

KANT ON NON-LINEAR PROGRESS

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ABSTRACT

Kant’s account of progress is often mistakenly portrayed as a steady movement toward realizing the highest political good. In this paper, I show that we also need to take non-linear progress into account. What exactly the highest political good is and whether it is realizable is a separate, complicated question, which I leave aside in this paper. Instead, I focus on whether and how political agents can be motivated by a belief in progress even in times when such a belief might seem unwarranted. My main concern is the following question: Is regression in terms of realizing our ideals a reason to abandon a belief in a Kantian account of political progress? As part of my answer to this question, I consider the relationship between Kant’s account of a guarantee of perpetual peace in the Treaty essay of the same name and his later reference to a historical sign in the *Conflict of the Faculties*. The paper considers how Kant’s account of progress allows us to confront apparent moments of regression within a substantive account of progress and a robust notion of what the realization of a political ideal would look like. I focus on how an individual in a Kantian account might be motivated by the idea of political progress and how his non-linear account of progress helps the agent to be further motivated to promote political change in situations of apparent regression.

KEYWORDS

Immanuel Kant, political philosophy, progress, regression, perpetual peace.

THE QUESTION OF PROGRESS

Has progress become a thing of the past? In recent years, the political landscape has become ever bleaker; trust in national and international institutions is dwindling, financial crises have left consumers without trust in economic growth, hostility towards immigrants and asylum seekers is on the rise, citizens have little faith in their political representatives and, at the time of writing, most industrialized countries have halted all non-essential activities due to the threat from a new virus. In this situation, belief in political, legal and moral progress seems misplaced. This impression is reflected in Anglophone political philosophy: among others, Richard Rorty challenged the traditional account of progress as depending on an outdated teleological account of

history.¹ Others have formulated a critical account of progress that focuses on normative constraints on the process rather than its result, thereby making progress a feature of a procedure rather than a final end.² Some of the strongest concerns about the notion of progress have been voiced by Amy Allen in *The End of Progress* and John Gray in *Heresies: Against Progress and Other Illusions*.³ Both argue that progress is an illusory notion that presupposes an oppressive conception of rationality associated with a Eurocentric idea of Enlightenment. Since Kant's account of progress is the paradigmatic case to which they are objecting, a thorough account of Kantian progress and its presuppositions becomes necessary to evaluate whether the philosophical notion of progress has a future.

Kant's approach to the topic is criticized for relying on an outdated account of evolution and for being inconsistent with Kant's own account of objective moral standards. In these critical accounts, Kantian belief in political progress is often identified with the modern conception of progress which entails a steady movement toward a realization of the highest political good only obstructed by minor setbacks. This characterization has recently been made by Amy Allen in the following way:

This modern concept of progress found its clearest expression in the classical philosophies of history of Kant, Hegel, and even Marx. There, historical progress was understood in the strongest possible terms, as a necessary, inevitable, and unified process. Whether operating through the mechanism of a purposive nature, which uses evil to produce good, or of the cunning of reason, which behind men's backs and over their heads rationalizes existing reality, or of the development of the forces and relations of production, which sows the seeds for communist revolution, these classical philosophies of history understood progress to be necessary (though they had somewhat different views on how much of a role individuals should or could play in bringing about that necessary development) and unified (as occurring more or less simultaneously across society as a whole). Moreover, these classical philosophies of history rested on metaphysically loaded conceptions of the goal or telos toward which progress aimed, whether that was understood as the realization of the kingdom of ends on earth, the attainment of the standpoint of Absolute knowing, or communist utopia.⁴

The key idea in Allen's analysis is that Kant, Hegel, and Marx conceive of progress as a unified process in which regression is merely temporary. On this account, the modern conception of progress is unitary and does not consider the different developments in different societies and understands regression as minor setbacks in a constant progressive development. Allen's interpretation builds on Reinhart

¹ Rorty, *Truth and Progress*.

² Forst, *Normativität und Macht*, 102–10.

³ Allen, *The End of Progress* and Gray, *Heresies*.

⁴ Allen, *The End of Progress*, 8.

Koselleck's account, which characterizes the modern concept of progress in the following way:

During the eighteenth century and in the time since then, it has become a widespread belief that progress is general and constant while every regression, decline, or decay occurs only partially and temporarily. In other words, decline or regression is no longer a pure oppositional concept to advancement or progress. This can be corroborated from numerous authors. One need only mention Turgot, Condorcet, Iselin, Wieland, or Kant, or in the nineteenth century, Engels, Haeckel, or Eduard von Hartmann.⁵

Koselleck adds that Kant was the first author to use the word German word for progress (*Fortschritt*) in the singular to describe a historical development. On this account, Kant is a representative of an understanding of progress, according to which human development is general and constant and regression is only partial and temporary. The aim of this paper is to understand Kant's account of progress as non-linear to reconsider the image of Kantian progress as unitary and general. An understanding of progress as non-linear would still be compatible with the claim that decline is merely temporary. What I intend to challenge is the idea that Kant's conception of progress sees regress and decline as partial and interprets progress as a unitary development.

