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THE PURPOSIVENESS OF NATURE, LIFE AND “WHAT ARE THINGS IN THE WORLD THERE FOR?”

Cinara Nahra

A teleological judgement compares two concepts of a natural product: it compares what the product is with what is (meant) to be. But if we think that a product of nature was (meant) to be something, and judge the product as to whether it actually is, then we are already presupposing a principle that we cannot have derived from experience (which teach us only what things are) [...] and so all judgements about the purposiveness of nature, whether they are teleological or aesthetical, fall under a priori principles: a priori principles that belong exclusively to the power of judgement, as its own principles, because these judgements are merely reflective and not determinative. (EE KU, AA 20: 240).

Would the efficient causes in nature be irreconcilable with the final causes? Put this way it seems like an Aristotelian problem, but actually this is one of the most fascinating discussions in Kant's philosophy and we could say that a great part of the coherence and harmony of the Kantian system depends on the answer he gives to this problem.

Kant puts this question in the form of an antinomy, presented not together with the others in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (KrV, B 434/462/472) but presented, instead, in paragraph 70 of the *Critique of Judgement* as follows (KU, AA 05: 386):

Thesis: All production of material things is possible in terms of merely mechanical laws.

Antithesis: Some production of material things is not possible in terms of

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merely mechanical laws.

But if we read it, instead, as (KU, AA 05: 387):

The first maxim of the judgment (thesis):

“All production of material things and their forms, must be judged to be possible in terms of merely mechanical laws”.

and

The second maxim of the judgment (antithesis):

“Some products of material nature cannot be judged to be possible in terms of merely mechanical laws (judging then requires a quite different causal law, that of final causes”).

Then these maxims are regulative principles for our investigation (of nature), and so they are not in contradiction. We should always reflect in terms of the principle of the mere mechanism of nature as far as we can, but in dealing with certain natural forms, and even with nature as a whole, we should reflect in terms of another principle (following the antithesis). In the solution of the above antinomy (KU, AA 05: 389) Kant says: “It is indubitably certain that the mere mechanism of nature cannot provide our cognitive power with a basis on which we could explain the production of organized beings”. Then he writes:

The following principle is entirely correct for reflective judgement, however rash and unprovable it would be for determinative judgement: that to account for the very manifest connection of things in terms of final causes we must think a causality distinct from mechanism. (KU, AA 05: 389).

Notice here Kant talks of a principle for reflective judgement. But what does this mean? It means that we are not talking here about how things are, but “as if they were”. It means that we cannot prove that the world is in fact like this, but we must think as if the world is like this.

But hasn't Kant already told us in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that in relation to knowledge we should always stay within the limit of the pure theoretical reason, avoiding the dogmatic position of going beyond their limit trying to obtain justified and demonstrable knowledge (*episteme*) where it is

impossible to obtain it? So how can Kant now in the *Critique of Judgement* talk about the possibility of admitting that some products of nature cannot be possible to be judged in terms of merely mechanical laws? The answer for this is precisely in the distinction between constitutive (determinative) and reflective principles that Kant proposes. Kant talks about this distinction in the first introduction of the critique of judgement (EE KU, AA 20: 211) where he says:

judgment can be regarded either as merely an ability to reflect, in terms of a certain principle, on a given presentation so as to (make) a concept possible, or as an ability to determine an underlying concept by means of a given empirical presentation. In the first case it is the reflective, in the second the determinative power of judgment.

A clearer explanation is given a bit further on (EE KU, AA 20: 214) when he argues that when reflective judgment tries to bring given appearances under empirical concepts of determinate natural things, it deals with them technically rather than schematically. In other words, it does not deal with them mechanically, as it were an instrument, guided by the understanding and the senses; it deals with them artistically, in terms of a principle.

But which principle is this? What is the principle of reflective judgment? Kant says (EE KU, AA 20: 214) it is the principle of a purposive arrangement of nature in a system, an arrangement made as if it were for the benefit of our judgment, in order to have any chance of finding our way through the labyrinth resulting from the diversity of possible particular laws. Hence judgment itself makes a priori the technic of nature a principle for its reflection.

