

Kant, Hegel, and Arendt on the Philosophy of History

In this paper, I take up the question: how can the philosophy of history undergird effective ethical action in the present? This question is guided by the intuition that, as Thomas McCarthy puts it, “how the past is constructed in relation to the present . . . is tied to a hopeful reimagining of desirable futures.”¹ One promising approach to this theme, I believe, emerges from the work of Hannah Arendt. In this paper, I begin from a puzzle found in her late work, where Arendt expresses a clear preference for Kant over Hegel as a guide to thinking about the philosophy of history. I elaborate on the substance of the Hegelian option that Arendt rejects, and comment on some of the misrepresentations that may have clouded her judgment of Hegel. But Arendt’s preference for Kant is deeply rooted for reasons that I think are revealing and noteworthy. Arendt thinks that it is only with Kant that we human beings can secure “the autonomy of the minds of men” and thereby “reclaim our human dignity” by denying history the role of the ultimate judge. As I interpret it, this is a claim about how to secure the grounds for ethical action, premised on constructing a certain relationship to the past. In the last section of this paper, I hint at Arendt’s recuperation of Kant in order to sketch the contours of a response to the initial question. I argue that for Arendt, history should be viewed as more than a “pile of debris” growing ever skyward, a clutter of haphazard events, but less than a well-ordered chain of events structured by ineluctable progress.² To adopt such a view of history, for Arendt, is to secure the grounds for human action in the present. In this respect, Arendt remains deeply Kantian. Kant thought that “if we assume a plan of

¹ Thomas McCarthy, “Response to Critics,” *Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy* 8, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 9.

² Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257. Arendt was influenced in her thinking about history by Benjamin’s famous essay; see p. 13 in her introduction to *Illuminations*.

nature” working itself out in history, “we have grounds for greater hopes.”³ It is the philosopher’s task to develop an idea of history that can be of use for mankind.

I. The puzzle

At the end of her life, Hannah Arendt turned to the theme of judgment. She lived to complete the first two volumes of *The Life of the Mind*, which discuss the faculties of *Willing* and *Thinking* respectively. At her death, the title page of *Judging* was found in her typewriter, with only two epigraphs to guide readers as to its contents.⁴ Fortunately, Arendt left two more sources with which we can reconstruct her aims and direction of thinking. The first is a brief *Postscriptum* to volume one of *The Life of the Mind*. The second are the lecture notes collected in a posthumously published volume called the *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*. Why did Arendt turn to Kant? The short answer is that Arendt thinks that in Kant’s third critique (written at the end of his life) we find for the first time the faculty of judgment singled out as “a major topic of a major thinker.”⁵ And in this third critique, Arendt says, we can find Kant’s “unwritten political philosophy,” one that turns away from man as the singular “reasonable being” of the first and second critiques to those communities of men as “earthbound creatures ... needing each other’s company even for thinking” that Arendt thinks are foundational to politics.⁶ It is only in the *Critique of Judgment*, Arendt says, that Kant thinks from the human condition of plurality.

Why exactly is the faculty of judgment important for Arendt? It is judgment, she says, that prepares the ground for “willing,” that is free, genuinely political action. “Since the past, being past, becomes subject to our judgment,” Arendt writes, “judgment, in turn, would be a

³ Immanuel Kant, *Kant: Political Writings*, ed. Hans Reiss, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 53.

⁴ See the Editor’s Postface in Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 1: *Thinking* (New York: Harcourt, 1971), 218.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, ed. Ronald Beiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 27.

mere preparation for willing. This is undeniably the ... perspective of man insofar as he is an acting being.”⁷ In her most intriguing and suggestive remarks on the subject, Arendt writes the following:

[The *modus operandi* of the faculty of judgment] is of some relevance to a whole set of problems by which modern thought is haunted, especially to the problem of theory and practice and to all attempts to arrive at a halfway plausible theory of ethics. Since Hegel and Marx, these questions have been treated in the perspective of History and on the assumption that there is such a thing as Progress of the human race. Finally we shall be left with the only alternative there is in these matters — we either can say with Hegel: *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* [lit. “world court,” also “Last Judgment” or “judgment of the world”], leaving the ultimate judgment to Success, or we can maintain with Kant the autonomy of the minds of men and their possible independence of things as they are or as they have come into being.