Non-linear progress helps us consider whether regression in terms of realizing our ideals is a reason to abandon a Kantian account of political progress. As part of my answer to this question, I consider the relationship between Kant's account of a guarantee of perpetual peace in the Treaty essay of the same name and his later reference to a historical sign in the *Conflict of the Faculties*.

In this paper, I do not defend Kant's legal and political philosophy as such but rather consider how it allows us to confront apparent moments of regression within a substantive account of progress and a robust notion of what the realization of a political ideal would look like. What qualifies as progress is part of the discussion, but the main idea is to focus on how an individual in a Kantian account might be motivated by the idea of political progress and how his non-linear account of progress helps the agent to be further motivated to promote political change in situations of apparent regression. In this respect, Kant's discussion of the historical signs of progress plays an important part in my argument.

The paper has four parts. (1) The relationship between legal, political and moral progress, in which I argue that Kant's account of the complexities of social progress provides us with a new understanding of the social nature of moral agency which

⁵ Koselleck, "Progress" and "Decline". An Appendix to the History of Two Concepts', 227; Koselleck, "Fortschritt" und "Niedergang" - Nachtrag zur Geschichte zweier Begriffe', 170.

includes a pedagogical aspect of practical reason. (2) The possibility of progress, in which I argue that a Kantian account of social progress can be separated from an account of history as a predetermined teleological development because Kantian progress relies on the contingency of history and the importance of single political agents. (3) The legal notion of a guarantee, in which I show that guarantors in legal peace treaties do not guarantee peace but rather guarantee intervention in case of noncompliance. (4) The idea of progress as a motivation for action. I argue that the duty to promote progress requires the possible feasibility of the ideal, even if this possibility can be very slim.

By engaging with Kant's account of non-linear progress, I show that the hope of contributing to a progressive development is relevant both for understanding the social aspects of individual agency and political activism.

1. LEGAL, POLITICAL AND MORAL PROGRESS

Before discussing the status of progress and its driving forces, we should try to understand what progress consists in according to Kant. Most importantly, Kant always considers theoretical and practical progress as mutually dependent. Theoretical progress encompasses the progress in the sciences and in philosophy, which expands our knowledge of the world and systematizes our existing cognition. Practical progress comprises the complexities of legal, political and moral progress, which Kant describes as an interdependent development, in which the development of one aspect promotes progress in the others. Kant's fundamental idea is that the promotion of education and the development of a just civil society will promote the moral development of citizens.

In this section, I rely on three central texts for understanding Kant's account of progress: *Idea for a Universal History from A Cosmopolitan Point of View* (1784), *On the Common Saying: That May Be True in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice* (1793) and *Conflict of the Faculties* (1798). Although all three texts provide a general description of history as progressing, they also contain many puzzles concerning the nature of progress. Kant's descriptions of the historical development of humanity change not only over time but also within a single text. In particular, Kant's claim in *Conflict of the Faculties* that nature affords a guarantee of progress has caused much confusion. I discuss this claim further in section 2 and 3, but before discussing the modality of progress, we should look at its characteristics and the ways in which the different types of progress intertwine.

In Kant's description of progress, it is important to remember that the timeframe is indefinite: humanity as such is progressing, and this brings with it the problem of our limited standpoint. For Kant, progress is always social, he thinks of progress not as

individual development but instead as a way in which humanity as such reaches its full potential.

In the earliest text, *Idea for a Universal History*, Kant describes how establishing a civil society promotes moral progress, but he also cautions that this development has not yet taken place. Instead, it constitutes a hope for future development. In this text, Kant identifies nature's plan for humanity with the development of a just civil society. He describes this endeavor as a *problem* which humanity has to solve rather than a guaranteed development:

[T]herefore a society in which *freedom under external laws* can be encountered combined in the greatest possible degree with irresistible power, i.e. a perfectly *just civil constitution*, must be the supreme problem of nature for the human species, because only by means of its solution and execution can nature achieve its remaining aims for our species.⁶

The problem of developing a just society is given by nature, but its solution is left to the endeavors of humanity. In this description, a just civil society is not only an intrinsic good, it also serves as a means to promote the "remaining aims for our species". By this Kant intends that citizens have better possibilities of developing their intellectual and moral capacities in a just society and in times of peace.

In the quoted passage, Kant personifies Nature and describes it as achieving its aims. This language is closely associated with Kant's account of humanity's unsocial sociability, but also provides a metaphysical dimension to his teleological account of progress, which seems incompatible with critical philosophy. In this early text, Kant makes the following teleological premise: "All natural predispositions of a creature are *determined* sometime to develop themselves completely and purposively."⁷ In this text, he describes how human natural predispositions develop in the species in an infinite timeframe.

This tendency to personify nature is particularly problematic in view of Kant's critical philosophy. Kant describes how nature uses our unsocial sociability as a force to drive progress. Through the human tendency to be both repelled by and attracted to one another, humanity is forced to establish a civil society, which in its turn promotes the development of our natural dispositions. In other passages in the same text, Kant describes providence as the cause of humanity's teleological development and refers to a wise creator behind this development as the cause of the teleological course of history.

⁶ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History*, 8:22. In the following, I cite from Kant, *Kant's Gesammelte Schriften* indicating volume:page number. English translations are from Kant, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant*.

