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# THE PRACTICAL-REGULATIVE TELEOLOGY AND THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSAL HISTORY IN THE *CRITIQUE OF PURE REASON*

Joel Thiago Klein<sup>1</sup>

Before beginning my analysis, let me clarify what I understand by a practical-regulative teleology. While the theoretical-regulative teleology is based on a theoretical interest of reason and makes possible a theoretical use of the ideas of reason and a theoretical teleology, the practical regulative concept is based on a practical interest of reason and makes possible a practical use of the ideas of reason. On the one hand, in practical teleology is in question the idea of a wise and morally benevolent creator of the world and the derivative idea of a morally beneficent nature, i.e., the idea of a nature that fosters the achievement of moral ends to human species. On the other hand, *theoretical teleology* is based solely on the idea of a wise creator of the world and its derivative idea of a well organized nature, but not in the idea of well organized nature that fosters *moral ends*.<sup>2</sup> Therefore both have different sources and different uses. While one is useful to the field of human action, the other has its utility for the field of cognition.

Moreover, it is also noteworthy that practical-*regulative* teleology is distinct from practical-*constitutive* teleology. A practical-constitutive teleology would be the description of human actions insofar as they follow from the moral law, that is, with respect to the immanent purposes of the agent's moral will. This could be approximated to the categorical imperative in its formulation as a kingdom of ends and the theory of moral ends presented in the *Doctrine of Virtue*. In turn the practical-regulative teleology goes beyond the limits of action of a single agent's will. It is not the end of an individual agent, but ends of the human <https://doi.org/10.36311/2020.978-85-7983-928-3.p291-302>

species and to embrace such moral view is necessary to assume a higher point of view of a *Nature*, which acts through *human nature* to ensure the continued progress of its natural dispositions. But this practical-regulative teleology has a different status for reason in its practical use as the practical-constitutive teleology. While practical reason demands without exception that we consider all rational beings as ends in themselves and establishes moral ends, it can not demand that the agent alone realizes the progress for human species. That is why practical-constitutive teleology is part of the answer to the question “What should I do?”, while practical-regulative teleology is part of the answer to the question “What may I hope?” While one refers to duty, the other refers to hope. Before examine the text itself, I must also stress that at no place Kant uses this terminology, but I hope to show in my analysis that the concepts are.

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In this paper I defend that there is a practical-regulative concept of teleology “hidden” in the *Canon of pure reason*. According to Kant, *Canon* stands for ‘the sum total of the *apriori* principles of the correct use of certain cognitive faculties in general.’ (KANT, 1998, p. 672; *CPR*, A796/B824). Moreover *there is just one canon of pure reason*, occurring in the *practical use*, i.e., there is only a canon for pure practical laws, namely the moral laws ‘whose end is given by reason completely a priori, and which do not command under empirical conditions but absolutely’ (KANT, 1998, p. 674; *CPR*, A800/B828).

It is in this context of practical philosophy that Kant asserts:

Pure reason thus contains - not in its speculative use, to be sure, but yet in a certain practical use, namely the moral use - principles of the *possibility of experience*, namely of those actions in conformity with moral precepts which *could* be encountered in the *history* of humankind. For since they command that these actions ought to happen, they must also be able to happen, and there must therefore be possible a special kind of systematic unity, namely the moral [...]. (KANT, 1998, p. 678; *CPR*, A807/B835).

If practical reason is legislative, i.e., if practical reason has ‘principles of the possibility of experience’, then it should be possible to encounter these

actions in the ‘*history* of humankind’. This possibility, by its turn, cannot be accidental, but should be given under a ‘special kind of systematical unity’, which could not be proven ‘*in accordance with speculative principles of reason [...]*, since reason has causality with regard to freedom in general but not with regard to the whole of nature, and moral principles of reason can produce free actions but not laws of nature.’ (KANT, 1998, p. 678; CPR, A807/B835).

