

Aim of Nature, Aims of Freedom

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In these comments, I focus on Chapter 9 of Lara Ostaric's The Critique of Judgment and the Unity of Kant's Critical System, titled "Kant's Teleological Philosophy of History." My aim is to share some questions and critical remarks concerning the role that Ostaric assigns to nature's alleged aim in human history, and suggest that moral development, progress, civilization, and culture all mirror aims of freedom – not of nature.

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1. The aim of nature

The scope of Lara Ostaric's *The Critique of Judgment and the Unity of Kant's Critical System* is impressive, and it is impossible – even despite its title – to say that it is a book on Kant's third *Critique* only. The focus on the systematic import of the *Critique of Judgment* is in fact systematic on its own, for Ostaric relies on it in order to frame key connections between different branches of Kant's critical system, thereby also weaving a consistent web of references between different texts: from his practical philosophy to his aesthetics, from the teleology of nature to the philosophy of history. Ostaric succeeds in making the case for "Moral Image Realism", according to which "representations of reflective judgments are normatively necessary in the epistemic sense and also serve as a schema for the Ideas whose objects are normatively necessary in the practical sense" (Ostaric 2023: 9). An important specification concerns the solution of the tension between 'realism' and 'image', whereby the latter "refers neither to some arbitrary creation of reason nor to a mere illusion of an instrumental sort, that is, the one that reason generates given its practical needs" but rather

to reason's principle of purposiveness, a rule reflective judgment heautonomously prescribes to itself and not to nature. In other words, it prescribes how it ought to proceed in its reflection on certain natural formations relative to the needs of our limited human cognitive capacities. (Ostaric 2023: 96)

In these comments, I focus on Chapter 9 of Ostaric's book: *Kant's Teleological Philosophy of History*. My aim is to share some questions and critical remarks concerning the role that Ostaric assigns to nature's alleged aim in human history, and suggest that moral development, progress, civilization, and culture all mirror aims of freedom – not of nature¹.

When introducing her interpretation of Kant's philosophy of history, Ostaric (2023: 235) makes the following statements:

[T]he best way to answer the question of the place of Kant's philosophy of history in his Critical system is to interpret his brief essays on history in light of what I take to be the main problematic of the third *Critique*, namely, the realization of our moral vocation, the highest good in the world.

[A]s in his Critique of Teleological Judgment, Kant offers both an epistemic and a moral justification of his view of human history as continuously progressing.

In order to make human history intelligible to ourselves, argues Kant, we must represent the individual events in human history under the Idea of "nature's aim."

The focus on the unifying role of the highest good and the view that Kant provides two complementary orders of justification for it represent two relevant merits of Ostaric in Chapter 9 and, given that Kant's philosophy of history itself belongs in Kant's account for the unity of reason and of the critical system of philosophy, both points are key components of Ostaric overall argument. I take this strategy to be original and effective, and I also think that Ostaric's rendering of Kant's own arguments in the form of two complementary justifications (epistemic and moral) of progress accounts for the unifying import of teleology far beyond the purposive order of organic life.

My aim in these comments is to consider to what extent we can really conceive of Ostaric's third point – nature's aim – as a presupposition or an actual drive towards the achievement of our own moral destination and the possibility of the highest good. I will share my concerns through questions and critical remarks related to specific passages from Chapter 9 in *The Critique of Judgment and the Unity of Kant's Critical System*. In general, I will try to show that Q0) the aim of nature Ostaric would refer to as the guiding thread in Kant's philosophy of history is actually an aim of freedom. Kant's nature is morally neutral in Kant's philosophy of history, therefore cannot account – however teleological and intentional *our understanding of it* – for what amounts to an entirely human responsibility essentially relying on practical freedom.

I will go through Ostaric's main claims in order to highlight some key points where the primacy of freedom over nature – rather than the other way around – seems to follow, and raise questions meant to give Ostaric the chance to further qualify her views – and/or counter mine.

¹ For the background of this reading, see Filieri 2021.

