

Bridging the Gap of Kant's 'Historical Antinomy'

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Abstract: In his influential work on Kant and history, Yirmiyahu Yovel identifies a problem which he terms 'the historical antinomy.' The problem states that no possible mediation can take place between the atemporal realm of pure reason and the empirical realm of human history. In this paper, I aim to bridge this gap based on a two-aspect reading of the faculty of reason, and then proceed to show reason's ability to apply transcendental ideas on empirical history for the sake of grasping a rational idea of history in a single, mediated process.

I. Yovel's Historical Antinomy

It is a patent understatement to say that reason is for Immanuel Kant the most important characteristic of the human being, and serves as the fundamental faculty in the promotion of historical progress. Some commentators, however, find that Kant's description of reason (*Vernunft*) in history (*Geschichte*) is not without inherent complications. One such problem was identified in a paper delivered in 1978 by Yirmiyahu Yovel, wherein he expressed concerns over a pair of seemingly untenable problems, namely, what he coined as the "historical antinomy" and the "problem of historical schematism" (Yovel, 1978, p. 129).¹ The 'historical antinomy' considers reason in relation to Kant's theory of time, and Yovel argues that it reveals a major difficulty in Kant's philosophy of history:

For reason to be a historical principle it must be embodied in actual time. Yet time, according to Kant's Transcendental Aesthetics, is merely a "form of intuition" that cannot apply to reason at all, only to empirical data categorized by the forms of the understanding. (1978, p. 129)

Subsequently, Yovel asserts that this constitutive contradiction, i.e., reason portrayed as simultaneously temporal and atemporal, is not only conflicting but also equally necessary to Kant's philosophy of history, hence the antinomy.²

The 'problem of historical schematism' displays a similar incompatibility, but instead of examining the relation of reason to its temporal and atemporal modes, Yovel continues to advance his concerns

by arguing that Kant cannot give a comprehensive account of reason in history:

How can a bridge be built between the history of reason and empirical history? I think that Kant does not and cannot have a sufficient answer. Reason is to grow, mature, and affect the world in and through empirical history, which goes on in time and is bound by natural laws. How can the correspondence between real states in experience and the stages in the evolution of reason be accounted for? (Yovel, 1980, p. 21)

Because Yovel thinks that no possible mediation can take place between the atemporal realm of reason and the empirical realm of history, the laws specific to those contrasting realms “cannot be united in a single process” (1980, p. 21). Consequently, the ‘problem of ‘historical schematism’ compliments the ‘historical antinomy’ insofar as it calls attention to a lack of unity in Kant’s account of how reason can be mediated by empirical history, and Yovel ultimately collapses both problems by calling them the “*historical antinomy*” (Yovel, 1980, p. 272).

The difficulties that arise from the ‘historical antinomy’ disclose two interesting and indispensable *aspects* of reason, namely, as mainly described in Kant’s systematic philosophy, (i) reason as formally self-standing and not given to temporal development, and, as described in Kant’s historical writings, (ii) reason as temporally progressive, following its own rational blueprint, moving toward greater development and facility, and increasing its influence in a world that may be rationally hoped (e.g., *inter alia*, a world of expanding enlightenment, moral community, and perpetual peace).³ The picture which emerges from Yovel’s examination of this problem is one of deep dissatisfaction, namely, that Kant’s formal description of reason seems embarrassingly unsuited with his idea of its evolving, historical development.

In this paper, I want to examine whether this problem is as untenable as Yovel believes. Specifically, I aim to address perhaps the most pertinent of Yovel’s questions, *viz.*: How can a bridge be built between rational history and empirical history? Yovel’s own attempt to address this problem locates how the concept of reflective judgment in the third *Critique* is Kant’s main innovation to answering the problem of reason as teleologically presented (Yovel, 1980, p. 159).⁴ However, while Yovel is right to incorporate the role of reflective judgment toward an explication of the development of reason in history, he ultimately concludes that systematic difficulties remain because “Kant [cannot]

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admit of an affinity between pure reason and its opposite, empirical reality” (Yovel, 1980, pp. 271-72).

