

Kant's Theory of Progress

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Abstract

My topic is Kant's theory of historical progress. My approach is primarily textual and contextual. I analyse in some detail Kant's three most important essays on the topic: 'Idea for a Universal History', the third part of 'Theory and Practice' and the second part of *The Conflict of the Faculties*. I devote particular attention to the Kant-Herder debate about progress, but also discuss Rousseau, Mendelssohn, Hegel and others.

In presenting, on Kant's behalf, a strong case for his theory of progress, I address the main objections which have been put to it. These are: (i) historical teleology is incoherent (history can't have a goal because there is no intentional actor functioning at the historical level); (ii) historical teleology undermines morality (if things are getting better anyway, why do I have to try to make them better?); (iii) progress involves 'chronological unfairness' (if things are getting better, doesn't this mean that earlier generations get a raw deal?); (iv) progress consigns the species to 'spurious infinity' (isn't endless improvement endlessly unsatisfactory?); (v) progress amounts to pernicious homogenization (doesn't the elimination of traditional practices and values impoverish our world?); (vi) the idea of progress is just 'secularized' religion (and should be rejected accordingly).

In relation to (vi), I consider the Löwith-Blumenberg debate, and draw some general conclusions about the issue of 'secularization'. In relating these to Kant, I argue for the following position: (a) his theory of progress is more than merely secularized religion; (b) to the extent that it can be described in terms of the secularization thesis, this reflects his 'critical' endeavour to rationalize Christianity; (c) in any case, the idea of progress by no means exhausts the rational potential of religion, and so should not be seen as intended to replace the latter.

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Note on Citations and Translations

Kant

All quotations from and references to passages in Kant's works are located by parenthetical citations of the volume and page number in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*, edited by the Royal Prussian (later German) Academy of Sciences, except for citations from the *Critique of Pure Reason*, which are located by the customary use of the pagination of the first ("A") and second ("B") editions.

All Kant's works referred to are listed below, in alphabetical order, along with: the year (or years) of publication or, with posthumously published writings, the year (or years) of composition; the volume and pages in *Kants Gesammelte Schriften*; the translation used (full details provided in the bibliography); a short title (if applicable).

'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' [1784] (8:33-42), trans. Mary Gregor, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 17-22.

Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View [1798] (7:117-334), trans. Mary Gregor.

'On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But Is of No Use in Practice' [1793] (8:273-313), trans. Mary Gregor, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 279-309 ('Theory and Practice'). References to the Third Part will also include the paragraph number, e.g. ¶3.

The Conflict of the Faculties [1798] (7:1-116), trans. Mary Gregor and Robert Anchor, *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 239-327. The Second Part (7:77-94) will be referred to as 'An Old Question', the shortened form of its sub-title (cf. p. 122). References to 'An Old Question' will also give the section number, e.g. §3, with §C referring to the Conclusion.

'Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History' [1786] (8:107-23), trans. H. B. Nisbet, *Kant: Political Writings*, pp. 221-34 ('Conjectures').

Critique of Judgment [1790] (5:167-484), trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (third *Critique*).

Critique of Practical Reason [1788] (5:1-163), trans. Mary Gregor, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 139-271 (second *Critique*).

Critique of Pure Reason [1781, 1787] (3:1-552, 4:1-252), trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood (first *Critique*).

'The End of All Things' [1794] (8:327-39), trans. Allen Wood, *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 221-31 ('End').

Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals [1785] (4:385-463), trans. Mary Gregor, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 43-108 (*Groundwork*).

'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' [1784] (8:15-31), trans. H. B. Nisbet, *Kant: Political Writings*, pp. 41-53 ('Idea'). References will also give where relevant the Proposition number, e.g. #3.

'Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion' [1783-86] (28:993-1126), trans. Allen Wood, *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 341-451.

The Metaphysics of Morals [1797] (6:203-493), trans. Mary Gregor, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 363-603.

‘On the Miscarriage of All Philosophical Trials in Theodicy’ [1791] (8:255-71), trans. George di Giovanni, *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 24-37 (‘Theodicy’).

Toward Perpetual Peace [1795] (8:341-86), trans. Mary Gregor, *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 317-351 (*Perpetual Peace*).

Religion with the Boundaries of Mere Reason [1793, 1794] (6:1-202), trans. George di Giovanni, *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 39-215 (*Religion*).

‘Reviews of Herder’s “Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity” ’ [1785] (8:43-66), trans. H. B. Nisbet, *Kant: Political Writings*, pp. 201-20 (‘Reviews’).

Letters to and from Kant are referred to by sender, addressee, date and volume and page number in *Gesammelte Schriften*. All translations are taken from *Correspondence*, trans. Arnulf Zweig.

Kant’s *Handschriftliche Nachlaß* is referred to by Reflection number (e.g. R6456) and volume and page number in *Gesammelte Schriften*. All translations are taken from *Theoretical Philosophy, 1755–1770*, trans. David Walford.

Herder

All quotations from and references to passages in Herder’s works are located by parenthetical citations of the volume and page number in *Herders Werke*, edited by Ulrich Gaier, Martin Bollacher and others, preceded by a page reference to the translation used, using the following key:

B *J. G. Herder on Social and Political Culture*, trans. and ed. F. M. Barnard.

Bu *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language and History*, trans. and ed. Marcia Bunge.

C *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, trans. T. Churchill.

Cr *German Aesthetic and Literary Criticism: Winckelmann, Lessing, Hamann, Herder, Schiller and Goethe*, ed. H. B. Nisbet, trans. Joyce P. Crick.

F *Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Michael Forster.

All Herder’s works referred to are listed below, in alphabetical order, along with: the year (or years) of publication; the volume and pages in *Herders Werke*; the translation used (full details provided in the bibliography); a short title (if applicable).

‘Extract from a Correspondence on Ossian and the songs of ancient peoples’ [1773] (2:447-497), trans. in Cr, pp. 154-161 (abridged) (‘Ossian’).

Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity [1784–1791] (6:11-898), excerpts trans. in B, pp. 255-326, Bu, pp. 48-58 and C, pp. 3-398 (*Ideas*). References to *Ideas* will also give book and chapter numbers, e.g. XV.3.

‘Journal of My Voyage in the Year 1769’ (9/ii:9-126), excerpts trans. in B, pp. 63-113.

‘Shakespeare’ [1773] (2:498-521), trans. in Cr, pp. 161-76.

This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity [1774] (4:9-107), trans. in F, pp. 272-358 (*This Too*).

Herder’s letters are referred to by addressee, date and page number in *Briefe: Gesamtausgabe*, vol. 5, eds. Wilhelm Dobbeck and Günter Arnold.

Introduction

My primary aim in this thesis is to expound Kant's theory of progress. By progress I mean *historical* progress. One might suppose that this would go without saying, were it not for the fact that much of Kant's thought about progress is concerned instead with the progress of the individual, in particular as this features in his argument for the postulation of the immortality of the soul. I will at times have occasion to refer to this other theory of progress and consider its relation to my topic. Indeed, it would have been possible (and no doubt interesting) to treat the two accounts of progress in tandem, as making up what one could then call the full theory of progress. Such an approach, though, would have meant less concentration on the historical dimension, and for this reason I chose not to proceed in that manner.

Kant did not write a major work on the philosophy of history. His endeavours in this field took the form of short articles and passages in larger works. The diversity of these texts (and their contexts) along with the apparently peripheral status of their subject-matter within the critical system makes the task of reconstructing Kant's philosophical history an interestingly complicated one. This situation itself suggests two distinct approaches which the interpreter could take. One would involve trying to reconstruct the theory of historical progress within the armature of Kant's philosophy as a whole, demonstrating its consistency (or otherwise) with the critical system. (For example, as part of the full theory of progress mentioned above.) The other direction would be to attend to the specificities of the particular texts, seeking to understand them in their polemical and intertextual contexts. The first approach will tend to privilege those passages in Kant's major works which touch on his philosophical history, in particular the *Critique of Judgment*, whereas the second will be best suited to the shorter articles in which Kant articulated his theory of historical progress. Of course, neither strategy is self-sufficient: each will need to engage with the material from the perspective of the other to at least some degree.

The project of reconstructing Kant's philosophical history within the critical system is of great value; however, from the point of view of one with a particular interest in the specific issue of historical progress, it is somewhat unsatisfactory. This is because the issue of progress inevitably gets submerged by the consideration of more general philosophical matters. I have therefore endeavoured to adopt a more focussed, 'horizontal' approach to investigating Kant's theory of progress. Accordingly, I focus on the three texts which most directly address the topic of historical progress: 'Idea for a

Universal History' (1784), the third part of the 'Theory and Practice' essay (1793); and the second part of *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), a sequence which covers nearly the entire span of Kant's 'critical period'. These texts warrant careful reading, a degree of attention which the more reconstructive strategy is usually unable to provide. They deserve it both because they are artfully composed and because they were written as interventions in debates about the idea of progress. This approach therefore enables me to see Kant in dialogue with his contemporaries, in particular with the critics of the idea of progress. The most notable of these is J. G. Herder, Kant's one-time protégé and subsequent philosophical adversary. As we shall see, everything Kant wrote on philosophical history in the 1780's was concerned more or less explicitly with him. One notable critic of the idea of progress who will *not* feature to the extent that his reputation in this regard might suggest is warranted is J.-J. Rousseau. The reason for this will become apparent in Chapter Three. For now, all I should say is that a quite different thesis would have been written had I attended to the Rousseau-Kant relation to the extent that it no doubt deserves.

In both attending to these debates and also more generally I have sought to present, on Kant's behalf, a strong case for his theory of progress. This has involved addressing some of the main objections which have been put to it. The particular criticisms I consider are: (i) historical teleology is incoherent (history can't have a goal because there is no intentional actor functioning at the historical level); (ii) historical teleology undermines morality (if things are getting better anyway, why do I have to try to make them better?); (iii) progress involves 'chronological unfairness' (if things are getting better, doesn't this mean that earlier generations get a raw deal?); (iv) progress consigns the species to 'spurious infinity' (isn't endless improvement endlessly unsatisfactory?); (v) progress amounts to pernicious homogenization (doesn't the elimination of traditional practices and values impoverish our world?); (vi) the idea of progress is just 'secularized' religion (and should be rejected accordingly).

I have devoted attention to other elements of Kant's philosophy. This has been necessary in order both to understand Kant's theory of progress and to elaborate responses on his behalf to criticisms of it. To that extent, therefore, my more contextual approach to the material does at times overlap with the project of reconstructing the theory of progress within the critical system. I have tried not to linger unduly on this aspect of my project, though the reader might possibly think at times (particularly in Chapter Two) unsuccessfully so.

The aspiration to provide a defence of Kant's theory of progress is itself significantly frustrated by my desire to attend to the details of Kant's own presentation of that theory. This is because Kant himself would ultimately want to defend his position on the issue of progress by referring back to more fundamental philosophical commitments. Conversely, his critics' objections to his progressivism need to be seen in the end as themselves based upon deeper disagreements with his philosophy. An important example of an issue which subtends some of the disputes about progress is the character of human rationality, about which in particular Kant and Herder have very different conceptions. I have therefore pushed the arguments as far as I can within the domain of the philosophy of history: as and when the nominal boundary marking off this area from more general philosophical issues is touched, I have simply indicated this.

At the same time, I consider that Kant's philosophical history benefits from not being locked too tightly into the critical system as a whole. Kant evidently held that historical progress was one way in which the rift between nature and freedom, or reality and reason, could be overcome. However, given the radical manner in which Kant construes that rift, the critics of his theory of progress, from Hegel to Yovel, have charged it with attempting the impossible. According to them, the dualism cuts too deeply to allow the kind of synthesis Kant wants. I find this line of criticism convincing, but have resisted interpreting Kant's theory of progress in a more thoroughly reconstructive way partly in order to avoid having to engage with it. I should make it clear that this strategy is not a matter of simply disregarding an objection to which Kant's theory is vulnerable, but is instead motivated by the belief that the theory considered in its own right is not as afflicted by the problem of dualism as Hegel and others suppose. No doubt this approach is somewhat artificial – the theory of progress is not an autonomous entity within Kant's philosophy – but it does enable us to see the strengths (and weaknesses) of that theory in its own terms.

There are nine chapters, arranged in chronological order. The first chapter looks at Herder's 1774 critique of Enlightenment progressivism. Chapters Two to Six deal with the theory of progress Kant presented in 'Idea for a Universal History' and Herder's response to it. In Chapters Seven and Eight I move into the 1790's, focusing on 'Theory and Practice' and *The Conflict of the Faculties* respectively. The ninth and final chapter will examine the claim that the idea of progress in general and Kant's version in particular merely amount to a 'secularization' of religious beliefs, looking in

particular at the work of two twentieth-century philosophers, Karl Löwith and Hans Blumenberg.

Chapter One: Herder

J. G. Herder (1744-1803), pupil of, later polemicist against Kant, is frequently and not inaccurately invoked as a critic of ‘the Enlightenment’.¹ In this chapter I will outline and assess the force and range of Herder’s objections to notions of historical progress as developed in the long essay *This Too a Philosophy of History*. In later chapters we will see how this critique was subsequently applied by Herder to Kant’s philosophical history.

The full (and lengthy) title of Herder’s 1774 tract – *This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity: a Contribution to the Many Contributions of the Century* – expresses at the outset the author’s ironical weariness in the face of the profusion of Enlightenment philosophical historiography. Herder is adding to the pile, not though with yet another work of the same character, but with a critical rejoinder to the presumptions and prejudices he finds to be rife in the mainstream. It is here that he first and most forcibly develops those ideas subsequently described by the term ‘historicism’.² Quite what this label means in respect of Herder will become clearer in due course, but the key thought is that of the necessary plurality and transience of forms of human culture and society. Different historical and environmental circumstances call forth correspondingly different human cultures, which, by virtue of their own character and dynamic, rise, fall and transform those circumstances in turn. There can then be no such thing as an ideal form of society, nor can all societies be made intelligible by means of some extrinsic criteria. Herder points up the problems that result for contemporary ‘universal’ historians, who attempt to encapsulate all of human history in their narratives. The effort, attention and empathy (*Einfühlung* – a word created by Herder)³ required in order to understand just one culture are immense. If this is hard to achieve, how much more difficult it would be to comprehend all cultures. What usually happens is that one culture is taken as the model and the rest misinterpreted accordingly. One important example of this strategy is classicism, which takes certain ancient

¹ Notably by Isaiah Berlin, ‘Herder and the Enlightenment’. I share some of the current unease about referring to ‘the Enlightenment’, but it is apposite in this context: Herder evidently does see himself opposing a dominant contemporary intellectual tradition, and does advert critically to *Aufklärung*.

² Cf. Meinecke, *Historism* [sic]. (‘Historism’ is also the term used by the translator of Koselleck’s *Futures Past*, presumably likewise to avoid confusion with Popperian ‘historicism’. The preferable strategy would be to reject Popper’s usage.) Beiser discusses historicism briefly in *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, pp. 6-7. A particular good recent account of historicism, with reference to Hegel, is to be found in Forster, *Hegel’s Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit*.

³ Meinecke, *Historism*, p. 297.

Mediterranean cultures as privileged exemplars, understanding and evaluating all others in relation to them.

The form of homogenized universal history Herder is most concerned with involves prioritizing the present local cultural form.⁴ Though, of course, every culture, on his account, does this to at least some extent – that is, focuses in on itself – what is distinctive here is the pseudo-objective endeavour to grade all other cultures and peoples accordingly. So he writes ‘the universal, philosophical, human-friendly tone of our century grants to each distant nation, each oldest age, in the world “our own ideal” in virtue and happiness’ (F 297 / 4:40). The charge Herder raises against what he takes to be the dominant conception of Enlightenment is that it is guilty of what we can (infelicitously) term ‘presentism’ (understanding geographical-ethnic presumptuousness to be included in this).⁵ This general presumption can take many forms. *This Too a Philosophy of History* explicitly distinguishes two main ones (F 298-299 / 4:40-41), but also describes a third, hybrid form.

The first strand in Enlightenment philosophy of history which manifests ‘presentism’ is what I will call *positive progressivism*. This involves taking contemporary values and attributing them to all other societies and peoples. Just as the present century sees Europeans striving to realize a particular ideal of virtue and happiness, so too all other human beings have striven to realize those very same ideals. This interpretation of history does not just apply ‘enlightened’ values to all other cultures; it supposes that these values were also recognized in them, however vaguely, and that human history consequently represents a collective and cumulative endeavour to achieve their realization, the ‘universally progressing improvement of the world’ (F 298 / 4:40). For Herder, this is clearly false. Human societies all have their own, divergent but equally human, standards of virtue and happiness, and are all able to live up to them (though they can fail in this). The claims that history reveals humanity to be engaged in one common endeavour in which it can be seen to make progress are thus nothing more than ‘novels [*Romane*]’ (F 298 / 4:40), one which only takes shape with the invention,

⁴ Though classicism often takes this form as well: the present age is privileged, along with the classical one, as that in which a return or revival is possible, if not already being achieved.

⁵ This prejudice has also been described as ‘cultural arrogance’ (Berlin, ‘Herder and the Enlightenment’, p. 171), ‘anachronism’ (Berlin, ‘Alleged Relativism in Eighteenth-Century European Thought’, p. 85) and ‘ethnocentrism’ (Beiser, *The Fate of Reason*, pp. 143, 349 n. 49). I prefer presentism, as this conveys the historicity of the presumption (which ‘cultural arrogance’ and ‘ethnocentrism’ do not), along with its self-reference (which ‘anachronism’ fails to capture – classicism can be anachronistic without privileging the present). (The term is recognized in the new *Oxford English Dictionary*.)

embellishment and suppression of facts. Positive progressivism thus amounts to stretching, generalizing the local form of culture – ‘Enlightenment’ – such that it extends to humanity as a whole, past as well as present, there as well as here.

Whom did Herder have in mind? He makes reference to various philosophically-minded eighteenth-century historians throughout his text, but the one who most clearly fits the bill in this respect is the Swiss writer Isaak Iselin (1728-1782), author of *Versuch philosophischer Mutmassungen über die Geschichte der Menschheit* (1764).⁶ This work, in its author’s words, described ‘the progress of mankind from external simplicity to an increasingly higher degree of light and well-being’.⁷ Iselin was characterized by Christoph Meiners in 1786 as one of the first exponents of properly philosophical history.⁸ In our own time, Peter Reill has emphasized Iselin’s representativeness.⁹

The second expression of presentism Herder highlights is a form of historical scepticism, whereby the study of the past shows that ‘vices and virtues, like climes, change, perfections arise and perish like a springtime of leaves, human ethics and inclinations fly away, turn over, like leaves of fate – no plan!, no progress!, eternal revolution – weaving and undoing! – Penelope-work!’ (F 298 / 4:40). This position shares with progressivism the privileging of the European present - its exponent ‘considers our century’s civil administration the *non plus ultra* of humanity’ and loves to ‘rave about our century’s light’ (F 307 / 4:51) – but does not delude itself into thinking that the process of enlightenment can be retrospectively attributed to all of the human past. In its attentiveness to the heterogeneity displayed in history, it is closer to Herder’s own standpoint; however, it always tends to engage with the past unsympathetically, seeking ‘to reduce whole centuries to barbarism, miserable state authority, superstition and stupidity, lack of ethics and tastelessness’ (F 307 / 4:51). The very randomness of history therefore means that the achievement of the present age can be supposed to be its work alone – it then owes nothing to the past, contrary to what the progressivist holds. Enlightenment would then be humanity (or rather part of it) pulling itself up by its boot-straps. This view of history can also make use of the idea of

⁶ Beiser identifies Iselin along with John Millar and August Ludwig Schlözer as Herder’s targets in this respect. *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, pp. 206, 400 n. 101.

⁷ Iselin, cited in Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, p. 52.

⁸ See Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment: Scottish Civic Discourse in Eighteenth-Century Germany*, p. 169.

⁹ Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism*, pp. 65-69; see also Oz-Salzberger, *Translating the Enlightenment*, pp. 169-189.

progress, but only in a restricted sense, as applying to the present age. ‘Progress’ would thus mark off the present as apart from the rest of history, rather than establishing its continuity with it.

Herder identifies a leading current of (particularly French) enlightenment with this version of presentism, mentioning in connection with it Bayle, Voltaire, Hume, d’Alembert and Diderot (F 298 / 4:41, F 312 / 4:57).¹⁰

What I have called ‘presentism’ is thus independent of a commitment to the idea of progress, when this is understood as a general, cross-cultural historical process. Alternatively, it can be seen as motivating divergent conceptions of progress, general and restricted. The first subsumes the past under the present dynamic, the second sets the present dynamic off against the past.

The two positions, progressivist and sceptical,¹¹ can be summed up in Herderian fashion as follows. The first is unhistorical, but not altogether demeaning to other cultures: it benignly, if myopically, sees them all as contributing and being oriented toward enlightenment. If the present age is that of light, then that light has dawned gradually throughout all of history. The second, sceptical position is somewhat more historical, being attentive to real differences between societies, but also more dismissive. It recognizes, to an extent, the plurality of values demonstrated by human cultures, but then judges them (that is, in nearly all cases, condemns them) in the light of the present ideals. Present light is contrasted with preceding obscurity; all other ages and places are dark ages, dark continents.

If the sceptical account is more robust, it should be noted that of the two only the positive progressivist account allows for the construction of a properly *universal* history, however fictional (on Herder’s account) this must of necessity be. The rationalist expectation that human history be intelligible as a whole, and not just as a random collation, provided a powerful impetus to universal history of a progressivist bent.¹²

¹⁰ Many of these thinkers in fact held more complex views, coming close in some cases to a traditional cyclical view of history, in which the current ‘light’ of day was almost inevitably to be followed by night.

¹¹ Beiser characterizes the two types of ‘presentist’ historical interpreters as, respectively, *Aufklärer* and skeptics (*Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, p. 208), which is unhelpful as Herder would want to emphasize the ‘Enlightened’ arrogance of both positions.

¹² The eighteenth century, particularly in Germany, saw a growing demand that universal histories be structured totalities, rather than merely inclusive compilations. Thus August Ludwig Schlözer, a famous Göttingen historian, argued in 1772 that ‘One can represent world history from two points of view: either as an *aggregate* of particular histories ... or as a *system*, in which the world and humanity form a unity, and in which all individual parts of the aggregate ... are collected and purposively

In discussing these two approaches, the one the flipside of the other, Herder implies that they exhaust the possible field. Yet in subsequent passages, he adverts to a third construction, a kind of hybrid of the first two, which I will call *negative progressivism*, combining the idea of historical progress with the derogatory attitude towards earlier cultures. These are now viewed as having been necessary for the subsequent achievement of enlightenment. The present age did not come into being on its own, but required the preparation of the past. ‘You can of course prove splendidly there how so many corners had first to be violently ground down before the round, smooth, nice thing that we are could appear!’ In short, ‘corruptions precede in order to produce improvement and order’ (F 310 / 4:54). The day of eighteenth-century Europe not only succeeds the night of previous history, but is only possible because of that darkness. Herder says this position follows ‘immediately from “the pet philosophy” of the century’ (F 310 / 4:54). In fact, given what he has already outlined, it by no means exhausts the enlightenment attitude as such, which has at least two other forms. And yet, for his purposes, negative progressivism does adequately sum up the standard views he is opposing. The dialectical recoil he adumbrates from positive progressivism to scepticism is then balanced out by a synthesis of the two positions, maintaining the universalism of the first with the greater grasp of particularity of the second. Negative progressivism thus incorporates both a general and restricted concept of progress, the former covering the long negative work of preparation, to which past generations contribute but from which they do not benefit, and the latter the advent of positive progress in the present. Progress is thereby figured as a two-stage process. The conscious endeavours of enlightened Europe to advance towards a happier future follow on from, and realize, the unconscious, unintentional progress achieved in the past.

Herder rejects all three of these ways of viewing human history. The basic flaw which vitiates them all follows directly from the ‘presentist’ starting point. In looking at the past through the lens of the present, with contemporary values clearly to the fore, it becomes impossible to do it justice. Past cultures are either completely misrepresented, as cruder versions of the historian’s own, or, if their difference is recognized (to some extent), they are treated without empathy, as depraved and barbaric. The sceptical perspective seems least tainted by these misrecognitions, in that

ordered’ (*Vorstellung seiner Universal-Historie*, vol. 1, p. 16, my translation). The latter was what was necessary: consequently, ‘a plan, a theory, an ideal of this science must be written’ (ibid. vol. 2, p. 2, my translation). Cf. Butterfield, *Man On His Past*, pp. 47-50 and Koselleck, *Futures Past*, p. 29. (Herder reviewed the first volume of Schlözer’s *Vorstellung* in 1772.)

it does not have the universalist presumptions which motivate them much more evidently in the progressivist accounts; yet, so long as this scepticism goes hand in hand with an assertion of the superiority of the contemporary civilization, it must tend this way too. Herder is also critical of the general prejudice that the present age is clearly superior. In a manner similar to Rousseau, he points out the losses and disadvantages consequent upon present-day 'progress'. 'Empathy', as applied to the past, should not bring about a rose-tinted view of it; then again, the same clarity of vision is what should be applied to the present. In being fairer to past cultures, that is, more positive about them, we can learn to become more objective about our own, by means of a counterbalancing awareness of its faults. (It remains to be seen how Herder thinks this general historical project can be achieved and to what extent it would be genuinely *philosophical*, i.e. one which accounted for the unity of the historical domain.)

As might be expected, Herder takes particular exception to the third position, negative progressivism. In viewing past cultures as necessary steps towards the present, which in themselves otherwise have no value, it claims that history operates instrumentally, sacrificing the happiness of previous generations for the benefit of that of enlightened Europe. Having ironically described what he calls this 'beautiful picture, order and progress [*Fortgang*] of nature', Herder retorts 'But not a thing in the whole of God's creation, am I able to persuade myself though!, is only means – everything means and purpose simultaneously, and hence certainly these centuries [are so] too' (F 310 / 4:54). Negative progressivism thus takes the 'presentist' disrespect for the past and attributes it to Providence. For previous peoples and societies to be merely means towards the present, they must have been used in this way, and only a providential God can be supposed to be able to have done this. This position thus relies upon, yet contradicts, Herder thinks, the concept of a divine creator. A universal deity could not coherently be charged with such apparently random partiality towards his creatures. In any case, the lives of past generations have not, on Herder's account, been as wretched as 'the pet philosophy' supposes.

Divine goodness is not the only issue: just as important, from Herder's point of view, is the retrospective attitude of historians (and others). They cannot, of course, *treat* earlier generations as means, but find it quite easy to *view* them in this way. This, no doubt, involves them in difficulties concerning providential justice, which they may not be aware of, but, more immediately expresses a meanness of spirit, a failure of historical empathy, which should be apparent to them. It is as much this human failing as the

problem about God's plans which concerns Herder in 1774. (He might well want to connect this tendency with the prevalence of actual instrumentalization of contemporary (especially non-European) peoples: the failure to recognize integrity of past generations can go hand in hand with the ability to mistreat present day ones.)

The puzzle for readers of *This Too a Philosophy of History* is that, amidst the exposure and ridiculing of various progressivist positions, its author himself insists that there is 'manifest progress [*Fortgang*] and development' in history, though this is of a 'higher' order than is usually supposed (F 298 / 4:41).¹³ What can he mean by this? How can Herder remain true to his historicist principles whilst using the idea of progress? There are two main interpretative responses to this problem, but before I deal with them, there are two minor senses in which Herder clearly accepts that there is progress, which should not be confused with his 'higher' version. First of all, he is keen to assert the continuity of human history: 'No one lives in his age alone, he builds on the preceding one, this becomes nothing but the foundation of the future' (F 299 / 4:41). Cultures and civilizations rise and fall, but out of and into each other. World history therefore does present a continuous narrative, in which what comes earlier can be seen as a means (but never merely a means) for what succeeds it. In particular, the interconnectedness of cultures provides for the accumulation and development of knowledge. At this level, there is progress, though Herder will of course want to remind us that this trajectory has nothing to do with any putative advances in virtue and happiness and is indeed all too likely to inhibit them. Secondly, 'progress' can also be used to describe the dynamic at work, though always in different forms, in each particular culture and historical era. This is one way in which Berlin tries to square the interpretative circle: he says that Herder's notion of '*Fortgang* is the internal development of a culture in its own habitat, towards its own goals'.¹⁴ In so far as all cultures demonstrate life, however slow or declining, progress could be said to be a trans-historical constant. This is, however, rather strained. Rising and falling are both motions, but only the former is progressive. Herder would in any case be averse to valorizing a model of cultural development which can all too easily be used to demean

¹³ The word used by Herder and rendered by Forster, here and elsewhere, as 'progress' is *Fortgang*, not *Fortschritt*. Berlin notes this, and gives 'advance' instead, which is not inappropriate ('Herder and the Enlightenment', p. 214). However, Berlin's tactic implies that Herder is counterposing 'advance' to 'progress' (cf. *ibid.* p. 215), whereas in fact Herder uses *Fortgang* to refer both to his own preferred 'higher' concept and to those he is criticising (cf. p. 13 above). (It is only in the late 1780s that he starts to use the term *Fortschritt*, by then becoming more prevalent.)

¹⁴ 'Herder and the Enlightenment', p. 217.

seemingly static or slow-moving societies and, conversely, to laud contemporary European society.

There are, then, as mentioned, two main ways in which interpreters have tried to make sense of Herder's claim that there is 'progress in a higher sense'. The first of these involves the assumption that history develops in the same way that an organism does, and has recently been adopted by Frederick Beiser. The second focuses instead on the model of the artwork, and can be found in Isaiah Berlin's essay.

Beiser claims that in *This Too a Philosophy of History* we find the application of 'an organic analogy to history', whereby 'all the cultures of the past are so many stages of growth'.¹⁵ History therefore is always progressing because humanity is always developing. There are obvious problems with this reading of Herder's text. For one thing, the evidence for it is exiguous. Herder does use the 'analogy taken from human ages in life' (F 281 / 4:20), but only ever to characterize one particular historical sequence, namely the passage from the ancient Hebrews to the Roman Empire, which is narrated in one part of the text (as Beiser points out) in terms of the passage from infancy to adulthood. But Herder is just as likely to employ quite different metaphors as well, such as from construction, to describe this historical succession (and others). There thus seems no good reason for taking the organic analogy to have either priority over the others or general extension over the whole of history.

It is unsurprising that Herder does not, contrary to what Beiser states, articulate his idea of 'higher progress' by means of an organic model, as it is ill-suited for his purposes. If the life-cycle analogy were to be applied consistently, we would expect to find ageing, decline and death following on from growth and maturity. This pattern may be generally applicable to civilizations themselves (and there are traces of such usage in Herder), but if assumed to be true of history as a whole, progress could only be used to describe the earlier stages. (This is clearly why Herder's growth metaphors fade away after the Romans.) In order to forestall this objection, we must take the analogy to involve only the positive dynamic, such that there is always only growth (never degeneration). This, then, strictly speaking, would be a *maturation* model, like an educative process, which need never end or enter into a down-turn, as opposed to an organic one. The difficulty now is that a progressivist account of human history constructed on this model looks too much like the kinds of account Herder has already

¹⁵ *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, pp. 208-209.

rejected. Maturationist progressivism, to give it a label, is clearly *less* unpalatable to him than the progressivist accounts considered earlier (indeed Herder was himself subsequently to promulgate a version of it). It allows, unlike positive progressivism, for the real diversity of historical cultures, understood now as different stages of growth, and not as lesser versions of maturity. Unlike negative progressivism, it can recognize the achievements of virtue and happiness in each stage, as being appropriate to them. And yet, it shares with both the assumption that later stages of history are superior to the preceding ones. (Maturity is clearly both normative and teleological.) Organicism, in its abbreviated and maturationist form, serves to support the presentist prejudices Herder finds so objectionable.

There is, as we shall see, a better way of making ‘higher progress’ intelligible. It is worth pausing for a moment to note two factors which appear to incline Beiser towards his unsatisfactory interpretation of *This Too a Philosophy of History*. The first is the strong connection he sees between historicism and organicism; as he writes, ‘historicism is frequently and properly associated with organicism, the notion that society can be explained according to the laws applicable to human creatures’, that is, in terms of ‘stages of growth’.¹⁶ It is true that historicists, Herder included, are prone to interpret societies and cultures as organic wholes, but not that they are therefore similarly inclined to consider human history itself in this way.¹⁷ Beiser mistakenly elides these two levels. Meinecke provides a useful corrective to the supposition that historicists seek to apply the organic analogy to history as a whole (as Beiser claims Herder does). On his account, historicism can deal with change in more various and subtle ways than are allowed by ideas of growth.¹⁸ This we noted earlier in Herder himself: construction metaphors, for example, can describe many more kinds of transition than organic development. In ‘building on what has gone before’, cultures can demolish, refurbish, adapt, extend the work of their predecessors, indeed even just camp in the ruins left by them. (Such metaphors, as well as allowing for more dialectical transformations, also suggest an open-ended, continuous process). The second factor leading Beiser to think that ‘higher progress’ is quasi-organicist or educational is his anticipation of Herder’s

¹⁶ *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, p. 6.

¹⁷ This is not to deny that historicists can construe history in biological terms, only that the source domain for such representations are ideas of ‘bio-diversity’, not the idea of the growth of an individual organism.

¹⁸ *Historism*, cf. especially p. lvii: ‘there is a difference between the evolutionary conception of historicism with its greater degree of spontaneity, plastic flexibility and incalculability, and the much narrower idea of a mere unfolding of an existing bud’.

espousal, from the mid 1780's onwards, of precisely such notions. That is, he reads the earlier work in the light of the later positions, as if what Herder means by 'higher progress' in 1774 is to be understood by means of the doctrines expressed in 1787. Like Meinecke and Berlin, I find the assumption of continuity implausible. Beiser's interpretation is thus itself 'organicist', reading the later 'flowering' of maturational progressivism back into the earlier 'seed', which is in turn indicative of the kind of errors organicism generates.

The alternative and superior reading is not explicitly developed by any commentator, though, as mentioned, it is certainly suggested by Isaiah Berlin.¹⁹ Part of what is striking about *This Too a Philosophy of History* is the frequency with which Herder characterizes human history as a work of art, most often a drama or a painting. These descriptions suggest that he conceives of both the unity and the progression of history as analogous to that of a human artwork. The course of human history thus amounts to an ongoing display of different instantiations of humanity: 'the history of the human species ... [is] an endless drama of scenes!, an epic of God's through all millennia, parts of the world, and human races, a thousand-formed fable full of a great meaning!' (F 335-336 / 4:83). Each scene 'displays a new and remarkable aspect of humanity' ('Ossian', Cr 158 / 2:456); its function is not to advance the plot and help bring about a conclusion. The drama is more like a pageant, more like Shakespeare (at least as Herder understands his work) than Racine.²⁰ For whom, though, is this performance undertaken? Clearly not the 'actors', who come and go with each scene. One may attempt to step out of role and view the whole; in which case, however, one is confronted with a huge painting, of which one obtains only a brief and tangential glimpse: 'who am I to judge, since I precisely only pass obliquely through the great hall, and eye a side-corner of the great covered painting in the obscurest shimmer? (F 357 / 4:106). The historian may try to focus on a 'particular group' of figures with the painting, but 'If you hold your face close up to the picture, carve at this sliver, pick at that little clump of pigment, you will never see the whole image – you see anything but an image!' (F 293 / 4:35; cf. F 357 / 4:106 also). Is history then a work of art with no audience or spectator? Here it becomes evident that the artwork idea is more than just a

¹⁹ 'Herder and the Enlightenment', p. 218.

²⁰ Shakespeare's plays demonstrate 'a multiplicity of estates, ways of life, attitudes, nations and styles of speech'; 'Every play is History [English in the original] in the widest sense' ('Shakespeare', Cr 168 / 2:508, Cr 175 / 2:520). (See Eva Knodt, 'Dramatic illusion in the making of the past: Shakespeare's impact on Herder's philosophy of history'.)

metaphor. There is indeed an audience - of one: 'it is only the Creator who thinks the whole unity of one, of all, nations in all their manifoldness without having the unity thereby fade for him' (F 293 / 4:35). Human history becomes an artwork, becomes whole, for God.²¹

Another form of art, one particularly suited to Herder's ends, is music (see in particular F 336 / 4:83-84). Thinking of history as if it were a piece of music captures the levels of diachronic and synchronic diversity best of all: at any one time a chord is being sounded, composed of the different notes struck by the various cultures around the world. As these cultures change, instruments come and go and new tunes are sounded. The resulting music has both harmony and melody; in fact, this image allows for discordant transitions which nonetheless enhance the whole. Berlin makes use of this idea: history is, for Herder, 'like a cosmic symphony of which each movement is significant in itself'.²² However, Berlin resists describing the advance of the whole as progress, wanting, as we saw earlier, to restrict the use of terms like progress and development to the dynamic of each 'movement'. This is not quite satisfactory: unless the segments themselves develop into each other or are similarly linked, the result cannot be a whole.

Understood in this way, as the temporal development of an artwork, Herder's 'progress in a higher sense' is consistent with his historicism. Each stage is as valuable as the rest, but the whole requires maximum diversity. Historical change and development are just as important in historicist progressivism as it is for the version Herder opposes. The key difference is that for the historicist, change is significant for what it reveals - another aspect of humanity - not in respect of where it is heading - a greater or more achieved humanity. The whole gains ever more perfection, but in the succession of aspects, not their accumulation.²³

The Leibnizian basis of Herder's thought should now be evident. According to Leibniz, all possible perfections are so manifold as to prevent their compatibility: this explains why 'the best of all possible worlds' must contain imperfections. Herder takes over this value pluralism and applies it specifically to the human species: the perfections

²¹ Cf. Ranke: 'Before God, all generations of mankind are equal; and this is the light in which the historian must look at them'; 'every epoch is directly before God; and its value is not dependent on what it produces, but on its intrinsic existence and its own distinctive identity' (quoted by Meinecke, *Historism*, pp. 505-506).

²² 'Herder and the Enlightenment', p. 218.

²³ A difficulty of course can arise in thinking of this given the propensity to characterize the unity of artworks in rather indeterminately organic terms.

of which it is capable are also such that they cannot be realized together. And yet this limitation can be circumvented by means of the very diversity of human life. At any one time and in any one place, the human species may only be able to demonstrate some of its possible perfections, but at other times and in other places, it will be possible for other capacities and virtues to be exemplified. Thus we read in *This Too a Philosophy of History*: ‘The human container is capable of no full perfection all at once; it must always leave behind in moving further on.’ (F 288 / 4:29). Discussing the combination in ancient Greece of virtues and vices, Herder writes:

But was it possible for those perfections to be developed in that amount and degree without these shortcomings? Providence itself, you can see, did not demand it, only wanted to attain its purpose in succession, in leading further through the awakening of new forces and the demise of others ... Is humanity capable of pure perfection in a single present condition at all? (F 295 / 4:37)

Finally: ‘What, O individual human being, with your inclinations, abilities and contribution, are you? And you have pretensions that perfection should exhaust itself in you in all its aspects?’ (F 357 / 4:106).

Indeed, the Leibnizian antecedents include some of the metaphorical resources that Herder uses. Recall the painting of which we glimpse only a fragment (F 293, F357); the same analogy is used by Leibniz in his 1697 text ‘On the Ultimate Origination of Things’. In an attempt to mitigate the unease we may feel at being told that this is the best of all possible worlds, Leibniz informs us that ‘We know but a small part of the eternity which extends without measure, for how short is the memory of several thousand years which history gives us.’ He then compares our ‘meagre experience’ to the very constricted view one might have of a ‘very beautiful painting’, seeing ‘some small part’ and judging what we see to be a ‘confused combination of colours, without delight, without art’.²⁴ Notice that here our ‘short experience’ equates to human history as a whole; the ‘bigger picture’ in which the segment makes sense is *eternity*. Herder’s innovation is to apply this analogy to each component segment of the past of the species: human history itself is the painting, rather than just a passage within it.²⁵

Herder’s ‘philosophy of history’ of 1774 is attractive in its appreciation of diversity and refusal to patronize or look down upon other cultures. It comes, of course, with considerable drawbacks too, not least in its heavy reliance upon the person of God, whose aesthetic pleasure is what explains and legitimates the course of history. One

²⁴ Leibniz, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 153. This text goes on to make the analogy with music as well.

²⁵ Herder is very unlikely to have read ‘On the Ultimate Origination of Things’, as it was only published in 1840 (Leibniz, *Philosophical Papers and Letters*, p. 486).

familiar objection is that the ‘pluralism’ (Berlin’s term)²⁶ which Herder espouses deprives him of any adequate normative criteria for judging or criticizing cultures.²⁷ This may well be true. It is worth pointing out, though, that Herder is very critical of the Europe of his day, in ways which follow on from his historicist principles. His doctrines about the suitability of different cultural forms in different particular historical and geographical circumstances lead directly to his denunciation of European colonialism. He finds similar grounds for protesting against the multi-national machine states of despotic absolutism. Kant, for one, may be able to offer better reasons for objecting to these things; one should not mistake Herder’s historicism, however, for a complacent relativism or accuse him of inconsistency when he does engage in such criticism.

One difficulty which Herder doesn’t address is that of reconciling his historicist’s sense for the entirety of the human past with his advocacy of local, self-contained cultures. Doesn’t such historical sensibility itself require stepping beyond one’s own horizons? Herder hopes that the appreciation of human diversity will work to reinforce the particularity of the historian’s home culture. But, as Nietzsche was to point out, it is much more likely to undermine cultural integrity.²⁸ Herder is not altogether unaware of this – ‘Enlightenment! We now know so much more, hear, read so much, we are so peaceful, patient, gentle-hearted, inactive’ (F 332 / 4:78). How, one wonders, are his own prolix efforts meant to have a different effect? Nietzsche indeed suggests that immersion in history had a deleterious effect on Herder himself, more unsettling than tranquilizing, though just as inhibiting: ‘He was a restless guest, tasting in advance every spiritual dish the Germans raked together over half a century from all the realms of space and time’ and hence never ‘sat at the table of the actual creators’ nor was ‘truly happy and satisfied’.²⁹

²⁶ ‘Alleged Relativism’, pp. 79-80.

²⁷ Allen Wood raises this charge in *Kant’s Ethical Thought*, p. 233. Beiser attempts to resolve the problem by appeal to his organicist account of ‘higher progress’: *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, pp. 207-209.

²⁸ ‘On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’, §4, p. 78.

²⁹ *The Wanderer and his Shadow*, §118, p. 338. (Nietzsche’s mother’s brother replaced Herder as General Superintendent of the Lutheran church in Weimar on the latter’s death. Nietzsche was at one stage thinking of referring to this in his autobiography, *Ecce Homo* (see draft material, p. 472).)

Chapter Two: What's the idea (in Kant's 'Idea')?

Some of the complexity of Kant's philosophy of history is concentrated in the very first word of the title of his first and most important text on the subject, the 'Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose' of 1784. At first glance, it might seem that Kant intends by the word 'idea' simply to convey the sense that this little essay is merely a sketch, a suggestion, one which would have to be filled out, if others were willing to accept it. Evidently the essay is an idea in this sense, but there is much more to Kant's use of term than just this.³⁰

To start, it is worth considering the apparent stimulus for the writing of 'Idea'. In February 1784, Johann Schultz wrote in the *Gothaische Gelehrte Zeitungen*:

It is a favourite idea [*Lieblingsidee*] of Herr Professor Kant that the ultimate goal of the human race is the establishment of a perfect constitution. He desires that a philosophical historiographer would undertake to write a history of humanity from this perspective in order to show whether humanity has come closer to this final goal at some time, has strayed from it at others, and what still remains to be done to achieve it. (8:468, translation taken from Kuehn, *Kant*, p. 288)

Kant refers to this in a note to the title of his own essay, published in November that year: 'A passage printed this year among other brief notices in the twelfth issue of the *Gothaische Gelehrte Zeitungen*, based, no doubt, on a conversation of mine with a passing scholar, calls for the present elucidation, without which the passage referred to would be unintelligible' (8:17). This is at least rather odd: Schultz was at that time Court Chaplain in Königsberg and also taught mathematics at the University (later becoming Professor of Mathematics) and so would have been known to Kant. In fact, he and Kant were friends: Schultz had long taken an interest in Kant's work, and became one of its earliest promoters, bringing out in 1784 his *Exposition of Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*,³¹ the publication of which the notice in the *Gothaische Gelehrte Zeitungen* was announcing. So, he was by no means 'a passing scholar'! Nor is Schultz's text as unintelligible as Kant suggests. The two peculiarities are linked: if Kant wants the reader to think that the original passage (which, noticeably, he himself does not provide) is an unsatisfactory résumé of his position, he is unlikely to want to admit that it came from the pen of one of his most valuable scholarly defenders. But why bother with this stratagem anyway? My guess is that it is a ruse, designed to provide an

³⁰ I am focusing on the title here, but it is worth pointing out that Kant uses the term throughout the essay and in a way which is evidently intended to tie in with its appearance in the title (see in particular the citation from #9, 8:29 given on p. 33 below). Paul Guyer has recently claimed that 'the term "Idee" occurs explicitly only in the full title of 'Universal History', not in the body of the text as it does in *Perpetual Peace*' (*Kant on Freedom, Law and Happiness*, p. 427 n. 15). However, in addition to the title, the word in fact occurs a further *eleven* times in what is quite a short text (!).

³¹ Available in an English translation by James C. Morrison.

occasion for the essay which disguises its real polemical context. It seems plausible to assume that the prompt for Kant's essay came not in the form of a misleading summary which he wanted to correct, but rather the publication in Easter that same year of the first part of Herder's *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*.³² The text of Kant's essay itself bears no trace of an engagement with Herder's work; this was to come in the 'Reviews' he published in 1785 (discussed in Chapter Five). Yet it is difficult to avoid concluding that one reason Kant had for writing an article on the philosophy of history at this stage in his career was the appearance of a work on this very topic which he took a dim view of. Herder's comparative popularity (and popular style) would moreover have raised the profile of the philosophy of history in a way which would make Kant's intervention all the more effective. Kant's title thus announces the challenge his own work presents to that of his former pupil: the singular 'Idea' unmistakably contrasting with Herder's proliferating, plural 'Ideas'.

This conjunctural and polemical significance of Kant's use of the term 'Idee' is of course only part of the story, for the term already had considerable importance in the philosophical system which Kant had introduced three years previously with the publication of the first *Critique*. Kant writes there that 'Nobody attempts to establish a science without grounding it on an idea' (A834/B862). In so far then as a 'universal history' had pretensions to scientificity, it too would have to be based on an 'idea'. What, in any case, would a universal history be? It would be the history of all humanity, so universal in the sense of inclusive. This comprehensiveness could take in, as was often the case with traditional universal histories, the future as well as the past. Yet it would presumably have to be more than just a collection of all the facts, actual and conjectural, falling under the intersection of the concepts 'human' and 'history'. For Kant, this would amount to what he calls an 'aggregate', a mere 'distributive unity', and would fail to satisfy reason's demand for 'systematic' or 'collective unity' (A644/B672): 'Under the government of reason our cognitions cannot at all constitute a rhapsody but must constitute a system' (A832/B860). In order to achieve this more

³² Kant was invited to review it in July 1784 that year (see the letter to Kant from C. G. Schütz, 10th July 1784, 10:394). It seems that at about that time he borrowed Hamann's copy to have an initial look (Kuehn, *Kant*, pp. 292, 487 n. 73). Kant's review of Part One appeared within just two months of the 'Idea' essay. Had Kant read *This Too a Philosophy of History*? There is nothing to suggest that he had, although he certainly did read Herder's other major publication of 1774, his *On the Oldest Document of the Human Race* (see the correspondence between Kant and Hamann about the book from April 1774, 10:153-161).

determinate form of unity, Kant holds that particular systematizing concepts are needed, which he calls *ideas*.³³

The main place where Kant deals with the systematizing role of ideas in science is the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic (A642-704/B670-732). The Appendix comes in two parts, the first entitled 'On the regulative use of the ideas of pure reason', the second 'On the final aim of the natural dialectic of human reason'. In what follows I shall deal with both in turn.

