

Between control and trust: paradigms of early modern and Enlightenment optimism in the thought of Kant and Spener and their continuity in contemporary thought

Entre controle e confiança: paradigmas do otimismo no início da modernidade e no Iluminismo no pensamento de Kant e Spener e sua continuidade no pensamento contemporâneo

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Abstract: The article addresses the question of the origins of optimism in the perception of the future and the role that the sense of being in control of reality plays in its formation. This article analyses two models of optimism present in modern and Enlightenment thought: those of Ph.J. Spener and I. Kant. It considers the factors that contribute to optimism, including a sense of control over one's fate as a result of independence from sub-natural factors (such as God) in shaping the future and a sense of belief that reality is developing in an optimal way.

Keywords: control; Enlightenment; fate; optimism; pessimism; trust.

Resumo: O presente artigo aborda a questão das origens do otimismo na percepção de futuro e o papel que a ideia de controle da realidade desempenha em sua formação. O artigo analisa dois modelos de otimismo presentes no pensamento moderno e iluminista: os de Ph.J. Spener e I. Kant. O texto examina os fatores que contribuem para o otimismo, incluindo uma ideia de controle sobre o próprio destino como resultado da independência de fatores subnaturais (como Deus) na conformação do futuro e a crença de que a realidade está se desenvolvendo da melhor forma possível.

Palavras-chave: controle; Iluminismo; destino; otimismo; pessimismo; confiança.

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The future can be approached in at least the two following and influential ways: optimistically or pessimistically. This raises the question of the source of optimism and pessimism. This paper will focus in particular on the question of optimism: What factors contribute to the development of a positive attitude in the individual and such expectations in society as a whole? In trying to answer these questions, let us look at the way of thinking that characterized the Enlightenment, an era in which an optimistic outlook on the future of humanity was one of its defining characteristics. Other typical features of the Enlightenment, including the conviction about the power of rationality, the belief that reasonableness is a universal quality and the demand for the construction of a universal and communicable system of knowledge, were shaped by the assumption that the future of humanity could potentially be improved. Optimism served both as the foundation for the development of other Enlightenment beliefs and as a driving force in the pursuit of Enlightenment objectives, self-reinforcing as a core tenet of the Enlightenment ideology. An intriguing question definitely worth looking into is the question of the ultimate source of the Enlightenment optimism. From what source did this optimistic belief emerge at that time? It is particularly captivating given that, at first glance, it appears to have no empirical justification. The evidence of human progress, for instance in the field of science, may suggest that further discoveries will be made but it does not provide sufficient grounds for an unquestioning belief in a better future.

The following article aims to reflect on the emergence of optimism as a worldview and examine the underlying rationality for this shift. This paper will focus on two kinds of optimism that may be observed in early modern theology and Enlightenment philosophy. It will compare notions concerning the predictions of the future developed by two classical thinkers, Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and Immanuel Kant (1724-1804). This choice is not accidental. Spener, who was not a representative of the Enlightenment but a forerunner of several Enlightenment ideas, is one of the very few theologians whose conception attracted Kant's attention. It would be inaccurate to claim that Spener had a significant influence on Kant, but there are sufficient parallels between their systems suggesting that they belonged to the same anthropological paradigm. In the context of the investigated topic, there is one striking similarity between Kant and Spener that is worthy of particular mention. Both Spener and Kant were strongly interested in the idea of moral progress and believed that such progress was possible. Their conviction about the real possibility of enhancement of human nature determined their belief that due to moral progress, a better future for the whole of humanity may be achieved. However, there is a crucial difference between Spener's and Kant's optimism concerning their visions of the future. Namely, Spener was convinced that the ultimate shape of the future depends on God's support and that no moral progress is achievable without God's grace. Kant, however, intended to develop a philosophical system in which the position of God in the traditional theological sense would be radically diminished. As I will try to show, although Kant devotes attention to the question of religion, his conception of God goes beyond the dogmatic framework of Christian doctrine, which influences his overall perception of the relationship between God and man. In particular, he questioned the theological assertion that God's grace is essential when considering the philosophical basis of moral behavior.

Spener is regarded as one of the most significant Protestant theologians of the modern era. However, comparing Kant's and Spener's thought is mostly beneficial for researching Kant's philosophy since the innovative nature of some of Kant's ideas – which do not necessarily seem revolutionary today – can be fully appreciated by comparing his thoughts with earlier traditions. Analyses of Kant's thought frequently occur in an isolation from its historical context: Kantian

philosophy is often interpreted as an autonomous system, with little consideration given to its position within the broader constellation of historical philosophical theories¹, the sources of Kant's inspiration, or the subtleties of his thought resulting from the historical evolution of the German language². This approach may give researchers some autonomy in formulating their own interpretations, but ultimately leads to a kind of detachment of Kant's system from its historical context³. However, in the case of the topic of this paper, it is this context that is particularly important.

A comparison of Kant's and Spener's views on the means of achieving a better future reveals some interesting aspects. A thesis may be formulated that in the period of several decades between Spener's and Kant's activities, a specific notion of the future emerged, according to which humanity does not need supernatural assistance to achieve future goals. The assumption of independence from divine influence in shaping the future cancelled the limits of expectations rooted in traditional theology. This opened a new perspective on the enhancement of human morality, unrestrained by the doctrine of the original sin. Therefore, the secularization of eschatological expectations concerning the future, which may be observed in Kant's philosophy, may be treated as a systematic source of Enlightenment optimism concerning the future. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated, the belief in humanity's capacity for self-determination in shaping its own destiny represents merely one of the factors that can influence the formation of an optimistic worldview. Another significant factor affecting the emergence of optimism is the conviction that – despite the lack of control over the future – the reality is progressing in an optimal direction independently of the influence of individuals⁴. This attitude can be defined as a form of trust in fate, or in other words, as a belief in an order of events that occurs spontaneously in an objectively correct manner.

Let us now undertake a detailed examination of Kant's and Spener's concepts to determine the extent to which their insights influence contemporary thought.