It goes without saying that I am responsible for all possible misunderstandings of Ostaric's arguments. These comments are structured as follows: Section 2 deals with Ostaric's epistemic justification of human progress. Section 3 then addresses the means of nature for establishing culture. Section 4 considers the moral justification; Section 5 reason's developmental path. In Section 6, I conclude by assessing Ostaric's take on Kant's alleged Hegelian problem.

2. *The epistemic justification*

The claim that "Kant's philosophy of history is limited to the history of the human being as a natural or phenomenal being and not as a noumenal being", and that "Kant's philosophy of history should be narrowed to a political history and the history of culture" (Ostaric 2023: 236) raises, it seems to me, two complementary considerations. The first is an agreement: human history and progress do not take place in the intelligible world, for both are essentially temporal, related to social, political, cultural achievements. The second is a concern, for the latter achievements all follow from rational and moral efforts as well, depending on the supreme law of practical reason – which is the law of an intelligible world. I think it is necessary to include the noumenal side of human nature in the picture without this to mean that human history is noumenal or merely intelligible *tout court*. The human being is indeed both part of nature and an intelligible being. Q1) How could history (a narration of the appearances of freedom, *IaG*, 8: 17 – the latter being an intelligible kind of causality, *KpV*, 5: 44, 48; *KU*, 5: 468²) only concern the human being as a phenomenal being – whereas it is also true that human nature as well is both phenomenal and noumenal?³ Q2) Moral agency is not supposed to be merely intelligible. The moral law commands to act, not just to will, and Kant accounts for the way in which human moral actions are both phenomenal events following the laws of nature and state of affairs determined a priori by an intelligible principle of causation – this is the argument of the *Typic* in the second *Critique*. Q3) How are politics and culture supposed to do without the noumenal side of the human being and represent at the same time the ways in which morality ought to unfold?

Ostaric (2023: 239) provides relevant qualifications for the thesis of the epistemic justification:

It would be helpful to understand Kant's justification for the use of a teleological principle in human history as similar to the way he justifies the use of a teleological principle in natural history. Human beings are not governed merely by instincts (like bees and beavers) but determine their will freely. We can call this the problem of "explanatory insufficiency of real causes,"

² All quotations follow the canonical *Akademie Ausgabe*. All translations follow the *Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

³ The essays collected in Filieri and Møller 2024 all deal, in different ways, with Kant's dynamic understanding of human nature.

that is, mechanical causality cannot be used as a constitutive principle for establishing a lawful unity in human history. But even if they determine their will freely, they do not behave “on the whole like rational citizens of the world in accordance with an agreed upon plan” (*IaG*, 8: 17), that is, they do not always do what they ought to. Human beings are not perfectly rational beings, but are also a part of nature. We can call this the problem of “explanatory insufficiency of ideal causes,” that is, rational causality cannot be used as a constitutive principle for establishing a lawful unity in human history.

Ostarcic is right when stressing that human beings “determine their will freely”, and yet this strengthens the idea that the noumenal capacity for practical freedom cannot be ruled out. True, both real and ideal causes are not enough, but this does not rule out that the latter at least – it seems to me – are necessary. So continues Ostarcic (2023: 240):

Thus, in order to make human history intelligible reason must represent human history in relation to “an aim of nature” (*IaG*, 8: 17), which is a “guiding thread” of reason. This “Idea” of nature’s aim or purpose is a regulative and not a constitutive principle. The philosopher does not claim that this is how nature is constituted in itself but that the philosopher must represent the history of the human species as if developing in accordance with nature’s purpose.

One question here is Q4) whether ‘making history intelligible’ does mean the same as ‘giving history a sense’. To provide a possibly consistent understanding of how history unfolds is not exactly the same as to provide the thread history would allegedly follow. It seems to me that Q5) Kant’s point is not the intelligibility of history (whereby real and ideal causes combine, and Ostarcic has a point when claiming they do not suffice), but history’s orientation (a regular course) towards essentially moral ends (our destination or vocation, the highest good), *then also* towards political and/or cultural achievements.⁴ After all, the *Idea* is for a universal history with a *Cosmopolitan* (not *Natural*) *Aim*. Ostarcic’s conclusion of the argument, however, takes nature to precede or foresee morality – or so I read it: “the aim of nature is not the development of theoretical and instrumental rationality for the purpose of attaining happiness but the development of rationality in virtue of which we can be worthy of being happy, that is, morality” (Ostarcic 2023: 240–241).

