The Philosopher as Legislator: Kant on History

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In several of his essays, Kant appears to be defending a progressive view of history.[1] In "On the Common Saying: That May be Correct in Theory, But It Is of No Use in Practice," for example, he writes that history can be viewed as an "unending progress toward the better" (TP 8:310; see also IUH 8:29-31; RH 8:65; CB 8:123; TP 8:312; PP 8:380; CF 7:88-89, 93-94). What this "better" is – whether it includes moral as well as political improvement – and how it may be attained are matters of keen interest and considerable debate among Kant interpreters.[2] Although I will be discussing and taking a position on these issues, my primary aim in this chapter is to examine what Kant's writings on history are *about*.

The question arises for Kant's essays in a way that it does not arise for works on, say, "Casca's attempt at Caesar's life," "the Great Fire of London," or "the age of revolution in Europe from 1789 to 1848," which are fairly straightforwardly about historical actions, events, or periods. Kant's essays have a very wide compass and treat historical phenomena, such as wars or the shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture, at a high level of generality, as kinds rather than individuals.[3] Kant explains that he is interested in "human actions," which he wants to consider "*in the large* [*im Grossen*]" (IUH 8:17), in order to bring to view the whole they compose; he calls this whole "universal," "human," or "world" history (IUH 8:17; CB 8:107; IUH 8:30; see also CB 8:121; RH 8:65; CF 4:79).

To say that Kant's essays are about human actions as a historical whole answers our initial question but also generates new ones. It is not clear, for example, how such a holistic perspective might be reached and by whom, what generic features of actions contribute to it, or indeed what the purpose of the exercise is. Consider, by way of contrast, the resurgence of

interest in world history among contemporary historians. Their aim is to allow neglected perspectives on historical events to come to light and to foster "translocal" historical thinking, which is particularistic rather than generalist.[4] As for contemporary philosophers, they have given up on encompassing accounts of world history for being mere speculations.[5]

Undeniably, Kant's conception of history is of its time. Kant makes a contribution to a genre of writing that was familiar to his contemporaries and has since fallen into desuetude. At the same time, history plays an important part internally to the Kantian architectonic. In what follows, I argue that Kant's conception of history as a unified whole presents distinctive features that are illuminating about the critical and moral commitments of his philosophy, and also conversely, that his conception of philosophy makes specific demands that his philosophical history aims to fulfill. The argument is structured around four questions, each of which I take in turn: Why does Kant believe it important that history be seen as forming a whole? How does he argue for the unity of the whole? What are the specific claims he makes about history? And why should anyone care for philosophical history?

Unity: Why?

Kant's historical writings span the entire critical period, from 1784, the date of publication of the *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*,[6] to 1798, the date of publication of the *Conflict of Faculties*; and they vary considerably in their focus, tone, and subject matter. What remains consistent is the view of history as the unified whole of human actions. Our first task is to examine what motivates this view. While not denying the force of biographical explanations, provided by the intellectual context in which Kant is writing and contemporary philosophical histories with which he is engaging, we are looking for a philosophical answer to our question.[7] To uncover it, we need to look outside Kant's essays on history, in works where he explicitly discusses the importance of unity (*Einheit*) for

cognition and action. Examining Kant's arguments for unity in these other contexts can help to contextualize these essays and orient our expectations regarding the study of history.

In the published works, the most extensive discussion of unity occurs in the *Critique of Pure Reason* when Kant argues that reason aims at establishing its own unity, "'the unity of reason'" (A302/B359). In the first *Critique*, the object of reason's attention is the understanding: unity is a "demand of reason, in order to bring the understanding into thoroughgoing connection with itself" (A305/B362). This concern with the unity of reason, however, has both deep roots and wider manifestations than this quote indicates. As Paul Guyer has shown, this is a concern that shapes decisively Kant's thinking in the decade prior to the publication of the *Critique*.[8] "The business of reason," Kant writes in 1778-79, "consists in creating unconditional unity in the greatest manifold in the employment of the understanding" (Ak 18:225 [R5553]). To come to grips with this and to see whether it has any application to the question of the unity of the manifold of human actions, we need to look at the work of the understanding first.

The role of the understanding is to unify appearances "by means of rules" (A302/B359). This unity serves our cognitive needs. It is thanks to the work of the understanding that we have experience, structured cognitions that form the basis of our knowledge of objects, including historical objects or "*empirical* data" (CF 7:91). Nothing follows from this, however, about history – or anything else for that matter – as a *whole*. History as a whole is not a possible object of experience and so it would seem that any inferences to a totality of human actions is subject to Kant's strictures concerning dialectical inferences of reason, that is, inferences to conclusions about unity *in* the object, which is to say, completeness and totality of appearances (see Ak 17:703-5 [R4757]; Ak 18:225-29 [R5553]).

To this negative argument, cautioning against misguided uses of reason, there corresponds a positive one about the regulative use of the ideas of reason, discussed mainly in the appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic. These ideas serve the demand of reason to bring the understanding into unity. This demand arises from reason itself (cf. A338/B396, A651/B679, A665-66/B693-94). The idea of a demand of reason can be seen either as stating a brute fact about reason or as stating a fact about our cognitive needs, since, as Kant claims, the need to unify the employment of the understanding, by making our cognitions systematic, ensures that our cognitions are in good order.[9] Whichever way we take it, the demand of reason is satisfied through the employment of regulative concepts or "ideas."[10] Although there may be indirect cognitive gains accruing from the regulative employment of reason, Kant insists that our knowledge is not enlarged through it: "If we survey the cognitions of our understanding in their entire range, then we find that what reason quite uniquely prescribes and seeks to bring about concerning it is the **systematic** in cognition, i.e., its interconnection based on one principle" (A645/B673). The ideas that Kant sanctions in this section are discipline-specific ones, such as "**pure earth, pure water, pure air**" for chemistry (A646/B674), and the idea of a "**fundamental power**" for psychology (A649-50/B677-78). Later, he includes ideas that were previously shown to be the result of illusory ontological inferences: soul, world, and God. These ideas, he argues, have permissible uses regulatively, on account of their unifying function. For example, once it is not considered ontologically, the idea of *the* world allows us to think of "nature in general, and the completeness of conditions in it in accordance with some one principle" (A685/B713). Such an idea expresses the conviction – and so an intellectual stance against both empiricist fragmentation and rationalist realism – that different explanatory models of nature as a "single given object" can be integrated within a whole that can encompass all (A684/B712). While history is not included in this discussion, in his very first essay on history, *Idea for a Universal History*,

