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978-0-521-87463-2 - Kant's Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim: A Critical Guide
Edited by Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction: history as philosophy**Amélie Oksenberg Rorty and James Schmidt*

Lively current debates about narratives of historical progress, the conditions for international justice, and the implications of globalization have prompted a renewed interest in Kant's *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*. The nine Propositions that make up this brief essay raise a set of questions that continue to preoccupy philosophers, historians, and social theorists. Does history, whether construed as a chronicle or as a set of explanatory narratives, indicate anything that can be characterized as meaningful? If so, what is its structure, its rationale and direction? How are we to understand the destructive and bloody upheavals that constitute so much of human experience? What connections, if any, can be traced between politics, economics, and morality? What is the relation between the rule of law in the nation state and the advancement of a cosmopolitan political order? Can the development of individual rationality be compatible with the need for the constraints of political order? Does the study of history convey any philosophical insight? Can it provide political guidance?

Kant's nine propositions subtly and implicitly express – and recast – some of the philosophical sources of his views: the voices of the Stoics and Augustine are heard clearly; and although Kant had reservations about Grotius, Hobbes, Leibniz, and Rousseau, their contributions, along with those of Mandeville and Adam Smith, are manifest in the *Idea for a Universal History*. It is as if this essay were a crucible in which Kant sought to synthesize the purified and transformed views of his predecessors, condensing them into a comprehensive political and cultural history with a philosophical moral. It is itself an instance of the integration of history and philosophical reflection that it heralds.

From the Stoics, Kant took the view that nature does nothing in vain, that its regularities are not accidental, but rather reveal a functional organization in which each part plays a necessary role, and that the exercise of rationality constitutes human freedom and finds its highest achievement in political cosmopolitanism. Kant followed Augustine in seeing a providential significance

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in history; but Augustine distinguished the divine ordinance of the City of God from the temporal human city, while Kant focused on the way that human strivings – often antagonistically and inadvertently – bring about a realization of chiliastic hopes within human history. Like Grotius, he held that there are universal natural laws that, in conformity with human rationality, govern political and moral right among nations. While he agreed with Grotius that these laws are discovered rationally rather than empirically, Kant did not follow Grotius in resting the necessity and legitimacy of rational laws on divine authority. Nor did he share Grotius' assumption that human beings were naturally sociable; indeed, the species' fundamental unsociability looms large in his argument. Like Hobbes, Kant thought that peace and political organization arise from the rational recognition that competition and conflicts endanger the natural human inclination to self-protection. But Hobbes posited rationality as a precondition for the possibility of political organization, while Kant thought that rational civic organization emerged gradually from the recognition that antagonism threatens the natural instinct of self-preservation.

Along with Mandeville, Leibniz and Adam Smith, Kant maintained that there is a hidden pattern, a law that underlies – and harmonizes – the apparently destructive narrowly self-interested activities of mankind; the hidden hand of nature is manifest to those who know how to read history and economics aright. Yet in contrast to Mandeville, he did not believe that public virtue emerges from private vices: it is the product of rationally constructed political institutions. Like Smith, Kant thought that morality requires self-legislating reflective activity; but where Smith saw the origins of such activity in the development of moral sentiments, Kant located it in the activity of the rational will.

Kant shared Rousseau's distrust in the ability of social affections to provide a reliable source of rational morality. And, like Rousseau, he followed the Stoics in constructing a mythical story – a kind of natural history – of stages in the emergence of rational self-legislation. He shared Rousseau's conviction that the achievement of constitutional political organization is key to a just civil society and that genuine individual and political freedom consists in autonomy rather than in unrestricted inclination. But while Rousseau assumed that such harmony is possible only in small, isolated polities, Kant argued that only a cosmopolitan political organization can ensure the peace required to achieve such autonomy. Although he agreed with Leibniz that a providential order underlies the apparent random chaos of nature, he dissented from Leibniz's view that cosmic harmony expresses divine will. Moreover, while Leibniz's divinely ordained harmony is atemporal, Kant thought that cosmopolitan harmony could be attained by free human activity

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through a long and antagonistic struggle: what Leibniz argued was an implication of metaphysics becomes, for Kant, the product of history.

