

KANT'S HERMENEUTICS OF PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT: Kant's Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View proposes a method of historiography according to which humanity is depicted as progressing towards a state of freedom, perpetual peace, and cosmopolitanism. In short, it puts forward what one might call a hermeneutics of progress: a self-consciously political exegetical framework. This paper locates the hermeneutic in Kant's political essays and explores a number of its characteristics, for instance, its self-reflexivity. The hermeneutic is seen to be more than a call for politically progressive historiography but also a broader philosophy of history that challenges institutional assumptions.

KEYWORDS: Kant; History; Philosophy of History; Cosmopolitanism; Progress

"We must also recognize that the entire universe is involved in a perpetual and most free progress, so that it is always advancing toward greater culture." Gottfried Leibniz, 1697

"We are the change that we seek." - Barack Obama, 2008

Kant wrote with a particular type of awareness of his audience. As many have noticed, the philosophy of his time was filtered by a political regime of religious conservatism and limited academic freedom. Critique of power was often present but masked, merely hinted at, or wrapped in irony. It is only visible to perceptive readers, and even among them, the interpretation is contentious and textually underdetermined. The hermeneutical challenge is omnipresent for texts in many

eras of philosophy.¹

When I speak of awareness, I mean more than recognizing that philosophy cannot but exist in a political world that influences it. I intend to think about a deeper form of awareness here. When philosophers are aware of the unavoidable political backdrop, they can bring it inside their works, making the work, so to speak, conscious of its own politics. They can recognize that the politics were inside all along. What was once seen as a limitation or inconvenience can be subverted. It can provide the basis for critique both of a society and philosophy itself. The limitation is transformed in the recognition that it is unavoidable. It then, due to the recognition, unavoidably becomes an integral part of the philosophizing. Whatever the philosophy is about, it is always also, at least implicitly, a commentary on and reflection of systems of power. The awareness is at bottom an awareness that metaphilosophy includes a political component. Insofar as all philosophy presupposes or gestures towards a metaphilosophy, politics is never far away. Philosophers may or may not be conscious of this fact about their work, but whether it is true is not up to them. And readers of dead philosophers may or may not be conscious of this fact about their task, but whether it is true is not up to them.

Kant displays this deeper awareness. I will be occupied with *Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View* but also to a lesser extent *What is Enlightenment?*, *Contest of the Faculties*, and *Toward Perpetual Peace*.² I will refer to them collectively as

¹ The reading I explore need not be taken as Straussian, though he lists Kant in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1952, p. 33. I have more in mind Nietzsche when he says, “All modern philosophizing is political and official, limited by governments, churches, academies, customs and the cowardice of men to the appearance of scholarship. [...] One may think, write, print, speak, teach philosophy—to that point more or less everything is permitted; only in the realm of action, of so-called life, is it otherwise: there only one thing is ever permitted and everything else simply impossible: thus will historical culture have it. Are there still human beings, one then asks oneself, or perhaps only thinking-, writing- and speaking-machines?” ‘On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life’ in *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale, New York, Cambridge University Press, 1997, p. 85.

² I will abbreviate the essays as *Idea*, *Enlightenment*, *Contest*, and *Perpetual Peace*. Less central but still included among the political essays for me are *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* and *On the Common Saying: This May be True in Theory, but it Does not Hold in Practice* (abbreviated to *On the Common Saying*). Immanuel Kant, *Toward Perpetual Peace and Other Writings on Politics, Peace, and History*, trans. David L. Colclasure, Pauline Kleingeld (ed.), New Haven, Yale University Press, 2006. All citations are to the standard *Akademie* edition.

the ‘political essays’ because I will use the *Idea* as the key for understanding them all—and, by a further possible extension, all of Kant’s *Werke*.

My main goal is to explore what might be called a ‘hermeneutics of progress’: a self-consciously political exegetical framework. Central to the hermeneutics of progress is its iterative and self-reflexive feature. As a result, not only will I suggest that Kant advocates such a framework (which in the first iteration is not novel), but to show its scope, I will outline it according to four iterations of awareness.