Here we shall have to concern ourselves, not for the first time, with the concept of history, but we may be able to reflect on the oldest meaning of this word, which, like so many other terms in our political and philosophical language, is Greek in origin and derived from *historein*, to inquire in order to tell how it was — *legein ta eonta* in Herodotus. But the origin of this verb is again Homer (*Iliad* XVIII) where the noun *histor* (“historian,” as it were) occurs, and that Homeric historian is the *judge*. If judgment is our faculty for dealing with the past, the historian is the inquiring man who by relating it sits in judgment over it. If that is so, we may reclaim our human dignity, win it back, as it were, from the pseudo-divinity named History of the modern age, without denying history’s importance but denying its right to being the ultimate judge.⁸

Why is Arendt so averse to Hegel? And what precisely does she find in Kant’s philosophy of history that is so appealing to her political theory? This puzzle provides the impetus for this paper. I address it in two main steps. First, I sketch a Hegelian account of the role judgment (the *Weltgericht*) plays in history. Then, I evaluate this account from an Arendtian perspective. I find that, for Arendt, the teleology Hegel implicates in his philosophy of history has an ultimately detrimental effect on human capacity for action. Second, I turn to construct Kant’s philosophy of history in a way that allows us to perceive with Arendt how he

⁷ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 1: *Thinking*, 213.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 216.

(proleptically) improves on Hegel's account. In my view, what Arendt finds fundamentally compelling about Kant is his basic concern for human dignity and "the autonomy of the minds of men." She sees in Kant a way for us to ground autonomous, free action in the present "without denying history's importance" but rather by claiming *our* role as judges of the past. This is possible because Kant takes a different view of teleology than Hegel. My concern is not to "accurately" reconstruct Hegel or Kant's philosophies of history, nor is it to evaluate Arendt's account as it relates to Hegel or Kant. (I will make some comments as to the accuracy of Arendt's interpretations, but assessing this is not my goal.) At the heart of my paper, instead, is the question: what are the implications of philosophy of history for the autonomy of human beings?

II. Hegel

In the enigmatic plan for *Judging* I presented above, Arendt summarizes Hegel's alternative conception of the philosophy of history through one brief aphorism: "Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht," or "world history is the world's court of judgment."

Hegel uses this phrase in §340 of the *Philosophy of Right*, where he writes that

*the spirit of the world produces itself in its freedom from all limits, and it is this spirit which exercises its right — which is the highest right of all — over finite spirits in world history as the world's court of judgement.*⁹

Judgment for Hegel, it seems, is not a human faculty but rather something that world spirit undertakes. Is Arendt thus warranted in accusing Hegel of making history a "pseudo-divinity of the modern age" and thereby ceding the grounds for human dignity?¹⁰ Let us see.

⁹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. Hugh Barr Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Following parenthetical citations are to this translation. Unless otherwise noted, I preserve all italics, spelling, and capitalization from this edition.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that framing the problem in this way raises the important problem of theodicy, which I will not thematize in this paper for reasons of space and time. For a good discussion of this issue with respect to Kant & Hegel's philosophy of history, see Michael Rosen, "Die Weltgeschichte Ist Das Weltgericht," in *Internationales Jahrbuch Des Deutschen Idealismus / International Yearbook of German Idealism*, ed. Jürgen Stolzenberg and Fred Rush, vol. 10: Geschichte/History (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 256–72.

Hegel thinks that history is characterized by contingency, which for Hegel means that history exhibits features that seem irrational. Thus, Hegel writes that history consists in “the ceaseless turmoil not just of external contingency, but also of passions, interests, ends, talents and virtues, violence [*Gewalt*], wrongdoing, and vices in their inner particularity” (§340). However, Hegel does not here mean that history is contingent at its core. Instead, Hegel sees the external features of contingency as something to be explained by the philosopher. Within the architecture of his overall system, Hegel tries to explain features of the world (e.g. the configuration of the state) as exhibiting universal features of reason. In the previous section, Hegel gives an example in terms of international relations: “the relations between states are unstable, and there is no praetor to settle disputes” (§339, add. [G]).¹¹ In domestic affairs, the sovereign sits in judgment over citizens and thus produces a semblance of rational order among the actions of citizens. In international affairs, the actions of states seem highly disordered. But there is an equivalent to the sovereign even among states: “the higher praetor is simply the universal spirit which has being in and for itself, i.e. the world spirit” (§339, add. [G]). Hegel thinks something similar happens in the case of history.

But it does seem puzzling that history exhibits such a mess of external features. How does the universal spirit, the “spirit of the world,” produce freedom (which for Hegel means rational order) from this contingency? Hegel proposes a mechanism by which the spirit “exercises its right ... over finite spirits”: the *Weltgericht*, or “world court of judgment.” The *Weltgericht* is the motor of world history. Hegel writes:

World history is a court of judgement because, in its *universality*, ... the *particular* — i.e. the Penates, civil society, and the spirits of nations [*Völkergeister*] in their multifarious actuality

¹¹ Additions (*Zusätze*) like these were not compiled by Hegel, but rather by his student Eduard Gans, who first published them in his own edition of the *Philosophy of Right* in 1833, drawing on lecture notes from two other students of Hegel’s, H. G. Hotho and K. G. von Griesheim. As the translator of the Cambridge edition notes, these additions should “be treated with caution, not so much because they are based on the notes of students (which actually seem to be conscientious and reasonably accurate in this case), but because Gans’s extracts are highly selective, combining material from two distinct lecture series and consisting largely of paraphrase rather than verbatim quotation.” Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, xxxvi. Nonetheless, the additions may be understood as relevant explanations of the main part of Hegel’s text, as in cases like the one cited here.

