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The moral ought in conjectural history

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ABSTRACT

This article defends the importance of the idea of historical progress for constructivist justifications of moral normativity inspired by Kant's analysis of practical reason. Focusing on some key methodological requirements that must be satisfied for the constructivist vindication of practical normativity to succeed, the article focuses on the concept of purposiveness as it develops within Kant's moral and political philosophy. It concludes that without a critical notion of 'purposiveness' and related philosophical analysis of history, the constructivist rejection of scepticism is at risk of circularity.

KEYWORDS Constructivism; Kant; practical reason; progress; history; politics; purposiveness; kingdom of ends

1. Introduction

Progress is an idea both unavoidable and dangerous. It is unavoidable because without it, our efforts to do the right thing seem to have very little orientation. And it is dangerous because the pursuit of progress has often given rise to instances of paternalism, colonial domination, and narratives of civilisational superiority. The latter perhaps explains why much recent philosophical writing is at best silent, at worst uneasy about the topic. In what follows I shall explore the former: the unavoidability of the idea of progress.¹ This is a familiar Kantian theme and, in my analysis, I shall help myself to a number of key elements in Kant's thought. But I also hope to present the idea as sufficiently plausible and relevant to at least one variety of contemporary moral theory, the variety of moral theory that purports to defeat scepticism and dogmatism by grounding morality on a rational procedure of construction of valid norms.

There are of course many versions of constructivism. In what follows I shall restrict myself to the analysis of core features on which most of the authoritative versions overlap. The most important of these is the inspiration drawn

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from Kant's account of practical reason. In this article, I want to focus on a crucial feature they all miss in borrowing from that account: the relation between the idea of moral progress and the practical justification of moral norms. While most of these theories appeal to autonomy, rational nature, or practical freedom to explain why moral norms are binding for human beings like us, without the idea of progress their refutation of scepticism is at risk of circularity.

The article proceeds as follows. [Section 2](#) explains what the postulate of progress means and why it is required in relation to the sceptical challenge. [Section 3](#) discusses the key methodological requirements that must be satisfied for the constructivist vindication of practical normativity to succeed. [Section 4](#) introduces the importance of the concept of purposiveness for one of these requirements, what I call the architectonic requirement. [Section 5](#) explains the relation between progress and the concept of purposiveness. [Section 6](#) explains the relation between progress and the philosophy of history. [Section 7](#) concludes.

2. The postulate of progress

Let me start with two obvious questions. Firstly, what does the belief in progress mean? To answer this question, it might be helpful to explain its epistemic status in terms of a propositional attitude located between two extreme kinds of belief. The first is a belief that progress is not impossible.² This sounds plausible but almost trivially so. Indeed, the position seems to gain its strength merely from the weakness of the alternative. The alternative account, the one that claims that progress is impossible, is weak because it commits to a form of prophetic theorising about the future. This form of theorising predicts the course of future actions, without being able to supply any reliable evidence on their behalf.

The second extreme belief is that moral progress is necessary. This is too strong. In arguing the case, one seems to misunderstand the nature of the agent responsible for directing actions compatibly with moral ends. To put the argument in Kantian terms, prophetic history of this kind would be warranted only if the prophet were able to shape the events it predicts will happen. As Kant argues, 'if we were able to attribute to the human being an inherent and unalterable good, albeit limited, will, he would be able to predict the progress of the species toward the better, because it would concern an event that he himself could produce' (Kant, 0000, pp. 300–301). The problem, however, is that humans are not exclusively moral. The motives of their actions are mixed, and it is very difficult to know in advance what effects to expect from circumstances such as these.³

To believe in progress is, therefore, to say more than progress is not impossible. But it is also to say less than progress is necessary. In this

article, I want to scrutinise and defend the Kantian idea that to answer the problem of whether the belief in progress is plausible, a shift in perspective is required. We need to focus on moral agency as it expresses itself in the course of human history, by examining particular social and political institutions as they promote or hinder that agency. In short, we need to explore history from a philosophical perspective, *as if* we were looking at a normatively purposeful system integrating moral motives, practical actions, and contingent events. This analysis of history, as I shall suggest in what follows is crucial, to preserve the self-correcting character of moral norms, and to understand the mechanisms through which specific historical social and political developments may contribute to their refinement. I shall turn to the question of whether this move is plausible towards the second half of the article. For now, let me begin by exploring why we might need it.

One obvious answer, and the one that is most familiar from the literature, is from the point of view of the consequences of moral action. One might argue that we need the belief in progress to encourage hope in the compatibility of virtue and happiness (see Anderson-Gold, 2000; Goldmann, 1971; Kleingeld, 1995). By hope I mean a kind of propositional attitude that increases our confidence in the idea that moral efforts can be successful and that those who undertake such efforts will be rewarded.⁴ Hope, one might argue, is essential to moral action; without it people would lack sufficient motivation to do the right thing.

Kant often encourages this interpretation when discussing the need for practical faith. But the answer is puzzling. Suppose you can get people to do the right thing by frightening them. In fact, suppose that they are much more likely to act morally, if they are frightened than if they are hopeful. Suppose you can frighten them by showing what horrible things human beings can do to each other and how nastily they have behaved in the course of human history. If fear is just as likely (or even more likely) than hope in motivating moral action, the postulate of progress plays no distinctive role. Indeed, moral regress could be just as effective (if not more). Why should we favour one over the other?

