

Kant's Universal History and The Paradox of Ethnocentric Egalitarianism

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Abstract: As a subset of political theory, postcolonial critique exists to examine the fundamental disparity in the asymmetrical power relations between the actors involved in colonial and imperial interaction. Part of this examination includes the assumption that the totalizing nature of imperial practice and its effects are necessarily problematic. This paper examines the notion that there can be a 'universal history' for human beings, as sketched in the political writings of Immanuel Kant. In addition, the historical context of Kant's political theory, centered within 18th century European imperialism, forms a substantial portion of the examination. The paper begins with a consideration of the friction between Kant's ideas of human freedom and natural necessity. Kant's solution to this conflict is to sketch a model of historical development that is then applied universally to human beings and human societies. This paper considers Kant's writings, in their historical context, in order to evaluate the degree to which Kant is subject to the problems inherent to the discourse of imperialism.

Background and Introduction

In examining the aims of the Kantian philosophical project it is clear that Immanuel Kant did not write a 'political philosophy' as such. However, as Karl Jaspers notes, Kant's "numerous short treatises demonstrate that [he] had more than an incremental interest in politics."¹ Indeed, Kant's writings on history are political in that they deal specifically with *development*. In one sense, Kant envisions a universal, cultural or anthropological progress for the human race. In another sense, Kant's notion of human progress is tied to the political sphere, which necessarily encompasses all human beings as members of a political community. In the short 1784 essay titled *Idea For a Universal History From A Cosmopolitan Point of View*, Immanuel Kant advances a hypothesis on the progression of

human history from a teleological² perspective. Here Kant is articulating a universal history, arguably influenced by the context of European imperialism. In the essay, what is readily discernible for Kant about the historicity of human beings is their apparent progression toward natural ends. Documenting history then, is done partly as an attempt to discover a natural purpose to collective human action. In Kant's words, by doing so "it might be possible to have a history with a definite natural plan for creatures who have no plan of their own."³ In turn, part of documenting

¹ Jaspers, Karl. "Kant," from *The Great Philosophers Vol. I*. (New York, USA: Harcourt, 1962), 101.

² This means that Kant conceives of history as having a linear progression towards an ultimate object or aim. Teleology entails the idea that there are ends or purposes that are pre-determined by nature. The term is derived of the Greek root *telos* meaning *end*.

³ Kant, Immanuel. "Idea For a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View" In *On History*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 12.

history includes an explanation for the source of human beings' natural purpose, and the steps required by the purpose itself. For Kant, it is insufficient to identify collective human development, as required by nature, without also considering the proper steps in which human development ought to occur. What pushes human development for Kant is "the secret ruse of nature that caused the species to progress and develop all of its potentialities in the succession of generations."⁴

In addition, Kant's narrative of the progression of human development rests on the notion that human beings are uniquely endowed by nature with the capacity to reason.⁵ For Kant, nature sets a framework of universal law within which the human being can exercise free will. Free will for the human being is essential to Kant's egalitarian moral theory, in that it is impossible to make sense of moral obligation if the human being is not free to make choices. Consequently, human action as subject to determinism would then fail to have moral worth. Without human freedom as the basis for action, human beings would have no sense of the moral obligation. Whereas the free actions of the human being appear chaotic, the collective action of the race progresses with a degree of regularity, as though it adheres to a common plan set out by nature's universal laws. Although the human being is endowed with free will, the arena within which freedom exists is

⁴ Arendt, Hannah. *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*. (Chicago, USA. University of Chicago Press, 1992), 8.

⁵ Kant, Immanuel. "Critique of Pure Reason," In *Kant Selections*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 96-97.

thus constrained by universal laws. While, for example, the human being may chose to live or die according to its own free will, there is a degree of statistical regularity to birth and death rates amongst all human societies. Kant notes that this regularity occurs,

*...according to laws as stable as those of unstable weather, which we likewise cannot determine in advance, but which, in the large, maintain the growth of plants, the flow of rivers, and other natural events in an unbroken, uniform course.*⁶

Thus, an inconsistency appears between Kant's considerations of the human being as free, while at the same time adherent to the uniform course of collective progress, as dictated in and through nature. Kant's solution to this problem comes by way of his universal history, in that the human being is considered subject to "unsocial sociability."⁷

