I Wish to Speak a Word for Nature: The Role of Nature in Kant’s Conception of Utopia

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As an environmentalist and steward of the Earth, I wish to speak a word for the natural world when it cannot do so itself. In conversation with a mentor, I was quick to question the role of Nature in utopia. My mentor commented that, “There are no disasters in utopia. Nature cannot function without disasters. Therefore, there can be no utopias in nature or no nature in utopia.”1 The response has proven to be an effective summary of how modern thinkers like Descartes and Kant had come to view the role of Nature in utopia: there was no role. Ultimately, Nature was a factor that could be mastered by humans, and in a final utopian state, Nature will have been overcome. Kant presents a detailed argument of this in his *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Purpose*. However, by doing so, I argue that Kant creates a tension with man’s place in Nature, and this proves to be problematic in our quest for utopia.

An understanding of Kant’s *Universal History* must be presented before the tensions can be unveiled. In his *Universal History*, Kant succinctly presents nine propositions that expand on the history of man and the role of Nature in this history. He begins with discussion about vestigial organs and reason. For Kant, reason is passed from generation to generation. The first and second propositions are relatively short and do not pertain much to my argument. Kant’s third proposition is where the argument truly begins. In his third proposition, Kant claims that it is in Nature’s intentions to transcend Nature. Kant claims that Nature has given man just enough reason in the beginning to overcome his “uttermost barbarism,” and that as reason progresses and reaches “the highest degree of skill,” it is not Nature that man should thank, but man himself, because it will be man that has progressed.2


2. Immanuel Kant, “Idea For a Universal History,” in *Political Writings*, 2nd ed., ed. H. S. Reiss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 43. All further references to Kant in this essay are from this source.
Kant declares in proposition four that this progression of reason will occur because of man’s “unsocial sociability;” the need for man to be around other humans and form societies, but with a resistance against society always looming. According to Kant, “Man has an inclination to live in society, since he feels in this state more like a man, that is, he feels able to develop his natural capacities. But he also has a great tendency to live as an individual, to isolate himself, since he also encounters in himself the unsocial characteristic of wanting to direct everything in accordance with his own ideas.” Kant credits Nature for this struggle, and is thankful that this struggle is apparent. Without this struggle, Kant argues that man would have nothing driving him to reach this highest state of reason, and that life would be remarkably dull. He even goes as far as to praise Nature for this, writing that this struggle is “the design of a wise creator—not, as it might seem, the hand of a malicious spirit who had meddled in the creator’s glorious work or spoiled it out of envy.”

The third and fourth propositions unite in Kant’s fifth proposition. For Kant, “The highest purpose of nature—i.e. the development of all natural capacities—can be fulfilled for mankind only in society, and nature intends that man should accomplish this . . . by his own efforts.” In order for this to be actualized, a just civil constitution must be established, “a society in which freedom under external laws would be combined to the greatest possible extent with irresistible force.” However, Kant makes clear in his sixth proposition that the actualization of this society is the most challenging problem to be solved by humans, and has yet to be solved. It is in this sixth proposition where some tension can be noted.

The sixth proposition states that man, “as a rational creature, . . . desires a law to impose limits on the freedom of all,” and “thus requires a master to break his self-will and force him to obey a universally valid will under which everyone can be free.” This master is found in human beings, and not in an entity like

3. Kant, 44.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 45.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., 46.
9. Ibid.
Nature. However, humans will also require a master, since human is still animal, and Kant, perhaps unknowingly, sets the stage for a hierarchy of masters. If human is still animal, which Kant claims, then man will still need to obey the master that is Nature. Kant is adamant that man is the master and “highest authority,” but this authority must also “be just in itself.”

Fortunately, the seventh proposition addresses the concern over who is the ruler. Man must be master of himself, man will create masters in their societies, and societies will inevitably have to create masters. To use an example in the present, we can look at federal governments and leaders of countries. They are rulers of the states and territories that they preside over, but these states and territories will have rulers as well. States will have towns and cities, and mayors will rule towns and cities, and each human will be responsible for their self in these cities. Kant reminds us of man’s unsociable sociability, and how this creates conflicts from person to person, town to town, and country to country, which can lead to war and upheaval. In order to resolve such conflicts, man must step back from his primitive nature and resort to his rational nature to resolve the conflict and establish peace.

Kant gives a nod to Rousseau and his savage man, but reminds us that humans are civilized and cultivated; we have “art and science,” we have “social courtesies and properties.” However, Kant admits “we are still a long way from the point where we could consider ourselves morally mature.” We still prioritize colonization and expansion of territory, and until these appetites can be curbed, no progress can be made toward a more morally mature society.

Kant’s eighth proposition states, “The history of the human race as a whole can be regarded as the realization of a hidden plan of nature to bring about an internally—and for this purpose also externally—perfect political constitution as the only possible state within which all natural capacities of mankind can be developed completely.” First, Kant clarifies that if we have knowledge of the intentions of this fulfillment of Nature, then we can speed up the process, if even by a little. Like the cosmos that astronomers have tracked for centuries, we can track our progression through history, so long as we are knowledgeable about it.

10. Ibid.
11. Ibid., 47.
12. Ibid., 49.
13. Ibid., 50.
Although the present generation, or even the generation following the present, may not be able to reap the benefits of this progression, Kant claims that future generations will benefit greatly, and the present generations should have awareness of what is to come in order to best prepare for the upcoming changes. Societies will have reached a point where freedom of religion is allowed, education is highly valued, wars and conflicts will seem meaningless and are unwanted, and civil liberties will not be infringed upon. For Kant, this is an age where “enlightenment gradually arises.” It is in this state that his “universal cosmopolitan existence” is realized, and humans will have transcended Nature, and therefore, transcended the struggle of the unsociable sociable man.