FIRST

Written in 1784, the *Idea* is the first of the political essays. Compared to Kant’s more historically influential works, it is strikingly non-systematic. In one respect this is unsurprising since it was written before the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), which many use in interpreting the *Idea*, and the abstract political philosophy of the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797).³ In another respect, it is easy to sense a dramatic difference in tone from the Kant of the system. The first line suggests a setting aside of speculative metaphysics and an embrace of the all too human activity of historiography:

Whatever concept of the freedom of the will one may develop in the context of metaphysics, the appearances of the will, human actions, are determined, like every other natural event, in accordance with universal natural laws. History, which is concerned with giving a narrative account of these appearances, allows us to hope that, however deeply concealed their causes may be, if we consider the free exercise of the human will broadly, we can ultimately discern a regular progression in its appearances. (8:17)

There is a place for hope in historiography. It is a project that can be conceived as orthogonal to various debates in speculative metaphysics.

Kant starts with two distinctions. The first is the difference between *history* and *past*. History is “concerned with giving a narrative account” of the past. It is the process of organizing and *in-forming* the unorganized matter of past events in

³ For an integration of the *Idea* into Kant’s system, see Henry Allison, ‘Teleology and History in Kant’ in (eds.) Amelie Rorty and James Schmidt, *Kant’s Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 24-45. A different take is Loren Goldman, ‘In Defense of Blinders: On Kant, Political Hope, and the Need for Practical Belief’, *Political Theory*, vol. 40, no. 4, August, 2012, pp. 497-523.

accordance with values. Corresponding to the distinction is two models of historiography. First, is it the job of the historian to *discover* the trends that exist independent of any historiography or, second, to *project* the trend onto the past? The past is not immediately intelligible *as history*, but we as historians must contribute something to make the past intelligible—something that is *in us*. The question then turns to what we contribute.

The second distinction is between two types of freedom.⁴ On the one hand, people freely choose to marry and have children. They do not appear determined to make their choices one way or another. A married couple might find such a suggestion to devalue the union. On the other hand, the “annual tables” that show marriage and birth statistics depict people as caught in large collective trends. History drives on, not so much ignoring individual choices as fashioning them into an arc that retroactively makes the choices seem inevitable. The marriage is a speck of data, predictable, or at least unsurprising. Choices become swallowed up in a grand, impersonal current. It is against this backdrop that Kant draws a distinction between two types of freedom. There is the freedom of an individual choice and freedom as a state and goal of Nature. “Each, according to his own inclination, follows his own purpose [...]; yet each individual and people, as if following some guiding thread, go toward a natural but to each of them unknown goal” (8: 17). He writes about this type of freedom in *Enlightenment*, where he describes it as the conditions for the public use of reason (8:36-7). The current is taking us in a particular direction. Nature is propelling us toward the state of freedom.

With these two distinctions in mind, the aim of the *Idea* comes into view. Since the past is a collection of individual acts, each taken for their own “absurd” reasons, Kant encourages the construction of a history that depicts humanity as making progress towards a perfected state of freedom. He is urging the adoption of a “normative-political progressive framework for historical interpretation,” as Barbara Herman says.⁵ Simply put, Kant is making available a hermeneutics of

⁴ The distinction in the *Idea* resembles the distinction between internal and external freedom we find in the *Metaphysics of Morals* (6:220).

⁵ Barbara Herman, ‘A Habitat for Humanity’, in (eds.) Amelie Rorty and James Schmidt, *Kant’s Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 150.

progress. With it historians can and should construct a narrative of humanity's development into a peaceful universal civic society. Such a state of freedom guides the practice of historiography.

This conception of history relies heavily on teleology. It is prominent in the first five theses of the *Idea*. Despite the central importance of the teleology, there is no direct argument for it in the essay. Many have puzzled over the absence. Kant certainly does not provide enough justification for such a strong metaphysical position. It is also difficult to understand why Kant thought he *needed* a strong teleology of nature in the first place, not to mention the further bizarre move to anthropomorphize nature (see *Idea* 8:19-20, cf. *Enlightenment* 8:42, *Perpetual Peace* 8:360). As we will see, at the end of the essay he indicates that the teleology might not be necessary for the construction of a universal history.

In the other political essays, teleology is less prominent and more delicately phrased. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant discusses the concept of providence. (He mentions providence in the *Idea* as well, though only in passing (8:30).) He says, “we do not actually *cognize* it as such based on the artifices of nature or *infer* its existence on the basis of such artifices, but rather [...] can and need only *add* it *in thought* in order to conceive of their possibility according to the analogy of human acts of artifice” (8:362). There is also a discussion of providence in *Contest* where Kant attempts to ground the idea of human progress in a shared experience (7:83-4). We could interpret him as evolving in the later political essays towards a more nuanced and system-friendly view. However, *Perpetual Peace*, written in 1795, is not without odd claims about nature: “When I say that nature *wills* that this or that ought to happen, I do not mean that she imposes a *duty* upon us to act thus [...], but rather that she *does* it herself, regardless of whether we will it so or not” (8:365). Talk of providence and a “divinatory history” is perhaps on a par with the *Idea*'s teleology in its obscurity. Regardless of the nuance in places, it is difficult to read Kant in a way that does not have him putting forward a strange and largely unjustified teleological picture—one that he might not need in the end.

It is tempting to invoke the *Critique of Judgment* (esp. § 83-4), a text published six years later, for an explanation of the *Idea*. Surely the teleology can be read as regulative. Yet there are no promissory notes or overt references to the system in the text. Did the coherence or plausibility of the *Idea* hang in the balance for that long? Were readers required to consult the preliminary sketch of teleology in the

first *Critique*?⁶ Is a pre-critical conception of teleology embedded in the political essays?

I propose we consider what results from staying within the *Idea*. If we choose not to take refuge in the system, what can be said about Kant's aim?

We might find answers by examining the role that the teleology plays in the broader project of the *Idea*. The teleology is related to Kant's general concern about war. He dreams the "sweet dream of perpetual peace" (*Perpetual Peace* 8:343). Yet war "seems to have been embedded in human nature" (8:365). In its last line, he links *Contest* to his contemporary political context of the War of the First Coalition and beginning of the French Revolution. *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* ends with Kant setting war in opposition to freedom (8:121). He discusses war at length in *MM* (§ 56-61). A cosmopolitan world is one of perpetual peace. So if nature is driving towards cosmopolitanism, the wars of the past can be recast as terrible but necessary moments in humanity's development. By contrast, Kant is motivated, especially in the later political essays, by a moral duty to contribute to the end of war.

Thus the teleology leads Kant to a somewhat ambivalent view. Despite its atrocities, war is Nature pushing humanity towards a solution to its greatest problem, namely, a universal civic society (fifth thesis). We are caught in Nature's plan to use our "unsocial sociability" in an often violent process of developing our capacities. "Humans desire harmony, but nature knows better what is good for their species: it wills discord" (8:21, he uses the same language at *Anthropology* 7:322). Antagonism induces progress. So in the *Idea*, Kant reframes war not as an issue of individual choice but as an essential piece of Nature's progress toward freedom. The teleology is meant to make the two conflicting ideas consistent. A war, like a marriage, gets caught up in the inexorable current of history. (War and marriage are sure to share other commonalities as well.)

Cosmopolitanism, the goal of Nature, is the condition for the safety and freedom of each state (8:26). In the final two theses we see this idea culminate in an injunction to historians:

⁶ Yirmiahu Yovel notes these and other issues. For him, the *Idea* commits a "major dogmatic error" that cannot be resolved without reading the *Idea* into the system (pp. 154-5). As he says, "I think it is both necessary and possible to reintegrate Kant's philosophy of history into his critical system" (p. 127). I agree only by half. Yirmiahu Yovel, *Kant the Philosophy of History*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1980.

