

OUT OF TIME

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The spirit that breathes in the Kantian essay *Perpetual Peace* must benefit every friend of justice, and even the most distant progeny will admire in this monument the elevated frame of mind of the venerable sage.

– Friedrich Schlegel, *Essay on the Concept of Republicanism Occasioned by the Kantian Tract “Perpetual Peace”* (1796)

Everybody’s cryin’ peace on earth, just as soon as we win this war.

– Mose Allison, *Everybody Cryin’ Mercy* (1968)

Dejà Vu

When I first became interested in Kant’s practical writings slightly over fifty years ago, not-so-surprisingly similar versions of several of the very same concerns that are on many people’s minds at present weighed heavily on my mind. The United States was involved in a protracted war in Vietnam that growing numbers of US citizens felt was unjust,² the environmental movement was gaining a solid foothold in the US and elsewhere (I remember participating in the first Earth Day at my high school in 1970), concerns about the increased capabilities of computers were growing, particularly in Silicon Valley where I grew up (and where my father worked at IBM),³ ever more frequent demonstrations demanding civil rights for women⁴ and racial minorities were revealing an underlying lack of consensus on justice, and, for all of the above reasons and more, skepticism about humanity’s future was on the rise. Isn’t there a more reasonable and just way to deal with these issues? my younger and slightly more idealistic self asked. Although I believed then as now that it is wildly imprudent to suppose that a theory constructed over two centuries ago should serve as a precise blueprint for contemporary policy, I continue to hold today that we can still learn a great deal from a Kantian perspective on issues relating to global ethics.⁵ In what follows I wish first to briefly articulate and comment on Kant’s views on several of these global ethics issues, but to also offer some Kantian reflections on why we have unfortunately made so little progress in resolving them.

<https://doi.org/10.36311/2318-0501.2024.v12n1.p47>

HUMANITY'S MOST PRESSING ETHICAL CHALLENGE?

Judging from the continuous outpouring of articles in the popular press, there is now a nearly universal consensus that humanity's most pressing ethical challenge at present is climate change. And here critics of Kant and Enlightenment thought might seem to have an easy point to score, for it is often said that we find a "lack of attention to the environment in the (Kantian) Western analytic philosophical tradition,"⁶ and, more damningly, that Kant's ethics "inevitably produces a hostile posture toward nature in general."⁷

The "hostile posture" charge is said to follow from Kant's well-known companion claims that "every rational being exists as an end in itself" (GMS 4: 428) and that nonrational beings – a category under which he subsumes all nonhuman terrestrial animals and plants – "have only a relative worth, as means, and are therefore called things" (GMS 4: 428). Rational beings are ends in themselves, but nonrational beings are only means or instruments.⁸ So, what are the members of the vegetable and (nonhuman) animal kingdoms good for? Kant asks pointedly in his third Critique. "For the human being, for the diverse uses which his understanding teaches him to make use of all these creatures; . . . he is the ultimate end of the creation here on earth . . . (KU 5: 426; cf. MAM 8: 114, V-NR/Feyerabend 27: 1319). On this point the enlightened philosopher does not appear to have moved beyond the ancient "dominion theory" of the Old Testament: "and God said to them: be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth" (Genesis 1: 26).

However, the "hostile posture" charge fails to take into account another famous claim of Kant's, viz., his remark in the *Metaphysics of Morals* that human beings have a duty not only to "refrain from" "violent and cruel treatment of animals" but also "to love something (e.g., beautiful crystal formations, the indescribable beauty of plants) even apart from any intention to use it" (MS 6: 443; cf. V-MS/Vigil 27: 710). The latter point is put more simply and directly in one of his ethics lectures: "No human being ought to destroy the beauty of nature" (V-Mo/Collins 27: 459-60). Clearly, if more humans since Kant's day had followed his counsel to love nature and refrain from mistreating animals the natural environment would not be its present catastrophic condition. Granted, not all friends of the environment are satisfied with Kant's articulation and defense of a duty to respect nature, for on closer inspection this duty itself rests on merely instrumental grounds. Mistreating animals is morally wrong because it "weakens and gradually uproots a natural predisposition that is very serviceable to morality in one's relations to other people" (MS 6: 443) – viz., empathy for the suffering of other humans, and we are to love nature because doing so promotes "a feeling . . . which, though not of itself moral, is still a disposition that greatly promotes morality or at least prepares the way for it" (MS 6: 443) – viz., the aesthetic experience of loving what is beautiful for its own sake. In short, nature is to be valued not for its own sake but rather "for its moral serviceability"⁹ – that is, its capacity to serve the moral growth of human beings. Nevertheless, even this admittedly "anthropocentric approach to environmental preservation"¹⁰ is more than enough to acquit Kant of the "hostile posture toward nature" charge. The attitude toward non-human nature

that humans should adopt, on Kant's view, is not one of dominion and mastery, but rather one of critical and responsible stewardship.

