Defending Kant after Darwin: a Reassessment of *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*

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After decades in which scholars have looked with suspicion at the teleology Kant defends in *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784), recently the essay, as well as Kant's progressive view of history in general, seems to have been enjoying renewed attention combined with a more benevolent attitude (e.g. Flach 2005, 2006; Fliege 2014). Among the questions still debated is the *status* of Kant's teleology and in particular: a) whether it is meant to have theoretical validity (Kleingeld 1995, 31; Kleingeld 2001, 210) or, like the postulates in the second critique, its use is only practical (Wood 2005, 111-2, Guyer 2000, 372-407); b) whether its theoretical ambitions are the same as those of any empirical science (Kaulbach 1975; 65; Rauscher 2001; 51) or do not extend further than the regulative function played by the ideas of reasons (Williams 1983, 20; Kleingeld 1995, 110-116); c) whether we have today any reasons to believe the progressive view of history Kant proposes (no matter whether for theoretical or practical purposes), given past and present atrocities, as well as the worldview currently offered by science.

This paper situates itself within this debate and argues that Kant's teleology in *Idea* can be salvaged only if the mechanism of social unsociability, considered as the true center of the essay, is a) detached from the − by contemporary standards − hardly defensible notion of 'natural dispositions' and b) understood in conjunction with general premises about human nature and the world that Kant takes as self-evidently true. From this perspective, Kant's teleology is reduced to the affirmation that, given certain constant features of human beings (mainly, limited benevolence and ability to see their best interest through experience) as well as relatively constant objective circumstances in the external world, an approximation of human affairs towards the 'cosmopolitan constitution' is more likely than its opposite or a condition of stagnation. Contrary to all previous interpretations of *Idea*, it will be argued that the status of this thesis extends beyond the merely regulative function of guiding our historical research towards some unity. The paper affirms that Kant's goal in *Idea* is more ambitious: the goal is that of providing reasons to believe that non-linear progress towards the cosmopolitan constitution, rather than regress or stagnation, is the most likely development of human affairs.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section focuses on the preliminary methodological remarks Kant offers before the nine propositions of *Idea*. The second section analyzes, criticizes, and discards the first three propositions. The third section, devoted to the last six propositions, introduces the 'Separability Thesis', i.e. the hermeneutical suggestion that

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the mechanism of social unsociability, with all the far-reaching consequences it generates for human affairs, can be reformulated in such a way that it becomes independent of the first three propositions. The fourth and final part reformulates the last six propositions of *Idea* with no reference to the idea of "natural dispositions". This reformulation is also offered as the most plausible teleological argument one can construct out of the material Kant offers in the essay.

1. The Methodology of 'Universal History'

In the introductory remarks to the essay, Kant sketches what seems to be a methodology for 'universal history', a project whose ambition he himself − no doubt − recognizes as problematic. Kant draws our attention to the rates of births, marriages and deaths in (large enough) societies to show that even phenomena that seem *par excellence* left either to sheer chance or to the free choice of individuals are influenced by objective factors, and as such are predictable with a certain degree of precision. We know in fact that birthrates, for example, are greatly influenced by the policy that a country adopts for young people in terms of accessibility to the job market, public nurseries, subsidies for maternity leave, level of women's education, religion, and so. Hence, at least regarding whether they are going to increase or decline, birthrates are as predictable as any other natural phenomenon.[2]

The existence of such regularities opens up the possibility of looking at the whole of human affairs as a *system* in which certain general tendencies can be identified. This identification presupposes that we have a rough knowledge of what humans are and of what the institutions in which they live can become, just to paraphrase Rousseau. It also presupposes that the objective circumstances in which they live are constant enough. However, if these conditions are met, there is no *a priori* reason that rules out the possibility of looking at history (the totality of human events) as a system in which regularities can be detected. With this methodological proviso in mind, let us approach the nine propositions through which Kant attempts to show that history is moving towards a cosmopolitan end.