One can regard the history of the human species at large as the realization of a concealed plan of nature, meant to bring into being an internally and, to this end, externally perfect state constitution, as the only condition in which nature can fully develop all of its predispositions in humankind. (Eighth thesis, 8:27)

After saying that the proposition somehow follows directly from the preceding one, Kant says,

One sees that philosophy, too, can have its chiliastic [or millenarian] beliefs, but this is a chiliasm the idea of which, although only from very far away, can itself promote its realization, and which is, for that reason, anything but fanciful. All that matters is whether experience can discover any evidence of such a purposeful process in nature. I submit: it can discover a little. (8:27)

There are several points to take from the puzzling passages. First, the teleology appears to diminish in importance. Nature's path is a secret and reveals little. Second, Kant now anthropomorphizes philosophy. And third, he introduces a crucial notion for the *Idea*: namely, the mere idea of something can be instrumental in causing it. Herman calls this the "proleptic effect": "where there is an end 'the bringing about of which is promoted by the very idea of it'"⁷ Kant invokes a similar concept in *Contest* with the term "divinatory history," which is possible "when the one divining the events *brings about* and arranges the events that he announces in advance" (7:80).⁸

The proleptic effect is implied in the ninth thesis: "A philosophical attempt to describe the universal history of the world according to a plan of nature that aims at the perfect civic union of the human species must be considered to be possible and even to promote this intention of nature." Kant again downplays the teleology: "Yet if one may assume that nature itself does not progress without a plan and ultimate intention," and then in the next line, "although we are too shortsighted to understand the secret mechanism of nature's organization, this idea may nonetheless serve as a guiding thread with which to describe an

⁷ Herman, 'A Habitat for Humanity', 154. Kant invokes the proleptic effect in the *Contest* as well (7:83-4). Rüdiger Bittner also discusses it in 'Philosophy helps History' in (eds.) Amelie Rorty and James Schmidt, *Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 230-48.

⁸ A similar, more system-friendly concept is found at *MM* 6:354. It resembles Kant's discussion at *On the Common Saying* 8:309. A proper understanding of the proleptic effect shows that it is different from a noble lie.

otherwise planless *aggregate* of human activities” (8: 29). Above I asked why Kant felt he *needed* the strong teleology of nature. In the conclusion of the essay, he is suggesting that the idea for a universal history does not in fact require it. What is important is the guiding thread of history, which a historian might either *project* onto the past or *discover* in nature. The latter plainly requires a teleology. If we see nature as having a goal, our actions might help us bring it about. Yet there is a tension, since the stronger the teleology, seemingly the less help nature would need from us. A history built from the point of view of cosmopolitanism would not only help us make sense of the past, but it would depict humanity as headed towards a greater state of freedom. The universal history would be a cause of the cosmopolitan state. This is the proleptic effect: we can *make* nature have an end by writing history *as if* it had an end.⁹ There is a space between projecting a guiding thread of history and discovering one.

In sum, Kant is considering nature as developing humanity toward a state of greater freedom, and the historian can write a history with this idea as a guide. The universal history is the product of a hermeneutics of progress: we can fashion the messy past (and present), full of painful war, into a broader progressive trend that will influence political decisions. The history would make the actions of individuals intelligible as moments in the development of humanity. It would be politically influential by directing the ambitions of “heads of state and their servants” (*Idea* 8:31). In so doing, it could have a proleptic effect: the universal history would bring about the very end of Nature that guided the historiography. The teleological picture of freedom and perpetual peace realizes itself. Not only the actions *in* history, but the act *of writing* history becomes a political act.

SECOND

The *Idea* is aspirational and romantic. It is also philosophically confusing and problematic. There is a great deal more to say about what a universal history would look like. Does Kant merely note its possibility? He invites historians to take up the project and gestures towards the concept that the project would be a cause of political progress, but then he also leaves the progress to Nature itself. I

⁹ We are reminded of Martin Luther King Jr.’s 6th principle of nonviolence: “the universe is on the side of justice.”

previously alluded to this tension: Kant moves away from individual freedom and toward a teleology that threatens to give Nature all control over our providence. Our history might swallow us up in its current and therefore rob us of our freedom. In asking ‘what are we to do?’ we are asking about the relation between the unpalatable teleology and the proleptic effect.

It is best to start by considering the audience of the *Idea*. Undoubtedly it includes historians and political leaders. Kant mentions both explicitly. All the political essays have an eye toward the politically powerful.¹⁰ But the audience is also philosophers—including Kant himself. The hermeneutic Kant offers is broader than a particular interpretative framework for history. In fact, Kant is employing the hermeneutics of progress *in the essay itself*. Just as he is calling for a progressive history, he is giving us a progressive philosophy—an instance of the type of work he is calling for. The political philosophy of history in the *Idea* is aware of itself.

We can split Kant’s ‘philosophy of history’ in the *Idea* into two tracks: history and philosophy. Accordingly, the awareness and self-reflexivity of the hermeneutics of progress has implications for both the history track (first iteration) and the philosophy track (second iteration). For instance, it is a feature of Kant’s own hermeneutics of progress that he should see in his philosophizing a political component and, in recognizing it, an attendant and latent proleptic effect. The call for a universal history is an event, an individual act of freedom, that becomes a moment in the development of Nature. The *Idea* qua event is *about* the development of Nature. I propose that Kant sees this. Thus, he should be read as writing in a way that would draw out the political effects he hopes to see. This includes mobilizing both historians and philosophers to the progressive cause. As a result, we discover a *dual* proleptic effect: to the historian, Kant is engaged in the foundations of the progressive historical project described in the ninth thesis. To the philosopher, we find in the *Idea* a model of what might be called *philosophy as invitation*: the self-conscious political use of controversy, omission, even poor argumentation, and more with the intention of prompting others to engage with issues within an established proleptic framing. Such philosophy is only possible through an implicit demonstration of

¹⁰ See *Contest* (7:92), *Perpetual Peace* (8:352), *Enlightenment* (8:40), and *Idea* (8:31).

metaphilosophical self-awareness. The *Idea* is an invitation.

Before I turn to the idea of philosophy as invitation in detail (the second track of the second iteration), let us return to the first. This iteration of the hermeneutics of progress (i.e. the application of the claims of the *Idea* to the *Idea*) can help explain the problems I outlined above. Kant is aware of the philosophical problems with his grand teleology of nature. The *Idea* is not a defense of the position because there is no argument for it. The omission is intentional. Instead, the teleology provides the philosophical basis for a universal history. It holds fixed the progressive development of humanity. The Mandevillian fourth thesis about the “unsocial sociability of men” forestalls the potential objection that there is no progress in history. Kant is building into the undergirding metaphysics a way of responding to cynical historians. The teleology makes it impossible to project a regressive trend (or no trend) onto the past. Kant’s awareness of the proleptic effect is at play in his teleology: the idea of nature moving towards freedom *causes* the universal history to be politically progressive. The teleology is itself political. It is already part of the historiography.

We can approach the same idea through Kant’s choice to anthropomorphize Nature. It shifts the focus away from the blame of individuals who have committed atrocities.¹¹ It is all swept up in Nature’s goal of freedom. So Kant is employing the hermeneutics of progress in his claim that war is an essential part of history.¹² Much of the historian’s job has been done by Kant’s formal political and metaphysical picture in the first seven theses of the *Idea*. All that remains for the historian to do is supply the empirical matter. Because of that, the proleptic effect already exists in Kant’s call for a universal history. Since he is interested in peace, he addressed a set of philosophical issues (e.g. freedom, teleology, war) with the politically progressive intention of supplying the basis for an intellectual project that would contribute to accomplishing peace. The basis is one aware of the tension implied by the teleology. Nature not only guides us towards its end, but it does so through encouraging our participation. As Kant says in the final line of *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, “Everyone is called upon by nature

¹¹ See Booth, ‘Reason and History: Kant’s Other Copernican Revolution’, *Kant-Studien*, 74, 1983, pp. 56-71.