⁷ Kant, *Idea*, 8:18 (emphasis added).

This leaves two competing candidates for the driving force in history: nature and providence.

Pauline Kleingeld has suggested that the ambiguity of Kant's position is related to the double aim of teleology. She suggests reading Kant's teleological view of nature as a regulative, heuristic principle, which helps us understand history systematically. The ambiguity in *Idea* emerges because Kant is discussing both theoretical and practical progress. This means that also his references to the driving forces in the development is double. Kleingeld suggests understanding the ambiguity in the following way: "Nature' is the better term for highlighting that historical progress is supported by natural means, but 'Providence' is the more apt term for stressing that this order of nature must be regarded as caused by a highest wisdom."⁸ Crucially, none of these options are certain. They are both options for the title's 'idea' behind humanity's development over the course of history. If we remember this circumstance, Kant's progressive view of history sits better with his critical philosophy. This leaves both nature and providence as regulative ideas, which guide our review of history but on which we may not base any certain claims about future developments.

Kant's arguments from analogy further complicate the line of argument. The text relies on two main analogies: the analogy between individual and species and the analogy between individual and state. The first analogy stipulates that the moral and intellectual development of the species is analogous to the physical development of the individual. The basis for this analogy is that both are cases in which natural dispositions are developed over time in a way which depends on the surrounding living conditions. Individuals develop their physical predispositions with the aim of becoming a complete adult human being and, analogously, humanity develops its moral and rational predispositions to reach a completely developed stage. Kant describes this completely developed stage as both 'outer' and 'inner', i.e. concerning both the civil condition of justice and peace and the moral condition of the individuals living in a fully developed society. Borrowing a theological term, Kant calls this final aim a *chiliasm*, which suggests a millennium of peace on Earth as the final aim of history. The analogy between individual development and human development is clearly a particular one, since individual development is constitutive of human development – without individual moral and civil development there would be no human development. However, Kant's idea is that a single human lifetime is too short to develop these natural predispositions completely and the complete development is therefore left to the species as such.

The second main analogy forms the basis of Kant's cosmopolitan argument. This analogy likens individuals in a state of nature to states without international law. Like individuals are in a state of nature without a civil state, states themselves are in a

⁸ Kleingeld, 'Nature or Providence?', 219.

potentially violent state of nature in the absence of a federation of states. Kant closely associates the promotion of a civil constitution and a cosmopolitan federation of states with what he describes as the complete development of the natural dispositions of humanity.

Between this early text and the other writings on historical progress, Kant wrote and published the *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (1790), which contains an extensive critique of teleological judgment. Concerning the use of teleological principles in the study of nature, Kant writes:

Arithmetical and geometrical analogies as well as universal mechanical laws, no matter how strange and astonishing the unification of different and apparently entirely independent rules in a single principle in them may seem, can make no claim on that account to be teleological grounds of explanation within physics; and even if they deserve to be taken into consideration within the general theory of the purposiveness of things in nature, this would still belong elsewhere, namely in metaphysics, and would not constitute any internal principle of natural science [...]⁹

Kant here rejects the use of teleological principles as a ground of explanation in natural science. Instead, he refers these principles to metaphysics. Any claim concerning the teleological principles of nature, which guarantee historical progress, would consequently make up a metaphysical dimension of history.

Kant's focus changes from nature to human agency between *Idea for a Universal History* and *Conflict of the Faculties* but all of his texts on history and progress contain personified references to Nature and Progress. These references give the impression that Nature and Progress determine the historical development, thereby undercutting free action. In both *Perpetual Peace* and *Theory and Practice*, Kant cites Seneca to describe how Nature influences the course of history: "*fata volentem ducunt, nolentem trahunt*" (The fates lead the willing, drive the unwilling).¹⁰ In *Theory and Practice*, Kant specifies that although he describes nature "which constrains one to go where one does not want to go"¹¹, human nature is also included in this account. Since human nature includes reason and the freedom to act spontaneously, a reliance on nature need not imply a deterministic account of history.

In *Idea*, Kant's argues that nature promotes the progress of our species through unsocial sociability, which drives us to establish just states and avoid war. He returns to this theme in *Conflict of the Faculties*, in which he describes negative and positive ways to promote humanity's progress over the course of history. Negative tools promote progress by removing obstacles whereas positive tools promote progress in a more

⁹ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5:382.

¹⁰ Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 8:365 and *Theory and Practice*, 8:313.

¹¹ Kant, *Theory and Practice*, 8:313.

direct manner. For Kant, moral progress is the measure of all types of progress, which means that legal or technical progress only count as such if they lead to moral progress for either current or future generations.

The most important negative tool to promote progress is preventing war. The corresponding positive tool is the establishment of a rightful civil state. In *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant defines progress as a development toward a *moral* aim. Humanity as such is progressing as we move towards this aim. If the final aim is moral, then legal progress is defined by its contribution to this moral development. Both in *Idea* and *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant describes how the establishment of republics furthers the moral progress of ‘nations’. For this reason, he maintains that the establishment of a republican constitution is both a right and an end:

This moral cause exerting its influence is twofold: first, that of the right, that a nation must not be hindered in providing itself with a civil constitution, which appears good to the people themselves; and second, that of the end (which is, at the same time, a duty), that that same national constitution alone be just and morally good in itself, created in such a way as to avoid, by its very nature, principles permitting offensive war. It can be no other than a republican constitution, republican at least in essence; it thus establishes the condition whereby war (the source of all evil and corruption of morals) is deterred; and, at least negatively, progress toward the better is assured humanity in spite of all its infirmity, for it is at least left undisturbed in its advance.¹²

According to this explanation, states that have a republican constitution or are “republican, at least in essence”, promote progress negatively by preventing war. War is prevented because these states consider citizens’ possible consent in their decision making and therefore avoid endangering their lives in war. Because war is the “source of all evil and corruption of morals”, the prevention of war is crucial for promoting progress. Note, however, that Kant is not demanding a complete republican constitution but instead allows for states that are republican in essence, meaning states in which the rulers legislate in ways to which the people *could* agree if they *were* consulted. This form of government prevents states from entering war, which would put the lives of their citizens at risk. This, however, is merely a negative promotion of progress, which ensures that progress is not hindered and humanity is left to advance in an undisturbed manner.

In the *Doctrine of Right*, Kant accounts for the rightfulness of republics but in this earlier text he provides an indirect argument for their establishment: Since republics promote progress, the establishment of republican rule itself counts as progress compared to other forms of government. This implies that even if republics promote progress negatively, the republican form of government counts as progressive. The

¹² Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:85-6.

republic is in other words both a means and an end; in terms of right, the establishment of a republic is an end, and, in practice, this form of government also serves as a means to promote moral progress.

Despite Kant's claim that republics are essential for social progress, these should not be established through revolution. In the *Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant advises against inciting to revolution, and emphasizes that the sovereign is obliged to promote progress, not the people.

It is sweet, however, to imagine constitutions corresponding to the requirements of reason (particularly in a legal sense), but rash to propose them and culpable to incite the populace to abolish what presently exists. [...]

However late it may be, to hope someday for the consummation of a political product, as it is envisaged here, is a sweet dream but that it is being perpetually approached is not only thinkable, but, so far as it is compatible with the moral law, an obligation, not of the citizens, but of the sovereign.¹³

Importantly, Kant is here emphasizing that the sovereign has an *obligation* to promote progress. This is still compatible with the idea that citizens can promote progress but unlike the sovereign they are not *obliged* to do so. In this text, Kant warns against abolishing what already exists by revolting to establish a better constitution. Instead, he focuses on the obligation of the sovereign to bring about the desired changes.

While Kant in *Conflict of the Faculties* appears to rely on the agency of the sovereign, earlier texts leave a more active role for the citizen. In *Idea*, he appears to favor political reform from below, which begins with the enlightenment of the citizens and from there influences the actions of the rulers.

This enlightenment, however, and with it also a certain participation in the good by the heart of the enlightened human being who understands the good perfectly, must ascend bit by bit up to the thrones and have its influence even on their principles of government.¹⁴

This passage suggests that the influence of progress flows in both directions: political progress promotes moral and intellectual progress but also the opposite is true. Moral and intellectual progress among citizens must also influence rulers to reform. Kant's earlier text thus assigns a more active role to citizens and their enlightenment is given a crucial role in political reform. This passage suggests a more active role for critical thinking and education than Kant's description of unsocial sociability suggests. Other passages on unsocial sociability appear to describe the deterministic instincts of unreflecting beings that are driven forward in a natural development against their will.

¹³ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:92.

¹⁴ Kant, *Idea for a Universal History*, 8:28.

In contrast, the focus on enlightenment suggests a different path. If enlightenment helps promote political reform, then the rational agency of citizens can also promote legal and political progress. Similar to Kant's description of the obligation to leave the state of nature, there are several driving forces in historical progress. The first is humanity's natural unsocial sociability, which drives us to establish legal institutions for our own protection. Unsocial sociability presents a natural driving force, which presents an empirical development in history. The second driving force is reason, which improves the content of laws and constitutions and promotes the enlightenment of citizens. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant describes reason as being behind the mechanism of nature: "reason can use the mechanism of nature, through self-seeking inclinations that naturally counteract one another externally as well, as a means to make room for its own end, the rule of right".¹⁵ This passage shows that although history is driven by natural mechanisms, we need reason to establish rightful institutions and promote social progress.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant describes reason itself as driven by teleological forces. In its theoretical endeavors, the regulative use of reason helps promote progress in the search for knowledge. In the appendix to the transcendental dialectic, Kant writes "that human reason has a natural propensity to overstep all these boundaries" but at the same time he asserts that "[e]verything grounded in the nature of our powers must be purposive and consistent with their correct use".¹⁶ Reason is thus urged to overstep its own boundaries, but at the same time this tendency must have a purpose. Kant elaborates further on the teleology of reason in the section of the architectonic of pure reason. Describing the proper role of philosophy, he writes that from the point of view of philosophy as a cosmopolitan concept, "philosophy is the science of the relation of all cognition to the essential ends of human reason (*teleologia rationis humanae*), and the philosopher is not an artist of reason but the legislator of human reason."¹⁷

Of course, this teleological description of reason does not exclude relapses and regressive tendencies. At no point does Kant claim that the historical development is a stable progression. However, in *Idea*, he points out that even when civilizations fall "there was always left over a germ of enlightenment that developed further through each revolution and this prepared for a following stage of improvement" (8:30). These leftover traces are what allows progress to be both constant and non-linear. Later

¹⁵ Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 8:366. Otfried Höffe has rightly pointed out that if this passage resembles Hegel's cunning of reason, this suggests that Hegel was a Kantian rather than vice versa (Hegel, 'Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte', 49 and Höffe, 'Zum Ewigen Frieden, Erster Zusatz', 162).

