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Human Nature as a Means of the Development of Reason; A Critique of Kant's state of Human Nature in "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim"

Kant's perspective of history is through a teleological lens, meaning that, in Kant's view, history, when taken as a whole, has purpose that serves as a function of its end, rather than as sequences of inconsequential events. When considered by this definition, history becomes the process for developing human reason over time, which means that the essence of human history is actually the maturation of reason. Through propositions such as the natural predispositions of people, the contextual growth of those predispositions, the conditions of humanity and reason, and the role of society in the growth of humanity's predispositions, Kant argues that the purpose of *unsociability* is revealed to be the driving force of reason in the context of a free will society. However, the claim of *unsociability* is also one regarding the state of human nature, that in some ways, the two are the same. This essay aims to critique Kant's description of human nature as combative and self-interested in favour of something more magnanimous, which would also contest his position of *unsociability* being the driving factor for the development of reason. If humanity is not self-interested to the degree of inflicting harm on others, as Kant suggests, then it must be something more benevolent that urges forward the development of reason and therefore the creation of society.

Within Kant's first proposition, Kant outlines the reasons why he thinks that the nature of people is primarily the utility of reason. He states that "all natural predispositions of a creature

are determined sometime to develop themselves completely and purposefully” (Kant 1784, 8:18). This means that through the law of nature, humans have a predeterminate purpose to develop their reason, as is in accordance with their nature of being. Kant later goes on to say that, because nature did not give to us the “horns of the steer, nor the claws of the lion, nor the teeth of the dog, but merely... hands” (8:20), it must be that humanity was meant to use reason, as no other animals can, to “make life agreeable” for themselves (8:20). From this we can further extrapolate that the reverse is also true, that animals, due to their predispositions given to them by nature, must do what their faculties have been intended for: to forage, to hunt, to defend. The essence of this section of Kant’s argument is to establish that, because of the way we are, it must be that we are, at least conditionally, rational beings who must use our reason, in the same way that a fish may use its fins, or a turtle its shell. However, reason is not like other qualities found in other parts of life, and therefore requires more time to develop.

Kant states in his second proposition that “In the human being... those predispositions whose goal is the use of his reason were to develop completely only in the species, but not in the individual” (Kant 1784, 8:19). This is also a probable cause as to why Kant views history as synonymous with the development of human reason- because it requires an expanse of time which precludes the mastery thereof in one lifetime. Unlike the use of certain characteristics such as claws or horns, which serve only the being in possession of them, reason’s utility and breadth can be distributed and analyzed over time, by separate individuals. Kant describes this phenomena, saying that “Reason itself does not operate instinctively, but rather needs attempts, practice and instruction in order gradually to progress from one stage of insight to another” (8:19). Confined by the limits of the human design, reason can only be nurtured by the germ, that is to say, only a little bit at a time. Due to this, multiple, successive generations of

knowledge sharing need to occur in this respect of reason. Again, Kant builds on this notion in his third proposition. “Since nature willed that humans must create every aspect of their lives outside of animal instinct by themselves, through the use of faculties distributed to them by nature, which would be reason and “free will grounded on it” (8:20), it appears that its aim for humans is to endeavor for themselves, the labor by which they produce the foundation for their next generation to continue building upon. Since reason can only be developed through generations of insight, which could be interpreted to be the culmination of collaborative efforts, as Kant claims, the issue of conflict arises.

With the requirement of continuity being a prerequisite for the development of reason, through the generational succession of knowledge sharing, the premise of society becomes an essential condition to history- the development of reason. However, Kant, in his fourth proposition, outlines a key point of note in response to this: people have “a great propensity to *individualize* (isolate)” themselves (Kant 1784, 8:21). Kant describes this phenomena as a form of “antagonism” (8:21). However, this antagonism is what Kant says is the very mechanism by which the fruition of reason is moved forward within society. As people have a desire to serve their own needs and desires, or to “direct everything so as to get [their] own way”, at the resistance of others, for people understand that others too desire their own successes through private machinations, so too do people wish to “obtain rank... among [their] fellows” (8:21). Kant defines this occurrence as the “unsociable sociability of human beings” (8:21); the simultaneous condition of wanting social clout amongst people “whom [one] cannot *stand*, but also cannot *leave alone*” (8:21). The ambition to stand apart within a group of others is what births culture. The conflict of each other’s greed and tyranny drives the culmination of insight, resulting in the development of the arts and sciences. Over generations, the insight created by

forebears is built upon by scions, a process Kant gives example to: “Thus, it did produce a *Kepler*, who subjected the the eccentric paths of planets in an unexpected way to determine laws, and a *Newton*, who explained these laws from a universal natural cause” (8:18). There is a great issue within these claims: Kant seems to entirely disregard the philosophical notions of a *cosmopolitan* perspective to assert *unsociability*.