Spener and the Hope for a Better Future

Philipp Jacob Spener is most commonly known as the father of Pietism. Indeed, he made a significant contribution to the establishment of the entire pietist movement, as his ideas became the theoretical basis for the foundation of pietist doctrine. Spener's system is worthy of further consideration for one additional reason. Namely, Spener contributed to the establishment of a novel quality in theology, which also impacted early modern and Enlightenment philosophy. His

¹ If these theories are taken into account, they are usually analyzed to a much lesser extent than Kant's philosophy.

² The method I am referring to involves carefully and systematically reconstructing the thought systems of the authors, who shaped the intellectual landscape from which Kant's system emerged. As for the possible influence of Spener's thought on Kant, it is noticeable to some extent; however, Spener's theology is often reduced to a general understanding of Pietist doctrine (Cf. PASTERNAK, 2014, p. 169 – 170). Any efforts to reconstruct this aspect are worthy of praise. However, it must be emphasized that each Pietist thinker held specific views that are rarely given due consideration and are often summarized too broadly. Therefore, considerations regarding such simplified concepts of pietistic theology do not provide a relevant picture of the complex theological movement we are dealing with when we speak of pietism.

³ In the research paradigm, within which the presented analysis is conducted, Kant's system is considered historical philosophical theory developed over several decades without any claim to complete coherence, which is why a philosophical analysis of Kant's thought is not a final exegesis, but rather a reconstruction of Kant's general position in light of what can be historically established.

⁴ This is a thesis that may not be irrefutable to researchers of Kant's thought. Dennis Vanden Auweele is a case in point. In his monograph *Pessimism in Kant's Ethics and Rational Religion*, he shows that Kant's views need not be interpreted as optimistic. (Cf. AUWEELE, 2018). However, my aim is to look at Kant's through the prism of the Enlightenment, which was characterized by a particular enthusiasm for the prospect of influencing reality.

theology was distinguished by an exceptional sophistication in addressing anthropological questions, which enabled him to elevate theological reflection to a level at which practical philosophy could readily engage with dogmatic issues. This process can be identified with the overcoming of the so-called metaphysical indeterminacy (CRISP, 2014, p. 81).

Spener's views on the future integrate several systematic elements. First, Spener held the conviction that the potential for individual moral advancement was a real possibility. The enhancement of human nature occurs in individual cases and is enabled by the event called "Wiedergeburt" – literally "rebirth" – which means "renewal". The concept of Renewal, also known as regeneration or restoration in theology, was not initially developed by Spener; it was already present in earlier theological theories for example in the thought of Martin Luther or in the Arminian theology. However, Spener proceeded to elucidate the central tenet of his system and subjected it to a meticulous analysis. In essence, for Spener, renewal signifies an instantaneous transition of an individual from the state of corruption caused by the original sin to an entirely new condition, which he designated as the state of a new human being. In his *Pia Desideria* Spener presented the famous sentence⁵:

I will refrain from commenting on the other remarks made in the sermons. However, I consider this to be the most significant aspect, as the essence of Christianity lies in the inner or new human being, whose soul is characterized by faith and whose actions are guided by the fruits of this faith, which manifest as the fruits of life. It is, therefore, evident that the overarching objective of the sermons should be to achieve this outcome (SPENER, 2005, p. 162).

The transformation into a new human being was one of the most important elements of Spener's theology. The transition was posited to occur as a result of divine grace and to entail a complete reconfiguration of the cognitive and volitional structures of the human being. The character of this transformation is so all-encompassing that, according to Spener, the affected individuals literally become "new men". The consequences of original sin were partially negated, resulting in a partial restoration of both their condition and volition to their original state. As a result, the individuals who have undergone this transformation are able to comprehend the necessity of following the divine rules and develop the subjective desire to do so. Consequently, the range of decision options to which the will may be voluntarily directed is radically expanded.

In contrast to those who have not yet undergone the renewal process, the individuals who have been reborn are able to not only desire what is sinful but also to voluntarily strive for what is good. Nevertheless, they are not compelled to do so. They are able to choose freely between obedience and disobedience towards divine rules. In contrast to the reborn individuals, the volition of those who had not yet experienced renewal was consistently oriented towards sinful options due to the corruption of their nature by original sin. The doctrine of renewal was a systematic basis for Spener to develop the thesis about human freedom. According to Spener, the reborn human individuals can be acknowledged as free, since they can make their decisions completely indeterminately and independently of all external factors. It is precisely on this point that the high degree of innovation of Spener's system within the spectrum of theological theories of Lutheran provenance can be clearly seen: Luther's claim that man's free will is dead lost its validity in the face of Spener's interpretation of the doctrine of renewal.

⁵ Self-translation. The original text is as follows: "Was ein und andere anmerckungen sonsten sind / die bey den Predigten zu beobachten / übergehe hier gern. Das vornehmste aber achte ich dieses zu seyn / weil ja unser gantztes Christenthum bestehet in dem innern oder neuen menschen / dessen Seele der Glaube und seine würckungen die fruchten deß lebens sind: Daß dann die Predigten insgesampt dahin gerichtet solten werden" (SPENER, 2005, p. 162).

Consequently, Spener's conviction regarding the potential for individual moral advancement also encompassed the possibility of collective human progress. His views are most clearly exemplified by the title of one of his works, *Hoffnung besserer Zeiten*, which translates literally as *The Hope for the Better Times* (SPENER, 2001). It is not without reason that Spener uses terms such as "*Hoffnung*" ("hope") or "*Pia desideria*" ("pious wishes"), which suggest that success in improving the state of reality does not depend solely on man. Spener's principal objective was to elucidate the manner in which individuals might transcend their baser instincts in order to approximate a pious ideal to the greatest extent possible during their earthly existence. He held the conviction that the restoration of the dispositions of human nature corrupted by original sin in individual cases would enhance the general situation of all humanity. The collective moral progress of humankind would result in a state that is as similar as possible to that of the eternal Kingdom of God. In this regard, Spener's exhortation to believers to engage actively in the improvement of reality represents one of the most distinctive elements of his theology. The individuals had the real potential to influence the future.

