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in a Cosmopolitan Sense*

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KANT ON THE ADVANTAGE OF THE COSMOPOLITAN PERSPECTIVE

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This paper considers the importance of a philosophical perspective for achieving Kant's cosmopolitanism. Kant tells us on many occasions that the highest aim of human nature is a cosmopolitan existence. This cosmopolitanism is the aim Kant conceives in much of his work whether he is speaking of the actions of individuals when doing anthropology or prescribing morality or if he is considering the relationships between nation states as he does in *Toward Perpetual Peace*. Because of Kant's emphasis on international and transnational relations as the pinnacle achievement of the telos of human nature, his call for a cosmopolitanism is often seen through the paradigm of an international or transnational unity. The last two decades have been witness to an acceleration of globalization and a greater interconnectedness between citizens of the world. This has led many to have greater concern for their relation to other citizens and other nations and has made Kant's concern for such relations far more practical and relevant¹. The real emphasis, however, of cosmopolitanism is not that of a bigger picture but rather that of a clearer picture. Namely, cosmopolitanism is not of value

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because it incorporates the concerns or experiences of other agents, nations or disciplines. Its value is that it allows for the highest use of reason, a free, public philosophical one. When reason is used locally or doctrinally, it falls short of its aim. Only when reason is used philosophically, cosmopolitically, can it achieve its aim. This isolates philosophy from other disciplines and methods. Other disciplines without philosophy are unable to achieve this cosmopolitan existence. Such a characterization, however also reorients the goal of philosophy. Not only is philosophy charged with making possible a cosmopolitanism but it also must provide the cosmopolitan view for other disciplines.

Much of Kant's critical philosophy is a turn to structure over content, to form over matter, to method of investigation as opposed to object of investigation. In the first *Critique*, Kant turns away from the traditional objects of metaphysics and provides an emphasis on a method that looks critically at the limits of human knowing. In the same way, in his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, Kant seeks to offer a new method for doing history. This new method is to be less concerned with a recounting of particular facts or events and more concerned with what Allen Wood calls "an a priori conception of a theoretical program to maximize the comprehensibility of human history."² What this cosmopolitan aim is concerned with is not an account of history that can capture more details or have more anecdotes. Rather this cosmopolitan aim is concerned with making sense of human history, with understanding the various events and occasions as being threads of a united fabric. This view conceives of a cosmopolis as an eschaton of human progress and a cosmopolitan history as understanding all that leads to it. On its surface this cosmopolis can be seen as a united federation of states or as a polity inclusive of all available viewpoints but

there is in this cosmopolis an analogous federation of ideas and disciplines. When Kant speaks of a universal administration of public right, this concerns not just a lack of political oppression but also a free, public use of reason as it applies to all human endeavors. In cosmopolis not only do states or governments get along for the sake of a perpetual peace but the method of a cosmopolitan view requires the diversity of human inquiry and investigation to work towards making sense of human history.

Kant suggests that human actions while they are subject to the laws of nature, are the appearances of the freedom of the will. That is to say, that what human beings do we can only hope is a phenomenal representation of an exercise of a noumenal freedom of the will.³ A provincial, or non-cosmopolitan aim of history concerns itself with retelling narratives or anecdotes. For Kant, a cosmopolitan aim of history calls for something more:

History, which concerns itself with the narration of these appearances, however deeply concealed their causes may be, nevertheless allows us to hope from it that if it considers the play of the freedom of the will in the large, it can discover within it a regular course; and that in this way what meets the eye in individual subjects as confused and irregular yet in the whole species can be recognized as a steadily progressing though slow development of its original predispositions.⁴

This cosmopolitan aim calls on us to look at the same events of human history not merely as coinciding events but as elements of a comprehensive understanding of humanity. As such, this is a shift in method more than it is a shift in object of investigation. It calls on our investigations to think of their objects not as they would contribute to this or that understanding but to human understanding in general. Such a method then does not depend upon what is being investigated,

it does not draw conclusions from disparate bits of data. Rather, this method commits to the inclusion of all bits of data in the understanding of the human condition.

For Kant, cosmopolis unveils an aim of nature that is not revealed by looking at the aims of individuals. This stems not just from the flawed and limited nature of particular human beings but from the fact that it is only as a species that human beings can realize their reasonable faculty, “those predispositions whose goal is the use of his reason were to develop completely only in the species, but not in the individual.”⁵ For Kant, the intrinsic worth of humanity stems from its freedom from the laws of nature. To be reasonable then is to exercise that freedom. The full expression of reasonableness is then not possible in a particular individual but only as a collective, as an expression of the reasonableness of humanity in general.