This is an intentionally provocative question. From a Kantian perspective, the motivation to do the right thing is self-sustaining. If belief in progress plays an important role in our account of moral action, it cannot be from the point of view of consequences (the extent to which Kant himself occasionally slips into this language can be discarded as misleading). In what follows I want to argue that progress is essential to the foundation of morality when it is understood as the relational, intersubjective enterprise that many constructivists take it to be.

3. The constructivist vindication of morality

The constructivist answer to the problem of morality is familiar. Rather than appealing to features of the mind or facts in the world to explain why we are moral, we begin by reflecting on the way in which reasons for action underpin everyday decisions. If we want to know whether such reasons could be considered moral, that is, create acceptable obligations that are binding for us, the first step is to scrutinise the principles underpinning them and come up with a plausible analysis of why these obligations are warranted. Roughly speaking, the constructivist answer is that such obligations are warranted if they emerge from a process of construction, whereby the authority of norms is expressed in the procedural inter-subjective recognition of generalizable principles (see for examples of this position, Forst, 2010; Korsgaard, 1996; O. O'Neill, 1996; Rawls, 1980).

This account is very attractive. It can produce authoritative norms, and thus avoid scepticism, without appealing to external principles grounding their authority, and thus avoid dogmatism. But the attractiveness of the theory is also perhaps its main source of vulnerability. Scepticism about moral norms could easily turn into scepticism about the source of moral norms. If the procedure of construction grounds moral normativity, what justifies the procedure of construction itself?

This is a familiar problem in response to which the most plausible versions of constructivism (i.e. those that do not in the end collapse to some version of realism or naturalism or conventionalism) typically emphasise the cumulative, even fallibilist, nature of the enterprise. The process of constructing moral norms, it is often argued, can vindicate itself reflexively (O. O'Neill, 1989; Rawls, 1980). In other words, its way of proceeding can be justified by looking forwards rather than backwards, comparing the method of construction to a plan rather than a finished product (O. O'Neill, 1989). This requires in turn that the plan be guided, firstly, by discipline in the selection of the tools deployed in the process of construction, secondly, by our practical interest in showing that the construction procedure can produce moral principles, and thirdly that the discipline and interest of the enterprise can indeed be combined in a unique moral system able to generate norms that are binding for finite agents like us.⁵

Before turning to the relation between these principles and the idea of progress, let me briefly explore each in turn.

The first task is negative: we ought to rule out reasons that attach to particularistic motivations and fail to meet standards of appropriate generalisation (in Kantian terms we have to exclude maxims that we cannot will to be a law). In assessing whether that is the case we are helped by both logic and the hermeneutic of past research: we can learn not to rely on previous wrong, unilateral or unproductive uses of reason and we preserve those findings that

survive critical scrutiny and can be appropriately generalised. Call this the discipline requirement.

The second is positive, we are guided by principles that promote our rational nature as reflected in the ability to set and pursue ends that can be willed to be laws or, to put it differently, our rational nature has a moral vocation. Call this the rational interest requirement.

Finally, the negative and positive constraint lead to a third one, a demand for coherent integration of the discipline and interests of reason in a self-validating system whereby the content of norms and their source reciprocally support each other. Call this the architectonic requirement. This latter, architectonic, requirement is satisfied when the norms constructed fit in a systematic whole which remains the product of autonomous agency (i.e. requires no dogmatic credo) whilst retaining its lawlikeness (i.e. does not lead to scepticism about their source and validity).

Readers familiar with Kant's philosophy will be unsurprised by the overlap between these three requirements and the account of practical reason that is at the heart of Kant's analysis of the supreme principle of morality.

The discipline requirement, i.e. the demand to abstract from maxims that we cannot will to be generalised, bears obvious affinities with the first formulation of the categorical imperative, the formula of universal law: act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law" (Kant, 1785/1996/1996, p. 73; IV: 421).

The second, the interest requirement, which translates into a demand to be guided by principles that promote our rational nature bears obvious affinities with the second formulation of the categorical alternative, the formula of humanity: so act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end and never merely as a means (Kant, 1785/1996/1996, p. 80; IV: 429). If the rational nature of humans consists in their ability to set and pursue moral ends, a principle that promotes rational nature is a principle that prohibits the degradation to mere means of agents whose nature is to set themselves moral ends.

Finally, the third, the architectonic requirement seeks to integrate the previous two by reflecting on the systematic conditions under which the formula of universal law and the formula of humanity come together. This architectonic requirement leads, Kant argues, in 'a very fruitful concept', that of a kingdom of ends as a realm of integration of all ends as well as the agents responsible for setting them in a systematic whole which expresses the intersubjective nature of the enterprise as well as how it might be binding for people like us. Indeed, Kant argues, if we abstract from differences among humans and the content of their ends and we preserve the formula of universal law as applicable to each of them, we arrive at the idea of 'a systematic union of rational beings through common objective laws, that is,

a kingdom, which can be called a kingdom of ends (admittedly only an ideal) because what these laws have as their purpose is just the relation of these beings to one another as ends and means' (Kant, 1785/1996/1996, p. 83; IV: 434).

