

# Idealizing History. A Critical Assessment of Kant's Historiography in *Idea for a Universal History*.

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## ABSTRACT

This essay analyzes Kant's conception of historiography in *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (henceforth; IAG). In IAG, Kant presents history as the necessary progression of the human race towards the full development of its rational and moral capacities, in accordance with a hidden plan of nature, which can only be realized after the establishment of a universal cosmopolitan condition. However, because Kant is unclear how moral and historical progress is possible, it remains unclear how to interpret his arguments and, consequently, how to write a history in line with IAG. In this essay, I attempt to answer this question by interpreting IAG in line with another Kantian text, *Was ist Aufklärung?* This analysis will not only show Kant's arguments in IAG to be inconsistent, but moreover that his proposal for a universal history is of unconvincing utility.

## Keywords

Kant, philosophy of history, moral development, universal history, *Idea for a Universal History*.

## INTRODUCTION

Kant's most important contribution to the field of historiography is his 1784 essay *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (henceforth; IAG), the only of his writings to deal exclusively with history. In the IAG, Kant formulates a guiding principle for writing a universal history, supported by nine propositions. He views history as the necessary progression of the human race towards the full development of its rational- and moral capacities, in accordance with a hidden plan of nature. This plan can only be realized after the establishment of a universal cosmopolitan condition, which is the end nature has intended for the human race.

The IAG has long been dealt a subordinate role within Kant's oeuvre. Yirmiahu Yovel for example has claimed the IAG to be in conflict with his critical philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Recent years have marked an increased interest in the IAG, as scholars begin to recognize the importance of history within the Kantian system. These scholars have likewise attempted to reconcile Kant's writings on history with his critical philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Even so, there remains considerable contention on Kant's conception of history in the IAG. Much of this ambiguity is caused by the fact that Kant leaves it unclear in the IAG how he believes historical and, concomitantly, moral

progress is possible. In his ethical writings Kant views rationality and morality as eternal and unchanging, thus excluding the possibility of an improvement. However, as Pauline Kleingeld has convincingly argued, Kant does allow our predispositions for the use of reason improve. This model views development as the discovery and refinement of these dispositions, and will subsequently be called the discovery model of moral and historical development.<sup>2</sup>

Terry Pinkard has pointed out that Kant develops a second model of historical- and moral progress in his essay *Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung?* (henceforth; WIA). In WIA, Kant defines enlightenment as the human being's emancipation from its self-incurred immaturity. According to the model Kant develop in this text, development is made through adopting the right attitude. Consequently, Pinkard calls this the indictment model.<sup>3</sup> The question which model of historical development informs the IAG is the single most important interpretive issue of the IAG. From the arguments of the ninth proposition it does not become clear how history can help bring about the plan of nature. Much of this ambiguity is caused by the fact that it is not explicit on which model of historical development these arguments are based. If we wish to understand why Kant believes we should adopt his idea for a universal history, we must first establish which model of development informs the arguments of the ninth proposition. More importantly, such an understanding is crucial if we wish to know what a history in accordance with the IAG would look like and, ultimately, to assess the tenability of his idea.

In this paper I will address these issues. In order to do so, I will offer a hermeneutical analysis of the first eight propositions in the first section. This analysis will show the first eight propositions to form a relatively straightforward argument, mostly but not exclusively in line with the discovery model. In the subsequent section, I will discuss Kant's essay *Was ist Aufklärung*, in which he develops the indictment model of historical progress. In the final section I will analyze the arguments of the ninth proposition and ascertain with which model of historical development these are most compatible. In contrast with the first eight propositions, the arguments of the ninth proposition only make sense on the basis of the indictment model. Using my interpretation of the arguments of the ninth proposition, I will finally be able to answer what a history in accordance with Kant's idea would look like. Kant's idea in the IAG is not only very vague in its contents, but moreover that it is of unconvincing utility. Consequently, we can only conclude

that the IAG fails to present a viable historiographical project.

## I NATURE'S HIDDEN PLAN

The central question of IAG is whether it is reasonable to assume a purposiveness in the course of human history. Kant believes this is the case and advances the view that individuals and the human race as a whole, even when pursuing their own ends, knowingly or unknowingly work to promote the plan of nature (Naturabsicht). This plan of nature is directed at the complete development of all human dispositions (Anlagen). The task Kant sets himself in IAG is to see whether he can discover this plan of nature and, subsequently, to formulate a guiding principle for writing a history in accordance with this plan.

