

# ***YESTERDAY WILL BE BETTER!*<sup>1</sup>**

## **KANT ON THE PROGRESS OF HUMANITY**

***Lisa Frank***

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, DE

I am an inquirer by inclination. I feel a consuming thirst for knowledge, the unrest which goes with the desire to progress in it, and satisfaction at every advance in it. There was a time when I believed this constituted the honor of humanity, and I despised the people, who know nothing. Rousseau set me right about this. This binding prejudice disappeared. I learned to honor humanity, and I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that this attitude of mine can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of humanity. (Refl, 20:44)

The gods have not revealed all things from the beginning to mortals but, by seeking, men find out, in time, what is better. (Xenophanes, circa 500 B.C.)<sup>2</sup>

### **1. Introduction**

Can one plausibly talk about the progress of humanity? Humanity can do good as well as harm, build and destroy, thus be *humane* or *inhumane*. This dichotomy has been expressed by Rousseau's notion of *perfectibility*. According to Rousseau, it is this character trait that distinguishes humanity from animality: humanity changes through time, humanity evolves historically. Unlike the animal, whose present reality corresponds once and for all to what it must be, thereby freeing it from the work of rising up to itself, humanity does not possess its humanity as fixed and definitive, but as a possibility that humanity must choose to realize. Hence, for humanity, and humanity alone, here exists the perpetual risk of fall and failure: humanity can be inhumane, yet the animal can not be "inanimal". Human history is then not in a linear movement, but instead in a cyclical one.

Although inspired by Rousseau's ideas, Kant breaks with the optimism of enlightenment and the idea of automatic progress. For him, humanity is distinguished from the animal through the existence of rationality and self-determination (MAM, 8:117). This distinction will be expressed by humanity through progress, but cannot be correctly seen as something automatic or inevitable. So what is the *conditio humana* in this case? Does the history of humanity in the political, moral, and artistic spheres of social life show a discernible change that can be understood as an advance? Can we believe in the perpetual progress towards betterment that Oscar Wilde imagines when he says, "Progress is the realisation of Utopias"?

A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at, for it leaves out the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias. (Wilde 1891)

To answer these questions from a Kantian point of view, first, I will look at Kant's position on the progress of humanity as based on his interpretation of Rousseau's seemingly

---

<sup>1</sup> "YESTERDAY WILL BE BETTER" is the name of a 1963 minimalist artwork by the conceptual artist George Brecht. See, e.g., Wikipedia (2019); and Knotek (2013).

<sup>2</sup> Fairbanks (1898).

pessimist conception of history. Second, I will discuss Kant's fatalism of inevitable becoming, from which a new sort of optimism emerges without overlooking the obstacles of history and time. Third and finally, I will reflect on the concept of *utopia now* (Hanna 2018: part 3).

## **2. Kant's View of Human Progress in His Interpretation of Rousseau**

In his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men* (1755), Rousseau seeks to uncover the origin of the prevailing inequality across humanity in the face of a historically traceable pattern of human development. To be able to carry out this investigation, he must get to the bottom of the very nature of humanity, that is to say, to the starting point of humanity as it presently exists. In doing so, he rejects modernity's degeneracy and offers instead the theory of the natural goodness of humanity in the state of nature. Rousseau affirms that the very idea of "being inhumane" is an existential contradiction that is not intrinsic to the human condition, and that human evils have crept into so-called human nature only during the course of development from humanity in its natural state, to humanity in society. He considers perfectibility a burden, imploring humanity to find a way back to his natural roots and inner goodness.<sup>3</sup> In some ways, Kant embraces Rousseau's critique; in other ways, he departs from it.

Kant embraces it, insofar as he shares Rousseau's complaint about the rampant inequality plaguing humankind (MAM, 8:118). This inequality is a sign of the malaise of culture, and Rousseau's complaint is symptomatic of the weariness felt by anyone who ponders the nature of civilized life and also direct result of the luxury that is a consequence of the progress of civilization. Kant also describes this progress as giving rise to an inevitable conflict (MAM, 8:117). Progress leads to prosperity, especially in the sciences and technology, that then leads to a moral corruption or *perversitas* (RGV, 6:30). The *perversitas* of society turns progress into regress:

If one thinks ... that human nature is likely to be better known in a civilized state (where its dispositions can develop in a more complete way) one will have to hear a long and melancholy litany of accusations against humanity.... It will suffice for the vices of culture and civilization (the most painful of all) to divert one's gaze from the conduct of mankind rather than to contract for oneself another vice, I mean misanthropy. (RGV, 6:33-34.)

and

and Rousseau was not so wrong when he preferred to it the condition of the savages, as long, namely, as one leaves out his last stage to which our species has yet to ascend. We are *cultivated* in a high degree by art and science. We are *civilized*, perhaps to the point of being overburdened, by all sorts of social decorum and propriety. But very much is still lacking before we can be held to be already *moralized*. (IaG, 8:26)

So for Kant, the "civilization" of humankind is not equivalent with its "moralization." And here is why they differ:

The fact is that men bend, and for good reason, under the weight of their existence, although they themselves are the cause of this burden. This is, in my opinion, explained in the following way. In the progress made by the human species, the cultivation of talents, skill, and taste (with their consequence, the pursuit of pleasure) naturally precedes the development of morality; and this imbalance is precisely the most painful and dangerous condition for the moral good as well as for the physical

---

<sup>3</sup> Rousseau (1959-1995:271-272).

well-being, because the needs grow much more quickly than the means of satisfying them. (EAD, 8:332)

It seems that the source of man-made harm is more complex for Kant than for Rousseau. He does not share Rousseau's solution of the "return to the state of nature", that is to say, to use nature against culture. Apart from the fact that the road taken by the Enlightenment is irreversible, it is unquestionably true for Kant that humanity has progressed to a higher condition by shifting from a natural to a civil condition. Indeed, the "natural" human being cannot be correctly called good and noble according to Kant:

Do we want to draw these examples from the state in which many philosophers particularly hoped to meet the natural goodness of human nature, I mean the state of nature; it will suffice to compare this hypothesis with the emergence of unprovoked cruelty in the murderous scenes at Tofoa, New Zealand, and the Navigator Islands, and the endless tragedies in the vast deserts of North America (reported by Captain Hearne) that no man derives any benefit from. We then have more vices of barbarity than we need to get away from this hypothesis. (RGV, 6:33-34)

He attributes strong inclinations towards evil to humanity, but also believes that humanity is just as much inclined towards good. Certainly, humanity is not angelic. But neither is it beastly. As Alexis Philolenko puts it, "humanity is enigmatic".<sup>4</sup> It attempts to proceed towards betterment, but is prevented from doing so "because man is certainly abusing his liberty with regard to the next man". A human being would prefer to dwell alongside another reasonable creature that sets limits to his liberty, but his own selfish and animalistic inclinations mean that he excludes himself from these limits whenever he can. Consequently, humanity needs a master, something very difficult to find, insofar as

the highest supreme authority ... ought to be just *in itself* and yet a *human being*. This problem is therefore the most difficult of all; indeed, its perfect solution is even impossible; out of such crooked wood as human being is made, nothing entirely straight can be fabricated. (IaG, VIII 23)

This constitutes a moderately pessimistic view about the possibility of humanity's steady progress. Kant, in interpreting Rousseau, asserts that the latter fashioned his concept of nature to generate the code of fictitious good practices that were needed to successfully criticize the progress of civilization:

Rousseau wrote three works on the damage done to our species by 1) leaving nature for *culture*, which weakened our strength, 2) *civilization*, which caused inequality and mutual oppression, 3) presumed *moralization*, which brought about unnatural education and the deformation of our way of thinking .... Rousseau did not really want the human being to go back to the state of nature, but rather to look back at it from the stage where he now stands. He assumed that the human being is good by nature (as far as nature allows good to be transmitted), but good in a negative way; that is, he is not evil of his own accord and on purpose, but only in danger of being inflected and ruined by evil or inept leaders and examples. (Anth, 8:326-327)

For Kant, culture does not facilitate the progress of humankind in a moral sense, nor is it the cause of society's misfortune. Nature's desired outcome for the human species is culture. What belongs to man as a task he must undertake for his own good is morality. Man must fight against the obstacles of his animalistic inclinations and come out of his natural coarseness (MAM, 8:117). Thus the phrase "the progress of humanity," for Kant, is not a "success" term implying an automatic or necessary improvement of humanity through history, but instead a concept that

---

<sup>4</sup> Philolenko (1997:30).

defines as our task and our responsibility the realization—albeit slow, difficult and full of evils of all kinds—of the idea of *moral cosmopolitanism*, namely, our obligation to belong to a global ethical community by *creating* it and *sustaining* it.

### 3. Progress Even Despite Non-Perfectibility?

Kant shares neither the progress-optimism of the classical Enlightenment, nor the Rousseauian pessimistic view of the inevitable corruption of an originally innocent, natural humanity by civilization. Kant rarely speaks about “perfectibility,” but at the same time he seems to agree with Rousseau’s view about it.<sup>5</sup> The question then arises as to whether, since we are human, and consequently are not perfectible, we are not necessarily destined, at least from the standpoint of the whole human species if not from the standpoint of the individual, to progress continually towards something better. When it comes to designating the process that leads humankind to its last, if not ultimate, end, he uses the term “approximation”; thus the sixth proposition of the *Idea* affirms that “only the approximation of this Idea [of progress] is imposed on us by nature”, because humanity, civilized or not, is too *crooked* to ever become completely *straight* (IaG, 8:23). Hence, to conclude that this approximation, even if it is not “perfectibility”, nevertheless is “indefinite”, in the sense that it is a goal to which we could be approaching endlessly, would seem to be a reasonable next step.

But in fact Kant does not take this step: he never characterizes this process as infinite, but only as continual and incalculable (IaG, 8:19). In *The End of All Things* (1794), his most optimistic but also most ironic essay, he states that the “continuous progress and approximation to the sovereign good in this world, is indeed insufficient, because an indefinite progress towards the ultimate end is at the same time the prospect of an indefinite series of evils” and excludes the satisfaction that can only come from the Idea that the same ultimate end “is finally reached once for all” (EAD, 8:335). At the same time, he dismisses the hypothesis that history moves back and forth between good and evil because, in a constant alternation of good and evil, life would be no more than “a farcical comedy”, a hopeless effort to roll “the stone of Sisyphus” (Streit, 7:82).

The only text, therefore, in which Kant speaks of human history as indefinite progress, is intended to show that, in fact, it *cannot* be correctly thought of it in this way. For Kant, the human race must be examined from the standpoint of pure practical *eschatology*, that is to say, an examination of “the end of all things” that is emptied of any mystical underpinnings. So Kant intends to predelineate the ultimate end of all irrationalism instead of denying it outright:

Pure reason, then, contains, not indeed in its speculative employment, but in that practical employment, which is also moral, principles of the *possibility of experience*, namely, of such actions as, in accordance with moral precepts, might be met with the *history* of mankind. (A807/B835)

When he speaks of the individual soul and its immortality, he grants an “indefinite progress” according to which the moral intention will always be more in conformity with the law.<sup>6</sup> The practical interest of reason in general will allow us to observe that “what in particular subjects seems confused and irregular may, however, be recognized at the level of the whole species as a constant, though slow, development of its original dispositions” (IaG, 8:17, 35). Indeed,

[i]ndividual human beings and even whole nations think little about the fact, since while each pursues its own aim in its own way and one often contrary to another, they

---

<sup>5</sup> Castillo (1990:292).

<sup>6</sup> See Hanna (2018).

are proceeding unnoticed, as by a guiding thread, according to an aim of nature, which is unknown to them, and are laboring at its promotion, although even if it were to become known to them it would matter little of them. (IaG, 8:17)

Over a sufficient length of time it appears evident that our human capacities aim at a goal that lies beyond the organic coordination of our species, that is to say an objective realm for moral goodness. In one lifetime, no individual can hope to accomplish measurable progress toward the attainment of this goal, yet the moral imperative does not cease to be binding on us. Although we cannot know for certain whether it actually leads to progress, nevertheless, since we can believe in its ideal by means of our practical reason,<sup>7</sup> there is hope for our improvement (cf. Anth, 7:119).<sup>8</sup>

For Kant, the primitive fact of human existence raises three fundamental questions: what can I know?, what can I hope for?, and what ought I to do?: so to be a human being is to aspire to knowledge, to hope and believe, and to distinguish good from evil, for the purposes of morality. The solution to the problem of overcoming human non-perfectibility lies, perhaps surprisingly, in one of the basic ideas of The Enlightenment: progress through education.<sup>9</sup> People have an awareness of the past, present, and future, and can use information to direct their actions towards a better future. People can learn from their own experiences as well as others', correct their mistakes, and develop plans for things to come. These dimensions of humanity are essential for critical reflection, allowing us to obtain information about our own identity.

Man will eventually reach his destination through education, religion, the way of life and the civil constitution, as well as the right of peoples. Man is an animal that needs an education (Refl, R1423, 15).

Humanity neither regresses nor progresses towards perfection, yet humanity can and must learn from history in order to make our world a better place for everyone:

And thus the result of an oldest history of humanity attempted by philosophy is contentment with providence and with the course of things human on the whole—which does not start from good and progress toward evil, but develops gradually from the worse toward the better; and each of us, for his part, is called upon by nature, itself to contribute as much as lies in his power to this progress. (MAM, 7:123)

In other words, we must hope not for *the best*, but for *the better*.

Kant says in the *Idea* that humanity often labors unintentionally to prepare a foundation for the later generations, so that they “may bring up higher edifice which was nature’s aim” (IaG, 7:20). This is the explicit demand to “extend our horizons over the private determination to the purpose of the species” (Refl, R1467, 15:2, 645-646). In his response to the *Renewed question: Whether the human species is in constant progress for the better?* (1798), in order to be able to say something about the “tendency of the human species as a whole”, Kant notes that there are “signs of our times” (*Geschichtszeichen, signum*

---

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., Lindstedt (1999).

<sup>8</sup> ‘Kant’s moral theory leaves room for the notion of moral progress, which is an issue that logically precedes any attempts at improving Kant’s views on the possibility or actuality of moral progress. That there be room for progress is vital for the moral theories of Kant and Kantians. [...] there must be room within the Kantian framework for the idea that rational capacities may develop and that moral conduct may improve over time’ (Kleingeld, 1999:16).

<sup>9</sup> Kant also attributes this solution to Rousseau: ‘The chief intention of Rousseau is that education be free and also make a free human being’ (Beobachtungen, 2:252).

*rememorativum, demonstrativum, prognosticum*; Streit, 7:84) which were needed in the history of the past and which can be interpreted as signs which functions as evidence of a possible tendency “for the better” and offer a reasonable justification of a “perspective of historical hope”. It helps us have faith that history can lead eventually to a unification of the human species so that people can become “world citizens”. He considered the event of the French Revolution as such a historical sign, even years after its failure.

From today’s perspective, we can look back at the past and understand *a posteriori* that the world is getting better. We can plausibly assert that the worldwide decline of famine and poverty as well as the worldwide decline of criminal cases are due to more widespread education,<sup>10</sup> and that oppression and discrimination, which of course still exist in many parts of the world, are reduced. Genocide is widely excoriated, and war is generally reduced by the workings of democracy. In these ways, progress in humanity can be observed via civil rights and social justice, and the fact that humanity has become more sensitive to the difference between justice and injustice. Much of what Kant demanded and thought humanly possible has been realized. We have ended slavery, and colonialism, and have created the United Nations as an International Tribunal, and a league of nations who have adopted the very important *Sustainable Development Goals* in 2015.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, we can deny the old saw that *in former times everything was better*. It wasn’t. On the contrary, things are better now. As Kant also recognized, this comparison of the present condition of humanity with humanity’s past enables us to undertake a “reasonable conjecture” concerning the transformation that has released humans from “the womb of nature” (MAM, 7:114).

For that purpose, progress is possible through free, rationally justified action. Moreover, it is humanity’s duty to develop its moral capacities and for each of us to

act in such a way that [he] always treat humanity, whether in [his] own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end, (MM, IV 429)

and to try wholeheartedly to do the right things. Humanity has the obligation to enlighten itself:

How should we think about future progress? We must not sit back and wait for problems to solve themselves, nor pace the streets with a sandwich board proclaiming that the end of the world is nigh. The advances of the past are no guarantee that progress will continue; they are a reminder of what we have to lose. Progress is a gift of the ideals of the Enlightenment and will continue to the extent that we rededicate ourselves to those ideals.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, the realization of *Sapere aude!*, dare to know!, dare to think for yourself!, is not a naturally occurring event, but requires a certain attitude and our personal commitment as thoughtful beings. The notion of the “free agent” is not neutral: it places freedom on the side of action, and not on our capacities alone. Humanity must be fully aware of the misdeeds done by human hands. Reason, to the extent that it brings about the progress of humanity, according to Kant, does not work instinctively but requires trial, practice, and instruction. The problem to be solved lies in what humanity *does and can make of itself*, not merely in what humanity is.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup> See “Our World in Data” (2019a; 2019b).

<sup>11</sup> ‘These objectives form a program of sustainable, universal and ambitious development, a program of the people, by the people and for the people, conceived with the active participation of UNESCO’ (UNESCO, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> Pinker (2018:44).

<sup>13</sup> ‘[T]he investigation of what he as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself’, (Anth, 7:119).

Therefore, a reconciliation between past history and the limits of our perfectibility is possible through experience and education. Humanity is the vehicle for knowledge about the necessity of universal moral law, and the process of becoming fully human is the same as the history of human autonomy and freedom.

#### **4. A Brief Reflection on the Idea of *Utopia Now* From This Standpoint**

A certain kind of fear about the future can be an effective driving force for encouraging people to initiate change. In moments of crisis, we have the best opportunities to change ourselves radically for the better. And a critical public is created only by collective consciousness-raising. For this purpose, however, fears are not enough. What is indeed needed is a positive future scenario, a vision of Utopia. One has to be able to imagine a social and economic framework that frees people from economic exploitation and oppressive labor, from inequality and injustice, from restrictive borders, from poverty, and from the lack of access to adequate healthcare and education. The radical transition to a better world will not happen by itself! No economic system produces a decent life for humanity out of itself. This is the task of humanity itself.

The idea of *Utopia Now* thus represents the combination of reason and humanism. We shouldn't think of it as a scenario we can only *wish* for, but instead as a scenario we can actively hope for.<sup>14</sup> *Utopia Now* isn't about a perfect society existing in a hidden place or in a far-off future, as all classical utopias standardly have it;<sup>15</sup> on the contrary, it consists in showing us what is possible here and now, given what we have. It is a, so to say, action-plan. The aim is to give as many people as possible the chance of a fulfilling, self-determined life. We have to become active, because even if we can never achieve the utopian ideals, it is our duty to approach to it (see, e.g., Refl, 15:706). We need the regulative Idea of *Utopia Now*, as Kant might have put it, in order to *hope*, because hope is the real driving force of social change: "[t]he good in the sensible world is progress toward perfection, not the possession of it" (HN, 335, 18:455).

#### **5. Conclusion**

Given our experience of significant historical events, we know retrospectively that today is better than former times, and from this we can take courage. *Yesterday will be better!*<sup>16</sup> As I am understanding this intentionally enigmatic phrase, it means that the day after tomorrow we can know that tomorrow was better than today, and we could continually live in better yesterdays depending on what we want and what we do.

We should not trust in an automatic, inevitable, progress, but only in a really possible progress that we create ourselves. We need to hope, so that our moral intentions can make a difference in the world. Moreover, according to Kant, one can go beyond the false dilemma which says that either humanity is fatally corrupted (the pessimistic conception) or else humanity is inevitably perfectible (the optimistic conception). These are contraries, not genuine contradictories; and both are false. Instead, we are responsible for changing the world in a positive way. This is what I will call the *hopeful* conception of the progress of humanity, as opposed to either the *pessimistic* conception or the *optimistic* conception. As I see it, the hopeful implementation of *Utopia Now* is a form of collective self-determination. It can be achieved by a society that is attuned to it. Human progress for the better is certainly not guaranteed, but we

---

<sup>14</sup> See, by contrast, Thomas More: 'Of course, I wish that more than I hope' (More, 2019:211).

<sup>15</sup> Saage (2006:59).

<sup>16</sup> See note 1 above.

*Contemporary Studies in Kantian Philosophy* 4 (2019): 20-28.

do have it in our hands to do better. So we should dare to think for ourselves!, hope for the better!, and then act accordingly. As Kant shows us, there is every reason for hope in this sense; and there is also no rationally defensible alternative to hope in this sense.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Castillo, M. (1990) *Kant et l'avenir de la culture* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France).

Fairbanks, A. (1898) *Xenophanes: Fragments and Commentary*, in *The First Philosophers of Greece* (London: Paul, Trench, & Trubner), available online at URL = <https://history.hanover.edu/texts/presoc/xenophan.html>.

Hanna, R. (2018) *Kant Agnosticism and Anarchism: A Theological-Political Treatise* (THE RATIONAL HUMAN CONDITION, Vol. 4) (New York: Nova Science), preview available online at URL = [https://www.academia.edu/36359665/The\\_Rational\\_Human\\_Condition\\_4\\_Kant\\_Agnosticism\\_and\\_Anarchism\\_A\\_Theological-Political\\_Treatise\\_Nova\\_Science\\_2018](https://www.academia.edu/36359665/The_Rational_Human_Condition_4_Kant_Agnosticism_and_Anarchism_A_Theological-Political_Treatise_Nova_Science_2018).

Kleingeld, P. (1999) 'Kant, History, and the Idea of Moral Development', *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 16:59–80.

Knotek, A. (2013) '“YESTERDAY WILL BE BETTER,” by George Brecht (1963)', *Visual Poetry*, available online at URL = <https://visual-poetry.tumblr.com/post/44713258301/yesterday-will-be-better-by-george-brecht-1963>.

Lindstedt, D. (1999) “Kant: Progress in Universal History as a Postulate of Practical Reason,” *Kant-Studien* 90:129–147).

More, T. (2019) *Utopia*. Available online at URL = <http://www.linke-buecher.de/texte/romane-etc/Morus--%20Utopia.pdf>.

Our World in Data. (2019a) “Extreme Poverty,” available online at URL = <https://ourworldindata.org/extreme-poverty>.

Our World in Data. (2019b) “Literacy,” available online at URL = <https://ourworldindata.org/literacy>.

Philolenko, A. *L'œuvre de Kant: la philosophie critique. Morale et politique*, Vrin: Paris 1997.

Pinker, S. (2018) *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress*, (New York: Viking).

Rousseau, J.-J. (1959-1995) *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes, Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard), vol. II.

Saage, R. (2006) *Utopisches Denken im historischen Prozess: Materialien zur Utopieforschung* (Münster: Lit Verlag).

*Contemporary Studies in Kantian Philosophy* 4 (2019): 20-28.

UNESCO. (2019) 'UNESCO and Sustainable Development Goals'. Available online at URL = <<https://en.unesco.org/sdgs>>.

Wikipedia. (2019) 'George Brecht'. Available online at URL = <[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George\\_Brecht](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Brecht)>.

Wilde, O. (1891) 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism'. Available online at URL = <<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/wilde-oscar/soul-man/>>.