2. The First Three Propositions

As reconstructed by Kleingeld (1995; 126-128), Kant borrows the first steps of the validation of his progressive view of history from the biologist J.F. Blumenbach. Blumenbach modified the then dominant biological paradigm, known as 'Evolutionismus' or "Theory of individual Pre-formation." He denied that organisms develop from miniature versions of themselves that already include all characteristics we observe in a grown-up individual. Rather, individual development is conceived as the result of the interaction between prefixed, God-given specific dispositions and the environment in which the individual grows up.[3] Clearly, both the concept of a set of capacities implanted by God in each species, as well as the formation of new characteristics as a result of the encounter between this set and the natural environment resonate in the first three propositions. They in fact state that: (1)the natural dispositions of all natural creatures are destined towards a full and complete development; (2-3) in human beings,

the chief natural feature, to which all other human dispositions are subordinate, namely reason, is best developed only in society. God gives humans reason but only through the interaction with a specific natural environment (civil society, best if of a republican sort) can this natural capacity fully develop.[4]

There is a lot to quarrel with in Kant's first three propositions as they are presented. Just to mention one problem, they set the whole proof of *Idea* on a circular path. In the first proposition, in fact, Kant assumes that all natural dispositions of a creature are "destined" to develop fully and in conformity with their *telos*. The subsequent propositions spell out the necessary conditions that enable that development. The argument thus seems to be moving from a teleological premise to a more specific teleological conclusion: from the assumption that nature has an end for all species (the full development of their preformed natural dispositions) to the identification of the specific end for the human species (the development of reason), and to the means nature provides to reach that end.

Leaving aside the circularity of the argument, there is a simple reason why we -- readers of the XXI century -- should dismiss Kant's first three theses. They are incompatible with the now dominant scientific paradigm, i.e. Darwinian or neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory. Contemporary science can account for the differentiation and the evolution of the species without making any reference to a pre-fixed, God-given set of characteristics for each species. What Kant called "natural dispositions", and we now call "genetic materials," is not fixed and can change through the combined influence of the two key factors of contemporary biology, i.e. mutation and natural selection. In the context of a Darwinian biology, especially if amended by later developments (e.g. Mendel), the by-and-large creationist model Kant operates with is denied and there is no room for his talk of prefixed and constant "natural capacities of a creature".[5]

So far, so obvious. What is perhaps less evident is that contemporary biology is so distant from Kant's scientific horizon that it enables what for Kant is utterly impossible. In a famous passage of the third critique (§75), Kant argues that mechanical natural laws alone "unordered by any intention" will never be able to explain "how even a mere blade of grass is produced". Actually, Darwinian biology can account for the 'production' of all features that constitute a specific kind of grass from merely mechanical laws, resting on the combined effects of mutation and selection, and without resorting to any 'intention' by nature, God or the like. As Kleingeld succinctly puts it, "[Darwinian theory] has removed teleology from biology" (Kleingeld 1995; 130). This is important because it already places constraints on any foundation of a progressive view of history that wishes to remain faithful to contemporary science. Any prediction as to the future state of human affairs, any 'universal history' we might dare to write today will have to refrain from attributing to individuals or species any pre-established end. It follows that it will have to arise out of a mechanical consideration of human interactions, combined with very general causal laws about human beings and the environment (physical and political) in which they live. In other words, any 'teleology' acceptable to contemporary standards will have to avoid the circularity of starting from teleological premises (like those noticed above in Kant's argument) and arise from considerations of human affairs viewed in a systemic perspective.

3. The Last Six Propositions

Fortunately, we do not need to defend the first three theses to save Kant's fundamental intuition in *Idea*. We can abandon the outdated view of nature as tending towards the realization of all prefixed "natural dispositions" and retain the mechanism of unsocial sociability with its consequences for the evolution of human institutions, at the domestic and international level. To be sure, in proposition 4 Kant connects the mechanism of social antagonism to natural dispositions by saying that nature employs the former to enable the full development of the latter. However, the series of predictable social transformations brought about by social unsociability would occur even if there were no "natural dispositions" which need to develop. All that is necessary for the mechanism in question to work is that humans truly, as Kant says, "cannot bear" their neighbours, who compete with them for scarce resources, and whom "yet cannot bear to leave" (IaG, AA 08: 21.9-10). In other words, for the mechanism to be triggered it is sufficient that humans and the environment in which they live be conceived according to rather uncontroversial and solid assumptions concerning our limited benevolence, the fact that we do not live in a world endowed with infinite resources (the circumstances of justice), and the capacity to see what is in our best interest and to learn from past mistakes.

