

Kant and Herder

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Philosophy of history in the eighteenth century was chiefly concerned to discover principles by which history could be understood “as a whole.” By assuming that Nature forms a system, the great mathematicians and physicists of the seventeenth century had provided universal principles for physical nature. We can “know” the parts, they argued, because we can rightly assume that certain principles hold for nature “as a whole.” Human beings are also part of the natural world and social and moral philosophy became challenged to find a similar lawfulness or patterning in the human historical and cultural realm. The particular type of lawfulness thought appropriate to explanations of human behavior is the lawfulness that unfolds from the pursuit of a common or collective purpose attributed to human nature. Such lawfulness, it was assumed, would give to history a direction that not only orders the phenomena of the past, but also would make history intelligible through the projection of an overall purpose. Contemporary historians do not generally accept the claim that history has an overall purpose and this claim is part of what distinguishes a philosophy of history from historiography proper, or the empirical study of past events.

The year 1784 saw the publication of two comprehensive works on the philosophy of history, Immanuel Kant’s *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* and Johann von Herder’s *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*. Kant, the elder of the two, had been Herder’s teacher and in time, a lively rivalry would develop between them and the supporters of their competing perspectives. While both philosophers are concerned to understand history as a whole and believe that humanity is a species that has a collective purpose, their treatment of the structure and goal of history and the source of its value is radically different. For Kant, the final goal of history is the moral perfection of the species expressed in the ever increasing realization of freedom under law. Culture for Kant is a vehicle for a universal form of moral progress culminating in a federation of free republics in a condition of perpetual peace. Herder, on the other hand, viewed history as the unfolding of the unique qualities of humanity as conditioned by time and place. Each unfolding, each national “genius” or culture, has an intrinsic value of its own not derived from its temporal location. Universal history is the complex pattern created by the complete realization of human potentialities within which each culture makes its unique contribution.

I first provide an exposition of several of Kant's essays followed by a section summarizing contemporary interpretations and criticisms. I then provide a general exposition of Herder's *Reflections* that includes his objections to Kant's philosophy of history followed by a section on interpretations and criticisms of Herder's philosophy of history.

Kant's Philosophy of History

The development of human freedom is the theme of *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose* (1784). Human activity, Kant tells us, occurs within the natural world and therefore must occur in conformity with natural laws. Yet, human actions are "free" and exhibit a type of spontaneity not characteristic of mechanically determined phenomena. For the causal observer the effect of free will on human action makes individual choices appear random and chaotic. Kant's solution to the problem of the lawfulness of human freedom is to adopt the standpoint of the human race as a whole. From this perspective, Kant claims, we will discover a regular movement in the aggregate. Here we are concerned not with the individual, but with the species and the development of its natural capacities. But herein we discern a difference between humanity and other natural species. Humankind is characterized by a far greater dependency of the individual on the species than is the case for animals generally. This is because the capacities associated with the exercise of reason require practice and cannot be fully developed within the life time of a given individual. The only means of rational development is the cultural transmission of skills from one generation to another. The unique impact of reason, which continuously expands the scope of the natural capacities of the species, implies that we must study humankind historically. Cultural development depends upon institutional mechanisms to discipline the competitive antagonisms that are built into the human condition as a consequence of this social interdependence. In particular, it is necessary to establish a form of civil law that will guarantee the greatest possible freedom consistent with the freedom of others so that this competition will proceed in a manner that fully develops these capacities. However, since all law requires a human administrator, and since humans naturally attempt to exempt themselves from its discipline, the task of creating and instituting a perfect civil order is an ideal that can only be approximated.

A further hurdle to be overcome in order to perfect civil society is the establishment of lawful external relations between civil societies or states. The same antagonisms that exist between individuals within civil society bring states into conflict. War drains civil society of the resources it requires to provide for the internal education and development of its citizens. Justice, then, must be pursued on two fronts simultaneously, both within civil societies and between states. Fortunately, Kant argues, the economic forces of development once underway will cause states to desire mediations to prevent war, which is economically disruptive. States will attempt various combinations of internal and external arrangements until they arrive at a condition that is self-sustaining. Kant refers to this self-sustaining condition as a cosmopolitan condition because it is only within a dynamic, interactive, lawful, and peaceful international order that all of

the natural capacities of the species can be fully developed. This, Kant concludes, is the goal of history and the moral destiny of the species.