— is present only as *ideal*, and the movement of spirit within this element is the demonstration of this fact. (§341)

How precisely is the world-spirit involved in the judgment of individual actions? Does the *Weltgericht* mean that the world-spirit exercises its power in all the particular instances? Is it correct to draw an analogy between the world-spirit in international affairs and the sovereign in domestic affairs?

One extreme would be this interpretation, where world-spirit has a sort of strong presence in world affairs. Then, the *Weltgericht* could be taken almost literally as a court of judgment where individual actions conform to the will of the spirit much like how the citizens' actions conform to the will of the sovereign: through the exercise of force, taken in its most extreme form as the threat of violence. At the other extreme of interpretation is a reading that aligns more with Kant. Here, world-spirit is analogous to one of Kant's categories that structure perception of the world. Events in the world conform to reason because reason is necessarily part of the way we perceive the world.

An analogy will help explain this point. When a mathematician looks at a sunflower, they may notice that the spirals in the center of follow a Fibonacci sequence. (With increasingly 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, etc. florets in each spiral.) The mathematician notices this fact because they already have in their mind this sequence. If you've been studying mathematics in your books all day, it makes sense that you start seeing arithmetic sequences in the world around you! Kant and Hegel are interested in the philosophical implications of something like this. Does the flower grow in the Fibonacci sequence because there is some mysterious mathematical spirit that imposes order on nature? That is hard to imagine. The modern understanding is that the sunflower grows in this pattern because it happens to be the most efficient way to pack in florets so as to maximize the gathering of sunlight in a certain surface area (and thus increase the energy gathered by a flower). In this sense, it is not just *contingently* the case that the number of florets follows the Fibonacci sequence. Nor is it just

the mathematician's obsession with numbers that makes them see rationality where there is just natural contingency. But reason manifests itself in the world in a way that does not involve a mysterious spirit forcing compliance with its will.

In the following sections, Hegel seems to lean back towards this more Kantian interpretation of world-spirit. He writes that world history comes to conform with world-spirit not (primarily) through *power* but rather through the manifestation of reason in the world:

Furthermore, it is not just the *power* [*Macht*] of spirit which passes judgement in world history — i.e. it is not the abstract and irrational necessity of a blind fate. On the contrary, since spirit in and for itself is *reason*, and since the being-for-itself of reason in spirit is knowledge, world history is the necessary development, from the *concept* of the freedom of spirit alone, of the *moments* of reason and hence of spirit's self-consciousness and freedom. It [world history] is the exposition and the *actualization of the universal spirit*. (§342)

Weltgericht is the consequence of spirit actualizing itself in the world, because spirit “is only what it does.” World history develops in the way that it does because it manifests reason. Individual actions are the “exposition ... of the universal spirit.” At this point, it seems like Hegel would agree that reason manifests itself in history much like how mathematics manifests itself in nature. This seems like a plausible interpretation that does not need recourse to some mysterious metaphysics.

More importantly for Arendt, this interpretation leaves room for the agency of human beings. They are not *forced* to comply with some plan of world-spirit, as a sovereign forces their citizens to comply with their will. Instead, the actions of human beings *manifest* some patterns of reason, because we are part of nature and nature itself is structured by reason. This is not a dispiriting view of human agency. In fact, Hegel would say that this *secures* the grounds for human freedom, because for Hegel freedom does not consist in us acting in accordance with arbitrariness (*Willkür*). Rather, to borrow the words of Allen Wood, for Hegel “freedom is possible only to the extent that we act rationally, and in circumstances

where the objects of our action are in harmony with our reason.”¹² Therefore, identifying the patterns of reason that are manifested in world history is actually for Hegel a *demonstration* of human freedom, not in any way a constraint of it.