Kant invites his readers to consider precisely an "idea" of history. So it would not be unreasonable to extend the regulative use of ideas of reason in the domain of history and argue that history allows us to view human actions in a systematic way. But why should such a view of human actions matter? Why is unity important for *history*?

To answer this question, we can turn it on its head and look at why *lack* of unity might be a problem. Unlike nature, which is the whole of appearances (see, e.g., Pro 4:295; MFS 4:467), history is a subset of appearances, those which can be identified as human actions. History then, as many commentators point out, is the domain of the realization of our practical aims, our moral ends and political aspirations to justice.[11] The introduction of these practical concerns creates a distinctive need. When well-intentioned people consider history, Kant argues, they are beset by moral despair:

> The thinking human being feels a sorrow [*Kummer*], one which can even become a moral corruption, of which the thoughtless knows nothing: namely, discontent with the providence that governs the course of the world on the whole [*im ganzen*], when he estimates the ills that so much oppress humankind, and (as it appears) leaves it with no hope for anything better. (CB 8:120-21)

Constructing history as a unified whole can have a role in alleviating the sorrow that can lead to moral corruption, provided the whole is one in which oppressive ills are neutralized. So one justification for unity in history might go like this: thinking human beings need hope, hope needs assurances of progress, and assurances of progress need a progressive view of history as a whole. Such a history would be contrived to console, embolden, and reassure the righteous. So constructed, history is not answerable to cognitive needs but rather to psychological ones.[12]

While not without foundation in Kant's writings, this psychological explanation for treating history as a unified whole is quite misleading, because it treats hope merely as an

affect related to the expectation of something good (as in An 7:255). There is considerably more to the question of hope than this affect, however. In the first *Critique*, Kant describes the question "What may I hope?" as being "simultaneously practical and theoretical" (A805/B833). Note that, in its general form, the question arises with respect to any prospective doing: one seeks reassurance about a theoretical matter, concerning facts and likelihoods, prior to undertaking a practical commitment. Kant, of course, is interested in our moral commitments here. He analyzes the question by providing the suppressed conditional, "'If I do what I should, what may I *then* hope?'" (A805/B833, emphasis added). Crudely translated, the questioner asks: if I am good, what am I to expect? The key fact implicated in all of our expectations, according to Kant, is our natural desire to be happy. Less crudely, the question is about the possibility of a "connection of the hope of being happy with the unremitting effort to make oneself worthy of happiness" (A810/B838). Importantly then and despite its first-personal formulation, the question of hope is ultimately conceptual and metaphysical, not personal: it concerns the possibility of uniting happiness and goodness.

How is the question to be answered? "Not through speculation" is the brief answer. Assessing the possibility of uniting happiness and goodness exceeds the speculative use of reason, because it brings into play practical matters, such as the idea of the determination of the will "with respect to the final and complete end" (CPrR 5:120). The attainability of this end, which Kant calls the highest good, is a matter for practical reason and is addressed in the second *Critique* in the discussion of the postulates, immortality of the soul, an intelligible world, and a "highest independent good" (CPrR 5:132).[13] This discussion takes us beyond history. The ideas that satisfy the practical interests of reason and that answer to the conceptual and metaphysical issues raised by the question of hope are concerned with history only negatively, in the sense that they are history-*transcending*. As Kant puts it in "Theory and Practice," even though we seek to bring about "happiness combined with and in

conformity with the purest morality," it is only duty that is within our power; the rest "exacts from reason belief, *for practical purposes*, in a moral ruler of the world and in a future life" (TP 8:279).

To appreciate how the question of hope relates to the topic of history, we need to look again at reason's demand for unity. In the Architectonic of Pure Reason, Kant defines architectonic as "the art of systems."[14] A system is "the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea" (A832/B860). The contrast is with systems that are not really worthy of this name and that are mere aggregates of cognitions (A835/B863). Philosophy is just the system of philosophical cognition. Kant introduces here an important distinction between two different kinds of philosophy. The first, which is the only philosophy practiced "[u]ntil now," is "**scholastic**." It seeks "the **logical** perfection of cognition," but it fails to take into account moral ends of humanity (A838/B866). The second kind, which Kant implies is new and starts with him, follows the "**cosmopolitan concept**," according to which philosophy is "the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*)" (A838-39/B866-67). The philosopher who follows the cosmopolitan concept is "the legislator of human reason" (A839/B867). The legislation of human reason, in turn, has "two objects, nature and freedom." The former "pertains to everything that **is** [*was da ist*]" and the latter "to that which **should be** [*was da sein soll*]" (A840/B868). Systematic philosophy in the cosmopolitan sense aims to bring together the theoretical and the practical in the legislation of human reason. Only through such a systematic conception of the legislation of human reason can the practical ends of reason be promoted (A832/B860).

