

Mendelssohn and Kant on Human Progress: a Neo-Stoic Debate

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Melissa Merritt
University of New South Wales
m.merritt@unsw.edu.au

Abstract:

The chapter replies to Paul Guyer's (2020) account of the debate between Mendelssohn and Kant about whether humankind makes continual moral progress. Mendelssohn maintained that progress can only be the remit of individuals, and that humankind only "continually fluctuates within fixed limits". Kant dubs Mendelssohn's position "abderitism" and explicitly rejects it. But Guyer contends that Kant's own theory of freedom commits him, *malgré lui*, to abderitism. Guyer's risky interpretive position is not supported by examination of the relevant texts in their intellectual context. I first identify the historical origins of the term *abderitism*, which here signifies the independence of individual progress from social conditions. By contrast, Kant argues that individual progress cannot be independent of the progress of the species, acting as a corporate agent. This arresting position, I argue, must be understood in light of the Stoic ethical-teleological presuppositions generally accepted in eighteenth-century German discussion of human progress.

Keywords: Mendelssohn, Kant, Enlightenment neo-Stoicism, cosmopolitanism, ethical teleology

Author bio:

Melissa Merritt is Associate Professor at the University of New South Wales and Australian Research Council Future Fellow (2018-2022). She is the author of *The Sublime* (Cambridge University Press, 2018) and *Kant on Reflection and Virtue* (Cambridge University Press, 2018), which won the 2019 North American Kant Society Book Prize.

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Melissa Merritt
University of New South Wales

1. Introduction

The question whether humankind is continually progressing “toward improvement in its moral determination [moralische Bestimmung]”, as Kant puts it in his 1798 *Conflict of the Faculties* [SF, 7:81 (298)], has a long history in German rationalist thought.¹ As a result, various interventions on the topic can plausibly be represented as a philosophical debate — albeit one that spanned the better part of the eighteenth century,² and as a result involved a fair bit of talking to the dead. Thus in the 1793 *On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice*, Kant presents his own affirmative answer to the question about human progress as a reply to his late friend Moses Mendelssohn [TP, 8:307-8 (304-306)], who in his 1783 *Jerusalem* argued that while an individual human being may progress, humankind as such only “continually fluctuates within fixed limits” (Mendelssohn 1783: 2:47/1983:97)³ — a position Mendelssohn takes in reply to his late friend G.E. Lessing’s 1780 *The Education of the Human Race*. “Only look around you at what actually happens”, Mendelssohn exhorts, and “as far the totality of the human race is concerned, you will find no continual progress in its development that brings it ever closer to perfection” (1783: 2:46/1983:96). No doubt: for while we may take heart that witches are no longer burned at the stake, there is at least as much at hand in our own time to lament.

The attractions of Mendelssohn’s position do not turn simply on the plain facts in evidence when we just “look around”. Mendelssohn’s baulking at a thesis marshalled by Lessing and others to support claims of Christianity’s developmental superiority over Judaism is justified for other kinds of reasons, too.⁴ And it is plausibly a sign of Mendelssohn’s solid good sense to chide Lessing for having us picture “the collective entity of the human race as an individual person” that providence has “sent [...] to school here” for its upbringing (Mendelssohn 1783: 2:44-5/1983:95-6). Inasmuch as moral progress is to be understood to be the work of choice, manifest in appropriately developed attitude and disposition rather than simply in outward deed, what sense can there be in supposing it to be a possible attribute of the species, conceived as some such corporate entity? Thus Paul Guyer’s recent proposal that Kant misunderstands himself — that his own theory of freedom commits him, *malgré lui*, to Mendelssohn’s position on human progress (Guyer 2020:321-337) — might be met with a sigh of relief.

Yet the interpretive risks of attributing such self-misunderstanding to Kant run high, and are not underwritten, I will argue, by examination of the relevant texts in their intellectual context. Kant makes his own position quite clear in Part Three of *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*: the

¹ Translation modified: the Cambridge translation has “destiny” for *Bestimmung*. However, what is possibly “improved” is not the final destination, as this rendering implies, but our readiness for that end; hence I’ve opted for the more literal “determination”.

² It is an aspect of the debate about the *Bestimmung des Menschen* (the “destiny” or “determination” of the human being). For excellent historical discussion, see Kuehn (2009), and Brandt (2007), who highlights the Stoic background of the debate.

³ Mendelssohn (1783) has two parts, with the pagination resetting at the start of the second part; here I cite page 47 of part 2. Translations are my own; but I’ve consulted Arkush’s, also cited here.

⁴ “A better instructor must come and snatch the exhausted primer” — the Hebrew bible — “from the child’s grasp. Christ came” (Lessing 2005:231). On the interpretation of Lessing, see Allison (2018 [1966]); on *Jerusalem* as a reply, see Altmann (1973:514-552).

progress of individuals cannot be independent of the progress of the species, acting as a corporate agent. Guyer fails to take the measure of this arresting claim, which constitutes Kant's starkest rejection of Mendelssohn's position on human progress. Full examination of Kant's extremely demanding view on human progress lies outside of my present scope; my more restricted aim is to draw attention to the neo-Stoic context of the debate, to show how Kant arrives at this conclusion and rejects the *prima facie* more sensible position of Mendelssohn.

