

# Some Remarks on Kant's Concept of an a priori History

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## I. Introduction

In *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784), Kant states that it is possible to discover [*entdecken*] a regular course in the historical development of mankind, by interpreting such development as the result of a hidden *plan of nature*. Although history seems to exhibit a nonsensical course of human affairs, the philosopher can adopt a *perspective* which allows him to grasp a coherent meaning of «universal history» and to anticipate, in a sense, the course of future events, given that such perspective –so argues Kant– encourages the performance of actions which might promote our progress towards a republican constitution and a cosmopolitan order. The philosophical *perspective* outlined in the essay of 1784 would also have the advantage of instructing rulers on how to improve political institutions, and would provide, finally, an important element to the justification of *nature* considered as *providence* (*IaG*, Ak. VIII, 30-31)<sup>1</sup>.

To be sure, Kant's intention in this essay is not to *demonstrate* that humankind is continually improving; given the free character of the human will, it would be impossible to predict such improvement.

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<sup>1</sup> In their account of the purposes of *philosophical history*, some interpreters have pointed out that it provides important elements for a *theodicy* (Kuhlen, 2009, 69; Ameriks, 2009, 67). As Muchnik states, Kant not only attempts to secure an intelligible meaning of history, but also to provide a new conception of divinity which results from adopting the *aim of nature* as our own aim. Kant's writings on history are hence connected to the development of a *rational religion*, within which God would be no longer conceived as an external authority.

Moreover, if we turn to historical experience in order to take position in the debate on human progress, we might even conclude that mankind has made no progress at all: ambition, egoism, violence and war seem to be constants throughout history. Nevertheless, and precisely in order to avoid such a skeptical conclusion, the philosopher –as a *spectator* of history– is able to adopt a different *point of view* and to reach a different conclusion. The perspective proposed by Kant –that is: the interpretation of history as the result of a *plan of nature* oriented to a full flourishing of human dispositions– has an evident advantage, i.e. that it makes progress attainable. As we shall see, this is, indeed, the main goal of *philosophical history*: to provide an incentive to the fulfillment of our moral duties, contributing thus to the accomplishment of fundamental goals of human race. Even if such perspective can be considered as *theoretic* –given that it provides a way of *understanding or conceiving* the meaning of history–, its main character is, as we shall see, ultimately *practical*<sup>2</sup>.

Despite the a priori character of *philosophical history*, Kant wonders whether we have any justification to adopt such a philosophical perspective on the course of history. To the question of whether “experience reveals something of such a course as nature’s aim” (IaG, Ak. VIII, 27), his response is that we can find little –although insightful– *signs [Spuren]* of this *aim*: the progressive extension of freedom and the advancement of Enlightenment reveal a progress of our species; on the other hand, commercial relationships between States become tighter and this situation encourages the creation of institutions which anticipate, in a sense, a cosmopolitan order (IaG, Ak. VIII, 28). These *historical signs* support our confidence in progress and avoid hopeless predictions which

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<sup>2</sup> Whereas some interpreters emphasize the *theoretical* character of Kant’s account of history –see, for example, Wood (2006: 245-247)–, others consider it as mainly *practical* (cf. Lindstedt, 1999, 135ss.; Bittner, 2009, 231ss.; Flikschuh, 2006, 384ss.). The theoretical dimension of *philosophical history* is connected with the application of the principle of *systematic unity* –as exposed in the first *Critique*– to the domain of history (Kleingeld, 2009, 175-176, Wood, 2006, 249). An *idea* is, for Kant, a regulative concept of pure reason, an *a priori* teleological representation which enables reason to reach an unconditioned totality within the realm of empirical scientific investigation. Many interpreters agree that the teleological conception of nature –which will be fully developed by Kant in KU– is already anticipated in IaG (Guyer, 2006, 347-34; Ameriks, 2009, 49, 57-59; Allison, 2009, 24ss.). The teleological conception of *universal history* is *theoretical* since it makes it possible to overcome the chaotic appearance of human affairs, and to reach a systematic and coherent conception of historical facts. But such conception also reveals a *practical dimension*, since the «aim of nature» in relation to history points to political and juridical goals, namely: the republican constitution and the cosmopolitan order (Allison, 2009, 24-25; Ameriks, 2009, 55).