¹⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 642/B 670.

¹⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 839/B 867. I expand further on the idea of the philosopher as legislator in Møller, *Kant's Tribunal of Reason*, 162–65.

developments can rekindle earlier progressive efforts and thereby continue their efforts despite earlier setbacks.

Because human beings are both physical and rational beings, we are driven by both natural and rational forces. Kant's claim is that both reason and human nature drive us toward the same aim, namely the complete development of our moral and rational predispositions. These driving forces present us with both the motivation to establish a just civil society and the rational capacities to develop the rules guiding this society.

In sum, progress for Kant is the development of a just civil society and an international federation of states ensuring peace, which provide the conditions under which humanity can flourish morally. Because humanity can only progress as a species, Kant's account of progress is necessarily social and cosmopolitan. However, the question of the modality of this development still remains: is progress in history a necessary or merely a possible development?

2. THE MODALITY OF PROGRESS

Kant appears to oscillate between an account of historical progress as merely possible (*On the Common Saying* and *Conflict of the Faculties*) and as a necessary teleological development towards a given endpoint (*Idea for a Universal History* and *Perpetual Peace*). A necessary teleological development would be epistemically problematic for two reasons: first, it appears to involve a deterministic claim about human action and second, a teleological claim about historical development. While a deterministic development need not be teleological, the challenge for Kant is to describe a teleological account of human action, which does not recur to determinism.

In *Idea for a Universal History*, Kant's teleological account of the development of our rational predispositions in the entire species rather than the individual are linked to his understanding of nature as teleologically structured. This view of nature is centered around the notion of epigenesis, which explains the development of individual organisms by referring to natural dispositions or so-called seeds (*Keime*).¹⁸ However, even in this early text, Kant only grants nature's teleology the status of a regulative idea that guides our inquiries without having the cognitive status of

¹⁸ On Kant's account of biological development, see Goy, 'Epigenetic Theories', in which Ina Goy shows that Kant's theory of biology contains preformistic and epigenetic characteristics, which resembles the theories of Johann Friedrich Blumenbach and Caspar Friedrich Wolff. Philip Huneman has convincingly argued that Kant's account of biology changes in view of his new position on teleological judgment in the third Critique. See Huneman, 'Reflexive Judgement and Wolffian Embryology'.

For an excellent account of Kant's "epigenesis of reason", see Mensch, *Kant's Organicism*, 138–45.

knowledge. His account of both history and nature relies on the idea that their development can be interpreted *as if* they were part of a teleological development.

In *On the Common Saying: That May Be True in Theory, but It Is of No Use in Practice* (*Theory and Practice* in brief), which was written after the third *Critique*, Kant presents the idea that we may regard history *as if* it were progressing. Instead of considering whether history is actually progressing, he suggests we consider whether we are warranted in understanding history *as if* this were the case. This strategy is in line with his use of regulative principles for practical purposes.¹⁹ Rather than consider whether they are in fact warranted, he considers whether we might use them fruitfully without giving rise to cognitive illusions.

This idea was explored most comprehensively by Hans Vaihinger in his *Philosophy of 'As If'* and recently by Appiah in *As If*.²⁰ In Kant scholarship, Lea Ypi has focused on Kant's account of progress as part of an *as if* approach to political agency.²¹ In parallel with Kant's account of teleology in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, she argues that Kant's philosophy of history can be read as an *as if* history according to which it is rational to act as if historical progress were guaranteed. This approach involves acting *as if* the unprovable ideas of reason were warranted. Rather than focusing on the epistemic warrant for progress, Kant focuses on its practical use. For Kant, the presupposition that progress is possible provides a practical necessary motivation for action:

[H]owever uncertain I may always be and remain as to whether something better is to be hoped for the human race, this cannot infringe upon the maxim, and hence upon its presupposition, necessary for practical purposes, that it is practicable [*thunlich*].²²

Although we might not even be warranted in hoping for something better for humanity, Kant asserts that it is still necessary to presuppose that an improvement is possible. This possibility is not a mere metaphysical possibility, but instead we need to presuppose that improvement is possible *through our actions*. That is, in order to act, we must presuppose that our actions can improve the world for humanity. Otherwise, we would have no reason to act. However, this does not imply that progress is guaranteed or necessary. Epistemically, we can neither claim that progress is possible nor necessary. Instead, progress shares the status of the ideas of reason that are necessary for practical purposes but epistemically unwarranted.

¹⁹ On this point, see Lindstedt, 'Kant: Progress in Universal History as a Postulate of Practical Reason'.