Kant canvasses three possible positions on the issue: humanity is continually regressing towards evil, or “moral *terrorism*”; continually progressing towards good, which he dubs “*eudaimonism*” (or “*chiliasm*”, if we're taking the long view); and the position he associates with Mendelssohn, that humankind as such is neither progressing nor regressing but in “eternal oscillation” within some fixed range, which he calls “*abderitism*” [SF, 7:81 (298); also VASF, 23:459].⁵ To get our bearings on the intellectual context of Kant's debate with Mendelssohn, I begin by examining the significance of the label *abderitism* (§2). I then identify the Stoic conceptual framework widely presupposed in the eighteenth-century German discussion of human progress, which helps us appreciate the teleological mode of argument that Kant deploys in his work on the topic (§3). Finally, I explain why this background is required to understand Kant's rejection of *abderitism* in the aforementioned texts, especially the *Religion* (§4). My broad aim is to indicate how Mendelssohn's and Kant's divergent positions on human progress reflect competing views about the philosophical import of Stoicism for German Enlightenment thought.

2. “Abderitism”

Guyer suggests that Kant coined the term “*abderitism*” with reference to the inhabitants of ancient Abdera, who were “renowned for their supposed vacillation” (2020:321). However, this gloss, for which there is little textual basis, leaves the term essentially unexplained.⁶ We might instead remark upon Kant's casual deployment of the term, as if it needed no explanation — a sign of his presuming a frame of reference with his readership that may well be lost to us now.

In antiquity, the citizens of the Thracian city of Abdera had a notorious reputation — one that is reflected, for example, of Cicero's shorthand “*id est Αβδηριτικόν*” (“it's *Abderitic*”) for something like: “it's senseless” (*Letters to Atticus* 7.7.4 [Cicero 1999 2:212]; see also 4.17.3). “Abdera” designated rampant foolishness, stupidity verging on lunacy.⁷ Bayle (1820 [1697]) devotes an entry to Abdera in his *Dictionary*, recounting Lucian's story of a mysterious fever that swept the city one summer, inducing trances among theatre-goers, who for weeks on end could do nothing but throng the streets, reciting tragedies — a contagion that abruptly subsided with the onset of a cold winter. But while the *Abderites* have been decried as fools through history, Bayle observes, nevertheless many “great men” have come from there: the sophist Protagoras;

⁵ The *Religion* opens with a version of the *terrorism*/*eudaimonism* distinction [RGV, 6:18-20 (69-70)], but without those labels, presenting *eudaimonism* as an Enlightenment view with Stoic roots. He also deploys the term *chiliasm* [RGV, 6:34 (81)], distinguishing a “philosophical” variety that aims at perpetual peace through federation-of-states cosmopolitanism, from a “theological” variety that “awaits the completed moral improvement of the human race”. In this chapter, I am concerned with the debate about ethical (not political) progress, though Guyer (2020) addresses both. Since Kant regards moral terrorism as a non-starter — its truth, he contends, would entail that the human race would already have destroyed itself [SF, 7:81 (298)], ignoring the possibility that we may indeed be in the *process* of doing just that — I will not consider it further here (likewise Guyer 2020:321n1).

⁶ Guyer does not indicate the source from which he draws this view. He may be thinking of a passage from Cicero on Democritus, a famous citizen of Abdera. Cicero recognises him as great, but censures him for his fanciful dithering about “the nature of the gods”, deeming his proposals “more worthy of Democritus's native city than of himself” (ND 1.120 [Cicero1933:114-117]).

⁷ See, e.g., Martial, Epigram X.25 (Martial 1993:340-341).

the pre-Socratic philosopher Democritus; Anaxarchus, a philosopher who accompanied Alexander to India; the historian Hecataeus; and Nicaenetus the poet. Hence Juvenal, one of Bayle's sources, takes the great intelligence of Democritus to show "that exemplary men of excellence can be born in a dense climate, in a country of morons" (*Satires* 10.48-50).⁸

What we have just learned may have only increased our puzzlement about Kant's labelling Mendelssohn's view of human progress "the abderitic hypothesis" [SF, 7:82 (292)]. Certainly Kant is not saying that Mendelssohn is a raving lunatic. The clue, rather, lies in the remark from Juvenal. Mendelssohn, we noted, takes progress to be the remit of individuals — not of the species as a whole, and *a fortiori* not of this or that human community. Thus progress, and any possible excellence, would be in some significant sense independent of whatever degree of enlightenment (or endarkenment) that may be ascribed to the species or any particular human community as such — just as Democritus's wisdom is independent of the general foolishness of the Abderites.

We need not object that Kant could not reasonably expect his readers to recall this particular entry of Bayle, or the quips of Cicero⁹ or Juvenal. Democritus, as the protagonist of Christoph Wieland's satirical novel *History of the Abderites*, published serially in *Der deutsche Merkur* beginning in 1774, provided a popular emblem of the idea in question.¹⁰ The novel is a comedy of errors following Democritus's return to Abdera after many years, having grown learned and wise through far-flung travels.¹¹ Although Democritus at first appears harmlessly eccentric to the Abderites, before long he's roundly derided as mentally ill. On this basis, a cousin petitions to place Democritus under guardianship to claim control of his inheritance, and calls Hippocrates as a medical witness for his case. Hippocrates arrives in Abdera and, meeting Democritus for the first time, instantly recognizes him as a fellow sage — or, as Wieland puts it, a fellow *cosmopolitan*. Offering his expert advice in the senate the next day, Hippocrates testifies to the sickness of the Abderites themselves and departs, leaving them at first dumbstruck, and then rushing to outdo one another in claiming to have spotted him as a quack all along.¹²