However, matters stand differently with regard to the weaker "lack of attention to the environment" charge. Here Kant and Enlightenment intellectuals generally (indeed, the entire Western philosophical tradition) stand guilty as charged. Although Kant presciently warns readers in his *Physical Geography* that human beings "change the climate of countries considerably" when they "drain swamps, fell forests," and "build dams" (PG 9: 298), he of course does not mention the burning of fossil fuels such as coal, oil, and natural gas, nor does he advise humans to alter their climate-changing practices. Enlightenment intellectuals were not hostile toward nature, but they did not give much thought as to how to protect it simply because nature did not yet seem to need much protecting – the tremendous extent of the damage that humans have caused to the environment was not yet visible. But now an additional problem arises. Kant's famous proposal for a *Völkerbund*¹¹ – an idea which is often said to have inspired later institutions such as the League of Nations, the United Nations, and the European Union – was conceived with one purpose in mind; viz., putting an end to war. As he writes in *Toward Perpetual Peace*: "there must be a Bund of a special kind, which can be called a *Friedensbund* (*foedus pacificum*), . . . [one which] seeks to end all wars forever" (ZeF 8: 356). This *Völkerbund*, Kant notes in one of his ethics lectures, is designed solely "to make possible a universal peace" (V-MS/Vigil 27: 591). And the reason why the Kantian *Völkerbund* was intended as a *Friedensbund* is simply that Kant regards war as mankind's single greatest enemy. As he states in his *Conjectural Beginnings of Human History*: "the greatest evil [Übel] that oppresses civilized peoples stems from war, yet to be sure less from one that actually is or has been than from the ever relenting and even ceaselessly increasing preparation for future war" (MAM 8: 121; cf. SF 7: 86).

But is war in fact the greatest evil that oppresses civilized peoples at present? Ritchie Robertson, in his most recent work on the Enlightenment, writes: "although war shows no sign of vanishing, it has changed its character."¹² The reasons behind the changed character of war are numerous and not always obvious, but one result is that – much to Kant's horror – many people today, rather than vigilantly pursuing their duty to promote peace,¹³ have learned to live with war. And in the meantime, new and seemingly greater evils have replaced war in the minds of growing numbers of people. But doesn't this mean that Kant's league of nations, conceived as a *Friedensbund*, is now obsolete? No, because part of what makes war evil in Kant's and others' minds is that it destroys the quality and ultimately the possibility of human life. So, if and when other forces also reveal this same life-destroying potential, humans should also unite to constrain them. Additionally, climate change, like war and other evils that currently threaten humanity's future such as artificial intelligence and bioterrorism, is clearly a collective problem that requires international cooperation, and Kant's *Völkerbund* was designed to combat collective problems that threaten humanity's future. As Anthony Pagden notes, for Kant

any type of international association among peoples will ultimately be more than a merely practical arrangement for suppressing warfare, much as that was to be applauded. It would also, for Kant, be the instantiation of what he calls humanity's "cosmopolitan right." This is not, he insists, a philanthropic principle. It is a right. And if there was any single "systematic thing in the history of human behavior," it was that "one idea led all the others, that is, the idea of their right." It is the

right that each people has to enjoy a peaceful relationship and to communicate with all others, for the desire for communication with one's fellow beings was for Kant, as it was for most of the writers of the Enlightenment, a primal human drive. Because humanity, he wrote, "means on the one hand the universal feeling of participation, and on the other the capacity for being able to communicate one's innermost self universally, which properties, taken together, constitute the sociability that is appropriate to humankind, by means of which it distinguishes itself from the limitations of animals."¹⁴

In short, a proper Kantian international association is one that is ultimately intended to respond to all collective problems that pose fundamental threats to humanity in order to protect human beings' cosmopolitan right. And climate change clearly falls under this purview.¹⁵

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Contrary to what one might reasonably infer from the recent wave of articles about artificial intelligence in the popular press, it is by no means a new topic. Many Enlightenment philosophers discussed AI in detail,¹⁶ with La Mettrie's *Man a Machine* (1748) being perhaps the most famous example. "Let us conclude boldly then that man is a machine, and that in the whole universe there is but a single substance with various modifications,"¹⁷ he declares on the final page of his radical work. Leibniz's unrealized plan of devising a calculator "being used to mechanize all reasoning processes, once all possible thoughts had been given a number through his projected 'Universal Characteristic'"¹⁸ is a second pioneering Enlightenment discussion relevant to AI. Instead of breaking their heads in fruitless argumentation, Leibniz predicted, people in the future could simply set the dials and crank the handle of a machine and then announce, "Let us calculate, Sir,"¹⁹ thereby resolving the matter.