The Transcendental Dialectic as a whole deals with the metaphysical or transcendental ideas which reason generates in its search for the unconditioned. Kant's strategy is to demonstrate the aporias which result when these are taken to mark out supersensible objects of knowledge, ones which transcend the world of experience (e.g., the idea of the immortal soul and God). The first part of the Appendix starts by suggesting that the transcendental ideas nonetheless also have an immanent use (as opposed to the bad transcendent use Kant has been criticizing), which leads one to expect that the discussion will once again focus on the traditional metaphysical ideas of God and so on. But not so: it is only in the second part that the metaphysical ideas previously examined in the Transcendental Dialectic are again considered. Instead, in the first part Kant introduces some new, formal ideas and their associated principles. The central idea is that of systematicity. This in turn has three subordinate ideas, unity, manifoldness and affinity, which mark out the three vectors of systematic order (A662/B690). These ideas, 'taken in the highest degree of their completeness' define the ideal 'projected unity' which reason always strives for. Reason's objects are the cognitions provided by the understanding, which present themselves as a mere 'distributive unity' or 'aggregate' (A644-5/B672-3). Using the threefold idea of systematicity, reason organizes these cognitions and directs the understanding to find more which can be fitted into the emerging pattern. The idea of systematicity itself is unconditioned: it marks out an infinite and perfect order which reason with its theoretical constructions can only ever approximate (A647/B674, cf. also A663/B691). Reason's use of its ideas of systematicity is therefore regulative, 'bringing order into particular cognitions as far as is possible'.

³³ We can therefore see that it is likely that Kant will share the expectation (articulated in particular by Schlözer – cf. pp. 13-14, n. 12 above) that universal history be more than just a compendium or chronicle. (For explicit confirmation of this, see pp. 32-33 below). It should also be noted that Kant's system/ aggregate contrast replicates Schlözer's. Some other instances of Kant's use of it can be found at A64/B89 and A832/B860.

Kant insists that reason's use of its regulative ideas cannot be merely 'logical', that is, merely an expression of its subjective preference for systematicity. Rather, reason must also presume that 'its goal' is in harmony with 'the arrangement of nature', that systematicity is a feature of nature as well as of itself (A651/B679). If this were not held to be so, reason would have no ground for believing that systematicity provided the 'touchstone for truth' (A647/B675), nor would it confidently expect and search for it in circumstances where it was far from evident (A657/B685). Kant terms this belief a transcendental principle or presupposition (A650/B678, A651/B679), arguing that the logical use of the regulative principles (as heuristic or methodological) is only possible on its basis. Thus the idea of systematicity is held to have 'objective but indeterminate validity' (A663/B691): it essentially involves 'the maxim of regarding such an order as grounded in nature in general' (A668/B696).

The ideas of systematic unity as such are purely formal. In order to have purchase in specific contexts of enquiry they have to be applied and instantiated. Kant gives examples from the fields of chemistry and psychology: 'ideas of pure earth, pure water' etc. (A646/B674), and 'the idea of a fundamental [mental] power' (A649/B677). These are all postulated theoretical entities, used to ground the unity (and difference) among, respectively, 'materials' and the various effects and faculties disclosed by 'inner sense'. Again, Kant stresses that each particular idea 'does not function merely as a problem for hypothetical use, but pretends to objective reality' (A650/B678). The idea is generated by reason, as staking out what would satisfy its drive for systematicity, but is then attributed to nature.

The problem with this move, which Kant repeats throughout the first part of the Appendix, is that such attribution appears as yet wholly ungrounded, if not unintelligible. Systematic order, as we have seen, is reason's own creation. Yet the transcendental idea of systematicity attempts to project this creativity onto nature. Reason needs reassurance that its theoretical constructions of systematic unity are not simply just that – its own constructions – so attributes that unity to nature itself. But nature itself, as 'the single given object' (A684/B712) demonstrates no comparable constructive agency, only mechanical connection. The transcendental presupposition that systematicity is (indeterminately) objective is insufficient to shore up the regulative use of reason.³⁴

³⁴ Thomas Wartenburg's account of the regulative use of ideas in science in 'Reason and the Practice of Science' is vitiated by his not seeing this problem. This is related to his taking Kant's account to be

Kant moves on to address this problem in the second part of the Appendix (indeed, this part only fully makes sense as response to it). He is ostensibly concerned here with the three metaphysical ideas investigated in the Dialectic proper, namely the psychological, cosmological and theological ideas (the soul, the world and God). These are now redescribed as themselves having regulative (or immanent) application, in accordance with the general account of the regulative use of reason given in the first part of the Appendix. In the process, something interesting occurs. The three transcendental ideas are usually taken as having their own form of metaphysical unity, as the ideas of the subject, the object and the totality of knowledge. However, in their regulative guises, the first two appear as mere instances, if very general ones, of systematicity,³⁵ whereas the last, the idea of a highest intelligence, is revealed as the keystone of the whole structure. As Kant writes, 'it is from the idea of a most wise cause that we take up the rule that reason is best off using for its own satisfaction when it connects up causes and effects in the world' (A673/B701).

The thought of such a 'highest intelligence' or 'most wise cause' is stated to be the only way in which it is possible to consider the world as a whole and in all its parts as forming a systematic unity. The regulative use of reason requires the thought of a divine world cause in order to be able to conceive of nature as itself systematically ordered, which in turn is required if we are to take reason's striving for systematicity to be anything more than its own subjective 'principle of economy' (A650/B678). The regulative idea of a highest intelligence or world cause (identified as the idea of God at A685/B713) is thus what underpins the transition from the merely logical use of the idea of systematicity to its transcendental use.³⁶

It is worthwhile clarifying what this argument is *not*. Firstly, it is not the argument that the regulative use of reason finds the idea of a divine world cause *useful*, as itself a

contained in the first part of the Appendix alone, whereas in fact the second part is, as we shall see, a necessary continuation of it.

³⁵ Remember that Kant prepared us for the regulative role of the idea of the soul in the first part of the Appendix, in the form of the 'fundamental power'.

³⁶ Oddly, having made so much of this distinction between the logical and the transcendental application of ideas in the first part of the Appendix, Kant neither uses nor refers to it at all in the second part. In fact, given what I am suggesting about the real purpose of the second part, this is really quite strange. There are other indications of a superficial lack of a join between the two halves, notwithstanding their deeper harmony. For example, in the first part, Kant denies that regulative ideas allow of a 'deduction' (A663-4/B691-2), while in the second part he claims that they do (A699-70/B697-8). This leads one to suspect that the first part may have been written after the first, without the second part being revised accordingly.

heuristic device for promoting the search for systematic order.³⁷ Kant clearly does believe that it is useful in this regard, but doesn't argue for its introduction simply on this basis, even though at times it can seem that he does. For example, he writes that 'we have to do merely with a regulative principle, which we recognize as necessary ... and for which we assume a supreme ground merely with the intention of thinking the universality of the principle all the more determinately' (A676/B704, underlining added for emphasis). This can be read as suggesting that whilst the regulative principle is necessary, the assumption of a 'ground' is simply a means of reinforcing our grip upon the principle, but not in itself a necessary condition for our use of it. Kant goes on, though, a few sentences later: 'I am not only warranted but even compelled to realize this idea, i.e., to posit for it an actual object' (A677/B705, underlining added for emphasis). (By giving the idea (of systematicity) an object Kant here means giving it a ground or cause, i.e. a 'higher intelligence'.) Similarly, and even more clearly, Kant subsequently states that 'reason cannot think this systematic unity in any other way than by giving its idea an object' (A681/B709, underlining added for emphasis; again, 'giving its idea an object' means positing a divine cause). It is indeed this stronger construal of the relation between the ideas of systematicity and God that the transcendental use of the former idea requires.³⁸ Accordingly, Kant urges that not only '*can* we ... assume a unique wise and all-powerful world author ... but we *must* presuppose such a being' (A697/B725, Kant's emphasis).

Secondly, it is not a teleological proof of the existence of God. The argument does not proceed from the perception of natural order to the claim that a divine creator must exist, but rather from the necessity to presuppose that nature is systematically ordered to the idea of a world-cause.³⁹ The extent to which that presupposition is borne out, i.e. by the successful application of ideas of systematicity in natural science, goes to support that presupposition, and does not add to the warrant we have for postulating the idea of its cause. Kant reiterates throughout that the regulative use of reason gives us no

³⁷ Susan Neiman's account of the regulative use of ideas frequently reduces Kant's argument to this merely heuristic level. She writes, for example, that the 'claim [that] God created the world ... is simply a model that we can use in giving life and body to the directive to seek systematic unity' (*The Unity of Reason*, p. 182, underlining added for emphasis).

³⁸ A related interpretation of this part of the Appendix would have it that its primary purpose is to provide a role for the metaphysical ideas, so as to rescue the systematicity of reason itself. No doubt it achieves this, but the impetus comes from the demands of the theoretical and regulative use of reason, not from a desire to sublimate its metaphysical tendencies.

³⁹ Cf. Kant's consideration of the 'physico-teleological proof' of God's existence (A620-6/B648-54).

grounds for believing that God exists, only instead for thinking that it is 'as if' there is such a being.

There are thus two ways in which one can misconstrue the regulative idea of a highest intelligence. One way is to underplay its role, by reducing it to a merely useful heuristic fiction. The other way, by contrast, is to exaggerate its force, and treat it as a teleological argument for the existence of a highest intelligence.

Kant indeed argues towards the end of the Appendix that it is more appropriate to talk of Nature rather than God 'because this restrains us from the presumption of making a bigger assertion than we are warranted in making, and at the same time points reason back to its proper field, which is nature' (A701/B729, cf. A699/B727). Referring to the idea of the highest intelligence as 'Nature' instead of 'God' therefore underlines its regulative status in two ways. Firstly, it is supposed to accentuate the abnegation of any existential claim, to make it 'clear that I ground things not on the existence or acquaintance with this being, but only from the idea of it' (A701/B729). Presumably 'Nature' achieves this by virtue of more evidently being a fictional personification.⁴⁰ Secondly, and more straightforwardly, 'Nature' directs us to nature, whereas the thought of God can encourage metaphysical day-dreams.⁴¹

Though the form of Kant's argument so far is clear, it is unlikely to be judged convincing. That there is a need to see the systematicity we expect in nature as somehow grounded in it is apparent, but why does this lead ineluctably to the idea of a highest intelligence as cause of the world? Kant's reason for thinking that it does relies on the idea that systematic order is something we know we can and do produce ourselves. In investigating what we evidently have not created, we can suppose it to be systematic only by thinking that it has been created in a manner analogous, if superior, to our own rational productions. Kant is much more explicit about such analogical inferences in the earlier consideration of the 'physico-teleological proof' of God's existence. The comparison there is drawn between 'the artful structure [of] natural products' and that of the products of 'human art':

once we are supposed to name a cause [for natural products], we could not proceed more securely than by analogy with such purposive productions [those of human art], which are the only ones where we are fully acquainted with the causes and the ways they act. Reason would not be able to justify to itself an attempt to pass over from a causality with which it is acquainted to obscure and unprovable grounds of explanation, with which it is not acquainted. (A626/B654)

⁴⁰ This argument is made explicitly in the *Critique of Judgment*, 5:383.

⁴¹ My interpretation in this paragraph follows that of Pauline Kleingeld, 'Nature or Providence? On the Theoretical and Moral Importance of Kant's Philosophy of History'.

(Notice here that the systematicity or 'artful structure' is taken as given; reason is presented as subsequently searching for 'a cause'. Kant's argument in the Appendix reveals that the analogy must operate first of all in the other direction. It is only in virtue of a prior and regulative assumption of some form of divine causality that reason is entitled to think it encounters 'artful structure' in nature, as opposed to this being just a subjective projection.)

The analogy between natural products and human art can also be drawn, more pertinently and more closely, between our construction of systematicity in our knowledge of nature, a human product, and that same systematicity considered as objective and therefore as if a divine product. The regulative use of reason enables the construction of epistemological systems which must be taken as mapping out and onto an original ontological construction.

As well as obliging us to think of systematicity as always created by a rational agent, the inescapable analogy with human rational activity requires the thought that such activity is necessarily *end-directed*. We create things, which are systematic, but for purposes, with aims in mind. So too, then, in respect of the transcendental presupposition of systematic unity. This must be thought of not only as created, but also as created in order to realize ends. The ends or aims served by the overall systematicity of nature of course remain as necessarily obscure as the similarly suppositive process of its creation. Theoretical inquiry has neither reason nor ability to push its investigations in either of these directions. The mere idea that nature is *purposive* confirms and grounds the presupposition of its systematicity, in tandem with the idea that it is a *creation* (the two ideas, for human reason, being indissoluble).

We can now see how complex Kant's doctrine of regulative ideas is. The central idea is that of systematicity (including its three subordinate ideas). This idea as such then features both as a logical idea (the subjective and formal goal of reason's endeavours) and as a transcendental idea (the formal structure of the world). Its use in theoretical inquiry requires its manifold application and instantiation - as ideas of this and that postulated entity or classificatory category. Further, the transcendental idea necessarily involves the positing of the additional ideas of a higher intelligence (as ground and cause of objective systematicity) and the unknowable end or ends served by that systematicity. The regulative use of reason thus points both to theology and teleology.

I have so far presented the complete opacity to human reason of, on the one hand, the possible process by which natural systematicity could have been created and, on the other hand, its putative ends or aims as being of the same order. However, there is an important asymmetry between the two. The mere thought that it is as if nature is created suffices to account for the supposition of systematicity. Yet in so far as the purposiveness of that systematicity remains equally abstract, human reason will inevitably find its investigations somewhat stymied. That is, systematicity in its maximal sense is only arrived at in any particular instance when there is also a grasp of the end aimed at.⁴² (This is clearly the case with understanding of human systematicity.) Reason will therefore want to apply particular regulative ideas of ends in its investigation of nature, with a view to achieving a higher degree of systematicity:

This highest formal unity that alone rests on concepts of reason is the *purposive* unity of things; and the speculative interest of reason makes it necessary to regard every ordinance in the world as if it had sprouted from the intention of a highest reason. Such a principle, namely, opens up for our reason, as applied to the field of experience, entirely new prospects for connecting them up with teleological laws, and thereby attaining to the greatest systematic unity among them. (A686-7/B714-5)

Luckily nature itself (once again) answers to this demand. Teleology thus figures not only in the form of a background presupposition of empirical science (i.e., in terms of what Kant later calls, in the *Critique of Judgment*, ‘formal purposiveness’) but also as a mainstay of a particular type of empirical science (biology). For it is in organic nature that reason finds instances of systematicity which call for the application of ideas of ends. This is not so much because organic nature is simply more ordered than the rest of nature; rather, it is because it demonstrates a different *quality* of systematicity, namely the systematicity of *activity*. By activity we should understand something analogous to human activity itself, not the merely mechanical mobility of a clockwork device or planetary bodies (both of which we must think of as the *results* of such or similar activity). For Kant, then, the systematicity of living things obliges us to say that (it is as if) they have ends set for them by Nature which they are striving to reach and in relation to which all their parts and sub-processes are organized. This general idea (cf. A688/B716) is then applied to the various species of organisms, whose classification itself takes shape by means of regulative ideas of systematicity (cf. A651-6/B679-84). The end, though, which each individual member of the species is striving to realize, is

⁴² ‘Teleological explanations seem more genuinely explanatory than others because they explain systematicity in terms most comprehensible to us’ (Neiman, *The Unity of Reason*, p. 88).

(as far as we can tell) just the idea of (the perfection of) the species itself, the full and continuing realization of its potentialities.⁴³

Such teleological ideas of end are clearly meant to be part of the complex system of regulative ideas. Yet they are regulative in a quite particular sense. By now, though, the meaning of 'regulative' is no doubt already rather opaque, so a little clarification is in order. Reason's ideas were originally characterized as regulative because they marked out the unconditioned goal which reason itself strives for. That is, they regulate or direct its activity (cf. A644/B672). This regulative function is predicated upon the very unattainability of the goal itself: reason can only ever approximate the perfection of systematicity it holds out for itself (cf. A647/B674, A663/B691, also A509/B537). There is, then, no 'as-if'-ness about ideas of reason considered in this way: they are simply reason's ends. As the account unfolds, however, the regulativity of ideas takes on an additional sense. Reason finds itself positing pseudo-objects in the guise of 'ideas' in order to facilitate its pursuance of systematicity (such as the ideas of basic elements or fundamental powers mentioned earlier). These ideas are regulative in an additional sense, in that they postulate, if 'problematically' or provisionally, the existence of something. When Kant calls these ideas 'regulative' (or, often, 'merely regulative') he means to convey the problematical status of the existence of these objects as well as their role in directing or underpinning empirical enquiry. This problematical status is of course most relevant to those ideas whose objects it would be impossible for the progress of science eventually to discover, and above all to the idea of a 'world-cause' which serves as the keystone of the whole system. Regulativity thus has two aspects. The first involves the goals reason sets itself (the 'logical' use of ideas). The second relates to the associated postulation of entities (the 'transcendental' use of ideas), and it is here that the qualifier 'merely' crops up. The teleological ideas of ends are regulative in both these senses, functional and ontological, yet their functional role is necessarily *double*. The idea of an organism's end regulates our inquiry into that organism, but is also supposed to regulate the very activity and organization being examined.

And so to return finally to the question of universal history. The systematicity required for the construction of a genuinely universal history is only possible by the

⁴³ Compare A317-8/B374: 'A plant, an animal ... these show clearly that they are possible only according to ideas; although no individual creature, under the individual conditions of its existence, is congruent with the idea of what is most perfect of its species'.

application of a unifying 'idea': 'Nobody attempts to establish a science without grounding it on an idea' (A834/B862). That Kant expects his 'idea for a universal history' to have exactly this function is made explicit at the end of the essay: 'this idea may yet serve as a guide to us in representing an otherwise planless *aggregate* of human actions as conforming, at least when considered as a whole, to a *system*' (#9, 8:29, underlining added for emphasis).⁴⁴ This claim echoes a programmatic statement made in the Appendix to the Transcendental Dialectic about the regulative use of ideas in science:

This unity of reason always presupposes an idea, namely that of the form of a whole of cognition, which precedes the determinate cognition of the parts and contains the conditions for determining a priori the place of each part and its relation to the others. Accordingly, this idea postulates complete unity of the understanding's cognition, through which this cognition comes to be not merely a contingent aggregate but a system interconnected in accordance with necessary laws. (A645/B673, underlining added for emphasis)

So what kind of idea? The most likely candidate would seem to be a regulative teleological idea, on the basis that human activity is more like that of other living species than, say, the movement of heavenly bodies (notwithstanding Kant's invocation of Kepler and Newton at 8:18). In this case, universal history would be, as Allen Wood says, 'a branch of *biology*'.⁴⁵ But surely this would be a very *odd* way of proceeding? Why should we attempt to understand human action on the model of other organisms when our understanding of those organisms relies upon the analogy we make between our own end-directed behaviour and the apparently end-directed behaviour we take them to display? (cf. the passage from A626/B654, quoted at the bottom of p. 29). Surely it must be possible to conceive of a less indirect route. In particular, if it were the case that human actions in general were themselves intentionally oriented towards an idea, then the universal historian would not have to *apply* an idea in order to systematize the data, but would be able simply to *recognize* this idea in history. That ideas can have this practical function, namely of regulating our actions as well as our theoretical endeavours, is emphasized by Kant at the very outset of the Transcendental Dialectic (A314-7/B371-4). Indeed, taking his lead from Plato, he implies there that ideas have their place first and foremost in this realm, 'where human reason shows true causality' (A317/B374). Two practical regulative ideas are mentioned: the idea of virtue and the idea of 'the Platonic republic'. As ideas, both are thoughts of a kind of

⁴⁴ Again, note Kant's agreement with Schlözer's stipulations for universal history (cf. pp. 13-14, n. 12).

⁴⁵ *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 208.

perfection, which human action can aim at, but never completely accomplish. In respect of the second idea (which is more extensively discussed than the first), Kant writes:

A constitution providing for the greatest human freedom according to laws that permit the freedom of each to exist together with that of others ... is at least a very necessary idea.... Even though this may never come to pass, the idea of this maximum is nevertheless wholly correct when it is set forth as an archetype, in order to bring the legislative constitution of human beings ever nearer to a possible greatest perfection. (A316-7/B373-4, underlining added for emphasis)

The idea of the optimal integration of the freedom of individuals can serve to motivate and guide the efforts of individuals to bring it about. As a task which is both collective and endless, its undertaking would require *historical* time. This idea therefore seems perfectly suited to function as an 'idea for a universal history'. Indeed, the 'Platonic republic', in the more abstract form of the 'perfect constitution', is of course what Schultz went on to claim was the germ of Kant's proposed philosophical history (see p. 23).⁴⁶ To construct a universal history on this basis would be to ground it in *rational practical* teleology, the end-directed comportment of rational agents. To the extent that their efforts were successful, the resulting universal history would track the emergence of collective agency, this being what the ever-improved forms of political organization would generate. This teleological process would thus reflexively strengthen itself, by bringing human beings closer together and enhancing their collective ability to control their destiny.

The first *Critique* opens up two possible directions in which a universal history could go. On the one hand, the desired systematicity could be achieved by applying the idea of a 'plan of nature', such as investigators use in relation to organic nature. On the other hand, the idea could be discovered in history, as one of the goals rational agents set for themselves. In the first case, the plan would be 'regulatively' referred to 'Nature'; in the second, actually attributed to human beings, both individually and, increasingly, collectively. It might seem obvious that the rational teleology approach is the one Kant would adopt in his outline philosophical history, given its applicability to human beings as practically rational agents. (Schultz seems to have thought so.) We shall see in the next chapter whether this is so.

⁴⁶ Schultz, as the author of a comprehensive *Exposition of Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason'*, would have been familiar with Kant's discussion of the idea of the Platonic republic (though it does not figure in his account of the *Critique*).

Chapter Three: Kant's historical teleology

We saw in the last chapter that the first *Critique* provided two kinds of regulative idea with which one could construct the outline of a universal history: on the one hand, a theoretical idea, constructed on the basis of natural teleology; on the other, a practical idea, taken instead from rational teleology. Looking now to the 'Idea' essay, we find Kant almost immediately appearing to reject both approaches. At the beginning of the second paragraph of the introductory comments, he writes: 'Since human beings neither pursue their aims purely by instinct, as the animals do, nor act in accordance with any integral, prearranged plan like rational cosmopolitans, it would appear that no systematic [*planmässig*] history of humanity is possible (as it would be, for example, with bees and beavers)' (8:17, translation amended). The project of universal history seems to founder at the very outset. The course of human history is so chaotic, it seems, that it resists any form of systematization. It is not just simply unorganized, such that it allows ordering, but is instead disorganized, preventing any attempt to structure it. Neither of the two types of teleological order can mesh onto it. The problem is that human beings evidently do operate teleologically, but, unlike comparable animals or rational cosmopolitans, their ends are not harmonized and united into or as if by the one idea. Instead, they are all at odds: 'everything as a whole is made up of folly and childish vanity, and often of childish malice and destructiveness' (8:18).

The two teleological accounts Kant invokes here underpin quite different kinds of history. He discusses the possibility of systematic history with regard to animal species (as in '*natural* history'), but of course such history would present the simple repetition of patterns of development and behaviour through the generations, and would not have to account for change over historical time, nor be able to do so. By contrast, the kind of universal history appropriate to rational cosmopolitans would have to allow for the possibility of historical change. Indeed, as rational agents working to a plan, such beings would have a progressive history, as they endeavoured to approximate their regulative practical goals.

It should be noted straightaway that Kant presents the dilemma facing the prospective universal historian in a manner which relies upon a very strong conception of rational teleology. That is to say, the contrast is drawn between animals and rational *cosmopolitans*, with the latter understood as agents who have already all agreed on their

joint plan of action. It is as if such agents were already citizens in a perfect (cosmopolitan) state, such as would enable them to achieve this degree of unanimity. This at least leaves open the possibility that there might be other, weaker forms of rational teleology which might find more purchase in relation to human history.

The two teleological models Kant refers to at the beginning of 'Idea', natural and collectively rational, generate distinct conceptions of history, namely static and developing. Although human beings act in ways that prevent the application of either of these teleological models, nonetheless the course of their history displays a kind of change similar to that found in the second of these. It is of course because of this historical heterogeneity that the whole issue of the possibility of a universal, systematized *history* becomes relevant in the first place (as compared with the uniformity of the past in 'natural history'). The *form* of human history thus encourages the application of rational teleology, although its content does not.

The tendency to think of universal history in terms of rational teleology is motivated in two further ways, practical and theoretical. Firstly, the very self-conception human beings can have of themselves as rational and free agents inevitably inclines them to expect history as a whole to conform to a rational plan. Kant stresses that the fact that it doesn't provokes 'indignation [*Unwillens*] ... despite the apparent wisdom of individual actions here and there.... The result is that we do not know what sort of opinion we should form of our species, which is so proud of its supposed superiority' (8:17-18, translation amended). Secondly, a history of rational world citizens would not have to make recourse to the 'merely' regulative props indispensable in natural science, and so would answer all the more satisfactorily to reason's demand for total intelligibility. In other words, given that 'reason has insight only to what it itself produces according to its own design' (Bxiii) and that it is in the realm of practice that 'human reason shows true causality' (A317/B374), the most adequate universal history would be one that tracked the practical rational causality of humanity.

There are three reasons, therefore, why the prospective universal historian will tend towards systematization by means of rational teleology. Yet this is not possible: human beings do *not* 'act in accordance with any integral, prearranged plan like rational cosmopolitans'. It would appear that the philosophical historian, faced with this impasse, now has no room to move in. Kant, though, breezily declares that there is another route: 'The only way out for the philosopher, since he cannot assume that humanity follows any rational *objective of its own* [*vernünftige eigene Absicht*] in its

collective actions, is for him to attempt to discover a natural objective [*Naturabsicht*] behind this senseless course of human events' (8:18, translation amended). Given that the rational teleology approach appears to fail, therefore, the only recourse is to try again with natural teleology. But why does Kant think that this is at all promising? Haven't we already been told that the organic 'natural history' model will not work here?

Kant's justification for appealing to a *Naturabsicht* is in fact quite straightforward. Although human history is disanalogous with natural history in that it is properly historical and isn't instinctually determined, it does, like natural history, involve individuals who have no 'agreed plan'. In the case of animals, this absence of plan doesn't vitiate the purposive systematicity, as this is intelligible in the light of a regulative intention of Nature, in accordance with which the creatures operate unwittingly. That is, to understand the purposive design and behaviour of, say, bees, the investigator has to think of these as fulfilling a plan of Nature's. Nature here is personified as an intelligent, designing agent. (Remember that Kant made it clear in the first *Critique* that this is the most appropriate way to characterize the intelligent author to whom reference must be made in teleological investigations.) Kant's hunch is that it might be possible to find a *Naturabsicht* which fits human history and which would help generate the desired systematicity. Human history is not the *same* as natural history, but it might be *like* it. (As we shall see, the *Naturabsicht* also ultimately leads to a *vernünftige Absicht*, the very absence of which originally occasioned this detour into natural teleology.)

Our suspicions are likely to be aroused by Kant's reference to the idea of a natural objective, as this sounds as if it will involve the fanciful postulation of an extrinsic purpose served by the course of human history, similar perhaps to Herder's idea that history is a pageant arranged by God for his own benefit. In fact, the regulative idea of a natural objective is meant to function reflexively: it amounts to the general claim that the aim of every living species is its own perfection. 'Nature's intention' is that each individual (or pair or group) fully realizes (or comes close to so doing) the capacities of the species (cf. A317-318/B374, cited on p. 32, n. 43).

The idea of a natural objective thus forms a key element of natural teleology. Kant expands on its role in the first 'Proposition' of the essay:

All the natural capacities of creature are destined sooner or later to be developed completely and in conformity with their end. This can be verified in all animals by external and internal or

anatomical examination. An organ which is not meant for use or an arrangement which does not fulfil its purpose is a contradiction in the teleological theory of nature. (8:18)

The strategy of universal history is to apply this regulative maxim to human beings and see whether a plausible account of human history can be generated. The first and crucial step is taken in the Second Proposition:

In man (as the only rational creature on earth) those natural capacities which are directed toward the use of his reason are such that they could be fully developed only in the species, but not in the individual. Reason, in a creature, is a faculty which enables that creature to extend far beyond the limits of natural instinct the rules and intentions it follows in using its various powers, and the range of its projects is unbounded. But reason does not work instinctively, for it requires trial, practice and instruction to enable it to progress gradually from one stage of insight to another. Accordingly, every individual man would have to live for a vast length of time if he were to learn how to make complete use of all his natural capacities; or if nature has fixed only a short term for each man's life (as is in fact the case), then it will require a long, perhaps incalculable series of generations, each passing on its enlightenment to the next, before the seeds implanted by nature in our species can be developed to that degree which corresponds to nature's intention. (8:18-19)

In essence, therefore, universal history is made possible by means of the application of *natural* teleology to *rational* beings. Nature's plan is that human beings, like other living creatures, fully develop all their capacities. Rational capacities, unlike instinctual ones, allow of and in fact demand endless development. Given that human beings are finite (this is part of what it is for them to be natural creatures), this task must be accomplished by the species over successive generations. Humanity is therefore necessarily historical.⁴⁷

Kant seems initially reluctant to follow through on the logic of his own argument and call reason 'a natural capacity'. As a result we get in the Proposition itself the symptomatically awkward locution, 'natural capacities directed toward the use of reason', whatever that means. The following elaboration of the Proposition makes it plain that it is reason itself which develops over time, not some putative natural capacities which sustain its use. Kant's initial scruple is quickly forgotten, though, for thereafter he repeatedly uses 'natural capacities' to refer to what are clearly *rational* ones (e.g. #4, *passim*). To an extent, we may feel that this is warranted simply because rationality pertains to human beings as part of their 'nature'. But this is to use 'nature' in a different sense to that which is operative in 'the teleological theory of nature' (#1, 8:18).

There is a further difficulty, the resolution of which will in turn justify Kant's naturalistic characterization of rationality. The difficulty is that Kant's argument can seem to be in danger of proving too much. If human beings are historical because they

⁴⁷ R. G. Collingwood comments: 'Kant has here achieved the remarkable feat of showing why there should be such a thing as history; it is, he shows, because man is a rational being, and the full development of his potentialities therefore requires an historical process' (*The Idea of History*, p. 98).

are rational, why doesn't their history display tranquil and orderly progression? This is indeed what seems to be suggested in the picture of generations 'each passing on its enlightenment to the next'. It is as if each generation is as rational as the others, handing onto its successors the results of its endeavours and thereby helping to achieve incremental advance. As Herder pointed out in relation to Iselin and others, this conception of progress bears little relation to the historical record.

The problem arises because there are two senses in which reason determines human historicity. On the one hand, the *application* of reason to tasks human beings can set themselves, such as improving their material conditions, can generate an endless historical sequence. This is the sense implicit in the model referred to in the previous paragraph. On the other hand, the *development* of reason as a faculty also requires historical time. It can seem that Kant's argument in the Second Proposition trades on the first sense, whereas in fact it relies upon the second. Indeed, this is the real point of describing reason as natural: it too must grow and unfold, like a natural organ. Human historicity results originally not from the fact that human beings *are* rational but from the fact that they have the capacity to *become* rational.⁴⁸

For Kant, the development of rationality amounts to more than an endless maximization of its instrumental potency. It also involves the increasing awareness of reason's ability to set its own ends. This in turn means that the species will have gradually to attain collective agency. Rationality requires that human beings ultimately comport themselves in the manner of 'rational cosmopolitans', acting in accordance with an agreed plan. The development of reason thus connects directly with the process of approximating the perfect political constitution as outlined in the first *Critique*. In coming ever closer to this ideal state, human beings will progressively acquire the capacity to act as a collective agent, that is, *as* humanity. The quasi-organic way in which reason develops amounts in part to this knitting together of individuals into a harmonious unity.

We can now see how Kant's idea for a universal history *combines* natural teleology with rational teleology. There are in fact two ideas at work in it, not simply one as suggested by the title. The first idea, taken from natural teleology, is that of the full development of the capacities of the species, and the second idea, taken from rational

⁴⁸ Kant writes in his *Anthropology* that 'man, as an animal endowed with the capacity for reason ... can make of himself a rational animal' (7:321). Collingwood again: 'History, then, is a progress toward rationality, which is at the same time an advance in rationality' (*The Idea of History*, p. 99).

teleology, is that of the species coming to act as a collective agent though ever perfecting its political institutions. Our history is not like that of rational cosmopolitans, but it could well be that of agents *coming to be* rational cosmopolitans.

Universal history thus shares with the study of organic nature the regulative idea that species are such that they can achieve the full development of their capacities. Unlike organic nature, though, historical teleology involves the use of this idea with regard to rational creatures. This has two general consequences. Firstly, human beings have a genuinely historical existence (due to both the development and the application of reason), something not to be found at all elsewhere. Secondly, the extent to which human beings, like other creatures, have to be interpreted as functioning in accordance with a plan of nature because they act without a plan of their own is necessarily qualified. The full development of their rational capacities (which is the *Naturabsicht*) must involve the acquisition of collective agency, which precisely means that human beings will come to agree a plan of their own. 'Nature's plan' is for humanity to have eventually a plan of its own, and so has a curiously self-effacing quality. Its satisfaction requires its own progressive evanescence. As they approach the status of rational cosmopolitans, human beings will continue the process of developing their capacities, but in an increasingly self-conscious manner.

It is important to stress these aspects of Kant's historical teleology, as many recent commentators have tended to over-emphasize its similarity to natural teleology. This tendency is certainly a salutary correction to the usual preference for *predominantly* moral interpretations, which disregard or deprecate the elements of natural teleology, but itself goes too far in the other direction. For example, Allen Wood, a particularly prominent exponent of this new approach, writes that Kant's 'theory of human history ... is "naturalistic" ... in that it does attempt to understand humanity as a biological species in the same way as other animals are to be understood'.⁴⁹ This claim is correct at a formal level, in that universal history only gets going by virtue of the use of the principal regulative maxim of natural teleology (i.e. Kant's 'First Proposition'), but at the substantive level it is clearly wrong, as the outcome of the use of this maxim is a completely *sui generis* account. In a similar vein, Wood states that 'Kant's philosophy of history is "naturalistic" in that he treats history as a branch of *biology*'.⁵⁰ Not so: the

⁴⁹ Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 207 (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 208 (his emphasis).

application and consequent *adaptation* of a biological principle by the philosopher in this context do not make the results natural science.

This 'naturalistic' reading is encouraged by Kant's insistent and continual appeal to the personification of Nature in the 'Idea' essay. Nature, we read throughout, wills, gives, uses, knows, compels and imposes. It has already been pointed out that this language is quite consistent with the characterization of natural teleology in the first *Critique*, and so does not, contrary to Yovel's claim,⁵¹ mark a regression into pre-critical dogmatism. But does it not nonetheless confirm the equation of historical teleology with natural teleology? There are two points to be made in response here. Firstly, while Kant does continue to refer in this way to 'Nature' right up to the end of the essay, he significantly adverts in the penultimate paragraph to 'Providence' instead (#9, 8:30). This shift to an overtly moral conception of the world author confirms that humanity's historical task will *in due course* be the realization of a *moral* world order. The role of 'Providence' is to underpin the practicality of reason's own ethical projects, not to serve as the nominal locus of the plan human beings unconsciously carry out. I will say more about this in the next chapter.

Secondly, the very insistence with which Kant appeals to 'Nature' demonstrates the extent to which historical teleology is *not* wholly naturalistic. This sounds paradoxical, but follows from the peculiar character of that teleology. The idea of 'Nature's plan' or 'objective' is taken from the study of organic nature, but functions differently there. We expect, Kant holds, when investigating living creatures, to find that it is at least possible for each individual (or pair or group) to develop fully (or near enough) the capacities of the species. Nature's plan is thus for bees and beavers to be more or less as they are. With humanity, though, things are different: the natural objective necessarily remains only ever partially fulfilled (human beings have yet to become what they are). The plan therefore always stands out from the course of human history, rather than being in effect adequately actualized in it, as in 'natural' history. This incompleteness marks out the plan's historical, futural status, indeed the demand that humanity attain to a position from which it can rationally direct its continuing realization. As a result, the universal historian is perhaps obliged to be *more* emphatic in making recourse to talk of 'Nature's plan' than the natural teleologist from whom it was adopted.

⁵¹ Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, pp. 154-155.

In sketching out the way in which Kant wants to interweave natural and rational teleology I have rather jumped ahead of the argument as it unfolds in the Idea essay. To return, then, to where we were: having informed us in the Second Proposition what 'Nature's plan' is, Kant now turns in the Third to the 'means' it uses to achieve its purpose. The primary means is, we should not be surprised to read, reason itself, along with the absence of instinctual prowess:

Nature has willed that man should produce entirely by his own initiative everything which goes beyond the mechanical ordering of his animal existence, and that he should not partake of any other happiness or perfection than that which he has procured for himself without instinct and by his own reason. For nature does nothing unnecessarily and is not extravagant in the means employed to reach its ends. Nature gave man reason, and freedom of will based upon reason, and this in itself was a clear indication of nature's intention as regards his endowments. For it showed that man was not meant to be guided by instinct or equipped and instructed by innate knowledge; on the contrary, he has meant to produce everything out of himself. Everything had to be entirely of his own making – the discovery of a suitable diet, of clothing, of external security and defence (for which nature gave him neither the bull's horns, the lion's claws, nor the dog's teeth, but only his hands).... (#3, 8:19)

Humanity therefore starts in conditions of scarcity – not so much a scarcity of external resources as of the equipment with which to secure them – and has to work out for itself how to get by in the world. But Kant considers that this is not enough to account for a genuinely progressive momentum. Why will our primitive human beings not be content with the first form of diet, clothing, etc that they produce, or some subsequent forms which seem (to them) to put them on a par in terms of the conveniences of life with other animals?

It is to rule out this possibility that Kant introduces in the following proposition his famous thesis of 'unsocial sociability'.

The means which nature employs to bring about the development of innate capacities is that of antagonism within society, in so far as this antagonism becomes in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order. By antagonism, I mean in this context the unsocial sociability of men, that is, their tendency to come together in society, coupled, however, with a continual resistance which constantly threatens to break this society up. This propensity is obviously rooted in human nature. Man has an inclination to live in society, since he feels in this state more like a man, that is, he feels able to develop his natural capacities. But he also has a great tendency to live as an individual, to isolate himself, since he encounters in himself the unsocial characteristic of wanting to direct everything in accordance with his own ideas. (#4, 8:20-21)

Kant goes on to demonstrate how such antagonism leads to the generation of 'law governed social order', and it is this aspect of the thesis that has traditionally attracted most attention. But in Proposition Four itself (and to a lesser extent in the following Proposition as well), the focus is on the way in which social antagonism serves to stimulate the development of human abilities. It has this effect by generating 'self-seeking pretensions', such as 'the desire for honour, power or property', which

'encourage man towards new exertions of his powers and thus towards further development of his natural capacities' (8:21).

It can now appear that Nature is playing a more interventionist role, kitting human beings out with specific inclinations so as to realize its end. Moreover, these would seem to be inclinations which we might well want to be without, or at least hope would be eradicated in the course of historical progress. But when examined more closely, 'unsocial sociability' reveals itself to be just the way in which *reason* itself is manifested. Kant explains the sociability element of the oxymoron not by appeal to some kind of herd-instinct, but rather by virtue of the fact that only in society does man 'feel able to develop his natural capacities', these capacities of course being essentially *rational* ones. Sociability is thus the result of an indistinct sense that human beings are creatures whose 'capacities are such that they can only be fully developed in the species, but not in the individual' (#2, 8:18). In opposition to this is the inclination to unsociability, 'the characteristic of wanting to direct everything in accordance with [one's] own ideas [*nach seinem Sinne*]' (#4, 8:21). This is surely a crude form of autonomous self-determination, distortedly expressed in the form of rationally engendered self-regard (what Kant will subsequently term 'radical evil'). So once more, Nature is responsible for nothing other than human beings having reason (and not much besides).⁵²

The picture so far then looks like this: human beings lack the instinctual equipment which enables animals to get by, so must apply reason in order to survive (#3). At the same time, reason generates desires and conceptions of self-regard which serve to ensure that the process of development continues even after basic survival needs have been met (#4). Of course, 'unsocial sociability' also leads to conflict between individuals, which in turn cuts against the tendency for their efforts to contribute to the realization of the capacities of the species. Consequently, what is further required is 'law-governed social order'. This too is then shown to emerge from the premises so far

⁵² Yet again, therefore, we are liable to be misled by Kant's emphatic talk of Nature. In his 'Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History', written a year and a half later, he goes some way to counteract it. For example, we read in the Fourth Proposition of 'Idea' that 'Nature should be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or ever power' (8:21). In the 'Conjectures', we are told by contrast that 'it is a peculiarity of reason that it is able, with the help of the imagination, to invent desires which not only *lack* any corresponding natural impulse, but which are even *at variance* with the latter. Such desires, which are known primarily as *lasciviousness*, gradually engender a whole host of superfluous or even unnatural inclinations to which the term *luxuriousness* applies' (8:111, underlining added for emphasis). The two statements are not inconsistent, once we realize that Kant's account of what is natural for human beings in the earlier essay is nothing other than for them to possess reason.

adduced, in that the conflict and chaos engendered by 'unsocial sociability' prompt individuals to undertake a sequence of prudentially motivated transitions into civil society. In this condition, 'unsocial sociability' is regulated and thereby rendered much more efficacious in the service of 'Nature's plan'. Human beings'

inclinations make it impossible for them to exist side by side for long in a state of wild freedom. But once enclosed within a precinct like that of a civil union, the same inclinations have the most beneficial effect. In the same way, trees in a forest, by seeking to deprive each other of air and sunlight, compel each other to find these by upward growth, so that they grow beautiful and straight – whereas those which put out branches at will, in freedom and in isolation from others, grow stunted, bent and twisted. All the culture and art which adorn mankind and the finest social order man creates are fruits of his unsociability. (#5, 8:22)

The development of social order facilitates the productiveness of 'self-seeking pretensions', whilst slowly mitigating their destructive force. The remaining difficulties they provoke in turn ensure that there is always pressure to improve further social arrangements. This process will continue indefinitely, ever more closely approximating the 'perfectly just civil constitution' (#5, 8:22). Kant has at last explicitly introduced his supposed *Lieblingsidee*.

Kant's proposal for a universal history is thus constructed on the basis of two ideas or ends: the first one, taken from natural teleology, of the full development of the capacities of the species, and the second one, associated with political philosophy, of the perfect state. Their interrelation is best expressed in the Eighth Proposition: 'The history of the human race as a whole can be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about a ... perfect political constitution as the only possible condition [*Zustand*] within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely.' (#8, 8:27) The realization of the two ideas is to run concurrently. Just as humanity can never stop developing its capacities, because the 'range of [reason's] projects is unbounded' (#2, 8:19), so too it will never have done perfecting its political organization. Discussing the difficulties involved in bringing about a perfect state, Kant writes: 'Nature only requires of us that we should approximate to this idea' (#6, 8:23).

Kant distinguishes two levels at which 'law governed social order' is to be achieved. The first is that of the state itself, the second, the international sphere. Whilst some progress has been made (in some parts of the world at least) at the first level, little has been made at the second, where states themselves behave much like individuals did before they were forced to enter into civil society. The next stage will be to start the process of regulating international relations and building 'a federation of peoples', which will in turn make it possible for the deformations presently afflicting civil society

to be progressively eliminated. Once again, the impetus for this transition will come from the miseries and costs brought about by unchecked antagonism:

Wars, tense and unremitting military preparations, and the resultant distress which every state must eventually feel within itself, even in the midst of peace – these are the means by which nature drives nations to make initially imperfect attempts, but finally, after many devastations, upheavals and even complete inner exhaustion of their powers, to take the step which reason could have suggested to them without so many sad [*traurig*] experiences – that of abandoning a lawless state of savagery and entering into a federation of peoples.... (#7, 8:24)

Kant stresses the haphazard character of the course history is likely to follow on its way to a cosmopolitan world order. ‘Progress’ toward the commencement of perpetual peace will be wayward and painful. Once underway, though, progress will adopt a much more regular pace. It should also take the form of a more balanced development of human capacities. Unrestrained antagonism, both at the national and international levels, not only holds up the process of development, but also ensures that such development as has taken place has neglected the all-important moral dimension:

When it is little beyond the half-way mark in its development, human nature has to endure the hardest of evils under the guise of outward prosperity before this final step (i.e. the union of states) is taken; and Rousseau’s preference for the state of savagery does not appear so very mistaken if only we leave out of consideration this last stage which our species still has to surmount. We are *cultivated* [*kultiviert*] to a high degree by art and science. We are *civilized* [*zivilisiert*] to the point of excess in all kinds of social courtesies and proprieties. But we are still a long way from the point where we could consider ourselves *moralized* [*moralisiert*]. For while this idea of morality is indeed present in culture, an application of this idea which only extends to the semblances of morality, as in love of honour and outward propriety, amount merely to civilization. (#7, 8:26, translation amended [‘moralized’ in place of ‘morally mature’])

The invocation of Rousseau in this passage provides a good opportunity to comment on the extent to which Kant is responding to and indeed agreeing with the citizen of Geneva’s critique of progress in the *Discourse on Inequality*. Rousseau’s opposition to progress is quite unlike Herder’s. Rather than denying, as we saw Herder do, that history is essentially characterized by a progressive dynamic, Rousseau accepts that it is, but argues that its tenor is mainly negative. The reason for this is that what generates ‘progress’ is not human rationality as such (what Rousseau terms ‘perfectibility’), but the spur given to this by the reflective selfishness all human beings develop in society (what he calls ‘amour-propre’). Progress is thus in large part attributable to reprehensible motivations. Moreover, given these motivations, progress invariably goes hand in hand with inequality and conflict, and the increase in social complexity and inequality in turn serve to heighten amour-propre. Kant’s ‘Idea’ essay clearly borrows much from this account. He agrees that perfectibility is a necessary but not a sufficient condition of progress: rational beings would be content to remain in an ‘Arcadian, pastoral existence’, with all their talents ‘hidden for ever in a dormant state’ were it not

for their 'self-seeking pretensions' (#4, 8:21).⁵³ The idea of 'unsocial sociability' is clearly inspired by Rousseau's 'amour-propre' (cf. *Religion*, 6:27, 93). And given this second and decisive factor, the course progress takes is inevitably ambivalent, involving as many disbenefits (violence, inequality) as benefits, if not more, at least so far.⁵⁴

Kant does not fully endorse the Rousseauian approach, however. The important differences are as follows. Firstly, in the *Discourse*, Rousseau argues that progress was not originally inevitable, because human beings initially lived asocially, and so did not acquire the amour-propre required to get historical advance going.⁵⁵ There is considerable scholarly debate about how serious this line of argument is intended to be.⁵⁶ We may suppose that Kant agrees with the skeptics, viewing it as a rhetorical device to isolate a notional 'pure state of nature' for contrastive purposes. In 'Idea' and elsewhere, human beings are assumed to have always existed in societies, and hence with 'unsocial sociability' from the outset. Secondly, Kant is more positive about the development of civil order, which he sees as following a prudentially guided progressive course. This will, or so he hopes, in time ensure that future progress takes a less pernicious form. There is little indication in Rousseau of a comparable degree of trust in human beings' ability to learn from their mistakes. There are of course optimistic elements in his thought, particularly in *The Social Contract* and *Émile*. Kant emphasizes these in 'Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History' and argues that his own way of construing the history of the species accommodates and reconciles their optimism and the pessimistic account of the past articulated in the *Discourse* (8:116). Kant's philosophical history certainly is a brilliant response to Rousseau, synthesizing and taking forward many of the latter's ideas. Whether it is, as Kant and many Kantians like to think,⁵⁷ genuinely in Rousseau's spirit, is another matter, which I will not go into here.⁵⁸

⁵³ Richard Velkley is mistaken in claiming that Kant places more importance on 'the stimulation of natural hardship' in bringing about progress than Rousseau does (*Freedom and the End of Reason*, p. 156). For both, subjective factors equally outweigh objective pressures.

⁵⁴ In 'Idea' the emphasis falls on war and aggression; inequality is rather neglected. But this Rousseauian theme is stressed in parallel discussions in 'Conjectures' (8:117-118 n.) and the *Critique of Judgment*, §83 (5:432).

⁵⁵ Rousseau, *The Discourses*, pp. 157-9, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3, pp. 160-2.

⁵⁶ Compare, for example, Victor Gourevitch, 'Rousseau's Pure State of Nature', with Henrich Meier, 'Rousseau's *Second Discourse*'.

