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# Kant's Idea of History

Angelo Cicatello

## 1.

Is there a philosophy of history in Kant's work? What does "philosophy of history" mean in relation to Kant? In what sense can one use this expression, especially in relation to the Kantian concept of philosophy?

It is important to make this question clear. That is, if we claim to use the expression "philosophy of history", in relation to Kant, without applying it in an extrinsic way, we first need to understand it in relation to the Kantian concept of philosophy. Otherwise, we risk looking for something in Kant's work that occurs in other philosophers, but not really in his work. Therefore, if the aim is to recognise something as a philosophical consideration of historical events by Kant, we will have to do it in terms of the Kantian meaning of philosophy.

Therefore, what is philosophy for Kant? As a preliminary answer to this question, we can recall the definition that Kant uses in the *Critique of pure reason*: «Philosophical cognition is rational cognition from concepts (*Vernunftbegriffen*)».<sup>1</sup>

Obviously, this *dogmatic* notion needs to be understood in terms of the Kantian *critical* approach to rational knowledge. That is, rational cognition from mere concepts must be examined in order to understand the legitimacy of the use of his concepts. Philosophy by Kant can be summarised under this aim – to guarantee the use of certain concepts. While considering, of course, the meaning of *deduction* in the Kantian sense; juridical and not only logical: «Jurists, when they speak of entitlements and claims, distinguish in a legal matter between the questions about what is lawful (*quid juris*) and that which concerns the fact (*quid facti*), and since they demand proof of both, they call the

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1. KrV, A 713 B 741 (transl. in KANT 1998). Citations from Kant's texts refer to volume and page numbers in the Akademie edition (Königlichen Preußischen [later Deutschen] Akademie der Wissenschaften [ed.], 1900-, *Kants gesammelte Schriften* (=AA), Berlin: Georg Reimer [later Walter De Gruyter]), except for references to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (=KrV), which is cited by page numbers in the original first (A) and second (B) editions.

first, that which is to establish the entitlement or the legal claim, the deduction».<sup>2</sup>

Deduction of a concept from a juridical point of view means to adduce clear legal ground for an entitlement to the use of this concept from experience (empirical concepts) or from reason (a priori concepts). As rational knowledge, philosophy must first of all consider the legitimacy of the concepts it uses. Philosophy in general (*überhaupt*) concerns the concepts of causality, substantiality etc. the deduction of which is called «transcendental».

Transcendental deduction means to adduce clear legal ground for an entitlement to the use of a concept, which is not from experience but from reason. We do not find these concepts in mere experience. Experience cannot guarantee their necessity and universality.

In the specific case of a philosophy of history, more particular concepts have to be considered. According to this perspective, the philosophy of history means the possibility to justify the use of concepts that we employ if we claim to have a rational, and not only empirical, knowledge of historical events.

This kind of rational knowledge considers historical events as being parts of a whole, of a process, so it claims to achieve a global vision, an *Idea* of human history, as the title of the well-known Kantian text from 1783 suggests: *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht*.

The term «idea» must be understood in the technical Kantian meaning as a concept whose content, or 'object', cannot be directly experienced. In fact, experience seems to suggest something very different. It suggests we adopt a skeptical position about the possibility of collecting human affairs in a meaningful whole, in an *idea*:

Since human beings do not, in the pursuit of their endeavours, follow merely their instincts as do animals, and yet also do not, as would rational citizens of the world, proceed in accordance with a previously arranged plan, it does not seem possible to present a systematic history of them (as could be given for bees or beavers, for instance).<sup>3</sup>

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2. KrV A 84 B 116.

3. I. Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (=IaG), AA 08: 17 (transl. in KANT 2006c).

In the first instance, the spectacle of world events does not seem to encourage us to believe that a «systematic History» is achievable.