It is important to keep in mind that the issue under discussion here arise from the context of the famous questions: ‘1. What can I know? 2. What should I do? 3. What may I hope?’ In this case, it might be quite enlightening if one realized that, starting from an ambiguity present in the third question, Kant divides the argumentation of the text into *two parts*. In the first (KANT, 1998, p. 678-682; CPR, A808/B836 - A815/B843), he starts off his argumentation with the notion of a *moral world*, as an intelligible world, to the concept of a *realm of grace*, in which ‘one attends only to rational beings and their interconnection in accordance with moral laws under the rule of the highest good’ (KANT, 1998, p. 680; CPR, A812/B840). Along this line, Kant answers the third question from the perspective of the *moral individual* and tries to legitimate notions as God (who ensures the fair distribution between happiness and being worthy of happiness) and a future life (immortality of the soul) (KANT, 1998, p. 679-680; CPR, A810/B838).

In the second part (KANT, 1998, p. 682-684; CPR, A815/B843-A818/B846), the argument starts from the practical concept of God, as an omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent and eternal being, and tries to put both the intelligible world (determined by the legislation of freedom) *and the sensible world* (determined by the legislation of nature) *within the same system*. Therefore this systematical unity ‘**leads inexorably to the purposive unity of all things** that constitute this great whole, in accordance with universal laws of nature, just as the first does in accordance with universal and necessary moral laws, and unifies practical with speculative reason.’ (KANT, 1998, p. 682; CPR, A815/B843, **bold letters added**) From this point on, the perspective does not focus on answering the question of individuals’ hope, but opens up the potential view of the *whole human species* and its existence in *this world*. Following this line of thinking Kant continues:

**All research into nature is thereby directed toward the form of a system of ends, and becomes, in its fullest extension, physico-the-**

**ology.** This [...] brings the purposiveness of nature down to grounds that must be inseparably connected *a priori* to the inner possibility of things, and thereby leads to a *transcendental theology* that takes the ideal of the highest ontological perfection as a principle of systematic unity, which connects **all things** in accordance with universal and necessary laws of nature, since they all have their origin in the absolute necessity of a single original being. (KANT, 1998, p. 682-683; *CPR*, A816/B844, **bold letters added**).

The statement that ‘all research into nature is thereby directed toward the form of a system of ends’ means, in my eyes, a form of practical teleological conception of nature and of world. Even though Kant does not use the term practical-regulative teleology, he is using this concept. This can only be the case, because it is a system that includes the physical nature and relies on the practical concept of the ‘ideal of the highest ontological perfection as a principle’. Kant leaves no doubt that he believes that only ‘moral theology has the peculiar advantage over the speculative one that it inexorably leads to the concept of a *single, most perfect, and rational* primordial being.’ (KANT, 1998, p. 682; *CPR*, A814/B842). In other words, the ideal of ontological perfection reached from a moral point of view enable us to unify nature and freedom, not in some intelligible world, but throughout its fullest extension until to becoming a ‘physico-theology’.

In an opposite interpretation Kleingeld states that when Kant says that ‘[a]ll research into nature is thereby directed toward the form of a system of ends’ (KANT, 1998, p. 682-683; *CPR*, A816/B844), then it ‘remains unclear whether Kant thinks the harmony between nature and morality requires a teleological natural order, or whether a systematic unity of mechanical causal laws might do as well.’ (KLEINGELD, 1998, p. 331f) In my view it does not make sense to think that the mechanical laws of nature would permit us to imagine some union between nature and freedom, because the only thing that we are allowed to envision, in the theoretical point of view worked out in the first Critique, is that there is no contradiction between thinking nature and freedom as both being possible (which was established in the resolution of the *Third Antinomy*). However, to idealize such a union in a system, i.e. legitimize the thinking that both build together a system, then this is only possible from the concept of a practical-regulative teleology.<sup>3</sup>

Regarding the use of such a concept of practical purposiveness or practical-regulative teleology in nature, Kant is carefule enough to add that ‘we still cannot even make any purposive use of knowledge of nature **in perspective of cognition** unless nature itself has introduced purposive unity; for without this we would not even have any reason’ (KANT, p. 1998, p. 683; *CPR*, A816f/B844f, translation modified, **bold letters added**). *This means that one cannot make a theoretical use of a concept of purpose that was aroused and legitimized in the practical use of reason.* If the ‘[m]oral theology is therefore only of immanent use, namely for fulfilling our vocation here in the world by fitting into the system of all ends’ (KANT, 1998, p. 684; *CPR*, A819/B847), then the same occurs with this concept of practical-regulative teleology or practical purposiveness, which is derived from that concept. In other words, the only legitimate use to be made of the concept of practical-regulative teleology is that which promotes the practical ends of reason and does not try to take the place of empirical research regarding the theoretical interest of reason.