⁵⁷ For example, Eric Weil: 'it took Kant to *think Rousseau's thoughts*' (cited by Gourevitch, 'A brief guide to further reading', p. xxxviii).

⁵⁸ One reason why Kant may have had an exaggerated sense of the optimism of Rousseau's work and felt that his own followed on from it is his belief that Rousseau had endorsed the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's plans for a federation of nations, published in 1713 under the title *Projet pour rendre la paix*

The difference, then, between Herder and Rousseau as critics of progress can be put like this. In response to the postulation of a progressive historical dynamic, Herder denies that there is any such primary dynamic: things aren't (and don't need to be) getting better. (And yet, for Herder, the belief that they are may in fact make things worse.) Rousseau, on the other hand, accepts that there is this general trajectory, but claims that it is on balance deleterious. (And yet, for Rousseau, the mutability that marks history does mean that change for the better could take place.) There are therefore two distinct ways of opposing Enlightenment historical 'optimism'. On the one hand, we have Herderian optimism (in the original sense of the term) – all *is* (and *has been*) good. On the other hand, we have Rousseauian pessimism – things have in fact been getting worse and worse.⁵⁹ Each position, though, incorporates an inverse rejoinder in respect of the future: with Herder, the fear that the belief in improvement may bring about decline; with Rousseau, the idea that awareness of decline may encourage attempts to rectify matters. The optimism and pessimism are thus both tempered. As critiques, Rousseau's account has the advantage of intimacy with its object – this indeed is what made it so powerful.⁶⁰ At the same time, however, this intimacy allows for the possibility that it could be taken up into a more sophisticated version of Enlightenment progressivism – which is more or less what Kant did.

Kant has so far identified *three* dynamics as the 'means' Nature uses in order to realize its plan:

1. rational inventiveness in response to scarcity and danger (#3);

perpétuelle en Europe. This belief was not unreasonable, given that Rousseau had composed a paraphrase of the Abbé's work, 'Extrait du Projet de Paix Perpétuelle de M. L'Abbé de Saint-Pierre', published in 1761. However, this was a piece of work Rousseau had been commissioned to do (and did reluctantly). (See Maurice Cranston, *The Noble Savage: Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1754–1762*, pp. 25–28.) Rousseau was in fact fairly skeptical about the proposal, and expressed his thoughts about it in his 'Jugement sur le Projet de Paix Perpétuelle', which was only published posthumously, in 1782. Kant knew of the Abbé's ideas before 1761, but after having read Rousseau's *Extrait* nearly always paired the two together as advocates of the plan for perpetual peace (cf. *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 3, p. CXLV). There are two such references in the published work, one in 'Idea', the other in 'Theory and Practice' (8:313). There is nothing to suggest that Kant knew that Rousseau was less than a whole-hearted supporter of the Abbé's scheme; certainly, his continuing references to Rousseau as proposing the very same idea imply that he was not aware of this.

⁵⁹ Herder was certainly aware of the dissimilarity between his position and Rousseau's. In his 'Journal of My Voyage in the Year 1769', he wrote: 'In every age – though in each in a different way – the human race has had happiness as its objective; we in our own times are misled if, like Rousseau, we extol ages which no longer exist and never did exist, if we make ourselves miserable by painting romantic pictures of these ages to the disparagement of our own' (B 89 / 9.ii:30). Herder rejects what he takes to be (not unreasonably) Rousseau's nostalgia. Note by contrast that Kant concedes there is something in this primitivism.

⁶⁰ Cf. Mark Hulliung, *The Auto-Critique of Enlightenment*, Chapter 2, 'Philosophical History'.

2. unsocial sociability leading to the development of human capacities (#4);
3. unsocial sociability leading to the establishment and development of civil order (##5-7).

These are not strictly separate, as unsocial sociability has its progressive effects by stimulating rational inventiveness. Indeed, Kant implies that the first dynamic tends only to function in this way. Nature, we should remind ourselves, in fact does nothing during the historical process. Having supposedly placed human beings, unpractised rational creatures, on the earth, it then retires, and leaves them to get on with it. It has also now been clarified that Nature's plan has two component ideas: (i) the idea of the full development of human capacities; (ii) the idea of 'the perfect civil union of humanity' (#9, 8:29).

It is tempting to describe Kant's theory so far as a theory about the *unintended consequences* of human action. It is evidently an unintended consequence of selfish and aggressive actions if these provoke other people to take steps to constrain their perpetrators.⁶¹ But this unintended consequence is precisely what the second set of individuals themselves intend. From the point of view of the universal historian, the reaction of the second group can itself (if successful) have unintended consequences, namely the benefit it brings to future generations and, more importantly, the contribution it makes to bringing humankind closer to a perfect civil order. Every successful institution of a new mode of social order is therefore progressive in two senses: to the individuals bringing it about, it marks an advance on the previous unsatisfactory state of affairs; to the universal historian, it is part of a process of approximating a perfect state of affairs. In the first instance, progress is retrospective and aims at a new (but inevitably temporary) stasis; in the second, it is forward-looking and aims at continual renovation. We can therefore identify three types of unintended consequence:

1. one type of actions provoking attempts to prevent or minimize them;
2. actions producing the benefits they were meant to have but for longer than was intended or envisaged;
3. actions incrementally amounting to progress towards a state of affairs not intended or envisaged by the agents.

⁶¹ These could indeed be the same people who were responsible for the selfish and aggressive actions, reflecting subsequently on the consequences of their actions.

It should be noted that the third type is not strictly speaking an unintended *consequence*, but rather an unintended *significance*. Universal history redescribes the operation of prudential reactive rationality as oriented towards a distant future *telos*.⁶² The primary unintended *consequence* remains the way in which unregulated unsocial sociability generates its own regulation. The progressively systematic way in which this occurs obliges the philosophical historian to attribute this consequence to an intentional agent, on the principle that the thought of order requires that of a designer. Consequently, instead of saying merely that unsocial sociability *leads to* law-governed social order, Kant tells us that 'Nature ... employs the unsociableness of human beings ... as a means of arriving at' it (#7, 8:24, underlining added for emphasis). Even more strikingly: 'All wars are accordingly so many attempts (not indeed by the intention of men, but by the intention of Nature) to bring about new relations between states' (#7, 8:24-25). Unintended consequences, if they produce order, have to be thought of as in some sense intended, though not of course by the human agents involved. In this, Kant is at one with many other eighteenth-century thinkers, such as Adam Smith with his 'invisible hand'.⁶³ We should not make the mistake, however, of assuming that Kant (and the rest) are attempting to *explain* the actions and events (in this instance, for example wars) by their effects.⁶⁴

In any case, historical progress is not solely to be explained by appeal to unsocial sociability and reactive rationality. These factors, as we have seen, generate advances which can be construed as incrementally realizing two regulative ideas, the full development of human capacities and the perfect political constitution, although this is no part of the intention of the human agents involved. This, though, is not to rule out the possibility that human beings could wilfully direct themselves towards these ideas and act accordingly. Indeed, as I have already argued, it follows from Kant's conception of what it would be for the human species to develop its rational capacities that the universal historian will anticipate that human beings (or at least some of them)

⁶² Cf. Michael Rosen's discussion of unintended consequences: one of the 'superior perspectives' from which they can be observed involves the supposition 'that actions have a wider significance as part of a progressive process of historical development' (*On Voluntary Servitude*, p. 101, cf. p. 124 also).

⁶³ Smith is similarly not averse to invoking 'the intention of Nature' and 'the plan of Providence' when accounting for the unintended generation of civic order. See J. Alvey, 'Adam Smith's view of history', p. 5. For evidence of Kant's familiarity with Smith's work, see Samuel Fleischacker, 'Values behind the market: Kant's response to the *Wealth of Nations*'. Fleischacker reckons that 'it is not inappropriate to see overtones of Smith in all of ['Idea']'s social teleology' (p. 386).

⁶⁴ A (hostile) account of historical teleology which I think makes this mistake is to be found in Jon Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 108-118.

will at some stage start comporting themselves in this way. In other words, progress will gradually become fully intentional. If this were not to occur, then the species would have failed to develop its abilities along the lines which the application of the maxims of natural teleology led us to expect.

Kant of course believes that this development has already begun in his historical present. The term he uses to refer to this pivotal quality of the current era is enlightenment. In his hands, the term '*Aufklärung*' is to an extent ambiguous, for he employs it not only to refer to the *sui generis* progressive potential of the present but also to designate the progressive dynamic of history as a whole. Both senses are to be found in 'Idea for a Universal History'. As to the broader idea of enlightenment, we are told in the second section that the task of developing humanity's capacities 'will require a long, perhaps incalculable series of generations, each passing on its enlightenment to the next' (#2, 8:19). In the fourth section, 'unsocial sociability' is introduced as the primary mechanism generating 'a continued process of enlightenment' (#4, 8:21). Finally, Kant's outline of political history in the ninth section tracks the survival through each 'revolution' of 'a germ of enlightenment' (#9, 8:30). The more focused version of *Aufklärung* figures in the eighth section: describing the political and social conditions of present-day Europe, Kant comments: 'thus ... *enlightenment* gradually arises' (#8, 8:28, Kant's emphasis). This enlightenment is not just yet more in the way of cultural development or improvement of political institutions, but rather the advent of a new principle of development and improvement.

The claim that enlightenment describes what is distinctive about the present is more fully articulated in another of Kant's short essays, namely 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?', published just one month after 'Idea for a Universal History'.⁶⁵ The term is initially applied in relation to the process of individual development: 'Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority [or immaturity: *Unmündigkeit*]' (8:35). Understood in this way as maturity, enlightenment is the condition in which autonomy has been achieved and can start to operate. In the normal run of events, of course, 'minority' is not 'self-incurred', but rather the necessary process of becoming mature. It can be 'self-incurred' if, once this development has taken place, the opportunity to 'come of age' is resisted. Kant's real position is that such arrested development is far more likely to be the result of

⁶⁵ December 1783, also in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*.

imposition from outside, not 'self-incurred'. Thus when considering *social* enlightenment, he writes 'that a people should enlighten itself is ... possible; indeed, this is almost inevitable, if only it is left its freedom' (8:36). Toward the end of the essay, Kant makes explicit the designation of his historical present in terms of *Aufklärung*:

If it is now asked whether we at present live in an *enlightened* age, the answer is No, but we do live in an *age of enlightenment*. As matters now stand, a good deal more is required for people on the whole to be in the position, or even able to be put into the position, of using their own understanding confidently and well in religious matters, without using another's guidance. But we do have distinct intimations that the field is now being opened for them to work freely in this direction and that the hindrances to universal enlightenment or to humankind's emergence from its self-incurred minority are gradually becoming fewer. In this regard this age is the age of enlightenment or the century of Frederick. (8:40)

Kant therefore has two conceptions of enlightenment. The first applies to history as a whole, and involves a gradual process whereby each generation learns from both the successes and the mistakes of its predecessors, thereby becoming successively more 'enlightened'. The second applies to the present, and marks a qualitative shift whereby humanity is for the first time entering into its maturity. The first construal of enlightenment of course also gives the present a privileged place: the progressive dynamic of history ensures that the present era is always superior to the past. Thus Kant can refer to his time as 'the age of the greatest enlightenment yet' ('The End of all Things', 8:339), with the implication that previous ages were also times of enlightenment, just with less of it than now. The 'maturity' model, by contrast, unavoidably marks out the past as *unenlightened*.

The discussion of the Eighth Proposition does not explicitly thematize this second idea of enlightenment along the lines of 'What is Enlightenment?' (although, as mentioned, the term is used in this sense, and emphasized, about half way through it). But the idea that the historical present is pivotal is central to it. Having stated in the Proposition itself that history can be seen as the process whereby a 'perfect political constitution' is approximated, Kant writes: 'We can see that philosophy too may have its chiliasm [*Chiliasmus*], but one whose occurrence can be promoted by its idea [*ihre Idee*], though only from afar, so that they are anything but over-fanciful [*schwärmerisch*]' (#8, 8:27, translation amended). Chiliasm is the religious doctrine that Christ will reign on earth for a thousand years before the last judgment. This idea is translated by Kant into 'philosophical chiliasm, which hopes for a state of perpetual peace based upon a federation of nations united in a world republic' (*Religion*, 6:34). I shall return in Chapter Five to discuss his appropriation of this Christian belief. For

now, what is important to note is Kant's willingness to conceive of historical progress as having as its end a temporal state, a *period* of time, rather than just, as usual, an asymptotically approximated *point*.⁶⁶ One can adduce two reasons as to why one might conceive of the goal of progress in this extended fashion: firstly, it helps us to consider the progressive process as involving attainment as well as endeavour; secondly, it articulates the important sense in which history is (that is, will be) stadial. Perpetual peace will be a qualitatively distinct phase in human history, and one which deserves millennial status. Of course, unlike the original religious version, the philosopher's millennium is not supposed to terminate, but rather continue into perpetuity, achieving ever greater perfection.⁶⁷ However, the difference between the two which Kant chooses to emphasize involves the role of human agency. The 'millennium' of perpetual peace is not a *schwärmerisch* delusion, he argues, because its 'occurrence can be promoted by its idea'. Philosophical chiliasm does not rely upon an 'invisible hand' to bring about the condition it anticipates. Instead, philosophy itself serves to stimulate interventions which consciously aim at the idea. The teleological dynamic of history is starting to become explicit: human beings can begin to take over the reins from Nature.

As yet, though, there is nothing to suggest that such enlightened chiliasm was not possible in earlier times (unless we take the reference to philosophy to suggest that only in *the* enlightenment has it taken off). Kant goes on to make it clear that the invocation of chiliasm at this late stage in the argument of the essay does expressly relate to the possibilities of his own historical present:

human nature is such that it cannot be indifferent even to the most remote epoch which may eventually affect our species, so long as this epoch can be expected with certainty. And in the present case [*in unserer Falle*] it is especially hard to be indifferent, for it appears that we might by our own rational projects [*vernünftige Veranstaltung*] accelerate the coming of this period which will be so welcome to our descendents. (#8, 8:27)

The clear implication of this passage is that such rational projects were *not* a realistic possibility for 'our' predecessors. This is confirmed in what follows, for Kant goes on to describe the conditions under which '*enlightenment*' has arisen in eighteenth-century Europe, and how the commitment to the good of 'the enlightened person [*der aufgeklärte Mensch*] ... must gradually spread upwards towards the thrones and even influence their principles of government' (#8, 8:28).

⁶⁶ Kant comments on this in *The Conflict of the Faculties*: the belief that 'the human race exists ... in perpetual *progression* toward improvement ... could also be called *chiliasm* if we view the goal of progress within a broad prospectus [*im weiten Prospect*]' (7:81, underlining added for emphasis).

⁶⁷ And yet we will see at the end of the next chapter that Kant is not averse to exploiting the implication of finality and consummation.

Kant's chiliasm could still justly be accused of being *schwärmerisch* were it not for the fact that he places the hoped-for millennial condition far off in the future. Even though we can assist in its realization, this can only be 'from afar [*von weitem*]'. In the passage quoted in the previous paragraph, it is implied that it is 'the most remote epoch'. This also contrasts with much religious chiliasm, which is notorious for expecting, indeed predicting, the imminent arrival of the thousand-year reign.⁶⁸ But it is not only the religious whose hopes can be mocked as 'enthusiastic'. Previously in the essay, Kant had commented that the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's plan for a federation of nations, which Kant himself approves of, had been ridiculed as '*schwärmerisch ...* because [the Abbé] thought its realization was so imminent' (#7, 8:24).⁶⁹ (Notice now how the two factors differentiating philosophical chiliasm from other, 'religious' forms of chiliasm stand in a degree of tension: philosophy both sets the goal in the far distance and yet tells us that we can hasten its approach.)

Enlightened individuals try to influence the public and powers that be and thereby help humankind along in the direction of a cosmopolitan world order. The Abbé de Saint-Pierre is indeed a good example, even though his efforts were flawed. What he lacked, it would seem, was a properly historical perspective on how this world order might be arrived at. This perspective, as elaborated by Kant, provides two things: firstly, a historical time-scale, whereby we recognize the immense period in which peace is to be achieved; secondly, an account of this historical mechanism which can assist in bringing it about. The Abbé lacked both these and as a result his interventions were ineffectual: firstly, as we have seen, he assumed that it would be possible very soon to institute a new international order; secondly, he had no idea as to how this would come about other than by moralizing appeals to the princes. The enlightened activist therefore needs the historical perspective Kant provides in order to be truly

⁶⁸ Kant was certainly familiar with one chiliast who conforms to this stereotype, namely the Swabian pietist and theologian, J. A. Bengel (1687-1752), whose work on apocalyptic chronology he discusses in the first part of *The Conflict of the Faculties* (7:62-63 n.). The editors of *Religion and Rational Theology* also detect his presence elsewhere in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (7:80-81) and in *Religion* (6:18). According to them, Bengel prophesied that the millennium would commence in 1836 (p. 457 n. 9), though a later note (ibid. p. 473 n. 31) gives 1738 (*sic*) instead. Ernest Benz identifies two such predictions, one for 1809, and a subsequent estimate of 1846 (*The Mystical Sources of German Romantic Philosophy*, p. 34). Of course, given the nature of Bengel's enterprise, it could well be that all of these dates can be correctly attributed to him.

⁶⁹ Kant in fact refers to the plan 'put forward by the Abbé de Saint-Pierre and Rousseau' (emphasis added). See footnote 58 above. L. W. Beck's translation of this passage has the plan for a league of nations being 'laughed at as fantastical by the Abbé de St. Pierre and by Rousseau, perhaps because they believed it was too near to realization' (*On History*, p. 19, emphasis added). Beck must have had Rousseau's genuine opinion of the Abbé's idea in mind in rendering the passage this way. However, the result is both inaccurate and incoherent.

enlightened. Kant's universal history does more than merely describe enlightenment: it enacts it as well. In disclosing Nature's plan to us, it enables us to make it our own. The point is reiterated in the Ninth Proposition: 'A philosophical attempt to work out a universal history of the world in accordance with a plan of nature aimed at a perfect civil union of mankind, must be regarded as possible and even capable of furthering the purpose of nature itself.' (#9, 8:29, underlining added for emphasis).

Some commentators on Kant's philosophy of history are so taken with its stress on 'Nature's plan' that they completely overlook the extent to which it explicitly adverts to enlightened action. For example, Booth writes: 'How [philosophy] can bring the millennium to pass Kant does not tell us'.⁷⁰ This then enables him to claim that Kant's philosophical history predicts an era of peace which will arrive without any intentional effort being required to bring it about: universal history's 'promise, its "sweet dream" does not require any effort by us'.⁷¹ This is plainly incorrect. (A more pertinent objection would question whether the belief that 'Nature' is inevitably going to force humankind to advance towards perpetual peace does not undermine the moral, enlightened commitment to work toward this same goal. I address this in Chapter Seven.)

The converse error is made by those commentators who are prone to exaggerate the sense of the importance of the present they detect in his historical writings. Yovel is a good example:

The Enlightenment is thus a turning point in history.... Once the philosopher has succeeded in grasping the immanent plan of nature, it ceases to be hidden; and its coming to philosophical consciousness creates a new historical situation ... after the cunning of nature has made the Enlightenment itself possible, there is a new departure in history.

Yovel goes on to suggest that he finds this somewhat 'utopian', but does not elaborate.⁷² Later on he writes: 'Now it is possible to look back on the history ... of religion and politics, and find the latent paradigm unwittingly produced in them.... [W]ith the full theoretical explication of these histories ... in politics, religion, and above all in ethics, a radically new era begins'.⁷³ I believe Yovel exaggerates the significance of the era of enlightenment, indeed as if it were an *enlightened* age, which Kant of course denies. Kant himself never describes his own era in these inflated terms. Yovel is of course perfectly aware that the 'rational history' is not expected to replace natural teleology but

⁷⁰ *Interpreting the World: Kant's Philosophy of History and Politics*, p. 108.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* p. 115.

⁷² *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, pp. 153-4.

⁷³ *Ibid.* p. 269, underlining added for emphasis.

will instead work alongside it, indeed in a subsidiary role. Yet he continues to indulge in talk of 'a radically new era'. His interpretation therefore suffers from being too dualistic, as is for example evidenced by the title of his fourth chapter: 'Rational History *versus* Natural Dialectic'.⁷⁴ This then forms the main theme of his *objection* to Kant's theory, i.e., that it is too *dualistic*.⁷⁵ Kant attempts to provide a much more unified account than that which Yovel describes.

In conclusion: Kant's universal history is teleological. The 'aggregate' of historical data is unified by showing how human actions over time amount to progress toward the realization of two goals, the full development of human capacities and the attainment of perfect civil order. The universal historian employs these two ideas to regulate the ordering of the data. In so far as they enable order to be constructed, these ideas must also be attributed to historical agents. For the most part, though, they cannot be attributed to historical human agents: even when they make progress, they are not doing so with the idea of it in mind. Accordingly, the developing diachronic order has to be regulatively attributed to 'Nature': what the universal historian uncovers is Nature's plan, not one held to by past individuals. Kant's historical teleology thus relies upon a version of *natural* teleology. As I have tried to emphasize, this should not obscure the fact that the primary and only properly explanatory form of teleology involved in universal history is that which operates at the level of the ordinary, end-directed behaviour of human beings. Indeed, Kant's extensions of teleology outside the human domain all rely upon analogy with it. The expectation that universal history be teleological thus derives from the understanding that human beings are consciously end-directed agents. So whilst universal history makes explicit appeal to the intentionality of Nature, this is required in order to be able to conceive of the order which unintentionally results from the intentional activity of human beings. Our end-directedness comes first. Not only that, but it is for Kant both possible and necessary that this develops in such a way as to obviate reference to 'Nature's plan'. Enlightened human beings are able to orient themselves to the ideas which had previously been the sole possession of Nature. In addition, part of the plan shared by Nature and the enlightened is the construction of forms of global civil order which will enable humanity as a whole gradually to develop and exercise collective agency. As well, then, as the nominal agency of Nature, there are three types of human teleological

⁷⁴ Ibid. p 158; see also his diagram on p. 195.

⁷⁵ Ibid. pp. 277-9.

comportment on which Kant builds his philosophical history: individual, but oblivious to the two ideas and prompted by unsocial sociability; individual and committed to the ideas; collective and committed to the ideas. The course of history should show a transition from the former to the latter, as human beings come to be rational cosmopolitans.

Chapter Four: Reconciliation and Theodicy

In the first *Critique*, Kant identifies three questions which he claims determine the scope of philosophy. These are ‘What can I know?’, ‘What should I do?’ and ‘What may I hope?’ The first question marks out the theoretical ambition of philosophy, the second, its practical scope, whilst the third question is ‘simultaneously practical and theoretical’ (A805/B833). Kant explicitly refers to his universal history as ‘philosophical history’ (‘Idea’, #9, 8:31), so in which of these senses is it ‘philosophical’?

For the most part, as we saw in the previous chapter, the emphasis in ‘Idea’ falls on the *theoretical* character of universal history. The ideas adduced serve to regulate and systematize an otherwise disordered array of empirical data, just as in other areas of theoretical enquiry. The task is outlined by reference to notable scientists, namely Kepler and Newton, and proceeds by employing principles taken from ‘the teleological theory of nature’ (8:18). At the same time, though, universal history also has a clear *practical* role. Individual agents in the present can use it to comprehend and regulate their own ethical, intellectual and cultural projects (rather than being buffeted around by ‘unsocial sociability’). Indeed, it is part of the narrative of Kant’s universal history *that* they do so.

Kant’s philosophical history can therefore be seen as answering to the first and second of the defining questions. But the third question touches on a motivation for it which is, if anything, more important still. To get a grip on this, it makes sense initially to think of it somewhat differently from the formulation given in the *Critique*.⁷⁶ Instead, we can take it as articulating a demand for a kind of existential reassurance, something like ‘how ought I to think of myself, *qua* human being?’ What is being asked for is a way of reconciling ourselves to the human condition. There are two aspects of the human condition that are particularly relevant here. The first is the chaotic and distressing character of the historical life of our species. This was described in ‘Idea’ in the following way:

We can scarcely help feeling a certain distaste on observing [human beings’] activities as enacted in the great world-drama, for we find that, despite the apparent wisdom of individual actions here and there, everything as a whole is made up of folly and childish vanity, and often of childish malice and destructiveness. The result is that we do not know what sort of opinion we should form of our species, which is so proud of its supposed superiority. (8:17-18)

The second is our own individual mortality. Kant touches on this in the second section of ‘Idea’: ‘every individual man would have to live for a vast length of time if he were

⁷⁶ It should be understood that in what follows I am describing just one strand of the many which Kant’s third question opens up.

to learn how to make complete use of all his natural capacities [i.e. reason] ... [but] nature has fixed only a short term for each man's life' (#2, 8:19). In both cases, the problem arises when the individual recognizes that she has reason, but then is confronted by facts which undermine this self-identification. If I, as a human being, am rational, then why have my fellows on the whole behaved so irrationally? Why am I unable to live up to my (infinite) rational potential?

These difficulties allow of religious, other-worldly resolution (of sorts), which Kant is himself not averse to propounding at times. For example, the 'distaste' we feel at the wrong-doing displayed in the past may perhaps be offset by the belief that the offenders face divine justice in the afterlife.⁷⁷ The disproportion between the length of our lives and the infinite possibilities of reason is cancelled if we can think of God allowing us to live on after the expiry of our mortal existence (though Kant only ever allows this 'postulation' in respect of the *demands of pure practical* reason, i.e. morality).⁷⁸

Kant's universal history provides more direct means of neutralizing the worries touched on in 'Idea'. We can reconcile ourselves to the course of past history if we come to see it as the unavoidable way in which the human species develops, in particular, the way in which it develops its rational capacities. Kant's use of 'childish [*kindischer*]' twice in the passage cited above from 8:17-18 is revealing: we are meant to take it as straightforwardly pejorative, but if history involves the process of humanity *becoming mature*, then some form of 'childishness' is precisely what we should expect to find in it.

The second issue, mortality, is directly addressed in the second section:

And the point of time at which this degree [i.e. the full degree] of development is reached must be the goal of man's aspirations (at least as an idea in his mind) [*muß wenigstens in der Idee des Menschen das Ziel seiner Bestrebungen sein*], or else his natural capacities would necessarily appear by and large to be purposeless and wasted. In the latter case, all practical principles would have to be abandoned.... (#2, 8:19, underlining added for emphasis)

Kant argues that such comportment is necessary if we are to reconcile ourselves to the fact we are each unable to develop our rational capacities to their maximum extent. The reflective appreciation of what human beings are capable of requires this commitment to

⁷⁷ See, for example, *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:489-90.

⁷⁸ Cf. *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:122-124. The general argument was advanced by Joseph Addison in 1711: 'a Man can never have taken in his full measure of Knowledge, has not time to subdue his Passions, establish his Soul in Virtue, and come up to the Perfection of his Nature, before he is hurried off the Stage. Would an infinitely wise Being make such glorious Creatures for so mean a purpose? Can he delight in the Production of such abortive Intelligences, such short-lived reasonable Beings? Would he give us talents that are not to be exerted? Capacities that are never to be gratified?' The answer is of course, 'no': the soul is immortal and can therefore make 'perpetual Progress ... towards the Perfection of its Nature'. (*The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, vol. 1, p. 458).

the progress (and the achievements) of the species. Without it, we would feel alienated from our own abilities and indifferent to their development.⁷⁹

Universal history thus reassures me in my identity as a rational being and encourages me to commit myself to the progress of the species. I now *can* do so, as the philosophical historian has shown me that there is progressive movement in history, despite appearance to the contrary; moreover, I *should* do so, in order that I do not abandon ‘all practical principles’. What, then, may I hope for? Obviously, that progress continues and that, more importantly, it takes a less rocky road than before. In particular, I may hope that my own efforts (in all fields) both contribute to what has already been achieved and are themselves built on in the future. Theory and practice come together as hope.

Kant’s universal history is therefore maximally ‘philosophical’: it provides answers to all three questions. ‘What can I know?’ – that there has been progress. ‘What ought to do?’ – act so as to achieve progress. ‘What may I hope?’ – that there will continue to be progress. Answered in this way, the three questions illuminate the distinct temporal vectors of philosophical history, its concern respectively with the past, present and future.

The claim that Kant is concerned in his philosophy of history to show how we can be reconciled with history and indeed mortality is liable to encounter resistance from some of his interpreters. An instance of this resistance is to be found in Yovel. He recognizes that Kant at times does argue that we should ‘be content ... with the course of human affairs as a whole’ (‘Conjectures’, 8:123), but considers that this results in an unduly contemplative and passive attitude. On his account, the ‘more interesting’ (and authentically Kantian) position is as follows: ‘justification of the individual’s existence lies not in knowledge of the course of history, but in *action*, by which man ‘gives value to ... life’ [8:122]; it is not in the contemplation of history but its actual *creation in praxis* where finite rational beings should look for their metaphysical satisfaction’.⁸⁰ What Yovel ignores is the connection between the two points of view (which is what Kant was getting at with his ‘simultaneously practical and theoretical question’). As Kant has argued in ‘Idea’, reconciliation with history is necessary if we are to be able to

⁷⁹ Cf. ‘Conjectures’ on the ‘discontent’ which ‘thinking people are subject to’ (8:120-121).

⁸⁰ *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, pp. 145-146 n. 18.

conceive of ourselves as rational practical agents, and so undertake the ‘creation of history’ Yovel focuses on.⁸¹

The manner in which universal history counters the distaste observers are liable to feel when confronted with the ‘malice and destructiveness’ which predominate in the record of the past is suggestive of *theodicy*. This is the name given, following Leibniz, to theological endeavours to demonstrate that the existence in the world of evil, suffering and imperfection generally is compatible with the existence of a divine and loving god. Theodicy is a complicated topic. One of the reasons for this is that there are two distinct concerns underlying the project. The first involves the issue of how one is to relate oneself to a world of evil and suffering. The second focuses directly on the idea of God: how are we to think of him given the fact that he appears to allow these imperfections? These two questions articulate what we may respectively refer to as the subjective and objective aspects of the task of theodicy. It endeavours to address the first, subjective question by appealing to the idea of divine justice, but this then generates the second, objective question. God is the answer from the subjective point of view, but the problem from the objective point of view.⁸² One can see how theodicy gets caught up in a circle, appealing to God to assuage the distress caused by the experience of imperfection but then struggling to reconcile our idea of God with that same imperfection. A further difficulty arises in respect of the different ways in which faith in God helps to sustain the believer in the face of sin and pain. One type of theodicy will want to use the idea of God to enable acceptance and affirmation of the world as it is: things are not as bad as they initially appeared. Another type of theodicy instead concedes that they are as bad as they look, but goes on to claim that God will rectify matters in *another* world. The first approach attempts to achieve a reconciliation with the world; the second tries to provide compensation for it (as with the ‘religious, other-worldly solutions’ mentioned on p. 58).⁸³ The reconciling approach is in principle more attractive, as it deals directly with the original problem, but is in practice very difficult to bring off. By contrast, consolation is easier to offer, but is less satisfying as a solution.

⁸¹ Neiman’s account in *The Unity of Reason* (pp. 175-176) is similarly flawed.

⁸² This ambivalence is reflected in the famous debate between Rousseau and Voltaire following the Lisbon earthquake. Rousseau exemplifies the subjective dimension of theodicy (for him, belief in God is the answer), whereas Voltaire focuses on the objective problem.

⁸³ This distinction between ‘reconciliation [*Versöhnung*]’ and ‘consolation [*Trost*]’ is taken from Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, p. 67, see also *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §147Z, pp. 222-3. For discussion, see Hardimon, *Hegel’s Social Philosophy*, Chapter Three.

Kant's attitude towards theodicy is of a piece with his general strategy of denying knowledge of the objects of religious belief in order to make room for faith in them (*Critique of Pure Reason*, Bxxx). Consequently, he urges that all attempts to deal with the objective problem of theodicy, that is, the issue of how to square the idea of God with the reality of evil and suffering, should be abandoned. There is no way we can accomplish this, and trying to do so is both presumptuous and counter-productive. However, we are justified in appealing to God's goodness in order to counteract the despair which the experience of evil, suffering and imperfection will otherwise produce.⁸⁴ Kant thus counterposes what he calls 'authentic theodicy', which adopts the subjective point of view, to 'doctrinal theodicy', which deals with the objective problem ('Theodicy', 8:264). By distinguishing the two and ruling the second to be illegitimate, Kant hopes to break the circle bedeviling theodicy. The question remains as to whether Kant's 'authentic theodicy' will reconcile believers with the world or instead outline how they will be compensated for the way it is. In fact, Kant appears to want to have it both ways: his texts oscillate between the two approaches. The issue of how we should understand the relation between these two strategies will be touched on in the rest of this chapter and in the following two as well.

To add to the complication, we should note that the term 'theodicy' is frequently used nowadays in yet another way. Two notable exponents of this trend are Raymond Geuss and Susan Neiman. Both of them have recommended that we distinguish between the original, religious conception of theodicy and what they call a 'more encompassing sense' or a 'broad sense' respectively.⁸⁵ Their approach is to detach the underlying subjective question – how can we be 'at home' in a world of evil and suffering – from the religious answers which theodicy (in the traditional sense) provides. Consequently, the term can serve to characterize philosophical strategies designed more generally to reconcile us to the world we live in, whether these strategies are religious or not. This inflation owes a great deal to Hegel, and certainly seems appropriate in relation to his philosophy, given the ambiguous status of God within it. In other contexts, though, the use of 'theodicy' in this broad sense is rather unhelpful. There are two obvious reasons why this is so. Firstly, we end up using the term to characterize philosophical projects which have nothing to do with divine justice, which is what the word *means*. Secondly, this use of the term obscures the extent to which

⁸⁴ Cf. the third *Critique*, §87, 5:452-453.

⁸⁵ Geuss, 'Art and theodicy', pp. 82-83; Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought*, p. 239.

traditional theodicy tended to end up neglecting the task of reconciling human beings with the world. As I have argued, the problem of theodicy in its ‘objective’ form concentrates on reconciling *the idea of God* with the world. In so far as a subjective dimension continues to be articulated, its focus will be the believer’s relation to God, not the world.⁸⁶ Even to the extent that the human perspective is central to theodicy, it by no means follows that the result is reconciliation: often enough, theodicy ends up offering *consolation* instead.

In line with Geuss’ and Neiman’s expanded understanding of theodicy, it would seem straightforward enough to take Kant’s philosophical history as an example of the enterprise.⁸⁷ The ‘third question’, as I have glossed it, expresses the need for reconciliation, and universal history is evidently intended as one way of answering it. But to leave it at that would be unsatisfactory, given that Kant has his own explicit and sophisticated attitude toward theodicy. We should therefore consider how this attitude might relate to his ‘idea for a universal history’.

The best place to start is Kant’s ‘Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion’, delivered either in 1783-84 or in 1785-86, that is, either just before or a short time after the publication of the ‘Idea’ essay.⁸⁸ These lectures are intriguing as in them Kant gives a much more positive account of traditional theology than the reader of the first *Critique* would have expected. This is, one assumes, because they are lectures, intended to give the students a comprehensive view of the range and sophistication of Christian thinking, and not just the lecturer’s own, more austere version of it. Kant’s generosity to the tradition extends to its endeavours in theodicy, which he outlines in some detail. The problem is introduced as follows: ‘Against these moral perfections of God, reason makes objections whose strength have driven many human beings crazy and plunged them into despair’ (28:1076). (Note that this is what I have termed the *objective*, theocentric problem of theodicy, though with an emphasis on its subjective

⁸⁶ For example, Kant describes the traditional task of theodicy as ‘combining [*vereinigen*] the course of world events with the divinity of their creator’ in order that ‘the impartial spectator’ can be ‘reconciled [*versöhnte*] with heaven’ (‘Theodicy’, 8:260 n., underlining added for emphasis and translation amended [‘combining’ replacing ‘reconciling’ in the first line]).

⁸⁷ Neiman fails to address Kant’s philosophical history in *Evil in Modern Thought*. She recognizes that both Rousseau and Hegel offer historical solutions to the general problem of theodicy, but not that Kant can also be seen as doing so. Her portrayal of Kant bears too much resemblance to the Hegelian caricature. Geuss also does not discuss Kant’s account of history, but then his focus in ‘Art and theodicy’ is Hegel and post-Hegelian ‘theodicies’. However, his treatment oddly ignores the fact that Hegel himself only describes his philosophy *of history* as a theodicy and indeed emphasizes that our need for reconciliation is strongest in relation to history (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, pp. 42-43).

⁸⁸ On the dating of the lectures, see *Religion and Rational Theology*, pp. 337-338.

consequences.) Kant proceeds to present a variety of traditional theodical arguments, such as the idea that the wicked really do, contrary to appearances, suffer in this life (28:1076-1082). It is striking that all of these arguments are expressly rejected in the 1791 'Theodicy' essay (for example, compare 28:1081 and 8:261-262). However, there is one argument, and it is the one which is of interest to us, which does not figure in the subsequent attack on doctrinal theodicy. This involves the claim that evil will disappear 'through the progress toward good', that it is what human beings have to overcome in the historical process of their gradual perfection. The account Kant gives of this is initially very similar to that given in 'Idea for a universal history' (but notice how God is invoked, not Nature):

One must note that among the many creatures, the human being is the only one who has to work for his perfections and for the goodness of his character, producing them from within himself. God therefore gave him talents and capacities, but left it up to the human being how he would employ them.... He proceeds to educate himself, but with each new step he takes some new false steps, and in this way he approaches ever nearer to the idea of perfection in a rational being, which he will nevertheless perhaps not attain to for millions of years. – In this earthly world there is only progress. (28:1078-1079)

It would thus appear that Kant was at least tempted to enlist historical progressivism in the service of doctrinal theodicy. Perhaps he just couldn't resist experimenting with his thoughts on philosophical history in this way and then sharing them with his students. But what is remarkable is the extent to which he then has to deviate from the account familiar to us from 'Idea'. The Lectures continue:

Thus evil in the world can be regarded as incompleteness in the development of the germ toward the good. Evil has no special germ; for it is mere negation and consists only in the limitation of the good. It is nothing beyond this, other than incompleteness in the development of the germ to the good out of uncultivatedness.... God wills the elimination of evil through the all-powerful development of the germ toward perfection. He wills that evil be removed through the progress toward good. Evil is also not a means to good.... (28:1079, emphases removed)

In this progressivist theodicy, evil is nothing other than an absence which humanity gradually *fills in* – there is not even anything the species could be said to *overcome*. Downplaying the reality of 'evil' in this fashion was a standard manoeuvre in traditional theodicy, and one of the features which Kant was later to pour scorn on. As well as being inadequate as a theodicy, Kant's account is also deficient when compared to the philosophical history which it relies upon. Whatever other failings one might want to charge Kant's universal history with, disregarding or diluting the prevalence of human wrong-doing and suffering is not one of them. Indeed, it is one of its strengths that it shows how they produce progress. But in using progress as a theodicy, Kant has to discard the claim that unsocial sociability is its primary mechanism. This then leaves the account of history as little more than a pious wish.

This is of course no accident. If God's goodness and justice are supposed to be vindicated by the progress toward perfection which he makes possible, then there can be no praise of 'vanity' or 'insatiable desires' and the like, as we found in 'Idea' (#4, 8:21). Recognizing the extent to which progress only takes place because of 'evil' would be to impugn the very divine goodness supposedly being defended. This, I would argue, is another reason why Kant is keen to use the regulative idea of Nature in his historical teleology. Earlier it was noted that Kant recommends use of 'Nature' rather than 'God' in teleological inquiry because: (i) the former term involves a less assertoric claim; (ii) it points us toward nature, rather than leading us away into the domain of the supernatural (A699-701/B727-9). We should now also see that we can assign to Nature intentions and devices which it would sound at least odd to attribute to God. Thus Kant can write 'Wars, tense and unremitting military preparations, and the resultant distress ... are the means by which Nature drives nations ... to take the step ... [of] entering a federation of peoples...' ('Idea', #7, 8:24, underlining added for emphasis). To claim that these were the means by which *God* got the human species to take this step would be precisely to exacerbate the kind of problem which doctrinal theodicy attempts to resolve. This ties in with Kant's repeated insistence on the inadequacy of the 'physico-teleological' proof of God's existence (or argument from design). There are two aspects to this inadequacy: on the one hand, it would be impossible to discover sufficient order in nature from which to infer an omnipotent being (as opposed to merely a very potent one, or collection thereof, as in paganism); on the other hand, natural order is morally neutral, or patchy, and so gives us no reason to think that its putative creator is supremely good (again, paganism, with its set of sometimes benign, sometimes malign artistic deities, seems more congruent with natural teleology).⁸⁹

Kant's attempt to use universal history as a *doctrinal* theodicy ironically demonstrates why his version of it cannot serve this purpose. It is therefore not surprising that we hear no more from him along these lines (and indeed that he only articulated it in the lecture hall in the first place). But this does not debar universal history from functioning as an *authentic* theodicy. Remember that for Kant authentic theodicy involves that faith in God which helps enable the believer to reconcile herself

⁸⁹ For example, from Kant's 'Theodicy' essay: 'Teleology (and through it, physicotheology) gives abundant proof in experience of this artistic wisdom [i.e. Nature]. But from it no inference is allowed to the moral wisdom of the author of the world [i.e. God]' (8:256 n.; cf. A627/B655). Teleology's affinity with paganism is emphasized in the *Critique of Judgment*, §85, 5:439-440; cf. A625/B653.

with an imperfect world. We have already seen how philosophical history contributes to this task. And yet for it to share in the title of authentic theodicy, it surely has to incorporate some form of appeal to divine justice, and it would seem from the argument of the previous paragraph that it cannot. Does Kant's reliance upon 'Nature' prevent us from describing his universal history as an authentic theodicy?

It might well do, were it not the fact that his reliance upon 'Nature' is by no means as exclusive as his practice throughout most of 'Idea' implies. Toward the end of the essay, Kant states that his universal history

opens up the comforting prospect of a future in which we are shown from afar how the human race eventually works its way up to a situation in which all the germs implanted by nature can be developed fully, and in which man's destiny can be fulfilled here on earth. Such a *justification* [*Rechtfertigung*] of Nature – or, better [*besser*], of *Providence* – is no mean motive for adopting a particular point of view in considering the world. (#9, 8:30, translation amended [‘better’ replacing ‘rather perhaps’ in the fourth line])

The appearance here of 'Providence' marks a significant change of perspective. History is no longer being considered simply from a theoretical point of view: the emphasis has turned instead to the way in which universal history answers to and directs human hopes. Accordingly, it seems, we are now allowed to make reference to Providence, indeed to speak of its 'justification'. The introduction of an explicitly divine label for the creative agent to whom reference must be made in teleological enquiry does indeed suggest that Kant's philosophical history should be thought of as an authentic theodicy. But how is Nature as it were upgraded to Providence? It seemed that one of the reasons why the idea of Nature was used in teleology in general and in universal history in particular was precisely that it did not have providential connotations.⁹⁰

The difficulty is resolved when we recall that the universal historian expects the course of human history in due course to involve both the construction of a cosmopolitan order and the genuine implementation of moral principles ('Idea', #7, 8:24-26). Accordingly, if the record of the past suggests the hand of what Kant elsewhere calls 'stepmotherly Nature' (*Groundwork*, 4:394, second *Critique*, 5:146),⁹¹ the future should see developments which indicate a much more providential plan. It is above all the 'comforting prospect' of the *future* provided by universal history that enables reference to be made to Providence.

⁹⁰ That Kant distinguishes between Nature and Providence separates him from many other eighteenth century thinkers, for whom the two were in effect interchangeable. This is true, for example, of both Herder (cf. the passages from *Ideas* cited in the next chapter, pp. 69-70) and Adam Smith (cf. the passages cited by Alvey, 'Adam Smith's view of history', p. 5).

⁹¹ Contrast Herder: 'I find Nature everywhere a good mother [*gütige Mutter*]' (*Ideas*, VIII.5, C40 / 6:294).

For the most part, Kant has a simpler and more direct way of invoking the idea of a providential God in the form of his moral proof for the existence of God. According to this, the demands of morality license the ‘postulation’ of the existence of a moral author of the world as the precondition for the belief that these demands are realizable.⁹² However, what Kant offers us in the ‘Idea’ essay is not the mere postulation of Providence but rather its ‘justification’ (8:30). Teleological universal history amplifies and strengthens practical faith. Indeed, it does more than this: it ensures that such faith takes a mundane, historical form. Without it, Kant argues, our hopes and wishes would inevitably be obliged to take an exclusively other-worldly turn, marked by dejection and palpably second-best:

For what is the use of lauding and holding up for contemplation the glory and wisdom of creation in the non-rational sphere of nature, if the history of mankind ... is to remain a constant reproach to everything else? Such a spectacle would force us to turn away in revulsion, and, by making us despair of ever finding any completed rational aim behind it, would reduce us to hoping for it only in some other world. (#9, 8:30)

As ‘Providence’ signifies, as Kant says elsewhere, the ‘concurrence of divine wisdom with the course of nature’ (‘End’, 8:337), such other-worldly moral faith would have to eschew the idea of it and instead rely solely upon the thought of God as a heavenly ruler. In the absence of the reconciliation which universal history enables, consolation will be all that is available.

But if our hopes for the human future are such that belief in Providence is justified, how is this to be squared with the recourse the past obliges us to make to ‘stepmotherly’ Nature? Presumably, once the philosophical historian has plotted out the full dynamic of human history, it becomes possible to see that the harshness of Nature’s means were all intentionally for the best. As Kant writes early on in ‘Idea’,

It seems as if Nature had intended that man, once he had finally worked his way up from the uttermost perfection in his manner of thought and thence (as far as possible on earth) to happiness, should be able to take for himself the entire credit for doing so and have only himself to thank for it. It seems that Nature has worked more with a view to man’s rational *self-esteem* than to his mere well-being. For in the actual course of human affairs, a whole host of hardships awaits him. (#3, 8:20)

Nature thus operates rather like the tutor in Rousseau’s *Émile*. The tutor is trying to raise his charge so that he attains to autonomy and self-esteem: ‘preparing from afar the reign of freedom’.⁹³ To this end, *Émile* is subjected to various hardships. Presumably, once his education is complete, he will be able to see that this apparently ‘stepfatherly’ treatment was in fact providential from the outset.

⁹² *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:124-132.

⁹³ Rousseau, *Emile*, p. 63, *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 4, p. 282.

The obvious problem with this manner of reconciling universal history's references to (non-moral) Nature and (moral) Providence is that the human species, unlike *Émile*, is not an individual. If Nature/Providence is, as it were, 'cruel to be kind', the cruelty and the kindness seem to be unevenly distributed across the generations. *Émile* may have no cause for complaint at the hardships and deceptions he undergoes, but surely the innumerable human beings who have suffered because of unsocial sociability (usually someone else's) and missed out on the eventual attainment of 'self-esteem' would have? Kant is aware of this, for he almost immediately goes on to note that

What always remains disconcerting about all this is firstly, that the earlier generations seem to perform their laborious tasks only for the sake of the later ones, so as to prepare for them a further stage from which they can raise still higher the structure intended by nature; and secondly, that only the later generations will in fact have the good fortune to inhabit the building on which a whole series of their ancestors (admittedly without any conscious intention) had worked without themselves being able to share in the happiness they were preparing. (#3, 8:20, translation amended)

The 'disconcerting' character of progress, the very skewed distribution of the supposed benefits of historical progress, problematizes a retrospective redescription of Nature as Providence (it certainly wasn't providential to those earlier generations). Indeed, this apparent unfairness is surely one of the reasons why Kant invokes Nature nearly all the time, not Providence.

It would therefore appear that the extent to which universal history can serve as a 'justification of Providence' is limited. However, this is in line with Kant's insistence that we should not presume to think that the ways of Providence are entirely accessible to us (i.e. that we should not slide from authentic to doctrinal theodicy). Notwithstanding the 'disconcerting' features that remain, 'it is of the utmost importance that we should be content with Providence' ('Conjectures', 8:121), and we should not allow those features to undermine our confidence in progress.

The observation that a certain kind of progressivist philosophical history portrays earlier generations as mere means to the advantages to be enjoyed by later ones was of course pressed by Herder as a knock-down *objection* to that particular genre (Chapter One, p. 15). More needs to be said as to why Kant rejects Herder's criticism (which he may have in mind in writing the passage quoted above), and I will turn to this task in Chapter Six. For now, I hope to have shown that universal history attempts to provide us not only with knowledge and guides for action but also reconciliation with human history and grounds for hope. It is therefore appropriate to think of it as, in Kant's own terms, a form of theodicy.