Kant's successors echoed many of his essay's central insights, but – once detached from broader argument in which he had situated them – their significance was radically modified. Hegel also saw history as a narrative of the antagonistic but providentially progressive emergence of a rational and self-legislative world order, but he had reservations about what he saw as Kant's utopian hopes for a cosmopolitan world order. Marx shared Kant's conviction that history is driven forward by paradoxes and contradictions, but the concern with rights that lay at the heart of Kant's account of civil society played no role in his theory of society. Darwin and his followers would, like Kant, insist that the evolution of species is not the work of individuals (and, indeed, does not necessarily redound to their benefit), but they rejected his attempt to find signs of providence in the workings of nature. In the end, the precipitate from Kant's synthesized compound would prove as diverse as the elements that composed it.

If we take Kant at his word, the immediate impetus for his audacious synthesis was modest enough. A note by his colleague Johann Schultz in the *Gothaische Gelehrte Zeitung* had reported that Kant's "favorite idea" was the notion that "the final end of humankind is the attainment of the most perfect political constitution" and that Kant hoped a "philosophical historiographer" might undertake a history that would show "how far humanity has approached this final end in different ages, or how far removed it has been from it, and what is still to be done for its attainment." As Kant explained in the prefatory footnote, he wrote the article out of a concern that, in the absence of the "elucidation" that he now sought to provide, Schultz's summary "would have no meaning" (8:15).

Readers today typically encounter *Idea for a Universal History* in anthologies of Kant's writings on history or political thought. However, when it debuted in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* of November 1784 it appeared in markedly different company. Edited by Johann Erich Biester (librarian of the Royal Library in Berlin and secretary to Baron Karl Abraham von Zedlitz, a champion of Kant's work who served as Frederick II's minister for ecclesiastical and educational affairs) and Friedrich Gedike (a prominent educational reformer and Gymnasium director), the journal had been launched the previous December with the hope that it might attract writers who shared a "zeal for truth, love for the dissemination of useful enlightenment and for the banishment of pernicious error."¹ *Idea for a Universal*

¹ Editors' foreword to *Berlinische Monatsschrift* I (1783), pp. vii–viii.

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History was the lead article – a testimony, perhaps, both to Kant's growing reputation and to Biester and Gedike's sense of the importance of his contribution for the broader aim of their fledgling journal – in an issue that included a series of reports (assembled by Biester) documenting the religious fanaticism, medical quackery, and popular prejudices that still held sway over the citizenry of Berlin, and the latest installment of an account of the social and cultural life of Berlin and its environs, allegedly written by an anonymous foreigner (who was not shy in pointing out the ways in which Berliners remained less than enlightened) but, in fact, the work of Biester's co-editor Gedike.² While the contributions from Gedike and Biester reflected the journal's interest in exposing – and, through this exposure, attempting to overcome – impediments to the enlightenment of the citizenry, a third item in the issue demonstrated how much had already been accomplished. The article in question was a reprint of a sermon from the previous century in which an earnest, but obviously unenlightened, clergyman sought to find theological significance in the recent birth of a pair of monstrously deformed piglets. As J. G. Selden observed in his prefatory note, however much the population of Berlin was still at the mercy of quacks and religious enthusiasts, one could take some consolation that its clergy had become somewhat more enlightened.³

Idea for a Universal History was the first of sixteen articles – addressing topics which ranged across the fields of ethics, history, anthropology, natural philosophy, and politics – that Kant contributed to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* over the next decade and a half.⁴ It was here that he published such well-known works as his answer to the question “What is Enlightenment?” (December 1784), “What is Orientation in Thinking?” (October 1786) – his intervention in the so-called “Pantheism Controversy,” the first chapter of *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason* (1792), and his extended account of the relationship between theory and practice (September 1793), along with less familiar contributions to the fields of natural history (essays on lunar volcanoes and the alleged influence of the moon on the weather), theology (among them, his critique of Leibniz's *Theodicy*), anthropology (an essay on the concept of race), and law (a discussion of book piracy). In the pages of the *Berlinische*

² [Biester], “Anekdoten,” *Berlinische Monatsschrift* II (1784), pp. 428–46, and [Gedike], “Ueber Berlin. Von einem Fremden,” *Berlinische Monatsschrift* II (1784), pp. 447–70.

³ J. G. Selden, “Auszug aus einer märkischen Bußpredigt wegen zwei monströser Ferkel,” *Berlinische Monatsschrift* II (1784), pp. 471–9.

⁴ For Kant's relationship with the journal, see Peter Weber, “Kant und die *Berlinische Monatsschrift*,” in Dina Edmundts, ed., *Immanuel Kant und die Berliner Aufklärung* (Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Riechert Verlag, 2000), pp. 60–79.

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Monatsschrift, Kant cut a rather different figure from that of the author of the three critiques: his general stance is more casual, the positions he takes up more frankly experimental, and his style considerably more accessible. He appears in a role that today would be described as that of “public intellectual”; in the terminology of his own day, it was here that he played his part as a member of the cosmopolitan community of readers and writers who made up the “Republic of Letters.”

In these essays, Kant made the cause of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* his own. Toward the close of his response to an article in the journal that, in passing, requested that those who had argued for the “enlightenment” of the citizenry first answer the question “What is enlightenment?,” Kant pondered the question of whether his was an “enlightened age.” He offered the cautious, but hopeful, response, “No, but it is an age of enlightenment” (8:40). *Idea for a Universal History* shared the same hope that the barriers that prevented the spread of enlightenment were in the process of being dismantled. Its eighth proposition held out the prospect that the removal of restrictions on the freedom of citizens, when coupled with a “general freedom of religion,” would result in an “enlightenment” that would “raise humankind even out of the selfish aims of aggrandizement on the part of its rulers ...” and “ascend bit by bit up to the thrones and have its influence even on their principles of government” (8:27).

In May 1793, the Berlin book merchant Carl Spener suggested to Kant that he produce an expanded version of the essay, applying its principles to the tumultuous events that had taken place in France. Kant declined, commenting that when “the powerful of this world are in a drunken fit” it would be advisable for “a pygmy who values his skin to stay out of their fight” (11:417). He did, however, return to the concerns of the essay four months later in his contribution to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* “On the Common Saying: That May be True in Theory, But it is of No Use in Practice,” an article whose final section considered the relationship of theory and practice “from a universally philanthropic, that is, cosmopolitan point of view” (8:307–9). The arguments first broached in *Idea for a Universal History* were given a more thorough reconsideration in *Toward Perpetual Peace* (1795) and in the sections of the *Metaphysics of Morals* (1797) devoted to “the right of nations” and to “cosmopolitan right” (6:343–55).

Kant’s essay has never lacked admirers. A chance encounter with it was enough to convince the poet Friedrich Schiller that he needed to engage in a more extensive reading of Kant’s work. In its pages Ernst Cassirer found the foundation for “the new conception of the essence of the state and of history that Kant had developed” and Jürgen Habermas was struck by the

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“system-exploding” implications of an intertwining of philosophy and history in which “the philosophy of history itself was to become a part of the enlightenment diagnosed as history’s course.”⁵ But *Idea for a Universal History* has tended to be overshadowed by *Towards Perpetual Peace*, a work that was both more circumscribed in its theoretical apparatus and more focused in its political proposals. Friedrich Meinecke, for instance, paid little attention to the *Idea for a Universal History* in his classic study *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* and discussions of Kant’s work by international relations theorists have tended to focus chiefly on *Towards Perpetual Peace*.⁶

The *Idea* has also long been available to English readers. It was among the first of Kant’s works to be translated, appearing alongside Kant’s response to the question “What is enlightenment?,” his discussion of the relation between theory and practice, *Towards Perpetual Peace*, the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, and a number of his other contributions to the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* in John Richardson’s two-volume collection of Kant’s *Essays and Treatises on Moral, Political, and Various Philosophical Subjects* (1798–9).⁷ A second translation, by Thomas De Quincy, appeared in the *London Magazine* of October 1824 and, five years later, the Lake Poet Robert Southey interpolated De Quincy’s translation of the propositions (but not Kant’s comments on them) into *Thomas More, or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society*.⁸ It was rendered into English once again at the close of the nineteenth century in William Hastie’s collection *Kant’s Principles of Politics* (1891).⁹ The emigré political scientist Carl Friedrich provided a partial translation of the essay in his 1949 compendium of Kant’s philosophical and political writings.¹⁰ But Friedrich was chiefly interested in

⁵ Ernst Cassirer, *Kant’s Life and Thought* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 223. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1989), p. 116.