might produce, in the end, the evil they announce (SF, Ak. VII, 80)<sup>3</sup>. So, the following difficulty arises: even if Kant states, in several passages of his main juridical and political writings, that empirical arguments are completely irrelevant within the frame of an *a priori history*, he nevertheless identifies certain historical events as signs of progress. Additionally, he provides no criterion in order to justify the consideration of certain facts as relevant, while neglecting others as providing no supporting evidence against progress. In this paper I analyze these difficulties in order to show that they can be solved, to some extent, if one considers the features Kant assigns to *philosophical history*, and more specifically: if one takes into account its *a priori* and normative character.

## II. Philosophical history as a normative interpretation of human history

As I have pointed out, Kant's *philosophical history* attempts to find a perspective that makes the sense of history intelligible, in order to anticipate, in a way, the future course of human development. The *a priori history* is a *prospective* history, in that it seeks to establish a *point of view* which might encourage the fulfillment of our moral duties, therefore contributing to *progress*, construed in both moral and political terms<sup>4</sup>. Kant stresses that no skeptical argument based on empirical evidence can prove the impossibility of progress, because in this particular field –that is: in the realm of a philosophical history–, we do

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<sup>3</sup> I shall return to this topic later. For now, it is sufficient to stress that Kant's account of history relies on the idea that agents themselves produce the events that they announce in advance. To forecast a complete decline of morality and the progressive corruption of the human race would lead precisely to that result; on the contrary, to foresee progress promotes progress, since our confidence in the effective possibility of mankind's moral and political improvement works as a powerful incentive to act accordingly.

<sup>4</sup> As Kleingeld points out, the development of human rational dispositions requires certain civil and political conditions, which means that *rational*, *moral*, and *political* progress are not independent tasks (Kleingeld, 2009, 172). To be sure, in laG human progress is mainly characterized in political and juridical terms: a constitution ruled by the principles of law and justice and the institution of a *cosmopolitan right* are the final goals that nature aims at by *nature*. In regard to the connection between political and moral progress, although Kant claims, in *Toward perpetual peace*, that a republican constitution is possible even within a *people of devils* as long as they are rational (ZeF, Ak. VIII, 366) –that is: as long as they behave according to prudential motives–, some texts suggest that the institution of a republican civil order might contribute to the development of morality (Allison, 2009, 43).

not deal with what is but with what ought to be<sup>5</sup>. As he states in *On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Hold in Practice* (1793), theory gains priority over practice since it establishes the regulative principles which must orientate any praxis as such (TP, Ak. VIII, 305-306; ZcF, Ak. VIII, 370, 377-378; MS, Ak. VI, 354-355)<sup>6</sup>. If this is so, when it comes to our hope in progress, we cannot resort to empirical evidence; we must only consider our duty to presuppose a constant improvement of the human race:

I will thus be allowed to assume that since the human race is constantly progressing with respect to culture as the natural end for the same, it is also progressing toward the better with respect to the moral end of its existence, and that this progress will occasionally be interrupted but never broken off. It is not necessary for me to prove this supposition, rather my opponent has the burden of proof. I rely here on my innate duty to affect posterity such that it will become better (something the possibility of which must thus be assumed) and such that this duty will rightfully be passed down from one generation to another [...]. However many doubts about my hopes may be given by history that, if they were sufficient proof, could move me to give up on a seemingly futile task, I can nonetheless, as long as this cannot be made entirely certain, not exchange my duty [...] for the prudential rule not to work toward the unattainable [...]. And however uncertain I am and may remain about whether improvement is to be hoped for the human race, this uncertainty cannot detract from my maxim and thus from the necessary supposition for practical purposes, that it is practicable” (TP, Ak. VIII, 308-309).

