *Critique of Pure Reason* are to the pages of the first (A) and second (B) editions. All other page references are to *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited under the auspices of the Königl. Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1902-). Translations are my own. Abbreviations used:

Anth = *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*

C1 = *Critique of Pure Reason*

C2 = *Critique of Practical Reason*

C3 = *Critique of Judgment*

CB = "Conjectural Beginnings of Human History"

CF = *The Contest of the Faculties*

DC = "On the Determination of the Concept of a Human Race"

DHR = "On the Different Human Races"

End = "The End of All Things"

Gr = *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*

HR = Review of Herder's *Ideen*

Idea = "Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View"

MM = *Metaphysics of Morals*

Ped = Pedagogy

PP = *Perpetual Peace*

Rel = *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*

TP = "On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory but It Does not Apply in Practice'"

UTP = "On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy"

WE = "What is Enlightenment?"

1. Idea VIII, 21, 26. See also section 3.

2. Recent work showing the social character of the highest good in Kant has made this problem urgent. On the social conception of the highest good, see Andrews Reath, "Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 26 (1988): 593-619; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 29-80; Sharon Anderson-Gold, "Kant's Ethical Commonwealth: The Highest Good as a Social Goal," *International Philosophical Quarterly* 26 (1986): 23-32. In the second Critique, however, Kant's discussion of the highest good loses its focus on the highest good as a world in favor of a more individual-oriented approach.

3. See, Idea, CB, C3 §83, TP, PP. The second essay in the *Contest of the Faculties* is an exception, however, since here Kant does not employ the notion of development.

4. The account of Kant's view of history that I present here is not uncontested. Yirmiyahu Yovel and Otfried Höffe have argued that Kant's philosophy of history addresses legal and political, but not moral progress (Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant* [München: Beck, 1983], 244f.; Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* 127). While this is true for part of the second essay in the *Contest of the Faculties* (CF VII, 92), the evidence given in note 1 above and at the end of section two shows that in the vast majority of his texts on history Kant does speak of moral development. That suffices for the purpose of this paper. For a more detailed defense of the claim that Kant's view of history includes moral progress, see my book, *Fortschritt und Vernunft: Zur Geschichtsphilosophie Kants* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1995).

5. Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, p. 4. Yovel largely disregards Kant's essays on history, maintaining that they are restricted to political history. Instead, he develops his thesis of the 'non-empirical history of reason' in Kant's work on the basis of the *Critiques* and the

Religion. This hermeneutical approach prevents him from seeing that Kant actually speaks of a history of the development of the predispositions of reason, not of a development of reason itself. It also explains his thesis that Kant cannot build a bridge between his notion of a history of reason and empirical history (p. 21).

6. Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, 271.

7. Anth VII, 322-24; cp. Idea VIII, 26.

8. At the end of the eighteenth century this question was the subject of considerable debate in biology. See Peter McLaughlin, *Kants Kritik der teleologischen Urteilskraft* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1989), 9-31, and John H. Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant's "Critique of Judgment"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 189-227.

9. See, for instance, "On Mental Deficiencies in the Cognitive Power," Anth VII, 208-12, and "On the Character of the Sexes," Anth VII 303-311. I discuss the tensions between Kant's use of the gender-neutral term "human being" [Mensch] and his specific remarks on women in my article, "The Problematic Status of Gender-Neutral Language in the History of Philosophy: The Case of Kant," *Philosophical Forum* 25 (1993): 134-150.

10. But bear in mind the tension between this view and his views on women. The same applies to Kant's notion of race. Although his official race theory is put strictly in terms of skin color, Kant's arguments occasionally deteriorate into racist assumptions regarding mental capacities, see, e.g., UTP VIII, 175-6.

11. CJ V, 424. One finds similar remarks as early as 1762, see McLaughlin, *Kants Kritik der teleologischen Urteilskraft*, 26.

12. According to occasionalism, God intervenes at every conception to give matter its organic form. According to the theory of individual preformation, God created the "germs" for each and every individual organism at once, and all these miniature organisms are stored in the manner of Russian dolls, awaiting the time of their further development. Cp. C3 V, 422-3.