Kant, however, as I have argued elsewhere,

is not a fan of AI. In his view, all natural organisms possess a "formative power" that cannot be replicated in machines. As he remarks in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*: "An organized being is . . . not a mere machine, for that has only a **motive** power, while the organized being possesses in itself a formative power, and indeed one that it communicates to the matter, which does not have it (it organizes the latter): thus it has a self-propagating **formative** power, which cannot be explained through the capacity for movement alone (that is, mechanism)" (KU 5: 374). As a result, Kant believes that humans cannot be replicated (much less improved on) via inorganic means. As he declares at the conclusion of his essay, *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* "the human being . . . is . . . more than a machine" (WA 8: 42).²⁰

But while Kant remained adamantly skeptical on the philosophical issue of whether human cognitive and developmental capacities will ever be fully replicated in machines, the potential destruction of human life that AI poses now and in the future is another story. This is an empirical issue, and one that is easily verifiable. And – like climate change – it is also a problem that by its nature requires collective action and international cooperation. In July 2023 the UN Security Council held its first meeting to discuss the threat of AI, and at this meeting UN Secretary General António Guterres "called for a global watchdog to oversee a new technology that has raised at least as many fears as hopes."²¹ Here as well, a properly

designed Kantian Völkerbund would respond to the evidence that AI constitutes yet another major threat to humanity's future and demand that its members take action.²²

BIOSECURITY CONCERNS

Biosecurity concerns (e.g., new pandemics, bioterrorism) are another contemporary threat to humanity that Kant and other Enlightenment intellectuals have relatively little to say about. The closest analogy would be repeated governmental employment of quarantines as a safeguard against the plague, “which afflicted Europe intermittently from the Black Death in 1348 to the 1720s.”²³ However, all these quarantines were merely local efforts, and did not involve international cooperation. The first vaccines for smallpox were also developed during the Enlightenment, and in several texts Kant discusses the morality of the new and not-yet-well-understood practice of inoculation. For instance, in the “Casuistical Questions” following his discussion of suicide in the *Metaphysics of Morals*, he writes: “Anyone who decides to be vaccinated against smallpox puts his life in danger, even though he does it in order to preserve his life. . . Is smallpox inoculation, then, permitted?” (MS 6: 424; cf. Refl. 1550-51, 15: 971-72; OP 22: 302-04). Although Kant does not directly answer his question here (his “Casuistical Questions” are intentionally open-ended, and are designed to encourage readers to exercise their own power of judgment), elsewhere he does assert that smallpox vaccination amounts to “moral recklessness” [*moralische Waghalsigkeit*] (OP 22: 302), which suggests to some that he was an anti-vaxxer *avant la lettre*.²⁴ Finally, some contemporary theorists have argued that we should turn to Kant's moral theory for help in making decisions regarding vaccine distribution, although opinion remains divided on how much solid advice he really has to offer here.²⁵

But current biosecurity threats, like climate change and AI, clearly require strong collective action and international cooperation if they are to be dealt with successfully. Pandemics don't respect national borders, and neither does climate change or AI. These are all threats to the right of human beings to enjoy a peaceful relationship and to communicate with all others – viz., they all constitute a violation of what Kant called humanity's cosmopolitan right. Unless and until all human beings are seriously regarded as “citizens in a single all-encompassing juridical realm”²⁶ or what Kant called “a universal state of humans [*allgemeiner Menschenstaat*] (*ius cosmopolitanum*)” (ZeF 8 349 n.),²⁷ these current threats to humanity's future may soon overwhelm us.

Why, then, despite the fact that the United Nations has been in existence since 1945, does there continue to be so little effective international cooperation on these matters? I turn now to a somewhat complicated Kantian response to this question, one which highlights different and at times conflicting aspects of his position.

TIME

Kant does not often address the question, “How long will it take for humanity to establish a *Völkerbund*?” but when he does, he is exasperatingly vague. For instance, in his discussion of the establishment of a *Völkerbund* in the Anthropology *Friedländer*, he asks:

But how can we contribute something to this and accelerate it? The philosopher must make his concepts of it known, and present them for closer examination. Teachers must form character, so that rulers will understand it and bring it about. In this way, such a state of affairs would exist, which we have no hope of experiencing. This contemplation is very pleasant, because it is an idea that is possible, but for which thousands of years will still be required” (V-Anth/Fried 25: 696).²⁸

Similarly, in his brief discussion of Saint-Pierre’s senate of nations at the end of the *Collins Moral Philosophy* lectures, he concludes by noting: “This is the destined final end, and the highest moral perfection, to which the human race can attain, which is to be hoped for after the course of many centuries” (V-Mo/Collins 27: 491). However, one obvious problem with this “many centuries” scenario is simply that we may not have enough time left on earth to carry it out. Harvard astrophysics professor Avi Loeb, for instance, in his recent piece “How Much Time Does Humanity Have Left?” writes: “we are likely to survive a few centuries but not much longer.”²⁹ Nevertheless, the Kantian perspective on the matter appears to be that humanity is not yet ready for a true *Völkerbund*. We need more time.