Kant explicitly asserts here that we should not resort to historical facts neither to assert nor to deny progress. Our hope in progress does not need to be grounded in empirical data, for it is the moral law that demands that we have hope for the future and that we trust in the feasibility of progress<sup>7</sup>. In different occasions, however, he regards

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<sup>5</sup> Lindstedt (1999, 130). As Kleingeld points out concerning Kant’s justification of the *belief in progress*, given the normative character of Kant’s juridical doctrine of right, “the problem of what is right is fundamentally independent from the question of what is *feasible* or realistic. Yet the normative theory should not contain prescriptions that are absolutely impossible because it is incoherent to prescribe that someone do something that is patently impossible” (Kleingeld, 2006: xx). As Kleingeld herself stresses, our belief in human progress have both moral *and* theoretical grounds, the latter being connected to a teleological conception of *nature* as an *a priori* conception imposed by reason (Kleingeld, 2006, xxii). I shall come back to this point later.

<sup>6</sup> For a detailed account of the regulative character of the ideas of pure reason within the frame of Kant’s practical philosophy, see: Beade (2014, 473-492).

<sup>7</sup> In one of his handwritten notes, Kant refers to a «natürlichen Wunsch auf die Hofnung», suggesting that hope should be regarded as an effect of a natural disposition of mankind (cf. *Refl.* 8077, Ak. XIX, 608).

certain historical events as *signs* –even as *proofs* [*Beweise*]– of human progress: current complaints about moral corruption –as he argues in TP– actually prove that our moral standards are higher than those in the past (TP, Ak. VIII, 310). As I have already stressed, the problem here is that he offers no justification of this resort to certain historical events as conclusive evidence of human progress; in effect, he does not even explain why it is possible to regard certain historical facts as clear *signs* of progress, while dismissing other facts as irrelevant. Is it possible to establish a sound criteria which could legitimize the identification of *relevant* historical facts in the frame of an *a priori history*?

This problem arises with particular emphasis in *The conflict of the faculties* (1798), where Kant explicitly asserts that “the problem of progress is not to be resolved immediately through experience” (SF, Ak. VII, 83), but adds that

the divinatorial history of the human race must be nonetheless connected with some kind of experience. There must exist some experience in the human race which, as an event, indicates that the latter has a makeup and capacity to be both the cause of human progress toward the better and (since this is supposed to be the act of a being endowed with freedom) the agent thereof (SF, Ak. VII, 84).

One particular historical experience –the French Revolution or, more precisely, the unselfish *enthusiasm* shared by the *impartial spectators* of the Revolution– is regarded here as a *sign* of the moral character of our species, which provides a solid ground to augur human progress. The witnesses of the Revolution show unanimous respect for the principles of *liberty*, *equality* and *fraternity*, and is for the sake of those principles that they support the revolutionary cause, despite of its unpleasant consequences (SF, Ak. VII, 86). Now, it is not our mere capacity to give ourselves the moral law (and to obey it) which allows us to predict progress, since the human disposition to evil is just as radical as our disposition to good<sup>8</sup>. In several texts Kant refers to human propensity to disobey the moral principles and even wonders,

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<sup>8</sup> As Guyer emphasizes, both evil and good are possible effects of our free choice, and so evil is not an inevitable result of natural inclinations or desires, but one of the possible results of a free will, which in certain occasions chooses to subordinate the maxim of morality to the maxim of self-love (Guyer, 2009, 148). However, this does not mean that good and evil are not *equal* possibilities for human freedom: Kant distinguishes between propensities to evil, which are contingent, and predispositions to the good, which are necessary. For a detailed account of Kant's conception of free choice, see: Allison (1990, 51ss.).