Chapter Five: Herder (and Hegel) vs. Kant

Two months after the appearance of ‘Idea for a Universal History’, Kant’s review of the first part of Herder’s *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity* was published (8:45-55, January 1785). In this, Kant took issue with his former pupil’s poeticizing and analogizing approach in dealing with the place of human species in nature (the directly historical elements of *Ideas* were still to follow). Kant’s review infuriated Herder, who vowed to take his revenge in the second part, which he was then working on.⁹⁴ The object of his attack would inevitably be ‘Idea for a Universal History’, whose theses he lambasted in letters at the time. Part II of *Ideas*, comprising Books Six to Ten, duly appeared in August 1785. The critique of Kant’s philosophy of history is a running theme throughout Books Eight and Nine. Book Eight indeed opens with a disparaging reference to the ‘metaphysician’, i.e. Kant, who proceeds in an *a priori* fashion, ignoring the actual material of history, unlike the genuine ‘philosopher of history’, i.e. Herder (VIII.0, C 33 / 6:286).⁹⁵ Kant is in fact never mentioned in the work, though he is (inaccurately) quoted once (IX.4, B 323 / 6:368-369). The challenge laid down by Herder must have been irresistible, and Kant replied in November 1785 with his second review (8:58-66),⁹⁶ over half of which (amounting to nearly all the substance) is devoted to dealing with Herder’s criticisms of his own ‘Idea’ essay. In what follows, I shall consider the debate between the two as it focuses on the question of progress. One of Herder’s objections is more precisely (and more revealingly) articulated by Hegel, and so for a few pages I enlist the latter to press the anti-Kantian case.

Much of Herder’s sniping at Kant is ineffective and ad hoc. For example, in Book Eight he blithely deprecates the attribution of unsociability to humanity: ‘Peace, therefore, not war is the natural state of mankind’ (VIII.4, C 61/ 6:316). As no doubt even Kant may have conceded, Herder is in better form when dealing not with arguments but with metaphors. His twisting round of the arboreal analogy from Proposition Five of ‘Idea for a Universal History’ (quoted on p. 44) is particularly effective: ‘As far as it may be, no tree is permitted to deprive another of air, so as to

⁹⁴ See in particular Herder’s letters to J. G. Hamann of the 14th February and F. H. Jacobi of the 25th February 1785 (*Briefe*, 5:106, 109).

⁹⁵ Herder regularly referred to Kant in this way, as in for example his letter to Hamann of the 28th February 1785: ‘It is strange that the metaphysicians, as for example your Kant, do not want any history even in history’ (*Briefe*, 5:111, translation taken from Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn*, p. 642).

⁹⁶ In fact this was Kant’s third publication in this series: between his two reviews he replied in print to a protest about the first review made by a defender of Herder (‘Reviews’, 8:56-58).

render it a stunted dwarf, or force it to become a crooked cripple, that it may breathe with more freedom. Each has its place allotted it, that it may ascend from its root by its own impulse, and raise its flourishing head.’⁹⁷ (VIII.4, C 61 / 6:316)

In the closing paragraphs of the fifth and final chapter of Book Eight, Herder launches into his most extensive attack on Kant’s position:

How, for instance, can it be, that man, as we know him here, should have been formed for an infinite improvement of his mental faculties, a progressive extension of his perceptions and actions? nay, that he should have been made for the state, as the end of his species, and all preceding generations properly for the last alone, which is to be enthroned on the ruined scaffolding [or ‘edifice’: *Gerüst*] of the happiness [*Glückseligkeit*] of the rest? The sight of our fellow-creatures, nay even the experience of every individual life, contradicts this plan attributed to creative Providence. (VIII.5, C 75 / 6:332)

Herder registers the duality of the historical process as construed by Kant, involving the development of both human faculties and political structures (the two ‘ideas’ dwelt on previously). He also seems to have in mind the passage at the end of the Third Proposition in which Kant admits that historical progress is ‘disconcerting’ (quoted on p. 67): he picks up on Kant’s construction metaphor as well as the suggestion that *Glück* is reserved for those at the end of the process. Herder objects to the accounts both of the means and the ends of historical progress that he detects in Kant.

Firstly, the idea that earlier generations suffer in order to bring about benefits for later ones is on the one hand not true – there is no evidence for such a claim – and on the other hand cannot be true, for it involves attributing evil to Providence. These of course were general criticisms which Herder had already advanced forcibly in *This Too a Philosophy of History*: now we find them thrown at Kant: ‘Ye men of all the quarters of the Globe, who have perished in the lapse of ages, ye have not lived and enriched the earth with your ashes, that at the end of time your posterity should be made happy by

⁹⁷ The editor of *Ideas* in *Werke*, Martin Bollacher, otherwise so astute in detecting references to Kant and others in Herder’s text, does not comment on this one.

The arboreal analogy had featured in an earlier debate about progress. In *Émile*, Rousseau cites Fontenelle’s claim that the ‘whole dispute about ancients and moderns comes down to knowing whether the trees in the past were bigger than those today’. Fontenelle means us to take the question in a purely rhetorical sense – of course trees were the same then as now. Similarly, human beings were the same then as now, and so the moderns should be taken as the equals of the ancients. Rousseau, by contrast, takes it as a serious question: ‘If agriculture had changed, it would not be impertinent to ask this question’ (*Émile*, p. 343; *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 4, p. 676). The relevant trees to compare are not wild, natural ones, but cultivated varieties. As practices of cultivation can be assumed to have changed over time, the results will have done so as well. The implication is therefore that contemporary ‘trees’, i.e. human beings, are stunted and distorted. Compare the famous opening paragraph of Book One: ‘Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man. He forces one soil to nourish the products of another, one tree to bear the fruit of another ... He wants nothing as nature made it, not even man; for him ... man must be fashioned in keeping with his fancy like a tree in his garden.’ (*Émile*, p. 37; *Oeuvres Complètes*, vol. 4, p. 245.)

European civilization: is not a proud thought of this kind treason against the majesty of Nature?’ (VIII.5, C 78 / 6:335). The argument, such as it is, seems to be this: history cannot reveal the sacrifice of the happiness of early generations for the benefit of later ones, because no such sacrifice has taken place: the supposition that earlier generations were less happy is false, occasioned by the kind of ‘presentist’ inability to understand and appreciate past forms of life. Earlier generations are just as able to attain contentment and well-being as their successors: the ability of each in this regard is quite independent of the attainments of the others.

Secondly, the ends which Kant adduces are served by historical progress cannot in any case be the destination of the human species: on the one hand, they are not required for what is its true destination, namely happiness, and on the other hand, they are all too likely to cut against it. ‘Neither our head nor our heart is formed for an infinitely increasing store of thoughts and feelings; our hand is not made, our life is not calculated for it’ (VIII.5, C 75 / 6:332). The basis for Herder’s claim is much the same as we have seen above: very many human beings have been perfectly happy without enlightenment and government, so these cannot be necessary for this. Moreover, members of those societies with a surfeit of enlightenment and government (i.e. contemporary European ones) are manifestly less happy. Herder is particularly suspicious of ‘large states’ in which ‘hundreds must pine with hunger, that one may feast and carouse: thousands are oppressed, and hunted to death, that one crowned fool or philosopher may gratify his whims’ (VIII.5, C 77 / 6:334).

Kant comments in his review on both of Herder’s lines of attack. With regard to the first objection, he notes his critic’s allegation that the idea of progress is a ‘treason against the majesty of Nature’, adding archly that others would ‘more prosaically describe [it] as blasphemy’. Unfortunately, Kant then passes up on the opportunity to deal directly with the charge, appealing to ‘the limits of length to which this review is subject’ (‘Reviews’, 8:61).⁹⁸ As already promised, I shall pick up this issue in the next chapter and examine various reconstructions of what Kant would or should have said in response.

A little later, Kant responds to Herder’s assertion that the end of Providence in relation to human beings is their happiness. Kant retorts that happiness cannot constitute ‘the value of [human] existence’, whereas, we are to presume, the ends he has

⁹⁸ In fact, it was the time constraint Kant was working under which was probably more relevant (Kuehn, *Kant*, p. 297).

identified in ‘Idea’ can. This is not to gainsay the importance of the ‘image of happiness which each individual creates for himself’; indeed it is by means of this that the dynamic of ‘progressing [*fortgehende*] and growing activity and culture’ is set in motion (8:64, translation amended). There is, one feels, more that Kant could and should have said here. Happiness as such may not suffice as a postulated end of history, but is it thereby to be excluded altogether? The manner in which Kant constructs his idea of the highest good suggests not.⁹⁹ In respect of Kant’s philosophy of history, the case for making happiness more central is surely strong.¹⁰⁰ Kant has already stated that desire for happiness is an important motor of progress: we may be prone to assume that this desire is self-defeating, but is this necessarily always going to be the case? In particular, will historical experience not enable human beings to learn from the ways in which happiness has proven to be elusive? More pertinently, the historical prognosis contained in ‘Idea’ does imply that the future will be a happier time. Perpetual peace may not directly produce happiness, but it will certainly eliminate one of the primary causes of unhappiness. Kant himself recognizes that future generations will share in a *Glück* unavailable to their predecessors; Herder is not entirely unjustified in seeing in this an expectation of greater *Glückseligkeit*. Again, I shall return to this issue in the next chapter.

Herder’s treatment of Kant in the fifth chapter of Book Eight is vitiated by his implicit presumption that Kant is guilty of what I earlier called ‘presentism’. It is as if for Herder the ‘enlightenment’ idea of progress (i.e. not his own ‘higher’ version) must always translate into an uncritical enthusiasm for contemporary conditions. Thus just because Kant’s version of the idea emphasizes the development of political institutions, he is therefore assumed to be a supporter of the machine states of ‘enlightened absolutism’ and is condemned accordingly. However, Kant is largely at one with Herder in his dislike of these autocratic regimes, indeed his ‘universal history’ explicitly

⁹⁹ In the second *Critique*, Kant argues that whilst virtue is the supreme good, ‘it is not, on that account, the whole and complete good as the object of the faculty of desire of rational finite beings; for this, *happiness* is also required’ (5:110).

¹⁰⁰ If we identify the purpose of history *as* the progressive realization of the highest good, then the case is unarguable. A sophisticated exposition along these lines is presented in Yovel, *Kant and the Philosophy of History*. I have resisted following this approach partly because he has exemplified it well enough and partly because it obliges one to concentrate on fitting Kant’s philosophy of history into his system as a whole, rather than attending to its details and considering it in relation to the work of other thinkers. Two symptomatic absences which indicate the difference between Yovel’s approach and mine: (i) the idea of the highest good does not appear in the three Kant essays in philosophical history which I focus on; (ii) Herder’s name is completely absent from *Kant and the Philosophy of History*.

elaborates his objections to the status quo. What is to be hoped for in the future is something quite different: the ‘perfect political constitution’ will be ‘without precedent in the past’ (‘Idea’, #8, 8:28).¹⁰¹

Herder continues to worry away at aspects of Kant’s philosophical history at various places within Book Nine. He takes particular exception to the claim that ‘the human being is an animal that needs a master’ (‘Idea’ #6, 8:23), calling it ‘easy but evil’ and suggesting that it should instead be reversed: ‘the human being that needs a master is an animal’ (IX.4, B 323 / 6:369). Herder fails to attend to Kant’s argument that coercion is necessary in order to constrain the unsociability that impedes the development of individual and collective autonomy: we *all* need a master in order to become *our own* masters. Kant repeats Herder’s unattributed and tendentiously inaccurate quotation in his response (‘Reviews’, 8:64).¹⁰² He goes on to deny that the doctrine is ‘evil’, but adds that ‘it may well have been stated by an *evil man*’, this being his only (moreover indirect and ironic) admission of authorship of the claims which Herder’s criticisms were directed at.

A more substantial line of criticism is advanced in the first chapter of Book Nine of *Ideas*. Herder here considers claims about the development of humanity which give pride of place to the species, rather than to individuals. Once again, and again without it being made explicit, his target is clearly Kant, as the latter in turn recognised. The Second Proposition of the ‘Idea’ essay stated that ‘In man, as the only rational creature on earth, those natural capacities which are directed to the use of his reason are such that they could be fully developed only in the species, but not in the individual’ (8:18). (This apparent privilege is also conveyed in the first review: ‘all that nature reveals to us is that it abandons individuals to total destruction and preserves only the species’ (‘Reviews’, 8:53).) Such claims, unsurprisingly, Herder finds completely unacceptable, seeming, as they do, to express a complete disregard for the ends of individuals.

Herder’s argument, as I reconstruct it, has three parts to it. In the first, Herder claims that the idea that ‘the education of mankind’ means ‘the education of the species as a whole and not that of so many individuals comprising it’, is only intelligible on the presupposition that the species is itself the real individual, of which putatively

¹⁰¹ Wood notes Kant’s agreement with Herder regarding contemporary ‘paternalistic’ government, but does not explain why Herder gets Kant wrong (*Kant’s Ethical Thought*, pp. 254-255).

¹⁰² Herder’s full ‘quotation’ reads: ‘the human being is an animal that needs a master, and who expects from this master, or association with him, the happiness of his ultimate destiny’ (IX.4, B323 / 6:368-369, underlining added). Only the underlined phrase is Kant’s; the rest is bogus.

individual persons' minds are only fragments (IX.1, B312 / 6:337-338).¹⁰³ This idea he calls 'the Averroistic system' (referring to the medieval Islamic philosopher Ibn Rushd's doctrine of monopsychism), thereby presumably intending to convey its flagrant untenability, without having to elaborate as to the moral or metaphysical reasons for this.¹⁰⁴ If monopsychism is ruled out, then, and this is the second part of the argument, the idea that the species develops, but not the individuals, becomes 'wholly unintelligible'. 'For species and genus are merely abstract concepts, empty sounds unless they refer to individual beings' (ibid.). Any property which is attributed to the species must also apply to the individuals whom the species-concept describes. Kant, in replying to Herder on this point, finds (initially) nothing to disagree with: 'Certainly, anyone who said that no single horse has horns although the species as a whole is horned would be uttering an absurdity. For in this instance, "species" signifies nothing more than that precise quality in which all individuals must be identical' (8:65). At this stage, Herder and Kant could, it seems, agree on two points: (i) the species, as a universal term, does not develop, educatively or in any other way, at all: it is precisely what must remain constant throughout any developmental changes; (ii) if, on the other hand, we take 'species' to denote the collectivity of members falling under the universal, then this can be said to develop only by virtue of the development of the members. Thus, to talk of 'the education of the species' just means the successive and cumulative education of the individuals comprising it. Herder can therefore himself write: 'We speak therefore of an education of mankind. Every individual only becomes man by means of education, and the whole species lives solely as this chain of individuals.' Herder's supposition that he has identified a dilemma for Kant (Averroism or unintelligibility) is mistaken. It relies upon the allegedly Kantian premise that the species develops, not its individual members. But this is not what Kant claims. His position is instead that only the species *fully* develops ('Idea', #2, 8:18, cited in the previous paragraph). This does not imply that individuals themselves do not develop (or are 'educated').

¹⁰³ 'Education of mankind' is Lessing's phrase, not Kant's, though the latter is happy to continue with it when responding to Herder.

¹⁰⁴ 'Averroes' is the Latinized name given to Ibn Rushd. Wood, commenting on the Herder-Kant exchange, claims that 'Herder does not explain what makes Kant's view "Averroistic" ' (*Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 390 n. 7), when in fact he is quite clear what this is. Wood may have been led into this misconception by dealing only with the sentences from Herder which Kant excerpts in the second of his 'Reviews' (8:65), as these omit the phrase which answers his question.

The real bone of contention between Kant and Herder lies in the different ways in which they understand the relation between the two senses of ‘species’, as universal and collectivity. For Kant, the important sense in which the species (in the second sense) develops is by realizing the potentialities which define the species (in the first sense). As a result, later generations can partake in a more fully actualized humanity than their predecessors. It is precisely this coupling which Herder, in the third part of his argument, rejects:

if I were to attribute to such abstract concepts [species or genus] every perfection, culture and enlightenment of which man is capable, I should contribute to the actual history of man no more than if I were to speak of animalkind, stonekind and metalkind in general, and decorate them with all the noblest qualities which, if they really existed, in any one single individual or entity, would cancel each other out. (IX.4, B 312 / 6:338)

Herder takes human ‘perfection, culture and enlightenment’ to come in as many different forms as do, say, metals or animals. The species as collectivity, or ‘chain of individuals’, displays a multiplicity of perfections which therefore cannot be attributed to the universal concept of the species, as potentialities latent within it: this would be as if to claim that the concept ‘metal’ contained the specifications for all possible metals and was realized in each of them. No one metal, however, could demonstrate all the ‘qualities’ of ‘metalkind’; they ‘would cancel each other out’. The same, then, is true for humanity. Its perfections are plural; historical time is required for their successive realization. If one talks of an ‘education’ or ‘progress’ of the species, it can only mean a transition *through various perfections*, not an advance *to one*. Herder’s objection to Kant’s species-talk thus, ultimately, rests upon his Leibnizian historicism. In the second review Kant accurately quotes from, but does not respond to, this passage. One can imagine that if he had done, he might have pointed out the confusion between species and genus at work in it. Herder’s comparison of humanity with ‘metalkind’ implies that it is like a genus-term, under which species (which specify various ‘perfections’) fall. He thus tries to articulate the relation between individuals and their species-concept on the model of that between species and the genus to which they belong, in order to apply to the former the looseness appropriate to the latter.

Herder in turn might be quite happy to defend his more elastic conception of the human species. Do we not find just such a diversity of ways of life comparable to the differences between animal species in the same genus? Is it not this ability to adapt to different historical and geographical conditions that constitutes our common humanity? If this means that the human species is *sui generis*, well Kant himself argues that it is (cf. ‘Idea’, ##2-3). The nub of the dispute relates to the authors’ respective conceptions

of human rationality which, we may take it, both agree is what marks out the species from the rest. For Herder, rationality is primarily adaptive, whereas for Kant it is essentially self-determining.¹⁰⁵

The main reason why Herder suspects Kant of ‘Averroism’ is the latter’s claim that the potential of the human species is realized in the collectivity, not in individuals. This collectivity needs to be understood in two ways, synchronically and diachronically: (i) at any one time, human beings collectively (if imperfectly) realize their common essence; (ii) correlative to that imperfection, human beings through time advance in the project of realizing their common essence. The individual is thus doubly subordinate: she herself can never be fully human, but must recognize that humanity in the living human totality of which she is a member; however, even that living human totality cannot fully represent humanity, but is only one of a succession of generations in which human rationality is ever more adequately developed. This is the main point Kant emphasizes in his rejoinder to Herder: it is possible to speak of the species attaining its end, that is, fully developing human potential, not because it in fact does exhaust this process, but rather because it continues doing so into infinity:

if the human species signifies the totality of a series of generations which runs on into infinity ... and if it is assumed that this series constantly approximates to the line of its destiny which runs alongside it, then it is not a contradiction to say that the series in all its parts is asymptotic to this line yet coincides with it as a whole. In other words, no single member of all the generations of the human race, but only the species, attains its destiny completely. The mathematician can provide elucidation here; the philosopher would say that the destiny of the human race as a whole is *incessant progress*, and that its fulfilment is merely an idea - but in every respect a very useful idea - of the goal to which, in keeping with the intention of providence, we have to direct our endeavours. (‘Reviews’, 8:65)

Notice how in this passage the characterization of the species’ ‘destiny’ alters: at first it is what is approximated, asymptotically, but by the last sentence it has become the process of approximation itself. From progressing towards the goal, progress itself becomes the goal. (I return to discuss this issue again later in the chapter.)

The suspicion of ‘Averroism’ takes root in Herder because he reads Kant as saying that the species can achieve what individuals cannot, and thus that the species has a mind superior to and incorporating the minds of individuals. However, the superiority of the species over the individuals results not from the limitations of the latter’s mental

¹⁰⁵ Herder’s conception of rationality is conveyed in these sentences from *Ideas*: ‘The practical understanding of man was intended to blossom and bear fruit in all its varieties: and hence such a diversified earth was ordained for so diversified a species’ (VIII.3, C 58 / 6:313); ‘Reason is an aggregate of observations and exercises of the soul: it is the sum of the education of the race’ (IX.1, Bu 49 / 6:337). Kant of course holds that reason is no mere ‘aggregate’ but necessarily systematic – cf. *Critique of Pure Reason*, A832/B860 and my earlier discussion, pp. 24, 33.

faculties, but from the finitude of their existence.¹⁰⁶ From this, no ‘Averroistic’ conclusion should be drawn.

Kant’s urge to respond to Herder was by no means exhausted by the second review. He proceeded in his next two publications, ‘On the Definition of the Concept of a Human Race’ (also November 1785) and ‘Conjectures on the Beginning of the Human History’ (January 1786) to take further issue with *Ideas*, firstly, its criticism of his racial theorizing, and secondly, its interpretation of the Book of Genesis (*Ideas* X.5-7). Indeed, it has been argued by Zammito that the writing of the *Critique of Judgment* itself was largely motivated by Kant’s continuing desire to attack Herder.¹⁰⁷ Kant passed up the opportunity to review the Third Part of *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, which came out in 1787, wanting instead to concentrate on the ‘critique of taste’ which would in time become the third *Critique*.¹⁰⁸ One need not subscribe, though, to the Zammito thesis in order to hold that Kant still wished to maintain the debate with Herder. For Kant tried quite hard (in the end unsuccessfully) to get a colleague and supporter, C. J. Kraus, to deliver a proxy critique of the Third Part.¹⁰⁹ Herder similarly would not let matters lie, developing over the following years an ever more comprehensive but by all accounts inept ‘metacritique’ of his former teacher’s philosophical system. However, in the ensuing debate, the issue of historical progress, which had been central to the skirmishes of 1785, got largely submerged. In particular, Herder did not bother to react directly to Kant’s second review, as he had done to the first (in turn provoking Kant’s ripostes in the second). Nonetheless, it is possible to detect one further move in their argument about progress. In the final Book of Part Three of *Ideas*, published in 1787, Herder writes as follows:

The end of whatever is not merely a dead instrument must be implicated in itself. Were we created, to strive with eternally vain endeavours after a point of perfection external to ourselves, and which we could not reach, as the magnet turns to the north; we might not only pity ourselves as blind machines, but the being likewise, that had condemned us to such a state of Tantalism, in forming us for the purpose of such a malignant and diabolical spectacle. Should we say in his exculpation, that some good was at least promoted, and our nature preserved in perpetual activity, by these empty endeavours, incapable of ever attaining their object; it must be an imperfect, ferocious being, that could deserve such an exculpation: for in activity that never attains its end can lie no good; and he has weakly or maliciously deceived us, by placing before our eyes such a

¹⁰⁶ As emphasized in ‘Idea’: ‘every individual man would have to live for a vast length of time if he were to learn how to make complete use of all his natural capacities’ (#2, 8:19); regarding ‘the inhabitants of other planets ... perhaps their position is such that each individual can fulfil his destiny within his own lifetime. With us it is different; only the species as a whole can hope for this’ (#6 n., 8:23).

¹⁰⁷ Zammito, *The Genesis of Kant’s ‘Critique of Judgment’*. His approach is heavily criticized by Kuehn in a review in *Kant-Studien* 87 (1996).

¹⁰⁸ See Kant’s letter to Schütz, 25th June 1787, 10:490. This letter implies that Kant had earlier indicated his willingness to review the third instalment of *Ideas*.

¹⁰⁹ See Kuehn, *Kant*, pp. 330-331.

dream, from a purpose unworthy of him. But happily we are taught no such doctrine by the nature of things. (XV.1, C 82 / 6:630-631)

If we are to take it that no generation attains the end, and that all are consigned to move along the path of endless progress, then we are being presented with an account of human history just as unsatisfactory as in the ‘ruined scaffolding’ passage (quoted on p. 69). The unsatisfactoriness has two aspects: on the one hand, such a picture is inconsistent with our belief in a provident creator; on the other, it provides a highly unattractive template for our own endeavours: we should not try to comport ourselves in this way. To be continually aiming at something which can never be attained is rather all too reminiscent of the perverse punishments inflicted in ancient myths. Herder had in fact already suggested this criticism in the 1785 instalment, associating the (Kantian) idea of the ‘infinite improvement of mental faculties’ with ‘the Hell of Tantalus, the bottomless buckets of the vainly labouring Danaids’ (VIII.5, C 76 / 6:333). It is not unreasonable to suppose that its elaboration in 1787 is in part a response to Kant’s striking assertion of the infinity of progress at the close of his review of Part Two of *Ideas*.¹¹⁰

This antipathy to the endlessness of historical progress was subsequently to become a pronounced theme in Hegel’s philosophy of history, and it is worth pursuing the issue with reference to him.¹¹¹ We read in Hegel that historical

advance or progression appears to be a process of infinite duration, in keeping with the notion of perfectibility – a constant progress which must always remain distant from its goal ... [But] progress ... is not an indeterminate advance ad infinitum, for it has a definite aim – namely that of returning upon itself. (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, p. 149)

This vision of a process whereby the spirit realizes its aim in history clashes with a widespread attitude concerning the nature of ideals and their relationship to reality. For no opinion is more widely held or more frequently voiced than the lament that ideals cannot be translated into reality ... But ... ideals of reason ... have a genuine claim to be satisfied, for their non-fulfilment is generally recognized to be an objective injustice. (*Ibid.* pp. 65-66)

Hegel’s rejection of the idea of infinite progress is elaborated in the *Science of Logic* (1812, 1831) and *The Encyclopaedia Logic* (1817, 1830). These texts deal with such progress at a general level, so that the endlessness both of historical progress and of the progress of the immortal soul toward holiness are addressed. The latter conception features in Kant’s postulate of the immortality of the soul as argued for in the *Critique*

¹¹⁰ It is also worth noting that Herder starts in 1787 to reject the idea that progress is ‘asymptotic’, picking up the term Kant used in the conclusion of the second review (and which he hadn’t used before): cf. *Ideas*, XV.3, C 103 / 6:654-655. There are further denials that progress is asymptotic in Herder’s *Letters for the Advancement of Humanity* from the 1790’s - see *Werke*, vol. 7, pp. 121, 126 and 802-803.

¹¹¹ Michael Forster makes a very strong case regarding Herder’s importance for Hegel throughout *Hegel’s Idea of a Phenomenology of Spirit*.

of *Practical Reason*. In what follows I shall stay with Hegel at this more general level before considering the way in which the differences between the two types of progress have a bearing on the effectiveness of Hegel's criticism.

Hegel's charge, like Herder's, is in essence that the endlessness of progress consigns the advancing subject to an infinity of dissatisfaction. His way of pressing this complaint is to castigate 'progress' as amounting to what he terms 'spurious or negative infinity'.¹¹² He thus distinguishes between true and spurious infinity, which correspond to what A. W. Moore terms metaphysical and mathematical infinity.¹¹³ The former is a self-enclosed perfection, the latter an infinite progression. In the *Science of Logic*, the two are figuratively represented in the images of the circle and the (endless) straight line.¹¹⁴ True infinity 'consists ... in remaining at home with itself in its other, or (when it is expressed as a process) in coming to itself in its other'.¹¹⁵ Spurious infinity is, by contrast, the endless failure to arrive. Without the hope of ever 'coming home', what was the point of setting off?

Hegel's polemic stresses the tediousness of 'progressus in infinitum': for example, he mocks Kant and others for finding the (spurious) infinite sublimely terrible: 'the only really terrible thing about it would be the tedium of continually positing a limit which is again done away with, so that one stays forever at the same spot'.¹¹⁶ Elsewhere he bemoans the 'perpetual repetition of one and the same content', the 'tedious alteration' and 'wearisome repetition' involved.¹¹⁷ This is due to the way in which Hegel conceives of infinite progression as an uncompletable series of finite steps, in which the finite (where the process has got to) is repeatedly 'negated' in favour of the next stage, which when attained is likewise 'negated': 'a limit is set, it is exceeded, then there is another limit, and so on without end'.¹¹⁸ Infinite progression is thus understood on the model of the series of natural numbers (e.g. 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 and so on) or the succession of temporal instants.¹¹⁹

This is clearly an inadequate model for understanding Kantian infinite progress. Hegel takes progress to involve continual advance by means of a repeated procedure,

¹¹² *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §94, p. 149.

¹¹³ *The Infinite*, pp. 1-2.

¹¹⁴ *Science of Logic*, p. 149.

¹¹⁵ *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §94, p. 149.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* §104, p. 166.

¹¹⁷ *Science of Logic*, pp. 142, 229.

¹¹⁸ *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §94, p. 150.

¹¹⁹ 'E.g., we say, for example, "this time", "now", and then we keep continually going beyond this limit', *ibid.* §94, p. 150.

whereas Kant thinks of it as essentially goal directed. (Which is not to say that these could not be compatible.) In Hegel's characterizations, there is no sense of an ultimate end, instead just a re-iterated dynamical sequence. No wonder, then, that 'this progress is not a real advance but a repetition of one and the same thing'.¹²⁰ This captures perfectly well the endless advance of the natural numbers. As there is no end-point towards which they are leading, of course they do not take us any further. Hegel is right: nothing but tedium could be said to be the outcome. Another way Hegel describes the spurious infinite is as a kind of perpetual 'flight' or 'fleeing' (*Flucht, fliehen*).¹²¹ This suggests that the dynamism of progress is essentially negative, powered by a dissatisfaction with the stages that have been reached, rather than a desire to get to where the series is leading. Again, this seems to miss the mark with regard to Kantian progress, with its momentum of approximation, not escape.

The appropriate mathematical analogy for Kantian infinite progress, a process aimed at and advancing toward a goal which it nevertheless cannot reach, is, as we already know, asymptotic approximation, not sequential advance. In figural terms, this would be represented as a curving line approaching a straight line, as Kant himself does in the second review, or, in numerical terms, the sequence $1 + \frac{1}{2} + \frac{1}{4} + \frac{1}{8}$ and so on, that is, endlessly inclining towards 2.¹²² Michael Inwood, from whom I have taken the numerical exemplification, claims that Hegel tends not to 'distinguish between a series that tends towards a limit ... and one that does not'.¹²³ It is not surprising, then, that Hegel's characterizations of the latter type of series (tedium, flight) are inappropriately applied to the Kantian conception.

The terms Hegel should have employed in this respect, instead of 'tedium' and 'flight', are 'frustration' and 'pursuit'. For example, the immortal soul, endlessly advancing toward holiness must surely feel frustration in never being able to reach that goal; the task is one of continuous pursuit, but with the object always elusive, even as the gap is always diminishing. In general then, for Hegel, an endless process of asymptotic approximation, necessarily related to an unattainable goal, can only be permanently unsatisfactory. The curving line of progress strives to meet up with the

¹²⁰ *Science of Logic*, p. 228.

¹²¹ *Science of Logic*, p. 228, *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, §94, p. 150.

¹²² So the 'spurious' infinity of progress is always approaching, but never reaching, the 'true' infinity of perfection. Cf. A. W. Moore, *The Infinite*, pp. 86-87.

¹²³ Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary*, p. 140.

straight line of perfection, but never does so.¹²⁴ It is this sense of the ‘spuriousness’ of infinite progress which appears to be in Hegel’s mind in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (cf. the ‘lament’ that the ‘goal’ or ‘ideal’ can never be fully realized).

However, the pursuit model underpinning this objection is really not appropriate: progress is not just a matter of getting ever closer to some ultimately unattainable goal; it is, step by step, an actual increase in perfection (perfection here understood in a relative sense). The supposition that endless progress is fruitless or even self-contradictory because it never gets to the end is surely false. This is not to say that talk of ‘asymptotic approximation’ is therefore out of place: if for instance we take the curving line to be defining a volume as well as marking a trajectory, then the geometrical figure retains its applicability.

This does not completely dispose of the objection. Endless progress remains a state of permanent dissatisfaction, even if not quite to the complete extent implied by terms like ‘pursuit’. Herder’s earlier version of the criticism registers this: even if some good is achieved in the course of progress, the fact that it nonetheless continues to aspire to a goal it can never reach means that it must always generate discontent. But now we come to the real difficulty with this line of argument: to whom are we to attribute the dissatisfaction? In so far as we are taking Hegel’s objection to relate to the putative endless progress of the immortal soul, the answer is obvious: the individual moral agent. If, on the other hand, we are considering it in relation to *historical* progress, matters are less clear. An unhappily striving subject is only conceivable if we do what both Kant and Herder do not, and think of the human species as a supra-individual subject (i.e. as with Averroes). Hegel of course does have a candidate for such a subject in his idea of *Geist*, which we can imagine would find infinite historical progress endlessly dissatisfying. But this does not justify Hegel in supposing that Kantian historical progress also involves this negativity. (Herder is somewhat less culpable, in that he evidently does suspect that Kant implicitly relies upon a conception of the species as an individual, but, as we have seen, this suspicion is unfounded.)

The pertinence of Hegel’s objection to Kant’s conception of immortality is borne out by the fact that Kant himself is aware of the problem. This, I would argue, is apparent

¹²⁴ Joseph Addison writing in *The Spectator* in 1711 used the figure of asymptotic lines: ‘The soul considered with its Creator, is like one of those Mathematical Lines that may draw nearer to another for all Eternity, without a possibility of touching it: And can there be a Thought so transporting, as to consider our selves in these perpetual Approaches to him, who is not only the Standard of Perfection but of Happiness!’. He evidently didn’t find the prospect disturbing. (*The Spectator*, ed. Donald F. Bond, vol. 1, p. 459.)

even in the second *Critique*, but becomes more evident in his subsequent writings. For example, in *Religion* we read that

According to our mode of estimation, [to us] who are unavoidably restricted to temporal conditions in our conceptions ... a continuous advance *in infinitum* [*continuirlicher Fortschritt ins Unendliche*] from a defective good to something better, always appears defective, so that we are bound to consider the good as it appears in us ... as *at each instant* inadequate to a holy law. (6:67)

And more clearly still in ‘The End of All Things’:

For the state in which [the immortal individual] now is will always remain an ill compared with a better one which he always stands ready to enter; and the representation of an infinite progression toward the final end is nevertheless at the same time a prospect on an infinite series of ills which, though they may be outweighed by a greater good, do not allow for the possibility of contentment; for he can think that only by supposing that the *final end* will at sometime be *attained*. (8:335)

Kant’s attempts to resolve this difficulty by factoring in some kind of divinely induced ultimate attainment are complex and fascinating, but need not detain us here.¹²⁵

For Kant, the human species is destined to make endless progress. This necessarily involves that there is a goal which can never be attained. Accordingly, there are in effect two ends: the actual end of infinite progress and the nominal end of full perfection. Humanity can achieve the former, but not the latter and yet it is only by aspiring to the latter that it can ensure that it remains on track in respect of the former. Following Silber, we can term these ends ‘immanent’ and ‘transcendent’ respectively.¹²⁶ The clearest indications Kant himself gives of this necessary duality relate (once again) to the individual’s moral vocation:

This holiness of will is nevertheless a practical idea, which must necessarily serve as a model to which all finite rational beings can only approximate without end and which the pure moral law, itself called holy because of this, constantly and rightly holds before our eyes; the utmost that finite practical reason can effect [*bewirken*] is to make sure of this unending progress [*Progressus*] of one’s maxims towards this model and of their constancy in continual progress [*Fortschreiten*], that is, virtue.... (5:32-33)

That law of all laws, therefore, like all the moral precepts of the Gospel, presents the moral disposition in its complete perfection, in such a way that as an ideal of holiness it is not attainable by any creature but yet is the archetype which we should strive to approach and resemble in an uninterrupted but endless progress [*Progressus*]. (5:83)

The criticism is often made that because it is impossible for human beings to achieve holiness they cannot be coherently commanded to try to do so.¹²⁷ Yet it is possible

¹²⁵ For an interesting account (about which I have reservations), see Perovich, “‘For reason ... also has its mysteries’”: Immortality, *Religion*, and “The End of All Things”’. See also Ward, *The Development of Kant’s View of Ethics*, p. 152. It is worth noting that Kant continues to worry away at the issue of immortality well into the 1790’s. It has become all too common to assume that he either abandoned or neglected the earlier doctrine in favour of exclusively mundane conceptions of the human vocation. See for example Wood, *Kant’s Moral Religion*, p. 182 and Michalson, *Kant and the Problem of God*, p. 99.

¹²⁶ Silber, ‘Kant’s Conception of the Highest Good as Immanent and Transcendent’.

¹²⁷ Broad, *Five Types of Ethical Theory*, p. 140; Reath, ‘Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant’, p. 607; Guyer, *Kant on Freedom, Law and Happiness*, p. 352.

(assuming temporal immortality) endlessly to approximate holiness, and so this must be, as Kant says, ‘the real object of our will’ (5:122). This ‘real’ or immanent end has to be regulatively determined by the ‘ideal measure’ of the transcendent end.¹²⁸ In the ‘asymptotic approximation’ passage from the second review of Herder’s *Ideas*, the same argument is made in respect of historical progress: ‘the philosopher would say that the destiny of the human race as a whole is *incessant progress*, and that its fulfilment is merely an idea - but in every respect a very useful idea - of the goal to which, in keeping with the intention of providence, we have to direct our endeavours’ (8:65).

I have argued that the Herder-Hegel objection to the infinity of progress relies upon the assumption that there is a supra-individual historical subject who can experience something of the dissatisfaction they exaggeratedly portray (as is the case with the immortal soul). Kant should therefore have no problem espousing the endlessness of historical progress. It is therefore somewhat puzzling that he is by no means as assertoric on this issue as one might have expected. In particular, the doctrine is barely detectable in ‘Idea for a Universal History’. There and elsewhere we find an apparent emphasis on the completability of the historical process.

Accordingly, every individual man would have to live for a vast length of time if he were to learn how to make complete use of all his natural capacities; or if nature has fixed only a short term for each man’s life (as is in fact the case), then it will require a perhaps incalculable [*unabsehblichen*] series of generations, each passing on its enlightenment to the next, before the germs implanted by nature in our species can be developed to that degree which corresponds to nature’s original intention. And the point in time [*Zeitpunkt*] at which this degree of development is reached must be the goal of man’s aspirations (at least as an idea in his mind), or else his natural capacities would necessarily appear by and large to be purposeless and wasted. (‘Idea’, #2, 8:19, translation amended [‘long’ in line three deleted])

Kant *twice* refrains in this passage from stating that the full development of our rational capacities is an endless task. His motivation for doing so may in part relate to a desire to minimize the discrepancies which arise when principles of natural teleology are applied to human beings. These principles lead to the expectation, as with other species, that human capacities will be developed completely, with no unrealized excess (cf. ‘Idea’, #1, 8:18). More significant is the claim that the thought of such a completion is required if individuals are to be able to reconcile themselves to the inevitable discrepancy between their abilities and achievements. This is more than just the thought that fulfilment is the asymptotically approached goal: fulfilment is now supposed to be a state we think of as being achieved at some distant *Zeitpunkt*. Why does Kant say that this is necessary? My guess is that in identifying with the species,

¹²⁸ Cf. Silber, op. cit. p. 485.

the individual attributes to it its own concern for the contentment which completion brings (cf. 'End', 8:335). To that extent, Herder and Hegel are right: the endless progress of the species is, to our imagination, 'tantalizing', and consequently we are motivated to imagine its consummation. There are thus two perspectives on the progress of the species: the theoretical one, which asserts its endlessness, and the subjective one, which imagines its culmination.¹²⁹

Kant's most explicit treatment of this issue is in *Religion*. Part Three of the work deals with the historical development of an 'ethical community', or a 'universal republic based on the laws of virtue' (6:98), or 'church invisible' (6:101), i.e. the moral counterpart to the juridical community which was the focus of 'Idea for a Universal History'. This, as we might expect, is a 'sublime, never fully attainable idea' (6:100), an 'ultimate perfection' in relation to which all humanity can achieve is 'continual approximation [*continuirliche Annäherung*]' (6:122, 6:131). Kant goes on to discuss the Christian expectation of an actual end to the world, with the establishment of the Kingdom of God (and not just its endless approximation). In line with the general programme of *Religion*, he then attempts to give as rational account of this as possible:

As regards its guidance by Providence, the Kingdom of Heaven is finally represented in this history [*Geschichte*] not only as coming nearer, in an approach delayed at times but never entirely interrupted, but as being ushered in as well. Now the Kingdom of Heaven can be interpreted as a symbolic representation aimed merely at stimulating greater hope and courage and effort in achieving it, if to this narrative there is attached a prophecy ... of the consummation of this great cosmic revolution, in the image of a visible Kingdom of God on earth ... so that the *end of the world* constitutes the conclusion of this story [*Geschichte*]. (6:134)

A little later, he refers to the 'representation in a historical narrative of the future world' as 'a beautiful ideal', which is what is aimed at in 'the continuous progress [*Fortschreiten*] and approximation toward the highest possible good on earth' (6:135-136). The line of thought in these passages must be that human endeavours to approximate an idea of perfection are facilitated by an image of the realization of that perfection. The 'Kingdom of God on earth' is thus an 'ideal', i.e. a symbolic instantiation of an idea of reason. In contrast to the way in which the ideal of holiness is discussed in the second *Critique*, this new ideal is not presented as always beyond the human dimension (though it of course remains beyond human *capacity*). Rather, God himself is imagined as intervening to bring it about. The fact that it is a Kingdom of

¹²⁹ Hans Blumenberg has described the manner in which modernity's anticipation of infinite progress can make the idea of a termination attractive (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pp. 85-6). However, he sees this as motivating distinct conceptions of historical progress in which there is a definite end to the process (his example is Marx). What I am suggesting is that in Kant this 'countermove' takes place alongside the idea of endlessness against which it is a reaction.

God underscores the impossibility of a humanly achieved consummation of historical progress and thereby reminds us of the endlessness of *our* task.

A danger remains in that the invocation of divine agency can serve to curtail the sense of what humanity itself is called to do and is capable of doing. Kant thus has to emphasize that all we can ever think that God might do is to provide, as it were, the finishing touches to our endeavours:

To found a moral people of God is, therefore, a work whose execution cannot be hoped for from human beings but only from God himself. Yet human beings are not permitted on this account to remain idle in the undertaking and let Providence have free rein.... Each must, on the contrary, so conduct himself as if everything depended on him. Only on this condition may we hope that a higher wisdom will provide the fulfilment of his well-intentioned effort. (6:100-101)

In proving itself worthy of having its historical efforts consummated by God, humanity endlessly defers this apotheosis. By contrast, expectations that the end of the world (and of history) is imminent are usually castigated by Kant as reflecting a view of humanity as depraved and deserving of punishment. In ‘The End of All Things’, Kant addresses the ‘opinion about the corrupt nature of the human race, which corruption is great to the point of hopelessness; this makes for an end, and indeed a terrible one, the only end (for the greatest part of humanity) that accords with highest wisdom and justice.... Hence the omens of the last day ... are all of a terrible kind’ (8:331). If, on the other hand, one is more optimistic about the possibility of progress, this will ‘nourish the hope that the last day might rather come on the scene with Elijah’s ascension than with the like descent of Korah’s troops into hell, and bring with it the end of all things on earth’ (8:332, translation amended: *ether* rendered as ‘rather’ instead of ‘sooner’).¹³⁰ (In *Religion*, Kant even attempts to rescue this kind of apocalyptic belief for ‘religion within the boundaries of mere reason’: ‘the announcement of the proximity of the end of the world ... expresses very well the necessity for us to be ready for it, yet (if we ascribe to this symbol its intellectual meaning) in fact always to consider ourselves as actually the chosen citizens of a divine (ethical) state’ (6:136).)

The possible (if somewhat problematic) utility of the ideal of a Kingdom of God on earth may be conceded. But why should we take it to be anything other than entirely optional? The suspicion will surely remain that Kant is merely doing the best he can with traditional Christian notions. If one has been brought up believing these sort of things, then it makes sense to try to rationalize them as Kant does, but only as a means

¹³⁰ The *Religion and Rational Theology* version (‘sooner’ for *ether*) implies that the positive end is more likely to be nigh than the negative one, whereas surely Kant means to contrast the expectation of imminent catastrophe with the thought of a very distant fulfilment. In their translations of ‘End’, Robert Anchor and Ted Humphrey both use ‘rather’ (*On History*, p. 75, *Perpetual Peace*, p. 97).

of effecting a transition out of religion altogether.¹³¹ I have already indicated why such a response is inadequate in respect of this particular case. A representation of an end to progress is needed in order to counter the imaginary sense of dissatisfaction engendered when individuals identify with the species as a whole, and an end is only thinkable by appeal to divine consummation. *Religion* suggests a more general rationale for representing a conclusion of history. Our ‘amphibious’ nature as both rational and embodied creatures means that we have a need for images and narratives, as well as mere thoughts, of the human vocation, ideals as well as ideas.¹³² It would be mistaken, though, to assume that ideas themselves cannot generate affective motivation: Kant holds that they can, in the form of the feeling of the sublime. Accordingly, the ‘aesthetics of progress’ would be primarily a matter of sublimity, as Kant suggests when invoking ‘the sublime, never fully attainable idea of an ethical community’ (6:100, underlining added for emphasis). And yet sublimity by itself is just too strenuous; something more harmonious is also needed to complement it, in short, the ‘beautiful ideal’ of a consummated progress (6:135, underlining added for emphasis).¹³³

¹³¹ This is Yovel’s approach – cf. *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, pp. 201-23, especially, pp. 214-5.

¹³² Guyer has done much in his recent work to emphasize this aspect of Kant’s thought – see for example, *Kant and the Experience of Freedom*, p. 31.

¹³³ Writers on Kant’s philosophy of religion oddly fail to engage with the historical eschatology presented in *Religion*. Michalson’s otherwise excellent account of the ethical community in *Kant and the Problem of God* (pp. 99-122) is a case in point. According to Michalson, Kant’s ‘“kingdom of heaven on earth” will be a kingdom designed and produced by our own hands, rather than one delivered by the divine hand’ (p. 99). I hope to have shown that this is a false antithesis. His apparent obliviousness to the issue of completion is symptomatically revealed in the claim that there is ‘a certain ambiguity about whether moral perfection will actually be achieved – or only increasingly approximated – through immanent human action’ (p. 101, cf. also p. 121). I think it is obvious that there is no such ambiguity. Anderson-Gold has attempted in *Unnecessary Evil: History and Moral Progress in the Philosophy of Immanuel Kant* to argue for the importance of God for the ethical community, but only as a sustaining ground and focal figure (pp. 48-52): she too ignores the role that the thought of God plays in making it possible to represent a finally perfected ethical community. Another recent treatment which I have found unsatisfactory in this regard is Hare, *The Moral Gap: Kantian Ethics, Human Limits and God’s Assistance*. Hare at least recognizes that ‘Kant has a reading of traditional Christian eschatology’ (p. 271) but sees it as only contingently motivated: if people do have chiliastic beliefs, then these can be made useful, but are by no means necessary (p. 273). Despland, in his *Kant on History and Religion*, only sees in *Religion* the account of ‘progressive coming to earth of the Kingdom of God’, not its treatment of a final consummation (p. 238).

Chapter Six: What is ‘disconcerting’ about progress?

We saw in Chapter One that one of Herder’s objections to the idea of progress was that it tended to consign earlier generations to the status of mere means, whose value is only the contribution they make to the happiness of their successors. His criticism had two components: on the one hand, this picture *isn’t* true – the lives of earlier generations were not as benighted as the progressivists suppose; on the other hand, this picture *can’t be* true – for it imputes to God an injustice which is inconsistent with his providence. Kant’s theory of historical progress, first made public ten years after Herder had originally aired these and other thoughts on the topic, clearly seemed to his former pupil to fall foul of this criticism. And so, as we saw in Chapter Five, much of Herder’s attack on ‘Idea for a Universal History’ amounts to an elaboration of the ‘merely means’ objection as he thinks it applies to Kant’s position. Frustratingly, as I noted, Kant adverts to Herder’s criticism but then passes up on the opportunity to respond to it, blaming the length constraint his review was subject to. It may be that he felt he had already taken sufficient cognizance of the ‘merely means’ charge, for the work Herder was reacting to itself displays an awareness of it. This comes in the passage at the end of the Third Proposition where Kant admits that progress ‘always remains disconcerting’ and ‘puzzling’ because of the way it appears to discriminate against earlier generations (#3, 8:20). (Herder has this passage in mind in his assault on the Kantian position in Book Eight of *Ideas*, borrowing its construction imagery.) We have already briefly considered this passage (at the end of Chapter Four), but now I would like to examine it in more detail and assess Kant’s apparent confidence that he can brush off the Herderian objection. Along the way, I will address and disagree with the ways in which contemporary Kantians tend to deal with the distressing character of progress.