Kant holds that the greatest problem before mankind that human nature draws us to is that of a federation of states, “a civil society universally administering right.”⁶ Kant goes on to elaborate on the principles of such a federation in *Perpetual Peace* but holds that such a society would aim at the development of all of humanity’s reasonable dispositions. On the level of states, cosmopolis requires “an inwardly and, to this end, also externally perfect state constitution, as the only condition which it can fully develop all its predispositions in humanity.”⁷ On the level of human inquiry cosmopolis leads to enlightenment.

The enlightened status of cosmopolis should be understood in terms of Kant’s own account of enlightenment. Kant thinks of enlightenment as a kind of unity between a purely intelligible emancipation and a practical and communal progression. He tells us that enlightenment is understanding; it is being able to think for oneself; and it is the making use of such understanding:

Enlightenment is the human being's emergence from his self-incurred minority. Minority is inability to make use of one's own understanding without direction from another. This minority is self-incurred when its cause lies not in lack of understanding but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another.⁸

The successes of the enlightenment lie not only in people coming to understand things for themselves. They also lie in people—as individuals and as communities—having the resolve to put into practice what they have come to understand. Thus the freedom enlightenment is twofold. It is a free public use of reason and it is a freedom act on it. While many modern discussions of cosmopolitanism focus on establishing the freedoms of global citizens to act in a certain way and be protected from oppression and poverty, it is essential to understand the role of a free use of reason in a truly cosmopolitan perspective. This public use of reason must be understood as being broader than an administration of political rights. Kant famously criticizes the cleric in his private use of reason,

Thus the use that an appointed teacher makes of his reason before his congregation is merely a private us; for a congregation, however large a gathering it may be, is still only a domestic gathering; and with respect to it he, as a priest, is not and cannot be free, since he is carrying out another's commission.⁹

The use of the cleric's reason is private because it is used instrumentally at the behest of another. In the same way, our use of reason as a world state would be limited if its only uses were directed at administering right.

In her article *Kant's Conception of the Nation-State and the Idea of Europe*, Susan Shell argues that the guiding principles of

the modern European Union in fact fall short of Kant's conception of a federation of states and his view of cosmopolitanism. In part, Shell argues that the current understanding of a federation of states fails to appreciate the use of reason Kant was advocating and in turn shift the dynamic to a nationalistic affective unifying identity. This kind of federation is not Kantian in that it does not grasp the richness of the ideal of cosmopolis,

What finally unites the peoples of Europe is not some shared positive ideal or goal, but only a negative tolerance or forbearance—a common relinquishment of the 'drive' toward an 'overarching organic-cultural national identity' displacing that of other member states. Citizenship proceeds, not directly, through participation in a common civic project, but only indirectly, through a reciprocal unwillingness to foist the conditions of one's own sense of belonging upon others.¹⁰

When we think of cosmopolis as merely a lack of fighting, a lack of expressed hatred between peoples, we conceive of cosmopolis too narrowly. In so doing we conceive of a private use of reason. We look to make reason work for us to accomplish some end rather than freely follow reason towards the human telos.

Kant is quite clear on the fact that this cosmopolis has not been realized. We should not, however, be waiting for such cosmopolis to engage in cosmopolitan inquiry. Quite the contrary, Kant suggests that cosmopolitan inquiry is a step towards cosmopolis,

A philosophical attempt to work out a universal world history according to a plan of nature that aims at the perfect civil union of the human species, must be regarded as possible and even as furthering this aim of nature.¹¹

A cosmopolitan perspective for human inquiry requires such inquiry to be more reasonable. When the focus of human inquiry is shifted away from the matter or content and towards the reasonableness of the inquiry, we have a clearer insight into the ends of human reason. It is in this way that Kant seeks to shift philosophy away from a traditional discipline. It is rather a method for all human inquiry. Philosophy allows our aims in history, physics and economics to be cosmopolitan:

Hitherto the concept of philosophy has been a merely scholastic concept—a concept of a system of knowledge which is sought solely in its character as a science and which has therefore in view only the systematic unity appropriate to science and consequently no more than the logical perfection of knowledge. But there is likewise another concept of philosophy, a *conceptus cosmicus*, which has always formed the real basis of the term ‘philosophy’, especially when it has been as it were personified and its archetype represented in the ideal philosopher. On this view, philosophy is the science of the relation of all knowledge to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*)....¹²

Of course when considering cosmopolitan aims we must acknowledge the danger of colonization, a risk on the level of states, ideas and inquiry. No doubt a form of cosmopolis was used as justification by many imperialists when they sent soldiers across borders or professors when they tell world history by beginning with Greece¹³ or many academic vice presidents when they eliminated Slavic and Romance language departments to create Modern language departments. Many of these—and many far more pernicious than these—we know not to have been motivated by cosmopolitan concerns and rather only falsely justified so but is there a danger in these kinds of exclusionary, suppressive and sometimes oppressive movements resulting from cosmopolitan intentions. Kant’s

own former student J.G. Herder expressed concerns over the Enlightenment's eurocentrism. He was particularly worried about thinking of the eschaton of human history looking towards the happiness of the species or humanity in general and not to the happiness of individuals. With the eschaton so located, many individuals could have their particular happiness or success thwarted for the sake of the ends of humanity.