This is what could be called the Separability Thesis: the theory of "natural dispositions" and the theory that spells out the consequences of social unsociability are separable and independent. One can believe in social unsociability (proposition 4) as well as accept the account that spells out the predictable institutional repercussions of such a mechanism (propositions 5-9) without endorsing the "natural dispositions talk" in which they are embedded. Not accidentally, Kant himself will introduce the concept of unsocial sociability in the First Supplement of *To Perpetual Peace* after an account of nature completely different from the one introduced by the first three propositions.[6]

Detaching social unsociability from natural dispositions is obviously still insufficient to ground a progressive view of history. At most, we have removed one obstacle. Something needs to be said to prove that the causal story and the chain of conditions of possibility envisaged in propositions 4 through 9 are plausible. Three crucial points, however, are already clear. To begin with, the only teleology that can be defended within *Idea* is, so to speak, a teleology without natural purposes. Holding that history has a predictable (albeit non-linear) development is fully compatible with saying that nature does not have any plan for us. In fact, the reformed and de-dogmatized teleology we are about to defend is closer to predictions concerning the evolution of complex systems (e.g. the distribution of molecules of gas in a controlled environment or changes in births rates caused by certain policies in large societies, as in Kant's example) than to providential perspectives on our destiny. Secondly, precisely because this new teleology rests on empirical causal mechanisms, its validation cannot stop with the proof that such a perspective is necessary for finding some unity in the otherwise lawless aggregate of human events. Its validation will have to rest, quite simply, on the truth of those mechanisms. Finally, even abstracting from the last point, there is a general reason why we have to reject all readings (e.g. Williams 1983, 20; Kleingeld 1995: 132, Fliege 2014, 167) that construe the status of Kant's teleology merely in regulative terms. The idea that without a progressive view history would be an aggregate non-

amenable to reason is simply false. In fact, a view that attributes to history a *regressive* tendency would be as useful as Kant's for that purpose. It would 'systematize' history just as well. It follows that the justification of any progressive view of history (including Kant's own) needs more than the simple thought that such a view is 'good for science' or the like.[7] What is needed, quite simply, is a good argument showing that progress (measured in terms of approximation to the cosmopolitan constitution) is more likely than regress or stagnation.

4. Towards a Reconsideration of Kant's Teleology

With this much clarified, let us have a fresh look at the reasons Kant offers in the last six propositions to prove that history is progressing. This is our central question: once Kant's propositions are purged of all references to "natural capacities," are we left with a material that enables us to construct a compelling argument? The new argument can be formulated in six steps.

1. "Unsocial sociability is "obviously rooted in human nature" (IaG, AA 08: 20.34) and dictates the necessity to live in society. Through competition, it fosters the development of human talents.

2. Intellectual talents lead humans from barbarism to culture, which in turn is the first step towards moralization. What used to be an aggregate of amoral individuals who stick together because they cannot afford to live in isolation gradually becomes a society in which individuals accept the limitations of their freedom according to a universal law: "a *pathologically* enforced social union is transformed into a *moral* whole" (IaG, AA 08: 21.16-17);

3. A "perfectly just civil constitution" (IaG, AA 08: 22.18) which assigns equal spheres of freedom to all consociates is the institutional setting that best enables human coexistence and best coheres with the growing moral capacity of individuals.

4. This institutional achievement is difficult to reach and yet nothing in human affairs rules it out as impossible.[8] Actually, given humans' capacity to learn and to improve from culture to morality, the outcome is favored by objective factors.

5. There cannot be any "perfectly just civil constitution" in one state without a "law governed external relationship with other states" (IaG, AA 08: 24.3-4). Some form of global institution is necessary to remove anarchy form international affairs and this is in turn necessary to establish a just domestic regime. A "federation of peoples" therefore serves the interest of individuals and states. It follows that it is reasonable to assume that a lawful, peaceful yet competitive international system (IaG, AA 08: 23.26-29)will be reached one day.

6. Experience already give us *some* hints that the system of international relations has certain features that facilitate that achievement: a) "The mutual relationships between states are already so sophisticated that none of them can neglect its internal culture without losing power and influence in relation to others" (IaG, AA 08: 27.29-31); b) civil freedom can no longer be so easily infringed without disadvantage to all trades and industries, and

especially to commerce" (IaG, AA 08: 27.34-35); c) conflict is generally against commerce, which makes the peaceful, diplomatic resolution of international controversies not only in the interests of the conflicting parties, but also of other states that are linked to them by relation of economic interdependence. In sum, experience shows some signs suggesting that the 'system' of human affairs tends towards a "universal *cosmopolitan existence*" (IaG, AA 08: 28.34-35).