Kant outlines in the Third Proposition of ‘Idea for a Universal History’ how humanity has to work itself up ‘from the uttermost crudeness [*Rohigkeit*] to the highest degree of skill, to inner perfection in his manner of thought and thence (as far as is possible on earth) to happiness’ (#3, 8:20, translation amended). As the Second Proposition has stated, this task is necessarily historical, requiring ‘a perhaps incalculable series of generations, each passing its enlightenment onto the next’. In concluding the Third Proposition, Kant then writes:

What always [*immer*] remains disconcerting [or ‘strange’: *befremdend*] about all this is firstly, that the earlier generations seem to perform their laborious tasks only for the sake of the later ones, so

as to prepare for them a further stage from which they can raise still higher the structure [*Bauwerk*] intended by Nature; and secondly, that only the later generations will in fact have the good fortune [*Glück*] to inhabit the building [*Gebäude*] on which a whole series of their ancestors (admittedly, without any conscious intention) had worked without themselves being able to share in the happiness [*Glück*] they were preparing. But no matter how puzzling [*ratselhaft*] this may be, it will appear as necessary as it is puzzling if we simply assume that one animal species was intended to have reason, and that, as a class of rational beings who are mortal as individuals but immortal as a species, it was still meant to develop its capacities completely. (#3, 8:20, translation amended [Nisbet omits to translate *immer*])

Kant therefore recognizes that his universal history depicts what Alexander Herzen called 'chronological unfairness'.¹³⁴ But exactly what is it that is seemingly unfair?

In general, the complaint that progress is somehow unfair can be put in two main ways. One is to claim that the historical process is unfair to *earlier* generations; the other is to claim that it is unfair to *all* generations. It is possible, of course, to run these two together: if, as Kant usually asserts, progress is infinite, then every generation will be, in time, earlier in relation to others. Thus the objection that history is unfair to all generations can be expressed by reference to its unfairness to earlier ones. I suspect this explains why the two types of criticism are not usually distinguished. Herder's objection is of the former variety: progress is pernicious because it treats generations *differently*. It should be obvious from the passage under consideration that Kant is also entertaining the former thought: his explicit focus is on the apparent unfair way in which history treats earlier generations. Kant resists generalizing the plight of earlier generations in the manner just described; 'earlier' and 'later' do seem to be fixed by reference to some kind of event (the completion of the 'building').

The idea that earlier generations are disadvantaged can take different forms. One approach is to focus on a supposed uneven distribution across time of the burdens and/or benefits of the historical process of development. The more forceful kind of complaint, as with Herder, claims this unfairness demonstrates that the earlier generations are reduced to the status of mere means, labouring only for the sake of benefits they produce for generations down the line. Kant's 'disconcerting' picture seems to present all these objectionable qualities: earlier generations undertake most if not all of the effort, yet themselves get no benefit from it; worse, they labour unintentionally, as if unwitting slaves to Nature's plan.

Why does Kant consider that his account of historical progress should have these perplexing features? According to the Third Proposition, they follow directly from the claim that human history is the history of the development of human capacities,

¹³⁴ Quoted in Berlin, *Russian Thinkers*, p. 226.

whereby an original paucity of instinctual abilities is slowly transcended. However, this simple model of history does not itself entail the 'disconcerting' and 'puzzling' picture Kant provides. This picture we may summarize as follows: only earlier generations labour; they do so unintentionally; they receive no benefit from their labour; but the product of their labour builds up, until, at a certain stage, the work is complete and successive generations benefit from it without themselves having to contribute. In this model, history appears as a two-stage process, a period of construction, undertaken unwittingly, followed by a period of habitation: hardship, then happiness. Let us call this picture A. Kant simply presents it as if it follows from the more general conception of history as a process of working up from crudeness to sophistication. However, it should be evident that it does not. The idea that history is a developmental process suggests a quite different story, in which: all generations labour; they do so intentionally;¹³⁵ and receive benefit from their labour; which at the same time builds up; and this process does not terminate. Let us call this picture B. On this account, each generation would strive to improve its conditions, and would also benefit from its efforts (though nowhere near to the same extent as all its successors do). Consequently, 'chronological unfairness' of a sort remains, as each generation finds itself inheriting a higher level of development than its predecessors. This 'unfairness' need only relate to the distribution of benefits, as we may assume not only that each age has to continue to work, but also to put in the same degree of effort. The burdens therefore would therefore be equally shared, even if the benefits are always skewed in favour of the future. Notice that on this model, the chronological unfairness would be one which affected *all* generations; if the process of working to develop capacities never terminates, then the benefits will keep on accumulating, ensuring that each generation will be less favoured than those which succeed it. Picture B is to some extent true of Kant's theory of progress. For example, Kant endorses what he takes to be Herder's observation that 'inventors have often to leave it to posterity to reap greater benefits than they themselves enjoyed' ('Reviews', 8:61).¹³⁶

¹³⁵ This leaves it ambiguous as to what it is that they intend, i.e. whether they simply intend to work in order to get the benefit themselves, with no thought for the future, or whether they are (in however vague a way) also labouring with an eye to posterity.

¹³⁶ Herder's point in this part of *Ideas*, IX.3 is in fact rather different: he wishes to highlight two types of unintended consequence which follow from inventions: (i) a profusion of inventions undermines inventiveness – 'the easy access to inventions has to some extent blunted the European's inventiveness' (B 316 / 6:359-360); (ii) inventors cannot control the use their products are put to – 'It was not in your power to determine how the world, how posterity, should apply your inventions ... The inventor of gunpowder had no inkling of the destruction which the explosion of his black powder

Given that Propositions Two and Three seem to imply picture B, readers can be inclined to interpret the 'disconcerting' passage in ways which rely upon that picture and so dilute the force of the passage. Some contemporary Kantians fall into this trap (indeed, the readiness with which they do so suggests that this fall is not altogether unmotivated.) Robert Louden is a case in point: when discussing the passage from the Third Proposition, he manages to downplay the strangeness Kant highlights by (a) implying that the workers who do the 'preparatory grunt work' (i.e. the 'earlier generations') actively intend their contributions to the construction process ('they do participate in promoting an ideal' and 'can experience [this] participation'), and (b) suggesting that the construction process never ends, so that in fact all generations must contribute to it ('no individual or group participates fully in this destiny: we can only approximate it').¹³⁷ Louden therefore in effect attributes picture B to Kant. On his reading, the apparent unfairness of the historical process can only relate to the uneven distribution of benefits: progress in the development of human capacities inevitably results in later generations benefiting more than earlier ones, simply by virtue of being later. As well as disregarding the problem of the differential allocation of burdens, Louden also detracts from the worrying quality Kant finds by in effect demonstrating how all generations are in the same situation. There is then no particular respect in which earlier generations are disadvantaged, as later ones also find themselves having to contribute to a process which brings about greater benefits for posterity: as Louden says, 'Each generation struggles so that future generations will have a better life'. Notice moreover that this is a task generations seem to shoulder willingly – the sense Kant conveyed of them being unwitting agents is completely lost, and with it a considerable chunk of the 'strangeness'.

Louden maintains that the remaining chronological unfairness in respect of benefits is still 'disconcerting' (indeed he has to, if he is to make good his claim to be accounting for Kant's admission that the course of history is disconcerting), but one might well think that it is not. To see this, we can look at how John Rawls addresses the issue in section 44 of *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls there considers an analogous case of chronological unfairness in the context of his 'savings principle', whereby 'each

could cause...' (B 317 / 6:361). In the second review, Kant tries to charge Herder with contradiction: he cannot assert that inventions generate greater benefit for posterity than for their creators and at the same time deny that human aptitudes 'were meant to be developed fully only within the species' ('Reviews', 8:61). But Herder is trying not to assert the first of these statements.

¹³⁷ *Kant's Impure Ethics*, p. 58.

generation makes a contribution to later generations and receives from its predecessors. The first generations may hardly benefit at all, whereas the last, those living when no further saving is required, gain the most and give the least’.¹³⁸ Rawls points out that ‘the question of justice does not arise’, even though we may feel that something is awry here, as nothing can be done retrospectively to improve the lot of those who came earlier: ‘We can do something for posterity, but it can do nothing for us’.¹³⁹ Rawls indeed cites the passage from Kant we are considering to illustrate what he calls the ‘natural [but] misplaced’ feeling that there is ‘chronological unfairness’ (he uses Herzen’s phrase), not noticing that Kant’s picture is much more unsettling than the one he presents.

On Rawls’ account, every generation is indebted to its predecessors, but can do nothing about this and so should not trouble itself with ‘disconcerting’ thoughts about the apparent unfairness of it all. But his text suggests that to the extent that each generation is indebted to its predecessors, it best responds to this by in turn providing for its successors. A kind of reciprocity is thereby established. Nothing can be done for the preceding generations, but something can be done which addresses the justified sense of indebtedness, which is to do for future generations what earlier generations did for us. The problem would arise again if there was little or nothing which could be done for posterity, i.e. if, in Rawls’ picture, the sum saved was such that it need not be increased, or, as in Kant’s picture, the ‘building’ was finished. (Indeed, Rawls appears to suggest that this could be so, as his ‘last’ generations live ‘when no further saving is required’, or at least not very much (they ‘give the least’).¹⁴⁰ Presumably generations living after this point had been reached, when no more saving was required, would still have duties in relation to their successors, namely not to deplete the sum saved (in Rawls’ terms) or degrade the building (in Kant’s terms), so they would still have to do (or rather not do) something. Yet they would even then not be able to avoid the sense of

¹³⁸ I quote from the first, 1972, edition of *A Theory of Justice* (here, p. 290). Section 44 is one of the parts of the text which Rawls revised for the second, 1999, edition (‘I revised §44 ... trying to make it clearer’, p. xiii of the ‘Preface for the Revised Edition’). His revisions do alter the tenor of his discussion and hence the pertinence of my comments on it, and I will note them as relevant in the footnotes. In this instance, the last part of the quotation, the sentence beginning ‘The first generations’, is not found in the second edition (p. 254).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 291. In the second edition, the sentence beginning ‘We can do something’ is omitted (p. 254). I discuss this alteration on p. 93, n. 142. The sentence itself seems to have in mind the words of the eighteenth-century Irish parliamentarian, Boyle Roche: ‘why should we put ourselves out of our way to do anything for posterity; for what has posterity done for us?’

¹⁴⁰ But note that this element of the discussion was removed in the second edition of *A Theory of Justice* (cf. n. 138 above). It could well be that this was done in the light of considerations similar to those I go on to make in this paragraph.

living off the achievements of the past. In other words, chronological unfairness of the kind Rawls considers can be discounted not simply because, as he says, the 'situation is unalterable' but also because the situation is on-going, i.e. that generations continue to work for the future as well as for themselves. If this were not the case, then the disquieting sense that earlier generations shouldered an unfair proportion of the burdens might well be appropriate, notwithstanding the unalterability of this situation. Rawls is therefore right within the terms of his own argument to fend off the charge that progress is somehow problematic, but only to the extent that his account ensures that all generations continue to contribute to the process of development and thus share the burdens. (This approach coincides with Loudon's strategy, yet also reveals how this has the effect of almost entirely eliminating the appearance of unfairness.)

What is absent from these two writers (and others) is any apparent recognition of the factors which go to justify the unsettling picture which Kant draws.¹⁴¹ Two in particular should be highlighted. First of all, I noted earlier the difficulty of reconciling this picture with the basic account of the progressive development of humanity outlined in Propositions Two and Three: this indeed seems more congruent with the kinds of account proffered by Loudon et al. However, when we turn to the fuller story which emerges over the essay as a whole, we discover, as we have already seen, that what characterizes human history (at least so far) for Kant is not so much labour as *war*, or rather, not only labour but also war. Human individuals are self-seeking antagonistic creatures, always wanting to win out and lord it over their fellows. It is this 'unsocial sociability' which drives them to work - without it they would be happy to live as Arcadian shepherds - but also into conflict with each other. The primary task human beings are confronted with is thus that of constraining their own quarrelsomeness (i.e. not overcoming a state of natural scarcity of goods or an inadequate provision of instinctual capacities). Kant thinks that this task has been substantially if imperfectly completed at the local (national) level in Europe, but has yet to be seriously engaged with on international plane. Only when global peace has been securely established by means of a 'federation of peoples' ('Idea', #7, 8:24) will humanity be fully able to develop its capacities, free from the suffering and wrong-doing which had previously been its unavoidable and collateral accompaniments. It is surely this narrative which the Third Proposition's 'disconcerting' picture adverts to. The building which the

¹⁴¹ Included in 'others' here is Paul Guyer, who subjects the 'disconcerting' passage to a similarly distorted interpretation in *Kant on Freedom, Law and Happiness* – cf. pp. 375, 376, 390-393.

earlier generations are said to construct is not so much a symbol of the general level of cultural and technical development of humanity, but instead refers to the 'universal cosmopolitan state', in which, once initiated, all future generations will reside. The work which members of the earlier generations put into its construction is the selfish and aggressive pursuit of their own ends, which in turn makes necessary the establishment of social order.

Kant describes the initial establishment of the universal cosmopolitan state as marking the half-way point in human development (Proposition Seven). History thus has in this respect two stages: war followed by peace. The early generations live through conflict and distress, slowly learning the hard way the need for and the means of constraining 'unsocial sociability' in its various aggressive manifestations. Until this process is completed, there is no reason to suppose that there will be any lessening in the misery and destruction human antagonism causes; if anything, as this antagonism gets played out on an ever larger scale and with more developed resources, things will get worse. Later generations, those whose 'good fortune [*Glück*]' it will be to live as citizens of the cosmopolitan federation will thereby benefit from the 'sad [mournful, tragic: *traurig*] experience' (Proposition Seven) of humanity up to the half-way point.

This picture is much more distinctly off-putting than the kinds of account proffered by Rawls and Loudon. The unfairness is not simply related to a chronological accumulation of benefits, but instead to a radical transformation in the circumstances of human life. Later generations do not just have more of something, they have something quite different. (Indeed, Kant in the Eighth Proposition goes so far as to invoke the Christian notion of the millennium to characterize the happy future awaiting humanity - cf. pp. 51-52.) Moreover, it is impossible to modify this picture so as to dilute its power to unsettle. We saw earlier how Loudon achieved such a dilution. He suggested that historical progress need not be thought of as too disconcerting because (a) earlier generations can intend to contribute to the benefits accruing to later generations, and (b) later generations must themselves continue the construction process, as this is an endless task. It should be clear now that neither of Loudon's moves is possible in respect of the 'from war to peace' story. As we are to understand the effort which earlier generations put in and which helps bring about global peace as being the aggressive pursuit of private ends it would be incoherent to suppose that this could be entered into with the aim of promoting the cause of global peace. The establishment of a cosmopolitan state can only be the *unintended* consequence of such actions. At the

same time, this state is something which can come about: it is not merely an ideal which can only ever be approximated, but a possible reality. Future generations will (we hope) have the good fortune to live in 'this happy time', not simply get ever closer to it. They will no doubt have to work to maintain and perfect the constitutional arrangements, as well as continuing to develop rational capacities, but this work will be of quite a different order to the 'labours' of their predecessors.

The second factor feeding Kant's sense that the historical process is perplexing which Loudon and Rawls fail to register is of course the thought that the painful path of progress is what Nature has planned for humanity. By the end of the Third Proposition, Kant has already if anything overemphasized the extent to which the construction of a progressivist universal history requires the thought of a teleological designer, so these writers are perhaps more culpable of neglecting to address this factor (though their tendency to dismiss the invocation of Nature as outdated or dogmatic no doubt explains why they neglect it). The idea that Nature is as it were the higher-order agent who uses the earlier generations as means is itself present in the 'disconcerting' discussion and helps explain what is troubling Kant.

In the absence of reference to such a higher-order agent, one who sets the plan according to which earlier generations unintentionally labour, it is not possible to protest that the idea of progress involves earlier generations serving merely as means for the benefits which later generations are to enjoy. Who else could it be who uses them in this manner? The argument would collapse into absurdity if it were to be alleged that it is the later generations themselves who abuse their predecessors. As Rawls says, 'posterity can do nothing for us'; so too, it can do nothing *to* us. But this is perhaps a little too quick: later generations surely can mistreat those who came before, not in fact, but, as it were, in the way in which they construe facts. That is to say, it is possible for the past to be considered only in respect of how it has led to a superior present or even more glorious future, in which case it is all too easy for past generations to be *viewed* merely as means.¹⁴² This was one of Herder's main objections to enlightenment philosophical history (cf. p. 15). This tendency, however, should not be taken as vitiating the project of universal progressivist history but rather as something which is

¹⁴² As noted p. 90, n. 139, Rawls removed the sentence 'posterity can do nothing for us' in the second edition of *A Theory of Justice* (p. 254). Indeed, the paragraph in which it was originally placed was amended to make it explicit that the one-way flow between generations specifically involved 'economic benefits' (p. 254, emphasis added), rather than the more general 'exchanges' which featured in the first edition (p. 291). These changes, we may suppose, were motivated by considerations of the sort I have advanced here.

counteracted both by universal history itself (in the positive story it tells about the development of human capacities, which all generations have contributed to) and by other forms of historiography, in which past generations can be considered in a more empathetic and commemorative manner. (Kant makes clear at the end of the essay that universal history should not supersede what he calls 'empirical history', which we may take to include these other ways of engaging with past lives.)

There are therefore two key respects in which historical progress is disconcerting. Firstly, the process of regulating unsocial sociability will eventually mean that future generations will enjoy a world free of war, whereas their predecessors suffered its ravages and indeed it is only because of this suffering that progress towards peace is made. Secondly, this process is one we have to think of as having been intended by Nature, who then appears to be a malign and arbitrary being. Herder's objection thus presses Kant at a vulnerable spot. As we recall, there were two components to the criticism, which relate to the two respects just identified: on the one hand, this picture *isn't* true – the lives of earlier generations were not as benighted as the progressivists suppose; on the other hand, this picture *can't be* true – for it imputes to God an injustice which is inconsistent with his providence.

We have already noted the weakness of the first part of Herder's case. In *Ideas* he tries to rebut Kant's insistence of the prevalence of hostility and aggression between human beings by appealing to their innate peaceableness (cf. p. 68). Kant has good grounds for disregarding this kind of wishful thinking. Herder may be right to highlight the extent to which progressivists consider previous cultures with disdain – witness 'enlightened' contempt for the middle ages – but Kant's claim here is not an instance of such 'presentism'. Herder's position is doubly flawed, in that it fails adequately to register both the reality of the miseries the human species has brought upon itself and the desirability of progress to a better state. Kant, on the other hand, can appeal to both these aspects, the factual and the normative, in support of his universal history. Its plausibility, moreover, derives from the manner in which the two are yoked together: the suffering brought about by unsocial sociability itself generates ever greater degrees of civil order. (And to that extent, picture A (p. 88) is misleading: the earlier generations do inhabit the building as they construct it.)

The second element of Herder's objection claims that it contradicts our idea of the Creator to think that his plan uses earlier generations as mere means to the advantages enjoyed by later ones. Part of the way in which Kant can deal with this is to insist,

against Herder, that the superintending agent to whom we attribute the plan of history is Nature, not Providence (or even God).¹⁴³ Nature is to be distinguished from Providence precisely by virtue of its non-moral character: there is then no inconsistency in thinking of its plan as involving the mistreatment of earlier generations. This is no mere ad-hoc device designed to get Kant off the hook in this respect, for Nature is characterized this way in natural teleology generally. And yet this move can only block the Herderian objection to an extent, for Kant also wants, as we have noted, to see the course of human history as justifying *Providence*, that is, a much more clearly moral and fully divine conception of the creator. As the distinction between Nature and Providence is ultimately dissolved in historical teleology, the disturbing quality of progress does seem to problematize the notion of Providence in a manner which invites Herder's criticism.

A further response which Kant might want to make to Herder is to deny that Nature or Providence ever treats earlier generations *merely* as means.¹⁴⁴ Herder's original formulation in *This Too a Philosophy of History* certainly rests upon this claim (Chapter One, p. 15) and it is implicit in the passages from *Ideas* where he targets Kant (Chapter Five, pp. 69-70). Similarly, recent scholars, such as Galston, who think that 'we must suspect that the mode of operation of history is in Kant's own terms immoral',¹⁴⁵ do so because they take the treatment of earlier generations to infringe the third formula of the categorical imperative, the 'Formula of Humanity': 'So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or that of another, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means' (*Groundwork*, 4:429).¹⁴⁶ All Kant need do to fend off this particular objection is to show that whilst Nature may treat some generations as means, it also treats them as ends. This is straightforward enough: Nature's plan is first and foremost for human beings to develop their own abilities, and this is something all generations participate in. So, in a way, the response to the merely means objection is to point out the positive role earlier generations play in raising the species from 'crudeness to the highest degree of skill'; it is their capacities, and not just those of their successors,

¹⁴³ Herder presses his objection with reference to God (cf. p. 15), Providence (cf. p. 69) and Nature (cf. p. 70), not discriminating between these terms.

¹⁴⁴ As noted by Wood, *Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 389 n. 4.

¹⁴⁵ Galston, *Kant and the Problem of History*, p. 28.

¹⁴⁶ Cf. Galston: 'Morality commands that every man be treated "always as an end and never as a means only".... Yet the notion of the sequence of generations, each labouring for the last, appears to reduce men to means with equal thoroughness' (ibid. p. 230). Another commentator who makes this point is Booth, *Interpreting the World: Kant's Philosophy of History and Politics*, p. 123; he is clearer than Galston that an agent is needed if this charge is to stick, and accordingly identifies 'Nature or Providence' as the culprit.

which are developed. It is here, therefore, that the developmental narrative suggested by Propositions Two and Three, i.e. picture B, is relevant.¹⁴⁷

Even if Nature (or rather Providence) is cleared of the charge of immorality which Herder and others have wished to press, we are surely still left with the sense that its plan displays considerable partiality towards later generations. This is less of a problem than the one Herder and like-minded commentators allege,¹⁴⁸ but is more of a problem than the one Loudon and Rawls attempt to relay on Kant's behalf. As a result, progress 'always remains disconcerting'. I would now like to summarize the reasons Kant has for affirming his idea of progress in the face of its troubling character.

Firstly, Kant is committed to the idea of progress as a result of the application of principles of natural teleology to the human species. This is what he emphasizes in the Third Proposition itself: 'no matter how puzzling this may be [i.e. the unsettling course of human history], it will appear as necessary as it is puzzling if we simply assume that one animal species was intended to have reason, and that, as a class of rational beings who are mortal as individuals but immortal as a species, it was still meant to develop its capacities completely' (8:19). There is thus a *theoretical* gain. Secondly, as described in Chapter Four, universal history enables the individual to be reconciled with the course of history, mortality and humanity itself. It may be 'puzzling' that good can emerge from wrong-doing and suffering, but it would be much worse if wrong-doing and suffering were endlessly to be repeated without such progress. Thirdly, the historical process should become much less problematic once the current state of international unsociability starts to become regulated. This development both will enable and should be guided by increasing enlightenment: humanity will therefore begin to come together as a collective subject and appropriate the plan of history for itself. The unpleasant sense of human beings working unintentionally to Nature's plan will then be dissipated.

¹⁴⁷ Wood claims that 'the end of developing the predispositions of the human species ... (on Kant's view) honours the dignity both of those in whom the capacities are developed and those whose effort and suffering serve as means to develop them' (*Kant's Ethical Thought*, p. 390 n. 4). I fail to see how this can be so. Wood here takes humanity as composed of two groups, one whose members have capacities which are enhanced, the other whose members do not, but who apparently strive instead for the sake of the first group. This strikes me as quite inconsistent with the full picture offered in 'Idea', according to which the developmental process is one in which all individuals share (and benefit from, if disproportionately). Wood here seems merely to reiterate the one-sided conception of historical progress which provoked the 'merely means' objection in the first place.

¹⁴⁸ Beiner and Booth in their 'Introduction' to *Kant and Political Philosophy* describe Kant as displaying 'revulsion' in the Third Proposition of 'Idea'.

These factors outweigh the unsettling character of historical progress; they do not cancel it. The unease and distress we are likely to feel in thinking of the fate of the earlier generations (indeed even our own and future ones) will remain. Kant would urge, in the spirit of 'authentic theodicy', that we should not allow these feelings to undermine our confidence in Providence (cf. the conclusion to Chapter Four). An obvious way in which they could be neutralized is by belief in an after-life, a continued existence in which (amongst other things) individuals could be compensated for the toil and suffering undergone in this world. If this were so, then traditional religious beliefs would serve to shore up commitment to progress. Although Kant never articulates this thought, it is one that has occurred to some of his commentators.¹⁴⁹ Kant of course does provide a critical defence of the Christian belief in a life after death in a heavenly kingdom in all three *Critiques* (if to varying degrees) as well as in texts such as *Religion* and 'The End of All Things'. It is therefore not implausible to assume that one of its functions could be to offset the disquiet we might otherwise feel about the fate of our predecessors.

Kant's universal history is usually taken to exemplify the modern tendency of secularizing human hopes, focusing them onto this world, not another. To its advocates, this tendency registers the desirability of reconciliation over consolation (cf. p. 60). Kant himself adverts to this in 'Idea':

what is the use of lauding and holding up for contemplation the glory and wisdom of creation in the non-rational sphere of nature, if the history of humanity ... is to remain a constant reproach to everything else? Such a spectacle would force us to turn away in revulsion, and, by making us despair of ever finding any completed rational aim behind it, would reduce us to hoping for it only in some other world. (#9, 8:30)

Philosophical history is recommended to us as a way of avoiding a despairing resort to other-worldly consolation. This passage conveys Kant's sense of the unsatisfactoriness of the appeal to heavenly compensation. Yet what he objects to is the *exclusive* recourse to this device – 'hoping for it only in some other world' (underlining added for emphasis). This then allows for the possibility that such religious expectations could complement our mundane historical ones and even compensate for that which 'always remains disconcerting' about human history.

It may be conceded that practical faith in an after-life may help assuage the distress occasioned by the thought of those whom progress has left behind, but denied that it is in any sense mandatory. If one already has such beliefs, then they are useful in this

¹⁴⁹ For example, see Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 385, Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, p. 131 and Reath, 'Two conceptions of the highest good in Kant', p. 603.

regard, but this utility is not itself a reason for holding them in the first place. The possible complementarity of philosophical history and traditional religious beliefs does not detract from their essential independence from one another. (This response is similar to one we considered at the end of the previous chapter.)

This approach can try to treat the question of the perplexing character of progress in either of two ways. On the one hand, it could simply note it and move on: the fate of earlier generations is not taken to be a problem to be addressed. This clearly won't do. Universal history is more than a merely theoretical construction, which we are to treat neutrally. In engaging our hopes for the future, it must also provoke disquiet about the past. We can't have one without the other. Consequently, the non-religious approach has also to recognize that there is a problem and then develop a response to it.

This task is typically undertaken by appeal to commemorative historiography, whose potential role in complementing universal history I have already referred to (pp. 95-6). Commemorative history is charged with promoting what has been called 'anamnetic solidarity'.¹⁵⁰ Remembering the fate of past generations is supposed to reinforce our commitment to assist in the process of overcoming the causes of suffering. 'The finality of human suffering does not weaken the resolve to seek a just society, but strengthens it; the very fact that this suffering cannot be redeemed makes it so much the more urgent to seek a society without suffering caused by social conflict.'¹⁵¹ However, as Harry van der Linden admits, it may not always work this way: the remembrance of past injustice and pain has the capacity 'to overwhelm us' and inhibit action in the present. His solution is to recommend that when this occurs we should 'turn our back' on the past: 'forgetting' must trump remembrance.¹⁵²

Kant would agree, I think, that anamnetic solidarity will tend to be disabling – that is why we might think of its full achievement as being a job for God, not for us. He would be skeptical about van der Linden's proposed alternative. Do we have the ability simply to block out those features of the human condition which might otherwise lead to feelings of hopelessness? The discussion of 'the righteous man' in the *Critique of Judgment* suggests that we do not (§87, 5:452-453). For Kant, mere strength of will is never enough. Van der Linden's strategy of active forgetting looks very similar to the righteous man's attempt to ignore the reality of evil and death and, we may presume, is

¹⁵⁰ Cf. Habermas, 'A reply to my critics', pp. 246-247 and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, pp. 14-16.

¹⁵¹ Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, p. 131.

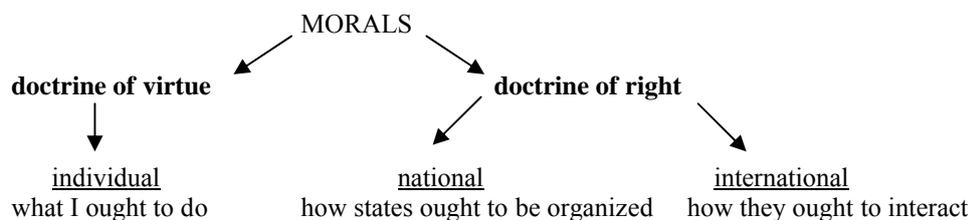
¹⁵² *Ibid.* p. 132.

no more likely to succeed. There is reason, then, for thinking that the secular response is inadequate. We can neither adequately commemorate nor effectively forget past suffering. A religious response starts to look more than merely optional.¹⁵³

¹⁵³ The idea of 'anamnetic solidarity' derives in large part from Walter Benjamin. 'At any given time, the living see themselves in the midday of history. They are obliged to prepare a banquet for the past. The historian is the herald who invites the dead to the table.' (*The Arcades Project*, p. 481 [N15,2]). Yet Benjamin would not have wanted this to be understood in an exclusively secular manner. In a related note he quotes from and then comments on a letter from Max Horkheimer as follows: 'On the question of the incompleteness of history, Horkheimer's letter of March 16, 1937: "... Past injustice has occurred and is completed. The slain really are slain... If one takes the lack of closure entirely seriously, one must believe in the Last Judgment..." ... What science has determined, remembrance can modify ... in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted to us to try to write it with theological concepts' (Ibid. p. 471 [N8,1] underlining and ellipses added for emphasis). The experience may be religiously infused even if the practice of writing is not. The invocation of the divine on the one hand and secular historiography on the other therefore need not be construed as 'two alternative paths', as Axel Honneth claims they are ('A Communicative Disclosure of the Past: On the Relation between Anthropology and Philosophy of History in Walter Benjamin', p. 91). Benjamin was much influenced in this line of thinking by Hermann Lotze, from whose critique of the idea of progress in *Microcosmus* (1864) he made many excerpts for *The Arcades Project* (esp. *The Arcades Project*, pp. 478-481). Pursuing a theme now familiar to us, Lotze urged the rejection of 'the thought that the work of vanishing generations should go on for ever only benefiting those who come later, and being irreparably wasted for the workers themselves' (*Microcosmus*, vol. 2, p. 173, excerpted by Benjamin, op. cit. p. 480 [N13a,3]). Instead, we should hold to the 'presentiment that we shall not be lost to the future, that those who were before us though they have passed away from the sphere of earthly reality have not passed away from reality altogether, and that in some mysterious way the progress of history affects them too' (*Microcosmus*, vol. 2, pp. 173-174, from 'in some mysterious way' excerpted by Benjamin, op. cit. p. 480 [N13a,3]). '[I]t is only by presupposing the truth of this belief that modern views can free themselves from the internal contradictions in which we found them involved' (*Microcosmus*, vol. 2, p. 175; not excerpted by Benjamin). Lotze in turn was evidently influenced by Herder, indeed going so far as to claim that *Microcosmus* was an attempt at a 'repetition of the undertaking which we have so brilliant example in Herder's *Ideen zur Geschichte der Menschheit*' (vol. 1, p. xvi).

Chapter Seven: ‘Theory and Practice’

In his 1793 essay ‘On the Common Saying: That May Be Correct in Theory, But It Is Of No Use in Practice’, Kant defends the practicality of ‘moral’ theory – which states how things ought to be – in response to those critics who assert that ‘what sounds good in theory has no validity in practice’ (8:276).¹⁵⁴ The essay ostensibly engages with three such thinkers, Garve, Hobbes and Mendelssohn, each of whom is presented as skeptical about prescriptive theories in relation to, respectively, ‘morals generally [*Moral überhaupt*]’, *Staatsrecht* and *Völkerrecht*.¹⁵⁵ In fact, as Kant makes clear, Garve’s objections are focused on the practicality of the ‘doctrine of virtue’, which, in the typology Kant was developing in the 1790s, forms part of ‘morals’, along with the ‘doctrine of right’, which in turn includes *Staatsrecht* and *Völkerrecht*.



The essay, we are told in the Introduction, will address each of these areas in turn, the doctrine of virtue in Part One, national right in Part Two and international right in Part Three. However, Part Three deals for the most part with the issue of historical progress. This (and other considerations)¹⁵⁶ can lead the reader to view the whole essay as a portmanteau collection, each of whose parts is best considered in relative independence from the rest.¹⁵⁷ This would be a mistake, particularly from our point of view. The idea of progress, which is the focus of Part Three, relates to the ‘theory and practice’ debate as a whole and is a fitting theme on which to conclude that debate. To see how this is so, I shall reconstruct, in rather schematic form, the debate between the anti-theorists and Kant.

¹⁵⁴ These senses of ‘theory’ and ‘practice’ do not line up with Kant’s distinction between theoretical and practical reason. If anything, they are related inversely: ‘theory’ is practical reason, and ‘practice’ is the domain disclosed by the facts provided by theoretical reason – ‘the nature of things’ (8:313). (Indeed, for Kant, one could say that practice is more theoretical than theory, and vice-versa – cf. *Critique of Judgment*, 5:173.)

¹⁵⁵ Part Two is ostensibly directed against Hobbes, but in fact the targets are Burke, Gentz, Rehburg and others, all of whom had in the early 1790’s criticized the French revolution and republicanism generally (see the editorial comments in *Practical Philosophy*, pp. 275-276, and Henrich, ‘On the meaning of rational action in the state’).

¹⁵⁶ Such as the fact that Kant had originally planned to publish what became the first part (written in response to Garve’s 1792 criticisms) separately (see Kant’s letter to Biester, 30th July 1792, 11:350).

¹⁵⁷ As is indeed true of *The Conflict of the Faculties*, which will be examined in the next chapter.

The anti-theoretical appeal to ‘practice’ is in large part an appeal to *history*. For Burke *et al*, it is obvious that the record of the past demonstrates the inapplicability of high-flown theoretical prescriptions. Moral considerations should therefore be tailored to fit practical, historical realities rather than abstracting from or ignoring them. This line of argument takes two forms. The weaker form focuses on the inapplicability of new-fangled ideas, which it will dismiss as utopian whilst admitting that they ‘sound good in theory’. The stronger form denies even this: in appealing to the past it looks not just for empirical constraints on what can be achieved but also normative orientation. The proposals of republicans and others are accordingly held *not even* to be ‘good in theory’. The situation is further complicated in that the two forms of appeal to the past are in principle independent of each other. It is quite possible for someone to argue that the undesirability of ‘theory’ does not mean that it is unfeasible: with enough effort, its prescriptions could perhaps be put into effect. Conversely, an anti-theorist could hold that theory is both undesirable *and* unfeasible. There are thus *three* distinct positions which the anti-theorist can adopt: ‘theory’ is (i) unfeasible; (ii) undesirable; (iii) unfeasible *and* undesirable. Only to the first of these can the ‘saying’ ‘it sounds good in theory, but...’ properly be attributed. And yet those who hold the third position may also (if disingenuously) adopt the saying in order to put their case in two stages: ‘that may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice; and in any case, it isn’t even correct in theory’.

Kant’s explicit focus on those who assert that ‘what sounds good in theory has no validity in practice’ means that his primary concern is the issue of practicality. His response to the anti-theorists’ historically based skepticism on this point can be supposed to come in two parts, the first looking at it in relation to ‘practice’, the second, ‘theory’. In relation to ‘practice’, Kant does not challenge the account of the past presented by the anti-theoreticians; indeed, he largely accepts it (or rather his own version of it). His objections are rather to the inferences they make from it. The anti-theoreticians overstate their conclusions in two respects: they argue from the fact that something didn’t happen to the claims that (i) it could not have happened; and (ii) it could not happen. The past could only have been the way it was, and the future can only be the same. Kant will argue that in both instances an assertion of necessity is being made which empirical evidence can never justify. In relation to ‘theory’, Kant argues that it states how one ought to act, and from this necessity the possibility of the action follows. How I or others have acted in the past is irrelevant. (This is as close as

he gets to dealing with the issue of ‘desirability’: normative orientation cannot be taken from historical facts.)

Kant’s first argument thus tells us that historical experience can give us no good reason for denying that moral principles are applicable; his second argument urges that the force of these principles itself gives us good reason for thinking that they are applicable. Accordingly, the appeal to history made by the anti-theorists does not disconcert Kant. Indeed, he frequently emphasizes the extent of his agreement with the facts they adduce. For example, in Part One, we find reference to ‘the *history* of maxims’ (8:287) and ‘historical experience’ (8:288), which indeed display that what ought to have happened in fact rarely did: ‘experience proves, regrettably, that maxims for the most part flow from the latter principle (of selfishness)’ and not from moral principles (8:287). Similarly, in Part Two, Kant is willing to admit that the ‘original contract’ presupposed by political right is one which ‘history’ does not show to have ever been entered into by anyone (8:297). (Of course, it remains for him to explain why history has this character: see p. 105 below.)

The anti-theorists’ response to this line of argument then goes like this: to the extent that the ‘theorists’ recognize, as we have just seen with Kant, the gulf between the way things have been and the way (on their account) they ought to be, they will advocate abrupt historical transformation as the only way to overcome this. Theory thus has a necessary affinity with revolution, this being the means by which it envisages its own realization, and revolution is obviously pernicious.

The anti-theoretical opposition to revolution takes two basic forms, depending on whether the appeal to the past is used to argue for the unfeasibility or the undesirability of theory (bearing in mind that it could be used to argue for *both*). If it is asserted that theory simply can’t work, then any revolutionary endeavour will be assumed inevitably to fail, following which the temporarily interrupted historical practices and institutions will revive. If, on the other hand, it is supposed that theory could be successfully implemented, then revolution is feared precisely because it will eliminate traditional practices and values. In both cases, the critics will focus on the immorality of revolution, but in the first case its futility will also be stressed, whereas in the second the disastrous likelihood of its success will be emphasized.

‘Theory and Practice’ is one of the many texts in which Kant comes out strongly against any alleged right of revolution and so it is straightforward for him to deny that

his conception of theory is tainted with revolutionary tendencies.¹⁵⁸ It would be a mistake, though, to assume that this is all he has to say here. The issue for Kant is not just the immorality of acts of revolution, but also the impossibility of revolutionary transformation. That is, he contests the very equation of theory and revolution which the anti-theorists find so intuitive. They assume that the historical disparity between theory and practice means that the two can be conjoined only by means of a radical rupture *at a point in time* – revolution. Kant, by contrast, takes the same disparity to be such that it can only be overcome by means of an endless approximation *over all time*.¹⁵⁹

Kant’s response to the anti-theorists therefore comes down to the assertion of the possibility of progress in the implementation of moral principles, both at the individual and social levels. His defence of theory attempts to take the wind out of the sails of its critics by showing that much of what they point out is in fact compatible with it. Thus Kant can agree with Burke *et al* regarding ‘historical experience’ and the moral indefensibility of the French Revolution. More importantly still, he concurs with them in respect of the necessary unfeasibility of theoretical principles as such, though for Kant this relates only to their absolute practicality. To that extent, theory can never be absolutely realized, but only progressively implemented. In contrast to the critics’ fixation on the weight of the past, Kant adverts to the openness and endlessness of the future.

Although Kant does not make it explicit, the role of progress in mediating between morality and reality is detectable in Parts One and Two of ‘Theory and Practice’. In respect of the doctrine of virtue, he writes:

Perhaps no-one has ever performed quite unselfishly (without admixture of other incentives) the duty he cognizes and also reveres; perhaps no one will ever succeed in doing so, however hard he tries. But ... he can become aware of a maxim of striving for such purity; that he is capable of, and that is also sufficient for his observance of duty. (8:284-285, underlining added for emphasis)

¹⁵⁸ Indeed, the irony is that most of the opponents of ‘theory’ are by no means as absolute as Kant is in rejecting any supposed right of revolution. There are two reasons for this. First of all, revolutions (of a certain sort) have taken place in the past, and are part of the tradition the anti-theorists frequently appeal to. Secondly, and most importantly, the kind of revolution they approve of are partial and/or restorative (this being the original sense of revolution – even the restoration of the British monarchy in 1660 was called a revolution). So when the anti-theorists anathematize revolution, it is revolution of a total, transformative or utopian character that they have in mind, in other words the more modern sense of the term.

¹⁵⁹ Practice is thus a matter of progressive reformation. This does not mean that there is no place for revolution. In *Religion*, published earlier in 1793, Kant argues that becoming morally good requires ‘a *revolution* in the disposition of the human being’. But this is a ‘revolution in the mode of thought’, which can only be implemented by ‘a gradual reformation in the mode of sense’ (6:47), i.e. ‘constant progress’ (6:48). ‘Theory’ therefore *is* revolutionary, but only at its own level.

As noted above, Part Two emphasizes that the ‘original contract’ cannot be ‘proved from history’. Kant’s response to this is to argue that this does not in any way vitiate its practical possibility, given that it is mandated by reason. At the same time, though, he does not go on to say that the ‘original contract’ *could* be entered into by anyone; rather, ‘as a fact it is indeed not possible ... [but] is instead *only an idea* of reason’ (8:297). As such, it is something that can only be progressively approximated.

The central role accorded to progress is already touched upon in the Introduction to ‘Theory and Practice’:

But in a theory that is based on the concept of duty, concern about the empty ideality of this concept quite disappears. For it would not be a duty to aim at a certain effect of our will if this effect were not also possible in experience (whether it be thought as completed or as always approaching completion); and it is theory of this kind only that is at issue in this present treatise. (8:276-277, underlining added for emphasis)

Kant does not deal explicitly with the idea of progress in the first two parts of the essay because the task of doing so is being left to the third. This in turn is to be explained by the fact that whilst progress is his answer to much of what is urged by the opponents of theory, it is also one of the objects of their antipathy. Progress may be part of the solution, but it is also part of the problem.

For Kant, the rift between theory and practice can be overcome (endlessly) by progress. However, this proposal is not going to find favour with the anti-theorists, for much the same reasons as we have already seen. The historical past, once again, will be invoked to demonstrate either the impossibility of progress, or its undesirability, or both.

As Kant has chosen to debate with those who concede (whether genuinely or for the sake of argument) that things ‘sound good in theory’, it is the first of these objections that he is primarily concerned with. The arguments advanced earlier suggest the line he will adopt now: nothing the anti-theorists can adduce about the past can rule out the possibility of progress. But this response is much less effective than it was before. As progress is supposed to be a general historical dynamic, its apparent absence in the past matters more than the absence of a particular kind of event whose possibility we might wish to assert. Utopian revolutionaries at least have this advantage, namely that their preferred means of realization involves a radical break with the course of history, and is less vulnerable to this kind of empirical skepticism.¹⁶⁰ Evidently more is required if

¹⁶⁰ For example, Walter Benjamin: ‘Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train – namely the human race – to activate the emergency brake.’ (*Selected Writings*, vol. 4, p. 402).

Kant is to provide a satisfactory response to the anti-theorists, and it is to this task that he turns in the third and final part of ‘Theory and Practice’.

Before we look at Part Three itself, it is worth noting that Kant does make some suggestive moves in Parts One and Two which do go at least a little way to countering the anti-theorists on this issue. In particular, he provides a partial explanation of why the past displays little in the way of the implementation of theory and offers some indication that things are and will be different:

That historical experience up to now [*Geschichtserfahrung bisher noch*] has still not proved the success of the doctrine of virtue may well be the fault of just the false presupposition that the incentive derived from the idea of duty in itself is much too fine for the common concept, whereas the coarser incentive drawn from certain advantages to be expected, in this world or even in a future one, from compliance with the law (without regard for the law itself as the incentive) would work more powerfully on the mind, and that up to now [*bisher*] it has been made a principle of education and homiletics to give preference to the aspiration for happiness over that which reason makes the supreme condition of this, namely worthiness to be happy. (8:288, underlining added for emphasis)

Kant alleges that it is the very presumption against ‘theory’ which has contributed to its failure, in other words that bad theory has helped to produce the actuality it claims to be merely pointing out. However, the very fact that it now has to attack theory indicates that the latter has now attained a degree of explicitness which in turn bodes well for the future. It should now be possible to reform ‘principles of education and homiletics’ in accordance with the purified principles of morality. If this were to take place (Kant’s reference to ‘progress in religious insight’ (8:305) implies that it is now underway), ‘human morality would soon be better off’ (8:288). Progress in theory will facilitate progress toward that which theory prescribes.¹⁶¹

Part Three of ‘Theory and Practice’ is a particularly complicated Kantian text. It deals, as the rubric of the essay states, with ‘theory’, but in a more complex way than the two preceding parts did. In both Parts One and Two, the identity of the theory under examination was clear – in the first, Kant’s own doctrine of virtue, in the second, the doctrine of right as it applies to the state (republicanism). We would accordingly expect the third part to address the doctrine of right at the global level, and indeed this is what Kant tells us in the Introduction (8:277-278). However, issues of international right only come to the fore toward the end of Part Three, and the relevant ‘theory’ (the plan for perpetual peace proposed by Saint-Pierre and re-packaged by Rousseau) and its opponents (‘great statesmen’ and ‘heads of state’) are only introduced in the penultimate

¹⁶¹ In a related manner, Kant accounts at the end of Part Two for the prevalence of ‘anti-theoretical’ political theory and its constricting effects (8:305-306).

paragraph (§10, 8:312-313).¹⁶² Up to then, the focus is on theory of another kind, namely the theory of progress. As I have been arguing, this is what we should have come to expect, for the whole ‘theory and practice’ debate ends up turning on this very issue. Matters are complicated still further by the fact that theory relates to progress in two ways: first of all, there are general hypotheses about the course of history as a whole (‘theoretical’ in a general, non-moral sense); secondly, there is the duty to make progress (which is ‘theoretical’ in the sense of the essay’s theme).¹⁶³

After some preliminary paragraphs dealing with Mendelssohn, which I shall return to later, Kant gets going properly in the fourth paragraph (8:308-309). He claims there that all human beings have an ‘innate duty ... so as to influence posterity that it becomes always better’ (§4, 8:309) and in this way to contribute to the progress of humanity. Kant then makes his familiar argument against the anti-theorists:

It does not matter how many doubts may be raised against my hopes from history, which, if they were proved, could move me to desist from a task so apparently futile; as long as these doubts cannot be made certain I cannot exchange the duty (as something *liquidum*) for the rule of prudence not to attempt the impracticable (as something *illiquidum*, since it is merely hypothetical).... (§4, 8:309)

‘Historical experience’ is not only unable to dissuade me from attempting to do my duty; it is also unable to prevent me from hoping that things will improve. The agent should have confidence that her own actions will be efficacious and also that other agents will contribute as well. Kant invokes Mendelssohn at this point: the latter’s efforts on behalf of the ‘enlightenment and welfare of [his] nation’ must have involved the presupposition that others would also participate: ‘For he could not reasonably hope to bring this [enlightenment and welfare] about all by himself, without others after him continuing along the same path’ (§5, 8:309). This connection between my action and that of others is built into the very manner in which Kant construes the ‘innate duty’: one should promote progress ‘in such a way that this duty may be legitimately handed down from one member [in the series of] generations to another’ (§4, 8:309). My actions should aim to help inculcate the progressive outlook in others. In contrast, therefore, to Lessing’s ‘divine education of the human race’ (§2, 8:308, underlining added for emphasis), Kant emphasizes that progress depends (at least in part, as we shall

¹⁶² References to the Third Part of ‘Theory and Practice’ throughout the rest of this chapter will also give the paragraph number, as here.