Where this interpretation runs into some difficulty is in Hegel’s explanation of how particular individual actions relate to the universal pattern of history. Hegel seems to say that the actions of particular people are adjunct to this progress of spirit:

the states, nations [*Völker*], and individuals involved in this business of the world spirit emerge with their own *particular and determinate principle*, which has as its interpretation and actuality in their *constitution* and throughout the whole *extent* of their *condition*. In their consciousness of this actuality and in their preoccupation with its interests, they are at the same time the unconscious instruments and organs of that inner activity in which the shapes which they themselves assume pass away, while the spirit in and for itself prepares and works its way towards the transition to its next and higher stage. (§344)

Perhaps the most troubling part of this passage is that Hegel writes that particular people (and states) are “unconscious instruments and organs.” This seems to be saying that human beings do not have *conscious* control over their actions, but rather do things without knowing that they are really executing the plan of a higher power. In the process, the forms that human beings “themselves assume pass away, while the spirit in and for itself prepares and works its way towards the transition to its next and higher stage.” The former passage could be interpreted along the lines of the mathematician interpreting nature: perhaps we do indeed unconsciously follow some rules of nature, like how flowers follow mathematical rules without a conscious will to do so. But the latter passage seems to underline that these actions are purely instrumental: their function is to enable the transition of the spirit to a higher stage. This is troubling for a reader like Arendt, who cares most about securing the grounds for autonomous human action.

¹² Ibid., xii.

I have begun this section by attempting to read as generously as possible Hegel's philosophy of history as a defense of human freedom and autonomy. Yet even with contextualization, the line *Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht* seems emblematic of the ugly side of Hegel's philosophy of history. As Michael Rosen notes,

on its most obvious interpretation, [the aphorism] seems to support a deeply unsympathetic image of [Hegel's] philosophy of history. If the Last Judgement is not something that is carried out by an omniscient, omnipotent and (above all) just creator-god but left to the verdict of history then it looks as if Hegel is (as Benjamin called him) a *Gewaltmensch* and a mystic of violence, someone who is inspired by the idea the World Spirit fights on the side of the big battalions.¹³

It is too easy to interpret Hegel as implying that world-spirit uses violence to make individual actions conform to a grand plan of history. And, for Hegel's worst critics, this plan of history is not really just but rather justifying the existing order. (This is the uncharitable interpretation of Hegel's famous dictum that "what is actual is rational"; namely, that reason is just the philosopher's attempt to justify the way things happen to be, even if society is unjust.) At its worst, as Rosen indicates, this kind of Hegel looks back at history and sees in all contingent actions the ultimately necessary progress of world-spirit. Even the Shoah, in this light, should be seen as an "instrument" whereby "the spirit ... works its way towards the transition to its next and higher stage" (§344).

It is worth emphasizing what is at stake for Arendt. Arendt's deep-rooted concern for the autonomy of human action lies in her historical analysis of the elements of totalitarianism (and her experience living under a totalitarian regime as a German Jew). For Arendt, Hegel is proto-totalitarian because he cedes the autonomy of men to history. Instead of humans judging for themselves, world history is the court wherein world-spirit exercises *its* judgment. According to Arendt, Hegel's picture of world-spirit puts man in such a bind as to leave him no space for movement, no freedom for action.

¹³ Rosen, "Die Weltgeschichte Ist Das Weltgericht," 256.

Arendt almost seems to have Hegel in mind in passages where she describes precisely this restriction of movement under totalitarian regimes. In the revised edition of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (these remarks were added after she wrote *The Human Condition*), Arendt wrote that totalitarianism “substitutes for the boundaries and channels of communication between individual men a band of iron which holds them so tightly together that it is as though their plurality had disappeared into One Man of gigantic dimensions.”¹⁴ In so doing, totalitarianism “destroys the one essential prerequisite of all freedom which is simply the capacity of motion which cannot exist without space.”¹⁵ Totalitarianism, for Arendt, differs from tyranny in that it defies lawfulness not in an arbitrary way but precisely according to ineluctable progress. “Far from being ‘lawless,’” Arendt says, totalitarianism “goes to the sources of authority from which positive laws received their ultimate legitimation.”¹⁶ By following “the law of History or the law of Nature,” totalitarianism “can do away with petty legality.”¹⁷ Totalitarianism thus “executes the law of History or of Nature without translating it into standards of right and wrong for individual behavior” and thus claims to “establish the direct reign of justice on earth.”¹⁸ Judgment is no longer about particulars, with a human act of translation between principles and situations. Instead, for Hegel as with totalitarian regimes, judgment is implemented directly in the world.

Indeed, justifying historical actions as the inevitable manifestation of the logic of an idea is precisely the characteristic that Arendt thinks distinguishes totalitarianism. Her term for this new principle of politics is *ideology*. Ideology uses “the purely negative coercion of logic” to derive “a whole line of thought” from a single starting idea.¹⁹ Historically existing totalitarian regimes took their governing ideologies “dead seriously” and “proceeded to drive

¹⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1951), 611.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 612.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 606.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 607.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 617.

ideological implications into extremes of logical consistency which, to the onlooker, looked preposterously ‘primitive’ and absurd: a ‘dying class’ consisted of people condemned to death; races that are ‘unfit to live’ were to be exterminated.”²⁰ Instead of thinking about what we are doing as historical actors, under ideology we simply follow the “irresistible force of logic.”²¹ In following Hegel, Arendt thinks, we disregard the autonomy of men. This means both undermining the idea that an action can be taken that might make a difference to history and retrospectively seeing the progress of events as inevitable.

In short, Arendt’s deep distaste for Hegel’s philosophy of history is based on her previous analysis of the ingredients of totalitarianism. Rightly or wrongly, she sees in Hegel’s denial of agency and replacement of thinking with ideology a step in the direction of Hitler and Stalin. In Arendt’s view, Hegel’s attitude towards the past cripples our ability to act freely and politically in the present.

Before moving on to Kant, I want to indicate two ways in which we might push back on Arendt’s interpretation of Hegel. First, Arendt relies on the idea that the world-spirit is totalizing. As I explained at length above, there are ways to interpret the *Philosophy of Right* that leave more room for autonomous individual action than Arendt assumes. Second, underlying Arendt’s philosophical criticism is a distaste for Hegel that seems to rely on the old impression of him as a functionary of the conservative Prussian state. This criticism has a long history, dating at least as far back as 1857, when Rudolf Haym wrote that “the Hegelian freedom state ... is an extenuating construction of police desires as these actually existed in Prussia.”²² This view of Hegel has been discredited as historically inaccurate by more recent scholarship. Without delving into details, it is worth quoting Allen Wood’s assessment:

²⁰ Ibid., 619.

²¹ Ibid., 620.

²² Rudolf Haym, *Hegel und seine Zeit: Vorlesungen über Entstehung und Entwicklung, Wesen und Werth der Hegel’schen Philosophie* (Berlin: Gaertner, 1857), 385. Translated as Haym, *Hegel and his Times*, in Robert

Hegel was no radical, and certainly no subversive. In relation to the Prussian state of 1820 he represented the tendency toward moderate, liberalizing reform. . . . Hegel did not have to be ashamed of publishing his views (until the middle of 1819, most of them were even the official position of the monarch and his chief ministers). But they were diametrically opposed to the views of Prussian conservatives on some of the largest and most sensitive political issues of the day.²³

By the standards of his time, Hegel was a liberal reformist, not a conservative. We might thereby partially dismiss Arendt's castigation of Hegel, insofar as it rests on discredited views of his politics. But I am not interested in passing judgment on whether Arendt was right to reject Hegel. Instead, I find it interesting and valuable to explore her relationship with Hegel because it reveals what Arendt finds valuable to retain in relation to the philosophy of history: namely, the autonomy of human beings and their capacity for free action that is not pre-determined by some totalizing force like progress. This is perhaps expressed most succinctly by Arendt in her late *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, where she writes that "it is against human dignity to believe in progress."²⁴

III. Kant

Arendt makes this statement in the context of discussing the paradox she believes lies at the core of Kant's philosophy of history. She thinks Hegel's blind faith in "progress" cedes the ground for securing belief in human dignity. But Kant is more complicated. As Arendt writes:

In Kant himself there is this contradiction: Infinite Progress is the law of the human species; at the same time, man's dignity demands that he be seen (every single one of us) in his particularity and, as such, be seen — but without any comparison and independent of time — as reflecting mankind in general. In other words, the very idea of progress — if it is more than a change in circumstances and an improvement of the world — contradicts Kant's notion of man's dignity.²⁵

Stern, ed., *G.W.F. Hegel: Critical Assessments*, The Routledge Critical Assessments of Leading Philosophers (London: Routledge, 1993), 234.

²³ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, x.

²⁴ Arendt, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy*, 77.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

For Arendt, Kant represents what it is possible to redeem from Hegel — a sort of proleptic correction to the latter’s excessive faith in progress. Arendt sees in Kant a kindred spirit, one who is basically concerned as she is with egalitarianism, modesty, and critical thinking. This is the view she expresses in her *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* when she quotes the autobiographical passage where Kant writes: “I would find myself more useless than the common laborer if I did not believe that [what I am doing] can give worth to all others in establishing the rights of mankind.”²⁶ This feeling of affinity with Kant underlies her reading of his work, as we will see later when she takes up the third critique as it informs her thematization of plurality and action.

But the basic paradox Kant tries to navigate is clearly evident in his texts: namely, the tension between understanding human actions as manifestations of free will on the one hand and as determined in accordance with natural laws on the other. Take, for instance, Kant’s essay entitled “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose.” Kant’s titular idea is his hoped-for rubric that might “give us some guidance in explaining the thoroughly confused interplay of human affairs and in prophesying future political changes.”²⁷ Why would such an idea be desirable? Kant says that

we may hope that what strikes us in the actions of individuals as confused and fortuitous may be recognized, in the history of the entire species, as a steadily advancing but slow development of man’s original capacities. ... Individual men and even entire nations little imagine that, while they are pursuing their own ends, each in his own way and often in opposition to others, they are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature. They are unconsciously promoting an end which, even if they knew what it was, would scarcely arouse their interest. (41)

Like Arendt and Hegel, Kant starts from the common-sense assumption that history exhibits the freedom of human actions, which results in phenomena that appear confused because they

²⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 29. The translation and the editorial addition in square brackets are Arendt’s own. For the original passage from Kant, see Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*, ed. Patrick R. Frierson and Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 96; *Akademie Ausgabe* 20: 44.

²⁷ Kant, *Political Writings*, 52. Parenthetical citations in this section are to page numbers from this edition.

are freely willed. The problem with viewing human actions in this way is that they don't seem to amount to anything. Kant thinks that "if we assume a plan of nature, we have grounds for greater hopes" (52). Finding an idea that "may yet serve as a guide to us in representing an otherwise planless *aggregate* of human actions" might help us see this aggregate as "conforming, at least when considered as a whole, to a *system*" (52).

What is the upshot of recognizing such a system? This is not a matter of academic interest. Rather, Kant thinks that recognizing such a

regular process of improvement ... opens up the comforting prospect of a future in which we are shown from afar how the human race eventually works its way upward to a situation in which all the germs implanted by nature can be developed fully, and in which man's destiny can be fulfilled here on earth. (52)

Finding a pattern of progress in history would enable us to see how seemingly senseless actions add up to progress towards enlightenment. The alternative is to see the history of mankind as a "spectacle" which makes us "turn away in revulsion" (53). And such a spectacle, "by making us despair of ever finding any completed rational aim behind it, would reduce us to hoping for it only in some other world" (53). The problem with this turning away from earthly affairs is that it then erodes the motivation people have to undertake actions. To recapitulate: Kant thinks we should look for a system behind the disordered aggregate of free actions that constitutes history. We should do so because we might then recognize how the full development of humanity (its enlightenment, or "emergence from its self-incurred immaturity") is realizable here on earth. In turn, recognizing this will help *bring about* that enlightenment by encouraging people not to despair of their ability to take action in the present (as we might despair when we "turn away in revulsion" from history when viewed as Benjamin's "pile of debris").

Kant thinks the task of the philosopher is to provide ideas that enable humanity to flourish. In short, Kant proposes his idea of history because it might help enable the enlightenment project to thrive. As he writes, "such a *justification* of nature ... is no mean

motive for adopting a particular point of view in considering the world” (53). Kant’s philosophy of history is thus basically driven by a *practical* concern for human freedom. This is what Arendt finds attractive in Kant. For her, too, constructing the past in relation to the present is basically a way of securing the grounds for ethical action in the future. To put it in terms of Kant’s autobiographical passage that Arendt quoted: Kant’s approach to philosophy of history is useless unless it can “give worth to all others in establishing the rights of mankind.”²⁸

So much for the reason *why* Kant pursues an idea of history that links free human actions to natural progress. But this doesn’t explain *how* these two aspects of history might be reconciled. As Kant notes,

It is admittedly a strange and at first sight absurd proposition to write a *history* according to an idea of how world events must develop if they conform to certain rational ends; it would seem that only a *novel* could result from such premises. (52)

Indeed, a novel is not such a bad analogy. If a philosopher’s primary concern is to motivate human action and secure progress towards enlightenment, then perhaps writing a novel that interprets history in a positive light would not be such a bad idea. But Kant is after something more, a sort of “law-governed history.” Still, he fully acknowledges the challenges involved:

Since men neither pursue their aims purely by instinct, as the animals do, nor act in accordance with any integral, prearranged plan like rational cosmopolitans, it would appear that no law-governed history of mankind is possible (as it would be, for example, with bees or beavers). (42)

Put in more modern terms, the trouble is that human actions can’t be observed and rationalized as we do for natural events.

Yet Kant thinks that there *is* a way to understand individual freely willed action as amounting to a higher plan — and that this understanding is scientific, not that of a novelist.

²⁸ Quoted in Arendt, *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy*, 29. See above at fn. 26.

To accomplish this, Kant adopts the model of political economy and other sciences that deal with data *in the aggregate*:

Thus marriages, births, and deaths do not seem to be subject to any rule by which their numbers could be calculated in advance, since the free human will has such a great influence upon them; and yet the annual statistics for them in large countries prove that they are just as subject to constant natural laws as are the changes in the weather, which in themselves are so inconsistent that their individual occurrence cannot be determined in advance, but which nevertheless do not fail as a whole to sustain the growth of plants, the flow of rivers, and other natural functions in a uniform and uninterrupted course. (41)

Getting married and having a child are significant acts of human free will; their “individual occurrence cannot be determined in advance.” Yet when observed together, as large data, these occurrences exhibit law-like trends. Demographics are governed by laws — not in the sense of laws that people must obey under threat of punishment, but in the sense of laws as patterns that manifest out of seemingly random sets of data.