The discussion about architectonic grants us a unique perspective from which to appreciate the importance of unity in history. To see history as a whole is to have in view human actions. In this context, "history" is a collective name for human actions in the large, *im Grossen* (IUH 8:29). The reason for considering human actions in the large is because we

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take an interest in the essential ends of human reason. The question of hope can focus our attention on history, if we take it to ask about the realizability of what ought to be within the natural world. Natural phenomena are subject to natural causal laws. By contrast, what we set out to realize as moral beings are laws of freedom. The domain of the realization of these practical ends is the domain of actions. This domain, in turn, is made available for philosophical consideration through a conception of history as a whole. The this-worldly and historical question of hope is addressed by the cosmopolitan concept of philosophy that aims to unite theoretical and practical uses of reason. So the philosophical motivation for a unified conception of history relates directly to this more ambitious unity that philosophy, in its cosmopolitan conception, aims to establish between freedom and nature.

The challenge now is to show how the historical whole is formed. Minimally, it must be composed of actions. For this, a concept is needed that is action-specific and can serve as a rule for unity of actions so that they form a whole. The next task then is to identify the conceptual tools that enable Kant to adopt a perspective on history as a whole.

Unity: How?

Actions are observable phenomena like any other natural occurrences (cf. IUHP 8:18). All appearances, including actions, are subject to causal laws. So causality cannot be the rule that helps us pick out actions. Basically put: “Matter causes [*wirkt*]. Will acts [*Willkür handelt*]” (OP 21:226). To pick out actions, we need some rule other than causality. If we look for something that picks out actions more narrowly and distinguishes them from other natural occurrences, we need to look at what further characteristics actions have. In the first *Critique*, Kant concerns himself with how actions are brought about. He argues that, although the will (*Willkür*) has “an empirical character” (A552/B581), reason should be considered as “the persisting condition of all voluntary actions” (A553/B581). To this intelligible character of

the action, however, Kant says "no **before** or **after** applies" (A553/B581). When we look at history, however, before and after do apply. For example, Kant writes that a universal cosmopolitan existence may be achieved "after many transforming revolutions" (IUH 8:28), or that practical reason may triumph "after many unsuccessful attempts" (TP 8:313). So we need to look for a mark of actions that is amenable to this kind of temporal talk but that also sets them apart from the movement of the planets or a shift in weather patterns.

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant describes all actions as being end-directed: "Every action," he says, "has its end" (MM 6:385). He gives the following account of ends: "An *end* [*Zweck*] is an object of the choice [*Willkür*] (of a rational being), through the representation of which choice is determined to an action to bring this object about" (MM 6:381). He later specifies that an end "is an *object* of free choice" (MM 6:384). So, on this account, an action involves at least the determination of the will (*Willkür*) or exercise of our capacity to choose, which is transcendentally free, and the representation of the object we seek to bring about, or end. Because *Willkür* is determined by the representation, "to have any end of action whatsoever is an act of *freedom* on the part of the acting subject, not an effect of *nature*" (MM 6:385). This connection of the end of an action and freedom makes the notion of an end a plausible candidate for a distinctive mark of actions. The notion of end is attractive because, while connected to freedom, it admits of temporal talk. For example, one of the ends that Kant recommends as a duty is one's own perfection through the cultivation of one's faculties, which explicitly involves progressive achievements such as diminishing one's ignorance and correcting one's errors (MM 6:387). What we need now is a way to unify actions in the large through this notion of end.

Ends (or final causes) are the domain of teleology. Kant discusses teleology extensively in the third *Critique*, granting it a legitimate place in the natural sciences, in particular the biological sciences.[15] Our question is whether or to what extent this discussion

is relevant to the history of human actions. Kant turns to teleology because mechanical causal natural laws do not suffice to explain certain features of organisms such as their capacities of self-reproduction and self-preservation (CJ 5:371). He argues that we should accept that there are things, products of nature, which are possible as ends and which cannot be cognized through the understanding alone, "rather even empirical cognition of their cause and effect presupposes concepts of reason" (CJ 5:370). Basically, teleology is important just to cognize these things. The problem with invoking reason is that it presupposes "acting in accordance with ends (a will)" (CJ 5:370). Kant then devotes most of his analysis of teleology to show that this problem is superable. The upshot is his vindication of the notion of "a **natural end** [*Naturzweck*]" (CJ 5:370). The idea of a natural end helps explain how we cognize beings that are organized and self-organizing (CJ 5:374).

The basic shape of the difficulty Kant tries to address here is this: even assuming a dynamic conception of matter composed of attractive and repulsive forces (see MFS 4:537), it is still a mystery how the formative force of natural products is *communicated* to matter so that they look like they are deliberately put together (CJ 5:374). A *Naturzweck* is a purposive unit whose parts are determined by the whole: "Organized beings are those of which, and in which, each part is there *for the sake of the other*" (OP 21:184). This "for the sake of" gives us the telic function contained in the notion of a purposive unit. The notion of a purposive unit, in turn, comes with a normative conception of what something ought to be, that is to say, the end for the sake of which the parts are organized just so it can be realized or not. If the end is realized, the being in question is a good specimen of its kind; otherwise it is defective in some way. Importantly for Kant's argument, from teleological explanations of parts of nature – "or even of nature as a whole" (CJ 5:397) – no ontological conclusions may follow; teleology is a guideline or a maxim for the reflecting power of judgment (see CJ 5:389, 399).[16]