For Kant, nature creates *unsocial sociability* by endowing the human being with the desire to associate with its fellows, while at the same time striving for its own interests. Kant notes that while the human being is selfish and antagonistic, this antagonism is "...the cause of a lawful order among men".⁸ On Kant's telling then, nature wills a friction between human freedom and natural law, which acts as the basis for universal human development. The rational capacities of the human being in singular are then directed toward the

⁶ Kant, Immanuel. "Idea For a Universal History", 12.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*

development of a collective reason in the race. This is because the human being is bound within its existence by the conditions of its finitude. As Kant notes, “since nature has set only a short period for [individual human] life, she needs a perhaps unreckonable series of generations, each of which passes its own enlightenment on to its successor.”⁹ Hence the collective cultural yield of human reason in one generation is conferred to the next so as to continually add to the “development in our race which is completely suitable to nature’s purpose.”¹⁰ In articulating the inevitable friction between freedom and natural necessity, Kant is influenced by Rousseau in that the freedom of human beings, in conjunction with their natural competitiveness, is antagonized by societal constraints. Kant notes that the “propensity [of human beings] to enter into society bound together with a mutual opposition that constantly threatens to break up society” constitutes an antagonism between human beings that advances their collective development.¹¹ In short, human beings submit to the Rousseauian idea of the *social contract*, regardless of their individual desires, because their association allows them to achieve as a collective what they otherwise could not achieve alone. As Jaspers puts it, the result of this antagonism “is an asocial society that whets all the powers of man.”¹² With the friction of *unsocial sociability* in mind, Kant’s project is to sketch a universal history in which he establishes and clarifies the *telos* in the progress of

humanity that accords with the universal laws of nature. This project continues in an essay written during the French Revolution in 1795, titled *Perpetual Peace*. Here Kant takes up the idea of a *telos* in human progress in relation to the governing of states. In this text Kant envisions the *telos* of human society as being one of an interminable suspension of hostility, in conjunction with enduring cooperation among states. Kant’s summary of the steps required for this *telos* begins in the first section, which contains “The Preliminary Articles For Perpetual Peace Among States.”¹³ Running through both the *Universal History* and *Perpetual Peace* is Kant’s teleological account of human progress. In the first essay he is concerned with the cultural progress of human beings. In the second the progress of the race in the political sphere is the primary concern.

It is the chief objective of this paper to consider Kant’s *modus operandi* against the backdrop of European imperialism. As a part of this consideration I will comment on segments of Kant’s narrative in order to expose the ways in which Kant’s thinking falls victim to the problems within the discourse of imperialism. Specifically, I will demonstrate that Kant’s view of a natural or universal *telos* for human societies is premised on an ethnocentric bias. Acting as an impediment to Kant’s hypothesis is what Robert Young calls a “paradox of ethnocentric egalitarianism.”¹⁴ By this it

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 15-16.

¹² Jaspers, Karl. “Kant,” from *The Great Philosophers Vol. I.*, 105.

¹³ Kant, Immanuel. “Perpetual Peace” In *On History*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2001), 85.

¹⁴ Young, Robert. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 2004), 32.

is meant that there is a problem with Kant's teleological notion of development. In particular, the degree to which certain aspects of Kant's philosophy can be universalized is questionable, given his Eurocentrism. I will explore Young's term in relation to British and French imperial practices in specific, as a means of problematizing particular aspects of Kant's overall project. Prior to discussing the paradox of ethnocentric egalitarianism however, I will clarify the scope of the problems to be taken up here in relation to Kant's moral philosophy.

I. A Sketch of Kant's Universal Moral Theory

Prior to embarking on the project of problematizing the universal applicability of Kant's conception of development, it is necessary to briefly discuss the universality of Kant's egalitarian moral theory. Kant's conception of morality is demonstrated by the *categorical imperative*, as stated in his *Fundamental Principles for the Metaphysics of Morals*. Before stating the imperative, Kant notes that nothing is universally good except for the good will.¹⁵ Unlike qualified goods, the goodness of the will of the human being is not measured in terms of the positive effects it produces. Rather, for Kant, the will is inherently good by nature of the intrinsic value of it. The adherence of the good will to the moral law in question comes by way of willing maxims that accord with duty for its own sake. The subjective principle by which the law is observed is what Kant calls a maxim.

¹⁵ Kant, Immanuel. "Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals," In *Kant Selections*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1998), 248.