Kant draws on a popular image from Wieland (and Juvenal) — the wise Democritus in his foolish native city — that he extends as a label for a view of human progress: namely, that the progress of an individual is independent of humanity's saturation of folly and wickedness — which, if the image holds, is considerable and unbudging. But Kant's coinage of the term is not exactly a *reference* to Wieland: at any rate, Wieland's own view of human progress not "abderitic", on Kant's terms, at all. We can see this in Wieland's 1788 "The Secret of the Order of Cosmopolitans", an essay on the philosophical underpinnings of *The History of the Abderites* that also offers some indication of the intellectual context of the broader German debate about human progress.¹³

Wieland opens by recalling the mysterious bond between Democritus and Hippocrates, and sets out to explain how, and in what sense, cosmopolitans form an "invisible society" (Wieland 1930: 207). In Wieland's account, the natural law of right reason (214, 222) that binds cosmopolitans remains hidden from "the great heap" of humanity (210). Yet this "secret" bond, Wieland

⁸ "...cuius prudentia monstrat / summos posse viros et magna exempla daturos / vervecum in patria crassoque sub aere nasci" (Juvenal 2004: 370-71).

⁹ See also n6.

¹⁰ Notably, Kant claims that abderitism, if true, can only result in a "farcical comedy" [SF, 7:82 (299)], or a "farce" that we cannot reasonably enjoy as a portrayal of "real life" [TP, 8:308 (305)]. We'll return to those remarks in §3.

¹¹ Bayle, *s.v.* Democritus, reports that his "extraordinary inclination for the sciences" led him to travel to Egypt, Babylon, Persia, India and Ethiopia to consult with philosophers, priests, and ascetics.

¹² I've outlined the dramatic arc of the second instalment of the novel, "Hippocrates in Abdera" (Wieland 1993).

¹³ *Das Geheimniß des Kosmopoliten-Ordens* (Wieland 1930). Translations are my own.

claims, does not undermine rule of law in ordinary communities (217-18). Nor is it at odds with Enlightenment progress: for one does not enter the cosmopolitan order through any secret initiation or esoteric teaching; rather one is “born to it” (210). Wieland argues here from assumptions about providence that were common in eighteenth-century German discussion about human progress. Broadly, they are presuppositions about how we are equipped, in the way we are created, so that we are predisposed to do the things we need to do to develop our essentially rational nature to completion. These assumptions draw from the comprehensive natural teleology of the Stoic tradition, as we will see in more detail in §3. Wieland sketches the Stoic conception of providential nature, taking it to yield an “irrevocable moral axiom: that by means of an unerring organization of nature, the human race perpetually approaches the ideal of human perfection, and the happiness arising from it, without ever reaching it” (222). He follows with a Lessing-style picture of humankind progressively developing through history (222-3).

For Wieland, the progress of the species can only rest with those born to the cosmopolitan order — and not everyone is. Here we must register Wieland’s elitist distortion of Stoic cosmopolitanism.¹⁴ Although being born to the order does not, Wieland notes, mean that the individual cosmopolitan has no need to learn and be instructed (210); nevertheless, Wieland gives no indication that such development would involve struggle or difficulty. So progress is beyond the ken of Abderite-style fools, and not thematized as a challenge for those born into the cosmopolitan order. The upshot is a restricted view of cosmopolitan duty. When the ignorance of “the great heap” proves impenetrable — as it does for Democritus by the end of Wieland’s novel — the cosmopolitan may withdraw, to take up other, essentially private, pursuits.¹⁵

We can thus see that Kant’s label “abderitism” evokes Wieland, without yet referring to Wieland’s own view of human progress. For Wieland, like Kant, is a “eudaimonist” on the matter — i.e. he takes the species to be continually advancing towards the perfection of our essentially rational nature. Yet otherwise their views are starkly different. For one thing, the Stoic works that most influenced Kant were preoccupied with the practical difficulties of progress (rather than, say, with the theoretical determination of the attributes of the sage).¹⁶ And for Kant, as we will see in §3, this difficulty cannot be bracketed in the teleological account of the development of the species. Moreover, as we will see in §4, Kant claims that the progress of individuals ultimately requires the progress of the species, which leads him to posit an extremely demanding form of cosmopolitan duty.

3. Teleological arguments about human development

¹⁴ Kleingeld (2012:16) is right to emphasise this point. But she errs in tracing it to Wieland’s distinction between “world-residents and world-citizens” (Wieland 1930:214). On most Stoic accounts, the cosmopolis is the community of all rational beings — thus including in its membership not just perfectly rational beings (gods), and beings with perfected reason (sages), but also ordinary human beings (non-sages, i.e. progressives and fools). But the textual sources, Vogt (2008:65-110) argues, suggest a distinction between such mere belonging or “residency” and full-fledged citizenship. Here we might observe that Kant draws a similar distinction in the *Groundwork*: we all belong to the “kingdom of ends” in virtue of possessing a rational will, but one actively takes one’s place in it as a “lawgiving member” — a citizen, we might say — by developing and acting from a *good* will (see e.g. 4:433-435). There is nothing elitist about either the Kantian, or the original Stoic, view: for it is possible, at least in principle, for *anyone* to make themselves fit for such citizenship. Wieland’s elitism therefore does not stem from the resident/citizen distinction, but rather from his founding claim that cosmopolitans are “born to” the order, whereby it follows that only *some* are able to develop into full-fledged “world-citizens”.

¹⁵ See also Kleingeld (2012:25-6).