A COSMOPOLITICAL DISPOSITION?

A second aspect of Kant’s theory of humanity’s future draws on speculative biology, and is more optimistic in tone. In a marginal note to his *Handschrift* for *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, he writes: “there is a cosmopolitical disposition [*eine cosmopolitische Anlage*] in the human species, even with all the wars, which gradually in the course of political matters wins the upper hand over the selfish predispositions of people” (Anth 7: 412).³⁰ In Kant’s view, all natural organisms, humans included, are born with built-in goals and purposes. Nothing in nature “is in vain, purposeless, or to be ascribed to a blind mechanism of nature” (KU 5: 376, cf. 379). “Every creature reaches its destiny [*Bestimmung*] in the world, i.e. reaches the time in which all of its natural predispositions are developed and come to maturity” (V-Anth/Mron 25: 1417-18, cf. Anth 7: 329). However, in the case of non-human organisms, each individual member of the species normally attains the complete *Bestimmung* implied in its predisposition, whereas in the case of humans, only the species as a whole reaches it. As Kant remarks in the *Anthropology*: “with all other animals left to themselves, each individual reaches its complete *Bestimmung*; however, with the human being only the *species*, at best, reaches it; so that the human race can work its way up to its *Bestimmung* only through *progress* in a series of immeasurably many generations” (Anth 7: 324; cf. V-Anth/Mron 25: 1196, Refl 1499, 15: 781, *Päd* 9: 445)

Kant’s theory of natural predispositions, particularly when it is applied to humans, has both a descriptive as well as a prescriptive side. On the one hand, it points to natural, developmental structures within biological organisms. On the other, it tells us what *ought*

to be the case in the future. As Kant states at the beginning of his *Lectures on Pedagogy*: “the human species is supposed to bring out, little by little, humanity’s entire natural predisposition [*Naturanlage*] by means of its own effort” (Päd 9: 441). The prescriptive side also takes into account a role for human freedom in attaining the species’ destiny, for this itself is part of our species’ biology: “nature does not proceed without a plan or final aim even in the play of human freedom” (IaG 8: 29).

But what are we today to make of such claims? Although biology has certainly made great strides since Kant’s day, the strongly teleological style of biology presupposed by his theory of predispositions has lost favor. And while the science of genetics, which didn’t yet exist during Kant’s pre-Mendelian era, has also made great advances, contemporary geneticists have yet to locate a cosmopolitical predisposition in humanity’s gene pool.

CONSTITUTIVE/REGULATIVE

Kant also occasionally employs his famous distinction between regulative and constitutive principles in discussing humanity’s future, and here the net result is a softer, more cautious conclusion than we encountered in his remarks on biological dispositions. In his brief discussion of the development of a cosmopolitan society toward the end of the *Anthropology*, he writes: “however, this idea, unattainable in itself, is not a constitutive principle (the principle of anticipating lasting peace amid the most vigorous actions and reactions of human beings), rather it is only a regulative principle: to pursue it diligently as the vocation of the human race, not without a grounded assumption of a natural tendency toward it” (Anth 7: 331). Kant’s reference to “a grounded assumption of a natural tendency” toward a cosmopolitan society at the end of this quotation is probably an intimation of the *cosmopolitische Anlage* discussed in the previous section. But let us return to his distinction between constitutive and regulative principles. Regulative principles help orient human understanding (they amount to what nowadays might be called “heuristic aids to research” – cf. KU 5: 411), but unlike constitutive principles they do not determine the objective reality of events or contribute directly to our knowledge of them. Regulative principles, on the other hand, “demand that we seek something [as Kant puts it, they direct “the understanding to a certain goal” (KrV A 644/B 675)], – but they do not guarantee that what we are looking for can be found” (cf. KrV A 179-81/B 221-23).³¹ Kant himself puts the point perhaps even more negatively in his first *Critique* when he remarks that “even though one may never concede them [viz., regulative principles] objective reality (existence), [they] are nevertheless not to be regarded as mere figments of the brain, rather they provide an indispensable standard for reason” (KrV A 569/B 597). In other words, as I have argued elsewhere, calling the idea of a cosmopolitan society a regulative rather than a constitutive principle in the end amounts only to an inspirational hint “that something may happen – not that it will or must.”³²

HISTORICAL PROGRESS

Yet another dimension of Kant's discussion of humanity's future comes out in his frequent references to historical progress. This particular dimension falls somewhere between the biological confidence of a predisposition or natural tendency toward a cosmopolitan society and the more cautious proclamation that something may but not necessarily will happen implied by the language of regulative principles. In his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, for instance, Kant begins confidently by predicting that he will be able to discover "an *aim of nature* in this nonsensical course of things human" (MAM 8: 118), and later in the same essay key aspects of the aim are revealed when he refers to humanity's "first true steps from crudity toward culture, thus all talents come bit by bit to be developed, taste is formed, and . . . a beginning is made toward the foundation of a mode of thought which can with time transform the rude natural predisposition to make moral distinctions into determinate practical principles" (MAM 8: 121).