13. CB VIII, 110: "because if [these qualities] were innate, they would also be inherited."

14. DC VIII, 105. Creating a tension with his own general view that predispositions do not change, Kant ventures that the original predisposition for the other skin tones must have subsequently disappeared.

15. Thus, ontogenesis recapitulates phylogenesis, and both processes have the same structure. On ontogeny, see, e.g., Ped IX, 449f., 455f., 486ff.; on phylogeny, see, e.g., Idea VIII, 26; Anth VII, 322ff.; Ped IX, 451.

16. Michel Despland, *Kant on History and Religion* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1973), p. 67f.

17. Allen W. Wood, "Unsociable Sociability: The Anthropological Basis of Kantian Ethics," *Philosophical Topics* 19 (1991): 325-351, here p. 336.

18. This seems to be contradicted by Kant's talk of 'proofs' of progress in "On the Common Saying" (VIII, 310). But given that Kant's entire argument in that essay is premised on the impossibility of any theoretical proofs, and given that he argues for progress on moral grounds, the term 'proof' must be interpreted in a weaker sense than that of a theoretical proof. Kant also employs a weaker sense of the term 'proof' in the phrase "moral proof for the existence of God" developed in the *Critique of Judgment* (§87).

19. Kant occasionally denies this himself, saying that if one looks at behavior of others, one will conclude that only self-interest is their motive (e.g., Gr IV 453, CF VII, 91-2). As Christine Korsgaard has recently noted, his argument is not valid: *Creating the Kingdom of Ends* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 210.

20. Emil L. Fackenheim, "Kant's Concept of History," *Kant-Studien* 48 (1956-57): 381-398, here p. 397.

21. See also William A. Galston, *Kant and the Problem of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 231ff.; Paul Stern, "The Problem of History and Temporality in Kantian Ethics," *Review of Metaphysics* 39 (1986): 505-545.

22. CB VIII, 115. The same is true of any individual, regardless of historical context, see Rel VI, 39-44.

23. WE VIII, 39; HR VIII, 65; CB VIII, 115; TP VIII, 308; Anth VII, 324; CF VII, 88-9.

24. The acquaintance is one of Kant's regular guests, the mayor of Königsberg, Theodor Gottlieb von Hippel. He is the author of the book, *Über die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Weiber* [On the Civil Improvement of Women] (Berlin: Voss, 1792). The reports about women confronting Kant can be found in J. H. W. Stuckenberg, *The Life of Immanuel Kant* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986 [orig. 1882]), p. 186.

25. See the third part of "On the Common Saying." In this essay, Kant appeals to the duty to improve posterity (e.g., by moral education, enlightenment) in order to justify the assumption that "humankind is progressing towards the better regarding the moral end of its existence, and that this progress may at times be interrupted but never broken off" (VIII, 308f.). But Kant also defends the weaker thesis, that it is possible that things will be better in the future (e.g., VIII, 309).

26. Henry E. Allison, "The Gulf between Nature and Freedom and Nature's Guarantee of Perpetual Peace," in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant Congress*, ed. Hoke Robinson (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1995), 37-49, here p. 46. Paul Guyer has argued this point, too, in "Nature, Morality and the Possibility of Peace," in *Proceedings of the Eighth International Kant Congress*, p. 51-69, here p. 66.

27. Kant also claims that this view of history "justifies providence," in that the suffering that humans have caused each other throughout history is redeemed by the fact that it is part of a process that brings humanity closer to a good telos (Idea VIII, 30). This historical theodicy is

highly problematic within his moral philosophy, but this does not affect the question at issue in this paper.

28. The standard interpretation that the postulate of God serves to back up the belief that the virtuous will be rewarded in an afterlife overlooks the fact that Kant primarily describes God as the creator of the world. E.g., C2 V, 126, 128, 129, 130, 145.

29. Kant wrote in the margin of *Perpetual Peace*: "It is best to assume that nature in the human being works toward the same goal as morality." *Immanuel Kant Werkausgabe*, ed. Wilhelm Weischedel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), vol. XI, p.237, n.2.

30. G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), §§ 599-631.

31. See also Henry E. Allison, "The Gulf between Nature and Freedom," p. 47. In light of this acute analysis, it is a bit strange that Allison also maintains that the link between purposiveness in history and the final purpose of creation (a moral world) is obscure (p. 42).