It is important to note that Yovel does not ask for *proof* of a correspondence between the history of reason and empirical history, but only for an answer that does not violate or do damage to Kantian tenets while also showing how the two modes are compatible and “ultimately coherent” (Yovel, 1980, p. 22). In an attempt to respond to this difficulty, this essay aims to explore whether there might be a different way to frame Yovel’s problem in order to find some kind of unification between reason and history. Consequently, it argues that there is a way to skirt the ‘schematism’ by showing how Kant’s systematic philosophy can provide a desired rapprochement, with the result that some of the features which Yovel takes as hopeless and impossible might actually find plausible resolution.

II. An Attempt at Skirting the Schematism

In his magisterial *Kant and the Philosophy of History*, Yovel states that he put aside Kant’s “peripheral” or historical essays (Yovel, 1980, p. 127), instead turning his reconstructive efforts toward Kant’s systematic writings.⁵ In contradistinction to Yovel’s approach, my paper takes its central point of departure from Kant’s 1784 *Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Intent*; specifically, its Second Thesis:

Reason in a creature is a faculty to extend the rules and objectives of the use of all of its powers far beyond its natural instinct, and reason knows no limits in the scope of its projects. However, reason itself does not operate on instinct, but requires trial, practice, and instruction in order to gradually progress from one stage of insight to another. (Kant, 2006, p. 5)

What I find so important about this sentence is Kant’s statement that “reason in a creature is a faculty” (*Die Vernunft in einem Geschöpfe ist ein Vermögen*),⁶ which will be crucial to my efforts to bridge the gap of Yovel’s historical antinomy. Toward this goal, I will turn to Kant’s essential formulation of reason as a faculty or capacity⁷ in its regulative use,⁸ i.e., as a fundamental ability to do something or perform some function, and then proceed to show the unique function of the “transcendental ideas” of reason in its *unifying* sense. Viewed in this light, reason can be understood as one thing with two, non-contradictory aspects: reason presented as a constitutive, *a priori* ground; as well as reason functioning in its regulative capacity. In identifying the problem of the ‘historical

antinomy,' Yovel seems to conflate these two aspects; namely, he seems to miss the distinction between reason as the *faculty* of principles (i.e., as a capability), which is possessed by all rational human beings, and reason as the faculty of *principles* (i.e., as knowledge a priori).⁹ The difference being that the former is a *capability* which is possessed and requires growth in temporality, while the conceptual fund of *principles* in the latter is, indeed, atemporally set.

The faculty of reason can therefore be understood as an inherent ability to perform some action by using very specific principles, an ability that not only improves in historical time, as related in the historical essays, but also serves for the comprehension, "something to which reason leads through its inferences" (Kant, 1998, A311/BB367). In this capacity, reason is a faculty of inferences which directs and provides guidelines or maxims for the use of knowledge. However, it is also important to note that this normatively guided action can sometimes fail in its performance, requiring reason to correct its own errancy.

Consequently, we can detect a consistent thread that is woven through Kant's critical works and historical essays that portrays reason as a readily available faculty, one that is restless, in need of instruction to perfect its powers, as well as being confronted with its own challenges, which it attempts to overcome toward its future fulfilment in special mankind. While Kant argues that all of a creature's natural predispositions (*Anlagen*) are indeed destined to develop in conformity with its end (the first Thesis in 'Idea'), it is actually the faculty of reason that requires sustained practice and self-instruction to progress toward its destinal perfection (the second Thesis in 'Idea'). Consequently, a plausible response to the problem of the historical antinomy is to note that reason as a faculty has two unequivocal aspects: reason is a capacity that is possessed by rational beings (e.g., a normal human infant has the faculty of reason, and though not yet rational, still possesses this innate capacity), and reason is also a capability whose use can be cultivated and improved in temporality (e.g., an adult whose faculty of reason has been developed and promoted by education [*Bildung*], which improves the faculty's own ability to form better judgments). It is this dual aspect of the faculty of reason, which I shall argue can serve to bridge the historical antinomy.

III. The Faculty of Reason

The association of reason with being a capacity is raised by Kant in his theoretical, moral, and historical writings; indeed, perhaps no more forcefully than in the 1785 *Groundwork's* two-worlds theory, wherein he makes the argument that the moral law is made possible by virtue of

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human beings having a rational faculty to cognize themselves as members of the intelligible world (Kant, 1997b, p. 58), which is not only a *sine qua non* foundation of all rational actions, but also takes into account reason as a capacity that is shared with all other all rational agents (Kant, 1997b, p. 57).