In the Second *Introduction of the Critique of Judgement* Kant explicitly says: “the principle of purposiveness of nature (in the diversity of its empirical laws) is a transcendental principle” (KU, AA 05: 182) considering a transcendental principle (KU, AA 05: 181) “as one by which we think the universal a priori condition under which alone things can become objects of our cognition in general”. However Kant notices that judgment neither can explain nor determine this technic more closely; nor does it have an objective basis from cognition of things in themselves. He explains that the principle of reflective judgement by which we think nature as a system in terms of empirical laws is merely a principle for the logical use of judgement. Though in its origins it is a transcendental principle (KU, AA 05: 214), it allows us only to regard nature a priori as having in

its diversity the quality of a logical system under empirical laws. The judgment's own principle, according to Kant is (KU, AA 05: 216): "Nature, for the sake of the power of judgement, makes its universal laws specific (and) into empirical ones, according to the form of a logical system". He says that this is where the concept of purposiveness of nature arises.

The idea is very simple actually: what Kant is suggesting is that we have to look at nature as if it was a system that is in order and has a purpose. We have to think of all the laws of nature as if they were a part of a logical system, and, vice versa, we have to think as if nature was a logical system from where all empirical laws derive. This brings us to the concept of technic of nature that Kant defines (KU, AA 05: 219) as nature's causality regarding the form that its products have as purposes, contrasting to the idea of mechanism of nature (KU, AA 05: 219) defined by Kant as the causality nature has insofar as it connects the diverse without a concept underlying the manner of this unification. Nature's technic, however, is only a relation of things to our power of judgement. In other words, we could never prove that nature works, indeed, as art or as a technic, but we must think as if this was the way that nature works. We can only prove that she works as a mechanism, but we think actually as if beyond working as a mechanism nature works, as well, in a purposive way.

To think of nature as a mechanism is actually not contradictory with thinking of nature as a technic, since we are looking at her from two different points of view. When we look at nature as a mechanism we are seeing her from a scientific point of view, where only things that can be proved or shown can be accepted. Nature from a scientific point of view is nothing but a set of natural laws, a set of objects and a set of efficient causes acting and producing effects. From this point of view we don't need to presuppose anything beyond mechanism, not even final causes, because through mechanism we can explain all the natural phenomena. What we cannot conceive through mechanism, says Kant is how organized beings are possible. However, says Kant, at least in view of the character of cognitive power, we must regard mechanism as originally subordinated to a cause that acts intentionally (KU, AA 05: 422).

According to Kant (KU, AA 05: 418):

It is commendable to do comparative anatomy and go through the vast creation of organized beings in nature, in order to see if we cannot discover in it something like a system, namely, as regards the principle

of their production.[...] So many genera of animal share a certain common schema on which not only their bone structure but also the arrangements of their other parts seems to be based: the basic outline is admirably simple but yet was able to produce this great diversity of species, by shortening some parts and lengthening others, by the involution of some and the evolution of others. Despite all the variety among these forms, they seem to have been produced according to a common archetype, and this analogy among them reinforces our suspicion that they are actually akin, produced by a common original mother. [...] From this matter and its forces governed by mechanical law seems to stem all the technic that nature displays in organized beings and that we find so far beyond our grasp that we believe that we have to think a different principle to account for it.

What Kant seems to be saying here is that mere mechanism doesn't explain how life is possible and in order to give some kind of explanation for this we have to go beyond mechanism and to think of nature as having a purpose, exactly as he had already suggested in the preparation for the solution of the antinomy in the paragraph 71 of the Critique of Judgement (KU, AA 05: 389). This kind of explanation, even though it is not *episteme*, demonstrable knowledge, fills yet an explanatory gap that mere mechanism cannot fill. When we think as if nature has a purpose, it is then possible to give some kind of explanation on how organized beings are possible. Life emerges because nature has a purpose and the purpose of nature is to create life (organized beings), and especially, to create rational life. The purposiveness of nature is operating invisibly underlining the whole mechanism of natural laws, giving unity to all these laws, and putting the system in order.