¹⁶ I am thinking above all of Seneca — progress is the dominant and unifying theme of his *Letters* — but also Epictetus and (as a source of Stoicism) Cicero (see e.g. *Tusculan Disputations* 4.59 [1927:394-5]). The question of the particular Stoic influences on Kant is too broad to take up here; but for an indication of the significance of at least Seneca and Cicero on select topics, see Merritt (2021a and 2021b).

I would like now to identify a certain kind of argument that Kant makes, in several texts, about human development. The texts I chiefly have in mind are the 1784 *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, which we turn to here, and the 1793 *Religion*, which we will consider in §4. These arguments presuppose a providential teleology rooted in the Stoic tradition; and Kant’s rejection of abderitism will be examined in this light.

Idea consists of a series of “Propositions” established from a providential natural teleology. We should not be surprised by Kant’s open acceptance of this premise [IaG, 8:18.23-24 (109)]: the essay is a contribution to the ongoing German discussion about human progress, the parties to which commonly accepted the same broadly Stoic providential natural teleology. *Idea* is framed as a response to abderitism, which Kant signals at the outset by observing that there is no apparent plan of progress, whether instinctive or contractually arranged, in human life; writ large, human life appears “woven together” from nothing but folly, vanity, and malice, “despite the wisdom appearing now and then in individual cases” [8:17-18 (108-9)]. The essay is also a consolation writing [see 8:30 (119)].¹⁷ Traditional consolation writing — which, incidentally, Seneca made a Stoic specialty — aims to show that what seems bad (e.g. exile, death, and so on) isn’t really. Of course the folly, vanity, and malice constituting the warp and weft of human life *is* bad; but, Kant argues, we are rationally warranted in taking it to be part of a providentially governed developmental process that leads towards the completion of our essentially rational nature. However, this developmental process will only unfold as it should if we do certain things — above all, change the terms of our social and political communion. Abderitism affords no motivation to do those things.

The broad argumentative arc of the essay goes as follows. The “First Proposition” is established on the basis of the “the teleological doctrine of nature”: “*All natural predispositions of a creature are determined [bestimmt] sometime to develop themselves completely and appropriately [zweckmäßig]*” [IaG, 8:18 (109)]. This is not simply the idea that living things are to be represented as functionally organized. Rather it is a point about *creatures* who have been providentially endowed so that they develop to completion. The application of this principle to the human being generates the central problem of the essay: the development of our predispositions, as rational animals, appears to give rise to social conditions that are inappropriate (or *zweckwidrig*) for our completion as essentially rational beings. Kant returns to this problem in the *Religion*, as we will see in §4; both works argue for a “cosmopolitan” solution to the problem, which we will consider in turn. To understand Kant’s arguments, we need to acknowledge the Stoic background that they presuppose.

The Stoic account of human development is a specification of their general account of animal development, which is all part of the comprehensive teleology that flows from their commitment to the rational governance of nature.¹⁸ Animals are distinguished from plants in being *alive*¹⁹ — a designation Stoics explain in terms of *agency*. Animals do not simply grow in the right conditions, but rather must *do* certain things in order to realize fully as a creature of a certain kind. To do these things is to act appropriately, i.e. to perform *kathékonta*, or *officia* in Cicero’s Latin (DF 3.20 [Cicero 1998:105]). Nature therefore endows each animal with affinities for those actions and things that preserve its constitution, and alienates or repulses it from “whatever appears to promote its destruction” (DF 3.16 [1998:103]). In this way, animals are oriented, in the way they

¹⁷ On this point see also Bittner (2009).

¹⁸ Specifically at issue is the Stoic doctrine of *oikeiōsis*, which I very briefly outline here, drawing on three canonical sources: Diogenes Laertius (7.85-88 [1925:192-197]), Seneca (Ep 121 and 124 [2015:484-489, 497-502]), and Cicero (DF 3.16-26 and 3.62-64 [2001:69-73, 84-85]).

¹⁹ See, e.g., ND (2.120-121); Kant takes the Stoic conception of life for granted, e.g. at [KpV, 5:9n (144)].

are created, towards the completion of their natures — *predisposed* to act appropriately. And as this follows for the human being as well, the Stoics arrive at the fundamental ethical maxim: “to live consistently and harmoniously with nature” (*congruenter naturae convenienterque vivere*, DF 3.26 [1998:108]) — for nature leads us to virtue (DL 7.87).²⁰ But where all other animals can only be complete according to their kind, the human being stands to be complete “in accordance with universal nature, and universal nature is rational”; so it can be said that nature orients the human being to *good* in an unqualified sense (Seneca Ep 124.14 [2015:500]).

We cannot here examine the Stoic account of human development in any detail. One programmatic point, however, must be made. These Stoic arguments are concerned with how things proceed from “natural principles” (see e.g. DF 3.20) — with how things go when we successfully take up nature’s lead. But we do not in fact tend to develop as we should: indeed, on the Stoic view, we corrupt ourselves as soon as we acquire reason.²¹ This is another large topic that we cannot examine in any detail here. Roughly, the idea is as follows. Once we come into the use of reason, our actions are expressions of commitment to views about what is a reason for doing what; we are at that point subject to endemic evaluative confusion that one account attributes to “the persuasiveness of external things [τὰς τῶν ἔξωθεν πραγματειῶν πιθανότητας] or to the communication of our associates [τὴν κατήχησιν τῶν συνόντων]” (DL 7.89).²² The important point is that this corruption is *unnatural*: it’s a turning-away from the end that nature sets for us,²³ and so must consist in a perversion of the predispositions that properly orient us to that end, the good. Here we stray from nature’s developmental mandate: so it is not an episode of the story of human development *from natural principles*.²⁴ Although Kant’s own account of human development draws on these Stoic sources, he insists that our badness must be part of a developmental story that can still turn out well in the end. That, indeed, is the consolatory message of *Idea*.

Another, more positive, point of comparison must be observed. The telos governing these accounts of human development is the completion (full realization or perfection) of our essentially rational nature. But the advances we make along the way are not exclusively moral, although — by Kant’s lights at any rate — the entire progression is governed by a moral end. So Kant argues that providential nature was measured out our merely animal endowments meagerly, to spur us to exercise ingenuity and develop not only “the greatest skillfulness” of the sort required for technological and cultural progress, but also “the inner perfection of the way of thinking” [IaG, 8:20 (110)] — which, for Kant, is typically a way of referring to moral virtue.²⁵ And we see the point borne out in the “cosmopolitan aim” invoked in the title of *Idea*, as well. Although the essay is largely concerned with a progression towards political federation-of-states cosmopolitanism, it nestles this progression within the scope of one that drives towards “a moral whole” [8:21 (111)], “a universal *cosmopolitan condition* as the womb in which all original predispositions of the human species will be developed” [8:28 (118)].²⁶

Now let us bring this background to bear on Kant’s argument against abderitism. The first claim of *Idea*, that *all* of a creature’s natural predispositions are determined to develop to completion,

²⁰ Diogenes Laertius (1925:194-5).

²¹ For some discussion of the point, and sources, see Merritt (2021a).

²² Diogenes Laertius (1925:196-7).

²³ Hence διαστρέφασθαι ... τὸ λογικὸν ζῷον (DL 7.89 [1925:196-7]): taking the verb in the middle voice, the sense is that the rational animal *diverts itself* from its telos — perverts or corrupts itself.

²⁴ This is not to say that Stoics are not deeply concerned with the sources and nature of human badness; the point is just that the account of human development *from natural principles* brackets that problem.

²⁵ This point is related to Kant’s remarks about the “second and higher” human *Bestimmung*, which consists in the perfection of the rational will [KpV, 5:87 (210)]; for discussion see Merritt (2018:149-50).

²⁶ For a similar observation, see Kleingeld (2009:172).

entails that the creature itself is so determined; and since — as the essay goes on to argue — we are, in the course of this development, collectively establishing social conditions that countermand the developmental imperative at issue,²⁷ the progress required under the assumption of providence must concern the species, not just the individual. That is Kant’s master argument against abderitism. In *Conflict of the Faculties* and *Theory and Practice*, Kant appeals as well to the unbearability of abderitism’s here-and-there outcroppings of (individual) progress: “in the long run it turns into a farce” that no reasonably well-disposed human being can enjoy [TP, 8:308 (305); see also SF, 7:82 (299)]. Kant then takes himself to be entitled

to assume that, since the human race is constantly advancing with respect to *culture*, as its natural end, it is also to be conceived as progressing toward what is better with respect to the moral end of its existence [...]. I do not need to prove this presupposition; it is up to its adversary to prove [his] case. [TP, 8:308-9 (306)]

Kant says that he is entitled to assume the eudaimonistic view of human progress for two reasons: (1) human cultural progress can, presumably, be admitted as a plain fact; and (2) providential teleology is common ground in the debate about human progress. *Cultural* progress indicates a general advance towards an end that we can only conceive as the completion of our essentially rational nature; and as long as we grant that we are in principle endowed with what we need to progress towards that end, then we must suppose that our progress — such as it is — moves ultimately towards “the moral end” of our existence. Mendelssohn, the adversary explicitly in view in this passage, endorses the providential teleology at issue;²⁸ so it is left to him to defend the coherence of abderitism, given (1) and (2).

Here it is helpful to consider a different kind of Stoic discussion of human development, one we know about from Seneca’s discussion of Posidonius in Letter 90.²⁹ Evidently, Posidonius was interested not just in the highly abstract argument about human development from “natural principles” outlined above, but also in concrete inquiry into human progress, down to the nitty-gritty details of evolving material culture. Seneca criticizes Posidonius for supposing that wisdom drives such developments: “not content” to trace the evolution of farming equipment, Posidonius “proceeds to lower the sage into the flour mill, saying that it was he who first began to bake bread, in imitation of nature” (Ep 90.21-22 [Seneca 2015:327-8]) — and so on in this vein. Seneca cautions against the assumption that technological and cultural innovations have any direct relation to moral progress, even if both require the development of reason. Posidonius might have been fascinated to describe how looms first evolved, but what would he have made of “our modern looms, which produce clothing that is virtually transparent and gives no aid to the body or even to decency” (Ep 90.20 [Seneca 2015:329])? There is no reason to suppose that technological and cultural advances contribute to genuine *progress*: they are more an expression of restlessness, or an interest in keeping boredom at bay. Related to these claims is the strong view Seneca takes on the social sources of corruption, which he took to justify certain forms of withdrawal, in order to find more suitable conditions for one’s own progress.³⁰

²⁷ See especially the “Fourth Proposition” of IaG [8:20-22 (111-112)], which we’ll examine in §4.

²⁸ Mendelssohn’s general sympathy for Stoicism is on display in *Jerusalem* (1783 1:95-6/1983:75). We should, however, particularly notice the close similarity between the providential teleology endorsed in *Phaedon* (Mendelssohn 1972:106-7) — in remarks cited by Guyer (2020:326) — to that flagged as the premise of Kant’s *Idea*, as noted above.

²⁹ Posidonius was a contemporary, and something of a teacher, of Cicero; Seneca often cites him as an authority on Stoic doctrine, and thus is unusually critical in Letter 90.

³⁰ On the social context of corruption, see e.g. Seneca Ep 7.2 and 41.8 (2015:35 and 125), as well as *De Vita Beata* (especially 1.4) and *De Tranquillitate Animi* (both in Seneca 1932). Seneca’s call for withdrawal from “the crowd” (*Vita Beata* 1.4 [1935:100-103]) is, at the same time, a call to find refuge in friendship with other progressives, i.e.

Now, Kant suggests that a similar world-weariness stands behind abderitism. The proponent of abderitism, in his presentation, observes as follows:

Bustling folly is the character of our species: people hastily set off on the path of the good, but do not persevere steadfastly upon it; indeed, in order to avoid being bound to a single goal, even if only for the sake of variety they reverse the plan of progress, build in order to demolish [...] [SF, 7:82 (299)]

While Kant is clearly sympathetic to this world-weariness,³¹ he rejects the abderitic response.³² This expression of sympathy plays a dialectical role in the debate. The proponent of abderitism must recognize the unsuitability of our communities, our social worlds, to individual moral progress. That leaves two ways open. One is to cleave to abderitism, and take progress to be an individual, essentially private affair that permits certain kinds of withdrawal and restricts cosmopolitan duty.³³ The other is to find sufficient grounds for hope, and recognize that progress cannot be an essentially private affair: this is Kant's path. As we will see next, it leads to an extremely demanding conclusion about cosmopolitan duty.

4. Kant's rejection of abderitism in the *Religion*

My aim in §§2-3 was to draw attention to the intellectual context of the German debate about human progress, focusing particularly on the Stoic ethical-teleological conceptual framework that was widely accepted by the parties to this debate. This positions us to recognize that Kant's claims about human progress fall within the scope of a teleological argument, and thus that his endorsement of eudaimonism — i.e. the view that humankind makes continual moral progress — must be assessed in the context of such an argument. Here I focus on Kant's view of human development and progress in the *Religion*, with *Idea* in a supporting role. I will outline an interpretive approach that draws on the Stoic background to these arguments and should improve our understanding of Kant's rejection of abderitism.

Let me first recapitulate and elaborate Guyer's view that Kant is committed to Mendelssohnian abderitism. Mendelssohn, we noted, expresses skepticism about any conception of the species as a single corporate entity on its own developmental path, and contends that progress can only be the remit of individuals. Thus the species, and *a fortiori* any particular human community, can only be an aggregate of individuals; and any measure of its progress can only be a kind of sum of the various advancements and backslidings of the individuals comprising it at any given time. Moreover, Guyer adds — apparently on Mendelssohn's behalf — inasmuch as some of these individuals are babies and young children in a pre-rational state and thus not *able* to make moral progress at all, there can be no sense in the idea of the species as a whole making progress (2020:235). Moreover, Guyer suggests, abderitism is the only possibility if we take moral progress to require certain developments in attitude and disposition. For Kant observes that while we can be coerced into outward performances, we can never be coerced to make some performance for some particular end [MS, 6:381 (513)]. Ends can only be freely adopted; and moral progress requires the adoption of certain ends. Genuine moral progress is therefore not expressed in outward performances, but in the exercise of the first-personal practical point of

individuals aiming to develop towards virtue (a theme stressed particularly in *De Tranquillitate Animi*). For discussion of the Stoic conception of friendship between progressives, see Long (2013).

³¹ See e.g. also RGV [6:33-4 (80-81)], right before he gathers himself to assert his commitment to human progress or "*chiliasm*" [6:34 (81)].

³² We need instead rational grounds for hope, which empirical observation cannot provide [TP, 8:309-310 (306-7)].

³³ Regarding Mendelssohn on this sort of point, consider Altmann (1973:540). See also n30.

view, which we can only readily countenance in the singular — in the “I”, not the “we”. The species is simply not an entity to which any genuine notion of moral progress can be ascribed.

That is an outline of the abderitism that Guyer attributes to Mendelssohn and claims is required by Kant’s theory of freedom. Noting Kant’s express charge about the abhorrence of abderitism, Guyer adduces Mendelssohn’s commitment to immortality: each has the not just the duration of natural life, but an eternity, in which to develop to completion. But Kant, Guyer contends, had given up on the practical postulate of immortality by the time of the *Religion*, in favor of the view that “complete conversion from evil to good is possible for every individual at any and every time of their natural life” (2020:234). Guyer alludes here to the account of “radical evil” and its overcoming presented in Part One of the *Religion*. Radical evil is the fundamental corruption of the human being’s evaluative point of view that we each invariably bring upon ourselves in an act of free choice, just as soon as we come into the use of reason [RGV, 6:38.1-2 (84)]. In *Religion* Part One, Kant provides a highly abstract moral-psychological account of this corruption, explaining it as the subordination of the principle of morality to the principle of self-love [6:36 (82-3)]. Radical evil, on this account, can only be overcome in an act of free choice that reverses this order, effecting a “revolution” in the disposition and way of thinking (*Gesinnung* and *Denkungsart*) [6:47.24-34 (92)]. Inasmuch as this conversion rests on a single act of free choice, it is not conceived as a *process*: but it does not follow that we make ourselves good in an instant. Guyer, in supposing as much, fails to register the overarching developmental concerns of Kant’s argument.