Kant also wants to go a step further and say that these patterns are *aim*-directed.

Weather is random; but when observed in aggregate, patterns can be detected. These patterns, when themselves observed as part of a larger natural system, fulfill the aim of sustaining natural functions like the growth of plants and the flow of rivers. Similarly, Kant asks, couldn't human actions *when viewed in aggregate* fulfill a larger aim? Without going into too much detail, the clear reference here is to political economy. In *The Wealth of Nations*, Adam Smith had famously written about an “invisible hand” which guides self-interested individual actions into a greater good for society as a whole. Smith even claimed that “by pursuing his own interest,” an individual “frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it.”²⁹

The term Kant uses is “unsocial sociability,” by which he means “the development of natural capacities [by means of] antagonism within society, in so far as this antagonism becomes in the long run the cause of a law-governed social order” (44). This is a similar idea

²⁹ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations* (Strahan: London, 1776), book IV, chapter 2, paragraph 9.

to Smith's: in both cases, the selfish drive that motivates human actions like labor and trade actually adds up to a law-governed system that maximizes common benefit. Thus, Kant writes, "individual men and even entire nations ... are unwittingly guided in their advance along a course intended by nature" (4I). In short, "unsocial sociability" is one of the mechanisms whereby individual free action can be understood in terms of law-like patterns that together help bring about enlightenment.

At this point, Kant has transitioned from talking about individual human actions to discussing society as a whole. As Ernst Cassirer put it:

[Kant's] ethics orients him toward the individual and toward the basic concept of the moral personality and its autonomy; but his view of history and its philosophy leads to the conviction that it is only through the medium of society that the ideal task of moral self-consciousness can find its actual empirical fulfillment.³⁰

In other words, Kant's ethics pushed him to see the individual as autonomous and freely willing; but in trying to discern a pattern guiding history in the aggregate, Kant's focus turned to mechanisms of society. Kant's work is to reconcile these two perspectives.

Like Hegel, Kant is interested in *how* progress can manifest itself in the aggregate of individual human actions. How does the aim-directedness, the telos, manifest itself in human actions? The answer must be one that secures both the free activity of agents and the aim-directedness of their actions in aggregate. As Katerina Deligiorgi puts it:

Kant's concept of history, then, is the concept of a whole that is ordered internally by means of telic concepts that connect its parts, concepts that have as their main task to attribute these parts to the activity of agents whose purposes and ends explain these parts. ... Kant's teleological ordering of history as a formal domain aims at preserving actions as distinct objects of investigation by allowing us to make references to the purposes and ends agents pursue in and by their actions.³¹

³⁰ Ernst Cassirer, *Kant's Life and Thought*, ed. Stephan Körner, trans. James Haden (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 223–24.

³¹ Katerina Deligiorgi, "Actions as Events and Vice Versa: Kant, Hegel and the Concept of History," in *Internationales Jahrbuch Des Deutschen Idealismus / International Yearbook of German Idealism*, ed. Jürgen Stolzenberg and Fred Rush, vol. 10: Geschichte/History (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 185.

For Kant, then, progress in history should be understood more in terms of the *purpose* or *end* adopted by a particular agent. This approach to teleology contrasts strongly with that of Hegel, for whom understanding progress in history means describing how a system functions. To put it crudely, Hegel sees a top-down court of judgment whereby world-spirit manifests its aims in seemingly chaotic individual actions. By contrast, Kant describes a bottom-up world of free agents who take actions to pursue purposes and ends. When viewed in aggregate by a philosophical mind, these individual actions *add up* to a rule-governed system. As Deligiorgi puts it, “Hegel’s rehabilitation of final causes creates a new problem for the agent who now disappears in a sea of ends.”³² By contrast, Kant’s approach maintains the utmost fidelity to the autonomy of the individual agent, even as he recognizes that autonomous actions add up to a sort of progress.

IV. A brief (re)turn to Arendt

The implications of this point are numerous, both with respect to Kant and Arendt — for instance, on the subjects of theodicy for Kant and society for Arendt. I cannot go into detail on these points here. But I do want to highlight one point with which Arendt began: judgment. The way in which Kant perceives teleology in nature is by judgment. Progress is the “category” by which the historian can look at the past and discern a law-governed order. Thus, Kant writes, his “idea is only a notion of what a philosophical mind, well acquainted with history, might be able to attempt from a different angle” (53). Kant himself provides us with an analogy to physics. There, everybody can observe that the planets pursue eccentric orbits. The philosopher, in Kant’s view, supplies a guiding principle (like reason). And then, nature produced a Kepler who found an unexpected means of reducing the eccentric orbits of the planets to definite laws, and a Newton who explained these laws in terms of a universal natural cause. (42)

³² *Ibid.*, 190.