There is no proof that this is the case, but we must think as if it is the case, and this is the reason why this kind of judgement is not determinant, it is reflective. The principle of reflective judgment is precisely the technic of nature, i.e., this purposiveness. Here we do not have any concept, as theoretical pure reason give us, or any idea as practical reason gives, we have a technic, a way to think, a teleological way of thinking. It is not the case that we have abandoned science, a knowledge based on justification, demonstration and efficient causes, since this is the only way to investigate how things work. It is just that beyond science we must see a *telos* and a purpose for all this mechanism. We must see through this mechanism, beyond it, even though this is not science, this is art.

Having distinguished determinative and reflective judgment in the KU, Kant can now reconcile efficient and final causes (KU, AA 05: 412):

As applied to one and the same natural thing, we cannot link or reconcile the mechanical and the teleological principles, if we regard them as principles for explaining one thing from another, i.e., regard them as constitutive principles of determinative judgement [...]. The principle so must lie beyond both, but containing the basis of nature. Now the principle that mechanical and teleological derivation have in common is the supersensible, which we must regard as the basis of nature as phenomenon. But of the supersensible we cannot, from a theoretical point of view, form the slightest determinate and positive concept.

Further on Kant says (KU, AA 05: 413) that all we can do is this: if we happen to find natural objects whose possibility is inconceivable to us in terms merely of the principle of mechanism, so we must rely also on teleological principles.

It seems now that we have the moral of the tale : Living beings for Kant (organized beings) is a natural object and at the same time is something impossible to be explained merely in terms of mechanism, then we have to presuppose a teleological and intentional cause to explain living beings, i.e., to explain....life! Kant writes (KU, AA 05: 413):

Hence we keep to the above principle of teleology viz, the principle that, in view of the character of human understanding, the only cause that can be assumed (in order to account) for the possibility of organic beings in nature is a cause that acts intentionally, and that the mere mechanism of nature cannot at all suffice to explain these products of nature. But we are not trying to use this principle to decide anything about how such things themselves are possible.

What Kant is actually saying here is that the only way to explain the existence of life is presupposing an intentional cause for it, even though it is impossible to explain how this cause works. In other words, we have to presuppose a teleological explanation for life, but we cannot demonstrate or show how it works, how final causes act.

This “*modus operandi*” in Kant isn’t new. In the critique of practical reason Kant had already put forward the ideas of Liberty, God and Immortality as postulates. There he said that we can presuppose these ideas, even though

we cannot prove them. They are not theoretical dogmas (KpV, AA 05: 132) but practical presuppositions, they don't enlarge the speculative knowledge but they confer objective reality to the ideas of the speculative reason and justify concepts. Theoretical reason and practical reason can now be reconciled because their domains are now distinguished and this is why Kant can now say that God, immortality and freedom are postulates of practical pure reason. In doing this he enlarges the pure reason, from a practical point of view, without, at the same time, enlarging the speculative knowledge, exactly as he has announced (KpV, AA 05: 135). In doing this he admits the presupposition of positive freedom, immortality and God, without demonstrating their existence.

What he does in the *Critique of Judgement* related to the principle of the purposiveness of nature is something similar to what he has done in the *Critique of Practical Reason* with these three ideas. The purposiveness of nature is not something that can be proved, and Kant is not enlarging the speculative knowledge proposing this. The purposiveness of nature is something we have to presuppose as well, not for practical reasons here, but in order to make sense of experience in itself, to make sense of Nature as a whole. If we do not presuppose this *telos* the laws of nature will still work but one very important thing in the universe would not be explained ...the emergence of life. The existence of life or the existence of organized beings in Kant's parlance, cannot be explained without the regulative principle of purposiveness of nature. Again it is possible to do the analogy with the postulates of practical reason. In the practical reason Kant would say that we are allowed to admit the existence of God even though it is not possible to scientifically explain how God works or even what God is. The same happens with purposiveness of nature, being impossible to describe how it operates. Taking again the existence of life as a paradigm we have to think as if nature as a whole was orientated for life, even though it is impossible to show how she worked in order to produce it.