¹⁶³ The title of Part Three invokes ‘the cosmopolitan point of view’ (8:307), and this already conveys some of the breadth of scope of the text, as ‘cosmopolitan’, in Kant’s hands, can refer either to matters of international right or the outlook of the progressively minded ‘world citizen’ (cf. Flikschuh, *Kant and Modern Political Philosophy*, pp. 184-188). Both senses are involved here.

see) ‘on the education we give the younger generation’ (§6, 8:310, underlining added for emphasis).

The ‘hope for better times’ and ‘prospect that matters could become better in the future’ (§5, 8:309) thus follow inevitably from reflection on the demands of duty. Yet this does still seem to be an exiguous basis for a belief in progress. For one thing, it only relates to the future: that there ought to be progress can only support belief in progress yet to come. Kant is right to stress that ‘doubts raised from history’ cannot completely destroy such hope, but they can certainly seriously weaken it, especially for those of us who are not particularly heroic in our optimism. This is where the opponents of theory will press their case: if there hasn’t been progress so far, why should we believe that the future will be different? The strength of Kant’s position is its invulnerability to their inductivist skepticism, but this is, as it stands, also its weakness, in that it appears to concede the truth of their construal of the past.

If historical progress is supposed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, between morality and reality, more is needed to convince us that this is a plausible prospect. In particular, more is required in order to counter the skepticism of the anti-theorists. Kant therefore goes on to provide a number of supplementary arguments in defence of the claim that ‘empirical arguments against the success of these resolutions accomplish nothing here’ (§5, 8:309). In the first instance, he appeals to technical advances, such as the advent of hot-air ballooning. Empirical, ‘historical’ arguments would have suggested that these too were impossible, simply because they had not been achieved in the past. Kant’s analogy is flawed: yes, the particular feat concerned is no doubt novel, but the record of similar endeavours in the past does give us confidence that it could succeed. Technical progress *is* a fact.

Moving briskly on, Kant then refers to ‘a good deal of evidence ... that in our age ... the human race has made moral progress’ (§5, 8:310).¹⁶⁴ If progress were genuinely underway now, then our ‘hope for better times’ would certainly have more support.¹⁶⁵ The only evidence which is presented is, ironically, the prevalence of complaints about contemporary depravity. Kant argues that the increased pitch of these complaints demonstrates not that human beings have got worse but that the standards used to

¹⁶⁴ Similarly in ‘The End of All Things’, published the following year, we read of ‘the experimental proof [*Erfahrungsbeweisen*, or ‘experiential evidence’] of the superior morals of our age as compared with all previous ones’ (8:332).

¹⁶⁵ This line of argument is, as we shall see in the next chapter, developed in *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

evaluate them have become more stringent. The ‘moral progress’ he has in mind here is therefore *progress in theory*, i.e. enlightenment (cf. p. 105 above). The purification of moral principles stands in two relations to historical progress: it is itself progress (if only essentially at the level of theory) and so gives us confidence that progress is possible; it means moreover that one ‘sees farther ahead’ (§5, 8:310, underlining added for emphasis), i.e. one can start to envisage properly the progressive historical project of putting theory into practice.

As if this assertion of progress in the present were not striking enough, Kant concludes the paragraph by attempting to generalize it: ‘our self-reproach becomes all the more severe the more levels of morality we have already climbed during the whole course of the world that we have become acquainted with’ (§5, 8:310). This claim is puzzling: if past progress, ascending through ‘levels of morality’, was so straightforwardly assertable, why was this not done much earlier in the discussion? What in any case is the evidence for this, particularly if we are meant to take it that the present age outstrips all others in progressive dynamism? The best way, I think, to read this sentence is less as an unjustified extension of the preceding argument and more as an anticipation of and transition to the next one. For Kant immediately proceeds to open up a very different response to the anti-theorists, one moreover which is explicitly designed both to co-opt and to counter their non-progressive account of the past:

If we now ask by what means this unending progress toward the better can be maintained and even accelerated, it is soon seen that this immeasurably distant success will depend not so much upon what *we* do ... but instead upon what human *nature* will do in and with us to *force* us onto a track we would not readily take of our own accord. (§6, 8:310)

In a manner familiar to us from ‘Idea for a Universal History’, Kant goes on to explain how ‘human nature’, in particular the desire for power and status, generates a Hobbesian war of all against all, first of all at the individual level, resolved (or at least controlled) by the prudentially motivated agreement to submit to the ‘coercion of public law’ and then also at the level of states themselves. Progress in respect of *Recht* has therefore been achieved in the past and is likely to continue similarly in the future because of human aggressiveness and selfishness.

Kant’s argument here is a brilliant rejoinder to the anti-theorists. Instead of continuing, as they would like and expect, merely to emphasize ‘hope’ and ‘possibility’, he takes them on at their own game. Kant accepts their jaundiced (in his eyes) view of human beings as mainly self-interested and short-sighted.¹⁶⁶ He also adopts their

¹⁶⁶ Cf. Beiser, *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, pp. 42-44.

inductive method, extrapolating from past patterns into the future. Putting the two together produces an account which does demonstrate humanity’s historical advance through ‘levels of morality’, even if this advance is not itself morally motivated.

This account enables Kant to broach the ostensible theme of this part of the essay, namely the ‘theory’ of cosmopolitan right, as represented by the plans of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre (and soon Kant himself – *Perpetual Peace* was to be published two year later). International relations are in such a parlous state and military capacities so advanced that more war, and ever more costly war (in all senses), is inevitable. This, it can be envisaged, will force states to enter into the slow process of regulating their relations by law and establishing lasting peace treaties. An important element in this process will be played by continuing progress at the level of *Staatsrecht*: the increasing financial costs of war (brought about by technical progress) will oblige states to govern in a more republican manner, in order to obtain consent for taxes. Yet the people will be reluctant to agree to these, and will slowly be able to constrain the rulers’ ability to wage war. (The populace will also be motivated by the fact that it, not its rulers, bears the brunt of the other costs of war.)

The ‘natural’ mechanism described in Part Three thus undergirds the historical practicality of the principles of right at both the national and international levels and so directly relates to the concerns of Part Two as well.¹⁶⁷ Kant holds back on introducing it until the end of the essay, partly as its future role relates more particularly to the international level and partly as it serves more generally to rebut anti-theoretical skepticism about progress. Kant is careful not to overstate the doctrine: he calls it a ‘mere hypothesis’ (§9, 8:311), which in turn connects back to the type of ‘hypotheses’ and (epistemic) ‘theories’ about historical progress that Mendelssohn is reported as objecting to (§2, 8:308).

Kant’s response to the anti-theorists regarding progress is two-fold: (i) individuals have a duty to contribute to progress, and have good reason to view the future positively; (ii) there is in any case a historical dynamic which has been slowly realizing the principles of right and will probably continue to do so. The first, moral argument relates to progress in both virtue and right, but only in the present and future; the second is restricted to right, but does have inductive support for its claims about the future.

¹⁶⁷ It also relates to the possibility of progress at the level of doctrine of virtue, the topic of Part One: the establishment of ever greater civil order goes hand in hand with developments in education and communication which help to remove some of the barriers to virtue.

This double strategy, in particular as it applies to cosmopolitan right, is emphasized in the concluding paragraph:

For my own part, I nevertheless put my trust in theory, which proceeds from the principle of right, as to what relations among human beings and states *ought to be*, and which commends to earthly gods the maxim always so as to behave in their conflicts that such a universal state of nations will thereby be ushered in, and so to assume that it is possible (*in praxi*) and that it *can be*; but at the same time I put my trust (*in subsidium*) in the nature of things, which constrains one to go where one does not want to go.... (§11, 8:313)

The moral argument takes precedence, given its stronger force: what ought to be must be possible. The historical argument is subsidiary, but nonetheless vital. Together, the two are mutually reinforcing. However, interpreters tend either to deny or to disregard this positive interaction. Those who do the former argue that the historical argument cuts against the moral argument. Those who do the latter take Kant’s ‘trust in theory’ to stand in no need of any supplementation at all. I will now address both approaches in turn.

The suspicion that Kant’s ‘trust in theory’ and ‘trust in the nature of things’ are in tension is a familiar one. The point is forcibly put by Honneth: Kant’s ‘speculations about natural mechanisms and empirical constraints actually render every morality superfluous’.¹⁶⁸ There are in fact two distinct charges, which are not usually separated out: (i) belief in natural mechanism *weakens* the moral motivation to bring about progress; (ii) the lack of scope for moral action *encourages* the belief in natural mechanism. In principle, these are independent processes, though of course it is easy to imagine them mutually reinforcing each other. In what follows I will focus on Frederick Beiser’s prosecution of the case against Kant. He presses both charges, though he does not explicitly distinguish them as I have done.

Beiser states the first allegation succinctly: ‘The Kantian subject need not do anything to realize the republican constitution because, regardless of individual decisions and actions, the mechanism of unsocial sociability will realize it for him.’¹⁶⁹ Accordingly, ‘trust in nature’ cuts against ‘trust in theory’ and generates an undesirable passivity (the section from which this sentence comes is titled ‘Kant’s Conservatism’). I believe this objection is mistaken, for the following three reasons.

Firstly, *naturally generated progress is not at all inevitable*. For Beiser to make his objection stick, he has to exaggerate the certainty with which Kant presents his ideas about the mechanism of self-interest. Note in the sentence quoted just above his use of

¹⁶⁸ ‘Is Universalism a Moral Trap?’, p. 162. Similarly, Williams, ‘Kant’s Optimism’, pp. 12-14, and Krasnoff, ‘The Fact of Reason’, p. 29.

¹⁶⁹ *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, p. 55.

‘will realize’; similarly, when glossing the earlier presentation in ‘Idea for a Universal History’, he comments that ‘this plan must be realized’.¹⁷⁰ However, Kant makes it clear in ‘Theory and Practice’ (and elsewhere) that it is merely a ‘mere hypothesis’ and an ‘uncertain’ one at that (§9, 8:311), and thus does not in any way *guarantee* the realization of the principles of right.¹⁷¹

Secondly, *even if it were, ceteris paribus, inevitable, it is by no means desirable*. Even to the extent that it is efficacious, the course which unsocial sociability is likely to take is highly unattractive, and indeed serves to encourage moral intervention to try to mitigate its unpleasantness and achieve a more direct and less painful approach to the better.

Thirdly, *‘Nature’ can only be effective in relation to progress at the level of legality*. However much ‘unsocial sociability’ achieves in the political realm, individuals will continue to have moral responsibilities, including ones which overlap with and subtend concerns of *Recht*.

The second charge is that the lack of scope for moral action *encourages* the belief that ‘Nature’ will produce progress in any case. According to Beiser, Kant’s restricted conception of political agency means that for most people, and in some cases all, activity is not possible, even if they were motivated to undertake it. Accordingly, quietism is in effect enforced, which in turn leads individuals to place faith instead in ‘the natural of things’. This objection is in some ways more effective, in particular because it does not rely upon an over-stated construal of the natural mechanism thesis. The Kantian subject may be quite aware of the mere probability that ‘Nature’ will bring about a continual approximation of theory, but this will not detract from her clutching to this prospect if it is the only way of conceiving how this might be possible. (Indeed, the need to have some means of understanding how the gap between theory and practice might be closed could well offset some of the uncertainty afflicting the ‘hypothesis’.)

The weakness of the charge relates instead to its assumption that Kant has a very restrictive conception of political agency. This relies on the application of either an anachronistic understanding of political activism (evident in Beiser’s references to trade

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 54, underlining my emphasis.

¹⁷¹ In *Perpetual Peace*, published two years after ‘Theory and Practice’, Kant does say that ‘Nature guarantees perpetual peace through the mechanism of human inclinations itself’, but goes on to add that this is ‘with an assurance that is admittedly not adequate for *vaticinating* [*weissagend*] the future (theoretically) but that is still enough for practical purposes and makes it a duty to work toward this (not merely chimerical) end’ (8:368 [translation amended – cf. p. 144, n. 223 below]). Nature thus only guarantees perpetual peace to the extent that its mechanism facilitates the effectiveness of moral action. The guarantee is that our efforts will not be fruitless.

unions and the like) or one which allows for the legitimacy of revolution. If, though, one agrees with Kant regarding the illegitimacy of revolution and recognizes, as he does, that opportunities for activism are constrained by circumstances, then his position looks far less ‘conservative’. In the context of ‘enlightened despotism’, there isn’t much that the progressively minded individual can do – which isn’t to say that it is not vital to strive to accomplish it. Accordingly, Beiser has to push his case to the extreme, and ask ‘What if the monarch refuses to heed the grievances of his subjects and introduces censorship?’ He argues that in this case, ‘the oppressed’ would, on Kant’s account, have but ‘one source of solace’, namely recourse to Kant’s ‘trust in the nature of things’.¹⁷² Such censorship would of course have to be total for it to deprive subjects completely of the ability to act, that is, quite unlike the censorship Kant was suffering from at the time of writing ‘Theory and Practice’. In these extreme circumstances, ‘solace’ might certainly be sought in appeals to ‘Nature’s plan’ or ‘Providence’, but there is nothing to suggest that they are particularly likely to come about or likely to be more than relatively temporary states of affairs.

Beiser’s argument would have more force if he noticed that the efficacy of political action is a problem even when the scope for it is relatively unconstrained. Even if you and I and ‘others continuing along the same path’ (§5, 8:309) do all that we possibly can to help the cause of progress, there will still be a huge gap between what we can envisage achieving and the demands that theory makes of humanity as a whole. There are two reasons for this gap: (i) experience (history) tells us that most people will not intentionally participate in the progressive project; (ii) even to the extent that they do, it will not be possible for them maximally to co-ordinate their activities (‘humanity’ cannot yet act as if a single agent). Kant adverts to both of these points when explaining why we appeal to ‘Nature, or rather *Providence*’:

people in their *schemes* set out only from the parts and may well remain with them, and may be able to reach the whole, as something too great for them, in their ideas but not in their influence, especially since, with their mutually adverse schemes, they would hardly unite for it by their own free resolution. (§6, 8:310)

Consequently, the idea of the natural dynamic is attractive because it makes up for the inevitable deficiencies of human agency (fractured and frequently selfish), not its complete impotence or absence. A further discussion of this point comes a page later. The teleological ‘hypothesis’, we are told,

is uncertain, like all judgments that want to assign for an intended effect not entirely within our control the only natural cause adequate to it; and even as such, it does not involve a principle for

¹⁷² *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism*, p. 54.

the subjects in an already existing state to enforce it ... but only for uncoercible heads of state.... Thus it can be considered an expression not unbefitting the moral wishes and hopes of people (once aware of their inability) to expect the circumstances required for these from *Providence*, which will provide an outcome for the end of *humanity* as a whole species, to reach its final destination by the free use of its powers as far as they extend, to which end the ends of *human beings*, considered separately, are directly opposed. (§9, 8:312, underlining added for emphasis)

This is the one passage that comes close to confirming Beiser’s allegation that ‘Providence’ and political passivity go hand in hand. His interpretation fits if we take ‘inability’ (in the fifth line) to refer to the putative inability of ‘subjects in an already existing state’ to put pressure on their leaders to abandon militarism (this being something the leaders can only come to through *natural* ‘coercion’). However, Kant has already described in the phrase underlined what the ‘people’s’ inability amounts to. The ends of humanity as a whole constitute ‘an intended effect *not entirely* within our control’, and this is why appeal is made to Providence. In any case, Kant’s claim that ‘subjects in an already existing state’ are unable to assist in the process of the realization of the principles of international right is peculiar. This process will of course be undertaken by the ‘uncoercible heads of state’, and not their subjects, but Kant’s prediction as to how this will happen appears to give quite an important role to the latter. Advances in national and international right are to proceed in tandem, with the costs of militarism encouraging republican reform, and increasing republicanism undercutting the ability of states to go to war. It is Kant’s expectation that the subjects’ preference for peace will over time progressively constrain their leaders’ penchant for war.

Beiser’s charge of ‘quietism’, in both its forms, fails. I will now turn to the other reading of ‘Theory and Practice’ I mentioned, namely the one which over-emphasizes the moral argument. This interpretation need not deny that Kant also appeals to ‘the nature of things’, but is prone to ignore this part of his argument. To the extent that its role is recognized, it is minimized: the ‘nature of things’ provides welcome support for the idea of progress, but is not necessary for it.

The demands of morality are directly linked to the belief in progress. ‘Theory’ (practical reason) tells us that humanity *ought* to make progress toward realizing its prescriptions. As this is ‘not demonstrably impossible’, we are allowed to believe that it is possible that humanity *will* make such progress. (This belief is further encouraged if evidence can be found that progress is currently underway.) This ‘hope for better times’ follows inevitably from the consideration of the demands of theory as they relate to *future* time. Kant’s optimism in this respect is, as noted above, rather shaky. We look

to the future in this way precisely because the past seems to reveal theory and practice to have always been at odds. The circumstances in which hope becomes possible also render it problematic: maintaining faith in the future in the face of the dispiriting record of the past is no doubt admirable and heroic, but only because it is so difficult. Kant frequently implies that such heroism, while conceivable, is not really an option for most of us.¹⁷³

It is often assumed that Kant’s response to this problem is to argue that morality itself directly licenses us to believe in progress, future, present *and past*, notwithstanding evidence to the contrary. On this reading, practical reason generates a ‘need to believe in human progress’,¹⁷⁴ which is held to be as it were self-authorizing. (I have to believe in progress, therefore I can.) Justification for this is taken to be found in Kant’s theory of the postulates; indeed, despite the fact that neither the term is used nor the doctrine referred to in ‘Theory and Practice’, it is claimed that this text presents historical progress as a postulate.¹⁷⁵ It is frequently further alleged that this ‘postulate’ functions as a substitute for the official religious postulates presented in the second *Critique*.¹⁷⁶

I believe that this interpretation is incorrect. It is true that Kant appears to be presenting a postulate-type argument in the opening stages of the third part of ‘Theory and Practice’. Having described in the third paragraph the pernicious effects of a non-progressive conception of history, he starts the fourth as follows: ‘I shall therefore be allowed to assume that ... the human race is ... to be conceived as 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.’ (§4, 8:308-309, underlining added for emphasis). However, the warrant for this claim is then stated to be the duty each of us is under to contribute toward humanity’s progress, i.e. the argument described earlier (p. 106 above). As we have seen, this only justifies belief in future progress, and leaves the problem of the past untouched. More importantly, the omitted

¹⁷³ Cf. the *Critique of Judgment*’s ‘righteous man’ (5:452-3), discussed in Chapter Six.

¹⁷⁴ Neiman, *The Unity of Reason*, p. 179.

¹⁷⁵ Lindstedt: ‘Kant begins the third section of ‘Theory and Practice’ by indicating that the assumption of universal history is made for moral reasons ... Kant believed the progress of the human race to be a necessary postulate of practical reason’ (‘Kant: Progress in Universal History as a Postulate of Practical Reason’, p. 144).

¹⁷⁶ Neiman: ‘Might this very minimal postulation of God’s existence be replaced by the postulate that the world as a whole is progressing toward the best? There is some reason to think so ... [‘Theory and Practice’] presents a moral argument for the need to believe in progress ... strongly suggesting that practical reason could substitute faith in progress for faith in God.’ (*The Unity of Reason*, p. 179.)

parts of the sentence just quoted invoke a separate premise, namely the fact that ‘the human race is constantly advancing with respect to culture (as its natural end)’.¹⁷⁷ The rest of the paragraph does not clarify what role this premise plays in the warrant we have to assume progress; nor does it even seem to refer to it. But it should at least be obvious that Kant is not appealing solely to the dispiriting consequences of a pessimistic view of history in justifying this warrant. Knowing as we do how Part Three proceeds, the reference to constant cultural advance is most plausibly understood as an anticipation of the identification in paragraphs six to nine of a ‘natural’ mechanism which generates political progress.¹⁷⁸ Kant’s assumption of progress thus rests on the two arguments presented earlier, and not on the mere untenability of the opposite view of history. Neiman is right to assert that practical reason generates a ‘need to believe in progress’, but not one that can produce that belief out of itself. Instead, the ‘need to believe’ is answered by the combination of morality’s ‘hope for better times’ and the theory of the mechanism of Nature. As the former only functions in respect of the future, the burden of dealing with the difficulty of the past falls on the latter.

Kant’s strategy, here and elsewhere, is not simply to assume that humanity has made progress because it would be too depressing to think otherwise; on the contrary, it is to show that, despite appearances, humanity has made progress. The pessimistic picture would produce despair, if it were the whole story – but it isn’t. The challenge Kant faces therefore is to provide an alternative construal of the facts. We have already seen how he delivers this: yes, he says, history does reveal a continuous parade of violence and stupidity, but there is at the same time and as a direct result a gradual advance in political conditions. The failure of moral theory to make much headway is conceded, but explained in part by the slow rate with which progress in such theory has itself been achieved.

¹⁷⁷ The full sentence therefore reads: ‘I shall therefore be allowed 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, and that this will indeed be interrupted from time to time but will never be broken off.’ (§4, 8:308-309).

¹⁷⁸ This is not to deny that it could be interpreted differently. In particular, a more natural reading of the sentence in question could go like this: the progress humanity has made in respect of some of its ends (the ‘cultural’ ones) allows us to believe that the rest of them (the ‘moral’ ones) will also be realized. Cultural progress partially confirms the teleological hypothesis that all human ends should be realized historically (cf. ‘Idea’, 8:18-19), and so encourages the expectation of full confirmation. However, this argument, which does feature in ‘Idea’, is out of place in the context of ‘Theory and Practice’ – nothing else in the text suggests it – and in any case does nothing to justify belief in past moral progress.

That Kant’s strategy does take this form is, I hope, clear. I would now like to demonstrate that it has to: the idea that progress could be a postulate is in any case untenable. The doctrine of the postulates succeeds (if at all) because the entities or states postulated transcend the world of experience. The idea of the immortality of the soul, for example, is neither contradicted nor confirmed by it. As a result, practical reason can support belief in immortality, as with this idea it becomes possible to conceive of the satisfaction of the demands of the moral law. Practical reason can override theoretical reason and engage in such postulation only in relation to the domain of the non-empirical, where theoretical reason is obliged to renounce its claims to knowledge. The doctrine thus explicitly denies that practical reason can postulate empirical objects or states of affairs in accordance with its needs. Yet this is precisely what Neiman and Lindstedt claim takes place in ‘Theory and Practice’. Plain irrationality results: theoretical reason informs us that progress hasn’t taken place; practical reason insists that it has. This clearly cannot be what Kant intends. The process of postulation is supposed to overcome the inadequacy of our knowledge, by leaping over its limits; it is not supposed to contradict what we in fact know.¹⁷⁹

There is a further, more subtle difficulty with the ‘progress as postulate’ interpretation. The official postulates stand in relation to moral demands as the conditions of possibility of their satisfaction. What is not postulated is the *process* of their satisfaction – that is what remains for us to undertake. For example, belief in God and the immortality of the soul make it possible for us to conceive of an individual’s endless progress toward holiness. This progress itself is not postulated. If it were, the very point of postulation would be undermined. Moral faith is supposed to help sustain the thought of what I ought to do, not predict that I will do it.¹⁸⁰

Two points can then be seen to emerge in relation to the issue of historical progress. First of all, progress (past or future) is the wrong kind of thing to postulate – not just, as before, because it takes place in the world, but also because as postulated it would take on a programmatic quality or inevitability contrary to the very purpose of a postulate.¹⁸¹ Secondly, if anything were to be postulated in relation to progress, it would be its conditions. Lindstedt ultimately recognizes this: although he asserts throughout his

¹⁷⁹ Guyer highlights the difference between the ‘noumenal realities’ involved in the religious postulates and the mundane character of historical progress, but does not see that this prevents the description of the latter as a postulate. (*Kant on Freedom, Law and Happiness*, p. 428.)

¹⁸⁰ This point is somewhat qualified by what I go on to say at the top of p. 120.

¹⁸¹ Guyer makes a similar point in *Kant on Freedom, Law and Happiness*, p. 429.

paper that ‘the fact that the human race is progressing is a postulate necessitated by pure practical reason’, his more considered position is that ‘two postulates ... are needed, analogous to the postulates of immortality and God’.¹⁸² Accordingly, what is apparently required in order to dispel the anxieties occasioned by the gloomy historical record is the postulation of the necessary conditions of historical progress, which are (i) the assumption of the infinite continuation of the human species (analogous to the immortality of the individual soul), and (ii) the idea of ‘Nature’ as a world-designer. Lindstedt then connects these putative postulates with those passages in ‘Idea’ which mobilize similar ideas.¹⁸³ He is of course entirely correct to assert that these two ideas are essential to the project of universal history, but overlooks the fact that they are entirely legitimate *theoretical* propositions. Re (i): the assumption of the continued existence of the species is a perfectly plausible empirical prediction, quite unlike the thought of the immortality of the soul. (And, as such, not certain: on a number of occasions Kant mentions the possibility that the species itself could become extinct.)¹⁸⁴ Re (ii): the invocation of a world-designer is, as we saw in Chapter Two, defended in the first *Critique* as a necessary presupposition of empirical enquiry, that is, as a regulative idea. (To be sure, in so far as we think of a world-designer as sustaining the efficacy of our moral endeavours (individual or collective), we will construe it as a moral being, i.e. as God. To that extent, postulation does enter the picture. But what is postulated is just God, not something ‘analogous’ to him, still less ‘progress’.) In any case, Lindstedt’s *soi disant* postulates are in themselves insufficient to counter the thought, prompted by a pessimistic understanding of the historical record, of the futility of progressive action. Re (i): the thought of the ‘immortality’ of the species will only deepen one’s despair if one already takes the past to demonstrate the divergence of ‘theory and practice’. Indeed, Kant suggests that such a pessimistic view tends to go hand in hand with apocalyptic expectations of the imminent end of history (cf. ‘End’, 8:330-332). Re (ii): wielding the regulative idea of ‘Nature’ in itself will do nothing to assuage our anxieties unless the facts allow themselves to be *regulated by it*. Once again, we find Lindstedt showing some awareness of this: ‘the question soon arises, nonetheless, as to how the possibility of these two postulates of practical reason might be attested to in the world Kant can, or perhaps must, offer a more detailed

¹⁸² Lindstedt, *ibid.* pp. 144, 143, underlining added for emphasis.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 143 – the relevant passages are ‘Idea’, #3, 8:20. #6 n., 8:23 and #9, 8:30.

¹⁸⁴ For example, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:89; cf. also, *Critique of Judgment*, 5:427-428.

account’.¹⁸⁵ His ‘postulates’ as such resolve nothing, but merely describe (and mis-name) the moves theoretical reason makes in setting itself the task of establishing *whether or not* progress can be identified in history. Only if a certain degree of success is made in this enquiry can the threat posed by the negative portrayal of the past be put to rest.¹⁸⁶

Neiman emphasizes what she takes to be Kant’s anti-Enlightenment pessimism about the course of history. This is of course of a piece with her claim that progress is a postulate: moral belief in it is only necessary if there is some problem with what theoretical reason tells us about history. I have already argued that this reading renders Kant’s position incoherent. I now wish to contest Neiman’s claim that Kant does take such a bleak view of history.¹⁸⁷ The ‘evidence’ she adduces is remarkably weak. For example, she invokes Kant’s dismissal of his 1759 essay on ‘Optimism’ in support of her denial that his Critical position is itself optimistic.¹⁸⁸ The fact that the Leibnizian optimism he defended in 1759 (this *is* the best of all possible worlds) is quite distinct from the historical optimism Kant subsequently developed (this *is gradually becoming* the best of all possible worlds) is passed over. Neiman’s main evidence comes from *Religion*, which she claims ‘dismisses “modern optimism”’.¹⁸⁹ This purported quotation derives from a phrase in the old Greene and Hudson translation, in which ‘optimistic’ renders *heroische* (6:19).¹⁹⁰ The problem with the material she cites is that all it does is indicate that ‘the history of all times’ (6:20) shows human beings to have remained at the same (rather miserable) level of individual morality throughout: the progress it denies is progress in *virtue*. It would be good-natured (*gutmüthige*), even heroic (*heroische*) of us to think otherwise, but incorrect. All that Kant is rejecting here (and even then mildly) is a form of retrospective optimism regarding virtue. Ironically, if there is anything in Kant’s works which resembles the ‘postulate of progress’, it is just this assumption: The ‘heroic opinion ... that the world steadfastly ... forges ahead

¹⁸⁵ Lindstedt, *ibid.* p. 143, underlining added for emphasis.

¹⁸⁶ Neiman similarly slides, though in her case explicitly, into issues of regulativity when trying to expand upon the ‘progress as postulate’ claim. She writes: ‘that the world is in progress toward a better state’ is a ‘regulative principle’ (two pages previously it was a postulate), by which she means that it expresses the ‘demand that the world come to meet the claims reason advances’ (*The Unity of Reason*, p. 181). Presumably it is at least in part up to the world whether it responds to these claims.

¹⁸⁷ Neiman writes of Kant’s ‘denial that experience confirms the idea that the world as a whole is progressing toward a better state’; ‘we have every reason to doubt it, [i.e. that] the world [is] progressing to a better state’ (*ibid.* p. 180).

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.* p. 184 n. 30.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.* p. 180.

¹⁹⁰ *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, p. 15. The translation in *Religion and Rational Theology* itself uses ‘optimistic’ a few lines later, but for *gutmüthige* (6:20).

[in respect of] moral good ... (not just growth in civilization)’ is described by him as ‘an well-intentioned [*gutmüthige*] presupposition on the part of the moralists, from Seneca to Rousseau, intended to encourage the indefatigable cultivation of that seed of goodness that perhaps lies in us’ (6:20, translation amended). Yet Kant reminds us that ‘the history of all times attests far too powerfully against it’. But this is *not* to deny that there is ‘growth in civilization’, nor that this progressively ratchets up levels of *Recht*, nor indeed that the present is witnessing genuine moral progress.

I would not want to claim that the belief in progress bears no resemblance to a postulate. In an important respect it is very much like one, inasmuch as Kant does seem to think that the moral requirement that there be progress gives us additional reason to affirm the theoretical hypothesis that there has been and will continue to be progress.¹⁹¹ (Indeed, the diligence with which theoretical reason develops its hypothesis no doubt in part reflects the interest of practical reason.) But the hypothesis must have some empirical plausibility in order for practical reason to be able to reinforce it. The official religious postulates are also essentially dependent upon the contributions of theoretical reason, as practical reason can only exercise its primacy in relation to the material supplied to it, such as the metaphysical idea of God. But, as noted earlier, theoretical reason is constitutionally incapable of justifiably affirming whether there is a God or not, and so practical reason’s intervention is necessary in order to get belief in the existence of such an entity off the ground in the first place (as opposed to the mere thought of one).¹⁹² The question of progress, on the other hand, is one which theoretical reason is able to tackle. Of course, its competence varies depending on the particular domain involved. The past is obviously more tractable than the future, issues of *Recht* more so than *Tugend*. And yet the opacity of both the future and the moral dispositions of past individuals does not preclude enquiry into them. (I discuss this issue in a little more detail in the following chapter.)

¹⁹¹ This certainly seems to be the implication of ‘Idea’, #9, 8:30.

¹⁹² To clarify: the resemblance between the two cases is *not* that in both practical reason adds to the reasons one has for affirming *x*, for, in the case of the religious postulates, there is *no other reason* for doing so. The similarity involves the manner in which the primacy of practical reason allows it to *make more* of the relevant contributions of theoretical reason. In the case of the religious postulates, this addition is quite dramatic: practical reason can give objects to the mere ideas of speculative reason (this is what ‘postulation’ means in this context), if only from a practical point of view. Practical reason’s role is necessarily more circumscribed in relation to historical progress, the reality of which is primarily a matter for theory. A difficulty is that Kant only ever describes the operations of the primacy of practical reason in terms of ‘postulation’, whereas in this case a different term is evidently called for. The absence of this other term no doubt helps explain the willingness of commentators to latch onto the idea of a postulate when seeking to characterize the interaction of practical and theoretical reason in Kant’s account of progress.

It is also true that one component of the belief in progress resembles a postulate. This is the expectation, discussed on pp. 106-7 above, that others will participate in the historical task of realizing the demands of morality. This functions like a postulate in that it helps to counter the sense of futility that might otherwise afflict the progressively-minded individual. Moreover, it is formally similar to a postulate in that the opacity of the future, which enables practical reason to project into it, is analogous to the unknowability of the supersensible. But these are only resemblances. In particular, the future is, as already indicated, not forbidden territory to theoretical enquiry. Indeed, it is to counteract the vulnerability to inductivist skepticism of the ‘hope for better times’ which practical reason generates that Kant puts together his own theoretical prognosis.¹⁹³

Moses Mendelssohn is the representative ‘anti-theorist’ Kant invokes in Part Three of ‘Theory and Practice’. Given that I have been able to reconstruct Kant’s line of thought with only passing reference to Mendelssohn, it might well appear that the latter’s role is rather perfunctory. Indeed, when one compares the third part with the first, one is struck by the extent to which the first is structured around Garve’s objections, whereas Mendelssohn’s observations are merely used as a starting point for Kant’s own argument. This is not altogether surprising: Mendelssohn’s doubts about theory relate to the idea of progress; he has nothing specifically to say about cosmopolitan federations and the like, and so only engages with part of the ‘theory’ with which Kant is concerned. In addition, his objections are aimed at Lessing’s conception of historical progress, not Kant’s. I have already had opportunity to note Kant’s subtle articulation of the difference between his idea of progress and Lessing’s (cf. p. 106). Neither here nor anywhere else do we find him attempting to establish any affinity with the project of the ‘divine education of the human race’.

Mendelssohn’s skepticism about the doctrine of historical progress is well conveyed in the excerpts Kant provides in the second paragraph of Part Three: ‘An individual makes progress, but humanity constantly vacillates between fixed limits; regarded as a whole, however, it maintains in all periods of time roughly the same level of morality, the same level of religion and irreligion, of virtue and vice, of happiness and misery’

¹⁹³ Cf. *The Conflict of the Faculties*, where Kant denies that belief in progress is ‘just a well-meaning and a commendable proposition in a practical respect’ (7:88). This passage is quoted more fully on pp. 141-2 below.

(¶2, 8:308).¹⁹⁴ Kant, as we have seen, will go on to challenge directly this view of history: there is ‘unending progress toward the better’ (¶6, 8:310). His immediate response to Mendelssohn, though, is to argue that the non-progressive conception of history is untenable in itself. It leads to moral despair, in that inductive extrapolation from the past makes us think that the demands of morality are unrealizable. Accordingly, Kant holds, we have to try and construct an alternative account.

This argument presupposes that historical progress is (at least in part) the way in which we have to think of the fulfilment of moral demands. But this clearly begs the question. For Mendelssohn, the demands of morality are addressed solely to the individual, and are to be thought of as realizable by virtue of an appeal to the immortality of the soul (in a manner similar to Kant’s claims in the *Critique of Practical Reason*). Religious belief, not universal history, is the means of averting despair. ‘Progress [*Fortgang*] is for the individual man, who is destined by Providence to spend part of his eternity, here on earth’.¹⁹⁵

Mendelssohn should certainly be faulted with failure to engage with issues of *Recht*, in effect shrinking morality to *Tugend*, and this, it would seem, would constitute part of Kant’s more considered reply to him, as is evident from the rest of Part Three. Yet the direct accusation evidently misses the target.

The circularity of Kant’s criticism is apparent in the very manner in which he presents Mendelssohn’s account. Kant imposes on it qualities of struggle and failure which are simply not present. He claims that it shows a Sisyphean process, where the effort to advance is always frustrated, and provides a view of the world ‘as a place of atonement for ancient sins’ (¶2, 8:307-308). But, as Alexander Altmann says, ‘nothing of this sort is found in Mendelssohn’.¹⁹⁶ These characterizations would perhaps be appropriate if humanity was attempting to make the kind of progress Kant thinks it ought, but only managed to achieve ‘in all periods of time roughly the same level of morality’ (Mendelssohn’s words, cited in ¶2, 8:308). This distortion of Mendelssohn’s views is required in order that they articulate the ‘what sounds good in theory has no validity in practice’ position. For Mendelssohn to play the role accorded him, he must be supposed to think that the species ought to be making progress. As a result, the

¹⁹⁴ Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism*, originally published in 1783. The two paragraphs from which Kant takes his citations are to be found at pp. 96-97.

¹⁹⁵ *Jerusalem*, p. 96 (not quoted by Kant).

¹⁹⁶ Alexander Altmann, ‘Commentary’, *Jerusalem*, p. 212.

apparent fact that it doesn’t means that history is seen as a ‘tragedy’ and ‘in the long run, a farce’ (§3, 8:308).

Mendelssohn’s actual view of history is in fact much closer to Herder’s. Rather than being a pessimistic progressivist of the sort just outlined, he appears to advocate a positive pluralism like that of *This Too a Philosophy of History*. Its attraction for him is not hard to discern: given his desire to defend Judaism against conversion approaches from both Christians and rationalists, the pluralism and traditionalism to be found in Herder would have suggested themselves as very useful resources. Thus we read in the paragraph immediately preceding the two from which Kant quotes, the following highly Herderian thought: ‘all the inhabitants of the earth are destined to felicity; and the means of attaining it are as widespread as mankind itself’, whose suitability to Mendelssohn’s apologetic purposes is evident.¹⁹⁷ The point is emphasized in the concluding paragraph of *Jerusalem*: against those who urge that there should be ‘only one flock and one shepherd’, Mendelssohn claims that ‘diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence’.¹⁹⁸

What unites Mendelssohn and Herder is a Leibnizian pluralism, according to which human perfections are so manifold as to prevent their compatibility. It is surely something like this which ultimately underpins much of the skepticism about ‘theory’ which Kant is dealing with in ‘Theory and Practice’. ‘Theory’, in picturing its ideal state, the goal of progress, either operates with a reduced set of possible perfections, jettisoning the rest, or assumes that incompatible perfections can in fact be combined, or both. What is envisaged is therefore *not even* ‘good in theory’.¹⁹⁹

Kant does not engage with this line of thought in ‘Theory or Practice’, nor indeed anywhere else in his published work. The only place where he does address the Leibnizian idea of the incompatibility of all perfections is in his very early set of reflections on optimism, from 1753–1754, in which Kant devotes a long paragraph to expounding its untenability. ‘What is it which causes the essential determinations of things to conflict with each other when they are combined together, so that the perfections, each of which on its own would increase God’s pleasure, become incompatible with each other?’ (R3705, 17:236). Kant holds that Leibniz has no answer to this question. In addition to the metaphysical unacceptability of Leibniz’s position,

¹⁹⁷ *Jerusalem*, p. 94.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.* p. 138.

¹⁹⁹ Cf. Aurel Kolnai, *The Utopian Mind*, pp. 29, 38, 41-3.

Kant clearly thinks that it is in any case unsatisfactory, given that it encourages acceptance of a view of the world as being less than fully perfect: we 'remain troubled' (R3704, 17:233). Pope's attitude, 'everything is good', is far preferable (even if less plausible).

It should not be thought that Kant is completely deaf to the historicists' praise of diversity. One of the interesting features of his work in the 1790s is a willingness to recognize both the existence and value of cultural diversity. In 1785 Herder argued that a global state was impossible because of the extent of geographical, linguistic and cultural differences between nations.²⁰⁰ In both *Religion* and *Perpetual Peace*, Kant appropriates this argument: differences in languages and religion will thankfully prevent the formation of a 'universal monarchy' (8:367; cf. 6:123 n.). But this diversity does not go deep. In both texts, Kant also asserts that 'there can only be one single religion' (8:367 n.; cf. 6:107-8), of which the different 'religions' are merely vehicles. Presumably the same is true of language. It seems that Kant can learn from Herder (and Mendelssohn), but only to an extent. Their disagreement about progress is based upon more fundamental philosophical commitments.

²⁰⁰ *Ideas*, VIII.5, C 78 / 6:334-5 (this passage comes between those from which Kant quotes in the second of his 'Reviews' at 8:64 and 8:61).

Chapter Eight: *The Conflict of the Faculties*

The Conflict of the Faculties, published in 1798, stands, perhaps by accident, as Kant's final philosophical publication.²⁰¹ It is, as a whole, a curious work, composed of three separate essays, notionally linked by the theme of the relationship between philosophy and the three 'higher' faculties of the traditional university structure, namely theology, law and medicine. As the work unfolds, the significance of this theme becomes progressively attenuated: in the preface and the first part, on philosophy's relation to theology, it is very prominent; in the second part, titled 'The conflict of the philosophy faculty with the faculty of law' (7:77), it makes an appearance but is by no means central to the piece; whilst the third part, dealing with medicine, does not engage with it at all. The use of the theme of 'the conflict of the faculties' as a mere linking device to piece together the parts for publication is also underscored by the clearly distinct motivations Kant had for writing each part: in the first instance, to respond to recent religiously inspired attempts at censorship in Prussia; in the second instance, to re-examine the question of progress in the light of current events; and, in the third, to respond to the gift of a book and consider his own ever more apparent physical frailty. Kant had in fact written what became the second part as a separate essay, under the title 'An old question raised again: is the human race in constant progress toward the better?', which in due course became the sub-title of the published version (7:79). He tried to get this published in a journal towards the end of 1797, only to have this attempt blocked by the Prussian censor. Its appearance the following year, alongside the other two essays, was only possible because of the death in November 1797 of the reactionary Frederick William II and the consequent lifting of the censorship regime he had instigated. Even then, Kant did go to the trouble of seeking legal advice and sending *The Conflict of the Faculties* to Halle for publication, thereby bypassing the Berlin censor.²⁰²

²⁰¹ The same year also saw the publication of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, but this was entirely based upon lecture materials Kant had written many years earlier, and so whilst Kant did devote time in 1796 and 1797 to working these manuscripts up into a publishable form, it is reasonable to suppose that he was not re-working them in a substantial way. As we shall see later, the *Anthropology* is relevant to an understanding of the second part of *The Conflict of the Faculties* (pp. 143-4, n. 222).

²⁰² On these events, see Kant's letter to Tieftrunk, 5th April 1798, 12:240-1 and Kuehn, *Kant*, pp. 403-405. The editors of *Religion and Rational Theology* claim that the essay was 'apparently written in 1795' (p. 235), presumably on the basis of Kant's letter to Tieftrunk of the 13th October 1797, where he writes of two essays he has in a bureau that 'one of them is complete, the other almost so, and they have lain [there] for more than two years' (12:208; the editor of *Correspondence* also thinks that the 'completed essay' is 'An Old Question' – cf. p. 529). Yet in the April 1798 letter Kant refers to 'An

Of the three essays, the second is the most significant, and is certainly the one that has attracted most attention ever since (even if this attention has tended to be too narrowly focused on the famous central passage in which Kant discusses the French Revolution, to the neglect of complex arguments weaved around it). Its significance for Kant is indicated both by the considerable amount of draft material he generated in the years in which he was working on it and by the efforts he made to ensure its publication.²⁰³ However, the polemical and conjunctural reasons Kant may have had for composing ‘An Old Question’ are difficult to discern, particularly in comparison with ‘Idea’ and ‘Theory and Practice’, where the relevant motivations were evident. For one thing, why did Kant feel that the ‘old question’ needed to be asked again, given that he had already addressed it in ‘Theory and Practice’? Indeed, the question as formulated in 1798 – ‘is the human race in constant progress toward the better [*im beständigen Fortschreiten zum Besseren*]?’ (7:79, translation amended) – is almost identical to that raised in 1793 – ‘[will the human race] always progress toward what is better? [*immer zum Bessern fortschreiten*]?’ (8:307). That it had to be asked again implies that Kant thought that the answer given in ‘Theory and Practice’ was less than fully satisfactory. In what follows we shall see that Kant certainly does try to improve upon the arguments discussed in the last chapter, in particular by strengthening the case for the assertion ‘that in our age ... the human race has made moral progress’ (8:310). And yet the spur to do so seems more likely to have come from some of the reactions generated by *Perpetual Peace*, published in 1795. In that work, as noted previously, Kant emphasized ‘Nature’s guarantee’ that a global federation and with it perpetual peace would come about (8:360-368). To many of his more radical readers, this approach seemed to leave too little room for intentional endeavours to promote these ends (along

Old Question’ as a ‘recent work’, not one which by then was three years old. In any case, the identification of either of these two essays with ‘An Old Question’ is untenable, given that in a draft of the October letter Kant also refers to an essay which he has just sent to Berlin for publication, and this can only be the version of ‘An Old Question’ which was rejected by the censor (13:464; for more detail, see Reinhard Brandt, ‘Zum “Streit der Fakultäten”’, pp. 65-66). There is therefore no reason to think that ‘An Old Question’ was complete before late 1797. It is of course also possible that Kant worked on it again in 1798, prior to its publication as part of *The Conflict of the Faculties*.

²⁰³ As Peter Fenves comments: ‘Kant wrote out a surprising number of versions of what was to become [‘An Old Question’], each of which has its own character and addresses slightly different thematic concerns. The multiplicity of versions testifies both to the difficulty and to the overall significance of the question itself: indeed, [‘An Old Question’] turns out to be not only Kant’s last major published work of philosophy but one of the most intricately devised and revised of his texts.’ (*A Peculiar Fate: Metaphysics and World-History in Kant*, p. 171 n. 1). These drafts are to be found at 15:650-651, 19:604-612, 22:619-624 and in *Kant-Studien* 51 (1959-1960), pp. 3-13.

the lines of the criticism put forward by Beiser and discussed on pp. 110f above).²⁰⁴ Kant's emphatic reference to 'Nature's guarantee' certainly exposed him to this charge, even though, as I suggested, his closing comments in the 'First Supplement' are an attempt to rectify this impression (8:368, cited p. 111, n. 171). One German writer who criticized Kant on this score was the young Friedrich Schlegel. In his 'Essay on the Concept of Republicanism Occasioned by the Kantian Tract "Perpetual Peace"', published in 1796, Schlegel refers to Kant's invocation of 'Nature's guarantee' and then comments: 'I still frankly want to confess what I find missing in it. It is not enough to show the *means* of its possibility, the *external occasions of fate* that lead to the gradual realization of perpetual peace. One expects an answer to the question *whether the inner development of humanity* leads to it.'²⁰⁵ What Schlegel wants is some indication of a positive moral-political momentum toward the realization of republican and pacific ideals, not just the negative path of prudential rationality. Kant certainly knew of Schlegel's essay,²⁰⁶ and it seems likely that he would have read it. As we shall see, 'An Old Question' does strive to counter the supposition that Kantian progress is wholly or mainly a matter of some 'hidden hand' mechanism.

The objection can be taken to involve two elements. Firstly, progress ought to engage humanity's moral character – without this, it does not really count as progress. Secondly, only to the extent that it does do we have sufficiently strong warrant for asserting future progress. Critics such as Schlegel therefore consider that Kant's concentration on the non-moral grounds of historical advance both detracts from the value of progress and makes it appear less likely. The criticism is of course misplaced. Kant's hopes for the future explicitly rely upon, if not exclusively, his trust in individuals' ability to undertake enlightened moral action. And yet it is true that this is somewhat underplayed in 'Theory and Practice' and certainly less than obvious in *Perpetual Peace*, with its emphasis on 'Nature's guarantee'. It may be supposed to be in view of this that Kant felt it necessary to address the 'old question' once again and reiterate the double basis of his belief in progress.

²⁰⁴ One such critic was the English radical and chemist, Thomas Beddoes, who, reviewing *Perpetual Peace* in the London *Monthly Review* in 1796, wrote that he was 'disappointed' with the passivity of Kant's approach. See Micheli, 'The Early Reception of Kant's Thought in England, 1785–1803', pp. 276–277.

²⁰⁵ Friedrich Schlegel, 'The Concept of Republicanism', p. 109. The suggestion that Schlegel's review was instrumental in prompting the writing of the second part of *The Conflict of the Faculties* was made by Klaus Reich in 1956 (see Kleingeld, *Fortschritt und Vernunft*, p. 68 n. 2).

²⁰⁶ At the end of R6340 (otherwise unrelated), Kant notes the title of the essay, the name of its author and its place of publication (18:666).

