



Historical trends and human futures¹

Onora O'Neill

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Cambridge, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA, UK

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Cosmopolitanism
Historical trends
Ideas of Reason
Immanuel Kant
Philosophy of history
Optimism
Pessimism
Progress
Unsocial sociability

ABSTRACT

Kant's essay *Idea for a universal history* with a cosmopolitan purpose differs in deep ways from standard Enlightenment views of human history. Although he agrees with many contemporaries that unsocial sociability can drive human progress, he argues that we know too little about the trends of history to offer either metaphysical defence or empirical vindication of the perfectibility of man or the inevitability of progress. However, as freely acting beings we can contribute to a better future, so have grounds for committing ourselves to human progress even if we cannot guarantee or know that it will continue indefinitely. As Kant sees, it, human progress is better seen as a practical assumption—an Idea of Reason—than as a theoretical claim.

© 2008 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

When citing this paper, please use the full journal title *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science*

1. Introduction

In the winter of 1784 Kant published two essays on politics, history and the future of mankind. These essays are 'Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan purpose', (Kant, 1991c [1784]) and 'An answer to the question: What is enlightenment?' (Kant, 1991a [1784b]). They are the earliest works in which Kant sets out some of the distinctive implications of the critical philosophy for politics, history and the future of mankind. Yet apart from some short, occasional works (Kant, 1991g [1785]; 1996 [1785]; 1991b [1786]), Kant then turned aside from these themes for the better part of a decade. He resumed intensive work on the trend of history and the future of mankind only in his late works of the 1790s. Arguably he found it necessary to go further towards completing a critique of reason, and in particular of practical reason, before returning to what he had come to see as the *practical* questions of history and politics.

The two essays of 1784 have often been read as occasional pieces that rehearse widely accepted Enlightenment views. 'What is enlightenment?' has been read as a limited defence of press freedom, marred by an embarrassing partial endorsement of enlightened despotism. 'Idea for a universal history' has been read as a conventional eighteenth-century account of the social dynamics by which conflict can lead to human progress. As I read them, both essays develop distinctive themes and arguments that are deeply rooted in Kant's critical philosophy and both are in many ways remote from conventional Enlightenment thought.

I have explored what I take to be the deeper themes of 'What is enlightenment?' elsewhere.² The essay has often been read as a rather tepid defence of freedom of speech, which concedes too much to 'enlightened' despotism. As I read it, the essay seeks to articulate central requirements for a critical conception of reason. In it Kant distinguishes 'public' and 'private' uses of reason in a distinctive way that does not hinge on the size or composition of the actual

E-mail address: oon20@cam.ac.uk

¹ Note on the texts: references to Kant's writings use the date of a contemporary translation into English, with the date of first publication given in square brackets. Page references use the standard Prussian Academy volume and page numbers (Kant, 1900–, cited as Ak.). However, where a translation does not include them, the page number of the translation is given, with sufficient indication of the location of the passage to make it simple to find it in other editions and translations (for example, references to 'Idea for a universal history' include the identifier IUH and the number of the 'Proposition' as well as a page number). Where short titles are in conventional use, I use them; where translations of particular passages seem to me unconvincing I have offered my own version, and given the German text in a footnote.

² For example, in O'Neill (1989), Pt. I; (2004a,b).

audiences addressed, but on characteristics of the reasons that are offered.

In Kant's view, 'private' reasoning is restricted, in that it relies on but does not vindicate putative authorities, such as the edicts of state or church, or the claims of happenstantial desires or opinions. It can therefore offer reasons only to those who accept the presumed authority, and any conclusions it reaches are conditional on that acceptance. This account of 'private' reasoning explains why Kant classifies the communication of those acting in an official capacity as 'private': they offer reasons only to others who accept their 'authority'. As Kant sees it, private reasoning is a partial and incomplete form of reasoning that cannot provide reasons to 'the world at large', however widely it is disseminated.

Kant contrasts such 'private' uses of reason with 'public' reasoning that is not premised on any unargued source of authority, so could in principle be relevant to 'the world at large', that is to any reasoning being. The central claim of the essay—that Enlightenment is not (as others depict it) a matter of the growth and spread of knowledge, but of the emergence of autonomy—is to be understood in this light. Kant does not view autonomy as a matter of individual choice (that understanding of the term became prominent only in the second half of the twentieth century), but as a feature of principles that could be principles for all, that are both law-like in *form* and universal in *scope*. Autonomous principles (for action, and arguably also for thought) could be principles for all. 'What is enlightenment?' may be a short work, but it engages with the deepest themes of Kant's work.