Granted, this Kantian narrative about humanity's historical progress is part of a much larger Enlightenment story. Turgot, for instance, in his lecture "On the Successive Advances of the Human Mind" (1750), speaks for many of his contemporaries when he announces assuredly that the study of world history reveals how "manners are gradually softened, the human mind takes enlightenment, separate nations draw nearer to each other, commerce and policy connect at last to all parts of the globe, and the total mass of the human race, by the alternations of calm and agitation, of good conditions and of bad, marches always, though slowly, towards still higher perfection."³³

At the same time, however, Kant's faith in humanity's historical progress is not as naïve or dogmatic as that of many of his Enlightenment brethren, largely because he acknowledges a strong role for free will in his conception of human nature. Whether humans progress or not ultimately depends on what they choose to do. Their historical progress is not preordained or causally determined. As Kant states in the *Conflict of the Faculties*: "No one can guarantee that now, this very moment, with regard to the physical disposition of our species, the epoch of its decline would not be liable to occur. . . . For we are dealing with beings that act freely, to whom, it is true, what they *ought* to do may be *dictated* in advance, but of whom it may not be *predicted* what they *will* do" (SF 7: 83).

But even for those of us who favor Kant's more sober faith in historical progress over Turgot's dogmatic proclamation that history "marches always . . . towards still higher perfection," the problem at present is that fewer and fewer people are inclined to subscribe to *any* doctrine of historical progress. As Tyson Retz notes at the beginning of his recent book, *Progress and the Scale of History* (2022), progress has "lost its luster:"

After reaching its high point in the nineteenth century, the new century quickly demonstrated humankind's ability to put its achievements to devastating ends. The word increasingly appeared in sardonic scare quotes, studies on the history of the idea abounded, and progress's critics were lauded as frequently as earlier generations had celebrated its prophets. A quarter way into the twenty-first century, there is no sign that progress is set to regain its former renown. Optimists prosper in certain circles, but pessimism is in vogue, crisis talk more pervasive than progress talk. There now seems to be a widespread attitude that our current day may not be the newest phase in the movement towards a better future.³⁴

Or, as Nietzsche remarked earlier and a bit more succinctly: “interpreting history . . . as a continual testimony of a moral world order and ultimate moral purposes . . . that is *over* now; that has conscience against it.”³⁵

EXTERNAL, INTERNAL, IN-BETWEEN

One longstanding and perhaps interminable debate among Kant scholars is whether his philosophy of history concerns only external (legal, political) progress or, additionally, internal (moral) progress.³⁶ Otfried Höffe is a clear representative of the former position. He writes: “Kant limits progress to political justice, including both national and international law. And law, as such, involves the authority to use force. Since history has to do with outer events, it is not at all possible that its ultimate meaning lies in an “inner” progress, in a development of the moral disposition.”³⁷ Pauline Kleingeld, on the other hand, reveals her commitment to the latter position when she writes: “neither of these two kinds of legal progress can be called the final purpose of history, rather both are themselves means to a further end. The true final purpose is the complete development of the ‘predispositions of humanity’, which culminates in moralization, that is to say, in the transformation of human living-together into a ‘moral whole’.”³⁸

Granted, for those who side with Nietzsche in holding that *all* talk of historical progress is “*over* now,” this debate between externalists and internalists may be a moot point. Nevertheless, there is an often-overlooked middle position in this debate which I wish to explore briefly now, both because its textual basis in Kant’s writings is much easier to establish and because its aftermath in the world at present offers us one clue as to why effective international cooperation, despite the increasing need for it, has yet to be realized.