Kant's central contention in the essay certainly serves as a response to Schlegel's demand. The argument is introduced in section five: 'There must be some experience in the human race which, as an event, points to the disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance toward the better, and (since this should be the act of a being endowed with freedom), toward the human race as being the author of this advance' (7:84). The necessity here should presumably be understood as conditional upon the requirements outlined in the previous paragraph. That is, 'there must be some experience ...' given that progress ought to involve humanity's moral character and/or given that such evidence is needed in order to sustain a suitably confident expectation that humanity will make progress. The desired degree of expectation is indicated by Kant's reference in the heading of the fifth section to 'the prophetic history of mankind' (7:84, underlining added for emphasis): evidence that the species is acting as 'the author' of its 'advance toward the better' will enable us to foretell progress with a greater assurance than speculations about the likely course of prudential self-interest allow. (I shall return at the end of this chapter to consider Kant's use of the language of prophecy.)

Kant proceeds in the next section to describe 'an occurrence in our time which demonstrates this moral tendency of the human race':

This occurrence consists neither in momentous deeds nor crimes committed by human beings whereby what was great among human beings is made small or what was small is made great, nor in ancient splendid political structures which vanish as if by magic while others come forth in their place as if from the depths of the earth. No, nothing of the sort. It is simply the mode of thinking of the spectators which reveals itself publicly in this game of great revolutions [*Umwandlungen*], and manifests such a universal yet disinterested sympathy for the players on one side against those on the other.... Owing to its universality, this mode of thinking demonstrates a character of the human race at large and all at once: owing to its disinterestedness, a moral character of humanity, at least in its predisposition, a character which not only permits people to hope for progress toward the better, but is already itself progress in so far as its capacity is sufficient for the present. (§6, 7:85)

The rest of the section goes on to explain that the relevant mode of thinking is that which manifests itself in support for republican revolution in France. The most striking difficulty with this argument (and the one which has generated nearly all of the attention that 'An Old Question' has received) is this: how can Kant commend as moral 'participation' in the revolution, given that he is adamant that revolution is always unjust.²⁰⁷ (Indeed, he reiterates this position in his second footnote to §6, 7:87.) Alongside this difficulty is the problem of understanding how this 'occurrence'

²⁰⁷ Cf. 'Theory and Practice', 8:297-8; *The Metaphysics of Morals*, 6:318-22.

demonstrates ‘the disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance toward the better’ (§5, 7:84).

The most straightforward way to resolve the first of these issues is to recognize that the enthusiasm Kant identifies is essentially an enthusiasm for republicanism, not revolution. The ‘moral character of humanity’ would therefore be demonstrated by the identification of and commitment to the principles of right on the part of impartial spectators.²⁰⁸ This is doubtless correct, as far as it goes, but to leave it at that unduly disconnects the spectators from the events they are viewing: given their moral commitment to republicanism, how then do they stand in relation to the revolution in France? Kant writes that ‘it may be filled with misery and atrocities to the point that a right-thinking human being, were he boldly to hope to execute it successfully a second time, would never resolve to make the experiment at such a cost’. Even still, he continues: ‘this revolution, I say, nonetheless finds in the hearts of all spectators ... a wishful participation that borders on enthusiasm’ (§6, 7:85).

One may agree with its ideals, yet in so far as one must condemn its means, there would appear to be no room for ‘wishful participation’ in the revolution. Krasnoff suggests that the way to resolve the tension is to admit that the spectators were wrong to show enthusiasm but that notwithstanding this, their response still demonstrates a ‘moral character’, just one which happened to be misdirected. This is implausible: surely in this case, their enthusiasm would be, like that of the revolutionaries, immoral, even if ostensibly aimed at the good.²⁰⁹

This is not to say that a ‘right-thinking human being’ would find nothing encouraging in the French Revolution. To the extent that it reveals republican principles to be ones which can be realized – they are not, as the anti-theorists are prone to allege, simply utopian – the revolution would be cause for optimism. In addition, as republican states are in principle pacific, the existence of the French republic gives grounds for hope that the pressures for war can be reduced (cf. §6, 7:85-86). Kant of course has to be careful here: he would not want it to be thought that revolution was the only or the most effective way of achieving the implementation of republican principles. The ‘right-thinking human being’ must therefore wish instead for an evolutionary approach, this being both itself moral and more likely to produce stable results (§7,

²⁰⁸ For example, Nicholson, ‘Kant, Revolutions and History’, p. 261.

²⁰⁹ Krasnoff, ‘The Fact of Politics: History and Teleology in Kant’, p. 31.

7:87-88 and §6 n., 7:87). (The likely uncertainty of the revolutionary path is hinted at more than once by Kant.)

Reasons of this sort are sometimes adduced by commentators wishing to reconcile Kant's apparent endorsement of the spectators' approval of events in France with his condemnation of revolution. For example, Yovel writes: 'Kant's final position [i.e. in 'An Old Question'] is that one cannot justify any revolution a priori, but that there are revolutions that are beneficial a posteriori, that is, once they have occurred.'²¹⁰ This is perfectly consistent with Kant's general understanding of the historical process, whereby good can emerge from wrong-doing. However, it is irrelevant in this context, as Kant is not attempting to account here for a detached, retrospective judgment but rather for an enthusiasm for events which are still underway. (The judgment could be made whilst the events were still on-going, but would have to appeal to the anticipated beneficial consequences.)

To summarize the discussion so far: Kant claims that the spectators display a moral enthusiasm in relation to the French Revolution, but he also rejects revolution as immoral. As a result, various strategies have been devised to resolve the appearance of inconsistency. The first of these emphasizes the onlookers' commitment to the principles of right (e.g. Nicholson). This reading preserves moral enthusiasm, but disconnects it from the revolution, and so fails to accord with Kant's text. The second approach concedes that the spectators are wrong to 'participate' in the revolution, but that this can be discounted: their hearts are in the right place (e.g. Krasnoff). This interpretation does latch on to a form of enthusiasm for the revolution, but one which is in fact only pseudo-moral, so it too should be discarded. The third tack appeals to those features of the revolution, or rather its results, which a 'right-thinking' observer would recognize as good (e.g. Yovel). Accordingly, it identifies a positive, retrospective moral evaluation of the revolution, but one which completely lacks any sense of 'wishful participation'. Each of these interpretations therefore loses one of the elements of Kant's 'occurrence'; taking them in reverse order, the enthusiasm, the morality and the connection to the revolution. Matters are complicated inasmuch as the three spectator positions identified in these readings are not altogether exclusive; in particular, it would be quite possible for a Nicholson-type spectator also to adopt the perspective of a Yovel-type viewer as well.

²¹⁰ *Kant's Philosophy of History*, p.215 n. 15; cf. also p.153 n. 28.

Clarification comes in the (usually neglected) final paragraph of section six:

... genuine enthusiasm always moves only toward what is right, and it cannot be grafted to self-interest. Monetary rewards will not elevate the adversaries of the revolutionaries [*Revolutionirenden*] to the zeal and grandeur of soul which the pure concept of right produced in them; and even the concept of honour among the old martial nobility (an analogue of enthusiasm) vanished before the weapons of those who kept in view the right of the nation to which they belonged and of which they considered themselves the guardians; with what exaltation the uninvolved public looking on sympathized then without the least intention of assisting. (7:86-87, translation amended ['revolution' replaced with 'revolutionaries'])

Kant here describes the revolutionaries themselves as displaying moral enthusiasm, with the enthusiasm of the spectators being generated as its reflection. How can this be squared with the moral condemnation of revolution? One obviously unsatisfactory way of doing so would be to treat the rebels as suffused with moral enthusiasm, such that we praise their commitment to the cause whilst objecting to their actions. This is evidently unacceptable because it is this so-called commitment to the cause that led to their carrying out crimes in the first place; enthusiasm of this sort is completely wrong. (In other words, this interpretation would treat the revolutionaries in the same way that Krasnoff treats the spectators.) The difficulty is, however, easily resolved when we note that the 'revolutionaries' Kant discusses in this passage are in fact not rebelling against authority (which is always illegitimate) but rather defending the (new) state against 'counter-revolutionary' attack. As this new state approximates 'the pure concept of right', it is a worthy stimulus of 'genuine enthusiasm'.

It should be clear by now that Kant uses the term 'revolution' in a rather elastic sense. In its strict form, it refers to the violent overthrow of government. When discussing revolution in this sense, Kant is always unambiguously hostile. This is evident not only in texts such as *The Metaphysics of Morals* but even, as noted earlier, in 'An Old Question' itself, where we find Kant telling us that 'revolution ... is always unjust' (§6 n., 7:87). The 'French Revolution' according to this use of the term signifies the events of 1789. At the same time, Kant also uses 'revolution' to refer to the broader process of change initiated by and including successful rebellion. Accordingly, '[t]he revolution of a gifted people which we have seen unfolding in our day' (§6, 7:85, underlining added for emphasis) is the on-going sequence of events started in 1789 but running on throughout the 1790s. This 'French Revolution' signifies (primarily) the establishment, development and defence of the republic *subsequent to* the toppling of the old regime. It is the 'revolutionaries' of the later phase whom Kant adduces as

manifesting moral enthusiasm, not their predecessors, whom we might call the actual revolutionaries.²¹¹

This strategy smacks of a forced compartmentalization. How can Kant be so sure that the criminality of the revolution is located only in the initial moment of rebellion? His mention of ‘misery and atrocities’ could mean that he does not think this, but if this were so, then the revolutionaries of the second, republican phase could hardly be claimed to show a ‘passionate participation in the good’ (§6, 7:86). It is more plausible to assume that Kant takes the ‘misery and atrocities’ attending the revolution in the second stage to be those inflicted by the counter-revolutionary forces of the rest of Europe, and in response to which the ‘revolutionaries’ display their ‘zeal and grandeur of soul’.

The claim that events reveal a ‘moral tendency’ is likely to provoke suspicion. How can Kant be sure that republican enthusiasm is morally motivated given his frequently expressed insistence that one cannot infer from acts to motives? The mere fact that republicanism accords with morality is insufficient, as it also accords with the self-interest of most, if not all, people. Nevertheless, Kant is justified in proceeding as he does, for two reasons. Firstly, he emphasizes those aspects of republican sentiment which make it more plausible to think of it as emanating from a ‘moral character’. In the case of the spectators, he can appeal to (a) their impartiality, as evidenced for example when it is expressed by, say, Germans, in support of republicans in far away places such as France – ‘more than a hundred miles removed’! (§6 n., 7:86); (b) the dangers (censorship, calumny etc) faced by those making republican declarations; (c) the very gradualism with which republicanism is urged.²¹² All three factors cut against the imputation of self-interest. Similarly, one of the reasons why revolutionary soldiers are claimed to display ‘genuine enthusiasm’ is that they are prepared to die in defence of the principles of right (cf. *Critique of Judgment*, §28, 5:263 on the sublimity of war). Secondly, Kant describes the ‘proof’ of the moral character in decidedly weak terms:

²¹¹ This interpretation is similar to those advanced previously by Seebohm, ‘Kant’s Theory of Revolution’, and Brandt, ‘Zum “Streit der Fakultäten”’. Brandt writes that: ‘The French Revolution to which Kant refers does not relate to the events of 1789, as is usually supposed, but rather the revolutionary process, or ‘evolution’ of the 1790’s’ (p. 50, my translation). However, Kant seems much more taken with the ‘revolutionary’ defence of the republic. Seebohm similarly neglects this feature.

²¹² Kant emphasizes the disinterestedness of progressivists in ‘Theory and Practice’: ‘the mind is nevertheless cheered up by the prospect that matters could become better in the future, and indeed with unselfish benevolence, since we shall be long in our graves and shall not harvest the fruits we have helped to sow’ (8:309).

the sought-for occurrence merely ‘points to’ the moral character, in the manner of a ‘sign’ or ‘intimation’ (§5, 7:84). This accords with Kant’s concession that there are circumstances in which we have to make judgments about underlying moral character, in which case we have no option but to ‘read it off’ from empirical actions.²¹³

We can now understand why Kant holds that the spectators display a moral enthusiasm with regard to the revolution. It is, as noted earlier, essentially an enthusiasm for republicanism, but one which is inspired by the moral enthusiasm displayed by the defenders of the French Republic. Why then does Kant only appeal to the spectators as revealing the ‘moral tendency’ when section six makes it clear that some of the ‘actors’ do as well (and indeed that the spectators’ enthusiasm is dependent on that of these actors)? To address this issue, we first need to look at the second difficulty mentioned above, namely the question of how the ‘occurrence’ of the revelation of the spectators’ mode of thinking stands in relation to the question of progress.

What Kant is looking for is some sign of a ‘moral tendency’ which would amount to the ‘disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance toward the better’. The occurrence which section six appeals to seems inadequate in this respect. Is there not a serious mismatch between what it reveals and what Kant requires for his assertions about progress? The moral tendency of the spectators may be genuine, but does it in fact amount to a capacity to move humanity forward? It seems instead to issue merely in the hope for progress, rather than the action which would deliver on this hope. Indeed, if one were looking for representatives of humanity’s ability to advance toward the better, would one not be far more likely to opt instead for the obviously active revolutionaries in France – and is this not what the enthusiasm of the spectators itself indicates? In this case, the spectators’ moral hope for progress would be invoked and sustained by the progressive agency of the French republicans.

We can start to resolve this problem by recalling that the response of the spectators is manifested ‘publicly [*öffentlich*]’ (§6, 7:85). The onlookers are characterized as passive in contrast with the active revolutionaries (‘the uninvolved public [*Publicum*] looking on ... without the least intention of assisting [*Mitwirkung*]’ (§6, 7:87), but this does not mean that they are wholly contemplative in their response. On the contrary, they actively engage in public debate about the significance of the revolution, the validity of

²¹³ Cf. *Religion*, 6:71-7, and, for commentary, Loudon’s discussion, *Kant’s Impure Ethics*, p. 148, which follows that of Kleingeld, *Fortschritt und Vernunft: Zur Geschichtsphilosophie Kants*, pp. 72-75.

the principles of right and the attitude of other states to the new republic. It is only by virtue of this activity that the spectators demonstrate their moral mode of thinking. We should not therefore be misled by Kant's use of the term 'spectator' into thinking that the 'uninvolved public' is wholly passive.²¹⁴

It remains the case that their activity is fairly modest in comparison with that of the revolutionaries. More to the point, it is still not at all clear how the former agency is connected to 'the disposition and capacity of the human race to be the cause of its own advance toward the better' (§5, 7:84). If we suppose that the spectators' mode of thinking is publicly expressed in the form of hope for (non-revolutionary) progress, or a belief that humanity ought to make such progress, then the original problem returns. Hope no doubt reveals a moral character, but not one which can yet deliver on this hope.

Kant's response must be to stress that the spectators are doing more than just declaring their hope for progress: they are themselves pressing for and thereby helping to engineer that very progress. The public interventions they make serve both to secure increased public endorsement of the principles of right and to encourage the powers that be to take heed of these principles (cf. §8, 7:89). Kant touches in particular on the latter point in the two footnotes to section six. The first of these discusses 'the grumbling of the subjects, provoked not by the internal policy of the government but by the conduct of the latter toward foreigners, if perchance that conduct should hinder them [i.e. the foreigners] in their republican tendencies' (§6 n., 7:86, translation amended). This must surely refer to those 'spectators' who take it upon themselves to protest about their government's penchant for military ventures against the French republic. The second footnote touches on the even more delicate topic of 'internal policy': 'A being endowed with freedom ... can and should therefore ... demand no other government for the people to which he belongs than one in which the people are co-legislative' (§6 n., 7:87, underlining added for emphasis). This demand, though, has to be addressed as a request to the existing authorities to govern 'in a republican way, that is, in the spirit of republicanism and on an analogy with it' (Kant having had to add here the vital qualification that republican government 'may not come to pass through revolution which is always unjust').

The spectators' efforts are thus directed toward the peaceful promotion of republicanism, primarily at home, by encouraging republican reform, but also, by trying

²¹⁴ Cf. Krasnoff, 'The Fact of Politics: History and Teleology in Kant', p. 32.

to influence the home state's foreign policy, abroad. This action is aimed at bringing about progress and does directly demonstrate the moral causality required to produce it. At the same time, this action itself indicates an actual advance, given that such public clamour had not been in evidence previously. The present therefore reveals much more than a mere moral call for progress; on Kant's account it displays the endeavour to make progress, which is itself progress. Accordingly, he writes that the 'moral character of humanity' demonstrated by the spectators 'not only permits people to hope for progress toward the better, but is already itself progress in so far as its capacity is sufficient for the present' (§6, 7:85). Our desire for evidence of humanity's ability to act as the 'author' of its advance toward the better is thereby fully met. Indeed, Kant seems to want to suggest that we could ask for no more progress than that which the spectators have made and are making.

The problem remains: the progress that the spectators themselves want and are pressing for has yet to occur. We may accept that it is progress for them to be pressing for it, and even allow that circumstances may be propitious, such that it is not unreasonable to expect that it will come about. Yet until it does, the evidence that humanity is able to make progress must be judged to be exiguous. To put the point another way: Kant can certainly refer to his 'occurrence' in order to show that humanity has a 'moral character' but not that it is the 'author' of its advance toward the better. To make the latter claim is to anticipate the intended effects of the spectators' actions. Perhaps this is a little too harsh; the spectators could be said at least to be trying at present to act in an authorial role, i.e. displaying the 'disposition' if not the 'capacity'. However, the issue of the possible effectiveness of their efforts remains open.

We can now return to the question of why Kant does not refer to the moral enthusiasm of the second-phase revolutionaries in support of his identification of a 'moral tendency'. He omits to mention them, not because their actions fail to reveal genuine enthusiasm (for they do reveal this), but instead because their behaviour, unlike that of the spectators, does not provide a satisfactory model of progressive agency. Change must come about gradually and peacefully, and so whilst the 'zeal and grandeur of soul' of the revolutionary soldiers can inspire the spectators, it is not what they should aspire to.

Kant's interpretation of the present is meant to provide the basis for an answer to the 'old question'. And yet the question itself is somewhat ambiguous. As conveyed in the sub-title, it would seem that the entirety of humanity's historical existence is at issue.

Accordingly, we could express it as ‘is the human race *always* in constant progress toward the better?’ However, Kant starts the essay by declaring that our interest in the question relates explicitly to the future: ‘We desire a fragment of human history and one, indeed, that is drawn not from past but from future time’ (§1, 7:79). The question could therefore be put as follows: ‘*will* the human race henceforth be in constant progress toward the better?’ This bifurcation is then replicated in the ways in which Kant builds on section six. One direction he takes is to argue that because humanity has the ‘disposition and capacity’ to make progress, we can assert that it ‘has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth’ (§7, 7:88), that is, to answer affirmatively the maximal version of the question. The other route he follows is to focus on the present occurrence and use this to provide warrant for a strong claim about the future: ‘I predict [the human race’s] progress toward the better, which, from now on, turns out to be no longer completely retrogressive’ (§7, 7:88), i.e. to engage with the question in its restricted form. Not only are there these two distinct lines of argument, but they appear to be in conflict. I will proceed to deal with them in turn, looking first at the argument for the claim about the future.

In section seven, Kant argues that the progress initiated in the present will continue indefinitely into the future because of the historical singularity of the current ‘occurrence’:

That is, I predict [humanity’s] progress toward the better, which, from now on, turns out to be no longer completely retrogressive [*rückgängig*]. For such a phenomenon [§6’s ‘occurrence’] in human history will not be forgotten, because it has revealed a tendency and faculty in human nature for improvement [*zum Besseren*] such that no politician, affecting wisdom, might have conjured out of the course of things hitherto existing.... (§7, 7:88)

According to this quite remarkable claim, what guarantees the course of future progress is the revelation in the present of humanity’s ‘disposition and capacity’ to make progress. Not only does the moral engagement of the spectators demonstrate this to the philosophical interpreter, it does so to a wider audience as well. Presumably, Kant takes it that the spectators themselves understand their comportment to reveal humanity’s ability to advance toward the better (this would help explain their ‘enthusiasm’); if the revelation is unforgettable, it must certainly be apparent to those for whom it is contemporary no less than to those who will be able to look back on it. The assertion of ‘unforgettability’ also requires that the present demonstrates a break with the past, ‘the course of things hitherto’: the ‘disposition and capacity’ could not have been apparent prior to its manifestation in the present (had it done so, the latter would not be particularly remarkable).

The unforgettability of the ‘phenomenon’ serves to secure future progress by providing a permanent stimulus to renewed attempts to make progress. It matters, therefore, *because* future progress will not be a straightforward linear ascent. Instead, it is quite likely that there will be reverses and set-backs, in which case recourse to the recollection of this original moment of progressive impetus will be vital to getting things back on course. The assertion that humanity will continue to make progress does not exclude the possibility of moments of retrogression or stagnation, but claims that there is now a guarantee that these will not derail the process. Accordingly, the extent to which Kant can answer the ‘old question’ positively with regard to the future is already somewhat qualified: he cannot justifiably forecast *constant* future progress, but rather progress overall.

There is a weaker form of this argument, with which Kant’s should not be confused. This weaker version would simply state that any progressive period can serve to inspire future generations to continue along the same path. Appeal is made in this weaker argument to the possibility that any such period *could be recalled* subsequently. Kant, by contrast, is making the stronger claim that his era *will not be forgotten*. It therefore underwrites future progress, rather than merely making it more likely. The weaker version also fails to accord priority to any particular period, whereas Kant implies that his is unique, and so will not be superseded in this respect by subsequent periods, even if greater progress is achieved during these.

What, though, of the memorability of the revolution itself? Kant does mention it in the context of the ‘unforgettability’ argument:

But even if the end viewed in connection with this occurrence should now not be attained, even if the revolution or reform of a national constitution should finally miscarry, or, after some time had elapsed, everything should relapse into its former rut (as politicians now prophesy), that philosophical prediction still would lose nothing of its force. - For that occurrence is too important, too much interwoven with the interest of humanity, and its influence too widely propagated in all areas of the world to not be recalled on any favourable occasion by the nations which would then be roused to a repetition of new efforts of this kind.... (§7, 7:88, translation amended)

This passage has been cited by those who want to argue that Kant’s ‘occurrence’ is in fact the revolution, not the attitude of the spectators.²¹⁵ It has to be said that Kant’s precise meaning here is not clear. Is he really asserting that the memorability of the revolution will stimulate the future revolutionary ventures? This is plausible enough, but hardly consistent with what he has urged elsewhere. It is more likely, I suggest, that Kant is trying here to convey his recognition that the establishment and defence of the

²¹⁵ E.g. Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, pp. 168-9.

French Republic will also function as an ‘unforgettable’ spur to renewed efforts at implementing republican principles, though of a different kind.

Kant takes issue in ‘An Old Question’ with conceptions of historical progress that rely upon a putative increase in the ‘quantity of good’ in individuals’ predispositions from generation to generation (§3, 7:81-2), or the enlargement over time of the ‘moral foundation in humanity’ (§9, 7:91-2). The ‘moral character’ which section six identifies must therefore be one which pertains to humanity as a whole and at all times, not just its current, ‘enlightened’ members. The question then arises as to why this ‘character’, or ‘disposition and capacity’ to make progress, was not apparent before. Kant presumably must hold that only now have conditions proved to be propitious for it. Such conditions would include the general social and political level of development. One particularly important factor would be the existence of a public sphere in which the spectators can air their views and suggest reforms to the authorities.²¹⁶ Kant is therefore not committed to the claim that enlightened spectators are more moral than their ancestors.

The fact that circumstances are right now gives us reason to assume either that they will remain so, or, less ambitiously, that they can become so again. Kant’s stress on the function of the unforgettability of the initial ‘occurrence’ suggests that he thinks that conditions will fluctuate in the future, being ‘favourable’ at some times, and not at others (cf. the passage from §7, 7:88 cited on the previous page). Yet such alterations will be relatively superficial, given that we are meant to take it that they will not seriously impact upon the existence and continued development of the international public sphere which is one of the conditions both for the continuing memorability of the ‘occurrence’ and for the exercise of the ‘tendency for improvement’ itself.

However, Kant cannot allow himself to be too confident. Conditions may be right for the expression of the moral tendency, and developments in France may encourage the belief that republican constitutions are not impracticable, but circumstances do not yet bode well for republican reform. In particular, the powers that be do not seem receptive to the recommendations of their enlightened subjects. Consequently, it is not yet clear that pressure for reform will bear fruit. For this to happen, conditions will have to become still more propitious.²¹⁷

²¹⁶ This sphere is constituted in large part by journals such as the ones in which Schlegel’s and Beddoes’ articles (and those of Kant’s discussed in the previous chapters) were published.

²¹⁷ Cf. Kleingeld, *Fortschritt und Vernunft: Zur Geschichtsphilosophie Kants*, p. 76.

As well as arguing that the ‘occurrence’ justifies optimism about the future, Kant also attempts to use it to demonstrate the actuality of progress in the past: ‘the human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth’ (§7, 7:88). Section Five, which outlines the general argument into which section six’s ‘occurrence’ is then fitted in order to generate the conclusions drawn in section seven, makes it explicit that it is intended to demonstrate the actuality of progress, present, future *and past*:

There must be some experience in the human race which, as an event, points to the disposition and capacity of the human race to be the *cause* of its own advance toward the better, and (since this should be the act of a being endowed with freedom), toward the human race as being the *author* of this advance. But from a given cause an event as an effect can be predicted [only] if the circumstances prevail which contribute to it. That these conditions must come to pass some time or other can, of course, be predicted in general, as in the calculation of probability in games of chance; but that prediction cannot enable us to know whether what is predicted is to happen in my life and I am to have the experience of it. – Therefore, an occurrence must be sought which points to the existence of such a cause and to its effectiveness in the human race, undetermined with regard to time, and which would allow progress toward the better to be concluded as an inevitable consequence. This conclusion then could also be extended to the history of the past (that it had always been in progress) in such a way that that occurrence would have to be considered not itself as the cause of progress, but only as an intimation, a historical sign (*signum rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognostikon*) demonstrating the tendency of the human race viewed in its entirety.... (§5, 7:84, translation amended and underlining added for emphasis)

The basic argument is straightforward enough. If humanity is to progress toward the better, it must have the ability to bring this about, in an intentional and therefore moral fashion. If it has this capacity (and conditions are right), it must be possible to detect that it has it via an ‘experience’ which ‘points to’ it. Once we have such an experience, then, as we have seen, future progress can be safely asserted (conditions allowing). The problems arise with the supplementary move Kant makes, extending this ‘conclusion’ to ‘the history of the past’. There are two ways in which this could be achieved. On the one hand, it could be supposed that if the experience is not one which is peculiar to its time but rather one which could reasonably be assumed to be available at any time, then past progress could also be asserted. On the other hand, as the capacity in question is one which inheres in humanity as such, and so is one which past generations possessed as well, it can therefore be assumed that they too were making progress, even if this was not and is not apparent. These additional arguments are evidently inadequate. The first is valid, but nothing Kant says suggests it and it is in any case contradicted by section seven. The second argument appears to be what section five is attempting to convey, but is invalid: the possession of a capacity is not equivalent to its exercise.

The key phrase comes in the very middle of the paragraph, the qualification of ‘its effectiveness [*den Act ihrer Causalität*]’ by ‘undetermined with regard to time

[*unbestimmt in Ansehung der Zeit*]. This would seem to be the element which Kant thinks entitles him to the subsequent extension of the initial conclusion. It is very difficult to see how it follows from the preceding consideration of ‘conditions’ in the second and third sentences. The line of thought here is that progress claims must be based on an experience which indicates the functioning of a moral tendency and not on predictions about when future circumstances might be right for it. Kant admits that it is possible to attempt such predictions, but states that they are insufficiently accurate (he uses the analogy of predictions based on probability). More simply, one might think, the problem with prediction is that in the absence of the progress which would reveal humanity’s ability to bring it about, it is impossible to state exactly what the appropriate conditions for it would be. This discussion of ‘conditions’ and ‘circumstances’ seems pertinent to the task of explaining the historical singularity of the sought-for occurrence, along the lines I suggested earlier. It is therefore all the more difficult to see how it can issue in the characterization of the event as one which indicates a causality whose effectiveness is ‘undetermined with regard to time’ and so which allows of attribution across all historical time. The only way in which Kant could squeeze this out of the materials he has to hand is as follows: because I cannot predict when conditions will be right, what I must look for instead is an occurrence which is not dependent on circumstances, and therefore indicates a capacity which is, has been and always will be effective. But this hardly succeeds: if Kant does find an ‘experience’ which points to humanity’s ability to make progress irrespective of conditions, then he would have to explain why this remarkable capacity had not been apparent before. And if it hadn’t been apparent before, then the claim that it was in any case always operative is all the more perplexing. Kant’s extension to ‘the history of the past’ in sections five and seven is unfounded. The fact that morally motivated progress is taking place now can at the very least give grounds for hope in the future, but it does nothing more than suggest that such progress could have occurred in the past. Moreover, section seven’s main argument implies that current moral progress provides grounds for optimism precisely because it is novel, thus cutting against the claim that the species has ‘always been in progress’ (§5, 7:84). The priority Kant attributes to the present undermines the attempt to give a positive answer to the maximal form of ‘the old question’ and helps explain why he directs his attention to future history.

Kant’s optimism about the future is in better shape than his retrospective assertions about the past, but only relatively. He tries to extract a considerable amount out of what

is strictly speaking only as yet pressure for progress, not progress itself. That public support for evolutionary republicanism demonstrates a moral capacity of humanity is plausible; whether, and under what conditions, this tendency could become genuinely and continuously effective is another question.

As if in recognition of these problems, in the last third of the essay Kant provides another line of argument to shore up his position. The key section in this regard is the ninth, which considers the progress the species can make by means of ‘an increase in the products of legality in dutiful actions whatever their motives’ (7:91, underlining added for emphasis). In a manner familiar to us from ‘Idea’ and ‘Theory and Practice’, Kant outlines the way in which non-moral motivations can generate ‘progress toward the better’. Kant projects this dynamic into the future:

Gradually violence on the part of the powers will diminish and obedience to the laws will increase. There will arise in the body politic perhaps more charity and less strife in lawsuits, more reliability in keeping one’s word, etc., partly out of love of honour, partly out of well-understood self-interest. And eventually this will also extend to nations in their external relations with one another up to the realization of the cosmopolitan society. (§9, 7:91-2)

Although, as stressed earlier, the weakest part of Kant’s main argument was its extension to include the past, the new argumentative move is explicitly made with regard to claims about the future, what ‘will’ be the case. Again, therefore, the essay’s express concern with the future comes to the fore. The ‘prophetic history’ (of the future) may be less vulnerable than the account of the past, but its weakness clearly matters more. At the same time, though, the appeal to prudential and other non-moral motivations made in section nine does allow of application to the past. Indeed there is no reason to assume that these factors were not operative in the past and (at least to some degree) generated progress then. In fact Kant must hold that both these things are true as otherwise he would have no basis for predicting, as he does, the efficacy of these mechanisms in the future. It is therefore plausible to assume that there has been and will continue to be non-morally motivated progress toward the better, independently of whatever contribution the ‘moral tendency’ may make to the process.

The mechanism of self-interest has until now been most effective in spreading legality within national communities. At the level of ‘nations in their external relations toward one another’ (§9, 7:92), self-interest, honour, etc, continue to tend to result in ‘violence on the part of the powers’ (§9, 7:91). Kant states his expectation that the ‘negative wisdom’ (§10, 7:93) of prudential rationality will eventually serve to bring an end to war. Human beings, he writes, ‘will see themselves compelled to render the greatest obstacle to morality – that is to say war which constantly retards this

advancement – firstly by degrees more humane and then rarer, and finally to renounce offensive war altogether’ (§10, 7:93, underlining added for emphasis). This compulsion will take the form of the ever-increasing costs, in human and material terms, of international conflict. Kant believes that as the European nations are currently incurring these ever-increasing costs as a result of their penchant for counter-revolutionary war, it is likely that they will soon be brought to this state: in the conclusion, we read that ‘the painful consequences of the present war can compel the political prophet to confess a very imminent turn of humanity toward the better that is even now in prospect’ (7:94).

The course of prudential progress proceeds, like that of moral progress, ‘gradually’ (§2, 7:91) and ‘by degrees’ (§10, 7:93). At the same time, the present holds out the prospect of a prudentially motivated ‘turn’ toward the better (§C, 7:94), in that an end to war – ‘the source of all evil and corruption of morals’ (§6, 7:86) – can now be anticipated.

The path of progress is painful, according to the argument of the last third of the essay. Human beings learn the hard way the need for and the means of control over their selfish and violent tendencies. In fact, the process is getting increasingly painful, as a result of the ever-increasing destructiveness of warfare.²¹⁸ To think that this process was going to continue in the future would be as much a cause for ‘despair’ (§C, 7:93) as hope. Humanity would then be in the position of a patient who is always told that he is improving despite obvious signs to the contrary, and who could only exclaim ‘I’m dying of sheer improvement [*Ich sterbe vor laute Besserung*]’ (§C, 7:93). ‘No pain, no gain’, the doctor might reply, but this is itself unlikely to reassure the patient if the pain shows no indication of lessening. What the patient needs to hear is that the treatment is imminently going to turn around and acquire a more straightforwardly progressive character. This then is what Kant tells those of his readers worrying about ‘the health of humanity and its progress toward the better [*zum Besseren*]’ – it will not die in the course of its ‘improvement [*Besserung*]’ (§C, 7:93).

Kant’s answer to the old question is emphatic: ‘the human race has always been in progress toward the better and will continue to be so henceforth’ (§7, 7:88). He describes this ‘proposition’ as ‘valid for the most rigorous theory, in spite of all skeptics, and not just a well-meaning and a commendable proposition in a practical

²¹⁸ Kant does not explicitly make this point in ‘An Old Question’, but it is implicit in his supposition that the consequences of the present war may be so painful as to provoke a reaction away from war altogether.

respect'.²¹⁹ The proposition rests upon two separate arguments. The first appeals to a moral tendency for improvement, the second to non-moral factors, in particular prudential rationality. The placing of his 'proposition' at the end of the exposition of the first argument can suggest that he means the answer to rely exclusively on this. (It has certainly proved possible for some commentators completely to ignore the presence of the second line of argument in the text.)²²⁰ Yet Kant does articulate the non-moral argument very explicitly in the closing sections and makes it the focus of his conclusion.

Kant's 'belt and braces' approach serves to shore up the weaknesses of each argument considered on its own. The 'moral tendency' argument fails to justify any retrospective assertions of progress and works in relation to the future in large part because it is the future and so has yet to happen. The argument from self-interest is much more successful in respect of the past, and thereby can claim warrant for its claims about the future, only it deals with a rather erratic and rough kind of progress, the kind one wouldn't wish for. The 'very imminent turn of humanity toward the better' which Kant promises in the final sentence of the essay should therefore involve the interaction of the two dynamics, which, when working together, should be able to achieve consistent and increasingly pain-free progress. In particular, the 'moral tendency' will be able to work with the mechanism of self-interest, for example in the form of encouragement given to rulers 'to govern in a *republican* ... way' (§8, 7:91) through appeals to what is in their interest, in particular when this is not immediately apparent to them. Morality can thus mould self-interest in its own image.

It is therefore not just the 'question' which Kant repeats from 'Theory and Practice': the answer too is, in the end, largely the same, if with extra emphasis on the moral dynamic. And yet the manner in which Kant brings in the second part of his answer appears to cut against the first part. Section nine claims that 'the profit (result) of the human being's striving toward the better can be assumed to reside alone in the good deeds of human beings, which will become better and better and more numerous' (§9, 7:91). Kant seems to be saying here that non-morally motivated progress – an increase

²¹⁹ Note the clear implication that belief in progress is not a (quasi-)postulate, 'valid' only 'in a practical respect'.

²²⁰ For example, Krasnoff alleges that we find in 'An Old Question' that 'Kant has broken sharply with the assumptions of "Idea for a Universal History"', i.e. the argument that progress depends upon prudential responses to violence (what Krasnoff calls 'the thesis of exhaustion'). ('The Fact of Politics', pp. 29-30.)

in (mere) legality – is all we can justifiably expect. But what of the ‘moral cause’ which Kant enthused about in sections five to seven?²²¹

There are two lines of thought adduced in section nine in support of the restriction of progress to mere legality. The first stresses that we should not appeal to an ‘ever growing quantity of morality with regard to intention’ (§9, 7:91) as either the driving force of progress or its outcome. The advance toward the better will occur ‘without the moral foundation of humanity having to be enlarged in the least; for that, a kind of new creation would be necessary’ (§9, 7:92). Notice that Kant does not deny either that humanity has a ‘moral foundation’ or that this could be a cause of progress, but only that such progress requires or results in its enlargement. Consequently, a contradiction between sections six and nine would exist only if the earlier passage relied upon this idea of moral expansion. As I argued earlier, the moral tendency demonstrated in reaction to the revolution does not derive from a sudden increase in humanity’s moral basis; instead, it reveals a character that had always been there, yet which can only be expressed given certain conditions.

The second, and more pertinent, line of thought invokes Kant’s doctrine of the inscrutability of moral or ‘intelligible’ character (cf. A551/B579). Given that we cannot infer from the fact that an action accords with the demands of morality that it was performed for that reason, it would seem that there should always be a presumption in favour of supposing that such actions are carried out for non-moral reasons. (This would also seem to accord with the doctrine of ‘radical evil’ developed in *Religion*.) Accordingly, our hopes for the future, if they are to remain reasonable, should limit themselves to what can be expected from the operation of self-interest, honour, etc. The cautiousness of this approach certainly seems to be in tension with the ‘enthusiasm [*Enthusiasm*]’ (§6, 7:85-6) expressed in the middle sections of the essay. To see how this tension is resolved, or at least managed, we need to consider Kant’s analysis of the various ways in which one can try to make judgments about the future.

Kant starts the essay in section one by distinguishing between three types of forecasts about the future. These are what he calls predictive, prophetic and vaticinatory history (§1, 7:79).²²² Prediction (*Vorhersagung*) is that manner of knowledge of the future

²²¹ Robert Louden identifies ‘an ambiguity within [Kant’s] own presentation’, in that §9 ‘seems to contradict directly’ §5 (*Kant’s Impure Ethics*, p. 147).

²²² All three adjectives are emphasized by use of spaced type in Kant’s text, though this is not followed through in the Robert Anchor/Mary Gregor translation. The original version of this, by Anchor alone, (published in *On History*, ed. L. W. Beck) fails to emphasize any of the three words; the latest version,

which is based upon induction from past regularities – the example Kant gives is astronomical predictions of eclipses. Prophecy (*Wahrsagung*) is a non-inductive yet (purportedly) empirically based foretelling of the future, as traditionally when soothsayers interpret current and unusual natural occurrences as portents of things to come. Vaticination (*Weissagung*) is also non-inductive, but claims to take its lead from divine inspiration, rather than particular facts about the world.²²³

The reader will inevitably suppose that Kant introduces prophecy and vaticination simply in order immediately to dismiss them and turn instead to prediction, which would seem to be the only rational way to make claims about the future (Hume notwithstanding). Yet consider the impact this would have on Kant's endeavour to answer the 'old question'. Future progress could then only be asserted on the basis of past progress, and there would be no room for the kind of argument attempted in sections five to seven, whereby future progress is taken to be guaranteed not by

Anchor's text adopted and slightly revised by Gregor (published most recently in *Religion and Rational Theology*) italicizes the first and third term, but not the second (which turns out to be the key one). It has to be conceded that Kant's syntax is not as clear as we might want it to be in the first sentence of section one, such that it is possible to interpret it as saying that all claims about the future are predictions, of which inductive claims (on this reading not given a specific label), prophecies and vaticinations are all versions. (This is the way R. Makkreel takes it in *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, p. 148.) However, this is not consistent with the way in which Kant goes on to use the three terms; in particular, 'prediction' (*Vorhersagung*) is for the most part quite clearly used in connection with empirical induction (e.g., §9, 7:91). The clinching factor supporting my reading of the passage is the fact that the three part distinction between prediction, prophecy and vaticination is also made (this time somewhat more clearly!) by Kant in §36 of *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View* (7:187-188). This book was of course published in the same year as *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798) and we know that Kant worked on preparing it for publication over 1796 and 1797. It is therefore appropriate to take the two passages in tandem.

Kant may have been prompted to utilize and develop *Anthropology's* account of prediction, prophecy and vaticination in 'An Old Question' by Schlegel's review, in which Kant's use of *weissagen* in *Perpetual Peace* (8:368 – this text is quoted on p. 111, n. 171 above) is picked up ('Essay on the Concept of Republicanism Occasioned by the Kantian Tract "Perpetual Peace"', p. 129).

²²³ The Robert Anchor/Mary Gregor translation of *The Conflict of the Faculties* (included in *Religion and Rational Theology*), translates the German terms in a manner which obliterates the significance of the distinctions Kant is drawing. Taking them in reverse order: *weissagend* is translated at first as 'premonitory' (§1), but the cognate terms *weissagen* and *weissagenden* are subsequently rendered as 'prophecy' and 'prophetic' (§§2-3). In section one and the first paragraph of section two, *wahrsagend* and related words are translated by 'divinatory', 'divination', etc, but then 'prophecy' again takes over (§2, third and fourth paragraphs, §5 heading, §7 heading and §C). The translation sticks almost entirely to using 'prediction' for *Vorhersagung*, except for the third paragraph of §7, where it is given as 'prophecy' (and, in the previous line, 'predict' is given for *wahrsagern!*). It has to be admitted that the choice of 'prophecy' for *Wahrsagung*, which I too adopt (though consistently), is slightly awkward given that Kant does use the Latinate term *prophetisch* as a synonym for *weissagend* in the opening section (and we also find the cognates *Propheten* and *Prophezeiung* in the third and fourth paragraphs of §2 respectively). Finally, it should be noted that *Sehergeist* is translated as 'prophetic insight' in §7. The version of the essay by H. B. Nisbet included in *Kant: Political Writings* is slightly more careful in respect of marking the distinctions, though this is spoiled by the inexplicable failure to translate the key phrase in the opening section where Kant introduces and describes *Wahrsagung*.

previously experienced regularities but by a presently experienced novelty. Indeed, the character of the forecast made in the essay's central sections looks rather similar to section one's 'prophecy': both involve the interpretation of something new as providing the basis for knowledge of the future. And so it should in fact come as no surprise that Kant explicitly uses the language of prophecy to describe the claims he makes there about the future. The headings for sections five and seven both assert that what they are providing is 'prophetic history [*wahrsagend Geschichte*]', and we further find reference to the 'historical sign [*Geschichtszeichen*]' (§5, 7:84) and 'aspects and omens [*Aspecten und Vorzeichen*]' (§7, 7:88) on which it is based. This apparently rhetorical device might seem rather dangerous: why align oneself with the spurious practice of prophecy when it would surely be possible to find or create different terms to characterize the forecasts one wants to make? Won't the skeptic feel encouraged to protest that Kant's prophecies are as subjective and deluded as those of the sooth-sayer?

In fact, Kant proceeds in section two to claim, in a most subtle way, that prophecy is or at least can be perfectly rational. The future can be known in a non-inductive way if what is claimed will happen is being brought about by human action, in particular by the action of the 'prophet' himself:

HOW CAN WE KNOW IT? [i.e. whether humanity will progress in the future] As a prophetic [*wahrsagende*] historical narrative of things imminent in future time, consequently as a possible representation a priori of events which are supposed to happen then. – But how is history a priori possible? – Answer: if the prophet [*Wahrsager*] himself makes and contrives the events which he announces in advance. (§2, 7:79-80, translation amended)

The prophet knows what is going to happen because he is making it happen. *Wahrsagen* is therefore the mode of expectation appropriate to end-directed agents in respect of their projects. Kant then explains how instances of traditional prophecy and indeed vaticination also do fit this model, despite appearances to the contrary. He considers three examples: ancient Jewish prophets foretelling doom and gloom, contemporary politicians prophesying disaster if republicanism takes hold and, last of all, the apocalyptic anticipations of enthusiastic ecclesiastics. In each case, the claim made has some validity, though not because of alleged supernatural communication (as in the first and third examples) or worldly insight into human nature (as in the second). Rather, this element of truth rests upon the (no doubt disavowed) efforts made by their authors to ensure that their prophecies come about. Kant thus suggests that purportedly non-teleological prophecies (whether naturally or supernaturally based), in so far as they have any plausibility, do so by virtue of being in fact teleological *Wahrsagung*, according to which the prophets in fact create the states of affairs they foretell.

Ecclesiastics, too, occasionally vaticinate [*weissagen*] the complete destruction of religion and the imminent appearance of the Antichrist; and in doing so they are performing precisely what is requisite to call him up. This happens because they have not seen to impressing on their parishes moral principles which lead directly to the better, but rather fabricate into essential duty observances and historical beliefs which are supposed to effect it indirectly.... But then they complain about irreligion, which they themselves have caused and thus could have announced in advance [*vorherverkündigen*] even without any special prophetic gift [*Wahrsagergabe*]. (§2, 7:80, translation amended)

The explicit purpose of section two is to expose and poke fun at the duplicity of the anti-progressivists, with Kant's irony very much directed against the reactionaries of his own day, both the Prussian clerics who had earlier had his own work censored and the political opponents of republicanism, such as Edmund Burke. Yet his characterization of prophecy as 'history a priori' is surely not merely ironic, as some have claimed.²²⁴ As we have seen, Kant himself uses the term '*Wahrsagen*' later in the essay. How then do the claims of sections five to seven fit the account of 'prophecy' given in section two? In general terms, quite well. Prophecy requires the production of future events, so in cases where a teleological endeavour is underway, prophecy is possible. In the earlier passage, the 'prophet ... makes and contrives the event which he announces in advance [*zum Voraus*]' (§2, 7:80); subsequently, we read that the desired 'prophetic history' is only possible if humanity becomes 'the author of [its] advance [*Fortrücken*]' (§5, 7:84). Accordingly, Lewis White Beck is right to identify Kant's answer to the 'old question' in these central sections with 'history a priori': 'the Idea of history will be realized only if we act in the faith that it can be realized, and produce those events which will exemplify it'.²²⁵

At the same time, Kant's 'prophecy' is importantly dissimilar to those he dissects in section two. Firstly, the prophets there themselves produce the events they foretell,

²²⁴ Booth, 'Reason and History', p. 63; Fenves, *A Peculiar Fate*, p. 185.

²²⁵ *On History*, p. xxv. Peter Fenves has urged that we should *not* apply §2's analysis of prophecy to what Kant is himself trying to provide in the essay (*A Peculiar Fate: Metaphysics and World-History in Kant*, p. 188 n. 9). If Fenves' point were simply that Kant's 'prophecy' is in some particular respects unlike those made by the ecclesiastics and politicians, then he would be correct but not thereby able to deny the reflexive application of the *general* model of prophecy which is advanced in §1 and §2. Fenves' claim, however, rests upon the argument that Kant's §7 forecast cannot count as a teleological prophecy because 'the decisive moment of ['An Old Question'] it is not at all the "production" of an event but, rather, the event as a *reception*' (p. 188 n. 9; cf. pp. 256-257 also). Fenves is clearly confused here. It would appear that he takes Kant's focus on the response of spectators *to* an event (the French Revolution) to mean that the relevant capacity of humanity which is identified thereby is *not* a productive one (in contrast to the evidently productive capacity of the revolutionaries). But Kant clearly intends for us to understand the spectators' responses to have intended effects (getting rulers to govern in a more republican way and to make moves toward perpetual peace). In other words, they do indicate a productive causality which is meant to fit into the template of 'history a priori'. Fenves is in all probability led astray by his aestheticized approach to Kant, which inclines him to view the spectators as if they are merely spectators, looking on as if in a theatre, whereas for Kant they are supposed to be agents in the public sphere.

being in a position to do so, with the power appropriate to their status as leaders. Kant, on the other hand, is appealing to the agency of ‘humanity’ as a whole. Secondly, traditional prophets are *false* prophets – not because what they say isn’t true, but because they merely pretend (consciously or not) to be receiving supernatural inspiration or reading signs and omens. Kant, by contrast (and paradoxically), is a true prophet,²²⁶ and for two reasons: (a) he avows the teleological agency on which the prophecy rests; (b) he attempts a genuine interpretation of the ‘aspects and omens of our day’ (§7, 7:88) in order to be able to detect the agency involved. In short, he does both what traditional prophets can’t do and what they merely pretend to do.

Traditional prophecies of the kind analyzed in section two are self-fulfilling, in that getting other people to believe in them is part of what is required to make them come true.²²⁷ Of course, the members of the laity under the influence of ‘inspired’ ecclesiastics, for example, who believe in the forecast do so for the wrong reason, that is, they take it to be a supernaturally guided vaticination, and not, as Kant tells us it in fact is, a teleological prophecy. Kant’s prophecy is also to an extent self-fulfilling, though in a transparent manner. Its truth likewise depends on its being believed, but in this case because the belief sustains the agency which is making the prophecy true.²²⁸

Kant’s prophecy is based upon his identification of the appearance in the present of a ‘moral tendency’ from which future progress can be forecast. What, then, about his second argument, which bases its forecast on the mechanism of self-interest and other supposedly ‘physical’ causes? Here, we should not be surprised to find, Kant uses *Vorhersagung*: ‘we have only empirical data (experiences) upon which we are founding this prediction’ (§9, 7:91, underlining added for emphasis). Unlike the ‘prophetic

²²⁶ Compare Hegel, for whom ‘prophecy [*Prophizeien*] not the business of the philosopher’ (*Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, p. 171).

²²⁷ The phrase ‘self-fulfilling prophecy’ was coined by the sociologist Robert Merton in 1948. He used it to describe the syndrome whereby a false belief evokes behaviour which in turn makes the originally false conception come true (*Social Theory and Social Structure*, p. 477). The phrase in fact fits Kant’s account of *Wahrsagen* more accurately, as in this making the belief public, actually *prophesying*, is necessary to the process, whereas with Merton’s instances it is not.

²²⁸ The only commentator I have come across who has attempted to engage with Kant’s claim to be providing ‘prophetic history’ is Rudolf Makkreel, in *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant*, pp. 148-151. However, he identifies ‘prophecy’ solely with the practice of divination, the reading of ‘signs’, ‘aspects and omens’: ‘*Wahrsagende* history thus involves a reflective art of interpreting historical events rather than a determinant science of explaining them.’ (p. 149). Admittedly, Makkreel does see that teleology enters into Kant’s prophecy (cf. pp. 148-149, 151) but not prophecy as such. (In other words, he relies only upon §1’s characterization of *wahrsagen*, and passes over §2’s.) In addition, he does not notice the important contrast between prophecy and prediction.

history' of sections five to seven, which was able to eschew reference to the past, the prediction of non-morally motivated progress is explicitly grounded by it.²²⁹

Kant's answer to the 'old question' is therefore achieved by means of both prediction and prophecy. The predictive approach examines the historical record cautiously and inductively, presuming neither to infer moral motivation nor to take the present as opening onto a different future. Prophecy, by contrast, seeks to interpret current events in such a way as to adduce the 'moral character' of humanity and to declare a new epoch for it.

²²⁹ Conversely, 'prediction' is a wholly inappropriate schema to use in relation to moral progress (cf. p. 137), as Kant explains in §§3-4 (7:81-4) – note especially the use of *Vorhersagung* in the first sentence of §3 (7:81) and the emphasized use of *vorhersagen* in the first paragraph of §4 (7:83).

(Unfortunately, Kant's use of 'prophecy' and 'prediction' terms is not always as clear-cut as my presentation would have it, although for the most part it is. In particular, we find 'predict' and 'prediction' employed in §7 to elaborate on what the heading assures us is 'prophetic history' (§7, 7:88).)

Chapter Nine: Secularization

It is commonly thought that modern philosophical history of a positive, progressivist, or teleological character (which I will henceforth refer to simply as philosophical history) should be understood as a secularization of religious beliefs, in particular Christian ones. At its most basic level, this claim asserts that philosophical history translates theological notions of a hoped-for end state for humanity into a purely mundane dimension. What I would like to do in this final chapter is: (i) assess this interpretative and evaluative strategy in general terms; (ii) consider two notable contributions to the debate about ‘secularization’; (iii) examine the applicability of the thesis to Kant’s philosophy of history.

The secularization thesis appears in many forms, and these themselves can be classified in a number of different ways. To start off, it will be helpful to make some basic distinctions. The most important one of these is also the simplest: does the proponent of the thesis think that the secularization identified in the philosophical history in question is a good thing or a bad thing? Is the fact of secularization to be praised or criticized? The usual tendency is to suppose that the process is pernicious, often because the use of the hypothesis is taken to show that there is something disingenuous or deluded about the philosophical endeavour being examined: the critic is pointing up something which the philosopher would not want or be able to avow. However, the secularization interpretation is by no means the sole preserve of the enemies of philosophical history, even though the term itself has come to prominence in their hands. As we shall see, philosophical history usually understands itself, in various ways, as a secularization of religion, and indeed takes this as one of its strengths. Consideration of the thesis must therefore commence with the recognition that it can be advanced in both a positive and a negative fashion, both from within (or on behalf of) philosophical history and from without. A second level of distinction relates to the extent to which the process of secularization establishes significant distance from religion. For some advocates, the interpretation reveals that philosophical history remains effectively religious, and so there is an underlying continuity between what went before and what follows. On the other hand, it is also possible to stress the degree of transformation achieved by means of secularization, such that there is still a genetic reference back to the theological antecedents, but one which has become vestigial. Putting these two distinctions together, *four* basic positions within the secularization debate can be identified:

	Philosophical history:	
	Good	Bad
Stress on continuity	Position A	Position C
Stress on discontinuity	Position B	Position D

Table 1

Position A. According to this version, secularization would be a good thing, maintaining continuity with the religious ideas and needs which it took over. Hegel’s philosophy of history can be interpreted as achieving a secularization of this kind, according to which Christianity fulfils itself in the historical realm. The dimension of the divine is not dissolved in the process, but preserved and realized.²³⁰

Position B. Post-Hegelian philosophers, from Feuerbach to Habermas, are also prone to claim that the transformation of religion into philosophical history is a good thing, but in their eyes because it does eliminate what was essentially religious. In being brought fully down to earth, Christian expectations and historical schemas are thereby given truth-value, but in the process are rendered irreligious.²³¹

Position C. If Hegel and others think that their accounts of human history have value by virtue of the way in which they retain a religious quality, the contrary and critical claim is possible as well. Indeed, this position, using the secularization hypothesis to identify a continuity with religion which then is used to condemn the intellectual project in question, is undoubtedly the most popular. It certainly goes back to Nietzsche and crops up frequently to characterize and dismiss speculative philosophy of history.²³²

Position D. Finally, the secularization claim can be utilized to criticize philosophical history as a perversion of religion. According to this position, translating religious schemas into the mundane, historical realm traduces and falsifies them.

The table can be given a different spin if we make the vertical axis reflect the positive and negative attitudes towards religion involved:

²³⁰ Thus K. L. Michelet, Hegel’s pupil and disciple, writing in 1843: ‘The goal of (Hegelian) history is the secularization of Christianity’ (cited by Löwith in *From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 403).

²³¹ Thus Jürgen Habermas: ‘might not secularization in the sense of demythologization bring out the moment of truth in myth? ... Secularization is then admittedly the progressive critical appropriation of traditions which are the sole source for the logos of a humanity that is to be realized through the historical mediation of nature with the human world.’ (‘Karl Löwith: Stoic Retreat from Historical Consciousness’, pp. 92-3.)

²³² For example, Michael Forster: ‘As Nietzsche implies in *The Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life*, the popularity of this sort of historicism [teleological universal history] is all too easily explained in terms of its perpetuation in a modified guise of recently discredited theological dogmas, and gratification thereby of the culturally habitual emotional wants formerly satisfied by them.’ (*Hegel’s Idea*, p. 294 n. 10)

	Philosophical history	
	Good	bad
Religion: good	Position A	Position D
Religion: bad	Position B	Position C

Table 2

Notice here that C and D have swapped places.

For positions A and B, then, secularization is a *legitimizing* term; for C and D, by contrast, it serves as a *delegitimizing* term.²³³ Positions A and B therefore relate directly to types of philosophical history, and the labels can be used to refer to these, whereas C and D have philosophical histories in general as their targets.

Do positions A and B exhaust the range of relevant philosophical history? It seems plausible to assume that they do, given that between them they cover a very wide continuum, from the explicitly theological to the completely irreligious. In particular, position B can take in theories which concede only the most vestigial, rhetorical or tactical similarity to religion. Even those which do not even claim this much can reasonably be described in terms of secularization if only as a way of responding to and rebutting those who seek in a hostile manner to diagnose in them the lingering remnants of Christianity.²³⁴

One reason why philosophical historians are prone to articulate their theories in ways which either implicitly or explicitly advert to secularization is that the process can be seen as an instance of the progress which the theories seek to describe.²³⁵ Philosophical history can thereby reflectively account for its own historical advent. Conversely, its critics can also see it as part of a wider process of secularization, but one which is interpreted as decline. Indeed, some come close to constructing an inverse image of the object of their criticism, a *Verfallsgeschichte*.²³⁶

Accordingly, we can take modern philosophical history as coming in either A or B form, with critical positions C and D aligned alongside them. Table 2 above reveals a level of lateral affinity between the critical versions of the secularization thesis and their objects. Of course, both C and D will take equal exception to A and B together, but the varying attitudes toward religion which separate them mean that each has a particular

²³³ Cf. Robert Pippin, *Idealism as Modernism*, pp. 269-271.

²³⁴ Could a philosophical history credibly disavow any historical or philosophical connection with religious belief? This is just about conceivable, but does not seem to be a genuine possibility in the modern Western context. Certainly all the key instances of the genre do evince the requisite relation to religion.

²³⁵ For example, as with the Habermas citation in n. 231 above.

²³⁶ Habermas, 'Karl Löwith', p. 83.

force with regard to *one* of the types of philosophical history. Thus position C attacks both A and B for being religious, but as B-type philosophical history denies that it is (still) religious, the C-critic has a more interesting case to make, that is, uncovering the latent presence of religious elements in theories which assert their freedom from them. In doing so, it can appeal to its affinity with position B, for both are anti-religious. Its strategy is in effect to deny that there is a distinction between A and B, that B in fact collapses back into A. The converse is true for D. It shares with A a positive valuation of religion, as opposed to B and C, but exploits this commonality to reveal to A its fall away from true faith. A's claim to be in some fashion realizing Christianity is shown to be deluded; it in fact degrades religion, such that it is on a par with B-type theories. Consequently, the basic thrust of position C is to claim that philosophical history is essentially continuous with religion (i.e., as per A), notwithstanding the efforts made to disguise this (B). Position D argues the other way, that philosophical history is essentially irreligious (i.e., as per B), even if some try to assert the contrary (as in A). The affinity in each instance is with the position which ostensibly shares the critic's view of religion; the dialogue which this enables is then turned into a diagnostic unmasking.

It is also possible for these lines of affinity to work the other way. Each type of philosophical history may want to distinguish itself from the other and, to this end, can line up with the critical position which shares its relation to religion. Most notably, irreligious philosophical history (B) can choose to link up with position C to the extent that it wants to distance itself from A-type constructions. Conversely, A can share with D the latter's objection to B (but not to itself).²³⁷

Laying out the positions in this rough and ready way inevitably distorts some of the complexities and subtleties found in the actual engagement with philosophical positions. For example, the distinction between positions C and D can blur in practice. If, for example, a proponent of the C approach claims that the residues of religion in philosophical history are disavowed by the latter (i.e. as in B), then that history can be charged with both being as bad as religion (i.e. C) and worse than it (i.e. D). The Nietzschean suspicion that philosophical history is a hiding-place for religion can be sharpened by pointing out its dishonest and cowering character, sarcastically contrasting

²³⁷ An instance of this strategy can be found in Walter Benjamin's utilization of religious criticism of secular theories of progress to 'reinfuse' Marxism with the theology it may have thought it had successfully dissolved.

it with the sublime faith which it timidly attempts to continue. Conversely, position C could blur into B: philosophical history may fail on its account because it involves the secularization of religion, but could nonetheless be applauded for at least trying to construct a rational schema for the interpretation of history.

The secularization thesis can be applied in ways which demonstrate the genetic fallacy. This occurs when the critic takes the ‘historical origin (or sustaining causes)’ of a doctrine to reveal its falsity.²³⁸ The readiness to detect the prevalence of this fallacy can go hand-in-hand with an insistence on the distinction between the ‘history of ideas’ and philosophy proper. But it would be wrong to dismiss the idea of secularization as ‘unphilosophical’. In most instances, it is wielded to identify and focus on the content and character of philosophical histories, not merely their origins. Of course, merely to establish that a philosophical doctrine contains or expresses religious ideas is not automatically to condemn it: we need to be told (and convinced) why those ideas are cause for rejection. In some cases, this is left unstated, as if it just goes without saying, which in turn can attract the suspicion (in fact unwarranted) that the genetic fallacy has been committed.²³⁹

Karl Löwith is a prominent exponent of the secularization thesis in its negative, critical form. He prosecutes the case in *Meaning in History*: ‘the following outline aims to show that the philosophy of history originates with the Hebrew and Christian faith in a fulfilment and that it ends with the secularization of its eschatological pattern’.²⁴⁰ On his account, there are two stages to this process of secularization. In the first place, the desired-for future state of fulfilment is transferred to the mundane realm, in history as opposed to beyond it. In the second place, history is shown to be leading toward this state, rather than it coming about as a result of apocalyptic intervention from without. The *eschaton* thereby becomes respectively both a historical *finis* and a historical *telos*. Löwith is aware that both these moves have been made within Christianity, almost from the outset, thereby paving the way for the (further) modern secularization of eschatology in irreligious philosophy, but argues that they are in essence alien to it. What he calls ‘genuine Christianity’ expects nothing from history other than its

²³⁸ The quoted phrase comes from Forster, *Hegel's Idea*, p. 445.

²³⁹ Forster helpfully outlines ways in which genetic considerations can contribute to the discrediting of doctrines: *ibid.* pp. 445-6.

²⁴⁰ *Meaning in History*, p. 2.

cessation, this being the condition for a transition to a radically different domain.²⁴¹ The forms of religious belief that allow of metamorphosis into philosophy of history only do so because they are already essentially secular. In addition to this particular process, whereby the Christian idea of consummation is brought down to earth, as both end and goal of history, secularization, as already indicated, also denotes the general process of the elimination of religious beliefs. A fully secular philosophical history would thus embody the secularization of the *eschaton* within an atheistic framework (historical materialism probably being the most perfect example for Löwith).

What genuine Christianity and its various secularized forms have in common is a faith in the future. This goes hand in hand with, in fact is motivated by, dissatisfaction with the present, past and likely future. Such hope, ‘living by expectation’,²⁴² is contrasted unfavourably with ancient conceptions, in particular Stoicism, which urge an affirmative acceptance of the repetitive cyclicity of human life and history: ‘Who would be prepared to deny that the classic view is sober and wise, while the Hebrew and Christian faith, which erected hope into a moral virtue and religious duty, seems to be as foolish as it is enthusiastic?’²⁴³ All the same, Löwith articulates a clear preference for the genuine Christian conception of hope over its secularized versions (whether ‘Christian’ or not). In appealing to a radical and transcendent redemption, it does not require the believer to delude herself that things are getting better and that mundane satisfactions would be sufficient, nor does it lead to the inevitable pains of disconfirmation. ‘Faith in things invisible cannot be invalidated by any visible evidence.’²⁴⁴ ‘Hence hope can never be refuted by so-called “facts”; it can neither be assured nor discredited by an established experience. Hope is essentially confident, patient, and charitable. It therefore releases man from wishful thinking as well as from resignation.’²⁴⁵ The purer and more extreme the eschatology, the better – though it would be better still, it seems, if it were possible to abandon it altogether.²⁴⁶ Consequently, he characterizes the secularizations of Christianity, whether ostensibly within the tradition or claiming to break with it, as ‘perversions’.²⁴⁷ The two levels of

²⁴¹ For ‘genuine Christianity’, see *ibid.* pp. v, 28, 29 and *passim*.

²⁴² *Ibid.* p. 204.

²⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 205.

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p. 205.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p. 206.

²⁴⁶ Ironically, as Löwith presents it, pure Christian faith comes close to converging with paganism in its ability both to recognize and accept the mundane cyclicity of suffering and death, though as a fallen condition, not a natural one. See his discussion of Augustine, pp. 163, 170.

²⁴⁷ This word and its cognates crop up regularly, e.g., pp. 17, 44, 159, 192.

contrast, on the one hand between futural expectation and Stoicism and on the other between unworldly and worldly forms of futural expectation, enable Löwith to engage with philosophical history both in terms of its underlying continuity with Christian eschatology and in terms of its transformation (perversion) of it. This double register allows him to criticize philosophical history along the lines of both position C and position D simultaneously.

One might wonder at this point whether Löwith has not exaggerated true Christianity's indifference toward history. Salvation may be expected beyond history, but the guarantee of this is an historical event, namely Christ's incarnation. Human history, as well as having a beginning and end, also has a centre, as Christian *Anno Domini* chronology demonstrates. It is possible to fill in the stretches of time on either side of the central event, as decline followed by advance,²⁴⁸ but Löwith resists attributing such narratives to the original church: 'Seen in the light of the faith that God is revealed in the historical man, Jesus Christ, the profane events before and after Christ are not a solid chain of meaningful successions but spurious happenings whose significance or insignificance is to be judged in the perspective of their possible signification of judgment and salvation.'²⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the fact of the incarnation, something radically new, ruptures the historical pattern of sin and death in a way which does lend itself to the thought of further transformations. Löwith alludes to this himself in one of his appendices: 'The mere fact that Christianity interprets itself as a *new* Testament, superseding an *old* one and fulfilling the promises of the latter, necessarily invites further progress and innovations.'²⁵⁰ At the same time, the fact that 'the word became flesh' can suggest that redemption could or even must occur in this world.²⁵¹ Consequently, the central fact on which Christianity bases itself can easily be interpreted in ways that encourage both the belief in a historical process leading to a final consummation and a historical, secular conception of that consummation. The double secularization of pure Christian expectation is thus not as internally unmotivated as Löwith wants to claim.

²⁴⁸ Ibid. pp. 182-183.

²⁴⁹ Ibid. pp. 184-185.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 212. This is the theme developed by Joachim and subsequently by Lessing.

²⁵¹ This is for instance how Hegel saw it: 'For because it is God who appears in human existence, for all that he is universal in himself too, this reality is not restricted to individual immediate existence in the shape of Christ; it is unfolded into the whole of humanity in which the spirit of God makes itself present....' (*Lectures on Aesthetics*, vol. 1, p. 521.)

Löwith's work provides us with a useful example of the negative use of the secularization theory, as it attempts to straddle both of the modes identified earlier, i.e. C and D. I shall now try to evaluate the criticisms he advances in a little more detail.

In the first instance, Löwith charges philosophical history with being continuous with eschatology. At its heart, he urges, is an unquestioned faith in the future, which retains its religious character. That is to say, it is essentially irrational, a refusal to accept reality in its repetitiveness. The expectation that the future ought to be better than the present usually goes hand in hand with an intense dissatisfaction with the present; the future is looked to as an open realm in which release from current distress can (miraculously) be granted or obtained. The characterization of this kind of orientation toward the future as religious and irrational (though understandable) is plausible. What Löwith seems to assume is that all forms of future orientation are ultimately of this kind, such that if we think of the future as different from and superior to what precedes it, our comportment toward it must be based on faith.

It certainly helps Löwith in his identification of this underlying attitude of unfounded faith when he can adduce instances in which philosophical history incorporates the characterization of the present as a time of suffering and misery. This explains in part the attention he gives to Proudhon, for whom the future is anticipated in religious fashion as a time of salvation because current conditions are terrible.²⁵² Or, in the words of Orosius (a pupil of Augustine), 'Future events, which become desirable because of our feeling of disgust for the present, we always believe will be better'.²⁵³ However, this feature is in fact *uncommon* in philosophical history, as Löwith himself recognizes when considering other thinkers (e.g. Comte). Unfortunately, he does not allow this recognition to influence his basic schema, which he continues to use to label all philosophical history as eschatological. This is particularly clear in the following programmatic statement: 'the starting-point of the modern religions [i.e. philosophies] of progress is an eschatological anticipation of a future salvation and consequently a vision of the present state of mankind as one of depravity'.²⁵⁴ If, as seems reasonable, we take this as a succinct account of the eschatological position, and, following Löwith, we identify philosophical history as essentially eschatological, then in every instance of philosophical history we should expect to find 'a vision of the present state of mankind

²⁵² See especially p. 66.

²⁵³ Quoted by Löwith on p. 178.

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.* p. 61

as one of depravity'. *But we do not*. Far from incorporating an eschatological denial of the present, progressivist philosophical histories usually view the present positively. Things could of course be better, but the indications are that they will become so.

The progressivist's confidence in the future typically has a double basis. First of all, the past is supposed to demonstrate a positive dynamic which is then extrapolated into the future. Secondly, the present allows for action to be undertaken to produce improvements.²⁵⁵ Theory and practice can thus combine to sustain a suitably measured teleological optimism. This can seem sufficiently removed from the eschatological futurism Löwith invokes as to block his description of it in terms of the latter. The real question is how plausible this optimism is: merely to point out that it shares an orientation towards the future with irrational religious beliefs does not automatically reveal it to be irrational as well.

The second strand of Löwith's critical account of philosophical history is the claim that it is also discontinuous with religion, 'perverting' it in various ways. Here the other-worldly extremism of authentic Christian expectation works to its advantage, enabling it to transcend the vicissitudes of this world. Philosophical history, by contrast, immerses itself in them, and consequently falls foul of them. At this level, Löwith's account becomes rather diffuse, covering a variety of criticisms, some better than others. I shall focus on what I take to be the three most important.

The most prominent instance of philosophy's 'perversion' of religion is its secularizing of the end-state for humanity. Religion, unconstrained by reality, can envisage the state of salvation in the most glorious (and incredible) ways. Philosophy, by contrast, has to work with mundane possibilities and so inevitably produces banal conceptions of the fulfilled life, limited to 'earthly happiness'.²⁵⁶ 'No secular progress can ever approximate the Christian goal if this goal is the redemption from sin and death to which all worldly history is subjected.'²⁵⁷ This objection only works if one accepts the underlying assumption that the only progress worth having would be one that

²⁵⁵ For Löwith, it seems that if I want things to be better, this can only be an irrational refusal to accept things as they are, which leads to the expectation that some other (and mythical) agent – God, 'history' – will bring about the desired-for transformation. However, it is of course also possible to want things to be better and to do something about it. The future does not have to be considered as either just the endless repetition of the past or an arena in which we wait and hope for radical change from on high. It is also the dimension in which our projects unfold and in these we can attempt and sometimes succeed to buck the patterns of the past. *Human* teleology thus provides the basis for a third perspective on the future.

²⁵⁶ Ibid. pp. 46, 111

²⁵⁷ Ibid. p. 189.

radically overcame the mundane condition (however characterized), that is, if one accepted a deeply negative (i.e. Christian) attitude toward the world. But the secular progressivist, religious or irreligious, will have, one would have thought, already rejected this attitude. Löwith's objection makes more sense if we suppose that he thinks that philosophical history is still in thrall to the desire for 'redemption from sin and death', yet tries to fob it off with this-worldly projections.²⁵⁸ But in secularizing the answer, isn't the philosophical historian often also transforming the question as well? Löwith is on stronger ground when pointing up the crassness of much progressivist utopianism, but he disregards the extent to which this does not exhaust the range of philosophical histories.

A second instance of 'perversion' relates to the disregard the philosophers display towards individuals. Löwith articulates the criticism in the following passage:

Comte, like all philosophers of history, thinks in terms of generalities but not of individuals or persons ... the universality of history and its continuity are overemphasized at the expense of the finite and personal character of human life ... It is the crux of all philosophies of history of a secular and positive tenor that they adopt the universal element of the Christian understanding of history but eliminate the Christian concern about persons.... (p. 88)

Given the polemical tone of *Meaning in History*, it is not unreasonable to assume that we are meant to take it that it is but a short step then to eliminating persons themselves.²⁵⁹ Löwith is clearly right to point out the way in which, as a result of the very nature of the theoretical endeavour, philosophical history tends to overlook individuals. This does not entail, though, that the requisite 'concern about persons' is thereby necessarily lost. Two points need to be made: on the one hand, philosophical history can itself register this absence, such that it manifests that very concern; on the other, philosophical history does not have to be all that a philosopher engages in. It is only if philosophical history is taken on its own or in a one-sided way that the issue can become a problem, theoretical and practical.

Finally, there is the allegation of wishfulness in the portrayal of the past. Löwith claims that philosophical history, like authentic Christianity, indulges in wishful thinking about the future. Yet of the two, only the former applies this retrospectively as well.²⁶⁰ The results are implausible progressivist narratives. This line of attack does at

²⁵⁸ Cf. 'the secular drive toward a final solution of problems which cannot be solved by their own means and on their own level', *ibid.* pp. 158-159.

²⁵⁹ Cf. p. 89, and the use of 'final solution' in the passage cited in the previous footnote. See also Elster, *Making Sense of Marx*, pp. 116-8 for similar thoughts.

²⁶⁰ Löwith characterizes this endeavour as one in which 'the interpretation of the past becomes a prophecy in reverse' (*ibid.* p. 6), echoing Friedrich Schlegel's 1798 definition of the (philosophical) historian as a 'prophet [*Prophet*] facing backwards' ('Athenaeum Fragments', §80, p. 27).

least recognize that the philosophical historians try to provide their expectations with some sort of inductivist basis, which are therefore not eschatological in quite the same way as the hopes of the genuine Christian. However, Löwith thinks that these attempts always fail, so that rather than sustaining the belief in a better future, they are themselves sustained by it. Only in this way can he mount his double level critique, whereby philosophical history is condemned for being both like Christianity and unlike it.

Löwith's assertion that progressivist accounts of the past do not square with historical reality relies upon his own construal of that reality, in which it demonstrates the transience of all human achievements and the ineliminability of suffering.²⁶¹ This tendentious account is itself open to challenge. He evidently has a point in certain instances, given the ability (which Herder addressed) of some progressivists to rewrite history in accordance with their ideals.²⁶² Yet the obvious implausibility of some philosophical histories does not mean that all of them display this failing, or that Löwith's inverse view of things is any more credible. At times, it can seem as if Löwith is simply assuming that any historical account which supports an optimistic view of the future must be empirically unfounded just because it is used in this way. This would surely be, once again, to beg the question. The argument has to proceed in the opposite direction: having shown the falsity of the historical narrative, one can then adduce motives which may have led to its being held to be true.²⁶³

Löwith's strategy of contrasting philosophical history with Christianity to the detriment of the former certainly hits some targets. It does seem that some 'modern religions of progress' are guilty of providing banal conceptions of humanity's destiny, promoting a dangerously instrumental attitude toward individuals and producing partial and implausible constructions of history itself. But this is not to say that *all* philosophical histories are necessarily vulnerable to criticism on these scores.

²⁶¹ 'An unprejudiced view of this play of human passions and sufferings, irrationality and violence, provides neither a basic idea nor a rational goal in the history of the world. It is a "confused heap of rubble" and a "shambles" upon which the fortune of peoples, states and individuals is sacrificed.' (*From Hegel to Nietzsche*, p. 216.)

²⁶² The figure he considers of whom this may be said is Comte, whose 'outlook on history cannot but falsify historical reality' (*Meaning in History*, p. 89).

²⁶³ Again, see Forster's helpful discussion of genetic arguments in *Hegel's Idea*, pp. 445-6. Presumably Löwith might feel that having uncovered enough instances where optimism and implausibility went hand in hand, it was reasonable to assume a causal link between the two and infer from the former to the latter. He would though have to ensure that his examples included the most sophisticated versions of the genre, and not just those which prove the point he wants to make.

We will see later how Kant fares against Löwith's attack on the philosophy of progress. Before that, I would like to consider another important contribution to the debate about secularization. Hans Blumenberg is a noted critic of the whole secularization approach, both as it relates to modern conceptions of history as well as to other intellectual, cultural and political domains. The first part of *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* is devoted to its critique, taking Löwith amongst others as its target. Blumenberg's focus is not so much philosophical history, though he turns towards this in due course, but rather the idea of progress which is central to it. His argument involves the following three moves: (i) a direct argument against the secularization thesis; (ii) an alternative genetic account; (iii) a consideration of philosophical history, showing how the secularization hypothesis could ever have appeared plausible.

Firstly, Blumenberg stresses the disanalogies between Christian eschatology and the modern idea of progress. These are such that the latter could not have been generated by means of the secularization of the former:

What signs are there that even suggest a likelihood that theological eschatology, with its idea of the 'consummation' of history by its discontinuance, could have provided the model for an idea of the forward movement of history according to which it was supposed for the first time to have gained stability and reliability through its consummation or its approach to its consummation? ... Regarding the dependence of the idea of progress on Christian eschatology, there are differences that would have had to block any transposition of the one onto the other. It is a formal, but for that reason a manifest, difference that an eschatology speaks of an event breaking into history, an event that transcends and is heterogeneous to it, while the idea of progress extrapolates from a structure present in every moment to a future that is immanent in history. (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 30)

The disanalogies are three-fold: The primary difference, as indicated above, is that eschatology relies upon divine intervention from outside history, whereas progress is supposed to be a dynamic internal to it. Secondly, eschatology looks to the termination of history, whereas progress opens up the prospect of its infinite continuation. Thirdly, eschatology usually involves terrible cataclysms prior to the looked for consummation, so occasions fear as much as hope, whereas progress is normally intended to promote optimism, both about the present and the future.

Blumenberg's exploitation of these differences is not as conclusive as he thinks. For one thing, his argument against 'the genetic nexus' is somewhat similar to Löwith's evaluative contrast of philosophical history with 'genuine Christianity'.²⁶⁴ Both writers point to important differences between the two, which for the one serve to portray progressivism as a perversion of Christianity, but for the other are supposed to undermine the very supposition that it in any way derives from it. Moreover, the very

²⁶⁴ *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 29.

features which Blumenberg invokes are ones mentioned by Löwith as part of his endeavour to paint philosophical history in as poor a light as possible:

A basic difference between Christianity and secular futurism is, however, that the pilgrim's progress is not an indefinite advance toward an unattainable ideal but a definite choice in the face of an eternal reality and that the Christian hope in the Kingdom of God is bound up with fear of the Lord, while the secular hope for a "better world" looks forward without fear and trembling. They have in common, nonetheless, the eschatological viewpoint and outlook onto the future as such. The idea of progress could become the leading principle for the understanding of history only within this primary horizon of the future as established by Jewish and Christian faith. (*Meaning in History*, p. 84, cf. also pp. 111, 112-113.)

The difficulty with Blumenberg's argument from disanalogy is that it skates over all the intermediary 'secularized' forms of Christianity, ones which weaken and downplay the particular qualities of 'genuine' eschatology. The genetic story advanced by secularization theorists will certainly look implausible if it attempts to move straight from austere other-worldly Christianity to the modern idea of progress. As we have seen with Löwith, though, the process of secularization is one which, it can be shown, occurs *within* religion long before it happens *to* it, and indeed can only happen to it *because* it has already happened within it. Blumenberg is by no means unaware of this, but it seriously weakens the force of his assertion that eschatology and progressivism are poles apart.²⁶⁵ His response is to emphasize the non-Christian, Hellenistic character of the elements, such as the idea of Providence, which modern philosophical history took from theology. This is all fair and well, but does not alter the fact that it was from *Christian* theology that it took them, even if this theology had drifted a long way from its Pauline origins.

The second part of Blumenberg's argument is the flipside of the first: if the modern idea of progress does not derive from Christianity, where does it come from? Here we are pointed, as one would expect, to 'novel experiences' in the early modern period which led to its generation: on the one hand, advances in the natural sciences and on the other hand, the slow emancipation of the arts from the dominance of classical models.²⁶⁶ These developments only justified a modest and provisional conception of progress. For example, the status of artistic progress is always uncertain, and classicism took a long time to fade. But, as Blumenberg points out, the advantage of 'the aesthetic model of progress' is that 'here it is man, and man alone, who produces the realities in the

²⁶⁵ See Lawrence Dickey, 'Blumenberg and secularization: "Self-assertion" and the problem of self-realizing teleology in history', and also his *Hegel: Religion, Economics and the Politics of Spirit, 1770-1807*, pp. 12-32 and 40-57.

²⁶⁶ *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 31.

aesthetic sphere, and hence would also be the agent of any progress that might take place in it'.²⁶⁷

Having argued for the legitimacy of the modern idea of progress, Blumenberg turns, in the third stage of his overall argument, to address philosophical history. What he needs to do is explain why it is that the secularization thesis can seem so plausible, if, as he has urged, it has no real basis. Blumenberg's answer is straightforward: modern philosophy felt obliged to occupy the theoretical space opened up and maintained by the Christian salvation story, and so over-inflated the idea of progress to fill it:

the modern age found it impossible to decline to answer questions about the totality of history. To that extent, the philosophy of history is an attempt to answer a medieval question with the means available to a postmedieval age. In this process, the idea of progress is driven to a level of generality that overextends its original, regionally circumscribed and objectively limited range as an assertion. As one of the possible answers to the question of the totality of history, it is drawn into the function for consciousness that had been performed by the framework of the salvation story, with Creation at one end and Judgment at the other. The fact that this explanatory accomplishment exceeded the powers of its characteristic rationality was not without historical consequences. (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, pp. 48-49)

Blumenberg sees this as part of a general pattern whereby new ideas get yoked to inherited and antiquated questions. Philosophical history is thus a transitional form, a hybrid generated by modernity's mistaken endeavour to engage with its predecessor on the latter's own terrain.

The modern age's readiness to inherit such a mortgage of prescribed questions and to accept as its own the obligation to pay it off goes a long way toward explaining its intellectual history. There is an element of tragedy in the way in which this effort, as generous as it was hopeless, finally ends with the more or less explicit insinuation that the inheritance came about in a dishonest way ... the process that is interpreted as secularization ... should be described not as the *transposition* of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin but rather as the *reoccupation* of answer positions that had become vacant and whose corresponding questions could not be eliminated. (*The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, p. 65)

Blumenberg ultimately can seem to come very close to presenting a secularization thesis himself. Philosophical history does derive from religion, but only in respect of its totalizing theoretical ambition. The precise characterization he gives to the idea of secularization ('the transposition of authentically theological contents into secularized alienation from their origin', underlining added for emphasis) allows him to resist the description of the process he identifies as a secularization. The approach then enables Blumenberg to rescue the 'authentic rationality' of the idea of progress from the wreckage of the projects of the philosophical historians, such as Hegel and Comte. (These two figure both for Löwith and Blumenberg as central purveyors of the genre.)

²⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 33. Note how closely Blumenberg ties progress to human teleology.

The coherence of this third part of Blumenberg's argument rests upon the proposition that the questions about the totality of human history to which modernity responded with its universal histories are ones which it should have ignored (and was ultimately able to). The confidence with which the possibility of a genuine intellectual interest in history as a whole is dismissed here is surely troubling.²⁶⁸ It is possible to concur with Blumenberg in his skepticism regarding the existence of a fixed canon of philosophical questions yet feel that philosophical history does more than simply respond to the challenge of outmoded theoretical schemes. The very development in modernity of a distinctive understanding of historical temporality might be thought to be likely to prompt consideration about the course of history as a whole and the nature of human historicity. On Blumenberg's interpretation, it is difficult to understand why philosophical history became such an important issue in eighteenth-century Europe, as opposed to a vestigial hangover, if the intellectual needs which it engaged were as extraneous to the age as he claims.

Moreover, Blumenberg is in some difficulty in trying to pin onto Christianity a concern with the historical totality. As Löwith makes clear (and even Blumenberg recognizes),²⁶⁹ 'genuine Christianity' is indifferent to the historical trajectory. To be sure, it can point to a beginning, a middle and an end, but these serve to mark the transcendence of history rather than define a topic for theoretical inquiry. In so far as theologians have inquired into the sense of history as a whole, it is much more plausible, as Blumenberg himself indicates, to see them as responding to and transforming questions and concepts inherited from Hellenistic thought rather than elaborating an essentially Christian concern. This goes hand in hand, as Dickey has described, with the secularizing and teleological strand in Christianity which can be seen as leading to modern progressivism.

Both Löwith and Blumenberg identify an intrinsically Christian component in philosophical history. For the former, it is an underlying and enduring existential orientation, deriving from Christian religion. For the latter, it is a transitional intellectual inheritance, coming from Christian theology. The two approaches converge inasmuch as they both detect 'faith' lurking within philosophical history, but for Löwith the element of faith is basic, whereas for Blumenberg it is what is produced when the

²⁶⁸ For similar worries, see Dickey, 'Blumenberg and secularization'.

²⁶⁹ *Legitimacy*, p. 43.

idea of progress is over-extended – ‘the transformation of progress into a faith encompassing the future’.²⁷⁰

In the third and final part of this chapter, I would like to consider briefly how Kant’s philosophy of history stands up to the various criticisms which go under the heading of ‘secularization’.²⁷¹ Löwith’s primary objection to progressivist universal history is that it is oriented by the unfounded expectation that the future will be better than the past, an expectation it shares with and inherits from Christian eschatology. The ‘hope for better times’ (‘Theory and Practice’, 8:309) is only possible because it exploits the fact that the future always remains unknown and so can serve as a space for utopian projections.²⁷² There is clearly an element of this in Kant, but it is surely tempered by the attempt to base hope for the future on both a hard-nosed view of the past and the endeavours undertaken in the present to achieve a better future. Expectation is thus not unfounded, or at least not completely so.

It may seem, therefore, that Kant’s idea of progress, in being philosophical and historical, can resist the eschatological accusation. What though of Löwith’s second objection, which engages with the ways in which philosophical history differs from genuine Christianity? To the extent that we may think that Kant can rebuff the first charge, it would seem that he must be more exposed to the second. I identified three criticisms as particularly significant for Löwith in his attempt to portray philosophical history as a ‘perversion’ of Christianity. The first of these is that mundane conceptions of a future consummation cannot adequately answer to the desire for fulfilment which motivates them. As stated, this begs the question, though the charge may nonetheless be applicable in some cases, namely those in which the motivating aspiration is for ‘redemption from sin and death’.²⁷³ The most straightforward way in which to see that this is not true of Kant is simply to recognize that his version of ‘moral faith’ itself provides ways of answering these desires. Philosophical history is thus not intended entirely to supplant more traditional religious beliefs, but rather to operate alongside them (once these have been suitably purified). It therefore cannot be charged with attempting to satisfy all religious yearnings with secular substitutes. Löwith’s second

²⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 49.

²⁷¹ Although both Löwith and Blumenberg mention Kant, neither deals with him in any detail. It may be that for both his philosophical history is an awkward case.

²⁷² More accurately, these should be termed *uchronic* projections, in line with the neologism coined by the nineteenth-century French neo-Kantian, Charles Renouvier.

²⁷³ *Meaning in History*, p. 189; cf. p. 156, n. 258 above.

line of criticism is more effective when he appeals to a less religious standard for evaluating secular versions of the millennium, some of which can certainly be accused of succumbing to a hedonistic materialism. But this charge likewise has no bearing on Kant; indeed, if anything, it is a problem for him that his conception of a future of endless striving is too bracing and sublime (cf. Chapter Five).

The second point Löwith raises is the anti-individualism of philosophical history. Kant articulates this concern even more sharply: for him, it is primarily the historical process, and not just the description of it, which poses the problem (cf. Chapter Six). In registering the issue, Kant has already demonstrated that his perspective does not ‘eliminate the Christian concern about persons’.²⁷⁴ Moreover, as I tried to show, ‘moral faith’ can itself assuage the perplexity that progress provokes.

The third criticism in this cluster is the claim that philosophical history inevitably falsifies the historical record, and that its constructions are therefore only sustained by the belief in the future which they are intended to sustain. For Kant, it is true that his motivation to construct a universal history derives in part from the desire to provide ‘a comforting prospect of the future’ (‘Idea’, #9, 8:30). But we should not therefore assume that this interest leads him to disregard or distort historical reality. The decisive issue here is of course the question of the empirical plausibility of his account of history, something which I am not going to be able to address. But it would certainly be very difficult for Löwith to accuse Kant of ‘wishful thinking’ in his account of the past. As we have seen, this is by no means a ‘rose-tinted’ view. In so far as progress has taken place, it has been nearly always as a result of self-seeking and frequently violent behaviour, and its course has been slow and erratic. At this point I imagine Löwith would switch to his opening C-type critique: the problem with Kant’s universal history is not that its depiction of the past is wishfully optimistic, for it isn’t, but rather the fact that as a result it fails to justify the optimism about the future which it is supposed to. If the course of history really has been as Kant describes, then there isn’t much to look forward to. Such optimism as Kant does provide seems to be simply pulled out of a hat, in typical eschatological style.

It is at this point that a Löwithian critique of Kant’s philosophy of history starts to bite. As we have seen, Kant has two further points to make, but neither is likely to impress his opponent. Firstly, Kant will appeal to the necessary practicality of the

²⁷⁴ *Meaning in History*, p. 88.

demands of the moral law. Löwith would no doubt detect in this an essentially eschatological appeal to a transcendent divinity. Once again, therefore, the debate about progress devolves onto disagreements at a more fundamental level, consideration of which would take me beyond the scope of this thesis, except to say that the onus is on both parties to back up their positions. Secondly, Kant will emphasize the particular grounds for optimism that the present affords, in particular the indications that the species has attained a kind of maturity which will enable it to start to make proper progress. In this instance, Löwith would have reason to judge Kant guilty of at least a degree of wishful thinking.²⁷⁵

The problem for Kant is the way in which he oscillates between predictive and prophetic kinds of expectation (to use the terms examined in the previous chapter). Challenged by a skeptic about the optimism of his 'prophecy', he refers to his 'prediction' to back it up. Unfortunately, the latter does not really match up to the former, except in so far as Kant has surreptitiously allowed the inductively based expectation to be infected by the more eschatological outlook. I referred earlier to the combination of prediction and prophecy as a 'belt and braces' approach (p. 142); however, it looks as if the discrepancy between the degrees of optimism they sustain means that whilst both devices can hold the metaphorical trousers up, only one of them is able to do so at the correct level.

Löwith's general diagnosis of an eschatological wishfulness thus does have some applicability to Kant's philosophical history. Indeed, Kant's double strategy, particularly in the writings from the 1790s, can be understood as in part motivated by an awareness of the vulnerability of his historical optimism to this charge. Ultimately, though, this optimism relies upon a confidence in the realizability of reason which, even if it does not answer Löwith, at least blocks him.

For the purposes of this discussion, I am treating Blumenberg as a kind of secularization theorist, given that he tries to account for the development of modern philosophical history by appeal to questions and ambitions inherited from Christianity. Accordingly, he would want to detach Kant's commitment to the idea of progress, construed as the self-assertion of the modern age, or 'Enlightenment', from its inflation into a universal history. The initial problem with this strategy is its denial that the

²⁷⁵ In particular, although Löwith does not develop an argument along these lines, because of the way in which Kant is prone to interpret contemporary cultural and technological developments in the context of an 'ages of man' schema, such that he can talk of the 'maturity' of the species. This is surely to exaggerate the status of 'enlightenment'.

questions and interests which motivate philosophical history are unworthy ones. As we have seen, Kant would want to assert that there are perfectly good if not in fact necessary theoretical and theodical questions which universal history attempts to answer. In reply, Blumenberg might admit that the questions are *prima facie* reasonable, but go on to claim that they are in the end unanswerable and so ought to be given up. This would be to emphasize the *ambitions* philosophical history took over from religion and theology, more than the questions themselves.

Blumenberg's diagnosis of theoretical hubris evidently presupposes that philosophical history of the kind under consideration inevitably *fails*. Kant would disagree with this, and also demur the imputation of excessive ambition – his universal history is for the most part notable for the modesty with which it is presented. One may suppose that one index of the failure of philosophical history from Blumenberg's point of view would be its reliance upon discredited metaphysical and theological assumptions, such as the idea of Providence. An interesting part of his case is the denial that this idea properly belongs to Christianity, and so is not something which can be said to have been illicitly appropriated from it. However, whether authentically Christian or not (cf. my earlier quibble about this, p. 161), it is definitely a religious and theological idea, and as such is vulnerable to the usual empiricist skepticism. If I am right in thinking that Blumenberg would take exception to the way in which the idea of progress is inflated by being hitched to the idea of Providence, then once again we can establish a degree of common ground between him and those who criticize philosophical history for depending on discredited theological dogmas.

Similarly, for many contemporary readers, the real problem with Kant's philosophical history is that it is *insufficiently* secularized. In terms of my earlier schema, this would be to say that it is an A-type construct, still essentially continuous with religion, when it should be B-type, abstaining from religious devices altogether. This is particularly apparent in the embarrassment some commentators display when having to deal with Kant's appeals to Nature and Providence.²⁷⁶ A related approach is to suppose that his theory of progress is in effect completely secularized as it is, and so stands quite independently of what all have to agree is Kant's continuing commitment to religion.²⁷⁷ It is then often further argued that the philosophy of history can serve as a properly modern and secular replacement for the lingering residues of religiously-

²⁷⁶ E.g. Van der Linden, *Kantian Ethics and Socialism*, p. 100.

²⁷⁷ E.g. Neiman, *The Unity of Reason*, pp. 179-80.

inflected aspirations apparent in Kant's texts. This line of interpretation therefore takes the process of secularization to be one which amongst other things describes Kant's own intellectual trajectory. For example, Andrews Reath identifies the presence in Kant's texts of incompatible 'theological' and 'secular' conceptions of the highest good, the latter describing 'a state of affairs that can be achieved in *this* world, through *human* activity', 'a social goal to be achieved in history'. He then claims that 'the theological one is predominant in the earlier works, such as the first and second *Critiques*, while the secular one is predominant in ... the later works', concluding that 'historically, Kant's thought about the highest good develops in the direction of the secular conception'.²⁷⁸

I hope to have shown in this thesis that such views are mistaken. Firstly, Kant's idea of mundane progress, whilst obviously secular in its focus, is bound up with an appeal to a theistic creator. Kant even goes so far as to enlist the belief in a divinely consummated end state on its behalf. As I have argued, none of this should be taken to qualify the fact that progress is always something human beings have to achieve. Secondly, the idea of progress is not meant to be a substitute for other-worldly aspirations. The best way to see this is to recognize the extent to which it itself gives rise to and is supported by such aspirations. Kant's continuing commitment to central transcendent elements of Christianity enables him to deflect some of the D-type objections put to philosophical history by Lotze, Löwith and others. The immanent and transcendent, 'theological' and 'secular' approaches are best seen as complementary and not as rivals.²⁷⁹ (In this, we might suppose, Kant is remaining true to what some take to be an original duality in Christianity.) The two points I am trying to make in this paragraph can be put like this. On the one hand, secularization need not be, and is not with Kant, a process which takes one out of the religious or theological domain. On the other hand, secularization need not, and does not with Kant, exhaust the putative rational potential of religion. The tendency to assume the opposite in both cases inevitably obscures the real character of his project.

I do not claim to have resolved all the issues raised in the debate about secularization, but hope at least to have mapped out some of the terrain. To close, I would like to consider the phrase 'religion of progress', which critics such as Löwith are

²⁷⁸ Reath, 'Two Conceptions of the Highest Good in Kant', p. 601; cf. pp. 606-7, 608-9 n. 20.

²⁷⁹ In this I agree with Despland, *Kant on History and Religion*, pp. 276-7.

prone to throw around in a hostile fashion.²⁸⁰ It is not sufficiently realized, I think, quite how apposite this phrase is in relation to Kant. In *Religion*, he devotes much space to describing how the enlightened Christian church can serve as the vehicle for the growth of the ‘ethical community’, or ‘invisible church’. But the church itself must progress as a church, by slowly shedding its dogmatic trappings. Religion therefore has explicitly to become a religion of progress: ‘every church erected on statutory laws can be the true church only to the extent that it contains within itself a principle of constantly coming closer to the pure faith of religion’ (6:153). Such a church does not worship progress, but dynamically articulates and promotes the progressive vocation of humanity. The development of the church in this direction will not be untroubled. The passage from *Religion* continues:

By contrast the servants of a church who do not take this end into consideration but rather declare the maxim of constant approximation [*continuirliche Annäherung*] to it as damnable [*verdamulich*], while depending on the historical [*historischen*] and statutory part of the church’s faith as alone salvific, can justly be accused of counterfeit service of the church or ethical community under the dominion of the good principle (which is represented through the church). (6:153)

The controversy about the idea of progress, which here Kant adverts to, is still with us.

²⁸⁰ See especially *Meaning in History*, p. 113, also p. 61, cited on p. 154 above.

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