'Idea for a universal history', on which I shall concentrate in this article, is only slightly longer, but it too engages with very deep themes of Kant's work. It develops some of the implications of Kant's claims about the limits of knowledge for the claims we can make about history, politics and the future of mankind. Rather than claiming that human progress is written into a divine plan, or can be read off historical trends, or that it can be inferred from what we know of human nature—all of them widely accepted views at the time—Kant argues that human progress must be seen as grounded in practical rather than theoretical considerations, in human freedom rather than in empirical evidence.

2. The evidence of history

'Idea for a universal history' begins by pointing to a seeming tension between human freedom and the possibility of knowing whether human destiny is one of progress, regress or endless oscillation. This tension calls into question the very possibility of discovering laws of social change that support an account of 'universal history'.

The problem is not that history reveals no regularities. Kant notes that although human action is freely chosen, we can find law-like historical trends when we consider matters 'on a large scale' (Kant, 1991c [1784], p. 41; IUH, introductory paragraph). He points out that although marriages, births and deaths (not all deaths!) reflect human choices, underlying demographic trends

are often law-like over considerable periods. So the fact that history is woven out of freely chosen human action does not *of itself* show that it is uncoordinated or random, or demonstrate that we can say nothing about progress or decline, about human destiny or purpose. However, the observable regularities are not enough to support *universal* claims about the human future. Kant concludes his introductory remarks by pointing out that

Since men neither pursue their aims purely by instinct, as the animals do, nor act in accordance with any integral, prearranged plan like rational cosmopolitans, it would appear that no law-governed history of mankind is possible (as it would be, for example, with bees or beavers). (Ibid., pp. 41–42)

There are two distinct reasons why historical trends cannot reveal the underlying character or trend of human history as a whole. In the first place, the evidence within any period is often variable. Secondly, even where it is not, the trends of a given period may not last indefinitely.³ Consequently, the evidence available to us underdetermines universal claims. It points reliably neither to progress nor to decline, nor to indefinitely prolonged oscillation, so cannot answer the question *whether the human race is progressing*.⁴ If we are to answer this question we must rely on other considerations, or use other methods.

This epistemological caution sets Kant apart from optimists who think that history reveals progress, from pessimists who claim that it reveals decline, and from those who think that it reveals neither progress nor decline, but only Sisyphean oscillation.⁵ 'Idea for a universal history from a cosmopolitan point of view' begins from the claim that surface trends of history do not allow us to judge whether human destiny leads to progress, to decline or to neither.

Yet despite casting doubt on the prospects of finding historical evidence for the long term course of history Kant proposes to look 'behind this senseless course of human events' (*widersinnigen Gänge menschlicher Dinge*) and hopes to find a guiding principle or thread (*Leitfaden*) to provide the 'Idea for a Universal History' (ibid., p. 42). As elsewhere in his writings, Kant shifts his approach when a question resists frontal attack.

3. Ideas of Reason and the teleology of nature

The most significant divergence between Kant and other Enlightenment thinkers who wrote on human progress therefore lies not in his specific claims about the dynamics of progress—on this he is insightful, but in many ways quite conventional—but in the types of arguments he offers in support of those views. Kant does not offer a metaphysical or theological argument to show that this is the best of all possible worlds, or that progress is inevitable. He also does not claim that history reveals or demonstrates progress. Nor does he argue that human history regresses, or that it oscillates. His most basic claim is negative: neither metaphysical proof, nor theological argument, nor adequate empirical evidence for any of these views is available.

³ Kant's thought is as much mathematical as philosophical. In IUH, 8, he puts the point as follows: 'this cycle of events seems to take so long a time to complete, that the small part of it traversed by mankind up till now does not allow us to determine with certainty the shape of the whole cycle, and the relation of its parts to the whole. It is no easier than it is to determine, from all hitherto available astronomical observations, the path which our sun with its whole swarm of satellites is following within the vast system of the fixed stars; although from the general premise that the universe is constituted as system and from the little that has been learnt by observation, we can conclude with sufficient certainty that a movement of this kind does exist in reality' (Kant, 1991c [1784], p. 50). The point may be put more cheerfully in a Limerick: 'A trend is a trend is a trend / but we never know where it may bend. / It may suddenly swerve / Or cautiously curve / Or asymptote on to the end' (the Limerick may be sung to the tune of 'I went to the animal fair').

⁴ Kant formulates the problem of human perfectibility and historical progress in these words at various junctures. See 'A renewed attempt to answer the question: Is the human race continually improving?' (Kant, 1991f [1798]) which forms part of *The conflict of the faculties*. He also returned to these themes in 'On the common saying: That may be correct in theory but it is of no use in practice' (Kant, 1991d [1793]). For recent discussion, see Williams (2003); Ellis (2005).

⁵ In 1783 Moses Mendelssohn, to whose work Kant responds here and elsewhere, had argued that human history alternately progresses and declines. See Mendelssohn (1983 [1783]).

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1160706>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1160706>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)