Moreover, the thesis that reason is a capacity which is possessed by human beings is affirmed by Kant in the Second Introduction of his *Critique*. Kant inaugurates his critical project by writing that, “reason is the faculty that provides the principles of cognition a priori” (Kant, 1998, A11/B24), which is rearticulated in the *Transcendental Dialectic* more succinctly as “the faculty of principles” (Kant, 1988, A299/B356). As faculty qua other human faculties, e.g., cognition, judgment, perception, etc., Kant argues that reason not only influences other faculties, but is also capable of realizing its own interests, which is also expressed in the second *Critique*: “Reason, as the faculty of principles, determines the interest of all the powers of the mind but itself determines its own” (Kant, 1997a, p. 100).

Reflecting on his characterization of the faculty of reason in the first and second *Critiques*, in the Preface to his third *Critique*, Kant begins to describing reason not only as a faculty containing principles, but also as an active *ability* (*Vermögen*) to cognize from *a priori* principles (Kant, 2000, p. 55), and we see him reiterating the very same notion in the 1798 *Anthropology*, wherein he states, possibly itself bridging the gap between the systematic and historical works, that the human being is endowed with a special “*capacity of reason... whereby he first preserves himself and his species; second, trains, instructs, and educates his species for domestic society; third, governs it as a systematic whole (arranged according to principles of reason) appropriate for society*” (Kant, 2006, p. 226).

Consequently, we observe how Kant consistently describes reason, whether theoretical or practical, as a *productive* capacity or “practical faculty” (*praktisches Vermögen*). Hence, while we note that the faculty of reason is constituted *a priori*, it also requires interaction with the empirical world, and Kant argues that through this repeated interaction, the faculty of reason becomes “more developed” through “progressive cultivation” (Kant, 2000, p. 322).

The idea here is that the faculty of reason does not develop in a vacuum. Far from being perfect, reason also has weaknesses, and in the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant writes that reason cannot completely free itself from mistaken entanglements because there will always exist a possibility for reason to be deceived (Kant, 1998, A298/B354-5). Here Kant again directs us to the development of reason and argues that reason

can never be assured of its correctness, but must always be open to submitting itself to self-correction. As we have seen, Kant's wide-ranging catalogue of the faculty of reason describes it as an innately possessed capacity, which, as ability, is given to improvement, as would exhibit any other type of capacity.

Reason as a capacity thus displays a self-determining, creative facility, one that is seemingly without limits, and Kant argues that reason is purposive insofar as the products of reason are aimed toward its own ends.

IV. Bridging the Historical Antinomy

We have seen how in Kant's theoretical, moral, teleological, anthropological, and historical writings, the faculty of reason is characterized as a useful capacity. In this sense, Kant argues that the faculty of reason can also be useful in furnishing standards and goals by seeking out the highest ground of unconditional unity. In the *Transcendental Dialectic*, Kant states that the transcendental ideas perform this function (Kant, 1998, A299/B355-6), and my own reading of these ideas is in accord with Sebastian Gardner's view that as an active capacity, "Reason thus transforms itself from a purely formal, merely logical faculty, into a 'transcendental' faculty intended for a 'real use'" (Gardner, 1999, p. 217).

Kant argues that in this capacity, the transcendental ideas of reason strive to unify and subsume all particular experiences under increasingly higher principles of knowledge (Kant, 1998, A321/B378). Subsequently, the transcendental ideas serve as a kind of guide to the unconditioned, and can be used to grasp normative standards. If we apply this regulative use of reason to history, we might say that when reason at first considers empirical instances of history it employs the transcendental ideas to formulate a totality. Here we note that in addition to the three special transcendental ideas (the subject, the world, and God), Kant identifies other possible ideas of reason that can serve as "ground" or standards.

Is empirical history included in the employment of these ideas? It is, for example, when Kant turns to consider the transcendental ideas in relation to historical instruments of political governance:

A constitution providing for the greatest human freedom according to laws that permit the freedom of each to exist together with that of others (not one providing for the greatest happiness, since that would follow of itself) is at least a necessary idea, which one must make the ground not merely of the primary plan of a state's constitution but of all the laws too; and in it we must initially abstract from the present obstacles,

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which may perhaps arise not so much from what is unavoidable in human nature as rather from neglect of the true ideas in the giving of laws. (Kant, 1998, A316/B373)

As this passage illustrates, when reason employs the transcendental ideas to history, the seeming incompatibility between empirical and rational history which was identified by Yovel appears to be mediated in a single process. Consequently, with an understanding of the dynamic interplay between the faculty of reason and history (i.e., its regulative use, the employment of transcendental ideas, and historical content), we can continue to build a bridge to span the divide Yovel discerns between rational and empirical history.