The discussion of teleology and its applications in biology is not obviously helpful to the topic of history. If the notion of "end" is fully at home in the study of organisms, then it cannot serve as a distinguishing mark of human actions. So we need to examine whether ends of actions are in any way distinctive. In the first *Critique*, Kant introduces the notions of "purpose [*Absicht*]," "purposiveness [*Zweckmässigkeit*]," and "end [*Zweck*]," arguing that they can help with the systematicity demand, by enabling us to "regard every ordinance in the world as if it had sprouted from the intention [*Absicht*] of a highest reason" (A686/B714). To have a purpose in pursuing an end requires a conscious being who acts intentionally in order to realize the end. One example, in the cosmic context Kant is discussing here, is the God of theistic arguments, the "world-author" (A687/B715). Authorship is connected with a representation – or "consciousness" (MM 6:224) or "idea" (CJ 5:435) – of what one sets out to do, which is characteristic of purposeful productions. In light of this connection, we can see the teleological explanations that Kant defends in the third *Critique* as *stripped down*, aiming precisely to loosen the link between authorship on the one hand and purpose and end on the other. So for example, Kant concedes that an organism, which is just the "product of the parts and of their forces and their capacity to combine by themselves," and so the product of "a mechanical kind of generation," appears as a purposeful (*absichtliche*) production even though it is not (CJ 5:408). In the *Opus postumum*, Kant even likens organisms to artifacts, only to emphasize the difference from artifacts, namely the absence of authorial purpose: "An organic natural body is thus thought of as a *machine* (a body arranged **intentionally** as to its form). Under no circumstance can it be a property of matter to have an *intention* [*Absicht*] …; for all matter (and every part of it) is composite" (OP 22:548). One conclusion we may draw from this is that the discussion of teleology in the biological context is not directly helpful for history precisely *because* it presents us with a version of teleological explanation from which purpose (*Absicht*) is taken out. Natural teleology is not irrelevant to history, as we shall see

presently, since the fact that human beings are also natural beings plays a role in how Kant construes history. It is simply not sufficient for the study of human actions as a whole, for which we need the concept of a purposefully pursued end.

But now a new problem arises. Purpose is fine when applied to individual actions (cf. MM 6:227). I purposefully pursue an end and as such count as the author of my action, you purposefully pursue an end and count as the author of your action, and we may share a purpose and coordinate our actions. By contrast, if we consider human actions in the large, as Kant invites us to do, it is unlikely that we will find that there is a single purpose to them. We cannot assume coordination of intentions for the sake of some end. But if we cannot do that, then we do not have a teleological whole of history; we only have this action or that, this purpose or that. Formally we can still of course speak of history as a collective name for actions, but the material of history will be as disparate as ever. Short of assuming some supra-historical author whose intentions are realized in history, nothing so far gives us grounds to consider, as Kant states in the very title of *Idea for a Universal History*, that there is a cosmopolitan purpose (*Absicht*) to history as a whole.

Here are the elements we need to fit together: natural teleology, the purposeful teleology of discrete actions, and history understood as a whole of which something can be said with regard to its overall purpose. Natural teleology remains relevant to our concerns, because it concerns beings and thus also human beings. In the *Idea* essay, which predates the first edition of the third *Critique*, Kant already argues that it is reasonable to assume what he calls the "teleological doctrine of nature" in order to make sense of the relations between parts of organisms and the organism as a whole (IUH 8:18). Kant then applies the doctrine to the natural predispositions of human beings, arguing that they are set to manifest themselves and develop. This move, from organic parts and organic wholes to natural predispositions and their manifestation, is not fully argued for, but it is in conformity with arguments developed

later in the third *Critique*. Still, nothing follows from this with respect to purposes in discrete actions or actions in the large. Some authors take this reference to natural teleology as evidence that, in this essay at least, Kant treats history as a branch of biology.[17] One way of understanding this claim is that history is treated as a *being* with parts arranged for the sake of an end. The epistemic problem is that, unlike natural organisms with which we are acquainted and which give us our notion of the end for which their parts are arranged, we have no equivalent contact with history as a whole.

The question is this: from where do we get the idea of an overall purpose, *Absicht*, served by or through human actions (IUH 8:24)? Kant is not offering his readers the fruits of his empirical research into history. We said earlier that it is unlikely that we find a common purpose to human actions in history, and Kant would agree to this: history in his sense is not a matter of empirical discovery. Nor, however, is he claiming that he has achieved a theoretical vantage point from which he can inspect human history as a whole and tell us something about how it ends. History is in part a theoretical abstraction, merely the compositional aggregate of all actions and a collective name for human actions. Attaining this theoretical perspective is costless and also not hugely helpful, given our earlier answer to the "why?" question.

We established previously that history speaks to a this-worldly concern about the practical unity of nature and reason. This role cannot be fulfilled by a mere compositional aggregate nor by pointing at this or that action. We need a notion of history as an *organized* whole. The shape of this whole is not read off its parts, discrete actions, even while it is the parts alone (it seems) that contribute to history's organization. And this is precisely how Kant puts it in the *Idea* essay: we seek, he says, "a guiding thread for exhibiting an otherwise planless *aggregate* of human actions, at least in the large [*im Grossen*], as a *system*" (IUH 8:29; see also CF 7:83). [18] "History," as Kant uses the term and variously qualifies with the

adjectives "universal" or "world" or "human," is already a philosophical term of art: it is the idea that ends of human actions *are* organized purposefully.[19]

What is history?

One way of summarizing the findings of the previous two sections is to say that history is a whole shaped to fit the cosmopolitan concept of philosophy. While the employment of such a concept sounds indulgently speculative, Kant believes that he can offer a critical defense of it. He rejects standard progressive views of history – "[e]udaimonism, with its sanguine hopes … of progress endlessly broadening its course toward the good" (CF 4:82) – and claims on behalf of his account that it is tenable within the constraints of "the most rigorous theory" (CF 7:88). Kant's assurances have not always convinced readers, who criticize his philosophical history for being dogmatic, necessary but ultimately incoherent, or, at best, a heuristic depending on a now obsolete natural teleology.[20] The more sympathetic readers view it as a regulative idea or an instance of the exercise of reflective judgment.[21] I doubt that we need these theoretical tools to ensure the critical acceptability of Kant's philosophical history, because, as we shall see, its theoretical claims are limited and, on the whole, weak. Recall that philosophical history matters because a this-worldly answer to the question of hope matters. The question of hope, Kant says, is "simultaneously practical and theoretical" (A805/B833). The this-worldly, historical portion of his answer to the question "what may I hope?" is equally hybrid: it contains some relatively undemanding theoretical claims and the outline of a practical standpoint, which Kant invites us to occupy as readers of these essays. I discuss the theoretical claims first.