⁶ Friedrich Meinecke, *Cosmopolitanism and the National State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970). The focus of *Towards Perpetual Peace* among theorists of international relations stems, in large part, from its framing of what has come to be known as the law of the “liberal peace” – the thesis that republics will be less inclined to make war on one another. For a recent discussion of the literature, see Huntley, “Kant’s Third Image: Systematic Sources of the Liberal Peace,” *International Studies Quarterly* 40, 1 (1996).

⁷ Emanuel Kant, *Essays and Treatises on Moral, Political, and Various Philosophical Subjects* (London: William Richardson, 1798).

⁸ Kant, “Ideal for a Universal History on a Cosmo-Political Plan,” *London Magazine* 10 (October 1824), pp. 385–93 (reprinted in *The Works of Thomas De Quincy*, ed. Frederick Burwick [London: Pickering and Chatto, 2000], 4:204–16); Robert Southey, *Sir Thomas More, Or, Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (London: John Murray, 1829), p. 408. Montesinos, More’s partner in dialogue, praises Kant’s work as an exception to “the trash and tinsel and insolent flippancy” that typically appears in literary magazines.

⁹ William Hastie, ed., *Kant’s Principles of Politics* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1891), pp. 1–29.

¹⁰ Carl Joachim Friedrich, *The Philosophy of Kant* (New York: Random House, 1949), pp. 116–31.

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Towards Perpetual Peace, in part because of the chronological accident of the sesquicentennial of its publication's falling in the same year as the founding of the United Nations.¹¹ A more serious engagement with *Idea for a Universal History* had to await Emil Fackenheim's discussion of Kant's writings on history in *Kant-Studien* and Lewis White Beck's influential collection of Kant's writings on history.¹²

The motifs of Kant's "Idea" continue to echo in the problems and issues central to contemporary philosophy and the philosophy of history. Historians and philosophers alike remain concerned about whether it is appropriate to speak of grand narratives of historical 'progress' or 'development.' Political and economic theorists argue about the relation between nationalism, global economics and cosmopolitanism. Social psychologists attempt to understand the sources of – and the constraints on – human aggression, the "unsocial sociability" of mankind. Public intellectuals wonder whether philosophical history – as it goes beyond local or national narratives – can play a role in ensuring civil justice.

Our authors have contributed to the further interpretation and understanding of the complexity and the audacity of Kant's synthesis. Allison explores the role that assumptions about teleology play in the essay, while Ameriks examines the way in which Kant applied the concept of purposiveness to his discussion of the development of human capacities. Kuehn focuses on the differing assumptions about human progress that distinguish Kant's arguments from those of his contemporaries. Schneewind and Wood shed new light on what was perhaps the most novel concept in Kant's arsenal: the notion that the progress of the human species is the product of its "unsociable sociability." Taking his point of departure from Kant's famous image of the human race as a "crooked timber" that could never be made "entirely straight," Guyer traces the evolution of Kant's reflections on justice. Herman analyzes the emergence and aims of civil society while Kleingeld explores the transformation of Kant's conception of cosmopolitanism. Förster analyzes the way in which *Idea for a Universal History* bound together the concepts of history, nature, and the development of the species, while Lloyd explores his debts to – and departures from – earlier accounts of

¹¹ This coincidence was the point of departure for Carl J. Friedrich, "The Ideology of the United Nations Charter and the Philosophy of Peace of Immanuel Kant 1795–1945," *Journal of Politics* 9, 1 (1947).

¹² Emil Fackenheim, "Kant's Concept of History," *Kant-Studien* 48 (1956–7). Lewis White Beck, ed., *Kant on History* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 11–26. Beck's collection was quickly followed by Hans Reiss, ed., *Kant: Political Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), and Immanuel Kant, *Perpetual Peace and Other Essays*, translated by Ted Humphrey (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983).

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the role of providence in history. Pinkard reflects on Kant's treatment (crucial for later German idealists) of the relationship between philosophical norms and historical facts and Bittner offers some reservations about the role that Kant assigned to philosophy in the history that he constructed. These essays, we hope, will serve to remind readers of the richness and subtlety of Kant's essay and to serve as a provocation for further engagement with its far-reaching implications.

The editors want to thank Allen Wood for permission to reprint his translation of *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim*, from the Cambridge Edition of *Kant's Writings on Anthropology, History and Education*, ed. Guenther Zoeller and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge University Press, 2007), and Karen Carroll for her generous editorial help. Amélie Rorty is also grateful to the *gemütlich* hospitality of the National Humanities Center and its grant of the William C. and Ida Friday Fellowship. James Schmidt thanks the Boston University Humanities Foundation for its support.

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Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim

TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION

This essay appears to have been occasioned by a passing remark made by Kant's colleague and follower Johann Schultz in a 1784 article in the *Gotha Learned Papers*.¹ In order to make good on Schultz's remark, Kant wrote this article, which appeared in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* late in the same year.

This is the first, and despite its brevity the most fully worked out, statement of his philosophy of history. The "idea" referred to in the title is a *theoretical* idea, that is, an a priori conception of a theoretical program to maximize the comprehensibility of human history. It anticipates much of the theory of the use of natural teleology in the theoretical understanding of nature that Kant was to develop over five years later in the *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. But this theoretical idea also stands in a close and complex relationship to Kant's moral and political philosophy, and to his conception of practical faith in divine providence. Especially prominent in it is the first statement of Kant's famous conception of a federation of states united to secure perpetual peace between nations.

The *Idea for a Universal History* also contained several propositions that were soon to be disputed by J. G. Herder in his *Ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Humanity*, leading to Kant's reply in his reviews of that work (1785) and in the *Conjectural Beginning of Human History* (1786).

Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht was first published in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* IV (November 11, 1784). The translation is based on the presentation of the work in AA 2:15–31 and was undertaken by Allen W. Wood.

¹ The passage referred to is the following: "A favorite idea of Professor Kant is that the final end of humankind is the attainment of the most perfect political constitution, and he wishes that a philosophical historiographer would undertake to provide us in this respect with a history of humanity, and to show how far humanity has approached this final end in different ages, or how far removed it has been from it, and what is still to be done for its attainment" (AA 8:468).

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[8:17] Whatever concept one may form of the *freedom of the will* with a metaphysical aim, its *appearances*, the human actions, are determined just as much as every other natural occurrence in accordance with universal laws of nature. History, which concerns itself with the narration of these appearances, however deeply concealed their causes may be, nevertheless allows us to hope from it that if it considers the play of the freedom of the human will *in the large*, it can discover within it a regular course; and that in this way what meets the eye in individual subjects as confused and irregular yet in the whole species can be recognized as a steadily progressing though slow development of its original predispositions. Thus marriages, the births that come from them and deaths, since the free will of human beings has so great an influence on them, seem to be subject to no rule in accordance with which their number could be determined in advance through calculation; and yet the annual tables of them in large countries prove that they happen just as much in accordance with constant laws of nature, as weather conditions which are so inconstant, whose individual occurrence one cannot previously determine, but which on the whole do not fail to sustain the growth of plants, the course of streams, and other natural arrangements in a uniform uninterrupted course. Individual human beings and even whole nations² think little about the fact, since while each pursues its own aim in its own way³ and one often contrary to another, they 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 to them.

Since human beings in their endeavors do not behave merely instinctively, like animals, and yet also not on the whole like rational citizens of the world in accordance with an agreed upon plan, no history of them in conformity to a plan (as e.g. of bees or of beavers) appears to be possible. One cannot resist feeling a certain indignation when one sees their doings and refrainings on the great stage of the world and finds that [8:18] despite the wisdom appearing now and then in individual cases, everything in the large is woven together out of folly, childish vanity, often also out of childish

* A passage among the short notices in the twelfth issue of the *Göttinger Gelehrten Anzeigen* this year, no doubt taken from my conversation with a passing scholar, elicits from me this elucidation, without which that passage would have no comprehensible meaning.

² *Völker* ³ *nach seinem Sinne*