However, Spener's vision of the future was not as straightforward as it may appear. Despite the assumption that individuals could influence the shape of the future world, Spener was convinced that the biblical vision of the approaching apocalypse could come true at any time. A number of passages in his works allow us to assume that he held a strong conviction that the era in which he lived may be the last. For example, he presented an intriguing interpretation of the Book of Revelation in his treatise *Muhammedismus in angelis Euphrataeis S. Johanni Apocal. IX. v. XIII. & seq. praemonstratus* (SPENER, 1664)⁶. It is surprising that Spener believed that individuals were in a position to influence the future, given his deep conviction about the possibly approaching apocalypse and the necessity of submitting to God's grace. It appears that there is a certain discrepancy in Spener's views on the future. On the one hand, he asserted that individuals could play an active role in improving the world. On the other hand, his theological views on the apocalypse implied that the fate of humanity depended largely on God.

What initially may appear to be a systematic contradiction in Spener's system of thought is, in fact, not an inconsistency at all. In order to ascertain the coherence of Spener's beliefs, it is essential to consider them from the perspective of contemporary modes of thought, which diverge considerably from the understanding of reality prevailing in the early modern and enlightenment epoch. A distinctive feature of Spener's perspective is its synthesis of the belief in the human capacity to shape future outcomes with the assertion that divine agency exerts a significant influence on these developments. This conviction in the capacity of humans to influence reality while acknowledging the role of a higher power led to the conclusion that, while humans should strive to shape the world, they are not the sole determinant of its form. The realization that despite their endeavors, they would not be the ones to determine the ultimate shape of the future remained an element present in Spener's thought but no longer a tenet of Kantian philosophy.

Kant and the Demythologization of Christian Anthropology

A direct comparison of the views of Spener and Kant reveals the emergence of a new element in philosophy over several decades: the idea of a possibility that the future may be solely deter-

⁶This is admittedly a very early text, but there is evidence that Spener already during his early activity represented views on freedom that are similar to those he put forward in his later writings. He presents such views for example in his *Dissertatio de Conformatione creaturae rationalis ad Creatorem* of 1653.

mined by humans. The idea was innovative in Kant's time because it offered an alternative to the previously dominant vision of the future, in which humanity had limited control over events because the future was largely determined by divine will. Spener's assumption of the possibility of moral progress can be said to have formed the basis of Kant's own thesis. Kant correctly identified that Spener, like himself, espoused the belief in the possibility of moral advancement. In *The Conflict of the Faculties*, Kant explicitly referenced Spener's concept of renewal.

The problem (which the valiant Spener called out fervently to all ecclesiastical teachers) is this: the aim of religious instruction must be to make us other men and not merely better men (as if we were already good but only negligent about the degree of our goodness). This thesis was thrown in the path of the orthodox (a not inappropriate name), who hold that the way to become pleasing to God consists in believing pure revealed doctrine and observing the practices prescribed by the church (prayer, churchgoing, and the sacraments) to which they add the requirement of honorable conduct (mixed, admittedly, with transgressions, but these can always be made good by faith and the rites prescribed). The problem, therefore, has a solid basis in reason. (SE, 7:54)

As can be observed, Kant's stance on this matter is not entirely uncritical. His criticism was fundamentally directed against Spener's claim that the character of an individual's transformation from the state of the corrupted nature to the state of a new human being is supernatural or must be recognized as a "miracle". The very element in Spener's system that triggered Kant's criticism was thus the claim about human beings' dependence on divine support in the face of their moral progress. Kant's position was that individuals are capable of attaining moral perfection independently, given that the capacity to do so is inherent in their rationality and can be fully explained within the framework of the normative nature of moral laws.

Kant says the following:

But the solution turns out to be completely mystical, as one might expect from supernaturalism in principles of religion; for, according to it, the original, incorruptible moral predisposition in man's nature, though supersensible, is still to be called flesh because its effect is not supernatural as well; only if spirit (God) were the direct cause of man's improvement would this effect be a supernatural one. So man, being by nature dead in sin, cannot hope to improve by his own powers, not even by his moral predisposition. (SE, 7:54)

When viewed through the prism of early modern soteriological theories, it may be seen that Kant believed that humanity possessed some capacity to conquer evil without reliance on supernatural assistance. The theological narrative that people can aspire to goodness, but always require divine intervention to really achieve it, was problematic for Kant, since it implied an assumption of an irremovable passivity of humanity in its quest to improve its moral condition

This is a thesis that is certainly worth pausing over, as it may raise some objections.⁷ Firstly, Kant did not claim directly that people's capacity for moral goodness implies that they will certainly act morally. Similarly, it does not follow that the propensity to do evil can suddenly be eradicated from human nature. Furthermore, Kant drew attention to the collective dimension of human activity, which conditions the emergence of space for morally good actions: Although each individual independently engages in moral reflection and makes individual decisions, Kant is also aware that the collective aspect plays a certain role in the process of moral progress.

⁷ As Pasternack points out, this is a question in Kant's philosophy that is difficult to resolve unequivocally. Pasternack says: "(...) in Religion this particular need for Divine assistance is removed. With the introduction of the Change of Heart, we do not need to be forgiven for falling short of a standard that cannot possibly be realized, for it is a standard that is actually within our reach. Nevertheless, this does not preclude some other necessary role for Divine aid. But unfortunately, the text is notoriously unclear on this point, with various passages conveying different views as to whether it is still in some way necessary, or whether we can accomplish the Change of Heart fully on our own" (PASTERNAK, 2014, p. 144).

Nevertheless, Kant argues that it is unjustified to expect individuals to act in the right way if they are not capable of doing so unassisted – in this point his views are completely contrary to what theological theories have claimed, regardless of the assumed degree of human capabilities in a soteriological perspective in those theories. Moreover, for Kant the belief that evil can be possibly overcome justifies the principle found in Christian moral teaching: the fact that God requires humanity to be good implies that humanity must be capable of this. It is groundless to require of someone something that is beyond their capacity.

In *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, Kant says the following:

For, in spite of that fall, the command that we ought to become better human beings still resounds unabated in our souls; consequently, we must also be capable of it, even if what we can do is of itself insufficient and, by virtue of it, we only make ourselves receptive to a higher assistance inscrutable to us (RGV, 6:45).