Kant wants to adduce support for claims about the attainability of progress in various domains of human life. To do this, he turns to general facts about human behavior, which explain the kinds of things people do: engage in wars, form societies, and so forth. These

general facts of human behavior are in turn presented using the conceptual tools we identified earlier: natural teleology and the purposeful teleology of individual actions. When human actions are viewed in the large, with the help of these conceptual tools, Kant argues that certain rational ends are attainable, and *therefore*, one may attribute purpose (*Absicht*) to this whole even in the absence of a single author. Attainability of rational ends is what counts as progress. Different essays emphasize different sorts of rational ends. Most focus on political arrangements – the prospects of the establishment of a just constitution within states and of peaceful relations between states – and some discuss broader gains in culture.

Despite these differences, Kant's treatment of history is remarkably consistent: first he identifies action kinds, then he analyses them in terms of general traits of human behavior, and then he considers whether, given these traits, right and virtue can be established. In the essays concerned with political progress – *Idea for a Universal History*, "Theory and Practice," and *Perpetual Peace* – Kant identifies certain actions, such as people forming social groups, cultivating the land, getting into conflicts, and so on. He then analyzes these actions with reference to general anthropological traits, such as antagonism (IUH) and conflict (CB). Finally, he argues that these traits do not hinder and can even promote the realization of principles of right. So Kant gives an affirmative answer to the question: given such and such facts of human behavior, is a hopeful or progressive perspective on history tenable? On the basis of this, he then claims that a purposeful shape can be given to the whole of human history. In short, form is, in part, what the content permits.

I will show how this theoretical argument works by focusing on one example from the *Idea* essay. As we saw earlier, here natural teleology applied to human beings gives the argument that human capacities and talents are bound to develop (IUH 8:18). Human capacities and talents are displayed in actions. Individuals purposefully pursue whatever ends they choose, honing their talents and developing their abilities in doing so. Observing such

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matters from afar, or "in the large," two traits emerge that are constant in human life, regardless of what talents people have and what ends they purposefully pursue: sociability, the need to cooperate for success in individual endeavors, which brings people together in societies; and its opposite, the desire to be free of interference from others (IUH 8:20-21). This example, replicated in other works, shows how Kant seeks to identify dynamic structures that have a basis in natural teleology but also allow us to take into account the various projects human beings pursue.[22] These dynamic structures, such as "*unsociable sociability*" in *Idea*, enable Kant to say something general about the *means* by which any ends human beings have are realized. We do things by pooling our resources together and by splitting apart. Because this "antagonism" is a natural trait of the species (IUH 8:20), Kant then examines whether, given this trait, the establishment of a just constitution is possible. To this he gives an affirmative answer because justice does not require the eradication of antagonism. On the basis of this, he then argues that nature, understood as the natural forces that operate in human societies, can be seen as contributing to the realization of an end, which is *not* purposely pursued by the individuals concerned, yet is attainable "i.e. a perfectly *just civil constitution*" (IUH 8:22), which ensures individual freedoms within a whole that permits cooperation.[23] The idea of "purpose" attributed to the dynamic natural/historical whole is simply another way of speaking of the attainability of (some) rational ends in the long run, and the attainability of even some rational ends counts as progress.

The practical standpoint outlined in the historical essays comes to view once we pose the question of why anyone should be tempted by such an ambitious conception of history in the first place. Granted, the theoretical claims are weak. Still, nothing like a philosophical history is needed for *comparative* judgments about progress. International organizations and think-tanks regularly check progress over time given certain goals, such as "democracy," "governance," "poverty reduction," and so on. Philosophical history the idea of a

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purposefully, progressively organized whole of human actions has a practical role that is revealed once we consider ourselves *qua* agents.

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As a way into the practical argument, I want to use Dieter Henrich's idea of what he calls the "moral image of the world."[24] Henrich develops this argument in the context of a discussion of the postulates of pure practical reason, and in particular the idea of the final and complete end. We discussed this earlier, only to conclude that it is a history-transcending goal, and therefore not immediately relevant to a progressive view of history. Nonetheless, the way Henrich presents the idea of the moral image is relevant to our current concerns and in particular the practical perspective from which Kant is making his argument about history. Henrich does not define at the outset what this moral image is; he simply says that it is an image of the world that enables the agent to "possess a perspective not only on his conduct but also on the constitution of the world he belongs to."[25] In the broader practical sense that interests us here, the world presents itself to the agent as constituted in such a way that the ends of reason are realizable.[26]

Highly relevant for our purposes is Henrich's discussion of the role of the moral image. Starting from the basic Kantian thought that "to act always means to pursue *purposes*," Henrich offers two alternative ways of understanding the role of a moral image of the world.[27] The first is the equivalent of what we called earlier the psychological explanation of the concept of history: as Henrich puts it, a moral image is a "helpful fiction" arising from the agent's hope for happiness.[28] The second is the moral image as constitutive of agency. We are committed to it by virtue of being moral; the moral image "arises spontaneously from the good will" and is integral to the moral perspective. This constitutive role is of great interest and importance. Unfortunately, Henrich's discussion of it is rather elliptical. Henrich says that the moral image of the world arises when conscience becomes endangered and needs to obtain help in order to sustain itself: he states explicitly that the moral image is "a

strategic defense for morality's integrity."[29] The moral image as strategic defense, which arises spontaneously when conscience is endangered, looks very close to the helpful fiction version of the moral image, which arises to encourage and perhaps console the good. Therefore, I want to put this strategic role to one side and focus on the idea of an image of the world as a "constitutive component of the moral perspective itself."[30] Adapting it to our present concerns with history, we can say that there is a *cosmopolitan* image of the world summoned by the conscience of an agent fighting for justice, enlightenment, culture, "the better." Philosophical history is then simply this cosmopolitan image of the world; it is history from the perspective of agency.