In the remainder of the IAG, Kant forwards nine propositions to support his teleological conception of history. In the first proposition Kant states that "alle Naturanlagen eines Geschöpfes sind bestimmt, sich einmal vollständig und zweckmäßig auszuwickeln,"<sup>4</sup> for else we would have to assume nature to be purposeless. In the second proposition Kant states that human beings are to develop their dispositions directed at the use of reason fully in the species, not in the individual. Because nature has limited the lifespan of human beings, the full development of these dispositions can only be accomplished over the course of many generations. It is important to note that the plan of nature operates on the level human race as a whole, not that of the of the individual. As a result, Kant can allow individuals the freedom to work contrary to the plan of nature without directly threatening the credibility of his idea.

In the third proposition, Kant claims that nature has endowed humans with only the bare necessities for survival, leaving it up to themselves to improve their condition through the use of reason.<sup>4</sup> According to Kant, nature seems to have been more concerned with man's self-worth than with his wellbeing. Consequently, nature has not set the attainment of happiness to be the ultimate goal for the human race, "sondern daß er sich so weit hervorarbeite, um sich durch sein Verhalten des Lebens und des Wohlbefindens würdig zu machen."<sup>4</sup> To be sure, reaching this state will produce the greatest possible happiness for human beings. However, considered from the plan of nature this happiness is corollary, and not a goal in itself.

In the fourth proposition Kant claims that the mechanism nature employs to effectuate the development of human dispositions is their antagonism in society. Humans have a tendency to enter into society, as society will allow them to further develop their capacities. At the same time, humans have the unsocial inclination to live according to their own private will. The tension between setting goals for oneself and the dependency on others to effectuate these goals is what gives rise to what Kant calls man's unsocial sociability (ungesellige Geselligkeit). Although the antagonism resulting from unsociable sociability gives rise to strife, conflict and discord, it also inspires renewed efforts to create a better

condition and prevent further suffering. Consequently, Kant claims that without unsociable sociability, all human dispositions would lay eternally dormant.<sup>4</sup> Unsociable sociability is thus the driving force behind moral and historical development.

The greatest problem nature has set the humans race in reaching the end of nature is the establishment of "eine vollkommen gerechte bürgerliche Verfassung [...]." <sup>4</sup> Kant claims establishing such a constitution must also be considered the highest goal set by nature, as it is only upon completing this task that its other goals for the human race can be attained (fifth proposition). In the seventh proposition Kant claims that for this problem to be solved, it is first necessary for states to enter into lawgoverned relations in a federation of peoples (Völkerbunde). The external relations between states, similar to the unsociable sociability in society, are marked by a high degree of antagonism, which manifests itself most strongly through warfare. Although the manifestations of the antagonism between states again appear to be wholly negative, these will nonetheless compel nations to abandon their lawless condition and enter into a federation of peoples, which can ensure peace and security among its members. Kant expresses the hope that through the best possible cosmopolitan constitution internally and rule of law between states externally, a universal cosmopolitan condition will be established capable of maintaining itself.<sup>4</sup>

Taken together, the first eight propositions of the IAG present a straightforward argument, primarily in line with the discovery model of development. Kant believes history to display a hidden plan of nature, aimed at the full development of the rational dispositions of the human race. Although this development starts anew in every individual, culture enables people to share their insights with other human beings and future generations, allowing these to benefit from previous achievements. In this process, culture not only allows the development of rational capacities to persist over the course of history, but culture itself will improve to better facilitate the development of rational capacities in the individual and the human race. The IAG also concurs with the indictment model. Because the development of rational dispositions starts anew in every individual and is a free choice, this development requires the right attitude. In a negative sense, this attitude is shaped in confrontation with the suffering resulting from man's unsociability, which inspires people to undertake efforts to improve society. Positively speaking this attitude takes shape through culture and education on the one hand. Eventually, the cultivation of morality will result in the establishment of a universal cosmopolitan condition, allowing humans to live in conformity with their freedom and worth as rational beings.