From this essentially practical perspective, one can think of human history as a history of progress. After all, “those actions in conformity with moral precepts [...] *could* be encountered in the *history* of humankind”. Like theology, it is possible to say *mutatis mutandis* that this practical-regulative teleology

is in perfect agreement with the moral principles of reason. And thus, in the end, only pure reason, although only in its practical use, always has the merit of connecting with our highest interest a cognition that mere speculation can only imagine but never make valid, and of thereby making it into not a demonstrated dogma but yet an absolutely necessary presupposition for reason’s most essential ends. (KANT, 1998, p. 684; *CPR*, A818/B846).

Based on these essential ends of reason, it is no wonder that three years later Kant wrote an essay entitled *Idea for a universal history with a cosmopolitan aim*. It was intended to develop a universal history according to a practical teleology whose aim was to promote the essential ends of reason: which are *practical ones*. Thus Kant’s philosophy of history is a kind of cognition ‘that mere speculation can only imagine but never make valid’. It is not just reason on its theoretical use, but also and after all the reason on its practical use that tries to build a system. I believe that it is in this way that one should read the passage where Kant says that universal history seeks ‘for exhibiting an otherwise planless

*aggregate* of human actions, at least in the large, as a *system*' (KANT, 2007, p. 118; *Idea*, 8.29). However, since reason remains within the boundaries of its practical use, it does not have to answer to same criteria than a theoretical use.<sup>4</sup>

If the interpretation presented here is correct, then it can be said that the ambivalence inherent in the question 'What may I hope?' permits a systematic study of the relationship between transcendental philosophy and the philosophy of history and religion. However, even if universal history and religion fall under the same aegis, neither perspectives can be commingled nor can they be seen, strictly speaking, to converge. The philosophy of religion tries to answer the question "What may I hope for *me* when I do what should I?" whereas the philosophy of history seeks to answer the question "What may I hope for *the human race*, when I do what should I?" "While the former question focuses on individuals and its answer presupposes another world, the second question focuses on the human species and its response must be adequate to this world. In this sense, the practical interest of reason in a universal history looks for opening

a consoling prospect into the future (which without a plan of nature one cannot hope for with any ground), in which the human species is represented in the remote distance as finally working itself upward toward the condition in which all germs nature has placed in it can be fully developed and its vocation here on earth can be fulfilled. Such a *justification* of nature - or better, of *providence* - is no unimportant motive for choosing a particular viewpoint for considering the world. For what does it help to praise the splendor and wisdom of creation in the nonrational realm of nature, and to recommend it to our consideration, if that part of the great showplace of the highest wisdom that contains the end of all this - the history of humankind - is to remain a ceaseless objection against it, the prospect of which necessitates our turning our eyes away from it in disgust and, in despair of ever encountering a completed rational aim in it, to hope for the latter only in another world? (KANT, 2007, p. 119; *Idea*, 8.30).

Thus, in *Canon* Kant grounds practical-regulative use of teleology on the practical interest of reason to build a system in which freedom and nature form one single system and not simply two no contradictory systems existing side by side, but without articulation. I think that this is Kant's strategy of argument in *Canon*, even though he does not present it in a detailed form. That Kant himself was not satisfied with his answer is evident by the fact that he returned to this point in others two *Critiques*. Although the character of the argument are still

*in nuce*, the *Idea* essay is not a dogmatic error because it is legitimized on the basis of practical-regulative use of the ideas of reason, whose foundation and perspective is moral-practical from the beginning.

Finally, it is important to point out that the peculiar nature of the question about hope refers to a possible future state of things, so this is a theoretical question whose answer must also be theoretical: “‘If I do what I should, what may I then hope?’ is simultaneously practical and theoretical, so that the practical leads like a clue to a reply to the theoretical question and, in its highest form, the speculative question.’ (KANT, 1998, p. 677; *CPR*, A805/B833). When we ask about what we may hope, we seek to know how something may happen in the future if we act from duty. Doing what I should, I want to know what I have right to hope for. This is a theoretical question that looks for a theoretical answer, but which essentially depends on an praxis, an action from duty. Therefore, this is a theory of a peculiar kind, a theory which is theoretical useless. It is a theory sustained and driven by practical reason, so it is a theory legitimized only for a practical use. It is a theory in the same sense that the *GMM* and the *CPrR* are a theory about moral duties or how can we realize them.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this concept of *practical-regulative theory* has a completely different meaning as the concept of a *theoretical-regulative theory*.

In Kantian philosophy, theoretical reason cannot assume results of practical reason to build a theory or guide understanding in the search for knowledge, but practical reason can build a theory to satisfy its needs [*Bedürfnisses*] as long as it does not contradicts or hinder the work of theoretical reason.<sup>6</sup> So the project of a universal history is a theory which is theoretical useless and does not belong as a part of philosophy of nature, but only as a part of philosophy of freedom.

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*Some final remarks.* In order to conclude this paper I just want to make some final remarks. First, in my point of view, the claims set out in the preface of *Idea* can be seen as a reflection on Kant’s aim to instigate and to attract the reader’s attention. It is well known, after all, that this essay was not directed merely at an academic audience. Even its role as popularization is linked to



its practical intention, i.e., to convince the readers and specially the kings of the reality of progress and to encourage their contributions to the same. Kant explicitly points out this practical aspect of the universal history as an influx from philosophy into the political *praxis* in the last lines of *Idea*.<sup>7</sup>

Second remark, the *practical* interest regarding the practical-regulative teleology must not be confused with a *pragmatic* one. In the *GMM*, Kant asserts that '*history* is composed pragmatically when it makes *us prudent*, that is, instructs the world how it can look after its advantage better than, or at least as well as, the world of earlier times.' (KANT, 1996, p. 69; *GMM*, 4.417n) Prudence only cares about the sagacity of achieving a durable advantage which may well be limited to a particular and selfish interest. History, which is written with *practical* interest, attempts, in turn, to act on the individuals, politicians and on entire generations and *convince* them that the participation in the construction of a world as it should be, namely of a world accordingly to rational moral ends, is not theoretical meaningless. In other words, the universal history presents a way of how a world may be if we act as we should. Due to the difficulty of this enterprise, Kant admits that 'it appears that with such an aim only a *novel* could be brought about.' Although 'strange and apparently absurd' (KANT, 2007, p. 118; *Idea*, 8.29), Kant believes that his philosophy of history still remains extremely *useful* in the practical field and in accordance with the practical interest of reason insofar as this theory protects morality from skeptical attacks of philosophers ('as such in *Abbé de St. Pierre* and *Rousseau*') (KANT, 2007, p. 114; *Idea*, 8.24) and of *political moralists*. It is no wonder that this becomes one of the main topics of the historical-political writings of the nineties, as such in *On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice* (KANT, 1996, p. 304-309; 8.307-313), *Toward perpetual peace* (KANT, 1996, p. 331-351; 8.361-386) and *The conflict of faculties* (KANT, 2001, p. 297-309; 7.79-94).

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## NOTAS / NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> This became clearer in further works like, for example: "Although the proper concept of *wisdom* represents only a will's property of being in agreement with the highest good as the *final end* of all things, whereas [the concept of] *art* represents only competence in the use of the suitable means toward *optional ends*, yet, when art proves itself adequate to ideas the possibility of which surpasses every insight of human reason (e.g. when means and

ends reciprocally produce one another, as in organic bodies), as a *divine art*, it can also, not incorrectly, be given the name of wisdom - or rather, not to mix up concepts, the name of an *artistic wisdom* of the author of the world, in distinction from his *moral wisdom*. Teleology (and, through it, physicotheology) gives abundant proof in experience of this artistic wisdom. But from it no inference is allowed to the moral wisdom of the author of the world, for the natural law and the moral law require principles of entirely different kinds, and the demonstration of the latter wisdom must be carried out totally *a priori*, hence in no way be founded on the experience of what goes on in the world. Now since the concept of God suited to religion must be a concept of him as a moral being (for we have no need of him for natural explanation, hence for speculative purposes); and since this concept can just as little be derived from the mere transcendental concept of an absolutely necessary being - a concept that totally escapes us - as be founded on experience; so it is clear enough that the proof of the existence of such a being can be none other than a moral proof." (KANT, 2001, p. 25 / 8.256n).