The good will elects maxims that adhere to the practice of doing duty for the sake of duty, as set out by the categorical imperative. The imperative states that human beings ought to "act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law"¹⁶ This form of the categorical imperative entails that for actions to have moral worth they cannot be adhered to as a means to an end, but simply as an end in themselves. To rephrase the law, if the intent of the human being in willing an action cannot be a universal law for all human beings then the intent of the act and the act itself will fail to have moral worth. In short, actions, insofar as they are moral and accord with duty, can be universalized.

The imperative is categorical in the sense that it hinges on a universal application of the moral law to all human beings, as finite rational beings, who then have individual moral agency. For all human beings, then, the opportunity to realize the moral law is given universally by nature in the very structure of human reason. That is to say, for Kant, the moral law is given in and through nature. As was noted previously, the feeling of moral obligation, or duty by the human being, hinges on human freedom within the framework of universal law. Thus, what becomes problematic for Kant's view of moral development is the degree to which it can be universalized. This sketch of Kant's moral theory demonstrates his usage of a universal model reliant upon natural law as the guiding force of development.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 268.

It is not that Kant conceives of a universal morality for the human being that is problematic for us here. Furthermore, it is not the intention of this paper to criticize the egalitarian nature of Kant's moral theory, so as to make a case for a context-dependent moral relativism. Kant's moral framework is not unsalvageable. While Kant does conceive of morality and ultimately development as being monocultural, his ethic can survive his Eurocentrism. However, as Thomas McCarthy remarks, ensuring this would "require a reconstruction of Kant's moral vision to make room for multicultural universalism and multiple modernities."¹⁷

II. The Problems of Imperialism in Universalizing Kant's Model of Development

Having considered the model of universality elsewhere in Kant, I will turn to the problems of imperialism in Kant's conception of universal cultural and political development. The issue at hand is that Kant conceives of the developmental progress of human political organization as conforming universally to a model of European imperial design. The pervasive nature of his model of universality appears in reference to Kantian moral development, historical development, and in reference to the development of states. For the paper's purpose henceforth, it is the latter two applications that are especially problematic. On the *telos* of development in statecraft Kant notes that,

*The guarantee of perpetual peace is nothing less than that great artist... working according to... the profound wisdom of a higher cause, which predetermines the course of nature and directs it to the objective final end of the human race.*¹⁸

It is admirable that Kant conceives of a purpose in nature that pushes toward the development of an enduring and sustained state of peace for humanity. Additionally, one can hardly condemn the merits of suspending hostility in favour of peaceful coexistence. Nonetheless, the model of empire comes through Kant in a variety of ways. One aspect of the pervasiveness of empire, that is especially intriguing and tirelessly emphasized in Kant's work, is the need for *development* as the *telos* of human morality, history, and political organization. Indeed this is an interesting departure from the conception that happiness or human flourishing should be the end of human beings, as some Aristotelians might assert.

The apparatus of empire comes through again in Kant's consideration of the push for development, as stimulated by the *unsocial sociability* previously noted. It is this friction that takes human beings "from barbarism to culture" without which they would be condemned to be as "good natured as the sheep they herd [and] would hardly reach a higher worth than their beasts."¹⁹ Elsewhere, in his review of Herder's *Ideas on the Philosophy and History of Mankind*, Kant explicitly bears out this

¹⁷ McCarthy, Thomas. *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 68.

¹⁸ Kant, Immanuel. "Perpetual Peace", 106.

¹⁹ Kant, Immanuel. "Universal History", 15.

sentiment regarding the indigenous population of Tahiti:

Does [Herder] really mean that, if the happy inhabitants of Tahiti never [been] visited by more civilized nations, were destined to live in their peaceful indolence for thousands of centuries, it would be possible to give a satisfactory answer to the question of why they should exist at all, and whether it would not have been just as good if this island had been occupied by happy sheep and cattle as by happy human beings who merely enjoy themselves?²⁰

What severely compromises the universality of Kant's conception of development is his desire to purport the European model of development as an ideal that is dictated by natural law. Here Kant is conflating the source of moral obligation with the source of political development in assuming that natural law must be the root of both. This occurs in conjunction with the systematic removal of the existential worth of human beings who fall outside Kant's teleological model of European development. This is exemplified by Kant's discussion of pastoral human existence in his *Universal History*, as well as his remarks on the indigenous Tahitian peoples. Hence attempts to marginalize Kant's Eurocentrism, by localizing his opinion to the prevailing social attitudes of his time, are not acceptable to the arguments made here. This is because Kant's remarks form part of a larger discourse of imperialism, which contains a vast array of theories on the existential worth of human

beings. In short, Kant's attitudes go beyond racism, to a point of dehumanization. Thus it is impossible from a contemporary perspective to attempt to reduce uncomfortable aspects of Kant to mere historical context. To do that would be to drastically oversimplify Kant's *Universal History*. This is simply because Kant conceives his political philosophy on the basis of universality. Kant employs dehumanization on those human beings that do not fit his framework because they impede its universal applicability. Consequently, while Kant's political philosophy purports itself as contextually transcendent, it continually relies on the presuppositions of a 19th century European cultural context. Arguably then, postcolonial critique overcomes certain aspects of European philosophy of this age by simply acknowledging the viability of non-western perspectives in political theory. Finally, the problems inherent to Kant's method subject him to the paradox of ethnocentric egalitarianism as theorized by Robert Young, which I will now unpack in order to place Kant squarely in his historical context.

III. Ethnocentric Egalitarianism and the Historical Context of Kantian Development

The paradox of ethnocentric egalitarianism is considered in a discussion of both British and French imperial practice. Young begins with French imperial expansion as attached to the notion of a *mission civilatrice*. This means that French imperialism envisions colonial subjects of France as having the opportunity to become 'civilized' human beings as a result of

²⁰ Kant, Immanuel. "Reviews of Herder's Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind," In *Kant: Political Writings*. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 219-220.

their exposure to a superior language, culture and religion. In fact,

*The mission civilatrice was more central to French imperial ideology than any other on account of the French colonial doctrine of assimilation. As the image of greater France implies, however far away the colonies may have been, they were administratively and conceptually treated as part of mainland France.*²¹

The paradox here is contained in the notion that France sees the colonized subjects of states, like Algeria, as having the potential to be civilized. To a certain extent, the assumption that a colonized subject requires civilizing assumes, on a basic level, that all human beings have equal potential for enlightenment. In Kantian terms, human beings, or collections of them (states), share a universal *telos*, and progress toward its realization as a segment within the collective historical narrative. In an oddly paradoxical manner, French imperialism echoes Kant's first thesis in his *Universal History* in that it assumes "all natural capacities of a creature are destined to evolve completely to their natural end."²² In other words, French imperialism takes this idea to be axiomatic, while simultaneously assuming that the greatest natural end for the human being is the perceived cultural, linguistic and religious superiority of the French people.

Supporting the paradox is the fact that French imperialism recognizes its own superiority in conjunction with the

²¹ Young, Robert. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 30.

²² Kant, Immanuel. "Idea For a Universal History", 12.

universal humanity of human beings. This recognition however, failed to correspond to respect or sympathy for colonial subjects.²³ Although French imperialism recognizes the differences between cultural concentrations of human beings, this meant that their imperial policies "sought to make [them] the same," thus embodying the paradox of ethnocentric egalitarianism.²⁴

Initially, British imperialism approaches colonial expansion under a similar guise to that of the French, namely a duty to civilize the savage.²⁵ However, British imperial practice differs from that of the French in that it sidesteps a complex bureaucracy in favour of a decentralized imperial system.²⁶ Indeed, the Indian 'mutiny' of 1857 led the British to adopt a more decentralized method of governing that extended outward from Britain as a general overseer.²⁷ This contrasts with the more holistic approach of the French in creating dominions in the image of France itself. The Indian mutiny also impacted the British distinction between colonies and dependencies.²⁸ In effect, this distinction resulted in different forms of rule for the colonies of North America than for the dependency of India. Thus, the British are arguably more racist in one sense than the French, in that their decentralized imperial system assumes that certain colonial subjects are incapable of European enlightenment. In short, it systematically favours those colonies that bear cultural similarity to,

²³ Young, Robert. *Postcolonialism: An Historical Introduction*, 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

or can trace lineage from, the centre of the British Empire. British mercantile imperialism then, becomes less concerned with educating and assimilating dependencies and is more concerned with exploiting indigenous populations to generate wealth.²⁹ The paradox of ethnocentric egalitarianism is therefore present in the British imperial model in a different fashion to that of the French. British imperialism does not appear to deny the Kantian notion of a universal *telos* among human beings, but rather questions more outwardly what counts as a human being. It is unsurprising, then, that Kant does this in his own writing in referencing indigenous Tahitians. Consequently, while the British conception of 'self rule' claims to give greater autonomy to its colonial subjects, it holds in the same instance that nonwhite subjects are of a lesser humanity and therefore incapable of achieving equal levels of enlightenment to the British themselves.