Clearly, cultural development is an important part of Kant's philosophy of history. But what exactly is Kant's theory of culture and how is it related to humankind's moral destiny? In *Conjectures on the Beginning of Human History* (1786) Kant provides a general theory that clearly separates culture from nature by arguing that culture arises from the exercise of choice made possible by reason. Earlier in the same year Kant published a review of the first two installments of Herder's *Reflections*. In this review Kant criticized Herder for constructing a new form of naturalist metaphysics (knowledge claims that go beyond all possible experience). Herder's goal in these chapters of *Reflections* was to demonstrate the continuity between the history of the universe and the history of humankind. To ground this continuity, Herder postulates invisible forces operating within matter from which living things and reason as a natural power arise. Kant objects that in postulating such forces we are moving beyond the possibility of experience that for Kant is the boundary of all natural explanation. In particular, Kant takes issue with Herder's characterization of reason as emergent from and predetermined by mankind's physical organization. This naturalization of reason was antithetical to Kant's Critical System that depended upon a discontinuity and analytical separation of reason from nature. In *Conjectures* Kant distances himself from Herder by making clear that the history of freedom is distinct from the history of nature and arises from the free choices of human beings. Kant states that his account of "origins" will assume that humans have linguistic and conceptual skills that they have acquired by their own efforts. If such skills were already innate, Kant argues, they would be inherited whereas experience tells us that human beings in every generation must learn these skills anew. Reason for Kant introduces discontinuity with natural instinctive powers by creating artificial desires and modifying human responses accordingly. The successful development of the skills necessary to satisfy increasingly complex desires requires patience, practice, and instruction, making the individual radically dependent upon the group.

While *Conjectures* provides the same general overview of history as *Idea*, this essay lays particular stress on the origin of cultural conditions from human reason, freedom, and choices. This enables Kant to locate responsibility for cultural ills in individual human beings. Cultural choices entail differentiation along a number of dimensions such as labor, class, and economic base, leading to distinctly different cultural forms and ultimately to group conflict. Although for individuals cultural dependence creates burdens, for the species cultural development is from the worse to the better, since these ills can be overcome by progress toward more perfect forms of culture. The essay ends with a call to individuals to contribute toward this progress. The notion that individuals have a duty to contribute toward the progress of the species is implicit in many of Kant's writings but is spelled out with particular clarity in part three of *On The Common Saying*. In this essay Kant argues that we have an inborn duty, as a consequence of membership in a series of generations, to influence posterity in such a way that the cultural and moral progress of the species continues. In *Idea* Kant had maintained that the ideal of morality belongs to culture but must be refined and developed into clear practical principles. Culture then is a vehicle for moral development and contributions toward the moral refinement of culture are part of the general duty of every individual.

Conjectures provides us with a complex view of human development that places the internal perfection of culture and the adjudication of cultural differences that cause conflict at the constantly moving center of moral progress. Peace, Kant tells us, will require a perfect culture and a perfect culture will require the full development of mankind's capacities including the fullest possible differentiation of cultures. Here there is an overlap in the visions of Kant and Herder. Full cultural differentiation is seen by both as inherently valuable and as part of a cosmopolitan destiny. However, Kant believes that the adjudication of these differences and their ultimate flourishing in a cosmopolitan condition requires the development of institutional legal orders at both the civil and international levels. Herder, as I shall explain in a later section, was suspicious of legally coercive mechanisms as a vehicle for cultural advancement and viewed the state as a degenerate, rather than a progressive development. Kant's theory of culture in *Conjectures* thus leads back to the philosophy of history articulated in *Idea*, where the problem of a perfect civil society and the problem of a just international order are interconnected.

Kant's mature philosophy of history cannot be fully understood without reference to *Perpetual Peace* (1795), which lays out the complete legal institutional structure necessary to achieve the cosmopolitan condition that is the ultimate goal of history. Here Kant repeats some of the themes of *Idea*. Peace will require the institution of republican governments and a federation of republics dedicated to the preservation of the security and freedom of each state. What is new in *Perpetual Peace* is Kant's addition of a third level of law that he calls "cosmopolitan right." All states entering into the republican federation must accept the requirements of a cosmopolitan right that Kant terms hospitality. Hospitality forbids hostility toward anyone who merely attempts intercourse with their neighbors. Such intercourse can be refused, but it cannot be attended with violence nor can the traveler ever be unnecessarily harmed or endangered. Hospitality does not automatically lead to permanent residence or to privileged terms of commerce. These must all be negotiated. But Kant insists that the principle of hospitality is a form of right, a matter of law and not of etiquette. This third article guarantees that a republican federation will enjoy an open form of communication and not become an aggregate of "walled" communities. Cosmopolitan right is then the institutional precursor of the cosmopolitan condition and fills out an additional prerequisite of moral progress.