Kant argues in his fifth proposition that a “civil society universally administering right” is the greatest problem humanity faces in its endeavors of reason (Kant 1784, 8:22). As humans, by their nature, are also self-interested, Kant states that people “must enter into this condition of coercion” as otherwise people “can not long subsist next to one another in wild freedom” (8:22). The coercion Kant speaks of is “a perfectly *just civil constitution*” (8:22). The argument in this proposition presupposes that people cannot survive long outside of a society with good constitutional law, as their free will would drive them to harm others for their own selfish purposes, which undermines the *aim* of nature’s predispositions of humanity. Thus, due to the *unsociability* of people, we gain the necessary and sufficient requirements to subject ourselves to the coercion of law, which creates the best conditions for the collaborative development of reason to exist. However, as a citizen with a cosmopolitan perspective, one would act with the moral wherewithal to care for, out of duty born by cosmopolitan ideology, one’s community members. In a cosmopolitan setting, the world is one’s community. Within this ideology, a just society would not come from a need to restrict one’s individual freedoms, which Kant argues the lack of restriction (law) would result in the harming of others for one’s own greed, but rather from a sense of moral duty. How can *unsociability*, a claim that every person is only worried about their own interests and accolades to the point of harming others, lead to an understanding

of a global society wherein a duty to act also in other's interests exists? The answer is that it cannot.

Corroborating with his previous proposition, in his sixth proposition, Kant claims that "the human being is an animal, which, when it lives among others of its species, has need of a master" (Kant, 1784, 8:23). Kant argues that this is because an individual will misuse his freedoms and exempt himself from the rule of law while simultaneously willing for laws to limit the freedoms of everyone (8:23). Ergo, individuals need a master "who breaks [their] stubborn will and necessitates [them] to obey a universally valid will with which everyone can be free" (8:23). Kant further goes on to say that this master must, of course, come from the "human species" but that, due to the fact that the master is indeed also a human, this position becomes corruptible by their nature, as it is the same as the human in need of a master (8:23). Only when one has the "correct concepts of the nature of a possible constitution, great experience practiced through many courses of life and beyond this a good will that is prepared to accept it" will the solution to this issue exist (8:23-8:24). However, there continues to be errors in this thought.

The notion of the "correct concepts of the nature of a possible constitution" references the laws that preside over a "civil society universally administering right" (8:22). As Kant would call it: a perfectly just civil constitution. However, a just constitution- a moral constitution- cannot arise from the aim of reducing an individual's capacity to harm others in the seeking of one's own benefit; it must be through magnanimity, wherein the aim is for individual's to purposefully build on and *with* each other's endeavors in a consideration of communal success where a just and moral constitution can arise. While a moral constitution would intend to eliminate harms done to others by individuals in the seeking of personal gain, its focus would not be to do so.

Rather, a cosmopolitan society with a moral constitution would focus on collaboration, the effort by which reason is propelled forward from the germ into fruition. The essence of community, a central tenet to cosmopolitan ideology, is that success is shared amongst its members. As previously stated, due to the short nature of human lives, reason can only mature in the setting of the species. That is to say, reason can only mature through collaborative efforts. If a “just” constitution is focussed on limiting the harm one can do to others while that individual works toward the maturation of reason, it insinuates that, due to the selfish and isolationist nature of the human being, their work as an individual can only be meaningfully built upon when they can no longer seclude their work. This is an inefficient development of reason. However, since communal collaboration is more efficient in terms of developing reason as a species, as it can occur in one lifetime rather than after one, then it would be the rational conclusion to adopt in relation to societal governance in the form of a just and moral constitution. Kant infers this notion in the second condition for a solution to the problem of a master being human and also just in itself.

When Kant references “great experience practiced through many courses of life”, he is alluding to the previous point regarding the collaborative effort of developing reason, albeit the less efficient route. With this claim, Kant posits that only through analyzing multiple lifetimes wherein one was a master, or in most cases a leader of government, can an individual be a truly just one. In part, we use this system today in the study of history: who were the leaders of this time at this place and what did they do right? While this system may garner results it is also inefficient due to its requirement of someone having done the *right* thing in the past. It also precludes the consideration of current affairs. However, we can also encounter the more efficient system, wherein we have active collaboration in one lifetime, in the societies of today.