To appreciate what goes missing in Guyer’s account, let us look more closely at the relevant passage:

If by a single and unalterable decision a human being reverses the supreme ground of his maxims by which he was an evil human being (and thereby puts on a “new man”), he is to this extent, by principle and attitude of mind, a subject *receptive to the good*; but he is a good human being only in incessant laboring and becoming i.e. he can hope [...] to find himself on the path of constant *progress* from bad to better. [RGV, 6:47-8 (92)]

The “revolution” is not a complete conversion to good: it rather makes one *receptive* to the good, puts one on the path of progress. Kant’s point can be elaborated when we recognize how his argument draws from Stoic accounts of human development. The premise of Kant’s argument in *Religion* Part One is the “original predisposition to good in human nature”: as *original*, it is laid in us in the way we are created; as a predisposition *to good*, it orients us to act appropriately, i.e. do the things we need to do to complete our essentially rational nature in a specifically human way.³⁴ The development that it governs is, moreover, comprehensive: it is not simply to do with moral perfection narrowly construed. Now, radical evil is the self-inflicted corruption *of this predisposition* [RGV, 6:43.18-20 (88)]; thus its overcoming, the “restoration” of this affective orientation “to its power” [6:44 (89)], does not make one straightway good, *sans phrase*. It rather makes one (again) a *progressive*, someone genuinely on the path to good.

That parenthetical qualification is meant to acknowledge the fact that the original predisposition to good must be uncorrupted in our pre-rational state: babies act appropriately — i.e. in completion-promoting ways — fully guided by the “element” of the original predisposition that does not involve reason, the “predisposition to the *animality* of the human being” [RGV, 6:26 (74-5)]. This element includes, among other things, our affinity for human fellowship [6:26.17-18] that is obviously manifest in babies. Let me take this as an example for making two general

³⁴ For more elaboration on this point than I can provide here, see Merritt (2021a:13-15).

points about the original predisposition to good. First, we should not suppose that this element (the predisposition to animality) continues to orient us in a non-rational or brutally animal way once we come into the use of reason: our affinity for human fellowship is surely *transformed* when we come into the use of reason. Second, though, Kant suggests that we corrupt the original predisposition to good just as soon as we come into the use of reason — a point he likens to preparing a rootstock so that it can take a graft, diverting its energy for an alien end [6:26-7 (75)]. So, for example, through fellowship the human being “feels himself more a human being, i.e. feels the development of his natural predispositions”; but yet the development of those predispositions that aim at the use of reason kindles, at the same time, the human being’s propensity to individualize or isolate herself [IaG, 8:20-21 (111); compare RGV, 6:27 (25)]. The human being is attached to the exercise of her own agency, and must be, to develop her rational capacities: indeed, this is the crux of the predisposition to *humanity*, the second element of the original predisposition [RGV, 6:27 (75)].³⁵ As a result, at some point we will invariably see the agency of others as potentially undermining our own, and resist this; and we will expect resistance from others just as much as we each dole it out ourselves. On this ground “can be grafted the greatest vices of secret or open hostility to all whom we consider alien to us” [RGV, 6:27 (75)]. But the resistance will sweeten the relish of what is then so hard-won by our own hands, driving us to develop our powers all the more.

Now it is this resistance that awakens all the powers of the human being, brings him to overcome his propensity to indolence and, driven by ambition, tyranny, and greed, to obtain for himself a rank among his fellows, whom he cannot *stand*, but also cannot *leave alone*. [IaG, 8:21 (111)]

Providence has set us up to be thus antagonistically situated in society, to impel us to act in ways that must be understood as appropriate, in essentially Stoic terms: that is, as promoting the completion of our essentially rational nature. Yet in so acting, we collectively create inappropriate (*zweckwidrig* or completion-detering) social conditions, countermanding the developmental imperative at issue.

Religion Part One is concerned with the nature of radical evil and its overcoming in an act of free choice: its dramatic arc concerns an individual’s conversion to progress. Given the considerations just adduced, however, this individual’s achievement must prove utterly fragile. That is the predicament Kant foregrounds at the start of *Religion Part Three*. We need not assume the post-revolution hero’s associates are “sunk into evil” and nefariously intending harm: “it suffices that they are there, that they surround him, and that they are human beings, for them to corrupt each other’s moral disposition and make each other bad” [RGV, 6:94 (129)]. Kant echoes here Senecan themes about the communication of fault, or vice, in essentially mindless ways — like a contagion spread through mere proximity, or a deadly crush as we jostle in a crowd.³⁶ But our post-revolution hero — the “morally well-disposed human being” — recognises that he is “in this perilous state through his own fault” and is thereby “*bound [verbunden]*... to apply as much force as he can muster in order to extricate himself from it” (6:93). There must be some way, the hero reasons, “to establish a union which has for its end the prevention of this evil, and the promotion of the good in the human being”: otherwise he cannot coherently will his own perfection. This union is an “ethical commonwealth [*ethisches gemeines Wesen*]” [6:94 (130)], which Kant characterizes as “a universal republic based on laws of virtue” [6:98 (133); see also 6:100 (134)].

³⁵ The third is the predisposition to *personality* — the readiness to find appropriate action motivated by respect for the moral law. Unlike the first two, this third element admits no vicious graft [RGV, 6:27.37 (76)]. But radical evil is nevertheless conceived as a *comprehensive* corruption; for discussion, see Merritt (2021a:16-7).