Kant’s final and ninth proposition is that although the realization of such a cosmopolitan existence may be impossible, we must regard this existence “as possible and even as capable of furthering the purpose of nature itself.” Kant reminds us of the history of the rise and downfall of Greeks, Romans, and barbarians, and remarks that “we should observe how their inherent defects led to their overthrow, but in such a way that a germ of enlightenment always survived, developing further with each revolution, and prepared the way for a subsequent higher level of improvement.” If a cosmopolitan existence cannot be realized, perhaps we can appreciate our improvements from the past, and aspire to push ourselves closer and closer to the telos that Kant has presented us with.

In his lecture “The Death of Utopia Reconsidered,” Kolakowski displays his admiration for “Kant’s theory of the radical evil and his belief in the indefinite progression of rationality,” and deems both “useful” in mankind’s present search for utopia. At the conclusion of his lecture, Kolakowski remarks:

He did believe, though, in the calling of the human race, in a teleologically propelled movement, the end of which we can never achieve or locate in time—an asymptotic growth, as it were—and which we nonetheless always have to keep in mind if we want to remain human. These two complementary sides of his “as-if” philosophy—a belief in a perpetual

14. Ibid., 51.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 52.
motion, loaded with struggles and contradictions, toward a goal, and a disbelief that the goal might ever be effectively reached—are certainly reconcilable in philosophical terms.

Kolakowski notices this tension in Kantian philosophy that Kant has also presented to us: an end that humans will never reach, but an end that must be kept in mind, despite its inability to be realized. This tension is, more or less, realistic. Kant accepts that the realization of this cosmopolitan existence is impossible, or near impossible, but to take note of its importance and potential hope that it offers the present generation and future generations is imperative. However, tensions arise in Kant’s *Universal History* from the importance of Nature.

Kant fails to realize the importance of Nature and the relation of human beings to this overall. In his fourth proposition, Kant exclaims that, “Nature should thus be thanked for fostering social incompatibility, enviously competitive vanity, and insatiable desires for possession or even power.” Kant puts the blame on Nature for the supposed faults of humans, and gives humans the credit of rationality. Kant’s incorporation of Nature involves only the struggle between the rational and the irrational social incompatibility. Nature should be given credit for both the struggle and the rational. Despite the fact that man is the only rational being, this is the result of Nature’s teleology, and credit must be given when due. It is no different than the example that Kant brings forward in the fifth proposition. If a tree encounters no competition for resources, the tree is more than likely to grow twisted and warped, to absorb as many resources as possible and without any barriers blocking it from doing so. If a tree is surrounded by other trees, and all are equally competing for resources, then the trees will be forced to grow straight up, because there is nowhere else to grow. The tree is forced to discipline itself when surrounded by others, but alone, the tree is not disciplined and will grow as it pleases. Nature is involved and credited with the creation and realization of both the individual warped tree and group of perfectly vertical trees.

The sixth proposition, as noted above, is a large area where Kant fails to recognize the importance of Nature for humans. He does not offer the solution of Nature as the master of humans. Failure to recognize the importance of Nature on the hierarchy of humans is almost like eliminating the niche of humans from the

18. Kant, 45.
natural world. Kant is adamant on the fact that this highest authority must be both “just in itself and . . . a man,”19 but by acknowledging Nature as a master of humans and as, perhaps, the highest authority, there may be some sort of potential in the actualization of Kant’s cosmopolitan existence. Nature would also provide a universal means for this ideal existence to be actualized. If we accept that human beings are part of the natural world, we must also recognize the universal importance that Nature has played in human history. Empires have been destroyed not only by wars, but with assistance of bacteria and viruses. Famines that have demolished populations have been attributed to floods and fungi. To transcend Nature would be to demolish one of the most crucial parts of our history that has stood by humans since the beginning of time.

Perhaps the largest tension that Kant has given us is found in the eighth proposition. Kant claims that Nature’s plan is hidden, yet here he is presenting Nature’s plan. Nature is subject to change at any given movement, and though humans have tried and tried to accurately predict the future of the natural world and the teleology of Nature, we have failed countless times. It is an approach that conservation biologists take when attempting to preserve an endangered species. They may present potential solutions as to how to best approach the situation of saving a species, but ultimately, these are educated predications, and can still fail.

The precautionary principle, often used by those in environmental policy, is another example. The principle is used in attempts to justify a decision that is being made that has potential of harm, especially to the environment, and when scientific knowledge is lacking for something that has a potentially immediate threat. The Kyoto Protocol is a fine example of this principle. It is impossible to accurately predict what Nature’s intentions are, yet Kant is doing this. Not only is Kant doing this, but also, he is using this as a way to speed up man’s teleology. This could potentially place man down an “incorrect” path that Nature was not intending humans to ultimately arrive at, but one that humans are ultimately placing over importance and value of Nature’s intended telos.

Kant’s failure to incorporate humans into the natural world and failure to give proper credit to Nature’s importance was a notable tension in reviewing these propositions. Although some may argue that Nature can only be given so much credit, and that Nature has no place in the place that is no place, we can be reminded of our appreciation for the struggle that Nature has placed on us.

19. Ibid., 46.
Without this struggle, our lives may be pathetic existences, more so than they are already, and we would have no drive in attempting to achieve a utopian state. Especially in times where it is absurd to agree with science and accept the inevitable proof that humans have contributed significantly to climate change, it is worth the reminder of our place in Nature, and the credit we must give to Nature as the only rational beings who may be able to do so.

Bibliography

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