metaphorically, how one could expect to construct something completely straight from the *crooked timber* of which humankind is made (IaG, Ak. VIII, 23; RGV, Ak. VI, 100)<sup>9</sup>. In SF he notes that, given a mixture of evil and good in the constitution of human beings, “the measure of which he does not know, he does not know himself what effect he can expect from it” (SF, Ak. VII, VI, 84). Our capacity to subject ourselves to the moral law cannot be, hence, a sufficient ground for foreseeing progress: the advancement of mankind can be inferred, not directly from our moral condition, but from a fact –a historical *fact*–, which in turns reveals a human natural tendency towards self-perfection as a moral disposition<sup>10</sup>. *That fact* –i.e. the enthusiasm among the impartial spectators of the French Revolution– is, indeed, the *sign* which allows us to remain hopeful about our constant progress (SF, Ak. VII, 84).

As the spokesperson of this *divinatory history*, Kant augurs that human beings advance towards a republican constitution and a cosmopolitan order, within which peaceful relationships among States can be guaranteed:

In light of circumstances and signs prevalent at present I propose that the human race shall attain this end and herewith also predict, even without the gift of the prophet’s vision, a progression of the human race from then on toward the better that can not be completely reversed. For such a phenomenon in human history will not be forgotten, since it has uncovered a predisposition and power in human nature the likes of which no politician would have been able to cleverly deduce from the course of events to date (SF, Ak. VII, 88).

Kant stresses that, even if the Revolution failed, this philosophical prediction “would loose none of its force”, which means that this *historical sign* is regarded as conclusive (whereas those facts or events which might seem to deny progress should be regarded, however, as

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<sup>9</sup> Guyer states that one of Kant’s main purposes in his account of *philosophical history* refers to the necessity of promoting the adoption of moral principles in the domain of political action: despite the *crooked timber of mankind*, a just civil constitution is possible provided that the rulers behave as *moral politicians*, provided that they act according to the requirements of moral principles (Guyer, 2009, 148-149). For a detailed analysis of Kant’s metaphor of a *people of devils* and its methodological or *legitimative* meaning, see: Höffe (1992).

<sup>10</sup> As has been pointed out, Kant’s main arguments in IaG presuppose a teleological conception of nature, and with respect to *human nature*, human beings are considered as beings whose distinctive natural disposition –that is: their rational dispositions– enable their constant self-perfection (Ameriks, 2009, 57-59). For an analysis of the debate among the Enlightenment authors of the on human *perfectibility* and its influence on Kant’s account of human natural dispositions (as orientated towards a full development in the course of history), see: Kuhen (2009, 73ss.).

totally irrelevant). I believe that a brief account of Kant's concept of an a priori history can provide important elements to overcome this difficulty.

In the first place, even if the moral law demands that we have hope on the possibility of progress, the fulfillment of moral duties requires certain incentives, as Kant states in his formulation of the doctrine of the *highest good*<sup>11</sup>. Just like the *postulates of pure practical reason* –i.e. the immortality of the soul and the existence of God– operate as powerful incentives for obeying the moral law (KpV, Ak. V, 122-134), the acknowledgment of certain *signs* of progress reinforces our hope in the progressive perfection of human beings and thus promotes the performance of moral actions, which brings us closer to a better state<sup>12</sup>.

I believe that this is precisely the role played by resorting to certain empirical facts as *signs* of progress within the domain of philosophical history: the acknowledgment of such facts encourages our hope in progress, which in turn improves our chances to act according to the requirements of the moral law. Some interpreters suggest, on the contrary, that Kant's resort to empirical facts as *signs* of progress is connected with the necessity of assigning *objective reality* to the idea of a universal history: such reality –so they argue– would depend on the

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<sup>11</sup>Hope in human progress finds a solid foundation in Kant's concept of a *highest good*, as the idea of a possible reconciliation of virtue and happiness (see: KrV: A 804ss. /B 832ss; KpV, Ak. V, 43; KU, Ak. V, 569). Whereas the moral *highest good* refers to the ethical community and supports institutions the virtuous would join, the political *highest good* is connected with the idea of a cosmopolitan order composed of a federation of republics (Allison, 2009, 44; Yovel, 1980, 274). There is a vast bibliography dedicated to the analysis of this doctrine and its fundamental relevance for Kant's moral philosophy and also for his philosophy of religion (Smith, 1984; Engstrom, 1992; Reath, 1998; Mariña, 2000). Although I cannot discuss here the notion of a *highest good* and its connection with Kant's account of history, it is worth noticing that a proper account of Kant's concept of an a priori history should consider the necessary relationship between duty and the incentives required for its fulfillment. As Kant states in *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, "although on its own behalf morality does not need the representation of an end which would have to precede the determination of the will, it may well be that it has a necessary reference to such an end, not as the ground of its maxims but as a necessary consequence accepted in conformity to them. For in the absence of all reference to an end no determination of the will can take place in human beings at all [...]; without this end, a power of choice [...] instructed indeed as to how to operate but not as to the whither, can itself obtain no satisfaction. So morality really has no need of an end for right conduct [...]. Yet an end proceeds from morality just the same" (RGV, Ak. VI, 4-5).

<sup>12</sup>As Bittner points out: "describing history as following such a plan contributes to history's moving on in that direction" (Bittner, 2009, 231). Bittner stresses that the acknowledgment of the *aim of nature* regarding history can accelerate the advancement towards an *end* which becomes clear with the aid of philosophical reflection. In this specific sense, he argues, *philosophy helps history*.

possibility of finding *empirical signs* which might *correspond* to that idea (Förster, 2009: 193-194). The main problem with this interpretation is that it suggests that Kant conceives of an *aim of nature* that would be actually operating in history, and although some of his expressions could be read as supporting that interpretations (see, for example: IaG, Ak. VIII, 27)., I believe there is enough textual evidence to conclude that the notion of an *aim of nature* (which orientates human race towards progress) is an *idea of pure reason*, that is, a rational construction –or heuristic principle– the *objective reality* of which cannot be theoretical, but only *practical*, i.e. it can only rely on its binding character regarding empirical history. The main purpose of Kant’s assessment of empirical historical facts is therefore not to find *examples* which could demonstrate the *theoretical* objective reality of that idea, but only to encourage a hopeful, optimistic, attitude towards progress, in view of its practical consequences<sup>13</sup>.

In the second place, and with respect to the criterion which could justify the identification of certain facts as *signs* of progress (and the dismissal of other facts as irrelevant), I believe that we should take into account that Kant does not hold that the *philosopher of history* should adopt just *any* perspective, but only one that might promote moral actions. To be sure, historical facts which appear to contradict the idea of progress can be considered as irrelevant *only after a certain perspective has been adopted, that is: the perspective of an aim of nature* which guarantees human progress. But the selection of that *perspective* is neither casual nor contingent: to adopt an opposite *perspective* and hence conclude that our species does not make any progress at all, would imply disobeying a practical duty, for, as I have already noticed, hope in human progress constitutes a *practical obligation*. Even if some passages suggest that the philosopher (by considering history) could choose among different available perspectives<sup>14</sup>, this choice is not actually

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<sup>13</sup>We should keep in mind that *philosophical history* belongs to the realm of reason and its *a priori* regulative representations, and not to the realm of understanding and its *a priori* constitutive concepts (cf. Booth, 1983, 63; Kaulbach, 1975, 67).

<sup>14</sup>As he discusses these different positions adopted within the debate on human progress, Kant warns us that “perhaps it is due to the incorrect choice of perspective from which we view the course of human events that the latter seems so irrational” (SF, Ak. VI, 83). This observation suggests, indeed, that the adoption of a certain perspective might be the result of a *free choice*. Nevertheless, I believe that this cannot be interpreted as conclusive evidence to affirm that Kant regards such adoption as indifferent: in effect, pure practical reason recommends neither *moral terrorism* nor *abderitism*, but clearly advises hope on human progress.