¹² cf. *Critique of Judgment* 433.

itself to contribute, to the best of his ability, his part to this progress” (8:123).¹³

What about the idea of philosophy as invitation, the second track of the second iteration? Kant is providing philosophers with a demonstration of politically conscious philosophizing. I will explore three aspects of the demonstration, each at a different level of depth. First (and most superficial), the *Idea* is Kant’s attempt to find the arguments that move people. There is something motivational and inspirational in the *Idea*. We should work to achieve the goal of peace. In the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant calls perpetual peace the unachievable ultimate goal of nations. Nevertheless, nations should approximate peace as much as they can (6:350). We do not find the same qualification in the political essays. This can be taken as evidence of their central political valence and as an invitation to read them without reliance on the system and the regulative status of ideas. An effective way to quash motivation is to say that a goal is unachievable. Kant is doing the duty of the public philosopher by providing a model for others.

Further, we can see this collection of intentions best in *Enlightenment*. For Kant, enlightenment is a picture of progression from blind obedience to freedom of inquiry. It is a type of development in Nature. There are some independent thinkers who lead the way and “will spread the spirit of rational appreciation of one’s own worth and the calling of every human being to think for himself” (8:36). Kant is trying to carve out the legitimacy of public scholarly critique of institutions of power (e.g. the state, religion, the military). In the *Idea* he is using teleology to generate a particular model for a universal history. Namely, he is framing freedom as a consequence of a movement of enlightenment and history in general. The idea of human progress is used to defend the enlightenment position of freedom to critique, a progressive position and one important to Kant (8:39). Enlightenment is also an example of a “guiding thread” of history. He understands himself as more than a member of a tradition. He is also a thinker who is constructing the tradition, especially in writing about the tradition. *Enlightenment* is accordingly proleptic. This is manifest in the use of philosophical doctrine as a means of challenging or convincing those in power. Regardless of the success, the philosophy is an instance of what Kant believes philosophy should

¹³ See Makkreel, Rudolph, *Imagination and Interpretation in Kant: The Hermeneutical Import of the ‘Critique of Judgement’*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990, 132. He discusses *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* specifically at 133-6.

be. And all those who engage with him do so within his established proleptic framing. Open and public debate about enlightenment is a feature and exemplification of the progression towards enlightenment.

To return to the *Idea*, Kant surely knew that his obscure teleology would be provocative. If we are concerned with an important issue like peace, it is crucial, and perhaps obligatory, to write in a way that encourages others to engage. Hence, in the second iteration we can see that the writing style is meant to have the same effect as Kant's call for a progressive history: he is obliquely calling on others to join his project of progressive philosophy.¹⁴ This is a central aspect of Kant's philosophy as invitation. The strange and incomplete metaphysics of the *Idea* is aimed at drawing more philosophers into the project, even if as critics. When Kant downplays the teleology in the ninth thesis, he is making the call for a universal history detachable from the teleology. The project could receive a different metaphysical basis. The result is the two tracks described above—namely, the same call for a progressive project directed separately at historians and philosophers. He is leaving gaps in the substantive historical and philosophical claims. The gaps entice historians and philosophers into the broader political project. They entice by encouraging two types of response: either as allies, to accept the claims and add substantiation, or as critics, to reject the claims. In the latter case, the philosophy as invitation can still forward its aims. So the proleptic effect is found not only in the idea for a universal history, but also in *how* Kant calls for the history. He does so through philosophy as invitation.

Third, there is a deeper point about Kant's philosophy as invitation. Since he is engaged in self-consciously political philosophizing, he thereby lays bare the politics of all who would respond to him. The self-reflexivity of the hermeneutics of progress forces a conversation about philosophy and/in/as politics. Responses to Kant require grappling with the political aim of his project. They cannot simply exist as detached, apolitical objections (or endorsements). The attempt would take place in the first iteration and fail to see the second. The responses