Government leaders can look not only at each other to see what they do justly, but also at perhaps smaller ministerial positions to encounter just administration. This is a system that embraces the cosmopolitan ideology that Kant originally aims to posit.

Lastly, in his third condition to a solution on the matter of a master being a human but also just in itself, Kant concedes that they must also possess a “good will that is prepared to accept it” - the *it* being the two previous conditions (Kant 1784, 8:24). However, this is incongruous with his stance of human nature. If, by their nature, human beings are self interested to the point of harming others, and that without the coercion of law humanity would not be able to “subsist next to one another in wild freedom” (8:22), then a human being simply cannot have a good will. If an individual’s most tenable characteristic is that they are selfish to the degree of external harm, then it would be paradoxical for them to also possess a goodwill that could recognise through their reason the efficacy of collaborative effort and communal success and therefore set aside personal gain in order to achieve a greater communal one. However, if, as this essay proposes, human nature is rooted in something more benevolent than Kant suggests, then there is no paradox, as good will must exist with a good nature. By solving this paradox, in the recognition of something like a good human nature and the rejection of Kant’s position, the system perpetuating the development of reason becomes more efficient, while also accounting for limits and inconsistencies within the original theory. This conclusion further contributes to the latter parts of Kant’s argument for the development of reason in a society with a cosmopolitan aim.

Kant argues that the final form of a society is a “moral whole” (Kant 1784, 8:21), and that without our unsociable characteristics of “selfish pretensions” that are “not at all amiable in themselves”, our talents (reason), would “remain eternally hidden in their germs” (8:22). That is

to say, Kant argues that our disposition of externally harmful self interest allows us to cultivate our reason, which corresponds with the *sociability* of our unsociability as it allows us to garner social standing amongst our peers. Specifically, Kant says that our propensity for “incompatibility,... spiteful competitive vanity,... [and] the desire to possess or even to dominate” is what allows us to “fill the void in creation in regard to [our] end as rational” (8:22). However, if we are to reach a societal *moral whole*, then must not the focus be on mutual aid for one another’s endeavors, and one another’s passions? Kant even agrees, saying “[humanity] wills to live comfortably and contentedly” and that “the human being wills concord” (8:22). However, if this is the case that human will, or reason itself, intends us to be cooperative or harmonious, and that our reason is a part of our nature, then our nature must also engage in cooperation and social harmony. Rather than a coercion of law, wherein individuals agree to limit their freedoms only to limit others freedoms to the extent that one may act without certain interferences or harms done to oneself by others, communities would adopt the notion of *virtuous law* wherein individuals agree to limit the freedoms of themselves and others in order to wholly participate in a cosmopolitan society. This is the cosmopolitan aim for a societal moral whole.

Kant’s notions of human nature within “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim” suggest that it is selfish to the extent that individuals will harm each other because of their greed, for their ambition, or for self gain. This claim extends so far that Kant feels that it is a justifiable conclusion to reach that humanity would not survive next to each other without the coercion of law. It is a *coercion* of law because supposedly the only reason people subject themselves to the rule of law is to make sure that no one else can interfere with or harm them in a way that could impede their freedom. While under this state, society is formed and the issue of leadership is brought forth. A leader, whom must be just in itself but also human, is bound to

become corrupt due to their human nature, and it is only by the understanding of the nature of a correct constitution, the study of lifetimes of previous leaders, as well as the possession of a good will that they may be able to overcome such inclinations. A society with this perfect constitution, as well as a leader who is just in itself, will produce a societal moral whole, and achieve the cosmopolitan aim. However, as was previously stated, multiple points of this argument are erroneous. Thus, if humans have something like a good nature, and society is formed because they are inclined to help one another in their endeavors so as to live harmoniously and contentedly, then they would introduce *virtuous law* to engage and actualise this reality. With a good nature, the human being that becomes a leader would possess a good will, and through the collaboration of others become just in itself. With both a leader just in itself and virtuous law, this society will produce a societal moral whole and realize the cosmopolitan aim within the tenets of a cosmopolitan ideology. Therefore, the development of reason, based on something like a good human nature, will become actualised.

References

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