The first thing to note is that Kant is not himself ignorant of such dangers. In fact, arriving at a cosmopolis, whether considered in terms of states or inquiry "is at the same time the most difficult and the latest to be solved by the human species."¹⁴ The interaction of ideas, persons and states seems to always find an antagonism in society that those in authority are quick to use as a justification for war.¹⁵ But the critique of such vicious practices is only possible with a cosmopolitan view. Only under an aim that seeks to make sense of the totality of human activity and inquiry can such practices be shown to be flawed. It is only without a cosmopolitan aim that we can blind ourselves to shortcomings of imperialism. Only when thinking provincially can a vice president look away from the error of eliminating a department of classical languages.¹⁶ Moreover, to adopt a cosmopolitan aim is not to exclude any individual. Cosmopolis is not a call for an individual to sacrifice her own happiness for the sake of society. Rather it is to suggest that there are some achievements and successes that belong to no individual but instead to humanity in general. This becomes even clearer when we situate the discussion in terms of human inquiry. There is a coalescence on the part of enlightenment, on behalf of thinking philosophically or cosmopolitically that belongs to no discipline or school of thought. An ideal university achieves its end not through the strength of a particular department or the accomplishments of a few of its brightest students. Rather there is a reasonableness to the ideal university

that permeates throughout its departments and students. And of course, Kant does not conceive of cosmopolis as yielding happiness for anyone. Kant does not think of cosmopolis as the city of God. Kant is concerned with a free, public use of reason and such use of reason has no guarantees—for individuals or collectives—about attaining happiness. Concerns for our ultimately happiness, for Kant, must rest with faith in God.*

There can be a final concern that asks whether or not the eschaton of human history is one of a perfection or elevation of reason. Could it not perhaps be something less than that (chaos or brute animal existence) or perhaps something more (glory or divine salvation)? Is Kant in some way being too optimistic in believing in the order and structure of the human telos. He suggests that as practical, human beings must have faith that there is an order and a telos to human nature and that we simply do not have at our disposal the access to make any claims about the noumena of human nature. To address this question any further with regards to human existence it beyond the scope of this paper but when we consider human inquiry, without doubt the elevation of human inquiry is to make it most reasonable. This I argue occurs only when inquiry is taken on with a cosmopolitan aim.

* Elsewhere in this volume there are lengthier discussions of Kant's vision of cosmopolis and its relationship to a city of God as well as discussions concerning Kant's faith in God as being the way to ensure the highest good, a proportionate juxtaposition of virtue and happiness.

NOTES

- ¹ At the beginning of *Perpetual Peace* Kant includes a disclaimer—perhaps facetitiously—that claims that since he sees himself as doing political theory and since politicians have no time for political theorists, he expects not to be considered as someone making trouble for the establishment.
- ² *Anthropology, History, Education*, p. 107.
- ³ Kant in many places suggests that what is unique to humanity is a personality that is free of the restrictions of the laws of nature. As phenomenal human beings, however, our actions will always be subject to some laws of nature and so much the way that we must have humility in the face of noumena concerning the traditional objects of metaphysics, Kant suggests we can only hope that our actions represent a free will.
- ⁴ *Universal History* 8:17.
- ⁵ *Universal History* 8:18.
- ⁶ *Universal History* 8:22.
- ⁷ *Universal History* 8:27.
- ⁸ *What is Enlightenment*, 8:35.
- ⁹ *What is Enlightenment*, 8:38.
- ¹⁰ *Idea of Europe*, p. 239.
- ¹¹ *Universal History* 8:29.
- ¹² *Critique of Pure Reason* B867.
- ¹³ Kant goes out of his way to explain that his mention of the Greeks here is to point to the first record we have of history not to suggest that the first relevant entry in human history is that of the Greek state. Even with this disclaimer there is room to suggest that Kant is guilty of this same oversight. An oversight that a cosmopolitan perspective would call on us to avoid.
- ¹⁴ *Universal History* 8:23.
- ¹⁵ About this Kant seems to suggest that while on the other end of war there seems to be a tranquility or order that might move us closer to cosmopolis, the wars themselves do not seem to be inevitable.
- ¹⁶ To give some credit to university administrators I am here not ignoring the possible set of constraints that she might address in taking such action but whatever those constraints are, they cannot be cosmopolitan. It is difficult to see how the elimination of the study of any language moves the narrative of human history towards its eschaton, towards its most reasonable.

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