¹⁴ It is worth noting that Kant was successful. Fichte was certainly influenced by Kant's idea for a progressive philosophy. The *Addresses to a German Nation* is fruitfully read in this way. The final address is a fiery call for political action (cf. "Contest" 7:83). Fichte also starts *The Characteristics of the Present Age* with a lecture called "Idea for a Universal History." See Manfred Kühn in (eds.) Fred Rush & Jürgen Stolzenberg, 'Kant and Fichte on 'Universal History'', *Geschichte/History*, De Gruyter, 2014, pp. 37-53. It is possible to list more contemporary examples.

would lack the self-awareness that Kant is exemplifying. This is equivalent to saying that they would lack a basic understanding of Kant's idea. The core of the philosophical message of the *Idea*—which we find chiefly in how the teleology is presented—is the unavoidable politics of (meta)philosophy. So all engagement *becomes* part of Kant's progressive project. Just like with the whole of nature, there is no stepping outside of it. The view from nowhere is, as many have noticed, a political view.

We find two tracks in the second iteration of the hermeneutics of progress. Kant's self-awareness in the *Idea* pertains somewhat differently to the historians and philosophers in his audience. For historians, Kant is already undertaking and displaying the historiography that he is hoping to see from others. They should build on his foundation. For philosophers, the *Idea* is an example of philosophy as invitation. The particular philosophical positions are less important than the political framing in which they appear. As such, Kant can perform philosophy strategically in a way that invites others to engage in his political project. When the invitation is politically self-aware, all philosophical engagement must reckon with its own politics, even in the attempt to contest the alleged self-awareness of the invitation. Otherwise, the engagement is immediately off the mark.

THIRD

I am exploring an interpretation of Kant's political essays. In the second iteration I claimed that the self-reflexivity of the hermeneutics of progress is the key to understanding the *Idea*. The act or event of the *Idea* essay is the progressive philosophy he is inviting us to take up.

At this point it is important to see that my interpretation thus far is itself an application of the hermeneutics of progress. I am attempting to accept Kant's invitation. I have taken myself to be engaged in the same political project that I see Kant both encouraging (first iteration) and engaging in himself (second iteration).

Insofar as I am doing 'history of philosophy', my approach is as a historian and a philosopher. Both tracks in the second iteration are relevant to me. How should I approach my project? Which values am I expressing? What am I projecting into the past? And to what future of philosophy am I contributing? In finding these questions explicitly and self-reflexively in Kant's political essays, I

necessarily find them present in all philosophizing, including my own. If I am accepting Kant's call, I must make the political component of the philosophy aware of itself.

What does the hermeneutics of progress enable me to say about my interpretation? When I reference the political aspect of Kant's philosophizing, I mean both the subject matter and the act of philosophizing. The *Idea* is about the two coalescing. The coalescence simply *is* the deeper form of awareness. It is also a consequence of Kant's call for a universal history that the call itself is an event to be interpreted by a future historian. Its meaning is left undetermined. But by the proleptic effect present of the *Idea*, Kant attempts to contribute to the universal history he is asking the historians to write. He is also philosophizing in a way that he hopes future philosophers emulate (as is likely true of all philosophizing). So my claims about the proleptic effect are interpretations *of the sort that Kant himself describes*. They are determinations of a past event in accordance with an idea. Which idea? Kant's own idea. This is the third iteration: my determinations are facets of a history about the political progress of philosophy. The framework according to which I am interpreting Kant—and finding a hermeneutics of progress—is a product of itself. Hence, the third iteration can be seen as a validation of Kant's proleptic effect. The idea of a progressive history and philosophy *has brought about* a progressive history and philosophy, as meager as it might be at present. Calling Kant's idea proleptic makes the idea proleptic.

If I read Kant as providing the tools for the construction of a progressive political project, Kant becomes a part of that very same project (which should not be taken to imply that he requires unending scholarly study). He is making a "philosophical prediction," as he says in the *Contest* (7:88). In that case, I, writing in his future, have the ability to supply him with confirmation. Or, importantly, I am unable to supply disconfirmation. My disagreement signals the rejection of the progressive political project, which still takes place within the proleptic framing. But I am motivated to attempt to supply confirmation precisely because of the content of the prediction—namely, the idea of a progressive philosophical project. My interpretation of Kant, quite literally, makes my interpretation of Kant right. The hermeneutics of progress bears its own fruit.