indifferent, for pure practical reason demands that we remain confident about the possibility of a constant improvement of our natural dispositions and, as a result of that, of civil institutions<sup>15</sup>. This is why Kant condemns both *moral terrorism* (that is: the idea of a constant regression of human race towards the worse) and *abderitism* (i.e. the idea that human beings are in a perpetual standstill regarding the development of their moral condition): both *perspectives* simply *produce* the worse they *announce* (SF, Ak. VII, 81). By contrast, the perspective of an *aim of nature* which orientates us to progress, provides the necessary motivation for the performance of moral actions –which, in turn, make progress attainable<sup>16</sup>. That is, sin sum, the main advantage of that *perspective*, which should be regarded, indeed, as the only *rational perspective*<sup>17</sup>.

Just as *theory* should regulate all practice as such, an *a priori history* should promote our constant effort to shape empirical facts according to the demands of pure practical principles<sup>18</sup>. Whereas natural

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<sup>15</sup>Booth seems to suggest, on the contrary, that the philosopher might be free to consider history from one or another perspective: “Kant’s purpose, I will argue, is to show that we are, to some extent, at liberty to write its [history’s] scenes and to turn away from it at the end, elevated or degraded by what we have chosen to make of it” (Booth, 1983, 56). Although I share some of the conclusions drawn by Booth in his account of Kant’s *philosophical history* as a particular case of the critical *Copernican Revolution*, I believe that Kant does not conceive the *perspective* of an *aim of nature* (which orients mankind towards progress) as *one among many other possible perspectives*, but regards it as *necessary*, that is, as a point of view which is actually *demand*ed by practical pure reason. The consideration of *universal history* as a process orientated towards progress is not merely contingent, but obligatory, in view of its practical consequences (as we shall see, such *necessity* is not, of course, logical or transcendental, but only normative). Lindstedt seems to agree on this when he states that progress is a *necessary* practical postulate: “the fact that the human race is progressing is a postulate *necessitated* by pure practical reason” (Lindstedt, 1999, 144)

<sup>16</sup>If human beings believed in the futility of their moral actions, they would fall prey of despair (see: KU, Ak. V, 452-453; RGV, Ak. VI, 4-5).

<sup>17</sup>As Lindstedt points out, our belief in progress is justified by Kant through principles of pure practical reason, and that is why *hope* can be considered *rational* (Lindstedt, 1999, 145). Kuhen seems to agree with this interpretation when he states that *universal history* “can only be considered as an expression of rational hope. Kant argues that this hope is deeply founded [...] in the nature of the moral dispositions or, as he puts it, in the nature of practical reason” (Kuchen, 2009, 91).

<sup>18</sup>Even though my interpretation does not fully agree with the premises involved in Yovel’s account of Kant’s *philosophical history*, I believe he is right when he concludes that the relationship between *empirical history* and *a priori history* is one of the most important issues addressed by Kant in IaG, an issue which the interpreter characterizes as the problem of *historical schematism* (Yovel, 1980, 278ss.). Others interpreters agree that Kant’s *philosophical history* addresses the question of the empirical realizability of pure practical principles (Kleingeld, 2006, xxii; Pinkard, 2009, 218).

scientists formulate hypotheses in order to *force nature to answer their own questions* (KrV, B XIII), the *philosopher of history* adopts a point of view which allows him to interrogate empirical data and thus to interpret certain particular events as signs of progress. This adoption cannot be regarded, however, as an arbitrary procedure: it constitutes the necessary methodological strategy in the frame of a *rational history* as a discipline based on pure practical principles. To be sure, the *necessity* involved in the selection of that perspective is not a *logical* necessity, but a *normative* one: the *perspective* adopted by the philosopher of history is *necessary* only in the sense that it is compelled by pure practical reason due to its moral consequences.