In several texts Kant points to what he calls “moral veneers” (cf. Zef 8: 375 n.) in modern life – developments which “are not themselves wholly moral but are morally important, morality’s instruments.”³⁹ For instance, in a footnote to *Toward Perpetual Peace* he refers to the modern state and its legal apparatus as one such veneer, since “by its checking the outbreak of unlawful inclinations, the development of the moral disposition to immediate respect for right is greatly facilitated” (Zef 8: 375-76 n.). By curbing citizens’ inclinations toward violence and encouraging their respect for law, “a great step *toward* morality (though it is not yet a moral step)” is taken (Zef 8: 376 n.). Similarly, in the third *Critique* he writes: “Fine arts and the sciences, which by means of a universally communicable pleasure and an elegance and refinement make human beings, if not morally better, at least better mannered for society, very much reduce the tyranny of sensible tendencies, and prepare humans for a sovereignty in which reason alone shall have power” (KU 5: 433). And in one of his anthropology lectures he echoes this sentiment about art as means to morality when he states: “Although the fine arts do not make the human being better, they nevertheless do refine him, and make it easy for him to become morally good” (V-Anth/Mensch 25: 1102). Similarly, in Kant’s earlier-cited discussion of the achievement of a *Völkerbund* in the *Collins Moral Philosophy* lectures, he asserts that we can hope for this “great step toward perfection” “from nowhere else but education” and that

“the Basedowian institutes of education⁴⁰ create a small but fervent hope in this regard” (V-Mo/ Collins 27: 470-71; cf. Päd 9: 444). Finally, in the *Anthropology Mrongovius* Kant refers to still more steps to morality: “what are the means of improving civil society and the constitution? 1. Education 2. Legislation 3. Religion” (V-Anth/Mron 25: 1427; cf. V-Anth/Mensch 25: 1198).

But there are several serious problems with Kant’s moral veneers thesis. First, if these veneers are assumed to be necessary and/or sufficient means of moral improvement, counterexamples easily come to mind. Some graduates of the world’s finest universities still manage to become violent criminals, not all humans who experience the beautiful succeed in becoming morally good agents, some children born in the world’s most just societies still become outlaws by the time they reach adulthood, some of the most fervent religious believers are quite familiar with sin, etc. So, these veneers are certainly not sufficient means. Nor are they necessary. There are many morally good agents who have not received any formal education, exposure to the arts, religious training, or the luck of having been born into a just society.

Although Kant’s language is admittedly ambiguous, I don’t think he is best interpreted as implying that these veneers are necessary and/or sufficient means to moral improvement. A somewhat milder interpretation, which I favor, is that the *kinds* of art, education, religion, and civics that many countries still favor at present are unfortunately not conducive to bringing our species closer to “a system that is cosmopolitically united” (Anth 7: 333). [As Kant himself remarks in one of his anthropology lectures, “We have already come far in culture, in civilization we have not done much, and in moralization we have done almost nothing” (V-Anth/Mensch 25: 1198).] All too often, these moral instruments are employed in the service of nationalistic goals. A better educational system, for instance, “might foster the ability of all citizens to engage in and to imagine ideal deliberations”⁴¹ and what Kant called “an interest in the best for the world” (Päd 9: 499), but few educational systems at present do this. However, even the best education (or art, or religion, or government) is no guarantee of moral virtue.

So, where does this leave us? Not in a good place. Insufficient numbers of individuals and governments have yet to convince themselves that they need to alter their self-interested behavior, and at any rate we may soon be out of time.⁴² There are certainly no guarantees that humans will become cosmopolitically united, and ultimately it’s up to us: “For we are dealing with beings that act freely, to whom, it is true, what they *ought* to do may be *dictated* in advance, but of whom it may not be *predicted* what they *will* do” (SF 7: 83).⁴³

Abstract: Versions of many of the same global ethics issues currently on people’s minds sparked my initial interest in Kant’s practical philosophy half a century ago -- e.g., international justice, war and peace, the natural environment, artificial intelligence, and human rights. Although it would be wildly imprudent to suppose that Kantian theory should serve as a precise blueprint for contemporary policy, I do believe that we today can still learn a great deal from Kant’s perspective on global ethics. In this essay, after briefly articulating his own views on these global ethics issues, I offer some Kantian reflections on why we have unfortunately made so little progress in resolving them.

Keywords: Kant, Progress, League of Nations, Cosmopolitan, Right, Global Ethics, War and Peace

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NOTAS / NOTES

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² During my freshman year of college, I participated in a demonstration in front of Fort Ord, California, at which we tried to stop traffic by sitting together with our arms locked on the highway. We were subsequently maced by the police.

³ My father used to have a placard on his desk that read: "To Err is Human, to Really Foul Things Up Requires a Computer." Although the origin of this maxim is not certain, it first appeared in 1969.

⁴ My mother flew out to Chicago during my first year of graduate school and invited me to attend a demonstration in support of the ERA (Equal Rights Amendment) with her and several of her friends. The ERA was never ratified by Congress.

⁵ See Robert B. Louden, *The World We Want: How and Why the Ideals of the Enlightenment Still Elude Us* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) for a defense of this position.

⁶ Helga Varden, "Kant and the Environment," *Studi Kantiani* 35 (2022): 27-48, at 27.

⁷ Scott M. Roulrier, *Kantian Virtue at the Intersection of Politics and Nature: The Virtue of Soul-Making* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 129. Roulrier himself goes on to argue against this popular view.