The revolutionary nature of Kant's statement can easily be overlooked if the exact context in which he presents his statement is not taken into account. It is significant, that Kant does not utter these words only in the general context of his reflections on religion, but that this is one of the few places in his writings where he refers to a specific theological concept. Since Kant formulated his views in the context of Lutheran theological tradition, particularly Pietist theology, he was responding to the long-standing theological heritage of viewing human autonomy in doing good as being extremely limited by the necessity of God's support. It is precisely the context that is crucial to fully appreciate the uniqueness of Kant's thesis, and it should not be overlooked when analyzing the quoted passage.⁸

It is not without significance that Kant utters these words in relation to the problem of theodicy, directly referring to the legacy of Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz. In doing so, Kant touches upon the very core of the problem of world's dependence on God's will. However, the view presented in the quoted passage changes radically over the next thirty years (Cf. KROUGLOV, 2018). Kant distanced himself from a way of perceiving reality, in which man is treated merely as an element of created reality, and eventually attributed to man some power to shape that reality. It is also evident that, as time passed, Kant's approach to articulating the question of religious matters underwent a shift and the image Kant presents in his later reflections is already different.⁹

In order to understand the idea of demythologizing Christianity in Kant's thought, one must pay attention to one more key aspect. Kant perceives the idea of God in a completely innovative way, treating it as an inherent element of a philosophical system (Cf. THEIS, 1994). The concept of God is therefore not the dogmatically determined foundation on which the system is built, but is itself part of that system (see THEIS, 1994, p. 323).¹⁰ This may be one of the reasons,

⁸In this context, interesting perspectives are provided by recent monographs entitled: *Religionsphilosophie nach Kant: Im Angesicht des Bösen* edited by M. Kühnlein and *Kants Theorie des Bösen im Kontext* edited by G. Sans and T. Hanke (Cf. KÜHNLEIN, 2023; HANKE, 2024).

⁹Not only did the position of man come to the fore, but also the very concept of God evolved: It developed from the idea of a real entity – which Kant discussed treating Wolff's metaphysics and Newton's physics as his point of reference – to the regulative idea (Cf. THEIS, 1994, p. 33– 34; p. 325).

¹⁰At this point, it is worth quoting Theis directly: "Unsere gesamte Rekonstruktion der Entwicklung von Kants theologischem Denken orientierte sich am Gedanken einer Konsistenz bzw. Harmonie zwischen verschiedenen Diskursebenen innerhalb eines philosophischen Gesamtprojektes. Dieser Grundgedanke war zunächst als ein Postulat verstanden oder gedeutet worden, nämlich derart, daß ein philosophischer Diskurs seiner Idee nach konsistent sein soll. Unsere These lautete, daß bei Kant der theologische Diskurs ein Teil eines philosophischen Gesamtprojektes ist und daß er demzufolge nicht unabhängig von diesem funktioniert"

why Kant's understanding of God and of matters of faith in general may sometimes appear to be inconsistent with Christian dogma – however, Christian dogma did not have the same systematic importance for Kant as it did for earlier thinkers. It is not difficult to see that Kant's view of man's position in the world, but also his way of expressing himself on the truths of the Christian faith, begins to deviate significantly from the paradigm dominant in Christianity. It can, therefore, be reasonably assumed that Kant presented already views one could consider secularized – even if religious matters still remained an important subject of his reflections. The use of the term “secularized” seems appropriate in this particular sense, as Kant's perspective on issues of faith is not dictated by any ecclesiastical authorities; rather, it emanates from Kant's aspiration to preserve the coherence of his own philosophic system.¹¹

Despite the differences between Kant's and Spener's views, it is difficult to deny that both thinkers were convinced of the real possibility of individuals' moral progress. It is, therefore, pertinent to inquire about the implications of Kant's assumption that the future is solely within the control of humanity and should not be treated as a subject of divine influence. In other words, what were the consequences of Kant's secularized view on the possibility of future improvement?

Kant's Secularized View and its Consequences

The initial consequence is a particularly straightforward implication. Kant's concept of moral progress for individuals excludes the assumption about the remaining traces of the original sin in human nature, which was a common viewpoint among theologians. For Spener, the concept of renewal does not imply the complete eradication of the corruption of human nature resulting from original sin; rather, it entails a state of equilibrium. Unlike Spener, Kant did not believe in the concept of original sin in the traditional theological sense: his understanding of moral progress was that it involved the ultimate elimination of evil in human nature, which occurs only as a result of an individual's decision to consistently respect the moral law. Consequently, Kant's perspective is more optimistic than Spener's, who considered it implausible to eradicate the vestiges of original sin in earthly life (SZYRWIŃSKA-HÖRIG, 2024, p. 44–46).¹²

The second consequence of the secularized view on the future is that the considerations re-

(THEIS, 1994, p. 323). The distinction between the theological and secular perceptions of religion should however not be confused with Kant's own distinction between historical faith and a purely rational religious system.

¹¹ At first glance, Kant's views seem to be completely immersed in a religious context.: Kant speaks of the existence of God and the significance of establishing the Church. One can even point to interpretations that equate Kant's concept of the church with his idea of kingdom of ends (see ex. PALMQUIST, 1994, p. 426). However, in a historical context, his way of expressing himself on theological figures is a milestone. It suffices to look at his claims through the prism of the philosophical reflections of German thinkers – not to mention theological theories – in the 17th century to see that Kant represents a qualitatively different view of religion than his predecessors, ex. Christian Wolff and Christian August Crusius. Kant decisively rejects a certain paradigm, still derived from scholastic philosophy, of speaking about religious categories in a manner consistent with doctrine, and begins to speak about them in a completely independent manner. As previously mentioned, religious concepts are an element of the system for Kant, not a doctrinally defined external reference point. The consideration (or lack thereof) of this distinction by contemporary commentators on Kant influences their interpretation of his thought. For example, it is worth comparing the different views on Kant's ethics presented by J. B. Schneewind and J. Hare. Although Hare accuses Schneewind of misinterpretation, Schneewind analyses Kant's thought from a different perspective. While Hare makes operational comparisons between Kant's thought and that of earlier philosophers, showing how their theories relate to each other, Schneewind considers both changes in Kant's thought over time and changes in the paradigm that occurred in his philosophy. (Cf. HARE, 2000, p. 463; SCHNEEWIND, 1997, p. 512-513).