Kant writes (KU, AA 05: 415):

It is however quite undetermined, and for our reason forever undeterminable, how much the mechanism of nature does as a means toward each final intention in nature. Moreover because of the above -mentioned intelligible principle for the possibility of a nature as such, we may even assume that nature is possible throughout in terms of both kinds of law (physical laws and laws in terms of final causes operating in universal harmony, even though we have no

insight whatever into how this happens). Hence we also do not know how far we may get with the mechanical kind of explanation that is possible for us. Only this much is certain: no matter how far it will take us, yet it must always be inadequate for things that we have once recognized as natural purposes (Naturzweck), so that the character of our understanding forces us to subordinate all those mechanical bases to a teleological principle.

Now the pieces of the puzzle start to fit together. In the paragraph 65 of the Critique of judgment (KU, AA 05: 374) Kant had already defined organized beings as the things considered as natural purposes. Organized beings are nothing but living beings and living beings are then a natural purpose. Mere mechanism cannot explain natural purposes, so mere mechanism cannot explain the emergence of living beings, the emergence of life. So our understanding forces us to look for a teleological principle to explain and understand life and this principle is the principle of purposiveness of nature.

This could be the end of the story but not quite. For Kant there is still another question, possible to be asked only if we go beyond mere mechanism, and the question is (KU, AA 05: 434) “what are things in the world there for?” We arrive here to the concept of a final purpose (*Endzweck*), i.e., a purpose that requires no other purpose as a condition of its possibility. Man is the final purpose of nature, but man as a moral being, as much as any other rational being in the world (KU, AA 05: 323). As Kant said, now we cannot ask for what end does man exist. Man, but only man considered as a *noumenon*, man as moral, man as free in the positive sense of freedom, is the final purpose of creation, is the final purpose of the existence of the world. Here, he can subject all nature and he must not consider himself subjected to any influence of nature in opposition to that purpose (KU, AA 05: 323). In other words the creation of rational beings capable of morality is the final purpose of the world.

To conclude I will say that the promise of the KU is fulfilled. The immense gulf that Kant mentioned existing between the sensible (nature) and the suprasensible (freedom) (AA 20: 176) is now filled. As Kant wrote:

Hence it must be possible to think of nature as being such that the lawfulness in its form will harmonize with at least the possibility of achieving the purposes that we are to achieve in nature according to laws of freedom. So there must after all be a basis uniting the

supersensible that underlies nature and the supersensible that the concept of freedom contains practically.

The basis uniting both is the reflective principle of purposiveness of nature, a teleological principle that doesn't say how the world is but describes the way that we must think as if the world were. It is like if there is a correspondence between the way that our mind works and the way that the laws of nature are connected in a sense that without this teleological presupposition, the laws of nature as a whole, nature as a whole, wouldn't make sense for us. A logical system of empirical concepts is nothing other than a *telos* in the system of nature, an order in the set of laws, a law in the diversity of laws. We don't know if there is, in fact, this order, but we think as if there was one, it is like if our mind was able to see this, even if we don't know if this *telos* is in fact there. But If the world is not like this, it doesn't matter. At the end of the day all that matters is that this *a priori* hypothesis, the teleological way of explaining the world, is able to reconcile efficient and final causes, science and art, mechanism and *telos* and this is a much more beautiful and harmonic view than the one of a world where there is an insurmountable barrier between them.

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PARTE IV
FILOSOFIA DA HISTÓRIA, FILOSOFIA DO
DIREITO E FILOSOFIA POLÍTICA
PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY OF
RIGHT, AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY