

“The use of the word ‘nature’ [...] is more befitting the limitations of human reason”: Kant and the semantics of nature

*“O uso da palavra ‘natureza’ [...] é mais adequado aos limites da razão humana”:
Kant e a semântica da natureza*

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Abstract: The paper analyses selected passages from Kant’s critical and pre-critical writings in order to articulate a unified framework that reconciles causal mechanism, divine purposiveness and teleology within the Kantian approach to practical philosophy.

Keywords: freedom; History; human reason; Kant; nature; semantics.

Resumo: O artigo examina trechos selecionados dos escritos críticos e pré-críticos de Kant a fim de promover uma análise unificada capaz de reconciliar mecanismo causal, intencionalidade divina e teleologia no âmbito da abordagem kantiana da filosofia prática.

Palavras-chave: liberdade; História; razão humana; Kant; natureza; semântica.

What is the driving force of human history? Is it the exercise of human freedom – our capacity to set ends according to reason and choose actions as means to achieve them? Or is history driven more by a kind of Newtonian nature – by causal mechanisms that operate independently of human reason or will? A variation of the second answer could be based on Kant’s pre-critical perspective. In his *Universal Natural History and Theory of the Heavens* (1755), Kant argues that God’s goodness and omnipotence are demonstrated not through miracles or supernatural interventions, but rather through the lawful and mechanical order of the natural world¹. Applying this framework to human history suggests that the unfolding of historical events could similarly be understood as part of a larger network of causes and effects, progressing in accordance with a divinely ordained providence. This introduces a problem that goes beyond the classical problem of theodicy, namely the question of how mechanistic explanations of nature can coexist with divine purposiveness and teleology:

In the arrangement of the solar system [...] we have recognized the wisdom of God which has so beneficially ordered everything for the good of the rational beings that inhabit them. However, how can one now reconcile a mechanical doctrine with the teaching of intentions in such a way that what the highest wisdom itself designed has been delegated for implementation to coarse matter and the regiment of providence to nature left to its own devices? [...] Must not the mechanics of all natural motions have an essential tendency to many such consequences that accords with the project of the highest reason in the whole extent of connections? (1:363)

A Newtonian view of nature seems to leave no room for anything resembling a “teleological doctrine of nature” (8:18). A universe operating according to mechanical laws, functioning as a closed and autonomous system, seems to require no divine creator and could, presumably, explain its existence from within itself (LALLA, 2003, 436). The young Kant recognizes this challenge:

The defender of religion is concerned [...] that if natural causes can be discovered for all the order in the universe that can be brought about by the most general and most essential properties of matter, then it is not necessary to invoke a highest governing power (1:223).

Before addressing moral questions concerning divine providence, a theoretical problem inherent to any cosmogony must be resolved. How can an explanation of the universe, based solely on Newton’s mechanical laws, be reconciled with God’s purposeful plans for creation? Furthermore, how might a teleological account of nature be integrated with the natural laws governing our phenomenal world? A critical solution to this problem will be developed in Kant’s mature work. If an appeal to teleology is to be legitimized and made the basis for an account of human history, it could only serve as a heuristic tool or regulative principle, helping to make nature more intelligible to us by satisfying the inevitable striving of human reason for systematic unity and overarching theories. However, a look at Kant’s early writings proves useful for understanding his attribution of purposiveness to nature and his occasional preference for using the term ‘providence’ instead of ‘nature’ in later works.

Let us consider two examples. In the ninth proposition of the pivotal essay *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim* (1784) Kant refers to his view of history as a “justification of nature”, immediately qualifying his choice of terminology with a parenthetical remark:

Such a justification of nature – or better, of providence – is no unimportant motive for choosing a particular viewpoint for considering the world. For what does it help to praise the splendor and wisdom of creation in the nonrational realm of nature, and to recommend it to our consid-

¹ Kant’s writings will be cited below according to the Berlin Academy Edition of Kant’s Collected Works, with volume and page numbers provided. For the English translation see The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Immanuel Kant.

eration, if that part of the great showplace of the highest wisdom that contains the end of all this – the history of humankind – is to remain a ceaseless objection against it, [...] (8:30).

And in *On the Common Saying: This May Be True in Theory, but It Does Not Apply in Practice* (1793), Kant points out that progress in history could not be achieved if nature did not already steer us in a particular direction – or, as Kant puts it, – “force us onto a track we would not readily take of our own accord” (8:310). To convey this idea of enforcement, Kant once again emphasizes that ‘providence’ might be the more appropriate term:

If we [...] ask by what means this unending progress toward the better can be maintained and even accelerated, it is soon seen that this immeasurably distant success will depend not so much upon what we do [...] and by what methods we should proceed in order to bring it about, but instead upon what human nature will do in and with us to force us onto a track we would not readily take of our own accord. For only from nature, or rather from providence (since supreme wisdom is required for the complete fulfillment of this end), can we expect an outcome that is directed to the whole and from it to the parts, [...] (8:310).

Let us explore the context of this remark. In *On the Common Saying* Kant responds to contemporary debates on the possibility of cultural and moral progress. He quotes Moses Mendelssohn, who argued that while individuals may excel and achieve great things, humanity as a whole pays for each advancement with setbacks and regressions. According to Mendelssohn, there is no such thing as species-wide progress in human history. To counter this pessimistic view of humanity’s future, Kant appeals to our duty to contribute to the development and perpetuation of human capacities through education and tradition.

I rest my case on my innate duty, the duty of every member of the series of generations – to which I (as a human being in general) belong and am yet not so good in the moral character required of me as I ought to be and hence could be – so to influence posterity that it becomes always better (the possibility of this must, accordingly, also be assumed), and to do it in such a way that this duty may be legitimately handed down from one member [in the series of] generations to another (8:309).

The clause in parenthesis is essential. Just as each of us has a duty to strive for moral self-perfection, we also have a duty to assist future generations in developing their rational and moral faculties through education and critical self-reflection. Since it is both pointless and normatively ineffective to impose a duty without a corresponding ability in those obligated, we must assume that moral cultivation and improvement over time are indeed possible. Ought implies can. This principle is well known from Kant’s critical works. When applied to an individual’s moral character, Kant emphasizes that no matter how evil a person’s past actions may have been,

his duty to better himself was not only a duty in the past; it remains his duty now. Therefore, he must be capable of it, and if he fails to act accordingly, he is, at the moment of action, just as accountable and stands just as condemned as if [...] he had only just fallen from innocence into evil (6:41).

A pessimistic view of past moral progress does not absolve us from the duty to improve ourselves or to do our best for the moral education of young people. Instead, the burden of proof shifts: to argue that historical progress is impossible, Mendelssohn would need to present compelling reasons to challenge a fundamental principle of deontic logic.

After having argued his thesis regarding historical progress, Kant asks “by which means” progress is maintained and accelerated (8:310). His claim that progress in historical development relies less on our actions and deliberate choices and more on what human nature does “in and with us” (*ibid.*) ties back to Kant’s early cosmopolitan view, according to which only a federation of states with coercive powers to enforce its laws can enable humanity to fulfill its rational and

moral capacities.

In the introductory remarks to the *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan aim*, Kant acknowledges that humanity's "doings and refrainings on the great stage of the world" (8:17) appear to defy rational meaning. As the "collective result of people's free actions" (WOOD, 2009, p. 112), history seems to lack any discernible order or direction. However, Kant contends that there is a way to render "this nonsensical course of things human" (8:18) theoretically intelligible: we must try to understand human history as being guided by an "aim of nature" <*Naturabsicht*> (8:17). Nature has not only endowed us with predispositions for the use of reason but also guides their development in a teleological process, using specific means to achieve its end.

In the fourth proposition of the *Idea for a Universal History*, Kant maintains that progress in human history is partially driven by social antagonism, which he calls the "unsocial sociability" <*ungesellige Geselligkeit*> of men. While we have a "propensity to enter into society," we also possess a "thoroughgoing resistance" to socializing with others, making us prone to isolating ourselves and tearing society apart (8:20). Although Kant does not use the exact expression, this combination of opposing character traits has been aptly termed "the cunning of nature", alluding to Hegel's doctrine of "the cunning of reason" (YOVEL, 1980, p. 165). For if our social drives were not counterbalanced by self-serving and anti-social incentives, we would lack a crucial motivation to grow beyond ourselves and to enlighten and enrich the readily satisfied demands of daily life.

Thanks be to nature, therefore, for the incompatibility, for the spiteful competitive vanity, for the insatiable desire to possess or even to dominate! For without them all the excellent natural predispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped (8:21).

Kant's most comprehensive account of social unsociability appears in his later work, *Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1793). There are, Kant says, three original predispositions toward the good in human nature: animality, humanity, and personality. The predisposition to animality pertains to our biological being. Like unreasonable animals, humans possess a "physical or merely mechanical self-love" (6:26), which encompasses instinctive elements such as self-preservation, the sexual drive, and the desire for community. While the predisposition to animality serves the survival and flourishing of the human species, the self-love associated with humanity differs from this biologically rooted form. Here, reason becomes "subservient to other incentives" (6:28) and provides our sensual inclinations with the rational means to pursue happiness by achieving personal goals and self-chosen ends (cf. 5:73). Kant describes this rational capacity for self-love as one that is inevitably "comparative [...], although physical in nature" (6:27). Since the predisposition to humanity involves the rational faculty of comparison, we assess our well-being not only by evaluating and ranking potential objects and ends of deliberate choice, but also by comparing ourselves with others. "Out of this self-love originates the inclination to gain worth in the opinion of others" (6:27). We judge the lives we lead and the decisions we make based on the value they hold in the opinion of others, which provides a constant source of self-discontent. "[The human being] is poor (or considers himself so) only to the extent that he is anxious that other human beings will consider him poor and will despise him for it" (6:93). While our social nature inclines us to think of all people as equal, our unsocial drives spark suspicion that others might be better off than we are, leading to jealousy and rivalry.

These vices, however, do not really issue from nature as their root but are rather inclinations, in the face of the anxious endeavor of others to attain a hateful superiority over us, to procure it for ourselves over them for the sake of security, as preventive measure; for nature itself wanted to use

the idea of such a competitiveness [...] only an incentive to culture (6:27).

Reason is also central to the third predisposition, that of personality. Although humans are rational creatures, rationality alone does not inherently equate to morality (6:26, note). While the predisposition to humanity aligns with hypothetical imperatives, employing reason to pursue arbitrary, non-moral ends, the predisposition to personality “is rooted in reason that is practical in itself, i.e., in reason that legislates unconditionally” (6:28). Therefore, a third predisposition in human nature must be introduced – one that emphasizes our capacity to respect the moral law and to act in accordance with it, “by disregarding all desires and sensible incitements” (4:457).

Kant defends a teleological view of nature, stating that “everything in the world is good for something” (5:379). The first proposition of the *Idea for a Universal History* holds that nature intends all natural predispositions of an organic being to be developed completely and purposively. “An organ that is not to be used, an arrangement that does not attain to its end, is a contradiction in the teleological doctrine of nature.” (8:18). Nature does nothing in vain; it adapts organisms to their environment so that their predispositions will, sooner or later, reach their full development.

Assigning an intrinsic purposiveness to nature is an indispensable part of our attempts to systematize knowledge of the empirical world. In the *Critique of Pure Reason* Kant argued that reason can arrive at the “greatest unity of experience” only when it is allowed, for heuristic purposes, to “also connect things according to teleological laws” (A 687/B 715). Viewing nature as if it were ordered by a supreme intelligence increases the intelligibility of nature, helping us to discover universal generalizations in experience and establish interconnections between them. However, applying teleological laws to nature does not introduce a supernatural ground of causality (5:383). The idea of natural purposiveness serves only as a regulative principle in our inquiries into nature, providing coherence and systematicity to our empirical cognitions, thereby extending the explanatory scope of Newton’s mechanistic conception of nature. Kant is careful to insist that “the teleological way of judging” (5:382) complements but does not supplant physics or natural science. Searching for “a hidden plan of nature” (8:27) does not entitle us to explain empirical facts by reference to some superhuman intention.

In the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, Kant explicitly distinguishes natural purposiveness from intentional purposiveness, emphasizing that he has chosen the expression “end of nature” <*Zweck der Natur*> precisely because he does not want to blur the boundaries between theology and science. As a matter pertaining to “the reflecting, not the determining power of judgment” (5:383), Kant’s teleological doctrine of nature involves no metaphysical commitments:

In teleology, insofar as it is connected to physics, we speak quite rightly of the wisdom, the economy, the forethought, and the beneficence of nature, without thereby making it into an intelligent being (since that would be absurd); but also without daring to set over it, as its architect, another, intelligent being, because this would be presumptuous <*vermessen*>; rather, such talk is only meant to designate a kind of causality in nature, in accordance with an analogy with our own causality in the technical use of reason, in order to keep before us the rule in accordance with which research into certain products of nature must be conducted (5:383).

One significant aim of Kant’s critical philosophy, as developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, is “to deny knowledge in order to make room for faith” (B XXX). Faith is necessary because the laws of nature and those of morality are fundamentally independent of each other. Morality requires us to conceive of ourselves as members of an intelligible world that is not governed by

the causal determinism of Newtonian science. While the empirical ‘freedom’ of human beings is only relative, concerning the subjective pursuit of means for achieving sensible ends, transcendental freedom denotes an absolute freedom, which – without being compelled by sensible incentives or needing them at all – facilitates, under the command of moral law, the capability for “pure reason of itself” to be practical (5:121). Freedom of the will as a causal faculty means for Kant, “beginning a series of occurrences from itself, in such a way that in reason itself nothing begins, but as the unconditioned condition of every voluntary action, it allows of no condition prior to it in time” (B 581f.). Such a “causality of reason” does not occur in the causally determined world of appearances and can only be asserted as an “intelligible faculty” (B 579) inherent to the noumenal nature of humanity (6:239).

In the opening sentence of his 1784 essay, Kant alludes to his solution to the transcendental problem of free will, which he believes justifies assuming that our actions in the natural world are also free. He seeks to make the results of this freedom – our “doings and refrainings on the great stage of the world” – systematically intelligible by uncovering within them an unconscious, collective purposiveness, not guided by individual or collective choices, but by nature. Since teleological purposiveness, as a regulative idea, implies that something appears as if it were designed or produced according to the idea of some end or plan, two accounts of human history must be distinguished (cf. KLEINGELD, 2001). In the physical teleology of the philosophy of history, our observable actions in the empirical world must be understood as if they were destined to promote a peaceful and state-like federation of states as the natural end of humanity. In the moral teleology of the philosophy of religion, our inner freedom as members of the intelligible world must be understood as if it were destined to establish an “invisible church” (6:101) as the end of creation. We must consider the progress of humankind in its dual aspects: namely, “with respect to culture (as its natural end)” and “with respect to the moral end of its existence” (8:308/9). In both cases, we must assume that striving for an unattainable end deprives that end of any reasonable and motivating force. As Kant states in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, if the highest good that humans can achieve through their intelligible freedom – namely, to become not only worthy of happiness through moral virtue but also to experience happiness at some point in their lives – were impossible to realize, then the commands of moral law “would be fantastic, directed toward imaginary ends, and must therefore in themselves be false” (5:114).²

Against this background, it seems plausible to attribute Kant’s choice of terminology to his intention to underscore the distinct tasks of the philosophy of history and the philosophy of religion. The personified use of ‘nature’ aligns with physical teleology and empirical history, while ‘providence’ pertains to faith and to what a good person may hope for, a concept reserved for the philosophy of religion. The title quotation from Kant’s 1795 essay *Toward Perpetual Peace* corroborates this distinction between different lines of inquiry.