²⁰ Vaihinger, *Die Philosophie des Als-ob: System der theoretischen, praktischen und religiösen Fiktionen der Menschheit auf Grund eines idealistischen Positivismus*; Appiah, *As If*.

²¹ Ypi, 'Natura Daedala Rerum?'

²² Kant, *Theory and Practice*, 8:309.

Kant expresses a similar idea in his account of cosmopolitan right in the *Doctrine of Right* (1797). There he explicitly uses the expression ‘as if’ to describe how we need to think of peace:

So the question is no longer whether perpetual peace is something real or a fiction, and whether we are not deceiving ourselves in our theoretical judgment when we assume that it is real. Instead, we must act *as if* it is something real, though perhaps it is not; we must work toward establishing perpetual peace and the kind of constitution that seems to us most conducive to it (say, a republicanism of all states, together and separately) in order to bring about perpetual peace and put an end to the heinous waging of war, to which as their chief aim all states without exception have hitherto directed their internal arrangements.²³

Kant here specifies that acting *as if* something is real is not the same as a fiction. Perpetual peace is thus not a necessary fiction but rather a necessary presupposition. The passage from *Theory and Practice* also shows acting *as if* progress is practicable is also possible even when hope is unwarranted. While hope involves a feeling, acting as if provides reasons that are necessary for action.

Unfortunately, the idea that we have to act *as if* something were true gives very little specific guidance. Kant tells us that acting *as if* is more than a fiction but less than certainty. We have to act *as if* something is real even though it might be false. Acting *as if* is in other words a type of extended self-deception. Kant recognizes that this may even be necessary when hope is not warranted. Wolfgang Kersting has rightly pointed out that this perspective makes history a product of interpretation. History is created when natural processes are interpreted from a legal and political point of view.²⁴ For this reason, we can act as if history were progressing, since history is a product of human action.

Despite the necessity to presuppose that progress is possible for practical purposes, Kant still attempts to provide reasons to believe that it is really possible. In the *Conflict of the Faculties*, he focuses on the idea that progress is warranted because of the moral predisposition of human beings. But, he specifies, the course of history is not predetermined: “so far as time is concerned, it can promise this [i.e., progress] only indefinitely and as a contingent occurrence” (7:88). The specific unfolding of history is thus not given but Kant’s point is that our moral disposition for the good makes social progress possible.

²³ Kant, *Doctrine of Right*, 6:354 [emphasis added].

²⁴ Kersting, *Wohlgeordnete Freiheit*, 84.

3. LEGAL GUARANTEES OF PEACE

In view of fallbacks in development and enlightenment, we are faced with the question of whether progress is guaranteed or merely possible. Kant's views on the matter appear to change and there appears to be a shift from Kant's mention of a guarantee in *Perpetual Peace* to his references to mere historical signs in the *Conflict of the Faculties* and *On a Common Saying*. Here it will be helpful to understand the notion of a guarantee, which Kant uses to describe nature's teleology. In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant describes nature as providing a guarantee for perpetual peace in the future:

What afford this guarantee (surety) [*Gewähr (Garantie)*] is nothing less than the great artist nature (*natura daedala rerum*) from whose mechanical course purposiveness shines forth visibly, letting concord arise by means of the discord between human beings even against their will; and for this reason nature, regarded as necessitation by a cause the laws of whose operation are unknown to us, is called fate, but if we consider its purposiveness in the course of the world as the profound wisdom of the higher course directed to the objective final end of the human race and predetermining this course of the world, it is called providence.²⁵

The term *Garantie* is a legal term, which Kant also uses in the *Doctrine of Right*. There, a guarantee involves the assurance of property:

For a civil constitution is just the rightful condition, by which what belongs to each is only secured, but not actually settled and determined. – Any guarantee [*Garantie*], then, already presupposes what belongs to someone (to whom it secures it).²⁶

In this usage, a guarantee is an assurance in property, which is provided to a possessor to secure his or her property. Here Kant is describing the establishment of a civil society, which guarantees but does not determine property. For this reason, the distribution of property is left as it were in the state of nature and the state merely guarantees this preexisting distribution. Kant therefore emphasizes that a guarantee here presupposes a previous distribution of property.

The notion of a guarantee also appears in Kant's account of peace treaties in the *Doctrine of Right*. Here he describes a guarantee as assuring the continuation of peace:

The right to peace is 1) the right to be a peace when there is a war in the vicinity, or the right to neutrality; 2) the right to be assured of the continuance of a peace that has been concluded, that is, the right to a guarantee [*Garantie*] (6:349)

²⁵ Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 8:360-1.

²⁶ Kant, *Doctrine of Right*, 6:349.

Here the guarantee assures an already concluded peace treaty. In both occurrences, guarantees assure the continuation of what has already been established. In the case of property, the state guarantees the preexisting distribution of property. In the case of peace treaties, the guarantee assures that the peace treaty is kept. In the legal usage, guarantees are assurances of an existing state of affairs.