There are four ways of understanding what such a practical justification of philosophical history amounts to. First, following Henrich, we can say that the agent intending or planning or setting about to pursue right and virtue presupposes that her goals are realizable; hence, an image of the world in which success is possible is part of her practical attitude. There are grounds to believe that Kant is addressing such agents both individually and collectively, seeking to instill a sense of collective doing:

> I rest my case on my innate duty, the duty of every member of the series of generations – to which I (as a human being in general) belong ... – so to influence posterity that it becomes always better (the possibility of this must, accordingly, also be assumed), and to do it in such a way that this duty may be legitimately handed down from one member [in the series of] generations to another. (TP 8:309)

Second, and following from the above, we are tasked to *be* such agents. Kant both addresses us as agents and seeks to recruit us to the cause of right and virtue. As he puts it in the *Groundwork*:

> *Teleology* considers nature as a kingdom of ends, *morals* considers a possible kingdom of ends as a kingdom of nature. In the former the kingdom of ends is a

> theoretical idea for explaining what exists. In the latter, it is a practical idea for the sake of bringing about, in conformity with this very idea, that which does not exist but which can become real by means of our conduct. (G 4:436n)

Third, by identifying us as agents he is also saying that we are the agents of history. History is not just something that happens; it is something that people do. The desolation that befalls well-intentioned people when they contemplate all the horrors of history is a desolation of *contemplation* that can make us forget that we are responsible for bringing about the better:

> it is of the greatest importance to be *content with providence* (even though on this earthly world of ours it has marked out such a troublesome road for us), partly in order to grasp courage even among our toils, and partly so that by placing responsibility for it on fate, we might not lose sight of our own responsibility, which perhaps might be the sole cause of all these ills, and avoid the remedy against them, which consists in self-improvement. (CB 8:121)

Finally, Kant is himself aware of his own agency as a writer of history. Stories about what we do and what we can achieve matter "prophetically" because they encourage or discourage us. Prophets are "authors" of the fate they foretell (CF 4:80). To conclude, then, philosophical – that is, purposeful, progressively shaped – history provides us with a cosmopolitan image of the world and is, as such, a *constitutive* component of practical agency.

The philosopher as legislator; or, why should anyone care for philosophical history?

"To search for 'unity' and 'system,' at the expense of truth, is not, I take it, the proper business of philosophy."[31] This quote, from G. E. Moore, is likely to resonate with students of philosophical history. Kant's philosophical history has a theoretical and a practical aspect. It is theoretically a unity formally as a mere compositional aggregate of human actions. To give a progressive shape to this whole we need to be persuaded by the cosmopolitan

conception of philosophy; we may call this the practical formal unity of history. If we now ask whether the latter is true or at least plausible, we can look at the theoretical claims Kant makes in order to adduce support for his progressive view of history. These facts about human behavior are, I argued, plausible. Nonetheless, they are very weakly supporting the progressive view of history; this is because no facts can verify or falsify a view of history as a whole. At best, once one has such a view one can look to see what facts there are that can possibly support it. Here is where the practical perspective containing a cosmopolitan image of the world becomes crucial. To illustrate by means of a contrast: in the *Conflict of Faculties*, Kant tells the story of a patient, who, tiring of his doctor's optimism and reassurances of imminent recovery, exclaims, "*I'm dying of improvement, pure and simple!*" (CF 7:93). Kant does not present himself as a doctor telling his readers stories of progress. This is because he does not take his readers to be patients. History is not to be suffered but to be created. What Kant tries to communicate to his readers is that what matters is the practical standpoint of the agent, not that of the patient.

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We have now reached a reasonably detailed understanding of what Kant's writings on history are about. What remains to be discussed are some of the broader assumptions Kant brings to the writing of philosophical history, starting with his notion of practical agency. Kant does not anticipate that some of his readers can extricate themselves from their cosmopolitan tasks by claiming lack of interest or indisposition. Irrespective of our circumstances, we are, each and all, equally addressed by the "ought" of right and virtue, because it is an objective practical requirement. Objectivism, which Kant defends in his moral and political works, goes hand in hand with his commitment to unity and system. This coupling is an expression of Kant's practical, critical rationalism, which states that the ends of pure reason in its practical employment are realizable in the world, even though we have no reason, as critical thinkers, to believe that the world is pre-ordered in accordance with

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such ends. With respect now to these ends of reason, some, such as the final moral end, are history-transcending, as we saw earlier. Others, though, are not. These historical, practical ends include thinking freely and participating in our and our fellow-citizens' enlightenment, living justly and peacefully, and cultivating a virtuous disposition – in short, being better. In his writings on history, Kant provides us with the cosmopolitan image of the world that is constitutive of the active pursuit of such ends.