FOURTH

What would it mean to object to my reading? How might we settle a dispute over interpretation? As I hope we can see in this final iteration, these are not the questions that concern us. Rather, we are interested in where the questions come from. We find at this moment that we are not debating about Kant. Depending on the content of the progressive political project, he can be discarded. To object by pointing to lines of an old text would be to miss the point entirely.

So perhaps a better question is whether we should accept the hermeneutics of progress. Any answer would involve an awareness of the coalescence of the philosophical and political. That is, our debate over a hermeneutic is metaphilosophical and thus political. So how I interpret Kant—or anyone else, even myself—reflects not only a set of political values but also an awareness, or lack thereof, of my audience. I can take the limitations posed by my community inside the work, make them conscious of themselves, and write in an aspirational, proleptic manner. I have explored a particular candidate hermeneutic here, and differentiated it from the standard style of Kant interpretation. Instead of giving a familiar looking argument for it, I have attempted to show that such an argument would be self-defeating. If I am applying Kant's hermeneutics of progress to myself, then, like with Kant, we should find that all engagement *becomes* part of the progressive project. There are no detached, apolitical arguments. There is no outside. Thus we cannot get there from the outside.

In familiar Kantian fashion, my progression through various iterations does not represent various premises of an argument, from which I now derive a conclusion. I also do not start with a foundation and build on it step by step. Rather, full appreciation of the later iterations requires seeing the ways in which they are present in, and in fact make possible, the earlier iterations.

I could say more about the contours of the fourth iteration. But since it is an application of the hermeneutics of progress to this essay as a whole, perhaps it is best done by others. In the third iteration I said that, because of the proleptic effect, my interpretation of Kant confirms my interpretation of Kant. Naturally, in the fourth iteration we find the same possibility: others can supply me, and by extension Kant, with the same confirmation. This paper *qua event*, even its omissions and ambiguities, is left undetermined and awaiting those who come after. Confirmation, however, is not an issue of textual analysis. At the level of the

text, only confirmation is available. At the more important level—to which this paper stands as invitation—confirmation is purely an issue of whether one wishes to accept the abstract progressive political project.

Nevertheless, with an eye to the future, I will finish by tracing out several further conjectures.

Kant teaches us that the past becomes a history through the application, consciously or not, of an idea. The worth of our individual choices, and the society that informs them, is not immediately or inherently determined. The meaning of our actions, is as yet undetermined. In constructing a grand arc of history, we become free despite depicting ourselves as moments in a trend of inevitable progress. The act of creating the history determines us, but insofar as we create the history, we are self-determining. This is the meaning of freedom. We are free from our history, not our past—or better, we are free *in virtue of* our history. To say that we are the cause of the future, just as the past is the cause of us, says little. It is an analytic truth about time: the past comes before and brings about the present. But the past *as history* does not come before us. It is chiefly a story about ourselves, not the past. Built into the story is a picture of progress rooted in an estimation of who we are right now. To use a simple image, our history is like packing for a journey. We pick items on the basis of knowing, consciously or not, where we want to go, what we think we will encounter, and what we are strong enough to carry.

As another form of self-determination, we can create, through the political power of our history, the world that will judge our own past actions as significant or not, revolutionary or not, free or not. Even if we do not self-determine directly, we have a type of indirect power. How posterity views us is determined by the current actions that determine what posterity will be.

What do we mean when we say “*the history of philosophy*”? It is the interpretation of the past into something (an object, a canon, a curriculum) that has power over us. It determines the course of the future in a way that, at one level, strips us of our freedom. It tells us who we are and what to do. It constrains what we can say. But we can recognize both that we have determined ourselves and, because of that, at another level, remain undetermined. We wait for those in the future to determine us—to interpret our works, to turn us into specks of data, to discard us. The meaning of our actions is up to them. They will be writers

of history. But to us, from the history we write, they are the result of what we do now.

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