The word «systematic» identifies a cognition which is not «a mere aggregate». As Kant says: «[...] systematic unity is that which first makes ordinary cognition into science, i.e., makes a system out of a mere aggregate of it».<sup>4</sup> And: «I understand by a system [...] the unity of the manifold cognitions under one idea».<sup>5</sup> The notion of a system as uniting the manifold under one idea is understood by Kant in connection with the notion of an end (*Zweck*): «The scientific rational concept thus contains the end and the form of the whole that is congruent with it [with the end]».<sup>6</sup> «System» in Kant is always related to the concept of «end». That is, a system is not a mechanism, but it is similar to a living organism according to which the parts contribute to the life of the whole, and the whole contributes to the growth of the parts. In conclusion, a system is not only organised according to the relationship between cause and effect, but also according to the relationship between middle and end.

In the specific case of the *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Perspective*, the idea of history as a whole is related to the representation of a determinate end. Kant recognises this end in the complete development of human predispositions. Kant articulates this at first through the general schema of biological development of natural beings. As we read in the first proposition: «All of a creature's natural predispositions are destined eventually to develop fully and in accordance with their purpose».<sup>7</sup> Therefore, Kant moves from a more general premise, which refers not only to man, but also concerns the animal condition.

For Kant, the possibility of writing a meaningful history is related to the theme of the development of natural predispositions. On this specific point Kant explicitly recalls a teleological theory of nature: «An organ that is not meant to be used, or an arrangement that does

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4. KrV, A 832 B 860.

5. KrV, A 832 B 860.

6. KrV, A 832 B 860.

7. IaG, AA 08:18.

not achieve its purpose (*Zweck*), is a contradiction in the teleological theory of nature».<sup>8</sup>

The representation of a teleological arrangement of nature is not without problems. Also, in the *IaG*, Kant had not yet developed a structured discourse on teleology, as it would be developed later in the *Critique of Power of Judgement*. However, Kant is already clear in the text on the fact that a teleological theory of nature can only have a regulative use. That is, a teleological reading of nature does not directly express a cognition of nature. Kant does not claim to affirm that the course of nature is teleologically orientated. This proposition cannot have an objective meaning as if it were a description of nature and its objects.

Instead, the teleological theory of nature is needed to lead our knowledge to the maximum possible unification of phenomena. Then, we could say, a teleological representation of nature is not a result of knowledge, but its presupposition. It responds to a theoretical maxim: we *must* presuppose that particular laws of nature can be unified under the idea of a whole and this idea of nature as a whole helps us to find all the particular laws of nature.

Therefore, on the one hand the idea of an intelligent order of the natural world corresponds only to a subjective need of our reason. On the other hand, the same idea is indirectly related to the knowledge of objects, because it is presupposed by this knowledge. In other words: the idea of nature as a whole – as an order directed to an end – is certainly subjective but not arbitrary. Behind all particular cognition there is the *thought* that we move in a world that makes sense. Otherwise knowledge would be like a ship that sets sail in the suspicion that, just out of the harbour, it would be engulfed by a whirlpool.

Moreover, a teleological representation of nature is a viable alternative compared to an even more pretentious reading. In fact, with the mere reference to mechanical laws we could not explain how particular laws of nature are consistent and do not conflict with each other. We cannot explain this, unless we make reference to the idea of a giant random order. And this idea, we could say, is theoretically more pre-

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8. *IaG*, AA 08: 18.

tentious than the idea of a finalistic order. In fact, the order of fortuity requires an unbelievable number of coincidences, an endless series of miracles.

This view of teleology as the most reasonable alternative to the random order, becomes stronger after the *IaG*, in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, especially in relation to the nature of living organisms. They present a kind of relation between the parts and the whole, which would not be understandable through the concept of mechanical causality. A living organism as a whole produces the parts and at the same time it is itself produced from the parts. The form and the dynamic of this reciprocal production requires the concept of finality to be explained:

It might always be possible that in, e. g., an animal body, many parts could be conceived as consequences of merely mechanical laws (such as skin, hair, and bones). Yet the cause that provides the appropriate material, modifies it, forms it, and deposits it in its appropriate place, must always be judged teleologically, so that everything in it must be considered as organised, and everything is also, in a certain relation to the thing itself, an organ in turn.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.