In explaining how rational beings belong to the kingdom of ends, Kant draws an interesting distinction between a member and a sovereign. A rational being, he argues, belongs to the kingdom of ends as member when he complies with the formula of universal law but is also the subject of it by virtue of submission to other people's wills. A sovereign, on the other hand, is a rational being with the ability to give laws without being the subject of any other wills. This implies that *if* the will is free, a rational being is always lawgiving in the kingdom of ends. However, the position of sovereign, i.e. independence from the will of others, can only be held in case 'he is a completely independent being, without needs and with unlimited resources' adequate to his will' (Kant, 1785/1996/1996, p. 83; IV: 434).

The most common interpretation of these passages in relation to the constructivist vindication of morality results in an analysis of the kingdom of ends as a concept that renders intuitively plausible the ideal of a possible social order where moral agents are subjected to laws that they jointly create and mutually reinforce (see also Ypi, 2017 for a discussion). Under this interpretation, the reason the kingdom of ends presents us with a fruitful idea is that it provides us with a standard for judgment against which to assess existing laws and practices, and reflect about their adequacy in promoting norms of autonomous co-legislation (see Hill, 1992; Herman, 1993; Korsgaard, 1996; Reath, 2006 and others).

This reading, however, is subject to several shortcomings, many of which have been highlighted by authors committed to some version of Kantian-inspired constructivism (see Herman, 1997, pp. 187–213). One is that it reduces the idea of the kingdom of ends to a simpler, intuitively more plausible rendition of the previous two formulations of the categorical imperative but at the price of failing to account for the additional, architectonic, requirement. The systematic unity of ends that appears for the first time with the third formulation seems to add a distinctive demand to the previous two, and yet the nature of such demand is not easily explained in the standard interpretation.

A second difficulty, potentially more troubling, is that this interpretation treats the idea of the kingdom of ends as a sort of culmination of the justification of constructivist moral normativity but at the price of obscuring the potential circularity of the argument. The circularity consists in the fact that the foundation of morality is related to rational beings' ability to pursue autonomous ends but the possibility of pursuing autonomous ends is in turn explained with reference to the rational constitution of moral agency (see for some discussions of the problem

Wood, 1999; Guyer, 2000; Ameriks, 2003; Allison, 2020, ch. 7). This, it should be noted, is a problem that Kant emphasizes when he warns of the potential circularity in the justification of the supreme principle of morality: 'We take ourselves as free in the order of efficient causes in order to think ourselves under moral laws in the order of ends; and we afterwards think ourselves as subject to these laws because we have ascribed to ourselves freedom of will' (Kant, 1785/1996/1996, p. 97; IV: 450). But as Kant explains, the mere analysis of the concept of a free will can only provide us with an account of *what it means* for the rationally constituted agent to act under the guidance of moral norms. It does not yet show that human beings (as beings who follow both moral norms and inclinations) *can* indeed so act. In other words, the analytical statement which refers the possibility of morality to the rational constitution of agency is not the same as the kind of synthetic explanation required to show that moral norms are binding for people like us.⁶

Rather than taking issue with the details of various constructivist accounts, in the following section I will present an interpretation of the argument for the kingdom of ends, which I hope does justice both to the novelty and distinctiveness of the architectonic requirement (including the demand for systematic purposiveness that it introduces) and which seeks to avoid the circularity of the dominant constructivist interpretation. I start by exploring Kant's thought that the kingdom of ends is a necessary idea of reason, but rather than revisiting the discussion of the *Groundwork* or the *Critique of Practical Reason*, I draw mostly on two unjustly neglected texts: the first and the third *Critique*.⁷

4. The kingdom of ends

The argument that the kingdom of ends is a necessary *idea* of reason and a very fruitful concept for thinking about how moral norms can be binding on us is present throughout Kant's works. It receives its first systematic treatment in the context of an analysis of the relation between *ideas* and *ends* in the *Critique of pure reason*. Here, the chapter on the *Canon of Pure Reason* has the task of reflecting on the interests of reason in combination with its disciplinary constraints. References to the 'productivity' and 'fruitfulness' of the practical use of reason appear frequently in an attempt to explain how the discipline and interest of reason can be combined into the same systematic, unitary framework. Such unitary framework is essential to show that reason can be both constrained and authoritative, both able to reflect critically on the norms it generates, and to recognise these norms as non-arbitrary and binding for reason-oriented beings like us (Ypi, 2021). The demand for architectonic unity or, to put it slightly differently, for a systematic integration of the discipline and interests of reason is essential to ensure that the

manifold of cognitions that reason accumulates through its learning processes can be harmoniously integrated with the practical ends it pursues in the moral domain.

The relationship between ideas and ends is clarified in the context of an important, if slightly mysterious assertion of the *Critique of Pure Reason* where Kant recalls the Platonic definition of ideas, to emphasise their relation to the order of ends. The philosopher's spiritual flight, which considers the physical copies in the world order, and then ascends to their architectonic connection according to ends, i.e. according to ideas, Kant argues 'is an endeavour that deserves respect and imitation'. But ideas also perform a 'wholly unique service' in all that relates to 'principles of morality, legislation and religion' where they 'make the experience (of the good) itself possible' (Kant, 1781/1998, p. 398).