I find it hard to go that far, and I would also suggest that the very fact that morality seems here to represent the aim of nature should make it clear that what Kant assigns to nature actually follows from

⁴ Fonnesu (2022: 372) has a point when stressing the political evolution – and the related crisis – of the notion of the highest good: “although Kant moves from an ideal of highest good closely connected with the metaphysical tradition and basis of a rational faith in its objects – God and the immortality of the soul –, his intellectual development shows the difficulties of this project and consequently the crisis both of the ideal of the highest good and of its systematic function. Kant’s development represents progressive liberation from the metaphysical legacy towards an ethico-political, wordly conception of the activity of human beings in human history.”

a moral, analogical understanding of nature itself. For one thing, Q6) while, on the one hand, it seems that nature “has willed” (*IaG*, 8: 19) morality, on the other hand it is indeed true that morality only follows from freedom – which disregards nature. Let me be clear: it does not disregard nature to the extent that progress does take place in history, then in the sensible world – not the intelligible one; yet it does disregard nature as a presupposition or the source of principles. Practical reason is genuinely practical because of its autonomy. In these terms, nature has no aim to provide it with. This clarification, it seems to me, also explains why Kant argues that Q7) freedom, not nature, is the subject of history:⁵ Said differently: “The history of *nature* thus begins from good, for that is the *work of God*; the history of *freedom* from evil, for it is the *work of the human being*.” (*MAM*, 8: 115).

Let us now expand on this issue and add further details concerning nature’s alleged means to realize what nature would, in Ostarcic’s reading, will.

3. *The means of nature toward culture*

Ostarcic (2023: 243) writes:

The initial formation of social bonds is “a *pathologically* compelled agreement” (*IaG*, 8: 21), an agreement, motivated by one’s interest in one’s own self-preservation and development, to set the laws for social interaction. However, “[t]he uttermost goal of culture” (*MAM*, 8: 117n), writes Kant, is not an agreement to just any set of laws but a formation of a “perfect civil constitution” (*MAM*, 8: 117n) grounded on “civil right” (*MAM*, 8: 117n). “A perfectly just civil constitution” (*IaG*, 8: 22) would be the one that allows a free pursuit of one’s ends in such a way that this pursuit does not encroach on the freedom of others. On Kant’s view, the republican constitution is the only constitution that is compatible with the principle of right.

As Ostarcic herself acknowledges, Q8) the ‘primacy’ of the republican constitution is due to its conformity to the principle of right, not to its conformity to nature’s aim. True, *unsocial sociability* plays a fundamental role as a means in moving from the state of nature to society, but only reason and freedom in terms of spontaneity and teleology can move the human species from pathologically grounded social agreements to a moral whole: from the state of nature and mere civilization

⁵ See Ferrarin 2024: 45: “The very question Kant raises in his writings on history, whether or not it makes sense as a whole, would not even arise if history were a uniform and lawlike order like nature. We can certainly recur to subsumption when we recognize familiar effects as caused by similar antecedents; events may well in part be the effect of mechanisms; history may well be ruled by an anonymous logic. But a determining power of judgment insensitive to the intertwining of causal chains in nature, purposiveness and reason’s causality, cannot suffice to account for history. Singling out a historical moment with an exemplary value, like the French revolution in Kant’s assessment, is beyond the purview of theoretical knowledge of nature, because we judge the empirical event as rather the realization of a supersensible practical idea. We do not bring an intuition back to its concept, but judge an event in light of an idea.”

to moralization and culture, including juridical and political culture. To sum up, while I think Ostaric's reconstruction of the epistemic justification of nature's aim in history works and addresses key issues, I also think we have to keep in mind – again, as Ostaric herself also acknowledges – that it does play a merely regulative, non-constitutive role: we are in the position to state that nature “has willed” morality only if we presuppose an understanding of nature's aim as in service of the aims of freedom. In Section 4, to which we now turn, I try to further argue that the aim of nature merely mirrors an analogical reference to freedom.