¹² It should not be forgotten that Spener, although he made significant modifications to Luther's theology, professed the characteristic Lutheran belief in the inability of humans to improve their condition without God's help.

garding the ideal future state in Kant's philosophy have shifted from the theological dimension to the political, which may be observed for example in his theory of peacemaking (Cf. PALMQUIST, 1994, p. 422). If one considers that the earlier theories of peace were invariably inextricably linked with the examination of the legitimacy of certain religious beliefs and the debate concerning their dissemination, the innovative nature of Kant's project of perpetual peace becomes evident. Although Kant speculated about the enhancement of individual moral condition, his vision of the future does not contain any kind of practical advice on what exactly individuals should or could do in their daily lives in order to experience their moral metamorphosis. His remarks on the positive transformation of the basis on which individuals accept maxims are very abstract in nature and cannot be considered as pragmatic advice (RGV, 6:44–53). Instead, Kant developed the concept of perpetual peace, which had an entirely different character than Spener's instructions concerning the individual strategies to contribute to the enhancement of the future world. Therefore, it is legitimate to argue that the overarching Kantian project of future improvement was primarily concerned with the problem of governing social and political reality, with relatively little attention paid to the pragmatic dimension of pursuing individual moral progress. At this point, it becomes evident that there is a significant discrepancy between Spener's notion of the strategies for the enhancement of the future, which was predicated on the individual moral progress contributing to the betterment of life for the entire human race, and Kant's assertion that the formulation of general rules on the political level represents the optimal means of achieving the ideal future state in which the entire human race could flourish. Although Kant does not explicitly state this, there are a number of reasons to believe that his project for perpetual peace was influenced by his secularized anthropological notion. One particularly notable assumption is Kant's treatise entitled *Toward Perpetual Peace*, about which one may legitimately assume that it is rooted in his secularized view of the possibility of individual moral progress excluding the support of a higher power. In essence, Kant was convinced of the ultimate sustainability of peace. It is crucial to emphasize that Kant's concept of peace was not merely a temporary cessation of military hostilities; rather, it encompassed the absence of any potential for conflict to arise. Kant spoke in a tone that suggests that it is possible to achieve a state of peace that is permanent in nature. Interestingly, he suggests that one of the conditions for bringing about peace is the abolition of armies. This refers to the so-called third article of the Preliminaries, which begins with the words:

Standing armies (*miles perpetuus*) shall gradually be abolished entirely for they continually threaten other states with war by their willingness to appear equipped for it at all times. They prompt other states to outclass each other in the number of those armed for battle, a number that knows no limits. And since the costs associated with maintaining peace will in this way become more oppressive than a brief war, these armies themselves become the cause of offensive wars, carried out in order to diminish this burden (VAZeF, 08:345).

This is one of the numerous conditions for perpetual peace presented by Kant, which is, however, of a unique nature. It suggests that the mere removal of the potential for military operations could indeed contribute to the extinction of conflicts. While the abolition of armies is a necessary first step on the path to achieving perpetual peace, Kant's premise is based on the thesis that the source of conflict can be extinguished. Such an assumption is systematically incompatible with the classical theological doctrine of original sin. The classical dogma of original sin posits that the fallen nature of humankind is a source of potential conflict that cannot be rectified. This can be observed in the theology of Spener, who claimed that even the nature of the reborn individuals was, to some extent, influenced by the original sin. As long as the effects of the original

sin – commonly referred to as “maliciousness” – remain within the nature of human beings, the potential for conflict will persist. From this perspective, even the complete abolition of all military forces, whose existence could be perceived as a threat to others, does not necessarily eliminate the underlying causes of this potential hostility. An interesting point emerges here: if Kant did not deny the classical theological view on human nature, which implies the impossibility of liberating humanity from the consequences of original sin, he would not be able to assume the possibility of achieving sustainable peace as the potential source of the possible conflicts among people would never be eliminated.

It is crucial to emphasize that this is an aspect of Kant’s thought that is most clearly evident in the analysis of Kant’s philosophy in relation to the historical context of its emergence. The fact that Kant even reflects on the potential possibility of permanently extinguishing conflicts appears to be unique in comparison with earlier theories of peace, which focused on introducing harmony between warring parties but presented a pessimistic view on the elimination of the foundations of conflict inherent in human nature, whether original sin or religious differences.

Spener’s and Kant’s Notions of Optimism

The differences between Kant’s and Spener’s versions of optimism become apparent when one looks at their views on optimal strategies for preparing for the future. Spener urged believers to embrace conversion and atonement, which he believed would signal to God that they were prepared for renewal. With divine assistance, they could undergo a moral transformation, and as the number of those who had been reborn increased, the entire human race would begin to resemble the Kingdom of God. This condition could potentially be interrupted by the apocalypse, about which Spener was convinced it was approaching. Nevertheless, even if God decided to induce the apocalypse, the efforts of humankind would not have been in vain. The pursuit of renewal and the endeavor to align the terrestrial realm with the Kingdom of God represented the optimal and sole means by which humankind could prepare for the future. Spener’s views were thus a synthesis of optimism and belief about the possibility of progress on the one hand and humility regarding the independent decisions of God on the other.

In Kant’s philosophy, the theologically determined idea of necessary subordination towards God has been superseded by a strong emphasis on pragmatism. Kant believed that humanity has great autonomy and self-governance over its reality. While he did not exclude the possibility of divine intervention, he did not consider it as a factor that should be taken into account in the rational analysis of the current state of affairs or the design of the future. This is because, as has already been emphasized, Kant assumes that if it is reasonable to expect humanity to become morally better, then this must be achievable for humanity (RGV, 6:45). Even if divine intervention was possible, Kant maintained that humanity should be responsible for the future as if everything depended solely on its own decisions (Cf. ex. RGV, 6:28–32; 40–41).