- <sup>3</sup> In order to support her interpretation Kleingeld makes reference to one passage from the *second Critique* (KANT, 1996, p. 256; *CPrR*, 5.145) and another from the *third Critique* (KANT, 2002, p. 341; *CJ*, 5.478f.). According to her reading, in both passages Kant left open the possibility of a connection between freedom and nature mediated by the concept of *theoretical teleology*. I propose, however, an alternate reading of both passages. The point in the second Critique is that none can prove that such a unit is impossible, but then Kant emphasizes that, for *our* reason, this unity is possible only under the presupposition of a wise and *moral* author of the world, to whom we think in analogy with our way of think and acting, therefore according to a teleological thinking. The issue in the third Critique is that *moral theology* is possible without *physical teleology* but only with practical reason. However, *moral theology* could not possibly represent theunity of reason without *moral teleology*, or it would not be possible to represent the unity between nature and freedom in *this world*, i.e., for us is not possible to envision theunity of reason without moral teleology. I believe that the only way to make this link between nature and freedom conceivable is by way of the concept of practical-regulative *teleology*.
- <sup>4</sup> In this case I disagree with Kleingeld (2001, p. 210) who claims that Kant uses a moral concept to answer a theoretical question. If my interpretation from *Canon* is correct, also for the practical reason raises the question of systematicity of the empirical world, especially regarding the history of human beings. Regarding her interpretation of the difference in the use of the concepts of nature and providence in the practical point of view I agree with her.
- <sup>5</sup> In the writing *On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice* this concept of a practical theory becomes explicit: 'A sum of rules, even of practical rules, is called *theory* if those rules are thought as principles having a certain generality, so that abstraction is made from a multitude of conditions that yet have a necessary influence on their application.' (KANT, 1996, p. 279; 8.275) 'But in a theory that is based on the *concept of duty*, concern about the empty ideality of this concept quite disappears. For it would not be a duty to aim at a certain effect of our will if this effect were not also possible in experience (whether it be thought as completed or as always approaching completion); and it is theory of this kind only that is at issue in the present treatise.' (KANT, 1996, p. 280; 8.276f).
- <sup>6</sup> This topic is discussed for example in the *CPrR*: "Thus by the practical law that commands the existence of the highest good possible in a world, the possibility of those objects of pure speculative reason, the objective reality which the latter could not assure them, is postulated; by this the theoretical cognition of pure reason certainly receives an increment, but it consists only in this: that those concepts, otherwise problematic (merely thinkable) for it, are now declared assertorically to be concepts to which real objects belong, because practical reason un-avoidably requires the existence of them for the possibility of its object, the highest good, which is absolutely necessary practically, and theoretical reason is thereby justified in assuming them. But this extension of theoretical reason is no extension of speculation, that is, no positive use can now be made of it for *theoretical purposes*. [...] But when once reason is in possession of this increment, it will, as speculative reason, go to work with these ideas in a negative way (really, only to secure its practical use), that is, not extending but purifying, so as on one side to ward off *anthropomorphism* as the source of *superstition* or specious extension of those concepts by supposed experience, and on the other side *fanaticism*, which promises such an extension by means of supersensible intuition or feelings - all of which are hindrances to the practical use of pure reason, so that the removal of them certainly belongs to an extension of our cognition for practical purposes, without contradicting the admission that for speculative purposes reason has not in the least gained by this: (KANT, 1996, p. 248f.; *CPrR*, 5.134ff.) I argue extensively about this point in my paper: [...]"

- <sup>7</sup> See also the example of the Anthropology's lesson of *Menschenkunde* (1781/1782): "Um nun die Ehrbegierde der Fürsten anzureitzen, solchen erhabenen Zwecken nach zu streben, und für das Wohl des ganzen menschlichen Geschlechts zur arbeiten, würde eine Geschichte, die bloß aus cosmopolitischer Absicht geschrieben wäre, von erheblichen Nutzen seyn. Eine solche Geschichte müßte bloß das Weltbeste zu ihrem Standpuncte nehmen, und nur diejenigen Handlungen des Andenkens der Nachkomme würdig machen, welche die Wollfahrt des ganzen menschlichen Geschlechts betreffen." (KANT 25 (2).1202f.) Regarding the propagandistic and practical intention of the universal history, the following reflections written between 1775-1776 are also illustrative: *Refl.* 1436, 15.628.01-02; *Refl.* 1438, 15.628.10-24; *Refl.* 1440, 15.629.16-18; *Refl.* 1441, 15.629.20-23.