Criticisms of Kant's Philosophy of History

The social and cultural interdependence of human beings is a constant theme of Kant's philosophy of history. Human beings are culturally formed and socially dependent creatures who must build the institutional structures of republican governments and the international federation under cosmopolitan law. The essays on philosophy of history are consistent and mutually self-supporting in their identification of humanity's moral and historical goal. Nonetheless, Kant's philosophy of history has long been considered marginal to his critical system and has been criticized as incompatible with his ethical theory on two general grounds. The first is that moral development in history implies a moral inequality between generations violating the postulate of the

moral equality of all humanity. The second is that moral progress in history implies moral causality in the phenomenal (empirical) world violating the postulate that morality has a strictly noumenal, non-empirical, character.

The claim that moral progress in history is incompatible with Kant's ethical principles has a long lineage going back to Emil von Fackenheim's 1956 article "Kant's Concept of History." In that essay, Fackenheim argued that given Kant's definition of rationality, a rational (moral) man must be free and responsible without qualification. He concluded that historical development either qualifies moral freedom, or that morality to the extent that it is possible does not develop historically. From this line of reasoning, it follows that Kant's claims concerning the moral development of the species violate the moral equality of all humans because earlier generations would be either not free, and therefore not moral agents, or, lacking full moral development, morally inferior. Furthermore, history would produce unfairness because earlier generations would contribute toward a progress that they would not enjoy. While this implies a hedonistic goal that Kant would not endorse, it nonetheless appears to devalue these earlier generations by valuing their contributions only as a means to the final moral goal. This was Herder's view of the implications of Kant's *Idea* and is also implicit in the complaint of Hannah Arendt (1982) that Kant's conception of moral progress violates human dignity.

Other commentators, such as William Galston (1975), have focused on the apparent contradiction between Kant's definition of moral freedom as a non-empirical reality and his claim that morality is causal in shaping the historical order. According to Galston, Kant does not sufficiently identify the source of moral progress in the historical order. In addition, Galston maintains that Kant goes so far as to indicate that historical progress can be purely the result of natural causes or even the consequence of "evil" in the form of unsociable sociability. Naturalist explanations Galston concludes cannot, on Kant's own terms, carry the weight of the claim that there is moral progress in history. These objections arise from the apparently dogmatic (metaphysical) character of the claims made in *Idea* concerning nature's substantive (purposive) and causal role in the historical process. Allen Wood (1998) has since argued that Kant's later development of the subjective status of teleological judgment (judgments about nature's purposes) in the *Critique of Judgement* (1790) rectified the dogmatic character of Kant's naturalist assertions in *Idea*. From the perspective of the *Critique of Judgement*, statements about nature's purpose are a heuristic device that enables observers to interpret holistic patterns on analogy with human purposes. Nature's purposes whatever their explanatory value do not have the objective or causal status of physical laws and so do not violate human freedom. Along these lines, Paul Guyer (1995) has argued that Kant's references to the "cunning of nature" when describing the creation of social institutions must be interpreted as shorthand for the use by human agents of natural knowledge about the human condition in designing social institutions to support the achievement of moral goals. Under this interpretation it is humans in their exercise of freedom and not physical nature driving historical development. Yirmiahu Yovel (1980) has provided further support for the proposition that human agency is the principle factor driving historical development in Kant's philosophy of history. He argues that on Kant's own terms, with the post-enlightenment appearance of reason, history must be interpreted to be the work of human agents capable of and responsible for the

creation of institutional mechanisms designed to promote moral progress. Sharon Anderson-Gold (2001) has maintained that in *The Contest of the Faculties* (1798) Kant develops a theory of historical “signs” intended to represent agent produced moral causality in the historical order. Contrary to Galston, she claims that Kant does identify a specific source of moral progress in the disinterested public judgments that affirmed the republican principles of justice espoused by the French Revolution. By demonstrating moral sympathy for the (moral) principles of the revolution, the public according to Kant has exhibited its own “disposition.” Having exhibited a moral disposition toward the goals of human freedom and equality, Kant concludes that humanity can be the source of its own improvement and on that basis, moral progress can be predicted over the course of the species’ (indefinite) future history.

Early criticisms of Kant’s philosophy of history that focused on presumed incompatibilities with his ethics insufficiently recognized that Kant regards individuals as having genuine moral duties to contribute to the progress of humanity and that these contributions are both part of the history of freedom and of the individual’s own moral good. These duties, Anderson-Gold (2001) argues, tie the individual’s moral good to the social good of the species. Kant’s postulation of duties to contribute to historical progress are expressions of the duty to contribute to the highest good which he claimed to be the ultimate object or final end of the moral law. While the concept of the highest good remains controversial in Kant’s ethical system, Yovel (1995) has demonstrated that this concept necessarily and systematically brings Kant’s ethical ideals into the realm of human history. Kant’s moral philosophy then necessitates his philosophy of history through the conception of the highest good, rather than being incompatible with it.