Nothing in this long argument makes a reference to natural ends or to ends of nature, let alone to a plan of providence. All we have comes from considering human affairs as a system in which certain forces will exercise their effect, *if certain general circumstances remain stable*. The mechanism of social unsociability combined with general premises about the environment in which humans live suggest that our world, the world of human actions, with all its unintended consequences, is a world biased towards the cosmopolitan constitution. The argument is not only compatible with contemporary science, but asks us to accept rather uncontroversial assumptions regarding our nature (mainly our limited benevolence and our ability to learn) as well as to consider certain features of our environment as constant. If one rejects the argument, it should be shown which of the mechanisms that Kant relies on does not apply or fails to yield the expected effects. An *a priori* rejection of such a view on the grounds that it is 'metaphysical', too ambitious or worse, incompatible with critical standards, is not acceptable.

This is obviously not to say that Kant's 'universal history', even if reconstructed most charitably as we have attempted to do, is free of difficulties. It is debatable, for example, whether it relies on a thought that, encompassing the totality of experience, is in tension with the limitations imposed on our cognition by the first critique. In fact, without an all-embracing stretch of one's cognition, how could one rule out the possibility that the same natural mechanisms that today make progress more likely will not change in the future? Or, even if we assume that human nature is stable, it could be that the same mechanisms become inert or even counterproductive because they are inserted into a new set of objective circumstances (for example, a dramatically insufficient amount of vital resources for the world's population). And what if some passion were to become so dominant in the constitution of future human beings as to impede the perception of their best interests?

These and other objections are fully legitimate and should be addressed. The goal of this paper, though, was to come up with a teleological view that is not ruled out by our best science from the onset, i.e. even before doubts regarding the specific mechanisms Kant appeals to arise. Secondly, the goal was precisely to draw the boundaries of the field in which the confrontation with the critics should occur. In our reconstruction, the battlefield is that of systemic analysis of complex systems.[9] Thirdly, the goal was to show that *Idea* is mainly about the objective grounds we have to adopt a progressive view of history. On our reading *Idea* is neither about the heuristic opportunity to endorse a certain perspective, nor about the necessity, for practical purposes, to do so. Downplaying the ambitions of the essay to the attempt to make a case for the regulative or practical importance of adopting such a view is far from prudent. As we have seen, it exposes Kant to too obvious retorts.

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ABSTRACT. The paper argues that Kant's teleology in *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* can be salvaged only if the mechanism of social unsociability, considered as the true center of the essay, is a) detached from the − by contemporary standards − hardly defensible notion of 'natural dispositions' and b) understood in conjunction with general premises that Kant does not make explicit, but rather takes as self-evidently true. In this perspective, Kant's teleology is reduced to the affirmation that, given certain constant features of human beings (mainly, limited benevolence and ability to see their best interest through experience) as well as relatively constant objective circumstances of the world we live in (mainly, availability of finite yet sufficient resources and sustainable growth in a competitive yet peaceful system), an approximation of human affairs towards the 'cosmopolitan constitution' is the most likely outcome. The paper moves the first steps towards a defense of this thesis by reformulating Kant's argument in a way to make it compatible with contemporary science.

KEYWORDS: Teleology, Evolution, Progress, History, Social Unsociability.

Notes

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2 The example of weather predictions is along similar lines. We may not know whether next summer is going to be hotter, but we know that if we keep on polluting, the average temperature on our planet will increase.

3 In other words, at the beginning God created all species with their generic dispositions, but the development of an individual is left to nature which has the power to generate new features out of the 'package' of generic preformed features implanted by God.

4 The shift from individual to specific pre-formation allows Kant to conceive of the development of reason (our chief capacity as determined by God) as occurring not in the limited time span of an individual life but in the succession of many individual lives as occurring in the history of the species.

5 Species are not fixed entities in the contemporary paradigm and alleged 'specific' dispositions are even less so.

6 There, nature does not push to develop the pre-fixed disposition of the species, but enables humans to live in all areas of the world, then spreads them everywhere through war, and ultimately forces them to enter into (more or less legal) relationships.

7 One may think that it rests on the thought that we need to assume this perspective to make sense of our practical life, but this is clearly not Kant's strategy in *Idea*, where this thought is, at best, never made explicit.

8 It is difficult because it rests on the fulfilment of three conditions: a) a correct conception of the nature of a possible constitution, b) great experience tested in many affairs of the world (e.g. a comparative evaluation of the results brought about by republican and despotic regimes); 3) "above all else a good will prepared to accept the findings of this experience" (IaG, AA 08: 23.26-29).

9 In our case, admittedly, a very complex one, i.e. the totality of human affairs.

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