In light of the interpretation given here, it would be quite wrong then to see Kant's philosophical history as merely a consolatory fiction or as an example of callous optimism, an instance of the *bonum*-through-*malum* or "good as a result of bad" pattern.[32] Rather, it is an integral feature of his critical philosophy: the justification of providence that Kant offers in his historical works fulfills in part the promise of the cosmopolitan concept of philosophy, to show that practical and theoretical aims fit together. This cosmopolitan concept in turn would not even be conceivable without Kant's practical conception of philosophy. This is what he says about the value of mathematics compared to the value of philosophy "with respect to the practical":

> The former [i.e., mathematics] is that of *technical-practical* reason (skill in the discovery of *means* for whatever ends), the latter [i.e., philosophy] is *moral-practical reason* and is directed to the *final end*, which is absolutely (categorically) obligatory, namely to create men of improved character [*Gesinnung*]. (OP 22:545n)

This conception of philosophy fits the idea of the cosmopolitan concept of philosophy from the first *Critique*. The philosopher who has this conception of the discipline is a "legislator of human reason" (A839/B867). The philosopher neither uncovers nor imposes a law. The philosopher is a legislator in the sense of serving human reason: "Him alone we must call the philosopher," Kant says, who uses all cognitions as tools "to advance the essential ends of human reason" (A839/B867). Philosophical history plays a small but significant role in this

task. It has a claim then to our philosophical respect because the cosmopolitan concept of philosophy is the only one worthy of the name.

Notes

1. I say “appears” to avoid conflating Kant’s progressive view with what he calls “*eudaimonism*” or “*chiliasm*,” which he explicitly rejects as “untenable” (CF 4:81-82).

2. An extremely valuable collection is Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt, eds., *Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim”* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). For discussion on the nature of progress, see Arnd Pollman, “Der Kummer der Vernunft: Zu Kants Idee einer allgemeinen Geschichtsphilosophie in therapeutischer Absicht,” *Kant-Studien* 102, no. 1 (April 2011): 69-88; Allen W. Wood, “Kant’s Philosophy of History,” in *“Toward Perpetual Peace” and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, ed. Pauline Kleingeld (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 243-62; and Pauline Kleingeld, “Kant, History, and the Idea of Moral Development,” *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (Jan. 1999): 59-80. On the theoretical assumptions underpinning the claims about progress, see Katerina Deligiorgi, “Actions as Events and Vice Versa: Kant, Hegel and the Concept of History,” in *Internationales Jahrbuch des deutschen Idealismus*, vol. 10: *Geschicte*, ed. Jürgen Stolzenberg and Fred Rush (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2014), 175-95; Lea Ypi, “*Natura Daedala Rerum*? On the Justification of Historical Progress in Kant’s *Guarantee of Perpetual Peace*,” *Kantian Review* 14, no. 2 (July 2010): 118-48; David Lindstedt, “Kant: Progress in Universal History as a Postulate of Practical Reason,” *Kant-Studien* 90, no. 2 (Jan. 1999): 129-47; Pauline Kleingeld, *Fortschritt und Vernunft: Zur Geschichtsphilosophie Kants* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1995); and Pauline Kleingeld, “Nature or Providence? On the Theoretical and Moral Importance of Kant’s Philosophy of History,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 75, no. 2 (spring 2001): 201-19. Classic treatments include Dieter Henrich, “Über den Sinn vernünftigen Handelns im

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Staat," in *Über Theorie und Praxis*, ed. Dieter Henrich (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1967), 7-37; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980); Harry van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988); and Sidney Axinn, *The Logic of Hope: Extensions of Kant's View of Religion* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1994).

3. Kant mentions war frequently in IUH, TP, and CF. It is only in the latter that he refers to "the present war," though it is not clear which specific war he has in mind. One famous reference to a specific historical event, albeit veiled, is to the French Revolution at CF 7:84.

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4. See Dominic Sachsenmaier, "World History as Ecumenical History?" *Journal of World History* 18, no. 4 (Dec. 2007): 465-89; and Dominic Sachsenmaier, *Global Perspectives on Global History: Theories and Approaches in a Connected World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 5.

5. A *locus classicus* for philosophical criticisms of philosophical universal history is Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968). For further references and a critical discussion of Danto, see Deligiorgi "Actions as Events," 176-77.

6. Although I follow Allen Wood's Cambridge translation here, the German word that he translates as "aim" is *Absicht*, purpose. In what follows, this notion will play an important role in conjunction with the notion of "end [*Zweck*]."

7. Kant reviewed J. G. Herder's 1784 *Ideas for the Philosophy of History of Humanity* (RH 8:43-66). He discusses Moses Mendelssohn's views on history when he addresses *Jerusalem oder über religiöse Macht und Judentum* (1783) in "Theory and Practice" (TP 8:308), and he indirectly confronts Mendelssohn under the label "*abderitism*" in *Conflict of Faculties* (CF 4:81). Mendelssohn was responding to the progressive views expressed by G. E. Lessing,

who wrote a very influential essay on "The Education of Humanity," which appeared in 1777 in part, and in full posthumously in 1790.

8. Paul Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law, and Happiness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 60-95. Guyer distinguishes between systematicity and completeness, and he argues that the unity of reason is effectively practical and consists in the idea of attainment of maximally consistent system of purposes or "systematic happiness" (94). Although I follow Guyer in my discussion of the *Reflexionen*, I do not distinguish as sharply between completeness and systematicity, and my argument about the unity of human actions required for philosophical history takes a different direction.

9. See too: "Progress (*progressus*) in knowledge (*qua* science in general) begins with the collection of the elements of knowledge, then connects them [in the] manner in which they are to be arranged (systematically). For the division of this enterprise into a doctrine of elements and a doctrine of method constitutes the supreme division; the former presents the concepts, the latter their arrangement in order to found a scientific whole" (OP 21:386).

10. See Paul Guyer, *Kant's System of Nature and Freedom: Selected Essays* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005), 11-38. A different approach, by Paul Franks, is to show that Kant offers a deduction from an absolute ground to secure the requisite unity and so answer the Agrippan trilemma. See Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing: Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 62-79.