## II THE QUESTION OF ENLIGHTENMENT

The IAG appeared in the Berliner Monatsschrift of November 1784. The Monatsschrift of the following month likewise featured an essay by Kant by the title Beantwortung der Frage: Was ist Aufklärung? (henceforth; WIA), in which Kant develops the

indictment model of historical development. In the opening lines of his essay, Kant defines enlightenment as “der Ausgang des Menschen aus seiner selbst verschuldeten Unmündigkeit.”<sup>5</sup> Kant defines immaturity as the inability to make use of one’s reason without the direction of others. Kant takes cowardice and laziness to be the reasons why people continue to rely on authorities instead of thinking for themselves. Therefore, Kant coins “Sapere Aude! Habe Muth dich deines eigenen Verstandes zu bedienen!”<sup>5</sup> the motto of the Enlightenment.

According to Kant, the prospects for a single individual of leaving his immature condition and enlightening himself are slim. However, he claims it is almost inevitable for a public that it should enlighten itself. All that is needed is the freedom to make use of reason publicly.<sup>5</sup> To elaborate his claim, Kant introduces a differentiation between the public and the private use of reason. Kant defines the public use of reason as that which a scholar makes when addressing the reading world. This use of reason should always be left unrestricted, as it alone can bring about enlightenment. The private use of reason on the other hand is that which a citizen uses in the civil post or office with which he is entrusted. This use of reason can be limited for the sake of public order without threatening the advancement of enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Kant takes the example of a church minister who questions certain religious doctrines. When addressing his congregation he makes private use of reason, and cannot deviate from church doctrine. Conversely, as a scholar addressing the reading world he makes public use of his reason, and should be granted unrestricted freedom to question these same doctrines.<sup>5</sup>

Just as in the IAG, Kant reflects on his time by raising the question whether his age can be considered an enlightened age. He believes to have strong indications that the obstacles to universal enlightenment are gradually being lifted, making his age one of enlightenment. Kant concludes by stating that once the power to think freely has been developed sufficiently, this will influence the disposition of the people and finally the principles of government, allowing them to live in accordance with their dignity.<sup>5</sup>

It is in the WIA that Kant puts forward what Pinkard calls the indictment model of historical development. Kant identifies the inability of people to think for themselves as the most important impediment to development, which results from a lack of courage. The advancement of enlightenment thus requires the public to adopt the right attitude towards their rational capacities and muster the courage to think freely. This free thinking is at first restricted to a separate sphere; that of the scholarly world. Once people have entered this sphere, they can contribute to both their personal enlightenment and that of the public. Here we find how the discovery model and the indictment model complement each other. Entering the scholarly world requires courage and thus the right attitude (indictment model). After people have entered the scholarly world, they can participate in advancing culture through discovering the requirements of reason (discovery model). Inversely, culture will allow later generations to be instilled with the proper attitude

(indictment model), helping them to advance culture even further (discovery model).

### III THE CONSOLATION OF HISTORY

In the ninth and final proposition of the IAG Kant claims that a philosophical attempt to write a universal history in accordance with the plan of nature is not only possible, but will actually help its realization.<sup>4</sup> It is only at this point in the IAG that Kant turns his attention specifically to historiography. According to Kant, the merit of his guiding principle is not merely that it can be used to predict future political developments, since one can deduce these from history without assuming the course of human events to be purposive.<sup>4</sup> So what is the merit of Kant’s guideline, and how does a history written in accordance with it serve to promote the plan of nature?

Kant offers two arguments for adopting his guiding principle. The first argument is what I call the hope argument. Kant claims that adopting his guideline will provide a consoling outlook on the course of human affairs. Additionally, it will help appreciate the wisdom and ingenuity of nature.<sup>4</sup> Considered from the discovery model, it is rather peculiar for Kant to cite the hope argument. After all, showing what we may hope for does not necessarily facilitate the discovery of the requirements of reason, nor would it automatically help us comply to these requirements. However, in light of the indictment model we can understand why the hope argument is crucial for Kant. We have already established that Kant grants people the freedom to work contrary to the plan of nature. Even so, in the eighth proposition, Kant claims human nature, “selbst in Ansehung der allerentferntesten Epoche, die unsere Gattung treffen soll, nicht gleichgültig zu sein, wenn sie nur mit Sicherheit erwartet werden kann.”<sup>4</sup> More than offering a consoling outlook, a history in line with IAG can show people what they may reasonably hope for in the future. In doing so, history will help people overcome their indifference to the plan of nature and assume their responsibility in its realization.