### III. Some final remarks

This brief account allows us to conclude that, in order to understand Kant's intentions in the development of this *philosophical history*, we should consider, first and foremost, its *a priori* (and normative) status. As has been pointed out, another *Copernican Revolution* takes place in the realm of an *a priori history*<sup>19</sup>. In the *Critique of pure reason*, it is stated that metaphysics should follow the methodological path walked by mathematics and physics: only through a radical *change of perspective* were those disciplines able to constitute themselves as proper *sciences* (KrV, B XIII). Given that this methodological revolution provided a secure foundation for the development of those disciplines, metaphysics should emulate them and adopt the premise that human reason can only understand what it produces according with its own principles. As a discipline based on pure rational principles, *a priori history* is not an exception: just as the physicist «interrogates nature with the aid of its own principles» –his hypotheses–, the *philosopher of history* should interrogate empirical facts by adopting certain principles, namely: those which can elucidate a regular course and coherent meaning of those facts and can encourage, on the other hand, the performance of certain actions (those which promote progress). Now, in order to grasp a systematic and consistent sense of history as a *whole*<sup>20</sup>, it is necessary not only to adopt a point of

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<sup>19</sup>See Booth (1983, 56ss.).

<sup>20</sup>Förster emphasizes that, since the second half of 18th century, the concept of *history* begins to exhibit a new meaning and thus starts to refer to a general, *universal*, history: on the one hand, the

view which can provide such systematic unity, but also to interpret certain particular events as signs (as already noticed, this *guideline* is, for Kant, the idea of an *aim of Nature* which secures progress, whereas the French Revolution is, as he states in SF, the main *historical sign* of such progress).

In short: despite some irreducible differences between *rational history* and other rational sciences, any pure rational discipline should apply the same basic principle, that is: reason can only *know* what it produces by itself (that is, to be sure, the main lesson passed down by critical epistemology: *a priori* knowledge is only possible as knowledge of a priori constructed objects). The main obstacle in this parallelism between *rational sciences* and *rational history* concerns their unequal epistemological status. *Rational history* is not, of course, a *science*: it does not provide *objective knowledge*; it only attempts to reach a prospective, normative, consideration of historical facts. *A priori history* can only augur the future based on its acknowledgment of what men *ought to do*, but –as Kant explicitly warns–, “we are speaking here of freely acting beings, beings who can be told in advance what they ought to do, but for whom it cannot be predicted what they in fact will do...” (SF, Ak. VII, 83). *Philosophical history* cannot, therefore, *predict* with certainty the future course of events, for the free nature of human will makes such a prediction impossible (Kleingeld, 2009, 177; Williams, 1983, 1). Nevertheless, it can encourage us to act according to the moral requirements of pure practical reason, and in this sense, it provides a decisive incentive to the progress of mankind.

In *Dreams of a Visionary Explained by Dreams of Metaphysics* (1766), Kant asserts that:

The scale of reason after all is not quite impartial, and one of its arms, bearing the inscription, «Hope of the Future» [*Hoffnung der Zukunft*], has an advantage of construction, cause even those slight reasons which fall into its scale to outweigh the speculation of greater weight on the other side. This is the only inaccuracy which I cannot easily remove, and which, in fact, I never want to remove” (TG, Ak. II, 349).

The *advantage* that might *incline the scale* in the context of a *philosophical history* –an advantage according to which some facts

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notion of *history* no longer refers to particular *histories*, but makes reference to a whole process: the history of mankind; on the other hand, the term becomes progressively associated with the present and the future, and not only with the past (Förster, 2009, 189s.).

become more relevant or significant than others— refers, ultimately, to the practical interests of pure reason. In the end, only such interests can justify our confidence on a constant advancement of human race towards a better condition.

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**Abstract:** Despite the a priori character of philosophical history, in several passages of his main juridical and political writings, Kant identifies certain historical events as signs of progress. Moreover, he provides no criterion in order to justify the consideration of certain facts as relevant, while neglecting others as providing no supporting evidence against the progress of the human race. In this paper I analyze these difficulties in order to show that they can be solved, to some extent, if one considers the features Kant assigns to philosophical history, and more specifically, if one takes into account its a priori and normative character.

**Key Words:** History; Nature; Progress; Hope; Reason

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