The notion of a peace guarantee was common in European peace treaties, where it is also called *assecuratio pacis* or *Friedensgarantie*. International peace treaties would include a guarantee, which assured the mutual respect of the treaty. This guarantee involved a third party, to whom the power to uphold the guarantee is transferred. Ideally, the guarantor would be an uninterested third party that was superior in power to all interested parties of the treaty. A prominent but slightly misleading example is the Treaty of Westphalia.²⁷ In this treaty, the guarantors were Sweden and France, who were allowed to intervene if the treaty was not kept, although in this example both countries were interested and not third parties. A better example of an external guarantee is the French-Portuguese peace from 1713 under the Treaty of Utrecht, in which the British Queen provided the guarantee.²⁸ Note that the guarantors do not guarantee that the peace is kept. Instead, they are given the power to intervene in case of noncompliance.

In *Perpetual Peace*, Kant is clearly drawing on this tradition in his peace guarantee. By including a guarantee, Kant is following an established structure of a peace treaty. Similar to the mentioned treaties, a third power provides the guarantee. In *Perpetual Peace*, this power is nature. However, we must remember that the guarantor in peace treaties does not guarantee future peace. Instead, the guarantor promises an intervention in case the peace treaty is broken. In the case of the French-Portuguese peace, the British queen does not guarantee that the peace is kept. She guarantees that she will intervene in case of noncompliance. Since Kant does not use the term ‘guarantee’ to describe the course of history in any other texts, I think it is likely that the term here serves to establish the structural similarity with actual peace treaties. According to the treaty analogy, nature ought to serve as a stronger third party that will intervene if any of the signatories break the treaty for perpetual peace. The intervention, however, could only be indirect. Kant describes how nature intervenes, even against the will of human beings, to drive humanity towards its final end of peace and justice. The means for this intervention are the nature of human inclinations, which lead people to be necessarily in contact with one another while they also threaten one another’s existence:

²⁷ Die Urkunden der Friedensschlüsse zu Osnabrück und Münster nach authentischen Quellen nebst darauf bezüglichen Aktenstücken, historischer Uebersicht, Bücherkunde und Anmerkungen.

²⁸ Kremer, *Macht und Moral*, 136.

In this way nature guarantees perpetual peace through the mechanism of human inclinations itself, with an assurance that is admittedly not adequate for *predicting* its future (theoretically) but that is still enough for practical purposes and makes it a duty to work toward this (not merely chimerical) end.²⁹

The guarantee clearly does not ensure a particular outcome since it is inadequate for predicting the future but it does provide a driving force, which helps achieve this end. In light of the legal vocabulary and the text genre which Kant is mimicking, I think we must understand this as a very particular guarantee. It would be hasty to claim that *Perpetual Peace* presents nature as determining a particular outcome of history. This is also the case for legal guarantors: they intervene in case of conflict. Like the legal guarantor, nature provides a force which helps humanity overcome wars and conflicts. However, nature does not guarantee the outcome, it merely allows us to assume it for practical purposes. In analogy with peace treaties, nature assures a non-linear progressive development, in which noncompliance is regulated by human nature itself. This brings us to the topic of progress as a motivation for action since here we find the practical reason for not excluding progress during regressive times.

4. PROGRESS AS MOTIVATION FOR ACTION

Kant repeatedly emphasizes that human action is what drives progress and that enlightenment and education play an important part in the process. The idea that nature provides a guarantee means that there is at least the possibility that our efforts are not in vain and that regressive developments are only temporary. As guarantor, nature intervenes in case of drawbacks but does not guarantee the final outcome. Kant's motivational insight is that political actors may presuppose that their activities will contribute to a progressive development. This insight is condensed in his account of the 'historical sign' of progress. He uses the historical sign as an indicator which political actors can use to convince themselves that their endeavors are not necessarily in vain.

[...] such a phenomenon in human history will not be forgotten, because it has revealed a tendency and faculty in human nature for improvement such that no politician, affecting wisdom, might have conjured out of the course of things hitherto existing, and one which nature and freedom alone, united in the human race in conformity with inner principles of right, could have promised. But so far as time is concerned, it can promise this only indefinitely and as a contingent occurrence.³⁰

²⁹ Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 8:368.

³⁰ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:88.

The use of different perspectives is decisive in Kant's account of progress: The description of a development changes depending on whether it is viewed from a limited human standpoint or from "the standpoint of Providence".³¹ Kant argues that we merely need a single sign that humans are capable of causing lasting change in world to warrant an interpretation of history as progressive.³² If such a capacity is present in human beings as such, then the circumstances under which they can be exerted are merely a question of probability and, presupposing an infinite timeframe, the right circumstances will eventually arise. For this reason, progress is compatible with a non-linear development which includes retrogression.

Axel Honneth has argued that Kant accounts for two different signs of progress: those that are system-conforming and those that are system-bursting. Honneth argues that although Kant's teleological account of history and biology is outdated, what remains actual of Kant's philosophy of history is that political activism requires at least the hope that we can change the world for the better. However, the idea that Kant would promote "system-bursting" activism is far from Kant's own account since Kant explicitly warns against revolution and favors a revisionist approach to social reform.³³ I agree with Honneth that progress requires a belief in the possible feasibility of the ideal, even if this possibility cannot be proven. Political actors who bring about real social changes cannot be motivated by ideals they conceive as fictions, they need to act *as if* they knew the ideal were feasible. Kant's description of the historical sign provides the insight that political agency requires more than a fiction but much less than an assurance. The idea that nature provides a guarantee is not the same as a certainty of a historical development. It rather means that nature provides the framework which makes this development possible and that an intervention is possible in case of retrogression.