This is central to understanding the relation between ideas and ends of reason both in connection to what Kant calls the kingdom of nature (the order and purposes in the natural world) and the kingdom of ends (the realm of moral purposes). The demand for architectonic unity that the passage expresses has both a speculative and a practical side to it. From a speculative perspective, the assumption of purposiveness in the natural world is crucial for reason's ability to bring under unitary principles the multiplicity of the laws of nature, an activity which is in turn central to the process of taxonomic arrangement of the cognitions of the understanding. Without postulating a purposive arrangement of nature, systematic unity could not be posited (see for a longer discussion chs. 4 and 5 in Ypi, 2021). But while the unity of nature is grounded on a hypothetical principle of reason which postulates that the laws of nature are indeed arranged compatibly with an idea of purposiveness, it is only from the point of view of moral experience that we have evidence of reason's activity as a faculty oriented towards ends immanently and constitutively. This is where the distinctive character of practical demands reveals itself. Here, Kant argues, practical ideas have 'the causality actually to bring forth what their concept contains' and such a teleology of reason is 'fruitful in the highest degree and necessary in respect of actual actions' (Kant, 1781/1998, pp. 402–3).

To better grasp the implications of this analysis, it is important to understand why it is said that in all that concerns the principles of morality, law and religion ideas make possible the very experience of the good. What is at stake here is not simply the organisation of external cognitions according to an idea of unity necessary to the heuristic of systematic research. It is rather the external projection in the sensible world of the kind of internal unity that characterises practical ideas. This is precisely what Kant means when he argues that the idea of a Platonic republic, far from representing a utopian flight away from reality, represents a necessary idea which should be at the basis not only of 'a state's constitution but of all the laws too (Kant, 1781/

1998, p. 397). The model of an idea of constitution 'providing for the greatest human freedom according to laws that permit the freedom of each to exist together with that of others' is a crucial example of the purposive character of practical ideas, an example necessary to underline, on the one hand, their objectivity and, on the other, the way they constitute rational presuppositions of real actions.⁸

The idea of architectonic unity is thus grounded in the practical use of reason, and essential to the assertion of its normative character. Such normative character of practical reason always presents itself to us not merely as a set of abstract obligations but as a concrete synthesis that needs to be realised in time through practices like the ones that Kant mentions: law, religion, and morality. Practical ideas are concrete normative demands that reveal the self-correcting, self-developing and purposive nature of reason: denying this purposiveness would imply denying its very normative power (see also Velkley, 2001).

To understand why practical reason grounds moral norms we have no need to draw on an idea of conformity to ends that is external to objects of experience (as is the case with the speculative use of ideas). We need no higher anchor to confirm the authority of our norms and their self-correcting character. Architectonic unity is expressed dynamically in the very process of using reason as practical reason, in the expression of its demands as concrete conditions of possibility for historical actions. This answers one half of the problem we raised when discussing the justification of constructivist methodology in connection to the argument about the kingdom of ends. Normativity reveals itself through history, and indeed not just individual history but the history of human beings as they collectively engage with each other in the process of developing institutions that reflect the demands of practical reason. However, this is not enough to address the second half of the question we raised in connection to the kingdom of ends: what guarantees that this kind of normative demand is also binding for human beings who are both subject to the demands of morality but also beings vulnerable to natural (non-moral) limitations? What guarantees that the self-correcting nature of reason will continue to assert itself and that the process of generating moral norms will carry on in the appropriate way?

This further question takes us back again to the problem of the relation between the order of nature and the order of ends, the link between systematic moral unity and the systematic unity of nature. Without explaining how the realm of nature and the realm of ends are connected to each other, we cannot explain how moral norms can actually bind human beings whose moral motives are always mixed with non-moral ones. What is even more important for our purposes, without a guarantee that moral norms can bind human beings in a coordinated and continuous way, the learning processes on which reason relies to develop its self-correcting character would lack

development in the direction required to defeat scepticism. And without all that, the architectonic requirement of reason would remain unfounded.

To see the difficulties raised by this challenge, recall that the necessity of the postulate of systematic unity has to do with the kind of experience that ideas in their practical use make possible. Rational ends are posed in a world ruled by the laws of nature, a world that we can postulate as purposeful for the sake of our reflection but that we, as humans, do not create. The member of the kingdom of ends is in fact not a sovereign: the success of her moral actions depends not just on what she does to comply with the demands of practical reason but also on what other people do, on the kinds of empirical contingencies and limitations they encounter in the process of inscribing their practical demands on the world. But all this means that it is in principle conceivable that the world might not be at all compatible with the practical moral use of reason, or even that it might obstruct it. However, the constitutive nature of practical ideas, the unconditional duty to realise what they prescribe regardless of all empirical phenomena demands a way to reconcile this dualism. A sensible world in which the laws of nature obstruct the practical use of reason would render pointless all human attempts to promote their moral ends in it.

This is where the idea of the kingdom of ends becomes important. The kingdom of ends is a realm where moral actions are coordinated and where the practical ends of each individual human being form part of a purposeful whole where the conditions under which the morality of each can flourish is a task for the entire human species. The kingdom of ends is not merely a condition that every human being can expect to be part of, instead it presents all individuals with a collective historical task to do their share in promoting the interests of reason while progressively overcoming its constraints. As we have seen, for Kant, the ideas of reason unfold throughout history. If the kingdom of ends is understood as a concrete historical imperative, its realisation requires conscious human actions that seek to progressively realise the coordination and continuation of moral efforts. This means that the actions of human beings, actions that taken separately can only form an aggregate of empirical manifestations of moral willing, have to transcend the limits of individual morality, and become organic parts of a systematic whole where they are coordinated and preserved.

5. Systematic unity and purposiveness

The analysis of the architectonic requirement of reason in the process of constructing authoritative moral norms led us to the crucial idea of purposiveness in making sense of that requirement. Focusing on the concept of purposiveness, however, opens up new questions concerning how exactly we should understand the notion of 'purpose' and the link between the order of

nature and the order of moral ends. That there should be a link between the two is clear: if reason ought to realise its imperatives in the empirical world, where natural inclinations are as much present as moral demands, it must be possible for such ends to be realisable in the way reason prescribes. Or, to put it differently, the coordination and continuity of moral ends, their systematic integration in a way that protects the interests of reason and preserves its learning processes ought to be guaranteed.

To better understand the question behind this systematic requirement it is important to single out two features: the unconditional nature of the demand to realise the kingdom of ends and the limitations that human beings encounter in the natural world. In a world of perfect moral beings, there are no obstacles to the duties prescribed by reason in its practical use. A mere representation of rational ends is enough to guarantee not only the successful outcome of single moral acts but also the spontaneous coordination of all individual actions in a progressive development guaranteeing the realisation of ends for the entire human species. And yet, Kant explains, such an intelligible world, a world ordered in accordance with all moral laws as 'it can be in accordance with the freedom of rational beings and should be in accordance with the necessary laws of morality' (Kant, 1781/1998, p. 678) is never given to the human being in their empirical existence. But the idea is also a necessary idea of reason 'which can and should have its influence on the sensible world, in order to make it agree as far as possible with this idea' (Kant, 1781/1998, p. 678). The duty to promote the kingdom of ends is not restricted to the cultivation of individual virtue but concerns the promotion of an entire moral world; it represents the authentic destination of human reason and the accomplishment of its architectonic requirements. Only in the ideal of its progressive realisation can we represent the essential ends of reason and think about the process of generating moral norms as self-correcting and self-validating in the appropriate way.

It is important to emphasise that the imperative to realise the kingdom of ends presents us not just with a demand to guarantee individuals' negative capacity to avoid being determined by external motives. It is also not a demand to guarantee the positive capacity to produce specific moral actions in the phenomenal world. The question, rather, has to do with the *collective* and *systematic* capacity to see our efforts to transform the world compatibly with moral ends in a coordinated and continuous way. Freedom is a minimal condition for the possibility of moral action, but the kind of freedom required here must be expressed inter-subjectively and in an ongoing way, it is required for the effectiveness of moral ends understood as historical ones. Since duty is not limited to the cultivation of personal virtue but rooted in a concept of the kingdom of ends where moral efforts are coordinated and continuous, the question of how to represent this moral world from a historical perspective presents a key systematic challenge.

On the one hand, a moral duty to transform the sensible world in accordance with the essential demands of reason involves all rational beings taken as members of the kingdom of ends and the totality of their efforts: their collective duty to realise the kingdom of ends should be understood as 'a regulative idea of history' (Yovel, 1980, p. 5). On the other hand, the capacity to subject nature to such a transformation requires a strong guarantee that the environment and conditions in which their ends intervene are amenable to demands of reason, assuring human beings of the absence of obstacles to their projects and of the preservation of their efforts through future generations. What is at stake, in both cases, is the need for conceptual tools able to mediate between spheres entirely heterogeneous and yet necessarily interdependent: nature and freedom, phenomenal and noumenal, possibility of reason and reality of facts. In the *Lectures on the philosophy of religion*, Kant emphasises, that the idea of systematic moral unity and the necessity of realising the moral ends in the empirical world gives weight to the idea that 'the entire world can be seen as a universal system of ends both from the point of view of nature and from that of freedom'. Such a doctrine of ends, Kant argues, 'is called teleology'.

The notion of teleology is central to understand why we must approach history not simply as a random sequence of events with different characters as protagonists but from a philosophical perspective that tries to find a moral orientation in it. Only a perspective on history as morally purposefully can explain how means and ends are integrated into a meaningful coordinated and continuous whole that structures human interactions across space and time. Without a philosophical concept of history, Kant explains, we would not be able to understand in what way humans constrain and condition each other so as to continuously learn from the failures of reason and to promote its moral vocation. Random actions and events form an aggregate, but what is needed to support the notion of a morally integrated whole is a systematic concept of moral history, held together by the principle of purposiveness. The architectonic requirement of reason necessary to a constructivist vindication of normativity requires a systematic perspective on history able to guarantee the cumulative nature of moral learning.

For much of his life, Kant assumed that the concept of a moral order on which the belief of progress in history relied was somehow grounded on (or at the very least aligned with) an order of nature: indeed the very conflicts between human beings – war, commercial rivalry, selfish inclinations, the desire for recognition by others – were seen as a sort of purposive intervention of nature preparing for the rule of reason.

Yet it is not difficult to see how the argument that assumes a purposive order of nature, albeit necessary to the architectonic requirements of reason, is fraught with difficulties. If a constructivist account of morality has to rely on a postulate of purposive order guaranteed by the wise intervention of nature

(or any other kind of authority) to establish how moral norms can be binding in a coordinated and continuous way, it collapses into a dogmatic credo like the one it initially tried to escape from. The postulate of systematic unity of moral ends must be grounded on something other than the assumption of a nature that progressively benefits the development of moral ends (or a wise author of the world). For a start, both of these ideas can be easily ridiculed by the sceptic. There is very little evidence of nature promoting our ends, there is much more evidence of it standing in our way, of obstructing morality rather than encouraging it. Nature, Kant emphasizes in a different work, has not taken man for her special favorite; 'it has rather spared him just as little as every other animal in her destructive effects, whether pestilence, hunger, danger of flood, cold, attacks by other animals great and small, etc' (Kant, 1793/2000, p. 430). One could of course pretend that all this will in the end serve higher purposes and somehow promote the demands of morality: this is the path that Kant takes in his earlier essays with the idea of a cunning of nature secretly promoting the kingdom of ends. But one could also take an alternative, much more plausible, route, one which connects better with the reflexive nature of the principle of purposiveness that Kant develops in the third *Critique*. Such an approach, appropriately developed, abandons all uncritical references to the teleology of nature and seeks to develop an exclusively human, philosophical-historical, standpoint. Let me explain.

6. Reason and culture

To address the architectonic requirement of reason and explain how practical norms can be both self-correcting and authoritative, one needs to focus on the intersubjective integration of moral ends through something like an ethical community. Only if moral duties are understood as duties that presuppose mutual, intersubjective relations, between humans, can one hope to explain how the learning processes on which reason relies in developing its self-corrective capacity can improve over time. Turning to the history of reason is crucial to explain how reason becomes known and explicated to itself. But for this process of self-knowledge to be considered authoritative and improving over time, the capacity of reason for self-improvement must be guaranteed, it must be given, somehow. How can that be justified?

As we saw, one option is to assume that nature will assist reason in this task. But that strategy is full of shortcomings, reason would overstep its limitations in claiming to know what nature is up to, in asserting that everything in the world exists *for the sake of the human being* (or that the human being is the final end of nature). A second strategy is to turn to reason's own history with an eye to assessing how it can vindicate itself while reshaping the external world. This requires a shift in standpoint, the application of

something like the Copernican revolution to reason's own past, present and future.⁹ What does this shift in standpoint imply?

I suggest that it implies adopting a heuristic of moral research whereby the process of self-explication of reason is validated by looking at how reason reshapes the historical world, i.e. with the help of a philosophy of history centered on the idea of moral progress. Instead of asking what nature does for human beings, we turn the question on its head and ask what human beings do with nature to advance the kingdom of ends. Here, the kinds of institutions (political, legal, religious, social) that human beings develop collectively over many generations are seen as contributions to the process of refining the demands of reason in a cumulative and systematic way.

This process need not take a conscious form from the start. People might develop moral norms for all kinds of non-moral motives. Culture is precisely the process through which human beings refine the mechanisms of interaction with each other and seek to change the external circumstances of their lives even if they are not always fully aware of the demands of morality. The important point is that this shift in perspective signals how human beings end up refining their skills, both instrumental and moral, whenever they interact with each other and seek to change the circumstances of their life, whenever they set and pursue their ends in the external world. Thus, reason vindicates itself reflexively, but the process through which that vindication becomes known to humans is historical through and through, and requires an analysis of history from a purposive standpoint.

To explain the means through which rational interests are promoted by humans in the course of their historical development, we can return to the Kantian notion of 'culture'. Culture, Kant argues in the *Critique of Judgment*, is the aptitude and skill for which the human being can use nature and promote any ends in general (Kant, 1793/2000, p. 430). Culture refers to a subjective attitude to promote individual goals in so far as this is progressively refined and tends to culminate in the achievement of a formal condition under which human beings can accommodate reciprocal claims affecting each other, including claims of a conflicting kind.

One aspect of cultural development has to do with political institutions. The culture of 'skill', as Kant explains, guarantees the coordination of ends and prepares the ground for the establishment of political mechanisms through which 'the abuse of reciprocally conflicting freedom is opposed by lawful power in a whole', which we call 'civil society' (Kant, 1793/2000, pp. - 299–300). Thus, the emergence of various political systems and the consolidation of different forms of rule reflect (in better or worse ways) human beings' training in the culture of skill. The process of establishing mutual external constraints prepares the conditions under which morally compliant behavior can be expected even from recalcitrant individuals: mutual destruction, envy, greed, selfishness are contained by means of laws. The more

consciously this process is reflected in distinctive political institutions (the republican state is one example), the more successful the process of refining moral norms in a coordinated way is likely to be.¹⁰

A second aspect of culture, what Kant calls the 'culture of discipline', is also helpful to see how the systematic requirements of the kingdom of ends are satisfied in the continuous preservation of the propensity to follow moral norms. Unlike the culture of skill, which relies on coercive mechanisms, the culture of discipline relies on the formation of habit, social norms, education, progress in the arts and sciences, to consolidate the process through which human beings learn to discipline their passions and prepare their minds for the rule of reason. Thanks to the culture of discipline, the achievements of reason become part of a collective inheritance that can be handed down from one generation to the next, thus ensuring the availability of means through which moral ends can be preserved continuously. As Kant puts it, 'beautiful arts and sciences which, by means of a universally communicable pleasure, and an elegance and refinement make human beings, if not morally better, at least better mannered for society'. Their impact is to 'reduce the tyranny of sensible tendencies, and prepare humans for a sovereignty in which reason alone shall have power' (Kant, 1793/2000, p. 301).