4. *The moral justification*

Ostaric's moral justification, meant to complement the epistemic justification, is framed as follows:

With reflective judgment, the objects that practical reason demands that we *conceive* as real are represented as if obtaining in nature. Because representations of reflective judgments are normatively necessary in the epistemic sense (i.e., we must represent human history teleologically in order to render it intelligible) and also serve as a schema, or its analogue, for the Ideas whose objects are normatively necessary in the practical sense (i.e., reflective judgment's representation of human historical progress serves as an analogue of the schema of the Idea of God's providence), the representation of human historical progress in Kant's philosophy of history can be referred to as, what I call, “moral image realism” (MIR). (Ostaric 2023: 250)

Q9) When invoking providence, Kant clarifies that the analogy with the end of a wise creator leads us to assume this end as determining the course of human history. However, this does not mean to clear the name of providence and nature as merciful forces to which we owe devotion or gratitude. The route of history can only be plotted by reason through practical freedom, while the role of nature and providence, even in the case of the guarantee of perpetual peace (*ZeF*, 8: 360-362), concerns exclusively the question of the means, not that of the ends.⁶ As it is evident from Kant's words themselves, we still deal with a rational assumption (an analogy) which works as a means for us to make sense of our exclusively moral ends. Said differently, the guarantee, whose object is public right, aims to ensure that right will make war useless thereby taking war's place as a means for moral progress. It is no coincidence that Kant states that it is reason, not nature, that which prescribes us the moral end (*ZeF*, 8: 362). Nor it is a coincidence

⁶ See Ypi 2010: 129: “If we follow the essay on history and argue that what guarantees the possibility of moral progress in the world is the way in which nature intervenes teleologically to transform the human species, we end up undermining the spontaneity of the categorical imperative and depriving human beings of moral responsibility. Moreover, postulating the teleological unity of nature for the sake of reason's practical interest runs the risk of bridging the gap between nature and freedom in a way that threatens to undermine Kant's theoretical findings with regard to the indemonstrability of a natural providential order.”

that Kant concludes his argument by stating that what nature does for the purpose of perpetual peace refers to “the end that the human being’s own reason makes a duty for him, hence to the favouring of his *moral purpose*.” (ZeF, 8: 365). It is not that nature is prescribing, foreseeing, or aiming at morality. Rather, our understanding of nature follows from an analogy: *as if* nature were working, with its means, for the aims of freedom.

5. Reason’s development

In a passage, Ostarcic seems to bring the noumenal side of human nature back in the scheme of her reading:

[...] Kant’s allusion to epigenesis within the context of human history is neither related to (1) a natural progressive development of morality (i.e., increasingly greater number of individuals with moral *Gesinnung*), nor (2) a natural progressive development of freedom and reason as such. Instead, it refers to the development of our institutions which are increasingly based on the principle of right and the overcoming of the conflict between the human natural with the human moral predispositions. All this development takes place in space and time and in accordance with the laws of nature. However, just as in epigenetic explanations of development in biology, *there is an aspect to this development that is atemporal and ahistorical* (and therefore “preformed” in some sense), namely, *human absolute freedom and morality*, which belongs to the noumenal realm and is *not the object of the historical progressive development*. [emphases LF] (Ostarcic 2023: 256)