We begin by noting that when the faculty of reason turns its power to consider history it attempts to piece together its empirical components under regulating principles that can formulate a rational conception of the whole. If we now overlay this rational activity over empirical activity in history, we might say that the faculty of reason attempts to seek a mode of totality in the seeming interplay of unrelated events, and even though these are ideas, they have a practical, *poietic* power:

In it practical reason even has the causality actually to bring forth what its concept contains; and hence of such wisdom we cannot likewise say disparagingly: It is only an idea; rather just because it is the idea of a necessary unity of all possible ends, it must serve as a rule, the original and at least limiting condition, for everything practical. Although we have to say of the transcendental concepts of reason: They are only ideas, we will by no means regard them as superfluous and nugatory. (Kant, 1998, A328/B385)

These ideas are regulative insofar as they represent states of affairs that do not exist, but provide standards that ought to exist. They serve as models of rational hope which we ought to work to achieve, and in this activity reason and empirical history do seem to be mediated in a single process.

V. Closing Remarks

I began this paper by developing Yovel's concerns over the historical antinomy, and proceeded to consider the question of how a bridge could be built between the reason and empirical history. In formulating the problem, Yovel asked only for a reconciliation that does not violate Kant's philosophy while providing a bridging principle which can represent a

totality (Yovel, 1980, p. 286). With regard to this problem, I first posited a response based on a two-aspect reading of faculty of reason, and then moved to show the faculty of reason's ability to apply transcendental ideas to empirical history for the sake of grasping a rational and regulative idea of history as a totality. Considered together, I should hope they represent a plausible response to how Kant's philosophy is able to mediate reason and history in a single process.¹⁰

Notes

¹ The problem of the 'historical antinomy' receives expanded treatment in Yovel (1980).

² In the *Transcendental Aesthetic*, Kant argues that time (and space) is an irremovable form of intuition, which is *a priori* and makes the "actuality of appearances possible" (Kant, 1998, A31/B46). Therefore, because reason is a transcendental faculty, if it were historicized, and thus unavoidably integrated within time, it would have to take on the character of an appearance, which is self-contradictory.

³ A similar problem identifying an untenable dualism within Kant's philosophy is raised by Michael Despland (1973, pp. 66-7) with regard to Kantian morality as both timeless and embedded in the historical process, which is quickly introduced and then passed over just as quickly.

⁴ For example, by reflecting on history in an analogical or metaphorical sense, i.e., *as if* it is purposive, without ascribing any purpose to history itself.

⁵ Robert B. Loudon (2000, p. 6) states that Kant scholars are generally preoccupied with the three *Critiques*, with the result of neglecting his other writings; especially, the in the "field of impure ethics," which is the name Loudon gives to those areas of Kant's writings which are not concerned exclusively with aprioristic cognition. Moreover, in contrast to Yovel, Allen Wood (1999, p. 208) argues that "Kant's philosophy of history is indispensable for an understanding of his ethical thought." As does also Pauline Kleingeld (2001, p. 204), "Kant's philosophy of history... fulfills a function in both his theoretical and his practical philosophy."

⁶ I will use the terms 'faculty' and 'capacity' interchangeably; basically, as an ability. The German *Vermögen* treats these terms synonymously. For an instructive treatment of the term 'faculty' and its connotations within Kant's *Critique*, see Wood (2008, pp. 114-16).

⁷ The German word for 'capacity' and 'faculty' is also rendered as *Anlage* ('predisposition') and *Fähigkeit*, but as I will soon show, it is only as *Vermögen*, which connotes the power or capability to do something, that Kant employs when describing the faculty/capacity/ability of reason.

⁸ Regulative principles not only set a goal for us, they also include procedures that we can use to reach this goal.

⁹ Gilles Deleuze (1999, pp. 1-10) also draws a distinction between reason

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as a faculty in relation to its interests, and as a faculty “capable of realizing [its] interests.”

¹⁰ I should very much like to thank Professor McQuillan for his generous comments to my original submission, which prompted me to consider Yovel's claims and Kant's critical explications of reason in instructive ways.

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