⁸ Christine Korsgaard defends "the claim that we human beings are obligated to treat all sentient animals . . . as what Kant called 'ends in themselves', at least in one sense of that notion" [*Fellow Creatures: Our Obligations to the Other Animals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), xi]. She argues later that "there are two slightly different senses of 'end in itself'" (141) – viz., an active and a passive sense – and accuses of Kant of conflating the two. I think what Kant had in mind is closer to her "active sense," and I think he would reject her conflation charge.

⁹ Roulrier, *Kantian Virtue at the Intersection of Politics and Nature*, 130.

¹⁰ Roulrier, *Kantian Virtue at the Intersection of Politics and Nature*, 141.

- ¹¹ Usually rendered in English as a “league of nations.” But I will leave it mostly untranslated in what follows, partly in order to underscore some key differences between Kant’s original idea and subsequent international federations. In the Kantian *Völkerbund*, for instance, there are no “great power vetoes” – each member state, regardless of size or the extent of its political power, has one vote. Also, member states are required to sign nonaggression treaties with all other member states as a condition of membership. Third, member states are expected to abolish standing armies and to stop incessantly threatening other states “with war by readiness to appear always prepared for war” (ZeF 8: 345). And, last but not least, “the civil constitution in every [member] state shall be republican” (ZeF 8: 349).
- ¹² Ritchie Roberston, *The Enlightenment: The Pursuit of Happiness 1680-1790* (New York: Harper, 2021), 761
- ¹³ “reason . . . delivers an absolute condemnation of war . . . and . . . makes a condition of peace . . . a direct duty” (ZeF 8: 356).
- ¹⁴ Anthony Pagden, *The Enlightenment: And Why It Still Matters* (New York: Random House, 2013), 361. In this passage Pagden cites first from Refl 1420, 15: 618 and then from KU 5: 355.
- ¹⁵ For additional discussion of Kant and climate change, see Zachary Vereb, “Sustaining the Individual in the Collective: A Kantian Perspective for a Sustainable World,” *Kantian Review* 27 (2022): 405-420. Vereb argues that Kant’s philosophy “has untapped potential for the climate crisis” (405).
- ¹⁶ See, e.g., Margaret A. Boden, *Mind as Machine: A History of Cognitive Science*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006), esp. 1: 51-130.
- ¹⁷ Julien Offray de La Mettrie, “Man A Machine,” in *The Portable Enlightenment Readers*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 202-09, at 208.
- ¹⁸ G. MacDonald Ross, *Leibniz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 12-13.
- ¹⁹ Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, “Preface to the General Science” (1677), in *Leibniz: Selections*, ed. Philip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1951), 12-17 at 15. This is one of several Leibnizian schemes later satirized by Jonathan Swift in Part III of his *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726).
- ²⁰ Robert B. Loudon, “Humans-Only Norms: An Unexpected Kantian Story,” in *Kant on Morality, Humanity, and Legality: Practical Dimensions of Normativity*, ed. Ansgar Lyssy and Christopher Yeomans (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 131-147, at 131-32 n. 2. I believe that Kant is alluding to La Mettrie in the citation from WA 8: 42.
- ²¹ Franz Fassihi, “U.N. Officials Urge Regulation of Artificial Intelligence,” *New York Times*, July 18, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/07/18/un-security-council-ai.html>. Fassihi also reports that at this meeting “China’s ambassador to the United Nations, Zhang Jun, pushed back against the creation of a set of global laws and said that international regulatory bodies must be flexible enough to allow countries to develop their own rules.” Pushback (on the part of many sovereign states) against the creation of global laws continues to be one of the major obstacles to effective international cooperation. For instance, at a subsequent news conference held on September 8, 2023, Guterres emphasized that “the climate crisis is worsening dramatically – but the collective response is lacking in ambition, credibility, and urgency” (Sibi Arasu, “U.N. chief urges G-20 to convey urgency on climate,” *Portland Press Herald* September 9, 2023, pp. C1-2, at C1).
- ²² For further discussion of Kant and AI, see *Kant and Artificial Intelligence*, ed. Hyeongjoo Kim and Dieter Schönecker (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022).
- ²³ Robertson, *the Enlightenment*, 430. See also Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), an historical account of the London plague in 1665 based on extensive research. The journal is undersigned by the initials “H.F.” (p. 212), which suggests that Defoe’s uncle Henry Foe was the primary source of information. Defoe himself was only five years old when the plague began. The journal ends with the following “coarse but sincere stanza: *A dreadful Plague in London was, / In the Year Sixty Five, / Which swept an Hundred Thousand Souls / Away; yet I alive*” (212).
- ²⁴ See Dennis Schulting, “Vaccination, Autonomy, and ‘Moral Recklessness,’” *Kritik’s Newsletter*, February 14, 2022 (<https://kritik.substack.com>).
- ²⁵ For discussion and references, see M. C. Altman, “Kant in the Time of Covid,” *Kantian Journal* 41 (2022): 89-117.
- ²⁶ Pauline Kleingeld, *Kant and Cosmopolitanism: The Philosophical Ideal of World Citizenship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 7; cf. 72-91.
- ²⁷ However, as Kleingeld emphasizes, Kant’s use of this term “should not be taken to imply that Kant advocates the establishment of a world state that would absorb existing states” (*Kant and Cosmopolitanism*, 74 n. 2).
- ²⁸ Japanese philosopher Nishi Amane, who introduced European theories of international law to Japan in the late nineteenth century, once remarked that Kant’s perpetual peace would not arrive until “10,00 years in the future at the earliest” [quoted in Oona J. Hathaway and Scott J. Shapiro, *The Internationalists* (London, 2017), 148]. He was not far off.