In the *IaG* the teleological theory of nature is less articulated than in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. However, the *First Proposition* already identifies in the biological perspective the basis to construct a teleological reading of History. History is properly understood as the development of man's natural predispositions. Natural predispositions are different in humans than in other species. Rather, we could say, this specific difference makes the development of human predispositions a "historical" one. The *Second Proposition* focuses on this. So, if the *First Proposition* raises the idea of the biological development of animals, the *Second Proposition* points out what is different in humans. That is, history as the development of human beings needs something more than we can find in the biological development of animals: «In the human being (as the only rational creature on earth), those natural

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9. I. Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (=KU), AA 05:377 (transl. in KANT 2002).

predispositions aimed at the use of its reason are to be developed in full only in the species, but not in the individual».<sup>10</sup>

Man's predispositions refer to the use of reason. They can be called rational predispositions. That is, human beings have to learn to use reason. Therefore, the end of history in a philosophical perspective is the whole development of natural predispositions of men to use reason.

What kind of predispositions does Kant mean when he is speaking about the predispositions to use reason? And, which is the highest degree of their whole development?

We are starting to answer the last question: the whole development of rational predispositions is a moralisation of the human being. This means: men having to learn a use of reason that is not merely an instrumental one. The moralisation of the human being corresponds to the use of reason as a capacity to conceive of something which is an end in itself (*Endzweck*), namely something which cannot be used as a means to another end.

As the development of the human predispositions in the use of reason, history is properly aimed to provide objective, that is, social and political conditions that favour the achievement of mankind's moralization.

Here we can recognise a problematic point of Kant's rational reading of history, namely the relationship between civilisation and moralisation, or in simpler terms, the relationship between historical (cultural, political) progress and moral progress. It seems on the one hand that Kant identifies in the former a condition that promotes the latter. However, the relationship between historical and moral progress is more complicated, because moral progress has to do with a revolution in thinking, something more radical that goes beyond progress of culture and civilization. As Kant says in the *Seventh Proposition*:

We are *cultivated* to a great extent by the arts and the sciences. And we are *civilized* to a troublesome degree in all forms of social courteousness and decency. But to consider ourselves to be already fully moralized is quite premature. For the idea of morality is part of culture. But the use of this idea, which leads only to that which resembles

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10. IaG, AA 08:18.

morality in the love of honour and outward decency, comprises only mere civilisation.<sup>11</sup>

The *IaG* focusses particularly on the question of historical and political development. Moral progress is considered more deeply in other places and in particular in the *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* and also in *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Nonetheless, the issue of the relationship between political progress and moral progress is not central to our discussion

Instead, it is important to return to the rational predispositions. Why do they characterise human development as being different to animal development?

In the *Second Proposition* Kant says that reason, rather than instinct, has to be learned. On the one hand «Reason is the ability of a creature to extend the rules and ends of the use of all of its powers far beyond its natural instincts, and reason knows no limits in the scope of its projects».<sup>12</sup> We could say, it is a *metaphysical* ability that goes beyond the sensible attitudes of animals.

But for this purpose, reason needs to be adhered to in order to make attempts. Its path is not predetermined: «Reason itself does not function according to instinct, but rather requires experimentation, practice, and instruction in order to advance gradually from one stage of insight to the next».<sup>13</sup>

As experimentation, practice and instruction need time and an offspring of generations, the progress of the reasoning being cannot be accomplished in an individual man. From this point of view, history can be only the history of the human genus.

Rather than the development of instinctual predispositions, the development of rational predispositions is a learning process. For this reason the history of human beings is not only biological. The acquisitions of a generation do not have hereditary character and passing on progress-results of a generation to the next has to be “culturally” mediated. It could be said that enlightenment is not genetic, but each generation is wild at birth. That is, only through instruction can a

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11. *IaG*, AA 08: 18-19.

12. *IaG*, AA 08: 18-19.

13. *IaG*, AA 08: 19.

generation advance one step and thereby pass this progress on to the next generation.

As Kant says, each new generation «[...] must start again with its ABCs and tread the same path that has already been followed».<sup>14</sup>

### 3.

The thesis of development of rational predispositions provides the key to understanding what Kant's progress means, that is, the central concept of his philosophy of history.

As philosophy of history yearns to justify the use of certain concepts, the concept of progress as the natural human predisposition to progress is precisely at its core.

As a historical and not only biological development, this is not guided by instinct. Reason has to learn, reason has to become reason. That is, human beings have to become cultural, social, political and finally morally aware of their rational predispositions. This awareness can only be reached with the exercise and the use of reason itself.

It is possible to identify a coexistence between two very different elements of Kant's philosophy of history. On one hand reason is the same for each human being and for each generation. On the other, reason needs time to become a reality in the world. Reason is shared by all human beings, like their natural possessions. Unlike natural possessions however, reason needs to be developed historically. Only by developing this natural disposition can humans be worthy of the definition of rational beings (reason in progress).

In the first case we have to deal with a metaphysical consideration of reason as characterising each individual as rational being, in the second case we have to deal with a social and political meaning of reason that asks to be shared in a common space. In the first case reason is in each individual as man, in the second case reason embodies a duty. It means what individuals must do to become citizens of a human community. And the accomplishment of this task needs time, the time of history. Therefore, philosophy of history means trying to establish

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14. I. Kant, *Muthmasslicher Anfang der Menschengeschichte*, AA 08:118, note (transl. in KANT 2006b).

a bridge between both meanings of reason, *the metaphysical one* and *the historical one*.

According to this perspective man must make himself worthy of his being rational. The word “worthy” is very important: man has to accomplish his task in history by himself. Only in this way can he get «rational self-esteem». As Kant says in the *Third Proposition* of *IaG*:

Nature has willed that human beings produce everything that extends beyond the mechanical organization of their animal existence completely on their own, and that they shall not partake in any happiness or perfection other than that which they attain free of instinct and by means of their own reason.<sup>15</sup>

The possession of reason in humans is a match for the lack of other animal features. Therefore, humans need to independently provide their means of sustenance, clothing, outward security, defence, etc. They are not guided by instinct and this favours the development of rational predispositions and self-esteem. Words like «worthy» and «self-esteem» let out traces of morality in the historical progress. Moreover, morality is linked with the metaphysical attempt of rational beings to «produce everything that extends beyond the mechanical organisation of their animal existence». The higher degree of this rational production is the representation of an end, which cannot be made into a means to obtain something else, namely the representation of an end-goal (*Endzweck*).

Therefore, the «extreme economy of Nature» with man's lack of natural equipment may lead to the development of his rational predispositions. The Kantian teleological theory of nature says: nature helps reason.

But, it does not mean that Kant identifies both elements, as if he said, like Hegel, that nature becomes reason, and reason in the history becomes itself. Such philosophy of History does not take place in Kant. In fact, nature and reason are separated in Kant.

The regulative value of his teleology says that nature *can* be read as helping man to develop his rational features, but not that the reason acts

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15. IaG, AA 08:19.

secretly in nature. Nature causes discord, reason asks for concord.<sup>16</sup> Therefore they are very different.

The bonds of the Kantian rational reading of history are thus marked. And overcoming these bonds would mean abusing the teleological theory of nature, which would lead to writing bad metaphysics.

How does nature help human progress?

Antagonism is the means by which nature promotes the development of human predispositions. Kant refers the antagonism to a double tendency of man:

Human beings have an inclination to associate with one another because in such a condition they feel themselves to be more human, that is to say, more in a position to develop their natural predispositions. But they also have a strong tendency to *isolate* themselves, because they encounter in themselves the unsociable trait that predisposes them to want to direct everything only to their own ends and hence to expect to encounter resistance everywhere, just as they know that they themselves tend to resist others<sup>17</sup> (AA 08:21).

Kant calls this double natural tendency «unsociable sociability». In which human community is characterised by competition and rivalry. And this conflicted dynamism incites human beings to develop their talents:

Without those characteristics of unsociability, which are indeed quite unattractive in themselves, and which give rise to the resistance that each person necessarily encounters in his selfish presumptuousness, human beings would live the arcadian life of shepherds, in full harmony, contentment, and mutual love. But all human talents would thus lie eternally dormant, and human beings, as good-natured as the sheep that they put out to pasture, would thus give their own lives hardly more worth than that of their domesticated animals.<sup>18</sup>

Only this antagonistic condition promotes enlightenment, the development from barbarism to culture and as Kant says:

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16. Cf. I. Kant, *Antropologie in pragmatischer Einsicht* (Anth.), AA 07: 322 (transl. in KANT 2006a).

17. IaG, AA 08:21.

18. IaG, AA 08:21.

the beginning of a foundation is laid for a manner of thinking which is able, over time, to transform the primitive natural predisposition for moral discernment into definite practical principles and, in this way, to ultimately transform an agreement to society that initially had been pathologically coerced into a moral whole.<sup>19</sup>

In this quotation Kant identifies the end of development of human dispositions in the transformation of society in a moral whole, and sees the cultural and social progress as a condition of moralisation. That is, only «through continual enlightenment» can an individual become able to recognise their disposition to morality. Kant seems here to supply a key to unlock the meaning of moral progress.

On the one hand morality cannot improve, because it is expression of an *a priori* law. From this point of view morality is timeless and it would not make sense to refer to it as a temporal progress. On the other hand, man needs to learn to recognise his morality. Moral progress can be understood as a development of this capacity to recognise morality in the man. Of course, there remains the problem of a different distribution of responsibilities within the different development degrees of society. As a matter of fact, if a human being needs time to become able to recognise his morality, and the past generations are less aware of their moral capacities than the latter, it could mean the former are also less responsible than the last. That is, moral progress (progress in man's awareness of morality) makes the moral judgement dependent on time. Instead, it seems to be inconsistent with the Kantian theory of moral imputability: the morality of action is not dependent on phenomenal (i.e. temporal) conditions, because it originates from freedom, so neither is a judgement on morality. In fact, according to Kant everyone, even the less morally behaved, is morally responsible, because he has a «primitive natural predisposition for moral discernment»<sup>20</sup> That is, moral content of action is, we could say, *a priori* recognisable. It concerns human being as rational being, and it is not dependent from the determined concept of morality he has.

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19. IaG, AA 08: 21.

20. IaG, AA 08: 21.

4.

However, the *IaG* focusses primarily on historical and political progress as the basis of development for man's rational capacities. This is the relevant matter.

Historical and political progress refers to the creation of «a law-governed organisation of society». Such society allows to harmonise the antagonism of its members with a limitation of freedom, so that freedom of each is consistent with freedom of others.

The act of making freedom of each with freedom of others consistent defines the Kantian principle of right.

In the *Metaphysique of Morals*, Kant says: «Right is [...] the sum of the conditions under which the choice [*Willkür*] of one can be united with the choice of another in accordance with a universal law of freedom».<sup>21</sup> Therefore «[a]ny action is *right* if it can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law, or if on its maxim the freedom of choice of each can coexist with everyone's freedom in accordance with a universal law».<sup>22</sup> The Kantian doctrine of right is founded on this sentence. The concept of right is concerned with the necessity to lead human antagonism among freedoms toward a legal social order, according to them everyone's freedom can and must coexist with the freedom of others. Kant speaks more deeply of a civil society.

What does civil society mean? One can deduce the meaning of civil society from a specific relationship among the elements that constitute the concept of right. More precisely, civil society arises from a right combination of freedom, law and force. The fundamental principles of right are Freedom, Law and Coercion (Force). That is: right lets freedom of choice coexist with everyone's freedom because it limits the freedom of each person to the conditions of a common law. And this limitation is only possible by the constraining power of law. Therefore the concept of right combines freedom, law and force. A *rightful* constitution is dependent on a right combination of these three elements. In the *Antropolgy from a Pragmatic Point of View* Kant gives an icastic synthesis of this topic:

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21. I. Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten* (=MS), AA 06:230 (transl. in KANT 1996).

22. MS, AA 06:230.

- A. Law and freedom without force (anarchy).
- B. Law and force without freedom (despotism).
- C. Force without freedom and law (barbarism).
- D. Force with freedom and law (republic).<sup>23</sup>

Strictly speaking, only the latter can be called a civil constitution.

Man is required to leave the state of nature in order to enter the civil state. This task is directly related to the development of predispositions such as the use of reason. Rational predispositions can only be fully developed in a condition that protects from the danger of violence and war. This condition, in the case of human beings, can only be found in a society that is established on the coercive power of public right.

Men are required to leave the state of nature in order to enter a civil state. They are obliged to do this because the natural condition is configured as a state of war even when there is no war in act. As Kant suggests, a non-rightful condition «[...] is a *condition* of war (of the right of the stronger), even if it is not a condition of actual war and actual attacks being constantly made (hostilities)». <sup>24</sup> That is, independently on whether there is a conflict or not, a non-rightful condition is a state of war, because only the right of the stronger, i.e. violence itself, resolves conflict. And such a condition «[...] is in itself still wrong in the highest degree» <sup>25</sup> even in the absence of an actual conflict.

This poses a decisive challenge about rightfulness and the possibility to enter the civil state. This challenge goes even beyond the survival of the human species. In other terms, entering the civil state does not simply represent a way to take cover from a natural condition. It means leaving a condition in which there is a constant life danger.

By staying in the state of nature, man risks losing humanity regardless of whether life is at threat.

According to Kant the main point is not, as in Hobbes, whether there is a need to avoid violence, which is understood as a natural state of war. Instead the emphasis falls on the legal obligation of man to escape from a condition in which, not even in the absence

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23. Anth., AA 07:330-331.

24. MS, AA 06: 344.

25. MS, AA 06: 344.

of conflict, each one remains, in principle, exposed the arbitrariness of the other without being able to appeal to a judge who exercises his rights. In other terms, outside the law the full development of humanity is at risk. From this point of view, it is irrelevant whether the state of nature is violent or not. In a state without law (*Zustand der Rechtlosigkeit*), humanity has been lost before even lives are lost. Therefore the principle of public right according to which «[...] it must leave the state of nature, in which each follows its own judgment, unite itself with all others»<sup>26</sup> does not result, from a pragmatic logic, since is not a kind of hypothetical imperative of survival – if you do not want to die, you have to enter into a civil state. The principle of public right instead represents a condition by which man knows that he belongs to a human community. According to Kant the true risk is not that men commit injustice against each other, but rather that they commit the greatest injustice by persevering in a state that is not legally founded. Such a state is not simply violent in its effects, but in its essence, because it prevents the very development of human rational predispositions and therefore the condition by which each individual can be said to belong to mankind.

That is, the human genus is not only a natural genus. Each individual can only become worthy of belonging to a human genus as long as he can create a political order of peace. There can be only one history of the human genus from a political point of view, each individual must conquer the right to belong to the human genus. This is only possible when human beings embrace their disposition to use reason in their history. A development of rational dispositions demands the political development of a global order. Hence, the human genus is not solely a natural concept, but rather it is a historical one.

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26. MS, AA 06: 312.

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