³⁶ See the references in n30.

However, the ethical commonwealth cannot be brought into being through any individual effort. Even if all of us were each to make the radical-evil-overthrowing choice all at once, we would not thereby establish this ethical commonwealth. For the realization of this commonwealth requires that the human species act as a corporate agent: the duty at issue is not one that an individual human being has to another, but rather “a duty of its own kind” — namely, a duty of “the human race towards itself” [RGV, 6:97.17-19 (132)]. The ethical commonwealth

requires rather a union of such persons into a whole toward that very end [sc. moral perfection], [i.e.] toward a *system* of well-disposed human beings, in which, and through the unity of which alone, the highest moral good can come to pass [...]. [6:97-8 (133); my emphasis]

Examination of Kant’s conception of the ethical commonwealth is a complex and difficult topic unto itself. For our purposes, it may suffice to acknowledge the extreme demandingness of the duty. The post-revolution hero, who (as we noted) recognizes the need to establish the ethical commonwealth, also cannot work towards this end as long as she thinks of morality as an individual pursuit, and virtue as a private good. Now, one of Kant’s points about the corruptibility of the “predisposition to humanity” is that we are inclined to value our own agency in fundamentally perverted ways: so we might be inclined to value virtue, too, as one’s own work. Perhaps this is the sort of evaluation Seneca encourages, when he remarks that we should be glad to be endowed with a rational capacity that we are called upon to *make perfect*, rather than having been created perfect by nature, like gods: for then we would have been robbed of the “special value and splendor” of virtue, that “we have ourselves to thank for it” (Ep 90.2, [2015:324]). One must transcend that way of thinking in order to enter into the Kantian idea of the ethical commonwealth: one must see that it is not *my* virtue or *your* virtue that really matters.

Kant gestures here to an idea that — I think it is fair to say — we can scarcely appreciate from where we stand. We can only grope around with loose and highly imperfect analogues. Kant himself remarks that the “sublime, never fully attainable idea” of the ethical commonwealth must be scaled down for any recognizable human purpose, proposing that its best approximation takes the form of “a church” [RGV, 6:100 (135)]. Some readers, no doubt left alienated by this proposal, have suggested the demanding ideal be domesticated in terms of other kinds of partnership, such as friendship.³⁷ But since the commonwealth is an association under laws of virtue, such proposals are only apt if we have a rather special kind of friendship in mind — namely, something akin to the friendship between progressives that is arguably manifest in Seneca’s *Letters*.³⁸

At any rate, we can return now to the “old question”. The human race can only progress, Kant has told us, through the establishment of the ethical commonwealth; but that is only possible through some profound evaluative transformation in the species as a whole — or, in the approximations, of much smaller communities within it. With this in mind, let us revisit Kant’s endorsement of the eudaimonist theory of human progress: we are entitled to assume that “the human race [...] is progressing toward what is better with respect to the moral end of its existence, and that this will indeed be *interrupted* from time to time but will never be *broken off*” [TP, 8:308-9 (306)]. I leave it an open question whether “the church”, at least as anyone has ever known it, offers a genuine approximation of the ethical commonwealth; what I want to do in closing is consider Guyer’s failure to register the demanding idea of the ethical commonwealth, and its role in Kant’s conception of human progress.

³⁷ E.g. Wood (2000) and Ebels-Duggan (2009).

³⁸ On this conception of friendship, see Long (2013).

Guyer (2020:326-7) supposes that since radical evil and its overcoming are each made possible by an act of free choice, there can be nothing inevitable about either: just as we choose evil, so we can choose good — and having made the one choice does not block the possibility of making the other at some other time. And so, he argues, since there is nothing inevitable about the progress of individuals, by extension there can be nothing inevitable about the progress of the species, conceived as an aggregate of individuals; thus despite K’s explicit endorsement of eudaimonism in regards to human progress, his own theory of freedom commits him to abderitism. In arriving at this view, Guyer tacitly supposes that the radical-evil-overthrowing choice is an expression of freedom in essentially voluntarist terms. Recall, though, that Kant speaks here of an “unalterable decision” [RGV, 6:47.37-48.1 (92)]: he does not characterize the choice that overcomes radical evil as one that might be succeeded by a choice that again reinstates it. Once we find the path of progress, we can’t go back: that is the upshot of Kant’s remark. But our advancement on this path may only come in fits and starts, since it depends on the establishment of the ethical commonwealth — or at least on genuine and suitable approximations of this extremely demanding idea.

Why does Kant endorse eudaimonism, when it points to an idea of cosmopolitan duty so demanding that we can scarcely grasp what it requires? The answer, really, is that it is entailed by the providential teleology that is commonly presupposed in the German debate about human progress. To reject that presupposition is to deny — or at least rule out for the sake of argument — that we are endowed with what we need in order to develop our essentially rational nature to completion, which for Kant is to suppose that we are unable to do what morality requires of us. But to accept the presupposition is to say that progress, of some sort, is possible. Mendelssohn, who accepts this presupposition, claims that progress is only possible in individuals, not the species. Kant argues that Mendelssohnian abderitism is incoherent: if we are to suppose that we are endowed with everything we need to perfect our essentially rational natures, then it must be possible for the human race to establish the ethical community, or at least those approximations suitable for its continual (if not uninterrupted) progress — even if, from any familiar first-person practical point of view, we can scarcely appreciate what this asks of us. We must be eudaimonists about human progress, Kant concludes, on grounds of rational faith.

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