Kant's views on the role of culture suggest that the development of moral dispositions (even if not morality itself) over time can be acquired and learned thanks to the development of new skills in the human species, to the progressive subjection to coercive political institutions regulating the reciprocal pursuit of ends, and to processes of cultural emancipation through which specific social norms are stabilised in distinctive cultural and scientific artefacts. This account sheds a different light on the way in which we think about the postulate of progress and its role in the justification of moral norms. The cultural development of human beings reveals their battle against the limitations of nature, a progressive attempt to become more moral as they take control of the external world. The real actions of human beings in the historical world are expressive of their freedom, as a matter of 'knowledge' acquired and transferred with the contribution of many generations, not mere subjective 'opinion' or individual 'faith'. As Kant puts it, freedom is 'the only one among the ideas of reason whose object is a fact', the reality of which can be established 'in real actions and thus in experience' (KU 468: 333).

This also helps us answer one of the problems we raised earlier with respect to dominant constructivist interpretations of the kingdom of ends: the problem of circularity in the justification of the practical authority of reason. As we saw earlier, explaining the authority of moral norms by reference to the rational constitution of agency merely answers the question of how it is possible for human beings qua rational agents to act morally, it does not explain why moral norms are binding for people like us (not merely

rational but also determined by non-moral motives). The latter requires, for Kant, not merely an analytical answer but a sort of synthetic explanation that shows how given their free choice to pick either good or evil, human beings are capable of responding to moral imperatives and ignoring averse, selfish or otherwise immoral, inclinations. The answer, I suggest, consists in the moral learning that history reveals if we analyse it from the point of view of the promotion of certain moral ends, as the realm in which the demands of the kingdom of ends are progressively satisfied. Freedom, as a fact of reason, reveals itself in the historical actions of human beings, and in the institutions and norms developed to channel these actions in a morally purposive way. Thus, for example, the event of the French Revolution represents from that point of view a 'rough indication' or 'a historical sign' that could prove the 'existence of a *tendency* within the human race as a *whole*, considered not as a series of individuals' but 'as a body distributed over the earth in states and national groups' to make progress towards the better. The event reveals a 'moral cause' at work, one whose evidence is given both by the attempt to build institutions that embody principles of right (a republican constitution) and by the disinterested enthusiasm with which spectators of the event sympathized with the agents who sacrificed their lives to make that particular institutional setup possible.

The answer to our initial question of how it is possible for moral norms to be binding for people like us does not amount to a mere assertion of what flows from our rational agency, nor is it simply an ungrounded assertion of the principle 'ought implies can'.¹¹ The answer is rather that moral principles can be binding because there is a collective equivalent to the individual formation of character, the idea of training virtues so as to consistently respond to the demands of morality. In the case of individuals, although, as Kant so often likes to remind us, even the worse criminal is in principle capable of morality, cultivating virtues is essential to the process of maintaining moral character, to the development of habits that go beyond single moral acts and that contribute to consolidate the decision to act morally throughout a lifetime. In the case of collectives, the idea of a moral history is equally important. It ensures the development of the moral character of the human species (as a whole) and delivers a notion of reason able to remain both self-correcting and authoritative. Closing the gap between the imperative to act morally and the particular acts reflecting that decision relies on a morally-charged (i.e. philosophical) perspective on history (see Yovel, 1980, p. 172 for a discussion).

7. Conclusion: a critical philosophy of history

Kant's philosophy of history, and the idea of reason's progress that underpins it, have an important role to play in addressing the problem of how moral norms bind finite and fallible human beings like us. From a Kantian

perspective, we make progress while learning to reorient our inclinations, discipline our selfish passions and develop other-regarding attitudes. We further seek to stabilize these learning processes in institutions and practices that can be transferred to future generations so that their own learning processes do not begin from scratch, and so that there is a repository of moral development on which we can rely for guidance. Such an account of progress as a history of self-correction of collective cultural, social and political institutions is very different from the complacent accounts that have given rise to paternalist narratives of liberal superiority and colonial domination in the past. A critical philosophy of history, Kantian in spirit, but also seeking to go beyond Kant's own limitations, should be built around the struggles for emancipation from the hierarchies of class, gender and race, rather than obscuring them. The lessons learned from them must feed into the patterns of institutional renewal that are needed to correct ongoing failures and to generate alternative social and political arrangements, both within the state and between states.

Enlightenment is understood as an ongoing process. We construct our own moral guidance and in doing so we rely on nothing other than our own reason, its self-correcting capacities, and the authority of the principles it generates as it learns from the mistakes, and often also tragedies of the past. In doing so, we defeat skepticism bit by bit, and the more we progress, the more reliable our tools become. There is no cause for being overly optimistic because there are no external authorities to guarantee our infallibility; we are not guarded forever from making mistakes. But, there is also no cause for being overly pessimistic, and for denying that there is a moral cause at work in human history. Morality is, yes, grounded in rational agency, as many constructivists maintain, but the further evidence for why rational agency has the power that it has over human beings like us is not simply that human beings like us have the capacity for morality. That, as Kant knew from early on, would be circular, and also unlikely to move the sceptic. The evidence is rather in freedom as a fact of reason, a fact which we experience throughout history, and which is a matter of *knowledge* of oneself rather than mere faith in external forces.