The use of the word nature when, as here, we have to do only with theory (not with religion) is more befitting the limitations of human reason (which must confine itself within the limits of possible experience with respect to the relation of effects to their causes) and more modest than is the expression of a providence cognizable for us, with which one presumptuously puts on the wings of Icarus in order to approach more closely the secret of its inscrutable purpose (8:362).

In his detailed study of Kant’s concept of providence, Ulrich Lehner describes a development that begins with Kant’s preference in his early writings for a sapiential rather than an actualistic

² On Kant’s stance on divine providence in relation to the highest good, cf. HAHMANN, 2016.

view, and that ultimately leads to an increasing marginalization of divine providence. From a critical perspective, nothing can be known about the relation of God to the world. Given the limitations of theoretical reason and our ignorance regarding things in themselves, Kant contends that reason does not provide us with a theoretical warrant for belief in divine providence. Instead, reason offers a practical warrant, according to which divine is to be restricted to the ‘seeds’ implanted in us, namely to our rational predispositions toward the good and the accompanying anti-social drives. Lehner concludes that “Kant’s concept of providence radically closes God off from the world, substituting in its stead the actions of human praxis, thereby reducing providence to a *providentia socialis seu immanens*” (LEHNER, 2007, 484).

Although Lehner’s assessment is broadly accurate, it remains incomplete in some important respects. The second proposition of *The Idea for a Universal History* states that the teleological process of the development of natural predispositions takes a different form for the human species. Unlike other natural creatures, whose predispositions are determined by instincts and confined to a single mode of life, human beings, as a rational species, have the capacity to lead a self-devised life and strive for self-improvement according to ends they adopt as their own (7:321). We must assume that human history is a learning process that can be promoted and encouraged through education, as well as through social and cultural institutions. “The human being can only become human through education. He is nothing except what education makes of him” (9:443). Human predispositions for the use of reason cannot fully develop within the lifetime of an individual but only gradually within the species as a whole, requiring an indeterminately long historical process (8:18). Relying on “a hidden plan of nature” and on divine providence as its source is not only a regulative idea aimed at unifying and systematizing our cognitions, but also of moral relevance, as it opens up “a consoling prospect of the future,” (8:30) motivating us to improve ourselves and contribute to the betterment of posterity, even when our actual aspirations may fail. However, some caveats must be considered. Kant clearly envisages that empirical progress toward a legal order not only involves cultivation and civilization, but also moralization terminating in the transformation of the legal-political order into a “moral whole” (8:21).

To avoid depriving a virtuous person of the hope that this aim may one day be attained, it is surely not enough to advance the metaphysical hypothesis that God will, at the right moment, redirect the course of events – contrary to the very natural laws He Himself has established. On this matter, Kant is in agreement with Spinoza. Metaphysical hypotheses about the divine source of teleological purposiveness in nature miss the decisive point: what matters is the practical confidence in the effects of divine wisdom. However, Kant is well aware of the frailty of human nature. As humans are both sensible and rational beings, they are susceptible to sensual temptations, which generally makes it easier for them to follow inclination rather than duty. Due to his inherent predisposition - the ‘physical’ self-love, which he is not accountable for – man is not only attached to the incentives of sensuality but also finds the objects of his desires pressing upon him in an emotionally charged manner, thereby satisfying the empirical self “just as if it constituted our entire self” (5:74). Consequently, there arises the propensity “to make oneself as having subjective determinants of choice into the objective determining ground of the will in general” (ibid.). This propensity to elevate personal happiness to an “unconditional practical principle” of action results in turning self-love into “self-conceit” (ibid.), thus becoming a question of moral attitude.

Even though the “propensity to evil” (6:28) is inseparably connected with human nature, “ascent from evil back to the good” (6:45) is nevertheless possible. Religion has to do with what a good person may reasonably hope for. And in this context, Kant concedes that “some supernatural cooperation is also needed to his becoming good or better, whether this cooperation only consist in the diminution of obstacles or be also a positive assistance” (6:44). However, “the human being must nonetheless make himself antecedently worthy of receiving it” (ibid.).

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