- ²⁹ Avi Loeb, “How Much Time Does Humanity Have Left?” *Scientific American*, May 12, 2021 (<https://www.scientificamerican.com>). However, as Yogi Berra is said to have remarked, “predictions are very hard, especially about the future.” In a recent *New York Times Magazine* article, Loeb is variously described as “the most famous practicing astronomer in the country,” someone who is considered “a pariah” by “many in his own field,” and one who, “as a kid growing up on a farm in Israel,” “wanted to be a philosopher or a writer, but compulsory military service led him to science” [Seth Fletcher, “Galaxy Quest,” *The New York Times Magazine*, August 27, 2023, 30-35, 46-47, at 33.
- ³⁰ For more on this issue, see my “Cosmopolitical Unity: The Final Destiny of the Human Species,” in Alix Cohen (ed.), *Kant’s Lectures on Anthropology: A Critical Guide* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 211-229.
- ³¹ Lucas Thorpe, “Constitutive Principle,” in *The Kant Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 51-52, at 52.
- ³² Louden, *The World We Want*, 219.
- ³³ Anne-Robert-Jacques Turgot, “On the Successive Advances of the Human Mind,” in Isaac Kramnick (ed.), *The Portable Enlightenment Reader* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 361-63, at 362. See also the readings in Chapter 7 (“Progress”) of L. G. Crocker, *The Age of Enlightenment* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 287-320.
- ³⁴ Tyson Retz, *Progress and the Scale of History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 1.
- ³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ed. Bernard Williams and trans. Josefine Nauckhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), § 357.
- ³⁶ For discussion see my “External Progress and Internal Progress,” in *Kant’s Impure Ethics: From Rational Beings to Human Beings* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 144-52.
- ³⁷ Otfried Höffe, *Immanuel Kant*, trans. Marshall Ferrier (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 198. (Translation modified slightly.)
- ³⁸ Pauline Kleingeld, *Fortschritt und Vernunft: Zur Geschichtsphilosophie Kants* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1995), 14.
- ³⁹ Patrick Riley, *Kant’s Political Philosophy* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman & Allanheld, 1983), 80.
- ⁴⁰ For discussion of Basedow, see my intellectual biography, *Johann Bernhard Basedow and the Transformation of Modern Education: Educational Reform in the German Enlightenment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). Basedow opened his experimental school, the Philanthropinum, in Dessau in 1776, and Kant was a fervent supporter. Although the school closed in 1793 (due in part to Basedow’s lack of administrative skill), by 1790 sixty-three Basedowian schools had been founded in Germany alone. Basedow, like Kant, was born in 1724. But he died in 1790 – fourteen years before Kant.
- ⁴¹ Philip Kitcher, *Moral Progress*, with Commentaries by Amia Srinivasan, Susan Neiman, Rahel Jaeggi, edited and introduced by Jan-Christoph Heilinger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 98.
- ⁴² Cf. Kitcher: “Unless the human population radically changes its ways during the immediate future, our descendants are highly likely to inhabit a world so harsh and inhospitable as to challenge and confine their lives” (*Moral Progress*, 100).
- ⁴³ An earlier version of this paper was prepared as an invited lecture for the inaugural session of the International Forum on Global Ethics, held at Fudan University in September 2023. Unfortunately, I was unable to obtain a visa from the Chinese government, and thus was not allowed to travel to Shanghai. Nevertheless, I would like to thank Kang Qian and Sun Xiangchen for their invitation to present the paper at their conference. Thanks also to Roey Reichert, Richard Eldridge, and William Harper for their comments on an earlier draft of the essay. A revised version of the paper was presented at the inaugural session of the online lecture series KANT300 in April 2024. Many thanks to Klaus Denecke Rabello for this invitation.

Recebido / Received: 21.04.2024

Aceito / Accepted: 22.04.2024