When we observe how reason shapes the world according to its own ends, when we witness the efforts of men and women who devote their entire lives to shaping institutions and practices that embody that freedom, we know that morality binds us, and we experience how we can choose the good motive over the evil one. When the sceptic questions us further, we do not need to respond by invoking rational agency or the capacity for normativity, but our own history, history not understood as a random collection of people and events but history told from the point of view of reason and of the battle for morality. The universal idea of history from a cosmopolitan viewpoint is, pace what Kant actually says every now and then, not the history of how the cunning of nature assists reason in the development of moral dispositions,

but of how reason transforms nature, progressively defeating evil and realizing the ideal of a universal ethical community, the kingdom of ends in this world.

To sum up, I would like to return to where I started. Prophetic history, Kant says, is warranted only if the prophet contrives the events he foresees. The more human beings take their fate in their own hands and shape events in accordance with moral goals, the more their belief in the ability of moral norms to bind them is warranted. The answer to the sceptic is thus not a theoretical one, it is rather one that points to the evidence of morality in history. It is not to *argue* for the moral thing to do based on our rational capacities, but to show how it is *done* when these capacities have been, and are, actually realised.

Notes

1. The article is not directly concerned with hope, however, an important implicit theme in it is the moral justification of a type of belief which is institutional and intersubjective and plays a functionally analogous role to the one played by hope in personal cases. For a further discussion of this see my analysis in (Ypi, 2023).
2. While Kant seems to have considered this type of justification for progress in some of his writings, the claims on which I focus in what follows are stronger.
3. Or as Kant puts it, 'in connection with the mixture of good and evil in its predisposition, with the proportion of which he is not acquainted, he himself does not know what effect he might expect from it' (Kant, 0000, p. 300).
4. Some might argue that hope and belief in progress are two different things, and that the real challenge is on whether 'hope' can replace the belief in progress. See for remarks to this effect Huber 2023 and my reply in Ypi (2023).
5. These methodological provisions are contained the *Doctrine of Method* of the first *Critique* and are labelled the doctrine, canon and architectonic of reason. Note some overlaps between this account and O'Neill's discussion on method in O'Neill (1992), pp. 280–308). O'Neill's analysis however is too focused on the negative aspects of the construction process and only emphasizes discipline and lawlikeness. She also does not see the overlaps between these methodological constraints and the analysis of the three formulas in *Groundwork* to which I turn in the next paragraph.
6. For the analytic/synthetic distinction and the critique of pure practical reason required to explain how the moral law may be possible for people like us, we need a metaphysics of freedom, something Kant sets out to provide in the third part of the *Groundwork*. The effort is continuous with the *Canon of Pure Reason* in the first *Critique*, and attempted again in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. It is also at the centre of the *Critique of Judgment* and crucial to understand Kant's philosophy of history, see for a discussion Ypi (2021).
7. Most discussions of Kant's method focus usually on the first *Critique* (e.g. Onora O. O'Neill, 1989) but overlook its links to the third. As I explained in greater detail elsewhere (see Ypi, 2021), the question of the systematic unity between nature and freedom is first discussed at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason* but returns in all of Kant's major writings, until it is eventually resolved in the *Critique of Judgment*.

8. A governor, Kant also explains in the *Lectures on the philosophy of religion*, has the capacity to arrange his state in accordance with the idea of a perfect republic, so as to bring it closer and closer to perfection (*PR*, 1; 99). In the *Lectures on Logic*, this very same idea is equated to the architectonic idea to which we must model ourselves so as to avoid proceeding out of blind compliance with authority or merely in accordance with instinct (*LJ*, 93; 85). In later political writings, as well as in the *Religion within the limits of reason alone*, the same argument is given a much more rigorous form, see Ypi (2017).
9. Yovel (1980) argues that reason has both a history of becoming known and explicated to itself and a history of reshaping the external world, however the two are considered as separate attempts to assess the value of history for two different uses of reason (speculative and practical). In my account they are integrated: the former relies on the latter.
10. Notice that morally compliant behavior is not the same as moral behaviour: the latter can only be expected from the voluntary endorsement of moral norms and could not be imposed via external coercive mechanisms.
11. Paul Guyer makes this argument in revisiting Kant's claims in *Religion within the limits of reason alone*, where Kant argues that despite the original fall, the command of the moral law 'resounds unabated in our souls' (Kant. Guyer takes this statement to mean that Kant is here simply asserting that 'ought implies can' and that he further "derives the actuality of our freedom to fulfil this demand from the principle that we must be able to fulfil our duty, which is also asserted without any argument at all' (See Guyer & Timmermans, 2009, p. 202). But Guyer misses the connection between Kant's commitment to propagate the ethical community in *Religion*, the third *Critique* and Kant's political writings, all of which form a systematic treatment of the issue of what 'signs' we can find of reason working its way throughout history to show us the real processes through which the ideas of reason imprint themselves in institutional and cultural practices that humans jointly shape.

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