So the question here is: Q10) does or does not the noumenal side of human nature (“there is an aspect”) play a role in history? That the development of predispositions takes place in time does not make the moral predispositions at stake *natural*. On a related note, that the very same development does follow the laws of nature does not imply ruling out the laws of freedom. This point requires further clarification: Q11) how is it that freedom and morality both unfold throughout history as predispositions and are not “the object of the historical progressive development”? On a different note: Q12) does ‘epigenesis’ mean ‘preformation’? We are not naturally made for anything as far as culture and morality are concerned. It thus makes no sense to take literally, namely constitutively, Kant’s statements that nature has grounded two dispositions in us: the natural and the moral (MAM, 8: 117-118n). The only plausible way to accept that nature has grounded even moral dispositions would compel us to admit that nature is capable of freedom. While this may be a viable route for many philosophers after Kant, from the Romantics to Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, it is not one taken by Kant – as Ostarcic herself acknowledges at the end of Chapter 9. Kant can only require us to assume nature *as if* it gave us reason and freedom as predispositions, since we know that nature proceeds in an analogous way with any of its species. This is possible only because we assign to nature an aim that mirrors – but does not foresee – the aims

of freedom. Let me bring these comments to conclusion by adding one last note on Ostarić's alleged Hegelian problem.

6. *The Hegelian problem*

When countering readings according to which “Kant’s philosophy of history” would be an anticipation of “Hegel’s situating of practical reason historically” (Ostarić 2023: 256), Ostarić asks: “is it the case that Kant removes completely the function of nature’s purposiveness and replaces the regulative with a constitutive status of the progress of human history, namely as that which necessarily follows from reason that is now fully aware of its own potential?” (Ostarić 2023: 257)

One first remark is that, I suggest, Q13) there is room for arguing that Kant does situate “practical reason historically” without implying that this would amount to a Hegelian view. The reason is that the distinction between Kant’s and Hegel’s views on history is based on two different accounts of the relation between nature and freedom. Hegel’s nature is in a way capable of freedom, while Kant’s is not. In turn, this explains why – it seems to me – Kant’s appeal to the aim of nature is a merely analogical reference in order to render the idea of freedom’s guiding thread for the cosmopolitan aim of history. Said differently, since nature for Kant cannot display freedom in the proper sense – though it does display lawfulness and purposiveness – the reflecting power of judgment makes it possible to bridge between nature and freedom by assuming the former *as if* it were displaying the latter.

Yet Kant’s practical reason is situated historically, and its signs⁷ throughout history make it evident why the history of freedom is the work of humankind (recall *MAM*, 8: 115). True, right and virtue are not one and the same thing for Kant, and while they might belong together in his metaphysics of morals, that scheme radically diverge from Hegel’s account of reason’s unfolding in and through right and, most importantly, the State. But again, both views do situate (practical) reason historically. Therefore Q14) it is not the case “that Kant removes completely the function of nature’s purposiveness”, nor it is the case that he “replaces the regulative with a constitutive status of the progress of human history”. However, it is and *ought to be* the case that progress “necessarily follows from [a] reason that is now fully aware of its own potential.”

A reason that is critically aware of its own boundaries and powers is the sole source from which we are to draw all principles governing

⁷ See Möller 2022: 148: “the historical sign is capable of proving [*beweisen*] a tendency in humanity, which allows us to claim with regard to the past that humanity has always been in progress and that this progress will continue in the future. His claim is that if we can prove that humanity can cause progress then this proves the efficacy of a moral predisposition, which, in an infinite timeframe, will develop fully in the future. His prediction is that moral progress is the inevitable consequence of a moral predisposition and the historical sign is meant to prove the existence of this predisposition.”

reason's own domains: nature, freedom, and history too might deserve this title in a sense. And no, – should one be tempted to take this route – reason's full, critical awareness of its own potential is not, nor could never be, Hegel's absolute spirit.

For Kant, nature's aim is part of a broader teleological picture grounded on freedom's aims. To resort to nature's aim actually means to understand nature as mirroring ends that are, in many ways, non-natural. In fact, the intelligible causality of practical freedom (and our moral vocation in general) may well be said to be unnatural in many regards: it compels us to disregard sensible inclinations, to give up desires and ambitions, to make great efforts and even to contravene any convenience assessment. Nature is, *per se*, morally neutral. The aim of nature is, accordingly, nothing but an analogical mirror for the aims of freedom.

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