IV. Universalizing Kant's History: The Problems of Application to States

Returning to Kant, the *Universal History* essay begins with the premise that all human beings have a *telos* given in and through nature.³⁰ As was previously discussed, this relates directly to the assumptive principles of British and French imperialism regarding the treatment of colonial subjects. From here, Kant summarizes the progression of rational development in the human being. For Kant, the *telos* of the human being is the development of the rational faculty upon which humanity develops

according to a plan of nature.³¹ Following the development of the rational faculty, the human being is lead toward its rational end, which is namely the development of a perfect civil constitution centered on republican government.³² Whereas Kant's *Universal History* essay may be read simply as a conjectural hypothesis, it is the expansion of his idea of how the perfect civil constitution is to be brought about, and for whom, that is troublesome. This is because the method for developing such a state follows Kant's teleological model of universal development and fails to account for states that fall outside the model. As part of his universal conception of political development, Kant condemns armed conflict on moral grounds, as an impediment to the ends of *Perpetual Peace*. For Kant "No State [ought to] by force interfere with the constitution or government of another state."³³ What is striking about this statement is that Kant denounces the interference of states with one another on moral grounds. This is problematic because Kant simultaneously requires that human beings be naturally subject to *unsocial sociability* as a means to spur their development. Certainly, it has already been discussed in Kant's work that an unfettered pastoral existence by human beings must be broken up if human development, impelled by the *telos* of nature, is to occur.³⁴ It seems that Kant is then caught in a contradiction. Indeed as McCarthy notes, Kant

²⁹ Ibid., 33.

³⁰ Kant, Immanuel. "Idea For a Universal History", 12.

³¹ Ibid., 13.

³² Ibid., 18.

³³ Kant, Immanuel. "Perpetual Peace", 89.

³⁴ Kant, Immanuel. "Idea For a Universal History", 15.

...condemns European settlement and colonization on the grounds of morality and right. And yet, it seems that he cannot but rely on them for teleological purposes, that is, precisely as vehicles at the time for the spread of European culture and civilization, law and religion throughout the world.³⁵

Lastly, Kant's conception of the perfect, civil constitution is expanded on in section II of his essay on *Perpetual Peace*. It is here that Kant specifically expounds his faith in the republican constitution. Following the abolition of armies and unwelcome interference of states with one another, Kant notes that a federation of states, each with a republican constitution, will ensure peace through principles of mutual hospitality.³⁶ At this stage of the project Kant also considers the root of this constitution.

The republican constitution, besides the purity of its origin (having sprung from the pure source of the concept of law), also gives a favorable prospect for the desired consequence, i.e., perpetual peace.³⁷

Having sketched Kant's moral theory and noted the contradiction in his notions of universal development it is interesting to see again that Kant equates the source of republican government to the same source as the moral law. Moreover, this passage seems to indicate that both the highest form of morality and the highest form of government are derived from pure

³⁵ McCarthy, Thomas. *Race, Empire, and the Idea of Human Development*, 62.

³⁶ Kant, Immanuel. "Perpetual Peace", 102.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

concepts, as given universally in nature. This is problematic in that Kant is seen to be conflating moral development with political development, and in doing so presumes the superiority of a western democratic paradigm that he deems universal. Thus, Kant's thinking falls victim to the same paradox of ethnocentric egalitarianism to which Young refers. Ultimately, in the second definitive article for *Perpetual Peace*, Kant writes of the "attachment of savages to their lawless freedom" in reference to those who not only exist outside the net of republican democracy, but also outside his federation of states.³⁸ This is a final attempt by Kant to explain anomalous phenomenon that exist outside the framework of his universal history, which includes societies perceived by the west to lack technological, political, and cultural development.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the notion of 'universal history' in the political writings of Immanuel Kant. It is clear from our examination that Kant's notions of cultural and political development fall short of being universal. Clearly, what compromises the universality of Kant's conception of development is his desire to justify a Eurocentric model that he perceives as dictated by natural law. Finally, the manner in which Kant borrows 'universal' principles from a particular, historical and cultural context limits the applicability of his project. However, there remain moral aspects of the Kantian notion of development that merit a closer look in a contemporary context.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 98.

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