Herder’s *Reflections* and His Objections to Kant’s Philosophy of History

Herder’s *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind* (1784–1791) consists of 20 books published over a period of 7 years. The scope of this work that grounds universal history in cosmology is unusual even by eighteenth-century standards. Herder begins with an overview of man’s place within the solar system. He then narrates the natural history from which the shape of the earth, the atmosphere and the distribution of the lands and oceans of the earth has arisen. This “origin” story is intended to provide the background conditions from which variations in the histories of nations will later be drawn. The unique qualities of humanity, Herder tell us, follow from the unique physical organization of the species, in particular its upright posture. From this organization flow reason and ultimately even language and religion. Culture, for Herder, is continuous with nature, and nature has as her purpose the creation of the most variegated forms of life possible. Following these general cosmological and geophysical speculations, Herder provides detailed accounts of the manifold cultures that have occupied the earth leading up to modern European civilization. In this sweeping account of universal history, Herder gives new valuation and status to the culture of primitive peoples. Cultural historiography and not merely military or political historiography takes center stage.

Herder believed passionately in the individuality of each *Volk* (people). The representations of every people are uniquely shaped by their physical environment, history and traditions, which he referred to collectively as “climate.” The shepherd, Herder tells us, perceives nature with different eyes than those of the fisherman or the hunter. The unique circumstances of each people led Herder to maintain that measures of happiness and perfection were internal to each culture. Individuals must find their fulfillment within their cultural traditions. Reason is found then in a social consensus within a given tradition. Herder rejected the enlightenment notion of reason as a source of universal standards, for this implied the possibility of external criticism of culture from a higher or privileged position. In his theory of historical understanding Herder insisted on an interpretation and evaluation of cultures based upon internal standards of value. He even accepted that these standards were incommensurable but believed that they could be penetrated by a sympathetic identification (*Einfühlung*).

The historian then looks not to external standards but seeks to reenact events empathetically by “feeling” his or her way into the circumstances of others. This form of cultural relativity led Herder to reject the notion of history as a story of progress in which prior stages of cultural development were mere means to the development of later stages. In particular, Herder rejected Kant’s notion of the coercive political state as a necessary condition for historical progress. For Herder peoples constituted the natural basis of the state. Modern expansionist states had destroyed these natural arrangements and replaced them with artificial groupings. In Herder’s view, the modern state was responsible for the condition of oppression and war. For Herder the modern state represented a degenerate condition that tended to deform and destroy authentic forms of culture. Because he viewed authentic cultures as the proper basis of self-governance, Herder emphatically rejected Kant’s claim that man was an animal that needed a master, calling this an “evil” proposition.

Herder’s disagreement with Kant’s philosophy of history is largely driven by disagreement with his moral philosophy and its underlying dualisms. Despite broad agreement with Kant on the cultural and historical qualities of humanity, Herder makes clear that he cannot accept the overall evaluative framework that structures Kant’s philosophy of history. He strongly rejected universal moral values insisting on the intrinsic value of each cultural form. Yet, paradoxically, despite cultural variety, Herder also insisted on the unity of the species. Despite his rejection of an external linear progress, Herder did believe in a form of progressivism that flowed from his general conception of nature as an active vital force striving to produce durable forms of life. Despite their unique core qualities, Herder recognized that cultures influence one another both chronically and diachronically, thus interpenetrating and building upon one another.

Unlike Kant’s view of nature as a “step mother,” who cares little for humanity and uses antagonisms to force humans to produce their own good, Herder conceived nature as nurturing. He rejected the need for any universal institutional mechanism for eradicating conflict arguing for a more direct application of the natural principles of justice in the relations between states ending exploitation, domination, and oppression. According to Herder, evils oppose and destroy one another until only utility, or that which serves the general welfare of humanity survives. Reason Herder tells us may be disturbed, but it does not exist as an autonomous force external to particular traditions. Rather, embodied in traditions, reason is wholly within individuals and

peoples, transmitted and even “propagated” as peoples interact. Justice is the balance and equilibrium of active powers contending within determinate limits. Thus defined, reason and justice are natural propensities providing the overall order without which the “species would cease to be.” Humanity is then the particular combination of reason and equity achieved in the various conditions under which the species has existed and will continue to exist into the future.