While Kant excludes teleology and determinate development from a theoretical perspective, he still argues that the hope of contributing to progress is necessary from a practical perspective. But why must progress be possible from a practical perspective? First, because the possibility of progress can serve as a motivation for action. However, this claim rests on the psychological premise that motivation for action requires the hope that the action will succeed. We might imagine a situation in which a person acts out of duty without any hope that their action will succeed or that it will contribute to a progressive development.³⁴ Instead, according to Kant's moral philosophy, reason can

³¹ Kant, *Conflict of the Faculties*, 7:83.

³² On the relation between the historical sign and progress, see Recki, 'Fortschritt als Postulat und die Lehre vom Geschichtszeichen'.

³³ Honneth, 'The Irreducibility of Progress' and Kant, *Doctrine of Right*, 6:319.

³⁴ I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this objection. As a powerful example, the reviewer cited Sandro Pertini, former president of the Italian republic and anti-fascist partisan: "in life it is sometimes

be practical and the moral law alone can serve as a motivation for action. There is no need for a further motivation to do the right thing.³⁵

While the hope of progress is not strictly necessary as motivation, Kant has a more important normative reason to insist on the possibility of progress: we can only have a duty to promote progress if progress is possible. This follows from the general principle that ought implies can, which Kant phrases as “*ultra posse nemo obligatur*”.³⁶ In the essay on perpetual peace, Kant makes the point that the promotion of peace is a duty, which presupposes that progress is possible:

In this way nature guarantees perpetual peace through the mechanism of human inclinations itself, with an assurance that is admittedly not adequate for *predicting* its future (theoretically) but that is still enough for practical purposes and makes it a duty to work toward this (not merely chimerical) end.³⁷

Kant needs to show that progress is possible since there can be no duty to do the impossible. For this purpose, progress need not be constant, but can take place in a non-linear development.

In closing, we can now return to Allen’s and Koselleck’s descriptions of the modern conception of progress quoted at the beginning of this paper. They both claim that Kant is a defendant of the modern conception of progress according to which progress is unitary and constant. The claim that Kant understands progress as constant was partly confirmed, but only as a practical, regulative idea. For Kant, progress can be assumed from a practical point of view, because it renders the duty to promote progress possible. If we understand history as what Wolfgang Kersting calls an ‘*Interpretationskonstrukt*’, i.e. a construction of interpretation, then Kant warrants an interpretation of history as progressing.³⁸ This does not amount to claiming that progress is and will be constant, instead Kant’s claim is that progress is a possible and helpful interpretation of historical developments.

My main objective has been to show that Kant’s conception of progress is not necessarily unitary. As Amy Allen has shown, the problem with a unitary conception of progress is that it implies a scale of progress according to which some societies are less developed than others. In other words, a unitary conception of progress risks

necessary to know how to fight, not only without fear, but also without hope” (“nella vita talvolta è necessario saper lottare, non solo senza paura, ma anche senza speranza”) Pertini, ‘Lettera alla madre’, 31 October 1933.

³⁵ Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:76.

³⁶ Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 8:370.

³⁷ Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, 8:368.

³⁸ Kersting, *Wohlgeordnete Freiheit*, 84.

becoming ethno-centric.³⁹ There are passages in Kant's description of progress, which fit this description. In *Theory and Practice*, Kant gives the following description of progress as combinable with occasional breaks:

I shall therefore be allowed to assume that, since the human race is constantly advancing with respect to culture (as its natural end) it is also to be conceived as progressing toward what is better with respect to the moral end of its existence, and that this will indeed be interrupted from time to time but will never be broken of. I do not need to prove this presupposition; it is up to its adversary to prove [his] case.⁴⁰

In the first sentence, Kant describes human progress as both constant and unitary. However, Kant also specifies that this is compatible with occasional breaks. In times of regress, Kant's claim is that "however uncertain I may always be and remain as to whether something better is to be hoped for the human race, this cannot infringe upon the maxim, and hence upon its presupposition, necessary for practical purposes, that it is practicable."⁴¹

5. CONCLUSION

Kant's account of progress offers many insights and as many puzzles. In this paper, I have showed how Kant thinks of progress as necessarily social and how moral progress promotes legal progress and vice versa. We have also seen how Kant borrows the notion of a guarantee from actual peace treaties to provide an external surety for peace. Most importantly, Kant accounts for progress as a necessary presupposition, which is presupposed in any attempt to promote progress. In other words, Kant's account struggles with the fact that the motivation to promote progress comes from an idea that progress is possible. Whether acting *as if* is a self-deception of a far-fetched hope, it proves to be necessary for action, especially since history is a nonlinear development in which progressive and retrogressive developments intermingle.

³⁹ Allen, *The End of Progress*, 25–34.

⁴⁰ Kant, *Theory and Practice*, 8:308-9.

⁴¹ Kant, *Theory and Practice*, 8:309.

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