In other words, Newton and Kepler used the “guiding principle” to make structured laws out of a mass of seemingly arbitrary data. Perhaps something similar might happen if the philosopher supplies an adequate guiding principle for history:

Let us now see if we can succeed in finding a guiding principle for such a history, and then leave it to nature to produce someone capable of writing it along the lines suggested. (42)

The complication is that history is basically unlike physics. The activity Newton and Kepler undertake is determinate judgment, where there are rules and categories under which to subsume the particular. By contrast, history (like aesthetics) belongs to the realm of reflective judgment, where there are no universal rules under which to subsume the particular. Thus, Kant famously wrote in his third critique that “there will never be a Newton for a blade of grass.”³³ This is because we can never know *a priori* the laws that govern the growth of an organism or the way history will proceed in the way we know how orbits will go. The idea of history that Kant develops is *regulative*, not *constitutive*; we cannot *know* that such laws of history or of the growth of organisms are constituted in this way, but we can proceed *as if* they are, because they are laws of our faculty of judgment.

To dive deeper into this topic would require a thorough analysis of Kant’s third critique that I am not prepared to undertake within the confines of this paper. But I will note that this is precisely where Arendt turns next. If she had lived to write the third and final volume of *The Life of the Mind*, much of her discussion would have been on Kant’s *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. (Hence why her posthumously published *Lectures on Kant’s Political Philosophy* offer clues as to how her thoughts would have evolved.) For now, I will leave these remarks as suggestions for where to turn in future research.

³³ Kant wrote: “it is quite certain that we can never adequately come to know the organized beings and their internal possibility in accordance with merely mechanical principles of nature, let alone explain them; and indeed this is so certain that we can boldly say that it would be absurd for humans even to make such an attempt or to hope that there may yet arise a Newton who could make comprehensible even the generation of a blade of grass according to natural laws that no intention has ordered; rather, we must absolutely deny this insight to human beings.” Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 271.; *Akademie Ausgabe* 5: 400.

Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have sketched some components of Arendt's philosophy of history by relating it to her relationship with Hegel and Kant and noting the interrelationships with other parts of her philosophy. A systematic reconstruction of Arendt's philosophy of history is beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, in this last section, I want to take some aspects of what we have learned to return to the question animating this paper: how can the philosophy of history undergird effective ethical action in the present?

Arendt's abiding question has been how to conceive of history so that it has space for action. She asks: can you thread the needle between history having a plan (and thus not being simply a "pile of debris") and individuals having genuinely free actions? Arendt's intuition is that the answer lies in Kant's development of the faculty of judgment. She is especially interested in the third critique because the judgments Kant develops there are always of particulars; they cannot be judgments where a particular is subsumed under a universal law. As Arendt writes, in her view "judgments are not arrived at by either deduction or induction; in short, they have nothing in common with logical operations."³⁴ Kant helps her elucidate this point. Her question as she develops it in *The Life of the Mind* will be inflected by her lifelong concern with plurality — thinking of *men* in the plural, rather than *man* in the singular. Thus, she will ask: how can reflective judgments be intersubjectively valid?

In asking this question, Arendt clearly outlines the political stakes of the philosophy of history. In reading Kant and Hegel alongside Arendt we see a triadic relationship emerging between progress, autonomy, and judgment. Understanding history under the rubric of progress denies the human capacity to judge. Judging, for Arendt following Kant, is critical for human autonomy. Arendt dislikes Hegel's account because it downplays the role of humans in judging history; the world-spirit literally takes on the role of the judge in the

³⁴ Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, Vol. 1: *Thinking*, 215.

Weltgericht. In order to shore up the significance of human action, Arendt must go on to give a more substantive account of the faculty of judgment. How we look at the past — as an inevitable unfolding of progress in nature or as a “pile of debris” that “grows skyward” blown by the storm we call “progress” (to quote Benjamin again) — has real, immediate implications for our capacity for ethical action in the present. For Arendt and Kant, this capacity for ethical action, this “autonomy of the minds of men,” rests on our capacity for judgment.

This paper has addressed the puzzle of why Arendt sides with Kant over Hegel in evaluating their respective philosophies of history. In so doing, we have also seen a few elements of Arendt’s own construction of the past in relation to the present, as it undergirds the capacity for ethical action in the here and now. To thoroughly reconstruct this Arendtian account of the philosophy of history is a task that still awaits.

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