For Herder, authentic cultures are not imperialistic, and he saw no contradiction despite his rejection of universal values in condemning Rome for destroying the ancient balance of nations, claiming that under Rome “a World bled to death.” Even with the example of an imperialist culture before his eyes Herder does not give way to pessimism but trusting to nature’s purpose he assumes that new nations will rise from the ashes and each will continue to seek their own maximum perfection. Thus, Herder claims, nature’s purpose is accomplished in each individual because each people are all that they can be in their time and place.

Herder rejects Kant’s postulation of a universal and autonomous moral realm. Still, he nonetheless accepts that humankind has a purposive inner direction displayed through cultural formations, which do in effect build upon one another and tend toward the development of what for Herder appears to be a moral goal. He calls this moral goal *Humanitat* which despite violent oscillations is best grasped as the production of ever more refined, mutually reinforcing and harmonious cultural forms. While rejecting any simple hierarchy of cultures, Herder’s universal historiography terminates in modern European civilization, which he regards as fortunately situated by virtue of its rivers and trade to develop its own peculiar genius of “industry” in the arts and sciences. What this new cultivation will mean for universal history is not yet clearly spelled out but Herder clearly invests great hope in the contribution that modern Europe is yet to make. In many respects *Reflections* is intended as a pedagogic tool for the education of modern Europeans.

Criticisms of Herder’s Philosophy of History

In addition to being influential in his own time, Herder is credited with numerous significant intellectual contributions to many modern disciplines. Because of his insistence on the significance of language in the life of a people, Herder is considered a contributor to the modern philosophy of language and comparative linguistics. Through his sympathetic appraisals of the mythology and poetry of primitive peoples, he strongly influenced the development of aesthetic theory as well as cultural anthropology.

Perhaps Herder’s greatest contributions are to the transformation of historiography. F. M. Barnard (2003) credits Herder (along with Vico) for being among the first to grasp that historiographic explanation is fundamentally different from natural causality. In rejecting mechanistic modes of causation as inappropriate for historiography, Herder is one of the earliest proponents of viewing historiographic explanation as concerned primarily with the “inner” qualities of events, grounded in the reasons, motivations and values of historical actors. Otherwise, Herder’s historiographic explanations are

multi-causal, referring to genetic, geographic, and cultural forces. Ultimately, Herder does not distinguish sharply between external causation and (internal) human agency in history, leaving the nature of historiographic explanation embedded in a naturalist (though not mechanistic) framework.

Herder's emphasis on the intrinsic value of all cultural forms and his insistence on a historiographic methodology that denies an external evaluative framework are among the sources of a profound change in philosophy of history that led to the rise of historicism. Friedrich Meinecke (1972) considered Herder one of the originators of this new historiographic perspective that would emphasize the individuality of historical events and jettison the idea of an unchanging human nature. Herder contributed to the rise of historicism by insisting on the individuality of cultural forms and their contribution to the deep structure of human existence. The philosopher and intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin (1976) finds Herder's most original contribution to be in his explorations of the meaning of "belonging" to a group. According to Berlin, in this respect Herder exceeded the understanding of his contemporaries and preceded modern social psychology. Herder is most radical in his insistence on the incommensurability of cultural values. Berlin detects an inconsistency between that fundamental commitment and Herder's attempt to see in human history a general advance (*Fortgang*) or overall purpose of development that he called *Humanität*. F. M. Barnard (2003) also noted this inconsistency stating that Herder leaves unexplained how distinct cultural forms in any sense "belong to" an historical process that should exhibit a universal pattern. According to Barnard, Herder cannot explain how the progressive changes that over time result in the human quality he deems *Humanität* are related to the morally distinct cultures that are the specific products of the historical process.

Criticisms of Herder's philosophy of history flow directly from the qualities that are most unique and admired in his work, such as his rejection of dichotomies, his use of analogies, and his poetic use of metaphors. What appear on the surface as contradictions may reflect this mixed mode of argumentation. Perhaps the best way to understand Herder's apparently unsystematic approach to the manifold materials that profoundly interested him is to see his style as driven by a strategic use of rhetoric, intended to shake up and shake loose what he perceived to be a misguided a priori conceptualizations in Kant's philosophy and in much of the philosophy of the Enlightenment. It is not that Herder rejected the mathematical sciences or the possibility of enduring human values. He simply saw too much richness in history and the human condition to force either into analytical categories. If Herder's methodology was not precise, it may reflect his attempt to capture the emergent quality of the life sciences that he sought to position as the foundation of the human sciences.

While Herder's naturalism remains problematic, it has, nonetheless, also been a source of independent methodological orientation for the human sciences. Having set the human sciences apart from the mathematical and physical sciences, Herder has provided inspiration to subsequent generations of culturally oriented researchers, who have gone on to construct independent methodologies from which much original and insightful analysis of the human condition has arisen.

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