A further notable divergence between Spener’s and Kant’s perspectives on the enhancement of the future pertains to the potential for radical transformations in human nature. Both authors were convinced of the capacity of humans to undergo positive transformation. Spener advanced a theological concept of spiritual renewal, which constituted the focal point of his theological thought. Similarly, Kant believed that humanity should be acknowledged as capable of struggling against the evil inherent in its nature without the assistance of supernatural means. The

divergence between the two authors' perspectives on the permanence of this overcoming of evil was a significant point of contention. Spener was faithful to the Christian doctrine and believed that the effects of original sin on human nature could never be completely eradicated. Instead, he argued that they could only be mitigated through divine grace. Kant, however, was much more radical in his views, proposing that the individual could overcome the evil in their nature by making a conscious and voluntary decision to act consistently according to morally good maxims (RGV, 6:44–53). Although Kant does not rule out the possibility of God's support in doing good, he takes a revolutionary step by creating space for discourse that does not take this help into account.

The differences between the versions of optimism that characterize the thoughts of both authors are becoming apparent. Spener's optimism is distinguished by a certain degree of moderation with regard to both the capacity of individuals to act independently in shaping the future and the potential for radical moral improvement. Although such an improvement is a possibility and should be striven for, people remain highly dependent on divine grace. Similarly, all efforts to shape the future for the better should, according to Spener, proceed with the understanding that the ultimate outcome of the future is not under the control of human beings but is instead a matter of divine determination. These beliefs imbued Spener's perspectives with a notable moderation, a quality that stands in stark contrast to the more radical stance observed in Kant. Kant allowed for the possibility that humanity may be solely responsible for shaping its own destiny – people's decisions should be made with the awareness that they influence the shape of reality, rather than merely cooperating with divine intervention. Similarly, he held the view that the individuals were capable of overcoming the evil within themselves.¹³

In Kant's thought, a significant development was made: the assumption dominating over centuries that humankind is dependent on God was treated as unobvious. In Kant's philosophy, the concept of future thinking underwent transformation, evolving from a contemplative exercise to a pragmatic design for a better world that was devoid of its traditional sacred dimension. The vision of the apocalypse has been superseded by a vision of a better tomorrow. Similarly, the millenarian expectation of the *Second Coming* has become an expectation of the advent of an era of a better life. The process of humanity's emancipation from a higher power, symbolized by God, can be viewed as an exemplification of the Enlightenment ideology, which underscored the intrinsic potential of human nature. Consequently, the secularization of future perspectives can be regarded as an indicator of progress in human thought and, as Kant himself asserted, liberation from "self-incurred immaturity" (WA, 8: 35).¹⁴

In order to identify the conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of historical theories which could be of benefit in the modern world, two key issues require consideration. The initial issue for consideration is that of modern optimism, or more specifically, the question of whe-

¹³This becomes clear when we examine Kant's erroneous criticism of Spener's idea more closely. A thorough analysis of this issue is required, but briefly, it can be presented as follows: Kant believed that, according to Spener, humanity would overcome evil through renewal ("Wiedergeburt"). However, he criticized the fact that, according to Spener, Renewal could only take place through divine intervention. Therefore, Kant believed that improving the moral condition must depend on human beings themselves. However, he did not take into account that, for Spener, Renewal did not signify the total eradication of evil. By misunderstanding Spener's idea, Kant revealed his own views on the possibility of overcoming evil in human nature.

¹⁴When speaking about progress, it is not my intention to suggest that secularized views are inherently superior to those shaped by religious convictions. Rather, I am simply emphasizing the changes that have occurred within the field of philosophy, without making any evaluative judgements.

ther contemporary society shares the view held by Kant and Spener that the future of humanity will be better and that some enhancement of human nature may take place. The second issue pertains to the question of the sense of independence from external factors that accompanies individuals in their daily lives. It is about the extent to which people feel able to plan and shape their own future. By examining these two issues, we can attempt to ascertain whether, in relation to them, we can speak of a modern inheritance of the way of thinking that was present in the thought of Spener and Kant. We may, therefore, consider whether the contemporary perception of the world corresponds more closely to the thought of Spener or Kant.

The Contemporary Form of Optimism

Historical analysis provides a valuable opportunity to challenge past theoretical perspectives with contemporary thinking. All the more so when reflecting on optimism since contemporaries – just as before – look to the future with certain expectations, hopes and fears. However, it is difficult to give a clear answer to the question of the determining factor of their worldview. Therefore, in order to gain an insight into the nature of modern optimism¹⁵, let us take a look at the question of modern optimism and compare it with the optimism that characterized the thinking of Kant and Spener.

When trying to answer whether contemporary thinking about the future is characterized by optimism, a certain ambivalence emerges at first glance. On the one hand, we like to think of ourselves as the successors of the Enlightenment. Its demands for rationality, a universal system of knowledge and communication as a means of exchanging information are very close to our own. Like the Enlightenment, we seek to combat superstition and irrational prejudice. A common approach to religiosity is a compromise between faith and rationality. All these features seem to indicate that, as in the Enlightenment, we should believe in progress and in the possibility of shaping reality for the better in the modern age. Plenty of evidence suggests that we have every reason to be optimistic about the future. Particularly significant here is the recognition of the developments in technology and science that are opening up perspectives for dealing effectively with problems that have posed real challenges in the past. We are aware that science and technology are continuing to develop, giving hope that the methods of dealing with problems will become increasingly effective in the future.

At the same time, however, an optimistic view of the future is not definite. There is no denying that the current sense of being able to have a positive impact on the future is accompanied by a certain fear of the dangers that the future may bring. At this point, it is sufficient to mention three such threats that are predominant. The first is climate change, the second is the prospect of epidemics, and the third is the potential for the outbreak of war. It is worth noting that none of these is in itself new: wars and epidemics have occurred in the past, and the vision of ecological catastrophe due to climate change and pollution has been developing over decades. Nevertheless, it is evident that the past few years have served as a stark reminder to individuals across the globe that these perils are not merely hypothetical but rather have the tangible capacity to impact us. It becomes evident that the discussion about the aforementioned threats does not con-

¹⁵I use the term “modern optimism” to refer to a number of observations concerning the modern perception of reality which have been made in recent years, ex. in Josef Römel’s article “Zwischen medizinischem Optimismus, sozialer Distanzierung und religiöser Lebenshilfe”. Earlier, Oskar Pfister also provided interesting comments on optimism and the sense of having an impact on reality in his article *Die Rolle des Unbewussten im philosophischen Denken*.

cern merely potential possibilities; rather, it encompasses options that could materialize in the near future and whose effects will directly affect the contemporary, as well as future generations. As a result, a heightened sense of insecurity is evident. Furthermore, it is notable that these threats manifest themselves in diverse dimensions of reality. For instance, while an epidemic is a purely biological phenomenon, the outbreak of war is already an event that can be considered from a political and ethical perspective. This illustrates that the dangers we currently perceive have their roots in both the natural world and human nature.

It can, therefore, be argued that the optimism characterizing contemporary thinking stems from the belief that individuals have the ability to modify their situation according to their own preferences. The belief that people can actively change their future makes them optimistic that this future will be better. However, this is not an unconditional form of optimism. The dominant mood of our era is namely that of decline, which serves as a counterweight to the sense of optimism. This observation justifies the thesis that current pessimism has its genesis in a pervasive sense of the lack of control over various dimensions of reality that may be perceived as threatening. Despite technological advancement, it is not feasible to circumvent the risks associated with biological processes. Similarly, it seems that the moral and social values espoused are not sufficiently universal to avert potential political and military conflicts.

Nevertheless, an examination of the ideas put forth by Spener and Kant reveals that both thinkers also did not assume the complete independence of humanity in planning the future. In Spener's system, God was the primary determinant of the future world. Spener's system advocated concern for the future yet simultaneously asserted that the ultimate form of reality was contingent upon divine intervention. Kant's thought diverges from this perspective. He posited the autonomy of humans from supernatural influences, ascribing to them a markedly elevated degree of autonomy in the shaping of the future in comparison to Spener's perspective. Kant held the view that individuals are capable of independently influencing their moral development and even overcoming the morally negative aspects of their nature. This conviction also determined his views on progress in interpersonal reality. Kant postulated using the potential for the shaping of the social and political dimensions of life, as well as the establishment of a permanent state of peace on Earth. The significance of this move is difficult to overstate; one might even suggest that Kant liberated eschatology from its temporal religious context. Nevertheless, even Kant assumed that the future of humanity is not solely within the power of humankind to determine since progress does not occur randomly but takes place within some concrete boundaries. In Kant's writings, there are passages that posit the idea that nature and history, understood as a development of reason, is the driving force behind human actions, carrying out its plan, for example:

All of creature's natural predispositions are destined eventually to develop fully and in accordance with their purpose (IaG, 8:18).

In the human being [...] those natural predispositions aimed at the use of its reason are to be developed in full only in the species, but not in the individual (IaG, 8:18).

And thus is the outcome of an attempt to write, through philosophy, the most ancient part of human history: satisfaction with providence and the course of human events as a whole, a course which does not progress, beginning with good, toward evil, but rather develops gradually from worse to better. Everyone is called upon by nature itself to contribute, to the best of his ability, his part of this progress. (MAM, 8:123).

Kant was persuaded that human experience was an integral aspect of a universal historical process. This prompted him to ask the question of the meaning that accompanies history. On

an initial observation, the history of humankind is defined by a multitude of violent and immoral occurrences, including armed conflicts. Nevertheless, Kant maintained that it is worthwhile considering the possibility of an overarching objective towards which history is progressing. Kant thus concluded that in the life of individuals, as well as in the life of humanity as a whole, reason comes to the fore and constitutes the ultimate goal towards which everything strives. It is precisely the thesis of the development of reason and the strengthening of the position of reason in the world that can be taken as the teleological context for Kant's considerations. Therefore, according to Kant, despite humanity's control of reality, all human activity is part of a certain purposeful order. It can be argued that Kant's belief in the purposefulness of nature and history acts as a moderating factor of human freedom. Nevertheless, Kantian teleology allows for a considerable scope for human spontaneity. This represents an expression of the Enlightenment belief that progress is not accidental but rational and, therefore, a positive phenomenon.

Optimism Between Control and Trust

It is interesting to note that, looking at the views of people living in the present, it can be concluded that it is the sense of the loss of control over reality and the presence of uncontrollable factors that prevent the development of an optimistic attitude¹⁶. As has been demonstrated, epidemics, wars, and the dangers of a worsening climate are examples of factors that present a problem for an optimistic approach to life. All these phenomena are uncontrollable and cannot be considered with certainty to be avoidable. In order to comprehend the genesis of optimism, it is however important to make the distinction between exerting control over reality and the conviction that, despite the absence or strong limitation of control, events are progressing in the objectively most favorable manner. This disposition can be designated as trust in fate.

The differentiation between control and trust appears to be crucial in the context of investigating the source of optimistic beliefs. All indicates that it is not only a sense of control over reality that is the source of optimism but rather a kind of belief that events will unfold in a favorable way whether or not they correspond to the plans of individuals. It is important to note that the two factors of the sense of control over reality and belief in fate are not mutually exclusive; they do not necessarily condition each other. It is evident that the sense of control may coexist with trust in fate; however, this is not a prerequisite. Furthermore, there is some indication that belief is a more important factor than a sense of control in the formation of an optimistic attitude. The sense of control can be a contributing factor to optimism; however, it is trust in fate that is a necessary condition for its formation. The mere presence of the conviction that the world is heading in the right direction, even if only in spite of human influences, is sufficient for an optimistic view of the future. Nevertheless, the sense of control over reality devoid of faith in fate can invariably be accompanied by a pessimistic apprehension that this control may be misused, resulting in regression.

These theses are confirmed by the observations of modern researchers. Modern theories also deal with the theme of belief that the future will bring the expected positive events, but they do not speak of "trust in fate", but rather of "hope". It can be seen, however, that modern authors identify precisely with the concept of "hope" the potential of the individual to develop the conviction that the future with a certain probability will bring the expected positive events.

¹⁶Josef Römelt, for example, pointed out that an optimistic attitude could be at risk (RÖMELT, 2022, p. 33).

However, in the contemporary discourses the very concept of “hope” has different meanings. For example, Adrienne Martin distinguishes between hope understood “as a combination of the desire for an outcome and the belief that the outcome is possible but not certain” and the second type of hope, which she describes as “hope against hope”. The latter type she describes as “hoping for an outcome that one highly values but believes is extremely unlikely” (MARTIN, 2014, p. 5). The important point is that both types of hope assume the impossibility of the individual to completely influence the shape of future events, while at the same time assuming that the individual believes that the future can bring what he or she expects, however improbable it may be. It is precisely the inability to control future events that is the condition for the subject to develop hope. Philip Pettit, in turn, emphasized the relationship between hope and the awareness of one’s own limited possibilities in influencing future events:

To hope that something is the case or that you can make it the case, then, is to form an overall outlook akin to that which would be appropriate in the event of the hoped-for scenario’s being a firm or good prospect. Where the prospect is manifestly beyond your control, it is to sustain a more or less sanguine set of attitudes and to act on other fronts in the way that such attitudes would prompt. And where the prospect is within your sphere of influence – however improbable it is that the influence will be effective – it is to act as if there were also a good chance of making it come out as you wish. It is to embrace an assumption that gives you heart and life and energy. It is to embrace this assumption, furthermore, even if you happen to wax quite optimistic (PETTIT, 2004, p. 158).

Another important feature of hope emphasized in modern theories also corresponds to the early modern and Enlightenment notion of faith in fate. This is the belief that the future will be better, even if future events do not directly contribute to the personal satisfaction or happiness of the individual. Hope refers to the expectation of positive change in general, rather than the expectation that an individual will be fortunate. This aspect was emphasized by Adam Kadlac, who contrasted the belief in a better future with the individual’s expectation of their own happiness. It is the belief in a better future, not identified with the individual’s desire to achieve happiness, that is said to create the potential for the individual to develop an attitude of hope. Kadlac states: “[...] I want to suggest that the hope for a good future is better suited than the hope for happiness to constitute the general trait of hopefulness” (KADLAC, 2017, p. 213).

Despite the similarities in understanding individual expectations of a positive future, a specific difference between modern and Enlightenment types of such optimism needs to be noted. This is evident when we look at the terminology used by contemporary authors. As can be seen in the quotations, the central term for the expectation of a better future is “hope”. In the article presented here, we did not use the term “hope” but instead referred to “trust”. This is an obvious difference, and there is a good reason for it. This change in terminology is due to the fact that the contemporary considerations are carried out within a context which does not directly refer to the religious sphere. Therefore, the factor of destiny in the eschatological sense does not appear in it. By emphasizing this difference in terminology, it is easier to see that historical expectations of a better future have shown a stronger attachment to the idea that a better future is guaranteed by some external factor – be it God, the natural order of things or the development of reason. Therefore, in the historical context it is much more appropriate to speak of “trust”, because trust refers to an external factor which is a guarantee of the eventual fulfilment of expectations. The use of the term “hope” does not presuppose any such factor. Thus, “hope” refers to a situation in which someone would very much like a certain scenario to come to pass but cannot say that they trust it to happen because they believe in the operation of certain laws. “Hope” is based on

probability, while “trust” is based on confidence in a certain higher order.

It is interesting to note that, as observed in the introduction, there is no empirical evidence to support the belief that the future will be inherently better than the present. Even the scientific evidence of human progress does not provide sufficient grounds for an unquestioning belief in a better future. Therefore, such a belief must have some other basis. In light of the aforementioned observations, it can be concluded that the foundation of an optimistic worldview is not contingent on a reality check or scientific data. Instead, it is shaped by a belief in the potential for a better future, which we defined as trust in fate. The question thus arises as to the source of this trust. On the basis of the analysis presented, it can be concluded that two distinct sources can be identified in early modern and Enlightenment thought. These are the belief in divine providence and the belief in the historical progress of reason.

Concluding Remarks

The aim of this article has been to identify the source of optimism in people’s thinking about the future. It can be seen that this source is to be identified with a worldview that is based on the belief that the future will have the most optimal shape. What appears special, however, is that the belief that the future will be better has a specific basis. It is not an empirical basis, nor is it simply a hope that is combined with a wish for something that may be unattainable. It is much more a belief in a certain factor that ensures that things happen independently of individuals in the most optimal way. This is an interesting observation in the context of one fact. Namely, as we have noted, the time in which Kant and Spener formulated their visions of the future was a period in which there was a kind of liberation of human thinking about the future from religious eschatological tendencies. Kant can be regarded as one of the first thinkers, who attributed such a high degree of autonomy to humanity, that it could be assumed that the future lies in the hands of human beings and not only of God. This was, however, not his arbitrary interpretation of human condition, but rather the result of breaking away from viewing religious issues from a dogmatic perspective and instead placing them on an equal position with other elements of his philosophical system. It was precisely this consideration of God as an integral part of the philosophical system, rather than as an external point of reference against which the system was created, that constituted the most important step in laying the foundations for optimism in Kant’s version.

This observation is noteworthy in that it situates the optimistic worldview on a par with the categories of religious thought. This observation provides insight into the defining characteristics of the Age of Enlightenment. If an optimistic attitude to the future was one of the most characteristic features of the Enlightenment epoch, and if this optimism was based on a belief in a better future that could not be substantiated by any evidence, then it can be concluded that Enlightenment optimism was more ideological than rationally justified. This conclusion may not appear satisfactory in light of the assumption that the Age of Enlightenment was a time in which a rational approach to reality played a special role.

Nevertheless, this fact sheds light on a significant aspect of human nature. It appears that perspectives on the future can evolve independently of the logical indications of the potential trajectory of future events. This phenomenon is worthy of further consideration, particularly in the contemporary era, where the confrontation with cultural and technological changes can evoke

sentiments of both optimism and anxiety. These sentiments may potentially motivate concrete actions that could have profound and sustainable effects for future generations.

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