The second argument, which I call the legacy argument, has two parts. First of all, Kant claims that the way in which history is presently recorded raises the question how future generations will reflect on the burden of history we will leave them with. According to Kant, future generations will only be interested in what previous generations have achieved or harmed from a cosmopolitan perspective. Secondly, Kant claims such a perspective will help direct the actions of heads of states and their servants, whom are very much concerned for their reputation, to the only means that will ensure they will be remembered with reverence.<sup>4</sup> Again, we cannot adequately understand the twofold legacy argument on the basis of the discovery model. We may believe a history in accordance with Kant’s guiding principle can provide lessons from the past, and thus help inform future changes in political constitutions. However, since Kant admits one can enjoy these benefits without having to assume purposiveness, he cannot make these arguments in favor of adopting his idea. To make matters worse, the

discovery model cannot meaningfully be applied to the second part of the legacy argument at all. However, seen from the indictment model, we can understand a history in accordance with Kant's principle can make us aware of our part in the course of history and our responsibility towards future generations. Just as with the hope argument, this awareness will motivate people to assume responsibility and thus promote the realization of the plan of nature. The same holds true for heads of state. Their concern for their legacy will cause them to follow the actions that will ensure they are remembered well. The historian taking a cosmopolitan perspective will be able to identify these actions as those that will help the establishment of a universal cosmopolitan condition.

We are now ready to turn to the main objective of our investigation, and answer what a universal history written in line with Kant's guiding principle would look like. We have seen that the argument Kant develops in the first eight propositions ties in with both the discovery and the indictment model, without this giving rise to serious issues. Nonetheless, with the legacy and the hope argument Kant cannot have it both ways; if he wishes his arguments to be understood unequivocally, he must side with one of either model of historical development.

At this point Kant runs into serious difficulties. We have already established how the hope argument claims a universal history will help people assume responsibility for the course of history. Even so, by itself this argument does not give us much to go by in terms of the actual content of such a history. Should a historian reveal how traces of enlightenment have been preserved over the course of history? Again, since according to Kant one does not have to assume purposiveness in history in order to do so, he must have a different role in mind for his historiography. Moreover, such a historiography it would follow the discovery model, and we have just established that the hope argument is incompatible with the discovery model.

The legacy argument provides us with more clues for the content and form of a history in line with the IAG. Central to the first part of the legacy argument is the belief that future generations, when studying history, will only be interested in what their ancestors have achieved or harmed from a cosmopolitan point of view. Thereby, Kant seems to argue that a universal history should only narrate what is relevant from a cosmopolitan point of view. Even so, because Kant takes a dialectical view on historical progress, even actions that are seemingly detrimental or indifferent to the plan of nature can or must be seen as essential to its realization. The problem for the historian is how to identify which actions are to be included, as potentially any action is relevant from a cosmopolitan point of view. And on this point, Kant fails to further explicate himself by offering clear epistemic criteria or methodological guidelines. The second part of the legacy argument also provides the historian with some clue, as it points to the ability of directing the actions of heads of state to those means that will ensure they will be remembered well. Were a historian to put this use central in his history, the result could aspire to no more than a mirror for princes. However useful this may be in

promoting the plan of nature, it can hardly be said to yield a viable or adequate universal history.

## CONCLUSION

Based on our investigation we can only conclude that the IAG fails to form a tenable proposal for a universal history. This failure can in part be attributed to the incompleteness of Kant's project. Since the ninth proposition fails to provide historians with clear epistemic principles or methodological guidelines, it remains unclear how to write a universal history in accordance with Kant's guideline. In all fairness, Kant is modest in his formulations, referring to his idea as a preliminary attempt.

More detrimental to the tenability of the IAG is the inconsistent view Kant takes on the role of historiography in realizing the plan of nature. Our analysis has shown that the first eight propositions are primarily in line with the discovery model, whereas the arguments of the ninth proposition can only be understood on the basis of the indictment model.

Question remains whether the failure of Kant's historiography also discredits the rest of the IAG. Considering the coherence of the first eight propositions, one may argue Kant would have done better to leave out the ninth proposition and the topic of historiography altogether. The resulting text would have formed an internally consistent elaboration of a teleological conception of nature and history. Such a text would have gone further in realizing Kant's ultimate aim with the IAG; to have people believe in the possibility of moral progress and to encourage them to take their responsibility in realizing this progress.

## ROLE OF THE STUDENT

The research I present here is an abridged version of my bachelor thesis in philosophy.

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