11. Most recently in Kristi E. Sweet, *Kant on Practical Life: From Duty to History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

12. Cf. the distinction Kant makes between psychological and moral (e.g., An 7:258).

13. The intelligible world is just what Kant calls the ideal world, obtainable by abstracting all spatiotemporal notions. But "for such an intelligible word to be the highest good," we need God, because this world as a good contains the notion of the law of freedom through which

one is able "to determine one's will" (CPrR 5:132). To these postulates of practical reason, we should add the concept of the "ethical community," which is introduced in the *Religion* and designates a union of people under laws of virtue or divine commands, as "people of God" (Rel 6:98).

14. For a detailed treatment of these passages, see Lea Ypi, "Practical Agency, Teleology and System in Kant's Architectonic of Pure Reason," in *Politics and Metaphysics in Kant*, ed. Sorin Baiasu, Sami Pihlström, and Howard Williams (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2011), 134-51.

15. For an excellent account of the early modern discussion of final causes, see Jeffrey K. McDonough, "The Heyday of Teleology and Early Modern Philosophy," *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (Dec. 2011): 179-204.

16. On the normative conception of form, see Hannah Ginsborg, "Kant's Biological Teleology and Its Philosophical Significance," in *A Companion to Kant*, ed. Graham Bird (Malden, Mass.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005), 455-70; and Marcel Quarfood, "Kant on Biological Teleology: Towards a Two-Level Interpretation," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 37, no. 4 (Dec. 2006): 735-47. For a more Aristotelian view and contemporary discussion, see Mark Bedau, "Where's the Good in Teleology?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52, no. 4 (Dec. 1992): 781-806. Kant's discussion of the legitimate use of teleology is part of his solution to the antinomy of teleological judgment, which is presented as an antinomy between mechanism and final causes (CJ 5:386-89 [§70-71]). In what exactly the antinomy consists is a matter of ongoing controversy; see Angela Breitenbach, "Kant on Causal Knowledge: Causality, Mechanism, and Reflective Judgement," in *Causation and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Keith Allen and Tom Stoneham (New York: Routledge, 2011), 201-19.

17. See Allen W. Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 208. For a different view that still acknowledges, as I do here, that human beings are also natural beings, see Karl Ameriks "The Purposive Development of Human Capacities," in *Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim"*, 46-67.

18. The discussion of this "thread" belongs to an argument about chance and the prospect of barbarism, which forms the rhetorical context for the questions: "whether it is indeed rational to assume *purposiveness* [*Zweckmäßigkeit*] in the arrangement of nature in the parts and yet *purposelessness* [*Zwecklosigkeit*] in the whole" (IUH 8:25). See also Kleingeld, "Kant, History, and the Idea of Moral Development."

19. There is a parallel and a contrast here with cognitive needs relating to what Kant calls "delimitation" and "outline" that arise with respect to natural phenomena. In the *Opus postumum*, Kant defends the need for a metaphysical foundation of natural science in relation to physics, because "without the former, [it] would be merely an aggregate (*farrago*) of observations of nature that would permit no secure delimitation or outline" (OP 21:477-78; see also OP 21:183). The metaphysical foundations mentioned here give the basic dynamic theory of matter that I attributed to Kant earlier. See also Michael Friedman, *Kant's Construction of Nature: A Reading of the "Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 221-22. In history we seek an outline of a dynamic whole composed of actions that does not, however, determine actions *a priori*.

20. Earlier interpreters (e.g., Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*) tend toward the "dogmatic but necessary" view, whereas more recent interpreters (Kleingeld, *Fortschritt und Vernunft*; Kleingeld, "Nature or Providence?"; Henry E. Allison "Teleology and History in Kant: The Critical Foundations of Kant's Philosophy of History," in *Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim"*, 24-45) find a greater range of theoretical resources in Kant's thought for dealing with history and progress.

21. See, for example, Rudolf A. Makkreel, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the "Critique of Judgment"* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), esp. 130-31; and Katerina Deligiorgi, "The Role of the 'Plan of Nature' in Kant's Account of History from a Philosophical Perspective," *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 14, no. 3 (March 2006): 451-68.

22. In later essays, as well as in the third *Critique* (esp. CJ 5:430-33), Kant makes much more of the sociability aspect. He gives a highly differentiated concept, "culture," as the matrix for the development of human talents not just individually but also across generations.

23. It does not matter for Kant's argument whether individual agents have the establishment of such a constitution as their end. In fact, the ends of individual agents may be "directly opposed" to such an end (TP 8:312). Still, Kant claims, progress is an attainable end in the long run; or, as he puts it in "Theory and Practice," progress may "be *interrupted* from time to time but will never be *broken off*" (TP 8:309).

24. Dieter Henrich, "The Moral Image of the World," in *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 3-28.

25. Henrich, "Moral Image of the World," 14.

26. In line with the overall purpose of his essay, Henrich associates the moral image with the belief that "it is possible to promote a state of the world in which happiness and merit coincide" (Henrich, "Moral Image of the World," 25).

27. Henrich, "Moral Image of the World," 24.

28. Ibid., 25.

29. Ibid., 13.

30. Ibid.

31. G. E. Moore, *Principia Ethica*, rev. ed., ed. Thomas Baldwin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 270.

32. See here the illuminating discussion of the publication context of IUH in Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt, introduction to *Kant's "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim"*, 4-5. The *bonum*-through-*malum* expression is from Odo Marquard, "Unburdenings: Theodicy Motives in Modern Philosophy," in *In Defense of the Accidental: Philosophical Studies*, trans. Robert M. Wallace (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22. See also William Rasch, "The Public of the Intellectuals – from Kant to Lyotard," in *The Impact of German Idealism: The Legacy of Post-Kantian German Thought*, vol. 2: *Historical, Social and Political Thought*, ed. John Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 26-50.